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Sewing the self: Art, needlework and Liu Beili's intersectional identity

ABSTRACT

As a Chinese-born woman living in the United States, Liu Beili is aware of the structurally, politically and representationally formulated intersectionality based on her national origin, ethnicity, language, gender and other factors. As a high-profile artist, Liu's multimodal, polysemous and intermedial art reflects on the nuance that provides for understanding an intersectional immigrant's sociocultural experience. Liu analogizes her femininity to water, which is resilient, and regards her art practices as the way to 'better understand how migration and diaspora impact human experience through encounters and separations, displacements and assimilations, the intimacy of memories, and the gravity of time'. This article scrutinizes Liu's relational art, social participation and civic engagement by focusing on three pieces of performance-based projects, all involving the traditionally feminine task of sewing. Through the simple act of sewing, Liu investigates multiple experiential discourses on the intersectional community: oppression, repression, displacement, disempowerment, self-empowerment, communication and reconciliation.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality
intermediality
relational aesthetics
Asian American
diaspora
feminism
anti-racism
pandemic

Western critics have tended to interpret the works of Chinese American artists through an ideological or ethnographical lens, meaning that the artworks are often conveniently classified as 'political art', which expresses criticism of the

1. I exemplify two references here, and there are many more. These two references are chosen because they talk about two other Chinese-born, American-based female artists, Liu Hung (1948–2021) and Zhang Chun Hong (b. 1971), whose educational background, academic endeavours and professional pursuits are comparable to Liu's.

artists' national origin, or 'ethnic art', which highlights the aesthetic features of the non-western society (Movius 2019: n.pag.; Diaz-Camacho 2020: n.pag.).¹ In this article, I attempt to challenge the existing perspective and investigate how artist Liu Beili's (b. 1974) multimodal and polysemous performance-based art speaks for the sociopolitical experientiality of a displaced population more specifically than the 'Chinese American' – female immigrants who have been ostracized by structural intersectionality, political intersectionality and representational intersectionality. These institutions exclude them from liberal social reforms, marginalize them in feminist and antiracist politics and culturally construct them into the idea of non-western women (Crenshaw 1991: 1245). Born in China, Liu Beili has been pursuing her artistic career as an artist and art educator in the United States since the early 2000s, which allows her to understand the discourses on the intersectional population who are largely muted and almost invisible outside of academia and transform the discourses into visual arts, relational aesthetics, social participation and civic engagement. Her time-based art in the intermedial space makes the audience – who will sometimes be called 'experiencers' in later paragraphs – not only 'see' but also 'feel' and 'know'.

This article looks at three performance-based projects, all involving sewing, and explores intersectional feminism as Liu Beili's perceptive and analytical framework of understanding the overlapping factors imposed on the particular social group. In *The Mending Project* (2011), Liu was sewing when 1500 pairs of iron scissors were suspended above her head. While the cloud of scissors turned the gallery into a space of oppression, uncertainty and violence, Liu repressed her emotion and resisted with her simple act of sewing. *Light as a Feather* (2017) featured Liu sewing dip-dyed feathers onto her dress in front of an installation of cascading feathers. This work was a reflection of the lightweight, anonymous lives of immigrant workers vanishing in the waves of industrialization, urbanization and worldwide neo-liberalism. In *1000 Prayer Mask Project* (2020), Liu recycled the prayer flags from her earlier work *Thirst* (2013), modified the flags into face masks and gave the masks to the public. A needle pierces, pins, stitches and fixes. From past to present, the needle has been used to fabricate a herstory of disempowerment and self-empowerment. In Liu's hand, the needlework steps outside the boudoir, targets the broader audience and delivers a cross-cultural intermedial message that calls for humanity to unite in solidarity in the time of pandemic.

THE MENDING PROJECT (2011): OPPRESSION AND REPRESSION

The Mending Project took place in Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, Texas (Figure 1). According to Liu Beili, the performance-based installation 'consist[ed] of 1,500 pairs of Chinese iron scissors suspended from the ceiling, pointing downwards, forming a menacing dark cloud, the performer s[at] beneath the countless sharp blades of the scissors, and perform[ed] an on-going simple task of mending' (Liu 2016a: n.pag.). Meanwhile, the audience could cut off a piece of white cloth and Liu would later sew the pieces together. Some already mended fragments were placed on the ground around Liu's workbench. The fabric polygons were seamed together along their sides. The sewed 'border' of two pieces was slightly tightened, forming a 'mountain ridge', which added some three-dimensional sculptural features to the mended fragments.



Figure 1: Liu Beili, *The Mending Project*, 2011. Performance-based installation. *Women and Their Work* Gallery, Austin, TX. Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio.

Many Chinese characters are phono-semantic compounds, so it is not surprising to find formal or compositional similarities between a character and its visual reference. The composition and components in *The Mending Project* can be seen as two Chinese characters that coincidentally embody the cultural codes of the artwork: *jiǎn* and *rěn*. *Jiǎn* is constructed with the upper radical *jiǎn* ('a pair of scissors or using a pair of scissors') and the lower radical *yǔ* ('feathers'), which literally means scissor-cut feathers of equal length or to cut the feather from its root with a pair of scissors. Metaphorically, *jiǎn* means to reduce, to wipe out and to oppress. Liu's art projects have used feathers to represent human lives, especially women, which will be elaborated in a later part of the article. Here, the feather was Liu herself, or 'any woman' (Liu 2015: n.pag.). Hence, in the context of *The Mending Project*, the character of a pair of scissors over a feather tells a historical and ever-present narrative of standardization, regulation, uprootedness and oppression. On the other hand, the second character *rěn* places *rèn* ('a blade or to kill with a blade') above *xīn* ('heart'), meaning enduring, tolerating, refraining, repressing, as well as being firm and tenacious. Therefore, the metallic, silent blades over the beating heart of Liu spoke to the conditions and qualities of *rěn* experienced by the female diaspora with whom Liu identified.²

The suspended scissors in *The Mending Project* were formally likened to the Sword of Damocles, reminding people of the ubiquitous peril, but ironically, while the Sword of Damocles regulated men in power, the scissors symbolically jeopardized women disempowered by imminent patriarchy. For the intersectional group, the patriarchal oppression comes from both domestic

2. Please refer to the glossary to determine the characters. *Jiǎn* ('to oppress') and *jiǎn* ('a scissor') are two different characters.

and societal expectations, from both their national origins and the new countries. The cultural tradition rooted in the national origin haunts immigrant women like 'a menacing dark cloud' (Liu 2016a: n.pag.). For instance, the Neo-Confucian rhetoric *Qing Petty Matters Anthology* compiled by Qing littérateur Xu Ke (1869–1928) includes a number of heroines using scissors to protect their chastity at the cost of their lives. In the anthology, 'Chaste Lady Shen Died to Reject Zou' tells the story that Zou attempts to assault a 17-year-old girl, who, in fear that she is unable to escape, picks up a pair of scissors she uses for needlework and kills herself instead (Xu 2010: 39). 'Sutteeism of Mei Luojie for Her Fiancé' depicts an 18-year-old girl, who, after hearing about the death of her never-met fiancé, first picks up a pair of scissors to cut her hair and then drowns herself (Xu 2010: 48). A pair of scissors is a key component of a sewing tool kit, and sewing as a cultural behaviour is associated with women's conventional morals of discipline, chastity and domestic production. A girl is taught to sew and to be chaste at a young age, so a pair of scissors in the kit is literally and symbolically protecting the traditional ideals of domesticity, gender role and hierarchy. Although Liu Beili lives in the contemporary era, the collective memory of the relationship between the scissors and the chaste maidens has been inscribed in her mind through written history, storytelling, literature and TV shows.

In the new country, gender subordination usually intersects with other forms of oppression, such as racism and classism, which, like the dark thunderstorm cloud, haunts the immigrant women and keeps them from envisioning chances for emancipation. Structurally, for example, domestic violence against immigrant women is not private or personal, because they face multiple obstacles to seeking legal protection due to their migration status, language barriers, moral pressures and other factors, which makes them more vulnerable to mental and physical victimization (Crenshaw 1991: 1247; Womenslaw.org 2020: n.pag.). Politically, for instance, communities of colour tend to use the integrity of the community to avoid internal conflicts or 'scandals', especially the gender issues (Crenshaw 1991: 1253). Culturally, the extremely mature entertainment industry in the United States produces cultural imagery that is ethnically stereotypical – such as the submissive Asian woman as Madame Butterfly or a 'Yamato nadeshiko' – which influences the mainstream culture and formulates 'common sense'. 'Common sense' legitimizes sexual violence and social discrimination against the intersectional community.

The intersectional disempowerment can also be intentionally imposed or inadvertently enhanced, societal or social. This atmospheric, unescapable oppression was ingeniously incorporated in *The Mending Project*. While the real danger came from the scissors, the cast shadow of the scissors was projected on the walls like an encircling fence made of dried branches. Independent of the scissors, the cast shadow was a powerful agent for altering the inner orientation and creating an uncomfortable feeling (Zettl 2005: 368). When the experiencers entered the room, their cast shadow overlapped on the wall in various shades of grey. The cast shadow looked like a crowd outside the scissor fence, gazing at the one in the middle (Figure 2). When the experiencers interacted, they cut off a piece and left it in the designated spot silently. There was no conversation or direct eye contact between the experiencers and Liu. They knew that the fabric would be mended by this Asian woman. This non-communicative encounter was all about the labour and the final product. Liu was like the woman sitting quietly behind the counter in a Chinatown laundry. People tend to assume that the Chinese woman in a Chinese grocery



Figure 2: Liu Beili, *The Mending Project*, 2011. *Performance-based installation. Women and Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX. Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio.*

in Chinatown does not speak English, or sometimes, the consumers are just afraid to offend her unintentionally, so they avoid talking to her, purchase their items and leave. Living in the same city or even the same neighbourhood, personal and cultural communication between the native born and the diaspora can be minimal, so the stereotypical impression of the Chinese as perpetual foreigners isolates the diaspora, especially the intersectional group, like the encircling shadow of the crowd and 'fence', and reduces their existence to a specialized labour force of the city (Lee et al. 2009: 69–84).

With blades over her head, Liu kept sewing and the mending project grew larger. If the Chinese character *jiǎn* is about the external environment of oppression, then the Chinese character *rěn* pictographically unfolds the repressing and firm heart of Liu or 'any woman' (Liu 2015: n.pag.). Liu talks about the performance of hand sewing under the scissor blades:

I feel the performer could be myself or could be any woman who sits in the space to counter the threats and violence above. She is in control; she is in charge; she is the one who creates. [...] When we are facing that uncertainty and concern and fear, or we are facing difficulties of our lives in this world, the best thing we could do is perhaps something very simple. And if we can do with persistence and calmness, some change could happen, so that might be one of the ways how we can live our lives and probably one of the reasons I make this project.

(Liu 2015: n.pag.)

Silence never means acceptance. Liu asserts that ‘any woman’ can calmly resist uncertainty and pressure, because women are living and dealing with threats and violence all the time. Meanwhile, women, like formless but resilient water, not only adjust to fit in the situation but also change the environment little by little. For instance, through observation and interviews, sociologist Yu Shi noticed the ‘everyday forms of resistance’ and ‘coagulate politics’ adapted by the subcontracted Chinese immigrant women workers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Shi exemplifies, ‘[t]hey secretly lower the sewing quality and often use ethnic rhetoric to bargain for benefits. They were once so angered by their employer’s requirement to work overtime for a Christmas order that they decided to sew the buttonholes slightly wider’ (Shi 2008: 376). Perhaps this anonymous rebellion imposed no impact on industrial exploitation or consumerism, but it would express collective dissatisfaction and build an alliance without risking any worker’s job. Alternatively, maybe the slightly larger buttonholes would cause some embarrassment to the consumers, hurt the brand and initiate the butterfly effect that looms large later, echoing Liu’s artist statement ‘[a]nd if we can do with persistence and calmness, some change could happen’ (Liu 2015: n.pag.).

***LIGHT AS A FEATHER* (2017): GENDERED LABOUR AND ARTISTIC CAPITAL**

Liu visualized her experience and perception of the ‘growing numbers of displaced population’ and ‘feminine labour’ into a performance-based installation called *Light as a Feather*, which was clearly named after the old Chinese saying: ‘Although death befalls all men alike, it may be heavier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather’ (Liu 2019: n.pag.) (Figure 3). A feather-light life usually refers to an indistinct individual of the undistinguishable masses, embodying the sense of ‘lowness’ and ‘mutuality’ (Williams 1976: 193). When the lightweight avian feather malfunctions, it floats down quietly with no trace. The artwork conveys meanings that surround the intersectional discourses on immigrant women workers, including the gendered labour, industrial repetition, anonymity, invisibility and agency.

Through an intersectional lens, *Light as a Feather* examined historical, spatial and psychological displacement, a word where senses of disconnection, relocation, alienation, exclusion, silence and redirection entangle. Historically, the soft sculpture and Liu Beili performatively sewing the dyed feathers onto her dress reminded people of the deterritorialized women working with clothes in cities and foreign countries for extremely low wages in social and global restructuring. Spatially, as a site-specific artwork, *Light as a Feather* migrated to and navigated the predefined space to find its position responsively, resulting in an emphasis on a transitive definition of the site. Psychologically, displacement refers to an unconscious defence mechanism – a means of dream distortion in Freud’s account – that redirects an unacceptable impulse to a less-threatening target (Freud 1933: 49–50). The labour of sewing was rendered into a ‘redemptive and healing process’ by the artist, as if it was purely beautiful, motherly and enjoyable despite the historical pain and ongoing inequality (Liu 2019: n.pag.).

In contrast to the hometowns, metropolises and foreign countries are seas of alienated strangers who barely share a common identity. Historically, capitalist industrialization started in European cities, and artists began to see immigrant workers – especially women – as an urban subject, such as Anna



Figure 3: Liu Beili, *Light as a Feather*, 2017. Performance-based installation. The Diego Rivera Hall, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI. Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio.

Blunden's *The Song of the Shirt* (1854) and Honoré Daumier's *The Laundress on the Quai d'Anjou* (1860–61). Those who controlled productive resources and social institutions legitimized the systems of economic stratification that led to desperation, starvation and other consequences. Liu's installation has often involved long-hour sewing works, such as *Lure/Series* (2008–20) and *After All/ Mending The Sky* (2016–17), transforming the same act from the domestic or

factory labour into art production. In *Sewn the Sweatshops of Marx*, Thierry de Duve labels Beuys as the doorman to the 'alienated, perhaps, but not exploited' modernity, because Beuys saw artistic creativity as labour capital (de Duve [1990] 2012: 13). In Liu's performance-based projects, the exhibiting space (land), Liu's institutional and social capital as a high-profile artist-professor (capital), artistic creativity (entrepreneurship) and her labour as artistic capital (labour) are the four main factors of capitalist production. The deterritorialized immigrant women portrayed in the nineteenth-century urban paintings stitched and they were in a form of systematic alienation that displaced them from the modern liberal societies and the industrial products produced by them. Liu, an intersectional artist in the twenty-first century, stitches as an autonomous, self-realized entity that embodies all four factors of production.

If an ordinary working-class woman has been exploited yet independent then and now, then the 1911 Triangle Fire, which killed 146 workers who were mostly immigrant teenaged girls, was the deadliest workplace accident in New York City's history (Cannon 1996: 1332–33). Working in a cramped space bitmapped by sewing machines, most victims were at the intersections between politics, class, gender, language, citizenship and age (Young 1997: 60–74). The victims inhaled smoke and jumped from the high windows. Their lungs were inflamed and bodies fractured. Though not a direct representation, the dip-dyed feathers suspended from the ceiling looked like the falling souls and burnt ashes. Liu stitched the feathers to her white dress. By covering up herself with dip-dyed feathers, she merged into the backdrop and identified herself with the fatal history. In the process of stitching, Liu became increasingly invisible, like the anonymous victims who together had been historicized into a prelude for the Progressive Era reformist movement. In contrast, people will remember the artist called Liu Beili, but people will never query about the individual birds from whom the feathers came.

Manual labour that is related to clothes usually assumes a subordinate position under intersectional conditions. Shut out of other types of work that did not require English skills or capital, such as mining and farming, the socially discriminated Chinese men ran many laundry businesses between the late nineteenth century and the end of the Second World War across the United States. Avoiding posing threat to White, male workers, these men interfered with the domestic tasks and the gendered division of labour, causing a further racialized and gendered gaze towards the Chinese American community (Wang 2004: 85). As a Chinese American woman, Liu Beili has been at the intersection of the gendered race and racialized gender, which naturally associates her with the domestic space, wifely submission, 'object for the taking', industrious model minority and handicrafts. While social institutions – from the government to a family unit – have promulgated legitimizing ideologies that make the division of labour natural, artistic institutions – from the museum to a class – have validated the hierarchical division of art that 'domestic' crafts are not 'fine' art. The division has set barriers for women, people of colour and people outside the in-house system of art to make real 'art' (Crowther 2003: 121–31). Liu confronts the stereotypes by displacing the gendered, racialized, domestic, wifely, tactical, industrious and crafty act of sewing into a setting designated to house fine art.

While *Light as a Feather* explored sewing as a cultural behaviour, manual industrial work and artistic capital, *After All/Mending the Sky* discussed if sewing as domestic production could not only be created, but also be creating and creative (Figure 4). Liu was inspired by the Chinese mythology of Nüwa,

that '[a]fter a tear in the sky brought suffering and calamity to her creations, Nüwa (goddess and creator of mankind) took on the arduous task of mending the broken sky to protect her creations' (Liu 2017: n.pag.). Like *Light as a Feather, After All* was lightweight and descending. The indigo raw silk was constructed into nine forms of semispheres, which looked like nudity, cellular complex or cumulonimbus. From the semispheres descended sewing threads,



Figure 4: Liu Beili, *After All/Mending the Sky*, 2017. Multimedia installation. Grunwald Gallery of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio.

each with a needle attached to the end. Both the cells and the nimbostratus cloud had a symbolic significance of vitality and reproduction. 'Cloud and rain-fall' together meant sex, which could be traced back to the Chinese mythology of the goddess of Mount Wu and her romantic intercourse with the king.

In the feminine and equivocal space of *After All/Mending the Sky*, the experiencers would interpret multilayers of meanings: reproduction and destruction, mother nature and their own mothers, herstory and history. The experiencers would feel soothing and threatening, beautiful and lonely, delicate and unfinished, cohesive and broken, motherly and heroic all at the same time. Liu comments on her own work that '[t]he installation draws a parallel between the goddess' heroic effort and the humble, domestic, women's task of sewing – both endeavours of mending and healing' (Liu 2017: n.pag.). In a traditional family, the mother, like Nüwa, creates, reproduces and fixes. She always works, but she does not have an authored work – such as a signed artwork like *After All/Mending the Sky* by its artistic creator. Liu Beili uses her own artworks to give the invisible, anonymous, never-finished process of bodily acting of sewing an authorship and a meaning by turning the crafty labour into a performance-based installation.

In addition to the historical displacement of the intersectional population, the spatial specificity of *Light as a Feather* indicated decentralization, relationality, mobility, plasticity and fluidity, which together embodied the intersectional discourses threading through Liu's artistic career. First, a piece of site-specific art is phenomenal, conditional and responsive, not egocentric, fixed or condescending. It is displaced in the architecturally and ideologically predefined venue to complete a relational space. A site-specific piece 'attack(s) on the prestige of both artist and artwork', because it challenges the traditional idea that the space is a container for art as its content, and it allows the spectator to be conscious of a relational space that is constituted by the relations between the objects (Crimp 1993: 16). A relational space is not only about the art it houses but the 'whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space' in which an experiencer encounters an object called art (Bourriaud [1998] 2002: 112–13). Second, the site-specific art displaces the experiencers in an ambiguous space where she has to 'confronts her own effort "to locate, to place" the work and so her own acting out of the gallery's function as the place for viewing' (Kaye 2000: 2). Each individual experiencer's subjectivity transforms the art, and the active participation makes the art never-ending (Brown 2014: 92). Site specificity is 'not only in the securing that displacement through the wedding of the artwork to a particular environment' (Crimp 1993: 17) but 'occurs in a displacement of the viewer's attention toward the room which both she and the object occupy' (Kaye 2000: 2). The displaced experiencer tries to explore the unwritten guidance of what she should do with the non-traditional artwork as an audience. She is neither a rule maker in the artworld nor assigned an institutional role in the relational space where she can comfortably connect with the objects. Eventually, she will be able to observe and process the intermedial information into their cognizance, or she will be a 'perpetual foreigner' till she leaves (Brown 2014: 89).

Light as a Feather took place in the Diego Rivera Hall at the Detroit Institute of Arts. This hall permanently houses Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals* (1932–33). Detroit is a world-renowned industrial city where the Ford Motor Company is located. Famous for the first moving assembly line for large-scale manufacturing in 1913, the Ford Company introduced its revolutionary automated car assembly line in 1927. Diego Rivera responded to

the industrial persona of Detroit with a city-specific work. For instance, Rivera horizontally divided the mural on the north wall into three parts, and in the two side parts, he stylized the workers in the foreground to make them look like ancient Aztec stone relief. The middle section is framed by two gigantic metallic steam-powered stamping machines, which form a citadel gate to a futuristic, mechanic world. The perspective emphasized by the lined-up machines and conveyors in the mechanic world extends to a far distance, implying the everlasting linear progress of human-machine relationship – usage, collaboration, symbiosis and more.

Liu Beili's performance-based installation happened against the east wall, the direction of sunrise, on which an infant in the bulb of a plant is embraced by two ploughshares and flanked by two loving female nudes holding grain and fruit. Liu's artwork responded to the site formally, historically and symbolically. Formally, the cascading feathers resembled the colour and graphic patterns of the bulb and the root system of the tree, creating visual coherence from the mural to the ground. Historically, since Rivera's completion of his murals, the Ford Company has further merged human and machine by introducing cobots in the 2010s. The theory and concern of historical materialism, capitalistic use of machinery and technologized social relations have permeated Rivera's and Liu's art and artmaking processes. While Rivera painted the male workers and the muscular machines, Liu focused on the stereotypical women's tasks in the mechanical age of reproduction. Symbolically, if the sleeping infant in the bulb in the direction of sunrise symbolizes hope and birth, then the light feather as a Chinese metaphor symbolizes powerlessness, vulnerability and death. Liu was sewing the feather onto her dress and cutting the thread in her performance, just like the infant's umbilical cord would eventually be cut and she/he would navigate the world of adult rules and adult scales.

Hence, *Light as a Feather* added a sequel to the pictorial narrative of Rivera's east-wall mural. The two female nudes and Liu formed a trinity of motherly figures around the infant, and the cascading feathers brought the root system and soil to the ground. The destined displacement, followed by vulnerability and death, was awaiting the infant. Although the Marxist philosophy embedded in Rivera's art practice makes this mural look displaced and 'un-American', it is site specifically corresponding to the socio-economic facts of Detroit (Hodges 2015: n.pag.). Liu's conceptual art seems 'un-Rivera', but it merges into the architectural and ideological context where it has been displaced and continues the narrative in its own way.

Light as a Feather visualized psychological displacement. Like Liu, a few contemporary women artists have also incorporated the media of needles, threads and fabrics in their artworks to reflect on their personal experience and collective memory. For instance, Sheila Hicks's site-specific weaving installations, Faith Ringgold's hand-sewed mandala-like quilt, Alexandra Kehayoglou's nature-inspired rugs, Liz Collin's performance-based kitted installation and Lin Tianmiao's needle-and-thread installations all investigate the emigrational struggle, familial oppression, sociocultural alienation and other discourses observed from elder female relatives and the community. Some works highlight the bodily exhaustion, oppression and distortion in the labour of sewing, provoking attention to subjugation. Some pieces turn weaving and embroidering into painting and sculpture, recognizing the artistic potentiality of 'crafts' and 'womanly work'.

Liu's sewing has never been about venting or skills but 'a desire to transform feminine labour into a redemptive and healing process' (Liu 2019:

n.pag.). As discussed above, metaphorically, the saying 'light as a feather' is about death, as well as invisibility and anonymity of the intersectional subordinates, and ideologically, Rivera and Liu cross-temporally explored the (gendered) labour in the mechanical age. There are not 'redemptive and healing' thematics in the works. Therefore, redemption and therapy can be seen as an unconscious self-protective psychological mechanism called displacement, which, through the postponement of affect and redirection, transforms the negative feeling of the victim and her empathizer to more acceptable emotions. Acceptable emotions do not mean acceptance. In different performance-based projects against theatrical sets, which indicated 'threats', 'violence', 'uncertainty', 'fear' and 'difficulties', Liu or 'any woman' shed no tears nor flailed about in hysterical yelling, but calmly, determinedly and modestly pursued her objective, believing that 'some change could happen' (Liu 2015: n.pag.).

1000 PRAYER MASK PROJECT (2020): LIFE AS ART, ART AS LIFE

Between March and May 2020, Liu Beili launched the *1000 Prayer Mask Project* (Liu 2021: n.pag.). She made and gave away 1000 masks from the prayer flags used in her earlier project *Thirst* (2013). Liu posted three photos in a row on the webpage of the project, showing the prayer flags in *Thirst*, a folded and pinned flag and the juxtaposition of a stack of flags and some finished masks. She also added a collage of selfies in which people are wearing prayer masks. While Liu was sewing for *The Mending Project* and *Light as a Feather* to craft an intersectional framework for visualizing diasporic identities, she intended to sew the fragmented human population together in the *1000 Prayer Mask Project*, because the COVID-19 pandemic had brought vulnerability, segregation, discrimination and other negative feelings once experienced by the diaspora to the entire world population indifferently. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins asserts that '[a]rt is one of the ways that people communicate' in his famous 'Statement on intermedia' (Higgins 1966: n.pag.). Higgins considered the happening, phenomenal and dialectic features of art as the enormous potency to rebuild communities in the era of chaos. The *1000 Prayer Mask Project* was an intermedial project through which art media, life media and social media converged, and in which plants and humans, art and life, the artist and the audience reconciled with each other and with themselves.

Thirst was a multicomponent site-specific public art installation that memorialized the over 500 million trees killed by Texas droughts between 2011 and 2013 and called for attention to the impact of climate change (Liu 2016b: n.pag.) (Figures 5 and 6). The first component consisted of a dead cedar elm – a Texas native tree – excavated from the earth and installed slightly above water. Its root system was reaching out like desperate claws, but the tips still could not reach the water surface. It was illuminated at night in sharp white colour, like a ghost haunting the water source. The distorted reflection of the tree ghost was soaked under water, evocative of a dream scene. The second component was the 14,000 pray flags in various locations around the Lady Bird Lake. Liu borrowed the physical form and spiritual reference of the Tibetan prayer flags. When the traditional Tibetan prayer flag flies, the wind chants the sutra on the flags and spreads the word along its route. Hence, the prayer flag in *Thirst* sang an elegiac chant in the wind of the trees in Texas and of all losses caused by climate change.



Figure 5: Liu Beili, *Thirst*, 2013. Site-specific installation. Lady Bird Lake, Austin, TX. Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio.



Figure 6: Liu Beili, *Thirst*, 2013. Site-specific installation. Lady Bird Lake, Austin, TX. Courtesy of Beili Liu Studio.

Liu Beili's *1000 Prayer Mask Project* juxtaposed trees and humans, history and present in order to evoke people's awareness of the disasters, including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the causes behind the disasters as the true enemy that the global community should contend against in unity. Geopolitical conflicts, racial discriminations, gendered divisions and other manmade walls and segregations have been only worsening the situation. Extreme weathers – such as the Texas droughts and California wildfires – have killed many trees, whose causes can be at least partially attributed to industrial pollution and over-exploitation of natural resources, but people have not taken enough action. Then came another wave of warning, the fatal pandemic COVID-19. Spatiotemporally far from the year of 2020 in the United States, Liu's *1000 Prayer Mask Project* anachronistically echoed epidemiologist Dr Wu Lien-teh's (1879–1960) hand-sewn cloth mask during the 1910–11 epidemic of the Manchurian plague, which is believed to be the prototype of what we know today as the N95 surgical mask (Wu 1923: 307–58). More than 100 years ago, Dr Wu promoted quarantining and wearing cloth face masks by doctors, nurses, patients, contacts and the population in the region, which was groundbreaking in the history of epidemic containment. Additionally, for the first time, responding to Dr Wu's call for help, an international team of medical scientists collaborated to fight against the plague. If 100 years ago, people could contain an epidemic with masks and international collaboration, why have containment measures become so difficult today in the digital era of high-tech and easy communication? Physical distances were dissolved, but invisible walls have been erected.

The *1000 Prayer Mask Project* reconciled art and life by dissolving the cult of the artist as genius and unifying the alienated producer and recipients. The pluralist art of the twentieth century has featured many -isms, resulting in the philosophized art practice that requires professionalized literacy of art. The social and economic relationship between the artist and the recipients, and between the artist and the broader public, has been built on the fetish of the art-as-commodity. Peter Bürger explains the veneration and exclusion of art as part of its social determinants in his discussion on the institution of art.

The bourgeois society sees art as antithetical to the praxis of life does not have the character of a norm, it contains no rules which must be followed as works are produced [...] In bourgeois society, the production of art as mediated by the market has alienated producers and recipients from each other. The rift between producer and recipient is ideologized early in the cult of genius which reflects the new self-consciousness of obscures its actual social determinants.

(Bürger 1985–86: 23, 29)

Liu Beili first brought the domestic, crafty and gendered labour of sewing into the space designated for fine art or conceptual art – the very opposite of the extremely obvious, trivial and functional everyday objects. This time she recycled the material evidence of her earlier art project *Thirst* and converted art media from an installation piece into life media of personal protective supply. Moreover, because Liu has been a high-profile artist and the material for masks was taken from an artwork, the civil act of making and distributing masks became an art project. The trajectory of the prayer flags from art to life and from life to life-as-art emphasized radical media fluidity. Art historian J. Sage Elwell believes that the fluid dialectic between different art media, and

between art media and other media, can go 'beyond the exclusive purview of the fine arts and into the borderlands between extra-aesthetic disciplines falsely separating the media of the singular human project' (Elwell 2006: 28). Liu's *1000 Prayer Mask Project* went beyond the theatricality and spectatorship of art. It offered relational aesthetics that the artist initiated information exchange between herself, the direct participants and the global community.

Liu Beili used a sewing machine to achieve her manufacturing goal, which disestablished the prestige 'aura' of fine art. Usually, Liu emphasizes handcraftsmanship and bodily experience. She was hand sewing in her performance-based installations *Light as a Feather* and *The Mending Project*, and she was hand coiling threads for *Red Thread Legend Series* (2008–20). The video project *Tie. Untie* (2008–09) shows a close-up moving image of the artist's hands unravelling a red thread soaked in water. The traditional and ritualistic process of artistic production, in Walter Benjamin's words, marks the presence of the work in time and space, which leads to its unique existence whenever and wherever it happens to be, so the work has its aura (Benjamin 1968: 214–18). In contrast, Liu was using a sewing machine to complete the 1000 prayer masks as quickly as possible. Strictly speaking, manufacturing with a sewing machine was not a process of mechanical reproduction, but it allowed Liu to produce enough pieces 'to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which [was] just as ardent as their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction' (Benjamin 1968: 216). By embracing a sewing machine, she embodied domestic business and industrial efficiency and abandoned the artistic 'aura'. Performative, phenomenal sewing brought life into the realm of art, and productive, mechanical sewing sent art into the domain of life.

While most gallerists and some artists have been trying to sell art 'à la carte' by dismantling large-scale and mixed-media installation artworks into 'houseable' components for art collectors, the *1000 Prayer Mask Project* made *Thirst* physically uncollectable and commercially malfunctional. In other words, each flag was no longer a collectable piece of *Thirst* but a functional protector to prevent respiratory infection. Elwell talks about the significance of intermedial fluidity that

We often fail to recognize that we are intermedial beings and our seemingly disjointed endeavours and inquiries are merely different appearance of the singular human endeavour to reconcile ourselves to ourselves, to reconcile our materiality and necessity with our consciousness and freedom.

(Elwell 2006: 29)

This time, Liu reconciled the materiality and spirituality of her art by modifying the art project for commemorating life into the social practice of saving life. She freed the printed fabric from its invented symbolism as a prayer flag and its artistic role as part of an installation by turning the *objet d'art* back into a thing – a piece of patterned fabric. Confronting the pandemic and the question of life and death, the cultural codes that infer economic meaning were stripped off, leaving commonality in humanities.

Recipients of Liu's masks posted photos on social media as part of their thank you notes. Most photos are selfies, in which the lower part of their faces are covered by masks with black prints of trees growing upwards. The tree trunk and branches look like the mirror image of the bronchi and bronchioles

in lungs. Healthy lungs operate to take oxygen from the air into the bodies, while trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. The trees printed on the masks died by 2013 and the prayer flags were once held aloft by the air, sending out memorials for the past and wishes for the future. The dead trees had stopped producing oxygen, but the tree-prayer-masks could guard the lungs. Most people show smiling eyes in the photos, assuring positivity to the public who see the photos.

The social photos inspire new relationships between the medium, space, temporality and spectatorial selves, and they also reshape the relationship between the artists, the audience and the larger public. Sociologist Nathan Jurgenson, who coined the term 'social photo', writes that selfies – either taken by oneself or others by request – are 'a procedure for self-knowledge [...] This identity work is deciding to remember something as quintessentially me, a choice, a performance, memorialized within the frame' (Jurgenson 2019: 54). The process from pressing the camera shutter button to visualizing the 'self-knowledge' is the active presence and creative output. The photograph is an intersection of gazes, and the selfie dissolves the gender ideologies and power relations of gaze. John Berger has defined the gaze as masculine and colonial. The model photographer of the selfie is 'the surveyor and the surveyed', meaning that she is both the active doer defined by what she does to others and the active presence defined by her attitudes towards herself (Berger 1972: 46–47). This quintessential self wearing a face mask made out of a prayer mask was about the protection of oneself and others, as well as the determination to combat the pandemic. The shared idea, through online visual communication with selfies as assurance, unconsciously and deliberately fabricated a community threaded through by the life-as-art project.

Selfies are intermedially recreated artworks with new material, sensorial, spatiotemporal and semiotic features. While Liu's project can be categorized as a socially engaged practice, civil act, participatory art or happening, photography is a different medium of production, storage and distribution. Some photos of people wearing the prayer masks are in a domestic setting – probably also to support the stay-at-home orders – and some outside in front of a symbolic landmark of health and peace. Some photos are in black and white against a dark background, focusing on the confrontational eyes to deliver a warning message of danger. Some photos show a multigenerational household, all wearing face masks. The happening of wearing the mask, posing for and taking a selfie and constructing an idea of me have been virtually restored and distributed to those chosen by algorithm, not the artist. Through the technical media, the art media and life media were converged on social media (Elleström 2013: 153–54). The intermedial conversion of the recipients' social photos led to the fluid dialectic between media, contributing to the anachronistic and global form of communication.

CONCLUSION: RELATIONAL AESTHETICS, FLUID DIALECTIC AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

In conclusion, through the simple act of sewing, Liu Beili has brought needlework into the realm of art and takes art out of a gallery into the domain of life. The wall surrounding a designated space for fine art is like the invisible walls, rules and hierarchies that separate, discriminate and eventually fragment the population into sects. Identifying herself with the intersectional community, Liu has experienced, observed and learned about racialized gender, gendered

race as well as other structural, political and representational oppression. She analogizes femininity – including the womanly feature, gendered race and gendered labour – to water, which is resilient. In *The Mending Project*, she was sewing under oppression but still repressed her inner fear. In *Light as a Feather*, she was sewing to commemorate the historical loss of the displaced population and to identify herself with them. In the *1000 Prayer Mask Project*, she sewed to evoke media fluidity, demonstrate mutuality and promote unity. Liu embodies the new generation of the intersectional community, who is changing the situation by making the hidden problems sound and show and by querying on the hegemonic ‘common sense’ of the artworld.

GLOSSARY

Jiǎn (feathers of equal length; to cut feathers into equal length; to cut off feathers at the root; to oppress; to annihilate) 翦

Jiǎn (to cut with a pair of scissors) 剪

Liu Beili 刘北立 (b. 1974)

Nüwa (goddess and creator of mankind) 女娲

Qīng bei lei chao (Qing Petty Matters Anthology) 清稗类钞

Rěn (to tolerate; to endure; to be hard-hearted) 忍

Rèn (blade) 刃

Wu Lien-teh 伍连德 (1879–1960)

Xīn (heart) 心

Xu Ke 徐珂 (1869–1928)

Yǔ (feather) 羽

Zhenlie (female chastity) 贞烈

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