



# ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal /Vol.1, No.2 Apr.-Jun., 2023

## Hard and White Cannot Coexist: Recombining Concepts in a Semantic Fallacy

Wu Hong

**To cite this article:** Wu Hong, “Hard and White Cannot Coexist: Recombining Concepts in a Semantic Fallacy,” *Art Frontier* 1, no.2 (June 2023): 129-135, <https://doi.org/10.64212/KPVF1039>.

**DOI:** 10.64212/KPVF1039

**ISSN:** 2835-5490

**EISSN:** 2836-841X

© 2023 Frontier Press.

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

**Website:** [www.artfrontier.org](http://www.artfrontier.org)

**Email:** [artfrontier2023@outlook.com](mailto:artfrontier2023@outlook.com)

**Publishing Frequency:** Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



# Hard and White Cannot Coexist: Recombining Concepts in a Semantic Fallacy

Wu Hong

INT: Hard, white, and stone are three—is that admissible?

GSL: It is not admissible.

INT: Are two admissible?

GSL: It is admissible.

INT: How so?

GSL: Without the hard, one gets the white—this is two being raised. Without the white, one gets hard—this is two being raised.

INT: If you get its whiteness, you can't say there is no whiteness. If you get its hardness, you can't say there is no hardness. Yet it is the stone that is thus, so are there not three?

GSL: Seeing, you do not get its hardness, but you do get its whiteness, so there is no hardness. Touching, you do not get its whiteness, but you do get its hardness, so there is no whiteness.

INT: In a world without whiteness, it would not be possible to see the stone. In a world without hardness, it would not be possible to feel the stone. Hard, white, and stone do not exclude one another—is it possible to hide the third?

GSL: It hides itself. It is not that it is hidden and so concealed.

INT: Its whiteness, its hardness, and the stone certainly achieve [the] filling of [one an] other. How is there concealing itself?

GSL: Getting its whiteness, getting its hardness, the



Hard and White Cannot Coexist: Liu Shuiyang's Solo Exhibition

Curator: Wu Hong

Producer: Hu Jiebao

Dates: July 8, 2023–August 8, 2023

Location: Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive 2, 3F

Address: Museum Road, Songzhuang Art District, Songzhuang Village, Tongzhou District, Beijing

seen and the not seen, are separate. The one and the two do not fill each other and are therefore separate. Being separate is being concealed.

INT: The stone's whiteness, the stone's hardness, the seen and the not seen, the two and the three are like breadth and length and mutually fill each other. Are they not raised?

GSL: A white thing that is white does not limit [or fix] its whiteness. A hard thing that is hard does not limit [or fix] its hardness. What is not limited [or fixed] is shared (general). How are they these stone's (specific attributes)?

INT: If you touch the stone, there is not what is not a stone. If there is not a stone, there is not that which "selects" a white stone, and there is no mutual separation, which was originally the case and was never otherwise.

GSL: The stone is one, hard and white are two, and exist in the stone. There is, then, the known in it and there is the not known in it. There is the seen in it and the not seen in it. Therefore, the known and the not known are separate from each other; the seen and the not seen are hidden from each other. Because of the concealment, who is to say there is no separation?

INT: The eyes are not able [to perceive] hardness, the hands are not able [to perceive] whiteness. [Still], it cannot be said that there is no hardness, and it cannot be said that there is no whiteness. They (the senses) differ in their duties; one does not substitute for the other. Hard and white are bounded in the stone; how are they separate?

GSL: Hardness not joined with stone is hardness and

things share [it]. If it is not joined, it is hardness, and with hardness, there is essentially hardness or not hardness. A stone is a thing and hardness. The world does not have what is like hardness, and hardness is concealed.<sup>1</sup>

This exchange is recorded in "On Hard and White", a well-known philosophical discourse from important Warring States School of Names philosopher Gongsun Long. He held that only the whiteness, and not the hardness, of a piece of hard white stone could be perceived with the naked eye. The sense of touch could determine that the stone was hard, but not that it was white. Thus, there are only two kinds of stones in the world: white stones and hard stones. There are no hard, white stones. The eye can perceive the whiteness of the stone, not its hardness, so the stone is "not hard". The hand can perceive the hardness of the stone, not its whiteness, so the stone is "not white". When whiteness can be seen, touch cannot find hardness. When whiteness cannot be seen, touch finds hardness. Seeing and not seeing both results in separation. From this, we can infer that hardness and whiteness cannot coexist in a stone, so they are separate from one another.

Traditional Confucian political ethicists did not have a high opinion of Gongsun Long, believing his theories to be sophistry or mere conceptual or linguistic games that had nothing to do with reality. Gongsun Long's ideas touch on fundamental elements of linguistics and logic, even as they seem to run counter to basic common sense. His deductive process, which purposely creates logical obstacles and linguistic traps, is not intended to legitimize false reasoning. Instead, he constantly questions the connotations and extensions of a concept and interrogates the precise relationships between names



Figure 1. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No.1*. Installation, heating radiator, steel tube, diameter 690 cm, height 76 cm. 2019-2023.

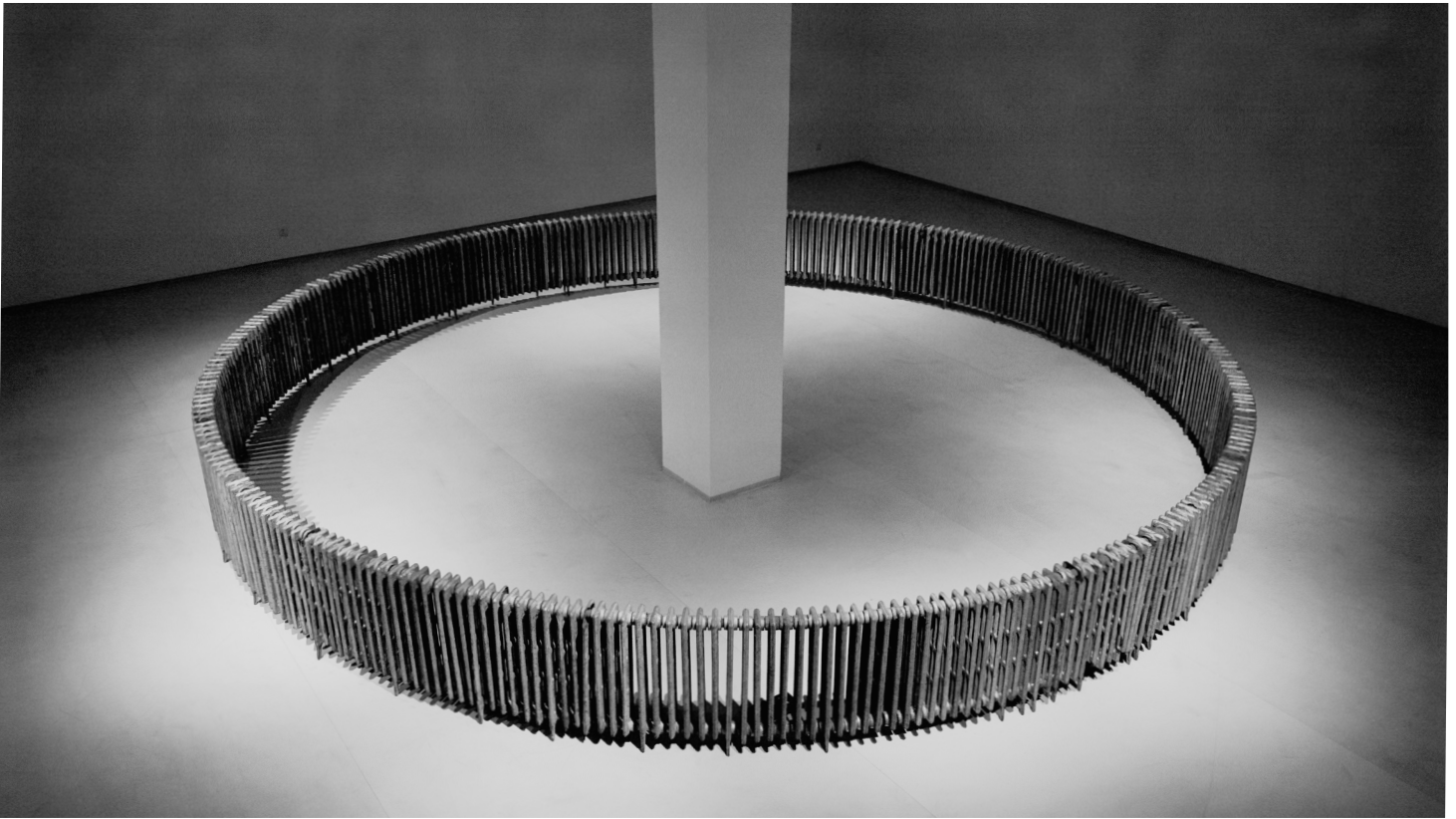


Figure 2. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No. 1*.

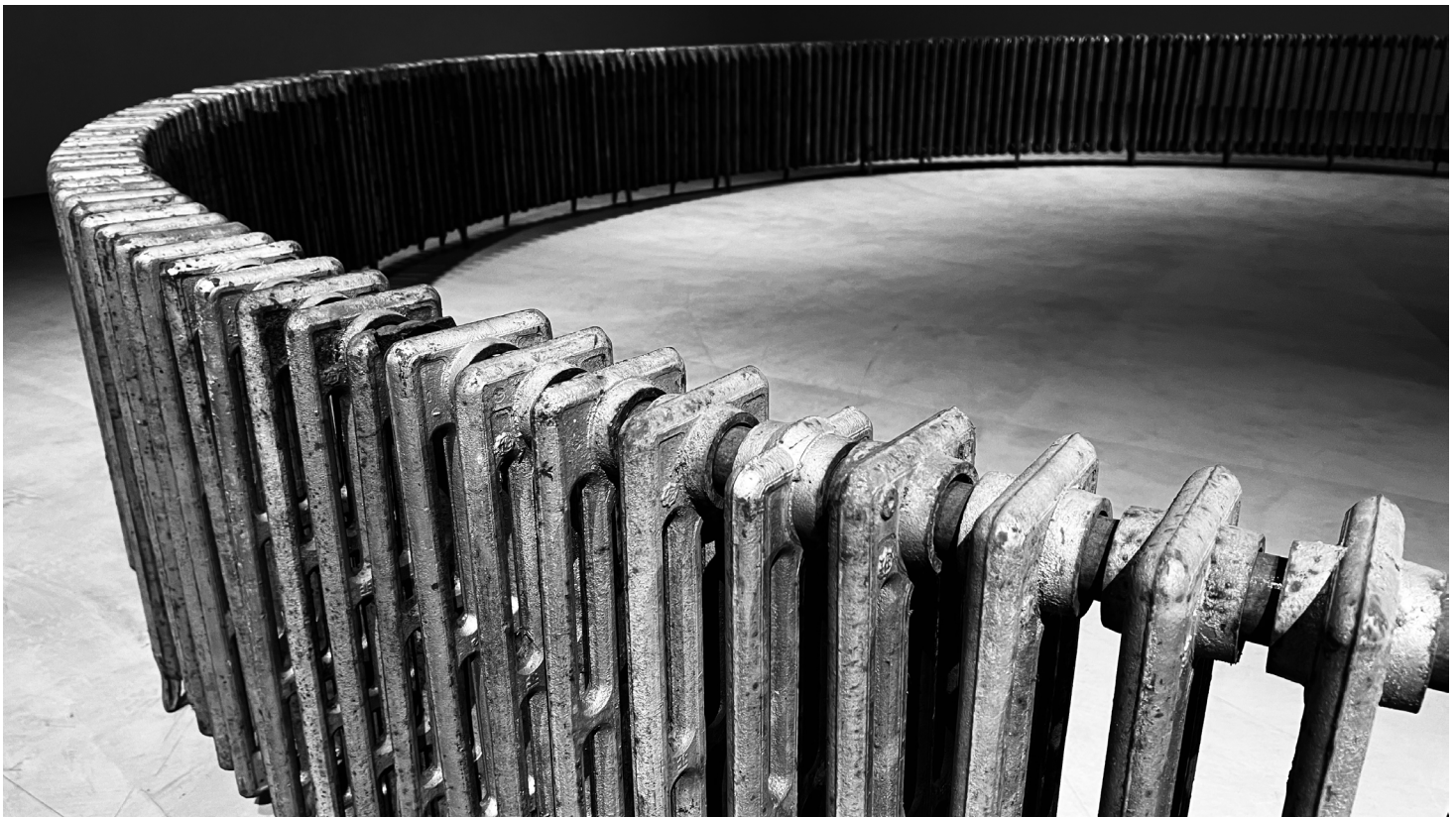


Figure 3. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No. 1* (part).

(the names and conceptions of things) and realities (the normal appearance and substance of things), which reveals the intellectual fetters or ethical constraints hiding within common sense or intellectual reasoning.

The modern philosophy of language has elevated linguistics from conceptual examination and logical reasoning to ideological analysis. In *Truth and Method*, Han-Georg Gadamer stated that “Being that can be understood is language, and that man is the Being of language.”<sup>2</sup> We must express our understanding of the world and our ideas and interactions through language, but language shapes and limits our way of understanding the world. Our actions are prisoners of language. After conceptualizing concrete things, our thinking becomes constrained by concept.

In logic, a “semantic fallacy” originally referred to a fallacy in the relationship between the linguistic symbol and the thing to which it refers, which occurs when we use linguistic symbols. In a given linguistic environment, the use of the same word in different senses (to express different ideas) can result in linguistic ambiguity and fallacy. The modern philosophy of language purposely uses semantic fallacy as a logical method to break down the constraints that linguistic inertia and the ideologies

behind linguistic systems can place on human thinking. As a result, fissures appear in normal linguistic logic and values systems, which in turn inspire reflection—through language—on the language itself and the ideologies constructed by that language. This is generally true of Gongsun Long’s logical process in “On Hard and White”.

In conceptual art, implanting concept causes logical fault lines and ruptures in meaning to arise through the subversion, deconstruction, or tearing of normal semantic logic, highlighting the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified in semiotics, in which the signifier cannot be reduced to a concept (what Ferdinand de Saussure called the “signified”), and the signified cannot depend on a specific signifier (a specific unit of language). To address the logical gaps left by the elimination of the constraints of previous systems of signification, the recombination of meanings or the implantation of concepts allows for the formation of a new system of signification between the new signifier and signified.

This new solo show for Liu Shuiyang follows the 2021 exhibition at the Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive inspired by another Gongsun Long paradox. “A



Figure 4. “Hard and White Cannot Coexist: Liu Shuiyang’s Solo Exhibition” exhibition site. July 8, 2023.



Figure 5. “Hard and White Cannot Coexist: Liu Shuiyang’s Solo Exhibition” exhibition site. July 8, 2023.

White Horse is Not a Horse” explored the sociological significance of materials in contemporary art. We can consider this new exhibition a logical extension of “A White Horse is Not a Horse”.

We can trace the conceptual logic behind the works in the present exhibition back to four stages in Liu’s creative process. In the first phase, he used the undifferentiated treatment of plaster models, which are an important part of academic art training, to question the homogenization of art education and cultural values. In this phase, although the creative logic of his work essentially conveyed a concept through external, manmade forms, he had already asserted the semantic relationship between inside and outside that would appear in his later work.

In his second creative phase, Liu contrasted the influence of endless natural evolution on human skeletons and their parts with a study of the imprints that social and invisible forces have left on the human body. He then externalized the result as a social analysis and values critique with an ideological bent.

We could consider his third creative phase a prequel to the works in this exhibition. During this phase, physically replacing the materials in the works allowed Liu to transform their sociological significance, which in turn revealed the critical meaning of the materials within their new signifying logic.

So far, Liu’s creative logic has proceeded from the

outside inward, and the semantic elements in the work have moved from great to small. He has built the works in this solo show from his fourth creative phase on pieces from his third phase, while also returning to his inside-to-outside process. Morphemes, which are essential to convey a concept in a work, also represent the process of moving from small to great. As Hui Shi once said, “That which is so great that there is nothing outside it may be called the Great One, and that which is so small that there is nothing inside it may be called the Small One.”<sup>3</sup>

Paraffin wax is an important intermediate material in this process, but it is also a transitional, “translating” vocabulary. Rebar is an essential manufactured item in modern society and a key material in reinforced concrete; it is a way of externalizing a culture’s desire to “modernize”. As the skeletons for concrete bodies, rebar’s material characteristics and processing methods meet a need for tensile strength and overall strength. When Liu renders rebar in paraffin wax and exposes it to sunlight, heat, and other natural forces, it invariably softens, melts, collapses, or becomes deformed. When social forces press, roll, or strike it, the traces it leaves behind externalize the social mood of the collective unconscious. In the end, Liu restores rebar to its metallic material. This presents an interesting logical paradox, much like the one Gongsun Long raised in “On Hard and White”. The rebar, as a material or as something we



Figure 6. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No.3*. Installation, cast iron, 315×70×55cm, 2019-2023.



Figure 7. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No.4*. Sculpture, cast iron, 175×196×20cm, 2019-2023.



Figure 8. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No. 5*. Sculpture, cast iron, 30×32×20cm, 2019.



Figure 9. Liu Shuiyang. *Work No. 6*. Sculpture, cast iron, 31×32×20cm, 2019.

can touch, is inherently hard, but the exterior form that we can see is soft. With paraffin wax as an intermediate or vocabulary, this logical paradox purposely creates a semantic fallacy. At this point, there has been a semantic fissure between the rebar's signifier and signified. If he had simply switched the materials in traditional sculpture, the meaning of the work would only stretch to this point. However, in the context of conceptual art, the logical paradox manifested by the semantic fallacy is just the starting point for the next conceptual translation.

After he returns the signifier of the material to the initial signified of meaning, rebar—a way of externalizing a culture's desire to “modernize”—becomes an important subject of reflection. It is part of our general knowledge about modernization and an ideological foundation for modernity. After this piece of common sense—which really appears to be correct—is again placed within the context of the logical paradox produced by a semantic fallacy, Liu's work critiques ideological modernity, society's collective unconscious or mass culture mentality, and systemic societal violence. The concept gradually appears and becomes clearer from this apparent ruin of meaning.

June 16, 2023, morning, Beijing

WU HONG is a critic, curator, managing director of the Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive, and guest professor and graduate advisor at Jilin College of the Arts.

LIU SHUIYANG was born in Lin Yi, Shandong in 1974. He graduated from the Department of Sculpture, Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University in 2001. He is now living and working in Beijing. His works cover sculptures, installations, videos, behaviors and other media. The creation materials include traditional bronze and marble materials, as well as construction wastes and various molten metals after the fire, such as the concrete creation installation works left after the demolition beginning in 2013. Liu Shuiyang's works often touch on today's taboo subjects, such as injury, disaster and social problems related to life and survival. His works have been in an exhibition in New York, Cologne, and Kwangju, such as the Martin Gallery of the University of Muenburg and Arts Center, Museum Zündorfer Wehrturm in Cologne, and also participated in group exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai and other places.

Editor: Wang Jingyuan

## ENDNOTES

1. Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *The Mingjia and Related Texts* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2019), 245-253.

2. Han-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 490.

3. Zhuangzi, “Tian Xia”, [Under Heaven] trans., James Legge, accessed June 16, 2023, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/tian-xia>.