Wang Tong

Between Reality and Simulation.
A few reflections on the works exhibited at Traces of Time
by Manuela Lietti

Wang Tong (b. 1967 in Jilin, China, lives and works in Beijing) explores photography with the accuracy of a philologist, while continuously expanding the scope of a genre which, for him, is a meta-language for investigating the complex liaison between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the real and the ideal, the historical and the daily. As an author of documentary images rooted in the keen observation of past history and contemporary reality as well as the tension between strong narrative elements, Wang Tong has devoted his career to portraying the abrupt changes that his mother country has undergone. He documents the construction and incessant renegotiation of China’s identity in both the individual and collective senses. His photographic work is the prism through which we can view the various layers of Chinese history that are inevitably intertwined with the artist’s personal experience. In Wang’s oeuvre, these elements overlap with thrilling results, and each photograph reflects a specific moment in his mental and geographical topography.

A leitmotif in Wang Tong’s body of work which occupies a central role also in the current exhibition *Traces of Time* is the investigation of identity writ large. The landscape, especially the urban one, becomes a metaphor not just for the incessant metamorphosis of Chinese society, but for the Chinese condition. Desires, hopes, fears, and a sense of transiency are all rooted in and reflected by this landscape. The series *Forging Cities* epitomizes this core aspect of Wang’s work. *Forging Cities* is an encyclopedic project on which the artist has been working for more than a decade, an open series focusing on the hundreds of cities across China that Wang Tong has visited and captured in his insatiable lens. Wang has assembled an urban *Wunderkammer* of expanding cities suspended between reality and fantasy, desire and fulfillment. Amusement parks under construction, a bridge by a lake enveloped in mist, concrete walls that unquestionably divide the rural from the urban, towering skyscrapers, iconic vistas recognized even by casual viewers, and anonymous urban corners are just a few of the myriad subjects incorporated into this massive project. These Chinese cities are captured in black and white photos that are often intentionally blurry, presenting the urban world as a collage, constantly unfinished and challenged by new visions. While aspiring to the perfection that is the visual proof of China’s rapid growth, these cities are also undergoing an illogical process of development, convulsively hurtling towards an unattainable future. Uniqueness often gives the way to monotony; it is not by chance that, apart from a few famous spots, most of the photos are about “non-places” whose reason for being follows the same logic but fails to provide any specificity with regards to their location and relationship with it.
The almost complete lack of human figures is quite symptomatic of urban areas that overwhelmingly and increasingly define people as outsiders, metaphorically and literally. When human figures are present, they convey strong a visual and semantic message. A group of people are “trapped” in a crowded elevator that feels more like a prison cell. Workers perform calisthenics, incidental to a master plan of which they are not the protagonists. They are not even viewers; they are simply present to perform certain actions. Wang provides a subtle reflection on the feelings of estrangement conveyed by the futuristic aspects of cities. Because they mimic desires, these cities become mere simulations. Feelings of alienation characterize contemporary cities and their inhabitants. The urban elements of these cities are visual derailments that often do not fit together, and the residents of these cities are often unable to relate to one other, making the environment hostile and unreadable. In this sense, the perfect yet surreal cities portrayed by Wang Tong resemble those shaped by the tenets of the City Beautiful Movement; urban texture links power and social control to architecture and urbanism, instead of becoming an active carrier of meaning.

If *Forging Cities* is a striking and visionary reflection on the identity of landscape, then *Mao on the Wall* is a necessary contemplation of the mingling of past and present histories, as well as the manner in which grand narratives evolving over time reshape small narratives. Wang Tong has worked on *Mao on the Wall* since the early 1990s; in this massive project, he collects, documents, and fixes in time images of Chairman Mao that were stenciled on the walls of both private houses and public places in rural China mainly during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Mao and all the symbols that used to act as metonyms for his figure and political ethos, including the character zhong used to express loyalty and the iconic phrases “Long live Chairman Mao” and “Mao Zedong is the red sun in our hearts,” are captured by Wang Tong’s lens in various manners. The portrait of a young Mao, shy yet resolute, co-exists with his more mature profile associated with all the scientific wonders he contributed to launching. Private interiors are dominated by the omnipresent and sacred figure of Mao overseeing a wide array of daily, mundane, and even shabby objects that document the changing lifestyles of entire families, as well as their bonds to a recent yet remote past. Almost all of the buildings that appear in this body of work have been demolished or are now used differently, which makes these photos, almost 200 shots taken across China, witnesses to the political turmoil that impacted China for more than a decade and permanently changed its face, the incessant passage of time, and the constant quest for modernity that characterizes China, a country always on the move, always looking to the unfinished and the indefinite. Traces of past, present, and future times overlap in a body of work that both reflects and sublates reality, making it a perfect prism through which to read both micro- and macro-histories and the ways in which they interlace and adhere.
**Wang Tong**

Chinese artist Wang Tong was born in 1967 in Jilin, China; currently he lives and works in Beijing, China. Wang Tong has been active in the field of photography since the early 1990s when he started to create some of the most challenging and visually-compelling bodies of work ever produced in China. For its detailed and accurate approach to both the conceptual and the technical aspects related to photography, Wang Tong’s work has been extensively exhibited throughout China, as well as in Japan and Europe. It is also present in major Asian art collections. Wang Tong’s work has been presented in solo and groups shows organized at: Galleria Carla Sozzani, 10 Corso Como, Milan (2005); Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, Beijing and Tokyo (2006); Fotografie Noorderlicht, Groningen (2008); Alessandria Video and Photography Biennale, Alessandria (2011); Ofoto Gallery, Shanghai (2012); Stavanger Museum, Stavanger, Norway (2014); Format International Photography Festival, Derby, UK (2015), among others.

**Manuela Lietti**

Independent art critic and curator specialized in contemporary Asian art, Manuela is based in Beijing. Since 2003, she has been active as a curator, critic, and coordinator in the field of gallery and museum exhibitions as well as public art projects, in China and abroad. She has worked with various institutions, included: Venice Biennale (Venice), The Israel Museum (Jerusalem), CAFA Art Museum (Beijing), Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), Carrara Sculpture Biennale (Carrara), The Chinese Ministry of Culture (Beijing), The Italian Ministry of Culture (Rome), Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (Beijing). She is a correspondent for the art magazine Arte e Critica and regularly contributes to a number of other art publications included Frieze, Flash Art, artforum.com.cn, artron.net.