

Wisdom in Rocks: A Conversation with Zhan Wangⁱ

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***Abstract:** The Chinese artist Zhan Wang has been widely noted for his conceptual sculptural works. Through simulating rocks and rock-formation processes by using modern technology and materials, he interrogates the dichotomies between humanity and nature, humanity and technology, modernity and tradition, and development and preservation. In this conversation, Zhan reviewed the conception and making of his works that particularly dealing with rocks. He also explained his views on a series of issues such as ecological awareness, the environmental crisis, the social engagement of art and the blurring of boundaries between art and other fields.*

Yang Jing: Since the mid 1990s, a number of Chinese artists have addressed ecological and environmental issues in their works. Your art has always reflected ecological concerns. But critics haven't referred that much to this dimension of your work. What do you think of this situation?

Zhan Wang: We often hear and use the term ecology. I myself have been thinking too about this term. However, when you speak of ecology, perhaps your understanding of ecology is different from my understanding. Can you give me an example — which of my works do you consider are connected with the ecological issue?

Yang Jing: In my opinion, ecological concern is embodied in most of your works, such as *Artificial Rocks*, *Floating Rock* and *Floating Mountain of Immortals*, among many others. Your works didn't specifically refer to an environmental problem; they are more abstract, like a broader philosophical reflection. But your works conveyed a warning message — implying a tension between the industrial civilization that human beings have created and the natural world in which we reside. In this way your work is connected with ecology.

Zhan Wang: Yes, my understanding of ecology hardly has any connection with a specific environmental issue. In my works, I don't refer to an ecological and environmental crisis. I guess this is why critics don't directly connect my works to ecological awareness. What is the interrelationship between my stainless steel Taihu rocks and ecology? You just mentioned ecological awareness; this refers to the fundamental relationship between the human being and nature. Primitive nature is a dangerous world in which human beings can't survive. Humans must transform nature to survive. There is an essential contradiction between nature and man which we cannot deny. Any simplistic or radical idea of ecology and environmental protection is not applicable. From the global perspective, environmental issues are quite

complicated. We see that the USA has done well in environmental protection; however, as a superpower, the USA has outsourced a lot of pollutant industries to third world countries. Developed countries have paid enough attention to environmental protection and the idea of environmental protection has been widely accepted in these countries; however, their environmental problems have just been shifted to other countries. Therefore, when thinking about ecological issues, there is a big gap between the global and the one-country view. Looking at this issue from a global view is much more complicated. We shall allow different civilizations, life styles and developmental modes to coexist, for example, the primitive civilization, the traditional agrarian civilization and the modern industrial civilization will all be allowed. But in reality, all nations had to follow the same way — the Western way of modernization and industrialization. There are also people who think that we should let countries choose their own way of life, but at the same time there should be a unified rule, and every country must abide by this universal human rule. Artists don't like a homogeneous world; they prefer a more diversified and colorful world. But most humans do not think in this way. They often crave sameness. This single model actually caused the destruction of the Earth's ecology system.

In addition, I think there is difference between ecology as a concept and actual environmental protection. I am hardly involved with environmental protection due to my belief that environmental protection is a practical issue rather than a conceptual one. Art deals with concepts. Environmental protection refers rather to law and execution. If a country has made strict environmental laws and everybody obeys the law, how can it have an environmental problem? Environmental problems come out when the law is not enforced or when one person has the final say. It relates to whether the government makes decisions in accordance with legal procedures. This is already an issue of politics; it has moved away from making art.

Yang Jing: Concerning the relationship between ecological awareness and environmental protection, I think the former is more at philosophical and spiritual level and the latter at a practical level. Ecological awareness is conceptual, about human beings' perceptions and beliefs; environmental protection is the execution or implementation. Returning to the beginning of our talk, your art didn't answer a concrete question, nor did it give a solution. You posed these questions instead of seeking a concrete answer.

Zhan Wang: Right, artists don't have such a huge capability. Art is based upon individual value and ideas. Art cannot replace the practical dimensions of law and politics. However, art works can intrigue people to think about the relationship between humanity and nature.

Yang Jing: There are many interesting points in your work; for example, why did you use stainless steel as the main material and why did you use the shape of Taihu rocks? Can you give a more detailed explanation about this?

Zhan Wang: The original rock represents nature. But how do we regard industrial civilization, how do we perceive the power and potential of human beings? When I made a stainless steel rock, there existed a relationship of copy between the “industry” and the “nature”. Without human labor and technology, nature is only a primitive existence. If we make good use of human labor, such a pair of contradictory things, nature and industry, can be perfectly integrated. I think the two are confrontational with one another but cannot be separated. Look at this stainless steel rock: it's hollow and there is no rock inside, but it maintains the form and appearance of a genuine rock, and its reflecting surface shows the industrial characteristics. Human ability to transform nature is infinite, but how can we develop this ability in an ecologically compatible way instead of against nature? For example, when we build up a dam, we must consider how it complies with nature, rather than against nature. Art and science are interconnected at this point.

To be precise, if I made a rock and replaced the original rock, it would be against ecology, because whatever I did, it would be impossible to create a genuine rock. If I just put a real rock here without making anything myself, it would be just a natural object instead of art. But the artificial rock I made is ecological. I respected nature; however I used another material to copy the natural rock, which represents human labor. I employed human's capability to the maximum, and at the same time kept in accordance with nature instead of destroying it. If we are talking about ecology, this is the ecological view in my work. I think this is the question I posed in my work.

If the audience follows my work, they will get to my point. They need to follow the logic of my work to think of its material characteristics, such as whether the original rock was bought or man-made, and its process and technique, such as how the stainless steel sheet was hammered and polished. All these are significant. All these technological factors are part of my thought.

Yang Jing: I think the title *Artificial Rocks* is very interesting. Its Chinese translation “Jia Shan Shi” has two different meanings. The first meaning is the rock of the “artificial mountain”; the second meaning is the “fake” mountain rock. Ancient Chinese people installed Taihu rocks in their garden to simulate the mountains in nature. It reflected the confrontation of humanity and nature after China became an agrarian civilization as well as expressed ancient Chinese people's dream of merging with nature. That's why ancient Chinese scholars put Taihu rocks in their gardens, to create an illusion of still living in nature. I think Taihu rocks were employed by ancient Chinese people to simulate nature and your work has simulated Taihu rocks; that is a double simulation. This work reminds us how ancient agrarian civilization simulated nature as well as how modern industrial civilization simulated nature. It shows the transform from ancient agrarian civilization to modern industrial civilization. This is an interesting point.

Zhan Wang: The ancient Chinese thinking came from people watching and meditating in their gardens, from which emerged Chinese philosophy. Your interpretation is very meaningful that this work was simulating the way the ancient people simulated nature, so in a way is philosophical sculpture.

Yang Jing: Yes, therefore, the artificial rock has become a concept.

Zhan Wang: And the appreciation of rockery was not invented by any elitist individual, it originated from the people.

Yang Jing: Have you researched when it was that the ancient Chinese people started to install Taihu rocks in their yards and gardens?

Zhan Wang: In the Han dynasty the Chinese already had the hobby of making a small mound in the walled yards. There was already the appreciation of “scholar’s rocks” in the Tang dynasty. The culture of rockery appreciation reached its peak in the Song dynasty due to the Song emperors’ favoring of it. After the Song dynasty, the tradition went downward, but it always existed. Later, it became very popular among the people. There was no garden without artificial rock. So this has become a cultural gene in Chinese people’s blood and everybody is attached to this tradition.

Yang Jing: This describes then a transformation from being appreciated only by the elites to becoming favored by ordinary people.

Zhan Wang: I chose Taihu rocks because they were known by all Chinese. But the more popular something is, the more ignored and neglected it can become. How do we reexamine this cultural tradition? This is one side. From the other side, Taihu rocks are a type of rock and you can find it in many places around the world; it does not exclusively belong to Chinese culture. Rocks belong to the Earth, belong to all human beings. Rocks not only belong to the ancient time, but also to the present time. So, looked at in this way, it is not restricted to one place, culture or time, it is just a natural being. Chinese scholars chose it and endowed it with a certain cultural meaning. But you can’t say it is solely Chinese element like lute-playing, chess, calligraphy and painting. If a Taihu rock is put in a Western garden, it might acquire another function. For example, Western people might see it as a construction material. Taihu rocks are a medium through which humans interacted with nature. No matter whether in the West or the East, people have been thinking about the medium, the relationship between human beings and nature. Many ancient cultures around the world, such as in Europe, Japan and Africa, among many others, worshipped stone. It is a common tradition of human civilization, rather than merely a Chinese tradition. If we examine a Taihu rock from this view, we understand that it would be too narrow-minded to consider it exclusively as part of the Chinese cultural tradition.

Yang Jing: So it has multiple meanings, not merely as a Chinese characteristic. The

ambiguity in your work is very attractive to me, as it is as well, I think, to many other people who stand in front of your work.

Zhan Wang: It does have multifold meanings. But some critics are restricted by their stereotypical views. I attended a couple of exhibitions focusing on the dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity. I felt somehow upset. I don't think I belong to those artists who use traditional elements, so I felt that my art was misunderstood. This misunderstanding might last for a long time.

Yang Jing: The material and technology were rooted in your understanding of the human–nature relationship. You mentioned that nature is an uncertain world in which we cannot survive; therefore it is impossible for humans to completely return to nature. As an artist, what do you think of the anthropocentric view in the relationship between human beings and nature?

Zhan Wang: Completely returning to nature is impractical and ridiculous. For instance, a poisonous insect could easily kill us. To survive, humans must change nature and conquer the hostile environment. Some ecological researchers and environmentalists are totally against the anthropocentric view; this is radical and already away from art. If we totally deny the dichotomy of man and nature, we have denied art. Art is a human production; without human labor and thinking, there is no art. The premise of art is the form, and it was human beings who created the form. This is the essence of art.

Yang Jing: Humans are molded by culture, so art as an artifact is also the product of culture. That is why according to Western art philosophy, a pure natural item is not an artwork.

Zhan Wang: Yes. So, the stainless steel artificial rock is a risk in the sense of art philosophy. On one side, the work possibly slides into being a pure natural thing which has no human-made form. Without the form, it can't be called art. Once, an artist took a piece of rock to the exhibition, and I considered it as a failure. Secondly, the technique is a problem. If this work is only a display of technique, it is also away from art. These two potential dangers might be enough to destroy this work. So, my work should not be a pure natural item, nor a handicraft. In the most precarious situation, I found a perfect point and made the rock into art. This was quite difficult. Many people didn't understand why this work became a classical series in Chinese contemporary art. Its enduring appeal is due to the internal difficulty.

Yang Jing: In my opinion, perhaps its enduring appeal is also because it has been consistently changing and developing. As far as I remember, you started the *Artificial Rocks* series in 1995, and you made hundreds of pieces. Some were quite huge while others small. They were all displayed as sculptures. Afterwards, from around 2000, you created *Beyond Twelve Nautical Miles* and *Mount Everest*, and your stainless

steel sculpture gradually went beyond the conventional venue of sculpture art and entered different public spaces. For example, who had thought that contemporary art could be installed in the open sea, in outer space and on the top of Mount Everest? In my view, this is also the reason for their everlasting appeal, because it broke the conventional understanding of the art venue.

Zhan Wang: Yes, since 2000 I have slightly expanded my works into four different spaces, including the project *Inlay the Great Wall* that was made by hollow stainless steel bricks plated with titanium. These spaces, except the Great wall, are difficult to reach. I don't mean it is impossible to get to these spaces, but normally people won't think to go although they would be able to get there if they really wanted to. Other artists never thought of putting their works in these spaces. For instance, artists put their sculptures at the lakeside or seaside, or in a fountain, but not in the open sea.

Yang Jing: Did anything in particular inspire you at that time?

Zhan Wang: Yes. The project *Beyond Twelve Nautical Miles* was one example. Around 2000, the issue of globalization began to be widely discussed internationally. I felt that the focus of globalization discourses was which culture could represent the global culture, instead of discussing a global public space. I thought that the open sea was a space without cultural identity, as it belongs to all the human beings. This work is more or less a way of ridiculing the discussion of globalization at that time. It was executed at the Lingshan Island in Shandong. The Lingshan Island is a small island in the Bohai Sea. It is the farthest island from the mainland. According to the International Maritime Convention, within 12 nautical miles is the territorial sea, and beyond 12 nautical miles is the exclusive economic zone. The exclusive economic zone is not territorial sea, and beyond the exclusive economic zone is the open sea. The project of placing a rockery in outer space is related to the meteorites. In fact, this work is related to the ancient Chinese idiom "The man of Qi worries in case the sky should fall". Later, I thought, maybe this work should not be called *New Sky Plan*, maybe it is better to title it as *The Man of Qi Worries in Case the Sky Should Fall*. This ancient idiom carries negative meaning about entertaining imaginary or groundless fears and worries. But I think about it from another angle. I think that human beings need to be worry a bit. For example, scientists have this kind of consciousness, and it could be expressed in the saying "Those who do not plan for the future will find trouble at their doorstep". Many of the great inventions and creations come from the result of groundless worries. The inertia of man makes us take the imaginary fears and worries as jokes. I used a joke to express this idea in a more interesting and ridiculous way. It could be regarded as scholarly humor.

Yang Jing: Since 2008, your work has changed a lot. The content and expression of the works are very different from in the original rockery series, but the inherent logic and meaning are still related to nature and people. Can you talk about the train of thought that runs through the main works after 2008?

Zhan Wang: After 2008, I started to explore another direction. In 2008, I had a huge exhibition at the National Art Museum of China; it was like a retrospective exhibition of my previous works under the broad theme of “Artificial Rocks”. After that, I started to integrate some factors other than stainless steel into my work, and I undertook a deeper exploration of form. I did not any more focus on stainless steel itself, but on the rock itself, which I copied using stainless steel. That is to say that I concentrated on stainless steel before 2008 and after that I concentrated on the rock. I first thought that if we enlarge a rock, it becomes a mountain. The natural forces, such as movements in the Earth’s crust, and wind, rain and lightning have shaped the mountains of the Earth. I simulated all these in a glass box. I simulated the chaotic situation of the beginning of the Earth; I put soil into the glass box, and then simulated the process of mountain formation, making rock in an hour. The result of one hour is like the effect of hundreds of millions of years, so it is called *Suyuan Stone Generator — 1 Hour Equals 100 Million Years*. Then I made *My Personal Universe*, the basic idea being rock explosion. A rock can be blown into countless small pieces, somehow the the evolution of the universe and the energy produce bursts. The universe begins from a point and then becomes huger and huger. All human behavior is a microcosm of the explosion of the universe, so this work reminds us of many other things in our lives. I talked to them about this in an interview, but I don't think they really understand it. These two works are interrelated. After *My Universe*, I made *Nowhere*. This work seems to be a void, but with a beam of light, you will see a lot of dust in the space. This dust is my sculpture. I have seen dust before, and against the sun, you can see floating dust, but at the time I didn't think it was art. It is a coincidence that the smog began in the year of my *There is Nothing*.

I also made a batch of works in Singapore at the same time, called *Universe*. I broke a stone and then copied the piece into stainless steel. The key point was keeping the broken pieces without making any change, not even changing their positions. These pieces were mostly collected. Perhaps other artists would have moved these pieces, but I exactly respected the state at the moment after breaking. I think this is ecological thinking. After this work, I made *Morph* series. I chose my own image reflected on stainless steel and then made it into sculpture. After that, I made another batch of sculptures in mud. I imagined myself as a rock and I changed the shape. Meanwhile, in my imagination, I moved between going through the Earth’s mantle and crust with the magma until it finally slowly cooled down to form a rock.

Yang Jing: It seems that you were using human labor only sparingly. Is that due to the awareness that when we apply the technologies that our civilization has endowed us with, we must maintain a restrained attitude and not abuse our power and strength?

Zhan Wang: Right, we shouldn’t misuse human power. We should use our most sophisticated and advanced technologies to comply with nature. This is the highest aim we should pursue. Art making is in the same situation.

Yang Jing: When making these works, did you think about the potential social impact they might have?

Zhan Wang: I wish the audience to be attracted and moved by my work and to appreciate it. To be frank, the thematic issue I addressed in my work was less important. For instance, if my work engages with a political issue and the people find my work thought-provoking, that would be what I want. But if a group of visitors see my work and start to discuss politics in the exhibition hall, it would not be my wish. Similarly, I do not really expect the audiences to discuss issues related to outer-space meteorites. The truth of the Big Bang and the process of the evolution of the universe are issues that scientists like Stephen Hawking care about. Although these themes are borrowed from the political and scientific fields, they are essentially obedient to the needs of artistic creation. If I don't use art, but engage in environmental protection as an ordinary person, it is not art creation, but my life experience. Of course, these experiences will perhaps inspire me and transform into my future work, but I cannot say that being involved in environmental protection is my art. In the same sense, I oppose the use of art as a means of propaganda and oppose the complete integration of the artist's personal creation and political purpose.

The core of art must be personal. In China, since Mao's Speech at Yan'an Forum, neither the artists nor the government has divided the two aspects. In my opinion, the government could urge artists to engage with the subject of the war against the Japanese invasion, and the artists surely could dedicate themselves to that war, but at the same time they should have their own art. The two aspects shouldn't be mutually exclusive. A one-sided emphasis on the role of art as propaganda has resulted in the lack of real art in China for a long time, and produced only propaganda. Art relies on a unique personal language and form; when an artist totally fit his work into political purpose, there is no personal form. Going back to the ecology we talked about, this is actually against the ecological principal, as the essence of ecological thought is to respect diversity. There are two types of human intervention: the first type is good and ecologically appropriate intervention that means respectful and moderate intervention; the other type is bad and anti-ecological, as it means excessive intervention and a lack of respect for the laws of nature.

Yang Jing: You emphasized that the core of art must be personal and this core value must be maintained. But when contemporary art engages with society, it certainly does bring up questions about the borders of art. We mentioned environmental protection: so how do you regard Joseph Beuys' tree planting project as well as his other activities related to environmental protection?

There are two kinds of engagement: the first is indirect. For example, my work involved with ecological thinking also engages with society because it might inspire people. The other type is more direct, as in the example of Beuys. Beuys was a very

unique artist and he had deep influences on later socially-engaged artists. But I think his works were still within the domain of art. First, his work was original as nobody before him had done that. Artists often discover the phenomena that other people neglect but which deserve people's attention. The artists pull them back to public attention. This is their work. But, if another later artist did the same thing that Beuys had done, he would be an imitator, not an initiator. According to the logic of art, he is not a core artist, but only an applied artist. We say, today, a lot of socially-engaged artists are applied artists. If art engages in society, it must maintain its originality. Beuys' engagement was original, so he was a core artist. Furthermore, we shouldn't forget that his Green Party and Direct Democracy experiments were only part of his works; he also did a lot of installations and sculptures with fat, blankets and honey.

Yang Jing: You classify artists into core artists and applied artists. This is an interesting fresh idea for me.

Zhan Wang: Actually, I've always classified artists in this way. Core means originality, and outside of the originality is applied, that's to say, artworks as ramification. In Chinese contemporary art, many ideas are used by previous artists, and that degrades a number of contemporary Chinese works. When I made my artificial rocks, I endeavored to find where my idea was rooted. I was born in China, and I'm definitely under the influence of traditional culture. I first found this out, and then I found the originality of my work. Once, a foreign guest asked me if the whole of Chinese traditional culture and art except for the appreciation of rock were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. I thought his idea very inspiring, and of course reasonable. In the Cultural Revolution, traditional literature, drama, religion and many other things were criticized, but nobody criticized rocks. All other things of our traditional culture were taken down and destroyed, but nobody regarded rocks as reactionary, nobody destroyed them. So, the part of our culture which is the closest to nature was not broken; the root of the philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu was not destroyed.

Yang Jing: And nobody made trouble for bamboo either.

Zhan Wang: Exactly. Even at that time, nobody was so mad as to cut bamboo down; this is an interesting example as well. Coming back to the core of art, Beuys' engagement with society was experimenting whether art could intervene in society and to what level art could engage with it: this was the core issue of art. Looking at what he did, he organized the German Green Party and practiced his idea of Direct Democracy. How can Direct Democracy actually be realized in society? Thus, he did not really solve a social issue, he made an art experiment. Don't forget that his Direct Democracy was not realized at the parliament, but at the Kassel Documenta. His project of planting trees was also a work made for the Kassel Documenta. If he had been an environmentalist, he should have devoted all his lifetime to planting trees, and perhaps going to plant trees all over the world. That would be another matter, rather than making art. Coming back to my own work, I put the floating rock in the

open sea, on the top of Mount Everest and in outer space. To realize my artistic idea, I interacted with other fields, that to say with people and institutions from non-art circles. But my work didn't move out of the realm of art. For example, I discussed my work with staff working at the planetarium, but it was still an art issue: it didn't become a research question or a scientific discovery for the planetarium.

Yang Jing: The border of art is a significant issue when contemporary art engages with society and includes addressing ecological and environmental issues. I can see that although your concept of sculpture has been expanding all the time, the core of your work is still within the domain of art.

Zhan Wang: I have a strict grasp of the core of art; I have never declared or promoted the idea that art enters into other fields. I've been cautious not to engage too deeply with society. I can't be too close to social reality; I must keep some distance from it for thinking about the issue of form. That explains why I have avoided addressing environmental problems. I believe that it is not necessary for an artist to pursue direct and quick social impact, as that might be precarious for the career of an artist.

i This interview with Zhan Wang was conducted at the artist's studio in Beijing on 10 May, 2016. The interview was originally in Chinese and translated into English by the author. The Chinese transcript was reviewed and approved by artist Zhan Wang and kept in the possession of the author.

ii Yang Jing is an art researcher from China. She is currently undertaking a post-doctoral research at the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies of the University of Jyväskylä, focusing on ecological awareness in Chinese contemporary art. Yang's research on ecological awareness in Chinese contemporary art is currently granted by the Finnish Cultural Foundation.