

## **Absorbing and mis-understanding other culture: The alternative to extreme nationalism**

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Chinese artists in North America, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Republic of China now have their work rooted in style of realism, international abstraction, avant-gardeism as well as conceptions of the self. Nevertheless interpretations of their work often leads to misunderstandings about the values and meanings of the image.

Part of the reason for this is because art is general capitalizes on the brute physical properties of its raw material. Artists use the creative process of 'making' which includes free association and access to what we call 'absurd' strategies to provoke the unnameable impression, so intense and ungovernable that they have been compared to erotic sensations. Artists use a different kind of logic for analysis of life which is a process of 'matching'. There is more room for mistakes when we cross over cultural boundaries so miss-matches of meaning and image generate unexpected readings. There is often a failure of the image to say what it means and this failure leads to new complex ideas which we have not seen before. Deflections and scramblings of meanings also result from imprecise term like Dada or Zen or Political Pop Art. Unfortunately nether conventional Art History nor Aesthetic Theory give us adequate tools to make a clear interpretation of other cultures.

The first problem we meet when we try to link cultures in a 'new complex' is the difference between a Western culture which places emphasis on the individual point of view and the Chinese culture which tends to respect authority, deferential communication and social heritage.

However, today as Chinese artists enter the discourse around the individual and the human body and they look for meaning through psychological analysis, their attitude towards life and art fundamentally changes. Here we are dealing with more than a principle of style, borrowed art techniques, new art materials and the new concepts. Also video works and installation projects go beyond traditional methods and plug into film and digitalized forms of mass communication networks. So the experiences of life have become centered on lifestyle and conditioned by the stereotypes and dictates of fashion.

### **WHERE EAST MEETS WEST; AN EXAMPLE**

I would like to begin this examination of culture difference and shared aspirations by discussing the work of the artist Hemans Yu who developed her traditional ink painting style in Taiwan and after studying art in Canada arrived at a mature stage of oil painting which embodies an awareness of the Zen moment where the artist and viewer confronts the sublime grandeur of the landscape of water and mountains. Her oil paintings go further to explore the inner psychological space of the artist. The connection between her

two methods can be discovered in her drawings of rooms and doorways. The light in these works is an intrusion on the dark shadows where the essence and myself of life reside. The dark corners are synonymous with inner spaces of the body and the psyche. The black areas are the sanctuary of the spirit, a location for comforting identity, secure from the light of the unknown. When the artist moved to oil painting her traditional use of black became the 'shadow' referred to in the writing of Carl Jung. This archetype for the anima and animus in the personal unconscious moves her work from the existential model of Chinese ink painting to the individual search for balance and fortitude within the individual person. The artist's work provides a good example of the way Chinese values have absorbed western psychology and the international style of abstraction. As a modernist production her oil paintings can be shared by different cultures,

As we move into the post-modern world of international networks and international business affairs, the future of art as we know it historically may disappear and be replaced by simulations life and marketing devices of spectacle now being used in the fashion industry. Will there still remain an interest in making art objects as part of a collective or as an individual artists? Art objects and the makers of art will no doubt continue to have audiences which satisfy their desires by the things which embellish their lives. Perhaps what will change is the invention of a better system for distribution or exchanges of art objects.

When we ask the main question of this conference, where are we going? I see three main areas of inquiry.

#### **I. ? THE COMMERCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF ART? :**

How much financial support for Chinese artists can be found in the sales to foreigners and how much is available inside China? When compared with the corporate or wealthy individual art collectors in the West, Asia has had a different method for support of the arts. In general Asia has provided models for the production of art and the welfare of artists by linking art with cultural organizations. When seen as an integral part of cultural education, Chinese artists have an opportunity that is different from one dominated to question the history of Russian Socialist Realism and outmoded teaching traditions based on 19<sup>th</sup> century European formulas. So many world conditions have changed that current analysis needs to be done in the flight of the large world of cultural exchange. Will China provide its own market for public sculpture, painting, video art and art event, or will China forge other roles for its artists? What kind of art will satisfy a Chinese society newly freed from historical class difference? Will China soon have an elite class of luxury consumers of art for personal status? Or will art be made in art factories for export to overseas Asian restaurants, hotels and personal residences? Or will Chinese art fulfil other human needs as the means for social dialogue? If I turn to Canada for comparison we see that the market has declined with the recession along with the reductions of government support for artist run organizations. Art institutions are struggling for survival because of reduced subsidies. Canada Council a long time source of government support for individual artists and public art galleries provides fewer and fewer opportunities for artists to produce exhibition of their work. The alternatives for many artists have been exhibitions by artist-collectives, who raise funds by holding benefit concerts and together help with publicity for the show. Temporary locations are found in empty shopping centres, warehouses, banks and churches which can be cheaply rented for one month venues. Sales are few but the collective spirit which comes from working together and the large crowds who attend the opening events make them a challenging and inspiring occasion for artists. Most artists who are in these shows have

one or more other jobs to support their creative work. Two examples which I show here are "Nethermind Collective" which has yearly shows in locations where challenging site specific installation works can be constructed.

Another group of seventeen figurative painters called "True to From" arranged a large show in a vacated bank in a shopping centre, thus introducing their work into the heart of the commercial zone of the city. Artist run centres such as A SPACE in Toronto have a policy of addressing the issues of the ethnic communities in Toronto. The example I will use involved my own work done in collaboration with He Gong and Li Ning two visiting artists from Chongqing. Our question for the project was "Where is here"? Together we examined the meaning of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America and what it could mean to both the First Nation people and on the idea of the exile and the refugee's hand-to-mouth struggle for food. Mr He Gong represented this with a work made of blackened cooking pots assembled to form a large sailing painting by Gericault, the "Raft of the Medusa" and small drawings of bowls of rice used for counting off the days of a long journey or days in exile. Mr Li Ning fashioned two large ship's sails constructed of dozens of hand sewn T shirts bought at the Salvation Army second hand store for 50 cents a pound. These sails were stencilled with the words of disenfranchised people of the third world. Both pieces were dramatically featured with low theatrical lighting and centrally placed in the exhibition space surrounded by my paintings. My own work featured a close look at my own family fortune in coming to Canada. This was placed in contrast with the work of He Gong and Li Ning to show what we had in common and the very different class privilege of my own ancestors. It was very obvious that the newcomers are marginalized and the opportunities are not equally shared. However, by working together on a project such as this we did come to appreciate our common creative drive as art-makers, and the pleasure of opening new links between East and West.

## **II. ? CRITICAL AND THEORETICAL DISCOURSE ?**

Chinese writers and artist-teachers have borrowed the styles of Western art with brief analysis of how these borrowings have affected art education and art practice. What is the place of the new western art in Chinese art schools, libraries, art journals and the public art collections? What kind of critical discussion takes places around the work of foreign artists such as Antonio Tapies from Spain, Robert Rauchenberg from the USA. Alex Colville from Canada or Gilbert and George from England?

The discussions currently taking place around the different trend in Western art may provide some fresh direction for Chinese culture as it enters the post-modern condition of simulated forms of communication. These Western art strategies may provide certain new avenues for cross cultural connections. I will discuss the following five themes or discourses which I believe are most relevant to the future of Chinese new art.

**1. Deconstruction of the Symbolic Place of a Person in Society:** Here we look at the works of performance artists Lori Anderson and photographer Cindy Shorman. These artists look at the systems of representation and they ironically insert themselves into the manner and form of the mass media which uses spectacle, narrative and shock as part of their strategy.

2. **The Human Body as Symbiotic Site:** Here the human body becomes the landmark for struggle, disillusionment and awakening. When we look at the drawing installations of Betty Goodwin, the paintings of Landon Mackenzie the awareness of the life and death of the organism of our body becomes more acute. The seductions of the beauty industry and Feminist strategies for empowerment inform these works.

3. **A Deep Questioning of The Sources of Mythic Power:** As we look at our heritage and history, the folly of ideology comes into question. Artists question where to place their roots and how to link up with forces that have a value outside of governments or multi-national corporations. Joseph Beuys is a German installation-performance artist who used his enigmatic identity to create a myth around his ecology centre work. The artist was seen as the sensitive for social transform the base material of life into a creative role available to everyone. Anselm Kiefer a German painter of the generation which followed Beuys looked at the history of Germany including the Nazi ideology which lead to the devastation of the land in wartime. Facing this tragic theme he looks at the NAZI destruction as if it were the compost heap of human culture out of which new life could emerge. Antonio Tapies the Spanish artist also takes the "scar" as theme in his earth bound pictures. The roughness of these works pulls us away from the seduction of the TV monitor and the glossy magazines and speaks to us directly through the physical surface. The texture and patina of history is our reminder of the richness of the physical and the transient aspect of human life. All through these pieces is a pathos and an element of the heroic valour that comes with life's struggle.

4. **Psychological Reading of Personal Identity:** The shift of awareness that comes with post-modern discourse has forced artists to see the world as a complex of social, political and personal relationships inside and outside the family home. Eric Fischl a painter from New York examines the life of an adolescent growing up in the USA. He takes the mundane and the ordinary and invests it with surprising turn of events between family members living in suburbia. Gilbert and George from Great Britain examine the sign systems of gay culture, the parallel values of its brotherhood and the crisis of AIDS. The methods they use rely on the style of popular culture, billboards and fashion advertising as these are used devices to construct identity.

5. **The Understanding of popular culture:** Here the new landscape, is the commercial package with its superficial skin as barrier to life. There is some irony in this vision of glorifying superficiality and at the same time taking the surface as the subject of the art work. The late Andy Warhol of America, has been compared by some Chinese artists to the equivalent of a Zen master who can look impartially at a car crash victim or a movie star. His methods which include allowing other artists to make the work for him is highlighted when he named his studio 'The Factory'. He ran his art production like a business and he lived the life of a professional consumer of popular culture. He celebrated high social world through his interview "Magazine" making the high life of famous people ordinary. He also purposely failed to develop any deep personality themes and was quoted as saying that. He wanted to be a machine. For many of the artists in the west Warhol played the joker who reduced all things to masking of reality be it glamour, death or a soup can. Sigmar Polke is the European version of Warhol who present an even greater enigma since his materials include life threatening poison paint and works that are made to eventually self-destruct. The spirit of DADA and the absurd strategies support the element of surprise in all this form of art. David Salle a New York painter combines Disney cartoons with naked female forms as a means to shock. His

works take on life regardless of meaning due to their sheer creative inventiveness. Of course because their meaning is vague and indefinite they can mean anything to the collector and in that way enforce the collectors prestige. All the themes for this kind of work take on a value just gold currency and can be manipulated freely on the international market.

It would be possible to show works by Chinese artists using the same five categories. But I think that would be a mistake because it would then appear that the Chinese artists were merely copying Western trends. The conditions for Chinese artists working in "The Space in between cultures" or those addressing the modern condition in Hong Kong or Taiwan are using similar western strategies such as the personal approach, abstraction, surrealism and variations on political pop art but these works materialize out of the conditions of Chinese / Western economic and social culture. It is in this boundary area shared by cultures that the most interesting mistakes of understanding occur.

**III. ? DIFFERENCES ?:** What were the essential social asserts of art in China? Does it contribute to the thousand and one things that interest people, such as childhood, uncertainties, cities, doubts, dreams, poetry, parents, loves...? China has a great history of art which flowered under the Emperor's Feudalism and atrophied under the Russian styled socialist formula. Now foreign influences are being consumed as quickly as Michael Jackson's music, Calvin Klein's blue jeans, or Karaoke on CD-ROM. We were all showing signs of becoming what we consume. Why do we read about contemporary Chinese art and categorize it in Western terms like Political Pop Art, the Avant-Garde, Dada or even "New Wave" a term which is borrowed from Western pop music, or life style marketing? China should be searching for its own terms of reference. It is a healthy tendency when we can learn to borrow from each other but we must also maintain some integrity with regard to our differences. We appear to be going towards a cultural balance between a United Europe, North America and the Asia Pacific Region. How will this balance of difference be manifested? To discuss this we must also include an awareness of the political power of countries and the monetary power of multi-national corporation.

In order to examine some of these differences I would like to turn to the work of three Chinese artists who have made the transition to working in the Western art system while maintaining their Chinese heritage.

**Go Xiong**, is from the Sichuan Academy. He arrived in Canada eight years ago and has come to grips philosophically with his identity problems as a foreigner. I am quoting from a statement in Gu Xiong's exhibition, "my ethnicity doesn't matter to me. Being Chinese or Canadian is irrelevant to me. I only know that I am an individual living in this world. As an artist I don't believe in nationality. I strive to be an international person in an international and multi-cultural world...As an artist, you must break through all national barriers. Artists who are unable to accept different ideas often restrict themselves within their own culture." This is only a small part of a lengthy statement regarding comforts, conflicts and suffering. A recent work, "The Basement" speaks most clearly about his confrontation with contemporary North American culture as a person in exile. The work centres around three charcoal drawings of (1) a dark stairway leading up to the light, (2) a grave-like opening leading to a basement window and (3) a visible at the top. The drawings signal a release from a cave or a kind of rebirth process. The black of the charcoal is carefully applied to reveal multiple levels of darkness and light in the fine tracery of foliage. Other details like a curtain moving in a breeze, a door latch

silhouetted against the bright sunlight and the black door-mat welcome the viewer at the threshold. The beauty of the black drawing overshadows any sense of dread and contrast with the background wall of red banners and panels exhorting the artist to greater achievements. The artist's words on the red back wall signify sacrifice and creative spirit. English translations on the banners refer back to Chinese proverbs such as "Burn your boat after you have landed". Another element centred in the exhibition space is a painted enclosure with densely packed images of mass-produced common consumerism makes reference despite its vivacious colours to death and destruction. The work as a whole develops the Chinese notion of destruction's link to creation. Gu Xiong has grounded his work in the "Here and Now" using the simplest of means to express a major philosophical theme of death and resurrection with refinement and clarity. In closing his statement for the show he says "It is this conflict of culture which has entered my work since coming to Canada, and it is in a state of constant evolution. In the process of evolution my ideas are born. None of this however can be expressed artistically unless the artist has developed technique. This must come from study and practice and from long experience. It creates a new individual culture – it is not an evolution of the original culture, nor is it a copy from another culture, it is a **"new complex"**

**Gu Wenda** from Hangzhou is currently living in New York and his installation works have been shown in many places around the world. Norway, Poland, France, Germany, Japan, New York City, Israel and Canada just to name a few. His work springs from an existential view of the world rooted in Mythology. He often starts his projects with questions about social taboos, the unspoken rules which guide social behaviour and the misunderstandings which lead to creative renewal. He places a great emphasis on the material he uses such as human hair and human placenta powder to name what has been the centre of his most recent works. There is a Utopian dream and the expression of heroic power communicated to the minds and psyche of the viewers. He is always seen as the outsider, the trickster causing one to reflect on mortality and the mysteries of birth and death. Gu Wenda considers himself to be an international artist and like the artist Joseph Beuys, Antonio Tapies and Anselm Kiefer determined to rise above the commercialism or the politics of the time and speak about collective awareness of the shared life experience. This experience includes uncertainty, fear, misunderstanding and co-operation using monumental spectacle events as art. Gu Wenda has become a kind of nomad, connected by his fax machine to the museum system while also being prepared to use alternative venues whenever necessary. Writing and documentation by this artist and other theorist set up a ground work for projects that are specific to the dynamics of the host country.

**Lu Jia** is an artist who has settled in central Canada runs a small art school to teach children Chinese painting techniques. Her oil paintings focus on the somewhat idealized human body in terms of classical beauty. Pride in the exotic visual sense contrasts with the social political struggle which she faced in the cultural revolution. By avoiding direct confrontation with the evils she has experienced, her work opens the door to what is the unfulfilled desire. This is a kind of reverse psychology and genuinely compelling because she uses her own body as subject of the work. Artists have learned to juggle more than one occupation and vision in order to survive financially but the Dunhuang cave murals recently has linked up with a Japanese Buddhist organization to compose a twentieth century version of this vast historical legacy. Using the most sophisticated computer systems the artist is planning drawings for a vast mural of several thousand Buddhist

figures. Lu Jia is at home in Japan, Beijing or Calgary and her projects to make an easy access between cultures as she bridges with the past for the future generations.

The problem we have is in understanding the deep roots of these works by Gu Xiong, Gu Wenda and Lu Jia is because they are new complexes. Nevertheless our struggle to understand as well as the misunderstandings help to show us that narrow nationalist styles by comparison can only tell us what we already know.

In summary I have tried to show that some of the most creative discourses come out of honest attempts to communicate. Even when the result leads to misunderstanding the images generate inadvertent and unexpected meanings in the very process of trying and failing to signify. My contention is that by addressing similar shared problems and by using unfamiliar methods we may uncover vital differences as well as new opportunities. Perhaps the margins of cultures will bear more fruit than some kind of return to national style. These "new complexes" referred to by Gu Xiong can be essential steps to the future of Chinese culture.