

The plan is always disturbed by reality and I have to delay it .

Interview3: Na Ying Yu/ Li Mu



Li Mu and Na Yingyu in the northern part of Qiuzhuang. Photo by Zhong Ming

Na Yingyu(NYY): Besides the two wall paintings of Sol LeWitt you worked on with Lu Daode, what else have you done in May and June?

Li Mu(LM): A lot, I've shown the performance art of Ulay/Abramovic by playing the video in the grocery; I also printed the Andy Warhol Mao portraits and hung them in the villagers' houses. Of course, it's not finished. In between the two things, we launched an activity called "Picnic with Ellen Zweig" for the kids.

NYY: Do you think it's a lot of work?

LM: For me , yes. I'm very busy, though you might not see many works.

NYY: Normally speaking, the working process is quite slow. Do you feel anxious about it?

LM: No, because I don't think that I can speed it up. According to my original plan, I should have finished the other two works: the installation "HI HA" by John Kormeling and the fifty pyramidal wall pieces by Dan Flavin. But Yang Gaoju has been delaying his work. He had many problems. When the circular fluorescent lights were sent to us, we found over twenty of them were broken.

NYY: When the lights were shipped the second time, it was already in June.

LM: Yes, that's why this piece of work was also delayed. Besides, I dealt with some family matters in the past two months.

NYY: How much time did the family matters take?

LM: Quite a lot. Because my father has some conflicts with my uncle. I spent a lot of time dealing with this situation.

NYY: Most of the time was spent in dealing with the family matters?

LM: Not that much, half the time.

NYY: It made the whole process slow down. What do you think of that?

LM: I think it's good to be slow. It gives me more time to reflect on the works and the relationships among the people here.

NYY: Did this slowness bring changes to your work?

LM: The works for which I had a clear plan, it won't affect them much, but those for which I have no clear plan, it will affect them in some way. For example, Richard Long's work: a circle made of branches. I wanted to set this piece on the open space at the east side of my house. But the owner of that patch of land set up a shed on it in order to get more compensation from the road repair project. I am waiting for the right moment. Maybe after that shed is demolished or maybe I will find another new space to do that piece of work. As the environment is changing, I should also make adjustments to my plan. I don't want my works to be a landscape, just for villagers to watch. I want them to be engaged in the works.

NYY: How about the works you've done already? Aren't they landscapes? Do villagers actively take part in them?

LM: Different people are engaged in each piece of work. That "Turning Ladder" of Sol LeWitt went into the lives of 14 families. It's not a landscape, but something closely related to their lives. To my relief, the fact that Lu Daode and I worked together on the two wall paintings brought much fun to his life. And some time later, to my surprise, a young villager called Fan Meng made his own turning ladder to decorate his sitting room. Li Taijing offered to give me a space in his home for a Sol LeWitt painting. I no longer worry that the works will only be a landscape, because they actually entered peoples' lives. Andy Warhol's Mao portrait was hung in many families' houses, resulting in a new round of discussion about Mao Zedong. That video of Ulay/Abramovic's performance art is closely related to a person---the owner of that grocery Wang Gaoqi. Because the video was shown in his grocery, he watched it everyday. He was thinking of its meaning and how he could explain the performance to others. I am a little concerned about where I should put Daniel Buren's painting. At first, I planned to put it on Wang Hedong's two-story building. But he doesn't live in that house. I feel I am creating a landscape. Later you suggested that I paint the stripes on the fence at the door of the library and that I grow corn behind the fence, which gave me some ideas.

NYY: I only suggested that you grow corn in front of the library But you immediately got the idea of making a fence with stripes painted on it.



A young villager Fan Meng copied a "Turning Ladder" in his new house.

NYY: You are forced to slow down your working pace. The landscapes are gradually becoming part of their life, so familiar to the villagers that they kind of ignore them. Do you think it has something to do with the slow pace?

LM: Yes, this is important.

NYY: So, will you slow down the pace of the next works on purpose?

LM: Yes.

NYY: When do you think you can finish this project?

LM: I have to delay my plan. I wish to finish copying all the works by the end of July.

NYY: What if you can't finish all of them by the end of July?

LM: Then I have to delay it until August. I always have a feeling that it's not the best time to do the "wood circle" of Richard Long. Because I want to cooperate with a person---a older woman who rides her tricycle to the levee on the river and picks branches for firewood. If I can work with her and use the branches she picks to make that "wood circle," it will be more interesting. I always hope that my works are related to the life of one person, several persons or more people. Maybe I will delay it until the right season.



Li Mu and his former middle school classmate Yang Gaoju were putting up Andy Warhol's Mao Portrait.

NYY: Did you make a deadline for your work when you started this project? What was in your mind at that time?

LM: Based on my knowledge of this village, the people here, and the copying work, I could map out a very detailed schedule of my work.

NYY: So, you had a plan for the project?

LM: The plan is always disturbed by reality. I have to delay it without knowing when it will be finished.

NYY: The production cycle of your previous works was shorter. What would you have done if your plan had been disturbed by reality in your previous works?

LM: In my previous works, the timing was controllable. But, this time I feel it's going to be delayed forever.

NYY: Do you feel upset with the delay or do you enjoy it? Or do you have any other thoughts?

LM: I'm not upset, I am just resigned to it.

NYY: When I first arrived here, you told me that you wanted to complete the project as soon as possible and then leave this village right away. What do you think now?

LM: Now, even though I finish the project, I can't leave this village.

NYY: Why not?

LM: Copying the works will probably be done in the next two months, but the project is far from being completed. It's just a beginning to set up all the works in the village. The development of the works and their future will be more interesting. So I really don't know when the project will end.

NYY: Why did you have the idea of leaving the village as soon as possible before?

LM: It's very cold in the winter. The weather was so bad that I had a problem adjusting myself to the environment. At the beginning I wasn't getting along with my family or with the villagers. I told myself that I didn't like this place and I didn't belong here, and this place didn't belong to me.

NYY: Your relationship with your father isn't that intense after two months. Your father even said he was proud of you. How did that happen?

LM: Whether he meant it or not when he said that, at least I feel he respects my work. He saw what I did and how I did the work. This project is like a plant. It's growing. At the beginning, he didn't see any future for this project. He thought it was meaningless to do it and did not support me. As time went on, he gradually felt that other villagers respected me and also respected him. More and more children come to the library. More people appreciate the existence of the library. Meanwhile, foreign visitors came to see my works in Qiuzhuang. He witnessed all these things and that's why he said he was proud of me.

NYY: Now your project is going slowly but pretty well. And your relationship with your father is also improved. Thinking of the two changes, which one is more important to you?

LM: Both are important to me. If I can't get along well with my father, every day I will think of leaving here. I couldn't stay here for another second.

NYY: Is it because you stayed at home long enough and communicated more this time that the project and your relationship with your father both developed in a positive way?

LM: Yes. Time is very important. I said just now that my father learned more about me in the past couple of months. In fact, I also learned more about him.

NYY: Do you know your father in a new way?

LM: I never think of that. I just feel he is very close when I see him.

NYY: What did you feel towards your father before?

LM: I was afraid of him before.

NYY: Even after you became an adult?

LM: Yes. I was afraid of him and disliked him. I didn't want to see him. We didn't see eye to eye.

NYY: I feel this point more strongly that this is a project about time. It's not a branch art museum, nor is it a landscape for the villagers, nor do you do this only to interact with the villagers.

LM: I don't think much about the time concept. I just feel I need more time to do my work.



Andy Warhol's Mao Portrait is hung in a family's sitting room.

NYY: According to my knowledge of you, you are very strict with yourself and demanding of yourself. Whenever you want to do something, you execute it step by step. However, for this project, don't you feel you are wasting time for most of the time?

LM: No. I don't think I am wasting time. I must experience the time. I know that I can't control outside things. I need more time to do my work. The more time I have the better I can deal with things here. Whether I was resting, eating, receiving my friends, or dealing with family matters, I never thought I was wasting time.

NYY: The reason I mentioned this is because that you told me you were upset before leaving New York. We both stayed in New York for half a year almost at the same time last year. You felt you kind of wasted time because you created little work. So, why don't you feel you are wasting time on this project?

LM: I don't reject the things that are not related to this project. Whether they have something to do with my project or not, I don't reject them. When I realized this, I don't feel that I am wasting time. Besides, I'm very busy, very very busy. There are many things I haven't found the time to do. I even neglected some very interesting things. Take the wall paintings of Sol LeWitt, for example. When we started the painting, the tree just sprouted. Just a few days ago, we found half of the wall was covered by the persimmon tree. We neglected this subtle thing, because we were engaged in other things. I keep reminding Zhong Ming that every piece of work we are doing now exists in parallel with each other. So keep an eye on them and don't forget that they are right there.

NYY: What's the difference between this project and your previous works?

LM: Looking back to my previous works, I found I always tried hard to make them as good as those great works I've seen.

NYY: Standardized works?

LM: Yes. I once saw many great works. I also want to create great works. But for this project, I don't want it to be any of those good works I've seen. This project is a turning point for me. Or maybe it's a change of my mind. Though I kept emphasizing that I wouldn't do standardized contemporary art, it just stayed in words. I never fulfilled my words out of my heart.

NYY: How did this change happen to you?

LM: One reason is the fact that I left Shanghai, the center of culture and contemporary art. Because I realized the limit of that environment; the second reason is that I came back to Qiuzhuang where I was immediately surrounded by real life. To me, art only takes up a very small part of life, so I don't take it too seriously; the third reason is due to my communications with you and Jay Brown. I compare my work with yours and then adjust my direction. I'm always thinking of where I really want to go and what I want.

NYY: This project is happening in sync with your life here, isn't it?

LM: I think so. Art comes from life. There is no sense in splitting art from life.

NYY: Did you try to cut down on the process of splitting art from life or are you just not splitting art from life at all?

LM: I want to put my art experience into life. But in the end what I saw was still life. I didn't see much art. But I think this might be more interesting. If the work doesn't come out of life, even though it turns out to be something exquisite or the essence of thought, it's not what I want.

NYY: OK, I have no more questions.



The video of Ulay/Abramovic performance art was played in Wang Gaoqi's grocery.

LM: In our last talk, you said you felt a little bored. Did you change your views about this project after two months?

NYY: I still feel bored. Everyday is the same, which is just like my past. I take the word "boredom" as a neutral word.

LM: I remember that the first time you came here, you were very enthusiastic about the project. It was extremely cold, but you were very high in mood.

NYY: I drank white wine everyday.

LM: Yes, you stayed here for about ten days during the spring festival, and then you were away for two months. In between that interval, I called you and asked you to come and help. Why did you come to help me or did you have your own plan? What were you thinking at that time?

NYY: I didn't know how long I would stay and didn't think of what I could do. I could only do you a little favor. Since you needed me at that time, I came. We are close, so close that we didn't need to care much about self-esteem.

LM: Don't you feel that you are wasting your time by coming here to help me?

NYY: We talked about that. As we are now middle aged, why not share our time? This time we can share two or three months. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. How could I let the chance go?

LM: Though you came to help me, you never stopped looking for a new direction and theme for your own creation.

NYY: My creation always happens in other places, but it takes some time to have the idea. I stayed here only for two months. I didn't have any idea in the first month.

LM: But later I saw you walk around the village everyday, with your camera. You walked through those little alleys and even walked in the river. Later on you took a series of pictures of the concrete walls and the tree branches. How did that idea come to you?

NYY: I've walked around the village for maybe ten times. All the things in the village look the same to me. Inside of the village, what we see is the real reflection of the Chinese rural areas: trash everywhere, no drainage system, hypocritical civilities; but outside of the village, what an idyllic scene if you ignored the pesticide bags at your feet: the flowing rivers, the rippling wheat fields, men plowing and women weaving. However, I don't want to create a fake idyllic scene, neither do I want to directly record the facts. I want the landscape itself to make a virtual reality. When you just arrived, I told you that the concrete walls were so ugly. I went to the villages both in the southern and northern part of China. I found there are decorations on the walls, some more, some less. But here, they just set up the wall, and then leave it there. Every newly built two-story building has those monotonous concrete walls. Before, at least the walls were made of red bricks. But as I passed by them every day, I started to accept them and gradually I started to appreciate them. For me, they don't possess an aesthetic feeling, but there is a vitality in them. Standing among the trash and trees, don't you feel that there is the life burning in them? I appreciate that. This is my view about this village.

LM: How did you notice the trees and concrete walls?

NYY: I discovered them all of a sudden. I neglected them at first. I passed by them every day. One day I took several pictures of them, and then started to take more pictures of them.

LM: So they were actually not discovered by your eyes but by the camera.

NYY: Yes, they were discovered by the camera.

LM: I think it's very interesting that you found these interesting scenes with your camera, which gave you the idea of this work.

NYY: The machine dominates humans, hahaha.

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