

Close Window



Siu Lan Ko Critiques the French Work Day

alice pfeiffer 02/17/10

In spite of plummeting temperatures, the Quai Malaquais on Paris' left bank, home to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, was full this past Sunday morning. An eclectic mix of students, tourists and locals frenetically photographed two large banners, hung on the facade of the stately 17th Century building.

The large black banderoles bear a different word on each side: "travailler" (work), "plus" (more), "gagner" (earn), "moins" (less)—and have been, in the past 72 hours, the cause of an uproar involving the government and thousands of students and journalists. (LEFT: PHOTO BY THE ARTIST)

The flags are a work by Chinese artist Siu-Lan Ko (b.1977, Xiamen), who is concluding her two-year residency at the Ecole. The piece, *Ye set the cart before the horse—cleane contrarily and arsy versy as they say* is part of a group show featuring work from the Royal College, London, and the Lassalle College of the Arts, Singapore, at the Beaux-Arts.

The choice of words refers to a slogan of then-presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2007: "Work more, earn more," a rhetorical ploy (one more shocking in a country proud of its 35 hour work week) that clumsily combines paternal control and capitalist zeal with the suggestion of repetitive labor.

All kinds of cheeky variations of the famous sentence can be read on Siu Lan's banners by passers by on the street and river bank. Like the Art and Language movement in late 60s Britain, and Sots Art in early 1970s-era Soviet Union, her utilization of identifiable words distorts codes from political messages and turns propaganda into a source of individual empowerment.

Set up on Wednesday, February 10, to be officially presented on the opening of the group show on Friday 12, the work only survived for a few hours. Soon after its installation, the director of the Beaux-Arts Henry-Claude Cousseau ordered for it to be taken down, without prior warning or discussion with the artist.

"Maybe they are just afraid to get in trouble." says Ko, who the director refused to meet personally, " I never got any explanation directly from the school, but from an email written to me by the curator Clare Carolin from the Royal College, it was mentioned that she was being told that the school is currently renewing its funding agreement with the Ministry of Education."

A press release was soon sent out, accusing Ko of "instrumentalizing the establishment, without prior notice," although the project was approved by the school months before.

Ko was informed that the work produced at the Beaux-Arts should be "neutral"—"but who decides? And since when are art and politics two separate things?" asks Ko. During the May 1968 student riots, the façade of the Beaux-Arts building was covered in riotous banners. Ko, who previously works with NGOs and has a sociology background, has frequently used art as a platform to question political issues and mass communication in China.

Word of the work's removal traveled quickly. By the next day a Facebook group was created by an anonymous supporter, and soon joined by over 5000 people. Ko receives about 200 emails of support a day, she says.

On the day of the opening, the building was flooded with press. Crowds came by dozens with their own, cut out, miniature banners that they spread all over the ground of the exhibition.

Cousseau was nowhere to be found—until Ko barged into his office, where he was having a private reception. "He looked at me, took one last sip of champagne, and quickly walked off and locked himself in a private room, without saying a word." The following day, Ko received an apologetic phone call from Minister of Culture Frédéric Mitterand. She was soon informed that the banners would be re-hung. Late Saturday, the now famous work of art was there again.

"This is not for me, it's for arts, it's for everyone. It's about defending the freedom of expression. A right that belongs to everyone. The question of work and propaganda is a universal one."

SIU LAN KO'S WORK IS PART OF SEVEN DAY WEEKEND, AN EXHIBITION ON VIEW THROUGH FEBRUARY 21. THE ECOLE NATIONALE DES BEAUX ARTS DE PARIS, IS LOCATE AT 14 RUE BONAPARTE, 75006.

find this article: <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2010-02-17/siu-lan-ko-ecole-des-beaux-arts/>

