

Liu Xia Exhibition, Hong Kong: Curator's Remarks

by A. D. Coleman

When you elect to live and work as a public intellectual, you build a platform for yourself in the agora, that metaphorical "marketplace of ideas" in which concepts contend energetically and truth, like cream, eventually rises to the top, or so we like to think. At that same moment you also step into an arena in which ideas struggle with each other, often violently and even brutally, for dominance. That those contests take place mostly with words and images rather than swords and spears does not make them less fraught with danger or less consequential than a confrontation between gladiators on the Roman sands. People have paid for their words with their lives; this audience surely needs no list of names to verify that fact.

As a long-time member of PEN American Center who has served in the past on its Freedom to Write Committee in New York, I support my fellow writers everywhere in their struggles for freedom of thought and expression, their battles against censorship. In that way -- via donations, letters to various authorities, service in professional organizations -- I've supported Liu Xiaobo and other writers over the years. But my involvement in this project is different.

I got into this entirely by accident -- though it begins to feel like karma to me. In my professional life I work as a critic, historian, and curator of photography. My oldest friend, Doug Sheer, with whom I played in the sandbox in my infancy, introduced me in New York last February to Guy Sorman, the French economist and social commentator, who extracted a set of prints of these images by Liu Xia from mainland China and initiated this touring show after his 2007 book *The Empire of Lies* persuaded her that she could trust him. Guy needed someone who knew more about the world of photography and traveling exhibitions than he did to carry the project forward. Having spent a late-winter morning admiring the images and some hours talking with Guy, I couldn't think of anyone more qualified than myself to take on those tasks. My wife Anna Lung, my partner in my professional projects involving Chinese photography, encouraged me to take it on, so I volunteered. It didn't feel as if I had much choice, nor did I want one. I thank Guy Sorman for making me an offer I couldn't refuse.

This work of Liu Xia's deserves the international audiences it's reaching because, first and foremost, it's potent, evocative imagery. It demonstrates that twenty-first century China produces world-class visual artists whose work communicates across the boundaries of language and culture. Though its specific messages may not have the approval of the current hierarchy on the mainland, by employing photography, often considered the most democratic of all creative media, restricting herself to basic techniques, and using the most mundane subject matter, Liu Xia makes photographs so passionately engaging and readily accessible to the average citizen that critical exegesis becomes superfluous. They manifest in creative action the aspirations of which Premier Wen Jiabao spoke to CNN in October 2010: "I believe freedom of speech is indispensable, for any country. . . . Freedom of speech has been incorporated into the Chinese constitution. . . . The people's wishes for, and needs for, democracy and freedom are irresistible."¹

Today marks the first time that these photographs have been exhibited on Chinese soil. For making that possible, I want to thank the Independent Chinese PEN Center, especially Patrick Poon and Tienchi Martin-Liao of the ICPC, which initiated and organized this showing; the City University of Hong Kong, its present host; Amnesty International, which provided "The Empty Chair" by Dutch designer Maarten Baas for the installation; the Taipei 228 Memorial Museum, which assisted in the production of these prints; and the Hong Kong Arts Centre, where these prints will go on view later this month.

This exhibition premiered last fall in Boulogne-Billancourt, just outside of Paris. From here the show will go to Taipei, then to Berlin, then to Madrid, then to Richmond, Virginia, and from there to points still to be determined. You can track its itinerary, and the evolution of corollary projects such as a monograph devoted to Liu Xia's photography, at the website we've developed, liuxiaphotos.info.

We intend to continue this tour at least until Liu Xia is freed from house arrest and can determine its subsequent trajectory herself. We are prepared to keep it on the

¹ "Fareed Zakaria: Interview With Wen Jiabao," CNN, aired October 3, 2010. Transcript accessed May 24, 2012 at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1010/03/fzgps.01.html>.

road until Liu Xiaobo's release from jail. I want to thank both of them for the opportunity to engage with this imagery, and with the crucial issues embedded within it.

We look forward to attending, someday, the conclusion of this exhibition's world tour at a venue in Beijing, with Liu Xia herself, and Liu Xiaobo, present. Meanwhile, through these remarkable images they're both here with us in spirit, and we're honored to have this small role to play in today's celebration.

Thank you.

(This is the complete text of remarks delivered at the opening ceremony for the exhibition "The Silent Strength of Liu Xia" sponsored by the Independent Chinese PEN Centre at the City University of Hong Kong on June 9, 2012.)