



## RESPONDING TO CRITICISMS OF THE TEXTUALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART WITH AN EXAMPLE

**Loy Luo**

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### Abstract

This essay responds to philosopher Chen Jiaying's critique of the "textualization" of contemporary art — the phenomenon in which conceptual and discursive structures seem to dominate artistic practice. Through the example of a New York exhibition, I argue that the textual dimension of contemporary art is not a symptom of decline or over-intellectualization, but rather an inevitable manifestation of the self-reflection of art in the age of language. The text, as an extension of the visual, becomes a performative field where artistic consciousness, theoretical interpretation, and curatorial practice interweave. By reconsidering the relation between writing, image, and exhibition, this essay proposes that textualization should be understood as an act of thinking through art itself — a gesture that opens new possibilities for the visibility of thought.

### Keywords

Textualization; Contemporary art; Chen Jiaying; Exhibition discourse; Performativity; Art and Language; Curatorial theory

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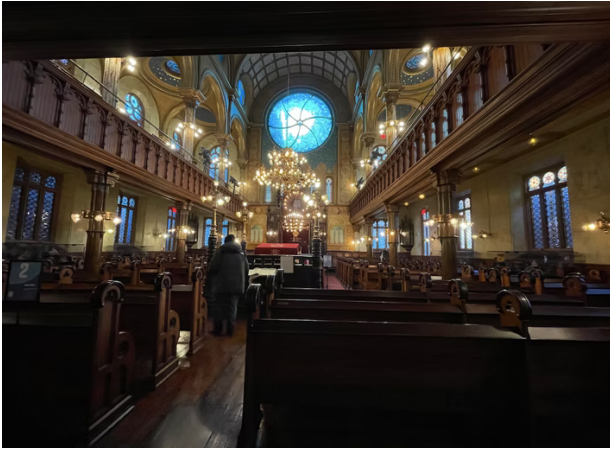
### **Biographical Note**

Loy Luo is a contemporary artist based in New York. Her practice explores the philosophical and cultural dimensions of abstraction through painting, sculpture, and writing. (<https://www.loyluospace.com/loyluobio-cv>)

*Images: From EVERY PROTECTION, work by Debra Olin at The Museum at Eldridge Street, October 14 – April 24, 2022*

# Responding to Criticisms of the Textualization of Contemporary Art With an Example

Writer: Loy Luo | April 20, 2022 | Source: Dominoart WeChat Official Account



Recently, Mr. Chen Jiaying wrote an article against the trend of textual contemporary art, emphasizing that art should be based on the power of direct feeling, rather than turning the creation into an obscure text that requires technical interpretation. Interestingly, he says, "Reading text brings imagination and expands the living space. "To enable people to understand reality in the cross-reference of many worlds", but he only gave the privilege of such interpretation to scholarship, to be more precise, philosophy, while the text and interpretation of art were pseudo-scholarship in his opinion. His views naturally reminded me of Debra Olin's current solo show.

## Appreciation: intuition reinforced by text

A month ago, in the traditional atmosphere of the Elderidge Street Synagogue Museum,

suppressed by reason. However, a large number of facts show that the molding and

I was excited to find the works of Olin, a contemporary artist currently on display, in tune. The tension between the work and the space makes my senses jump, and some vague intuitive impressions often linger in my mind for days. However, when Kiefer's dress finally broke through the chaos and came to my mind, followed by postmodern philosophical words like "being," "absence," and "body," I realized that the power of the text had broken through the vague intuition of pure sensibility. No, I don't think I could have had such a strong intuition if it wasn't for the historical knowledge, visual experience and philosophical texts that I had stored in my brain to think about the relevance of things to life. That is, intuition is not pure, it is the underlying text that tirelessly shapes consciousness, repeatedly tricking us into backtracking and fabricating our intuitions.

We know that animals are not intuitive when entering art scenes, and of course it might make sense to use bulls' intuition for red as a counterexample, since biological intuition really is intuition. From this we can infer that intuition is a hierarchical system, and the primary intuition is that of animals. Some people believe that animal intuition is strong and human intuition is weak because it is

The artist was inspired by an article she came across in a magazine in 2008

suppression of rationality over sensibility will make sense intuition into another state of higher energy. That's why the hidden truth is so much more exciting than the open truth. Text often plays a role of concealment and even repression.

Of course, artistic creation requires the use of intuitive images, but the intuition of contemporary art is more like an iceberg floating on the water than before, and the audience can only



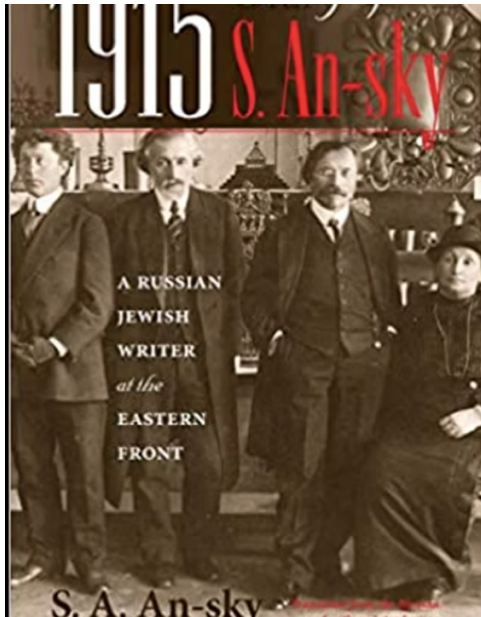
perceive this part directly. Would his intuition decline with more text reminding and guiding the viewer that there might be more ice underwater? No! He will re-examine all the details he can see with more curiosity and more intuition to participate in feelings and imagination. After I had finished reading and interviewing about the exhibition, when I stood again in front of the womenswear installation beneath the cathedral ceiling, all the voices, present and absent, seemed to come from all directions, converging into a symphony.

**Creation: Multiple layers of text texture**

entitled "A Category: The Sky and the Jewish Ethnographic Project" and became interested in it. In the extensive literature, she found a 2,087-questionnaire. The part of the questionnaire about motherhood and childbirth inspired the artist's image. The questionnaire, which had no answer because of the war, made her feel the mysterious atmosphere of light and darkness, known and unknown, hidden and revealed. So we know that there must be a page in the artist's reading. As we know, Heidegger's eastern mysticism philosophy has been a very important context source of modern and contemporary art creation rural areas of China. In one piece, the feet of adults circled around the hem, as if engaged in a secret, silent fertility cult. in Europe and America for quite a long time. Olin's choice of unrepeatable single-plate printing forms and open, non-preset production methods can be seen as footnotes to this popular text.

Around the theme of pregnancy and protection, Olin made her grandmother's white nightgown a base pattern, symbolizing life and growth. On the pattern, she illustrated the questions in an-Sky questionnaire as witchcraft totem on the ancient stone wall (of course, the collection of modern life objects and images and the using of collage techniques show the time mark of the work itself). "Is it considered a charm for a pregnant woman to wear an apron?" The question is presented in the form of a

white dress with a black apron and pink lace. The black apron is actually an ultrasound image of a pregnant fetus, and the apron image seems to give the fetus an extra layer of care. "Do evil spirits invade new life? The question became a maternity dress with small mirrors similar to the exorcism mirrors still used in some



The absence of childbearing in all the images of the works reminds us that human reproduction is ultimately a kind of self-sacrifice, and the greatest concern of a race with a specific tragic fate for its own survival is expressed by the artist in a subtle language like a huge thunder. The focal point of the human epic is the fetus, which is being carefully protected. The fetus is both present and absent in philosophy. There are countless works of art that have addressed the fate of the Jewish people throughout history, but this creative text touches the weight with light design.

### **Exhibition: Text overlay upgrade**

Here, the synagogue actually participates in the exhibition in the form of text, which involves the transformation of the concept of contemporary art exhibition. Unlike in the past, the space is no longer just a place to display and sell works (except for commercial exhibitions in commercial galleries), but as an established context. No matter the works are presented in the form of homogeneity or heterogeneity, they cannot avoid the established existence, but only speak their own words. Moreover, the synagogue is not merely a background here, but a dynamic subject that exerts pressure and influence and accepts change. If space and art are equal subjects, artists and curators should carry out interactive dialogue according to the theory of intersubjectivity, that is, they jointly complete the upgrade from a single work or spatial text to a composite and superimposed exhibition text.

The synagogue space, as the participant of the exhibition, is not an eternal static on a slice of time, but a life in a state of flow, which is growing. It is not an existence, but existence itself. It gains more possibilities by participating in different exhibition activities. The subject of art itself is a composite text of material, time and event. It should absorb more subjects or texts in the cooperation with the subject of space to create more possibilities for the composite text of exhibition.

### **Contribution: The textualization of contemporary art is a revision of past confusions**

In essence, the textualization of

contemporary art is not a new creation, but the restoration of normality in a sense. As we all know, it is not until modern times that works of art are divorced from a particular temporal and spatial text, or from a particular context of meaning (witchcraft, religion, royalty). Witchcraft totems are associated with a whole set of worship rituals; Religious images are associated with symbolic image pedigree and grand narrative. Royalty ICONS annotate legends that are indistinguishable from

truth in order to give legitimacy to power. Although images can be visualized, text is the cornerstone of artistic images' deterministic meaning. Historically, artistic production has always been combined with text, and only by combining text can it be comprehensively interpreted.

The "independence" of modern art began with the pursuit of independent identity by artists in the Renaissance. Then they chose their subjects freely, thus getting rid of the fate of the so-called "handmaiden" who sang praises; Later, abstract art made language independent of content, while matching the slogan of "art for art's sake". Finally, at the beginning of the last century, modern art gained unprecedented "freedom" and "victory". The greatest progress was the full respect for the independence of the artist, which inspired great creative passion and reached an unparalleled level of formal exploration. However, this progress also overcorrects, for while liberating art, it also separates art from the social space-time organism. On the one hand, many modern artists exaggerate the subtleties of their personal feelings without caring about their work's relationship to the world and other people. On the other hand, commercial

exhibitions in commercial galleries make people suspect that spiritual art has been objectified and thrown into the capital market. In fact, the market encourages the artist's alienation.



Contemporary art emphasizes the return of art to society and life. However, this return is clearly not a return to the original track. We can see that contemporary art has a more obvious textual tendency in form, that is, artistic creation needs to link background texts and establish meaningful texts, and there is a closer connection between artistic creation and exhibition. Artistic creation is no longer one piece after another as in the past, but more like the execution of a project. It involves the reflection of postmodern philosophy on modern philosophy. The seemingly exaggerated banter, irony and absurdity in contemporary art are just people's attempts to use deconstructivism to counter the original huge and stubborn rational-based grand narrative of structuralism. If there is a lack of

understanding of the contemporary philosophical background and the development trajectory of art itself, it is not easy to understand where the motivation of textual contemporary art comes from, and aphasia will occur.

### **Conclusion: Three differences between philosophers and contemporary art**

After the above statement, we can probably sort out three main differences between the philosopher Chen Jiaying and contemporary art:

*First, art is defined as a sensory object that can be grasped intuitively.*

We have explained that even in the classical and modernist eras of visual art, the viewer could not fully grasp art through mere intuition. Moreover, since Duchamp's "Fountain" came out in 1917, it has been more than 100 years since art challenged the visual boundary to enter the conceptual world.

*Second, the differences in text definition.*

Mr. Chen spends more than half of the chapters to explain the concept of text, but the text he defines is narrow, text category, thinking category, static, technical, instrumental, and object. This definition is consistent with the established conclusion that textual interpretation is the prerogative of scholarship, especially philosophy. However, contemporary art

uses the concept of text more widely, which is beyond words, active, subject, interactive, environmental, polysemy and so on. The application of text concept in contemporary art is practice prior to theory, and the interpretation of text here is also in the sense of hermeneutics, which is free and non-mandatory. It aims to help illuminate more possibilities of art.



Mr. Chen said, "The conditions that constitute the text are the space and time interval, and the lack of intuition. Because of the distance in time and space, ancient art can be regarded as text, while contemporary art is not. Let us put aside the meaning behind the phenomenon is nihilism, the problem is that the phenomenon of what we see in the strict sense is limited, most of them in each level has a part is not intuitive, especially

in the field of art object and image is mostly alluding sexual intuitive association, they are destined to have Mr. Chen "lack of intuition" text characteristic, from this point of view, Art is natural texts, and they require interpretation.



Say "time interval" again. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that "no one can step twice into the same river" is the law of the rapid change of time and space. So not only can ancient art be considered as text, but all art can be considered as text because of the time and space interval that exists between the creation of art and the appreciation of art. The viewer has the right to demand

interpretation, and of course he can waive the demand and establish his own interpretation if he can achieve self-consistency between the limited images he has acquired and his own feelings.

*Third, from Plato onwards, the arrogance of philosophy over art.*

"By the standards of traditional works of art, contemporary art, poetry and film woven into everyday life are largely non-

text, and reading them requires no special skills. I think that's still true of good works today, and some new art and literary critics have greatly exaggerated their textual nature." Is art good if you don't need special skills to understand it? Not historically. A lot of good art often has to wait for the next generation of viewers to understand. It's not about technology or intuition, it's about ideas. So the technique of interpreting art is no less than that of reading philosophy.

In addition, "For the listener, deep reading habits, extensive education and so on help him to understand the work, but he doesn't need much technical preparation. Philosophical writing requires a great deal of understanding, patience, etc., and, because of the historical nature of the concepts described above, a philosopher needs some academic preparation. "But in fact, learning philosophy may begin in adulthood, while appreciating art begins in childhood, and may even be a genetic reserve. In modern times, philosophers who do not know art can become excellent philosophers, but if contemporary artists do not know philosophy, it is difficult to become the best artists.

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