

Sarah Champion (CEO) Chinese Arts Centre, UK, in conversation with Anthony Lam
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Sarah: I first became aware of your work from a project you did with Canary Wharf many years ago. It was a series of documentary style photographs that they displayed and made into a publication. Could you tell us a little about this project and following on, how your work has encompassed both your individual artistic practice as well as working with institutions, including museums and galleries on projects involving the public.

Anthony: Firstly, you are referring to the public participation project *Take a Fresh Look* made in conjunction with Canary Wharf Arts & Events, which was specifically about generating a public and 'positive' view of Tower Hamlets in the year 2000. This project was researched, facilitated and produced by myself primarily and invited five hundred people, both individuals and those attending 26 different social and community centers, to take part in making photographs about their view of living and/or working in Tower Hamlets. From this, a publication was made and a publicly sited touring exhibition.

It is pertinent at this point to mention a personal and social project that I produced in 1995 called *Notes from the Street*, supported by Autograph ABP and Camerawork gallery, which was also about community in Tower Hamlets. *Notes from the Street* was a project made about, and with, a group of young British Bangladeshi men in the east end and it was part of my photographic response to changes and transitions within this particular community. The photography reflected a time when a shift in values was (and still is) occurring within this community. It depicted with images and text, young men who were asserting a unique sense of identity located in both Bangladeshi and British cultures.

Notes from the Street, a social and critical project in many ways (including public display - as advertising panels inside Docklands Light Railway trains), is at odds with the image of the same place that *Take a Fresh Look* managed to produce. So much so, that whilst everyone was happy with the displaying of *Take a Fresh Look* in public, *Notes from the Street* encountered resistance and opposition due to the image(s) it displays of a people and lives marginalised from the centres of power and influence that symbolise Canary Wharf, the new financial centre of London, and its remaking of the (image of the) east end. This sense of perception and image is always changing and it is something that I am sensitive to regarding the making of my projects and the subsequent readings.

In terms of my working practice, I'd like to talk about my differing 'personas' within photography, working with the 'public' and engaging socially. I have a longstanding involvement with photography that stretches back over twenty years. I have had many different roles; as a photographic artist, freelance photographer, University Lecturer, exam board assessor, magazine picture editor, student, education workshop leader and facilitator, project manager... All these experiences have reinforced my sense of the social within photography, and this is a recurring interest that I hold. Furthermore, whether working on personal projects or working with people on participation projects, my intent is the same; engaging critically with the photographic image.

This relationship with the image is approached from new angles and shifting models for engagement depending on each project I am involved with. Regarding this, one interesting social project I devised and led (*Home* 2001 and *In & Around* 2002 with The National Trust) was part of an attempt to engage meaningfully with a group of homeless individuals (*Home*) and eighteen

households (*In & Around*) in Hackney, London. In *Home*, I worked with six individuals over the space of three months building a rapport and relationship to enable an exploration of what the idea of (a) home meant to each individual at that time. And with *In & Around* I made relationships with householders based around their actual experience and feelings associated with their own home. This parallel exploration of a thematic; exploring the line between the personal and the public, allowing a freedom for interpretation and involvement, was key and led to two important pieces of work. The resulting photographic installation (including pinhole photography) made in collaboration, pointed to a model for engagement that I feel most comfortable with and one in which I feel more can be achieved on a personal and professional level.

Sarah: Your work seems to focus on the Chinese community, whether in the UK or abroad. Is this a deliberate decision?

Anthony: I would beg to differ on this point. If anything, my work is more centred on the environmental and social conditioning in certain spaces and places such as London, Hong Kong and China, than it is specifically about any sense of a Chinese community. Within my work there is always a sense of the personal and allied to that politics and society. I am very much aware of this due to my own 'conditioning' as such, having lived most of my life in the east end of London.

This environment has shaped my personal and worldview in many ways, growing up in a historically poor working class area (with a transitory populace from all corners of the world) that has changed tremendously during my lifetime. The changes that have affected and shaped the area and its peoples during the past two decades or so (with the transition from 'back end' of London to the fore front of London's regeneration and reconstruction project), have served to inform and clarify my positioning within photography and the issues that I explore and pursue.

As an artist working with the photographic image, this maybe even more 'apparent'. However, in all my photo works I am less interested in depicting or representing any community let alone a Chinese one (wherever that maybe). It is true that I have actively engaged with groups of people that happen to be (amongst others) Chinese and this has been a reflection of my own cultural background somewhat, but it has never been fully representative of my interests or impulses which are wider than any one community.

My project *Port of Call* (2002) is a good reference point here. I had been originally contacted by The British Council to develop a piece for their *Common Ground* exhibition, exploring aspects of the contemporary British Muslim experience. They had seen my *Notes from the Street* project which explored the lives of British Bangladeshi young men. Of course, these men were also Muslim, although that aspect of their experience was never a focus for my activity. Not wanting to repeat, go down familiar avenues or necessarily represent any one community, I decided with *Port of Call* to research and produce photographs that explored the broader canvas of identity and citizenship politics in a culturally diverse and contemporary Britain.

Port of Call interrogates the terminology, bureaucratic language and inference defining the issue of asylum and nationality. The resulting images utilised texts from the British Government's White Paper 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain' (the basis for the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002) within new 'pictorial' representations of England, the intention being to subvert the classical imagining and imaging of the country. It was important for me that this photographic inquiry into the psychology and politics of borders, identity and culture, asylum and migration reflected upon the current debates and discourse concerning globalization.

Further, the point about a focus on the Chinese community; *HeadSpace* and *eat bitterness* definitely deal with places which are specifically Chinese, but I like to think that the reading(s) and

issues that an audience can take from the work are much more universal than that and ultimately more about our shared human experience and the times that we are living in.

In *HeadSpace* (2004) a series of photographs that were taken in Hong Kong, I was interested in my position with, and distance from, a people and place that I felt some sense of kinship to. This work evolved from my physical and emotional journeying within that society over a period of 15 years and multiple trips and periods of residence. It was a difficult piece of work for me to pursue and complete. To be able to confront my personal feelings, relationship and ambivalence within an (other) space and to process and communicate these senses and experiences into an effective photographic piece. *HeadSpace* can be read as a very personal response to Hong Kong, its community and its built environment; as much as it could be read as a response to the change and transition of sovereignty in 1997 and the seeming lack of clarity and direction, the fear and ambivalence, generated by this monumental event which pervaded society and its peoples after so many years of distancing colonial rule.

Recently I have produced a body of work titled *eat bitterness* (2007) which makes comment on a place called China and its recent and present spurt of immensely rapid economic, industrial and social transformation under the all encompassing spread of the market economy and globalization. Within this piece I have deliberately made imagery that does not allow a viewer to 'locate' the work. There is a definite veiling of this place, with an intention for the viewer to engage with the implications of 'eating bitterness' rather than the location specifics of time and space.

The series contains a sense of a certain groundlessness, foot looseness, finding a way, creating a mapping; photographing gestures of presence and absence, fleeting a historical interventions within the landscape of this 'unknowable' place. The weight of representational concerns and expectations regarding the consumption of difference becomes a key focus.

Sarah: Recently we worked with you on the National Portrait Gallery commission to support members of the London Chinese community create their own exhibition. Of all the artists, you seemed most generous in giving the community the skills and confidence to create their own work, rather than presenting yourself as the expert. Can you tell us a little about this experience and if this approach was a deliberate one.

Anthony: The work in partnership with families associated with the Soho Family Centre was a highly enjoyable time and very different from the projects that I pursue as an artist. In all the public participation projects that I lead on, I am always attempting to operate with participants on an open platform for the development of ideas and images. Of course, I bring to the table experience and skills that the participants do not necessarily have. It is the sharing of ideas, communication and experience that I am more interested in during this type of work rather than proving that I can make a certain type of image...

Without this collaborative exchange, the work becomes meaningless for me in the context of the overall social project and so pointless to an extent. In this particular project, I tried to make sure that all potential avenues for photographing ideas, stories, experiences, people etc. were there for the group to go down, even if it could end up in a wrong turn, as this could also be fruitful!

Sarah: Finally, can you tell us about your future projects and the direction your work is likely to take.

Anthony: One project I am working on presently is *The Schengen Principle*, a book work. This project explores the idea of arrested development and movement within boundaries surrounding the monolithic monument to new labour and capital that is the Canary Wharf development in the east end of London. In this project I am researching and photographing histories associated with the area, exploring the idea of patronage and benevolence and weaving into this a sense of the present and the playing out of preconceived and received social roles and positions. There will be a text narrative accompanying the photographs and I am exploring the idea of creating a fiction, a new way of working with photography for myself.

I am also extending work in China, taking up some of the themes and conceptual concerns displayed within *eat bitterness* and potentially taking another route to producing work. For myself, all work is primarily about process and the journey one undertakes to get to the other side....

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