

ATTITUDE AND DISCIPLINE – NOTES ON XIE NANXING'S PAINTERLY ETHICS

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In an earlier text on Xie Nanxing's work, I had set about describing *untitled* (No. 1) (2006) from the point of view of a scholarly, yet personally engaged spectator. Attempting a formal analysis, as those of us properly trained as art historians are wont to do, I soon had to acknowledge the painting's capacity to throw to me off my course, to lead me astray and distract me, despite my deep investment in the exercise of a close reading of the work. Initially struggling against this loss of control, I came to understand, over the course of writing the essay, that the painting's insubordination to the viewer's controlling gaze is one of its themes.

Writing, in my case, always implies staring for long periods of time at the canvas (full) and my notebook (empty). This is not an idle exercise, for I am busy reconciling myself to the fact that I have only my wits to steer me through what I know will be a painful process of putting into words those unfocused thoughts, flighty observations, and fleeting insights that may or may not be stirring in my brain as I am beholding the painting—one never knows exactly what this amalgam of firing synapses might add up to, until one has actually put it on a piece of paper.

Proposition A: Confronted with a painting of Xie Nanxing's, an honest viewer—that is a viewer who seriously tries to understand the work—might more often than not be thrown into what amounts to a crisis of spectatorship.

Spectatorship, or rather, its crisis, was at the core of my earlier musings. Drawing from diverse sources—such as the early romanticist philosopher-poet Novalis to the film *Blow-Up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni—I showed that Xie Nanxing is not alone in eliciting a troubled response from his viewers. In fact, his work must be understood as part of a larger tradition of artists who have concerned themselves with some of the fundamental questions of media. They sought and seek to draw on the potential of a medium to challenge what it represents in the first place. As Novalis wrote prophetically, "All that is visible clings to the invisible."¹

There is always someone smarter and someone dumber than we are. Sometimes, I am even dumber than myself. Prompted by so much mumbo-jumbo in the field of critical and curatorial writing, I try hard to write with as little jargon as possible. In light of this, let's revisit what is at issue here: any form of communication attaches itself to a medium. And any medium has its limitations, be they structural or due to the way a culture has used and interpreted said medium. In theory, we know that every time something is said, something else is left out, covered over, unsaid. But ordinarily, we focus on what is being communicated. We disregard the absent content. Furthermore, we deny the fact that all representation implies a double process of simultaneously making visible and invisible.

Proposition B: The paintings of Xie Nanxing cause a crisis in spectatorship not because the artist is a sadist or wants to confuse his viewers. He is simply occupied with the problem of painting. His is the attitude of someone concentrated on a mentally and practically difficult task. Though the artist remains considerate toward the spectator, at one point wishing, "to paint a space in my painting so that the viewer can feel as if he is inside the picture,"² I would claim that the spectator is but an afterthought in this undertaking. Yet, by addressing the ambivalences of mediality in the paintings themselves—for example, by creating a tension between figuration and abstraction—Xie Nanxing denies the viewer the fantasy that spectatorial meaning can be had without cost.

In my earlier text, I concluded that the artist disabuses conventions of visualization in order to bring into being something that would ordinarily be invisible. And I defined the thing that was being brought into being as a form of spectatorship: "How we come to see the way we see and how our imagination and desire are bound up with the act of seeing, how we learn to see by turning our eyes inward and summoning our ghosts— this can be discovered in Xie Nanxing's painting..."³

Seven years later, I am sitting in the artist's studio once more, in preparation for a new text on his work. Seven years is a long time, even for a painter as slow as this one: "Too much painting dilutes me," he

¹ Novalis, *Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk*, in: *Werke*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel, Munich/Vienna 2002.

² *A Talk Between Xie Nanxing And Ai Weiwei*, in: *Xie Nanxing, Works: 1992-2008*, Beijing 2008, p. 89.

³ Ruth Noack, *Alles Sichtbare bafet am Unsichtbaren - All That is Visible Clings to the Invisible*, in: *Ibid*, p. 31.

has told Li Zhenhua in an interview.⁴ I find this discrepancy to many of his Chinese peers—who are quick to invent, produce, and adapt at an accelerated pace—astonishing. Outside of the studio, the world has changed its face, but inside, time seems to have stood still. Yes, there have been new series. Yet, the artist has not changed his serial mode of painting and thinking. Yes, he has branched into new painterly and conceptual experiments. Yet, the series he has just finished, *untitled nos. 1-6* from 2014, consisting of six canvases of varying sizes, looks similar in style to *untitled* (No. 1) from 2006.

Here is one of the familiar features to be found: though Xie Nanxing insists that "the target is figurative painting,"⁵ he still employs a highly convoluted method of image-generation that makes this outcome rather unlikely. (Which is probably why he insists on figuration in the first place ...) Take the painting *untitled no. 1* from 2014, which is based on a photograph of an image on a screen, on which a video of the back of a small oil painting was played. For the filming, strong light was pointed at the front of the canvas, seeping through the paint and creating a new image. The painting itself was a copy of a photograph of a vase of flowers, taken by the artist's mother. For those of us willing to pay attention long enough, the ghost of a reflection of the artist with a camera on a tripod appears, caught on the screen as he is shooting a photo of the video.

Along the lines of earlier works, the painting denies us a correct viewing position, from which we might decipher the image fully. We need the distance of an overview to see anything resembling a "form," but due to the treatment of the surface with different oils and brushes, some areas on the canvas reflect light in such a way as to "white-out" what is painted. If we want to see those parts, we must come up close to peruse the surface directly in front of our nose, thereby losing the overview.

Proposition C: Given the personal background of the photograph on which untitled no. 1 (2014) is based, it makes sense to shift the perspective from an aesthetics of perception, i.e. from the spectatorial pleasures or displeasures, to give some attention to the artist's own practice. I suggest that there is an existential component to Xie Nanxing's painting, which comes into conflict with a purely media-based analysis or an exclusively perception-centered aesthetics.

"I don't think I have made any great progress," Xie Nanxing tells a colleague in a conversation ten years earlier. Ironically, the painter is highly prolific at the time, and development—no less than "progress"—is obvious. Today, he has gotten to the "more exciting stage" of his artistic career, which he wished for as a young artist.⁶ In Xie Nanxing's case though, I take the excitement to be less about being appreciated by a wider public than about achieving some degree of understanding of his own work: What am I doing as an artist? What are my creative needs and desires, my weaknesses and failures, and how do I go about addressing them in my painterly practice? Xie Nanxing has come to realize that "what I am doing now comes from my skepticism," and feels self-confident enough to express that.⁷ Apparently directed toward recent Chinese art education, which he feels to be stuck in following pre-determined directions, this skepticism is also trained inward, on the artist's own production.

Xie Nanxing and I have been sitting in his studio, looking at *untitled no. 1* (2014) for quite some time now. Its yellow-greenish palette is not tasteful. He calls it "sick," and explains that this painting was quite literally a work of evocation. A sort of tribute to his mother, whose death lay back a few years when he turned to her photo of a camellia flower as the starting point for this new series. The fact that his reflection appears in the palimpsest of echoes only emphasizes the mother's absence. All of us must do the work of remembrance at some point in our lives, even if we fully realize its impotence. Some absences are absolute.

After a while, I realize how much courage and discipline it must have taken to stop working on this canvas. Surely, an artist can declare a work finished, and possibly, there is formal legitimation for the decision to end at the point one does. A designated method of image generation helps in determining such a point, as does painting technique—Xie Nanxing's style can only accommodate so many layers of paint. Nevertheless, the amount of time spent with one canvas allows for some flexibility. Who is to stop a painter from working and reworking the canvas indefinitely? It has been known to happen even to the Old Masters.

⁴ Li Zhenhua, *AN INTERVIEW with XIE NANXING*, artist publication, 2014.

⁵ In conversation with the author in February of 2015.

⁶ *A Talk Between Xie Nanxing And Ai Weiwei*, in: *Xie Nanxing. Works: 1992-2008*, Beijing 2008, p. 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*

In *untitled no. 1* (2014), there is some indication of struggle, mostly with the balance of color: to make green, yellow, and blue cohabit on one picture plane is not an easy thing to pull off. But he does. Pull it off. And he does. Finish the painting.

untitled no. 2 (2014), a smaller iteration of the first piece, sums up what the artist has learned in the first work. It is as if the artist wants to make sure that his hard-earned capabilities can exist and survive outside of the psychology of mourning, which is, after all, a highly personal motivator for making a work, one which should not, and probably cannot, be exploited as a procreative tool.

By the time Xie Nanxing starts with the third canvas, he has completely reined in his memorial drive. Again, the work is based on the mother's photograph, but *untitled no. 3* (2014) is a new beginning, devoted to painting as a discipline. A formal problem is posed, once more having much to do with the checks and balances between figuration and abstraction: the painting is built from several layers of meaning, which remain decipherable (if one goes into the mode of image archaeology), while they are simultaneously made to cohere via the composition.

That last sentence sounded quite opaque. I realize that I could be writing all sorts of things about these works and not many people could refute me, for the simple reason that those reading the text without the opportunity to actually look at the canvasses would remain without the appropriate instruments to counter my explications: the paintings do not reproduce well and thus the reproductions stay opaque themselves. If the reader recalls that one of the conundrums of these works is the fact that one has to piece together their "look" from different viewing positions, all of which seem to exclude each other, it should be obvious that a photographic camera, with its fixed point of view, must fail in capturing their essence. Moreover, the paintings are very rich in detail, yet, given their lack of iconography, difficult to retain in the mind, other than as a kind of mirage.

Proposition D: Any attempt at interpreting a work from Xie Nanxing's series untitled nos. 1-6 from 2014 must be made in the presence of the thing itself.

I wonder whether this isn't a strong motive for collecting these paintings—they beg ownership, mocking the viewer to grasp and hold onto the visual apparition. I wonder whether it even makes sense to write a text about these works, instead of proposing simply to the prospective viewer: "Go and have a look at these paintings yourself"!

Conversely, the experience that the image of the painting continues to escape us accentuates the presence of the work in an almost eerie way. Curiously, this is not because the physical attributes of the paintings are made to count, as they might very well be, if the painter had placed an emphasis on the body of the painting by treating the painterly surface in a certain way or by pointing toward the materiality of the framed canvas. No, the fact that we know that the painting is there, but *not there for us to behold in any finite way*, allows it to develop an existence independent from us, or rather, next to us. We know that these works have presence, even more than we sense it. I would even suggest that they have the presence of beings. But I have allowed myself to digress into phenomenology once more, when I wanted to focus on the painter's attitude...

That Xie Nanxing shuns descriptive titles might provide us with a path forward. The artist claims that titles would be meaningless, "because I have expressed myself clearly through my paintings."⁸ In other words, where his paintings are concerned, the only reference he admits to the paintings themselves. This underlines their material existence. However, in comparison to other painters who would similarly relegate all power of making meaning to the work itself, Xie Nanxing's paintings are strangely dry. I've mentioned the equivocal tension between figuration and abstraction several times, but here we are confronted with a new indeterminacy, one even more complex: the paintings show an ambiguity between the painterly and the conceptual modes of artistic practice.

In western histories of contemporary art, one often differentiates between those practices that value aesthetic objecthood and those that reject it in favor of a de-materialized concept of art. In particular those painters who display an interest in, and ability for, the manipulation of the material language of

⁸ In conversation with the author in February of 2015.

painting, are more often than not cast in the first group, sometimes even lovingly called *Malerschweine*, or “painter pigs.” The others, who are adhering to a conceptual take, are thought to seek as much of an eradication of the individual painterly gesture and materiality as possible.⁹

Proposition E: Xie Nanxing's paintings cannot be cast in the camps of either aestheticized objecthood or conceptual de-materialization. They hover firmly in between.

For me, the painting in which this indeterminacy is realized most fully is *untitled no. 4* (2014). Perhaps its success owes something to the fact that its source image is not a photograph, but a painting undertaken by Xie Nanxing himself, of a young tree on a small plot in the courtyard of his studio. I imagine him walking by this little glimpse of domesticated nature every day, with plenty of occasion to study it. When I was leaving the studio, after looking at Xie Nanxing's new series for several hours, the wintery sun was shining and the air was dry. The scene gave off a spirit of ideality, though the little garden is actually rather banal. Rather than being impressed by the view itself, I was, most probably, more influenced by the after-image of my perception of the painting, which had seemed to me to verge on Chinese ink painting, and bearing some of its intellectual values, though it remained obviously something else. Mind you, I am not talking about the tacky attempt to turn ink into oil, which is sadly so prevalent in third-rate, Chinese contemporary art. On the contrary, all aspects—the flat and staggered composition of the landscape, the way that the painting seems to have slipped downward and out of its central axis, the batik-like application of brownish color to the lightly tinted background—all of these conspired to give an effect of catching a scene at the precise moment when it is able to signify eternity. It was almost painfully present and nearly perfectly absent at the same time.

If *untitled no. 4* (2014) is somewhat of a masterpiece, the painting that follows risks all: *untitled no. 5* (2014) is testimony to Xie Nanxing's discipline, which prompts him to challenge himself with every new work, and to his ethics, which drive him to question what he seems to have achieved in the true spirit of a skeptic. Again, a flower plays a prominent role; this time, the artist has asked one of his students to furnish him with a source painting, and again, the image is sent through all the hoops of transmission, from one medium to the next, before it is placed on the large canvas. Of all the works in the series, *untitled no. 5* (2014) is probably the most resolved.

But my love belongs to *untitled no. 6* (2015), another small work whose source image is one last flower, painted by the artist. This final iteration of the series seems to have been made by the *artist for himself*. He is now in full control of his motif and of the wet splotches that are interjected into the play of color on the surface of the canvas. He even allows himself some pastosity, which might be construed as excessive, were it signifying anything. But as the artist comments, “I wanted to paint something, but it is nothing.”¹⁰ I come to think of the splotches as a site of the painter's one need for expressivity, a form of signifying signification without figure or content. They suggest a future path to be explored. And thus the last painting is also the perfect vehicle for starting a new series. In the end, it remains unclear to me whether the splotchy, yet pastose areas indicating painterly excess are the reason that this painting has been painted in the first place, or simply a by-product of Xie Nanxing's artistic attitude and discipline. But I do not ask him about this. Somehow, it would seem too vulgar to pry.

Proposition F: If we follow the philosopher Peter Osborne's claim that all contemporary art is post-conceptual art, which he defines as

1. the acknowledgement of art's critical legacy, i.e. the fact that art has an ineliminable aesthetic dimension (for it requires some form of materialization) and simultaneously

2. an acceptance of the necessity to make an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials¹¹, we must call Xie Nanxing a contemporary artist in the truest sense of the word.

⁹ For the purpose of my argument, I am dangerously foreshortening art history. For an argument against this reductionist view of painting versus conceptualism, see T. J. Clark on Malevich in his *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from the History of Modernism*, New Haven and London 1999.

¹⁰ In conversation with the author in February of 2015.

¹¹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London 2013.