

SYMPHONY OF RIDDLES: WU SHANZHUAN: RED HUMOUR INTERNATIONAL

REVIEW BY JONI LOW

In Wu Shanzhuan's installation *Red Humour Series: Big Character Posters/Dazibao*, a room is filled with the chaos of handmade signs and bold "character posters" reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. The apparent absence of rhyme and reason feels like a glimpse into the artist's clever mind: within this "room" exists an indiscriminate collection of information, an overload of meaning disconnected from the realities of daily life. This was the situation that many people in China, growing up during the Cultural Revolution and then living in a climate of social and political relaxation during the 1980s, tried to make sense of.

Or make non-sense. I think Wu Shanzhuan accepted this chaos, and out of this acceptance emerged an artistic journey, the details of which are now published in a large monograph titled *Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International*. This is a treatise focusing on his solo work plus nearly ten years of collaboration with Icelandic artist Inga Svala Thórsdóttir.

Opening the book is, figuratively and literally, like lifting the lid of an archivist's treasure chest. Inside one discovers a whole collection of artists' writings, reproductions of crumpled sketches, photographs, nude photographs (I'm sure that got your attention), and a range of essays from Chinese and Euroamerican perspectives. The smaller booklet-sized artist writings, nestled between pages of the larger volume, lend an informal accessibility to the work, and the visual essays provide breaks between discussions of art while illustrating the art being discussed. The format is wonderful—as each segment acts as a stand-alone piece, one can approach it with one's own style of reading; taken as a whole, it is a comprehensive and thoughtful compilation, if not slightly overwhelming in size and scope.



Cover of *Red Humour International*.

For me, the strength of this book resides in the stories it tells of how Wu Shanzhuan left China after 1989 and developed his artistic practice as a Chinese artist living abroad. Furthermore, it tells an amazing story of collaboration—of how two people from different regions of the world can meet, connect on a shared idea, and develop an art practice that enhances everyday life, both for themselves and for those who encounter their work. Each art project that Wu and Inga embark on is fluidly continuous with previous ones,

deconstructing concepts in order to rebuild their own; together, the projects crescendo into a symphony of delightful riddles for the reader to experience vicariously.

Wu Shanzhuan is interested in unveiling the nature of art and reality and in bringing art back into conversation with the everyday. One senses this in his *Red Humour Series* (1986), where Chinese characters, so overloaded by ideological excess, are freed from this confusion and allowed to exist as forms in their own right. In *Selling Shrimps* (1989), a performance at the National Gallery in Beijing, Wu sold shrimp brought from his hometown, Zhoushan, and let a consumer frenzy unleash itself in the gallery, exposing the beginnings of a capitalist market system that was encroaching on art making in China. What Wu discovered through these artistic processes was that the meaning of art resides not in the art object, or the artist, but in the context and the experience itself.

After 1989, Wu left China for an artist's residency in Iceland, where he developed the concept of Red Humour International, thereby extending his playful critique of ideologies in the East to those of the West. Wu's first exposure to a fully capitalist market economy further reinforced his observations about how humans place meaning onto 'things'—art, words, consumer products – and how designating a fixed meaning limits the possibilities of existence for that 'thing'. Wu found a prime example of this in the concept of the supermarket, where 'things' only become useful once they are purchased. In the art world, Duchamp's declaration of the ready-made as art transformed urinal to art-object, and robbed this 'thing' of its utilitarian value. When Wu met Inga, the two converged on the idea that art since Duchamp had become too far removed from everyday life. Inga—whose art practice involved the pulverization of things in order to free them from the burden of meaning— was eager to deconstruct Duchamp's Modernist myth. Wu, who was engaged in bringing conceptual art back to the realm of the everyday, and who described himself as “a rebel within the art circle” — wanted to resolve this separation of art from everyday life. So together they traveled to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden, where he urinated in Duchamp's Fountain. This performance, entitled *An Appreciation* (1992), became Wu's and Inga's



Wu + Thórsdóttir, *Pouring Bottled Water Back into the Victoria Harbour*, 1993, action, Hong Kong. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.



Wu + Thórsdóttir, *Posing for Swimming*, 1994, Cibachrome. Photo: Peter Meyer. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

first artistic collaboration. As Wu recalled in an interview with Martina Köppel-Yang, “Sometimes Duchamp-talking can be a way to fall in love.”

Together, Wu and Inga developed a manifesto for things entitled *Things' Right(s)* (1995). Modeled after the UN Declaration of Human Rights, this passport-sized document proposed the idea of equality between all things without the assumption that man is the centre of the world's activity. The concept of *Things' Right(s)* led to a series of collaborative artistic experiments, all of which utilize everyday materials, spontaneity, and humour to subvert the logic of a global market economy and reveal the fictions of capitalist ideology. Their art shapes our thinking and understanding of the world and invites us to envision our realities in different and creative ways. For example, in *Second Hand Water—Second Hand Reality*, Wu and Inga use the analogy of water distribution to examine the over-processed nature of contemporary existence. Though the distance between users and sources of water has increased—we can drink water readily from taps, or buy a bottle of water at the store. As Wu and Inga observe, water is packaged for us and delivered to us in the same way that news is, and too often we accept this second-hand reality without questioning the source.

To reveal the absurdities of this distribution cycle and bring experience back to the source, Inga performed *Pouring Bottled Water Back into the Victoria Harbour* (1993) which was filmed by Wu. It is forbidden by law to dump anything into Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour but what is

criminal about dumping water into water? By opening up this loophole in a mischievous way and juxtaposing "processed" water with its "natural" source, the action reveals a contemporary paradox: our "natural" water is not natural, but in fact so dirty from human pollution that one wouldn't dare swim in it. Appropriately, in a subsequent performance, *Posing for Swimming* (1994), Wu and Inga are posed in bathing gear, ready to dive into these same murky waters. The effect is hilarious and at the same time sobering: we accept the ways things are handed to us through human interpretation and production, but our environment is suffering from human abuse. Without being prescriptive or dogmatic, Wu and Inga reveal the urgent need for a reconceptualization of society's relationship with nature, and it is here that the concept of Thing's Right(s) becomes more relevant than ever.

These are but a sampling of the many projects in this book that illustrate Wu and Inga's approach to art making. Aesthetically their art comes across as light, playful, and unassuming – no different than anything we encounter in our everyday lives. However, their art rest on a very clear artistic philosophy that is evident in Wu's earlier art and developed further through collaboration with Inga. This philosophy is interpreted in imaginative ways throughout the book's accompanying essays. I found the essays by Chinese authors particularly interesting as they help to explain the Chinese wordplay inherent in Wu's concepts and the Chinese traditions his practice draws upon. As curator Gao Minglu notes, "Wu's discussion happens in a very Chinese way, where analogy is employed as method . . . [and] poetic, intuitive, random, imaginative, and ambiguous approaches appear to be crucial factors in his methodology." What I enjoy most about Wu's approach is the very Daoist idea that art is merely a container to hold the concepts. Once we've grasped the concept, we can forget about the art—just as, in the famous Zhuangzi riddle: "Words exist because of meaning—once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words." For me, this is the beauty of something that is both simple and profound—and perhaps refreshingly so in today's contemporary art world—profound because its so simple.

It may be because Wu's "containers" appear so ordinary and everyday and because his approach is so indirect and casual that his brilliant conceptual art has been largely unrecognized and often misunderstood in the Chinese art scene. This is a point that several authors raise in their essays, and perhaps it is the motivation for the book itself. Yet such a fate may be not so much a tragedy as it is a necessary element of being truly avant-garde. Wu and Inga's art making sits at the crux of the art world's debates about relational aesthetics and the capacity for art to have social impact.

Wu Shanzhuan: Red Humour International

Published by Asia Art Archive (Hong Kong, 2005)

With essays by Norman Bryson, Qiu Zhijie, Gao Minglu, Ursula Panhans-Bühler, Gao Shiming, and an interview by Martina Köppel-Yang

In English and Chinese, with illustrations