Humanistic Care

Zhao ZHANG [illegible]

“Humanistic care” is the core concern of Zhao ZHANG’s works, and it also reflects his pivot. Although the internet became particularly prominent, while reflecting on the relationship between the Internet and people and trying new methods of creating, he continues to focus on a human-oriented theme. *Flowing out of the Frozen River* is an improvisation he made while visiting Northwest China in early 2021, which coincides with his lockdown and stagnation experience during the pandemic.

“[illegible]”[illegible]2021[illegible]

Flowing out of the Frozen River

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Biography

Zhao ZHANG: Young Artist – MFA Fine Arts in School of Visual Arts

Zhao ZHANG’s creation focuses on the gap between individual perception and structural language in the current life dilemma. By appropriating daily behaviour and spectacle and resetting in a semantic context, he loosens the inertia of thinking and action. Through investigation, dialogue, performance, and theatre creation explore the possibility of promoting individual life’s desirable state with localization, regionalization, and network dynamic contact.

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Interview

The names would be abbreviated as “Cleo” (Cleo CHEN) and “ZHANG” (Zhao ZHANG).

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Cleo: Could you tell us about how you arranged your daily work and life during the pandemic compared with pre-pandemic? What were the changes in this period?

ZHANG: We’ve really been through a tough time in the pandemic, even though it is under control now, but we are still in its shadow. I would like to talk about my status during the earlier phase of the pandemic. This coincided with the students’ winter holidays in China, so as a senior student, I was in my hometown, preparing for my graduation project. Due to travel restrictions, there was basically no way for me to go back to the area of Baoji in Xi’an Province for field visits and investigations of my project. As a result, I spent a lot of time searching for related information online. At the same time, my personal art creation has also stalled.

The lockdown in Wuhan is iconic I think. Before that, I was doing social surveys on the trumpet troupe (trumpet is a traditional instrument of China) and folk performing arts groups in the rural areas of my hometown in northern Jiangsu Province, I’d followed up twice on their performance on the spot. However, once we locked down, the number of public events were rapidly reduced. Therefore, my personal art project had to be put on hold too.

The reasons above might have caused feelings of confusion, anxiety and a little bit of helplessness at the beginning of

the pandemic. Moreover, the Internet could always cause us to drift into the news where bursts of information about the rising numbers of infections were tearing at my mood, making me feel anxious all the time, so I paid a lot of attention to the situation in Wuhan. However, my spirit and body were both isolated, which meant that I had nowhere to release my pent-up feelings. After being forced to adapt to do all things online, I began to put my attention back on my own work and keep moving forward with things, such as graduation, the process of personal creating and attempting to write more.

I went to Shanghai in the last six months and participated in the collective creation of a small theatre group called “Caotaiban”. The theme of their new script was about the feelings which emerged during the pandemic. We have scheduled the first performance to take place in Wuhan in early April, as an attempt with the new project. Then from December last year to early January this year, my friends and I visited some folk grottoes (Buddhism, Taoism, Deism, and related historical sites) and in Inner Mongolia (Erdos Dongsheng, an area of the Inner Mongolia Province, and northwest Shaanxi Province and northern Shaanxi Province. Inspired by the natural environment and folk beliefs, I created the artwork ***Flowing out of the Frozen River*** and ***Business as usual***.

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Cleo: Could you tell us about any changes you have gone through or discovered? What might be your Pivot during the pandemic be?

ZHANG: The pandemic made me reconsider the relationship between myself and the digital world. Before the pandemic, I felt that the Internet was invisible, just like the air we are breathing, it's so unfelt that I hardly thought about it in normal times. What's more, I've recognized the Internet as a kind of medium that is broken through physical limitations, which could provide us with multiple different perspectives. However, after the outbreak of the pandemic and the lockdown made it inescapable, then the internet became blunt, abrupt and the only method for communicating, which alarmed me.

I realised that when it is hard for us to meet physically, the digitalisation of our networks has caused alienation among us. Everyone is flattened and tends to be the same without our facial expressions, clothing, etc. This could be a reason why we're gradually losing our patience with the online content. Although, it is undeniable that the Internet will become more and more important in the future, so I am also actively learning some codes and programming languages, which I would like to use as a new expression method for making art.

With all these things though, I still drew a defensive line deep in my mind, that is, what I should value most is never the techniques used in the artworks, but about its core displays of humanity. The specifics still need to be sorted out, so briefly, I will call it "The Humanistic Care".

ZHANG: My Pivot probably emerged during the time I was preparing for the ***Gibberish*** exhibition. It was the end of May and the beginning of June 2020 and China had already suffered a lot from the pandemic, and the strategy for controlling its spread had started taking effect. I also returned to Xi'an to

prepare for my graduation. Before that, I was still very anxious, because it’s really hard to keep calm under the conditions of lockdown and barely going out. Although I would force myself to focus on my own affairs, my mood would still be dragged by the Internet. Therefore, I was always very tense, a bit like a “war footing.

After returning to Xi’an, this tension and anxiety eased a lot, I started to no longer take the pandemic as the main crisis that needed to be resolved. Since it cannot be solved quickly, I should be more patient and should cope with its existence in my daily life. Also because I became numb to the overwhelming information, I might have accepted the possibility of its normalisation unconsciously, in order to feel better.

At that time, all the domestic colleges and universities were holding their exhibitions online, unsatisfied with that, my friends and I in the same class rented one of the stores in the urban village opposite our college to hold a small physical exhibition—***Gibberish***. These stores were very hot before the pandemic and became desolate once the pandemic broke out. On the one hand, this theme referred to the multi-faceted content created by everyone participating in the exhibition. On the other hand, gibberish is the meaningless codes displayed due to the programme crash, which reflected the physical stuff that couldn’t be transformed by the Internet.

Everyone was suffocated at that time—there had been no exhibitions for about half a year. As a result, lots of people came to see the ***Gibberish***. The initial idea was to let this exhibition appear as an intervention at the site of the village in the city, which was more in line with my style of art. Therefore, I tried my best to make this exhibition as a white box within my budget, because I would take it as my feeling during the pandemic, which also suddenly broke into our lives.

The link of ***Gibberish***: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hJgoHdksSG97j8Q8St11IA

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Cleo: When did you start to conceive the artwork *Flowing out of the Frozen River*? And what inspired you?

ZHANG: Actually, ***Flowing out of the Frozen River*** is an improvisation. I saw lots of frozen rivers during my process of fieldwork. Some of them had tiny waterfalls, but basically, none of them was completely frozen except the one shown in my video. That one was the only waterfall that was totally frozen, including its speed and its impetus. I could imagine that it must have momentum normally but it was just restrained by the ice. We all knew that it had power, but at that moment, it just couldn’t break away, it could only be free when the spring came to melt the ice. This scene instantly corresponded

with my experience of lockdown and my state of pause during the pandemic. Therefore, I decided to break the stagnant state with a clumsy creeping movement.

It was really painful during the process of shooting. I fell down more than a dozen times and my arms were bruised and my head was buzzing. Originally, I wanted to edit all the fragments in the video, so that the place under the frozen river might be covered with “bodies” in black. However, after considering the perspective and the visual sense of the audience, I thought it might be better to keep it concise, so I only added three fragments. This also made the video shorter which might be more convenient for it to be shared online. After all, it is not a live performance, so as a video artwork, it’s still easier to attract people with a simple and short one.

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Cleo: What does *Flowing out of the Frozen River* mean to you?

ZHANG: In some ways, it contains my expectations and imaginations. For example, I hope it could flow again. Owing to the fact that I have been enrolled in New York Visual Arts (SVA) for a year of online courses, and I have not had the opportunity to go to New York to be in an urban setting. What’s more, many visas for us to go to America have been temporarily cancelled, so for me, it was really a hard period.

I sincerely hope that our world could recover to move forward and never be blocked.

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Cleo: I have noticed that your artworks mostly reflect on the dilemmas and illusions in our lives through media such as images, bodies, or the Internet. Is this a focus of your work? What is the relationship between *Flowing out of the Frozen River* and your other works? (Taking the formalism like “Dust-proof net should all be in a uniform green” mentioned in *Covered* as a field, I’m wondering whether you’ve turned to think about a larger field of the environment we’re living as a human being?)

ZHANG: The reflection of living as individuals is always the point I’m concerned about, and the “Frozen River” is also in this context of my work. However, I’m always wary of such a grand topic as “our living environment as a human being”, because many things will lose their authenticity once being enlarged—everyone’s understanding is different, so the grand topic may also be filled with ambiguities.

Covered is just an artwork based on thoughts of some domestic phenomena that I have seen. From a more macroscopic view. If I situate it in international circumstances, the elements involved in a certain phenomenon may tend to be more diverse, because the group illuminated by it would be more diverse.

The majority of people in China are still Chinese but the people in the United States are from various ethnicities and various cultures. Even though living in the same area, their concerns are still different from each other. According to this, being situated in a specific region could make my art

more perceptible, effective and practical. At least it won’t cause too much ambiguity, so I wouldn’t rush to pick big topics for my work at present.

Simultaneously, regional and macroscopic things definitely have their connections. I think it’s like the relationship between blocks and surfaces. The microcosmic could be expanded from a small field to a larger one, and there might be a balancing point to let this transition have potential to be processed. If it is a specific localising artwork, it would need a more superior point of fielding, and it may require everyone to understand the context of its concern. Everyone might know understand grand topics but their practical experiences are still diverse, so we need to keep our exploration of the balance point among these.

The link of ***Covered:*** https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/whxYD__5JSLtbq3pgidYwA

[illegible]**covered**[illegible]“[illegible]“[illegible]

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Cleo: I’m also very interested in *Business as usual*, so could

you talk about that work? What kind of meaning you intended to express through the work?

ZHANG: The Unharmed Land is about the transcendent power of the Folk beliefs. It was filmed in the northern Shanxi Province, that is, northwest Jin (abbreviation of the Shanxi province of China, which refers to the region of Shanxi Province nowadays used to be the territory of the Jinn state during the Spring and Autumn period in Chinese history).

Shanxi was generally prosperous in ancient times and is gradually declining in modern times. Livelihoods of people there dependent are more on mineral resources, and the scale of urban development is limited. Therefore, as a result, the ancient buildings in Shanxi are well preserved, which also includes the folk cottages.

Almost every village there has some cottages or temples, for working the gods of nature, Buddhism, Taoism, and gods from the local legends. For example, when it is dry, the local inhabitants would build a Dragon King Temple (According to some Chinese ancient legends the Dragon Kings are the gods living deep in the sea, they charge the water and are responsible for the rainfall, each of them own an area of response). The folk beliefs there are very regional, it is possible that upon crossing from the mountain there, no one knows the gods worshipped by the village.

Due to historical reasons of modern China, the strategy of “Posijiu”(at that time, the rapid development of China caused some drawbacks of persuading the faster development, as a result, some unreasonable strategies emerged, Posijiu is one of them, means breaking the things old for creating new things, during the process of implementing this strategy, many historical objects were labelled as “old” and were destroyed), almost all the statues of these temples were smashed, and some even were reduced to ruins. The statues that exist are all newly made in the past two decades. Hence, the technique

displayed in these statues are very crude, such as the sculptures are very straight, but the eyes and noses painted on it are a bit crooked which makes them look weird. The charm of the previous statues was also no longer in keeping with inherited beliefs. The lack of the inherited beliefs means that the local people between the ages of 3 and 40 don't recognise the heritage. The older people are the only ones who understand the stories of the past.

ZHANG: There is a scene where I am standing nakedly with four trees with groundwork in front. One of the trees fell down when local people wanted to renovate the temple, the locals didn't dare to build it by taking that as the punishment of God. Therefore, when I was in the ruins of the temple, I could feel the divinity, weak and firm, which seemed to be a supreme power that could transcend history, time, and all the disasters. In fact, this divinity is closely related to our humanity. Basically, divinity is humanity. Even if young people do not understand past beliefs, they still have a sense of respect for them. They are still very sincere when talking about these things, which is the best reflection.

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Cleo: Then why named it as *Business as usual*?

ZHANG: ***Business as usual*** means that it has experienced some upheaval, but it still seems to be unchanged. Even if it was destroyed physically or spatially, so were those symbols and statues of the gods, but they are still "as usual", because they are still there, and also, the divinity and humanity carries on.

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Cleo: You have curated exhibitions such as *Gibberish* and ***Being?*. Their forms are very interesting. Therefore, is there anything about your curatorial work experience you want to share with us? What do you think might be the relationship between your art curation and your own artworks?**

ZHANG: I think there is no clear boundary between creation and curation. ***Hi there?*** can also be regarded as an artwork. At that time the art gallery had no funds and no equipment. Accordingly, in my process of designing the exhibition, I reconsidered my right to choose as a curator, and I chose to relinquish this right.

I posted this piece of news on the official account—"Hi there?", it is the same as the first sentence we use for chatting or adding a friend, so I asked the question of "Hi there?" then waited for a response from audiences. By doing this, I gave up my right to choose, and I didn't want to choose the art museums either. I just provided the audience with an address, and once they received it, I would show it as soon as possible.

Finally, I received more than 30 works, I disassembled and displayed them one by one at the opening of the exhibition. In fact, my process of dismantling and displaying was equivalent

to a piece of performance artwork. There was even an audience to answer the question of “Hi there?”, it’s kind of like a response of Joseph’s question “Everyone is an artist”. There was another kid who brought a painting that had just been painted in the institution named “798”, I also noted his name. Later, during my reflection, I felt that I didn’t really forfeit my rights, what’s more, I even expanded my rights for giving anyone the right to be an artist. This is actually quite ironic, and it came to me on reflection. It was like a joke. I originally wanted to dismantle the power, but resulted instead in the infinitely expanding of it. Of course, it is interesting in terms of form, with a high degree of participation, but it was still about to discuss.

The link of ***Hi there?:*** https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/awHn7IyAidZuc8RDlgzbIA

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Cleo: What kind of impact did the pandemic have on your work? (It can be viewed from both internal and external perspectives, such as how it affects your work plan? Or

whether it has changed the focus of your work or thinking? Does the city your are located in provide any help for the artists? etc.)

ZHANG: Internal – The pandemic made me reflect on our treatment of the relationship between individuals and the Internet which I've mentioned above. Our relationships with others has morphed to be our relationship with the Internet, which invoked many thoughts in me.

External – The change of my study plan was a hard blow for me to take. At that time, I was interviewed by different schools online, but after I decided to go to the one in the United States, my life started to be torn apart. I took online classes at night and could only start my day at noon, because of the time difference. Taking courses online made me feel that the benefits were discounted. It's easy to get distracted after a long period studying, and it is impossible to establish effective contact with my classmates, because we couldn't see each other. Therefore, we can only devote our energy to more personal things, so we couldn't exchange our different thoughts and news. This always disappointed me.

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compared with before the pandemic?)

ZHANG: In the past, I focused more on the physical presence of my body. It should be great for the audiences to watch those performance artworks and physical creations on the spot. Although it is also very important now, what I might consider as another crucial part is how to spread my work through the Internet and be more effective. Given that our physical feeling on the site is very special and specific, such as the posture or the expression in the eyes, even the different timing of staring at the audience for seconds or for minutes would express various meanings. When it comes to be shared on the Internet, the length of time should be controlled strictly. It is impossible to spend a lot of time for a single action. I need to do more things such as editing the actions, consider its position of being a video artwork, and how to gain more effectiveness. It is necessary to use editing as a method of showing the core of the work. This is also a main concern of my creation.

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the recent emergence of encryption art.

This is an inevitable trend, but its about the technique or the medium, such as a medium like gaming which I also see as very important. The game relies heavily on the Internet, and of course, it requires the realistic equipment too.

Online doesn’t conflict with the humanistic care and the core of humanism I’m concerned about. Actually, I’m actively exposed to new technologies. I think this could be desirable as long as we can implement it into inspiring our emotions reasonably.

However, those physical things are also a line that does not just vanish. Such as the skill of painting. Painting is actually an approach that has existed for centuries, although there were people who say that ‘Painting is dead’, it has still been developing until now. As long as our human being won’t really become the brain in the tank, the physical presence of our body and multiple senses are always the important parts. Personally, I prefer the physical one.

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ZHANG: Yes, if we want to accept new media, we need to dig out its benefits. Nonetheless, there are still some great artworks online. For example, an American female artist disguised herself as a beautiful girl from Florida on Instagram. She took beautiful selfies every day to earn popularity and fans. In the end, she exposed that it was just one of her artworks. Internet art like this could bring a lot of provocative and innovative thoughts.

There is also low-tech art. It is an artist who makes a very old small cart, put a mobile phone in it, and walked on a bridge. Finally, Google map showed that the bridge was very crowded. As a result, later all the cars would detour. However, this is the one expressed in a more negative way.

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ZHANG: It was an elective course in the second semester of my sophomore year, which was about earth art. I was attracted to its way of creating and thinking, because I was always liked to think about things indiscriminately, so I tried to organise some of my vague thoughts in an organised way to let them become more rhythmic, and finally I applied them as artworks.

The first creation I made was about land art, named “The Endless Road”. I take art as the thing that can bring me a sense of being redeemed versus designing. It feels like art is leading me, and I want to live like this. Although I am also very interested in designing, I feel that it’s the thing more external or too professional. However, by creating artworks I could express myself and my state of existence in a better way. I feel that I can live a better life when I’m engaging with Art, and I would no longer be that anxious or be dissolved in my normal life. Art can redeem me from these hopeless days. Although the daily life is not bad, it seems that I need a transcendent force to guide me. I think, then I believe both in Art and in myself.

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cultivate themselves.

ZHANG: Exactly, “cultivate” is quite a good description. This is just what I believe, now I feel like my life is full of challenges. The road I have just embarked upon is very exciting!

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