

Ran Dian Online : 'BENTU: Chinese Artists in a Time of Turbulence and Transformation', by Ingrid Luquet-Gad, 31th March 2016

“BENTU: Chinese Artists in a Time of Turbulence and Transformation”

Fondation Louis Vuitton (Bois de Boulogne 8, Avenue du Mahatma Gandhi 75116 Paris),
January 27–May 2, 2016

For more than a decade, France had not seen any major shows of contemporary Chinese art. Thus, when Fondation Louis Vuitton Paris turned its attention to China this spring, the stakes were high, as the understanding of the country's scene in France is still in a nascent stage. The exhibition in “Les Clefs d'une passion” (“Keys to a Passion”), curated by Suzanne Pagé, features a selection of Chinese works from the permanent collection and international lenders. And then there is “Bentu”, a group of works by twelve Chinese artists exploring the idea of a return to native soil, shaped not so much around the quest for a Chinese identity per se, but rather showing how local and traditional elements are being translated into a whole new context—a global one, mediated through new technologies.

The last major group exhibition in France of contemporary Chinese artists took place in 2003, when the Centre Pompidou devoted more than 1,500 square meters to the show “Alors la Chine?” As ambitious as it was monumental, the show surveyed around thirty artists of various ages and backgrounds, and also included architecture, music, and traditional crafts. Devoted to the all-encompassing theme of “the incredible dynamism of Chinese artists” in the context of “China's mutations since 1990,” the result was predictably confusing and chaotic, and possibly dissuasive. Nonetheless, what Paris has seen since of the Chinese art scene has mostly been isolated works by star artists, more representative of their successful integration into the global art market than of the changes happening in their home country. To name only a few, these included Ai Weiwei's 2012 solo show at Jeu de Paume; Yan Pei-Ming's (resident of Dijon, France, since the end of the 1980s) intervention at the Louvre in 2009; and the work of Huang Yong Ping (also based in France, since 1989, and represented by the French gallerist Kamel Mennour), which will soon occupy the Grand Palais for Monumenta. In late 2014 a timid attempt to fill this gap was made with “Inside China” at the Palais de Tokyo, co-organized by the curator Jo-Ey Tang and the founder of the K11 Art Foundation, Adrian Cheng. The sparseness of the space allotted to the show greatly hindered its span.



Huang Yong Ping, “Cinquante bras de Bouddha”
 (“Fifty Arms of Buddha”, 1997–2013)

Many of the works at Fondation Louis Vuitton, centered around themes of pop and contemplation, and raise the issue of dialogue between Eastern and Western artistic heritages. A good example of this (though it is not part of “Bentu”) is one of the masterpieces of the collection, the Duchampian bottle rack “Cinquante bras de Bouddha” (“Fifty Arms of Buddha”, 1997–2013) that Huang Yong Ping transformed by mounting on it the arms of Buddha statues. “Bentu” offers diffuse knowledge of some of the younger, mid-career artists represented in the collection; this is notably the case with the work of Cao Fei, who exhibited at Le Plateau in Paris in 2008, and Xu Zhen (aka MadeIn), seen at the 2013 Lyon Biennale.



Hu Xiangqian, “The Woman in Front of the Camera”, 2015



*Cao Fei, “Live in RMB City”, digital animation still, 2009
(©Cao Fei; courtesy the artist and Cao Fei Studio)*

“Bentu” begins with the video “The Woman in Front of the Camera” (2015) by Hu Xiangqian, displayed in the hallway in front of the exhibition space proper, which provides a good insight into the tone and intentions of what is to come. On-screen, a middle-aged woman dances in a trance, her face filled with rapture, in what appears to be a busy business district. All around, a gray and anonymous crowd is hurrying by, seemingly without noticing her. “How to construct one’s own identity?” the work seems to be asking, both through and against those of others? This issue runs loosely throughout the show, amplified by the theme of a contemporary hyper-individualistic utopia. Cao Fei’s video installation “Strangers: City” (2015) occupies a whole room. Several screens display online exchanges between the artist and strangers she met in the chat room Chatroulette. In defiance of the forum’s usual sexual motives, the artist—or rather her online avatar—shares scenes from daily life: a dish cooking, a Buddha statuette, finger-shadow animals on a wall. Yet contact is never really established, since one screen is always left empty, devoid of human presence. The project appears as the direct continuation of her work at the 2007 Venice Biennale, “i.Mirror” captured online-life sequences from the parallel world Second Life.

In describing Cao’s work, the curator and critic Hou Hanru emphasizes the idea of “brand-new human beings,” a term coined to designate Chinese youth lusting after new experiences, driven toward individualism amid the rise of a consumer society. Many works in “Bentu” focus on the quest for a new spirituality mingled with the modern-day, social media– fueled idea of “self-design,” a term coined by the philosopher Boris Groys to describe the will to constant self-improvement imposed on us by social media.¹ And even as the references to Buddhism proliferate, they tend to serve as cultural signifiers devoid of deeper meaning. Spirituality appears to have been reoriented toward a more diffuse, secularized, new-age mode as mediated through self-help guides. On six screens, “Physique of Consciousness” (2011), a video by MadeIn, presents a man in a sports outfit exercising against a bright blue sky to instructions dictated by a reassuring female voice. The exercises are in fact prayers and positions taken from various religions combined with yoga and tai chi exercises to create a parody of fitness videos. A few rooms later, a similar thread is taken up by Liu Shiyuan. “From Happiness to Whatever” (2015) is a cozy space covered in carpets permeated by a voice repeating encouraging and positive messages (all taken from Danish radio; Liu is based in Copenhagen).



*Xu Zhen (Produced by MadeIn Company), “Physique of Consciousness”, video, 2011
(©Xu Zhen; courtesy the artist and MadeIn Company)*



Liu Shiyuan, "From Happiness to Whatever", 2015

A closer look at Hu Xiangqian's aforementioned video loop quickly reveals how passersby, of course, cannot help but glance at the woman's eerie behavior. Likewise, the self can never be constructed without taking into account the outer world. "Bentu" does not completely deny the link to cultural heritage, even if the theme is, refreshingly, not a central one. Thus, beyond tensions between past and present, East and West, the works show how hybridization and a free, almost iconoclastic use of references can prove truly creative. In dialogue with his previously mentioned video, Xu Zhen's imposing sculpture "Eternity" (2014) uses cultural references as readymades. Like the artist Bertrand Lavier, who is perhaps best known for superposing different readymades to produce new meanings, Xu juxtaposes casts from the "Winged Victory of Samothrace" (on permanent display at the Louvre) with a sculpture representing a bodhisattva from the caves at Tianlongshan in the Chinese province of Shanxi. Just as individuals now inhabit the free-floating realm of the digital world, so do more traditional notions of the copy and the original appear outdated, and have been replaced by a more fluid, copy-paste model.

All that is solid melts into air; all is subject to permanent change. This also works on a third level, that of mutations in the landscape. The theme of a return to some sort of home territory appears full of ambiguities, as native soil no longer contains anything recognizable. Liu Wei's paintings, mapped out on a computer and minutely executed by a large number of assistants, seem superficially reminiscent of the tradition of abstract, optico-kinetic art. A glance at the title "Purple Air" (2014), however, quickly reminds us of its context: an allusion to the toxic color of the sky in China's big cities, which pervades as well the perception of reality delivered through highly formal compositions. Maps, too, relate to this tendency; Qiu Zhijie's "From Huaxia to China" (2015) displays a country divided into areas such as "Liberalism," "Bourgeois Liberalization," and "Political Islam," among others.



Xu Zhen (Produced by MadeIn Company), "Eternity-The Soldier of Marathon Announcing Victory, a Wounded Galatian", 2014



*Liu Wei, "Untitled", installation view at Louis Vuitton Foundation, 2015
(©Liu Wei; courtesy of the artist and Louis Vuitton Foundation)*



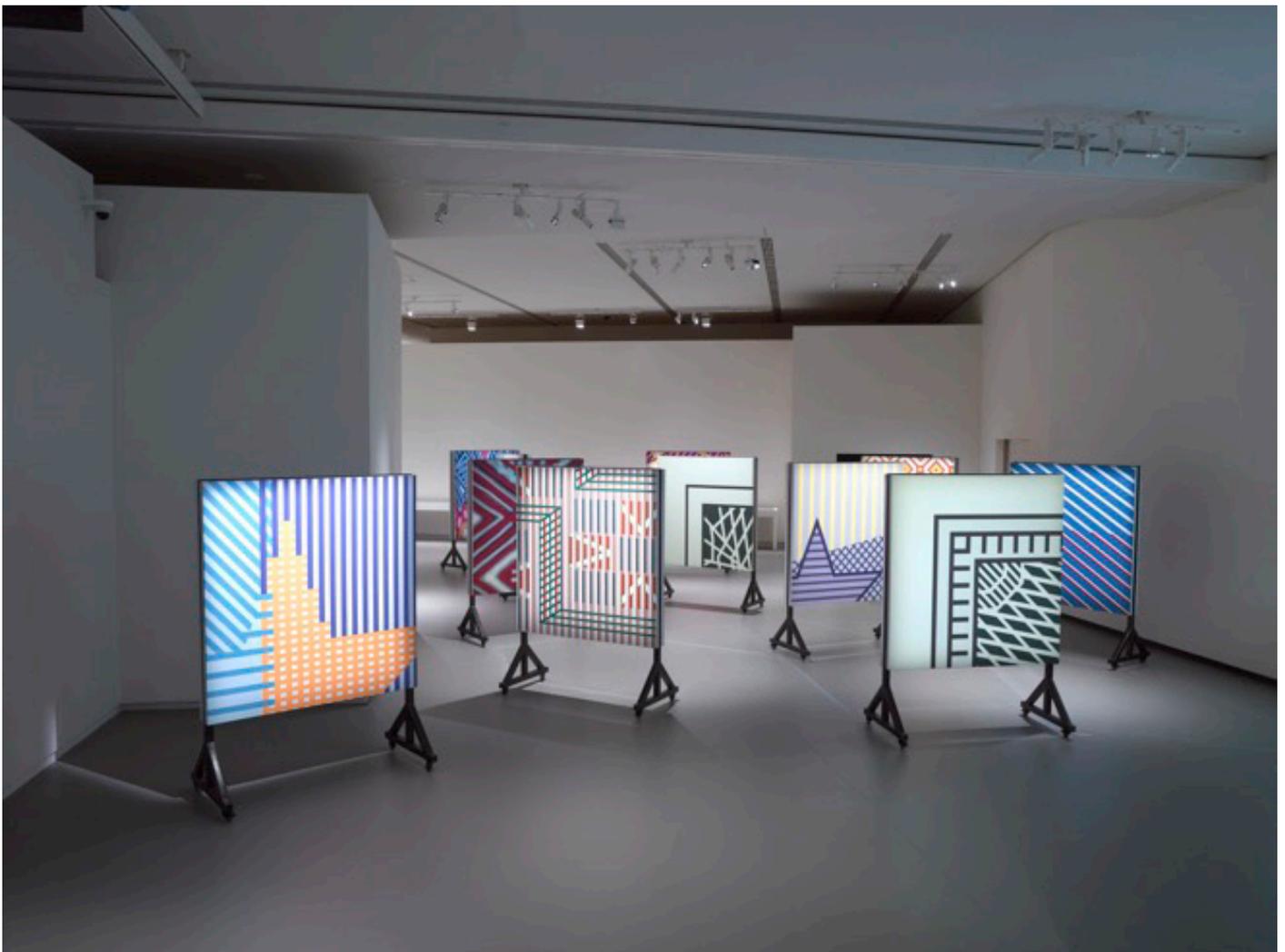
Qiu Zhijie, "From Huaxia to China", 2015



*Liu Chuang, "BBR1 (No. 1 of Blossom Bud Restrainer)", video still, 2015
(©Liu Chuang; courtesy of the artist)*

The most powerful works in the show invoke the temporality and uses of new media to meditate the topic of change. This is the case with Liu Chuang’s video “BBR1” (“No. 1 of Blossom Bud Restrainer”) (2015), made from advertising footage found on the internet about toxic pollen invasions of cities in spring, a side effect of widespread unregulated planting of poplar trees during the Maoist era. In this half-factual, half-fictional video, the artist mixes smooth, glossy music-video aesthetics with found footage from documentary reports. Even as it reveals the powerful attraction of propaganda communication tools, one cannot help but feel attracted to the pleasant aesthetic—this pervasive ambiguity proving itself a far more powerful denunciation than a frontal critique.

The strength of “Bentu” lies in the way it chooses to focus on a few strong, individual artworks, most of which have been produced in the last couple of years, instead of trying to establish themes and categories. As the cultural turn of the 1990s opened the scene to outside eyes—for example through the “China Avant-Garde Show” in Berlin in 1993 or the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999—the current decade in Chinese art seems a crucial one. The liberties taken with traditional references (transformed into signs of the thing itself), the constant translation and transposition of the resultant effects, and the talk of collisions between two worlds are highly relevant in the context of our chaotic world of web-based media and experiences, and show how artists seem to thrive particularly well in a chaotic state of flux.



*Xu Qu, “Currency War series”, 2015
(©Xu Qu; courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery)*



liu Xiaodong, "Jin Cheng Airport"



Hao Liang, "Virtuous Being", 2015