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**ART REPUBLIK SITS DOWN WITH VETERAN ARTIST ZHANG DALI AND SIPF FAIR DIRECTOR GWEN LEE TO EXPLORE "FLUX REALITIES: A SHOWCASE OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY". BY NADYA WANG**

This page, clockwise from top to bottom: *Goddess*, 2011, Wang Qingsong; *I Remember II No. 1* (detailed view), 2008, Liu Xiaofang. All images courtesy of the artist.

Facing page: *Wintery Forest* (detailed view), 2014, Yang Yongliang. All images courtesy of the artist.

# In Conversation

As part of the 4th biannual Singapore International Photography Festival (SIPF) 2014, "Flux Realities: A Showcase of Chinese Contemporary Photography" is on show from 22 August to 2 November at the ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands. The exhibiting artists are Wang Qingsong, Yang Yongliang, Wei Bi, Zhang Dali, Liu Xiaofang, Maleonn (Ma Liang) and Wang Ningde. Curated by SIPF Director, Gwen Lee, this is the first time the artworks of these emerging and established Chinese contemporary artists have been brought together in an exhibition.

Art Republik sat down with veteran artist Zhang Dali to learn more about his series of works on display, "A Second History", his thoughts on Chinese contemporary art and his first-time visit to Singapore; as well as Fair Director Gwen Lee to find out more about the exhibition and what can be expected from this year's SIPF.

## *Interview with Zhang Dali*

*(The following interview was translated from Mandarin to English by Nadya Wang.)*

### **How did you come up with the idea to compare official photographs with original ones in "A Second History"?**

There were two sources for these works. The first was the museums, where I went to look at negatives. The second was books from the 1950s and 1970s. Some political figures present in the former were no longer present in the latter. I worked on this series for 7 years, but in reality, it is a work that is not finished. I have met with people who have told me about important pictures that I have missed.





From all the photographs I gathered, I made comparisons. The main thing about these photographs is not whether they are real or fake. Rather, we can find out from them the trajectory of Chinese history in the past 60 years. I wanted these works to be portrayed in the simplest way possible so that everyone could look at them, and immediately understand something about Chinese history. At the same time, I wanted to encourage people to question the images and other “truths” that they encounter in their daily lives.

**What made you focus on this idea in particular?**

All my works are about China’s reality, looking at the migration of people from the countryside to the city, and at changes to the urban landscape for example. I grew up in the rapidly changing Chinese society, and through my work, I talk about changes in the Chinese society and societies in general, and the human condition.

**What difficulties did you face collecting your materials for this series?**

I needed to rely on insiders to help get me into the archives. And this was a tedious undertaking. It was unlike a painting that one can conceivably finish in a few days. This was an endeavour that took years. It was about sifting through lots of photographs with an artist’s eye. I also had to be a historian, with the responsibility to understand the stories behind each photograph in order to use them empathetically.

**There was no Photoshop in the days these photographs were made. How were these manipulated?**

I believe this was the predecessor to Photoshop. Some of the editing was done directly on the negative. Others were altered by drawing directly on the developed photograph. In my opinion, some of these works were better manipulated than the edited photos we encounter today.

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**“A Second History” resides between art and photojournalism. Do you think the audience in Singapore can understand the meanings of this work?**

I believe everyone can. People have responded well to my works when they were exhibited in Europe and America. The series can be understood and appreciated across countries and cultures, for it is certainly not only the Chinese who have edited photographs in history.

**Have you met with any problems exhibiting “A Second History”, which can be seen as a rather sensitive series of work?**

In the beginning, yes, but not so much anymore. If there were any difficulties, it would usually be when these were exhibited in public spaces such as museums in China, especially in Beijing. If it was in a private gallery, or in a place far away from Beijing, such as in

This page, from top to bottom: *Flux Realities: A Showcase of Chinese Contemporary Photography* at ArtScience Museum. Courtesy Marina Bay Sands; Artist's Impression of DECK. Courtesy SIPP.

Facing page: *Some Days No. 23* (detailed view), 1999-2009, Wang Ningde. Courtesy of the artist.

Guangdong or overseas, then it did not really present a problem. But of course, I needed to be cautious because if I fanned the fire too much, it would not bode well for my livelihood as an artist.

**You have worked in many mediums in your long career as an artist, including oil on canvas and graffiti. What has encouraged this experimentation?**

Every time I create a new work, I am not so concerned about the medium. I first come up with the concept. After I am clear about this, then I try out different mediums, and decide on the one that will best express my idea.

**As a pioneer in Chinese contemporary art, what challenges do you think young Chinese contemporary artists face?**

For those born in the 80s and 90s, they have all the resources they could need at their disposal, and to an extent, take things for granted, so I believe that their biggest challenge would be to know themselves, and to be willing to challenge themselves.

**What are your thoughts on this group exhibition of Chinese contemporary photography?**

I find this exhibition well-curated, and am honoured to have my works exhibited alongside these excellent examples of Chinese contemporary photography.

**And what do you think about the SIPP and the cultural atmosphere in Singapore in general?**

This is the first time I am here in Singapore. I do not know much about the cultural atmosphere in Singapore. But in recent years, I have come into contact with several Singapore-based curators, gallerists and collectors. I believe that Singapore has been very active on the international contemporary arts scene in recent years, and has much to contribute to it.

#### *Interview with Gwen Lee*

**What were the motivations behind this exhibition, and how did it come together?**

In the past few years, I have been invited to attend various exhibitions and festivals in China, and I have also curated a couple of photography showcases as well. In the process of discovering so many amazing works, I started to wonder why they had not been

shown in Singapore outside of commercial galleries and art fairs. I wanted to present the photographic development in China to the Singapore public.

**Why the name Flux Realities?**

Flux Realities is a nod to the constantly changing perceptions we have of the world we live in, and how we constantly renegotiate what we choose to remember and what we choose to forget. I was motivated by the amazing changes in China in the past three decades and how these have been reflected in and ruminated upon in the artworks of contemporary Chinese artists to reveal the psyche of their society.

**Did the concept of the exhibition or the selection of the artists come first?**

I chose the artists first. I was keen to have a complete chronology, from the times of Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to the Open Door policy, and to see the sweep of changes through modern Chinese history. I chose artists experienced these realities in their daily lives.

**How far do you think these artists reflect a unique Chinese point of view in their works? What universal themes do you see them portray?**

I think the language of photography is global and accessible. I find that even in the most personal artworks, such as Maleonn's "Postman" series inspired by his childhood ambition to be a postman and showing scenarios staged against China's cityscape, there is a very tangible relationship between the work and the Chinese nation. However, they also revolve around core recurring themes that everyone can relate to, such as remembering, history and nostalgia.

**Where do you see photography situated in the contemporary art world?**


I think artists are first and foremost concerned about being creative and use photography as one of many mediums to express their ideas. As an example, Yang Yongliang is essentially a Chinese ink painter who uses a digital drybrush to create his artworks, revealing new possibilities in photography as a creative medium.

**As the founder of 2902 gallery, a gallery that focuses on photography, is there a market for Chinese contemporary photography? Who are collecting these works?**

It boomed with the rest of contemporary art. And it is never about the photograph, but always the intention behind it. There are of course people who remain nostalgic for black-and-white photographs and the like. The photographs that make waves, however, are the new ones that have strong concepts.

**What can the public look forward to aside from the Flux Realities Exhibition which we previewed today? What are you particularly proud of at this year's festival?**

DECK, an acronym for Discovery Engagement Community and Knowledge is something that I am most proud of. It is a physical creative space made up of 19 shipping containers that will connect the campuses of art colleges LASALLE College of the Arts and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Through this project, we wish to bring art to the people, and raise the profile of photography as an art.

We are also proud of our year-long educational programming, for which there is a huge demand from schools. We are very grateful for the National Arts Council seed grant, which has allowed us to grow our team, reach out to more people and to achieve more with SIPP in general. 



The *Singapore International Photography Festival* will take place from 3<sup>rd</sup> October to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2014 at various venues. More information can be found at [www.sipf.org](http://www.sipf.org).