

Urban Fictions

Richard Rowland

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Over the course of the last twenty years the Chinese economy has developed at an extraordinary rate, becoming open to and increasingly intertwined with the West. However, the current social conditions that this process has led to are often not made easily visible. The depiction of China in the lineage of art documentary photography throughout the twentieth century has significant discontinuities due to conflict, revolution and international diplomatic relations that might be described as difficult.

Urban Fictions by Richard Rowland is a photographic work in the still and moving image that presents a complex social depiction of aspects of modern China. Its focus is a broad national narrative involving consumerism and rapid economic expansion together with a certain spectacle in the form of the image.

The idea of the nation as a kind of image was described in Benedict Anderson's influential book *Imagined Communities*ⁱ. Anderson proposed that how a nation is represented as an idea takes precedence over the lived experience of community. Put simply, the nation is something as imagined as it is real. In this sense *Urban Fictions* offers us a way in which we might imagine and observe early twenty-first century China as a newly international imagined community.

The still photographs in this work show a range of buildings and their immediate environments, mostly houses and apartment blocks. Some images show office complexes and business parks. Simulated international architecture abounds; hybrid forms of the Lodge, Townhouse, Almshouse and Villa make manifest imagined European dwellings. Despite their different subjects, all of these pictures share a straight and rectilinear form with diffuse light to illuminate detail and to enhance the similarities between pictures and differences between subjects. These aesthetic and technical considerations refer to an art documentary photographic lineage from Eugene Atget through to the work of Stephen Shore and Bernd and Hilla Becher. More recently, the works of Steffi Klentz, Sarah Pickering and Seung Woo Back adopt similar production methods, but deploy them quite differently to show a very different twenty – first century world, a world often poised between reality and artifice.

These types of pictures belong to a class of images referred to by Susan Butler in *The Mise en Scene of the Everyday*, an illuminating essay that explains the approach taken in much of the aforementioned work with reinvigorated concerns about 'social landscapes of the constructed environment'ⁱⁱ. This approach is often characterised as drawing upon considerations of the 'typology'

or 'the archive', a systematic method of picture making together with the organisation of such pictures in sets or series that invite comparison, contemplation and scrutiny. It is an approach according to Butler 'relying on indexical descriptiveness in the external world to the point that systematic description itself becomes symptomatic – both in relation to what is described and in relation to a certain will to knowledge that becomes evident through repetition.'ⁱⁱⁱ

This approach 'documents' its subjects, but is self-critical of what is involved in doing so. It acknowledges a certain artifice and ambivalence in what might be termed a 'documentary aesthetic', a way of seeing the world as well as the photograph itself. The subjects of *Urban Fictions* are in a sense already images, even before they have become photographs.

The use of both the still and moving image in *Urban Fictions* to represent some immediate realities of modern China also recalls the complex convergences that occurred during the origins of documentary photography as it developed out of documentary film. In the late nineteen-twenties and early nineteen-thirties, the 'anti-aesthetic' realism of John Grierson who established the term 'Documentary' encountered the poetic and painterly considerations of Alberto Cavalcanti, Basil Wright and Humphrey Jennings in the mid nineteen-thirties and forged compelling new ways of representing reality.

The moving image elements of this work therefore operate in a complementary but quite different way to the still images. It is the incidental spaces and moments absent from the still photographs that are their focus. Human presence enters the work in the moving image. The subjects of these pictures oscillate between the specific and the uncertain. In some of the former, a marriage ceremony is completed, a military guard stands to attention flanked by large advertising photographs and a construction worker takes apart a wall brick by brick. The latter images that punctuate the duration of the piece are more poetic

and form a counterpoint to the sensitively observed everyday activities of work and leisure. However, the differences between images are not always so absolute; while treetops gently sway in the breeze in one image and in another gentle ripples appear on the surface of water, elsewhere, close - ups of construction machinery, piles of aggregate and the leftovers of takeaway meals in the street form strange still - life subjects that remind us economic activity is never too distant.

The image undergoes shifts in size throughout the duration of the piece. The full screen implies a full view of a given subject. Smaller images shift from the left to the right of the screen. Sometimes a double image appears giving a split screen effect emphasizing the incidental and fragmented character of the image. This reminds us that vision itself is incomplete and that the relationship between vision and knowledge is not straightforward.

Urban Fictions therefore raises complex questions about the evolving economic, social and cultural condition of modern China. However, in doing so, this work also asks questions of its own form in which the photographic image as a kind of document is complicated by the understanding of it equally as a kind of formal and rhetorical picture. The relationship between visual documentation and artifice offered by *Urban Fictions* enables us to ask some compelling questions through its images of modern China of the complex, shifting and uncertain character of an increasingly international world.

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ⁱ Benedict Anderson, (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York

ⁱⁱ Susan Butler, (1995) 'The Mise-en-Scene of the Everyday' in *Photography in the Visual Arts*, Art & Design Profile No. 44, Academy Group, p.17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

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