

passages



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Cover:
CHUTIAN GOLDEN PAPER,
13 August 2007:

Fugitive Drops Through Ceiling

Around 6 pm on 10 August, some 50 doctors and nurses attending an HR meeting at a beauty parlour in No.16, Wu Sheng Road in Hankou were startled when a man dropped through the concrete ceiling. He had jumped off the sixth floor while fleeing a mob.

Photo: Li Yu and Liu Bo, from the series "Victims" (2007)

12–39 Dossier: CHINA'S CULTURAL SCENE



In their work, Ta Men, an artists' collective, and the photographer duo Li Yu and Liu Bo offer critique of modern Chinese society (pp. 12 f., 18 f., 24 f. and 32 – 39).

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Li Yu and Liu Bo

The photographers Li Yu (born 1973) and Liu Bo (born 1977) live and work in Wuhan, China. For their photo series "13 Months in the Year of the Dog" (2006) and "Victims" (2007), the artists staged stories drawn from the Chinese daily news: the crime beat, the absurd and the everyday coalesce in scenes reminiscent of film stills. www.photobang.cn

Ta Men

The artists' collective Ta Men ("They") comprises Lai Shengyu (born 1978), Yang Xiaogang (born 1979) and (until 2006) Chen Li (born 1973), all of whom live and work in Beijing. Always using the same room with picture window as a backdrop, Ta Men stage hysterically overblown scenes of life in the big city. In digitally processed photographs and oil paintings alike, theirs is a pessimistic portrait of China's consumer culture.

Migrant Workers



From our cosy perch in Switzerland, the first thing that strikes us about China is the amazing pace of its growth. In the span of one single generation, a land of rice farmers has become a factory supplying the entire globe. The cottages of yore have mutated into canyons of glass and steel in burgeoning megacities, the whole sustained by an infrastructure that anticipates the 22nd century. Such a remake of Genesis in just two decades would have been unthinkable without the army of migrant workers who follow the construction sites from one end of China to the other. These sons and daughters of poverty-stricken farmers flee the countryside to make over Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing, and in the process provide fodder for our western fantasies.

China's architectural metamorphosis is matched by a cultural renaissance, as inspiration from the country's past as well as from the outside world floods in to fill the vacuum left by the Cultural Revolution. China is not only the world's largest construction site, it is also its greatest atelier. Local artists have found their niche between global expectations and their own taste for experimentation, with a cunning to match the reluctance of official Chinese cultural policy in the face of independent artistic production. Artists are the journeymen and women of the mind, labouring on the construction sites of perception, intellection and exchange. They have captured the imagination of the Swiss cultural world, whose exponents have not been slow to set out on journeys of their own.

With *Swiss Chinese Cultural Explorations*, a two-year programme focusing on the Middle Kingdom, Pro Helvetia aims to foster exchanges between Swiss artists and China's multifaceted culture. In this issue of *Passages* we invite Chinese intellectuals to have their say, and furnish us with insight into their country's independent documentary film scene, its contemporary conceptual art, and the growth of its pop and rock music industry. In their work, meanwhile, young artists turn a critical gaze on modern Chinese society. Taken together, the accounts of artists from China and Switzerland prove that cultural exchanges between the two countries are a veritable voyage of discovery. For Swiss and Chinese alike!

Pius Knüsel
Director, *Pro Helvetia*

Swiss Design in Hollywood

A rift opens in the enormous ship: the Titanic is rent in two between its majestic funnels, baring its innards and sending passengers sliding across the deck and clinging to the railing while its stern slowly sinks into the dark and frigid ocean. The Swiss freelance designer and concept artist Christian L. Scheurer committed this catastrophe to his drawing board in countless variations until he had created a cinematic effect worthy of Hollywood.

Although the film industry has become one of the most prolific cultural production centres of our era, the world is unfamiliar with the names of the Swiss artists who, for years now, have been creating highly successful figures, fantasy characters and sets for international film productions and video games. *Swiss Design in Hollywood* is the first show to feature the contributions of Swiss artists to the field of design and digital imagery in major productions such as *Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Fifth Element*, *Star Wars* and *Alien*. The digital exhibition is based on DVDs and supplementary internet documentation, which is accessible to viewers on Pro Helvetia's website

Concrete canyon from the science fiction film *The Fifth Element* by Christian L. Scheurer. Video still.



(www.prohelvetia.ch/expo). Forming the core of the exhibition are twenty panels dealing with the work of a number of artists – the likes of H.R. Giger, John Howe, Christian L. Scheurer and Deak Ferrand – for film and video-game productions. A selection of videos also provide insight into modern design techniques such as matte painting, concept design and special effects.

Swiss Design in Hollywood, which targets both the general public and specialists in the field, is the brainchild of Yverdon's Maison d'Ailleurs. It was commissioned by Pro Helvetia, whose offer of the show free of charge to Swiss embassies throughout the world makes available a simple and affordable instrument to convey Swiss cultural accomplishments to countries where Pro Helvetia has a lower profile. Predecessors to the exhibition, such as *Comic Land Switzerland* and *Ticinese Architects Worldwide*, were mounted over one hundred times in some forty countries. Those interested in staging such an event can order the exhibition through any Swiss embassy.

Compass – Swiss Culture to Go



Fresh sounds on *Compass*: The unusual vocal stylings of Swiss-American Erika Stucky. Photo: Gina Folly

Conceived as an interactive kaleidoscope of the visual arts, *Compass* is a guide to Switzerland's diverse cultural offerings. The new promotional website features an up-to-date selection of concerts, films, exhibitions, readings and theatrical and dance productions by Swiss artists, with texts, images and sound samples of projects supported by Pro Helvetia and ready to go on tour. *Compass* provides access to a continually updated cultural calendar as well as direct contact to artists. The online platform is intended for curators, programmers, cultural attachés and members of the diplomatic corps around the world – and of course anyone curious about Swiss culture anywhere. www.prohelvetia.ch/compass

Artists' Books for Swiss Talent



"Monstera" (detail)
by Franziska Furter.

Who will be the movers in the art world of tomorrow? For its *Cahiers d'Artistes* series, Pro Helvetia is constantly on the lookout for promising Swiss artists whose work takes readers by surprise and captivates them with its originality. The current series offers seven artists and one artist couple – selected from among 220 submissions – a debut publication in the form of a *Cahier d'Artiste* or "artist's book". For over ten years now, Pro Helvetia's *Collection Cahiers d'Artistes* has lent support to aspiring Swiss visual artists by giving them an instrument with which to make

themselves known to a wider public. From 8 to 14 June, under the auspices of the Swiss Art Awards ceremony in Basel, Pro Helvetia will present this year's crop of artists' books. The jury chose to honour the Chapuisat Brothers, Francisco Sierra, Aldo Mozzini and Marie Velardi, from the French and Italian-speaking regions of Switzerland, and, from the German-speaking region, Ana Roldan, Franziska Furter, Marianne Engel and Sladjan Nedeljkovic.

Published by Edizioni Periferia, the new *Cahiers d'Artistes* are available in book shops and from Pro Helvetia. The deadline for applications for the 2010 series is 12 June 2009. Details under www.prohelvetia.ch

Contemporary Vibes

Jacques Demierre is composer-in-residence at *Les Amplitudes*.
Photo: ZVG



This spring, La Chaux-de-Fonds will host the fourth edition of *Les Amplitudes*, a bijou biennial festival of contemporary music showcasing an internationally renowned composer. Featured guest for 2009 is the Swiss musician, composer, teacher and sound-poet Jacques Demierre, who joins other artists at a variety of venues during the six-day event. In *Entre-deux*, a sort of improvisation on demand and just one of the many unique festival offerings, Jacques Demierre will play ten-minute solo pieces for one audience member at a time. Sponsored by Pro Helvetia,

Les Amplitudes is a red-letter event on the calendar of the Swiss contemporary music scene, and enjoys an international reputation beyond Switzerland's borders. But it's not only festival-goers' ears that are in for a surprise between 12 and 17 May in La Chaux-de-Fonds: with films,

sound installations, musical spoken-word and dramatic performances and workshops, the festival also invites its guests to discover a new approach to music. www.lesamplitudes.ch



"From now on, we want a real
play, with real parts."
(Patrick, 12 years old)



Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad

Airport Kids, a piece of documentary theatre, presents scenes from the life of modern nomads – the children of refugees and of the managers of multinational corporations – who describe their world to the adults in the audience. A play with authenticity and fiction that is at times unsettling.

**By Anne Fournier (text) and
Caroline Minjolle (photos)**

“Can I have my e-game back?” 9-year-old Oussama booms out at the house. The lights are back on in Hall 2 of Zurich’s Theater Schiffbau. Rehearsal is over. Julien (8), Kristina (10) and Patrick (12) didn’t wait that long to head backstage and escape from a stage that, for six months now, has made troubadours of these nomadic children. “Juliette, is it true you love music?” No answer. The little 6-year-old girl is now all by herself on the boards; she seeks out her mother, seated somewhere beyond. Juliette is intimidated. After all, however soft-spoken they may be, the directors Stefan Kaegi and Lola Arias questioning her are strangers. Juliette, who often tags along on her musician parents’ travels, has been cast as the next “expert” in the *Airport Kids* stage play touring Europe since May 2008. They are “airport kids”: they hail from Morocco, Ireland, China or Brazil.

The children describe our world of today, onto which they project their gaze and their utopias.
Director Stefan Kaegi (centre)



Child refugee, adopted orphan, senior manager's son

The stage set consists of airport containers: the cast's homes. A place where, for instance, Kristina, the child of Russian parents and a pupil at Lausanne's International School, can dream of a vocabulary understandable to one and all. The setting also features rails, screens, and musical instruments: the cast's language. Words in which, for instance, Sarah can sing of the Africa that her father fled due to war and that she never got to know. It is the multinational and chaotic world of kids forever on the go, rootless, and adept at improvising in several languages. Off-stage, the youngsters are the offspring of directors or of refugees, or else adopted orphans. The fact that they all have left somewhere else behind creates a tie stronger than their differences in background. Ranging in age

from 6 to 14, their route has landed them in Lausanne — here they attend school, and here Stefan Kaegi of Switzerland and Lola Arias of Argentina have selected them to stage their production at the Théâtre de Vidy. On stage, in an atmosphere reminiscent of an airport, they each play their role or join in the chorus, declaiming or singing out flashes from their life in successive scenes. Their experience is still minimal. And yet, during their trips and throughout their dreams, these eight children — nine counting Garima, who joins in by video as he follows the moves from one place to an-

other dictated by his father in the service of Tetra Pak — already have a long and winding road behind them.

Working hand in hand with them, Lola Arias and Stefan Kaegi, by now known for blending documentary and fiction in their work, have invented life-scenes that are more or less inspired by the children's real lives. The children describe our world of today, onto which they project their gaze and their utopias. Thus we have Patrick, the son of the vice-president of Philip Morris and proud owner of his first credit card at the age of 10; or Clyde, an orphan from India adopted by Swiss parents under circumstances he goes on to relate. The team have been working with some twenty youngsters since 2007, drawing on their life stories, and then adding some imaginary flourishes (Kristina is not as keen a tennis player as she comes across in *Airport Kids*, she herself makes clear), before going on to script the actual play. "How do you see your future?", "What do you like?", "Are you comfortable on airplanes?" Casting was based on the interest of their biography, and their behaviour towards the audience. The resulting production takes inspiration from their everyday life but immerses them in a time frame they have never before experienced, namely the immediacy of theatre. "They are unpredictable and disconcerting in their demands and in the trouble they have in concentrating. Even after months of putting on the show, we still have to keep them from dropping out," explains Boris Brüderlin, assistant stage director.

Theatre starring "experts" of the everyday

A few hours before one of the performances, the players waxed professional: "From now on, we want a real play, with real parts," Patrick jokingly declared. The only answer came in the form of a question from the sound engineer: "Who forgot to turn off their cellular?" It's as if they were old hands at this, impatient at times and quite proud of themselves. Six months is a

The fact that they all have left somewhere else behind creates a tie stronger than their differences in background.

long time in the life of a 9-year-old. Enthusiastically, Lola Arias asserts: “They’ve told us tons of stuff. It’s what we used to inject real life into fiction. Anyway, their world is so alive that it is very fragile. It’s hard to know where a lie sets in...” It’s been several years that the artist Lola Arias, now 32, has been globe-trotting. Thanks to the theatre. After studying literature and drama in Buenos Aires, she founded the *Compania Post-nuclear*, enabling her to engage in mime, song and dance. A writer and stage director, she revels in the tension between reality and fiction that has informed her creations. This taste also brought her close to Stefan Kaegi of Solothurn and his commitment to exploring society from a documentary perspective. In Brazil in 2007, the two joined forces to stage *Chacar paraiso*, a performance bringing to light the life of policemen and their families. With an eye to revealing, to disturbing. But not to judging. “We show. Without saying if it’s good or bad,” the director explains. Today 36, Stefan Kaegi once dreamt of becoming a journalist, but later he turned to the theatre and its “experts” — that is, artisans of

everyday life placed in a fictional setting destined to reveal their imaginary world. And this whether they be truck drivers (*Cargo Sofia* – X, 2006), model-making fans (*Mnemopark*, 2005) or call-centre employees in Calcutta (*Call Cutta*, 2005).

A globetrotter, Stefan Kaegi draws inspiration from a world whose changes he observes in the course of his own travels. Having studied philosophy and the visual arts in Basel and Zurich, he went on to complete a programme in theatre studies in Giessen, in Germany. “I didn’t want the acting degree course that casts you into a mould and teaches you the art of fencing. That approach is a threat to art,” he asserts. In Giessen he met Daniel Wetzel and Helgard Haug, with whom he founded the Rimini Protokoll theatre collective in 1999. At once creators and observers, the three used public spaces to act out and produce “ready-made” documentaries for the stage. Their idea was neither to reproduce nor to dramatize reality, but to display such reality within a theatrical structure. In other words, to point a finger at the theatricality of our everyday lot. In 2002, they invited

200 voters to witness the parliamentary debates in Berlin, before enjoining them to take seats in a mock-up of the Parliament, and in turn to deliver the arguments they had heard the politicians set forth.

The resulting “documentary theatre” is a malleable concept that uses snatches of reality and a journalistic tone to provide a thoroughly hybrid approach to everyday life. During the early ‘60s, the stage director Peter Weiss attended the trial of Auschwitz death camp staffers before the Frankfurt criminal court. Based on his notes and the minutes of the trial, he composed *The Investigation* in the form of an oratorio, making him the first to propose a genre built up of political theses and openly-declared sympathies. In the meantime, bringing reality into play has become a popular tool to reflect upon both the theatre as such and its ethical purpose. Nowadays, theatrical productions in a documentary vein tend to distance themselves from any value judgment: they are more likely to ask questions or to turn issues aside, at times through laughter. Then there is also the humour-tinged stand taken by Rabih Mroué

Airport Kids in action: They come from Morocco, Ireland, China and Brazil.





Sarah sings about an Africa she has never seen.

of Lebanon with respect to the stranglehold of war on his country: *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* – produced at Zurich's Theater Spektakel in 2008 – marries a documentary form to the stage players' fiction, resorting to the absurd to denounce the conflict.

Children – “scale models of the future”

Stefan Kaegi's close involvement with the “experts” selected on the basis of their everyday life sets his approach apart and lays him open to criticism. At the Festival d'Avignon in France, for example, it was noted that in *Airport Kids*, the *mise en abyme* of reality is performed by youngsters rather than by adults. All of a sudden, what the youngsters say on stage – that is, their opinions of the real world built without them until now, and often without their necessarily being aware of it – is at variance with, even in contradiction to, the way spectators perceive (or wish to perceive) it. You have children denouncing the worries or absurdities belonging to adults. Julien, hailing from China, overstepped the bounds of his role to haggle with the audience over the worth of his country measured in rice. And then there's Aline, who boasts of the virtues of war. One wonders: does the illusion spooned out by theatre bring authenticity into play? Does it cater to a taste for voyeurism? Does it risk trespassing the limits of the theatrical dimen-

“I'd like to be an actress someday. A real one.”

sion? Stefan Kaegi and Lola Arias justify their work with the youngsters by remarking that they (the children) “are like scale models of the future, while as yet unaware of the laws of the world. True, many words of our own crop up during the show, undermining the fine line between fiction and reality. They open new doors. Where is it that we are strangers? In whose eyes are we strangers? The same questions cross the minds of the nomadic youngsters and the members of the audience. We come up with no answers.” Beyond this questioning as to whether distancing has or has not been achieved, the feelings of unease thus aroused are akin to those that today's globalized world has in store for tomorrow's adults.

In Zurich, enjoying their evening snack, Oussama of Morocco and his fellow cast members are serene. “We feel comfortable. In a way we're the ones writing the text,” he comments with a laugh, adding that gaming is his way of relaxing. The youngsters are like little sorcerer's apprentices, frightening in their mixture of innocence and adult knowledge. During 2009

they are on tour all across Europe; spring will see them in Paris and Hamburg. New demands continue: “They made me into a soldier. I think I laughed it off but, actually, I don't want to make war. Even if I like the boots.” Aline, whose background is Brazilian, loves the projectors. She's delighted, as betrayed by her smile. About to politely lift fork to mouth, she admits: “I'd like to be an actress someday. A real one.”

www.rimini-protokoll.de

Anne Fournier is Zurich correspondent for the daily *Le Temps*. She studied *Arts de la scène et du théâtre* in Paris, where she dedicated her research work to Genevan playwright Sylviane Dupuis. Fournier sits on the jury for the Hans-Reinhart Ring award.

Translated from the French by Margie Mounier



A break during rehearsals: The mood is cheerful and relaxed.

Constantly Seeking Difference

What do you get when a Swiss in Linz plans an Austrian city's year as the European Capital of Culture? Artistic Director Martin Heller encounters rituals from the Far East as well as some intercultural stumbling blocks.

By *Martin Heller* – I have been working outside Switzerland for several years now, and while I keep one foot in Zurich, on my native soil, I am more often than not on the hoof abroad: mainly in Austria, or rather Linz, to be exact, population c. 200,000, the centre of a region with almost half a million inhabitants and the capital of the federal state of Upper Austria.

In 2009, together with Vilnius, Linz is the European Capital of Culture. As its Artistic Director, I have been charged with all of the planning work in and around this banner year. My main task is to put together a programme boasting original, individual events and offerings while also recognizable as a coherent whole.

As a result, I am in regular contact with cultures other than my own – both figuratively, with regard to the contents of the programme, and literally, in the very surroundings in which I do my work. Due to the largely public nature of the projects I am involved in, my work raises a series of specific questions. To what extent, for instance, can cultural peculiarities be understood as national, or indeed local, phenomena? Is it possible to characterize everyday cultural processes as the result of a particular mentality? How is it that preferences and values palpable at all levels of the culture industry can be so nation-specific, even when the two nations in question share an official language – and what are the consequences of such distinctions?

So here I am, in Linz, where common sense dictates that the programme for a city's year as European Capital of Culture take said city into account, with all of its traditional strengths and glaring peccadilloes, its desires and objectives; and hence

such a programme will necessarily proceed from an attempt to read and comprehend that city's urban fabric. This means in turn that its *culture* must be understood as broadly as possible, and compared with that of other cities. Needless to say, this is much easier said than done. After all, such an assessment is only partially based on hard facts, and must depend upon a range of soft factors in its identification of things like a city's urban potential, its affective climate, and its cognitive patterns.



But what if I experience Linz differently than its inhabitants do, because I happen to be Swiss? Because I bring different criteria to bear, different typologies, different expectations, as I try to find my bearings in an urban society whose strangeness is revealed only gradually, on second glance, beneath the surface of the ostensibly familiar? It's as if a programme of events devoted to Europe were being devised obliquely, through the back door, as it were – by way of countries like Norway, Turkey and Switzerland, whose European status is undeniable but which for one reason or another are not members of the European Union.

In any case, it is certainly European differences that frame my life at the moment. Austria is not Japan – for all that its

code of etiquette and predilection for indirect communication are surprisingly reminiscent of the Far East – and as a result I am hardly suffering the sort of culture shock I had once thought to prepare for as a student of ethnology. Rather, it is precisely the microscopic nature of Austrian difference that is the rub, its potential for bewildering deviation from my Swiss norm, coupled with a constant need for reassurance.

As a result, my work calls for prudent empathy if I am to get the best possible return on the outsider's perspective, with its penchant for experiencing the other as Other and thus constantly subjecting its own position to critical scrutiny. This means neither downplaying nor dramatizing the crucial perception of cultural difference, but instead incorporating a healthy dose of it into each and every assessment of reality. If you take intercultural stumbling blocks and inconcinnities seriously, after all, you stand to make a far greater impact than many an international convention of specialists. For myself, I would like to see an extended discussion of what Linz's year as European Capital of Culture could have to offer for the everyday life of medium-sized towns in, say, Estonia or Portugal. Because this will inevitably lead to a humanist perspective on the uses of culture, and because it is the only way to turn differences into cultural capital, for the good of all concerned.

Martin Heller (Heller Enterprises) is an independent exhibition curator, author and cultural entrepreneur based in Zurich. He is currently serving as Artistic Director of *Linz 2009 European Capital of Culture*. From 1998 to 2003 he was Artistic Director of Expo.02, the Swiss national exhibition.

Translated from the German by Rafaël Newman

EXTRA EUROPA SWITZERLAND
Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, joins Linz09 in presenting contemporary culture from Switzerland, thus enhancing cultural exchange with Linz and Upper Austria. Over 30 projects showcasing music, film, comics, visual arts, architecture, literature, theatre and dance are underway, organized together with Austrian counterparts. A selection of these collaborative projects is also on view in various Swiss cities.
www.prohelvetia.ch/extraeuropa



"Tank" (2006), oil
on canvas by Ta Men



CHINA'S CULTURAL SCENE

How does the Chinese independent documentary film and theatre scene negotiate the twin perils of censorship and the market? What is needed for a cultural exchange between Switzerland and the Kingdom of the Middle? How does Chinese pop music sound? And why is China's contemporary art world in crisis? Seven commentators on China's current cultural scene, from both East and West, tackle these issues.

Claudia Porchet: Ms Wettstein, Pro Helvetia is increasing its presence in Asia, with a branch office established in India and a major project currently underway in China. Why China?

Angela Wettstein: The cultural scene in China is developing at a breathtaking pace, especially as regards fringe venues for art. Flourishing and incredibly dynamic work is being done in all disciplines, and the Chinese cultural scene is interested in experimentation and new art forms. Intensifying our cultural ties to China will mean a great asset for both Switzerland and China. We would like to establish networks and support exchange between institutions in both countries, such as academies, cultural organizations and festivals, and to do so as equals. Part of Pro Helvetia's foreign policy consists of expanding its commitment to Asia. This began with the Swiss Contemporary Arts in Japan programme, followed by a branch office opening in New Delhi in 2007. If the collaboration with our Chinese partners is successful we will be opening a local liaison office there too.

How does Pro Helvetia approach a completely different culture such as that of China?

To start with we conduct careful research, and cooperate with specialists and local partners. We have to take differences in communication style into account. In Switzerland we communicate differently – in a more direct, structured and business-like manner, proceeding step by step. In China communication might be termed “spiral”: a subject is identified and steps are taken, but you are forever returning to the questions you asked at the outset. It's like a hike in the mountains I took with some Chinese people. While I spent the whole time envisaging the destination in the form of the next restaurant, the Chinese were constantly looking back and discussing the route that they had already covered. Such differences make it difficult to draw up contracts, among other things, because even after a

“A great asset for both China and Switzerland”

Swiss Chinese Cultural Explorations, Pro Helvetia's cultural programme, opened in October 2008 in Shanghai with Heinz Spoerli's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and a series of Sino-Swiss cultural projects have since followed. Angela Wettstein, Pro Helvetia's project leader, talks about the rewards and difficulties of cultural exchanges with the Middle Kingdom.

Interview: Claudia Porchet

contract has been signed you keep revisiting its preconditions. Contracts are less binding than they are for us – more important are personal contacts, or *quanxi*.

What is the relationship like between Pro Helvetia and the Chinese authorities? With whom do you actually collaborate?

On the one hand we work together with the authorities – a cultural exchange would not be possible otherwise. All cultural events and projects require official approval: for example, an exhibition at the National Museum of China would be under the control of the Ministry of Culture. On the other hand, we also work together with private alternative cultural organizers. These are very important partners for us,

We would like to establish networks and support exchange between institutions in both countries, such as academies, cultural organizations and festivals.

since collaborating with them allows significant scope for development. Because we believe that this sort of direct dialogue has a beneficial effect on the democratization process, we decided to continue our commitment to China even after the criticism levelled at the country in the summer of 2008.

Do you meet with any difficulties in your project work in China, such as censorship?

Apart from the approval procedures I've already mentioned, which are quite laborious, each project is subject to the question of feasibility and censorship. For example, it is not possible to appear naked on stage in China, nor to present scenes with explicitly sexual content. In addition, there are other organizational obstacles: a visa must be obtained for every entry into China, which is a time-

consuming procedure. Chinese artists coming to Switzerland are also required to have visas, by the way.

How has Pro Helvetia positioned itself on the Chinese cultural scene?

We support projects that Swiss artists and organizers realize directly with partners in China. Under the aegis of its Swiss Chinese Cultural Explorations programme, Pro Helvetia called on Swiss artists and organizers to plan exchange projects with China. Proposals were submitted, but a precondition was an existing invitation from a Chinese partner. From the 117 projects proposed, the jury selected nine that were particularly impressive. A further two dozen projects in the fields of music, dance, theatre, literature, visual art and film will be realized in China and Switzerland by May 2010.

China invests primarily in traditional art. Most Chinese performing artists who create contemporary art receive virtually no support from the state or from foundations. They tend to play various roles, creating art, organizing events or curating exhibitions. While such figures are extremely flexible,

their foreign language skills are often quite limited, so it is vital for Pro Helvetia to work in China with specialists, who serve as liaisons and undertake tasks like translation and networking. We have three Chinese employees in Beijing and Shanghai who perform valuable services in our work with local partners. The extensive knowledge of European culture possessed by our Chinese partners is astonishing. In Chinese schools the study of western classics from the realms of literature, philosophy, art and music is mandatory, whereas here our knowledge of Chinese culture is negligible – which makes our work on the ground all the more interesting.

We want to initiate cultural projects in China for which there is an audience. We also believe that the relationship between the two countries will only endure in the long term if our Chinese partners are committed – financially as well as culturally.

The China programme has a budget of three million Swiss francs. What can you do with that kind of money?

Such a budget does not allow us to support projects in the remotest corners of China, nor is it our intention to do so. By way of comparison, France commits thirty million euros to its cultural programme in China. For our part, we concentrate on the leading cultural centres: the cultural capital Beijing for one, as well as its rival Shanghai, which is more influenced by Europe and the American east coast, and thus more international and open. The two cities are developing culturally at a great pace, and provide a fertile ground for intensive dialogue between artists from both countries. Former industrial zones are being converted into large cultural areas where, as of recently, streets are lined with cafes, galleries and shops. It is actually nice to take a stroll in such places now, what with culture and commerce rapidly taking root. Projects are also scheduled in ten to fifteen other Chinese cities. In order to optimize our own presence there, we are collaborating with Presence Switzerland and the Swiss Embassy in Beijing, as well as with a host of other partners in China.

Which projects have already been launched?

For one thing, Switzerland was the main partner in the exhibition *Synthetic Times – Media Art China 2008*, which took place at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in the summer of 2008. The exhibition featured both established and upcoming artists from over thirty countries. Pro Helvetia supported four Swiss productions in the field of new media.

Another experiment was a co-production at the Grand Theatre in Shanghai last November: Heinz Spoerli rehearsed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* together with the Zurich Ballet, Chinese actors, and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. Despite a lengthy preparation, however, they actually rehearsed together for just three days. The combination of perfectly staged neo-classical dance, Chinese actors, and the music of Mendelssohn and Philip Glass, all presented on a gigantic stage set, was fascinating. It went down very well with Chinese audiences, and the performances were sold out.

What is the main focus of the China programme?

We support selected music and theatre projects that faculty members from Swiss art schools develop in collaboration with Chinese academies. For example, there is an exchange between music ensembles in which Chinese and Swiss musicians are commissioned to write new compositions for performance in both countries. What's more, the independent theatre group Capri Connection is planning a project with Chinese artists that deals with the traditional art of healing – and its associated rituals – in Emmental and Qingdao.

Another emphasis is on the electronic arts, the interface between art and technology. One project arising from this synthesis is Switch On, which was launched in Shanghai in December 2008. The core of the project is a substantial crossover programme – from audiovisual performance to electronic music – that aims to support exchange between artists from Switzerland and China, and to give the wider public an insight into

changing music scenes and club culture. A key partner in the field of electronic art is swissnex shanghai, the branch office of the State Secretariat for Education and Research – a network spanning technology and science. Important synergies are emerging from the fruitful collaboration between Pro Helvetia and swissnex.

Our Chinese partners show great interest in a collaboration with Switzerland, and in the coming year we will be presenting parts of the programme in Switzerland as well. So it promises to be pretty exciting!

Swiss Chinese Cultural Explorations, Pro Helvetia's cultural programme with China: www.prohelvetia.ch/china0810

Angela Wettstein has been project leader for Pro Helvetia's international programmes since 2003. She is a trained cultural mediator.

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Translated from the German by Bill Gilonis

Caochangdi (or CCD) Workstation, on Beijing's Fifth Ring Road next to the small village of Caochangdi, is located some eight kilometres from the city's center. Amid China's present rapid development, Caochangdi may thus be considered a liminal space between the urban and the rural. Those who live in the village have long since left their ploughs, opting instead to rent their land to outsiders, either as housing for migrant workers or gallery and studio space for artists. These two disparate populations now commingle in the environs of Caochangdi, from whose main street the new expressway to Beijing Capital Airport is clearly visible, as are the cars that roar along it day and night. The little village serves as a metonym of the capital in its current phase of rapid development.

This article treats CCD Workstation as a case study of independent cultural production in China. By examining the relationship between one independent arts space and the documentaries and performance art it produces, we may better understand the general trends in independent art production in today's China.

The pressures of censorship and the market

Our story begins in the early 1990s, the era in which China's independent documentary and theatre movements were born. A group of artists, unsatisfied with the restrictions placed on their work, took their first steps towards producing art outside of television stations, film studios and any other government-sponsored organizations. They made intermittent appearances at bars, during student activities at various universities, or in the form of "insider screenings" in regular theatres, non-ticketed events in line with government regulations. Besides such venues, the only other exposure such artists could hope for was at international film, art, or theatre and dance festivals.

When China entered the twenty-first century, its rapid economic development created a commercialized society in which strict cultural policies began to loosen. However, independent art production still

China's CCD Workstation: A New Environment for Independent Cultural Production and Dialogue

China's independent documentary film and performance art scene, still in its infancy, is struggling with censorship and commercialism. Not far from the boomtown of Beijing, the independent artist Wu Wenguang has created a place where documentary filmmakers and performance artists can do their work, free from official constraints and as part of an international network.

By Wu Wenguang

lacked funding, patronage and overall support. The reform era also ushered in an intensely materialistic culture, making these early independent artists that much more aware of their isolation and otherness. Furthermore, not only were television stations, cinemas and theatres continuing to turn down their independent, non-commercial work, the bars that were willing to screen their films were going bankrupt while theatres demanded exorbitant fees for any chance to perform on their stages. Those who persisted in creating documentaries and performance art by independent means were thus faced with a painful predicament: either conform to the needs of television stations and theatres for propaganda and commercial products, or resign themselves to the rounds of the international film and performance art festivals.

So the artists' native Chinese audience had all but disappeared, their relationship with the rest of society had been severed, and their creative resources were on the wane. As China moved into its current phase of modernization, its independent documentary filmmakers and performance artists found themselves in a crisis, trapped between the official system and the market, barely able to survive, let alone develop their craft.

CCD Workstation – a place for independent artists

I began shooting documentaries in 1988, which makes me China's first independent documentary filmmaker. In the early 1990s I joined forces with the choreographer Wen Hui to launch China's first independent performance art group, Living Dance Studio. My own personal experience thus exemplifies that of other artists who persevered in producing independent work. Rather than simply bury our heads in the sand of our own work, we also had to support the environment that allowed us to continue developing our independent documentary and performance art, which in practical terms meant actively constructing art spaces and forming networks with like-minded independent artists, whether our age or younger, so as to foster our own art and ensure our voices could be heard.

We began construction of CCD Workstation in 2005 guided by these goals. Though Wen Hui and I originally built the studio to serve as our personal workspace for documentary production and performance art, we also opened our doors to a host of public activities, including collaborations with foreign artists and art agencies, documentary and performance art workshops, lectures and art festivals. We hoped to provide a space in which fellow travellers could provide each other with mutual support and dialogue.

CCD Workstation's main annual events have been the May Festival and the Crossing Festival, the latter held in October. Both festivals feature independent documentary and performance art activities running simultaneously, and have to date

allowed CCD to exhibit over one hundred independent documentaries, multiple performance art pieces by groups such as Paper Tiger and Zuhe Niao, as well as performances by fledgling groups from more than ten different cities, including Beijing, Jinan and Guangzhou. CCD also oversees related funding and development projects, among them the Villager Documentary Project, launched in 2005, which invited ten farmers from nine different Chinese provinces to participate. The original project, funded by a joint European Union and Chinese government Village Governance Training Programme, asked the villagers to film political processes in their respective villages. This resulted in raw and provocative footage offering insight into village elections, land division issues, tourist industries in Tibetan regions and the newly urbanized generation's alienation from its rural hometowns, in addition to charming sequences in which the new digital video technology is introduced to China's rural citizens.

Upon completion of the EU project, I wanted the villagers to continue to express themselves through documentary films, and invited them to do so under the aegis of CCD. Four of the original villagers took me up on my offer and have since completed a total of eight feature-length documentaries. For example, Wang Wei focusses largely on disputes arising from corrupt village leadership, while Shao Yuzhen films the television crews frequenting her village, and thus creates a subtle satire.

Aside from the Villager Documentary Project, we also have the Young Documen-

**In a vast nation like China,
an independent workstation
can only hope to make a
tiny mark. We want to offer
a glimmer of hope...**

tary Filmmaker Training Project, begun in 2006, in which over 120 young filmmakers from all over the country have participated by producing their first independent documentaries. In terms of performance, the Young Choreographers Project began in 2006 and has continued for three years now, with 30 young choreographers having received funding and opportunities to premiere their pieces here.

With a video camera to the village physician

These activities and funding projects all occur within the context of an expanding international dialogue. Several European cultural institutions and art festivals (such as Holland's Borneoco, Germany's Goethe Institute and Switzerland's Swiss Films and Pro Helvetia) have with their support and funding allowed us to invite European performance artists and filmmakers to perform their pieces, screen their documentaries, and even direct workshops or give lectures. Swiss director Peter Liechti, for example, hosted our most successful workshop to date at the last Crossing Festival, held in October of 2008, with the support of Swiss Films. Ten young Chinese filmmakers participated by showing rough cuts of their newest films, many of them debuts. Several of the films shown in this workshop enraptured audiences with their subject matter, conceptual innovation and interesting point of view. Song Tian's *Flowers* presented children at a holiday camp where discipline is meted out together with a healthy dose of nationalism. Her opening sequence, a black screen with a soundtrack of a child reading a hyper-disciplinary "pep talk" to her fellow students, juxtaposed contemporary post-socialist youth with old-school ideology. Wang Hongjun, meanwhile, set up a camera in the small health clinic in his village to film *One Hundred Patients of Dr. Jia*. One by one, patients with diseases

ranging from the common cold to cancer file in to see the cigarette-wielding Dr. Jia; the film's ingenuity lies in the fact that Wang Hongjun's angle remains unchanged throughout the sequence. Ethical issues aside, *One Hundred Patients of Dr. Jia* reads the malaise of an entire society through the illnesses suffered by the patients of its title. Wang Hongjun was subsequently invited by Shenzhen's OCT Art Museum to screen his film at its Documentary Forum, held in December of 2008.

The films screened at or funded by CCD are all independently produced by the filmmakers themselves, and reflect their own experiences in today's society. Their subject matter touches on everything from the struggles of migrant workers in the city to the plight of the unemployed and the fate of homosexuals in China. And although these films have no greater a chance than they did before to be broadcast or screened in the mainstream media, CCD is able to provide their creators with a venue to present their work, as well as a place for an engaged audience to experience and discuss these forms of cultural production.

In this vast nation, an independent space such as this, as well as the independent art and dialogue it produces, can only hope to make a tiny mark. It is, however, our intention to offer a glimmer of hope, to encourage the growth of other such spaces and forms of art production, and in turn to foster a new environment for independent cultural production and dialogue. And perhaps, as China continues to travel down its current expressway, we may be able to construct our own independent byway.

Wu Wenguang is an independent documentary filmmaker, author and producer of dance performances. Born in 1956 in Yunnan, China, he has lived in Beijing since 1988.

This article can be found in Chinese on Pro Helvetia's China website:
www.prohelvetia.cn

Translated from the Chinese by Marilyn Ong



Chinese farmers make their first documentary films
and offer insight into political processes in their villages.
Photo: Su Ming



"Mah Jong" (2007),
photograph by Ta Men



Chinese contemporary art is in danger. This is not idle speculation but rather inescapable fact. Its decline, which seemed to have taken place overnight, has actually been a long time coming. The recent collapse of the financial markets has given the fall a sense of abruptness; and yet the inner logic of Chinese contemporary art's development has long been problematic. The markets boom in recent years, prior to this unexpected drop, had appeared to be an upward spiral, but little care was taken to ensure that artistic practices and theoretical discussions were enjoying equal attention, resources and appreciation. As many artists and dealers were thriving on what felt like an endless free ride, critics of an art system over-dependent on money were predicting the coming of a harsher season. Now that the party is over, can we look into the darkness with courage and hope?

Stimulating artistic experiments in the 1980s

Chinese contemporary art enjoyed a resounding start in the late 1970s. On the heels of the Cultural Revolution, artists were eager to find their own voices and recover their aesthetic senses without having to conform to the monotonous ideology of the ruling party. It was an age in which the decision to paint a still life, a landscape or a domestic scene was a choice of political moment. The desire for open expressions of emotion and opinion was ultimately unstoppable, manifest in passionate campaigns launched by the artists to publicly display their works and communicate with the general public.

These fervent calls for diversity and freedom of artistic and intellectual expression continued to echo into the 1980s, a decade widely considered to have ushered in China's most recent cultural renaissance. Thanks to the rapid recovery and growing dynamism of intellectual life in their country, Chinese people once again were exposed to an abundant (if fragmented) flow of information and ideas from the West within a short period of time, after years spent in isolation from the outside

Playtime Is Back

In today's post-boom Chinese art world, a young generation of conceptual artists are busy inventing a range of practices that move beyond the socio-political work conventionally recognized and promoted by the mainstream system, and thus breathing new life into China's art scene.

By Carol Yinghua Lu

world. There was a strong compulsion felt among intellectuals to reflect on China's recent history and immediate reality from the vantage point of disjointed hearsay and a distorted reception of Western artistic movements, which, combined with specific local knowledge and ways of thinking, gave rise to a diversifying and dynamic art scene. Chinese artists enthusiastically embraced foreign ideas and art forms, and relentlessly and uninhibitedly copied them in an effort to create their own. It was a time of stimulating artistic experimentation and discourse, of naiveté and genuine fascination.

Many key contemporary Chinese artworks were created during the 1980s and

early 1990s, and many pivotal critical essays were composed. Artists came together in groups (among the best known are Xiamen Dada in Xiamen, the Pool Society in Hangzhou, and the Measurement Group in Beijing) for animated exchanges and to organize exhibitions, conferences and publications. Shows took place in outlandish places, from the outskirts of cities to the artists' own apartments. While reality provided neither comfort nor the conditions necessary for artistic events, the urge to make things happen was greater than ever.

Profit opens doors in the 1990s

The June 4th Student Movement in 1989 brought the liberal atmosphere and intellectual openness to an abrupt close at the end of the decade, and China entered a phase in which the emphasis was placed on monetary matters and pragmatism rather than intellectual endeavour. Chinese contemporary art faced the dire reality of a marginalized and even unlawful status, largely excluded from the official exhibition venues. Artists continued to experiment and to engage conceptually with reality while simultaneously fighting for resources and support to make and exhibit their art, and the struggle for legitimacy and government recognition took centre stage. And as usual in China, the door opener during this phase was profit. When a market began to take shape for Chinese contemporary art in the West in the latter years of the 1990s, the government resolved to make peace with contemporary art within its own borders while at the same time bending it to its ideological exigencies.

In 2000 Chinese contemporary art entered a transitory period, one that continues to this day. Its structure now comprises a steadily growing network of local and international galleries, museums, auction houses, art magazines, art fairs and biennales. Still suffering from a comparative ignorance of the art history of the West and, more importantly, of their own country, a body of knowledge that had suffered severely during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese artists are currently caught between the urgent call to carve out their own



Shooting *Panda Express* by Fang Lu.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

unique artistic language and the implacable call of the art market to meet its particular demands. In the process they are gradually writing a new chapter in Chinese art history, one in which the conflicts faced by contemporary Chinese artists are very much in evidence.

The past decade of market-driven growth has made of art a business, and a profitable one at that, and this in turn has rendered it particularly vulnerable to the latest economic meltdown. Now that the soil in which the art world thrived has been laid fallow, the “anything goes” spirit that had animated it during the 1980s may at last return to reclaim the ground for more spontaneous, playful, over-the-top artistic experiments and discourses. The working day has ended: it’s time to play.

A new generation of conceptual artists

Caught up in this revival is a young generation of artists, steadily emerging in the aftermath of the art boom that had been responsible for devaluing all standards for art other than its price at auction. Building on the general growth of faith in an art scene that was also, ironically, a product of this same boom, these young artists can now find satisfaction and intellectual autonomy as they think for themselves and develop a myriad of new practices.

Chinese artists are currently caught between the urgent call to carve out their own unique artistic language and the implacable call of the art market to meet its particular demands.

Like many recent art-school graduates, Fang Lu relocated to Beijing not long ago, unperturbed by the harsh climate of the north and drawn by the capital’s great energy. The Beijing art scene is one of China’s most developed, boasting the largest pool of artists from all regions of the country, as well as galleries worthy of the name and a dynamic salon culture. While studying graphic design as an undergrad in the USA, Fang Lu saw her very first contemporary art show at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, an institution affiliated with MoMA. She was struck by the display of TVs and sprawling cables in

a darkened room, amazed more by the way the art was shown than by its content. The visit was enormously fruitful for the young artist, stretching a grasp of art rooted in traditional practice as exemplified in her own family, and moved her to a life as an artist instead of the designer she had first set out to become. She earned a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in new genres (video and performance) at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2007 before returning home to pursue her artistic career.

Working mainly in video, Fang infuses her art with a passion for media and the everyday by remaking news stories and quotidian scenarios with subtle wit, as well as conceptual twists playing on video’s status as a documentary tool accessible to all. *Panda Express* (2007) is based on US reports of the Chinese practice of showing pandas videos of their species mating, with an eye to increasing their population. Fang filmed two female actors in panda costumes performing scenes of mating, which she then posted on YouTube as a video clip. By thus using the democratic and open system of the internet, Fang was able to put her own version of the story into mass circulation.

Challenging the authorities, demythologizing status and renown

Like Fang Lu, many artists are thinking deeply about the essence of artistic media and production as well as of the art industry. Although he is working towards an MFA at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, whose sculpture department offers the school’s most rigorous training in the socialist-realist tradition, Lu Zhengyuan constantly challenges institutional authority in an effort to demythologize status and renown. For his latest conceptual painting series, “XXX” (2008), he asked an untrained assistant to “copy” iconic artists such as Cai Guoqiang, Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi, Damien Hirst and Andy Warhol using printed reproductions of their works, and thus create paintings in their styles based on his own conception and projections. The unnamed assistant’s versions are shown next to a description of the particular artist’s practice, as quoted from a periodical.

Upon his graduation in 2000, Liang Shuo, another alumnus of the CAFA’s sculpture department, received a great deal of

attention for his realist sculptures of migrant workers in Chinese cities. Between 2002 and 2004 he was artist in residence at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, an experience that importantly shaped his subsequent work. Since then, he has focused his thinking for the most part on the materials and processes of artistic production. In an ongoing project entitled “What Thing” (2006-2008), he picks a random object or sculpture, immerses it in wet clay, and removes it, leaving only its imprint. He then makes a cast of the hollow, which he terms “the negative space”, and uses it in turn to produce a sculpture of this “nonexistence”.

Merely citing examples of the work of such young artists scarcely gives a complete picture of the lively and self-motivated scene just beginning to emerge in China. Many experiments are only now unfolding, and a wide range of discussions have only just begun. Young artists who grew up in a well-supplied, well-informed artistic climate, constantly engaged with the outer world, are now willing themselves to work, to think, to participate and to share, driven by a sense of urgency and the desire to continue making art, albeit within their own practical constraints. There is no time to lose. It’s time to play.

Carol Lu is a contributing editor at *frieze* magazine and a curator and art critic based in Beijing.

Foodscape – A Culinary Journey Through China

Excerpts from the diary of Arno Camenisch

The train is twelve minutes late arriving in Biel. It is November 30, 2008. The carriages are packed, the luggage racks crammed full. Above the seats runs a quotation from Max Frisch: "The precondition of tolerance is the recognition that our thinking is always conditional." Frisch's name will crop up again, in meetings with Chinese authors. Dürrenmatt will be mentioned too; but unlike with Frisch, his name will be greeted with a nod. The train departs.

*

Food is served and I see on the monitor that we are flying over Poland. With me are Odile Cornuz, Vanni Bianconi and Peter Weber, all three authors, and Margrit Manz, the project organizer. The artist Martin Zeller awaits us in Hong Kong. The potatoes are delicious, and the meal is washed down with coffee and red wine. We are in China to take part in an exchange with Chinese writers, and gain a closer insight into Chinese culture via the medium of food. In two weeks' time, when I sit in the train on my way back to Biel, I will have some idea of what China is all about, beyond the fact that it looks like a chicken on the map of the world. This is my first trip to China – well, my second, to be exact. Eight years ago I spent thirty hours in Hong Kong.

*

Descending towards Hong Kong. My mind goes back eight years to the first time I arrived here. In those days, I knew how to milk a cow and sharpen a scythe. I knew how hot milk had to be before the rennet was added, how to strike a block of wood with a mallet in order to split it. I knew how to construct a centrifuge and I knew that if you put your finger in it, it would tear off your hand. I didn't know any English yet.

*

Hong Kong stands like a goose amidst the hills by the sea. Its skyscrapers are innumerable and tall. Its crowning glory is the harbour, with its cranes and iron structures like oversized chairs lined up as if awaiting the giants of this world, biding their time behind the hills until twilight when, as the tourists stroll through the busy streets, dazzled by the neon lights and the multiplicity of odours, they will emerge, take up position on their chairs and gaze out at the seascape, occasionally glancing at each other and raising their eyebrows.

English builds bridges. At our later meetings we will need translators. Yet despite the common language there remains a grey area, between what we could say in our mother tongue and what we can manage in a foreign language. The Swiss authors who have travelled with us converse in a mix of languages that moves from French to Spanish, into Italian or German, Swiss German and English. Rumantsch is only of use when I want to talk to myself.

*

The foodscape laid out on the turntable before me appears baffling and mysterious, and I can only begin to imagine how I will

**Goose tongues and chicken's
feet, frogs with snake
essence, shark fins, roasted
pig's ears, black eggs.
I stick to rice...**

cope with it. Fish stomachs tied together in bundles, pieces of eel reminiscent of *The Tin Drum*, goose tongues and chicken's feet, frogs with snake essence, shark fins, roasted pig's ears, black eggs. I stick to the rice, taking some each time the bowl passes in front of me, and scribble in my notebook that rice is a gustatory interface, a point of contact. I wash it down with tea, large quantities of tea. Occasionally I drop my chopsticks on the table. I have a fork in my pocket.

*

In my hotel room I read poems by Leung Ping-Kwan – "Strange Tales of Birds and Flowers"; note down a sentence of Peter Weber's ("A place becomes visible in another"); reflect on concentration, overlaying and alienation, write the word "identity" in my notebook, turn the book round and look at the word upside down. In my mind's eye, I recall the sight of the old man in a shop down an alleyway calmly removing a

cobra from a wooden drawer in his sideboard, cutting off the tip of its tail and placing the creature in a fabric bag, explaining "Grasp the snake at its seventh vertebra. That's where the heart is and that's how you paralyse it."

*

We leave Hong Kong on the morning of December 6 after further meetings at the hotel school and film school, where the chief topic of discussion is food in film from the early days through to Ang Lee. My mind is full of impressions, but I still do not really feel I have grasped the essence of the city in this short time. Much seems to me unduly universal, as if conforming to an unspoken standard. A kind of fusion, like the concept of fusion cuisine that was brought up at our meeting in the hotel school. In the taxi on my way to the bus terminal, I reflect that Hong Kong used to have 200 newspapers and now has only two. I also think about a typical Hong Kong drink: coffee mixed with tea and drunk with sugar.

*

Mainland China. The border is behind us; Shenzhen, our next destination, lies ahead. Our taxi follows the Pearl River inland. The Pearl River is a brown snake, and Hong Kong is its head. The silhouettes of Shenzhen's tower blocks rise up above the horizon.

*

On a restaurant terrace. Beside me sits a woman wearing spectacles without lenses. It is cool. Shenzhen is a city that didn't even exist thirty years ago. Today, fourteen million people crowd its streets. Over bridges, through buildings, across squares, around the corners of houses, across roads, until after several hours we reach the vast government square; I feel as tired as if I had been lugging whole sides of pork through the city, and notice that the stream of humanity has dried up, that the square is empty and swept clean, that the government building looking out onto it appears immense, like an oversized switchboard. I realise that it has no windows, and I feel as if a brick would serve me just as well as my brain.

*

December 8, Shenzhen bus terminal. The voice of the woman making the announcements is as monotonous as if generated by a computer. A notice hangs in the



WC: "Save paper, save environment." I think of the meetings with theatrical folk, of stage lighting and blocking diagrams. The food in Shenzhen was spicy and good, and I'm starting to appreciate Chinese cuisine.

*

We pass through landscapes dotted with factories. Between them are plots of land containing barracks with ponds and ducks. The television in the bus is showing a disaster movie. Two hours later, as the afternoon draws to a close, we arrive in Guangzhou: lots of traffic, lots of noise. In the hotel foyer stands a Christmas tree with packages of all colours around its base. The staff are wearing Santa Claus hats. American Christmas songs are playing on an endless loop. I try to ignore them. I might as well try to herd elephants up the steps.

*

We dine at the home of the Swiss consul in Guangzhou with guests from the artistic community. It is difficult to communicate with the writers and the photographer, and we are forced to rely on a translator. There is an impressive view of the Pearl River and the city from the consul's apart-

The Pearl River is a brown snake, and Hong Kong is its head.

ment. The food is Chinese and western European, and is served with Chinese and Italian wine.

*

On the morning of December 11 we depart for Macau. On the ground in front of the bus terminal lies a poker card. It is the king of clubs. A motorcyclist overtakes the bus. He isn't wearing a helmet and he's barefoot.

*

In the centre of Macau we stand before a Portuguese façade. It is crumbling, and is illuminated as soon as the sun goes down. It commands a view of the coastline, winding honey-yellow around the peninsula. Amid the warm blocks stands the Grand Lisboa, which looks like a cornflower. As night falls, the cornflower catches fire and attracts myriad insects to the roulette tables, where no rake is used to collect the chips, where there is no "Rien ne va

plus," and where the clocks have no hands. "You are your own king, you are your own camel."

*

Back in Hong Kong, the city seems to me like an old friend. Here ends our journey through the Pearl River Delta, which is roughly the size of Switzerland, where various languages are spoken and the local colour makes the difference. China through food. Assimilating culture. Food as a way of preserving tradition. I think of the link in the brain between memory and the sense of taste.

*

Our flight back to Switzerland leaves in the evening. I write four postcards, buy a music box for my daughter, and acquire a decorated espresso spoon for my wife. I still have my fork in my pocket. I haven't used it. Our last meal together is excellent. I note that the more I see and think I know, the more I move away from what is familiar to me. I've forgotten how to construct a centrifuge; all I can remember is what happens if I put my finger in it.

www.food-scape.net

In April 2009, a group of Chinese writers will be making a literary and culinary study trip to Switzerland. Autumn sees the publication of a joint anthology including both texts and pictures.

Arno Camenisch is a student at the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel, where he also lives. His story *Sez Ner* will be published in German and Rumantsch by Urs Engeler Editor in May 2009.

Translated from the German by Geoffrey Spearing



Food in China:
A riddle wrapped in
a mystery...
Photo: Martin Zeller





"Family" (2007),
oil on canvas by Ta Men

Chinese popular music has always been directly affected by politics, the economy, and changes in life-style. Each turn and development in the music scene during the period under review can be seen as a reflection of its times. During the nineties I worked for ten years in broadcasting, compiling and hosting programmes of rock 'n' roll, jazz and avant-garde music. This was not really my profession: the reason I kept it up for such a long time was because, in those years, broadcasting rock 'n' roll and avant-garde music had an emancipatory function. Nowadays, however, following the rapid development of the internet and the change in mentalities, contemporary popular music has become totally commercialized and tends to serve as nothing but light entertainment.

Influences from Europe, America, Hong Kong and Taiwan

It was in Shanghai, China's vibrant international metropolis, that Chinese popular music originated, where as far back as the thirties and forties of the last century, Chinese popular music began to thrive in public dance halls. No new impulses were to reach China until Deng Xiaoping's political opening in the early 1980s, when Shanghai was one of the first cities in the People's Republic of China to begin making pop music from Europe and America, as well as from Hong Kong and Taiwan, accessible to the general public. All of a sudden – it must have been around 1980 – streets all over China seemed to be full of trendy young people listening to Teresa Teng, Taiwan's queen of pop, on their portable cassette players. Soon afterwards, China released Li Guyi's "Nostalgia". But it was in those years, too, that many pop singers (including Li Guyi himself) were criticized for their "decadent" style, and that a book entitled *How to Recognize Decadent Music* was published. It is apparent that in the early years of China's reform policy, its domestic pop music continued to meet resistance from left-wing ideologues.

At approximately the same time, a number of radical young artists and writers began to take European and American pop stars, especially rock stars, as their models. And that would be the case for a

Pop Music: The Pulse of a Nation

Once upon a time, foreign influences on China's pop and rock music were abundant and fruitful, and Chinese rock was a horde of rebellious energy. Now, says Chinese music critic Sun Mengjin, with the spread of the internet and TV casting shows, the mainstream and the dictates of the market have commenced their triumph train in the Kingdom of the Middle as well. A sobering spectacle.

By Sun Mengjin

long time afterwards: whereas pop music from Hong Kong and Taiwan appealed to the general public, European and American rock was heaven to only the few.

The first foreign rock artists to be introduced to China were The Beatles, Elvis Presley (known in Chinese as the "Cat King") and The Doors, and in the 1980s much of the music broadcast on radio was western pop. Nevertheless, rock remained taboo, and the first Beatles songs to be broadcast were at first smuggled into pop programmes.

Chinese rock music: counterculture from the underground

There had been an underground music scene in China for a long time, but in the 1980s and 1990s rock bands sprang up all across the country, and particularly in Beijing. According to the domestic rock community, therefore, today's musicians

are already China's fifth or sixth generation of artists. Nevertheless, only very few groups, among them Cui Jian (recognized as the father of Chinese rock), Tang Dynasty (Tang Chao) and Black Panther (Hei Bao), have had any impact on the general public.

For the first twenty years of its existence, Chinese rock was positively weighed down by its own seditious ideas, an oppositional attitude that kept it out of the musical mainstream. For much of that period, rock musicians and avant-garde artists existed side by side in the same underground situation. While European and American rock had long since entered the cultural mainstream, Chinese rock cleaved to its rebellious stance. Under the constant pressure of the state censors, who demanded political correctness (as they still do), Chinese rock became a sounding board for the existential and intellectual crises, the anger and self-doubt, the despair and resignation that the

nation's musicians had been storing up for so long.

As China moved from a planned economy to the market system and saw its values fundamentally overturned, Chinese rock musicians of the founding generation and their epigones gradually disappeared from view. Those who have managed to survive to the present day while maintaining their high standards are as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorns.

The founder and pioneer of Chinese rock was Cui Jian. In 1989 he released his album *Rock for the New Long March* (Xin Changzheng lushang de yaogun) in accordance with the official procedure, followed by *Solution* (Jiejue) in 1991. Later, the following caused a furore among a small but dedicated fan community: Tangchao's *A Dream Return to the Tang Dynasty* (Meng hui Tangchao), the compilation albums *Chinese Fire 1* (Zhongguo huo 1) and *Beijing Rock 1* (Beijing yaogun 1), as well as several albums released in the mid-nineties by Zhang Chu, Dou Wei or He Yong.

While the always clear-headed Cui Jian was to continue on stage, it was not long before the other rock musicians fell into an unprecedented decline and seemed to have

While European and American rock had long since entered the cultural mainstream, Chinese rock cleaved to its rebellious stance.

nothing more to say. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, the industrialization of pop-music production had still not really got underway and the apparently flourishing music wave of the late nineties turned out to be nothing but a bubble on the market, which also affected the already marginalized rock scene. Secondly, certain rock producers tried to create “superstars” at special events, but the short-lived glory followed inevitably by indifference and loneliness was something most rock musicians could not cope with. But in his most recent CD, Cui Jian makes use of electronic effects and other newfangled musical gimmicks, thus proving that “the father of Chinese rock,” at least, has never left history’s stage.

Dakou CDs – recycling as inspiration for the underground scene

Before the spread of the internet, the greatest inspirers of Chinese pop music, particularly of rock, were the so-called *dakou* (“cut hole”) CDs that streamed into China from abroad. These audio products had been legally produced by foreign companies and shipped to China as junk to be recycled,

Under the constant pressure of the state censors, Chinese rock became a sounding board for existential and intellectual crises.

punched to render them unusable for broadcasting, but still playable nonetheless. Chinese music lovers collected them, and thus had their first experience of foreign music not with bootleg editions but with *dakou* CDs. Since the import of music products in the regular way was subject to strict controls and legal music products were far beyond the means of Chinese music fans, *dakou* recordings paved the way for the development of Chinese underground culture, and the many musicians, critics and fans who grew up under their influence came to be known as the *Dakou* Generation. They combined their distinctive Chinese experience with Western musical forms to create a series of outstanding works, among them *Confucius Says* (Zi Yue) and *Beautiful Pharmacy* (Meihao Yaodian), to mention only two. At the same time a batch of experimental musicians emerged, such as Li Jianhong and Zhou Pei.

Since the dawn of the 21st century, new trends in Chinese pop music, and rock in particular, are causing concern, as independent ideas and positions have become a thing of the past with the popularization of the internet and the rise of audience-chosen superstar culture. The dearth of meaningful topics, the lack of commitment, the uniformity of musical styles and the pursuit of instant fame have made it possible for a mindless internet ditty like “Mice love rice” (Laoshu ai dami) to become a hit all over China, and where the only musical events are Super Girl contests. The vogue for talent contests is certainly a by-product of China’s rapid economic expansion and might possibly give pop music a new lease of life during its long decline and losing battle on the marketplace; but it is also the phony boom of a bubble economy. As for hitherto marginalized musical styles such as rock and avant-garde, the unprecedented attention of pop-music producers has only served to hurry its demise.

At present Chinese pop music seems to be flourishing thanks to the pretty faces of a batch of young idols; what is lacking is original music that might endure the test of time. Mawkishness and hedonism even permeate the sounds of many underground rock bands – just one of the effects of globalized aesthetic trends. An era characterized by real ideas has definitely come to an end. And just like all of us who are faced with today’s economic crisis, our musicians have no idea what they can do to put the world back in order.

Audio samples on the internet:
www.myspace.com/cuijian
www.myspace.com/lijianhong

Sun Mengjiin is a music and film critic and a poet. He lives in Shanghai and works as programme director for art at Shanghai Eastern TV.

This article can be found in Chinese, along with additional music links, on Pro Helvetia’s China website: www.prohelvetia.cn

Translated from the Chinese by Helen Walliman



Cui Jian: The father of Chinese rock.
 Photo: Keystone

In the People's Republic of China, as in all socialist countries, to this day culture enjoys a jealously guarded special status – not just as a tool of propaganda, but also as a symbolic form of the New Life for which the communist party stands. “In reality,” argued Mao in the notorious 1942 speech in Yunnan in which he formulated the party's cultural policy, “there is no such thing as an art that runs parallel to or is independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the overall revolutionary cause of the proletariat or, as Lenin said, the ‘nuts and bolts’ in the overall mechanism of the revolution.” While conceding a difference in practice between political and artistic criteria, Mao argued that the goal must be to merge them: “We demand the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the most accomplished artistic form possible.”

The communist party as artist

The “we” invoked by Mao is the party. In terms of the mission he assigned to it, the party is responsible not only for politics, but also for art and for the creation of the higher level on which politics and art are one. The party is, in other words, itself an artist, bringing art to a new and higher plane. To put it more precisely, it is the true artist that views all other artists as mere subordinates charged with execution of its will.

We need to bear this in mind in order to understand a phenomenon that, for all the cross-pollination with identically named phenomena in western countries, is something distinctly different: China's “culture industry”. The Chinese communist party has, in recent years, adopted this term with increasing frequency and enthusiasm despite its unmistakable connotation of western cultural criticism, and now apparently has no compunction about delegating culture at least partially to the market. This fact cannot simply be explained by the celebrated pragmatism with which China has, since the end of the 1970s, accepted the increasing divergence between theory and practice in the interest of economic success. Culture touches the core of the party's

China's Culture Industry – Between Consumption and Control

What role does culture play in China?

Mark Siemons' analysis identifies a new kind of culture industry, one that interprets the popular will as the will of the consumer, and even markets cultural criticism as an artistic label.

By Mark Siemons

claim to authority, which it has absolutely no desire to give up. Or, to put it another way, it is culture that forces politics to declare itself, and pinpoints the political reforms still required.

How, then, is the ruling party's enduring claim to art and culture to be reconciled with the incalculable and arbitrary aspects of the market? To answer this question, it is useful to return to the “Year Zero” of the status quo, namely the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution did not merely set out to destroy traditional culture: it also intervened profoundly to change the basis of China's communist ideology. The excess of ideological arbitrariness brought forth a nominalism that had little time for old concepts. Yet once pure ideology had been liberated from its framework, it could replace its signifiers at will. A vacuum had been created, which the restored party elite could fill with new content.

Under the newly privileged precept of modernization, it seemed to require only a modest gesture on the part of this elite, a mere sleight of hand, to resolve the resulting contradictions: the party need merely interpret the will of the people as the will of the consumer, of the market, and all the frictions are miraculously eliminated. What

makes this possible is the fact that for the ruling party as artist, the market is just as abstract – and therefore elastic and malleable – a variable as the people had been before it. The pseudo-essentialist concept of the people is replaced by a term of similarly broad scope – but one that concedes from the outset that it is nothing more than relation, artifice and arbitrariness. The perception of reality that underlies marketing, as it goes about arousing needs and creating and propagating brands, is explicitly constructivist: it believes only in the brands, dreams and desires that it has itself created – but does so with a fervour made all the more intense by that very fact. Ironically, therefore, it is the market that prevents the awareness of its contingency from weakening the authority of the communist party. In a sense, the market thus extends its invisible hand to the invisible hand of the state.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that some all-seeing mastermind must have hatched this sophisticated concept fully grown out of its head. Rather, the current programme of China's culture industry is the result of the eventful history of recent decades, having gradually emerged from the interplay of state action and autonomous social energy. Indeed, the confused situation of the 1990s created the very conditions under which it could arise. It became apparent to the government that the contemporary arts, which it had previously viewed with suspicion, could actually be fitted quite neatly into its designs, that the power of traditional iconography is not uncontrollable, but can be harnessed in the name of business and the international culture market. In other words: even if – and indeed precisely because – art was treated as critical in the west, it need not inevitably be a threat to stability, provided its sting had been successfully blunted by the primacy of market categories. The real breakthrough did not come, however, until the commercial success of this art proved incontrovertible.

The Chinese state as cultural industrialist

The Chinese state manifests itself within its culture industry in a variety of ways. First, it operates in its own right as the principal

cultural industrialist, being active in the market via the medium of the cultural entities – from newspapers to ballet companies – that it has transformed into companies. Further, like other states, it creates the conditions under which money can be earned from culture. It offers incentives in the form of tax breaks, and organizes and finances platforms such as art fairs. More specifically Chinese is the overall supervision that it exercises via a range of public authorities and institutions. Good old censorship is a part of this, but there are also new tools, described in terms customarily associated with business. Above all, though, the party maintains its desire to dictate the cultural issues with which society is to engage, albeit now by means of the culture industry.

Yet one should not make the mistake of assuming that the categories of culture recognized by the state are uniform, homogenous and immutable. In the area of film policy, for example, official support is offered sometimes to major historical productions and sometimes to neo-realist chamber pieces, and the guiding thread ap-

pears to be one dictated not by content, but rather by the orientation toward the criteria that western prize juries are assumed to apply. Zhang Yimou's staging of the opening ceremony at the Olympic Games, and Chen Kaige's latest film, dealing with Mei Lanfeng, master of the Beijing Opera,

**In a sense, the
market thus extends its
invisible hand to the
invisible hand of the state.**

suggest that the emphasis has now shifted to the dissemination of traditional Chinese high culture.

Responsibility for publishing houses lies with the propaganda ministry and the press and publications authority, and the main instrument used to manage the book market is the licences issued by the latter to state publishing houses. Every book requires a licence number before it can legally be published. Nowadays, many books are published by private business people operating strictly in accordance with mar-

ket criteria. Legally constituted as culture agencies, they are still obliged to purchase their licence numbers from the publishing houses, all of which still belong to the state. Publishers submit the titles and a summary of the contents of their proposed publications to the local books authority for approval; where sensitive topics such as political leaders, the military, religion and recent history are concerned, they are required to hand over the entire manuscript, which is then considered by a critical reader group made up of reliable, retired party cadres. Publishers that attract attention by publishing books on awkward topics receive fewer licences the next year, thus limiting their ability to do business. Control, therefore, is also exercised by economic means.

Cultural criticism as an artistic label

Generally speaking, the market and state surveillance are viewed not as divergent systems, but rather as realities that imbue and condition each other. Indeed, the means of censorship and control can themselves be transformed into money, giving rise to something that could be described as the



Visitors at the Ullens
Center for Contemporary
Art in Beijing's 798 art district.
Photo: Lionel Derimais

first post-Adorno culture industry. But does it also create that “all-encompassing system” of which Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in a celebrated chapter of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*? The answer is of course no. Even the fact that in China the planning, controlling and sanctioning power of a state that views itself as a cultural force is added to the market forces that neutralize culture is far from sufficient to make the whole into an ineluctable system. Part of the reason for this is that the party and state are by no means as central, consistent and organized as many in the West believe, and as party and state themselves no doubt would wish to be. Moreover the two phenomena that, in Adorno’s concept of the culture industry, were to be experienced in the West are equally valid here: the revelation that criticism – and even cultural criticism – could be implicated in the culture industry as a label in its own right; and that, as so-called “pop intellectuals” have been observing since the 1970s, one can make distinctions even within the culture industry, and is therefore not abandoned to the

Even if – and indeed precisely because – art was treated as critical in the west, it need not inevitably be a threat to stability.

whims of an omnipotent demiurge. The market’s performance and its niches quite predictably offer opportunities for those prepared to use them, opportunities that are not subsumed in the strategies of the culture industry.

The best example of this ambivalence is the art district in Beijing known as 798. This factory complex, originally built by architects from the GDR in the 1950s with an unabashed nod to the Bauhaus movement, was rediscovered by artists at the dawn of the new century. Over the years, it became an officially acknowledged nexus for the creative culture industry, and was increasingly taken over by bars and ceramics studios, fashion boutiques, advertising agencies and art bookshops. The only development that might halt its progress is the international financial crisis, which has already prompted the closure of some of the galleries in 798.

Naturally, the western cultural industries are willing participants and supporters, and 798 is now home not only to the first foreign outpost of New York’s celebrated Pace gallery, but also to the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. When the building was inaugurated in 2007 by the Belgian art patron Guy Ullens, its pur-

Generally speaking, the market and state surveillance are viewed not as divergent systems, but rather as realities that imbue and condition each other.

ported aim was to enhance participation by Chinese artists in international critical debates. One year later, this ambition was manifesting itself in exhibitions such as *Christian Dior & Chinese Artists*, in which the most celebrated of Beijing’s artists – whose works already commanded top prices – were integrated into the Western fashion business.

Nevertheless, 798 still contains locales and exhibitions that simply cannot be slotted into any government or social strategy. Indeed, here and elsewhere in China this potential is often actually increased once the official government taboo has been lifted. As sometimes in the West, perhaps the chief determinant is the willingness of individual artists to perceive themselves primarily via the categories of the market – if at all. Nevertheless, even here in 798 the authorities occasionally ordain the removal of pictures on the basis of more or less unfathomable criteria – though their objections are now couched in a more genteel discourse. As a result, for some outside China, the district still retains a whiff of subversion.

Mark Siemons writes on culture in China for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

This article is a shortened and updated version of an essay in *Lettre Internationale* 79.

Translated from the German by Geoffrey Spearing

On completion of my music studies in Munich in 1983, having graduated in conducting and composition, I decided not to return to China directly. After all, classical music is rooted in Europe, and if you are a Chinese musician seeking to assimilate that tradition, then you must let yourself be impregnated by it, as the Chinese saying has it, in order to internalize it, as it were. Of the many Chinese musicians who have been through this process, some have gone on to national and international fame, in a proper fusion of the Western and Chinese cultures. The deliberate blending of cultures has proved to be a recipe for success, in so far as Chinese influences have lent new qualities to European classical music.

I owe my early acquaintance with Western music and art to my privileged family background. I was born into a family of artists in Shanghai, which allowed me to cultivate a close relationship to Western art even during the radically anti-Western Cultural Revolution. In 1979, when I was already working as Professor of Conducting and Composition at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, I received a grant to study at the Conservatory of Music in Munich. This meant that my music studies started again from scratch when I was thirty years old. At that time a Chinese person in Bavaria was regarded as something almost exotic. All people knew about Chinese music was that it was very difficult to understand, which is what I heard again

“All people knew about Chinese music was that it was difficult to understand”

Muhai Tang is the Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Zurich Chamber Orchestra, and an internationally acclaimed musician. Originally from Shanghai, for the past four years he has been living in Switzerland – a place he describes as a God-given Paradise with overly circumspect inhabitants.

Muhai Tang, as told to Wei Zhang

when I brought *The Peach Blossom Fan*, a Kunqu opera, to Zurich two years ago. But that is beside the point. You simply have to be prepared to listen to music in an open-minded manner and let it transport you to another world. In the meantime, I have come to appreciate traditional Chinese music, to which I barely paid any attention earlier, as one of the most highly developed artistic forms of expression. After decades of the Chinese learning from Europe, Europeans would be well advised to make a closer study of certain aspects of Chinese culture.

In Chinese philosophy there is a dialectic of complementary principles: *xu* (emptiness, implication, suggestion) and *shi* (reality, representation, expression). In the West, people are mainly aware of the *shi* principle, whereas it is the *xu* principle that is central to the Chinese aesthetic, and that reveals the essence of the Chinese conception of art. When a horse gallops across the sky, as a celebrated Chinese verse has it, the limitless bounds of the imagination released

by the *xu* principle find expression. The creativity of both artist and listener is lent wings, and a spiritual independence is fostered, to the enrichment of classical music.

I am more than satisfied with my current job and my life in Switzerland, because Switzerland seems to me to be a God-given Paradise. I am immensely impressed by the Swiss cultural and linguistic diversity. My four-year-old daughter has the good fortune to grow up speaking four languages: in addition to her Korean mother tongue and the Chinese she has from her father, she speaks English and is learning German at kindergarten.

My everyday dealings with Swiss people give me the impression that they are very conscientious and reliable in their work, if on occasion almost overly circumspect and reserved. They are also hesitant and sceptical at first when confronted with another culture, and yet they are perfectly willing to engage with it provided the encounter is conducted in a seemly and elegant fashion. In comparison, the great Chinese civilization with its centuries of tradition is less shy about embracing other cultures. China is self-confident enough not to be defensive.

Wei Zhang is the author of *Zwischen den Stühlen. Geschichten von Chinesinnen und Chinesen in der Schweiz* (Neither here nor there: accounts of Chinese in Switzerland), published by NZZ Libro in 2006, and writes for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, among other publications.

Translated from the German by Bill Gilonis



“Let yourself be impregnated by classical music.”
Principal Conductor Muhai Tang.
Photo: Alberto Venzago

Li Yu and Liu Bo

The photographs printed here
are from the series
“13 Months in the Year of the
Dog” (2006) and
“Victims” (2007). The artist
duo, intrigued by the
way the media construct reality,
use their pictures to
restage items from the Chinese
daily news.

CHUTIAN METROPOLIS DAILY,
5 June 2006

Moonlight Cactus in Full Bloom

Last night, 14 fragrant moonlight cacti
bloomed in Ms Zeng's apartment at the Bureau of
Quality and Technical Supervision.
Ms Zeng said the flowers opened at 7 pm and did not
close again until 11 pm.









CHUTIAN METROPOLIS DAILY,
28 August 2007

*Long-Distance Runner from Sichuan Nearly
Starves to Death*

A Sichuan man on a self-financed marathon in honour of the Olympics appealed to the police yesterday when he ran out of money on National Highway 107 in the Dongxihu district of Etouwan. Police officers treated him to noodles, bread and water, and the man was able to continue his run in the direction of Wuchang.

CHUTIAN GOLDEN PAPER,
4 April 2006

*Blitzkrieg at the Beauty Parlour – Business as
Usual despite Vandals*

A sizable mob yesterday stormed a beauty parlour at 87 Renhe Jie in Hanzheng Lu. The vandals laid waste to the premises at 2 pm in an attempt to force the owner to close up shop. Oblivious to the awkward situation, two customers tranquilly completed their treatment.









CHUTIAN GOLDEN PAPER,
5 April 2006

Thirteen-Year-Old Sets Fire to Classmate's Home

With the help of a forged key, 13-year-old Xiao Qian frequently stole from the home of her classmate Lin Yu (names have been changed). On 1 April, during one such incursion, Xiao Qian was unable to find any money and set fire to the Lins' master bedroom in anger. Yesterday the two families reached an agreement: Xiao Qian's parents are to pay Lin Yu's family RMB 30,000 in compensation.

Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, maintains offices around the world in order to promote cultural exchange with Switzerland and to expand cultural networks.



NEW YORK
PARIS
ROME
WARSAW
CAIRO
CAPE TOWN
NEW DELHI

A Beehive of Culture



Fragments on the horizon:
“Le phare” (1999). Sculptor Silvie Defraoui shows her work this fall at the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris.

ley and Kaeser play the game completely differently, that is to say: equally. When they talk about their programmes and visions, they deliver a monologue in duet. They literally finish each other's sentences.

A well-balanced programme

Where did they learn this highly efficient rhetorical technique, which always manages to anticipate and dispel any possible doubts raised by visitors? For the last fourteen years Jean-Paul Felley (42) und Olivier Kaeser (45) have been running the arts space Attitudes in Geneva. The two French-speaking Swiss first met as students in the University of Geneva's art history department, and soon realized that they wanted to become curators. Together. Jointly.

The influence exerted by Attitudes, the arts space they created, reaches far beyond Switzerland's borders. Felley and Kaeser have organized around 100 exhibitions in 18 cities between Geneva and Buenos Aires. This enormous workload has involved collaboration with over 300 artists.

The new directors of Pro Helvetia's Cultural Centre in Paris want nothing less than to transmit their love of art to the public. Co-directors Olivier Kaeser and Jean-Paul Felley met the press in March.

By *Joachim Johannsen*, Paris – Olivier Kaeser and Jean-Paul Felley, the two new co-directors of the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris, sit at facing desks, a novel scenario for an interview. The visiting journalist familiar with previous directors Werner Duggelin, Daniel Jeannet and Michel Ritter quickly learns

the correct head movements: from left to right and back again, like following a tennis match. The directors serve each other lines with the elegance of sportsmen, ping-ponging arguments back and forth.

In both theatre and politics, ruling pairs often function according to the principle of the power behind the throne: Louis XIII had Cardinal Richelieu, Richard Nixon had Henry Kissinger, and Peter Stein had Dieter Sturm. Fel-



“Monologue à deux”: Olivier Kaeser (left) and Jean-Paul Felley, the new co-directors of the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris.

The programming in the Paris Centre extends as far as the building’s infrastructure and the institution’s mandate allow. The plan is equal representation for music, theatre and film, with perhaps a slight preponderance for the visual arts – which is unsurprising, given the directors’ backgrounds. The facilities will be renovated, the rooms touched up. The library, with its view of the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, will be converted into a bookstore-café. A welcome improvement to the foyer, which was always rather bleak in spite of the good selection of reading material.

The new programme already boasts one highlight: in 2010 Jean-Christophe Ammann, the curator’s curator, will be given free rein. The 2009 season kicked off in March with Lutz & Guggisberg, a Zurich-based duo, to be followed in May by a film programme in collaboration with the Visions du Réel film festival in Nyon. Autumn will feature works by sculptor Silvie Defraoui.

Worth mentioning is also an innovative new approach to funding: Jean-Paul Felley and Olivier Kaeser have proposed approaching sponsors. Pro Helvetia has not only granted them permission to seek additional third-party funding to supplement their annual budget of two million, it has urged them to do so. Times have clearly changed: when Zurich Opera House director Alexander Pereira launched

a similar search in the 1990s, there was an uproar. Back then he was considered to have betrayed the cause of pure art; today he is regarded as a pioneer.

In addition, there is a plan to establish an Association des amis du Centre Culturel Suisse (Association of Friends of the Centre Culturel Suisse), an idea that institutions like the Schauspielhaus Zurich introduced a long time ago. Also in the pipeline is a culture magazine to be published three times a season, which will comment on scheduled events and place them in a broader context.

Une belle folie

Not only has the post of director been split in two (with salary shared two ways, so that finances remain in order), there are also to be two directorial offices. Olivier Kaeser and Jean-Paul Felley plan to divide their time between Paris and Geneva. They have retained the Attitudes office and will certainly continue activities under their old Geneva-based label. It seems they have far more ideas than a half-time job can accommodate. They want the Centre to become a “beehive” (“une ruche”) bustling with creativity.

At the interview’s conclusion, Jean-Paul Felley sums up their approach with a catchphrase. He even stands up to make his declaration – but that might just be a coincidence. In any case, he says that what he and Olivier Kaeser experience and what they wish to convey to others is “a beautiful madness” (“une belle folie”). How else, after all, is one to describe the salaried management of art

and artists, driven by a passion most people associate with the pursuit of a hobby, and an expensive one at that?

Their method for bringing art and public together is that of the *passeur*, the ferryman, or the *transmetteur*, who conveys today’s contemporary art across the boundaries that still tend to separate it from the general public. They have been influenced in their passion by Jean-Christophe Ammann, the great museum director and curator who, despite his own accomplishments, always sees his role as standing behind the artist (“derrière l’artiste”) – unlike Harald Szeeman, who regarded exhibition-making itself as an artistic act.

One thing is certain: contrary to the sensationalist reports in the French-Swiss weekly *L’Hebdo* that greeted their appointment, Olivier Kaeser and Jean-Paul Felley are not about to launch a new revolution. Nor does the traditional roster of national stereotypes lead anyone to expect the Swiss to import this particular product to France. Kaeser and Felley are positively bursting with enthusiasm, that is undeniable. But it is part of the job, and a professional rather than an ethnic quality. Their task is to scour the Swiss microcosm for works they can show the great world in Paris.

Could this be the beginning of a beautiful madness?

Joachim Johannsen is a culture journalist based in Paris.

Translated from the German by Bill Gilonis

What they experience and wish to convey to others is “a beautiful madness”.

“In New York, if you’re not open-minded, you don’t last long”

Lively, bold, trendy – the Swiss Institute, in the heart of New York, is the standard bearer of a Switzerland that is innovative and open to the world.

By *Roman Elsener*, New York – There’s nothing wrong with chocolate, cheese and Heidi, but Switzerland has other things to offer as well. “An amazing number of Swiss artists have something to say,” says Gianni Jetzer, Director of the Swiss Institute (SI) in New York. He attributes this to a kind of Swiss sophistication: “We didn’t invent either chocolate or watches, but we make the best clockworks, and we turned cacao into chocolate bars. Art builds on this kind of visual, articulate sophistication,” explains Jetzer with a smile that, in the past two years, has graced a wide range of media – he has been central to making the SI’s openings into musts for everyone who’s anyone in the contemporary art world.

Time Out, a popular guide to the city, included SI in its list of the city’s 40 most important art institutions, and star curator Matthew Higgs has made the space one of his ten hot tips for anyone on the lookout for art in New York City. The authorities have taken notice, too: while the SI receives up to 45 percent of its funding from Pro Helvetia, it also gets financial support from the cultural authorities of both the city and the

state of New York. SI President Fabienne Abrecht’s medium-term goal is to reach a yearly budget of one million dollars with the help of grants from other foundations and additional, private contributions. After all, for this non-profit organization to continue as a prized artistic jewel in the city life of downtown Manhattan does have its price. So the grant from Switzerland is vital to the institute, but cultural sponsorship pays off for the country, too, as is proven by the long list of famous contemporary Swiss artists who have managed to make names for themselves in the highly competitive New York art world, such as Gianni Motti, Ugo Rondinone and Olaf Breuning.

***Dark Fair* – making art mysterious again**

As a national institute, Jetzer said, the Swiss Institute is far ahead of others. For one thing, it shows its colours very clearly: not only with the flag that flies over Broadway in a new design by a different Swiss artist every year, but also because a large majority of the exhibited works have Swiss origins. Still, the SI’s importance for contemporary art in New York goes beyond national boundaries – and once, the police even came to Jetzer’s building. It was not that he had done anything wrong; on the contrary, the *Dark Fair*, which he put on as a contrast to the *Armory Show* (the largest New York art fair), was so popular, with the exhibition space lit only by the light of candles, projectors and flashlights, that a long line formed downstairs on Broadway – so long that even

some police officers wanted to know what was going on up there.

“Such shows are an attempt to restore some of its mystery to art. If we can work with other original organizations, we can make a lot of things happen,” says Jetzer. “Everyone who was at the *Dark Fair* talked about it with other people, and word of mouth is still the best form of advertising!”

The SI follows the times, even when they are bad: during the financial crisis, it has been offering a monthly “Lunch Date” – five dollars will buy you soup and a tour of the exhibition. After Christmas, as a supplement to John Miller’s exhibition *Regift*, Jetzer and his colleagues organized a gift exchange. “New York has a surplus of everything,” says Jetzer. It is imperative to find and occupy niches; for his part, Jetzer enjoys discovering and supporting artists who have not yet received the attention they deserve.

As a contrast to the contemporary cult of youth, Jetzer tries to bring different generations together, and his exhibition of photographs by Zurich photographer Walter Pfeiffer was enthusiastically received by young New Yorkers. For the coming spring, he has now even managed to convince the Swiss artist Manon, who has shown work since the sixties but avoids airplanes, to come to the United States for her first exhibition here. “She took an extremely daring step by presenting herself quite serenely both as a muse and as an art object,” says Jetzer. He has not the slightest doubt that the intriguing artist will be a hit with American viewers. “In New York,” he says, his eyes flashing roguishly with the desire to continue reinventing the Swiss Institute, “if you’re not open-minded, you don’t last long!”

www.swissinstitute.net

Roman Elsener is a journalist in New York for the SDA news agency and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

Translated from the German by Andrew Shields



“Science Classicism Lycanthropy” (2007), oil on canvas by Greg Parma Smith from the REGIFT exhibition.

Art and science are increasingly involved in a serious, productive dialogue. The science network swissnex sponsors projects with Swiss artists.

By *Felizitas Ammann* – “Beautiful, politically stable, clean – Switzerland enjoys an excellent reputation in China,” says Flavia Schlegel. “When it comes to research and innovation, however, hardly anybody thinks of Switzerland.” To change this, she moved to China in October 2008 to become the head of swissnex Shanghai. Switzerland’s State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) has swissnex offices in Boston, San Francisco and Singapore as well, with one in Bangalore due to be established this year.

As different as the locations of the “Swiss Science Network” are, what they have in common is their self-appointed function as mediators: between Switzerland and other countries, between research and business, among the various disciplines. In practical terms this entails such activities as providing Chinese doctoral students with information about research opportunities in Switzerland, finding Chinese investors for Swiss researchers, and helping universities in both countries establish joint projects. In each case, the point is to draw attention to Switzerland’s excellence in science, education, and innovation.

Swissnex’s efforts are focused on science and technology, but culture also plays a role in its projects. In Shanghai, science and culture are right next door to each other, as it were: swissnex and Pro Helvetia, which currently has an office there because of its programme in China, are both housed in the Swiss consulate. But rather than competing, they complement each other: “For example, we use the presence of Swiss artists to encourage student exchanges and other types of exchange between art schools in both countries,” says Schlegel.

Swissnex Shanghai’s own cultural projects always have a specific starting point, be it *Expo Shanghai* in 2010 or such topics as air quality and energy, which attract interest in China. Artists in Labs, one

such project, was initiated by the Zurich University of the Arts: it provides fine artists with access to laboratories in the natural sciences, thus encouraging dialogue. In this exchange of know-how, research and its implications are reflected in art, while artists are given insight into new technologies. For Schlegel, such cultural projects are a means to an end: “The goal is never just cultural sponsorship. We want to increase our visibility, generate interest in research, and most of all encourage mutual understanding.”

Visibility is of the utmost importance, as Christian Simm knows from many years of experience. So he is glad swissnex San

Francisco work has also been going on with Pro Helvetia: since 2008, an agreement has guaranteed a regular series of projects with Swiss artists.

As a centre for new technology that serves as a gateway to Silicon Valley, San Francisco is a good base for swissnex. People here are very willing to experiment, says Simm. Beyond that, the West Coast is the capital of American product design. So it’s no surprise that the San Francisco exhibition on the Swiss Design Prize attracted a great deal of attention: Swiss design is well known here, after all.

Such a situation also makes more unusual events possible. Simm, who was educated as a physicist, thinks it is important for the natural sciences to be exposed to outside comment on a regular basis, and thus five to ten of the eighty or so public events his office stages every year have an artistic component. For example, with *Bio-Tech vs. Bio Art* in 2004, swissnex took advantage of the world’s largest congress on biotechnology to give local art students carte blanche for an exhibition on the subject – including a tour with two guides, a professor of art and a Swiss biotech entrepreneur.

www.swissnex.org

Felizitas Ammann is a communications specialist at Reso – Dance Network Switzerland and works as a freelance cultural journalist (for the *Tages-Anzeiger*, *DRS2* and *nachtkritik*, among others).

Translated from the German by Andrew Shields

“We want to increase our visibility, generate interest in research...”



Francisco is housed in a historic building right in the city centre. Many hands make light work: eight of the eighteen work spaces in the open-plan office have been sublet to start-ups from Switzerland, to Swiss universities, or to the investment-promotion agency Greater Zurich Area AG, which not only cuts down on expenses but also reflects the spirit of the institute. “Connecting people,” says Simm, is the essence of his work, and in the last five years swissnex San Francisco has established a far-reaching network. Like all such offices abroad, it is financed by the Swiss government, from which it receives a third of its budget. The rest comes from cooperative projects, sponsoring and mandates. Joint

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Culture and Politics in Conversation

Switzerland's official cultural policy is at a crossroads. Which direction should it take? What is the best way to promote Swiss culture – and is there even such a thing?

The next issue of *Passages* takes on the nexus of culture and politics. We report on Pro Helvetia's new programme, *Strange Bedfellows: Culture and Politics in Conversation*, reflect on past crises and conflicts on the Swiss cultural scene, visit some of Switzerland's starving artists and successful artistic entrepreneurs, and ask young politicians and artists for their visions of a national cultural policy.

The next issue of *Passages* will appear in late August 2009.

Passages

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The Lead-Free Computer

By *Pierre Keller* – “It is far better to know something about everything than all about one thing,” wrote Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées* (“Thoughts”). As the director of a school of art and design for the last thirteen years, I am delighted that the days when students confined themselves to a single field are long gone. Back when I was a student at the University of Art and Design Lausanne (ECAL), the painters painted, the sculptors sculpted, and the composers arranged characters. Today’s young people happily embrace every area of visual creation, with a thirst for knowledge and practical experience that ranges across photography, the visual and graphic arts, and industrial design.

Nowadays, their appetites already whetted, students are clued up about more or less everything that is going on, and no longer stick rigidly to their preferred subject. For teachers this is a very good thing. I often like to say that admission to ECAL is a function of three factors: “Curiosity, curiosity and curiosity; we’ll take care of everything else.” This fundamental difference from my student days is no doubt due to the emergence of new technologies, chief among them computers. Even before they enter a school of art and design, students have written blogs, produced flyers for birthdays or parties with hacked copies of Photoshop and Illustrator, created photographs thanks to the wonders of digital imaging, and sought out the biographies of their favourite artists by typing them into Google or consulting Wikipedia – all with a few clicks of a mouse.

Although the advent of such technologies has undoubtedly had an impact on teaching, for those like me who (despite taking courses each summer) are still streets behind the budding Bill-Gates clones I see around the university, they remain in some ways a closed book. But the fact that the average age of the teaching staff at ECAL is thirty-three means that



both they and their charges can freely express themselves in a language peppered with expressions such as Flash Player, command+c, vectorization, WiFi and JPEG. Of course, I still miss the days when typesetting characters were made of lead and kept in type drawers. Today, the talk is all of computer fonts. Each to his own era, as one might say! Nevertheless, while I insist that my students keep abreast of the latest technology, I believe it is vital for them to maintain a link to more traditional materials and use the “old-fashioned” techniques as well. With that in mind, I’m in the process of establishing (or rather, re-establishing), a lithographic studio within the walls of ECAL. *Shades of Back to the Future!*

Now before you get the wrong impression, I’m not suggesting we should return to an age no one under twenty can remember. Indeed, I never cease to be amazed by disciplines such as interaction design, which combines the ideas I mentioned above, namely computer technology and the interdisciplinary approach. This field is growing rapidly, and fits perfectly into our iPhone era as it involves complex communication projects (tele-

phone software, web applications and interfaces, as well as interactive installations and projections), drawing on the know-how, techniques and strategies of digital publishing. The future (and especially that of certain artists and designers) perhaps lies in the new epoch rushing towards us at the speed of light (or rather, of the kilobit)...

Pierre Keller is director of the University of Art and Design Lausanne (ECAL) and a professor at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL).

Translated from the French by Geoffrey Spearing





“você tinha tempo” (2006), India ink and dispersion, by Jan Eichenberger

The illustration comes from a sketchbook kept by the artist during a visit to Brazil, where he travelled and worked. Jan Eichenberger is a freelance graphic artist, painter and graphic designer and a member of the Maphia artists' collective, among other affiliations. Since 2007 he has shown his work in Baden, Basel and Zurich. He did preliminary studies in design at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) before training as a graphic artist. Eichenberger lives and works in Baden.

The great Chinese civilization with its centuries of tradition is less shy about embracing other cultures.

“All people knew about Chinese music was that it was difficult to understand”
Wei Zhang, p. 31

The documentaries touch on everything from the struggles of migrant workers in the city to the plight of the unemployed.

China's CCD Workstation: A New Environment for Independent Cultural Production and Dialogue
Wu Wenguang, p. 16

Under the constant pressure of the state censors and their demand for political correctness, Chinese rock became a sounding board for existential and intellectual crises.

Pop Music: The Pulse of a Nation
Sun Mengjin, p. 26

There is no time to lose. It's time to play.

Playtime Is Back
Carol Yinghua Lu, p. 20

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