

Necessary Redundancy: Hu Qingyan Works  
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Redundancy is a form of superfluousness. It is manifest as an aspect of non-crucialness or definitive superfluousness to an object. Rationalism has a habit of using logical thinking to extract the basic traits of an object from this clamorous world, and filtering out all redundancy. In this way, human reason penetrates the essence through phenomena, and generates a name, definition and concept of the object. This conceptual logic and practice gave rise to a logocentric knowledge system and force of tradition. Within this systemic structure, redundancy often appears as a form of unnecessary repetition. The repetition of components, of functions and of data appear to be a form of waste. Redundancy seems to waste time, to waste space, and to waste energy. But this repetition and redundancy serve as a spare tire for the system. When the active components, functions or data of the system lose effect, redundancy comes into effect, serving as a necessary replacement. Otherwise, the entire system will deviate from the norm and collapse. Redundancy is distributed throughout the various systemic structures of the world, manifesting as surplus, useless elements. Redundancy is not the same as surplus. In the commodity society, surplus manifests in use value as an asset, while in exchange relationships, it manifests as a deficit. But whether it is in terms of use value or exchange relationships, redundancy always appears useless. Since redundancy is often expressed as a form of idle existence, it occupies unnecessary time, space and energy. For this reason, it has always been the object of subtraction in the systemic structure, destined to be reduced, cleared and rooted out. But no matter how humanity progresses, simplifies and refines various systemic structures, redundancy can never be fully eradicated. It is the nightmare of rationalism and progressivism.

Classical philosophers held that all that exists in reality is rational, and all that is rational is real. Redundancy exists in the real world flooded with objects. Redundancy is a form of reality. Thus, redundancy is rational. Hu Qingyan is accustomed to observing external things in the same way he examines himself, treating the investigation of things as a physical practice through which to reflect on the structures and behaviors of his own intentionality and intentional behaviors. In Hu Qingyan's creative model of cyclical progression, the temporal and processorial elements generated by the artistic text are constantly emphasized and highlighted. For this reason, from the viewpoint of phenomenology and the logic of semiotics, Hu Qingyan not only treats redundancy as an object of his intentional behavior, he has gradually produced a unique understanding of redundancy. In his view, redundancy is a property of contemporary art. Though redundancy is superfluousness, it is a necessary superfluousness. There is a certain useful uselessness to redundancy, just as art is to society. In future society, humanity's unique artistic endowment will be the key, irreplaceable element that differentiates them from strong artificial intelligence. Thus, the research of redundancy has become a means for Hu Qingyan to rationally analyze, grasp and speculate on the entire objective world through practice.

Human consciousness is not a blank slate, but contains an inherent spatiotemporal framework and intellectual process. In regard to external things, human consciousness is not passively recording and reproducing, but actively recognizing and constructing. Through structures of intentionality, consciousness not only accepts the traits of the object, it also organizes these traits into a unified object of awareness. Thus, Hu Qingyan believes that the material objects he uses in his artworks, whether they are such natural materials as stone, wood, ceramic, and sculpting clay, or manmade objects such as steel pipe fittings, are all primordial things yet to be illuminated by the light of conscious intentionality, things with no order or meaning. It is only when the intentional activity of the artist's consciousness is cast onto these things from the outside world that they become the objects of Hu Qingyan's consciousness, and take on order and meaning. In his quest to probe the essence of materials, Hu Qingyan often engages in a practice of laborious investigation of objects, carrying out meticulous examinations of the various traits of objects, thus obtaining an embodied cognition of mental perception activated by physical experience. In this way, Hu Qingyan uses rational practice to effect deep investigation and recognition of the physical substance and inner order of the material object, through which he further attempts to reconstruct the concepts and meaning of the material object. The semiotic feel of Hu Qingyan's works often stems from the massive amount of redundancy in perceptual input resulting from this intentional activity. These cognitive redundancies have physical meaning within the spatiotemporal framework, manifesting as a kind of outer shell

spectacle in the artwork. They also have spiritual meaning within the structure of intentionality, which is embodied as a semiotic visual language.

The semiotic feel of Hu Qingyan's works stems from the outer shell spectacle expressed by the materials. Many of these shell-like works are all appearance, completely empty inside. They have not been packaged or spruced up, but show their plain side, simple and unadorned, with the feel of the original surface appearance, outer form, skin or shell of the everyday object. But in the viewer's perception, none of them fit their names, or are what they appear to be. They all seem to embody the Buddhist concept of "emptiness." In the "Empty Cube" series, in these one-meter granite cubes almost entirely emptied out, it is as if we can bear witness to the inner form of granite, and the inside of a stone is still stone. Through the holes distributed irregularly across the surface of these granite cubes, the viewer can get a glimpse of the empty and dark form within the granite, but using the naked eye alone, they are still unable to see the true interiority of the stone. In the "Bang" series, those cracked and scarred ceramic objects were all originally cast and glazed ceramic vessels, encompassing space and volume. But before they were fired, the artist threw each of them against the hard ground. At the moment these raw ceramic vessels made impact, the air inside them was caused to explode and escape by the immense air pressure, creating random fissures of varying size and shape. In the clash between human strength and external reaction, these ceramic objects, due to their resemblance to fungi, take on the appearance of natural things, but because of the bulging of the fissures from impact, their inner layers and qualities have exposed their entire interiority. In the series "Go in One Ear and out The Other," countless long carbon steel pipe fittings with wide openings and twisted forms have been randomly and seamlessly fitted together by the artist at any point where two pieces are the same size. Professionally joined and welded together, these pipe fittings loop through each other and link to one another, like an explosively-growing rhizome, constantly expanding and extending into every vector of space. The openings of these channels have the shapes of human ear canals and cochleas. They are at once the starting point and end point of the entire complex pipe installations, and due to the hollowness of the carbon steel pipes, they have the functions of sound resonance and transmission. These openings are both senders and receivers for sound wave channels. The non-centric, non-linear, networked spatial structure presented in "Go in One Ear and out The Other" has the kind of interconnected networks found in various information systems. As they find balance between order and disorder, boundaries and boundlessness, they also manifest a posture of sustainable development. In this way, Hu Qingyan's intimate, physical actions transform material objects into philosophical thinking that represents, reflects and even reconstructs the interconnecting links between people and nature, thus generating the spiritual meaning of the works.

The empty shell form that appears so often in the imagery of Hu Qingyan's works is actually a stacking of likenesses and indices according to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. It catalyzes the shared functions of likeness and symbol, and has connotations of the Buddhist concept of "emptiness," where all that is perceived is empty, and all is impermanent. Hu Qingyan's empty shell forms are rooted in his reflection on the Zen layers of "empty form, empty nature, empty mind." Empty form is impermanence, which means that the appearance of all things is constantly changing, emerging and ending. Empty nature is the state of no self, and no self is a changing self, an impermanent self, an undefinable self. Empty mind is the state of no attachments, treating everything as empty. In his artwork *Landscape on a Sculpting Table*, Hu Qingyan repeatedly uses a lump of sculpting clay to imitate different objects, as if performing an endless life study sculpture class. The object can be a stone, a Buddha statue, a ball, or something else. The pile of sculpting clay has no form of its own, but like a tiny transformer, it can use imitation to become an incarnation of any object. This lump of clay, rooted in the reasoning that all images are changing and impermanent, uses the three layers of "emptiness," i.e., "empty form, empty nature, and empty mind," to allude to a Zen state of no form, no self, and no attachments. Hu Qingyan places emphasis on the present context in the creative process. Each now is a self-contained existence that breaks the linear axis of time and breaks through the three-dimensional world. Self-containment as Hu Qingyan perceives it in tradition is a presence that is contemplative of self-nature, and self-nature is a person's inherent inner nature. Thus, for Hu Qingyan, the so called truth of the object is Immanuel Kant's thing-in-itself. The thing-in-itself cannot be attained or known. The object known by people is always an outward appearance of the thing-in-itself as perceived through the a priori perceptual framework. Human reason and human knowledge are limited to the outward appearance of things-in-themselves as refracted through people's subjective spatiotemporal framework. In the process of generating the empty shell sign, Hu Qingyan constantly probes the materiality of the object, seeking out the original face of the external world or even his own life, and revealing a

tireless pursuit of the metaphysical id. This is the Zen concept of “seeing the true nature with a pure mind,” as well as the epistemological concept of “self-knowledge.”

Patina is a term for the film or finish that builds up on an object due to long term oxidation. The influence of the external environment, phenological reactions in materials, and long term contact with the human body lead to the permeation of dust, atmospheric particles, sweat and other fine particles to create a glossy patina on an object. Patina differs from the inner components and original material properties of the thing. It is detailed, meticulous, tender, smooth and transparent clothing bestowed on the thing by long term human contact. Hu Qingyan carefully polishes the shells of all the objects that interest him, turning them into a radiant “patina” shining with the light of wisdom. The “patina” is not a part of the thing’s inner components or inner properties. It is not the original outer shell of the thing, but seemingly a redundancy bestowed on the object by people. But it is a necessary redundancy. The trappings of traditional aesthetics entailed by this “patina” seem to add what Walter Benjamin would see as a human “aura” to Hu Qingyan’s works. Hu Qingyan has persistently engaged in intellectual and spiritual artistic labor in order to “polish” the various ordinary things to which his consciousness and intentionality are directed, and in this way, his artwork series are a demonstration of an alchemical contemporary art production model. Through his own actions, he has responded to the critical ideas of such philosophers as Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, who said that all of human creative practice is on the decline or even disintegrating. As Cassirer sees it, in terms of the development and transformation of language, creativity is becoming increasingly meaningless. In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, he wrote, “The bond of tradition is at its strongest here, and it appears to leave only a small scope of creativity to the individual.” In fact, just as these philosophers say, art is perhaps, just like other traditional realms of practice, already a part of the past. Tradition is too strong, and so called practical philosophy can no longer present any new knowledge in the contemporary context. It seems only a small scope is left for human practices. To Hu Qingyan, this remaining scope for human activity is not a redundancy covered over by cultural traditions. Thanks to the information explosion and the exponential growth of technology, information redundancy is growing exponentially in the age of the digital revolution, producing all manner of possibilities for future humanity. As long as the artist continues to act within the contemporary context, it will be possible to engage in knowledge production within this remaining scope.

Though the truth is unattainable, and the thing-in-itself cannot be known, we cannot say that people’s perception and recognition of the surface appearance of things is a kind of redundancy of consciousness or redundancy of spirit. Thus, in Hu Qingyan’s apperceptive thinking, redundancy is an index of a lost thing, and a stand-in for a thing which is absent. Redundancy makes an invisible, abstract object world real and tangible. The greatest equality, justice and happiness is a kind of utopian vision for human society, as well as something missing and absent in our current reality. Humanity is never satisfied with its present state. This dissatisfaction arises from the pursuit of missing things, from the great desire for absent things. The artist’s constant creations of symbols and substitutes to fill in for that which is missing and absent creates a semiotic system that constantly marks out the myriad forms of the world of art.