

## 13 | The laughter behind the painted smile

Yue Minjun, *Untitled*  
(2005)

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Yue Minjun is one of the leading Chinese artists today. He turned to art later in life, joining an artists' village in Yuanmingyuan in the early 1990s, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square student crackdown and the closure of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition at the National Gallery – events that were symbolic of the political and social turbulence in China. A few years later, this village became home to most of the leading contemporary Chinese artists today, including Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei and Zhang Xiaogang, among others. Many of these artists were loosely grouped together as “cynical realists”, artists disillusioned with the aesthetics of social realism, the then-current ideologically driven artistic style imposed on artists, but also weary of the commercialism of Western capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Struggling to make sense of the contemporary society in which they found themselves, these artists' works encapsulate the unease of asserting oneself as a unique individual within the conformist-driven, collective mindset of Chinese culture. Drawing on the iconography and style of social realism, they turn propagandistic art on its head, using it to reject the utopian visions of collective identities. With wry sarcasm and stinging irony, these artists appropriate the idealized imagery of socialist propaganda

to highlight its disturbing use as a form of social control over collective identity.

Yue's *Untitled* from 2005 is a work that is representative of the visual scepticism that Yue's work evokes. The canvas is filled with a whole row of men – smiling, dangling their toes in the water, enjoying the delights of a beautiful day. Each person in the row has the same face, the same smile, the same pose, the same body – this row of smiling men appears to continue indefinitely, if only we could see beyond the picture plane. The mass of faces, identical in expression, look like paper cut-outs glued onto the row of rigid bodies that are carefully perched on the small white bench floating above an equally artificial lake of sparkling, clear blue water. These smiling faces take over most of the canvas, and what little space remains is given over to an almost completely nondescript background – some pristine water below and generic greenery around the edges of the canvas.

It would be convenient to situate this work, and Yue's *oeuvre* as a whole, within the style of cynical realism, but I think such attempts are misguided. Like his contemporaries, Yue's works adopt an exaggerated, simplistic visual imagery that is so straightforward that one cannot help but want to look beyond the surface interpretations for something deeper. If there is anything obvious in Yue's work, it's that the obvious isn't so; that reality is not as it appears. And, indeed, a constant theme of Yue's work is the repetition of simple motifs, obvious styles and stereotypical icons, all in order to encourage this sceptical attitude toward the surface appearances in his work. Like the cynical realists, Yue creates art whose visual representations do not accurately or truthfully reflect reality in a way that is designed to get the viewer to question the appearances. This is a kind of visual scepticism: a scepticism about how to interpret the appearances represented in the work.

But what distinguishes Yue from his fellow contemporaries is how he wants us to respond to visual scepticism: cynical realists respond to the socio-political situation with a cynical, critical and disillusioned attitude; Yue's work, in contrast, invites the viewer to imagine alternative social and political possibilities – a positive and empowering attitude.

To defend this alternative positive interpretation of Yue's work, I shall consider a particular work by Yue, *Untitled* of 2005. I explore first the way in which this work invites us to adopt a visual scepticism toward his

paintings, the view that reality is not as it appears in this work. It does so by offering the viewer an image, whose content is absurd, an image whose apparent surface meaning cannot coherently constitute the actual meaning of the work. As a result, the standard viewer expectation that we should appreciate what we see in the image is thwarted – whatever it is that we ought to appreciate in this work is not what we can in fact see.

How then should we approach Yue's work if what we ought to appreciate is not what we in fact see? One might be tempted to give up trying to make sense of his work. But then one would miss something deep and important in the work. Yue is inviting us to imagine alternatives and possibilities that we cannot literally see in the work, but which stem from the image presented: it invites us to break away from the rigid conformism of contemporary Chinese culture. In this respect, Yue's visual scepticism calls on viewers to look beyond what is merely presented and to imagine how life could be otherwise, to walk away from the traditional rule-bound culture and the socio-political conformism used to control thinking. I conclude by commenting on the positive recommendations we should take from Yue's work about how we ought to approach life more generally.

### **Beneath the surface**

Let us then consider the laughing men in Yue's work. These identical men appear in the middle of nowhere, completely disconnected from anything and everything. Moreover, they are disconnected from one another, and to us, the viewers. This is rather surprising, because, at least from what we can see, they have every reason to be completely connected to each other: they are tightly squashed together, sitting almost on top of each other; they are in the middle of nowhere, which suggests that there must be something common to these men that brings them together; they are all smiling, an inherently social and bonding activity that typically is the result of having shared a common experience together. And yet, everything else in the picture tells us that these individuals have nothing in common: they seem radically separated from one another, without any connection to each other, without any relations to each other. Their smile is done with eyes closed tight, as if to block the world out, to obliterate the outside world,

and shut themselves off from anyone either in the fictional world of the picture, or from us viewers.

The absurdity intensifies when we consider the men's faces. They are not faces of men, but in fact self-portraits of Yue himself. We typically expect a self-portrait to be the kind of image that highlights a person's singularities, that identifies what is distinctive and unique to him alone, that points out what sets him apart from everyone else. A self-portrait is a window into the artist's own soul, revealing his most intimate secrets and inner, private emotional states. These are our expectations when confronting a self-portrait. But in contradiction to all this, Yue uses his self-portrait as a template, copying its image over and over again. This is a clever move on many levels: artistically, to repeat the image contained within the self-portrait undermines our traditional expectations of a self-portrait. Where a single self-portrait invites us to consider the author's individuality, Yue's multiple images remind the viewer that his own individuality has been suppressed, replaced with an oppressive, collective identity. The cartoonish, mocking quality of these self-portraits draws attention to an unusual use of physiognomic expression for artistic purposes.

Using the self-portrait to represent every man, Yue underscores the collective sameness and cultural conformity – a socio-political critique of his country. In addition, by repeating the self-portrait, Yue constructs a plural subject – a “we” that is also an “I.” Hiding behind this plural subject, Yue can distance himself from the criticisms contained in his work, a clever political move to voice opposition. Better still, the plural subject also transforms the criticisms contained in Yue's work into criticisms attributable to the plural subject instead of Yue himself.

Finally, the absurdity of the smile as a mask to hide behind has particular importance in Chinese culture. Repeated in Yue's work is not just his own self-portrait, but, more importantly, his smile. Again, the physiognomic expression here is used for socio-political critique. The grinning, pink-faced man, eyes closed, mouth open almost physically impossibly wide, is larger than life – so much so that his image fights to take over the entirety of the canvas. At first glance, it is a simple, light-hearted smile, one that might convey an openness and honesty that is to be valued and prized. And yet, it is a smile as mysterious as the Mona Lisa's – for there is no apparent reason given to the viewer that might explain why this man is smiling. It is

a smile completely dissociated from the happiness that ought to be causing the smile: the physiognomic expression is completely divorced from the person's underlying emotional state. The physiognomic expression is used to artistic end – to create artifice.

But, what are we meant to be seeing, then, if not what we literally see? If visual scepticism prompts us to challenge what we see, and if what we see are caricatured physiognomic expressions, then we ought to be questioning the physiognomic expression as an authentic expression of the self, and how this is used for socio-political commentary.

### **The laughing man**

Yue Minjun's paintings are situated in a long tradition of deceiving images, especially ones involving smiling self-portraits: former communist-style propaganda posters were designed to construct an alternative narrative of history and of the individuals experiencing that history, one according to which workers are happy, a kind and gentle leader looks down benevolently on those workers, and everyone works together happily for the collective good. In propaganda posters, the mythologized leader's detached, smiling head hangs high in the sky over the workers. Yue turns this smiling self-portrait around: instead of the party leader, we see Yue's own face, smiling down on us all and laughing at us. The smiling Yue, who stands for anyone and everyone, has replaced the smiling leader that Yue now mocks. The laughing man is laughing at how we see our past and challenging us to think about how we see ourselves now.

The propaganda posters' deception is merely a particular instance of a broader phenomenon. This discrepancy between what is portrayed, and the reality it represents underscores the highly ambiguous attitudes that the Chinese have about their actual past and the related official history. Where most (pre-modernist) art embodies the standard mimetic goal of art imitating life in a bid for representational realism, propaganda art does the opposite: to get life to imitate the art they present, art that embodies an idealized, sanitized version of reality.

But, this duplicity of the smile extends into Chinese attitudes about their contemporary world as well.<sup>2</sup> Even today, images rarely reflect reality, and

much of life involves portraying oneself differently than how one feels: one's physiognomy cannot betray one's authentic feelings. This is something to which Yue Minjun himself is deeply sensitive:

Everyone had to appear to do the right thing all the time ... Conforming was an all-consuming activity in the work life of many individuals. At least that much was the same for everyone in China at that time. Which, incidentally, is why to laugh, to assume a smile in order to mask your real feelings of helplessness, had such resonance for my generation.<sup>3</sup>

Yue adopts propaganda posters' stylistic features in order to negate their traditional meanings and infuse them with a meaning that any common Chinese person would find apparent beneath the surface: this smile masks the helpless feeling that paralyzes people. And, indeed, that is exactly how these men appear to us: frozen in time and space, smiling because there is no other appropriate response.

At this point, we can appreciate another explanation for what Yue is trying to achieve with visual scepticism. We have already seen that Yue articulates a visual scepticism in order to prompt viewers to question what they see in the paintings. But, these paintings are clearly analogous to the lives of ordinary Chinese: given the crackdowns of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese must have been questioning what they perceived all around them. Their own socio-political reality is one that ought to prompt the very same visual scepticism that Yue himself represents in his paintings: the way reality is represented, what we see – in paintings, as in life – is not as it truly is.

So, Yue's work is intended to prompt viewers to experience a visual scepticism in two different domains – first, a literal visual scepticism with regard to the physiognomic expression in Yue's self-portraits, and, second, a symbolic visual scepticism with regard to the socio-political reality of contemporary Chinese life. From the point of view of an ordinary Chinese worker, who has lived his entire life in a work unit, who is told what to do, how to live, what to believe, it might be frightening to find oneself not having anything to do but to enjoy oneself, as these characters have themselves found in this image. The challenge of constructing meaning in life out of

nothing, while in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing, without any purpose, would be a very daunting enterprise indeed. Such a fear might even prevent us from being able to appreciate the amazing things that surround us or to enjoy the people in whose company we find ourselves. What to do when one suddenly finds oneself in a world in which reality is not as it appears? If we take Yue's works to embody visual scepticism in both painting and real life, then we can interpret Yue to be recommending laughter as an appropriate response in both arenas.

Yue's work embodies a simple truth about laughing which I believe is crucial to understanding how he thinks we ought to respond to the sceptical challenge: laughter is a source of hope and optimism that things will be better. It is a challenge for the viewer, to resist the simple, passive response of disappointment with life, and instead find energy to confront reality as it is, and embrace laughter as an authentic response to the socio-political situation. For Yue, this optimism is central:

So this is how it all began: I was thinking that the image of a laughing face ought to be perceived as an assurance that things would be better: that a future life could be as rewarding and meaningful as the Buddha promised ... I decided that my laughing faces would be my own personal reminder of our situation, and which would be easily understood by people around me, and ordinary folk, too, who had learned to laugh because they understood that any other response was futile.<sup>4</sup>

The smile, then, is a mask to hide behind, but a mask whose fakeness Yue hopes will eventually become genuine.

### **Philosophical import**

It might seem that we have now come full circle – we began by noting the absurdity of these smiling men in the middle of nowhere; we explained away this apparent absurdity by appealing to Yue's visual scepticism about taking representations at face value; Yue's scepticism, in turn, is a device to reassure viewers that the best response to absurd situations is to laugh



– the apparent absurdity of the laugh turns out to be the most appropriate response given the situation.

Of what use is visual scepticism for Yue, if we end up exactly where we started? We may be back at the same recommendation – laughter. But, the reasons behind the recommendation are quite different. Where at first, the physiognomic expression of laughter was used solely to artistic effect, to prompt a visual scepticism, to challenge the viewer to confront his socio-political reality as it truly is, now, the very same physiognomic expression is being encouraged not for artistic reasons, but for socio-political ones – to confront the authorities, to challenge the status quo. Where, socio-politically, Chinese were forced to smile in order to hide their personal expression, to mask their authentic feelings, and to promote a rule-following, compliant attitude imposed by the government, now Yue encourages us to laugh as an expression of socio-political criticism, as a confrontation to authorities. The reasons for laughing are now very different indeed!

We have already examined in detail the nature of Yue's visual scepticism. We must now understand how the physiognomic expression can be used as a socio-political expression of hope and optimism. To appreciate this, it is useful to situate Yue within his artistic and socio-political context. Yue and his fellow contemporaries experienced first the exhilarating excitement of being able to leave their work units to start new, self-sufficient lives in an artists' village; to have the freedom to present themselves authentically through new and exciting work. And, then, this all comes to an abrupt end with the Tiananmen Square crackdown and the National Gallery's unexpected closure. Pervading the art scene is a sense of unease and weariness about the possibility of artistic freedom and the future of individual expression. To respond to these emotions with the listlessness of disappointment is to accept that the government's impositions on artists have been successful, and to grant that the government has already won. For the artists to express disappointment or sadness about the situation is for them tacitly to accept that the artists have already lost the fight. Worse, it buys into the basic starting point of the government: that the government can control artists, and the artists' expression of disappointment is proof that the government has already won.

Against this backdrop, Yue's laughing man no longer looks absurd – instead, the laughing man offers us a way of escaping government control.



To laugh at, or in spite of, the government is to recognize that some challenges and problems cannot be dealt with using reason, rationality or argumentation. To laugh at the government's use of coercion and force, is to walk away from the fight with the government and to deny that it is a fight worth having. Artistically creative as a response to the crackdown, it is also politically astute: to laugh is to place oneself outside of any battle, to deny the very existence of a battle, against the government's attempt to impose conformism upon the artists. The laugh, then, is a politically savvy response to an immediate threat. But, it also shows the way to a philosophically enlightened attitude as well.

The reason that laughter is a philosophically enlightened activity is that to laugh is to appreciate more about the situation than we might otherwise see if we were to remain critical, negative and ironic. The laughing man motif very generally is a useful device that encourages us to break free from our individual perspective; to detach ourselves from the situation, in order to understand that situation more clearly. The laughing man, then, exemplifies a certain attitude toward life, a certain way of being in the world that Yue is recommending we adopt:

Yue comes closest to saying something subversive when he describes the role of laughter in his works. "If you are faced with a situation you cannot change, then laughter may be the only possible reaction", he says. "But if many people start laughing, it can become a proactive force for change." His creature might lack the wit and wisdom of a Shakespearean fool, and any wry comment on the human condition is hidden behind the laughter. But maybe that's the point in a country whose critics are silenced.<sup>5</sup>

The epistemic stance we are invited to take toward these laughing men is precisely the same epistemic stance that Yue is suggesting that the Chinese themselves take to their own situation. In the face of the laughing men's absurd situation, they laugh; and so too, should we laugh in the face of our own life when it appears absurd to us.

Laughing can exemplify this detachment from life because laughing is a form of acknowledging uncertainty. When confronted with a difficult

situation, we might respond with criticism or negativity, as the cynical realists recommend, or with laughter, as Yue encourages. To be negative, however, is a very limiting response. For one, it presupposes a particular perspective on the situation – that the situation is as difficult as it appears. To be critical of a situation is already to grant a hopelessness, an inability to escape the situation. But, Yue encourages us to laugh in the face of difficult situations. To laugh is to acknowledge uncertainty, to remain open to all options, not to close oneself off to different responses. Laughing, then, allows us to detach ourselves from our own perspective, to appreciate the situation for what it is, for all that it might be. While we may not have access to all those options, laughing allows us to rid ourselves from prejudices that prevent us from seeing things for what they really are.

And so we return to the laugh – but now with new reasons. In today's world, as in Yue's work, when confronted with appearances that do not conform to reality, we are invited to laugh. But, if Yue is right, the reason we are laughing is not to conform to the collective identity imposed by the Chinese culture, but instead to laugh as an authentic and personal expression of hope when faced with an uncertain future. In so doing, we can appreciate the way in which Yue puts physiognomic expression to a novel artistic use, to point the way toward a clever socio-political critique embedded in the simple act of laughter.

The use of the smile and laughter as a way of promoting detachment and openness is not uncommon to Chinese thought. Daoism is one of the main religious and philosophical systems of thought that encourages an anti-authoritarian, free-spirited and open-minded approach to life. Expressed through the classic texts *Tao Te Ching* and *Zhuangzi*, the socio-political views about how to live are expressed through literary stories with humour and light-heartedness. In this respect, we can see Yue's use of physiognomic caricature to engender certain socio-political critiques of his country to be firmly entrenched within China's artistic traditions.

But, there are lessons here for Westerners, too. Physiognomic caricatures abound in contemporary Western culture as well – advertisements, fashion magazines, clothing stores are all full of images of men and women appearing a certain way. These men and women are represented to us with artificially great big smiles on their faces, just like Yue's laughing men.

What difference is there really, between a propaganda poster encouraging us to take pride in our hard work, and a computer advertisement encouraging us to take pride in getting our jobs done no matter where we might be? Between a work unit that uses social pressure to keep everyone's hair cut in a particular way, and a fashion magazine that gives us step-by-step instructions to recreate the hair styles of the rich and famous?

Yue's laughing men may look radically different from the smiling models that pervade Western culture, but they both share that artificial physiognomic expression that Yue exaggerates to generate his socio-political critique. In many respects, Yue's work has even more serious implications for Western society, since not only does our society idealize that artificial physiognomic expression, but we do so in the name of valuing our individuality and personal expression.

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