

Revolution or Bust



Yue Minjun - "The Execution"

One wonders if twenty years from now art from North Africa will have gained the cache now associated with Chinese art. A vogue for post Tiananmen Square works has quickly grown over the past few decades, as fascination with China's politics and economics has been matched with an interest in its aesthetics. Even documents from the Cultural Revolution have been reclaimed – either for their dissident status or as useful documents of “social realism” through which to understand the “cynical realism” and “political pop” associated now with such figures as the Luo Brothers.

But it's not entirely clear what to make of mainstream or dissident Chinese art today. It seems to coincide almost directly with the dilemma of such appropriative art in the west: it risks mere cooptation without affecting the real problematic structure at hand. What, really, is political about Mao, pop-style, with bottles of Coca-Cola floating around? Certainly we should acknowledge the power of belief in the Cultural Revolution, and the necessary disillusionment to follow, but the representation of that disillusionment does not a new revolution make.

For a rarely shown video, Harun Farocki made a documentary about the planning of a mini-mall. One watches for some time as the German executives debate where to place an ATM. Conversations like the following are heard: If we place it here, one planner says, we'll get the diagonal traffic from the shoe store. But if we place it here, we'll get the traffic entering from the food court. With meticulous precision, the developers plan exactly how to extract as many ATM fees as possible, and also to ensure a steady flow of readily accessible cash into the consumers' hands. One might laugh at

or chide the avarice, but it is possible that such goal-oriented precision is the greatest achievement of contemporary capitalism.

One wonders where such tactics are in Chinese – or indeed any – political art today. Sarah Topol's slate.com essay “Revolutionary Logistics” looked in detail at how cell phones get charged, or toilets arranged, or food organized, in the midst of an unfurling uprising. But where have such logistics been since? Will we see in Egypt the logistics necessary for a functioning democracy, or will a loss of precision cede power to the forces that gather?

Perhaps the most striking image in the show Post-Mao Dreaming: Chinese Contemporary Art at the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania, is one from the Grasslands Series by Yue Minjun. The series as a whole features several of Yue's trademark characters with smiling faces in various poses in what are presumably fields in China. The images have variously been



interpreted as about China's youth and frivolity in politics on the one hand, and, on the other, as a serious comment on the difficulty of coming to terms with the atrocities of elements of Chinese rule over the past few decades. (This is most famously seen in Execution.) In the Grasslands image on display, Divine Figure, Yue's character, larger than life, is about to smash into the Chinese countryside. If there is something to fear about the outcome of our revolutionary moment, it is perhaps no longer this “only a God can save us” gesture, which is, of course, more likely to destroy the food subsistence than inspire any great action. Rather, it is that our new network societies will prove as susceptible to failure as the dream of charismatic authority.

-Avi Alpert

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A Larger Refrigerator

April 1 - May 29

319 N. 11th st. Philadelphia PA

MARGINAL UTILITY

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VOL. 2, NO 14 MARCH 2011

Front and Back Cover:

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Printed and Distributed by

Marginal Utility

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Layout: Daniel Finch