

PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON MENG HUANG'S DISTANCE SERIES

(Wolf-Jürgen Cramm)

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Philosophy attempts to explain concepts that are central to our understanding of ourselves and the world. In particular, it tries to make the implicit (presuppositions, implications, associations) explicit. In doing so, philosophy is also a critique of language, dealing as it does with the conditions and limitations of sense, of meaningful expression. Its ideal is—according to my understanding of it—impartiality, candor, rigor, precise argumentation, and conceptual discipline.

If *art* achieves its aim, it expresses something that cannot be precisely described in words. Of course it is possible to interpret it, and it makes sense to do so. After all, art works with symbols that can be decoded. Still, something of the unutterable always remains—something that *appears* in good art.

To comprehend means to either integrate things into an order, or allocate them to one. It also means the ability to create unity. Art, however, always depends on a moment of incomprehension, of wrestling to understand, which is not necessarily achieved in the end. And it subsists on the *feeling* evoked by artistic expression, as well as on memories, deep emotions, and atmospheres.

If you want to observe the paintings in Meng Huang's *Distance* series from the philosophical perspective defined here, then you have to turn to the symbols that can be interpreted, to what can be said about the things being expressed, the things being represented. In order to do this, some conceptual and interpretative ideas follow.

ON THE DISTANCE SERIES

If you take the artist's biographical statements into consideration, Meng Huang's *Distance* series seems to represent a tension between distance and intimacy, between the individual and society, between freedom and a feeling of security or belonging, between the desire for adventure or willingness to take risks on one hand, and the longing for protection or safety on the other. To say that there is a tense relationship between these two conceptual poles means that the tension cannot be utterly and satisfyingly resolved on one side or the other. But I will not go into details of Meng Huang's biographical or political background here, which may play a role in his work. Instead, I will make a few philosophical and conceptual remarks.

For Meng Huang, *space* is a symbol of *freedom*. Here, space can be meant literally—in a topographical sense, for instance—or metaphorically, when referring to a space that could potentially be used for activity and thought, for example. The topographical space portrayed in the paintings, however, also seems to symbolize the space of possibilities. Objects depicted in them could also represent certain possibilities.

Freedom is a multilayered concept. There is an important distinction between the freedom to choose (or free will) and the freedom to act. Someone may limit my freedom to act without limiting my freedom to choose. Even if an external force takes away my freedom to act, I still have the freedom to choose to accept or reject this force.

Yet another important distinction vis-à-vis the concept of freedom is the difference between negative and positive freedom: freedom *from* something (from compulsion) and freedom *to* something¹. I am free in the negative sense when no one forces me to do things I do not want to do (here, you might think of the process of defending yourself from state or social interference). I am free, or freer, in a positive sense when I have the means or the opportunities to expand my room to act, which makes it possible for me to

¹ "Positive" or "negative" are not used in an evaluative sense here, e.g. in the sense of "good" or "bad" (forms of freedom).

exhaust my potential (here, you might think of the opportunities offered by education and upbringing). Take rules, for example. A moral or legal rule can limit my freedom to act. But in a certain way it can also enlarge my room to act—room that might be otherwise limited by correspondingly unregulated conditions. Also, the rule of logic does not limit my thoughts, but makes them possible. The rules of a game limit me on one hand, but they are what makes it possible to play the game in the first place.

Being free from something does not tell me what I *should* do, or what is right. But it is an enabling condition for doing the right thing. Roughly put, freedom—in the sense of being able to choose, to say “yes” or “no” to something—is a condition of dignity and self-respect.

Empty spaces cannot actually represent the freedom to choose or the freedom to act. Freedom always requires an alternative, a structure. Meng Huang’s spaces contain landscapes, buildings, or technical facilities; train tracks, especially, are featured. Tracks predetermine the way. Alternatives—and hence, freedom—arise in places where the tracks fork at switch ties (which can be seen in some of the pictures in the *Distance* series). There are limitations, however, to the appropriateness of train tracks and switch points as symbols of the freedom to choose or to act, because the latter are far more complex. Still, tracks can symbolize a direction, a predetermined path, an ambition, or a yearning. There is no visible goal in Meng Huang’s *Distance* series; if there is one, it lies beyond the horizon, in the “distance.” But you know that train tracks lead *somewhere*. This recalls a childish notion of distant adventures, when you imagine that tracks must *necessarily* lead to a more interesting or better place—all you have to do is be able to follow them. Perhaps there is an indication that being subjected to the compulsion of the tracks—the voluntary surrender of negative freedom (such as giving up striving for personal happiness or wealth)—is necessary in order to get to a better, *freer* (in the positive sense), yet obviously still far-distant place beyond the horizon.

The black-and-white (or brownish, or yellowish-white) gloom of the pictures may indicate, on one hand, that anywhere else is better than here, or, on the other, that the notion of a better place beyond the here and now is illusory. In some paintings there is actually no light on the horizon; all we can do is hope for it. In contrast, the horizon seems lighter in other paintings. Every now and then a pulpy mass tenaciously runs or drips down from the upper edge into the pictures. Perhaps it is a reality that overwhelms the free, open space and the hopeful, longing gaze toward the horizon?

On the other hand, maybe the palette does not represent—or only partially, at least—a gloomy atmosphere or a fundamentally pessimistic attitude, but (also) stands for rigor, austerity, simplicity or clarity, the concentration upon form and structure.

There are no people or living creatures to be seen in the paintings from the *Distance* series. Perhaps this is intended to allude to the notion that there is no humanity in the here and now. It may, however, also indicate that the distance between the subject (which may correspond to the perspective of the painter or the person viewing the picture) and other subjects is so great that they are not visible in the immediate surroundings.

A philosophical commentary such as this one cannot and does not want to offer any sort of definitive or final interpretations. That would be something that the artist probably does not wish, either. In any case, the power that lies in these paintings seems to subsist on a mixture of intellectual pessimism based in personal experience and an indelible, rather intuitive hope for better, freer conditions. This powerful *mélange* cannot be really *described*, but it *appears* – and so can be seen – in Meng Huang’s *Distance* series.

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