

The Institute for Provocation and KVS (Royal Flemish Theatre, Brussels)

## China – Congo



### Fact Sheet

#### *Project brief*

Over the last decade, political and economical mobility between the Chinese and African continent has increased exponentially. The China-Congo project stages an artistic encounter on the topic between Chinese and Congolese artists, writers and architects.

Two fieldtrips are concluded with a series of project presentations, scanning the narratives, objects and architectural traces collected by the Chinese-Congolese field trip team, while opening debate on issues such as the effects of economic globalization on post-colonial imagery and the emancipatory potential of third-world mobility.

#### *Timing*

Field trip to Kinshasa: First half of March 2010

Field trip to Guangzhou: Second half of March 2010

Project presentation in Essen, Theater der Welt: 5 – 12 July 2010

Project presentations in Beijing, Brussels and Kinshasa to be decided

#### *Credits*

A project of The Institute for Provocation and the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS)  
Supported by Arthub Asia, Hong Kong and Theater der Welt, Essen

Field trip participants: Chen Shuyu, Jiang Jun, Zhao Chuan, Vitshois Mwilambwe, Marie-Louise Bibish Mumbu, Sammy Baloji, Bebson de la rue, Freddy Tsimba, Paul Kerstens and Els Silvrants-Barclay (with 2 more names to be confirmed.)

Project co-ordinators: Paul Kerstens, Els Silvrants-Barclay and Chen Shuyu

### Curatorial notes

*A few lines of thinking (\*) – in three frames (\*\*)- and one scenography (\*\*\*)*

\*

The main threads of the China – Congo project are the narratives, objects and experiences collected during two fieldtrips with 5 Chinese and 5 Congolese artists in March 2010; first in Kinshasa, and immediately after, in Guangzhou.

These two fieldtrips add artistic mobility to the controversial economic and political mobility between the red superpower and the black continent. First and foremost with the aim to establish an *in-situ* encounter between individuals that - even though increasingly connected in political propaganda and on economic fact sheets - in real life hardly seem to meet. What is the state-of-being and which are the human implications of the ongoing Chinese - African migration? And how can we map this out in the form of personal stories, traded objects, people and architecture?

Being part of a post-colonial climate, with – following world capitalism – global cultural interests, the China-Congo project initiated by 2 Belgian organizations active in China and Congo respectively has no choice but to position itself at the very heart of the ongoing debate on the political economy behind cultural production and representation of non-western imagery.

The China – Congo project, and the case study it represents, proposes a radical shift in perspective, making it somehow irrelevant to think in terms of the traditional opposition between East and West, North and South, centre and periphery. Even though one might argue that China in a sense is the new West - scouting Africa's hinterland for its rich mines and resources - and that traditional oppositions thus have not resolved but rather shifted, it is a fact that through Chinese-African mobility a different image of Africa appears: one of big real estate developments and investments, quite in contrast with the war- and poverty ridden images the international press agencies successfully sell to the Western audiences (as artist – film maker Renzo Martens poignantly points out in his recent work *Enjoy Poverty*).

Meanwhile, the West assumes the role of critical observer, both during the fieldtrips as the project presentations that travel from Essen to Brussels, to eventually return to Kinshasa and Beijing. Can such a

configuration in effect give rise to a new kind of criticality on the representation of Africa and China in Western eyes?

Or back to a broader scale: how does the Chinese-Congolese mobility feed into the cultural representation of a periphery that has now developed its own centres? Can we detect some kind of emancipation in this process, or quite the opposite? And what does this case contribute to the debate on status and effects of cultural globalization and exoticism, and what kind of implications does this bring for the contemporary arts?

\*\*

The China – Congo project will attempt to tackle the thematic mentioned above, in the first place on an inter-personal, non-academic level. A group of artists and architects are sent out on field explorations to map out different realities behind the presence of Chinese in Kinshasa, and Congolese in Guangzhou, China's Southern capital, in dialogue with the local artistic communities in both cities. They will be asked to collect impressions, opinions, and stories, to track down objects or look into architectural traces, whatever appears relevant.

In a second phase, the artists will be asked to digest and eventually seek a strategy to materialize the experiences of both fieldtrips in their own way, without imposing specific formats or insisting on finished artefacts.

Finally, the raw material collected during and documentation of the field trips, along with the artists' experimentations afterwards, will form the dramaturgical sediment for a series of project presentations.

The first presentation in that series, hosted by Theater der Welt in Essen in July, will also be the first occasion for all of the involved artists to meet again after the field trips, and consequently, will allow for the first confrontation of their experiences, the output and thought work generated.

This calls for a presentation format that is in fact a process, taking the form of a constantly changing installation, rather than a static exhibition. The presentation will make use of three inter-dependent levels, or *frames*: a documentary, discursive and artistic frame. In each of them, core material on the field trips will be enhanced and elaborated with relevant additional input that is not produced by the artists themselves, but is proposed by them or by the two outsiders of the organizations that initiated the project.

The first, documentary frame, stages the field trip participants as the protagonists of a video installation showing the field trips as they actually took place, combining video diary fragments with footage shot both by the participants themselves and the cameraman travelling along. As its name suggests, this frame has no other intention but to function as a document setting the stage.

The second, discursive frame takes it a step further, by hosting a series of live roundtables and/or talks with field trip participants commenting on the experiences and opinions collected, further contextualized with interventions and contributions of other specialists on the topic from a wide, cross-disciplinary perspective. The frame seeks performative and informal set-ups allowing for the audience to participate and/or intervene throughout different modes of engagement.

The third and final artistic frame functions as a platform for the artistic experiment that comes out of the field trips, added up with existing artwork that the field trip participants consider relevant to show in the context of their experiences. The frame might at first sight take the form of an exhibition, but in fact does not have the intention to draw artistic conclusions around a clearly defined curatorial set-up; rather, it should be seen as a project space in which artistic proposals are made, shown, re-appropriated and adapted.

The idea is to use the third frame to show the process behind cultural representation, its different strategies of coming into being and the ambiguities and difficulties that are inherent to them, to touch upon the complexity of factors and partners that all have an impact, not in the least by critically addressing the role of the West - somehow vexed in the sideline - but still more than only an innocent bystander. After all, the China - Congo project might accommodate an artistic encounter between Chinese and Congolese artists; the project is indeed organized by two Belgian organizations, with Belgium being - not without self-irony - the previous colonizer of Congo.

To conclude, the project does not only aim to portray the mobility between China and Africa as a fascinating case to study, but also addresses the necessity to develop alternative understandings and interfaces for traditional divisions between centre and periphery that, even in the art world, are still widely spread.

\*\*\*

The three content frames introduced above all have their own specific set-up; however, nor do they have clear borders, beginnings and endings, nor is their content static - except perhaps partially the first, documentary frame. They all inform each other and as tools for reflection, they are continuously quoted and adapted in the second and third frame.

When embarking on thought work on how to display these three frames for an audience, it is quickly apparent that they need to be integrated not only content-wise, but also physically, by forming a constellation of rooms and spaces in one integrated scenography in one single space, in order to guarantee they can actually be occupied and read at the same time.

The idea is to create a scenography in a space that is both a *working station* for the field trip participants, and a *display* of the project for the visiting audience.

As the field trip participants will be working in the space from morning till evening during the 3 days the project is running, their modifications and additions will make for the display to continue to evolve as a changing, “live” installation. The audience will be given different choices to “visit” this installation. They can step “on the platform” and visit the installation from the inside, meet with the field trippers, both in real time as in the screened video diaries of the documentary shown inside, through the work they have generated or are in the process of generating.

They can also keep the distance and take a seat on the audience tribune in front of the installation. At certain moments in the 3 days, we will “activate” this more formalized set-up by organizing lectures and/or roundtables in the installation for which the audience is invited to take a seat in the tribune. Apart from these “timely” interventions, we keep the audience tribune set-up as a metaphor for the Western perspective it represents and to allow for different modes of engagement between audience, fieldtrip participants (that with a tribune in front of them, somehow take the role of “performers”) and field trip material.

Thus, the scenography will take the form of an evolving installation that is constantly “populated” with people at work, audience visiting, informal discussions and organized events such as talks and roundtables, documentary and artistic material generated during and after the fieldtrips.

The final layout of this scenography will be defined in the period after the field trips as a side-task of the architects involved in the field trips, in collaboration with organizers and the rest of the field trip team, and in consultation with the host of the project presentation. It will be a set of rooms or boxes set-up in a square / rectangle space of around 15 by 15 meters, in which an audience tribune of about 30-40 seats can be integrated.

### Project outcome

A documentary installation will be produced out of the fieldtrips, which will premiere during Theater der Welt in Essen in July 2010.

Project presentations will travel from Essen and Brussels back to Beijing and Kinshasa, and will be concluded with a publication edited by The Institute for Provocation and Jiang Jun/Urban China.