

Three-Way to Eat a Fish

Article: Gu Qianfan GONGPRESS 7/28

I heard that there are three reasons to explain why Tong Yixin starts to go fishing: he doesn't have much money, so he needs to save money for his creation; he likes the dark feeling of the place name, so he lives at Gravesend cemetery, Brooklyn, where he can take 20 minutes bus to Coney Island; he does not care much about food but easily gets hungry.

It is natural to go fishing. Imagine a young artist who can explore beyond the urban area as well as eat a lot food after returning home. The dispositioned romance and affordability are both sincere. In 2017, Tong organized his 1-year fishing experience into an exhibition and displayed five videos and six multi-material art installations.

The exhibition is very standard. Video is in a square shape and the installation is also standard like a work on shelf. In artist's own words, he gives up the previous exploration on space, and tries to just "put the work there". For the audience, the 11 hanging square artworks are similar to 11 dishes, plus the amazingness of Tong going fishing and eating them afterwards. Someone told me without a second thought—the exhibition is delicious.

Not only I feel the beauty and deliciousness—some comments of artwork *Water Is in Front of the Bushes* said that the rap-alike background narration can be accurately described as "reading menu". The video was shot by the artist's portable camera. Tong runs through the bushes and comes closer to the water bank. Narration with a rhyme mutters: "Twill dogfish, black sea bass, blue gill sunfish, rainbow gourd fish....." Hundreds of fish names are mentioned, like a feast of fish is arriving around the corner.

Another video work *Camera PopperLure* is very attractive. Bright video projection occupies a whole wall by itself, and the sound echoes around the space. "PopperLure" is a transliteration of a bait fishing tool. Uses the fake bait to make a splash and vibration, attracting predator fishes. Tong's fake bait is a water-proof micro-camera, tailed to the end of fishing line and thrown into water. It captures a series of rugged photos: weeds, horizon, buildings in distance, and various watermarks.



Photo 1: Tong Yixin, *Camera PopperLure* (2017), video with sound, 5'34", screenshot of the video

These two works are like the light “fish soup”. The main ingredients are integrated into soup, so you can taste them without seeing fish meat. In fact, it is rare to find a specific and complete fish in the whole exhibition, especially in several video works. Although they are shot during the fishing, but there is no fish appeared. In *Camera PopperLure*, fake bait is not able to capture any fish in the end. Considering the misleading effect of the bait itself, the really hooked “fish” by the camera are us, who are watching this video in the exhibition hall. For sure, as the person controlling the fishing line, Tong is also hooked himself by the camera——he, wearing earphones, shows up sometimes. His lighted red palms are shaking occasionally. In the work *From American Flag to Go Fishing*, he is chatting with strangers, who are drawing along the beach. And in *Cut a Fallen Tree to Clean Out a Fishing Spot*, he is holding a feller to work. Fisherman, the same as the audience like us, is a hooked fish. I think of Barnett Newman’s metaphor that artists should become ornithologists as well as birds. Tong is following it, as a fisherman and as a fish, reflecting the paradox existed in the reality. Besides, Tong sees his art practice as “anti-productive” and spent a lot of time fishing rather than artistic creation. He is alert to the inter-exploitation prevailed between artists and material/audience/ organization, so he often chooses to use anti-productive to produce, act as a fish that captures himself ashore. He self-exploits between the roles of fisherman and fish in an effort to reduce the exploitation on each other.



Photo 2, Tong Yixin, Exhibition *NYC Fishing Trip* photos. The foreground is artwork *Fish Scale III* (2017), aluminum, paper board, yarn, screw, size flexible. Works in the background are *Fish Scale I* and video *From American Flag to Go Fishing* (2016).

The main dish of the exhibition is “fish skin”, which is thrown away in most of time: the series of *Fish Scale* has various marvelous net patterns. *Banana Trout* uses a flashing screen to reveal analogy in trout skin and spotted banana peel. In *Prattsville Swimmer*, the magazine clipping is collaged with round mouth white fish skin, and in *Wild Brown Trout Watermark Painting*, the marker’s sketching is alike diamond fish pattern.

Use *Fish Scale III* as an example (see photo 2), Tong Yixin accidentally picked up a paper board, which is as solid as a brick, when he went fishing near the beach. It is hanging from the ceiling (again, he seems to fish the audience). In the cross-section, the connection among papers is naturally formed scales pattern. Folding and bending areas look like immersed by water before. The most attractive detail is that the toothed aluminum plate and screw are inserted from the side direction—like using a harpoon to check prey, and even more like adding a strong connection in certain crack area.

This crack, as well as connection area, are very interesting. In Tong’s video work, when he goes fishing, there are people, sceneries but no fish; when he returns to daily life, he finds fish everywhere. He adds both artificial fossil and speaker enclosures into the installation. It is like an “un-artist” style which Allan Kaprow ever said: they “use their life-alike form and setting” to remind us “why art can not be forgotten completely. Meanwhile, it could be overlooked at all.” Or, from the situationist international point of view, Tong is “gradually becoming a full-time observer who are watching something ridiculous going on in front of him” —a pessimistic observation. Tong leads us to watch, but there is always nothing to watch: The abandoned burnt black ship docks at the shoal

in front of bushes ,and sundries are casted around; videos shot by fake bait camera are shaking and abstract, hardly to focus; chatting with an encountered graffiti, who is not being honest; also the falling down tree, he can't clean it by himself. Things are falling apart, and even can not be counted as a story. Tong is using anti-productive to produce, and also watches without anything, achieving fun through boredom. This kind of "void" is a resistance towards the "ridiculousness in front of eyes". From Tong's point of view, more serious production, more ritualized observation, more attractive is all resulting in ridiculousness.

Tong previous works are discussing itch, vomiting and exotic fitness. He seems always interested in abnormal situations which are "elusive and uncontrollable". It is a typical concept from Deleuze and Guattari: the characteristics of a group are just some symbolic entities, and the most important thing is the boundary ——abnormal entities. "Fish skin/fish scale is exactly the symbol of group/individual and abnormality/boundary, Those are the connection of the cracking part in a more general sense——for example, in the book *A Thousand Plateaus*, there is a pair of theme "infection through animal colonies" "agreement with the exceptional abnormal people". The epidermis is the boundary which encloses various entities. The infection among similar entities and the agreement with abnormal entities are the expression way. The inner system experiences plenty of alien invasions and group infection, then screening, digesting, absorbing and eliminating. The epidermis is pathological, and the final output after the previous process. The fractal arrangement of Fish scales and colorful variation of fish skin have complex and profound references. Just like itch and vomiting, they are a symptom of inner disorder, and the tip of the iceberg. Fish skin/scale is repeatedly appeared in Tong's installation, probably referring to a solid boundary guarded by abnormal entities: don't fear of expression and don't be used by expression. Keep creating but remember the hidden exploitation in the creation. By the way, why I mentioned *A Thousand Plateaus* is because Tong is reading this book right now. He said it is used to relax the brain.

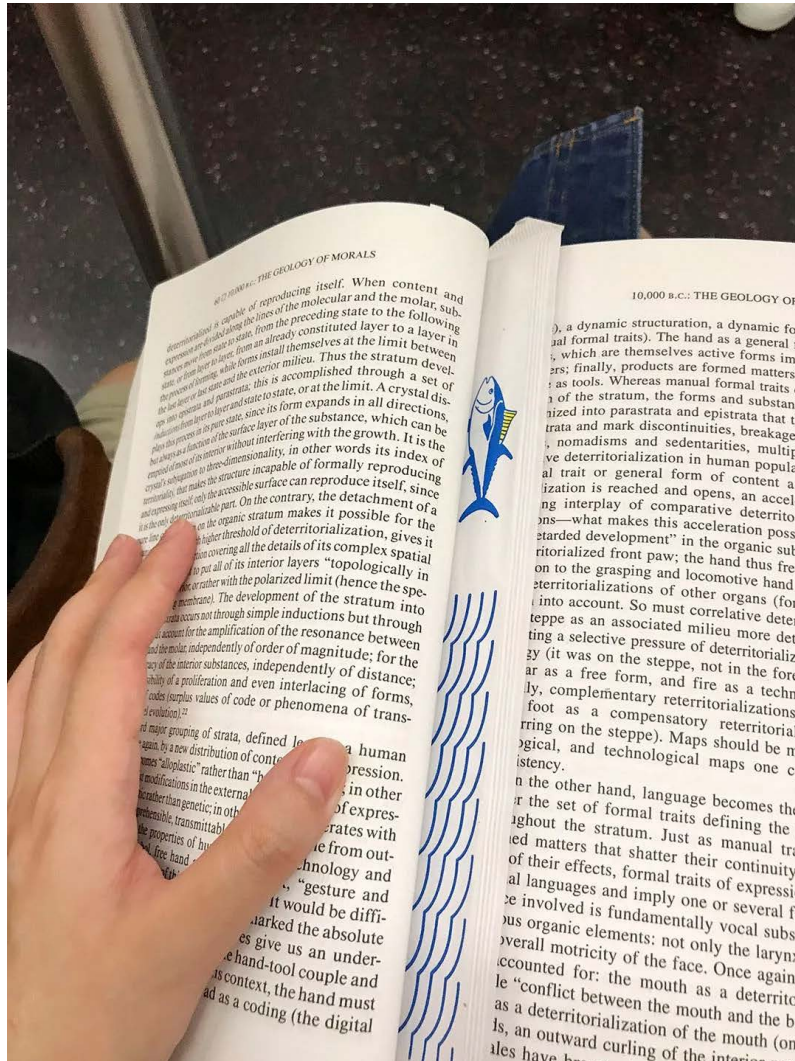


Photo 3: Tong Yixin's *A Thousand Plateaus* and the fish and wave pattern printed disposable chopsticks as the bookmark.

Fish soup and fish skin taste very light. Tong said that there is a norm that the frequency of fishing should not exceed one time per month. Other hooked preys should be released. Later, I asked him to eat fish together, eating “fish meat”. At that time, three to five people sat together to have a meal. We were arguing fiercely all the time about the ambiguity area of those existed art concepts. Grilled fish was on the table. People were like fish groups, alienated but connected, various entities covered by different epidermis. I remembered that Tong was impressive at that time. He can distinguish whether it is freshwater fish or not depending on the fish meat texture. He also talked about the pornographic interpretation of fishing —the extended fishing rod is like the erect genital. I can't tell the difference between table joke and art discussion.

Can eating a fish meal become an anti-art moment in life? There is no strong value output in this creation. Just daily life, those relax, undisciplined, harmonious and tiny things. Can this kind of creation become “anti-art” in art?

I also think of another Tong's work——

In *New Comments to your Youtube Videos*, Tong screenshot strangers' comments:” this damn video makes me excited without marijuana.” The artist is surprised and printed the screenshot photo on textile, then hung it on the wall, like it is the most beautiful fish he has ever hooked.

This shared feeling from this stranger reminds me that although we are not able to experience other people's creation in person, we can experience the aftertaste after a meal, and the exciting and unforgettable feeling after watching — it is a dessert.

[Endnote]

[1] Exhibition "Fishing Trip in New York City", Brooklyn NARS Art Foundation, August 4th-September 1st, 2017.

[2] From the email correspondence between Tong Yixin and the author, September 16, 2017.

[3] "Tong Yixin: New York City Fishing Trip", Artforum Chinese website, text/Duan Ziying, link: <http://www.artforum.com.cn/archive/10768>

[4] Newman's original words are "Aesthetics is to artists, as ornithology is to birds. Aesthetics is to artists asornithology is to birds." Reference here

This is Jordan Kantor's view when discussing the artist Frank Stella's abstract expressionism: "Think of Barnett Newman

The famous punch line feels like you have to be an ornithologist and a bird at the same time.

[5] Excerpted from Alan Kaplow, "The Meaning of Life (1990)", "An Anthology of Fuzzy Art and Life" (University of California Press, 1993), p. 230.

[6] The original text is taken from Author Unknown, "The Use of Free Time", Situationist International Anthology, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 74.

[7] From the email correspondence between Tong Yixin and the author, September 16, 2017.

[8] Deleuze, Guattari, "A Thousand Plateaus", translated by Jiang Yuhui, (Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2010), p. 345.

[9] Ibid., p. 347.

[10] From the email correspondence between Tong Yixin and the author, September 16, 2017.



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