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INSIDE

The Displacement of Language into the Realm
of Visual Art

Artist Features: Chen Hangfeng, Xing Danwen

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Tansy Xiao

A Conversation with Cai Dongdong



Tansy Xiao: When you were a photographer in the army, did you have freedom of artistic expression?

Cai Dongdong, *Eighth of December*, 2008, C print, 100 x 199.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Cai Dongdong: Back then, between 1997 and 2001, I was in the No. 16 Aviation Academy of the People's Liberation Army. Over a thousand soldiers went there to study, and there was a demand for a photographer to create an archive of both their photographed portraits and personal profiles. I was doing an administrative job in the army; therefore, this task was assigned to me. I ordered a local newspaper called *Chinese Photography*, together with all the reference books mentioned in it, to teach myself how to use a camera. So I picked up the camera techniques quite quickly, from shooting pictures to darkroom processes.

Tansy Xiao: So you learned photography from scratch when asked to do a commissioned job?

Cai Dongdong: Yes. I was deeply impressed by two books on world contemporary and avant-garde photography—*Contemporary Avant-Garde Photography* and *Contemporary Masters of Photography*¹—and thus had access to the work of great artists like Cindy Sherman. As a portrait photographer in the army, I was shocked at the time that a woman took photos of herself throughout her life as different characters. In 2002, after five years in the army, I enrolled in the photography department at the

Beijing Film Academy. Back then only a few academies had photography majors, but I was already a skillful cameraman. So while I was in the academy I also started a small photo studio next to it.

Tansy Xiao: Since you worked as a professional photographer, whether in the army or at your own studio, where do you think the demand of documenting a specific moment comes from in photography in general?

Cai Dongdong: I took photos in the army for three years, and after that, for three more years at my own studio. During the whole time I always thought I was nothing more than a photographer, and I never really considered why I took photos or why people wanted to produce images. I stopped traditional photography in 2005 and turned to art theory, after which I began to create artworks that critique the production of an image. For instance, in my work *The Eighth of December* (2008), I restaged the scene of Francisco Goya's oil painting *The Third of May 1808* (1814–15) but with a different narrative—the KMT executing Chinese revolutionaries—and I replaced the shotgun with a camera. It's a representation that reflects Susan Sontag's quote "a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder—a soft murder."² As years passed, I came to realize that her theory does have its limitations, and photography has deeper qualities to it than solely as a violent symbol.

Tansy Xiao: The same concept is also embodied in your new work *Aiming at the Camera* (2017), in which a camera on a small tripod confronts a found image of some youths holding guns in silence. However, in other pieces at a recent exhibition (*Cai Dongdong: Photography Autocracy*, Eli Klein Gallery, New York, November 30, 2017, to January 18, 2018), violence exists more as a subtle suggestion and a metaphor, in the form of bullet holes, shooting targets, or military uniforms.

Cai Dongdong: This installation actually recaptures how the found photo used in *Aiming at the Camera* was made: there was a camera on the tripod standing in front of the subject. Photography can have a violent nature to it; it can conceal the primitive desires of humanity. To take a photo is the same as when Adam approached the forbidden fruit.

Tansy Xiao: You're a photographer who gave up taking photographs and now appropriates them instead; a soldier who put down his gun. When you use found images to create work, is it like killing with a borrowed instrument?

Cai Dongdong: You're describing the camera as an aggressive weapon. But I think the process of photography includes the fusion of Yin and Yang, negative and positive. The act of taking a picture is Yang, while the production of the image inside the darkroom is Yin. Photography is both. I've been thinking about such essential things behind photography for some years now. The moment when you take a picture, it's cosmic, an integrated



Left: Cai Dongdong, *Off the Target*, 2015, silver gelatin print, arrow, 54 x 54 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Right: Cai Dongdong, *Practice Shooting*, 2015, silver gelatin print, mirror in frame, 53 x 53 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



Left: Cai Dongdong, *The Mountain Cutters*, 2017, gelatin silver print, stones, wood, 52 x 55.5 x 56.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

Right: Cai Dongdong, *Aiming at the Camera*, 2017, gelatin silver print, Leningrad camera, tripod, wood, 120 x 56 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.



experience. My use of found objects, on the other hand, is to break the integrity and continuity of a picture, to make ambiguous what might seem like a clear image.

Tansy Xiao: Please talk more about your use of found objects and found images.

Cai Dongdong: There are a lot of examples in art history. Movements like Dadaism focused on processing and remolding images per se, often manipulating them. But my scheme is different in that I tend to create a dialogue with the existing images. Like when an arrow hits a target, it's for a reason. It interacts with the content of the image.

Cai Dongdong, *Big Harvest*, 2017, gelatin silver print in frame, 30 × 49 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

Tansy Xiao: It looks like a typical existential technique, to reconstruct reality in order to reveal its absurdity. It's interesting to think about the fact that existentialism peaked after World War II. Due to the collective trauma and insecurity in society, the self-mockery of individual malaise extended to the questioning of institutions. So is it a historical collective state of mind that you tried to reconstruct, or its projection in our own time?



Cai Dongdong: I'm essentially working with images themselves. However, due to the content of the images, it's hard to avoid political interpretations, so it is dual purpose. On one hand it's the invasion of an image, on the other hand it's the disintegration of the historical moment within that picture.

Tansy Xiao: Is it an allusion to the situation in contemporary society?

Cai Dongdong: I think so.

Tansy Xiao: I've read about another public art project of yours in China that took the form of a temple incorporating various representations of gods collected from the public. The demand of deities is often based on either desire or fear. What made you decide to collect and to display these gods in contemporary China where religions were marginalized or even abolished post-Cultural Revolution? Was there anything unique in terms of people's responses to the idea of deities?

Cai Dongdong: Traditional Chinese culture is by no means atheistic. There are a lot of local deities out there. I lived in the rural areas in Northwestern China for a couple of years when I was a kid. Every village has their own god and their own temple. On the first and the fifteenth of each month villagers would go to the temple to worship the local god and make wishes to them. As



Cai Dongdong, *Oh My God*, 2014, crowd-sourced art project, installation view, Heiqiao. Courtesy of the artist.

an adult I've lived in suburban Beijing: Songzhuang, Caochangdi, Heiqiao . . . all of them at one time villages, yet, sadly, the tradition of local gods was lost. I've talked to the locals and they said that there used to be temples.

Tansy Xiao: Sounds like a typical process of gentrification in which urbanization overwrites the regional culture.



Left: Cai Dongdong, *Oh My God*, 2014, crowd-sourced art project, installation view, Heiqiao. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Cai Dongdong, *Oh My God*, 2014, crowd-sourced art project, entrance view, Heiqiao. Courtesy of the artist.

Cai Dongdong: So with this art project I wanted to establish my own temple. Initially I planned to do it at an artist-run space in Caochangdi, but one of the shows they hosted offended the authorities due to its radical content and the space was shut down. I wasn't able to do the temple project until another friend got a space in Heiqiao and asked me if I had any potential project in mind. So that was it, we set up the temple. However, there was no god and I ended up on social media calling without any expectations for people to contribute invented gods. To my surprise thirty "gods" were brought to the opening. That project continued for more than two months, people even brought in real local gods from their hometowns in conjunction with the invented ones, and we filled up the whole exhibition space from the floor to the ceiling. We had a donation box by the entrance; the money collected contributed to the project and the space.

Tansy Xiao: A non-profit temple.

Cai Dongdong: Exactly. The whole project was running independently outside of the capitalist system.

Tansy Xiao: I thought about the concept of post-postmodernism that Tom Turner nailed in 1996 “that seeks to temper reason with faith.”³ To instinctively enshrine various deities could be seen as a model of decentralization, an extreme representation of cultural niches, as well the reconstruction of reason and order within the chaos of the world. What do you think about that?

Cai Dongdong, *Oh My God*, 2014, crowd-sourced art project, installation view, Heiqiao. Courtesy of the artist.



Cai Dongdong: My temple project is actually called *Oh My God* (2014). It's more of an exclamation with surprise. The world might be chaotic for some people, but for others like politicians, historians, and religious believers, those who view the world in the context of a specific system, their minds are clear and organized. People were born with religious needs. Despite the fact that the social environment in China discourages religion, I've had from an early age an unidentifiable figure that I wanted to pray to. I think everybody has one. In Christianity human beings appear to be both negligible and mighty. I still believe that the idea of God could only exist in the context of monotheism. Gods are no longer gods when there are too many of them. Now, everything in relation to that particular project has been packed into one large container. It would be an interesting archive to look at in a few years.

Notes

1. Ruan Yizhong, *Contemporary Avant-Garde Photography* (Beijing: China Photography Press, 1990), and Ruan Yizhong, *Contemporary Masters of Photography* (Beijing: China Photography Press, 1988).
2. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).
3. Tom Turner, *City as Landscape: A Post-Postmodern View of Design and Planning* (Chapman and Hall: London, 1996), 9.