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San Francisco. Exhibit: Irreducible: Contemporary Short Form Video: California College of the Arts/Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, Logan Galleries

Dore Bowen

San Jose State University, dore.bowen@sjsu.edu

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Outing, 2000, the reflective interior of an escalator catches the last seconds of a figure's quick exit. Especially intriguing is Haley's *Negotiation*, 2001, where a long shot reveals two figures becoming aware of one another as they near an intersection at the base of the Angel's Flight funicular railway. Such images imply narratives, which are perhaps non-existent. It is precisely this slippage between reality and fiction that sustains the myths and stories that allow this city to thrive.

Leaving the subject entirely out of the narrative further enhances a sense of ambivalence and intrigue. In **Mungo Thomson's** video animation, *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)*, 2002, the roadrunner and coyote characters are poignantly absent—all that is left is the stark and endless desert backdrop of their chase. Without subjects, however, the landscape loses its meaning. A strange urge takes over: needing to complete the narrative, the viewer slips into the role of the missing subject. This compulsion to fill in the blanks in order to be released from limbo is a thread that runs through the exhibition.

Veracity and fantasy collapse in **David H. Bailey's** powerful installation, *Pull Me from the Wreckage*, 2003. The piece symbolically traverses both land and history with long, narrow, and horizontally-intersecting strips of wood harnessed to vertical poles by rubber bands. The poles carry tiny wood billboards that start at one end of the platform by marking certain world historical landmarks—World War I, Darwin, Frank Lloyd Wright—to then focus on specific struggles between man, society, and nature, as evidenced in Los Angeles—earthquakes, riots, emergency housing, drought. From an aerial perspective, the interrelatedness makes perfect sense. Navigating through the mess in his car, however, the lone Angeleno is shielded by a conceptual blind spot from any understanding of cause and effect.

As LA's sprawling topography relegates the Angeleno to a paradox of isolated mobility, an existential limbo emerges. It is both a physical and a psychological no place. Cleverly, *The Lateral Slip* attempts to shift awareness by pulling our perspective out of the gridlock and turning the details of our surroundings into markers.

—Christina Kline

SAN FRANCISCO

Curated by Ralph Rugoff, *Irreducible: Contemporary Short Form Video* (California College of the Arts/Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, Logan Galleries, January 19–March 19, 2005) features works that focus on gesture rather than narrative or metaphor. If they incorporate a range of reproductive media—including digital, video, film—the selected works forego the visual pyrotechnics found in the work of, for instance, Jeremy Blake and, instead, reference performance-inspired video from the 1960s and 1970s by such notables as Martha Rosler, Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci. A situation is recorded without explicit narrative intent; what occurs is a depiction of an unfolding event, situation, or performance.

The pioneers of performance-video were concerned with the artist's physical engagement with the medium. Think of *Remote Control*, 1971, an erotic encounter between Acconci, in one box, and artist Kathy Dillon in a second box. The two bodies are linked by the video image as Acconci instructs Dillon to tie herself up with rope, gesturing as though they were co-present, cajoling her to perform his commands. The image hinges the artists' bodies, extending Acconci's gesture and its signifying valence. The two artists are "hooked up" and the video extends Acconci's sado-masochistic desire to capture, command, and bind Dillon.

Working in a similar vein, Danish artist **Mads Lynnerup's** *Untying a Shoe With an Erection*, 2002, mediates a link between the artist's foot, hand, and penis. While the fixed-viewpoint image depicts only the artist's ankles, high-tops, and a string tied to one shoelace, the wall text divulges the connection between the string and the artist's penis, stating that a mere two minutes is all it takes for his masturbation to untie his lace. After reading this text, the viewer's imagination rises upward; yet unlike *Remote Control*, she is not afforded a glimpse of the sexual activity.

The term performance-video only inadequately describes certain works in this exhibition. My neologism "image-event" better describes engagements with the image as event, rather than an extension of an event. For example,



Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, *Returning a Sound*, 2004, video projection, video transferred to DVD, 5 minutes 42 seconds (courtesy of the artists and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris)

Chinese artist **Song Dong's** *Walking Through the Mirror*, 2002, explores the conundrum produced when the separation between image and event is threatened. This four-minute DVD projection features a bifurcated image: the left side of the vertical frame depicts a square turquoise panel while, on the right, a group of eager spectators—including appropriately-clad military cadets—are gathered, framing modern city architecture in the background. The artist approaches with a sledgehammer and, in slow motion, begins to strike the left panel. As he does the audience begins to quiver, the city to quake, eventually cracking and exposing the image on the right to another view. In this split image, the viewer is witnessing the performance from two angles—a mirror's back and front. After collapsing the mirror from the back, and thus revealing a second, reversed, and ultimately shattered scenario on its reflecting-side, the artist walks through the mirror's frame, having deconstructed (metaphorically of course, for there is yet another camera recording the event) the image-proscenium. If Song hammers away at illusionism he, like his performance-video predecessors, nonetheless emerges a hero, walking through the shattered frame and over the debris that scatters his work's battlefield.

South Korean artist **Kimsooja** stages *A Homeless Woman (Cairo)*, 2001, in a less didactic, though no less ingenious, manner. The camera records behind the artist's back, as she lies in a public

square, facing a stream of bystanders who gather to watch her sprawled figure on the pavement. The spectators—alternately laughing, frowning with concern, or heckling with cohorts—create a community of sorts around the artist who, acting as a palimpsest, reveals the shifting and layered attitudes toward the female figure, its public presence, and homeless in Cairo. In its subtle staging, this work suggests a curious logic—without the camera there would be no event; without the event there would be no community; without the community there would be no body under scrutiny.

Interesting alternatives to the artist's primacy in the image-event—as hero or object—are suggested in this exhibition as well. In *Returning a Sound*, 2004, by Puerto Rican partners **Jennifer Allora** and **Guillermo Calzadilla**, a young man rides a motorbike sporting a horn for a muffler through Vieques—a small island off Puerto Rico. Unlike other works in the exhibit, *Returning a Sound* has a narrative thrust; it charts the young man's celebratory journey through a recently decommissioned U.S. Navy bomb-testing area of the island. The droll irony of this reverse-military salute breaks the somber narrative with its spontaneity.

Anri Sala's *Mixed Behavior*, 2004, suggests an alternative to the heroics of *Walking Through the Mirror*. In this nine minute video the artist-as-DJ mixes groovy sounds under a rain-soaked tarp to accompany the New Year's Eve fireworks in Tirana, Albania. In

Mixed Behavior, the Albanian artist steps back from his creative role to watch this scene with the viewer. A documentary sensibility is suggested: without fireworks, without a cause for celebration, without the city in the distance, there would be no light and, by extension, no image. Before the artist enters the scene and after he leaves, the event surely continues. Such works provide a counterpoint to both the performance-videos created four decades ago, and the hopped-up digital wizardry often featured in galleries today. *Irreducible* demonstrates that a new crop of artists is willing to engage the image-event on fresh terrain.

—Dore Bowen

STANFORD

"Who is more beautiful—Chinese or foreigners?" "Have you ever made love to a western lady/man and is there any difference?" The answers to such questions are humorously explored in Beijing-based **Qiu Zhijie's** interactive CD-ROM *The West*, 2000, one of the more lighthearted works included in *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University; January 26—May 1, 2005). A group show featuring twelve artists—five living outside China and seven living within—*On the Edge* is an important addition to the recent spate of China-focused contemporary art exhibitions to tour the U.S. from which it differs significantly in its thematic approach.

Independent scholar Britta Erickson has, in fact, organized *On the Edge* to show the bold and experimental ways in which Chinese artists are dealing with their position in both the art world and the geopolitical arena, giving weight to the view that art and politics are inseparable. The works are organized and displayed in three thematic sections: "The West through a Political Lens," "Cultural M \acute{e} lange," and "Joining the Game: The Chinese Artist Meets the World". Owing perhaps to its university setting, the show bears a considerably didactic tone.

With her extensive knowledge and expertise in the field of Chinese contemporary art, Erickson selected an array of strong pieces by superior artists. Among these are Beijing-based Qiu Zhijie's mazelike CD-ROM,

The West, which combines stock images from newspapers and popular media with video interview clips and voiceover to form a half-factual, half-absurd montage that demonstrates that "the west" exists only within the realm of the imaginary. A solitary military aircraft glides over a body of water in Shanghai-based artist **Zhou Tiehai's** mesmerizing triptych, *Civilization*, 2004. Airbrushed to perfection, its deceptively simple composition belies Zhou's interweaving of Song-Yuan (12th—14th century) painting styles, contemporary political subject matter (the plane is modeled after the U.S. Navy EP-3 spy plane that was captured in southern China in 2001), and a commercial technique.

Other highlights include New York-based **Zhang Huan's** brilliant performance *My New York* (organized by the Whitney Museum in 2002). Inspired by his perception that New Yorkers demonstrated extraordinary strength and determination in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Zhang donned a bodysuit of raw meat—transforming himself into an exaggerated fleshy superhero—and walked along the street, releasing doves outside the Whitney Museum. A series of paintings and cutouts by Beijing/Hong Kong-based artist **Yan Lei**, *May I see your work?*, 1997, and *The Curators*, 2000, deftly links historical images with the international art world's current power structures in his characteristically blurred paint-by-numbers style. Paradoxically, both Yan and Zhou have made early careers out of pranksterism and biting criticism of the art world, propelling them through the biennial circuit and into the homes of well-known foreign collectors.

Some selections, however, seem out of place given the overall theme. Works like Beijing artist **Yin Xiuzhen's** *Portable City-Shenzhen*, 2003, more aptly illustrate the effects of globalization on ideas of home, personal experience and travel than specific western art world concerns. Likewise, **Xu Bing's** *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, 1994-1996, and *Case Study of Transference*, 1994, are not only exceedingly familiar to international art audiences, but also seem to reiterate simplified assumptions of "east" and "west." Indeed, naming a section of the exhibition "Cultural M \acute{e} lange" is overly reductive, implying a simple mix-



Zhang Huan, *My New York: #4*, 2002, chromogenic print, 150 x 100 cm (reproduced by permission of the artist; photo courtesy of Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University)

ing of two fixed elements to create a third. A comparison might be made, here, between *On the Edge* and *The American Effect* (Whitney Museum of Art, 2003). Despite laudable intentions to forge new ground, both exhibitions occasionally rely on platitudes about the west that undermine the sophistication of the work. It is perhaps no coincidence that the only two Chinese artists selected for the Whitney show—Zhou Tiehai and **Xing Danwen**—are also featured in the Stanford show, with Xing Danwen exhibiting the same body of work.

By now, it should be no secret that the field of contemporary Chinese art has grown exponentially in recent years, resulting in increased attention from curators, museums, galleries, and collectors operating within the global art world. Similarly, it is no surprise that the repercussions of recent political incidents between the U.S. and China have yielded innovative works by Chinese artists.

What is less clear, however, is the reasoning behind the curator's choice of the umbrella term "the west." One wonders about the ideological position that situates contemporary Chinese art practice in opposition to "the west." Could this approach inadvertently reinforce the very stereotypes and presumptions that many of these artists are seeking to dismantle? Are there not artists in China making work about events in China?

Whether the exhibition is rigorously developed around a theme or not, *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* is an unquestionably valuable educational tool for newcomers interested in the field of contemporary art. The show's several newly commissioned works by visiting artists and extensive catalog are to be admired for their substantive import and will guarantee the importance of this exhibition for years to come.

—Pauline J. Yao

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