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**STAGING ART AND CHINESENESS: THE POLITICS OF TRANS/  
NATIONALISM AND GLOBAL EXPOSITIONS, JANE CHIN DAVIDSON**

Manchester: University of Manchester Press (2020), 224 pp, h/bk,

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The visibility of Chinese contemporary art in the early 1990s at the Venice Biennial (among other expositions) is often seen as symbolic or evidence of the hegemonic art world's increasingly 'global' character. Yet, as Davidson points out in this elegantly written book, artworks from China did not appear out of nowhere to engender a rethinking of the contours of the art world. The production of artworks in Asia, among other non-western European regions of the world, had been purposely relegated to art historical oblivion or, at best, markers of difference or makers of craft. This contradiction embedded in the 'global' is at the heart of 'Chineseness' that Davidson deftly explores both through the rise of biennials at the end of the twentieth century and close analyses of artworks by a range of artists. Davidson's book smoothly pivots from chapters that are deep dives into artworks to those that sketch broader strokes of the contexts of display.

'Chineseness' is a term that film critic and literary critic Rey Chow used to derisively describe the West's preoccupation with contemporary Chinese cinema in the 1990s that she contends was nothing more than cross-cultural fetishism. Davidson convincingly claims, though, that video-based artworks (in particular) function differently than the film screen – they gesture both to the historical orientalist gaze of the West as well as its reinterpretation. Moreover, she powerfully argues that the technological shift and digital currents instantiated by performance, video and digital screens of contemporary art demand new ways of thinking. For instance, Davidson makes fascinating connections between the writings of philosopher Louis Althusser and Chairman Mao Zedong. She also suggests an update of Althusser's well-known theory of interpellation, which refers to how individuals are hailed into place as subjects in the world. Davidson invokes film theorist Kwai Cheung-Lo's 'interpellation beyond interpellation' to signal that, in the context of her case studies, viewers hail back while they are being subjectified. In this way, Chineseness as a knowledge category stands in for ambivalence of the borders of nations and locations, both of which are important in the logic of the global exposition and the codification of artists as representations of countries.

The first half of Davidson's book focuses on artists. An entire chapter is devoted to Patty Chang's works. It is an exceptionally in-depth and nuanced reading of the artist's artworks. For instance, Davidson discusses the double channel *Die Ware Liebe: The Product (or Commodity) Love* (2009), inspired by

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philosopher Walter Benjamin's essay that describes his meeting with the famous Chinese American actress Anna May Wong in the 1920s. Chang channels the essay's implicit desire and orientalist overtones by staging a fantasy love scene between Wong and Benjamin. She casts Chinese actors in both roles, effectively short-circuiting the objectification of the Asian female. The entire love scene is shot from behind the stage, with the film crew visibly blocking the scene. That is, the viewer is always aware the tryst being depicted is a construction. In effect, Davidson analysis of Chang's work defamiliarizes the literal and metaphorical staging of Chineseness while underscoring its always transnational character. Davidson looks carefully at works that have not received sustained scholarly treatment. Indeed, this might be the first time that *Die Ware Liebe* has been examined at all, as far as I am aware. In the next chapter, Davidson continues what I am going to refer to as 'scholarly care' to three ecofeminists' works that further shatter the coherency of Chineseness as a stable sign.

Davidson then moves from close analysis of artworks to exploring global expositions. The first of the final two chapters discusses the rootedness of the biennial format in world's fairs. Davidson takes the reader from the Crystal Palace of the 1851 Great Exhibition of London to a discussion of more recent iterations of Documenta, in particular, those by Okwui Enwezor, and his 'platforms', and by Adam Szymczyk, who sited his exhibition between Athens and Kassel. Drawing on Benjamin's writing on dialectics, Davidson reasons that 'the Venice Biennale is, by nature a visual reminder from the time it was made but also serves as an object that bespeaks something different in the present' (128). In so doing, Davidson avoids reducing biennials as inevitable projections of the past or treating them as unilaterally exceptional, new phenomena.

The final chapter focuses on expositions and museums to blast the global (postcolonial) and world (colonial) binary and stages Chineseness as a 'performing archive', one that is self-reflexive and therefore able to interrogate its own ontology. In one example, Davidson focuses on two Ming vases (dated to roughly 1500) at the Pitt Rivers Museum that, for value and connoisseurship, are seen as items made for the Chinese dynastic class. However, the genealogy of these vases suggests that they cannot be reduced to the sign of a known, stable, pure 'China'. The vases were made for export to the Sarawak (in the Malaysian state of Borneo), the people of which were thought to be nomadic (before the arrival of the British White Rajahs) and therefore would move the vases from place to place. Through the conceptual approach of a performing archive, Davidson allows for these objects not to be seen as fixed and known, but as constantly changing signifiers of Chineseness.

Davidson productively compares, without collapsing, the difference between Chineseness and Edouard Glissant's theory of creolization several times in the text. It becomes clear that her examination of 'Chineseness' has broad ramifications for scholars working on vastly different regions and cultures. That is to say, much like creolization has moved beyond the Caribbean (at least for Glissant), Chineseness has moved beyond China. Davidson not only hints at the spatial but also the temporal expansion of the relevance of her concept. Indeed, this is the first monograph to critically explore the way in which China as a nation has discursively operated as a sign both in historical and more recent global expositions. For this alone, the book is important to curatorial studies because it provides much-needed historical context to better situate the late twentieth-century framing of Chinese art as fine art on a global stage. Finally, Davidson shifts from the traditional analysis of Chineseness

through documentary film and cinema to a consideration of the display and exhibition of different screens, both in and out of the gallery space. In so doing, she signals the importance of curatorial studies in understanding the paradoxes and complexities of fraught terms such as Chineseness.

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