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<th>Title</th>
<th>Pillar of Shame: The underlying meanings beyond the sculpture</th>
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<tbody>
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CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

2013-2014 Semester A

Art review:

Pillar of Shame: The underlying meanings beyond the sculpture

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Introduction

Contemporary art is comparatively a new concept in the art-world in the twenty-first century compared to the traditional historical painting, some judge it as being ungraspably complex and diverse covering from politics or feminism to mass culture with overwhelming philosophical and symbolic meanings (Carroll, 1999; Stallabrass, 2006), whereas the others depict it as being simple and approachable without any fixed and specific art concept and principle (Art21, 2013), allowing observers’ free interpretations. The Pillar of Shame sculpted by Jens Galschiøt is selected in this art review paper to analyse its form, style, genre, process as well as content and context in the contemporary art-world and to figure out its underlying symbolic meanings.

Historical background of the artwork

Before looking precisely at the sculpture, reviewing its historical background is of utmost importance to recognize its underlying meanings and intentions of the artwork more comprehensively. In practice, the Pillar of Shame (1997-XX) is a sculpture or project created in the 1997 by Jens Galschiøt, who is a Danish artist, contemporary sculptor and a social activist. The Pillar of Shame first established in 1997 in commemoration for Tiananmen (massacre) Movement in China in June 4th 1989, in collaboration with the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China in order to perpetuate the memory of the brutality and the victims lost in the crackdown (Galschiøt, 2000).

Apart from erecting on Hong Kong Victoria Park in 1997, the Pillar of Shame has been exhibited in different local universities in Hong Kong from 1997 including Chinese University of Hong Kong and City University of Hong Kong to arouse students’ and viewers’ awareness.

Albeit the pillar was originally painted in dark colour, it was repainted into colour orange in 2008, boosting public consciousness about the human rights violation in China as well as
connecting to the artist’s The Colour Orange Campaign and the Summer Olympic Games held by China. Currently, the Pillar of Shame is relocated to the University of Hong Kong to continually capture public’s attention and commemorate the June 4th Crackdown.

**Selected photos of the Pillar of Shame**

*Photos featuring the form, shape and style of the artwork*

*Pillar of Shame (1997-XX) by Jens Galschiøt*

(Picture 1, first erected in 1997)

(Picture 2, re-painted in orange in 2008)
Artwork analysis

The form: A sculpture with artistic and frightening elements

Form, is the mode of presentation of its meanings embodied and articulated to the viewers, it is also the fundamental step of an artwork that gives shape to its content and underlying meanings (Carroll, 1999). Pragmatically, the sculpture was mainly made of steel, bronze and copper as raw materials, constituting a two-ton weight sculpture mounting on the University of Hong Kong recently. As an eight-meter tall sculpture featuring 50 twisted human bodies and distorted facial expressions and surreal gestures, it is undeniably shocking and frightening to the viewers at the first sight followed by its in-depth and symbolic meanings, the colour dark similarly creates terrible and miserable atmosphere towards the general public as well. Aside from the weird segments lying on the sculpture, there are some sentences carved on the base of the sculpture as the general theme of the artwork, marking “The old cannot kill the young forever” and “The Tiananmen Massacre, June 4\textsuperscript{th} 1989” in English and red colour. Remarkably, the sculpture was recolored into sharp orange
in 2008 in lieu of dark, intensifying the sense of bloodiness and horror and capturing the audiences’ eyeballs in return. All these physical contours help observers to recognize its subject matters and essence in advance.

**Style and genre: A mixture of symbolism and political sensitivity**

Beyond dispute, the sculpture itself is socially and politically sensitive as it symbolizes the bloodshed and historical incident of June 4th Tiananmen Movement in China in 1989 by greatly employing the exaggerated segments and grotesque gestures. Impelled by the cruel massacre, the sculpture serves as a symbol and a platform for general public to commemorate the young students died in the incident and uphold the spirits of human rights and personal freedom that should be guaranteed in the contemporary world. As reiterated by Jens Galschiot (1998), “the sculpture itself is not intended to make one fell shameful or to judge and criticise a single party, but rather to mark a dreadful event that has had painful consequences for the civilian population.” The primitive purpose of the sculpture is to raise public awareness and to strive for a structural political reformation in the modern China which ensures human basic rights and protects the freedom of speech.

**Process: Not a static piece of art**

The root of the sculpture should be traced back to 1993 during the planning stage of the sculpture, including the blueprint model, the selection of materials and exhibiting city. After accomplishing the Pillar of Shame in 1996, the sculpture first was decided to display at the annual candle-light vigil at Victoria Park in 1997 and afterwards exhibited in different universities around Hong Kong (Kwok, 2010), in cooperation with the Hong Kong Alliance in Support Patriotic Democratic Movement in China. Seemingly, the sculpture is not a static piece of artwork lying in a museum or an art gallery to wait visitors’ appreciation, public’s support and students’ active participation are also involved. More importantly, as a dynamic
project belongs to Jens Galschiøt, the Pillar of Shame does not solely mount on Hong Kong. there are another four Pillar of Shame in the entire world to mark their historical dreadful events and protest against their infringements of human rights and freedom, for instance, located in Mexico, Brazil, Berlin as well as Italy.

**Content and context: Unveiling its underlying symbolic meanings**

Unlike form, content, is the essence, the theme as well as the underlying meanings of an artwork (Carroll, 1999). As a symbolic sculpture, it is by all means that the sculpture does convey meanings to the audiences in order to resonate the general public and reveal the social injustice and violation of personal freedom in China after the 1989 Movement. On the top of the list, the sentence “The old cannot kill the young forever” carved on the base of the sculpture, “the old” could be interpreted as the existing political power and regime in China whereas the “the young” could be associated to the young generation who is striving for human rights and social justice, pinpointing the context and the intention of the Pillar of Shame at an early stage. For the weight (two-ton), it indicates the heavy lives losses created in the Tiananmen Square Crackdown that could not be recovered by remedies. For the torn facial expressions and the 50 twisted human bodies, they signify the oppression and deprivation of human rights particularly under the bombardment of the June 4th Crackdown.

On the other hand, the colour dark symbolises the grief and young students died in vain in the 1989 Movement, expressing their sorrows and despairs. It is ironic to mention that the colour orange repainted in 2008 tones the red (nationalism and communism) and yellow (democracy and social justice) hues together, symbolizing the sculptor’s The Colour Orange Campaign to enhance people’s awareness about the violation of human rights in China and coinciding with the China’s 2008 Summer Olympic Games in the meantime.

All of these aforementioned features of the sculpture aim to arouse public consciousness about the current political spectrum and the condition of human rights in China, and pass the
historical legacy to the next generation to avoid oblivion of the sufferers died during the Tiananmen Square Crackdown.

What makes the artwork contemporary?

Being socially and politically sensitive

In addition to being created in the twenty century, the sculpture also meets the criteria of being a contemporary artwork. The Pillar of Shame itself is extraordinary and politically sensitive as it directly and bravely challenges the Chinese authority for her social injustice and violation of basic human rights which are typically perceived as a “taboo” in the past. With a sense of being a socially & culturally engaged artwork, the Pillar of Shame successfully extends beyond a museum or an art gallery into everyday life, and even becomes an activist or a symbol in affecting social dynamics and blurs the boundary between an artwork and daily lives (Thompson, 2012), the artwork made by the social activist and the contemporary artist Ai Weiwei is no exception. Driven by Galschiøt’s intentions, the sculpture could convey messages to the observers in commemoration for the Tiananmen Movement and the victims suffered. What’s more, the artwork leaves room for public’s different interpretations and thoughts, constituting a contemporary artwork without fixed meanings and uniformed perspective.

Allowing public voluntary participation

Encouraging public’s participation is comparably a vital organ of the Pillar of Shame becoming a contemporary artwork. As an on-going project organized by Galschiøt, the objective of the sculpture is to raise public awareness on human rights and freedom, public participation is significantly honoured by the sculptor. For instance, the sculpture was repaired and recolored in 2008 by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movement in China, university students and supporters in Hong Kong without Galschiøt’s
genuine involvement.

In fact, Jens Galschiøt was denied access to Hong Kong by Immigration Department at that time, the artwork and the Colour Orange Campaign could not be accomplished without the efforts exerted by Hong Kong citizens. Their support could ultimately help the Pillar of Shame to immortally erect on Hong Kong. This kind of interactive and approachable sculpture characterizes the spirit of contemporary artwork which permits public participation, it is rarely and even impossibly seen for historical artworks or paintings like the “David” by Michelangelo and the “Mona Lisa” by Leonardo da Vinci.

**Constructing meanings by the viewers but not the sculptor**

One distinctive element between contemporary artwork and non-contemporary artwork is whether the audience could contribute and construct the meanings to a sculpture or an installation itself to make it more completed (Art21, 2013). The Pillar of Shame, correspondingly, encourages viewers to construct their own feelings and understanding to the sculpture, reinforcing its primitive meanings and generalizing its original intentions of the artwork. More precisely, the sculpture first erected on the Victoria Park due primarily to the 1989 Movement in China and to commemorate the victims died, after absorbing public’s personal reflections and projection, the sculpture subsequently becomes an indispensable symbol to uphold human rights and denounce the authoritarianism (single ruling party) of Chinese authority. It is clear that the meanings of the sculpture are intensified and deepened by the viewers’ responses, fostering a two-way communication between the artwork and the viewers and constituting a completely different symbolic meaning imposed on the sculpture.

**Employing the effects of social and mass media**

Social and mass media play an important role in today society, contemporary art is no exception. The sculptor, indeed, makes good use of the mass media to spread the symbolic
meanings of the Pillar of Shame to the general public especially to the young generation to a great extent. Receiving media’s invitations to attend interviews, establishing an exclusive website to provide detailed information of the sculpture and recent projects, and even setting up personal Facebook (called the Defence of humanism) and YouTube accounts for raising public awareness, all of these modern technological involvement help to resonate more viewers and underline the essence of contemporary art by breaking geographical confinement which are difficult to find in the past.

Original thinking: What is the future of the Pillar of Shame?

As an on-going project (1997-XX) organized by Jens Galschiøt, the primitive objective of the artwork has been achieved to arouse public attention of the 1989 Tiananmen Crackdown here and now. As reiterated several times, the ultimate success of the Pillar of Shame highly depends on the general public and their willingness to participate, spreading the ideas to the whole society and passing the legacy to our offspring. The sculptor now gives great autonomy and control to the Hong Kong people to decide the existence of the sculpture. Will the sculpture be faded away by the history? Could be message conveyed in the sculpture pass to the next generation? Will Hong Kong people perceive the spirit of the sculpture differently in the future? Sadly to say, the Pillar of Shame is solely a sculpture to offer its symbolic meanings but cannot control people mind-sets, the above questions need to be answered by the viewers and Hong Kong people as their efforts could reciprocally and truthfully make the sculpture immortal and everlasting.

Conclusion

Contemporary art is no longer resting in the art gallery or an art museum barely, it does extend into our everyday lives with its unique and symbolic meanings, touching the social and even political spectrum in nowadays society. The sculpture, Pillar of Shame is a good
demonstration of a contemporary artwork that encourages viewers to construct personal interpretation on the sculpture or social issues, adopts social and mass media for spreading ideas and even allows public participation to repair the sculpture. All of the aforesaid characteristics mark the new trend of artwork and make art more interactive and approachable, involving more audience and viewers to feel the creators’ intentions and inspirations behind the artworks.
References


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