

Presentation For 'The Curating The Other' Research Seminar

My name is Rebecca Weeks I'm an artist and a curator and I'm based in Penzance in Cornwall.

I began researching China and quickly became interested by the conflicting messages on the internet about China. On one hand there were many sites advocating buying antique and contemporary art as good investments, and positive reports about the laissez faire attitude of the Chinese Government which seemed to suggest it is now hard to provoke the government but alongside these articles I found a report from PEN the international organisation that campaigns for the freedom of speech around the world that described a conference that took place in Hong Kong in February that many Chinese writers were too afraid to attend or were prevented from attending.

As a result of these conflicting messages about China my research for this seminar has come to focus upon the process of negotiation within China, around questions of what is accepted by the government and what is not, and of trying to understand why something is acceptable or not.

Sergio gave me the contact details for an artist called Ma Yongfeng. Ma is currently in the UK doing a residency at Artsway. I began a dialogue with Ma last week explaining my involvement with this seminar and asking him if he would be so kind as to exchange emails about the experience of being a Chinese artist so that I could gain a better insight into the relationship of contemporary art to the Chinese government. He was kind enough to agree. Through exchanging emails with Ma I soon realised that it is not as simple as to say there is a real problem in China with the freedom of speech and with human rights violations, issues which one should address in some way. I specifically asked Ma about his piece titled 'The Swirl' a video piece, in which five live Koi carp are filmed as they are swirled around a washing machine. This unsettling sight is a commentary by Ma on the loss of ancient Chinese culture symbolised by the carp, and about the relentless mechanistic indifferent progress of globalisation. I asked Ma if he has shown this in China and how the work sits with government attitudes. I'll read you a section of the email he sent back;

"As to freedom of speech sometimes is really a real issue, sometimes not, it depends on the extent what you are saying, you know I mean communist government want the economic power to be a intangible hand to control everyone's life, sometimes to be live is very important for people, so the government takes advantage of this situation to cover up the dark side.

actually they don't care or support contemporary art, this is not the critical thing for them, sometimes there are no censorship unless your work of art is very political at first sight.

but they do have a serious censorship on film. to tell you the truth you can really see the profile of chinese contemporary art in the west and china as you like except the radical works.

I have showed my work *The Swirl* in china and west many times, in china few people care about the relationship to politics, maybe people is becoming number and number, but in a money-oriented country who care about it?

if you have got money you can do any cool show in china, they are doing it, cos many rich people have invested in chinese contemporary art, maybe it is a kind of herd mentality or blind speculation, who knows what?"

Ma's email left me with further questions like why do the government censor film, and not other art forms unless the work is overtly radical, is it because they think there is a much wider audience for film than say performance art? Do they think that it doesn't really matter what the contemporary artists are doing because relatively few people are involved. Ma's email gave me a sense that people are weary of politics and are transitioning to a far less politicized relationship to everything, this doesn't mean that the government see things less politically possibly more that they have realized the lure of the possibility of wealth is a good enough bribe to ensure complicity in most people who have lost faith in politics.

Conclusion: All of this has lead me to think that if I were to curate a show in China I would curate a show around these questions of what is acceptable and what is not and around the negotiation process. I would show works that are permitted and maybe the proposals for works that were not allowed or have been censored along the lines of le salon de la refuse in post impressionist france, perhaps I would even display my curatorial negotiation process. I would try to address the cultural boundaries in China in some way that would give myself and others some insight into Chinese contemporary culture.