

Following-up and Directing Reality - In/Re News

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News events in contemporary China have reached an unprecedented level of multifariousness. Their eccentric nature has gone far beyond, or even, challenged one's imagination. It is no wonder that news events have become subject matter [source materials?] for film director Jia Zhangke and novelist Yu Huato create their latest works *A Touch of Sin* and *The Seventh Day* respectively. On the other hand, professional news reports and photojournalism, which fulfill the social responsibility for truth-telling, often appear embarrassingly delayed and off-base due to live reports and announcement via social media. Encountering these new and difficult challenges, media practitioners and photojournalists ought to direct public attention to current and future social issues by means of journalistic practices that are more socially responsible, professional, visionary and sensitive to problems.

Thriving on the prosperity of mass media, information circulation has achieved a striking level of effectiveness, thereby occasionally causing difficulties in establishing the relationship between images and reality. Do the ubiquitous images dominate news production or is it the other way round? In either case, the enormous production of news has stimulated a sense of reality among artists and photographers. In response to news items and the hidden reality behind them, a number of artists and photographers have managed to overcome huge hurdles to capture the truth that they recognize as genuine, revealing the complexities of our world. Such photographic practices could be considered as "sited in" the locality where the news event takes place. In contrast, a number of other artists who are informed and inspired by news images, recreate the reality by using these visual forms as source elements and clues. Their works could be regarded as artistic practices based on "re-"processing.

This article discusses a number of artists and photographers who, regardless of their roles, have utilized photography to follow news events or rethink about historical incidents, intending to create a visual representation that allows broader interpretations. Their artistic purposes can be summarized as raising and questioning social problems and their causes, reviewing the mechanisms of news production and provoking deeper contemplation on contemporary reality. At the

same time, their creations encourage introspections on the medium of photography itself.

The basic responsibility and position of news photography is centered on revealing relatively urgent and realistic issues related to people's livelihood and social development. These are still well demonstrated by a number of outstanding photographers. Lu Guang, for instance, through a series of astonishing pictures in his work entitled *Polluted Landscape*, brings to light the severe environmental dilemma taking place around the country. Wang Jiuliang, in capturing scenes from over 400 landfill sites in Beijing's surrounding areas, attempts to warn us by providing pictures of waste-engulfed land. Identifying specific issues and problems in their work, both of these photographers have fulfilled a social responsibility as photographers. Lu adopts a typical reportage style while Wang employs an approach that references landscape.. Regardless of the differences in their concepts and methods, both share the same concrete objective to, by way of photography, provide evidence that social development at the expense of the environment and future generations are no longer approved or condoned by the people.

Additionally, there are photographers who take a continuous and thoughtful approach to their topics, and attempt to paint a wider background picture of certain breaking news stories. Referring to the shocking tragedy of repeated suicides by the workers in mega-sized multinational cooperations in Guangdong, Zhan Youbing provides us with a panoramic and realistic view of the life of internal staff in these companies, convincingly illustrating an apathetic and mechanical system of production management and its consequences. Though Zhan's approach is typical reporting, his observations and narratives are still much needed. Unquestionably, there are also professional photographers who do not conform to linear narratives found in traditional news photography. Take for instance Liu Jie, who combines conceptual photography and traditional reporting, to highlight particular conditions in Chinese rural villages, such as those in which the young and prime-aged workforce has largely moved away to the city.

Apart from uncovering the truth within a conventional news format, there are also artists and photographers who decide their own topics and conduct their own field research. Results are published afterwards in efforts to raise public concern. Taiwanese photographer Yao Jui-Chung and his team LSD (Lost Society Document) are exemplary of such artistic qualities. In Taiwan, due to various reasons stemming from domestic economic demand and local elections, campaign promises were

made in the name of cultural development. Large amounts of money were therefore invested in public structures, which immediately became disused or “Mosquito Halls” upon completion of construction. Concerned about the abuse of public funds, Yao led a team of students to probe into and promulgate the situation with photographs and words that urge for measures of rectification. Meanwhile, he organized camera workshops in the name of LSD, and invited public participation through two rounds of thorough investigation. Eventually, their results were published in two volumes titled *Mirage - Disused Public Poverty in Taiwan*. Their campaign has successfully drawn social attention, compelling the relevant authority to hold a dialogue with them. To a certain extent, Yao and his team have accomplished the goal of publicizing a social problem.

In *The Choi Yuen Village Group Portrait Series*, Ducky Tse documented the daily life of villagers during their struggle against the building dismantlement by the Hong Kong government. This series, which grows organically from his documentary project, serves as a literary record to the daily struggle of rural people as well as a profound visual interpretation of the citizen’s memories. Through this, Tse’s personal log and observation are converted to collective memories shared by the villagers, which in turn establishes a collective identity through a visual format.

In contrast to the above, there are artists or photographers who embrace a different approach, which I will discuss under the topic “In/Re News”. Their creations, though based on factual events witnessed in the news, are not entirely dependent on it nor in any way defer to its authority. On the contrary, they occasionally adopt an “anti-news” position and aim to question the news itself and its mechanisms of production. Their endeavors, on a certain level, grant us a better opportunity to scrutinize the reality we are confronting.

For instance, in processing unexpected incidents that touch our nerves, Ou Zhixiang and the Li Xu + Liu Bo Group display a style that distinctively deviates from documentaries. In the *Push-Up Series*, Ou blends his own body with the locations where social episodes happen. His artistic strategy is to use the form of behavior art to magnify the significance of these occurrences, which might otherwise be ignored due to the massive information flow. With his own physical form, Ou expresses his personal reactions to social events and phenomena that he deems too important to overlook. Judging every latest major happening, he will instantaneous arrive at the scene and, at lightning speed, record his naked push-up performance with his camera. Using his “improper” posture, he protests against the arrogance of the

people in power within our society.. Furthermore, in that same way as he exposes his flesh and bones, Ou strives to lay bare the naked truth of these impactful incidents symbolized by the constructions and phenomena in his pictures.

The works by Li Xu + Liu Bo Group, on the other hand, fall into the category of "re-presentation of news". Based on media broadcasts, they direct video performances and endow them with a certain temporality. Their "re-narratives" are designed to amplify and strengthen aspects in news broadcasts that are easily omitted, highlight certain effects and strengthen one's understanding of the events. With such "re-created news", they communicate their own position and opinions with the audience. Reading these "parallel narratives" of fake news, one couldn't help asking: what is truth in today's world, art or reality? And with regards to the artists: are they imitating or creating reality?

Revelations of the various methods and practices behind image production play a critical role in enhancing the capacity for the public to decode messages in mass media. Artists Zhang Dali and photographer Zhang Xiao have made their own explorations in these areas. The former has chosen images that are widely reproduced in Chinese and expatriate media and inspected their original sources and reviewing ways in which they were produced. Comparing the raw images with their final editions, Zhang Dali unveils outrageous acts of image editing that deliberately effect the manipulation in the production and circulation of images in mass media formats. Zhang Xiao, on the other hand, completely discloses the unethical yet common culture in the Chinese news industry by exhibiting the monstrous amount of Red Pockets (the so called "honoraria" payments) he has been given while working as a news correspondent. Each of these Red Pockets are displayed together with the pictures he took for each campaign, plainly demonstrating the pay-and-reward relationship in the production of "news" reports.. Touching on the ethics of the contemporary journalism industry, the art piece confronts us with the question of where the bottom line lies in the journalistic industry. This question of course also encapsulates the photographer's own reflections and critique of the production of news.