

Interview with Liu Xinyi: The younger generation's political narrative

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Liu Xinyi is one of the few artists of the younger generation directly focuses on political subjects. In his earlier works such as "From Marx to Mao", "Automatic Arms" and "Universal Protest Banner", we have already seen his examinations of the radical elements in contemporary politics. In his more recent works such as "One Night Back to Wartime" and "We Have Friends All Over the World", he presented the viewer new visual forms by reforming political symbols which formerly held special meaning. In his view, as a source of text and knowledge that can be drawn upon, politics can be treated as a basic material to be employed in the pursuit of conceptual research. The artist works in a satirical and playful manner as he expresses his doubts while breaking down and reconstructing traditional language of ideology and history in the pursuit of liberation of his own free will in the present day.

In his latest project, an installation titled "Chaoyang Qunzhong" (The Chaoyang Masses), Liu Xinyi employs the unique location of A307 to create a mockup of his conception of the home of a member of the "Chaoyang Masses", in which he combines existing items in the apartment with all sorts of realistic props that indicate information of one's age, gender, career choice, and even across possibly varying degrees of social responsibility through his depiction of this imaginary home. He creates a profile outline of the lifestyle and value system of a "traditional Beijing resident". Through the meaning carried by the objects the artist arranges, the identity of the "Chaoyang Masses", as well as the sense of group identity that this concept conveys, is brought into a blurred and unclear focus.

Chaoyang Qunzhong (The Chaoyang Masses): "Blurred expression is a reflection of mutual understanding within society"

Artron: How do you imagine the person who lives in this home?

Liu Xinyi: In the beginning, I believed I was creating an individual whom I would depict by assembling his or her "home". However, while I was working at the site, I found that the creative process did not proceed according to my logic, with many elements seemingly out of place, until I came to the realization that I was depicting a group, rather than painting with objects a portrait of an individual. This group, coincidentally, is one that is not often the subject of mainstream art, as this subject is even more "mainstream" than mainstream art itself. Perhaps the way of life and values of middle-aged and elderly Beijingers, as well as their cultural interests, are found to be worthy of much artistic attention.

Artron: What is the television program being played?

Liu Xinyi: This is something that I downloaded. Every afternoon from 5:30 to 6:30, Beijing Television broadcasts a program about healthy living. The episode that I incorporate into my work is about how to “observe” high blood pressure. In the program, a young host and a middle-aged doctor discuss health issues that affect elderly. Since different age groups presumably have vastly different experiences related to high blood pressure, the selection of this program carries meaningful suggestion as to what age viewers would possibly be watching it.

Artron: What was your original inspiration for this project?

Liu Xinyi: My inspiration for this exhibition was drawn from the fact that the exhibition space itself is located within a residential complex, while at the same time it is part of an arts district. Thus, this space finds itself straddling two diverging contexts, with the rarified world of fine art on one hand, and the vulgarity of daily life on the other. It would be a shame if one were to simply treat it as a gallery space like any other. I am most interested in the relationship between “contemporary art” and “contemporary life”, and the question of which one exerts the most influence over the other. According to some, contemporary art is already a filtered portrait of contemporary life. I take the reverse, and ask whether contemporary life produce a filtered portrait of contemporary art.

Artron: How to filter?

Liu Xinyi: Why do people choose to come to 798? This in itself is a complex question. One comes with the hope to connect with the latest trends in art, because one has certain preconceived expectations. One arrives at an exhibition space and encounters works of art, regardless of whether they are paintings, installations, videos or photographs, one hopes these works will gather the fashionable collection of sensory experiences. During most of the time that works of contemporary art being viewed by an audience, the works themselves appear aloof, while the viewers are just bystanders. The relationship between the viewers and the works they encounter remains static, with clearly defined roles of exhibitor and audience. In this work, I have not placed any objects overtly displaying any sort of artistic language, leading many viewers to ask: “where is the art?” Of course, this process of discovery is different for each viewer. Some viewers inspect each object more carefully than I have myself, while others only give them a cursory glance, with one viewer believing that he had entered the wrong room and then turned around and left. I can accept all of these outcomes. Thus when I talk about a process of filtering of contemporary art by contemporary life I am speaking about this phenomenon, about the viewers’ expectations towards art and towards themselves, and whether they wish to enter into situations different from what they had originally contemplated.

Artron: As a concept, what special meaning does the term “Chaoyang Masses” have in your work.

Liu Xinyi: The term “Chaoyang Masses” (Chaoyang Qunzhong) has always had a double meaning, as it is an unclear reference. Does it refer to an individual, or to a group? What sort of background does this individual or group have? One can probably only imagine it as a person who was not government officials, yet a part of the “neighborhood watch” system. They have a strong feeling of attachment to the city in which they reside. All of these meanings are not clearly defined, but this lack of definition is, itself, informational.

Artron: I agree wholeheartedly with your assessment. In the reality of today's China, groups are not clearly defined. Society's acceptance of identities that are poorly defined seems to pose no problem at all.

Liu Xinyi: I believe this is a sign of social cohesion and mutual understanding, particularly in a society that is increasingly de-politicized. This is also one of the themes in my work dealing with historical models.

“A rumination on previously held knowledge”

Artron: Have you been in Beijing all of the time since your return to China?

Liu Xinyi: I was first in Hangzhou for one year, after which I have been living in Beijing.

Artron: How would you describe your experience of the city of Beijing?

Liu Xinyi: Beijing is a wide and complex city that is quite difficult to describe with precise language. Obviously, Beijing is a classic example of a major node in a network of globalized cities, engaged in industrial outsourcing while also possessing a highly developed media industry. Also, there exists among its residents an emerging middle class lifestyle that appears to be very “contemporary”. On another note, the “law of the jungle”, or survival of the fittest is readily accepted by Beijing. There are people being driven off the road, businesses or employees squeezed out of industries, or even residents forced to leave the city everyday. At the same time, however, Beijing is also one of the few cities on this planet that is not centered by capitalism despite the fact that the city is full of economic activities and materialistic resources. The center of Beijing is not found in the CBD among its cluster of new skyscrapers, but rather in the open spaces that lie around Tian'anmen. Its political atmosphere is quite contradictory. In Beijing, residents of all ages enjoy attempting to decipher political developments. I have seen many times people gathering together to engage in heated debates of Mao. Making no comment on the level of their arguments, their debates of Mao reflect their degree of concern for this country as well as their attempt to find meaning in their own lives as citizens of this country, and therefore is a rather emotional topic. Such subjects are of great importance yet still cannot be fully and openly discussed by the society today.

Artron: Your works are often related to political topics, conveying an experimental style. What is your attitude toward politics?

Liu Xinyi: I concern myself with political experience, particularly on the conceptual and intellectual level. I treat politics as a body of knowledge that I must grasp. Today, social media, new media, and your own readings all constantly create an ever-growing pile of shallow memories in your mind. Is it not interesting if they can be arranged organically into an integrated narrative in works of art? Such experience is quite common in the information age. The act of processing information, re-coding it, and then transmitting it to

another person is not limited to artists, but in fact undertaken every day by everyone with the ability to read and write. However, in most situations, one is only in a position to be influenced by politics, with little opportunity to exert influence upon them. Thinking about this from another angle, if politics is constantly influencing our understanding of the world, then if I hope to truly develop my own understanding of the world I inhabit, why should I not be able to do the same to politics as what it is constantly doing to me? Were I to have a burning desire to gain a feeling of acceptance by others, and to place my faith in the ability of laws and social norms to guide my formation of a conceptual order, perhaps I would not have needed to do the work that I have done.

Artron: One of your works deals with the topic of September 11th. In it, an Afghani is fanning himself in the desert with a postcard from Manhattan, with the work titled “Sunny and Dry”. I have not seen the film myself, only knowing about it from a media report. Can you tell us more about this work?

Liu Xinyi: Downtown Manhattan is a symbol of American economic power. The attacks of September 11th disrupted America’s post-Cold War order. Ten years later, as we look back, we find that from an objective view, the attacks of September 11th afforded China time and space to capitalize on the trend of globalization to become a fully commercialized economy. In fact, the whole film is played backwards. In the beginning, there is a black spot on the top of the twin towers, as the postcard itself has caught fire, but as the film plays in reverse, the signs of fire slowly disappear, with the buildings appearing completely normal. The sound in the background is the television speech made by President George W. Bush on the night of September 11th, 2001, in which he declared war on terror. This speech, however, is also played in reverse. While the act of using a postcard to fan oneself appears approximately the same when played normally or in reverse, the typical Texas-accented English spoken by President George W. Bush becomes very strange played in reverse, sounding almost like a language or dialect from central Asian or the Arabic world. This is a fictional narrative, imagining that the idea for the attack never left the desert of Afghanistan, and the skyline of Manhattan was left unchanged. In reality, everyone knows that the attack did take place, and that nothing was left unchanged, affecting the paths that the lives of millions of people would take. The world will never be able to return to the time before that fateful day.

Artron: Why is the work titled “Sunny and Dry”?

Liu Xinyi: In Chinese the title is “*The Weather is Good*”, while in English the work is titled “*Sunny and Dry*”, meaning that the humidity is low and the sun is shining, perfect weather for sunbathing. In fact, both the Chinese and English titles borrowed language from the September 11th, 2001 weather report, which stated that “It is sunny and dry, with a mild temperature. It is going to be a good day.” The Chinese and English titles do not match up because they are complimentary to one another, two parts of a whole.

Artron: What is the purpose behind your depiction of such a scenario?

Liu Xinyi: The scenes depicted in my work are rarely drawn from my own personal wishes; I merely provide the viewer with something that is contradictory to his or her common sense. It may draw a certain reaction, or put another way, it is a conceptual tool to provoke the imagery of memory. Just as most people’s visual

memory of the September 11th attacks is limited to fragments of what they saw on television, my aim in creating this work is to play upon the viewers' experience of knowledge, and in so doing provoke rumination upon their pre-existing knowledge concerning this event. This is in my view something that all artwork should accomplish.

Politics as a Conceptual Foundation

Artron: You previously stated that one of your favorite Chinese artists is Huang Yongping. What in particular do you like about him or his work?

Liu Xinyi: Anyone living a modernized lifestyle will inhabit a globalized environment, leaving us unable to simply define one's conceptual world based on his or her place of residence. This means that one who lives in India is not so different from one who lives in Pakistan, and that someone who lives in China is not necessarily unaware of the issues that are of importance to those living in the United States. People living in modernized societies inhabit a multi-dimensional cultural space-time which usually is fractured and warped. This is something I personally experienced to a great degree after I arrived in England. At the very least, I believe that Huang Yongping became aware of the need to integrate his varied cultural experiences as he came to face a Euro-centric narrative and a stubbornly linear historical view at a very early stage. While absorbing the traditional European global view, he has the ability to construct an independent view of world of his own.

Artron: Isn't the school in the UK where you studied, Goldsmiths, one that places particular emphasis on conceptual work?

Liu Xinyi: Yes. In the American and British system, conceptual elements are a critical reference point in the evaluation of any modern work of art. At school, one is not told that they are being trained in concept formation, yet since oral and written expression are key parts of the coursework, most of the students' time is spent reading, thinking, working in the studio, and writing essays, with ideas subject to constant refinement. All expression which touches upon personal emotional experience is subject to doubt, to the point that efficiency of artistic concept can be pursued without any thought given to the artistic language that might be used to express it. Obscurity is not a problem; artists are evaluated based on their ability to penetrate complex bodies of knowledge and experience and proceed to transform them into engaging works of art.

Arton: Why did you choose this school's Art Department?

Liu Xinyi: I still wanted to engage in the practice of artistic creation, though Goldsmiths also has other departments which are closely related to contemporary art, such as the Department of Visual Culture and the Cultural Studies Center. My main motivation for going there to study was my desire to imbed myself into the front line of contemporary art. At the time, I felt that studying contemporary art in China left one with a

second-hand experience, while the question of how to understand modernization also remained. When I was at university, China's modernization was focused on catching up with the achievements of the West. Put another way, one did not know what type of modern culture China was ultimately pursuing. I hoped to go to a country that was already thoroughly modernized, to see what art could still accomplish in such a place.

Artron: What is your most strongly felt impression of your time at Goldsmiths?

Liu Xinyi: When I arrived to begin studying there, I imagined a globalized world, where there were not many barriers lying between people of the same age. However, soon after my coursework began, I came to realize that this was not in fact the case. Conceptual art demands a foundation of experience. While with regard to methodology, conceptual art can, when compared to other schools of art, be practiced with less regard to cultural background. Nonetheless at Goldsmiths a Euro-centric outlook was highly pervasive, as was a reliance on post-modernist texts. These were the problems that arose from my coursework. I am not opposed to post-modernist thought and enjoyed studying Foucault and Baudrillard, and post-colonialists such as Said and Derida, yet the more I read and studied, the more I became stymied by the questions of whether I actually was, or could be, part of a European cultural endeavor. It was then that I came to realize that the environment in which I was raised, and the structure of my knowledge of the world, was completely different from that which had produced European post-modern and post-colonial thought. I was thus driven to find a sphere in which I could work, and it was at this time that I discovered politics as a subject I could engage with in my art. I was driven to focus on politics because, if one is in search of an elemental experience to use as the basis for conceptual art, politics reveals itself to be the most basic element in the formation of human thought in any time or culture.

Artron: Earlier artists who went abroad, such as Huang Yongping and Xu Bing, were still working from a perspective highly influenced by tradition culture.

Liu Xinyi: This is an issue of visual resources. In fact, the areas in which artists can work are quite limited, while the visual resources they can employ in that work are even more scarce, particularly with regard to language. Almost any artist coming from a developing country will lack modern visual resources. Strangely, only when one goes abroad does the importance of one's own cultural identity become apparent. Perhaps this is an interesting aspect to globalization, where one goes to a different place with the sole purpose of going home; where one places himself in an environment completely different from the one to which he is accustomed, with the sole purpose of looking back on the life he left behind. The logic may seem contradicting, yet the results can be quite positive, as such experiences can provide great insight. For example, Goldsmiths is a politically progressive school. At the time of the 2010 student protests in London, I had already graduated. The school dean's office was occupied by student protesters, while a young sociology professor led students to the Conservative Party headquarters to take part in the protests there, where during the chaos the door was smashed in and works of art displayed inside were damaged by students spraying fire extinguishers. The political demands expressed, including asking that the government refrain from austerity measures with regard to education and public works, and that more resources to be dedicated to the bottom segments of society, were in Europe considered to be extremely left-wing. For someone coming from a socialist country to an historically left-wing bastion nestled within one of the great representatives of capitalist countries, I

could not help but come to consider my own political inclinations. Instead of rushing to define myself politically, I found it more interesting to explore the relationship between these paradoxical elements. In fact, a radical left-wing is an organic component in any capitalist country, as the absence of a strong right-wing government would take away the left-wing movement's utility in the society.

Artron: Their division into left- and right-facing groups is only a reflection of their differing stances and attitudes concerning the social system as well as the rights of citizens. However, in your works, for example those dealing with nations after the conclusion of the "cold war", you expand the realm of discourse. Within this expanded political discourse, do you have a stance of your own?

Liu Xinyi: Yes, my own stance concerns the creation of an integrated global historical narrative. If one is to talk about globalization, then the question of how to talk about globalization in the same context, is unavoidable. In the past, all history was national history, or regional history. Europe has the narrative of European civilization, while Asia has the narrative of Asian civilization. Later, colonialism brought the Americas into the European narrative, while India came to be included in the British narrative, and China, might be included in studies in Japan. This process is an increase of the scope of each individual narrative, until it becomes part of the process of global capitalism, with a global narrative emerging. Yet the process is problematic due to the fact that there does not exist any dominant driver of this process, nor any mutually accepted driver. Hence, a long-term battle will be waged for control of the global discourse and the ability to determine the final global historical narrative, with a few powerful players emerging. If I was interested in this direction, I perhaps should have chosen to study international relations, and used my talents to win China a larger voice in international discourse. However, one can easily predict that most knowledge will still be formed through applying logical questions, or put another way, one will not have much opportunity to take elements of the existing body of knowledge and proceed directly to re-organize them according to one's own will.

Artron: So, your works are not in fact statements of your own political stance, but rather using politics as a conceptual foundations, to, like what you said, lead viewers into a process of rumination on their own epistemology?

Liu Xinyi: Since I have never intended to use my works to express political desires, my works are therefore not only about politics. Politics is only one dimension of the subjects I deal with. There are also economic and historical issues that I raise, which is evidenced in "Chaoyang Qunzhong" (The Chaoyang Masses). I am still most concerned with how much influence the experience knowledge in the information age can exert on one's understanding of other people and humanity as a whole, which ultimately becomes a question of liberation, namely one of cognitive liberation.

---Translated by Sid Gulinck