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Conversations on Michael Zheng's Exhibition “A Tree is a Tree” at 500 Capp Street, 2022

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Abstract

In this article, curator and critic Hou Hanru engages in a conversation with artist Michael Zheng about his exhibition titled “A Tree Is a Tree”. The discussion revolves around topics such as perception, conceptual art, and the influence of Buddhism on Zheng’s practice of contemporary art, particularly site-specific installations. Zheng describes his residency at The David Ireland House, explaining how it leads to a deep observation of ordinary details and helps develop ideas for the exhibition. Drawing from a Buddhist saying, Zheng explores the concept of direct experience versus intellectualization and discusses his approach to conceptual art influenced by Buddhism. In his artistic process, he highlights the significance of ordinary daily occurrences and unassuming elements, such as cracks in walls. Examples of his works, including an installation with a window blind and a photograph of a wall pasted back onto the same area, are discussed, revealing his interest in illusions and the mechanisms of perception.

Key Words

Direct experience, perception, conceptual art, site-specific installation, Buddhism

[All works, with the exception of those noted otherwise, are from the exhibition “A Tree is a Tree” in 2022.]

Hou Hanru

Tell me about your residency at the David Ireland House.

Michael Zheng

The residency was for me to get to know and experience the House itself. It was time for me to come up with ideas for the show afterward. Since then, I have been creating works in response to my experiences there.

HH

This is very interesting. There is a period of living there and then working on the situation. Then you produce projects, which are not really like the traces left there. It was kind of taking a distance to reflect. It created an abstraction of that experience, responding to the specific works and context in the building with a second thought. So, it was not an easygoing kind of “life equals art”

or “art equals life”.

MZ

No, not at all. Because it was short, it was very condensed. My sensitivity was heightened, and I noticed a lot of details. And out of it came all the works.

HH

Yeah, I think that time lag is important. There is always a possibility to turn the living process directly into the final realization. But you didn’t choose that. In the meantime, there’s also a very conceptual appearance of the works in the project. It’s taking over different rooms, with different strategies to use the rooms and the context, sometimes directly responding to the objects there. And that helps create a conceptual frame or conceptual substance for the work. It’s pretty rational.

However, it seems to be quite different from what you wanted to say through this connection with Buddhism. Maybe I have a misunderstanding of what Buddhism is in your mind. You do talk about the Tree.

But you have to go through a step, which is the tree as knowledge. But in the end, you arrive at the tree as the tree, which is no longer a concept. It's not the origin of the tree, and so on. So this process is pretty conceptual, but very different from the outcome as a form. I think it's interesting to see how you negotiate these two kinds of overlapped yet distant frameworks of mind.

MZ

Very interesting way of putting it. Let's get into it. In the context of this exhibition, as I understand, Buddhism is what I would like to summarize with the saying "A tree is a tree". It came from a saying,

"Before one knows Buddhism, a tree is a tree, a mountain is a mountain. And when one starts to learn about Buddhism, a tree is no longer a tree, a mountain no longer a mountain. But when one gets Buddhism, a tree is a tree, a mountain is a mountain."

And you're saying that our direct experience of relating to a tree as a reality is just directly relating to it, as opposed to going through an intellectualization of it and then coming to relate to it as a tree. The former is how I typically live my life, because I grew up under

the influence of Buddhism. But with that background, I went through this intellectualization process, through education, learning about the different ways of looking at Buddhism, and reading the scriptures repeatedly. So it's inevitable for a person like me to relate to the teachings of Buddhism from that angle. So that's one.

Secondly, even more so, I am coming from the perspective of creating conceptual art under the influence of Buddhism. The conceptualizing part, for me, is already inevitably intellectualizing it. So I am very conscious of it. In the context of this residency, with that preparation, I let the actual situation in David Ireland's House speak to me. For example, I started to notice the very unassuming things, such as the cracks, the nail holes and other "unsightly" things on the walls. And those became the fodder for my thinking regarding how life can be made into art. I started thinking, if David Ireland could make art by looking out of one of his windows and narrating it, then what is the possibility of being inspired by that way of thinking? Things outside of the window are nothing special in common sense. But by his blocking up the window, that gesture of intervention somehow transcends those very ordinary



Figure 1. Michael Zheng. *The Blind*. Installation with a window blind, 45.5"×94.5".



daily occurrences. It becomes more about perception all of a sudden. Then other people could benefit from his way of seeing ordinary things. That was very intriguing to me.

That observation inspired me to make works in response. Right next to that window that he blocked with the copper plates, I built a blind that would have covered a similar window. That is a conceptual device for me to speak to what is hidden and how meaning is created. A blind is normally used to cover an opening like a window. By installing the blind directly on the wall, it creates this conundrum: what is covered? Or is there anything that is covered? Or is it signifying something else? This way of questioning is how I approach my work.

HH

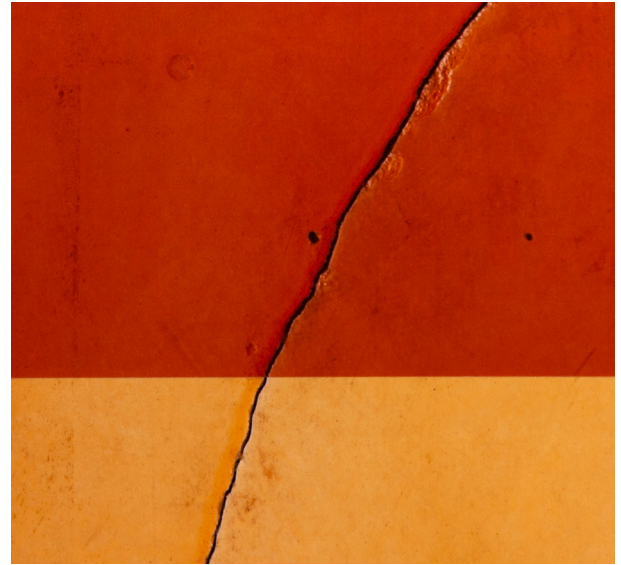
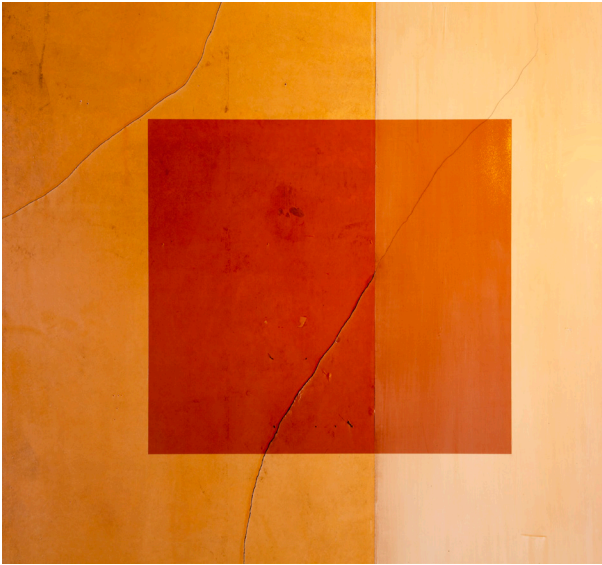
And, in a way, one can also say this is a gesture or a strategy to activate something which was potentially there.

MZ

Very much so. And, for me, there are two layers to it. One is that I genuinely believe that everything in daily existence has its unique causal validity. It is just that we

human beings somehow assign different meanings to different things. We value some things more than others. But from the perspective of their existence, they are just there. A crack in the wall has the same significance as the beautiful color that David chose to paint the wall with. So I want to bring that out so that people have a chance to see from that perspective. Secondly, I do believe that those small details in daily occurrence can be a catalyst for creative work. And, in my own body of work, I happen to be interested in how we see things, and how we perceive what we call reality. That kind of thinking benefits from my doing this show at the David Ireland House, because the house has a lot of this kind of features. They are very unassuming, but if you do pay attention, they can be very interesting and intriguing, such as the cracks in the walls. Based on that observation, I have at least two pieces in the show that foreground the cracks in the walls.

For one piece, I picked a wall that happened to have a lot of very prominent cracks. For some reason, David painted the wall in two different colors with a very clear dividing line. I just took a picture of the wall itself and printed it on paper life-size. And then I pasted it back on the same area of the wall directly, making sure that the patterns all matched up perfectly. All of a sudden, this



Figures 2,3,4. Michael Zheng. *The Wall*. Photographic installation, photograph of wall on the wall, 18"×20".

piece of paper somehow transformed itself into some kind of transparent material. To our eyes, it looks as if we're seeing through something transparent at the wall. But in reality, you can see the thickness of the paper on the side. So it is my interest to present this kind of illusion we encounter in life, while at the same time, I disclose the mechanism by which this illusion is created. This way, people get both opportunities to see how we're in a way deceived; yet at the same time, if we contemplate on it, we can perceive what we are seeing and how we perceive it.

HH

This makes me think of a very connected but different example. The example is that of Joseph Kosuth, who looks into creating three kinds of readings: an object, the concept, and an image.

MZ

The Chair ?

HH

Yeah, *the Chair* (Joseph Kosuth: *One and Three Chairs*). The chair itself, the image of the chair, and the dictionary definition of the chair. And that was somehow an extremely rationalist way of thinking: look into three ways of defining, trying to be exhaustive in terms of how human brains perceive the world, and trying to fix it. Trying to memorize and turn it into a kind of permanent knowledge through image making. In your way of dealing with this kind of repetitive, tautological appearance, the importance is not the image. The importance is this process of grasping a particular

moment of contact between an object, the light, and the human being, which is not a rationalist kind of approach to perception, but it's much more about a kind of sensibility or a sensation of the moment. And you try to render it transparent, as you called it. But actually, it's about creating another sphere that is coming to cover the fixed materiality.

So yes, it is a very beautiful gesture.

MZ

Thank you.

HH

I am just very curious about the *Camera Obscura* piece, which is another example that emphasizes even more on the flow of time: the flow of things, the flow of images, shadow, air, and also human sounds, and so on. And it's extremely interesting to see the confrontation



Figure 5. Joseph Kosuth. *One and Three Chairs*. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, image source from The Museum of Modern Art, 1965.

between the two systems of dealing with perception. You don't have the same aim as Kosuth, who tries to define something that is, by nature, impossible to define. Right? And somehow, I think your device is trying to let it live in its way. But in the meantime, trying not to hold on to it. Instead, it's somehow proposing a veil or a screen through which people can enter into this process.

MZ

Yes, indeed. In the context of Kosuth's methodology, I think that by contrast, my approach is more experiential. I don't prescribe definitions or solutions. I'm a little bit more humble than he was (laugh). I do have things to say about any subject matter. But the way I say it is by creating the situation so that it provides a possibility for the viewers to enter through the situation I have created. That way they make their conclusions.

Say, for example, *the Chair*—it's very interesting that you would bring up *the Chair* piece (by Kosuth), because I once made a piece referencing Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*. I took a magazine photograph of his piece, the chair, the image, and the definition. I then gave that photograph to another artist and asked him to make a chair out of this information. So basically,

this artist was given this very authoritative definition of what a chair should be. It's like "Ex Cathedra", from the Pope's chair. What I tried to do was to honor the very last mile of this authoritative definition of a chair, which is the receiver. Once he receives this information, what does he do with it? All the information that he got, the definition and the actual image, was one-directional. And he had to create the other dimensions, like sideways and back ways, the whole three-dimensional aspects of the conceptual chair. He had to make it up. So when you see the chair he created as a result, it's really weird. When you look at it frontally, it looks exactly like in Kosuth's photograph. But from the side, it looks wrong. No matter how you look at it, it's just like, something is off. But for me, the fact that something is off really speaks to my viewpoint on these things. Everybody is doing a re-creation when they are handed certain visual or textual information. For me, that's true with not just Kosuth's piece, but really with any works. I don't know how many times I've sat in front of the Mark Rothko painting in SFMOMA, and every single time I was transfixed; until one time, I didn't feel anything. I was like, what happened? It was the same painting, but I was different that day. And I didn't get anything out of

Figure 6. Michael Zheng. *As Is (aka Camera Obscura)*. Installation, black materials darken the room with only a small hole with a lens in a window.



it. That was a very pivotal moment for me as a creator myself. I became much less fixated on what I handed to the other people. Rather my focus shifted to be on the viewer, the last part of the artistic circle. Because art is not complete until it is met by the viewer, right? And what they do with whatever I create is my emphasis.

So, in that context, what I do with the *Camera Obscura* is to create a situation in which you can enter the situation and feel it out. You feel out all the visual and other sensory information. And you experience how you perceive that phenomenon yourself, and then you come to your conclusion. I don't know what I'm telling them. I am just presenting to them the situation, including that the image is upside down. And all of a sudden, they might become aware of the fact that everything we see in the world is actually upside down. But somehow, we never become conscious of it because our eyes somehow flip it before we perceive it. You know, all those little details, I find it very interesting, useful, and helpful to bring to the awareness of the participants. So that's how I approached this series of work.

HH

Apply this to the house of David Ireland as a place where he, as a person, was living. So, do you feel there's a kind of effort trying to distance yourself from his ghost? (smile)

MZ

Not consciously. Rather, I let it happen to me. When I was sleeping in his bed, it gave me goosebumps feelings because there was a photograph of him above the bed. So I could not avoid being affected by it. All I could do was to feel his presence with a benign intention, and see what I could do under the influence. So from that perspective, I did see a lot of things in his bedroom. For example, when I was laying there, on the wall across from me, there were two photographs. One was Joseph Beuys, and the other was Duchamp. So all of a sudden, I saw that there was a certain thing about the lineage. Every artist, no matter how great they are, is influenced by something or somebody. In that way, I felt privileged and excited that I was allowed to be in direct relation to this kind of heritage. And from there, my eyes went down. I noticed that there was a bucket of *Dumbbells*. Before that, I had only seen the *Dumbbells* as they were

Figure 7. Michael Zheng. *As Is*.



displayed as David's artwork. But now I was sleeping in his bed and right next to the bed, there was a bucket of them. I didn't think the organizers intended to show them as artwork. But all of a sudden, I was presented with this ambiguity. How do I come to terms with, or how do I reconcile with this thing that is otherwise an artwork, but now is just a pile of them? Where is the line? So, all of these very minute thoughts came to me, and I had to have a certain understanding of them. And that, to me, was the relationship that I had while I was there, dealing with the "ghost". And I liked it. It was those moments that inspired me. He wasn't teaching, but I was learning stuff. It was great.

HH

This is why it's interesting that eventually you come up with a much more figurative interpretation of this relationship through the image of the roots. The tree roots. This very big photographic piece with four images of roots forming a room. (*A ROOT IS NO BRANCH*) That, in terms of language, is also radically different. It's so figurative, so representative, and also spectacular in a way. So, I'm curious to see, you're shifting from a transcendent, almost immaterial kind of fixture of a certain floating moment, a certain fugitive kind of



Figure 8. David Ireland. *Dumbbells*. Concrete cement, circa, 1983.

feeling, to an affirmative gesture about this connection. You might call it, as you said, the genealogy of artistic connection. So how do you decide to conclude the exhibition or the project in such an affirmative way?

MZ

That's a very intriguing perspective of it. The way I thought of it was very intuitive. It was because I realized there are two floors in the building and I could see the ceiling of the first floor as the continuation of the upper rooms. So it's very natural to present the Root piece from the ceiling, because formally it just grows down from the second floor. So that's how I intuitively came to that piece. Now how do I include that piece in the show, and to the extent that it encapsulates the show? It was through the meaning that I conferred to it. I was shocked to encounter an arroyo that exposed tree roots which had such a rough, robust, and intricate rootball system. Plus, one of the big shoots from the roots was so long and low that I was compelled to trace it. To my surprise, even though its tip is much lower than the bottom of the rootball and touched the floor of the arroyo, at the very end there were some green leaves on it! It was a branch! I realize that my perception of things is, to a large extent, conditioned by my learning. I assume a tree is in such a way that there is a root, a trunk, branches, and so on. And I don't question it, until I was presented with this conundrum in real life. So I created this piece to allow viewers a similar process of self-discovery. You're right that with this piece I conceptually and intentionally use the encounter to speak to something, which is how we perceive it. That's how I fit it into this show.

Now that you've asked this question, I remember that after I had made the Root piece, I noticed that the Accordion Room was rather long. Strangely, the space was contiguous, but one part of it was wider than the other. Naturally, I had positioned the Root piece in the wider part of it. Because the second part of the room was so much narrower, when I walked there, there was a weird bodily sensation of almost a claustrophobic feeling. I intensely felt the presence of the left side, which had a door and some cabinets. A lot was going on there. But on the other side, there was nothing. Just a white wall. So I thought, what if I do a mirror image on the other side? All of a sudden, when we walk through it, we have to negotiate what does it feel like? What is representation? What is actual existence? The photograph that I put on the wall is, by definition, a representation of the other wall. But because it is so large it has a physical presence to it. I think it would be dismissive to think of it as just a representation, because it affects our body in the same way as the actual cabinets



Figure 9, 10. Michael Zheng. *A ROOT IS NO BRANCH*. Photographic installation, fragmented text on each panel, "A ROOT" "IS" "NO" "BRANCH", compels the viewer to circumnavigate the installation, 40"×40"×60".

and the door. So those were the things that I was intrigued to play with, how I made sense of the downstairs as a component of the show.

HH

A last question. How do you think your project makes sense in the current situation? Apparently, on the one hand, there's a dialogue with a very long obsession with the history of California Conceptualism. On the other hand, California Conceptualism is somehow different from other groups of artists. It's closely related to the atmosphere of the West Coast and the Asian connection, especially the Zen Buddhist influence. It has been directly or indirectly involved in a lifestyle closer to nature, more spiritual. This, of course, is still present today, but it's quite historical. In the present state of the world, particularly in San Francisco, the social reality becomes much more hysterical. On the one hand, you have the turmoil of the conflicts between different communities, (especially the old inhabitants and the newcomers, the hipsters and the homeless, and so on). We all know that. And now we are also in this kind of racial, gender, COVID, post-COVID kind of mess. Your

current project, this special project, is also quite different from most of the previous projects you have done. For example, your projects that took place in galleries or museums were very short, temporary, performative actions. This time, it's a kind of long-lasting residency/exhibition that takes place daily. How do you see that this particular project makes a special sense in this context? I know that it might not be your ambition to deal with this kind of question, but how do you situate yourself by being an artist of "your type" at this moment?

MZ

Yeah, I have thought about these things. I have observed and been quite involved in contemporary art dialogues. Given the time that we live in right now, which is in your words, chaotic and filled with conflicts of all kinds, I experienced being on the receiving end of this kind of very aggressive behavior from the polarization of thinking, even in the Bay Area. So I am living in that actual world. I don't know if you could imagine it, but the show that I'm presenting right now is my way of dealing with it. Obviously, in actual life, I would have



Figure 11,12. Michael Zheng. *Mirror Mirror on the Wall*. 7 rows×12 columns of photographs each 10"×10", gaps between photographs 2".

to deal with the same things as everybody else. Some of them are quite confrontational. It is my conscious conclusion that none of the prevailing ways has an actual long-term effect on the solution. For example, speaking of political polarization, I used to be very politically involved with the voting process, activism, etc. But over time, I started to see the pros and cons of that way of activism. A lot of it, if we're not aware, actually adds to the confrontational effect in actual life. Of course, politics being what it is, it has to have this confrontational aspect because one is taking a stance. So I value and respect that. And I have friends who make art in that way, and I respect their work. However, I do believe that there is an alternative way of dealing with a confrontational, chaotic, conflict-ridden society, which is to steadfastly go the opposite way. By showing and living it as an example of a possible and plausible way of existence contemporaneously with the other ways, you show them your force.

For example, I do believe that my life is more grounded now that I've chosen consciously to live this way and make art this way. And I really can observe that my becoming this way has a calming effect on my immediate circumstance, including the people around me. They tend not to be as agitated. People are otherwise very irritable these days. It takes just a little bit to blow up. When they are in the presence of behaviors such as this, they have less tendency to go to the trigger behavior. For me, it is a very practical solution to actual life problems. And I'm very, very hopeful, because I have been taking on this kind of project. I have also been introduced to people in this sector of life. For example,

three years ago, I was invited to do a residency and a show in Victoria, Canada. Since the show was focused on the notion of being in the present, and Buddhism's influence on contemporary art, I was introduced to several people who were not necessarily in the art, but the "experts" in their fields, including an ordained Zen monk and Japanese scholar. At the age of 80+, he came to our meeting on a bike and carried himself in a way that was relaxed and had an immediate calming effect on people. I thought, wow, I'm going toward that age myself and I hope that I learn something from that. And I am practicing it myself now, including making this kind of work.

So yeah, that's how I relate to the current contentious life. It is really by choice. I do meditation and regular yoga practices. By now, you can't ask me not to do it, because I know its effect on myself. It's really beautiful to have an opportunity to create a kind of stage to present that as a possibility. And whenever I'm given an opportunity, I will present this view and this way of life. I believe that it is a good antidote to what's going on right now.

HH

Very good. So life goes on.

MZ

Life goes on, as they say. A tree is a tree. A mountain is a mountain.



Figure13. Located in San Francisco's Mission District, 500 Capp Street is a physical location rooted in conceptual art that was David Ireland's home. It is where the collection and archive inform artist-driven exhibitions, programs, educational workshops, and curatorial practice. David Ireland was an artist with a diverse practice who viewed the making of art as a part of daily life. He blended sculpture, architecture, painting, and performance, and drew on ordinary materials such as dirt, concrete, wood, or wire that he collected.

HOU HANRU is a prolific writer and curator based in Rome, Paris and San Francisco. He is an advisor for numerous cultural institutions including Times Museum, Guangzhou, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, and The Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York, and frequently contributes to various journals on contemporary art and culture and lectures and teaches in numerous international institutions. He has curated and co-curated over 100 exhibitions for the last three decades across the world including: China/Avant-Garde, National Museum of Art of China, Beijing, 1989; Cities on the Move, 1997–2000; Shanghai Biennale, 2000; Gwangju Biennale, 2002; Venice Biennale, French Pavilion,

1999; The 2nd Guangzhou Triennial, 2005; The 10th Istanbul Biennial, 2007; The 10th Biennale de Lyon, 2009, etc.

MICHAEL ZHENG is a conceptual artist. He was born in China and is based in San Francisco. He received his MFA from San Francisco Art Institute. His work has been exhibited in international biennials and museums world wide. His art is influenced by his practice of Ch'an Buddhism (禪宗). His works in mediums include performance, photo-based installations and drawing. The archive of his projects can be found at michaelzheng.org.

Editor: Liu Kexin

侯瀚如與藝術家鄭濟忠的對話：“樹是樹”

展覽空間：500 Capp Street, 舊金山, 2022 年

摘要：在本文中，策展人及評論家侯瀚如與藝術家鄭濟忠就他的展覽《樹是樹》展開了一次對話，討論認知、觀念藝術以及佛教對鄭濟忠當代藝術實踐的影響，特別是與特定場地裝置藝術相關的部分。鄭濟忠描述了他在 David Ireland House 的駐地計畫，解釋了如何通過對日常細節的深入觀察來為展覽開發創意。鄭濟忠借用佛教的一句格言，探索直接體驗與知性化之間的關係，並討論了佛教對他觀念藝術創作的影響。他強調了像牆壁上的裂縫這樣的日常普通事件和不起眼元素對於他藝術創作的重要性。文章通過他的作品的示例，包括一個窗簾的裝置以及一張牆壁的照片粘貼在同一堵牆上的作品，揭示了他對幻覺和認知機制的興趣。

關鍵詞：直接體驗；認知；觀念藝術；特定場地裝置；佛教