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SESSION 177: ROUND TABLE: 'MEMORY OF THE PAST, CAPITAL OF THE PRESENT': RED LEGACY IN CHINA

By Miri Kim

This intellectually and visually stimulating roundtable was chaired by Carma Hinton (George Mason University) and focused on the legacy of China’s socialist past in China’s not-quite-so socialist present. I’d like to think I took good notes, but this was a session very rich in materials and ideas (and excellently managed time-wise, which means things moved along at a brisk pace), so apologies in advance for any errors or omissions.

The roundtable began with Michael R. Dutton (University of London), who presented three short videos exploring how political icons can become de-politicized through commodification, “museumification,” and the processes of nostalgia and memory-making about the past. These changes are not relevant to just China but other parts of the world, such as Eastern Europe, which have been experiencing dramatic changes in recent years. It is imperative, Dutton argued, to consider how and why objects created to serve a particular political purpose (e.g., to instill a visceral awareness of class-based social injustice in the viewer) are deliberately moved away from their original intended meaning.

The first video, “The Political Life of Inanimate Objects,” led us through Grūtas Park in Lithuania (known unofficially as “Stalin World”) where the statues of socialist leaders like Lenin have been literally put out to pasture in a forestland theme park. It also offers visitors a chance to mosey through re-creations of Soviet gulag camps. Peopled by statues of former leaders, this controversial park, Dutton suggests, is one example of how icons of the socialist past can be de-contextualized, even trivialized, reducing the possible range of positive and negative emotional engagement (“affective connection”) with the past thereby.

The second video, “Fabrications,” was a short introduction to Chinese conceptual artist Cai Guo-Qiang’s equally controversial installation at the 1999 Venice Biennial, where he exhibited “Rent Collection Courtyard,” a reproduction of statues made in the 1960s depicting a rapacious landlord and the suffering of his peasant victims. Made in the socialist realist style, the 1960s statues are not individual characters but a representation of a politically unambiguous, unified collective experience—the landlord symbolizing bourgeois oppression and the figures of the peasants standing in for the whole of China’s downtrodden masses. During questions, Chang Tan (Pomona College) brought up the need to understand politics as an art form with specific emotions, and Dutton commented that the problem of trivializing and exploiting the Red legacy raised by Guo’s work opens up the question of what kinds of things, exactly, we should be considering “politics.” Guo’s installation is framed in part as a critique of Western artistic traditions that value originality—a “re-contextualization,” in other words, that takes a piece of China’s socialist past to serve an aesthetic goal. However, some still see a trivialization of a traumatic past that is far from over, several decades into the future.

The third video, “Communities on Patrol,” showed a Chinese policewoman on her neighborhood beat conversing with a resident about his concerns, an example of interaction between the state and the people that forgoes the mass politics of emotion, with its potential to rouse millions of individuals, in favor of a individualized experience. Seen in this way, how the Chinese state mobilizes “affectivity” today appears distinctly opposed to the one-size-must-fit-all approach of the Cultural Revolution. Read the rest of this entry »

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