

Anthropological Records of Life

On *New Work Project*: Niu Chun-chiang X Luo Jr-shin

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On the mattress, Luo Jr-shin, Found mattress, toothpaste.
240×210×16 cm, 2006



comb me a waterfall, Luo Jr-shin, comb, wig, 1910s vintage post card, wood frame, metal bracket \ glass, dimensions variable, 2011

"The more the two things are opposite, they are more akin."

—Plato, *Lysis*, 215e [1]

" [...] life that is not primarily a productive process, that is not tailored to developing a product, that is not 'result oriented'. In these terms, art is no longer understood as the production of works of art; but as documentation of life-in-the-project, regardless of the outcome the life in question has or is supposed to have had. This clearly has an effect on the way art is now defined. Nowadays art is no longer manifested as another, new object for contemplation that has been produced by the artist, but as another, heterogeneous time-frame of the art project, which is documented as such."

—Boris Groys [2]

The exhibition entitled *New Work Project* in the Hong-Gah Museum presents a joint project by two artists, Niu Chun-chiang and Luo Jr-shin. They had set up a rule before the show started: both of them had to select three previous works from the other and to reach a consensus six times through discussions and communications before respectively representing such consensus, as a response, through another artwork. In other words, the exhibition finally presents six previous works and six new works as groups. Each group contains two works sharing the same title. Mentions about the author and the year of creation are also be hidden intentionally. Such a rule also allows Niu and Luo to deduct from their chaotic struggles and debates during more than one year the four questions they attempt to propose through the project (and toward themselves): "Does inspiration exist?", "How does an artist work?", "Is the process of an artist's own stylization important? Is there any limit to it?" and "What are their respective concerns

beyond art?”.

Domesticate the Foreign

First, seen from the rule and the experimental attempt of the show as well as presenting the works in groups of two, one observes that both Niu and Luo treat “contradiction” and “difference” through a comparative juxtaposition. The result (exhibition) that is derived from such a comparison can be said to be topological; in other words, the result of the show is due to the fact that both Niu and Luo have made certain investigations on the concepts and ways of thinking regarding the other’s artistic creation and have appropriated the content of such investigations as important references for the results (final products) of their own observations. It can also be said that such a way of planning (with a certain rule as its pre-condition) obliging the two artists to take on the mission of investigation is similar to the field research carried out by an anthropologist. [3]

It is exactly in the chapter entitled “domesticate the foreign” [4] that Lévi-Strauss, in considering the work of investigation in Japan, mentioned that other scholars collected almost a hundred sets of data showing certain habits of behavior in Japan in comparison to those in the West. The habits that are reversed and opposite are in fact the same. The data were further listed and compared. In Lévi-Strauss’s view, such a comparison put under one same structure shows not only the differences between data from the East and the West but also these scholars’ attempt to express the difficulties of mutual understanding through such a way of expression. In other words, such a symmetrical conceptual form in fact explains a way to approve differentiated individuals, that is, the party at the side of juxtaposition and comparison tries to domesticate the difference of the other party. It is also precisely in this sense that these scholars’ investigations actually provide a better way to

understand “other”. If we view, despite the fact that the content of data (artworks) of Niu and Luo does not show “reversed, opposite” connotations, they operate the exhibition in a way that is close to the comparative investigation referred to by Lévi-Strauss. To put it in a clearer way, from Niu and Luo’s repetitive discussions over twelve works (a process that involves disputes and even leads to the renunciation of a certain idea) to the final consensus of presenting the works in groups of two, the process and result of such a reconciliation manifest the meaning of domesticating the foreign as it is proposed by Lévi-Strauss. For the two artists, such a rule for the project makes them accept and approve to a certain extent the different opinions and treatments of the other. And this perhaps also gives an answer about how the four questions they asked themselves in the context of the show proceed and are represented in the show.

And what do Niu and Luo intend to represent through the juxtaposition by groups of two, if not what Lévi-Strauss termed as “reversed, opposite”?

Double-Blind Experimentation

“Is the process of an artist’s own stylization important? Is there any limit to it?”, one of the questions proposed by the aforementioned exhibition may be taken as the corresponding point of this inquiry. The fact that works of Niu and Luo share the same titles and that the background information (artist’s name and year of creation) which could have made a work easily recognizable is hidden suffices to explain their view on this question, which is to say that they have taken the “double-blind” experimental form, making it impossible to distinguish the objects of comparison from those of experimentation. In this way, the artists manage to test and investigate the question regarding the artist’s own stylization. On the basis of this, they further propose such a hypothesis: is the work that is a “remake/reproduction” of another work merely a transformation in the medium and the formal approach? Seen from the works’ expression, Niu and Luo do hold concept-oriented thinking towards how to produce works consider from this point of that respond to the other’s previous works. In other words, this is to say



Even They Never Met, Luo Jr-shin, mirror, glass, watermelon(yellow and red) / approx. 100x50x50 cm



Even They Never Met, Niu, Chun-Chiang, video, 30'



Longevity, Niu Chun-chiang, three-channel video installation in loop, cutting sheet



Longevity, Luo Jr-shin, object, visual installation, dimensions variable

that their new works are based on the conceptual points deducted from their observations on the other's previous works and not on considerations about the works' media or formal approach. For example, one of the pieces of *On the Mattress* is composed of two objects: old mattresses with toothpaste stains; the other piece of the same title is expressed through three two-dimensional photographic prints on which are inscribed interweaving English letters and numbers. The former not only makes that the objects of daily life do not refer to their given forms and contextual meanings but also reverses meanings between the objects and sculpture with the latter being a kind of record on the artists' intimate desires.

However, this is not to say that the hypothesis of the artist is valid. It is better to say that from the previous work to the new work, what is manifested is not "merely" the differences of medium and formal approach but the so-called "inspiration" for artistic creation. From the very start, the difference in the signifying context already made lots of differences since new works are derived from (one of) the concepts of previous works. Such an idea already distinguishes itself from the starting point of previous works. Here, one also has to note that: the two artists still "distinguish" these works into twelve works. Such an act of distinction shows that Niu and Luo still consider the twelve works being divided into six sets of works are produced on the basis of "different" inspirations. To put it in a clearer way, the works that are grouped by two are not "identical" just because they share the same title, just like people with the same names would differ greatly and essentially in their internal personalities and external expressions.

On the other hand, the double-blind experimentation of Niu and Luo is doomed to failure, just as the failed double-blind experimentations are due to rather strong therapeutical effects or side effects. Because of the suggestive connections between the titles of works and their forms as well as the selecting other's previous works that might have been exhibited, this exhibition also fails to completely hide the data, thus losing the meaning of using the double-blind experimental form.



(Front) *We'll meet at 8:00pm, July 28, 2011*, Luo Jr-Shin, shoes, chairs, shoe lace, dimensions variable
 (Back) *We'll meet at 8:00pm, July 28, 2011*, Niu, Chun-Chiang, post-it note, mixed media / dimensions variable



(Front) *The Banquet*, Luo Jr-shin, mixed media, poster / dimensions variable
 (Back) *The Banquet*, Niu, Chun-Chiang, video, 7'44"



The Banquet (detail), Luo Jr-shin, mixed media, poster / dimensions variable

Project, Time and Record of Life

However, no matter the experiment in the frame of the project by Niu and Luo succeeds or not, *New Work Project* is a rather inspiring attempt. The nature of the project is just temporal. As Groys puts it: someone executing or living in a project is also living in the future since the person executing a project will be transposed from the moment (present) to a virtual future by this project. Therefore, there is a difference of time between he/she and others who still have not arrived at the virtual future and wait for this future to take place. This is what Groys means by 'a parallel state of heterogeneous time' [5]. On the other hand, Biopolitics where we live, the difference between an artwork and a documentation of art lies in their rather distinct relations to art even though they both use the same medium and ways of expression: the former makes art manifest in its objects and

immediately seen by people and can refer to many other things beyond themselves but cannot refer to art. The latter can refer to art but it is not art per se. According to Groys, a documentation of art refers to life itself through the medium in an art space, regarding life to be events taking place in a certain segment of time; therefore, life can also be considered a certain time that is formed in an artificial way. It is also because of this, we may say that life is composed of a series of events (projects) within different segments of time [6]. Seen from this perspective, the specificity of *New Work Project* precisely lies in the fact that the subjectivity of the project is not focused on producing an artwork but that it documents, within a certain segment of time, parts of the temporal structure of the heterogeneities of the two artists' Groys also points out that, in the age of life respectively.

Notes

1. Quoted in Claude Lévi- Strauss, *L'Autre Face de la lune: Ecrits sur le Japon*.
2. Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project".
3. Such hints might be found in one of the objects placed in *Longevity*: two books, *The Innocent Anthropologist* and *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*, are placed on a table with various news clippings, manuscripts, photos and other objects.
4. See note 1, pg. 137-141.
5. See note 2.
6. See Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation". See also two articles from the special issue "What Art Got to Do with Art ? ": Chen Tai-sung's "Installation. Pulling off a Dynamic Trace of Life: A Tentative Reading of Groys' Aesthetical Thinking" and Wang Po-wei's "Art of Life and Life of Art".