

## Jiang Zhi: Suspension and Placement

Leo Li Chen

“I just want you to be happy/ temporarily/ singing a song/ saying/ temporarily.”

This is a short poem Jiang Zhi wrote in the prologue of his work series *Love Letters* (2010). The succinctly meaningful verse is just like the flowers in *Love Letters* that were doused in alcohol and set aflame, without embellishment or exegesis. It is hard not to be touched by the imminence of the flowers' tragic destruction. However, Jiang Zhi seems not to dwell on the tragic destiny of flower and fire. *Love Letters* belongs to the present, wherein the coexistence and commingling of flower and fire are equally temporary and real. They are the clock's hour hand, now, before it hits the next moment; they are the boulder in front of Sisyphus.

*Love Letters* is captivating. In the face of a sudden passing of one's lover, one could only approach this drastic change as blameless misfortunes in a stochastic world, and any additional attempt to aestheticise or philosophise would be a stretch. He is an artist, and at the same time a lover, a father, a writer, and a poet. Just as Jiang Zhi's solo retrospective at Guangdong Times Museum of Art, “Jiang Zhi: If This is a Man” (2012), attempts to return the titular role of the artist back to the subjectivity of the person, we could try to understand his artistic personae by gauging the multitude of Jiang Zhi, only to risk falling into the trappings of art systems and agency theories. Without these prescribed social roles, Jiang Zhi is an independent individual just like you and me, inevitably admitted into the structural framework of modernist humanism, while simultaneously existing in a collective and living in a secular world as an individual.

Similar to the generation of artists who grew up against the backdrop of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s, Jiang Zhi reacts to the epochal transformations in political climate, market economy and cultural atmosphere. Like

Jiang's work *Object in Drawer* (1997), presented in the iconic artist-organised experimental exhibition “Post-Sense Sensibility: Alien Bodies & Delusion” (1999), these artists use radical and self-initiated practices to distinguish themselves from the double shackles of prevailing art movements, including, on one hand, the figurative realism of official and academic art, and on the other hand, the “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” that garnered much attention from the international art market. Jiang created the video work, *Fly, Fly* (1997), in the house of fellow artist Qiu Zhijie, in which a hand imitates the flight of a bird's wings in a cramped living space against the music of *Méditation*, infusing escapist ennui with Romantic classicism. In *Shi Zhi* (1999), Jiang documented the eponymous poet who influenced the generations during and after the Cultural Revolution, expressing the poet's struggle with psychiatric illness and the absurdity of reality. From 1995 to 2005, Jiang worked as a journalist and editor in Southern China, and had an independent writing practice in experimental novels and poetry. Because of this background, his artworks involve media and social issues, and engage the poetics and rhetorics of language and literature, interweaving the individual's condition in society and a sensitivity to the internal motivation of language.

Jiang Zhi's work touches on living experiences and the poetics of artistic expression, often prompting the awakening of one's will. His work is the “suspending placement” of time and experiences yet to be processed – it does not trace the past or refer to the future, but relays the stasis of a present moment, its pendulous dangling and swaying, its cyclical trailing and returning. It is at the same time a temporal suspension of meaning

and signification, prioritising process, doubt and struggle over definition and judgment. In 2016, Jiang revisited the yester-flowers of *Love Letters*. The reflective trajectory on the unpredictability and cyclicity of life has resulted in a change in the material form and temporal display of the same floral subjects. During our discussions on this exhibition, Jiang mentions the *Fūshikaden (The Book of Transmission of the Flower)* by the great Noh playwright and aesthete Zeami Motokiyo. The treatise uses “flower” as a vehicle to discuss the ontology and spirituality of Noh, in particular the interior journey of the artist and the stylistic development of performativity against a transient temporality, “like flowers, becoming, in the times of the years”. In the *Going and Coming* series, Jiang utilises the dried flowers left from *Love Letters* and captures the different moments when they move about on a spinning table, suspended in a temporal series of movements and fragments, ever returning and reincarnating. These flowers thus achieve a second life through the reappearance of heterogeneity through the representation of homogeneity, purporting a way to perceive the organic multiplicity of life. In the *Fade* series, the artist replaces the real and transient subjects in *Love Letters* with acrylic, silk and glass flowers that are artificial, seemingly permanent, and ever-green, though showing traces of dust and time. By reconstructing the décor of a common Chinese household in the 1980s, the artist allegorises the foregone epochal aestheticism and romantic imagination of a good life. The collective memory which had gathered dusts through the years is dusted again, restoring anew a tranquil moment amidst the hectic shifts and chaotic adjustment in the collective society. The stillness of the still life stands as a stark contrast to our present age, where one enjoys an ever-accelerating pace of change and volatility, yet foregoing a safe space to deposit one’s feelings and desires. *Fade* also reveals the artist’s meditation on classical Chinese philosophy, that things are “neither new nor old, neither going nor coming”.

The four channel video, *In the Wind*, consists of four interweaving scenes, “Sisyphus’s boulder”, “Father’s back”, “Shifting trees”, and “Tempest”. As Sisyphus submits to the lithic absurdity of fate, the father walks toward the direction of an endless past and away from an unending future. The endlessly shrill winds subsume all the suffering, misfit, loneliness and fluctuation of being, as time passes in its sheer violence and annihilation. The indescribability of the wind characterises the individual’s ontology and destination, which are uncertain, irretrievable and untraceable. In Jiang’s work, it is as if every “individual” is suspended and placed against the nihilistic, formless and ferocious wind, where one’s experiences stream from the past, but one’s destiny never quite arrives. Stuck between going forward and backward, neither restorable nor retraceable, one could only huddle here.

**Leo Li Chen** is an independent curator and researcher based in Hong Kong with a research focus on Chinese contemporary art. Chen is also a research fellow in City University of Hong Kong. His main research interests focus on spatial and aesthetic politics, the moving image and artistic interventions in Chinese cities. His recent curatorial exhibitions include “Adrift” (OCAT, Shenzhen, 2016), “That Has Been, and Maybe Again” (Para Site, Hong Kong, 2016) and “After Party: Collective Dance and Individual Gymnastics” (Blindspot Gallery, 2017). Chen is a long-term contributing writer for *Artforum*, *Leap*, *The Art Newspaper China* and *Art World*.