

模仿与还原

文：苏伟

乡村啊,是的。乡村。
这里没有真正的敌人,
而走在小路上与之伴随的是红的像火的牡丹,
和那盛开的菊花朵朵。
好吧,让我们就走在乡村的小路上吧。

这段精彩的独白出现在艺术家李然(1986年生于湖北)新近创作的录像作品《从卡车司机到骑兵政委》(2012年)的结尾处。走在乡村小路上,两旁的花朵按其本来的面貌开放,没有对象的指称,没有意义的追寻,行走、相遇,就完成了全部含义。在这里,语言和时间既安守在各自的地域,又相互象征和牵引着。这段诗意十足的文字折射出艺术家创作中所关心的时间性、及其连接的现代性问题。在这部取材于前苏联的电影《一个人的遭遇》的作品中,李然扮演了一位前苏联的士兵形象,惟妙惟肖地模仿了共产主义意识形态下矫情做作的演员表演方式,诉说了一位前苏士兵缅怀过去、憧憬未来的故事。录像中的地点明显带有当代的痕迹,他用随拍和跟拍的DV镜头演绎,模仿大众文化的表现方式,戏谑了士兵(其实是当下的我们)对过去的迷恋和乡愁的情绪。艺术家试图打开现代性时间的一角,分解它控制我们的身体和经验的权力,进而质疑时间的诠释性力量。这件作品凸显出李然实践中极为重要的现代性讨论,这一讨论,不仅连接着我们当下经验、判断和认识的悖论而具有理论和社会意义,也同样连接着当代艺术工作本身的问题。

从《圣维克多尔山》起,李然近两年的创作完成了一系列重大的突破,他的实践开始逐步走向当代艺术最核心的区域,面向并体会着各种关系和边界的变化,并不断地向我们提供有关艺术本身的解答。

李然的实践向批评工作提出了挑战。他用模仿、复制和戏谑的手法塑造了强烈的表达方式和风格,这通常会诱使当代艺术批评的思维惯性走入文化和社会批判的窠臼而对他实践的真正指向视而不见。另一方面,在他实践转变的伊始,讨论“主体性”成为了他作品中最为锐化和充满触角的维度;而随着他工作的不断深入和精确,“主体性”问题似乎消散在了作品所讨论的、所指向的以及试图重新观看和挖掘的东西中,我们的观看似乎走到了隧道的尽头,失去了赖以支撑我们思考其创作的精神指引。表面看来,这一点为批评工作设置了极大的难度,打断了有效性的铺陈和阐释;但也恰恰是这一点,为艺术批评提供了最为有益的参照:还原艺术家工作的语境,始终是我们秉持距离感之前最需面对的基本工作,而这种还原,在更本质的意义上,也是对艺术本身的还原。

因此,李然的实践和艺术批评之间具备这样一种非依附性的、互为推动的关系,它们面前的地平线在很多方面是平行和互为补充的。相比于对于艺术本身的浪漫想象(这一问题在诸如当代绘画实践等领域中不断显现),李然的工作在另一个更具内省性的地域进行。

行为作品《圣维克多尔山》(2012年)作为李然第一次以“模仿”为手段的尝试,是在夹杂了对于艺术史传统、艺术系统和文化语境的反思中,暗暗用只言片语的修辞描述“相处”、“遭遇”等等与



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当代艺术实践息息相关的基本问题。而录像作品《地理之外》则用更为平易和戏剧化的方式,塑造了歧义的“遭遇”语境,作品指向的某种程度上已经跨越了相对抽象的“遭遇”问题。他在作品中模仿了著名地理探险节目《Discovery》的拍摄,扮演一位节目主持人,在刻意造假的影棚内“记录”一次煞有介事的探险。我们很熟悉《Discovery》这类节目控制观众情绪和思维的手段,刻意的现场感、制造疑惑、解密的过程、语气造作的配音——这些都被李然挪用进由他自己配音的表演中,还不时地穿插两句与艺术有关的谈论。在这个虚假的“遭遇”中,当我们在他所模仿的和被模仿的角色和事件之间寻找着艺术家的身影时,却常常固执于自身的经验系统,走进作品的内容迷宫。伪装在模仿外表下的艺术家不断重复他者的意见和意愿,这些重复之间常常是模糊甚至自相矛盾的:在重复的刹那,那些历史叙事忽然出现了断层,重复自身被消解,一切被重复的叙述都有可能李然虚拟的似真似假的语境中,以全新的、激进的、非派生性的面貌重新出现。也正是因为重复,艺术才超越了(不可重复的)事件的意义,超越出机制和系统的垄断,而折回到艺术自身的自我关照之中。

模仿,以及模仿“模仿”,是李然近期实践的主要手段,但不可忽视的是,李然拒绝用模仿塑造一种可标识的美学风格,而是通过模仿的动作让个体性渗入到创作本身的最深处,从而考察叙事与真实、语言与时间、经验与想象之间的地域。比如作品《威廉·贺加斯之前与之后》,在这组绘画中,李然在画布上似是而非地模仿了贺加斯这两幅讽刺宫廷生活的名作局部,这种方式继承了《圣维克多尔山》中放映截取艺术史上的绘画作品局部的幻灯片的做法。威廉·贺加斯擅长制造和模仿宫廷轶事,创造出独具一格的讽刺画风格。李然挪用并且模仿了贺加斯的模仿,试图抛弃叙事,用刻画画作局部的方法而接近事件的现实。同时,模仿的动作剥离这个本就虚构的现实的完整性和美感,艺术自身凸显了出来。

新近创作的《漂亮的知识》(2012年)是一件双屏录像作品,取材于互联网上流行的一段某法国“通灵师”自述预测未来的视频。两部分中,一个直接采用了这段记录这位“通灵师”1980年预测若干年后全球重大事件的视频;另一个部分,李然自己扮演成这位预言家的形象,模仿他的法语语调和身体语言,用假的法语重新再现了他的预言过程。在当下模仿和重复历史中某个预测未来的行为,这为作品搭架出一个没有方向感的,过去、当下与未来交织在一起的时间图谱。原始视频的真实性本身就值得怀疑,很可能用伪造时间的方式进行了一次知识伪造。而这一知识,经由媒介、身份和政治话语的过滤,变得神圣、正确并且安抚了我们对世界无穷性的现代恐惧。李然用模仿的方式放大了这种现代性的“漂亮”知识的世俗意义、欺骗性和政治图谋。更重要的是,具体到我们的艺术行业和语境中,这种知识经验的形成方式仍然大量存在着,并且在不同的实践领域扮演着各自的角色。《漂亮的知识》向艺术语境那些缺乏内在性和参照性、并因此自我复制为趣味和商业载体的讨论进行了揶揄,这件作品以非常明确的方式反向透露出李然实践的维度和工作领域,在他的此次上海艾可画廊个展中尤为具有特殊含义。

“艺术是一种偶遇,”李然常常这样描述自己的工作。偶遇代表着工作的弹性和有机性,以及对规则与秩序之外他者的向慕。我们可以把它理解为一种还原,还原到系统之外艺术本身之上,而不拘于美学的绝对性;还原到对行业语境中的感知中,而保持足够的自省和反思;还原到一种当代意义上的创作,在接近任何价值的时候,明确创作的立场。



Mimicry and Return

By Su Wei

*Ah, the village, yes, the village.
There are no real enemies here,
And all along the little road are peonies, flaming red,
And chrysanthemums in full bloom.
Well then, let us walk on the village road.*

This brilliant piece of monologue appears at the end of the video piece, "From Truck Driver to the Political Commissar of the Mounted Troops" (2012), by the artist Li Ran (born 1986 in Hubei province). Along both stretches of the village road, one sees flowers blooming naturally, without an object of reference or the pursuit of meaning. Simply walking and encountering completed the entire meaning. Here, language and time are safe in their own domains, and yet they represent and intermesh with one another.

Li Ran's poetic lines refract the temporality which was of concern to the artist at the time of creation, along with the related question of modernity. In this work, a mimicry of a Soviet film, "The Fate of a Man," Li Ran plays the role of a Soviet soldier: he imitates to a tee the affected and artificial style of acting under Communist ideology, and enacts the story of a Soviet soldier reminiscing on the past and yearning for the future. The video clearly betrays traces of the present at certain points — with digital-video-style angles like casual shots and follow shots, he mimics the modes of expression in mass culture and satirizes the soldier's obsession with the past as well as his nostalgic mood (which in fact are ours).

The artist attempts to open up the temporality of modernity, break down its power of control over our bodies and experience, and thereby call into question the interpretive power of time. This work highlights the discussion of modernity which is extremely important in Li Ran's artistic practice. This not only links up the paradox of our experience, judgement, and knowledge of the present with rational ideas and social significance but is also connected with the question of working in contemporary art today.

From "Mont-Sainte-Victoire" onwards, Li Ran has undergone a series of breakthroughs in the past two years. His practice has gradually moved towards the core issues of contemporary art — facing all manners of transformations in relationships and borders, and continually proposing solutions and interpretations of art itself.

Li Ran's practice offers challenges to the work of criticism. He uses mimicry, reproduction, and satire to mold a strong expressive mode and style. This often means that the normal train of thought in contemporary art criticism towards the conventions of cultural and social criticism is unable to truly see his practice for what it is. On the other hand, since changes began in his practice, the discussion of "subjectivity" has become the sharpest and prickliest dimension in his works. With the increasing depth and precision of his work, the issue of "subjectivity" seems to dissolve within what the works discuss, broach, and attempt to observe and excavate anew, so that our observations appear to have reached the end of the metaphoric tunnel and have lost the spiritual guidance that used to support reflections on his creation. On the surface level, this presents an immense difficulty for criticism by cutting off effective elaboration and explication, yet it is precisely this point that offers a useful point



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of reference for art criticism: the return to the context of the work of the artist is, in the end, the most basic task being faced prior to upholding a sense of distance, and this return, on an essential level, is a return to art itself.

Therefore, between Li Ran's practice and art criticism exists this particular type of non-dependent and mutually propelling relationship. The horizon before them is in many respects parallel and mutually reinforcing. Compared to the romantic imagination of art itself (which keeps appearing in various fields such as contemporary painting), Li Ran's work takes place on an even more introspective level.

The performance piece, "Mont-Sainte-Victoire" (2012), is Li Ran's first attempt at using "mimicry" as a technique. In mixing reflections on art historical tradition, the art system as well as the cultural context, the work subtly uses a few strokes of rhetoric to portray basic issues like "coexistence," "fate," and so forth, all of which are intimately related to contemporary art practice. And in the video piece, "Beyond Geography," he even uses simple and dramatic means to fashion a contested context of "fate" while on a certain degree he already transcends the fairly abstract topic of "fate" itself. This work mimics the videography of *Discovery*, a well-known geographical adventure program; in it, Li Ran plays the role of a program host and on purpose fashions a fake "documentation" on film with a simmering adventure.

We are all familiar with the techniques such programs use to control the audience's emotions and thoughts: the meticulous creation of a sense of presence, of doubt, of the process of unveiling secrets, the mood-inducing voice-over — all of which were appropriated by Li Ran in his performance with his own voiceover, to which he occasionally adds a few lines of art-related discourse. In this fabricated "encounter," when we seek out the traces of the artist in the roles he mimics and the things mimicked, we end up stuck in our own modes of experiences and confined in the labyrinth of content. The artist, disguised under mimicry on the surface, constantly repeats the opinions and yearnings of others, and such repetitions are frequently blurry to the point of self-contradiction — in the instant of repetition, such historical narration suddenly reveals ruptures and constantly dissolves itself. All repeated narrative could emerge again under dramatically new, progressive, and non-derivative guises in Li Ran's simulated context, part-real and part-fake. And precisely because of such repetitions, art can transcend the (unrepeatable) significance of things as well as the monopoly of the structures and systems, and revert back to the care of art itself.

Mimicry, as well as the mimicry of "mimicry," is the main technique in Li Ran's recent practice. What should not be forgotten is that Li Ran refuses to fashion a recognizable aesthetic style through mimicry, but rather, the act of mimicry allows individuality to permeate into the deepest recess of creation itself, thereby examining the zone between narrative and truth, language and time, experience and imagination. In the series of paintings "William Hogarth — Before and After," Li Ran seemingly appears to mimic sections of Hogarth's satire of court life. This follows through from "Mont-Sainte-Victoire" to borrow from the magic lanterns used in paintings throughout art history. William Hogarth, adept at creating and mimicking the various anecdotes of the court, had a distinctive satiric style of painting. Attempting to forego narrative, Li Ran appropriates and mimics Hogarth's mimicry, and attempts to approach the reality of things through the portrayal of sections of the painting. At the same time, the act of mimicry strips out the completeness and sense of beauty in what is originally a fabricated reality, in order to allow art itself to stand out.

His recently created piece, "Pretty Knowledge" (2012), is a dual-channel video work which takes after a segment of a video, popular on the internet, of a certain French seer who relates his predictions for the future. In one, he directly uses the video documentation of this "seer" predicting various major



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events due to happen after 1980; in the other video, Li Ran himself plays the role of this seer and re-enacts his predictions with an imitation French, mimicking his French intonation and body language.

In this performance piece of mimicry and of the repetition of a historical prediction of the future, the artist constructs a timeline without a sense of direction, one that mixes the past, the present, and the future. The truthfulness of the original video itself comes under suspicion, and perhaps comes to fabricate knowledge through the fabrication of time. And such knowledge through the filters of the media, of identity, and of political discourse appears sacrosanct, legitimate, and comforting in terms of our modern fear in the face of infinity.

Through mimicry, Li Ran expands the vulgarity, deceit, and political conspiracies of this modern kind of “pretty” knowledge. More importantly and concretely in the art world and context, such modes of formation of knowledge and experience still exist to a large extent, and plays various roles within a diverse range of practices and domains. “Pretty Knowledge” is an act of derision towards the lack of introspection and of referentiality, and towards the interest in and commercial discussion of self-reproduction in the discourse of art. The work clearly reflects on the breadth and depth of Li Ran’s practice, contributing to the peculiar significance of his solo exhibition at Shanghai’s AIKE-Dellarco Gallery.

“Art is a kind of chance encounter,” Li Ran frequently says when describing his own work. Chance encounters represent the flexibility and tactics of work, as well as an admiration of something outside rules and order. We can understand this as a kind of return, a return to art itself which is outside the system and unconfined to aesthetic absolutes; a return to a certain introspection and reflection with regards to the perception of the context of the field; a return to creation imbued with contemporary significance, to a clear creative stance in the face of any value.

