Art history, as a scholarly practice, is confined by a certain code of ethics in terms of interpreting actual influence and patterns of change within the art of an era; criticism, although it is often referred to as a first draft for art historical writing, is subject to no such fidelity to narrative, and occasionally even attempts to influence the realities of the art with which it interacts. The art historian can move only in one direction, seeking connections but attempting, always, to leave aside the question of the future in relation to any given moment in order to locate the intrinsic properties of the work at hand. One of the greatest pleasures of the art critic, therefore, is to cast off this temporal arrow and move in the opposite direction, to seize upon the objects of the present and follow the shadows of their forms into the past, further and further back until, at last, the seed of all that now exists is located in the earliest projects and feeblest lines of an artist or writer. A perfect opportunity for this exercise, inefficient and undemanding as it is, presents itself in the form of “Trilogy,” the latest solo exhibition by the Beijing artist Liu Wei, precisely the kind of artist whose every move is predicated on some version of his past and who draws lines of comparison and analogy across years and series. This is an archaeology of invisible traces, one that never fails to position the past work of the artist within the framework of his present but may necessarily be discarded immediately upon the production of a newer body of work—one that may not be tied to the mold presented here.

艺术史，作为一种学术研究，就阐述某一时代艺术之变化的模式与实际影响而言，受限于特定的道德准则；评论，即使经常被当作艺术史写作的第一稿，却并不忠于叙述，还偶尔试图影响与之互动的艺术事实本身。艺术史学家只能选一个时间轴寻找联系，但往往试图将与未来相关的任何给定时间的问题搁置一旁，以定位手头作品的本征。由此，艺术评论人最大的乐趣之一，即抽掉这一时间箭头往反方向走，把握当前对象，跟着形式的影子回到过去，回到很久以前直至最后，当下一切的萌发之源在艺术家或作者最早的项目、最微弱的线索中被定位。这一无聊松散的练习获得了一次绝佳的呈现机会；“三部曲”，也即北京艺术家刘韡的最新个展。有一类艺术家，其每一创作都可从过往的某一创作中得以预测，其经年的多个系列不断画出对比与类比的参考系。刘韡恰是这类艺术家。这是一门针对不可见痕迹的考古学，在艺术家目前的创作框架中定位其以往作品当然可确保万无一失，但当更新的作品出现时，这类评价可能必须立即摒弃——这和我们在这儿讨论的模式可没什么关系。
Liu Wei, "Trilogy", exhibition view at Minsheng Art Museum, 2011
刘韡，《三部曲》，民生现代美术馆，展览现场，2011年

Take, simply as the most easily accessible example, the paintings that seem to constitute the walls of this exhibition in a highly sculptural way, literally framing the main event—a role-played by the aggressive installation components that spread from room to room—by providing it with a strict horizontal limit. These paintings seem primarily indebted to a video aesthetics, as if the face of the canvas were a winking reproduction of a closed-circuit feedback loop caught in the midst of its cycle. As much as they absorb this lens-based process of vision in stride, however, they also deaden it, adding a decidedly monumental mass to the picture plane in such a way that the cyberpunk levity of Liu Wei’s best-known paintings, the “Purple Air” series (2006-2010) is almost literally crushed. Whereas Chris Moore sees in these new pieces a determined horizontality that responds to the Western landscape tradition, for me they mark a material transformation of the verticality of “Purple Air”; the transition is not one of viewing paradigm so much as it is one of density, crushing the buildings and lights that soared upward in the apocalyptic cityscapes of the past several years and rolling them back into immensely heavy sheets of thick gray material—perhaps an approach to the steel and molten glass that lies beneath neon signs and curtain walls. Paintings like “Meditation” (2011) contain “Purple Air,” neither denying the verticality of the latter nor offering an essentialist presentation of dimension or meaning in their own right. Within the project of "Trilogy" as a whole, this picture is a concrete wall containing and funneling flows of light and vision.

举个最简单的例子，此次参展的画作以高度雕塑化的形式占据展厅四壁，将展览主体——延展至多个房间的野心勃勃的大型装置——以严格的横向界限框起来。这些画作似乎借鉴于影像的审美观，画面就好比一个闭路反馈回路循环至半路时拍立得的复制品。虽然它们尽可能从容自若地遵循这种基于镜头观点的视觉处理，但是同时也延滞了它，将庞然之重果断加入画面；相形之下，刘韡最知名的画作《紫气》系列（2006-2010）中那种网际朋克（cyberpunk）的逍遥感几乎彻底地被压抑了。

墨虎恺在对这一展览的评论中指出，这些新作所呈现的坚决横视视觉是对西方风景画传统的回应。然而在我看来，它们是对《紫气》系列纵向视觉的材质性转变，这一转变并非是视觉范式的转变而是密度的转变，而将犹如世界末日的城市天际线中摇摆直上的建筑与光线绞碎，将之碾回巨大沉重的厚灰材料——也许是重回霓虹与幕墙之下的钢筋与熔融玻璃的把握尝试。画作如《冥想》（2011）将《紫气》包含其中，并不否定后者的垂直性，也未提出自主的关于维度或意义的本质呈现。将这幅画置于整场“三部曲”看来，它就好比是一堵包含并漏入光线与视觉流的水泥墙。
It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of that particular Caochangdi space over the later development of Liu Wei’s installation practice, particularly in terms of the body of work that surrounded “The Outcast” (2007), a massive glass building constructed of reclaimed wooden windows and doors, many of them painted the pale green that signifies institutional architectures from the Chinese context like schools and hospitals, and containing broken furniture and dead trees besieged by a dust storm whipped up by industrial-strength electric fans. Functioning as an extension of the artist’s studio in some way, this particular exhibition managed to absorb the outside world and recreate it in microcosm within the territory of art, albeit within an immediate environment that could only generously be described as a white cube; the brute nastiness of the dusty and decaying stretch between gallery and studio very much became the content of the work, and this thematic has since tempered the exuberance of color and form in Liu Wei’s more graphic-oriented work. Moreover, a number of formal concerns that first appeared in that project are echoed again within the more finished environments of “Trilogy.” There is, of course, the question of scale: “The Outcast” is probably the largest piece the artist has completed in physical terms, and he certainly revels in the power dynamics that emerge when viewers of an exhibition can only look upwards and, to some degree, cower in terror to take in the full vision of his work. This is present particularly in “Golden Section” (2011), a portion of which consists of shipping crates that form pillars and walls in the lobby of this latest exhibition—signaling directly and immediately that scale works only in one direction. In a more nuanced way, “The Outcast” also pioneered the use of a certain set of observer relations, offering a spectacular site of destruction within a (leaking) glass pavilion. This measure of distance—which wavers between critical and alienating—has never disappeared for Liu Wei, especially in the institutional setting. No matter how we are instructed to “Open the door,” as the wall text in the Minsheng galleries notably commands, the body is never allowed to come into contact with the forces that threaten it.
One of the first objects the viewer encounters in the Minsheng space is a series of towers and other architectural structures made of books, no doubt first carved and then perhaps pulped together for consistency. Comparisons with "Love It, Bite It" (2007) and other architectural works in oxhide are inevitable, but here it is the differences in material practice that are instructive: rather than working in the organic and highly tactile mode of dog chew toys, which themselves present an allegorical possibility that verges into dangerously spectacular territory, the transition to using black-and-white text on paper seems to continue the video aesthetics visible in the paintings present in this exhibition. Like the television sets in "Power," the media capacity of these books as information carriers is destroyed along with any possible reference to their content and transmission capabilities, but still there is an insistence on this media aesthetics. These latest towers are also significantly more rectilinear, replacing in some way the oppressive vertical lines of "Purple Air" even as they are abandoned on the picture plane; the potential of organic growth, always present in pieces like "Love It, Bite It," has been abandoned in favor of the critical right angle. The piece may draw its interest in waves of deconstruction and reconstruction from the oxhide works, but the aesthetic is borrowed more precisely from the "Porcelain" series (2006-2007): formal repetition, strict symmetry, and the superficial reference to technological forms despite the lowliest of materials.

Participants entering the Minsheng Museum saw the first piece—a city high-rise architectural model, where books are cut open, pulped into a paste, and then put together for consistency. Comparisons with "Love It, Bite It" (2007) and other architectural works in oxhide are inevitable, but the difference in material practice is instructive: rather than working in the organic and highly tactile mode of dog chew toys, which themselves present an allegorical possibility that verges into dangerously spectacular territory, the transition to using black-and-white text on paper seems to continue the video aesthetics visible in the paintings present in this exhibition. Like the television sets in "Power," the media capacity of these books as information carriers is destroyed along with any possible reference to their content and transmission capabilities, but still there is an insistence on this media aesthetics. These latest towers are also significantly more rectilinear, replacing in some way the oppressive vertical lines of "Purple Air" even as they are abandoned on the picture plane; the potential of organic growth, always present in pieces like "Love It, Bite It," has been abandoned in favor of the critical right angle. The piece may draw its interest in waves of deconstruction and reconstruction from the oxhide works, but the aesthetic is borrowed more precisely from the "Porcelain" series (2006-2007): formal repetition, strict symmetry, and the superficial reference to technological forms despite the lowliest of materials.

Liu Wei, "Power", television monitors, dimensions variable, 2010-2011
A central aspect of “Trilogy” and one of the major talking points at the 2010 Shanghai Biennale (and even prior to that, in its first incarnation at Long March Space), “Merely a Mistake” (2010-2011) might also be one of the most exciting works on view here from a critical perspective simply because it offers so much pseudo-archaeological material ripe for exploitation. It consists, in its final appearance, of layer upon layer of salvaged wooden frames and cuttings, many again appearing in the institutional green of “The Outcast” but also now with blue, yellow, and black; these structures come together with visible bolts and other pieces of hardware to form architectural towers, halls, and more abstract forms, recalling everything from a cathedral to a playground. In terms of material and working process the debt to the works described above is obvious, but there is a slightly more theoretically inflected bent that may prove productive for this particular set of pieces. For the series known as “As Long as I See It” (2006) but also including a range of other smaller pieces individually titled “Cigarettes and Ashtray” (2006), “Brick” (2006), and so on, Liu Wei shot Polaroid instant photographs of everything from particular objects to full landscapes. Then he cut through the actual objects according to how they were positioned within the frame of the photograph: where trees were cut off at the top of the image, he hacked them down to size; where a brick strayed across a composition, he sliced it accordingly; where a pool table and sofa spanned the width of the picture, he created a new form of physical perspective. This is, of course, a bold claim of the power of vision and reception over the external world, but I am primarily interested in how this way of working has influenced the artist through later projects. In “Red Disturbs Green” (2009), which consists of a number of horizontal neon lights transecting a green bush on a concrete frame, all cut into an absurdly rectilinear form, we find a highly poetic visual quotation of “As Long as I See It No. 1” (2006), the piece that cut a series of trees on a concrete block. “Golden Section” (2011), a set of angular black blocks that come together appropriately from only one certain perspective in the room, similarly develops this notion of ideal perspective, perhaps also drawing on the observation dynamics of “The Outcast.” And while there is certainly a bit of Gordon Matta-Clark to “Merely a Mistake,” Liu Wei’s cuttings function in a much more visual way—transposing the failed realities of perception onto space rather than allowing ideal forms to come into being.

“三部曲”核心《仅仅是个错误》（2010-2011）是2010年上海双年展的热作之一（其另一版本也在长空间展出过），从评论角度出发它可能也是此次展览中最激动人心的作品——仅仅因为它提供了许多可供开采的伪考古材料。在其最终版本中，它包含了一层又一层回收再利用的木框木条，其中很多依旧被染成《徘徊者》的那种象征性绿色，但也有蓝色、黄色和黑色：这些结构被诸多螺栓等诸多可见的建筑零件固定在一起，多种的构造形状让人浮想联翩，从教堂到操场。从材料和工作方式而言，这个作品受上述作品的影响是显而易见的，但也有其更理论性的倾向，可以证明这套特别作品的多产。如刘军先前的系列《看见的就是我的》（2006）、甚或一些相对小型的独立作品，如《香烟和烟灰缸》（2006）、《砖块》（2006）等等，刘军用相片夹拍了许多即时成像的照片，从特定物件到地方景色；然后根据相片中物件的位置关系实际制造了对应的物件：如被砍了树冠的树干，只因照片中仅拍了树干；有块砖头的半截跌入到画面中，于是他也将之切下一半；一张桌球台与一张沙发，根据相应照片的宽度也不幸免刀切的命运，他创造了一种物质视角的新形式。这显然是视觉与感知对外在世界的大胆宣言，但我最大的兴趣点还是在这种方式如何影响艺术家之后的创作。在作品《被红颜色干扰的绿》（2009）中，一系列水平后排的霓虹灯分割了一丛绿色灌木与混凝土块，且全被切成荒诞的直条型。在作品《看见的就是我的之一》（2006）中，我们还能发现某种极富诗意的视觉引用，这件作品将几根插在混凝土块上的树移植平。《黄金分割》（2011）从室内的特定视角出发，一系列棱角分明的黑盒子被组合到一起，对这一完美透视方法进行深化，可能还得益于《徘徊者》的观察。《仅仅是个错误》无疑带著点Gordon Matta-Clark的影子，然而刘军的切割更多是在视觉上发挥功效——在空间中颠覆知觉的败落现实，而非激活完美的形式。

Liu Wei, “Merely a Mistake II”, door frames, wooden beams, acrylic board, stainless steel, dimensions variable, 2009-2011
刘军,《仅仅是个错误II》，门框、木框、亚克力板、不锈钢，可变尺寸，2009-2011年
This latter aspect has become something of a marker for Liu Wei, allowing him to traffic in questions of technology and transformation without ever having to leave the discourse of contemporary art proper. We find this mode of thinking again in "Antimatter" (2006), the series for which the artist tackled certain domestic appliances and consumer electronics by tearing out their inards and creating cyberpunk objects that might reasonably have emerged from the world of the "Purple Air" paintings — again, however, owing more to the secondhand electronics markets of semi-rural Beijing than to any particular imagination of the future. In terms of technique, however, what Liu Wei gathered from this stage of his practice was assemblage — an aspect of his work that may have gone missing with "Trilogy." True, "Merely a Mistake" nods to the use of salvaged furniture and its sculptural renewal, but the messy logic of assemblage, which rightfully births a new and unitary if divisible object through the accumulation of constituent components, fails to materialize. This is both the strongest and most dangerous moment of this exhibition, particularly in its institutional environment: this body of work is aesthetically consolidated, but, without an air of experimentation, it is unclear what the artist might actually do next. The experiment provides an eternal open door, a way out of failed projects and into new territories. Here we find no obvious failures — but nor do we see an indication of evolution beyond the present situation.

Critical archaeology attempts to locate our dislocated present in the material past, reading vertically through the aesthetics of a mass of history that can only be produced horizontally. I would like to propose an archaeology of the sort I have deployed in my reading of Liu Wei's "Trilogy" as a potential working method for the artist; it is, after all, an approach to temporality that I first gathered from his ideas of experimentation, and it seems to offer a coherent stylistic narrative able to subsume both the laboratory process that characterizes his studio and the finished objects and arrangements that so carefully lay out his arguments for the audience. I recall an interview with the artist at his studio in early 2009, when he explained for me his working methods in a way that masterfully summarized and yet exposed the very foundations of his approach to artistic knowledge: everything, from the landscapes of "Purple Air" to the structures of "The Outcast," is drawn from the brief drive from his home to his studio. Perhaps a 20-minute ride, this short line presents a cross-section of contemporary Beijing, from the relatively upscale area of Lido past the art district at 798 and into the Huantie, a testing track for railway locomotives that has been colonized by studio communities. Liu Wei draws a simple horizontal line across the map, and out of this emerge an entire plane of vertical developments, growing outward and into the territory of reception of his audience. By reading history at an angle perpendicular to its production we are able to draw narratives, like this one, that offer something of value to the present — albeit something transient, a form of knowledge that will necessarily disappear as soon as the horizontality of chronology is allowed to accumulate a further stage of cultural production.
Liu Wei, “Merely a Mistake II”, door frames, wooden beams, acrylic board, stainless steel, dimensions variable, 2009-2011

Liu Wei, “Golden Section”, wooden furniture, iron, 1226 x 510 x 290 cm, 2011