

About the exhibition *INSIDE VIEWS* -

Contemporary Photography from China at the WestLicht Gallery in Vienna

In 2015, the OstLicht gallery presented Ren Hang's first comprehensive solo show in Europe. During his stay in Vienna, he created works that are now being made prominently available for the first time as part of the extraordinary exhibition *INSIDE VIEWS*. In my opinion, the proportion of social documentary photography could have been greater in order to shed more light on the social aspects. The series is accompanied by an extensive making-of, photographed by WestLicht director Peter Coeln, who captured Ren Hang's photo shoot in the Vienna Woods with his camera, thus providing a unique insight into the working methods of the exceptional artist from China, who died in 2017. To mark the exhibition, the documentation is also being published as a limited edition photo book under the title *Ren Hang at Work*.

The exhibition *INSIDE VIEWS* is a cooperation with the Alexander Tutsek Foundation, Munich, and the OstLicht Gallery, Vienna. With works by Chen Ronghui, Liang Xiu, Pixy Liao, Liu Ke and Huang Huang, Liu Tao, Luo Yang, Ren Hang, Silin Liu, Wang Bing and Zhang Huan.

Historical and social context

The economic reforms initiated under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s opened China to foreign investment and led to the creation of a capitalist market economy within a "socialist framework". Put simply, from the point of view of the exploitation of human labor, the best (or worst) of two worlds collided. On the one hand, a new, dynamic imperialist power emerged, and on the other, the resulting social tensions were suppressed with a heavy hand by a "Communist" Party experienced in mass repression. These reforms led to unprecedented economic expansion, but also to growing inequality and social tensions. Fun fact: the People's Congress, the theoretically highest authority in the political system, has the largest number of billions of deputies in the world. Since the 1990s, China has increasingly relied on export production and cheap labor, leading to a massive shift of the rural population to urban areas, where they often had to work in precarious conditions.

The working class is the central subject in the production relations of capitalism. In China, the expansion of industrial production has led to the formation of a huge working class that often lives and works in precarious conditions. However, this working class is not homogeneous; it consists of migrant workers, urban workers and migrant workers, all of whom are subject to different forms of exploitation and oppression.

Since 2000, strikes and industrial action in China have increased in both frequency and intensity. These struggles are often spontaneous reactions to poor working conditions, low wages, unpaid overtime and a lack of social protection. A notable example is the Honda strike in Guangdong in 2010, in which thousands of workers demanded higher wages and better working conditions. This strike was one of the first large-scale and high-profile industrial action in China and inspired many other similar actions across the country.

Example Foxconn

The strikes and, above all, the suicides of workers in Foxconn branches in the People's Republic of China have become legendary: the Taiwanese company is one of the largest electronics manufacturers in the world and produces for numerous well-known brands, including Apple. The working conditions in Foxconn's factories, especially in China, have attracted international attention for years and are the subject of numerous reports and investigations.

Wages at Foxconn factories are often low. While some increases have been made over the years to comply with minimum wage laws and public pressure, wages often remain just above the subsistence level. Many workers rely on overtime to earn an acceptable income. Working hours at Foxconn factories are notoriously long. Reports have spoken of shifts of up to 12 hours, and several times six days a week. Although Chinese labor laws prohibit overtime, the work environment at Foxconn is characterized by high production pressure. Workers often report strict supervision and an intense pace of work to meet production targets. Many of the tasks at Foxconn factories are monotonous and require long hours of standing or repetitive manual movements, causing physical and mental stress. There have been reports of inadequate safety measures leading to accidents and health problems. This includes both physical injuries and long-term health effects from handling hazardous materials.

Many workers come from rural areas and live in dormitories provided by Foxconn. These accommodations are often overcrowded and offer little privacy, which can contribute to social isolation and psychological distress. The psychological stress at Foxconn factories is well documented. High pressure, long working hours and poor working conditions have led to numerous suicide cases, especially in 2010 and 2011. This sparked international outrage and prompted Foxconn and Apple to promise measures to improve working conditions.

There is only one legal trade union in China, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which is closely linked to the Communist Party and often serves as a tool to control the working class. Independent trade unions are illegal and are heavily repressed by the state. Despite this repression, numerous unofficial workers' organizations and support networks have been formed in recent years and play an important role in labor struggles.

The strikes and labor struggles in China are an expression of the contradictions of expanding capitalism. The expansion of

industrial production and China's integration into the global economy have led to an intensification of the exploitation of the working class, which inevitably leads to resistance and labor struggles. However, these struggles are not only economic, but also political, as they challenge the rule of the Communist Party and the stability of the regime.

On the development of Chinese photography since 2000

As in the rest of the world, digitalization has revolutionized photography in China. The proliferation of digital cameras and smartphones has massively increased the production and consumption of photography. This technology has enabled a broad section of the population to participate in photographic discourse. Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo play a central role in the dissemination of photographs and encourage the emergence of new visual cultures.

China has experienced unprecedented urbanization since the 1990s. Photographers such as Zhang Dali and Wang Qingsong have documented and commented on this transformation. Zhang Dali, known for his series "Demolition," documents the demolition of old buildings and the construction of new urban structures to illustrate the tensions between tradition and modernity. Wang Qingsong uses large-scale, staged photographs to depict the social impacts of urbanization and consumerism.

China's conceptual and avant-garde photography has attracted international attention. Artists such as Ai Weiwei and RongRong & inri use photography to pose critical social and political questions. Ai Weiwei uses photography as a medium of criticism and resistance. A major exhibition of his work was recently shown at the Albertina Modern in Vienna, which also dealt in detail with the repression against the artist.

Documentary photography in China has played an important role in portraying social realities. Photographers such as Lu Guang and Sim Chi Yin focus on environmental issues, social inequalities and the impact of economic change. Lu Guang has gained international recognition for his work on pollution and the living conditions of workers, while Singapore-born Sim Chi Yin's projects examine life on the periphery of Chinese society.

Photography has taken a firm place in the contemporary Chinese art scene. Major museums and galleries in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities have hosted exhibitions by local and international photographers. The Three Shadows Photography

Art Centre in Beijing, founded by RongRong and inri, is a major centre for contemporary photography in China and promotes exchange between Chinese and international artists. However, exhibitions of contemporary photography are still a balancing act. A certain degree of artistic freedom is also part of the external image of "modern" China. The authorities, however, keep a close eye on what can and cannot be shown.

Many of the Chinese artists currently on display at Vienna's WESTLICHT also live and work in this field of tension. The spectrum of works on display is wide, so I have very different approaches to the individual works on display. I find Ren Hang's (see below) photographs technically exciting, and the provocative intentions behind his work as well. I feel the same way about Zhang Huan's photos - during a very excellent tour with WestLicht curator Fabian Knierim and art mediator Nathalie Neubauer, certain similarities between his work and the works of the Viennese Actionists were pointed out.

In the following, I will restrict myself to a more detailed treatment of Ren Hang, as his work contributed significantly to the realization of the current exhibition. Without wishing to diminish the value of the other artists exhibited, I will then restrict myself primarily to Wang Bing and Cheng Ongui, as I see greater social relevance in their work.

Ren Hang – the tragic provocateur

Ren Hang (1987-2017) was a Chinese photographer and poet who gained international fame through his provocative and controversial work. His photographs, often nude and erotic, question traditional values and norms and were therefore bound to offend a state that rewards - or punishes - the compliance of its citizens through a system of "social credit points".

Ren Hang was born in 1987 in the city of Changchun, Jilin Province. He began his career as a photographer while studying advertising at Beijing University. With no formal training in photography and driven by a strong creative impulse, he began photographing his friends in intimate and often unconventional poses.

Ren Hang's photographs are characterized by their minimalism and the use of strong colors. Often taken in natural settings or in spartan interiors, his works place great emphasis on the human body and its expressive possibilities. His models, often naked and in unusual poses, consciously break with traditional notions of shame and decency.

A recurring theme in Ren Hang's work is sexuality, which he depicts in a way that is both tender and challenging. By emphasizing physicality and intimacy, he aims to celebrate the normality of human sexuality and question the limits of censorship and morality.

Ren Hang's work faced considerable opposition in China. His photographs were often censored due to their explicit nature and taboo-breaking, and Ren Hang himself was arrested several times. Despite these difficulties, he continued his work and became a symbol of artistic freedom and resistance to state oppression.

In the West, however, his work has been widely celebrated and shown at international exhibitions. Ren Hang's work has been exhibited in prestigious galleries and museums, including the Foam Photography Museum in Amsterdam and the Fotografiska in Stockholm.

In addition to photography, Ren Hang was also a poet. His poems are about love, pain and the search for meaning in an uncertain, unstable world. Ren Hang suffered from severe depression, which is reflected in many of his works. In February 2017, at the age of just 29, Ren Hang took his own life. His death sparked shock and grief around the world.

Why does Ren Hang's work form a key axis of the exhibition "Inside Views"? Here is an excerpt from the press release from WESTLICHT:

"In 2015, the OstLicht gallery presented Ren Hang's first comprehensive solo show in Europe. During his stay in Vienna, he created works that are now being made prominently available for the first time as part of the INSIDE VIEWS exhibition. The series is accompanied by an extensive making-of, photographed by WestLicht director Peter Coeln, who captured Ren Hang's photo shoot in the Vienna Woods with his camera, thus providing a unique insight into the working methods of the exceptional artist from China, who died in 2017. To mark the exhibition, the documentation is also being published as a limited edition photo book under the title Ren Hang at Work."

Ren Hang has never been seen at work before; Peter Coeln's documentation of Ren Hang's precise and yet joyful "directing work" will be a highlight in the literature about the Chinese artist.

Chen Ronghui – the eyewitness of change

Chen Ronghui is a photographer and photojournalist whose work is an in-depth exploration of social and environmental issues. Known for his documentary projects, which often examine the impact of China's rapid economic change, Chen has quickly gained international recognition.

Chen Ronghui was born in China in 1989. He began his photographic career relatively early and quickly developed an interest in documentary photography. After studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he returned to China to focus on projects documenting the social and environmental changes in his home country.

What is striking about Chen Ronghui's works is the almost strict composition and subtle use of color. He shows the effects of rapid urbanization and industrialization in China and tells the stories of the people affected by these changes.

A central theme in Chen's work is the relationship between humans and the environment. His series "Petrochemical China" documents the environmental impact of the petrochemical industry on rural communities in China. These works vividly demonstrate the harmful effects of industrial pollution and raise questions about sustainability and the social costs of economic growth.

One of his best-known projects is "Freezing Land," which deals with the phenomenon of ghost towns in China. Some photos from this project can be seen in WESTLICHT. This series documents abandoned and half-finished towns that were created in the course of urbanization but were abandoned due to economic misplanning or speculative real estate deals. Chen's sometimes melancholic photographs show the emptiness and decay of these urban spaces and what they do to the people who remain there.

Another of Chen's major projects is "Yellow River," in which he documents life along the Yellow River. The Yellow River, often referred to as the "cradle of Chinese civilization," is now severely affected by pollution and climate change. Chen's photographs show the everyday struggles and resilience of the people who live in this region. At the same time, the viewer is asked to decide for themselves: what price is justified for industrialization and economic growth? How long are we prepared to turn a blind eye to the effects of environmental destruction in the interests of profit?

Chen Ronghui's work has earned him numerous international awards, including the World Press Photo Award and the

Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund, and his photos have been published in the New York Times Magazine, TIME, and National Geographic, among others.

Wang Bing – frightening insights

Wang Bing is a documentary filmmaker and photographer. Since the early 2000s, Wang Bing has developed a unique visual language through his films and photographs that capture the everyday life and social realities of Chinese society.

Wang Bing was born in 1967 in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China. He studied photography at the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts and film at the Beijing Film Academy. His education and interest in documentary practice laid the foundation for his later career as a filmmaker and photographer.

Wang Bing's work is characterized by a blunt and often minimalist approach. His documentaries are known for their length and their intense observation of everyday life. Wang often uses long, unedited shots that immerse the viewer in the world of his protagonists. A central theme in Wang Bing's work is the lives of marginalized communities. He documents the stories of those who are often overlooked or ignored - laborers, peasants, migrant workers and the homeless. Through his sensitive and respectful approach, he gives these people a voice and brings their stories to light.

Those interested can find examples of Wang Bing's work on the Internet, for example Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks (2003), one of his best-known works. The nine-hour documentary film, which is divided into three parts, documents the decline of the Tie Xi industrial site in Shenyang, a former stronghold of heavy industry. Through the eyes of the workers and residents, Wang Bing paints a vivid picture of the social and economic transformation in China. If you compare Bing's film with footage from the present day, you can see how similar the fates of workers around the world are.

In Three Sisters, Wang Bing focuses on the lives of three young girls in a remote village in Yunnan Province. The film shows their daily lives, which are characterized by hard work and poverty, but also their resilience and solidarity.

Dead Souls is a harrowing eight-hour documentary about the fate of survivors of the campaign against "the right" in the late 1950s. Over a million people were sent to forced labor camps in the Gobi Desert because they were suspicious of the Mao-Stalinist system.

Wang Bing's photographic works reflect the same themes and approaches as his films. They document the daily lives and struggles of ordinary people in China and are characterized by a similar aesthetic and narrative depth.

To summarise: INSIDE VIEWS is an extraordinary and complex exhibition. Anyone interested should check the WestLicht website to see if and when the next guided tour is available - as mentioned, curator Fabian Knieriem and art

mediator Nathalie Neubauer offer exciting and in-depth information about the exhibition, the artists and their works.

Trigger warning (hihi, I finally have one of those!): Anyone who is frightened by nudity and rather explicit sexual depictions should avoid Westbahnstraße until the end of the exhibition!

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