

Diana Yeh
On eat bitterness

Anthony Lam's *eat bitterness*, arising from his Artists' Links residency in China, consists of a set of eleven photographic prints, presented in a lavish red box. The ('Chinese'?) red might promise 'grand visual statements', but instead, it opens with a print of a newspaper cutting titled 'Old Habits Die Hard'. Strokes of a marker-pen blank out place names. Playing to our desire to identify and know through locating, the text invites us into a guessing game. Following images are close-in details of place, conjuring traces of a post-industrial site, in a materiality that has overwhelmed human presence. Disused, an apparently monumental tyre collapsed, sags, others less identifiable spaces refuse easy verbal translation. Suffocatingly close, the photographic eye 'catches' the smell of rusted metal and petrol fumes, flaked paint, stained walls, a viscosity in some evoking histories of sweat, of blood, of now absent bodies of labour. Abandoned, neglected, in arrested decay, this place could be any place, an everywhere but where it's desirable to be. In the final image, a mountainous white cover of a cab seat surges into the frame, abruptly delivering us into 'modernity'. A welcome relief to the unrelentingly dismal sequence of images, it acts, for me, as a question mark as much as a punchline, what were we looking for? Close-in itself, the image evokes a mode of vision as much as mode of travel, a mode of vision in travel, a hermetically sealed air-conditioned capsule of travel without change, vision of distance and privilege that questions the authority of 'being there'.

In its presentation, *eat bitterness* self-consciously enters as an art object into relations of exchange, but, a recalcitrant commodity, it does so on its own terms, stripping pleasure and fantasy from consumption through a privileging of what was left behind in its process of production. Eluding dominant images of China – skyscrapers, quaint Old Beijing, rural life that collude with the Chinese government's own national image-making – Lam locates an unfamiliar China, off the Beijing–Shanghai–Guangzhou circuit. Appearing in the midst of the craze for China, the work could be read as a gesture that disrupts and critiques the rush to both 'know' and 'own' China through, among other things, its contemporary art, the new accoutrement of the social and cultural elite. It reminds us of the uneven development in China where 'social democratisation and justice building are evolving very slowly, not to say almost stagnated'.