

To Rebel is Justified:

Performing a bridge between reality and fiction

Text by Milly Alexandra Dery



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *To Rebel is Justified* (detail) 2013. Photo : Ou Chang

For her first exhibition at MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels), Chun Hua Catherine Dong offers a new body of work. Rooted for the most part in performance, her practice is part of a contemporary artistic movement that questions and redefines feminist and identity issues of our time. Catherine Dong's work offers a reflection on subjective experience and explores how humans are shaped by the social and cultural forces around them.

Alternating between performance, video and photography, Dong's work interweaves historical references and identity stereotypes. The artist questions the relationships between power, the individual, collective memory and resistance. In the exhibition *To Rebel is Justified*, the Chinese-born artist adopts a famous slogan used by the Red Guard to re-examine certain sociopolitical events in modern China.

Produced in China, this photographic series, takes us back to one of the country's historic moments. Personified by Catherine Dong, the protagonist is a fantasized representation of the Red Guard, an iconic figure of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Employing the strategies of reappropriation and subversion, Dong reuses various symbols and markers of Chinese identity and history to high-

light the hierarchies of power, the performativity of identity and the relationship between the individual's private and social spheres. In this case, the distortion of costume and gesture transforms the image of the guard zealously defending the revolution into a kind of caricature of himself, the embodiment of absurd devotion and servitude performed to an extreme. Indeed, harsh living conditions and the promises of the revolution led many young men to commit themselves body and soul to the Maoist enterprise. In this personal vision of the Red Guard position, the artist reverses the roles, and the executioner becomes the victim. This scene seems to accentuate a perspective often neglected; Mao's executors were also the instruments of an ideology of which they could not fully grasp the implications and consequences. This special unit, mainly composed of young university and high school students, fought fervently to protect the ideals of the revolution: the annihilation of China's "old society" and the establishment of a "new society." These revolutionary ideologies quickly became embodied in the affiliation of an individual to different economic and social classes, and led to a dark period of persecutions and massacres. To date, the event remains traumatic for its loss of human life, the failure of ideology and the rejection of traditional Chinese culture and values that were both sacred and millennial. The images in the series show several similarities. The character, in a submissive posture, stares at the camera with a neutral expression on her face. The scene instinctively recalls the suffering and powerlessness of those who were labeled enemies of the revolution during Mao's regime.

In personifying the Red Guard, the artist's body becomes the primary medium and the true locus of various forms of violence and humiliation. Nudity, submissive and disconcerting, prevents the viewer from looking away from all these images that recall certain



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *To Rebel is Justified* (detail) 2013. Photo : Ou Chang

facts of history that we try hard to forget. The nude body, revealer of identity, shows the sensitive and vulnerable human being hiding under the military uniform. In doing so, the body introduces a personal dimension to a largely collective and dehumanizing political enterprise. In other words, the materiality of unveiled flesh seems bring the individual back to the forefront. Through her art, Catherine Dong has an equal effect on the physical senses and on the intellect.

The video work *The Yellow Umbrella – An Unfinished Conversation* is the recording of a poetic performance inspired by pro-democracy demonstrations that took place in Hong Kong last fall. The metaphorical reconstruction of this event, commonly called the "Umbrella Revolution," is embodied in a performance choreographed by Catherine Dong. With near perfect synchronization, twelve young women execute a series of movements that undeniably remind us of a form of military exercise. Paradoxical



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *The Yellow Umbrella* (detail) 2015. Photo : Laurence Potier

attitudes, such as waiting, rebelling and submitting, are palpable. As a result, the artist offers two reconstructions in the gallery space, one of the past and one of the present, demonstrating how these two temporalities are connected in the Chinese reality, like an ongoing conversation.

Openly criticizing the behaviour of the authorities, ridiculing important historical figures and using provocative nudity are all taboo in China and face censorship. To this day, the Chinese authorities tend to alter or delete certain historical events from the public record, and the Chinese people have a complex and divided relationship with the past and the legacy of communism. Catherine Dong's themes find expression in the works of many of her contemporaries who are currently well-established on the international

scene. Since the end of the Maoist regime, many artists, through performance or conceptual photography, stand in opposition to the discourse of the Chinese government by proposing a new version of the past or a re-investigation of the collective memory¹. From the perspective of cultural studies, the work of Chun Hua Catherine Dong gives a second wind to those whom the dominant model has left behind. Through artistic exploration, she shines light on themes that are suppressed in official discourse and historical narrative.

Translated from French by Christopher Campbell.



Chun Hua Catherine Dong, The Yellow Umbrella (detail) 2015. Photo : Laurence Poirier

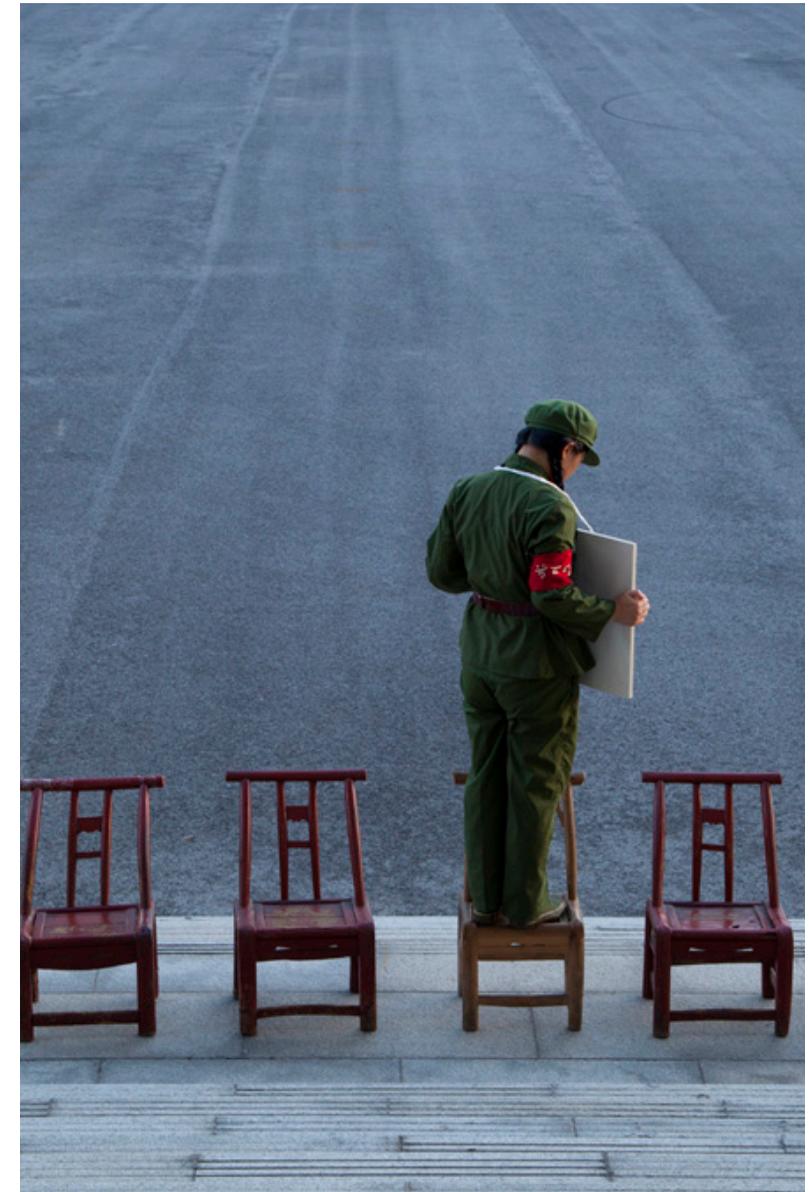
Chun Hua Catherine Dong is a Chinese-born artist working with performance art, photography, and video. She received a B.F.A from Emily Carr University Art & Design and a M.F.A. from Concordia University in Canada. She has performed in multiple international performance art festivals and venues, such as Dublin Live Art Festival, Infr'Action Venice, ENCUESTRO 2014, Grace Exhibition Space in Brooklyn, Kaunas Biennial in Lithuania, INTERNATIONALES FESTIVAL FÜR PERFORMANCE in Mannheim, Place des Arts in Montreal, M: ST Performance Festival in Calgary, Visualeyez Performance Festival in Edmonton, and so on. She has exhibited her works in North America, Europe, and Asia. Among many other awards, she is the recipient of the Franklin Furnace Award for avant-garde art in New York in 2014.

Milly Alexandra Dery is an Art History master's candidate at the University of Montreal. Her current research focuses on the challenges and the representation of space constructed in the photographic image.

Chun Hua Catherine Dong

To Rebel is Justified

February 14 - March 21, 2015



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¹ HA THUC, Caroline (2014) L'art contemporain en Chine depuis 2000, Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Scala, p.66.