Embracing contradiction: The Long March Project

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Abstract
An awareness and respect for where one is standing in relation to its conscious surroundings should inform the manner in which you speak or act. To begin to speak is to express a desire to know, to act is to express a desire to understand. This liminal space between knowing and understanding is a varied experience that is fundamentally anchored in context – from where do these two points greet each other and from what pathways have they arrived? This will be a discursive set of thoughts, sprung from the methodology of the Long March Project, which will discuss the concept of 'difference' and 'locality', in reference to 'Long March Project - Chinatown', an ongoing international artistic experiment, creating spaces where historical, social and cultural contradiction is challenged and provoked.
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Embracing contradiction: The Long March Project

Curators, critics, artists unpack parallel perceptions of the 'other' in terms of East and West, exploring how such projections of difference, and direct cultural links, are embodied in the local.

Today's topic of discussion is a rather complex and many-layered statement, heavily bound in particular terminologies that dictate a certain way of seeing the world. Today, by way of loose introduction, I will convey a discursive set of thoughts, which have sprung from the methodology of the Long March Project, to focus on the concept of 'difference' and 'locality' in reference to the Long March Project - Chinatown, an ongoing international art project, creating spaces where historical, social and cultural contradiction and assumption is challenged and provoked.

To speak is to express a desire to know, to act is to express a desire to understand. Embracing contradiction, challenging assumption -The Long March Project

An awareness and respect for where one is standing in relation to its conscious surroundings should inform the manner in which you speak or act. To begin to speak is to express a desire to know, to act is to express a desire to understand. This liminal space between knowing and understanding is a varied

experience that is fundamentally anchored in context – from where do these two points greet each other and from what pathways have they arrived? The space in which they meet is also critical to the interpretation of this encounter, and of most interest today for this discussion, is understanding what subsequently occurs. Yes these nodes, or 'meeting' points, are still initially judged by the power of aesthetics in the recognition of ethnicity, which is the root of an individual's story, however what is most powerful is how that individual's perception of mobility today empowers or troubles the root of his/her beginning, and thus unfolds a further discovery of the self, uncovering the new in existing spaces of culture and economy in a particular social fabric and altering, adapting, challenging, engaging, embracing these found areas of 'play'. This rather abstract narration of relation attempts to embrace the slippage of cultural, historical, social, geographical boundary, discipline and stereotype, it is about the creation of a different visual and textual language that seeks to give meaning back to the experience of the present.

The Long March Project, based in Beijing, is an ongoing artistic experiment that acknowledges the importance and inherent potential of this 'narration of relation' in particular spaces at particular times.

Fundamental to what we consider an ongoing journey of the Long March Project is a desire to articulate the specificity of the local by confronting the complex contradiction of today's movement across global dimensions and virtual parameters. The movement between international and local standards of civic and economic operation; between traditional social custom and popular international trend; between religious identification and acknowledgement of associated racial prejudice – all of these 'meeting points' are spaces of creative negotiation that collide in various ways. The Long March Project seeks to examine and provoke these spaces through the process of artistic production.

This is an attitude if you like, that seeks to acknowledge, and indeed find benefit in the *modus operandi* of contradiction. In an age where travel has never before been so fluid and possible, we find ourselves limited by fear and government paranoia. In an age where the banality of popular reality television can ignite and expose cultural prejudice as experienced by Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty on Big Brother UK ; in an age where economic growth of the global economy is at an all time high and yet we are faced with reckless management of the sustainability of limited water supply and thousands left dying in pain in Africa due to pharmaceutical bureaucracy; in an age where communication exchange over the internet has enabled a new economic-savvy generation at the cost of a dwindling respect for the traditional art of writing – the spaces in which such contradiction arises is a reality that the Long March Project seeks to engage and take advantage. Such an attitude necessitates the revival of a historical consciousness, a re-awakening of the past in order to better understand a potential future; it seeks to find and illustrate how various social and economic systems of knowledge can be adapted to local needs in order to create a better understanding of the context and purpose of human production, believing it is through culture and our visual economy that such contradiction or difference can be confronted in an effort to broaden

society's understanding and seeming acceptance of a given praxis of existence.

The Long March Project is very conscious of the international shift in thinking in these last few years regarding concepts of 'post-coloniality' and the discussion of contemporary art. Though ideas and relationships concerning the terms East and West; Occident and Orient; Empire and colonialism hold a particular and important moment in history, and while acknowledging their influence and affect on particular situations of certain contexts, today the stereotypical implication of such terms overlooks the spheres of human existence that move in and between so many different narratives.

The artistic experiment of the ongoing Long March Project consider it vital that binary oppositions of East/West; centre/periphery; mono-culturalism vs. multiculturalism, paradigms central to the Orientalist prism discussing the operation of cultural difference, be artistically and conceptually challenged, to further engage with current contexts of cultural capital and its systematic relationship to ideas of trade and societal exchange. It is by drawing artists' to respond to the current global circulation of cultural knowledge and symbolic capital that social relations become further highlighted, exposed and challenged.

The current paradoxical and intertwined relationship between art, market, culture, politics and social agency are all relevant and empowering precepts to which artists today respond. This complex web of relationships is consciously activating and participating in a global economy that recognises the potential of multiplicity, rather than responding or reacting to oppositional identity politics.

A discussion of difference today is not just about an expression of cultural origin, a popular discussion point of exclusion in the historical power relations between 'East and West', the notion of difference can be considered a repetitive process of re-arrival, a continuous journey of self reformulation based on lived experience, where an identification with place or space is intimately bound.

So just who and what is the Long March Project?

The Long March Project was initiated in 1999 by artist, curator, writer Lu Jie. He spent 3 years undertaking research in China and abroad before the Long March Project was given birth in 2002. Determined to find a way in which knowledge concerning history and culture could be more broadly and artistically engaged and made relevant and accessible to a broader society, he wrote a 90 page curatorial precise that explored China's Revolutionary Long March of 1934-36 as a framework, methodology and departure point for further discussion.

At each of the sites that comprised this monumental journey of Mao Zedong and his Red Guard, who marched through the countryside of rural China**,** Lu Jie proposed to hold artistic activities that engaged

with historical events pertinent to each revolutionary site, presenting artistic material from China and abroad, that challenged social, cultural, political and economic assumption of social memory and lived experience.

This research came to physical fruition in the first project undertaken in 2002, titled 'A Walking Visual Display', co-curated with artist Qiu Zhijie, and involved the re-tracing of this historical 6000 mile journey, re-visiting important revolutionary sites and working with local communities in conjunction with over 250 artists, writers, theorists, curators and scholars, from China and abroad. On this journey new works were realized, discussions were debated and documented, and history was re-visited, challenged and provoked. Taking place in public parks and community halls; private living rooms and official government offices; involving lively discussion concerning the ideological legacy of the Cultural Revolution and the comparative study of the birth of communism in China, Russia and Cuba….

Performance, painting, photography, drawing, installation, poetry readings, sculpture, video, film screenings, forums, symposia and much much more took place and was vigorously documented, with press releases and online diaries being updated and launched while on the road. Artists from overseas flew in from far-flung corners of the world to engage with local communities whose definition and understanding of what we consider to be 'contemporary', what we consider to be 'art' was challenged and debated.

After 3 months, and having completed only half of the desired journey, the Long March team returned to Beijing where Lu Jie formed 'Long March Space' which continues to support an ongoing exploration by 'Long Marchers' across various geographies, discussing ideas of revolutionary memory in a local context, and collaborating with participants from around the world to reinterpret historical consciousness and develop new ways of perceiving political, social, economical, and cultural realities.

The Long March Project can be considered a complex, multi-platform, international arts organization and ongoing art project, that can be simultaneously considered a curatorial lab; a publishing house; an artistic collection; a meeting place; a gallery space; a consultancy; a commissioning and production atelier, artistic facilitator, and author. From a critical distance, all of these avenues of production aim to provocatively construct, and in turn renew, presumed action and thinking concerning 'contemporary art'.

The ongoing journey of the Long March Project can be conceived as:

- a process of movement through space, time, or thought without a fixed beginning or end, involving multiple transformations
- a methodology which stresses adaptation to local and temporal circumstances, focused on artistic,

social and educative activities that are designed to interrogate contemporary visual economies

an artistic intervention, operating on a national and international platform, in collaboration with artists and an increasing range of public, private and independent arts organizations and individuals.

The Long March Project seeks to move beyond the presumed language of difference and alterity, transforming a linear past through shared motivations in an eventual unfolding of divisive boundaries — a process empowered by understanding the power of art to communicate. It is hoped the sharing of contextual specificities of artistic production will engage ideas, and project new avenues, for the development of new methodologies of existence.

This is, if you like, a new Long March of self-discovery, with no fixed or desirable conclusion. Marching through various sites across the world, on a pathway of engaged and collaborative creative expression, this collaborative journey seeks to nudge and nurture cultural specificity, empowering the voice of the local through an opening of awareness in its resonance with a larger global collective. It is an explorative experiment that desires a different text and terminology for the practice of living that does not fall into the easy trap of oppositional politics, but rather embraces the multiplicity of human experience.

As Jacques Ranciere points out 'All these oppositions – looking/knowing, looking/acting, appearance/reality, activity/passivity – are much more than logical oppositions. They are … a partition of the sensible, a distribution of places and of the capacities or incapacities attached to those places. Put in other terms, they are allegories of inequality. This is why you can change the values given to each position without changing the meaning of the oppositions themselves…..The positions can be switched, but the structure remains the same…Emancipation starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that 'interpreting the world' is already a means of transforming it, or reconfiguring it.' (p.277 'Emancipation of the Spectactor' Art Forum, March 07.

Ranciere's acknowledgement of how values can be changed without changing the meaning of the oppositions themselves goes to the heart of the Long March purpose – to amend, confront, and expose how mis-readings and assumptions can become values that enforce, support or hinder the meaning of action and community.

In 2005, the Long March Project began 'Chinatown', an ongoing series of site-specific artistic activities that engage with the varied parameters of purpose and function of this stereotypical space as a global

phenomenon - be it socially activated, culturally imagined or economically driven, while also examining the anxiety and dislocation inherent within the history of these geographical sites.

The emergence of large Chinese communities in cities outside China was largely due to historical trade links and opportunistic individuals seeking personal fortune during the gold-rush years (particularly in Melbourne and San Francisco) from the late 1700s on. These urban areas were originally shunned as ethnic ghettos by non-Chinese, where migrants, mainly men, lived and worked. Predominantly populated by those of the Chinese diaspora, these early communities were deemed areas of cultural insularity and thus not looked upon favourably for their foreign habit and custom. They were also areas characterized by prostitution and crime. These areas had little to no civil planning and grew in tandem with the influx of predominantly Chinese immigrants, often beside other established migrant communities such as the phenomenon of 'Little Italy' in the US.

Yokohama's Chinatown in Japan is one of the oldest in the world and dates back to the Ming Dynasty established in 1871, when Yokohama's sea port was opened up to foreign trade. It was first populated with Chinese schools and community centers, whose growth moved in conjunction with the political links between the two countries. The Chinese community first relying on their three knives (hair-clippers, chef's knife, and tailor's scissors), and today it has flourished into a well developed and independent economic culture and social system. In the late 19th Century, England employed large numbers of Chinese in their merchant marine (as direct benefit from seizing power of Hong Kong and Shanghai in the 1840s) and so began the movement of Chinese labour from the mainland to the UK. Closer to where we sit today, in Liverpool in 1868, Alfred Holt established the first steamship link to China, building on the success of trade in silk and cotton, and thus a local Chinese community began to thrive in what is now considered the most established Chinese community in Europe. Boarding houses were the first businesses initiated, who offered travelling seaman a taste of home where they could speak their own language in a country where their customs were unfamiliar. This population later suffered the repatriation policies of the late 1940s, after WWII, when English shipping companies realised they could not compete with their US competitors and thus dropped seaman's wages to such an extent that these men could not feed their children born to English wives...and were thus forced to return to China. I convey this historical detail by way of presenting the narrative of arrival and departure inherent in the formation of these geographical sites, but also to re-introduce the vital consideration of context in the generation of meaning in the 'local'. The presence of 'nostalgia', and the mingling of familiar custom with strategies of survival is intimately linked to the experience of migration.

How does lived experience, informed by cultural custom, deconstruct or distinguish the idea of the 'local' - an experience in relation to, or characterisation of, a certain place. How is this particular space defined for the individual and his/her acknowledgement of a collective cultural memory? How is this space

identified and given meaning in the 'ordinary'?

The experience of Chinatown across the world today is invariably described by its 'paifeng' gates, annual Chinese celebrations and food, Chinese medicine and grocery stores where delights from not just China, but its geographical neighbours of Thailand, Vietnam, Japan and Korea, amongst others, can also be found - these are of course but a few, albeit stereotypically expected operations.

This 'Chinatown' project seeks to re-engage the production of meaning in visual culture. Confronting such statements, as 'This is just another made in China project that is selling Chinese symbols' is just one of many mis-readings referred in the construct of a Chinatown that is intimately bound up in nationalist and colonial critique. It is exactly these types of narrow understandings that the Chinatown project is interested in addressing. The narrative set forth by the globalization of Chinatown is about the repetition of return and departure, and how each process is invariably linked to a searching of the self outside a familiar setting.. We are always re-arriving, but in different forms.

Though the title 'Chinatown' conjures particular stereotypical images of architecture, custom and purpose, for this ongoing project, artist's have engaged with the idea of appropriation of cultural habit; the desire and ambition to defy the odds, to succeed in an ideal (which was the dream that so many immigrants brought with them in the initial creation of these physical sites); to challenge the supposed exclusivity of one context from another; to engage with the local community, to document their perception of a Chinatown, through a contemporary art event, but also as a social exercise. It is a project that seeks to trouble the association of value within a given visual system. It is a project that acknowledges how what comes to be can then be re-evaluated, re-appropriated, embraced, subverted or rejected. But it is also an investigation that begins with the local and the context of each site in the realization of cultural capital.

The project began with an emphasis on the term 'Chinatown' as a misnomer, in order to artistically open up theoretical and practical spaces of thought about cultural identification and social practice, It announced the following:

1. Chinatown is not an exhibition of Chinese art
2. Chinatown is not a topic assignment
3. Chinatown is not "made in China"
4. Chinatown is not a symbol of China
5. Chinatown is not nationalism
6. Chinatown is not post-colonialism

7. Chinatown is not differentiation
8. Chinatown is not about sociology
9. Chinatown is not an ethnographic turn
10. Chinatown is not the combination of theory and practice

For the 2005 Yokohama Triennale, in Yokohama, Japan, Chinese artists Xu Zhen and Gang Zhao were two of six artists to participate in the initation of the 'Long March Project – Chinatown'.

In Xu Zhen's installation '8848-1.86', the familiar instruments of a hunting expedition for extreme sub-zero temperatures were scattered across the space. Pick-axes, thermal garments, measuring devices, tents, documentary maps and notebooks were the evidential objects of an ambitious journey, displayed alongside a documentary video and photographs depicting 3 figures that appear to have triumphantly succeeded in their quest – but just what is this supposed quest? When did it take place and why?

8848 is the publicly acknowledged height of the world's tallest mountain – Mt. Everest. In 2006 the Chinese government sent 10 Chinese survey experts and mountaineers to re-assess the prior reading of the Chinese expedition of 1975 (this is an annual expedition and 2005 was the first expedition to return with a change in reading). In Xu Zhen's work, we witness his 'team' saw off 1.86 meters (the height of Xu Zhen) from the summit of this mountain, carrying back this lump of rock to the exhibition floor.

Audiences may rightfully wonder if what they are looking at is real. Xu Zhen wants his viewers to feel perplexed in determining the difference between the artist's expedition to cut off 1.86 meters for the sake of art; and the recent team who used the newest technical equipment to re-measure the altitude of Everest. This work queries motivation and our understanding of truth, it is an expedition that leaves the viewer doubtful of the merit of the task, calling into question ethics of standard, scientific progress, the meaning of political borders regarding the continuing cultural conflict between Tibet and China relations, all of these questions are integral to the supposition of value in the 'Long March – Chinatown' project. Xu Zhen's work points to the ridiculousness of people's belief in 'facts' and 'universal truths' by demanding his viewers think on how facts are discovered, communicated and distributed. This work 'ridicules' humankind's quest for 'height' (which metaphorically insinuates power and ambition) in an overturning and disruption of preconceived social and historical perception through a humorous illusion of mythic proportion.

'The Harlem School of New Social Realism' was initiated by Chinese artist, Gang Zhao, in 2002, beginning as a casual discussion around his dinner table in Harlem, with Satch Hoyt, Franklin Sirmans, Deborah Grant, Lilly Wei, Brett Cook-Dizney and Jeff Sonhouse (artists, writers of black African descent or affiliation), regarding the possibility of a New Social Realism, debating the facts and philosophical

similarities surrounding the genesis, influences and motivations of revolutionary acts in Chinese and African American society, and the broader global arena. Documentation of this kitchen discussion was projected in the warehouse-like space of the Yokohama Triennial, the energy and personal conviction witnessed in this at-times heated debate calling to mind the theoretical similarities encountered by the historical Long March and the broader international arena of revolutionary actions by such figures as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. It also illustrates the importance of questioning the effects of mobilising a cultural community and the negotiated spaces of engagement afforded by this local encounter between disparate cultural practices – a fundamental characteristic of the development of the Chinatown phenomenon across the world today.

These encounters which pose the meeting of local, international, private, public, clandestine and transparent acts were also experiences of the historical Long Marchers, and it is also a battle that today's Long March Project confronts. This informal gathering in Gang Zhao's home ultimately ends without drawn conclusions, it is a documented ongoing discussion that seeks to seed further recognition of shared histories in understanding why revolutionary acts occur; it is a continuing discussion that acknowledges an inherent failure in idealism, while at the same time understanding its empowering of social change. This continuing project takes place in another country (America), displayed in another country (Japan); facilitated by another country (China) and soon it will begin its second chapter in New York in 2 weeks time at The Studio Museum in Harlem with prominent members of the African American, Chinese and international artistic communities.

This movement of discussion and participants is emblematic of the historical development of the Chinatown phenomenon. This discussion of a utopian ideal in considering a new social realism was selected for the 'Chinatown' project as it demonstrates the reality of globalization and its push for a universal standard, that despite the increase in contact and interaction between and across cultural communities, there will always be social practice and custom particular to an ethnic identification that gives rise to contradictions that cannot be overcome.

In March 2007, the 'Chinatown' project moved to Auckland, New Zealand where it took place as part of the 3rd Auckland Triennial, collaborating with local New Zealand artists Daniel Malone and Kah Bee Chow. This time the catch-cry for the project was titled 'NO Chinatown? Or NO Chinatown!', in response to the curious absence of this cultural phenomenon in a city whose Asian communities make up 36% of the city's over 4 million people.

'NO Chinatown' took place after extensive research was undertaken regarding the history of movement between China and New Zealand, while also undertaking several site-visits to ascertain the legitimacy of indeed asking the question why there is such an absence of a geographical site, which was so unlike the

existence of these "centres" of Asian culture across the world. In New Zealand, Asian people are those who identify with or feel they belong to one or more Asian ethnicities. The largest being Chinese, followed by Indian, Korean, Filipino, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Cambodian and Thai.

One particular aspect of this event in New Zealand that I would like to talk about is the 'NO Chinatown' survey - Should Auckland have a Chinatown? Does Auckland in fact already have many Chinatown(s)? What indeed constitutes a Chinatown or any (Self) determined cultural identification with place?

While attending the Chinese lantern festival in March 2007, with well over 200,000 of Auckland city's population, the entire evening festivities were conducted in Mandarin, with no other language offered as translation. It was at this event, that the 'NO Chinatown' survey began with the erection of a marquee emblazoned with a 'NO Chinatown' banner, where Long March Project volunteers handed out questionnaires engaging the public's opinion of the concept of a 'Chinatown'. The following is an example of some of the 13 questions asked:

Do you feel that Auckland needs a Chinatown?

(Yes / No / Not sure)

Why or Why Not?

What do you think is the most convincing reason for building a Chinatown in Auckland?

a. Promoting trade
b. Promoting tourism
c. Promoting Cultural Diversity
d. Revitalizing Auckland City
e. No Benefit
f. It will have a negative benefit

Have you ever been to or visited a Chinatown? (Yes/No)

What would be the main reason for you go to a Chinatown? (circle all that apply)

a. Culture and tradition
b. Shops and restaurants
c. Authentic Chinese food
d. Vibrant, dynamic atmosphere
e. Would not go

Completed questionnaires were placed on display at Auckland's Artspace as part of the Auckland Triennial, alongside Long March banners that were to be used for a public march down Auckland's Queen Street. These questions raised a flurry of mixed responses. Results at times articulated a lament of this lack of a cultural community; others proposed the need for action; while some gave voice to a confusion regarding the need for such an over-determination of site in relation to cultural identification. Some people were antagonistic, some were in support of such a centre for tourist opportunities and in general the project catalysed an intriguing amount of popular attention on air and television.

The interpretation of the local can be an experience of what i have today characterised as a 'contradiction', a subjective acknowledgement of the 'facts' as placed in front of our conditioned eyes, eyes which nostalgically call to mind a memory of another time, another place which is inherently linked to that moment we first set foot in the world, this root is carried with us as a seed that grows and thrives, adapting and changing with its journey across cultural and psychological parameters of survival that is inherently bound up in the result of movement across space that results in experiences of dislocation, alienation and anxiety which are then over time reflected and historicized as part of human experience and turned into something sentimental or nostalgic. The power of this dislocation lies in its contradiction or the denial of a perceived reality which in turn catalyses a new method of negotiation of space in the local – the exchange of stories, opinion, habit is grounded in the experience of a particular space and context where difference is but a perception that enables or offers a broader understanding of the present.

This is a world whose push for a 'universal cultural value' presents confidence through familiarity – universal road signs; international chain stores; websites offering multi-lingual accessibility; creation of the European Union; international banking systems and much more – the projection of difference in this age of mobility and accessibility, though never separate from our cultural root, now takes on a much more subtle and at times sinister character.

As Ghassan Hage writes, 'The global aestheticised city is … made beautiful to attract others rather than to make its local occupants feel at home within it. Thus even the government's commitment to city space stops being a commitment to society. This global urban aesthetic comes with an authoritarian spatiality specific to it. More so than any of its predecessors, the global city has no room for marginals. How are we to rid ourselves of the homeless sleeping on the city's benches? How are we to rid ourselves of those under-classes, with their high proportion of indigenous people, third world looking (ie, yucky looking) migrants and descendants of migrants, still cramming the non-gentrified parts of the city?'

The Long March Project believes it is by acknowledging and engaging with this systemic reality of

contradiction, by understanding the knowledge structures at work, by attempting to intervene with this power play that conceives of difference, be it social, economic, religious or cultural, that new ways of perceiving the local, of re-inventing self identity are discovered, and in turn the nurturing of the imagination of the individual can take place and thus be empowered to act.

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