

FICTIONAL RECOVERIES

Li Ming (Hangzhou), Ng Joon Kiat (Singapore), Shang Yixin (Hangzhou), Wang Zhibo (Hangzhou), Morgan Wong (Hong Kong)

“Entropy is evolution in reverse.” Robert Smithson

Given that the current production and circulation of contemporary art are dictated by the market and its monetary power, how artists reconcile themselves with the new “art” economy through their practice and social engagement seems to be increasingly irrelevant. After much discussion on the promises of economic globalisation, we are now reaching an impasse. On the one hand, the interest in contemporary art from new peripheries continues to capture our infatuation with the new “others”, yet how prepared are we to really understand the cultural nuances from the margin? What are our expectations from the voices of the subaltern?

Fictional Recoveries explores our expectations of young artists. In light of the failed avant-garde movement, we still desire to use art as a catalyst for social change and young artists are very much at the forefront of achieving this noble mission. *Fictional Recoveries* investigates the artists' genuine intention of propagating their ideals to a broader public and their survival strategies of recuperating themselves from constant rejection by society as a subject matter for their inquiry.

This sense of loss and ambivalence has to do with our assumption that the role of the artist is to make intellectual progress for the future. But how about considering the contrary instead? Drawn from the 2nd law of thermodynamics, the late American earthwork artist Robert Smithson incorporates the concept of entropy to explain a phenomenon of energy drained rather than obtained. To look at the future as a logical continuation of the present is common, but can we study the regression from the future from the vantage point of the obsolete? Instead of looking at artists as content providers, we should free them from the burden of forwarding the established art canon. Our consideration of what they have lost during their interaction with the public may offer a clearer reflection of our current society. What artists do have no practical use, for it is the futility of art itself that provokes a fertile ground for new forms of imagination and experimentation to arise. Smithson's remark on the position of artists from the 1960's is still pertinent today: the transformation from one creative state to another, so central in contemporary art, may be reductive in nature. Smithson writes:

But for many of today's artists this “desert” is a “City of the Future” made of null structures and surfaces. This “City” performs no natural function; it simply exists between mind and matter, detached from both, representing neither. It is, in fact, devoid of all classical ideals of space and process. It is brought into focus by a strict condition of perception, rather than by any expressive or emotive means. Perception as a deprivation of action and reaction brings to mind the desolate, but exquisite, surface-structures of the empty “box” or “lattice”. As action decreases, the clarity of such surface-structures increases. This is evident in art when all representations of action pass into oblivion. At this stage, lethargy is elevated to the most glorious magnitude.¹

¹ Robert Smithson, *Entropy And The New Monuments*, 1966, <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm>.

The artists in *Fictional Recoveries* share a few common traits. Their sense of desolation and independence from the art system elicits a keen spirit among these individuals. By recovering what is initially dysfunctional in different forms—to conduct a performance on the street, to retrieve something personal and intimate in a metropolis, to play with light and objects, to question the representation of territory and dystopia—*Fictional Recoveries* is metaphorical of an impasse or “actions (that) pass into oblivion”. For the void from their collective voices is not meant to convey a pessimism or passivity; rather, it exposes a common predicament facing many emerging artists of the current generation.

Li Ming’s casual yet tour-de-force style is outside of cinematic conventions. His video made in documentary format is not only intended to record the artist’s performances in different public spaces; rather, Li connects his actions with the natural elements in the depicted scenes to create imaginary scenarios in order to subvert social control and power struggle. In *Nature*, the artist uses a working fan to comb bushes and the water pool. In another episode, Li attempts to spray paint on a moving electric fan. *Swordsman – Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha* makes fun of Big Brother, in the Orwellian sense, and comments on China’s incessant urban development. *Song of Artists* is a critique of the herding of ducks with their heads chained together; their immobility is representative of the art community’s failed struggle with collectivity. Li will create two installations, In the *Shadow of Reality I* and *Nothing Happened Today*. Utilising a large photograph of fictional hardwood floor patterns and a large number of painted manicured fingers, this installation addresses our infatuation with artificial surfaces in our living environment and on our body. Using a large number of toy soldiers to form individual characters to write out the phrase Nothing Happened Today, this installation expresses a nihilistic attitude towards the exhibition as a credible space for exchanging knowledge and experience.

Morgan Wong stages a strong contrast of physicality versus dematerialisation in the gallery space. For *Untitled – Agnosia Series I*, located at the back corridor of the gallery, Wong’s minimalist interpretation of IFC, one of the tallest buildings in Hong Kong, is impersonal and strictly formal. In addition, the artist uses a video camera to zoom into selected windows of the skyscraper to capture the anonymous movement of office workers. The pixilated colour fields are intended to recuperate something private in a highly generic and uniform environment. Located on the opposite end of the same corridor is a brick sculpture together with a video titled *Demolishing Rumor*. In response to the rumour that all the buildings in the Cao Changdi art district in Beijing would be demolished in 2010, Wong turns this rumour into a reality by building a 1:12 brick model of one of the galleries in the district; he then demolishes the brick model inside a building at 798 and also at another location in Cao Changdi respectively. For *Journey*, Wong presents us a photograph in relation to a series of videos that record the artist’s hourly journey (within 24 hours) on a touristic street in Hong Kong. The individual lines on the photograph are digitally derived from the audiences’ interactions with the individual video in order to compose a two-dimensional mediascape that suggests the collapse of distance and the potential for broader social interactions.

Shang Yixin investigates the many subtle qualities of light and time, and how they alter our association with an object. For *Clue*, drawing on the actual film on multiple transparency projectors, Shang places a tree trunk at the centre of a space and works with the shadows from the actual tree and its fictitious branches to create a visual lattice in the space. Like drawing in an actual space, Shang literally extends the line projected from the trunk outward and upward. The intention is to reconnect what was initially severed in a given space and in turn question the identity of the original object. In the neighboring space next to *Clue* are paintings of various dimensions. Shang uses a spray brush to create a set of highly decorative colour patterns in the manner of a net. To undermine the painting’s own physical presence, Shang considers the painted surface as a threshold for mediating order and movement.

Ng Joon Kiat's paintings from the *Green Series: Nature and Borders* remind one of a map. A map is a false representation of a physical place with an innate discrepancy between the map (as something ideal) and the actual territory (as something real). Ng states: "These paintings engage thinking and questioning about the sense of demarcating a territory, land identity and the impossibility of doing so." For an artist coming from Singapore, Ng is critiquing a city-state's strategic location of materials and its colonisation of other territories by means of economic and human resources. *Light Miles* is an installation that utilises a programmable stage light to illuminate a painting. In close resemblance to a landscape painting, the varying light condition transforms a static canvas into a moving image, and the painting takes on a self-cancelling quality. The timeless quality of a painting has been duly transformed into something as ephemeral and temporary as a filmstrip. The viewers are transposed into a contradictory state of not being able to differentiate the static from the temporal, the still from the moving.

Wang Zhibo's landscape paintings convey a dystopian vision of an artificial environment, cold and inhuman. Depicting generic public squares or parks that lack any humanistic dimension, the supposed picturesque quality, embedded with visual fragments of obtrusive urban infrastructure and displaced classical ornaments taken from the Internet, speaks of the infringement on nature so commonly seen in many Chinese cities. The surrealistic sentiment reminds us of the paintings by De Chirico with distorted classical order; the landscape becomes contained and displaced for we are not sure whether the artist is depicting reality or an artificial mental landscape.

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