

Liu Wei: The Creative Gesture

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In March 2007, I visited the studio of Liu Wei in Beijing. Among the works there, mostly semi-abstract paintings that made reference to the urban landscape, I noticed what looked like a strange little house, a model of a building, made of those ox hide dog chews made to resemble bones. Liu explained that he was thinking of using it in a performance where a dog would attack and eat the building. In May that year, he exhibited an installation of these buildings, entitled *Love it, Bite it*, at the CAAW (China Art Archives and Warehouse) in Beijing. I saw the exhibition and proposed that we should include the work in “China Power Station: Part 2,” a show that took place in Oslo from September to December 2007 and was curated by myself and Serpentine Gallery directors Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist. The work is now in the Astrup Fearnley Collection in Oslo. In an interview with Obrist, published in the book *Hans Ulrich Obrist: The China Interviews*, by the Office for Discourse Engineering in 2009, Liu commented on his installation:

The title comes from the material, which is the ox hide used to make dog chews. The concept is actually quite simple: it’s a city made entirely of parliament buildings that now look shabby. Most directly, it shows how the human desire for power and the animal desire for food are the same.

In step with China’s economic thrust onto the world stage, its domestic art scene has quickly and assertively gained a significant presence within the international art world. This seismic change, less than three decades in the making, has allowed Chinese artists to break free of traditional emphases and adopt a new language inspired by Western artistic references. Liu belongs to a generation of artists born in the late 1970s and 1980s who have come of age in this era of avant-garde identity. They are the product of a highly particular socio-political situation: in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, cultural revolution was brewing and a true awareness of the avant-garde had arrived. This generation is well educated, versed in the lessons of both Western and Eastern art history, and has benefited from the freedom to travel, which has enabled these artists to build extensive international relationships. Not only are they the first “post-Mao children,” but they are also a mobile and connected generation of truly global artists. Despite this mobility, and the tendency of their predecessors to go into exile overseas, much of this group has chosen to stay in China. Reasons for this include advantageous working conditions and a beneficial economic situation (large studios at a fraction of the cost of those in Europe or America, and an upwardly mobile base of patrons to support their work). Additionally, China is a sign of power, resilience and dynamism in the new millennium. It has shifted globally from the cultural periphery to the center, and these artists want to stay in the country of their birth because they are intrigued by their homeland and eager to be a part of its future development.

Liu's work can be characterized by a post-Duchampian impulse associated with an expanded vision of modernism. Instead of developing his practice within established medium-specific frameworks, he has adopted a more variable approach premised upon altering and recombining readymades of both Chinese and Western origin into rich installations that confront viewers with a variety of often theatrical, and almost always confounding, narratives. Acutely aware of his place in history, but also concerned with breaking tradition, Liu intermingles artistic inventiveness and an engagement with serious social and political questions, inviting the public to take part in intersubjective relationships. He does so through a symbolic constellation of objects, created out of unexpected materials and placed in surprising configurations, that deal with universal topics such as power and politics, society and identity, history and memory, art and philosophy, or with more abstract notions like time, unpredictability, chance and illusion. Each of his works is like a vessel loaded with intelligent and meaningful reflections on the human condition, and the power of his art lies in the originality of the forms, objects, materials and narrative structures that he brings together. A neo-modernist who believes in development and progress, he subjects readymade objects to new socio-cultural assessment. The vulnerable, often beautiful situations he evokes through his delicate materials and means create an awareness of social unity that underlines the fragility of the social fabric.

Liu works with a deep sense of experimentation in a great diversity of media, including photography, painting, sculpture and installation. In photography, he has composed landscapes out of human body parts with a conscious nod to John Coplans. He has also transformed TVs, washing machines, refrigerators and fans into strange, subtle and poetic works conveying a sense of absurdity, naming them "Anti-matter" and giving them a second life. As a parody of the war machine or the space program, he creates out of Chinese porcelain impressive and enigmatic objects that resemble military items and space ships — eminently poetic, dramatic and even frightening works that narrate transcultural fictions. When he is not cutting and resizing everyday objects to match a standardized geometric modernistic schema, he is inventing archeological findings in a battle against forgetting, or constructing palaces out of old doors and windows, or, as we have seen, making a cityscape out of dog chews that comments on the fragility of political power and the continuous dialog between nature and civilization, infused with his ongoing reflection on truth and memory. And parallel to all these different and highly inventive works are more settled paintings that make cross references to his object-based art but are clearly founded on and integrated within the tradition of modernist painting.

In fact, Liu's entire practice can be seen as a fragmented cityscape whose social structure is reduced to an essential state for the sake of clarity of message. This stems from an urgent imperative to involve the spectator. Liu's visionary experiments and stimulating

situations — especially the body-related installations — ensure that the viewer becomes involved in the artistic process. Viewers are made highly conscious of their own presence and existence in relation to their environment and to society. This turns the spectator into an active player in the more-or-less controlled process that leads to the formation of meaning. There is a reversal of subject and object here: the viewer becomes the object and the context becomes the subject. What happens next is part of the work's form, substance and meaning.

Liu invites the spectator into a handmade world of manipulated objects that question conventions and contradictions, including social injustice, consumer society and our standardized way of living. His works are articulated around his refusal of fixed notions regarding political hegemony and ethnic differences. The way in which the individual is captured inside a complicated system of temptation and desire controlled by the State, as well as the military and weapons programs, the penitentiary system, violence, and even the art world itself, often become his raw materials. "Modernity" as it relates to current urbanism, architecture and design is also part of his personal, sociological and anthropological study of the contemporary human condition. He questions the nature of those social phenomena that can be seen as systems for conditioning and ruling, dictating the appearance and behavior of people's everyday lives. While such "modernity" proposes a utopian vision of the future, Liu shows how it actually leans towards uniformity and reduced personal initiative — how all is designed to fix the individual in a preconceived role.

Liu's skepticism regarding such notions is inlaid into his art objects. In a time of distancing and appropriation, of adopted or factory-produced artworks, he returns to personal expression. While he does employ readymades and recycled materials, his formal language can be described as "bricolage," a form of expression where the hand of the artist is clearly visible. Bricolage is part of the tradition of modernism in which Liu's art, especially his paintings, is deeply rooted. As such, he does not accept postmodernist notions of the diminished identity or responsibility of the author. He is a political and moral artist who loads the object, formally and thematically, with a personal message about honesty and personal experience, implicating the spectator in a way that promotes social awareness. He is critical of the fading out of self-expression, and skeptical of a culture of overwhelming consensus. While he fears the oppression of the individual by "visionary" state and corporate domination, he is, however, fascinated by their well-structured and functioning mechanisms. Rather than fighting the system, he is more eager to point out its failings and to repair it.

Liu Wei has forged a special position within the international contemporary art scene. He is an artist of his own time, but he is not part of an art movement. He belongs instead to a tradition of artists who take up a clear individual position through their personal artistic language, their humanistic scope and their deep political and social commitment.