

Prof. Johanna Liu - Namelessness and Darkness: Reading Andreas Walther's Art

Artist, Andreas Walther

It was in the late Fall of 2014 that I first met Andreas Walther in Taipei, when I attended an international conference on the issue of author/authorship in the arts, held at the NTUE (National Taipei University of Education). During the meeting I asked Andreas in Chinese, 'Ni shi she ying shi ma? Are you a photographer?' He denied it straightforwardly and claimed in Chinese, 'Bu, wo shi yi shu jia. No, I am an artist.' I looked at him and continued to enquire curiously, 'Do you mean you are an artist of photography?' He insisted, 'No, I am an artist'. It was amazing to hear someone proclaim oneself an artist, in an age when art turns out to be an open concept while the identity of the artist is in flux. I was wondering why and how he saw himself as an artist. Andreas explained to me, 'I am an artist because I have been making the images with digital photography and video, in particular the images that relate to [Chinese] landscape paintings *shanshui hua*'. Later, when Andreas showed us the photo albums of his works, I was attracted particularly to the miraculous darkness in the series of works entitled 'Namelessness'. I started then to figure out the aesthetic ground of Andreas Walther's art.

Through the extraordinary pieces which Andreas Walther provides generously as front- and back- cover images, to the special issue on 'Universality, Artist, and Aesthetics' in *Universitas, Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* (November 2014), which I co-edited with Yolaine Escande, I read and much more closely learned about Andreas Walther's artistic ways of revealing the mysterious power of things, evoking the hidden beauty of nature shaped as landscape images in his works.

Evidently it is to display the poetic way of creating, rather than to declare a social status, that Andreas Walther proclaims himself an 'artist'. He has been pursuing poetically an artist's identity and its mission through the art works he performs in practice. Many German poets and writers, such as Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) have concerned themselves with the problem of identity and mission of the artist-as-poet. Friedrich Hölderlin enquired 'what are poets for 'in a destitute time when gods went and left the mundane world behind' (*Bread and Wine*); while Walter Benjamin explored 'the task of the translator' in raising the fundamental questions of poetry as art and poetry as art's primal language, when he made translation of *Tableaux Parisiens*, a collection of poems by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Andreas Walther, as an artist, has proposed similar questions, however in a different way. He exposes his poetic thinking through the creative activity of making his works. It is through artistic performance in photography or video landscape images that Andreas Walther acts as an artist. In his works Walther discloses the aesthetic thinking of poetry as essence of art both in theory and in practice, and touches upon Benjamin's mission of translation, e.g., the process of reading and interpreting the primal language of works in poetic writing as well. But even more extraordinary is his aesthetics of taking the work process as one of reading and interpreting the traces of nature present in objects, and the creative practice of letting the traces of nature come and go as a non-human way of writing objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*). In viewing aesthetically his extraordinary works, I would say namelessness and darkness are the two key aesthetic terms necessary to understand Andreas's Art.

Namelessness, the artworks

Andreas Walther's works, entitled 'Unnamed' rather than 'Untitled', refer not only to the author's reflections about the informative function of the work's name or title, but also to the profound poetic experience of creative activities, comprehended from the point of view of classical Chinese Daoism and contemporary Western philosophy or postmodern aesthetics. A work without a title would liberate the audience from the informative function of theme, while a work without a name alludes to the aesthetic dimensions of art-work, with the poetic images grounded both as the primal beginning and as a distinct entity. The process of naming in creative writing and reading is one of the basic issues in contemporary Western aesthetics. Naming the beings is the primary goal of poets/artists when making their work, while poetically reading means the extension of the process of ceaselessly forgetting the name, naming and renaming. In reading Andreas Walther's landscape painting entitled 'Unnamed', we can see various aesthetic meanings of namelessness in interpretation.

First of all, a work unnamed points to the elimination of any name-tags established, including scientific labels, topological index, social, political or cultural signs, as conceptual frameworks in reading images; rather, it refers

to the work itself as the name given in the process of renaming the objects being created. That is, the images shown in the photographs or videos are the renaming of things depicted through landscape in nature. However, the images of things visualized in nature-landscape rise and fall, and vicissitudinally disperse, without any traces left behind. That is the image of the hexagram *huan* (dispersion) in the *Book of Change, I Ching*: 'Water and wind moving above the water form huan'. The naming of nature-landscape inscribed on papers is launching the beginning of contemplation to see how primitive nature flows freely in things; nevertheless, the visualized pictures of nature-landscapes, simultaneously and paradoxically, would be separated from nature itself and turn out a representation of landscape as distinct from primitive nature, due to its fixation. Furthermore, the unnamed title of Andreas Walther's works significantly displays an aesthetic reflection on landscape. He never sees the pictures of landscape shaped in his works as the naming of the things but as residual images of nature as it changes. Therefore, the work has no name. The work, even more, is not a name of nature. The landscape artwork, belonging to nature in flux and drifting among the numerous things, thus has no name. 'Without a name, it is the beginning of Heaven and Earth... Only one who is ever free from desire can apprehend the enigma of Dao' (Laozi). Walther's work has no name. The landscape images shown in his works look familiar, but from an unknown place, having no landmarks, no references. Most of them seem remote from the mundane world, and evidence of humans is rarely seen. Nonetheless, it has a mysterious energy awakening the audience's mind aesthetically to feel the extension of life, the transgression of boundaries, and the presence of the sacred through traces of the visible.

Darkness, the black color

By the end of 2014 Andreas Walther had made a series of new works, printing the landscape images on black paper. Aside from being nameless and derepresentational, the core pictorial features which Walther creates in these new series are the poetic image of time and the color of mysterious darkness. With digital photography and video Andreas Walther makes the pictorial images of landscapes expose the vicissitude of nature moving in the duration of time. To understand the process of making those pictorial works, the time duration is one of the primary parameters. The duration of picture-making involves photographing and post-production to be accomplished within set timeframes, as well as timing the right moment of shooting, before internalizing the atmosphere of the specific landscape to be framed. Sometimes it can take up to several months of post-production. Shih Tao (1642-1707), Chinese painter in Qing dynasty, made a note on landscape in his *Treatise on Painting*: 'In searching for the extraordinary peaks to make rough sketches, I encounter with mountains and rivers in spirit, therefore, I make the trace of nature in transformation under my brushes'. Searching for the images of landscapes means an extended time of wandering, but the artist meets mountains and rivers in spirit instantly. Andreas Walther's video works of shanshui reflect the duration of landscapes in days and nights; the diptychs or triptychs of photographic scenes of nature are an instant encounter with numerous objects in spirit when making traces of objects transformed into his art works. The duration of landscapes in time and the instants of encountering mountains and streams in spirit are also embodied in viewing experiences when gazing at Andreas Walther's artworks, particularly the black series in 2014, printed entirely on black paper. The initial darkness gradually melts into different shades of colors in the viewer's sustained gaze; the exuberant flowers and trees slowly emerge from darkness, the open wilderness extends toward the boundaries, the branches and leaves reach into the sky, and the forest trails lead to the depth of distant horizons. The darkness in Walther's works is one of abstruse nature. Black is the color of night; in Chinese, the color of black is called *xuan se*, indicating sky, as in *Book of Change*, 'Black sky, yellow earth'. Also, among the five cosmic elements, black refers to the color of water, representing the unfathomable resources nourishing all living beings. According to Chinese Daoism the term *xuanming* (mysterious darkness) indicates the formless image of Dao, empty, distancing and reaching far into the abyss. The color of mysterious darkness is the color of Dao, situated in the profundity of darkness, between the visible and the invisible.

That Andreas Walther works in black also harks back to Chinese and Western histories of painting. Mark Rothko (1904-1970) in his later years conveyed mysterious religious experiences with large color fields. His large fields of black are impressively striking. However, Chinese literati painters have been proficient in

demonstrating the seasonal changes of landscapes, the diverse appearance of flowers, birds, trees, and other living things, with different shades of ink. It was called 'ink play'. Connecting deeply with these two cultural legacies, Andreas Walther, when he makes his art works, rather than expressing subjective emotions or the state of things with black, lets the natural landscapes emerge from the shades of black through the technique of photography. It is an alternative objectivism. Walther's painting reality is therefore not a quest for likeness of all things, but a display of the interaction and dialogue between nature and landscapes, perception and medium, by means of digital photo-graphy. Landscape shaped in visible form manifests the traceless traces of nature in Walther's dark pieces. All living things thrive and radiate in the darkness, transcending cultural boundaries beyond representation of language, and displaying a characteristic of universality in art.

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