

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Hanru, Hou. "A necessary reminder", *De Appel*, 1998.

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A necessary reminder

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Huang Yong Ping's art should be understood first of all as a set of strategies of cultural resistance to the power of dominant discourses including the institutional system itself. As a major figure in the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s, Huang Yong Ping has developed a radical system of thought and language that articulates critique and counter-propositions vis-a-vis the dominant power. His work introduced Western avant-garde art and thinking to China and emphasised the Dadaist tradition and deconstructivist theories. He combined these with traditional Chinese philosophy, which has been oppressed for many years under Maoist rule, in order to create a strategy to subvert the established and oppressive order of 'official art' in China. Today, living and working in the West, he focuses on a critique of Eurocentrism that still prevails in the dominant global discourse. To emphasise the alternative position of his critique, he resorts increasingly to Chinese culture that remains unfamiliar to the Western intellectual world. At the same time, various deconstructivist and post-colonial theories continue to provide him with a source of inspiration as critical counter-positions to the established order of Modernist culture. They enable him to confront the new reality of economic and cultural globalisation and the restructuring of the world order.

The notion of change is central to Huang Yong Ping's thinking and art. As a basic principle of the Chinese *Weltanschauung*, this idea is inscribed in the literature of Chinese philosophy and culture, most notably in the I Ching, the Book of Changes. It states that the world is always changing and is in a process of in multi-orientational movement and transformation. Reality consists of change, of the perpetually-reorganised tension between Yin and Yang, between necessity and chance, order and chaos. Whereas, since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the Western idea of the world and modernity has stressed rationalism, now the emphasis of 'irrational' movement, change, chance and even chaos, (as a more complete world view) can provide

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an effective strategy to deconstruct the redundant ideologies of Modernism and Eurocentrism. Huang Yong Ping understands this perfectly. After moving to the West in 1989, he introduced metaphysical and practical systems such as Chinese divination and geomancy so as to counterbalance the rationalist, scientific and technocentric systems of Western ideology and knowledge. Here, art's aim is Art is to transgress the borders within which it has been defined and limited by the Western categorisation of disciplines.

In his recent work, Huang Yong Ping intervenes directly and provides a critique from within Western society itself. These interventions focus on events involving ethnic, cultural, political and economical conflicts, tension and transformations. They are mainly the consequence of colonial history and of the current globalisation which consists of a transformed reflection of that history. The issues of post-colonial migration, border crossing and cultural-political conflicts between the West and the Other are provocatively raised in pieces such as *Passage* (Glasgow, 1993), *Yellow Peril* (Oxford, 1993), *Human Snake Plan* (Columbus, Ohio, 1993), *Trois Pas, Neuf Traces* (Marseille, 1996), *Terminal* (Rotterdam, 1996) and *The Doomsday* (London, 1997). *AQ*, his solo exhibition project at De Appel, is the latest development in this direction. Here, Huang Yong Ping has reappropriated the trademarks of two Dutch companies: Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (the Dutch East Indies Company, or VOC) and Philips. They in turn represent the global expansion of the Dutch economy in the imperial era (from the 17th to the 19th century) and our own post/neo-colonial times. Ironically, Philips, the most powerful Dutch company in today's global economy, is currently sponsoring the collection of VOC ceramic products that is now on show in the Rijksmuseum's 'VOC Gallery'. This connection between the two companies testifies to the historical continuity between colonisation and today's post-colonial reality. The discovery of this 'coincidence' was the starting point for Huang Yong Ping's project.

In the installation, Huang Yong Ping presents the logos of the VOC and Philips as featured on tea boxes, canons, ceramic plates and packing cases. The VOC was a company that combined various forms of economic, military and political expansion.

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It was the direct forebear of the contemporary multinational corporations. Chinese tea was one of the main products that was traded by the VOC. Chinese tea was a status symbol in the 17th and 18th centuries; it epitomised the craze for *chinoiserie* which in itself represented a typically colonial consumption of the Other. Huang Yong Ping has chosen tea as a form of drink (or food) that articulates the notion of consumption in general and the consumption of the Other in particular. As A. Appadurai remarks, the original meaning of consumption derives from eating. ¹ Consumption is consequently a 'technique of the body'. The consumption of products from other cultures within the colonial context signals a colonial appropriation of the Other's body. Meanwhile, it not only implies new habits for the consumer but also involves subtle but significant subjective changes through this new 'technique of the body'. In the consumption of the Other, the colonial subject also undergoes a form of self-deconstruction through an occasional and unconscious identification with the Other. In fact, Huang Yong Ping has already developed a whole strategy to deconstruct Eurocentrism by creating a 'food chain' that links cooked rice, insects, animals and various supermarket foods. Here, tea is engaged so that it becomes a new node which strengthens the chain of critical actions. To underpin this effect, Huang Yong Ping has included a real-life, mealtime scene in the installation as a 'footnote' to the main narrative: a dinner table with eight ceramic dishes and VOC boxes is presented at the end of the space so as to suggest that the story will somehow never end.

Of course, Huang Yong Ping makes a point of reminding us of the role of imperialist violence as was once committed by the coloniser over the colonised in the colonial expansion of Western capitalism. But he also emphasises the less visible and even more dangerous form of violence that is implicit to contemporary globalisation. This is why he has included the small replica of a VOC canon which is displayed on one side of a set of scales. The tension between the VOC box and the Philips box on the two sides of the second balance and the potential loss of equilibrium between the two sides also stress the continuing violence of Western market expansion. Ultimately this

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balancing act or state of affairs has to be destroyed. The end of this equilibrium is both inevitable and imminent. It is the fate of things and also the fate of colonial history. Huang Yong Ping identifies this process of dealing with the fact of things or (to be more precise) with the paradox of things as being an elemental task within this work. Here, it is important to note that the title is a reversed VOC sign. Obviously, this suggests the subversion of colonial hegemony. The necessity of such subversion is reinforced by the intense ambience that is created by the work. The installation is diagonally structured as a 'valley passage' and is surrounded by the VOC and Philips products while the huge scales in the middle function as the focus of the magnificent energy evoked by this structure. This energy entices the audience into directly experiencing this movement and consequently provides a unique experience in which a historic transition is represented both metaphorically and physically.

The form of the valley passage also suggests a spatial openness. This openness not only leads us to experience the energy inside the space but also directly connects the work to the context of the venue itself: to the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat where *De Appel* is situated in the city of Amsterdam. This location is also an influential element in the construction of the work's meaning. The street is full of antique shops that trade in Oriental and African objects. They are decorated using the most cliché-ed of colonial representations of other cultures. More interestingly, this street leads directly to the Rijksmuseum itself, where the VOC gallery is sponsored by Philips! In fact, Huang Yong Ping recognised this specific connection with Holland's colonial past and decided to include it in his project from the very beginning. It is no coincidence that he targets both VOC and Philips products within this project. The work potently pinpoints a specific historical and economic context and eloquently describes the process of transition from colonisation to globalisation.