

**Liang Shu Han, Randian:** 'ON and OFF with Xu Qu',  
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## ON and OFF with Xu Qu

As a preview to the exhibition "ON | OFF: China's Young Artists in Concept and Practice," randian is publishing a series of conversations in the lead-up to the opening, offering insights into the concept and planning of the show, and the perspectives of participating artists.

"ON | OFF: China's Young Artists in Concept and Practice," an exhibition of the work of 50 young mainland Chinese artists, will open at UCCA (Ullens Center for Contemporary Art) in Beijing on January 13, 2013. Curated by Sun Dongdong and Bao Dong, the exhibition aims to survey the work of these artists in the tense context of recent Chinese history and their experience of life and artistic practice. Liang Shuhan met artist Xu Qu to discuss the exhibition in the final weeks of its preparation.

**Liang Shu Han:** What does the title "ON | OFF" evoke for you?

**Xu Qu:** It's very interesting. I researched the term online, and discovered "ON|OFF" was the name of a very famous gay bar that used to operate in Beijing. Lots of newcomers used to like to visit this bar, but it's closed now. I wanted to see if I could find some photos or files and replicate the bar in some exhibition hall. I think there will always be some unique groups like homosexuals in the great human masses of society, and they always have their own venues. I found it really amusing that the title of this exhibition also happened to be the same as the gay bar; it's so coincidental. You can explain this name any way you want, on and off, open and shut, etcetera. Certain groups will always have icons they recognize, but other groups will be in the dark about them – this is what I've gleaned from this title. We all have our own value systems, but perhaps this is where the problem lies; they are too rigid, too delineated, and I don't think this is a good thing.

**LSH:** Can you briefly introduce the work(s) you will be showing in the exhibition?



**XQ:** I hope to emphasize physical memory. Like I've discussed with you before, my father was in the Navy, and in an attempt to understand what it was like, I went to Xisha Islands [in the South China Sea] to experience the tropics. I believe there are many elements involved in physical memory. When I'm working I unfold these memories; it's comparable to removing something from a safe. I often wonder if this method qualifies as a creative process. At the "ON|OFF" exhibition, I'm going to create a relationship between everyday objects, the exhibition space, the staff, and everyone attending. I'm planning to place a monumental marble cube in the exhibition hall. I will instruct the employees of the nearby coffee shop to bring a cup of coffee and place it on a designated spot at five in the afternoon. I wish to determine the labor value inherent in this act of setting down a cup of coffee.

There are two parts to my exhibit at UCCA. The first portion is very gentle — the simple action of a staff member setting down a cup of coffee. When I discussed it with them, the staff at the café said they could provide the coffee to me free of charge; I didn't need to pay anything. I told them this was wrong; the core of this project is found in my expenditure prompting a resultant action from them. Perhaps the coffee will then be consumed by someone familiar with my work. It doesn't matter, because someone from the cafe will replace it with another cup of coffee every day. It takes three to five minutes to walk from the cafe to the exhibit, during which the temperature of the coffee will decrease incrementally. This repetition of labor is what I wish to exhibit.

In contrast to the mildness of the first piece, I will have another work right beside it which is also related to the value of labor and time. I'm going to install a support structure on the wall beside the piece with the cup of coffee on top of it, and strap a water cooler bottle to the wall. The labor value in this piece lies in the tiny amount of money earned by the worker who brings the water. Every day, he places a new bottle in the structure and takes down the previous day's bottle. It's the same action as the one performed by the staff member from the cafe. The worker who brings the water will have a pair of scissors with him, and I'll also place a hatchet beside the display so he can choose to use the axe to break the water bottle, damaging the object giving his labor its value. When people perform the same action day after day in their work, it creates a cognitive dissonance; my piece will release this dissonance and allow it to be expressed in another situation. Of course he could go the way of dark humor and choose to pierce the jug with a dagger. So those are my two interrelated works, one of them gentle and the other extremely violent. In fact, I want to target some concepts found in art history like conceptualism. Take for example Michael Craig-Martin's work "An Oak Tree" at the 4th Guangzhou Triennial. I didn't think the significance of his piece lay in the written explanation "This is an oak tree"; rather, I was moved by the process of raising the glass and placing it on the shelf. Artists place an image in front of people and ask them to understand it, but we have been creating conceptual works for a great many years, and I wonder how to push things further.

**LSH:** How do you conceive the relations between your work and the curatorial framework of this exhibition?

**XQ:** I haven't communicated much with the curators because they're quite familiar with my past works. They've placed a lot of trust in me.

**LSH:** What do you feel you share in common with the other artists in the exhibition?

**XQ:** I can't really say at this point, the exhibition hasn't taken place yet and I can't predict what we might have in common. So it's too early to say.

**LSH:** The current moment presents us increasingly with choices and different perspectives from which to view our situation. How do you think this affects art?

**XQ:** It definitely affects me, and in many different ways as well — for example, the physical memory I just mentioned, or the relationships I'm going to create in the exhibit, or the process of putting the thoughts I've gradually accumulated on display at the exhibition hall. Anything marginally constructive will be a huge achievement for me

**LSH:** How do you understand the current broader conditions for emerging artists today? What are the barriers and edges for you?

**XQ:** There definitely are a great number of opportunities now. All of the artists I know have had chances to exhibit their works, and everyone works hard and puts in immense effort. But the opportunities and barriers differ from person to person. An artist might suddenly be confronted by something completely unrelated to art and find their work improves; on the same note, the quality of their work might also decline tremendously. Anything could happen. But so far I've never worked with a gallery, and don't have any plans for long-term contractual obligations to any galleries. Over the last few years, I've been constantly searching for an adequate space where I can try to express my thoughts as eloquently as possible. Though issues often arise, like the overwhelming power of commerce. I question how to harness this power and use it for my own means as an artist. I don't want to take advantage of it; I want to use it in service of a specific value or a particular philosophy. The struggle for power is just like some many wars and conflicts, whether it's a tug of war, or a battle of annihilation. There's no set process to solving these problems quickly.

**LSH:** What is the most significant question facing your artistic practice now?

**XQ:** Currently, the most significant question I'm facing is how to maintain the clarity of vision. Modern art is ideological, and ideologies naturally require something to sustain them. But when artists place too much emphasis on the source of their sustenance, problems appear and they will find themselves controlled by commercial forces. This brings a high degree of complications, and the unspoken contract will start to break down.

**LSH:** So, when the exhibition opens, I can grab a cup of coffee next to your piece every day?

**XQ:** Right. Five in the afternoon, every day.