

Retrospective: The Thirteenth Sedona Conversation in Guangzhou, China

Image Flux: China

Video art, digital media content, independent and documentary film

November 15-18, 2006

The Conference opened the first day with speakers from the academic community. Zhang Xian Min, who teaches at the Beijing Film Academy as a professor of cinematography, offered an overview and a framework for the discussion of the video art and film movement in China. He also holds a professorship of cinematography, a graduate of the Beijing Foreign Language Academy, and of FEMIS in Paris, France. Zhang Xian Min developed his presentation around the thesis that there is no single subjectivity in China. As China engages in its long search for a national identity, competing viewpoints and even shifting ideology transforms the cultural contexts. He emphasizes the impact of economic ambition and globalization forces on not only the national identity, but also the multicultural and diverse interpretations of the larger China public. Film and video product assist the artist and the reassessment of the anxiety, stress, and complications of such large transformation occurring in China.

Gary Swanson, a Fulbright Scholar and professor of English Journalism at Tsinghua University, has compiled a distinguished broadcasting career, spanning 26 years, and has been the recipient for 57 awards for broadcast excellence, including three national Emmys. Professor Swanson offered an overview of the responsibilities, both ethical and professional, in producing documentary film or video content. His lectures and professional work include placing documentary production in the context of ethical journalism, but the research and rigor and arduous task should be taken into account if one is to undertake documentary production projects.

Cao Kai graduated from Nanjing Art Academy in 1992. He has worked for the movie media for several years and founded his own studio and became an independent planner, film-maker and copywriter after the year 2000. He has given lessons and lectures on new media art and experimental short subjects.

Robert Adams, a designer and architect, has worked both in the United States and China. He is currently an assistant professor at the University of Michigan in the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Mr. Adams presented a video that emphasized the evolution of a city. He stressed the drive

of urbanism eclipses the city's properties of landscape, nature of industry, labor, and material culture.

Charles Townley whose background includes a PhD in Information Studies from the University of Michigan, shared his interest in Video Art, which he feels holds up a mirror to society, perhaps particularly in modern China. History may show that this art form will have significant historical value in the future. Currently, however, Dr Townley feels this art form is not accessible. He posed a model for indexing and distributing video product represented at Image Flux: China. In addition, video art and digital media content, its important groundwork movement, cannot be historically captured. This is a loss for the creative talent video art and digital media content represents.

While the Sedona Conferences and Conversations have moved about the world, having facilitators on the ground in Barcelona, Jamaica, Dublin, and most lately Guangzhou, China for Image Flux: China, fortunately, we have had Dr Megan McShane, a Fulbright – Luce Scholar in Art History, while teaching at Sun Yat-sen University and Wu Jie an independent curator and image critic on the ground. A brief sketch of their backgrounds is as follows.

Megan C. McShane, Ph.D. United States Fulbright Scholar. She holds an endowed Fulbright in Art History from the Luce Foundation, and teaches Modern and Contemporary Art History at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou in the formidable History Department, with the support of Hong Kong Arts Benefactor Leung Kit Wah. She has also lectured at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing on American Art and Ecology artists. She has been a fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., a Violence Studies Fellow at Emory University, and she has worked with the Rockefeller Center for the Analysis of Contemporary Culture, at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Recently, she has lectured at such universities as the Sorbonne, Cambridge, Oxford, the University of Chicago, U.C.L.A., the University of Helsinki and the Art Academy in Tallinn, Estonia. Her current research interests cover the phenomenon of converging New Media in China, where she currently lives and teaches.

Wu Jie. Independent curator and Image critic-Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing. He was the co-founder of "U-theque," a non-profit film club in Guangzhou, organizing bi-weekly art film spectacles with discussion forums and issuing film newsletters on the scene. In addition, he acted as the main organizer of "Beijing/Shenzhen/Guangzhou/Hong Kong short films collection," "New Chinese Images Series," "Hong Kong Independent Film Exhibition," "French New Wave," "Japanese Movie Month," all of which included the showing of more than a hundred films from 2000-2003. He has initiated and hosted several workshops for mainland and Hong Kong directors, including Cui Yunxin, Simon Cheung, Kuo

Weilun, Chou Qiang, Zhang Weixiong, Shu Kei, Lou Ye. Recently, he collaborated with Empfangshalle, the German art unit in Guangzhou in 2006. His current project entails exporting Chinese Documentary Films to Barcelona in the project, "AEpistemology."

Anna Bryzski is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Kentucky. She is editor of *Partisan Canons*, Duke University Press, 2007. Her work has appeared in numerous publications such as *Centropa*, and *Art Criticism*, *19th Century Art Worldwide*, *Art and National Identity at the Turn of the Century*, Cambridge University Press, *Modern Art in Central Europe, 1918-1968*, Czech Academy of Sciences. Anna did her graduate studies at the University of Chicago.

Dr Bryzski made a powerful case that exposure and distribution are major factors in the elevation of worth and the perception of value of art forms growing out of digital reproduction. For the audience of younger Chinese video artists and for the general creative population immersed in producing video art, digital media product and other such forms, Dr Bryzski feels this effect has tremendous implications for producing artists and independent digital media content products who normally do not have distribution channels at hand.

Three community college instructors were in attendance and introduced to the China audience. Stephan and Lori Schultze, Directors of the Zaki Gordon Film Institute, Sedona, Arizona and Darrell Copp, Evening Chair for the Department of the Communications and Performance Art at Scottsdale Community College. Stephan Schultze explained the workings of his Film Institute, its mission and its impressive capacity, mainly to help starting film makers to be successful entrepreneurs. Darrell Copp also was on hand to discuss his impresario role on putting on Hate Film Genre in Festival and Workshop settings among the Image Flux participants.

The artist Gao Shi Qiang represents a substream of video artists active in China who concentrate on tracing the social realities of modern China. He depicts China in metaphorical terms of child, teenager adult and age. China's transformation from a centrally planned economy and a centrally controlled Socialist Republic grows metaphorically to a market, western type free commerce system. China's identities shift, reform recast themselves – the following interview with Gao Shi Qiang is offered for illustration.

Interviewing Artist Shi Qing

This interview took place on November 5, 2006 between Shi Qing, the noted Chinese film maker, photographer, and art critic, and Gao Yunxiang, Assistant Professor of History, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. Before the interview Gao watched his older films "No Lotus in Winter," "Black Taboo," and then Shi screened his new film, "Anorexic." The following interview includes selections from the two and a half hour session between Shi and Gao.

Gao Yunxiang: Shi Qing, would you first please introduce yourself? Tell us about your upbringing, education and work.

Shi Qing: Originally, I majored in electrical engineering in a college in Hebei province. Later on, I was enrolled in China Central Arts & Crafts Institute (Today's Qinghua Arts & Crafts Institute) to learn art design. However, I did not finish either school. That was the 1990s, the so called new-media art just started in China. Therefore, relevant information and resources were very limited. There hardly were any exhibits. I learned new trends and information mainly through magazines. Everyone in this field ended up here by both choice and chance.

Gao: What about your youth before college? I know that you were born in Baotou, Inner Mongolia.

Shi: That part was quite complex. Yes, I was born there, but I lived in many places afterwards.

Gao: Why are you called post-sense sensibility artist? What does Post-Sense sensibility mean exactly?

Shi: I believe that the post-sense sensibility exhibits held a special position in China's art history. Post-sense sensibility has two dimensions of meanings. One is historical, the other is academic. Let me start with the historical dimension. In January, 1999, more than 20 young artists participated in the first Post-sense sensibility exhibit entitled "Alien Bodies and Delusion" organized by Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun. That was their first or second time to participate in a public exhibit. A group of young artists emerged from the show and many of them are very famous now. It is fair to show, the group of young artists who has worked in the art field for 10 years are more or less related to this show. In this show, a human corpse was used as artistic material, which was the first time in China. Due to the controversies it caused in terms of values, it drew media attention and became the focus of the exhibit. The creation of other artists was tentatively neglected. Academically, the concept of "post-sense sensibility" was raised by Qiu and Wu. I can not guarantee that my understanding is exactly theirs. To me, that was against the over-

conception trend in contemporary Chinese art. People are pursuing so called "idea arts." They got a concept or idea first, then spent all the energy in showing this idea or concept. Post-sense sensibility is to counter, adjust, and change this over-conception trend through adding in sense. But this sense is different from the traditional sense. Rather, it is post-rationality sense.

Gao: Then what kind of sense is this post-rationality sense?

Shi: You have to ask Qiu and Wu about this. I can not answer for them. The second Post-Sense Sensibility entitled "Spree" happened in 2001. Different from the first exhibit, the goal of the second one is against Chinese exhibit system. Traditionally, each artist occupies his or her own space and exhibits independently. This time, artists were asked to work together to produce inter-related art works. The third post-sense sensibility exhibit entitled "retribution," which was the most powerful, complete, and influential, happened the same year. After the four exhibits entitled "Inside Story" in 2003, the mission of post-sense sensibility was fulfilled and individual artists began to pursue their own ways.

Gao: Can you talk a little bit about your work and your basic artistic philosophy?

Shi: My work involves setting, performance, video, photography, and multi-media. One of the characteristics of my work is to combine all these formats inside one theme and show them together. Since I have strong interest in the sense of time, performance and video are the major fields in my creation. Short video is a major media. Photography and setting is about space. They are still in terms of time.

I divide my work into three stages. I call the first stage (1999-2003) "Black Taboo" period. The name is from my individual exhibit in the "Long March Space" in the 798 Space. I focus on how human sub-consciousness discussed by Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung is reflected in adolescents' mind and sense. I feel China then was in an adolescent stage, energetic, disordered, and confused. That was a kind of confused youthful power. I combined these two directions for my first stage.

Gao: Were you trained in psychology?

Shi: No, self-taught. The second stage (2002-2004) is "Myth Language" period. This stage overlaps with the first stage. If the first stage focuses on individuals, the second stage is about the fate of the nation, and the collective. Myth is something every one in the group can relate to and it offers a bigger platform for my work. The third stage (2005-) is the period centering on the cities, the changing cities in China. China is experiencing the transition from countryside to city, which involves both disorder and opportunities.

This is related to my personal life experience. My father worked in a secret nuclear plant and my family lived in a remote mountain area. I have lived in cities for twenty years by now. To certain degree, everyone in modern China lived in agricultural society in the countryside. As we can see from Chinese classical literature, especially poems on landscapes, countryside represents tradition. Our current and future living environment is and will be cities. Both my mind and living environment experienced the transition from traditional Chinese countryside style to cities.

Ultimately, my work explores the status quo and future of China as a nation.

Gao: How do you view the presentation of bodies in your work?

Shi: For me, art has the role of self-direction. I hope to demonstrate my research of the society through sense-oriented means. Philosophy and sociology is logic oriented. Artists have to use individual sense to express themselves. Therefore, physical sense and experience are very important. This is also related to what I read. As an artist, after you expressed some instinctive feelings, in order to advance, you have to resort to the accumulation of knowledge. My early work focuses on psychology, and now my work is more about body. As a significant element to influence society, body serves as an angle and method for me. My attention to body is mainly influenced by Michel Foucault. My new work *Anorexic* demonstrates its theme through body as well.

Gao: Tell me more about this piece, please.

Shi: *Anorexic* is imagination of the living conditions of a special group in China. Actually, it absorbs the real lives of people I know, including my relatives, my friends, and my neighbors. They were born at the end of the Cultural Revolution, experienced the trend of “becoming workers” in the transition from agricultural society to industrial society after the Cultural Revolution, and went through the later transition to market economy. They were thrown to the very bottom of society after a series of enormous social transitions in China. This work is also about my attention to “murders without intension.” They kill not for romantic affairs, for hatred, or robbery. Rather, it is a violent release of emotion long oppressed and ignored. The majority of those who committed “murders without intension” is from the above mentioned group. *Anorexic* is my attention to the above two points.

Gao: Why do you express through bodily phenomenon?

Shi: This is my methodology. *Anorexic* is a subtle analogy to the flawed social system. Why? Because human existence depends on food. When our body system rejects food, it is actually self-rejection and self-destruction. This is very much like our current society, which is

supported by the above mentioned generation, but rejects and neglects them at the same time. This isolation amounts to scary urban unstable elements. Bad examples are already emerging. The longer and deeper is the isolation, the worse the result.

Gao: Why do you write the captions at the very beginning and times of the whole day on bodies?

Shi: For visual effects.

Gao: What kind of visual effects?

Shi: (Laughter). Let the formats be richer. I use different times in a day to symbolize the different stages of his whole life. Morning is his childhood, noon is his middle age, and the evening is his end or the darkest time of his life.

Gao: Why do you use women's nude body?

Shi: Women's nude body is related to both the theme and the specific stage of his life. I use this body to show desires. His youth and mid age, the 1980s, is the period in which they express their (sexual) desires very strongly. This historical period is the very period when the economic conditions of Chinese began to change for better. The mark of better economic condition is the fact that we have meat to eat. We can eat meat daily.

Gao: So meat in food is symbolized by women's body as well?

Shi: Body suggests two kinds of meanings. One is desire to food and drink, the other is sexual desire. Due to the special situation in China, during and before the Cultural Revolution, both were severely oppressed. Expressing and discussing sexual desire could lead to jail time.

Gao: This special group includes both men and women. When you made this film about them, did you think about gender perspective?

Shi: Not at all. These roles are abstract concepts that include both men and women. A man on screen does not necessarily suggest a patriarchal society. I am not sure whether you have noticed or not, the four stages of his life is played by four different actors because I would like to make the role universal.

Gao: What if left for women to play the four stages of the person's life?

Shi: I feel women's bodies contain special meanings and the cultural symbols they represents are too strong. If I used four women, the audience would think I was talking about women's issues or feminist issues. It would be misleading and my real intention would be distorted.

Gao: Are you saying that the protagonist is abstract, at the same time, it must be a man?

Shi: No, I am not saying that it is must be a man. Because man's body has abstract meaning, and woman's body is too concrete... cultural symbol. It would cause misunderstandings.

Gao: What about the plants? They are always present in your films.

Shi: By borrowing traditional Chinese opera method, I use plants to symbolize forest. On the other hand, as we can see in traditional literature, forests represents psychology: green, with life, damp, knots, and easy to get lost in. I myself enjoy the visual effect of green plants.

Gao: When watching your films, I always feel that you as the director is always present, although invisible. What do you think?

Shi: This is a very good question. I believe art is a tool to show my ideas and views. I am not satisfied with just telling a story, which does not have too much meaning for me. Like a scholar or writer, I would like to express myself through my work.

Gao: How do you find your actors?

Shi: Before, I used my friends. Now I hire the so called “mass actors” through special channels. Professional actors are very expensive. They also show too many hints of performance, which is not what I want. What I want are real people in real life. For these two reasons, I stick to “mass actors.”

Gao: Do you need to train your “mass actors” on the spot?

Shi: Both friends and “mass actors” have their work. Long term training is impossible. I met most of my actors first time on the shooting scene. I just tell them, “do not think of performance, just be yourself in real life.” I pick those fit in my roles on the spot. Sometimes, I change my roles plan according to the actors I found. When real people stand in front of you, they themselves are stories. When they do not meet my requirements, I adjust my requirements.

Gao: Do you have your audience in mind when you create your work?

Shi: Not really. All I care is to express myself. By the way, foreigners have a hard time to accept my work. There must be two reasons: On the one hand, my work is really hard for them to understand; on the other hand, they are more willing to accept the pre-existing cultural symbols in their mind, such as red lanterns, pandas, the Great War, and Cultural Revolution Statute. The shifting and real China is too alien for them.

Megan McShane offers reflection on why China’s video Art and Digital Media content are so timely.

Why China? Why Now?

Currently, there is a very important phenomenon in China based on Digital Video and the relatively cheap way it is propagated. Artists and Directors regularly shift and move DV copies in and out of universities and cities all over China, among themselves, and internationally. Chinese historians,

practitioners, and critics are treating 1997-2002 as a prehistoric moment in the new image production, calling it the DV Movement. The first phase was important because it signified a loss of control by the official system. Similar to the internet, there is a new wave in the production and propagation of the digital medium and the discourse surrounding the medium.

Early on, this was largely due to what they call “folk videos,” or simple oral histories being recorded. This early emphasis on the personal and interpersonal still remains intact, as there are, of course, the large Hollywood style blockbuster films that speak to a completely different audience.

What we see as an important, genre changing moment is based in the individuals' empowerment to record, create, and propagate unofficial narratives through Digital Media. This is true in the Fine Arts, in Documentary Film, and Independent Film. The narratives are not overtly political but rather deeply personal. It is through the individual stories of coping with the exponential speed of change in society here that one finds an important social phenomenon manifesting itself, and recording itself.

The genres of Fine Art Video, Documentary Film, and Fictional Independent Film, are also in dialog with each other. This is quite different than the American or European system of image production. Similarly, there is a diverse set of institutions participating in the critical discourse surrounding the new image production, facilitated by the convergence of the genres and the new media forms.

This phenomenon of “convergence” has been heralded by technology gurus for years in the West, but merely as a utopian visionary construct among the elite. Here in China, the New Media genres spontaneously converged, largely due to the absence of existing structures for the dissemination, analysis, and production of digital media.

This retrospective cannot cover every presentation and film showing – it is possible these video presentations can be viewed at future Sedona sessions. Since we had five German participants and presenters, some exploratory groundwork has been underway to put on similar forums in Germany, possibly Berlin or Munich.

We have run out of publication runs of a 125 page overview, but we would like to provide readers with the names of the following sponsors, curators and presenters whose contact points can possibly be provided.

(Image Flux: China credits from PPT goes here)

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