

Liu Ding: Frameworks Framed

by David Spalding

The critique waged by the work of Beijing-based artist Liu Ding is best characterized as viral. Through his practice, which crosses genres fluidly and includes photography, sculpture, installation, painting and performance, the artist questions the various signs and structures used to confer value and meaning onto artworks. These include pricing schemes, the artist's signature, methods of production, notions of originality, and sites and modes of display. By continually mutating, his work endures and even thrives in nearly any context, threatening to infect all it touches. In the process, it jeopardizes the status of the artist, his artwork, the workers who sometimes fabricate it, the galleries and museums that present it to the public, the collectors who buy it, and, increasingly, the conceptual categories and interpretive frameworks used by viewers who produce, privilege and deny its various meanings.

For *Products* (2005), commissioned for the Second Guangzhou Triennial as an installment of the artist's multi-part series *Samples from the Transition*, Liu Ding enlisted the participation of thirteen professional artists from the nearby city of Dafencun, China's "painting factory" village, where workers produce thousands of paintings daily to fuel a giant export business. Under Liu Ding's direction, the artists performed their assembly-line painting process during the opening of what is arguably China's most important international art exhibition. Working in an ancillary site temporarily annexed by the Guangdong Museum of Art, the painters were positioned on a pyramid of platforms, where they moved from canvas to canvas as they added their contributions (one artists paints only a tree, another a stork, and so on) to forty nearly identical landscape paintings. The painters were paid their standard factory wage for their four hours of work. The resulting paintings remained on view for the duration of the exhibition.

Through his staging of *Products*, Liu Ding challenged the criteria that the Triennial uses to confer merit upon artists, and the ability of the art market to bestow value on works of art. After all, unlike the other works in the Triennial, the quality and value of the artworks made in Dafencun is transparent: paintings that accurately resemble their models are approved by quality control agents; those that do not are revised or destroyed. The value of the works is equally clear-cut, as one company, called Eager Art, explains to potential customers on their website, "The price of paintings is decided [by] whether they are easy or hard to paint."¹ In *Products*, the paintings' status as commodities is both revealed and undone by Liu's insistence that the labor (indeed, the laborers) required for their production are visible. Audiences were left to consider how the paintings made in the Dafencun factories differ from the other works on view in the Triennial, and why.²

Continuing his exploration of how context can shift our perception of art and its value, in Frankfurt the following year, Liu Ding presented the Dafencun paintings in gold frames, hung salon-style in a staged sitting room, complete with red damask wallpaper and a suite of carved wood furniture.³ In their gilded frames, surrounded by symbols of "European" luxury, the paintings were clearly adept at social climbing, given their humble origins; even though many were in a state of partial completion, these *Products* were both over the top and somehow plausible markers of wealth and taste. More recently, at Arnolfini in Bristol, Liu Ding offered *Liu Ding's Store - Take Home and Create Whatever is the Priceless Image in Your Heart*⁴ (2008), initiating a new, ongoing project called *Liu Ding's Store*. The artist again returned to the painting village, commissioning ten banal paintings of the type one encounters in hotel rooms—those anonymous creations that promise to soothe guests into pharmaceutical sleep—but with important differences. Each painting offers up only a single, iconic image floating in a field of white. Everything else appears to have been erased, so that in one work, a glowing orange sunset hovers over emptiness, while in another, a saccharine waterfall floats in space as it curls around invisible rocks. The paintings were signed by the artist and sold for a mere £100 each. The project's title is an invitation: buyers can either take home the paintings and complete them (relying on those "priceless images" in their hearts) or they can hang onto the work in hopes that Liu Ding's reputation will continue to grow and that the work's value will steadily increase. After all, how often does one have the chance to collect a work by a rising Chinese artist for less than the cost of a good meal? And wouldn't completing the painting be an act of defacement? The images in our hearts, Liu Ding reminds us, are never priceless. The buyer is implicated

whether or not the possibility of profit surpasses the desire for personal expression: one can either add to the canvas, eroding its value by undermining its authorship, or recognize the purchase as an investment.

Having pushed the Dafencun paintings to their limits, in 2008 Liu Ding began to shift his focus away from the artwork's status as a commodity and began a broader investigation of the production of meaning in art and visual culture. Again, the emphasis was on context as a decisive factor in the elevation of object to artwork, but here historical and interpretive frameworks are more carefully considered, weighed against one another and tested. This signaled a change in the way the work looked. While kitsch had been the ruling aesthetic in much of Liu Ding's prior practice—the sentimental landscapes of Dafencun and the plastic gemstones used in *Fantasies for Small Potatoes* (2005), to name just two examples—the new work seemed to blanch in its seriousness. Suddenly, visual pleasure was secondary, even relegated. *Experience and Ideology* (2008) followed: a series of appropriated, black and white nature photographs paired with hand-written texts that made assertions about how our perceptions and images of the landscape are never neutral, but instead encoded by larger cultural forces.

For I WROTE DOWN SOME OF MY THOUGHTS - LIU DING, Liu Ding's first solo exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile, Lucerne, the artist both focuses and extends the concerns raised by *Experience and Ideology*, bringing together a body of closely related works in order to challenge the epistemological systems we use to navigate both life and art. With several works again pairing photographic images (snapshots, found visual material) with careful, hand-written texts, one is immediately reminded of the conceptual art of the 60s and 70s, with its anti-aesthetic stance and its need to catalogue, count and comment. But what was radical then has become a style, a series of visual tropes used to situate this new artwork within a particular history and lend it an air of detached philosophical contemplation. Indeed, Liu Ding's exhibition is in dialogue with the artwork of this earlier period, but if we are to take the exhibition's title at face value, it suggests a casual conversation, sparked by (and perhaps not moving beyond) personal reflection. This would be a mistake. The exhibition is not simply a display of recent works or a diaristic sketchbook, elaborated and made public; rather, it is a carefully engineered psychological experiment that asks us to reconsider the conceptual categories into which we've divided our worlds.

The work in I WROTE DOWN... is not a complete departure for Liu Ding, but rather the result of a deepening exploration of ideas he has been working through for several years, presented in a new way. Hence *Encountering Matisse Twice* (all works in the show are dated 2009), which unites a black and white reproduction of Henri Matisse's *Les Coucous, tapis bleu et rose* [*The Cowslips, Blue and Rose Fabric*] (1911) that the artist had seen as a teenager with a page (or picture of a page) from Christie's 2009 auction catalogue for the Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Berge Collection, which shows the same work hanging behind its owner, Saint Laurent, in his home. These images are taped casually to a large white background and placed in a pale green frame, which is meant to catch the viewer's eye. (Frames are important to Liu Ding, another obvious but potent symbol of his interest in the difference between vision, which is optical, and visibility, which is socially conditioned.)

As with the Dafencun paintings, which went from the factory to a Triennial and finally to a sumptuous (if artificial) living room, Liu Ding wants us to think about how the reception of *Les Coucous, tapis bleu et rose* changes as it goes from being strictly an image (no frame, no context) to one element in the luxe interior of a famous designer's home. How is the work's value increased through its association with Saint Laurent and the other elements in his taste-making collection?

Below the pictures, Liu Ding writes:

In 1987, I saw this black and white print of Matisse's work, casual, inventive, peaceful, uninhibited. I was enchanted. I was hoping to reach a world as carefree as his. All I could do was copying and copying his work.

In 2009, I saw this work again in color in an auction catalogue, with a very refined frame, a famous and sophisticated owner, in a handsome house, with beautiful decorations and delicate

flowers. Everything was so graceful and classic. Fame, politics, public recognition, and money has unified everything under one roof.

It may be incidental that Matisse's work, labeled Lot 55 at the Saint Laurent auction, was recently sold for a staggering € 35,905,000, including buyer's premium. Two more things are of interest here: the positing of an unmediated image with which one could commune, as suggested by the "enchanted" experience in 1987 (indeed, the "copying and copying" implies the speaker has no interpretive rubric as he tries, unsuccessfully to make the work his own); and the celebratory description of the YSL catalogue photo, which floridly overflows with adjectives ("refined, famous, sophisticated, handsome, beautiful, delicate, graceful, classic") as it seems to uncritically embrace the conflation of wealth, fame and taste that have reshaped the artist's perception of the artwork. Neither of these possibilities is satisfying, but instead calls into question the position and authenticity of the speaker (notice my slippage here, between the artist's name and the more distanced "speaker"), which is constructed through our engagement with the exhibition's textual component. In reading the works' inscriptions, we are not merely reflecting on the artist's thoughts, but are confronted by something else—a deliberate provocation, a ruse.

Art is Everywhere, the title of another work pairing a color photograph with text, is also the conclusion drawn by the speaker after mistaking a refrigeration unit containing snacks for an artwork. With its strangely anthropomorphic proportions, the refrigerator stares out at viewers dumbly, offering its last few soft drinks and snacks as if in consolation for having disappointed us for not being art, despite the title that graces it.

Everyone who frequents contemporary art galleries has had an experience like this one. In fact, the institution has the power to transform anything that enters it into art, and this sometimes disorienting catalytic effect is yet another framework to be considered in the context of Liu Ding's exhibition. It's an issue most famously introduced by Duchamp, whose readymades were a central point of departure for the generation of conceptual artists that followed. In 1969 Joseph Kosuth argued: "With the unassisted readymade, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said....This change—one from 'appearance' to 'conception'—was the beginning of 'modern' art and the beginning of 'conceptual' art."⁵ Thus, Duchamp's impact on conceptual art provides another interpretive clue in the exhibition, for Liu Ding is rehearsing the story of the readymade, but deploying the visual language of Duchamp's successors to do so.

Liu Ding, however, has another genealogy in mind. With *History*, a casually assembled photo-collage embellished with text, the artist plays with the possibility of locating another work in the exhibition, *Photograph*, within an idiosyncratic history of contemporary art. *Photograph*, essentially a piece of unexposed photo paper that the artist has fully processed, is a 30 x 40 cm white rectangle mounted on a relatively large (135 x 125 cm) white background, inside a black frame. With its teasingly empty title, *Photograph* can be engaged from any number of directions, suggesting to me discussions of the photographic medium's materiality (rather than purporting to be a clear window onto other worlds) and its indexical relationship to duration, seen in works as varied as Dinh Q. Lê's weavings made from unexposed film, which are meant to reflect potential histories that have yet to happen, and Hiroshi Sugimoto's long-exposure photographs of movie screens, respectively. Every viewer will have different associations.

However, Liu Ding invites viewers to understand *Photograph* in relation to three specific artworks: Yves Klein's *La Vide* [The Void], 1958, an empty vitrine in an empty gallery presented in his solo exhibition "The Specialization of Sensibility in the State of Raw Materials into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility"; Tom Friedman's *1,000 Hours of Staring* (1992-1997), which is made of "Stare on Paper"; and a 2001 work by Ignasi Aballí in which the artist painted a mirror white by covering it with correction fluid. Does putting a refrigerator in the Tate make it art? Does putting a blank piece of photo paper in dialogue with works of contemporary make it art? As Liu Ding says of the refrigerator: "It's hard to tell."

Of course, Liu Ding is again highlighting the relationship between a work's context and the judgments we make about it. One could easily argue that the works chosen by Liu Ding as precedents for *Photograph* are nothing more than false-morphologies, whose relationships to one another run no deeper than formal similarities.

However, the notion of the void (or that which is blank) is central to the entire exhibition, because many of the works in the show are nothing more or less than blank screens onto which we can project whatever meanings we like. Through his use of text and juxtaposition, Liu Ding plays on our suggestibility, encouraging us to test a variety of conceptual frameworks as we try to make sense of what we're seeing. American artist Robert Morris succinctly described this exact same set of issues with concision and clarity in the beginning of the 1960s:

From the subjective point of view, there is no such thing as nothing—Blank Form shows this, as well as might any other situation of deprivation.

So long as the form (in the broadest sense: situation) is not reduced beyond perception, so long as it perpetuates and upholds itself as being an object in the subject's field of perception, the subject reacts to it in many particular ways when I call it art. He reacts in other ways when I do not call it art. Art is primarily a situation in which one assumes an attitude of reacting to some of one's awareness to art.⁶

Throughout the exhibition, one finds consonances with the canon of conceptual art; many of the issues addressed by Liu Ding here are not new *per se*. Though the show relies on the period's visual language, the artist may not be aware of the historical precedents that were set by artists working over forty years ago as they struggled to re-define art. As I have indicated above, Liu Ding has arrived at the questions raised by this exhibition—about the status, value and meaning of an artwork, and, more broadly, regarding the ontological categories into which we sort “reality”—by following the logic of his own practice, which is rooted in a critique of values in contemporary urban China. Trapped in Liu Ding's web, I must admit that my comparison between Liu Ding's investigation and the work of primarily American and European artists of the 1960s and 70s reveals as well the historical and cultural forces that have shaped of my own academic training. More importantly, it also raises questions about how contemporaneity must be continually reformulated when we consider and compare artists working in radically different contexts.

In Liu Ding's exhibition, art history is invoked by *History* and then turned on its head with *Omission*, a marble stone supporting an invented, impossibly complete art history book (*A History of Chinese Contemporary Art: 19XX to 2050*) and bearing the inscription “Omission is the beginning of the writing of history.” Here (art) history is presented as unreliable, based on exclusions and personal preferences, despite claims to objectivity and neutrality. While the notion that history is always partial, biased and based on the logic of exclusion is now commonly accepted within the academy, in Liu Ding's exhibition, the concept is activated, embodied and experienced, as it poses a real-time challenge to the conclusions we may have just drawn about other works in the show. In this way, the exhibition constantly offers frameworks through which to understand the works, only to smash them.

We tend to become emotionally involved in subject matters that were invented is a partially opened, black iron box, upon which is written, “Let's suppose this is the beginning of a discussion.” The work suggests a deformed minimalist gesture, a defiled Robert Morris or an orphaned Sol LeWitt. Mysterious and magnetic, the box lures you with the promise of its plenum, but a quick look inside verifies that it is indeed empty. If this is, in fact, the beginning of a discussion, we're going to need to invent something to talk about. And yet to write about this work, even if only to describe its formal qualities or semantic function within the context of the exhibition, validates the artist's point: anything, however arbitrary or generic, can become a blank screen onto which we readily project meanings. Instead of being “about” anything, the work is a deliberate cipher, pointing back toward the viewer and highlighting our own frames of reference and desires for content. *We tend...*, Liu Ding told me, is meant to be the “opening line” of the exhibition. It “actually doesn't represent anything, it's a subject matter I have invented. But because it's placed in the exhibition, people will begin to develop their thoughts around it and invest certain emotions into it.”⁷

One of the strongest works in the exhibition, *Descriptive, Narrative, Descriptive, Narrative*, pairs two Chinese plant stands to show how our worldviews profoundly shape the way we see and imagine. Like ideas congealed into material culture, each stand—a platform for the display of domesticated nature—embodies particular conceptions of nature, rather than purporting neutrality. The base pedestal, made from a rhizomatic whorl of roots, whose twisting forms simultaneously suggest snaking muscles, curling tentacles and an untapped,

subterranean world, is part of a centuries-old Chinese tradition of root carving that “assists” nature’s readymades through carving, staining and polishing to make them more fantastical. On top of this tremulous creature rests another, smaller stand, this one fashioned out of molten porcelain, an impossible ceramic landscape of melting blue and white mountains; on top, a painted scene depicts a fisherman perched on his boat within the same landscape. In the world of contemporary art, platforms and stands are usually rectilinear and white, pretending to disappear as they offer up artworks or precious objects for our scrutiny. Here the platforms themselves are culturally coded—like the platforms on which all our knowledge rests—displaying modes of representation, ways of seeing, rather than plants, objects or other artworks.

Viewing the show *I WROTE DOWN SOME OF MY THOUGHTS - LIU DING*, one finally begins to question the most fundamental assumptions about how we experience and categorize our visual landscape. Moving between the works in the show, it’s as if we are testing the different lenses and filters of an antique kaleidoscope, turning it again and again as we hold it toward the light. Through the exhibition, Liu Ding heightens our awareness of the fact that seeing is never purely optical, inviting us to rethink old habits and make new interpretive choices both within and beyond the gallery’s walls.

1. <http://www.eager-art.com> last accessed on March 6, 2009.
2. Portions of these introductory paragraphs previously appeared in my essay *Priceless Images, Heartless Paintings: the Critical Complicity of Liu Ding*. In: *Liu Ding - Products*. Bristol: Arnolfini, 2008. pp. 31-37.
3. Liu Ding’s exhibition “*Samples from the Transition - Products*” was on view at the L.A. Galerie, Frankfurt (Germany) from June 29 to July 22, 2006.
4. Presented in the exhibition “*Far West*”, an exhibition on view at Arnolfini, Bristol (UK) from June 28 to August 31, 2008.
5. Kosuth, J. (1969). *Art After Philosophy*, *Studio International*, November-December 1969. Reproduced in Kosuth, J. (1991). *Art After Philosophy and After*, *Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. Guercio, G. (Ed.), with foreword by Lyotard, J-F. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
6. Morris, R. (1960-61). *Blank Form*. Reproduced in Osborne, P. (Ed.) (2005). *Conceptual Art*. New York: Phaidon. p.195.
7. “This is the work I tend to place at the beginning of this exhibition. The sentence written on the black box, ‘Let’s Suppose This is the Beginning for a Discussion’ is really my opening line and idea for this exhibition.” Liu Ding in an email to the author, dated March 2, 2009.