

Daimler Art Collection

On Curbstone Jewels and Cobblestones

Second part of an exhibition series with new acquisitions of contemporary Chinese and international art

November 13, 2015 – April 10, 2016
Daimler Contemporary Berlin

China can no longer be thought of as separate from the rest of the world: within the art industry, as booming economic zone and global actor—China is on the up. Recent Chinese developments that relate more readily to the international context often overshadow China's traditional core—the nation's cultural history, which bears the mark of dramatic sociopolitical upheavals. Still, here we can see an accumulation of intellectual and artistic assets with significant historical determining factors coming into play. In-depth study is well worthwhile: it enables one to draw individual and specific conclusions about the rapidly-changing status quo. Our series of exhibitions in Berlin, which consists of three exhibitions over a period running from May 2015 to Summer 2017, is dedicated to a dialogue between Chinese contemporary art and examples of art movements from other nations. Accompanied by a diverse program of events, it will offer a space for discussing controversially aspects of China's past and present. A total of 40 artworks by approximately 20 Chinese artists expand the Daimler Art Collection's international profile, continuing on from the acquisition of artworks from the world tour destinations of South Africa, Latin America, Australia, India, and Asia since 2003.

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China is a significant trade partner and production location for Mercedes-Benz and Daimler. Our focus on China offers an expanded cultural exchange; it provides multiple perspectives and opens up discussion on the complex linkages, divergences, and entanglements that exist between Chinese and Western-style contemporary art.

The artworks by the Chinese artists relate to the chief focal points of the Daimler Art Collection: Abstract and Conceptual Art, and new art media. At the same time, these artworks constitute an entirely new and distinct complex of works within the collection—both culturally and aesthetically. The first part of the exhibition—‘From a Poem to the Sunset’ (May 1 – October 18, 2015)—was concerned with conceptual approaches, installation, and video artworks, focusing on the significance of artistic traditions and on the collision of diverging cultural, media and art-material worlds. The current exhibition, ‘On Curbstone Jewels and Cobblestones’ (November 13, 2015 – April 10, 2016), emphasizes artworks from the field of sculpture and photography. The artists are not only in search of their own individual means of expression—with particular reference to the details of their own biographies—but they also formulate answers to the essential questions of our age. Their artistic responses to these questions may take the form of constructed parallel worlds, artwork documentations, or portraits, but also of specific, concerted attempts to influence the society behind their own life influences. The artworks on display make plain the fundamental changes within the worlds in which we live, give expression to existing stereotypes and judgments (or prejudices) about ‘the other,’ and deal with the social and political consequences of globalization. The third and final exhibition in this series, beginning in spring 2017, will be a ‘discussion’ between primarily Abstract Art tendencies of China, Germany, and other nations. The next stage will be a complete exhibition of all our newly acquired Chinese artworks at our Daimler site at Stuttgart-Möhringen for 2016. It is intended primarily for our employees in the Stuttgart area who will be invited to attend themed tours, but external groups are also welcome, provided that they register in advance.

The three-part exhibition series at the Daimler Contemporary Berlin is accompanied by an extensive program of events. During the run of the exhibition series various discussions will take place with the aim of providing an independent forum on specific China-related themes and of bringing together a selection of significant figures from China with the host serving as moderator. Artistic background factors and approaches of the exhibited artworks will be discussed as well as fundamental questions and topical themes relating to cultural and social developments in China. The artists featured in the

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exhibitions will speak at discussions, lectures, and performances. Additionally, an all-day symposium was held with Chinese, European and American experts on September 15 and 16, 2015, where current trends in the various different artistic media, together with cultural production conditions in China, were discussed in a concentrated and condensed form. The research work produced at these events will be made available online and in an accompanying publication. Further on, there will be an ongoing communication program with regular weekend themed tours and workshops for children.

As a nation of economic growth, China is becoming increasingly central to international interests. In this light, it is becoming ever more apparent how little we actually know about this nation's specific, typical character. The various different approaches embodied by the works of Chinese contemporary art newly acquired for our collection—including those by the younger generation of artists—enable memorable and multi-faceted insights into Chinese culture and history, and allow us to cast an eye over the social and artistic developments of recent times.

Renate Wiehager
Director of the Daimler Art Collection, Stuttgart/Berlin

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Whereas the first part of our series of exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, which was entitled 'From a Poem to the Sunset,' specifically focused on conceptual trends in video art and installation art, the exhibition entitled 'On Curbstone Jewels and Cobblestones' focuses on the juxtaposition of sculptures and installation pieces with photography. The photographs, which are somewhere between documentary, artificial composition and fiction, are presented on the walls around the interior stairwell to serve as a continuous photographic connection with reality, while the sculptures, art objects and occasional whole-space installations are arranged along their own meandering course through the Daimler Contemporary. This dialogic interchange gives a structure to the whole of the exhibition's open space, thereby enabling different viewing perspectives. This exhibition of a total of 24 artworks by twelve artists from seven nations outlines aspects of human communities in densely populated urban areas, and in the rapidly growing great cities of China in particular. How should we respond to the sociopolitical transformations brought about by increasing urbanization worldwide? What forms might best allow one to express the social changes that go hand-in-hand with these tendencies? In what ways do our shifting living conditions alter learned, accustomed values and patterns of behavior, role models and traditions? And, last but not least, what artistic visions of the present-day and of the future can be created as a result of observing these transformations of human existence?

The exhibition begins with a playful dialogue—which nonetheless repeatedly strikes a serious note—between the Japanese artist Ayumi Minemura, who lives in Berlin and produces art under the label Are You Meaning Company (AYMC), and two Chinese artists: Yin Xiuzhen and Zheng Guogu. Minemura's transport-form, mobile, multi-part, small-scale sculptures are her response to the problem of defining individuality in an age of urbanization and global travel links. Her interactive artwork entitled *Two Getting Along Project*, and the APMC's multicolored paper *Are You Meaning Houses* (mass-produced, but handmade), cause the viewer to reflect on human relationships, and on diverse forms of dwelling and inhabiting—as applied to standardized one-room apartments and modular buildings.

Yin Xiuzhen is a concept artist who works with fabric. She creates abstract portraits of great cities of all nations packed into suitcases (*Portable Cities*) from items of clothing collected in the cities themselves. Her 'clothing psychograms' or 'identity blends' (*One Sentence – No. 40, 78, 86*) combine production and personality, everyday materials and everyday reality with both a sharp critical eye, and plenty of humor.

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Zheng Guogu's early photographic work in this space formulates questions of identity within society that are opened up again in numerous ways throughout the exhibition. In order to create *Me and My Teacher*, Zheng spent several months accompanying a mentally handicapped homeless man through the streets of Yangjiang, using his camera to record scenes from his companion's everyday life. The resulting 'docu-fiction' photography series shows us how the photographer—through the eyes of his subject—wants to see the world: unprejudiced, and free from conventions.

It is only a short step from the delicate material of Yin Xiuzhen's works to the spacial installation entitled *a secluded and pleasant land, in this land I wish to dwell* by Leonor Antunes, which is the product of much research by the artist into the cultural, craftworking and architectural traditions of Brazil, and, more specifically, of her research on a building by the architect João Batista Vilanova Artigas. The characteristic range of materials used by the artist, many of which are organic—exotic woods, cotton, leather equestrian tack, but also bamboo, and hemp—combine to create sculptures that are symbols and icons of utopian locations; its 'ambient' of crossing temporal paths is based on a processual understanding of art and design. The artworks of the Chinese artist Wu Hao also describe a specific place—Wuhan, the artist's home city in central China. In addition to his painting *I pity you No. 3*, 2014, the exhibition includes two other artworks by Wu Hao that cannot be allocated to or filed under any single media heading or genre. *Rolling Gate No. 6*, a 'rolling gate ready-made' taken from an everyday context and featuring abstract streaks of color, sprayed-on telephone numbers and other signs left by Chinese jobseekers to advertise their services, can be read equally well as a painting or as a political statement. Dried traces of paint in containers produced by the artist's activities in his workshop (*Watermarks Project: Wuhan*) are materializations of the painting process and its key medium, and thereby emphasize the temporal factor, which is inherent in their 'self-acting' origin. The end result is a 'collaborative project' with contributions by the artist himself, by the urban environment and by its inhabitants. Side-by-side with these artworks are 30 photographs from the markedly conceptual *The Chinese* (1994–2002) series by Liu Zheng, with its very moving subject matter. Without any claim to encyclopedic completeness, Liu, in the 1990s, documented a section of the Chinese population that had hitherto been largely invisible, both in society and in the media, and the conditions in which these people lived. In doing so, he succeeded in conveying an impression of the rapid and dramatic sociopolitical upheavals of that time, with an unsparing eye.

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Alicja Kwade's decorative item and Wang Sishun's lead sculpture only superficially appear to constitute a contradiction in this context—in fact, both artworks teach us to truly perceive without jumping to premature conclusions. Despite its prestigious and expensive-looking form and elegant presentation gesture, the raw material of Kwade's *Bordsteinjuwel (Brunnenstraße)*, 2008, was a pebble found on a Berlin street and subsequently polished. This artwork's theme, pointed up by the way it has been processed, is its own status as a thing of value. Wang Sishun is also interested in analyzing the principles of economic standardization, and their consequences as expressed in industrial manufacturing and processing techniques. His folded metal sculpture *The Indeterminate Boundless No. 5* was created specifically to be practical for presentation in an art context; seen from this perspective, the sculpture is a commentary on the entanglements of art with the economy.

As one moves through the exhibition, one reencounters the recurring concept of thematic and media interrelatedness: Benedikt Partenheimer's series *Particulate Matter* replicate, in a painterly aesthetic reminiscent of the works of William Turner, the dense smog of urban landscapes—putting one in mind of Bruce Nauman's conceptual approach to the subject in *L.A. Air*; these images express an unrestricted interest in human beings, and in humanity's living conditions. A cold reality lies behind these romantic photographs—a reality that is often censored out of the media for the benefit of economic interest groups, and of members of the Chinese government.

The break between the visual appearance and the hidden causative factors of an image also plays a role in the oeuvre of the Chinese artist Ma Qiusha. Ma Qiusha's artworks usually begin with the artist's personal surroundings and specific living conditions. They visualize themes that may be taboo, emotional or familiar. In the video artwork *All my sharpness comes from your hardness*, the viewer experiences a symbolic, ambivalent and acoustically forceful image: the impression produced by the brutal wearing-down—and simultaneous sharpening—of skate runners by the passage of the skates over hard ground. Looking at the images entitled *Fog No. 6* and *You (Kaleidoscope No. 2)*, it is as if one can still hear the squeal of metal on asphalt: a tearing through the planar surface occasioned by a psychological force, or a resistance.

The artworks of Cao Fei are also fed by observations of the smallest social unit—the individual, with his or her individual needs—further on, by observations of macrostructures that bring about existential

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changes in everyday life—at work, and in social relationships. For her eight-part photographic series acquired for the Daimler Art Collection, which is entitled *My future is not a dream*, 2006, the artist's subject is the impenetrable world of industrial production in China. Her photos—the product of weeks of discussion and workshops with the workers of an Osram factory in Foshan—show the collision of maximized market efficiency in the form of anonymized production processes, and the intimate real-life worlds and utopias of the factory workers. This photographic series is Cao Fei's attempt to provide an artistic space for these people's wishes for self-fulfillment and self-representation, which are rarely put into words or depicted.

The artist Deng Dafei also frequently addresses peripheries and edges of society. For his video *Dark Utopia II* he looked into the emergence of these so-called “Antizens Agglomeration Areas” - “grey zones” outside Beijing's 5th Ring Road. Deng takes a daring, disconcerting look behind the facade of the modern “Chinese dream”, not as a challenge to the state authorities, but primarily to draw attention to the position of disadvantaged population groups amid these epoch-making transformational processes. !” Deng Dafei declares himself emphatically on the side of the life of the migrant workers, people without whom the construction of the metropolitan cities would not be possible, yet who themselves can never be a part of these cities. He also believes in the significance of the edges, the peripheries, and the supposedly insignificant. In these places, he seeks out possibilities for an imaginary utopia, in which humanity and fellow-feeling – and difference and freedom of opinion – can still be found. In *Dark Utopia II*, Deng Dafei creates ephemeral moments in which the beauty of poetry and the powerful symbolism of fire can overcome social reality in China.

In the cabinet space another artwork by Alicja Kwade: *Kreisel (Inception)* presents a scene from the final sequence of the blockbuster film of the same name by Christopher Nolan: an iconic image symbolizing the deceptiveness of media realities, and the fluid transitions between our ‘waking’ and ‘sleeping’ consciousness. These works have plenty of thematic connections to the nearby artworks by the French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and the Taiwanese artist Chen Chieh-Jen in the next room. The Japanese and Chinese neon sign of ‘Dream’ condenses Gonzalez-Foerster's alienating—poetic and filmic—experience of major Asian cities. Chen re-composes specific biographical events (which are often tragic or traumatic) in the form of photographic re-enactments. He turns material from contemporary history into a ‘timeless’ image—as can be seen from this image from the series entitled *Friend Watan*, which parallels the traditional genre of historical painting. Individuals or specific

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sectors of the population that appear in his photographs and films are regarded critically in relation to their wider social context—in relation to Taiwan, to China, or beyond.

In the final room, we present Cao Fei's film *La Town*, an impossible love story in a mysterious setting frozen in time, a world built from the figures and buildings of model railway enthusiasts. At the end of the film, the life and history of La Town appear sealed in glass museum cases, with historical 'patterns' becoming an authoritarian, selective interpretation of the history of this fictional city. The dreamlike dialogue of the two off-screen voices, inspired by Marguerite Duras' 'Hiroshima mon amour,' escapes from the visual impressions gained from the images, counteracting the horrors of the post-apocalyptic images with the intimacy of a conversation between lovers. Reality and construction, forgetting and remembering, life and death enter into a sinister entanglement in *La Town*.

'On Curbstone Jewels and Cobblestones' concludes with a dialogue between works by Thomas Struth and those of the Chinese concept artist Zhao Zhao, whose artwork inspired the title of the exhibition. These two artworks were created ten years apart—a timespan during which tremendous changes took place in the political agenda and geopolitical significance of China. Struth's 1997 artwork documents a Shanghai street scene objectively and emotionlessly, but the cobblestone glued to the surface of Tiananmen Square by Zhao Zhao must be seen as a subtle, barely perceptible but unmistakable politically-motivated intervention. In an era of individual and social restrictions and a seemingly unstoppable rush toward globalization, Zhao Zhao reveals to us a nonconformist perspective on China's authorities, and their paradoxical system of values. Both photographs confront us with the tension between art and life, but they also remind us, once more, just how much views of China have shifted over the past two decades.

Christian Ganzenberg / Julia Martha Müller

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