

**SUITCASES, MAPS, WOLVES AND GLASS WALLS:
MAPPING URBAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND REFLECTING ON GENDER ASYMMETRY IN
CONTEMPORARY ART**

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ABSTRACT

*With my urban suitcase in my hand, I recently traveled to cities in both Asia and Europe to undertake research as part of my PhD titled *The Transient City: mapping urban consciousness through contemporary art*. Included was an art residency and exhibition in Beijing and an international curatorial project in Vienna. While mapping East/West aspects of an emerging urban consciousness through an investigation of international art biennales I observed something else – a gender asymmetry blind spot. In a ‘post feminist’ world many would argue that gender imbalance is no longer relevant. While reflecting on the question ‘Does it matter?’ I saw the artwork of Yin Xiuzhen and Cai Guo Qiang. Both artists are part of a changing East/West relational position that is evident in their work. Gender is not. As a viewer with gender numbers on her mind I found the metaphors of suitcases, maps, wolves and glass walls began to take on meanings not intended by the artists but ironically symptomatic of their experiences as artists. In complex times when gender can be fluid the answer to my question would have to be both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Perhaps the most important issue though is that before such answers and their relevance to a collective urban consciousness can be explored, we first need to observe the blind spot and why it exists.*

As an artist and curator my work took me to Beijing, Vienna and Berlin in 2006 where I experienced art installations by two Chinese artists, Yin Xiuzhen and Cai Guo Qiang. Both intensively engaged me, drawing me into the works and setting me off on a tangent of thinking not intentionally imbedded in either of the works by the artists themselves.



SUITCASES & WOLVES.

AN INTERPRETIVE DRAWING BY MAGGIE MCCORMICK BASED ON A VIEWING OF YUN XIUZHEN, *PORTABLE CITY* IN 'CHINA NOW', SAMMLUNG ESSL, VIENNA 2006 AND CAI GUO QIANG *HEAD ON* IN 'CAI GUO-QIANG: HEAD ON', DEUTSCHE GUGGENHEIM, BERLIN, GERMANY, 2006.

ART WORKS BY YUN XIUZHEN, INCLUDING '*PORTABLE CITY*', CAN BE VIEWED AT <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/intartdata/artists/asia/chn/yin>

ART WORKS BY CAI GUO QIANG, INCLUDING '*HEAD ON*' CAN BE VIEWED AT <http://www.caiguoqiang.com/>

In the first installation I viewed in Vienna, titled *Portable City*, by Yin Xiuzhen, a huge world map was crisscrossed with colliding strings that connected cities across the world – East, West, North, and South. The interconnection points of the strings created a density of entanglement that made it impossible to distinguish the starting and finishing points. In front of the map several suitcases were filled with 'portable cities'. The suitcases arrived by air with the artist, direct from the airport carousel to the exhibition space. In the second work, titled *Head On* by Cai Guo Qiang, viewed in Berlin, a pack of ninety-nine wolves hurtled forward through the air in a furious moment of pure focused energy. They crashed headlong into an unexpected glass wall and tumbled to the ground, one after the other, stunned and confused. The symmetry of their purposeful flight transformed into a dysfunctional pile of bodies, going nowhere.

Viewers complete a work of art through their relationship with the work determined by their experience. In this case I came as a viewer with years of experiential and observational knowledge of art, artists and exhibitions overlaid with a more recent enquiry into the nature of urban consciousness and how this is mapped through contemporary art. My life and artwork, like that of Yin and Cai, is evidence of the transient experience of that uniquely urban and connected era alluded to through Yin's metaphorical suitcases. Departing from Melbourne my 'urban suitcase' has traveled to multiple cities in both Asia and Europe, including Beijing, and Vienna and Berlin where these installations were viewed. This rapid transition between cities in the East and the West can be seen in both my artwork and the direction my thinking began to take as I reflected on this experience and the metaphors of suitcases, maps, wolves and glass walls.

My viewing of the works was in the context of my research interest in contemporary Chinese art that has paralleled my interest in the changing relational position between what is perceived as the East and what is perceived as the West. Living in Australia where the East/West relationship is already turned on its head by the West being in the midst of the East as well as by the East being an integral part of a unique Australian Western identity. China has become central to my enquiry due to two key factors. Firstly there is a certain familiarity with China that is built into the Australian experience with many Chinese people settling in Australia. Secondly the opportunity to visit and exhibit in China in 2002 as part of the 'Nü Horizons' exhibition, shown at the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Art and the Donghua University in Shanghai, consolidated this connection between the two places. My connections through curatorial projects such as 'melbourneconnectionasia' in 2003 and 2004 and more recently my artist Red Gate Gallery residency in Beijing 2006, both overlay being born Australian with a global consciousness that is redefining connection points. Equally important in shaping how I see is my European background and experience as both an artist and curator.

Out of such transient urban experience an urban consciousness is emerging that is moving away from a direct relationship to, and identification with, specific cities to identification with global urban experience. This experience informs a global discourse which in turn is shaping urban consciousness. The depth of this discourse will be determined by our collective capacity to see clearly and to interpret what we see in the context of conscience.

THE COLLECTIVE MAP

Urban consciousness is the collective map that records our transient and connected state of being. 'Ours is the time of "trans" ' (Minglu in Hanru 2002: 71) or connection. As human beings existing on one planet we are connected in many ways despite the differences between us. Carl Jung observed one aspect of this as the 'collective unconscious' or universal psyche through the connection of archetypes evident in all societies. Urban consciousness, on the other hand, has grown out of a state of change towards transient urbanism.

The collective is urban and to be urban is to 'live in permanent processes of transition, hybridisation and nomadisation' as well as 'living simultaneously in different time zones' (Braidotti 2002: 2,6). Cities are connected in an unprecedented way as they grow and merge to create new urban realities. People have become urban flâneurs wandering physically and electronically through and between urban space across the world.

Transience or nomadism 'is not to be *without* a place but to define a sense of place through action and imagination' (Chin in World Views: Maps & Art catalogue 1999: 48). Braidotti describes it, as 'a kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. (2002: 215). Deriving from the Latin word *conscientia*, consciousness is related to a sense of moral consciousness. In this context, urban consciousness goes beyond awareness to action in response to conscience. As artist Mel Chin so eloquently puts it, a new collective map is emerging as 'Motion plus Action equals Place (i.e. Map)' (World Views: Maps & Art catalogue 1999: 48).

The interconnectedness of life was made dramatically visible by the first image that most people ever saw of the earth as a whole, *Earth Rise* (photographed by Bill Anders). It was taken from space in 1968 during the Apollo 8 mission, a forerunner to the Apollo 11 moon landing. An image even more familiar is one taken in 1972 on the last Apollo mission. Unlike the first one that is partly shrouded in darkness, this image is of a clear, illuminated earth suspended in space. It has become the most commonly published photograph in history. Since then this image has come to be associated with a sustainable world. Global concern about climate change and global warming is evidence of one aspect of a growing urban consciousness or conscience, in relation to the effects of an urban world and the need for a collective response to many issues. However the image that is most representative of urban consciousness is the ever-familiar flight route map in on-board flight magazines. The flight route map connects cities, irrespective of distance and time in favour of movement and connection. Each of us has our own transient map that has become an integral part of our urban identity and consciousness. Each visualises the transient rhythm of interconnected urban life and urban consciousness as the collective city – 'history tattooed on your back' (Braidotti 2002: 3); history in the making tattooed on our backs.

MAPPING EAST AS WEST AND WEST AS EAST

New East/West transient maps are in the process of forming. Putting electronic virtual mappings aside, personal mappings of nomadic and multiple hybrid experiences are symptomatic of, and contributing to, an emerging urban consciousness. The art mappings of Yin, Cai and many others reflect this.

Both Yin and Cai were born and studied in China, Yin in Beijing while Cai moved to Shanghai, the most Westernised Chinese city at the time. From 1862-1943 Western countries controlled much of Shanghai and inevitably Western thinking had an influence in Shanghai before other Chinese cities. In 1986 Cai moved to Japan just as a Chinese avant-garde art movement was emerging in China reflecting a growing East/West awareness of and access to each other. In Japan, Cai encountered Japanese contemporary art that was also in a process of finding a balance between national pride and the cult of Western culture (Fei 2000: 9). He was influenced by both the Guptal Group that ran from about the 1950s to the late 70s, and Mono-ha, a Japanese art movement that developed in Tokyo between 1969 and 1970. Both posed Asia as central rather than peripheral to contemporary practice, questioning the prevailing views in the West. Later in 1995 Cai received a grant for P.S.1, a major art space and residency in New York, a city that is perceived as central to cultural practice. Like many other Chinese artists in the 1990s he immigrated to the United States and continues to live in New York, while travelling to and exhibiting in cities across the world.

Yin, on the other hand, remained in China and became part of the contemporary art movements that Cai left behind. This included an influx of Western texts and art into China including the Robert Rauschenberg exhibition at the National Museum of China in 1985. Koppel-Yang observed what seemed to be an insurmountable cultural discrepancy between Rauschenberg's art and the Chinese environment (2003: 20). Yet despite this the impact was immense and combined with the local underground movements led not to a reproduction of Western art but rather an interpretation of this work filtered through the Chinese experience. This was expressed in multiple ways and cannot be seen as one movement but what generally can be seen to unite the artists at the time is their urban base and responses to changing urban conditions both in China and worldwide.

Although Yin and Cai have encountered the West in different ways in relation to a changing East both have contributed to a changing consciousness. Fei says of Cai's work that the East-West cultural dialogue is at the 'heart of his work' (2000: 9). He has established 'countless bridges' (Martinez, 2002, online) by creating geographic, aesthetic and conceptual connections in a complex emerging scenario. Their art concerns may differ but the same could be said of Yin's artwork. Even though she remained in China her work reflects a nomadic sensibility.

THE ASIAN PHENOMENON

The impact of Asia on an emerging global urban consciousness cannot be understated. At the end of 1999, Cai Guo Qiang instigated a gunpowder explosion that created the outline of a dragon in the sky over Vienna, titled *Dragon Sight Sees Vienna*. Multiple similar works were undertaken in other Western cities such as Valencia in Spain and New York in the USA. (To view these images go to <http://www.caiguoqiang.com/>).

The work heralded what many have come to call 'the Asian century' (Turner, 2005: 2). This includes what has been termed 'the China phenomenon' (Britton and Huangfu, 2003: 15). China's growing power on the global scene worldwide has produced an unprecedented interest in all things Chinese, including Chinese art and artists both in China and living abroad. Yin and Cai's exhibition histories and my recent Red Gate Gallery arts residency and exhibition in the 798 Art District in Beijing is part of this phenomenon.

My experience of the 798 Art District in Beijing confirmed an international exchange that is changing the face of East/West dialogue. This huge area in the Dashanzi district of Beijing was originally set up as a showcase factory area designed by East German architects in the Bauhaus style in the late 1950s. By the 1980s and under the pressure of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms many state owned enterprises such as this one underwent a decline. This coincided with the rise of the avant-garde art movement and artists began to move into vacant factories. By 2001 foreigners also began to move into the area with the American Robert Bernell being the first. Bernell set up the bookshop Timezone 8, now known worldwide. Huang Rui and Xu Yong set up the 798 Space and set in train an East/West art boom of galleries, art studios and residencies in Beijing. Other moves into China such as Australian Brian Wallace, who set up the first contemporary art gallery of Chinese art, Red Gate Gallery, also set in train the changing mood in Beijing. The 798 Art District even has its own biennale, the Dashanzi International Arts Festival that began in 2004. At the same time art by Chinese artists is in demand and shown across the world – all part of the China phenomenon.

The East/West discourse can be read as both an encounter and a collision of opposites but 'these dualities are not polarised, however, but combined ... on a global level' (Fuchs, 1997, quoted in Zhang, 2005: 32). The flow between cultures is never one way. What is changing is the balance of that flow. Half of the world's people live in Asia and this is increasing. In particular China's immense economic, political and cultural power is flowing across the globe. Contrary to Western perceptions, China has always seen itself as central rather than peripheral to the world scene. 'China' or *zhongguo* means 'Empire of the Centre' (Hou, 2002: 43). In China in the past foreigners were seen as primitive strangers that kept China substantially isolated from the West until relatively recently. Now the dragon is on the move and the foreigners are in the den. This is symptomatic of changing East/West relations across the world, even though the historical contexts vary in different Asian locations.

THE BIENNALE PHENOMENON

The 'Asian phenomenon' can be seen in the make up of international art biennales across the world. This has been of particular interest to me in my research to date. Three of the top seven artists shown in biennales since the early nineties are Asian artists reflecting a fast growing changing ratio of East/West numbers. Two of the top three are Chinese. Yin has participated in

several biennales including The Sydney Biennale 2004, 2nd Fukuoka Asia Art Triennial 2002 in Japan, Biennale San Paulo 2004 in Brazil and the 3rd Asia Pacific Triennial 1999 in Australia. It is Cai though who is a biennale favourite described as the 'artist-of-the-moment' (*Art Asia Pacific Almanac* 2005/2006: 10). Cai is one of the most exhibited artists in biennales. Outside of this he also exhibits extensively in other major international exhibitions. In 2006 alone he has exhibited nineteen major works.

The biennale is an urban phenomenon and a part of the global cultural flow between cities. Both Yin and Cai are part of the 'biennialisation' of the world. This is a transient urban concept of sub cities that appear regularly in physical cities across the world. Since the first biennale in Venice in 1895, the concept has transformed into many different models from biennales, to triennales, to quadriennales, from specific city based events such as Documenta in Kassel, Germany, to events wandering from city to city as Manifesta does every two years. For the purpose of simplicity all will be referred to as biennales in this paper, as this encapsulates the concept. The Italian word *biennale* means bi-annually, 'every other year'. With the growth of the biennale concept the word has come to refer to 'a large-scale exhibition held periodically to showcase international contemporary art and simultaneously act as a vehicle from which to establish the cultural positioning of a city' (Asia Art Archive, online) on the global map.

The word 'biennialisation' is a response to the worldwide proliferation of biennales, particularly since the 1990s. From the first biennale in the 1890s to the 1980s, only seventeen were in existence (Asia Art Archive, online). The Asia Art Archive lists the number of current biennales as sixty. In her survey Stevens counts eighty biennales across the world in 2006/2007 (2005, p. 22). Figures vary but all indicate a rise in the number of these events worldwide. Since the beginning of the 21st Century Europe has launched eighteen new biennales (Asia Art Archive, online) and Asia has matched the number. As many biennales are now occurring in Asia as in Europe, the birthplace of the concept. In the nine months from September 2005 to May 2006, five biennales were held in Indonesia alone. Asian participants are growing in numbers represented at biennales as both artists and curators. Steven's world map marks the locations of current biennales with red dots with a black line shooting out to the name of the city (2005: 24 - 25). It looks remarkably like a flight path map.

NUMBERS NUMBERS

While mapping East/West aspects of an emerging urban consciousness through this investigation of international art biennales I observed another set of numbers that revealed something else – gender asymmetry. Amongst the top ten Asian artists shown in biennales since 1990, only one is a woman, Sooja Kim from Korea/New York. Looking at the bigger picture through a mapping of the

selection of curators and artists on the biennale global circuit a general gender asymmetry trend can be observed.

Of the one hundred and twelve most invited artists across a survey of sixty-four biennales between 1993 and 2006, twenty-three exhibited in more than five events, with the largest number of participations being nine events. Of this group of twenty-three, thirteen are men and ten are women appearing to indicate a gender balance that is 'unusual in many other spheres' (Britton, 2005: 37). The balance is quickly tipped when observing that five out of seven of the artists who have been most exhibited in biennales are male with the top three, all men – Cai Guo Qiang, Yang Fudong and William Kentridge.

Britton also notes in the 2005 Artlink biennale survey that the overwhelming majority of the top nine curators are male. This is backed up by the Asia Art Archive survey that lists the five independent curators who have curated the most biennales 1990 to 2006. They are Rosa Martinez, Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Fumio Nanjo and Harald Szeemann. Four out of the five are male. This is reinforced again in the 50th issue of the journal *Art Asia Pacific*, by a series of photographs of curators of the recent biennales in Asia, in Singapore, Shanghai, Gwangju, Busan and Taipei. These are independent curator Sharmini Pereira, one of the team who put together the Singapore Biennale, together with Fumio Nanjo (the Artistic Director) and the other curatorial team members, Eugene Tan and Roger McDonald as well as Tobias Berger, Dan Cameron, Shu-Min Lin and Wu Hung. Of the eight people photographed, five are Asian but only one is a woman, Sharmini Pereira. The fact that most curators of Asian biennales are Asian is not a point of note but the fact that only one is a woman may be a noteworthy observation. Neither observation is commented on in the accompanying article (Maerkle, 2006: 90-95).

Very few comprehensive biennale surveys have been undertaken. One of the most recent editions to the biennale survey list is the Asia Art Archive's online survey, 'All You Want To Know About International Art Biennials'. Full of facts and figures the answer to the question: What is the percentage of male and female artists? remains unanswered. As they say, you don't need to count when 'it is clear that the majority of artists participating in international biennials are male'. When an article appears in an Australian journal titled 'The Sheila's Biennale', and opens with the sentence 'For the first time in 51 years, for 2005 the Venice Biennale has entrusted its curatorship to the hands of women' (Hoffe, 2005: 40), its time to reflect. This is especially so in the light of the fact that the Biennale of Sydney has not done much better. It is one of the oldest biennales. When it started in 1973 no women were included in the event. There have been only two women curators, Dr. Lynne Cooke in 1996 and Isabel Carlos in 2004. A third one, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, will curate the 15th Biennale of Sydney in 2008 - three out of fifteen.

When the New York collective, the 'Guerilla Girls', who were prominent in 'outing' the gender imbalance in New York galleries in the 1980s, appear at the Venice Biennale in 2005, it all seems far too reminiscent of the cause of those eighties art actions. The 1970s saw the rise of the Women's Art Movement and a period of consciousness raising of male/female asymmetry in both society and art in the West. The 1980s brought a less stringent approach and with this an institutional backlash could be observed in the many major exhibitions that included almost no women. The Guerrilla Girls formed in 1985 after the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened an exhibition titled 'An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture'. It was supposed to be a summary of the most significant contemporary art in the world. Out of one hundred and sixty nine artists, only thirteen were women. (Guerilla Girls, web site).

An Asia based version of the Guerilla Girls' 'outing' can be seen in Chinese artist Hong Hao's actions in the nineties to highlight the lack of Chinese artists invited to participate in Documenta, a major European art event. He created a fictitious biennale titled 'Oahgnoh' (his name spelt backward), the Biennale: Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte 2001-04. Earlier he and fellow artist Yan Lei pretended to be the commissioning curator of Documenta X, leinay Oahgnoh (their names spelt backwards), and sent letters to Chinese artists inviting them to be in the exhibition.

The numbers for both women artists and Chinese artists have definitely improved since these 'outings' but even though Hill notes that 'women took the lions share of the prizes' (2005: 11) at the Venice Biennale 2005, it is the Asian and in particular the Chinese artists who have been more successful in now getting their 'lion's share' of biennales. What struck me though is that almost all the Asian artists are men.

NUMBERS CAN LIE AND TELL TRUTHS

Numbers can have a way of deceiving and distracting from the real issues. Numbers only indicate quantity not quality. Developing a curatorial premise for a major biennale cannot be compared with organising a much smaller event. Some curators and artists are simply deeper in their inquiry/enquiry and their work is more significant even if it is shown in less biennales. Some argue that the biennale is a spent force and that the real contribution of art and artists lies elsewhere. There are many significant artists of course who choose to work outside of the biennale system or who do not fit into the agendas of current biennale models.

Be that as it may and despite criticisms and perceived inadequacies the biennale is still a major site where urban consciousness is reviewed and revealed through both visual translation of, and verbal dialogue about, urban issues. Globalisation and urbanisation have drawn Asia, and in particular China, into a cultural re-examination. The biennale has become a stage for this discourse.

Further there is continuous discussion amongst curators and artists alike on globalisation, the centre and the periphery, the East and the West, gender however, is rarely included in these debates. For gender the male/female numbers are starkly out of balance and yet this goes uncommented on by either men or women. It is not the asymmetry of individual biennales that is the point at issue as each has its own focus that may or may not be affected by unequal gender representation. Rather looking over a long time frame and into the immediate future gender imbalance appears to be a characteristic of all biennales.

AN URBAN AGENDA

The word gender has come to be associated primarily with feminism or women's issues. Writing about the Chinese experience, Louie uses this as the basis of his claim for a need to now theorise the male gender (2002: 99). Louie and others recognise 'gender is a relationship' (Garber and Turner 1995: x) within or between particular groups. It is often seen as associated with sexual identity and in particular dualities of difference but it has also been argued that gender is more fluid in the individual (Butler 1990). Despite the validity of this latter position, especially in relation to global fluidity in general, the man/woman relational position remains a social construct that continues to impact on urban consciousness. Cities are the stage on which women and men play out gender relationships, between each other and between themselves, according to their cultural parameters. As such any investigation into the changing nature of the city and the formation of urban consciousness, must include gender as a category of analysis. Biennales interestingly have begun to include gender in their documentation in relation to whether the artist is male or female, along with multiple other information, but to date I have not found any reference to gender imbalance in this documentation or what their rationale is for including this information. I suspect it may be to assist the viewer to interpret unfamiliar names.

Post 1970s took us into a world reviewing the 'isms' and amongst the reviews was 'Post Feminism'. With this came a state of gender amnesia. In a 'post feminist' world gender imbalance can be an unexpected and confusing subject. What is the impact of gender asymmetry on either men or women? Does it still matter? As life as we know it rapidly changes the answer could be both 'yes' and 'no'. The context though has changed to a far more complex scenario than that of the 1970s as we become more aware of aspects such as class and differing East/West perspectives on gender as Louie points out in his discussion (2002: 2-21). Not least of these is a fast growing urbanism and connectivity that challenges gender roles. A recent biennale in Prague was ironically called Tina B (This is not Another Biennale). This paper could well be called Tina Fi (This Is Not A Feminist Issue). This is an urban issue.

9. QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

In this context my experiential encounter with both Yin Xiuzhen's *Portable City* and Cai Gou Qiang's *Head On* posed a number of questions. Art maps the world we live in as much as the world we want to live in. In many ways art can be seen as the world's conscience. This is evident in both artists' work. Issues of gender are not. As a non-Chinese speaking viewer I was not immediately aware of each artist's gender from their names and the issues addressed in the works could be read as universal. But as a viewer with gender numbers on her mind, these two artists, one a woman and one a man, began to reveal the human side of numbers through each of their experiences as artists.

Yin's work, *Portable City*, was included in an important international survey of contemporary Chinese art, 'China Now', Sammlung Essl, Vienna 2006. Amongst my observations I noted that of the forty-one participating artists in this major exhibition, only three were women. Is this representative of 'China now'? If it is, what does this mean to 'China future' and by default 'global future'? The number three is also relevant to Cai. As I mentioned earlier, he is one of the top three artists most exhibited in biennales. What is the scenario in which this gender asymmetry has emerged? The East/West relational position, like gender relationships, is socially constructed. As the former morphs into a new state what impact does this have on the latter? I saw Cai's work, *Head On*, after these observations and the metaphors of the glass wall and of the broken symmetry of the wolf pack could only lead to a further enquiry.

10. WOLVES AND GLASS WALLS

The idea of the biennale is a transient concept that repetitively sets up new relational positions between art and city as well as between city and city through its artists, curators and viewers. This reflects the changing nature of art itself towards what Bourriard terms 'relational aesthetics' or the inter-human relationship that is represented, produced or prompted (2002: 112). This can be seen in the working method of contemporary artists and curators including the work of Yin and Cai.

Much of Yin's work is described by Bergquist (online) as employing a communication based working process. The project *River Above River* is a good example where she collected empty containers from people along the river and invited them to write onto the container what was used for. These were then filled with water and formed into a boat that lay on the riverbank. In another way her suitcases in *Portable City* also embody a relational process as the exhibition of these works included the flight itself. This active process is evident to the exhibition viewer in the visible used luggage tags and the state of the cases themselves. A journey is in progress.

Cai's *Head On* can be 'read' in this way through both his Western and Eastern influences such as the influence of the thinking of the Japanese group Mona-ha. Theorist and co-founder of Mona-ha, Lee U. Fan brought together Taoist philosophy with Western thinking (Zhang 2005: 12). Here art was viewed as 'an experience or an event rather than an object' (Quoted in Zhang 2005: 120). Cai's use of materials, process and outcome, is experiential. He uses gunpowder as an active art material. The aesthetic created generates a relationship that requires the viewer to experience the work directly. The energy of the gunpowder pervades the entire work. On opening the door of the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin to see the exhibition *Head On*, the viewer is immediately 'in' the work. The wall image of a 9 x 4 metre gunpowder drawing of hundreds of wolves whose bodies form a giant vortex, and the two channel video work of a house exploding with fireworks, reference an experiential relationship between the work and the viewer at an earlier interactive process. The viewer literally needs to walk under and through the work in order to view it. More importantly, action is required in order to experience the idea embodied in the work. As each viewer becomes a part of the work for other viewers this creates an aesthetic that relies on relationship rather than static viewing. Needless to say such relationships are transient and foster multiple interpretations.

The written text accompanying the exhibition positions the work as Cai's response to the omnipresence of German history in Berlin in places like Checkpoint Charlie, the Soviet Memorial, the remains of the Berlin Wall and the memorial museum Topography of Terror. All of this is there but what is of greater interest is what is not said in the information brochure – the mapping of the relational viewer and the translation between the artist's visual statement and the viewer's mental map. As the viewers are both male and female the metaphors of the wolf and the glass wall can be read in multiple ways, whether or not this is the artist's conscious intention.

The wolf first appeared in Cai's work after he moved to the West. *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf* makes a reference to 'The boy who cried wolf' and American concerns with a 'Chinese threat'. In *Head On* the pack of wolves in flight looks remarkably like a dragon. In the East the dragon is sacred. Both wolves and dragons are perceived as threatening in the West. A closer look can reveal that both the mythical dragon and the real life wolf embody other complex interpretations. In particular the symbolism and metaphor of the wolf in guises from the evil and fearful stalker to the nurturing wolf mother all rest somewhere in the collective psyche in myths, fairy stories and images. In the context of this discussion though the social structure of the wolf pack becomes the most relevant. Lopez's demystification of the wolf (1978) reveals some interesting connections to human behaviour. This is not by interpreting wolf behaviour through experience of human behaviour but rather better understanding of human behaviour through observation of the wolf. Lopez points out that the social structure of the wolf pack and in particular the crucial role of the female wolf is often misinterpreted (1978: 32). Females and males head up packs and strongly influence the behaviour of the group but it is the female who is often faster in hunting and makes the life and death decision of where to den and consequently where the wolves will hunt and survive. The wolf is a social animal but unlike

much human behaviour, it depends for its survival on cooperation not conflict. The flight of Cai's wolf pack adds visual reinforcement to this observation. Misinterpretation of wolf behaviour, Lopez points out is often related to what we expect to see. The same can be said of observation of human behaviour.

Although Cai does not make any reference to 'A wolf in sheep's clothing' in the piece *Head On*, the idea is not far from the viewer's mind in realising that the wolves that appear to be real are in fact made from sheep's wool. The wolf and the sheep can be seen as opposites or dualities. This could be read as a male/female metaphor with one in disguise as the other. Is the apparent symmetry of the wolf pack in flight in reality out of balance? In his own statements Cai describes the work as something more than a response to Berlin, namely a reflection of 'the contradictory powers of violence and beauty' (Cai Guo-Qiang, *Head On* exhibition information brochure). Cai seems to suggest that both exist side by side. An asymmetry of violence and beauty though leads to a less than beautiful consequence seen in this work as the painful writhing of wolves smashing to the ground on impact with the glass wall. Could an asymmetry between men and women, particularly in the context of the male assuming the male and female position, lead to similar consequences?

'The future is by destiny a wall' (Hou 2002: 92), a psychological wall that is put up to protect identity as globalisation begins to knock down walls. It is the point of both resistance to change and the embracing of change. Hanru is discussing here 'Chineseness' in a non-gender specific way, in a globalising world in which the East and the West are negotiating new relations with each other. Both will change in the process and both are knocking down the walls they have constructed as Hou goes on to suggest must happen.

11. SEEING THE BLIND SPOT.

The gender wall with its reflective transparency can play tricks as the image inside the wall merges with the image reflected on the wall from the outside. It can be difficult to see what is real and what is illusion. Is the wall there or is it not there? The biennale, it seems, confirms it is and also confirms itself as a site of an emerging urban consciousness that embodies the cultural mores of what could be called gender amnesia or gender blindness. It is simply not fashionable to notice the glass wall from either side. This it seems to me is the key issue in addressing the question 'Does gender asymmetry matter'?

The human eye has a blind spot in its field of vision. This lies on the point of the retina where the optic nerve leads back into the brain. The optic nerves for left and right eyes are symmetrical. The blind spot of the right eye and the left eye lies somewhere right and left respectively of the centre of vision. Since the right eye can see whatever lies in the left eye's blind spot, and vice versa, the two eyes together provide complete vision. Symmetry is required to see. As humans we have a

propensity towards 'blind spots' that have nothing to do with physical capabilities. We do not 'see' what we do not want to see or do not think needs to be seen. Amongst the cacophony of urban issues, the once much commented on 'glass ceiling' has been quietly replaced by the global 'glass wall'. Like Cai's confused wolves crashing into an unexpected obstacle we not only do not see the wall, we do not want to see it.

In the 1970s the focus was on gender imbalance and inequity. Today we are more able to see cultural imbalance. All biennales do not of course display a complete cultural balance as the key agendas and focus varies as do the locations but broadly speaking an awareness can be observed. Biennales are platforms from which curators and artists are able to launch their ideas on a highly visible international scene. Many different curatorial models have provided new frameworks for understanding culture. This includes the curatorial concepts of Hou Hanru and Rosa Martinez mentioned earlier as amongst the most active curators. Martinez invited Cai to curate the first China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the 51st Venice Biennale 2005, the one dubbed by Hoffe as the 'Sheila's Biennale'. Chinese artists began to appear at the Venice Biennale in 1993 but it took until 2005, one hundred and ten years, for both a woman curator and a China Pavilion to appear at the most prestigious of biennales. A woman may well have curated this biennale and overseen a re-dressing of cultural balance, but the gender imbalance continued, most pointedly in the China Pavilion. In keeping with Hoffe's colloquialism it would have been more aptly called 'the Chinese bloke's pavilion'. Cai invited six artists to represent China – Yung Ho Chang, Liu Wei, Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, Wang Qiheng, Xu Zhen. All men.

It can be argued that the subject matter of the China Pavilion is universal and reflects the issues of our times, irrespective of whether the curators or artists are male or female. To a degree this is true. 'Virgin Garden: Emersion' explores aspects of rapid change in Chinese society in a globalised world. What is concerning is that the majority by far who engage in this emerging discourse are male, and both the participating men and women do not appear to notice this dichotomy. Hou Hanru curated the most recent China Pavilion in the 2007 Venice Biennale. Titled 'Everyday Miracles' the focus is on women's contribution to contemporary Chinese art. The work of Cao Fei, Kan Xuan, Shen Yuan and Yin Xiuzhen is featured. The question must be why revert to putting women into a special category? Women are not absent from the contemporary art scene as artists, curators or subject matter. As subject matter they appear in a range of guises. By its existence this subject matter questions the asymmetry of its creation. This is too big a field to be considered here. Rather here the interest is in the low representation of women artists in the high-profile international biennale circuit. Can such an asymmetry deliver a full discourse? One of the anecdotal perceptions of the biennale circuit is about 'the band of nomadic super-curators ... roaming the world, hunting either alone or in packs' and that 'most of them are dangerous to women' (Britton 2005: 34). The wolf metaphor viewed from this perspective seems oddly apt.

Britton's comments are one of the few to observe an imbalance but she does not go onto discuss the relevance of this to the quality of the biennale discourse or if this is due entirely or in part to the predominance of male curators. As seen earlier in this paper the 'Sheila's Biennale' also delivered gender imbalance. Curatorial decisions obviously have an impact but cannot be seen as necessarily central to the cause of asymmetry of gender.

The increase in Asian participation in biennales has brought its own imbalance of gender with it and built on a Western asymmetry of gender that was already well established. The artwork of Chinese women is often critiqued in the context of 'a female discourse' (Zhenqing, Yang 2003: 63) rather than a human discourse or urban discourse. There is a strand of art by women that does reference aspects of life peculiar to women and in this an independent female discourse can be observed. What is not observed is the reality that just as some aspects of male discourse are male specific and some are universal, so too are aspects of female discourse. Equally where materials or imagery traditionally associated with women are used, this is a point for comment. On the other hand where similar materials and imagery are used by male artists this is often described in very different terms. For example in the catalogue for the exhibition 'China Now' in Vienna the work of Qin Yufen, a woman, is described as employing 'articles of female everyday use' (China Now catalogue: 282). The work exhibited was an installation titled *Wind*, made of paper fans, silk and silk threads. On the other hand the work of Zhu Jinshi, a male artist whose installation was equally sensitive and employed similar materials, such as paper, was described as using 'characteristically Chinese materials' (China Now catalogue: 294). One is described in a gender specific way, the other in a cultural representative way. Yin Xiuzhen is referred to as 'one of the most active women artists' in an essay on her work (Berquist, online). I have never come across a reference to Cai Guo Qiang as a 'one of the most active male artists'.

As curators, women (where they exist) are almost always part of a curatorial group rather than the artistic director. The rationale put forward for this situation and that of artists is 'socio-economic conditions and traditional ethics' (Zhenqing, Yang 2003: 63). This is at odds with Huang's claim that the 'question of equality between the sexes has almost been completely resolved in China' (2002: 88) pointing out that long before Western feminism swept through the 70s Mao Zedong had declared, 'Women hold up half the sky'. There are some debates to be had here but in the context of this paper the more important statement by Huang is that gender imbalance 'is purely an issue involving artistic activity' (2002: 88). Culturally specific scenarios are important when making judgments in relation to the role and position of men and women and the way these have been played out in different ways in the East and the West. Both though reveal certain 'blind spots' in relation to reality. Huang at least has observed the imbalance in the arts dialogue and he recognises the contribution of women artist not as a female but as a universal discourse. Although on the surface the numbers do not look good it may well be the Chinese who will have the capacity to embrace this missing dialogue.

Observing gender asymmetry in the biennale numbers is a shock as it seems to be a debate long since dispensed with and many would argue that it is simply not an issue any more. But if you can still ask, 'Why are there no women artists?' (Nochlin, 1998) or at least 'Why are there not very many women artists?' at the beginning of the 21st century, and even more to the point 'Why does no one notice they are not very many women artists and curators?' something has not been resolved. Nochlin's question was posed at the height of awareness of, and action about, gender asymmetry in the West. She argued then that the key issue lay in the inability to see that asymmetry is not a natural state but an institutionally constructed scenario, a glass wall that protects artistic power structures. The biennale is both a site of progressive thinking and at the same time it has become institutionalised. This may be where part of the answer to such a question is to be found. Those who criticise the biennale concept may well be able to see that no matter what model it currently assumes none are any longer capable of contributing to an urban consciousness that reflects our collective global, urban destiny. As Clark (2006: 54) points out the biennale concept has run its course in its current format that can only be broken by introducing what he calls a 'self-denying ordinance' whereby artists and curators only do one biennale on the circuit and so open up the field of selection and inclusion.

Such critiques may well begin to reveal the gender blind spot. The biennale is one of the many urban models where urban consciousness is being formed but the quality of the engagement being undertaken needs to be questioned. These major art events are presented as sites of insight and yet at the same time cannot see. An emerging urban consciousness must surely challenge or at the very least question prevailing relational positions. To answer the question 'Does gender asymmetry matter?' in the contemporary world is a complex and difficult journey but one that needs to be begun by first seeing that a question needs to be asked.

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