



*half
the
sky*

luise guest



LIU SHIYUAN 刘诗园

The Edge of Vision

Liu Shiyuan was educated partly in China and partly in the United States. Married to a Danish composer and musician, she lives between Beijing, New York and Copenhagen. This leaves her, she says, in the uncomfortable position of feeling like an outsider everywhere:

Working across three countries has influenced me a lot. I am doing something really very much related to cultural differences, very different to artists based in Beijing. They don't really go out [of China]. Artists here are all talking about how China is now. Because I am outside the wall I can see it from another angle, and I can see there is something beyond that. From the first moment I travelled I saw there are a lot of things that we share – there are not *so* many differences between cultures... Then the second thing I noticed is, yes, there *are* many differences, but not in the ways that people think.³³

The assumptions made about Chinese art in the west, and western art in China, and how the artist herself is perceived by both Chinese and non-Chinese as straddling two cultures, intrigue her. Interviewed by art critic Iona Whittaker in 2012 she said:

I have lived in Beijing, New York and Copenhagen. Through my art practice, I try to release myself from the discourse of cultural difference. I have come to question the very notion. This is in part because I find it increasingly difficult to point out fixed social norms that are exclusive to specific locations. I work with an awareness of cultural differences to make art that shows the overlap between cultures in order to communicate a globalized view of the world.³⁴

Liu Shiyuan at home in Beijing, October 2013, photo LG

Liu Shiyuan (*top*)
A Conversation with Photography (details) 2012
installation, dimensions variable
images courtesy the artist

Born in Beijing in 1985, Liu's early talent ensured that she followed the expected path to the high school affiliated with the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and to CAFA for a degree in New Media. She was given her first camera at the age of eight, but hated photography because a strict teacher focused on 'boring' technical aspects of camera craft. At that early age, she sought out dark subject matter, she says, rather than the expected happy and beautiful subjects: 'When I was eight years old I looked for bad things to take photographs of, like car accidents.' Later, in high school, the focus of her training was on painting. She said, 'I was the best artist in the middle school, so if there was only one student who was going to get into CAFA, that would be me!' Later, however, she realised that places for students who did not have to sit for the gruelling entrance examination were allocated on a political basis (in China everything comes back to *guanxi* – connections and reciprocal obligations) and Liu was never in the running due to her father's 'bad family background' – the Cultural Revolution continues to haunt people even today. Reflecting on this early art education, Liu Shiyuan says:

Our education was Russian style – in realistic oil painting. I can paint something that looks as real as a photograph. Then I thought, if I can do that, I might as well just make photography! But you never know, I might come back to painting when I am maybe seventy years old.

Liu travelled to the United States for postgraduate study where she was disconcerted to find that students in New York were expected to speak critically about their own work, an entirely unfamiliar experience:

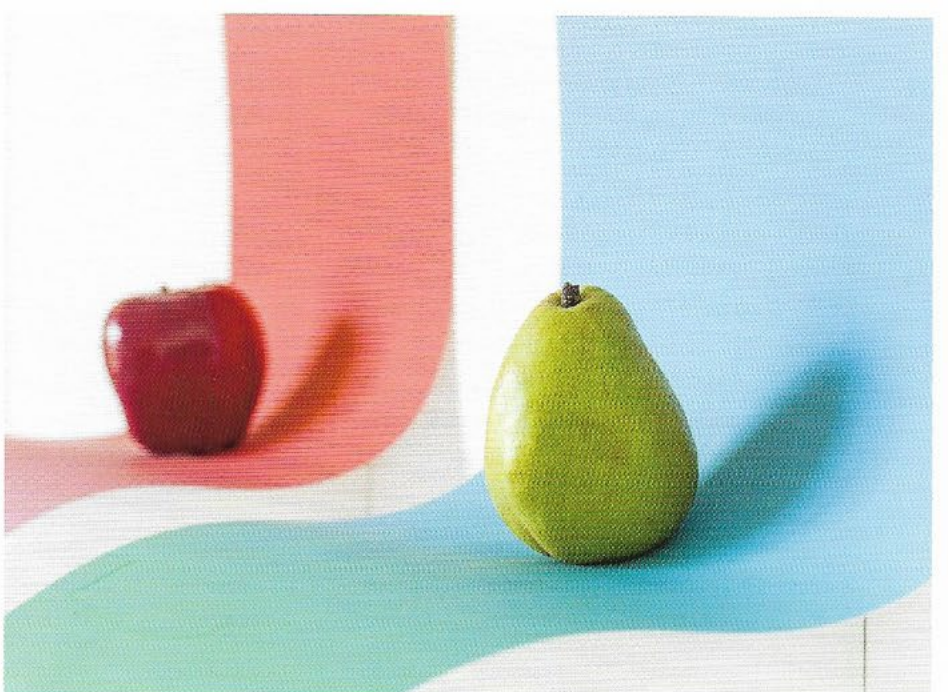
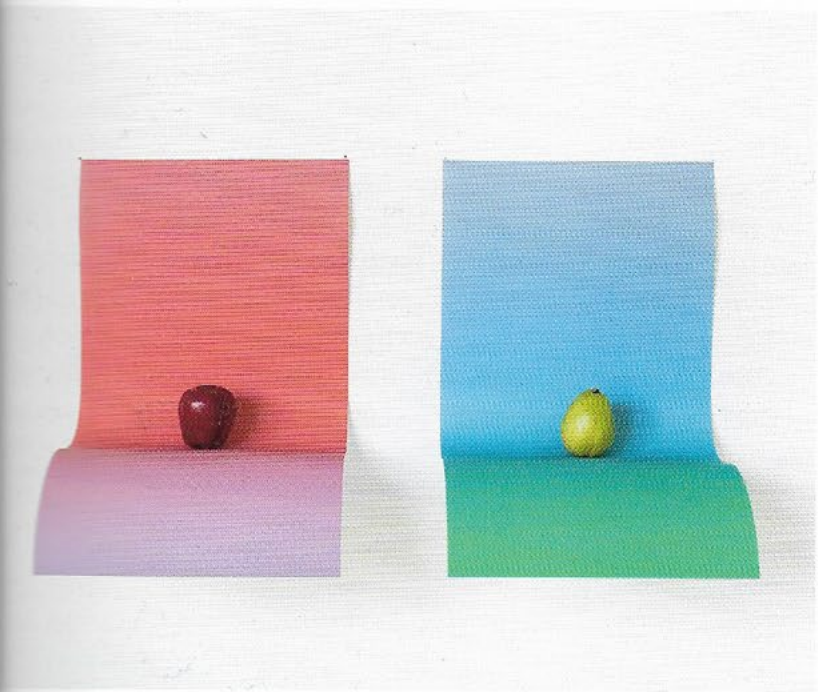
In the beginning they always wanted me to talk about my work and I had to do it. In CAFA we don't talk about our work, we just say 'blah' and become friends with our professors! Once you translate the work into language you pin it down a lot. I said to my professor, 'I don't want to talk about my work, I *cannot* do it!' [But] in the end I learned how to talk about my art practice in New York. Now I can write a pretty good statement about my work in English. And if you want me to I could talk about it for eight hours!

I had no doubt this was true – Liu is voluble, articulate and thoughtful in three languages.

Liu Shiyuan bridges her two worlds of life in Beijing with her family and a different life in Copenhagen with aplomb, but she is always aware of cultural nuances and slippages. In Beijing, Liu and her husband live in the tiny one-roomed apartment where she grew up, allocated to her father by his work-unit. It is hard to imagine a smaller space for a family of three people. Now, her parents own two other apartments,

Liu Shiyuan (*middle*)
As Simple as Clay 2013
installation views, c-type
photographs, dimensions variable
images courtesy the artist

Liu Shiyuan (*bottom*)
We Were Never Alone, Never Bored 2014
inkjet prints, apple, pear
dimensions variable
images courtesy the artist



one in the southern part of Beijing and another on the outskirts, 'right on the edge of the map,' says the artist. Her parents worry that she does not have a stable income, and that she has married a musician. In part their anxiety is based on their personal history:

My father is from a very rich family – they were super rich during the Qing Dynasty. During the Cultural Revolution – boom! My father had a terrible childhood. His parents were sent to the countryside. At five years old he was forced to do work in the fields. Even after I was born in 1985 people still said bad things about his family background. Even today people in his company say things like that – it's terrible when you think about it. He joined the party to give me and my mum a good life, but he is happy I married a foreigner to have a different kind of life, and another option if things are bad again... But he worries that I don't have a job with a salary. He says two people cannot both do art, one person must earn some money!

When she was living in New York, Liu perceived it as a much tougher city for an artist than Beijing. In fact, she says, her Chinese artist friends kept calling, exhorting her to return: '[They] said "Shiyuan, this is the last train from the eighties and nineties – you must come back and get on this train or you will miss it!"' Liu believes – and her group and solo shows attest – that the continued interest in young emerging artists in Beijing is a result of the immense popularity and celebrity attached to those artists who broke new ground in the late 1980s and 1990s:

People are interested in new things and new artists. I think the galleries here are very open, more than in the States. I think the galleries [in Beijing] are more concerned with the work itself, not with the artist, or whether they are female or male. Whereas in New York the competition is much more intense and people still think you are a young emerging artist when you are thirty-five! I don't feel pressure because I am just doing what I am doing, and I want to just keep doing it and continue my work. I think that success will come if my work is good enough. If the work is good it will bring its own opportunities.

Much of her work is about uncertainty and flux. She makes us doubt our perceptions of the world and, indeed, the medium of photography itself. Influenced by the work of Penelope Umbrico (her teacher at the School of Visual Arts in New York) who created an installation of images of the sun sourced from Flickr, Liu Shiyuan has often turned to the internet for her source material. For her first solo show in Beijing, in 2012, she found the floral imagery she wanted for the installation *A Conversation with Photography* by searching Google using

terms like 'cliché flowers' and 'disgusting flowers'. The result was a wall entirely covered with densely layered exotic flora. *A Conversation with Photography* disrupts our expectations with its shifting focus and ambiguities of scale. Three frames decorated with the same flowers are installed at eye level. Look inside and you see nothing but tinted glass, the flowers on the wall behind, and perhaps a reflection of yourself. This digital collage of tropical blooms plays with our assumptions of photographic veracity, creating a surreal and incoherent – almost psychedelic – experience. Liu is interested in the relationship between language and images. Is what you find on Google an objective truth? How do the algorithms of search engines manipulate our experiences? Notions of truth have become ever more slippery and elusive, she believes.

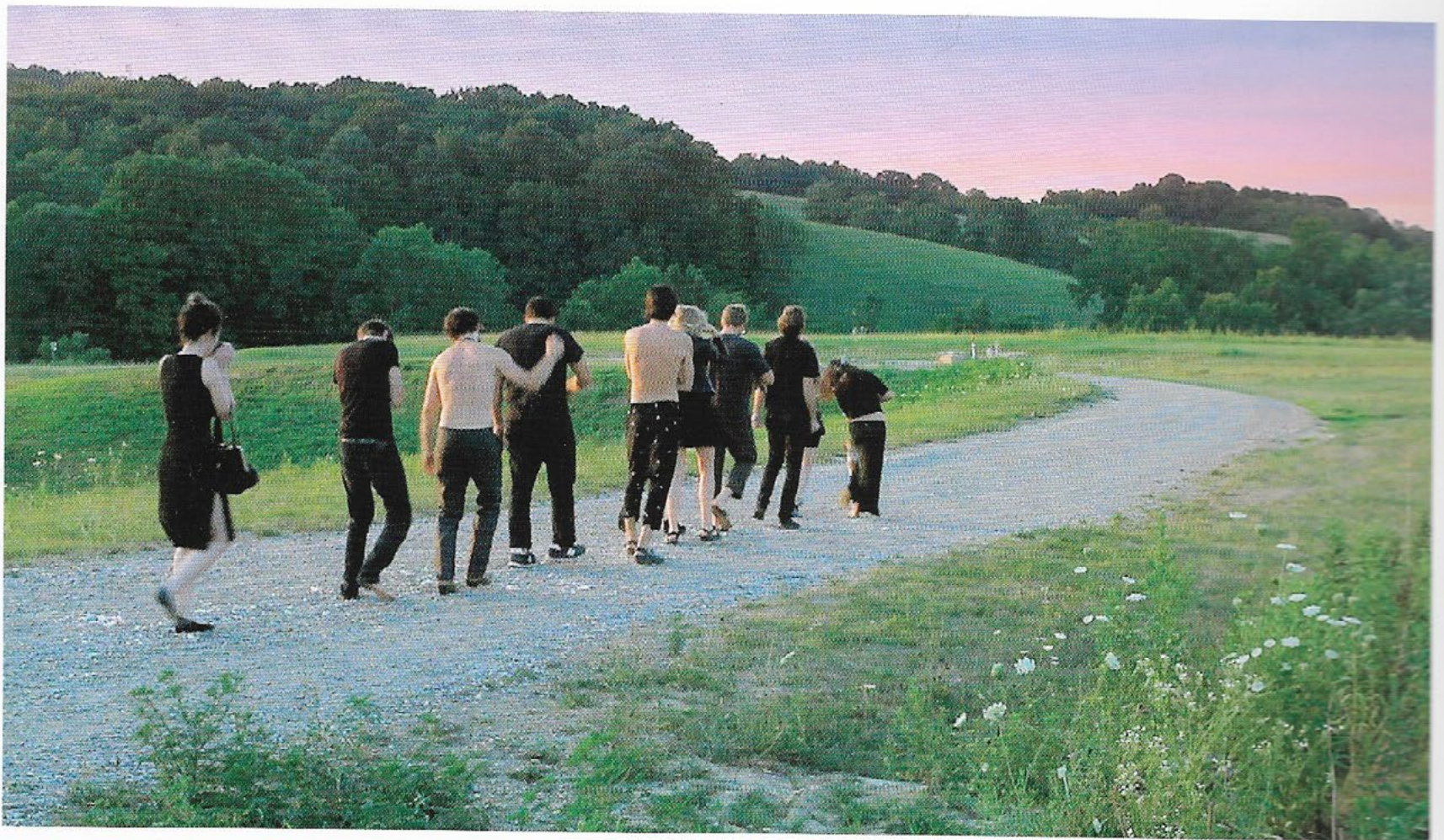
Re-en-act (2012) features images of expensive, opulent jewellery (sourced from Google) arranged on what appears to be the green felt of a billiard table, or the roulette table in a casino. Liu does not want these images read in a simple, singular way, as an obvious critique of extremes of wealth, rather, she says, she is 'making something beautiful' that may be interpreted in multiple ways – or perhaps not at all.

As Simple as Clay (2013) was developed during a period in Denmark when, without the obligations of family, a gallery to represent her, or a job to go to, she was bored and at a loose end. She decided to make art – maybe even deliberately bad art. A trip to an art supply store provided her with raw materials for the installation – a bag of clay. She says:

I was expressing a cross-cultural idea about the boundaries of culture – the process of making work and its cross-cultural nature. I noticed that there is a lot of overlap between cultures. That's the essence of human beings – mostly people are the same. So I was trying to find the things that are different.

She translated the word 'clay' into different languages, exploring how people used it and thought about it in different cultures.

Liu began to collect images of clay and clay-like substances like ice-cream, tofu, butter, and soap, making the background of each image blue to erase any context. She said, 'I feel like there is something that all people in the world are doing together. It's a little bit sad, that installation. When some people join their hands together and try to make something together it makes me cry...The materials are just waiting for people to make them into something.' The final installation consisted of one thousand, one-hundred-and-forty photographs, an attempt to evoke the energy and emotion of creative work. The artist says it 'presents a cross-cultural ideal in the sense that the boundaries of culture are both present and obliterated.'³⁵



Liu Shiyuan is playing a complicated linguistic and visual game. 'Art has to be beautiful, in my opinion,' she says. 'I am currently very interested in the standards of beauty.'³⁶ Her ideas of beauty are unconventional, found in the everyday world of supermarket packaging and advertising, rather than in any 'high art' notions of taste:

I like the images in supermarket catalogues, I think there are some very good photographs. I cut them out and stick them in my notebook. Why is beauty so important? My beauty is different from 'arty' beauty. My understanding of beauty is about truth and honesty and daily life. I want to put everything into my work – philosophy, art history, beauty. [For me] it is more about *why* do I do it? What am I doing? It is all about the idea.

Seeking a visual language that transcends assumptions about visual culture, Liu strips away narrative through the use of found images, making 'camera-less photography' and 'footage-less' video.

Like other Chinese artists who spend time overseas, she feels some discomfort when fellow artists or curators accuse her of being too 'western':

I think my work is related to Chinese culture, but not in a political way. In my work I don't tell you all of my thoughts, I hide a little bit – I hide half! I think this is traditionally Chinese. You make it be little-by-little, step-by-step... I don't want my work to be too conceptual. I hate work that is just one idea – it's so boring, *why* not just say it! I think this is something I learned from my teacher in the States [Penelope Umbrico] – it's thinking about *who* takes pictures, *why* take pictures... There is something about traditional photography that is magic, but now the magic is being lost.

Liu Shiyuan watches BBC wildlife documentaries and they provide inspiration for video works:

For example, the nature documentary might be about lions or tigers, and they use beautiful images of sunsets, and other beautiful footage in between to make it narrative, and sometimes they even use the same footage in different documentaries!

Her practice is dedicated to exposing narratives of this kind as cultural artefacts. In works such as *Sunrise*, she disrupts assumptions and challenges cinematic conventions. We think we are seeing a long shot of the ocean before dawn, with

ocean sound effects. When the camera pulls back we realise it is in fact a television screen transmitting feedback from the camera. She describes it as 'a piece of misunderstanding video work.'³⁷ What she likes about video, she says, is that 'it is just a bunch of still images strung together.'

The Edge of Vision or The Edge of the Earth has a soundtrack in which one of the artist's friends imitates David Attenborough's hushed wildlife documentary voice over ambiguous landscape footage from China, Denmark and the United States. Some is the artist's own footage, shot over a long period of time in her journeying between cultures, but other elements are sourced from the web. She complicates the relationship between the artist, the audience and the work, 'opening up a space for us to explore the cultural, moral and ethical discourses embedded in the genre of documentary.'³⁸ Her interest in liminality and fluidity may well come from her own sense of being nowhere, in a space between cultures: 'I am very interested in the things that are in between. Maybe because I am myself somehow in between.' *Beyond the Pale*, Liu's 2014 solo show at Andersen's Contemporary Gallery, Copenhagen, presented 'found' floral imagery once again, in a sculptural installation that explored how audiences engage with unfolding sequences of associations and visual/neural connections. Meaning is elusive here, as in earlier installations, but the experience is a sensory and aesthetic delight. Liu Shiyuan's work requires us to suspend our instinctive drive to interpret and categorise.

Liu represents a new generation of artists, who not only work across cultures and forms, but deliberately undermine and challenge their boundaries. She is immersed in international debates about photography and image-making. She represents a new generation of artists, who not only work across cultures and forms, but deliberately undermine and challenge boundaries. Where other photographers seek to reinvent and subvert traditional forms such as ink painting, Liu sees that as 'wearing your Chinese identity on the outside.' Artists of her generation no longer have to do this in order to be accepted outside of China, she says. Nevertheless, she still identifies herself as primarily a Chinese artist:

Of course! I am Chinese, I am trained at CAFA. I am a Chinese artist. If I say that to other artists here in China, they think, 'Oh OK, you are an artist' but if I say that to westerners they say, 'Oh, you are like Ai Weiwei.' Why do I say I am a Chinese artist? Firstly because I have a Chinese passport, I am Chinese. In China, people think my work is not sufficiently Chinese. But when I show my work outside out of China in the west, people think it is something quite new and something they have never seen before... I think our works are more individual than the older generation. We have different ways - I want my work to be strong [too], but our strategy is quite different... to be strong, it must be honest to ourselves.

Liu Shiyuan believes that today, the boundaries between China and the west are more fluid than in the past. 'I think that in 1985, the year that I was born, China was [finally] open and everyone got so excited,' she says. 'The older generation really wanted the west to see China. For us, the traditional Chinese culture is on the inside of our body, it is not on the surface for everyone to see.'

Caught between different identities, Liu Shiyuan faces contradictory expectations: 'When I am living in Europe I see America. When I am in America I see China. I am outside everything. I have a really big responsibility towards art history. I really have to care about that, and I think my work has to be beautiful. I think about everything in that way.'



FANG LU 方璐

Lovers are Artists

An empty shopping trolley engulfed in flames slides sideways across the cement floor of an abandoned building. The long shot dissolves to close-ups of young faces, screaming. There is no sound except an amplified heartbeat and electronic noise. Later, the same young people goose-step in formation around the empty space with an Alsatian dog on a tight leash, throwing what appear to be tear gas canisters, engaging in ritualised forms of hand-to-hand combat. This is Fang Lu's video *No World*, which employs the language of film to consider how public actions become theatrical performances. Far from spontaneous expressions of authentic selfhood, Fang Lu suggests that in an age of mediated imagery, the desire to record and curate each of life's moments,



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