

(RE-)IMAGINING THE CITY

SHANGHAI DREAM-THEATRE AND THE NEW SHANGHAI SURREAL

Thomas J. Berghuis

At no place and at no time in recent history is the pressure of the economic bubble as demanding as in the case of China *now*. Hence, Chinese artists—perhaps more than anywhere else in the world—have been keen to express their views on the notion of the effervescent market-economy in their work.

In recent years, Shanghai has been at the centre of these new approaches in contemporary artistic production in China. The city's art world features a large number of artists who propose their comment on the dream-theatre

of rapid economic development and link their work to discourses on rising consumer culture and large-scale urbanisation. Together with artists in other major centres in China (particularly Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Beijing), they have begun to organise exhibitions around these themes, in conjunction with a new group of local curators who have made it possible to convey these discourses to the international art world.

Shanghai offers something in the line of a mesmerising *locale* (some have called it a

'Zone') that is suspended some place between [modernist] historical reality and [post-modernist] contemporary fiction. I maybe shanghaiing the reader with my view of Shanghai as *Sin City*, the fictional city of Basin in Frank Millar's comic books of 1991-1992, recently (2005) released as a film. But further, I am drawn to examining the intrinsic *theatricality* of Shanghai that I see evident in the emergence of the city; in the appearance of recent cultural production by its artists; and in the contemporary art society. From this perspective, I am tempted to propose the concept of the *Shanghai Dream-Theatre* in an attempt to portray the *dramaturgy* and *performance* of the city and the apparent impact that it has on cultural producers.

The notion of a *Dream-Theatre* also relates to the conflicts that exist between the tangible presence of the old city (for example at the Bund) and the multifaceted manifestations of the volatility of the new city (such as in the Pudong New Area). These conflicts, I would argue, are much better understood as the *juxtapositions* between historic *reality* and contemporary *surreality*; particularly in the way the *Shanghai Dream-Theatre* becomes (re-)imagined by contemporary artists whose work deals with the conditions of existence. Hollywood is seen as the *dream-factory* of cinema: Shanghai can become the *dream-theatre* of contemporary art. Inside the *Shanghai Dream-Theatre*, the artists' concerns with the conditions of existence have further generated a new aesthetic that might be described as the *New Shanghai Surreal*.

During the past seven or eight years Shanghai has certainly entered the spotlight of the international art world, with the development of the large M50 art district, the opening up of the Shanghai Biennale in 2000 as a 'truly international' art event, and, more recently, the emergence of a great number of contemporary art museums in the city. However, the most important changes in Shanghai (and elsewhere in China) have been in the emergence of new artistic and curatorial practices. These could be seen as early as April 1999, when the exhibition *Art for Sale* opened in a supermarket space located on the fourth floor of the Guangchang shopping mall in the central shopping district at Huahuai Road. This event, which clearly set a new benchmark for independently organised public art exhibitions in China, was designed

超市 ART FOR SALE

施勇 Shi Yong

20.00
170.00

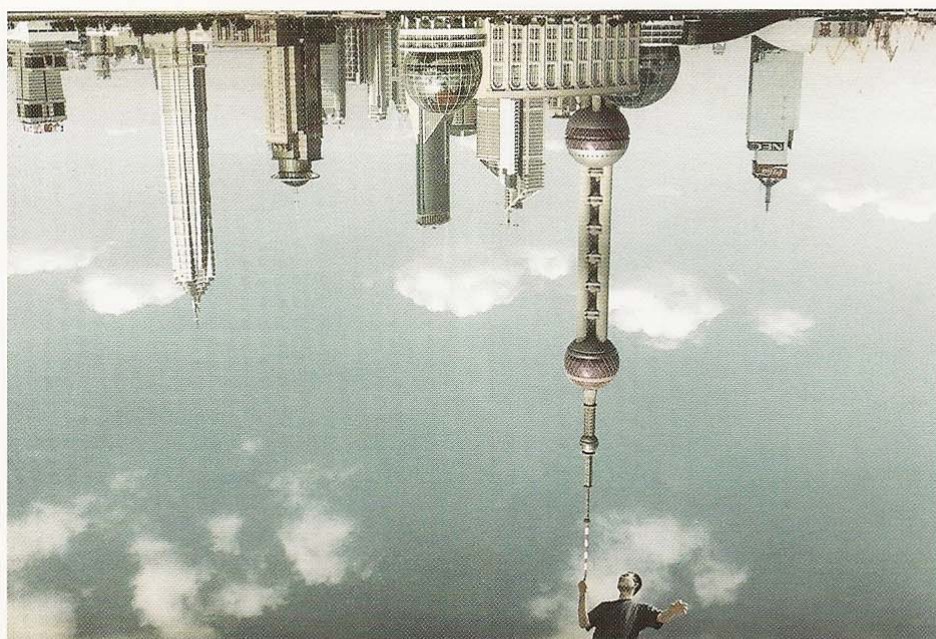
杨富东 Yang Fu Dong

40.00

我爱我的祖国

"I love my Motherland"

MADE IN CHINA - WELCOME TO SHANGHAI BY SHI YONG, CHINA, 1999. FIBERGLASS, REINFORCED PLASTIC AND ACRYLIC, 30 X 6 X 6 CM. IMAGE FROM THE CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION ART FOR SALE, SHANGHAI, 1999, CURATORS XU ZHEN, YANG ZHENZHONG AND ALEXANDER BRANDT



to confront art with the centres of Shanghai's consumer culture, facing art with society and vice versa.

The exhibition was divided into two parts: for the front section of the exhibition space (inside the supermarket), 24 artists from across China had been asked to create consumer products that were to be sold at the opening; and at the back of the exhibition space, in the storage section, 19 artists had installed more 'conventional' artworks. Both sections of the exhibition featured a large number of artists from Shanghai. They included Shi Yong, who was selling a small sculpture of a blond-haired Chinese figure wearing a black Mao suit, titled *Made in China – Welcome to Shanghai*. In the back section, Yang Zhenzhong installed his video piece *The Face of Shanghai*, featuring scenes of Shanghai residents, filmed through a white mask. The final video was distorted by projecting it through a glass tank filled

with water with two speakers pressed against the back, which shook the image by the vibration of the soundtrack.

Several years later, in 2003, Yang Zhenzhong (born Hangzhou, moved to Shanghai 1993) would come up with another major project about the city. This time the work featured a series of digital photographs of the artist holding on the tip of his finger several of the new urban landscapes of Shanghai -- which are, as the title suggests, *Light and Easy*. A year later, these photographs inspired one of Shanghai's most active independent curators, Gu Zhenqing, to organise the exhibition *Light as F...! – Shanghai Assemblage, 2000-2004* at the National Museum of Art in Norway. In his introduction for the exhibition Gu explains how there are numerous examples of a growing culture of [relative] 'ease' to be found in present-day Shanghai and this is 'precisely what artists have been intermittently

investigating'. This culture of 'ease' is also evident in the way artists penetrate the contemporary art scene, sourcing their works from within popular experiences of a rising consumer culture and rapid urbanisation. The resources of contemporary society thus form the basis of what Gu Zhenqing (following several local curators) identifies as the way many artists deal with concerns of 'conditions of existence', especially from the late 1990s onwards.

In my research of contemporary art in China over the past ten years, I have also come to notice how these concerns with the *conditions of existence* are often highly personified: presenting the viewer with the direct or indirect embodiment of the artists' experiences of their physical surroundings and social environment. These levels of personification, particular in performance art, have triggered criticism from more conventional parties within the Chinese art scene, who see performance art as part of a subculture which overemphasises the focus on individual expression, leading to the general public's indifference towards these works. It is certainly true that many such works tend to focus on a small cohort of professional artists and their direct supporters. But this may be the case across the entire art world. Working through a broad range of digital media, many artists in China have clearly chosen to place emphasis in their work on 'artificial reproduction', often combined with a strong sense of 'wit' directly aimed at attracting the attention of the arts community even though these works might be less appreciated by general audiences in China. These artists have to be seen as key *players* in dealings with the conditions of *their* existence in the city, but also in *their* dealings with the art world.



28 QUESTIONS BY XU ZHEN, CHINA, 2004. TYPE C PHOTOGRAPH ON PAPER, 120 X 240 CM, EDN OF 5. COLLECTION SHANGHART GALLERY, SHANGHAI, REPRODUCED COURTESY SHANGHART GALLERY AND THE ARTIST



This can also be seen in the recent work of another renowned artist from Shanghai, Xu Zhen, who has also been one of the key organisers in the local art scene. In particular, I am referring to his 2005 project *8,848-1.86*, produced for the 2nd Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art. Even while creating the work, Xu Zhen managed to cause gossip amongst the Chinese art community about how he had been part of an officially-sponsored Chinese survey team which scaled Mount Everest to position survey equipment for measuring the height of the summit. Further, the rumor spread that he had somehow managed to saw 1.86 metres off Everest's peak, which was to be sent to Yokohama. Zhen's final installation featured 'the' block of ice, 1.86 metres tall, preserved in a glass refrigerator and surrounded by professional climbing equipment and photographic documentation, and accompanied by a video of the 'expedition' (the video later also featured at several exhibitions in Europe).

Throughout his career, Xu Zhen has also produced a series of works that deal directly with mapping the changing conditions of the city of Shanghai through the lens of the camera – for example, in his photograph *28 Questions* (2004). To the trained eye these types of photograph may be recognised as making use of a text-book categorisation of contemporary photography; they show signs of embracing a 'deadpan' aesthetic; of a cool and composed approach to photography that transcends the subjective level of the artist. Yet, considering the title *28 Questions* one can see a clear message emerging, and therefore these photographs fail to completely escape the 'subjective level'. *28 Questions* aims to bear witness to tangible moments in history, rather than addressing the real-time event of

the present. This makes these photographs somewhat problematic, in that they become almost too 'self-explanatory' and too 'literal'. In recent years I have witnessed increased criticism (in China and overseas) of how Chinese artists have deliberately started to produce predictable imageries surrounding rapid economic change in order to draw on the popular imagination of Western audiences and the global art market. Some critics have even used the term banal.

I would argue the opposite: that the majority of Chinese contemporary art addresses a multifarious tension between the objective function of the artwork and the subjective role of the artist producing it. Among Chinese artists, there appears to be a constant tension between wishing to create an irrational response to the absurd conditions of existence, while at the same time feeling the need to include a certain degree of rationality in the final work. Perhaps the reason for this is a desire to forestall indifferent responses from general audiences and provoke more questioning from professional viewers; making their art more marketable. However, I'd also like to argue that there is particular stylistic and aesthetic discourse to be found in these recent artworks from China, including those that are produced in Shanghai. These stylistic discourses take place amid a local discourse on how artists deal with concerns of the *conditions of existence*, which I argue takes place inside the specific 'locale' of the *Shanghai Dream-Theatre*. The challenge now is to find a term that will allow the stylistic and aesthetic discourse of these works to be better understood as a whole.

Aside from Xu Zhen, other artists working in Shanghai clearly feel much more confident

in choosing an approach to their work that enables them to make use of an implicit aesthetic and at the same time offers the transposing of popular stories. This approach allows their works to be understood by many viewers, and is often accepted and praised almost immediately by both general and professional audiences, both within China and overseas. This is particularly the case with the work of Yang Fudong, who in recent years has achieved international prominence for his numerous video and photographic works; he is especially well known for his series of video works produced on black and white 35mm film transposed to DVD.

Many of Yang Fudong's video works narrate—both visually and in sound—the stories of a group of young intellectuals who have chosen to escape from the corrupt societies of the urban centers decomposed by excessive materialism. They withdraw themselves amid the misty forests and seas of clouds of the well-known pilgrimage site of Mount Huangshan in Anhui Province, nearly 450 kilometres southwest of Shanghai. Fudong's works combine a set of historic and visual references, passing through different 'time-zones' in each frame. Hence, these 'contemporary' intellectuals follow the trail of famous painters and poets in Chinese history who have sought similar retreat from the administrative centres. In another twist, their clothing styles range from contemporary 'dress smart, look smart' to the more classic style of the 'Shanghai modern'. Finally, these works present these intellectuals with carefully directed melancholic gazes; making them appear to dream about tradition, and thus distracting their eyes from observing the actuality of the *now*.

From the work of Yang Fudong one can get an understanding of how it becomes increasingly difficult for Chinese artists to grasp a sense of reality in their dealings with the current conditions of existence -- including their dealings with the city and their dealings with the society of the art world. Therefore, an increasing number of artists seem, instead, to focus their work on the disconcerting interaction between events of the past, the present and the future. Once the concerns of these artists with the conditions of existence start to address the improbability of the future, their work can be led into a dream-like state that is reflective of the *Shanghai Dream-Theatre* in which these artists live. The result can be artists who seek to use the thoughts and images produced by their unconscious in juxtaposition to those perceived by the conscious mind. Hence, I am tempted to argue that the conditions under which a new



group of artists in China have materialised their artistic practices in recent years has led to the emergence of a new form of *surreality*. For the sake of providing some clear directive to this argument, I have decided to call it the *New Shanghai Surreal*.

This time around *surreality* is used as a way to overcome the past conditions of socialist-realism as well as the present-day vehement conditions of 'pure' capitalism. Artistic practice therefore becomes a way of (re-)imagining the contiguity of the two levels of perception—of the real and of the surreal; and transposing it back onto the world. The appearance of the *New Shanghai Surreal* can be traced in the work of Yang Zhenzhong, Xu Zhen and Yang Fudong, but perhaps even more in the work of another artist from Shanghai, Lu Chunsheng. In particular I am referring to Chunsheng's ongoing series of works captioned by the phrase 'one of the most foolish attacks against science fiction is the opinion that it cannot forecast the future'. These include the photographic piece *Witch* (2004)—featuring an uncanny scene of a coal mine—which could also move into the discourse of 'deadpan aesthetic'. In particular, I am thinking of how the proposed *New Shanghai Surreal* could also position itself as a reinvestigation of the German *Magical Realism* or the *New Objectivity* movement (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Hence, aside from the photographic work *Witch*, I am also referring to Lu Chunsheng's video *A History of Chemistry, Vol.1*.

A History of Chemistry, Vol.1 unfolds the story of the evolution of a group of four sailors coming from the ocean. The four sailors are likely to be symbolic of the Four Modernisations (of Agriculture, Industry, Science and Technology

and National Defence, first introduced by Zhou Enlai in 1975 and designed to turn China into a leading economic power by the start of the 21st century); they are led by one central character (possibly representing Science and Technology) and move inland towards a large industrial site. Here a fifth character is added, which would refer to the idea of a Fifth Modernisation -- namely that of a People-led Democracy, as was demanded during the 1989 student protests at Tiananmen and other parts of China. Eventually the story moves back to the ocean's shore, where the central character summons more sailors by holding the hammer of the 'industrial proletariat', after the 'hammer and sickle' symbol of communism.

These types of works that emerged from artists in Shanghai are often seen as highly 'individualistic'. This, it has been argued, makes contemporary art from Shanghai very different from contemporary art produced by artists in Beijing, where, since the late 1980s, artists from all over China have grouped themselves into artists' villages and have established several movements strong enough to conquer the old-fashioned and highly bureaucratised national art institutions. Shanghai, on the other hand, is said to feature artists and art professionals who are not only 'individualistic', but also have become known to be after 'making a quick buck' (known in Chinese as *chao renminbi*) on the global art market. At least, this is the feeling that I got from talking to some of the members of the local art world, including during my most recent visit to Shanghai in March 2007.

In this article I have chosen not to follow such general discussions of the fluidity of the Shanghai art world, which has recently led to criticism of its volatile and banal nature. Instead, I have endeavoured to address the notion of the myriad of *juxtapositions* that continue to emerge within the present-day *locale* of the *Shanghai Dream-Theatre*; and to pair this notion with the idea of a new aesthetic concern in recent work by contemporary artists that can be described by the term *New Shanghai Surreal*. I therefore conclude by expressing the hope that this article will offer some support to those working in the frenetic and effervescent Shanghai art world.

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