

Xu Qu: Rejuvenation

Curator: Sun Dongdong

Duration : 2021.3.13 - 4.30

Location : Tang Contemporary Art 2nd Beijing space

Tang Contemporary Art is proud to announce the opening of Xu Qu's solo show "Rejuvenation" on March 13, 2021, at 4 p.m. at the gallery's second Beijing space. The show was curated by Sun Dongdong.

This exhibition will present Rejuvenation, a new series created from 2020 to 2021, including nearly twenty works of painting and installation. Xu Qu's solo show "Straight Line" at Tang Contemporary Art Hong Kong just ended in February. From the enormous moai sculptures on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the spiritual embodiments of Western theories of civilization to the politicized vision of miniaturized landmarks in the Beijing World Park, Xu Qu summons dialectical images and the possibility of rejuvenation or resurrection from more distant geographical scales and nearer sites of circulation.

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I

On April 5, 1722, a small fleet of ships exploring the Pacific for the Dutch West India Company "discovered" an island in the South Pacific, far from the American mainland. They arrived on the island on Easter Sunday, so the captain of the fleet, Jacob Roggeveen, called it "Easter Island," which meant "the land of our Lord's resurrection."ⁱ In fact, as we now know, this island was not an unpopulated place, devoid of civilization. In addition to several thousand indigenous people, there were also nearly one thousand massive stone sculptures built by past generations of those indigenous people as part of their belief system. The indigenous people called these stone images "moai," and the island "Rapa Nui," which literally translates to "navel of the world."

Jacob Roggeveen using the word "resurrection" in the 18th century was part of the intellectual playbook of European colonizers since the Age of Exploration in the 15th century. Like the other European explorers before him, the discovery of these new lands was accompanied by the discovery of "civilization." In the discursive politics of civilization and barbarism, civilization shifted from spatial (geographical) differences toward temporal (historical) ones, which confirmed the superiority of European civilization. German legal scholar Carl Schmitt wrote, "From the 16th to the 20th century, European international law considered Christian nations to be the creators and representatives of an order applicable to the whole earth. [...] Civilization was synonymous with European civilization. In this sense, Europe was still the center of the earth."ⁱⁱ

If the original name meaning "navel of the world" referred to the geographic location of the island on the earth, then the later name "Easter Island" represented Europeans creating a new world in their own image. Here, the word "creating" is related to *nomos*, a core idea in Schmitt's theory of European international law. Contemporary scholar Liu He has translated *nomos* as *guizhi* (规治). The term *nomos* comes from ancient Greek and has three meanings. The first was to acquire and occupy land, and the second was to divide or assign acquired land. The third was to open for grazing, which represented the development, management, and use of the divided land. In re-interpreting *nomos*, Schmitt does not sidestep Europe's history of carving up the world into colonies. The historical progression he called a "spatial revolution" was full of violence, killing, and pillage perpetrated against pagans; Europeans fought bloody battles to advance and preserve their interests. However, as a legal scholar, Schmitt's purpose in discussing *nomos* was not to critique the oppression and death caused by Europe's colonial history; as Liu He has noted, he translated Schmitt's *nomos* as *guizhi* because Schmitt's theory of international law always emphasized that politics and governance were fundamental; law is subordinate to the needs of politics and governance. The international law that resulted from the Enlightenment corresponded to the technical requirements of European capitalism in an era of accelerating global *nomos*.

Notably, Schmitt published his book on this subject in 1942, at a time when we all know that the world was embroiled in World War II. Schmitt never truly addressed this fact; he simply cited a few brief words of someone else's at the end of the volume, referencing the destruction and chaos that the world was facing in an extremely oblique way. Moreover, in confronting the world at that time, Schmitt maintained a "positive" political attitude because, based on his study of regional politics since the Age of Exploration, the chaos around him would eventually return to a new global *nomos*. From there, we are likely to immediately think of the post-war world order led by the United States and the global crises we are currently facing in the twenty-first century.

II

Like many people, Xu Qu has never been to Easter Island, but like Xu, we are familiar with it. This familiarity has nothing to do with whether we have been there. In the 1930s, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote that the modern age is the "age of the world picture," and Easter Island is part of our memory because the moai have been transformed by mass culture into symbols of mystery. Of course, this is also inextricably linked to its naming after a Western holiday. Anthropologists today generally use the name "Rapa Nui," but the reputation and image of Easter Island have been closely tied to the symbolic economy of modern travel. Some tourists who have gone to Easter Island have reviewed the

experience on travel-related social media platforms, noting the isolation, distance, and mystery; funnily, the same tourists also rated the local hotels, restaurants, bars, and other amenities. The admixture of the two and the differences between them may have cemented Xu's interest in the moai.

Xu Qu "discovered" Easter Island in a tourist setting in China: Beijing World Park, a special park that housed scaled-down versions of the world's famous monuments and historic sites. These places from around the world were presented to tourists like fossils. Construction began on the park in 1992, a key year for Reform and Opening in China. As we know, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992 was a watershed moment in Reform and Opening. After that time, China fully invested in and developed a market economy. As the world's factory, China gradually engaged with the process of economic globalization guided by neo-liberal ideology. In 2001, China joined the WHO and was selected to host the Summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008, which were landmark events in China's move toward globalization. For Xu, the "worldliness" that Beijing World Park offered incorporated a globalized worldview. At the same time, Jiang Zemin wrote the name of the park in his calligraphy, giving the park a political overtone. In China at that time, it was a world that had arrived in advance, like a prophecy, but for us today, that prophecy has actually manifested as a post-globalization era, complete with borders and distance; the landmarks in the World Park are like a series of boundary markers delimiting terrain. Xu Qu chose the moai, and in the dialectical relationship between their distant geographic scale and nearer space of circulation, he discovered the possibility of resurrecting or rejuvenating these images.

Resurrection or rejuvenation is always related to life and death; the replication of the moai in Xu Qu's "Rejuvenation" is a temporal narrative that appears after a spatial exorcism. When we wait for melted scrap car parts to meet with signs of the end of civilization, the spatial force fields that originally belonged to energy, action, and merit are compressed and folded by outside forces, thereby becoming folds that confine the living world. This is a world shrunk down to the particular, an aggregate that is constantly being formed in historical space. It can be abstracted as Agamben's concept of "naked life," or concretized as a series of living worlds: from the indigenous people in places formerly colonized by Western countries to the refugees flooding Europe, from the American workers in the Rust Belt to the Chinese workers laboring in three shifts to provide cheap goods for the world, from the take-out delivery person directed by an algorithm to the lonely man cocooned in a world of online information. Paradoxically, the circumstances of these labor markets are similar, but after the universalized promises of globalization failed, nations have shirked or shifted responsibility for the world's problems, and we have once again returned to opposing camps of "us" and "them." The historical ghosts attached to the moai have been summoned once again, and perhaps they have always been hiding in the nomos; they simply appear when a new order replaces the old.

History is constantly shifting between tragedy and comedy, and the fate of humanity has vacillated between the collective and the individual identity, much like the visual relationship between Xu Qu's painting *Dust* and installation *Drip*. From the grander perspective of the universe, every life on earth is equal to every other, like specks of dust, but once shifted to the measure of earthly space, the antagonisms and battles require sovereign boundaries. If the various conflicts in the world can be transformed into a dialectical image of the harmony of opposites—like Xu Qu's installation *Ceremony*—then this abstract form can only exist in the mind of some lofty sage. Therefore, we return to the beginning with the moai, sculptures erected to honor belief. In Xu Qu's work, they have been reduced to bones. The sculptures and their psychological foundations are two sides of the same coin; they can be interpreted as the summoning of traditional spirits, or as Nietzsche said, "In order for a shrine to be set up, another shrine must be broken into pieces: that is the law."ⁱⁱⁱ In beginnings and endings, memory and forgetting are bizarrely fused together. From this perspective, "Rejuvenation" as an exhibition brings together all of the unease, anxiety, anger, and upheaval of this chaotic era, approaching a vision of history. Walter Benjamin made the analogy of the angel of history, who is irresistibly propelled "into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."^{iv}

Artist

Xu Qu, born in Jiangsu Province and graduated with a MFA in Fine Arts and Film at Braunschweig University of Art (2008). He currently lives and works in Beijing. From the "51 m2 11#" at Taikang Space to the project "Xi Sha, South China Sea Projekt 1#" and the "Upstream", Xu Qu's art practice has always been discussing the aesthetic considerations behind social connections through direct movements. However, although he adopts direct movements as before, he attempts to get rid of any unnecessary elements that distract the theme, using the minimalism to simplify the picture. The ultimate goal of the artist is to examine the ultimate target of anthropic aesthetics, and what kind of values and thoughts that the confrontation or mixture of different aesthetic experiences would bring us in different eras.

Curator

Sun Dongdong is a curator and art critic. He was born in Nanjing and he received his master's degree from the Fine Arts Department at the Nanjing University of the Arts. He previously served as Senior Editor of LEAP, responsible for scholarly features and exhibition reviews. He has curated exhibitions at UCCA, Times Museum, A4 Art Museum, and other art institutions. Sun currently lives and works in Beijing.

i The Chinese word *fuhuo* (复活) can be translated into English as either "rejuvenation" or "resurrection."

ii Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2003), 86.

iii Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 75.

iv Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2019), 201.