



laboratorio d'arte

dossier

# Cina XXI secolo

## arte fra identità e trasformazione



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botto and bruno meet Liu Xiaodong

an in-depth look at

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### Chinese art in the XX century

After the death of Mao Zedong (1976) and the decline of the cultural revolution, Chinese production slowly moves away from the frame of reference of propaganda art. Till that, it was forbidden to represent typical subjects from tradition such as landscapes, flowers or birds because considered typical of a private, intimist and bourgeois vision, far from the concept of “art for the masses” proclaimed by Mao. At the end of Seventies, China is on its way towards an important turning point both politically, socially and economically. Art testifies this moment of transformation: initially the artists unite in groups and currents, giving life to the first avant-garde movements and expressing a strong reaction to the past. Having overcome this first phase and having metabolized the shock of Tian'anmen Square (1989), the groups give way to individual research. Censorship remains largely in place, although in the last twenty years government intervention has slackened.

### the exhibition

The exhibition *China XXI century* suggests well-known and emerging artists and witnesses the development of a new sensibility in the way of representing the world that, in spite of geographic distances, is quite near to the Western world. It is a heterogeneous and complex art which has in the space of a number of years moved from being homologated regime propaganda to an audacious experimentation. Characterized by a fresh and direct communication, original both in style and content, contemporary Chinese art has a strong relationship with its past and with its ancient traditions, while taking in and elaborating influences and contaminations from other cultures.

From the very beginning of the new millennium the Chinese art scene has been very articulated: different protagonists are part of it - by origin, history and artistic background - operating with different means and getting their inspiration from both international and Chinese artistic currents. Attempting to put them together under the one definition, means reducing the complexity of their research. Compared to the previous generations these artists stand out both for their use of a universal language, linked to what is happening elsewhere on the globe, and for the versatile use they make of photography, video, installations and performance. Some of them manifest a certain disenchantment towards the accelerated modernization their country is undergoing, others choose to portray a society where they are both active agents and spectators, exploring themes like identity, home, the metropolis, new customs, globalization.

In a society in transition like the Chinese one the problem of identity – political, cultural, social and sexual – is linked to the question of how one relates to others and the eternal conflict of how the other sees us and how we see ourselves from inside. A significant trend in Chinese art and culture today is the one that explores the urban space, both internal and external – home and the city – portrayed by the artists as changeable landscapes in continuous development, and disturbing at times. Among the numerous artists featured in the exhibition those who pay particular attention to this trend are Yang Zhenzhong, Yang Yong, Weng Feng, Cao Fei and Liu Xiaodong.



Yang Zhenzhong  
**Cycle Aerobics (level 2)** • 2005  
 a series of eight coloured photos  
 each 100 x 100

**Yang Zhenzhong** puts together photographs taken in different parts of Shanghai and images of symbolic objects for the Chinese culture: missile-launching, tanks, caterpillars, fork-lifts, newsstands and stone lions. In his photomontage these heavy objects magically appear so light that they can be lifted by the hand of a man. The speed with which change happens and the security generated by the economic boom seems for the occasion to have even overcome the force of gravity. And yet when standing in front of these works we cannot but help fear that any moment now the weight of reality can descend upon those objects, crushing those insolent young people that dared challenge the laws of nature.

The series of eight photographs featured in this exhibition shows streets and modern buildings of Shanghai in the background. The protagonists in the works are always a young Chinese couple cycling and executing a number of spectacular acrobatic exercises. Having fun, wrapped up in themselves and disinterested in what is going on around them, skilfully gliding through the air, smiling and weightless like tightrope walkers. Their performances are set in the metropolis and seems to suggest that in the spaces of the city it is still possible to feel free and express oneself.

**Yang Yong** explores the condition of young people that live in the city in a phase of advanced urbanism. The lens of his camera capturing the urban reality of Shenzhen, a city where the young generation, brought up in a consumer culture, abandons the old Chinese identity in favour of an increasingly globalized style. His subjects are girls, a category which is both fragile and strong, who move within enormous scenographies. Young ladies tied to the city in a strange relationship of dependence and mistrust: self confident and imposing presences, but at the same time overwhelmed and in awe of the enormity of the spaces. In the series *Cruel diary of youth* Yang Yong presents a series of contrasts: interior and exterior, the squalid nature of semi-deserted building sites by day and the shining buildings downtown by night, neon lit streets pulsing with life.



Yang Yong  
**The cruel diary of youth** • 2005  
 light box • cm 120 x 120



Yang Yong  
**Fancy in the tunnel** • 2003  
 light box • cm 120x90



Weng Fen  
**Bird's Eye View Shanghai 1** • 2001  
 photo mounted on aluminium  
 cm 16x200

The sober and melancholic glance of **Weng Feng** falls on the skyline of the ultramodern megalopolis. In his images it is possible to undergo the very emotions that many Chinese are experiencing in the long awaited for epochal change. The girls of Weng Feng are emblems of the new generation; always portrayed from the back and wearing school uniforms, they look onto the emptiness that separates them from the metropolis in the horizon. They are spectators afflicted by a “yearning for the new”, projected onto a world to which they don’t appear to belong. The dimension of time is suspended, as in the silence of a wait. The emptiness which separates the young people from their city is both an insurmountable distance and a starting point, from where to begin the construction of a new identity.

**Cao Fei**’s work explores the bewilderment between identity and locations. The artist creates fragments of stories in which the characters are at the same time imaginary and real: young people dressed as Japanese manga heroes who use the city as a backdrop to their epic fights, their undisputed reign. They are grotesque visions because in fact these characters have no contact with reality, are emarginated and seem affected by a neurosis. Cao Fei’s reflection is provocative and revolves around the tendency that adolescents have of escaping towards synthetic worlds, as a result of the virtual and oniric way they relate to the city. As in a daydream, when standing before his works we wonder about the old Chinese cultural identity being questioned by the new economic policies and globalization.

*RMB City. A second life city planning*, the video present at the exhibition, is a kind of sarcastic model of the city of the future, composed of a concentration of Chinese symbols put together to explore yet again man’s relationship with the city. The result is a chaotic disorienting island, made up of chimneys, factories, flyovers, deformed flags, bicycle wheels and pandas suspended in the air. As in a video game everything is approachable and permeable, but only virtually speaking.



Cao Fei  
**RMB City. A second life city planning**  
 video DVD • 2007

**Prima mangia, Eat first**

**by Liu Xiaodong**

For the occasion of the exhibition *China XXI century, Art between identity and transformation* Liu Xiaodong decides to spend a month in Rome and commits himself to the realization of a great painting. The **Forum** of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni transforms itself into an atelier where the artist paints from real life *Eat First*, a modern Last Supper in homage to Italy and to the genius of Leonardo, painted with models engaged directly in Roma among "common" people, collaborators, friends. On five canvases, that measure in total two metres and a half by ten, the artist portrays the thirteen models that are eating around a table laden with Mediterranean foods and dishes.

**Liu Xiaodong** is a painter who shows a lot of interest in the lower social classes less equipped to deal with the forward leap undertaken by China in the last fifteen years. He commits himself to exceptional endeavours, portraying live scenes and landscapes on canvases of a huge dimension. Many of his works, oils on canvas, reproduce visions of outdoor locations inhabited by human presences, men and women who live in the country and in the city where the painter chooses to paint and who pose for him like real and proper models. The people he portrays are docile, taciturn, good-natured and never scornful of their society. For the series **Hot Bed** Liu Xiaodong travels to the ancient village of Fengjie, the thriving heart of Chinese culture, precisely when it is about to be razed to the ground to allow the construction of the famous dam the Three Gorges. We are talking about the greatest construction carried out in China after the Great Wall, constituting the biggest source of electricity production in the country. With its two thousand years of history the village will be completely submerged in water, becoming a metaphor of a country that, in order to build new things, is willing to cancel the memory of its past. The workers who find themselves in this location become the living models of his picture. What unites the six dumbfounded workers of *Three Gorges Displaced Population* is a yearning for something that will never return and the hope for a better future. This visit by Liu Xiaodong is also the subject for a documentary *Dong*, whose director Jia Zhang-Ke then gets the idea to make *Still Life*, the film that won the Golden Lion award at the Venice film festival. The China which this selection of artists offers us is a country similar to a building site in continuous transformation, which sees its own historical identity vanish and that struggles to preserve its roots. This is not a destiny reserved exclusively to China but awaits a large part of the Western world. The ecological upheaval, the accelerated urbanization, the weakening of traditions and the incessant research into one's identity are part of our culture too.

It is for this reason that the educational proposals of the Laboratorio d'arte constitutes a reflection on theme of identity with a project of meeting between Italian and Chinese artists, capable of creating a place of dialogue between cultures, geographically distant, but close in the way they relate to changes in the urban landscape.



Liu Xiaodong

**Three Gorges Displaced Population • 2003**

oil on canvas • cm 200x800



### the artist's house

In 2005 botto and bruno participate in a European project Didart ([www.didart.net](http://www.didart.net)) and realize an Artist's House along with six other world-famous artists. The Artist's House was built to be transported and featured in some of the most important contemporary art museums of Europe, all Didart partners. It is a pre-fabricated module, the size of a three-door wardrobe, foldable and transportable on wheels, to be personalized and transformed into a sort of "visual diary", containing images of the most significant works: video, souvenirs, books, films, clothes, tools of the trade, music and a selection of cultural references and suggestions which have inspired the poetics of the artists. In the central part of the house there is a table, a window and library shelves; on the left there is a hand basin, a mirror and a rubbish bin; on the right we find a wardrobe, some drawers, a fridge, television and cd player. More than just a cosy nest, the Artist's House is a container that opens up to the outside world as well.

### who botto and bruno are

Gianfranco Botto and Roberta Buno have worked together since 1992. From the very beginning they have focused on a collection of photographic images which they took themselves in the outskirts. In their hands photography is not just a means for an objective recording of reality, but a repertoire of images to recompose in order to create a virtual suburbia. Uninhabited degraded buildings, abandoned factories, undeveloped land, fragments of a desolate and desolating landscape are fixed on various supports and touched up by hand with violent colours, using a procedure similar to a photomontage. Their aim is to reflect on the possibility of giving back an identity to the outskirts, drawing attention to the invisibility and anonymity of the people who live there. A part of urban and social landscape, always protagonist of the two artists, the same hambient all around, city inhabited by adolescents without a face.

### *My house is your house-Wode jia shi nide jia* botto and bruno meet Liu Xiaodong

Hosted in the Atelier, the installation *My house is your house, Wode jia shi nide jia* is a close up encounter between the work of botto and bruno and Liu Xiaodong's. The botto and bruno's Artist's House is transformed to welcome the Chinese artist who, with his suitcase of personal objects, books, cds, clothes and photos, occupies part of the space of the two artists from Turin as a visiting guest. Installation and, at the same time, educational project, the artwork sets up an encounter where memories, opinions, impressions emerge on how to make art and on their own work as artists as well as their respective cultures and on the cities in which they live. More than just a comparison of their work, it is a reflection on the identity of the individual in an ever-changing, fragile and at times alienating, urban environment. On the perception of space and of oneself in two societies which are so different but are characterized by many traits in common. In this process of knowledge and comparison, in spite of the apparent formal contrast, it is possible to trace common aims and ideals. The Chinese artist is a figurative painter while botto and bruno use photography and digital technology as their means; Liu paints realistic portraits which become focal points in his works whilst botto and bruno's models often have their faces covered. Paradoxically however, the result which they aim for, despite the employment of different means, is the critic of a system that puts people aside in the name of economic and power interests. It is not a type of "political" art but one surely where the artists use their expressive means to denounce the facts. The House is a dialogue between objects that narrate passions and an artistic research, that speak of memories and their most significant experiences. One need only come up closer and pick them up to find out something about their stories. In this way the poetic research of the couple from Turin enters in relation to and con-fuses itself with the story of the Chinese artist. If botto and bruno's work is an instrument for exploring and moving within the apparently silent spaces of suburbia, Liu Xiaodong's is a narration in which locations get mixed up with people and objects with emotions. In spite of the employment of different means, both explore an urban situation often characterized by a deep squalor, and a search for identity by the young people who live on the fringes of the big cities.



botto and bruno's house  
2005

## suggested reading from the Scaffale d'arte

### essays

AA. VV., *Arte contemporanea cinese*, Mondadori Electa, 2006  
AA. VV., *Didart - Artist's House 05*, Galleria Arte Moderna Bologna, 2005  
Gianfranco Botto, Roberta Bruno, *Something in the sky*, E-Gabriel, 2001  
Philip Tinari, Mario Ciampi, *Artisti in Cina*, Verba Volant, 2007

### for young children and teenagers

AA. VV. *Cina eterna*, rivista DADA n. 20, Artebambini, 2004  
AA. VV., *Com'è il tuo paese? L'Italia e la Cina: due mondi che si incontrano*, Fatatrac, 1992  
AA. VV., *La città ideale*, rivista DADA n. 13, Artebambini, 2003  
AA. VV., *Places*, Museum of Modern Art, 1999  
AA. VV. *Vieni a casa mia? I bambini italiani e i bambini cinesi si incontrano*, Fatatrac, 1992  
Béatrice Alemagna, *Un Lion à Paris*, Autrement Jeunesse, 2006  
Colleen Carroll, *How artists see the city*, Abbeville Kids, 1999  
Jochen Gerner, *Berlin (Jochenplatz)*, Editions du Rouergue, 2000  
Pierre Janneau, *Roma 44*, Editions du Rouergue, 2002  
Jason Lutes, *Berlin*, Coconino Press, 2003  
Anthea Peppin, *Luoghi nell'arte*, Giannino Stoppini, 1991  
Miroslav Sasek, *Questa è New York*, Rizzoli, 2005  
Miroslav Sasek, *Questa è Venezia*, Rizzoli, 2006  
Scuola Principe di Piemonte, *Ciao, come ti chiami?*, Sinnos, 2005  
Philip Yenawine, *Les Gens*, Museum of Modern Art - Albin Michelle Jeunesse, 1996  
Tim Yip, *Blue*, Grimm Press, 2006  
Tim Yip, *Illusion*, Grimm Press, 2005  
Yusuke Yonezu, *La mia città*, Zoolibri, 2007

### web sites

[www.chinese-art.com](http://www.chinese-art.com)  
[www.wangqingsong.com](http://www.wangqingsong.com)  
[www.caofei.com](http://www.caofei.com)  
[www.didart.net](http://www.didart.net)  
[www.duetart.com/dentro/artists/artists%20ita/Botto%20&%20Bruno%20ita.htm](http://www.duetart.com/dentro/artists/artists%20ita/Botto%20&%20Bruno%20ita.htm)  
[www.fototensioni.net/bottoeburno.html](http://www.fototensioni.net/bottoeburno.html)  
[www.radiopapesse.org/w2d3/v3/view/radiopapesse/notizie--1165/index.html?area=8](http://www.radiopapesse.org/w2d3/v3/view/radiopapesse/notizie--1165/index.html?area=8)