Chapter Nine

Yan Li in the Global City

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Humanity can move itself deeply
Humanity can’t do any worse
than humanity
Humanity is nothing but a tool
for making science
Humanity can’t but make some
noise
As it walks on past humanity

(Provoked by Yan Li 严力, 1999: 152)

The present era in scholarship on contemporary Chinese culture is in part one of tracing the textual beginnings of contemporary Chinese cultural transformation. Recent efforts to locate the first Obscure poems,\(^1\) the first attempts to display nontraditional art, or the first copies of Today 今天 magazine,\(^2\) have all been fueled by a number of texts of remembrance, most notable for poetry being the 2003 publication by Mang Ke 芒克 (b. 1951) entitled Gifted Generation 瞧, 这些人,\(^3\) Yan Li 严力 (b. 1954), a poet and painter whose contributions to these historical origins are undeniably substantial, is both surprisingly time-resistant and oddly out of place. Where powerful, even inescapable politicized points of reference frame the various endeavors of Bei Dao 北岛 (b. 1949), Jiang He 江河 (b. 1949), and others, Yan’s work seems to skate both above the fray and below the radar. This is not to say that Yan’s intentions are any less political than that of his contemporaries. Indeed, thirty years into his career as an artist and poet, Yan is arguably one of the artists most enduringly frustrated by ongoing difficulties to develop free space for expression in contemporary China. Within this same historical period, though, Yan’s style, particularly as a poet, strikes a clear contrast to that of his compatriots. Where the other Obscure poets were ponderous, seemingly cognizant of their pioneering legacy even just as they started their
work, Yan’s work was markedly lighter, almost playful in what were anything but playful circumstances. This light, buoyant quality has remained consistent through his earliest experiments as a painter and poet in the 1970s, in his move to New York in the mid 1980s, and even in his return to China in 2000. During this time Yan’s style has also been largely peripheral to many of the mainstream constructions of this literary and artistic historical record.

I am using the global city as a metaphor for the space that Yan Li has inhabited for the past three decades. My characterization of this space draws heavily on two sources. The first is the “global city” identified by Saskia Sassen. Sassen’s analysis, which focuses on Tokyo, New York, and London as three examples of such cities, defines global city as an urban center independent of the nation-state that contains it and even the local communities of which it is comprised. These urban centers are instead channels of the worldwide flow of information, concentrations of producer services systems that themselves require centralized command and control. Thus, despite the ever extending—global—reach of goods and, particularly, services, the sites wherein the terms of this reach are shaped and defined are a precious few. The second is somewhat more literal in nature. It is the notion of “grobalism” developed by George Ritzer in which massive corporate “nothing” is expanded to worldwide reach through a global marketing network that leaves no local stone unturned. Combining these two insight provides a lucid picture of the global situation as an interconnected and increasingly commoditized space for, among other things, artists to produce their work. Yan Li, I argue in this chapter, has turned the changes in largely economic systems to the advantage of his art, producing work that circulates effortlessly in the global systems. He does so, moreover, while staying true to a style he developed as early as the 1970s, a style that turns out to have been, in many respects, ahead of its time.

Placing Yan Li

A clear picture of Yan’s work begins in the frame of contemporary Chinese poetry of the mid- to late 1970s. Yan Li came of age at a time when his contemporaries Bei Dao, Shu Ting, and others were setting the stage for a major takeover of the mainstream, official poetry establishment in China. The raw subjectivity of their work, a pained and anything-but-“obscure” lyrical voice, derived from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and in retrospect strikes a telling