

**Display and Escape****"He Chi: Next Door"****Arrow Factory (38 Jianchang Hutong, off Guozijian Jie, Beijing), Mar 15—May 5, 2016**

This past spring, as an old elm tree in the Arrow Factory backyard began to sprout, He Chi observed the changing colors of the leaves every day and painted the room green. I thought that there wasn't much novelty in the concept for the project; it could have been completed in the mind. Before I headed there, I went over different shades of green that could work for leaves and ordered them according to imagined transformations. I expected little difference on site.

On a certain afternoon in April, He Chi and I were sitting in the doorway of Arrow Factory. The sky was azure blue, and fresh buds had appeared on the old elm tree. From time to time, dogs from the hutong houses slipped out for some fun; their owners chased them back in over and over again. By around four in the afternoon, the staff at the bakery next door were kneading the dough, working at full speed. The skies turned overcast and a light drizzle set in; the light darkened a bit and the leaves became subdued. He Chi clicked a few shots on the camera now and then, but he was mostly just sitting on the hutong across from the art space, observing the passers-by and the scenery. Last spring, in a mountainous part of Fujian, I saw some old men sitting alone in front of their homes, silent. Dogs set about in packs, going up or down the mountain, oblivious to the people. The afternoon flew by. The next day, the old men were again sitting there, from dawn to dusk.

It is so easy to neglect how He Chi uses his own body as a tool to sense time, sunlight, the wind and rain. Bringing his experience of living on the Northwest Plateau in China into the city, he contemplates how the weather and environment affects plants, searching intuitively for the right opportunities, much in the same way the old men in the mountains were waiting to sow and harvest. Though growth is an eternal state—predictable with knowledge—sunlight and winds vary by the day, with subtle differences in clarity and intensity; climactic transformations in each specific region render things unpredictable. Once inside the space at Arrow Factory, the green walls dazzled; if you stared long enough, the eyes saw patches of red and green. Look outside, and you see people passing back and forth; no one stopped or peeped in. The green edges formed an intangible barrier. I understood the green filling the entire room as the interior of the leaves or details of the scenery outside. He Chi has given up objectifying physical objects, and instead establishes through the human body an order between the old elm tree and the white box, all the while lowering that pressure from the awareness of viewing, instead offering viewers an opportunity to reflect independently on the object they are connected with. The green walls in Arrow Factory did not make up the entirety of the project—they transformed the artist's bodily experiences into visible output. The green walls were merely the technical means, not the complete form of the artwork.

He Chi did not elaborate on the title of the exhibition, “Next Door” (in Chinese, “隔馆” [geguan] or “Site of Separation” or “Hall of Separation”). Here, the word “Ge” originates from Wang Guowei’s *Renjian Cihua (Notes on Ci Poems in the World)*, in which “Ge” (“separation”; read as “implicit”, or “non-expressive”) and “Bu-Ge” (“non-separation”; read as “explicit”, or “expressive”) were employed to formulate aesthetic critiques of literary works. Wang Guowei praised “non-separation” and rejected “non-separation”. “Separation” is akin to observing flowers through the fog— through a layer of mediation. In contrast, “Non-Separation” is like looking at flowers right before one’s eyes—clear, straightforward, and easily visible. These standards might not seem as easy to tell apart today. The creations of artists always hover between the two—closer to the objective world or viewers, or else to the artistic subject or the artist. “Next Door” embeds the artist’s personal experience, which is a barrier as far as viewing is concerned, behind which is the rupture of urban living from the logic of life as it originally was in the countryside. The resonances between the two probably remind viewers to deepen their imagination about what is ruptured. Segregation, obstruction, and blockage have spatial connections in the literary sense; the “Hall of Separation” that He Chi describes, though to some extent a means of spatial rupture, is more of a temporal rupture. Yet all this is interconnected without any barrier being present in his private space-time. The intuitionist Henri Bergson believed that intuition can delve into the inner being of objects, whereas analysis remains a surface phenomenon, and therefore does not grasp the essence of an object. The essence of the world lies in a “moving continuity” which can be grasped only through intuition, while analysis starts with space-time, obstructs the continuity, and thus can only stay on the surface.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the analyses of artworks in this article are arbitrary and one-sided.

Three young ladies stopped to read the introduction to the project posted on the window at Arrow Factory. He Chi went up to chat with them for a bit. Aside for the neighbors (who were accustomed to it), they were the only passers-by who paid attention to the green room that day. Aside from the perspective of consumption, contemporary art spaces for the most part run parallel to social life, even if they are situated in a residential neighborhood, by the side of the road, inside a factory, or in a shopping mall. Art harbors an ambition to enter social life, and yet is often obstructed by these parallel spaces; social life keeps offering source material for artistic creation, while what artists ultimately weave together and display tends to be metaphors for society within contemporary art spaces. The mechanism of display was born from museums’ logic of collection which documents, historicizes, and makes sacred ordinary objects. Therefore, entering the parallel space of art—the exhibition space—it is very difficult to emphasize non-objectification—even with the most intangible form, dialogue, there’s always some measure for disguised conversion. Debord’s prescription was to provoke more actions that enter into the realm of reality, gradually repair social relations and replace the manufacture of products consumed by passive onlookers. The Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk writes, “One reason why artists are no longer interested in a passive process of presenter-spectator is the fact that such communication has been entirely appropriated by the commercial world....After all, nowadays one could receive an aesthetic experience on every corner.” The artist and activist Gregory Sholette and the art historian Blake Stimson note that “in a world all but totally subjugated by

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<sup>1</sup> Li Duo, Analyses on Wang Guowei’s “Ge” and “Bu-Ge”.

the commodity form and the spectacle it generates, the only remaining theater of action is direct engagement with the forces of production.”<sup>2</sup> Proponents of this logic have been quick to escape from the traditional mechanism of display by bringing about real short-term or periodic incidents in the social space, or incorporating practical functionalities into their projects in order to differentiate them from works born under the logic of pure display—and in this way return art to social life. The key is to have it break free from the shackles of display—that constant impulse towards the object and the merchandise.

The high-profile exhibition in 2015 “Unlived by What is Seen”, held at Beijing’s three most important art galleries, had at its core the notion of refuting the consumption of images. Afterwards, the exhibition was heavily criticized for its attempt to occupy the moral high ground not with image consumption as its focus, but by rearranging everyday incidents or happenings initiated by artists and placing them in the exhibition space—yet returning to the conventional mechanism of display, fundamentally, is contradictory and reactionary. These incidents did not depend on exhibition spaces to come about, but *do* badly need exhibition spaces as the site of effective execution. Moreover, so far, such artworks do not have any criteria of assessment, and they are validated by their existence alone. This is because once effectiveness becomes the requirement, the moral legitimacy revolving around artistic creation through actions (but not images) will once again be questioned. Getting closer to concrete issues but being far removed from artists as subjects can make a show of power through dissemination—but then again, that will diverge completely from artists’ undertakings.

Two plays I saw recently feature two different forms of disconnection or separation. “The Balcony”, adapted from Jean Genet’s work, used “environmental theater” as its selling point—with the seats removed, it allowed the audience to walk around the space. Nonprofessional actors had weak control over their bodies, but nevertheless wanted to grasp a sense of performing on stage; the beam of intangible spotlight above them pigeonholed their performance, disconnecting the story of the play from the audience even without the seat barrier. Another play, “The Survived Summertime”, created by young theater workers Yu Kai, Chen Chencheng, and Wu Jiamin, attempted to take the audience back to the summertimes of their respective childhoods. The theater venue used smells, lighting, and voices to establish situational contexts which more or less had some practical effect. Nevertheless, the interior monologues that ran through the entire play were overly self-centered—which, coupled with highly skilled use of body language, resulted in a sense of detachment and accentuated the awareness of the creators’ emotional appeal.

An art project that relies heavily on the artists as subjects obstructs its passage to the perception of objective reality (audience), whereas dwelling in the objective realm makes artists’ pursuit susceptible to losing its necessity and becoming merely the reportage of incidents—a dilemma confronted by every action. Apart from the above-mentioned tension, the difficulty in initiating actions also lies in the need to avoid double misreading—that is, not to use old models of cognition; and yet it is difficult to discern diverse perspectives and

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<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*. Chapter one: “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents”.

organizing models at the outset. Perhaps the only option for connecting with the future while being “separate” (“Ge”) from/about the present is to rely on the endless imagination of artists. When language cannot permeate, then the purpose of providing a convenient path is to achieve being “non-separation” (“Bu-Ge”) in the delivery.

*Kaili Blues*, a hugely popular recent film, has been panned for its use of long takes for the last forty minutes, with the complaints focusing on the rigidity of such a device—a heavy vestige of the old masters. Looking back at the film itself, the employment of long takes indeed forms a temporal parallel with the audience—which, coupled with the male protagonist’s clumsy poetry and a meaningless camera shot of a forklift truck, depicts the daily visage of Kaili, a third- or fourth-tier small town. Internet broadcasts, too, parallel the present and can dispel the barriers of space. Unlike the total consumerization of web celebrities, the endless daily routines recorded around the clock by global surveillance can be returned to reality only because they are never gazed upon excessively.

The hutong at night was dimly lit. Without light, the color of the leaves on the old elm tree was totally invisible. Having drawn a black curtain inside the room, He Chi was repainting the green for the day. As opposed to what I had guessed, he merely added a couple of layers over the previous hue.