

Political Games and the Politics of Play - on “Responsive Institution”

Interviewer: Bao Dong

Published in December, 2013
@ Look Art Space, Ren Art Center

Bao Dong: The title of the exhibition was initially set as, “Community Center”, in your opinion, what are the specific differences between the Chinese “Mahjong and Chess game room” and “community center”?

Liu Xinyi: This is an interesting question. I have paid special attention to the two local communities in Hangzhou, and there is a “Mahjong and Chess game room” in each community. They are often the most frequented public spaces, especially in the evenings. If we were to consider it with television and the internet as the most effective scenarios, then we can claim that the fastest realization in today’s social participation is entertainment fairness. In other words, the mode in the fairness of entertainment alleviates the irrevocable disparity in people’s income and political status. Of course, the attraction of the “Mahjong and chess game room” also lies in its excitement of winning or losing money, while the games remain the same, it is difficult to embody the public’s vision and disposition. Therefore, I thought perhaps I could stimulate people’s interest in participating, and facilitate the space in becoming where anyone could imagine about the world, isn’t this also the initial political ideal for community centers?

Bao Dong: Why have you given up on this exhibition title in the end?

Liu Xinyi: The information embedded in this exhibition title is critical. On the one hand, the implications of a community center seemed too specific, one is more inclined to associate it with official political characteristics as much as it is intended as a self-banter. Then I figure that these words would only be seen as a functional terminology, and they would not attract much attention. On the other hand, it is too ambiguous as a title and its focus seems unclear. It could be understood as, “Most artists wishes to be the “center of activity” on one’s own exhibition opening”, which obviously is not the primary concern of this project. Eventually, I turned to methodology as I searched for the universality of the artwork. Fortunately, one of the artwork’s titles is, “Responsive Institution”. On a second glance, whether the second combat as one loses a game of chess, or to send “animals and plants” to mars, or using economic index as entertainment tool, I seem to proactively responded to a number of common visions. However, the supernatural context the title represented would encompass the overall project, allowing the audience to keep their sense of humor while they participate.

Bao Dong: Do you think contemporary art holds geo-politics? In other words, do you think your artworks require a specific audience? Have you imagined an ideal audience?

Liu Xinyi: The geo-political environment for contemporary art largely relies on the ramification of geo-politics. There is sufficient evidence to prove that the incessant ideological struggles of the Cold War was almost inseparable from its artists and designers who fought on the visual fields through respective propaganda channels. Providing a rather distant example, if the West has not gained success from the Cold War, then the commodified conceptual art represented by the YBA would not have rapidly earned the appreciations of the capital on Wall Street. The globalized art trade and individualistic values directly ostracized those critical cultural energies within Europe and America. Moreover, the strange façade of allowing to exhibit/permitting to show “contemporary Chinese art” in Western museums and art institutions is another example. Those conservative voices who believe to represent Western interests are supportive of political criticism in the names of art outside of Euro-America regions in their attack of the regional in order to gain advantage in the geo-political discourse, while they adopt an ambivalent strategy towards their struggle in the development of contemporary art within. They censor public resources, demand social responsibilities from artists, and indirectly encourages art to steer towards creative economy. Interestingly, regardless of which art center you are in globally, most artists have to gain their potential to develop by becoming respectable business talent. It is not an overstatement to claim geo-politics as an annotation of contemporary art.

For my own work, as long as the work is assigned with a public property, in other words, shown publically, it would require careful deliberation and interaction with public thinking and such thinking is not entirely utilitarian. I must hypothesize that there are certain viewers who have had profound individual experience in the topics I am engaging them in, and who would not be easily convinced by the artist. There will always be more viewers who have a good understanding of the happenings in the contemporary art practices and who look forward to its development, who has insatiable curiosity to the broad topics of the contemporary. All of these precepts require me to be exigent to my own artwork, especially to open up a path of thinking beyond individual understanding. Moreover, I wish the experiments of my peers and myself would broaden the resources of such “ideal viewer”, and we would stimulate the interest of people of various professions, education and economic background, in order to explore and comprehend new perspectives of the myriad world. In turn, this would compliment and challenge my work on an epistemological and conceptual level.

Bao Dong: I also think contemporary art in the post Cold War globalization era has entered into a homogenous and dispersed state. One of its characteristics is the abstracted relationship between art and its local experience, where art has been placed in the vacuous environment, such as large-scale exhibitions and art fairs, as if all art practices can be gauged over a common denominator. Under such circumstances, I would like to ask whether viewers with specific background would enter your work more effectively than others? Perhaps, they share common social experience or similar standard of intellectual interests as you...

Liu Xinyi: The exhibition would nevertheless provide an opportunity for the artist to observe the viewers. It is quite gratifying when one’s work would gather thoughts or emotions from others. I have noticed that being constantly online allows art viewers of my generation to switch to their roles of self-media in the art scenes. This would allow them to consciously look for the various details used to criticize the intent of my work; and those who have had experiences of living abroad are

more willing to exchange or rant on our common experiences; as for the collectors and curators, on the one hand, they hope the artist would talk about their ideas with passion, on the other hand, they are more reserved with their thoughts due to various reasons; moreover, there has been multiple occasions where the workers would rant about their rather cruel yet sensible understanding of my work. Those viewers of various backgrounds have shared with me senses and judgment from multiple social tiers, and their feedbacks are meaningful references for my works in the future. Whether I am concerned with who is the more ideal or effective object, is like the artist discussing the utilitarianism in balancing one's career, I would rather leave the discussion to the bystanders.

As for the global homogeneity, I think it's a temporary outcome of the capitalist chase. The developed nations represented by the G7 were the first to internally assimilate, and those so-called international cities scattered outside of this club, from time to time, behind their superficial and mode of urban tendency, one would spot the "eye-catching" cultural barriers. Even though the power holders of urban management aim to control and persist the top down systematic reform and cover-up, however their "shaky foundation" leave the project progress lagging behind the expectation to "globalized" expectation. Even though the progress of global aesthetics seem to have taken dramatic measures since the eruption of the financial crisis, yet there has not been a contender that would compete with it in the visual world, so the construction goal in people's mind would only rely on the nearly hypothetical industrial social vision. Perhaps such strange situation would engender new meanings through the efforts of today's generation in a decade, just as time would possibly provide those beyond the "effective figures" many changes.

Bao Dong: In "Second Strike", why have you chosen International chess, rather than Chinese chess or the game of go?

Liu Xinyi: it was a difficult choice to make between the game of Chinese chess and International chess. Whether the context of the River of Chu and Han borders in the Chinese chess game or the King and Queen of the international chess, are both referential systems of ancient political separations in China and Europe. The reluctant singular term of the world has not been pertinent for a century, it seems that no one is interested or has the ability to create a fair game that summarizes the various traditions of warfare. And inventing a game that no one knows how to play rejects possibilities of participation. In the end, I decided to combine the characteristics of the visual and rules of the international chess. The grid board without borders can be "open", and the malleable black and white chess pieces are symbolic, moreover, the rules of international chess allow for more possibilities of draw. These characteristics are comparable to the strategic stalemate of the major powers today.

Bao Dong: Since these works are highly participatory, so I imagine you would choose the ones with easy access. In the 798 exhibition environment, compare to Chinese chess, there are a lot less people who know how to play international Chess. Or, you don't require actual participation, but to use the game to provoke a kind of participatory imagination, in other words, you are more interested in the conceptual efficiency, rather than the social impact of the artwork?

Liu Xinyi: How would one define actual participation? For the artist, it implies to open his context of thinking to the worldly ideas radically, while he takes risks. In comparison, according to the logics of everyday behaviors of Chinese people, the matters of art seem hypocritical. Without causing too

much effort from the viewers, the expected social context of the exhibition would be habitually replaced by consumer logics. Moreover, the bodily participation in artistic projects is a relatively uncontrollable detail, as much as I wish my artwork would not favor the identities of the viewer. At the same time, I am also not enthused to equate my project as to the setup of the game room. Such contradiction may only be bridged and circumvented in the gained techniques in further practices.

Conceptual efficiency may be trained control, it depends on whether the artwork is tenable within the system. I have yet to witness that the intrinsic capacity of the artwork exceeds its symbolic implications, even its social significance is also generated from symbolism. Beuys' social sculptures can be said as the conceptual combination of both artistic and political practices, until this day, it remains as a discussion in the artistic context that continues to expand into sociological and political disciplines. In my practice, I can only prioritize the efficiency of the artwork, while not giving up on the possibilities of expanding on its social impacts.

Our conceptions make us inclined to believe in the social impact of culture by relying on textual or the artwork's inherent ethical power and knowledge, and by which to achieve its broad dissemination. However, art in the supply-greater-than-demand phenomenon of the industrial society demands scrupulous strategy and ability of control, that would wisely transfuse interesting information through social channels. Thus far, the most mature and effective channel is the media, and the self-media model on social media is an even more subversive platform adopting the vivid voices of the masses to defeat the myriads of intellectuals' envious fields of commentaries. The essence of social impact that the artists expect is still cultural elitism, how would one adroitly participate into the competition of future discourse is the challenge that is imminent to my generation of artists.

Bao Dong: What is your opinions on the difference between entertainment and game?

Liu Xinyi: My understanding of entertainment is a repetitively tested response of audiences' interest. Television programs, films and the internet games as representatives of the entertainment industry are keen to evaluate whether their product is attractive enough to guarantee sustainable profit for the industry. Behind the entertainment is the entertainment industry, the prioritized economic goals of the provisional system of mass culture. The nature of the business of this industry allows the outcome of the entertainment to be quantifiable through summarizing technical factors and adjusting strategies to increase productivity. A counter example is, if I were to describe the entertaining factor of certain people and their profession, there would definitely be a degree of biting criticism, because entertainment is generally referred to the tricks in pseudo-cultural products, which is difficult to be separated from commercial interests.

Although gameplay may also be used to describe individual or group engaged business, however, the intrinsics of gameplay is largely referring to the self-initiated activities. The social function is not its primary motivation. The activities are considered with game components, its participants would seem more serious, moreover, its emphasis would not lay on individual responsibility and significance. For instance, playing chess and fishing. And those who are obsessed with social functions are usually considered to score off people. If we compare it to entertainment, the main

difference would be that the game engenders aimless and subjective experience, and there is no standard in its estimation, but to refer to the participants' subjective experience.

Concerning these two aspects, I am not going to comment on my own practice. But let me go off on a tangent, presenting a situation with more complex motivations, that is, the artist's tendency to "self-entertain". Even though the viewers are willing to see art as comparable to a game, but pure games are inconsiderate of those beyond its participants, which creates an enclosed and self-efficient world. This contradicts with the art system's emphasis on sharing, dissemination and abstraction to cultural values. The unwillingness to share with others also suggests one's rejection to systematic evaluation. However, the proposal of "self-entertainment" has more or less revealed the participants' psychological expectations within the small circle, even though it might be melancholic, or humble and cautious. The focus of "self-entertainment" lies in its expectations in the outcome. It can be both a low and high expectation, which depends on the phase of the artist's career and his understanding and attitude of the contemporary art profession. The experientialist of entertainment is entirely appropriate to promote artistic creativity to wider reaches, while the artist may be destroyed by his own desires and the industries' repetitive testing. It is only once the artist has found the equilibrium between the entertainment and game factors, would he have the opportunity to be considered as an exception of the industrial society. Thereafter, would he continue to work towards gaining his own rights of the gameplay.

Bao Dong: In this exhibition, as well as in many of your previous artworks, you have adopted game factors in dealing with popular international political topics – at least on a middle class and epistemological level. There are many components of toys and small games, at least from what I remember, "the grippers", "the fortune cats", "gem puzzle", and for this exhibition, "darts", "chess", "draw". I even think these political topics are excuses for these games, like the game on the smart phone, "Save the World", where the players are only concerned whether the game is fun to play or not, rather than thinking about its background story. Of course, for you, it is not critical whether the games would be played or not, but the intellectual interest behind the games, political topics has provided a stage for intellectual interests.

Liu Xinyi: I am truthfully concerned about politics. Without boasting in changing the world, at least I would make an effort to follow up on the worldly changes and its developments. If I would offer expanding ideas on these issues in my own practice, at least I have emancipated myself from the rigid logics of knowledge that can also be quite satisfying.

It is not difficult to understand the trends in international political issues, the development of China is its essential condition, but the direct causes are discourses made by various media. International politics may be distant from most Chinese' actual political experience, and it would seem rather elite and safe to discuss it. I have occasionally overheard many middle-age intellectuals or businessmen in heated discussions of international situations, what surprises me was the content of their discussion is basically repeating those popular commentaries by various mainstream media, even the language they use are not interesting.

The fundamental reason behind such phenomenon should be blamed on the interests groups of world powers, not only tabloids continue to emerge and shortcomings are exposed, what is critical is

their gradually diminishing self-confidence and romance, thus the two meta-narratives would not escape the fate of collapse. The wanton deconstructive revelry and the whining of losing subjectivity is insufficient, there has to be people who would prepare for the reconstruction of proper world views. Political and economic experiments are undoubtedly the core components, however, their discourses are often over dominating and semantically abstract. How does one begin with oneself in observing details of the world, and adopt sensible approaches to understand its past, present and future, adopt its rich cultural resource and make them enlighten my practice, this is the game I wish to devote my life to experiment.

--Translated by He Xiao