

Shiyu Gao**ARTIST**

I would consider myself as one of those artists who would not be recognized as artists in any period of art history but now because I know nothing about the traditional skills about art like drawings or paintings. All that I know is just clicking buttons. So, I think I am more a digital artist.

Basically, I do video installations and sometimes mixed media installations, sometimes sculpture. I work most of the time with images

I am very much influenced by the subculture of Japan called Otaku who are the people who stay at home almost all of the time and they have this great passion towards certain things like the animations or the comic books in Japan. And then they would have their own set of languages and it is mostly involved ... related to these digital media. So, they have editing skills and then they will try to photoshop some images into things they would like to see and then they have this small craft made by themselves with small toys and stuff. These are all the tools they have as big fan of the animation and then they will try to somehow fulfill their desire by working individually at their home because the original meaning of "Otaku" refers to someone who stays at home all the time. So, because I also work individually and then I would very much take this set of language to reflect on my images that I have seen.

Of course, I consider myself as one of this Otaku culture.

ARTWORK

One of my recent works in the show is called "The Swiss Roll" and this artwork consists of two projections that are superimposed on each other.

One of the projections is a live stream of a rolling toy called "Swiss Roll" which is a dessert and is very popular in Hong Kong. I have this live projection of this toy which is rolling all the time and then it's beamed onto another projection which is more close-up shots of the protesters in the Hong Kong pro-test. And then they are superimposed on each other which results in a new video installation.

The idea is that ... Because this so-called "Swiss Roll" is a dessert, it's called "Swiss Roll" but it's actually not originated from Switzerland, it's originated somewhere in Central Europe but not in Switzerland. So, I consider it has some kind of identity crisis – so as the protesters in the Hong Kong Yellow Umbrella Movement who is also very struggled by their identity problem as a Chinese or as a mainlander or Hong Konger. I think there is a parallel here, so I superimposed two images together.

In another work I have done – also in this exhibition, it is called "City Revolutioner" – in which I use this idea of a city flaneur who takes a random walk in the city and then I will try to work also with my friend in Hong Kong and we will use this GPS navigator and then we try to walk in the city and then we will have the record of the routes that we walked. And then I will walk with this Chinese character of the revolution and my friend would walk in the English word "Revolution" in Hong Kong. I did this in Zurich so that we would both be a city revolutioner by doing this, but then again, we are not doing anything because this doesn't fit into the content at all.

PRODUCTION

For example this work, called the "Ribbon Pet-Raising Game" that I have produced, I started with this ... I read through several news reports and other information that I read online about the protest, when they had yellow ribbons as the icon for the protest. So, the supporters of the protest would always wear a yellow ribbon and then suddenly during the process of the protest a group of people who called them-selves "The Blue Ribbons" said they are against the yellow ribbon group and then there is a third group of people who call themselves "The Green Ribbon" or "The Purple Ribbon". So, they have different political positions. So, I think, "ok, there is a similarity in this, between the games

that I myself am very much interested in as a genre called the pet-raising game which is very popular in Asia. You have maybe a cat or a dog and then you raise it. It will grow or develop depending on what kind of things you are feeding it. So, I think it is more or less similar as the ribbon-raising stuff. So, I created an interface in which you can feed this originally transparent ribbon with different kinds of political opinion, education or maybe money or violence and then it will change colour.

I think somehow this is a very interesting representation of the situation right now in Hong Kong. I tried to use a very light-hearted attitude with this very serious thing of the protest and I think somehow it would reveal my attitude towards the whole thing.

Very often I would have doubts whether an artwork is successful or if it's failed. So, mostly – because I am personally too involved in my work – I would always depend on other people's opinion, especially the audience's.

Usually, I would talk to my friends about the artworks, in the way that a joke would be told. And then you know when the joke has ended because you know it always ends with a very sudden sentence and then the people will get the meaning by themselves, so I will test it somehow on my friends to see if they would get the humour inside.

Just like a stand-up comedian: He would come up with so many jokes but he always has to try them on the audience because he himself is too much involved with the jokes himself, so, he wouldn't know if this really works. He always has to have this audience to give him response.

MATERIAL

I work with a lot of ready-made objects. I always say I buy most of my works. I buy them in online shopping stores which I think is more or less a representation of the characteristics of the contemporary life because we buy things online. As you know, China is a very big manufacturing country and so many things are produced in China and people wouldn't know what these are for because there are so many kinds of different materials that you can buy online. For example this big horn called "vuvuzela" which has been used for the World Cup in South Africa and all of them are produced in one small town in China. And people who are living in that town, they are producing these horns without knowing what it is for. They just do it because it sustains their life. So, I think this is very typically or uniquely Chinese.

I myself prefer to use this kind of materials as they already have a kind of value or function or practical value of themselves and then I can alter it or somehow deconstruct the meaning of the materials.

MEDIUM

I work with my computer which I feel most comfortable with and also so I could do a bit of editing. I do editing photos with Photoshop and then editing videos.

I am very much influenced by the Marxist theories of the ideological critique. That is the big context that I am working with. Because of my undergraduate training in cultural theory and these Marxist theories which would allow me to see things in a more critical way and I will always try to reveal somehow in my works these contradictions and also all these ideologies which are hidden behind the things that we see in daily life. And I think this is more or less a very global thing because of the Internet and the information that is distributed online. People are more or less in the same context which is the capitalist and neoliberalist contemporary world.

PROCESS

Usually, I would start my work with a joke or some kind of funny idea. So, this time, it's like ... when I talk to my friends in Hong Kong, my class mates, they would always ask me – because I am from mainland China –, they would always ask me as a mainlander how is my point of view of this

movement and then they would explain their point of view. So, I think, "ok, there is a very strange position here because we are all from China but somehow we have different identities. So, I think I would start from this and I will try to find some ready-made objects. For example, in this work, it's a media representation of the Hong Kong protest.

And then there is the strangely made toy which is for a commercial use originally because it is intended to be put in window shops for people to see what are the products of some kind of dessert shop.

So, I think this ready-made object which already has a meaning can be altered here because of this parallel of an identity crisis and then I would just superimpose them on each other because I think it will be visually very interesting to see.

I would take the "Ribbon-raising game" as an example again. I started this idea with a funny thought of this changing colour of the ribbon which represents different political opinions and then try to make it into a very colourful game form so that people who have actually seen the work would somehow detect this kind of ridiculousness inside and then I think the work doesn't end with this, with only the exhibition. I think the documentation of the exhibition is also very important. When I document carefully about this work and also about my thoughts of the work. Usually I would produce them into some kind of physical form like a booklet or brochure. After the exhibition I would try to show other people this work and ask what they think about the work. Because I think somehow this idea of a very light-hearted attitude towards this very serious movement, I think this is my intention of the exhibition and I would like it to be circulating or to be discussed by more people or ... So people would say, "ok, this is also a way to look at the movement or to look at art". So, my documentation is also one of the most important processes of my artwork.

PRESENTATION

In most of the cases my works are presented in an exhibition form – in a space where all the works are presented physically. And then I would try to re-present all the works as documentation, as a booklet or a brochure so that people can have it as a reading material.

And then I have also presented my work in other contexts like in a music festival where my works are more or less considered as entertainment or as a decorative part of the whole festival. So, I think ... usually, I modify my works a little bit. It depends on different kinds of contexts. And also, in the end, I will also publish it online because I think it's a very convenient tool for my works to be circulated but I am also bumping into some problems because my website is kind of banned in mainland China because my domain is registered outside of China.

I think my audience are the people who are very much open to ideas and respect the pluralism of the modern times but who are also always ready to fight for their opinion. So, basically, I think those people who are somehow very interested in life of the contemporary world and would like to reflect on it, not only with their own point of view but who are always open to other people's opinions. Those are the people that I consider as my audience.

INTENTION

I do art because that's the most enjoyable thing that I have ever done in my life. I think I have a lot of intentions in my artworks, I have so many things that I would like to say about my artworks and to the audiences but I would somehow restrict my desire to tell them what I think and also what is my message behind it because I think this would somehow make my work more or less propaganda. And I think that is the worst role of art because I think an artwork should be perceived naturally by the audience themselves and without the intention being forced on them. Although I started with a very concrete idea or a lot of things that I would like to say. But in the end, when it is presented, I would like it to be as simple as it can and not so strongly intended in communicating messages as I would like it to.

If they would like to know more about what's my thinking behind this work they would probably read it from my writings or the booklets or other information of the exhibition. But if they think, "ok, that is interesting", and that's all, they could very much leave at that point.

I think it would be called a success if the people said, "it's interesting, ok, it's funny".

But I would consider it a complete failure if the people said, "oh, I don't understand anything," because I think most of the people who are not so educated in art or contemporary art would always say, "ok, contemporary art is something that I don't understand". So, I don't want to go into that category of very complicated artwork that rejects the audience once and for all. I think it would be nice if it's visually very appealing, very interesting, and then the people would get to know, they would like to know more about the artwork and somehow they would get something from it.

METHOD

As for myself, my strategy always starts with some joke or a funny idea and then I will go very much into research or theoretical base.

And then I will think about the presentation of the work in its simplest forms. So, that it's not so complicated. Then the audience would understand the work as soon as they see them. So, I think this is the point when I consider my work as finished. But if I would develop it into a more complicated or ideas or things that I would rather explain it in words, so I think that's not an artwork anymore because if you can explain something in words, why would you bother to do an artwork? So, I think that's basically the difference between artwork and then a thesis or not an artwork.

I focused mainly on psychoanalysis as my theoretical base and I am very much influenced by Slavoj Žižek, the philosopher, and also I would keep myself updated by the most recent – how to say – "heat topics" over the internet because I think people are interested in all certain kinds of things for a reason. So, I would dig into this topic which is so heated in the present time and see what is the thing behind it, what's the so-called lack and desire that they have, that they represent in this kind of passion for a certain thing and then I will try to analyze it with the skills I have theoretically and then try do some more research. After that I would turn to these ready-made objects and see if I could make something new out of it.

ART

Art is apparently not a basic need for survival for people but it's a very strong passion inherited from the people in the history. And I think that this means that art does have some function in the society. I would consider a good artwork of the contemporary world as something which is first and foremost aesthetically very appealing – not beautiful, but I think it should be interesting. And the second thing which is it represents the life of the contemporary world. I think that is very important for an artwork. It shouldn't be a century years old.

If you are a contemporary artist, it should be very involved with the life now.

So, the present time is very important in what I consider as contemporary artworks. And also I think it should be interesting or appealing aesthetically, visually. Not only with a good idea or a good concept but it should consist of a very interesting physical form for the people to understand.

I find it very strange and I think it's even a little bit ridiculous to tell people to read a whole page of theories or things that I would like to say with my artwork. I think art is a very tangible thing. So, if you have the physical form, people really see the thing and they will get it immediately without too much explaining which way it works. So, I think this is somehow a very intuitive thing rather than a rational thing. This is why I insisted on this physical form of an artwork. Maybe not physical as digital can also be one of the forms that I mentioned. But I think it's more or less very intuitive, very spiritual, rather than this rational thinking or a debate or a whole big theory behind it. I think that is more important for me.

BIO

* 1988, lives and works in Hong Kong and Shanghai, China. She studied Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, at the University of Leeds, UK, and Humanities at the Hong Kong Baptist University of Hong Kong. Shiyu Gao is an artist engaged with media such as photography and video installation.

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Credits

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