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

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/dore_bowen/3/
Outing, 2000, the reflective interior of an escalator catches the last seconds of a figure’s quick exit. Especially intriguing is Haley’s Negotiation, 2001, where a long shot reveals two figures becoming aware of one another as they near an intersection at the base of the Angel’s Flight funicular railway. Such images imply narratives, which are perhaps non-existent. It is precisely this slippage between reality and fiction that sustains the myths and stories that allow this city to thrive.

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

Veracity and fantasy collapse in David H. Bailey’s powerful installation, Pull Me from the Wreckage, 2003. The piece symbolically traverses both land and history with long, narrow, and horizontally-intersecting strips of wood harnessed to vertical poles by rubber bands. The poles carry tiny wood billboards that start at one end of the platform by marking certain world historical landmarks—World War I, Darwin, Frank Lloyd Wright—to then focus on specific struggles between man, society, and nature, as evidenced in Los Angeles—earthquakes, riots, emergency housing, drought. From an aerial perspective, the interrelatedness makes perfect sense. Navigating through the mess in his car, however, the lone Angeleno is shielded by a conceptual blind spot from any reality and fiction that sustains the male figure, its public presence, and homelessness in Cairo. In its subtle staging, this work suggests a curious logic—without the camera there would be no event; without the event there would be no community; without the community there would be no body under scrutiny.

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

Anri Sala’s Mixed Behavior, 2004, suggests an alternative to the heroics of Walking Through the Mirror. In this nine minute video the artist-as-DJ mixes groovy sounds under a rain-soaked tarp to accompany the New Year’s Eve fireworks in Tirana, Albania. In
Mixed Behavior, the Albanian artist steps back from his creative role to watch this scene with the viewer. A documentary sensibility is suggested: without fireworks, without a cause for celebration, without the city in the distance, there would be no light and, by extension, no image. Before the artist enters the scene and after he leaves, the event surely continues. Such works provide a counterpoint to both the performance-videos created four decades ago, and the hopped-up digital wizardry often featured in galleries today. Irreducible demonstrates that a new crop of artists is willing to engage the image-event on fresh terrain.

—Dore Bowen

**STANFORD**

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

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

With her extensive knowledge and expertise in the field of Chinese contemporary art, Erickson selected an array of strong pieces by superior artists. Among these are Beijing-based Qiu Zhijie's mazelike CD-ROM, The West, which combines stock images from newspapers and popular media with video interview clips and voiceover to form a half-factual, half-absurd montage that demonstrates that "the west" exists only within the realm of the imaginary. A solitary military aircraft glides over a body of water in Shanghai-based artist Zhou Tiehai's mesmerizing triptych, Civilization, 2004. Airbrushed to perfection, its deceptively simple composition belies Zhou's interweaving of Song-Yuan (12th—14th century) painting styles, contemporary political subject matter (the plane is modeled after the U.S. Navy EP-3 spy plane that was captured in southern China in 2001), and a commercial technique.

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

Some selections, however, seem out of place given the overall theme. Works like Beijing artist Yin Xiuzhen's Portable City, Shenzhen, 2003, more aptly illustrate the effects of globalization on ideas of home, personal experience and travel than specific western art world concerns. Likewise, Xu Bing's Square Word Calligraphy Classroom, 1994-1996, and Case Study of Transference, 1994, are not only exceedingly familiar to international art audiences, but also seem to reiterate simplified assumptions of "east" and "west." Indeed, naming a section of the exhibition "Cultural Mélange" is overly reductive, implying a simple mixing of two fixed elements to create a third. A comparison might be made, here, between On the Edge and The American Effect (Whitney Museum of Art, 2003). Despite laudable intentions to forge new ground, both exhibitions occasionally rely on platitudes about the west that undermine the sophistication of the work. It is perhaps no coincidence that the only two Chinese artists selected for the Whitney show—Zhou Tiehai and Xing Danwen—are also featured in the Stanford show, with Xing Danwen exhibiting the same body of work.

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

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

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

—Pauline J. Yao