

Moscow Diaries

MMoMA / Moscow

There was a trend among intellectuals in the 1920s: they went to post-revolutionary Russia to report news. Jacques Derrida christened this type of autobiographical travelogue “Back from Moscow, in the USSR,” emphasizing that such a trip did not imply a way *back*, because it was already a *return to* “the chosen fatherland,” a country of pure potential and universality. Invoking this genre, the exhibition “Moscow Diaries,” organized by the Center for Experimental Museology, resurrects two such pilgrimages made by Walter Benjamin and Alfred Barr Jr.

The show immediately inundates the viewer with an abundance of descriptive texts, diaries, catalogues and documents on the history of abstraction, as well as replicas of paradigmatic paintings. The room dedicated to the exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art,” originally organized by Barr at New York’s MoMA in 1936, epitomizes a linear history of art. Next door one could see a partial reconstruction of the 1931 “Experimental” exhibition by Soviet critic and curator *avant la lettre* Alexei Fedorov-Davydov, who privileged a rather dialectical model attributing artworks to certain classes and historical periods. In the final room, dedicated to Sergei Tretyakov, two empty constructivist chairs suggest a possible encounter between him, Barr, Benjamin or Fedorov-Davydov. Communist collectivist and capitalist individualist paradigms suddenly reconcile.

The project is positioned as intentionally nonartistic: instead of original artworks one encounters only extra-aesthetic artifacts. As the curatorial statement claims, the process of “deartization,” or withdrawal of an art object from its operational context, provides a “metaposition” outside the narrative of contemporary art. However, the very use of painted reproductions with traces of manual labor grounds this exercise in art history, namely appropriation techniques of the 1980s. In Derrida’s parlance, instead of directing *in*, i.e. above history and geography, the show points *back from*, i.e. to the hegemonic history of art that it wants to circumvent.

by Andrey Shental

Canton Express

M+ Pavilion / Hong Kong

Celebrating a donation from Chinese collector Guan Yi, M+ Pavilion’s “Canton Express” restages the seminal show of the same name originally conceived in 2003 by curator Hou Hanru as part of the 50th Venice Biennale’s “Zone of Urgency” section. “Canton Express” brought together artists from the Pearl River Delta, showcasing the first generation of Chinese practitioners concerned with a new globalized reality.

At the M+ Pavilion, the original rectangular layout designed by artist Zheng Guogu has been adapted to the new exhibition space. Liang Juhui’s *City* (2003), a pagoda-like tower housing numerous transparencies of Chinese people photographed from behind, has seemingly been cut down from its original thirteen layers to nine layers in order to fit the height of the exhibition space. Despite the recontextualization in a neat white box, these works remain powerful examples of artists reflecting on the process of urbanization.

Many of the works in the original exhibition were damaged or even lost. Some have been remade, like Feng Qianyu’s *Difficult to Birth* (2003), in which the original pupa-shaped photo holder is now a plain board; others were fixed, like Duan Jianyu’s *Artistic Chicken* (2003) — of the original one hundred pieces only forty survived. What’s missing is the broadcast project *Can You See?* by Xu Tan and Jin Jiangbo, in which the Arsenale exhibition site in Venice was connected with the Shanghai nonprofit Biz-art via streaming video feed.

U-theque Organization (Ou Ning and Cao Fei) re-present their short film *San Yuan Li* (2001) about the urban village of Sanyuanli. Zheng Guogu has reiterated the installation *Sample Room*, a nod to the productivity of Yangjiang, where forty percent of the world’s kitchenware is produced.

A reading corner allows visitors to browse documentation of the 2003 exhibition. Here one can also find the story of where the title “Canton Express” came from: apparently, the curator borrowed it from a Cantonese fast-food chain in Glasgow.

by Gu Ling

Patty Chan

Bank / Shanghai

Teary tongue kisses with her parents; live eels buttoned into her shirt: Patty Chang never shies from the taboo and the strange. In one instance she sliced open her bra to reveal a ripe cantaloupe, and between mouthfuls told the story of a close relative with cancer — a visceral exploration of the close associations between memory and consumption. Newer works in “Re-Configurations,” which introduces the American-born Chinese artist to the Mainland in her first solo show, still center on the body but exhibit a more cadenced and methodical inquiry.

Part of her ongoing “Wandering Lake” series, *Configurations* documents Chang’s picaresque quest to trace the effects of the South-North Water Diversion Project, a government initiative to divert flows from the Danjiangkou Reservoir to Beijing. Beginning at the site of the dam, the film meanders along the water’s edge, where the artist alternately downs bottled water and makes pit stops to relieve herself using a small urinary device. Traversing landscapes both bleak and barren, Chang’s feral markers draw symmetries between the waterways and the coursing veins of those whose lives both depend on and have been displaced by them. At one point, she pushes a small bread roll over the peculiar peeing instrument, an irreverent gesture that sees the object become a fleshy extension of her body. A series of these devices, upcycled from plastic bottles and rendered artisanal in glass, are also on display.

“For all the strangeness she packs into her work,” art critic John Yau once observed, comparing Chang to a slapstick performer, “she never winks.” While *Configurations* may witness the artist taking backstage to the political and ecological effects besetting the region, it nevertheless bares glimpses of her characteristic deadpan, and never fails to command the viewer’s steadfast attention. If the video monitors displaying some of the older works seem outmoded or anachronistic, it is only because this show attends to a larger project of inserting Chang into the canon of media and performance — a position that is well deserved.

by Ming Lin