

**BENTU**

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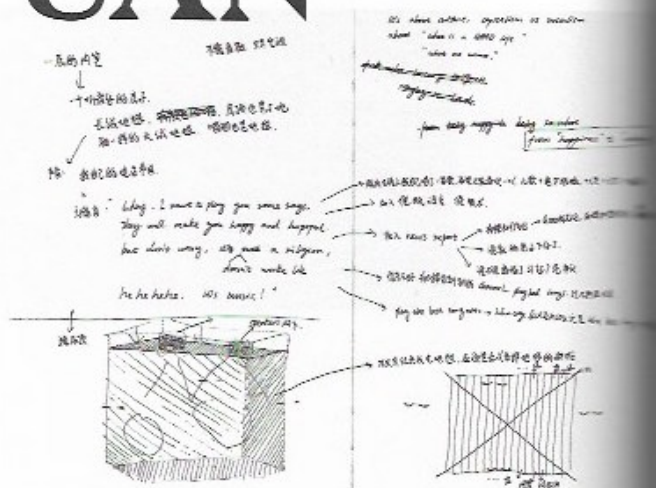
**CHINESE  
ARTISTS  
IN  
A  
TIME  
OF  
TURBULENCE  
AND  
TRANSFORMATION**

CAO FEI  
HAO LIANG  
HU XIANGQIAN  
LIU CHUANG  
LIU SHIYUAN  
LIU WEI  
LIU XIAODONG  
QIU ZHIJIE  
TAO HUI  
XU QU  
XU ZHEN  
YANG FUDONG

**FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON**

# LIU SHIYUAN

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Liu Shiyuan  
Sketch for "From  
Happiness to Whatever"  
2016  
24 x 36 cm

LIU  
SHIYUAN

## EVOKING AND CAPTURING EMOTIONS

SASHA ZHAO

As you step into this temporary meditation room, you are bowled over by the tightly knit wool carpets in different patterns covering the entire surface from floor to ceiling. Before your eyes adjust to the environment, you may feel that the space is about to collapse in on you the very next second. And you are also struck by how sensitive your hearing has become, due to the absorption of sound by the carpets. A radio programme called *From Happiness to Whatever* (which also gives the installation piece its title) is playing, recorded by Liu Shiyuan and her husband Kristian Mondrup Nielsen, a jazz drummer and music producer. The sound installation seems to reproduce the everyday scene of a Danish family listening to the radio. This radio show, broadcast in a country consistently topping world happiness rankings, seems to advocate a positive culture or ideology. As these words of happiness float in the air, putting you into a meditative state, you are awakened by the artist's whispers, alerting you to the danger of being lulled into a false sense of security.

The radio show's scripts seem like a set of courses on positive psychology. The programme brings to mind those amateur broadcasters who attract people's attention by playing the same tunes as popular rock stations or imitating TV shopping channels. "Moon Letter", the first part of the sound installation, comes from a speech that was never given in public. It was drafted by White House spin doctors for Richard Nixon in the event that the Apollo 11 astronauts failed to return from the moon. This inspiring speech shows how a disaster can be turned into a triumph of will. Certainly, this is a very human mechanism, manipulating results to make a failure look like a victory.

The second part, entitled "Brain Spa", is designed to induce a state of relaxation through hypnosis, during which deeper realms of the mind become more accessible. By following the prompts, the exercise helps you to "free your mind from all limits, bringing you greater satisfaction and hinting at ways to fulfil your potential and become all that you can be". This self-actualisation approach obviously imposes its own values. The popularity of psychotherapy confirms the mainstream desire for happiness: you need to be happy. Only those able to adjust themselves can fit in, while those full of dread and remorse are considered morbid and to be shunned. Just then, a cut-in piece breaks the soothing meditative atmosphere, an advertisement in the form of a poem, read with a Chinese accent, sounding strange and ridiculous. For this, Liu Shiyuan collected advertising slogans for household items from Chinese TV commercials and translated them into English using Google Translate. The asymmetry between the information communicated in the two languages, devoid of the original context, helps us to better understand how advertisements use words to guide our behaviour as consumers.

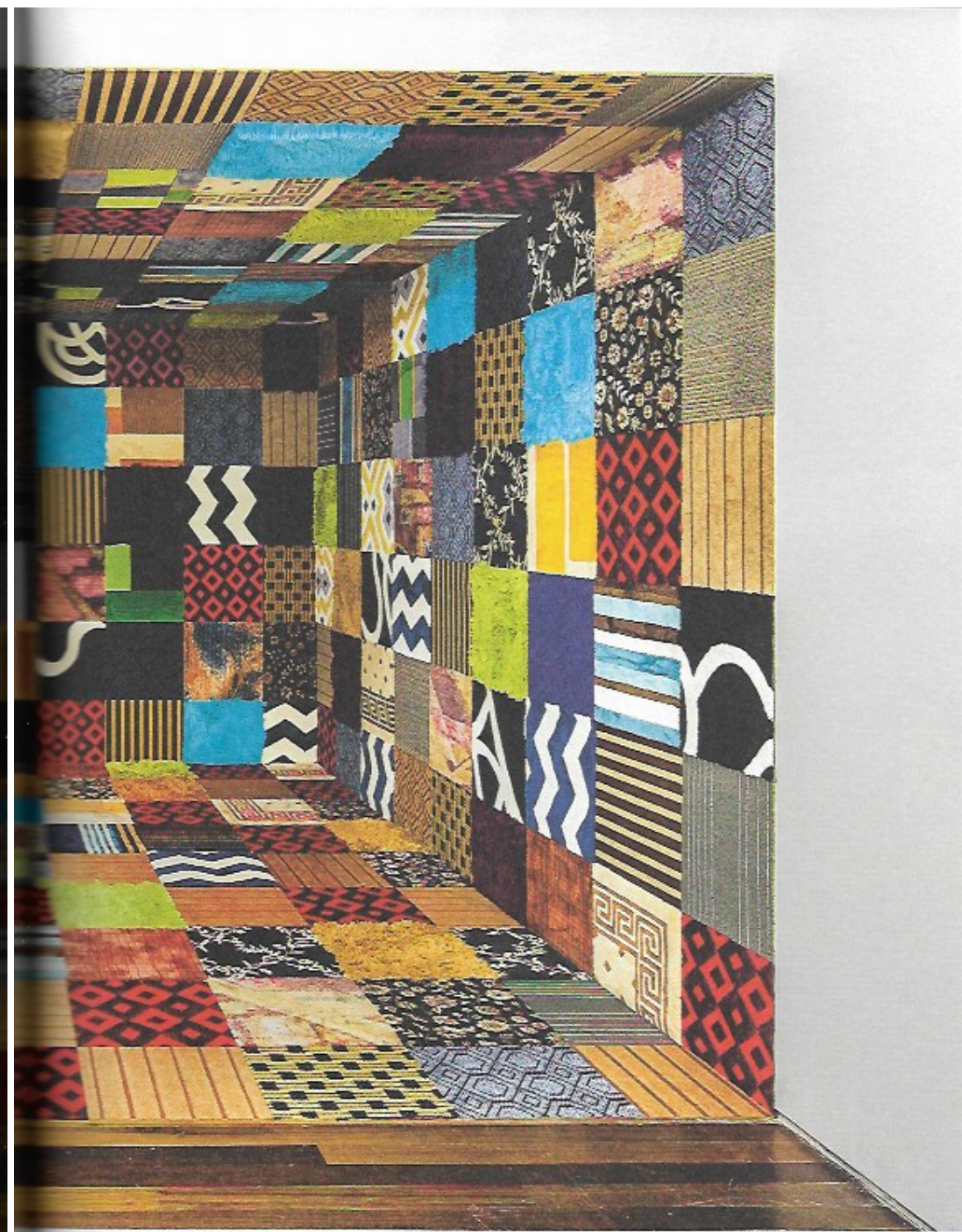
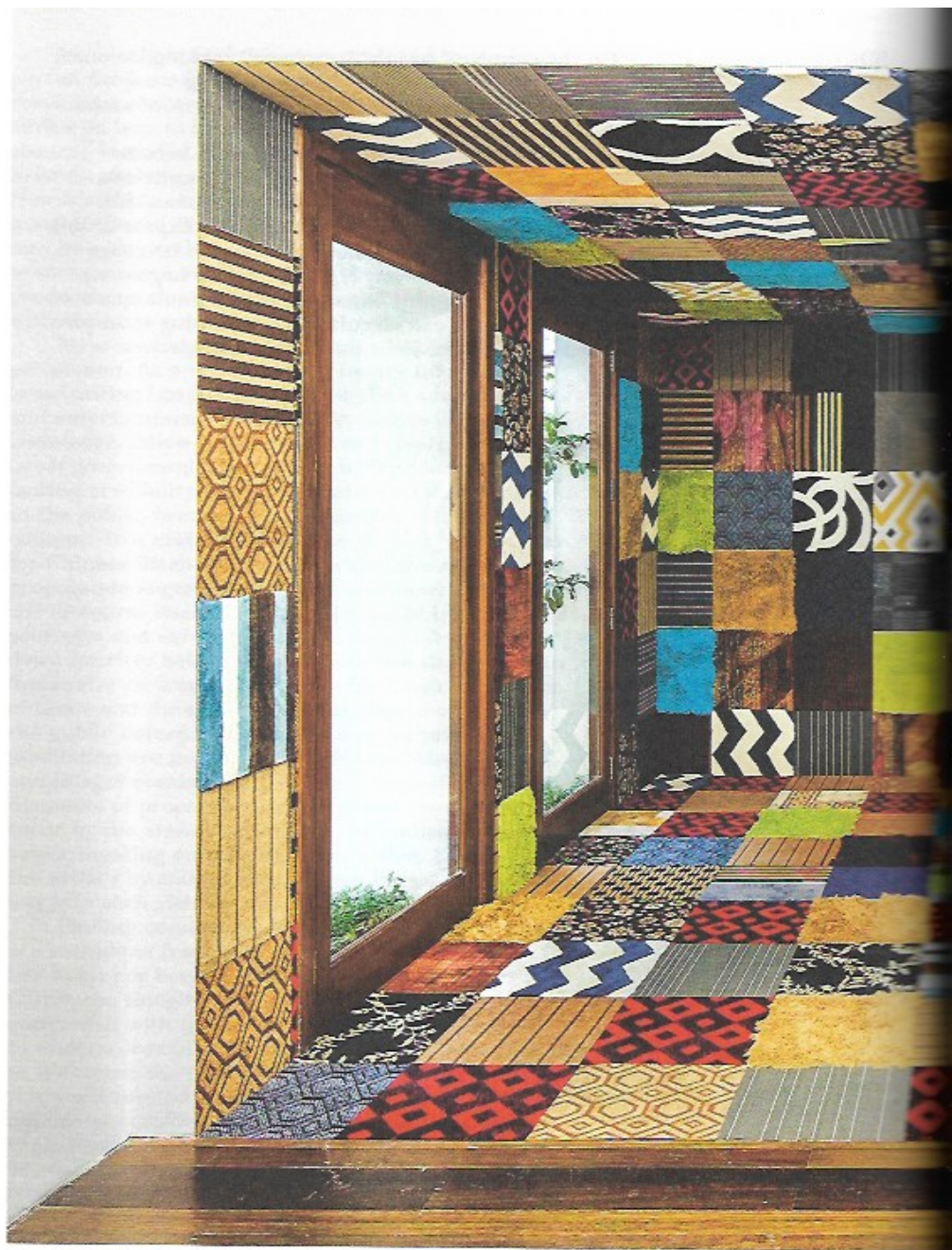
Visitors may feel the most confused by the last part of the installation, entitled "Making It". Given the previous content, one would expect to hear specific advice on how to be successful (the topic itself is absurd), but what follows is a long, vague description. Kristian has taken excerpts from the Discovery Channel's *How It's Made* series showing how various items are mass-produced in factories. The underlying comparison may be only partly in jest, but these images of mass production hint at the growing mechanisation of art production today and the success of this trend, along with the huge sums involved.

Mass media pervade our lives without needing permission. As a traditional vector for information, broadcasting has functions other than advertising and entertainment. For example, people can acquire knowledge, follow the news and even learn about the latest government policies. But in China, a country lacking credibility for the information made available to the public, broadcasting is more about form than content. To a certain extent, the auditory experience for Chinese listeners is one in which the art of propaganda engenders political hegemony through the discourse itself. This piece by Liu Shiyuan engages your eyes and ears. The space is designed to break down barriers between the private and the public (an immersive environment can readily inspire thoughts of home and the maternal bond), thus showing that the public nature of the media and the privacy of meditation are not mutually exclusive. Media voices and images coexist effectively in this playful parody. Elements of propaganda and hypnosis are used in turns by the artist to stimulate the audience's comfort zones, invoking emotions and reflection. Ultimately, the artist's intention, like a Trojan horse, makes its way into each visitor's mind.

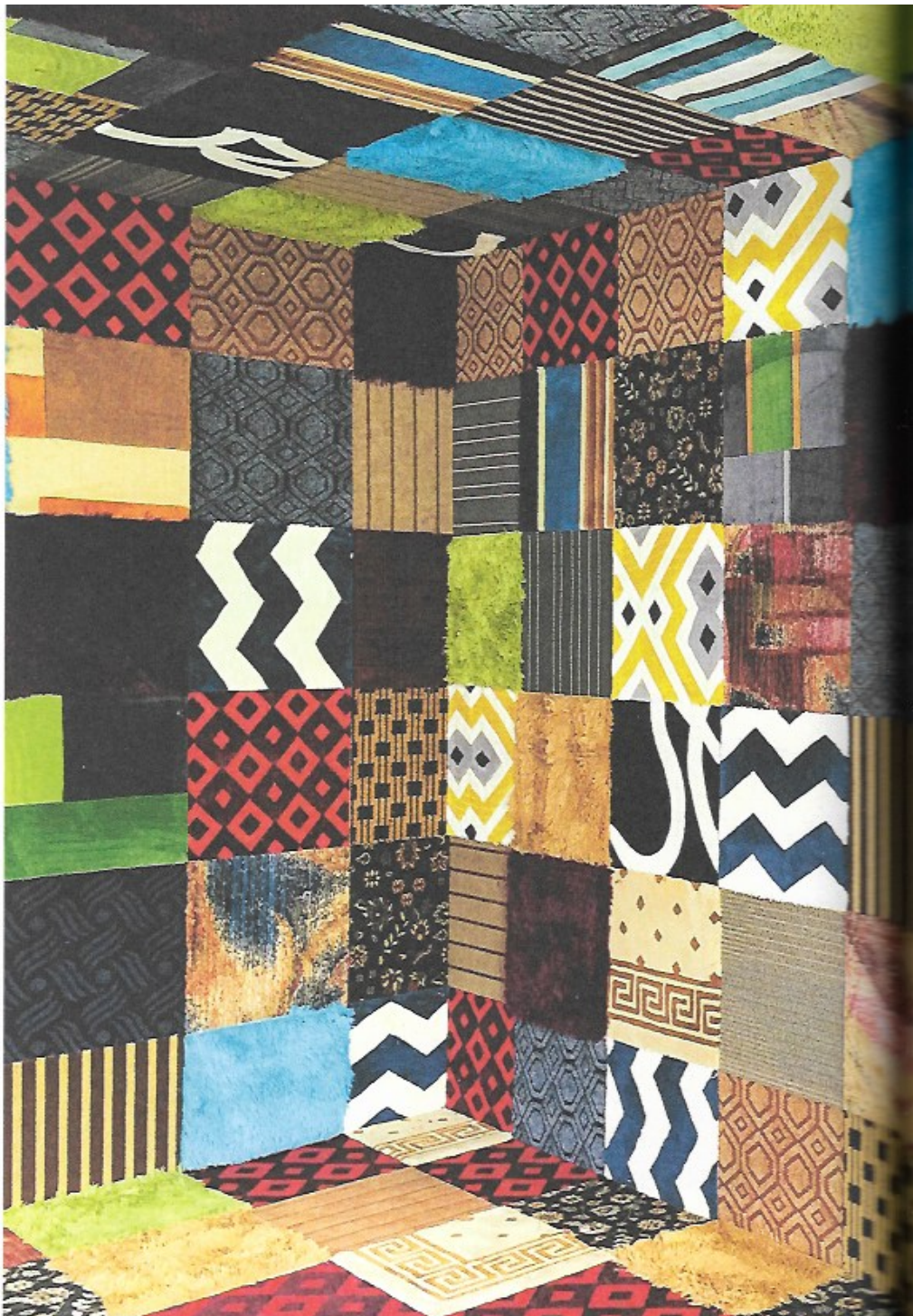
Finding connections among existing materials is a technique frequently employed by Liu Shiyuan in her work. For her installation piece *As Simple as Clay* (2013), she Googled images of clay and decorated an entire wall with these thousands of photos in order to underscore cultural diversity. And in *From Happiness to Whatever*, the tiles of carpets from countries around the world remind us that different cultures have varied notions of comfort, while the irregular composition suggests the frequent difficulty in bridging the gap between these cultures. The feeling of diaspora, frequently present in Liu's pieces, takes on an urgent dimension in this one. Appropriately, she points out that "happiness" as referred to in country rankings is only a mean value and cannot represent the real experience of any one individual. For her, although the Danish welfare system is often upheld as a socialist ideal, it cannot guarantee happiness for everyone.

On the contrary, a high "happiness" ranking becomes the face of the national ideology, building a way of life that conforms to the expected patterns of social development and economic principles.

It is worth noting that the different accents from Asia, North America, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom in this installation piece, like the varying protagonists in Liu's *Lost in Export* (2014), demonstrate the artist's desire to remain language neutral. She refuses any kind of cultural hegemony. *From Happiness to Whatever* draws us into a space where emotions can circulate freely, hoping to inspire discussions on the individual's role in society.



Liu Shiyuan  
From Happiness to Whatever  
2015  
Carpets, speakers, iPod  
Variable dimension  
Installation view at Leo Xu Projects gallery, Shanghai





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Preceding double page  
Liu Shiyuan  
From Happiness  
to Whatever (detail)  
2015

Liu Shiyuan  
As Simple As Clay  
2013  
Installation view at  
Leo Xu Projects gallery,  
Shanghai, 2015  
Variable dimensions  
(each unit: 19.2 x 10.2 cm)

**LIU  
SHIYUAN**



Liu Shiyuan  
Video stills from  
Lost in Export  
2014  
Video, stereo sound  
33'34"  
Music composed by  
Kristian Mondrup Nielsen