

Art in America

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**FOCUS:
CHINA**

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Sixty Ways of Looking at China

In the past decade, photography in the People's Republic has become a full-blown art form for the first time in half a century. Now two noted scholar-curators offer a major show--and, below, a wide-ranging discussion--designed to acquaint Western audiences with cutting-edge Chinese photographers and video-makers.

INTERVIEWED BY RICHARD VINE



Richard Vine: I think one thing that will surprise many viewers of your show is the newness, in several senses, of the work displayed. Can you give us a brief account of the recent emergence of "conceptual" photography in China? Is there a correlation between the social conditions of this work's production and the nature of its imagery and themes?

Wu Hung: This is something that I discuss in great detail in my catalogue essay. Basically, a major shift took place in 1997, when the photographers Liu Zheng and Rong Rong published the third issue of *New Photo*, a periodical devoted to experimental photography. Up until then, advanced image-making had been a sort of negation process, in which artists defined themselves simply by doing things that were contrary to mainstream expectations. But now, under the influence of Conceptual-art theories, they began to think of their work as deliberate constructs, representing ideas as much as objects-in-the-world. A new discussion group started up, the Every Saturday Photo Salon, and the title of its first exhibition became more or less synonymous with the emerging esthetic: "New Photographic Image."

After that, under the influence of postmodern concepts, practitioners began to pay a lot more attention to the whole idea of display: both how staging could be used to create meaning in images, and how the manner and context of showing the work could change its import and its effect on the viewer. Experimental photographers and film/video-makers also became very involved with incorporating other forms of representation into their own--performances, installations, even advertisements. Some artists--such as Rong Rong, Wang Jinsong and Yin Xiuzhen--worked at first with "straight" photography conventions, but fragmented and reconfigured their images into altered narratives. Liu Zheng photographed both live scenes and artificial tableaux involving mannequins and wax dummies. Others--such as Wu Xiaojun, Wang Qingsong, Hong Lei and Zhao Shaoruo--have employed various forms of artifice (sculpted puppets, elaborate mise-en-scenes, painted-over images, historical-photo replications) to convey a sense of theatricality that they associate with *dangdaixing* (contemporaneity). Thus while earlier conceptual photographers like Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili stressed the idea content of their work by repressing its visual attractiveness, many artists today emphasize

large-scale and bold imagery that can be fully realized only with the latest technology.

Contemporaneity, for these new practitioners, is associated with the notions of individuality--of particular viewpoints and visual languages, of private reflections on the ways "reality" can be constructed and deconstructed. This links them deeply to China's current social transformations, its increasing embrace--especially among the young--of inexorable globalization.

RV: What, then, is the current status of avant-garde photographers *visa-vie* the government? Do they receive any financial or institutional support? Are they subject to censorship? What is their relationship to photographers' unions and Party-sponsored publications?

Christopher Phillips: In just the five years that I've been traveling regularly to China, I've noticed a dramatic change in the way that Chinese contemporary art is regarded by the authorities. At the outset, exhibitions were still being closed down without warning, and denunciations of specific works and artists could be heard in the People's Assembly. But as it became apparent that Chinese artists were getting extraordinarily favorable attention in major exhibitions around the world, I think

Left, Sheng Qi: Me, 2000, chromogenic print, 47 1/4 by 31 1/2 inches. Collection International Center of Photography (ICP), New York.

Right, Zhang Dali: Demolition: Time Plaza, Beijing, 1999, chromogenic print, 35 1/2 by 23 5/8 inches. Collection JGS, Inc. Courtesy Courtyard Gallery, Beijing

Featuring the work of some 60 artists, 'Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China,' opens June 11 at the International Center of Photography and the Asia Society in New York, before beginning a two-year international tour. Here the show's organizers, Wu Hung, independent curator and professor of Chinese art history at the University of Chicago, and ICP curator Christopher Phillips, discuss their four-part exhibition and the dynamic nature of the contemporary photo-and-video scene in China.





Sze Tsung Leong: No. 6 Huashishang Fourth Lane, Chongwen District, Beijing 2003, chromogenic print, 12 by 15 inches.

"Artists have realized that a whole way of life is disappearing and being replaced by another, and much of their work represents a kind of stunned attempt to deal with this situation."

there's also a feeling that some opportunities are simply too good to pass up.

WH : In addition to such "export" exhibitions organized by the government (often as part of cultural exchanges with other countries), an increasing number of domestic exhibitions have also featured "avant-garde" photographers. One such show, focusing on experimental photographers like Miao Xiaochun, was held in December at the art gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Both the Shanghai Biennale and the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002 also included many conceptual photographs.

RV: What commercial opportunities now exist in China for the display and sale of this kind of work? **CP:** By and large, there's really no lack of exhibition opportunities for contemporary artists of all stripes inside China. Especially in the big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, young, independent curators are organizing shows in a whole range of venues. In recent years, there've been some extremely interesting group exhibitions presented in Beijing in older buildings slated for demolition. These have sometimes turned into pretty anarchic affairs [see A.i.A., July '01]. Curiously, some very serious and well-organized exhibitions are now appearing in the big new residential complexes that you see springing up all over Beijing. Most of these complexes include one or more enormous meeting halls, and enterprising young curators have been able to secure the use of some of these spaces for



Rong Rong: East Village, Beijing, No. 70, 1994, gelatin silver print, 42 by 63 1/2 inches. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

Liu Zheng: Three Professional Mourners at a Country Funeral, 2000, gelatin silver print, sheet, 14 1/2 inches square. Courtesy Courtyard Gallery.



that the cultural ministry made a conscious decision to try to find ways to use this art to bolster China's image abroad. One result has been the active involvement of the Chinese government in sponsoring large-scale contemporary exhibitions in Germany and France-- pretty tame affairs, I must say, but clearly a straw in the wind. Now you have the cultural ministry moving toward regular

Chinese participation in biennials such as those in Venice and Sao Paulo. In addition, a number of independent Chinese photography shows are now being organized abroad, and sometimes reverse- shipped into China [see sidebar, p. 191]. This is forcing many artists to walk a fine line. There's an incredible awareness of the danger of seeming to be a government-approved "official artist," but



Ma Liuming: Fen-Ma Liuming Walks on the Great Wall, 1998, chromogenic print, 50 by 78 3/4 inches. Collection JGS, Inc. Courtesy Courtyard Gallery.

group exhibitions, usually by promising the complex manager that their show will be a magnet for publicity.

The commercial opportunities are much more limited. The domestic market for contemporary art within China is tiny, almost nonexistent. The pattern is for the newly wealthy in China to start by collecting traditional Chinese art and antiques-- very much as Japanese collectors did in the first decades of Japanese prosperity after World War II. My own guess is that it will be the next generation of Chinese collectors, many of whom will have studied abroad and developed an enthusiasm for contemporary art, who'll start to seriously buy contemporary Chinese art, and also to encourage the founding of modern and contemporary departments in Chinese museums. For the moment, most of the interest still comes from foreigners--members of the diplomatic community in China, businesspeople and overseas collectors from Europe, the U.S. or Japan. There are a few very committed collectors, such as Artur Walther and Howard Stein in New York, and Eloisa and Chris Haudenschild in San Diego, who've moved quickly to assemble great collections of Chinese photo and video works.

In my experience, however, China remains very much an emerging art market. It's easy to be tempted by the prospect of finding great works at low prices, but you can't forget the uncertainties of the whole situation. There are still only a handful of professional, well-run contemporary galleries, such as Aura Gallery and ShangArt in Shanghai and Courtyard in Beijing. And you also have to contend with the fact that most Chinese galleries don't so much represent a roster of artists as sell individual pieces on consignment. In general, the artists still prefer to sell directly from their studios. The idea of splitting the sales price with a gallery seems utterly crazy to them. This weak gallery structure makes the whole question of controlling print editions and photo editions extremely tricky. When you're dealing with an individual artist, you can never be entirely sure that the announced size of a print edition won't mysteriously double or triple. This hasn't stopped private collectors from buying, but it has certainly made curators at major international museums take a wait-and-see attitude.

RV: Are these photographers viewed--indeed, do they view themselves--as agents of Westernization? How aware are they of Western photographic history? Of current practice on the international scene?

CP: Speaking in a very general sense, I've come to feel that to understand the photo works produced in China in the past decade, you have to keep in mind three different kinds of artistic encounter. First is the reassessment by younger Chinese artists of their country's own extraordinarily rich cultural tradition, with an eye to determining which works might have lessons or uses in the present. Second, I would say, is the voracious appetite for modern Western art, which was almost entirely unknown in China until the 1980s. It's now being swallowed all in one gulp--Malevich with Jackson Pollock, Cartier-Bresson with Cindy Sherman-- without an awful lot of discrimination. The references to those artists that now surface in contemporary Chinese works can seem quite bizarre and out-of-kilter--until you slowly start to understand how those works are being given new values within the context of Chinese art. Finally, what's really the key to most recent photo work is the artists' experience of witnessing the breathtaking physical transformation of China since the early '90s--especially the demolition of whole historic urban areas and the construction of thousands upon thousands of

"Contemporaneity is now linked to individuality-to particular viewpoints and visual languages, to private reflections on the ways 'reality' can be constructed and deconstructed."

futuristic skyscrapers. The artists have realized that a whole way of life is disappearing and being replaced overnight by another, and much of their work represents a kind of stunned attempt to deal with this situation. So you have all three of these currents swirling around in Chinese art today, which gives it to my mind a very unusual and distinctive flavor.

WH: Here it may be important to reflect upon the fixation of Western modern art on its own historical origins and lineages. Contemporary works created in this tradition are therefore necessarily intertextual and self-referential. The group of artists represented in this exhibition has few such burdens, and this must have contributed to the feeling of fearless freedom one finds in their works. Interestingly, documentary photographers—who represent a parallel tradition in contemporary Chinese photography—have a much more acute sense about their historical predecessors in the West. But these photographers are usually considered more conservative.

RV: In the recent past, one heard of difficulties procuring up-to-date materials and equipment in the PRC. But today the highly refined prints of, say, Wang Qingsong or Xing Danwen suggest a very different story. What are the technical possibilities for most Chinese photographers now? Do they generally have a high degree of formal training?

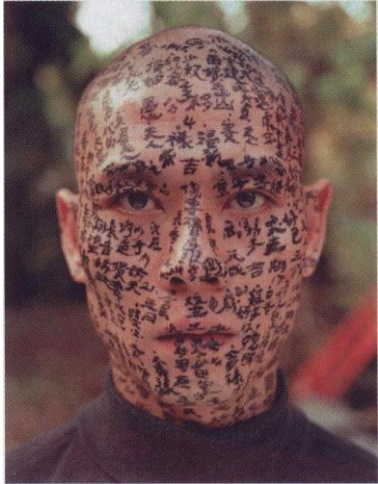
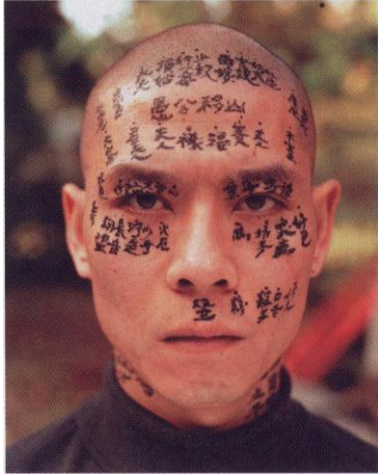
CP: Xing Danwen says that one key turning point came at the very end of the 1990s, when professional Chinese photo labs began to use the very latest

highend digital scanners and digital printing techniques. It suddenly became possible for artists to make enormous color prints—up to 30 feet long, in the case of Wang Qingsong. The move to that monumental scale seems to have been quite natural for many artists. It certainly encouraged them to come up with equally ambitious visual motifs.

I'd say that relatively few of the artists in our exhibition had any formal training in photography. They learned what they needed to know as they went along. Many of them originally trained as painters or sculptors in China's art academies, and that certainly has led them to pay attention to esthetic questions that are not confined to photography alone. It has also, I think, given them a very deep confidence in their own artistic powers. That's a quality that comes through vividly in the works they make.

WH: In fact, many of these artists don't identify themselves as "photographers." They were originally trained as painters or graphic designers, and their current practice mingles photography with installation, performance and multimedia work. Moreover, they don't have to master the craft of conventional or digital photography: they can function as "directors" and have cameramen record performances, or can hire computer specialists to create digital images (as Wang Qingsong does).

The relationship between photography and painting is a very important but understudied aspect of contemporary Chinese art. Chinese academic painters routinely (but often secretly) employ photographs, and so-called "conceptual photography" often shows a strong painterly quality due to the artists' original academic training. To explore this very situation, I am curating a small exhibition at Chambers Fine Art



Zhang Huan: Family Tree, 2001, two of nine chromogenic prints, each 50 by 40 inches. Collection JGS, Inc.



Hong Lei: Autumn in the Forbidden City, East Veranda, 1997, chromogenic print, 23 5/8 by 29 1/2 inches. Courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

in New York. Scheduled to open in June, it will be one of the "satellite" shows of the ICP exhibition.

RV: Whatever the equipment in hand, many of the artists you've selected choose to maintain a documentary, on-the-fly esthetic that—presumably— reflects their sense of the speed and radicality of the socio-economic changes now occurring in China. Is there an ideological divide between these photographers and those who favor elaborate staging and/or a fine-print sensibility?

WH: While some works in the exhibition (such as those by Rong Rong, Zhang Dali and Chen Shaoxiong) may indeed show strong connections with documentary photography, the artists firmly distinguish their work from the kind of workaday documentary photography known in China as *shijishi sheying*. One reason is that they consider the scenes in their photographs "constructed," resulting from the artists' intervention in the environment. **CP:** I think that for most Chinese artists who are using photography, there is not much concern with the supposed boundary between documentary and staged photographs. Liu Zheng, for example,

mainly photographs people in a straightforward black-and-white style that recalls the work of August Sander or Diane Arbus. But he also makes elaborately costumed and staged studio photos that are based on Chinese myths and legends. Yang Yong's photographs of young people living in Shenzhen at first remind you of Nan Goldin's casual, diaristic images. But then you begin to notice that in their details his scenes are often as minutely styled as a fashion shoot.

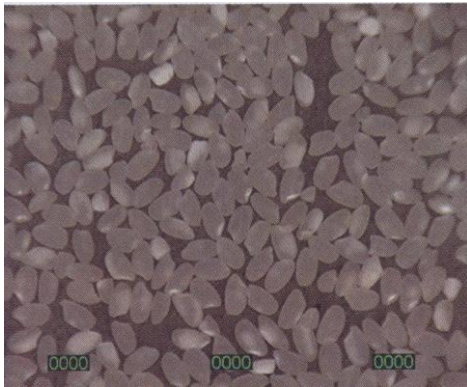
It's my impression that, for the moment, the incredible productivity of Chinese artists is far outrunning the ability of critics and art historians to accurately describe what's happening--much less to come up with considered critical judgments. "Let a hundred flowers bloom" could easily serve as the motto of the current situation in Chinese art.

RV: There is a rather troubled history, isn't there, regarding documentation of Chinese performance works from the late 1980s and early '90s, particularly those occurring in Beijing's ramshackle artist's community known as the East Village. Once images by Rong Rong and others began to be broadly distributed, practical and philosophical questions arose. What is the work of art--the performance or the photograph of the performance? Who owns the right of sale, diffusion and reproduction?... Does this ambiguity continue today, in a China notorious for widespread disregard of copyright and intellectual property concepts? WH: My sense is that the troubled history of East Village images has indeed become history: the



Huang Yan: Chinese Landscape--Tattoo, 1999, chromogenic print, 39 3/8 by 31 1/2 inches. Collection Artur Walther.

Two stills from Yang Zhenzhong's 922 Rice Corns, 2000, video, 8 minutes. Courtesy Shanghai Art Gallery, Shanghai.



artists involved are now older and more mature, and they are now selling pictures that they claim as their work based on different definitions of authorship. In an ideal scenario, these images resulted from group effort, imbued with ideas of not only performance artists and photographers but also other group members. (I have tried to reconstruct this history in "Rong Rong's East Village," an essay that accompanies the recent boxed edition of the artist's period shots.) But the current method seems to work well. Artists often own different negatives from the same performances and sell the resulting pictures through different venues.

Partly because of this historical lesson, today's performance artists and photographers maintain cautious relations when they work together. Performance artists, in particular, often pay a photographer to document his or her projects, and own the rights to the photographic images.

RV: Your show is divided into four thematic sections. Can you characterize each and tell our readers the selection criteria for the various categories?

CP: We tried, of course, to select artworks that can be seen as engaging and compelling works in their own right, and not just as illustrations of some theme. I think it's important to know that these four thematic divisions were not chosen arbitrarily, but grew directly out of our visits with a whole range of artists. The first time that Wu Hung and I met to discuss possible ways of organizing

an exhibition, we each brought a list of the main subjects and themes that we'd noticed in the works of the various Chinese artists we'd been seeing. We were a little startled to discover that our lists were almost identical. But it gave us a degree of confidence that we were somehow on the right track.

WH: Generally, "History and Memory" (at the Asia Society) and "People and Place" (at the ICP) are the artists' representations of China--a very old civilization as well as an emerging global power. The other two--"Performing the Self" (ICP) and "Reimagining the Body" (Asia Society)--are their representations of themselves. As Christopher has said, we didn't plan these four themes first and then find images to substantiate them. Rather, we reviewed many images, and these themes naturally emerged as common focuses of contemporary Chinese photography. Our job then became to select the best images among many.

RV: You revealed at the press preview that the show was done without use of Chinese government agencies or official channels of any kind. Did this prove, on balance, to be an advantage or a disadvantage? Was there--and is there generally--any problem getting works from China to the West? What about the artists themselves--can they travel abroad at will?

CP: The sad fact is that it's now much easier for Chinese artworks to travel to the U.S. than the artists who made them. The current security con-

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Chinese Photos

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cerns of the U.S. government have led to policies that make it all but impossible for Chinese artists to get an entry visa. We're hoping to be able to bring a number of artists from China to New York for the show's opening in June, but the difficulties are proving enormous.

WH: I share Christopher's sentiment. We are inviting artists to New York and Chicago, to participate in symposia and roundtable discussions. I really hope that they can come.

As for the question about using government agencies, my feeling is that we didn't actually need such assistance in organizing this exhibition and therefore didn't even consider it. For example, we can borrow directly from Chinese museums or from artists themselves. It is not necessary to go through the cultural ministry.

RV: Talk a little about the curatorial dynamic at play here. Was it beneficial to have this combination of fluent insider (Wu Hung) and informed outsider (Chris)? What were the major insights you gained from each other?

CP: Seeing the Guangzhou Triennial exhibition that Wu Hung organized in 2002 was absolutely essential for me. It was an enormous show, one that offered a very smart, comprehensive look at the ways that Chinese art developed from 1990 to 2000. To be able to spend time with those works, and to be able to talk to the artists about them, made me see the whole field of contemporary Chinese art from a new perspective. I think the same was true for many of the foreign visitors who came to Guangzhou.

WH: Thank you. The Triennial was a lot of work, but now I am happy that I did it.

The question of our dual curatorship of "Between Past and Future" is something I address in the June issue of *Yishu*. There I point out that we were faced with the problem of presenting a type of "regional" contemporary art, that of China, in a global context. Many international shows these days are entrusted to whole teams of curators, with the hope that a kind of representative composite will emerge from their choices. Christopher and I worked much more closely, in constant dialogue. Because of his wide-ranging knowledge of photographic history, he naturally tends to treat the Chinese work in a globalized, comparative manner. I, on the other hand, am trained specifically in Chinese art history, and strive to relate individual artists to very particular social, economic and intellectual trends within the country. Far from being contradictory, these two approaches actually fuse effectively and lead to an understanding that is, we believe, at once broad and nuanced.

RV: I would venture to guess that this show and its catalogue will set the terms of discussion in the field of contemporary Chinese art photography and video for some years to come. How would you describe the likely future of progressive Chinese work both within the People's Republic and abroad?

WH: In a way art photography is more "public" than art video, so I think that these two art forms will develop in related and divergent spaces. It is conceivable that experimental photography will increasingly mingle with design, fashion and advertisement--visual fields that are rapidly expanding in China and creating both excitement and anxiety among artists. Then there will be reactions against such mingling--some artists will try to divorce themselves from the high-tech, the urban scene and globalization, and will do things more private and possibly more profound. The development of photography will thus be characterized by interactions between these and other trends and intensions.

CP: I have a feeling that it may be in video, not photography, that you'll see the liveliest developments in Chinese art in the coming years. Barbara London's recent screening series of Chinese video for MOMA [see article beginning p. 130] gave a very clear sense of the energy and inventiveness that can already be found there. And I have high

expectations for the new media department that was just established at the China Fine Art Academy in Hangzhou. Its director is Zhang Peili, the pioneer of Chinese video art, and the facilities that I saw there are amazing. When you combine the technical sophistication available at such a place with the imaginative power of young artists like Yang Fudong, Cao Fei and Yang Zhenzhong, the results could be extraordinary.

"Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China" will be on view at the International Center of Photography and the Asia Society, New York [June 11-Sept. 5]. It will travel to the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago [Oct. 2, 2004-Jan. 16, 2005]; the Seattle Art Museum [Feb. 10-May 15, 2005]; the House of World Cultures, Berlin [spring 2006]; and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art [summer 2006]. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Christopher Phillips and Wu Hung, along with selected artist interviews, published by the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, and ICP/Steidl, New York, 2004.

A Sampler of Recent Chinese Photo Shows in the West

Zooming into Focus

This assemblage of 50 works by 13 artists is drawn from the holdings of San Diego art patrons Eloisa and Chris Haudenschild, who in just two years have put together an extensive compendium of photographs and videos by respected practitioners like Cao Fei, Chen Shaoxiong, Xiang Liqing, Yang Yong, Yang Zhenzhong, Feng Mengbo, Shi Yong, Yang Fudong and Zheng Guogu. University Art Gallery, San Diego State University [photos Oct. 25-Dec. 6, 2003; videos Jan. 31, 2003-Apr. 21, 2004], Shanghai Art Museum [March-April 2004]; Centro Cultural Tijuana [May-July 2004].

Pingyao in Paris

Thirteen photographers culled from the Pingyao International Photography Festival by French co-director Alain Jullien were presented in a subsequent group show in Paris. Among the participants were Song Chao, who had received a special jury prize; L'Oréal Prize winners Hei Ming, Lu Guang and Yan Chang Jiang; and Alcatel Prize honorees Wang Fuchun, Jiang Jian and Wang Yuming. MK2 Bibliotheque, Paris [Feb. 6-Mar. 28, 2004].

Over One Billion Served

Subtitled "Conceptual Photography from the People's Republic of China," this show organized by Julie Seagraves, executive director of the Asian Art Coordinating Council in Denver, concentrated on the idea-driven work that has emerged in China since the mid-1990s. The eleven artists included Wang Jingsong, Zhang Dali, Wu Xiaojun, Zhu Fadong and Wang Qingsong. Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver [Jan. 16-May 9, 2004].

Between Reality & Memory

The work of seven artists is presented by Gu Zheng, professor of photography at the prestigious Fudan University, Shanghai. Participants: Wu Siyi, An Ge, Du Yingnan, Qian Yu, Shao Yinong, Wang Ningde and Zhou Hal. Tishman Gallery, Parsons School of Design, New School University, New York [Apr. 20- June 4, 2004].

Documenting China: Contemporary Photography and Social Change

Gu Zheng, vice president of the Asian Society of Photographers, has selected work by seven photographers who chronicle recent transformations in daily Chinese life, in the countryside as well as the cities. The artists are Liu Xiaodi, Jiang Jian, Zhang Xinmin, Luo Yongjin, Zhou Hal, Lu Yuanmin and Zhou Min. Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Me. [Jan. 16-Mar. 28, 2004]. The show travels to the China Institute, New York [June 24-July 31], where it joins a companion exhibition, "China Between Revolutions: The Photographs of Sidney D. Gamble, 1917-1927" under the joint rubric "China Fast Forward: Photographs of Daily Life 1917-2002."