

Alexandra Grimmer

## **Miss Underwater. A Conversation with Liang Yue**

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Watching your videos is like a visual education for me. It's as if I am observing a landscape or watching the reflections of the sun on the surface of water. I am not sure whether I could discover these things on my own in nature, but you have brought them into a context that could only have been imagined by you. Intense and sensual moments are visible in your work.

On the other hand, your videos do not speak by themselves. Nothing moves quickly, and, therefore, nothing draws the viewer's immediate attention. One needs to sit down, take some time, and be open in order to discover all the fine details and small changes of perspective you are processing in your videos. They speak silently, and they reward the viewer once one fully focuses on them.

So, for example, after 2012, a year in which you realized five important videos, you told me that you planned on "travelling without any intentional plans for most of the year."<sup>1</sup> How do you discover the places that interest you and that you incorporate into your work?

**Liang Yue:** I find them simply by passing by places; often, I take the same road many times, but this one time, I observed some irregularity, something that piqued my interest and caused me to question the situation I found myself in. What fascinates me is very personal.

I think *Glarus* (2015), which was shot in Switzerland, represents such a coincidence, with the deserted house that I discovered, the cat, and the surrounding mountains—I came across them all by chance. This process is not something I can control. One's feelings are different from those of others because every person is not the same. I describe the world that I see, and then I let the world see what I observe. My work is like a breeze, and you may catch it. If you catch it, you get it.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** What is your intention when you start shooting something? Are there certain situations that you look for?

**Liang Yue:** I like to have a relaxed approach; I prefer to make work in a slow way, not an intense way. There is also a sense of familiarity in my work—like a feeling of *déjà vu* to certain situations—but you cannot touch it. It is simply a feeling that is familiar to your body or in your memory. This feeling is impossible to explain in detail; it is like preparing a soup with



various ingredients. Each ingredient cannot constitute the soup by itself. If I bring together a carrot, a pen, a mobile phone, and a fish, you cannot say that it is a pen soup or a fish soup.

Liang Yue, *Video No. 20151531 (The Cat in Front of Glarus)*, 2015, 3-channel video, 9 mins., 54 secs. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Watching my videos may remind you of an afternoon when you sat in your grandmother's old chair, the smell of this environment reviving your memories. This is what I would like to achieve when people are watching my videos; they should cause people to breathe and be reminded of familiar things.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** One of the things I admire about my Chinese friends is their ability to refrain from interpreting situations as a way of remaining non-judgmental. This keeps the mind free for pure perception.

Wang Jun brought up the idea of “meaningless situations” in a text about your work in 2013.<sup>2</sup> How do you manage to capture the feeling of meaningless situations in your videos? Are they really meaningless?

**Liang Yue:** This can be understood in many ways. I think the interpretation of meaningless situations for Wang Jun is that it actually contains many meanings, which come together as meaningless. In Chinese tradition, we consider the term meaninglessness—or emptiness—as something important. In Chinese ink painting, there are seemingly empty parts, which are meaningful because many invisible details are hidden in these places. These details could be in the imagination, emotions, memories, or things that are too far away to see. When you observe these empty parts from a distance, you might not recognize anything; it is only when you get closer that your attention can focus on them and all the details become visible. So I think this term is not meaningless at all in this sense.

This year I started setting up my camera perspective from a distance so that I am able to get closer—to move from these meaningless situations into a closer view. For example, seeing a white wall from a certain distance: when you approach it and observe it more closely, the white wall is suddenly covered with many particles, and each particle has a different character. There are in fact many different parts. It is like digging a hole into what



you thought was meaningless and then looking into it and finding many meanings. In the years 2013 and 2014, I did many videos, shot from afar without moving in closer. From a distance, you may be objective and calm and see the things that are not moving or that are just slightly moving.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** So, from this year on, you are focusing more on details so as to observe an interior world (from a more close-up perspective), which leads you in the same direction as your first videos, when you were shooting people in the city at close range, with noisy moments from the street.

**Liang Yue:** Right.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Now I want to talk about your videos from around 2013 and 2014. They seem to be a clarification and reduction to the essential details, all by remaining focused on simple questions. While you previously videotaped people and situations in the city from your point of view, these more recent videos often show outside spaces, those in nature, without people. There is less movement of the camera, and you have mostly adopted fixed framing. You also reduced the titles of your works to the date of the shooting. Yet, somehow, you are more present in these works than ever before.

**Liang Yue:** My works have to do with how I see the world. The procedure of how I start working is always the same. First, I calm down, I feel the air, and breathe. Then I try to keep conscious of my peripheral vision in order to be open for all small details we usually do not notice. For example, when you are looking at your computer screen, there may be some reflections, like blue lights, and from the corner of your eye, you might notice some green plants. When you see something like this, there might be other things you didn't notice or concentrate on, but your eyes will catch them. So, in most of my videos, I position myself at a distance—like an outside spectator—and I just observe. It is like diving into the air—this world is not the same as it was yesterday—or if I am a diver in the ocean, it is a whole new view for me. Sometimes, it is also like a bird's-eye view; I am choosing the points I am interested in. Sometimes I am close, sometimes I am further away.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** So basically you are creating your own space with each artwork, and people can then enter, feel, and see it.

Liang Yue, *Lady Lady*, 2006, single-channel video, 21 mins., 12 secs. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

**Liang Yue:** Yes, you could say that.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** There is one particularly special work you are creating for the exhibition at Chengdu MOCA (September 16 to October 15, 2017): an installation containing four photographs and one video with the sound of the wind.

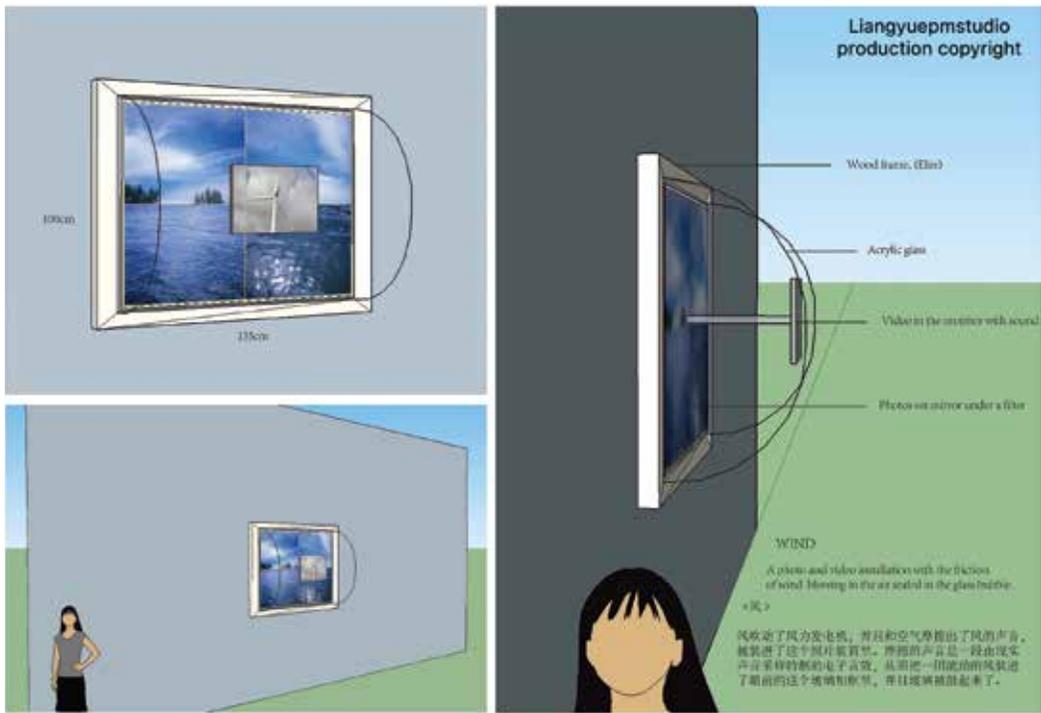
**Liang Yue:** The photographs of the sky and the water surface come from a new series that had been shown previously, and the video is a wind-driven generator rotating and making a loud noise, which is the air friction.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** You once mentioned that usually your photographs are darkroom prints where you are choosing the type of paper according to the character of the image. The way you shoot your videos and the materials that you use seem to be dependent on many factors. You appear to be quite knowledgeable about technical matters.

**Liang Yue:** Technical details are important to me. I enjoy experimenting and playing with them. I have many different cameras and I am familiar with the technical details of each piece of equipment. I am the one who repairs things at home. [Laughs.]

**Alexandra Grimmer:** You appear to be knowledgeable not only about technical matters, but also about image processing and video editing. But your webpage sometimes opens slowly from Europe.

**Liang Yue:** This is because of the Great Firewall in China; my website has to be moved to the other side of the wall. Because I use wix.com (a cloud-based web development platform based in Israel) to create my webpage,



Liang Yue, study for *Wind*, 2017, photographs and single-channel video, 100 x 135 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

it's very easy for me. But now I have to use VPN (A virtual private network, which is required for access to webpages that are blocked in China) in order to access and edit the website.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** In exhibitions such as *The Quiet Rooms* (2013, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai) or *Easy Going* (2014, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen), the physical installation of your work plays an important role. Your last solo show, *Intermittent* (2016, ShanghART, Beijing), is especially memorable. You managed to load the exhibition space with no less than thirteen videos, both as projections and on screens, yet you still made it possible to focus on one at a time when walking through the space. Most of all, by bringing the different videos together, you set them in a particular context and succeeded in providing an interpretation of your own work. What role does the presentation of your work play for you?

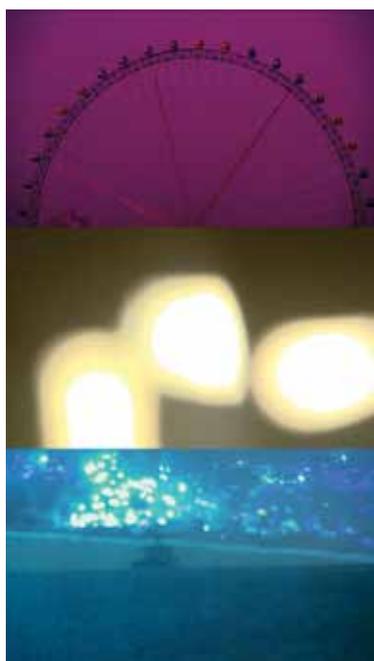
Liang Yue, *The Quiet Rooms*, 2013, 3-channel video, installation view, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.





**Liang Yue:** Although my work is just on screens, I think that by combining the videos or photographs and their projection in particular environments, I can create different interactions among the works in the space; together, the individual pieces make an installation. I think if you bring a single work into a space, it is already an installation. Since *The Quiet Rooms* I have started to design the space. So, for displaying my works, I will design their placement and how they will work with the space and the light. Again, this already creates a work that is an installation. That's why I think I need to not try to make what might be considered a real installation piece. In the future, I want to interact more with the exhibition space by using new technology to create holographic laser projections with a four-dimensional projector so that you can see a real person projected into the space.

Liang Yue, *Intermittent*, 2016, installation view, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Beijing.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** Your most recent work, *Fuzz Fuzz* (2017), has been realized for your exhibition at Project Room 901, Shanghai (May 6 to July 5, 2017). It is a work that you divided into three parts and that is projected on different transparent veils, which form a specific space with moving shapes, right?

**Liang Yue:** I thought about how to present the video according to the space. When somebody walks by, it may move a little, but very naturally. This means that I made the space fit the artwork, and I reflected on how people might come in and react to the work. Making

Liang Yue, *Fuzz Fuzz*, 2017, single-channel video, 15 mins. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.



Liang Yue, *The Quiet Rooms*, 2013, 3-channel video, installation view, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

my work sometimes feels similar to a movie director making a film. I'm first imagining how people will enter and leave the space. While the movie director has to decide where the actors are situated in every sequence of the movie, it is like a rehearsal of how an audience might enter and pass by the artworks for me.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** *Fuzz Fuzz* is like a choreography of form and movement for me, or like a symphony, with an introduction, some middle parts of intense development of the themes, and a clarifying finish.

Liang Yue, *Fuzz Fuzz*, 2017, installation view, Project Room 901, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.



**Liang Yue:** Yes, this might be. With *Fuzz Fuzz*, I prepared the material at the same time as I was creating the sound. There is a soundtrack for the video, and image and sound closely match. So the basic soundtrack was already

there at the beginning; it was released with the video, and I worked out the details and modified some of the sound later. There are three screens, and when you watch them, many things are happening at the same time. The audience should see that there are different spaces—for example, when you are listening to music, there are many things happening at the same time; there are parallel melodies and rhythms and different colours of sound.

At the beginning of my work, I focused on single things, and there are many silent works from that time. Now, I am bringing several things together, and the focus of my videos has shifted from my inner worlds toward the outer world. I always want to try something new and take my work in new directions. So, when I work, the outcome will be different, in the same way



Oppose page: Liang Yue, *Fuzz*, 2017, single-channel video, 15 mins. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

that a sculptor shapes the material and produces a sculpture. This new concept is not just a thought that pops out; it is more like a natural process, something that naturally emerges during the development of my work.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** There is often water in your works.

**Liang Yue:** The image of the surface of water will lead you into some form of meditation or hypnosis. The water's surface will always change along with the wind. When you watch it closely, you might fall asleep. Water is a substantial thing. It can fully embrace and surround you and you will feel safe.

Liang Yue, *The Quiet Rooms*, installation view, 2013, 3-channel video, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** In Chengdu, we are projecting one video from 2016: *Miss Underwater*, which depicts sea grass moving in a river accompanied by deep bass sounds.

**Liang Yue:** When I saw the plants moving in the water, I got a strange feeling. My eyes were drawn to the plant, and the other evening, I went to film this place. When seeing it with your normal eyes, you don't think that this is something special, but when you use the camera to film it, you will suddenly observe many interesting things. When you see the whole image, the plant is only a plant under a bridge, but when you zoom in, the plant becomes a special thing, and it has its own spirit. I felt like a child who is very excited. Children can imagine something in these forms and movements, but we see only reflections. This video is the first one in which I did the sound by myself. It was meant to be a sort of brain noise—sounds that come directly from the body.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Do you enjoy swimming and putting your head under water?

**Liang Yue:** Diving gives me the feeling of flying, as I mentioned earlier; I enjoy it very much. Other people want to dive to see the underwater world, but I enjoy the dream like feeling of flying much more—that there

is nothing but blue around me. I can just see some vague images or figures, and when I bring my head out of the water, everything looks very different.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** In your recent works, you have created your own sound. It is improvised music? How did you realize it?

**Liang Yue:** With every work, I have a concrete idea of what the sound should be like. When I want a type of sound, I always know of many ways to find it, and I start experimenting with it. It comes partly from the human voice, and I produce some sounds on the computer and record some noises from outside; for example, the friction of things moving through the air, as in my work created for Chengdu MOCA. Then I bring all these different components together. There are so many ways to realize sound. It is mostly a question of what type of feeling should be evoked through the sound, since it affects the impact of a video.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Recently, there is a lot of video art being presented in exhibitions and at art fairs. There seems to be a broader interest than some years ago. Do you feel this with respect to your own work?

**Liang Yue:** In the beginning, people may not have known my videos well, but I stick with what I believe. It is important to improve my work, and in this process, I think that my videos should receive more attention from other people who might be attracted to the final works. When people first see my work, they perceive it to be quite silent, but when they become familiar with it, and look deeper, they find much more than silence beneath the waves—they find something meaningful within meaningless situations. As an experience, they discover more and go deeper into it, like two strangers who have just met; they get along through their conversations, and they watch each other, and slowly, with time, they will understand each other better. I do not expect that people will immediately understand my work. By doing things that are important to me, people will slowly learn that there is something interesting going on, and as time goes by, they might become interested, and understand and pay attention. I am patient.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Your works can be experienced only by seeing them; neither a catalogue nor a description can replace the time required to watch your videos.

**Liang Yue:** For this reason, I want to do a solo exhibition every two years. People who saw my initial works for the first time will go to the next exhibition, and they will slowly start becoming interested. Then, they will go to see a third and fourth exhibition.

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#### Notes

1. Author's interview with Liang Yue, June 29, 2017, ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai.
2. Wang Jun, "Life is Really Meaningless—Feng Youlan (Chinese philosopher, 1895–1990)," in *Liang Yue PMStudio Production* (Shanghai: ShanghART Gallery, 2013), 10.