

## **Animalism and Transitions of Human Culture in the Work of Ma Yongfeng**

*By Thomas J. Berghuis*

*I, Zhuangzi, once dreamt that I was a butterfly fluttering about. I did as I pleased and knew nothing of Zhuang Zhou! Suddenly I had awakened a Zhuang Zhou with all his usual trappings. Now I don't know whether I am Zhuang Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly who is dreaming he is Zhuang Zhou. There must be a difference between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly, and this is meant by the saying that things undergo transition.*

*Zhuangzi, The Book of Zhuangzi, Chapter 2, "All Created Equal" (Around 300 B.C.)*

The first time I saw the work of Ma Yongfeng was in 2002 at his former home in Tongxian, 19 kilometers east of Beijing. At the time Ma Yongfeng had just completed his video-work *The Swirl* (2002), which depicts the life cycle of a school of six goldfish tossed around in the confined space of a domestic (top-loader) washing machine. As a child I had once heard the story about a small kitten that had crawled inside a front-loader washing machine to take a nap on a pile of towels, ready to be washed. Seeing the work brought me back to this story, and for a moment my thoughts were with the kitten as it got taken out of the washing machine. Surely these fish will be able to survive their ordeal, right? Soon hereafter the spinning cycle was completed and a loud click of the dial prompted the draining of the water. I found myself looking at the fish floundering at the bottom, gasping for water. A brief silence marked the repeat of the DVD.

The second time I watched this video work I began to consider the composite cultural and artistic layers that this work intends to offer the viewer, especially when considering the cultivation of precious koi in fishponds that adorn numerous temples, teahouses, and even private mansions. It has become one of the symbols of Chinese traditional culture to keep these types of goldfish that signify having lots of good fortune. They come to symbolize the way Chinese culture incorporates animals as symbolic representations of the conversions between the natural world and cultural realm. Hence, Chinese cultural tradition (with its foundation in an agrarian state) places much emphasis on the notion of 'animal culture'. At a time of great economic prosperity it may not come as a surprise that animals are once more placed at the forefront of Chinese cultural expression.

In recent years Ma Yongfeng has managed to provide an alternative discourse of cultural expression that is capable in drawing away some of the attention that is given to discussions of 'humanism' in Chinese contemporary art during the post-Mao reform period. Instead, Ma has chosen to expand his practices into a realm that deals with cultures of 'animalism': a term that brings forth the notion that (even in contemporary society) animals play a crucial role in the dissemination of cultural identity.

This can certainly be seen in the video installation *Beijing Zoological Garden* (2004), which takes on a prominent position in the current solo exhibition of Ma Yongfeng at Platform China, after it featured in a group show of Chinese video art, held earlier in 2006 at the PS1 Gallery in New York. The 27-minute work draws the viewer into the gazing lens of a digital video camera, as it encapsulates the movements of various animals that are kept inside the Beijing Zoological Garden. Drawing from the Lacanian notion of the *gaze* as *the mirror stage*, the human agency of the viewer replicates itself as the captured animals at the Beijing Zoo, and therefore we turn to the Deleuzian concept of ‘becoming animal’, as we are captured in our own cage of the exhibition space.

I first saw *Beijing Zoological Garden* on a television set at Ma Yongfeng’s new home in Huajiadi, located in the northeast of Beijing. At the time Ma explained to me that the entire work consists of a large video installation that is made up of 3 projection screens, which are carefully placed in a darkened exhibition space; thereby allowing viewers to be brought much closer to the full scale of the work. What struck me were the multiple layers of complexity that this work offers, including in the usage of different stylistic discourses and artistic techniques. For example, this can be seen the gentle reference to the hand-made qualities of digital video, whereby the entire video is shot from a hand-held position, and sometimes we even get to see the reflection of the camera lens on the window of the animal cages.

At the same time, the work incorporates references to sphere-shaped bird and flower paintings that were particularly popular during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). In fact, as can be seen from artist statements several of Ma Yongfeng’s works deal with the discontinuity of traditional cultural practices with the arrival of contemporary art. Hence, we learn how, according to Ma, his video work *The Swirl* also contains references to intellectual debates on “the decline of traditional values in modern China.” The conceptual approach to working with video, as a form of ‘new media’ practice, is further ridiculed in the most recent video work *Storm Model* (2005), which will also feature in a group show of Chinese video art, titled Video-Real, which takes part in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Israel Video Art Biennale – Video Zone that is to be held at the Center of Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv (December 2006).

In preparing *Storm Model* Ma Yongfeng spent several weeks working on a large model of a Chinese mountain-village that is struck by a severe storm, complete with torrential rains, floods, and combining sound, and light-effects. After the video was produced, Ma Yongfeng proceeded to destroy the installation. This work sets out to challenge the relationship between digital video, installation, and the common practice of model building, particularly in natural history museums across China. These man-made constructions pay reference to the mock-up residues of the real world, where everyday life becomes transported into the realm of simulacra.

The concept of simulacra is also imbedded in the creation of the photograph-series *The Origin of Species* (2005) that are featured in the second part of the solo exhibition at Platform China; thereby contrasting the video installation *Beijing Zoological Garden*. These photographs draw attention to the residues of artificial cultivation, by depicting man-made mock-ups of biological habitats that are stripped of their natural inhabitants. These virtual panoramas of simulated environments produce an uncanny sense of what the future will hold if mankind continues to project its own creation onto the natural world. Indeed, as Ma Yongfeng states “This is perhaps the scene that precedes the ‘origin of the species’ or the aftermath of biological extermination.”

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