

## **An UNEMPLOYED Artist**

By Yipeng Jiang

Apparently, one should denounce the logic of icons, images or texts in order to evaluate and comprehend Gu Dexin's artworks. Gu's life-long pursuit of art dates back to the late 1970s, a period that saw China flooded by a variety of western culture and art movements – from Renaissance to Impressionism, Greco to Picasso, messed up in a merry-go-round that influenced this young self-trained 'painter' well-known within He Ping Li, the compound where he grew up. He refused to allow his paintings to conform to any "ism", but rather scribbled beautifully and self-indulgently. However, when those who took his painting skills seriously introduced him to some instructors – a neighbor who took up painting as profession, a "rightist" teacher working at the Fine Art Academy, even a vice-president of an art academy who briefly participated in the Yan'an period, he could not bear to go to a second class -- he saw no point in painting like that.

In the earlier days, Gu did not even gain an admission card to sit for the entrance examination for the Central Academy of Fine Art. Though we have no idea what kind of works he submitted, the fact that the "Art History" instructed by art academies of that time ended at Impressionism explained the failure of Gu and his scribbles. Over the next several years, with no regrets at his failed attempt to enter the academy, he created an array of "mini-paints" – a group of aliens sprouting several pairs of breasts, which were later interpreted as "Beyond Sex" by the art critic Hou Hanru.

He was previously connected with various non-official groups of painters, such as the 'Stars Group' and 'No Name', both of which were fervently involved in the Beijing art scene of the 1980s. He felt particularly encouraged when he arrived at the works of Wang Keping at the once-famous "Xing Xing Exhibition". Wang's work that featured pure artistic means, brief but powerful in expression, with a distinctive viewpoint and attitude, ignited his earnest beliefs and ideals about art. Years later in a discussion with Robert Rauschenberg during his 1985 journey to China, the same feeling even saved him from a life full of alcohol and idleness, and made him later become an artist who is full of dignity and wisdom, able to command the world's most powerful artistic language.

Since the mid-80's, maybe even earlier, Gu has become unsatisfied with art creations on canvas, but has been eager to find a powerful language that could be sensed directly and reach to our mind without any futile conversions. He struck out to experiment with installation and soon became one of the pioneers in the field in China. Comparing with the "installations" generated in the "85 New Trend Movement" that were still confined by the imagery factors hailed from paintings and sculptures, his works presented his amazing intuition of handling "materials". To look at Gu's installations requires the strong-hearted; his instinctively capricious juxtaposition of daily objects like plastic, raw meat, and fruit are so sensible that it could suddenly lead to a startling and deadening effect to one's mindset. As all the materials are so common to daily life, Gu is able to get familiar with their qualities: how long does the raw meat take to deteriorate? How does one reshape a piece of plastic? What will the materials smell like after deterioration or reshaping? In order to grasp qualities of plastic – a kind of colorful, easy-to-remodel "new material" of the day, he even went to work in a plastic factory for several years. He tends to present the materials themselves in his works so as to let their silent but naturally sensible confession, or rather, the "existence", make sense to the spectators.

Since the end of the 80's, he has been actively involved in various international exhibitions. Within these various exhibitions we are confronted with his unparalleled ability for spatial arrangement and

control. His startling 2007 site-specific work, executed within neo-classical style architecture, a brief walk from the Bund in Shanghai, manifested his full capability. At first sight there was nothing to see as you walked into the space; but within a few steps as you followed the sidewalk tiles running away at a 25-degree angle, you felt seduced to march forward without realizing that you were about to effortlessly walk out of the window and fall into thin air. The sudden halt led the eyes down to the floor; several manholes with something dimly visible as blood red drew your attention inward, where floating maggots merged in a viscous silica gel. On the other side, a lake of blue colored silicon rested on the tall and broad atrium with sparkling reflections from the wings of the houseflies scattered on top.

Perhaps Gu Dexin was trying to bring us into a real situation: surrounding us is an extremely strange, dangerous, and suspicious world; then came a truth which was unexpectedly cruel: the vacuous and ridiculous existence of individuals and the fragility if life threw you into the deep, solitary abyss. Still, the moment you looked back, the scene had turned on its head into a vision of splendid grandeur, so peaceful and beautiful. It reminded me of a certain feeling expressed by an artist of the same age, “You seemed to have entered a slow motion movie”. The abrupt slowing-down of reality crawls unbelievably into surrealism, which seems to have nothing to do with you, though it truly exists with you are involved. When you crawl out of this slow motion world, you are no longer the ‘you’ that entered. I would rather believe, what Gu froze over for us, is a serious moment (“Ernste Stunde”, by Rainer Maria Rilke). It is certainly not a specified and tangible moment, but a moment that leaks out the secret of life.

These moments of rarity seem to be close at hand for Gu, which, I believe, are the result of his very long spiritual and intellectual engagement with the dark loneliness of grieving. Later, based on his gifted ability for visual expression, he chose to use the most direct and simple language possible to manifest his thoughts. He collapses the distance between the senses and the inner mind, reaching the so-called effect “Chu Mu Jing Xin”, which literally means ‘to strike the eyes and immediately rouse the mind’. Take the ‘kneading meat’ for example: he has kneaded a piece of raw meat for months or years until it has rotted and dried and framed in gold and with decorated flower patterns. Or the flagpole made of stainless steel, which was extended by 25 meters, lying across the center of the exhibition hall with kids rolling and horsing about on it. He has also made a few animations with simple-lined little cartoon figures, which amused five-year-old children, but grieved those who have suffered through history. There is a kind of rational craziness about Gu’s character that enables us spectators to realize that there are politics of power everywhere within our daily lives- a peaceful world on the verge of war with equality and liberty trampled by horrors. And all this time, you have probably perceived nothing.

As we have mentioned, Gu Dexin grew up in the compound of He Ping Li in Beijing, born there in 1962. In the past two decades, he has been invited several times to immigrate overseas. Regardless, he intends never to leave his place of birth, for he needs to constantly know more about “here” and to stay is the only way to gain access. He used to be an alcoholic who once passed out in a roadside garden. But now he has abstained from alcohol for health reasons. He married his wife in 1988, living a normal life as every married couple, grocery shopping and cooking meals all by themselves. When it is widely expected that he would become the last master of our time, he, to the contrary, denies his identity as an artist by filling the blank space for ‘occupation’ on the VISA registration form with: UNEMPLOYED.

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Appendix: a talk with Gu Dexin

Xiao Gu (little Gu) – as we have called him over the decades. I think it is because there're so many things “unchanged” about him. Xiao Gu is good to everyone. Extremely good! The smile on his face displays some kind of unwavering peace after survival. He never explains his works, seldom accepting interviews. We searched among his friends for memories of serious dialogue within informal discussions:

Q: Are you satisfied with your past artworks?

A: For me, to end means everything. I don't care about satisfaction.

Q: Do you care about the exposing your works to the public?

A: No.

Q: What kind of artist do you dream to be?

A: I don't care whether I'm an artist or not. I can be anything other than an artist.

Q: Then what you care about?

A: Maybe I care about knowing more.

Q: Such as truth or deceit?

A: Yes.

Q: What does contemporary art mean to you?

A: A sort of attitude.

Q: Why?

A: There're so many differences between art of the past and today. In the past, artists and art were products of their system, political or religious... like Leonardo da Vinci. Art was not commonly accessible to the public at that time. Only those with privilege were able to do art. Nowadays, however, anyone can do art.

Q: Where is art heading?

A: I think artists may not exist in the future art scene, what will remain are artworks only.

Q: As an individual, are you an optimist or pessimist?

A: A pessimist maybe.

Q: Why?

A: Cause of something hard to change within human nature.

Q: For example...?

A: Like power.

Q: Do you believe in anything? What enables you to go on with life?

A: Love.