

# 长征计划 LONG MARCH PROJECT

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## Planet Marx Reading Club Meeting #5

### Broken Production Chain



#### **Conversation: Zian Chen × Liu Wei × Song Yi Reinvention of a Broken Production Chain?**

**Zian Chen:** Pauline Yao's *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* was famously written in 2008, where the optimism in the art world culminated with Beijing Olympic. After the millennium, Chinese artists started to hire labor to help them finish more works. The writing explicated the factory-like contemporary art production in China with its

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eccentric pattern in its distribution of labor, of course relying on the cheap and plentiful of its labor cost. Compared to the decades before, such enlarged production scale could be seen as a decisive turning point of artists' practice here.

Pauline Yao's writing maintains an over-deterministic aspect. Referring to the notion of "expanded studio", she contributes to the precarious production lines of "contractor artist" with contextual understanding of how does one work with its ecosystem. She seems as well to point out the vacuum, in that the artists would invent one's own production line in a way that is democratic or reflective to its own nature of extraction.

*"The sheer quantity and availability of these workers and assistants heighten their involvement in all aspects of production: they are ubiquitous, and their pervasive presence transforms what is possible in the making of art in terms of budget, size, and time, and yet these workers are mostly invisible in Chinese art circles. They are a sort of backstage crew to the set of performers known on the international stage as 'contemporary Chinese artists.'"*

In the past two years, the original Chinese manufacturing model gets less sustainable, as the entire urban environment has changed. The number of migrant workers has decreased, while the living costs have risen. Today, if we are here to relaunch the discussion on "production chain", we should review how the artists at the time invented their own production systems, or how they adapted to the social production mode. For example, Yao talks about how Zhang Huan and Ai Weiwei managed to arrange an "in-sourcing" production chain, different from the regular "outsourcing" mode of other artists. On the other hand, we should be aware that the production mode described in *In Production Mode* has come to an end, and that it is impossible to continue the described circulation, production and concepts for the emerging generation of artists. Today, it is necessary to find new production possibilities in this "brokenhood".

Artists' relationship with their environment is closely related to the division of labour and their mode to life subjected to the urban environment. In fact, at the turn of the millennium, artists who want to work full-time in the art field often chose to go to Beijing, while there were small group of people went to Shenzhen, where job market and its pay rate outpaced other Chinese cities, along with a few underground art groups active in the scene.

**Liu Wei:** Actually, I didn't realize this phenomenon until I got in touch with the artists later. People including Liu Chuang, Jiang Zhi, and Chu Yun were all in Shenzhen at that time. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, for me and some of the surrounding artists, it was a necessary issue to rethink the form of artistic creation. As long as there is a sculpture or painting in all the exhibitions, the audience often instinctively resist such a form. In fact, we are still asking this question today: what is the art form of this era? After 2004, the artists began to have institutional support, and there were more places for them to exhibit. As a response, the audience also began to accept contemporary art. Thus, there were fewer confrontations, which is not unrelated to the market.

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**Zian Chen:** When I was reading this book, I kept thinking that it was a case study of “future archaeology”. Curator Louise Staunton once contributed to Shenzhen’s art scene with a show. She wrote on the title page of *Time is money, Efficiency is Life* (the third international art studio exchange project): “This is a research of future Oriental archaeology.” In other words, because of the special nature of Shenzhen, anything you write on site would be transcribed into history. Thus, the current moment is readily historical.

The situation recorded by Pauline Yao has quickly entered history. The conditions of the production chain are not what they were at the time. What Liu Wei mentioned just now also means that the problem of art is determined by the relationship of various external edges. In terms of your work, the appearance of your studio actually has an interactive relationship with your products.

**Liu Wei:** The way of working determines the form of the work. While artists are thinking constantly, institutions are also constantly intervening in this process. The current transformation makes studio landscapes radically different from those of the era as we first mentioned. Today studios are more like theme parks, with everything being well planned.

**Zian Chen:** The two directors of the KWM art center, Yuling Zhang and Tim Crowley, have been shooting more than 30 artists’ studios in China since 2015. In fact, many of these studios are not there anymore. Unintentionally, these films have become meaningful archives since then.

**Liu Wei:** China’s production chain has a special trait. The production process is not centered upon technical pursuit. Behind this is a very simple logic. For example, when processing a piece of material, it would be difficult if you want to make even a slight change. Even if you try to pay ten times the price, and tell people to spend more time thinking about the design, they will not do the work. This is the decision of the whole society, which is deeply involved in the status quo, the imagination of freedom, and the logic of survival.

**Song Yi:** Liu Wei talked about the fact that the production conditions of the Chinese society are not perfect. But this is not to say that production is impossible under such imperfect production conditions. Artists may try out a variety of combinations to come up with something that has its own aesthetic value. For me, Liu Wei’s work has always been a constant debugging process that would make up something aesthetically unique under these imperfect conditions.

As for the book *In Production Mode*, I personally think that Pauline Yao’s subintention may be a criticism of the large-scale production mode of Chinese contemporary art before 2008. I understand her critique as comparing this kind of production to “driver fatigue”, and it seems that artists should also reflect on the reasons behind such “driver fatigue”.

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One aspect of her response was that at the beginning of 2000, many art criticism articles in China only explained the works from the iconological perspective. She felt that this was not enough. It was in this context that she mentioned production mode. But I personally think that there seems to be a kind of dichotomy between society and art in her writing. On this basis, she then started to think about the connection between the two. Of course, the analysis in her is rigorous, and there is sufficient data to explain many problems at the time. However, I personally think that the framework itself may be further extended. The question we have to ask thus is: What is the possibility?

**Liu Wei:** My opinion on things does not stem from my somatic feelings, but from the complex judgment of individuals. This is what our art looks like now. You talked about “driver fatigue”, which means that there are faults in our system. But in this imperfect situation, do you choose to continue doing it or not? Sometimes we are forced to make a less bad choice. Because I feel that I have to make it, I look forward to it. In fact, I have produced a reality of doing.