

Institution: University of Chester
Unit of Assessment: 34: Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
Title of case study: ‘Crescendo’ – exploring propaganda film productions from Chinese state cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Described as ‘heroic’ by Louise Clements (Artistic Director of QUAD, Derby), Dinu Li’s very personal work has been seen as influential in the context of the development of political and economic change in China and the adoption of western contemporary art values. This year-long research project explored propaganda film productions from Chinese state cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s, with particular focus on themes of peasant uprising. Crescendo was the result of collaboration between Li and a group of villagers who had lost their homes to a road development – they feared corruption and were angry at the lack of compensation and the disregard to their human rights. Over the course of several clandestine meetings, a video art installation was created, with the villagers’ participation. The work was considered too politically challenging for Shenzhen OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT Shenzhen), the host institution, and this underlined the tension between reaching out to a contemporary democratic participatory art process and the values of the current political regime in China.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Since 2007, Li has been developing a trilogy of works interrogating the cultural developments in contemporary China, with a particular focus in the way culture is manifested in the everyday. A simple framework was conceptualised as a point of departure from which to develop the trilogy. To begin, he used the word ‘country’ as written in Chinese as a starting point, followed by an exploration into the meanings of the word. Previous research which was influential in the creation of ‘Crescendo’ include ‘The Mother of All Journeys’ in 2007 and ‘Family Village’ in 2009. These were followed by ‘Crescendo’ in 2010, which has been exhibited at a number of venues, including QUAD, the centre for art and film in Derby, in July 2010, and at PHotoEspaña, Madrid, in 2013.</p> <p>Li has been a Lecturer at the University of Chester since November 2009. ‘Crescendo’ developed out of his three-month residency during 2009 in Shenzhen, Southern China, funded by OCAT. As a Chinese state sponsored museum and art space, OCAT has a remit to engage with art and art practitioners from around the world, to promote cross cultural exchanges and interactions. In doing so, OCAT hopes such encounters encourages debate and discourses to further understand cultural values from a national and international perspective. http://www.newmuseum.org/artspaces/view/oct-contemporary-art-terminal-1.</p> <p>With this in mind, OCAT’s invitation to UK artist Li on a three-month residency matched its agenda to reach out and make links with the international art community. As a British educated and trained artist, one of Li’s main influences within his own multimedia practice stems from European painters of the 17th century, in particular that of the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. Li was able to discuss his practice and how he manages to make reference to key figures in Western painting as inspiration for his own work; he was also able to initiate a discourse about the value of appreciating historical and cultural contexts beyond one’s immediate surroundings and times. This linked with Li’s own research into his family roots in China, their displacement and memory of revolution.</p> <p>‘Crescendo’ interrogates the relationship between state-funded propaganda and self-initiated protest. The research project was conceived in response to a meeting with a group of Chinese people who were commemorating the loss of their village to a road development. The villagers, who were aged in their mid-fifties to mid-eighties, were angry about the loss of their homes, the fact no compensation was forthcoming, and the lack of consideration of their human rights. They also felt they were victims of corruption.</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

By consent, and over the course of several clandestine meetings, a flash mob-style intervention in a public space was developed and agreed with the group of villagers, who were participants in the event.

Split into two parts, 'Crescendo' is a single screen video installation, depicting ordinary citizens alongside the artist, confronting the issue of corruption within the confines of Shenzhen's busy underground metro. Preceding this, the video unfolds with a sequence of freeze-framed images from several popular Chinese state propaganda movies from the 1950s and 1960s, distilled at the very moments of the peasant uprisings.

Oscillating between risk and defiance, rationality and absurdity, the resulting work is a performance-based video exploring the significance of distance in terms of time and space, and the social and political perspectives defining our cultural landscape within the context of the times we live in.

The work has been referred to in the context of western contemporary art values and the development of political and economic change in China. With reference to the exhibition of 'Crescendo' in 2010 at the Chalk Horse Art Centre, Sydney, curator Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya wrote:

"...It is about how Asia is perceived and constructed, both from within and from the outside. It is about the contemporary challenges we are facing, although these challenges are not unique to Asia. It is about the identity of multiple realities and about the reality of multiple and complex identities. [...] Dinu Li addresses the problem of Asia with a more direct strategy, through a video performance denouncing corruption, put in context with the inclusion of archival images from Chinese propaganda films."

<http://greycubehk.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/leaflet-chalk-horse-the-problem-of-asia2.pdf>

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

'Crescendo' has been submitted in REF2. Exhibitions include:

- 2010 – Yesterday is History, Tomorrow is Mystery (solo exhibition and publication, 'Dinu Li / Selected Works / 2009-10')
QUAD, Derby: <http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/yesterday-history-tomorrow-mystery-dinu-li>
Curated by Louise Clements and Alfredo Cramerotti
- 2010 – The Problem of Asia (group exhibition)
Chalk Horse Art Centre, Sydney, Australia:
<http://www.chalkhorse.com.au/exhibition.php?e=2010-04-29&q=1&y=2010>
<http://www.para-site.org.hk/en/exhibitions/2010/problem-asia>
Curated by Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya
- 2010-2011 – Public Discourse Sphere: Aftereffects of Neo-liberalism (group exhibition and publication)
Alternative Space LOOP, Seoul, South Korea:
<http://www.aaa.org.hk/worldevents/details/16959>
- 2011 – Peripheries (group exhibition)
Piccadilly Place, Manchester: <http://www.peripheries.co.uk/journeys/dinu-li/>
- 2013 – Private Faces Public (group exhibition)
PHotoEspaña 13 at the IED Madrid:
<http://www.ied.edu/madrid/blog/photospana-2013-at-the-ied-madrid-private-faces-public/5747>
<https://vimeo.com/71562087>
Curated by Moritz Neumüller

Key funding:
 (2009) OCAT Shenzhen, China: £4,000 residency grant
 (2010) QUAD, Derby: £5,500 production, exhibition and publication budget

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

'Crescendo' documents a single performance held inside a metro train in Shenzhen, Southern China. The performance was acted out by 25 participants aged from their mid-fifties to mid-eighties and was filmed by Neno Belchev, a Bulgarian artist who was one of the other international resident artists hosted by OCAT. Supporting documentation in the form of stills photography was captured by Hong Kong-based arts journalist Phoebe Wong.

During the three-month residency in China, the 25 participants engaged in contemporary art practice for the first time in their lives. They were able to share their unique experiences with approximately 250 family, friends and colleagues. During the live performance, fellow passengers of the metro directly engaged with the work, and were confronted with the difficult but often unspoken issue of corruption. Responses from the 60 passengers varied from those who stared in surprise, to those who had been so disturbed or shocked that they ran to another carriage. Others joined in, shouting about the problems of corruption, while some complained about the public disturbances.

The completion of 'Crescendo' was initially met with a degree of predicament by OCAT. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, which deals with the problems of corruption, and the fact OCAT is Chinese state-funded, their initial reaction was understandable. As a result of this, OCAT declined to show the work in China. However, as time went by, OCAT saw the value and strength of the work and by the time the work was published in the form of a DVD, the organisation showed their endorsement by allowing their logo to be included in all publicity materials associated with the work and DVD.

Once the project had gained recognition within the UK's cultural sector, 'Crescendo' was eventually co-commissioned by QUAD, a public gallery institution in Derby. This development enabled the footage and archive materials to be edited into a seven-minute video, and a soundtrack for the work to be added.

The subsequent launch exhibition at QUAD lasted six weeks and was visited by 1,500 people from all walks of life. This included students from the University of Derby, local residents of Derby, art enthusiasts from across the UK, and specialist arts professionals – including curators, gallery directors, writers and artists. The accompanying publication was produced with a print run of 1,000 copies, 300 of which were posted by QUAD to their national and international contacts within the cultural sector. The remaining copies were sold during the six-week exhibition to gallery visitors.

As a result of completing this ambitious research and the subsequent exhibition in Derby, Li was invited to exhibit 'Crescendo' at other national and international exhibition venues, which benefited a much wider community. It has been disseminated in public institutional galleries around the world, including PHotoEspaña13 in Madrid (2,000 visitors), Piccadilly Place in Manchester (500 visitors), Alternative Space Loop in Seoul (1,500 visitors), and the Chalk Horse Art Centre in Sydney (1,500 visitors).

Published comments on 'Crescendo' include:

"In his new work 'Crescendo', Li explores dissent and engages people literally in anonymous exposure of corruption. Conceived as a flash mob style intervention in a public space, Li supports a group of individuals to participate in an act of momentary heresy. In a place where opportunities are scarce, competition is high, materialism is fashionable and individualism is a treacherous endeavour, this is a heroic act."

Louise Clements, Artistic Director, QUAD, Derby
 Preface text, Dinu Li / Selected Works / 2009-2010

“In inserting himself into the performance as one of the players in his film, Li fulfils a need to be on the inside in an act of identification. His family fell victim to the Communist victory in China in 1949. Split at the outset of the People’s Republic of China, family members dispersed into two separate, difficult worlds. One, the harsh struggle of ‘starting again’, as his father left for Hong Kong where you had to work your way up from scratch, a thankless labour with few rewards (and later to England). The other, a world of political exile, semi-imprisonment, and punishment for having material possessions and personal ‘wealth’ or simply property, cast as ‘landlord class’. Li’s mother’s home was destroyed; his aunt suffered from her position as a head teacher, a cousin was sent to Hainan, a wild island off the south coast, where there was little habitation. The hidden site, then, of the expanse of grey tarmac on the road outside Guangzhou, where homes or lives were destroyed or severely disrupted, provides a link to the site of Li’s unknown family home. Forcibly removed and obliterated at an earlier moment in history, within the lifetime of his parents, the family state of being was shattered and changed irrevocably. In a twist of historical fate, different histories emerged.”

Dr Katie Hill, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Chinese Art, University of Westminster, London
Text from: Crescendo (2010) Dinu Li’s film-performance-event on Shenzhen’s metro, Dinu Li / Selected Works / 2009-2010

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. The curator of the ‘Private Faces Public’ exhibition at PHotoEspaña 13 at the IED Madrid may be contacted to corroborate the cultural impact of ‘Crescendo’.
2. The impact on public understanding and engagement with the politics of the work can be corroborated by contacting the Artistic Director of QUAD, Derby.
3. The impact of the work within the current Chinese art context can be corroborated by contacting the Director of the Office of Contemporary Chinese Art, Oxford.