

Exhibition Review - Between Past and Future:

New Photography and Video from China

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Exhibition organised by the International Centre for Photography
New York and the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art,
University of Chicago, adapted for the Victoria
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Phoebe Scott

On entering *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*, the first impression to register, before any of the works themselves were even visible, was the sound of breathing. This effect was produced by the auditory accompaniment to photographs of Song Dong's 1996 performance piece (titled *Breathing*) and was an apt beginning to an exhibition where ideas of self-consciousness, the body and the limits of human capacity had a central and searching importance. *Between Past and Future* was a survey exhibition featuring 39 different artists, with work dating from the early 1990s to 2004. The exhibition presented the works as forming part of a contemporary artistic mediation of China's cultural and social past. How do contemporary artists in China address the vast body of artistic culture that has come to be understood as their heritage? What type of agency or even potency is available to an artist in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square? How is history to be dealt with, understood and represented? While the exhibition was limited to video and photographic work, a large amount of performance art was included under the auspices of these other two artistic forms. The diverse artworks were loosely linked by several common artistic strategies—or orientations—used by the artists to explore their situations.

One of the most prominent strategies to emerge from this collection of work was that of the artist rigorously drawing attention to the limits of his or her autonomy, both in terms of personal agency and of the potential of art practice. This emerged most overtly in two photographs by Qiu Zhijie: *Tattoo 1* and *Tattoo 2* of 1994. In the first work, an image of the character meaning 'no' was painted onto the artist's body and onto the wall behind him. It was impossible to look at the

body of the artist without first appreciating this overbearing negative, although what specifically it censured was left ambiguous. The viewer's gaze was blocked, with the artist's image appearing hemmed in by the character, a metaphorical evocation of a wider web of social proscription and convention communicated and carried by language.

Similarly, in a nine-panel photographic sequence which documented a performance by Zhang Huan (*Family Tree*, 2001), the artist's face was painted with ink characters until it was completely blacked out. In each photograph, more of the artist's skin was obscured. This work makes explicit that the experience of the body is a cultural matter. Zhang Huan denies recourse to the body as a natural or free site by performing the ways in which it is determined. Curiously, in these works, it is the artist's insistence on our noticing the limiting context of their practice that suggests the limitations are in some way surmountable, through a determination to be present and to be conscious. In both cases, as in many other works in the exhibition, it was the artist's body, turned into the 'model' in the artwork, which was both the site of limitation and the site of awareness.

A variation to this strategy of attention to the limits of artistic agency was a flirtation with the futility of the artist's position, explored with particular eloquence in the work of Song Dong. In his performance *Water Seal* of 1996, documented in this exhibition by a series of 36 sequential photographs, he stood in the Lhasa River for one hour and stamped the running water with a seal bearing the label 'water'. The water, of course, could not take the impression of the stamp. While on the one hand indicating artistic impotence, through the artist's inability to mark or alter his environment, on the other hand, it offered the emancipatory suggestion of a realm of existence beyond human codification, naming and control. This suggestion was strengthened by the bureaucratic implications of the gesture of repeated stamping: to resist this gesture is in some sense to resist complete political classification.

Song Dong also turned to the relationship between the artist and the urban environment, again drawing out the tension between futility and control. The film *Crumpling Shanghai* from 2000 showed brief segments of footage of the city of Shanghai, projected onto a sheet of paper which was regularly and repeatedly crumpled up by the artist, giving us a constantly shifting stream of images. This work was imbued with a sense of lyricism through the rhythmic creation and destruction of the images, although its message was the sober one of unfettered

urban change. The constant element in the work was that of the image of the artist's hand after each act of crumpling, visible in outline through floating dust motes in the light of the projector. While the artist was unable to arrest the pace of change or stabilise the image for the viewer, the presence of the hand attested to the artist's deliberate witnessing of the passage of events.

The idea of 'bearing witness' arose as another important strategy within the exhibition. One instance of this was the artist Luo Yongjin's meticulous photographic records of building sites in the process of development and destruction. Another was the photographs of Zhang Dali, an artist who actively intervenes in the urban landscape by knocking out the shape of a human face on walls scheduled for demolition. This gesture humanises the urban landscape and forces us to focus on the site of change. In a series of three very arresting images, Sheng Qi shows his left hand with a small photograph placed in the palm: in the first, a photograph of his mother; in the second, one of himself; and in the third, one of Chairman Mao. His hand is mutilated, as, according to the exhibition's text panel, Sheng Qi cut off his little finger when he left China, following the violence at Tiananmen Square. The gesture of the palm being held up and open compels us to stop and look: the artist's presence in the work again creates an insistence on awareness—in this case the awareness of historical memory.

A third strategy prominent in the exhibition was that of staging, performing, enacting and appropriating different cultural models. Some of these works offered a sense of 'dress-ups'—a trying out of identities through a trying *on*. Others attempted to evacuate the sense of reverence surrounding particular historical Chinese art works, by inserting contemporary elements or re-staging the artworks in contemporary terms, such as the works featured by Wang Qingsong and Hong Hao. Another instance was a photograph of the artist An Hong, who had cast himself as the Buddha and performed episodes of the Buddha's life. The theatrical and arch image of this performance undermines the exoticism of his costume and pose through the artist's direct and knowing gaze. These works contrive at a role play where the artist, or their models, actively inhabit the cultural past, and, by doing so, de-sanctify it and create a living engagement with it.

The protagonists in Cao Fei's video *COS Players* of 2004 used identity play as a vehicle for escapism, self indulgence and consuming fantasy. According to the accompanying notes, 'COS Play' is an activity originating in Japan, where the

players assume the identities of animated TV characters for periods of role-play. In Cao Fei's film, a group of teenagers, dressed variously as grim reapers, faux-ninjas, armoured and winged heroes, cloaked assailants and eccentric sages, face off in a developing urban city and work themselves up into frenzied rounds of choreographed battle. The film culminates in their staged mass death after their most ecstatic round of war-play. The teenagers then pick themselves up, spent and deflated, and return home to have dinner and do their schoolwork, still costumed but with an air of resigned normalcy. In the process of their game, they actively appropriate and transform the pedestrian urban space surrounding them. Their portentous and deadly serious play creates a vision of identity as being a matter of intention, will and concentration, rather than a cultural given.

One of the most moving artworks in this exhibition also used a fantasy of urban space to question identity and its possibilities. In *25:00 (No. 2)*, Chen Lingyang created an image of an out-of-time witching hour, where she can occupy her night-lit city as she chooses. In her photograph, she presents her body, enlarged to a fantastic scale, lying face down across the roofs of boxy apartment blocks. Her naked body becomes the axis of the urban sprawl around her. She is careful to resist an erotic objectification in her use of the female nude: the pose presents her foreshortened, from the crown of her head to her feet. The image offers the tension between the unassailable tranquility of the artist's body as placed within the work, and the potential vulnerability of that same body if offered up to the city at any time other than Chen Lingyang's mythical 25:00.

In the final room of the exhibition, two other works explored the possibilities for the female body in contemporary Chinese urbanism. Cui Xiuwen's film *Ladies Room* of 2000 used a concealed camera in the toilets of a Beijing nightclub to reveal the touching up, adjusting, dressing and undressing, and mobile phone chit-chat of escorts on their working nights. The commodity status of these women is made quite explicit in the film, through the appearance of wads of money, counted and then stashed on their bodies. Opposite, Yang Yong used the conventions of fashion photography to explore the newly urbanised space of Shenzhen, in an untitled installation drawing on work from 1996–2004. Clothing was of central importance in the images: coats, school uniforms, bomber jackets and sparkly playboy bunny t-shirts were the focal points in many of the photographs, particularly as the backgrounds were all anonymous urban spaces—shiny, empty malls, expressways, escalators and modern bathrooms. In these photographs, the fashion

model was the cultural model for the Shenzhen girls, whose role appears to be to consume, to dress and to draw the eye. The unfortunate conclusion presented by the juxtaposition of these two works was that the privileged woman can operate as a consumer, while the not-so-privileged woman is merely consumed.

This was an exhibition teeming with art and ideas and a short survey of the themes really does not do it justice. Despite the number of artists included and the variety of their concerns, the exhibition found a coherence which was all the more valuable for not being based on any attempt to define or manufacture an homogenous national aesthetic. Instead, it was the emergence of recurring strategies in art practice that threaded the exhibition together. Although the entire exhibition consisted of work in photography and film, very little of it contrived at the appearance of objective reportage, instead being far more interested in the assiduous documentation of artistic intervention. As a result, self reflexivity and self awareness were strong motifs throughout. While common to much postmodern art, their use by the artists in this exhibition was particularly strong and effective in teasing out the implications of their historical and cultural inheritance.

Images from the exhibition can be viewed at the Victoria and Albert Museum's website:
http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1369_between_past_future/index.php.