

Substructure

It is arguable whether the eyes or the hands should be considered the more expressive parts of the body. The cliché holds that the eyes are the windows of the soul, yet, if so, the hands play shifting roles throughout the entire house. They can be doors, walls, floor, rooms, furniture, inhabitants, events. Their sheer variety and complexity of expression and movements have lent them a natural and obvious attraction for artists and social theorists throughout history. They are capable of expressing languages for the deaf. And one needs only look to the most ancient examples of art making to see the hands visualized. At the caves of Lascaux, Altamira and Chauvet, Paleolithic painters used the hand-mark to tag their works, spitting pigment over the flattened palm against the cave wall, and silhouetting in eerie shadows their forever absent bodies. These hand-marks act as signatures, pre-linguistic and pre-literary names, identifying themselves, stating: “I was here, I made this. I exist.”

Images of the hands abound, continually to this day. They are signifiers of beauty, of labor, of humanity, of divinity. It is no accident that Michelangelo’s most recognized and endlessly copied image is that which we see at the very center of his iconic Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco. The artist conceives of God and Man as equivalently endowed human bodies, and connects them through the fingertips of each figure. The fresco portrays the mythological moment at which God breathes life into Adam, not using his mouth, nor his words, but issuing the divine spark of life by touching his finger. Michelangelo trips an electric switch through their hands, charging them. Compositionally, each figure is pointing, although God points actively towards Adam, who passively receives the magic life-pulse. God, in doing so, tells Adam, with his hand, “I shall become you, and you, me. We shall be One.” It is the ultimate expression of Renaissance-era humanism, placing divinity and humanity in a visually and conceptually inextricable equality of being.

This universal gesture, pointing, from one to another, is commonly used to identify, and to express the Ego. It is used to locate oneself in space, in three

dimensions, and thus to indicate time. By differentiating and separating, it unifies by creating dualities, which can only be defined by the inclusion of its oppositional concept. Here, there. Me, you. Creating these differentiations, and the early stages of naming associated with them, are the very origins of expressive language. Often, pointing is done with both hands, in different directions. It is utilized as a substitute for language, as when traveling in foreign places, to be understood when no other expressive commonality exists. And the hands are almost always used in combination with language, to enhance it. Clearly, the hands vocalized for us long before we managed to give names to things.

CYJO's series of photographs and videos, *Substructure*, uses a strict compositional framework intended to unify the hands, to place them in a common manner of pose, so that the differences between each pair may be heightened, through the process of eliminating gestural differences. We see the palms, we see the backs of the hands, bluntly. The photographs present the hands as evidence rather than as expressive device. These hands do not point, nor do they speak; they do not vary their position from one to the next. There are no gestures, and subsequently, there is no suggestion of language. Yet, within this controlled framework, due to their individual differences, their inherent humanity manifests itself perhaps more strongly. Compositional variety is absent; identity is present. Like those at Lascaux, these hands express verisimilitude of presence: "I am here, I am now." And collectively, they reflect a society outside of society, as does the subject of the project itself.

One might look at CYJO's hand subjects as exercises in abstraction, given the alluring formalism of her compositions. But there is nothing abstract about such hands. They are highly individualistic portraits, evocative and informative. Yes, they form abstract patterns and their surfaces are patinated with wonderful aesthetic richness. But I am first and continually wishing to "read" these hands, to look for signs in them, and to see them as biography.

The inclusion of the video element to accompany these photographed hands injects into them an interpretive specificity, pulling them out of abstraction and into the

realm of document, of data. The hand photos become an elevated platform to interconnect them as a series, and thus, as a community unto themselves. In attaching video to photo, CYJO maintains a conceptual energy which could not be accomplished if the two elements were presented separately. Still, I am tempted to analyze them individually as well, as each element lends to the project different associations and meanings, building upon and reflecting the content of the other.

The choice to enlarge the hands, for example, and to print them in black and white, lends these images art-historical gravitas. One immediately runs through the mental catalogue of other such images, by John Coplans, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Dorothea Lange and of painters from the variety of social realism movements throughout the western modern art canon (Courbet, Millet, Daumier, Kollwitz, Thomas Hart Benton, Diego Rivera, Ben Shahn, etc.). Images of hands, of workers especially, commonly figure in socialist art, and here too the expressiveness of hands, devoid of the remaining body, is sufficient to evoke an underlying political message. Once more, the link is made, visually and conceptually, between manual labor and divinity, with purity of spirit and honesty of work. The hands, in art, carry a virtuous message. They are almost always seen wizened, worn, strong, earthy, and therefore honest, ethical, transformed, sublime. In earlier art, in Van Eyck or Dürer or Raphael, the hands are often joined in prayer, elegant and in repose but not idle. Whether shown in contemplation or in activity, the hands suggest virtue, even whilst disembodied and faceless. The hand representation is never devoid of its role as symbol, as icon.

But isolating and enlarging the hands is not the only artistic device being utilized here. There is also the patterning and repetition to be considered, in both photos and video elements. Throughout CYJO's artistic output has been an emphasis placed on serialism, the method of utilizing sustained and repeated formal motives. Unlike the highly reductivist and process-oriented precursors of serialism (those artists who developed the technique in the 1960's and '70's), CYJO follows the more conceptually charged, hybridized form of serialism employed by a second generation of artists. In her series of photographs *Sunrise*, in which equal-sized rectangles of color gradations are taken from the background of the famous

portrait of Mao at the entrance of Tiananmen Square, flattened and abstracted, one is reminded of the artist Byron Kim, whose 1990's works depicted various color grids based on the chromatic shades of wall paints and makeup charts. In Kim's signature work *Synecdoche* (1992), the colors are associated with skin tones, in particular the specific skin colors of his friends, and thus the banal color scheme takes on a socially charged element, replacing the dispassionate color-numbering system with ethnic and racial identifiers, and further still, substituting colors for the people they individually represent, a small square detail summarizing and symbolizing the whole. It is this sort of associative conceptual underpinning which CYJO shares in her use of serialism as an aesthetic enterprise. It is never purely formal or abstract, and rather exploits the repetitive aspect of serial composition to imbue the works with emotional weight. It is one thing to see three or four images of hands; it is quite another to see 50 such images. By accumulation, the collective force of abstraction can push the subject matter further into its sociological message. We see the micro and macro simultaneously. In the specific example of the *Substructure* series, we perceive the individual portraits of the people interviewed while also understanding these individuals as belonging to a much larger societal group, thereby seeing their specific narratives in the context of their collective reality. The serialist approach takes on something more exterior and active than what its earliest practitioners explored: a power to inform and persuade, via an aesthetic analogue to statistics.

Which leads me to an essential element in the *Substructure* series I have not yet discussed, that is, the subtle composite addition of the original interviews from which the series has been generated. Seen with each pair of hands is a small video, showing the hands of the person in the accompanying photographs, during the course of their being interviewed for this project. Each video, like the photographs, is shot from a specific and repeated point of view, from overhead, with camera aimed at the subject's lap, the position where most of the time the person's hands are resting. Again, the person is seen anonymously, without upper body or face visible, and only a small area of the legs is shown. The films are silent, but the responses of the individual being interviewed are displayed in text captions across the screen. These videos are the origins of the hand photographs, and where the

photos are large and public, the videos are diminutive and private, dialectical aspects of each person interviewed for the project.

For the purpose of protecting the anonymity of the individual, CYJO eliminates voice, face, and body from the visual record of the interview. Yet, one perceives also identifying particularities that are absent in the large black-and-white photographs of the hands of these same people, both on- and off-screen. A young boy, in one film, scratches at his legs, slumps back into his chair slightly, fidgets from side to side, traces a finger across the edges of a patch sewn onto his pants. An elderly man gesticulates animatedly as he speaks, with passion for his hopeful vision of the future generations, his hands hardly ever seen in the film, restless. The hands of a middle-aged woman remain mostly stationary on her lap, except that her legs appear to shake the whole time, whilst she speaks with resignation of her limitations in being illiterate.

There is a degree of tension in these video pieces. One senses in the interviews an undertone of longing, as each person reveals how they compare the places they have left with their new urban lives. Each of them knows they are living in compromise, but acknowledge that they would rather take the risk than remain where they were. They are living for the future rather than beholden to their pasts. Yet they also express love for their home villages. One describes his favorite memory as the sensation of rolling his body sideways down the grassy hills in his native countryside. Even where such yearning is left unstated, the text of their words reveal that they are, invariably, caught between two worlds. But all of them have taken action to migrate, and all seem convinced that their lives are better now, can only be better, that there is no other choice but the paths they have taken, for themselves and their families. It is a common thread throughout the world, whenever people have emigrated in search of improvement. These are the optimists of history.

Coupled with the photographs, then, the videos of *Substructure* place the series into the realm of political documentary, commenting upon the collective phenomena of migrant workers in China. It reveals these workers, and their

children, as fundamentally positive, integral members of contemporary Chinese society, with specific stories but shared goals and aspirations. One does not see them as exploited, but rather as ordinary citizens, if one is to take their words at face value. Here, however, is where there is another underlying tension in the series. The photographs, which do not literally “speak” as do the videos, retain the silent power of abstraction and art, to convey an unspoken message of human plight. We understand that there is more to the stories than is revealed in the videos, when the two are seen together. The oversized images elevate, magnify and transport the individual hands into something more akin to the “universal expressiveness” that artists of earlier centuries sought to convey. They speak to human continuity, for better or for worse, just as the specific sociological realities of migrant workers do, in the here-and-now as well as across generations, unrecognized in the main, nameless and featureless. While the videos speak to us directly, the photographs suggest that these stories are not unique, and never have been. At this expressive crossroads, CYJO has created something artistically unprecedented and particular. She has managed to balance formal rigor and restraint with informational reality, cross-pollinating them into a newly irreducible hybrid.

Sean Mooney

