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EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Still from Patty Chang's *The Product Love*, 2009, 2-channel digital video installation, 42 minutes; at Mary Boone.

NEW YORK PATTY CHANG MARY BOONE

Anna May Wong, the first Asian-American to achieve Hollywood stardom, is the perfect subject for Patty Chang, who in recent years has made videos exploring the collision of stereotypes and mis-translations in the West's appropriation of Chinese culture. A darling of Europe, where Wong fled after encountering severe discrimination in the United States, the film star was interviewed by critical theorist Walter Benjamin, who wrote about the encounter in *Die literarische Welt* in 1928. Chang contemporizes this encounter in her new video installation, *The Product Love—Die Ware Liebe* (2009), the centerpiece of this show.

The Product Love was presented as a two-channel installation, running 42 minutes in its entirety. But it is actually a compilation of two video projects, one old and one new, which were projected in succession on opposite walls. The first is a version of *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West* (2006), in which three American translators struggle to turn Benjamin's florid German text into straightforward English. None of them are competent in this task, rendering most of the philosopher's insights unintelligible. But Benjamin's infatuation with Wong is apparent when he is quoted as saying, "The heart of love seems to be mirrored in those two eyes." The translators disagree when they come to a passage in which Benjamin asks the actress what medium she would work in if she could

not act in films. According to one translator, Benjamin wrote that the actress said "touch would," but he chuckles, acknowledging that she probably used the phrase "touch wood," since the philosopher recorded that she knocked on the table after uttering the expression. Another translator barrels forward, asserting that the actress meant to say that touch would replace acting, perhaps capturing Benjamin's wishful thinking. In any case, the facetious would/wood problem exists only in English—not German.

Benjamin's longing for the actress's touch is conveyed in the second half of the video project. For this, Chang assembled an all-Chinese cast to play a film crew making a porn movie based on the meeting between actress and philosopher, a reversal of the old Hollywood tendency to hire Caucasian actors to play Asian characters. Two actors are made up to play Wong and Benjamin, though neither boasts the star power of the originals. Instead we get two nearly naked, listless performers exchanging positions on a bed, while the actors playing the director and cameraman trade their present-day insights about the film star and the theorist.

To provide a taste of Wong's allure, Chang also included in this show *Laotze Missing* (2009), a 3-minute clip from the 1928 silent film *Show Life*, in which the actress plays a street urchin turned knife thrower's assistant. It is accompanied by a photograph of a Benjamin manuscript on Bertolt Brecht where the phrase "Laotse fehlt" (Laotze missing) is crossed out. Brecht's spirit is felt throughout this exhibi-

tion, whose title, "Die Ware Liebe," was in fact the working title for Brecht's play "The Good Woman of Szechuan," yet another Western take on a Chinese heroine.

—Barbara Pollack

MICHAEL CATALDI AND NILS NORMAN SCULPTURE CENTER

There were no "smart" classrooms or endowed professorships at "The University of Trash." From the start of the 12-week exhibition, however, a reading group on Karl Marx's *Capital* met at the Sculpture Center every Thursday, and silkscreening workshops and free-radio seminars frequently took place. Architecturally too, things were out of the ordinary: in lieu of the gothic spires and red-brick facades that grace so many college campuses, the University offered bales of flattened cardboard boxes, wooden scaffolding, outsize paper lamps and a "Jacuzzi" filled with mattress foam. The esthetics and the ethics of this institution were DIY. One might describe it as a space devoted to radical fun.

If Michael Cataldi and Nils Norman, the artists behind the exhibition, can be thought of as the University's presidents, they clearly renounced the powers vested in them. Using the exhibition space as an open platform, they invited various groups to build out the University: JustSeeds/Visual Resistance Artists' Cooperative constructed a half-scale replica of a former Tompkins Square Park band shell, and City-as-School, an alternative New York City high school, set up an imag-