

CHOPSTICKS: SONG DONG AND YIN XIUZHEN AT CHAMBERS FINE ART

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Figure 1. Installation view of *Chopsticks: Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen*. Chambers Fine Art, New York, NY November 7 – 30, 2002. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art

The object of *Chopsticks*, the exhibition put together by Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, the married couple from Beijing, was to celebrate the tenth anniversary of their first joint appearance as artists. Both artists graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at Capital Normal University in Beijing in 1989, but the occurrences in Tiananmen Square in early June of that year shook them deeply, resulting in a period of close introspection, during which they maintained a five-year-long hiatus from exhibitions, either installations or performances. Primarily personal in their expression, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen nevertheless look at large social issues: Song Dong has created a moving family memorial in his two video installations entitled *Touching My Father* and *Father and Son in the Ancestral Temple* (both works are from 1998), while Yin Xiuzhen has produced *Ruined City* (1996) and *Transformation* (1997), works which examine the great changes in Beijing wrought by the many construction projects there. For the recent show at Chambers Fine Art in New York, the couple put together a ritual space in which their lives and art were carefully interwoven in a series of works that were either collaborated on or indicated their relationship in some way.

The night of the opening resulted in considerable crowds, as well as a general sense of good cheer; the idea behind *Chopsticks*—namely, the kind of pleasure associated with a couple's anniversary—took over the evening. Visitors made their way from exhibit to exhibit; the first work the audience came upon as they entered the gallery were a pair of large (more than fifteen feet long) chopsticks, one made by Song Dong and the other made by Yin Xiuzhen (fig. 1). The couple had agreed that each should make the work not knowing how the other would proceed. Built into the rules was the symbolic relationship of the chopsticks to the husband and wife's bond: a commentary on the show talked about how it is necessary to use two chopsticks to bring food to one's mouth; possessing only a single chopstick is useless. In the same way, then, the couple's audience reasons, a person needs a partner to move forward in life. Despite, or perhaps because, each artist worked on his or her chopstick in

secret, gender differences became quickly apparent. Song Dong's chopstick is phallically rigid, being constructed of metal, while Yin Xiuzhen's chopstick consists of vaginally soft materials, being a suit of clothing that closed up by a zipper, which, when unzipped, reveals household objects such as a scissors or even a condom.

It is easy to see how the two works of art contrast as expressions of two different genders. It also makes sense to regard the pairing of the chopsticks as suggestive of a complete relationship. The concept of nurturing—chopsticks are needed utensils as they are the vehicle by which one is fed—is also part of the piece. In the case of Song Dong's work, another reference is made. The metal piece also points to the rod used by the Monkey King in the famous sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West*. In the story, the Monkey King, who is an escort of the Chinese monk Tang Seng, on his way to India to seek Buddhist sutras, symbolizes a rebellious spirit, one that often saves Tang Seng from fearful predicaments. He wins for himself an iron rod that is capable of calming the sea, as well as being able to shrink or expand at the notice of its owner. The rod, which aids the Monkey King during his many adventures on his way to Western Heaven (where the sutras are stored), also becomes, as the gallery notes point out, a symbol of authority in Chinese religion. Given the background of this reference, Song Dong's metal chopstick takes on all sorts of magical purposes, magnifying its role even as it maintains a relationship with the vaginal chopstick of Yin Xiuzhen.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Life* (2002) *Chopsticks: Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen*. Chambers Fine Art, New York, NY November 7 – 30, 2002. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art

Life (2002) presents a C-print on synthetic cloth, which delivers a 360-degree panoramic view from the heights of Jing Shan, a mountain overlooking the Forbidden City, set in the historical district of Beijing (fig. 2). It functions as a background to the couple's lives, which have taken place almost entirely in Beijing. Taken in winter, the view is mostly of the sky and the couple, dressed in black; the buildings sighted in the image belong to sites further down from the location of the camera. Yin Xiuzhen, seven months pregnant, offers the viewer the promise of spring in the form of an unborn child (it is possible to notice her swollen belly). As such, the work is a celebration of the couple's relationship, which has clearly (that is to say, visually) resulted in the creation of new life. *Life* consists of sixteen pictures, taken over a period of two hours. Even though it looks as if the image is unitary, the imagery in fact shows change over time. Changes in the couple's poses parallel the kind of change that is occurring in the surroundings they photograph. The image, printed on cloth that was stretched on the walls of the first room in the gallery, becomes a literal, as well as metaphorical, background for the couple's art endeavors.



Figure 3. Installation view of *Desirable Prize: Ping-Pong* (2002). *Chopsticks: Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen* Chambers Fine Art, New York, NY November 7 – 30, 2002. Courtesy of Chambers Fine Art

In a catalog essay for *Chopsticks*, Wu Hung points out that the couple proceeds by producing a “vernacular,” which, according to the artist, “does not derive from the conventions of international conceptual art.”¹¹ Neither does it “belong to the refined, elite cultural sphere, but mixes the literary quotations, idioms, and traditional phrases of the common city dweller.” Wu stresses that their vernacular belongs to “the typical language of a Beijing story dweller, and the traditional way of making smart conversation by ‘street intellectuals’ in this ancient city [Beijing].” Finally, the artist’s vernacular “rejects generalization. It is a kind of ‘insider’ language. No matter whether they are traditional, modern, or postmodern, vernacular artists must identify themselves as cultural insiders. Wu sees the idiom of these artists as necessarily “provincial”—that is, their imagery must be based on the specifically local, and only after the local has been expressed can a larger tie to a global language be made. Rather than express themselves within the prearranged, often aristocratic idiom of the global avant-garde, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen have remained loyal to the specifics of their non-privileged lives in Beijing, preferring what they know in detail to a vaguer, if more universally expressed and agreed upon, art vocabulary. In a sense, then, they are also being true to the implications of their class. Not having attended Beijing’s elite Central Academy of Fine Arts, they turn to their actual experience as artists from a comparatively humble background. In part, it is this homemade quality that makes the couple’s art distinctive, even as they participate in formal strategies—installation, performance art, etc.—that do in fact speak to a larger audience.

United Hands (2002) consists of two columns, covered in cotton cloth, that rise out of flowerpots. At the top of each column a hand reaches out, each hand holding a chopstick. Together, the chopsticks hold a small video monitor, which displays a tape of a journey the couple took from their home in central Beijing to the suburbs. The imagery records, in a personal way, the kinds of effects construction has had on the city, transforming it from an ancient place to an exceedingly new one. The two hands of the piece obviously refer to the collaborative nature of the installation, which seems as much an expression of love as it is an art strategy.

In *Self-Shot* (2002) the artists, recognizing that their experience has been similar in a parallel manner but which has not actually met in a single expression of art, decided to follow each other with an hour-long video recording each other’s movements within their home. Their versions of each other spontaneously taping the procedure of their taking photographs of themselves are claustrophobic but also funny; each artist follows the other with ruthless precision.

On some level, the couple is attempting to record for posterity their presence in the particular space of their apartment, which will soon be torn down to make room for the site of the 2008 Olympic Games. A series of small stools, reminiscent of the stools given children in China, occupied the space in which the video was to be shown. Here as elsewhere, the reference to childhood and personal expression is indirect.

In another installation, viewers had the chance to play ping-pong, thus participating in Yin Xiuzhen’s installation *Desirable Prize: Ping-Pong* (2002) (fig. 3). Playing with white and orange ping-pong balls (the latter brand named “Red Double Happiness”—another humorous symbol of the couple’s happy relationship), the audience competed for a prize: a medal made of a button sewn onto a long, green strap with a *Chopsticks* label. By seeking the prize and playing with the specially named balls, the two people engaging in ping pong are essentially staging a facsimile example of the collaborative process by which the two artists created the exhibition; there is a sense of humor in the substitution, which is gently meant to evoke some of the shared experience of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen. In the same room were, on the wall, examples of edible bonsai—cookies and other sweets—that visitors could eat at will. And on the floor were a couple of large bronze pots, which held fruit punch and water. The room itself felt festive and oddly interactive; one quite literally ate one’s surroundings. And the activities described reinforced the viewer’s sense that he or she was meant to mimic the couple’s lives in some way. Hence the need for symbolic activities, in which a sense of closeness and bonding would be repeated in a simulation of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen’s relationship.

It is interesting to speculate on the connection between the private and public in the art of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen. The couple decides to celebrate their lives together in a public fashion, yet they also encourage visitors making their way to the gallery to meditate on the essentially private experience of their bonding—this happens despite the “openness of the collaboration. The meaningfulness of the shared activities in the gallery is ritual in nature, and the notion of ritual action may be best understood as private behavior performed publicly for the sake of society. There is an intensely self-aware element to the pair’s art, which zeros in on the essential similarity of their esthetic, most effectively seen in the work in which they videotape each other in the act of videotaping each other. The self-reflexivity of the couple’s actions and works prolongs our relation to their art; as a result, we start to stand in as substitutes for the artists themselves. Participating in the good will of the opening, which was so much like a party after a wedding, the audience not so consciously evaluated themselves as behaving in a manner similar to the actions of the artists themselves. In other words, the participatory aspect of *Chopsticks* asks that we do as the artist have done, that is, we reenact the activities that the artists agreed upon as part of their celebration. By behaving so, we come closer to the couple’s intentions; indeed, it seems that we share their sense of joy. For all the specific rootedness of the art and behaviors, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen see art as catching anyone and everyone in their grasp. They have made the process enjoyable, even humorous, by which we, as fellow participants, are rendered hopefully as happy as the artists themselves.