

## DIARY OF A MADMAN

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## Boundaries

Cheng Ran is part of a new generation of young Chinese artists who grew up in an era of pirated DVDs, the Internet, the deluge of media pseudo-facts, and plentiful opportunities to travel abroad. Therefore, unlike the older generation whose focus lies primarily on identity or generic cultural reflection, Cheng Ran and his peers face the challenge of defining and developing their individual artistic autonomy in an increasingly monopolized global environment. Perhaps this is why his generation is particularly interested in such themes as boundaries, differences, resistance and marginalization.

As Cheng Ran himself has said, “when a boundary becomes blurred and opens up something new, that is what I look for in my work.” His artistic practice has followed this motto since. This is best embodied in his first film format artwork *In Course of the Miraculous*, a nearly eight-hour piece. It tells the stories of three adventures, all of which end in death: George Marlowe’s failed attempt to climb Mount Everest, Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader’s mysterious disappearance in the Atlantic Ocean, and a violent revolt on a large Chinese fishing boat that ended 22 lives (the mutiny of the Lurongyu 2682). In this work, he challenges not only the ideas of typical film length and accepted narrative structures, but also the boundaries and conventions with which audiences have grown comfortable. For his next project (presented in this exhibition), Cheng shifts his focus to new territory: the idea of ‘otherness’ and the meaning of language.

In the following paragraphs, we will analyze in detail Cheng’s new project *Diary of a Madman*. It can be viewed as Cheng’s latest cinematic experiment to understand the essence of language & speech, otherness, aspects of psychogeography, and the relationship between time and the urban environment.

*Diary of a Madman* is an ongoing project consisting of three parts, each filmed in a different location. The first of these was completed during a three-month residency in New York in 2016. This was followed by another residency in Jerusalem in the same year. The work *The Dream of Jerusalem*, which is part of the project *Diary of a Madman: Jerusalem*, serves as the prelude to this exhibition, though the overall project is still a work-in-progress. In Hong Kong, the artist filmed and completed *Diary of a Madman: Hong Kong* in 2017, making the existing project a visual trilogy of a phantasmic journey across three vastly different cultural spheres.

Cheng Ran and *Diary of a Madman* by Lu Xun

The title is a direct reference to the short story *Diary of a Madman* by Chinese writer Lu Xun (b. Zhejiang, China, 1881–1936), which in turn was inspired by Nikolai Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman* (1835). Lu Xun is considered the leading figure of modern Chinese literature and his *Diary of a Madman* (1918) was the first and most influential work written in vernacular Chinese since the fall of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), China’s last feudal regime. The story, narrated in the first person and arranged as a series of diary entries, tells the tale of a mentally challenged man who believes that all those around him have become cannibalistic and are plotting to prey on him. A profound sense of loss, alienation and madness run throughout the course of Cheng Ran’s work in the first person. In *Diary of a Madman: New York*, we encounter a blonde girl in red saying, in broken Mandarin Chinese with a foreign accent, “I don’t know what you are talking about,” and a torch bearing girl wandering inside a cave underneath New York saying “I cannot hear my voice, I do not know where I am but I can see the shadows of Manhattan...” in Hidatsa, a near-extinct Native American language. In *Diary of a Madman: Hong Kong*, we hear the artist speaking Cantonese as the voice-over of an abandoned dog (“Tang Gou”) and see Hong Kong through its eyes. Unlike Lu Xun’s story, Cheng is less interested in an explicit political message. By using brilliant cinematography expressed through his idiosyncratic ideas on memories, living space and language, his story conveys a mysteriously poetic sensation—one which lingers on between the streets of Manhattan and the remnants of their shadows inside a disturbed mind that hums along to a strange tune...

1. *Psychogeography*, Merlin Coverley, Pocket Essentials, 2010, p.10.

## Cheng Ran, Psychogeography and Otherness

One prominent theme of Cheng Ran's *Diary of a Madman* echoes the idea of 'psychogeography,' a phenomenon extensively discussed in the book *Psychogeography*. According to the author Merlin Coverley, the term was first coined by Guy Debord, who described it as "the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."<sup>1</sup> Understood as the point where psychology and geography meet, aspects of psychogeography have been closely associated with an illustrious cultural lineage involving literary figures such as William Blake and Daniel Defoe, and thinkers such as Guy Debord and Walter Benjamin, among others. Similarly, Cheng looks at the psychological and cultural impact of urban space on individual lives, and creates isolated characters who mutter a language alien to themselves and whose identities become unidentifiable—as if speaking through their minds' eye against a backdrop of the ever-expanding cityscape that threatens to consume them.

Many of Cheng Ran's works possess a cinematic quality that captures a fleeting moment in the most unexpected scenario. This is particularly magnified in *Diary of a Madman: New York*. There are instances when the characters look directly at the camera, against the Manhattan skyline or in the midst of a cluttered water tower interior. Their sudden gazes deliver a somewhat chilling and pensive effect, and we are immediately reminded of the fragility of this easily assumed veil between the observer and the observed.

Cheng is apt at conveying an intense emotional state that perhaps all of us have buried deep down in our unconscious. In this madly melancholic world where homeless people, pigeons, girl with torch, rubbish bags and derelict building interiors become something far more symbolic, the space and their protagonists seem to merge into one entity, unable to be freed from a formless confinement. Just as Cheng once observed, "For each story I give them a straightforward script. Perhaps every character created is also myself. I can be a pigeon, a rubbish bag, a girl, or a madman...I speak through all of these personas." In one stunning shot in *New York*, a girl walks into a cave with a burning torch. She wanders around aimlessly, speaking in Hidatsa (an endangered Native American language) of being lost and directionless. In *Psychogeography*, Coverley expresses his concern for the fate of the "flâneur," who is so closely bound to the place he inhabits that any redevelopment of it would threaten his very existence.<sup>2</sup> Stepping back, Cheng seems to be pointing to, if not explicitly, American history and postcolonial social divisions through the eyes of the Hidatsa-speaking girl, unveiling something long forgotten that was once the true "spirit of the place."

In the second installment of the trilogy, the artist shifts his focus to contemporary Hong Kong—a Hong Kong stripped of the shiny façade and myriad shopping complexes, as seen through the eyes of "Ma Ying" ("麻鷹", Black Kite, *Milvus migrans*, a medium-sized bird of prey) and "Tang Gou" ("唐狗", stray dog). Two frames display a slideshow of still photographs of everyday life in Hong Kong, with voiceovers alternating between the two characters, both of whom speak in Cantonese. The stories unfold as the two characters describe their lives in the backstreets of this metropolis: Tang Gou's joy in finding a thrown-away curry, his observations on massage parlors, homeless people on the street, hypodermic needles and pills buried in bushes, and his reflection on his own future at the little electronic shop where he stays. Ma Ying seems to appear every time after Tang Gou's story and to highlight a sense of melancholy through being the "other." Perhaps the sky is more uninhibited than the ground; she catches glimpses of change in the city, expresses her love for the harbor and (like Tang Gou) ponders the state of her own migratory existence. In the course of less than 11 minutes, the work poetically builds up a tension that stretches between the unknown faces of city dwellers and their flawed habitat. Ma Ying and Tang Gou exist as narrators as well as the quiet city on-lookers who, in one way or another, live everywhere yet belong nowhere. At the end of the Hong Kong story, we hear the last lines of Ma Ying (Black Kite):

'If the clouds could be stopped  
would I be squeezed out to the edge too?  
I don't want to leave this year. I want to see more.  
Each person in that dense forest, walking, seeking.  
There is light.'

2. *Psychogeography*, Merlin Coverley, Pocket Essentials, 2010, P.20.

The third installment, *Diary of a Madman: Jerusalem*, focuses on conflicts that have emerged and evolved over the course of history under varied geographical and cultural circumstances. The region in question cannot be more characteristic or symbolic: Israel, the historical cradle of the three monotheistic religions, with its notorious Arab-Israeli conflict. It appears, however, that what matter more to Cheng Ran than the actual sights of Jerusalem are people's impressions, memories and conceptions of these places that linger on in their minds. Very much like the countless imaginative encounters in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the sense of a particular place is not fixated in one form, every city being a giant kaleidoscope of sounds, images, and moments, when the unseen is made visible and the visible is seen in a new, fresh way. It is also a reflection of genius loci—the particularities of a location or, in Coverley's words, the "spirit of place," through which its current inhabitants are connected with the histories of its previous inhabitants and events by virtue of being in the same geographic locality.

There is a luminous artistic and literary tradition of being the "other," the "outsider" or "onlooker." The discerning eye is like Nietzsche's "untimely being," examining the world with a dark gaze so he will not be consumed or assimilated. Cheng's characters are beset by desperate conflicts of "otherness," and bellow in alienated languages in the midst of their strangely familiar surroundings. Thus "otherness" becomes the means of their psychogeographical expression, which gives rise to a feeling of mystery and absurdity. Clumsy Chinese spoken by foreign actors creates a strange sense of dislocation and hints at New York's cultural complexity. We see a young African American man walking across the bridge shouting "I will not go back," and an old man trapped in an abandoned water tower whispering "I was born free, into the sea...I was born in the wilderness." All these fragments seem to merge together to form an entity. In the video of the pigeons, the artist narrates in inconsistent, vague English and quotes Allen Ginsberg's poetry. It is as if Ginsberg is speaking through the pigeons.

#### Language and Speech

In *New York* and *Hong Kong*, Cheng Ran focuses on the issues of language and speech. First, he employs role reversal, so each statement is spoken in a tone foreign to its own speaker. As mentioned above, in a pigeon-themed short video in *New York*, Cheng recites a poem by Allen Ginsberg in broken English in a way that makes the words increasingly difficult to distinguish. In another scene, a girl with a torch repeats the lines "I cannot hear my voice...shadows of Manhattan" in the Hidatsa language inside a cave. These lines come up again in *The Self-Portrait*, where shadows of Manhattan are projected onto the artist's face as he repeats the words of the torch-bearing girl. Cheng uses light and shadow as a metaphor in cinematography and presents a curious scenario: language against language.

To analyze in a conceptual framework, we are inevitably led to Derrida's notion of "différance" and "difference." In Derrida's view, "difference" signals not only the distinctions of concepts but also defines the very essence of being different. Here, "difference" generates difference itself endlessly. Derrida thus created the word "différance" to radicalize the idea. His "différance" is the difference generated by "difference." Only through this continuous separation, distinction, constant reestablishing of boundaries and infinite transgression could there open up a possibility meaningful to others.<sup>3</sup>

In *New York* and *Hong Kong*, Cheng freely deconstructs meaning and speech in their original setting by reversing roles, thus presenting a complex lingual situation that resists instant definition. This situation seems unfathomable and absurd. But it is in such a scenario that we are forced to look at the nature of language and speech from a fresh viewpoint. And this is exactly what the artist would like us to understand in his work: through all the dilemmas and contradictions, within imageries fused with the demolition and reconstruction of words, Cheng opens up a profound space for contemplation of "otherness."

As Derrida points out, "aporia" (dilemma, difficulty, confusion, hardship) is the only path to pursuing a relationship with others, so that it becomes possible to understand the inexplicit nature of difference, opposition, confusion and contradiction. As such, the artist strives to challenge the boundaries of languages, cultures and nations. In the first two parts of *Diary of a Madman*, he "ventures to comprehend that which is impossible to comprehend and endeavors to speak the unspeakable."<sup>4</sup>

3. *Key Words in Cultural Studies*, Wang Min'an, ed., Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2007, p. 117, 139 and 423.

4. *Key Words in Cultural Studies*, Wang Min'an, ed., Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2007, p. 156.