

A SENSE OF PLACE: CHAN CHI-LING AND WONG WO-BIK IN CONVERSATION WITH DAVID CLARKE (1996)

The following interview took place at the time of Annie Chan and Wong Wo-bik's exhibition A Sense of Place, held between December 1988 and January 1989 in the Department of Fine Arts, H.K.U..

DC: The works in your exhibition are unusual in that they are designed to be shown in a particular place, and at the same time they are about that place. Furthermore, some of them were (at least in part) even made in that place. Perhaps, then, we should start by talking about the site itself, the room in which the exhibition is being held. How did you become attracted to this location?

WWB: It began when I came to see the David Hockney show. I couldn't help noticing the sink. It is so big, and it sits there right in the middle of the wall. It seemed so out of place. I talked to Annie, and she felt the same thing.

DC: Can you explain a little more? Just because the sink looked out of place in the room, why did that inspire you with the idea of having an exhibition there?

WWB: Well, it is very unusual. Firstly, it is so big. It's unlike a normal one - for washing hands or whatever - it looks more like what you might find in a photographic area. Usually a sink in a room is not as important as this one - it's just placed in the corner. No one will notice it until they find it necessary to use it.

DC: When an exhibition is going on in that room it stands out as the only thing in the room which is not a work of art. Some artists who have shows there go out of their way to hide it for that reason. Of course, when the room is being used for its normal function - when teaching is going on in there, when it's full of tables and chairs - it just fades into the background. One of the interesting things about the room is that it has many different functions: As well as being an exhibition space it's also a classroom, and a corridor for access to rooms off the balcony beyond it.

WWB: The room always looks so much bigger when it has an exhibition going on. But now, when it's filled with chairs and tables and everything, it looks so different.

DC: So you were inspired by the room as it looked whilst it was playing its role as exhibition space. But while you've been working on the show, the room has been a teaching space.

WWB: Annie and I have the idea of moving all the chairs and tables away, to clear everything away, except the sink, of course.

DC: During the exhibition? Or do you mean before that time, as part of your preparation?

WWB: We plan to move the tables and chairs away for a while, maybe a day or two, so that we can take some kind of collaborative pictures together.

DC: I'm still not sure that I understand what your original idea was, but perhaps you could explain further by saying how that idea changed and developed during the process of working on the exhibit.

WWB: Annie started making some paintings about the room, and in particular the windows (plate 8). I was interested in photographing the effect of light on furniture. Then we moved outside the room, and even went to other parts of the campus to take pictures.

DC: So the room itself became less important as you continued working?

WWB: Yes, but it remained a point of reference. We always have to refer back to it.

DC: Annie, what first interested you in the room?

CCL: I started working for the exhibition by drawing pictures of the window. We always came to use the room in the afternoon. At that time the light was just sitting on the window and it was really very beautiful.

DC: So it was something of an accident that you became interested in those particular light effects? It just happened to be that the only time you could get to use the room was when the light was beginning to fade away.

CCL: I usually wasn't able to get to the room before 4 p.m., and I would have to be finished by 5 p.m. when evening classes began there.

DC: Students also using the space to make art!

WWB: Sometimes we used the room on a Saturday or a Sunday as well.

DC: When the whole building is empty.

WWB: Not exactly!

DC: Of Course! Many people from the general public come in to take photographs. And there are other sorts of art activity taking place as well: I've seen people sketching and even shooting movies in the building.

CCL: We became fascinated by the shadow and the light, by the windows and the

doors - and by the high ceiling. Then we started moving out of the room, becoming interested in the columns and the stairs.

DC: Were you always interested in the same things about the room, or did you develop different interests?

CCL: Are you asking whether we have been working together or not?

DC: Yes.

CCL: We always work together. When one of us has an idea, she shows her work to the other. We compare our work and exchange ideas.

DC: Can you give some examples of the way in which your separate work has become interwoven?

CCL: For example, Wo-bik will take a lot of pictures and I will use these as reference material for my paintings. I need to look at photographs as a guideline, as reference materials that can help me to remember how the room looks.

DC: You've started using photographs not just as reference material, but as part of your paintings.

CCL: Yes, and I've started to take my own pictures.

DC: So, just to clear up something: The photographs that are used in your own painting are ones you took yourself.

CCL: Yes, they're not Wo-bik's photographs. I will take a photographic image, then Xerox it, enlarge it or try to distort it in various different ways. They may have different exposure times or may be developed differently. I've never used photographic images in my work before, so I must have been influenced by Wo-bik.

WWB: She could be a very good photographer.

DC: Wo-bik, besides straightforward photography, what kind of work have you been doing?

WWB: I started doing mixed-media work. That is, using a variety of techniques (fig. 31).

DC: What techniques did you end up using?

WWB: Well, some very old processes: Cyanotype (sometimes called 'Blue Print') and Van Dyke (sometimes referred to as 'Brown Print').

DC: Could you explain something of the technical detail?

WWB: All these processes begin with a first generation negative. By that I mean the first photograph I took. Afterwards, I change the photograph or the original negative to a second generation negative, that is, a high contrast graphic arts film (such as Kodalith or Sakuralith). This is just black and white, or rather black and transparent. On the lith film I can add line drawings or other kinds of marks. Then I contact it on a piece of paper or cloth coated with the blue print or brown print chemicals. After contacting it, I then put it under the sun, so this can be called a kind of sun printing process. At this stage I am free to add further marks, and of course they can now be of any colour. The paper might be ordinary water colour paper or print-making paper, not the usual kind of photographic paper.

DC: Annie, perhaps you can say something about the techniques or materials you used in your work?

CCL: Well, I tend to work from small to bigger sizes in my work. I use enamel paint and mix this with oil and acrylic - which is water based - as well. I also use cattle markers - these are like oil crayons, but in a bigger tube.

DC: Are they really used by farmers to mark cattle?

CCL: That is their original use, yes. They are water proof and oil based. I use enamel paint because it gives a more shiny surface than acrylic. With acrylic I sometimes use those colours which have a metallic look. I use a lot of mediums - including pencil - any kind of medium that I can get.

DC: Including photography.

CCL: And also Xerox images. I glue the photographs onto the painting's surface and paint on top of the photographs. Layers and layers of paint and images.

DC: I know that this use of a multiplicity of mediums is something that has occurred in your work before, so there is a continuity in that. Is there however any area you would like to emphasize in which - perhaps because of the nature of the project - we can see noticeable differences from your earlier work?

CCL: I think there's a big change in subject matter. I worked in a very abstract way in my previous exhibitions. Colour has changed as well: Compared to my last show, the colours in this one are not bright. There's a very different mood. I'm using a lot more black than before. Sometimes the whole wall will be black, and the floor as well. It might not look like a room at all. I wanted to dramatize it, to convey my sense of it rather than how it actually looked.

DC: You're expressing your feeling about the place rather than describing what it

looks like. Did you learn anything from the way in which other artists have dealt with interior space?

CCL: I think I was influenced first by Beuys and Kiefer, and then by Jennifer Bartlett - by the way she mixed mediums. She did over two hundred drawings on the subject of swimming pools and that helped me realize that someone can take one subject and really concentrate on it. This is what we want to do. I looked at a lot of architectural spaces as well.

DC: Do you mean architectural diagrams?

CCL: Not diagrams, but sketches, a lot of architectural sketches and a lot of photographs.

DC: Wo-Bik, can I ask you a similar question to the one that I asked Annie? Are there any photographers that have been particularly important as an inspiration for your own work?

WWB: I like Eugene Smith - his image impact - and Joel Meyerowitz - his sense of place. I also admire Cartier-Bresson for his ability to find the right moment to press the button, and William Larson for his unconventional and innovative approach to photography.

DC: Finally can I ask you to say a little about why you asked Sabrina Fung to contribute some taped music for the show?

CCL: A little while back Sabrina contributed some music to a mixed-media event that was being held in Hong Kong, so we thought she would be the most suitable person to involve in the project. She often plays the music of John Cage who is a composer well known for his close involvement with visual artists.

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