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## Mo Yi: An Ethnographer in Contemporary Chinese Art

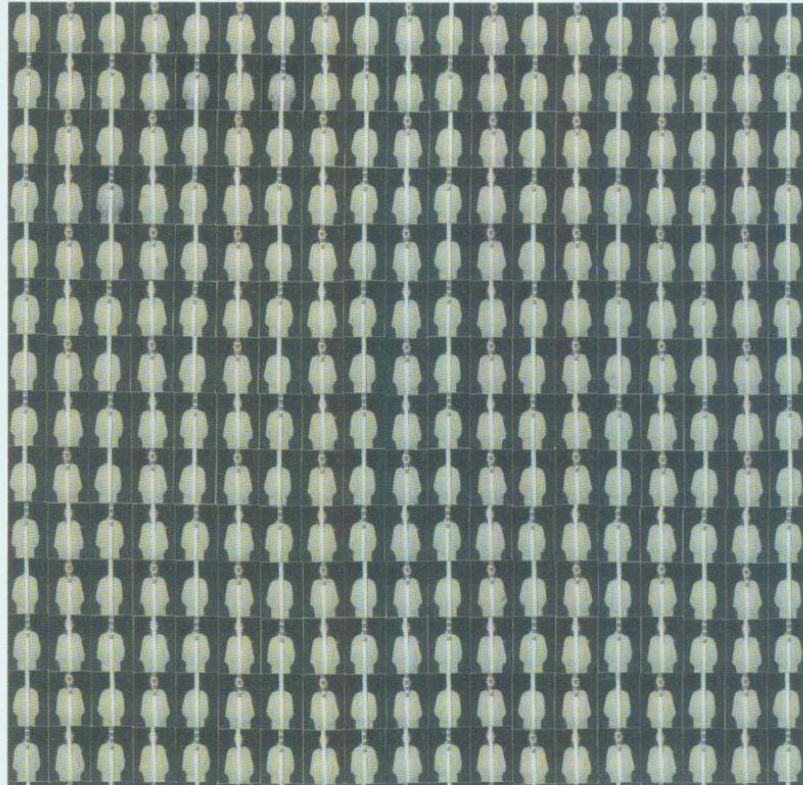
Wu Hung

The world of contemporary Chinese art is full of glittering, self-congratulating celebrities who compete with one another over the sale price of their works at Sotheby's auctions and who find as much joy in their new cars as in their art. Should Mo Yi ever appear among them (a hypothetical situation that I have never witnessed), he would be seen as a total oddity. Appearing older than his real age (he was born in 1958), he has a haggard face with an earnest expression. He is nearly bald, and his once long and dark beard has become sparse and greyish. He strikes one as a person who sleeps little and cares little about his appearance, and he could easily be mistaken for a migrant rural worker in Beijing or Tianjin (where he lives). I have never heard him praise his own work, although I have been seeing him almost every summer for the past seven years. Usually he travels to Beijing to pay me a visit. He calls from the Beijing train station before showing up at my door with rolls of photos tucked under his arm (he only recently acquired a computer). He unrolls the photos one by one, offering explanations now and then in a low, tentative voice. This may be his way of inviting suggestions and criticism—the purpose of his visits. I always find myself talking more than I usually do on such occasions, especially because I am equally interested in his ideas and projects, which differ considerably from what one sees in popular art magazines.

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In an interview with me, Mo Yi identified himself as “basically a Tibetan,” although neither of his parents are Tibetan and he was not born in Tibet. When his mother was about to give birth to him, she was travelling in a truck that fell into a gorge. Most of the passengers died, but she (and he) survived. During the Cultural Revolution his parents both worked in Lhasa. When he was fifteen, he was recruited by the soccer team of the Tibet Autonomous Region. He played professional soccer on and off for twelve years (from 1973 to 1985), first representing Tibet and then the city of Tianjin. In 1982, he became fascinated with photography and travelled around Tibet to take pictures with a “blockhead camera” (*shagua xiangji*—the Chinese term for a simple automatic camera). Around the same time, he also tried to enter college, but this goal proved to be only a fantasy for a person who never even finished junior high school. When he retired from professional soccer, he asked to work “anywhere that needed a photographer.” He was assigned such a job in one of Tianjin’s children’s hospitals.

Neither in my interview with him nor in his writing does Mo Yi show a strong interest in politics. His involvement in politics has been intuitive and emotional. To show his support for the June Fourth student demonstrations in 1989, for example, he designed and staged a “performance,” marching on Tianjin’s streets as a mourner holding a funerary banner. On his white robe he wrote a couplet: “Laughing, I mourn for the death of the feudal system. / Crying, I am greeting the birth of democracy.” He also wrote two large characters on the banner: *Qu ye*, or, “It’s gone!” Mo Yi explains: “What is gone is my earlier blind faith [in the Party], and so I am laughing. I also cry because it is so difficult for democracy to arrive.” A big crowd gathered around him, cheering and taking pictures. This performance made him a household name in Tianjin but also one of the “ten big criminal cases” (*shi da an*) handed over to the city’s police department after the crackdown on



Mo Yi, *Front and Back: Memory of June 4*, from *Memory of 1989* series, 1997, colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Walsh Gallery, Chicago.

the movement. Mo Yi lost his job, was under house arrest for several years, and in 1997—when I first met him—was still living in fear.

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By Mo Yi's own account, his involvement in the June Fourth movement was largely an accident, but his interest in society has stayed at the centre of his art. In particular he has been fascinated by the city—not a city's architecture but its "expression" (*biaoqing*), which he finds on people's faces and in their clothes, movements, and living spaces. This fascination has also led him to question the accuracy of photography in documenting reality. His 1988 project *Expression of the Street* was an experiment in which he tried to free photography from the photographer's subjectivity:

In an exhibition in 1987 I showed a series of photos called *City Dwellers*. Afterwards many viewers wrote to me blaming me for photographing people only at "detached, lonely, and suspicious" moments. These comments made me wonder whether I had psychological problems—whether the world was actually fine and everyone was happy, but my "sick eyes" selected only those "false and distressed" scenes. I was scared by such thoughts and decided to undertake an experiment, separating the camera lens from my gaze and employing the camera only as a mechanical instrument for recording. My method was to tie the camera behind my neck or to hang it behind my waist. Using an extension cord I took a picture every five steps when walking on the street. I wanted to see what people and their city look like when they were not selected by my eyes.<sup>2</sup>

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This experiment initiated many projects Mo Yi undertook in the following decade. The result of these projects was twofold: on the one hand, he gained confidence about his “eyes” from his experiment. For example, as he describes them, the majority of images captured by his camera in the 1988 project “document an ‘expression’ of expressionlessness and apathy: people’s gazes are cold and detached, they seem to have no desire to be related to one another and seem to be separated by invisible walls.” On the other hand, the significance of his experiments was never limited to the images they captured; the act of obtaining such images took on its own meaning, so that to him photography became a form of “happening” and active thinking. He continued his *Expression of the Street* project into the 90s; the numerous photos he took in those years helped him construct a “history of collective subjectivity” in a major Chinese city. He began another project, *A Swaying Bus*, in 1990, taking pictures of fellow passengers and/or outside scenes. “It is strange,” he said to me, “that people in the same bus would feel that they share the same destiny.”<sup>33</sup> This then led to a sister project, *Landscape Outside a Public Bus*. In his 1995 project, *Photos Taken Through a Dog’s Eyes*, he lowered the camera to near ground level; the randomly taken pictures show various kinds of movements and gestures.

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After 1989, Mo Yi’s investigation of the city developed alongside another theme in his photography: his experience during the aftermath of the June Fourth movement. His memory of this experience is the subject of a number of works. An early series called *Front and Back: Ten Thousand Prisoners* shows compulsive destruction and repetition of his own images. Two photos from this series are constructed from such image-units. In both pictures, two images alternate, showing the front and back of the photographer, but both views are obstructed by a white column in the middle. We see four black Chinese characters printed on the column—*gong’an juzhi* (“made by the police department”)—when the figure behind the column faces inward, away from us. But when the figure turns around to face us, the column also turns around to conceal the inscription.

These two views are therefore not simply “front” and “back” images of the same scene, but represent two different juxtapositions of the portrait, the column, and the inscription. Although the excessive repetition of the image-units in the picture seems to reject any sequence of reading, their individual pictorial or verbal elements are often comprehended in a hierarchical order. As an experiment, I asked six Chinese viewers on separate occasions what they saw in this picture. Without exception their eyes were first caught by the inscription “made by the police department.” A majority of them then tried to explore the figure: the hidden face here and the blurry hair there. Some commented on the striped shirt, which reminded them of a prisoner’s uniform. Only as an afterthought did they point out the digital date in each tiny image-unit, but this discovery often led

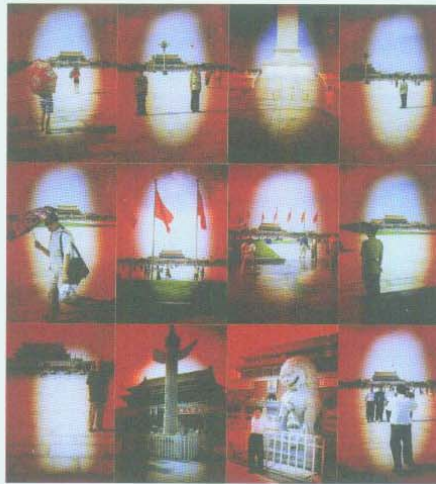


Mo Yi, *Front and Back: Memory of June 4* (detail), from *Memory of 1989* series, 1997, colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Walsh Gallery, Chicago.



to a dramatic change in their reaction. This date was first ignored because, in one viewer's words, "it is not really part of a photo—it is only a mechanical imprint by a 'blockhead camera.'" Then his eyes suddenly shone when he absorbed the meaning of the date: "89-6-4." To him, the picture seemed to have suddenly gained an entirely different meaning.

Interestingly, the photographic style and constructive method of *Front and Back: Ten Thousand Prisoners* seems to deliberately reverse that of Mo Yi's spontaneous portrayals of the city. Unlike *Expressions of the Street* and related series, here it is the photographer who is photographed, and the circumstances are documented by inscriptions. Also differing from his other pictures, here spontaneity is completely rejected and the composition is rigidly constructed. The "subjective intervention" of the photographer is still suppressed—his self-image is blocked and obstructed. But this erasure results from the violence of an external object—the column with the inscription "made by the police department." This external violence and the photographer's obstructed self become the content of memory—a "stamp" repeated over and over in the two pictures.



Mo Yi, *Yesterday's Memories on Today's Landscape, June 4 1999*, from *Memory of 1989* series, archival Epson inkjet prints, 1999. Courtesy of the artist and Walsh Gallery, Chicago.

These two subjects/styles have continued in Mo Yi's photographs. On June, 1999, the tenth anniversary of the failed pro-democratic movement, he staged another performance, this time in Beijing. For years he had been growing a beard. That morning he shaved off his beard as well as his hair and eyebrows, and then took photographs of himself in Tian'anmen Square. It is possible to think that he carried out this self-inflicted punishment to activate his traumatic memory. It is also possible that he designed the performance to trace the source of the trauma—to show that his personal tragedy was rooted in a greater tragedy that had taken place in the Square ten years earlier. He recorded the performance in two sets of photographs, but manipulated them in different ways to create dialogue between the images and the performance as well as between the images themselves. Although the pictures were taken on June, 1999, he printed the date 89-6-4 on them to indicate the historical event that the performance commemorated. The two photographs have similar compositions, but one appears as a documentary record of the performance while the other resembles an art photograph, with the edge tinted blood red and Mo Yi's self-portrait cut in half.

At same time, he continued his studies of the city and expanded his investigation into related areas, including popular culture, advertising, and various urban spaces (*City of Signs*, 1998; *Landscape of Time*, 1995; *Vanishing Landscape: The Old Town of Tianjin*, 1995–2002). He continued taking black and white photos, but was also attracted by dramatic colour contrast, and often used a coloured photo flash to artificially enhance such contrast, imbuing ordinary urban scenery with an unnatural and doomed atmosphere. This new interest stimulated a series of images focusing on

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numerous advertisements randomly posted by private vendors and small businesses on telephone poles and other obscure spaces in Tianjin. Captured under a red flash, the posters seem soaked in blood, floating against street scenes tinted a dreamy blue colour in the background.

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*My Neighborhood*, the largest project that Mo Yi has attempted so far, grew out of several earlier series, including *Blackboards* in 2001 and *Landscape of My Living Environment* from 2001 to 2004. Consisting of several hundred photographs in seven series and a video, it was completed in 2006 and first shown in two locations in rural China (Pingyao and Lianzhou).

This project records the visual environment of a typical Chinese urban community through a systematic representation of seven particular spaces: (1) the entrance of an apartment building, (2) the communal hallway inside a building, (3) protective metal frames outside windows, (4) various things inside these barred windows, (5) air conditioners protruding from individual apartments, (6) blackboards for public announcements, and (7) the communal yard where quilts are aired on a sunny day. The video, entitled *When Night Falls—The Pinghu West Community*, takes an alternative perspective and represents passage of time: it consists of a single long shot at an outdoor space in the neighbourhood. The place is filled with people during the day—we see children playing and old women sitting around chatting. But as night falls, the lights in the surrounding buildings begin to shine and the place becomes silent. Whereas the photographs in the seven series are all fragmentary and isolated images, the content of this video conveys the natural rhythm of people's daily life.

More than any other work in his impressive repertoire, this project distinguishes Mo Yi's art from *jishi shying*, or "documentary photography" which also covers similar subjects such as urban space and people's activities. Most important, unlike many documentary photographers who are interested in capturing individual scenes or moments, Mo Yi is fascinated by the seemingly inexhaustible varieties of mundane objects and spaces. His view is therefore necessarily encyclopedic, and his pictures focus on details, not grand compositions. As a result, *My Neighborhood* has gradually grown into a comprehensive visual record of a particular urban environment at this moment in Chinese history. His short descriptions of the seven spaces, which head the individual sections, highlight this approach and also summarize his observations of the changes taking place in the neighborhood. For example, he begins his description of the barred window series with this observation:

After the 1970s, people started fencing their windows with iron bars. Nowadays, 70% of apartments above the fourth floor install these bars; for apartments on the first floor the total is 99%. The material and form of these bars protrude from the wall, making the view of the exterior very interesting.

For the most part, these iron frames were designed by the owners themselves. They procured the materials, welded, and installed them. Standing before a hundred windows is like standing before a hundred people—each possessing its own personal character. . . .<sup>4</sup>

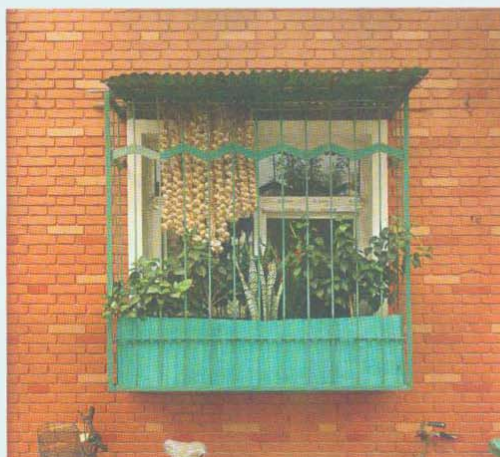
And for "hallways" he writes:

Communal hallways are sites that tend to collect assorted odds and ends. Things that people no longer have any use for, yet are unwilling to discard completely, sit in these spaces for years on end. The small red boxes are for people who get the newspaper delivered. The green boxes,



each equipped with a small door, serve as mailboxes for the families within the housing unit. Here is a green radiator pipe alongside some coal briquettes left over from the previous winter. To install a radiator requires a large initial lump sum payment. The cost of heating a 40 square meter room over the course of a winter is approximately 800 RMB. Burning coal is significantly cheaper. Each briquette costs .42 RMB. To get through the winter, one needs no more than a thousand bricks, thus totaling less than 400 RMB. While it can be troublesome to burn coal, it not only produces warmth but can also be used as an energy source for heating water and cooking food.<sup>5</sup>

Such descriptions and accompanying images allow us to summarize three main features regarding Mo Yi's artistic aspiration and working method in developing this project. The first concerns the subject and intensity of the project: *My Neighborhood* is a prolonged investigation of the visual culture of a particular group of people in their own environment. The second is his contextual approach: rather than looking at a small set of variables or a broad social phenomenon, Mo Yi attempts to reach a detailed understanding of particular circumstances. The third is his detached attitude: disassociating himself from any political or social agenda, Mo Yi assumes the role of dispassionate observer speaking in an objective, scientific manner. These characteristics are all essential features of a standard ethnographic investigation. We can thus call him an "ethnographer" in contemporary Chinese art.



Mo Yi, *Window*, 2005-2006, from the *My Neighborhood* series, archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist and Walsh Gallery, Chicago

On the other hand, it is also apparent that Mo Yi's "objective" attitude is no more than an assumed role. He has lived in a similar environment for many years and has intimate knowledge about it. As the title of *My Neighborhood* signifies, he identifies himself as an "insider" of the represented space. In this sense, his role as an "ethnographer" is a constructed artistic persona, which provides him with an alternative perspective to examine familiar scenes and objects. This dual positioning increases the richness and complexity of the project, making it both an important sociological record and an artist's personal testimony of his connections with ordinary people and places.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Mo Yi conducted by the author, May 15, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> Cited in Du Jianfeng, "Zoujin Mo Yi" (Entering Mo Yi), *Renmin sheying* (People's photography), no. 558 (June 28, 1995), 1.
- <sup>3</sup> See note 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Wu Hung, *Mo Yi: My Neighborhood* (Chicago: Walsh Gallery, 2007), 20. Translation by Peggy Wang and Wu Hung.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.