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Twilight of the Communist Idols

Political Notes on Cao Fei

BY JOHANNES HOERNING



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CAO FEI, *Whose Utopia*, 2006, still from video: 20 min. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy the artist; Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou; and Sprüth Magers, London/Berlin/Los Angeles.

"At first, we were spies; then, we became explorers; finally, we evolved into underground workers."

- Cao Fei, "Hongxia"

"Even [a] long life comes to an end."

- Mao's response to a Red Guard's prayer that he live forever

"At the very time when [humans] appear engaged in revolutionizing things and themselves, in bringing about what never was before, at such very epochs of revolutionary crisis do they anxiously conjure up into their service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battles cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in such time-honored disguise and with such borrowed language."

- Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-52)

As an object of analysis, China is a moving target. Its economic rise and social transformation keep producing outcomes that make definitive judgment or prediction imprecise if not impossible. Most of what is said or written about China might better be classified as preliminary speculation with varying degrees of trenchancy and relevance. But speculators, too, must look for some orientation and find parameters to get their work off the ground. The multimedia practice of Guangzhou-born artist Cao Fei may serve as such an index. How an artist like Cao—born in the early reform era in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic distinction between winners and losers slowly began to latch on to all utopian leftovers—looks at China and reflects on the nation's past and present social character may tell us a great deal about what China has become, at least in the eyes of one of the winners of China's rise. It is through this middle-class lens and as amateur ethnographer that Cao approaches what appears to be her favored objects of analysis: China's factory workers. Her films and installations maneuver between technological fantasies, science fiction, modern romance, and portrayals of the inner lives (as the artist imagines of them) of ordinary workers in southern China. Her artistic concerns reach from the ideology of development to questions of China's ongoing modernization.

Cao's recent publication *HX* (2020), a richly edited book that formed the theoretical component of her 2020 show "Blueprints" at London's Serpentine Galleries, offers insight into the core interests of her practice. Covered in deep-red velvet, the publication is filled with archival material from Cao's private



CAO FEI, *Whose Utopia*, 2006, still from video: 20 min.



CAO FEI, *Asia One*, 2018, still from video: 1 hr 3 min 20 sec.

collection, preceded by political commentary and analyses from various contributors. Much of the source material in *HX* is rooted in Maoist visual culture, permeated as it was by images of smiling and deeply concentrated workers at the service of a common cause and augmented with texts that remind viewers who was leading whom into a prosperously communist future. While direct references to these texts are missing in Cao's films—which are filled instead with scenic dialogues and atmospheric music in brilliant futuristic tinctures—her imagery is no less marked by the complete absence of coercion. No one disobeys and no one punishes. No one rebels and no one disciplines. There are no enemies to labor interests, for there are no antagonistic interests to begin with. Workplace hierarchy and social distinction have become natural laws of motion, such that they require no further representation, discussion, or reflection. Unsurprisingly, then, as in the film *Whose Utopia* (2006), all that the portrayals of factory workers under seemingly reconciled conditions reveal are their interests in various forms of dance.²

This is not to suggest that it is any artist's job to put artistic production at the service of better political judgment, and even less to say that artistic production should (or even can) be at the service of social or political change. From an official point of view, the latter is entirely unwelcome, such that the role of the artist in the eyes of the state becomes either something like a civil servant producing state decoration or that of a creative entrepreneur who engages in profitable entertainment without any political ambition of their own. Cao somehow embodies all of these roles, despite her complaint that "China's senior leaders have never publicly visited, nor have they formally acknowledged the legitimacy of contemporary art in China."¹ The artist has, in the process of her ethnographic and aesthetic investigations, become a celebrated name at home as well as abroad without the nuisance of pseudo-protest as it once emanated from a figure like

Ai Weiwei. That her work is not censored outright and that she seems to enjoy relative creative freedom might be negative proof for the formal acknowledgment of contemporary art that she finds missing at the regime level.

Like any other political entity, China is shot through with contradictions. The best artists can do—or the most we can expect them to do—is to shed light on these contradictions. It would be misguided to expect Cao, or anyone else, to resolve the contradictions through artistic production. In the case of Cao, the artist herself has become full of contradictions, remaining deliberately vague and non-committal—laudably Duchampian, perhaps. Working at the center of a cultural market entirely regulated by the principle of profit and freed from the burden of having to supply emancipatory content, Cao's works often preclude the political left's standard criticism by playing an art-capital-politics game whose futuristic commodity aesthetic invites viewers to something that never actually turns up.

The most obvious contradiction in China—which cannot but inform Cao's or any other contemporary Chinese artist's work—is that the Chinese state to a large extent follows the logic of capital, leading some economists to describe this arrangement as "political capitalism." The party-state, however, rules in the name of communism and continues to secure its legitimacy by recourse to the 1949 revolution. While communist principles had defined everything that the party did in its early beginnings from the founding in 1921 onwards, the revolution, however, failed entirely as a communist revolution. It had to make way for the more urgent task of national liberation and succeeded precisely in this task. The nation building that had followed national liberation was presided over by the communist party, whose repeated touting since 2012 of "The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (*zhonghua minzhu de weida fuxing*) is a regular reminder of its proud nationalist success and lasting political achievement;

in official terms, a testimony to the “original aspiration” (*buwang chuxin, laoji shiming*). That the Chinese Dream (*zhonguo meng*)—another official term in circulation since 2012—is not the dream of communism hardly needs emphasis, for how could a communist dream be compared in all seriousness with the American Dream by none other than Xi Jinping?

Unsurprisingly, then, whatever is dreamy in Cao’s celebrated films *Whose Utopia*, *La Town* (2014), *Asia One* (2018), or *Nova* (2019) has nothing to do with communism. Workers are not dreaming about the abolishment of private property, or liberation from their disenfranchisement or sudden dislocation by the state or capitalist oppressors. Nor are they dreaming of overthrowing a not-so-communist regime, which once understood itself as advancing proletarian dictatorship. Even though Cao’s working-class personnel in *Whose Utopia* share a location under the same factory sky, whatever class consciousness one might assign to these workers as workers pales in comparison to the hyper-individualized ethos of each dreaming for her or himself: dreams about mundane values without higher purpose trump every alternative of collectivized political aspiration. It is their individualization and fragmented subjectivity that prevents them from unification. One person, one dream, while others continue to labor. What the future holds is not an alternative political or economic arrangement but more of the same: dreams that money can buy.

From this observation in Cao’s work emerges a social parameter that should support informed speculation about Chinese society at several levels. In the creative medium of moving images, the development of a new social parameter was captured best in Wang Bing’s three-part documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002). In one scene, the local government of the Tiexi district in Shenyang invites residents to take part in a lottery. Speaking into two microphones from a stage high above hundreds of participants, the host proclaims that “now, we all know that in this world, there are no saviors, there never have been. To change our lives, we have got to rely on our own physical strength and intelligence . . . Success, whether in business or in life, requires



CAO FEI, *La Town*, 2014, still from video: 42 min 13 sec.

an investment.” In the absence of a savior and a higher purpose in life, collective utopian aspiration made way for individual investment, enjoyment, and failure.

This scene, among many others from *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, captures how people have come to live their lives, what they have come to live their lives for, and how they can hold only themselves responsible for success or failure above a minimum threshold of subsistence, whether they like it or not. What counts as success or failure—indeed the birth of this very mundane distinction to classify individual life situations and social worth in relation to one another—is a product of the reform era and defined in opposition to those former proletarian and revolutionary virtues that were once part of China’s communist horizon. Measuring one’s life competitively by individual success or failure reflects the inevitable outcome of China’s capitalist modernization and (neo)liberalization. Growing up without experience outside this quasi-capitalist way of life, Cao appears to have transformed Wang’s sober realism into an aestheticized concern for the conditions of workers in China’s “New Era.” What in Wang’s documentary still seemed like an atmosphere of mourning for the way life had been organized before Mao’s death becomes in Cao Fei’s films a fixed social and political condition without alternative. Relating to the pre-reform past must take the form of speculative imagination, calibrated by historic documents and narrative kitsch reflective of her generation’s emotional-hedonistic distance to the ascetic Maoist past.

A penchant for such an eclectic nostalgia has permeated Cao’s work for some time, including, most recently in “Blueprints” and “Staging the Era” (2021) at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. This nostalgia speaks through Cao’s meticulous reconstruction of spaces and memories through archival objects and reliquaries of the nation’s formative Sino-Soviet relations as well as the Cultural Revolution. Cao indeed “conjures up into [her] service the spirits of the past,” as Marx put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, but she does so for questionable reasons. Mixed up



CAO FEI, *Nova*, 2019, still from video: 1 hr 49 min.

with Cao's fascination for China's tumultuous 20th century history is the reconstruction of her pop-cultural upbringing in Guangzhou in the 1990s. The artist re-staged her life under reform-era conditions in which the gradual commodification and self-commodification had taken on a force of their own for modern Chinese subjectivity. Her commercial success and her collaborations with the entertainment and fashion industry positions Cao as one of the key representatives of the elective affinity between art and capital.

Cao's ambitious historical research began with the changing nature of the Hongxia Theater, a cultural space in Beijing's Jiuxianqiao district that was part of a vast factory infrastructure conceived under Soviet guidance, used in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Like other such official cultural spaces, the Hongxia Theater was a gift of the state for the entertainment of laborers during non-working hours, representing the elite's concern with the cultural wellbeing of its base—ideology-conforming entertainment as payback for the relentless commitment of workers for the greater socialist cause. Cao's collection of archival material and her commentary in *HX* represent the highly ambiguous relationship between China's past, marked by proletarian consciousness and ascetic values of Maoism, and the reform era, post-socialist present augmented by the absence of higher goals for the future beyond banal nationalism.

In the book, printed right after the artist's own writing on her emotional relationship to the Hongxia Theater, Jiang Jun's essay "After 'The Ten Major Relationships,'" stands out for its celebratory nationalist tone. One wonders what role Jiang's unambiguous nationalistic celebration plays in the context of Cao's rather ambiguous thought and work, or what the curators at the Serpentine thought when they edited the book together with the artist. In any case, the piece is highly instructive for situating Cao as an artist and for making sense of her concern with the working class. Jiang's essay about China's "peaceful" rise, its "independence" and "autonomy" in all respects—ideological, financial, territorial—makes no single mention of communism other than the fact that it was and is a communist party solely to be held responsible for China's independence and autonomy.

The author finds a neat correspondence between Mao's China in the 1950s—a time and place of slogans like, "build afresh the stoves," "invite guests after cleaning the house," and "leaning to one side"—and what China is attempting today, namely in undoing US hegemony. This straightforwardly propagandistic piece, shot through with anti-historical clichés and phraseology, conveniently ignores the detrimental social results of China's First Year Plan, its initial adoption of Stalinist methods, Mao's Anti-Rightist purges, and mass starvation of the Great Leap Forward. Instead, it ends with the resounding promise of China's universal rule as "all-under-heaven with the same warmth and cold throughout the globe." As is well known, to the Confucian principle of all-under-heaven (*tianxia*) corresponds a ruler appointed by heaven, the son of heaven (*tianzi*). How such a heavenly ruler, above the fray of democratic procedures, would represent workers and meet their social demands once they are tired of dancing, is anyone's guess. What does the inclusion of such a piece tell us about Cao's artistic strategy?

The question thus remains what exactly she confronts in her practice. Does her work fall into the aestheticized pseudo-critique of someone like Francis Alÿs, who, like Cao, seems to be motivated by giving a voice to those who cannot afford one and are actively prevented from formulating their "true" interests? Since when does art have this capacity, and why do artists continue to emulate the role of ethnographers, anthropologists, or social workers? In all their deep concern with the downtrodden, might they not be better advised to change profession? Cao's work appears a little more ambiguous, especially with respect to the question what exactly the disadvantage is and who has caused it. To be sure, her work does not engage in political intervention, such that it would challenge the official demand to "tell China's story well" (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*). Neither do her videos seem at risk of being classified as "making China ugly" (*chouhua*), as was the case, famously, when the foreign filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni was invited by the party in 1972 to film the great achievements of the Cultural Revolution. Entirely disappointed by Antonioni's filmic view on things, *People's Daily* at the time complained that "it seems as if China's revolution has



CAO FEI, *The Eternal Wave*, 2020, still from virtual reality, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Acute Art.



CAO FEI, *Asia One*, 2018, still from video: 1 hr 3 min 20 sec.

not changed the status of Chinese people and has not liberated them spiritually.”³ By contrast, Cao’s recent films, with their technological brilliance and hypermodern aesthetic, provide an image of China’s utopian past and disorienting present, which has so far been met with silent acceptance or benign indifference. Such attitudes are hardly accidental from the state’s point of view as holder of the monopoly on symbolic violence. Cao’s interpretation of history manages to remain sufficiently close to dogma, even where her interpretation suggests symptoms of spiritual crisis at the individual and collective level: presented with ever-greater economic freedom but no less political control, what have Chinese of her generation and after come to live their lives for?

Linked to questions about what Cao is confronting in her practice is whether her work claims to be transformative, a claim made by many of today’s cultural producers concerned as they are with marginality and the voiceless? And if transformative, for whom? For the morale of her middle-class audience or for Chinese workers, the majority of whom are rural migrants (nearly 300 million, a third of China’s labor force) in precarious jobs, subcontracted and disenfranchised without a “right to rebel” (*zaofan youli*)? In her essay “Hongxia,” Cao acknowledges part of the problem with her artistic strategy and social position, writing, “[all] of this was a way to indulge our wishful thinking from the lofty pretense of art. Like the vast majority of people, we are powerless and sorrowful in the face of epochal change.”⁴

Recognizing lofty indulgence, to be sure, is not sufficiently critical reflection on her role as an artist; neither is “magical thinking,” as the Serpentine curators call Cao’s state of artistic mind.⁵

I have so far largely avoided including facts about China’s working-class situation into my reflections, not least because I am dealing with artistic production from which, as I mentioned earlier, it would be wrong to expect a clear message about anything and particularly about things with such high political stakes. Yet, when works of art such as Cao’s are explicitly concerned with the disadvantaged, when they communicate a profound sadness for the order of things—“powerless and sorrowful”—and aestheticize social situations for purposes of cultural entertainment, it might be prudent to remind ourselves of some facts. Let me end my political notes on Cao, somewhat drastically, with a quote from the sociologist Lin Chun, who comments on the “New Era” rhetoric introduced by Xi Jinping and taken up by Cao in various titles and utterances:

“Evaded outright [by this rhetoric] is a basic class analysis of China’s actual contradictions: its exploitative productive relations, structural inequalities, as well as class, gender, ethnic, and regional disparities and conflicts. The fact that 60 million children are left behind in dilapidated villages by struggling parents working faraway as urban subalterns alone taints any socialist decoration. This deliberately apolitical formulation will not revive the pride of labour but only further encourage developmentalist greed, waste, rifts, and resource depletion—both at home and abroad.”⁶

1 Cao Fei, “Hongxia,” in *HX* (London: Serpentine Galleries, 2020).

2 One of the few exceptions in contemporary Chinese video art dealing intelligently with questions of working-class conditions and workplace hierarchy can be found in the work of Li Liao (b. 1982, Hubei).

3 Quoted in Christian Sorace, “美学 Aesthetics,” in Christian Sorace et al. (eds.), *Afterlives of Chinese Communism* (London: Verso, 2019), 13.

4 *Ibid.*, 39.

5 Joseph Constable and Rebecca Lewin, “Magical Thinking in the Work of Cao Fei,” in *HX*, 19–22.

6 Lin Chun, “群众路线 Mass Line,” in Sorace et al. (eds.), *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, 126.

CAO FEI (born 1978, Guangzhou) graduated from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 2001. She is known for her video, multimedia installation, and internet work that reflect the rapid and chaotic changes of Chinese society. Her most recent exhibitions include the major solo “Staging the Era” at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, in 2021, spanning two decades of her practice, and the large-scale exhibition “Blueprints” at London’s Serpentine Galleries in 2020. She has participated in the Shanghai Biennale, Moscow Biennale, Taipei Biennial, Biennale of Sydney, Istanbul Biennial, Yokohama Triennale, and the Venice Biennale. Cao was nominated for the Hugo Boss Prize in 2010.

JOHANNES HOERNING publishes on topics of art and political theory. Recent writing include essays on Heidi Bucher, Tetsumi Kudo, Paul Thek, Franz West, as well as a critical analysis of the political thought of French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon. He is the lead researcher at M+ for the museum’s Marcel Duchamp collection and archive and is currently writing his PhD dissertation at Cambridge University, part of which focuses on the history of political ideas in modern China. In 2021, Hoerning co-founded Fluids, a curatorial platform based in Hong Kong.