

## Contemporaneity in Experimental Chinese Photography

Wu Hung

Photography became art again in China in the late 1970s and 1980s. Whereas this visual technology was largely reduced to a propaganda tool during the first thirty years of the People's Republic, it reconnected with individual expression after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was over. The April Photographic Society—the first unofficial photo club in post-Cultural Revolution China—emerged in 1978; the exhibition it organized in Beijing the following year, entitled *Nature, Society, Human*, attracted a huge audience hungry for images outside the official media. The 1980s witnessed a delayed introduction of the major schools and masters of western photography from before World War II. Their techniques as well as social and artistic aspirations influenced a generation of young Chinese photographers, whose first goal, not unexpectedly, was to regain photography's credibility as a record of real social events and human lives. The result was a sustained “documentary movement” from the 1980s to the early 1990s, which produced many works with a strong political agenda, either exploring the dark side of society—poverty, deprivation, social stratification and political injustice—or glorifying an idealized, timeless Chinese civilization unspoiled by Communist ideology.

This initial process, which Chinese critics have termed a “Photographic New Wave” (*sheying xinzhao*), lasted about a decade and laid the ground for a new generation of photographers to undertake wide-ranging artistic experiments beyond realism and symbolism. Photography became linked to an ongoing experimental art movement in the early and mid-1990s, employed by avant-garde artists to record performances and staged scenes. Since

then, a brand of image-making, often referred to by Chinese artists and critics as “experimental photography” (*shiyan sheying*), has grown into a broad trend; its continuous, exciting development over the past decade has been characterized by non-stop reinvention, abundant production, multifaceted experimentation and cross-fertilization with other art forms. While “experimental photographers” find inspiration in performance, installation and multimedia art, painters, performers and installation artists routinely employ photography in their work, sometimes even reinventing themselves as full-time photographers. Photography now plays a central role in contemporary Chinese art because of its openness to new visual technology such as digital imaging, and because it most effectively challenges the conventional boundaries between fiction and reality, art and commerce, object and subject, thereby inspiring and permeating various kinds of art experiments in China.

*Zooming into Focus: Contemporary Chinese Photography from the Haudenschild Collection*, one of two exhibitions that this catalogue documents, showcases some of the most recent developments in this experimental art. Most works on display were created in the past five years, while a considerable number date from 2000 to 2002. The exhibition thus has an acute focus on *contemporaneity* in a twofold sense—the contemporaneity of China as a rapidly changing society, and the contemporaneity of photography as a constantly self-inventing art form. In terms of subject matter, these images demonstrate the artists' overwhelming concern with their living environment and their own identity.

A striking aspect of Chinese cities in the 1990s and 2000s has been a never-ending destruction and construction. Old houses are coming down every day to make room for new hotels and shopping malls. Thousands and thousands of people have been relocated from the inner city to the outskirts; in their place a new “urban generation” has begun to invent a globalized culture for itself. This situation is the context *and* the content of several works in this exhibition. For example, Weng Fen’s striking photographs of two southern cities, Shenzhen and Haikou, show a young girl sitting on a wall and looking out; following her gaze we see a mirage-like cityscape emerging on the horizon. The wall thus separates not only space but also time; and the girl mediates not only “here” and “there” but also “now” and “then,” extending our view to an alluring future. When we turn to Xiang Liqing’s *Rock Never*, however, we are abruptly brought back to the (intensified) reality of a “post-modern” Chinese city: the six large pictures in this series represent residential high-rises as paradoxical structures, characterized by their uniform, anonymous architectural style on the one hand, and by abundant signs of human activities on the other hand. The simulated repetition of both types of image brings these two aspects of a contemporary Chinese city into sharp conflict.

As Xiang’s pictures imply, the emerging city attracts experimental photographers not only with its buildings but also with its increasingly heterogeneous population. To Chen Shaoxiong, a member of the avant-garde Big Tail Elephant Group in Guangzhou, a heterogeneous city resembles the stage of a plotless tableau; what unites its characters is the place they share. This notion underlies his series of photographs in this exhibition, which are conceived and constructed like a series of puppet theaters within the real cityscape. Images in each photograph belong to two

detached layers: in front of a large panoramic scene are cut-out miniatures—passersby, shoppers and policemen amidst telephone booths, traffic lights, different kinds of vehicles, trees and anything one finds along Guangzhou’s streets. These images are crowded in a tight space but do not interact. The mass they form is nevertheless a fragmentary one, without order, narrative or a visual focus.

Representing urban spaces and population, Chen’s photos are linked with another popular subject in contemporary Chinese photography—images of a new “urban generation,” called *dushi yidai* in Chinese. Works belonging to this category include Yang Yong’s *Cruel Youth Diary*, Yang Fudong’s *Don’t worry, It will be better...* and *The First Intellectual*, Yang Zhengzhong’s *Cycle Aerobics* and Zheng Guogu’s *A World View Digital Image*. Instead of portraying the lives of urban youths realistically, these images deliver constructed visual fictions. Each work consists of multiple frames, which invite us to read them as a narrative unfolding in time. Indeed, such interest in seriality and story-telling may be traced to contemporary Chinese experimental cinema, especially the “urban generation” films of the late 1990s and early 2000s. But the “stories” in the photographs remain non-specific or allegorical. What the artists hope to capture is a certain taste, style and mood associated with this generation of people, and for this purpose they have created images that are often deliberately trivial and ambiguous. Yang Fudong’s *Don’t worry, It will be better...*, for example, represents a group of fashionable Shanghai yuppies, including a girl and several young men. The pictures resemble film stills, but the plot that connects them remains beyond the viewer’s comprehension. In a different and more comical style, another work of Yang’s in the exhibition, *The First Intellectual*, comments on the vulnerability and insecurity

of such yuppies—a by-product of China's social and economic reforms.

Images of the “urban generation” are further linked to the self-representations of experimental artists, who often identify with this generation. In fact, a strong interest in representing the self sets experimental photography apart from other branches of contemporary Chinese photography. For example, although documentary photographers also take pictures of people and urban scenes, they approach their subjects as belonging to an external, observed reality. Experimental photographers, on the other hand, find meaning only from their interaction with the surrounding world, and customarily make themselves the center of a photograph, as seen in many works in this exhibition: Hong Hao's *Mr. Hong Usually Waits...*, Shi Yong's *Forever and You Cannot Clone It, But You Can Buy It.*, Zhao Bandi's *Zhao Bandi and the Panda*, Feng Mengbo's *Shot 0074\_Q* and *Shot 0075\_Q*, Cao Fei's *Beautiful Dog Brows* and Xu Zhen's *Sewer*. Shi Yong represents himself as multiple, mass-produced robots; Zhao Bandi employs the style and format of a public poster for his self-portraits; Feng Mengbo turns himself into an action hero in the fictional world of a computer game; Hong Hao imagines himself as the master of an opulent, Western-style mansion; Cao Fei transforms herself into a cat; Xu Zhen constructs an abstract picture with images of his body parts. Taken together, these images, the results of masquerade and self-manipulation, both reflect the crisis in the artists' self-identity and their urgent quest for individuality in a rapidly commercializing society.

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