

PROJECTING THE REALITY OF CHINA THROUGH THE LENS: ON THE ARTISTIC PRACTICE OF XING DANWEN

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Xing Danwen, *A Personal Diary of Chinese Avant-Garde Art in the 1990s, 1993–1998*, image from the series, Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming in *The Third Contact*. Courtesy of Xing Danwen, Kiang Gallery, Meredith Palmer Gallery, SCALO.

As an individual participating in the changing society of China, Xing Danwen took up photography in 1989 and used that modern visual medium to record her dialogue with contemporary China's social reality. At that time, the role and the potential of photography as a means of artistic expression had not been fully recognized in China. During the past fifteen years, social developments and changes have brought enhanced recognition to photography as an art form and to the role the photographic image plays in everyday life, thereby allowing it to become more diversified and complex. Xing Danwen's art mirrors these social changes in all of their richness.

It is difficult to define Xing Danwen's art. Her artistic practice with photography is abundant and varied, and her subjects—the body, memory, sexuality, cultural status, globalization, dislocation, consumption, desire—are extensive and reflect her personal concerns. However, despite the various methods she employs and the broad scope of the subjects she chooses, there is one thing that remains unchanged. Through the medium of photography, she continually demonstrates a personal critical view of the reality she encounters and the circumstances of the epoch she lives in.

A Personal Diary of Chinese Avant-Garde Art in the 1990s was one of Xing Danwen's earliest works. With an individuated perspective and dynamic camera work, she created bold and unconstrained photographic images. She witnessed as a participant and documented the most remarkable moment of China's contemporary art scene in the nineties: the emergence of performance art in



Xing Danwen, *I am a Woman*, 1994–1996, image 6 from the series. Courtesy of Xing Danwen, Kiang Gallery, Meredith Palmer Gallery, SCALO.

Beijing's East Village (an artists' village). The images depict and transcend the struggle and anxiety of artists who confronted the dilemma between reality and their inner selves. These artists often used their own bodies, at times in states of extreme agony, to reflect the contradiction and conflict they felt, and they attained immortality in the pictures created by Xing Danwen. These self-exiled artists, the extraordinariness of their ordinary lives, their performance art and happenings, have become, through Xing Danwen's camera, a remarkable visual document of China's contemporary art history. Her body of work also manifests the essential nature of photography itself—through the revelation of the camera lens, the extreme absurdity of life has been turned into a more powerful and important event than reality itself and has been drastically elevated to a new mythological state. The artist's strange, powerful surrealistic images have grown into a new structure of reality—a reality that can survive only in the picture. To a certain extent, her photography, while alienated from performance art itself, has alienated the photograph as a document of reality as well. One of the reasons for this is that the photographer, who stares at what is taking place in front of the lens through the viewfinder, is not satisfied to be merely an onlooker but creates an

interpretation with her own subjective eye, which transforms the action in front of the camera within the second of recording it. Under such circumstances it is nearly inconceivable for a photographer to remain aloof from events taking place in front the camera. The atmosphere of the performances, as well as the special mirror-like existence of the photographer herself, made it impossible for her to stay away from these events. Therefore, her visual representation is both participation and subjective interpretation.

Considering the body of work by Xing Danwen in an historical context, it seems possible that a new direction for photography was taking place in China. Her photographs were divorced from mainstream ideology and cast a glance toward marginal society or “others” from the standpoint of mainstream valuation. It was of major significance during that time. With her strongly subjective images, Xing’s photography boldly advocates marginal survival and rights, breaks with convention, and ascribes significance to the objects she photographed from her extraordinary visual perspective. From the very beginning of her photographic practice, she has explicitly shown without any hesitation a consciously subjective attitude. This extends through to her photo essays shot in China and other parts of the world. These works have a similar orientation—the artist uses imagery to express her inner voice and to air her own view of the world.

The female body has most often been represented under a male gaze. Xing Danwen’s *I Am a Woman* of 1994, boldly rejects this. It can be considered one of the earliest images of nudity shot by a woman in China’s photographic history. As advocated by its title, it represented the establishment of assertive self-consciousness by a woman. In an enclosed space, Xing Danwen, through rich and varied visual angles, tricky shadows, and interwoven female bodies, concocted a private space for women, intangible for others. This pictorial space could only be shot with the mutual trust and interdependence of the women involved. One of her photos of a woman facing a mirror is reminiscent of *Facing the Mirror*, painted by Wen Yiduo for Pan Guangdan’s 1927 psychoanalytical novel *Feng Xiaoqing*. In the work of Wen Yiduo, the image of the character in the novel, Xiao Qing, was represented in the mirror. In the picture, though, it was the lead character Feng Xiaoqing who was watching herself in the mirror, and there is indeed another pair of eyes watching behind her back. Here, it is a privilege of the man to imagine the woman and structure her image, and it is the man who is motivated to watch and present it. However, in Xing Danwen’s work, the same picture of a woman facing the mirror is of a woman watching a woman, a woman defining the emotion and body of a woman. By representing the woman’s body, Xing Danwen provided for the first time a concrete shape to the existence and advocacy of the new woman in China. If these photographic images mark the waking and consciousness of the artist as a photographer, then her photographing the female body establishes her own female identity.

China is becoming globalized, and perhaps this is a necessity of history, but it carries a lot of external costs. Xing Danwen’s *disCONNEXION* series of 2002–2003 is about the electronic trash dumped in China by Western countries. This is a severe problem, but it is handled by the artist in an aesthetic way. These images, photographed in Guangdong, China, are graphic in their composition, and this industrial electronic trash originating from far away developed countries is presented elegantly and even sentimentally. Walter Benjamin once remarked on photography’s capability to transform garbage into an aesthetic object. However, Xing Danwen’s intention is not related only to aesthetics. She also returns to the intrinsic qualities of photography with an understanding of the expressiveness of colour, and she intelligently uses colour to contrast with her intention of emphasizing a more resolute critical perspective. One can easily recognize this



Xing Danwen, *Duplication*, 2003, image 2 from the series, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Xing Danwen, Kiang Gallery, Meredith Palmer Gallery, SCALO.

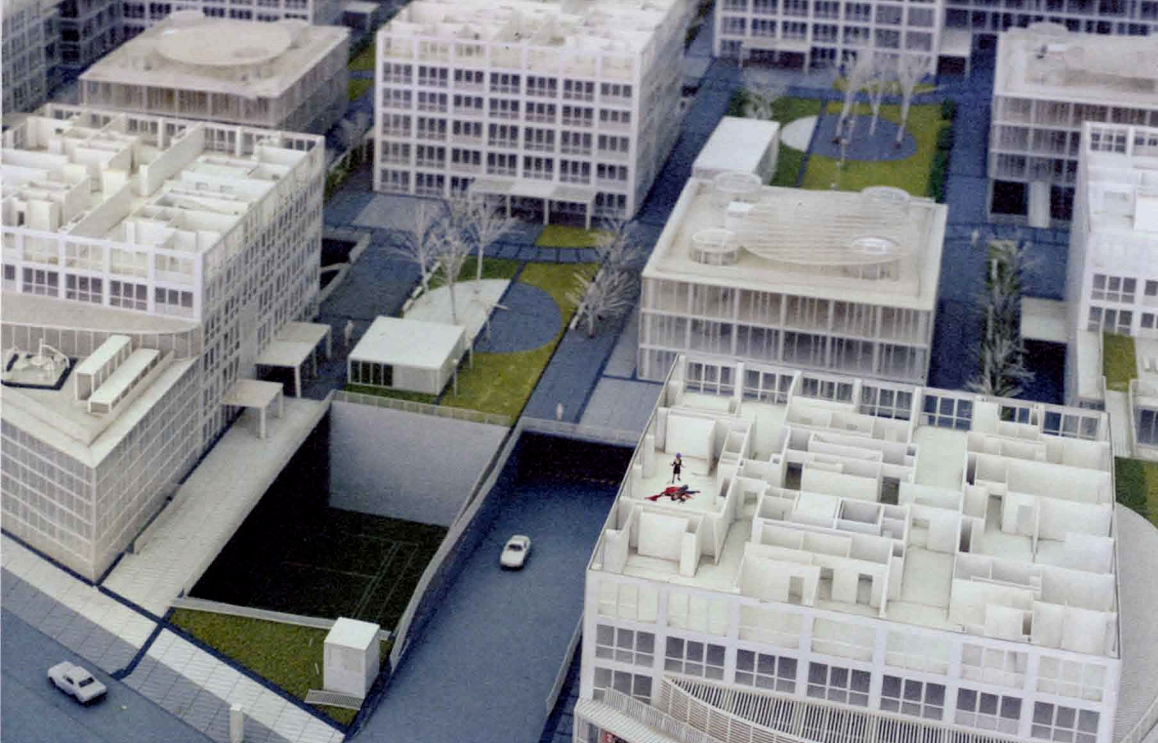
from the disturbingly beautiful images constituted from inorganic plastic electronic products, the negative impact residing under the mask of globalization. Globalization is like a double-edged sword: while developed countries provide themselves opportunities for a powerful economy, the negative effects of environmental and social problems are exported. This virus, growing inside the body of globalization, is circulating around the world. Wherever there are benefits from globalization, there are also problems caused by it. China, while enjoying the benefits of globalization, is at the same time gulping its bitter fruit.

With her acute consciousness of the theme of globalization, Xing thoughtfully chooses photography as a global communicative visual medium, making her voice on such problematic issues available to the world outside China. Thus, Xing Danwen herself, a Chinese artist who is very active internationally, has benefited from globalization.



Xing Danwen, *Disconnexion*, 2002–2003, image C2 from the series, 148 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Xing Danwen, Kiang Gallery, Meredith Palmer Gallery, SCALO.

Xing Danwen's latest work, *Urban Fiction*, constructs a modern Chinese city in the process of rapid urbanization. Drawing upon fiction and a theatrical visual language, she intelligently exaggerates the worries, setbacks, and dreams of urban women who are immersing themselves in the middle class dream and thus displaying the loneliness and isolation of urban dwellers as well as the human alienation derived from modern life. As a result of China's current real estate boom, with its growing number of modern high-rise towers, sales offices and showrooms are now a widespread presence in most cities. In these sales offices, one finds exquisitely crafted architectural models that show both architectural designs integrated with the surrounding community and the interiors of housing projects presented with the roofs opened. These are just maquettes, but they are also an illusion of reality. Real estate developers cleverly create fantasies and dreams. The proportionately scaled-down maquette is a visual marketing tool and a micro-scaled promise of desires that people feel they are able to own. Taking advantage of digital technology, Xing Danwen manipulates these private spaces and fills them with the desires of urban women, giving us the chance to peer together with her into all kinds of secret human dramas performed through her



Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction*, 2004–2005, image 0 from the series, 227 x 160 cm. Courtesy of Xing Danwen, Kiang Gallery, Meredith Palmer Gallery, SCALO.

invented stories taking place inside these architectural models. Through these women’s various forms of behaviour and expression, one can detect complacency, pretentiousness, mistakes committed through blindness, and dead ends. All of these run counter to the myth of middle-class happiness promised by real estate advertisements. Xing lets us peep through the roofs and windows into the interior of what human life is, and she confronts the eternal conflict between dream and reality. Through a corner in a high-rise building, one gets to see the question and the “truth” that reside behind luxury and indifference: to what extent can people be the masters of their own destiny? Xing Danwen thinks that this entire body of work is “playful and fictitious, wandering and interweaving between reality and fantasy.” However, even though it is “wandering and interweaving,” it is just like a sharp needle shuttling back and forth, piercing the fantasy bubble of a desired graceful contemporary life.



Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction* (detail), 2004–2005, image 0 from the series, 227 x 160 cm. Courtesy of Xing Danwen, Kiang Gallery, Meredith Palmer Gallery, SCALO.

No matter how experimental and shifting Xing’s artistic practice is, China’s ever-changing reality constitutes the background and context of her work. As her photography addresses “reality,” the subject matter she examines establishes her own “reality” artistically. The human desire existing in contemporary life has found its formation inside her images. Today in China, photography has become transformed from a popular medium into an art form. Indeed, there are quite a number of artists who know how to seize the opportunity of its popularity without much knowledge about photography itself and manage to get quick attention by using photography boldly. However, Xing Danwen’s artistic practice has, right from the beginning, proved that her involvement in photography arises from a profound interest, and she has consistently worked with a serious attitude. She understood well the potential of photography and devoted herself to the development of its potential whole-heartedly. She has proved her excellence with a sustained, reliable, and irreplaceable artistic achievement. Through her talents one can discover how photography as a modern medium can be endowed with contemporary significance.