

## **Reduction is a Concept: A Review of Hu Qingyan's Sculpture**

by Wang Chunchen

When Hu Qingyan was studying sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he enjoyed reading books on the theories of contemporary art; he was always fascinated by discussions on the boundaries and concepts of art. He particularly liked reading Danto's books, finding them very enlightening. Nothing else struck him as having such strength of critical thought, and it gave him an enjoyable feeling of freedom while he was studying and researching sculpture.

Hu Qingyan grew up in a China that was just then undergoing enormous changes. Without being able to draw from this era of change, how could we ever talk about contemporary Chinese art or delve into the issue of China? Take sculpture for example: China has been focused on realist sculpture since the twentieth century, and this satisfied many of society's needs. But as China developed, artists needed something other than just realist sculpture and its ideas; their artworks needed to conform to a new awareness of objects.

Chinese sculpture is tied up with the Chinese context, the changes in contemporary art, and also new globalized concepts, and the new awareness. Its contemporary features are mostly found in transgressing the legacy of struggle in artistic thinking, and using physical materials to reduce and reveal the true nature of things. After almost a decade of growth, these features are becoming increasingly apparent. Hu Qingyan is one of the most well-known figures in this area; his sculptural language and ideas perfectly embody the aesthetic features of new Chinese sculpture.

Hu Qingyan's unique perspective on sculpture gradually emerged from all his years of studying, up until he graduated and then also as he made art: it was a conscious progression. When Hu Qingyan was a graduate student, he loved to read, paying close attention to different views and opinions. He knew clearly that he had to choose his own path. He emerged from the complex legacy of recognizing sculpture, understanding that the essence of art is a bare bones idea. This concept of reduction struck him as what was most desirable. Because the previous generation had taken on so much and struggled so much, their approach to art was sometimes awkward. Hu Qingyan is the complete opposite. He doesn't want to be overly constrained by social and political influences. His quest is to validate art and sculpture with real materials.

It's really not easy to pursue artistic independence. The concepts, the language, and the medium are all interconnected. Hu Qingyan first extricated himself from the old ideas, and shook off his hostility to modernism. Key to this was gaining peace of mind, getting back to basics through a growing self-confidence, a philosophical attitude, and a deep understanding of artistic truth. Getting a grasp of the essence of art and ways of expression were no longer complicated. When presented with a complex situation, he was able to consider it openly, think clearly, and work easily. An artistic possibility needed to be established for this new awareness. This was not just about establishing a new art, but rather it was about re-building human

values. That is why Hu Qingyan has been discovering all kinds of materials from life, and deducing their structure, revealing their nature, from their own bearing. They appear quite commonplace; like something that's just been picked up, readymade, and not like something that at first looks like art. In this important respect, Hu Qingyan has mirrored a school of artistic thought of this moment: Today's history has travelled a long road, now it's the time to reduce its many natures.

Formerly, art was dogmatic. It employed all kinds of ways to dictate and to control people's understanding and judgment. It consistently delineated what was art, what was not art, and there was a clear distinction between the two. On the surface, these look like academic boundaries, but in reality, they are full of conflicting concepts and political allegory, even to the extent that they have led to real political struggle. Essentially, the definition of art and its boundaries are open, but in reality, because of systemic and institutional habits or rules, art has not been limited to the visual representation of an object. That being the case, where should we place Hu Qingyan's work? As mentioned earlier, it is an expression of the liberation of individual freedom; in the context of China not only does it need to get rid of blind narrative, it also needs to go beyond what's in vogue. They are works of profound investigation. This is Hu Qingyan's fundamental approach, and also why he has chosen the reductive path. For example, each one of the steel tubes spotted with rust in *The People*, was originally a piece of waste from modern society, and now it exists as an object that has been sculpted by an artist. After Hu Qingyan had welded and sealed each piece, they presented a shocking picture, they had come alive: they were so lifelike, beating rhythmically! These are the living core elements of objects that contemporary artists are discovering, and everything that needs to be reduced in our awareness of life. Otherwise, in our modern material world, we will not be able to go beyond the material itself, and then like deadwood, we will not be able to witness the extraordinary nature and transcendence of our flesh and blood bodies. Therefore, awareness in contemporary art (and that includes sculpture) is the reduction of the meaning of the life of a material, and the significance of its own separate existence.

As it entered the contemporary era, sculpture underwent dramatic changes. On the one hand, it has clung to the original techniques of sculpting, of demonstrating the beauty of sculpture; on the other hand, just like artistic concepts, it has undergone a transformation. It is no longer a type, a defined object. If we say that a painting is defined to some extent by the use of a canvas, brushes, colors, lines, paper, and so on, then there are no such boundaries with sculpture. Having no boundaries does not mean there are no rules, and it does not mean there is no reflection or focus. Hu Qingyan's *Firewood* and *The Ten Sculptures* are good examples. His works dealing with wood have always just been made of wood. If it was a treatment of wood using a ready-made item, then that material was wood. But Hu Qingyan makes a subtle distinction with his understanding of this concept; he breaks through the conventional understanding of a ready-made item, and he uses the form of a wood sculpture as a way of reducing back to the true nature of the wood itself. They look like ready-made items made of wood, but each one of them, stroke by stroke, has been carved by him. Here, he is questioning what we mean by ready-made, and paring down to the direct nature of awareness. Viewers

mistakenly believe that they are looking at a piece of modernist art, but after all is revealed, their concept of ready-made has been unfurled.

Also, Hu Qingyan further reflects on the action of making art itself. He's not content with redefining the true nature of sculpture (hand carving). He's also not opposed to the conceptual meaning of a ready-made object; what he's aiming for is the self-composition of a material rather than arbitrary materiality. What he wants to reduce is the material nature of art in the material itself, and the concept of materiality that does not control or treat so-called artistic quality in his art. He relinquishes control of how his works take shape. The object itself is the model, it is the form, or we can say the object itself is the artwork. Hu Qingyan's reduction is an attempt to bridge the gap between sculpture and a ready-made object: to eliminate the dogmatic idea behind the ready-made object, allowing him to take the object he has chosen, in its original form, and present the simplest understanding of it. The conceptual nature of reduction that Hu Qingyan is emphasizing is the property of the material itself: it discards all those preconceptions and expectations we have about the form of art. For example, in Hu Qingyan's *The Empty Room* series, square steel tubes writhe randomly, they appear like freely growing vines, advancing with abandon. The structure, the shape, and the size are determined by random decisions by the welder, and do not come from the artist's instructions. There are no artistic rules, they only exist, in twists and turns, extending on forever, just as Hu Qingyan explained, it "gives me the feeling that I'm always running forwards chasing time along its orbit. Whenever you feel like it's been a long time since you set out, it's only when you look back that you realize actually all this time you have been following your own orbit within a particular space. Within this orbit, the starting point runs to the end point, but the end point then becomes a new starting point. There's no beginning and no end. It seems to have turned into a constantly extending eternal maze." The result is they have come back to life, with their random structure actually shaping an infinite space, and this space is life. The meaning of contemporary art is once again affirmed in the negation of various limitation, obstacles and ignorance. Today we are obscuring too many objects, hiding under too many things. If there is a new emergence, then we must go back to the start, to allow our awareness to directly start from a point of purity. We can see this in how Hu Qingyan makes his art; whether it's a child playing with clay (*Bang*) or a canvas with a gingham pattern drawn on both sides (*Black and Yellow Cloth*), or the discarded sprues of bronze sculptures (*Fruitless Trees*), all of them are trying to get to the true nature of our awareness. They look like they have no real significance, but in actual fact, they have a very immediate and specific focus, and in the context of China, and within the dimensions of globalization, they prove that China today is a sculpture.

Translated from the Chinese by Dinah Gardner