

Indecent

PHILIPPE PIROTTE

Proposals

More than ever, images pretend to give us direct access to reality itself. The ever-expanding media act as our “eyes on the world,” providing us with information about what happens across the globe. But there are too many events to capture, and too many images to digest, day in and day out. Critics have often argued that Xu Zhen’s work questions the media and official narratives, revealing how we are too easily manipulated and fooled by our eyes. This comment is certainly not an incorrect description, but the artist pushes beyond this evident fact to a harder truth: our own complicity in what we choose to see and what we ignore.

Many visitors to Xu Zhen’s exhibition “Impossible Is Nothing” (2008) at Long March Space, Beijing, were disturbed when they entered a hot, brightly lit room containing an artificial Sahel landscape. An African toddler crawled around in the dirt as a mechanical stuffed vulture fixed its gaze upon her.¹ Some people immediately walked out of the installation and exited the gallery while others engaged in heated debate. *THE STARVING OF SUDAN* (2008), as this work is called, had such an impact on most viewers that they forgot it was only one of two installations in Xu Zhen’s solo exhibition, which borrowed its title from an Adidas advertisement. In the first gallery space, visitors encountered *DECORATION* (2000), featuring a large spaceship and a video that appears to show astronauts working inside. This room was deliberately left unheated, in the middle of winter, to provide a palpable sense of the extreme cold of outer space. The contrast between the two works was enormous, and the slogany title of the exhibition amplified its uncertainty, ironic questioning, and cynicism as well as the queasy feeling it gave visitors.

The tableau of *THE STARVING OF SUDAN* was a faithful re-creation of a famous photograph by South African photographer Kevin Carter, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1993. Carter’s photograph shows a vulture eyeing a girl as she lies on the ground, exhausted and near starvation. The vulture appears menacing, and the photo provoked a flurry of

PHILIPPE PIROTTE is director of the Städelschule and Portikus in Frankfurt.



XU ZHEN, *THE STARVING OF SUDAN*, 2008, performance, video, photographs, dimensions variable,
 exhibition view, "Impossible Is Nothing," Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 /
 DAS HUNGERN DES SUDAN, Performance, Video, Photographien, Masse variabel, Ausstellungsansicht.

commentary on the ethics of photojournalism.²⁾ Critics stated that Carter should have helped the child, instead of taking a picture. Even though the impression created by the photo was not entirely true to life,³⁾ Carter had violated a taboo by showing us something we did not wish to see. Shortly after the opening of his exhibition, I asked Xu Zhen what he hoped to achieve by staging this provocative scene; his contentious answer was “没有意思” (méi yǒu yìsi), which roughly translates as: “It has no meaning.”

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag writes that “the frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show may be translated into an accusation of the indecency of regarding such images.”⁴⁾ We reject the image as if in self-defense when someone attempts to insinuate such horror into our “reality.” The effect, however, is to isolate the object of horror, to quarantine it outside “reality,” and to neutralize it, at the risk of completely and irreversibly depriving it of meaning.

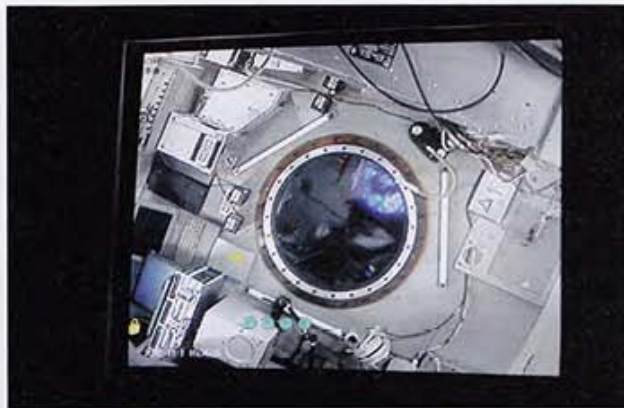
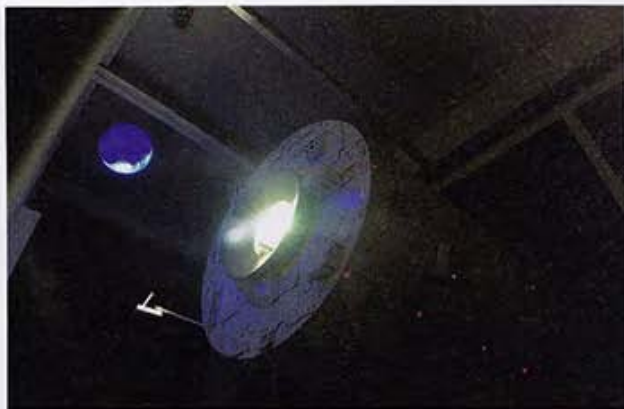
Viewers of *THE STARVING OF SUDAN* could only enter the space from the one corner that placed them at the same point from which the photograph was taken. At first, many of them unwittingly re-enacted the shooting of the photograph with their own digital cameras and cell phones.⁵⁾ These amateur photographers were manipulated into capturing a staged situation exactly as Carter himself had framed his own tableau.



XU ZHEN, *DECORATION*, 2008, mixed media, exhibition view,
"Impossible is Nothing," Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 /
DEKORATION, verschiedene Materialien, Ausstellungsansicht.

We have all become inured to the inflationary, and often spectacular, production and consumption of images of human suffering in the media. Nevertheless, many gallery visitors felt uncomfortable with this emotionally charged scene, which raised questions of exploitation; Western viewers in particular were troubled by the racial dimensions of the work. Chinese viewers, however, saw another possible meaning: Was Xu Zhen pointing out the link between China's global—and even cosmic—ambitions and its dependence on oil from Darfur?⁶⁾

Xu Zhen had previously explored the optics of photography in the performance installation *IN JUST A BLINK OF AN EYE* (2005). In this work, a performer seems to defy gravity as he or she tilts backward, as if ready to topple—and yet remains frozen in place. Of course, this is an illusion, achieved via a metal armature on which the performer lies. But as in *THE STARVING OF SUDAN*, the viewers' freedom to frame reality in time and space to their choosing with their cameras is reversed as they are faced by a kind of three-dimensional photograph. Although first shown in Beijing, *IN JUST A BLINK OF AN EYE* was later presented in New York and Europe, each time performed by a local Chinese migrant laborer: In place of the usual image of China as superpower, we encounter the fragile image of a citizen who has left home to enter the global workforce. The proximity of performer to viewer only accentuates the differences between their positions. We might be awestruck by the virtuosity of the performer, upset by the global economic structures and racism the performance references, or, again, indignant at the work's obscene exploitation of the performer, but this spectacle is only a snapshot of a reality that we usually avoid confronting.



XU ZHEN, DECORATION, 2008, exhibition view,
 "Impossible is Nothing," Long March Space, Beijing, 2008 /
 DEKORATION, Ausstellungsansicht.

In 2009, Xu Zhen rebranded himself as MadeIn Company, but his provocation persists. Take, for example, the series "PLAY" (2011–12), in which silicone sculptures of naked women with beaded necklaces, feathered headdresses, and some even with lip plates are suspended from the ceiling and tied in hemp rope, in a manner reminiscent of *Kinbaku*, a Japanese form of sexual bondage. The women depicted in the sculptures were widely perceived to be African tribeswomen, which the artist denies; rather, he hints at the eagerness of audiences to read artworks as problematic. Yet the underlying message is no less polemical, as the tight bindings around the artwork in the gallery space point to the hierarchies and power dynamics present throughout the art world. On a more "playful" level, however, Xu Zhen has created a reflection of the captivated viewer, both troubled and excited. The art of *Kinbaku* lies in the rigger's skill at constraining his partner while providing pleasure, turning immobilization into liberation. For Xu Zhen, this is a metaphor for spectatorship.

- 1) The three-year-old child, born to Guinean immigrants, performed for five hours a day for three weeks, under the supervision of her mother, who was paid by the artist for the project.
- 2) In fact, the moral reproach heaped on Carter was so overwhelming that the photographer took his own life some months later.
- 3) Vultures often waited in that area because food was delivered there.
- 4) Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 105.
- 5) Colin Chinnery, "MadeIn by MadeIn" in *MadeIn Company*, no. 6 in the series "Inside the White Cube" (London: White Cube, 2012).
- 6) Katherine Don, "Xu Zhen at Long March Space," *Art in America* (May 2009), 167.

XU ZHEN, *IN JUST A BLINK OF AN EYE*, 2005,
performance, 14 Rooms, Art Basel, 2014 /
IN NUR EINEM AUGENZWINKERN, Performance,
(PHOTO: ANDRI POL),
Image below / Bild unten: (PHOTO: MARK NIEDERMANN)

