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Who Goes, Where Are? [part 4]

Documentation as gesture in alternative art practices of contemporary China

by Edward Sanderson and Elaine W. Ho



Collage of photos from *The Meeting Room* project, organised by Elaine W. Ho and Rania Ho, hosted by the Arrow Factory, Beijing, from November 2012 to January 2013

An intriguing membrane of intimacy is formed by casual banter among friendly acquaintances who happen most often to meet in the context of art events. This membrane, gelled by the knowing exchange of glances, an inside joke or simply ‘catching up’, shields one against other forms of bubbling sociality, piercing the airs of rampant display that make it otherwise difficult to see what would have been the intended object of display – art itself. How classical! Of course, we live in an era of art in which the object of art becomes more and more difficult to pinpoint, no longer so well defined against the mushy pea-soup of the art ‘context’ and its socio-economic workings as industry and media phenomenon. What Peter Sloterdijk neatly rounds up as a ‘pathology of spheres’ manifests as our sliding upon the surfaces of these micropolitical membranes towards smooth, polished forms; money – so they say – put where the mouth is.

It is thus that our unlikely collaboration begins. This experiment, entitled *Who Goes, Where Are?* kneads together a series of public dialogues that address independent initiatives in the Chinese context and the reflexivity of one-to-one conversation via a performative play between language and gesture. Each encounter is reworked and recontextualised from the previous – from a joint academic paper to a performance to an audio collage – making the objects of artistic research indistinguishable from their processes and complicating our roles as independent researchers as well as practitioners. The recurrence of old East–West dichotomies is only another aspect of the much-needed reformation of subject and object positions in this dialogue. What follows is an annotated documentation of a documentation, taken from the first two instances of our ongoing encounter:

He had deftly picked up a technique of knitting with his bare hands. Although bound together, his hands kept moving. She flung the red and grey wool towards and away from him; they had a syncopated conversation.



Elaine W. Ho and Edward Sanderson, *Who Goes, Where Are?* [part 2], 3 April 2014, ArtReview London. Photo courtesy Jason Yen

¹ Transcribed content taken from Elaine W. Ho and Edward Sanderson, *Who Goes, Where Are?* [part 2], performance dialogue at the ArtReview Bar (London, 3 April 2014)

ELAINE W. HO Who are you?¹

EDWARD SANDERSON I am Edward Sanderson, an art critic based in Beijing, and I write about contemporary art in China, specifically researching independent artist initiatives and collectives. And who are you?

EW H My name is Elaine W. Ho. I've been living in Beijing for the last eight years, working as an artist, freelancer, precarious worker of sorts. The practice has been mostly grounded in a so-called 'alternative' collaborative project space known as HomeShop.



HomeShop series number one: Games 08, closing ceremony, 2008, Beijing. Photo courtesy HomeShop, Beijing

Research intersects with art intersects with criticism here, in the sense of a field of research organised according to a flow of personal interest, balanced aesthetically upon a precipice also known as a canon, or perhaps an academic standard, or – further – an industry. Work is fettered in constant toil with that certain outside, and this begs the question of representation within artistic research because

representation always occurs as a mimesis in reference to those external relations: working in a local community, peers within the discipline, the artworld and perhaps even some kind of utopian-not-yet.²

We hope that you will take keywords like 'alternative' and 'self-organised' merely as the broaching of questions.³

There has been some debate about an adequate, nonderogatory sense of the Chinese term for 'alternative'.

Creative practices deemed 'alternative' have a long lineage in China (as elsewhere), but may not be consciously or immediately referred to as such, or only designated as 'alternative' *ex post facto*.⁴ To generalise, the 'alternative' work exists in a space of lack, but new forms of community, for instance, emerge from such spaces, and what they propose to the 'mainstream' are new configurations of social organisation and distributions of power that are both an aesthetic, creative formation and a political proposition.



The basic idea is that I've described these spaces as a kind of image of a certain 'unmappability', circumscribing the political, cultural and economic flux that exists in China – perhaps all over the globe – but most affectively, of course, as a personal struggle of positioning (or not wanting to position) oneself too clearly amid the overwhelming forces of socio-capitalistic hegemony.

ES In those *hutongs*, HomeShop was quite hidden away, but you had a quite specific community that you were working with. Why was that important?

EWB The whole project came out of an interest in those communities, so after moving in...

...the voice of representation...

EWB ...there was an interest to understand more. And I think 'living life' (so to speak) comes out of that interest in understanding and attempting to react...

2 Representation occurs here in its etymological sense, as a calling to mind by description, whereby one could possibly come to serve, show or embody the other – from the late fourteenth century, meaning 'to bring to mind by description', also 'to symbolise, serve as a sign or symbol of; serve as the type or embodiment of', and from the Old French *representer*, as in 'present, show, portray' (twelfth century), from Latin *repraesentare*, as in 'make present, set in view, show, exhibit, display', from *re-*, the intensive prefix, plus *praesentare*, 'to present', literally 'to place before'. "Represent", *Online Etymology Dictionary*, http://etymonline.com/index.php?term=represent&allowed_in_frame=0 (Douglas Harper, 2010–14)

3 Content from Elaine W. Ho and Edward Sanderson, *Who Goes, Where Are?* [part 1], research presentation at *Friday Night Salons* at Tate Modern (London, 28 March 2014)

4 Wu Hung, 'Reinventing exhibition spaces in China', *Museum International*, No 211, Vol 53, No 3 (2011), and Gao Minglu, 'Changing Motivations of Chinese Contemporary Art Since the Mid 1990s', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 11:2–3 (2012) 209–219

Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou. Photo courtesy Edward Sanderson

Documentation, in this sense, was an active part of that attempt, both as form of observation but also in acknowledgement of the fact that every form of documentation is a recognition of value, a proposition and a coming *towards*.

EW H In the beginning we were just making friends.

The points at which the practices of the everyday intersect with one's identity is a matter of ethical concern for understanding the nature of the relation outside of blind practice.

ES When you're working with people, especially when they're not within [existing] institutional structures (the gallery system or museums, say) – you end up getting in much closer relationship to them. So you have to be friends to know what they're doing, to talk about them, to interview them – that kind of thing.

What is interesting for me to think about is how 'organisation' occurs here as an internally binding agent, and 'representation' as an external one.

EW H You're representing these artists and groups, so to speak?



Arrow Factory, Beijing.
Photo courtesy Edward Sanderson

From the perspective of a critic, the review is one level of external representation; for the artist, it could be a website or list of exhibitions. But the degree of cohesion or discrepancy between these forms of representation indicates the complex array of audiences and agendas.

EW H So how does your form of representation of these artists and groups organise a particular aspect of the artworld or the art industry?

ES Well, representation does that by default, really.

But it is perhaps our task here to approach this so-called 'business of art history' as a heuristic rather than hermeneutic mode of engagement – *documentation as gesture*. The 'academic turn' in contemporary art reflects back upon art history

and the discourses that seek to understand and contextualise it. In Simon O’Sullivan’s readings on the ‘Aesthetics of Affect’, art history is reenvisioned ‘as a kind of parallel to the work that art is already doing, rather than as an attempt to fix and interpret art – art history, perhaps, as precisely a kind of *creative writing*’.⁵

...When labour and work are highly confused, as is the case with artist-run spaces, it becomes highly difficult to articulate a position relative to a particular framing of work and *the work*.

...This aesthetic understanding of organisation occurs in the tracing of activity towards the realm of representation, and it is here where the power relations and inequalities of organisation, affiliation and collaboration are concealed or revealed. One particular question we must ask is, ‘Where is *the work* within all of this?’



5 Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation’, *Visual Cultures as Objects and Affects*, ed Jorella Andrews (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 21

A Diaodui, *Sleeping*, (ongoing), Beijing. Photo courtesy Edward Sanderson

If we are to understand research as a way of speaking *about* an aesthetico-political work, the means and processes of politics and the community must necessarily be highlighted as *workings* rather than works.

Images of people gathering say very little about what the work is. Workshops, performances, event-based gatherings and the much-talked-about other variables that have loosely come to be known as ‘social practice’ characterise much of what HomeShop and the other case studies in our research do. Vitamin Creative Space, while commercially operated, organises itself differently from a traditional gallery, and could more aptly be described as an art off-space that happens to be run by a gallerist.⁶ Cooking and urban agriculture have been common topics of Vitamin’s events, as is sometimes the case for Arrow Factory in Beijing, whose regular series of installations is interspersed with artist-led bake sales and bar nights.⁷

In these examples, not only does the gloss of photography add an extra glow to the mediation of the social, but it disperses as well, such that the spaces between people and the representation of collaboration take on ambiguous meanings. When looked at from a standpoint outside of China, the political reading is emphasised. However, our focus upon the structures of language, the poetics of translation and the creation of image (or an imaginary) refers primarily to the micropolitical and liminal aspects of self-organised practice.

6 The homepage of Vitamin Creative Space asserts that ‘in order to operate independently from institutionalised funding, it is active both as an independent art space and as a “commercial” gallery. Vitamin Creative Space actively challenges preconceptions by merging these two traditionally opposed strategies for supporting and presenting contemporary art, targeting the search for new Chinese contributions at both the artistic-practice and the institutional level within the new global context.’ http://www.vitamincreativespace.com/en/?page_id=2

7 Arrow Factory is self-described as an ‘independently run alternative art space in Beijing that is located in a small *hutong* alley in the city centre. Arrow Factory reclaims an existing storefront and transforms it into a space for site-specific installations and projects that are designed to be viewed from the street 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.’ www.arrowfactory.org.cn

This is an artistic environment where lack of public funds for culture obviates the need to justify work as per the speculative tallies required by government-supported models. 'Open platforms' are actually seldom tolerated, as effective results most often need to be speculatively generated before projects even begin. The Beijing-based group A Diaodui's lighthearted approach stems precisely from the contradictions of being together within an atmosphere of intense production. In a series of informal performances, members visit temples and sleep in little tents on their grounds. To be 'open' then comes to encompass the possibility of doing nothing at all.

ES I think this an interesting ploy even – that you might deliberately and precariously set that up.

EWB And is that precariousness a particular trait of their effectiveness?

ES Well, I think if you look at precarity as a response to institutionalisation, then yes.

Artist and curator Ma Yongfeng's *Dragon Fountain Bathhouse* project (2010) is such an intentionally risky ploy. In this example, the artist embraced the temporality and invisibility of a small public bathhouse in a village on the outskirts of Beijing by encouraging interventions that subtly enjoined with the space. For the eight-hour span in which the show lasted, failure and frustration became part of the game of viewing.

...these practices work in places and in ways that create their own conditions of existence on-the-fly, as it were. One might even argue that this precariousness is a constituent feature of these practices.

These are fluid subjectivities, of course. *But performativity, we feel, is part of the (re)presentation of activities, to oneself and to the public.*

This is an ongoing script. Further developments of *Who Goes, Where Are?* will appear imminently. ara



Ma Yongfeng, *Dragon Fountain Bathhouse*, 2010, Beijing.
Photo courtesy Edward Sanderson