

The Power of Photography

Statement for the exhibition

Between Past and Future-New Photography and Video from China (2004-2006)

By Miao Xiaochun

Photography was invented for the purpose of recording objective truth. However, while using this medium, especially using it as a medium of artistic expression, one will discover that photography does not completely record reality. Any photograph can only depict a certain section of the world, with a certain width and a certain length. This is not to be considered solely a limitation, for it can be used to emphasize the importance of a part of the scene and its implied meanings. Photography can only record a split-second record of time; nevertheless, it makes that second eternal. A black-and-white photograph may be untruthful, but it transforms the colorful world into black, white, and gray in an abstract way, presents us with an unusual view of the world, and can bring us much joy.

Photography's untruthfulness arises primarily from our subjective choices. When we hold up a camera to photograph a scene, it is guaranteed that some concept is guiding our fingers. Otherwise, why is this scene, and not another scene, to be photographed? Why is the shutter pushed down at this split second and not another? Even a photograph taken without any obvious purpose might express the concept that subjective choice is wrong and should be abandoned. Choice is always involved. From this perspective, all photography is conceptual photography. On the other hand, even if a photograph is a conceptual work; it still records something with camera and film. Even if the appearance is changed and it is difficult to recognize, it still records something in the world. Thus all photography, including our so-called conceptual photography, is at one level documentary. We only divide photography into inaccurate categories for the convenience of discussion; in actuality these two cannot be separated, nor are they antagonistic. Photography combines objective recording and subjective choice, which intensifies the expressive

power of the work. We use this feature to either directly or indirectly express thoughts and feelings that might only be incompletely expressed by language or through some other media, or that cannot be expressed by language at all. This is the power of photography.

It may not seem necessary to discuss the size of photographic work. Small ones are delicate, large ones are striking, and each scale is unique in its own ways. But it has become an aesthetic issue that needs close attention. Today photographs are getting bigger and bigger, a phenomenon prompted in part by large exhibitions. In the 1960s and 1970s, most photographic work was displayed in so-called photography salons, where delicate photographs were appreciated and praised. Moreover, it was difficult to produce large photographs. Later a vast amount of photo-based artwork entered art galleries. With gigantic painting, installations, and sculptures displayed within vast museums, photographic work was driven to enlarge its size and volume. After the emergence of digital printing in the 1980s and 1990s, this became an easier task. All of a sudden, photographs were huge. The questions then became: how big is big, and what kind of image quality is acceptable for an audience?

Some artists do not care too much about image quality in a traditional sense, or if they do care, they do not have the ability to deal with both scale and quality. This kind of work is already accepted as long as it is meaningful. Other artists insist on using large cameras and negatives, which results in high image quality in the traditional sense even though the resulting photographs are over two or three meters. The works of Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, and Thomas Ruff are of this kind. A new photographic language is developed, and such photographs will probably be displayed to an audience in gigantic galleries where all their fine details can be seen. In this sense, the end result of this kind of photograph is already known while the work is still nascent. This is the exact opposite of “expanded” photographs with a poor image quality. Small reproductions of this kind of photograph will lose a lot of detail, even effect the expression of meanings. But you cannot have both, and artists need to decide which one they want. If an audience already knows the meaning of a small photograph after seeing the good-quality reproduction, then

seeing the original work afterward will not bring much joy; for large photographs, it is better to see the originals. This is the return to an artist's hard work, and also to the pleasure of being part of the audience. Otherwise, why go out of your way to see an art exhibition?

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