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Li  
Ran

## A conversation with

Li Ran  
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Mariagrazia  
Costantino

M: Hello Li Ran. I know your work quite well, however I still wish to know something more. Looking at your videos, I personally find that their core is the evaluation of the ways people relate to history. It seems to me that you're treating history a bit like a physical object, expressing its significance through a number of symbols. On the other hand, there seems also to be a focus on how culture is generated. Can you explain the relationship between history and culture inside your work?

L: It's not so much how I look at history, but rather how, within our actual working sphere and knowledge – including the art industry and the system of cultural and artistic production – history has become the medium and foundation of our investigation of the world. History is a kind of reality. I'm not obsessed by history, but I think it's necessary to discuss it, so I "appropriated" what can be considered historical material. And what made me choose this type of material is that within my work inside this industry, I discovered

many things that I wanted to express urgently and clarify. For instance, when we work, we may encounter a dialectical dead end in the way knowledge is handled, because, I'd argue, in the process of communication there is always some kind of displacement of the cognitive experience. I am very interested in this aspect: today, when we talk about contemporary art and look for the ways to express one's own production, convey it to the others or let the others convey it, we may bump into many expressive obstacles. I think these difficulties derive from the way we look at our own history, and from the fact that certain things cannot be completely disclosed in this process. What is modernity in the end? What is our position in the understanding of modernity? There are so many issues, like for example assessing whether new things, the things brought by "progress", are valuable or not, whether is it worth following the tradition, or breaking the boundaries of art and let it penetrate into social practices. Talking about

value, I don't think all these motivations are worth much. For me what truly matters is how to look at the past knowledge and connect it to the present. This should be placed neither inside the post-colonial context, nor in a colonial one, for pursuing a local or regional "return to the roots". This may derive instead from how we assess the exclusiveness and peculiarity of certain things and the banality of other things. It's in the search for a reciprocal contact between the "extraordinary" and the common, and back to the individual. So I use a lot of elements from modern art. The early history of Chinese art was about the essence and intrinsic nature of art; today the crucial thing, not to mention in art, lies in the consideration of aesthetics. However, when we ponder over the many issues of the present, this type of experience also gives us a very strong critical awareness. In last year's work *Another Story* I've discussed precisely this aspect.

M: I feel that when you talk about history, you are talking about culture at the same time, at least this is my interpretation.

L: To be more accurate, it is history of art and artistic culture. In my work I may use the same language of the mass media, or the narrative devices of old black and white films. This is, I believe, just the final phase, but putting these aspects aside, my impression is that the problems encountered in the artistic creation are many more.

M: Do you reckon that whoever "produces" culture has the control over history?

L: Culture to me has a very broad

spectrum of meanings, what today we refer to as artistic culture is different from contemporary art we're discussing. Working myself in the contemporary art, I'm obviously more aware of the type of art around me, the one I experience. But I think culture is broader, a bit like foam, it covers a bigger space. I think I'm still facing the issue of the roots in my work. There is no equivalence between popular culture and art. Culture, and history too, are notions too broad, and they need a very concrete way to stay connected. Within this connection the material an artist needs can be found: I make use of the material selected as an expressive tool. But again, it's neither history nor culture, rather the current reality I perceive.

M: You mentioned post-colonialism, but I feel you don't like very much all these "posts", perhaps they're just too simple.

L: I'm not trying to avoid post-colonialism, just like a painter could not deliberately avoid drawing cartoons. In my practice, I've slowly become acquainted with things that are considered not so cool, such as the "artistic experience" or "academia". But the type of experience I come from is the experience that most of my relatives found themselves in. Reality is actually pretty interesting, what I do is just take it and write it down. Like in my older work *Beyond Geography*, where I act like the host of a virtual program of geography, and carry out, or pretend to carry out a geographical exploration. Many people looking at this piece may believe that I'm referring to post-colonialism: I actually don't discuss these

issues in a post-colonialist context, rather I treat post-colonialism like an object placed in my film. In fact, it should be seen more as a background rather than an argument of discussion. The foundation of my work is the personal expression of a relational and reciprocal reality.

M: Why do you have to do this? You have at disposition all the elements required by performance art. In this system you're not just a plain performer, but you seem to become the TV host you impersonate. Is it your goal to control the work better?

L: What I think can be really felt inside my work is the heavy fog produced by matters such as "the artist's work", or questions about "what is an artist", "what is creativity", and their reciprocal relation. This prevents us from assessing what, in the end, is an artist. As for phenomena such as the "myth of the artist", the "mystification of the artist's work", "the artist-star", the "commodification of art" and its symbolization, it's impossible to say whether these are good or bad in themselves; if today we don't dispel this fog away in facing knowledge and dialectic, it will be very difficult to look at each other and work together. Like Hans Belting said, "we must tear the veil". In my work, I'm constantly tearing the veil around the question "how do artists work?". That of the artist is just another way of working: it's not a showcase, rather, a context providing a form of support. I believe my work is not isolated but it's closely linked to my existential environment and creative feelings. Of course I will keep on imagining, pulling the veil down, but maybe I will also

create more things that I don't understand. In my new work I will try to reduce my own performances, and let actors replace me. In short, my urgent question is "what is art"?

M: This is very poignant. Along with your more-recent productions, this exhibition also comprises your earliest works, all representing your creative approach. Your first video work *Talk*, although may not have a big visual connection with your later works, still reveals your own stance, and your exploration of the body's discipline.

L: Looking at this piece today there can be another type of interpretation, but at the time of its implementation, there wasn't really much involvement in it. I wasn't participating much in this kind of work and practice. Maybe like you said, it was kind of physical training. But there is another piece I made then, also performed by an artist I was close to: at that time I was paying attention to the possibilities this medium allowed to reproduce the artist's body.

M: Your series of four paintings *Before and After* were inspired by William Hogarth's homonymous work. I think this work is also somehow related to your later videos. The issue you seem to be considering in it, is how to make life as expressed in art to continue.

L: I have studied painting at the academy, and this piece is a little wish I made when I looked at its history. It is quite close to certain aspects of the classics of art selected and discussed in another work of mine - *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. In *Before and After*, I have re-painted four sections taken from Hogarth paintings: the actual work is a reproduction

this is a truly post-modern approach. I don't think you do this deliberately, but you seem prompted to do so in a natural way. Another issue you engage with is the identity on the artist. Your works, including *Born Again* and *Another "The Other Story"*, on the one hand can be considered funny and amusing, but on the other have a kind bittersweet taste. In the moment you perform, you're also trying to resist to be reduced to a "thing". For me the real problem lies in the fact that the artist has become a fixed "thing". On one side, because some artists are long time dead, it is difficult to judge what kind of person they were; on the other, most of the time it's their works which represent them, that's why they can end being reduced to a "thing". I don't know if agree with my opinion.

L: Of course. But I don't think I fight against this with such an intense anger, neither I put so much passion in mobilizing and involving people in my sense of humour and amusement. What I would rather do is looking at my own position. For instance, we just mentioned colonialism and post-colonialism, or matters concerning art criticism and art history, and again all the problems of communication. When I face these problems, I find myself in an opposing stance. But I don't feel the need for such a fierce opposition: it can also be humorous, following the different personality of each character. As for my expressive language, I think it can follow the path of fun, along with humorous jokes. This is the condition I aspire to, yet it does not mean that I express a completely different type of things. I wish to

use a natural language to conduct my work in a relaxed way and express myself.

M: Exactly. In fact the title of this exhibition – "Degeneration" – was inspired by your work as well as by that of the other artists. You have all chosen different media, but share an overall similar sense of humour. Of course it cannot be said that you explicitly fight against something, but to me what you all do in your practice is looking for solutions to certain unpleasant phenomena, concerning not just your own survival, but also that of the whole society. For artists like you, there must be many boring moments, especially when someone ask you to explain you work. I believe your work is a reaction to this kind of feeling. I don't know if I'm right or wrong...

L: It's something like this. I remember when I started being part of the so-called "art world", an elder artist told me that the work of the artist is mainly carried in a condition of fearlessness but also idleness. Now I know what he meant. The artist's bustle is different from the mechanical repetition of a company job: in it there are in fact lots of leisurely moments for thinking about the creation of works. In general you need to find a way to materialize your creativity, yet discomfort and discipline are still necessary to a certain extent, and this at the moment seems to have become a chronic problem, one that cannot be overcome so easily. Having said that, it is often this anxiety and confusion that propel my work, rather than a sense of self-satisfaction. All these issues are at the core, but at the same time at the border. Sometimes a problem encountered

by chance, one that is obviously not central, will soon be replaced by another problem, reabsorbed within the creative process. Most of my interest lies in this. Of course there can also be a lot of instinctive pleasure in making films, performing and painting: this is an indispensable part of my work. But my priority is still the evaluation of ideas and the ways to express them, and how to mobilize my own instincts: these two aspects are actually intertwined.

M: Each artist has his own priority. In my opinion, your priority is avoiding to be used, and to prevent this from happening you are the first to make use of yourself.

L: Many times my work is about setting up a context for myself: initially there was no much need for a curator to help me expressing this context in a complete way. In fact I could find a way to create my own personal context and involve the audience in it. But in later exhibitions I was also involved in conversations with curators. The piece *I want to talk to you, but not all of you* discusses what in the end we've been doing, as well as the context artist and curator provide to each other, as well as support. But it also reflects some problems, such as the fundamental lack of communication, and the fact that we work in different directions. What is the situation inside the linguistic microcosm of an exhibition and why is this type of partnership (between artist and curator) needed? All the problems I pay attention to, to sum up, derive from the art sphere. Certainly, they don't develop from other cognitive experiences or disciplines... I just keep on thinking about

what is at the core of art. So every connection in this sense may become material for my work. This is my starting point, but also my creative propelling force.

M: How do you see yourself, as a young Chinese artist, inside the complex universe of contemporary art in China? And how do you think this is seen from outside?

L: Once, I was speaking to a South African artist about the system of contemporary art in China, Africa and Asia. Afterwards, I heard him say to a curator "You know what, Chinese artists think!" I thought, "Weren't we thinking before?!" I was shocked, but now I feel that perhaps he was right. A lot of Chinese art works appear very grand, but there is not much at the level of actual knowledge. It's not only about artists: knowledge production has to do with relationships. It's very difficult to transfer knowledge, because there seems to be a disconnection between curators, writers, artists, galleries and museums. I would like that different people working together on exhibitions might actually transform knowledge. I feel that a lot of artists – good artists – of my generation are lonely. Sometimes I am too. We can't communicate, and in exhibitions the work sometimes looks as if it were alone, like a person just standing there.

M: What are your next plans? Will you go in the same direction?

L: In early December I will present a new work inside a group show. This work won't be performed by me, but the narration will be entrusted to actors I found, who will present the story encompassed in the creative

process. While I was looking for the actors, I already knew what their role might be, but due to the many unforeseen factors such a process implies, I'm not sure I will apply this method again in the future: there should be no stereotypical element within my method of "self-performing" anyway. My future work may still revolve around art and art critique, and extend the scope of the exhibitions to all the other related aspect. These topics demand an in-depth analysis and it takes time to monitor them constantly. Whether it's me or someone else who performs, this is a very natural process, and a conscious aesthetic choice.

M: Thanks very much for your time Li.

