

Form and its Exterior: Construction as an Event

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One

Some of the images that Li Tao provided me with are sources and inspirations for his works. For example, most works in the "Pengzhou Bubble" series are based on his trip to Pengzhou, Sichuan last year. The images, usually a corner or a clip he shot while travelling (some were taken from Ikea or an unknown street corner) were all extracted, collaged or transformed from his usual capture, discovery and collection practice. During these processes, Li Tao's real concern was not these often neglected corners, but the physical-logical relationship of everyday objects, especially the abstract forms produced by conventional design and layout, and the hidden forces behind them.

The idealist metaphysical trend of thought in the 19th century is an essential setting for the emergence of "formalism", which is closely related to "historical inference and generalization running the gamut from quaint to the dangerous¹". In other words, the underlying logic of "form" is to find a set of universal principles², a universal truth, a zeitgeist. Therefore, it is conceivable that "formalism" would infiltrate linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, intellectual history, art history, and other fields. Although Li Tao is not an absolute formalist, form constitutes the starting point of his creation. Those corners of daily life are just like nameless fragments of Art Deco by Riegl, concealing an internal drive. In this sense, we can also take Riegl's view of art history as a theoretical footnote of Li Tao's creation. The difference is that Riegl is a staunch anti-materialist, while Li Tao is entirely material-based.

¹ David Summers, "Form"-- Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description, edited by Preziosi, *Art in Art History: Critical Reader*, p. 120, and 124.

² such as Wolflin's "five pairs of concepts": "Line drawing and painting", "plane and depth", "closed-form and open form", "unity of diversity and identity", "clarity and ambiguity"; Greenberg's so-called "planarity", "media" and "purity"; etc.

Admittedly, Li Tao's works are all made up of concrete substance and materials, but his creative foundation does not derive from these daily trivials, but from photography. To a greater extent, the form and motivation of his works come from his camera than from his eyes. Photography, a media link that has long been neglected plays a significant role in here. At the end of *Museum Without Walls*, Malraux thinks that "... the very thing that had constituted its homogeneity; that thing is of course photography. So long as photography was merely a vehicle by which art objects entered the museum, a certain coherence obtained."³

Similarly, only when photography is used as a carrier to make these everyday objects enter the sight of artist Li Tao and be constructed can they have a form of consistency. Photography here is not only an act of capturing ready-made products but also a sculpting process. Photography does not necessarily mean the disappearance of "aura"⁴ as what Walter Benjamin calls it. On the contrary, it gives these ordinary objects vitality and a special "aura"; It doesn't eliminate the distance between art and life either, on the contrary, it pushes art and life further away, with the illusion of diminished distance. This also means that photography does not completely homogenize it, but intends to create more heterogeneity on such basis. As Thomas Crow said: "The viewing mode of the camera brings timeliness, accidents and contingency; It is the enemy of objective and neutral gaze cherished by traditional aesthetics. "⁵

Two

Li Tao was particularly fond of Rudolf Stingel, an Italian artist. Through his creative logic, a trace of Stingel's can still be seen. Stingel has been challenging traditional painting norms, questioned and interfered the audience's understanding and experience of art. Stingel also

³ quoted from Douglas Crimp, *On the Ruins of Museums*, photographed by Louis Lawler, trans. by Tang Yiming, Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing House, 2020, p. 47.

⁴ "... The Unique Phenomenon of a distance, however close it maybe. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the **aura** of those mountains, of that branch." as seen in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans.' note.

⁵ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Xixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*, trans. by Jiang Wei and Deng Tianyuan. Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing House, 2020, p. 65.

converted photos into paintings, but what attracted Li Tao was how Stingel converted graffiti and scratches left by the audience into paintings and sculptures, using materials like rubber, carpet, painted aluminum, foam plastic, and pigment, releasing a unique aesthetic and texture. Of course, for them, this is only the first step or a part of their artistic practice, which they never seem to show to the audience. On such basis, Stingel turned parts of these graffiti into "bas-relief" pieces, while Li Tao returned to the form combination of objects. Apart from the ready-made products (cement, composite boards, wooden bars, glass, plaster-boards, brass forks, etc.), the objects here also included various traditional sculptures made by mould rollers, and finally presented various "forms-objects" or "objects-forms" temporarily constructed according to the pictures.

Unlike Stingel, Li Tao doesn't want to appeal to the expressionist interest of pictures. He pays more attention to various relations between abstract objects, such as superposition, extrusion, collision, and meshing. This relationship may seem stiff, but there is no lack of hints from various force vectors. For example, in Pengzhou Foam -3, the circle formed by the rope to the left and the radian on the middle plasterboard, including the radian of the glass in the lower right corner, created a group of multiple parallel torques, or an aesthetic principle based on "motifs". At the same time, the composition of the picture——let's call it painting——keeps its symmetry and balance, and forms an internal tension with the parallel torques. In this sense, it is different from the Russian "supremacism" and "constructivism".

If viewed from a close-up, it does have a tinge of Lyshitski and Kazimir Malevich, like a revolutionary poster pointing to an unknown Utopia. However, it was only partial, unlike the Russian avant-garde, which "leaned wood, metal and cardboard against the wall, or placed them in a corner, or hung down from the ceiling"⁶, thus forming a motif in the crowded room. Li Tao's whole picture is always kept in a balance, or consciously suppresses the torque and vector. Another example is Pengzhou Foam-6, in which eight squares of white plaster blocks of different sizes are orderly "spliced" on a square wooden plank similar to a bed board. The arrangement seems to fill the whole picture evenly, but if you look carefully, you will find that there is actually a rotating vector in the arrangement. Malevich once completely ended his painting with "black squares", but here in Li Tao's work, the picture not only kept its balance and smoothness but also kept subtle traces and flaws like brush strokes, some of which were initially carried by the ready-made products and sculptures (such as indentation

⁶ Camilla Gray: *The Russian Experiment in Art (1863-1922)*, revised by Marianne Burley-Molly, trans. by Xu Xinwei, Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2019.

on plaster board, rough edges of sculptures, etc.), others were left intentionally (such as irregular scratches on glass edges, incomplete symmetrical dots, etc.).

In fact, it is difficult for us to define Li Tao's works accurately. Perhaps he tries to get rid of dogmatic media classification and wanders freely among various media right from the start. Therefore, although all his works are "produced" and not flattened, it is evident that most of his works from this series have the attributes and characteristics of painting. He intentionally put his works in a box, which implied "collecting" on the one hand and played the role of a frame on the other. More interestingly, these ready-made objects he misappropriated initially have a sense of order and polyphony, such as parallel wood, plaster or foam boards arranged in an orderly manner like bricks, and the glass attached to the picture, etc., all of which imply a sense of polyphony and plane of the picture. However, he can't completely achieve planarization. Both the sense of space formed by the box and the sense of hierarchy of ready-made objects imply that this is not a painting. Even if it counts as one, it's definitely closer to Steinberg's "plane painting" rather than Greenberg's sense of "formalism".

In the late 1960s, in the classic review of *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Steinberg keenly pointed out that there is always a central line running through the interpretation of the paintings of pre-modern old masters, even through cubism and abstract expressionism: "Painting reproduces the idea of a world, a worldspace, and it can read something consistent with the erectus posture of human beings from the picture. The upper part of the painting corresponds to our headspace; And the bottom edge aims at where our feet stand."⁷ However, when we come to Rauschenberg (including Dubuffet), although we still hang their paintings on the wall, these paintings "no longer simulate the vertical area, but the mysterious plane level", they "symbolically imply such hard surfaces as desktop, studio floor, nautical chart, bulletin board, etc. implying that any object can be dispersed on it, materials can enter, information can be received, printed, and indented."⁸

Li Tao's practice has once again brought us back to this critical moment. For him, this is certainly not an annotation to Steinberg's theory, nor a repetition of Rauschenberg's

⁷ Steinberg: *Alternative Criterion: The Art in Twentieth Century*, trans. by Shen Yubing, Liu Fan and Gu Guangshu, Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011, p. 108.

⁸ Steinberg, *Alternative Criterion: The Art in Twentieth Century*, p. 109.

mistakes, but an attempt to find a "plane painting" and return to this crucial node in history and create a new path. The fundamental difference is that if Rauschenberg is expanding, then Li Tao is more likely to continue to shrink. This contraction, no matter in composition or color, makes his works seem closer to formalism on the surface. Still, because it strengthens its internal tension, it inhibits the avant-garde and revolutionary potential the form may have. He is not a very invasive artist by nature, and he always plays with those objects and tools carefully to avoid making any fatal mistakes. As the ruins of "Universe" in his solo exhibition at Tabula Rasa Gallery (Beijing) in 2019 suggests, he is not an anarchist, but a dystopian.

Rauschenberg used many different media languages in his works, such as photography and screen printing. Li Tao also used photography, but photography was not directly reflected in his works. Photography extends Rauschenberg's language, which is often only a part of it, but for Li Tao, photography is a limitation. What he does is more of an exploration of mutual transformation among photography, sculpture and painting. Once again, Li Tao's practice is not formalism or essentialism, but formalism or "constructivism" based on "generation".

Three

"There is nothing outside the text." Derrida's famous saying declared "the death of the author" and "the disintegration of the subject". Kojin Karatani believed that if this is the case, formalism is also a text. In other words, both "structuralism" and "post-structuralism" are formalism in nature. From this, we can imagine why formalism is a "generation", because it is this utter "constructive" attitude that shows its baseless and exposes its "generation", and only through thorough constructiveness and formalization can it come to the exterior. Of course, if "generation" is formalized, there is no "exterior" of the formal system.⁹ Unless the "generation" cannot or is difficult to analyze in form. Therefore, the "construction can only be an event, an accident"¹⁰. Only in this way can we truly inch towards the exterior of the form.

⁹ Kojin Karatani: *Architecture as Metaphor*, trans. by Ying Jie, Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Publishing House, 2017, p. 6.

¹⁰ Kojin Karatani: *Architecture as Metaphor*, trans. by Ying Jie, Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Publishing House, 2017, p. 10.

For Li Tao, when he used his camera or mobile phone to capture daily corners and fragments, it had already formed a construction or event. When he transformed it into an artwork, it is a reconstruction or re-eventualization. Although he has his own set of aesthetic purport and formal conventions, in actual practice, to overcome these purport and conventions, he deliberately created some absurdities and misappropriations. He always sets some "damages" or "obstacles" in some orderly arrangements, such as the glass in the middle of Pengzhou Foam -3, the plaster relief in the lower right corner of Pengzhou Foam -4, the copper fork in Pengzhou Foam -5, the gray-pink plaster block embedded in the middle of Pengzhou Foam -7, etc., in the orderly arrangement background (such as horizontal and vertical, They are not only a kind of heterogeneous overflow or generation, but also a "aliens" which has no contact with them, but only assembled "unintentionally" or "forced".

The installation Pengzhou Foam C1, C2 and C3 is the largest group of works in this series or this solo exhibition. It consists of three parts, C1, C2 and C3, which respectively represent three different spatial forms: the right side (C3) is a wooden box nailed together from abandoned planks, on the top of the box is a striped dusty pink plaster block almost the same size; On the left (C1) is a "curio shelf" which is also made of those wooden bars and planks, and two "irregular-shaped" plaster sculptures are placed on the shelf; In the middle (C2), a group of slim wooden planks are laid flat on the ground in a certain order, on which some irregular plaster sculptures or unidentified objects are scattered, and its shape seems to be a disassembled wooden box with goods lying flat on the ground. Consider it as three different spatial forms of the box: C3 is a closed space, C2 is an entirely open space, and C1 is a semi-open space. The three are horizontally placed together, forming a unique "constructed landscape". Every ready-made and non-ready-made thing has a particular symbolic meaning, but here, through the construction of form, Li Tao took away these symbolic meanings and derived into a new structure. It is a microcosm of the urban landscape. The combination of the historical sense of the abandoned wooden planks and those sculptures with different shapes full of futuristic touch is somewhat absurd yet veritable. It is also a symbol of migration and memory, from "packing", "unpacking" to "putting on shelves" (or vice versa), all of which imply a time dimension. Of course, it also reflexively points to the movement and change of these ready-made objects and artworks themselves. Paradoxically, it is very formalistic in logic, as if it constitutes a "self-referential formal system", but its purpose is not to point to the form itself, but to move towards the outside of the form.

When Jasper Johns held his first solo exhibition in New York in 1958, his works was "unacceptable" for professional authors like Steinberg, let alone the general public. It is when Steinberg's second visit that he understood the true meaning of Johns' painting. He gradually realized that Johns' genius lies in that he brought an end of illusion painting. From then on, the treatment of paint is no longer regarded as a medium of transformation; It is not only a disregard for the human theme, just like abstract art, but also a hint of absence, a lack of humanity in an artificial environment. Therefore, only the signs of objects-artifacts are left behind, and in the absence of human beings, these signs eventually become objects.¹¹ This is a paradox. On the one hand, it continues the logic of formalism, with thorough objectifying, but on the other hand, there are still signs of human beings in the materialization process.

It is precisely this point that attracted Li Tao, who once admitted that Johns is his favorite artist so far and never avoided Johns' influence on him. In my opinion, it is this antimony logic in Johns' picture that inspires Li Tao: form is both attached and detached to matters and experiences simultaneously. For example, the layout of works in the exhibition hall, especially the works hanging on the wall, is a window, while others are a square cut in the wall or a sectional view of the wall, while the largest set of installation and the urban landscape outside the window in the back cleverly constitute a mirror or parallel relationship... It can be seen that they are both attached and not attached to the space (including the view outside the window) at the same time. "How does the form go outside?" "Why does construction become an event?" This may be the true focus of Li Tao's practice. For this reason, he presupposes a most appropriate way of watching: not staring or ignoring, but a momentary glance, a chance encounter and an unforeseen event. And for event watching, he hopes to give the viewer a perceptual break or a brief distraction.

¹¹ Steinberg: *Alternative Criterion: The Art in Twentieth Century*, p. 27-32.