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Three Value Orientations in the Development of Contemporary Fiber Art

Kai LIANG*

Abstract

Neutral thinking in contemporary Chinese philosophy is based on the era characteristics of diversification and multi-polarization. It is not only a way of thinking but also a value of judgment, which can provide a choice and a path to the development of contemporary art. Development of contemporary fiber art not only provides the experimental field of contemporary art, but also reflects the value and significance of neutral thinking in the future development of art. This article will discuss three value orientations in the development of contemporary fiber art, such as from the concept to the material, from the appreciation of ugliness to the beauty, and from the elite to the general public, exemplifying the From Lausanne to Beijing International Fiber Art Biennale and trying to explore the future and value of fiber art.

Keywords: From Lausanne to Beijing, fiber art, Neutral thinking, value orientations

Özet

Çin çağdaş felsefesinde tarafsız düşünme, çeşitliliğin ve çok kutuplaşmanın çağ özelliklerine dayanmaktadır. Bu sadece bir düşünme şekli değil, aynı zamanda çağdaş sanatın gelişimine bir seçim ve bir yol sunabilen bir yargı değeridir. Çağdaş lif sanatının gelişimi sadece çağdaş sanatın deneysel alanını değil, aynı zamanda sanatın gelecekteki gelişiminde tarafsız düşüncenin değerini ve önemini de yansıtmaktadır. Bu makalede, kavramdan materyale, çirkinlikten güzelliğe, elitlerden halka, Lozan'dan Pekin'e kadar Uluslararası Çağdaş Lif Sanatı Bienali örnek alarak, Lif Sanatının gelişimindeki üç değer yönelimi tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Lozan'dan Pekin'e, lif sanatı, tarafsız düşünme, değer oryantasyonları.

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Introduction

The concept of fiber art gradually gained recognition after the middle of the 20th century. The rise of contemporary fiber art is closely connected with several exhibitions, including Lausanne Biennale (1962-1992) Lodz Triennial (1975-now) From Lausanne to Beijing International Fiber Art Biennale (2000-now) among others. Since the 1950s, international exhibitions have played a significant role in the international fiber art movement, promoting the formation and growth of fiber artist groups and enhancing the social influence and international recognition of fiber art. The fiber art movement in China has been developed rapidly with more than one hundred art colleges and universities setting up fiber art majors or curriculum. This has resulted in a fiber art education system that spans from vocational education to general education. Development of contemporary fiber art not only provides the experimental field of contemporary art, but also reflects the value and significance of *neutral thinking* in the future development of art (Zou, 2016, p. 6). The rapid development of fiber art has also greatly encouraged fiber artists around the world to see that fiber art may possibly become a different and influential artistic field. With the in-depth development of contemporary fiber art, with over half a century of profound development of contemporary, it will be easier to understand this phenomenon and the future of the movement with a stronger theoretical construct. This dialogue would be accelerated, if artists who identify themselves as fiber artists could answer a series of questions such as: *How does fiber become art? What's the value of fiber art? What's the future of fiber art? How do they see their identity within the field?*

Although the Lodz Triennial still uses "Tapestry" in the title of the exhibition, it is hard to describe all kinds of fiber works, especially the works in new materials such as metal wires, papers, leaves, plastics, etc. and new forms such as three-dimensional installations. Accordingly, the following phrase is written on the front page of the 15th Lodz Triennial catalogue: "the oldest and largest exhibition promoting contemporary fiber art". The same argument is made in the USA as well. Fiber art is taken as a kind of contemporary art that is based on fiber materials. Elissa Auther took the works of Shelia Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz as examples in her paper *Classification and Its Consequences: The Case of "Fiber Art"* to show that fiber artists tried to classify fiber art as "art" rather than "craft" (Auther, 2002, p. 2-9). Therefore, fiber art as a new concept offers a new vision and orientation for its future development.

In China, the development of fiber art was accompanied with From Lausanne to Beijing International Fiber Art Biennale (Hereinafter referred to as the 'Biennale'). It was held in different cities all over China such as Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Zhengzhou, Nantong, Wuzhen and Shenzhen since 2000. The 9th Biennale received about 2000 applications from 54 countries and districts, which made it the largest fiber art biennale in the world. Besides, some other kinds of fiber art exhibitions such as triennial or regional exhibitions increased the popularity of fiber art in China. Still, based on the long history of tapestry and textile, fiber art is still a new form of art facing the choices between concept and material, tradition and modern, art and craft, the elite and the public. *How will it find and form its own way and value?* This article will take the Biennale as an example and try to explore the future and value of fiber art.

From the Concept to the Material: Open Communication Path Between Humans and Nature

Chinese modern art was deeply influenced by Western art forms and conceptions since the new China (the People's Republic of China) was found in 1949. Many Chinese artists adopted Western art forms to express their critical ideas about the social problems and political movements in China. This kind of political art reflected common experiences and memories of a certain generation from a particular era and played an important role in the political criticism and social reflection. But as time passed, The political emphasis on art gradually lost its significance and became a shortcut to enter into the Western art world, which results in the dissatisfaction and disappointment with the so-called *conceptual art* in China.

Nowadays, there is a new trend in classical fields of art such as painting and sculpture: the exploration of new materials. It is more difficult to make any changes when a field of art matures. Paintings and sculptures have been isolated in their respective circles, and China National Art Exhibition is also struggling in the competition in techniques and modeling standards. The appearance of sculptures made of cotton, linen, wool, paper, etc., and comprehensive paintings with new materials such as branches, petals, leaves, metal, plastics, etc., shows the potential in and popularity of *comprehensive materials* arts.

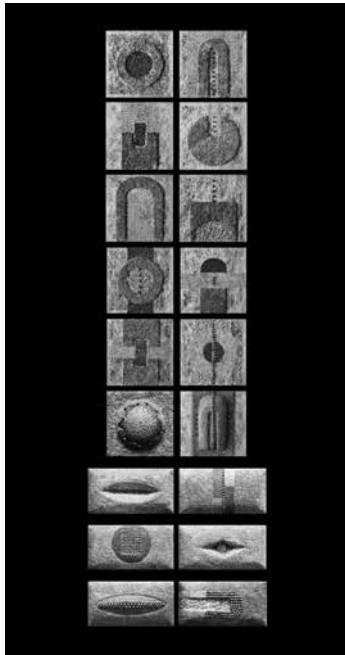
Besides the visual elements, the sense of touch, smell and taste also contribute to artistic feelings. Prof. Shao Dazhen, an influential art critic in China, in the Conference of

China Contemporary Arts and Crafts, once said:

“The revolutions in the art forms are often preceded by the changes in materials. Artists are more sensitive to the materials than to the forms, especially about the spiritual and cultural background of the materials (Lin, 2014, p. 28”).

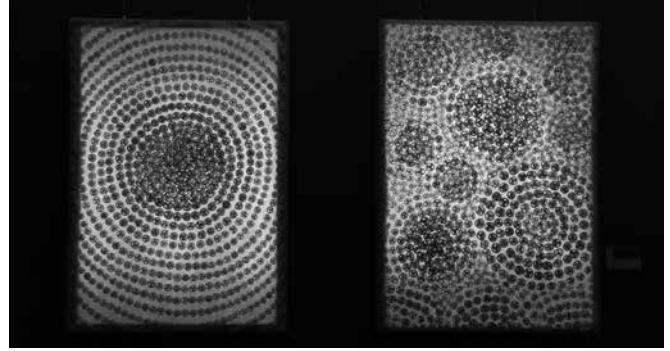
Accordingly, fiber art constitutes an experimental field of contemporary material art. Fiber art is often made of soft materials, not only including silk, wool, cotton, linen, rattan, willow, grass, etc., but also including artificial synthetic fibers, recycled materials and some unknown materials in the large *fiber* world. The materials of fiber art are known and unknown, limited and unlimited, which widens possibilities in fiber art.

Chinese artist Liu Penyu won the excellent award in the 9th Biennale with the work ‘Kun’. The word ‘Kun’ is usually accompanied by the word ‘Qian’, and both of them are from the I-Ching (the Book of Changes) text. The term ‘Qian-Kun’ refers to the whole universe. ‘Qian’ symbolizes the heaven and the male, and ‘Kun’ symbolizes the earth and the female. Her word ‘Kun’ is made of fallen seeds from sycamore trees and formed into the diagrams from I-Ching that symbolizes the circle of change in human life and the patterns of the universe. The fallen seeds are taken as the return and rebirth of life, and deeply connected with the motherland, the earth, the female and the nature. The combination of the materials and the ancient Chinese conception expressed the care for nature and life.



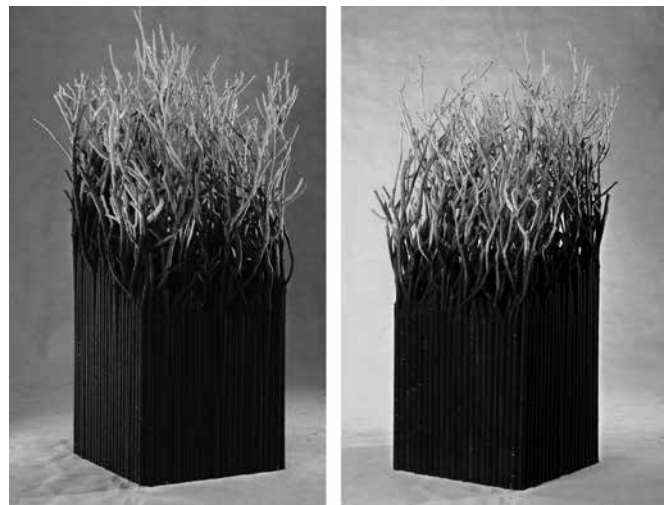
1. Liu Pengyu (China), *Kun*, 130cm×280cm, seeds, 2016

Another excellent work of 8th Biennale is made of dry vegetable sponge that is common to see in Chinese daily life. The artist cut sponge into slices and then glued them into a whole; using LED light in the back, the natural beauty of the texture is enhanced.



2. Zhang Yifan (China), *Circle*, 60cm×90cm×2, vegetable sponge, 2014

The golden award of the 4th Biennale was won by Chinese artist Ren Guanghui. His work ‘the landscape of ink’ was made of branches. The branches were wrapped by woolen yarns with the subtle color changing from black to grey and then to white. The piece looks like a burned forest which reminds us of destruction of the nature by human beings. The deep concerns for nature, the transformation of ordinary objects and the aesthetics of Chinese ink art were perfectly joined into one piece.



3. Ren Guanghui (China), *Landscape of Ink*, 66cm×66cm×180cm, branches and woolen yarn, 2006

These three artworks turned common things into uncommon ones, creating new perspectives and concepts for the viewers.

Mankind created the cultural world, concrete cities, and the virtual space of the Internet, resulting in the separation from the nature. We are getting further and further away from the natural environment and human nature. *How can we keep in touch with nature?* Fiber Art offers possibilities to solve problems.

“This materiality determines the importance of craftsmanship in fiber art. Craft is the act of sanctity. Therefore, fiber art must be sustainable and environmentally friendly, reflecting the truth of life and the rhythm of nature.” Prof. Liu Jude said (Lv, Liu, Li, Ni, Lin, 2012, p.71).

Fiber art is a time-consuming handwork. Weaving or embroidery is a private, sensational and creative process that is different from the industry of mass production. The old proverb, ‘threads in mother’s hands’ describes that women poured their emotions for their loved ones using the threads in the process of sewing. When these works appear as gifts or decorations in life, people feel deeply touched and connected within the intimate relationships. The trends of manual culture, slow life, and return to nature are all repercussions of industrial society.

The exploration of materials and the protection of crafts open a communication path between humans and nature. This is also true for fiber art. Fiber art is often considered as an art of warmth and benevolence, for its connections with maternity, home, the earth, the nature, and tradition. Contemporary fiber art world is trying to build a poetic space and spiritual home for everyone.

From the Appreciation of Ugliness to the Beauty: The Value of Care

Some contemporary artists in China often mock the “old” concept of “art should be beautiful”, because they appreciate the value of ugliness and discomfort in art. They take art as a kind of weapon for political criticism or conceptual destruction. *However, what should we do after the destruction?* Maybe, constructive thinking is more important nowadays. To some extent, the appreciation of ugliness is full of anger, skepticism and negative emotions, but the appreciation of beauty asks for satisfaction, confidence and positive visions. The value of

care in fiber art shows the appreciation of beauty. As Prof. Lv Pintian said in the opening of the first Biennale,

“Fiber art should be a contemporary art which holds on the beauty” (Lin, Zhang, 2000, p. 71).

Fiber art pieces are generally made by using soft materials, which lends itself to the consideration of warmth and benevolence. As a kind of artistic practice of care, contemporary fiber art provides a constructive way of thinking and even a solution to the problems between humans and nature, humans and society, and humanity itself.

In the project called “Denial of Fear and Despair: Talismanic Shirts”, two artists from Turkey, Jovita Sakalauskaite (originally Lithuanian) and Elvan Ozkavruk Adanır, worked on the idea of talismanic shirts that protected people from diseases, from dangerous enemies, and healed them from illness. For this project, 65 women from different countries donated their own white shirts to show their support for the women who are subjected to physical or sexual violence or abuse. They cut the shirts into pieces, then the holy sayings, prayers, wishes and other embellishments were added before the pieces were assembled. The exhibition of this project entitled “Denial of Fear and Despair: Talismanic Shirts” to highlight the issue and increase the care for women who are subjected to violence.



4. Jovita Sakalauskaite & Elvan Ozkavruk Adanır (Lithuania/Turkey), *Talismanic shirts*, installation, recycled shirts, 2016

Many of Jovita Sakalauskaite’s artworks are about the care for humanity, for the female, and for life. Another artist who works with similar concepts like Jovita Sakalauskaite is an American artist, Karen Hampton. Her work ‘The Matriarchs’

is about two women, the mistress and the washerwoman. They are different characters at the plantation. The washerwoman on the right is filled with the text: 'With hands red and sore she stands wash rinse shake' and the mistress on the left is decorated with different words: 'a flirtatious creole goddess of love and luxury'. These women's hands are in everything and they both have silent power, one in the house and another at the outside world.



5. Karen Hampton (America), *The Matriarchs*, cotton, hand stitched thread, 335cm×137cm, 2000

"I'm giving them presents rather than disappearing in the structure of the civilization. They don't exist, but within their own room, they are very powerful." The artist explained (K. Hampton, interview, 2017).

This piece tries to express the strong ideas and feelings in a minimal number of stitches on the re-purposed hand-loomed cloth.

Her perspective as an African American woman and a feminist mother shows her care about the history of her ancestors and the lives of women of color. She says:

"Fiber art is a language for me. All my work is about healing. I believe that the telling the stories is healing for the individual, the community and the world. (K. Hampton, interview, 2017)".

On the other hand, fiber artworks are widely applied into the public space in architecture that eliminates the feeling of apathy and monotony brought by the heavy use of hard materials in modern life. Moreover, fiber art is highly recommended by architects as the warmest art in modern architectural space. Prof. Lin Lecheng, the leading fiber artist in China, has more than one hundred huge fiber art projects in different kinds of public spaces such as the government halls, hotels, office buildings, and private houses. His work 'Landscape' was completed with the technique of natural wool plush to express the literati spirit in traditional Chinese landscape painting. This piece was chosen to hang in the grand hall of the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University in 2003.



6. Lin Lecheng(China), *Landscape*, wool, weaving, 400cm×2200cm, 2003

Prof. Lin says:

"The color of this piece is close to the color of the wall. Therefore, when you catch a sight on it, it is there, and

when you do not pay attention to it, it merges with the color of the wall. It is not particularly noticeable and often invisible. (L. Lecheng, interview, 2015)".

Maybe that is the truth of fiber art. The value of care is natural, subtle and silent, just like the philosophy in Daoism that could be expressed as follows: "the great sound seems soundless, the great image seems formless". It is the appreciation of beauty with confidence, care and love. Thus, fiber art in the open spaces realizes the aesthetic value of protection and care for the public physically and mentally.

Fiber artists are attempting to explore the relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and humanity itself with fiber art creations in a care narrative. In the dialogue between time and the world, fiber art becomes an art of warmth and benevolence.

From the Elite to the General Public: Everyone is an Artist

There is a famous slogan in Chinese fiber art: Everyone is a fiber artist. It seems incredible how one could easily become an artist since art is often considered as a game for the elite with an academic background, professional training and high aesthetics. To some extent, the saying "everyone is an artist" challenges the traditional concept in classical art. Prof. Lin Lecheng, the chief curator of the Biennale, says, "Whether or not you have received professional education or training, or come from different fields or disciplines, you can enter the world of fiber art without barriers and express your own feelings and ideas with fiber artworks (Wang, 2011, p. 122)".

The value of "everyone is an artist" lies in the fact that it provides an open possibility and encourages the public to participate in artistic creation. In an era that places special emphasis on *interaction* and *sharing*, the promotion of aesthetics asks for an open field for the public to engage in and experience art.

The diversity of fibers and the familiar feeling about fiber materials makes it possible that everyone could be a fiber artist. Ruan Shaozhen, a craftsman with no professional training in art school, was inspired by the workshops in the Fiber Art Research Centre of Tsinghua University. She created lots of "potatoes" with silk stockings and cotton.



7. Ruan Shaozhen (China), *Potatoes*, 250cm×250cm, silk stockings, cotton, 2012

Her works were so vivid and interesting that all viewers wanted to touch them and take part in the process of making art. And her work won the excellent award in the 7th Biennale. The craft of cross-stitch was so popular in China that almost every housewife took it as a hobby. Instead of creating the works themselves, they always copy famous paintings or designs. Liu Quanhua, the leading person of the Chinese cross-stitch movement, won awards in the biennial exhibitions for several times. Her work "landscape" series depicts the land into picturesque disordered squares in a bird's eye view. And some big lines like blood vessels or trivers emerge on and disappear into the land. The works express the deep connection with the motherland and the local culture.



8. Liu Quanhua(China), *Motherland*, 250cm×160cm, threads, plastic net, cross-stitch, 2008

Her works were highly valued, because she expressed her own feelings and ideas with common techniques and materials of cross-stitches. In the 7th Biennale, a work completed by a group of kindergarden children, drew a lot of attention in the exhibition. Many pieces of small quilts were sewed together and bordered with red scarfs. This childish work not only showed the creativity of children but also gave inspiration to the mature artists.



9. Kindergarden children guided by Zhou Bin (China), recycled cloth, 240cm×360cm, 2012

These works show new visions and more possibilities for China's folk arts such as cross-stitching, quilting, knitting, and baskets-weaving. They show that people can express their own feelings and ideas with their original designs and creativity. In the daily art creation, individual wisdom and creativity are integrated into works, instead of copying and copying. This kind of art will become a true art that reflects the spirit of the era and the essence of the time. The idea of "from the elite to the general public" is searching for the balance and

connection between the high art and the public.

Conclusion

Neutral thinking is a constructive and holistic way of thinking. This kind of thinking will be valuable in the development of contemporary art in near future. The value orientations of contemporary fiber art have their own missions. These goals could be explained as follows: 'from the concept to the material: open communication path between humans and nature', maintain the reasonable tension between man and nature; 'From the appreciation of ugliness to the beauty: the value of care in fiber art creation' provides a constructive way to the problems between humans and nature, humans and society, and humanity itself; 'From the elite to the general public': "everyone is a fiber artist" encourages the public to participate in artistic creation to bring beauty back to life. Fiber art does not make unipolar choices in these transitions and problems. Instead, it seeks the balance between concepts and materials, the elites and the public, the appreciation of ugliness and beauty, which leads to the wholeness of self-existence: beauty.

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