Spring 5-2-2019

Clear and Complex

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Clear and Complex

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2019

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Introduction

“Couple days before, my friend Jisoo paid me a visit to my studio, the first thing she said on that day was, “what do you think of the news about Xi?”

I had no idea what’s been happening with Xi. She told me that as China’s president, Xi has made constitutional amendment through parliament voting, which means he could remain in office indefinitely.

After she left, I tried to find out what was going on. Besides a few official announcements, hardly anyone was discussing it online. All the keywords on the topic were marked as sensitive, in order to prevent people from searching and posting about it.

Then I opened a few websites of Western mainstream media, and found they were full of news on this event, but they all read pretty much the same, nothing note-worthy.”

—— My dairy on May 19th, 2018
Why I Make Art

My parents, aunts, uncles, grandfather and cousins are all artists or involved in the arts in some way, and I naturally embarked on a similar path. Because I grew up around art and within art circles, my growth as an individual artist has been heavily influenced by the world around me. My creative visions, hence, reflect the art world itself.

When I first started making art, I did what I thought the art world does, as in my projects *How I Become a Contemporary Artist* (figures 1 and 2) and *Welcome* (figure 3). My practice has always had an emphasis on methods of expression. My interest in the method is far greater than my interest in the content of any particular work.

Figure 1: *How I Become a Contemporary Artist - How to do interview*, 2015, Single Channel Video, 22’46”
I had not figured out the significance of my interest in methods of expression until I realized that if I am interested in the method, then I must be able to explain its significance. Moreover, I have concluded that significance must be capable of opening up a deeper and broader topic, such as identity and social politics, or in my case, the status quo of Chinese society.
The Status Quo of Chinese Society

Understanding what I mean by the status quo of Chinese society is crucial in the understanding of my art practice. For example, according to the China Digital Times, until December 2018, the Chinese government marked at least 4,000 sensitive words on the Internet (it is not an accurate statistic, as these 4,000 words are compiled by editors and netizens through posting/searching online experiments). In China, people cannot use these words in domestic public platforms because the government censors and filters content by scanning for keywords. As a result, the number of keywords increases\(^1\) due to there being no

\(^1\) Anne Henochowicz, Collecting Sensitive Words: The Grass-Mud Horse List, China Digital Times, First updating, June 4, 2013. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/grass-mud-horse-list/
platform for open discussion or reading, as in the event of Xi’s constitutional amendment. Ways of resistance that are commonly used in the West, whether through discussion, protest or voting, are not feasible in China. Obviously, it is very difficult for Chinese nationals to articulate their opposing views loudly and clearly. You can speak out loud, but you cannot be heard clearly, or you can articulate your opinions clearly, but your voice cannot be heard. However, this does not mean that Chinese citizens have lost the spirit of resistance.

There are two groups of contemporary artists in China. One group consists of the artists that work inside the Chinese system. These artists rely on state-owned institutions and receive salaries. Their works endorse the positive aspects of the society’s current condition and praise people’s happy lives. The other group consists of artists working outside the system. Most of these artists do not have a fixed income, but rather rely on galleries, art dealers and foundations to make money. It is these contemporary artists, the ones working on the outside of the nation’s official institutionalized system, that have always been a major force of resistance in China.

According to my observation, two extremes exist within the second group. One is the artist whose work is commercially didactic, the other is the artist whose work is abstract. To understand the work of the latter, viewers need to be culturally informed via lectures, forums and texts. Most of the time, however, the viewers see only a "picture". To me, neither of the two types of artists have “clear and complex” methods of expression as I suggested earlier, which means that no matter what they hope to express through their works, their resistance is basically ineffective. Both groups are trying through their methods to discuss the problems in Chinese society, however, because of China's strict censorship policies, their works are either
being taken down and not shown or are shown because their message is abstract enough to not be understood.

My method comes in between the commercially didactic artist and the artist who makes abstract works. It is important to me for my art to come from the issues in society that surround me and to present a subtle direction in my viewpoints without clearly declaring my opinions. To speak around the subject as a way to speak about the subject in order to subvert China's strict censorship policies. Because of my position as an artist in China and my understanding of China’s status quo, I use my own art to consider how artistic expression can resist such harsh censorship.

Methods of Expression

When I find an idea that interests me, I try to examine it from various perspectives. Why does it happen? What are the possible outcomes? What does it matter to me? Why am I interested in it? What are my feelings about it, my doubts, and the parts I don’t understand? I will put whatever I find relevant to this ‘idea’ into my work, then blend these elements together. As these elements come from multiple lines of possibility, it is often not easily accessible. Because of this, titles are an important component in my works. For example, in my

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2 For example, if I were to be against an apple, let's say, I wouldn't just paint "I hate apples." I would instead use video to illustrate the bland flavor of the apple, use a photograph to show that the container the apple is in is ugly, and make a sculpture that shows the apple skin stuck in your teeth. Then, I would assemble these elements together and declare them as one artwork with a clear title like "Oranges Are Prettier."
performance piece *Photograph a Chair in Many Ways* (figure 4) I stood in front of the audience and announced the title of the work at the beginning of my performance.

In this performance (figure 5), I had informed all audience members that I would take photos of a chair. But what I actually did was take photos of the light source, the audience, the space that contained the chair, and the various outcomes of my intervention. The viewers began to realize I was not taking photos of the chair and started to pay attention to the method of my expression. My method being both clear and complex.

Figure 4: *Photograph a Chair in Many Ways, 2019, Performance Video, 5'09'"*
Stood in front of the audience and announced the title of the work. Then wandered into the exhibition room with a Polaroid camera and found a random chair in the room.

1. I put the chair under the light source, and took a photo. I pinned the photo on the wall.
2. I looked up at the light source, took a photo of the light. I pinned the photo on the wall.
3. I picked another chair that had the same function as the first one, but looked different. I took a photo. I pinned the photo on the wall.
4. I took a photo of someone else’s work in the same room. I pinned the photo on the wall.
5. I walked out of the space, took a photo of the entire space. I pinned the photo on the wall.
6. I went back to the first chair, kicked away the chair, and took a photo of the fallen chair. I pinned the photo on the wall.
7. I turned around and took a photo of all the people who were looking at me doing this performance. I pinned the photo on the wall.
8. I took a photo of the blank wall and floor where the first chair was. I pinned the photo on the wall.
9. I walked to the manager of the space, said “chair” to him, and took a photo of him. I pinned the photo on the wall.
10. I walked to the wall with all the photos, and took a selfie. I pinned the photo on the wall.

End of the performance.

Figure 5: Script of Photograph a Chair in Many Ways, 2019

The Future

Joseph Beuys is one of my favorite role models. Besides having been politically active and candidate of the German Green Party, Beuys was an professor in Düsseldorf. In a 1969 interview with the American art magazine Artforum, Beuys declared: "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art." During his time at the Dusseldorf Art Academy, he taught over 300 students, leaving his mark on an entire generation of artists. As an educator, he never on any account attempted to restrict them to his own particular concept of art but only built their self-conscious as an artist: "I never in any way attempted to force my own idea of art onto

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3 Willoughby Sharp, An Interview with Joseph Beuys, Artforum, December 1969
people. On the contrary, I always sought those possibilities which are inside every individual one of us."⁴ Beuys defined the artist's task as "one of making people aware of their creativity, as a demonstration of the possibility of change by employing creativity, and finally as the initiation of the necessary changes."⁵ Beuys didn't believe in silence, he spent most of his life trying to explain to the public that 'all men are artists'. He makes me realize that the energy of an individual contemporary artist is very limited and if I stand for freedom, I need to push my idea to the people who have the most creativity and open mind - students.

In December 2018, I organized a two-week workshop in the Experimental Art Department at Centre Academy of Fine Art, the name of the workshop was “Clear and Complex”. During this workshop, I took the students to various contemporary art spaces in Beijing. I asked them to look at the exhibitions analytically from a peer’s perspective rather than a viewer’s. I ask the students to try to grasp the grading between “too clear” and “too complex.” The academic system makes use of its influential power by guiding students to observe their surroundings with this “clear and complex” method of expression in order to utilize this method to express what they want to say. I believe, when they have a good knowledge of this “clear and complex” approach in thinking, their self-conscious will much stronger than before, and that is the purpose of the workshop.

There’s still a very long way to go if we want to use this approach to break away from social restrictions. However, I believe the emergence of this approach of expression in the current era and, especially in China, will be very significant. It shows me the possibility of achieving true freedom of speech through artistic resistance. I am willing to devote all my energy in it for this possibility. I think my art practice and thinking are meaningful, because my method

⁴ Beuys in conversation with Glozer, 1984, p. 200
⁵ Stefan Germer, Haache, Broodthaers, Beuys, October, Vol. 45 (Summer, 1988), p.68
of expression has touched upon this broader topic. I think of my thesis as functioning as an index to my method of expression by showcasing a montage of elements extracted from my current environment in New York in anticipation of my return to China.
Bibliography


Stefan Germer, "Haache, Broodthaers, Beuys", October, Vol. 45 (Summer, 1988), PP. 63-75


Petra Richter, "Beuys: 'To be a teacher is my greatest work of art'", Published on June 7, 2017, https://issuu.com/schoolofthedamned/docs/petra_richter_knoebelbeuys_0

**Image List.**

*All the Reasons that Make Me Hate Political Power*, 2019, Acrylic on a door, Cinder Block on a Plinth, Color Print on a Paper, Handcuffs, Lingerie, Acrylic on Canvas, Paint on Chandelier, Single Channel Video, Sound Track on a Speaker, Paint on Flags, Paint on Pedestal, Clock, Pencil, Paint on a sofa, Spray Paint on Crystal Bits, Dimensions Variable

1. Image 1. Front side of Installations
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5. Image 5 *All the Reasons that Make Me Hate Political Power - The Painting*, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 131x183cm
Installation Images

Image 1