

An abstract painting featuring a central, dark, irregular shape that resembles a stylized figure or a mass of organic matter. This central form is surrounded by vibrant, textured brushstrokes in shades of red, orange, yellow, and black. The background is a light, mottled blue and white, with some darker blue and green accents. The overall composition is dynamic and expressive, with a sense of movement and depth.

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After the collective conceives of a new idea for an exhibition, a curator drafts an inspirational text that shapes the overall concept and theme of the show. These texts can take any form that the curator feels inspired by: fable, stream of consciousness, informative, discursive essay, and so on. The curator may or may not title the show; input from all members of the team is considered. We generally try to name the exhibitions with titles that provoke curiosity. After (or even while) artworks that embody the concept are created, our creative writers compose "blurbs" to accompany them in the gallery. Like the exhibition texts, blurbs may take any form that the writers feel fit the work and pushes viewers to think about what they are seeing or experiencing. We have had blurbs that are short stories, narratives from the figures in the work, poems, and researched essays with footnotes. Blurbs are not meant to only inform the viewer, but also to inspire them to create their own meaning. Again, it's that flight of the imagination principle. The writers also title the individual works, and these are typically associated with the blurb in some way. The whole process is very transparent and is driven by collaboration. Everyone has a voice.

It is not uncommon to hear about artists who are marginalized by political authorities in China. Have you dealt with censorship, interference, or other suppression?

We have never had any problems related to censorship. The goal of Liu Dao has never been to comment on sensitive or political issues, we leave that to other more outspoken artists. We may take inspiration from, for instance, demographic changes in contemporary China, but our take is always humorous and light-hearted. We don't have an agenda, nor do we strive to be political artists. That's simply not what we are about. Most of all we want our viewers to reach their own conclusions, independently. If art dictates, it ceases to be art.

Liu Dao is a collection of international artists working in Asia. To what extent do you identify your work with Asian art, if at all?

As an international collective our philosophy is global. Our members hail from across China, Hong Kong, France, North America, South America, the UK, Poland, and Australia, and our philosophy is based on the individual cultural experiences of all our members. But of course since we are all living in China, we draw a great amount of inspiration from our daily life here. It centers and locates our practice in space and time, but we try to find a universality of human experience in our artwork.

We try to shy away from being tagged as "Chinese art." We feel that once you put a certain country in front of the word "art," it has the potential to become kitsch and to be relegated to the status of souvenir. Most people wouldn't travel to New York, looking to find "New York Art." The link to China in our art is strong, but it is more about our collective personal experiences. The goal of all artists should be to simply create artwork. Liu Dao believes that nationality does not factor in to the equation, you either make art or you do not—the rest shouldn't matter.

Commercially speaking, video art and collaboration works rarely garner as much attention as traditional mediums and solo work. Is this an obstacle? How do you address the sales-sustainability model?

We've never viewed the type of artwork that we create as an obstacle. But it does take more time to be recognized as something "bankable" when you are working within a collective setting, especially in producing time-based video art. At this point we have been working within these mediums for over eight years now and have opened five Liu Dao specific galleries. Having these years and numbers under our belt perhaps allows for collectors to trust us more. As we keep growing and expanding and adding new talents into the mix, we are allowed the opportunity to create unique artworks. We find that as we take risks, so do our buyers and collectors.

In 2012 you made the announcement "Following the 5 Year Plan for world domination, the Liu Dao electronic art collective has sailed across the straits to set up a mini-island6 in the glamorous heart of Hong Kong." That was two years ago, your Hong Kong space is now a thriving gallery and you just opened an outpost on the island of Phuket. What's next?

We hope to always keep growing and expanding. With three spaces in Shanghai (flagship location at M50, ShGarden, and the Bund), island6 HK, and our newest location in Phuket, island6 Marina, we plan on continuing to bring the Liu Dao vision and artwork to the world. We are currently looking into a new space in Istanbul, which has been a city that is very receptive to our artwork as their own contemporary art scene matures and gathers international respect. As a city firmly planted in both Europe and Asia, we feel it encapsulates the international crossroads reflected in the collective.

In addition to our own spaces, we also have representatives in various countries and work with independent galleries on art direction. So far we have representatives in Beijing, Hong Kong, Bangkok, London, Dubai, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, New York, Paris, and Germany. We are always looking to expand to new cities.

When it comes down to it, our hope is more for the welfare of the future of the art world. The collective was formed for a very specific reason, so we really want to continue representing a platform in which collaboration and innovation can provide a new formula for artists to follow.

Mimi Brown, Founder and Director, Spring Workshop

How did you arrive at the name Spring Workshop, what does it mean?

The name *Spring* comes from a beloved Sufi poem, and refers to the season, the leap, the coil, and the fresh water that surges from the earth. And *Workshop* means that this is a place for experimenting and getting messy.

What is your mission?

Spring's mission is to experiment with the way that art is created, enjoyed, and supported. We partner with other local and international not-for-profit organizations to offer space and scope to their programs. Our aim is to work with artists and audiences in a bespoke way, trying to find a unique thread for each event that will give both the creators and those of us who enjoy their creations new insights into the artistic process.

For example, Berlin-based Singaporean artist Ming Wong recently completed a two-month research residency (December 2013 to February 2014) at Spring as one of our projects in partnership with Para/Site Art Space. Ming was researching Cantonese operatic cinema, and we organized numerous meetings and meals for him so that he could engage meaningfully with the people and resources of Hong Kong. One day at lunch at Spring, he broke into a smile and said "Eureka!" after a conversation with his lunchtime companion gave a new direction to his project. At the end of the residency, Ming shared his research process with an audience of 140, followed by a rambling evening of drinks and dinner at Spring in which he asked for our feedback on his presentation. He will now go on to create a new work in our fall exhibition and a performance that will premier in Hong Kong during the 2015 New Year holiday.

The unique and exciting part of this project from our vantage point is that so many of us will have been involved with understanding and contributing to the development of this artwork from the start straight through to the finished work.

You are located in Wong Chuk Hang, an industrial neighborhood of car repair shops and warehouses. Does the environment play a role in experiencing Spring Workshop?

Absolutely. I had been in Hong Kong for many years hoping to find a neighborhood like this when one day I finally walked into this industrial building in Wong Chuk Hang. Cupid must have shot an arrow because I instantly fell in love with the neighborhood and the building (where Spring is currently housed)! Beyond car repair shops and warehouses, the neighborhood carries vestiges of old Hong Kong, like sprawling high-ceilinged manufacturing spaces, now used more for storage or offices, as well as the Nam Long Shan Cooked Food Market which serves impeccable Thai food and perfect *nai cha* (milk tea) and the Tai Wong Yeh Temple featuring those enormous, slow-burning incense coils that



The Universe of Naming exhibition art student workshop #2, May 2013, at Spring Workshop. Courtesy of Spring Workshop.

scent the entire quarter, along with the cinnamon scents from the Po Chai building and candle factories just across the street. In addition to these old-fashioned elements, Wong Chuk Hang also has a dynamic modern edge, with an MTR station due to open across the street from us in 2015, designers, artists, writers, and architects with offices ensconced in many of the warehouse buildings, and new shops, cafes, and galleries springing up every month. To help you find all the hidden gems in our neighborhood, Spring publishes the winning map of our annual Wong Chuk Hang map competition in which young Hong Kong artists are invited to render the area in their own styles.

To me the rough-and-romantic nature of the neighborhood is crucial for Spring. This is an industrial, dynamic place where people are free to make things, construct things, create things.

The first time I visited the space, it felt like I had snuck into someone's house and was having a look around. Then a woman popped out from behind a wall and asked me if I wanted to see what she was working on, which was a total surprise (it was an artist in residence). Is it part of your mission to disarm visitors like that? How does the architecture of your space facilitate dialogues between artist, audience, and community?

What a perfect visit. Yes, we do hope to do exactly that: to disarm our artists and audience into interacting in unexpected ways! Since the audience and those who are interested in culture in general are a key element of our mission, the layout was carefully thought through in order to avoid the near-total anonymity of some residences and to create public areas that are sunny and welcoming. Spring is a place of gentle engagement for both artists and audiences. And even when our residents are a bit reluctant to engage or are busy working, they still usually pop out to join us on weekdays at the communal table, disarmed by the fresh food served for lunch.

Our flexible architecture is an intentional part of our mission to produce new experiences for our visitors each time they come to Spring. Qiu Zhijie's *The Universe of Naming* installation took over the entire space; then we held workshops and talks for adults and children throughout the installation. We have used our biggest artist studio, Winter Studio, for public talks, dinners/lunches, a mini concert, and even a theatre performance. On June 14, we held an outdoor concert of Indian protest songs, *Singing Resistance: A Musical Performance with Sumangala Damodaran* in collaboration with Asia Art Archive, welcoming our audience of over 150 people to get comfortable on cushions, carpets, and beanbags across the gently lit terrace. When we host meals and events people disperse into corners of the space and find their own spots to connect and reflect. It is clear from each event that varying the spatial relationships between the creators and their audiences is a useful tool for keeping the energy dynamic for everyone.

I understand there's no expectation for artists in residence to produce work. This must be liberating for them. What has been the outcome of this philosophy?

Yes, our "secret residences" where no one even has to know that the artist/curator/writer is here have been popular indeed. One artist arrived for a month-long summer residency following a string of commitments and told us that this was the first time in two years she had no immediate production deadline. After three days here, she burst out of her studio and told us with a smile that due to the lack of pressure, she was suffering from a profusion of fresh ideas. This is an ideal outcome.

Tell me more about Moderation(s)—where did the idea come from and what have you learned?

A few years ago when Defne Ayas (now the director of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art) still lived in Shanghai, I used to visit her there and we would sit in our pajamas for hours over a pot of tea, dreaming up projects. *Moderation(s)* is one result of those pajama sessions. Once we had Herman Chong on board as the "moderator," the project unfolded in an ideal, stately way, as a set of programs that created time and space for different people to interact and create, never in a rush, side by side in two cities (HK and Rotterdam), and as part of a longer project that circled back on itself while still moving forward.

This project enabled Spring to make good on its mission to create a platform for exchange. Over the course of the two-year project, we engaged more than 50 local and international artists, curators, and writers in various programs, which engendered a conference, three exhibitions, three residencies, and a book of short stories. We learned from this project the pleasure of working with an open concept and a purposefully slower timeline than usual. We learned to savor process.

Last year I saw the exhibition *The Social Contract*. I was asked to sign a legal document, which legally prohibited me from speaking about it for a while afterwards. Thinking back, there were some live eels in a fish tank, and other curated miscellanea scattered around the walls and floor. It reminded me of a basement I used to hang out in when I was 16. Due to the secrecy element, there was also no literature about the content of the show. Can you help me connect the content with the concept?

The contract has indeed expired, meaning that we now have permission to discuss what we saw. But given that a crucial part of *The Social Contract* was to eliminate discussions about

what we see and to locate us in the realm of our own impressions, I would be going a bit against the project's ethos by mapping out the story of the artwork displayed inside. Instead, perhaps the ultimate experience for you as the participant is to revel, even post-contract, in whatever sixteen-year-old basement memories the piece evoked for you in the moment.

I missed Qiu Zhijie's *The Universe of Naming*, which I think was something really big, figuratively and literally. How major was the installation and how did people respond to it?

The installation was indeed physically enormous: Qiu's highly detailed maps on the walls and floors and his collection of 256 engraved wood, glass, and steel spheres took over the whole space at Spring, turning it into a giant universe of diagrams. The audience was encouraged to roll the spheres over the maps as they wished, thus becoming co-creators of the meanings within the installation. Then, in addition to his own work, he managed to fold in the results of a workshop he conducted with 50 Hong Kong students from six different universities who worked with him to create next-iteration maps of this city using debris from the streets. So it was quite a massive artwork.

The exhibition was major because it allowed us key access points to his talent as an iconic artist who draws upon numerous traditions and concepts to create his encyclopedic artworks. He is also an extraordinary teacher and thinker who is working to revolutionize the way that art is taught in China. And the cherry on top to this rare insight was that every sort of viewer could relate to his work. It was truly universal.

International press about art in Hong Kong has been dominated by two major commercial activities: auctions and Art Basel. How do you feel about this?

I imagine that someone who reads about these major art activities in Hong Kong will infer that there are other dynamic players in the art environment that also nourish the city's cultural scene. And if they are curious, as I was on arriving in Hong Kong a decade ago, they will scratch the surface and find an entire deeper layer of arts engagement and activity. I am encouraged by anything that fuels interest in what is happening here.

The opening of M+ and the greater West Kowloon Cultural District in a few years may be an undisputed need for a city like Hong Kong, but do you think it will detract from the work of small venues that have filled the niche for curatorial projects and non-profit arts organizations for so many years?

Hong Kong's arts landscape not only has plenty of room for all of these players, it needs all these players. An arts landscape is an ecosystem, and the smaller, subtler non-profit layer is a key underpinning to the more visible layer inhabited by the larger players.

You lived in California before moving to Hong Kong. Have there been any dialogues between these two places?

Although there has not been a structured dialogue, we have had the pleasure of working with a few Californians and California-based talents such as Chris Fitzpatrick, Betti-Sue Hertz, Xiaoyu Weng, and Anthony Marcellini. I suspect that California has played a part in Spring's casual, flip-flop-wearing nature.

I understand Spring Workshop has a self-imposed five-year lifespan. How hard will it be to pull the plug and are there any plans for the afterlife?

There are so many plans for the afterlife that pulling the plug will just be a step into the next.



The Universe of Naming exhibition with 50 art student workshop #1, May 2013, at Spring Workshop. Courtesy of Spring Workshop.