

WORDS AND IMAGES: LEUNG PING-KWAN AND LEE KA-SING

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Poet Leung Ping-kwan and photographer and graphic designer Lee Ka-sing have been friends for many years and have long had an artistic dialogue. A few years ago they decided to create a collaborative work, with Leung providing the poems and Lee producing the accompanying images. This was not a simple case of images following words as in conventional illustration, however. The poems and images arose together in the course of a close working relationship, and are given equal weight, being published or exhibited in linked pairs. The title of the project is Foodscape, since its subject matter is food, drink, and the social occasions at which they are consumed, and works which resulted from the collaboration were shown in Vancouver in 1997 and Hong Kong in 1998. A catalogue, also titled Foodscape, was published in 1997 by The Original Photograph Club, Hong Kong. The project continues, more recent works showing a fascination with Macau as the moment of its return to Chinese sovereignty approaches. Given Foodscape's juxtaposition of the verbal and the visual, I have chosen to introduce it by means of a broader consideration of the relation between words and images.

Images in subordination to words

Between the Renaissance and the middle of the C19th, the dominant role of images in Western art was a story-telling one. Preexisting religious, mythological or historical narratives, for instance, provided the basis for some of the best known paintings of Raphael, Poussin or David. A widely employed Latin phrase, *ut pictura poesis*, emphasized the similarity which was felt to exist between poetry and painting.

Images attempting to escape from words

One of the first people to seriously undermine this analogy between the poetic and the visual was the C18th writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In his *Laocoon, On the Limitations of Painting and Poetry* (1766) he emphasized the difference between spatial and temporal arts forms. Verbal narrative was regarded as an example of the latter, whilst only the former could really be addressed to the eye. Story-telling was seen as inappropriate to the spatial all-at-onceness of images.

In painting, as opposed to aesthetic theory, the breakdown of art's narrative function (and hence its subordination to words) can be seen in the work of Manet. Although later artists, such as Monet, produced images which showed less concern with the narrative function than Manet, he produced works which were more radical in their effect because one is able to observe narrative failing in

them. Narrative expectations are raised by works such as *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-3), yet not fulfilled. One is left with a frozen moment which cannot be explained away by reference to some prior narrative totality: the spatial triumphs over the temporal.

Certain tendencies in C20th art seem motivated by the desire to escape subordination to the literary. Artists often attempted to communicate through more directly visual means, asserting in this way the autonomy of the visual. Form and colour were more visible now as form and colour, and some even sought a holy grail of `purely` visual art, an art which appeals to the eye alone. Critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried encouraged artists in this direction.

Words in images

Although story-telling was now much less common, words did not altogether disappear from art in the modern period. The Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque, for instance, frequently contained words. Instead of standing `behind` images, words now entered them, but as objects subject to visual manipulation, a much less exalted role. Indeed, words in Cubist paintings were often subject to fragmentation, a further undermining of their power.

The presence of words within Lee Ka-sing's images is best understood as a continuation of the practice which the Cubists introduced. Like them he sometimes uses words as a way of making a contemporary or popular reference. Words, and indeed images, are often taken by Lee from pre-existing sources, and whilst this practice of open borrowing is frequently referred to as `postmodern` it can already be found in the Cubist technique of collage, which enabled Picasso and Braque to introduce a double-voiced quality into their art.

Images that allude to words

As well as introducing words into his images, Lee has also been known to invoke them obliquely. He has on occasion introduced a five-pointed star into his images (for example *Star* of 1995 and *Hello, Hong Kong* of 1989), and whilst this has an obvious public meaning as a Chinese communist emblem, in his case it also has a private reference too, recalling the last character of his personal name, which has the same sound in Cantonese as the Chinese character for `star`. This sound resemblance doesn't really work so well in Putonghua, the official Chinese national dialect, and so it functions as a local Hong Kong reference as well. The Cubists were not averse to making puns, either: a fragment of a newspaper masthead in a still-life, for instance, might also read as the French word for `game`. But this punning with images seems somewhat different, and to my mind can only be understood by reference to specifically Chinese traditions.

At Chinese New Year, for example, it is common to encounter objects (or images of objects) whose names sound similar to something auspicious.

Whilst such visual/verbal puns are entirely conventional, there is also more inventive play in the same vein. The students in Beijing, for instance, after the suppression of the 1989 Democracy Movement, vented their frustration by throwing small bottles from their dormitory windows. These *xiao ping* recalled the given name of the Chinese patriarch, Deng.

Various other Hong Kong artists, in addition to Lee, have produced works which rely on playful visual/verbal associations for a part, at least, of their meaning. Mak Hin-yeung's *Bible From Happy Valley* (1992), for instance, is a sculpture of a horse with an open book across its back. The title refers to a racecourse, and hence to betting, but in both Cantonese and Putonghua the verb used to describe losing at gambling has exactly the same sound as the word 'book'. The open book might resemble a pair of wings, enabling the horse to fly to the finish of the race, but since it is made of lead, this horse is unlikely to make good speed. Kith Tsang's *Guong Guen* (1998) is a sculptural work assembled from found objects which illustrates a Cantonese slang phrase. Since non-Cantonese speakers (including those fluent in standard Chinese) will find both the Chinese and the romanized title of the work difficult to decipher, word play in this case serves to give a consciously local meaning to the work.

Images juxtaposed with words.

In recent decades the quest for a purely visual art has been abandoned, and one consequence of this has been a renewed possibility of dialogue between art and literature, but on different terms from before. Now visual art was more sure of its autonomy, and was unwilling to play a subservient role. Even when illustrating a pre-existing text, visual artists of this time have often been unwilling to follow it in a direct way: the etchings David Hockney produced to accompany Grimm fairy tales (1970), for instance, sometimes involve inventive departures from the stories themselves.

One influential model for a renewed dialogue between visual and other art forms was the *Untitled Event* held at Black Mountain College in 1952 by John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and others. This performance brought together Rauschenberg's paintings with sound, movement, and poetry, but each element was completely independent. Performers were merely given a 'score' with 'time brackets', and had freedom to decide how to fill it out. None knew in advance what each other's contribution would be, the different elements being juxtaposed for the first time in the performance itself.

Much collaboration since between visual artists and practitioners of other art forms has taken this form of juxtaposition. Anything, nowadays, can be placed

next to anything, without a hierarchical relation existing between the various elements. What was a transgressive use of chance and a rejection of rigid imposed structure or form in *Untitled Event* can sometimes now become a mere lazy avoidance of the question of structure or relationship instead.

The relationship between Leung Ping-kwan's poems and Lee Ka-sing's images avoids this kind of lazy juxtaposition. In the 1997 *Foodscape* catalogue, for instance, Lee's image *Portrait of a Chopboard* makes clear attention to the same subject as the accompanying poem *Onion*, even if it chooses to explore it in a different way. This poem and image pair have a greater degree of parallel than any other in the book, since the words of the poem have been disposed on the page to recall in their visual arrangement the form of an onion. Some of the words of the poem reappear within *Portrait of a Chopboard* as well, and Lee seems to have chosen those which, although they come from a meditation on an onion, could refer just as well to his method of making images through the overlap of disparate forms: the phrase 'one layer on top of another' is repeated several times.

Leung's poem discusses the activity of peeling an onion, but the inclusion of a typical Chinese wooden chopboard in Lee's image is a reference to an alternative way of gaining access to an onion's interior. As well as recalling the poem's subject in this oblique or indexical way, the circular board also has a visual resemblance to an onion that has been subjected to the process of chopping. The grain of the wood on the chopboard (echoed by a series of circles layered on top which resemble a diagram of planetary orbits) recalls the rings visible in a sliced onion. In a more private reference, the chopboard also recalls the poet, and not just his poem's subject: it is related to an earlier image which Lee used on a namecard that he designed for Leung.

In *Onion* Leung has chosen a rather prosaic, everyday object, and the poem reads as a defence of poetic involvement with the concrete world of commonplace experience (even though it can bring tears to your eyes). At the beginning of the poem an undefined 'they' are attacking onions for lacking any essence or substance. Since onions are also accused of being too Western (the first character of the Chinese term for onion implies a foreign or Western origin), 'they' may be imagined as guardians of highbrow Chinese culture fearful that its core is under threat of erosion by foreign or lowbrow influences. Such a reading is confirmed by the end of the poem where 'they' are defined more clearly as wearing robes, sipping tea and solving lantern riddles. A literati gathering is evoked, and the inclusion in Lee's image of figures in classical Chinese dress may have been inspired by these lines.

The issue of cultural purity alluded to in *Onion* is also to be found in *Tea-coffee*. Tea, emblematic of Chinese culture, is juxtaposed here with coffee, a 'Western' or imported drink with no traditional associations. The question of cultural meeting, and of whether anything good can come from it, is addressed through a

consideration of a drink made from mixing the two. Since such a drink is popular in Hong Kong, the poem is an oblique meditation on the hybridity, yet specificity, of Hong Kong culture. The inclusion of the name of a particular restaurant in Lee's accompanying illustration (*Discussing the relations between the sexes in Tan Dao Coffee Shop*) similarly introduces a local reference, and the juxtaposition of both Chinese and English text, and of both Chinese and Western images, can be said to offer an echo of the poem's concerns.

Since many of Lee's other works have also brought together explicitly Western and explicitly Chinese images it may be wrong to stress this last point. Perhaps poems such as *Onion* and *Tea-coffee* are best seen as meta-discursive statements in defence of a particular pre-existing cultural practice shared by the artist and the poet (rather than just instances of that practice). Both operate within and accept as positive the culturally-plural situation of Hong Kong, eschewing a national or traditionalistic essentialism and exploiting any available hybrid mix as long as it 'tastes right' (the food metaphor is quite helpful here). Although each is equally distant from authorized or inherited Chinese modes, in some ways hybridity is more openly visible in Lee's work than Leung's, which have less of an obvious 'tea-coffee' quality about them. Leung's *Images of Hong Kong* (which dates from before the *Foodscape* collaboration, and is published in *City at the End of Time*, Twilight Books, Hong Kong, 1992) is an exception to this generalization, *being* a poem in which he does openly 'collage' different voices, but this work is a conscious response to an earlier image of Lee's (*Hello, Hong Kong*) where disparate objects and images are brought together in a manner which is reminiscent of collage. Although Lee's images are responding to Leung's poems (albeit more obliquely than pre-modern illustrations would), the reverse is also true. In the collaboration of Lee and Leung, words and images are discovering a new reciprocity.

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