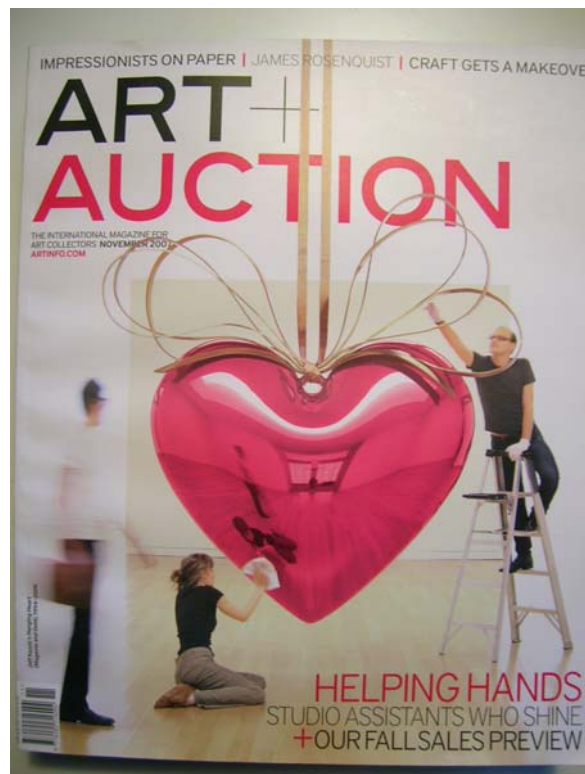


# L'écume des jours

Hu Fang

Where should we begin?



Jeff Koons's Hanging Heart, Magenta and Glod, 1994-2006,Cover Image of Art + Auction, Nov.2007

I took another glance at Jeff Koon's "Hanging Heart" - a shiny magenta heart suspended and adorned by whirls of golden ribbons. The work graced the cover of the November 2007 issue of Art + Auction, and I was struck and moved by the photograph - not by the eye-catching and dazzling lustre of the heart, but rather by the girl with brown hair in the picture who is carefully polishing the plastic heart with a piece of cloth. Her side profile is captured by the lens as she kneels on the gallery floor. You can't even really see her face clearly. Yet you can sense her absolute concentration in her work, as if she is oblivious to the rest of the world. She wipes the heart repeatedly, until there is not a speck of dust left. I had unwittingly chanced upon her beauty: a young woman without a name who is so attentive towards a magenta heart which does not possess a heartbeat.

That expensive heart encapsulates the innumerable hopes and ideals that people have for it. Thereafter, it will be coaxed to life by the undulating flux of capital and monetary value. Will it still remember the warmth of that girl who had conscientiously taken care of it?



The Fair, London.



Fluid Platform, Frankfurt

That same continuous ritual of cleaning can often be seen at art fairs as well. Each and every temporary white cube is invested with immense physical and mental efforts, so that a charming display can be put up. Everything revolves around that short time span of five to seven days. After that, it all returns to its original state, as if to that same depth of nothingness endemic in life.

Art fairs have become a basic foundation for global economic and artistic exchanges today. The numerous international art fairs have not only become part of the art world's cultural life cycle, but have also spurred on the vitality of towns and cities by becoming an effective lubricant of the global economy. The dizzying array and range of works displayed at these art fairs have deeply influenced the way in which people view and encounter art. It has engendered a particular kind of "art fair oriented" work and attitude. Through a variety of the commodification of art, art fairs have managed to become a channel for global capital, and through that, allows for the most complete display of "liquid art in liquid time".

The phrase "liquid art in liquid time" is drawn from Zygmunt Bauman, suggesting the flaws in the notion of infinite and lasting value. In the dialogue between Zygmunt and Maartta Jaukkuri, in response to Maartta's question: "How is it possible to define infinite, eternal values in this kind of mental environment?" Zygmunt pointed out:

*It is not even just the question of "mental environment". To make your and my lives more complicated, it is the question of daily human experience in the liquid-modern world... That world cares little about immortality, has neither room nor time for eternal values, stumbles from one episode ( quickly forgotten) to another ( stillborn)...* ①

In today's reality, we constantly feel under pressure from the massive changes that globalisation brings. Yet, we are still unable to define the epoch or times that we are living in today. According to the sayings of Chinese philosophy scholar Zhao Tingyang, the current world is not one that moves in a stable fashion; rather, it is a world "that has no world view of the world." He observed that:

*The contemporary world is one which faces urgent political and ethical crises. At the same time, behind contemporary political and ethical questions often lie economic ones. As a result, political and economic issues are frequently bundled and dealt with concurrently. Cultural issues are regarded as historical posturing and positions for political ones, and could well be part of the intricate structures of politics and economics. As such, it is inevitable that philosophical thought is incorporated as part of this historical construct: the composite of politics, economics and culture could well allow for mutual advocacy and understanding, or could provide a means for deconstruction. It is therefore almost impossible to consider them as mutually exclusive.* ②

Zhao asserts that while this fact constitutes a challenge for modern-day knowledge systems and production, it also encourages the development of new methods of analysis, and at the end of the day, people do change the world through the alteration of their questions and views.



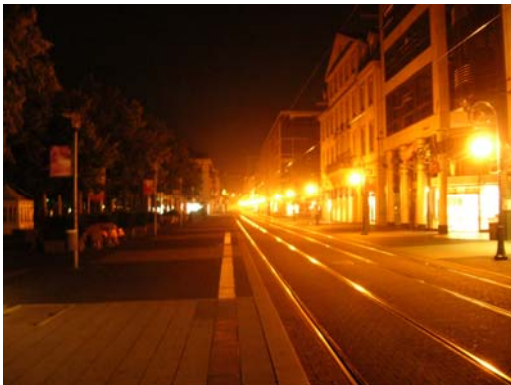
Two scenes of documenta 12 indicate "The Migration of Form".

I will willingly view documenta 12 as a complex yet relevant exhibition in response to a world unable to define itself. Through the myriad encounters, discussions and sharing sessions with different people, I was able to see the world through their eyes, as well as acutely sense my own puzzlement.

At a talk entitled "The Migration of Form", Roger M Buerger spoke about the crises that documenta was encountering, in terms of financing, the nature of the space, as well as the form of exhibition itself, the latter which is also known as "the crisis of form". Through a series of examples taken from artists' works and his own experiences in curating and organising exhibitions, he proposes a way to resolve the crisis of the exhibition itself: through the migration of form. What we witness at the end is an exhibition that is rich in discourse, that incites people towards loving or hating it. It is precisely this concept of "the migration of form" that allowed Ai Weiwei's installation, Template - which collapsed as a result of the torrential rain and strong winds - to remain on the exhibition grounds as if some mysterious force has interacted with it, rather than have it removed simply because its fall was regarded as a failure.

The exhibition has managed to circumvent its crisis through the use of the aesthetics of experience.

Hence, by allowing for each individual to become conscious of his or her own observation, the exhibition might provide more opportunities for "rewriting" and "reciprocal benefits."



Obere Konigstr, 2:07am, 15 June 2007



Time Square, 11:27 am, 8 August, 2007

On 14 June 2007, I remember heading back to my living quarters from the documenta exhibition hall at about 2 a.m. in the morning. I passed by Kassel's main street, Obere Konigstr. (see left image) and that distinct peace and quiet moved me tremendously. In a few hours' time, the mysterious screen over documenta 12 would be removed to herald its opening. Yet that precise moment that I was in was so serene that I felt as if all the contradictions surrounding the exhibition had evanesced; even the imminent launch of documenta had faded away. I thought I could distinctly hear the different voices that the earth was emanating: if I had left this place at that moment to go to another town or another "world", perhaps over there, 99.9% of the people wouldn't be aware of the existence of documenta in Kassel or what it signified. All this might not affect the lives of the people there. In another "world", "Chinese Supergirl Voices" was

showing on TV, the electronic screen on Times Square was flickering to life, and people were still weeping because of some heartbreaking Korean drama series.

Ai Weiwei's work involved bringing 1,001 Chinese people to Kassel. However, these 1,001 Chinese people do not have a single unified image. Rather, the significance of the work is that it brought with it 1,001 disparate experiences.

In my opinion, this piece vividly portrays how Chinese society is altering through its movement towards a common experience, where everything from "ideology" to "consciousness" is ruthlessly turned around: all meaning is only manifest through the immediacy of language, and that is precisely how we attain immediate joy, happiness and meaning, all of which constitute the experience and value of living.

Concurrently, a sense of anxiety and restlessness elicited due to the prospect of losing public culture and the core values of Chinese society could develop. In his book *Chinese Spiritual Living in Common Customary Society*, Chinese scholar Xu Jilin observed that whilst on the surface, contemporary China's culture and lifestyle has a sense of diversity and multiplicity, in actual fact, most of these are only reflections of materialism, which affects each individual's principles and ideologies. Therefore, the diversity demonstrated on a superficial level really connotes a kind of separation and fragmentation, and it reflects a profound social gap that is almost unsurmountable.

This is by no means a claim that there is no spiritual life. Rather, what preoccupies people in terms of their spiritual life is mass and popular culture. This already symbolises a significant shift in Chinese cultural and spiritual life towards materialism, and brings to the fore the veneer of free choice in the kind of lifestyle one opts to have via the marketplace.



Cao Fei, Nujiang River Project, Lyon Biennale. The photo shows the ending of the video work – the interior of a local church, with the text saying “God is Love”.

One of the recurrent themes in Cao Fei's work - from *Hip Hop*, *Milkman* and *Cosplayer* to *Whose Utopia?* - deals with how people find their own spiritual space within a world that is assaulted by mass and popular culture.

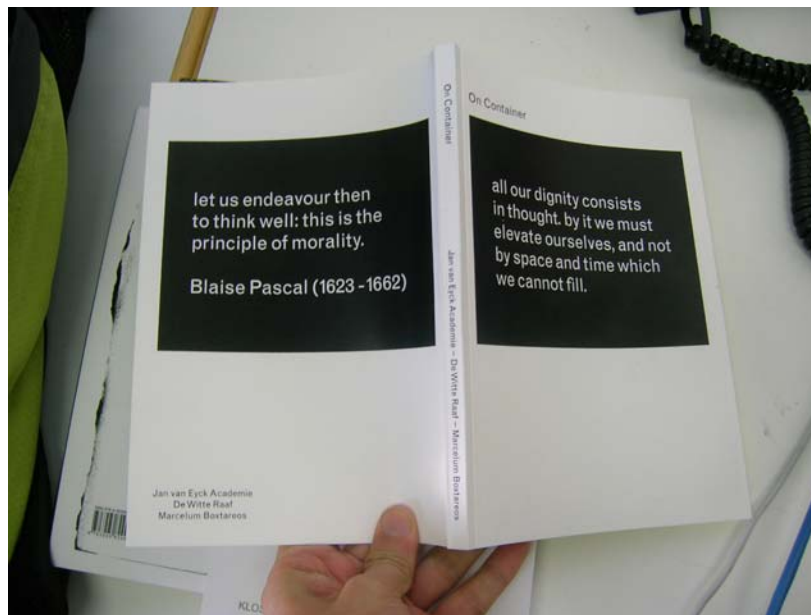
During the period of preparation for the Lyon Biennale in 2007, I had more opportunities to discuss *Nujiang River Project* – Cao Fei's participating work – with the artist. In the film, Cao Fei and two young hip hop musicians embarked upon a route towards Yunnan.

They took with them a DV camera and a sense of curiosity about the journey, and left the ash-filled haziness of Guangzhou for Yunnan – a land renowned for its legendary mystical beauty, but which is also suffering from the vagaries of cultural assimilation. Their journey was one which sought to rediscover the original state of the individual through that which they would see on the road. Each of the travellers carried his and her own problems and yearnings through the journey. As for the significance of the trip, it was something that could only be spoken about after the whole journey.

The repeated appearance of the church in *Nujiang River Project* is by no means an accident. It was not meant to signify some sort of religious fervour in the usual sense of the word, but rather serves as a metaphor calling for the scrutiny of one's value system: in this constant global flux, where cynicism has become commonplace and value systems are in a state of collapse, can this affiliation engendered by art help us make choices in life? More specifically, can artistic creation be a method to aid us in making choices in life?

I am willing to view *Nujiang River Project* as an allegory which can be extended into an exploration of life's journeys. Through the very act of creation, an individual's movement is gradually constructed and no longer takes a significance akin to the popular notion of revolution. Instead, this movement is established upon a grounded sense of honesty towards one's difficulties and subsequent choices. Countless individuals and their compatriots who are in the minority will in time forge their own sense of responsibility and dignity.

In one of our dialogues, Cao Fei referred to this sort of “movement” as “love”.



Cover image of *On Coverstation*, discussion must continue.

During an interview with Zhang Yaxuan, the Chinese artist Yang Fudong talked about plans for his new work Plan for a Library. This is a work that targeted for completion in 10 to 15 years, and will include 22 films. "All the films will more or less talk about a latent topic: that is, whether there is spiritual life in this world, and this may require ten years or more to grasp..."

Is there spiritual life in this world?

"Till now, I am convinced that people have a spiritual dimension to their lives. This spiritual aspect could be akin to what has been mentioned in books about ideals and beliefs. Our so-called pursuits could well evoke this sort of feeling." The reason for using the approach of Socratic Questioning here is because "this is the sort of thing you need to experience slowly, and not something you can grasp totally just by the mere mention of it... A lot of things, you need to encounter and savour it yourself, rather than have some sort of information guide to tell everyone about it."

By taking this direction of discourse, we can see that it possesses a close relationship with linguistics. "In recent years, I noticed that my works - and those created by friends around me - have a sort of undefined speed, as if it has a sense of acceleration. This sense could allow for some things to vanish. These things - be they naive or beautiful - still lack contemplation. The lack of thought possesses an implicit belief in everybody's subconscious sincerity, and that this same sincerity applies to the acts and things that one does as well."<sup>③</sup>

Whose utopia? Is there spiritual life in this world? After endless rhetorical questioning, in actual fact, what I see is more affirmative signals. In an email sent to me by Keith Wallace, he wrote about "doubt", as well as how "doubt" functions in a world rife with dilemmas to actively uncover its raison d'être:

*Something that I often think about is the idea of doubt. I tend to work through a process of doubt rather than confidence. Confidence to me signifies authority and authority signifies a solid position, but everything is fluid, history is fluid, life is fluid. Doubt suggests constant questioning about one's actions and ideas. And it is not a question of mistrust or disbelief, but a question that nothing is definitive. So, it is true, there is no conclusion, but in spite of that, discussion must continue.*

I believe in hope - that light of dawn in people's daily existence. It does not reside in the exhortations of advertisement, nor does it speak through the official slogans of the authorities. Hope can only be found within. Individuals have to use it to penetrate the fear and dark nights of the soul, even as we continue living in a world replete with crises.

*Some day, sooner or later, I will admit  
The things I do not understand;  
The wilderness  
The scent of sombre melted wax  
A destructive trip  
Traces of words under light  
Some day, sooner or later, I will rest*

*While you notice that I say so little, so little  
I only talk about some unimportant stuff, unnecessary stuff, but let me  
Say them, and stay a little while.*

Photos by Hu Fang

## Notes

- ① Zygmunt Bauman is Professor at University of Leeds and is known for works such as *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993) and *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Maaretta Jaukkuri is Chief Curator at Kiasma, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki. The quotation is from a published text named "Liquid Art in Liquid Time", which is the transcription of the conversation between Zygmunt Bauman and Maaretta Jaukkuri.
- ② Zhao Tingyang, *No World View for the World*, China People's University Press, 2005, pp.1-2
- ③ Quote from Zhang Yaxuan and Yang Fudong, Interview with Yang Fudong, *Contemporary Art & Investment*, Issue 9 of 2007, pp.50-53
- ④ Wang Wei, *Dialogue*, 1998, *Collected Poems*, self-published book.2006.