

Zhou Documents

12-22-1993

Essay: Five Hours of a 1000 Yuan Worth Allegory of Love

Tan XU 徐坦

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

Recommended Citation

XU 徐坦, Tan, "Essay: Five Hours of a 1000 Yuan Worth Allegory of Love" (1993). *Zhou Documents*. 351. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhoudocs/351>

This Essay 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.

FIVE HOURS OF A 1000 YUAN WORTH ALLEGORY OF LOVE
(FOR THOSE WHO WERE NOT THERE)

To follow the entire process would have taken more than five hours: the whole afternoon and evening wandering around in Guangzhou, ending up in the outside of the "Red Ant" pub. And even though Chen Shaoxiong likes to say that "nothing happens", the 24th of November, 1993, was actually an unusual day for the people who took somehow part in the third art event of the "Big Tail Elephant" group.

大象

It started in Xu Tan's house, in the Academy of Fine Arts, placing a plastic female model (like those used in clothes shops) on top of an army truck driven by two young People's army recruits. The model is carrying a large bazooka on her shoulders, wearing a blue helmet, and stares at the world with big, fixed blue eyes. Slowly the truck heads towards the academy's main door, and dives into Guangzhou's frenetic traffic. From the street, one could see the silhouette of the evidently artificial body and its heavy load, on a gray sky background. On the truck, two people taking pictures and filming the whole event. On the street, riding motorbikes, the same kind of assorted team video-documenting the work and its audience. What Xu Tan wishes to reach, is the fusion of his work with expressions of daily life; no matter whether the people on their bikes look at his model with attention and curiosity, with indifference, or don't even pay any consideration to it. The truck leads toward some of Guangzhou's main spots: the Zhujiang river, the Haizhu square with its big sculpture in memory of the liberation of the city by the communist party, then towards Beijing street, where many old houses are now being destroyed to be replaced by new, tall buildings. In Beijing street the previous shops have given place to luxurious, colourful international chain-stores. The traffic jam urges to a stop, and the people stare at the strange *ensemble* mostly with perplexity; some laugh or show indifference. The percouse of the truck touches the Martyrs' park, then makes the final stop at Mc Donald's; the day coming already to dusk.

Xu Tan imagines his artwork as something between an object of everyday use (or non-use), and something that, due to its strangeness, gives a dramatic, theatrical feeling. The viewer is not requested to understand the artist's meaning; the artwork has its own existence despite the author's idea. So the symbol of the United Nations soldiers (Blue Helmet), embodied by the model, may be caught only by viewers very concerned with international politics.

爱的寓言

"Allegory of love" is the title of Xu Tan's work. It can be the false love of the First world for the Third world, or the false freedom of homosexual love amongst army men, recently "approved" by Clinton. In the outside of the "Red Ant" pub Xu Tan will place, late in the evening, two female models with fish tails (mermaids) and blue helmet, tenderly embracing each other, with a fixed expression on their faces. And when, later on, some students will throw rests of a meal on top of the models, the artist feels that his purpose is beeing nearly fulfilled. His piece lies there, like rubbish, among people eating and drinking, becoming a very ordinary part of the environment, but still with a sense of strangeness. This might in my eyes be also an allegory of the alienation which a small group of artists must feel in a city where just a few people partially share the same way of thinking,

while the major part still looks at them with a kind of amusement, indifference, surprise, or disdain.

Having experimented how it feels to put his work in the outside, in a daily environment, Xu Tan realised even stronger how the four walls of a gallery, even of a non-institutional space, would be restrictive and suffocating. The core of his meaning would then be very difficult to understand, practically impossible.

Still, beside the happening itself, he needs to document his art visually; he needs pictures and videos supporting its ephemeral existence. He wishes to have images which show the interaction between the work and the viewers, to compensate people who were not there, mostly from the art world, for their inability to watch the whole process. I would say, Xu Tan has privileged the common viewers, those who don't know anything about his aim, and who didn't even bother to think what kind of apparition was that, passing their bikes on the way home.

What art critics can see is another part of the work: they have been given a meta-language to look at. They can have photos of female models lying on the floor among eating folks, covered by spinachs and *doufu*, or pictures of a fragile plastic body carrying a big, menacing gun beside the entrance of the "Red Ant", where it has been placed during the late evening. They will be enabled to have a complete, yet mediate impression of the environment, missing the real thing.

The impressive woman soldier overlooks the ruins of a brick walls, trace already neglected of Lin Yilin's performance. The absolute novelty of this happening of the "Big Tail Elephant" group sees the artists facing new ways of expressing themselves. Place and time circumstances need a forceful, condensed manifestation, which is much related to the immediate response of the viewers. So in Lin Yilin's "100 pieces and 1000 pieces" the meaning resides in the action rather than in the final result of his labour. The artist once again uses gray bricks, a material widely present in old Guangzhou's building (now being replaced by concrete), but for the first time these don't recall any architectural impression. A metal ladder, 100 bricks and 100 banknotes of 10 yuan each, plus a boxing-glove are the chosen materials. Wearing the glove, Lin Yilin climbs the ladder and places on its top one brick, then another, inserting a banknote between them. Then he keeps on building a sort of precarious construction of bricks and money, completing first all the steps of the ladder, then posing them on the floor nearby.

When all the bricks and money have been used up, he starts the "de-constructive" part of the action. He grabs a banknote and tears it causing the superposed brick to fall on the floor. Then he harshly beats the same brick on top of the money, until the brick has broken into pieces, and uses these pieces to build another, uneven, wall. Lin Yilin then throws the money to the astonished viewers, who react differently, either avoiding accurately any contact with the cash, or grabbing it enthusiastically. Some have been noticed setting fire to the money, others tried to collect as much as they could.

The action ends with all the money been distributed, all the bricks smashed on top of the banknotes and then put together to form another wall. The top of the ladder is the last step, as it has been the first. The artists is sweating, he rises his glove like a boxeur after the match.

Lin Yilin's art seems to have come to a new phase. From his interest for a status between architecture and sculpture, to the focusing on materials themselves, then to a forceful expression of energy. This might be either the inner energy of a material, depending on its structure, on its latent capacity or social meaning, or the energy spread both by the artist's action and by the viewers' reaction. Moreover, the connexion of materials is determined by different forces owned by the objects themselves, and produces energy. So by tearing a piece of money-paper one can cause the fall of a brick; the meaning of this act will go further *through* though, being filled with social contents, beside considerations strictly related to the very nature of the material.

The production of energy, being dependent on the value of different materials, their relationship and the interaction with artist and public, is here expressed all at once, during a 50 minutes happening. This new intensity is somehow justaposed to the stillness (yet powerful) of Lin Yilin's earlier works.

The artist feels he has somehow found a simpler way to express himself; now the main point is not whether he should use the "wall" pattern again (subject of many works in the past): it is mainly the creation and propagation of forces that interest him. Thanks to the very process of making an artwork, it becomes possible to determine a change in the relationship between different materials, and between the artwork and the audience.

The money distributed to the people is somehow special, recognizable: it has the artist's mark on it. It carries, together with the traces of dusty bricks, some meanings which will eventually involve the viewer's thoughts, will lead him to wonder about the happening he has been witnessing, will start a mental activity as a result of the employment of different forces and therefore will become itself a source of energy.

Lin Yilin obtains therefore the propagation of his work in a concrete and/or metaphorical way, and urges the participation of the unaware audience.

His performance has just finished, and a bell rings. The complicated installation built by Chen Shaoxiong suddenly lights up, his planned starting time having been already reached. Several neon tubes in various colour suggest the shape of a quadruped, with few lines for body and legs and a circular tube as a head. The rendering is reduced to the indispensable, still the figure of a cow is instantly appearing in the viewer's mind. Maybe because a plastic tube with intermittent green lightspots resembling to a flush of nurturing milk connects the animal to the artist's body.

The abdomen of this imaginary cow contains a board; on it, the title and time of the work: " 5 hours 9.30 p.m. to 2.30 a.m.". 五个小时 Beside, an old-fashioned clock with a tiny hen pecking at every single second with its movable head. It's a small farm what Chen has put together. He thinks everyone, human beings or animals, hides a clock in the inside, natural and/or artificial; and that this is the origin of the daily succession of physiological needs or of more sophisticated activities.

The personal watch inside Chen Shaoxiong's body has decided that he will be sitting there, beside the door of the "Red Ant", with an electrical device hanging from his neck and a rubber luminous tube in his mouth, for five hours. With an expression of perfect *nonchalance*, he is somehow fooling himself, apparently wasting time and electricity (the numbers of the electric device constantly rotate showing the exact amount of consume, every

fraction of time), waiting for the planned five hours to be spent in a complete absence of happenings.

Five hours which would pass anyhow, their existence not depending on the artist's will. They would not have been grouped together, though: every moment would have assumed a different value in different events, becoming more or less relevant in the life of anyone. Chen has decided to re-define a period of time which could be considered as made of either five hours, ten half hours, 300 minutes ... of different activities, giving it a fixed content, a unique lack of activity.

The way he will spend the evening is not depending on anything but his previous determination. It isn't the succession of actions, of needs, which shapes these hours; rather, the decision to be completely imperturbable to these aspects. He has cut a period of time restricting its duration and its content in a completely arbitrary way. He is no longer the slave of a daily rhythm of happening: he has shown his preference for the "nothing happens" condition.

Actually watching the transparent tube which links the artist's body to the imaginary cow, we can't make sure of the direction of the electric fluid. Is the animal feeding Chen Shaoxiong, or vice versa? Is the electricity coming from the wires, or from the author's body? Do the electric disposals possess a sort of more powerful vitality than the one of human body and mind? Artist and viewers are captured in a sort of fluctuating relationship, where the roles are constantly inverted.

After having been sitting for a while, Chen is urged by the viewers to give them his place. They sit there, one after the other, playing with the tube and having it twisted around the body. The plan of Shaoxiong has already been modified; the transparent materials he likes to use for their ability to become subject for spatial and temporal changes, begin to have their own vitality and don't necessarily follow the artist's idea.

It is actually the subversion of roles, together with the oncoming of the unforeseen, the unexpected, that thrills Chen; he is ready to give up his pre-planned event, and to enjoy the succession of happenings which will enliven his five hours.

So that he doesn't mind when three policemen come and order him and the other artists to dismantle the installations within half an hour. His apparently useless, wasteful inactivity has been completely subverted by exterior agents; he has been playing both the part of the artist and the viewer, the creator and the created, the human being and the animal, the dispenser of electricity and its possible victim, the one who can decide the succession of events and the one who can do nothing but pack his stuff and quickly leave.

His way to devote a certain amount of time of his existence to a "pause", to an apparent stillness of the brain, has instead provoked several unexpected events, has been diversified variously.

The evening of the 24th of November has been really dense of feelings and thoughts. The artists of the "Big Tail Elephant" say they have chosen the outside of the "Red Ant" bar because they couldn't find anything else, and therefore they had to fit their works into the concrete environment. They say the reason why they together form a group is a kind of mystery - maybe only due to the fact that they all live in Guangzhou, maybe much more (common

feelings, common language and interests..). They also admit that all this cannot be only a matter of coincidences.

What they know for sure is that their works, their activities should not be considered merely from a point of view of "achievement". They don't wish to create perfect works, beautiful art. They feel somehow this way to look at art would lead them to a dead end, to something complete and therefore restful.

They instead need to rise questions, to stimulate reactions, to continuously evolve and be critical and self-critical.

They aim at an imperfect, yet forceful, artwork.

1993, 12, 22

Monica Dematte

莫妮卡