

# Business As Usual

## New Video from China

Cao Fei and Yang Fudong

### North Galleries

July 11, 2009 – October 4, 2009

All works in the exhibition are drawn from the Haudenschild Collection, San Diego.

*Business As Usual* presents works by two of the most prominent video artists working in contemporary China, works that are central to the development of each artist and iconic representations of the nature of the present reality of the economic miracle in China and the social impact of the vast changes that mark the new China.

Cao Fei and Yang Fudong each portray the emergent new middle class in China, Yang Fudong in the urban centers and Cao Fei in the Overnight Cities that were built as production centers for the industries that now churn out such a large portion of the clothing, lighters, light bulbs, and spark plugs sold on the international market. They fill orders for stores like Wal-Mart and high-end clothing designers like Eileen Fisher. Behind chain link fences, the work shifts are long. The young workers, migrants from the poor villages of the interior, live in dormitories above the factories, locked into this new utopian Metropolis.

When was the phenomenon of the New China born? China is a country of contradictions. With one of the oldest writing systems in the world, it has record-high illiteracy. It is a society that has always valorized the past by looking back to a mythologized Golden Age, a pattern that preserved ancient institutions and served the ruling elite. The People's Republic, established in 1949 after civil war in the aftermath of the collapse of the last imperial dynasty in 1911, was created to overturn the social structure. Like the Soviet system that inspired Chinese socialism, the intention and certainly the rhetoric was to create a workers' utopia. But under the leadership of the deified Mao Zedong, the insularity of China did not end nor did poverty or a situation for peasants that was virtually feudal. Mao's economy was ideologically driven. The Great Leap Forward was agricultural reform that created famine. The Cultural Revolution was a ten-year period that saw the destruction of culture and education and the torment and death of artists, musicians, and intellectuals.

With Mao's death in 1976, leadership passed to Deng Xiaoping who, almost immediately, reversed much that Mao had done. In 1978, within a year of his appointment, Deng declared that China would pursue "Reform and Opening." He created industrial cities on barren land, near ports to facilitate exportation, and encouraged young people to leave their villages and families and to go to work in the new industrial metropolises.

The impact was both liberating and alienating. Young people, whose lives back home would have been under constant surveillance by parents and neighbors, were suddenly on their own. They had their own money and they had a strange sort of freedom. They lived in dormitories within the company precincts where company officials replaced the parental roles. But the social pressure to conform to Chinese traditional gender roles was absent.

Another marker in the creation of a new China is with the democracy movement and the incident at Tien-an Men Square on June 4, 1989. If Deng was a people's hero for establishing Reform and Opening, he was a villain for his harsh treatment of the student-worker protesters. When those occupying the vast square refused to leave, he ordered tanks and guns to clear them out. No one is certain of how many were killed.

What is the starting point of the New Art in the New China? In 1985, the New Art Movement emerged and, concomitant with the new work, art magazines began to be published in Wuhan and Beijing. It is by no means a coincidence that in that same year Robert Rauschenberg had a solo show in Beijing. One can easily imagine the impact his free-wheeling approach would have inspired in young artists in China.

In 1989, China/Avant-Garde opened at China Gallery only to be closed the same day. For Westerners, the beginning was 1993 when ten Chinese artists showed at the Venice Biennale. At this point, Chinese contemporary art began to impact Western art, and Chinese artists who, by traveling and through new technological channels, began to absorb the art of the West.

The two artists whose work is shown present a changing China and reveal mixed feelings. They each choose a personal visual vocabulary; they each examine a different segment of the new, young society that is the engine of the New China. Their two approaches reveal the upheaval of social mores in different poetic voices.

Marilyn A. Zeitlin  
Director and  
Chief Curator

Cao Fei, in the triptych *Whose Utopia*, portrays workers who have left their small hometowns to pursue life in the big city. They took with them dreams to be dancers and singers and ended up in factories. Working within the environment of a light bulb factory, Cao Fei simultaneously portrays three progressions: first, the beginning-to-end production of the lightbulbs; second, the span of a single day; and third, a transition from a world in which the machines dominate, to a revealing of dreams and aspirations, to a moving series of portraits in which the individual is shown with the machine as a prop, the person presented with dignity.

I. *Imagination of Product*. 10 minutes. The first of the three movements is a ballet mécanique, the creation of light bulbs in OSRAM Lighting, Ltd., in Foshan, Guangdong, China. The artist traces the process from bare tubes to completed bulbs, tested, boxed, and ready to ship from warehouse. It follows a day from early morning to last light.

The machines are the actors and the workers their handlers. The machines perform with the precision of disciplined dancers. For the first four minutes, we do not see a human form, just the mesmerizing rhythm of repeated actions by the machines. The camera moves in a relentless, restrained way, beautiful and mesmerizing.

And then suddenly, we see a pair of hands, then more hands. They are working with intensity and delicacy to sort metal filaments. Then, a portion of a face peers into the camera. More faces, then feet. We see the human workers assembled in parts, as we do the light bulbs, and as the bulbs start to form, we see increasingly whole figures. They work in silence, with no contact -- only once do we see a worker talking, joking.

The dance of the machines at first recalls the factory sequences in which Charlie Chaplin is enmeshed and entrapped. There is no humor here but rather a sweetness as the artist allows the scenario to unfold in what seems like a simple, inevitable way. The sound is that of the machines, manipulated to become percussion music.

The multiplicity of production units is analogous to the endless labor supply. The workers are young. Many are women. We see them as the bulbs are tested, the boxes assembled and stuffed. We see accountants, then stock shelves. Forklifts move through the dimming light. We hear birds as the light begins to fade and the camera moves outside to emptiness. The machines continue mindlessly, even after the workers leave, and the screen fades to black.

II. *Factory Fairytale*. 5 minutes. This section moves from the mechanical to allow us a glimpse into the emotional inner world of workers. Through their actions, we see their aspirations. In the factory, we see dancers slowly moving among the assembly benches and stock shelves. A tango dancer in a diaphanous dress is in the cathedral-like space of the stock shelves; a ballerina in tutu and wings does her pas-de-bourré among her co-workers assembling parts; a soft shoe dancer in his OSRAM jacket moves through the aisles; a thin girl in jeans strikes ballet poses and makes strange movements like a dying bird. At one point, the ballerina is seated, wings and all, at her assembly bench.

Guitar players appear next to machinery. One dancer seems to pick up on the movement of the one before, so that there is a passing on of fluttering motions, then turning.

Then we see one of them on the roof of the factory. The sense of loneliness and emotional barrenness is mirrored in the view of the city. All is newness, industrial structures in a gray sameness. We then see a lone girl on her bed in the dormitory looking out on endless rows of similar rooms. Her melancholy is silent, but palpable. The movement ends with two lines of verse:

You cry and say  
Fairy tale is lie.

III. *My Future Is Not a Dream*. 5 minutes. In this movement, the focus is on the individual. Those shown are no longer anonymous nor broken into parts. Against a sound curtain of piano arpeggios, in front of which we hear a person whistling, we see workers silently posing against a backdrop of their work place, their task momentarily frozen. They are unsmiling. Like saints with their attributes or portraits by August Sander of workers with their tools, the machines

are behind the workers. In China, even kings were not shown in portraits until the eighteenth century. This is a new China, to show the individual with a face, an identity, and dignity.

A band plays a song with English lyrics. The English is bad and the pronunciation often incorrect, but the message is emotionally right on point.

Part of your life had waned and waned  
And to whom do you beautifully belong?

The final scenario is a line-up of members of the band. Each wears a white tee-shirt with a single character. Taken together, the characters read the name of the band and of the section of the work, which is the summary of the lives of the people whom Cao Fei so poignantly presents.

My future is not a dream.

MAZ

Yang Fudong is one of the most prominent contemporary artists living and working in China; his photographs, films, videos, and installations have been exhibited internationally since 1999. The two videos in this exhibition, *City Lights* and *Honey*, are set in the intense urban environments of contemporary China, and the protagonists are members of the new middle class in the emerging market economy.

While the narratives are disjointed, the videos are a pleasure to watch for their sensual use of color, bold imagery, staging, and for their sound tracks. This may explain their international popularity. In *City Lights*, we see recurring, memorable vignettes. Couples dancing in a stark, sunlit, highrise apartment and in springtime in a plaza. Men passing open umbrellas on black and white, rainy streets or appearing around corners with guns like gangsters. Yang Fudong also uses broadly recognizable imagery from Chinese popular and traditional culture. In *Honey*, the men wear Mao suits, and in other works by the artist, peasants wear broad-brimmed hats and the backdrops are dramatic rural landscapes or ancient gardens.

While in art school, Yang Fudong had little access to international video art. His early influences came from classic Chinese films, particularly from Shanghai where he now lives. Shanghai is considered the birthplace of Asian cinema and in the first half of the twentieth century was second only to Hollywood in terms of production and popularity. Many of these films were already grappling, close to a century ago, with the ramifications of change, the collision of the past and present, tradition and modernity, elitism and populism.

Yang Fudong follows in these footsteps and combines traditional elements with the reality of massive change in China. His videos have a tension despite their sensual and poetic beauty as groups of people play out disjointed narratives. The actors are often idle and aimless or engaged in repetitive and nonsensical activity like ballroom dancing (*City Lights*) or playing cards (*Honey*) alone. The actors' movements are awkward, which Yang Fudong says comes from a preoccupied state of mind. He draws from his own experience of participating in tea ceremonies where, "...it's possible for people to make bizarre movements unconsciously or have unrealistic thoughts in their minds."<sup>1</sup>

The result is that the characters seem to be in states of psychological confusion. They often gather in urban apartments and public spaces like streets and plazas, yet they are isolated. The critic Yao Yuan has identified the tension as antagonism towards the modernized city and towards everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Yang Fudong focuses on distinct social groups within China who are particularly affected by current social change and in a state of flux: intellectuals and the middle class. While the middle class is new, the intellectual or scholar's role is important throughout the history of China. With the exception of the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals were leaders and advisors for both the powerful and powerless, and often involved in local and national politics. Today, as Western and Chinese authors have noted, intellectuals have an ambiguous position. Discredited and persecuted during the revolution, they now either exist at the margins or are being consumed into the new market economy.<sup>3</sup>

This explains the discomfort of the figures in both videos. Despite their obvious level of success and physical wellbeing, they are dissatisfied and at times apprehensive. In *Honey*, the characters either sit in a modern apartment or walk through the city's streets, looking over their shoulders. Yang Fudong has said that "...these are people who are well educated but often feel lost in society. They have their own passions and ambitions, but don't know where their road leads or what their final destination will be. They don't even have a clear aim. It's hard to tell who imposes a harsh reality on whom."<sup>4</sup> The lushly dressed female figure is a strange protagonist seeming to represent the brash, new order in contrast to the older, more passive men in beige Mao suits.

Reconciling the past with the present is a global issue, and Yang Fudong's work resonates with global audiences. Yet he explores aspects of social and economic change specific to China. There are references and symbols in his work difficult for Western audiences to decipher. When interviewed about the extreme popularity of contemporary art from China with Western audiences, Yang Fudong has said, "They think we are doing our work for them. We're not. We're doing it for China."

Heather Sealy Lineberry  
Senior Curator

Notes:

1. Interview with Yuko Hasegawa, *Flash Art*, March-April 2005
2. Yao Yuan, "Antagonism and Transcendence" in *Light as Fuck, Shanghai Assemblage, 2000-2004*, The National Museum of Art, Oslo, 2004.
3. Elisabeth Slavkoff, "Chinese Intellectuals in Yang Fudong's Work – A Western View," 2005, on [www.shanghartgallery.com](http://www.shanghartgallery.com)
4. *Flash Art*, 2005.

Cao Fei, born in 1978 in Guangzhou, China, received her BFA from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 2001. Her work is frequently exhibited in international biennials and surveys of contemporary Chinese art. Cao Fei lives and works in Beijing.

Born in 1971 in Beijing, Yang Fudong graduated from the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou where he trained as a painter. He began working with film and video in the late 1990's. Yang Fudong's work has been exhibited in the 2003 and 2007 Venice Biennale, the first Moscow Biennial in 2005, and the fifth Shanghai Biennial in 2004. He lives and works in Shanghai.

The exhibition was curated by Marilyn A. Zeitlin, Director and Chief Curator, and Heather S. Lineberry, Senior Curator, of the ASU Art Museum. Gallery guide texts written and compiled by the curators with assistance from Rudolph Navarro, Curatorial Assistant.