

"Misleading Trails" in Multiple Perspectives

Xie Xiaoze

Suffering from jet-lag one spring morning in 2003 around 4:00am, Dan Mills and I were talking in a hotel in Beijing. We had come to China to curate the exhibition "Regeneration: Contemporary Chinese Art from China and the US." Our discussion turned to the artists in the show and we soon discovered that there was no lack of paralleling or interconnected concepts and strategies between Chinese and American contemporary art. We then came up with the idea to organize an international traveling exhibition to develop communications and exchange among artists from both countries. Originally we called the show "Obsolete Knowledge, False Systems, and Misleading Trails."

"Misleading Trails" is a result of our interaction and collaboration with a number of artists for a year and a half. Ai Weiwei, Hai Bo, and Hong Hao live in Beijing; Xiaoze Xie is from China but lives and works in the States now; Enrique Chagoya, Dan Mills, and Vernon Fisher are American artists. The artists have been actively involved in the curatorial process of "Misleading Trails." which can be regarded as an "organically produced" show. Even though there is not a single theme or artistic medium linking all the works in the exhibition, there are diverse and complex correlations in between the featured works. The natural merging of conceptual and visual elements, the layering and complexity of meanings, the questioning and challenging of cultural and political significance and established value systems, deconstruction or synthesizing of art forms, the ambiguity of artistic styles, all of these are the traits that this group of extremely individualized artworks share.

Ai Weiwei takes a keen interest in altering and subverting the original function and significance of representative and symbolic elements in Chinese culture. His reconstructed Ming and Qing Dynasty furniture has no more practical function but still maintains its succinct and elegant proportions. His Han Dynasty urns covered in white industrial lacquer or painted with Coca-Cola logo probably can't be valued as antique any more but they clearly demonstrate the fundamental nature of daily utilities. Lining up of feet and hands of Buddhist sculptures in a grid showcases the variety of postures and styles and lends these fragments another form of unity. His body of work is diverse and versatile, all containing contradictions, absurdity and substantial discrepancy in time and space. His application of "readymade" is a tribute to Duchamp but the value and significance of his chosen medium (antique) lends his subversive gesture exceptional weight. Is he an antique connoisseur, a minimalist architect, a conceptualist or a post-modernist artist? Accidentally or not, in Nangao where Ai Weiwei resides in Beijing, Guang Han Tang - a thriving antique furniture business, and China Art Archives and Warehouse - a space for avant-garde art, are just a few steps apart from each other.

In the recent decade, **Xiaoze Xie** has immersed himself in painting books and newspapers stacked on the shelves in libraries. Occasionally he has been accused of being "too nostalgic" for digging into "stacks of old papers." However, the newspapers featured in his recent paintings are freshly off the newspaper stands.

Fragmented news photographs and bits of texts often disclose stories of violence and wars, juxtaposed with events of daily life. "Chinese Library Series" (1995-present) depicting worm-eaten, thread-bound books have an air of decay and seem to suggest oblivion and obliteration. As art critic Robin Updike writes, "At first glance, Xie seems to be venerating books and all they stand for—knowledge, history, the life of the mind, freedom of the intellect. But there is also something foreboding about these images. Like the endless books in Jorge Luis Borges' hellishly labyrinthine library, perhaps these books are only a confusing trail to nowhere. Open their pages and be trapped by their seductions into an eternity of unreality." "Chinese Library Series" and Ai Weiwei's works are different interpretations of the "misleading trails" from a cultural perspective.

Hong Hao's silkscreen series "Selected Scriptures" (1989-2000) are a direct rip-off of old Chinese tomes opened at two random pages. The maps in his "book" no longer provide accurate information of geographical or administrative regions. Instead their symbols, texts and graphics become real "misleading clues," giving a more realistic picture of contemporary life: multinational companies seizing territories; missiles and submarines spreading all over the place; rampant murders and tortures, as well as omnipresent brand name products and commodified sexuality. As Enrique Chagoya observes, "The world is endlessly re-mapped and re-named, with new rules and rulers in recurrent holocausts." Hong Hao's latest creation, "My Things" (2001-04) is a series of scanned photographs of arranged ordinary objects, which are trails of the artist's personal life. "My Things No. 7" (2004) features all of his books, from revolutionary comics from his childhood to famous Chinese literature classics, to publications on Western contemporary art, to all kinds of art catalogues from his recent exhibitions. It reveals how the whole cultural, social and political climate can influence and restrain an individual's development.

Along the same lines, **Vernon Fisher** has stressed "the conditionality of art." That is to say that the "creation" of artwork is always restricted by art history and the bigger cultural background and social environment; the meaning of art is to a large extent determined by such specific contexts. Fisher gained much recognition with his practice of "Narrative Art" in the 1970s and has been regarded as an important postmodern artist. He is a self-possessed nihilist who never limits himself to a theme, style or medium. On the contrary, he constantly mixes text, drawing, realistic painting, abstract painting, pop art, found objects and other elements. By means of juxtaposition and superimposition, he allows all these modes of representation to supplement, contradict and negate each other in his work. The dance of consciousness, the track of thinking, the confusion of reference systems, the loss of interpretation, and a range of philosophical "misleading trails" are often captured in Fisher's work. Part of his work also deals with society and politics. His work "Man Cutting Globe" (1995) was inspired by the American custom of hollowing pumpkins to make scary face lanterns at Halloween. He used the style of popular illustration to pose a critical question: are we involved in, or just "innocently" witnessing the dividing up and destruction of the world?

The works of **Enrique Chagoya** and Dan Mills offer more direct commentary of history and politics. Both artists respond explicitly to the latest conflicts and wars. Chagoya notes, "The 20th century has been perhaps the most violent in the world's history. Human kind is in constant war with itself, perfectly capable of total destruction. This is the raw material for my art." The Mexican born Chagoya merges the styles of Mexican folk art and icons of Catholicism with elements from American popular culture as well as European art history to forge a unique style of his own that is both naïve and sophisticated, humorous yet serious. "Cultural Imperialism," which Chagoya refers to as "Cultural Cannibalism," has been an important motif in his work. Chagoya's new work incorporates symbolic signs such as the map of America, Jesus Christ, tanks, and battleships to reveal the delicate connection between religion, ideology and politics and to satirize the fact that this sole superpower positions itself as the Savior of the world.

Dan Mills' work is often noted for its wit and biting humor. His earlier works can be regarded as "the archeology of knowledge," often exposing the self-important racist prejudice and the colonialist inclination found in early geography and history textbooks taught in European and American schools. "Beacon" (1998) was painted on a found wall map used in a classroom, it revealed the world as a chessboard overshadowed by religious, imperial and military powers. In the "US Future States" (2003-present) series, Dan Mills embraces the current leaders' imperialist leanings and takes them further by supporting a grand empire-building scheme, using the American "CIA World Factbook" website as a primary source for all sorts of information on politics, military armament, and energy in countries targeted as future states. The peculiarly shaped and colorful maps of "Future States" illustrate political "misleading trails." The past and the present actions taken by America including its colonialist history, recent invasion of Iraq, and open threats to other countries are the realities addressed by the works of both Dan Mills and Enrique Chagoya.

Hai Bo's photography addresses personal experience placed in the bigger picture of reality. His earlier works were juxtapositions of old and new photographs that encapsulated the changes in people and society and the passage of time. Hai Bo lives in Tongxian on the outskirts of Beijing. His latest photographs capture the surroundings and people on the margin between the urban and rural areas. At first glance, they appear to be snapshots but their extremely simple composition with geometric elements betrays a sense of aloofness. They portray real and common situations that simultaneously have a sense of theatrical alienation. The gray sky and pale sun in some of his photographs lend the images a surrealist air of dreams and fantasies. His work is characterized by the helplessness felt by individuals placed in an alien environment and the existential absurdity of living without purpose or significance. Hai Bo's work adds a new perspective and a different medium to the exhibition. Unlike the styles of the other artists in the show, Hai Bo opens up stylistic "misleading trails" with work that is deceptively simple, yet ambiguous and open-ended.

In the burning heat and humidity of July in Guangdong I was sending e-mails to Beijing and the States in the "New Global Village Internet Bar," making the last

preparations for the exhibition to open in August. Pop-up ads constantly crowded the screen; English, Mandarin and the surrounding Chaozhou dialect were mixed up in my mind, confusing the meaning of words; the buzz of electric fans and the noise of computer games eventually drowned out my thoughts. At this moment, all I could feel was the changing of life. This is the rich soil in which contemporary art grows.

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Spiritual Orientation and Possibility of Survival

Ai Weiwei

If an artist must offer an explanation about his existence, his physical and psychological state, this explanation is inevitably linked to the times he lives in, the politics and ideology of his times. This explanation naturally reflects the artist's perspective of the world, which is represented by the artist's unique linguistic style. As an absolute fact existing in the world, this style of the artist has the same explicit characteristic and unequivocal nature as every other what we call "fact."

However, being explicit in art can be "layered" and "ambiguous." Different interpretations and implications often produce solid spiritual orientations. It's more like a finger that sticks out and points to a space that is impossible to make out or register, and a future where nothing happens but everything can also happen.

Who can clearly describe the emptiness behind those firm and persistent looks or on the contrary, the unfathomable deception behind those casual expressions?

Today, if we can still consider the spectrum of our activities as a complete world, we can then say that our current psychological trait is a split personality. Multiple linguistic systems, multiple values, and multiple standards have shaken the traditional aesthetics of human beings the most. Today's spiritual world calls for new aesthetic evaluation and brand new values since the old system is so artificial and ineffective, so impossible. But possibility itself distinguishes the state of our existence. Having gone through a thousand years of suffering and glory, rationality and material civilization, human beings have overcome one obstruction after another and arrived at a formless state and at a total loss. We only exist in possibility now.

Every possibility has come from inside of us. Every order and reason is like wishful thinking. The multiple disorders of reality, incurable madness, and ambiguous conclusions render our world more complicated and confusing.

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