

Don't Ask "Where Are We?"

By Li Xianting

The title "Where are we?" frightens me a little. As an individual, to what extent can an artist ask this question on behalf of "us"? The traditional Confucian view of art as "articles carrying doctrines" and "cultivating moralization and improving ethics" burdened art with too many important social and moral tasks. After the Song Dynasty surrendered, the paintings of literati got away from Confucianism's utilitarian view of art. By the time of the May 4th Movement, these utilitarian ideas had been thoroughly refuted by modern thinkers. Then, during the period from the 1940s to the Cultural Revolution, art was completely reduced to an appendage to state politics. Nearly a century of Chinese art history has cared too much for "us". So, now, "Where are we?" When the gate to China was bombed open by Western powers, the frame of reference immediately expanded to the rest of the world. In the course of its modernization, China has experienced more contradiction than advancement. Particularly since China reopened to the West, in the new situation of economic and information globalization, the vast ocean electronic media have lured everyone into the raging torrent. Our concepts of "we" and "I" have been shaped by various kinds of information; "my" and "our" roles have thus become ambiguous; and the boundaries between "I", "you" and "he/she" and those between "we", "you" and "they" are also becoming increasingly blurred. It is more difficult to say clearly where "we" are. Or does the question "Where are we?" need to be answered?

If the question "Where are we?" must be answered, I would rather say "I am in my heart". I tend more and more to regard art as a kind of religion; that is to say, art is only a means and method of self-salvation. In their creative activities, artists consider no external standards, and faced with the purity and sincerity of their own souls, they care for no requirements of Vanity Fair magazine to maintain them. In fact, this is no mean feat. Since "I" have been fostered by all kinds of education and information, then what am "I"? Or in a vogue word, the self has no essence, but in the world of the works "I" create, "I" have been rescued from the reality of "my being shaped". In the artistic sense, the self is similar to the self in a religious sense and becomes a pure and completely free mind, in which "I" am confirmed.

However, the process in which "I" am rescued from "being shaped" isn't an abstract and purified process. In modern society, there is no Peach Garden as described by Tao Yuanming and there is no shortcut to success. For a time, "personal cultivation" is characteristic of freeing oneself from a particular ideology, education or information. I have emphasized the influence society has on art, and not the artistic representation of social phenomena. What I emphasize is the tension in life between the individual and society. There has never been abstract and pure human nature. Due to the pertinence and conflict of individual feeling, only in a specific living environment can a person display the force of personality featuring sincerity, passion and fearlessness of hardships. As Han Yu said that "if a thing is off balance, it may contend", and that "the same is true with human beings in language; if they have no alternative reasons, they will speak; there are ponderings in their chant and there is emotion in their cry" (A Preface of Seeing Off Meng Dongye). In this sense, since the May 4th Movement, while the literati's practice of painting was opposed and art was once again advocated as "articles carrying doctrines", what art had been concerned with was the literati, or the intellectual's awareness of misery. Here, the "doctrine" doesn't represent the abstract and conceptualized "we" or the "national awareness", but is an independent and free spirit attached to a particular stage of history.

Here, the so-called "spirit of the age" is not set in advance and doesn't stand high above. It gradually

emerges through each sincere soul just as brooks slowly converge into a big river. No “I” can, or shouldn’t attempt to, touch the “spirit of the age”; you can only touch your own soul. As the saying goes, “man proposes, God disposes”. Once an artistic work comes into being, it no longer belongs to an individual but becomes the spiritual wealth of the entire society; then the society begins its mechanism of choice. Therefore, not everyone’s soul can be shared by society. We can look at success from an angle other than that of the vanity fair of art. There is a kind of artistic work we can regard as a success: one that carries individual feelings shared by society; in other words, artists must get involved in the establishment of new aesthetic standards for the whole of society through their own artistic creation. Only then can it be meaningful. In this sense, the freedom and independence of artists are freedom and independence arising from a new social situation. They are freedom and independence with a new cultural pertinence. Han Yu said that “the same is also true with heaven in seasons and the things good at making sounds are borrowed to represent them”. In this sense, that “everyone is a critic” is no less important than that “everyone is an artist”. Viewing of art must be more widespread than creating of artistic works. In viewing art, judgments such as ‘like’ or ‘dislike’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are kinds of criticism. The mechanism of social choice is one mechanism by which “everyone is a critic”.

Certainly, sharing is a complicated process of social selection, and only when art transcends the realistic and utilitarian relations of a particular period of time and is shared by human beings over larger periods of time and space can it be of greater significance. Actually, this is another question that “I” cannot touch; “it is the time heaven chooses”. So success is unimportant, or for the artists, success all the more belongs to society and Vanity Fair and is a long way from art’s significance to “my” soul. That “everyone is an artist” is not to emphasize success. Particularly in the art system and in history all down the ages, standards for choosing “success” have been so rigorous that they have excluded from art not only the ordinary people but also a great number of artists. In fact, when an old farmer labors on the ridge of a field humming a tune, in “my” soul, this is art. This is the reason why I have quoted many times the words of Sima Qian’s A Letter to Ren An in recent years. “People of this kind all have melancholy and depression in their minds. As they cannot accomplish their ideals, they turn to record and narrate the historical events and want their successors to see and understand their intentions. After Zuo Qiuming lost his eyes and Sun Zi had his feet cut off, they could never be appointed. Then they retreated to write and propound their ideas so that they could vent their indignation and have their articles handed down future to generations to express their ambition.” Because they have melancholy in their hearts, they have words to say. They don’t seek fame or gain or play a role in reality. They only want to rescue their souls and express and vent their internal melancholy, and to justify the “self”.

On the occasion of the opening of Beijing Center for the Arts, “Where are we?” was made the title of the exhibition. Works of many very successful celebrities of contemporary art circles will be on display. For these celebrities, it would be meaningless for me to make any further comments. So what is left for me to do is to offer some of my thoughts about the title “Where Are We?”, which serves as part of my social networking effort. I also take this opportunity to congratulate Ms Weng Ling, who has been my friend for many years, on the opening of her art center.