

Anatoly Shuravlev

Reach Out – China

Exhibition in Beijing: 8.3.–20.4.2014

Opening: Saturday, March 8, 2014, 4–7pm

Russian-born, Berlin-based artist Anatoly Shuravlev (*1963) spent several months at the artist's studio at our gallery in Beijing to prepare his exhibition *Reach Out – China*, just as he did in 2007 for his previous show, *China Connection*. And indeed, the current exhibition pursues the topics of the earlier one, with its similar title and its focus on China. Here, though, the artist takes self-referencing even further. In preparation for his 2007 exhibition he made a series of all black c-prints.¹ Each print contains a tiny white dot in the center, which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be in the shape of Japan, Great Britain, India, the United States, or China. Shuravlev actually revised one edition of this series by engraving slogans and drawings into the acrylic glass over the original images. Although this seems like a rather brutal act at first sight, the artist regards it as a refinement. He reworked the prints in accordance with his personal development, just as one might re-read a book several years later.² Moreover, by physically altering them, he turned one set of the former edition of three into unique works. The missing depth of these linear engravings is contrasted with the viewer's reflections behind them. The observer can never look at the work without looking at himself. Shuravlev even engraved some words and images mirror-inverted, so that the viewer's alter ego inside the work would be able to read it.

Shuravlev tries to do something similarly impossible with the bronze handprint *Reach Out–Ai Weiwei*.³ This intention is not rooted in coquetry but in his true conviction that art can make things happen, which in other contexts are utterly impractical. With this work he made a “third, free hand” for Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who is famously not allowed to leave his home country. The handprint is in contrast to its original able to travel. But this is not the only potential it provides. It also gives visitors access to the renowned personality and the opportunity to “reach out,” whether they want to show their solidarity by putting their hands in Ai Weiwei's, or whether they are just curious.

The political implications that arise first in the mind of a Western observer are secondary to Shuravlev. He is more concerned with philosophy than plain politics. Therefore, it is also purely accidental that the monks who created the large map of China⁴ in the next room are from Tibet. The confrontation with the borders of China is, of course, a painful topic for the Tibetan religious community, whose leader, the Dalai Lama, does not miss a chance to protest against the Chinese occupation, as he calls it. But for Shuravlev it was only important for the religious people to create the mandala and thus perceive it through their outlook on the world. For them the completion of a mandala is a religious ritual and means something totally different from what it will represent to the visitors of the exhibition. Shuravlev was looking for this confrontation between religious and artistic language. In a religious setting the mandala would be destroyed immediately after being finished. Contradictorily, in an art context the work would not be destroyed after the end of the exhibition. The artist does not abide by both sets of rules; the mandala will exist for the duration of the exhibition and afterward be available for sale, but in another form: the sand will be sold in bags, as pure material, which is never to be spread out again.

The light-absorbing qualities of the black sand make the mandala look like a black hole, which symbolizes everything and nothing, not only in Tibetan culture. Such a paradoxical connotation also seems a fitting allegory for Shuravlev's question of “What is this China?” He considers it so gigantic, diverse, uncontrollable, and contradictory that it is fundamentally incomprehensible. Again, a viewer trained by Western media has to discipline himself not to think too much about the notion that “nothing ever comes out of a black hole,” because Shuravlev has a longstanding preoccupation with radically black imagery. He often refers to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* and its double entendre as radically reductive gesture in the art context and as manifestation of spiritual energy, similar to Buddhism's idea of the oneness of everything. Likewise, Shuravlev's exhibition is best absorbed with a broad view. The formally minimal works are actually totalities. A Kalachakra mandala, for example, represents its creator's concept of the world and is traditionally conceived as a map of the mandala palace surrounded by the perfected universe. The handprint is a strong *pars pro toto*. An image of a hand forming a victory sign, for example,

gets a message across without showing the whole body. In Catholicism a relic such as a drop of blood or a piece of cloth, which has had contact with the body of a saint is thought to bring the believer closer to God. The hand- and footprints of celebrities in front of the Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles are visited by thousands of tourists each year, who want to compare themselves with the beautiful and famous. A similar kind of self-reflection is seen in the revised c-prints: an artist looks back at his work and himself several years later and asks the same self-scrutiny of the viewer. The outcome is not overly positive; sentences such as, “Note to self: you are a fucking idiot,” “Fuck You,” or “I can’t save you from yourself” make it clear that there is “No art comfort here.” Maybe that is true, but instead there is a surreal, grand idea of what art can do on display.

- 1 *Big India, Big China, Big USA, Big Japan, Great Britain*, all: 2008, c-print, edition of 3, acrylic glass, 179 x 124 cm
- 2 *New Old Big India, New Old Big China, New Old Big USA, New Old Big Japan, New Old Great Britain*, all: 2013, c-print, unique, hand-engraved acrylic glass, 179 x 124 cm
- 3 *Reach out – Ai Weiwei*, 2013, bronze, concrete, edition of 3, 12 x 25 x 30 cm (bronze), 100 x 27 x 32 cm (plinth)
- 4 *Universe of China*, 2014, black sand, unique, 580 x 711 cm