



Berlin, 23 May 2017

ARTISTS AND WORKS OF THE EXHIBITION

Museum für Fotografie

Jebensstr. 2, 10623 Berlin

Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat + Sun 11 am – 7 pm, Thu 11 am – 8 pm

Working on History.

Contemporary Chinese Photography and the Cultural Revolution

18 August 2017 – 7 January 2018

An exhibition by the Kunstbibliothek – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Chinesischen Kulturellen Austausch e.V. (GeKA), supported by the Hauptstadtkulturfonds

A Second History by **Zhang Dali** (b. 1963 in Harbin, lives in Beijing) is one of the large series which mark a turning point in Chinese artists' engagement with their country's political history. Over the course of 130 panels, Zhang systematically examines the manipulation pervading China's entire visual propaganda tradition, manifested in techniques of retouching, collage and over-painting. By presenting originals next to the reworked pictures, along with by their publication context, the series clearly reveals the strategies of China's official accounts of history.

Cai Dongdong (b. 1978 in Tianshui, Gansu Province, lives in Beijing) makes photographs from the Cultural Revolution the basis for clever installations, exemplified in works like *Shooting Practice*. A mirror placed at right-angles to a photograph of a shooting lesson—a scene originally staged for propaganda purposes—transforms it into a symbolic image of threat. Cai also plays here on the ambiguity of 'shooting' with a weapon and with a camera.

The 2001–02 video installation *Summer of 1969* by **Cao Kai** (b. 1969 in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, lives in Nanjing) is suffused with the euphoria of late 1960s youth. To the insistent, joyous sound of the riff from *Summer of '69* by Canadian rock singer, Bryan Adams, Cao superimposes footage of pop stars of that era—including Che Guevara, John Lennon, Martin Luther King and Mao Zedong—over images of impassioned crowds, from hippy gatherings to the revolts in Paris in May 1968, from Woodstock to China's Red Guards. However, the unreserved enthusiasm in the images leaves the contemporary viewer with ambivalent feelings.

The exhibition features the work *450 Cultural Revolution* (2011–13) by **Mo Yi** (b. 1958 in Tibet, lives in Beijing), taken from his series *Illusory Memories*. In the series, Mo decomposed classic photographs from the Cultural Revolution into outsized pixels, or alternatively assembled them into a large image-mosaic, as in his photographic wall-relief with ceramic blocks and red threads. In this way, he critically interprets a large number of political subjects. The work is complemented by two photographs, taken more than twenty years apart. Each image is visually striking in its use of bright red, a colour immediately recognizable to a Chinese audience as alluding to the bloody years of the Cultural Revolution.

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Washing, an installation by **Wang Youshen** (b. 1964 in Beijing, lives in Beijing) is here given a new staging, developed by the artist for the Museum für Fotografie. Since 1999, Wang has produced different versions of the piece for a number of museums. In Berlin, he will place newspaper and private photographs from the Cultural Revolution in thirty-six developing trays, each filled with water. In this way, the pictures are washed and re-developed, only to then slowly disappear. The photographs used in the process include also historical newspaper images from the Kunstbibliothek's Photography Collection: Chinese and German pictures are here mixed together.

The photograph of **Wang Qingsong** (b. 1966 in Daqing, Heilongjiang Province, lives in Beijing) is the largest in the exhibition. In *Competition*, Wang combines the reminiscence of press photographs from the Cultural Revolution with the depiction of a team of poster painters. It is a monumental staged image translating the production of the former political banners into the contemporary world of commerce. Here, the participants no longer act in the service of ideas, but rather to advertise commodities.

The series of large-format images about the Yellow River by **Zhang Kechun** (b. 1980 in Bazhong, Sichuan Province, lives in Chengdu) includes a strange procession of swimmers bearing the portrait of the Great Leader, recalling Mao Zedong's swimming of the Yangtze in the summer of 1966. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's sporting achievement was the subject of numerous photographs and texts. In the same year, one particular image of Mao was widely publicized: it shows the Chinese leader in a dressing gown, an arm raised in greeting. Below Mao, the poster reproduces his poem *Swimming* in delicate calligraphy. As in a concave mirror, the poster condenses the strategies of official visual propaganda, presenting the Great Leader as having both sporting prowess and the common touch, as both educated and self-confident. The photograph of the Yellow River swimmers forms part of a much larger project by Zhang, which included a walk he undertook along the banks of the legend-shrouded river, in search of its power. However, Zhang found nothing mythological about today's river: in the crude reality of its passage through concrete and pollution, all its legends appear to have been washed out to sea.

Assembly Halls, a photo series completed between 2002 and 2004 by the artist couple **Mu Chen** (b. 1970 in Dandong, Liaoning Province, lives in Beijing) and **Shao Yinong** (b. 1961 in Xining, Qinghai Province, lives in Beijing), depicts former meeting spaces used for propaganda events at the time of the Cultural Revolution. They documented these spaces in consistent fashion: always shot frontally, devoid of people, the camera pointing towards centre stage. The images become a kind of living witness to Chinese social change, calling forth both subjective and collective memory.

Qu Yan (b. 1955 in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, lives in Beijing), in his series *Power Space*, also turns his attention to sites of power. In villages and small towns, he sought out Communist Party headquarters, revealing

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their symbolic power in images of early communist thinkers, posters, flags, and wall slogans.

The people in the series *Some Days*, produced between 2001 and 2009 by **Wang Ningde** (b. 1972 in Kuandian County, Liaoning Province, lives in Beijing), seem lost in dreams, submerged in their own inner life. With closed eyes, they appear to have withdrawn entirely into the past. They invite the spectator to join them on a journey into a history which weighs them down in the form of troubled memories.

In the interactive installation *My Private Album*, **Feng Mengbo** (b. 1966 in Beijing, lives in Beijing) allows visitors a glimpse into his own family's photo album. On the basis of these images, he allows the audience to develop their own narration of what he regards as a highly typical story of a Chinese family, whose development was profoundly influenced by the country's political history. The CD-ROM installation was developed in 1996, and was shown at the documenta in Kassel a year later. This is a new adaptation of the work, prepared for the Museum für Fotografie.

In his series *White on White*, **Maleonn** (b. 1972 in Shanghai, lives in Shanghai) illustrates the emotional power of historical photography. Maleonn collected old Chinese snapshots at flea markets and rubbish heaps, lending them new strength and dignity by placing them within white developing trays. Against a backdrop of powerful collective image-propaganda, the staging of this installation directs the gaze towards the significance of photographic memory.

The direct, confrontational portraits in the series *New Life* by **Song Yongping** (b. 1961 in Shanxi Province, lives in Beijing) depict the final years in the life of his parents as they restage photographic portraits taken in the 1960s. His parents look forward to their approaching death with dignity, seeking an approach to enduring life in old age while looking back on the years of their marriage.

The affective force of historical group portraits is demonstrated in the work of Hai Bo and He Chongyue. For the series *They*, **Hai Bo** (b. 1962 in Changchun, Jilin Province, lives in Beijing) laboriously tracked down people depicted in photographs from the time of the Cultural Revolution. He re-photographed them in identical arrangements, with dead or untraceable people represented by an empty space. The simple act of juxtaposition between older and newer photographs serves as a starting point for reflections on the fragility of life.

Zhuang Hui (b. 1963 in Yumen Town, Gansu Province, lives in Beijing) is utilizing group photography, blending together performance and organization, expression and metaphor. Beginning in 1996, he made a series of large-scale group pictures; each time, he organizes several hundred workers, farmers, medical professionals, People's Liberation Army soldiers, or students. He uses traditional methods and a rotating panoramic camera to take group photographs, and the figure of the artist himself always appears on the right side of the picture.

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For his picture series *An Aging Population*, **He Chongyue** (b. 1960 in Beijing, lives in Beijing) travelled throughout China, particularly to remote villages. In each of the villages chosen, he took portraits of all the inhabitants, making use of the traditional horizontal-format group portraits, still popular today. For the most part, the groups consisted only of old people left behind in villages: the younger generation had given up agriculture and moved to the city to work as migrant labourers.

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