

NETWORKED:

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The perfection of the imperfection (or the principles of adaptation II: the evolution)

By Davide Quadrio

This text was written for a publication that never got to the printer. Still, after a couple of years, it seems to me that some of the considerations and examples involved in the text are central of many of the art organizations that straggle between independency, local context and the international art system.

“Here, you will get to know Chinese youth oil painters, and become our friends while enjoying our oil paintings full of eastern sentimental appeal, modern and classical realism oil paintings.

XXX Art Studio was a professional oil painting organization, which set up in 2001 ,It mainly sell Chinese youth oil painters original oil paintings to collectors,while receiving entrusted orders of oil painting portrait from different countries and areas all over the world. Foreign collectors, such as American, Japanese, Australian, Brazil and so on, have collected most of his original oil paintings.

We are sure that you will be satisfied with it because of its good quantities in both art standard and materials. If you enjoy a certain original oil painting artwork you can choice to purchase; if you are an art agency or oil painting wholesale dealer, send an e-mail to us, We can provide large numbers of any kind of the high quality oil paintings.”

From a promotional email of a Beijing based gallery received in October 2009

"A leaner, meaner, angrier art world that has to fight harder for our attention is exactly what we need."

From Time for a cull in the art world. The art world is plunging, along with the rest of the economy. Hooray, by Waldemar Januszczak, New York Times, 11 January 2009

I_ Prologue: Rites of Passage

I have a problem”...this is how Lina Saneh’s performance starts. Lebanese, woman, shaken by the war she lived through. Legislation in Lebanon allows only to be put in a coffin and be buried, unacceptable for her. This theatre piece is how she tries to find solutions to this unacceptable ending. She wants to be cremated, cremated, fire and ash. No other possibilities. She decides then to get rid of her body while alive, piece by piece, and finally be one with it. Her performance traces a journey between resistance and survival, between compromises and the final goal of her life: be cremated. This strong image stayed in my head for months now and echoes some of the fundamental questions of my actual professional life.

In Thailand it is becoming a trend to go to Wat Prammanee monastery in Nakhon Nayok to get a fresh start in life. People lay in pink coffins (9 to be precise) and they are reborn after few minutes. The monks read sutras, preach and purify the bodies in a community ritual, guiding their passage to a new life as they transcend (as a totally uncritical

metaphor) the phase of ineptitude in making a decision (due to the ignorance of knowing what psychological tools are necessary) to that of dealing with the trauma of change and on to rebirth, as the only solution for “removing” the stress of change: is this collective ritual that transforms the individual process into a shared process of communal intimacy.

2_ Confession

I start this text with two strong images of people dealing with frustration, social obstacles or private disillusionment: these are images that can offer a valid backdrop to what I am about to describe.

So let's start from there: the first question by Linah: what is my problem after all?

In a recent symposium in Chicago held at Ellen Stone Belic Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in the Arts and Media, Prof. Wu Hung described me/BizArt and later of Arthub as being for many years at the margins, underneath, present, important for sure, fundamental even but developed in such a local context and with so much attention to the locality and not to the contemporary (star) system that these experiences have been put at the margins of the glorious history of Contemporary Chinese Art: just because they were at the margin of the only possible model: the art economy i.e. making money: “provide large numbers of any kind of high quality oil paintings”

BlzArt/Arthub/me were doomed to be unclassified/ unclassifiable: not for profit, independent, without money so without power...what did this organization really do?

3_ The margins

Even if my words seem to bring a sort of disillusionment and haste, it is actually the contrary.

It is true that BlzArt/Arthub/me are working at the margins but these margins are incredibly interesting, complex and at the end rewarding.

In fact the last 10 years of building BizArt and then Arthub gave me the opportunity to develop connections with government institutions (local and international) and made me part of the process of negotiating a position and of dealing with the idea of “soft-power” to change boundaries of existence or (in the case of international institutions) to receive funding or to achieve a “protected” status as representative of an international organization or cultural/political institution.

Dealing with this kind of continuous schizophrenia tired and still does tire my mind on one hand but also keeps me in the “self-control” mode. It forces me to analyze the “constructed realities” that I am working on and in and that I am (more or less consciously) shaping or supporting, so to find the meaning of what I do.

What is the meaning of making progressive production for public intrusions? Is the educational value of any importance in artistic creations? Is the creation based on team work useful to put in place a possible artistic system in a place like Shanghai where only commercial galleries are operating independently?

Considering what is happening worldwide with this recent financial crises, is there a possibility of a different economy in the artworld? What is the next possible step after years of simply miming the stock market and the economic transactions even hidden in so-called sponsorships?

While I am saying all this, the markets are in the first recession in decades, the governments are trying to keep this failed system afloat and the arrogance and the shortsighted boom of the art market in China exploded in a matter of few months: galleries are closing, artists are worried, and investments are declining.

Nevertheless, it is a good time. It is the time for new occasions (re-birth) and to have finally the time to re-think, re-evaluate, re-position all efforts.

The only thing that I can do to answer this, is to reassess via artistic "episodes" of my own experience, the complexity of the social-political-economic background that made China this unique context for such fast cultural development but also doomed it in a matter of few years.

4_Important considerations

1- the socio-political situation of China is still one of a regime.

To say it as it appears in the document called "Charter 08"

"The political reality, which is plain for anyone to see, is that China has many laws but no rule of law; it has a constitution but no constitutional government. The ruling elite continues to cling to its authoritarian power and fights off any move toward political change. The stultifying results are endemic official corruption, an undermining of the rule of law, weak human rights, decay in public ethics, crony capitalism, growing inequality between the wealthy and the poor, pillage of the natural environment as well as of the human and historical environments, and the exacerbation of a long list of social conflicts, especially, in recent times, a sharpening animosity between officials and ordinary people."

I think that it is very dangerous not to remember this point and it is fundamental not to be blinded by the economic success and glittering urban life that it is presented both by Western and Chinese media. Comments like somebody's in Berlin recently recited: "if you want to become a millionaire marry a Chinese woman", on the other hand, do not help to solve the other side of the coin: the remains of imperialistic attitudes and the ignorance of the "other" that such statements bring with it.

2- China cultural situation: official vs civil societies does not differ that much to what happens in the so called developed countries or international organizations: there are different speeds and ideas of what cultural development is, and usually civil societies are far more progressive than the official institutions. This is the way it is. The very big difference is that in China the recent 20 years of cultural development have been the locus of incredible contradictions.

I analyzed this problem in a recent text commissioned to me by AAA in Hong Kong:

" China, the country that had been silent for four decades became the driving force for the worldwide economy in only a few years. Everybody wanted to be a part of it, and governments worldwide were interested in getting into bed with China. Art and culture were the most natural and easiest ways to approach China and to try to better

understand how to access this relatively 'unknown' (the exotic 'other') political, economic and cultural entity. The Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) created ASEP for this very purpose. European governments put in place and invested in ambitious cultural programmes (such as the Year of China in France and the Year of France in China). Anxieties over linking with China progressed with the advent of the Olympic Games in Beijing last year and the forthcoming Shanghai Expo in 2010. From underground events to international festivals, symposia and exhibitions, artistic productions and architectural landmarks, and university-to-university programmes, China became the new undiscovered territory. The desire for internationalization, the lack of a progressive development of cultural frameworks and the inadequacy of existing infrastructures have pushed China (and to an extent other Asian countries as well) to adapt quickly via a sort of copycat infrastructure and content. With this sort of acceleration and urgency, China has been forced to adapt to the situation and has been pushed into learning on the job, with the consequential problems ensuing.

5_ Three key-experiences

Here below for the first time I will describe 3 projects between art/economy, art/sponsorship, art/public presentation that I hope can give an image of the complexity of the making of art projects in China in the last decade. All the documentation has never been presented in a publication and it has been actually "auto-censored" for many years.

Trying to be away from simplistic sensationalism, the "report" of these three projects is a testament of my personal experiences in "unsuspected" times.

I- Choi Jeongwha, Shanghai Bouquet: a public sculpture.

In 2005, via the mediation of a shanghaihese huaqiao, Wendy Moy, BizArt was called to present a project for the district of Changning, the heart of Shanghai. The project called to make a monumental piece that the Government of Shanghai would have commissioned and built. The call was for international and local artists.

We called the Korean artist Choi Jeongwha, to submit a proposal which was in line with the ultra-kitsch style of the artist. I huge flower tree as close as we could imagine to the Lyon version of it.

After several official presentations, renderings, even video clips, the project was accepted and a contract was to be put in place.

Before doing so, the government and Wendy Moy wanted to have all technical references and also supervise the factory (based in Beijing) that would have been responsible of the construction of the flowers.

We resisted and we could actually kept the drawings for ourselves but a supervision of the factory with Wendy Moy (in principle on our side) was agreed upon.

After supervision of the factory quality, the project had a free to go and the contract signed by BizArt was sent to the Shanghai Municipality.

After that, silence for a week. The coming week my assistant Vigy Jin called me saying that our technical team was resigned and wanted to leave BizArt at once. This news took me by surprise but after several meetings with the technical team, we had to let them go.

At the same time, we kept on calling Wendy Moy for updates on contract and time schedule for the construction. After few days, Wendy Moy did not pick the phone up anymore.

To make the story short, a month later we discovered that Wendy Moy and BizArt technical team were working on the project without us and of course without the artist. The tree was built with shape and colours changing in the next month or so. The contract never came back nor down-payments were made to us or the artist.

Some time passed by when suddenly my assistant Vigy received a telephone call by the Shanghai Municipality, asking for a meeting. At the meeting we discovered that the contract was signed (in a photocopy) and that we were guilty of not following the work of the tree i.e. the result was not up to the standard. We of course told them that, first we did not receive the contract signed nor the down-payment so the contract was not in force, second that Wendy Moy did all the work without us and the artist, third that it was too late to fix the sculpture and that the only possibility was to remake it from scratches.

Of course they disappeared again, I never heard of them since...the tree is there to everybody to see, signed by Wendy Moy...

2- Solo Exhibition, underground- private/public co-operation

The 2006 "Solo Exhibition" was very likely the most ambitious one that this group of artists has arranged in the last few years (even if the circumstances turned it into more of a happening). The event was made possible with the technical and logistic support of BizArt, the Dolan Museum, and the Zendai MoMA. It was actually a combination of 38 solo shows by as many artists, each one curated utterly independently of the others, which, of course, made for a total of 38 catalogues, 38 invitations, 38 press kits, and 38 different and separate spaces clustered in a former industrial facility that had just been remodelled. The exhibition covered an area of roughly three thousand square meters. Approximately eighty people contributed to the making of the event, including the artists; BizArt, Zendai MoMA, and the Dolan Museum collaborators; and students. Each artist was in charge of his or her "solo exhibition," from the form and content to the design of the invitation and the catalogue. And perhaps as a result of the long "silence" imposed by the censorship that prevailed from 2000 to 2006, the critical content of several of the works on display was quite direct, and at times their visual impact was rather disturbing. The young Zhang Ding, for example, presented a photographic study of pornography in China; He An designed an installation about rape. The works were labelled as "unstable" by the authorities, and in the presence of over a thousand visitors, the exhibition was closed down by cutting off the electricity just ten minutes after it opened. News of this was not made public. On the one hand, the local press was silenced; on the other, we ourselves chose not to enlist the international press, considering that by working in China, and intending to work in China in the future as well, we had to play by the rules and accept all the consequences of breaking them. We undertook multiple negotiations with the authorities to try to rebuild our relationship with them. As soon as the exhibition was shut down, the three organizations behind the event were indicted, and a number of the artists had to make themselves scarce for weeks. Some of them went away, others faced the local authorities, and still more were forced into hiding."

3- eArt, publicly commissioned project and site specific

Final Cut-Processing New Media in Public Space was a five-day programme of live performances, site-specific installations and video screenings in Xuhui District, a flourishing and bustling area of Shanghai. Presented as part of the [Shanghai eArt Festival 2008](#) with a special focus on the 'livability' of urban space, public sphere, and its transformation through new media, Final Cut has been developed in co-operation with visual artists, musicians, DJs, architects, programmers, dancers, and designers. Featured artists and presenters include Christian Marclay, Elliott Sharp, Wu Na, Bruce Gremo, Wang Li Chuan, ???, Ben Houge, Yan Jun ??, Top Floor Circus???, Aajiao, Nunu, Ling Xi, B6, Alizia Borsari, Dead J+Chen Xiongwei, Feng Mengbo, Wang Yuyang, Zhou Xiaohu, Michael Bell Smith, Shih Chieh Huang, Terra Bajraghosa, Takeshi Murata, and Eric Siu. On view will also be Hipic.org and 40+4.

This project on which I have been working with Defne Ayas for more or less a whole year, was betting on this paradox: standing on the principle of open-ness and curatorial respect in an organization like eArt where political agendas are at the centre of preoccupations and not the quality of the artistic content. It has been a step by step approach, a psychological game and an attentive charade of communication which was always open and continuous. It was based on negotiations, binary strategies, progressive thinking and adaptation but this time the curatorial team was able to play the game to a full 100% using linguistic skills to their potential but most of all utilizing the language of the heart, the language of somebody who had strangely lived within this system for almost two decades and who knows what it means to do so.

This process testifies to the possibility of building a dialogue based on similarities, not differences and working where we can accept misinterpretation as a basis for creating possible new meaning. It has been the empowerment of translations (language, concept, emotions): the curatorial approach was based on local and international intrusions.

So we go back to the idea of the meaning and how curating a public "official" art project needs to create the abcs of a conceptual architecture that will finally be offered to a local audience (with the risk of creating misinterpretations and zones of silence as well).

And in the end, Choi jeong-hwa's tree, Solo exhibition and eArt's experience created a sort of short circuit in my practice and helped me to solve the problem of my belonging to a project like BizArt that is now ready to fly without my daily presence. It was the moment I needed to feel able to move on and change directions again.

6_ It was the perfection of the imperfection

So now I am on the verge of a new life and I still feel that the only way to create sense is to push the sensitivity of adaptation: only in this way can the artistic content "activate" possibilities (of team-working, sharing ideas and developing new projects). In this sense, if I have to define my curatorial approach, I think that it could be described as the creation of catalytic moments for artists and ideas to open up to the future. Qiu Zhijie, in a recent conversation, describes "future" as simple "life" or better, where the idea of a future is based on trying to control the anxiety of it (which most of the time is merely economical). It corrupts and deviates the depth of what alternative models and aspirations can be: it is not about methodology but about construction/processes/attempts which move new thoughts and new paradigms. I believe that all of the above is related to the concept of freedom, where free artistic works are disengaged from a "model" (post-modern? post-colonialist?) and play in a free place, a cluster where positive and liberating energies can be put into place.

To summarize, when I talk about the future I mean it as something that opposes the “futuristic” approach and the nostalgia of the retro-future or the future as destruction of the present. What I want to stress is the deconstruction of the present that is based on the power of nuances, negotiations and the soft-power I have been so keen of for many years in Shanghai.

I think that in this unexpected and new condition in China, the artistic community needs to think of whatever power art has got in the context as being part of a bigger picture; it needs to give up the ethnicity/nationalism to get into the roots of open-ness that was such strong ally of the greatness that the Empire possessed in certain moments of its past: there is a real possibility of optimizing the privileges of trans-national knowledge.

This is what I hope for art practitioners and art organizations in China. To dare to move away from a simplistic “sufficient” achievement and destroy the defenses built in making it.

7_ or Double Happiness: a memento

Generosity is a hard concept to grasp. It doesn't usually manifest itself when you expect it and it often happens without desiring it. Yet, generosity should occur with a revolutionary attitude or maybe as a revolutionary act. This act is a reflection of daring to change and go beyond a dictated life and social formalism. Daring to change is the basis of bringing hope into whatever is created, and in this revolutionary sense it is the only possible way to make a society grow beyond a certain status quo. And it is this rupture of the umbilical cord and separation which makes you an adult, a new whole. It implies a distinct, yet variable process of critical analyses, to move on and change: dare to fail and to go back few steps to move forward.

If my experience in China taught me something, this was and still is the best lesson.

Davide Quadrio, a sinologist and art historian, was cofounder and director of BizArt in Shanghai, the first nonprofit independent art lab in China, from 1998 to 2008. He is now cofounder and director of arthub asia (www.arthubasia.org) and works and lives in Bangkok, Thailand. Since 2009, his endeavors brought him to create Far East Far West Ltd, an art production company which supports new, challenging productions for artists or projects based in Asia. This article is an edited text from the lecture: The perfection of the imperfection or the principles of adaptation II, held at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Oktober 2009.

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