

# *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*

## Educators' Pack



*Cao Fei, Utopia 2006*

### Introduction

As home to Britain's oldest Chinese community, Liverpool has maintained close links with China, particularly its twin city, Shanghai. *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* at Tate Liverpool is the most comprehensive survey of contemporary Chinese art to be staged in this country. It features a wide range of artists working predominantly in new media, including several large scale installations and new commissions.

The exhibition offers schools not only a chance to explore the varied and complex nature of the art of one of the world's most culturally sophisticated countries, but also the opportunity to examine new media art in the context of a modern art gallery.

All of these works have been created during this millennium.

Contemporary artists in China demonstrate a confidence that stems from a sense of their own status in the international art scene. Chinese art is in great demand in the global art market and with the establishment of collective arenas such as the 798 Art District in Beijing and the Morganshan Warehouse complex in Shanghai, young artists are choosing to live and work in their native country, unlike previous generations who had been forced to emigrate in order to pursue their artistic careers.

The title, *The Real Thing*, is significant on several levels.

- Many of the artists in the exhibition explore the relationship of fact and fiction in art – the real and the imaginary.
- The title can also refer to the West's obsession with discovering the "real" China. How representative of Chinese art are these artists?
- It reflects the genuine interest in real life issues shared by many of the featured artists, which contrasts with the enforced "social realism" of art in China under the Mao regime.
- Its invocation of a certain advertising slogan also distances these artists from the "political pop" of the previous generation – their art REALLY IS "the real thing".

### Gallery Activities

- Discuss the title of the exhibition. If you were a curator, would you have chosen this title to describe these works? Think up an alternative title.
- Pick one work that you think best represents "The Real Thing" and give reasons for your choice.
- Choose one work that you think might not be "The Real Thing". Give reasons for your decision.
- Visit the International Modern Art display on the First Floor at Tate Liverpool and make a note of some of the different materials used. How many of these materials can you find in *The Real Thing* exhibition? Are there any new materials in this exhibition? How do you think art has changed in the last twenty years?

## Two Site-specific works: Gu Dexin and Ai Weiwei

### Gu Dexin, *2007/03/30 (Lighthouse Funnel)*, 2007

The location - the physical, historical and cultural context of an exhibition - is a significant factor in the choice of form, content and materials for Gu Dexin's work. Prior to this exhibition, he visited Tate Liverpool and found his inspiration moored in the Albert Dock outside the gallery. He chose to recreate the funnel of the red lighthouse boat that served as the last of its kind on the River Mersey. He worked in a scale as near as possible to the original, faithfully duplicating every detail by consulting archived engineering plans with a team of workers from a local steel plant in the port of Tianjin. The only modification that the artist made to the lighthouse was the addition of sound. Twelve loudspeakers blast out a soundtrack compiled specifically for the work, recorded from everyday noises such as traffic, human voices, water and a variety of bangs and clanking. The title refers to the opening date of the exhibition.

### Discuss

- What does the soundtrack contribute to this work?
- Would you describe the sounds as site-specific?



*Ai Weiwei and Fake Studio, Working Progress (Fountain of Light), 2006*

### **Ai Weiwei and Fake Studio, Working Progress (Fountain of Light), 2006**

Ai Weiwei has created this site-specific work, a spectacular chandelier, eight metres high, floating in the Albert Dock, lit up by 800 light bulbs and powered by an underwater plug. It was inspired by Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919), which, had it been realised, would have been a taller and even more imposing than the Eiffel Tower. Ai Weiwei also invites comparisons between the Russian artist's idealistic aspirations for the new age and the radical redevelopment currently taking place in Liverpool.

The artist may also have been aware of the fact that a sculpture by Arthur Dooley based on *Tatlin's Tower* occupied the south corner of the Pier Head during the 1970s, commissioned by Liverpool Trades Council but since removed pending the waterfront development.

### **Tatlin's Tower**

*The Monument to the Third International*, or *Tatlin's Tower* was a monumental building designed, but never built by Russian artist and architect, Vladimir Tatlin. It was to have been erected in Petrograd following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, constructed from industrial materials: iron, glass and steel. The industrial materials were significant for Tatlin, being symbolic of power, hope and modernity.

Its main form was a twin helix which spiralled up to 400m in height, with the main framework containing three enormous rotating geometric structures. At the base of the construction was a cube housing meeting rooms, which would complete a rotation over twelve months. In the centre, a cone contained offices which revolved once a month and at

the top of the structure, a cylinder containing a communications centre, would turn daily. Visitors would have been transported around the tower by means of various mechanical devices.

Even if the gigantic amount of steel had been available in Russia at this time, it is doubtful that this monument would have been structurally practical.

### Activities

- Look at images of Tatlin's proposed monument and compare it to *Working Progress (Fountain of Light)*, 2006. Discuss the artists' choice of materials.
- Make your own model of Tatlin's Tower. Use materials not normally associated with fine art (eg matchsticks, cardboard, pasta, sweet-papers etc)
- Design a monument for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century celebrating modern technology. What materials would you use? How would visitors be transported around it? What would it be used for?
- Plan a site-specific work for the Albert Dock or another location of your choice. How would your art relate to the site? What materials would you use? What would make it specific to the location?

## Two Video Installation Works: Li Yongbin and Cao Fei

### *Li Yongbin, Face V, 2006*

Li Yongbin is fascinated by the capacity of the face to convey not just nuances and expressions, but more subtle psychological states. In his works he has super-imposed or mirrored the face on different surfaces in order to evoke memories, explore relationships and psychological associations. For example, the video, *Face 1 1996*, superimposed his mother's image over his own features, merging both faces to create an unsettling third. *Face 11 1996*, filmed the artist's face reflected in water. The calmness and stability of the image is violently disrupted as he sends waves through the liquid, distorting and fragmenting his features, suggesting a deeper, psychological disturbance.

*Face V*, featured in this exhibition, takes the form of an installation related to a childhood memory. The exact nature of the experience is not specified. We are left to speculate, entering the space to the sound of a child breathing heavily in sleep, with an unexplained, shadow occasionally appearing at the window.

### Activity

- Find different surfaces to reflect your face, eg. tv screen, shop window, water, car door, picture-frame etc. Photograph or draw the resulting image.
- How does the material affect the reflected face?  
What mood or psychological state is evoked?

### ***Cao Fei, Whose Utopia? What are you doing here? 2006***

This work was produced as part of the Siemens Arts Programme, What are they doing here? In which the company invited artists to make a work as part of a residency within various factories across China. Cao Fei chose the Osram lighting plant in the Pearl Delta, near her home, where the local economy is booming thanks to the efforts of a young provincial, labour force. Her video attempts to capture the mundane, working life of the factory workers, a generation born to be farmhands, but displaced by agricultural machinery and then ironically placed in charge of machines in order to make a living. The video also captures their dreams as they dance through the warehouse, shadowbox in the packaging plant or strum a guitar as an imaginary rock-star. This workforce is the engine that drives an economic reality that everyone wants to be part of. Aspirations of a better tomorrow fuel the dreams of the workers – while they may surrender their skills and labour, do not sell their souls.

#### **Discuss**

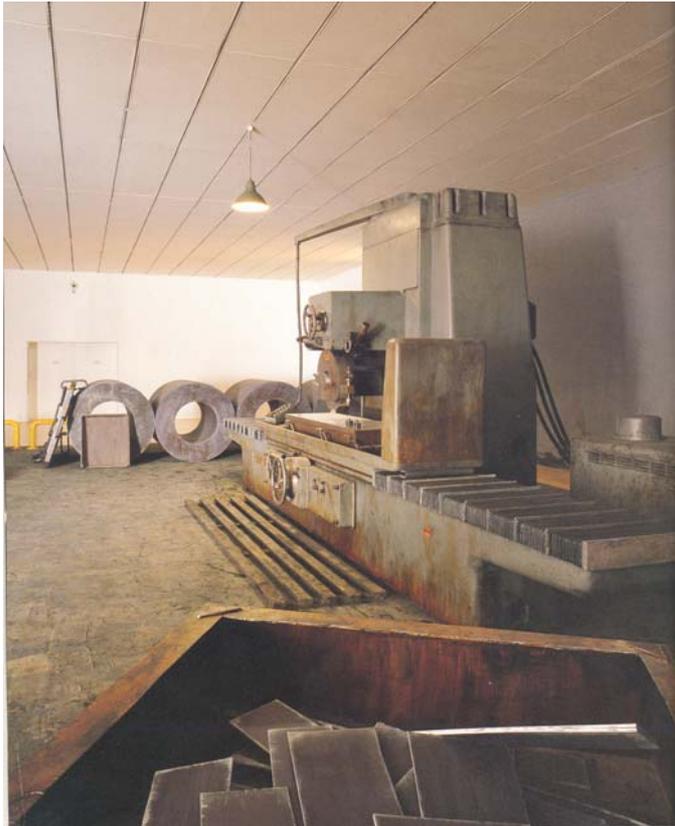
- How artists differentiate between dreams and reality, truth and fiction (find other examples in this exhibition)
- How artists convey dreams – what other media could be used besides video?

#### **Activities**

- Choreograph or act out your dream escape from the classroom
- Write two contrasting pieces of prose or poetry about one person's real life situation and dream of escape.

## Two Realists: Yang Shaobin and Zhang Hui

**Yang Shaobin** draws upon personal memories and associations in his work. *800 Metres* is based upon the mining town where he grew up. He works in the traditional medium of painting and in the Social Realist style associated with the period of his youth. However, whereas Social Realism tended to portray workers as heroic, in a glossy, optimistic mode, Yang Shaobin depicts the harsh reality of toiling underground. The rough, physicality of his painterly brushstrokes emphasises the brutality of these conditions.



*Zhang Hui, Factory Floor, 2004*

*"I love the idea of the final parts not being that which on the surface they appeared to be."*

**Zhang Hui** based his installation work, *Factory Floor*, on personal experience of working at the "East is Red Tractor Factory" where a fellow worker lost his legs in an industrial accident. The factory and its machinery has been recreated meticulously for the gallery in polystyrene. The individual components of the work were made by workers from the factory.

### Discuss

- Which of these works offers the most convincing representation of real life? Give reasons for your choice.
- How has each artist manipulated his materials to convince you that he is portraying a real situation?
- Compare these works with Cao Fei's video, "*Whose Utopia?*" How does she portray working life?

## *Work in Focus:* *Xu Zhen, 8848 Minus 1.86, 2005*

*"Climbed the Himalaya. Sawed off the top of Mount Everest(-1.86cm)and moved it downhill for exhibition. Placed this icy stone in specially made glass refrigerator for preservation. A video documentary shows a group sawing off the top of Mt Everest"*

*- Xu Zhen 2005*



*Xu Zhen, 8848 Minus 1.86, 2005*

In May 2005, artist Xu Zhen led an ascent on Everest. His aims were to test the veracity of the contested elevation statistics and to reduce the peak himself by 1.86cm (his own height). His expedition team would then transport this sawn off piece of rock and ice back to base camp and eventually, Shanghai. With the aid of a refrigerated unit he would then display it as part of an art installation alongside archival materials, such as the tools used for sawing and mountain climbing equipment as well as film and photographic documentation of the expedition.

The work can be interpreted as a humorous comment on China's "reclaiming" of Tibet. It also challenges the spectator's trust in the artist, and by extension the institution. Is this art as documentary or a cleverly presented narrative?

## Everest – the facts

**Location:** Himalaya Range on the border of Nepal and China (Tibet)

**Elevation:** officially given as 8848 metres (29,028 ft) - the highest mountain on earth as measured by the height of its summit above sea level.

Radhanath Sikdar, an Indian mathematician was the first to identify “Peak XV”, as it was then known, as the world’s highest peak using trigonometric calculations. He found it to be 29,000 feet but publicly declared it to be 29,002 feet to avoid giving the impression that it was a rounded estimate rather than exact measurement.

The official elevation of 8,848 metres, was established in 1955 and reaffirmed in 1975. In both cases, the snow cap was included in calculations. An American expedition of 1999 measured the mountain from base to rock head, giving an elevation of 8,850 metres and a snow elevation of 1m higher, though this measurement has never received official recognition. In 2005, the People’s Republic of China’s Everest Expedition announced the highest point of rock to be 8,844.43 metres with an ice cap of 3.5 meters, implying an elevation of 8,848 metres. In reality, the snow and ice layer varies according to season, making a precise measurement impossible. The impact of global warming and tectonic shifts in the range also add to the difficulty of ascertaining a definitive elevation figure.

**Names:** the ancient Sanskrit name for the mountain is *Dev giri* or *Devadurga* (“Holy Mountain”). In Nepali it is known as *Sagarmatha* (“Head of the Sky”). The Tibetan name is *Chomolungma* or *Oomolangma* (“Mother of the Universe”, and the related Chinese names are *Zhumulangma Feng* or *Shengmu Feng*.

In 1865 the mountain was given its English name by the British surveyor-general Andrew Waugh in honour of his predecessor, Colonel Sir George Everest.

**First Ascent:** May 29, 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay

In 1924, the discovery of the bodies of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine on the peak has offered new evidence that they may have actually reached the summit in 1924.

## Discuss

- Fact and fiction in art – can sculptures or installations tell a story?
- Is this representation of Everest any less true than a photograph, painting, video or written account?

## Activities

- Look at other artists’ representations of mountains, eg Paul Cézanne, Ed Ruscha, Richard Long
- Read an account of an Everest expedition (or watch a video) and discuss whether you think it possible to transport a 1,86cm piece of ice and rock from summit to base camp.
- Plan your own installation piece based on a walk or journey you have undertaken (real or imaginary). What souvenir would you bring back with you as the focal point of the work?

## Glossary

**New Media** – art created with new materials and technologies, seen in opposition to traditional media (ie painting, sculpture etc). New media encompasses a wide range of materials, such as computer graphics, video, robotics, conceptual art, installation, performance and virtual art.

**Installation Art** – uses sculptural materials and other media (eg video, performance sound etc) to alter the way we experience a particular space. This can be a gallery space or an intervention in a public place.

**Realism** – a stylistic description referring to art that is representational or true to real life in appearance.

**Site-specific art** – is created to exist in a certain place, the artist taking the location into account when planning the work.

**Social Realism** – propaganda art - a form of realism adopted to create rigorously optimistic pictures of working life where any critical or negative element is banned.

## Further information

**Groom, Simon and Smith, Karen**, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*, Tate Publishing, 2007

**Hoffman, Jens, Napack, Jonathan, Tinari, Philip**, *Shanghart*, Buchandlung Walther Konig, 2007

**Smith, Karen**, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*, Scalo, 2005

**Sullivan, Michael**, *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary*, University of California Press, 2006

**Phillips, Christopher and Hung Wu**, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*, University of Chicago Press, 2007

## Other Resources

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Everest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Everest)

<http://www.shanghartgallery.com/>

dvd: Conquest of Everest – Revisited 1953-2003 (released May 2004)