

Press Release

Inga Svala Thorsdottir + Wu Shanzhuan: from paper to paper Curated by Liu Tian

November 4 2023–April 7 2024
Long March Space, Beijing

Inga Svala Thorsdottir + Wu Shanzhuan's exhibition "from paper to paper" opens at Long March Space on 4th November 2023. The exhibition has been designed by curator and researcher Liu Tian, the artists' long-time collaborator.

Unlike their more project-based exhibitions previously showcased at Long March Space such as "kuo xuan" (2011), "CAUSE AND EXAMPLES PROJECTED FROM IT" (2017), and "Today Became a Holiday" (2019), the content of this exhibition consists of around 600 creative sketches on A4 paper selected from various stages in Thorsdottir and Wu's long artistic career spanning more than thirty years.

Each sketch can be considered a work of art in its own right and often seems at once a draft, a set of notes, a drawing, a document, and a daily record. Transcending the notion of "artwork" narrowly conceived, these A4 sheets embody a range of mutable stages in the creative process of a work: antecedent, birth, embryo, prototype, essence, and excess. It is precisely this distinctive quality that allows the unique use of writing, sketch, daubs of color, narrative and planning in each piece to reveal modes of thinking, feeling and tribute that are complex, esoteric, and even absurd.

Furthermore, in the context of the accumulated achievements of this artistic duo, the around 600 pieces of A4 paper in this exhibition are but the tip of a giant iceberg. In their almost forty years art career, they have continued to build a vast, complex and coherent system that integrates the philosophical, visual, imaginative and creative.

In this sense, these A4 sheets of paper are a series of succinct insights or cross-sections that combine to form an abbreviated snapshot of the expansive vista that is the artists' career. The pieces act as an "index" of sorts that allows us to get an overall impression of these important artists whose complexity and prolificacy has previously made acquiring comprehensive knowledge of their artwork so difficult. We can look out over the expanding topography of their artistic output, described by the artists in terms of a "subway" system, before stopping at a specific "station" to delve into an instance of the creative ingenuity and consistent compassion that characterizes their work.

As well as engaging with great questions that have concerned humanity since the axial age, these sketches interestingly also touch upon some of the most disputed and hot-button topics of the contemporary era: identity, gender, capital, globalization, labor, equality, revolution, media, infrastructure, ecology, anti-anthropocentrism, and so on. However, most of the works came about some time ago and, as part of a self-sustaining, ever-growing creative system, they have been contemplated and expressed through a series of inventive and interrelated concepts:

Thing's Right(s); An International Soup; Yellow Flying; Monosex; Vege-pleasure; Paradises; Tobuy Is Tocrete; Selling Oneself At Large; Red Humour International; Bird Before Peace; An Appreciation; Pulverization; Flame Thrower; SMS & Its Enemy; @=p³wc; The Second Hand Water; Borg; Nature Is a Taxi; Temperature War; Butterfrog...

These are accompanied by another set of free-spirited, speculative, and metaphysical concepts:

Deficit; Times Zero; Unusefulness; Examples; Tourist Information; Perspective-Projection; Perfect Bracket; kuo xuan; Little Fat Flesh...

This dialectic or link between the quotidian and transcendental, as well as the artists' continuous interaction with the outside world by commenting on or building upon their work, lies at the heart of their artistic practice. It is also what characterizes these A4 sheets of paper, both the ground from which inspiration spontaneously bursts forth and the workshop in which ideas land and take shape. Appearing in compressed form on these plain and

compact blank pages, it slots itself into everyday life while nonetheless encompassing (or “projecting”) a boundless creative space that is “at large” and which the artists occupy like “ecstatic heretics”. A standard 80g sheet of A4 paper therefore is a blank bible awaiting the next daily instalment of absurd theology to be written upon it. This is the energy we feel in *Today No Water*, the almost-700-thousand-character novel Wu Shanzhuan wrote and described as “a storage container for words”.

Perhaps, as in their ingenious expression, “Answer before question,” these captivating concepts both precede and answer the aforementioned thorny questions of our age. It is this “sense of reality” that ties into the historical and international upon which the hopes of this exhibition are placed. Although it might act as an “index” providing an outline of their work, we must not see it as a “retrospective” in the nostalgic sense, for it is also a prelude to the research, exhibitions and publications that Inga Svala Thorsdottir & Wu Shanzhuan will continue to carry out going forward.

Wu met Thorsdottir in Iceland in 1990, when he was already considered one of the most important artists in '85 New Wave of China. During their first meeting, Thorsdottir shared with him one of her ideas: urinating in Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Wu boldly volunteered to be the “performer” of this work and the two of them travelled to Stockholm to carry out the piece they called *An Appreciation* (1991) at Moderna museet. From this was born the concept of “Thing’s Rights”, which sought to liberate “Things” (including artworks) and resulted in Thorsdottir and Wu turning the Declaration of Human Rights into the Declaration of Things’ Right(s). This was the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration between the two artists that continues to this day.

Today, in these ambiguous and demoralizing times, they have once again surprised us with the extent of their commitment, productivity, and creativity.

With the state of “work in progress”, they request of us our “appreciation”, not merely as observers “reading” or even “scrutinizing” their work, but as interrogators posing broader questions:

How can one begin and continue to work with certainty?

How is an artist’s “autonomy” related to the “world”? And how can one prevent it being reduced to petty selfishness or simplistic opposition?

Faced with all the visible and invisible chains that bind us, how can one attain “emancipation” through creative work?

Only the size of the exhibition space determined the number of featured works. As the artists have said, “Art is the sum of all things that cannot be summarized.” One could argue that the abundance and complexity of topics touched upon by the pieces in this exhibition demands a simple and candid setting. It is for this reason that this innumerable sum of around 600 unsummarizable things are presented here in an unadorned space and beneath a straightforward, lower-case title.

Text by Liu Tian

About the artist

Inga Svala Thorsdottir, Icelandic born 1966. Graduated 1991 from Painting Department of the Icelandic School of Arts and Crafts. 1995 graduated from the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg. 1993 founded Thor’s Daughter’s Pulverization Service. 1999 founded BORG.

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Wu Shanzhuan, 1960 born in China, 1986 graduated from Normal Department of the Zhejiang Art Academy. 1995 graduated from the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg. 1985 founded Red Humour. 1990 founded Red Humour International.

Since 1991 Thorsdottir and Wu have been working and exhibiting collaboratively and working as independent artists as well. They live and work in Hamburg, Iceland and Shanghai.