

## **Art of Hammering: Act, Repetition and Purification**

Sukmo Kim (Art Historian/Curator, PhD)

Central to Ye Jinyoung's art is the concept of relation (relationality). One of the ways this is manifest is through his use of dots—a common metaphor for artists to express themselves—and other representations that resemble dots. Figuratively, a cluster of dots are both a representation and a reflection of a web of relationships that the artist is forming with those around him. Keeping the element of 'relation' in mind, proper approach of Ye's artwork goes beyond the visual appreciation of the final work; rather, we are invited to engage in the process of the artwork's making.

Ye's works can be divided into three groups according to the material and technique used. First is a set of works using thin aluminium pieces that are of even length, next a collection of thin clay pieces sized and painted like flower petals, and lastly mixed media objects made up of slim needles, capped with clay and adhesives. While all of these groups vary in composition and quality, they are all dynamic attempts at creating a change and movement across the plane surface. There is a distinct structural quality to these works found in the way the elements are distributed in clusters, and are repeated across the plane with a degree of variation. In other words, these groups of works are isomorphic representations of the same motif that have undergone, and are still undergoing an organic change reflecting a stream of consciousness.

The three groups are conceived as simultaneous response to a single subject-matter. In the beginning, a prominent theme in Ye's works was that of a distanced contemplation of all worldly phenomena that stroke an Eastern tone. Early works by Ye included stylized adaptations of traditional Korean painting methods. It was after a profound inner struggle that Ye went through that his artistic production saw a major change. The act of hammering repeatedly on wire strips—an object he found by chance—offered Ye consolation from anger that had been bottled up for too long. Hammering provided him a way out of mental lethargy he was about to fall into.

Soon enough, Ye saw that the act of hammering—which started as a way to vent out anger—was now shaping the wire into thin strips that bore marks of impact imprinted on them. By cutting up the strip into units of steel cords and stuck them onto a flat plane, Ye created a unique structure that was neither a painting nor a relief. What is remarkable here is the transforming process of bodily repetition and mental purification that come together as art.

French Philosopher Merleau-Ponty has challenged the conceptual philosophy of the West with his notion of the "body". In his view, Western philosophy has been predominantly conceptual with its emphasis of the rationality and the mind, a tendency that dates back to the Cartesian "cogito". So Merleau-Ponty highlighted the specific scene of living, championing the empirical and practical nature of sensory existence that complements the rational thinking. As the philosopher points out, abstract thinking that fails to materialize in reality is but hollow speculation. When it comes to the encounter with the existential world, what is essential is the action delivered as bodily sense and movement.

Clearly, Ye's production is an articulation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on the body. His creation is an accumulation of action that his body has carried out. The weight of his hammer is transferred through his body and the repetition of hammering act results in the physical alteration in the steel wire. At the level of phenomenon it appears as though thin and round wire strips have been flattened; at the existential level, however, an ontological shift has taken place. Ye's continued hammering, fueled by his internal conflicts and mental agony, may be first felt as a sense of physical fatigue, but it is in fact a sign of existential recognition and perception of the body. It is at his physical limit that the perceptual boundary between the body and self is effaced; what remains is the material that fully embodies the marks of hammering. And that remainder attests to Ye's artistic existence.

Ye then chops the uneven steel wires—which has the semblance of his wounded ego— paints them and arranges them across the plane surface that he prepared. A new quality emerges from the plane as it is filled with numerous steel pieces. That is, individual strips give off their color by means of reflecting with neighbouring pieces and thus reach the viewer's eye indirectly. Artist's practice has caused yet another transformation as it results in the viewer's aesthetic experience.

Recalling once again the motif of 'relations' which is at the center of Ye's production, his handling of the materials and their delivery of artistic effect becomes once more convincing. Ye's objects, as they continue to generate optical movement with one another, do not place the viewer into a certain fixed viewpoint. Just as every human relationship does, his works continue to shift and change shape. All elements surrounding the artwork--the direction of the light, viewer's perspective and movement—can cause a phenomenological change and create a new, unexpected vision.

Other groups of Ye's work that were produced concurrently—such as those made with flat, painted clay and mixed media artworks using clay formed into a round shape connected to cotton picks—arise from the same motif as the steel wire work. From this range of outputs, we can note a high degree of enthusiasm on the part of the artist in that they all are results of such arduous efforts of examination. Once the artist finds a sculptural possibility, regardless of whether it is intended or by coincidence, then he is willing to undertake a strenuous process of experimentation. Various works which are produced as a result then grow as distinct formal groups. That is why we can trace these works of different qualities back to a single original form. What is characteristic about Ye in other words is an organic structure whereby the whole refers to the part and the parts refer to the whole; as the parts and the whole reinforce the artist's consciousness, they subsequently give birth to new productions.

For Ye, artistic production is a journey to nirvana by setting oneself free from the perpetual cycle of being and non-being, by removing one's agony through a distanced contemplation of the world. His art has no flashy technique nor flamboyant rhetorics, nor does it need either. Art is a process for Ye Jinyoung, a continuation of repeated action.