

## Pictures from an Exhibition

Keren Smith

But how many daydreams we should have to analyse under the simple heading of Doors! For the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open. In fact, it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings. The door schematizes two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of daydream. At times, it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open (Bachelard 1994: 222).

Ideological sensibilities on the subject of exhibitions are finely tuned in these days of post-orientalist awareness. If it is assumed that we have outgrown a taste for the fake exotika associated with the 1931 Colonial exhibition in Paris, for example, then the role of display in presenting the iconic expressions of another culture could still be seen to flirt dangerously with the public's acquisitorial juices. Whether for new knowledge, sensations or experience, the avidity stimulated by the exhibition-experience is nicely indicated in the French term, *exposition*: a public presentation for the purposes of furthering (or introducing) knowledge and a public 'spread' of artfully arranged goods for display in a shop-window. Thus commodification and culture become one.

But exhibition-going, whether in pre-post or post-post colonial mode need not be (and may never have exclusively been) a mere entrée to some plat du jour to be devoured, leaving the chin mired with the gravy of consumerist greed. Apart from the fact that the two exhibitions I wish to examine here are composed of works chosen and installed by the indigenous artists themselves, both exhibitions – 'Alors la Chine' in Paris and 'Concrete Horizons' in Wellington – offer reflections on the experience of thresholds, doorways, and openings fundamental to our experience as social and cultural beings, rather than mere consumers. I would like to suggest that not only the experience of the doorway, but also the heightened awareness of its symbolism and power, is endemic to appreciating the "pictures" from these exhibitions, and the openings they make in the 'walls' of another culture. In this case the 'other' culture represented is China; the point of departure – arrival, or *embarquement*, what you will – Paris, and Wellington respectively.

The semantics of doorways derives from their contextual relation to the boundary markers that indicate limits and off-limits, possession and protection, identity and belonging. If towers and spires symbolise the spirit of the city, like Proust's spires resumed the whole "spirit and essence of Martinville", then a city's walls could be said to represent its identity as a social collective. The process of the visual and architectural definition of the city of Paris is as readable as the growth-rings in a tree. A succession of walls, from the medieval circular wall with its sixty-seven towers, through to the Enceinte des Fermiers Generaux in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the nineteenth-century fortifications of the industrial age, have all attempted to contain and delineate a growing metropolis that has swallowed them in turn, leaving scattered traces behind. The coherent urban landscape that dramatically defines the experience of being either "inside" or "outside" the city today owes its distinction in part to this organic process, even more so, perhaps to the interventionist urban planning of Haussmann in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The accretions and deposits of age are what *Alors la Chine* contributor Li Xianting envies Paris in his lament over China's demolished walls, the rubble of which testifies to an ongoing policy in urban China of destruction-as-progress. The exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in Paris's Pompidou centre, the curtain-raiser for the year of China in France (Nov 2003-Nov 2004), thus provided a venue for

comment on the urban development and destruction that runs many of the exhibits like a fault-line:

La construction du neuf doit-elle forcément se faire au prix de l'anéantissement de l'ancien ? Paris a conservé sa physionomie du temps passé, sans que celle-ci pèse pour autant sur la modernité de ses nouveaux quartiers. Quant aux transports modernes de la ville, très bien desservie par son métro, ils n'en ont pas entamé l'intégrité. Une cité historique est un patrimoine culturel complet, le symbole d'une culture. Paris n'est devenu Paris que parce que cette ville est le produit de la culture française des XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles ; il en va de même pour Pékin, produit de la culture impériale des Ming et des Qing. Chaque culture est un système stylistique soutenu par un système de valeurs déterminé. C'est une structure formelle complète ; il n'est pas possible de la reproduire, ni de la mutiler. Elle peut être transformée au gré des besoins de l'homme moderne, mais ne peut pas être attaquée jusqu'à l'os.

Malheureusement, à notre grande honte et à celle de nos descendants, Pékin, ainsi que la totalité des cités historiques chinoises, ne mérite plus aujourd'hui cette appellation. Dans ces villes, il n'y a même plus une rue dont la trame visuelle soit à même de faire ressentir la présence d'une culture, d'une histoire (*Alors, la Chine?*: 2003).

[Must the construction of the new necessarily be at the cost of the old? Paris has retained her ancient character, without allowing this to stand in the way of the modernity of her newer *quartiers*. The city's transport needs have been similarly met by the very efficient metro system, but not at the cost of the city's identity. An historic city is a vital cultural inheritance, to the point where it may even be considered a symbol for that culture in its entirety. Paris has become Paris, in so far as she reflects the culture of 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>-century France; the same could be said of Peking, a reflection of imperial culture of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Each culture is a stylistic system informed by a specific set of values. It functions as a coherent, formal whole that can be neither reproduced nor mutilated. It can undergo transformation in response to the needs of contemporary man, but it cannot survive an attack that penetrates to the very marrow. Sadly, to our undying shame and the shame of our ancestors, Peking, along with every other historic city in China, no longer merits the name of city. In all of these cities, not a single street remains which bears the mark of what we could recognise as the presence of a culture, or a history.]

In his distress for China's loss, Xianting idealises aspects of Paris's own urban history: the demolition work of Haussmann was, for its time, on a similar scale to the demolition work currently underway in Peking, and provoked similar outrage among the dispossessed, whether the actual dispossessed who lost their homes, or the intelligentsia who felt they were losing their cultural bearings. Etchings from the period record vistas of rubble, rendered apocalyptic by the exploitation of inky shadows and troubled skies, and suggestive of just such an attack on the city, "jusqu'à l'os", of which Xianting writes above.

The exhibition in Paris, like the one in Wellington, thus evokes the violence of all Haussmannian projects while focussing on a vertiginous present where the iconic role of city walls is being contested with unprecedented intensity. In the destruction of China's cities is seen to lie not only continued fidelity to Mao Zedong's call to 'destroy in order to build', but a heartfelt threat to the notions of cultural integrity and wholeness as the nation accelerates into a global future. In such a context, the openings in a wall are less a gateway than a two-way breach, the destruction from within joining the impact of the invasion of Western pseudo-ism from without. Wang Wei's 12 black and white photographs in the *Concrete Horizons* series in Wellington's Adam Art Gallery perfectly confront the ambivalence of the new urban

project. Entitled 'Temporary Space' the work exploits the simplicity of its constituent parts - human figures, bricks, space – to create a construction narrative that can be read backwards, Chinese-style, or forwards, Western-style, to spell out simultaneously the backward loss to China's architecture that is the result of its 'forward' urban planning. Wang Wei's installation requires the reflective engagement of the spectator to realise the wry ambivalence hidden in the mortar of its unfinished walls. Song Dong's 'Eating the Great Wall' in the same exhibition, however, invites visitors with more ruthless charm to actively consume the dainty wafer biscuits forming its fortifications. Through this shared act of consumption, urban fragments are gradually revealed in the screens concealed behind the wafer-wall, making us all guilty participants in the creation of the new through the devouring of the old. The true ambivalence of openings and doorways, which the Romans related so aptly to their two-faced god of gates, intrudes its provocative tonality on the spectator with Song Dong's installation. How much more so when that spectator has already accepted the invitation to enter into another exhibition through a quite different doorway that nonetheless tells a similar tale.

The enormous archway of Xu Tan's L'Arche du bonheur at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, mimics the entrance to imperial or sacred temples, except that its basic building blocks are white polystyrene food-containers:

[des] sortes de lunch box ou de doggybag à la chinoise ... symbolisant le repas quotidien en même temps que le provisoire, l'artificiel et le polluant (*Alors, la Chine?* 2003)

[...a kind of lunchbox or Chinese-style doggybag ... which symbolises the daily meal as well as what is temporary, artificial, and rubbish to be thrown away.]

It is with a somewhat eerie elegance that this detritus of hundreds of take-away meals, floats slightly in the air-currents disturbed by the movement of visitors to the exhibition. Disturbed, as they may also be, by the odd sense of burden this ephemeral structure communicates, despite the new and difficult beauty that emerges from its act of recycling.

In this case, the symbolic weight of the doorway truly functions Bluebeard-wise, or, as Bachelard might have it, as a door that perhaps should never have been opened, or 'that should not even have been imagined open'. Both the Paris and the Wellington exhibitions include in their accompanying commentary reflections on the impact of China's 'attempts to merge more closely with the international community'. Zhang Zhaohui in 'Concrete Horizons' refers not only to the successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics, but to Shanghai's more recent efforts as a candidate for the 2010 World Expo. It is indeed ironic that all the cultural plundering of the West represented by previous centuries of colonialist exhibitions are as chitchat compared with the rumblings of self-divestment occurring in preparation for the transformation of urban China into a vast global display-case. If rubbish is the obvious and universal result of a worldwide consumerism, then Xianting suggests that the same kind of terrible booty may accompany the victorious entrance of China through the gateway of an international marketplace. In the wake of such a parade, Xianting intimates, are signs of the transformation of China into "a vast rubbish-heap":

L'utilitarisme a fait de la Chine une vaste poubelle : charme europeen et toits traditionnels chinois, coca-cola et culture du the dans l'esprit lettre, ecstasy et secrets de grand-mère, poursuite de la mode ou reflux des profondeurs, le bon et le mauvais affluent vers nous. A défauts de valeurs et de repères, nous n'avons plus que des desirs et des besoins (*Alors, la Chine?* 2003).

[Consumerism has turned China into a vast rubbish-dump : European charm mixes with traditional Chinese roof-lines, coca-cola with ceremonial tea-drinking and ancient learning, ecstasy tablets with old wives tales, fashion with profundities, the good and the bad flow over and swamp us. Without values or points of reference, all we have left are wants and needs. ...]

According to Xianting, this atomising of culture can hardly be associated with Western postmodernism, since it is generated by a much more unselfconscious reaching for the old 'peasant' myths of 'joy-luck', wealth and long life. Instead of representing an imaginative projection into the future, therefore, the entrance to the new glitzy cityscapes could be seen as offering new-old vistas through to a past of complacent privilege, conjuring a kind of "aristocratic ease" which, it is mistakenly assumed, will somehow expand to fill the cultural and spiritual void it has helped create. If Xianting is right, then the triumphal Arch of take-away Happiness is not a doorway into the 'ultimate depths of being', so much as a condemnation to wander everlastingly on the surface of things. As China has made openings in its Great Wall, therefore, and as it continues to solicit economic and cultural exchange with countries like France, so it seeks openings in the citadel of the world market, a gateway through which it might pass from isolation to inclusion. The nature of the rewards for passing 'go', however, are by no means as certain for China, or the rest of the world, as they are on a Monopoly board.

Only one thing is clear. No-one can pass through a doorway and remain unchanged. With their reflections on walls and portals, the Paris-Wellington exhibitions remind us that the in-between spaces doorways represent are also a threshold of expectancy and danger, excitement and fear. The "cosmos of the Half-open" imposes the choice of a beginning that must be made before the destination can be fully seen. Not, perhaps, the "absolute point of departure" that Derrida eschews, but a departure, nonetheless, entailing loss and gain. If the massive bites out of the spine of Chinese traditions have already entailed losses as well as gains for the Chinese people making their entrance into the market economy, then the exhibition visitor also experiences something of the ambivalence of doorways. Passing through the 'Arche du Bonheur' by invitation, rather than invasion, eager to respect the protocol of the door, we discover that we are already invaders, already responsible for strangers we have never met, for a landmass we might never have visited, in our common implication in the ways and mores of global consumerism.

Developing the thematics of the doorway allows a following through to the letter of the Chinese character which features on the cover of the French exhibition catalogue *Alors la Chine*. Appropriately, and even more so given the venue for the present review, the character signifies a crossing or passage, a medium or interval between two points. In other words, a place of mediation and meeting, an in-between place of departure and arrival, that is recognised as a potential site of drama and happening in its own right. Downstage Theatre's recent showing of *Niu Sila* in Wellington represents the true place of mediation and meeting in the present writer's journeyings between Paris and China. In other words, New Zealand, a country as far from China in demographic importance as it is from China geographically. The boyhood friendship of white middle-class Peter Butler, with his Samoan friend Ione, begins with a knock at the door, as Ione comes to collect his mate for the eventful walk to school. Despite the contrary pulls of culture on the two boys as adults, the friendship has changed both of them so that their adult selves feel the draught when the other is not there. The play closes with another knock on the door. This time, it is Vincent from Hong Kong who has come to collect Peter's son for another childhood odyssey

en route for school. 'Taro for thought' indeed. And a reminder to the audience that the highest percentage of immigrants into New Zealand at the present time hail from Chinese-speaking countries. If Dave Armstrong requests that 'palagi (European) audience members [...] entertain the idea that Pacific Islanders contribute far more to our society than cleaning out offices & scoring the odd try on the wing', then it behoves so-called 'brown people' and 'white people' to likewise remember that the Chinese who come through the arrivals gate contribute for more to New Zealand than Chinese food and forged drivers licences. It is to be hoped that they do not find the gate 'closed, bolted, padlocked'. The final outcome for all of us, of course, remains open.

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