

Wu Shanzhuan *Today Became a Holiday*

There is a fine line between nonsense and the nonsensical, humor and megalomania. Wu Shanzhuan's works navigate this distinction, occasionally tipping into obscurity and solipsism. He first came to prominence with his installation *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* (1986), which literalized

of logistics as working method," as the paintings arrived in seven shipments to Beijing from Hamburg, Reykjavik, and Shanghai, with the "epic narrative duration" of the show serving as a "holiday, a time of painting" that the artist and curator call "World Flatday." Each of the works are a "gift"

marking the artist's labor, with painting serving "as a remedy to resist the burnout syndrome of the contemporary."

The logic of the display was inscrutable; it was a retrospective of no specific meaning, only of accumulation. There were works from Wu and Thorsdottir's more than three decades of collaboration, including the trilingual (English,

From its inception, Wu's practice has been anti-art. His approach could be seen as Dadaistic, in the sense of believing that the only truth is nonsense, and Daoist, in believing in spontaneous action but not intention. Art historian Gao Minglu has noted that for Wu, "analogy is employed as method," tracing his practice to Chan Buddhism, "which encourages an ironic sensibility and a refusal to privilege any one doctrine over another in the search for truth." It makes sense in this light to see Wu's exhibition as a demonstration of the contemporary phenomenon of exhibition logistics (shipping, displaying, viewing) rather than a collection of distinct meanings articulated in individual paintings over the course of Wu's career.

The idea of the title—"Today Became a Holiday"—is itself a temporal, semantic riddle: How and why does this transition occur? What then is a "holiday" compared to just a "day"? And what is the meaning of "World Flatday"? Does the logistics of shipping and displaying more than 200 paintings demonstrate the world's "flatness" in geopolitical terms, or is it the chaotic jumble of symbols—letters and characters, outlines of objects and people—that makes the world "flat" in a postmodernist, or ideological sense? Wu's approach is to demonstrate the world through creative, often spontaneous forms of imitation, rather than producing a synthesized, consumable understanding packaged in an artwork. Wu's art, and the exhibition, can refuse to work for the viewers, and in that sense, each piece declares each day to be a holiday.

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WU SHANZHUAN, *Four Layers: Sky/Blast/Butterfrog/Balloon*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300.5 cm. Courtesy Long March Space, Beijing.

the ideological and semantic chaos of postwar China. He asked his friends to paint over found posters with giant red, black, and white slogans—some taken from Cultural Revolution propaganda, others from classical poetry and commercial advertising. Wu then wrote out four characters on the floor: *Wu ren shuo dao* ("no one can interpret it").

More than three decades later, Wu deployed a similar strategy in his seven-month-long exhibition, "Today Became a Holiday," at Long March Space. The approach was maximalist, with more than 200 paintings filling the gallery walls on exhibition designer Chen Chao's custom-made armature, and a plinth in the middle of the space containing around a dozen overlapping tapestries. Curated by Wu's artistic and life partner Inga Svala Thorsdottir, the show was based on "the concept

Chinese, and Icelandic) red banner that reads *How To Do Nothing* (1990–91) from the *Red Humour International* series. From their *Things Rights* project is the painting *Showing China from Its Best Side(s)* – 95 (2005), bearing the titular phrase in red characters across a saccharine landscape of waterfalls. There were even moments of visual continuity, as in the triptych of black-clad protesters throwing rainbows positioned next to *A Small Perspective Is Encounting [sic] a Large Perspective* (2017), a horizontal piece depicting around a dozen figures milling about. In another section, the painting *Bosch's Window Line, Umbrella, Airplan [sic], Butterfly, Frog* (2013) contains the words "frog," "umbrella," and "butterfly" in a grid, while the adjacent canvases, such as *Four Layers: Sky/Blast/Butterfrog/Balloon* (2014), featured outlines of these creatures and objects.