

Zhou Documents

1996

Artist Note: Three Layers of Thoughts on the Project A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man

Bo NIU 牛波

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhoudocs>

Recommended Citation

NIU 牛波, Bo, "Artist Note: Three Layers of Thoughts on the Project A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man" (1996). *Zhou Documents*. 196.
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhoudocs/196>

This Artist Notes is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Zhou Documents by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

Three Layers of Thoughts on the Project

A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man

Niu Bo

Ren Jianguo (translator)

First Layer: The Project Itself

The formation of the project is a gradual progressive process, undergoing several years of trial and searching for directions with three actual experiments. My 1990 project entitled *Eyesight Test: Before Entering the Museum* presents a huge eyesight chart hanging above the entrance of the museum with crowds of visitors lining up in the plaza to have their eyesight checked at various spots. The message conveyed here is to challenge the epistemology that "what is not visible is not in existence" and to call for taking another "look" at the arts that are created mainly to be "seen." In 1993, I carried out the second experiment at the Contemporary Art Center in Mito Art Tower, Japan. The show was named *Meditation Against the Wall*. Let me explain why it was so name.

An Indian monk named Dharma came to the ancient China to preach his teachings, but he found it was hardly accepted. He then began to wander around until he came to Shao Lin Temple where he settled down in a hillside cave and sat facing the wall every day, practicing yoga and meditation. That became the origin of a frequently used Chinese proverb "Ten years of meditation against the wall in an attempt to break in." The monk was the very founder of Zen Buddhism.

The installation of the show was like this: In a virtually empty exhibition room an infra-red video camera was shooting a white wall. The wall was bare, but the viewer could see on the monitor an eyesight chart hanging behind the wall. Indeed, the viewer could go round behind the wall and could actually see the chart. In short, by using the

modern technology, the show provided an artistic "false evidence" to illustrate the concept of "Being" and "Nothing" of Zen Buddhism. On the basis of these two experiments, the project *A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man* came into being. The project was first displayed in the Kilin Art Center, Japan in Spring 1995, and will be displayed again at Z Gallery from March through April 1996 with greater depths and grander accomplishment.

This is how the installation will be set: Two rooms are installed at the gallery; one is in dark, the other is brightly lit. Inside the bright room a blind man is waiting. The viewer goes into the dark room first where he has to "feel", "experience" and "comprehend" the material objects in the room in an attempt to memorize them. Afterwards, he goes on to the bright room to pass the memories onto the blind man with the help of the language. The blind man then makes visible images with clay accordingly.

Second Layer: Opening the Hidden Eye

In both Buddhism and Taoism there is a strictly confidential way of practicing yoga and self-cultivation called "opening the hidden eye." It is regarded as "a secret of all secrets." The so-called "hidden eye" lies slightly above between the eye brows. It links up with the pineal body of a person's brain. The modern medicine has found sufficient evidence to support its existence, referring it as "a degenerated eye" or as people call it the third eye. To open the hidden eye, in fact, is to revitalize its functions through special practice of self-cultivation. Why is it so important to open it? What's the difference between "the hidden eye" and the naked eyes? In Buddhism it says whatever human beings see through their naked eyes is all "mirage" and not real. It is just a superficial phenomena at a certain level. To open the hidden eye is to let the pineal body see the outside directly, not going through the optic nerves as it does now. The hidden eye will not create unreal images but see through the essence of the object. The vision of the hidden eye consists of five ascending levels and each level has a upper, middle and lower phase, respectively. These levels are viewed as the reflections of the truth of the universe. The following is a brief description of the five levels:

Level One Naked Eye Opening

You can see the light that ordinary naked eyes can not see.

Level Two Celestial Eye Opening

You can see things behind the wall and see through a human body in a perspective way.

Level Three Wisdom Eye Opening

You can see the images of other time and space.

Level Four Fa Eye Opening

You can see similarities and differences of all time and space, past and future.

Level Five Buddha Eye Opening

You can break through all the barriers of time and space and see the farthest edge of the universe.

If the purpose of art is "to be seen," what the art creator does is actually let people know how he himself sees this world. For instance, the animals painted on the Greek porcelain of the eighth century B.C. were not anywhere superior to the murals painted by the deer hunters of Southern France and Spain 20,000 years ago: they show the front view of the body but the sides of their legs. European artists never painted the galloping horses right until the discovery of photography. Ancient Africans used to paint their bones on the side of their body as decoration; Michelangelo used to do autopsy to learn structure of a human being. While European artists tried to "rightly" depict "different objects at various distances" by hanging a "perspective frame" before a naked girl, Chinese artists drew their emperor's dinner table with the front edge "on the same length" as its far end edge, making it look like a trapezoid. But in the mountain and water landscape paintings, by using "scattering perspective" they were able to present several dozen kilometer long river banks on a landscape scroll. The artists before impressionism presented sunlight as "candle light"; Chinese artists used only two colors: black and white.....

It is one world, but there are so many different ways of "seeing" it. It is all resulted from at what level the artist's "hidden eye" has been opened. It was from this point of view when I declared "to ferry people out of the sea of bitterness with arts" (Buddhism advocates ferrying everyone out of the sea of bitterness). The history of

contemporary art can be viewed as a history of the mankind's endeavors to supersede the limits of his naked eyes (The abstract painting is a good example). In an article discussing various ways to re-critique the history of contemporary art in terms of different levels of the hidden eye, I wrote: "The diligent efforts made on the part of the modern art over the past hundred years have failed to supersede the material time and space of the world we are now living in, and have failed to overcome the limits of the level on which the mankind is staying. We are still in the phase of what Mi Buddhism calls 'worldly' cultivation, that is, wandering in a long passage from the 'naked eye' to the 'celestial eye'" This is also one of the motives I had in mind when I did the artistic experiments of zero gravity. I wanted to have the "naked eye" opened onto other space. This consciousness has been the thread that ran through all my artistic activities. For instance, *Eyesight Test: Before Entering the Museum* is at the level of the naked eye while *Meditation Against the Wall* is at the level of celestial eye. In the project of *A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man*, my attempt is to open the "hidden eye" reaching the "wisdom eye" level so that we can experience, from our space, the strength and existence of other space.

When a monk tries to open his hidden eye through the practice of self-cultivation, he would sit down and observe what is going on before his forehead. At the beginning there is nothing. Totally dark. Gradually, the forehead turns pale and glowing. The light becomes a revolving flower that itself is getting transparent. Then the monk would find himself running on a long endless passage. Lao Tze had this very experience. He ran and ran and on half way he came across something like a mirror which in fact was the reflection of the universe. Lao Tze found the corresponding relationship between his own space and the space of the universe. He advocated the union and oneness of heaven and man, but what he saw was still his own space. The dark room is just the representation of this space. When the viewer has lost his sight, he would naturally use other senses to experience the objects. He would bypass all the optic nerves and other functions to sense the existence of the hidden eye. But we are not offering a special course to help the viewer "open his hidden eye." The viewer would draw back on his experiences to make judgment, that is, to use his brain to present what he feels -- producing "perception." For instance, he feels a flower which does not have the quality of a real flower as it is made of silk, but he can smell the scent of a real flower as it is sprayed with perfume. The

overlapping of the two flowers produces the vision of a third flower in the brain. This kind of state is what Zhuang Zi gets into when he wonders "Did I dream myself to be a butterfly? Or did the butterfly dream that I have changed into a human?" While it is a wake up call for the memory, it is also a wake up call for the "hidden eye." "Seeing" is only a way of recalling. As Lao Tze himself did not reach the status of Fa Eye level, this Oriental way thinking has since been mired and did not make any progress. All the scholars after Lao Tze did was no more than interpret his theory. What's more, as the interpreters were not at the level of having the consciousness to open the hidden eye, they used the saying "it is not Taoism any more when it could be spoken out" as an excuse to gloss it over. Indeed, it is self-deceiving. That's why I must let the viewer speak out the unspeakable Oriental thoughts (to the blind man).

While the dark room represents the monism of traditional Eastern philosophy of perception, the brightly lit room represents the dualism of classical Western philosophy of ration. The latter undoubtedly is the symbol of the world of the "naked eye." When I was an art student in Beijing, China, teachers always told us: Light gives the color; and only because of light can we see images; to paint the light is what painting is all about; with light there are "sense of quality", "sense of size" and "sense of existence." Since Aristotle established the theory of science, this method of understanding the laws of the universe scientifically has been continually improving itself to the point that the mankind can not but use it to draw conclusions for everything in our space.

It is in the bright room that such progress and the confusion that the progress has brought with it are presented. On the wall are the marble pillars of various ages and vestiges of statues. Human being's visions have been attracted and fixed by material objects, leaving no possibility of appearance of the "hidden eye." But right in the middle of the room is sitting a blind man whom I put there as a "hidden eye" of the mankind. He is viewed as a "blind spot" beside the two rooms and two theories of civilization -- a third force. I believe those who were born blind (perhaps it is not appropriate to call them so) are the chosen few though they themselves may not think so. I believe the blind who are shut away from "seeing" things are perhaps the "scientific" proof of the existence of the "hidden eye" which people in general tend to regard as "superstitious." Medical researchers at Graham Women's Hospital of Boston, Massachusetts conducted an extensive test on 11 blind persons and the results proved most of the blind people have

the ability of "sensing the light with the brain" which means they have the "natural" "hidden eye."

The viewer comes out of the dark room and passes the memory to the blind man with words. He also gives the blind man some wet clay from the wall. I call the object made from the clay an "image of incarnation in the process." It is not because it gets all the senses of feel, smell, hear, memory, language and vision involved in the course of its formation, but because of the viewer's participation and his keeping vigil over the course of transition. In doing so, he clearly experiences the relationship of today's reality and the two histories of human civilizations. From the depths of the brain and soul of the blind man who can see neither of the two rooms nor the image of the statue he is making by his hands reveal the clues of the future thoughts of the mankind. Behind the door that we are trying hard to open lies the self that we have left by ourselves.

Third Layer: Bardo Status

If the two rooms are representing the two worlds, the viewer is the being of a continuous "incarnation" or "Bardo" between the two worlds. While he is traveling back and forth between the two rooms, he is able to compare the outlook of the two. The rational way of thinking is in effect resulted from the criticism of the dark room, but the logic which has been established on the basis of the criticism is facing a wall in the end. People find "the question we are facing today is no more different from the one mankind raised several thousand years ago -- why is it the world as it is?What is different today is that we have a better concept." (By Weinbert, holder of Nobel Prize of physics)

Through this work one not only raises doubt about the objectivism based on natural science and material beings, but realizes that it could have a better chance to have our conscience saved if the spirit were put above materialism. Without the viewer there would be no independent and objective existence. Both the objectivism in the bright room and the imaginative subjectivism in the dark room are not perfect methods. Beyond them there is a third force, which is similar to Madh Yanika in Tibetan Buddhism.

The current method is really a Hopkins' choice. You either choose the bright room in its "re-presentation" style, a world of beings of characteristics waiting to be summed up by human beings. Or you choose the dark room, sinking into a chaotic

relativism. The third force beyond the two rooms is the one represented by the viewer and the blind man. The movement surrounding the viewer and between the two rooms is a linkage of "incarnation." Between them there are no relations for reference, no difference between the subject and object, no conflict between the Eastern and Western civilizations, and no line of separation. Today, the only valuable civilization should be the civilization of this planet which we have not yet had. However, I believe this is the time we began to have a global civilization. In the bright room, the subjective element "I" is excluded and laws are sought purely based on objective observations. The knowledge gained this way will produce the same results regardless of the place and object. It is the objective "truth." Ours is the age of great success for obtaining this knowledge. On the other hand, the knowledge gained through "my" participation in the dark room is very individual, perhaps appropriate to the participant only. But to that individual, all is true and meaningful. Can we have both truths? In this project, the linkage between the two truths is the viewer. One moment in the viewer's mind it may be "perceptual" while another moment it can be "rational" when the blind man asks the viewer to go back to the dark room to experience one more time for better expression. In the book *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Bardo means middle or halfway. The two rooms are just two points of incarnation (they neither departure nor arrival terminals). The statue the viewer makes together with the blind man is exactly the image of this "Bardo." The premise for this Bardo is regardless of the conflict and separation of the two rooms, just as the merger of the light and darkness produces all the colors. The negation to the powerful weapon of the modern man -- the method to draw a clear line separating various civilizations -- will bring about a boundary in its true sense.

According to Buddhism, Bardo is also one of the states that the practitioner of Zen meditation and self-cultivation tries to attain. The practitioner shall experience "death," for the heart presents its defined and higher level under the status of Bardo. However, "Bardo" is not resulted from religious practice. It is intrinsic to our nature and will display through self-cultivation. Heart is the essence of life. To train the heart we will have a good heart that contains magnanimity. One of the purposes of the project is to let the participants experience the nature of the heart. From the discovery of the heart and from the expression of a pan-civilization in its broad sense, one is to experience the

"hidden eye" in one's heart and use it to observe one's own consciousness. From every awakening heart comes out the transition of conscience and the consciousness that you yourself is the very third force.