

## Of the Immaterial and Its Corporeality

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1. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, German philosopher, scientist, mathematician, diplomat, librarian and legal scholar, wrote in Latin, French and German, was author of the pioneering *Monadologie* (1646–1716).
2. René Descartes, French philosopher, mathematician, natural scientist, founder of early modern rationalism (born in 1596 in Touraine, France, died in 1650 in Stockholm, Sweden).
3. Otto von Guericke, scientist, inventor, politician, paved the way for the physics of the vacuum (1602–1686).
4. Cited in: Horst Bredekamp, *Die Fenster der Monade, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' Theater der Natur und der Kunst* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2004), 50: 'Nichts, bar jeden Werdens und Vergehens.'
5. Trinh Xuan Thuan, *Voyage au Coeur de la lumière* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).
6. *Ibid.*, 52.

In the opinion of the physicist and philosopher Leibniz,<sup>1</sup> the belief held by his so-called 'vacuist' colleagues that space is fundamentally empty was a *drôle de pensée*, a funny thought. Their dispute about notions of space, about whether, as Leibniz contended, it was a material continuum or, as Descartes asserted,<sup>2</sup> it was invisible matter coursing with particle structures, or again as Otto von Guericke claimed,<sup>3</sup> space was instead 'nothingness devoid of becoming or passing away',<sup>4</sup> was not limited to the era of the Enlightenment. In the present period, in particular, debate on this question has regained intensity in the light of recent scientific research suggesting that the energies by which our thoughts are transmitted could be gauged in material and measurable form.<sup>5</sup> Leibniz could only have dreamt of connections of this kind. But when he postulated that there was no space without body, and no time without action, might he have been aware how much his own world outlook paralleled Chinese conceptions – by then already familiar in Europe – of cosmology as a single physical and mental fabric?<sup>6</sup>

This remarkable correspondence seems to suggest itself when we observe the work of the Chinese sculptor Liang Shaoji. His purpose in presenting sculptures shrouded in the floss of silkworms is not to come up with an aesthetic form that might earn him a new label in the official world of art. Rather, he is concerned with creating something akin to a visual

philosophy, but one that is universally so comprehensible that in quite a striking manner it even coincides with the world of thought set out by Leibniz. Thus we encounter an astonishing similarity between the conviction of the Enlightenment scientist and philosopher that physics without metaphysics were meaningless, and the realm of artistic expression explored by the Chinese sculptor, which in poetic terms revolves around a notion of the cosmos as an integrated whole, while at the same time remaining rooted in the utterly real observation of nature in the here and now.

### Thread and Flame

Shaoji set up his studio on the slopes of Tiantai Mountain. In Chinese the site is also known as Tiantai Shan, roughly meaning 'Path of the heavens mountain': the high plateau is famous for its endless sweep of clouds, while its countless waterfalls lure one into contemplation of such ideas as the interminable succession of moments that culminate in the dissolution of time. This region has seen the establishment of a number of Buddhist monasteries, among them the headquarters of the Mahayana schools. Mahayana Buddhism teaches the doctrine of the Five Paths that lead to enlightenment, one of them being the Path of Seeing. While Shaoji's art is certainly not a vehicle for the Buddhist creed, with his extremely precise observation of nature, his characteristically Chinese embrace of a contemplative union with nature that entails the complete surrender of the self and identification with the present moment, his work could barely be placed in any other context but this.

Shaoji has been breeding silkworms for 20 years. His studio has the appearance of a research laboratory. As if he were exploring how far he could displace the heroically egocentric hand of the author from his sculptural work, his sculptures are sustained by a direct dialogue with nature. Furthermore, nature itself is being challenged to act as the artist, since Shaoji begins his sculptures by constructing little more than a kind of frame and then allows the silkworms to complete the work. In miraculous concord with the artist these small creatures wrap and transform his specifications. In one case, for instance, he cuts a collection of short bamboo stems. The tallest are barely as high as the knee, the shortest only go up to the ankle. Once the silkworms' weaving is done the outcome is a sculptural assembly of unnameable forms, whose surfaces are as pristine as freshly fallen snow. The viewer is fully captivated by the magic of something not created by human hand: a gentle, semi-transparent web sheathes the bamboo and in the accidental shapes of the silk cocoons invents a new figure. But it is not just the form of the bamboo stems that has been transformed by the silk-

#### Liang Shaoji

*Candle/Nature Series No. 87, 2003*  
bamboo (partly burned), wax, silk  
variable dimensions  
courtesy of ShanghART Gallery,  
Shanghai

worms' labour: their delicate weave resembles the tissue of clouds in the sky; it creates a different space and a different time, opening up dimensions that go beyond commonplace reality, yet – while never exceeding it – bring the heavens down to earth. Just as silk thread, above all by dint of its fineness, can produce a strong, tightly knit and warming fabric, bamboo too, above all by dint of its flexibility, can display its strength in withstanding great storms. Both substances embody the paradox of fragile force.

Shaoji combines the silkworms' labour with dripping wax, thereby ultimately creating a visual epitome of the two-line poem he likes to quote: 'The thread of the spring silkworm will only end when the silkworm dies / And not until the candle has burnt to ashes, will the tears begin to dry.'

Here the thread of the silkworm is seen in analogy with the breath of life. In mythology throughout all cultures the phenomenon of thread is invested with broad connotative complexity. In Hindu myth the image of thread is likened to the self (*atma*) and to breath (*prāna*). Similar to the candle's bond to its flame, the silkworm consumes itself for its thread. When the thread is finished the worm's breath extinguishes. Besides the form of these sculptures, it was above all such parallels between the candle and the silkworm that inspired Shaoji to give this series of works the title *Candle/Nature Series No. 87* (2003).

### Silkworm and Bee

There are further analogies linking the two materials wax and silk. As it dries in the air, the fibrous weave spun from fine filaments of the larva's saliva is transformed into its protective shell. It is inside this cocoon that the silkworm moults from its final form to become a moth and then produces the first phase of the next silkworm generation, the eggs. Thus the silkworm lives in its own product; its cocoon embodies the unity of the beginning and the end of life. At the same time, it also embodies the uniqueness of a moment – the instant the moth emerges to lay eggs and meet its own death, the cocoon is destroyed. Likewise bees, as producers of wax that are also characterized by a life cycle of several phases from egg, larva and hatched insect, produce and inhabit their honeycomb hives in a similar manner. Thread and wax are linked as the products of these two comparable insects. In terms of this material context's transference onto the world of ideas, not only do Chinese mythology and language weave an analogy between textile threads and the intellectual 'threads' of texts and commentaries,<sup>8</sup> viewing everyday material reality and spirituality as intimately entwined, but, quite remarkably, Leibniz in particular also formulates

7. Li Shangyin (813–853). This verse is quoted in: Marianne Brouwer, *Liang Shaoji: Cloud* (Shanghai: ShanghART catalogue, 2007).
8. Pierre Grison, *Présence du bouddhisme*, in: *Dictionnaire des Symboles* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1969), 319.

### Liang Shaoji

*Globe/Nature Series No.1*, 1989  
barbed wire, desk globe, silk  
25 x 30 cm  
courtesy of ShanghART Gallery,  
Shanghai

9. Bredekamp, *Die Fenster der Monade*, op. cit. (note 4), 16: 'Totum universum est unum corpus continuum. Neque dividitur, sed instar cerae transfiguratur, instar tunicae varie plicatur.'

the basic tenets of his scientific insights through the metaphor of woven fabric, in which thread and wax are brought together. In other words, Leibniz evokes the dual character – spiritual and material – of these substances. In his view: 'The entire universe is a continuous body that is not divided but, like wax, can assume various forms and, like a tunic, can be folded in a variety of ways.'<sup>9</sup> Yet it is precisely this phenomenon of seamlessly evolving transformation in the varied 'plication' of a single but constantly changing temporal and spatial substance, that characterizes Shaoji's work.

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### Veil and Mirror

One altogether self-evident element of this way of thinking is the disintegration of our accustomed measure of proportionality. The silkworm and its production, which thread upon thread is capable of erasing all traces of time and human presence, can grow to such a size in Shaoji's work that they fill the entire universe. This image springs to mind on viewing the work *Globe/Nature Series No. 1* (1989). Beginning his *Nature Series*, significantly, with a world globe, Shaoji conceives nature as a cosmic whole that encompasses flora, fauna and mankind. In his view of the world, the balance within the entire system and the harmony of these cosmic resonances need to be safeguarded if one seeks to grasp how damage is inflicted on nature. In tune with his way of thinking, he regards wars as destructive energy that also interferes with the spheres of the entire cosmos. This particular work came about under the impression of the Gulf War, which at that time had just broken out. Conceivably the most violent antithesis to the gossamer filaments of the silkworm, barbed wire has engorged the planet in its rampant coils, to the extent that the planet has disappeared from existence. The empty rack of the table globe is crammed with loops of barbed wire, its razor-sharp presence instantly evoking associations with violence, war and oppression – a visionary image of a world destroying itself. Do the nightmare scenarios of widespread warfare, of war as a global conflagration, strike us as exaggerated if not absurd because we remain resolutely in denial about the deeper significance, say, of having to let our bags be searched each time we make an innocuous visit to a museum? Are we too, like the silkworm, not inhabitants of a world we ourselves have produced? The coils of barbed wire in *Globe* are in turn enveloped in a diaphanous gauze of silk floss. The fluffy covering scarcely veils the brutality lying beneath it. Here, as in all revealed religions, the veil acts as a mirror that reflects all the more clearly what lies concealed. At the same time, in this work the universe itself has long since assumed the function of a

#### Liang Shaoji

*Mounting/Nature Series No. 103*, 2004  
two piles of newspapers, silk  
160 x 60 x 110 cm (2 x)  
courtesy of ShanghART Gallery,  
Shanghai

spindle that with the inexorable cycles of growth and decay, of formation and corrosion, has started weaving blurring layers, relentlessly erasing the horrors of time, mercilessly extinguishing the anger of revolt and memory. This has strong parallels with another kind of weaving that Shaoji undertook during a long meditative performance in which he observed an actual reflection. For the performance he first transported square panes of mirror to the summit of one of the Tiantai Mountains, laying them out on a rock plateau. Seated on the edge of the mirrored clouds, the artist's likeness flows with the clouds, looms forth then disappears, becomes blurred as they partially obscure it. He himself becomes cloud beneath the clouds and becomes one with surrounding nature; he calls the work literally what it is: *Cloud Mirror/Nature Series No. 101* (2007). What he is showing here is nothing other than reality; he simply renders it visible, making it experienceable to the extent that it becomes a palpable or visual form of thinking.

Thus woven silk tissue too can become reflection when light is caught in it and gleams. Indeed, it is as if a silkworm were holding up its mirror to us, allowing us to peer down an unending sequence of delicate weaves that spin clouds of silk floss over rudimentarily improvised bed frames made of wire. Once again our familiar sense of proportion has been unhinged – an everyday household item has shrunk into a toy the size of a matchbox, causing the cocoon from which the silk floss is jutting out to take on a gigantic appearance. Are we observing this landscape of tiny beds from a great distance? Similar to what certain Chinese picture scrolls would have us believe when they depict minute figures of people at the foot of a vast mountain? Has the bed been adjusted to accommodate the silkworm, or inversely, have we shrivelled down to the larva's size? At any rate, what this suggests is that there is no difference between the worm and man. Shaoji's thinking ties in with Far Eastern notions of a complete dissolution of hierarchy. He considers human life with all its mutations and transformations as directly comparable to that of a silkworm. Likewise, we too have the ability to create a product that outlasts our own lifespan. With light refracting in a golden gleam on the threads of the silk weave, as we peer down into the centre of the coiling woven tunnel it is possible, here and there, to make out a chrysalis, a small abandoned sheath. After a while, on closer inspection this image might begin to summon a strange sense of familiarity. Couldn't Bosch have taken one such cocoon as a model for the shaft in his panel painting *Ascent of the Blessed*?<sup>10</sup> Painted with such corporeality that the figures of the souls are able to tread its walls, is his tunnel of light not precisely this, palpable space as spun substance? The pigment, transformed in its

10. Hieronymus Bosch, Dutch painter (1450–1516). The painting *Ascent of the Blessed* is part of a four-panel polyptych depicting the hereafter. Two of the panels are dedicated to Paradise, the other two to Hell. Oil on wood, 86 x 39 cm, Palazzo Ducale in Venice.

mass into a built presence, bears similarity to the silk threads. In the cocoons of silk, woven space can be distinctly observed as corporeal reality, quite as if nature were at least just as much an artist as human beings can be, as if the human monopoly on artistic creativity had in fact become suspect, if not invalid.

### Vertigo

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But it is not only space and light that acquire material presence in Shaoji's work, time as well is converted into tangible substance. The silkworm, so it seems, has the last word. Its silk glands are located on its lower lip. Breath and saliva, which together form its thread, are the same material from which we shape our words. Do we not speak idiomatically of 'threads of conversation', 'spinning someone a line' or even 'spinning a yarn'? Shaoji allows his silkworms to crawl over newspapers. Once the newspaper is covered in a milky sheath of gossamer, once the headlines of breaking news have disappeared beneath the cloudy weave of a different temporal dimension where the present and the past are interlaced into a single physical continuum of time, Shaoji adds the next layer of newspaper straight from the press to the gradually growing pile. *Mounting/Nature Series No. 103* (2004) is the title he has given these mute mounds of words that grow out of and beyond time. In another work he adopts a similar approach, dispatching his silkworms to spin veils around colliers' helmets, which he outlines in reduced skeletal frames made of wire. The small opening on the front is where the miner's lamp would be attached. And yet our minds cannot help imagining them as gas masks, especially when Shaoji parades these *Helmets/Nature Series No. 102* (2004) in large numbers. The true dread they inspire lies precisely in how their contours are smoothed over by the silky floss, setting their horror in soft focus and making the drama recede to such a distance that any attempt to preserve its memory seems to be absorbed, if not silenced by the silk cocoon. Both works show the levelling process of time, how it erodes and grinds down sharp contours of memorable definition. Simultaneously and paradoxically, however, the cocoons also create their antithesis. They reveal the very object they shroud, are always veil and mirror in one. Furthermore, they weave together different worlds, join opposites, offering the viewer something akin to visual threads that lace together the disparate moments of uncertainty and accident, of fragility and stability, of the fleeting instant and permanence, uniting the world of observed phenomena with the world of ideas, uniting finitude with infinity.

The experience of gradually coming alive to the world manifested in Shaoji's works, which

is both universally intelligible yet so characteristically shaped by traditional Chinese thinking, is tantamount to the sensation of vertigo, unleashed by the way each element in this world is bound into an interminable process of transformation, in which every phenomenon is related to another, in which as if by some secret thread all appearances and all ideas are woven into a common fabric of perpetuation and

204 mutation. In this giddy process the human subject is not accorded a special status; it is simply matter, which like the pages of newspaper will be shrouded and absorbed by the cocoon of time. Shaoji shows us the threads spun by human hand, shows the barbed wire and the lines in the fabric of freshly printed text and compares these with the threads of the silkworm; he leaves it up to the viewer to decide which threads are the strongest. Like the silkworm, we too are hanging by a single thread. Shaoji reveals that this vertigo would actually be an inherent part of our everyday experience if only we allowed ourselves to open our eyes to the precariousness of our lives, if only we allowed ourselves to take that 'Path of Seeing' he describes. This is where the ways of thinking in the Far East and in Europe share common ground; this is where we with our inclination to blank out reality and seek refuge in fantasy worlds might properly hear Leibniz, who challenged Descartes' claim 'I think, therefore I am' with the assertion 'I see, therefore I am', and repeatedly demanded just one thing from us: *aperire oculos* – to open our eyes.<sup>11</sup>

11. Leibniz, *Monadologie*, op. cit.  
(note 1), 193.