

About *Qiuzhuang Project* - Collections from Van Abbemuseum

Li Mu

In May 2010 I was invited to participate in an exhibition titled *Double Infinity* organized in Shanghai by Arthub Asia and Van Abbemuseum, and back then I submitted two proposals. According to the first one, as an artistic intervention I would have worked as part of the staff of the gallery and get the standard payment (New Job, 2010), whilst the second proposal entailed the shipment of the works of the Van Abbemuseum collection to my hometown, a village in the north part of the China. Finally the Van Abbemuseum chose the first option.

During the opening reception, I was talking to the curators and organizers of the exhibition, (Charles Esche together with Defne Ayas, Davide Quadrio, Remco de Blaaij), about the possibility of exhibiting the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in my village, but Charles, the Van Abbe Director, thought that was a crazy idea. The next day though, we met again and on that occasion he invited me to visit the Van Abbemuseum saying that, after my trip there, we would have discussed possible ways to make my project come true.



My hometown is called Qiuzhuang, it is a country village that belongs to the Zhuyao village located in Sunlou Town, Feng county, Jiangsu province. I was born in 1974 and grew up there until, at the age of 17, I left to attend the Suzhou Art and Design School. Since then I use to spend at least one or two weeks with my parents at the village every year.

Qiuzhuang was a very beautiful place in my memories; during my childhood the people of the village were fairly poor, but the relationship between them was simple and harmonious. Different flowers and fruits grew on trees in different seasons. There was a river in front of my house and, in summertime, I would spend most of my time catching fish and swimming in its water.

I cannot remember when I started to dislike my village. As I grew up, and the country became economically oriented, the village started to change and my feelings about it became complex. There were more and more small factories and wood board processing family workshops, a lot of farmland was occupied, and a lot of noise was made. People as well started to change, everyone was becoming more materialistic and the idea that an education was useless was spreading out between the villagers. People would start throwing rubbish in the river, and the country road would get damp and muddy whenever it rained. Villagers raised the base of their house, and what used to be the road became a river. The blossoming trees were nowhere to be seen and fast growing aspens replaced all of them.

I felt lucky for having left the village and have started my own art career. I wished I could escape, the farther the better, as living there was causing me nothing but stress. Finally I realized that, no matter how far I would go, I could not mentally escape from that place. In the depth of my soul, all my thinking, my fears and hesitations were all being originated from the experiences I had while growing up in the village. The plan I proposed to the Van Abbemuseum was not a project I had been thinking for a long time but it was a very instinctive idea instead, an idea I am even surprised of. With this project in mind I have now the courage to look back at my village, as I know the only way to overcome my fear is to face it. My knowledge and my art are my weapons.



In June 2011 I spent two weeks to do some research at the Van Abbemuseum which is located in Eindhoven, a Dutch city that has the same size as a Chinese county. The Museum hosts masterpieces by artists like Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Ei Lissitzky, Richard Long, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Ulay/Abramovic, Bruce Nauman, Daniel Buren. My impressions of the city were of tranquility and courtesy, I could feel the fresh tide of scholastic thinking hiding behind the borders of the gallery. I would study the museum collection all day long, in the exhibiting space and in the library. I was very interested in the Minimalistic pieces housed by the Van Abbe, as if the briefness and order were the aspects that my village was lacking the most. The three portraits of Mao Tse Tung in the show room on the second floor reminded me of my childhood, every family would hang a portrait of chairman Mao in the house, the same portrait, now is a classic piece of modern art.

During my visit in Holland I visited the artist and designer John Kormeling, who had designed the *Street of Happiness* for the Dutch pavilion of the Shanghai Expo in 2010, and had also some works displayed in *Double Infinity*. His workshop is a small building painted in white, if seen from afar it looks like the White House, however, inside it is like a chaotic warehouse, where you can hardly find a place to sit. We talked about my village, about some minimal artists who do not personally create their own works, and we also discussed the relationship between original and copy. He thought for a while and then he fetch two seals with which he stamped my notebook. One seal was the "ORIGINEEL" whilst the other one was a "KOPIE" and he asked me to identify which was which. It was in that moment that I suddenly realized I did not actually have to carry the original masterpieces from the Van Abbemuseum to my village, because there was no difference between the originals

and the copies. Whether original or not, it would have been the same to the villagers, and maybe just the ones aware of some artistic notions would have noticed the difference. The next day I met Charles Esche and told him about my conversation with John Kormeling and my decision to copy some pieces from the Van Abbemuseum collection to bring to my village. He really liked the idea and, at that point, the next step was selecting the right pieces to reproduce.

In December 2012 I returned to my village and started working on the project, which will last until July 2013. Time is a central part of this work, it is not just a matter of preparing it and reproducing the pieces, which of course takes a lot of time, but also the analysis of the interactions of the project with the villagers entails a slow process.

My work started with the implementation of a library (*A LIBRARY PROJECT*) in the village as a tool focused on building a relationship between the dwellers and me. The library is a public space that connects local people with the outside world and helps establishing a reciprocal understanding. Through the library, I can spread my knowledge and experience gradually, let the villagers understand me, and acknowledge the next steps of the project. The library is free and open to everyone; the books are from my personal collection and also from the donations of some artistic institutions and magazines. Whether children or adults, I wish the library will become a part of the villagers. I did not want my library to become a traditional one, but I wanted it to explore more possibilities given by its particular location in a small village, where the library will remain as a permanent project.



I reproduced artworks by Andy Warhol, John Kormeling, Dan Flavin, Daniel Buren, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Ulay/Abramovic, Carl Andre and Douglas Gordon. I selected these pieces because I wanted to find the connection or to establish a new relationship between these works and my village. I selected Andy Warhol's three portraits of Mao Tse Tung as Chairman Mao is the most familiar figure since, till a few years ago, every family would hang a picture of him. Today Mao's portrait is still used to guard off the evil spirits. There are many walls along the roads and I painted on them Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing* works. Sol LeWitt's abstract sculptures seem to have some practical functions, and their free replicas can be used in the villagers' daily life. I copied Richard Long's *Wood Circle* in the public space because leaves and branches are the most common materials and I wanted this piece to "return" from a museum space to nature. Ulay/Abramovic's performance video was shown in the grocery store in the village for it is the place where people use to gather and the video is easy to understand.

In a letter I wrote to Charles Esche and Davide Quadrio I said: "I was born in the village, grew up there and then I left, my family still lives there. Today I am back, to establish a kind of relationship with the village using my art, experience, and knowledge and explore the possibilities of influence and the ways to cope with each other. Maybe I can even find myself and my own direction through these activities. I think that, no matter how complex or difficult this project might be, it should always stay in line with the principle that this project is about a person, so it should always keep that a person's flavor".

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*A Library project was originally presented as part of archive exhibition "Institution for the Future" curated by Biljana Ciric.