Weng Fen (AKA Weng Peijun), Eggshells: Chorographic Communication

Weng Fen’s sculptural and photographic work playfully critiques China’s rapid economic and industrial progress. In his pieces, he comments on the risks of hasty civic growth and questions the role of the individual in the brand new metropolis. His “Accumulated Egg” series is especially concise in its analysis of China’s hurried development. The series consists of a number of model cities and structures built entirely from blown out eggshells. He was inspired by an old Chinese proverb; “There’s no such dangerous task as piling up eggs.” The delicacy of his eggshell cities represents the fragile state of China’s accelerated infrastructure. The pieces are a physical manifestation of his concern for the stability of modern China.

Of the series, “Three Gorges Triumph” (Fig. 1 & 2) is perhaps the most relevant to China’s current state. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam has had a major influence on the reshaping of Chinese cities. Some cities have been propelled into teeming metropolises while others have
been demolished to make way for the dam. In his installation, Weng Fen built a room-sized model of the dam from eggshells. Along with the sculpture, he included a massive display of comments and articles about the dam that he collected almost exclusively from the internet.

He created the installation as a self-consciously biased informational presentation. Weng Fen is very mindful of his role as an artist in relation to real world issues. He says, “Artists can not change anything, but only construct an information system by using his artistic language to offer an alternative way to the public.” “Three Gorges Triumph” is an “information system” meant to offer visitors an array of perspectives on the dam from which they can construct their own unique viewpoint. The piece then functions in two distinct modes— that of the physical sculpture and that of the informational presentation.

The sculptural element could be considered choreographic in nature. The other pieces in the “Accumulated Egg” series might fit better under this title, since they are depictions of entire cities, but Three Gorges Dam’s presence has shaped groups of people so massively that its spatial properties arguably deserve to be considered in the same realm as a city. Critic Gu Zhengqing suggests that "Three Gorges Triumph" can be compared to one of the many city models that high class Chinese frequently encounter in their real estate investment research. He says,
"Models are usually built exquisitely as if they were pieces of craftwork. By highlighting the good features and eliminating some shortcomings of the actual place, they all appear to be unrealistically magnificent and attractive to consumers."³

These idealized depictions of spaces are 21st century chorographic maps.

In her essay, "Mapping Places: Chorography and Vision in the Renaissance", Lucia Nuti discusses Ptolemy's distinction between chorography and geography, ultimately assigning chorography with the subjective, sensual representation of a city, rather than the rational, mathematical rigor specific to geography. Chorographers used their own sense of vision to depict the feeling of a city. This allowed imaginative possibilities, including unusual perspectives, colors and shapes. Nuti writes,

"The selective eye of the chorographer stares at single geographical objects and then, working on the paper, renders them close or distant, two- or three-dimensional, rough or finished, according to his specific needs, his skill and his personal choice."⁴

The architectural models that Gu Zhengqing spoke of are made with a similar sentiment. They are created for the purpose of illustrating the feeling of a city.

Gu Zhengqing argues that the "Accumulated Egg" series tempts viewers to approach its pieces as architectural models. He suggests that the audience is drawn into the pieces by their structural similarity to the
architectural models onto which they are accustomed to projecting their dreams of prosperity. Thus, "Three Gorges Triumph" uses a familiar chorographic style to attract viewers, while simultaneously using the subjective element of chorography to insert a subversive message about the dam through its particular medium: eggshells. The audience should be initially drawn into the model by the glossiness of the presentation and then struck with the fragility and impracticality of the means by which it was built.

In addition to this process, the viewer must also interact with Weng Fen's collection of clippings. On the inclusion of the clippings in the installation, he explains;

"What concerns me is not the correspondent relationship (between the sculpture and the clippings), but that they could build up an information loop within the work. Our judgement of things is influenced by several factors, one is the resource of the information, one is the inclination of the info, and another is our attitude. Personal attitude is formatted by compositive elements such as society, country, nation, economy, ideology and times, all these elements construct a structural system. I just want to realize such a system and integrate it into my work as an indispensable dimension."

Weng Fen’s choice to present information as an artistic installation embodies Baudrillard’s assessment of our society as being grounded in information and communication over the physicality of objects. In “The Ecstasy of Communication”, Baudrillard states that
“People no longer project themselves into objects... the car is still a vehicle of performance, a stage where it becomes an information network... the fundamental issue becomes the communication with the car itself, a perpetual test of the subject’s presence with his own objects, an uninterrupted interface.”

“Three Gorges Triumph” works in much the same way as Baudrillard’s car analogy. Weng Fen offers his audience an object from which they can interpret a certain message–the object doesn’t exist simply as an object, but rather as a metaphor, a physical manifestation of Weng Fen’s perspective on the dam issue. He invites his audience to enter into a dialogue with the object, and furthers this motion through the presentation of internet information. In effect, Weng Fen has arranged an interface through which the audience can become familiar with the issue of the dam, and formulate a perspective based on the pieces of information that he presents to them. His audience is not merely projecting themselves onto an object, but entering into a meta-dialogue about the place of individual perspective within China’s massive thrust of progress.
Fig. 1


Bibliography


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