

98

UNVEILED REALITY

เปิดม่าน ความจริง

拓開的真實

## Unveiled Reality

By Wu Meichun

The main streams of contemporary Chinese "Art Photography" are Aestheticism and Neo-documentary. The Aestheticism is skilled exploration of the form of objects and seizing specific instants that had been stressed. Various images of scenery, local traits, and folk customs, as well as portraits in the style of salon art, all fell into this category, which essentially appealed to official photographic organizations and publications, and also won general approval from the masses. Neo-documentary photography emphasizes the relationship between objects and their specific surroundings, bearing witness to human nature in a random assembly of objective images. The artists' camera reaches into the concealed and forbidden areas of society, revealing intimate individual worlds. Lu Nan's series on the Catholic life in rural Shanxi Province, and Zhang Hai'er's series about the miners are powerful and stunning. These trends may be aligned with Bresson's notion of a "decisive instant" that characterizes the classic aesthetics of photography, and has had strong influence among Chinese intellectuals.

Conceptual photography started from 1990's and became increasingly vital in the past few years in China. As an examination of the function of photography itself in an overall cultural context, it demonstrates concerns with deconstruction and appropriation of its original function. It is not confined to the final picture itself, but focus on fundamental issues, such as how to take a photograph, why to take it and how to use it. Conceptual photography can be perceived as measuring and exploring the boundaries of established photographic conventions. It is more profoundly involved in the spiritual change and cultural re-adjustment occurring in contemporary China as it remoulds the identity and faculty of photography.

Chinese society in 1990s is a castle besieged by intense conflicts between various political, economic and cultural powers. Rapid economic development aggravates the division between rich and poor, and quickens the splitting and re-arrangement of social groups as fortune and power shifts to different hands. The unified, conventional base of ethics and cultural identification has been shattered and is fast crumbling away. Along with the steep rise in the volume of information available, an overall popularization of mass media, the centralization of politics still exists. Power constantly demonstrates itself to be a mysterious force in social life that is as much just out of reach as it is found to prey too close. Danger lurks on every side as the natural environment rapidly worsens and legislative system remains far from sound. Chinese people find themselves thrown into a thriving whirlpool of hidden opportunities but great instability. Individual lives are pressured and finally crashed under the intense weight of their daily problems. The appearance of identity crises is a penetrating self-irony in a mass culture. For artists living in the narrow space between myriad contradictions and those who attempt to reveal the possibility of freedom, chances lie in taking the initiative.

Zhang Dali's tactic is to add graffiti to the flurry and disorder of the cityscape in Beijing. In recent years he has anonymously placed hundreds of a distinctive human profile in the streets and lanes of the capital. Again and again, his image forces its way unexpectedly into the gaze of pedestrians, and has become indelibly engraved in their minds. Alongside traffic jams, the demolition of buildings, and the relocation of occupants, his graffiti works have been part of people's experiences of the city. Not only are they viewed, but themselves are viewers of the spectacles in the city. An almost abnormal cool-headedness and silence lends an air of mystery to these onlookers. The profile floats out from the sub-consciousness of the city to the surface, making a modern-day seal to the certain part of city scene and freeze it into a documentation.

Like Zhang, Xu Tan tries to document the cityscape by repeating the image of Boeing jets flying over the city of Guangzhou. Against the hubbub of this so-called economically developed region of Southern China, due to the close proximity, the incredible size of the bodies of these planes conveys an ominous suggestion, reminiscent of a colonial invasion. The image of plane seems to be a proclamation of globalization. In the overwhelming noise, the streets on ground became annotation of regionalism. A dialogue about modernity is taking place.

In Zhu Jia's pictures, two pedestrians walking together by accident didn't notice a sign placed in front of them by the artist. The hand-held board reads: "Did they have sex?" It is unimportant whether these two know each other or not, for the privacy has been invaded and a new reality invented. The sick fantasy of voyeurism holds no bounds once it is stimulated. It touches off the innumerable possibilities born of the collapse of ethical standards and the sophisticated re-organization of social relations in contemporary life: any absurd event is plausible, while the truth remains elusive. We have been long used to living in a world saturated by media, and allowing the delight and grief of media fiction to satisfy our needs and desires. We have been long used to listening to truths interpreted by words. The hand holding the sign across the picture is more authoritative than any truth for what it holds are words.

Yan Lei's work bears a close resemblance to commercial advertisement, which is precisely the domain of violently competitive discourse. What moves on the surface of media is a range of languages that justify themselves at the same time they cancel themselves out. They build a compelling picture filled with all sorts of compromising expressions. Language infuses pictures with significance. It also wipes significance out. When we extract a message through illustration, we are controlled by the power of that illustration. This is an instance of the inter-relation of knowledge and power to which Foucault refers. In one group of new works, Yan Lei demonstrates his experience of power through embarrassing situations in which he has found himself rather than using metaphors. Presented to crowd of well-dressed museum directors or curators from the West, the work of an artist from a Third World country is not just an insignificant image waiting to be interpreted; rather, it is like a fish who is too hungry to refuse jumping at the bait.

In his works of surrealistic digital images, Wang Wangwang creates a collage of symbols of traditional culture and portraits of political leaders of our time together with images from the natural world, the wilderness, planets and the universe. The invented worlds are so absurd you can sense the ill portends. However, the ambiguity that suffuses the picture permits its survival in the orthodox system of power. Titled with lines quoted from the great leaders' writings, this group of works presents a curious integration of ridicule, nostalgia and parody, and have been legitimized as a calendar sold with great success through official outlets to many private homes. This style of playing the parasite on the very institutions that attempt to subvert, and play tricks with, power is Wang Wangwang's approach to art. Conversely, Huang Yan strives to establish a personal system of communication in a somewhat solemn and tragic



Zhang Dali 張大力  
Dialogue 1991-98

sense through his parody and confrontation of mass media. Huang Yan produces a tabloid titled *Huang Yan News*. Each issue has a different headline news, such as murder, folklore, or prediction of the future. He aims to offer the same fully-packed, meaningless, trivial and unbelievable information in the midst of a surplus of information and visual pollution, with an attempt to fight for a space for discourse within the mainstream. More recently, the paper carried the following headline: Artist Huang Yan commits suicide by lying himself on railway track. This was accompanied by a gory image of the scene digitally processed. Huang Yan's publishing will continue. Various heterodox, original but tiny fables are shot out like darts hidden inside sleeves. An unfortunate prediction in the information society has been testified: Only those who are stubbornly biased can survive.

How can people use photographs in a digital and internet-connected world? Documentary work can suddenly be rewritten, replaced, and manipulated in a specific context. If we say that the focus of the above artists is to explore the cultural identity of photography, then the experiments of Qiu Zhijie are largely directed against the inner problem of photography; its objectivity.

The popularization of digital photographic techniques has resulted in a "crisis of credibility" about the objectivity of photography. Meanwhile, Qiu Zhijie began to take a reversed obscure process. Using specifically created arrangements of objects with a dramatic effect, he makes on-the-spot reports by way of normal documentary approaches, to achieve the results looks exactly as any digital image. The portrait with thumbtacks pinned all over the body is a perfect example. This kind of photograph makes no attempt to conceal its "untruthfulness", Baffled spectators immediately see through the web of lines. Whether it is truthful documentation of false scenes or false documentation of real scenes, photography is awarded the truth of an objectivity that has become dilute through the mass of doubt and suspicion raised by over-interpretation. In his series entitled *Being Good*, Qiu Zhijie argues the absence and impotence of objectivity in photography by illustrating the influence upon body language engendered by the presence of camera. Facing the camera, people naturally make poses they consider to constitute "good" gestures. But the "good" gesture is not natural. The perfect positive image illustrates social classes, identities, fashions and ideology. "Every shot produces one good acting each time". Photography is a kind of political instrument that represents the positive image of the world. It controls and rewrites the figures it presents: objectivity never ever exists.

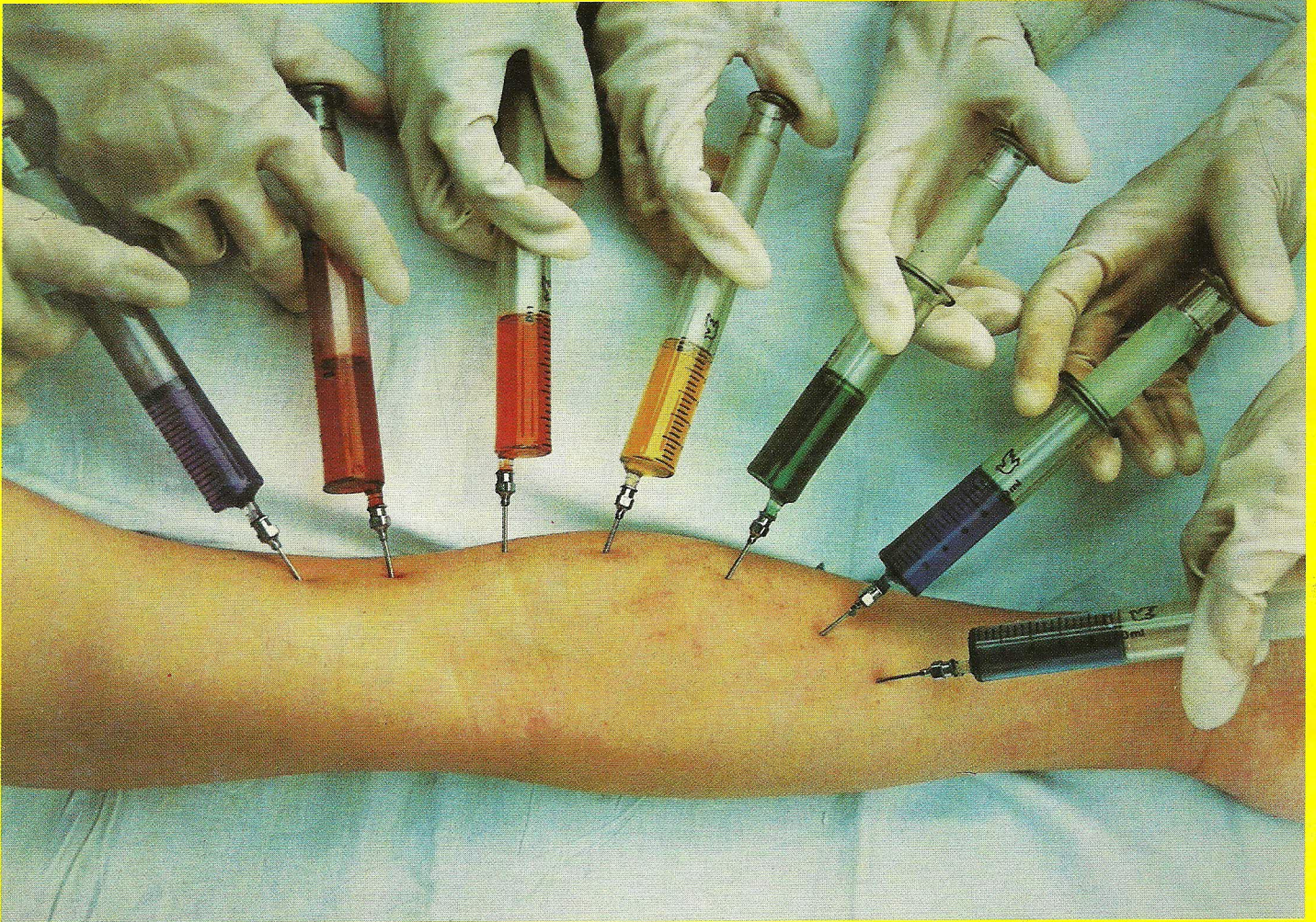
Qiu Zhijie's caricature-styled irony stems from his strong disbelief in objectivity. On the contrary, Geng Janyi observes the world with a level head, as if conducting a scientific observation. He casts doubt upon the notion of a "standard photograph" by reproducing different types of identification cards of the same person, such as membership card, residence booklet, employee's card, driver's license, medical card, and marriage certificate. Political and economic contexts posited from different perspectives reveal variations within the same image. Behind the identity and variation of the same portrait, there exists a powerful and penetrating interpretative system of society and its self-evident control upon individual life. Both face and soul have been branded by its stamp.

The common trait of Chinese artists is a deep, emotional reflection upon the radical changes in social phenomena and the vicissitudes of Nature and Man. Rong Rong focuses on the ruins dotted throughout China, especially those worn-out photographs that have been witness to the ruin of spiritual life. The failure of man to outwit time are manifest, and the madness, the ostentatiousness, the helplessness, and the changes are all recorded in a single image such as the a congenitally deformed child in a circus troupe, a torn poster or calendar, or even an old couch. The image of Rong Rong lying naked on the bed in which he was born is the basic metaphor of his whole work: an intense doubt about civilization and modernity.

For Zheng Guogu, this sort of doubt develops into a sense of bewilderment. The artist counters this by shelving the chaotic and trivial aspects of daily life. A series entitled *Youth in Yangjiang* offers a profile of the psychological mood of the small town on the Pearl River Delta in which he lives. This place is an experimental workshop of many human values: the urbanization, the influence of Hong Kong movies, electronic media, Taiquandao and Japanese cartoon, worship of cabalistic violence, friendship and sexual awakening of youth, all constitute a brand-new post-colonial cultural scene in Zheng Guogu's noncommittal photo collages. These tiny, fragmental and fleeting pictures construct a narrative that is devoid of plot: these lives are lived at a distance that can not be crossed. Floating images tell evasive stories. In Zheng Guogu's art, photography invents a semi-true style of life. In his own words: "everything is open to conjecture".

An Hong creates his own cultural scenery with direct conjectures. He presents a clumsy image of China integrated with Beijing Opera, cartoons figures, Vinayaka of Tibetan Buddhism, ancient Chinese teachings about sex, and advertisements for curing venereal diseases. This inferior performance is injected with an affected mystery and ornamented with showy and vulgar props to create a festive air. The result is an implication of a Western spectator wearing "colonially-tinted" lenses. Is this a kind of deformed native pop art, or precisely its own irony?

The emerging of conceptual photography in China is not directly from the photography itself, but the fruit of its use by a large number of experimental artists. Where many of these artists are shifting their practice from painting to an exploration of different media, photography represents an open field that is remarkably vital. In times of fast-changing and complex circumstances, the potential at the frontier of photography will open more room for philosophizing and contemplation, and will offer more possible routes for expressing and evoking emotions. If human nature is to be carried forward, every kind of media will have to undergo a process of marginalization.



“Unveiled Reality : Contemporary Chinese Photography”

by

11 Artists from the People's Republic of China

Art Center, 7fl. Centers of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok  
in Collaboration with Art Beatus Gallery, Vancouver and Annie Wong Art Foundation, Hong Kong