

A study on the development of Chinese conceptual photography in the 1980s

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Abstract: In the 1970s, under the high pressure of the “cultural revolution”, Chinese people’s thoughts were in a state of repression. In the 1980s, after the end of the cultural revolution, when ideological control became loose and the economy recovered, China entered a period of development again. Exchanges among countries were more frequent, and the western post-modernism trend of thought was introduced into China, which had a great impact on Chinese literary and artistic creation. The documentary tradition of photography began to recover, and people began to try to inject personal feelings into the language of photography in addition to exploring the language of photography itself.

1. Introduction

In 1979, most of photographic groups such as “April shadow society”, “fission” group, “north river alliance” group and so on created photographic practice works, which have strong concept. After the cultural revolution, “April shadow society” was the first self-established independent photography group that did not rely on the government, which has important symbolic significance for contemporary Chinese photography. “Fission” group was in Beijing, whose creation idea was to change the material world through human subject consciousness, showing the richness of human spiritual space. With their critical consciousness and innovative ideas, these photographic groups arouse artists awareness of another layer of functions of photography, leaving many conceptual schematics to be appreciated for Chinese photography in the 1980s.

To explore the photographic works with a strong concept in the 1980s, the author believes that in addition to the photographic experiment of self-expression and individuality in the photographic group, there is also an important school of “pictorial photography” developed from “collection photography”. Chen Fuli is a representative figure in this period of pictorial photography. His experimental “combination of shadow and painting” photography can be seen as representing another group of photographers’ spiritual pursuit of Chinese ancient literati in the 1980s.

2. Transformation of the Concept of Photography in the 1980s

The exploration the emergence and development of conceptual photography in the 1980s, is from the self-exploration of “fission” group photography to the exploration of photographic media started by “academic photography association of Central Academy of Fine Arts”, and then to the photographic record of “eighty-five trendy” art movement performance art. The emergence of this kind of behaviors indicates that Chinese artists break free from the long thought of coolness and emancipate their minds. They use art as a medium to seek for channels of expression.

In 1985, the “fission” group often published a series of highly experimental works and advocated: “actively break life, then copy life, emphasizing the function of combining the intention of objectively existing things. We open our hearts very clearly and speak our minds very openly.” Their work is as personal as their manifesto. The work completely breaks away from the traditional documentary photography techniques, and creates fantastic and grotesque visual images through multiple layers of overlay, collage and other techniques.

For “fission” group at that time, there was such evaluation: “Beijing has a ‘fission’ group; their

work is published in the journal of modern photography; their works have no real life”, “the introduction of some of these things also is not harmful, and at least this kind of expression is an event, proving that our Chinese photography has a new style.” People began to realize the importance of learning western cultural thoughts. More importantly, at that time, Chinese society was in urgent need of a breakthrough in artistic thoughts and was eager to find a new direction for the development of art.

Both the public and the students took the medicine internally and then showed the effect externally. The “free creative group”, composed of several students from Xiamen University, expressed their bold opinions in the hand-made magazine “Xiamen University Film Friends Newsletter”, criticizing the outdated concept of photography and emphasizing the humanitarian feelings of photography. Then in 1987, five members of the group staged the “five ones” exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, causing a sensation. Their works used slide show in the form and remade a variety of creative methods; the content shows their thinking about art and life.

Shanghai’s “north river alliance” used cameras to explore the city, and thought that the ugly exterior may be closer to the truth. Most of the objects in their works were distorted and the images were blurred. They would like to choose corners and sections that are ignored by the public to create a sense of oppression through the gloomy tone. Today, when we look at the works of the “north river alliance”, we feel more of a rebellion, a kind of break away, rather than an exploration of the ontological language of photography.

In the process of fighting against the traditional documentary, concept photography began to sprout and develop in a new form in China. On the one hand, it is because of the gradual opening of the social environment after the cultural revolution, and on the other hand, it is because of the artists’ continuous demand for progress, development and proximity to the internal needs of the west.

3. The concept of “the combination of shadow painting”

It is another conceptual way taken by Chen Fuli in the 1980s to combine western modernist art with traditional Chinese cultural thoughts and to develop “pictorial photography” in the form of traditional Chinese cultural spirit. Chen Fuli’s “combination of shadow and painting” creative techniques and ideas are mainly based on the “collection photography” of Lang Jingshan in the 1930s. In addition to the photographic works with the meaning of Chinese painting collage in the darkroom, he repainted the finished photos.

In terms of scheme, Chen Fuli absorbed the scenery of traditional Chinese culture, and believed that the use of color was the main mark to distinguish Chinese landscape paintings. Monochrome was used in black and white photography to show the similarity of object textures, and simple lines and colors were the key to show object features. To the understanding of perspective in painting, Chen Fuli believed that bold innovation should be made instead of sticking to the one-point perspective in western painting. Based on the cavalier-point perspective in Chinese painting, the space of painting can be expanded. From these concepts of Chen Fuli, we can see that these are the ideas of Lang Jingshan’s “collection photography”.

While absorbing and inheriting the views of predecessors, Chen Fuli’s further innovation lies in that on the finished photos, find a painter suitable for the style of the picture, and then let him or her re-create the photographic works and inscribe or paint on them according to the characteristics. Such a joint work is called as “the combination of shadow painting”. From 1979 to 1990, he successively invited famous painters such as Guan Shanyue and Liu Haisu to complete his photographic works together. For example, he asked Huang Yongyu’s cranes to walk among the pine forests, and invited Han Meilin to paint on the photos of the sea of clouds to create the imposing momentum of horses running in clouds and fog in the pictures.

Chen Fuli’s “the combination of shadow and painting” brought a new direction to the Chinese image market at that time. On the collection of photographic works, photos are inherently

reproducible, which makes collectors discount the recognition of photos. The photo creation method of “the combination of shadow paintings” makes each work become the only one that cannot be copied. This way of creation has been recognized by Chinese and western photography. Feng Hanji, a famous Hong Kong photographer, argued in his essay “A Review of Recent Works of Chen Fuli” that western photography had been applied to traditional Chinese culture by Chen Fuli, and he also invited famous painters to speak their minds. Regardless of the creative value of the works, the western photography had already had a historic position in the collection system.

Chen Fuli's “the combination of shadow and painting” is a systematic conceptual photography in China in the early 1980s, continuing Lang Jingshan's “collection photography” and exploring the ancient Chinese style. The introduction of photography into China has greatly influenced the visual experience and viewing mode of Chinese people.

4. Going out - Arles photography festival

In July 1988, western curators turned their eyes to China at the Arles photographers festival and launched a large-scale exhibition on China. This exhibition was of epoch-making significance for Chinese photographers, and they could stand with the west in a bright and broad way without any restricted observation. It was a shot in the arm for Chinese photographers, and since then, Chinese contemporary photography has realized the two routes of “going out” and “bringing in”.

The main invited artists were: Wu Yinxian; Chen Baosheng; Xia Yonglie; Gao Yuan; Zhang Hai'er; Ling Fei, etc. Most of the selected works were based on documentary. Chen Baosheng used the darkroom collage technology to produce the only two collection photos other than documentary pictures, which were Flying Chinese Dragons and Horses and Ten Thousand Horses Galloping.

The exhibition curator Carl of China theme commented Chinese works: “in China, there are a lot of young photographers, whose technical level are not low; they are now seeking for the creation road of the unification of form and content, but I can see young people's works in China, lack of China's own characteristics.” Although the western media did not speak highly of Chinese photography in this exhibition, it did play a great role in promoting the development of China's own photography. Chinese photographic artists finally went out into the international community and could contact and display their photographic works on the same platform.

5. Conclusion

In the 1980s, the development of China's conceptual photography was not smooth. At the very beginning, it was excluded by the traditional photography circle and labeled with bourgeois thoughts. Photography was still considered to serve socialism instead of expressing individual feelings. The expression of individuals was divorced from real life and struggle, which would weaken the development of photography. The individuals in art cannot be the highest aesthetic principle in creation. These objections and doubts did not strike the budding conceptual photography, but deepened people's understanding and recognition of personal aesthetic expression and encouraged artists to explore the diversity of photographic language.

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