

**dslcollection 3D Virtual Exhibition
Curated by Martina Koppel Yang**

Exhibition Text

A museum is linked to the notion of estate. Yet, it represents not only a real but also a virtual domain. By deciding who and what is allowed into its domain the concept of the museum relies on the notion of territoriality. Curating a virtual exhibition of an actual collection, the DSL collection, is a kind of double deterritorialization. It means: taking possession of an established territory and designing a different context for the works of art being part of this collection. It is this process that renders the works and the space virtual and open for new and different contents.

Lin Yilin's installation "Standard Series of Ideal Residence" similarly imagines a virtual domain. Three structures made from steel frames filled with bricks simulate building elements. Lin created the piece in the early 1990s, when the extensive construction of such architectural entities designed as individual homes marked China's determination to rethink the country as a market economy. The beginning economic boom rapidly entailed a significant change of the urban environment. Lin, living in China's economic laboratory, the Pearl River Delta, grasped the political and historical importance of the transformation in the individual's living conditions and the public sphere. (Consumption began to substitute for ideology; the individual's dreams to construct an ideal residence began to replace the task to participate in the public sphere.) Lin Yilin is part of the Cantonese Big Tail Elephant Working Unit, a group of four artists, who at this very moment in time employed participation in the public sphere as an artistic procedure. They intervened in the urban environment as a kind of urban guerilla, thus creating areas of estrangement and reflection.

Liang Juhui's "City" is a reflection of the urban reality, too. Images of the city dwellers are piled up and built into a wooden tower in the form of a traditional Chinese pagoda. Here, the overwhelming verticality of the modern metropolis, as well as the growing mass of the urban population is represented. Verticality may be interpreted as a direction of economic development, and is set in relation to the horizontal movement of the apparently growing crowd projected on the ground inside the pagoda. Liang, who died in 2006, was also part of the Cantonese Urban guerilla, the Big Tail Elephant group.

Our next stop is Gu Dexin. Beijing-based Gu is one of the emblematic figures of contemporary Chinese art. Starting as an amateur with erotic drawings of little hermaphrodite beings in the early 1980s, he became known to the Western public at the exhibition "Les magiciens de la terre" in the Centre Pompidou in 1989 with installations made from melted plastic parts. His oeuvre focuses on the amorphous rather than on the defined form. Installations using organic material, like here: fruit, hence apples, and meat play on the aspects of fluidity, decay and metamorphosis. Gu sets them here in contrast to symbols of power and stability, like for example a flagpole, golden frames and the emblematic color red. His works speak of the artist's distrust in all kinds of systems of control - no matter if bureaucratic or aesthetic and his claim for an existential autonomy.

Zhang Huang's "Big Buddha", seems to be looking for transcendence and autonomy in an all-too materialistic environment, too. A large wooden skeleton, with an oversized skull, pretends to be a Buddha.

Nothing indicates that this figure is a statue of worship except for his majestic size and posture and the fact that it shelters a human figure in his hands. Even though the sculpture seems calm and balanced the spectator cannot but feel uneasy facing this strange unadorned idol. Zhang Huan, who is a Buddhist devotee, uses Buddhist imagery in his works since about a decade. Even though he tries to suggest meditative and spiritual qualities, these works nevertheless recall the violence and straightforwardness of his early performances exposing his body to extreme acts. If we considered these performances as a kind of ascetic prelude to his recent works, then we would have to qualify sculptures like "Big Buddha" as the endeavour to give form to his spiritual quest. Strongly influenced by artists like for example Maurizio Catalani, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, these works combine in a somehow baroque fashion religious folk traditions and pop art.

Ch'en Chieh-jen's silent video "Lingchi - Echoes of a Historical Photograph", is based on a historical photo taken in 1905 by a French soldier. It had been made known all over the West by Georges Batailles. The image shows the execution of a man in early 20th century China by the execution method Lingchi. The victim, drugged with opium, dies through slow mutilation with a knife. Ch'en's video touches on various aspects: First, the historical significance of the picture, which lies less in the documentation of a historical reality than in the reception of the photography. Through Batailles, the picture became an epitome of the aesthetics of horror and, later, a symbol of alienation and the other. Second the video reflects upon processes of consciousness such as the ecstasy evident in the facial expression of the tortured man, but also agony and lust - the agony of the victim and the strange lust of the torturer and observer. The reduced language of the video underlines these aspects: it is shot in black and white, in slow motion and it is silent. Chen actually conceived of the piece as a kind of mirror, which, like the hell mirror in Chinese folk religion, shows people their desires and wrongdoings.

The next piece, entitled "Just for You", is a multi-channel video by the father of Chinese video art, Zhang Peili. On ten screens, the video shows people of different age and social status singing "Happy Birthday" in Mandarin. The piece recalls the Chinese karaoke-fever of the late 1990s. Karaoke by then had become the favorite pastime of all strata of the Chinese society. Yet, by showing every participant on an individual screen and singing a cappella, Zhang underlines the importance of the individual in a society used to mass movements. ("Just for you" was created in 1999 for Zhang's participation in the 48th Venice Biennial. This very year was also marked by the 50th anniversary of the People's Republic of China and the 10th anniversary of June 4th, one more reason to underline the importance of individual participation in a common project, such as the construction of the modern China. Zhang Peili is one of the veterans of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s, and like all artists of his generation believed in the official Utopia of modernization. The reduced language of the video and extremely realistic approach, bare of any narrative elements, are typical for Zhang's style. They reflect the artist's straight humor and deep humanism. As he states: "This is a song nearly everyone knows how to sing, but very few people know, nor care who, in which year, in what country, composed it. It is a pop, an international symbol, a sign of happiness and a mark of time.")

Another piece with an extreme reduced formal language is "Calm" by Madeln Company. The piece consists of stones and rubble spread on a moving waterbed. The breathing effect created by this movement generates both, a feeling of tranquility and tension. Madeln is an artists' collective initiated by Shanghai-based artist Xu Zhen in 2009. The collective's slogan is "to focus on the production of creativity and to devote itself to the research of contemporary culture's infinite possibilities." The name refers to the aspect of industrial production and alludes to

China as one of the world's youngest and most productive factory. (Xu Zhen, the head of the collective is one of the most prominent Chinese artists of the 1990s. His personal work also includes directing an artist run space or intervening as a curator. Madeln therefore similarly has comprehensive approach towards art, combining all steps of artistic production, display and consumption.)

We now approach Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's sculpture "Angel". "Angel" is a life-size hyper-realistic sculpture of an angel. The angel, an old woman in a white gown and with featherless chicken wings, lies face down on the floor inside a huge net. Fallen, immobile, frozen into an all too realistic image of a supernatural being. Captured and apparently impotent she seems unable to act as a messenger of a higher instance or to be of any assistance to those believing in her existence. Tangibly real, but ineffective, her physical presence humorously emphasizes the transition between the real, the possible and the traumatic. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu work as a couple since the early 1990s and made her renown with works using actual human cadavers and other organic materials. Their works, performance, sculpture or installations are always setting conditions and situations challenging and surprising the audience.

Another piece by Liang Juhui in this exhibition is "One hour of Pleasure". The video was realized in 1996 in the supply elevator of a construction site in Canton. The artist wearing a safety helmet is sitting in the elevator playing a video game and waiting for the workers to join him. This concrete act interrupting daily routine can actually be considered the intervention of an urban guerilla, creating spaces of resistance and retreat within the environment of rapid economic development that characterized China in the 1990s.

Shen Yuan's "Loosing one's Spittle" reflects upon a totally different universe. She arrived in France in 1990 and remembers her arrival in a new cultural environment as a shock. She describes the process of repositioning herself, as one not only implicating a change of language and expression, but also resulting in a radical shift in her way of thinking. Thus language is the focus in the works made in the first decade after her arrival. Playing with the connotations inherent in simple materials and tools, and their juxtaposition, like for example ice and knives in this installation, Shen tries to develop a kind of universal language. The process of transformation - like the melting of the ice tongues and the consequent appearance of the knives that served as support for these tongues - is central in her installations and objects. Her sensitive works were received as a typically female approach to the question of migration, translation and globalization at large. Her use of mainly Chinese proverbs as titles is not only a slightly melancholic reminiscence on her time in China, but also a device to underline the ambiguity of meaning.

The next piece is a video by one of the most important young Cantonese artists Cao Fei. "Rabid Dogs", realized in 2003, shows Burberry-clad office workers acting and barking like dogs. The video is a persiflage on the for China new social class of so-called white-collar workers. Cao Fei, who is born in the late 1970s belongs to the generation whose youth was characterized by China's rapid economic development. She addresses the important transformation of society and of her immediate environment with a witty humor bordering on absurdity, typical of Cantonese youth culture and Hong Kong film and television series.

Next to "Rabid Dogs" we see Cui Xiuwen's "Ladies". The video was realized with a hidden camera in the female restrooms of a well-known Beijing nightclub. It illustrates one economic sector having come again to importance with China's economic boom: prostitution. Watching and following the "ladies" activities in the

restrooms throughout the evening: changing, outfits, readjusting make up and underwear, the spectator finally becomes aware of the actual occupation of the woman using the space. We can eavesdrop a conversation with a client, and see the women count the earnings of this evening.

Xu Zhen's "Comfortable" is an actual minibuss transformed into some kind of washing machine. Having a closer look, we can see plastic bags and clothes turning around in this unusual machine. The bus used as this not very effective washing machine is the typical means of transportation taking the rural population to the cities. Xu Zhen here makes an ironic comment on the growing gap between rural and metropolitan China.

A second work by Zhang Huan present in the exhibition is "Peace". Peace consists of a traditional Chinese bell with its clapper. The clapper however, is a life-size sculpture representing the artist. The artist's body is hanging horizontally from a wooden structure. The work recalls one of Zhang Huan's early performances, for which the artist had himself hung from the ceiling with his blood dripping onto a little cooker. This time however, corresponding to Zhang Huang's spiritual quests, his body is sublimated, covered in gold. Would striking the bell result in enlightenment?

For Jiang Zhi enlightenment lies in everyday routine, happiness and comfort in negligible details. "Post-Pause" imagines dreamlike gaps in the city-life of Shenzhen. Jiang Zhi who spent many years in this young Southern Chinese metropolis that is the symbol of China's economic and social transformation per se, here reflects upon the discrepancy between the material wishes of the mainly young city-dwellers and their capacity to lead an accomplished life. Can consumerism and the satisfaction of mere material desires finally make people happy?

"China and the quest for happiness" is the title of a German reference work on Chinese philosophy. "China" and "Quest for happiness", both notions are still a focus for contemporary Chinese artists today.

Martina Koppel Yang, 2012