

Cheng Ran

Existence Without Air, Food, or Water

Exhibition in Lucerne: 22.11.2013–18.1.2014

Opening: Friday, November 22.11.2013; 6 - 8pm

After three exhibitions at the gallery in Beijing, Cheng Ran is being introduced to a Western audience with his first solo presentation at Galerie Urs Meile in Lucerne. In his recently published debut novel, *Circadian Rhythm* (2013, paperback, English and Chinese version, 256 pages, 18.4 x 13 cm), the artist again takes up motifs and quotes from his earlier works; thus, the novel can be read as a subtext for this exhibition. But Cheng Ran does not simply repeat topics and images. With the translation into another medium he also provides a new perspective, another understanding, a variation, a new aspect. For example, the novel's reference to his early video work *Rock Dove* (2009, single channel HD video, color/sound, 5') also suggests an interpretation of it. In the video you see doves sitting on fluorescent lights. When the lights are turned on, they are startled and scatter in all directions. In the novel Cheng Ran's main character triggers a similar situation, described as follows: "It is like the moment of creation. The chaos only lasts for a moment. ... The birds quickly adapt to the change in their environment. Light and dark are no different to them; only change is a threat."

The first part of the exhibition focuses on *Circadian Rhythm*. Like props or unfinished chapters of the story, the installations frame a reading table. On a gray woolen carpet, *The Last Generation* (2013 pure New Zealand wool, manually embroidered carpet, 272 x 192 cm), the first sentences of the novel are embroidered: "It was not the best of times, it was not the worst of times ..." They are negated variations on the lines Charles Dickens employed to begin his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Receipts, tickets and other ephemera from scenes out of the surreal mystery seem to prove its validity (*Letters* (2013, written on paper, wooden frame, 9 x 124 x 84 cm)). With *Eagle and Deer* (2013, autoharp, motor, eagle feather, 43 x 64 x 53 cm) Cheng Ran transforms the energy of a scene from the book, in which an eagle awaits the death of a dying deer.

Cheng Ran's use of repetition and quotes also has another effect. The viewer very quickly gets a sense of recognition, which makes the topics seem familiar. By a second encounter, the stories seem strangely true and innate, because the memories come from the mind of the viewer. It doesn't matter if you read the novel first or visit the exhibition, see an installation or a video. Cheng Ran creates a parallel universe that seems plausible and true, even though time and space do not have their usual meaning in it.

In the second room a selection of Cheng Ran's video works is shown. Here, a slightly changed version of a dialogue from the classic Hollywood movie, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), is the recurring element. In *Circadian Rhythm*, it is the last conversation between the protagonist and his girlfriend. It also appears in the main projection, *The Last Sentence* (2013, single channel HD video, color / sound, 12'44"), where this conversation between a man and a woman about their wishes and beliefs is featured over images of a car ride through the south of Iceland. And lastly the same sentences can be found on pieces of paper that are placed like speech balloons between the objects Cheng Ran brought home from his travels (*Tide Conversations* (2013, stones, sea shells, fountain pen nibs, inscribed notepaper, wooden plinth, 105 x 244 x 80 cm)). In *Secret Notes to Nan Goldin* (2013, single channel HD video, color / sound, 16:9, 14'13") the artist hides similar, tiny, folded-up notes containing questions for the New York-based artist in the apartment of a friend, as he knows that Nan Goldin will be the next guest. Another scrap of paper from the pocket of the anonymous dead body leads to the first clue in the novel. The idea that a found message can also contain important information for a person for whom it was never intended, is elaborated in the video *Existence Without Air, Food, or Water* (2013, single channel video, color/sound, 16:9, 10' 45"). It is based on the poetic entries from a found diary, which Cheng Ran transformed into a song. The unknown, lovesick woman is also the author of the phrase that Cheng Ran has chosen for the exhibition title: *Existence Without Air, Food, or Water*. For the artist, this term refers to spiritual existence, which, in contrast to physical existence, has needs beyond air, food, or water. The title seems fit for Cheng Ran's oeuvre, since his works stand out because of their intangible qualities. His pieces are bearers of moods, portable atmospheres; despite their complex narratives and symbolic elements, these works

are not meant to be read iconographically. *Circadian Rhythm* ends with an even bigger mystery than it began with. Nothing is resolved. Cheng Ran understands art the way it was before semiotics. His artworks do not refer to a reality; they constitute their own.

1 *Circadian Rhythm*, 2013, p. 102

Cheng Ran was born in Inner Mongolia in 1981 and is currently based in Hangzhou, China, and in Amsterdam. After graduating from the Chinese Academy of Art in Hangzhou, he worked for Chinese video artist Yang Fudong for five years. He is currently participating in the Residency Studio Project at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Recent group exhibitions include *ON/OFF: China's Young Artists in Concepts and Practice*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China (2013); *The 1st CAFAM FUTURE*, CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, China (2012); *Kino der Kunst* Film Festival, Munich, Germany (2013); and the *26th European Media Art Festival* in Osnabrück, Germany (2013). Cheng Ran has also been nominated for the 2013 Absolut Art Award.