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Utopias/Heterotopias: Wuzhen Contemporary Art Exhibition

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The art of quiet speaking.

Wuzhen, otherwise known as the Venice of the East – or one of them – is a desperately picturesque little water town about two hours east of Shanghai, in the northern Zhejiang Province. Like many small towns in China, the impression upon entering, is of stepping back in time, to a place that is part-old East, part-closing down. It's a place that feels beautifully tragic, as if one is catching it just as it ends.

Chen Xianghong, CEO of Wuzhen Tourism, has big plans to make sure that end doesn't come. Having spent his childhood here, he has, since 1999, been slowly overseeing the implementation of a plan to revitalise his hometown.



Wuzhen, if one can imagine, is a town of two parts -the living, contemporary town, which is where an old Silk Factory resides, and the historic water town (the Western Scenic Zone) a restored – and by restored, we mean largely rebuilt using original

materials – Ming and Qing Dynasty village of cobbled streets, canals, bridges, and town houses. The WSZ is the picturesque, watery, Venice-like part, which one pays to enter, and once inside, bear witness to a vast organisation – 100 families – of people, dressed in distinctive blue tunics, who live and work here, running the hotels, crewing the restaurants, clearing the leaves from the streets, and ferrying tourists in the ubiquitous electric trams and canal boats.

Under Chen's guidance, the water town has become a popular tourist attraction, and now plays host to the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, the recently opened Mu Xin Art Museum, the World Internet Conference, and now, *Utopias/Heterotopias*, a contemporary art exhibition that trails through the Western Scenic Zone and inhabits the renovated North Silk Factory.

Utopias/Heterotopias features some big hitters. Organised by Chief Curator Feng Boyi, and with a curatorial committee that includes Hou Hanru and Uli Sigg, among others, Boyi has assembled some 40 artists from China and around the globe, including Xu Bing, Olafur Eliasson (also currently on display with a significant survey exhibition, *Nothingness is not nothing at all*, at the Long Museum, Shanghai), Bill Viola, and Ai Weiwei.

The inclusion of Ai Weiwei here, is not insignificant, as it will be his first appearance in an exhibition that is government funded since the conclusion of his house arrest and the return of his passport. His work, *Coloured House*, a structure made from the parts of abandoned traditional homes from southern China painted in modern building paint, is also emblematic of the exhibition's fine practice of the art of quiet speaking. As the exhibition catalogue states, the work is a "metaphor for the conflicts and contradictions between the demolition and the construction that has taken place in the course of China's urbanisation". And it is, indeed the large empty structure cannot help but allude to the miles of uninhabited apartment blocks that are now so typical of the Chinese city skyline and to the (possibly) failing utopian promise of such an expansive urbanisation program. It also quietly reminds one to question where those people, who abandoned these old homes and towns, are.





In the introduction to the exhibition, we are reminded that utopia is an illusory state, an ideal society that embodies human aspiration, whereas heterotopia, it states, is “a place of transcendence and a place of reality”. A heterotopia, according to [Foucault](#), is a representation, or approximation, of a utopia, or a parallel space (such as an asylum) where unwanted peoples can be deposited in order to make a utopia possible. He likened it to a mirror, where we in the real world look through to the utopia of the reflection, the reflected state being utopia, in that it does not exist. The heterotopia, then, is the action at the mirror’s surface, the friction between the real and the reflection – in other words, the place by which utopias can be approximated in a real space. It can also be a site of contestation where several spaces operate in the same place, as with the town of Wuzhen, where a ‘real’, historic, vacation village exists within a modern town, an imaginary idyll within an ordinary locus – museums also act as heterotopias in this way, static repositories of history within modern buildings, within living, contemporary societies.

A third state, which is likely more familiar to contemporary audiences, is dystopia, which could conceivably be described as the mental state created unintentionally by heterotopias when they pursue utopian visions. Dystopic states, despite their enormous influence on the contemporary pop culture zeitgeist – think *The Matrix*, *Hunger Games*, or *The Island* – do not appear to feature in contemporary art practice within this exhibition (the word appears only once in the exhibition catalogue), which may seem anomalous in the context, however, as with Weiwei’s *Coloured Houses*, what is not said loudly speaks most clearly.

Take, for example, Mao Tongqiang’s *Tools*, which consists of a field of 30,000 hammers and sickles, laid in rows. It is impossible to not interpret them as symbols of a failed communist ideology. “The metaphor here is self-explanatory” reads the exhibition essay, but it is also explicitly one about past failures. However, one cannot look at the thousands of numbered tools and not think about the workers who swung them, and in so doing, also think of the millions of workers who still work in perilous conditions. While the artwork deals explicitly with historic failures, it also resonates with today’s dystopic conditions.

Then there is Song Dong’s *Avenue Square*, an enclosed 100 square meter space, the walls and ceiling of which are lined with mirror, while the length is dressed to resemble a familiar Beijing street, made of garish plastic flowers, recycled detergent bottles, and other off-casts. Song invites the viewer to stop and use the space, “gather, eat with friends, pass the time, or entertain yourself on this street”.



Song Dong, Avenue Square, 2016

It is a seemingly benign invitation to an unremarkable interaction, made complicated by the red painted rear wall reminiscent of the buildings surrounding Tian'amen, and the antique lamppost, modelled on those of Chang'an Avenue, which leads to the infamous Square. References to the 4th of June affair, as it is still spoken of in China, are only ever spoken quietly, and so it is quite understandable that the exhibition posits the work as being a sort-of 'every street' – exhibition content in China is still scrutinised by the censors, after all.

What brings this quiet historic reference chillingly forward, from heterotopic past to dystopic future, is when the viewer realises that the fake surveillance cameras, made of detergent bottles, contain some real cameras, the footage from which plays in an adjoining room. Further, the combination of the cameras and the mirrors recalls Jeremy Bentham's concept of a [panopticon prison](#), the design of which allowed for the prisoners to be observed by a single guard without the prisoners knowing if they were being watched. While it isn't possible for the guard to watch all of the prisoners at once, the fact that the inmates could not be sure would mean they acted as if they were, effectively guarding themselves.

The work is a stark reminder that every action one undertakes – in the age of [WeChat](#) and other social media – is monitored, archived, and has the potential to be entered into the [evidence chain](#).

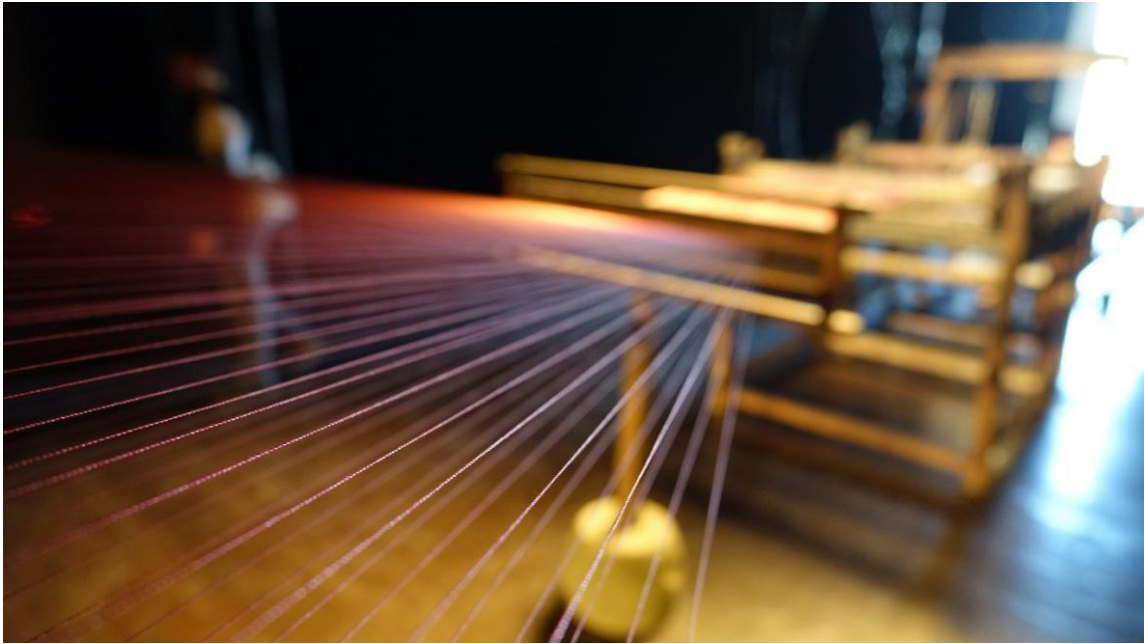


Eliciting connected concerns in a room nearby, is *The Dragonfly Eye (trailer)* by Xu Bing, a trailer for a film made entirely from footage assembled from the millions of surveillance cameras around China. The trailer takes us into convenience stores, violent roadside incidents, close encounters, and even people's homes in what will eventually become a narrative form feature. As with *Avenue Square*, Xu Bing's work can have a cascade effect on the viewer – at first, one views with the same voyeuristic fascination that one would watch reality TV or You-tube, and then a dawning realisation of the volume of footage and, as the viewer considers how many cameras they passed that day, the enormity of the suggestion that there is very little of our lives that isn't viewable is overwhelming. As with Bentham's panopticon prison, we have created a society whereby we can never know if we are being observed, and have become our own watchmen, all for the utopian ideal of safety. The role of government in this surveillance network is, of course, implicit, spoken quietly.



Among the international artists, there are a few crowdpleasers – Florentijn Hofman’s *Floating Fish*, for example, which is sure to gather crowds of selfie-takers -but many of them seem to connect obliquely with the curatorial theme.

An unquestionable stand-out is Ann Hamilton’s *again still yet*, which turns a traditional Chinese theatre into an operable silk loom by connecting the seats with the stage via the silk threads. One of the townswomen works each day to weave what will become a 20 metre tapestry, while the inclusion of work songs and bells, and the light filtering through the window behind the stage, transforms the space into something that straddles strata of time. The effect is bewitching, until the weaver stops and compresses time when she laughingly complains of being tired from all the work required – there’s that slight hint of dystopia behind the heterotopia.



Ann Hamilton's again, still, yet. 2016

Another is John Körmeling's *ANYWAY*, a deceptively simple mechanical interactive piece located at one of the gates that lead into the water town. It consists of a revolving circle made to match the surrounding paving, so that when one stands on it, one is both entering and exiting at the same time. Thus, one can look from the utopia inside to the dystopia outside – although, with the many workers in their blue tunics scurrying about after the tourists, playing Morlock to our Eloi, one wonders in which direction dystopia lies.





Others, such as Oliver Herring and Jaffa Lam, seem intent on working towards sustainable heterotopies in their practice, seeking to ameliorate the more undesirable effects of chasing utopia. Herring's *Areas for Action* collaborates with members of the local Wuzhen community to engage with and document the renovation of the old Silk Factory and its environment in a way not wholly performative nor object based. By working with locals from the surrounding town, Herring invites an element of risk and uncertainty, relinquishing the usual role of artist progenitor for one of social experimenter – a role which seeks to elicit positive change in the volunteering participants while leaving little behind but documentary evidence.





For Jaffa Lam's work, *Bleaching*, she worked with members of the Hong Kong Women Worker's Association (HKWWA) to unthread, bleach, and recombine fabric elements – some from fabric shops closed due to gentrification, some used in the street protests that the HKWWA were a prominent part of – to create new forms over embroidery hoops, which are then suspended as projection surfaces, like small floating worlds.

Lam's practice incorporates elements of education, social justice, and community based collaborative actions. With this, and previous works, she is engaging a dialogue about what a sustainable artistic and heterotopic practice means in an urban, neoliberal environment which more than ever leans towards the dystopic.

As one crosses the threshold when leaving *Utopias/Heterotopias*, and from several days in the Western Scenic Zone, there is a sense that one has been expelled from some utopian space – albeit a little like Fantasy Island, with its open-sided electric carts and blue tunicked groundskeepers – much like Adam and Eve after the Fall. That such an ambitious exhibition could have been imagined to be staged in such a place, and succeed, is perhaps surprising enough, but yet more surprising is that with the art of quiet speaking it has been allowed to say so much. With the promise of the project having a life in future iterations, one can only hope that it continues to explore

utopia, heterotopia, and perhaps even dystopia in order that it might speak a little louder.



The gate of Wuzhen, which serves as both entry and exit.