Liu Shiyuan:
From Being A Good Person To Whatever

__ **Fiona He**

As you climb a flight of stairs, glimpses of vibrant and red pomegranate photo-collaged on the sidewalls come in and out of your sight while you push through layers and layers of densely draping red beats, an arduous process that makes the end seem nowhere in sight. You would be mindful of every step you take to avoid tripping, and getting caught. If it happens that other people are taking the staircase at the same time, your experience suddenly becomes more exciting and dangerous as both of you navigate your way out. *OMG Welcome!* (2015), recently installed in Liu Shiyuan's solo exhibition at the Leo Xu Projects, *From "Happiness" to "Whatever"* provides an experiential entering point into the artist's intrigue in the limits of perception and experience, in this case, discovering the tipping point of danger and excitement occurring solely or simultaneously.

According to the artist, this is how she feels living as a recent immigrant in Copenhagen, Denmark. A true global artist, who has received her undergraduate degree at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing (2005-2009), then onto pursuing her studies at the School of Visual Art in New York (2010-2012), being out of place and having to integrate into the local cultural context drive Liu Shiyuan to question the exclusivity and specificity of all cultural norms. Unlike many artists living with constant shifting cultural locales, Liu Shiyuan does not export her native culture to feed the exotic desires of the other. Instead, as she notices the boundary delineates the

duality between conventional knowledge and everyday reality expands, she chose to adroitly experiment with employing artistic means such as installation, video and photography, as she contests their possibilities in her artistic practice.

Denmark is known for being one of the happiest nations in the world, yet living in the globalized present, as a conspicuous "other" in a foreign racial and cultural context, how does one negotiate the qualifications of happiness? *From "Happiness" to "Whatever"* (2015), not only has the artist questioned a "clichéd" cultural ideal such as "happiness", a common and objective goal experienced by disparaging subjectivities of the modern era. Furthermore, the work highlights Liu's enquiry of the mismatching semantics to its visual other. The radio is perhaps one of the most ubiquitous channels of mass media. The artist tunes the audience in to a series of programs she has pre-recorded, as if one is listening to a local radio station by stepping into the engulfing entrance of the gallery fully covered by one square foot size carpet of various patterns. To emphasize happiness as an ultimate cultural ideal, or even a social norm, every introduction of every program begins with guaranteeing his/her happiness to a point of psychological conditioning. Meanwhile, the correlation with the content ensuing the introductions is often arbitrary, let it be a commemoration letter on the martyrdom of those who have sacrificed their lives on the moon to discover truth to mankind; a session of "brain spa" that is supposedly meant to detox one's mind and help to relax, or the current innovative technology that improves productivity and etc. In the impossibility of a definitive configuration for "happiness", a standard that neither represents the individual or a social group, its semantics is as arbitrary as the indefinite "whatever". Moreover, the installation of the flamboyant visual atmosphere further disrupts its auditory incoherence in a presumably comfortable experience of listening to the radio. How does one become a "happy" person in global context coming from disparaging experiences and background is not the only question Liu Shiyuan asks herself and the viewers, but urges one to fine tune their senses, either auditory or visual, to discover the crevasses that exist between them.

Liu Shiyuan has always been a disbeliever of the mediums she employs,

particularly in her video works and photography. By tampering with the viewer's conventional knowledge of the medium, Liu introduces devices that challenges the viewers conception on the established standards and attributes. In other words, what you see is not necessarily what it is. In an early work *Sunrise* (2007), the screen flickers in a Hiroshi Sugimoto Seascape-like image in two different shades of chroma-key blue, accompanied by the sound of waves and seagulls. A scene easily mistaken as the idyllic ocean is suddenly disrupted as the artist reveals her manipulation with input and output of the image source. In fact, Liu Shiyuan has connected the video camera directly to the TV screen, what she shoots is directly played on the screen. As she turns the camera to the TV screen itself, we see one TV screen within another extending inwardly towards the center. Only then, do we realize that the idyllic seascape and its ambient sound effects was none other than a trompe l'oeil. A similar trick is played out in a faux terrorist scenario. In *Hi!* (2011), the camera hides behind a person holding a machine gun wearing long hair, as a girl in a bathrobe comes out the shower and greets the gunman, the camera zooms into the hair of the gunman in pixelated chroma-key blue, as we hear the clicking sounds. This less than one minute long video quickly zooms out, as the girl in the bathrobe realizes she was being filmed and closes the door. If you were an equal skeptic like Liu Shiyuan, you'd be rescued by the appearance of the chroma-key blue in both of these cases, as it separates the iconographical representation from the reality one experiences.

Her later video works, more elaborate in production and their deployments of technical devices, question the fundamental nature of documentary film and cinematic affects, as every stereotype and rules that define the genres are altered. In *The Edge of Vision, or the Edge of the Earth* (2013), a montage of footages shot at various locations across the world and web-sourced images of nature, this 6 min "documentary" is narrated with a British accent imitating David Attenborough (founder and documentary film maker of the BBC Life series), its nonsensical storyline for the "vision of the world" at times contradicts with images perceived, for instance the pairing of a group of people crying with descriptions often used to portray animal migrations. The montage of the various representations of nature, either photojournalistic

or digitally generated images subvert the "reality" of nature. Furthermore the plasticity of the sound effect makes the viewer doubtful of the work being a documentary. the genre of video. Indeed, an objective narrative focusing on factual information ascribed to the genre of documentary film making in fact entails the subjectivity of the filmmaker, only in this case, Liu Shiyuan's intentional inversion of the two would allow the viewer to realize the finesse of such balancing act. In the same light, *Lost in Export* (2015) contests to what we understand as "romantic cinema", a form of manipulated visual consumption that generates certain conditioned emotional responses through its deployment of well-worn clichés. In this seemingly linear narrative of romance of two young couples, through their encounters, their frustrations with their jobs and their infidelities to each other, Liu Shiyuan alters these established clichés of cinematic affects to allow her viewers a brand new visual experience. Either it is revealing her perception on the affect of iconography (as the characters John and Sophie are having a conversation about her discontent with her job, the camera zooms in on the cover of a book titled *Photography Changes Everything*), or making cinematographic parodies of classic films such as *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), or even the various technical variations of visual superimposition, low-resolution images and dimensional shifts of the moving images, *Lost in Export* de-conditions our emotional responses and liberates the viewers from being a film hostage .

Based on an equal footing, Liu Shiyuan's photographic works not only contests to the various notions of photography, as the artist walks on the crevasses between conventional tenets and its infinite possibilities that challenge them, but also continues to probe at cultural clichés. *If It Wasn't* (2012) plays with the perception of scale we assign to objects in an image. The proportion of the landscape and the size of the fruit, either a peach, an avocado or what not, superimposed on each landscape predominately occupies the relatively small dimension of the landscape, thus propelling the viewer to reconsider the relational scale. Does the frame of an image function to define its boundary between the represented image and its environment? In *A Conversation with Photography* (2012), Liu's sourced images of "ugly or disgusting" flowers in her representation of "beauty". They are collaged densely onto the frames and expanded onto the entire wall of

the gallery space. In the contrary, within the frames are tinted black glasses absent of any image. Liu Shiyuan inverts the primary and secondary roles of our conventional understanding of frame and image, as well as blurring the boundary of the "beautiful" and "ugly"; or in the discussion of light, a fundamental component of imaging. Liu discovers a discrepancy between man-made technology and natural phenomenon. Thus, to redefine the "right" understanding of light in *Extreme Deep Field* (2013), she collaged her own understanding of light as she references NASA's new imaging of light in the universe. And, such examples are abundant in her works.

It is apparent that sourced images from web search engines predominately consist of Liu Shiyuan's "raw material", a method adopted from her professor at SVA (School of Visual Art, New York), Penelope Umbrico, who is known for collecting and appropriating found images from social media. Unlike Umbrico's point of departure in the similarities of the images to obscure the boundary between its embodiments and metaphorical implications, Liu Shiyuan's collecting seeks to destabilize an objective standard, as she attempts to expand the boundaries of the semiotics, either in photography or film.

As Simple as Clay (2013) presented at the Yuz Museum Project Room sits at the crossroad of Liu Shiyuan's mission. A seminal work embodying many conceptual components of her artistic practice, its validity spans in multiple layers of understanding. The artist refers to the work as "the first moment of making art". Perhaps because it was produced in a period of time when the she was studying a new language. As an experiment, or possibly out of curiosity, she bought a piece of clay and wondered what kind of "terrible" work she would make out of it. An act of shaping it into every possible form and examining it in every angle has likely kindled the artist's first experience of manipulating malleable material. It might also have been due to the coincidence of learning a new language, as language is presumably the objective means of communication and her curiosity drove her to inquire into the visual counterpart of the same object. By inputting the term "clay" in a search engine, what translated through the search is not only "clay" per se, but an array of "clay-like" objects, such as butter, tofu, soap, foundation

and etc., that represent the various semblance in physical and metaphorical attributes of the material. Furthermore, the search grew exponentially as the term was translated into different languages in which its meanings expanded from cutting, sculpting, to even creating and experimenting. The artist has extracted the objects from its iconographical context in which they were first featured and replaced their backgrounds with chroma-key blue to restore a visual common denominator. While this common denominator unifies the totality of one's visual experience, at the same time, it obliterates the geographical and cultural context in which the objects were originally found. If we were to look at an installation of images of clay against its blue background alone, how would one make the association with its cross-cultural impetus? In fact, some of the images from this collection of photographs are made into the post cards and will be sold at the museum gift shop, circulating as any merchandise, these iconic images of one culture may be transferred to another. In the various manifestations of this analytical search, these photographs of "clay" were set up on a grid, where the viewers are invited to make their own association with this pool of images.

Liu Shiyuan embarks on a quest of unveiling a globalized view of the world by conjuring various cultural experiences of her own and presenting them through manipulating conventional knowledge of artistic mediums. She emphasizes that her artworks are not autobiographical, as she serves to trigger new perceptions on the cultural and visual clichés we have grown accustomed to. Through these visual dilemmas, pseudo documentary and romantic love stories, or the spectrum of images generated in the ramifications of something "as simple as clay", Liu Shiyuan negotiates her cultural roots with her encounters and delivers a subjective reality worth pondering. She wonders how to be a "good" person, a term with an equal opacity standard as "happiness", meanwhile the answer can be found in her deliberate revelation inserted in the work *The Edge of Vision, or the Edge of the Earth*, "Whether life is a good or bad thing, of course, depends on your point of view."

Art is not That Simple

Yuz Museum__ Looking at your education background, prior to your enrollment in the New Media Department of the Central Academy of Fine Art, you've already had an art education from the High School affiliated to the Central Academy of Fine Art or even earlier, what kind of teaching or training in art were they?

Liu Shiyuan__ Looking back from this point in time, I think the education I received is especially in "Beijing" style. I first began to study art at age eight. My dad bought me a Minolta film camera. I started learning about making sketches on Saturdays at the youth center, and took photography lessons on Sundays, which continued until I was enrolled at the Xubeihong Middle School. During that part of my childhood, it seemed to me that there was only one kind of good work of art, rather than many kinds of. Many people thought I painted well, but as a child, I had no idea why, neither did I know where I was good at nor had the teacher ever give me any explanations or express any of his comments.

I don't think the central child education had a lot of impact on me other than the techniques I had acquired, for example, how to apply primers, how to develop and enlarge photographs in the dark room. Rather, I am largely influenced by the other self in my mind, the world where I played alone as a child was strange, there were many bizarre things and phenomena that I still cannot fathom, neither have I spoken about them with anyone.

What kind of opportunity sparked your interest in adopting new media such as photography and video in your art practice?
In fact, I am someone who is uninterested in equipment, those rigid shells seem irrelevant to me, instead, I am more concerned with making artworks. I chose new media studies at that time, because I was tired of painting. During those years studying at the High School affiliated to the CAFA, my everyday life concerns was to know who painted the best, whose works was collected by the school. If you didn't pull an all-nighter at the Beijing Train Station making sketches, you wouldn't be considered a diligent student. I am not particularly talented in composition, and I couldn't guarantee every portrait I

drew was precise. In my fourth year, I changed my major concentration, and entered a creative space where I could make bizarre things and mistakes.
The way in which my artworks eventually developed was not planned in any way. I never felt I was a new media artist, but I only needed my images to achieve certain effects, and obviously different projects required different ways of technical support. Although my interest in iconography is not inspired by my initial focus on painting, only that I don't like creative mode that begins with the blank canvas.

You have been working on expressing and exploring visual and iconographical boundaries, what does exploring the boundaries mean to you?
First of all, I am someone living on the border. "Boundary" in my art practice is an important component. It does not mean I am someone living on the periphery, but someone who lives truthfully under two completely different governmental systems. I also realize that there is a sense of hitting the snags in the collages of images in my work, that's because the allusions and questions concern the different world views of different people who live under different systems and cultures, thus the relationships between different layers of the works are not definite claims.

In your works, one can see the clues from everyday life and objects, as well as the impact of the ubiquity of images, visual, internet, digital, technology, information of our era. Usually, when you are conceiving a work of art, from its conception to expressing it, what is the process like? How do the creative mode and medium affect this process?
The conception of an artwork seems to be an ongoing affair that can happen at any time. To conceive something for a work is in fact doing research and learning, whereas when I don't feel like I am thinking about a work is in fact the course of conception. Of course, an idea would occur to me out of the blue, and I would immediately start working on it. At that point, I don't know what kind of work I want to make out of it, but my action is mostly driven by the curiosity of an idea. Then the idea would mature and become a work of art, which requires the alignment of all components where both the artwork and myself agree, rather than I am making sole decisions. In the course of thinking and production, to be able to dialogue with the artwork is a sexy

thing. This is how I feel when I make works now. It was not the case when I was still studying at the art academy, where many works were abandoned then. I often use the computer, but I don't admire the Internet, and I am not a fan. I would find answers online out of curiosity, because I want to know how others think, therefore I chose these platforms to make artworks, and there are often many doubts in the subjects.

Some artists perhaps spent a lot of time to create works in their studios. For you, where does your artistic creation take place?
At home, or anywhere. I had free usage of artist studios both in New York and Copenhagen, but I returned them half way. I told the hosts, "You should have given it to those who need it." This is not because I purposefully want to integrate my practice with everyday life, but I truly consider art practice is my full-time job, which means 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. To keep a studio is inconvenient, because I have to physically go there, place things that are related to my practice and it has limitations. When I work with my assistant, I would ask him to come to my home.

Under what kind of circumstances was the work *As Simple As Clay* created?
It was a time when I recently moved to Copenhagen, in the depression of a Northern European winter. I was asked to pass the Danish language proficiency test within three months. This was the first time I couldn't live as I'd liked, and had to spent time to earn the rights of residency, I couldn't accept this fact. With a somewhat discouraging mood, I started to retrospect my past, and hope to start from zero, abandon the logics I was familiar with. So I went and bought a piece of clay, and wondered what kind of terrible work I would make out of it. On my way home, my husband introduced me to a friend of his, and told him I was an artist. I added, "I just bought a piece of clay." His friend laughed and said, "Are you going to reenact the film *Ghost*?" Suddenly, I felt the purchase of this piece of clay was amateur. Once I got home, I thought, how many people would find a cliché material that is as primitive, while seemingly closely related to artistic practice with such passion and without knowing what to do. So I began to search images of clay on the Internet, and became increasingly addicted to it, it continued for many months.

For this work, is scale a necessary component in the formation of its content? How much time did it take to make this work? Have you set a goal or a quality by which to end the production process?
Yes. Because this work does not have a focus, neither does it embody the voice of the artist. It is a flat coverage.
In my memory, this work took more than half a year to complete. The goal I had set at the time was: as much as possible, as comprehensive as possible. Although this work is based on the search results on Google, but I still had to apply control in the making process. Because the work of art is not only a concept or idea, I always thought art is not that simple, if it is only an idea, I can write and publish it, or even call people up and tell as many people as possible. Eventually, a work of art is presented vividly through visual means, so I should respect it, and make it strong. So I made many selections of the final images. I input translations of the term "clay" in multiple languages into the search, and carefully filtered all images on the Internet. Of course, if I were to remake this work now, it would be different, because there are new images being uploaded onto the Internet, to become a component related to "clay".

This work has been shown in various exhibition spaces, what are your hopes for the audience's experience at the Yuz Project Room?
I haven't given much thought to it. Showing it at an art museum, the scope of the audience is definitely greater than that of an art gallery. I think many people would take photographs in front of this work, haha. This is kind of fun, then they would upload the images, and return it to the Internet.

Q: When did you realize you would become an artist, or embark on a path of artistic career?
I started to draw when I was 2 years old, by 4 or 5 years old, I started to tell people I wanted to be an artist. I remember I had a new set of colored pencils every week, because I drew all the time, to amuse myself… and I haven't done anything else thereafter. At most, I had a few doubts in between, because I also wanted to become a graphic designer.

Email interview
November 7, 2015

关于艺术家

刘诗园，1985 年出生于北京，2009 年毕业于北京中央美术学院数码媒体艺术系，2012 年毕业于纽约视觉艺术学院摄影系研究生。现生活工作于北京和哥本哈根。她的作品多以摄影、图像拼贴、装置或录像的形式探究视觉表象与真实存在间的距离，在艺术实践中探索图像的边界，挑战感知和经验的局限，寻求事物的本质。其主要的展览包括：“从幸福到别的一切”（Leo Xu Projects，上海，2015）；“迷失出口”（空白空间，北京，2015）；“动态之再”与“CAFA 未来展”（中央美术学院美术馆，北京，2015）；都灵国家当代艺术博览会个展——现在未来项目（都灵，2014）；“范围之外”（Andersen's Contemporary，哥本哈根，2014）；“Now You See”（白盒子艺术中心，纽约，2014）；“在地未来”（何香凝美术馆，深圳，2013）；第 7 届深圳雕塑双年展（OCT 当代艺术中心，深圳，2012）；“Stillspotting”（古根海姆基金项目，纽约，2011）等。

Liu Shiyuan was born in Beijing in 1985, graduated with a BFA in New Media Art at Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing in 2009, and an MFA in Photography, Video and Related Media from the School of Visual Art, New York in 2012. She currently lives and works in Beijing and Copenhagen. Her works investigate the distance between representation and reality by way of photography, collage, installation and video. She explores the boundaries of image, challenges the limitation of perception and experience, and seeks for the essence of things through her artistic practice. Her major exhibitions include: From "Happiness" To "Whatever" (Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai, 2015); Lost In Export (White Space, Beijing, 2015); Moving in time B3 + Beijing Moving image exhibition and CAFAM Future (CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, 2015); Present Future section at Artissima (Oval, Lingotto in Turin, 2014); Beyond The Pale (Andersen's Contemporary, Copenhagen, 2014); Now You See (Whitebox Art Center, New York, 2014); Local Futures (He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, 2013); The 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale (OCT-Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen, 2012); Stillspotting (Guggenheim, New York, 2011) and etc.

关于 Yuz Project Room 项目空间

Yuz Project Room 项目空间是独立于余德耀美术馆年度展览计划下的全新展示空间，于 2015 年 9 月正式对公众开放。Yuz Project Room 项目空间邀请艺术家针对美术馆空间、环境及观众，创造特定场域的艺术作品及项目。以“一个项目＋一个展览”相结合的方式，在艺术家主动与空间产生互动的同时呈现当代艺术正在发生的当时当刻。

Yuz Project Room 项目空间旨在为国内外艺术家提供创作展示的平台和交流的契机，期待新的概念、内容和趋势在此发生。此外，Yuz Project Room 项目空间希望艺术家在介入到美术馆空间的同时，激发出不同以往的创意和想法，尝试打破既定的创作形式，探索当代艺术创作的可能性。

Yuz Project Room is a new independent program of Yuz Museum's exhibitions, which opens to the public in September 2015. Yuz Project Room invites artists to make site-specific works or projects, engaging boldly with the museum, its surroundings and its audience. Combining "a project + an exhibition", the artist interacts actively with the space and aims to present the moment when contemporary art is happening.
Yuz Project Room is the place where innovation, invention, and a new movement happen in the pathway of an artist. It aims to provide another platform for Chinese and international artists to exhibit their artworks as well as more opportunities to communicate with each other. Yuz Project Room invites the artist to get inspired with new ideas by engaging himself with the museum space and try making some breakthrough artworks that are different from his own line.

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像泥巴一样简单
As Simple as Clay
2013
摄影装置
Photography Installation
尺寸可变
Dimension variable