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Bernard Schütze

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Citer ce compte rendu
Live rightly, die, die . . .

David Tomas

Like the physical exhibition, the essay is structured according to a repeated doubling that proceeds from the project’s very title. The title’s first two words, “Live rightly,” are thus used in the essay’s opening paragraphs to introduce a broader discussion on the circulation of transnational artistic information within its contemporary historical, social, and economic context. In the following section, “die, die . . . The Exhibition,” Tomas points to the crucial role of Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness, which serves as an “inspiration” and “template” for the exhibition. Not only is the title Live rightly, die, die . . . a quotation from the novella, the entire unfolding of the project is guided by Conrad’s tale of colonial excess, transcultural transgression, and moral decay. Through the lens of this nineteenth-century literary reference – and its twentieth-century filmic embodiment in Apocalypse Now – Tomas constructs an overarching historical and narrative framework from within which to examine how the contemporary art world continues to be entangled in a “web of inherited economic and colonial values.” He argues that this approach allows him to situate the exhibition against the backdrop of its nineteenth-century “socio-cultural and economic underpinnings” and to take a distance from contemporary curatorial methods that apply academic theories, usually without scrutinizing or acknowledging their university origins.

Central to Tomas’s unorthodox exhibition process is the aforementioned doubling, which is expressed through an in-depth analysis of two “master” documents that guide the respective exhibition sections. The introductory document of the “Tourism” section – a nineteenth-century photograph of an eighteenth-century handbill titled Four Days Stage-Coch – serves to examine how a visual artefact can encapsulate the notion of travel not only in terms of transportation per se, but also as speculative travel across historical periods via a media interface. An 1890 photograph of a Chinese lingshi execution and a Hong Kong Telegraph article, which transmits a descriptive second-hand account of the gruesome scene in the photograph, are used to extrapolate the translatability of the exotic in various media and cross-cultural modes. In working through images and texts within their wider historical and socio-cultural ramifications, the essay is itself a sort of intellectual travelogue that reveals the various paths of thought that were travelled to arrive at this singular exhibition.

The two-part exhibition is well transposed into the catalogue through a presentation of the displayed works and artefacts of both exhibition parts. The works (some of which are original works, whereas others consist of artefacts such as letters, post cards, photographs, and books) displayed in the catalogue variously invite one to trace itineraries and connect routes on a perceptual and conceptual level. However, faced with what is at once unsettling and disorienting material, it quickly becomes apparent that such travels may have unsuspectingly taken one to a strange place. Reading through Live rightly, die, die . . . can at times give one the sense of having veered off course and being lost in a plethora of intertwined tracks – of being a hapless tourist caught in a dangerous, exotic place. Yet, this disorientation appears to be precisely what the compelling Live rightly, die, die . . . project seeks to induce by proposing an alternative exhibition practice that revalorizes art’s capacity to be a vehicle of the “unknown,” the opaque, the treacherous and unstable all the while critiquing contemporary art’s apparent complicity in a homogenized global culture that has its roots in the brutality and exploitation of colonial history.

Bernard Schütze is an independent art critic, curator, and translator. He regularly contributes articles to various art magazines and has written numerous catalogue essays and artist monographs. As a speaker, he has been invited to give presentations at several art-related events and universities in Canada and in Europe. He lives and works in Montreal.