

BEIJING



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Musquiqui Chihying, *The Jog*, 2014, two-channel HD video, color, silent, 1 minute. From “Meditations in an Emergency.”

“Meditations in an Emergency”

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In devising countermeasures to some crises, we ignore others. During the global outbreak of Covid-19, the need to quarantine and to social-distance has become a consensus view. Giorgio Agamben’s much-criticized arguments have touched on this point: The novel coronavirus has normalized the state of exception, resulting in the sacrifice of freedoms previously taken for granted and throwing humanity into a long-term state of fear and uncertainty. Post-lockdown, can we forge new kinds of social relationships?

Contemporary art institutions are responsible for engaging in cultural reflection, yet in China, the epicenter of the global outbreak, such reflection is often in conflict with official and populist positions. Here, in a museum whose regular activities had suddenly been suspended, a few young curators worked collaboratively and on short notice to create a holistic, encyclopedic program through which to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic. “Meditations in an Emergency” was divided into five sections—“The Fragile Everyday,” “Vital Signs,” “Beyond Animality,” “Othered Movements,” and “Out of Focus”—and dealt with themes ranging from biopolitics to technological control.

The viewing experience, one had to admit, was not entirely smooth. What curatorial logic, one wondered, connected Zhang Hui’s figural paintings, Shana Moulton’s mystical digital rituals, and Musquiqui Chihying’s satirical, anticapitalist performance videos? Looking deeper, one saw that the conceptual jumps required by the miscellaneous nature of the work had both form and purpose; the emergency, close enough to touch, had been purposefully dispersed into a kind of evocative atmosphere, compelling viewers to experience firsthand their unrelieved anxiety and trace it to its origins.

In the section “Beyond Animality,” for instance, Yi Xin Tong’s ten-channel video installation *Poems in the Mount Lu Zoo*, 2015–20, recounted the fantastic but true story of an abandoned zoo in the artist’s hometown, where migrant workers have taken over and inhabited the various empty enclosures. It serves as a kind of allegory—hinting, perhaps, at humanity’s comeuppance from the nature it has long tried to master. Here, the artist has no intention of offering any quick, convenient conclusions, but rather complicates the terms of inquiry. A skilled editor of moving images, Tong evokes China’s unique social reality and poetic tradition, using sustained observation to seek out the lacunae between humans and animals. This is where the work’s sense of poetry derives its power: In suggesting there are forms of cohabitation for the human and the nonhuman beyond one of mutual harm. The alternative is joint survival and transformation.

Strictly speaking, this show about emergency did not adopt the language of emergency—though this does not mean it tried to skirt our current reality. It sought out critical possibilities at the heart of contemporary art, which has, for a long time, been taking various emergency states as engines for thought, with individual works seeming to condense entirely exceptional dilemmas. The show also attempted to do justice to the various aspects of meditation. First and foremost, it was anti-utilitarian—opposed to immediate results. It strove to remake an epistemic framework according to a rubric separate from current-day considerations. The ecological disaster described in Robert Zhao Renhui’s *Last Cat on Christmas Island*, 2016; the migrant crisis addressed by Forensic Architecture in *Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe, Lesvos, Aegean Sea, 28 October 2015*, 2020; and the apocalyptic parable envisioned in Pierre Huyghe’s *Untitled (Human Mask)*, 2014, revolve around irreducible contradictions. The museum should not serve merely as a place of propaganda, legitimizing the moment in which we find ourselves, nor should it be a space for pessimism. It should be a political space that encompasses contradictions. Hal Foster’s recent appraisal in these pages of Paul Chan’s practice might perhaps be reused here: To be irreconcilable, he argues, is to keep “artistic form open and dynamic” so that “this making and unmaking of the object might inspire a related movement in the subject.” This many-sided exhibition constituted an irreconcilable event. In a Beijing whose reopening has restored the freedom to move but not to think, the show prompted viewers to actively reconsider the present state of affairs.

Translated from Chinese by Qing Zhang.

— Yang Beichen



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