

Floating signs : art as life, life as art in contemporary Hong Kong

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FLOATING SIGNS: ART AS LIFE, LIFE AS ART IN CONTEMPORARY HONG KONG

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*Niemals wissen wir wo wir sind
Auf einer Waldstrecke auf der Erde, im Wind
auf einem Bild, auf einem Blatt Papier
"Hier" ist die tödliche Vokabel
Matthias Göritz: Leerer Plastikbeutel*

Following Nietzsche's re-evaluation of all values modernism, especially post-modernism takes great pleasure in surprising man by constantly bringing up new issues in a changing world. During past decades, one was told of a scientific turn, of a linguistic turn, of a pictorial turn, of a translator's turn and of a performative turn. It is only a question of time when there will be another turn. The only thing that seems to last behind all these turns is the uncertainty of human cognition and knowledge.

"Xue er zhi bu zu" (学而知不足) is an old Chinese saying going back to The Book of Rites (Liji XXVIII.3: Xueji), it means that "any kind of learning leads to the realization that one's acquired wisdom is insufficient." This is not quite the same as what underlies the theoretical framework of the performative, but it is a good starting-point for our deliberations. *Xue, mana (bu)* in Japanese, actually was a ritual of imitating one's ancestors and reciting the classical texts aloud that were handed down by them. The insight into one's insufficiency at the end of one's studies has to do with the fact that one can never become an ancestor or come as close to them as one would want to. Still, traditional Chinese culture is an optimistic one, claiming it possible to obtain knowledge that can be accumulated. What then does *bu zu* (insufficient) mean? It means that one's endeavours have their limits in time and space.¹

Contrary to this view, modern man has to realize that no cognition or knowledge can be taken for granted at all. What seems to be sure today will be

1 Many pieces of information and material were given to me when I was doing interviews with artists in Hong Kong at the end of March 2003.

debatable tomorrow. This includes ourselves. We do not know who we are, where we come from, and where we go to. In this respect all signs given by tradition, by religion, by ancestors, by teachers, even by science begin to float. There is nothing we can be certain of: no text, no theory, no image. Presentation has replaced representation. Things only mean what they are at the very moment they are seen, heard, spoken of, or acted upon. They tend to disappear as soon as they are visualized. Among the five senses, seeing has become the most important sense organ. This is the reason why photography, film, slide and video have gained so much weight in the arts meanwhile.²

Transition, transience, transitoriness, these are the keywords of post-modernism, and at the same time they are also characteristic of the performative. For some scholars in post-modern studies, Hong Kong might be called the symbol of transience: from political, social, architectural and artistic points of view, this metropolis embodies constant change.³ Everything dissolves into something new and is replaced by ideas and things that are doomed to vanish as soon as they seem to have taken on a fixed form. Artists in Hong Kong, being aware of all these changes that every day take place around them, turn their experiences into works of art, but so far little scholarly attention has been paid to the art scene of this former Crown Colony.

Now I would like to introduce three photographers by making use of the theoretical background of the conference. As no one has tried to do this before, some difficulties may be unavoidable. The artists are Almond Chu (朱德华, Zhu Dehua in Mandarin; Chu Tak-wah in Cantonese, b. 1962), Ann Mak (麦安, Mai An in Mandarin, b. 1961) and Hisun Wong (王希慎, Wang Xishen in Mandarin, b. 1958). Their artistic enterprise is not only restricted to photography, as their interests and works also include installation, video art or art collection. Though their art is quite different, they share a certain life style that blurs the distinction between art and life. The aesthetic principles that underlie their artistic works are also the principles that structure their homes and their clothing. In this respect

2 Cf. *Paragrana* 10.1 / 2001 (Theorien des Performativen). In most cases this issue can be read as a request for funding or as a report about the work in progress.

3 Ackbar Abbas: "Introduction. The Last Emporium: Verse and Cultural Space," in: Leung Ping-kwan: *City at the End of Time*. Translated by Gordon T. Osing and the author. Cultural Studies Series Nr. 3. Hong Kong. Twilight Books Company in association with Department of Comparative Literature, University of Hongkong. 1992, pp. 3–19; Rey Chow: *Ethics after Idealism. Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading*. Bloomington and Indianapolis. Indiana University Press 1998; David Clarke: *Hong Kong Art. Culture and Decolonization*. London. Reaktion Books 2001.

their life is a continuation of their art. Life is art and art is life. Both can be regarded as staging the performative. These three artists differ from each other in so far as their pursuit is not quite the same: Almond Chu searches for timelessness in his art, Hisun Wong for the remote past, and Ann Mak for the present moment. Eternity, nostalgia and the fugitive would be the right keywords for the artistic project of these three representatives. As they share the same aim, i.e. permanent beauty, my reflections at the beginning of my paper might seem to be contradictory to the following comments. However, one has to bear in mind that their undertaking is inseparable from performance and only possible through the practice of ritual, ceremony and symbol, which help to dramatize their art. In this respect their art is a staged battle against the transitoriness of life.

I.

Just as in the case of Ann Mak, one has to take into consideration that Almond Chu's way to photography was not a direct one. He started as a painter and still draws his sketches before he takes his photos. What can be seen in his drawings is that he outlines his photos as a theatrical play that has to be performed on a stage. The same is true for his videos and installations, which he, however, only regards as a minor form of exercise or preparation for his photographs. Almond Chu, who used to paint in oils daily from dawn to dusk, finally gave up this strenuous enterprise when he discovered that he just learnt a Western technique without any spiritual enrichment. He regained his confidence in his art when he was introduced to the camera called Hasselblad. It was its square format that decided his way in the end. That is why one might still conclude that the change from painting to photography was just a change from one frame to another, from rectangle to square. It was, however, also a change of places: from Hong Kong to Japan. The most influential person was his Japanese teacher Iizawa Kôtarô and, finally, Japanese life style. Though the encounter with New York was a turning point for Almond Chu in 1993, Japan was and is still more influential than the New World. In 1983 he left Hong Kong for Tokyo. When he had lived in the former Crown Colony he first studied graphic design at the First Institute of Art and Design, then traditional oil painting in evening courses. In both cases he did not get what he wanted to find. In contrast, by studying photography at Tokyo College of Photography from where he graduated in 1986, he did not

only satisfy his artistic needs, but also got deeply involved in the theory and practice of “simple things.”

As is well-known Japanese culture completed the Chinese idea of simplicity in art and life. This aesthetic attitude, first in fashion during Song Dynasty (960–1279), preferred the unadorned manner, the plain style. In this respect, things of everyday life could become art as well. Being content with “eating, drinking, chatting,” as Almond Chu puts it today, was the background of many masterpieces of Chinese poets, painters, essayists about one thousand years ago. The same is true for Japanese works of art during the past several hundred years.

As a student Almond Chu was under the spell of the American artist Robert Mapplethorpe. He is still often characterized by art magazines as the “Chinese Mapplethorpe,” but when he was in New York for three months he turned away from this idol. He discovered that his endeavours were more a kind of “activity” than art. They were “too simple,” i.e. too simple in the bad sense of the word: it was a kind of superficial simplicity, a simplicity searched for, not the simplicity that is very complex. In his own words:

“I had always thought it was important to have a prop – a pistol, a pen or whatever – when I was doing a portrait”, he said. “I think that after my experience in New York, I understood more about the importance of simplicity in a photograph.”⁴

One might think of the portrait of “Allen 1993,”⁵ a male nude with a pistol in his mouth, and compare it to any later portrait of a flower. In the latter case we can speak of true simplicity that reveals simplicity naturally found on the surface, but not a constructed kind of simplicity that has to be searched for in its depth. This sounds very theoretical but will be clarified when I am going to introduce Almond Chu’s still life.

In New York Almond Chu enjoyed for the first time in his life a period in which he could totally devote himself to pure aesthetic questions. One has to know that he is a commercial photographer, too. He is running his own studio and makes his living from taking photos for business enterprises. Though he does not draw a line too clearly between commercial photography and artistic photography, he still can not afford to be too creative when he is taking his photos for firms and companies, he can only leave his personal “trademark” in his commissioned works.

4 Victoria Finlay, “Through Almond’s eyes,” in: *South China Morning Post* June 22, 1995, p. 22.

5 Antonio Mak, Almond Chu: *Portraits of Life*. Hong Kong [1993].

Turning away from Robert Mapplethorpe meant, among other things, turning towards Helmut Newton. Simply speaking it was turning away from movement (*dong* 动) to calmness (*jing* 静), from the rude to the elevated (*gaogui* 高贵) aspect of life, from staging drama to staging still life, (see below) but in most cases it was and is still the art of staged photography with its studio-based style.

For reasons of convenience I shall make a difference between the pieces dominated by food and those that were inspired by flowers within Almond Chu's "Life Still" project. In both cases we have to deal with a form of art that emphasizes things of daily life. Following the model of Rilke's *dinggedicht* (thing poem) one could speak of *dingfoto* (thing photo). The thing of daily life that is put into the center of the photographer's and viewer's attention is of different character in each case. In the first case the influence of theatre is obvious. Almond Chu seems to arrange a play on a table that might be a kitchen table or a dining table. In the second case both table and theatre are pushed into the background. There is also an aesthetic difference: the gory business of arranging fresh meat and vegetables bought from the market is replaced by the pure, untainted beauty of blossoms.

Critics have called the "Life Still" project undertaken with food "food for thought" and "le théâtre d'un gourmet." Under the influence of early surrealist photography Almond Chu creates so-called "involuntary sculptures," i.e. he arranges parts of dissected animals that he bought at the market in a certain way and style on a table before he starts to take pictures. One has to know that our photographer is also an excellent cook. As cooking too is an art for him, there is no difference between cooking and taking pictures. While he was staying in New York in 1993 he was already thinking of using food as material for his artistic creations. In his own words,

I like cooking and have special feelings towards "food". I always want to produce pictures related to this subject. I brought the materials from the market and set them on the table at my studio, and started looking at them in a different way than what others consider unappetizing.⁶

Before having a look at one example, we have to clarify two things. First, though labelled as anti-aesthetic, the photographer is not bloodthirsty. He only opposes the much illustrated and advertised stereotype of Hong Kong as dining heaven. Second, by means of his arrangements and photography Almond Chu

6 Quoted from Almond Chu Photographs "Life Still." Hong Kong: OP fotogallery 1999.

gives the “gory thing” that he bought from the butcher’s a form, a pure or artistic form. Unlike artists who tend to provoke with their bloody material, Almond Chu prefers to substantiate the formal aspect of the animal’s body. So finally, what he created is not the cruel aspect of reality, but an elevated (*erhaben, gaogui*) form of art. As he puts it, this was done under the influence of the theatre of the absurd and the pantomime. In the end gory cruelty is replaced by a faint sense of humour. We can see this very obviously in his photo called “Frog Bean Cake” (1999) in English, “Wadougao” in Mandarin and “Wahdougau” in Cantonese.

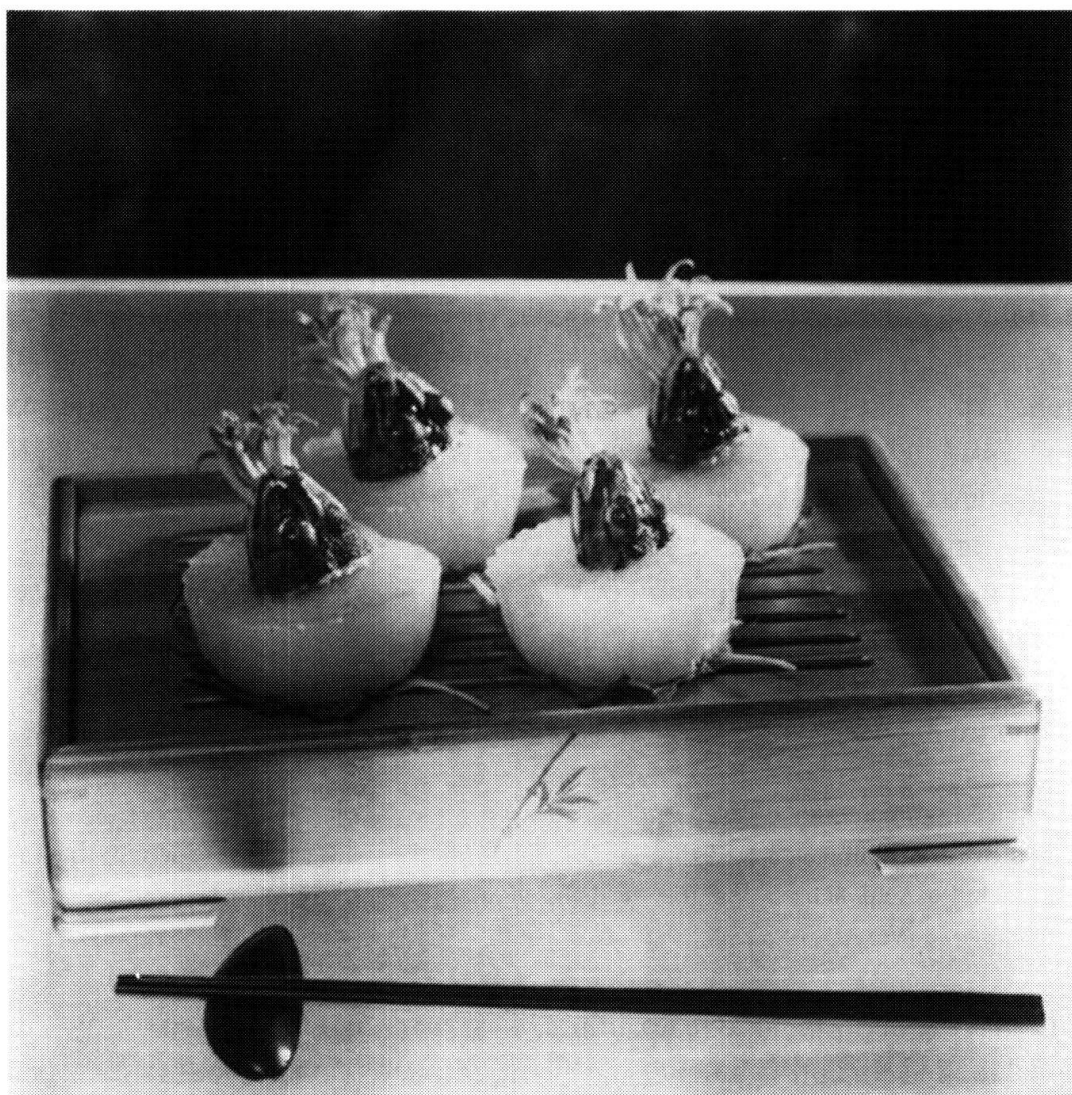


Plate 1: Wadougao (Almond Chu).

As the sound *wa* is homophone with *ma* in Cantonese, however, the title should be read something like “Madougao.” Maodougao is a dessert in Hong Kong. This helps to explain the arrangement of the photo. We see a Japanese dish put on a table with a pair of Japanese chopsticks in front. On the plate are four halves of bean cake filled with the heads of frogs. It is a black and white photo with shades of grey. It is filled with a light and thus corresponds to the aesthetic taste of our photographer, which I will address shortly. Still life in this case means that the frogs are dead of course, that no one is going to eat the dish. If they were active, the frogs would destroy the arrangement, and so would the gourmet. He has to control his appetite. What we see is really “food for thought” or food for the eyes. It is pure form in which the impulses of life seem to have come to an end.

When asked why his project is called “Life Still” and not “Still Life,” Almond Chu admits that he coined the term which is quite unusual in English. “Still Life” reminds him too much of *jingwu* (静物) in modern Chinese, that is literally “a thing that is still.” As the Chinese character *wu* emphasizes the material aspect too much, *jingwu* as still life seems to suggest dead life. But his creations called “Life Still” reveal that there is life going on and that in this sense the staged and photographed things are full of life. There is an “invisible force” working behind the blossoms and dead leaves in his flower series. Where does this moment of life amidst the presence of death come from? Almond Chu speaks of the inner life that even things enjoy. It is this inner life that allows the things to have a look at themselves, as he comments his photographs. This look at oneself might only be possible by the use of three artistic devices: first by the reduction of the colours to white and black and sometimes grey, second by the reduction of forms to the form of an egg or the round form, third by making use of a mysterious light. By these means the object of the photographer wins a kind of dignity that is called “the dignity of isolation” by one critic. Why isolation? Flowers, animals, vegetables, fruits as well as portraits and nudes are not imbedded into their surroundings, they are rather cut off from their neighbourhood and seem to rest only in themselves. As pure form they represent the basic forms of life: light and dark, round and square, creativity and sexuality. These basic forms can be reduced to two forms: black and round. Round things have been regarded as beautiful since man began to exist: they seem to be complete in themselves. At the same time they symbolize the beginning of life. Black is the sum of all colours for Almond Chu. He comments further:

Black represents what I feel. Its function in my photos is space, space to think. It is not meant as a definite statement.⁷

The colour black and the round form are the two essential elements of the triptych “Patrick and the Egg” (1993).⁸

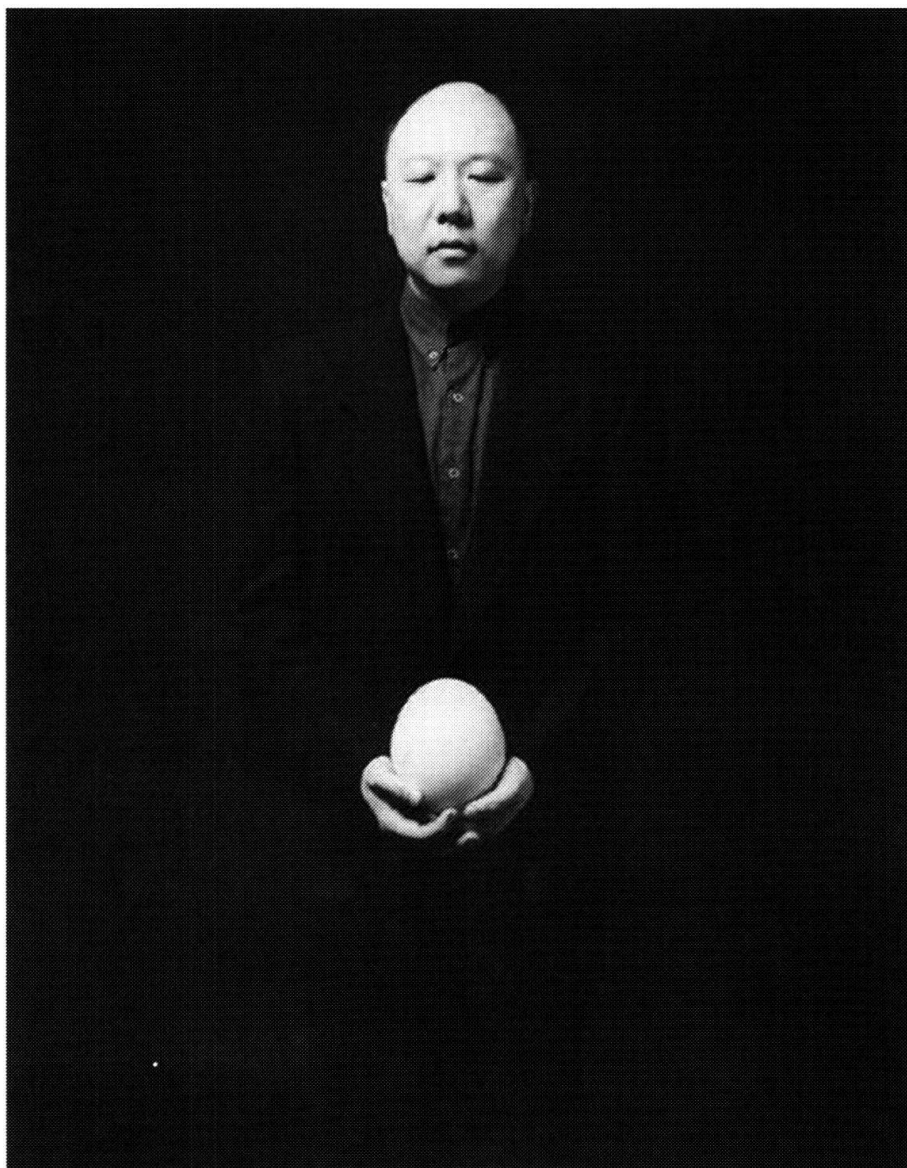


Plate 2: Patrick and the Egg (Almond Chu).

7 Joyce Tulkens: “The importance of the Colour Black,” in: *Photo Asia September 1993*, p. 28.

8 In: *Portraits of Life* (note 5).

In this photo the head of the psychologist Patrick Lee and the egg have the same form and the same colour. The magic that colour and form evoke, is created by the frame which is square and by the background which is almost completely black. If this is, as one critic called it, “man’s search for perfection,” it would also be right to say this is man’s search for the very first moment of life when everything began.

It would be very easy to explain the aesthetic ideas behind Almond Chu’s photography from a Chinese point of view. One is tempted to subsume the recurrent motifs and devices of black and white, of square and round, of man and woman, of life and death under the principle of Yin and Yang. The invisible force behind these opposites or correlations would be Dao or its emanation qi 气, the breath of life. The clear lines and the plain objects with their pure, simple and calm forms would require an interpretation that follows either the ideal of emptiness (kong 空), which is manifested in the arts of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), or the ideal of dan 淡, an unadorned style of daily life as developed during Song Dynasty. But one would be completely wrong by doing so. When asked about any kind of influence on his artistic ideas, Almond Chu would totally deny drawing any inspiration from Chinese conceptions. He would rather speak of Dali, Man Ray, Magritte, and French surrealism as being important for his early beginnings, but he now prefers to dismiss any theories except for minimal art and the philosophy of simple things. He even speaks of smashing all previous models and theories, so that it will be possible to see something that no one has seen before. In order to fulfil this aim, he does not want to fill his works of art with additional meaning. Critics therefore have characterized his art as an art without depth. True depth, however, cannot be seen, says Almond Chu. What he means by this has to do with the aim of his art. His purposes are timelessness and eternity. For a postmodern age, which denies permanent values, this sounds as if he set his sights too high. Nevertheless, Almond Chu, claims independence from time and space for his photographs. Sometimes his pictures are completed in his mind and still have to wait for years before they get their final shape in his studio. In this sense I have characterized the general principle that underlies the art of Almond Chu as metaphysics of forms. Only this helps to explain the mysterious light of his flowers and the sculpture-like bodies of his nudes. The forms seem to be removed from their objects; they seem to be independent and find everything in themselves. Whereas (post-)modern art favours the destruction of beauty, Almond Chu rescues beauty. Though he says he is an atheist, his commitment to eternal beauty gains a somewhat religious attitude. One of his exhibitions was called “Zen and

Flower” (*Chan yu hua*), with the blossom symbolizing the transgression of life, sex and death.

II.

In recent years the flat of Almond Chu and his wife Ann Mak have constantly attracted the attention of art lovers.⁹ Many newspapers and magazines have published illustrated reports in detail. It would now be possible to rebuild their home outside of Hong Kong. In their rooms it is not art that imitates life, but vice versa, life imitates art! “My attitude towards life,” says Almond Chu, “and my claim for life have formed my creative direction.” In this sense the arrangement of his world in black and white is not an artistic device but an inner attitude, and his *décor* is a dialogue between life and art. What is true for his art is true for his life, too, and vice versa. Daily experience is the source of his inspiration. Almond Chu prefers simple things. As simple things find their basic manifestation in black and white, in square and round, in clean and silent, his flat, arranged by Gary Chang, a leading Hong Kong decorator, and featuring pieces designed by such figures as Charles Eames and Jasper Morrison, is a world of chiaroscuro, of round and square forms: one sees white walls, black frames, round chairs, square tables etc. Even the house owners and their pets have to obey to the laws of these aesthetic ideas: Almond Chu is always in black, Ann Mak has to wear black and white, the two cats are grey and white. Grey is, as everybody knows, the mixture of black and white.

Which conclusion can we draw from this for our theory of the performative? Life as manifested in the flat of Almond Chu and Ann Mak needs two human beings and two animals in order to be performed as art. It is “still life” and “Life Still” at the same time: no door, no bed, no light, no vase are left to chance, everything is planned and in this sense daily staged by its owners. The home is a theatre where identity is performed. It is the identity of human beings, animals and things, an identity that is only possible through the “other,” i.e., white walls need the black clothes of Almond Chu to contrast, just as the white cat needs the long black hair of Ann Mak to feel the difference etc.

9 Cf. for instance Tinja Tsang: “All white now,” in: *South China Morning Post* August 26, 2001, p. 8.

III.

Art history is full of examples of creative couples. In most cases one partner has to remain in the background in order to allow the other to become more prominent. As Ann Mak is the manager of Almond Chu, her chance to establish herself as an artist is limited by practical considerations. She would even deny that she is an artist or producing art. Nevertheless, she has created some important productions. I have to restrict myself here to one example, as I have already introduced two of her artistic works recently and do not want to repeat myself here.¹⁰ Before talking about her installation “Encounter” (Yu, 2001) which was produced under the aesthetic supervision of Boris Groys as part of the German-Hong Kong project called “art window,” I have to clarify the background of the artist. Installation, video and photography as professional forms of art are very late enterprises in the life of Ann Mak. She is so deeply influenced by theatre that all her art productions have to do with the idea of the stage (*wutai*). The reason for this is very simple. When she was studying English literature and language at National Taiwan University in Taipei, Ann Mak began to specialize in drama. After her graduation in 1987 she tried in vain to get into the male dominated theatre world of Hong Kong. Finally, she gave up her plans of a drama career and went into the field of art management. For a period of nearly ten years she also dropped the idea of producing art of her own. Only at the end of the 90’s did she find back to where she came from: to the stage. But this time the character of the stage changed, now the stage is part of an installation or a video clip.

In contrast to Almond Chu and Hisun Wong Ann Mak’s approach to art is not a rational one. Her starting point is a “feeling” (*ganjue*), an experience of life (*Lebensgefühl*) or more simply an assignment by a patron or an institution. Both, of course, very often go together. The only influence upon her work she admits, is that of Wang Wenxing under whom she studied at National Taiwan University. This well-known Chinese writer taught her how to “read” the world. Her “reading” has more to do with space than time. It is the three-dimensional space that is needed for her installation and cannot be mastered through media alone. What Ann Mak tries to grasp is not timelessness as Almond Chu or the

10 See my: “Seltsame Geschichten. Zu einer Installation und Videoarbeit der Hongkonger Künstlerin Ann Mak,” in: *Orientierungen 1/2001*, pp. 110–115; and my: “Lyrische Trilogie. Zu einer Arbeit der Hongkonger Künstlerin Ann Mak,” in: *minima sinica 2/2002*, pp. 125–135.

past as Hisun Wong, but the moment. It is the moment in space, which she calls a crystal in her present life. This crystal is bound to sentiment, to (day)dream and to escape. Ann Mak emphasizes the overall result of her art. One should not, however, differentiate between emotion and reason here, but rather take dream and flight (Flucht) as the basis of one's view.

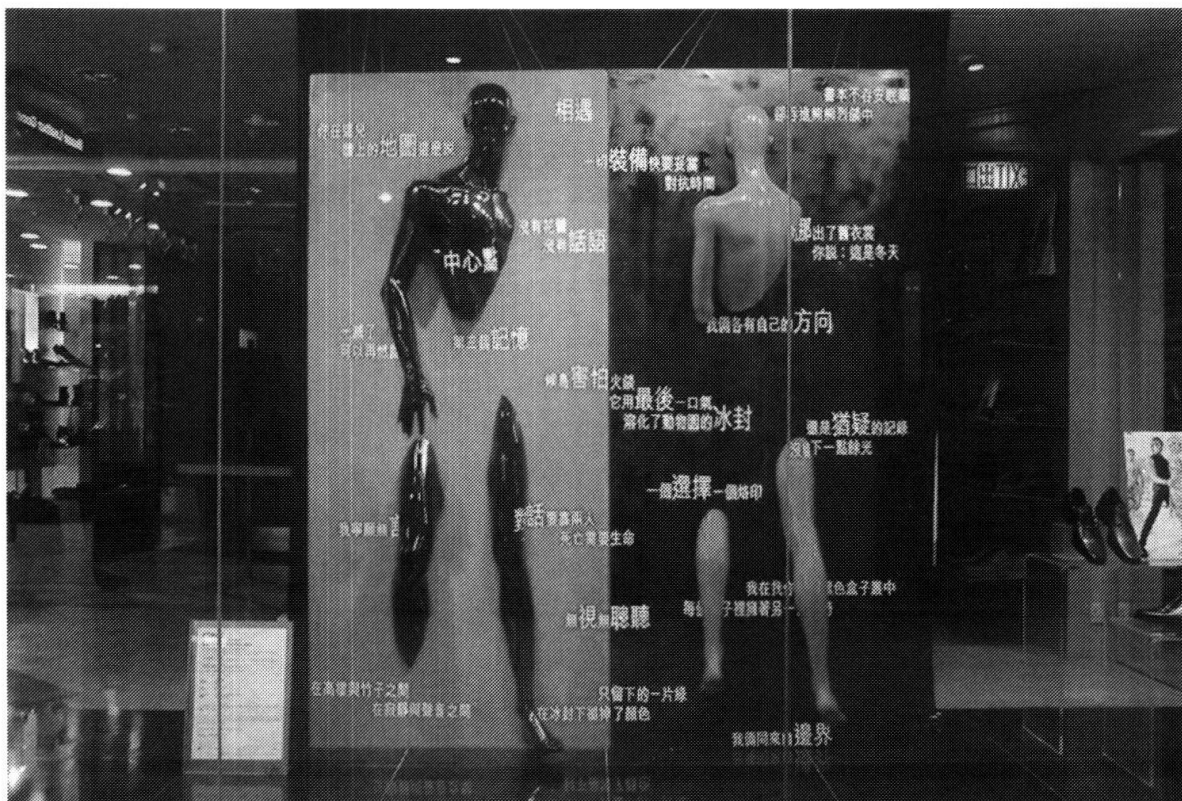


Plate 3: Encounter (Ann Mak).

As indicated above, the installation called “Encounter” was part of the project “Art in public spaces.” Twenty-three Hong Kong artists had the chance to display their works of art in shop windows throughout Hong Kong between August and October 2001. “Encounter” was shown at Millie’s, a store within the mall at Harbour City in Tsimshatsui. According to the advertisement, it was inspired by my poetry and was about the experience human beings make at the crossroads of life and death. The installation is made of fibreglass, wood and paint. It shows two figures in black and red in front of a red or black background. The figures are broken; they are set side by side turning their back to each other. They share Chinese characters, which are arranged in lines and in white colour. Some of the characters are bigger than others, emphasizing ideas of encounter, centre, memory, fear, dialogue, direction, enclosure, doubt etc. They are adaptations from

various poems of my first two poetry books *The New Song of Old Desperation* (2000) and *Towers of Fools* (2002).¹¹ As adaptations, they are, of course, interpretations and seem to tell the story that the two figures suggest, a story of search, encounter and escape, a story that is not bound to man and woman, but to the fate of human beings. It is the task of these figures to perform this fate in a visual way.

Though Ann Mak speaks of the emotional rather than of the rational power behind her works of art, we can still find a principle that involves a kind of order here. This has to do with the idea of “resonance” (*gongming* 共鸣). Ann Mak regards *gongming*, which means some kind of sympathetic response, as the prime aim of what she wants to realize in art. Above all, it is the installation that offers her the broadest possibility of “communication” (*goutong*) with others. Others can be people, can be books, or can be ideas as well. All of them serve her inspiration (*linggan*).

IV.

Once again, Almond Chu searches for eternity and beauty, Ann Mak seeks for the moment and “resonance,” Hisun Wong looks for things gone by and silence. Nevertheless, they have something in common: in each case, the home is a museum where its inhabitants live within their art. Whereas Almond Chu and Ann Mak stress the modern and postmodern age for themselves, their representatives being the colours white and black, Hisun Wong, who is the vice president of the Citibank of Hong Kong, concentrates on the simple things of the past. His collections of Chinese artifacts even include milk bottles used by former generations in Hong Kong. Everything in his flat is old and was used by known or unknown ancestors, except for his darkroom. In some respect Hisun Wong has come close to Kafka or Charles Ives since 1983. Since then he has been working and making money during the day like anyone else, but in the evenings he has been turning to his art that has been inspired by the past. His favourite object of photography is Northwest China. Since 1987 he has been visiting the bare landscapes and the lonesome deserts near the Silk Road.

11 *Das neue Lied von der alten Verzweiflung*. Bonn. Weidle 2000; *Narrentürme*. Bonn. Weidle 2002.



Plate 4: Sandstorm (Hisun Wong).

He wants to find three different aspects: a pure landscape without any human trace, quietness, and the idea of a scene that has not been changed for many centuries. His photos perform the past and they perform subjective narratives of the past. How is it possible to “reconstruct” the past? Hisun Wong sends his colour negatives to France and his black and white negatives to the USA for printing and to have them developed. In France, Fresson Print still uses methods of 1950 to make his colour photos look older, and American procedures guarantee that the black and white photos look as if they were taken in the 40’s or 50’s.¹² In both cases it is imagination not experience that guides the photographer to make Dunhuang look more Dunhuang, because Hisun Wong is too young to have lived in any of his favoured past ages.

One is of course again tempted to resort to Chinese tradition in order to explain what Hisun Wong tries to express through his art: the lonesomeness, the silence, even the nothingness of the desert whose natural sandy lines and forms he wants to keep forever in his photos. But he denies being influenced by any Buddhist or Taoist theories of “emptiness” (*kong*) or “plainness” (*dan*). Although he was educated as a Buddhist at High School, his approach is a purely scientific one. Influenced by the still life of Irving Penn and the night photos of Michael Cenna, fascinated by technology he regards his artistic work as a scientific enterprise in the darkroom which he started out of scientific curiosity when he was about 15. Here he finally creates the silence he chases. By taking away everything that is not necessary, he concentrates on the “dead things.”

Hisun Wong’s journey into the past is only finished when his photos are printed on heavy paper and wrapped up as a present. A light paper would not be serious, a photo without wrapping paper would be a photo presented without respect. That is why the presentation of a photo comes close to a ritual act. A perfect work of art does not need a name, it speaks for itself, but it does need a

12 Cf. the article “Wang Xishen. Chongsu Xibei huangmo (Hisun Wong. Reconstructing the deserts of Northwest),” in: *Ziben zazhi* (Capital) 182 (July 2002), pp. 126–129.

form of presentation. The emphasis Hisun Wong puts on the aspect of presentation reminds one of a saying by the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl. He claimed that a poem is only finished when it is read in public. In this sense a photo is only finished when it is presented to a viewer. This can also be seen as a performative gesture which artist and audience have to share to make art possible.

