



Collection of the artist

Cartographies of Fragmentation

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China

'Walls, walls, and yet again walls, form the framework of every Chinese city. They surround it, they divide it into lots and compounds, they mark more than any other structures the basic features of the Chinese communities'.

- *Osvald Siren*¹

By *Duncan Campbell*

The economic and social changes that have swept the People's Republic of China in the past two decades have been unprecedented in scale and rapidity. China, however, has undergone similar periods of accelerated growth in the past, with, arguably, similar artistic consequences. The late Ming dynasty (conventionally dated 1550-1650) was one such period. Then, as now, localized but rapid economic developments fuelled by growing commodity markets stimulated urbanization and social mobility, with new wealth undermining status relationships and accepted norms of private and public behaviour. At the same time, the commercial publishing industry both stimulated and benefited from increased literacy and educational opportunities, giving rise to a flourishing popular culture that displayed an ever greater willingness to question prevailing orthodoxies. Today, the explosion of Chinese content available electronically allows ordinary Chinese access, again within constraints, to alternative channels of knowledge and authority. In both instances, inflexible political structures proved slow to respond.

If economic and social transformations afforded greater opportunities for autonomous action on the part of the late Ming scholarly and artistic elite, they also induced in this elite intense anxieties about their status and role. These anxieties fuelled fascinating developments, as artists sought to negotiate the contradictions they faced. In his recent book Qianshen Bai speaks of the degree to which 'deformity or fragmentation' (*zhili* 支離), 'awkwardness' (*zhuo* 拙), and 'ugliness' (*chou* 醜) are characteristic of the painting and calligraphy of the late Ming period: 'Disfigured mountains and abandoned rivers (*canshan shengshui* 殘山剩水) are features of my paintings,' wrote the monk-painter Kuncan 髡殘 (1612-ca. 1675).²

The scholar and art critic Wu Hung has argued that this motif of 'fragmentation' characterizes contemporary Chinese art as well,³ and an exhibition recently mounted by Victoria University of Wellington's Adam Art Gallery, *Concrete Horizons: Contemporary Art from China* (February-May 2004) featured artistic responses to the destruction of the physical fabric of Chinese life. Curated by the gallery's director Sophie McIntyre, the exhibition engaged 'the tensions, the paradoxes, and the prevailing sense of disorientation and displacement of urban modernization'⁴ by bringing together works by seven young artists, mainly from Beijing and Shanghai, all of which seek to refract the ceaseless cycle of destruction and construction that now defines city life in China.

Bricks and mortar

Two recent works by the Beijing artist and photojournalist Wang Wei 王衛 (b. 1972), 'Temporary Space' and 'Dongba' (both 2003) highlight the plight of the floating population of *mingong* 民工 who do the dusty labour of transforming the urban landscape. Dirt-poor and disenfranchised, these men and women, ex-peasants who subsist by moving from one construction site to the next, are scapegoated by the majority of urban dwellers as being responsible for contemporary social ills. Yet, in the staged representation of 'Temporary Spaces', men photographed constructing and then dismantling a brick wall enclosing them acquire a proud and stoic heroism that harks back to the iconic 'model workers' of China's recent socialist past. With documentary grittiness, the video 'Dongba' reminds us of the dusty, back-breaking reality of these people's lives as they squat in the sun salvaging bricks from yet another site of devastation.

Wang Wei's video begins with one of the ubiquitous billboards depicting the modernized reality that will rise from the ruins.

This constructed modernity is the focus of the two works by the Shanghai-based Yang Zhenzhong 楊振忠 (b. 1968): 'Light and Easy' and 'Let's Puff', both 2002. Their intent is to reveal the ephemeral nature of the end product of this modernization rather than the heaviness of the labour. In the first, the artist holds up on his fingertip an inverted image of that icon of Chinese modernity, the New Shanghai of Pudong. In the second, a video depicting a young woman inhaling and exhaling brings intermittent life to the facing video of Nanjing Road, reminding us of the essential humanity that is the lifeblood of any city, so often forgotten by development planners. Song Dong 宋冬 (b. 1966), represented here by his work *Eating the Great Wall* (2003-04), also engages with the issue of transformation, but only once the audience has eaten away the sides of his twelve-metre-long Great Wall of wafers to reveal a bank of twelve television monitors showing continuous images of urban destruction and construction, a hand tracing the numbers of houses destroyed in a puddle of water, and a recurring question mark. Here Song Dong juxtaposes within the discourse on modernity that most problematic of China's icons, the Great Wall, and the age-old preoccupation with eating. A number of Song Dong's earlier works have in a similar manner engaged both the macrocosm and the microcosm: 'Eating the World' and 'Edible Bonsai' (both 2000).

Dial tone

The globalized forces of capitalism which breached Song Dong's Great Wall have impacted on the lives of many Chinese: the reality of increased mobility is addressed in the works of Wang Gongxin 王功新 (b. 1960) and Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍 (b. 1963). The rapidly changing images of Wang Gongxin's video installation *Where Are You?* (2003-4), accompanied by the ever-present, melancholic sound of the international dial tone, serve to convey the sense of displacement and permanent exile experienced by China's growing diasporic communities, as do Yin Xiuzhen's whimsical and tactile *Portable Cities* (2001), with their half-submerged maps.⁵

If these works are both clever and engaged, those of Wang Jun 王軍 (b. 1974) and Lin Tianmiao 林天苗 (b. 1961) are beautiful, dense, and troubling. Wang Jun's reassembled photographs of his friends embody a twinned sense of nostalgia and narcissism, reminding us that the focus on the self is as much a feature of this moment of Chinese artistic expression as it was in similar periods of change. Lin Tianmiao's computer generated photograph *Go?* (2001) juxtaposes the Chinese art of the landscape and the Western art of the nude in an unsettling manner. Does one enter this gently disturbing landscape



Courtesy of ShangART, Shanghai

Wang Jun, 'Great Happiness' 1998: b/w photograph, 45 x 34cm

from the left or right; does one move from top ('Heaven') to bottom ('Earth') or vice versa? The sensuality of the bodies seems displaced against the rocks in the foreground, while the bicycles' square wheels and the wrapped frames constrict movement as effectively as the bound foot of old.

Walls now define the contemporary Chinese city only through their absence; the 'disfigured mountains and abandoned rivers' of older traditions have become the demolished buildings and ruined neighbourhoods of today. In cities such as Beijing, new maps are produced each month in the vain attempt to chart the transformation; contemporary Chinese artists too have become the cartographers of this relentless and unstoppable change.

Concrete Horizons gives eloquent testimony to how contemporary Chinese artists negotiate space for themselves between the Scylla of an uncomprehending and occasionally repressive political system and the Charybdis of the temptations of the market, as successfully as their forebears did during the late Ming. Increasingly, however, they speak in a manner that is accessible to us all; one that, although specific to the particular circumstances of China, is also of universal relevance. ◀

Notes

1. Siren, Oswald, 1929. 'Chinese architecture'. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th edn., vol. V, 557.
2. Qianshen Bai, 2003. *Fu Shan's World: The Transformation of Chinese Calligraphy in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 126.
3. Wu Hung, 1998. 'Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Post-modern'. Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 59-66.
4. Sophie McIntyre, 2004. 'China Re-Constructed' in *Concrete Horizons: Contemporary Art from China*. Wellington: Adam Art Gallery, 5.
5. A number of Yin Xiuzhen's previous works, and those of her husband Song Dong, are discussed in Wu Hung, 1999. *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 120-26 and 54-59 respectively.

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Courtesy of ShangART, Shanghai



Wang Jun, 'Double Person's Game/Toy Bear' 1998: b/w photograph, 43 x 34cm