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Meditations after Grand Narrations. Some Thoughts about the Work of Qiwei Zhang

In the preface to the 6th book of his *Treatise on Architecture*, written about 33 to 21 CE, Vitruvius tells the history of shipwrecked Aristippus, who is left by a storm, by nature's might, at an unknown shore (on the Greek Isle of Rhodes). Fearing the cruelty of unknown human beings and wandering on a deserted shore, he suddenly recognizes geometrical figures written in the sand with a stick. He rejoices that civilized and cultivated men dwell here. In the famous first edition of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, printed in Venice in 1482 CE by Erhart Ratdolt, the basic geometrical figures like circle, square and triangle are not printed in black ink but in gold. Western Modernism, both Classical and Early Modern, continued that praise of Geometry as a means and symbol of universal values of humanity. While human arts and crafts had created myriads of forms and styles over tens of thousands of years, Modernist Art blurred the boundaries between geometrical diagram and the Visual Arts of painting and sculpture. Bauhaus, De Stijl, International Style, and the modernist movements were met with broad and intense response in China where since the earliest times, in the pursuit of beauty and form, the most subtle and sophisticated employment of geometry could be observed in bronze vessels, porcelain, calligraphy and other artifacts.

To bring back art to its pure geometrical origins was the aim of some of the most influential art-isms within the fields of non-figurative art and modernist architecture both in Western and Chinese Modernisms. In the paintings of his *Encroach-Series* and in the 100 paper works, Qiwei Zhang refers to the huge archives of "pure forms" which Traditional and Modernist Art, in Asia as well as in Europe, left as an enormous arsenal of innumerable variations of basic forms -- a vast array of variations of only seemingly "universal" forms, all contaminated with signs of style and with marks of the ever changing canonical conventions of "good composition" and aesthetic norms and principles. Qiwei Zhang learned the lessons of Retro-Geo, studied the early Hans Haacke, the *Cells* and *Conduits* of Peter Halley, and the works of contemporary retro-modernist artists like Santiago Sierra and Monica Sosnowska, of contemporary "Modernisme noir".¹

Since around 1985, for Halley, Geometry is no longer a promise of civilization and of the comforts of culture and technology, but a confinement of our everyday life, the everyday reign of containers, conventions, cells, and circuits within the Western and westernized Cities. For contemporary critical Retro-Geo, any form is loaded with content, mimetic power, and historical memory. Qiwei Zhang, in his series of the "*Encroach-Paintings*" does explore this deep melancholic ambivalence. Due to the virtue of his brush, abstractions and forms, which by means of repetition and consummation became stereotypical patterns, are showing again the beauty and the lure of articulate form and meditative gesture. Though, within the very same moment, due to the virtue of his conceptual mind and his attention to the "everyday", his seemingly abstract forms remind us of the brutalism and absurdities of progress. His most recent video; *Duck*, puts both an archaically animated and a popped-up Avatar of modernist comfort within a noir setting which mixes ecological disaster with the gestures of Informel and Action Painting. For Zhang, not only the promise of geometry, but also the danger of dark ages is an imminent motive and movens of the acts and movements of painting and drawing. In the hundred paper works of his series, *Daily Life*, he adds the spices of irony and reflection to his most skillful repetitions, variations, and handcrafted appropriations of once contemporary forms and styles. The Graveyard of Forms and buried Utopias may be a promising playground for a relatively good life, due to the virtues of respect and the smile of reflection.

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Note

¹ See the author and Johan Frederik Hartle, *Modernisme noir. Revisionen des Modernismus in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*. In: Christoph Bertsch, Silvia Höller (eds.), *Cella. Strukturen der Ausgrenzung und Disziplinierung* (Exhibition Catalogue, Rome, Complesso monumentale di S. Michele a Ripa, 2009), Bozen-Innsbruck-Wien: Studienverlag, 2009, p. 225-234 (Italian translation: p. 199-206); and id., *Zelle, Raster, Würfel. Überlegungen zu Michel Foucault, Peter Halley und Gregor Schneider*, in: *ibid*, p. 207-215 (Italian translation: p. 199-206).