



LIAO FEI: RESTRICTIONS ARE FUN

The first time I “saw” Liao Fei was by sheer coincidence. At an NGO exhibition, I saw Liao Fei’s work, “Smoke”, which was jointly completed with craftsmen from Loutang, a traditional town in the northern part of Shanghai. In the video, he rides a Forever traditional 28” bike, the back seat of which is equipped with a chimney made of galvanized iron. He cycles slowly on the small streets of the town like a vendor, and during the riding, he is constantly looking for things to burn, and produce different smoke by burning different materials. From the straws, plastic and newspaper to the scattered smoke, i.e. from one form to another, Liao Fei is very concerned about the change and transformation in different items. Coincidentally, this observation of the paths of the world was naturally inherited in the 2016 SHMOG “Annealing” project, “Plain”.

In fact, Liao Fei was not a newcomer to the “Annealing” project.

In the early spring of 2015, when Zhang Ding’s “Black Substance” was launched, SHMOG began to consider the future artist for the “Annealing” project. “After viewing Zhang Ding’s works, I thought it was fun, and I myself also wanted to explore the possibilities of this material,” Liao Fei then engaged himself in the project with this simple idea. Those

CONTINUOUS SURFACE (2.2m³) / 2016

by Liao Fei

who have seen the 2016 “Plain” exhibition must not have imagined what the project was like or what the artist was thinking in the beginning. At that time, the Glaze Gallery of SHMOG was located on the side of the main road, and it was covered by metal frame-window glass, which was a bit nostalgic with some industrial style. “In the beginning, I planned to tear down all the glass windows of the gallery, melt them, re-make them into window glass, and put it back in the frames. I wanted to videotape the process, edit it into a video work as the result of the ‘Annealing’ project. In this process of re-melting-making-cooling, Liao Fei believed that the substance would change, and the remodeled glass became less transparent, leading to subtle changes in light in the entire display space. In the meantime, some of the glass would be lost in the process of this high-temperature furnace, so the remade windows could be smaller than the original size, thus leaving breaches on the window edges. When the audience walked into the space, what they would see was a seemingly empty room; after careful observation, they would find the delicate differences in the surrounding glass.

This bold and fresh idea was supported by the museum, but the real implementation was not always under control. The change of the exhibition site, the huge amount of the glass, the insufficient furnace temperature, and the insufficient thickness of remade glass to be installed... After repeated experiments, Liao Fei found that he needed to remove the three labels he had on glass in the beginning: transparent, fixed and material, for there lay the biggest misunderstandings about glass: “There was too many principles and texture I didn’t know in the process of melting glass. This transparent material is ‘another material’ for me. Unlike other materials I imagined at first, glass could be melted and then turned into some new form: it is not ‘fixed’.”

Time waits for no one and rushes onward like streams. From the Spring Festival of 2016 when the museum first contacted Liao Fei, to the early autumn when he experienced repeated failures during experiments, both the museum and Liao Fei felt discouraged and a bit suffering. However, in art, sometimes mistakes and frustrations are a catalyst to help artists continue to think deeply about their work content and directions.

On one afternoon before the 2016 National Day, Liao Fei once again visited the museum with his iconic backpack. Before I expressed regret for his another experimental failure, he excitedly took out a new proposal which was based on the latest exhibition space layout, completely abandoning the original plan that he tried for the past six months. When my colleagues and I saw the new manuscripts, we were puzzled by those rough and simple lines overlapping together. “I would like to use the scene where water drops into the lake as the simulation model.” Before anyone had the slightest idea, Liao Fei began to describe the final effect of the exhibition: he would layers of flat glass layers and hollow holes to show the ripple caused by a drop of water into the lake, “I want to use flat glass and the cold processing technique, with the most common old green glass.



I want to use this common material to express the relationship between the material and our daily life, as well as the changes of the material in the social environment.

With the settling down of the new plan, the exhibition was then implemented accordingly. Soon after Liao Fei went back to the studio, I received his e-mail on the same day, "I found something interesting when I was calculating the ripples of the water drop. The depth of water has a great impact on the spread of the ripples, so between the 2.5 m^3 water and the 1 m^3 water, the difference of the speed the ripples spread can be as twice as fast, and the cone shape formed in the model can also vary greatly. It's very interesting and unexpected, thanks to the power of nature." An accurate and perfect presentation, required accurate calculation, but the generation of the water drop model was not easy. During the project, when Liao Fei was staying in the United States for artistic issues, he invited professional students at MIT to establish the calculation model according to the formula. Liao Fei was thinking about a "water drop in void", but it failed calculation as any water drop model must originate from a real-world environment, so the water drop must be put in a space for actual calculation, while considering the relationship between waves, the spread speed of ripples, the impact of the wall of the pool on water, and even whether the drop was from the sea or the lake. After several drafts, Liao Fei decided that the work would be one sea water drop falling into 1 m and 2.2 m of water, thus determining the final rendering.

When the "Plain" was officially open to the public, I believe the audience were overwhelmed by the three massive sets of works. An ordinary office was turned into a contemporary "white box", and a room covering 300 square meters was stuffed with



FAILURE EXPERIMENT
PRODUCT

glass, wood plates and wood sticks to be turned into the massive installation of “Plain”. The work only left the audience a 65cm-wide trail, to push or “force” the audience to feel and experience the interaction between the work and space, between materials and individuals. Two sets of glass installations—“Continuous Plain 1m³”, with a diameter of 1 meter and the “Continuous Plane 2.2m³” with a diameter of 1 meter—were placed at the exit and entrance of the exhibition, which substantially and forcefully displayed ripples generated on the plane from a drop of water at a certain moment. The ripples were also subject to changes in the depth of the water under the plane, resulting in changes in speed and completely different extensions on the time axis. The properties of the “Plain” exist only in our mind at certain moment, like in the Zeno’s paradoxes. We can only use our imagination “at this moment” to think about the whole picture of the plain.

In Liao Fei’s view, during his participation in the “Annealing” project of about a year, the most difficult thing was the “resistance” he felt in glass making techniques: from glass melting in the beginning, to the hole-drilling and thickness selection on glass plates in the new plan, and then to the hanging of the work which weighed about 4 tons, the implementation was nothing like what he expected in mind. “I like this kind of ‘resistance’,” Liao said optimistically. And even when the three sets of works were not able to be displayed elsewhere due to their size, he thought, “As these works were customized on the basis of the space and thus reflect the influence between materials and space, such mutual restriction is also fun.”

“In my future works, I will keep using glass and consider combining it with other materials, because I’m very interested in materials themselves. I like such so-called

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‘restrictions’, which is fun for the artists as this will eventually lead to the creation of the information conveyed in the works.” Liao Fei does not think that the glass, which is strong in industrial and craftsmanship characteristics, will influence the idea expression which is an emphasis of the contemporary, “Artists have their own scope of work, and so does glass; the two can undoubtedly produce an intersection, where the most interesting works may be born.”

Liao Fei now continues to explore the meaning of the material itself in a more in-depth level. “The main component of the glass is silica, and I am particularly interested in element of the ‘silicon’, Although silicon is the most common natural element in the Crust, humans have invented a lot of silicon compounds that have different shapes and structures. For example, the granite is a natural product of temperature, pressure and crustal movements, and humans can also create more and more silicon compounds. I would love to explore the relationship and contradiction between them.” Liao Fei develops interest of any research from the doubts he has about the surrounding things and himself; he explores the basic principles of things to gain wisdom and enlightenment for his style and works. Any cognitive progress made nowadays in humanity is largely dependent on scientific positivism. The mainstream world view to understand the outside world is basically a binary view on matters, which undoubtedly carries our hope to make a clear division of things. Isn’t this a resistance or restriction? Just as shown in “Plain”, how is it possible that there are absolute “plains” in the world?

“Restrictions are like rocks in the river; the water passes the rocks and eventually converge into a new stream. Such restrictions or resistance will result in very interesting outcomes. We are having a profound relationship with this material and looking to express in a more in-depth way so artists may have to jump out of the box. Restrictions of a material are fun.”

Ubiquitous as it is, restriction brings out the best of but some artists.

TEXT: CATHYE YANG