

The Post-Repetition Ego

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“The situation was perhaps no better with regard to repetition: in another manner, this too is thought in terms of the identical, the similar, the equal or the opposed. In this case, we treat it as a difference without concept: two things repeat one another when they are different even while they have exactly the same concept. Henceforth, everything that causes repetition to vary seems to us to cover or hide it at the same time. Here again, we do not reach a concept of repetition. By contrast, might we not form such a concept once we realize that variation is not added to repetition in order to hide it, but is rather its condition or constitutive element, the interiority of repetition par excellence? Disguise no less than displacement forms part of repetition, and of difference: a common transport or diaphora. At the limit, might there not be a single power of difference or of repetition, but one which operates only in the multiple and determines multiplicities?”¹

-Preface to the English edition of Difference and Repetition, Giles Deleuze

In Robert Musil’s novel- *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*), Musil describes the qualities of the virtual as: some sort of power, with the ability to imagine everything possible, and not seeing existence as more important than non-existence. People could see that this creative intelligence is worthwhile, unfortunately it always make the things that humans value seem artificial, making what they prohibit seem facilitated, or perhaps both just seem insignificant. ²The virtual is an essential constitution for creativity, artists step into this world as “romantics”, “weak”, “egotists” and “hypercritics”³, desperately attempting to reveal every obscurely hidden truth.

However, we constantly revise these values and restrictions in the discussions of contemporary art, as if they have possessed the artists’ ability to recreate. We are desperately after every possibility in the world, constantly expanding our visions for the future. In this context, the virtual becomes a natural guide for the Arts, a standard for practice, sometimes over-exposing Art in the projection of social and cultural needs. The situation that artists are in have become increasingly difficult, they remain romantic, weak, egotistical and hypercritical, but finding themselves incapable of things other than recreation - works of Art have become products of an echo or in relation to others. Artists realize that the worst scenario is where Art has been over-exposed and could no longer be produced, and any brave attempt would just end up being fed through different sections of the system, finding itself in a loop, chasing a ghost.

As a matter of fact, in Li Ran (born 1986, Hubei province)’s solo exhibition – *Mont Sainte-Victoire* at the Magician Space is also an attempt in recreation. Using the name of the mountain where Cezanne had resided and worked, and often the subject of his paintings, as the title of this exhibition, Li attempts to find his perspective into modern aesthetics, while revisiting the fragments of our history. The artist has compiled a four-act performance: “The Reflecting Scenery”, “The Gaze”, “The Tournament”, “The Chance Encounter”, where he performs live mimicking the dubbing in Chinese cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. In this piece of work, Li’s perspective is a recollection of contemporary replicas. On the surface, it presents modernist aestheticism as its subject, as if it were the artist’s own private investigation into Art history, this is where the spectators are misled into a seemingly safe trap - in its visualization and content, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* has the “approved” intelligence in the contemporary standard, which is substantial for theorists and critics to chew on, but the modernist aestheticism that the artist has chosen embodies an indescribable contingency, as it is recreated both in and out of the work. The main focus of this piece of work is not only Art itself, but also the sort of creativity that relies heavily on sensational impact and span. Chance encounters, bodily experiences and one’s commitment towards Art create a unique turning point for where works of Art could be conceived. At the end of the day, the ego of an artist that s/he recreates is just an artist, who Musil describes as the egoistic, hypercritical and spirit- liberating creators – the enemy of the critics, and the

¹ Gilles Deleuze. *Deux régimes de fous. Textes et entretiens, 1975-1995.* ©2003 Éditions de Minuit, Paris.

² Robert Musil. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.* Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH (February 1990). P. 25.

³ Ibid.

nomad who roams within Art.

Li challenges the sternness that Art has obtained within the system; perhaps it has not reached the point where the virtual is impossible, because Art itself is everything that the virtual is. On one level, this brings this piece of work into the narrower, specified context within the group of spectators, each of them yielding their own path into the work, basing on the way they understand and think about the system. At the same time, the contradicting relationship between the traditions of art history, critical theory and creativity, survival, and cultural context all appear as fragments seeped into the thoughts of the artist, distilling to a point where the ego and the act of recreation merges. The presentation of the work is momentarily powerful and attractive, asking us to identify with the small but tough ego of the creator.

During the performance, Li will be isolated in the room on the left where there will only be a window for the audience to look through. He reads from a “Dubbing Script” that he holds in his hands, sitting at a round table covered with a dark green cloth, under a light suspended above his head. He is dressed in a grey suit, wearing a pair of retro spectacles, disguising the artist, but at the same time revealing him as the performer. Three projectors are placed in the center of the exhibition hall projecting images that he collected in different speeds. On the right hand side displaces a video of a pre-recorded performance that will be run on loop after the performance.

Although the jocosity and irony that the dubbing brings into the scenes are not the artist’s initial intention, it fits perfectly with the work. The irony within is not the same as passion-gone-wrong, but a highlight of the limited amount of freedom during its creation. The subject of irony is never to govern any rules, as it is constantly on idle, away from the utopian goal, it grasps reality prematurely, denying “all that is real in history”⁴. In Mont Sainte-Victoire, irony allows the artist to roam between reality and the virtual – We should distance ourselves from the boredom that occurs after displacing ourselves as the subject of execution and modernist discussions, it emphasizes more so on the existence of the artist as an individual in the artistic context and the more general spectrum of the industry.

In Li’s four-act script, he transforms into different speakers – a proud youth, a left-winged youth, a youth, a middle-aged man, a frail elderly, an elderly, a female youth and narrators – a life coach, a show host, a sarcastic narrator... quoting and editing descriptions of creativity, Art history, the industry and contemplations of existence. These speeches include the artist’s own thoughts and also the borrowings of others’, constantly replicating and advancing, regardless of its ignorance and even self-contradiction. Under the mask of repetition, the repetition itself is cancelled out at the moment of its creation, where the artist has somehow altered in its process, creating a leap (Sprung) between reality and the virtual. Repetition and leap are two sides of the same coin, leaving us with the question – when leap means the constant advancement and elimination of things, could we survive the great nothingness that exist in-between?

In the post-millennium Chinese contemporary Art, there is a notable drop of the level of creativity and non-advancement in Art itself. In the past decade, the system started to rapidly become capital-driven and very political, where the individualism in theoretical and practical independence have been compromised. It is just recently that some practitioners with a strong sense of individuality have been surfacing, being very different from the Chinese contemporary Arts that are theme and pattern driven, constantly revising the self and the history around, and in their own unique ways, penetrate and influence their environment and the system. As one of them, Li’s practice presents a unique perspective, hopefully a beginning of a maturing practice, providing a real point of reference for our Art system.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Irony*. With continual reference to Socrates. Edited and translated with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1989(304). P. 275.