

The Life of Agent L

By Jo Wei

Stepping into Liu Xinyi's studio, one gets the feeling it is not very much like the studios one ordinarily sees — more like a garage, a machine warehouse, a laboratory. Located about an hour's drive from Hangzhou and away from any other studios, there is a desolate, isolated air in the studio. The space is divided into three: a work bench right when you enter, with the full range of drills, lathes, and wrenches; on the right is his photo studio; and on the left is his work station, with the computer hard drives for editing and testing lining the space. There is a sense of completeness, simplicity, and practicality. But even clearer is the flow of ideas. Liu Xinyi displays his working schedule, which is divided into four main topics with the progress indicated. Black indicates what has already been completed while red indicates something for which the inspiration is there but has not been realized.

This air of clarity really exemplifies the title of Liu Xinyi's first solo exhibition in China, *Agent L*. Agent L is Liu Xinyi's ego within the creative process — someone who loves history and politics, with a clear train of thought, a sly humor, an articulate expression, and top-notch technical skills. He also enjoys uncovering the hidden underlying causes of things with a light but pointed mockery, and does so in various ways. For instance, he observes things from a temporal perspective (*Elizabeth*), summarizes grand narratives wryly and abstractly (*From Marx to Mao; Universal Protest Banner*) or ridicules the essence of something through displacements (*Hair Salon*). One of his recent works, *Sunny and Dry*, is a good example. He tries to incorporate capitalism and takes up the theme of 9.11; yet such a serious topic happens to be placed within a light and fabular medium — a postcard of Manhattan. In this video piece, an Afghan youth stands with his back to the camera in the midst of what looks like a Central Asian desert, holding the postcard of the Twin Towers fluttering in his hands — until the postcards burn up in flames. The background music is President Bush's 9.11 speech broadcast in reverse — which sounds like some alien tongue. The agent is loquacious:

“In 2010, when American troops shot Bin Laden, I was in England. At the time, there was no way to respond, but I felt America's War on Terror and the connection to China very interesting, since China gained a large measure of geopolitical benefit under this pressure. America went to war at a time of strength, and yet this gained China some more time. The 9.11 incident flipped America's image for our generation. Before all this happened, capitalism was just humming along.”

Of course, the technical level was not ignored: “Right from the start, the plan was to burn, and the entire postcard burnt up in the process. Later I thought of adding phosphorus on the back so that it burns slowly while being fanned in the air.” He smiled at this point, lightly covering all sorts of complicated details from various lines of thought. But Agent L is not born like this.

I The China Academy of Art Period

— “I feel that the tradition at the China Academy of Art holds a hidden passion for Western art history.”

Liu Xinyi stayed at the China Academy of Art for ten years.

The Academy has an excellent tradition of art history, while he had since high school (a high school affiliated with the Academy) undertaken a classical art education systematically. Once at the Academy, he then came into contact with contemporary art history and theory. In such a cultivated atmosphere, Liu Xinyi felt he had run through, once more, the post-Renaissance art history of the West. That such a seemingly virtual art history was so deep and broad even slumped Liu Xinyi deep into confusion. “Having spent ten years at the Academy studying how to make art, I still didn't know the reason for which to make art. It was a bit sad,” Liu Xinyi says, smiling at the description of himself back then.

Liu Xinyi keenly hoped for a change, but wasn't very clear about it. So he prepared to leave the country and study abroad. In the year of preparation before he left, Liu went

to Beijing where he encountered something that left a mark on him: “When I got to Beijing, I was a volunteer interpreter at the UCCA. The main exhibition hall displayed Huang Yongping’s retrospective exhibition, *House of Oracles*, while in the middle and side halls was a group show of five trendy foreign artists. At the time I felt Huang’s works completely overwhelmed the foreign artists in terms of the depth of his thought and the treatment of the topic, and yet my work as a guide still had to include an interpretation of these two shows as though they were equal. Perhaps because of this experience, I started not to have a fearful respect towards Western art.”

Additionally, the special position of Beijing as the capital of the country makes Liu Xinyi truly feel the presence of politics. “Before, I had been living in Hangzhou, where the sense of politics wasn’t really thick in the air. While in Beijing, I encountered an event that was meaningful to me — a moment of political experience. I was near Tian’anmen Square and saw the National People’s Congress taking place on TV screen on bus — yet the real Congress was taking place in the Great Hall of the People, which my eyes could see was a mere stone’s throw away. This double feeling was fantastic.”

Although the sense of authority granted to art history by the China Academy of Art was only slightly shaken during his time in Beijing, it did not shift the foundations. With his mind full of such knowledge and with the germs of curiosity in politics, Liu Xinyi headed off to England without showing any signs that he would become Agent L.

2 The Early Period at Goldsmiths

— *“At Goldsmiths, no one teaches you. They just ‘whip’ you into shape.”*

Liu Xinyi, in the end, chose London’s Goldsmiths College, a school famed for the group of artists graduating in the 80s who rewrote the whole of contemporary art history — the by-now familiar YBA (Young British Artists).

Goldsmiths’ Art Department leaned left politically. What stood out at Goldsmiths was that the cultivation of the students’ minds was more emphasized than that of their

technical skills, while at the same time there was a tough system to train students to become independent artists in the future — to discover elements through independent reflection, to be able to explain and interpret works to potential curator, to accept criticism from all sides and even possess a strong, brave mentality of attack. Thus, it was in fact a “boot camp” of the mind.

Of course, such a system was not born out of nothing, least of all in a country as obsessed with tradition as Britain. In the 80s, the Head of the Art Department, Jon Thompson, had put in place reforms and abolished the system of different concentrations in the department, while lecturers like Michael Craig-Martin went a step further and encouraged students like Damien Hurst to pay attention to the movements in the market.

When Liu Xinyi first arrived at Goldsmiths, he did not think he had any particular identity problems; he just felt everything was very fresh and new. “At that time, I was the only one from Mainland China; the only other person who spoke Chinese was a Taiwanese student.” But after a few months, this feeling of freshness receded, and he truly started to feel the strict pedagogical regime at Goldsmiths.

At Goldsmiths, the semester is arranged so that there are six semesters over two years. Every semester includes a seminar where each student had to display works in front of fellow students as well as the lecturer. In such a situation where everyone knew exactly who created what, there would be severe critiques of the works being displayed. “However, the tradition at the school dictated that you had no chance to rebut on the spot; you could only take in everyone’s ideas or even mockery, and then synthesize all these comments back home later. It’s a bit cruel, and quite a few students couldn’t take it at first. A student from Peru and one from America chose to quit, one after the other.”

Even now, there is a hint of fear in Liu Xinyi. His first seminar exhibition was an investigation of the YBA from Goldsmiths. He undertook an analysis of their best works, almost like a textbook, and the titles of the works were also subjected to a dictionary-like interpretation — creating the feeling of an ironic textbook. “I come from

China, which is designated as the Workshop of the World in ordinary discourse there, so to explain the YBA like an instruction manual purposely matched the identity I paid attention to at the time.”

The second semester’s seminar is “Source”. The format didn’t include any exhibition of works but was purely a lecture where you described the source of an important element of philosophy or art history that deeply affected your ideas about art; in so doing, you introduced and developed your own methodology. At that point, Liu Xinyi discovered that most of the students already had their own determined field of research while he himself was still very confused. So he only analyzed Huang Yongping and Joseph Kosuth. “I always had a relatively tough time at Goldsmiths because I was always undergoing big leaps of experimentation.” Even though they were only trial attempts, from his choice of the two artists chosen he had liked emotionally and intuitively we can see Liu Xinyi’s tastes and tendency — always cognitive or perhaps with a rich intellectual sentiment.

Another aspect of the Goldsmiths pedagogy was the tutorial, which took place at least three times a semester. This was a time where students could display their own works and enter into a one-on-one discussion with the instructor. Unlike the sideways discussion of the seminars, this was a highly effective exchange. The theme of the tutorial could be about, for example, artists that you and the instructor were interested in. With this, Goldsmiths trains students’ abilities in description and expression, while at the same time allowed students many chances to be in touch with older artists that they admired or appreciated. Liu Xinyi discussed with the curator of Latin American art at the Tate Modern, as well as with Xi Jianjun, an older student at Goldsmiths. The advice they provided not only helped mold the works but also made Liu Xinyi reach a deeper understanding of the position and room for development on the part of Chinese and ethnic minorities in Britain.

3 The Later Period at Goldsmiths

— *“This was a very private, very minute feeling, but it did inspire me.”*

The pedagogical spirit at Goldsmiths is to wish for students to get into artistic practice, to discover their own self-definition from a deeper layer of their own contradictions. And Liu Xinyi discovered that the problem he faced was to present himself in front of an entirely new audience. Being completely outside a Chinese context, it was very difficult for him to communicate on a social and psychological level, and thus his creative direction was still very foggy.

However, Liu was constantly searching for a point of entry, which he accidentally hit on while back in China for a visit.

In April 2009, Liu again returned to Beijing. After having experienced a year or more abroad in Britain, he observed that the economy in China was far more active. Without a direct comparison, this perhaps would have been hard to detect; yet after contrasting this with his life in Britain, he found that “the center of the post-Olympics, post-crisis world was perhaps heading East.” At the same time, Beijing as a city had a stimulating effect on the people living there. The intense sensations he felt a year ago during the series of political events — the National People’s Congress, the March 14th incident (the riots in Tibet in 2008), and the overseas protests and boycotts against the Beijing Olympics — once again resurfaced and matured after the contrast between the way of life and cognitive modes in China and the West. An odd qualitative change occurred: he suddenly had the idea that politics was no longer something up on high but rather a very intimate personal feeling, which could perhaps even serve as an interesting theme in a work. “This was a very private, very minute feeling, but it did inspire me.”

After this seedling of a thought, Liu returned to Goldsmiths to continue his third semester there. He started paying attention to all sorts of political topics and started creating again. Yet when we observe his works for a long period after this, we find that they have a very obscure, literary, metaphoric quality, with a sense of barrier or estrangement.

His future wife and then girlfriend, Gu Ying, later came to visit him at Goldsmith, and stayed with him until he graduated. She had a very strong background in Chinese studies and religion. Once, by accident, they formed a study group of the *Diamond Sutra*. The former half of the work deals with “emptiness”, while the latter half deals with “non-way” (wufa). At points within the work, an important idea is discussed repeatedly — “appearances” or “views” (xiang). “I suddenly grasped that this world had true appearances as well as false appearances. Speaking of a thing that is in direct negation of the so-called truth will in fact stimulate people in search of truth. Similarly, in a world full of falsehoods, making imaginative but false appearances will never be as interesting as carefully explaining the truth.”

Thus, Liu Xinyi’s works started becoming lighter and stopped being obscure, complex, and heavy. This shift, as well as his accumulation of knowledge, understanding, and reading resulted in a qualitative leap in his three graduating pieces with regards to his earlier works.

“In the two years as a graduate student, I made 18 pieces altogether. The graduating work is something of a summation. The three pieces from the last period are pieces I was relatively more satisfied with: *From Marx to Mao*, *Automatic Arms*, and *Universal Protest Banner*. They mainly expressed my reflections on radical politics.”

Liu Xinyi mentioned the works *From Marx to Mao*. Europe was facing a financial crisis at the time he was creating the piece; everywhere around him, talk of Marxism grew louder. Every July in London, there always is a large gathering of Marxists who would carry the portraits of these four leaders on the streets — it was almost like time travel, as though heading back to the high point of European Communism. Such direct personal experiences are rather intense. At the time, he wondered how to express this; later, he remembered that there is a rather famous series of woodprints on Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. From afar, it appeared that the beards got smaller and sparser one after the other. This seemingly humorous shift in beards in fact encapsulates fundamental shifts in political history. And this humor in his works is prominent after Agent L gained levity.

4 Working Period

—“*Looking at the world from the standpoint of the old British Empire, your perspective can’t help but be broad.*”

After graduating from Goldsmiths, Liu spent a year as a blue-collar worker, working at the bicycle chain store, Evans Cycle. What he thought was that he wanted to truly live the life of ordinary British folks; plus, he would have the time to consider whether he would really become a full-time artist.

“In the store, there is a garage. To be a bike mechanic, there are three levels, and you begin training at the first,” Liu reminisced. “When I was working, I truly understood how hard the life of the British working class was. In the winter, you would start work every morning at 8 when the sun was just rising, and get off work at 4 or 5 as the sun was setting. Starting and finishing in darkness — life seemed to lack meaning. If it’s a full-time job, the monthly pay comes to 900 pounds. After 400 pounds for rent, there is barely anything to live on.”

After twelve months of toil, Liu then worked eight months as a white-collar worker, taking up secretarial duties at the Meridian Society, a non-profit organization devoted to helping the British public understand China. The writers and researchers studying Chinese issues at the institution did a lot of public work, so this was very much connected to the shifts in international politics. His work itself involved taking notes at conferences, organizing files, replying to mail, developing the membership base; every piece of mail required a memo to five superiors. Liu found such work mentally tedious, shredding time to bits and pieces, while he did not have any time to do art. He knew it was time to return to China.

These twenty months are very important to Liu, as he experienced real British life outside academia. His hardship etched ideas about art and politics deep inside of him. When he began repairing bikes, he truly understood how capitalism was not merely an abstract idea in a textbook. Moreover, during this period, he kept up with his reading habit and got interested in new topics, such as international relations.

Indeed, Britain, as a former empire on which the sun never set, is precisely the place fullest in such resources; past colonies have gone and left, but the international spirit remains. Everyone talked politics like it was something completely everyday and mundane. There, politics was not felt to be some internecine palace struggle or intrigue, but something historical and concrete. Observing the world with this spirit, your perspective cannot help but broaden.

5 The Formation of the Agent L

Liu Xinyi finally became the Agent L whom we see now. What he has absorbed has come from many directions: the ten years at the China Academy of Art, the combative spirit trained through the grueling years at Goldsmiths, the seemingly easy profundity gleaned from Buddhist classics, the ordinary life in a bike garage, the triviality of a clerk's life — all these finally molded the spirit of Agent L.

Welcome to the world of Agent L.

Agent L answers some questions, around certain keywords:

1 Politics

Jo Wei: Explain the relationship to politics in your works.

Liu Xinyi: The way I understand politics is as an all-pervasive, fundamental mode of social organization. It defines the functional object and field of economic and political activities. From the beginnings of human history, the function of politics is the reference point of the individual and the community, the clan or nation and the world. Though politics is so crucial and important, its historical development has been full of irrationality. From a starting point of dealing with political themes, I also have a certain interest in anthropology; thus, my work does not serve the purpose of expressing my own personal political views. Furthermore, I don't have that much passion in participating in politics as such; I only study political issues and hope to find new cognitive modes to understand human society.

Jo Wei: How do you view the sensitivity of the material?

Liu Xinyi: Regarding sensitivity, the value of some art works in fact lies in their being censored — in the expression of intelligence and courage in the face of the dictates of power. Radicalism is a temptation; it makes us feel like we possess an independent and uncompromising fighting spirit, but this is exactly what I harbor suspicions about.

2 History

Jo Wei: Your works have a noticeable historical depth, like in *Elizabeth* among others. How was your own historical perspective formed?

Liu Xinyi: Historians like Arnold Toynbee and Ray Huang (Huang Renyu) helped me establish a perspective at looking at history, but perhaps cultural scholars like Li Zehou and Wang Hui laid out different possibilities from a Chinese perspective. Other casual writers like Li Ao, etc., bring critical distance and a comparative cultural methodology. And traditional Chinese historiography inevitably influenced me deeply, however unconsciously.

3 Influence

Jo Wei: Talk a bit about people who have influenced or inspired you.

Liu Xinyi: From the get go, I was influenced by Huang Yongping; I really found out more about him while

I was in Britain. And artists like Martin Creed and Maurizio Cattelan are all very good, fun artists. Martin Creed, for instance, had a series of cacti increasing in height at the Fruitmarket Gallery show. Then there is his jogging project. Audiences at Tate Britain would see an athlete sprinting through the Neoclassical corridors of Tate Britain every 30 seconds, like clockwork — and of course inevitably references the classical and contemporary art on two sides of the long corridor. And the Swiss artist, Roman Signer, too, whose retrospective I saw in Zurich, which displayed his video works. He has always protested war in a non-art-historical way, without either deep historical enmity or bitterness. In a work like *Dot*, Roman places himself in a placid-looking natural landscape. Sitting in front of the canvas, the artist would have a bomb detonate behind him — when it suddenly explodes, he would leave a terrifying mark of the brush on the canvas.

4 Goldsmiths

Jo Wei: As an insider, how exactly was the educational system at Goldsmiths?

Liu Xinyi: Students at Goldsmiths do not just blindly worship the YBA; there's even a bit of a taboo when mentioning them. In fact, the YBA couldn't have represented the full academic breadth of Goldsmiths at the time; the school has more facets than that. What's meaningful is that the education at Goldsmiths did not spend much time emphasizing the completeness of the works, so the works of the vast majority of students appear obscure in its methods, rough in their techniques, and limited in appeal, but the graduates who end up as professional artists can all express the completeness of their works to the fullest extent. This actually stands in contrast to a general understanding in the art world with regards to Goldsmiths after the YBA — that what's unique about this school is that they can guide students to successfully commercialize conceptual art.

Jo Wei: And what's special about London's other art schools?

Liu Xinyi: The other art schools in London all have their own strengths: Royal College of Art (RCA) has the very trendy air of European high society; many consider it to stand in contrast to Goldsmiths as two extremes of approaches to value. The Slade College at University College London (UCL) is the grande dame of British art schools; for the British public, it is rather like the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China, with a more moderate approach. University of Arts London (UAL) has Central Saint Martins College and Design and the Chelsea College of Art and Design; these are younger and more visually oriented.