



Buddhism, Perception and Conceptual Art

**Conversations on Michael Zheng's exhibition
"A Tree Is a Tree"
at 500 Capp Street**

SPEAKERS

Hou Hanru,

Michael Zheng

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Hou Hanru

So, how long are you going to be in this residency?

Michael Zheng

The residency was over about a few months ago. It was to prepare for the exhibition at the David Ireland House.

Hou Hanru

So the exhibition is like the traces you left behind?

Michael Zheng

Not quite. The residency was for me to get to know and experience the House itself. I didn't make anything while I was there. It was time for me to come up with ideas for the show. It was done about three-four months ago now. Since then, I have been creating works in response to my experiences there.

Hou Hanru

This is very interesting. There is a period of living there and then working on the situation. Then you produce projects, which are not really like the traces left there. Really, it was kind of taking a distance to reflect. It created an abstraction of that experience, responding to the specific works and context in the building with a second thought.

Michael Zheng

Pretty much. That was a good summary of what I did over there.

Hou Hanru

So it was not an easygoing kind of "life equals art" or "art equals life."

Michael Zheng

No, not at all. And for that purpose, it's very different than all the other residencies I have done. At MacDowell, for example, they really pamper you. They give you food and everything. This one really was very intense, because it was rather short - four or five days. But I liked the intensity. Because it was short, it was very condensed. My sensitivity was heightened, and I noticed a lot of details. I had visited the House many times prior to that. But this was the first time I got a very close and personal experience with it. And out of it really came all the works. It's really amazing how one can respond.

Hou Hanru

Yeah...

Michael Zheng

A little bit of that is what you just said. However, the actual experience didn't literally just become the work. It became the impetus for the subsequent works.

Hou Hanru

Yeah, I think that time lag is important. There is always a possibility to turn the living process directly into the final realization. But you didn't really choose that. In the meantime, there's also a very conceptual appearance of the works in the project. Basically, it's taking over different rooms, with different strategies to use the rooms and the context. Sometimes, directly responding to the objects there. And that helps create a conceptual frame or conceptual substance of the work. It's pretty rational. However, it seems to be quite different from what you wanted to say through this connection with Buddhism. Maybe I have

a misunderstanding of what Buddhism is in your mind. You do talk about the Tree. But you have to go through a step, which is the tree as knowledge. But in the end, you arrive at the tree as the tree, which is no longer a concept. It's not the origin of the tree, and so on. So this process is pretty conceptual, but very different from the final outcome as a form. I think it's interesting to see how you negotiate these two kinds of overlapped yet distant frameworks of minds.

Michael Zheng

Very interesting way of putting it. Let's get into it. In the context of this exhibition, as I understand; Buddhism is what I would like to summarize with that saying "A tree is a tree." It came from a saying that "Before one knows Buddhism, a tree is a tree, a mountain is a mountain. And when one starts to learn about Buddhism, a tree is no longer a tree, a mountain no longer a mountain. But when one really gets Buddhism, a tree is a tree, a mountain is a mountain." And you're saying that our direct experience of relating to a tree as a reality, is really just directly relating to it, as opposed to going through an intellectualization of it and then coming to relate to it as a tree. The former is how I typically live my life, because I grew up under the influence of Buddhism (my mom was a Buddhist). But with that background, I did go through all of this intellectualization process. Through education, learning about the different ways of looking at Buddhism, so on and so forth. This included reading the scriptures over and over. So it's inevitable for a person like me to relate to the teachings of Buddhism from that angle. So that's one.

Secondly, even more so, I am coming from

the perspective of creating conceptual art under the influence of Buddhism. The conceptualizing part, for me, is already inevitably intellectualizing it. So I am very conscious of it. In the context of this residency, with that preparation, I let the actual situation in David Ireland's House talk to me. For example, I started to notice the very unassuming things, such as the cracks on the walls and the nail holes and other "unsightly" things. And those became the fodder for my thinking, in terms of how can life be made into art. Or how can it become the impetus to make art from. I started thinking, if David Ireland could make art by looking out of one of his windows and narrating it, then what is the possibility of being inspired by that way of thinking? For example, things out there are nothing special in a common sense. But by blocking up the window, that gesture of intervention, it somehow transcends that very ordinary daily occurrence to be a little bit more general. It becomes more about perception all of a sudden. Then other people could benefit from his way of seeing ordinary things. That was very intriguing to me.

That observation intrigued me to make actually two pieces in response. Right next to that window that he blocked with the plates, I built a blind that would have covered a similar window. So that is a kind of conceptual device for me to speak to what is hidden and how meaning is created. A blind is normally used to cover an opening like a window. By installing the blind directly on the wall, it creates this conundrum of like, what is covered? Or is there anything that is covered? Or is it signifying something else? So this way of questioning is really how I approach my work.

Hou Hanru

And, in a way, one can also say this is a gesture or a strategy to activate something which was potentially there?

Michael Zheng

Correct, very much so. And, for me, there are two layers to it. One is that I genuinely believe that everything in daily existence has its own special position. It is that we human beings somehow assign meanings to them and levels of meanings to different things. We value some things more than others. But from the perspective of their existence, they are just there. A crack in the wall has the same significance as the beautiful color that David chose to paint the wall with. So I want to bring that out and bring it to the forefront so that people have a chance to see from that perspective. Secondly, I do believe that those small details in the daily occurrence can be a catalyst for creative work. And, in my own body of work, I happen to be interested in how we actually see things, and how we perceive what we call reality. That kind of thinking benefits from my doing this show at David Ireland's House, because the house has a lot of these kinds of features. They are very unassuming, but if you do pay attention, they can be very interesting and intriguing such as the cracks in the walls. They are very prevalent, but I'm pretty sure nobody really pays attention to them, let alone honors them. Based on that observation, I have at least two pieces in the show that foreground the cracks in the walls.

For one piece, for example, I picked a wall that happened to have a lot of very prominent cracks and paint lines. For some reason, David painted the wall in two

different colors with a very clear dividing line. I just took a picture of the wall itself. Then I printed it on paper in life size. And then I put it back on the same area on the wall directly, making sure that the patterns all matched up perfectly. All of a sudden, this piece of paper somehow transformed itself into some kind of transparency, a transparent material. To our eyes, it looks like we're seeing through something at the wall. But in reality, you can see the thickness of the paper on the side. So it is my interest to present this illusion in life that we all encounter, while at the same time, I disclose the mechanism by which this illusion is created. This way, people get both opportunities to see how we're in a way deceived. Yet, at the same time, if you really give yourself the allowance to contemplate on it you can really perceive what you are seeing and how you perceive it. Things like that are very intriguing to me.

Hou Hanru

This makes me think of a very connected but a really different example. The example is that of Joseph Kosuth, who looks into creating three kinds of readings: an object, the concept, and an image.

Michael Zheng

The Chair?

Hou Hanru

Yeah, the Chair. The chair itself, the image of the chair, and the dictionary definition of the chair. And that was somehow an extremely rationalist way of thinking: look into three ways of defining, trying to be exhaustive in terms of how human brains perceive the world, and trying to fix it. Trying to memorize and turn it into a kind

of permanent knowledge through image making. In your way of dealing with this kind of repetitive, tautological appearance, the importance is not the image. The importance is this process of grasping a particular moment of contact between an object, the light, and the human being, which is not a rationalist kind of approach to perception, but it's much more about a kind of sensibility or a sensation of the moment. And you try to render it transparent, as you called it. But actually, it's about creating another sphere that is coming to cover the fixed materiality.

Michael Zheng

Exactly!



Hou Hanru

So yes, it is a very beautiful gesture.

Michael Zheng

Thank you.

Hou Hanru

I am just very curious about the Camera Obscura, which is another example that emphasizes even more on the flow of time: the flow of things, the flow of images, shadow, air, and also human sounds, and so on. And it's extremely interesting to see the confrontation between the two systems of dealing with perception. Apparently, you don't have the same aim as Kosuth, who tries to define something that is, by nature, impossible to define. Right? And somehow, I think your device is trying to let it live in its own way. But in the meantime, trying not to really hold on to it. Instead, it's somehow proposing a veil or a screen through which people can enter into this process.

Michael Zheng

Yes, that's a very beautiful way of putting it and very accurate as well. In the context of Kosuth's methodology, I think that by contrast, my approach is more experiential. So I don't prescribe definitions or solutions. I'm a little bit more humble than he was (laugh). I do have things to say about any subject matter. But the way I say it is by creating the situation so that it provides a possibility for the viewers or the participants to enter through the situation I have created. That way they make their own conclusions.

Say, for example, the Chair—it's very interesting that you would bring up the Chair piece (by Kosuth), because I actually

made a piece referencing Kosuth's "One and Three Chairs." I took a magazine photograph of his piece, the chair, the image, and the definition. I then gave that photograph to another artist and asked him to make a chair out of this information. So basically, he was given this very authoritative definition of what a chair should be. It's like "Ex Cathedra" from the God, you know, from the Pope's chair. But what I did for it really was to honor the very last mile of this authoritative definition of a chair, which is the receiver. Once a person receives this information, what does he do with it? For me, it's very interesting what the artist did with it. Basically, all the information that he got, the definition, and the actual image was one directional. Whatever direction that Kosuth presented that thing with was his perspective. And then he had to create the other dimensions, like sideways and back ways, the whole three dimensional aspects of the chair, or that conceptual chair. He had to make it up. So when you see the chair he created as a result, it's really weird. When you look at it frontally, it looks exactly like Kosuth's photograph. But from the side, it looks wrong. No matter how you look at it, it's just like, something is off. But for me, the fact that something is off really speaks to my viewpoint on these things. Everybody is doing a re-creation when they are handed certain visual information or textual information. They have to do this re-creation. For me, that's true with not just Kosuth's piece, but really with any great masterpieces. I don't know how many times I've sat in front of the Mark Rothko painting in SFMOMA, and every single time I was transfixed, until one time, I didn't feel anything. I was like, what happened?! It was the same painting, but I was different that

day. And I didn't get anything out of it. That really was a very pivotal moment for me as a creator myself. I became much less fixated on what I was handing to the other people. Rather my focus shifted to be on the viewer, the last part of this artistic circle. Because art is, in my view, not complete until it is met with the viewer, right? And what they do with whatever I create is my emphasis.

So in that context, what I do with the "Camera Obscura" (or the other pieces) really is to create a situation in which you can literally enter the situation and you feel it out. You feel out all the visual and other sensory information. And you experience how you actually perceive that phenomenon yourself, and then you come to your own conclusion. I don't know what I'm telling them. I am just presenting to them the situation, including that the image is upside down. And all of a sudden, they might become so aware of the fact that everything we see in the world is actually upside down. Somehow we never become conscious of it because our eyes, our retina, somehow flips it before we actually perceive it. You know, all those little details, I find it very interesting, useful, and helpful to bring it to the awareness of the participants. So that's how I approached this series of work.

Hou Hanru

Apply this to the house of David Ireland's as a place where he, as a person, was living. So do you feel there's a kind of effort trying to distance yourself from his ghost? (smile)

Michael Zheng

Not consciously. Rather, I really let it

happen to me. When I was sleeping in his bed, it gave me goosebump feelings because there was a photograph of him above the bed. So I could not avoid being affected by it. All I could really do was to feel his presence with a benign intention. And feel what I could do under the influence. So from that perspective, I really did see a lot of things in his bedroom. For example, when I was laying there, on the wall across from me, there were two photographs. One was Joseph Beuys, the other was Duchamp. So all of a sudden, I saw that there was a certain thing about the lineage. Every artist, no matter how great they are, is influenced by something or somebody. In that way, I really felt privileged and excited that I was allowed to be in direct relation to this kind of a heritage. And from there, my eyes went down. I noticed that there was a bucket of Dumballs, his own work. Prior to that, I had only seen his Dumballs as they were displayed as artwork. But now I was sleeping in his bed and right next to his bed, there was a bucket of them. I didn't think the organizers really intended to show them as artwork. But all of a sudden, I was presented with this ambiguity. How do I come to terms with, or how do I reconcile with this thing that is otherwise an artwork, but now, all of a sudden, is just one pile of them? Where is the line? So all of these very minute thoughts came to me, and I had to have a certain understanding of them. And that, to me, was really the relationship that I had while I was there, dealing with the "ghost." And I really liked it. It was really those moments that inspired me. He wasn't teaching, but I was really learning stuff. It was great.

Hou Hanru

This is why it's interesting that eventually

you come up with a much more figurative interpretation of this relationship through the image of the roots. The tree roots. This very big photographic piece with four images of roots forming a room. That, in terms of language, is also radically different. It's so figurative, so representative, and also spectacular in a way. So I'm curious to see, you're shifting from a transcendent, almost immaterial kind of fixture of a certain floating moment, a certain fugitive kind of feeling, to an affirmative gesture about this connection. You might call it, as you said, the genealogy of artistic connection. So how do you decide to conclude the exhibition or the project in such an affirmative way?

Michael Zheng

Interesting. I wasn't consciously doing it that way. But I am very...

Hou Hanru

My interpretation, reading your text, maybe it was in the wrong order that I read it.

Michael Zheng

No, no, no, no, it's a very intriguing perspective of it. And now that you presented it, I'd want to think about it this way. The way I thought of it, it was very intuitive. It was because I realized there are two floors in the building. Most of the works that I had done by that time were upstairs. Eventually, they also gave me the downstairs. The main space downstairs is what they call the Accordion Room, which is at the front of the building. I realized that the accordion room was directly underneath the room with the Camera Obscura and the other room. All of a sudden, I realized the ceiling was the continuation of the upper rooms. So for

me, it's very natural to present the Root piece from the ceiling, because formally it really just grows down from the second floor. It kind of protrudes into the space from upstairs to the first floor. So that's how I intuitively came to that piece. Now how do I include that piece in the show, and to the extent that it encapsulates the show? It was through the meaning that I conferred to it. It was really very shocking for me to encounter in real life that tree root which had such a robust, intricate kind of image and organism. And I knew there was something in there. Also, when I saw the roots, one of the big shoots of the roots was hanging so low that I was compelled to walk down there. Eventually, it turned out not to be a root. It was actually a branch that bended so low that it looked like a root to me at the time. That gave me the entry point to make that into a piece, because it was consistent with how I thought of the rest of the work there. Most of the time, I realize that my perception of things is, to a large extent, conditioned by my learning. I assume a tree is in such way that there is a root, a trunk, branches, and so on. And they have a certain relationship among the components, and I don't question it, until in real life, I was presented with this conundrum, I was like, how does that work? You know, the green leaves at the tip of the branch were actually much lower than the bottom of the root ball! That itself was almost humbling to witness. So you're right that with this piece I conceptually and intentionally use that encounter to speak to something, which is how we perceive things. So that's how I kind of fit it into this show.

Actually, now that you've asked this question, I became very aware after I had

done the root piece, that the Accordion Room was rather long. It had two parts. It's really strange that the space was contiguous, but one part of it was wider than the other. So naturally, I positioned the root piece in the wider part of it. And then I was thinking if I would just leave the rest of the room empty. So that was when that second piece came. Because the second part of the room was so much narrower, when I walked there, there was a weird bodily sensation of almost a claustrophobic feeling. I intensely felt the presence of the left side, which had the door and some cabinets. There's a lot going on there. But on the other side, there was nothing. Just a white wall. That gave me the intrigue that maybe I could use that spatial situation to speak to the same thing, as I'm trying to say with the root piece. It is really the bodily sensations, bodily experience with the space. So I thought, what if I do a mirror image on the other side? All of a sudden, when we walk through it, we have to negotiate what does it feel like? what is representation? What is actual existence? The photograph that I put on the wall is, by definition, a representation of the other wall. But because it is so large it has a physical presence to it. I think it would be quite dismissive to think of it as just a representation, because it affects our body in the same way as the actual cabinets and door. And so those are the things that I was intrigued to play with for this show. And that's why I feel downstairs makes sense as a component of the large show.

Hou Hanru

A last question. How do you think your project makes sense in the current situation? Apparently, on the one hand,

there's a dialogue with a very long obsession with the history of California Conceptualism. On the other hand, California Conceptualism is somehow different from other groups of artists. It's closely related to the atmosphere of the West Coast and the Asian connection, especially the Zen Buddhist influence. It has been directly or indirectly involved in a lifestyle closer to nature, more spiritual. This, of course, is still present today, but it's actually quite historical. In the present state of the world, particularly in San Francisco, the social reality becomes much more hysterical. On the one hand, you have the turmoil of the conflicts between different communities, (especially the old inhabitants and the newcomers, the hipsters and the homeless, and so on, and so forth). We all know that. And now we are also in this kind of racial, gender, COVID, post COVID kind of mess. Your current project, this special project, is also quite different from most of the previous projects you have done. For example, your projects that took place in galleries or museums were very short, temporary, performative actions. This time, it's a kind of long-lasting residency/exhibition that takes place daily. How do you see that this particular project makes a special sense in this context? I know that it might not be your ambition to deal with this kind of questions, but how do you situate yourself by being an artist of "your type" at this moment?

Michael Zheng

Yeah, I have actually thought about these things. I have seen and observed, and been quite involved in the contemporary art dialogues. Given the time that we live in right now, which is in your words,

chaotic and filled with conflicts of all kinds, I personally experienced being on the receiving end of this kind of very aggressive behavior through the polarization of thinking, even in the Bay Area. So I am living in that actual world. I don't know if you could imagine it, but the show that I'm presenting right now is actually my way of dealing with it, believe it or not. Obviously, in actual life, I would have to deal with the same things as everybody else. Some of them are quite confrontational, and some of them more calm, others are anywhere in between. It is my own conscious conclusion that none of the other ways have an actual long term effect on the solution. For example, speaking of political polarization, I used to be very politically involved with the voting process, activism, etc. But over time, I started to see the pros and cons of that way of activism. A lot of it, if we're not aware, actually add to the confrontational effect in the actual life. Of course, politics being what it is, it has to have this confrontational aspect because you're taking a stance. So I value that and I respect that. And I have friends who make art in that way, and I really respect their work. While I have had that kind of observation, I really do believe that there is an alternative way of dealing with a very, very confrontational, chaotic, conflict-ridden society, which is to steadfastly go the opposite way. By showing and living it as an example of a possible and plausible way of existence contemporaneously with the other ways, you show them your force.

For example, I really do believe that my life is more grounded now that I've chosen consciously to live this way and make art this way. And I really can observe that me becoming this way has a calming effect

on my immediate circumstance, including the people around me. They tend not to be as agitated, because everybody, (laugh) almost everybody, coming out of the election and the pandemic is very anxiety ridden. People are very irritable these days. It takes just a little bit to blow up. When they are in the presence of behaviors such as this, they have less tendency to go to the trigger behavior. For me, it is a very practical solution to the actual life problems. And I'm very, very hopeful, because I have been taking on this kind of projects. I have been introduced to people in this sector of life. For example: two or three years ago now, I was invited to do a residency and a show in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Because that show was focused around the notion of being in the present, and Buddhism's influence on contemporary art and contemporary life, I was introduced to several people who were not necessarily in the art, but the "experts" in their fields, including a practicing Zen monk, Japanese scholar who is also Japanese himself. Through the contacts with these people, I really was very convinced that there was more than one way of dealing with the conflicts. And the way this old gentleman dealt with the same conflicts that we all handle was very eye opening. For example, in his 80s, he came to meet me on a bicycle! That itself was immediately impressive. So I knew this person had something. As we were talking, I realized that he practiced those things that we all just read about, you know, Zen Buddhism, Kōan, and so on. He embodied that kind of teaching. The fact that he had lived to 80 something, it was a life lesson that it was really possible. He's got a great sense of humor, and was relaxed about life. And I thought, wow,

I'm going toward that age myself and I really hope that I start to learn something from that. And I am practicing this myself now, including making this kind of work. So yeah, that's how I relate to it. It is really by choice. And I do this kind of practice in real life. I do meditation and regular yoga practices. By now, you can't ask me not to do it, because I know its effect on myself. It's really beautiful to actually have an opportunity to create a kind of stage to present that as a possibility. And whenever I'm given an opportunity, I will present this view and this way of life. I really believe that it is a good antidote to what's going on right now.

Hou Hanru

Very good. So life goes on.

Mihael Zheng

Life goes on, as they say. A tree is a tree. A mountain is a mountain.

Hou Hanru

... maybe tomorrow you'll forget it.

Michael Zheng

Yeah. And then tomorrow, I will start again. That's the thing. It's not up to me.

Hou Hanru

I think that's pretty interesting, no? Let's stop here?

Michael Zheng

Yes.

Hou Hanru

If we add more, it becomes redundant.

Michael Zheng

Yes. Yes. The essence of it is already there.

And I like that feeling. I really appreciate the angles through which you asked these questions. Some of them I wasn't aware of until you mentioned them.

Hou Hanru

Good, Michael. Great.

Michael Zheng

Thanks. Have a good rest of the day!

Hou Hanru is a prolific writer and curator based in Rome, Paris and San Francisco. He is currently Artistic Director of MAXXI (National Museum for 21st Century Arts), Rome. He is an advisor for numerous cultural institutions including Times Museum, Guangzhou, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, The Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York, and frequently contributes to various journals on contemporary art and culture and lectures and teaches in numerous international institutions.

He has curated and co-curated over 100 exhibitions for last three decades across the world including: China/Avant-Garde, National Museum of Art of China, Beijing, 1989; Cities On The Move, 1997–2000; Shanghai Biennale, 2000; Gwangju Biennale, 2002; Venice Biennale, French Pavilion, 1999; The 2nd Guangzhou Triennial, 2005; The 10th Istanbul Biennial, 2007; The 10th Biennale de Lyon, 2009, etc.