‘Liu Wei, an interview’, in **China Talks**, by Jérôme Sans, 2010

Jérôme Sans: When did you begin to do art, and why?
Liu Wei: I really began doing art after I graduated, in 1996.
JS: What was your style like at that time?
LW: It was oil painting, things related to my ideals. It wasn’t expressionism, but I did use imagery.
JS: From oil painting, how did you arrive at the style you have now?
LW: The period between 1996 and 1998 was a post-graduate period of transition. I was painting, but also thinking about many different projects. In 1998 and 1999, I began to do the kinds of installation and video projects I’m doing now.
JS: What kind of installations?
LW: Early on, they were video installations.
JS: About what?
LW: Mostly about the body. It was very intuitive. I didn’t have any integrated ideas. I was working very intuitively, basically doing the kinds of things one should do at that age. Because I was young, there was only impulsiveness.
JS: What are your views on your generation of artists?
LW: I’ve been pondering this problem lately. The maturation period of the previous generation occurred during China’s most chaotic period, a time of changing values, evolving out of a one-dimensional social system. As we were maturing, that system began to fall apart. It was very chaotic, with all kinds of value orientations and value systems, all kinds of people. It was very open. In contrast to the preceding generation, our attitudes aren’t very clear. Our value system isn’t very well-defined. But I think the situation will get better. People I’ve met from my generation all have this idea. They all share a strong feeling about this. They have recognized the existence of this problem. I think it will get better, more multifaceted.
JS: Is yours a generation of optimism or of disillusionment?
LW: I think it’s a modest generation, very modest. This kind of modesty comes from suddenly encountering so many things we never had before and not knowing how to deal with them. By comparison, the previous generation had their own things. When everything suddenly opened up, they were very ostentatious. More than our generation, they were already totally in the middle of it. I think they are all a bit more ostentatious than our generation. Relatively speaking, our generation is more modest.
JS: How would you define your work?
LW: I couldn’t. There’s no way to define it.

JS: Your work jumps among video, installation, painting, objects. How do you relate all these things together?

LW: That's not how I think. I don't begin from a material or a technique and then think about what I want to do. Rather, I have an idea and then think about how to express it. I am always changing what I do; when I get fluent at a certain type of work, for example the cut pieces or any other series, at a certain point there are no longer any obstacles Interview with Liu Wei or problems. At this point I start to feel like there is no way to go on, precisely because there are no more problems, it is already dead, so I need to change to another sort of feeling. I want to preserve a state of permanent instability; this is the only way to stay active and vital.

JS: You are one of the rare artists in China who tries to kill the idea of style.

LW: Actually there is always still something beneath, but I could never use some surface thing – for example the way lots of artists use a representative form, almost like a symbol or emblem – as a way to define my work, or to prove that I had a style or position. But these symbols are actually anything but positions, and only the most basic ideas can represent your position. Just like in physics, when a structure is at rest, it no longer has any energy, but when the structure is broken, and its parts begin to move around again, it is filled with energy, power, and vitality. This is the only way to keep my work interesting.

JS: What inspires you?

LW: At the very least is it something that causes problems, something I cannot entirely grasp, the feeling that in creating these objects or realizing these ideas there is always an element of terror. After the works are made, these feelings remain unstable, leaving me in a constant state of anxiety. Perhaps there is another way to go about it; some people really enjoy stability in their creation, they are more than equal to the task, like the old masters, everything well thought-out. But I am not well-suited to this way of working, I don't find it sufficiently dynamic.

JS: How do you link all these different parts of your practice?

LW: It's all coming from reality; they are all things you can see. I don't see making art as a question of creativity, because you can't really create anything. Everything already exists; it's just a question of how you see it, from which perspective, good or bad. Or rather, how do you
use your own tactics to express it accurately?

JS: I see in your work a connection with architecture, from the Hutong windows, to the dog-chew sculptures of parliament buildings, to the paintings of urban landscapes. So there is this ironic approach, whether it is the dogs chewing on the bones, or this cage that hints at an
oppressive city with no more room for freedom. What is the relationship to cities?

LW: Cities are reality; all of China is a city under construction, and of course this influences me. You cannot ignore that; you can only ask why it is so. In the end, there are reasons for everything. All of this is about the system, in the end.

JS: What kind of statement is here, when you use elements from vernacular architecture to build a meeting room, or when you use bones to show the architecture of power?

LW: In this work I was aiming for a special connection between the material and power itself. It is very animal – the human will to power is like a dog to a bone, an animal reaction. And the viewer's reaction is very interesting, particularly compared to the effect I was aiming for, because the buildings actually look quite beaten-down, like a ghetto, as if all the political power of the world could be placed in a little slum. But when people see this work, they always say how nice it looks, how pretty the buildings are, and this proves that the artist should never trust his own eye.

JS: Actually, on its own, it's very unremarkable. But ultimately it takes on this kind of sculpted effect. It's truly very amazing. It appears to be handmade, but what emerges ultimately is completely industrial. I think these works of yours give people a sense you've taken something with a handmade quality and 'museumified' it. It has the sense of preconsumer
era China.

LW: Actually, anything able to inspire me, or a work that I make, is a bit like a key, because I don't know what exactly will inspire me. After I've been inspired, I'll create it. Or this thing I've made will inspire a certain aspect of a certain thing. It's like you're opening it up. Maybe there
are also ideas or spiritual things, and you don't know how to resolve them through materialization. These things perhaps serve this kind of function. If you can materialize it, it can inspire at a spiritual level.

JS: But still the buildings are falling apart, like after an earthquake.

LW: Yes, they are nearly broken, because the leather is of poor quality. Actually the desired effect is similar to the paintings I did of diamonds. Those were really bad paintings of diamonds; if they had been beautifully painted, the work would have been altogether different, because people would have known they were trying to represent diamonds. But no matter how poorly I paint, people always think my works are pretty. This leaves me helpless. Whatever you say is useless; some understandings cannot be changed. This is actually just another reason to make a work like this.

JS: Yes, because diamonds are very shiny, and there is that song, diamonds are a girl's best friend. So diamonds are a sign of power, money, shiny, visible.

LW: Right, so in the end I don't know what will work.

JS: But I like the idea of the dysfunctional, because these objects don't function anymore, like the architecture, which seems to be already destroyed, like after an earthquake.

LW: I do too. I think that once you make a work, you need to strip away all of its functional layers. Even beauty can be made problematic.

JS: You have these works where things are cut, appliances, washing machines, refrigerators, televisions. It is related as well – these are signs of luxury, of contemporary capitalist society.

LW: Yes, so one series is called 'Anti-Matter', it is an inversion of the objects. On some of them I have written other words beginning with "anti-": anti-human, anti-beauty, anti-use. written other words beginning with "anti-": anti-human, anti-beauty, anti-use.

JS: Anti-matter is anti-functionalism: a sign of contemporary capitalist society. You are using the very objects that people, especially in China, buy to make their lives nicer. It is not "anti-matter," it is the true matter of capitalism.

LW: Yes.

JS: We cannot say it doesn't matter. Living without this, you go back to a pre-contemporary moment. It is pure matter.

LW: That's right. I don't want to use strange objects, but rather things that exist in everyday life. I oppose the strange.

JS: I would say you are very ironic. You take all the signs of capitalism nowadays – even if artists all drive nice cars and have big studios – and say, "We don't care." It's a bit like the punk attitude. When you cut something like a pool table, you are turning it into pure matter. There is a critique of capitalism.

LW: This is all about "power" and "possession." You see these photographs, and the idea is that the power to frame the photograph is mine, and the objects left to you are sad and poor, cut in pieces. There are elements of boredom and pessimism.

JS: You think you have it, but in the end you do not. It's like your work 'Indigestion.' If you look at the gigantic shit, which is a monument of people who are eating well, there are all these electronic components.

So it's saying we don't digest well the new society or new technology; it goes with that.

LW: There's never any way to solve this problem, and each detail gets more and more complicated, each level exists in a complex relationship, you can never be clear on this.

JS: And yet we think that problems can be solved very fast, by e-mail, by text message. But in fact this creates more problems, more misunderstanding, more indigestion. And it goes back to this temporary, theoretical idea of 'Property of Liu Wei.' It is an irony where you reappropriate signs and symbols from Chinese culture or Western culture and declare them as your own.

LW: This work has to do with camouflage; there are no two pandas exactly alike. The earliest idea came from the name of a movie, Invisible Front. They are all cultural symbols.

JS: It seems more like an invisible invasion.

LW: Perhaps.

JS: And it looks more like the trailer of a feature film, like something dug up from the ground. The same with Mickey Mouse. There is this idea of the archaeological.

LW: Actually it's more what we were just talking about, the same starting point, a critique of the idea of objects or possession. In Beijing, perhaps because of historical or political reasons, I have this feeling that absolutely nothing belongs to me. Even if I have a house or a car, I don't have that feeling of total possession. This is unlike in Guangdong, where there is a strong notion of ownership. So here you can stamp your name on things and no one bats an eye, whereas in southern China they would think you were crazy.

JS: At the same time, it's a bit like street culture, where graffiti artists will mark a wall or a part of the city as a way of saying it belongs to them.

LW: I don't know anything about graffiti, but I don't think it's quite the same.

JS: It seems a lot like New York in the late 1970s, where artists had no room to express their work, and so they started to write on walls, like Basquiat. Keith Haring was in the subway making his drawings, and would sign them.

LW: My approximate feeling is that graffiti was about the artist displaying himself, whereas these works are not really about display.

JS: Yes, but you are writing your name, and most graffiti artists are doing the same thing, writing their name.

LW: But I'm not sure how much it matters that it is my name, and not some other name.

JS: But it feels that in the dog chews and other works, there is this irony of appropriating what you want, showing that now an artist can appropriate absolutely everything, there are no more limits to this appropriation.

LW: I haven't thought about it in this way, this idea of turning things to the artist's will. The key idea for me is that anything you see has some influence on you; you pay attention to exactly the things you want, the things you need. Because everything exists, so what you pay attention to, or what you are able to think of, are exactly and only those things. You cannot remember everything. This is my idea; the things I pay attention to are my most basic ideas.

JS: But you affix this label of "my property," which is a way of turning this thing into your own.

LW: This actually comes from the military, for example provisions stamped "Property of USA." I'm not sure; it was a friend who helped me translate this, an American, and he thought it was less the idea of a commodity than of an object not for sale, and so I chose to print this.

JS: So you won't sell this painting?

LW: Yes, it will sell. The inscription is just a property of the painting, not a real directive.

JS: Can we go back to these paintings that look like cityscapes? How do you compose these canvases? They look like views from the window, especially in Beijing where the sky is never blue, but often gray.

LW: Yes, but these paintings are completely meaningless. They don't have any meaning at all.

JS: For me it looks like you are mentioning that there is a high level of pollution in Beijing, that the sky is always gray.

LW: There was a bit of this at the beginning, because the painted canvases seemed so beautiful, so unlike life, so I called this series 'Purple Air.' In the Chinese classics, this idea of purple air also refers to a state of haze, a lack of clarity, but actually full of vitality. There are so many problems, but it is still lovely.

JS: What are your references among other artists?

LW: There are many, like Andy Warhol, because the first real lecture I attended was on Andy Warhol, when I had just started painting, in high school. Someone came to give a lecture on Warhol, and it was a huge influence. There are many, many others as well.

JS: How do you see the future of the Chinese art scene?

LW: I don't know. I have no way of thinking about this question.

JS: Why not?

LW: This question is not in my system.

JS: Which questions are in your system?

LW: It's rather individual, and it grows simpler and simpler as I peel away layers. But I don't think about questions like the future of Chinese art.

JS: Can you tell me one question you are thinking about?

LW: It's hard because just now I am trying to get rid of all my old questions, and to get beyond all my old works. I am doing this sort of work now, peeling away the old. But it's difficult; you can't get rid of them.