

Art and True state of Emergency

Wang Hui

Abstract: "2020+" is a large-scale art exhibition presented at the Beijing Red Brick Art Museum on July 31st, 2020 through different media, online as well as and offline, exhibiting the work of 15 artists, such as Chen Shaoxiong, Chen Zhen, Olafur Eliasson, Hao Hao, Huang Yongping, Liang Shaoji, Lin Tianmiao, Ann Rorschach, Rachel Ross, Amway Sarah, Song Dong, Tao Hui, Wang Gongxin, Yang Zhenzhong, Yin Xiuzhen, etc., covering different categories, such as images, installations, interactive installations, etc., with the purpose to open a multi-dimensional cognitive space during the period of the global havoc of the new corona virus, look back at the earth from the universe, leap from the perspective of death to the angle of view of the macro formation, and draw out the reflection on the reality, parting, consumption, life, etc., closely related to the issues of news of the current moment. In addition to the offline exhibition hall of the Red Brick Art Museum, the "2020+" exhibition also exhibited the online work "Earth Perspective" created by Olafur Eliasson for the 2020 "World Earth Day", the online presentation, created by Tencent Art in the exclusively for the Chinese region. Professor Wang Hui was invited to be the art consultant for this exhibition and wrote the preface for the exhibition. In this preface, the author proposes that the worldwide pandemic of the virus will lead the human society which has not yet broken away from the measures of the social isolation into an even more dangerous and uncertain era, characterized by the disappearance of the clear border between the state of normality and state of exception. In this sense, the function of art is the opposite of its mission, which is to create a "true state of emergency", as Walter Benjamin said: to promote the formation of new cognition and sensitivity, and the birth of new forms of expression, which in turn provide inspiration and opportunities for the changes in the times we are in.

Keywords: 2020+, emergency, normality, chain of crises

At the end of the novel *Plague*, Camus described two kind of feelings of separating oneself from the world of plague: one kind is in the time, when plague has not ended yet, three people as medical doctors slip away in the night to go to the seaside for a swim, in one moment they experienced a long-time absent feeling of being carefree, however they nevertheless returned to the enclosed city; the second one is, when the plague suddenly ends, and the people, who were longing to return to the state of normality nevertheless bring about a inappropriate feeling. The opening of the "2020+" stands in between these two emotional states: COVID-19 is spread all over the world, however after the harsh battle against the epidemic, the majority of the Chinese regions obtained indeterminate freedom; people were strenuously seeking the fit between the "state of emergency" and "state of normality." Within limits of the world, the

virus has overstepped the boundaries of immunology, and triggered the chain of crises: economic crisis, political crisis, military crisis, sanitary crisis are all in reciprocal relation with the pestilence, so that the human societies, which have not yet broken away from social distancing enter into even more dangerous and unpredictable times – its characteristics is the fast disappearing of the clear distinction between the state of normality and state of exception.

The virus does not only invade individual person's body, but it also favors the collective body, and favors those people, who roam in markets, prisons, religious places or places of entertainment and simultaneously immediately infect the members of their families or their most close friends; the management of immunology requests the people to maintain the social distance, and to alienate as far as possible from the collective activities, but also requires to form strict collective boundaries between different areas. The new world stricken by the epidemic situation redefined the meaning of the community, cities, the borders and customs, and simultaneously re-divided the land, sea and sky traffic in turn. Protection and exclusion, unity and alienation, and prevention and mutual requirement are reestablished in new forms; however the language, which expresses these new contradictions (nation, state, sovereignty, ethnicity, regions) is nevertheless mostly old. In the times, when the old language is already deficient, can art provide a language that accurately expresses the new situation?

The individuality of life and death has sharply declined during the pandemic. People watch the rising and falling of numbers every day, and view the isolation and exile as the self-protection policy of the community or the country. Vanishing of the people like a receding wave has become a mass incident. How should we give prominence again to the individual lives and the meaning toward oneself in this mass event? The investigation of individuals from different contexts, different cultures, and in different socio-political conditions emitting "I will die," highlighting the various states of life in the shadow of the end of death, might be precisely the starting point for further inquiry.

While witnessing the singular persons one by one answering the inquiry, I could not but think about the countless medical personnel, countless volunteers, and countless anonymous people of the same kind, who had no choice but to stay trapped in the same place, and nevertheless constantly pay close attention to the calamity, knowing they can individually die, but still risk their own lives, devoted to the cause of saving others, that feeling of "endless distant places, endless people, all related to me." Can contemporary art transcend the style of individualism and recreate the detailed investigation of the human faith amidst the energy and hidden storage of the collectivity in the background of these actions?

The spread of virus has greatly increased the dependence on science and technology – especially medicine and digital technology,

but it has at the same time caused the issue of the boundary line between science and politics. The scientific process and its verification of results have to suspend the influence of politics, the economic funding, the international collaboration and "exterior elements" of the establishment of its process. Scientists, just as before, appeal to the autonomy of science in defense of their own activity; however, in times of the pandemic, the international relations, backgrounds of governments, national decision-making, social evaluation, public opinion, and various rumors have broken through the conventional boundaries of science and technology. Facing governmental inspection doesn't include only the funding of the resources for the research institutions, partnerships and social statuses of the experts on public health, but also the WHO itself.

Under these conditions, scientists and their research are also under the microscope of governments. Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has summarized this phenomenon as the "politicization of medicine" and "medicalization of politics," but these two concepts have room to go one step further: Bruno Latour in his early research came to an enlightening conclusion, that science's rejection of sociality is actually precisely the manifestation of its sociality. In this sense it is necessary to ask: what word would more accurately describe the mutual relationship between medicine and politics or sociality?

The global ecological crisis has prompted people to re-examine development models and lifestyles, but the epidemic crisis has also enhanced the reliance of the people on technology and urged the fear of lockdowns and breaking apart of the supply chains.

Digital technology has not only changed the mode of communication, but has also transformed social relations – from the mode of daily communication between relatives and friends, the mode of carrying out of education and public activities (such as distance learning, conferences and exhibitions, etc.) to the mode of management of countries, all have undergone tremendous changes. The pandemic also broke the illusion of the interconnection is the peaceful and natural channel. The flourishing of consulting the news, the revelry of social media is inevitably and self-evidently equated with the expanding of the public. However, the contrary is true, its consequence is the fragmentation of the public. In the introductory reading of the "The World Post" it is pointed out that in the contemporary context the interconnectedness may become the driving force of the separation. The question is, in the so-called post-truth era, can art play the role of anti-media media? What kind of cultural and political conditions can enable technological interconnection to become a channel for dialogue, communication and integration, rather than becoming an incentive for separation and confrontation?

The state of emergency has become the norm in daily life, and its scale and length are unprecedented. Theorists worry that socio-political

procedures will be replaced by sudden mechanisms, and people will have to succumb to more interventions in daily life, and the large-scale development of technological means are super convenient for such interventions. But is the dependence on technology just a product of a state of emergency? We have to ask ourselves: are the crises in the political system, economic system, and social relations caused by a state of emergency? Or on the contrary, the state of emergency is just the product of political, economic, social and ecological crises? The state of emergency reminds people: society needs self-protection, life needs self-management, production and lifestyle need to be readjusted, and unequal global relations need to be changed. The normalization of the state of emergency induces people to engage in their own work as usual. Driven by the desire to return to normal, they consciously and voluntarily conceal the conditions that cause the state of emergency, so that the world of life “unaffectedly” continues. In this sense, the true function of art is the opposite of its mission as creation of the “true state of emergency,” according to Walter Benjamin: it is the promotion and the formation of new cognition and sensitivity, and the birth of new forms of expression, which in turn provide inspiration and opportunities for the changes in the times we are in.

Therefore, “2020+” is not just the theme of an exhibition, but it is the meaning of an uncertain future, a “real emergency,” and the failure of the old language (including contemporary art) and the emergence of the multiple possibilities.

July 28th, 2020 on the trip to Yuenan
(translated from Chinese by Katja Kolšek)

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