

## Between Perception and Art: Luo Jr-shin

### Questions Concerning the Forms in *Foam to Form*

Written by Wang Po-Wei (art critic)

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*“This paradigm determines artistic modernity as the break of every kind of art with the enslavement of representations, which made all art the means of expression of an external referent, and art’s concentration, instead, on its own materiality. So literary modernity has been styled as the implementation of an intransitive use of language as opposed to its communicative use.” — Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup>*

Luo Jr-shin, *Foam to Form*, 2015. Ink-sprayed-paper, wooden frame, charcoal, graphite, watercolor, acrylic, plaster, clay, gauze, plastic fabric, shells, minerals, handrail, block and tackle, doorstop, and other ready-made objects. Picture provided by Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts.

Luo Jr-shin’s work, *Foam to Form*, was created with a focus on styrofoam, a material commonly used for shock-absorbent packaging. The artist discovered its sculptural form — and its beauty — through the material’s functional shapes. Consisting of two parts, the drafts and records of his research of the shapes of styrofoam are hung on the wall while the other part, consisting of plaster casts, are arranged on the floor. The work is exhibited in varying levels of completion and incorporate an array of objects used in daily life.

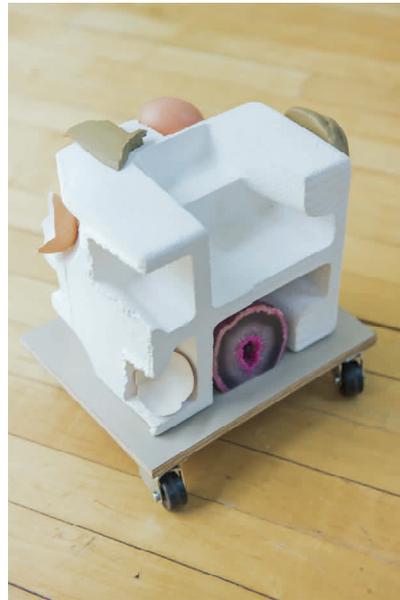
In the artist’s opinion, when the shock-absorbing materials were manufactured, the superficial aesthetics of styrofoam were not taken into consideration; its value lies solely within its necessary functionality. In regards to the aesthetic significance of these forms, the artist wishes to use his personal experiences with protective styrofoam in daily life to revert to the traces these forms have left upon our perception — or, more precisely, our perception of the qualities of these functional objects. Shock-absorbing styrofoam must be molded in accordance with the shape of the object it was intended to protect; its sculptural form is merely a transitional state, which in an artist’s eye, is a negative and

hidden state. From this point of view, *Foam to Form* presents us with a clear question that pertains to our times: What perceptual significance do the forms of objects hold for us?

The artist included styrofoam into the category of sculpture and ready-made objects and considered it within the context of the history of sculpture. Naturally, what we see in Luo's work is dissimilar to what Clement Greenberg discovered in the works of Anthony Caro, which inspired viewers to glean more than mere form through their eyes or thoughts.<sup>2</sup> Nor is what we see similar to what Michael Fried might have discovered in the minimalistic works of artists such as Tony Smith, whose works await the viewer to discover their 'presentness'.<sup>3</sup> Neither Greenberg nor Fried considered the qualities of a form though its function; they compared the form's qualities with how the object itself is experienced or understood. Compared to Greenberg and Fried, the question of awareness proposed by Luo Jr-shin considers function and form as two competing yet complementary qualities of one object. Luo's proposed question also refers directly to the discussion, conducted by Deutscher Werkbund, concerning the connection between a man-made object's function and form. This discussion contributed greatly to the slogan "function follows form," which ultimately became the dominant principal for design at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Then, in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this historical development also coincided with the rapid increase in the value of design which led to daily life becoming a part of the man-made world.<sup>5</sup> Luo's work, *Foam to Form*, is precisely the contemporary response to what Hans Belting opined, "The victory of the design field . . . is realized under circumstances in which artists' participation is absent."<sup>6</sup>

### Petrification of Ready-made Objects

However, the artist counterposed design with art to investigate how design became the frame of mind with which we now consider art. Luo's concept is very similar to the question proposed by Jacques Rancière: "I mentioned the question: how does the practice and idea of design . . . form a world of sentimental sharing so as to redefine the territory of an artistic life?"<sup>8</sup> Rancière clearly pointed out a new perceptual phenomenon which he considered a revolution in modern aesthetics that appeared in western Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This revolution separated aesthetics (also known as the study of perception) from daily life. From an artistic perspective, the genesis of this new perceptual phenomenon portended two pieces of important information.<sup>9</sup> Firstly, the topic of art would become more than a clear-cut order<sup>10</sup> that people would rely on for establishing a narrative of their world or society. Art would free itself from the ornamental roles it played as being a representation or (transitional) medium<sup>11</sup> of the world or of daily life; it declared to "create art for the sake of art." Secondly, the expressive forms of art no longer sought to imitate functionality or form — the forms established a



highly improbable (*unwahrscheinlich*) but nevertheless achieved order; the work itself is a manifestation of this order.<sup>12</sup> As aforementioned, art established a world that belongs to itself using a means of communication different from daily language. This is why — even after design had gained dominance over daily life and consumerism — art still maintains a certain distance from daily life and is, thus, able to reflect upon these functional objects.

In *Foam to Form*, the artist represents styrofoam by casting it in plaster, which separates it from the context of its functionality in daily life and propels it into the tradition of art. This form of petrification<sup>13</sup> allows the viewer to keep their experience untarnished by the significance of functional objects; it is a means of cleansing art and ridding it of any interference from the original medium itself. This technique does not make a ready-made object a part of the work, nor is it taking styrofoam and directly placing it into the exhibition space. It is truly, as its name suggests, turing foam (styrofoam) into form, with a particular emphasis on foam. Petrifying styrofoam is a strategy of magnifying form itself amidst the differences<sup>14</sup> between medium and form.

However, *Foam to Form* progresses beyond the process of petrifying and creating pure form. What we also see in the exhibition space are the drafts and records of the artist's research on shapes, along with other objects that are embedded in and incorporated with styrofoam. In our opinion, petrification not only means to fix form into place, but also to re-introduce form into form. As Luo describes it, he is dealing with questions concerning form using the category of sculpture, a category that came into existence through the development of art history. There are two steps that gained re-entry<sup>15</sup> to the creation of *Foam to Form*; first, the work was petrified and second, it was made into a sculpture. Although both steps deal with questions concerning form, they possess thoroughly different meanings. The previous paragraph dealt with the first step — petrification as a strategy of purifying the work into form. The second step serves

to “sculpturize” the form that had be re-introduced into the form; this step also ensures that the concept of “the functionality of styrofoam being dictated by other objects” will be made clear. The originally negative and hidden form is put through another step and concentrated into a form, becoming form itself. The work and the objects embedded in the styrofoam, such as metal frames, clay, and gauze, might not be the subjects the artist had intended to investigate; yet, their arranged presence in the plaster makes the shape of the styrofoam imminently apparent.

It is in the second step that form itself becomes the main question and context through which we can understand the role of Luo’s drafts and records. For the artist, the shape of the styrofoam refers to vestiges of life; on the whole, it is a controlled power over the meaning of life. It is by regarding the difference between functionality and form that we may comprehend the discrepancy in using form as functionality. Using form as function not only limits the development of functionality; it also controls the scope of the meaning of functionality itself. In other words, form is more than the boundary of functionality, it is its horizon. Luo has made expansive investigations between the boundary and the horizon, recording his findings in illustrations. The space opened up between petrification and “sculpturization” is where the artist’s imagination runs free.

### Wang Po-wei

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1. *Politics of Literature*, by Jacques Rancière, translated by Chang Hsin Mu, published by Nanjing University, Nanjing, 2014, p. 6.
2. *Sculpture in our Time: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, by Clement Greenberg, edited by John O’Brian, Chicago, 1993, pp. 55–61.
3. *Art and Objecthood*, by Michael Fried, by Chang Hsiao Jian and Shen Yu Bing, published by Jiangsu Art, Nanjing, 2009.
4. *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, by Reyner Banham, translated by Ding Ya Lei and Chang Hsiao Ying, published by Jiangsu Art, Nanjing, 2009, pp. 76–91.
5. *The Politics of the Artificial*, by Victor Margolin, translated by Jin Hsiao Wen and Xiong Yi, published by Jiangsu Art, Nanjing, 2009, pp. 127–146.
6. *Art History After Modernism*, by Hans Belting, translated by Su Wei, published by Jingcheng, Beijing, 2013, p. 188.
7. Hans Belting believed that, “The frame creates a distance between the audience and the work, making the work react in a passive fashion. Yet the meaning had already expanded to a common realm, a cultural realm.” For a more thorough discourse of what important role frame plays in our discussion of contemporary art and culture (including daily life), please refer to *Art History After Modernism*, by Hans Belting, translated by Su Wei, published by Jingcheng, Beijing, 2013, pp. 16–31.
8. *The Future of the Image*, by Jacques Rancière, translated by Huang Jian Hung, published by Artouch, Taipei, 2011, p. 126. The artist, under principles of separating functionality and form, entrusted a holistic line of thinking to the concept of ready-made objects — a concept that developed through art history. Although the artist did not clearly mark design thinking as the dominant concept for Foam to Form, his method of regarding form on a general level of (the overall) form is still, as we see it, at the core of design thinking.
9. *The Future of the Image*, by Jacques Rancière, translated by Huang Jian Hung, published by Artouch, Taipei, 2011, p. 140.
10. For a more thorough explanation of the relationship between daily life and world order, please refer to *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, by Arthur O. Lovejoy, translated by Chang Chuan You and Gao Bing Jiang, published by Jiangxi Education, Jiangxi, 2002.
11. For the transitional and intermediary role art has historically played in society, please refer to *The Invention of Liberty*, by Jean Starobinski, translated by Chang Gen and Xia Yan, published by East China Normal University, Shanghai, 2015.
12. *Art as a Social System*, by Niklas Luhmann, translated by Chang Jin Hui, published by Wunan, Taipei, 2009, p. 248.
13. *What is Literature? And Other Essays*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, published by Cambridge: Mass:Harvard University Press, 1988, translated by Bernard Frechtman, pp. 113-114.
14. Here we referred to a concept proposed by Niklas Luhmann in *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur*, translated by Chang Jin Hui, published by Wunan, Taipei, 2013, pp. 153–173.
15. Here we referred to a concept proposed by George Spencer-Brown.