

How to Make Vitality and Time Visible: The Logic of Jiang Pengyi's Art Creation

by Luan Zhichao

It is inaccurate and superficial to describe Jiang Pengyi's work as poetic or quiet. In his works lies an insistent appeal for heterogeneity. This heterogeneity is not reflected in the photographic techniques or subjects. Rather than examining photography as a creative medium by its breadth, Jiang is more interested in these questions: What other possibilities exist for an artist in exploring the depth of photography? In the context of today's art scene, what other forms of unison may emerge between the artist's body and photography as a technical medium? What other visual images can the artist create with photography? The heterogeneity of Jiang's artistic creation is therefore primarily reflected in his grasp of the heterogeneity of photography.

Non-semiotic Autonomous Objects

Jiang's works always deviate from our existing, formulaic understanding of images. His works are not rendition, meaning they are not realistic rendition of the external world through images. Nor are they representation, since the images do not embody any semiotic meaning for weaving some kind of sociological fable. His works exhibit a total autonomy that is free from any reference or metaphor, and from the endless chain of meaning that would ground the existence of the work in an external world. Of course, this does not mean that Jiang's works are disconnected from a certain kind of social reality. His series about urban landscapes (*Forgot the Password?*, *Unregistered City*, *Luminant*, *All Back to Dust*) present an undisguised view on this subject -- his works do not involve in reality through rendition or representation, or through establishing a connection between visual semiotics and meaning to give depth to the images. Rather, the involvement of his works in society or reality is purely an excess or a result of expression. This kind of involvement is not the whole purpose of creation or the core of the works' meaning; it is a specific effect that is born of the autonomous expression of the works. If we call Jiang's works heterogeneous, what are his modes of creation? The heterogeneity of his works is only relative if it stops at non-rendition or non-representation. What gives Jiang's photography its absolute heterogeneity is his complete rejection of image, his visual expression of the abstract essence -- the intrinsic vitality and time -- of objects. The entire meaning of his works only manifests fully when there is a total rejection of the two-dimensional structure of visual semiotics and meaning. Such absolute heterogeneity and depth stem from a complete break from conventional understanding, of a genuine appeal for newness.

For Jiang, true newness means invention, inquiry, break, and a simultaneous process of deconstruction and reconstruction. For this reason, he features everyday objects in his works without any narrative setting. Be it man-made or natural objects, these objects only exist in the sense of signifier, without any trace of signified. They are not the representation of anything; they are contented in the autonomy of their existence, as they exist purely as objects. Such purity of existence brings out the dignity of the objects, while the external surroundings and the photographic moment are captured in abstraction and even rendered as a stop, an eternal state. Instead of the tangible shape or image of an object, Jiang's real interest is in the existence of the object and its vitality in this very moment. In this sense, the logic of Jiang's creation lies in how to use image and visualization to reveal this vitality, and the traces it leaves on the dimensions of time. On this level of understanding, the different artistic forms of photography, painting and sculpture all serve the same function. Jiang has always worked on this non-representative, essential level where he seeks his answers and possibilities through photography. He does not render an object through a tangible image, but gives existence to a life by making the vitality of its existence visible. It is a non-semiotic existence that is not rooted in any meaning.

Deconstructing the Cognition of Image

The rejection of image is particularly pronounced in Jiang's works after 2009. In *Bigger than the Rain*, *The Suspended Moment* and *Dark Addiction*, the original forms of the objects, which denote their common definitions that are shaped by images and words, do not exist. The interior of the objects is illuminated, while materials are broken down into particles and atoms. In *Everything Illuminates*, what we see are physical objects, such as paper, chair, candleholder and bed. As the forms of these objects are blended with fluorescent liquid, the works illuminate the traces left by the objects' existence on time rather than their forms. The objects appear still in the photos, yet there is movement in one's viewing. In these works, all concrete images disappear and we cannot discern the original forms of the objects. This rules out our recollection of the interpretations of these objects as defined by the cognitive systems of our social frameworks: the paper is only paper, the rain is only rain, and a chair is only a chair. The familiar objects in our mind vanish in that moment, while only traces of their physical existence remain. In this context, Jiang is executing a kind of deconstruction -- he is engaging in the deepest, most essential deconstruction of the society in these most un-sociological works. Through the elimination of image, he deconstructs our existing cognition, the social codes of the objects, and the relation between the viewer and the objects being viewed. In his works, minute details of objects emerge from the micro view and extended exposure, which makes them look extremely unnatural and unreal. Yet the works illuminate the most inner, the purest and the truest essence of each object. These fine details counter the artificial, supernatural and hyperreal images and semiotics that we must face in the society, as they question the physical and cultural definition of "the real" in a semiotic society. He lets concrete images vanish from the images, which poses a reflection on the function and true nature of photography: How can we

recreate reality through the technical medium of photography, and to what extent the recreated reality may be considered as real? Through eliminating the primary characteristic of photography -- precision -- Jiang also removes the primary characteristic of image, the actual image of the subject. He strips an object or a reality of its most exterior truth to reveal its most interior truth. Each object exists as a mass of particles and noema, as it blends into the textures of the universe. It is independent from the forms that are defined by society and knowledge, as it exists purely for itself. On this level, Jiang's creation is a reassembly. Through photography, he recreates an imagistic world sans image in a world defined by images; his creation rejects the hyperreality of visual semiotics in real life by revealing the abstract authenticity of objects. If there is a certain kind of sociological critique in his earlier works about urban spaces, there is a more complete and effective sociological critique underlying in his later works. Beyond critique and deconstruction, Jiang is engaged in reconstruction: How can we meet with objects beyond the existing sociological and cognitive frameworks?

The Reconstruction of Perception

Jiang's answer revolves around perception and it is very much a Nietzschean take. It points to the vitality that is born of traversing all elements by bringing them together in a certain point in time. Vitality and time are two inseparable attributes that create the existential state of objects in Jiang's works. The movement of vitality in time; the illumination of the object's authenticity in the moment of photographic capture; the eternity of time in the dimensions of reality -- these are the trinity of Jiang's creation. After eliminating the narrative and logic of image, his works ultimately point to a perceptual morphology: vitality is invisible, as time is invisible. How to make visible the invisible? How to visualize these attributes that are essential to our lives and existence in the artistic realm? Jiang's creation is ultimately manifested in the visuals of process and that of realization. This kind of visualization is not only related to viewing; it is a search for the vitality that gives us our ability to view and perceive, and which makes objects perceptible. Be it fluorescent liquid (used in *Everything Illuminates*) or glow worm (in *Dark Addiction*), or the prolonged waiting from extended exposure that runs through Jiang's works, they all pose this question about initiative: What happens when an artist's body meets another kind of life or fluidity? What kind of confrontation is born when one kind of vitality intersects with another? In Jiang's works, it is ultimately the unison of visuals and the process of execution: the time and thought that fill the process of exposure; the intensity of the object becomes eternal in the moment of photographic capture, as the undeniable authenticity of the object is illumined. On this basis of understanding, Jiang offers a perception that counters cognition. Cognition is not passive or given; the definition of an object is not fixed, as it is no longer a cognized or existing object. The object is freed from any conceptual definition or knowledge of form presenting a form that may only be perceived. In Jiang's works, there is a precise, clear and forceful vitality that expels the precision of image from the pictures. This allows the work to go straight to the truest authenticity of any object, to escape from the reality that is narrated in images and words with over-precision in an imaged world. The viewing of such work is not to cognize an object, but

to perceive a certain vitality. It is not limited to an object, as it is to free the self into the world that has nurtured the object. It is not to explore a tangible reality, but to seek an abstract yet essential realness. In an era when everything becomes frighteningly real, we can only reach the core of something by piercing its exterior. Jiang executes this with his artistic creation. Between water in a tangible form (*White Pills*), water in its liquid form (*Bigger than the Rain*) and water in its solid form (*The Suspended Moment*), there is much greater commonality in the manifestations of their textures, gravity of existence, intensity of movement, and the tension of the moments than the differences in their forms and exteriors. Despite the differences in the thinking, states and surroundings, there is one body that exists through the creative process of all three series. It is the artist's presence, the consumption of the body's vitality in every passing moment, and the visuals of his thought entering the works. These are the visuals of Jiang's. They are the true images of the artist and his works that come from within: the movement of vitality, and the eternity of time.

The Creative Process, from External to Internal

If Jiang's works are a process of piercing the exterior to enter the interior, of movement from image to vitality and life, his creation is a process of piercing the external to enter the internal. In his city series like *The Private Goods Belonged to Somebody* and *Motionless Object*, we can still see a kind of desire for dialogue and answer, a certain faith in and projection onto the external world, and the possibility of existence in narrative and colors. These works portray the vulnerability and unease of the artist, of his confusion and confrontation with the external world. If Jiang still believed in the myth of exterior -- in establishing communication and connection with the external world through narration -- at the time, he has shown a gradual abandonment of such faith in his works from 2009 onwards. This abandonment is not a return to the personal, religious or spiritual existence; it is a return to life in which human and objects co-exist. His works move from the external to the internal, from form to vitality, from the moment to the eternity born of extended exposure, from concrete image to abstract expression. In his 2012 series, *Everything Illuminates*, the existence of objects is already the focal point of his thinking. However, the vitality of the external still anchors the creation of this series, where the objects speak through fluorescent liquid. It is only with the glow worm in *Dark Addiction* that the autonomy of existence is manifested when the object gives out its own glow. If the fluorescent liquid lights up the existence of an object, the glow of the glow worm is only a mode of existence of life, as the creature glows for the sake of glowing. This creation is the artist's process of discovery and exploration with his own body and life.

Jiang's works are an interchange of different vitalities: the vitality of time, which marks the dimensions of existence of the artist, the viewer and the object; and the vitality of life, which gives an active perceptibility to the artist, the viewer and the object. Moving from the external to the internal, Jiang lets vitality reveal the authenticity of existence and life, while time illumines the eternity of the moment. On

this level of understanding, Jiang's works are not only poetic or quiet. His works contain movement and the process of deconstruction and reconstruction, a creative process that runs all directions in perfect certainty. In an imaged world where visuals are defined by various restrictions, Jiang's works show how an artist's body can counter the power of such restrictions, and the possibilities of creating authentic visuals that are freed from any social framework. In this counteraction and confrontation, a different kind of heterogeneous vitality is born. It does not recreate or represent what we have already seen. Rather, it makes an object or another facet of it visible to us, or allows it to enter our vision in other ways.

About Luan Zhichao

Born in Guyuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Luan currently lives and works in Beijing. She majored in Cultural Studies in Beijing Foreign Studies University and received her master's degree in 2012. She writes regularly for *Art World* magazine, *Artforum* and other art related media. She is also a contributor to the publications of various galleries and art institutions, and her work ranges from criticism, translation to other kinds of writing.