

A PAINTER'S TABLE

Roundtable, OFF空间, August 20th 2017

Participants; Meng Yangyang, Zhai Liang, Katherina Olschbaur, Hu Wei, Bianca Regl
Simultaneous translation by Zhou Xinyi

Talk starts with some technical difficulty with Skype, acoustics for Ekaterina Shapiro-Obermair are difficult and hard to follow;

KO: We are just now thinking if it would be better to speak on an Iphone, but we dont know if its better. Should we just try like this?

ES: Alright.

BR: We bring you closer. So you just made it us all move closer together.

ZL: Its a little weird.

BR: We were just starting to introduce ourselves, since we dont all know each other. Maybe just a short introduction about our work.

The Skype thing is super distracting. It makes me feel like I live in the 22nd century. ... Anyways, I was just saying that this is my space, which just moved, this year, to a new location. But I am here today because I am painter, and I really enjoy this opportunity to talk about painting, making art from an artists perspective. It is very rare that people come together like this.

Katherinas topic for this talk is "change", and my own work also has undergone some rather drastic changes the last few years, which has given me a lot of questions to think about.

ZL: I am a painter, too, and a lot of my work is about fiction. Some of my paintings are abstract, some are figurative; my focus now is on reasons why to paint this, or paint that. I have changed my work a little bit, dealing more with details, and reasons. Maybe it will become a little bit more clear later.

MYY: I am also an oil painter. My work also has had some changes. Some changes in my life and studio situation have led to changes in my painting, which is a good thing. Previously my focus has been mainly on figures, but now I have changed to the abstract area. Now i am focussing on the most basic principles on paintings; a dot, a line, a space. Talking about the challenges of change is very interesting to me.

XY: I am the translator today, and I am not an artist., but I work in a not-for-profit art space in Beijing.

ES: I am an artist also. But I cant quite hear you; you were answering the first question of the questionnaire, right? I think there are some breaks in the connection.

KO: Maybe only a short introduction of yourself?

BR: Do you have Wechat?

ES: No, I dont. I have WhatsApp?

BR: Anybody has WhatsApp?

ZL: No. Maybe Facetime?

KO: In the beginning it was better.

BR: Yeah, I dont know why. I ll try to chat with her. Lets try without the video.

KO: Maybe we do without video, it seems a bit better.

BR: Do you think its better? Youve seen everyone and weve seen you!

KO: We try now without the video. But we have a photo of you.

BR: A very nice one.

ES: Can you hear me now?

KO: Yes!

ES: Maybe I can only introduce myself. I think it is a little bit annoying for both sides.

Well I started with painting, but now I also make sculpture, using all kinds of media, but in relation to painting. Reflections on what painting means, in general. And I thought maybe I can do it briefly, because of all this exhausting technical things. Can you hear me? So I read the folder, it was very interesting to go through all the different statements.

KO: Would you like to speak a bit longer now?

ES: Yes, maybe I speak now and then you can go on without this technical annoyances. Anyways painting is a very interesting subject (connection stops)

ZL: Hello?

ES: Yes.

KO: I have a very spontaneous question, now. So you also have been running your own art space for a couple of months, do you think this will change your practice, or not?

ES: No, I don't think it will. I don't think it will change the way I am working. So we have had the space for half a year, maybe less, the first exhibition was in March, and I think it helps to sometimes go deeper into the work, it helps to discuss the topics that we are interested in, or that I am interested in in particular, so it has influence on the practice, but in the same way as other things have influence. Influences.

BR: I have a follow-up question to that. When you say go deeper into the work, can you describe that a little bit more clearly? When you go deeper, do you know what you are looking for? Or does it mean, go broader?

ES: Unfortunately I can not really describe that, because afterwards it always looks quite obvious. During the work it is a very open question for me, I just try to use myself as a filter, so just looking for things that are interesting to me at the moment. So if I recognize something that I am interested in, it should be something with something special inside. So I can also fascinate other people with it. I don't know, it's just moving around and trying to understand something.

KO: Hu Wei, can you introduce yourself?

HW: Sure. I am Hu Wei, I think I am the exception here since you guys are all painters. I was changing as a painter in the Academy, but after graduation I gave up on painting. So at this moment I have no painting practice. Yeah, basically my current practice is in multiple media, I work with performance and installation, writing, video making, these kinds of things. Besides being an artist, I run a not-for-profit-space as well.

KO: I also try to introduce myself very quickly. My name is Katherina, I am a painter, I have been staying here in Beijing since three months during a residency, and the reason why in the end I wanted to speak about this topic initially didn't have so much to do with painting, but with the feeling that if you come from Europe, like in Europe now we have a time which I would describe as stagnation. So, the opposite of change, something which is maybe going backwards. So at this point I find it interesting to talk about change because change is always a very neutral word, you can see it positive or negative, but I feel in general the word has a more positive connotation. So change, mostly, implies a change towards the better. And the reason why I invited painters, or why I want to speak about painting, is because I am a painter, and I also have the feeling that painting is a practice where you still have this kind of idea of progress. So you change throughout your painting, you have some progress, you get maybe better with color, or you get more precise with whatever, but there is still this idea of progress. I also don't know if this is right, but I found it interesting to really speak about this topic.

I would say I am a figurative painter, but I could also say I am an abstract painter. It

depends on how you look at it.

BR: I think there is lot of topics already. But somehow I am still hung up on Ekaterina using the world filter. Ekaterina, can you hear me?

ES:...

BR: Do you also see yourself as a filter from the outside world to your canvas? To go deeper?

ZL: For me, painting sometimes means progress to a better color, or better drawing, but als a progress in better understanding the meaning of a work.

BR: I think that might be what Ekaterina meant, also. My understanding of change is tied very closely together to what you said, you try for some progress, you try to get better at something. But where do you go, you know? I am trying to put my finger on this even its very hard to say. I think it is difficult to talk about progress if there is no goal. But painting also doesnt work like that; if you tell yourself what you want to get better at its lost already. ... Is Ekaterina eating?

ZL: Yeah its morning in Europe. Maybe breakfast. Maybe after we all disconnect from the Wifi its better? Hello?

KO: Ekaterina?

ES: Yes?

BR: Hmm... I just feel this is super distracting for everyone?

HW: Maybe we can keep it short for her. She did answer the five questions.

KO: Ekaterina, we decided to keep this short for you. When you saw the questions, is there a topic you would like to speak about? Ekaterina?

BR: The line is quiet.

KO: Its always like this. When there is a group of people, everyones attention just focusses on the screen. Yeah I think its better if the focus on her is shorter.

ZL: I think its because of the signal.

BR: Oh, she said goodbye. She doesnt hear us. Lets leave it, its okay. We are still here!

KO: Now we know.

BR: Yeah, no more Skype.

KO: Technically we have to improve a bit. I find it very distracting. We all focus on her, and then there is no dynamic here. ... What do you think about, when you think about change, do you see it as a progress towards the better?

HW: Well its hard to say, a skill can improve towards the better, you can call that progress. But it also depends on the viewer, somehow. The viewer has their own taste somehow. Specifically, your progress in your art practice maybe doesnt connect with the viewer. Also the progress of your work, if it ends up in a gallery or institution, has it gotten better? Does it create a certain meaning for the artist themselves, but maybe not for the viewer? I also think contingency is very interesting. Also as an artist you have to deal with contingency, you can not plan everything ahead.

BR: Could you explain to me what you mean with contingency?

HW: Just like something happening outside of your expectation. Your art practice is not like directing a play, you cant just tell a bunch of actors on a stage what to do. One of the reasons I gave up painting when I graduated is because I feel its very hard to control things. Also I have difficulty to explain what happens on the canvas. I don't know how to talk about that to a viewer, to explain. To explain also the artists intentions.

BR: I think its good that you mention control. Because it is also connected to change.

KO: Yes. I also think contingency is a very big topic for us and our time. But I feel the

moment you speak about your practice and also you try to do a presentation, and you try to talk about what you did five years ago, what you did before and what you did then, because we don't have progress, maybe nobody actually believes in this, but you have a sort of narration, and I think this I also find very important, because you create a narrative about your work, about yourself, one fold after the other. So this is something, this is how we also deal with contingency, I think it's a term, in fact we can not really think it.

HW: Or not naturally accept it.

KO: Or deal with it. We have to accept it, or we can not fully accept it. Maybe it's nihilist, I don't know. Because maybe we want to believe in a kind of, not logic, but why the things are like this and like this. Maybe we want to believe we are getting better in the work when we are leaving one topic and moving on to the next.

Because it's the feeling that it's right to do this now at the moment. So we create a certain kind of logic for ourselves.

But I also find it very interesting why people start with painting and then leave it, leave it behind. I know many artists; why they think it's not enough for them.

BR: Maybe it's also too much.

KO: Whatever it is. Some people still stick to it. And it's not without problems (laughs). You stick too it, but then you are also dealing with the same problems. That it's maybe too much. A lot of things happen on a canvas which are not what you want, but you kind of have to deal with it. There is a lot of uncomfortable feelings, many emotions are included when you paint. How do you speak about this? Does it have any meaning in the end, for the finished painting? I always have the feeling that there is a very big difference between all the things that happen in the studio when you paint, all the decisions you make, and then when the painting is finished, it's always something else.

BR: Always.

ZL: Always, yeah.

HW: Actually I want to ask you, how do you govern this kind of emotion when you paint? Because you can not actually really let go, you are not only dealing with your emotions but you are also trying to create an image.

BR: That is a very hard question.

HW: I had difficulty with that.

MYY: I think your question is every artist's question, and it's a question for a lifetime. But every period that every artist has, you will have another question, another problem. Emotional problems, physical problems. So when we make art, we deal with this part of the problem. How to make the problem into art and solve the problem? I think it's not ... Making art is facing all these problems and also a way to solve all these problems. Painting is a process of knowing yourself. Some problems don't need to be solved, they just need to be experienced. Life is experiencing different problems. Experiencing changes, moving studios and those things. These are good opportunities to think about your own life and to think about art. For me, big shifts, chaos, let me know what I need most in life. In art I know which part is my favorite. Currently it is just the pursuit of peace, inner peace, so my work is about that. I know which part I don't need. Outer chaos makes me more responsible towards my choices. Some problems in painting I don't seek the answers, like I used to. I just experience all this and then make sure that the final result makes me comfortable. Peace is not simple, not about escape. But about knowing more precisely how to create, how to make art.

ZL: I would like to continue the topic that we touched on, about emotion. I think this is

interesting, painting is kind of like a performance, because you have to use your body, your fingers, so also this moment is the same as maybe a thousand years ago, the first men to use a brush made a similar performance, for painting, or drawing in some caves. This is I think why there is a lot of emotion inside. But whether you are happy, or sad, you have to let it go, follow the feeling.

BR: But at the same time, painting has some rules. It has a frame -

ZL: A border.

BR: If I exaggerate one feeling, like for example being super excited, you can not really concentrate on whats happening on the canvas.

ZL: Yeah.

BR: Its a fine line between those two things.

ZL: Yeah I know. Well there are some good artists, and some bad artists. Also some good works and some bad works. Its why, I mean, how can you use that emotion. Like, why is painting difficult. Its like we talked about yesterday; the contemporary art, be it opera, music, rock, everything can be political. But painting looks like it has a very strong border, compared to other media in contemporary art, a strong hold. You have to study for ten years how to make a good color, so stupid! For other artists, they must ask themselves, why do they spend so much time on making beautiful color? Its ...

BR: I am not sure about that. Because in other art forms, you have to study such a long time to pick the right word, or to play the piano.

ZL: Yeah, but, you can mix. Some artists occupied with political art, they can use what is happening now, and sometimes you find this kind of work is weak, because what really happened on the street, or in the government, is changing every minute, and political art becomes a document. You want to tell somebody about whats happening now. But painting is ... I forgot what we were talking about before, sorry.

BR: I think you were saying that some contemporary art forms don't have such a strong border.

ZL: Oh yes. So painting has its form, and you need to study it. The process is just different. Yes, you have to follow rules in painting.

KO: But nowadays the rules you follow you set for yourself. No one else can tell you your color is wrong, or right. It is also your decision if you care about color at all.

ZL: Sorry, I meant the rule is not a stable rule. Its rules that everybody has for themselves.

KO: I mean it as something positive. I mean it as a structure, or architecture.

ZL: In painting, you always have some way to set.

BR: Well painting also has this amazingly long history. I mean, especially for Europeans, its just, oh, I can only talk about myself actually. You know growing up you always look at paintings, and think about their frameworks, or what rules they follow. This is very hard to break later. Hard work.

ZL: Very hard. Different rules, different styles. Emotions also have a logic to make that. A strong shell. I want to know the reasons why I start a painting now. You must have a reason.

BR: Can you describe one of those reasons? To make it more clear?

ZL: I have a painting in my book of a white chicken. In a landscape. It faces a mountain, so its romantic. And why I painted it is because I read this story, and there was a sentence, "When I was young, blahblah", and then they talk about the traffic, or something. Some views, stories, I dont know, I forgot the story. But that sentence, "When I was young, .." it was attractive to me. It means something, means something to me. So I add something else, put it together. Make it complete. Like,

“when I was young, I travelled all over the world”; a story. You know, when I feel this sentence, feel the meaning, I want to paint a chicken, a fat chicken, and it faces a landscape, like an old chicken. Maybe it travelled all over the world. That is a kind of a reason, my reason. Not connected to art history.

BR: The question that poses itself to me, so, you see a sentence, like “When I was young,..”, why choose this sentence over another sentence, like “The sky is blue”, or something like that. Like, how do your reasons come together?

ZL: The reasons are like a magnet. “When I was young” is like a magnet, with a lot of associations in my brain. Some things just work as magnets. I dont care if its not a logic reason. Everybody is kind of like a memory stick, with a lot of trash inside. But maybe tomorrow, that trash becomes valuable.

KO: Can you describe why you paint still, and not do anything else?

BR: I mean the most obvious answer to that question is because I am not very good at anything else. This is the clearest answer I think. But I mean I love painting. I couldnt imagine ... There is no way to work in a different medium. It is just such a beautiful medium. Maybe it is narrow, or maybe it has the weight of its history, you know, all the things you can say about painting. But when you are in the studio, you pick up the brush, you make your color, none of this is important. In the best moment, I mean. In the worst moment of course you think it is a senseless affair, because it is senseless. But thats also beautiful, when you are in a good mood.

ZL: Sometimes when I look at your work, maybe this or that work has a clear reason. But you always told me you dont want to be connected to an old style. Like, working makes you happy, but maybe not some results.

BR: Yeah well I have a really difficult time with some of my old works. Like, as a person I am very far away from what I started out with. Like, when I talk about a love for painting I dont actually mean all of the works I made before (laughs). But the act of making them. Not the actual result. But I am also at peace with that. Its fine to go far away from what you know, and then you come back, and then you move away again. But I couldn't image going so far away that I stop.

I wouldnt know how to put this in my head. It would be such a rash decision.

KO: You mean the difference between your earlier works and the paintings now?

BR: No, I mean stopping painting.

HW: There is this dutch artist, I forgot the name, he is a sculptor, his work is kind of minimalist, he is chasing this kind of extreme aesthetics, in his art practice.

Everything very simple, and minimalist. He is sort of creating this utopia in his practice. In the end he committed suicide, because he couldn't take it. He touched this place between his studio practice and reality. He faced so many problems, that is why he chose this radical, uhm, solution.

BR: Well, somehow I find that easier to imagine then stopping to work.

KO: Well, because you continue something. I mean, its brutal, but you have an aesthetic idea about something, which is also existential.

HW: I want to ask you a question referring back to what you were saying earlier. You were saying, as a European, it is hard to break that frame of the long history of painting. So, I wonder how you were taught, trained as painter in the Academy. So what is the relationship between the rules, the frame and creativity. I mean the historical meaning of painting, which is still an object, the meaning of this object. Like, apples on a plate or something.

BR: Well, funny enough this is actually what I do, I make still lives, so what I deal with in my painting is very old fashioned. It has some, well it is obviously contemporary, but its rooted in a very old thing. Because somehow I cant get around

believing that this is somehow, like, real. Its that, yeah. And I wasnt really taught. My teacher, I think, deep inside he really hated painting. And most of all he hated student paintings. So he just didnt want to see them. When he came to the school he just told us to turn around our paintings. But that was really good, when you are a student you take a long time to make your work, you are so excited about it. And then somebody comes and tells you its just, puh, worthless, you start criticizing yourself, you question what you do. So that was good, from him, but he didnt actually teach us anything.

KO: Its interesting, because I think we both studied in different places, we didnt study together, but more or less at the same time, and it was, it is something, you cant even compare it to studying in London or somewhere else. The teachers, at the university in Vienna, they didnt teach you any technical things, but they also didnt teach you to think about, to verbalise your practice in a contemporary way. They didnt give you, like in England, or maybe in America, I dont know, they didnt, it wasnt a painting practice where you learn to present your work. It was more about like feeling, or this cliché of how to be an artist. Also you were together in a class, with other painters, and there was not so much language at all. Everyone was actually just doing his or her things. But in some way, when I studied, for me it was, I had a big complex towards anything kind of intellectual, intellectualism, and it got better after university. I have the feeling I learnt a lot, there was some kind of anachronism, I learnt a lot from, we were looking mainly at old art, art history with our teacher. I learnt about contemporary art over seminars I took, and they were about film. Film theory, all the things I learnt outside the medium of painting. I also studied set design, but only, I was always a painter, I am, and I was really always. Really kind of with full blood, and also super, uhm, I dont know, maybe not intellectual. I studied set design, because I liked that in the class they were speaking a lot about literature, also the teacher was always supportive of my. In a group they were speaking about processes, how you develop a play, how you develop a set design, so I liked it because I had the feeling I learnt a lot about it, to structure the own process. Because I had the feeling in the painting class everything was kind of emotional, I just couldnt deal with it at that time. I needed this complex for the intellectual. But later on, when I finished the studies, I didnt continue with set design, because I was also very bad at actually deciding anything in a group. I am very much that kind of person that needs to be alone, to stay in touch with, I have also to stay in touch with myself and thats also why I am in the studio. But often, I mean now all these things got better and also more, more interesting, but often I have the feeling, uhm, I need to go out of the studio and confront myself with the world outside, because so many things are happening, and they are really happening outside the studio. But I also dont think that its a matter of, that you are not fast enough, because anyways all these things reflect in your practice. But painting, its very slow. And also there is this kind of delay.

HW: Maybe that is the reason, like you mentioned, that its abstract, like, as an artist, how you combine your inner necessity with outer reasons. How you deal with that gravity.

BR: Hm, I dont know. I am also drifting away a little bit, but for some reason I was just thinking about the impressionists. Because I feel, in a way, a big part of the population of the world somehow agrees that they are good artists. Like, they have their umbrellas, and gift boxes, and its just this kind of imagery thats used again and again, and enters peoples houses, people find it very pleasant, good, in a way. Its very easy to get in touch with. Somehow the reason for them, not their reasons, but

the reasons, the whole movement came about because of technological advancement. Suddenly there is paint in tubes, they can go outside of the studio, they have cameras, they can take some photographs or whatever, so I mean, like, the point I am trying to get to is that they were so influenced by the outside, that it almost feels like, if its, you know, Monet painting those pictures or somebody else who just happens to be born at the same time is not so important anymore. Like, uhm, you know you are just this person that is somehow influenced by your circumstances, and you become this vehicle, to make something. Sometimes, late at night, I will think about this, maybe, I mean the worst case scenario is that we are all in that same position. That you are just influenced by the outside, or like, you are just a child of your time and there is not actually a lot you can do. Just make your work. I just dont know if they knew that. I don't know how aware they were of this circumstance. They are just a good example I think.

KO: Also at this point change is interesting I think. There are different perspectives, change is either, like there are different perspectives you can take on your work, one is that you are totally influenced, you are completely influenced by outer circumstances, which in fact this is true, it is true. At the same time the concept or the belief that you can change something, that you can decide at least, to choose this or choose that, gives you a possibility of acting, somehow. Which I like, because in some way the, if you think about, that you are only dependant on your circumstances and cannot do anything, makes me very hopeless.

BR: No I mean it is pessimistic, I know.

KO: Also very pessimistic, but in fact it kind of it is very true.

BR: Maybe we talk about the acting a little bit. I mean I am very much interested in the first question we have there. I guess its close to what we are talking about now.

KO: Did you experience one or more major shifts in your work? How did they occur? Were they the result of outer circumstances or inner reflection? - Do you want to start, Hu Wei?

HW: I think my answer is basically on the paper. I think the question of dealing with interest and also the necessity of something, like I am still interested in this thing, or that thing, but I think as an artist we always have to be concerned with our anxiety to express. The interest is not enough. Basically, we have to ask about our inner necessity to create an image. So, yeah, also recently I am kind of thinking about the "real", or the image, if the image has a kind of correlation with the real. The real is a little bit tricky, like speculating realism basically. Like images being extracted from reality by the artists, also maybe manipulations of the artist. Also, what is nothing, does it have something do to with reality? Also, during making a work I always ask myself what kind of necessity I have to create this work, because there are so many artworks already. (laughs)

KO: If you start googling (laughs).

BR: Google "art" (laughs)

HW: Yes I mean everyone has their reasons to create something.

KO: In which way would you see the connection between, or not connection, but, because you were speaking about anxieties and how it alters the view, if you integrate them or just ignore them. What do you think is the connection between what you define as interest, and where the anxieties are, as motor, or, is there any connection?

HW: I think there are different situations. For example, in the beginning when I was studying in the Netherlands I had a lot of anxieties because of the cultural differences, of the contact, or exchange, or something. Actually one of my teachers

was questioning my reasons for concern, what I had been doing before, how it relates to my interest, which is just very narrow. (a part inaudible)

KO: Because the interest is also something which we learn at the Academy, we have to be interested, we have to have certain interests. But these are always things that are located outside of ourselves, in a way. I mean they, we are connected to them -

HW: You mean how you choose your interest?

KO: Yeah, but anxiety, it connects you to things. Because its more dangerous. Its also this thing, which you can not completely control.

BR: You also cant completely control an interest, I think. Anyways I agree with what you say.

KO: Would you say that anxiety plays a part in your work? Or is it not something you are thinking of?

MYY: My anxiety gets less and less. Anxiety will control my actions, so I made rules how to make my art. A set of rules with precise steps to cultivate my habit. To make these sets of rules, first I find out where my weaknesses are. The weakness might be a previous habit of painting. Maybe caring too much about one painting, through this leading to a bad result. You must know what a bad habit is. For me, anxiety comes from bad habits. I know that my creation is very rich, but there a too many things, so I cant control them. My anxiety comes from not being able to control them. Once there is more control, my anxiety is reduced. The problem is very concrete. Logic in creation is weak in artwork. So, I made a set of rules that are very small, so I can create inside these rules.

I follow these rules, and when an idea comes into my head, I dont go along with it. I try to stick to the idea I conceived before.

KO: How do you deal with this in practice? When you have another idea, do you write it down, or do you just say, forget about it?

MYY: Forget about it! Forget about it! Next time! But I put it in my notebook.

BR: The moment you come back to these ideas, do you still consider them to be good?

MYY: Sometimes. Sometimes I think they are better than the ones I had before. Sometimes I think they are stupid. But at that moment, when I have them, its important to still do what I was doing in that period. Its a habit, to do this. If I have a good habit, I can make good art with my good ideas. And not be influenced by other things. I think its time to do this. When I was young, we were too free. Too free to do anything you can do. But its not a logic thing.

ZL: I am different. Meng Yangyang is very focused, she will put ideas away in a notebook. But me, if I have a different idea, and think its a good idea, maybe I will start in an opposite direction. Not keep at it. Maybe three directions. And sometimes, if I find a better idea, I quit the old idea. Until you find the best one.

HW: You make selections when you have exhibitions?

ZL: Yeah sometimes thats the reasons. But I sometimes I dont like style. Its hard for a painter to have a different style. You have to spend a lot of time on one direction, because you need to go deeper. But sometimes thats not good for me. Such a long time in one direction. Maybe you also need a higher direction. Maybe you think you take a road, maybe the Liqiao road, or the road to the airport, but I dont think about that, its just the road is facing east, so that direction includes the airport, or Liqiao, or Songzhuan, or whatever.

BR: This is not so clear to me now.

KO: The direction is going eastwards, so if I understand you right, its not such a big difference if you either take the airport road, or the next day take this way, or this

way. The general direction is east, but it doesn't matter so much if you change the road during the trip.

BR: Oh, I got it. You confused me because the airport is west of here.

ZL: Oh, I was still in Heiqiao.

KO: You are already east!

BR: But you can always go further. So how do you choose your ideas for a certain period? How does this decision happen?

MYY: Moving from Heiqiao was a big change for me. Not in a sad way. It was about my art career. I do art every day, work very hard. But when I look back every year, even though I worked so diligently, my work is still scattered all over the place. It didn't form a system. This happened when I moved from Heiqiao. So I think it's better to have a staged result. To make sure what you want to achieve during a certain period. Maybe it's also because I am a little older, and because I am more mature. So professional artists should have professional attitudes, professional plans. Just doing something because you like doing it doesn't seem to be a good idea now. Art is not only about an academic part, it also has a commercial part. You also need to consider the commercial part of making art. So this is a problem which every artist has to face, every artist wants to be recognized, and be shown in good galleries, good spaces. So I also think that professional artists also have to think about the commercial part of making work.

KO: Was it a problem, because what you said, or what I heard is that, in your previous work you were painting figures, and you were showing this work, in your gallery or in the spaces you exhibited, is it for them, how were the reactions of the people you work with towards that you changed? Or was there no reaction?

MYY: I didn't finish what I was trying to say before. The commercial part, it didn't mean that I am catering to any collector or gallery, to make what they want. I want to have my own style, my own appearance, so I have to make a set of rules which can show my style, my appearance for that period. So my anxiety doesn't come from not being able to create. It comes from not being able to present my "Meng Yangyang" brand.

So about your question; I never gave up going deeper into art, to explore. For me, if I am okay with the change, and satisfied with the progress, the gallery will also think it is progress.

KO: Yes, I agree.

MYY: The brand of an artist; the most important part is to be consistent, and stable, and going deeper, that should be shown in my works. Now I am also making clothes; it doesn't relate to art, but it can help to clear my mind. So these kinds of things, that are not related to art, can help me clarify my art rules. Yeah. I think, if I can't solve the anxiety problem through creating work, I should try other things. Then it's okay.

KO: That's important, this that you, uh, it shows that you reflect a lot about things. That you realize, that you can't solve everything. Sometimes you have to decide, to not solve everything on the canvas itself. At some point it is important to do something else. And to recognize this. It's really a very important step.

MYY: Yes. To me.

ZL: Well you are trying to get rid of all your anxieties. But to me, sometimes I am afraid of not having anxieties. That it becomes boring.

MYY: So your anxiety makes you always look for excitement?

ZL: In the bad moments. My question to Meng Yangyang really is, you have a lot of ideas, but you drop them, drop them, focus on that. You also want to do some designer clothes to train yourself to focus on something. But my problem is, like, I

get, certainty, if you you have no problem, its a problem. Just like, you need to, because, now, our culture has changed a lot, every minute something happens, a lot of great ideas, and I have to know why, like, if I get stable, a safe situation, and the same way for painting, I would be terrified.

BR: You are driving your car, going east, so relaxed, and then all the cars start overtaking you from all sides, all the fast cars.

ZL: Haha, yeah, just like I said, if you have a problem, its very easy to focus on something. So you focus on this maybe ten years, or more, but maybe artists cant solve some problems, and you will understand that very well if you spend some time with it. I am quite afraid of not having open questions. At worst, you just ask yourself about the questions.

MYY: But you dont only need questions, you also need solutions.

ZL: I said that before. How can you say ..

MYY: Well these questions are the middle aged artists questions.

KO: Well we are all a similar age actually, like around mid-thirties. Around. How old are you, Hu Wei?

HW: End of twenty.

BR: Its a good age.

KO: Its so interesting. I also agree, that there are problems in art, not the life problems, whatever, we have a lot of psychology nowadays in dealing with problems, but I dont mean these problems, I mean the art problems, I have the feeling that I, I never had the feeling that I really solved a problem. I have a lot of them, within artmaking, I never had the feeling that I sit in front of a painting and think okay, problem solved. I mean its very hard to finish a painting, so I sometimes, sometimes its really hard work and sometimes when I finish a painting, I am really dissatisfied, because its so much hard work, and I would love to have it much more free, and gentle. But I dont even think that I have the feeling like, oh, now I solved this, I can go to the next. But often I have the feeling that I have, that there are different layers. There is one layer which is very technical, which is really about these things which I would only speak with painters, for example, because I was always working with photographies, because I think a lot about images, and photography is something we are very used to use as a sketch, and then I do drawings, or I do watercolors, and the watercolors and the drawings, they are, I think, in a way to help you to get more true. So the photography is one thing, but the photography is always also very confusing, so in one way, I have one problem in the painting, how to, uh, get towards paintings, how much do I solve beforehand, how much do I make a drawing, do I really look, do I have photography that I look on, but at the same time if I have to speak about what is my problem in the art, that I am dealing with, with a person who is not a painter, I think I would not speak about these details, maybe I would speak about different things. I dont know. Do you for example write, do you, how do you, bring an order, or a system to the problems you have for yourself. Do you write, or do you just know what it is?

ZL: Sometimes I write. Sometimes I will ... yeah, I write. Maybe not about the original problem, maybe just some words, about the problem. Its interesting, I have a lot of books, from many years, writings, drawings, a lot of stuff. I find, maybe five years ago, the problems in my notebook, I have no interest in them. The problem is still in my painting, but it doesnt interest me anymore. Maybe its a problem for art history, but its not a problem for me. Its no big deal.

BR: I have the same experience, that sometimes a problem just appears, and then it dissolves. By itself.

KO: I also forget things very often.

BR: Haha, yeah, me too. I forget.

KO: Its also a very good way of clearing.

BR: True.

ZL: Problems always change.

BR: And some problems also just stay with you. Sometimes you just have this elephant ...

KO: And you fall over it repeatedly.

BR: And then after a while they become like family. Would be really sad if they would leave. Or like a pet.

ZL: I have another thing. Painting, when you start, its all about evil. The dark side, no good stuff, just dark side. Not happy.

KO: Maybe its because when you are a teenager, and you begin to make art, teenager time, you have the feeling of so much weight and you want to have it dark, because you want to have weight.

ZL: No I dont mean, I mean in art history, classic art. Even chinese classic art, its so much about evil. I mean, good topics, but ..

BR: I mean this is also, I think, because painting, at least in Europe, for a long time was also used, you know, to make people afraid of something.

KO: The church ..

BR: If you use it for power, people have to be afraid.

KO: People were illiterate, most of the people could not read, and so the images were the thing, they were strong, they were emotional, so the most common paintings, for the most common people, in Europe, they were these small paintings you see in the church, most of these were horrible, a lot of bad things happening, but this is were people can relate and also were the church can claim its power. The beautiful, erotic paintings, they were kept away, they were more for a selective audience. But I also think its about power.

ZL: So why do artists always think about problems. Happiness is so important for a public, but we artists always talk about problems. Kind of like -

BR: Well the mistake most people make, including myself, most of the time you think, uh, being, having a problem or being sad about something is the same thing as being serious. Its very hard to make light work, happy, as you said, and transport seriousness through it. But those things are really not related. It just looks more serious if its more sad, or dark.

ZL: Yeah. The feeling is like, if you think about a problem, you will look serious.

BR: Yes, but thats not actual reality. It is hard to think about happiness.

ZL: Chinese traditional painting, sometimes, they have some philosophy, how you to understand a thing, the world, like a pen, or a table. So this guy will look at bamboo for one week, just look at bamboo, one week. He will make a clear definition of the bamboo, of the meaning of the bamboo. And so the painting is just about bamboo, just a landscape, chinese traditional painting will ask for the meaning of the mountain, of a scholar. And whats the meaning of beauty, this gets kind of serious. If you know that. Its very strange in chinese art history. At that time, so strange, the painting is really like a photograph, of some bamboo. And that guy, the bamboo guy, when he stayed there, watching the bamboo, after four days, he got sick. Throwing up blood.

BR: Its a hard thing to do.

ZL: Very hard, very serious.

(Pause)

BR: The bamboo guy just killed me. Now I think maybe I dont actually have any problems.

ZL: Sometimes, also its just like Yangyang said, sometimes you like something, and then you dont like it a few days later. I will paint another, an opposite. I dont know why. I still care about a problem, but I just want to change.

BR: Well I have, you know, now I experience a weird chronology in my work. Like, some works, when I finish them, I feel like; oh my god! I did that! You all know that feeling, right? You stand in front of your painting and you just have that feeling of it being super good. And then that lasts maybe a week or so, thats usually the timeframe, and then one week later I look at it again and I am like, hmmm.... not so sure ... you and I... no... and it just becomes worse and worse and worse, and then maybe five years later, really, usually its five years, I look at it again and think like, oh yeah no, its okay. Really funny, I dont know why. I mean not for every painting, some are just bad, but yeah. And I cant change it, I have no influence over this. Do you also have that?

KO: Yes. The judgement. But it also doesnt help if you invite a lot of people to your studio, and let them help decide, because anyhow, everyone has a very personal opinion, you can not count on them. But your own, because, you would go crazy, one person likes this, one person likes that, and the reasons are banal. Also I never have this, that its absolutely consistent, that I know what it is and it wont change. But the closer I am to a work, the more extreme the mood changes.

BR: Yes.

KO: So if I am on a series, for a couple of months, if its around me, I know that it will be, that its really hardcore, I know the change will be between, this is really good, and my god i want to kill myself. This is the result of all, this is it! But then it changes, and the next day, or in the night it is different, or I am really tired or I like, all these, when I am still within the series, this is really extreme, so, but after a kind of distance, its better. But I also like when the paintings are just kind of away, you cant touch them anymore after a while.

ZL: So how do you define finished, what time do you think a work is finished?

BR: I have never really had this question. I know this is so weird, but I cant work on a canvas that has dry paint on it. I feel like once the paint is dry, its over, its finished, its dead. So I have tried to work around this, and I have tried to work in layers, but it always, I just get this really allergic reaction. I just cant do it. So I dont, so this question is not one of my bigger questions. I know it is for everybody else, but, it didnt come to me. Dont know about you guys.

MYY: I did figurative works, and turned to abstract works. When I graduated, I did a lot of figurative works. Its about feeling, about anxiety, about anger in girls' or boys' faces. Thats my, uh, stuff from when I was young. So when I grew up, some other things came to me, came to my life. And I think whether a work creates anxiety, or happiness, thats all an emotion, but now I am not expressing emotions, I am expressing a spirit. So the spirit seems neutral, it doesnt have, unlike emotions, some emotions are very strong, so if I am expressing happiness or peace, it seems weaker, but the spirit is stronger than the emotions. Just, the spirit goes above. The spirit is abstract, so it is very important how you express it. It has nothing to do with technique. If you can control that spirit, it is important to learn how to grasp that spirit and not to concentrate on the forms, or the technique. Technique and materials are only a tool, so you cant be a slave to these tools. It is very important to know that these things exist, but it is very hard to grasp that. So as a Chinese, Eastern mindset, thats the challenge. So this is everything, everyone is concerned by this

question, the spirit problem. If you are a teacher, or a policemen, whatever your profession, you have this problem. First you should have a variety of interests, and you should be open to all kinds of different things. So, each problem, every anxiety should be a way to get closer to the spirit part. While I am creating, I don't consider other people's opinions about my work, I only consider my own feelings. So for me, once I think that I have achieved this spirit part in a work, it is done. Maybe it's a very simple work, a small dot, or it's a very complex work, the spirit part decides if the work is done.

KO: You are not longer needed.

MYY: The most important thing is being confident, when I think yes, I have achieved it, and it's finished. Whether this is recognized in the art system is another thing, not for me to consider.

KO: This is a thing which you don't have so much influence about it.

MYY: Some contemporary artists are not very certain about their works, because they think too much about outside comments on their work. Whether it fits into the art system. If the artist is not confident about a work, how can she sell it to others. Not a physical sale, just saying my work is good.

KO: If you are seventy percent right, you have to fake the last thirty percent.

MYY: Yes, faking is part of confidence.

BR: I don't think there is a hundred percent confidence for any art work. Can't be.

KO: If you hear about, we are speaking about the painting, these processes in the studio, is there anything that you could also relate to your practice, or is it something that happens a very different, a completely different way?

HW: I think it's kind of a similar process. I have the exact same feeling as you Bianca, maybe not so extreme, but also like, after a couple of months, or a couple of years, your previous works change. You don't want to show them, just want to destroy them. But I have never gotten that idea that my works have gotten better again, like you after five years or so,

BR: Well it's not that the work has actually gotten better, you just become okay with it.

KO: Maybe the judgement changes.

HW: And also in terms of, about when an artwork should be finished, also only the artist can decide that. For me, when I was painting, on a canvas, it's like not asking anything from it. Not like in the Academy, when you have to finish a certain way.

KO: You have to understand the point, when the tension is so strong, and often you miss it. Then you fuck it up. But it's also part of it, to do the wrong decisions, often.

BR: Do you also have this inside of a work, I mean those swings of emotions, like, you start to paint and in the beginning it feels really fresh, and easy, and then you come to a point where it's super tight and doesn't move, and then you have to break it again?

KO: Yes.

MYY: Yes, yes, yes. Every work, I start doing it quickly. And then all those problems come up. And then I try to fix them very precisely. Like, the colors need to be brighter two shades, or move direction of a stroke. Very detailed actions. And when I solve one problem, I can cross it off my list, and then tackle the next problem, methodically. Art is very sensitive, but making art is reasonable, it's work.

KO: I am very impressed, I find it very impressive, the way also you speak, that you are very analytical about it, that you write all your problems down, yeah, I find it really impressive. I try it also, but I am very chaotic, also the way I work, sometimes I would follow this, and I also think that it really helps in getting a bit more of control of something. So that you really have, uh, it's not about inspiration, but it's about this,

that you really do it in reversal, you go from there to there.

BR: Are you talking about one work, or the whole process? Sorry.

KO: I never work like this, but I find it very impressive. And I think its a good way to really improve something. That you really focus very clearly, you split it up, its, you have the problems you want to solve, and you really split it up, and you go from here to there. And I find it very impressive.

BR: For me the impressive part about your work, Yangyang, is, your method is so, 1, 2, 3,...

KO: This is what I mean.

BR: But then the result is very loose. Right, Huwei, when she talks you would think she is like a minimalist, like a very strict artist, but the work, its very -

KO: It looks very poetic, very free. It looks even very spontaneous.

MYY: When I am drawing, I can be very free. But when I make the works, big works, I become very reasonable. I create lists of problems and then I solve them.

BR: That would be a really beautiful book. Not showing the finished works, showing a list of problems. That would be very nice.

KO: I also try, I also have notebooks where I, when I paint. And I know there are many painters who work like this, also Maria Lassnig, she was very focussed, one of Austrias most famous painters, she died, so shes from another generation. But its very, I think they were just publishing her notebooks also, she was also very poetic. Before she, she gave herself tasks in the studio, in the morning, but then also kind of a reflection part. I kind of try, I have some notebooks where I tried this, but then I became so over perfectionist, so I make a photo of every minimal step in a painting, and those painting where I try to work like this, they were, I had to throw them in the trash. It didnt work. So its, I dont know.

MYY: I have a daily list, of what I will do today. Because I have a bad habit. So I will, I want to correct those bad habits, so I have formed this routine to correct my bad habits.

KO: But the dangerous thing, if you think about it, think about good or bad habits, if it comes to your work, there is no judgement about if its good or if its bad, its only about how you can use it. How you can use your bad habits, how you can use your good habits, there is no good or bad. Its just the way, you can be a super nerdy and neurotic person, and suffer from it in the life, but in the work, it can really help you for something.

MYY: It makes me very happy when I do this.

KO: Thats good!

MYY: And I, I will also write, its not limited to my artwork, it also extends to life, like I ate how many eggs, how many apples, what time I got up, and then after two months, or when I look back, I can be like, wow, I did all that.

BR: I dont understand this. Because one day only has maybe sixteen hours, so, if you do this every day, you will only do this. You dont have time to paint!

MYY: No, no, no, just two minutes!

KO: She doesnt need to paint so much, she thinks more. Its bringing a structure into some things, so there is more freedom for the works.

ZL: Will you also tell yourself how long to paint?

MYY: No, I just record my actions. No standardized amount of work.

KO: Do you take notes, do you have a notebook?

HW: No, I only have an iPhone calendar. Just for meetings and those things. But I write sometimes, like artistic writing. It takes a long time.

ZL: When we were still students, once I found one of Meng Yangyangs notebooks,

oh maybe not a notebook, just a sheet of paper, like; next week I will finish these paintings, and what problems they have, so serious. Yeah, very serious. I wasn't serious, just a college student.

MYY: Well I like this for myself. I don't care about how other people do it. I like having a list, and then ticking off that list, it makes me happy.

In my life I am not like this.

KO: Well maybe for the work, it is also a way of letting go, like we have in the questions. So that there is a task, but then you can say, okay, I have done it. I can go to the next.

ZL: Meng Yangyang can be very crazy. I remember her driving off in her car one time, being gone twenty days, driving around the north of China. Just in a normal car, one girl by herself.

BR: I think it's a good time to finish, what do you think? Already three hours. Also some people have places to go.

KO: Does anyone have the feeling it was too short? Still something missing, to say?

ZL: Maybe later, during dinner, we continue.