

ON LIU WEI

刘韡评论

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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走向寻找联系，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，即摘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途时拍立得的复制品。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向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扶摇直上的建筑与光线绞碎，将之碾回巨大沉重的厚灰材料——也许是对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，也未提出自主的关乎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。

Then there is "Power" (2010-2011), a collection of old and gray CRT television sets in plastic housings of various colors arranged in stacks at the center of the final room of "Trilogy." Each television turns on and off in turn—seemingly at random although the electronic circuitry at work is never made available to the viewer—so as to produce sets of horizontal bright lines across the bleak surface of the monitor, letting off also a satisfying if slightly nerve-wracking crack of the sort that might accompany a surge of static electricity. This makes it a highly tangible piece of spatial engineering, and the entire room is set up so as to feel something like a revelation at the end of the exhibition: if the reader was, at any point, not convinced that the paintings are somehow manual screens opening into a video realm of signal and noise, this fact is now painfully obvious, almost to the point of belligerence. But there is a certain slippage that occurs between video painting, which might be read as a reference to the experimental histories of screen-based new media practice, and this use of a physical video apparatus used in a mode that is explicitly alien to the histories of media art (that is to say, as a component of junk sculpture without any reference to medium whatsoever), and this is a tension that should probably be preserved. Returning to the project of archaeology, it must be noted that this installation first appeared in another form in a massive warehouse-style space in Caochangdi on the edges of Beijing, a site in which it seemed to owe more to the electronic flea markets throughout the surrounding urban villages—and a sympathetic anthropology thereof—than the art historical and technical references that emerge in this crisp iteration for Shanghai.

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.

在“三部曲”最后一个展厅——《开关》(2010-2011)的中央,有一堆套着彩色塑料外壳、旧得发灰的CRT电视机。每台电视以随机次序轮回开关,其背后的电控回路自然不得见——死气沉沉的显示屏上横着数条明亮的水准线,关机时伴随的一声脆响可能带来某种快感或神经衰弱,甚或是静电激增。这让其成为了一件可触知的空间工程作品,整个房间的布置也是为了观者在展览最后能有所启发:如果先前的画作并未说观者它们从某种程度上而言其实就是视觉信号与噪音的影像,那《开关》将这一事实彻头彻尾地摆在观者眼前,近乎挑衅。然而在录像与绘画之间,确有某种模棱两可:后者可能会被当作基于镜头的新媒体创作实验史的一类参考,而前者直接使用影像仪器的模式对媒体艺术而言无疑是陌生的(也就是说,作为一座破烂装置的构成组件,它不具有任何媒介参考),而这种含有矛盾的对立应被保留。回到考古线索上来说,不得不提的是这组装置的另一版已经在北京市郊草场地园区的大型厂房空间展出过了,这里可能更适合举办城乡结合部电子设备跳蚤市场——带着人类学的同情心看来——而非为了追溯上海展览的干脆迭代而利用的艺术史学或技术性参考。

我们很难去高估草场地的那场展出对刘韡之后装置创作的影响,尤其就《徘徊者》(2007)而言,这组由回收木制门窗组成的大型玻璃建筑大部分被漆成浅绿色,也是中国大多数学校或医院建筑所用的标志性绿色,由工业电扇制造的沙尘暴围攻着装置中支离破碎的家具与树木残骸。这一特别展览犹如艺术家工作室的延伸,吸收外在世界并在艺术范畴内将之重塑为其缩影,尽管它所在的现成环境只能被勉强算作美术馆空间;展馆与工作室路上之间的多灰腐朽、蛮力污秽的桥接或多或少成了展览内容本身,这一主题已在刘韡的平面图像作品的颜色与形式中淬炼繁荣。此外,该系列所初现的诸多形式考量再次出现于“三部曲”更趋完成式的现场。当然规模是个问题:《徘徊者》可能是在刘韡的个人创作史上占据物理空间最大的作品,而艺术家本人肯定陶醉于观者无法一览全貌、甚而心怀敬畏地欲一解庐山的成就感。这一点在《黄金分割》(2011)中表现明显,主展厅被一组航运集装箱配件所占据,后者搭成各式高柱大墙——直接即时地指出了大规模作品的单一性。再深挖下去,《徘徊者》在一座大型(破顶)玻璃宫殿中为观者创造了一个壮观的拆除现场,并由此给予了一个特定的观察视角,在利用这一观察关系上,它无疑是先驱。这种在评论与疏远间游移不定的距离尺度从未在刘韡的创作中消失,就现场装置而言表现得尤其明显。即使民生展馆内壁上标着“打开这扇门”的指示,然而观者依然未被给予任何机会可与威胁着他们的某种力量正面接触。

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.

参观者进入民生美术馆看到的第一件展品是一组城市高楼建筑模型，它们用书本切割、压制而成。将之与《爱它，咬它》(2007)及其他牛皮制成的建筑作品相比较是在所难免的，就材料利用上的不同而言，它对我们或有启发：弃有机形态、高度触觉化的狗咬玩具，它们所代表的可能寓意陷入了某种危险的壮观之境；取而代之的，是白纸黑字对参展图画中影像审美的延续。如电视机装置《开关》，书籍对信息的承载与传播的媒体角色被抹杀，其内容与传播力的任何可能参考也被抹杀，但对媒体审美的那份坚持依然在握。这些新近完成的书籍之塔鳞次栉比，取代《紫气》系列中压抑沉闷的垂直线条，即使后者在这场展览中被完全摒弃于画面之外；自然生长的潜能总会在诸如《爱它，咬它》之类的作品中找到，这次却让位于冷冰冰的直角。作品可能旨在阐发自牛皮作品以来的解构与重构，而说其审美视角来自《瓷器》(2006-2007)系列可能会更为贴：形式上的重复、严格的对称与浅显地引用技术形式（虽然其材料极为廉价）。



Liu Wei, "Power", television monitors, dimensions variable, 2010-2011
刘伟，《开/关》，电视显示器，可变尺寸，2010-2011年

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)曾是2010年上海双年展的热议之一(其另一版本也在长征空间展出过),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。在其最终版本里,它包含了一层又一层回收再利用的木框木条,其中很多依旧被漆成《徘徊者》的那种象征性绿色,但也有蓝色、黄色和黑色;这些结构被诸如螺栓等诸可见的建筑零件固定在一起,多样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,但也有稍微更理论性的倾向,可以证明这套特别作品的多产。如刘韡先前的系列《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)、《砖头》(2006)等等,刘韡用宝丽来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,于是他也将其切下一半;一张桌球台与一张沙发,根据相应照片的宽度也未幸免一刀切的命运,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特权的大胆宣言,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,一系列水平排布的霓虹灯分割了一丛绿色灌木与混凝土架,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,我们还能发觉某种极富诗意的视觉引用,这件作品将几棵插在混凝土块上的树齐头斩平。《黄金分割》(2011),从室内的特定唯一视角出发,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》无疑带着点Gordon Matta-Clark的影子,然而刘韡的切割更多是在视觉上发挥功效——在空间中颠倒知觉的败落现实,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
刘韡,《仅仅是个错误II》,门框·木梁·亚克力板·不锈钢·可变尺寸,2009-2011年

This last 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 innards 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.

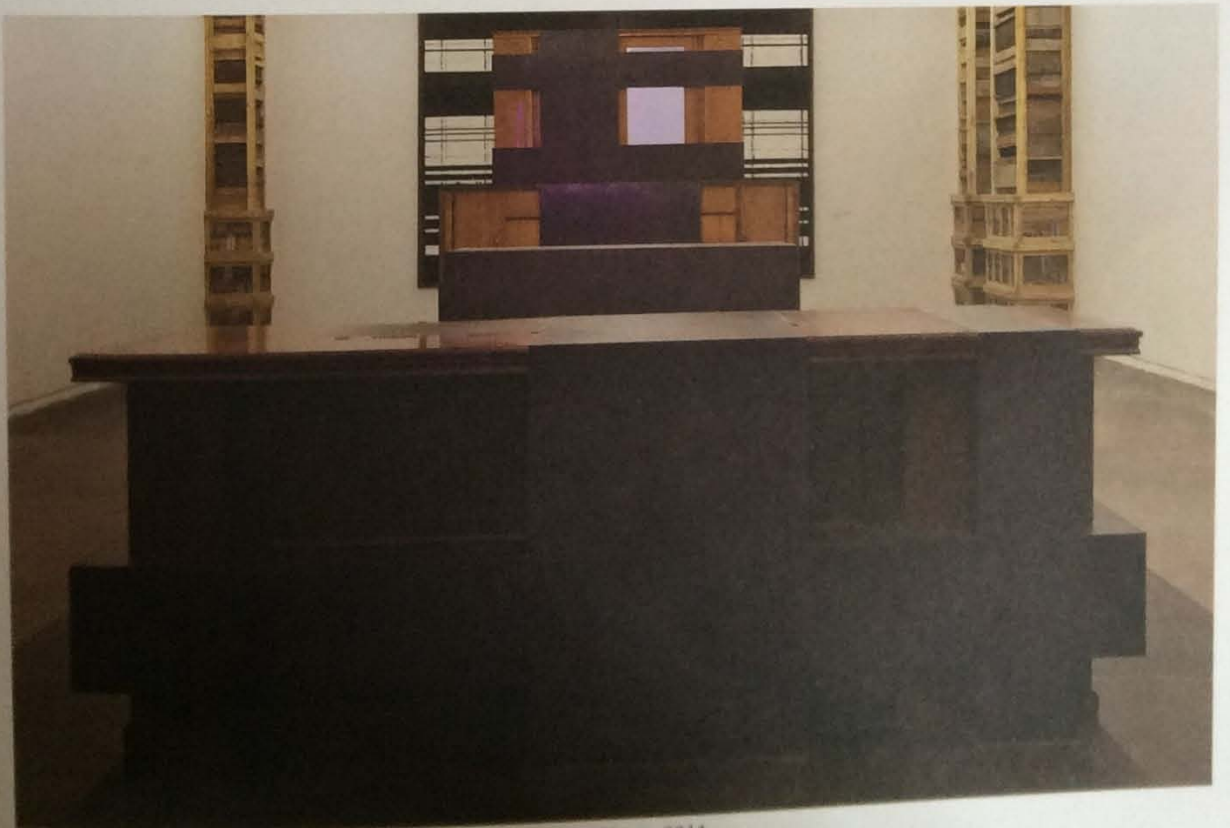
Critical archaeology attempts to locate our dislocated present in the material past, reading vertically through the aesthetics of a mass of history that can only be produced horizontally. I would like to propose an archaeology of the sort I have deployed in my reading of Liu Wei's "Trilogy" as a potential 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.

这种视角成为了刘韡的某种标志，让他在利用技术与变形的同时永远不会偏离当代艺术的话语。这一模式也可在《反物质》系列（2006）中找到，艺术家将一些电器的内部零件掏出来，整合成一个网际朋克般的玩意儿，其雏形可能就来自于《紫气》——然而正如前文所说，它依然更适合被摆在北京城乡结合部的二手电器跳蚤市场里，而非置于任何关于未来的特定联想中。不过就技术而言，刘韡这次的表现可谓集先前之大成——这种集成性在参观“三部曲”时可能会被忽略。没错，《仅仅是个错误》把舞台让给了回收家具与其雕塑转世，然而如果将这堆繁复组合化繁为简，其集成的混乱逻辑理所当然地会制造出一种新的单调，无法真正实现。这是全场最强有力也最危险的点，尤其是其处于这种（艺术）机构的场景：这件作品无疑是审美性的综合，但其实验气氛的缺失却让观者对艺术家下一步要做什么摸不着头脑。实验提供了一扇永远开放的门，是失败为成功之母的孵化器。在这儿我们并未发现什么失败——但也没在现场背后找到什么进化的苗头。

评论考古学（critical archaeology）试图在充满过去的物质、物品里定位已脱臼的现在。纵向阅读一大堆历史中产生的审美（而历史是只能被横向呈现的）。从对刘韡《三部曲》的解读中，我提炼出一种考古学，它也可以作为艺术家潜在的工作方法：它是我在初步收集其实实验想法时对时间性的探讨，看来它也提供了一种连贯文体的叙事。该叙事既可以包含一种能描述他工作室的实验过程，亦包含他精心设计、未为其主题讨论代言的成型作品与现场排置。回想起2009年初在刘韡工作室中与他采访，当时他向我解释了他成熟精炼的工作方法，但却对艺术知识探寻的基础只字不提：从《紫气》到《徘徊者》，一切的一切都生于其往返工作室与家的两点一线。这段路大概花费20分钟，可以是今日北京的一个截面，从高档社区到798再到环铁，后者为昔日的火车实验轨道，现已被多群工作室所取代。刘韡在地图上轻描淡写了一根水平线，从这根线一跃而起一座垂直的城，直冲观者而来。纵向来回顾历史及其产物，我们得以有话好说，正如此次展览，它为当下创造了某种价值——尽管转瞬即逝，尽管作为一种知识形式，在横向年表窜出更多文化产业新笋之时，它将必然消失。



Liu Wei, "Merely a Mistake II", door frames, wooden beams, acrylic board, stainless steel, dimensions variable, 2009-2011
刘辉, 《仅仅是个错误 II》, 门框、木梁、亚克力板、不锈钢, 可变尺寸, 2009-2011年



Liu Wei, "Golden Section", wooden furniture, iron, 1226 x 510 x 290 cm, 2011
刘辉, 《黄金分割》, 家具, 铁板, 1226 x 510 x 290 cm, 2011年