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EXHIBITION SYNOPSIS

About Samples from the Transition - Products by [Spalding David](#)
If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle... The commodity whispers to a poor wretch who passes a shop window containing beautiful and expensive things. These objects are not interested in this person; they do not empathize with him.

Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, 1938

A Manhattan collector who has been buying Chinese contemporary art since 1990 said that yesterday she watched her holdings appreciate by 10,000 percent. "And it's just going to keep going," she added.

"China: The New Contemporary-Art Frontier," Carol Vogel, New York Times, April 1, 2006

Liu Ding is an archeologist of the present. The artist excavates

everyday objects, embellishing and arranging them in ways that amplify the cultural desires they embody and foster. His evolving series of related installations, *Samples from the Transition*, confronts viewers with artifacts that point to the absurd contradictions produced by China's frenzied capitalism. For *Fantasies of Small Potatoes* (2005), Liu used items associated with power – including a gun, a globe, a banknote, and a notebook computer – completely covering them with one of his signature materials: glittering, artificial gemstones. Displayed in spot-lit vitrines that evoke department store display windows, the tacky opulence of the installation is unnerving, precisely because it is so seductive. Ultimately, *Fantasies* yields narratives of violence, greed and domination, but the sparkling jewels assure that these visions are rendered with the amorality of a child's cartoon. As if, under the spell of these things – and the agency they promise – the pain of others would seem inconsequential. One only has to pick up a newspaper to see such scenarios realized outside the gallery's walls. If, as Liu's projects suggest, the Chinese economy is characterized by a Vesuvian explosion, it has buried its residents in the ashen spectacle of consumer culture. Through his artworks, Liu Ding is not just offering evidence of this "transition." He is trying to dig us out.

But art, as Liu Ding reminds us, is not immune from the effects of capitalism's newest incarnation. With his latest installment of the *Samples* series, *Products* (2005/6), Liu demonstrates the ambivalent space that art occupies in discussions of our commodity culture – fashioning a mobius strip of critique and complicity that refuses easy resolution.

Originally commissioned for the Second Guangzhou Triennial,

Products invited a group of thirteen professional artists from the nearby city of Dafancun – China’s famed “painting factory” village, where workers produce thousands of paintings daily, fueling a giant export business – to perform their assembly-line painting process during the opening of what is arguably China’s most important international art exhibition. Working in an ancillary site temporarily annexed by the Guangdong Museum of Art, the painters were assembled on a pyramid of platforms during the exhibition’s opening, where they moved from canvas to canvas as they added their contributions (one artists paints only a tree, another a stork, and so on) to a series of identical landscape paintings. The painters were paid their standard factory wage for their work. The resulting paintings remained on view for the duration of the exhibition, and have been presented in Frankfurt alongside a garish domestic interior well-suited for their display

Site is central to Products’ various entanglements. Integral to the work’s staging in Guangzhou is the Guangdong’s Museum of Art’s location in the Pearl River Delta, or PRD: a cluster of southern Chinese cities, including Shenzhen and Guangzhou, that have experienced a surreal growth spurt since the 1970s, when the area began to mushroom into a network of congested urban sprawl that beckons with opportunity and repulses with an underbelly of decadence. As such, Guangzhou is a nadir (or zenith) of advanced capitalism, a perfect site for Liu’s ongoing explorations.

Regardless of curatorial attempts to create a platform for ongoing exchange, the recent Guangzhou Triennial, like the Triennials and Biennials that continuously operate worldwide, is also another node in the art market, a site where the status and value of works is affirmed and heightened through their selection (presumably by a

team of experts) and presentation within the exhibition context. In addition, the catalogue and related press coverage are just two of many related affirmations that can elevate the careers of participating artists. Through his staging of Products, Liu called in question the authority of the Triennial to confer merit to the artists, and the ability of art market assess a work's worth. After all, the quality and value of the artworks made in Dafancun is anything but arbitrary: paintings that accurately resemble their models are approved by quality control agents; those that do not are revised or destroyed. The value of the works is equally clear-cut, as one company, called Eager Art, explains to potential customers on their website, "The price of paintings is decided [by] whether they are easy or hard to paint."

For consumers, the use value of art—its essence—is a fetish, and the fetish—the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art—becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy. Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself.

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947

Just as Guangzhou and the surrounding Pearl River Delta has spawned one of today's most advanced forms of capitalism – and its Triennial is a locus for the christening of artworks with a stamp of artworld currency – Products' current incarnation in Frankfurt proves an ideal place activate another aspect of the installation's reflexive criticality.

The following story is worth repeating: Working at Frankfurt's

Institut für Sozialforschung during the late 1920s and early 1930s (and exiled to the United States thereafter), theorists such as Max Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, and Erich Fromm – in dialogue with Walter Benjamin - formulated a sophisticated, interdisciplinary set of tools for the analysis of what they dubbed “the cultural industry.” The neo-Marxist approach of the so-called Frankfurt School of critical theory saw capitalist ideology as the generator behind mass-mediated cultural forms (from soap operas and radio broadcasts to popular art and visual culture); their writings attempted to awaken readers and alter their paths toward the consumption of these poisoned pleasures. As Douglas Kellner has pointed out, “Mass culture for the Frankfurt School produced desires, dreams, hopes, fears, and longings, as well as unending desire for consumer products.” If Liu Ding has taken “Samples” of material culture and used them to diagnose the bizarre contradictions and collective fantasies arising from China’s warp-speed economic growth, it was the Frankfurt School that first developed a methodology that Liu’s projects depend on.

Liu’s Products is linked to a number of important art historical precedents, but he ups the ante. During the 1980s, American artists drew from the Frankfurt school to produce artworks that worked both against and within an increasingly hyperbolic art market, making their efficacy difficult to gauge. In a strange series of dialogical turns, artworks produced with an air of self-criticality were often subsumed back into the very market they attempted to censure. Some of these works, such as the early sculptures of Jeff Koons (Wet/Dry Double Decker, from 1981, remains emblematic), substituted commodities – in this case, vacuum cleaners – for art objects, suggesting an interchangeability between the two. This may seem to parallel Liu’s presentation of Products in a Triennial

setting – a gesture which immediately calls into question the value of all of the works in the show. Yet in the gallery, encased in custom Plexiglas vitrine and ensconced in a nimbus of Flavinesque fluorescence, Koons' vacuums assumed the status and the value of an art object – its critical stance reduced to a knowing smirk. Others works, like Allan McCullum's *Surrogates* (1982) and *Perfect Vehicles* (1986) deployed the forms of paintings and sculpture (respectively) to create works that were only signs for artworks, pure commodities deliberately void of any "content" or meaning.

Chosen by the Liu Ding for its banality, the source painting reproduced in Guangzhou and presented in Frankfurt – a fanciful, distant cousin to more traditional Chinese landscapes – is also a cipher. In Liu's installation, the painting is transformed into a series of inverted readymades, and while the artist is indebted to these earlier practices of commodity critique, he takes things much further. In *Products*, the paintings' status as a commodity is both laid bare and undone by Liu's insistence that the labor (indeed, the laborers) required for their production are visible. Further, his sensitivity to site ensures that even while the paintings are empty referents, they illuminate cultural and historical conditions in the locations where they are created and displayed.

Samples of the Transition – Products is reminiscent of one of Liu's gemstones: magnetic and multifaceted, it reflects and critiques the status of the art object from a dizzying array of angles. *Products* and the other works that comprise the *Samples* series are much more than material evidence of a culture in flux. As the projects begin to coalesce, they promise to compromise the very foundations that form the basis for their display and circulation. In doing so, Liu Ding's works are creating a complex web of

dialogues, opening new possibilities for artists to simultaneously resist and participate in the culture they are helping to create.