

Where Are We?

— The Value and Significance of the Contemporary Art

Another exhibition opens. As a curator, I should be used to explaining something of the origin and intentions of the exhibition, but this time it is different. After being away from Beijing for 6 years, returning to this familiar yet slightly strange city to start a new venture for the contemporary art center has deeply moved me. Naming the exhibition “Where Are We” reflects my own confusion concerning the contemporary art as well as the complication of life itself.

Before writing, I cannot help but reading several old friends’ new articles first. Frankly speaking, I really created a peculiar question for everybody including me. It is not a big question, since all of us are obviously aware where we are, as we are alive and are eagerly pursuing our ideals. Meanwhile, it is not a small question, because the question “where are we” is just like meta-propositions such as “who are we” or “why do we exist.” Since the birth of human beings, these meta-propositions have never had a satisfactory answer. The predicament is particularly urgent for the (Chinese) contemporary art that I am engaging in and struggling for.

Interestingly, writers from different fields and different backgrounds have all urged us to be calm in the face of the prosperity currently enjoyed by the Chinese economy and by Chinese contemporary art. I think it is a very positive signal. Candidly speaking, the development of Chinese contemporary art has had many twists and turns since the mid-1980s, and the present accomplishments and the relatively tolerant environment did not come easily. As a witness and a participator throughout the course of more than 20 years, I, along with many others, have experienced the development of Chinese contemporary art from its marginal, small-circled, and anti-mainstream beginnings to the establishment of its cultural and social value, noticed and accepted by the public. Today, it has almost replaced the official art. It is capable of participating in, exchanging with, and even influencing the international art system. To be fair, we ought to treasure the collective spiritual wealth which is short yet profuse. Unfortunately, today’s Chinese contemporary art is like a teenager in adolescence: before experiencing real life, it has been bombarded by commercialism, fashion and the star-like behavior of some artists. The real historical missions it owes to the development of Chinese society — innovative ideas, independent thinking, and social criticism — are facing the crisis of being dissipated! If, as a commentator once said, “people’s understanding of the contemporary art can only derive from its ‘influences’— money, power and political background,” is indeed true, and if the artists and their creative behavior are really like what the workers are doing on the assembly lines, then Arthur Danto’s lament of “the end of art” in the end of the 20th century is at hand!

Taking a broad view of world art history, what puzzles us are far more than these. The functions of “art” have been repeatedly questioned. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin predicted in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: the mechanical reproduction will eventually deconstruct the lofty status of classical art, and the right of art will be liberated from the hands of “the professionals” and become the general rights of the public. Soon after this statement, pop culture became the trend, and post-modernism art ruled the days. In 2005, John Gingrich (the contemporary British critic) claimed that, “In the past two and a half centuries of the western tradition, people claimed that art was ‘sacred’, art possessed the higher reality and the more solid existence than the daily life did, and art represented ‘eternity’ and ‘infinity’. Nevertheless, all of these arguments are exaggerations. If someone thinks something is art, then it is art.” The people familiar with art history should know that this is just the extreme reaction to the present chaotic state in which people cannot clarify the

questions of “what is art” and “what is the function of art.” Therefore, when Chinese contemporary art runs into the plight of the aphasia of the academic supporting system of the exterior and the chaos of the irrational environment of the interior, the location of “where are we” appears to be crucial. In other words, are there any values if the contemporary art, particularly the Chinese contemporary art, moves toward the future from the current starting point? How could it realize its values? These are questions that we need to go back to the beginning and clarify.

I believe that the “thinking ability” is the core value and content of the contemporary art. It is reflected in the records and reflections of the past, the excavations and presentations of the present, and more importantly, the selections and the inspirations of the future. In fact, from curating “New Image: 20 years of the Chinese Contemporary Painting” in 2001, participating in the hosting of “Urban Creation — 2002 Shanghai Biennale”, founding the Shanghai Gallery of Art of Three on the Bund in 2004, visiting Art Basel Miami in the United States and holding the “Beyond Icons: Contemporary Chinese Art in Miami”, to the imminent opening of the Beijing Center for the Arts, it can be said that during each crucial period of the development of Chinese contemporary art, what I wanted to excavate and present is a force such as the one implicated in the creation of Chinese contemporary art.

How to implement the demands that “keep the outstanding history of Chinese contemporary art remain in China” and “let the contemporary art integrate into the urban development to truly promote the social progress”? Although we have been diligently endeavoring for many years to engage in introspection, the result is not ideal. The great change in society and the accumulation of experiences have given my colleagues and me the responsibility as well as the possibility to continue this arduous mission, because Chinese contemporary art is always the reflection of Chinese spirit. Only Chinese can truly understand, face, and solve the various problems of life process on this land. The fundamentally driving force of the Chinese contemporary art can only be derived from itself.

For the present China, as with any country growing in the world, the gradually strengthening economy brings the hope of achievements in the culture. The traditional culture of five millennia is very precious, but the modern creativity and vigor are more important! There are two basic characteristics of the contemporary art: independent thinking and free creativity. It needs a group of artists having sincere faith and persistent pursuits; meanwhile it also needs the re-confirmation and persistence of the world of the art critics and the artistic promotion organizations. Therefore, the Beijing Center for the Arts and I would like to build up a fully interdisciplinary exchange platform, to attract the public’s attention to Chinese contemporary art, and meanwhile, to stimulate the sincere creations of the artists.

In the past ten years, subconsciously, I have been passively working and wandering between the enthusiasm of the new things and the hesitation of my choice. However, the founding of the new art centre is the initiative and positive exploration in my life. I recall the outing on the Labor Day. When it was getting late, my friend insistently asked me to walk through the deep forest; I was curious but I desperately retreated. My friend’s words made me wake up, “How could the people always staying in a safe place find the ideal paradise?”

Yes, are the core and the significances of art creation not so pure? At that time, I felt the fusion and sameness of life and art. They have the commonness of the thirst and the pursuit of the unknown, which are the unvarying sources of power! Whenever we feel tired or thirsty, just return here, and then we will regain the power; we will no longer be lost and we will be clear about “where we are”. This is

true, and credible.

Weng Ling

May 9, 2008