

Song Dongs's Exhibition 'Collaborations', 01.09-31.10.2017, Kunsthal Aarhus, Denmark

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In the fall of 2017 Kunsthal Aarhus presented the first "solo" exhibition in Denmark by the contemporary Chinese artist Song Dong. The non-monographic exhibition was entitled Collaborations – hence the quotation marks – and focused on collaborative forms. The title of the exhibition accentuates Song's strong interest in artistic collaborations – often involving members of his own family. On display was both some of the artist's best-known works and new creations. Song's work often focuses on family relations and geopolitics. They have a powerful way of expressing the effects of radical change and social transformation on members of his own family. He strives to combine the past and the present, the personal and the universal, the poetic and the political. Collaboratively. In Kunsthal Aarhus each gallery was dedicated to one chapter of Song Dong's artistic practice and collaborations, offering an overview of his diverse practice that embraces performance, installation, video and photography.

Entering the godinuniverse

In his interesting take on Donna Haraway's companion species, William Grassie explains Haraway's godinuniverse as:

storytelling that we discover, invent, and share. godinuniverse includes stories about physical and biological relations, social and psychological relations, gender, class, and ethnic relations, family relations, sexual relations, economic relations,

power relations, love relations, aesthetic relations, animal, plant and mineral relations. godinuniverse is a story about embodied semiotic relations that are causally significant in our thoughts and doings in ways both intimate and global.

(Grassie, 2011: 9).

When best, engaging with Song Dong's art feels like entering such a godinuniverse, including complex acts of kinship- and relation-makings. In this godinuniverse a multitude of relations are becoming. Relations between the artist himself and the vast number collaborators who participated in the realization of the exhibition. A (somewhat dim) attempt of creating a space for 'inter-visitorial' relation-makings, relations between architecture, consumerism and our digestive system. Relations between the inside of our homes and the surroundings outside. Interpersonal relations and not least the multifaceted, forever changing and often awkward family relations. The frailty and volatility of any such relations and relation-makings are made mercilessly present in a former piece entitled 'Stamping the water' (Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996), in which the artist stood in freezing water and repeatedly stamped a large wooden seal bearing the Chinese character 'water' onto the ceaselessly flowing and disinterested river. Despite his audacity he failed to establish more than a fleeting relation to the water: "I exerted great force [in stamping the seal on the water], but in the end left no trace". (Jun et al., 2017: 22)

Outside

Next to the entrance of the museum Song erected an architectural structure commissioned by Kunsthall Aarhus entitled 'The centre of the world' (2017. See figure 1). The layout was based on the essential concept of a Chinese temple and contained sand from all of the time zones of the world. The collaborative collection of sand was made possible due to a number of embassies and individuals, who had brought sand from their home countries. According to the artist, the work positioned Aarhus at the centre of the world, but it also allured to an extended hospitality inviting people to a shared space, offering a platform for free speech and exchange of ideas.

While the collaborative idea of collecting and bringing together sand was intriguing, this piece felt very much like a rather high-pitched political concept, which only(?) worked 'on paper'. Following the grand opening the structure quickly 'dilapidated' into an extra bench area, where cigarettes were the primary objects of exchange. The piece lacked the sublime elegance found e.g., in the conceptually related work 'Socle du Monde' (1961) by Piero Manzoni.

Inside

Inside Song's very popular and ongoing 'cake feast' entitled 'Eating the city' (2003-) initially occupied most of the museum hall (See figure 2). The piece was a large edible city modelled on the architecture of Aarhus. In collaboration with a group of local volunteers, Song built the city out



Figure 2.



Figure 1.

of 90.000 biscuits, waffles and cakes. Previously he has suggested that the work is an exploration of mindless consumerism and the dramatic growth of hastily and carelessly build cities (particularly in Asia):

Food is essential for humans, but biscuits - though they smell good and are sweet and cheap - are not helpful for the body. Biscuits are simple, like building materials, but they're bad things. Like these big, rapidly built cities (Alice, 2012: 1).

After the festive, but destructive "consumption" of the work on the opening night, the cake city was replaced by architectural structures built from Danish LEGO bricks by school children (See figure 2).

Here, the volunteers, the kids and the audience were invited into the collaborative process of both construction and 'demolition'. While the cake city was an impressive endeavor and had a charming, childish appeal to it, the installation as a whole came across as a bit 'gimmicky'. The urban theme found little resonance in a Danish setting. The white LEGO buildings seemed very Nordic: "[...] hart, abweisend und beständig wie skandinavischer Granit" (Fülberth et al., 2007: 140), but any

resemblance to Aarhus or the consumed city was utterly lost in the translation.

Finally home

The center piece of the exhibition was the highly versatile work ‘My Home is Your Stage’ (2013-2017). At Kunsthal Aarhus Song Dong had erected a house (reaching 5 meters high and 11 meters long) built partly from material from his own house in China (See figure 3). The house structure mainly consisted of recycled window frames, revealing the interior space within and one gable was left open, but framed with classic red theatre drapes and dimly lit. The rooms end-wall was covered by a slightly distorted and irregular mirror (See figure 3). Guests were allowed to enter and ‘use’ the house and they could book it for meetings, events and the like (one couple even got married there (Petersen, 2017)).

The piece was captivating and worked on several levels! The title was indeed apt – the setting felt both like a stage and a staged home. The work challenged notions of borders between the private and the public by inviting visitors inside, into a *private* home, which at the same time was utterly *public*; publicly accessible and visually available to the naked eye. While the outside aesthetic was colourful - even joyful - the space somehow came across as eerie, way too open and transparent – a feeling enhanced by the mirroring wall. It was a home, but also a scenography decorated with an odd abundance of chairs and stools (retrieved from friends and neighbours) and a couch made by Song’s wife and artistic collaborator Yin Xiuzhen (also on display in an adjacent gallery was their ongoing collaboration ‘The Way of Chopsticks’ (2006-)). The plethora of seats available added to the sense of a somehow

displaced home (Christoffersen, 1996). The strong use of every modest household items resonates both with multiple other works by Song Dong and ‘mundanity-invigorating’ STS scholars like Steve Woolgar and Dan Neyland (E.g.: Woolgar, 2006; Woolgar and Neyland, 2013). The collaborative links were multiple; Close relatives like his wife, friends and neighbours, but also in-situ collaborations between Song Dong and the local performers utilizing the space at Kunsthal Aarhus. This multivalent piece effectively entangled both the past and the present and the personal and the universal.

Here, the bystanding statue of police officer complicated the notion of home and privacy. However, here it was a series of sixteen life-size statues of law enforcement officers (Policemen, 2000-2004), each bearing the artist’s visage, which were “casually” scattered around the museum. Standing by doors or in restrooms they are both eerie in their personalized uniformity and their unnatural presence. They confronted the defenseless viewers and reminded us of our own mental policing and the difficult relations of self-governance.

Getting personal

Keeping with the personal feature; The exhibition in the basement of Kunsthal Aarhus centred on close relational collaborations. This section showcased a series of works relating to personal stories of Song Dong and his family-members: ‘36 calendars’ (2012-13), ‘My Daughter is My Four Seasons’ (2010), ‘Touching My Father’ (1997-2011) and a large-scale photo documentation of one of his best-known works ‘Waste Not’ (2005), which shows the artist’s mother’s house with all her belongings. Also on display was a film co-



Figure 3.

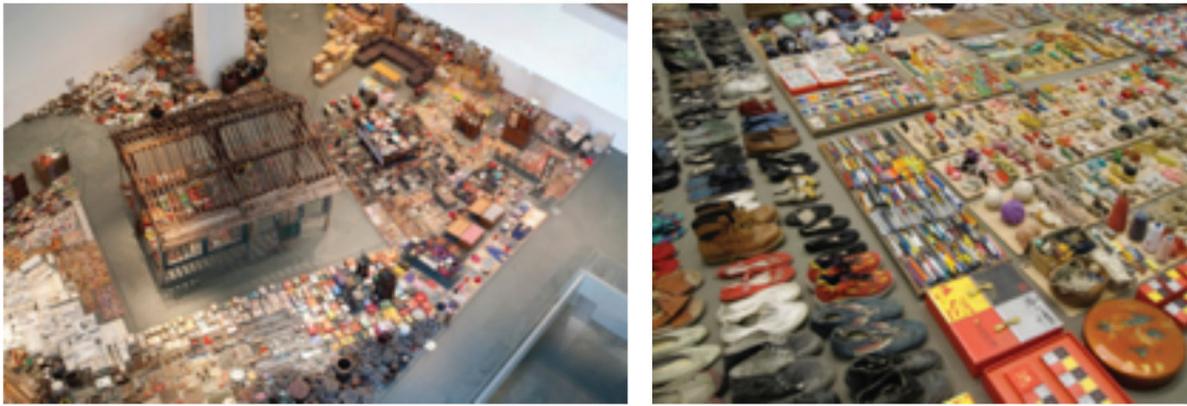


Figure 4.

authored by Song and his daughter Song Errui entitled '50+14' (2017). Of the personal works - 'Touching My Father' packed the biggest punch, not least due to the very touching work-description supplied by Song Dong. The work consisted of a short video of his (now dead) father. While shooting the video, Song had superimposed a golden - almost radiant - picture of his own hand stroking his father. The interplay between the otherwise physically reserved and "untouchable" father and the gentle strokes was both touching and emotionally difficult to hold. A very delicate 'touch-non-touch' strategy embracing both Chinese cultural-history and the need for personal intimacy. 'Waste Not' (2005) was an installation of the full complement of worldly goods belonging to the artist's mother, Zhao Xiangyuan (1938-2009) - including the wood frame of her house. Song's mother was typical of the generation of Chinese who lived through the hardships of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s abiding by the dictum *wu jin qi yong* (waste not). This guiding tenet deemed that resources be squeezed for all their value and nothing be wasted. For the subsequent generation - Song Dong and his sister, Song Hui, among them - the result was a childhood surrounded by partially used bars of soap, loose buttons, assorted buckets, and scraps of fabric, stockpiled and preserved as protection against future hardship, even in the face of improving economic conditions (MOMA, 2009).

The large photographs of the famous work functioned as a nice memorandum, but lacked the overwhelming dense presence of the actual work - displayed at Kunsthallen back in 2014 (See

figure 4). Less personally connected, but quite captivating was the extensive piece '100 Years' (2010) consisting of 100 black and white re-paintings of historic paintings coupled with 100 historic events. The pairings deliberately disregarded any obvious connections or concordances like time or theme, thus rendering all sorts of (made up) links and intriguing speculations possible.

While leaving Kunsthall Aarhus I feel an urge to revisit my godinuniverse. Here, I find both 'Song Dongian water stamps' of fleeting impact, but also new radiant and durable relations.

About the artist

Song Dong is a Chinese artist, born in 1966. He lives and works in Beijing. Song comes from a strong Chinese avant-garde performing arts community and developed into a major contemporary art figure in the progression of Chinese conceptual art. He has been considered at the forefront of Conceptual art in China since the 1990's. Song graduated from the Fine Arts department of Capital Normal University in Beijing in 1989. His practice embraces performance, installation, video and photography. Recent major exhibitions include venues as: 5th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2013), Carriageworks, Sydney (2013), Barbican Art Gallery, London (2012), DOCUMENTA (13), Kassel (2012), Venice Biennale (2011), The 6th Liverpool Biennial (2010) and MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York (2009). Song was awarded a UNESCO/ASCHBERG Bursary Laureate in 2000 and won the Grand Award at the Gwanju Biennale in South Korea in 2006.

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Notes

- 1 E.g. 'The Way of Chopsticks' (2001) – also on display – 'Surplus Value' (2016), and his best-known work 'Waste Not' (2005).