

Regarding Searching for Keywords

A dialogue between Hu Fang (HF) and Xu Tan (XT)

HF

How many people have you interviewed altogether *during the Searching for Keywords* process in the last 2 years?

XT

At the moment, some of the words and texts are merely a portion of the project. I reckon there must have been about twenty or so people interviewed in Zhang Jiang (Shanghai), and about twenty or so artists all over the country. Aside from those, there had been more interviews done in Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

HF

The main method of research for *Keywords* was through the medium of interviews and dialogues. Are interviews, for you, a methodology that is more vivid and effective?

XT

I do attempt other methods, for instance through Google or Baidu, to do my research. However, the videotaping of an interview produces a visual medium which is very important to me. A voice recording without images would be a totally different thing altogether. For me, this image, the expression of a person and his environment are absolutely integral factors for the linguistic realm. Moreover, all the interviews were direct, impromptu ones, and the immediacy of them is also very essential.

HF

Yet the final video work that was exhibited had some post-production work which you had done, notably the slowing down of the speed of the dialogues.

XT

I altered both the speed and pitch of the recordings, but that did not change their sense of immediacy and directness. This is because I want to accentuate people's self-consciousness and their surrounding. Also, I had specially chosen specific angles for the shots, such that I can film the person in such a way that is in accordance to the final presentation.

HF

Dictionary of Keywords is basically developed through these interviews and dialogues. When you were editing the work, did you carry out a process of analysing the words?

XT

Yes, the process of developing *Dictionary of Keywords* includes looking for various keywords and then categorising them, which in itself is a sort of analysis. However the kind of records I create is not based on a kind of scientific research or investigative sampling of society. The manner with which we encounter our material samples is not the same as the social sciences' investigations. Perhaps this indicates some sort of simulation at play – after all, simulation is related to the notion of play and gaming.

On another note, I think it could be meaningful too if we analyze this from the perspective of linguistics. However this could well be a very demanding job. For instance, in Chinese, many important phrases have a strong “a” intonation in them, such as “prosper” (“fa da”), or “to beat” (“da”) - some words that possess a deeper, unspoken meaning have a more modest sound to their vowels. Conjectures like these would be regarded as unprofessional by professional linguists, but it renders itself as being interesting when viewed from the perspective of video art.

HF

In fact, do the keywords that emerge from this work reveal your personal interest in the link between social consciousness and individual mindfulness? A lot of words have concrete conversational meanings in a linguistic environment. However they can transcend these concrete meanings from their common realm of understanding and take on a symbolic significance.

XT

From another perspective, this whole project is similar to a kind of linguistic game. But through this sort of game, it can develop a kind of symbolic correspondence with reality. We always say that art is mythology. Well then, language is like a kind of structure too. I feel that we cannot view keywords as a real reaction of contemporary society. We call them “keywords” - “keywords” are key. What this says is: you can derive some things from these sorts of linguistic games, and these things are provided for according to the rules of the game. You could, for instance, say that a lot of Chinese artists talk about “relations” - work relations, public relations. The word “relations” is used very frequently, and perhaps it cannot really explain any problems. Maybe this community of people use it more often, or maybe the folks who were interviewed today uttered this phrase more often today, this is something we can't be sure of. However, by treating them as “keywords”, an intriguing situation arises. You can sense some sort of symbolism within. That is to say, we Chinese people have a great interest in relations between people, one which is evident and fascinating. I'd mentioned before that our society is really one that is collective and communal, yet there are some artists like Wang Jianwei, who in his interviews repeats the phrase “collective” numerous times. That's why in fact, through this method - which is akin to spotting the ball that falls off-court - you can begin to sense such conceptual matter. You may vaguely wonder how these artists have entered the world of art or how this road towards entering the art world structured.

Hence, I didn't really want to embark upon a discourse about society through the idea keywords. Rather, I feel that there is a relatively large proportion of possible linguistic games here. I recall

something I saw whilst on a train – some young people looking very serious as they played a “game of killer”, and the people around them all found this hard to believe. I feel that through keywords, we can construct a kind of game akin to this.

HF

I think the topic of keywords comes a lot from your perspective in your personal practice, to look for a kind of immediate understanding of the situation as well as a way of participating in it at once. Words are therefore regarded as a sort of crucial material for your work. They link up the flow of consciousness with changes in the society as a whole

XT

Yes, I feel that this “linking up” which you speak of is an urgent and essential concept. Hans Ulrich Obrist once asked me, what is the difference between what you do and Western conceptual art? I think that this is a very important question because it compels us to consider our understanding of conceptual art. For me, I reckon that conceptual art of the 70s placed more importance on the play within the concept itself, whereas for us today, our game with conceptual notions deals more with linguistic games. Our direction for works is built from thereon, and hence we create a closer relationship with our own construction of concepts and that which determines their contents.

Therefore, whether conceptual art is still in its framework is no longer important. What we are doing is something that deals with consciousness in our reality and environment today. I feel that to force this into a set model would be detrimental. I also feel that this activity into consciousness is not merely happening amongst Chinese artist; many young artists in the West influenced by globalization and intercultural exchange are also creating similar works.

The reason why I still want to use the phrase “game” here is that we were just talking about how it is a notion that is used in linguistics and conceptualization of social realities. Art is indeed a great game, but it differs from the usual fun games of daily life. The two “games” certainly have disparate meanings in this case.

HF

The state of constant change in Chinese society today makes it appear like it possesses infinite potential. It is precisely this potential which results in its being in a seemingly unresolved state. So this strong sense of fluidity can affect the way in which art enters society, as well as foster a more vibrant and optimistic environment.

XT

I don't believe that whatever it is we are optimistic about will definitely become a social reality. When we are feeling positive, all it indicates is that we believe we may have a chance, and to say that we have a chance is, like you mentioned, an indication that the future is not bright. Moreover, on the one hand, this future – which isn't necessarily brilliant – accentuates to the whole world how unresolved it is; on the other hand, it precisely proves that this society still possesses some sort of energy. I feel that in its entirety, this situation is very meaningful. I think that this aspect is

evident in the works of artists such as Cao Fei.

HF

Should this sort of change also provide a sort of suggestion to activities related to the new perspective on knowledge and meaning – that is, to reject strict definitions and either/or propositions?

XT

I feel that in terms of the developments and vicissitudes of human culture, when it is at its brightest, it also means that it will be on the decline soon. I reckon that there're two parallels in the epistemological activities of humankind. For instance, just as we need two legs to walk, there are logical ways of acting and their illogical, crazy diametrical opposites. These two are constantly mutually reacting. What is interesting is: in China, the formulation of a logical construct and that of a counter-logical one lies in the consciousness of the same person, who is building up a very fascinating mode of thinking for the future.

This is why I told an artist yesterday, he said that the concept of keywords is one that comes from the West, and isn't suitable for use or consideration in China. What I meant to say earlier is precisely this – the concept of keywords is indeed invented by the West, but this term doesn't hold much importance in the environment of Western linguistics; rather, it is extremely appropriate in China and is a term used often in Chinese. In China, keywords are used widely – you can see keywords in the newspapers and magazines everyday – and this is simply because in China, keywords are themselves unclear entities. They are not the sort of products derived from logic and analysis in the manner that the West is used to. If we say that the West specializes in the invention, use, promotion and development of tools, then we can also claim that we are already used to not having a crutch to aid us in our progress. Hence, because keywords are such fuzzy conceptual tools in our context, I feel that this methodology for thought coincides well with the kind of inner consciousness that we are accustomed to.

HF

As I was reading these keywords, I could sense their connection to some sort of collective consciousness. But this relationship is exactly that within this project which seems rather ambiguous. I can feel that these keywords are actually not entities meant for analysis, but are meant to be media to be encountered and experienced by everyone...

XT

Right, the meanings of these keywords are really manifested within the ebb and flow of collective consciousness. For instance, I sense that Chinese people are more concerned about societal living than ways of creation. I also feel that this in itself is a kind of collective consciousness and knowledge. I think this covers quite an extensive arena and a lot of things are not really the way I imagine or believe them to be. At the same time, the sort of investigations that we do cannot accurately depict the movement of this collective consciousness. However, you can vaguely sense the movement itself, and it is precisely why this experience seems so much more alluring and intriguing.

HF

The whole research process of keywords is a comprehensive effort, and includes a live workshop, a dictionary and a website. It has become a multi-media process-led project. If the dictionary and website provide audiences with means of “self-learning” or “self-discovery”, then what is the focus of the live workshop in terms of interaction with audiences?

XT

I don't think the project is solely a sort of discourse or exchange on a linguistic level. It touches on myriad experiences that entwines the Chinese language with corresponding information emerging from Chinese society. This so-called artistic experience involves elements of knowledge, but can certainly also be attributed to the current interest in China as being “hot” or “hip”. If people had absolutely no interest whatsoever with Chinese society today, then the workshop would never had happened. Furthermore, the live workshop also presented propositions for culture and collective knowledge in the future. If everyone is not keen on the various modes of thinking and whether these can create true culture of value, then the workshop would also be hard to execute. This particular point is something that I am interested to discuss further with the audience. At the same time, through these participants, I can learn about the disparate keywords that they offer from various societies with different backgrounds and culture. Therefore, the workshop itself has become a means of extended research for me.

HF

Through this process, the research into keywords has become a means for self-learning and individual growth, while finally you aim to capture some essence that is constantly altering.

XT

Why not create another meaningful game in the linguistic environment of our society today? In this game, the way you play, the things you discover will always be fascinating. The future will not be the same as today's reality. Perhaps it will have more meaning than what we have today – this is absolutely possible. That is exactly why this project presents a sense of vigor as well.

4th November 2007, at Vitamin Creative Space “Beijing Pavilion”