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VOLUME 10, NUMBER 6  
10TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

# Yishu

典 藏 國 際 版

Journal of  
Contemporary  
Chinese Art

## INSIDE

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Second Yishu Awards for Critical Writing on  
Contemporary Chinese Art

Can Blandness Be Praised?

Chinese Urbanism and Contemporary  
Photography

Features: Xu Yong, Howie Tsui, Annysa Ng

Reviews: Ken Lum, Wu Hung's *Contemporary  
Chinese Art: Primary Documents*

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# 吴山专 Wu Shanzhuan

## 英格·斯瓦拉·托斯朵蒂尔

### Inga Svala Thorsdottir

2011.10.20 – 2012.01.20

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[kuò xuán]

解释：表示事物的开端和末端具有无限性  
Explanation: It shows that the origins and endings  
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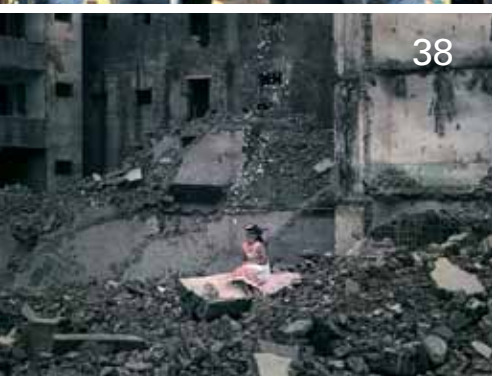
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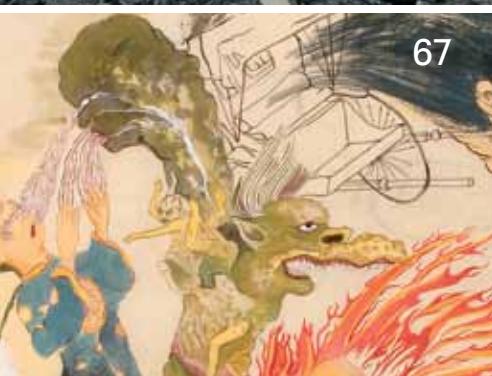
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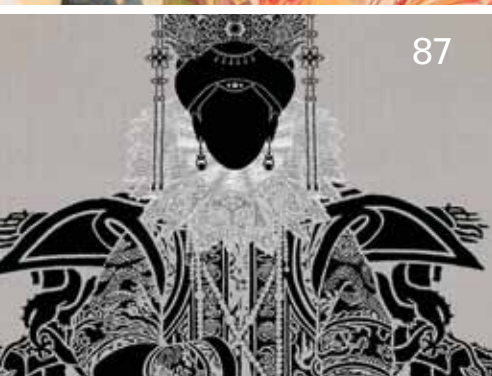
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# Yishu

Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art

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Cover: Zhang Peili, *X?* (detail), 1986, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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We thank JNBY, Canadian Foundation of Asian Art, Mr. and Mrs. Eric Li, Stephanie Holmquist and Mark Allison for their generous contribution to the publication and distribution of *Yishu*.

## Editor's Note

*Yishu* 47 opens with texts by Huang Zhuan and Zhu Qi, the two recipients of the Second Yishu Awards for Critical Writing on Contemporary Chinese Art. Huang Zhuan surveys the work of Zhang Peili and ties together various aspects, primary among them his important contribution to the evolution of video art in China, that have distinguished his work during a twenty-five year career. Zhu Qi provides an unapologetic critique that suggests China, and in turn its contemporary art, is potentially gambling away its integrity through the promotion of spectacles in order to establish a position as a major economic and cultural player on the international stage.

In contrast to Zhu Qi's focus on the spectacle, Voon Pow Bartlett considers blandness, an aesthetic that is little discussed in the contemporary context yet has held a specific historical resonance through the centuries of Chinese art. Alice Schmatzberger, in her discussion of photography and its relationship to the city, echoes Zhu Qi's apprehension about the alarming and unbridled growth of Chinese urban centers, but she looks to artists who are presenting perspectives that question rather than celebrate such growth. Adding to the complexity of China's ongoing social transformation is Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky's text on artist/gallerist Xu Yong and his compelling photographic document of one day in the life of a Beijing sex trade worker.

Joni Low interviews Howie Tsui, and Stephanie Bailey interviews Annysa Ng, two Hong Kong-born artists who now live and work in North America. While each of these artists explores different artistic mediums and iconography, they share an interest in subliminal states of consciousness, the supernatural, and the occult. And within this lies a strong influence of storytelling that draws upon traditional Chinese legend, myth, and opera as sources for their work.

Ken Lum's recent survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery is reviewed by Jamie Hilder, who traces a distinct continuity in Lum's employment of strategies that engage the viewer in a self-conscious and, at times, discomfiting reading of his work. Lum demonstrates a particular propensity towards combining humour with sobering sociocultural issues that result in work that is immediately approachable yet provocatively disorienting. In her review of Wu Hung's ambitious tome, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, Micki McCoy articulates some of the challenges one faces in constructing a history of contemporary Chinese art and considers how this seminal book will function as a productive resource from which to further explore contemporary art's complex trajectory.

Keith Wallace

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## Contributors

**Stephanie Bailey**, who is of mixed Chinese and British descent, is originally from Hong Kong. She studied in the United Kingdom and has been living and working in Athens, Greece, for the past four years. Her interests lie in contemporary art in relation to social, cultural, and political contexts, and she views her work as an ongoing education. She is an arts editor of *Athens Insider* and has contributed to international publications including *Art Papers*, *Art Lies*, *Naked Punch*, and *Adbusters*. She leads a foundation course in art and design at the Doukas Educational Centre, Athens, where she also lectures on art history and recently took part in the China-Europa Forum, held in Hong Kong and China, 2010, as a representative of culture and arts.

**Voon Pow Bartlett** is a London-based artist, curator, lecturer and writer. Her Ph.D. thesis, *Spectacle as Myth: Guanxi, the Relational and the Urban Quotidian in Contemporary Chinese Art*, was completed at TrAIN, Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. She has pursued an interdisciplinary and transnational career, having taught fine art practice and cultural studies at the B.A. and M.A. levels at Central St. Martins, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, Reading University, and Croydon College.

**Jamie Hilder** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. He received a Ph.D. in English from the University of British Columbia in 2010. His current research and artistic practices investigate how economic subjectivities are linked to the development of information technologies from 1970 to present.

**Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky** holds the O. Munsterberg Chair of Asian Art at Bard College. She has published several books, on subjects such as the art of the Tang dynasty and Chinese Buddhist art, and she has served as Editor of *Journal of Chinese Religions*. She has written many catalogues and has curated several shows on contemporary Asian art.

**Joni Low** is a freelance writer currently working at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Her writing has appeared in publications such as *Yishu*, *Ricepaper*, *Fillip*, and *C Magazine*, and in catalogues for local galleries, including the Richmond Art Gallery, Helen Pitt ARC, and Centre A, where she was previously Gallery and Library Coordinator. Low is interested in the relationships between visual art and language and art that exists outside the context of conventional exhibition

spaces—art that continues to de-stabilize and question the contemporary experience.

**Micki McCoy** is a Ph.D. student in the History of Art program at the University of California, Berkeley. She is interested in the relationship between art and technology in modern and premodern China and Inner Asia. Her current research focuses on representations of the heavens in the Song period.

**Alice Schmatzberger**, a natural scientist and an art historian, works as an independent writer on the development and management of transdisciplinary art projects. Her writing focuses on contemporary Chinese art, photography, and food in art.

**Huang Zhuan** graduated from the History Department of the Central China Normal University in 1982 and studied for a master's degree in Chinese art history at the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. He is currently a professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, where he leads masters students and serves as Director of the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal of He Xiang Ning Art Museum (OCAT), Shenzhen. He edited the magazine *Art Trends* (Meishu Sichao) from 1985 to 1987, and from 1994 to 1996 he helped to revamp *Gallery Magazine* (Hualang). His published works

include *Issues in Contemporary Art* (Dangdai Yishu Wenti) (1992), *The Schema, Tastes and Values of Literati Painting* (Quwei yu Jiazhi) (1993), *Pan Tianshou* (1998), and *Ideas and Actions in the Art World* (Yishu Shijie zhong de Sixiang yu Xingdong) (2010), among others.

**Zhu Qi** was born in Shanghai in 1966 and holds a doctorate degree in art history. He is a Beijing-based independent curator and art critic and has curated a series of notable contemporary art exhibitions since the early 1990s. In addition to curating, he has been writing critical and academic essays on contemporary Chinese art since 1994. He was the Chief Curator of the inaugural edition of the Beijing 798 Art Festival in 2007 and Artistic Director of the inaugural edition of the Beijing 798 Biennale in 2009.

## The Second Yishu Awards for Critical Writing on Contemporary Chinese Art

Huang Zhuan, Beijing  
Zhu Qi, Beijing

**Y**ishu: *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* is pleased to announce the recipients of the Second Yishu Awards for Critical Writing on Contemporary Chinese Art. Two jurors each made an independent selection: Karen Smith, an independent curator, author, and critic who specializes in contemporary Chinese art, selected Huang Zhuan; and Hou Hanru, Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs, San Francisco Art Institute, and curator of numerous important international biennials, selected Zhu Qi. Both recipients are based in Beijing.

Each award carries a value of \$5,000 CAD, and each of this year's recipients has a text published in the current issue of *Yishu*. The Yishu Awards for Critical Writing were established to encourage and recognize writers who are making an outstanding contribution to understanding the history and current issues of contemporary Chinese art.

Upon graduating from the Central China Normal University History Department in 1982, Huang Zhuan studied for a master's degree in Chinese fine art history at the Hubei Academy of Fine Art. He is currently a Professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, where he leads masters students; he also serves as Director of the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal of He Xiang Ning Art Museum (OCAT) in Shenzhen.

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In her nomination, Karen Smith remarked: "Huang Zhuan has been known and respected as a writer and critic for more than two decades. Since the late 1990s, much of his most important writing has been done in conjunction with exhibitions he has curated. The point here is that Huang Zhuan has always remained close to art and to the artists themselves. It sounds obvious, but this awareness of the creative process and of the individual's thought processes informs his writing as much if not more than conceptual or theoretical notions. . . . The influence of Huang Zhuan's writing and

criticality has been demonstrated in the initiatives he leads at OCT Art Terminal, which focuses on mentoring the next generation in a systematic and considered fashion through seminars, workshops, and curatorial projects . . . within a framework for analysis and open debate where ideas get tested and affirmed, or negated, as necessary.”

Zhu Qi, born in Shanghai in 1966, holds a doctorate degree in art history. He is a Beijing-based independent curator and art critic and has curated notable contemporary art exhibitions since the early 1990s. In addition to curating, he has written numerous critical and academic essays on contemporary Chinese art since 1994. He was the Chief Curator of the inaugural edition of the Beijing 798 Art Festival in 2007 and Artistic Director of the inaugural edition of the Beijing 798 Biennale in 2009.

Hou Hanru notes: “Zhu Qi, an independent critic and curator who has not gone through any classical beaux-arts training system, has proved to be one of the few truly critical voices who dares to take ethical and artistic positions through his consistent and audacious writings over the past two decades. He has developed the courage to confront the art scene with the most urgent and sensitive topics currently influencing it. His critical scrutiny not only covers the field of visual arts, but is extended to all cultural, and even sociopolitical, terrain, and he challenges the social consensus that has transformed artistic and intellectual production into profit-making systems. What is particularly remarkable is that Zhu Qi has brought his critical insights into profound investigations of history and philosophy, taking his work far beyond the limits of the Chinese academic discursive system. Zhu Qi’s intellectual integrity and critical consistency are also unique, and he represents an exceptional but urgently needed example in the art world today.”

The awards is a project of the Yishu Initiative of Contemporary Chinese Art and is supported by the Canadian Foundation for Asian Art, and Stephanie Holmquist and Mark Allison.

## An Antithesis to Conceptualism: On Zhang Peili

There aren't many artists who can engage in research from within the currents of contemporary Chinese art history. This is because of not only the complexity of the historical era but also the nature of its continuity. Those participants who lack a strategic logic either leave the art scene after a dazzling run with the trends of the time or make a hasty retreat after placing bets on their success within it. Zhang Peili is one of the few artists who endures because he has always been at the leading edge of trends or served as a creator of trends, and his position during this period of history has been established through his constant questioning and testing of those trends. His almost pathologically sensitive reasoning pushes him to challenge all manner of contemporary myths: of philosophy, of movements, of conceptualism, of the market, of anti-Westernism, and of technology. This act of challenging has led his art to maintain its open and individualistic state. More to the point, his art has always existed as a counterpoint to mainstream contemporary Chinese art, and this provides us with a paradoxical dimension for our investigation into his overall production.

Zhang Peili's work is full of skepticism for all forms of *a priori* conceptualism. He has always emphasized that he never sets any underlying principles for his work and that what he does amounts to nothing more than concrete facts that are "full of serendipity." Even words such as "experiment" leave him uncomfortable: "Principled experiments are anything but experiments. Perhaps discarding with experimentation is an experiment."<sup>1</sup> Such witticisms are always turning up in his discussions of linguistic style, video technology, the art market, the relationship between East and West, and even education. "I just want to place myself in a state of relative freedom." It is precisely this simple yet fundamental attitude towards his work that has determined that he will always play an important yet unclassifiable role in contemporary Chinese art.

### Painting

Zhang Peili's art began as part of the turbulent modernist art movement of the 1980s in China. This art movement, set against a backdrop of modern rational enlightenment and political rebellion, seemed to affirm its collectivist properties from the very beginning, which imbued the movement and its values of individual liberation with paradoxical properties. Dubbed the '85 New Wave Movement, it extended the passion for political resistance exemplified by the Stars Group of the late 1970s but

bestowed it with a determinist grand destiny that stripped it of any self-reflection. Join us or leave—this seemed to be the “non-choice” choice of the movement’s scene.



Zhang Peili, *Midsummer Swimmers*, 1985, oil on canvas, 185 x 185 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

From 1983 to 1987, having just graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art Oil Painting Department, Zhang Peili created a series of paintings in a surreal style that included *Midsummer Swimmers* (1985), *Stop Note* (1985), *No Jazz Tonight* (1987), and *X?* (1986), and took part in the 85 New Space exhibition (December 1985), which he organized with his academic colleague Geng Jianyi. Although later art historians would interpret these works as being overly expressive, the artist seemed more content to view them as a form of tactfully raised doubts about the philosophical modern art movement at the time, with its goal of creating a “grand culture” and a “grand spirit.” After the fact, he once said, “Painting should not take on so much stuff—like the Wanderers School did; too much narrative content and historical responsibility will dilute the value of painting in and of itself. We believe that such an era should end, an era of sentimentality. . . This [pointing at a painting from the 85 New Space exhibition] shows what is different from the other art groups. We were more concerned with individual experience and concrete things.” In this “manifesto,” he writes,

“Too much expounding on philosophical expressions of human nature has started to pain us.” He also declared an intent to “break the boundaries between languages and promote a muddled form [of them].”

In the *Swimmers* series—*Midsummer Swimmers* (1985), *Swimmers in the Water* (1985), *Swimmer Facing Upwards* (1986), and *Swimmer by the Pool* (1986)—and the *Music* series—*Appreciate Jazz* (1986), *Stop Note* (1985), *Profile of the Saxophonist* (1986), *Front View of the Saxophonist* (1986), *Man with Saxophone* (1986), and *No Jazz Tonight* (1987)—two such types of early memories and individual experiences were presented using highly realistic painting methods. But amongst the highly philosophized rational painting and various irrational expressive painting movements of the '85 New Wave Movement, Zhang Peili's painting style, which came to be called “cold expression,” imperceptibly took on a value of rethinking that transcended individual experience. This rethinking was first rooted in skepticism about the expression of “meaning.” In these seemingly solidified images of figures and objects, meaning became a non-referential signifier. Both Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi eschewed the sloppy philosophical and spiritual legends that often permeated or attached themselves to the images of the 1980s in order to dissociate themselves from this movement.



Zhang Peili, *X?*, 1986, oil on canvas, 110 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The X? series, created between 1986 and 1987, was a visual starting point for the various forms of Zhang Peili's conceptual art that would soon follow. The medical latex gloves, a sign that he would simply and repeatedly use, encompassed many of the codes in his later art and came from his early experiences with personal illness. That at least was obvious, but the hard edges, monochromatic colour schemes, and the meaningless mathematical signs added to the picture stifled any possibility for the expression of individual psychological experience, drawing these works into a state of abstraction. Their meaning was infinitely suspended, like full containers waiting to be poured open.

### Text

The year 1987 was a turning point not just for Zhang Peili but for Chinese modern art history, especially for the history of the Chinese conceptual art that would follow. In that year, the turbulent '85 New Wave Movement was beginning to grow silent. Wu Shanzhuan of Zhoushan had begun the "textual painting" of his *Red Series* and *Red Humor Series* (1987); Huang Yongping of Fuzhou, having organized the Xiamen Dada exhibition, was shifting his work towards individual research and created a series of classic works of Chinese conceptual art such as *Towards the Small Wheel* and *Chinese Painting History and Modern Painting History* (1987); Wang Guangyi began his "image revision" in the *Red Rational Series* (1987) of his early rational painting; and Gu Wenda, who had left the country, extended his feelers into experiments in installation art incorporating Chinese characters with *The Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground* (1987). All of this signified that an undercurrent of conceptualist art flowing against the enlightenment-oriented '85 New Wave Movement was rising to the surface and gaining recognition.

1987 was the year that Zhang Peili also created two conceptual text pieces, *Program that Acts First and Reports Later On* and *Art Project No. 2*. Together with *Brown Book No. 1* (1988), which came the following year, these conceptual artworks completely did away with visual expression. As the artist described them, these works were aimed at escaping from the "Cultured, affected petite bourgeois culture" and using a predetermined artistic programming method to express a focus on "standards" and "restrictiveness." Compared with other conceptualist art of the period, the "conceptuality" of these works appeared more thorough and pure. Compared to Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Series*, Xu Bing's *Book from Heaven*, or Gu Wenda's textual work *Inspiration Stems from Tranquility*, Zhang Peili's works did not even draw from any cultural carriers (such as Chinese character symbols or big character posters), religious or philosophical concepts (Zen or modern linguistics), or classical texts. Compared with such "non-self" conceptual works as Analysis Group's *Touch* or Huang Yongping's *Non-Expressive Painting* and *Towards the Small Wheel*, Zhang Peili's artworks preserved certain traits of psychology. When discussing his art with others, he prefers to use technical terms or descriptive language in an attempt to avoid grandiose interpretations of "meaning" or "value" so

①

程序

· 先奏后斩的忏悔——关于《X?》

1987年

我试图将一个创作过程以文字的方式告诉于您，以顺应“先奏后斩”的公共规范。

作品思路：《X?》。

以下为作品的五个步骤。

步骤一：

○ 洞孔版手卷（通章同于之且，原作：环境  
上生A且章牛胎的）正画与反画（大月+异的）  
拍成黑白照片，放大到12寸。

○ 依照照片洞孔版手卷幅长在 $100 \times 110$  或 $100 \times 110$  幅面存在上：

$100 \times 110$  幅面洞孔版手卷—双，横画系列。  
同幅面底色为(LA)，深底色为(LA)。

$100 \times 110$  幅面洞孔版手卷—只，构图直竖。  
同幅面底色为(LB)，深底色为(HB)。

直(LA)X18寸；(LA) 18寸；(HB) 3寸；(LB) 5寸。

○ 材料：油直版材料，纸，墨，生纸，白。

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Zhang Peili, *Program That Acts First and Reports Later*, 1987, text on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

艺术计划第2号

张培力

本计划以实际对话和视觉为宗旨。

全部计划由八个部分组成：

- (一)、对话、规则及对讲权、监视权。
- (二)、对讲员、监督员、监督员之职务、权利、义务及名称。
- (三)、产生对讲员、监视员、监督员之程序。
- (四)、对讲厅、监视厅结构及其他。
- (五)、对讲程序。
- (六)、对讲及监视规则。
- (七)、术语。
- (八)、说明。

一、对讲、监视及对讲权、监视权。

对讲：一种受限制的、被动的“交谈”方式。即按规则获得“对讲权”之人员，在规定的场所规定时间以规定方式与规定对象说话（也可称之为“谈话”“交谈”“对话”或“对说”）。

监视：一种受限制的、条件的看。即在视觉场所按规定方式对对讲员进行观察。

对讲权：进行对讲之权利。对讲权在规定的时间内（对话时间）或对讲厅（对讲厅）实际存在。

监视权：进行监视之权利。监视权在视觉场所（监视厅）实际存在。

Zhang Peili, *Art Project No. 2*, 1987, text on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Zhang Peili, *Report on Hepatitis A*, 1988, latex gloves, varnish, glass, oil paint. Courtesy of the artist.



that his artworks can be understood in a certain perceptive or experiential way. This aspect was presented in a slightly dramatic, biographical way in 1988 with *Report on Hepatitis A*. In that year, he became a victim of the Shanghai/Hangzhou hepatitis A outbreak. While many died in the hospital, he survived after forty days of quarantine and treatment, but this experience again suddenly revived his early memories of illness. This mental experience was directly transferred onto this installation piece; for example, it incorporated surgical gloves, plaster, and blood serum.

### Video

Zhang Peili, *30 x 30*, 1988, single-channel video, 32 mins., 9 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

In 1988, Zhang Peili created his first video artwork, *30 x 30*, for which he has become known as “the father of Chinese video art.” But in discussing this artwork, he maintains that he was simply trying to use a home video camera to create something



that was different from the appeal of television: “I wanted to create something vexing. It didn’t employ any tricks to evoke joyful sentiments; I wanted to make people aware of the existence of time. The temporal aspect of video happened to suit this need.” This artwork attempted, in its use of repetitive video clips, to affirm how the element of “time” resisted the linear narrative and entertainment function of traditional television or cinema. Actually, the idea for this work was created for the Huangshan Conference (whose official title was 88 China Modern Art Creative Symposium), which was being planned at the time. This conference is viewed as having been another important gathering for the ’85 New Wave Movement, alongside the 1986 Zhuhai conference. It was seen as the planning conference for the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition that was to be held the next year. But compared to the Zhuhai conference two years prior, the situation for New Wave art had changed dramatically. The overly philosophical and cultural New Wave Movement had been pushed into gradual decline as a result of attacks from all manner of analytical and critical conceptualist art, and the

leaders of the New Wave Movement, who had hoped that a large group event would help to re-energize their forces, clearly were unable to attain the resonance they had found in the Zhuhai conference. As Zhang Peili puts it, “Not long after 1985, we didn’t really like the word ‘movement’ anymore.” It was in this mindset that Zhang Peili brought the plan for this *30 x 30* to the conference, but it didn’t arouse the interests of the other participants—he was asked to present his first screening in fast-forward. If we were to say that the first encounter of this proposal, his first video work, was understandable given the context of the time, then the fact that this video, with its set camera angle, no added sound and no editing, would become a lasting topic of discussion in Chinese video art history was likely something the artist had never anticipated.

Video art has always played a melancholic role in contemporary Chinese art. It has had little chance of gaining the kind of commercial success enjoyed by canvas art, and it was never a natural symbol of the cutting edge, like performance art, with its aspect of “liveness” that made the state wary of it. Such a role has led video art in China to maintain a certain elitist tone. As in the West, Chinese video art emerged at a revolutionary time, but unlike in the West, it did not quickly become a member of a guerilla team declaring war on mainstream culture, nor could it become stranded as a captive of the technical sponsorship system. This unique ideological environment turned a naturally mass-oriented medium into something like a game of solitaire. Early Chinese video art (from the late 80s to the early 90s) was more like a moving camera; its main function was documentation, and it lacked linguistic properties such as “electronic syntax.” In Zhang Peili’s *30 x 30*, we can see the typical traits of early Chinese conceptualism, such as a simple and repetitive narrative method influenced by minimalism, but this work, when compared to similar video works in the West such as Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963) or Thierry Kuntzel’s *Still* (1980), also used cinematic methods to extend the psychoanalytical narrative logic of his earlier works: the broken glass and its repeated shattering and reforming conjured up powerful physiological and psychological metaphors. This psychological trait would persist in his later, increasingly technically sophisticated works.



Left: Zhang Peili, *(Hygiene) Permit No. 3*, 1991, single-channel video, 24 mins., 45 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Zhang Peili, *Imprecise Stimulation*, 1996, 4-channel video, 30 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

After *30 x 30*, video became the primary medium for Zhang Peili’s art, leading him to become one of the most experienced video artists in China. Continuing with the production model of this work, the artist created several artworks over the next decade that would enter into Chinese video art history, including *(Hygiene) Permit No. 3* (1991), *Work No. 1* (1992), *Water—Full Dictionary Standard Edition* (1991), *Good Until 1994/8/24*



Zhang Peili, *Continuously Expanded*, 2000, 6-channel video installation, 4 mins., 18 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

(1994), *Relative Space* (1995), *Related Beat*, (1996), *Imprecise Stimulation* (1996), *Focal Length* (1996), *Screen* (1997), *Fast 3 Slow 3 Fast 4 Slow 4* (1999) and *Continuously Expanded* (2000). The technique he uses evolved from a single track and single angle to simultaneously recorded video installations with multiple tracks and multiple angles. As a representative of Chinese video artists, Zhang Peili mostly employs a steady analytical attitude, creating a sensitive and concrete visual atmosphere in his work, where the ceaseless interplay of physical and psychological activities repeatedly plumb the depths of the medium for its narrative methods. The significance of this individual exploratory practice lies in its provision of a stable individual methodological foundation for Chinese conceptual art, where the internal forces of cinematic language are presented from the level of experiential perception.

Zhang Peili, *Relative Space*, 1995, video installation. Courtesy of the artist.



After the mid 1990s, Zhang Peili's explorations of video methodology went beyond a mere continuation of the former traits of psychology to engage a wider exploration of the semantic traits of video as an independent medium. Some examples are its unique methods for expressing time and space (*Relative Space*, 1995), the similarities and differences between digital and traditional images (*25 Repeated Shots*, 1993), the appropriation and mutation of ideological footage for video art (*Water—Full Dictionary Standard Edition*, 1991), the relationship



between positive and negative images (*Diary*, 1997), the structural relationship between video and installation art (*Focal Length*, 1996), the differences between the linear narrative qualities of single screen videos and the non-linear narrative qualities of multiple screen videos

Zhang Peili, *Water—Full Dictionary Standard Edition*, 1991, single-channel video, 9 mins., 35 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

(*Simultaneous Broadcast*, 2000), and, especially, visual issues such as the mutual relationship between video and new mediums such as the Internet. But as video and multimedia technology entered into the Internet era, Zhang Peili instead chose an entirely different working method. In the work that followed, his original interest in the “direct time” and “real time” of video slowly began to be replaced by silent memory remnants, and the direct cinema filming methods were replaced by the editing of existing cinema footage. I call this new working method “the montage revision of memory cinema.”



### Montage

After 2002, there were very clear changes in Zhang Peili’s working methods, beginning with the creation of a series of artworks that appropriated existing footage from old films embedded with political memories, *Dialogue* (2002), *Last Words* (2003), *Forward Forward* (2004), and *Happiness* (2006). These videos seemed to have brought us into a more complex context and can even cause us to have doubts about his work: Had Zhang Peili begun to discard his “pure art” working process and become interested in political and reality themes? In fact, many critics asked him about this, and his response can help draw us closer to these works:

Zhang Peili, *Focal Length*, 1996, 8-channel video installation, 15 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Beginning in 2000, I no longer used the camera to shoot videos and began to use “readymade” material. One of the methods was to seek out footage among the films being sold on the market. I care about those iconic, formalized elements with a sense of time. These elements are a concentrated embodiment

Zhang Peili, *Dialogue*, 2002,  
single-channel video, 6 mins., 21  
secs. Courtesy of the artist.



Zhang Peili, *Last Words*, 2003,  
single-channel video, 20 mins.,  
27 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



of the revolutionary heroism and romanticism in the plots of Chinese dramas from the 1950s to the 70s, embodying healthy aesthetic and grammatical habits. I pulled sequences from these old dramas and did some simple rendering to extract them from their original narrative structures and temporal settings. What I'm interested in are the different reading possibilities brought by them.

Zhang Peili, *Happiness*, 2006,  
2-channel video, 6 mins., 39  
secs. Courtesy of the artist.



This explanation might leave us a bit disappointed because the content that we see as critical of history and reality is in his eyes the same as the “temporal” elements found in his previous video works—merely the material of vocabulary and grammar, taking on meaning only

when they are put to use—and all he is concerned with are the “different reading possibilities” they suggest. It’s just as Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “The meaning of a word is its use in the language.”

Removed from language, all meaning becomes void. In other words, the difference in history, politics, and reality between Zhang Peili and other artists is that for him they are just the “apples” under Duchamp’s brush, unable to become the “structure” behind them. We often see criticality as the identifying mark of contemporary art, but, perhaps, as Zhang Peili sees it, criticism removed from artistic language and methods faces the same dangers as the target of its critique: It becomes either an opportunistic strategy or an ossified way of viewing and knowing things. In terms of methodology, this leads down the same disastrous track as the very objects that come under contemporary art’s criticism.

Zhang Peili has said: “I want to make things with temporal traits into things with no traits.” Let us take a look at how he uses his “montage revisions of cinema” to achieve this goal. Montage is the basic technique for connecting and arranging shots in cinema. Through the initial efforts of American director D. W. Griffith and Soviet directors Dziga Vertov and Lev Kuleshov, montage was developed by Sergei Eisenstein into an independent aesthetic rhetorical technique in cinema. Through the adjustment of settings, shots, arrangements, and editing, it directly changes the realistic qualities of film, lending it the function of symbolic and metaphorical rearrangement. Actually, Zhang Peili employed some simple montage-like techniques in his 1990s multi-screen installations, as in the non-linear cinematic effects produced through the juxtaposition of multiple screens in *Imprecise Stimulation* (1996), *Diary* (1997), and *Meal* (1997). The “slippage” effect formed by the juxtaposition of differently timed images on multiple screens or identical images at different speeds such as in *Simultaneous Broadcast* (2000) and *Magic in Loops* (2002) also had a certain montage quality. The difference here is that the use of montage was not to create a unified narrative structure and image content but, on the contrary, to draw the linear narrative into a non-linear state.

Most of Zhang Peili’s source material for these videos came from Chinese revolutionary films of the 1950s and 60s that were based on real events: *Sentry under the Neon Lights*, *The Sino-Japanese War*, *Strike the Invaders*, *Ascending Ganling*, *Daughter of the Party*, and *Red*. These films, representing a specific period, became the memory remnants and visual prototypes for his montage revisions. When removed from their original context, the temporal logic of these films was shattered and the meaning of their narrative removed. In Lev Kuleshov’s *Kuleshov Experiment*, various unconnected scenes from an inventory of scattered footage are arranged through montage into a sequence with narrative functions, but in Zhang Peili’s experiments, this process is turned on its head: In *Last Words* (2003), the repetitive juxtaposition of similar scenes puts their heroicist content into a state of hibernation. In *Short Remarks* (2006), the control and adjustment of the timing of scenes and an interactive installation does



Zhang Peili, *Short Remarks*, 2006, 2-channel video, 43 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

not entirely destroy the meaning of the sentence “The United Nations knows me, do I not know it?”; on the contrary, the new context gives it more powerful metaphorical properties. In *Forward, Forward* (2004), two juxtaposed battle scenes interfere with our set value judgments about war, drawing our impressions into an imagining that transcends culture. In *Happiness*, the montage technique becomes more dramatic—the two sequences of “speaking” and “applause” taken from the film *Battling the Typhoon* are repeatedly swapped, creating a brilliant comedic effect.

Zhang Peili, *Forward, Forward*, (2004), 2-channel video, 8 mins., 46 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



If we were to view the employment of this montage method as mere satire or a game of pure structure, perhaps it would violate the original intent of such an experiment, but, in fact, Zhang Peili is extremely dedicated to this work. He has repeatedly emphasized that the significance of his work is that it strives through technique and language to attain the greatest freedom for people in terms of senses and spirit. In my most recent discussion with him, he excitedly told me that during his editing of old films he discovered a new psychological topic worth exploring, which is that as he constantly moves his computer mouse, it leads to unpredictable effects in the film. He has become obsessed with this effect, about how the traces of a totally private experience can create a new cinematic relationship with images from public memory.



### Scenes

“Scenes” became a new form of grammar in Zhang Peili’s works beginning in 2006, with *Fixing the Old Just Like Old*, and it imbued his works with more social undertones. Such “scenic” experiments continued until *Scenery Outside the Window* (2007), *Gust of Wind*, which was completed in Beijing in 2008, and *Mute*, completed in Shenzhen in 2008. In these “manufactured fake scenes” and “game-like scenes,” it was still artistic linguistic thinking that was primarily at work.

Zhang Peili, *A Gust of Wind*, 2008, 5-channel video installation, 13 mins., 14 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

If “time” was always a central theme in Zhang Peili’s 1990s works and the readymade films he made after 2000, then “space,” or the relationship between time and space in film, became a new theme now. At the No Problem exhibition, held at the site of the old Huqing Yutang factory in Hangzhou, in 2006, he spontaneously engaged in a “just like old” renovation of one of the factory rooms: He renovated half of the room, a forceful intervention in an historical space that led to a new attitude towards space while raising new issues about it. With the work *Gust of Wind* at a 2008 exhibition at Boers-Li Gallery in Beijing, he considered these issues a paradox about how “a manufactured fact” can influence “real facts.”

The difference between his past work and this current video work lies in the fact that the production of cinematic meaning relies entirely on dual real/virtual spaces. They consist of three groups of settings that are constantly expanding in time: the first group is a high-end, elegant indoor environment that alludes to a serene, dignified, and ideal identity, a normal ideology of life; the second group is footage of the room being blown apart by the wind, which alludes to the unpredictable, imperceptible forces of time and nature; the third group is the ruins left behind after the room is destroyed by the wind, which alludes to an unpredictable dramatic result of this temporal paradox. Zhang Peili has always avoided discussing the specific meanings of the various visual elements in this artwork but has classified their potential meaning as: “Nothing can maintain its original state. Only that which is destroyed is real and eternal. . . . I am only interested in time and this unknown force. I think that is what is really



Zhang Peili, *Mute*, 2008,  
2-channel video installation.  
Courtesy of the artist.

eternal—time is eternal, that force is eternal.” In explaining this nearly religious nihilistic attitude, he does not forget to emphasize: “This attitude is not religious, because religion is certain and concrete.”

Zhang Peili has always maintained a unique keenness and wariness about the expression of various definitive concepts in his works. “As I see it, I haven’t expressed anything at all. I don’t think that language has a reconstructive meaning. I’m not certain at all about what I want to express, or about language itself. My attitude is very equivocal.” From the original plan to the final plan for the work *Mute* (2008), we can likewise get a sense of the role of such a working attitude towards the open-ended meaning of an artwork. This is the original plan: The exhibition space will be the virtual scene of an “incident.” The scene will present the remnants (or evidence) of the “incident,” such as a burned out car and the like, and multiple videos (*faux* news media) will be constantly “reporting” the “incident,” but the videos will be on mute, and because of this loss of sound, the “incident” will lose something as well, becoming neither this nor that.

The doubt raised about the rationality of news events by the loss of sound is the logical starting point of this artwork. In designing the scene of the incident, the artist prepared three different potential plans: the scene of a car accident, the scene of disinfecting a factory-style chicken coop, and the destruction of a clothing (or shoe) factory. He began by discarding the first plan because it could too easily be linked to a specific traffic accident, and the artificiality of the on-the-scenes reporting would relegate the artwork’s setup of the “news” to the superficial and formal. Next, he discarded the second plan, deciding that it too would be easily linked with specific news incidents such as SARS, which would lead to a linear reading of the work’s social import. The third plan, which is the one he finally settled on, became a process full of the “extraction” of meaning. He first decided to create a clothing factory rather than a shoe factory, and then discarded the idea of its destruction, opting instead to move a real factory to the exhibition space in its entirety. This was all in the interest of avoiding associations with recent violent incidents involving European boycotts of Chinese goods—at the

time, Chinese stores had recently been burned down in Italy and Russia. The remaining issues were all technical: “Will it be totally ‘muted’ or muted only momentarily? Should there be background noise from the factory? It could go for a while and suddenly stop, going quiet, only to suddenly have sound emerge again. That’s momentary muting.” The final plan added recordings of the workers on the move in the original factory taken by surveillance cameras. The final exhibition scene at Shenzhen’s OCT Contemporary Art Terminal had two projectors playing footage of the original factory environment, and these two screens intermittently went “mute.”

The strategy of drawing from new reports on social incidents while trying to avoid allowing these incidents to control or interfere with the linguistic meaning of the artwork apparently failed to stop the audience from making associations about the significance and social meaning of the artwork. In fact, it served to expand the dimensions of such associations. Zhang Peili’s work is basically full of this sort of logic: Art does not need to draw from any “correct” political attitudes, standpoints, or signs; it just needs to employ unique narrative methods and linguistic designs, and to constantly wash away people’s conceptual inertia and *a priori* readings of the artwork. This could be the truly revolutionary quality of conceptualist language.

### Conclusion

Zhang Peili’s rebellion against a conceptualist heritage is not limited to his superiority complex regarding all “concepts” or his dismissal of political correctness, but also includes his dismissal of the abstract linguistic properties of conceptualist art. He is accustomed to planting all manner of concepts into specific perceptions and states of life, turning them into a series of concrete visual linguistic themes. He has always instinctively struggled against the sacredness of art. This is not out of professional modesty, but, because, as he sees it, the excessive pursuit of these fantastic capabilities of art has led many artists to lose their sense of duty, responsibility, and joy, and has covered up the true significance of art. In order to express his aversion to the excessive attachment of meaning to art, he sometimes has no other choice but to declare himself an artistic formalist in an effort to set himself apart from those who produce images and signs with no view towards the basic logic and techniques of artistic language. Of course, he still believes in the power and moral imperative of the artistic spirit, rather than being a cold, aloof formalist, he is constantly wary of being manipulated by cultural passions and worldly gains. That is because, as he sees it, that would make it impossible for him to become a truly worthy practitioner of art.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from interviews in *Handbook on the Art and Work of Zhang Peili*, eds. Huang Zhuan, Wang Jing (Guangzhou: Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2008).

Zhu Qi

## **Super-sized Exhibitions, Throwing Away Money Like Dirt, and Digital Fireworks: Anticipatory Manufacturing and Extravagant Displays of Symbolic Representations of the Rise of China**

**W**ith the rise of the Chinese economy, something the whole world is recognizing, ongoing high-profile projects that manufacture symbolic representations have been in full swing. These projects actually reflect the early arrival of new nationalistic aesthetics and an accompanying identity anxiety. That is, while China has yet to witness development in culture and art on par with its economic rise, we are, nonetheless, rushing to manufacture a “temporary” culture that symbolizes this rise.

The spectacular grand ceremonies of the Olympic Games, exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai featuring projects in China by top Western architects, super-sized art exhibitions, and buildings representing a globalized style, as well as extravagant parties and new monuments tailored to showcase China’s new status, have all given the impression that China is throwing away money like dirt.

Digital fireworks performances have become the most enchanting and fitting form of display to represent the new Chinese dream. From the Beijing Olympics, Shandong Games, and Shanghai World Expo, to the Universiade in Shenzhen, traditional fireworks combined with computer-programmed pyrotechnics and the new media of laser shows are broadcast live on TV screens around the globe, airing images of an aesthetic not unlike the psychedelic shows in disco clubs. These images also bring to mind the evening song and dance performances of the Spring Festival—the perennial symbol of nationalism—which feed TV screens with images of countless sexy young girls dressing and dancing in an almost identical fashion to those who work in nightclubs, the difference being that these girls are performing on a much grander ceremonial scale. As a result of these live broadcasts, nightclub performances have also ironically now become nationalistic.

The day after the worldwide live broadcast of the World Expo’s opening ceremony fireworks performance was May Day. I was in Hangzhou and boarded a Guangzhou-to-Shanghai local overnight train that was jammed full of worn-down lower-class migrant workers rushing to Shanghai to see the Expo. Because there were too many passengers, the aisles of the train were packed to the point that I ended up standing for three hours. An obvious class divide can be observed on China’s public transportation.

For example, the Beijing Capital International Airport and the Beijing Railway Station are like two different worlds; on local trains, one rarely sees well-dressed women, but they're everywhere in the airport. Almost all the passengers on local trains wear an underclass expression of haggardness and hardship; these are people who often have no choice but to deliberate about purchasing a small item for five RMB or a lunchbox for ten.

The reason these migrant workers were determined to make their way to the Expo has much to do with the images from the live broadcast of the Expo opening digital fireworks the night before. During that worldwide broadcast, aerial shots "caressed" the Shanghai skyline time and time again while all of Pudong's skyscrapers were enveloped in the spectacular illusions created by the fireworks. These images felt more "New York" than New York itself; to some, China is leading the way in realizing a prescribed ideal representation of twenty-first century modernization. The decision to build modern skyscrapers in major Chinese cities has been mostly in the hands of city leaders, and these leaders' initial knowledge of modern cities could well be derived from the Chinese TV series *Beijinger in New York*, which was aired on major Chinese television stations in 1993. The opening sequence of this melodrama, a series that chronicled the early reform period of the 1970s when China threw itself into the embrace of the modern city as its new model of urbanization, featured aerial shots that "caressed" New York skyscrapers. This sequence of shots was in the same vein as the images showing the World Expo opening ceremony; now the Chinese themselves could experience their own paradise of modernization.

Even though Western society has already abandoned many of the myths of modernist skyscraper aesthetics, China still tries to prove and reclaim its position as a global leader through the construction of such monumental symbols of progress. In the field of contemporary art, similar examples also occurred before and after the Olympics. For example, in order to prove that contemporary Chinese art is capable of producing "grand masterpieces" in epic proportions, many artists began manufacturing large-scale exhibitions, installations, and paintings. What these works and art events flaunted the most was how the artists' capital investments have edged closer to that of the West. Because human labour and abandoned warehouses are inexpensive in China, many artists now claim that the square footage of his/her studio and the number of assistants on his/her team have now surpassed those of Westerners. However, the artistic concepts and forms in their work are still lifted from Western art. This phenomenon has similarities to China's processing industry which uses foreign ready-made concepts and forms that are integrated with Chinese materials, employs cheap Chinese factory warehouses and manufacturing labour, and then sells the processed products on the international market.

Many Chinese artists popular in the West over the past decade, such as Zhang Huan, Fang Lijun, Zhang Xiaogang, and Yue Minjun have in recent

years built massive studios, some of them employing dozens of labourers to help manufacture works. These artists are like “contractors” or art traders who take international purchase orders. Other artists soon followed suit; some artists in the Caochangdi district of Beijing have studios of over 1,000 square meters with product showrooms inside displaying a variety of works—from paintings, sculptures, photography, prints, and performance art documents to video art—all manufactured by evoking the idea of Western art. A truly sophisticated Western collector would not purchase works by these kinds of artists, since they tend to treat “avant-garde art” like an avant-garde business, and yet many collectors from China and Southeast Asia who know little about art are now patronizing these artists, although this situation has lessened somewhat since the 2008 financial crisis.

At the height of the market bubble, a lot of avant-garde artists seemed to have become avant-garde capitalists; each one spared no expense, claiming the need to invest up to one million RMB for their own exhibits in order for Chinese avant-garde art to catch up with Western art. Avant-garde artists in the West who are ridiculed are nevertheless sought after and emulated in China. For example, many Chinese artists worship the English artist Damien Hirst, whose diamond encrusted “skull” had a price tag of one-hundred million USD. In a parallel gesture, some Chinese artists have proposed to directly use antiques as the raw material for their installation work, so it’s no problem selling the resulting work for over a million dollars because the antique materials alone can be worth that amount.

Money worship and nihilism have thus entered the field of contemporary art. Successful avant-garde artists quickly become commercialized; however, they continue to capitalize on their “has been” reputation by pretentiously posturing before ignorant parvenus and media reporters, hoping to amass as much money as possible from their artwork and join the club of multi-millionaires before their aura dissipates. Some mediocre oil paintings have been hailed as star items in auction houses because of their astronomical sale prices; their market success gives the second- and third-rate artists who create them an illusion of artistic self-confidence, prompting them to state publicly their intentions to paint five-meter-high grand-scale paintings in spite of the fact that, other than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, few Western painting masters have created many works on such a scale. Several Chinese oil painters now create epic works in anticipation of being collected in the future by the world’s major museums, and such ambition can be observed even in some official artists employed by the government. For example, there have been many creative works on major historical themes by supposedly prominent official painters who completely lack the ability to handle paintings of such a scale; they simply enlarge their compositions, and, as a result, the images in these historical paintings have areas that appear empty and bare; they fail to even match the “revolutionary” exuberance seen in large-scale propaganda paintings during the Cultural Revolution.

This popular trend towards manufacturing flashy yet shallow “grand-scale masterpieces” to represent China’s ascendance can be seen in official art associations’ representations of major historical themes and the 798 Art District’s numerous extravagant avant-garde installations found in galleries at Beijing’s 798 Art District. It even exerts its influence on such international avant-garde artists as Xu Bing and Cai Guo-qiang. Not only do I feel that Xu Bing has since gone mainstream, his work also no longer questions traditional Chinese characters; instead, he showcases China’s heady rise by creating enormous installations that are produced by a team of workers, financially supported by art collectors, and inaugurated with grand opening receptions. For the past decade, Cai Guo-qiang has been devoting himself to creating fireworks displays for the central government. During the World Expo, he also utilized the theme of China rising for an exhibition at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai by “creatively” employing peasants’ odd, home-made machines and contraptions to exemplify peasant contributions to the creation of modern Chinese cities.

Actually, Xu Bing and Cai Guo-qiang’s works can be dualistically interpreted; one can interpret them as praise of China’s unprecedented economic rise over the past thousand years or as satirical commentary on how China’s rise to modernity has been built by exploiting sweatshop labour, squandering resources, and sacrificing the underclass. Such works are lauded by both avant-garde and official art; if commercial interests are also taken into consideration, then they are triply lauded. In fact, in the past decade many so-called Chinese avant-garde artists have been attempting this approach of appealing to both commercial and political desires. But no matter whether artists have such intentions or not, once they join the bandwagon of manufacturing symbolic new representations of China’s rise, they will surely be co-opted by such a hollow enterprise and follow a path of no return.

All expressions of either praise or satire about this rise require the use of nationalistic symbolic forms; for example, Xu Bing’s *Phoenix* installation or Cai Guo-qiang’s fireworks displays. Even if there is a slightly individualistic take in these projects, it’s insignificant, and often overshadowed by these powerful symbolic signifiers. Moreover, no matter how the historical reality of this rise will eventually transpire, it will be a brutal modernization process; any postmodern satire or overtly implicit and superficial criticism against this kind of modernization will be rendered completely void. Not only that, the use of nationalistic symbolic forms may actually, unintentionally, become another form of contemporary propaganda art. This phenomenon of the epically hollow, grand-scale masterpiece has been increasing ever since directors such as Zhang Yimou began making “imperial films” about the authoritarian Qin period. Scenes showing hordes of troops and horses, ten thousand arrows shot at once, and a litter of corpses everywhere not only represent the epic scale of violence and the spectacle of staged synchronized exercises by masses of people, but

also expose the emptiness of digital virtual imaging technologies and a conspicuous squandering of capital.

Those “masterpieces” manufactured for the rise of, if not originating from, a nationalistic ideology towards global ascendancy are then derived from a successful opportunistic strategy. In order to get into the thriving architectural market in China, many Western architects also partake in designing these “super-sized” buildings. An obvious example would be the attention-grabbing and celebrated designs of buildings in China, among them the CCTV building and the National Center for Performing Arts, designed by a number of major Western architects. They clearly were not designed according to avant-garde concepts; instead, they cater to the Chinese government’s and society’s ideological demands for their place in globalization. For example, they suppress all Chinese symbols by using new international avant-garde abstract forms to comply with the idea that China no longer uses conservative symbols, has joined the international avant-garde, and thus has globalized its architectural landmarks. However, in terms of their architectural scale, they simultaneously strive to return to the monumental aesthetics of today’s Chinese socialism.

The reason many international artists enjoy success and wide acclaim in China today is not because the true import of their artistic concepts is understood, but that one continuously hears of their success within the major international art scene. Cai Guo-qiang is a case in point—I would speculate that most Chinese people care only about the fact that he constantly appears in various artistic and political power arenas and in the media, without them ever understanding clearly whether his art is of any interest, or even what it is about. Because Cai Guo-qiang fulfills the dream of Chinese people to become a great success in the West, he was made into a symbol of the rise in the past decade by the Chinese media. Over the past five years, the scandal of astronomical sales prices manufactured through auctions and the media by a speculative art market also effectively manipulated Chinese people’s desire for a renaissance, and thus contemporary art was also made into a symbol of China’s rise. It seems that the unprecedented popularity of contemporary Chinese art abroad is valued above all else, regardless of whether these works are lifted from Western artistic languages or are ridiculing the image of new Chinese art.

Given that the rise of China is in a state of imbalance, its targeted and declared future value is still not clear. Because the modern Chinese economic revolution and reassessment of social morality that has evolved since the May Fourth Movement of 1919 has yet to fully run its course, there are no powerful and deep artistic resources to rely upon as China tries to invent symbolic representations of its rise. Thus, productions related to this rise resort to gaudy ceremonial displays, high-tech applications, and colossal expenditure to justify their value; through satellite television, they present a wasteful image to the whole world. This kind of extravagance is reaching new limits, which itself also becomes a symbol of China’s rising status.

This type of gaudy aesthetics even seeps into the more private and personal sphere of contemporary art, not only causing it to evoke the same nationalistic ideology seen in grandiose exhibitions at the national level, but also rendering any sign of individualistic perspective or avant-garde aesthetics invisible. On the other hand, the globalized super-sized spectacles characterized by massive expenditures and high-tech art create a sharp contrast with the struggling underclass of new industrial workers at Foxconn—the world’s largest maker of electronic components and the subject of controversies in how it manages its employees—and the young women claiming sexual abuse while working for Song Shanmu’s company, the Su Moon Education Group, and the worn-down underclass masses on the train making their way to the World Expo. This kind of global consumerism turns into a self-mockery; it means that behind the overblown aesthetics, there is an anxiety of a self-doubting identity related to China’s ambitious rise. It also means that without having a strong value system that emerges from within, in order for China to make the transition to the status of being at the global centre, it urgently needs scaffolding that supports its image as a rising nation. And while such a status is central, it is, for now, directionless.

*Translated by Cheng Tzu-wen*

## Can Blandness Be Praised?

In 1991, François Jullien asked his readers to rethink the assumption that blandness is an undesirable quality. This proposition forms the basis of his book *In Praise of Blandness*, which examines traditional Chinese artistic, literary, and philosophical culture in which blandness was a quality that was extolled.

Jullien's goal is to gain a better understanding of the European cultural and philosophical practices by examining those of China's.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I would like to explore the meaning of blandness through Jullien's description and other academic writings in order to engender a discussion of how, and if, ideas centred around blandness can be applied to contemporary Chinese art.

I have selected for discussion, as did Jullien, the artist Ni Zan (1301–74), who epitomizes the idea of “blandness.” Ni Zan painted landscapes in a monotonous and monochromatic style, where sparsity ruled, evolving towards even greater simplicity and spareness as he grew older. According to Jullien, Chinese critics traditionally characterized Ni Zan's style as “*dan*, the ‘bland.’”

As an artistic term, the word “bland,” interpreted in Chinese as *pingdan* or *dan*, has been variously described as “balanced and uneventful,” “simplicity,” “plain and spontaneous.”<sup>2</sup> In her book *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, Susan Bush uses the word “tranquillity” synonymously with blandness. She quotes the eminent calligrapher and critic Mi Fu (1052–1107), who praised the tenth-century artist Tung Yuan's paintings as having “much tranquillity and naturalness, being unique in the paintings of the Tang Dynasty,” noting that “the structure of the mountains is both hidden and revealed, the branches of trees emerge and disappear. Its conception and flavour are lofty.” Another acclamation on Tung, by the fourteenth-century scholar Tang Hou, noted that his work was “relaxed and his blandness (*pingtan*) quite attractive.”<sup>3</sup>

Ni Zan was a member of the literati during the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368), when literati artists devoted their lives to perfecting the three arts—painting, calligraphy, and poetry. He was a Han Chinese during the foreign Mongol rule, when many Chinese literati artists who held high government posts lost their official functions. Many of them adopted a spirit of eremitism as a rejection of the foreign government and to retain their independence. Ni Zan rose to be one of the Four Masters of the Yuan period, a cultural symbol of patriotism and moral regeneration, and one of the pivotal figures in the Yuan renaissance.

The function of painting during the Yuan period changed. During the earlier Song dynasty (960–1279), painting had played a crucial role in the ritual affirmation of the imperial cult and the religious beliefs of the Confucian state. The paintings at that time were representational, proclamatory, and served the state orthodoxy. Now, they merely served as an expressive outlet.

The Yuan rule represented a political landmark during which the oppression that the literati felt was channeled into a major artistic revival and synthesis. The central topic of debate amongst the literati at the time was the tension between orthodoxy and tradition, individualism and change. Painting retracted into itself, became more private and withdrawn, and there was a sense of rebelliousness as the literati artists turned to a more personal mode of expression. These artists were less focused on the external world—on transcribing the appearance of things—and more on reflecting on their own inner world.

Ni Zan played the role of the eccentric recluse and opted to live an unconventional life according to the social norms of his times. His style was seen to symbolize the struggle and the dialectic between the traditional and the individual. The blandness of his paintings evokes a feeling of calm and manifests a sense of control on paper even though his life was full of upheaval, as recorded in this poem by one of his contemporaries:

Master Ni paints as if he were carving a block of ice  
Rid of the sediments, his work achieves a sublime purity . . .  
Through his paintings one feels harmony with the universe.<sup>4</sup>



One of his more famous paintings, *The Rongxi Studio* (1372), epitomizes blandness with a composition that is flat and homogenized and unified by a vast negative space of water and sky. The ink is diluted, the range of colours narrow, the brush strokes indistinct, and there is a lack of perspective. Ni Zan’s control over the execution of his painting is so extreme that “no decorative, or merely pleasing touch relieves the platitude of the whole”; it is “drained of all opacity, unburdened of all weightiness.”<sup>5</sup>

Jullien describes the blandness of *The Rongxi Studio* in the following way:

In the foreground, only a few sparsely leaved slender trees clearly indicate the presence of vegetation. Arranged around this stand of trees, some flat rocks suggest the contours of a riverbank extending from point to point, while airy hills on the other shore unfold this level scene out into the distance.

Ni Zan, *The Rongxi Studio*, 1372, ink on paper, 74.7 x 35.5 cm. Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The limitless clarity of the sky answers the emptiness of the water, which spreads to fill the entire central portion of the scroll. Finally, a thatched roof, supported simply by four poles, presents the only sign of a possible human presence. But no one is sheltering beneath its eaves.<sup>6</sup>

Jullien traces the changing meanings of blandness from being a flaw to being a positive quality during the earlier Yongjia period (circa 300 AD). Poetry, in particular when inscribed on paintings as a colophon, played an important role in evoking and emphasizing the quality of blandness into the imagery. Blandness was then associated with poetic evocation and the consequent “symbolization” (*xing*) of a feature of landscape painting that can be appreciated for its intangible and inexhaustible quality.<sup>7</sup>

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), blandness came into its own and entered into critical discourse as a positive term, as exemplified by this poem by the poet Sikong Tu, entitled *Chongdan*, meaning “harmony-blandness,” written in praise of blandness:

Given over, by its nature, to silence,  
It is one with the secret of things  
It quaffs of the supreme Harmony  
Then, alone, with the goose, it takes flight.

Like the spring breeze  
That lightly brushes his robes  
Sound—sensed through the bamboo  
The beauty that one then takes away as it returns

You meet it, without going deep  
Search for it, and it grows ever more tenuous  
If, at last, it does take on form,  
You’ve barely grasped its hand, and already it is gone.<sup>8</sup>

Blandness reached its apparent ideal in the eleventh-century Song dynasty:

In composing a poem, in the present as in the past  
Only the creation of the plain and bland is hard.<sup>9</sup>

Jullien recognizes that there may be a contradiction in the above poem, which conveys a tangible form of the word “harmony” in order to express the intangible nature of blandness. He explains: “Blandness is not something to be fixed, isolated, and possessed; instead, it is carried through the life force of all things and can only be experienced in its entirety by distancing oneself. . . . It appears at the very edges of the perceptible, at the portal of the invisible.”<sup>10</sup>

The appreciation of the duality of painting and poem was demonstrated by the famous critic and writer Su Shih (1037-1101) who wrote:

When one savors Wang Wei's poems, there are paintings in them  
When one looks at Wang Wei's pictures, there are poems . . .  
Tu Fu's writings are pictures without forms  
Han Kan's paintings, unspoken poems . . .

From ancient times on, painters have not been common men,  
Their subtle thoughts are produced substantially as in poetry.<sup>11</sup>

This was echoed by the critic Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–72):

Ancient paintings depict ideas and not forms  
Mei's poems sign of things but conceal no emotion  
Few are those who understand abandoning form to realize ideas  
No less in looking at painting than in poetry . . .<sup>12</sup>

According to Jonathan Chaves, there is a complex relationship between the visual, formal structure of a Chinese painting and the verbal, imaginary structure of the poem inscribed upon it.<sup>13</sup> It was popular at the time for artists or their friends to inscribe a poem on the painting, or for various owners to make further inscriptions through the passing generations.

Chaves refers to the integral poem-painting as a “successful aesthetic experiment in Chinese culture, . . . The generic distinctions of the two modes of expression are purposely suppressed in the interest of evoking a single experiential world to which both pictorial and verbal images contribute.”<sup>14</sup> Ni Zan's paintings are typically integral poem-paintings (*tihuashi*), where he excels in the act of “suppression” that Chaves refers to, to bestow a particular aura of blandness and a unifying and fortifying essence to the dialectic between image and word.

James Cahill describes Ni Zan's painstakingly orchestrated refrain in *The Rongxi Studio* “as hesitant and unassertive as ever, the ink tone as pale . . . the scenery as plain . . . the earthy forms, which are self contained and placid. Nothing intrudes forcibly on the consciousness of the viewer; the painting, like Ni Zan's others, embodies the artist's longing for disengagement from a contaminated world.”<sup>15</sup>

Ni Zan's calligraphy and poems were considered by the Chinese critic Mi Yu-jen (1072–1151) to be a depiction of the mind.<sup>16</sup> Ni Zan creatively combines the archaic style of writing with the modern and exploits any inherent structural contradictions to arrive at his own particular famous style. One renowned example was achieved by combining aspects of the Tang style with that of the master calligrapher Chao Meng-fu to arrive at a style that is simultaneously awkward and sophisticated.<sup>17</sup>

Cahill concurs with Mi's view on *The Rongxi Studio*, noting that “paintings of this kind were certainly not intended to be descriptive—if that were the purpose, a technically proficient professional master would have been engaged. . . . To have one's house ‘portrayed’ by such a prestigious master as

Ni Zan . . . was to invest it with the values of literati culture in its highest, even most rarefied, manifestation.”<sup>18</sup>

As well as demonstrating the integral relationship between image and word, Ni Zan’s colophons also reflected his changing lifestyles, first the comfortable and the privileged existence that his earlier personal wealth allowed, in *The Rongxi Studio*:

How delightful is autumn, my inkstone and mat feel cool  
With bamboo shades rolled up, a light dew softens my robe  
Forest gates and cave windows send forth new pleasures,  
Green rain and yellow mist envelop distant bedrock  
Scattered bamboos wave in the bright sun  
The shadows of fir parasols lie beneath the moonlight  
I burn my incense in a gilded duck censer  
And collect fallen petals in a pouch by my pillow<sup>19</sup>

Through the ensuing political and artistic developments, Ni Zan eventually renounced any attachments to the government and to material possessions and spent the remainder of his life traveling on the waters of the lower Blue River and the Great Lake, living a simple and lonely life, often in monasteries. Sixteen years later, a more complex calligraphic style emerged:

I had once casually made this picture, and sixteen years have  
since passed! Looking at it I feel lost, as if seeing myself in  
another life.<sup>20</sup>

One of Ni Zan’s poems demonstrates the correlative tension within integral poem-paintings where emotions of desolation and homelessness hidden in the blandness and calm of his landscapes are revealed in the content of the poem inscribed on the painting:

If world affairs are like fire, my mind should be like water.  
In my inner house I must remain my own master.<sup>21</sup>

*Woods and Valleys of Yushan* (1372) reflects a stronger and more contented man who has come to terms with his life. In this masterpiece, Ni Zan “combined . . . a new calligraphic brushwork that revitalized both the perception of nature and the perception of the past . . . to achieve just the right tonal passages, creating an effect of tranquillity that is pure mood and poetry.”<sup>22</sup> His individual style of using abstract calligraphic strokes in a representational idiom became a new pedagogic orthodoxy and a popular expressive tool during the foreign Mongol rule. It enjoyed a revival some two hundred years later, during the Ming dynasty, when the Han Chinese were once again threatened with foreign invasion, this time from the Manchus.

Five trees, delicately painted, are placed along the riverbank to create a peaceful and still environment. Each tree is painted with care and delicacy and imbued with a distinctive characteristic of foliage, shape, and height.

Monumental mountains contrast with lush valleys. His poem on the painting celebrates the time enjoyed with his friends:

We drink wine and write poems  
The joyful feelings of this day  
will linger long after we have parted<sup>23</sup>

Ni Zan's form of blandness through the structure of the poem-painting (*tihuashi*) shows an understanding of the incommensurability of sensory experience and its representation in art that constitutes the integral relationship between poem and painting. He uses blandness to enable asymmetry between poem and painting where neither is considered primary but each perfectly complements the other. Blandness has the capacity to accommodate the formal as well as the social, political, and philosophical. It has that air of aloofness that can facilitate painterly and poetic metaphors. His landscapes encompass all landscapes and invite contemplation.



Ni Zan, *Woods and Valleys of Yushan*, ink on paper, 94.3 x 35.9 cm. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of The Dillon Fund (1973.120.8).

It is possible to construct analogies between contemporary Chinese art and Ni Zan's times. In our modern day globalized world culture with its media onslaught, Internet, and socioeconomic meltdowns, some artists fall victim to its homogenizing effect and tend towards a language that is understood by the world at large. There are others who engage in the debate on tradition, individualism, and change. There is also a sense of rebelliousness on a political and social level. There are artists who are communicating with the external world and are not private and withdrawn. Although some have chosen the route to leave the country, many have achieved international critical acclaim on behalf of contemporary Chinese art from within China.

Contemporary Chinese art has made a major contribution to the world, at least if commercial success is any measure. However, its uniqueness is more likely to do with spectacle than blandness.<sup>24</sup> The corollary of being on the global platform is an endless cycle of ever recurring trends, from art for art's sake to work of a relational nature. A quote from art historian Michael Schreyach adequately conveys the capricious nature of contemporary art

as: “an art of disengagement, which rejoiced in its separation from ordinary life, we are now to have an art which completely involves us in real life.”<sup>25</sup>

At the peak of its popularity, contemporary Chinese art brimmed with effervescence and basked in its sensationalism. Many artists tended towards pragmatism, rejecting traditional *sansuihua* (mountain–water painting) for more commercial or socially acceptable modes. Political Pop and Cynical Realism may contain political and social content but can also be viewed merely as an astute exercise in commodification, that of revolutionary zeal and its paraphernalia. This view is shared by Zhu Qi, a contemporary Chinese critic, who is of the opinion that artworks have become aesthetically pleasing and fashion conscious in order to compete in the ever-expanding commercial culture of the global urban arenas. He asked: “Why has art become so pretty of late?”<sup>26</sup>

The frenzy of the spectacle appears to have now abated, and there are signs of a return to tradition in the discourses of the intellectual circles. Officially, the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics projected an unmistakable message to the world, of Confucian peace and harmony. This sympathy with the traditional, although not necessarily about the quality of blandness, is also echoed in other disciplines such as the architectural concept for rejuvenating the *hutong*, Shao Fan’s use of Ming dynasty furniture, Zhang Xiaogang’s use of traditional language, “the new wave” embracing new *wenrenhua* (paintings of the literati), the use of traditional ink, calligraphy, and traditional motifs, and Chen Wenling’s use of lacquer to refer to China’s rich and illustrious past.

Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010, porcelain. © Ai Weiwei. Photo: Tate Photography. Courtesy of the artist and Tate Modern, London.



There are some contemporary artworks that serve as an antidote to the spectacle and some that exhibit qualities of blandness as we have discussed. Ai Weiwei’s use of sunflower seeds at the Tate echoes Ni Zan’s pale inks and its bland monochromatic monotony.<sup>27</sup> Cui Fei’s simple but ingenious use of twigs to feature calligraphy may have the capacity to reconcile the spiritual and the social life *à la* Jullien. According to Jonathan Goodman, her “poetic gracefulness”

may be a way to incorporate influences from her hometown of New York with the long tradition of Chinese art.<sup>28</sup> Jin Shan’s uneventful and poetic installation at the 2010 Frieze Art Fair may have set a new paradigm for his single-child generation, favouring the route of exile during an age of uncertainty, reminiscent of Ni Zan and his contemporaries.

Perhaps the issue is not whether blandness can be praised, but whether generating a pertinent discussion can lead to a more open framework in



which contemporary Chinese art is able to recapture and modernize its rich traditions and not be ideologically imprisoned, or only propagating and subverting the characteristics of an imported modernity, and, crucially, not live in “the nation of others.”<sup>29</sup>

Voon Pow Bartlett, *Chinese Woman in Beijing (le flâneur)*, 2007, photograph on aluminium, 82 x 48 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



To complete this discussion, it would be interesting and relevant to also consider Jullien’s other comment on blandness as an aspect of life; that in fact, as he suggests, the bland life constitutes an ideal.<sup>30</sup> My research into the Beijing art scene has inspired me to make artwork that explores the meaning of blandness in terms of its composition, presentation, and content. The monochromatic *Blue Mao* (2005) and *Chinese Woman in Beijing (le flâneur)*

Voon Pow Bartlett, *Blue Mao*, 2005, digital print on canvas, 71 x 91 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

(2007) are not merely visually plain, flat, and monotonous but invite meditations on the relationships of an urban city in China, the changing nature of *guanxi*, or face-to-face interaction among people in this globalized world of virtual relationships.

There may be room in this milieu to praise the idea of blandness and its attendant transcendental, transformative, and inexhaustible qualities, as illustrated by some of Ni Zan’s work above. As for a bland life, Ni Zan and his contemporaries represent an elite and privileged social class, notwithstanding political difficulties, and were in a position to introduce innovations in the arts as well to choose an ideological stance on life. The working classes of China today hold very different aspirations and may consider any edifications to be an indulgence. Their bland life does not necessarily correlate with art or those of the classical literati. The

hardship of the lives of the Chinese masses today is effectively conveyed by director Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1991 banned film, *The Blue Kite*. The film shows the lives of ordinary people during various political movements including the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution. It is a moving account of the lives of the poor and the suppressed, which one can describe as bland in its monotony, simplicity, and plainness. This version of blandness deviates from the aspirations of the classical elite scholars. The "suppression" of real life bears little resemblance to its effect on the artistic pictorial and verbal fields, nor indeed possesses any capacity to provoke anything approaching the meditative. In art and in life, blandness appears to live up to its intangible quality and is certainly worthy of further discussion.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jullien examines the subject of blandness "in order to set in motion a continuous re-examination and recalibration of European cultural compasses and of the practice of philosophy in the West." Francois Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Wen C. Fong and Alfreda Murck, eds., *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 89, 231, 250.
- <sup>3</sup> Susan Bush and Shih Hsio-yen, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 379, 231, 250.
- <sup>4</sup> Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 495.
- <sup>5</sup> Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 37.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. See note 8 on page 151.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>10</sup> Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 90.
- <sup>11</sup> Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 203.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.
- <sup>13</sup> Jonathan Chaves, "Meaning Beyond the Painting: The Chinese Painter as Poet," in Fong and Murck, eds., *Words and Images*, 431–58.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.
- <sup>15</sup> James Cahill, "Yuan dynasty (1271-1368)," in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1997), 175.
- <sup>16</sup> Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 205.
- <sup>17</sup> Fong, *Beyond Representation*, 482.
- <sup>18</sup> Cahill, "Yuan dynasty (1271-1368)," 175.
- <sup>19</sup> Fong, *Beyond Representation*, 477.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.
- <sup>24</sup> I discuss this in my dissertation, *Spectacle as Myth: Guanxi, the Relational and the Urban Quotidian in Contemporary Chinese Art (2005–2008)*, <http://transnational.org.uk/people/48-voon-pow-bartlett>. TrAIN, Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London, 2008.
- <sup>25</sup> Michael Schreyach, in "The Recovery of Criticism," quotes another art historian, Edgar Wind on artistic perception. James Elkins and Michael Newman, eds., *The State of Art Criticism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 8.
- <sup>26</sup> Zhu Qi, "Why has Art Become So Pretty of Late?" in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, eds. John Clark and Robert Bernell (New Art Media Ltd, 2000), 124.
- <sup>27</sup> Voon Pow Bartlett, "The Harmonization of Ai Weiwei," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 10, no. 1 (January–February 2011), 84.
- <sup>28</sup> Jonathan Goodman, "Cui Fei at The Warehouse Gallery, Syracuse University," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 10, no. 1 (January–February 2011), 104.
- <sup>29</sup> This comment by Homi Bhabha is also worthy of a discussion of whether living in "the nation of others" is an inevitable consequence of globalization. See the article "A Dialogue on Contemporary Chinese Art: The One Day Workshop 'Meaning, Image, and Word'," held at the University of British Columbia, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* (December 2005), 81.
- <sup>30</sup> Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, 39. He writes, "The blandness of the painted landscape cannot be confined to the realm of artistic effect. Rather it expresses wisdom, for the bland life constitutes an ideal."

## Pictorial City: Chinese Urbanism and Contemporary Photography

### The City...

The city is not merely a collection of buildings. It must be regarded as an autonomous entity, not only in an architectonic sense but also structurally, economically, politically, socially, and, not least, culturally. It is affected by a multiplicity of factors that are not only space and time-dependent but also constantly in flux. Horizontal spatial expansion, vertical growth, high density, and the range and type of social and economic interactions clearly distinguish the city from rural environments. Cities manifest, for example, a high degree of occupational difference, complex systems of transportation, a multitude of means for communication, and a wide range of public and administrative institutions. The concept of urbanity is sociologically linked to a way of life involving particular educational ideals, societal openness, and a range of accepted lifestyles that provide exposure to a high level of diversity. In the context of urban architecture, this implies certain spatial structures and varied social zones, but also specific patterns in the use of the space, including its manifold functional differentiation. Besides its sociocultural aspects, urbanization is also a central concept and characteristic behind city planning and development.

### ... and Photography

Photography has been related to the city ever since its very beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. “In many ways, it is the urban landscape that has perhaps become synonymous with photography,”<sup>1</sup> noted Susan Bright in describing this special relationship between photography and city. One way photography connects to the city is through the capturing of moments on the street, the documenting of a cartography of motion and life. Over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, or now in the twenty-first century, massive transfigurations of the urban environment—its function and its structures—have taken place, and the classic urban model both in the West and the East has changed as have the aesthetics within in photographic practices necessary to depict these changes. “This new urban development was not easily readable by the camera. The look of buildings and people could mask their functions as much as displaying them. Much of the city’s operation had become electronic and therefore invisible. . . . a recognition that the contemporary city can be understood as a kind of palimpsest: while its surfaces may be spectacularly photogenic, underlying them are complex social and political issues,”<sup>2</sup> reflects David Company, who adds, “The city, modernity, and photography are intimately linked. The modern city understood itself through its own image. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

In China the beginning of photography was rooted in the city as well. Around the 1860s, the first independent photographers' studios and clientele were located in the cities, and the urban environment was a source of their pictorial motifs.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century photography had become a leisure activity within the upper classes and remained a privilege for the imperial family, the literati, and others until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The earliest exhibition of photography seems to have taken place in 1918 at the University of Beijing, followed by others in Shanghai, which, during the late 1920s and 30s, became a hotspot for fashion, cinema, celebrity, and modern city life—with photography at the centre of the documentation of these activities. In a more recent context, Gu Zheng, in an essay of contemporary photography in China, draws a particular link between this medium and the massive urban social changes that have taken place since the middle of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

### Some Urban Codes in the Twenty-first Century<sup>7</sup>

China has one of the longest records of uninterrupted urbanization. The origins of the Chinese city, or walled urban centres, can be traced back to almost 3000 B.C. Chinese urban construction was always subject to an extensive set of rules and rituals: this ranged from, according to the rules of *feng shui*, the choice of the right location to build dates deemed suitable, and from the overall layout to construction details for walls, gates, and towers according to the application of cosmological principles and numerology. The symbolism of the Chinese city reflected imperial ideology and was characterized by an emphasis on the centrality of China as the middle kingdom and the Emperor as the son of the heavens. Of these design principles many are, of course, reflected in the arrangement of Chinese cities today. This interlocking of space and tradition is described as follows by Dieter Hassenpflug: “Beyond having regard to the fate of products and ideas that immigrated into China, it should not be overlooked that in the construction of the new China, the old China—and especially imperial China but also that of the Republic and the Mao era—were continued on from within, with endogenous forces.”<sup>8</sup> So one can trace fragments of continuity within all the on-going urban transformations.<sup>9</sup>

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, this classical Chinese urban structure underwent little serious alteration and remained, with some exceptions during the time of Mao Zedong, largely stable until the 1980s. In the course of reform under Deng Xiaoping, political, economic, and social changes had a significant impact on urban construction and uses of the city that led to the transformation of urban lifestyles. For example, until the 1990s the communes were the sole owners of land and held the rights to construct on it and use it, and the end of state housing led to the development of new neighbourhoods and the rapid growth of a real estate industry. Furthermore, due to the disbanding of the *danwei* system,<sup>10</sup> the close geographic link between work and residence also disappeared, and this was one of the reasons individual transport increased. The introduction of the five-day week may also be cited as one of the sources for change in city structures; the greater proportion of leisure time has led to corresponding

developments in urban construction, for example, shopping malls. Parallel to these developments has been a continuing increase in the standard of living for an ever-larger number of people with an ever-growing notion of, and desire for, consumerism. Finally, due to these developments urban family structures have also witnessed considerable change.

### **Urban Fabric**

Urban expansion takes place in Chinese cities at two levels: first, vertically, in the centres, with the focus above all on infrastructure and modern prestige construction within the transformation of historical quarters into modern business or shopping areas; second, horizontally, growing outwards, beyond the previous city limits into new satellite settlements. The reasons for these kinds of urban expansion are manifold: the need for new housing facilities, business districts, science parks, commercial spaces, wider roads, etc. In respect to this massive expansion, the approach to town planning plays a major role in urban development. Often a certain sustainability is lacking. Yung Ho Chang criticizes the lack of any planning in urban construction, saying that while many wonderful individual pieces of construction emerge, they do not work together to produce a good city.<sup>11</sup> New construction is seldom integrated into or provides continuity with what already exists. Hou Hanru remarks in this context that projects are usually constructed before any connection to the existing environment, structures, or residents' uses of space is considered—an international phenomenon that is known as “post-planning.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Linda Vlassenrood characterizes the modern Chinese city as a “city of objects; that is, a collection of iconic high-rises bearing no relation to the direct surrounding.”<sup>13</sup> There often seems to be a lack of understanding of how the architecture of buildings can contribute to the quality of urban life, or how the inhabitants might use a special structure or building. Wang Jun attributes this to the fact that “. . . the theories of urbanism applied in Beijing, as in many other Chinese cities, are based on dogmas that have been abandoned elsewhere in recognition of their drastic human and social consequences.”<sup>14</sup>

The historic centres of cities provide a well-known example. These were densely populated, had specific social structures, and were more or less ignored for decades by official authorities responsible for city planning—until in many cases the next step was the demolition of whole districts that had become extremely valuable real estate because of their central location. This meant not only that many inhabitants' living spaces were lost, but also that certain traditional construction typologies or specific forms of utilization of long-used urban space were lost. People were resettled away from these spaces—which consisted of mostly two-storey houses—often into high rises at the edge of the city. Here, a contradiction between traditional urban spaces in China and the requirements of the industrial age can be detected. This involves not only change, but also frequently the total loss of social networks, especially as on top of this there is usually no connection to existing urban infrastructure. The historical city is in the process of dissolution, and the dominance of Soviet role models—the

ideology of large squares and axes—is coming to an end, and, in parallel, a postmodern city is emerging.

On the other hand, this new infrastructure caters to the needs of the growing middle class. Economic and political decisions such as the aforementioned introduction of the five-day work week or the disassociation of workplace and dwelling place have led to changes of lifestyle—in the pursuit of leisure and in new social patterns, not everybody wants to live in the classic, narrow courtyard houses. As Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist stated in 1997 in their introduction to the exhibition *Cities on the Move*, these transformations are also “a process of renegotiation between the established social structure and influences of foreign, especially Western, models of social structure, values, and ways of living.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, urban culture is by no means formed solely by architectonic influences but is expressed in many other ways as well.

One special visual code evident in today’s Chinese city should be mentioned here—the so-called “urban fictions.” These new cityscapes feature the transposition of European urban “architectural ensembles” into the setting of Chinese cities as new residential areas. Hassenpflug explains this as the “mediatizing way China deals with the cultural heritage of the West, specifically of the European city,” or as a “landscape of urban stage-setting.”<sup>16</sup>

### **City Moves in Contemporary Photography**

Urban motion—changing facades and structures, the demolition and construction of buildings and urban quarters, expansion both vertically and horizontally, the shifting of city boundaries.

While the city changes and moves in both time and space, the people living in it change and move as well. This also entails an emotional effect on the city dweller, for the changes in and of the city move the people living there not only physically in their surroundings, by forcing them perhaps to walk faster in the streets or seducing them into rambling, but also by imposing a new cartography of movement, new patterns in street life. All of this affects the urban inhabitant personally, emotionally, and physically, and leaves traces of both a negative and positive nature in individual lives that can bring about expansion, prosperity, loss, limitation, or diversification.

The goal of Birdhead (Song Tao and Ji Weiyu) in their series *Birdhead World* (2004–05) is to chronicle everyday urban reality, describing the individualized life of young people in Shanghai. Photography is their tool to depict what moves them, to express their subjective impressions and feelings in a city of constant change. “This process of moving from the city of Shanghai to the world of Birdhead is very interesting,”<sup>17</sup> comments Birdhead on their concept of turning the outer world into their personal world. Their pictures often look as if taken by chance on the streets: someone is moving into or out of the frame, heads are partly cropped, and there are blurred, fragmentary image details, reflections of light, etc. The totality of the city is not composed merely of past and present



architecture, but necessarily also of the life of its inhabitants. With their photographs, Birdhead succeeds in directly conveying a sense of being “in the middle of the city,” as if we, the viewer, were on the move with them. This is accomplished, for instance, by Birdhead’s use of perspective in the pictures—the viewer is at the same height as the photographer and thus gains an impression of being directly with, behind, or next to the protagonists as they make their way through the city.

Top: Birdhead, *Untitled*, 2005, C print, 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artists.

Opposite page: Chi Peng, *Sprinting Forward*, 2004, C print, 220 x 74 cm. Courtesy of the artists.

In the series *Sprinting Forward* (2003–05), Chi Peng depicts naked, running male figures—the artist himself representing these multiple figures—seen from behind, apparently running away from something and finding themselves in various different urban surroundings. The movement is so clearly expressed that it makes the pictures look like they can be read in chronological order as a short story: someone (or several people) running with great urgency out of a building, rushing through the city in the middle of traffic, along wide streets past modern grey architecture, believing perhaps this could be the way to open space, but ultimately coming to an end as they arrive at some steps in front of the impermeable glass facade of a modern building. These movements may represent the idea of searching, but also that of fleeing, perhaps referring to certain social realities, or to personal sensitivities, uncertainties, and insecurities in the face of the social changes in urban life that repeatedly demand balance within one’s self. *Sprinting Forward* could thus be read as a reflection or visualization of an inner mental state or simply the restlessness of young people in urban life.

Jiang Pengyi, in his series *All Back To Dust* (2006–07), looks at the phenomenon of the dramatic skyscrapers that have sprouted up in the last decade and that he considers a symbol of China’s regained greatness—a symbol of its modernity on the international stage. In his photographs





he depicts modern high-rise buildings, including iconic ones such as the National Center for Performing Arts or the National Art Museum in Beijing. But this architecture is displaced from its urban context and has been miniaturized and recontextualized in a scenario in which they become ordinary waste. He refers above all to construction, to the speed with which these buildings are erected. Areas affected by the demolition in preparation for these towers are only indirectly addressed in that each example of construction often requires destruction beforehand, with both being necessary because the world comes into being only through change.<sup>18</sup> These buildings also generate emotions, inspire awe, seduce, and satisfy needs, not least the desire for spectacle. Diminishing and decontextualizing them counteracts a feeling of unease in the face of rapid change, making reality look not quite so intimidating. It also relativizes the significance of these overpowering buildings: “The grand objects outside are composed of countless microscopic particles. In fact, they are all just piles of dust.”<sup>19</sup>

Jiang Pengyi, *All Back to Dust-02*, 2006, C print, 180 x 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.

Weng Fen’s series *On the Wall* (1999–2002) records views of modern metropolises—the special economic zones of Haikou, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—taken from a distance to show their monotonous, uniform architecture, which ubiquitously repeats the same forms and facades. In the foreground of each image, a girl in a school uniform straddles a wall looking towards the faraway city skyline. She remains anonymous, and we are given no hint of her thoughts or emotions: Is she yearning for something? Welcoming future opportunities? Experiencing anxiety? Some walls are overgrown with plants, some are slightly cracked, the foreground sometimes unkempt and, thus undeveloped and still lagging behind the new urban China and revealing the gap between promised futures and present realities. Weng Fen has expressed appreciation for the city and its



Weng Fen, *On the Wall-Haikou (6)*, C print, 125 x 150 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist.

movements of demolition and new construction, people and traffic, even though, he says, at times he feels ambivalence: “This rapid development in the city filled me with passion. However, sometimes I did not know where I should begin, and sometimes I was concerned by the speed of the change. On other days I just found it splendid and wonderful. I felt a huge longing to be where things were moving and changing. . . . and maybe the sensation is analogous to how a person feels about modernization. It is all so new for him, and unforeseeable. Although he is confused, he is also full of hope.”<sup>20</sup>

### Migration

Within the context of China, different forms of migration need to be distinguished. As the importance of traditional agriculture decreases, the cities with their countless new building projects attract a large, continuous, and still-increasing stream of migrant workers. Once they arrive, these migrants largely have no rights, find support only in informal social networks and structures, live illegally in condemned buildings or at ephemeral building sites, and thus are forced to move constantly within the city. While these workers increase the populations of the cities, they don't participate in increasing urbanization in the sense of progressive lifestyles or education, and they are visible evidence of remaining poverty and social inequity. On the other hand, moving to the city in search of work often constitutes the only possibility of sustaining one's own family. Although the circumstances of these workers who make urban growth possible may affect social stability with their infrequent protest, their demands remain largely officially ignored officially thus far.

Another group of migrants are those who officially live and work in the city but, due to the restrictions of the *hukou* registration system,<sup>21</sup> are denied

further rights such as school for their children, social security, or access to certain residential areas. Many move to the city for economic reasons but then exert a different influence by following the course of the growing middle class with active participation in its increasing prosperity.

Last but not least, there is forced migration, or, rather, relocation within the city due to demolition of older residential buildings. All these different forms of migration lead to a constant movement (voluntarily or forced) of people between different places, sometimes resulting in a better living standard while most of the time not.

### **Residential Areas**

Smaller families now inhabit the city (due to the one-child policy and for economic reasons), and this has led to a higher demand for housing. Furthermore, modern urban families are no longer living in one room, and they are not sharing cooking or toilet facilities with other families. Residential construction does sometimes strive to cater to a balancing act between traditional social and cultural values and those of modern China, reflecting an overlap of sociocultural and urban development. The main elements and signs of this in current residential construction are summarized by Hassenpflug: “It [the new Chinese city] is, however, also the city of gated neighbourhoods, inward-facing neighbourhood courtyards, the vertical form, the roof and light sculptures and, not least, the neighbourhood as a lifestyle product with its own trademark identity. . . . In the new gated communities, old and new China are comingled in a new, creative way.”<sup>22</sup> The southward orientation of newly constructed flats is still of great importance in this context. A significant element in the internal design of the traditional Chinese city was the orientation according to the four points of the compass, with the highest rank ascribed to the north-south axis. Alignment towards the south was incorporated into the design of temples, halls honouring ancestors, etc., and indeed into the design of the entire city itself, which was aligned along this central axis—a principle that is still practiced today.

Confucian social ethic was manifested in the structure of traditional private housing that faced inwards towards one or more courtyards. Accordingly, an important element of such modern residential developments is the arrangement around a central green space that refers to the traditional Chinese garden and recalls the relative seclusion and inward orientation of a courtyard, with a closed-in spatial character of a semi-private neighbourhood courtyard.

### **City Ruins in Contemporary Photography**

Ruins can assume the form of single buildings or can consist of whole districts that are threatened by demolition or even already demolished, thus affecting the urban fabric, the city structures, the cityscape, and its topography. In growing beyond previous city boundaries, modern construction work can leave a wake of destruction in different ways. Architectonic ruins often carry traces of what they once housed, with

memories and sometimes loss still hanging in the air. The possibilities offered by what is to come as yet play no role, so the past dominates both one's psyche and the landscape. Ultimately, the modern city can have an emotionally ruinous effect: It ruins, it precipitates personal and social uprooting or loneliness, it intensifies isolation in spite of involvement by a society of many. The ever-faster processes driving the new urban reality, lifestyles that may be too focused on consumption, prevailing economic paradigms, homelessness due to re-location or migration, and melancholy arising from familiar social structures that are rapidly becoming transient can leave the public bewildered and lost.

Jiang Zhi's *Things would turn to nails once they happened* (2007)<sup>23</sup> is based on a real event. The picture shows a small house, a future ruin, on top of a small hill, which stands like a memorial on a podium in an already excavated building pit covering several thousands of square metres. In March 2007, this brick construction in Yangjiaping (Chongqing) suddenly received national and international attention. Already cut off from the water and electricity supply, with no path connecting it to the surroundings, this house became an emblem for the ruthlessness of the construction industry in urban China. The owners refused to relocate or to sell their property under unfair conditions. For three years they resisted demolition under the most adverse circumstances and delayed the building of a planned shopping mall.<sup>24</sup> Jiang Zhi further intensified this already symbolic image by very simple means—using a floodlight to dramatically illuminate the house at night. This strong yet ethereal beam of light produced a sort of gloriole, highlighting an example of insistence on one's rights, of the refusal to yield in the midst of ruins, and emphasizing that something worthy of attention was happening amid these ruins.

Jiang Zhi, *Things would turn to nails once they happened*, 2007, C print, 150 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space, Beijing.



RongRong has several times addressed the consequences of the demolition of city districts in his work. *Untitled* (1996–97), a series Wu Hung referred to as *Ruin Pictures*,<sup>25</sup> shows remnants of traditional residential houses in Beijing with their semi-demolished walls, the destroyed shells of what were once homes, and personal leftovers strewn about in the debris. In the

centre of *Untitled No. 10*, the peeling remains of wall posters can be seen—showing perhaps film stars or some other admired celebrities—engendering an exposed, yet almost intimate look into these rooms that were previously the site of lives being lived. These spaces have been transformed into a heap of rubble, leaving behind a place that has obviously long been abandoned by its former residents. There are no people in these pictures, only traces of them. Oddly, while the images have a ghostly quality, there is no sense of melancholy; they simply focus on loss and destruction.



At first glance, the *Urban Fiction* series by Xing Danwen presents modern apartment complexes that stand as promising symbols of the economic success newly experienced by the rising Chinese middle class. Architectural models used as condo sales promotion are shown, representing an image of the purposeful modernity of urban life, with the physical ruins of what was here before already removed and replaced, unlike earlier works I have discussed. These pictures do not overtly show anything auspicious, but the ideal living conditions that are promoted by these models begin to crack the longer one looks at them; behind these facades, no lively or worthwhile future unfolds. Small, discrete scenes emerge revealing forlornness and terror within city life—a couple fighting, a male corpse lying in a pool of blood, lonely people isolated on the street with no others to accompany them in the cold, sterile light. Xing Danwen has stated: “With this work, I have brought my vision and perspectives to these urban spaces. . . . You start to wonder: Is this the picture of life today? Do we really live in this kind of space and environment?”<sup>26</sup> People in cities once lived beside each other, and now they are on top of each other; unlike the horizontal community of the *hutong*, this is a vertical kind of living where people are separated from each other in little boxes. Here, physical upheaval is followed by psychological upheaval.

RongRong, *1996 No. 10 (1)*, 1996, from the series *1996–1998, Beijing*, silver gelatin print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy of Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction (0)*, 2004–05, digital photograph, 160 x 227 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction (0)*, 2004–05, digital photograph, 160 x 227 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



In the series *Uprooted* (2007–2008), Yang Yi addresses the demolition of his hometown, Kaixian.<sup>27</sup> Through digital technology, the pictures show completely submerged stumps, remnants of buildings, flats, streets, and figures in their everyday life. These images do not yet herald a new beginning,

but are wholly the result of loss, uprootedness, the state of having been violently torn away from long-established communities. In the words of the artist: “One morning . . . I woke up in a sweat. . . I come and go along these familiar alleys. I revisit my old school, the dazzle of lights emanating from the cinema, the riverside where I used to swim, the rooftops where I once went to get a breath of fresh air, the winding pathways. . . All is in darkness, unattended, there are no friends or relatives to be found anywhere. Where do all of these bubbles and floating objects come from? . . . In taking these photographs, I had to hold my breath and, once taken, would make my escape. I don’t intend to dwell on the meaning to be found in my photography. What is important for me is that I came from that town. . . In 2009 . . . Kaixian, the 1800 years of my childhood home’s history, was expunged. . . On that day, I will awake underwater.”<sup>28</sup>

### Urban Spaces

Public space does not mean only urban (physical) outside space to which no specific function has been assigned. Often this space is of direct or indirect social/political importance; it can, after all, be the expression of a civil society, offer a venue for assembly, or simply facilitate general social gatherings outside of private space. Traditionally, this type of public space has not been available to people in Chinese cities (in contrast to public space for markets, traders, and similar activities of everyday life). Confucian principles and values focused on private life and the family structured everyday life. Public places in traditional Chinese cities had other functions; for example in Beijing, Tian’anmen Square was used for coronations and



Yang Yi, *Uprooted-06, Nanjiao Dormitory*, 2007, digital photograph, 105 x 150 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.



victory celebrations, for parades and national festivities, spring festivals, and so on. These political public spaces were not made to sojourn in and can clearly be distinguished from commercial public spaces. Beside these public spaces exist what Hassenpflug describes as “open space,” a space outside of family and community, outside of work and educational areas, a space that “is still primarily non-space or “nowhere,” a blank urban space with the most functional significance . . . a space that has to be crossed or overcome in order to enter a meaningful space again in the end.”<sup>29</sup> Another way of giving meaning to this open space is to experience it semi-privately. This semi-private use of public space can be seen, for instance, in the fact that once-private activities such as drying laundry, playing mahjong, or having an afternoon nap have moved into the urban street.

While the use and meaning of public and open spaces are renegotiated and private as well as commercial buildings are increasingly replacing these spaces, there is as a result less space and structure for non-commercial art and culture. This was already noted by Hou Hanru in 1997 and can still be observed today.<sup>30</sup> After the demolition of East Village in 1994, a former village at the once eastern border of Beijing where important early performances and experimental art activities had taken place, the industrial zone of the 798 district in Beijing was redefined as a place for avant-garde art. Since then, this thriving art district has more or less completely turned into a commercial enterprise. Artists more recently moved further east, where they have occupied and built spaces in the village of Caochangdi. Yet, in spring of 2010, the first owners to move there received a municipal note saying that Caochangdi has been put into the Beijing Land Reserve Program, and demolition is again a threat as the city incrementally expands.

### **Olympic Games**

In the context of the Olympic games, Hou Hanru has taken a critical look at the city, its structures, and urban life in the twenty-first century. According to him, the fact that Beijing was awarded the Olympic games led to a “fervent rush towards urban expansion and construction of new architectural landmarks . . . in order to transform the ancient capital city . . . into a veritable global metropolis.”<sup>31</sup> He views the 3-D simulations connected with the architectural presentations as problematic: “Fiction replaces reality. . . . There’s no longer any difference between fiction and the city. . . . Suddenly, one sees a division of the city: one that is real for those who can afford it but fictive for those who cannot. . . . For the benefit of the minority who claim to be creating a new and upgraded life for the rest of the population, others are forced to accept the fiction as the reality and to give up land where generations of their families have lived and laboured.”<sup>32</sup>

He considers the development in the Dazhulan quarter of Beijing to be a particularly flagrant example of the “violence of urban gentrification.” For centuries a commercial centre that included small trades, handicrafts, teahouses, and prostitution, this area was neglected from the 1990s onward and ultimately deteriorated into a slum. In the course of the preparations for the Olympics, it was resolved that the quarter should be transformed

into an authentic Chinese tourist attraction; however, it was not renovated, but, instead, completely demolished and essentially re-erected as a mock-up of a traditional city quarter, with tourist and service businesses, and the original inhabitants were sent to the outskirts of the city. He notes that such destruction is not a new phenomenon of the twenty-first century but also took place earlier—driven, for instance, by “socialist revolutionary ideology and its radical form of achieving modernity.”<sup>33</sup>

### City Plays in Contemporary Photography

The city plays—but with whom, for whom, and to what end, and which games does it play? And who are the players, who are the audiences, or, indeed, the voyeurs? For whom or what does the city serve as a background, as a theatrical stage, as a setting for the architectonic, social, cultural, economic, or personal dramatic productions? The following musings about the artistic works are less about any kind of visual sociology than about having a closer look at the surfaces of city life, of buildings, at iconic buildings, their accessible aesthetics, and their political and/or commercial connotations. They are also about urban fictions, international forms of architecture that are supposed to function without any relationship to their respective specific surroundings or histories, hybrid spaces, productions of urban identities/individualities, and urban flotsam associated with these various aspects of the modern city.



Chen Shaoxiong, *The Third Street, Gedächtniskirche Berlin*, 2001. C print, 80 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

*The Third Street, Gedächtniskirche Berlin* (2001), by Chen Shaoxiong, could be viewed as a kind of street photography with an abundance of visual information, with different elements that intertwine in ways that do not seem to fit together and that interweave themselves into a jumble of urban props against the city backdrop. For this work, Chen Shaoxiong took photographs in the streets of Guangzhou of vehicles, passers-by, rubbish bins, traffic signs, billboards, and so on. These elements in the photographs were subsequently cut out and arranged as props in a three-dimensional “photo-collage,” as though they were on a stage, to create a new scene. In the next step, the then-fictive Chinese panorama was photographed once more, this time against the background of real European metropolises. These interchanges of media, spatial dimension, layers of time, real and self-

made objects, Chinese and European places, produce a fictive conglomerate, a completely new urban stage. Chen Shaoxiong described his thoughts on this topic thus: “Everything in this city is temporary. . . . As a witness myself, I would like to keep the memory of my life inside my built-up small-scale country, or to build a scenery monument for this ever changing city.”<sup>34</sup> In this work, the focus is on the street life and social interactions and the stage settings behind them.



The urban fiction resulting from transposing European urban architectural ensembles or codes to Chinese cities is the focus of Liu Gang’s *Better Life—At Shanghai* (2010), the title which refers to the slogan of the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010. Liu Gang considered the settings of several of these new cityscapes, many of them intended to function as promising residential areas for the rising middle class. Among such satellite towns that have been built around Shanghai, for instance, is Anting Neustadt, designed to represent the German city, New Amsterdam; or Thames Town, creating the image of an English city. The success of these towns—in the sense that they were expected to be accepted by future inhabitants—has varied greatly, with many of them having become ghost towns. What they are often used for is a destination for a visit, a weekend trip to experience scenery like Disney-world, to a “landscape of urban stage-setting”,<sup>35</sup> thus these towns have become a part of the urban spectacle. For Liu Gang, this development reveals the gap between economic and cultural development. Buying culture or style is just an aspect of financial ability, but culture needs more time to evolve and requires deeper reflection and understanding.

Liu Gang, *Better Life—At Shanghai*, 2010, digital photograph, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and C-Space, Beijing.

In *Theatre* (2007), Miao Xiaochun reveals a quasi-reversed hierarchical order of the pictorial elements. The renowned National Center for Performing Arts, one of the iconic buildings that was constructed in the course of modernizing Beijing prior to the 2008 Olympics, is seen only

as a background component of the picture; that is, it is not at the centre of this particular urban stage. Its grey dome looming in the background is not immediately recognized, and it represents nothing more than an appendage against the urban story that unfolds in the foreground along a narrow street in a *hutong*. Here, the public goes about its everyday business with the spectacle of the National Center for Performing Arts making little impact. Miao Xiaochun comments on this work as follows: “Looking at the almost completed National Center for Performing Arts from a traditional *hutong* in Beijing, it looks as strange as an alien being from outer space. It is like a spacecraft landed from nowhere; with its extremely futuristic style, it is ‘embedded’ in the heart of this ancient city, showing a sense of magical realism. . . . How can such a scene not impress or fascinate people and make people fantasize? The drama happening right here is no less dramatic than the operas and plays which will soon take place here in the near future.”<sup>36</sup>

Miao Xiaochun, *Theatre*, 2007, C print, 197 x 480 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



All the images in Yang Zhenzhong’s series *Light as Fuck* (2002–03) were taken in different parts of Shanghai, and all show a similar motif: A person stands on a street and balances something impossible on his or her fingertip, for example, a stone lion, a heavy piece of construction machinery, or iconic architecture such as Shanghai’s well-known Oriental Pearl Tower. These people do not seem to worry about their task; they manage it as if in play, and the objects appear weightless. So is modern urban life light and easy; that is, comparatively simple to manage? Yang Zhenzhong approaches different aspects of urban reality ostensibly with humour as the speed of economic, architectonic, and social change seems even to defy the law of gravity. This work can also be interpreted as pointing to the desire to cope more easily, indeed playfully, with the reality of this change. Behind the seemingly simple poses of these urban dwellers lies the artist’s spirit of criticality: “In most Chinese cities, a lot of buildings have been demolished. . . . It is easy to get lost in a once familiar street within weeks. . . . The image of the city in our memories becomes lighter, no more weight of history. . . . When the sights in a city no longer bear historical significance, its images in my memory will become more and more misty (light). Such cities, like Shanghai, make people feel excited and depressed.”<sup>37</sup>

In the work of these artists and their choice of motifs and visual strategies, urban photography is inseparable from social transformation. Photography has become an appropriate means to address speed and change in the social, economic, and architectonic fabric of the city, to express one’s own state of



mind or upset.<sup>38</sup> The artists' perspectives on the city are very different from each other, on one occasion definitively apolitical, purely self-related, with sometimes laconic statements about the status quo, on another critically commenting on development, or almost so cursory as to record the changes merely in a quasi-documentary fashion, expressing notions of anxiety, hope, passion, and bewilderment.

Yang Zhenzhong, *Light as Fuck*, 2002, C print, 182 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now* (Heidelberg: Edition Braun Wachter Verlag, 2008), 16.

<sup>2</sup> David Company, *Kunst und Fotografie* (Berlin: Phaidon Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Xu Xiaoyu, "Die Entwicklung der Fotografie in China," in Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (Hg.), *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der Volksrepublik China* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1997), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Shi Baoxiu, "Die Darstellung des Menschlichen in der chinesischen Fotografiegeschichte," in Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Bayrische Gemäldesammlungen München, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (Hg.), *Humanism in China, Ein fotografisches Portrait* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus im Wachter Verlag), 33.

- <sup>6</sup> “Gu Zheng: A Theory of Chinese Personal Photography,” in John Millichap, ed., *3030: New Photography in China* (Hong Kong: 3030 Press, 2006), 14ff.
- <sup>7</sup> Within this essay various aspects of the Chinese city in the twenty-first century as well as the plurality of artistic approaches within contemporary photography that address urban development and the manifold related consequences are depicted. It is not about a sociological, architectural, or other scholarly debates; for example, theories concerning the modern Chinese city like Rem Koolhaas’s concept of the “City of Exacerbated Difference” are not further looked into. Also, there are some further urban codes than that mentioned here, for example, the eclecticism of architecture, the iconography of advertising in public spaces, and aspects of urban social makeup such as the growing number of Internet cafes or the changes in wedding ceremonies.
- <sup>8</sup> Dieter Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas* (Basel/Berlin: Birkhauser Verlag, Bauverlag Gütersloh, 2009), 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Within the topos of change in the Chinese context, reference must be made in particular to the *Book of Change*, the *Yijing*. The book describes a basic principle of necessity of change as well as acceptance of change. The world in all its forms emerges from permanent changes of the two polar (not dualistic in the sense of countervailing but rather in a complementary sense) fundamental forces yang and yin. These changes offer both opportunities and risks; they do not represent fate as they can be influenced. In this flux, “time” is simply a change of a constellation of the forces, i.e., it is not something that is passive and passes by but an active factor that brings about events. In this context, it is also important to do what best agrees with the respective time quality, for example to go with the times, wait for the right time, etc. The change in/of the city in itself is thus not necessarily a problem, but rather the speed with which which existed disappears, leaving a gap in the continuum.
- <sup>10</sup> The place of employment was called *danwei* (work unit). As people also lived where they worked, the *danwei* system shaped and controlled the everyday life of its inhabitants (for example, the provision of food, permission for marriage, etc.).
- <sup>11</sup> Cristina Bechtler, *Art and Cultural Policy in China: A Conversation between Ai Weiwei, Uli Sigg, and Yung Ho Chang*, moderated by Peter Pakesch (Wien: Springer Verlag, 2009), 45.
- <sup>12</sup> Hou Hanru, “Living With(in) the Urban Fiction: Notes on Urbanization and Art in Post-Olympic China,” in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 8, no. 3 (May/June 2009), 17.
- <sup>13</sup> Linda Vlassenrood, “Making Change Sensible,” in Els Brinkman (Hg.), *China Contemporary: Architecture, Art, Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgever, 2006), 47.
- <sup>14</sup> Jun, “Impact of the Olympic Games on the city of Beijing,” in Frédéric Edelmann, ed., *In the Chinese City: Perspectives on the Transmutations of an Empire* (Barcelona/New York: Actor Publications, 2009), 338.
- <sup>15</sup> Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Cities on the Move,” in *Cities on the Move* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag gerd Hatje, 1997), section 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Hassenpflug, *Der urbane Code Chinas*, 16.
- <sup>17</sup> [www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/1077](http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/1077).
- <sup>18</sup> See my remarks on the *Book of Change*.
- <sup>19</sup> *Jiang Pengyi* (Beijing: Paris-Beijing Photo Gallery, 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> Heinz Norbert Jocks, “Weng Fen. Sehnsuchtsblicke in die Großstadtmoderne,” *Kunstforum International* 194 (November–December 2008), 214.
- <sup>21</sup> Within the *hukou* system in China, every household is officially registered. This record identifies a person as a resident of an area and can barely be changed. One of the consequences for migrant workers lies in the fact that in living outside their officially registered area they have no official access to government services, etc.
- <sup>22</sup> Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas*, 14.
- <sup>23</sup> Part of the *Light* series, *Things would turn to nails once they happened* (2008) also integrates a conceptual and performative approach.
- <sup>24</sup> Hou Hanru, “Living With(in) the Urban Fiction,” 14.
- <sup>25</sup> Wu Hung, “From Six Mile Village to Three Shadows,” Feng Boyi, Mao Weidong, Bridget Noetzel eds., *Compound Eye: Works by RongRong & Inri, 2000-2010* (Beijing: He Xiangning Art Museum, 2010), 178. Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hong Kong: University Chicago Press, 2005 [revised edition]), 117.
- <sup>26</sup> [www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/statement.html](http://www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/statement.html).
- <sup>27</sup> Kaixian is one of about thirteen towns that were flooded in the process of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. It was rebuilt at a new location.
- <sup>28</sup> *Yang Yi*, (Beijing: Paris-Beijing Photo Gallery, 2008).
- <sup>29</sup> Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas*, 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Cities on the Move,” section 4.
- <sup>31</sup> Hou Hanru, “Living With(in) the Urban Fiction,” 8.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>34</sup> [www.chenshaoxiong.com/article/article\\_en/article\\_en\\_08.htm](http://www.chenshaoxiong.com/article/article_en/article_en_08.htm).
- <sup>35</sup> Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas*, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> [www.miaoxiaochun.com/zhongwenyemian/yishujiazishu/yju.htm](http://www.miaoxiaochun.com/zhongwenyemian/yishujiazishu/yju.htm).
- <sup>37</sup> [www.yangzhenzhong.com/?p=1545&lang=en](http://www.yangzhenzhong.com/?p=1545&lang=en).
- <sup>38</sup> This applies also to the simultaneous presence of video, multimedia art, etc.

## Xu Yong's *This Face*

Xu Yong's latest work, *This Face* (2011), marks a continuation of his concern for the plight of prostitutes in China.<sup>1</sup> This time he engaged the services of a successful sex trade worker, Zi U, who works out of a luxurious hotel serving high paying clients. Like the artists of the floating quarters—or red light districts—that were reserved for the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment in nineteenth-century Japan, Xu Yong has taken the subject of the prostitute and explored its social and artistic aspects.

Prostitution is an ever-growing industry in China, where even college graduates and young, middle-class girls turn to the pursuit of cash in exchange for sexual services. Some girls prefer this life to a middle level job because they can make so much more money. Aware of their beauty and its short-lived value, and enticed by the riches of their contemporary materialist culture promoted in all the media, they pursue this path of apparent “easy wealth.” Fascinated by this recent development in China, Xu Yong decided to explore it in this project, but spent two years considering how to go about it. But even after having come up with a plan for the project, he was somewhat hesitant to pursue it because of the underworld nature of the work. Encouraged by friends, he eventually began the search for a subject.

Xu Yong acknowledges that there are several levels of prostitutes in China, ranging from those whose destitution leads them to stand by the road in the countryside, walk the city streets, or wait at train stations, to middle class women serving the higher levels of society. He found it difficult to document the squalor of the lives of lower class sex workers because of their lack of a fixed location for their work, the itinerant nature of their trade, and other attendant problems. Instead, he turned to those among the upper ranks. Trying to engage someone willing to collaborate was a task more arduous than he anticipated. Finally he met and entered into intense negotiation with Zi U, who was initially reluctant to participate in his scheme until she was persuaded with considerable remuneration for her time. Then came a lengthy period of preparation that included experimenting with the proper lens, selecting the focal length of the shot, choosing the lighting, arranging her pose, and other technical considerations. The project entailed his spending an entire day—January 19, 2011—taking photographs of Zi U; the results consist of 513 close-up shots of her face taken from the same angle, with the same lighting, and little apparent change in her emotional response to her situation.



Xu Yong, *This Face* (details), 2011, archival pigment prints, 20 x 15 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.



The project is a seemingly straight forward documentation of her appearance as she progresses through the day, from her sleepy early morning expression to her preparations for the start of the workday with freshly applied makeup and fashionable hairstyle, to the aftermath of each encounter, with the hasty efforts to get ready for the succeeding engagement. That day she serviced eight clients with two working breaks—an average day. In these pictures, Xu Yong captures the pace of her life, at times from minute to minute, from the slow passing of time in the morning to the increasing pace during the latter part of the day, and her winding down at night. In the pictures, her face appears increasingly tired, her makeup heavier and heavier, for with no time for reapplication, she applies layer over layer to repair her appearance. Exhibited in 2011 at Xu Yong's own 798 Space, in Beijing, this series of pictures formed a continuous horizontal band along the wall, and viewers could experience in sequence her day's progression.



Accompanying the photos was a narrative of an average day in Zi U's life. Written in her own neat calligraphy, it describes in salacious detail each client, what acts were performed, how she carefully collected the money, and some of her plans for the cash, among which were to buy her father a coat and her unemployed brother a cell phone—modest gifts would not make them suspicious of her true source of income. The sensational description of her sexual activities is offset by the matter-of-fact recording of the quotidian activities of her life—her raucous after-hours, early-morning meetings at a fast food restaurant with her friends, her life in a grand hotel, the take out meals delivered to her by her pimp. The narrative also disdainfully contrasts her situation with that of other sex workers, such as those who, employed in bars and licensed by the state, are forced to wear a nametag. She also relates a phone conversation with a friend about a former sex worker who left the trade to marry, and they speculate on her prospects of achieving a financially successful married life.

Xu Yong, installation view of *This Face* at 798 Space, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

Born in 1984, Zi U graduated with a major in tourism from a university in the northeast and worked as both a middle school teacher and as a tour guide. She has lived in Beijing since 2008. Her motives are clear: Zi

U expresses her love of money and how at the end of each encounter and again at the end each day, pleased with her earnings, she kisses the money before going to sleep.

Xu Yong avers that many of the middle class girls who become prostitutes are not necessarily victims, although the eroding toll of their work is evident. There are long hours confined to a hotel room, a monotonous day with little distraction, and the dangers of difficult, at times physically repulsive or violent guests (which Zi U describes in her narrative), being robbed, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, as well as arrest and incarceration by the police. In a recent interview, Xu Yong said that he believed they chose this work because they enjoy sex, but, more to the point, they relish the money and are able to amass substantial sums. Those who are smart enough to save can afford to retire and live a relatively luxurious life. Of course, their youth and inexperience may also lead to a potentially short-lived prosperity and to being taken advantage of by friends and family in need of cash. But the economics is enticing for these girls: a high-end sex worker can make up to seven thousand Yuan a night, while a college graduate may earn that in a week at best. Xu Yong explains how this is an ever-growing industry that attracts women from a diversity of backgrounds—models, singers, second-rate movie stars, college students, wives, and mothers. For these middle class prostitutes the danger of exposure to family and friends unaware of their activities could lead to dire social and familial consequences in addition to the abuses mentioned above.

Xu Yong and Yu Na, *Solution Scheme D4*, 2007, digital print, 110 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artists.



This is not the first project in which Xu Yong worked with a prostitute. For his 2007 series of photographs *Solution Scheme*, he collaborated with Yu Na, an unsuccessful model turned sex worker. Here the cleverness of the artist's conceit and his humanitarian concerns are evident. As a child of the Cultural Revolution, Xu Yong, along with others of his generation, is appalled at the licentious and luxurious lifestyles that involve such illicit activities as prostitution that pervade urban China and that are often achieved at the expense of itinerant workers living on the outskirts of



Xu Yong and Yu Na, *Solution Scheme B3*, 2007, digital print, 110 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artists.



Cui Xiuwen, *Ladies*, 2000, video, 6 mins., 12 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Beijing. As Zhang Dali explained in an interview about his artwork *Race* (2001–05), he took plaster casts of migrant people and sex workers, who were usually paid wages according to their age, with “fresh meat” costing more than older workers.<sup>2</sup> Other artists, like Cui Xiuwen, exposed the experiences of sex trade workers when she hid a camcorder in the ladies’ bathroom of a nightclub and captured their conversations while they primped before the mirror, talked on their cell phones, and concealed their hard-won earnings in their undergarments.<sup>3</sup> The Gao Brothers also used these citizens as models in their many paintings and sculptures, some of which address the problem directly by showing prostitutes being raided by cops or hauled off to jail kicking and screaming,<sup>4</sup> and Wang Qingsong makes no effort to glamorize their life in some of his photographic urban tableaux. These artists, like so many others, grew up in a highly restrictive and even prudish society and are not tolerant of the injustices and indignities suffered by these young women.

Xu Yong's empathy is evident in his *Solution Scheme* series, as he gave Yu Na total control of the scene's preparations: proud of her lithe body, she chose to appear nude, and, like a movie director, she was charged with the responsibility of manipulating the placement, poses, and actions of the four male models that Xu Yong engaged to work with her. With the help of a remote switch, she actually shot the pictures as well. Her biographical narrative, told in a straight-forward and unsentimental way, accompanied the luxurious, oversized glossy volume of photographs, and the profits from her equal share in the sale of the book have made her financially comfortable.



Gao Brothers, *Miserable Prostitute*, 2007, painted bronze, life-sized. Courtesy of the artists.

While throughout the world prostitutes are often the victims of misfortune and exploitation, in the West this predicament is often conveyed in a romantic way through movies and books. The glamorous version of the life of a call girl is the subject of such popular movies as *Pretty Woman*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Klute*, and *Irma La Douce*. Similarly, woodblock prints of mid-nineteenth century Japan by Kitagawa Utamaro and many other artists of that era featured beautiful and elegant geisha that may have also functioned as advertising for the houses of pleasure in which the geisha worked. They are fashionable creatures whose complicated hair styles studded with multiple adornments and many layers of silk robes, the main symbols of their personal wealth, attest to their status. Their very presence in art, even in the popular genre of inexpensive woodcuts, was unusual in the history of Japan and was the result of their new-found wealth and prominence. Some achieved considerable fortune and fame, and the nearly ubiquitous image of the geisha came to represent new urban leisure activities and their clientel, merchants who grew rich off the burgeoning

commercial markets, enjoyed the company of geisha. Consumption laws issued by the Bakufu government tried to limit the merchants' lavish existence. In sum, women, for the first time in Japan, were one of the main subjects of art, and no longer limited to a supporting narrative role in a historical or mythological drama.

More to the point is a comparison between Kitagawa Utamaro's woodblock prints, especially the series *The Twelve Hours of the Blue Towers* (1794–45) and the eighteenth-century novel by Kyoden, *The Other Side of the Brocade* (1791), both of which documented night life in the geisha house and the customers who, wanting a private view of the geisha, paid extravagant sums to witness the weary girls during the off hours of their seemingly alluring existence.<sup>5</sup> Though Xu Yong is apparently unaware of the Japanese works, the parallels are striking; Zi U's beauty is even presented in the same close-up and intimate view of the face, slightly turned to the side as seen in Japanese prints.

The social situation in contemporary China has comparisons to that of Edo Japan. Emerging from a restricted hierarchical military and agricultural society to a thriving urban economy, Japanese society underwent a redistribution of wealth from the samurai to the merchant class who were then able to afford the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the pleasure quarters. China today is experiencing great prosperity after the economic hardships endured under the Cultural Revolution, and there is a new class of urbanites who, like the merchants of Edo Japan, have the time and money to enjoy luxurious pleasures. As explained in the *New York Times* recently, the social custom of concubines is reemerging in China.<sup>6</sup> Different from the high-end prostitutes in the details of the social relationships they form, these women also enjoy generous compensation for the pleasure of their company, and their lives are partly fulfilled by the purchase and display of objects of conspicuous consumption. Some Chinese officials, like the Mayor of Hangzhou, who was exposed for his corruption and recently executed, or the newly fired Railway Minister, each maintained over a dozen mistresses. According to the *Times* article, having a concubine, a woman dedicated to one's pleasure, is now *de rigueur* for rich and influential men in China. Thus, in China's churning economy, women are finding an unconventional way to share in the prosperity and participate in consumer culture. In this way, and others, women for the first time are able to achieve some independence and financial security, and Xu Yong, like the nineteenth-century Japanese printmakers, is leaving a record of their way of life.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of an interview with the artist at his 798 Gallery Space in Beijing in June 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Karetzky, "Zhang Dali: The Face of China," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 4, no. 4 (2005), 69–75.

<sup>3</sup> Exhibited in *Femininity in Contemporary Asian Art: If the Shoe Fits . . . Vernal Visions*, curated and with a catalogue written by Patricia Karetzky, Lehman College Art Gallery, New York City, and Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 2002, (see [www.karetzky.com](http://www.karetzky.com)).

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Karetzky, "The Gao Brothers: All the World's a Stage" *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6, no. 2 (2007), 61–67.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Nelson Davis, "Artistic Identity and Ukiyo-e prints: The Representation of Kitagawa Utamaro to the Edo Public," in Melinda Takekuchi, *The Artist as Professional in Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 113–51; see 139.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Levin, "For China's New Rich, Status Is a Woman on the Side," *New York Times*, August 10, 2011, A6.

## Evoking Past into Present: The Spectral Imagination of Howie Tsui

Interview by Joni Low



Howie Tsui, installation view of *Horror Fables* at Centre A. Photo: Mathieu Richard. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A, Vancouver.

Over the past decade, Howie Tsui has produced a fascinating body of work, combining an array of disparate cultural and art-historical references that destabilize the experience of viewing in order to create unexpected connections between signifiers and narratives. His otherworldly compositions often draw eerie parallels with aspects of human nature and contemporary society. Fragments of stories may continually be present—in fantasies, myths, ghost stories, and tales of survival and hardship. Tsui demonstrates that although history may haunt us, it can also sometimes be played with, displaced, and recombined to activate new interpretations and understandings of past and present.

*Howie Tsui's work resides in the collections of the Canada Council for the Arts Art Bank, City of Ottawa and Centre d'exposition de Baie-Saint-Paul, and has been shown in North America, Europe, Australia, and Mexico. In 2005 he was awarded the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts for most outstanding young visual artist. In 2012 his work will be featured in *Phantoms of Asia*, a group exhibition on Asian cosmology and spirituality at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.*

*In June 2011, Tsui produced a new installation work and performance titled Celestials of Salt Water City, as part of his exhibition at Centre A in Vancouver, Canada. Adopting the form of utshushi-e—an eighteenth century pre-cinematic storytelling tradition in Japan that combines magic lanterns, slide projections, and music—Tsui presented stories gathered from residents of Vancouver’s Chinatown community, transforming familiar narratives of struggle and discrimination into fantastic, otherworldly fables.*

*Shortly after his performance, Howie Tsui and I sat down on the rooftop of the artist-run centre Western Front to reflect on recent works, his artistic process, and the stories interspersed throughout his art.*

**Joni Low:** Let’s begin by talking a bit about your body of work, *Horror Fables* (2008–10), which was on view at Centre A in 2011. There is an incredible depth and richness within these works, both visual and historical—a summation of a decade or so of your own research that is manifested in these fantastic collisions of ancient and modern Asian ghost stories, with their grotesque, hybrid forms and contemporary cultural references from Japanese manga to Hong Kong pop culture. Could you talk a bit about your methodology and how this research manifests itself?

**Howie Tsui:** It was through various popular mediums. First, I was reading books, usually compendiums of Japanese and Chinese ghost tales that are translated into English. They are pretty easy to digest because a lot of the tales are quite short. So it’s not as involved as plowing through a big novel—each story is around five pages. In addition to these books, I watched movies such as the 1960s Japanese horror films in the Criterion collection. One movie, *Kwaidan* (1964, Dir. Masaki Kobayashi), is adapted from traditional Japanese ghost stories; another movie, called *Jigoku* (1960, Dir. Nubuo Nakagawa), is about Buddhist hell.

I also embedded family ghost stories into some of the pieces that came from questions I asked of my relatives. And then there are more memory-based influences, in which I took images that traumatized me as a child, images from 1980s Hong Kong pop culture, and inserted them into my work. *Yeung Ga Jeung* (Yang’s Saga) was a six-episode television show about gods coming down onto earth and then meddling about in the politics of the state. There are some graphic scenes in it; it was pretty shocking to see this as a youngster.

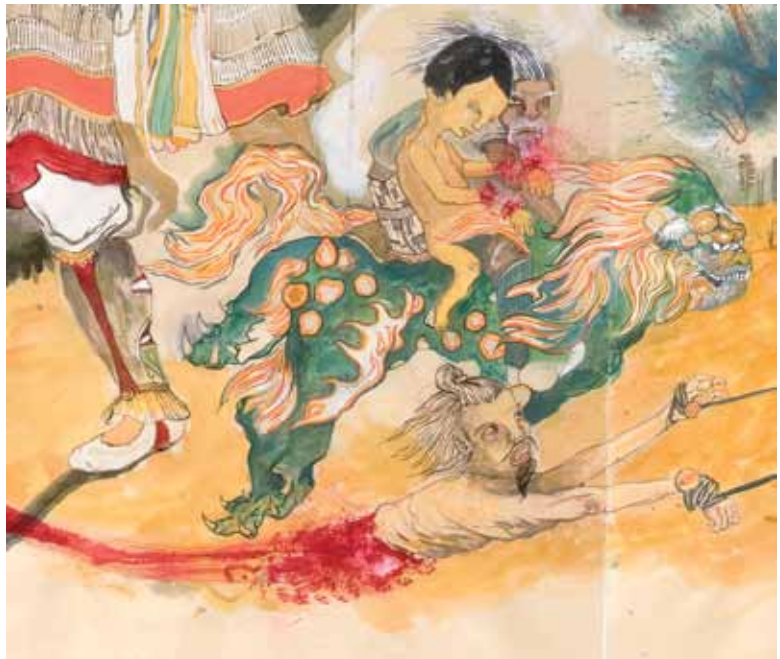
**Joni Low:** How old were you when you saw this?

**Howie Tsui:** I was probably around seven. Tony Leung is one of the actors—he played the role of a reincarnated Daoist deity (Duke of Thunder), and near the end of the series, the villains finally catch him. They tied him up to a wooden post on the beach by the sea, with the tide slowly rising. They try to kill him with arrows, but he won’t die because he is a reincarnated deity. The only way they are able to kill him is by slitting his forehead open and peeling the skin down over his face. This is on nine o’clock, evening NBC-

Howie Tsui, *Forest Romp* (detail), 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.



Howie Tsui, *Forest Romp* (detail), 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.



type prime-time TV in Hong Kong! And it's Tony Leung, too. Everyone loves Tony; no one wants to see him die like that.

**Joni Low:** That image has appeared in your work.

**Howie Tsui:** That's in *Forest Romp* (2009). And there's an image near that figure in *Forest Romp*, which is also from that television series with someone being dragged by a horse.

**Joni Low:** I'm curious about your process as the results of your research often seem to be non-linear, irrational, and create a destabilizing encounter for the viewer. Can you describe your experience of creating the scroll *Dead Sea* (2009), for instance? How did all the different cultural references come together?

**Howie Tsui:** I take all the notes from my research and then organize them in some way based on, say, setting and location, or how various images could be woven together to create hyper-narratives. For *Dead Sea* and *Forest Romp*, I used the natural environment as a guide, or a way to frame and figure out which content to put in which piece. *Dead Sea* was based on water stories. Usually I have a couple of anchor stories within each of the pieces that are more in-depth/involved, combined with anecdotal tidbits, images, and vignettes that form other components. *Hoichi the Earless* was the anchor story for *Dead Sea*, which is about a blind *biwa* player who was enticed to play music for a group of ghosts. To protect him, a priest painted his body with characters from the *Heart Sutra*, which rendered his body invisible. When the lead samurai ghost summoned Hoichi again, all he could see were Hoichi's ears, which the ghost ripped off in anger. In *Dead Sea*, the images illustrating this story ascend from the foreground of one of the panels.

Alongside these are other images—including these Heike crabs—that relate to a story about two warring Japanese clans. One clan was completely annihilated, and the myth follows that all the souls of the dead clansmen



inhabited the crabs; to this day, when you go to this beach in Japan and see the crabs, their shells look like they have faces. I googled Heike crabs to see the photos. So, I usually have these more concrete elements to anchor the piece, and then I leave it open-ended, with areas where I try to merge more intentional components with subconscious responses.

Howie Tsui, *Dead Sea*, 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.

**Joni Low:** In researching and keeping all these materials, do fragments of stories and images exist in your mind, like a sort of cognitive database, waiting perhaps months or years before finding an appropriate place in your work?

**Howie Tsui:** Yes, I think so. Even the images in the *Horror Fables* series were gestating for a while before I wrote a project proposal for what it would actually become. But I knew I wanted to make work that incorporated these images, especially the nostalgic childhood ones. In a way, I created a platform that used traditional ghost stories to satirize fear, while also allowing me to “sneak in” family ghost stories and weird, nostalgic 1980s pop culture, so there is a historic thread—of fear and horror—that runs throughout.

**Joni Low:** You’ve talked a bit about how your personal experience and upbringing configures themselves in your art. I understand you’ve moved around quite a bit, and I have noticed that the theme of migration appears in your work.

**Howie Tsui:** It’s interesting because I don’t really think much about how my personal experiences seep into the work. It seems that I’ve been privileged to be able to view the world from various perspectives, having moved around



quite a bit to places that are drastically different from each other—for example, from Africa to Thunder Bay, Ontario, which is a rather isolated blue-collar town, and then to a bureaucratic, political place like Ottawa. I was born in Hong Kong and lived in Nigeria for five years, and I would go back to Hong Kong for the summers, so my family travelled a lot. When we immigrated to Canada we moved to Thunder Bay, where I basically grew up; we lived there for fifteen years. But I don’t think I’ve addressed the theme of migration explicitly or intentionally in my work. Maybe in this new work, I’m addressing it more. I wouldn’t say *Horror Fables* is necessarily about migration. But it does reflect this kind of spectral or radiant perspective that I’ve acquired through my general life experience.

**Joni Low:** It certainly makes for an interesting world view. How about your personal experiences with ghost stories—and, specifically, ghosts?

**Howie Tsui:** Well, obviously, as a kid, you think about bogeymen and imagine there's something scary by the furnace in the basement. Then for a certain "enlightened" period, you totally don't believe in ghosts. I find that I've been going through waves of believing, in and out. Now that I'm researching the topic, I'm not even religious, but since I've been researching things like Buddhism, for example, it seems that through this process, I've quietly developed an awareness of the otherworldly.



Howie Tsui, *Forest Romp* (detail), 2009, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 91.4 x 317.5 cm. Photo: Stephen Fenn. Courtesy of the artist.

One time, a couple years ago, while touring in the band *The Acorn*, in the UK, on our way to France, we stayed in this really old hotel. I was lying down and my band mate was sleeping on the other bed. As I was trying to sleep, a light illuminated my eyelids, and I opened my eyes to see this little diamond-shaped light hovering above me. Suddenly, it expanded and created this huge flash of light in the room, then everything went dark, and I just started laughing. My band mate turned around and asked, "Did you just take a photo of me?" And I was like, "No dude, that just *happened*." It was weird because we were on the fourth floor and it could not have been headlights—the only other logical explanation I could muster.

Another time on tour, we were staying at the Senator Hotel in Saskatoon. I woke up naked, and I've never undressed while asleep before. My band mate woke up, and one side of his torso was wet—not with sweat, but as if someone had spilled something on him. But the bed was entirely dry. Someone from another band got locked in the bathroom, even though it

locks from the inside. She thought her sister was on the other side playing a prank, holding the door shut, but there was no one there.

**Joni Low:** Very strange. In terms of enacting influences, perhaps we can focus on the more performative elements of your practice. I find your solo exhibitions are like immersive installations with performance—your live frescoes, for instance, as well as your project *Celestials of Salt Water City*, which was commissioned for your exhibition at Centre A. Perhaps we can start by talking about the *Spectral Residue* frescoes. What is the relationship between these and, say, effigies, or other spiritual rituals and cultural traditions? What is the significance of burning images onto the gallery walls?

**Howie Tsui:** Did I ever tell you how these came about? Well, in 2008 I was doing an artist residency in Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec. It is a one-month residency where artists work in a hockey arena—they divided up the arena, and consigned artists to their own “compartments.” Artists had to be there for set times, from noon to five each day, with two days off. The public comes in and sees you at work—so there is this awkward, zoo-like, artist-as-animal kind of feeling of being on display. Many of my colleagues had filled up their spaces in impressive ways, shipping their large-scale paintings from Montreal. I just had a table, and was working on the four small, intricate pieces from the *Horror Fables* scrolls. I started feeling a bit inadequate about not having any physical presence in my space. So I thought, well, I better put something that will appear more substantive. So I hung this large roll of rice paper on the wall with the intention of just playing around with it, making gestural and expressionistic strokes to counter the tight, hyper-detailed work that was going on with the smaller pieces. It became a way for me to stay loose and limber.

On the last weekend of the residency, because curators were coming to visit, my plan was to remove the rice paper and put up the four finished smaller pieces in an effort to make my space look “presentable.” I was there late the night before, removing it, and then I realized, oh shit, this is stuck to the wall. I hadn’t placed any absorptive material behind the work and over the past two weeks, I had applied layers and layers of different inks onto the paper, so it stuck to the wall, and I was now peeling it off, and it started ripping, and I thought, this drawing is totally destroyed. The paper was shriveled up on the ground, all ripped and crumpled, and then I looked at the wall, which appeared to have all these eerie, faint marks and impressions. It could have just been a result of late night hallucinations but I started seeing what looked like faces, so I began trying to render these faces out of the markings. I found using a brush was too intentional—there was too much presence of the hand, whereas the marks and what I was seeing sort of came out of nowhere, it just kind of emerged. I had matches with me, so I held them close to the wall and started rendering the images using smoke stains, which I had never done before. I just tried it, and the matches produced this rich, saturated ochre colour from the combusted sulfur along with wisps of black smoke stains traveling upwards. It was a happy accident. When something like that happens, it’s a kind of golden moment in art-making.



My views of this work have broadened quite a bit from my initial reading. It began as a pretty simple process-based interpretation of the supernatural, where the paper resembles a corpse or body, and the transferred imprint becomes the drawing spirit. I normally use just one match at a time when rendering, but during the opening at Centre A, due to the large space, I had multiple matches all going at once, and people were telling me it reminded them of joss sticks, or incense. I had never thought of it that way, but these interpretations added another dimension to the work that I'm still digesting.

Residency space at Le Symposium international d'art contemporain de Baie Saint-Paul, 2008  
 Courtesy of the artist and Le Symposium international d'art contemporain de Baie Saint-Paul, Quebec.

**Joni Low:** For your project, *Celestials of Saltwater City*, a performance combining live narration, music, illustrated transparencies and projections, you bring that same spontaneity and process of discovery to the work. I understand it was based on six stories that you collected from conversations with elders in Vancouver's Chinatown-Strathcona community. Could you talk a bit about your process and about the stories themselves?



Left: Howie Tsui, *Spectral Residue* (detail), 2008, rice paper, acrylic, ink, matches. Courtesy of the artist .

Right: Howie Tsui, *Spectral Residue* (detail), 2008, rice paper, acrylic, ink, matches. Courtesy of the artist.

**Howie Tsui:** I had gathered a lot of research material and tried to illustrate it on as many slides as I could in the time frame, but I really had to stop at a certain point because I needed to begin assembling and sequencing the slides and rehearsing for the performance.

I started off the performance with slide projections depicting a ladies' mahjong game, which is actually inspired by Wayson Choy's 1995 novel *Jade Peony*. There are always these scenes where his mom goes out and plays mahjong really late at night and hangs out with the ladies. When we first

Howie Tsui, *Spectral Residue* performance at Centre A, 2011, rice paper, acrylic, ink, matches. Photo: Mathieu Bichard. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A, Vancouver.



Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City* rehearsals, 2011. Photo: Debra Zhou. Courtesy of the artist and Centre A, Vancouver.



moved to Thunder Bay, all the Chinese restaurateurs would gather together on the weekends and play. Our parents would play mahjong and we'd be wired on sugar, running around at three or four in the morning. *Deen sai ma! Wan do deen ma!* (You're crazy! You're playing crazy!). That's what they would say.

I wanted to begin with this because I have these warm memories about those times. I thought ladies gossiping and telling stories would be a good narrative entry point. And also in reference to terms like *tai hung yun* or "astronaut," the idea of how one's husband comes to Canada and the wives stay in Hong Kong.

**Joni Low:** And also the inverse, today, when husbands work in China and their families live here.

**Howie Tsui:** Right. I was also interested in the idea of having first wives, second wives, concubines, and so forth, together. I kind of see this first scene incorporating this idea as well—an unspoken hierarchy amongst the



mahjong players, where they might be from the same family. But those ideas are not implied, by any means, in the performance.

Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City, Mah Jong scene* (digital composite), 2011, *furos* (wooden projectors), Chinese pigments, and ink on transparencies. Courtesy of the artist.

The performance is fresh right now, so there will be many more interpretations of these images as they unfold in time. I wanted the story in the performance to follow a sort of timeline, so the next scene kicks off in Hong Kong around the late nineteenth century, during the great migration of workers leaving China for North America in search of gold and to build the railroad. It's a story that a friend told me, handed down from his partner's great-grandfather, about workers boarding a ship off the Hong Kong harbour; they tried to pack as many people on the steamship as they could and it capsized. He could swim so he made it to shore. But he recounted the desperation of the incident. Once the boat sank and everyone was in the water, there were people who couldn't swim who desperately grappled onto those that could. And the swimmers reacted by either rescuing folks or by kicking them away to drown. In this series of projections, you see red silhouettes of people boarding the boat, and then the boat capsizes. The next scene begins with a water horizon line with flickering figures slowly sinking, a swimmer dives down and rescues one person, while above, there are two characters, one kicking the other. I'm interested in the moral dichotomy of that situation.



Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City, capsized scene* (digital composite), 2011, *furos* (wooden projectors), Chinese pigments, and ink on transparencies. Courtesy of the artist.

That was followed by a set of eyes, which relates to a saying I recall from some history books, which goes something like this: “They call Vancouver Saltwater City because the water is salty from all the tears of the people that suffered.” It’s a very Chinese-type of saying, very pathos-laden. The same emotional appeal is used in the story of laundry workers who had a really rough life—they washed people’s clothes with their tears. I read a history book about laundry workers in the late 1800s, and it is always described as a very lonely time—their wives are back in China, so they are just doing laundry and working long days, and before the advent of other technologies, such as running water. So they would go down to the creek with a barrel and fill it up with water, wheel it back to the workplace and then boil it.

**Joni Low:** A lot of hard physical labour.

**Howie Tsui:** Yes, back breaking and psyche-busting lifestyles. When I interviewed Ken Lum, he was saying that he suspects that the toxic chemicals used for machines and fabrics at a garment factory where his mother worked led to the premature death of several women she worked with; they died of leukemia and were all about the same age. So there’s a weird connection to that story.

**Joni Low:** I seem to remember a scene with a face, with a grinning red mouth, with these floating images of chicken feet, *dan tart* (egg tart)—what’s that about?

**Howie Tsui:** That’s probably one of the most difficult stories to translate into *utshushi-e* form. It was a story told to me by Master Toa Wong, a ninety-year old opera singer, when I was here last summer doing early research. He shared a few really colourful ghost stories, mostly about spirit possession that he had personally encountered. That story starts off with an image of a teary-eyed mother forced to strangle her own baby due to poverty. She then stashes it under the bed and a baby ghost emerges, but it is trapped on earth and wanders aimlessly, not at peace—a hungry ghost that eventually possesses the body of a prostitute. Transcribing this story in a visual format was quite challenging because it was littered with colloquial Cantonese terms. That’s why I gave the prostitute the facial markings of a red-eared turtle, which references the Cantonese slang term for a madam, *Gwai Po* (which translates literally to turtle lady).

So the baby possesses this “turtle lady” while Master Toa Wong and his opera friends are having dim sum with her. He then recalls, “I knew she was possessed because these ominous clouds suddenly appeared in her eyes,” which refers to another Cantonese term to describe the symptoms of bodily possession by spirits. I tried to illustrate this sequence with a series of projections focusing on the eyes. First the eye sockets contained beady eyeballs; these were replaced by flashing lightning bolts, and finally storm clouds. It was a way for me to illustrate how her consciousness was taken over by the spirit. It was difficult to convey that.

The story finishes with the starving spirit-possessed prostitute eating dim sum ravenously and becoming super happy. There’s this Cantonese term, *hoi sum doa da guan dau*—so happy that you’re doing cartwheels, which is illustrated in the scene following the food scene. That one was really tough to do.

**Joni Low:** Did you get the sense that the audience was able to pick up on these sort of colloquial references? I’m sure that for those who are less familiar with these stories, it would certainly pique their curiosity, or perhaps encourage them to learn more, as it has for me.

**Howie Tsui:** It was difficult to know, as I was behind the projection screen conducting the performance and was unable to see the audience. Also, I did not get into too many detailed discussions about the piece afterwards. In retrospect, I wish I had included a little program pamphlet with the scene titles and a short description to offer a basic guide for the audience. I would be quite impressed if anyone was able to pick up on the colloquial references. But I think by incorporating colloquial interpretations in these stories, it reveals that I am a Cantonese speaker who is gathering stories in a slang-laden language.

**Joni Low:** So in illustrating these stories—these oral histories you’ve collected—do you feel an obligation, or an allegiance to preserve their original form?

**Howie Tsui:** I think it depends; it’s on a story-to-story basis. I have been trying to, but based on the laboriousness of drawing all of the frames for the performance of *Celestials*, I have to edit—there are details in some stories that I can’t include because it would be just too confusing. I’ve been editing and simplifying some stories; it depends on how dense a story is. So I am taking liberties with them.

**Joni Low:** How might your approach differ between the stories you collect and inherit from a personal connection and interaction, and stories that you have more of a distance from—those read in books, for example?

**Howie Tsui:** That’s interesting. I probably take more liberties with stories told directly to me. It’s so formal when it comes in a book format—it’s like it arrives as fact, you know? So in a way the medium in which I receive these stories dictates my flexibility in playing with the ideas.

With the stories found in books, my whole idea surrounding *Celestials* was to undermine historical portrayals of early Chinese immigrants as a nondescript and hapless labour force. Many older texts produced images of these nameless figures suffering generalized hardships in the few available areas of work. I think it is so difficult to feel something for these early immigrants when they have been, historically, so de-humanized, yanked of any sense of individuality or character. That is why my intention with the project is to transform these undistinguishable people into physically distinct creatures based on a Chinese book, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. It’s an ancient classic that includes snippets of information on Chinese cosmology, strange lands, animals, people, and things. It’s very otherworldly, with mention of “people with very long earlobes” and “people with backwards tongues” or “backwards feet”—it’s absurd. A treasure trove of the fantastic.

In cases where the stories are seemingly very solid, or very historical, I’m taking more liberties by going to the *Classic* and substituting these figures to kind of dilute it, to make it seem less like an archival history. That also plays with the whole term “celestials”—these otherworldly beings, these exotic creatures, which was used towards Chinese immigrants back in the day.

**Joni Low:** Which also took on a derogatory meaning.

**Howie Tsui:** Yes, and then it became derogatory. And I turn them into creatures, so there’s the whole concept of the “other,” the grotesque. In a way I’m kind of feeding that fire—exaggerating the exoticism and alienness.

**Joni Low:** This leads to questions I have about your relationship to other artistic traditions. I’m intrigued by the presence of the grotesque in your



Top: Howie Tsui, *Celestials of Saltwater City*, Queue Gang scene (digital composite), 2011, *furos* (wooden projectors), Chinese pigments, and ink on transparencies. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Howie Tsui, *Camaraderie*, 2005, acrylic and ink on canvas, 30.5 x 30.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

work, particularly in relationship to this sort of Rabelaisian, carnivalesque energy. How did you become interested in this?

**Howie Tsui:** This was before I began consciously thinking about making work within a larger conceptual framework. I was just doing sort of crafty, unintentional art making. I went through this phase where I was making really saccharine *kawaii* work—like the *Kawaii Noir* series (2002–05). The grotesque came out of a rejection of that.

When I was doing *Kawaii Noir*, it was all about creating these scenes about the baser aspects of human nature, but I just candy-coated it with these super cute characters. There are these scientific studies about why cute is appealing—the shape of a baby’s head, for instance. If you consider this in relationship to the evolution of Mickey Mouse over the years, you can see that he grew younger. I was interested in the phenomenon of neoteny.

**Joni Low:** This sort of prolonged adolescence, or infantilization of adults?

**Howie Tsui:** Yeah. And I was also attaching these nostalgic memories, simple things that as boys we used to do that were really cruel. Growing up in Thunder Bay, we used to have army worms. It’s this infestation of worms during certain seasons, and they were all over the trees—they were everywhere. In our neighbourhood, there would be clumps of writhing worms hanging from the trees, alive and undulating. And we were just like [shiver]: “Let’s get rid of them!” So we took a half-bottle of rubbing alcohol, knocked them all off the trees and put them into the bottle, dumped them onto the cement and lit them on fire.

I was interested in why we, as boys, thought of that. It reflects the imagination and wonder of children. It’s another one of those memories that was traumatic. I wanted to make connections between the basic reflex that some kids have—like burning insects with a magnifying glass and sunlight—with what happens when boys become men, and also come into positions of power. And how these experiences mirror one another. Is there something innate in us?

**Joni Low:** That sort of destructive impulse that lives within us.

**Howie Tsui:** Yes, like the dark part of our brain that conjures up torture methods. So in terms of the grotesque, I was interested in these baser aspects, and having children enacting these impulses. It seems like one can candy-coat it, have some neotenous figure doing it, which renders it digestible. People totally buy these sorts of things.

And then I had a complete rejection of *kawaii*, because I was seeing a glut of it everywhere, mostly in the kind of pop-surrealist low-brow art scene. So I rejected it completely and went in the opposite direction, to the grotesque. I was always drawn to the horrific, but was masking it, and then I just flipped it, straight on. It started with the *Of Manga and Mongrels* series (2006–08).



*Of Manga and Mongrels* was a kind of unconscious character-generating exercise where I was letting go of control by playing off of Hokusai's manga images, which in collage form served as a sort of "graphic trampoline." I inked atop of his collages, and by looking for visual cues and building upon his line, I was able to create these layered and amorphous double images. This method helped me get over my rut of creating the predictably cute figures that I was so sick of.

Howie Tsui, *Mindbuggery*, 2006, ink, acrylic, and collage on mylar, 152.4 x 106.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

**Joni Low:** What do you believe is the function of the grotesque, or horror, in society?

**Howie Tsui:** I think it is a reminder of our mortality.

**Joni Low:** Interesting. Could you elaborate on your relationship to other artistic traditions, such as Surrealism? You mentioned the whole idea of letting go of control, and I very much see the unveiling of the subconscious in this process.



**Howie Tsui:** I think at heart I'm a surrealist. Even from my various early exposures to European art, Surrealism was the only thing I was interested in. It was almost the art movement that made the most sense to me, because it didn't make sense, you know? I don't actually keep a dream diary anymore, but I think about my dreams a lot when I wake up, and then let them fade

Howie Tsui, *Scout Nublet*, 2008, ink, acrylic, and collage on mylar, 22.8 x 22.7 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

away into some sort of ethereal holding tank. But yes, Surrealism . . . I'm a huge Jan Svankmajer fan. He was very into Giuseppe Arcimboldo, and in *Of Manga and Mongrels* I utilize this approach of assembling smaller figures to create a larger portrait. Out of all Western art traditions, the Surrealist art movement is the one I identify with the most.

**Joni Low:** You mention Arcimboldo—I'm curious about the connections you make between Japanese erotic art and Renaissance art in your series *Shunga and Monsters* (2007–present). How did this come about?

**Howie Tsui:** Well, I finished the *Of Manga and Mongrels* series, and I liked that exercise. I suppose I was ready for more of a mental workout. The *shunga* erotic imagery is busier, more intense. I wanted to up the grotesque-ante even more. *Of Manga and Mongrels* was actually about portraits, about

the shifting nature of identity inherent in the immigrant's experience. In a way, it wasn't really about the grotesque as much as it was about identity and its different layers—the historical side and the contemporary side. *Of Shunga and Monsters* came about randomly, in a way, when I was invited to participate in a project called Love and Death for a publication called *Faesthetic*—more of a hipster thing.

I was working on *Manga and Mongrels* at that point, and in thinking about love and death I decided to use erotic prints to represent the love, and monster creatures for death. I just did one collage for the publication, and really liked it, so I made a bunch more after that. They're more successful, I think, than the *Manga and Mongrels*. They're more complex; I think they just became a real workout. I have to look at the collage, flip it and combine it with others until I see a secondary image. The actual inking, or line work, is easy compared to the looking part.

So in terms of how these traditions were combined, it was very random. I didn't have any strong intentions with it. It was just like: hipster magazine called love and death, working on collages, porn and monster! But afterwards you can read much more into the work. Formally, I see this series recalling my childhood infatuation with transformer die-cast robots from the 80s—the way they are so compact and morph into other things.

**Joni Low:** Yes, definitely. I find your work has this way of triggering and sparking different associations, and in many ways, I see your practice of cultural appropriation and intermixing as expressive of our contemporary circumstances. We have an array of cultural and visual materials virtually at our fingertips via the Internet, and Google searches can be a way of following a stream of consciousness, to pick and choose and draw from. It's interesting, though, because Google is indexing the world, yet, at the same time, these are man-made categories that life seems to continually evade, escape, and destabilize. I think your work expresses that in a very visceral way.

That being said, do you use Google a lot? Do you find you have a Google mentality? How does the Internet influence your work?

**Howie Tsui:** I use Google only when I'm making an image and require something historical—usually it's for an object, not for figures—for things like a boat, or a carriage. It's usually for architectural or structural components of projects.

**Joni Low:** In terms of references to other artistic traditions in your work, you mentioned that in *Horror Fables* you are riffing on the traditional Chinese landscape painting, without the training involved in composing a landscape that follows a certain order and understanding of the world, such as “heaven–society–man.” Can you talk a bit about your “creative bastardization” of the form?

**Howie Tsui:** Well, it's just like if I were to write my name in Chinese, it would look bastardized in itself. As for the landscape, it was weird because

*Horror Fables* was the first time I've ever included a landscape component into my work. I had very strong feelings against landscape for all the usual reasons, especially the legacy of Canada's Group of Seven. But for this series, I thought, well, I'm going to have to place these figures into some sort of space. For me, landscape isn't fun; doing the figures and the action is the fun part. I had to force myself to do the landscape, so I just bought some cheesy instructional books. Actually, instead of Google, I probably watch more YouTube to learn how to do things—especially making the projector boxes for *Celestials*.

Howie Tsui, *Mount Abundance and the Tiptoe People # 2*, 2010, Chinese pigments, ink, and acrylic on mulberry paper, 190.5 x 91.4 cm. Photo: David Barbour. Courtesy of the artist.

My main technique is to use a Chinese brush, and to make a mountain, I just roll or slide the brush. With the mulberry paper, it's really great because it creates a texture. So I'm bastardizing it, kind of like when I make noodles, because I'm going to be running them through my pasta machine, and I'm going to use my food processor with a dough blade, as opposed to all the other traditional ways. It's using a shortcut. There's no rule against it; I just know that there are people that train for twenty years doing landscape paintings and it's super Zen. It's just like calligraphy, those marks—the perfect bamboo, the perfect mountain, the perfect mist.

**Joni Low:** What sort of responses have you had, if any, from Chinese viewers who have that kind of experience or training?

**Howie Tsui:** Actually I haven't had this sort of feedback about the traditional landscape aspects of the work. I'd be curious. I think that people usually are more captivated by what is going on in the foreground of these paintings, and less so with the landscape.

**Joni Low:** I'm interested, as well, in your work and its relationship to written language. Your art seems to elude a verbal language—the variety of imagery and its strangeness is something that words can't quite pin down; it's a chase of sorts that I find particularly compelling. Can you talk a bit about the relationship between words and your work? Titling, titillation, etc. . . . Perhaps I can throw in a couple—Elephantitis of the Face, Mermongrel, Bi-polar?

**Howie Tsui:** Those come right out when I need to name. For both the *Manga* and the *Shunga* series, it was more like, oh, I need names for all of these, and I just bang it out. Sure, I said previously that I didn't have landscape in my work, and now I do; I'm definitely strongly against text in art. I dislike text in art because I don't want words to interfere with people's visual processing of the image. I know a lot of artists like that double play, but . . .

**Joni Low:** Is that why, for the installation at Centre A, there was an absence of text?

**Howie Tsui:** Not deliberately. For the exhibition at Carleton University Art Gallery, there were didactic snippets beside each piece, so the viewer



had entry points. But with the Vancouver audience, people are more knowledgeable about this material and it's much easier for them to engage with it than any other audience I've had across the country.

**Joni Low:** I do find that your practice is very critically engaged, yet the messages in your work are non-specific. What is important to you that people experience through your work?

**Howie Tsui:** Wonder.

**Joni Low:** As a way of closing, I want to ask about your experience as an artist in relationship to the world/art world/otherworld. Having observed you peripherally during your residency in Vancouver, I see that the social is very much a part of your overall artistic and life practice—be it your involvement with music or your interaction with the arts communities you become acquainted with through residencies and travel. Your Web site is also an interesting way of connecting with the world and the public. It's very much a visual spillover of ideas, an open book of sorts, where one can become completely immersed in the work. It's a very personal approach. In one of the pages on your Web site you mention where one can read about your work, and I believe you say “embarrassing interviews.” It's this sort of directness and immediacy that I find refreshing in an art context where there are often various barriers and controls constructed throughout an artist's career that seem to block access to them as people. I'm wondering how you think things might change, or might not change, as you progress in your practice? What do you hope will remain the same?

**Howie Tsui:** Actually, I'm naive, because I don't spend much time in art world contexts. A lot of this work was made in Ottawa, and there I'm sort of sheltered from any metropolitan art scene. It's sort of like being in a bubble. It is an isolated but focused way of working. When I started out I was very open about everything, which is a reflection of my personality. I'm really straightforward, and I just say what I think.

The funny thing is, I was talking to a friend who revealed to me some social strategies employed in a larger art scene, and how some folks conjure up an air of mystery around themselves. They would go to openings but avoid committing to any one clique or scene—just go for ten to fifteen minutes, make an appearance and then get out. I was really amazed by the theatricality of it all. I'm only recently beginning to understand that perhaps you can't just be yourself. This is all new to me, this idea of having to conduct oneself a certain way in the milieu in order to be successful. I'm hoping that I don't completely kill my career by being myself, but I think I'm just going to continue doing that. We'll see what happens.

## Annysa Ng: A Matter of Life and Death

Interview by Stephanie Bailey

**R**enewal is a persistent theme in the work of Hong Kong born artist Annysa Ng. She is known for stylized black-and-white silhouette depictions of faceless women caught between East and West through the astute appropriation of costume and the referencing of art history. Starting as an evening school student at the First Institute of Art and Design in Hong Kong whilst keeping down a day job, Ng later became a student for five years under respected watercolour teacher, Maytin Kan, holding her first solo show as an artist in Hong Kong in 1994. Over the course of Ng's career, the artist has ventured into a terrain of the unconscious teeming with underlying thoughts, dreams, and ideas. In 2002, Ng left Hong Kong, as well as all work she previously had made, arriving at the School of Visual Arts, New York, ready to start anew. Here, she discovered an affinity with the work of German artists, including Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys, which prompted her to leave SVA after two years to finish her studies at Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart, Germany. Now based in New York, Ng carries on with her the historical heritage of Hong Kong as a city arguably caught between two influences, the East and the West, as she continues on a journey that explores the role of culture, knowledge, history, and gender in a culturally and socially ambiguous world.

**Stephanie Bailey:** When did you make your first silhouette painting?

Annysa Ng, *Level*, 2004,  
painted wood, perfume vial,  
steel nut, 30.5 x 5.5 x 1.8 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist.



**Annysa Ng:** When I went to Stuttgart in 2004. I found the education there quite different because teachers in New York taught me that everything is about surface, how you build up the oil paint, the textures, and so on. In Stuttgart, I was a bit confused at first because my professor, Marianne Eigenheer, who was an important influence on me and taught me how to bring my inner self into my work, asked me why I was painting certain things. I thought the answers would be evident in the work, so I put painting aside and started making objects. The first object I made was a carpenter's level. I used a Chanel perfume tester vial and wood that I spray-

painted; this level is like a man's tool with a feminine edge. In 2004, I made my first silhouette painting using the outline of the Vermeer painting *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. I titled mine similarly, *A Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. But instead of a pearl necklace, I drew a necklace consisting of dentures. The painting hints that youth is fleeting. I had this idea for a while, and I knew that technically I could paint a beautiful woman really easily, but then the dentures would not show up because people would look at the face instead. So I came up with the idea of painting silhouettes of very famous paintings, and although people would not see the face, they would know that this is an image of a beautiful woman, and the dentures would stand out. There was a balance.



Annysa Ng, *A Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, 2004, ink on paper, 76.2 x 55.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Stadtbücherei, Stuttgart City Library, Germany.

Opposite page: Annysa Ng, *Ritual*, 2010, mixed media, 157.5 x 218.4 x 315 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

**Stephanie Bailey:** So did the painting develop concurrently with your object making?

**Annysa Ng:** You know, I think that all the way back to my time in Germany, in 2004, when I started to make these objects, along with the silhouette painting with the dentures, I just worked with whatever media were suitable to execute an idea.

**Stephanie Bailey:** What ideas are you drawn to in your work?

**Annysa Ng:** Psychology, the unconscious, fear. When I work I am in such a state of concentration that I kind of feel in between being conscious and unconscious. Over the years I have actually found the unconscious mind thinks better, so I pose questions to that part of my brain. I don't aim for my work to come out under one concept, but, gradually, I see the underlying concept of most of the work to be related to my interest in and perception of the unconscious. I think a lot about human behaviour and psychology. For example, some psychologists believe that people who are afraid of heights actually have a desire for death because they are afraid that they won't be able to stop themselves from jumping. From there I thought about ideas of love and death, and skeletons and weddings came to mind, so I created a skeleton bridal dress, *Veil* (2004).



Annysa Ng, *Veil*, 2004, fabric, crystal, bead, coat hanger, 50 x 140 x 15 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



**Stephanie Bailey:** There is a sense of the occult and a link with the spiritual world in your work, something evident in your bed installation, *Ritual* (2010).

**Annysa Ng:** Yes, the bed is antique and revisits the idea of dreams and how the unconscious shows up in the dream world. When you are sleeping you go back into the unconscious, and you let it take you somewhere. For me it's more like going back to your true self, home. Going home is also like going back to the womb—this timelessness and spacelessness of nine months when a baby develops, with all that is already there in the genes. Over top of the bed is an abstract form of a sleeve, like the mother's arms, and the mirrored orb in the centre converges the visible consciousness into a focal point in the virtual realm behind the reflective, mirrored surface. At the same time, dreams are timeless and spaceless; you don't know where you are, like in Paul Gauguin's paintings, where he often puts sleep and death together.

**Stephanie Bailey:** Dreams can equally evoke birth and death, the cycle of life itself and the continuation of things . . .



**Annysa Ng:** Carl Jung said dreams are the window to our unconscious, so when I think of dreams, I think of Zhuang Zi's "Butterfly Dream," because one day he dreamt he was a butterfly, and after he woke up, he asked whether he had been Zhuang Zi dreaming that he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuang Zi; it's a question of reality. *Who is the Dreamer* (2006), a chair with hair woven around its frame and with silk butterflies on the seat and back frame, is about dreams. I took a chair, took away the seat, and rested one of its legs on a crystal ball, which conveys the fragility of reality. The chair represents a world that

Annysa Ng, *Who Is the Dreamer*, 2006, synthetic hair, chair, crystal globe, silk, 150 x 135 x 210 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

appears to be real and exists objectively, but you cannot sit on this reality: You cannot sit on the chair because it is occupied by butterflies and dreams, which represent ideas. In one Zen story, someone asks a monk what the truth of "forever" is, and the monk answers that it is like a spring flower and a running river because nothing lasts forever and everything changes. Only change itself is forever and therefore truth lies in transience. I think the butterfly also expresses this.

**Stephanie Bailey:** When I think of white butterflies, I think of visiting my grandmother and my uncle's grave during the festivals of ancestor worship in Hong Kong.

**Annysa Ng:** That is a very Chinese thing. People say they always see the white butterflies around cemeteries, and quite often they show up during a

funeral. I think the scientific explanation is they are attracted to the incense or the light, but quite often people believe they are the spirit of the dead. There is also a Chinese opera, *Liang Zhu —The Butterfly Lovers*, which based on the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. The legend, set in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD), also says the butterfly is the spirit of the dead. This legend is about a woman, Zhu Yingtai, who disguises herself as a man in order to attend school. She falls in love with a fellow scholar but he is not smart enough to tell she is a woman. Yet they become good friends, and though not attracted to each other by appearance, they are spiritually connected. Three years later, her family asks her to return home. Too shy to reveal her true identity to Liang Shanbo, Zhu Yingtai comes up with an idea of telling him that she has a sister, and he should go to her home and ask for her hand in marriage. When the scholar goes to her home he's too late because Zhu Yingtai's parents have arranged for her to marry another man. As they were unable to be together for all eternity and had to separate, and then Liang Shanbo died. On the day of Zhu Yingtai's wedding, she goes to the tombstone of her love and all of a sudden the tombstone opens, and in happiness she jumps into the tomb, which closes behind her. In the opera, the lovers become butterflies, so they live on. That's the forever thing—spring butterflies.

**Stephanie Bailey:** Thinking back to *Ritual*, growing up with ancestor worship in Hong Kong feels like reconnecting to a past that exists in another realm, which is interesting when you consider how much butterflies seem to influence your work.

**Annysa Ng:** I remember when I was in junior high school, in Hong Kong, there was one poem written by a famous writer, Wen Yiduo. It's about the writer's daughter who died very young. I think in the early twentieth century the political situation in China was very unstable, and this writer wrote: "Lying under the earth could be quieter—the tranquility of hearing the earthworm burrowing; grass roots sipping is more graceful than the secular noise on the earth." Then he said, "I will tell the paper butterflies—the ashes of the burned joss papers flying tenderly—to fly slowly." It is very beautiful. I was brought up in Hong Kong, and I would go to the Chinese opera with my mother, and I would see these stories like *Butterfly Lovers* and the festival of the dead.

**Stephanie Bailey:** It's interesting, because in many ways Hong Kong retained many of the old cultural traditions of China that disappeared with the Cultural Revolution.

**Annysa Ng:** I think so. We didn't have to go through the Cultural Revolution so we could keep the Chinese traditions, yet, ironically, because Hong Kong was a Crown Colony governed by the British, it is both negative and positive.

**Stephanie Bailey:** How do you feel about being a Hong Kong artist?

**Annysa Ng:** There are questions. I remember some Western people telling me that the mentality of Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese people is very different. But I know some mainland Chinese artists, and I don't feel very different from them. I don't think I intend to, but I always find myself comparing various cultures. I find in general, Western and Eastern cultures think in similar ways, but they think they are the opposite of each other.

**Stephanie Bailey:** So opposite that they are almost the same?

**Annysa Ng:** It's like *yin* and *yang*, black and white. It's really hard to separate.

**Stephanie Bailey:** Is that one of the reasons you use black and white in your work?

**Annysa Ng:** Personally, I really like black and white. Since I was young I always used to wear black and white. Many people talk about that now—the use of black and white. But it's not something I intended. As I mentioned at the beginning of this interview, my unconscious is the main creator of my artworks. However, my unconscious just tells me the idea. My conscious mind then needs to analyze it. When I need to write an artist's statement, this becomes one of my problems.

**Stephanie Bailey:** But what draws you to these colours? Is it that black is the colour of death in the West, and in Chinese culture white is associated with death?

**Annysa Ng:** I always liked white very much. It is very pure. For example, a colour like red is red, and green is green; they are both just one colour. But to me, white is everything. All the colours combined together in light become white. When white light enters a prism, it becomes a rainbow. White and black are all colours to me. To me they embrace everything.

**Stephanie Bailey:** Like light and dark. Going back to the silhouette paintings, how have you developed them since the denture painting, in 2004?

**Annysa Ng:** Actually, in 2007 my then gallery in New York asked me to paint a wall mural after seeing my denture painting. Usually I don't like making work at the request of people, but at one point I said, okay, I'm going to do it, but I'm not going to do it the old way. Then the idea of combining the Qing dynasty-style costume with the Elizabethan collar just came to mind. In general, I took inspiration from the Qing court Jesuit painters. There were foreign court painters who came to China at the end of the nineteenth century as missionaries but ended up working in the Qing court. They introduced one-point perspective and Western styles to Chinese painters, but they also picked up Chinese subjects. The emperor, Quanglong, liked the Jesuit painters' art so much that he got them to paint more like Chinese, so in turn some changed their style to suit his tastes. I take that aesthetic into my own work. To me it's like Western people coming to China and

Annysa Ng, *Tea Silk and Porcelain* (detail), 2007, ink on paper mounted on PVC, 228 x 228 x 2.5 cm (mural). Courtesy of the artist.



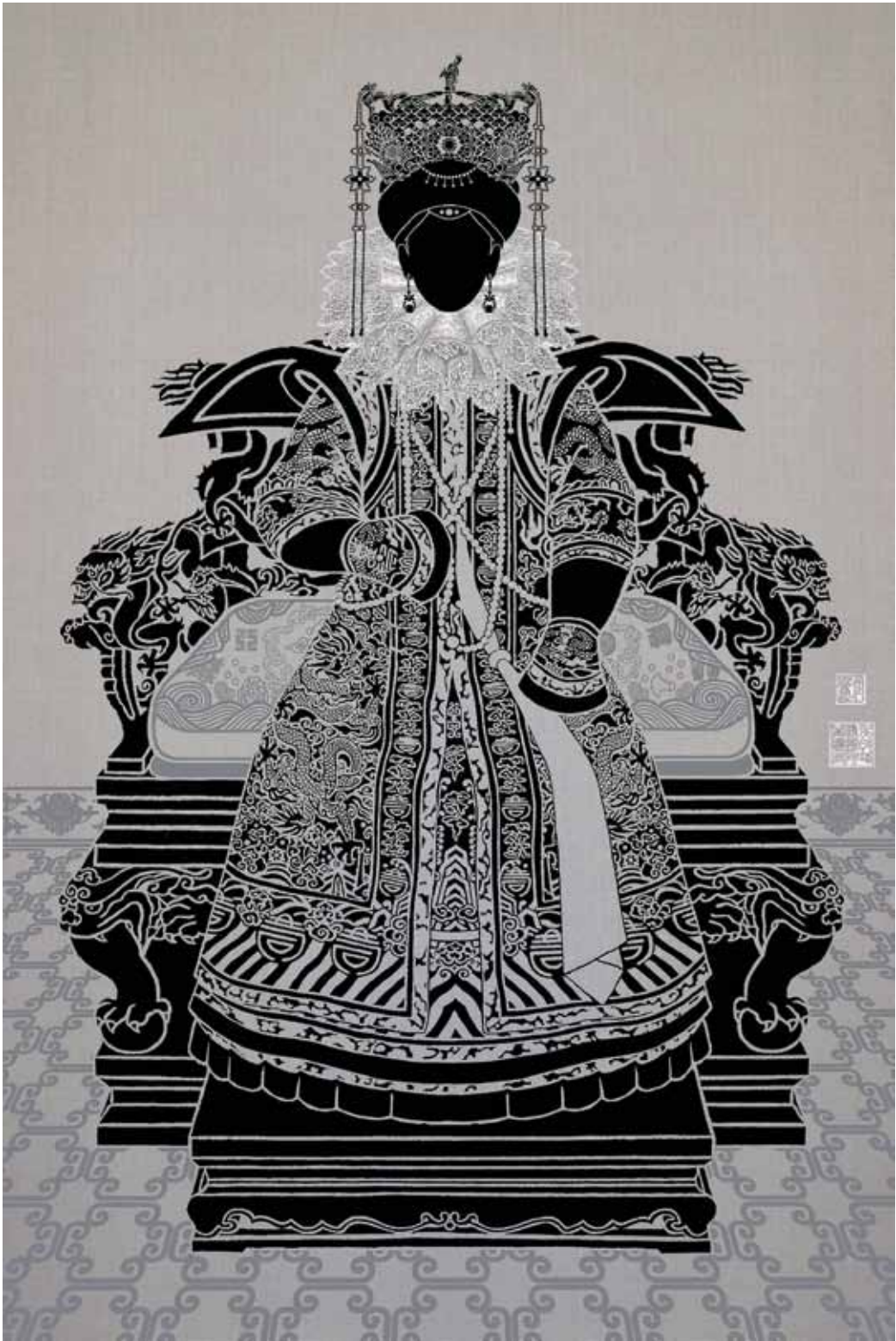
changing their style to suit Eastern taste, and I depart from that idea of an Easternized West to a Westernized East to further transgress borders.

**Stephanie Bailey:** When you finished the mural, in 2007, what did it reveal to you?

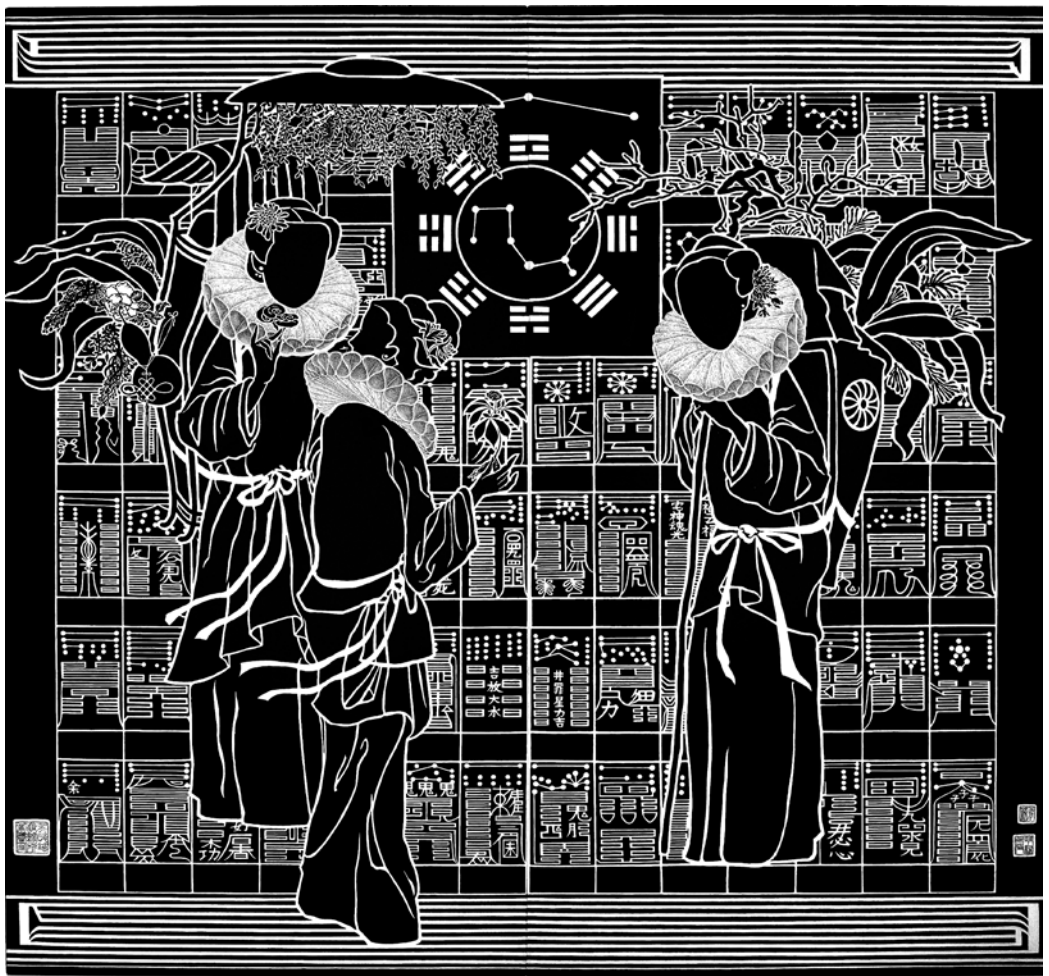
**Annysa Ng:** Actually, when I finished it, all of sudden I thought the paintings merged in one respect: the identity of Hong Kong. The featureless, blacked-out faces of the silhouette figures in Chinese robes and Elizabethan collars reveal not only the combinations of East and West that can be seen in Hong Kong, but also the specificities of the paradox that lead to the construction of a hollow identity. In Hong Kong, no one asks you where you come from, but overseas very often people do ask. It is politically correct to say I am Chinese from Hong Kong because Hong Kong is not a country. So I would say, “I am Chinese,” and they would say, “Which part of China?” And I would say, “Hong Kong.” Many times people would reply, “Oh, you’re not very Chinese, then.” I thought, “Oh, really? Then who or what am I?”

**Stephanie Bailey:** Are these questions expressed in your paintings?

**Annysa Ng:** I think they must be, because of my identity. That identity must have come out at some point, maybe when I did that mural, in 2007. People look at Hong Kong and ask what it is, and if you look at it as just another city of China it somehow gets lost. My quest in exploring what Hong Kong is, and what my identity is, are the inspiration for the paintings. The ruff on the collar of the oriental costume symbolizes the colonial culture of Hong Kong. It is what makes us (still) different among the cities of China. I am not embracing this colonial history, but it is Hong Kong’s history and



Annysa Ng, *Empress V*, 2011, pen on paper, acrylic on linen, 152 x 102 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



Annysa Ng, *Searching*, 2011, pen on paper, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 162 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



has made Hong Kong what it is. You cannot ignore it even though many Chinese people are not really happy to acknowledge this inglorious past. I have all these confused feelings and emotions about that part of history. So confused that I chose to detach myself from it and hence the black faces in my paintings.

Annysa Ng, installation view of exhibition at Blindspot Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

**Stephanie Bailey:** You recently had a show in Hong Kong of your silhouette paintings. Were you nervous about the reception of the works?

**Annysa Ng:** I usually do not feel nervous about how people look at my work. I am just curious about the responses. In fact, when I showed my paintings to this store in Chinatown that sells Chinese art supplies, the storekeeper asked me, “You paint so detailed, why don’t you paint the faces?” I didn’t answer, but I liked the question because that is actually the essence of those paintings. I think about these Hong Kong influences as if from a third person perspective, to tell the history without comment. Through the costume, the dragon robes, the images themselves, I wanted to keep my paintings detached and emotionally uninvolved. Hong Kong’s history is so complex. When you read about the Opium War, you feel it should not have happened and that it was a bad thing. You wonder, how did we become a colony? It feels almost unfair. Somehow, I always feel like Hong Kong is an orphan, and now China thinks we are different. But maybe the question is why we are different.

Jamie Hilder

## Looking and Laughing: Ken Lum at the Vancouver Art Gallery

February 12–September 25, 2011

Ken Lum, template for *Four French Deaths in Western Canada (De Soysa)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

**DE SOYSA** — Indrani, born in Ile de la Reunion, France, beloved wife of late Chandra, loving mother of Ranjit (Winnipeg, Canada), Channa and Keerthi (Australia), Nalin (France) and Rathna (Singapore), expired November 5, 2001.

Mrs. De Soysa arrived in Toronto, Canada in 1972, moving to Vancouver in 1977. Mrs. De Soysa was a homemaker. In her later years, she became an independent scholar studying and writing about tropical plants and gardens. She requested no funeral service but that her ashes be returned and scattered in Reunion.

An uncomfortable kind of looking is required of visitors to Ken Lum's survey exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It begins before they enter the gallery space proper, as they walk up the stairs of the rotunda, where they encounter *Four French Deaths in Western Canada* (2011), a piece Lum made specifically for this show. The work consists of a collection of enlarged death notices printed onto the gallery walls describing the lives of people born in France who died in western Canada. The obituaries are in English and do not immediately announce themselves as connected by anything but their genre; each maintains a fidelity to the charge-by-the-word brevity of the form, the banal descriptions of a life expressed in a hundred words or less.

The discomfort for the reader arrives in the same way it would if he or she were to read the obituaries in a newspaper, where the eye scans involuntarily for familiar names and cannot help imagine how her or his own life would read: which relationships warrant mention? Which accomplishments best represent a life lived? To whom would the task of composing the notice fall, and could that person be trusted to get things right? Is it possible to

get things right? The discomfort is magnified by the uncertainty around whether or not these texts were found or written by Lum. If they are found texts, they are morbid. If they are composed by Lum to mimic death notices, they are still morbid, but with a dark humour that is typical of Lum's work. Found or composed, they offer an appropriate physical and thematic entrance to a challenging body of work spanning more than three decades, one that emphasizes awkward encounters with text and image and the production of identities and anxieties in a historical moment in which lives can begin in one national context and end in another and still be considered so commonplace as to border on the unnoticeable.

But the uncomfortable looking that Lum's work demands is also a pleasurable looking: it provides the viewer with a problem, but one that he or she feels might be solvable. Of course the problems are not in the strictest terms solvable, and in most cases not even concretely identifiable. Lum is very good at productively harnessing the discomfort of his audiences. It is the sustained puzzling that captures the viewer and prolongs the moment of surprise and possibility. The uncomfortable looking initiates a critical position that functions well in a gallery environment, where the space acts to encourage efforts at social engagement that might be discouraged in other situations. In this way the social consciousness in Lum's work—issues of class, race, national and cultural identity are foregrounded throughout—draws the audience into ideas that do not operate in the same manner that they do in the dominant, media-driven political discourse, where cynicism and panic trump history and complexity.



This play between uncomfortable looking as/and pleasurable looking comes out in the relationship between Lum's public projects and his gallery-based work.

Included in the exhibition are two performance pieces from early in Lum's career, both of which depend on witnesses recognizing repetitions that confound explanation. In *Entertainment for Surrey* (1978), Lum stood on a slope by an overpass on a highway between Vancouver and one of its suburbs for an hour each morning for the duration of a work week. Cars passed him, and those who kept a regular commuting schedule recognized a pattern, perhaps expecting him to be there

Ken Lum, *Entertainment for Surrey*, 1978, video, 1 min., 45 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery.

each morning. The highway commute is difficult and strange, temporally and spatially, since the distance between subjects is increased in relation

to other spaces of everyday life. There is no opportunity for interaction or intimacy beyond the car horn, mouthed obscenities, and hand gestures that arise only when something threatens the flow of traffic. On the fifth and final day of the performance, Lum replaced his body with a life-sized cut-out image of himself, perhaps a lamentation of the impossibility of connecting with his audience (beyond the waves and honks he received), but perhaps also as a mark of jealousy for the relationship commuters have to images on billboards or buildings as they drive past. The strangeness of seeing a man, stone-faced and in the same clothes in the same spot every morning for four days—a scene that suggested a threat to the pedestrian in a high-speed space, but also potentially a person suffering from mental illness or instability—could have only become more bizarre with that split-second realization that he was only a two-dimensional representation. Then the questions come: Was the figure always two dimensional? Was I the crazy one? Why would anyone do such a thing?



Ken Lum, *Walk Piece*, 1978, video. Courtesy the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery.

Witnesses of Lum's other early performance, *Walk Piece* (1978), might have faced a similar perplexity. For this work Lum paced back and forth on a fifteen-foot path positioned between two buildings at Simon Fraser University for nine hours, the duration of one work day. The piece was visible from a walkway connecting buildings; observers who passed by only once might have seen Lum walking, or turning and pacing. Those who returned some time later and saw him again might have experienced

a feeling of the uncanny, and their scrutiny of the pacing figure would have been rewarded by further confusion springing from Lum's metronomic pace. When documentation of the work is shown in a video and accompanied by a text panel within a gallery, the discomfort of the live performance dissipates. Gallery viewers imagine an art labour that, through a long tradition of performance, often entails redundant or non-productive activities, but those who saw the work in its immediate context would not have had the privilege of such categorization. The question then becomes: How can the tools of critical art function within and affect everyday life? To the extent that Lum requires his audiences—both the retrospective, gallery audience, and the immediate, situated witnesses of the performance—to imagine different kinds of labour, he also challenges them to consider how work is collectively imagined at different scales. How do we account for the invisibility of certain labour in a globalized economy (Where do our products come from? How many of us work in manufacturing?), as well as that of class divisions, which often also possess a racialized character, a character Lum's work carries as a result of his being a Canadian of Chinese descent living in a time and space (Vancouver and its suburbs over the past thirty years) of sometimes quiet, sometimes loud xenophobia and racism?



It is that space that Lum's work operates in—that space both inside and outside the gallery—that provides so much of the energy in the current exhibition. The furniture sculptures on display operate within a disjunctive space: they are obviously mass-produced and therefore not on display for their design qualities, but they are arranged in a way that shifts their

Ken Lum, *Red Circle*, 1986, fabric, wood. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund. Photo: Trevor Mills. Courtesy of the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery.

meaning. Instead of being in a showroom or bulk flyer that represents the ideal domesticity for a family striving to achieve a kind of commercial normalcy, sculptures like *Red Circle* (1986) and *Corner Bed* (1990) present closed-off spaces or impossible arrangements. There is a sense of domestic exclusion or awkwardness to the work, as if the codes of living had been short-circuited by the movers. The furniture's larger cultural function—as a way to quickly gauge the social standing of the occupants of a space—has been rejected. In this way, the idea of “homeness” becomes complicated; the furniture on display appears to come from those stores that can furnish an entire home, so there is a homogeneity of style that is the mark of a new life in a new place, where there has not been the opportunity to accumulate goods, or to pass things down from generation to generation. The furniture signals a subjectivity that comes out of newness, rooted in objects, distributed in the mass circuits that carry both goods and people around the globe.

Ken Lum, *Amrita and Mrs. Sondhi*, 1986, Plexiglas and photograph, 102 x 25.9 x 6.3 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Ottawa. Gift of Ydessa Hendeles, Toronto, 1993.



Lum's series of *Portrait-Logos* complement the furniture sculptures in that they use the domestic genre of professional family photography, in combination with the vernacular of corporate design and sign production, to represent an economy of identity, one that operates in an unfree market of culture. *Amrita and Mrs. Sondhi* (1986), which on the right shows a young woman seated above and resting her hands on the shoulders of a person who appears to be her mother, and which on the left displays a yellow and green logo that uses the surname SONDHI to bisect a globe, serves to match the idea of the family as enterprise with that of the enterprise as family. As Michel Foucault argues in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, with the rise of neoliberalism came the dissolution of borders between the domestic and commercial spaces. Economic theory inserted itself into the everyday; relationships became networks and families became micro-enterprises, with contracts between spouses and parents and children operating as they would between manufacturers and distributors. immigrants became entrepreneurs who invested their human capital in

**HANOI TRAVEL**

**FLIGHTS, CRUISES & TRAIN TICKETS**



**DISNEYLAND PACKAGES  
FUN IN THE  
SUN TICKETS  
WE REMEMBER THE  
PEOPLE'S WAR**

Ken Lum, *Hanoi Travel*, 2000, Plexiglas, powder-coated aluminium, enamel, glue, plastic letters, 182.9 x 182.9 x 6.3 cm.  
Collection of Lothar Albrecht Gallery, Frankfurt and Private Collection, Japan. Courtesy of the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery.

the risk-heavy undertaking of living in a new space, with new people, and without access to full national or familial infrastructure. *Amrita and Mrs. Sondhi* alludes to that condition, with the idea of the younger generation pushing itself up from the shoulders of the previous. Amrita's shortly cropped hair, in contrast to her mother's, suggests a rejection of traditional roles not only for women, but for much of what defines the old world. The background of the portrait also implies a domestic space that takes its design cues from waiting rooms, with a muted abstract print in an unassuming gold frame hung between a hotel-style lamp and the ubiquitous fern, all in front of a wall papered in a beige pattern doing its best to go unnoticed.

The *Shopkeeper Signs* series uses the dissolution of the public and the private to again question how each bleeds into the other. Using the movable plastic letters that allow for the composition of specific messages within the semi-permanent tablet of a shop sign visible to passing foot and vehicle traffic, Lum presents a narrative in which the personal inserts itself into the public through the insufficiency of commercial dialogue to satisfy the emotional needs of the proprietors. The jarring effect of the work comes out of the appearance of a specific voice in a space that is designed for marketing, for the announcements that complement a business's operations: sales, promotions, new products. When personal messages appear in the same textual format, using the same limited space and style, questions about how language operates in the landscape of the urban and suburban everyday move to the foreground. That Lum uses mostly small businesses that have a visible link to immigrant or minority communities—the sign for Taj Kabab Palace includes a statement about the conflict in Kashmir, the sign for Hanoi Travel includes a reference to the “people's war,” and Ebony Eyes Beauty Salon adds “All Power to the People!” to theirs—again points to the ways in which subjectivities are produced within and, at times, against contemporary business structures.

A similar concern for the coming into being of contemporary global subjects is behind Lum's work using mirrors, several of which are included in the current exhibition. In *Photo Mirrors* (1998), where small, snapshot photographs are placed on the inside of larger, wood-framed mirrors that would not be out of place in bedrooms or foyers, the viewer feels as if s/he is looking into someone's personal mirror. There is a discomfort in seeing one's reflection in a gallery, where visitors go to look at things produced at a remove from their daily lives. Finding one's self at the centre of a mirror while looking at its periphery, with one's face becoming larger and more detailed the closer one peers at the small photographs, is a different experience than catching a glimpse of one's self in the reflection of a glass framed painting or photograph. The latter reflection carries a pleasure of affirmation, like the smooth and casual narcissism produced by the glossy surfaces of Apple computers and mobile devices screens. It has always been part of Lum's project, however, to provide ways for viewers to

uncomfortably encounter themselves. This is most pronounced in *House of Realization* (2007–11), where a text by the thirteenth-century Turkish poet Yunus Emre is printed backwards on a wall opposite a large mirror. Viewers have to read the text via the mirror, meaning that they have to read through or past themselves; they are forced to see themselves as a part of the text and to perceive themselves reading. But the “realization” of Lum’s title, to which Emre refers in his poem in the line “we witnessed the body,” comes when the viewer moves past the text and mirror and is guided down a corridor and around a corner into a large space behind the mirror. The mirror is in fact a two-way mirror—the tool of interrogators, witnesses, psychologists, and focus groups. Upon entering this space behind the mirror, the visitor realizes that s/he was being watched while s/he watched herself in the act of reading, and that s/he is now watching other visitors study the work in a performance of critical investigation. The viewer is forced into a voyeuristic relationship with other viewers, having first been an unwitting victim of involuntary scrutiny, and must experience a bizarre complicit shame when having to face the person s/he has been watching as they pass each other at the entrance/exit to the viewing chamber.



Ken Lum, *Photo-Mirror: Sunset*, 1997, maple wood, mirror, photographs. Collection of the Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Gift of the artist. Courtesy of the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery.



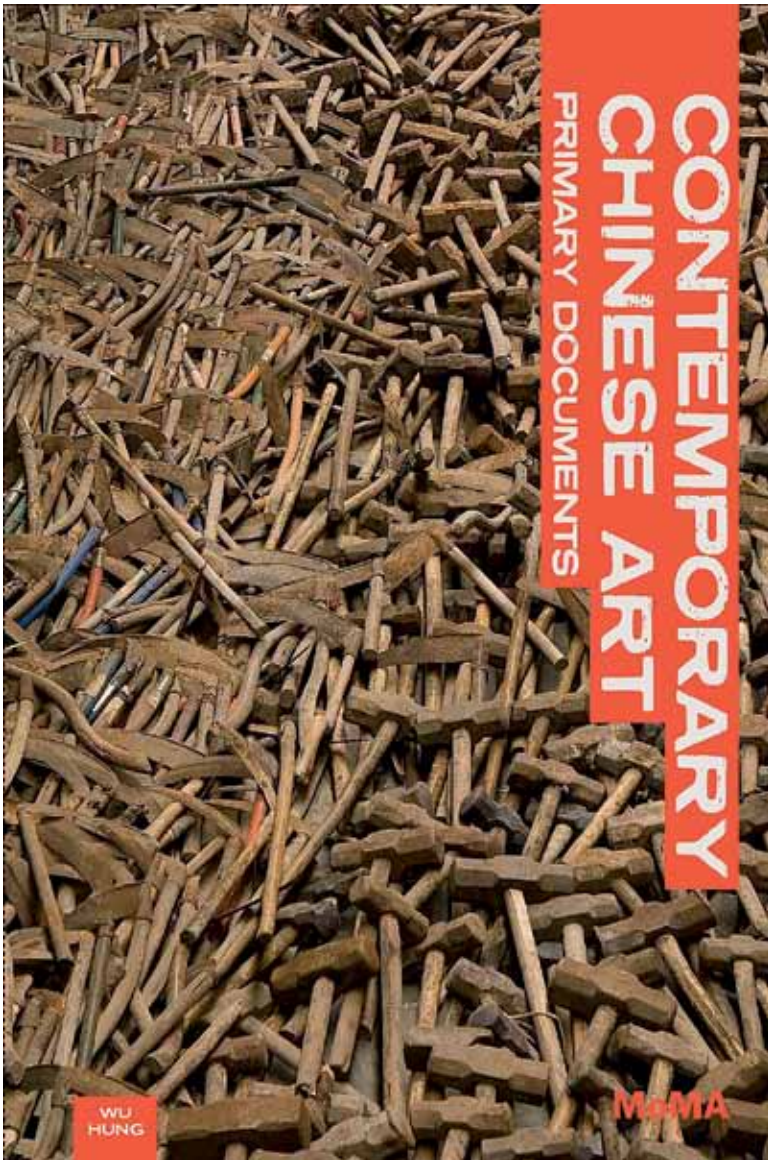
Ken Lum, *House of Realization*, 2007, installation with one-way mirror and text. Courtesy of the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery.

This is the uncomfortable looking that is also a pleasurable looking. The disruptive power of Lum's work to acclimate visitors to the uneasiness inherent to problems of racism, class barriers, exploitation, and commercial subjectivity functions as a primer for the social necessities beyond the gallery. The shocks and surprising laughter—there are a lot of laughs in this exhibition—are designed to spur questions about the role of the social in everyday life. How do our rituals and habits depend on ignoring other people in the name of privacy or politeness? What voices are present in logos and signs? Which voices are excluded? What are we allowed to represent, and what resists our attempts to categorize or understand? Why do we laugh and then feel bad for laughing, then laugh again and feel bad again? Why does feeling bad feel so good? These are the questions Lum's exhibition leaves us with, and they are to be taken seriously, even when they are funny.

Micki McCoy

## The Arc of the Archive—*Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*

Edited by Wu Hung with the assistance of Peggy Wang.  
New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010



**C**ontemporary Chinese Art: *Primary Documents*, an unprecedented anthology of some hundred-plus essays, manifestos, letters, official notices, and other materials, many of which are made available in English here for the first time, strives to establish a sequential historical arc for its subject. Spanning the period from its year zero, 1976, to the globalized, marketized early years of the twenty-first century, this arc presides over the sizable book's four temporally themed sections. These include the years of renewal immediately following Mao's death and the

unofficial end of the Cultural Revolution; the heady, exploratory years of the '85 New Wave Movement (*Xinchao yundong*), with its tragic end in the crackdowns of 1989; the crash course toward global marketization in the 90s; and the celebrated if complicated return of high-profile expatriate artists, full-on market embrace, and a degree of academic normalization for contemporary and “experimental” (*shiyan yishu*) art in the new millennium.

Within this relatively strict temporal framework, *Contemporary Chinese Art* provides plenty of opportunity for an encounter with some of the more notorious episodes of recent art in China: a 1979 transcribed poster demanding artistic freedom after the forced closure of the Stars Art Exhibition (*Xingxing meizhan*); the 1992 essay in which Li Xianting names and initiates the critique of Cynical Realism (*Wanshi xianshi zhuyi*) and Political Pop (*Zhengzhi bopu*); the press release threatening a copyright infringement lawsuit issued by the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute against the Venice Biennale, Harald Szeeman, and Cai Guo-qiang for the latter's appropriation of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, in 1999, and so on. Landmark debates between various critics and artists also play out in the anthology's pages, as in Li Xianting's essay (written under the *nom de plume* Li Jiaturun) arguing that the '85 New Wave Movement was primarily not an art movement but a struggle for ideological liberation, and the response and rebuttal by Gao Minglu, another of the period's chief critical voices. Many lesser-known episodes also appear from hard-to-find sources.

The broad periods that organize the book will be familiar to any follower of contemporary China, and the extension of this temporal structure over the entire collection indeed produces a sense of direct causal relationships. One entry often responds to the last. They also highlight the period awareness shared by the authors of recent Chinese art history and criticism. “Even in its early days,” the editorial coda states, “contemporary Chinese art showed a strong tendency to construct its own legacy through historical writing.” This statement thus casts the book's own attention to periodization as a recursive expression of that which it anthologizes.

The chronological framework sets up some challenges for Wu Hung and his collaborators, among them how to deal with the unevenness in the available materials from which it draws. The preface describes a kind of famine-to-feast growth of texts on contemporary Chinese art in the three-odd decades the book takes as its purview (which, unsurprisingly, parallels market trends). The editors respond to this problem with stronger involvement in the first and last sections, the latter of which (the coda) provides a brief historiographic review, addresses art and commerce, and introduces issues associated with the return, both long- and short-term, of expatriate artists including Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-qiang, and Xu Bing. That these high profile figures' returns have taken dramatically varied courses—for Cai Guo-qiang, official embrace in the form of an invitation to design the 2008 Olympic fireworks spectacle; for Xu Bing, entrée into the academic elite, having been appointed vice president of Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in the same year; and for Ai Weiwei, repression in the form of the forced

demolition of his Shanghai studio, surveillance, and detention—signals the continued volatility of the conditions of contemporary art production and research in mainland China.

Though Wu Hung bears the book's primary editorial byline, the volume is in fact the product of extensive collaborative efforts. Peggy Wang, a former student of his at the University of Chicago and currently an art history professor at Denison University, oversaw the book's translations. To determine the book's contents, moreover, Wu Hung convened a workshop at the He Xiangning Museum of Modern Art in the southern metropolis of Shenzhen. This effort to generate input from a group of mainland China-based critics and scholars is a kind of latter-day reflection of the winding threads of collectivism of Chinese art in the 1980s (a pre-marketized decade to which, at least this book seems to suggest, all of contemporary Chinese art and art criticism owes some part of its formation). All of these collaborators' names and/or voices, like Wu Hung's, appear many times in the materials of which this book is composed. Wu Hung's response, then, to the task of anthologizing a history that is in some ways his own was to collectivize or pluralize that charge.

This collaborative impulse seems to exceed the traditional bounds of the editor's purview, bleeding into the contents of the anthology itself. Even beyond the absence of consistent biographical introductions to the book's contributors, part two of the volume, whose subdivisions into "Intrinsic Perspectives" and "Extrinsic Perspectives" might suggest a practitioner/theorist or artist/critic divide, is not overtly concerned with its contributors' identities. This lack of separation seems to reflect, at least in part, a kind of closeness among the various members of the contemporary Chinese art world. As the coda reads, "[T]he authors of . . . early histories of contemporary Chinese art were without exception active insiders, and their work combines historical reflection with critical evaluation and mission statements."

The intertwined dynamic among artist, critic, and dealer (though the latter is largely absent) might be further explained by the view expressed in many of the book's constituent documents, and often the community at large, that contemporary art in China had such a thing as a moment of birth. (For example, the book's first two subsection headings are entitled "The Beginning of Contemporary Art" and "The Arrival of an Avant-Garde Movement.") Despite the too-clean break this year-zero narrative threatens to make with contemporary art's Mao-era past and earlier generations of Chinese reformers, this volume nevertheless makes clear that the various members of the contemporary Chinese art milieu have shared bigger and more urgent institutional and political stakes than one would otherwise realize.

The book's self-consciously collectivized or collaborative editorial process and the substitution of an editorial essay for anthology entries in the last section combine with its inclusion of later historiographic "appendices"

within its sub-sections to produce the sense that a clear distinction between “primary” and what would normally be considered secondary sources is not obvious in *Chinese Contemporary Art*. The subsection “Video Art,” for example, begins with an “appendix,” a 2002 essay on video and new media art by critic Wu Meichun and artist Qiu Zhijie, and is followed by three sets of project descriptions/artist statements by Zhang Peili (1992–97/2008), Wang Jianwei (1997), and Zhou Xiaohu (2002). While the intermixing of sometimes anachronistic appendices with artists’ and critics’ writings is occasionally confusing in its organization—as in the Video Art section—the choice effectively to treat all sources as primary documents is well reasoned. Less a function, perhaps, of concerted critique of modern scholarly practices than it is in line with a general tendency in contemporary art anthologies, this move in any case highlights the points of attachment shared by and between members of the art world. Thus it provides a degree of relief from the normally presumed irreconcilable positions of critical authority between artist, critic, and scholar.

The editorial preface insinuates that in spite of their well-documented interest in foreign art and philosophy, in the first decade or more after Mao’s death, Chinese artists were still largely working in a kind of isolation from their non-Chinese contemporaries. In a bullet point explaining the anthology’s restriction of materials to the mainland and those who emigrated from there after the 1980s, one reads that in the late 1970s contemporary Chinese art “emerged as a domestic phenomenon.” The word “domestic” is a quiet but insistent presence in the book. Domesticity in contemporary Chinese art is a curious concept to invoke, for its connotations of interiority can be read along the lines of both reactivity and intimacy: domestic as in nativist or nationalist, on the one hand, long an element of the deeply ambivalent relationship Chinese and Western intellectuals have historically had with one another (and expressions of which this volume provides many), and a turn inward to reexamine the domestic subject and her/his respective domicile—to reassert subjective interiority as an artistic concern, in other words—on the other. A few paragraphs further in, one reads that the 1990s are characterized by “globalization and a ‘domestic turn,’” thus implying two simultaneous and mostly separate (if not entirely opposed) frameworks for contemporary Chinese art, one inside, one out.

Perhaps this subtle emphasis on the domestic emerged in part due to the demands put on a non-Western area study produced for an Anglophone audience by an institution, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which was founded primarily to exhibit modern Western art—in other words, as a response to the recurrent problem of how to negotiate the seemingly limitless opportunities to conflate nation-state with culture and to reflect upon what is meant by “Chinese” in “contemporary Chinese art.” If the book’s exclusion of material from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan weren’t enough to suggest the complexities at work in the field of contemporary Chinese art with respect to identity and place, its entries on the topic of emigrant artists, curators, and critics (only the first of the three is explicitly acknowledged) should certainly do the job. The reader wonders whether

the section on overseas Chinese artists (to use the specialized term) might have been balanced perhaps by comment on the role of foreign scholars and critics, curators, and investors (who may or may not identify as sinologists), given the book's goal of increasing the potential for dialogue between those who identify as specialists and nonspecialists.

The book is upfront about the complex and often chaotic discursive stream that has attended the production of recent Chinese art. Wu Hung explicitly indicates the desire to preserve moments of awkwardness where they may have existed in the original, and while this results in translated jargon that is a little difficult to track without a separate glossary or editorial notes, it also underscores the anthology's potential to bring the issue of translation with respect to contemporary Chinese art generally to the fore. While many of the book's often-invoked terms and oppositions—avant-garde (*qianwei*) vs. modern (*xiandai*), official vs. unofficial, individual vs. collective—may not find satisfying resolution within the volume, the reader has the chance to engage with them in some of their translated source contexts.

The book's major strength is the opportunity it gives the English-language reader to engage with the persistently complex relationship artists and critics have had to official rhetoric, as well as its own institutional and economic bases. Contemporary art's contested Maoist and/or socialist realist origins extend beyond the appropriation of Mao-era slogans and pictures, and language symptomatic of a very rapid marketization is couched in both hopeful and anxious terms. *Contemporary Chinese Art* is a good place to find these complexities unfolding in documentary form.

If the anthology as a literary genre is meant simultaneously to provide a rough-and-ready historical account and be a source for selective and/or non-linear reading, the weight of *Contemporary Chinese Art* falls to the former function, and this is a product, no doubt, of the volume's meticulous, even strict, attention to periodization. The larger questions, such as that of the continued utility of an area-studies model for the discourse of contemporary art and problems of translation, while perhaps not resolved (this is not the book's goal), are nevertheless productively raised, and this promises to contribute to the ongoing discourse of its subject. One might be so hopeful as to anticipate a series of thematic anthologies that draw upon the topics the book presents—feminism, performance art, and photography come to mind—in addition to the studies that will undoubtedly benefit from the present one.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 404.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv–xv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chinese Name Index

Ai Weiwei 艾未未	Huang Zhuan 黃專	Shao Fan 邵帆	Wu Shanzhuan 吳山專
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Chang Yung Ho 張永和	Jiang Pengyi 蔣鵬奕	Song Shanmu 宋山木	Xu Bing 徐冰
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Fang Lijun 方力鈞	Mi Fu 米穀	Wang Jianwei 汪建偉	Zhang Yimou 張藝謀
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*Dawn of Asia*, a picture within a picture, is characteristic of Zhong Biao's charcoal renderings, golden frames, and fine acrylic embellishments. The framed picture within the picture portrays a mass of expressionless men and women dressed 1980s-style, wheeling bicycles and walking away from the rays of light in the dawn sky; a young and modern-looking girl peers into the gilded frame and sees herself hurtling above the crowd toward the light, as if she perceives hope in the distance. The contrasts of different times and spaces are brought together and divulge a speechless dialogue.

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