

A Life Full of Holes

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Reviews

A Life Full of Holes

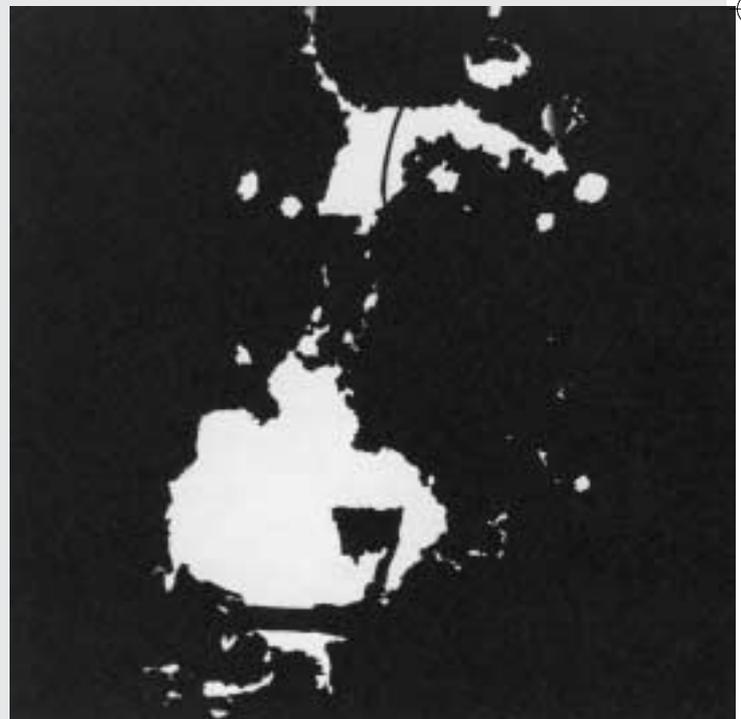
Anthony Downey

On first viewing, the image appears to be an eccentric map of an uncharted world. The filigree-like coastlines of these unfamiliar islands are realistically defined and clearly delineated, whilst the land mass – albeit in a reversal of traditional maps – is a clear-blue aquamarine. Study the picture further, however, and this inverted map resolves into something other than it first appeared to be. As to what that something else is, there is still some doubt until we read the accompanying title: *Container 1 – Rust holes in the top of a shipping container – Tangiers* (2003). The blue of these ‘regions’ is in fact the colour of a sky seen from the inside of a rusting shipping container; a corralled sky not so much boundless as claustrophobic. The photograph, now less visually ambiguous, becomes an illustration of confinement and restriction rather than exploration or travel. And it is between these two often reciprocal poles – stasis and movement – that Yto Barrada’s photographs address the state of conditional ennui that pervades Tangiers, a city both the nodal point for the illegal passage of Africans entering Europe and stagnation for those who remain there.

That the particular parcel of blue sky in *Container 1* is less concerned with the promise of possibility than it is with the curtailment of prospects is further reinforced when we consider the history that underwrites its production. Before 1991, any Moroccan wishing to travel to Europe could do so with the appropriate passport; since the introduction of the European Union’s Schengen Agreement, however, this passage has been effectively closed off. Those who have made the journey illegally are referred to as the ‘burnt ones’ because by burning their passports before departure, they effectively waive their rights as citizens to legal redress. The demotic sense of ‘burnt’ could also refer to the many thousands who have died in the attempt to make the crossing. It is against this backdrop that *Container 1*

takes on a further and somewhat sombre resonance when we consider how shipping containers are often used to transport illegal immigrants into the ports of southern Spain and France. At once an image of escape and confinement, this rusting shell becomes a mausoleum of sorts, a veritable death-trap for the unfortunate emigrant forced to make the often perilous, and yet seemingly necessary, journey across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Focused as they are on a popular point of departure for illegal immigrants wanting entry into Europe, and Tangiers’ far-from-resolved relationship to the Strait of Gibraltar, Barrada’s photographs could be also read in synecdochic terms: as representations of an often unremarkable element that comes to illustrate the lives of the city’s inhabitants. A further example will help clarify this suggestion. On a white-washed wall, the marks of a repeatedly bounced foot-



Container 1, Rust holes in the top of a shipping container, Tangier 2003

ball have been imprinted. Looking more like an abstract painting than a photograph, this innocent looking image – *Marks left by a Football, Tangiers* (2002) – hints at the tangible sense of incremental despondency that underscores Barrada's work and its themes. For the majority who do not make the journey across the Strait of Gibraltar, their fate is to be left marking time in anticipation of a never-to-be taken voyage. The apparently innocent pastime of kicking a football against a wall becomes an exercise in the measuring out of that most prized and yet most obdurate of commodities: time. This synecdochic level of representation – whereby the whole of Tangiers and its inhabitants is referenced in a constituent (and invariably telling) part – is a frequent trope in 'A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project'.

While there is a danger of interpretive prescriptiveness here, even the most innocuous image bears testament to inertia. The harmless spokes of a ferris wheel in *Ferris Wheel, M'diq* (2001) become a metonymic reminder of a people who are constantly in motion but apparently going nowhere. In *Le Detroit – Avenue d'Espagne – Tangiers* (2000) a boy holding a model ship in full sail walks along a wide engulfing street. Shot from above, this scene hints at both the expanse of the mutinous sea that separates Europe from Morocco and the wistful idealism – imparted by the idyllic model ship in full sail – that propels the 'burnt ones' to emigrate.

Taken between 1998 and 2003, these photographs give shape to the contours of the nominal hinterlands that Europe is increasingly committed to keep at arm's length; a commitment which is not, as these images reveal, necessarily commensurate with keeping such realities out of our conscience. 'A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project' evokes a series of interrogatives that encompass broader issues. What, for one, is the relationship of the aesthetic impulse to the documentary imperative that informs these images? This is to advert to a simple but nonetheless provocative question: to what extent does the application of an aesthetic sensibility – and Barrada's images are evidently taken with an eye to their compositional and formal allusions – depoliticise the residents of Tangiers in the name of getting a 'good' picture? Do Barrada's photographs *overlook* the residents of Tangiers by paradoxically looking at them with the eye of a trained artist and therefore *over-aestheticising* their predicament? This is the perennial conundrum faced by photography that takes as its subject social, political, economic or cultural inequality. The documentation of injustice – or the discursively segregated other – can often present an aesthetically overdetermined subject who in consequence becomes not



Ferris Wheel, M'diq, 2001

only decontextualised but symptomatic of both suffering and otherness. The aesthetic impulse can often usurp the documentary imperative. I would argue that Barrada's photographs recognise precisely such pitfalls and manage to balance themselves on that most vertiginous of fulcrums: the refinement of a documentary practice that implicates (and therefore complicates) the formal presence of an aesthetic without negating or relegating either.

The poignancy of this observation is evident in *Man with a Stick, Tangiers* (1999) in which a man with a holdall bag stands, legs akimbo, in a walled recess. Above him, amongst a palimpsest of embedded graffiti, there is a child-like drawing of a plane. The nose of the plane faces west, while the man, stick aloft in his hand, faces towards the east. The pose and context have apparently been staged. To read this image in explicitly symbolic terms is no doubt to tease out too much significance. Nevertheless, the image of the plane carries with it unmistakable overtures of travel and, hence, emigration. The subject in this image would appear to be both conscious of the 'plane' above him and yet totally out of sync with its implications. He will never take such a plane and his interstitial fate – orbiting around the daydream of leaving and the base reality of staying –

is emblazoned in the very *mise en scène* that he finds himself (figuratively and metaphorically) trapped within. The documentative imperative, a mimetic mainstay of photography, is imbricated here with an aesthetic inclination that nonetheless crucially avoids eliding the presence of either.

Rather than raising the all-too-easily evoked spectre of a biblical form of deliverance, 'A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project' suggests a far less satisfactory resolution. The purgatorial state of non-resolution and limbo-like condition of a people awaiting arrival is predicated on a form of departure that is simultaneously a self-effacing act of exile. This is not to suggest that Tangiers, or Morocco for that matter, is somehow destined to become an ahistorical relic of permanent stasis – a conceptual mainstay of imperial discourse that seeks to fix the other irreconcilably outside history and therefore beyond change. On the contrary, these images of Tangiers 'haunt' European discourses on 'human rights' and social (in)justice, and in turn direct our attention to a dilemma at the heart of identitarian representations that rely on segregation and disavowal. All attempts at discursive segregation necessarily evoke a corollary: the all-too-visible face of the disavowed other who underwrites and yet ultimately undermines the political rhetoric of fortress Europe.

Yto Barrada, 'A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project' was at The Mead Gallery, Coventry, 26 September–22 October 2005

Strangers with Angelic Faces ... or, better of two evils?

Gülşen Bal

'Strangers with Angelic Faces', a group exhibition curated by Levent Çalikoğlu and coordinated by Denizhan Özer, explores the existential territories encircling the place of the 'stranger'. Çalikoğlu asks pointedly: 'what does it mean to be a Stranger?' and continues by suggesting that the term:

... stranger constitutes such a broad area of life in modern society. Alien migrants penetrate borders, travellers render maps meaningless, the homeless who make the street their own, bizarre subcultures that make city life so dynamic.¹

His problem with resolutions seems to be compounded by asking questions of how particular forms of 'stranger' engage within a certain form of representation. His brief discussion in the exhibition catalogue seems insufficiently compelling, perhaps because of the lack of nuance that might justify his presentation of the different aspects of the term. The confined theoretical underpinning of the exhibition rationale is in consequence characterised by a loose



Denizhan Özer, *Ütücüler* (Pressers 1987–1988)



Serkan Özkaya, *Prolaterier Aller Lander* (as also known as *C*rim*son*, 2001–2004), floor installation

conflation of the notion of ‘stranger’ with other terms such as ‘alien’, ‘foreigner’ and ‘outsider’. We are left confused. Although these latter terms are obviously related to the notion of the ‘stranger’, Çalikoğlu does not make explicit the contextualisation between them. The introduction’s lack of engagement with the specificity of the questions raised does not clarify the odd domestication of the ‘stranger’ explained as ‘the only real “stranger” is the one we carry around inside ourselves’. The ‘stranger’ creates the order as well as being the ‘disruptive force’, while obtaining an ambiguous position.

If we are left with no real indication of how we are to perceive or transpose the term, how then can we be persuaded of the validity of such statements? Where does it really get us? On the other hand, what could the ‘angelic face’ refer to in its relation to the ‘stranger’?

Well... the angel... a concept. This proposes a narrative that perhaps suggests something about the ‘not readily spoken or expressed’ and imagines the ‘unimaginable’. Without such an interpretive approach to what might otherwise be considered irreconcilable and opposing extremes, ‘angelic’ in its connotation would remain ‘inaccessible’.

The interpretations of and responses to the ‘stranger’ endorse a view that divides the world into existentially opposed territories. Overly rigid ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomies mask the diversity within the ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the question poses itself as how we might respond to the strange and monstrous ‘other’.

If such is the premise, then what enabled this concept to play such a crucial role in facilitating individual artistic responses? Structure is crucial inasmuch as there must be functional parameters in which

artistic possibilities can be explored, particularly within the context of artistic expression in the last quarter of the century that has seen the emergence of a number of different, though potentially related, theoretical notions in the formation of identity.

This exhibition attempts to be a way of modelling the process of looking from the stranger’s perspective and is therefore lacking in an argument for its case. The viewers are left unclear as to what they are to take away with them.

Creating new contexts for pre-existing works, which have been shown in different venues under different curatorial contexts and policies as in this exhibition, could have opened up a new dialogue relative to the notion of the ‘stranger’. But only perhaps if this dialogue were informed by some provision of a backdrop against which the circumstances of each creative form served as agency.

Taking on the role of the ‘stranger’, however, allows one perhaps to step outside of ‘self’, which is something of a functional rather than essential interpretive aspect of this creative endeavour. But it does not, while examining the situation of ‘who are we and where we are’, appear to address the paradox of its promising intentions, namely of maintaining its function as a ‘cultural communication zone’ as well as transposing our cultural existence from the existential to the sublime or angelic.

SINGULARITIES... ANGEL WITH THE SCABBED WINGS?

‘Strangers with Angelic Faces’ features the work of Ergin Çavuşoğlu, Ali M Demirel, Paul Eachus, Simon Faithfull, Dryden Goodwin, Gül Ilgaz, Shona Illingworth, Rachel Lowe, Harold Offeh, Denizhan Özer, Serkan Özkaya, Şener Özmen and Erkan Özgen, Seza Paker, Neriman Polat and Pinar Yolaçan.

Serkan Özkaya’s floor installation *Prolaterier Aller Lander* (as also known as *C*rim*son*, 2001–2004) consisted of thousands of five-centimetre red sponge figures as if mutations were its very language. Özkaya’s approach highlights the issue of reproductions of the real. Here reproductions are the more powerful and authentic, and the original itself less significant, since by a set of internal relations the reproductions create a model against their own matrix. The point here is the creation of their own matrix in a circuit in which nomadic singularities interact and leave us with evidence but no judgement.

Shona Illingworth’s video work *Drill* (2002) examines structures of power and discipline and reveals a suppressed violence and control that establishes social inclusions and exclusions. Exhibited on

a continuous loop with no beginning or end, the work sustains a state of continual flux and reflects the situations with which we associate the notion of the 'stranger' as a 'disruptive force'.

Gül Ilgaz mostly employs photography as her medium. Her work deals with personal experiences yet also offers the viewer an opening to discussions of common everyday realities in the midst of ambiguous positions. In *Born/Bearing into Death and Swing and the Fall* (2004) she juxtaposes ontological realities onto a subject outside phenomenological discourse to give viewers an urge to exercise their tendency to fix narratives on others. What results is a transpositional voyeurism.

Imperative to Pinar Yolaçan's series of *PYP* (2001–2004) is the idea that photography is a medium of appropriation and possession of 'prototypes', and these, through stylistically performed poses, constitute the formal visual elements. Neriman Polat's photographic vocabulary, as it appears in her installation *Bath* (2004), explores habitation and ontological foundations through multiple visual references.

Seza Parker's video piece *Sophie and Camouflage* (2002) presents an interview with a transsexual heavy-weapons collector. The engagement with the interviewer becomes autonomous and produces a complex and a multi-faceted mirror. The Kurdish artists Sener Özmen and Erkan Özgen's collaborative video work *The Road to the Tate Modern* (2003) portrays the relationship between peripheries and centre while touching on the parody of globalisation. Anxiety may be identified in the work's continually dislocated idiom.

Dryden Goodwin is interested in the rhythmic tensions between motion and stillness in close proximity. The short film *Reveal* (2003) focuses on the evolution of a drawing, in this case a portrait, used to explore a developing relationship between the unknown character and the changing surroundings in the immediacy of the process.

Politics offers inspiration to Turkish artist Denizhan Özer's work *Ütücüler* (*Pressers*, 1987–1988). His work, being symbiotic with both the 'stranger' and the 'self', epitomises an identity without resistance to changes of boundaries and gives one the opportunity to create 'the externalizing eye', embodied in the notion of 'the foreigner from within'.²

By rejecting simple constructions of 'self' and 'other', of the unitary and the multiple underlying the paradoxes outlined above, attention goes to *NO MEDIATION* and ends with 'a challenge to the world to exist'. This exhibition proposes a re-evaluation of dispersed identity, an interstitial sense of 'self-in-other' and 'other-in-self', so that we may respond more effectively to the 'stranger' within us.

'Strangers with Angelic Faces' does deserve praise for its attempt, even as dialogue goes on within its usual boundaries. However, we are bound to ask: could this conflict within Çalikoğlu's project of making the 'stranger' more familiar end by negating its intention?

NOTES

- 1 Levent Çalikoğlu, 'Strangers With Angelic Faces', in *Strangers with Angelic Faces*, catalogue to exhibition.
- 2 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Leon S Roudiez, trans, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p 14

'Strangers with Angelic Faces', 2 March – 8 April 2006, Space Galley, London. The exhibition travelled to Akbank Sanat Gallery in Istanbul in May 2006

Contemporary Art and Anthropology

Effie Komninou

Any work that aims at challenging the boundaries between disciplines is in danger of being confined by the essentialism that structures these boundaries in the first place. *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* is a new and ambitious publication. Alas, in many ways it falls prey to this danger. That said, the premise of this work has its own merits.

The book is edited by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright and brings together the writings of a broad spectrum of anthropologists. As the editors state in their introduction, 'the aim of this volume is to stimulate new and productive dialogues between the domains of contemporary anthropology and art', while their intention is 'not with establishing contemporary art as an object of anthropological research – "art worlds" as other cultures to be studied'. Arguing for the necessity of border crossing, the editorial aspiration is 'to encourage fertile collaborations and the development of alternative shared strategies of *practice* on both sides of the border' (p 1).

This border crossing, or the construction of a record of relations and practices, is not new either to

art or to anthropology. Looking back at the last hundred years at least, the history of modernism in Western visual arts seems to have developed in tandem with the formation of nineteenth-century ethnography on both sides of the Atlantic. The constitution of both practices as institutional disciplines in the West has produced many affinities between them; and in so far as they can now both be viewed as sites for the production of *value* – artistic or anthropological – art and anthropology have equally been approaching representation as a ‘vehicle of knowledge’. On certain occasions these approaches were porous: the ‘artistic’ and ‘anthropological’ perceptions of the ‘primitive’ being the discourse par excellence of this osmosis.

Postcolonial and cultural studies have significantly influenced both disciplines and formulated the postmodern critique of their presumed unproblematic, universal and/or ‘objective’ representations. *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* touches upon this critique and in an interdisciplinary approach draws not only from anthropological writing and contemporary artistic production (Susan Hiller, Anselm Kiefer, Bill Viola, Anthony Gormley, Francesco Clemente, to name but a few of the artists discussed), but also from art and cultural criticism (in particular, the *October* group with numerous references to Hal Foster’s ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’).

The book promises to lead us beyond the ‘formal similarities’ into the ‘deeper affinities’ of art and anthropology. This aspiration makes the project sag under its own weight largely due to the fact that the vast majority of contributors are anthropologists. The discovery of ‘deeper affinities’ entails a different mutuality that this form of book forbids. The main concerns of its contributors turn roughly around the examination of representation as a site for the production of cultural value on one hand and, on the other, a multilayered dialogue on ‘aesthetics’ and ‘creativity’ against what the editors describe as anthropology’s ‘iconophobia’. A constant interplay between the empirical/subjective and the scientific/objective as zones of speculation and legitimisation perpetually informs the book.

Susanne Küchler, for example, discusses the works of Brent Collins and John Robinson in what seems to be a very formalistic – and thus highly aesthetic – approach to bring together sculpture and the mathematics of continuous surface. Nicholas Thomas offers an analysis of tattooing in a concise cultural history of how difference is ‘marked’ and signified upon the body. George E. Marcus and Fernando Calzadilla focus on the installation entitled *Market from Here, 1997*, which was presented in Caracas and at Rice University in Houston. Marcus offers a thought-provoking description of the ‘exper-

imentation of the ethnographic form’ over the last two decades, while Calzadilla gives his artistic account of how the project was approached, together with Abdel Hernández, and unravels issues of practice, appropriation and site specificity as vital to works informed by anthropological modes of thinking.

Artistic practices and positions are brought into play in order to argue for a ‘reclaimed position’ of both the figural and the sensual in the practice of anthropology. The figural is vital for Michael Richardson, in examining the work of surrealist painter Josef Šíma and its relation to anthropology. Though he admits that Šíma ‘had no particular interest in anthropology’ (p. 69), Richardson wishes to reintroduce surrealism as an ‘enabling force’ that penetrates reality from ‘within’, from the vantage point that understands the Other as an integral part of the human subject. Anthropology, he says, has to recover an-Other who is constantly being omitted, ‘not as a thing but as a relation, in which otherness is located on a borderline of consciousness and in which it is important to seek our correspondences’ (p. 70). Along these lines, Denise Robinson – the only writer, excluding the artists, who is not an anthropologist – offers a holistic review of Susan Hiller’s *oeuvre* as the canonical anthropologically informed artist who steadily works against anthropology’s essentialism and art’s idealisation of the ‘formlessness of the spirit’ (p. 82).

There is, however, a less reflexive approach to what could be understood as ‘the deeper affinities’, if these are perceived as a critical view on aesthetics, authority and power structures. Art practices are deeply scrutinised throughout the book, but anthropology’s ‘objectivity’ and cultural authority are left almost intact. There is an instrumental approach to art practice as well as to art writing, which is to a certain extent legitimised within the broader anthropological understanding of culture and the external critique that this book sustains, but at the same time restraining a deeper understanding of what art is, how it comes into practice, how its ‘value’ is contested and misused and how it informs the cultural production of objectivities. Art is in a sense approached as an unproblematic positive force with a particular usefulness for anthropology.

The book has an overarching voice and this is the writing voice of anthropology in the name of art. The artists present are brought in either as ‘case studies’ or as interviewees (Dave Lewis, Rainer Wittenborn, Claus Biegert, Nikolaus Lang, Rainer Cardillo), answering the same repeated questionnaire in some sort of a quantitative and normalising research exercise. Dave Lewis’s commissioned visual essay is unpersuasively dropped into the middle of

the book, very poorly reproduced and thus significantly decontextualised. The most distinct and direct artistic voice is that of Argentinean artist and writer César Paternosto, who discusses his own practice and the connections between modern abstract art and the abstract art of the pre-Columbian Americas.

The most direct approach to art's normalising operations and the dangers of instrumentalism is offered by Christopher Pinney. Pinney discusses Francesco Clemente's work in India in an informed way that alerts us to the kinds of 'power forces of affirmation... made available to those who redeem otherness' (p 61). In this vein, Pinney proposes a stimulating and demystifying reflection on art. But the approach that most persuasively attempts to demystify anthropology is Jonathan Friedman's essay on Carlos Capelán's work. Friedman discusses the construction of the modern world as a 'collection' and analyses how anthropological practice has fallen short of it with its 'genealogical' and largely fetishistic mode of data accumulation. Viewing collecting as 'a mode of signification', Friedman is critical of the 'deconstruction of localities' for the 'reconstruction of reality' that anthropology's genealogical mode perpetuates (pp 170–1). He traces the antipode of this mode in Capelán's work, and calls for an experimental anthropological approach that acknowledges specificities.

What becomes clear is that one of the book's underlying concerns is the tension between the universal and the particular, or, put another way, between globalisation and difference. Globalisation per se is hardly ever addressed but is implied throughout in unresolved tension. Elizabeth Edwards focuses on the work of Mohini Chandra in order to discuss issues of displacement, diaspora, identity and heritage. Edwards eloquently approaches photography with particular reference to anthropology. Here, what interests Edwards in Chandra's eclectic selections of photographic fragments of memory is the way experience could be historically reclaimed for anthropology to understand 'the elements active in the constructs of difference' (p 156).

Contemporary Art & Anthropology makes an overall compelling read, though is at times essentialist regarding the perceived 'use-value' of art, particularly when it deals with the issue of appropriations of form as 'the deeper affinities' between the two disciplines. As an anthology of provocations it is pluralistic and rich but the reader is left to wonder why some of the writers did not delve deeper into the new forms of ethnocentrism in the era of globalisation and choose instead to focus on art's aesthetic function and anthropology's 'aesthetic' capabilities. Arnd Schneider in his own essay discusses appropriation as

an artistic practice and offers an array of its potential applications to anthropological practice. He appreciates how the recognition of difference 'lies at the bottom of any appropriations, anthropological or artistic' (p 49), but allows a Hegelian idealism to underlie his views on artistic practices. One would expect Schneider to go deeper into the criticism of the contemporary reconstruction of the 'primitive' behind the alibi of multiculturalism and directly address issues of colonialism (or imperialism) that are still pertinent. Discussing how some artists deal 'well' or 'critically enough' with it is insufficient if one requires new directions both in the arts and in anthropology.

The problem with art today is the didactic and instrumental burden imposed on it from the outside, which deprives us of the proper critical distance to recognise what it cannot do for anthropology, science and government, and to acknowledge what might still be at stake: the appropriation of art as a site of production of difference and cultural value. Schneider warns us about the 'all-encompassing' tendencies in the 'present climate of globalization' but seems to expect more from artists than from anthropologists. Is this mystified idea of 'globalization' enough to demystify the power structures of appropriations, artistic or anthropological? Is it not about time for anthropology to recognise the limitations that its binary structures propagate and look deeper into the affinities of social and political structures and individual agencies?

There are plenty of references to and critiques of Hal Foster's seminal essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer' in this book. Foster's focal point is the unresolved tension between form and content in art, between aesthetic quality and political relevance; as he has previously put it, this 'turning away from questions of representation to iconographies of content; a certain turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified'.¹ Foster's critique – only incidentally addressing anthropology – underlines how an extrinsic 'theoretical concept or a political position' (in our case, the anthropological practice as artistic practice) can operate as the content of the work at the expense of analysing how the work can be political or theoretical in its own terms, and how it operates on the level of the signifier. This critique alerts us to the traps of identity politics being re-fabricated around art today and to the urgency for anthropology to recognise that knowledge is to be found beyond representation. What seems to escape this otherwise impressively informed book is the need for both art and anthropology to go beyond a reductive essentialist iconography into the deeper painful questions of representations, cultural capital and cultural authority.

NOTE

- 1 Hal Foster, 'The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial', *October*, no 66, Fall 1993, p 3

Contemporary Art and Anthropology, edited by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, Berg, Oxford–New York, 2006, 223 pages

Golden

Adele Tan

Part of me wishes that this exhibition did not take place within the Chinese Arts Centre. In a perverse turn of the concept 'site-specific', it has now become 'site-specifying', as in the site specifying the reading of the content, but in this case the 'site' is the surreptitious synecdoche of 'ethnicity'.

But this in itself should not allow me to cast a jaundiced view over the exhibition, which consists of four pieces of a well-considered series of works (conceived after a three-month stay in Berkeley, California in 2003 and still ongoing) across various media by the British-Chinese artist Susan Pui San Lok. The exhibition revolves around the word 'Golden', albeit too functionally dispatched across a small nondescript gallery space. The theme has nothing to do with the actual hue and sheen of gold but with a colouristic and qualitative attribute *du temps perdu* of memory, of the 'good old times' that we have consigned more conventionally to black and white.

Indeed the words 'nostalgia', 'memory' and 'archive' are the foremost operative descriptors of Lok's recent works. As Lok herself states:

Key questions include 'nostalgia' as a vehicle for negotiating 'place' in migration, against the 'nostalgic' as a mode of representation; spatial, oral and aural 'leisure' practices as processes of inscribing, translating and performing identity, memory, and territory; and their tactical, critical representation.¹

We are by now familiar with the barrage of discourses circulating in the field and with the artists who operate as their efficient and eloquent interlocutors. But will the aesthetic production be commensurable to or even exceed their discursive

counterparts, or will the discursive yet again become the alibi of the aesthetic? Will it be able to evade the terms and structures it so self-reflexively tries to displace, or once again be held captive to sticky catchwords such as 'identities', 'migration' and 'diaspora', often strung together in a single breath?

The two works that more successfully escape the ethno-national bind are *Golden (Vistas)* (2005, video, 15 minutes) and *Golden (Songs I, II and III)* (2005, audio, 25, 52 and 22 seconds), partly through their more apparent focus on formal experimentation in the acts of looking and listening. *Golden (Vistas)* takes as its subject San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, but dissolves its efficacy as a symbol by refracting it through three perspectives on three parallel LCD screens. The bridge is at times seen as concrete and at other times as insubstantial by an unstable camera and a palimpsest of shots; the panoramic dreamy land/sky/seascape is counterpointed by the close-up of the waters and waves crashing or rolling onto the shores. Whatever one brings to mind of the Golden Gate Bridge, whether it be its infamy as a prime suicide spot (despair), as an engineering feat (success) or its representation as a historic marker of the gateway for migrants (hope), such as the Chinese during the Californian gold rush, it is not the 'bridge-as-referent' that is important but rather the mental act or view of an imagined future situation provided by a particular bridge. As such, Lok seems to be making a literal correlation between the shifts in camera work to shifts in mental conceptions despite the purported stability of a symbol. *Golden (Vistas)* draws attention to the symbol in a surround mode, the surrounding elements transforming the imaginative act at every changeable moment.

Golden (Songs I, II and III) samples Anglo-American songs with the word 'golden' in their title by musically arranging the sung portions of the word 'golden' in the tracks. The tracks range from classics such as Bob Dylan, The Smiths and Tammy Wynette to contemporary pop-rock acts like Prefab Sprout, Razorlight and Super Furry Animals. These tunes are strangely addictive and even sonorously uplifting, complementing the soundtrack-less videos on display even though they are confined to listening posts. But they add little except in showing an industrious scouring through of song albums to generate 'theme' songs. This perfunctory sampling seems only to be more purposive when seen against some of Lok's concerns with language (eg, pidgin English or Chinglish) and subjectivity such as that of her earlier work *Notes on Return*, in which montaged images of Hong Kong are shown with a soundtrack of a Chinese poem recited by the artist and her parents in Cantonese and later in English to varying degrees of ease and fluency. Perhaps the word 'Golden' is only

incidental, for Lok appears to be more interested in the pauses, stops and hesitations of sound, song and speech, exaggerated by the sampling effect.

Across the other half of the room is the most prominent work of this series, *Golden (Years)* (2006, DVD, two-screen loop, 44 minutes), which consists of two large-scale projections on the adjacent walls of a corner. The images are principally centred on leisure activities such as ballroom dancing, festive celebrations and allotment tending, and are culled from personal footage shot in Hong Kong and London as well as that of past decades from pop culture, the Media Archive for Central England and television stations. Hence personal and public memories are thrown into a random sequence (but never straying too far from the themes circumscribing it) to form a narrative of movement, time and space, where intimate shots of hand gestures and rotating feet in the domestic realm of the artist's parents are connected to the whirling and swirling of Western dance soirées. The images are given a further frame of reference by the display on the facing wall of *Golden (Rewards)* (2006), which is a series of digital prints reproducing the certificates presented to Lok's parents, L C Lok and Y Y Lok, for their achievements in ballroom dancing and allotment tending by the council for Epping. Lok rightly wants to shift the discourse and representation of the Chinese in Britain from the hackneyed stranglehold of economics and cuisine in order to attend to more nuanced metaphors that take significance in other activities and modes of

action. Her interrogative practice hinges upon the terms that describe the doing, such as 'contact', 'cultivation' and 'tending', rather than terms that signify an essential being. Yet the choice of 'leisure' as a departure point fails to dislodge the stereotypes and instead presents another easily consumed point on the identity sliding scale.

What still leaves me perplexed and unsatisfied is that whilst Lok issues a range of incisive queries and tactics, the artistic production takes a more docile approach. The emotional pitch is pleasingly phlegmatic and nothing is ever risky or risked. Theoretical parameters and elaborations of the archival method of working, as already drawn out by Derrida's *Archive Fever* and Hal Foster's essay 'An Archival Impulse',² cannot explain away the fact that the images rescued from obscurity and resuscitated with a different meaning are not all powered to the same degree, and many of Lok's juxtapositions are reflective of the current cultural ambit, not productive of a differing or dissenting one. Lok seems to think that nostalgia can be critically recouped in and through art to address certain (identitarian) issues, but this series does not discuss how well placed nostalgia is in a work of art and I am as yet unconvinced that it is not a retrograde way of working. The cynic in me also sees the 'nostalgia-as-trope' trading on cultural memory that shades too easily into the management of culture and my eyes are drawn to the credits that state the ubiquitous 'kindly supported by'. Surely we cannot



Susan Pui San Lok, *Golden (Years)*, 2006, DVD, two-screen loop, 44 mins, gallery installation view

attend to cultural memory without simultaneously attending to the institutional agencies that have vested interests in producing that memory?

What surfaces in this exhibition is a map of strategies to recode, anchored by image and sound, but also a map where any historical analysis is evacuated and antagonisms and contradictions are flattened out. Even when personal history is marshalled as ballast for the subject, this is not readily extendable to any objective presence. Interestingly, though a family's narrative has been interwoven into the series, the works are at the same time largely de-personalised. Moving between the particular and the general, both poles are equally abstract and it is difficult to extrapolate from the experience of one to that of a community. I had some quizzical moments in the exhibition where I started asking 'who are these people?', 'who is doing the negotiating?', 'is this not a symptom of the minimal visibility of the Chinese in British public life?'. Call me nostalgic but it is here that I am reminded of Hal Foster's caution from a decade back:

For then as now self-othering can flip into self-absorption, in which the project of an 'ethnographic self-fashioning' becomes the practice of a narcissistic self-refurbishing. To be sure, reflexivity can disturb automatic assumptions about subject positions, but it can also promote a masquerade of this disturbance.³

NOTES

- 1 Susan Pui San Lok, 'Golden: Intro', available at: <http://www.visual-culture.com/project/golden>
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996; Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, no 110, Fall 2004, pp. 3-22
- 3 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA-London, 1996, p 180

'Golden: Solo Exhibition by susan pui san lok', 12 May-2 July 2006, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester
