

## Everyday Miracles

**Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, Kan Xuan, Cao Fei**

Four Woman Artists in the Chinese Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2007

Curator: **Hou Hanru**

Venue:

Chinese Pavilion

Arsenale and Vergini Gardens

The rapid development of contemporary art in China and its suddenly major impact on the international art scene have been as spectacular and significant as the modernisation and global emergence of China itself. First-tier Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are increasingly attracting the attention of the international art world, while Chinese artists are now an indispensable presence at major international events such as the Venice Biennale. The presence of the Chinese Pavilion in the Biennale, despite its brief history, has become a necessary element of this event, while its influences on the Chinese art community are equally significant.

A project for a national pavilion in the Biennale should be a relevant reflection on the current tendency of the development of the art world in a given nation. More importantly, it should be able to answer to some of the most urgent questions raised from the ongoing reality of that particular society, or more precisely, the negotiation between individual creators and their social context, offering insightful visions. At the same time, a national pavilion is also a particular, specific but open platform to contribute to the enrichment of the global art scene itself. The artists present should be able to carry out relevant projects to implement such a dynamic but often complex, double-bind mission.

After examining carefully the general situation of today's Chinese art scene and the specific context of the 52nd Biennale, we would like to focus the Chinese Pavilion on the work of four female artists, a project which seems to us both urgent and valuable in both the Chinese and international contexts. They are **Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, Kan Xuan** and **Cao Fei**. Ranging in age from mid-forties to late twenties, and with highly personal, original and diverse languages, they exemplify in particular ways the evolution of the engaging relationship between female artists and the Chinese art scene, and speak to the claims of women on the rapidly changing Chinese society of the last two decades.

While it is true that Chinese contemporary art, like contemporary Chinese society and culture more generally, has been going through a booming development. However, both inside and outside of China, the passion for Chinese contemporary art often overlooks the particular importance of woman artists as well as intellectual and social issues related to the situation of women's particular roles in China's contemporary life. China's modernisation process has rested upon a highly masculine vision of the world: rational, linear, speedy, vertical, progressive, efficient and utopian. Typical images can be found in the spectacular urban expansion full of skyscrapers and hyper-scale infrastructures of transportation... More seriously, the main social organisation remains essentially male-centric. And this tendency has been increasingly enforced by a reality that systematically pursues material growth. The contemporary art scene in China today embodies a similar vision celebrating the spectacular, the sublime and the powerful. This leads not only to a clearly visible economic and cultural "progress", but also causes some problematic concerns regarding social harmony. In terms of cultural and artistic production, the obsession with quantity and material efficiency considerably reduce the space for real imagination and poetry, as well as psychological life. It is no surprise that the presence of woman artists, with their particular modalities of

imagination, expression and action, is largely marginalised. However, without simply falling into the cliché of feminism, a significant number of woman artists have been creating some of the most sensitive, profound and innovative works, although they are often discreet and somehow marginalised. In fact their work often shows the most authentically creative and spiritually liberated aspects of the Chinese art scene today. This distant position and intellectual freedom allow them to acquire the most independent individuality and adopt the most original strategies of negotiation with the outside world.

In fact, globally, the question of women's creative contribution to the restructuring of today's artistic, cultural, social, economic and political reality is becoming a centre of attention today. However, the presence of woman artists in the "mainstream" of the international art world is still relatively insufficient. This reality urges us to reconsider the very mandate of the Pavilion itself. It's time to make it into a break-through and an exemplary case for both the Chinese and international art worlds to reconsider their inquiries of imagination, values and meaning production. **Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, Kan Xuan** and **Cao Fei** are certainly amongst the most remarkable figures in Chinese and global art scenes of our time. Their presence in the Chinese Pavilion, as this year's "representatives" of the Chinese art community, can clearly emphasize the urgency and importance of such a value shift. Grouping them temporarily under the banner of the Pavilion can foster the promotion of their particular roles and innovative voices, which should be equally influential as the male ones, in today's creative community. In the meantime, the significant context of the Chinese Pavilion, both culturally and physically, provides perfect conditions for the artists to explore and express their formal imagination and social commitment.

For the Pavilion, **Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, Kan Xuan** and **Cao Fei** are working on new and site-specific projects. Residents of different cities in China and abroad, and born and raised in four very special periods of recent history, they have developed and adopted very different artistic and intellectual positions and approaches. Based on these diverse experiences, they will produce highly personal but complementary installations to form a common project in the pavilion spaces, the petrol warehouse (Cisterne Building) and the garden (Vergini Garden). At the same time, they share a kind of common female sensational, intellectual and spiritual instinct: they are all deeply interested in contemplating and grasping everyday life as the starting point of their work. Shen Yuan, living in Paris and working internationally since 1990, focuses her concerns on the relationship between non-Western female identity and cultural conflicts embodied in bodily, linguistic and culinary differences. Yin Xiuzhen, born and based in Beijing, obsessively resorts to everyday objects such as clothing and textiles to construct testimonies to the mutation of the city and its impacts on her personal, familiar and social life in the process of China's integration into the global economy and power system. Kan Xuan, living between China and Europe for the last years, chooses to concentrate her energy on building up a sphere of solitude around herself and on turning that particular state of being into a spiritual and transcendent yet beautiful image flux in her video installations. Cao Fei, the youngest member of the group, opens herself to embrace the fresh, exciting and increasingly globalised lifestyles of the urban youth at the turn of the millennium, navigating through electronic entertainment, pop culture, virtual reality and adventurous urban drifting, etc. and turning these into multimedia and trans-disciplinary expressions. At the end, in spite of the apparent differences of their experiences in dealing with the everyday, these four artists have a remarkably common talent: they always manage to transform everyday objects and experiences into miraculously innovative and affecting pieces of art. In other words, they turn the everyday into the miraculous.

## The artists and their projects.

**Shen Yuan**, born in Fujian in 1959, was involved with the first period of China's Avant-Garde movement in the 1980s. Living in France today, she frequently travels between Europe and China to develop her work. This continuously migrating position, embodying the new identity of a "glocal" citizen, provides her with an incredibly open and singular vision that decisively influences her artistic creation. Her work, dealing with the destiny of non-western immigrant in the time of globalisation from a female perspective, has enjoyed high appreciation in international art circles. She has shown in major institutions such as Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, INIVA, London and at events like Liverpool Biennial, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Guangzhou Triennial.

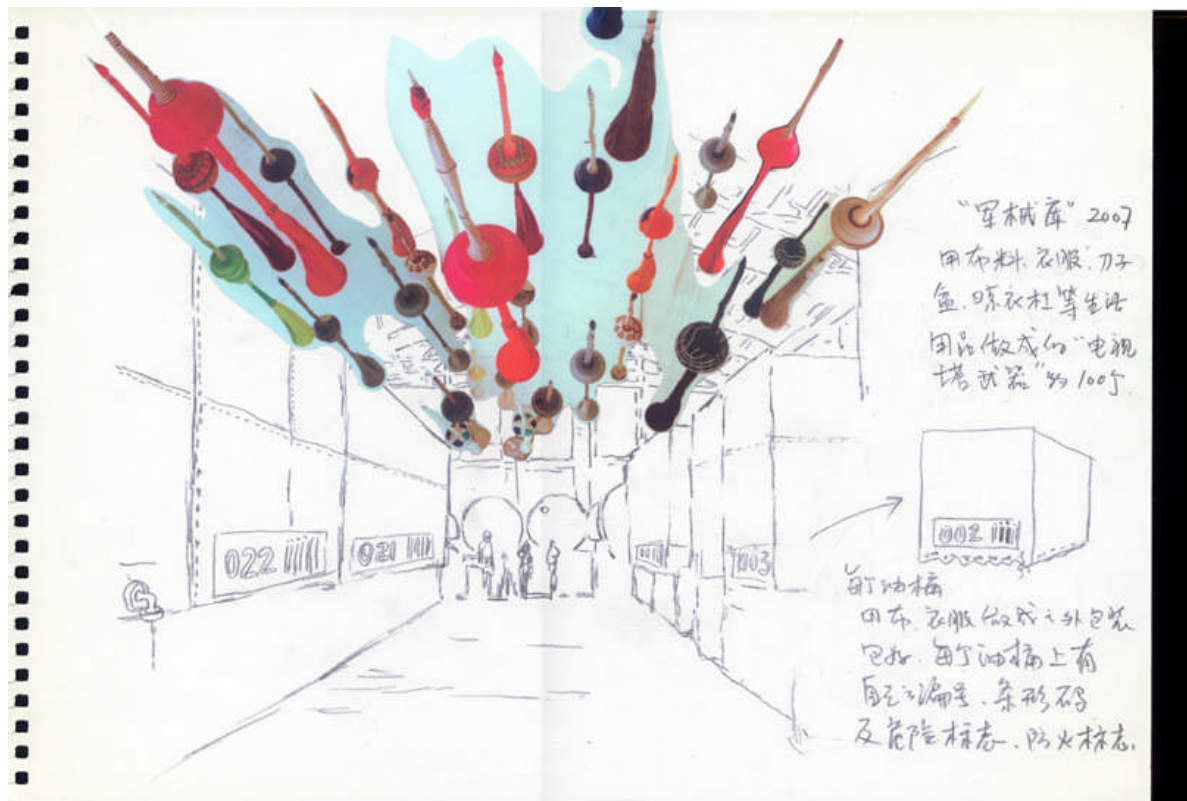
For the Chinese Pavilion, Shen Yuan proposes to create a new installation in the Virgini Garden entitled "le Première Voyage". Consisting of enlarged milk bottles and nipples and a video showing documentaries of the first trips made by adopted children to the West, she explores an increasingly frequent phenomenon in the age of global communication and migration. The artist states: "As a woman and an immigrant artist, I feel this issue is closely related to my own life. I'm concerned with the future of these children. Although they may be able to grow up in a comfortable environment, they would still have to face the question of cultural and racial difference and the difficulty of losing their real parents in the future."



Shen Yuan: "le Première Voyage", project for installation, 2007

**Yin Xiuzhen** was born in 1963 in Beijing, beginning her contemporary art career in the early 1990s. She engages with the mutation of Chinese society through her indefatigable negotiation between testifying explosive urbanisation and conservation of intimate memory, between experiences of cultural change in the time of global travel and determined search for consistent identity, she has developed an impressive body of installation work both in China and outside. She has participated in important events like Asia Pacific Triennial, 1999, the 26<sup>th</sup> Sao Paulo Biennale, 2004, Sydney Biennial, 2004 and numerous international museum exhibitions.

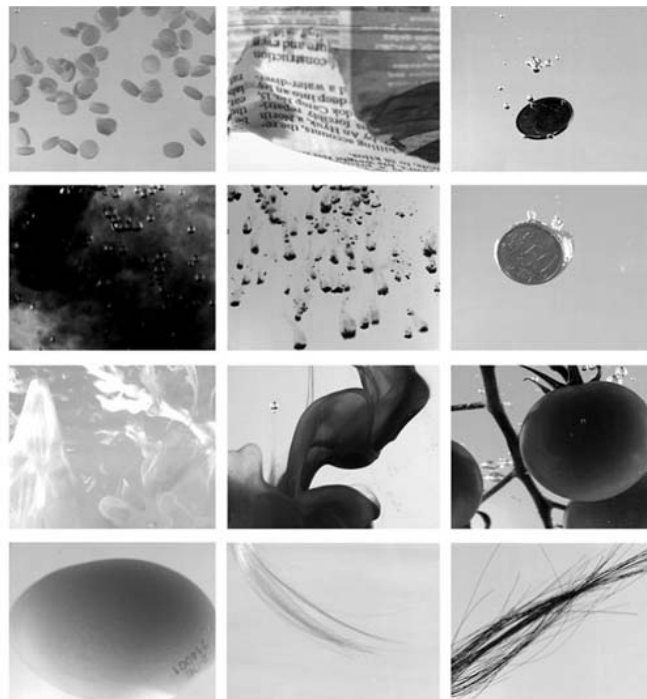
Conceived her project for the Chinese Pavilion in a site-specific manner, she names her work “Arsenal” after the site. She intervenes in the petrol warehouse (Cisterne Building) with over 100 pieces of “Weapon of TV Tower” to create a real “Armoury”. Entirely made of everyday objects like clothes, textile, plates and knives, etc., these “weapons” are hung like a mass of missiles above the overwhelming petrol containers which are covered with textiles printed with code bars and signs of danger. They form a threatening scenario evoking the current reality of excessive urbanisation, economic development and geopolitical conflict. The strong contrast between the feminine, sensitive, soft and poetic texture of the clothes and textile and the masculine, phallic-centric and sublime forms of the TV towers-turned-weapons creates a surprising and imposing drama, expressing a powerful but silent outcry against the prevailing violence that is menacing our world.



Yin Xiuzhen “Arsenal”, project for installation, 2007

**Kan Xuan**, born in 1972 in Anhui, is an independent and unique personality in the Chinese art scene. Living and working today between Beijing and Amsterdam, she systematically utilises video as the main tool to express her personal, poetic fantasy and philosophical reflections on the relationship between life and the world. Her language always draws on brief, minimalist and ephemeral but highly spiritual gestures and images. Her transcendent attitude, inspired by Zen spirituality, has produced some of the most radical expressions of absolute beauty. She has been exhibiting widely in both China and beyond, including the 2<sup>nd</sup> Guangzhou Triennial, 2004-2006, Havana Biennale 2006, etc.

Using the venue of the Petrol Warehouse (Cistern Building) in a radically discreet way, Kan Xuan shows a selection of her most significant video works on flat screen monitors and projections. Starting with “Kan Xuan! –Ai!”, this series includes “Countdown”, “A Persimmon”, “Object”, “Garbage”, “100 Times”, “A Happy Girl” and “Or Everything!” In it, she constructs a kind of labyrinth of light and sound that entices the visitors to enter a mysterious world in which one is surprised by alchemical moments of gazes on the everyday, from the most banal objects to nothingness... At the end of the tunnel, one would encounter a kind of enlightenment, like facing a “Kong An (公案)”!



*Kan Xuan: “Object” (video), 2003*

**Cao Fei**, born in Guangdong, in 1978, is the youngest but the most versatile in the group. Working with video, photography, performance, experimental theatre, documentary and fictional films, writing and other media, she vividly express the intense experiences of a young generation of Chinese urban youth navigating the wave of modernisation, urbanisation and globalisation. With an incredibly fresh but vigilant sense of humour, she examines and makes visible the very realities and dreams of this generation in various contexts from work to play, from suffering to happiness. Today, she garners a great deal of admiration from the international professionals in the art world. She has been presented in Venice Biennale 2003, 2<sup>nd</sup> Guangzhou Triennial and Sydney Biennale 2006.

Thousands of youngsters are deeply addicted to the virtual world created on the internet. The immensely popular online game “Second Life” ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) provides them with a “3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents”. It offers “a truly collaborative, immersive and open-ended entertainment experience, where together people create and inhabit a virtual world of their own design.” In this new world, all people are the nation’s “inhabitants”, there are no “countries” or “regions”, but only a digital world generated by imagination and creativity. Naming her avatar China Tracy, Cao Fei is building up an on-line project for the Chinese Pavilion to carry out an adventure into this virtual world that is exerting crucial influence on our perception of the real and thus considerably modifying our social relationships. Creating a China Tracy Pavilion on the website, Cao Fei will construct a platform for dialogue and exchange open to everyone. Venturing into this imminent future, this project will definitely bring the Chinese Pavilion itself to a much more global perspective.



*Cao Fei “China Tracy”, internet and installation project, 2007*

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Curator: Hou Hanru  
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