

Art is not enough. Not enough!

But this was China as Westerners imagine it: exquisite, illogical, very entertaining.

Eileen Chang, "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier", translation by Karen S. Kingsbury, 2007

I like to play with words. Not usually - because as a filmmaker I prefer pictures – but sometimes, if not often. First and foremost, I am interested in images; depictions of complex situations, recordings of vanishing moments - images of the invisible. That means, in a way, thinking in images – finding not only 'truth', but even 'sapience', a deeper knowledge¹⁾). When we started on 40+4, this was the over all concern: words and/or pictures.

In the field of contemporary art in Shanghai, - a very lively, fast changing and dynamic scene, looked upon with almost greedy fascination by the West - we perceived an underlying uneasiness which we wanted to get a hold on – find out why there was something like a restriction in enthusiasm, a limit in experimentation and spontaneity, a constrain in expression, may be sometimes even fear – fear of too open and too wild a blossoming of creativity. We had observed the fright of the artist of the opening of his show – or of how long it would take him to find a secure way of expression that would not run the risk of being controversial. – After all, there had been quite a few stories of penalizing actions, stopping vernissages, closing exhibitions, prohibiting events etc. which all had left their educational mark. Was there not a short-winded attitude towards all art in China – similar to the restricted and over-conscious way of talking? - or rather non-talking? Talking about history seems always difficult; one senses an air of patient leniency, as if everyone was waiting for the time when one would come around to a sensible point of view. And then history – what is it but a heap of old – old! - stories. Who needs that? Certain things in the past that made history are not good to talk about, so watch what you are saying. It seemed that just as there is a certain fear of playing with words, there is also a restriction in playing with images. Some experts mentioned these indications in the context of lack of criticism, or even of theory. Today, the most talkative section of art is the art markets – although the vocabulary there is numbers.

In spite of all this, there is a vast pool of creativity, unruly activity in art, swarms and herds of visual activists – artists – in Shanghai who - by declaring themselves as artists – recognize to have the duty to be free, unruly and independent.

How could we find answers – and images of art and artist in Shanghai *about* life under these restrictions – and, double bind, *with* these restrictions we observed? There was, if we would go straight ahead and talk to everyone, the risk of getting all the right answers – but nothing else.

¹⁾ There are numerous theories about 'thinking in images' instead of in 'words' – the forming of 'terms' out of the summation of images to an abstract perception; de-concretization of concrete images – the forming of an idea. Thinking in images is an alternative, valid form of thought process that is to differentiate from thinking in imageless terms. Thinking in images however remains in great complexity of concrete facts that contain, on the one hand matter-of-fact realities, and on the other hand, by not giving an interpretation, great ambiguity or openness.

I imagined all the famous and genial artist sitting in front of an aquamarine blue curtain, lit in a most perfect way with a blue edge on the hair, a golden soft shine from the left front to show their forbearing thoughtfulness, and a hard main light from the right marking the real dynamic personality of the artist. He would be expertly answering and talking about his works as if they were natural wonders of the world of the stock market.

We had to avoid just another art interview full of reverence and awe. We wanted to find out the role of art and of artists in the society of Shanghai today. That is why we developed, in a long discursive process, a set of questions that were simple, straightforward, unsentimental, factual – avoiding any loophole for ambiguous, highflying big talk. Facts of life, of the life of artists, that was what we wanted. The philosophy we could do ourselves.

We also did not want to include the art works in this ‘investigation’ – that was what it, by necessity, became: – a research project. A firm set of rules and measurable methods were required: instruments, methodology, statistics. The instruments we developed were a set of cards like from a card play (designed by Huang Kui), carrying the questions in certain groups – read to our interviewees in a high official tone like from the court announcer in Chen Kaige’s movie ‘Jing ke ci qin wang’ (The Emperor and the Assassin, 1998). This voice (by Xu Jie) brought a wonderful coldness of accountability back into any cosy situation on the verge of becoming too comradely. The other important instruments are DV cameras, one or two or three, recording the answers of our interviewees. Since we had to avoid any hint of fake security and brazenness in the question-and-answer-game, we did not want to arrange any special situation for the interviewees - we wanted to protocol the answers – it was not a matter of film art, of cinematography, of visual design – it was nothing but a protocol. And we recorded the answers, the talking, the words.

So, there we were – would it become a play of words after all, and nothing else? I would enjoy this, too. But it turned out that the visual material, as always with moving images, is nothing but the result of an analytical process in course of which the most hidden, the most unlike and the most enlightening facts and relations and connections appear. The old Film, later Video, and today the DV are surgical instruments of analysis²⁾ – and they bare the secrets of social and psychic connectivity.

Now seeing the images of our research is extremely exciting – the faces have an intensity that does not stem from photographic excellence. We decided to record the “interrogations” only with hand held cameras, without any artificial light, without any studio like arrangements. We played according to the rules of the Danish Dogma 95 without indorsing Lars van Trier’s silly PR stunt. Our recording was a method of almost scientific purity and factual materiality without any poor-man’s vanity.

The resulting audio and visual material has a stark and blunt touch to it. No atelier atmosphere, no picturesque studio, no paintings or works of art, no attractive places or exotic events. Nothing but talk – nothing but talking heads. While editing the ninety or so of hours of

²⁾ The whole process of creating and preserving moving images requires, historically and technologically, analytical processes – a method of deconstruction and reconstruction – and what the filmic technology with its 24 frames/sec did, that necessarily happened adequately or similarly in philological or philosophical / spiritual or intellectual processes, too. That is actually the main ambition and passion of every film maker – cognition / cognizance / gnosis / knowledge through images / seeing / recognition ...

material (with Zhu Xiao Wen) I was reminded of earlier examples of documentary films that bore the mark of this stark and straight methodology. One of the first films in this genre of 'talking heads' is the famous 'Point of Order' (1964) by Emile de Antonio, a montage compiled from TV footage of the 1954 McCarthy hearings³), that showed for the first time the power of the image when drama and destiny are happening in the heads of people. Most recent examples, like 'The Himmler Project' (2000) or 'The Hamburg Lectures' (2007) by Romuald Karmakar, go radically into the direction of trusting the word only, trying to deconstruct any visual information beyond verbal information. Our experiment resulted in the opposite – the visual takes up a stark and powerful part of information, one that presents much more than can be – and, more importantly, *wants* to be – said by words. 40+4 avoids any seemingly artistic cinematography and any designing of places, light, sounds, or people – it trusts the workings of the media machinery as an analytical instrument.

And yet – seeing the faces now, in their multiplicity and diversity, there is, although it is shot almost entirely in close-ups, the feeling of vast landscapes. Landscapes of spirit, of intellect and fervor. The visual, i.e. the *presence* of their thinking is not *on* the screen – it is right *before* the screen. There is a sense of suspense, carried by nothing but an extremely lean text that is *working* with words, that is struggling against a paralyzing confusion that often is the result of uncritical and unquestioned fusion. Questions – and answers – are simple, yet they are about the most complex facts of life. They are about survival; they are about the matters of one's place in society, in history, in value. We play with words – in a serious, gutsy way; we play with statistics – in a pristine, intimate and singular way. In a wider sense, it's all about art – the role of art. Beyond the existential orientation and the mental state of the individual, beyond any personal opinion. In this one way, the installation 40+4 is a close-up study of 40 artists in Shanghai, but in another, it is also a study of art in modern China – and of the role of the artist in the history of mankind.

The installation shows China in a different way than China is usually presented in the West – and as it is present in Western imagination and memory. I like the way it became a continuous pattern of text that nevertheless embraces us visually, takes us into intense discourse about human positions. It is a play with imaginations. Irregardless of language and exotism of cultural differences, it touches us closely and intimately – although it is done with great distance and coolness. It plays on many strings, it is a work of synchronicity in a deeper sense than images and sound⁴). It shows an invisible net of reality, and it does not show, as Eileen Chang's motto ironically suggested, the 'exquisite, illogical, very entertaining' side of China we see so often in art – this is much closer to the bone.

³) "Like most good documentaries it focuses on a small theme. The power of this movie comes mainly from ... peoples' facial expressions and appearances, words taken out of context and revisionist history. This power was due entirely to the fact that there was no script, no actors, no makeup artists, no retakes and special effects. This movie was cinema verite..." (IMBD-Comment)

⁴) 'The idea of synchronicity is that the conceptual relationship of minds, defined by the relationship between ideas, is intricately structured in its own logical way and gives rise to relationships which have nothing to do with causal relationships in which a cause precedes an effect. Instead, causal relationships are understood as simultaneous – that is, the cause and effect occur at the same time. Synchronous events reveal an underlying pattern, a conceptual framework which encompasses, but is larger than, any of the systems which display the synchronicity.' (Wikipedia)