

Never odd or even

Esther Lu

How to relate contemporary art's sensibilities and relations to contemporary life is no longer just a professional obligation restricted to artists or curators but also a task that audiences will have to confront and answer today. Beyond being a philosophical subject or evidence of bourgeois consumerism, art with such intriguing phenomena—whether as a trend or form of democratic culture—has revived the classic question “what is (not) art” and boosted it with dynamic energy as well as perplexity. Contemporary art in large, as the heir of conceptual art, finds its way out of many visual traditions and fine craftsmanship, whilst revisiting our physical sensibilities with greater technological means for either stimulation or exhaustion. Indeed, there are more and more social modes of art presentation as well as performances taking place in the name of participation, engagement or intervention, thereby creating highly complex matrixes of documentation, indexing and archiving, which are replete with critical metaphors that keep audiences assiduous, at times speechless, and even bamboozled.

The re-emergence of this classic question perhaps indicates the openness as well as uncertainty of art and how it reserves an obscure attitude towards its identity. A significant feature in today's culture, this question is regenerated and highlighted in the production of modernity. However, the purifying dichotomous force of modernity cannot achieve its full strength in artistic practice. On the contrary, modernism is often revealed as a paradox whereby art evolves within different localities and contexts to expose its potential diversity and multiplicity. This question also evokes the politics of social structures in the development of civilizations: processed as the symbolic act of democratic society, it reaffirms the operation of democracy through sustaining and activating the arguable validation of art, the practice of the commons in the hands of the public instead of the bourgeoisie, and the possibility of reinvestigating the institution of art from a non-Western perspective. Yet, such conditions do not promise nor extend our thinking of the practice of contemporary aesthetics: how we can perceive Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian theories; how to appreciate those dreams and drink in Li Bai's poems; how to, once again, in today's context, see poetry blossom; how to establish the continuity of art in the everyday practice of life so as to bridge the connections between knowledge and consciousness that were once cut off and excluded by modernity; how one could weave networks but not purify classifications when addressing cultural production, responding to the history we've inherited whilst continuously exploring and creating in our time.

This question even further suggests the problems surrounding art institutions, in which exhibition production has become the main driving force and framework for artistic production and presentation. I believe this is an interesting moment to discuss art objects again in relation to the form of their display and to observe their aesthetic development from the perspective of their content, form and production all the way to their presentation, and to acquire some solid threads from history. If we take Duchamp's *Fountain* as an important source of inspiration and turning point in the development of modern art, its significance lies in its confirmation of the power structures of art institutions, and how Duchamp borrowed such power and functions to engage with the definition and recognition of art and its status vis a vis the codes of objecthood. Since 1917, the definition, exchange and function of art, objecthood and thingness, have developed many overlapping chapters with continued fluidity between them. Its influence has stayed and today we do not fear the confusion or closeness between everyday objects and art objects as Clement Greenberg did in the 60s; indeed, we probably even love carrying Lee Kit's fabric bag/artwork with its humble slogan to ramble around an art museum or supermarket. If we take as truth the conclusion of Sven Lütticken's essay *Art and Thingness*—"a properly reflexive work of art can never be only about its status as art, about art itself. Since art's apparent autonomy is socially conditioned, the obverse of its heteronomous inscription in a global capitalist economy that penetrates into ever more realms of life and parts of the planet, the work of art's self-reflection is a sham if it is not potentially about everything, and every thing," [1]—then one would notice his great attention to the relationship between contemporary art and its situated context. Almost as a zeitgeist, "everything relates to one another in a globalized world" does not only reflect upon biopolitics but also art objects. It becomes more and more difficult for us to simply discuss an art object through its status quo and its authorial intents, and we are haunted by the need to see beyond its presentation. What are the consequences for art objects? When the external social context does not merely serve as the subject of artistic practice, but contributes to its ontological meaning, how can we interpret an art object and appreciate the extensive landscape behind it? How can we respond to it as an exhibition maker or audience? Do we need to adjust our aesthetic understanding of the image and form accordingly? These questions are the premises of this exhibition project.

Hereby I would like to analyze my inspiration from an important essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967) by Michael Fried to establish another thread for the following argument. Instead of falling into his delicate elaboration on the differences between modernist painting and sculpture versus literalist art (minimal art) in their objecthood, form, order, relation, etc., or his ideas on literalist art's significance in the development of art history, I would like to turn to what I think is the most

striking point in this article, which is his method of comprehending the modernist sensibility through his reading of the theatricality of art objects. Should we realize that the conflicts between theatre and art lie exactly in their space-time values regards presence, body, eternity and moment, etc., we would acquire a noisier and more diverse taste as well as mode of perception to investigate their aesthetic expressions and meanings, as well as question why—to a historical peak—contemporary art has made such a profound (or shallow) effort to establish a connection with audience's sensibilities.

I would therefore like to argue that the distribution of sensibility in the contextual meanings and processes of artistic practice, as well as the space-time of art presentation, are all part of contemporary art's composition, figure and form. That is to say, the art object is only the tip of art's visual vehicle and iceberg. As a form of display, an exhibition actually intends to reveal what remains invisible and external to an art object. I understand very well that the boiling fetishism in contemporary art cannot be eclipsed by this remark, but I would like to shed light on some core considerations and tendencies in contemporary artistic practice and through such clarifications capture and contemplate those invisible, abstract forms and movements—the unnamable resonance of sensibility between artist's practice and an audience's aesthetic participation, and that frequency transmitting the force of art. In Fried's discussion, he believes that the 'presentness' and 'instantaneousness' in modernist painting and sculpture defeats theatre because "this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it and to be embraced by the presentment of endlessness evoked or constructed by the work" [2]. After half a century, I would like to debate, in paradoxical opposition, that perhaps the performative presentness and the literal absence of contemporary art dilutes and crumbles both theatre and exhibition forms, in turn.

Meanwhile, I would also like to extend my view outside of art theory and borrow anthropologist Alfred Gell's analysis to re-frame this problematic. Gell constructs his anthropological theory to understand how human behaviors (of an artist, critic, audience, etc.) produce meanings in the production and circulation of art objects from social relationships in a cultural biographical space, and how art is shaped and enacted in a series of *life stages*. He understands that art, as a series of actions, as a social agent, is intended to change the world through not merely its symbolic meanings but also its complex networks of agency, intention, transformation, causation

and result [3]. Employing this methodology in the project, I have attempted to enlarge the context in which we read the art object so it is not restricted to the exhibition space and site but exists amidst the continuity of life, and to investigate art from the context of its situational social fabric, culture, human network structure, and the social mechanisms of ethics, customs and trend. Such recognition would then actually replace both the subject and the object, and the anthropological study of art could then observe subjects apart from primitive art, atypical art and extend to contemporary art, and further beyond the visual arts department. It mobilizes the sensibilities of seeing art in a borderless social framework and offers a means of studying contemporary human behaviors in return for reading art outside of the canon and frameworks of modern or Western art. We can then rejoice the question “what is (not) art” and its departure again—mysteries are not in things but rather rippling from artists’ actions and our ceaseless conspiracy.

Not predetermined by curatorial topics or tastes, *Never odd or even* is an exhibition project premised on aesthetic questions and its mission to experiment with perception exchange. As suggested by the palindromic nature of the title, the relations and movements of the action are to tickle, tilt and stretch those properties belonging to sensibility, perspective, space, form, agency and time, in order to approach, imagine and shed light on things beyond the visible and to revisit a classic question that ought to sustain itself as a question. It probes the expressions of contemporary aesthetics in order to seek the aesthetic consciousness of our time, informed and implied by various correspondences between our sensibility and contextual interaction. It may as well be said that the project attempts to offer ways of seeing instead of answering how art should be seen. I shall try to further address the abovementioned performative presentment and the literal absence of contemporary art to resolve our understanding of artistic practice in relation to exhibition forms: from artists’ imaginations to their ways of unfolding their research, action and creation - negotiating their timely questions and responses to their lives and beliefs, etc., in order to understand the *movement of form* and the *parameters in the space-time relation between body and arena*. Such discussions will lead us to think about the problems surrounding today’s exhibition-making developments, and why theatricality probably cannot sufficiently transcribe the formal question anymore and why the white cube, as a dominant and declining backdrop, accomplishes a gap or disturbance in art’s presentation.

If we take a close look at our contemporary body-space relations, it is not difficult for us to note how people’s sensibilities to space-time are fragmented in the post-internet era with flows existing between switching windows and worlds. Media intervention is established and contributed to by an ever-active participation model that guards the gates of our experiences in

the world, and our institutionalized knowledge can only show the growing and conflicting confusion about the progress and liberation of free wills. In many ways, our presence is often no more than a log-in click, which in itself is but a registration for the yet-to-come imagery. In the past two to three decades, the different human experiences in reality have influenced the space-time attributions and conscious expressions in conceptualization, research and production of art, as well as their display and distribution. The performative presentment therefore belongs to the rendezvous of consciousness mediated by art objects, while the literal absence tries to catch up with our running bodies. The biggest formal challenge for today's exhibition is how it, as a temporary memory space, can avoid being simplified to a site-specific status. It would make more senses to see how it could potentially become a fluid arena, a sports field, a qi field, to embrace and create dynamics that would turn objects into events and evoke the growth of sensibilities and perceptions. Unlike modernist painting and sculpture that are completely manifested in every moment, a contemporary art exhibition emphasizes how to provide an intertextual agency that mobilizes intuitive rhythms to embrace our shrinking physicality, rather than playing to a precise beat and defined measure. In this exhibition project, artists reveal multiple layers, dimensions of references and threads so as to indicate various realms for aesthetic understanding: interactive global circulation of materialism and economics; particular time-specific and culture-specific genre, taste, style and form endorsed by a local context; space-time conceptions narrated by scientific research and religious belief; penetrating action and gaze played out in the society of spectacle, etc. They each employ their own unique methodology to produce and unite knowledge, imagery and narration against institutional power and violence in order to give birth to the very object that could mediate and distribute sensibility and consciousness—the transformation as a force and action that, once again, would embrace its agency in aesthetics.

If an exhibition seeks to capture and transcribe something from our time, it has to engage with the production of space-time so as to connect the past and the future, which are no longer situated in a linear sense of time. It also has to answer the individual and collective statuses of beings and achieve the distribution of senses and sensibilities via agents of display—either material or not. This exhibition project aims to initiate new dialogues, hesitations and questions from the ripples of its very own actions; the curatorial thereby plays the role of producing abstract forms, not just setting a discourse. Like the audience, the curator is another social agent who responds to artworks and studies each individual's bodily participation in aesthetic activities in order to understand what artists are attempting to evoke, both through the objects displayed in the show and the aesthetic meanings conveyed through their practices and actions—the meeting

of these two eventually manifests the form that runs in a continuation of living.

The formal concept and question that *Never odd or even* asks and contemplates extends beyond what an art object exposes in optical space and is merged with a contemporary context engulfed by the production and circulation of imagery and materials in seamless interplay. It explores the contemporary reading of the poetic and the criticality of perspective exchange in life, so that the agency of art can be employed to expand our sensible dimensions and used to respond to one another, revealing an unfinished journey. Before this article creates another discussion destination, I would like to remark on the meaning of the exhibition title as a supplementary tool for imagining the narrative space of this project. The palindrome in the title creates an agency for return, which nevertheless can never truly retrieve its geometrical starting point in a four-dimensional space when we pronounce it. It thus projects a desire to be perceived in another dimension, while the infinitely open mathematical space, or spectrum, between any integer creates a spatial metaphor for audience's methods of perceiving *form*—it calls for a reconceptualization and recognition of the endless possibilities between life and art, where art becomes evident, or arguably unconfirmed in the forming of an exhibition.

[1] Lütticken, Sven. "Art and Thingness, Part III: The Heart of the Thing is the Thing We Don't Know."

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<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-and-thingness-part-three-the-heart-of-the-thing-is-the-thing-we-don%E2%80%99t-know/>

[2] Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

[3] Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.