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Weaving & We Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art

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Exhibition Review

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Spread over two floors, six galleries, and the museum grounds, *Weaving & We* brought together over 60 exhibitors—before counting parallel exhibitions organized around the city as part of the Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art. A high proportion of the works on display simply would not have fit into a typical city center exhibition space in Europe. The predominance of large-scale work coupled with a far more balanced representation of men and women as exhibitors and conference participants may not have been a conscious strategy for the event organizers. Nonetheless, these two facts contributed to an atmosphere far less consumed by familiar textile debates around gender, domestic narratives, and the individual.

For native English speakers, a confusing fact of the exhibition title was the absence of a particular emphasis on woven cloth; similarly the term Fiber Art was not intended to suggest a particular geographical representation despite the term being more familiar to Americans (exhibitors predominantly represented Europe and China). *The saying of needles* was a further stated theme, noted in Sarat Maharaj's keynote address at the Textile Thinking symposium, in his attention to the potential of the textile to needle—prick, prompt and poke away—at established thinking. Clearly inspired by Maharaj's style of thinking through an etymology of terms, the exhibition curators—Liu Xiao, Xu Jia, and Assadour Markarov—offer in the exhibition catalog further linguistic connections. But etymological games are hard to play in translation and what may very well be logical in one language soon loses meaning in another.

The Zhejiang Art Museum is located in a verdant area near the tourist pilgrimage locale of West Lake. A number of installations in the museum grounds were built around this thickly wooded landscape. Shen Lieyi's *Walking Cloud* (Figure 1) used bamboo to create rounded nest-like forms twisted around a group of trees punctuated by ladders reaching into the sky above. On this occasion China was not immune to health and safety restrictions and, sadly, by the time of my visit the work was marred by warning signs to not climb on the otherwise inviting ladders. In contrast, Atelier Chen Haoru installed

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Figure 1
Walking Cloud, Shen Lieyi, 2016 installation. Courtesy of Xu Jia and the Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art.

Figure 2
Mega Fabrication, Chen Haoru, 2016 installation. Courtesy of Xu Jia and the Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art.

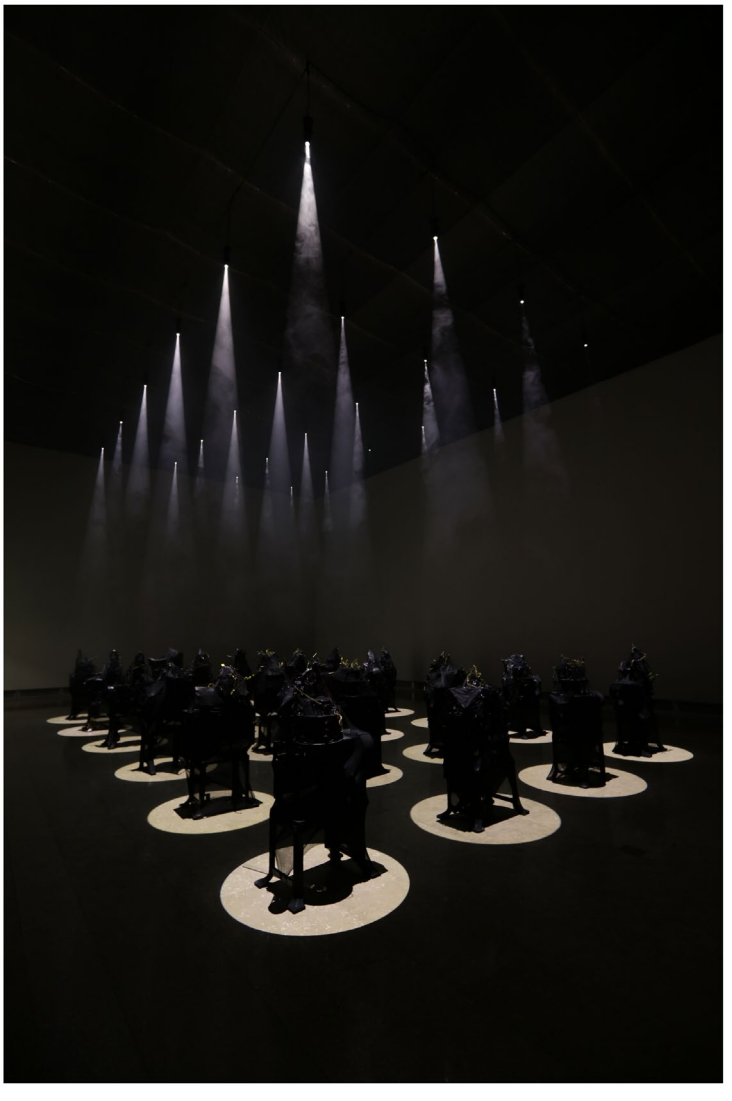

Figure 3
Farewell Song for Landscape, Yuan Xu Jiang and Yuan Liujun, 2016 installation. Courtesy of Xu Jia and the Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art.

Mega Fabrication (Figure 2) near the museum entrance. Described in the exhibition catalog as a team effort to weave in space, long sections of bamboo pierced the skyline in a jumble of sharp lines. Closer to the ground the bamboo suspended small, functional swinging seats for the public to enjoy.

Inside the six galleries the work exhibited was varied in quality and installation. In fairness, these differences offer a very real indication of the various national and cultural systems we all study, work within, and are inevitably informed by. Placement of video work enjoyed particular care with the installation of South Korean artist Kimsooja's multiscreen *A Needle Woman* (2005) usefully tucked at the end of a long gallery. This placement allowed viewers to watch uninterrupted by passing traffic, instead left to muse on the flow of faces moving around Kimsooja's stationary presence.

Figure 4
Factory, Chen Chieh-Jen, 2003, film and still images. Courtesy of Xu Jia and the Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art.

A thought-provoking aspect of the second Triennial was the number of artists who consider the themes of factory closure and loss of work. The topic is of course familiar across Europe and North America, but in my experience China often receives our blame as the place where manufacturing which has vanished from Europe has now moved. To find a number of Chinese and a Taiwanese artist also dwelling on local textile factory closures and obsolete industrial machinery was a sobering perspective to see.

Chinese artists Xu Jiang and Yuan Liujun's *Farewell Song for Landscape* (Figure 3) spotlit a grid of 24 sock knitting machines draped in spider webs of black cloth. The artists' catalog text explains, "This is the farewell song of [the] modern textile industry. This is the real industrial landscape." Accompanied by eerie audio and smoke effects, the work emphasizes the changes facing Datang, known as the Sock City of China for its volume of sock knitting, presumably the result of replacement by digital knitting machines.

Lu Yuanjion and Zhou Ping presented unsettlingly saccharine archive images from the now closed state-owned *Second Hangzhou Textile Mill* where Lu Yuanjion's parents met and both worked. In the catalog the artist acknowledges that neither parent is now employed by the textile industry. In contrast, British artist, academic and curator of the first Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art, Janis Jefferies, presented digital photographs of recent textile factory workers taken throughout Hangzhou in 2013 accompanied by a catalog statement, urging us to "not forget or be immune to textile workers whose daily lives are embroiled and embedded in a swathe of cloth, material, dye and weaving production …".

Perhaps the most moving response to this theme was the Taiwanese artist Chen Chieh-Jen's much earlier film and still images *Factory* (Figure 4) that recorded female workers invited to return to the closed factory Lian-fu Textile. The women are filmed "cleaning" the abandoned Taiwanese factory—the closure explained as yet another manufacturing exodus in search of lower wage labor.

In the room adjacent to *Farewell Song for Landscape* sat the

Figure 5
Green Land, Liu Wei, 2016 installation. Courtesy of Xu Jia and the Second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art.

oppressive green canvas walls of Liu Wei's *Green Land* (Figure 5). Enormous, wrapped shapes evoke a distinctly military atmosphere, heightened by the audio and smoke drifting from Xu Jiang and Yuan Liujun's installation next door. However, also included in *Weaving & We* is the extraordinary realistic embroidery of Liang Xuefang, who renders detail the eye can find hard to comprehend. A short walk away the impressive China National Silk Museum's exhibition of cotton shoes with embroidered soles, traditionally given as wedding gifts, provided a memorably sophisticated display. These contrasts sum up the efforts of the second Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art, which ranged broadly from the beauty of decorative histories to a deep sense of unease about the realities of textile production today.