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In-Betweeness on Stage

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BFA Thesis

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Abstract

It all started with the question of “where are you from”. Coming from China and making art in America, I have been confused by people’s question about where am I from and, more importantly, where I identify myself belong. By using installation as the main format, I created works with strong theatrical quality to restage and reenact my social and cultural experiences that finally led to my understanding of the “in-betweeness” of myself: I reside in neither of the two cultures but rather moving back and forth between them. I carry influences from both sides with me and present them through my works collectively speaking to a contemporary Chinese American artist.
In-Betweeness On Stage

The first eighteen years of my life, I was fully embraced in the Chinese culture and society: reading traditional Confucius teachings, practicing ink-and-wash paintings, visiting museums of ancient cultural ruins and listening to Chinese folk tales. After I came to the United States as a young artist, I was absorbing everything that is under the category of “Chinese” and deeply embedding all these influences into my identity.

Throughout my art making, I have been asking both myself and the viewers these questions: what does it mean to be a Chinese artist in the contemporary art world? How is Chineseness identified from the huge pool of artworks in galleries, museums and art fairs except for the obvious Chinese last name printed on the wall text? What am I doing that defines me as a Chinese but also differentiates me as an individual?

“Identity is a fluid thing,” says Britta Erickson (Silbergeld and Ching 233). It also starts to gain particular awareness after leaving its origins and accepting a new penetration. The “umbrella” of the original Chinese identity founded my art practice as an expression of my personal cultural and social memory in order to define my existence in the world. It is the welcoming, either active or passive, of the western world ideas, like the emphasis on individuality and the freedom of speaking, that encouraged and promoted my expression at this “in-between” position. Like many other Chinese artists living and working in the western world, I am looking for a “position” to house both my Chinese and American memories through my artist practices. The idea of “transnationalism” and “transexperience” have been discussed as a shared experience of Chinese artists who are actively practicing in the western world and trying to understand their dynamic identity through the shifting existence between China and the West.
This diaspora identity applies to my artistic identity not surprisingly after four years of art making in the United States.

However, Britta also indicates that, while we are searching for the “umbrella” to cover us as a group, “it is evitable that artists should be valued as individuals, as rigid categories cannot embrace subtle nuances of individual existence and expression” (Silbergeld and Ching 249). My exploration of the “in-between” identity involves not only individualized ways of manipulating cultural signifiers, but also theatrical approaches of art practice through installations.

**Manipulation of Cultural Signifiers**

According to Edward Said, the idea of transexperience is expressed through “the process of strategic adoption and rejection of references” (Chiu 39). There are three distinct strategies that are mainly used by the diaspora artists:

The three strategies are, firstly, the recovery of Chinese iconography as a way of remembering the past at a geographical and psychological distance from China; secondly, the juxtaposition of memories of China with its current reality; and lastly, the modification of Chinese signifiers, such as Chinese characters, to make them accessible to non-Chinese audiences. (Chiu 38-39)

In my art practice, these three strategies can all be seen in a certain degree. However, it is the third strategy, the modification of Chinese cultural signifiers, that can be most commonly found as my way of understanding and presenting my cultural identity.

As Melissa Chiu points out, Chinese artists manipulate cultural symbols to achieve a universal accessibility to the cultural origins. This is particularly seen from Xu Bing’s New English Calligraphy project during the past decade. This series of works combining the
traditional Chinese calligraphy writing system with English alphabets allow westerners to write English words that have a Chinese aesthetics without actually learning and understanding the language itself. Xu Bing represents many cross-cultural artists in China who create a sense of universal accessibility of Chinese culture through their works. The manipulation of the cultural signifiers, in this case the Chinese calligraphy, welcomes those cultural-outsiders to participate in this cultural activity and somehow get educated about the culture through interacting with the works.

Fig. 1. Xu Bing, Print from *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, 2011

Similar but also different from Xu Bing’s approach of modifying western elements in a Chinese aesthetic, I create this cross-cultural accessibility through contemporary western art aesthetics and techniques based on thorough research and studies of Chinese cultural references. The works are then aesthetically accessible to the western world maintaining influences from minimalism, constructivism and abstract expressionism that originated from the western art
world. However, the hidden cultural reference of Chinese traditions and symbols are referred to subtly by specifically choosing symbolic materials, strict repetition of ritualistic practices and restating the narratives from the old teachings. Rather than Xu Bing’s way of modification through Chinese cultural symbols, I bury the cultural identities underneath the outside layer of western art practices as a way of unifying the two sides of my identity, the East and the West.

Also, this rather hidden reference to the cultural background intentionally blocks the viewers from full accessibility to the Chinese culture. I am not creating works to educate the westerner about the exotic Eastern society. Thus, the works are not providing explicit explanations or annunciations of the original references for people to understand about certain aspects of Chineseness. When seen by viewers who do not have sufficient Chinese cultural knowledge, the pieces can be easily interpreted in ways that are far detached from my original intentions or ideas. But this is not problematic to me as the artist. The misinterpretation because of the lack of background information becomes part of the pieces themselves. This misunderstanding of my works helps to define my identity as an “in-between” artist shifting back and forth between these two cultures. The variety of interpretations from the viewers is crucial to my works since these different interpretations are generated only when the cultural reference is unclear to the viewers and there is ambiguity as they approach the works. Thus, it is important for me as an artist to set a start point of the pieces based on the messages that I am willing to deliver, but it is ultimately the viewers’ responses that help the pieces to complete as a representation of the cross-cultural “in-between” identity of myself.

In my piece, *Red Line (2015)*, I was referring to the ancient Chinese belief of the “red line” connecting male and female together through fate as a way to comment on the tension between two genders in the contemporary society. The cultural signifier of the “red line” is presented as
the most identifiable part of the material and is working in a visually minimalistic way to the viewers. By presenting the “red line” as a visual component in the piece rather than in the original format of wrapping around people’s wrists, the cultural reference is transformed in a hidden and subtle way of presentation. In this way, my work departs from the inescapable Chinese cultural representation that is rather obvious and dominant through works by artists like Xu Bing. However, when people approach this work, the movement of the strings in the air and the minimalistic aesthetics generate many different interpretations other than the gender relationship. It is visually accessible to all the viewers and silently accepting all the readings from its audience.

Fig. 2. Qiyuan Liu, *Red Line*, 2015

Another theme that is commonly used by cross-cultural Chinese artists is restaging cultural events from collective memory as well as using these reenactments of past events as vehicles to deliver their messages to the western world. In 1999, Cai Guo-Qiang installed the piece *Rent*
Collection Courtyard at the Venice Biennale, which is “a tableau of a feudal scene containing life-sized clay figures depicting landowners extracting rent from peasants” (Chiu 40). This piece was considered to be a significant restaging of Chinese social experiences in order to deliver the artist’s statement against feudalism to the public, especially to the western world. In contemporary art world, there has been a certain degree of western fetish towards Asian artists with strong political statement. By commenting on the culture they came from and viewing their past as outsiders, these Chinese artists are establishing their diaspora identities in the western art world as they critiquing the Chinese society in a way that is favorable to the westerners. In Cai’s case, “the Biennale jury was so impressed with his exotic provocation—Socialist Realism redux—that they awarded him the Golden Lion” (Vine 67). However, his approach also makes him a Chinese outsider that “Cai’s act—individualistic, commercial, Western-based—was seen as a betrayal of socialist doctrine and aesthetics” and eventually pushed him away from his Chinese origin and made him a diaspora Chinese artist in America (Vine 67).

Fig. 3. Cai Guoqiang, Rent Collection Courtyard, 1999
This idea of restaging and reenactment of past experiences is a major part of my art practice as well. However, rather than Cai’s approach of commenting on Chinese society through past social and cultural events, I am more focusing on personal memories and experiences in Chinese society as ways to understand and present my cultural identity. In my work *The Four: Happiness, Sadness, Fear and Anger (2014)*, I collected all of those digitally printed documentations of my daily life in Beijing as an objective way of recording my social activities during last summer. Then I categorized them into four groups based on the emotion each documentation reminds me of back in time. Finally, I created this personal altarpiece as a way to commemorate my past experience in China as well as forming an eternal record of how a young adult’s life looks like in the city of Beijing, summer 2014. There is no strong political statement in the piece. Nor there are any kinds of explicit statement about Chinese society. It is an objective documentation of Chinese social activities through the lens of a young individual. The categorization of the digital prints only makes sense to myself since they are closely related to personal memories that are not shown to the audience. As a result, it does not matter whether the viewers understand the Chinese language or not. Both the westerners and the Chinese viewers are equally distanced and blocked from full penetration into my personal altarpiece of memory. Consequently, this universal unreadability of the piece equalizes the Chinese and the westerners in the position of viewers and this equalization precisely speaks to my identity as an “in-between” artist that equally moves back and forth between the two cultures.
Staging Theatrical Experiences

Having spent a considerable amount of time in theater, I have been attempting to reenact my “in-between” identity through a series of spatial and narrative manipulations. Much of my art practice is in the form of installation, which is a way for me to condense time, space and narrative into theatrical experiences for the viewers to encounter. In Michael Fried’s discussion of minimal art, which he refers as “literalist art”, he specifically talked about the theatrical quality of minimal art: “the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater; and theater is now the negation of art” (Battcock 125). This juxtaposition between theater and minimal art hugely inspired me as a way to think about my work not as “objects” for people to see, but as “situations” for people to participate in and interact with. In this sense, to me, none of my work is considered complete with the absence of viewers, the same idea as a theater show does not exist if there were no audience.

In Fried’s discussion, he mentioned three elements that artists should consider in order to construct this theatrical experience with their works: control, size and inner life. These three elements are each well embedded within one of my three installation works. Realizing this not
only helps me to improve the theatrical quality of my works but also reversely supports the theory of Fried.

When Fried talks about “control”, he quoted Robert Morris: “But the concerns now are for more control of… the entire situation. Control is necessary if the variables of object, light, space, body, are to function” (Battcock 127). If we view the installation piece as a theater show, the artwork that I made is the actor. But merely having the actor is not enough for a show. We need other supports as well, which, in my piece, translates to placement, distance, lighting situation and etc.

This “control” of the situation is rather obvious in *The Four: Happiness, Sadness, Fear and Anger*. This pure white piece was shown in a black dark room with only one spotlight focusing on it. The four parts are separately placed on four identical pedestals that are one-inch apart from each other. The entire piece is placed in the center of the room but leaving a little more space in the front than in the back. These strict settings are highly intentionally to create a sacred altarpiece that has a precious feeling. It allows the viewers to walk around the piece, but with the one-inch distance, people are not invited to step into the piece during their interaction, which avoids too much penetration into my personal memory. People are also encouraged to interact with the piece from the front view rather than other directions, which adds to the image of an altarpiece. The lighting and the black room work together creating a precious feeling that speaks to the commemoration of past memory. All these aspects of control collectively build up a specific situation for the viewers to experience, which makes the piece highly theatrical.
Another element that contributes to the theatrical quality is “size”. When the size of the work “compares fairly closely with that of the human body”, the interaction between the viewer and the work transfers to the interaction between two people (Battcock 128). As a result, people are experiencing an active communication rather than a passive encounter, which has strong theatrical quality.

*Red Line* is made about human size where people can see it as a counterpart of their bodies. When walking pass by the piece, people activate air in the space and consequently “move” the strings of the piece. This spontaneous movement created by the viewers unintentionally involves them into the work and even allows them to become part of the installation. The gentle movement of the strings, corresponding to the movement of the viewers, becomes the silent conversation in the space. This conversation is then perceived as the center of its theatrical quality.
The last element is “inner life”. The way Fried puts: “the quality of having an inside…as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life” (Battcock 129). In this sense, the work is not only viewed as a whole, but also each part is having a “secret conversation” between each other that gives the piece its own life. In my piece *Gaze (2015)*, this “secret conversation” has a rather prominent existence: it is not only the gap between the two wood lumbers that is creating a conversation, but also there are more conversations going on even between each nails in the carved-out tunnels. Since the distance between each nail is carefully calculated and precisely measured, the conversation is then intentionally created and may even be led by me as the artist. With these “secret conversations”, *Gaze* is having a prominent theatrical life according to Michael Fried.
Conclusion

Having been questioning my identity for the past four years really helped me to develop artworks that explored deeply into both Chinese culture and the western art world. Realizing my “in-between” identity is both the end of confusion and the start of further exploration. How does this “in-betweeness” reside in the contemporary art world? When will this “in-betweeness” come to an end? If I encounter a third culture later in my life, will that change my “in-betweeness”? All these questions are yet to be asked and solved in the future. This confusion of identity may remain constant throughout my entire artistic life as my exploration of the world expands. At the same time, I will get familiar with more methods of art making and artistic expressions, that will assist me with further development of the theatrical quality of my works in the process of identity exploration.


