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Self-Imprisonment and Freedom: Yu Zhenli in His Eighteen Years of Living in the Mountains

Liu Xiaochun

In December 1988, Yu Zhenli wrote a limerick: “Mouth in the mouth, wandering in the wall, one remains a prisoner in the mouth; up and down, left and right, coming and going; a red apricot waiting in a circle, bring people back to prison. (口中口，牆中游，人在口中留為囚；上下左右步，來來去去走；一枝紅杏圈中候，引渡人再回到囚。)” This sly poem contains Yu Zhenli’s serious artistic attitude and attitude toward life that explains why he called his eighteen years of living in the mountains self-imprisonment.

Holding on to Freedom

Yu Zhenli is an artist of great creative energy. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), he traced and enlarged over two hundred portraits of Chairman Mao and created over eighty political propaganda paintings with great enthusiasm. Among them, *Welcome Brothers and Sisters to the Countryside* and *Socialism is Advancing Triumphantly Everywhere* can be listed among the representative artworks of the Cultural Revolution period. Afterwards, with the rapid changes in society, Yu’s artistic style also shifted violently into Scar art, with representative works such as *The Poetry of Peng’s Hometown Visit*, *National Disaster*, and *Old Oars*. Then his artistic style shifted to expressionism again, with his large oil painting *Women at Wedding Reception* (《吃喜酒的女人們》, 1989) becoming a famous work. Just as people realized his potential for expressionist painting, Yu turned to abstract painting on canvas with mixed materials and held his first

solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in March 1993. I hosted that exhibition for him, but the work was not classified, so nowadays it might as well be called abstract idealism. Later, when his talents for abstract painting were being discussed in academic circles, Yu gradually out of the painting circle. On 26 December 1994, he moved to Dahei Mountain in Dalian and started building a house from waste materials for eighteen years. Yu poured his artistic conceptions, social worries, thoughts of Zhuangzi, and life perceptions into the construction of the house, elevating his life, thoughts, and creations to a new level.

In that limerick, “mouth in the mouth” refers to the word return (回), and “man in the mouth” refers to the prisoner (囚). Each new exploration is leaving his old self, going away to find a home means to return, and a new exploration begins with a return. Exploration is a kind of self-reflection, hence the term self-imprisonment. He spent four years staying at home for abstract exploration, and at this time he spent eighteen years in self-imprisonment.

Self-imprisonment is not an escape from freedom or self-imposed closure, but rather self-respect for the solitude of the explorer, which is the artist’s commitment to independence and freedom.

Once the conditions are ripe, in an open state, the artist produces creativity “brought by the red apricot”, which is a gift from heaven according to a statement by Shi Tao. Only a few people can be “entrusted by heaven and earth (受天地之任)”, and “heaven grants people because they can be granted. (天之授人也，因其可授而



Figure 1. Yu Zhenli. *Little Electrician*. Propaganda painting, 75×53cm, 1972.

授之。)” Since people have been appointed, they must honor heaven and earth; however, only a few can abide by it and respect what they have been given. That is why Shi Tao sighed “Painters who perceive the world, must respect and persevere the feeling, strengthen and use it. It is connected with the outside and grows inside the heart. (夫受畫者，必尊而守之，強而用之，無間於外，無息於內。) *The Book of Changes* (《易傳》) says: ‘Heaven, in its motion, (gives the idea of) strength. The superior man, by this, nerves himself to ceaseless activity. (天行健，君子以自強不息。)’ This is why we should respect our feelings.” (Shi Tao’s words in the text are all quoted from *The Bitter Gourd Monk’s Paintings and Quotations* [《苦瓜和尚畫語錄》]). Self-imprisonment means respecting the acceptance of the attitude of a martyr.

People who practice self-imprisonment are lonely but also free. Yu Zhenli once described his mind when he left expressionism and turned to consider abstraction: “It was like walking in the night, at first we all explored the path together, but then fewer and fewer fellow walkers accompanied me. It was like suddenly falling

into a dry well, where people thought I was dead, but I found a lot of things I wanted to do down there, and the world was getting bigger and bigger. I embraced the wilderness almost in ecstasy without a complaint, becoming a lonely spirit keeper.” (Yu Zhenli’s words in the text are mainly quoted from the “Q & A transcript of Yu Zhenli and Liu Xiaochun”, *Art Literature*, 1994, 1st series [1st series overall]). His seclusion in the mountains is even more solitary, as if 10,000 people are running forward by the rules of the marathon, while he runs alone in reverse, falling into the castle of rubbish and ecstatically embracing the larger wilderness.

“Mouth in the mouth, wandering in the wall”—this is exactly what lonely minds are.

“Scripture must be with rights, the law must have the transformation” (Shi Tao). For the exhibition in 1993, Yu Zhenli said at that time “The exhibition is a funeral, when the exhibition is over, my life is finished, and I have to start again”. It shows that he already had a premonition that a new reincarnation of life and death was imminent, that a new rendition of the red apricot



Figure 2. Yu Zhenli. *Welcome Brothers and Sisters to the Countryside*. Propaganda painting, 1973.

would come, and that a new mandate from heaven was forthcoming. He fulfilled the prophecy with seclusion in the mountains for eighteen years, embracing the new birth and abiding by his heavenly vocation.

Nothing is greater than freedom of spirit. For the creators, solitude, respecting the senses, and self-imprisonment represent freedom.

Living is an Art

“Living is an art” is a postmodern concept of art. Postmodern, in short, means post-Duchamp. The erasure of the boundary between art and life is the derivative conception and phenomenon that Duchamp erased—the boundary between artwork and ready-made products. The real thing will take place in a few hundred years when there is no material art or artist in the human world. Until then, “life is art” is just a part of the artist’s future-oriented behavior. In the present age when life is not equal to art, there is only one possible way to implement the artist’s concept of life as art: to be absolutely like life

but never like life. It is life but not life, art but not art. Further, it will hold if the implementation of the artist’s act could coexist with these mutually contradictory assertions. Based on this, we see Yu Zhenli.

The first is that those eighteen years are Yu Zhenli’s life. Eighteen years ago, needing a studio due to the small size of his apartment, he chose Dahei Mountain after a study tour in Beijing and Dalian. Due to a lack of funds, he designed and built it himself and used construction waste extensively. During the construction, he worked with the two most common villagers’ assistants, the “two Wangs”, in the ravine, and built up a deep friendship. Moved by the selfless assistance of friends and family who had helped him through tough times, he held a very formal painting giveaway of thirty paintings from the *Rainbow Series*, which were gifted to his friends. He sent out and posted hundreds of open letters appealing for empty bottles to collect them widely, and received an overwhelming response. In the mountains, he called apprentices’ brothers and held several exhibitions of his “8+1” work. He kept a diary, which has accumulated over



Figure 3. Yu Zhenli. *Man's Portraiture*. Oil on paper, 53.5×38.5cm, 1972.

two million words. He grew food and vegetables and maintained forests and flowers which brought a lush and green mountain scene in the warm season. He discussed the arts and current events with literary figures and talked freely with villagers about the world. His studio was built and used at the same time, and he created paintings for several important exhibitions. When the basic living accommodations were in place, he brought his mother up to live with him in the mountains. The project ended, and his ninety-year-old mother passed away in peace. This is the real life of Yu Zhenli, and it leads to the second point: that all of the above is not what we often call art.

On the third point, this is not life in its ordinary sense. Countless artists have built studios or villas in the valley, countryside, by the water in the woods—none of whom have adopted the ascetic behavior of Yu Zhenli. When one sees a poor man who is a maniac and talks madly, working incessantly building something from junk, some think he is mad and has gone off the rails. Yu Zhenli was advised to paint something that would sell, it would be easy to build a decent studio with the money. But he said indignantly “Who will make art if they all go to sell their paintings?” That is to say, Yu Zhenli is clear that life in Dahei Mountain is not a purely material process but a spiritual journey. He said, “Going to the mountains means suffering, suffering represents death but brings a new life.” Referring to his actions as self-imprisonment, he further demonstrates that he conscious-



Figure 4. Yu Zhenli. Sketch, 1973.

ly views life in the mountains as a spiritual and cultural asceticism, a difficult trek for the soul. He lived and practiced the concept of art.

To emerge from social life and to dissolve into it is the destiny of art. While the final dissolution of art is still early, Yu Zhenli accepts Duchamp's overwhelming warning and practice. In other words, his actions are focused on art and its predestination. This brings us to the fourth point: eighteen years of self-imprisonment is a dissolution of art, an anti-art art.

Social Sculpture

In June 2011, I hosted a theoretical tea party on the topic of social sculpture and performance art at Jinshi Beach, Dalian. The meeting was organized by Dalian Chengmian Culture and Art Co., Ltd. and the topic was triggered by Zhenli. Critics such as Shui Tianzhong, Li Xianting, Jia Fangzhou, Wu Hong, Deng Pingxiang, Xu Hong, Chen Mo, Wang Lin, Tao Yongbai, Lu Xinhua, and Lin Xueming also came from different places for Yu Zhenli.

Yu Zhenli's constructions and their environments can be referred to as landscape installations, shaped buildings, architectural sculptures, or, in terms of process, acts of construction. But this is far from the entirety of the work, which as a whole encompasses his entire life during eighteen years, its causes and conse-



Figure 5. Yu Zhenli. *Landscape No. 4*. Oil on canvas, 48×66cm, late 1970s.

quences. The work is rich in linguistic elements and complex enough to write a novel. No better name could be found for this than social sculpture.

Duchamp was at ground zero in the idea that art identifies and disintegrates itself over tens of thousands or even millions of years. Therefore, he excluded all spiritual and cultural connotations, burying art itself in utter purity. Since then, installations, performances, earth, events, specimens, and multimedia have been triggered by ready-made works that no longer avoid spiritual and cultural connotations, but rather are successful in terms of their tension and depth. The combination of artistic and sociological meaning may be the mainstream in conceptual art in the twenty-first century.

The concept of social sculpture was developed by Beuys. All of his performance art is socially relevant, addressing questions about the German, the capitalist, the Germanic, life, art, education etc. Meanwhile, Beuys offers independent new ideas about performance art and installation art. His concept was “life is a work, life is an

art”. He counted the moment of his birth in 1921 as his first work, so it makes sense that Beuys used the term social sculpture to describe his actions. He was typically an artist who took on both an artistic and a social sense. One of his works that struck me most was a large public project.

On 19 June 1982, at the opening of the 7th Document in Kassel, Germany, Beuys planted the first oak tree for a project in which he planned to plant 7,000 oaktrees in the Kassel metropolitan area, each with a 1.2-meter-high basalt pillar, equivalent to his signature. He mobilised a wide range of people to contribute to the campaign, at a cost of instead of 500 marks per tree, with applicants receiving a certificate of donation and a certificate of planting issued by Beuys. The plan was that Beuys would plant the last tree five years later on the first day of Document 8 in Kassel; unfortunately, Beuys died in 1986. On 12 July 1987, the opening day of the 8th Document Kassel, Beuys’s son planted the 7,000th tree, completing the planting section of Beuys’s work.

This work also has a growth component which is a



Figure 6. Yu Zhenli. *The Old Man in Black*. Oil on canvas, 67×46.5cm, 1976.



Figure 7. Yu Zhenli. *Portrait No. 4*. Chinese painting, color on paper (rice paper), 68×47cm, May 1980.

social-ecological sculpture that can grow. Beuys expected that the oak trees would live up to 800 years, therefore the work would continue to interrogate art and warn society for centuries.

The rows of oak trees with stone pillars can be found in collections in many urban and rural environments around the world, and Beuys' questioning and call have spread around the world.

The most important characteristic of social sculpture is that it can be widely participated in by society. In the case of performance art in China, the shooting at the 1989 Modern Art Exhibition can also be called social sculpture. This means that performance art in China has had a social sculpture connotation from the beginning. The linguistic elements include two gunshots and the whole social reaction caused by the gunshots, including its relationship to the whole modern art exhibition, even the modern art movement, the legal system, all the way to the process of the arrest and release of the artist, the current copyright dispute between Tang Song and Xiao Lu, and so on. From my perspective, it is all the unfolding of the two gunshots, all an extension of the whole social sculpture.

In this way, I think that social sculpture should not be confined to the art of Beuys. It can be enlarged and expanded, broadly referring to certain kinds of conceptual art and performance art.

The sociocultural significance of Beuys' work is easily explained: environmental protection and ecological balance. Social sculpture should facilitate mass interpretation, so that it can be transformed into a social public act. It is also easy to mass interpret Yu Zhenli's construction in terms of urban and environmental protection, material and soul, green and harmony, and the reuse of waste. Certainly, there is a deeper artistic and sociocultural significance to the social sculptures that need to be further explained by experts; if they cannot be interpreted by the elite there is no academic ground to stand on, if they cannot be mass interpreted, it is difficult to develop the social dimension.

The Martyr is Possessed

Selling paintings to earn money, and then hiring a construction team to build a studio is common, but by comparison, Yu Zhenli's behavior is quite absurd, per-

sisting for eighteen years. Zhu Guangqian said that artists often have a mental illness, and in this case, it makes sense.

What possessed Yu Zhenli?

First, he was obsessed with the conception of art initiated by Duchamp, described above. Perhaps his consciousness was still hazy at first, but two or three years later he persisted and eventually grasped the concept.

Second is that there is a spirituality in obsessing over poor materiality. In his early expressionist period, he already showed a sensitivity to the materiality of oil paint on canvas and the texture of the picture. As he moved towards abstraction, the texture of his works became thicker and the solidity of material materials was further enhanced, hence his self-proclaimed figuration. He said: "Expressionist art sees the paint tools as the expression of the mind, I see it as the real presence." He emphasized the touch: "I started working as a laborer or a mason, and I felt it was something real and crucial." What are the important things? He explained: "Touch intimacy and feel clarity", experiencing the spiritual clarity of all things in intimate contact with painting materials. This sensitivity to material materials developed into the worship of poor materials for two main reasons. Firstly, touch was the basic way of perceiving the world for his father, who was blind, and what he touched was the most real, and as soon as Yu closed his eyes he developed a tactile mentality that related to his father. Secondly, in 1989, he participated in the Eight Artists Oil Painting Exhibition at the China Art Museum, which coincided with an exhibition of Tàpies' work. The Spanish artist's fascination and passion for materials ignited his reverence for poor materials. Faced with a used wine bottle, he would weep with emotion. The installations built up from old grindstones, used bottles around the studio, and even entire constructions, are large altars to poor materiality, an exchange from death to the reborn. Where is the holy phase in the abstract work *Touching the Sacred Phase*? It is in the touch, the whole act of painting, and in the aura. It is the process of the mind running through the material flow on the canvas through the hand, and also communicating the process between the mind and all things. When in a particularly good state, it is the process of touching the sacred phase in Yu's view. Tools run through the painting as if it were a mason plastering a wall. When building a house, the stacking of bricks and stones can be seen as an extension of the painting on the canvas, a sense of touch throughout.

Yu Zhenli was also obsessed with Kafka. The Austrian writer, who died at the age of 41, gave him cour-

age to endure solitude in the face of an absurd world. As Kafka said "I need solitude for my writing; not 'like a hermit'—that wouldn't be enough—but like a dead man. Writing in this sense is a more sound sleep, i.e. death. Just as one does not and cannot pull the dead from their graves, I cannot be pulled away from my writing desk in the night." No one could pull Yu Zhenli out of his self-imprisonment until he was willing to release himself. Kafka was engaged and withdrew many times, but never married. He probably could not reconcile his inner psychology of writing, which was full of absurdity and fear, with his mental state of being married and having children. Did Yu have a similar complex when he was divorced for over twenty years and never married again?

Yu Zhenli's deepest obsession is the ancient Chinese Zen. In *Zhuangzi-Heaven and Earth* (《莊子·天地》), Zi Gong saw an old man watering land, holding an urn down the tunnel to get water from the well, who "exerted much effort but saw little work", so he recommended a machine to the old man: "It is a lever made of wood, heavy behind, and light in front. It raises the water as quickly as you could do with your hand, or as it bubbles over from a boiler. Its name is a shadoof. (木為機，後重前輕，挈水若抽，數如秋湯，其名為槩。)" The old man put on an angry look, laughed, and said, "I have heard from my teacher that, where there are ingenious contrivances, there are sure to be subtle doings; and that, where there are subtle doings, there is sure to be a scheming mind. But, when there is a scheming mind in the breast, its pure simplicity is impaired. When this pure simplicity is impaired, the spirit becomes unsettled, and the unsettled spirit is not the proper residence of the Dao. It is not that I do not know. (吾聞之吾師，有機械者必有機事，有機事者必有機心。機心存於胸中則純白不備。純白不備則神生不定。神生不定者，道之所不載也。吾非不知，羞而不為也。)" Zi Gong was speechless. This is probably the earliest anti-modernization theory. According to Guy Alitto's analysis, facing the serious crisis of environmental pollution, ecological destruction, and desolation of the soul brought on by the rapid acceleration of high materialism and consumption, the twentieth century witnessed a worldwide cultural trend of anti-modernization, such as Dostoevsky in Russia, Tagore and Gandhi in India, and Koo Hongming, Wu Mi, Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili in China. Yu was influenced by this trend, which is why he lamented that "construction is destruction", and gave dignity to the waste materials and field grasses.

In actuality, Yu Zhenli was obsessed with his mind. Early in 1993, he said to me: "Walk alone means live lonely. The artist is a wanderer on the road, whatever stormy or miserableness, impeded the road. He looks for

his home and mother. But when he did then run away again, forever searching for the home of his soul. The artist is always wandering for life in death.” This is his basic understanding of art and life which is not quite the same as the average person. In his view, art is not a trade but a whole life, a quotidian dedication to chasing the soul, obsessed because of martyrdom.

Standards of Criticism

The standards of criticism are now largely set by foreigners. In the introduction to the “Exhibition of Yu Zhenli’s Paintings and Art Collection”, I mentioned three margins, namely that he has always been “on the

margins of the mass media, the art market and working society, often forgotten and ignored”. There is also another margin that I did not mention, and that is his marginal position in the international critical world, where foreigners do not recognize him. Why must we make foreigners recognize ourselves before we do? I once recommended a Chinese artist for a German exhibition, and I said that Western criticism always evaluates Chinese artists from an ideological point of view. He asked: Is there another one? I gave the example of Yu Zhenli. But after I said that, he did not respond at all. Recently Oliva suddenly turned away from ideology and became very interested in Chinese abstract art, calling it the great abstract art from heaven. From the



Figure 8. Yu Zhenli. *Sleep Out on the Streets*. Oil on canvas, 47×45cm, 1977.



Figure 9. Yu Zhenli. *Waves*. Oil on canvas, 80×100cm, 1987.



Figure 10. Yu Zhenli. *Small Draft of Women at Wedding Reception 1-3*. Oil on canvas, 24×19cm, 1988.

lines of his essay, he seems to be more concerned with maximalism, because maximalism dissolves minimalism a bit, and adds Chinese character, the breath of life, and the spirit of uniting humans and the universe to the cold stuff, which he admires very much. However, I think that Yu Zhenli has been pursuing this spirit for a long time, but he has not proposed a concept that corresponds to the West, such as minimalism. Yu Zhenli's work *Touching the Sacred Phase*, in which he participated in the Annual Nomination Exhibition of Art Critics held by Shui Tianzhong in 1994, is a repetition of five paintings in the same way, and it has the air of "being alone with the spirit of heaven and earth" (Zhuangzi). I think Yu Zhenli's eighteen years of construction are more important than Yue Minjun and Zhang Xiaogang's, not because Yu Zhenli is not of a high standard, but because our discourse system has not yet been established. So, the key is still to build up our system of critique gradually. No doubt, this will take time.

Yu Zhenli's act of seclusion in the mountains was distinctly critical of reality, but he eventually transformed his external criticism into internal cultivation—self-imprisonment. Instead of being indignant and sad, one might as well do what Laozi did: "Refusing to indulge in desires, dissolve strife and thwart people's sharpness, gather the shine and mix their earthly exist-



Figure 11. Yu Zhenli. *Small Draft of Women at Wedding Reception 1-6*. Oil on canvas, 24×19cm, 1988.

ence, this is profoundly mixing but differing in essence. (塞其兑，闭其门；挫其锐，解其纷；和其光，同其尘；是谓玄同。)"

Modified on 15 June 2012 in Beijing
[Yu Zhenli Art Museum provides the article]

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