

Like a Tree with Many Branches

On the Recent Works of Li Gang

Text by Heinz – Norbert Jocks

In considering Li Gang's (*1986 in Dali, China; lives and works in Beijing, China) very diverse groups of works and individual pieces, the increasingly strong impression one has is that this is someone who believes that working with form and materials is as important as the exploration of content and ideas, and that the artist is looking to balance the two. Li Gang describes his works as parts or derivatives of a tree that—like buds, blossoms, leaves, branches, and twigs—have their own unique appearances, while at the same time remaining part of a whole and thus referring to a greater context. Again and again the artist creates new works that are clearly different from their predecessors, and not simply because he uses a variety of media. They are so distinct that one cannot, at first, relate them to each other at all. Yes, one might even believe that they are pieces by very different artists, each expressing extremely different ideas and statements. Only gradually, when one begins to consider the mindset behind it all, is it then possible to discern internal connections and thematic focal points.

In conversation with the artist, one also notices how very much the works—even the highly abstract, specific meditations—are founded in life, although they do not attempt any sort of illustration of it, even in the artist's approach. Now, the abstract zeniths he achieves in this way recall the concepts of western artists. This, however, points up something that Li Gang is aiming for. It is not just an entirely different way of thinking and seeing. Although he has read Schopenhauer as well as Confucius, there is only a partial correspondence to western ideas. In addition, the path that he has taken in order to discover a general form of expression is evidence of a certain kind of incomparability. Frequently, he comes up with aesthetic solutions based on the experience that someone else has already discovered what he wants to say, but has not expressed it in the way that Li Gang would have wished. Having experienced the fact that traces of something, the memory of it, can reveal a somewhat more lasting effect, for the series *Fleeting Time* (2008-2009), the artist removed the paint from the canvases of finished figurative paintings and sealed the pigments inside transparent plastic bags as mementos, so that only a little bit of paint is left on the canvas to hint at the old image. This is the kind of detour Li Gang takes when he finally finds the most appropriate means of expression.

Creating a sense of unfamiliarity is, incidentally, a concept that arises relatively frequently in his work—for instance, in a conversation about his unique cellophane tape series, *It* (2010). Here, the artist used transparent tape to depict a small stone so that it suddenly looked unfamiliar. Instead of unfamiliarity, though, it could also be called a shift in perception—something that happens, for example, when we

see an enlarged section of a familiar object, or just a tiny part of a broad landscape we think we have known inside and out for years. At that point we feel more than just a slight irritation, because we are surprised to find that the aforementioned object or landscape is hurling its Otherness straight at us. Li Gang tries to convey this experience in his piece *Error* (2011). We do not see a normal painting in a rectangular shape, but a circular one, something like a sphere. He does not leave it at that, though, because he confronts a small version of this with one that is considerably larger, and we involuntarily wonder if it is an enlargement or a reduction. Are we seeing the same thing in small and large versions, or something quite different? The fact that we are dealing with a round, black form that looks like a tennis ball eliminates each and every question about what it might represent. This is not about the delayed identification of a section of the world, but quite simply about the disconcerting feeling that we have when faced with the monumental version of something small.

Li Gang is as interested in transforming or converting things that seem familiar to us as he is in forms of expression that do not yet exist. Let us single out a work made this year, titled *Mirror* (2011). The idea came to him, as he was free-associating one morning in the bath. Among other things, he imagined what it would be like if he could swim in the water, with which he was at the moment washing his hands and face—swim like a fish from his kitchen to the gallery; independent of this fantasy of a “line of flight,” as Gilles Deleuze calls it, he then had the idea to make a mirror out of a manhole cover. He polished a manhole cover in the middle until he could see a matte reflection of his face in it. It seemed to him that the repetitive act of polishing was like a process of self-discovery. However, this work has nothing to do with the concept of the readymade, as the western mind will all too suddenly assume, if only because Li Gang has never intensively studied Marcel Duchamp. Nor is he interested in trying to define art; rather, it is about expanding the levels of meaning of a peripheral object, something to which we would ordinarily never pay much attention. Perhaps it is even about the aspect of self-recognition in what he makes.

This also applies to the wooden pedestal he made this year. Instead of elevating something to the status of a work of art, this cube, painted white, stands on its own, and the artist himself has declared it an actual work, titled *Pedestal* (2011). The sight of it raises two questions: why is the pedestal declared a work of art in this way, and what is the meaning of the red color on the white paint that covers it. It is not until one knows that the traces of red come from banknotes rubbed onto the white paint that one understands that this work subtly and critically circles around the complex relationship between art and money. First, Li Gang was looking for a way to create a work with money, in a way that no other artist had undertaken before. A coincidental discovery, made when he was replacing an old briefcase with a new one, helped him. While emptying the old briefcase, he saw the discoloration caused by the banknotes that had been kept in it. So it was possible to dye things with money. In coloring the pedestal

by rubbing the banknotes on it, he points out that the purpose of pedestals in art is to declare that whatever is placed on them is a work of art. Second, the color of the money itself becomes one of the materials in the work of art and thus the meaning of its exchange value becomes an open question. Money has meaning because it is needed in order to acquire materials for making art, and because it elevates the status of a work when it is sold for a high price. Yes, it seems ironic that the object that is elevated to the status of a work of art is not actually a work of art. Whether it is good or bad does not appear to be very relevant when it is evaluated on the art market. Even a non-work-of-art can achieve the exchange value of a work of art there, and thus become a work of art, because it is being treated as such.

In his work *Da-Suan* (2011) Li Gang examines the relationship between modern technologies and resources. He has drilled holes at regular intervals into a total of thirty variously sized pieces of coal. By twisting screws into them, he describes the process of exploiting nature. One is reminded of the process of drilling to obtain oil and other resources, as well as the way that technology has penetrated the natural world. Like a colony of ants marking its path with the rice it leaves behind, Li Gang installs the pieces of coal in the space as if he is creating a poetic image from which one can draw endless associations. Each in his own way.

Translated from German: Allison Plath-Moseley