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2012.10.25 Thu, by Iona Whittaker Translated by: Liang Shuhan

He Xiangyu

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He Xiangyu Solo Exhibition.
White Space Beijing (No.255 Caochangdi, Airport Service Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing).

It is sometimes productive to imagine the impact of an exhibition with one element removed. Without the life-sized silicon model of the artist, lying in state wearing a Mao suit and shielded by a glass case, He Xiangyu's current exhibition at White Space might not be as memorable. Much as the exhibition is posited in cerebral terms — refracting the material world and a passage to the phenomenal one, existentialism and narration — its immediate effect is one of pure shock.

Shock is next to spectacle. But unlike spectacle, shock bleeds into broader emotional or imaginative registers. Let us imagine that the figure of the dead artist is not there; the other works in the exhibition might deliver themselves differently. A yellow door fitted with an illuminated light bulb for a handle seems less like a surreal portal to another place — a metaphysical entrance, or exit — than a formal play, juxtaposing one ordinary object with another in a manner unexpected and playful ("Sorry," 2011). The floor space before it is occupied with a rhombus formation of Chinese porcelain bowls ("08.23.2012"), some smashed and piled into mounds of shards amongst those left whole. Without the lifeless presence in the next room, they less readily conjure ideas about the lives of objects as a metaphor, perhaps, for human or historical event, instead recalling the artist's previous actions in breaking down and re-constituting materials (Coca-Cola into a black, silt-like deposit in the "Coca-Cola Project", 2009-10, for example) to new and visually-stimulating effect.

"A Grain of Rice" (2011-12) is a glass jar containing grains of rice on which have been written the names of deceased political leaders, sealed with wax. It is this work which most intimately speaks to the recumbent artist, stiff in the quintessential regime garb. Both the grains and the figure are held as if inside incubators. A strange atmosphere attends these glass containers: Who is responsible for these acts of preservation, and for whom are they intended? What, in fact, is being preserved? Is it for its own sake? The glass is a wall in more ways than one.

And so to the dead artist ("My Fantasy," 2012). One has the urge to embrace its morbidity in no uncertain terms; contemporary culture in the general sense prefers not to utter the word "death." Particularly in an age befallen, it seems, by a disproportion of disaster and discontent, society prefers the positive to the extent that its other side is almost denied until it forces itself forth. He Xiangyu's display last year in Paris of a life-sized model of Ai Weiwei, lying face down on the floor as if felled ("The Death of Marat") first — and interestingly — gave another artist similar treatment.

The effect of He Xiangyu's embalmed corpse in White Space (note that there was no curator here, only the artist himself) is to imbue the other works with a deep sense of departure — of collective symbolic identity as part of another realm containing traces of its predecessor — not unlike items furnishing the passage to the next place in the white tomb of a gallery. The hand of the artist is caught in extreme tension here; the willing suspension of disbelief accepts the loss of his life, yet to fake one's own death must be one of the most transcendent acts of authorship ever carried out. He Xiangyu is everywhere in this exhibition, yet ostensibly "departed." As a whole, this untitled outing is in every sense a potent evolution from what went before it.

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