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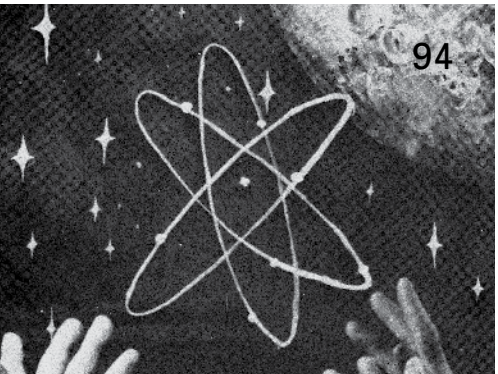

Yishu | Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art
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Cover: Wong Ping, *The Other Side* (detail), 2015, 2-channel video, 8 mins., 2 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

We thank JNBY and Lin Li, Cc Foundation and David Chau, Yin Qing, Chen Ping, Kevin Daniels, Qiqi Hong, Sabrina Xu, David Yue, Andy Sylvester, Farid Rohani, Ernest Lang, D3E Art Limited, Stephanie Holmquist and Mark Allison for their generous contribution to the publication and distribution of Yishu.

Editor's Note

Yishu has an extensive history, since 2003, of reviewing the work of artists of Chinese descent at the Venice Biennale. In this issue, Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker examines the exhibition at the China Pavilion, which brought together individual works as well as collaborations between folk artists and contemporary artists. She probes the challenges of attempting to convey traditional Chinese communal means of creativity to such a diverse audience as that attending Venice. Ornella De Nigris engages in conversation with Tang Nannan, one of the artists who participated in the China Pavilion. Tang Nanna delves into his personal experience of partaking in these collaborations while maintaining his belief that the meaning of his work should be transmitted in the most direct way possible. Yeewan Koon discusses the work of Samson Young, who represents Hong Kong at the Biennale, and who has created multifaceted installations addressing the dubious impact of "charity songs" meant to raise money for various disasters. She notes how the artist's work, in contradistinction to that of Tang Nannan, is contingent upon its complexity.

Alexandra Grimmer speaks with Liang Yue about her video projects and the role that intuition and the poetic play in evoking feelings of familiarity and memory through works that focus on the discreet or often-overlooked details of life. Stephanie Bailey converses with Wong Ping about his approach to psychosexual narratives and how animation provides him with a sense of freedom that photographic film does not. Vivian Kuang Sheng explores three important installations by Yin Xiuzhen that involve the direct interaction of viewers and the uncertain or disquieting experiences that this interaction can entail. Through the highly staged photographs of Fang Tong, Dong Yue Su deliberates on the immigrant experience of mainland Chinese who have relocated to other parts of the world, in this case Canada.

Yishu 82 concludes with an in-depth look at the April Photography Society, active during the late 1970s, which, as Adam Monohon proposes, has not been given its due credit for what he considers the first important photographic movement to emerge following the Cultural Revolution.

Keith Wallace

Erratum: On page 4 of Yishu 81 it should read that Gao Shiming is Vice President of the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou.

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E-mail: coart@ms37.hinet.net

VICE GENERAL MANAGER — Jenny Liu
MARKETING MANAGER — Joyce Lin
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傳真：(886) 2.2542.0631
電子信箱：coart@ms37.hinet.net

編輯製作：Yishu Initiative of Contemporary Chinese Art Society
加中當代藝術協會

會　長：鄭勝天
秘書長：陰晴
地　址：200 - 1311 Howe Street,
Vancouver, BC, V6Z 2P3, Canada
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電子信箱: office@yishujournal.com

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Contributors

Stephanie Bailey is Senior Editor at *Ibraaz*, Contributing Editor at *ART PAPERS* and *LEAP*, Editor-at-large at Ocula.com, and the current curator of the Conversations and Salon Programme at Art Basel Hong Kong. A member of the *Naked Punch* Editorial Committee, she also writes regularly for *Artforum International* and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. From 2006 to 2012, she directed and managed a BTEC-accredited Foundation Diploma in Art and Design at Doukas School, Greece. Her interests include the articulations of history and the relations of power coded into the production and exchange of culture. Recent essays have appeared in *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* (ed. Omar Kholeif, Space/Cornerhouse, 2014); *Hybridize or Disappear* (ed. Joao Laia, Mousse Publishing, 2015); *Happy Hypocrite #8: FRESH HELL* (ed. Sophia Al-Maria, Book Works, 2015); *Armenity,* the catalogue for the Golden Lion-winning Armenian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (ed. Adelina von Furstenburg, Skira, 2015); the 20th Biennale of Sydney Catalogue, *The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed* (ed. Stephanie Rosenthal); and *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle Eas*t (ed. Anthony Downey, Sternberg Press, 2016).

Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker is Director and CEO of the Biennale of Sydney and former Director of the Frye Art Museum, Seattle; Museum Villa Stück, Munich; and the Vancouver Art Gallery. She has curated numerous exhibitions on both contemporary and historical art, with a special emphasis on the history of the modern, most recently *Genius / 21 Century / Seattle*, Seattle (2015–16). In 2001 Birnie-Danzker was Exhibition Director of *The Short Century*, Munich (curated by Okwui Enwezor). She was curator of *Shanghai Modern: 1919–1945* (with Ken Lum and Zheng Shengtian) in 2004–05 and *Art of Tomorrow: Hilla von Rebay and Solomon R. Guggenheim* (with Karole Vail and Brigitte Salmen) in 2005–06. Birnie-Danzker has participated in numerous academic forums in China, and in 2012 she was invited to participate in the inaugural Museum Directors Dialogue of the US–China Forum on the Arts and Culture in Beijing.

Ornella De Nigris is an independent researcher and expert in Chinese art and language. Her present research activity focuses on the evolution of the Chinese art museum system and the formation of the Chinese artistic lexicon. In 2014, she received her Ph.D. in Civilizations of Asia and Africa from Sapienza University of Rome, defending a thesis on the contemporary Chinese art museum system. Since 2012 she has collaborated with Italian universities, as an adjunct professor of Chinese Art History at Carlo Bo' University, Urbino, and as a coordinator of the cultural activities of the Confucius Institute of Sapienza University of Rome. From 2008 to 2014, she visited Asia on numerous occasions for study and research on Chinese art history, Chinese studies, and museum studies. She regularly writes for international scientific journals and participates in national and international conference sessions.

Alexandra Grimmer is an independent curator and publicist based in Stockholm and Beijing. She holds a Ph.D. in Musicology and Aesthetics. From 1998 to 2002 she managed Ernst Hilger Gallery in Paris, and from 2009 to 2012 she was Director of International Affairs at Lingsheng Art Foundation, Beijing. She was also a deputy director of Galerie Lelong, Zurich, from 2007 to 2008. Her recent projects include exhibitions, talks, and performances at Museum Angerlehner, Austria (2014–17); *The Crocodile in the Pond—11 Artists from ShanghART*, at St. Urban Monastery, Switzerland (2016); and performances

that explore contemporary music and art with artists such as Bartosz Sikorski, Aleksander Gabryś, and Rafał Zalech, among others.

Yeewan Koon is Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong. Her primary research area is Ming and Qing paintings, with a secondary interest in modern and contemporary art in Hong Kong. Her book *A Defiant Brush: Su Renshan and the Politics of Painting in Guangdong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013) examines how an iconoclastic painter responded to the violence of the Opium War (1839–1842) by creating paintings that declared Confucius the bringer of chaos and questioned the authority of scholar-officials at this crucial moment. She is currently working on a new book project on export art and the construction of "Canton" as a conceit of global trade and local production. In 2014, Koon was the guest curator of *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*, the first major solo exhibition of the artist in Hong Kong. She has also penned numerous art reviews and critical essays for local publications.

Adam Monohon is a graduate of the master's programme in History of Art and Archaeology of East Asia, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and Pratt Institute's bachelor's programme in History of Art and Design. He is deeply interested in the history of photography as well as modern and contemporary non-Western art. His primary research interest of late has been the development and reception of art photography in the People's Republic of China.

Vivian Kuang Sheng is an art historian in contemporary East Asian and transnational art and an assistant professor in contemporary art at the Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong. Before taking her position at HKU, she taught modern and contemporary art history and theory at University of York and University of Manchester in United Kingdom. In 2014, she was one of the five winners of the Harmonious Society Award for Art Criticism, established by the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, Manchester, in conjunction with University of Salford, with the aim of discovering and encouraging talented young writers who are engaging with Chinese contemporary art. Her peer-reviewed article "Yin Xiuzhen's Fabric Cavities: Fabricating Strange Encounters" was published in *Sculptural Journal* 23, no. 3 (2014).

Dong Yue Su is a Chinese-language educator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada, and works actively with various institutions in Metro Vancouver to provide Chinese-language access to local arts and culture for Chinese communities. He grew up in South China and worked as a journalist before immigrating to Canada in 2004. He obtained his B.A. in Studio Art, an M.A. in Art History, and a second M.A. in East Asian Studies from the University of Toronto. He is interested in art criticism as well as sharing artistic experiences with general readers. He writes art-related articles for publications such as *Sing Tao Daily* and the English weekly *The Source*.

Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker

On *Continuum* and Radical Disruption: The Venice Gathering

Continuum—Generation by Generation, installation view, China Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale.

As I entered *Continuum—Generation by Generation*, the exhibition that graces the China Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, I thought of Ishmael Butler. An alchemist of speculative music, Butler is a member of the Black Constellation collective, whose offerings include "perpetuating ancient ritual, and undertaking the new and remarkable."[1] In a recent interview he noted, "radical disruptions can be a part of a continuum—and usually are."[2] I found neither radical disruptions in *Continuum* nor the new and remarkable.

The curator of the China Pavilion is Qiu Zhijie, Dean of the School of Experimental Art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing and Professor at the School of Intermedia Art at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou. He is an internationally recognized artist and an experienced participant in periodic exhibitions such as the Moscow, São Paulo, Shanghai, and Venice biennials, as well as the Guangzhou Triennale. In 2012, he served as Chief Curator of the 9th Shanghai Biennale,[3] which he co-curated with Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang), Boris Groys, and Jens Hoffmann.

The announcement of Qiu Zhijie's appointment as curator of China's national exhibition at the 57th Venice Biennale elicited high expectations. At an advance press conference[4] and in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, he outlined his curatorial intentions. *Continuum*, he promised, would be "firmly rooted in the DNA of Chinese civilization." The contemporary Chinese art it would present to the world would be "a new product that carries within it the essence of . . . collective creative endeavour over the centuries."[5] The mission of the 2017 China Pavilion, he added, was to capture "the energy of continuum or *bu xi* in Chinese, to convey the stories about regeneration in ancient texts and a new vitality in today's art making, and to capture the transformation and renewal of traditional artisanship."[6]

Yaji

To underscore his belief in an unbroken transmission of collective creative practice in China since ancient times,[7] Qiu Zhijie included masters of

Tang Nannan, *Marrow Return*, 2017, video, installation view, China Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale.

folk culture in *Continuum* and adopted for the exhibition's conceptual framework 雅集 (*yaji*), a traditional form of art presentation and appreciation in China:

> This year's China Pavilion is ultimately a new iteration of the traditional "elegant gathering" (*yaji*) of the Chinese cultural world. From the "Orchid Pavilion Gathering" to the "Gathering in the Western Garden," to the present-day Venice Gathering, *yaji* is the most appropriate vehicle for the creation, appreciation, and understanding of Chinese art. Just as guests at a traditional *yaji* gathering would respond to a poet's recitation by creating lines or poems of their own, the

artists in our *yaji* gathering in Venice awaken their nascent potential through collaborative games, creatively inspired by the work of other artists. This poses a strong contrast to the Romantic myth of solitary individual creation.

In this ancient vision of utopia, Chinese artists do not work in solitude: rather, their creations are always a kind of response, an opening up of a new trajectory, an anticipation of an antiphon, a commentary, a coda: an act of creation in a communal context.

Only art that meets these criteria can truly be described as "Chinese contemporary art."[8]

Wu Jian'an, *The Birth of the Galaxy*, 2012, paper-cut collage, installation view, China Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale.

Qiu Zhijie's adoption of *yaji* as a conceptual framework for an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art was not the first endeavour of its kind. Renowned scholar, theorist, and curator Gao Shiming, Vice President of the China Academy of Art, [9] and gallerist and curator Chang Tsong-zung[10] have long proposed that the traditional literati gathering could provide a compelling alternative to the conventions of the modern museum. Implicit in *yaji* practice, they have noted, "is a view of art fundamentally different from the traditional European aesthetics of 'representation'."[11]

In October 2013, Gao Shiming and Chang Tsong-zung organized an international academic forum on *yaji* at the School of Intermedia Art at

the China Academy of Art as well as an exhibition of calligraphic painting, video art, sound art, and interactive multi-media.[12] Three years later, in 2016, they participated as guest curators in *Beyond the Globe: 8th Triennial of Contemporary Art—U3*, curated by Boris Groys in locations across Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.[13] One reviewer described their work at the Triennial:

> During the Triennial, one half of the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana was dedicated to artists and curators from China. Its most interesting pieces are *Yaji Garden: Art Under the Sky* (2015) and *The Body of Confucius* (2012), created by curators Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming in collaboration with several other artists. *Yaji Garden* consists of representations, in various media, of mountains and brooks, which in ancient times functioned as meeting places for intellectuals engaged in "elegant gatherings" where debates and performances took place.[14]

Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming published a comprehensive essay on the occasion of the Ljubljana Triennial in which they described *yaji* as an "archetypal 'exhibition practice' of pre-modern China [and] a physical embodiment of the traditional Chinese mode of art connoisseurship."[15] The authors noted the distinction between the physical site of a traditional *yaji* gathering—a garden and its attached residence—and that of the modern museum—an architectural edifice of display. The *yaji* encounter, they proposed, is an apparatus for engendering communion with nature and an "aesthetic moment" which inspires creativity, tactile, immersive experiences, and engagement among those friends who share this appreciation:

> The "guests" would be expected to share their art, and take part in [interactive] connoisseurship by "artistic" responses such as composing poetry and commentary, or simply engaging in conversation. . . . The demand on both "host" and "guest" to articulate their aesthetic response dispels the passive spectator, and conspires instead to bring out the "aesthetic moment."[16]

The modern museum encounter, they proposed, encourages "passive visuality" while "the Literati connoisseur's practice of incorporating fresh artistic responses into old artworks demonstrates a resistance against 'museumization.' The attitude is that a relevant artwork should be a living project."

Despite their embrace of the traditional *yaji* or "elegant gathering" as a vehicle for creating, appreciating, and understanding art, Gao Shiming and Chang Tsong-zung recognized that ensuring it will thrive in a contemporary world of "voracious creativity" remains a challenge for its practitioners:

> As a contemporary institution the *yaji* garden requires a critical appraisal of its apparatuses, especially its cultural specificity, and reconsiders itself in terms of a new global

institution open to the world. The special dynamism and openness of contemporary museums benefit from a particular European tradition of iconoclasm, which emphasizes the "new" and the "radical." And as an open forum for negotiation of ideologies, the contemporary platform keeps alive the memory of the Greek agora, emphasizing democratic participation.[17]

The Venice Gathering

Yao Huifen and Wu Jian'an, *Yoshan Series*, 2017, Suzhou embroidery, installation view, 57th Venice Biennale.

Qiu Zhijie's aspirations at the 2017 China Pavilion for what the *Continuum* catalogue referred to as the Venice Gathering were boundless. He invited two masters of folk culture to participate—Yao Huifen, a master of Suzhou embroidery, and Wang Tianwen, a master of Shaanxi shadow plays—as well as two contemporary artists, Tang Nannan, a teacher at the School of Intermedia Art at the China Academy of Art, and Wu Jian'an, an Associate Professor at the School of Experimental Art at CAFA. Each artist was invited to present individual works as well as "collaborative games" with the other participants in which folk crafts and the work of contemporary artists were to permeate each other.[18] A large-scale shadow play screen, *Continuum—Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* (2015), which was a centrepiece of the Venice Gathering, was a collaborative work by all four artists.

Reproductions of two Song dynasty paintings from the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing—Li Song's *Skeleton Fantasy Show* and Ma Yuan's *Twelve Images of Water Surging*—were included in *Continuum* to illustrate Chinese attitudes to life, death, and time. Ancient fables—*The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* and *Jingwei Fills the Sea*—provided inspiration for the individual and collective works commissioned by Qiu Zhijie. They introduced into the *Venice Gathering*, he noted, "the traditional oppositional binary of Yin/Yang from the *I-Ching* (mountains/sea)."[19]

Was the Venice Gathering an effective apparatus for engendering an "aesthetic moment?" Did the artworks that ensued from collaboration among the invited artists practice succeed in incorporating "fresh artistic responses into old artworks?" Were they living projects?

There were live performances, at least during the three opening days of the Venice Biennale. Richard Vine of *Art in America* praised this temporary gathering as "surprisingly lively."

> To the delight of many visitors, Wang Tianwen (who holds the official title of first-level Chinese arts and craft master),

Wang Tianwen, Wu Jian'an, Tang Nannan, Yao Huifen, *Continuum—Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea,* 2017, shadow play screen.

puts on a full-blown shadow theatre performance, complete with live musicians, singers, and voice actors. . . . One can appreciate the artists' technical virtuosity.[20]

Continuum—Generation by Generation, installation view, China Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale..

Within days, however, the living projects had disappeared, and the permanent installation of the Venice Gathering faded into static remnants that appeared contrived, over determined, and stripped bare of the context that the collaborations among the four artists had given form to. There is no doubt that a significant barrier to appreciating *Continuum*, even during the opening days, was the China Pavilion itself, "a converted ship building warehouse filled with antique oil tanks, poor lighting, and limited space to exhibit."[21] Dark and cavernous, it is neither a garden in which to commune with nature nor a modern edifice of display.

In their essay for the 2016 Ljubljana Triennial, Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming recognized the potential for the *yaji* to be an ideal conceptual model for a biennial while anticipating its limitations:

> The phenomenon of the recent proliferation of biennials is an interesting case. New biennials hosted by urban centres from around the globe are event-based, and they are formed principally around the interaction between artists, curators, and specialists. Although the public is welcome and encouraged, they are no more than adjunct spectators. The biennial is a successful step in moving beyond the monolithic museum, and it may perhaps be provocatively interpreted as a form of mega-*yaji* (without the garden

and its cosmic implications). At the biennial, aesthetic interaction between artists, curators, and specialists take precedence over the authority of the typical modern museum, and there is no attempt to impose a consensus; diverse cultural positions are respected for their ability to engage the event.[22]

Perpetuating Ancient Ritual/Undertaking the New and Remarkable

Did the 2017 Venice Biennale have the potential to be a mega-*yaji*, and was it an ideal environment for this experiment? The answer to both questions is yes. The Venice Gathering at the China Pavilion, however, with all its good intentions, captured neither *bu xi*, the energy of continuum, nor the transformation of traditional artisanship. Despite the sincere efforts of the talented artists who participated in the Venice Gathering, there was little sense of the new or remarkable, and no demonstrable engagement beyond the opening days of the Pavilion with the world that gathered in Venice and sought to engage with the artists of China.

Qiu Zhijie, *A Network of Intertextaul and Collective Creation*, 2017, installation view, China Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale.

Importantly, *Continuum* was directed primarily to the professional audience who attended the 2017 Venice Biennale over a period of the three opening days.[23] For the six-month long duration of the Venice Gathering—May 13 to November 26—there were no continuous, living projects or a consistent means for the public—adjunct spectators, as Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming described them—to engage with the artists, their collaborations, and the compelling model of the *yaji* garden, which had generated the Venice Gathering. As Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming have observed, the *yaji* garden is continuing to evolve within its traditional confines. It offers, however, "a fresh context for thinking about dynamic, event-based practices of display and art experience. As a laboratory for aesthetic sensibilities and incubator of artistic imagination, the on-going project of *yaji* garden should remain an open invitation."[24]

Notes

1. Shabazz Palaces is a musical group founded by Ishmael Butler and Tendai Maraire. "The Black Constellation consists of a unified cross-disciplinary guild of Soothsayers, Makers, Empaths, and Channels. Their terrestrial offerings have been myriad, including . . . the perpetuation of ancient ritual, and the undertaking of the new and remarkable," Maikioiyo Alley-Barnes, unpublished wall label for *Ode to Octavia: Neo Ancient Talisman*, 2012; and The Black Constellation collective, *Ode to Octavia Part 12: (Sparkles) . . . Recollections of the Wraith*, 2012. in the exhibitions *Mw (Moment Magnitude)*, 2012, and *To: Seattle Subject: Personal*, 2016, at the Frye Art Museum, Seattle.

2. Dave Segal, "With Digable Planets and Shabazz Palaces, Ishmael Butler Has One Foot in the Past, and One in the Future," , May 24, 2017, http://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/05/24/25159577/how-shabazz-palaces-ishmael-butler-fused-the-past-and-the-future-to-change-hiphop-forever/.

3. See Barbara Pollock, "Shanghai Biennale 2012," *Art in America*, February 18, 2013, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/shanghai-biennale-2012/.

4. Sue Wang, "The China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale Launched a Press Conference to Announce the Use of 'Continuum' to Present the Immortal Pattern of Chinese Art," April 24, 2017, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, http://en.cafa.com.cn/the-china-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale-launched-a-press-conference-to-announce-the-use-of-continuum-to-present-the-immortal-pattern-of-chinese-art.html/.

5. *Continuum—Generation by Generation*, ed. Qiu Zhijie, exhibition catalogue (Venice: Pavilion of China, 57th International Art Exhibition, 2017), 13.

6. Press release, Pavilion of China at the 57th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, exhibition opening, May 11, 2017. B*ùx xi* provided the underlying premise of Qui Zhijie's exhibition as well as its title.

7. *Continuum—Generation by Generation*, ed. Qiu Zhijie, exhibition catalogue (Venice: Pavilion of China, 57th International Art Exhibition, 2017), 3.

8. Ibid., 10–11.

9. Gao Shiming's primary subjects are visual culture research, contemporary art studies, and curatorial study. He has organized numerous distinguished large-scale exhibitions, including *Farewell to Post-Colonialism: Third Guangzhou Triennial* (2008), and *Rehearsal: 8th Shanghai Biennale* (2010).

10. Chang Tsong-zung is a curator, founder of the private gallery Hanart TZ, Hong Kong (1983), co-founder with Claire Hsu of the Asia Art Archive (AAA), Hong Kong (2000), and a guest professor at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou.

11. Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming, *Yahi Garden: Art Under the Sky*, http://www.mg-lj.si/media/acff04c3cc/Yaji-Garden-Art-Under-the-Sky-CHANG-GAO.pdf/.

12. The academic forum, in which this author participated, was titled *Making Environment: Calligraphic Painting and Spatial Poetry in Garden*. The exhibition *Forest and Spring: Calligraphic Painting and Gardening* was to take place in Beishan Street, Manao Temple, at the foot of Baocu Hill, West Lake Expo Museum, and Baoqing Villa.

13. The exhibition took place from June 3 to September 18, 2016. Jela Krecic, "Beyond the Globe," 8th Triennial of Contemporary Art—U3, Ljubljana, Slovenia, June 3 to September 18, 2016, http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/"beyond-the-globe"-8th-triennial-of-contemporary-art-u3/.

14. Jela Krecic, *Beyond the Globe: 8th Triennial of Contemporary Art—U3*, Ljubljana, Slovenia, June 3–September 18, 2016, http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/"beyond-the-globe"-8th-triennial-of-contemporary-art-u3/.

15. Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming, *ahi Garden: Art Under the Sky*, http://www.mg-lj.si/media/acff04c3cc/Yaji-Garden-Art-Under-the-Sky-CHANG-GAO.pdf/.

16. Ibid. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming, *Yahi Garden: Art Under the Sky*, http://www.mg-lj.si/media/acff04c3cc/Yaji-Garden-Art-Under-the-Sky-CHANG-GAO.pdf/.

17. Ibid.

18. Press release, Pavilion of China at the 57th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, exhibition opening, May 11, 2017.

19. Ibid.

20. Richard Vine, "Choose Your China: Three Pavilions in Venice," *Art in America*, May 19, 2017, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/choose-your-china-three-pavilions-in-venice/.

21. Stephanie Chang, "Transfiguration: China at the Venice Biennale," *The Culture Trap*, 2013, "https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/transfiguration-china-at-the-venice-biennale/.

22. Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming, *Yaji Garden: Art Under the Sky*, http://www.mg-lj.si/media/acff04c3cc/Yaji-Garden-Art-Under-the-Sky-CHANG-GAO.pdf/.

23. The professional days were May 10, 11, and 12, 2017.

24. Ibid.

Ornella de Nigris

Continuum-Generation by Generation— The Continuation of Artistic Creation at the 57th Venice Biennale: A Conversation with Tang Nannan

Tang Nannan, *Archaeological Project of Global Beach Memory*, photography installation and interaction, 340 x 810 cm, 2012–16. Courtesy of the artist.

Video artist Tang Nannan showcased his work in the China Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. This conversation was conducted in Chinese and took place during the official inauguration of the Biennale's China Pavilion on May 13, 2017.

Ornella De Nigris: In this edition of the Venice Biennale, the China Pavilion offers a wide variety of works, encompassing a range of expressive languages related to traditional art and crafts as well as contemporary mediums. Also noticeable in this edition is the collaboration between artists creating various works defined by the curator of the exhibition as a "collective intertextual work."[1] Can you describe what the word "collaboration" means to you?

Tang Nannan: Qiu Zhijie, who was the curator of the China Pavilion, advocated this kind of collaboration between the artists. Before this, I had many collaborations with people when realizing my artworks. For example, the tent that we are sitting in right now is one of my works presented at the

Tang Nannan, *Archaeological Project of Global Beach Memory*, photography installation and interaction, 340 x 810 cm, 2012–16. Courtesy of the artist.

Biennale and is titled *Archeological Project of Global Beach Memory* (2012). You can see here many images portraying materials that have drifted onto the beach and are scattered on the sand. I felt that each of these objects must have a story; accordingly, I wrote a few stories myself. I also invited some friends to write stories explaining, for example, why a toy airplane landed where it did. Then a stone—why was it there in the sand? Then, on the opposite side of the tent, you can read the stories related to the objects shown in the pictures. You can see, for example, where the stone comes from and why is it there on the beach. The following section of the tent is *India Drift* (2013), the second station of the project I realized in India, which includes many interesting stories about that country. Next is a collaboration between my friend and me; unfortunately, now my friend is now deceased. The last one is an ongoing part of this project that I would have liked to collaborate on with the audience here in Venice, but I was too exhausted; I did not have energy to do it.

Ornella De Nigris: The works you are presenting here at the Venice Biennale all portray the sea in many guises and using different mediums. Indeed, according to the curatorial project by Qiu Zhijie, the sea and mountains represent the interpretative and symbolic key to understanding the whole China Pavilion. Can you describe what the sea means to you and what kind of symbol it is in your artistic experience?

Tang Nannan: In my early years, I used to live by the sea, in Xiamen. I have always lived in very beautiful places. My family, my grandfather, and my grandfather's father were all fishermen—as you can see, my skin is very dark. Therefore, I think painting the sea is kind of instinctive for me. However, very strangely, for over a thousand years of history, no one painted the sea in China; I could not find someone to teach me how to paint the sea. I wanted to draw the sea, I wanted to learn, but I could not find an artist or an example of an artwork I could learn from, except some landscape paintings by Ma Yuan [born around 1200 A.D.]. In the history of Chinese

Tang Nannan, *Flying*, video, 2013, 5 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

landscape painting, there are many paintings of rivers, streams, and lakes, but not the sea. There is a lack of painters who focus on the sea, not only as something to depict, but also as a theme within their work. There are many pictures portraying the sea, but they are the kind of images that hang in the living room of the middle class. They simply show a beautiful sea, which is a very superficial thing.

Ornella De Nigris: Each of your works in this exhibition portrays the sea using a very different vocabulary. In the video *Flying* (2013), for example, on a background of a nebulous and misty sea, a bird is floating between the mist and the waves, up and down. Can you describe the meaning of this work?

Tang Nannan: The inspiration for this work came to me after I read a chapter of the *Zhuang Zi* titled "Carefree Wondering." The original text says: "In the darkness of the Northern Ocean, there was a fish named Kun. Kun was so big that no one knew how many thousands of *li* [traditional Chinese unit of distance] its body extended. After its metamorphoses into a bird, its name became Peng. Peng was so big that no one knew how many thousands of *li* its body extended. It got angry and flew away; its wings becoming like clouds suspended in the sky." The meaning of this passage is that the bird flew away as it was unhappy, but Zhuang Zi does not tell us to where the bird flew. Peng was so big that he was not able to fly, and he "rose up, whirling for eighty or ninety thousand *li*." He was able to rise only once, when he used the power of the air. For Peng it was difficult to fly, so I thought that all flight must actually be very difficult. My work represents this.

Tang Nannan, *Odyssey Smoking*, video, 4 mins., 50 secs., 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

Tang Nannan, *Archaeological Project of Global Beach Memory* (detail), photography installation and interaction, 340 x 810 cm, 2012–16. Courtesy of the artist.

Ornella De Nigris: The other work that attracted my attention once I entered the Pavilion is located in front of *Flying*, the video *Odyssey Smoking* (2015). This time it is a train that in some way enters the vocabulary of the sea; in fact, we witness a crazy train journey in the sweep of the sea. Can you describe the metaphor behind the train?

Tang Nannan: The train represents us. It is us. This work in some way represents my feelings about life. Normally, the train should travel on the ground, but what we see here is a train traveling into the sea. I think that our human condition is like that train: one should be free, just like those children playing right here next to us while we chat. Children are free. Nevertheless, our society has norms that put us somewhere else, and I think this is outdated. I mean society has claims on us all, but we have very different claims on ourselves. For example, going to work is a very annoying thing. . . . Then why should we work? Moreover, in China everyone must get married and have children. In other countries, perhaps it is slightly different, but in China everyone must do so, especially girls, and if at the age of twenty-eight you are not yet married, your parents can be very disappointed. But why? I am not married, no one can blame me, but at my age, girls are finished. However, the train is also very confused; it does not have any direction, yet it can drive everywhere. There is no direction in this sea, and in the beginning of the film you notice that the train is attempting to follow a direction, over and over again, and then floats on the surface of the water. Finally, it cannot not find a direction, and it does not know if its direction is right or wrong, but it goes on and then disappears into the fog.

Ornella De Nigris: These two works, together with the other three videos presented here at the entrance of the Pavilion, all adopt the sea and a moving object or an animal as the main protagonist within the inner structure of the video. Can we say that each video expresses a different story, but a similar feeling?

Tang Nannan: Yes, all the works have in common my feeling about life. Moreover, so does the sound.


尋海記

Ornella De Nigris: You are one of the artists attending the Venice Biennale, an international exhibition that attracts people from different countries and cultural or artistic backgrounds. It is likely that many of them are not very familiar with Chinese culture. To what extent do you think that your works can be understandable and shareable for an Italian and an international audience? What feelings do you think they can provoke?

Previous page: Tang Nannan, *What's the Sea,* video animation, ink on paper and interaction, 2015. View of installation at the Chinese Pavilion. Courtesy of the artist.

Tang Nannan: I am very confident about my video. I think the audience will understand my message. There is no need to be acquainted with Chinese culture; my works are direct. This is why, in fact, my works are easily understandable. Look at them: there is one that dramatically grabs your eyes—one facing the sea, or those flowers I painted. They need no explanation. I have this kind of self-confidence, and I avoid making works that need to be explained. Many artists put a lot of details or elements into their work, which then need explanations in order for the public to understand it. I hate it.

Ornella De Nigris: I particularly appreciated the work named *What's the Sea* (2014), probably because the point of it is the collaboration between you and the public, a special public consisting of children. Can you explain the process and the idea behind this project and how you managed to involve so many children from around the world?

Tang Nannan: As I told you before, I had this idea of depicting the sea but could only find very few examples from which to learn. Then I thought that in addition to learning from tradition, I could learn from another source, that is to say, from children. The first to be involved was my friend's child, a little boy. In China, if you ask children to draw the sea, they all paint it almost the same way, because at the age of six or seven, after being taught by teachers how to draw a picture of the sea, they all draw the same sea—the beach, the coconut tree, and the sun on the right. The girl will draw a mermaid and the boy will draw a warship. This is why I think the teacher has impoverished their minds, and eventually I designed a course on my own—you can see that class in the video. In that class I was trying to bring the true face of the sea to the children. I also collected illustrations of the sea from twenty artists I believe represented it well and showed it to them as a subject matter. Ancient, modern, Chinese, or foreign, I showed them the different ways artists portray the sea. In addition, I also compared the sea with a person, which sometimes is quiet, sometimes angry, sometimes romantic, and sometimes long-winded. I would give them these kind of figures, and then tell them, "Paint it by yourself. You can draw a happy sea, an angry sea, a romantic sea. You can also paint a seabed. What would you like the seabed to look like?"

Ornella De Nigris: What kind of reaction do children usually have? Do they like the lesson?

Tang Nannan: They love it, and I found the traditional ink and wash painting is particularly suitable for children. In the documentary part of my work *What's the Sea*, children seem to be very happy. Recently, I went to the United States and discovered that American children paint very well, maybe because they feel free. I liked it very much. Earlier, you asked me about this opportunity—how was I able to involve so many children to join my lesson? In the beginning, I asked my university students to help, and they contacted some educational institutions, and, if they were interested, we would provide paper, the lesson, and so on, and then collect the works.

Then, we looked at fate: Chinese people talk about *yuanfen*, destiny. A few days ago Qiu Zhijie and I went to the University of Venice to make a speech, and I really wanted to carry on with this project. You see those words above the tent? "What does a wonderland look like in your mind?" I would like to ask Italians what they think about that. That is a sea, a big sea, and there is a piece of wood in the sea. The name of this work is *Floating Raft* (2012), a name that comes from an ancient Chinese legend. According to the Jin Dynasty's *Records of Diverse Matters* by Zhang Hua, this floating raft would appear each year on China's coastline, in July and August. At this time, if someone chanced upon the floating raft, prepared some food, and then sat upon it, the raft would take to the passenger to the Milky Way, in the galaxy of heaven. Once upon a time, a man prepared some food and got to the raft, and then the ship brought him into a faraway place where he saw someone drinking the water from the Campanula River. He asked, "What kind of place is this?" and the person said, "I am Niu Lang, and she is Zhi Nu." Then he came across many other places and finally returned. Therefore, we can say that this is a place connecting to the ideal world, and I would like to ask people how they imagine their own personal ideal place: "What does a wonderland look like in your mind?"

Ornella De Nigris: This work also intends to connect the sea with people's wishes and hopes, and I find this very pertinent with the words of Christine Marcel, Curator of the Biennale this year. She said that in a world full of conflicts, art and artists represent "the most precious part of what makes us human." Marcel also said that this Biennale, titled *Viva Arte Viva*, was "designed with the artists, for the artists, and about the forms they propose."[2] What does this mean to you, and how can you describe the relationship between your works and the exhibition space?

Tang Nannan: The main characteristic of my works is that they are relatively discreet, and are located near the works of Wu Jian'an, whose works are more, how to say, visually spectacular. My work is beside his, so quiet and calm. I just hope visitors will rest and relax, like outside here in the garden, under my tent, lying down on this beach chair, and read and appreciate my work in there. However, you see, this can be difficult because people are used to those artists who dramatically try to get your attention, so they do not notice works like this. Yesterday, a man was queuing in the

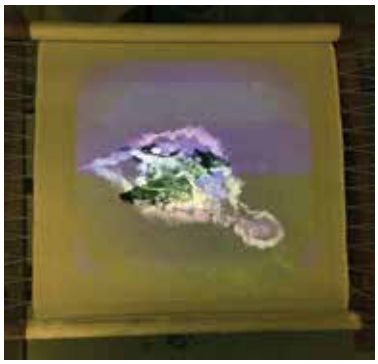
Tang Nannan, *Floating Raft*, photography installation, 400 cm x 1000 cm, 2012.
Courtesy of the artist.

back of the line for half an hour, and he thought the people in the front were lining up to see something extraordinary. But it was just a simple installation where people could sit under the tent and read the stories above.

Ornella De Nigris: This is because, as you said, visitors usually would expect something sensational and eye-catching. You talked about this relationship between your works and those by Wu Jian'an. How was the collaboration between you and the other artists for this exhibition?

Tang Nannan: As I told you before, I often work in collaboration with other artists. The China Pavilion was announced very late in China; it was almost around Chinese New Year when I got this news. The time to prepare for the exhibition was very short, only three months, so, at the beginning, working with the other Chinese artists of the Pavilion was very difficult for me. I was not prepared.

Ornella De Nigris: Perhaps this was because artistic language and medium are completely different from the other artists in the China Pavilion?



Tang Nannan and Yao Huifen, *Removing the Mountains*, 2017, mixed media.

Wang Tianwen, Wu Jian'an, Tang Nannan, and Yao Huifen, *Continuum—Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea*, 2017, shadow play screen.

Tang Nannan: It was for this reason, and, at first, I was not ready and became very anxious. However, I had about three weeks of anxiety, and then I suddenly had new ideas. I started to note these ideas and finally selected a number of them. A few days before starting this work, I knew that embroidery was not a problem for me, as this craft is a very beautiful one. The works would be embroidered with Yao Huifen according to my instructions and I could ensure the effect would be very good. I was a little worried about the shadow puppet play with Wang Tianwen, and just before the installation, I was very nervous. Anyway, when we installed the work, I was satisfied with the outcome and could finally relax. I was very tense, but this was just the beginning. Before starting to collaborate with the other artists of the Pavilion, my thinking was like the typical thinking of a traditional Chinese literati painter, a kind of official painter. In Chinese art history, rarely is there a serious discourse about the link between folk art and culture, and, because of this, there is very little folk art in my creations and I rarely incorporate it. However, this time, through the collaboration with Tang Tianwen, a master of shadow plays, and Yao Huifen, a master of embroidery, I started to enter the realm of Chinese folk culture, and this provided me with broader possibilities of creativity. Now I will have many new works related to folk art. I have already painted more

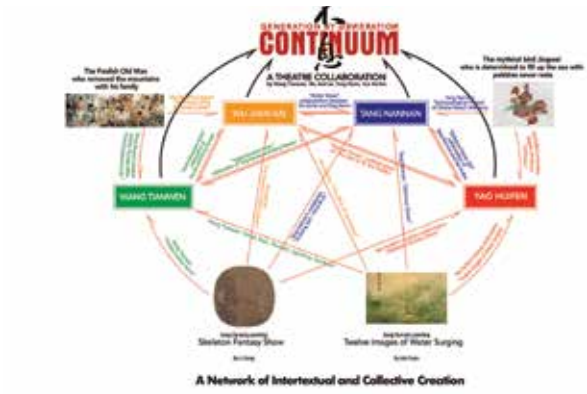
Qiu Zhijie, *Map of Succession of Teachings*, installation, 2017.

than twenty new pictures and draft projects for new works, so now I can say that the collaboration has been great.

Ornella De Nigris: Besides a strong accent on collaboration as a form of creating art, this exhibition also particularly stresses the importance of the connectivity, or *buxi*, between different generations of artists who pass on teachings and transmit art skills to new generations, and the mentorship relationship between artist or master and disciple. This concept is well represented by a very remarkable installation located in the *Archives* area of the exhibition, named *Map of Succession of Teachings* (2017). The installation is composed of dozens of portraits and images fixed to the wall, that, according to curator Qiu Zhijie, represent the most influential artists and art in modern and contemporary Chinese art history. Each portrait has a visual connection with the other pictures and portraits, forming a net, where each master is linked through a thread of multi-coloured cloth with his master and his disciple(s). From this installation, I learned about the relationship of the mentorship between Qiu Zhijie and you, and I want to ask: What kind of influence did this relationship have on you?

Tang Nannan: Mainly in terms of thought, as in the creation of our art we are very independent. The two of us are the same age; he is one month older than me. Probably his most important influence is his passion for traditional art. In China, a contemporary artist who loves traditional art, like calligraphy, is considered very unusual, and people in the artistic environment can think you are "fake contemporary." Therefore, it is very embarrassing to tell others that I actually practice calligraphy every day. At that time, when I was Qiu Zhijie's student, he told me that calligraphy is good, as good as the Chinese tradition is—I had not realized this before. He had been my doctoral tutor for seven years, and, besides, he also passed down to me another important teaching, that China's present situation is full of problems. He said to me, "Problems are many, but you cannot sit there and complain all the time. You have to work hard, do a good job with your work. You have to believe that in this society, no matter how it is, that the most important thing is that it is developing. Actually, if everyone was

be able to do their own job well, then the whole country would be good. But if you don't do anything but curse the government every day, this is useless." I greatly respect him.



Qiu Zhijie, *A Network of Intertextual and Collective Creation* (detail), installation, 2017.

Ornella De Nigris: The planning for this exhibition was complex, and in some ways conceptual and philosophical. I think Qiu Zhijie designed it very carefully. In the *Archives* section, for example, another work caught my attention, the installation, *A Network of Intertextual and Collective Creation* (2017). It is a map depicting all the works by the four artists, and it established a link between the artists according to the works created. Each one of you is associated with other artists, and a colour. Two works by Song dynasty artists, Li Song and Ma Yuan, are part of this map as well. In some way, this map reminds me of the "five elements diagram," where the elements wood, fire, earth, metal, and water give life to a mutual generation; that is, where each of the five elements is generated by one of the others, and, in turn, generates one of the others In Chinese. I am sure you represent the water element, and I think that Qiu Zhijie also represents one of the five, one essential part of this microcosm. I think in this respect, he is showing us his dual nature as an artist and curator.

Tang Nannan: Qiu Zhijie is very skillful. As for my element, I always paint water, and Wu Jian'an always paints mountains—I am the quiet, and he is the movement. I am *yin*, and he is *yang*. Look at the picture of *yin* and *yang* that Qiu Zhije has painted for this exhibition; it also represents Venice, with the Grand Canal in the middle dividing the two complementary parts. He is very skillful.

Ornella De Nigris: What about the way that the artists participating in this Pavilion were selected? Were they chosen directly by Qiu Zhije?

Tang Nannan: Yes, he chose them. I have not always been confident in my work, but, Qiu Zhijie, when he was my mentor, said, "You should go to see biennials. You should see more of this kind of large scale exhibition." Then, over a period of four years, I went to see biennials everywhere, but I found that I could not understand seventy or eighty percent of the works. In particular, as I mentioned earlier, when looking at these works I needed to read descriptions in order to understand their meaning—only after all

that was I able to understand. I became so tired of this! If you are an artist, a visual artist, then people should understand you immediately. Why should one need to read so many explanations?

Ornella De Nigris: Contemporary art has different levels of comprehension. The most obvious is on the surface and can be easily understood at the first look, but then slowly you can catch the innermost meaning—it's like a long discovery.

Tang Nannan: Yes, but I always wanted to create a kind of art that is understandable at first glance. Do you know the Chinese traditional poetry *shige*?[3] I love our ancient Chinese poetry, which uses just twenty characters and is able convey a very broad meaning. It can resonate for thousands of years. So why do artists make such complicated artworks.? This is the reason my video works are very short, a maximum of four or five minutes; it is because I do not want people to become bored. To watch and immediately understand, I long for this. I think the eyes have no frontiers, and, returning to the question that you asked before, I think good or bad is something that everybody can easily understand, including me.

Ornella De Nigris: I think one of the most interesting aspects of your work presented here at the Biennale is the interaction with people—this kind of interactive art is very meaningful. I do believe that the artist should relate to the audience and make them an active part in the process of creation.

Tang Nannan: It is a mutual gain. You see, if I was a tourist and went to Rome to visit the city and then left, this would not be interesting for me. Instead, I would prefer to go to Rome and bring my work with me and communicate with people, letting them know what Indian people think, or what Chinese people think, or what a poet thinks, and then ask them what they think. If I could get their thoughts and if they communicate with me, it would be very meaningful for me. You see, I want to do this work in twenty countries in three phases, and I plan to complete it in 2022, and that is why I called it *Global project*.

Ornella De Nigris: How many years have you been carrying on the *Global project*?

Tang Nannan: It has been more than three years. The part dedicated to India (which belongs to phase one) is finished, and I wanted to do the third phase in Venice. This a very personal work.

Notes

1. Qiu Zhijie , *Continuum—Generation by Generation: The 57th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Pavilion of China*, exhibition catalogue, Venice, May 13 to November 26, 2017, 9.
2. Macel Christine, *Biennale arte 2017, Viva Arte Viva*, exhibition brochure, 3.
3. *Shige* is a traditional poetry form that was practiced up to the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907 A. D.). Its meter is characterized by lines of five Chinese characters, organized in quatrains, with a total of twenty characters.

Yeewan Koon

What Is the Sound of Failed Aspirations? Samson Young's *Songs For Disaster Relief*

Entrance to Hong Hong Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

The ambitious theme of this year's 57th Venice Biennale is *Viva Arte Viva,* a rallying call by curator Christine Marcel for art to reconnect with a world that has been fractured by individualism and indifference. Although there are times when that idea descended into a retro-hippie display of the healing powers of art, there were also artworks that tackled the theme with political insightfulness and emotional depth. One presentation worthy of note was *Samson Young: Songs for Disaster Relief* at the Hong Kong Pavilion, which consisted of audio components, video, sculpture, two-dimensional works, performance, and installations, and was organized by M+ with guest curator Kwok Ying.

Samson Young, installation view at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2016. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy Gallerie Giesla Capitain, Cologne, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

In recent years, Samson Young has been making his mark on the international stage with shows at Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (2015), Kunstahlle Düsseldorf (2016), and Frieze London (2016). Although he is often referred to as a sound artist, it is a definition that fails to do justice to his multidisciplinary portfolio and to the complexity of his projects, which combine an array of different, sometimes disparate sources, concepts, and processes. For example, for Freize London, his *When I have fears that I may cease to be, what would you give in exchange for your soul* was a sound walk whose title was a mashup of a sonnet by John Keats and a country gospel song.[1] Participants went through the fair listening to a dedicated playlist on earphones, with instructions to walk through the fair, sometimes with visuals on an iPad, and sometimes the directions would lead to a live performance by Michael Schiefel. At the end of the sound walk, participants were given Samson Young's telephone number, and if they dialed this number, he would sing them a tune from wherever he was.

Samson Young, *When I have fears that I may cease to be,* 2016, interactive artwork. Photo: Dennis Man Wing Leung. Courtesy of the artist and Frieze London.

The walk was inspired by the classic espionage film *Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1944) based on a story by Graham Greene, and involved a series of surveillance reports by a Hong Kong bookseller known only as Lok. It evoked, without being too heavy-handed, the recent news of the kidnapping of four Hong Kong booksellers by mainland China authorities, and its implications for the future of freedom of expression in Britain's former colony.[2] But arguably more effective was how Samson Young transported participants into an alternate fictional world through sensory engagement from their vantage point within the spatial reality of Frieze's white tent.

In Venice, *Songs for Disaster Relief* also blended the imagined with the actual. The conceptual seeds of this project began when Samson Young

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

heard the 2010 remake of the 1985 charity single classic *We Are The World*[3] in aid of victims of the Haiti earthquake. Samson Young, a trained musician and composer, was disconcerted by this reiteration of an iconic Band Aid song, which he describes as being "out of time" with its excessive use of auto-tuning that jarred with the emotions of the song and rendering it anachronistic.[4] While he found the remake wanting, the song did prompt his interest in looking at charity singles and exploring different interventions to create remixes that stretch the conceptual and sonic ranges of these songs.

The conceit of the structure of the exhibition is as an EP album composed of remakes or responses to three classic charity singles: *Do They Know It's Christmas?* (1984), *We Are the World* (1985), and *Many Hearts Prevail* (1991), a Cantonese version of *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*.[5] Samson Young's "remakes" are a series of projects entitled *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the mythmaker who fell to earth), We are the World as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir,* and *Lullaby (World Music)*. Each project consists of many different works, but together they share one a common interest: Samson Young examines the 1980s/1990s humanitarian pop-music world projects through the lens of failed aspirations, and, in different ways, his works reflect back on our own sense of social responsibility and choice.

The first two rooms of the Hong Kong pavilion are dedicated to *Palazzo Gundane*. During Samson Young's research on charity singles in the 1980s, he came across a story of a group of unemployed musicians in Cape Town, led by singer-songwriter Boomtown Gundane, who made a song in response to another 1980s charity classic: *Do They Know It's Christmas?*. Boomtown Gundane's response song was aptly titled *Yes We Do*, with the

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

funds apparently going toward educational programs on contraceptives and safe sex. If the 1980s charity singles promoted a distinct blend of altruism and pop music glamour that, while well-intended, exploited the narrative of a third world country that needs to be saved, Boomtown's provocatively sassy response provides a much-needed African voice that challenged this image of the benevolent West.

The brilliance of this response was further capped when Samson Young later discovered that the story of *Yes We Do* was a fake article that originated from a satirical website in South Africa. While current affairs may uphold this fake news as being "in time" in a post-Trump world, far more compelling was the audacious wit of an African response to Euro-American celebrity advocacy. The fact that the singer Boomtown Gundane never existed is almost incidental to this powerful narrative.

Samson Young takes the story as a point of departure to recreate another "Boomtown Gundane." He was a rigger in the oil fields of Williston, North Dakota (one of the earliest boomtowns), and his real name is Michael Schiefel (a real artist who often collaborates with Samson Young), while his performance name is Boomtown Gundane. Boomtown loves cowboy movies, and country music, and hangs out in a bohemian-style room, and of course makes records that reach platinum status. Powerful narratives can be created by the biography of one person, and fiction gives us access to the inaccessible through the invention of possibilities. Samson Young, in these two connected rooms, presents a meta-fiction that presents Boomtown Gundane as a person, alter ego, and conceptual structure.

The first room pays homage to Gundane's music career with walls covered in "platinum" records made up of collages from found objects, gold gilding,

and drawings. In the centre of the room is *Winged Victory*, the "key visual" for the concert promoting the album featuring songs inspired by *Yes We Do. Winged Victory,* a 3D-printed sculptural model with a grey and green patina that is a mashup of Ronald Reagan, Pythagoras, and a space station that clashes with a military bugle. It references Reagan's unsuccessful Star Wars program, which asked scientists to devise a missile defense program that would make nuclear weapons obsolete. It was intended to be a type of bargaining chip to help end the Cold War, but this proved counterproductive. Throughout the 1980s, Reagan's refusal to give up the Star Wars program was one of the sticking points that prevented any arms agreement between America and the Soviet Union. As an example of thwarted ambitions, it was a spectacular one. Samson Young chose Pythagoras based on an anecdote that this classical figure would hold his geometry classes hidden behind curtains, as he believed that his students could better concentrate on the sound of his voice without the distraction of his physical presence.

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

The disconnection between a sound and its source is known as "acousmatic sound," a term coined by Pierre Schaeffer in 1955.[6] This is a listening paradigm where, by ignoring the sound source, one must refocus attention to the different types of sonic properties that without their signifiers can generate an abstract aestheticized experience. This is something at the heart of many of Samson Young's works that involves sonic fragments and sound objects. For example, he examined night bombings in war zone areas in *Nocturne* (2015), and recordings of bells at historical war sites in *For Whom the Bell Tolls: A Journey into the Sonic History of Conflicts* (2015).

Visually, *Winged Victory* lies recumbent like a fallen classical ruin that captures the subtitle of *The mythmaker who fell to Earth of Palazzo Gundane.* Its individual, grey-green components are enmeshed with each other at different angles so that there

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

is no one position that allows a complete view. Our mythmaker lies on a mirror that further erases clear definitions between the forms. That lack of clarity compliments a work where the conceptual lines between individuals are blurred and where there is no clear boundary between fact and fiction. It is not surprising that one of the influences in this project is Joseph Beuys, who constructed a fictional account of his own artistic life and used metaphorical and mythical speech to create an alternate persona (*Lebenslauf/Werklauf*, 1964–1970).[7] *Palazzo Gudane* can similarly be seen as Samson Young's creative autobiography, where the figure of Boomtown, and/or Michael Schiefel takes on aspects of Samson Young's life and persona, but, ultimately, our fictional hero maintains an agency separate from his maker.

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

In the next room, Samson Young has created an intimate space, a cross between a bohemian café and a private living room. Projected onto one of the curtains is an MTV video of Boomtown Gandane/Michael Schiefel singing songs from the "album" related to *Winged Victory* and against a backdrop of the North Dakota industrial landscape. The draped curtains refer back to Pythagoras, a metaphorical reminder of the disconnection between sound and its maker, which is the sonic heart of this room. For example, there are video animations of motifs of children taken from the album cover of *Do They Know It's Christmas?* and now isolated as singular imagery onto a bright empty television screen. The children from the original album cover were Victorian-style images, but now they are transformed into bright, pixelated versions dancing to manipulated versions of the 1980s classic. The overall visual effect is one of anachronism, and this complements the artist's edited abstract compositions, which displace the easy melody of the original. Again the relationship between sound source, mediated sound, and listener is intertwined and creates an experiential encounter through a metaphorical "curtain" of Boomtown Gundane that shrouds the referential properties of the charity single.

Unraveling the many threads of ideas that are tightly bound into *palazzo Gundane* is both frustrating and inspiring. It is like having a conversation composed of stops and starts, of non-sequiturs and anacoluthon, and where logic and fantasy are placed on equal footing. Nonetheless, overall the works exert a sense of urgency even if we cannot quite place our finger on the

anxiety. Perhaps it is in the way that Samson Young mixes technology with a post-Cold War 1980s world that reminds us we are living in a moment of fanatical leaders, unfinished wars, and untrustworthy superpowers, when the hardline politics of Thatcher, Reagan, and Gorbachev are echoed too loudly.

In *We Are the World, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir*, Samson Young returns to more familiar territory. This piece continues his interest in muted sound, in which he cancels out the main layer of sound to reveal the underlying "noise" of a sonic situation. Past situations include a string quartet (*Muted Situation #1, Muted Classical Quartet,* 2014) and Chinese lion dance (*Muted Situation #2, Muted Lion Dance,* 2014). In these he overturned the hierarchy of sound so that instead of the celebratory drumming that often accompanies a lion dance, the audience was left with the pattering of feet, exchanges between the performers, and the harsh breathing of men performing athletic leaps. In *We Are the World, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir*, one of Hong Kong's oldest choirs (the FTU) performs in full evening splendor against a backdrop of yellow curtains. Visually, it is a recording that is straightforward and sincere, but by taking away the top layer of sound, we are left with muted whispers and snatches of breath even as the singers exaggerate each word with stretched mouths and impassioned faces. The choir belongs to a political faction of the "Old Left" Beijing Chinese nationalists and part of the conservative bloc in HK that clashes with the liberal pro-democracy groups fighting for universal suffrage. But what is the political efficacy of a group whose rendition of *We Are the World*, instead of being a bracing anthem, is turned into, through being muted, an almost desperate appeal for global togetherness?

This idea of giving presence to either absent or suppressed voices continues into the courtyard with *Risers*, where a colourful empty stage sits against

Samson Young, *Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth)*, 2017, silkscreen print on vinyl cover, felt-tip pen on vinyl records, 3D-printed nylon, vitrine of found objects, movable curtain system, neon, video, animation, and 10-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: Samson Young, *We Are the World, as performed by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions Choir*, 2017, video and multi-channel sound installation. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

a brick wall. Behind this low wall are Venetian homes in which residents go about their daily chores, creating a stark contrast between the world of art and everyday life. This disconnection continues with a wall-mounted, neon-light quotation of a statement Mao Zedong made at a speech in 1956 for students who were to go to Russia to study: "The world is yours, as well as ours, but basically yours." This was the same year Mao launched the One Hundred Flowers campaign to encourage intellectuals to openly voice their criticisms against the government, purportedly in an effort to liberalize the political climate (although in reality this led to the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 to purge alleged "rightists" who voiced dissent, including students who went to Russia). This later campaign showed how the world was never the students', or at least did not belong to any student who failed to follow the directives of the State. The empty gaiety of the stage and the no less hollow ambition of Mao's statement correspond to the conceit behind the muted sounds of the choir recording. Overall this remake is perhaps the most explicit example of failed aspirations.

Samson Young, *Risers*, 2017, neon, modular stage platforms (wood, water resistant carpet). Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

Lullaby (World Music) is a video soundtrack remake of a Cantonese cover of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* that raised money for the Eastern China flood of 1991. In the film, we see Samson Young standing on a boat with his back toward the audience and singing a song composed of numbers rather than words. The numbers, sung in Cantonese, refer to the large digital screen used during the fundraiser to chart the steady climb of the money being raised. For Samson Young, this song, in a pre-handover Hong Kong, was a demonstration of Chinese nationalism in the early 1990s, but today Hong Kong's relationship with mainland China is tense. It is impossible to look at the current political climate without reference to the Umbrella Movement in 2014 when an unprecedented number of students and the members of the public occupied public roads in Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay and for seventy-nine days brought the country to a standstill. In particular it was a galvanizing moment for students who traditionally were less politically active, and drew attention to the question of universal suffrage and freedom of expression. The artist captures that tension by filming his boat journey, which remains continuously at a distance from landfall, at the point where the marine territories of China and Hong Kong connect. In this quiet rendition, Samson Young's repetition of numbers emphasizes a journey that never reaches its destination. But what is most evident here, as we have journeyed through the digital fragmentations of

Boomtown Gundane with its numerous layers of voices and the muted singing of the FTU choir, here we have the recovery of the singular human voice, performing without props and technology.

Installation view of *Lullaby (World Music)*, 2017, video, soundtrack and stainless steel. Photo: Simon Vogel. Courtesy of the artist.

The final piece is a quiet end to an exhibition that crossed many different media. Samson Young's ideas can be overwhelming, but at a time when anti-intellectualism is commonplace and in a Biennale with too many superficial works, his show provided a much-needed respite, even if at times a viewer may be left wondering how all these pieces fit together. Where Samson Young excels is the fluidity of his engagement with different genres, as he mixes concept, fiction, and reality into a polyphony of voices that continually demands that viewers think, and then rethink, their own perspectives. If the layering of ideas and references tests the extent to which clarity of ideas is needed in any artwork, it is at the level of emotions and experience where viewers can readily engage with the works. By focusing on historical moments when there were large-scale outpourings of charitable goodwill, Samson Young also asks of us, what are the ethics of choice? How do we choose what to do to ensure that our actions have impact? Can meaningful aspirations succeed? These may be sobering thoughts, but his works also exert an emotional presence and reinforce, even when distorted or muted, the relevance of the human voice. In so doing, they suggest that we have not quite forsaken hope. Viva Arte Viva.

Notes

1. The Keats poem is "When I Have Fears That I Cease to Be" (written in 1818, published in 1848), and the country gospel song is Doc Watson's "What Would You Give in Exchange For Your Soul" (on the album *The Three Pickers*, 2003).
2. In 2015, five booksellers in Hong Kong disappeared from China, Hong Kong, and Thailand. They were later found to be held in custody in mainland China for "illegal activities," raising international controversy regarding the role of publishers and freedom of expression in Hong Kong. In 2016, one of the booksellers was released and held a news conference detailing his confinement and the coercion he experienced to make a televised confession. For more on this topic, read Pen America's *Special Report: Writing on the Wall: Disappeared Booksellers and Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong* (November 2016), https://pen.org/sites/default/files/PEN-America_Writing-on-the-Wall_Hong-Kong-Report.pdf/.
3. The 1985 version of "We Are The World" was recorded by United Support of Artists (USA) for Africa. It was written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and produced by Quincy Jones. This song was a worldwide hit and raised over sixty-three million US dollars.
4. Ying Kwok and Sonia So with Doryun Chong, "In Conversation with Samson Young," in *E-Catalogue: Songs for Disaster Relief: Catalogue* (Hong Kong: M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, 2017), 54.
5. "Do They Know It's Christmas" is a song written by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure in response to the 1983–85 famine in Ethiopia. The two songwriters created a group of British singers known as Band Aid and recorded the song on November 25, 1984. The song sold a million copies in the first week. It was re-recorded three times, in 1989, 2004, and 2014, also for charity. "Many Hearts Prevailed" (滔滔千里心) is the most successful charity single in Hong Kong history. Based on the tune of "Bridge over Troubled Water," the Chinese lyrics are by Lai-Mau Chow. The song, along with a benefit concert and government support, altogether raised over 470 million HKD in ten days. More recently, a cover of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" with fifty British musicians was released to raise money for victims of the Grenfell Tower fire (June 2017).
6. For an introduction to acousmatic sound, see Brain Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
7. There are other references to Joseph Beuys, including the use of gold leaf to partially cover some of the award-winning "records" by Boomtown Gundane. In Beuys's famous performance piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (November 26, 1965), he covers his head with honey and, later, gold leaf, where the gold represented the sun, power, and wealth and the honey of rebirth. By referring to Beuys, Young highlights the performativity of Boomtown Gundane.

Alexandra Grimmer

Miss Underwater: A Conversation with Liang Yue

Alexandra Grimmer: Watching your videos is like a visual education for me. It's as if I am observing a landscape or watching the reflections of the sun on the surface of water. I am not sure whether I could discover these things on my own in nature, but you have brought them into a context that could only have been imagined by you. Intense and sensual moments are visible in your work.

On the other hand, your videos do not speak by themselves. Nothing moves quickly, and, therefore, nothing draws the viewer's immediate attention. One needs to sit down, take some time, and be open in order to discover all the fine details and small changes of perspective you are processing in your videos. They speak silently, and they reward the viewer once one fully focuses on them.

So, for example, after 2012, a year in which you realized five important videos, you told me that you planned on "travelling without any intentional plans for most of the year."[1] How do you discover the places that interest you and that you incorporate into your work?

Liang Yue: I find them simply by passing by places; often, I take the same road many times, but this one time, I observed some irregularity, something that piqued my interest and caused me to question the situation I found myself in. What fascinates me is very personal.

I think *Glarus* (2015), which was shot in Switzerland, represents such a coincidence, with the deserted house that I discovered, the cat, and the surrounding mountains—I came across them all by chance. This process is not something I can control. One's feelings are different from those of others because every person is not the same. I describe the world that I see, and then I let the world see what I observe. My work is like a breeze, and you may catch it. If you catch it, you get it.

Alexandra Grimmer: What is your intention when you start shooting something? Are there certain situations that you look for?

Liang Yue: I like to have a relaxed approach; I prefer to make work in a slow way, not an intense way. There is also a sense of familiarity in my work—like a feeling of déjà vu to certain situations—but you cannot touch it. It is simply a feeling that is familiar to your body or in your memory. This feeling is impossible to explain in detail; it is like preparing a soup with

Liang Yue, *Video No. 20151531 (The Cat in Front of Glarus)*, 2015, 3-channel video, 9 mins., 54 secs. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

various ingredients. Each ingredient cannot constitute the soup by itself. If I bring together a carrot, a pen, a mobile phone, and a fish, you cannot say that it is a pen soup or a fish soup.

Watching my videos may remind you of an afternoon when you sat in your grandmother's old chair, the smell of this environment reviving your memories. This is what I would like to achieve when people are watching my videos; they should cause people to breathe and be reminded of familiar things.

Alexandra Grimmer: One of the things I admire about my Chinese friends is their ability to refrain from interpreting situations as a way of remaining non-judgmental. This keeps the mind free for pure perception.

Wang Jun brought up the idea of "meaningless situations" in a text about your work in 2013.[2] How do you manage to capture the feeling of meaningless situations in your videos? Are they really meaningless?

Liang Yue: This can be understood in many ways. I think the interpretation of meaningless situations for Wang Jun is that it actually contains many meanings, which come together as meaningless. In Chinese tradition, we consider the term meaninglessness—or emptiness—as something important. In Chinese ink painting, there are seemingly empty parts, which are meaningful because many invisible details are hidden in these places. These details could be in the imagination, emotions, memories, or things that are too far away to see. When you observe these empty parts from a distance, you might not recognize anything; it is only when you get closer that your attention can focus on them and all the details become visible. So I think this term is not meaningless at all in this sense.

This year I started setting up my camera perspective from a distance so that I am able to get closer—to move from these meaningless situations into a closer view. For example, seeing a white wall from a certain distance: when you approach it and observe it more closely, the white wall is suddenly covered with many particles, and each particle has a different character. There are in fact many different parts. It is like digging a hole into what

you thought was meaningless and then looking into it and finding many meanings. In the years 2013 and 2014, I did many videos, shot from afar without moving in closer. From a distance, you may be objective and calm and see the things that are not moving or that are just slightly moving.

Alexandra Grimmer: So, from this year on, you are focusing more on details so as to observe an interior world (from a more close-up perspective), which leads you in the same direction as your first videos, when you were shooting people in the city at close range, with noisy moments from the street.

Liang Yue: Right.

Alexandra Grimmer: Now I want to talk about your videos from around 2013 and 2014. They seem to be a clarification and reduction to the essential details, all by remaining focused on simple questions. While you previously videotaped people and situations in the city from your point of view, these more recent videos often show outside spaces, those in nature, without people. There is less movement of the camera, and you have mostly adopted fixed framing. You also reduced the titles of your works to the date of the shooting. Yet, somehow, you are more present in these works than ever before.

Liang Yue: My works have to do with how I see the world. The procedure of how I start working is always the same. First, I calm down, I feel the air, and breathe. Then I try to keep conscious of my peripheral vision in order to be open for all small details we usually do not notice. For example, when you are looking at your computer screen, there may be some reflections, like blue lights, and from the corner of your eye, you might notice some green plants. When you see something like this, there might be other things you didn't notice or concentrate on, but your eyes will catch them. So, in most of my videos, I position myself at a distance—like an outside spectator—and I just observe. It is like diving into the air—this world is not the same as it was yesterday—or if I am a diver in the ocean, it is a whole new view for me. Sometimes, it is also like a bird's-eye view; I am choosing the points I am interested in. Sometimes I am close, sometimes I am further away.

Liang Yue, *Lady Lady*, 2006, single-channel video, 21 mins., 12 secs. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Alexandra Grimmer: So basically you are creating your own space with each artwork, and people can then enter, feel, and see it.

Liang Yue: Yes, you could say that.

Alexandra Grimmer: There is one particularly special work you are creating for the exhibition at Chengdu MOCA (September 16 to October 15, 2017): an installation containing four photographs and one video with the sound of the wind.

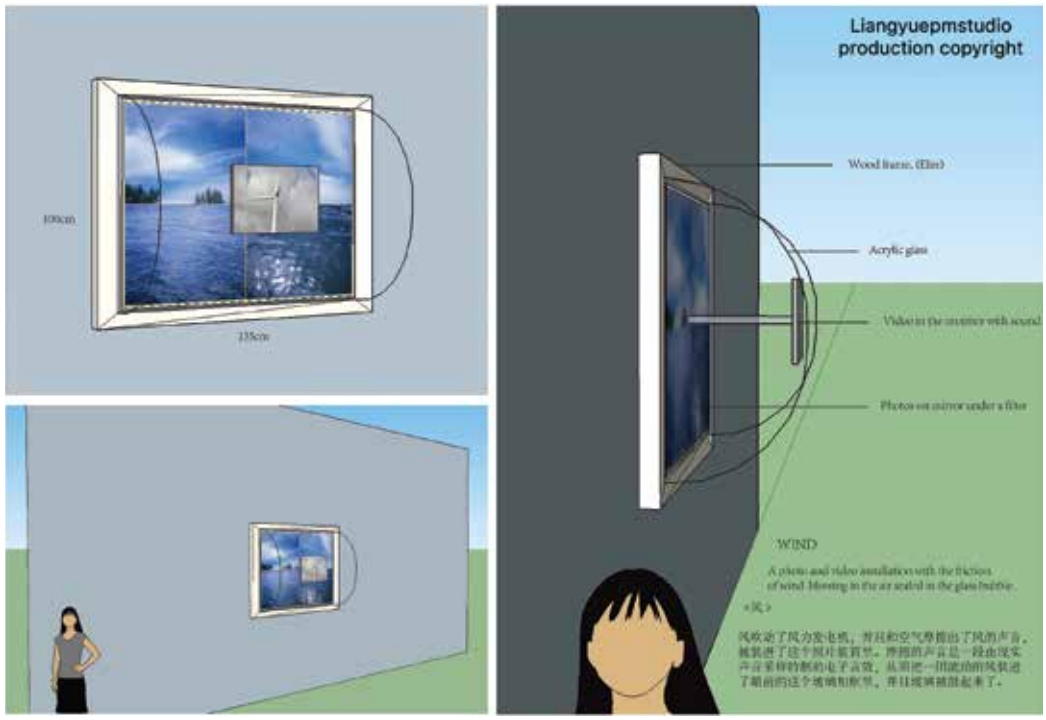
Liang Yue: The photographs of the sky and the water surface come from a new series that had been shown previously, and the video is a wind-driven generator rotating and making a loud noise, which is the air friction.

Alexandra Grimmer: You once mentioned that usually your photographs are darkroom prints where you are choosing the type of paper according to the character of the image. The way you shoot your videos and the materials that you use seem to be dependent on many factors. You appear to be quite knowledgeable about technical matters.

Liang Yue: Technical details are important to me. I enjoy experimenting and playing with them. I have many different cameras and I am familiar with the technical details of each piece of equipment. I am the one who repairs things at home. [Laughs.]

Alexandra Grimmer: You appear to be knowledgeable not only about technical matters, but also about image processing and video editing. But your webpage sometimes opens slowly from Europe.

Liang Yue: This is because of the Great Firewall in China; my website has to be moved to the other side of the wall. Because I use wix.com (a cloud-based web development platform based in Israel) to create my webpage,



Liang Yue, study for *Wind*, 2017, photographs and single-channel video, 100 x 135 cm. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

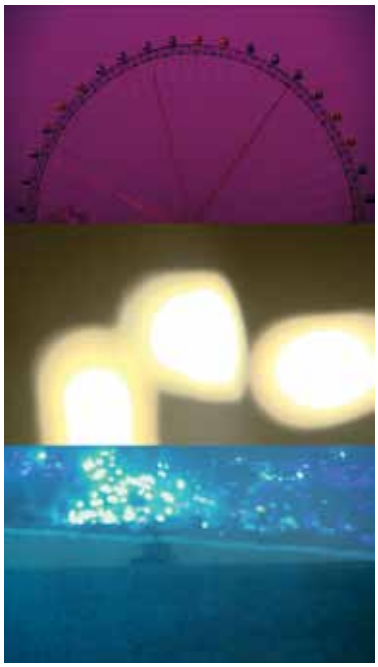
it's very easy for me. But now I have to use VPN (A virtual private network, which is required for access to webpages that are blocked in China) in order to access and edit the website.

Alexandra Grimmer: In exhibitions such as *The Quiet Rooms* (2013, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai) or *Easy Going* (2014, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen), the physical installation of your work plays an important role. Your last solo show, *Intermittent* (2016, ShanghART, Beijing), is especially memorable. You managed to load the exhibition space with no less than thirteen videos, both as projections and on screens, yet you still made it possible to focus on one at a time when walking through the space. Most of all, by bringing the different videos together, you set them in a particular context and succeeded in providing an interpretation of your own work. What role does the presentation of your work play for you?

Liang Yue, *The Quiet Rooms*, 2013, 3-channel video, installation view, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Liang Yue, *Intermittent*, 2016, installation view, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Beijing.

Liang Yue: Although my work is just on screens, I think that by combining the videos or photographs and their projection in particular environments, I can create different interactions among the works in the space; together, the individual pieces make an installation. I think if you bring a single work into a space, it is already an installation. Since *The Quiet Rooms* I have started to design the space. So, for displaying my works, I will design their placement and how they will work with the space and the light. Again, this already creates a work that is an installation. That's why I think I need to not try to make what might be considered a real installation piece. In the future, I want to interact more with the exhibition space by using new technology to create holographic laser projections with a four-dimensional projector so that you can see a real person projected into the space.



Liang Yue, *Fuzz Fuzz*, 2017, single-channel video, 15 mins. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

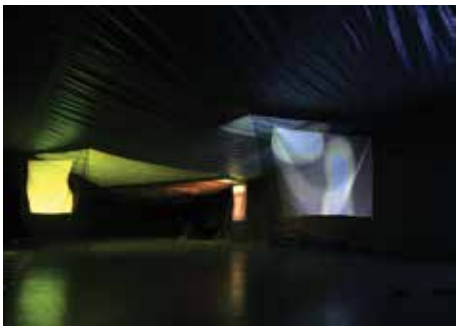
Alexandra Grimmer: Your most recent work, *Fuzz Fuzz* (2017), has been realized for your exhibition at Project Room 901, Shanghai (May 6 to July 5, 2017). It is a work that you divided into three parts and that is projected on different transparent veils, which form a specific space with moving shapes, right?

Liang Yue: I thought about how to present the video according to the space. When somebody walks by, it may move a little, but very naturally. This means that I made the space fit the artwork, and I reflected on how people might come in and react to the work. Making

Liang Yue, *The Quiet Rooms*, 2013, 3-channel video, installation view, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

my work sometimes feels similar to a movie director making a film. I'm first imagining how people will enter and leave the space. While the movie director has to decide where the actors are situated in every sequence of the movie, it is like a rehearsal of how an audience might enter and pass by the artworks for me.

Alexandra Grimmer: *Fuzz Fuzz* is like a choreography of form and movement for me, or like a symphony, with an introduction, some middle parts of intense development of the themes, and a clarifying finish.



Liang Yue, *Fuzz Fuzz*, 2017, installation view, Project Room 901, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Liang Yue: Yes, this might be. With *Fuzz Fuzz*, I prepared the material at the same time as I was creating the sound. There is a soundtrack for the video, and image and sound closely match. So the basic soundtrack was already there at the beginning; it was released with the video, and I worked out the details and modified some of the sound later. There are three screens, and when you watch them, many things are happening at the same time. The audience should see that there are different spaces—for example, when you are listening to music, there are many things happening at the same time; there are parallel melodies and rhythms and different colours of sound.

At the beginning of my work, I focused on single things, and there are many silent works from that time. Now, I am bringing several things together, and the focus of my videos has shifted from my inner worlds toward the outer world. I always want to try something new and take my work in new directions. So, when I work, the outcome will be different, in the same way

Oppose page: Liang Yue, *Fuzz Fuzz*, 2017, single-channel video, 15 mins. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

that a sculptor shapes the material and produces a sculpture. This new concept is not just a thought that pops out; it is more like a natural process, something that naturally emerges during the development of my work.

Alexandra Grimmer: There is often water in your works.

Liang Yue: The image of the surface of water will lead you into some form of meditation or hypnosis. The water's surface will always change along with the wind. When you watch it closely, you might fall asleep. Water is a substantial thing. It can fully embrace and surround you and you will feel safe.

Liang Yue, *The Quiet Rooms*, installation view, 2013, 3-channel video, ShanghART, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Alexandra Grimmer: In Chengdu, we are projecting one video from 2016: *Miss Underwater*, which depicts sea grass moving in a river accompanied by deep bass sounds.

Liang Yue: When I saw the plants moving in the water, I got a strange feeling. My eyes were drawn to the plant, and the other evening, I went to film this place. When seeing it with your normal eyes, you don't think that this is something special, but when you use the camera to film it, you will suddenly observe many interesting things. When you see the whole image, the plant is only a plant under a bridge, but when you zoom in, the plant becomes a special thing, and it has its own spirit. I felt like a child who is very excited. Children can imagine something in these forms and movements, but we see only reflections. This video is the first one in which I did the sound by myself. It was meant to be a sort of brain noise—sounds that come directly from the body.

Alexandra Grimmer: Do you enjoy swimming and putting your head under water?

Liang Yue: Diving gives me the feeling of flying, as I mentioned earlier; I enjoy it very much. Other people want to dive to see the underwater world, but I enjoy the dream like feeling of flying much more—that there

is nothing but blue around me. I can just see some vague images or figures, and when I bring my head out of the water, everything looks very different.

Alexandra Grimmer: In your recent works, you have created your own sound. It is improvised music? How did you realize it?

Liang Yue: With every work, I have a concrete idea of what the sound should be like. When I want a type of sound, I always know of many ways to find it, and I start experimenting with it. It comes partly from the human voice, and I produce some sounds on the computer and record some noises from outside; for example, the friction of things moving through the air, as in my work created for Chengdu MOCA. Then I bring all these different components together. There are so many ways to realize sound. It is mostly a question of what type of feeling should be evoked through the sound, since it affects the impact of a video.

Alexandra Grimmer: Recently, there is a lot of video art being presented in exhibitions and at art fairs. There seems to be a broader interest than some years ago. Do you feel this with respect to your own work?

Liang Yue: In the beginning, people may not have known my videos well, but I stick with what I believe. It is important to improve my work, and in this process, I think that my videos should receive more attention from other people who might be attracted to the final works. When people first see my work, they perceive it to be quite silent, but when they become familiar with it, and look deeper, they find much more than silence beneath the waves—they find something meaningful within meaningless situations. As an experience, they discover more and go deeper into it, like two strangers who have just met; they get along through their conversations, and they watch each other, and slowly, with time, they will understand each other better. I do not expect that people will immediately understand my work. By doing things that are important to me, people will slowly learn that there is something interesting going on, and as time goes by, they might become interested, and understand and pay attention. I am patient.

Alexandra Grimmer: Your works can be experienced only by seeing them; neither a catalogue nor a description can replace the time required to watch your videos.

Liang Yue: For this reason, I want to do a solo exhibition every two years. People who saw my initial works for the first time will go to the next exhibition, and they will slowly start becoming interested. Then, they will go to see a third and fourth exhibition.

Notes

1. Author's interview with Liang Yue, June 29, 2017, ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai.
2. Wang Jun, "Life is Really Meaningless—Feng Youlan (Chinese philosopher, 1895–1990)," in *Liang Yue PMStudio Production* (Shanghai: ShanghART Gallery, 2013), 10.

Stephanie Bailey

Sex in the City: Wong Ping in Conversation

Wong Ping, *Who's the Daddy?*, 2017, single-channel video, 9 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Wong Ping's work is about mining the textures and depths of life in a metropolis like Hong Kong, where the artist was born and now lives and works, in order to extract the latent desires, peversions, traumas, and ticks that run wild behind and below concrete covers. The artist specializes in short, single-channel animated videos that tell of hidden obsessions and secret compulsions, all distilled into stories expressed with a measured and deadpan intensity. *Who's the Daddy?* (2017), for example, tells the story of a man with "daddy" issues; he was told from a young age by his mother to kiss his father "passionately," and the protagonist understands his own behaviours as having emerged from that experience. He ends up meeting a woman on Tinder with whom he begins a non-penetrative sexual relationship that involves plenty of fisting, only to have his eye poked by his lover during a frustrated rage. Aesthetically, the work is constructed according to the style that has come to characterize the Wong Ping Animation Lab: adopting an 8-bit aesthetic that pays homage to the visuals from 1980s and 1990s Sega and Nintendo video games, formalized into a twenty-first century visual language. This speaks to the artist's training when it came to developing the format he has since come to be known for. With a background in multimedia design—he studied at Curtin University in Perth, Australia—and work experience in post-production at Hong Kong's TVB studio after graduation, (and a three-month period working in a printing house), he admits to teaching himself how to animate, which explains his specific aesthetic. On his visual

Top: Wong Ping, *Stop Peeping*, 2014, single-channel video, 3 mins., 48 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Bottom: Wong Ping, *Doggy Love*, 2015, single-channel video, 5 mins., 59 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

language, he once noted in an interview: "I think it's funny people see it as my 'style', because it's basically all I can do."[1]

But no matter how far Wong Ping takes the themes in his work, there remains a level of innocence and sincerity to the stories he tells, in part due to the sense that the artist is basing some of them on personal memories and experiences. *Stop Peeping* (2014), for example, is described as a story about his neighbour during one hot summer. In brief, the film follows the protagonist as he begins peeping through a hole in the wall at a young woman who lives next door, then starts to sneak into her home to collect her sweat and ends up making ice lollies out of the liquid he amasses, consuming them before the summer ends. The work provides a good introduction to the dynamics that are constantly at play in the artist's narratives, in which desire as a form of consumption is explored on a level that feels at once familiar and alien. With *Doggy Love* (2015), a commission by the online platform *Nowness* that was released on Valentine's Day in 2015, Wong Ping won the Spirit of Hong Kong Award for best animation at Hong Kong's Third

Culture Film Festival in 2016. In this short film, the artist tells the story of a teenager who falls in love with a girl who has breasts on her back, a tale that is recounted with a level of adolescent cruelty balanced out by a pubescent innocence, in which a young, sexually frustrated boy learns how to love only after participating in some schoolyard bullying as an outlet for his objectified desire. This teenage perspective, steeped in naivety, proves effective when it comes to the social commentary that seeps out of Wong Ping's work, some of which is searing and uncomfortable. Consider the artist's description for the *Jungle of Desire* (2015), a video that "illustrates the perfect ecosystem of a concrete jungle: an impotent husband, an unsatisfied wife, and a megalomaniac policeman."[2]

Wong Ping, *Jungle of Desire*, 2015, single-channel video, 6 mins., 50 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

In this conversation, the artist describes his journey into animation and the ways his narrative style developed, discussing early music videos and early animations that grounded what has since become his established visual language. He also discusses themes that recur in his work and his transition into the art world, commenting on the first solo exhibition he staged in 2015 at the Hong Kong space Things that can happen, and *Jungle of Desire*, a version of which was presented with Edouard Malingue Gallery as part of the NOVA Sector at Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2016.

Stephanie Bailey: You taught yourself animation after graduating from Curtin University. Could you talk about how you started?

Wong Ping: I'm an under-prepared and passive person, so I never thought it through when choosing an area of study. The decision to specialize in creative media at univeristy, despite a total lack of interest in design, art, or animation, was because the course did not involve any exams. All my classmates were so committed to mastering 3D animation, which was very popular then, but I could never work out the complex software and, out of frustration, I gave up after several failed attempts. I remember attending a colouring lesson in which the teacher literally lectured on the rules of colour matching. I found the formal treatment too bizarre and decided to skip school and surf the Internet at home instead. Perhaps even more bizarrely, I managed to graduate despite my poor grades. Before that, one of my teachers at university used to play weird short films and music videos in every class; that was the first time in my life I actually felt mind-blown.

After graduating, I couldn't find a job because of my poor techniques in multimedia design so I went to the library and self-studied with the aid of some software guidebooks. I did eventually land a job in post-production before I could even manage the basics, working through each frame in films to remove things like pimples on people's faces or enlarging the chests of female celebrities, and so on. It was an emotionally oppressive environment to work in; once, a director made a mistake and the entire crew had to spend one week to rectify a three-second scene. I began to question my life and my work and took to writing stories every night as an emotional outlet.

I was oblivious to the rules of animation at the time; I wasn't even equipped with basic drawing skills. Out of nowhere, a sense of vengeance against the world of formalities emerged for me, so I began to create animation with the few post-production techniques that I did manage to have. At first I just made some music videos for my friends in a band, and then I began to visualize the nonsensical stories I was writing. A new routine emerged in which I would come up with a story at work and then create and upload the animation online at home. This process proved to be a better catharsis than masturbation; I was truly happy.

Stephanie Bailey: What were the main influences in developing your visual language?

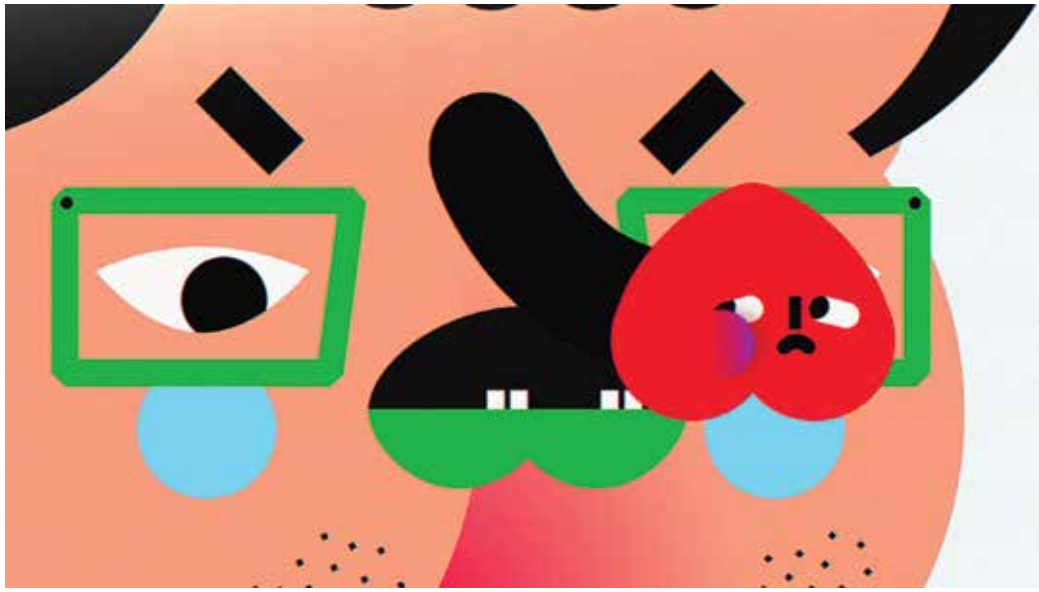
Wong Ping: I especially love short films—like the ones on Vimeo—for their straightforward and experimental nature. They are a highly flexible medium. Even watching a crap film is only a waste of a couple minutes, so there's not much to lose. As for my visual language, there weren't any particular sources of influence; it took me a while to develop an interest in film. To a certain extent, I am merely working against the rulebook in creating my own system of techniques. I've even been told a few times that my animation is too flat and somewhat lifeless, and the use of colour is too crass.

Stephanie Bailey: How did you develop your approach to storytelling, and what influences did you have, if any?

Wong Ping: To be honest, the jobs I got after my graduation, which include working in post-production at TVB, and also a three-month stint in a printing house, really drove me mad. One day, while at work, I resorted to my imagination, and after that a new story would emerge every day; I would get sweaty palms just by being carried away with those ideas! The only thing that mattered was posting them on my Xanga blog as soon as I got home. The stories had to be precise and within a certain word limit, because writing too much at the expense of sleep would make the next workday even more miserable—I would have to nap in the restroom. I guess that's how my approach to narrative developed; I had little interest in films, poetry, and novels back then, but I had read quite a lot of Japanese manga.

Story-wise, there weren't any influences per se, but I do have some favourites that emphasize dialogue, like Woody Allen. Minoru Furuya's later manga also had a huge impact on me, as I find traces of my own thoughts in his protagonists' monologues on the futility of a suicidal life. I remember reading *Shigatera 6* (2003–2005)[3] when I was younger and feeling very despondent for a whole week. It's a shame that marriage and children have made Furuya much more optimistic; it's probably good for him, but a bit disappointing for readers like me. I also love watching stand-up comedies for their meaningless thoughts on life and sarcastic rhythm—kind of like my recent creative thought processes. Come to think of it, a few years ago I declared myself a comedian in my Facebook bio. Ha!

Stephanie Bailey: There's a real sense of Hong Kong in your work, both visually and thematically. Aside from the video-game aesthetic that brings to mind smoky arcade halls, there is, for instance, a reference to Anita Mui's Canto-pop song in the title *Jungle of Desire*, and one scene in *An Emo Nose* (2015) shows Hong Kong's Bauhinia Flag with the petals withering and dropping off one by one. Could you elaborate on the way Hong Kong influences your work?



Wong Ping, *An Emo Nose*, 2015, single-channel video, 4 mins., 23 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Wong Ping: It's only from the feedback of others that I learned my work conveys a sense of Hong Kong, which surprises me as it's not my intention to study or describe Hong Kong's setting in particular. The city's iconic dense buildings and population never appear in my work; what does appear comes naturally as an elaboration of my living environment. Hong Kong is a claustrophobic city with a very high living standard, which can easily drive one mad. To calm the mind, I can only turn to a caricature of that madness as some kind of meditation.

To a certain extent, my work documents a state of living in Hong Kong at a particular time; rather than making reference to it, it's more like writing an autobiography. Take the making of *Stop Peeping*: I really was living in a subdivided flat in an industrial building, where a beautiful girl lived next

door. One day we met on the stairway during a power outage, and she told me that she's a singer; I was overwhelmed by that revelation.

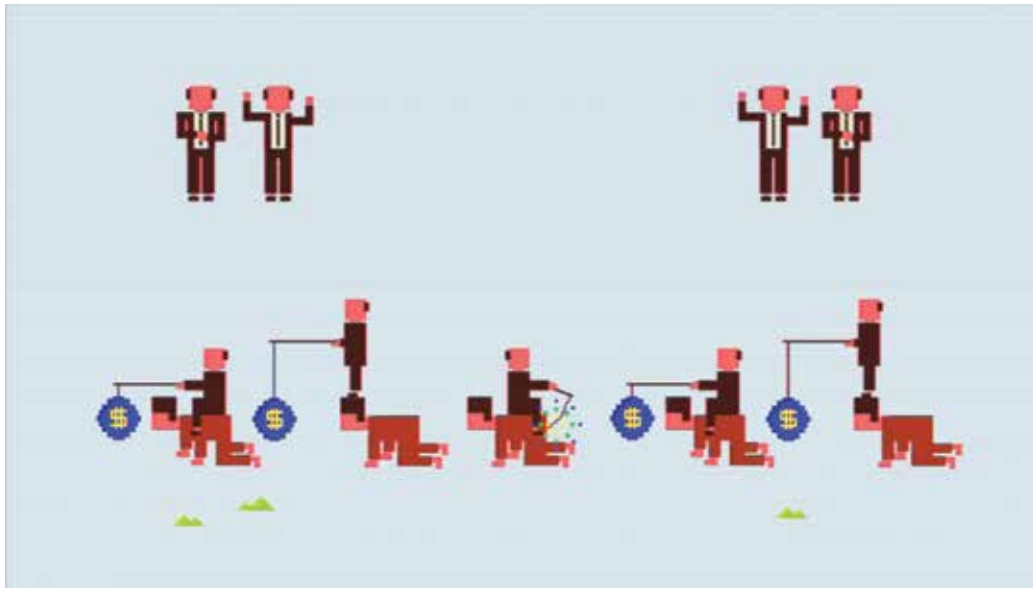
Stephanie Bailey: Was *Stop Peeping* the first animation short you made in the style you have become known for, and would you say that this was the work through which your visual language really emerged?

Wong Ping, *Stop Peeping*, 2014, single-channel video, 3 mins., 48 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Wong Ping: Yes, *Stop Peeping* was my first attempt at visualizing the stories I've been writing. Before that, I had made a few animation music videos, and *Slow Sex* (2013), an animation without dialogue, but never a narrative-based short, so it felt like something was missing. In the industrial subdivided flat where I used to live, once I had the guts to knock on the door of the beautiful next door neighbour to borrow a phone charger, but when I peeped over her shoulder as she opened the door, I saw a half-naked man in her flat. Out of that disappointment came *Stop Peeping*. Each paragraph of the narrative was accompanied by visuals, and they came alive like children's picture books. While I didn't like hearing my own voice at the time, to speed things up I just had to narrate the animation myself; the entire process took about a week. Then I tried to solicit help from professional voice actors, but they were too professional, as were the animation artists I tried to recruit to help with the visuals. Having accumulated more experience now, I usually start creating the animation when the narrative is about seventy percent complete, and I let the rest develop on its own course where it is beyond my control. Then I read the text aloud at my own pace and insert the recording into the animation with some edits, and it is done!

Stephanie Bailey: You created a music video in 2010 for the FRUITPUNCH song "We Want More," which represents a real precursor to where your work was headed visually and conceptually. In the animation, we see that humanity has been put on a treadmill and turned into an 8-bit computer game enacted within a closed or fixed frame—in one scene, a character collects college degrees that fall from above, while in another, arrows hit the backs of a man and a woman until they stand side by side, and then an arrow with a "love heart" pierces their heads and joins them together. How did you develop this video, and what impact did it have on your later practice?

Wong Ping: FRUITPUNCH's "We Want More" is one of my earliest animations—up to then I had only created one or two shorts. Frankly, I didn't care much about the lyrics whilst making the music video. I prefer working from my intuition as opposed to an approach that is descriptive; for instance, it's more interesting to visualize two completely irrelevant elements within a single composition. Upon learning that the demo was electropop, I immediately thought of 8-bit video games. As I mentioned before, I was harbouring many doubts about my life then (probably an effect of hormonal changes toward the end of puberty), so I decided to represent that sense of confusion and helplessness in the form of 8-bit, as though life were a video game. There wasn't much influence on my visual style, but content-wise it was the first time I projected my own feelings onto the work, and it opened up new perspectives about the possible ways of communicating myself visually.



Wong Ping, music video still from "We Want More," by FRUITPUNCH, 5 mins., 44 secs. Courtesy of the artist, No One Remains Virgin, and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Stephanie Bailey: You created the music video *Under the Lion Crotch* (2011) for the band No One Remains Virgin. This video depicts Hong Kong as a microcosm, showing people playing on an island—someone wears "I love HK" t-shirt, and another "HK love U"—who are attacked by a one-eyed phallic monster whose penis is a rocket that enacts devastation. When we see this "rocket" take off, a super-human woman emerges out of the sea to stop it, drenching the island with blood after inserting the rocket-phallus into her. The animation points to a wider theme in your work beyond overt references to sex that consider human relations and behaviour in general. Can you talk about that?

Wong Ping: Put bluntly, *Under the Lion Crotch* was made at a time when my generation decided to take their social discontent to the streets. I was one of them. The video conveys a sentiment in opposition to the spirit of Lion Rock, which my parents' generation has always taken pride in.

Stephanie Bailey: "The Lion Rock Spirit" being a phrase that emerged in Hong Kong in the 1970s around the television series *Below the Lion Rock*,

Top: Wong Ping, music video still from "Under the Lion Crotch," by No One Remains Virgin, 4 mins., 38 secs. Courtesy of the artist, FRUITPUNCH, and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Bottom: Wong Ping, music video still from "Under the Lion Crotch," by No One Remains Virgin, 4 mins., 38 secs. Courtesy of the artist, FRUITPUNCH, and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

which documented life in the city. The phrase came to encapsulate a Hong Kong attitude, or identity, in which hard work across all levels of society, contributed to growth and prosperity in the city.

Wong Ping: Back then, people made their way to upward social mobility through hard work. To this day the government is still using this labour-intensive spirit to sugarcoat the injustice and biased policy-making of the establishment, employing this core value as an excuse for not setting standard working hours and minimum wages. This makes me wonder: what, then, exactly is the spirit of Lion Rock exactly?

Under the Lion Crotch begins with scenes from the 2006 protests calling to preserve Central's Star Ferry. People fought against the phallic lion's tyranny, ending its rule by killing it. They then try to leave their forlorn birthplace but are taken midway by a motherly figure, leaving the island in a sea of red. The animation was made seven years ago and unwittingly foreshadows today's circumstances, which, in reality, are even worse.

Around the time, young people in Hong Kong were increasingly involved in street protests; so were my friends and I. *The Other Side* (2015), created some years later, follows from this discussion. Many of my talented friends decided to leave the city; you could say it was a second-wave emigration after the 1997 handover. They encouraged me to do the same, but I didn't have the courage.

Wong Ping, *The Other Side*, 2015, 2-channel video, 8 mins., 2 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

As such, *Under the Lion Crotch* weaves a narrative between sex, men and women, relationships, and violence to convey my wish to leave this place, which I deemed futile because of my own emotional baggage. I wanted to invest this feeling in the music video, but being rebelliously unconventional, I despised the usual self-evident representations. I worked really hard to experiment with ways of expressing myself without being too visible in my work, hoping it would mean something to the viewer whether he or she understood it or not, even if only as a perverse story. In this sense, *Under the Lion Crotch* had a rather huge impact on my practice, since during the process of making it I had been struggling to find that balance between overly self-evident storytelling and candid expression. I wanted it to be an autonomous story in its own right. It would be meaningless for me to represent the social climate verbatim; you might as well just watch the news.

After several international screenings I learned that Westerners could more or less feel the messages in my work even though they didn't quite understand it. This has really encouraged me to express my feelings through a visual language, as opposed to simply making gorgeous images. I used to have doubts about this kind of creative approach, but the award *Under the Lion Crotch* received that year, as well as the acquisition of the work for the M+ Collection, made me realize the immense potential of narrative allusion and encouraged me to further develop this practice.

Stephanie Bailey: It's interesting how your work is so much about daily life in a city like Hong Kong—daily life being a real focus for artists working in the city in the late 1990s and 2000s. Yet, your practice takes less of a readymade approach or documentarian perspective in order to abstract the darkness of urban life.

Wong Ping: From Facebook you can see every day the frustration we all share; entertainment news has grown very grim over the years, and politics therefore becomes a source of public amusement to counter that misery. Yet we remain ambivalent about politics. The needs of most people are

actually very basic; they probably don't even want to bother with politics. When policy-making reaches a point where even the fundamentals become problematic, however, there's no alternative except revolution.

In recent years Hong Kong has consistently ranked high among cities in the world in price indices, social disparity, and the unhappiness index. Many elderly people have to work as scavengers in the streets, whilst the younger generation struggles with lower social mobility. These are all statistics that need to be confronted head on. I recently met a young British person who used to travel a lot, but after Brexit he's been saying, quite depressingly, that he has to settle down in Hong Kong. I asked him what is it about Britain that prompted him to leave for good; his answer was, in fact, that Britain was in more or less the equivalent of Hong Kong's current situation. It's just his sense of unease whilst being abroad, but everywhere in the world it is probably just as bad.

Stephanie Bailey: The consideration of human relations and social behaviour in *Under the Lion Crotch* is reflected in *An Emo Nose*. Bees are depicted throughout the animation, and at one point the narrator in the animation considers the fact that humans are inherently social animals. This recalls Virgil's fourth *Georgics*, in which bees are viewed as a model for society.

Wong Ping, *An Emo Nose*, 2015, single-channel video, 4 mins., 23 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Wong Ping: *An Emo Nose* is very interesting. It was part of a project that I was participating in, and it became my only work not narrated by me; also it does not feature any sex or violence due to regulatory constraints. In reality, I am eager for friendships but fear human connections because I cannot take the failure of relationships. Sometimes I find it difficult to fit in at social gatherings; afterwards I would blame myself for speaking so little and being so useless. Contrasting this with my argumentative personality, I start to question whether I'd prefer my own isolation or isolation as a result of the vulgar uselessness of my friends. I reflect upon this in creative dialogues with myself and ask whether mankind can, against its nature as social beings, live in complete solitude.

Stephanie Bailey: This brings to mind the sense of *otaku* culture in your animations: the idea of alienated individuals in the metropolis who are often invisible, or unseen, as reflected in the confessions you narrate through your characters—they are darkly private, and deeply personal. You once said that animation suits you because you are able to create another world in your work without even leaving your room, yet this isolation is countered in your narratives, which all have a very strong element of confession.

Wong Ping: I am an *otaku*! Everything is unintentional: I used to be very loud and proactive in school when I was a child, but studying abroad had slowly turned me into a self-abased introvert. Becoming an animation artist perchance gives me an opportunity to go crazy in my practice every now and then, and in my animations I see my younger self again. You're absolutely right; my life, thoughts, and creation are very secluded. From brainstorming stories, writing, and drawing through reading monologues and producing a soundtrack, I need not deal with anyone except myself until the work has been published online. This kind of freedom is genuine pleasure. It's like I'm writing a Facebook status, albeit a really long one, and you're free to hit "like" if you want.

Stephanie Bailey: You have said you like reading the comments about your videos when you post them online, since your work can get some strong reactions. Could you talk about the dynamic you have with your viewers?

Wong Ping: I've tried uploading my work to the Internet in mainland China; you know that YouTube and Vimeo have been blocked by the authorities, but they have their equivalent video-sharing websites. I've failed so many times and was told that my content was not granted permission to be published. Then I tried incorporating educational elements of truth, kindness, and beauty in the video descriptions, adding positive messages like "love your family and study hard, kids!" or "vegetarianism is fun!" but none managed to bypass the censorship system. That's when I realized the power of China's "human" firewall; they literally assess each film manually. I gave up. Then someone in the mainland managed to repost my work, which received lots of strong comments accusing me of sensationalism and calling me out as a perverse Hong Kong pig. Some thought my mother must have abused me when I was a child. Most of these comments are a subjective re-interpretation of my work and, to me, they are even more creative than the work in question itself. As long as the commenters don't hate me so much that they want to kill me, I do take pleasure in reading their responses.

Stephanie Bailey: At the time you made the animated music videos mentioned earlier, you were also making non-animation music videos that reflect the themes you are working with, such as sex and love. How might you compare those works to your animations?

Wong Ping: For me, sex, love, and violence have always been a topic of interest. Leave truth, kindness, and beauty to the moralists! I'll be the

villain and handle the filth. It's my work's language, though not necessarily the subject. I've also experimented with film as a medium and actually liked it. Making animations can be lonely, whereas filming can be completed in the company of actors and a bunch of friends, but resource-wise film is a lot more costly.

So after some time I returned to animation as my primary medium. After all, it's a very personal practice. I'm basically godlike—if I want my protagonist to be nude, he wouldn't protest. Another thing about animation is that however violent and ridiculous the content is, a lot viewers somehow find the presentation adorable and automatically filter the things I say. I guess the effect could, on the other hand, be appalling if I used another medium to present my stories, and I would hate myself, too.

Wong Ping, *An Emo Nose*, 2015, single-channel video, 4 mins., 23 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Stephanie Bailey: What is the relationship between sex and love in your work? The form of the heart, for instance, appears throughout your videos. In *Stop Peeping*, it appears as a tattoo on the girl that the male character is peeping at; in *Doggy Love*, a teacher in sex education class asks why a heart represents love, to which one student answers it's because a heart looks like the head of a penis, and another says it looks like a woman's rear (which later makes an appearance as an expression of love); in *Slow Sex*, it appears on the bed sheets; and in *An Emo Nose*, a man's heart-shaped nose slowly drifts away from his face in response to his negative energy and lives a much better life on its own.

Wong Ping: Sex in my work can be understood as a language and a rhetorical device, the way the Triads (the Hong Kong mafia) are used to talk about politics, or horror films about life. My work mostly takes myself as a departure point and revolves around my living environment and the city. Sex is full of happiness, love not so. Even now, frustratingly, I still don't understand what love is. Sometimes I think I don't need it, but without it I'd feel lonely. The need for sex, on the other hand, is constant. I realize I don't know how to love, but more often it's really a matter of not knowing what I need. I look in vain to creative practice for answers, whilst obviously most of the characters in my animations have got it figured out.

Stephanie Bailey: What about the political observations that take place with regards to love and sex, which you consider from pretty savage or crude perspectives? *Jungle of Desire* is a case in point: it follows the life a cuckold watching, from inside a closet as his wife worked as a prostitute. He eventually develops rape fantasies directed at the policeman who uses his power to have sex with his wife for free.

Wong Ping: Every work is an attempt to explore multiple dimensions, always touching on a little bit of love, hate, and politics. *Jungle of Desire* perfectly manifests my feelings about Hong Kong. Look at the concrete buildings; each claustrophobic cubicle is filled with carnal desire, whilst life in the city destabilizes everyone's mind and body. The exhibition venue of *Jungle of Desire*, Things that can happen, is located in working-class neighbourhood, Sham Shui Po, where sex workers are active. Two years ago I came across an article about police exploitation of prostitutes at a time when the public image of enforcement was hitting rock bottom; still, these women were too scared to report the incidents. Drawing upon this theme, a story about vengeance slowly developed. Simultaneously I was wondering: since love often happens out of nowhere, is there a kind of hatred that is inexplicable, too? Without morality, the impotent man, the nymphomaniac prostitute, and the corrupt police officer seem to live in a primal jungle, feeding on the reciprocity of their needs.

Stephanie Bailey: Could you talk about how your work seems to focus on a male experience, and how much of this is a self-portrait or self-reflection?

Wong Ping: To me it's all very sensible since I have virtually zero knowledge of the female perspective. If I were to tell the story of a woman it would come out as very unconvincing and futile, so for now I have no interest in that. It's like, I'm scared of dogs and my friends are always trying to explain that there's no need to be afraid, that a dog's every gesture means nothing but friendliness. To me, however, a human interpretation sounds hardly convincing; recently one of my friends was bitten by his neighbour's dog. Rather than stories about men, it's more accurate to say that these are stories about myself, or my self in my imagination, or the version of self I'd like to become. It just happens that I'm a heterosexual man.

Stephanie Bailey: In *Who's The Daddy?* the protagonist is accused of being phallocentric, and he is actually portrayed at one point with a flower attached to the head of his penis. Similarly, in the presentation of works around the animation of *Jungle of Desire*, you include a neon light showing a man with a palm tree for penis, and lucky Chinese cats with penises for arms. In *Under the Lion Crotch*, a one-eyed monster with a rocket cock attacks an entire island. Why the phallic focus?

Wong Ping: Yes, there are lots of phalluses; I guess I'm a nymphomaniac. Sometimes I think, since pornography is a rather popular contemporary consumer product, even though I'm heterosexual I must have seen more

penises than my father has. Safe to say I've definitely seen more than my mother has. Now I'm digressing . . .

In *Who's The Daddy?*, one of the topics I want to explore with myself is that which concerns contemporary right-wing politics. Immediately I wonder if erect penises mostly tilt towards the left or the right. I found this interesting explanation: "the penis is usually curved. Of course it's hard to tell in its flaccid state. Once erect, however, it either tilts to the left or the right. There is no such thing as a straight penis in civilization." It's an excellent statement; why in civilizations only? Further research unveils that it all comes down to the invention of trousers; naturally the penis has to tilt to one side. So if an Asian man's penis is too short to tilt to either side, does society count

Top: Wong Ping, *Jungle of Desire*, 2015, installation view, NOVA sector, Art Basel Miami Beach. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Bottom: Wong Ping, *Who's the Daddy?*, 2017, installation view, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

as a civilization still? Or are we basically non-existent? Incorporated as the opening of *Who's the Daddy?*, this is one of its central concerns.

As for *Jungle of Desire*, lucky cats are very fitting for a sex worker's working environment. Essential to her business is not just fortune, but sexual desire too; hence the lucky cats' penis-paws. I contacted a sex worker organization and gave them ten lucky cats after the exhibition with the hope that it could benefit their business and that my friends would think of me when they visit a prostitute and see a lucky cat.

Stephanie Bailey: In turn, what role do women play in your narratives? In *Who's The Daddy?*, the female character comes across as a kind of anti-Saint: a contradictory figure radiating awesome, fearsome, or even cosmic energy, who wants nothing more than to get what she wants, and who loses her temper when she doesn't, only to feel sorry about it afterwards. In the exhibition you staged at Edouard Malingue in March 2017, you present an image of this woman on a yellow lightbox in a work called *Mammy* (2017), which depicts this woman as an icon of sorts.

Wong Ping, *Jungle of Desire*, 2015, single-channel video, 6 mins., 50 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong

Wong Ping: The appearance of women in my work mostly revolves around my crushes, lovers, intimate partners, and those I look up to as goddesses. Women are the muses that sustain my life. In terms of narrative, I'm basically using myself to instantiate the things I want to discuss. To a certain extent it's just a dialogue with myself. For instance, I use the female character's view on religion to elicit a paradox: despite the fact that abortion is condemned by religion as a sin, the aborted babies can still ascend to heaven, so logically abortion can be seen as a good deed. On the contrary, so many people's mortal endeavours to earn an afterlife are but a manifestation of their selfishness. Selflessness, on the other hand, knows that its consequence is condemnation, but it persists nonetheless.

I think I've said too much in *Who's The Daddy?;* it's like a stand-up comedy, even though it's not entirely gleeful. The theme song comes from a Cantonese nursery rhyme my mother used to play for me when I was young. I still listen to it on YouTube sometimes, and it never fails to soothe me, but it's the same with most pop songs. I just sing the nursery rhyme

Wong Ping, *Who's the Daddy?*, 2017, installation view, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

without ever fully understanding its lyrics. So I looked them up and realized the song actually had a terrifying message; the father keeps insisting that his son kiss him or it will be the end of the world, and compulsively asks the son if he understands. If this were a contemporary release, I suppose it would be pulled off Spotify. Curiously, though, back in the day, it was usually the mother who played this kind of song. As the narrative develops, I meet a sadistic woman and somehow take pleasure in being tortured by her, until one day I play the same nursery rhyme for my son and realize this pleasure all comes down to the servility my mother has instilled in me through the song.

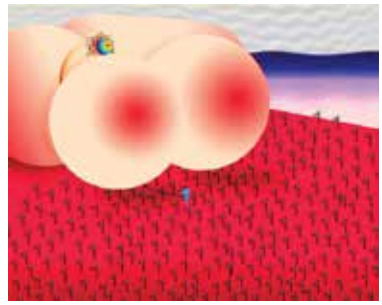
There aren't as many soothing nursery rhymes these days, though; they're replaced by classical music, which can allegedly improve children's intelligence. Ultimately it's a matter of functional and purposeful implantation rather than nurture, hence the small mechanical babies wearing VR goggles that I included in the exhibition.

Stephanie Bailey: Then there is the symbolism of the womb and vagina. In the music video for *We Want More*, one scene shows men in a line, like lemmings, going inside an opening that seems like a precursor to the way you would portray a woman's genitals in later work; for example, in *The Other Side* in which a man wants nothing more than to return to his

mother's womb, while in *Who's The Daddy?,* you talk about the labium being the borderline between criminality and legality. Could you elaborate?

Wong Ping: What I want to say is that men/women/penis/vagina is merely the artwork's language; sex and love might be the theme, but the narrative itself always takes centre stage. In *We Want More*, for instance, I want to express the idea that life is as boring as a video game; the vagina is only part of the game's opening scene. *The Other Side* features the vagina, too, but in the context of life's meaninglessness and the desire to reverse a kind of involuntary birth: parents are practically strangers to their children, who are forced into the construction of a familial relationship and the harmony it demands. Since I was a child I've always thought of being an orphan; that way I can build all my relationships at my own will. One of the issues I try to address in *Who's The Daddy?* is pedophilia: people tend to confuse "philia" (which denotes fondness) with sex as in the case of homosexuality, which is always associated with anal sex or AIDS, etc. It's weird how such fondness for a three-year-old, two-year-old, or one-year-old is criminal, but fondness for an unborn child in the womb enters a twilight zone where society's laws don't exist yet. The vagina can therefore be seen as the borderline between morality and criminality, as though the police are waiting outside ready to prosecute your thoughts. Within and without the womb, herein lies the fleeting moment of birth which, conceptually, changes everything. Hence like the work says, a pedophile need only push forward the love child's age with his willpower in order to avoid being stigmatized as a pervert.

Stephanie Bailey: Ultimately, though, it seems that in your animations, the narrative is not so much about separating the sexes as exploring their relationship with the other. Could you talk about how you navigate these relations, and how the condition of obsession and consumption feeds into it? In *Stop Peeping*, for instance, a man ends up collecting a woman's sweat to make lollipops he will later consume—the perfect distillation of the dynamics between men and women that you often portray in your films.



Wong Ping, *The Other Side*, 2015, 2-channel video, 8 mins., 2 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

Wong Ping: I think what you've mentioned just now is all about love, whose relational representations are not limited to sex; it has an expansive space for the imagination. I'm very interested in fetish. Viewers probably think my portrayals of women zoom in on their hostility and controlling ways, but from the perspective of fetish these are actually a kind of love and pleasure. There are too many types of fetish: whilst I like women's toes, some people prefer ASMR, watersports, voyeurism, vorarephilia, etc., which are equally fascinating. Once, whilst hiking with my ex-girlfriend, I licked the sweat off her skin as we reached the top of the hill. She was disgusted, but I thought it was love—the intense feeling of wanting to possess her whole. I never did it again after that.

Stephanie Bailey: *Jungle of Desire* in 2015 was your first official solo exhibition, when you produced objects to be presented alongside your animation, followed by *Who's The Daddy?* at Edouard Malingue in 2017.

Could you talk about how you have developed a relationship with the art object and with the exhibition space, and how you are using these elements as ways to frame or expand on the animations you create?

Wong Ping: There're too many things I want to say through animation. Most of the time I can only address each subject slightly, which has its strategic benefits, but sometimes I wish I could expand on my thoughts and engage with them in a real setting. I can't help but wonder: without my computer and software, or even electricity, what do I actually know? How should I express myself? I guess I'd just be nothing, totally worthless. Hence I believe craftsmanship needs to be revived, even though I think animation, the art of displaying images in twenty-five frames per second from scratch, is itself a kind of craftsmanship. But since viewing of the animation requires time, surrounding installation works can be treated as part of an immersive trailer, connecting the exhibition's thematic threads.

Stephanie Bailey: You were very much a regular on the film and animation circuit before you became involved in contemporary art. What is your relationship between these various worlds to which you belong?

Wong Ping: It took me a while to adapt to all the interferences outside of creation; sometimes it can be difficult to stay happy whilst making art. One thing that strikes me is the demarcation between animation/design/film and contemporary art, as though the two had their own modes of expression and, therefore, minimal communication. From past experiences and feedback, I've observed that whichever mode I choose to present a work, the other mode would always respond in some way with reluctance or bewilderment, holding on to its own creative vision. Sometimes I feel like I'm being torn apart between the two sides!

Translation by Nicole Go Ka Wing.

Notes

1. Sam Bekemans, "Interview with Animator Wong Ping," *Third Culture Film Festival*, June 17, 2016, www.tcff.tv/interview/2016-interview-wong/.
2. "Wong Ping's 'Jungle of Desire,'" *Juxtapoz Magazine*, January 11, 2016, https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/film/wong-ping-s-jungle-of-desire/.
3. Minoru Furuya, *Shigatera 6* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2003–2005).

Vivian K. Sheng

Yin Xiuzhen's Fluid Sites of Participation: A Communal Space of Communication and Antagonism

This essay considers a series of participatory works created by Yin Xiuzhen in which a typical Chinese domestic environment is re-created and restaged within an artistic context so that viewers can experience, albeit via heavily mediated means, an example of traditional form of communal life in China. Since the early 2000s, Yin Xiuzhen has travelled frequently around the world to exhibit her works in various institutions and events and, at times, make new pieces that were contextualized within those places. Her observations of life under radical social transformation in her home town, Beijing, have become a significant part of her investigations of transnational, transregional travel and exchange, which she communicates to viewers across geographical and cultural boundaries. By soliciting the viewer's active, embodied engagement with her works exhibited in public galleries, Yin Xiuzhen not only recalls the community dwelling environment in a specific local area, but offers a fluid artistic site of provisional social cohesion, enabling intercultural, interpersonal connectedness as well as irreconcilable conflict and disagreement. This essay grounds a discussion of Yin Xiuzhen's participatory pieces within the context of contemporary art and the exhibition-making market, which is characterized by an unprecedented interest in social participation and collaboration.

From the early 1990s, particularly with the rise of international art biennials, triennials, and art fairs, a surge of participatory artistic practices started to take place in a multitude of geographical locations, which sought to overturn the traditional relationship of the art object, the artist, and the viewer.[1] In contrast to a one-to-one interactive relationship between the art object and the viewer, participatory art tends to construct an artistic space of embodied viewers in order to explore concepts of community, political participation, and action. For instance, over the past two decades, the Argentine-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija famously has made a series of participatory pieces by transforming the gallery space into a public dining hall, where he cooks vegetarian green curry or pad thai that is served to visitors at his exhibitions. With his works, Tiravanija creates a convivial atmosphere of individual subjects coming together to have a free dinner party. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, first published in English in 2002, French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud categorizes the works made by Tiravanija and others, including Liam Gillick and Pierre Huyghe, as "relational art."[2] According to Bourriaud, relational art elicits interactive

encounters among viewers who participate in the artwork, and so constitutes an immediate temporary social collective.[3] From his perspective, this particular type of artistic practice presents a mode of "microtopias" in which individuals adopt a do-it-yourself approach in order to create positive human relations in the here and now.[4]

Bourriaud's idea of relational art was roundly criticized by Claire Bishop in her article "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," published in 2004. According to Bishop, Bourriaud's paradigm of relational art runs the risk of precluding the meaning of the artwork as "relational" or "temporary emancipation" and thus erasing differences.[5] On the basis of her reading of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Moufe's 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Bishop argues that conflict and antagonism are basic conditions in constituting democracy as an ongoing process, which continuously reveal the partiality, precariousness, and contingency of society and provide possibilities for questioning power and the dominant social order.[6] Bourriaud's claims for the politics of relational aesthetics, from Bishop's point of view, are "not intrinsically democratic" since they ignore the inevitable conflict, exclusion, and lack of resolution that characterize multiple interactions among individual subjects.[7] Viewers, of course, might refuse to participate in the artwork or engage with it differently from what the artist intended. An artwork can create a much more complex condition of participation than a simple, emancipated, and hospitable space for a moment of togetherness of individual subjects.

In this essay, I want to explore further the established debates about artistic participation and the social practice of democracy relative to Yin Xiuzhen's socially engaged practice. I will consider in what ways Yin Xiuzhen's series of participatory art pieces construct sites for temporary social connectedness and belonging that are fluid, while revealing instances of contradiction and rejection that are also part and parcel of attempts at collective cohesion; I will also look at how the artist practices and explores frictions and negotiations between local and global, promoting mutual understanding between China and the world, yet refusing to fabricate an illusion of harmonious reconciliation.

In 2006, Yin Xiuzhen created an installation piece titled *Restroom W* or *Restroom (Women)*, which provides critical insight into the communication and collision between self and other, private and public, and individual and communal. The work was made for a collaborative exhibition with her husband, Song Dong, held at REDCAT, Los Angeles. The two artists built a white box space inside the gallery and divided it with a temporary wall to constitute two restrooms, one for women and one for men, respectively. When the piece is exhibited, viewers, whether male or female, can enter into Yin Xiuzhen's work through a temporary door, labelled with the typical women's toilet sign. Within the room, a tripled-tiered crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, with its bottom suspended at about the height of the

Yin Xiuzhen, *Restroom W*, or *Restroom (Women)*, 2006, chandelier, concrete, plastic figure, bricks. Courtesy of the artist and REDCAT, Los Angeles.

viewer's head. On the far side of the space is a humble concrete structure constructed by the artist. Twelve sections of concrete slabs were placed side-by-side on the floor and along the bottom half of the wall, fixed together with mortar wiped on the surfaces. Its formal shape and its everyday materials call to mind Carl Andre's minimalist sculpture *Fall* (1968), which consists of twenty-one L-shaped, hot-rolled steel plates lying on the floor and leaning against the wall. However, with narrow rectangular troughs evenly inserted on the surface of each slab, Yin Xiuzhen's sculptural work is far from abstract. It resembles a shabby, squatting-trough-style public lavatory, which was commonly used in the old-fashioned, courtyard-house neighbourhoods in Beijing.

The courtyard house (*siheyuan*) is a typical Chinese dwelling in which the main structure of the building is constructed around a central courtyard. Each courtyard was traditionally for one family, albeit a large one that may have consisted of two or three generations and their servants. However, since the communist takeover of power in 1949, the majority of these compounds of houses were converted, owing to the drastic increase of the urban population, into multifamily apartments with a shared inner yard.[8] People living in the *siheyuan* usually shared the kitchen, rooms for food storage, and bathroom and toilet facilities.[9] In this sense, the *siheyuan* could be considered an ambiguous domestic space in-between the private and the public. While, on the one hand, such a living environment might set out to produce a relatively stable communal neighbourhood in contrast to the alienated modern apartment living style; on the other, it also too easily engenders a potentially troubling invasion of individual and family privacy. Owing to destructive urban renewal in the 1990s, the *siheyuan* and the intersected narrow alleys (*hutong*), which constituted the centuries-old architectural

layout of Beijing, were mostly demolished and replaced by modern apartment buildings. Only a small number of them have been preserved by the city's historical and cultural heritage industries. Some local residents, elders in particular, still live there and maintain the communal dwelling style.

At REDCAT, through her painstaking gestures of layering, wiping, and scraping, Yin Xiuzhen constructed a model of the communal toilet traditionally used in *hutong* courtyard dwellings in China and exhibited it in front of American viewers. According to Yin Xiuzhen, "[T]his kind of restroom is in one sense a meeting space. People using these toilets at once relieve themselves, read the newspaper, and chat about everything from international affairs to local gossip."[10] With this installation work, Yin Xiuzhen engages viewers in the re-creation of an old-fashioned communal living environment, recollecting a conventional collective bond. However, in contrast to her relatively idealized interpretation, which presents this type of public lavatory as an important community space and completely ignores its inconvenient and unsanitary conditions, a range of unsolved conflicts and contradictions in the formation of an immediate social collective are revealed to viewers by virtue of their own dynamic embodied interactions with the artistic site created by *Restroom W*.

Yin Xiuzhen, *Restroom W,* or *Restroom (Women)*, 2006, chandelier, concrete, plastic figure, bricks. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and REDCAT, Los Angeles.

As a non-functioning model of a primitive and austere Chinese communal lavatory installed in a contemporary American art gallery, the work is alienated from the stylish modern exhibition hall, conveying a status of displacement. Even after reading a short description of the work in the exhibition leaflet, it likely is still not easy for most American viewers to relate to Yin Xiuzhen's minimalist, sculptural piece as a toilet.[11] Wandering through the space, viewers can sense the uncomfortable, dazzling light and threatening heat from the 110 lit bulbs on the chandelier that hangs in the same space. The scale of this luxury item, which is more often found in a hotel lobby or other public venues, replaces the dim lamps commonly found in this type of toilet, thus evoking feelings of dislocation and inappropriate transgression. Because there are no partitions separating each trough, it appears that the most private acts must be performed in public. In this sense, Yin Xiuzhen's work intensifies the contradiction between private and public, individual and communal. Although viewers are not supposed to literally use her "toilet" in public, they are still able to feel a strong sense of discomfort and anxiety owing to the aggressive invasion of individual privacy demonstrated by the artwork.

Meanwhile, the presence of other viewers in the exhibition space might make this uneasy, embarrassing situation of social engagement even

more prominent. Within this enclosed "public lavatory," viewers, from my observations in the exhibition, rarely talked to each other. Some of them may have even felt perplexed and awkward, when encountering one another on the site. As viewers came and went in sequence, a contingent social collective, made up of the participating individual subjects who coincidentally and momentarily engaged with *Restroom W*, was formed and reformed. However, instead of a friendly, shared experience, this immediate, fluid sense of social connectedness with other bodies evoked in Yin Xiuzhen's work, I would suggest, was characterized by confusion and incomprehension about a particular culture and living situation, which can induce physical and psychic disquiet.

Yin Xiuzhen. *Restroom W* or *Restroom (Women)*, 2006, chandelier, concrete, plastic figure, bricks. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and REDCAT, Los Angeles.

In addition, behind the large column located at the corner of *Restroom W* lies a life-sized, wax sculpture of a new born baby boy, covered in artificial blood, whose right hand clutches a pair of scissors, as if the umbilical cord has been just cut from his body. His crouching, helpless posture might recall the Freudian infantile anxiety that occurs when the child is first separated from the body of the mother and is exposed to the outside world.[12] This wax sculpture was created in response to a horrific event—the attempted murder of a boy baby in a countryside communal toilet in China just before Yin Xiuzhen's exhibition at Los Angeles.[13] This "abandoned" baby boy, as Yin Xiuzhen indicated in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 2006, is aimed at challenging a stereotypical assumption about China constructed by American mass media, which has often reported that in the Chinese countryside male children are more highly valued, and some parents abandon their female babies.[14] Rather than simply essentializing a communal living environment in China, *Restroom W*, I suggest, creates what Bishop calls "the terrain of antagonism," again, where the boundaries of the different binaries discussed above remain unstable, and open to challenge and potential change.[15]

The conventional Chinese courtyard dwelling always takes the central position in Yin Xiuzhen's artistic exploration of social collectivity and public engagement. Unlike her amusing but slightly disturbing *Restroom W*, the series of participatory works *Beijing Opera*, which she started in 2000, present a different view of the collective living situation in the courtyard housing area in Beijing. The work is composed of three major parts—huge sheets of inkjet photographic wallpaper, wooden stools, and sound recordings. The sheets of wallpaper are derived from a group of

Yin Xiuzhen, *Restroom W,* or *Restroom (Women),* 2006, chandelier, concrete, plastic figure, bricks. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and REDCAT, Los Angeles.

photographs taken by the artist in the Houhai Lake district, located in the northwest of Beijing, where old *hutong*, courtyard buildings, and historic palaces are concentrated. Her photographs feature the collective quotidian activities of ordinary people, elders in particular, who live around the area. According to the size and location of each site the exhibition has been presented in, the choice of wallpaper and the particular placement of the stools have varied. By using and reusing her old photographs and wooden stools, Yin Xiuzhen continuously incorporates new events and relationships with human activities and places them into the narrative of *Beijing Opera.*

My discussion focuses on the version of *Beijing Opera* Yin Xiuzhen made and displayed in 2001 for a group exhibition, *Living in Time*, held at Hamburger Bahnhof Contemporary Art Museum, Berlin. Inside the spacious gallery room, huge photographic sheets of wallpaper were pasted all over the walls. The back right corner represented different groups of male elders sitting on stools around low round tables in a public courtyard and playing Chinese chess (*xiangqi*). A few people stand behind and watch the game with bamboo

fans in hand. Beside this scene, most of the central space of the wall on the right hand side is taken up by another sheet of wallpaper depicting a group of elderly people who are performing Beijing opera. While an elderly man is standing and singing, four other men sitting around him are either playing traditional musical instruments or simply tapping out the rhythm with a folded silk fan. There are several passers-by sitting or standing at the back enjoying the performance. Whereas the enlarged image on the front wall presents people casually sitting on stools or squatting on the curbs while chatting with each other and enjoying the beautiful scenery of Houhai Lake, the one on the left-hand side features a group of elders who are just ready to go back home after a traditional leisure activity, *liuniao*—which means individuals sitting together every morning in a public courtyard or along small streets to observe and talk about their birds in cages.

Yin Xiuzhen, *Beijing Opera*, 2001, inkjet wallpaper, stools, sound. Hamburger Bahnhof Contemporary Art Museum, Berlin. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Beijing.

Each of Yin Xiuzhen's enlarged photographs provides a view of people engaging with one another in a specific shared activity, emphasizing a sense of community and belonging. They persist in their habitual ways of life and enjoy their collective leisure time. Their slow, relaxed daily routines of singing, sitting, chatting and playing games preserve local cultural traditions and sustain the meaning of home and local community. In this sense, these images communicate a strong feeling of nostalgia, recollecting a past that is disappearing—an idealized, conventional mode of community existence that is being gradually lost in a rapidly evolving China due to the destructive process of urban modernization and the unprecedented intrusion of foreign cultural influences.

Thirty-two small wooden stools are scattered in groups around the room. Viewers are invited to sit on them and look at the artist's huge images pasted on the walls. These humble wooden stools can be perceived as metaphorical symbols of a stable and grounded collective life; they are the most common objects on which people sit as they chat with neighbours or family members on a daily basis. The placement of these stools brings to mind a specific collective experience during the time of the Cultural Revolution when people living in neighbouring areas would bring their own stools and sit together in the open cinema to watch propaganda films. Accompanied by the chant of Beijing opera coming out from a loudspeaker located at the far right-hand corner of the room, Yin Xiuzhen's work seeks to create a visually and aurally affective space in which viewers can participate in an immediate, contingent community life by sitting together on the stools and watching and contemplating various collective activities presented on the wallpaper.

Yin Xiuzhen, *Beijing Opera*, 2001, inkjet wallpaper, stools, sound. Hamburger Bahnhof Contemporary Art Museum, Berlin. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Beijing.

Viewers, even those who are willing to become engaged with her work, do not always feel obliged to do what the artist expects, however. It is undoubtedly not particularly comfortable to look at such huge images pasted on the wall from a low perspective, when sitting on the short wooden stools. Indeed, for many Western viewers, it might not be easy to participate in and restage moments of communal life in China simply on the basis of the limited, unfamiliar narrative unfolding in Yin Xiuzhen's wallpaper. As the feminist philosopher and social theorist Iris Marion Young has argued in her discussion of democratic communication, storytelling is an important vehicle for speaking across differences and promoting the understanding of people's experience in a different social situation.[16] Although storytelling is unable to assume a complete mutual understanding, it encourages communication, resulting in reasonable disagreement. To some extent, Yin Xiuzhen's artwork can be understood as an artistic vehicle that tells

of real life stories in China to viewers in the West without the expectation of achieving complete agreement. With strong references to a particular cultural background, her artwork reveals problems in introducing the local into a global context. A lack of understanding of the communal living situation in China can hinder the viewer's involvement with the artwork. Different from the intimate interactions of people depicted in the artist's oversized images, viewers, who momentarily encountered her work in Berlin, are in a sense rendered estranged outsiders. This disparity between Yin Xiuzhen's invitation for viewers to participate by sitting on the stools and looking at the wallpaper and their actual engagement with the work provides a distinctively critical insight into contemporary participatory art practices. An artwork that tends to create a hospitable communal environment for immediate, interactive public engagement might give rise to a totally divergent experience of participation marked by confusion or exclusion due to the deficiency of intercultural understanding when exhibited in different social and geographical contexts.

While *Beijing Opera* might be read differently by Chinese viewers, who have a better knowledge of the collective living situation in China, they, too, may feel embarrassed or reluctant to squat on the low wooden stools in such close proximity to other visitors they are not familiar with. Some of the stools are placed extremely close to each other. Given the tiny size of these stools, it is quite difficult for viewers, when sitting on them, to retain a polite and comfortable distance to other bodies. Some viewers, if they are with family members or friends, might prefer to sit together as a small group. Detached from the actual neighbourhood they are referencing, these wooden stools, now placed in the *Beijing Opera* installation in Berlin, can only recall, but never genuinely evoke the similarly casual and relaxed experience of communal life in old Beijing as it is shown in the wallpaper. Yin Xiuzhen's practice, in this sense, conveys her own anxiety and helplessness in maintaining and preserving local cultural tradition and collective life.

Different from Bishop's account of social antagonism in contemporary participatory artistic practices, which especially investigates the artwork's capacity to provoke conceptual unease and emotional disturbance that destabilize favourable communal relationships, Yin Xiuzhen's participatory piece creates a conflictual and unstable-collective engagement in both psychic and bodily terms. Rather than simply restaging an idealized, harmonious scene of community life, the artist, through *Beijing Opera*, not only sustains the tension of cultural difference, but also induces anxiety and discomfort on the basis of viewers' immediate bodily interactions and the inevitable collision and disagreement that mark interpersonal and intercultural communications.

Yin Xiuzhen continued her use of small wooden stools in *Collective Subconscious (blue)*, which was first exhibited in 2007. In the late 2000s, she created a set of participatory works constructed from scrapped transport vehicles. Assuming the form of both public transport and an architectural

Yin Xiuzhen, *Collective Subconscious (blue)*, 2007, minibus, stainless steel, used clothes, stools, music. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Beijing.

shelter, these works invite viewers to physically explore the interior space, representing pathways and meeting points of individual subjects within an art object. *Collective Subconscious (blue)* was constructed from an old, bisected minivan. After detaching the front and the back of the vehicle, Yin Xiuzhen installed an accordion-like, foldable steel structure set upon rows of tiny wheels that connects the two separate parts and then wrapped it with a colourful patchwork of four hundred items of used clothing collected from a range of people who reside in Beijing. In this way, an efficient minivan was dramatically transformed into an overgrown "caterpillar." The fabric membrane consists mainly of thin, translucent summer shirts and undervests; thus the gallery lighting penetrates the interior of the artwork. Looking from within, the fabric walls of the work appear like stained glass windows. The interior flooring is paved with steel planks upon which the artist placed a group of wooden stools along the two lengthwise edges of the space. The arrangement of these stools also, to some extent, recalls the collective dwelling situation in the Chinese courtyard, although they have been placed in a completely different context to the works discussed earlier.

The minivan was widely used in Beijing in the 1990s—a decade characterized especially by rapid urbanization and progressive economic development. As increasing numbers of courtyard houses in the old centre of Beijing were demolished, thousands of families had to move into modern high-rise block buildings erected in the suburbs of the city. In this situation, the minivan was employed by many as an inexpensive alternative to a standard taxicab for daily commuting. In the minivan, people from diverse backgrounds boarded for the same destination. Small wooden stools were commonly placed on the aisle when there were not enough seats for all passengers. These crowded conditions within the minivan did not produce an enjoyable

Yin Xiuzhen, *Collective Subconscious (blue)*, 2007, minibus, stainless steel, used clothes, stools, music. Photo: Yin Xiuzhen. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Beijing.

communal experience, but, rather, discomfort and embarrassment since within this confined space, one had to sit among strangers at very close proximity. This compressed and uncomfortable situation is also revealed to the participating viewers of *Collective Subconscious (blue)*, particularly when they stepped onto the shaky interior ground of this long narrow structure and squat on the low wooden stools close to one another. Similar to her *Beijing Opera* pieces, this work evokes an uncomfortable mode of "togetherness" through the viewer's engagement with the art object.

Meanwhile, since the early 1990s, due to the development of the global trade network, foreign investment began to pour into a few major Chinese cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, as well as some eastern coastal regions. Huge amounts of surplus rural labour started to flow into these developing areas to pursue better job opportunities and living situations, becoming a significant floating labour force.[17] Accompanied by a wistful ballad *Beijing, Beijing* that captures the mood of the time, this extended minivan can be also understood as a temporary site of repose marked by endless passages and accidental encounters of

moving human bodies, articulating the longing for belonging as modern nomads in contemporary metropolitan cities.

When the piece is on display, viewers who wish to enter Yin Xiuzhen's minivan usually queue in front of the sideway door to wait for their turn to climb into the artwork. Ideally, they are expected to sit on the small wooden stools, roughly arranged into two uneven rows, face to face, and to strike up conversations. A number of viewers may find themselves talking to people sitting around them or perhaps make friends after meeting each other coincidentally within the artwork. However, there are others who may be uncomfortable or reluctant to talk to people they have just encountered for the first time. Yin Xiuzhen's works cannot always instigate favourable and effective interactions among participating viewers; instead, inside *Collective Subconscious (blue)*, they are compelled to negotiate with both the space and the other viewers. The interior of the artwork is quite compressed even with a small number of viewers. Most of them have to bend over as they go through the structure, and, at times, if it is crowded, one needs to sidle along the stools and squeeze through other bodies.

Following her reading of social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey, Marsha Meskimmon proposes that place can be perceived as an event, "where place is not a fixed and stable marker of identity or power, but is a site of perpetual negotiation."[18] Through her labour intensive yet creative re-appropriation of old vehicles, clothes, and wooden stools, Yin Xiuzhen's artwork also has been constructed into an ongoing artistic event akin to that described by Meskimmon, one that is marked by multiple trajectories and the insistent negotiations of viewers engaging with her artistic space in a specific time and place. With her extended minivan, the artist materializes a mediated space in-between past and present, local and global, self and other, as well as individual and communal, in which these opposite terms, in Bishop's analysis, are presented as neither reconciled nor totally separate spheres.[19]

Yin Xiuzhen's works might provide an alternative perspective to reconsider the notion of social collectivity and the formation of human community in a transnational, transcultural context on the basis of a viewer's immediate experience of the art object and the contingent interactions with other participatory viewers. However, this cannot be simply understood as an effective, ameliorative approach to establishing positive, benign social relations. As shown in her works, the artistic form of participation can be unstable and disquieting; it even fails, when visitors to the exhibition refuse to be implicated in the artwork. Yin Xiuzhen's practice demonstrates a contradictory situation of contemporary participatory artworks. So-called participatory art, which generally endeavours to constitute a hospitable, artistic mode of socially interactive human community, is, here, in my mind, confronted with inevitable disagreement, conflict, exclusion, and uncertainty.

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Dong Yue Su

The Constructed Reality of Immigrants: Fang Tong's Contrived Photography

In one of her photographs, Fang Tong is seen sitting alone on a luxurious red couch in a living room decorated for Christmas. The striped wallpaper is in a bright green colour, complementary to her festive red dress. Fang Tong appears to be watching TV, but upon closer inspection, what appears to be an ordinary domestic scene appears off kilter: her gaze drifts away from the TV screen and disengages with the room; her upright sitting posture seems awkward against the comfy couch; her significant other as suggested by two glasses of wine on the table, seems missing. Overall, she is at odds with her surroundings. What is more askew is that the scene is deliberately revealed to be a setup on a theatre stage. The camera has zoomed out to include the red drapery backdrop and the wooden floor of the stage, which encapsulate the edges of the living room props.

This self-portrait image, titled *Lonely Christmas*, is from her photographic series *Soap Opera* (2016). Since she moved to Vancouver in 2006, Fang Tong has been exploring what she describes as "cinematic style" photography. In her practice, all things are conspicuously contrived—three mahjong players waiting for the fourth, a Chinese married couple are on the same bed but playing on cell phones separately, a teenage girl doing her social media podcast, an Asian woman on a date with a white man at a restaurant, and an upset bride in a bathroom. All the people in her images are actors, and they are set in meticulously detailed backgrounds. Each component has been carefully chosen and placed delicately in the scene under fine tuned photographic lighting in order to render a perfect scenario for what she describes as "the emotions."

Her photographs make no effort to conceal these contrivances; rather, it is such artificiality that makes the photographs interesting. There has been a long tradition by avant-garde artists of using photography to reveal the illusion of image making, and Fang Tong exposes her process of illusion making in several ways. First, the cinematic effect in her images draws the viewer into accepting the illusions. Then, a self-reflexive artificiality contradicts those illusions and creates a distancing effect, redirecting one's attention to the act of representation over what is being represented.

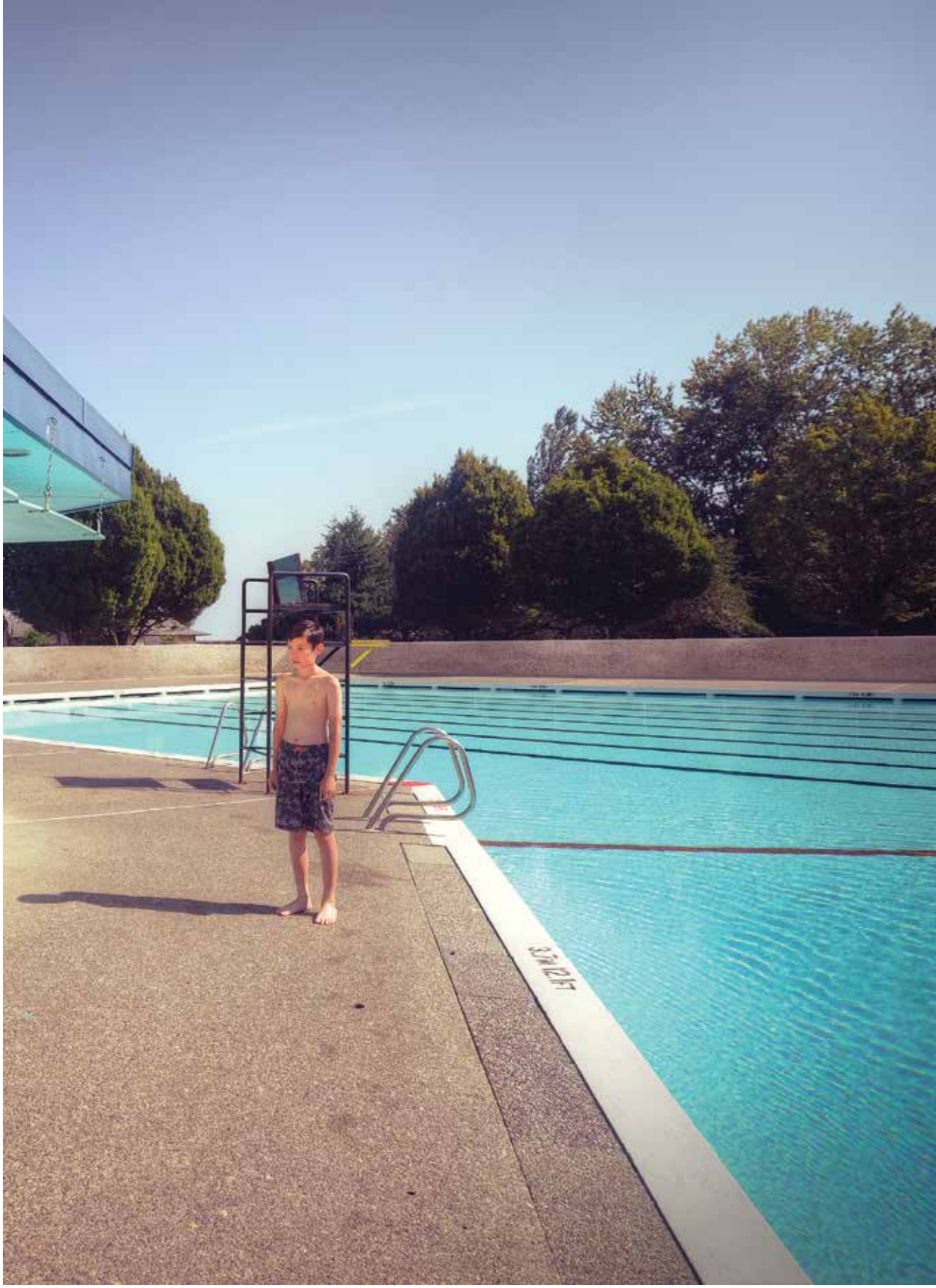
Fang Tong, *Lonely Christmas,* 2016, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The viewer can easily notice Fang Tong's acting in *Lonely Christmas,* so the immediate question that arises is: Is this her persona? What is the difference between her presentation and herself? Which one is more real? The relationship between representing and the represented becomes an interesting entangling of perspectives.

For Fang Tong, the distance between the artificial setup of the images and the supposed reality the images represents taps into the viewer's subconscious. In a photograph titled *Love Illusions* (2014), a beautiful young woman is standing shyly against the wall at a swimming pool, while a prepubescent boy blatantly gazes upon her body from a distance. The perfect lighting and the flawless positioning of the bodies in relation to the ambience of the scene imply the artificial intentions of it. The composition accentuates the tension of the awkward encounter between this duo. Fang Tong explained to me that this is a dramatic moment within a larger narrative, but the viewer is given no clue about what happens before or after. What one is able to feel are emotions, which compellingly invite the viewer to contemplate the scene and come up with his or her own narrative. This ambiguity creates abstraction within the image, and this is where the subconscious comes into play. Therefore, Fang Tong regards her contrived images as surreal.

Every detail Fang Tong places in the background of her compositions is a symbol of the character's psyche, as if in a visual logic of psychoanalysis; thus everything is tightly connected into a concise expression of emotion. This emotion goes deeper than the verbal impulse; as a viewer standing in front of *Love Illusions*, I can feel something is there, but I find it difficult to articulate what I feel.

Fang Tong, *Love Illusions,* 2014, injet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.


3.5m (12ft)

Fang Tong, *The Waiting Game*, 2016, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

As an immigrant from China, Fang Tong started her art practice in the 1990s in Shanghai. She studied oil painting at the Fine Arts Institute of Shanghai University and furthered her studies in the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. She relocated to Vancouver in 2007, and in her daily job she created surrealistic illustrations for the gaming industry, which prompted her to think about the relationship between realism and surrealism. In an interview with me, Fang Tong stated: "I have always had a love for the real and surreal, which produces a sense of freedom." She also mentioned as an inspiration Gregory Crewdson, an American photographer who is known for his contrived photography.

Since Fang Tong lives in Vancouver, her practice may appear to resonate with the photoconceptualism of what is known as the Vancouver School, generally identified with the work of Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Rodney Graham, and Ken Lum. The idea of creating cinematic simulacra is also familiar in Cindy Sherman's film stills. Stylistically speaking, what stands out in the work of Fang Tong are her bold colour schemes, meticulous detail, the stereotypical models she chooses and their makeup, and, particularly, the emphatic tension between the characters. The confidence expressed in her renderings resembles the style found in *VOGUE* magazine fashion photographs.

While Fang Tong's methodology is not new to the art world, her thematic choices are distinct. Fang Tong's work covers a wide range of characters and subject matter, but for the sake of this essay, I would like to highlight the aspect of new immigrants. *Chen Family* (2016), for example, shows a Chinese immigrant family in a Vancouver mansion, in which three generations live together but are psychologically distant from each other; the Caucasian wife is turning away from the seemingly unhappy parent-in-laws, and the ambivalent attitude of the Chinese husband and the daughter add to this strained family dynamic. *Growing Pains* (2015) depicts a disconnection between an immigrant mother and her Canadian-born teenager. *Gilded 1*

Fang Tong, *Chen Family*, 2015, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

reveals a lonely Chinese woman outside a luxurious house, appearing to be lost in its opulence. These photographs speak to certain truth within the lives of many immigrants.

Fang Tong, *Growing Pains*, 2015, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The discord surrounding these Chinese immigrant characters is reinforced through the use of subtle symbolism. For instance, the striped background in *Lonely Christmas* and the gridded door in *Growing Pains* are a recurrent motif in her works, suggesting prison bars that confine the characters. The theatrical effect in these photographs enables the characters to appear larger than life, which serves to amplify the sense of emotion.

What makes Fang Tong's reconstructed photographs even more interesting is when viewers who are new immigrants are factored in. At the opening of her solo exhibition at the Vancouver Lipont Art Centre in the suburb of Richmond (April 1 to April 27, 2017), there were all kinds of visitors socializing just like at any other art opening in Vancouver, except that there were also a significant number of Chinese from new immigrant neighbourhood communities; in Richmond, forty-nine percent of the population is of Chinese descent.[1] Many were commenting on the characters in the photographs, but I observed that they rarely seemed to note the contrivances within the images. For the fun of it, Fang Tong brought in the entire collection of Christmas props from *Lonely Christmas* and set them up to the left of the main gallery entrance facing the photograph of *Lonely Christmas*, on the wall to the right. She invited visitors to sit on the red couch under studio lighting. People were delighted. They lined up and took turns having their pictures taken. They were apparently fascinated with the materialization of elements in the photograph and enjoyed the disparity

Fang Tong, *Gilded 1*, 2015, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

between a winter setting in the photograph and the spring weather they were enjoying during the exhibition, but I did not hear any questions about the artist's obvious intent to emphasize the constructed reality in the images. While waiting in queue, I asked a Chinese gentleman standing behind me whether or not he noticed anything unusual, such as the stage backdrop surrounding the Christmas room in the photograph and the photographing of a Christmas scene in spring. He uncaringly answered: "So What? What's wrong with that? This is our real life in Canada." It seems possible that things that are constructed in the photographs are normalized by the viewers as something equally convincing to what they find in their own daily reality, to the point of expressing a reluctance to differentiate the two.

It's quite possible that a comment such as this gentleman made might be quite common among visitors who do not look close enough, but it occurred to me that the simple acceptance of these representations, despite the visual cues that should make them question it, is more likely to happen to people with recent immigration experience.

Experiencing a social and cultural gap is common among newcomers to Canada. The sense of tension, awkwardness, disconnection, foreignness, and distance in many of Fang Tong's photographs could be understood as the reflection of this gap. A further inquiry into the immigrant experience would be to ask how they make sense of local cultures despite the foreignness of them. They certainly have to attempt to normalize the gap at some point in their immigrant transition. To try and unpack this transitional process is puzzling but interesting. What does this transition in life mean to their cultural identities? Is there a cognitive dissonance between the past self, back home, and the present self, in Canada's West Coast? If cultural sensibilities have changed through this transition, which one feels more real and which one feels less so? As an immigrant myself, I don't have an answer. It is safe to say that for some this dramatic change in life must evoke some sort of surreal feeling, perhaps not unlike that expressed in Fang Tong's photographs.

Fang Tong, *Gilded 2*, 2015, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Indeed, Fang Tong's photographs convey this sensation of the gap in the experience of new Chinese immigrants. In *Gilded 2*, the Chinese woman sitting in her opulent mansion, although appearing to be foreign, conveys a strong sense of ownership. In *Lonely Christmas*, Fang Tong's persona within the Christmas room, although at odds with the spirit of the scene, manages to blend in with the color scheme of the room via her red dress. This gap is not to be taken simplistically as a barrier that separates new immigrants from their new country. It involves a complex feeling of normalization, denial, reconciliation, and other intimate feelings as represented in the photographs.

These immigrants are, either voluntarily or involuntarily, uprooted from the social fabric of their former homes and implanted into a new cultural environment. Back home, things that constitute everyday reality occur as second nature; in Canada, however, the things they encounter every day are not necessarily like those they experienced in their pre-immigration life and, thus, may produce a cognitive dissonance. Small talk with someone in English is not always fluid, not to mention the kind of challenges the couples in *Chen Family* experience living with their daughter-in-law, in this context herself seemingly a cultural other. New immigrants might not feel that they have an organic presence with their new surroundings, so reality might not have a solid grounding.

In *Gilded 1*, the Chinese woman who is humbly standing outside her mansion seems belittled and bewildered by the scale of her house. Discord is apparent. Supposedly, such a possession might be important to her new identity in Canada, but how confident does she feel about her identity based on the foreignness of the house she owns? Is this place truly a reality for her? Or is it simply a representation of her new life in Canada, which conceivably could be disconnected from who she really is?

I have no idea what might go through the mind of this woman represented in Fang Tong's photograph in order to make sense of her new life. For the gentleman I questioned, he was willing to believe in things that are constructed as reality in his life: "What's wrong with that?" He chose to dismiss the critical facts of disparity and incongruence. I would like to think that for some this is a necessary mental process to make sense of a life in transition.

Notes

1. Source: Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, https://richmond.ca/_shared/assets/2006_Ethnicity20987.pdf/.

Adam Monohon

The April Photography Society: A Re-evaluation of Origins, Artworks, and Aims

Introduction: The April Photography Society and the Chinese Avant-Garde

Li Xiaobin, *Children Mourning Premier Zhou in Tian'anmen Square,* April 4, 1976, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

As dusk settled over Beijing on April 5, 1976, the rows of floodlights encircling Tian'anmen Square suddenly flicked on, flooding it in their unnatural light. Worried about what was to come, and with nowhere to hide, many of the thousands then assembled in the square began to leave. "By 9 p.m., only a few thousand die-hards remained. At 9:25 p.m. security agents sealed off the square," trapping those who stayed.[1] As abruptly as the blinding light had filled the square before, "the gold-studded red gates of the Forbidden City swung open, and thousands of militiamen . . . poured into the square. Backed by police and five battalions of soldiers, they waded into the crowd, clubs swinging."[2] Trapped within the square, the crowd was driven to the square's northern end and piled into waiting vans.[3] That night, under the false sun of the floodlights, "hundreds were beaten and four thousand were arrested"—some sixty people died.[4]

Referred to as the First Tian'anmen Incident (*Si-wu Tian'anmen shijian*), April 5 was merely the conclusion of a longer anti-government protest—the first to have occurred since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Begun in early March of 1976, the protests began as a mass outpouring of sentiment for the recently deceased Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), the first Premier of the People's Republic. Having been denied the opportunity to publicly mourn the passing of their Premier, thousands of Chinese took to Tian'anmen to commemorate the loss of a man whose perceived high moral calibre and efforts to mitigate the excesses of the Cultural Revolution had made him a popular hero.[5,6] Zhou Enlai's passing, and the arrival of Qingming, a traditional festival for the mourning of ancestors, provided Chinese citizens a platform to air grievances with their leaders that they had long been forced to keep silent. "By commemorating Zhou Enlai," Jan Wong, a Canadian journalist resident in Beijing at the time, suggests, "the Chinese people were indirectly expressing their anger at Mao and the Gang of Four" (*Siren bang),* a radical political faction led by Mao's then wife, Jiang Qing).[7] Jan Wong continues: "Under a dictatorship, commemorating a dead Communist pioneer was the safest, perhaps *only*, way to stage a protest," [8] while Qingming was the most acceptable time to do so.

The radical environment in Tian'anmen Square in the days leading up to the incident fuelled a flourishing of independent artistic activity. Amateur poets flocked to Tian'anmen Square to write poems praising Zhou Enlai


周总理
敬爱的周总理

and obliquely critiquing Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the Gang of Four. At the same time, in response to official prohibitions on documenting the event, numerous amateur photographers made their way to the square, cameras in hand, to capture what was then unfolding there.[9] As the historian Shi Li has noted, the activities of these amateur photographers, each working independently, together constituted not only a "rise of citizen photojournalism" in China, but also the beginning of a new "social documentary tradition" in Chinese photography.[10]

United by the shared concerns and experiences that brought them to Tian'anmen Square during the First Tian'anmen Incident, alternatively labelled the April Fifth Movement (*Siyue yundong*), several photographers who had documented the spectacle of the protest came to organize the first independent art photography group in mainland China since the establishment of the People's Republic. Known as the April Photography Society—a name intended to signify "a blossoming spring" while simultaneously establishing a clear connection with the April Fifth Movement[11]—the group strove to advance the state of photography in China primarily through a series of exhibitions staged in Beijing between 1979 and 1981.

Not only the first independent photography society to emerge since 1949,[12] the group was also the first independent arts group to hold a public exhibition since the foundation of the PRC.[13] In spite of their extraordinary contribution to both the development of photography in China, and central position among the avant-garde artist groups that emerged in Beijing at the time, the April Photography Society has been afforded extraordinarily short shrift by art historians, receiving considerably less attention than other, roughly contemporaneous, independent art organizations—notably, those that worked primarily in more established mediums and embraced more outwardly dissident politics. Though frequently mentioned in recitations of the development of Chinese avant-garde art, such mentions rarely exceed a few paragraphs or provide any analysis. Though both Claire Roberts in her book *Photography and China* and Wu Hung in the exhibition catalogue *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* have given over more space to the April Photography Society in their histories of photography in China, both are exceptions in the larger discourse on the development of modern Chinese art, focused as they are on the medium of photography specifically.[14]

Characteristic of this often cursory attention, and the summary dismissal that often accompanies it as justification, is a passage by art historian Paul Gladston outlining the emergence of various independent arts groups in 1979:

> The public exhibitions staged by the April Photography Society and the No Name Group in Beijing in 1979 were the first of their kind to be held in the PRC since the early

> 1950s. However, because of the resolutely formalistic approach to art making adopted by the groups in question, the significance of these exhibitions as a definitive starting point for the development of contemporary art in the PRC remains somewhat compromised.[15]

Gladston further reiterates the conventional understanding of the period, stating:

> There is a general acceptance in the existing literature on the subject of contemporary Chinese art . . . that the development of contemporary art in the PRC was initiated by the group known as the Stars (*Xingxing*) . . . the first to stage an unofficial public exhibition of artworks that not only rebelled against the established conventions of Maoist socialist realism, but also . . . presented thinly veiled criticisms of Mao and the Cultural Revolution.[16]

Although the discussion of the contribution of the Stars to the development of contemporary art that follows is convincing, Gladston's preceding analysis of the significance of various early independent, avant-garde artist groups in relation to the broader development of contemporary Chinese art provides little meaningful rationale for his positioning of the April Photography Society as subordinate in significance to the Stars.

This essay aims to problematize such readings of the April Photography Society by elucidating the group's ties to the April Fifth Movement (March–April 1976) and foregrounding such discussion in an analysis of the contested legacy of the event. Additionally, by elucidating the group's ties to the values espoused by Zhou Enlai—which in part precipitated the April Fifth Movement—and to the broader cultural movement, widely referred to as the Beijing Spring (*Beijing zhi Chun*) (1978–1979), that followed, this essay will present an account of the group's significance, not couched in comparison to their more intensively studied contemporaries but more closely situated in the complicated social and political context from which the group itself emerged. In doing so, this essay will demonstrate the significance of works frequently dismissed as naïve or formalistic, as well as challenge the notion that the group was entirely apolitical.

Photographing the April Fifth Movement

In the days just after the passing of Zhou Enlai in January 1976, "one million people braved the bitter January wind of North China to stand for hours . . . to watch his body being taken to be cremated."[17] In spite of strict prohibitions on mourning[18] and attempts to keep the transport of Zhou Enlai's body a secret, massive crowds lined Beijing's Chang'an Avenue to watch the ambulance carrying the deceased premier pass by. According to Cheng Nien, in her memoir of the period, "In China, news travelled faster

by word of mouth than through the newspapers where the simplest facts could not be published without the approval of several bureaucrats."[19] Consequently, Chinese citizens knew Zhou Enlai had died even before his death was officially announced.[20] They knew, as well, that his body would be carried by ambulance down Chang'an Avenue on January 11.[21] Seizing the last opportunity to pay their respects to Zhou Enlai before his cremation, massive crowds turned out along the rumoured route.

By March of that year, with Qingming rapidly approaching, wreaths commemorating Zhou Enlai began to appear in Tian'anmen Square, frequently accompanied by eulogies and poems. Banned from properly mourning Zhou Enlai in the period just after his passing, and frustrated with the seemingly senseless prohibitions and censorship frequently enacted by the Gang of Four—typified by the strict prohibitions around mourning the former Premier—untold numbers of Chinese citizens flocked to Tian'anmen Square to express their grief. Determined to mourn Zhou Enlai, who, by the mid-1970s was seen by many Chinese as the county's last hope, "the sole person able to lift China out of the murky Cultural Revolution unleashed by Mao Zedong,"[22] and protest the rule of the Gang of Four, people seized the opportunity afforded by the arrival of Qingming.[23]

Despite the massive scale of these activities, official Chinese media were prohibited from covering the event.[24] At the movement's peak even foreign journalists, often afforded more leeway, were forced to put their cameras away.[25] By April 5 the environment in Tian'anmen Square had become so tense that some foreign journalists were "too wary to make even brief jottings in their notebooks."[26] Sensing the significance of the events then unfolding, "a group of youths picked up their crude cameras and threw themselves into the sea of people then gathered in Tian'anmen Square."[27] Aware that the photographs they took could not be published under the political circumstances of the moment, they photographed anyway; "they wanted to photograph for history," according to Wang Zhiping (born 1947), the principal organizer of the April Photography Society's three exhibitions.[28] The prohibition on official documentation of the event only gave rise to a wave of citizen photojournalism.[29]

Driven by a "sense of mission" to record "the Chinese people's struggle against the Gang of Four,"[30] myriad amateur photographers took to Tian'anmen Square, cameras in hand, to document all that unfolded before them. Independent of one another Li Xiaobin (born 1955), an employee at the National Museum of Revolution and History; Luo Xiaoyun (born 1953), a worker at a sock factory and daughter of a Party official; Wu Peng (born 1948), a railroad worker, and more than one hundred other photographers captured the April Fifth Movement as it took place.[31] Variously capturing scenes of mourning families; poets reading tributes to Zhou Enlai or veiled criticisms of the Gang of Four to massive crowds; and young men, marching forward with locked arms, singing the Communist *Internationale*;

these disparate photographers produced a rich and varied record of the movement. In doing so, they revivified a tradition of social documentary long lost to the constraints impressed upon official photography, shaped as it was by the visual language of state propaganda.

Quite unlike official photography, which, as photography historian Claire Roberts explains, necessarily strove to "portray positive images of leaders and nation building," demands that "intensified dramatically during the Cultural Revolution" (*Wenhua Dageming*) (1966–1976), the photographs produced by amateur photographers during the April Fifth Movement depict turmoil, anxiety, and instability—casting the nation and its leaders in an uncertain light.[32] Not only do the images capture scenes prohibited in official photography, but, also, they do so using a visual language long since abandoned by the Party. Neither news photography, "only allowed to report things in a positive light,"[33] nor artistic photography, a category tasked with depicting the positive changes brought by the Communist Party's rule within the framework of Party ideology, the images made by these April Fifth photographers are documentary images. They belong to a category "simply not allowed to exist" in the People's Republic at the time, [34] according to photographer and photography historian Gu Zheng.

Wu Peng, *Let Us Group Together and Tomorrow*, April 5, 1976, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Images like Li Xiaobin's *Children Mourning Premier Zhou in Tiananmen Square*, taken on April 4, 1976 and Wu Peng's *Let Us Group Together and Tomorrow*, taken the following day, are exemplary of the strain of social documentary photography borne out of the movement. In Li Xiaobin's image, two young children dressed in awkwardly fitting coats and caps stare morosely to a point beyond the frame, a funeral wreath bearing inscriptions to Zhou Enlai set on a tripod before them. To the children's left (the right of the frame), a young woman wearing a black armband embroidered with the phrase "Premier Zhou" (*Zhou zongli*) stands. The wet ground, the long faces, and the funeral wreath all convey a sombre air—capturing a quiet moment before the turmoil that would break out the next day. Problematically,

however, the woman to the children's left, her face marked with grief, clutches a bag bearing two bold characters: *kuaile* (joyful). Though clearly happenstance, a clash of symbols of the sort would be unthinkable in an official photograph. Beyond this, the haphazardly arranged crowd—in which many faces are largely obscured—is undoubtedly too discordant to have been permissible in an image intended as propaganda.

In Wu Peng's image, the lock-armed young men caught singing the Communist *Internationale*, upon more than a momentary glance, appear entirely disorganized. A spontaneous happening, the group activity lacks any of the order or coordination ordinarily seen in images of marching men from the period. Wu Peng has not carefully constructed a photograph of an event he was aware would unfold. Rather, he has captured a fleeting, spontaneous moment he found to be filled with significance—a scene he has described as "tragically heroic."[35] According to Shi Li, "this single image encapsulates unity, an essential quality of the mass movement. Arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, the citizens of China were determined to move ahead, away from an era dominated by Mao's power and ideology."[36]

Luo Xiaoyun, *Turning the Tide, April 4,* 1976, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Similarly, Luo Xiaoyun and Li Xiaobin's images of Li Tiehua, an opera singer, capture a fleeting and spontaneous moment. Standing above an assembled crowd, Li Tiehua shouted: "Down with whomever is against Premier Zhou!,"[37] prompting both Luo Xiaoyun and Li Xiaobin to scramble to photograph the moment. "Excited by the scene, Luo Xiaoyun immediately stepped on top of the rack of a bicycle and began shooting. She took at least ten frames, the best-known one being *Turning the Tide*."[38] Li Xiaobin, not having a bike handy, "stood on the strong supporting hands of two friends and took a few frames. Then he raised his arms high and 'blind-shot' a few more," resulting in jauntily framed images.[39] Both photographers, fuelled by a desire to document the most characteristic scenes of the movement seized upon moments like Li Tiehua's reading to a rapt crowd, devising spontaneous methods to best capture each scene.

Li Xiaobin, *Li Tiehua*, April 4, 1976, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

In contrast, an earlier photograph by Weng Naiqiang (born 1936), also taken in Tian'anmen Square, of Mao Zedong reviewing an assembled crowd of Red Guards, evidences a careful adherence to Party policies on aesthetics and ideological content. Not unlike Luo Xiaoyun and Li Xiaobin's images of Li Tiehua, Weng Naiqiang's photograph depicts a central figure addressing an assembled crowd from on high. Titled *Mao Reviewing the Red Guards* (August 18, 1966), Weng Naiqiang's photograph, according to Claire Roberts, "is a quintessential image of the early Cultural Revolution."[40] Roberts continues: "In Weng Naiqiang's photograph [Mao] appears like a helmsman charting a course through a sea of adoring masses, bringing to mind the song 'Sailing on the Ocean Requires a Steady Hand.'"[41] Through its careful construction—the outstretched arms of Red Guards fill a perfectly horizontal strip along the image's bottom edge, while Mao stands atop the brilliant red walls of the Forbidden City, at the image's centre—Weng Naiqiang offers the viewer not only an image rich in symbolism but also one that conveys a sense of stability and order.

Having been borne out of the April Fifth Movement, it is hard to see, then, how the April Photography Society can be understood to be less significant than the Stars Group following the rubric proposed by Gladston. These images, the bedrock upon which the April Photography Society was founded, both "rebelled against the established conventions of Maoist socialist realism" and, by having been made at all, exist as thinly veiled criticisms of Mao and the Cultural Revolution—two essential criteria put forward by Gladston in his defence of the Stars position as the sole legitimate starting point for contemporary Chinese art.

The "Beijing Spring" and the Contested Legacy of the April Fifth Movement

In the wake of the crushed demonstrations, and with control of the square firmly in the hands of Party leaders once more, the police began to conduct "searches of all the photography labs in and around Beijing in an attempt to confiscate films and prints related to the movement."[42] What they had failed to stop from being recorded they wished to make disappear.

Many of the photographers who risked taking photographs in the first place, however, were intent on seeing them preserved for prosperity. Already dedicated amateurs, most had set up makeshift darkrooms in their own homes and were able to develop their images without risking them being seized. Nevertheless, had police identified them in Tian'anmen Square there was little doubt their properties would be searched. Consequently, most devised ways to ensure their film would not be found. Luo Xiaoyun and Wu Peng turned to friends to hide their negatives while Li Yingjie feigned compliance, turning over negatives in which no one could be identified—lest the police use the images to further their own searches—and hid the rest.[43]

In time, however, the political atmosphere in Beijing shifted. "By 1978, all China was in ferment. Thousands who had been wrongfully imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution were set free."[44] Mao Zedong's death in September of 1976, followed swiftly by the arrest of the Gang of Four, plunged China into a period of political uncertainty. By August of the following year, at the 11th Chinese Communist Party Congress, the Cultural Revolution was declared to have officially come to an end. In this brief period of liberalization, labelled the "Beijing Spring" (*Beijing zhi Chun*), public opposition to Party policy, first expressed during the April Fifth Movement, markedly increased. Already, by late 1977, some photographers involved in the movement dared to take out of hiding negatives that they had secreted away.

Eager to share their images, a number of photographers independently produced and disseminated small volumes of their own photographs of the April Fifth Movement. Wang Zhiping produced a small pictorial album, comprised of gelatin silver prints pasted on white cardboard leafs. Titled *National Funeral* (*Guo Sang*), the album contained some three hundred

images of the April Fifth Movement, as well as a title page that featured a portrait of a youthful Zhou Enlai. Wang Zhiping circulated the album privately, prompting some others, like Li Xiaobin, to produce albums of their own.

Weng Naiqiang, *Mao Reviewing the Red Guards*, 1966, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Wang Zhiping, *National Funeral*, 1977, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Similarly, in early 1977, two compilations of poetry produced during the movement were published, circulating far more widely than any of the pictorial albums self-published by April Fifth Society photographers. After meeting with the editors of these two collections, and seeing the impact of their collective endeavours, Luo Xiaoyun decided that the photographers involved in the movement should undertake a similar project. In short time an editorial committee was founded, consisting of An Zheng , Gao Qiang, Li Xiaobin, Luo Xiaoyun, Ren Shimin, Wang Zhiping, and Wu Peng. Working secretly, with limited resources, and at great personal risk, the committee set out to collect all the images of the event they could find. Operating on a set of basic guiding principles the editors had a finished product, titled *People's Mourning* (*Renmin de Daonian*), by 1979.[45]

In December of 1978 Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) announced his policy of Reform and Opening, "the legislative starting point for the PRC's centrally driven and increasingly prodigious programme of modernization of the past four decades."[46] Deng Xiaoping's policy incorporated the "Four Modernizations," first proposed by Zhou Enlai, which had been a key factor in spurring on the April Fifth Movement. As Cheng Nien notes, during the movement, "The young people pledged emotionally to accomplish Chou En-lai's [sic] unfinished task to rebuild China through his Four Modernizations Programme."[47] What had once been part of the radical political agenda that drove the April Fifth photographers to pick up their cameras and head to Tian'anmen Square became official Party policy.

By the time *People's Mourning* was ready to be distributed, the political tide had shifted in its favour; the April Fifth Movement had been fully rehabilitated, with those imprisoned for participation released and prohibitions surrounding the event lifted.[48] Suddenly, a publication intended to be released unofficially and in contravention of Party mandate had five publishing houses competing for rights to print the book for a

national audience.[49] In the wake of Deng Xiaoping's implementation of Reform and Opening celebrating a mass movement that lauded Zhou Enlai and criticized the now imprisoned Gang of Four had become far more politically expedient than denying the movement's very existence.

The *People's Mourning* editorial committee, Left to right: Li Xiaobin, Gao Qiang, Luo Xiaoyun, Wu Peng, An Zheng, Wang Zhiping, and Ren Shimin, February 1978, photograph.

Initially an underground project, "the book carried an official endorsement" upon release.[50] Ironically, what began as a continuation and memorialization of earlier protests against a system that allowed factions like the Gang of Four to secure power became a tool of the highest level of government. According to art historian Wu Hung, the calligraphic dedication by Hua Guofeng (1921–2008), then Chairman of the Communist Party, on the volume's title page "helped Hua Guofeng gain public support and legitimated his mandate."[51] This official patronage also served to alter the status of the April Fifth photographers themselves. Shortly after the publication of *People's Mourning* the editors were publicly declared "April Fifth Heroes" and asked to join the official China Photographers Association,[52] membership in which would have assured them status in China's photographic community.

Disenchanted by what Wu Hung calls the "official hijacking" of their once radical project, the April Fifth photographers "turned away from political involvement to pursue an artistic photography outside the government's agendas."[53]

Establishing the April Photography Society

Not long after having been declared "April Fifth Heroes" and offered membership in the China Photographers Association, Wang Zhiping and Li Xiaobin, both central members of the editorial committee of *People's Mourning*, decided that they would do best to pursue a different path. While walking the grounds of the Old Imperial Palace (*Yuanmingyuan*), then a popular haunt for young artists,[54] Wang Zhiping turned to Li Xiaobin and proclaimed, "Let's not make a career in politics! Let's create art and organize our own exhibitions!"[55] They shared their idea with other photographers who had been involved in the April Fifth Movement and in *People's Mourning*. The idea was well received by the other photographers "who enthusiastically suggested that they form a photography society."[56]

Shortly after having decided upon establishing a photography society, the group settled upon a name as well. As Shi Li notes, "Wang Liping . . . suggested 'April Photo[graphy] Society' since 'it signified a blossoming spring, and at the same time established a clear connection with the April Fifth Movement'." [57] In time, a name for the group's first, and subsequent,

exhibitions, and the central thematic thread for all of the work produced and shown by members of the society, was decided upon as well. According to Wang Zhiping, "Zhao Jiexuan suggested the title *Nature, Society, Man*, for the [first] exhibition," to which Wang "quickly enthusiastically agreed."[58] Speaking of the now famous title, Wang Zhiping has stated, "It called to mind Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg's memoir *People, Years, Life* (*Liudi, Gody, Zhizn*), which I frequently had on my nightstand in middle school. I loved that book, and the rhythmic feeling of its title."[59]

Published in three volumes between 1962 and 1964, Ehrenburg's memoir covers the noted Soviet author's life from 1921 to 1941. A particularly prolific author and journalist whose significance in his home country had long been established, Chinese translations of *People, Years, Life* and *The Thaw* (*Ottepel*), an earlier novel which gave its name to the period of liberalization that followed Stalin's death.[60] As Guobin Yang, a sociologist with a focus on China, notes, these books were initially translated in order to "help cadres understand the Chinese Communist Party's critique of Soviet revisionism"—a movement to which *People, Years, Life* and *The Thaw* belonged—"and the alleged decadence of Western modernist thought."[61] Despite having initially been produced as objects meant to shore up the Party's policies, these books later "became popular readings among young people"[62] interested not in critiquing the volumes, but in learning from them. Wang Zhiping and his peers belonged to the ranks of these reform minded youth, who, at "varying degrees of personal risk, from public humiliation to imprisonment," had taken to reading and circulating such titles.[63]

With this in mind, the parallels between the April Photography Society, its members, and Ehrenburg goes far beyond a penchant for tripartite titles. Rather, selecting a title that mirrored in its structure that of Ehrenburg's memoir is merely a surface-level similarity that belies a broader adoption of thematic and stylistic, as well as social and political, concerns that closely echo those of Ehrenburg, and other Soviet revisionists. As Helen Muchnic, a prominent scholar of Russian literature, noted in a review of Ehrenburg's memoir in *The New York Review of Books*, shortly after its publication, "The title of Ehrenburg's memoirs in the original Russian is *People, Years, Life*,[64] a title intentionally disjointed to serve notice that his work is not to be taken as history, but only as a collection of memories, unsystematically recorded by a private individual."[65] For members of the April Photography Society, creating works that eschewed grand political themes or the feeling of official historical documentation was of paramount concern. The group instead strove to make images that read as personal impressions. Like Ehrenburg's memoir, the April Photography Society's exhibitions were disjointed, a seemingly random collection of individual and intimate stills of scenes taken from ordinary life.

After having filled in as photojournalists during the April Fifth Movement, the April Fifth photographers, in establishing the April Photography

Society, aimed to challenge documentary photography's grasp as the *de facto* photographic genre within the People's Republic. Wang Zhiping, the principal organizer of the April Photography Society's first and subsequent exhibitions said in a recent interview, "We thought at the time that photography, beyond being used for documentary purposes should also be used for art, a use that had been neglected, so it was our responsibility to promote this possibility in order to advance photography's artistic function."[66] "At the time," Wang Zhiping explained, "what photography lacked was what surrounded individuals in their daily lives, the expression of the most profound sentiments in people's thoughts, so this exhibition came to be."[67] Concluding, he remarked, "Personally, I thought that photography's artistic character should be emphasized, so we held the April Photography Society's first photography exhibition."[68]

The first *Nature, Society, Man* exhibition, April 1979, Orchid Pavilion, Zhongshan Park, Beijing.

Nature, Society, Man: An Art Photography Exhibition

The first *Nature, Society, Man*, exhibition opened on April 7, 1979 to an ecstatic audience, and visitors packed the Orchid Pavilion, a small exhibition hall in Beijing's Zhongshan Park where the show was heldfrom morning to night.[69] Hundreds of photographs by fifty-one photographers were hung on and over nearly every vertical surface within the exhibition hall. Photographs haphazardly strung from rails high on the walls dangled precariously in pairs, covering not only interior walls, but also interior doors and the large windows that looked out onto an exterior courtyard. Hung in a crowded, jumbled and decidedly amateurish salon style, spectators nonetheless packed the pavilion's interior, enthusiastically absorbing every last image, and "copying by hand every word that accompanied [them]."[70] The exhibition marked the beginning of a new era for Chinese photography. No longer the handmaiden of party politics, photographers were free to capture on film whatever they wished—to explore photography as art.

For weeks after the show first opened, according to Wang Zhiping, "you could say the Orchid Pavilion was like a sea of people."[71] One day, while standing on the lawn beside the pavilion, Wang Zhiping's university classmate, Zhang Yali, came over to him and remarked:

> I bought five tickets to see your exhibition. It's so crowded inside that people can't even move, and the scent of sweat fills the air. After looking at the show for a while you just have to go outside to take a breath of fresh air, then use another ticket to get back inside—taking one last gasp of fresh air before entering. You're all so immoral! You couldn't have found a slightly larger venue!?[72]

Wang Zhiping, foreword to *Nature, Society, Man* exhibition, April 1979.

The number of recorded visitors bears out Zhang Yali's impressions; some two or three thousand people are said to have visited the exhibition each weekday, with the number of visitors increasing to more than eight thousand on Sundays. [73] As Wu Hung notes, "the exhibition was a sensation."[74] The images on view, entirely unlike those that had circulated during the Cultural Revolution, caused quite a stir.


前言

王吉平
一九七九年四月一日·北京

Scrawled by Wang Zhiping in his characteristic "twisty and crooked" (*niuniu waiwai*) style, the foreword to the first exhibition outlined to visitors the group's aims while clarifying its ties to the April Fifth Movement. Though written in Wang Zhiping's hand, and signed in his name, the foreword's text was in actuality a collaborative endeavour.[75] However, Wang Zhiping has stated, "signing it 'April Photography Society' didn't seem suitable,"[76] and so, as the central organizer of the exhibition, he signed it himself.

The foreword to the first begins:

> On April 5, 1976, on Qingming in the year of the dragon, a group of youths picked up their crude cameras and threw themselves into the sea of people then gathered in Tian'anmen Square. A sense of mission prompted them to bravely take photographs, now precious documents of the Chinese people's struggle against the "Gang of Four". In April of 1979 this group of youths devoted themselves to organizing this exhibition of art photography. All of us were in new territory, again we bravely started to explore.[77]

By reinforcing the group's connection to the April Fifth Movement the foreword reminded viewers of the group's radical origins. This desire to emphasize their braveness and pioneering spirit is further clarified in the foreword's emphasizing that this exhibition required much the same mind-set as did photographing in Tian'anmen three years earlier.

After clarifying the group's ties to the April Fifth Movement, the foreword continues:

> Journalistic images cannot substitute art photography. Content is not equal to form. Photography, as an art, has its own characteristic language. It is now time to discuss art with the language of art, just as economics should be used to manage the economy. Art photography's beauty exists in nature's rhythms, social realities, and man's emotions. More often than not it is not found in "serious subjects" or "official ideology."[78]

Jin Bohong, *Echo Wall,* 1975, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

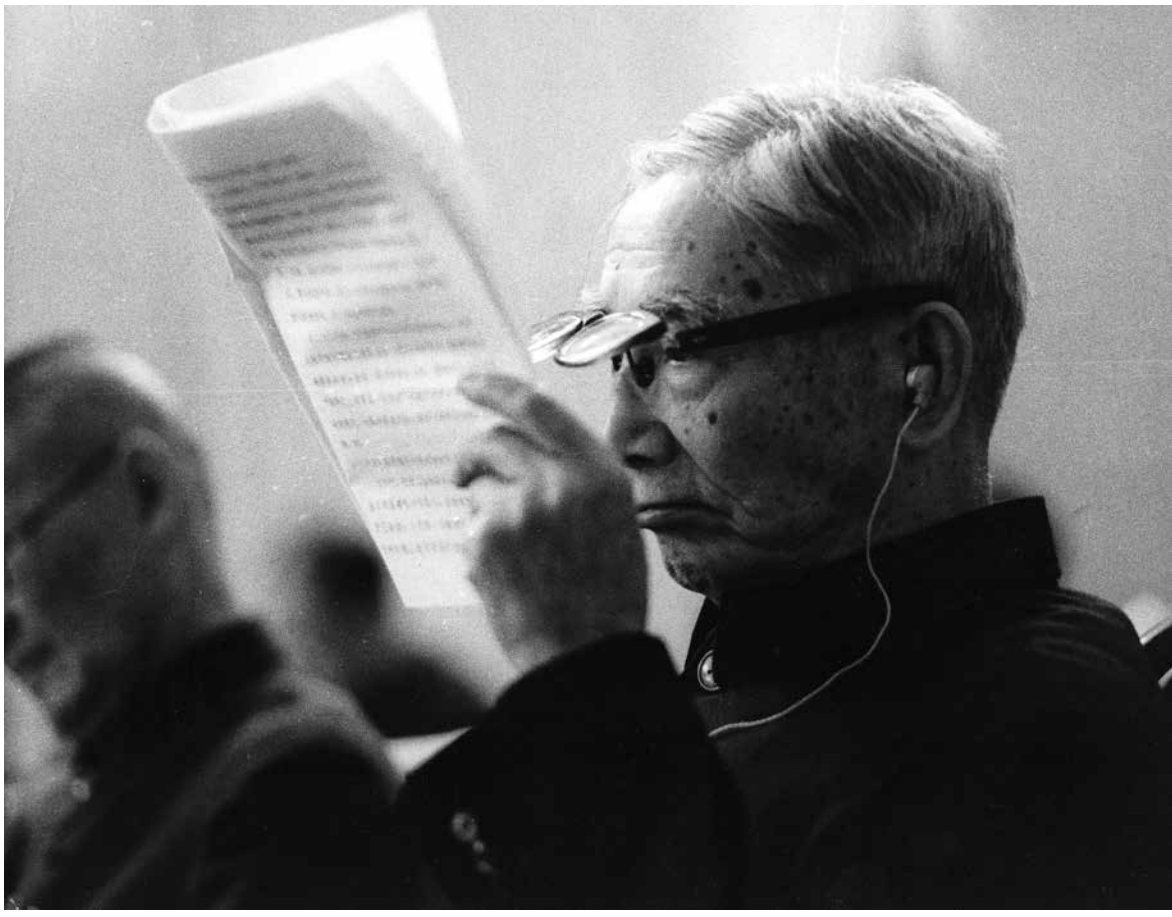
Members of the April Photography Society wished for photography to be freed of the restraints impressed upon it during the Cultural Revolution. What's more, they strove to consider not just the subject matter of their works—as was typical of socialist realist images—but also the form. They wished to imbue their photographs with more than just the inherent value ascribed to certain subjects. Images like Jin Bohong's *Echo Wall*, in its recording of the utterly everyday, both seize upon the potentials of formalism—of a newly self-aware photography—and the horizons opened by freeing photography from service to the Party.

Finding a Characteristic Language: Thematic and Conceptual Ties to Unofficial Journals

Many of the works included in this first *Nature, Society, Man* exhibition, as well as the subsequent two, can be understood, in part, as an extension of the thematic and conceptual concerns first explored in the unofficial journals of the Beijing Spring. More fundamentally, the April Photography Society's overarching claim, outlined in the group's first exhibition foreword, that "Photography, as an art, has its own characteristic language,"[79] echoes a popular sentiment raised by editors and writers involved with journals that emerged during the Beijing Spring: "literature for the sake of literature."[80] No shortage of works produced by members of the April Photography Society dealt with the theme of the "new man." First discussed in detail at this time, the "new man," as Chen Ruoxi notes, was meant "To replace the old mode of characterization" typified by the "model

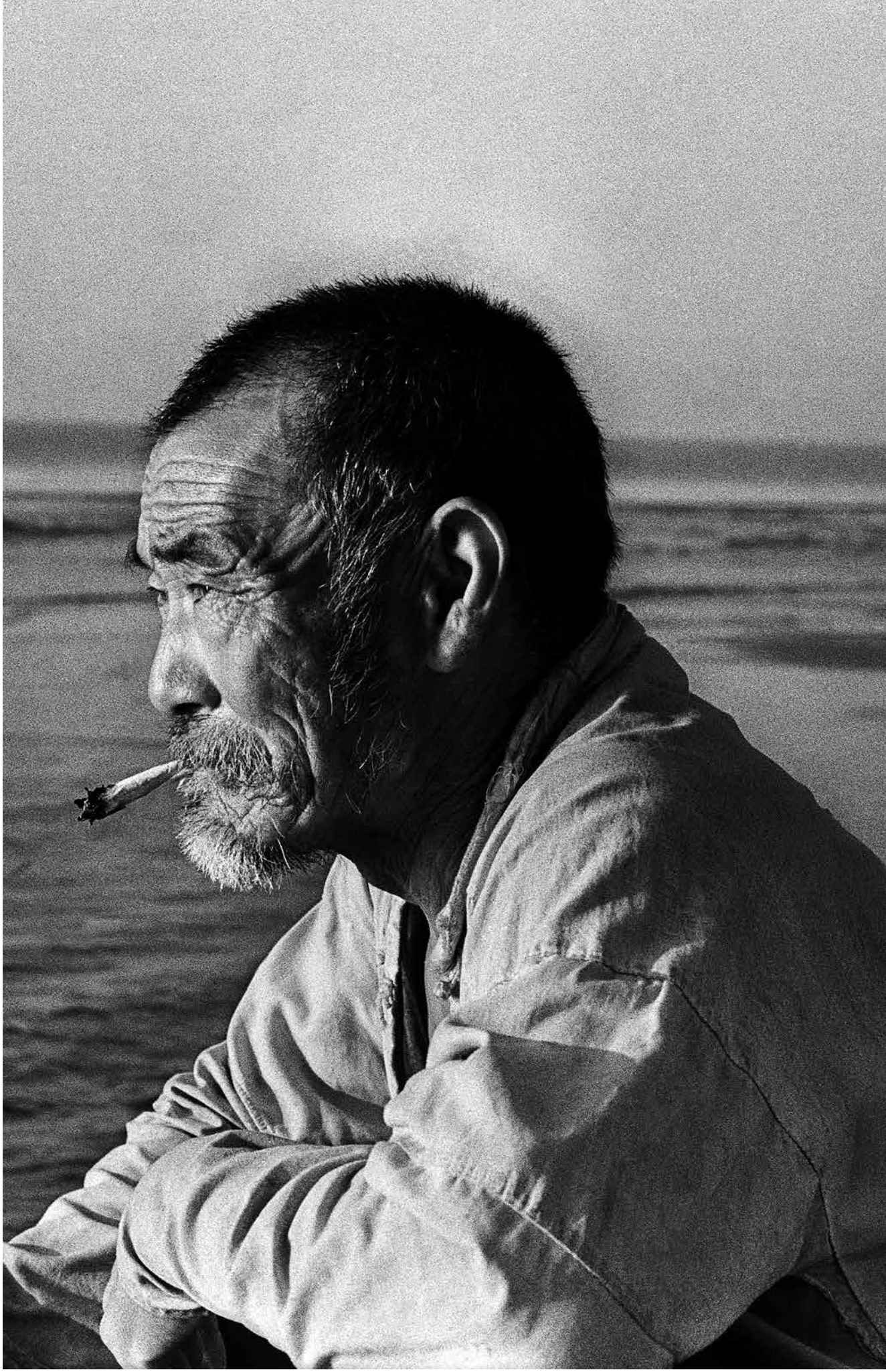
man," particularly by figures such as Lei Feng, a lauded revolutionary hero whose image and tale became ubiquitous during the Cultural Revolution.

The editors of one journal, *Fertile Land* (*Wotu*), were particularly ardent in promoting the notion of the "new man"; Chen Ruoxi writes: "the editors and writers of *Fertile Land* advocated the portrayal of people with flexible personalities capable of creation and error." [81] That is to say, "The independent person, accordingly, should have the right of self-denial, the right to doubt, to take initiative and look outward without being a megalomaniac, to love democracy, insist on personal interests and refuse to sacrifice without a good cause." [82] This emphasis on individualism, on upholding the real and avoiding the constructed ideal, is seen in the unflinching honesty of portraits shot by a number of April Photography Society photographers—among these are Liu Shizhao's *Endlessly Noble* (*Zhuangxin buyi*), a not entirely flattering portrait of the respected scientist Zhu Kezhen; Wang Zhiping's *A Life at Sea* (*Haishang yibeizi*); and Li Jiangshu's *Shi Lu, Painter* (*Huajia Shi Lu*).



Liu Shizhao, *Endlessly Noble*, 1980, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Perhaps the best-known image notable for its gritty realism to have come out of the April Photography Society is Wang Zhiping's 1979 *A Life at Sea*. The photograph, taken at Beihaide, on a stretch of beach along which stood an old fisherman's shack that Wang Zhiping would often rent, depicts the fisherman from whom he rented. Wang Zhiping recalls, "I would always



Previous page: Wang Zhiping, *A Life at Sea*, 1979, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: Li Jiangshu, *Shi Lu, Painter*, 1979, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

wake up in the morning to find the old fisherman squatting by the seaside, smoking."[83] And so, he took a photo of this scene—an unadorned still capturing a moment in the everyday life of an ordinary workingman. Though Wang Zhiping has shrugged off the image's significance, attributing the image's relative fame to its having been printed on the cover of the group's first catalogue, the photograph is nevertheless notable for its emphasis on the absolutely ordinary. Shown against a stretch of low waves, Wang Zhiping's photo of the fisherman catches his every physical fault. The harsh coastal light emphasizes the raggedness of his face and clothes. While the frayed tip of the hand-rolled cigarette dangling from his mouth only reinforces the imperfect reality of life.

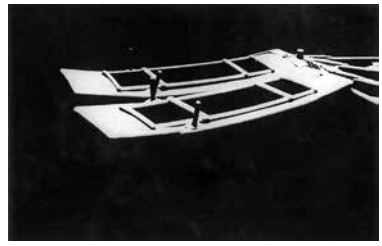
Another image, also included in the first *Nature, Society, Man* exhibition, by the comparatively unknown Li Jiangshu, captures an unapologetic portrait of celebrated painter Shi Lu. Simply titled *Shi Lu, Painter*, the image depicts the painter as aged and tattered, bearing the scars of the Cultural Revolution, sitting in a simply adorned room. Wang Zhiping, who had final say over the images included in the first exhibition,[84] wrestled with whether or not to include Li Jiangshu's image on the grounds that it was of a famous individual.

In setting out to organize the show Wang Zhiping and the others had agreed that it would be best to eschew any works that focused on anyone or anything famous. "I didn't want famous individuals, I didn't want important events, I didn't want lofty subject matter," he has said.[85] In assembling the exhibition Wang Zhiping and the others were motivated by a desire to offer the public with an impression of photography—of what the medium could do and could be—that was counter to that presented by photography's prevailing practitioners: photojournalists employed by state-sponsored news agency such as *Xinhua*. A central goal of *Nature, Society, Man* was to create an exhibition that opposed this sort of photography and, as Wang Zhiping has said, "to offer a corrective."[86]

Members of the April Photography Society indirectly explored the theme of romantic love as well. Wang Miao's *Date* (*Yuehui*), included in the group's first *Nature, Society, Man* exhibition, and Lü Xiaozhong's *River God's Galoshes* (*Heshen de taoxie*), included in the group's second exhibition in 1980, both depict a pair of boats floating idly atop a body of water, each gently pressed against the other.

Wang Miao, *Date (Yuehui)*, 1979, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Works that dealt with the Four Modernizations, an integral part of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up campaign first proposed by Zhou Enlai, also abounded. Two works included in the group's first exhibition, by Xu Zhuo and Liu Shizhao, dealt with themes promoted by the campaign in markedly different ways. Xu Zhuo's photograph *Modern*, a manipulated image, shot in a studio, approaches themes of modernization directly, while Liu Shizhao's photograph, *A Myriad of Twinkling Lights* (*Wanjia denghuo*), takes a more poetic approach. Both, however, make use of techniques well outside the established canon of photography at the time.



Lü Xiaozhong, *River God's Galoshes (Heshen de taoxie)*, 1978, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Unlike most members of the April Photography Society, Xu Zhuo had unique and unfettered access to a sophisticated darkroom and photography studio, which he seized upon in order to make constructed images quite unlike any others produced by his peers. Influenced by painting far more than photojournalism, like many other members of the April Photography Society (despite their desire to distance themselves from the strand of photojournalism pursued by major news agencies), Xu Zhuo utilized photographic techniques in lieu of a brush to create painting- or assemblage-like photographs.

In a recent interview Xu Zhuo explained his process, taking *Modern*, as an example: "I would start with a certain theme or idea and think of a composition. Then I would photograph the setup of this composition to visualize my idea," he said.[87] Moreover, Xu Zhuo continued:

Xu Zhuo, *Modern,* 1979, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

> The Cultural Revolution had come to an end and we were under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who in 1978 announced the strategy of realizing the Four Modernizations, in the fields of agriculture, industry, national defense [sic], and science and technology, to reinvigorate China's economy. What I was expressing was the eagerness of the people for modernization in science and technology. It was a bit like a poster, and still related to politics.[88]

In fact, Xu Zhuo seems to have underplayed the relationship of this particular image to political posters in discussing the work with Chen Shuxia, an art historian focusing on Chinese photography of the period. *Modern* directly references an earlier work, a propaganda poster, produced jointly by Liao Zongyi and Ou Huanzhang.

Titled *We Are the Masters of Science* (*Women shi kexue de zhuren*), the print appeared prominently in the March 1978 issue of the journal *Art* (*Meishu*), an influential arts publication of the period. A subsequent polychrome version of the image appeared in the June 1978 issue of *Serial Pictorial* (*Lianhuan Huabao*), another important publication of the period. In both images, a young, conventionally handsome man stands in the right corner

Liu Shizhao, *A Myriad of Twinkling Lights (Wanjia Denghuo)*, 1979, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

of the print, wearing a crisp white lab coat and sporting a neatly-coiffed Western hairstyle. Above his right hand, outstretched before him, palm open to the sky above, three orbital rings float around a small, central sphere: a graphic representation of an atom. An electric or telecommunications tower rises in the background, alongside enormous cogs, a Chinese flag, beakers, books, and plants, visual stand-ins for each of the Four Modernizations. The words "we are the masters of science" run along the image's right edge in Chinese characters and along the bottom in *pinyin*, a Romanization system that employs the Latin alphabet.

Absent from Xu Zhuo's images are the trappings found in Liao Zongyi and Ou Huanzhang's print that perpetuate tropes of Party propaganda—that is, the "model man"—as well as those that hint at the industrial and military implications of the Four Modernizations policy. Instead, Xu Zhuo's photograph presents a distilled, less explicitly propagandistic interpretation of Liao Zongyi and Ou Huanzhang's work. Xu Zhuo has replaced the youthful male figure, a "model" character, at the centre of the original print with a ring of disembodied hands. The absence of a similar figure in Xu Zhuo's photograph at once resists earlier conventions, while at the same time affording the viewer the ability to read him or herself into the image. *Modern* suggests that anyone can master science, that all can—as they are; there is no longer any need, his photograph suggests, to bend oneself to Party ideals. Modernity in itself, in Xu Zhuo's work, can be the sole saviour of the ordinary Chinese.

Similarly, Liu Shizhao's *A Myriad of Twinkling Lights* captures the myriad artificial lights of a cityscape at night as soft, glowing orbs of white

light floating against a background of hazily rendered, black and grey buildings. In its focus on the impact of electric light, and on an urban scene, Liu Shizhao's photograph explores themes associated with the Four Modernizations campaign in a markedly different way from Xu Zhuo's image, offering a poetic and impressionistic take on the modern, science-shaped urban life promoted by Deng Xiaopeng at the time.

By 1981, the April Photography Society's membership had increased dramatically, to a total of 171 members. That same year, the group held its third and final exhibition. Held in the National Art Gallery, the show marked the peak of the group's popular approval. Ironically, their entry into the National Art Gallery—to which the founding members of the Stars desperately sought to be admitted—is now frequently touted as evidence of their insignificance.

Liao Zongyi and Ou Huanzhang, *We are the Masters of Science (Women shi Kexue de zhuren)*, 1979, print. Courtesy of the artists.

Just as *People's Mourning* went from a radical undertaking to state propaganda and participation in the April Fifth Movement, from counter-revolutionary to heroic, the radical aims of the April Photography Society in short time were accepted into the mainstream. While Paul Gladston lists every obstacle encountered by the Stars as evidence of the significance of their contribution to the development of contemporary Chinese art, the April Photography Society's legacy suffers from its warm reception. Their legacy has come to be an unfortunate victim of their own early successes as historians, searching for dramatic ruptures, have retrospectively cast their gaze on artistic production of the period.[89]

However, this same success ensured that the impact of their images was felt more broadly in their own time. A quick survey of official photography magazines of the period, such as *Chinese Photography* (*Zhongguo Sheying*), shows a trend towards increased realism and formalism in the wake of the April Photography Society's formation. The formation of myriad other photography clubs, such as the Four Directions Photography Club (*Sifang yinghui*) in Xi'an, Shaanxi, and the *Everybody Photography Club* (*Renren yingzhan*) group in Guangzhou, Guangdong, speaks to the wide-ranging influence of the April Photography Society's Beijing-based exhibitions. Together, these groups formed a so-called "photographic new wave" (*Sheying xin chao*), the impact of which stretched through the 1980s and can still be felt today.

Notes

1. Jan Wong, *Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now*, (Toronto; New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1996), 170.
2. Ibid., 170–71.
3. Ibid., 171.
4. Ibid.
5. Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (London: Grafton, 1986), 422.
6. Wong, *Red China Blues*, 165.
7. Ibid., 167.
8. Ibid. (Italics Wong's own.)
9. Li Shi, "The April Fifth Movement: Marking the Rise of Citizen Photojournalism in the People's Republic of China," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (April 1, 2012), 70.
10. Ibid., 69.
11. Ibid., 80.
12. Ibid.
13. Claire Roberts, *Photography and China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 129. Roberts notes: "The exhibition was the first such event staged by an independent community arts organization since 1949 (it is earlier than the No Name and Stars art group exhibitions)."
14. Roberts, *Photography and China*; Wu Hung, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago, New York, and Göttingen: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, International Center of Photography, and Steidl, 2004).
15. Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 93.
16. Ibid.
17. Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, 424.
18. The so-called "five no's" were enacted: no black armbands, no wreaths, no mourning halls, no memorial activities, and no handing out of photos of Zhou.
19. Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, 422.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 70.
23. For an elaboration on the significance of the Qingming festival in relation to the April Fifth Movement and, more broadly, the connection between death ritual and protest movements in China, see: A. P. Cheater, "Death Ritual as Political Trickster in the People's Republic of China." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 26 (1991), 67.
24. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 70.
25. Ross Munro, "Peking Riot, Close up: Alone, a Westerner Feels the Crowd's Hostility," *Washington Post*, April 6, 1976, A11.
26. Ibid.
27. Wang Zhiping, "Zhanlan Qianyan Ji" (Collected Exhibition Forewords)" *Siyue Feng* (*April Wind*), July 11, 2010, http://wangzhiping.siyuefeng.com/article/13/. (All translations my own unless otherwise noted.)
28. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 72.
29. Ibid., 70.
30. Wang, "Zhanlan Qianyan Ji."
31. 119 photographers are credited in *People's Mourning*; likely more were active in Tiananmen Square throughout the duration of the April Fifth Movement. (*Renmin de Daonian* [People's Mourning], Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1979).
32. Roberts, *Photography and China*, 119.
33. Gu Zheng, *Contemporary Chinese Photography* (Harrow, UK: CYPI Press, 2011), 5.
34. Ibid.
35. Wu Peng, "Wu Peng: Duanzhe Xiangji de 'Si-wu Yingxiong'" ("Wu Peng: An 'April Fifth Hero' with a Camera"), 123, in Shi Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 73.
36. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 73.
37. Ibid., 74.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 75.
40. Roberts, *Photography and China*, 112.
41. Ibid.
42. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 71.
43. Ibid., 73.
44. Wong, *Red China Blues*, 188.

45. The photographs were to be sequenced in strict, minute-by-minute chronological order; when images showed the same event, photographs shot on larger format film were to be used; priority was to be given to images made by photographers not on the editorial committee. (Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 78–79.)

46. Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 85.

47. Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, 426.

48. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 75.

49. Ibid., 79.

50. Ibid.

51. Wu, *Between Past and Future*, 15.

52. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 79.

53. Wu, "Between Past and Future," 15.

54. See Sang Ye, "Fringe-Dwellers: Down and out in the Yuan Ming Yuan Artists' Village," *ART AsiaPacific* 15 (1997), 74–77.

55. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 79–80.

56. "Wang Zhiping: Bu Bai Shenfo de Siyue Yinghui" ("Wang Zhiping: The Unworshipping April Photography Society"), *Siyue Feng (April Wind)*, February 27, 2011, http://admin.siyuefeng.com/article/985/.

57. Li, "The April Fifth Movement," 80.

58. "Wang Zhiping," *Siyue Feng*.

59. Ibid.

60. Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 121.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. In its English translation Ehrenburg's memoirs were released under the title *Memoirs: 1921–1941. People, Years, Life*, has been used here to clarify the parallel between Ehrenburg's memoir and the April Photography Society's exhibitions.

65. Helen Muchnic, "Ilya Ehrenburg's Story," *The New York Review of Books* 4, no. 3 (March 11, 1965), 4–5.

66. "Wang Zhiping," *Siyue Feng*.

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68. Ibid.

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70. Ibid.

71. "Wang Zhiping," *Siyue Feng*.

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73. Wu, "Between Past and Future," 15.

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80. Chen Ruoxi, "Democracy Wall and the Unofficial Journals," *Studies in Chinese Terminology* no. 20 (Berkeley, CA: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1982), 94.

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84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

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87. Shuxia Chen, "Manipulation as Art: Photographs by Xu Zhuo, 1979–1981," *The Trans-Asia Photography Review* 6, no. 1 (Fall 2015).

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89. For a detailed discussion of this tendency, see Geremie Barmé, "Packaged Dissent," in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 179–200.

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