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This is the manuscript of a lecture by Karen Smith, given on Sept 16, 2015 at Daimler Contemporary Berlin.

Photography in China

This content of this talk largely centres on an exhibition that I curated that took place in China in 2015 (which was researched between 2012 and 2015). The exhibition came out of a series of projects I had been involved in with photography, the majority of an historic nature, and that began in 2003 with a particular focus on photography in China – and which included looking at work by both Chinese and foreign photographers. This rendered certain ways of seeing, or precisely the differences in ways of seeing, rather marked. This particular exhibition I refer to, entitled Grain to Pixel, spanned a hundred years of photographic enterprise in China by Chinese photographers.

This talk looks at the multiplicity of forms that can be seen to have evolved in the last fifteen years, and how a younger, digital generation is enriching the rather monolithic and pragmatic approach to the photographic medium that had existed largely up to the mid-1990s. Of particular interest here, as a phenomenon that emerged from my research and from the works that were brought together for the exhibition Grain to Pixel, is the force of a Chinese culture, a Chinese sensibility if you will, underlying much of the work in images that appropriate, parody and pun on traditions and sensibilities that are aligned with Eastern, Oriental and esoteric forms of artistic expression, the poetic nuances of presence and absence, which suggest “Chineseness” as a flavour or aura of the work. This flavour is also present in a form that is directly challenged and subverted, in the work of a younger generation of image-makers who are relevant to the “Post-2000” timeframe of this symposium.

Today, almost everyone has a camera at their fingertips and image-making is almost entirely digital. The transition from film format to digital unfolded from the late 1990s and has been experienced with particular speed and breadth in China. In this period, too, photography in China found its own full form of expression. Portable apparatus complemented by an ease of use in situations of low light, rapid motion or macro close range expanded the content, language and forms of photographic expression in ways that were previously unimaginable. This was further expanded by the ever-widening sphere of the internet, with a daily, hourly bombardment of images that could provide a life-time of seeing in a single day, if one was dedicated to absorbing it.

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It has had other effects too; the very ease of use has encouraged a number of photographers to return to early forms of photo-making technology with the aim of re-using outmoded processes, from cumbersome large-format cameras to diverse darkroom techniques. Much of this activity has been aimed at enforcing a creative distance from mass image production; at defining and preserving a photographic aesthetic. This has encouraged a wide range of experimentation and, at times, engendered a return to some questionable conventions of seeing, be that of depicting people in various forms of portraiture or in social situations and posed scenes. A hint of this ambiguity can be found *Simple Songs*, the out-of-time, and so very beautiful series of portraits by Sichuan photographer Luo Dan of a remote people lost to the present, but that were actually taken between 2010 and 2011. Luo Dan observes a real place in this present time and, yet, the people that have been selected as subjects by the photographer are defined by the style of the approach he determined – large-format camera, wet-plate colloidal process, meticulously executed on site and with the requisite time required, the slowed-down pace of the photographic act; in time / in step perhaps with the pace of life in this remote mountain valley, and thus enhancing the mystery and magic that suffuse his retiring, modest, doe-eyed subjects. No matter, therefore, how beautiful the results appear, they conjure instant allusions to exotic Oriental *types* with no clear indication if this is parody or homage, subversion or absorption of established ways of seeing – the civilised looking at the savage, the man burdened by the weight of knowledge and social responsibility romanticising the innocence of freedom and freedom from possession – is in fact pastiche or purely the discovery of the curious adopting unconsciously established patterns of looking. It is perhaps a mixture of all these things; and might be said to represent the ways in which the contemporary mind in China is mapping its own state of being and identity vis-à-vis physiognomic and cultural difference in others, in social status, through the environment or the current flow of information and readings of fact, fiction, of appropriation and creativity, and the visibility and power of the individual versus “community”, of whatever form that may take.

Mostly, advances in digital technology are giving a different meaning to the “truth” of a photograph. Photoshop is now widely accepted as a beneficial condition of the times, but some of the images produced as photographs today are almost entirely digital constructs assembled by a skilled hand that manipulates or compiles the image using a computer. This creates a new world of possibilities for artists to work with photography, but also suggests a problematic future for photography as we know it should it assume entirely camera-less form. The diverse group of photographers whose works are discussed here lay claim to a wide-ranging body of

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images and approaches that, via myriad topics and all manner of formats, reveal China through recent decades to today in all its rich complexity. A quick comparison of earlier documentary photographs, such as those by Yuan Dongping, one of China's first independent photographers, with those of a contemporary artist like Maleonn (b.1972) or digital fashion creative Chen Man (b.1980) underlines the shift in values.

Yet, as this change unfolds, patterns of seeing have not evolved in China exactly as they did in the West. Today, Chinese come to looking at a moment when everything is potential spectacle and everything is photographed all the time, but in terms of a photograph, the age that Sontag described fifty years ago -- "In China (seeing) is connected only with continuity. Not only are there proper subjects for the camera, those which are positive, inspirational and orderly, but there are proper ways of photographing, which derive from notions about the moral order of space that preclude the very idea of photographic seeing."¹ -- is not yet completely dispelled. As another Sichuan-based photographer Li Lang (b.1971) demonstrates with his portraits of people in the south-western region. The people stand in nature for a family group portrait in front of a backdrop printed with a cartoonish fantasy forest motif. Why is it that the fantasy forest trees prevail even when the real thing is all around?

For the purpose of controlling the timing here, I will present a handful of examples of works by various photographers at work now. These are roughly divided into sections that reflect the varying areas of interest in "the photographic endeavour" as established in the first century of photography's existence, and which serves to highlight one of the areas I am interested in, which is the Chinese ways of seeing vis-à-vis the development of photography in the West.

Society / Human Experience

By the early 2000s, opening and reform, begun in China, in the late 1970s, had opened up with creative and cultural field significantly. Zhang Hai'er, a successful commercial photographer represented by the Vu Agency in Paris, now began in earnest a series of images, portraits, in the vein of Brassai, that capture a subculture of alternative modes of being; cross-dressers, swingers, creatures of the dark and of deviant sexual preference, or so it might appear. The photographs are astonishing for the time in which they were created, but, in adopting an approach affirmed by Brassai in Paris, by Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin in New York, this body of work can also be seen as an early example of reclaiming the possibility of discovering, through

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Classic, p.170

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a native lens, social types in China; seeing people who were otherwise entirely invisible. This was the typical, or predictable, introduction in China into ways of seeing one form of “the other”, the social misfits in society. Here, we can also acknowledge the work done by Han Lei in the late 1980s to the early 2000s in his home town Kaifeng.

In the 1990s, individual photographers such as Lv Nan (b.1962), Liu Zheng (b.1969) and Yuan Dongping (b.1956) had come to see their goal as being to bring photography back to real (meaningful, social) issues. They worked thematically to create series of documentary photographs, for example as patients in a typical mental hospital, underground Catholic communities, communities attached to China’s illegal mines, and ethnic studies of peoples in Tibet and Xinjiang. These subjects were inevitably sensitive for the times. The apparent enthusiasm for “the other” – for that which is “not us” – as a means for unlocking truth about social reality in China was being encouraged by the photographers’ awareness of existing modes of seeing in the West established by photographers like Brassai, August Sander, Arbus and Richard Avedon, whose observations were instrumental in making visible what in most societies went unseen. There were significant restrictions placed upon what could be published in China the 1980s but that did not stop the photographers from making a comparable array of dramatic essays on modern life, which often circulated from hand to hand as self-printed albums of small photographs. The self-organised publication *New Photography*, produced by Liu Zheng together with Rong Rong (b.1968), was only possible towards the end of the 1990s.

The sense of projected reality in Song Chao’s (b.1979) portraits of miners which began in 1998 is blatantly theatrical – not least for the drama of the frame, which takes a cue from Richard Avedon’s style – but none the less convincing for that. We sense this is not playacting in the vein of artist-styled performances in the 1990s. Here is an example of a photographer taking an established cultural form of seeing, as images of workers, the bedrock of Chinese society, and turning the convention on its head. In Song Chao’s frames the miners are no longer idealized workers see labouring for the national advance – as photographed by Cai Shangxiong 1954, or even by Zhuang Hui at the East is Red Tractor Factory in Luoyang in the mid-1990s. Instead, they are real people, doing a job that is dirty, tough and dangerous given the extraordinary number of deaths that occur each year, yet, they retain their dignity and a sense of humour. The empathy channelled through the photographs has a direct correlation with Song Chao’s personal experience in the mines; he doesn’t need to show a disaster to humanize these men or heroics to command respect.

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Mu Ge's (b.1979) series *Going Home* 2005 shares an approach with Song Chao's *Miners* in that both photographers are at home in the subject and neither choose spectacle to convey the complex issues at stake. Mu Ge's photographs are also a series of poignant portraits of a people on the brink of a new life. The removal of communities from regions along the riverside of the Three Gorges for what was one of the largest relocation programmes ever undertaken. Here the mood melancholy, mournful. There is little action shown but waiting.

We can also look here to the collective social groups photographed by Li Nan (b.1961) and Di Jinjun (b.1978), the single portraits of his generation but that also overlap with the interest in returning to outmoded photographic formats – he also works with wet plate colloidal processes here. Li Nan's works seem to reference the group portraits of tradition and of that format used by Zhuang Hui in the 1990s for his action portraits involving entire communities, and yet speak of the present and the complexities of the new communities of workers under the impact of socialist economics with a capitalist bent.

In a different way, in seeking to map the social communities which populate China – a kind of Kerouac on-the-road concept meets the visual style of Robert Frank's *The Americans* way – many photographers have embarked upon contemporary journeys, one influential example being that of Luo Dan (who, before taking himself off to distant places, made epic journeys across China from east to west along the 315 Highway and from north to south along the eastern seaboard). Another is Zhang Xiao (b.1981) who produced a great series of portraits and images of local people in weird and wonderful array in the provincial areas.

These have encouraged in a quiet way the various photographers' questioning of identity, identities in a multiple sense. Again, in the works by Li Lang that I referred to earlier, images of the Yi minority people in the south-western provinces evoke a delightful innocence, picturesque quality that feels timeless. Li Lang uses the relationship between people and photography, as a counterpoint to the Yi peoples' relationship with modernity. The traditional dress of the Yi people is a daily habit but also a source of identity. Do we see expressions changing, allusions to new yearning for change, modernization? Not really. But perhaps like many things in a state of change, it is only a matter of time and this image will have been erased from daily life by the process of advance, living on in photographs alone. A circumstance shared by the minority groups living in the remote mountain area of the Nu River gorge, in the southern province of Yunnan who appear in Luo Dan's portraits.

One photographer who is really grappling with the alienated aura of the misfit – or of the alienating anonymity of contemporary lives experienced in provincial cities – is

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Sun Yanchu (b.1978). He is one of the most interesting and innovative photographers at work in China today, and in a fashion that feels unique, largely because he himself lives such an isolated existence, which is the essential context in which he makes his work. Although, courtesy of the internet he has access to a great deal of information; certainly more than in his early years as a photographer, and it has, to a small degree inspired his visual language and experiments with image-making. One might say that his work more in the vein of Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov than any other local (Chinese) or international “great” photographer. He still works for a newspaper in Zhengzhou, but his photographs have little to do with reporting daily news. The portfolio of works presented in 2009 at Three Shadows Art Photography Centre (and selected from among several hundred entries to the Young Photographer’s Award) was from a series titled *Obsessed* (2004-11). Sun Yanchu is obsessed with a state of mind – that alienation within contemporary life and its negligible value attached to life, to living, although in poor parts of China, one suspects that this has always been the case. The camera is his tool for extracting that state of mind from the physical world. It is a mode of working; he takes a camera with him everywhere. He captures simple elements of reality as they are experienced, often out of the corner of the eye and without conscious thought. Hence, the blur of the landscapes seen here, almost as if we feel the wind rushing through the trees. Here social status or identity is expressed in an abstract sense but by means that make the aura prescient for their concreteness.

Doing this well too from the early 2000s is the Shanghai-based duo Birdhead – Ji Weiyu (b.1980) and Song Tao (b.1979), which focus on the denser urban metropolis of Shanghai. They see themselves as documenting their world, which they do in an approach that is consciously random; fragments of life and environment. At the same time, the approach is specific, for the pair carries a camera at all times, ready to capture any detail of the environment, of human gesture or expression, or any scene that catches their attention. Here, alighted upon the delightful single frame of a surveillance camera which speaks to the expanding presence of cameras in daily life. The value of this body of work is as much archival as artistic. Similar to street photographers such as America’s Vivian Maier and Britain’s Tony Ray-Jones, the images are like a tunnel through which we will always pass back in time to this era.

Place / Landscape / Chinese culture

As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, one of the elements that reasserted itself over and over again through researching photography post—2000 is the love of, or the use of landscape as a motif. This is not merely suggesting a love of the land in the

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vein of Ansel Adams (1902-84) or Charlie Waite (b.1949), but a return to the kind of natural elements which are more familiarly found in the ink painting tradition, and which are thus slightly different from what the term “landscape” implies to a Western artistic practice. This particular way of invoking nature and landscape visually using a camera or photograph relates to the conventions of a cultural tradition which is often constructed in praise of absence, and emptiness, as clearly experienced in the works of Taca Sui (b.1984) and even Chen Wei’s (b.1980) delicate, ethereal “portraits”, which use space a signifier of persona. Frequently, the appropriation of such language is chosen as a means of reacting to the tradition, or of subverting the cultural convention. It is made complex because some photographers can be seen to be reinventing traditions that the same time.

In 2006, Adou (b.1973) spent a year travelling across the provinces of Gansu, Mongolia, and Qinghai with the aim of seeking out introspection, and to find a new vision of reality. He titled the series that resulted *Samalada*, which is the local name for the region in which the subjects, also the Yi minority, live. The photographs place particular emphasis upon the relationship between man and nature, mysticism of ancient ritual and the working realities of daily life. The images are further enhanced by the aged texture of the negatives, which was caused by the chemicals used to develop the film and the film being out of date. Ethereal though they may seem neither Luo Dan, Adou nor Mu Ge proffers these lands as a paradise to which Man ought to return. The remoteness of these lives, the incongruity with the hard-edged geometry of modern urban landscapes accentuates the fragility of tradition in these far-flung regions. It also provides, in context of China, a striking contrast to the pace of city life familiar to most people today. “Today” is important to remember when contemplating these works for in spite of their black-and-white throw-back to a past era, the dates are a wake-up call to parallel times, parallel worlds in which different peoples can exist within the same geographical region and dateline. The landscapes are perennially misty, dank, dark, with rain filled skies and rain-sodden plains, which suggest a mournful existence in places that seem to reject the inhabitants by force of elements.

These photographs are steeped in nostalgia, less as a conscious attempt to reclaim the past, and more as if a retreat from the intensity and danger of the modern world. They are also part of a resurgent interest in exploring actual land masses, hence the journeys undertaken, and in line with a renewed cultural value attached to indigenous aesthetics in which an abstracted essence of landscape plays a central role.

The recent work of Hai Bo (b.1962) returns to the landscapes of the northeast, places known to the artist, sentimentalism of his age perhaps, but haunting use of

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camera in a place to capture a scene. Similarly, an aura found in the work Zhuang Hui has done with photography in recent years – from the collection of seemingly casual images that comprise *Ten Years* (1993-2002) to the Photo Studio in Yumen.

All these photographers are indulging in a “return” to their point of origin, their birthplaces. Here another series from Zhang Xiao, from his home town in Yantai, and the use of black and white Polaroids and the wet-transfer process that separates the top layer of the Polaroid making each image unique and like a painting in one sweep.

Nostalgia is more readily invoked in images created using traditional, obsolete photographic techniques such as the antique wet plate negatives, known as the colloidal process deployed by Luo Dan and Di Jinjun, the cyanotypes created by Zhang Dali (b.1963), Han Lei’s use of lenticular printing and Zhang Xiao’s return to the Polaroid and the pigments that define this material. The works transport us to another world, another time and experience, using the most subtle of means to do so. This is the case with Taca Sui, whose grey-toned square-frame photographs are suffused with this aura of indigenous poetics. As both scenes from the landscapes and details of intimate parts of these, the images are suffused with stillness disturbed only by a whisper of wind or a drop of falling rain, and a muffled air of silence

Lin Ran (b.1958) also chooses the old-fashioned large format camera with its big negatives that achieve extraordinary detail. He travels great distances to meditate on the land and produces only one or two photographs per year; a pace dictated in part by the long journeys taken to arrive at empty, untouched tracts of land he photographs. Each scene is captured, solidly, enduringly, with an air of immutability and without a single person present to confront eternity with mortality. That distance is transposed into the photographs as an aura of suspended human time. Instead time is driven by elemental forces. Lin Ran’s wide open vistas, empty yet full of detail, are made all the more powerful when seen in a gallery setting.

One artist using new technology to tackle an age-old subject is Kan Xuan (b.1972) who, between 2013 and 2014, spent months travelling across China to explore all remaining traces of the myriad emperors’ tombs. Using an iPhone, Kan Xuan amassed tens of thousands of images. The greater portion of the images was done as straight shots. Some were manipulated to rather dramatic effect to take on the aura of the area or to enhance the drama of the land and its contours and contrasts as Kan Xuan experienced them; generally speaking, the format achieves a similar quality associated with the now defunct Polaroid process, which is part of the appeal. What makes this body of works fascinating is that the viewer is afforded the same visual experience as Kan Xuan mapping these remote and, in some cases, forgotten sites. Without the technological capability of this smart phone, it is hard to

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imagine how the project could have been approached in the same spirit of directness.

Softer invocations of China's painterly traditions are found in a number of more purely landscape or picturesque constructs like the ethereal black-and-white vistas compiled by Yang Yongliang (b.1980) using myriad small details of contemporary construction sites to imitate traditional landscapes, and the distinct colouring of mineral pigments used in similarly "*shanshui*-styled" landscapes by Yao Lu (b.1967). These are also constructed but from images of garbage: the ugly made beautiful by the camera's deceit.

In an homage to what appears to be a staple of Western art history, over two years beginning in 2011, Jiang Zhi (b.1971) produced a series of floral arrangements titled *Love Letters*; beautiful blooms arranged in the manner of a Dutch still-life and in the process of being consumed by fire. The large volume of Jiang Zhi's *Love Letters* indicates the obsessive nature of love, in pain as in pleasure, but so does the care brought to composing them. A slightly tangential example is Chen Wei, whose still lifes are convened to reflect the artist's scepticism about pictorial meaning and narratives invented to speak of reality. He sees the task of the artist to deconstruct the systems through which images flow, and provide critical considerations of the ways images act upon us.

Playing both with a familiar visual model and with a contemporary take on fantasy, in 2006, Jiang Zhi produced an uplifting construct, in which a shining rainbow filled the air above a contemporary urban skyline; in his words "a magical landscape of the metropolis". Jiang Zhi explained his interest in light as prompted by the proliferation of neon in his then home base Shenzhen, southern China. A close look reveals the rainbows as an assemblage of mini neon signs and lights. They symbolize the grand economic-growth narrative of Shenzhen, but injecting doubt to the idealized image proffered. Neon lights are pretty to look at and like so many things in life, they have a limited lifespan.

Youth Culture / Iconography

In the mid-1990s, Wang Qingsong (b.1966) began with a style that was rather fantastical, dressing up (and stripping down) in front of the camera to perform messages and concepts in ways that appeared almost kitsch. Beyond the somewhat simplistic surface, he was raising profound questions about the direction in which society was heading as materialism made ever greater inroads to the socialist culture. He portrayed himself as Buddha, Shiva, Christ, and a plethora of revered icons enmeshed in lavish clusters of consumer products and a mocking view of the

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ways in which developing nation's were reduced to fawning upon the first world to maintain economic balance and any hope of advance. But from this type of humanist indignation, Wang Qingsong evolved a methodology for his photographs, which involved ever greater casts of people and the construction of complex sets to convey his experience of the times. Following the approach he began in these works, in the 2000s he developed a style that now represents an extraordinary diversity of process, and of resources brought to creating them. Wang Qingsong is possibly the most serious of artists using photography and photography's narrative power as his tool.

In terms of constructing fantasies and narratives of the times, much of the drama and artistry that has been attempted and which centred on a particularly outlandish brand of fantasy or high-tech, high-production value approach, soon seemed jaded.

The proliferation of photographic practice that occurred now related to developments in the contemporary art world in China. Increasingly aware of contemporary art's diverse forms, and the respect that photography was accorded internationally, artists carried out a wide range of experiments using cameras. Given its association with truth, reality, photography provided a way to survey the socio-political, economic and cultural environment in a direct, contemporary way. The camera was now responsible for a range of dramatic, shocking, and seductive images. They required little personal intervention, yet the final work was loaded with implications and inferences. In the 1990s, few of these interventions had as yet direct interest in the medium's traditional values. Concept was everything, with a generous portion of fantasy woven into the approach. Early fantasists, like Hong Lei, began manipulating various mechanics of the craft and drawing directly onto negatives. He also was among the first to appropriate literary devices to photography, not for specific reasons of narrative, although that would come later in his fantastic landscapes (*Landscape with Aliens*, 2005) but to unravel mysteries of traditional art and history and their relevance to the past. This is a theme further developed in the extraordinary work of Ma Liang (Maleonn), whose fantasies are a combination of physical construct, theatrical enactment, pictorial assemblage and painting/calligraphy. The works have an edge to them that is very contemporary.

Whether as landscape, portraiture, narrative or fantasy, these approaches indicate a seam of pictorialism that seemed to want to align itself with painting. Here, Zhang Wei (b.1977) has drawn inspiration from iconic Western figure paintings, which he reproduces as a meticulous construct using multiple details from portraits of ordinary individuals. A similar technique is also applied to imitated portraits of contemporary celebrities. The young photographer Huang Xiaoliang (b.1985) creates

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composite compositions using projections and shadow play to effect images that appear more like drawings than photographs.

When a new wave of experimentation began in the new millennium, it was not only the viewer's experience of photography and attitude towards what may or may not be termed a photograph that was challenged. Photographers tested technical limits too. Artist Geng Jianyi (b.1962) began working with photography in 1990, and continues to find new means to redeploy its tools and techniques. By the late 1990s, his experiments focused on the materials of photography, from the chemicals used to develop photographs to the paper upon which they are printed. This might involve a Dada-like form of automatic drawing, where the photograph drew itself over time as the chemically-altered paper was exposed to light outside of the darkroom, as well as using developer to draw directly onto photographic paper in the darkroom. Geng Jianyi's work represents an innovative seam of art photography in China.

There is a similar feel to Sun Yanchu's experiments, beginning 2014, with contemporary tools of technology – smart phones and images as circulated on social networks. These take the form of a series of miniature, hand-coloured photographs that appear to be a throw-back to mid-20th century portrayals of women between movie stills and advertising, but which due to the handling of the content as a photographic object are very much of these times.

Icons are the substance of Yang Fudong's recent work with photography. The style is tied to nostalgia, too, which is a key emotion in the work of this universally acclaimed filmmaker. Yang Fudong (b.1971) uses photography to tackle the contradictory confluence of present and past, reality and idealized images of tradition and society. *International Hotel 1* is taken from a 2010 series of the same name, in which this musing finds perfect expression in the innocent glamour of what appears to be a picture-perfect past, the Shanghai beauty untroubled by issues of contemporary unrest, violence, inequality, injustice, pollution or terrorism. Yet, here, Yang Fudong's visualization is so perfectly plausible. We (want to) believe life must have been this way, and mourn its passing.

At the purely abstract end of the spectrum, artists work with tonality to control the texture and colour of their works. Jiang Pengyi (b.1977) and Feng Yan (b.1963) have more or less abandoned subject altogether and use Polaroid film light and to compose images of intensely pigmented chroma saturation.

With digital photography and the proliferation of images used daily in the world, photographers now have backgrounds in other fields, artistic or professions. The new synergy is an artiste like Chi Lei (Chilli) (b.1981), who describes himself as specialising in the interactive application of photography and painting, combining "the weird,

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strange and iconic super-realism of photography” to “challenge the definition of art and pop culture”. He is as “an audio mixer playing with the rapidly changing world”.

Part of the change is the interchangeability between art and fashion, where photography plays an elemental role in both. The rise of youth culture and economic growth and materialism in China paved the way for a new generation of contemporary photographers like Chilli, and in particular Chen Man. It was way back in the mid-1840s, that a German photographer first invented a technique for retouching negatives. This has especially resonance in China for under Mao, with the goal of constructing a flawless system for delivering socialism’s messages widespread use was made of retouching. China’s technicians were perhaps second to none; as Zhang Dali demonstrated in his exhaustive project *A Second History* which went to great lengths to identify all such changes made. Sontag noted that “News that the camera could lie made getting photographed much more popular.”² That may account for the obsession with selfies today, but al provide an interesting context for the work Chen Man does cleaning up and perfecting the photographic images she takes. It is what lends her work great demand: Chen Man’s distinct brand of high-polish whimsy and fantastical kitsch has helped to make the artist as much of a creative icon for her generation as the icons she creates.

To Conclude

The evolution of photography in China post-2000 has been aided by the founding of new institutions, galleries and festivals focused on the medium. These include Pingyao Photography Festival, Lianzhou International Photography Festival, Three Shadows Photography Award, and now the Shanghai Center of Photography (SCoP). The aesthetic styles are today far reaching and the two strands previously stood apart, documentary and conceptual, have benefitted from the dismantling of unnecessary boundaries. The question of how we define photography now remains a challenging one. Photographic images have an exclusive monopoly on communicating creativity, artistic expression and the experiences of culture. Some, like those by Wu Shankun, no longer require a camera. The image is constructed digitally, almost pixel by pixel, using the matrix of the computer screen and an assemblage of images found and pieced together at will. Beautiful, delicate, hard to fathom – they look as if they might be paintings, they are real in the sense of feeling surreal... are they photographs at all?

They are a perfect example of how the multitude of snaps created and

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, “The Heroism of Vision”, p.86, Penguin Classic, 2008

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consumed each day is changing the nature of photography, not least the ability of people to embrace the work of practicing photographers. This embrace of photography in general is an extraordinary phenomenon in China. Certainly, everyone is photography-savvy now, and although photography is not practiced by most people as art, it is yet the most democratic of mediums.

Grain to Pixel was at Shanghai Center of Photography September to December 2015. It opens at Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne Australia, June 2016.

Some of the information in this text first appeared as part of the catalogue essay for Grain to Pixel.

Karen Smith

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