

The Mathematic Aspect of Liao Fei's Practice

Author: Zian Chen

Taken at the most empiric level, Liao Fei has created pieces of mathematical puzzles.

Artist Liao Fei is fascinated with the formation of all kinds of systems, regulations, etc. That fascination can be found in his reading list, for example, his interest in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the history of science. In Liao Fei's recent practice his focus has been the construction of abstract closed fields - working mechanisms. In key works, the artist selects a variety of everyday materials to be arranged and displayed in an interior space. These reach a formal balance as governed by rules and as ordered as a sentence. His attraction to an almost linguistic organization of visual materials reminds us of Formalism. As seen in contemporary art, Liao's work is somehow reminiscent of the '85 New Wave movement. To look for external connections, we notice a kind of instrumentalist rationality in both Liao's and the historical '85 New Wave artists' practices. Their art creates emotional tension using logical thinking or abstract concepts. Just as with those '85 artists who attempted to escape the creative current of their time, Liao is indifferent to any relations between his work and art history.

To be more specific, Liao's indifference to art historical reference is an indifference to art as style or as text except when it comes to the problem of the truth. Liao is attracted to problems that are intrinsic to certain things yet somehow reveal by artistic form, and that is why he often uses mundane materials. In the "Movement" series, objects become performers. Liao installs a series of commonplace objects at temporary equilibrium and leaves them in an interior space until they lose their shape. The original torques is broken and the entire system collapses. The interior space becomes a closed system, where the artist establishes rules of how things come into being. He is mesmerized by the laws of nature and the mysterious causes behind those laws. According to the artist, "humans have no idea how these natural laws have come into being." In "Movement", the artist emphasizes the temporality in any closed system (and as a viewer, it's evident that their equilibrium is going to be broken sooner or later). "Signal" is based on the fundamental rules of "green light go, red light stop" and one can turn right on red light. The artist rides his

bike for one hour everyday for 30 days during which he avoids stopping while strictly following the rules. The work fully acknowledges the rules of a system in everyday life but excavates those roles to disclose the performativity of it. In "A Straight Line Extended", Liao borrows from classical mechanics and creates a combination of objects that could theoretically extend ad infinitum. He places a block of marble on one end of a straight steel plate and on the other end, another block on top of a smaller steel plate. The weight of the objects needs to be carefully calculated in order for the whole structure not to collapse. In order to use the levers most efficiently, the artist asked a friend to help with the mathematics and together they found the minimum pressure that could be taken by each lever. The amount of calculation needed is extraordinary - a full Excel page-long equation.

The thinking process of the artist resembles that of a mathematician: his practice tends to find the logic behind various events and to test and reiterate the logic. If we go through Liao's career, we will find that the most impressive part of his work is to translate the sense of balance that is always

found in mathematical equations to different visual languages. Through the minimum visual representation, we sense the kind of immediacy that only belongs to math, logics, and abstraction. What Liao really wants to remind us is that everything is more or less problematic, albeit seemingly otherwise, and he asks: how does the logic of things come to be? Just as language is unable to describe the order behind the grammar, we are unable to pin down to the logic with which chances are created and ways in which objects function. In other words, we can never manage the so-called “systems” through which we understand the world and events around us, how they take place, how they work, and how they eventually disappear.

Liao’s practice attempts to prove that these systems never last. Although everything runs in an orderly and stable way under the given system, but in a meta-perspective, what we think is true might just be specific to certain time and certain place. “This Sentence is False” is an annotation Liao added to his art practice. It shows that one attempts to use language to oppose the logic of language itself; and a component strives to find the boundary of the entire system.