

# ArtReview Asia



Charles Lim

Venice Biennale. Oh Buoy



# Books



## Hong Kong Parr

by Martin Parr GOST Books/Blindspot Gallery HK\$450/£35/€44/\$57 (softcover)

As an enthusiast of photography books, especially Japanese *shashin* books, I was once particularly fond of the kind of that not only let people view a massive amount of images, but also enjoy the ‘physicality’ of the book itself. Martin Parr’s publication *Hong Kong Parr* belongs to this type and perfectly fulfils the needs of both my eyes and my fingers. The photographer himself claims that this book can be viewed in four ways. It is realised via a smart design trick that uses different widths for left- and right-hand pages. If you thumb through it from the front, it is an uninterrupted record of the people of Hong Kong, and if you do the same in reverse, it documents local food and minor commodities alone. Turn the pages one by one, of course, and you merge the two. Finally, there is a 24-page insert with eight portraits of Hong Kong people plus a photograph of a pair of what in Cantonese are called *yaujagwai*, or fritters – a local food made of fried flour, normally to accompany congee for breakfast or as a late-night snack.

I must admit that the full-length portrait of the fritters is my favourite image. They look

like a couple of young lovers leaning against the wall, their arms embracing each other’s bodies. The ‘couple’ is sweet and pleased with themselves – a separate entity slightly outside Parr’s chaotic Hong Kong. Just like all the small fries, they provide the kind of apparently unexceptional moment that is both funny and sentimental.

Parr is perhaps best known for his photographs of people at leisure (often on the beach) around the world. But in Hong Kong, a mini-empire of commodities, quantities and signs, half of his attention seems to have been occupied by local food and other groceries. Indeed, food that seems organised and orderly, and people who build up a chaotic life, are the essential components of Parr’s Hong Kong. And perhaps even he wouldn’t deny that all the photographs are from a tourist’s perspective, offering a full set of visual clichés. But it’s his unique sense of humour, deployed as a method, that provides an alternative way to examine the clichés of this ‘metropolis’: most of the ‘people’ scenes encourage viewers to laugh, while most food

and groceries appear alien and mysterious to visitors from other cultures.

If these photographs can be seen as a certain kind of propaganda (as president of Magnum, Parr would probably laugh at this), then this book, coated with an oversaturated orange vinyl fabric, sets out to portray a fresh and vibrant city, a capital of consumption, full of energy. But in today’s world, that oversaturated orange colour and the vinyl fabric could hardly be seen as cool or contemporary; this retro design strategy belongs to the past and seems more cruel than sentimental. It was in 2013, one year before the Occupy Central movement, that Parr spent two weeks taking these photographs. Since then and the events of autumn 2014, Hong Kong has gone through a special period. It may appear as if nothing has dramatically changed, but actually everything has changed. The goods that make the materialscape of Hong Kong are still in good order, but people in this city need to be aware that they should no longer live in a costume drama.

Aimee Lin

## I Am a Script

by Freya Zhou and Yu Cheng-Ta Taipei Fine Arts Museum, TW\$500 (softcover)

One way of reading *I Am a Script* is as the script of *Practicing LIVE* (2014), a play and a three-channel film created by Taiwanese artist Yu Cheng-Ta. The script documents Taiwan soap-opera-style conversations at a family get-together at which the characters additionally act out different artworld roles. The film is not only a record of the performance, but also a documentary of the production in which the crew, the sets and even the large-character scripts held by a prompter are visible. Even more is revealed in intercut interviews with selected actors/actresses (extracts from which are included in the book): 10 minutes, 42 seconds in, Esther Lu, a curator in real life, but playing the role of a gallerist and the youngest daughter in the family, here states, ‘This group of so-called “actors” are actually professionals in the art field. To a degree, there was an element of each of us mimicking another’s role in this, so actually I didn’t feel that it was necessary to put too much effort into acting as someone.’ There is, then, a blurring of ‘acting’ and real life, and a sense in which the play seeks to reveal institutional structures in the artworld.

With all that in mind, reading *I Am a Script* page by page allows another truth of the tale to come into focus: that it’s a detective story focused on the absent artist David Yu, a good-for-nothing child to the family. Although he never appears in the play itself, as you trace the conversations among his museum-director mother (institution/rigid system) and art-critic father (theory/boredom), gallerist aunt (commercial practice), obsolescent-artist uncle (rubbish star artist) and retired art-historian grandfather (also a failed art collector), two other absent characters start to draw the attention of readers: David X, an emerging star artist, and Skyban, a mysterious collector who supports David Yu’s aunt and mother.

It’s no massive surprise when the truth is revealed (by two ‘outsider’ characters) in the final scene: Nicholas, a curator and a ‘friend’ of his uncle, reveals that David Yu is David X; and Mary, the domestic helper, that David is also Skyban. The real climax comes when Mary asks the family: ‘Have any of you been truly concerned about him?’ At that very moment, a broadcast comes wafting from the TV set announcing that David X has been shortlisted

for the Turner Prize. The film doesn’t end here, but after reflections, from director Yu Cheng-Ta and all the art practitioners serving as actors and actresses, on the complex structural networks of the artworld, and questioning the substantiation of art itself.

As the title of the book indicates, Yu allocates a subjectivity to the script. Given the artist’s interest in playing with different viewpoints, the real and the represented, and with language itself, there’s an inherent humour to be detected in the family name Yu – that of the artist Cheng-Ta himself, and phonetically an English language ‘you’. Further complications along these lines are also demonstrated via a ‘stone’, which is carried around by the failed art collector, and proves to be an artwork by David X. If, in this sense, the ‘stone’ plays the role of evidence of the artist’s presence, it also refers to Cao Xueqin’s eighteenth-century Qing Dynasty masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber* (a family drama in which one of the central narrators is a sentient stone) and the materialisation of the storyteller. Notably, it is Mary again who discovers the truth of the stone. Gu Ling

## *In the Wake: Japanese Photographers Respond to 3/11*

by Anne Nishimura Morse and Anne E. Havinga Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, £40/\$60/€59 (hardcover)

What can you do if, like Masato Seto, you feel you've seen 'something that should never have been seen'? If you're an artist, as this remarkable book shows, you can at least make images that capture some of that anguish and bafflement.

Seto is describing Japan's 'triple disaster' – the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck on 11 March 2011, and the ensuing Fukushima meltdown. He is one of the many Japanese photographers who have been making visible, in all sorts of unexpected ways, the invisible fear, grief, anger, sadness – and the invisible fallout – produced by the catastrophe. Fifteen photographers, including Seto, are represented in *In the Wake*, published to accompany an exhibition running at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston until 12 July.

It's not that images were in short supply when the disaster struck: much of the world saw the terrifying footage shot from TV helicopters of that black slab of sea smashing its way inland, and the aftermath of towns and villages reduced to shards and rubble. But then the news cycle moved on, leaving Japan somehow to cope (or not) with 'something that should never have been seen'.

*In the Wake* starts at that point of struggling to record what happened. Kōzō Miyoshi, known for his large-format black-and-white images, picks out the chaos in almost painful detail: the insane geometry of the ruins, of torn-up rail

tracks and ships rammed far inland. Keizō Kitajima steps in closer to capture in colour the uncanny anarchy of the aftermath – the insolence of an untouched building, for example, and its perfect reflection in a shred of seawater left behind by the tsunami. Naoya Hatakeyama's picture of a rainbow over Rikuzentakata, his devastated hometown, seems absurdly hopeful until you find out that his mother lived here and lost her life to the disaster.

If pictures by these three are as close as this work comes to documentary, that's because *In the Wake* is also testimony to the degree to which Japan's photographers have long pushed the boundaries of the form. Nobuyoshi Araki, one of the figureheads of Japanese photography represented here, responded to the drama of '3/11' by gouging scratches into some of his negatives. The results speak not only of deep emotion but also of frustration at the limits of what photography can do: he scratches across classic Araki images and even a self-portrait.

Lieko Shiga, born 40 years after Araki, had been working since 2008 as 'village photographer' in Kitakama, which felt the full force of the tsunami: she narrowly escaped, losing her house, her studio and a year's work. Her 2013 book *Rasen kaigan (Spiral Shore)*, which won her wide international acclaim, alludes only obliquely to the disaster, but seems to delve deep into

the places it might have touched. Its puzzling, beautiful, highly manipulated images of the villagers engaged in nocturnal rituals, a selection of which have been reproduced here, are unforgettable. (If *In the Wake* has one major fault, it is that its cover is almost identical to that of *Rasen kaigan*.)

Some of the photographers respond principally to the Fukushima nuclear crisis – and its nightmarish reopening of the wounds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The ghostly traces of radiation haunt many photographs – Shimpei Takeda's radiographs of contaminated soil, Kikuji Kawada's TV screenshot of caesium cancer cells, Takashi Arai's mysterious blue and gold daguerreotypes and Seto's iconic negative of VIP visitors to the Fukushima site, stumbling around in protective suits and gas masks.

Amid such formal experiments, the most powerful photographs here – like Hatakeyama's rainbow – are not only the riskiest but also the simplest. Rinko Kawauchi visited the disaster zone not expecting to take photographs. But then she spotted two pigeons – one white, one black – and followed them with her camera as they swooped and strutted amid the rubble. Her stunning pictures leave many questions open. Is it wrong to 'aestheticise' such experience? Or is it actually what we need? As she says in her note in the book, 'Creation awaits us after destruction.' *Andrew Johnston*

## *Stationary 1*

Edited by Christina Li and Heman Chong Spring Workshop, free (softcover)

Reviewing a book distributed free of charge and promoted via recommendation – you hear about the book, then email to request one of the 2,000 copies from Spring Workshop, and they post it to you, which gives the book itself something of the character of an 'insider' conversation – presents some problems. Any critique of what is in effect an act of generosity (leaving aside print and production, five HK\$3.70 and five HK\$1.70 stamps decorated the transparent packaging of the copy that reached London) is bound to sound somewhat churlish and mean-spirited. And yet, offering a response that bows to the grateful politenesses that accompany gift reception seems pointless and to render redundant the notion of *Stationary* as a generator of any kind of dialogue. And, after all, the reader does pay one price for this book: the time spent reading it.

*Stationary 1* is the first instalment of a five-year annual publication project produced by Hong

Kong-based nonprofit Spring Workshop and led by artist Heman Chong, Spring's now-director Christina Li, writer Janine Armin and designer Julie Peeters. A collection of short stories, it's intended as 'a literary space for contemplation', with the publication itself a 'suspended moment' in which contributors – in this first example, writers such as Quinn Latimer and Sean O'Toole, artists such as Sharon Hayes and Adrian Wong, and curators including Rosemary Heather and Chris Fitzpatrick – share a thought or concern that might not otherwise emerge as part of their own creative practice. Sound a bit indulgent? It is. But if art is there to afford anything, it's space for alternative thinking. And, for the most part, the stories collected here amount to more than a collection of daydreams.

Indeed conversation is where *Stationary 1* is strongest. Not in the sense of Nav Haq and James Langdon's closing conversation about art

and book production, but rather in the way that various themes – recording, filing, migration, protest, groups of animals and mourning, to name a few – echo through the various contributions. There are ups and there are downs, and only occasionally the feeling that what you are reading would not get published except as an act of generosity. Perhaps it's a testament to *Stationary 1*'s strengths that the most overtly art and related theory-based texts (by writer Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer and writer-artist Ho Rui An) in the final third seem like something of a letdown. Where does that leave us, then? Wanting to know more about Frank Chu (a professional protester who is the subject of Fitzpatrick's contribution), dipping into Amazon to find out what else Clifford Irving has written and, thanks to Wong, looking awkwardly at other people's pets. A definitive conclusion doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that *Stationary 1* is about. *Mark Rappolt*