

Multiple Practices and the Logic of Narrative

Text: Luan Zhichao

Yang Yuanyuan's artistic practice has always been multifaceted - even though multiplicity does not have any unique connotation in the contemporary art field, because most contemporary artists work with multiple mediums and deal with various issues concerning art, society, history, politics and environment, in attempt to make their works more accessible to a wider audience, while also reinforcing the value of the works regardless of restrictions in space, time and interpretation. Multiple practices have become an inevitable choice for artists in this day and age. It is clear that multiplicity in this sense is also a trait in Yang's practice - her recent works comprise of different forms such as images, texts, installations and artist books, and themes such as cities, migration, image, narrative, identity and memory are often seen in her work. However, in comparison to multiplicity in this context, what makes Yang's work more complex and intriguing is the multiple structure of her practice itself, which is a conscious and self-aware kind of multiplicity.

To look or to read? This might be our initial reaction when we first encounter Yang Yuanyuan's work. We instinctually make a distinction between image and text, visual and textual narrative. This distinction ensures that we are not lost in the two different types of symbolic logic, and ensures that we follow both of these narrative threads to make sense of what the artist is trying to say. Furthermore, most of the time we see text as a secondary element in visual arts, as a mere description of or a supplement to the visual content - even though this perspective makes the assumption of an inadequacy in our eyes and in the act of looking itself from the very beginning.

However, this is not an either-or situation to Yang, the two logics were never binary opposites. What is worth mentioning is that the artist always claimed to be someone who communicates visually, though she often talks about the novelists and writers whom she admires in conversations and in her artistic practice. To her, between image and text is not a "1+1=2" kind of relationship, but an internalised way of thinking cultivated over many years of observing and reading; artistic creation is not about the act of looking and reading, but the ways to make them possible in the process of creation itself. It is within the montage of image and text that looking and reading can be practiced, thereby reinforcing the presence and validity of both of these logics.

Hence, the issues concerning artistic creation in Yang Yuanyuan's practice have been closely related to looking and reading in multiple senses from the very beginning. She has restored a semiotic way of looking and reading where we separate image from text, and distinguish between looking and reading - image and

text are both symbols for communication, and are both narrative forms, their functions and methods are similar in terms of non-ideological signifier and signified. From this perspective, it is no longer strange to find various visual and textual materials such as old family photos, archival photos, photos taken by the artist herself, movies, documentations, letters and novels in Yang's works, where all of these materials signify the same characters, locations, events. Whether the artist is communicating through image or through text; using existing or original images and texts to create her narrative; in a third person or in a first person perspective, none of these matter - but the importance lies within the narrative itself; in the contexts where these images and texts become narrative; and in the way the artist uses these materials to construct the stories.

This abolishes the secondary classification of mediums, but returning to the smallest element before the medium; where looking and reading are treated without distinction, back to the most basic cognitive mode, which is a kind of reduction and restoration - it cancels out all the labels that we impose on images and texts, which then become image and text themselves; though at the same time this is also a kind of magnification - the materials have been rendered boundless, and have become the most basic symbolic element in creation. In this sense, image and text to the artist are like paint to a painter, they are the basic materials in her practice. It could even be said that this is a type of phenomenological creation, an empirical way of producing - each image and text are in essence panoramic, leading to all worlds and to all pasts and futures.

She is like an archeologist, she never misses anything that she discovers in the process of creation, and never passes up on any rumour she hears on the street; she is like a detective, she pays attention to details, and tries to piece together a story from the past; she is like a weaver, she weaves images and texts in a framework where the logic within varies, and intertwined; she is also like a construction worker, she builds a scaffold for a story with images and texts. What kind of narrative logic is this? What kind of looking and reading experience is this for the spectator or the reader?

Firstly, this is a realistic narrative. It is evident in her use of past-tense in telling the stories, as well as the documentations and true stories that she has included in her work. However, realism is to construct a character, to tell a truth and to prove a truth - realist artists always try to tell us something in their narrative. This is why objects, characters, locations and times in realist works are always described in such clear and linear ways, and the narrative logic is always reinforced. These elements are evident in Yang Yuanyuan's work, where we are always able to find interesting long stories, with characters who are born and have growth, experiences and memories. Realistic images and texts construct a lively character, as well as the stories surrounding this characters. However, when these elements try to arrive at a destination, an ending, or a truth, we would quickly lose track of them. Just as the way the artist on the one hand uses images and texts in her work, while on the other hand, she questions the history, transformation,

characteristics and the possibility of the two as part of her artistic creation - there is always a sense of self-reflexivity and self-destruction, a recurrent, superficial realistic illusion.

Without a doubt, it is not the artist's intention to recreate Kraków in *10 Days In Kraków*, or Porto Alegre in *At the Place of Crossed Sights*, nor is it to tell a story of the lives of photographers V and T who lived on the opposite sides of the ocean. Behind these realistic settings, a kind of narrative that is based on but differ from realism is cultivated. In this kind of narrative, our focus should not be on what the artist has recreated with these materials, but the kind of clues that she has hidden within the materials; the purpose of narrative at this point is not to tell others of the events that have taken place, but to discover the many coincidences and possibilities, as well as indications and revelations of the future that have been hidden in the details of these events.

This is where contradiction and conflict inevitably happen: on the one hand there are real, existing materials, on the other hand there are the semi-fictional stories that the artist has made up with these materials; an absolutely objective truth and also an entirely subjective fiction. This way of producing is bound to provoke and cause certain effects - when image and text become materials for creation, and when narrative becomes the construction and deconstruction of these materials. It could also be said that it is a kind of creation that is initiated by the artist's attempt at defining her creative methods: to create is not to impose a fixed form or style onto a certain topic, but to interpret the narrative logic itself, and to reconstruct these creative methods.

Content and form are creative logics shared by art and literature, to a certain extent, they reaffirm the order of narrative. In abandoning this logic would perhaps shed some light on the disorder in Yang Yuanyuan's practice. Indeed, I do not wish to make the assumption of "like work like artist", because I have experienced more poetic judgment and logical thinking in her work than with her as a person. In terms of narrative form and content, the same disorder is found both with her and in her work. This troubled me immensely from the very beginning, just like the difficult position that her texts and writings have placed me in - the readers can be satisfied by the information and entertainment that the artist's texts present to them, though they also expect an insightful interpretation of these information and a firm value judgement in critical writings. Even if we were not to talk about it critically, but to merely describe the work itself, I would still have many questions to ask - to describe it is a predicament in itself. There are too many complicated relationships between characters, too many hidden information, too many spatial threads, too many connotations and signifiers... These questions are like blackholes in a game, they make me doubt myself - can I make assumptions, under the circumstances where so many questions have been left unanswered; though at the same time I also doubt whether they are the core issues in question?

The answer that I have given myself is no. To me, this kind of looking and the blackholes in our understanding have given Yang's work an uniqueness and complexity, which is also part of its charm. Looking at her work is as though you have fallen into a long and endless motion, or to have stepped into a river with no end in sight, and be in an eternal flow. All kinds of materials propel the development of narrative, with an indescribably strong sense of history and presence. We are faced with issues concerning society, politics, history, identity, memory, migration and cities in-between, where these issues have left their marks in the movement driven by images and texts, sometimes they transform into countless branches, while sometimes they gather together and create a grand image. These threads create an intricate web of space and time, some span over centuries, some a mere few years; some cross paths or become close to one another in some point in time and space, and subsequently diverge; some come to a definite end, while others continue on outside of the context of the work... The blackholes within the narrative logic itself are what connect the pieces together. If we were to say that realistic narrative strives to tell a truth, then this kind of fiction that is based on reality would be striving to create blackholes, to create a logical maze. Each moment is a constructed moment, but also a resolved moment. Each image, each word presents a living person, an existing place, a documented conversation, and a trackable event. However, these presentations are empty to a certain extent, because what the spectator witnesses is a space-time that has once existed, which crumbles in the newly arranged images and texts, and together, they construct the next plotline and narrative. The specific information that these images and texts carry is not to describe the truth, but to resolve it; it goes through a process of self-denial in the narrative, while disguising and altering itself in the new images and texts.

Hence, V is important, and so is T, because the images and texts related to them are the materials that this project is based on, the narratives revolving around them construct the framework for the work; though at the same time, V and T are also not important, they are like Kafka's K, they are the necessary narrative elements and propellers of plot development - this is where characters become something similar to objects. It could be said that, if there is a main character and a consistent thread that exist throughout these works, then it would be the artist herself and her narrative logic respectively. At this time, the work is like a poetic spaces constructed by images and texts, while the people and objects in these materials have become spatial elements, the tension between looking and reading is everywhere, constructing an imaginary model. This model embodies the presence of narrative, on the one hand it is the realistic narrative's representation of an objective world, on the other hand it is the imagination that the artist has constructed basing on these fragments of reality. The blackhole between reality and fiction embodies the fracture between a subject and an existed reality, while the work itself and the fragments of self-denial within create the threads that the audience could comprehend with.

Hence I have given up on making sense of the characters and events in the artist's work. The reason for that is, after a series of attempts, while I realised that I was deep in a kind of linear narrative logic, the artist had already begun on a journey that she practices in real life: walking, observing, communicating - ceaselessly establishing relationships, the important thing is not to possess truth, nor to recreate reality, but to collect fragments that can construct thousands of parallel space-time and possible narratives; while I searched for an ending for the story, the artist had already begun thinking about how to connect the separate threads, thereby starting an endless narrative where the beginning and the end overlap; while I made sense of an event in the story, the artist had already emphasised the importance of the personal experience and the perception of this event. In this sense, the importance of traveling and cities is of the same importance as narrative, there are levels of truth, as well as levels of fiction. If journeys and cities in real life have constructed the starting point of creation, then fictional journeys and cities are completed in creation itself. From streets to characters, locations to objects, events to memories, the artist uses images and texts as coordinate axis, to draw a city and the historical maps of some of these people. This map is not panoramic, it moves from one point in the universe to the other, following the narrative constructed by the artist with images and texts, unraveling from the far past to the present. Connecting these two coordinate axis, the curves or routes grouped together are the conversations initiated by the artist with her external and personal experiences. To look or to read? The answer is perhaps a conversational journey similar to the creative logic of the artist.