

Perceptual Strategies

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Artistic research and knowledge production are the buzzwords in today's global world of art. The buzzwords refer to forms of research and knowledge that cannot be channeled through rigid academic-scientific guide-lines dealing with generalization, duplication, and quantification. Artistic research engages in the unique, the qualitative, the particular, and the local. In other words, the content of artistic research can be understood as a non-philosophical, experimental rearticulation of how various media – such as painting, photography, and public space art – present the world visually, in the form of perceptual regimes and strategies. Artistic research defends itself critically against each mode of visual reduction and cultural disciplining in the form of a dynamic mapping of a series of heterogeneous, open-ended rearticulations, thus demonstrating different forms of knowledge production. In so doing, artistic research deals intrinsically with the crucial question of the artistic image's role and its media-specific position in current visual cultures.

The work of Li Lei, the Chinese abstractionist, indeed sides with artistic research and knowledge production. Artistic research's focus on issues such as the importance of autonomy of research, critical attitude, and communication; and the above mentioned features of the unique, the qualitative, the particular, and the local; all resonate in Li Lei's work. Li Lei's abstract works do not appear as singular works of art; they are not mere incidents in a familiar field of traditional abstractionism. In China, there is no abstract tradition, let alone a body of well-known classic abstract art. Therefore, Li Lei produces his works in a serial form, where series such as the Tao Series, the Landscape and Humanist Painting series, and the Dhyana Flower Series demonstrate a form of artistic research conducted in China's local art scene, where abstract art is a unique mode of painting, inviting both artists and viewers to develop a novel attitude with respect to perceptual strategies, iconographic imagination, and communicative skills. In other words, Li Lei's artistic research projects engage in a novel perceptual regime, based on utilizing a painterly medium in an abstract language, so that a topical iconography could be developed, able to open new registers of perception related to novel possibilities of orientation, and imagination.

In the late 1980s, critics like Robert Hughes could still distinguish the domain of painting from mass culture. Hughes argues, "Painting is exactly what mass visual media are not: a way of specific engagement, not of general seduction." Such views came to an abrupt end during the 1990s. Suddenly it seemed that painting could easily assimilate any other medium. The history preceding this development is told aptly by Peter Weibel in *Pittura Immedia*. In Weibel's view, painting up until the 1970s was categorized by the assumption that "there is a direct relationship between paint/color and the canvas, with artistic subjectivity as the only mediator."⁽¹⁾ However, during the 1980s, painting leapt back into the illusion of immediacy, due to the transavant garde movement and the non-complex iconography of "wild painting." Weibel maintains that the 1990s facilitated an ideal synthesis of painting strategies linking to earlier achievements and scrutinizing the horizon of representation as such through critical experimentation. The new generation of painters not only reacts to the images produced by the media and the history of art, they go a step further, by also anticipating the consequences of these images for art. Peter Weibel describes this form of image production as *immediation*, i.e. the process of going through different media before painting, and rethinking the question of the visual.

It is through a similar reflexive strategy, i.e. thinking through the position of the image as such by way of a painterly detour, that Li Lei's vocabulary of images is defined. It is a language focused on the logic of visibility, through a dialectic tension of mediacy and immediacy. This procedure gives rise to a post-semiotic rediscovery of the image as a complex coalescence of visibility, discourse, body, and figurality, underscoring the dynamics of Li Lei's *immediation*: a strategy ultimately removing the artistic image permanently from the one-dimensional dictatorship of the accelerated iconography of mass culture. Thus, a novel, differential iconography emerges, able to bring an unprecedented experience within the reach of (Chinese) apprehension.

How could strategies of dynamic imagination and perception-based knowledge be further systematized, analyzed, and understood in a 21st-century theoretical sense? For that, we need a specific topical terminology filled with lines, maps, cartographies, and geographies. Indeed, we need the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze to guide us further in those explorations.

In *Negotiations*, Deleuze claims, "What we call a 'map' or sometimes a 'diagram' is a set of various interacting lines (thus the lines in a hand are a map). There are of course many different kinds of lines, both in art and in a society or a person. Some lines represent something, others are abstract. Some lines have various segments, others do not. Some weave through a space, others go in a certain direction. Some lines, no matter whether or not they are abstract, trace an outline, others do not. The most beautiful ones do. We think lines are the basic components of things and events. So everything has its geography, its cartography, its diagram. . . . There are various spaces correlated with different lines, and vice versa (here again, one might bring in scientific notions like Mandelbrot's fractals). Different sorts of lines involve different configurations of space and volume."⁽²⁾

The Deleuzian multiline or multiplicity-based network produces a specific mode of analysis "based on two components: a two-line streaming mode of analysis based on the thought of philosopher Henri Bergson, and the form of motion produced by quantum mechanics and its emission of particles and exchange of packets of energy producing the concept of nonlocalizability. . . . Deleuze's multiplicity mode of analysis creates a fascinating visualization of a figure of thought where a correlating, open system of two streams of interacting concepts . . . (are) all based on the interplay of lines, dimensions, strata, planes, spaces, and plateaus. . . ." ⁽³⁾ Thus, the streaming two-line mode of analysis, and its related multiplicity mode of analysis, yields two continuously interacting domains, producing a stream of novel concepts and insights. Li Lei as an artistic