**Conversation between Michael Pinsky and Helena Reckitt**

HR: Going around Chengdu everybody I met had been to your show or was about to go to it. It was a real talking point. And these weren’t just visual arts people. Some of them were dancers, some worked for a film festival. They were excited about the use of video and technology, and keen to see how a big multi-media show of this kind was designed and laid out.

MP: They talked a lot about *A Stitch In Time*, they would say, ‘*Oh yes, I know this pattern well, that pattern’s from Chengdu, and that's a royal pattern*’. As an artist you can use and abuse these source materials. You don't need to be the expert because all you're doing is a kind of conjuring trick, bringing elements together. You bring them from the unknown and you present them back into the unknown. But of course viewers know this unknown. People were particularly amused by the Mao textile.

HR: Why do you think?

MP: I don't know. I did ask Mei, ‘*I'm not going to end up offending people by having this, am I?*’ And she said, *'No, it's fine'*.

HR: It's reached the point where you can be playful with the image of Mao.

MB: The Mao textile was designed by a Chinese artist influenced by Andy Warhol's prints of Mao. So the Mao portrait was appropriated in New York and then was re-appropriated back into China by this modern textile designer. Then it was bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and then I re-re-appropriated it for my work, which was then shown back in China. This constant flux and flow is something I like playing with. Particularly pushing contemporary designs next to revered textiles.

HR: So you were deliberately choosing this range of cultural sources?

MP: Yes, choosing the range, then pushing them back together any way possible. I remove myself from thinking about the intellectual and historical content of the pattern. I aesthetically stitch things together as if I am completely unaware of pattern's associations. It is interesting for the people who see the work because they have been saturated in those patterns all their lives.

HR: That work required the public to piece it together as a puzzle. Was there any difficulty in setting that up? I know there was some anxiety from the museum about whether the public would actually do it.

MB: I wanted to create a work that closely involved the institutions, the public and the place, but I had to be careful in this case not to overstretch the abilities of the institution. I had to be realistic about where I would get the source materials from, and what the audience was able to do. The work pushed the boundaries quite hard for the institution and the place, but it didn't push project to the point of failure.

HR: That's interesting because there's a lot of public spectacle in China but presumably relational aesthetics and social practice have not been happening in institutionally sanctioned contexts. Maybe that’s changing now.

MB: It's started to happen with Chinese artists who have been trained in the West and practice primarily in the West. They've taken on a practice that is, or has the potential to be, socially engaged, but what's happening in the main institutions doesn't represent these changes.

HR: And there is a lot of control over public space, isn’t there? I know you had to get permission to piece the work together in public even though it was just outside the Museum.

MP: Public space in China is closer to private space in the UK. Public space in the UK is gravitating towards the control systems that are already in place in China, which is unfortunate.

HR: You're struck in Chengdu that there’s no graffiti, there’s no litter. You don’t see homeless people. You start to wonder where all the untidy stuff goes.

MP: This is exactly why Chengdu feels like private developments in the UK. There are hundreds of people cleaning all the time. This obsession with having clean public space is everything. It makes you feel that you're in a corporate controlled area.

HR: The area where the Museum of Contemporary Art is located in Tianfu Software Park feels like a corporate campus.

MP: Which it is, but when you see the rest of Chengdu it's clean and controlled as well.

HR: They've really tidied up all those alleys haven't they? They've developed them around entertainment, shopping and lifestyle.

MP: That said, there is still a lot of vibrancy and it hasn't white washed out Chengdu's sense of personality. The culture is evident in the food. There is strong feeling of Sichuan culture even in the big complexes.

HR: There is an incredible vitality in the everyday life. I was in a fancy department store surrounded by families eating lunch. The backdrop was a freeze of a photograph of people somewhere like Canterbury sitting in street-side cafes, and it was presented as the lifestyle that one aspires to. The British people in the freeze section were really frumpy, with beer bellies and bad clothes, eating chips and downing pints of beer, slouched in their chairs. In comparison the Sichuan people had their delicious packed lunches and were far more vivacious. I thought, what you've got is so much more vital that this image that you might aspire to.

MP: The hoardings for the new residential developments in Chengdu have some strange images of average, mid-sized towns in middle England. But it isn't what's happening in Chengdu. The culture is too strongly rooted to be overpowered by this commercial drive.

HR: I wouldn't say it's not commercial because for a Communist country there’s incredible buzz around commerce. In the markets and cafes people love eating out, particularly in large groups. So money is changing hands. But it doesn't seem to be this globalized, generic culture, which of course your work is partly about.

MP: Yes, it doesn't feel like manufactured entertainment, like sitting in a Pizza Express, having your semi-sophisticated pizza. They still have their noodles and they know how they like them.

HR: I was chatting to some friends in Chengdu about the importance of eating, and how there is a special meal that happens at the very end of the day. So people will eat dinner quite early but deliberately save some room for a late-night snack when they reconvene with friends. This late meal is delicious, not too filling but lovely and exquisite. I was struck by the developed and refined food culture in Sichuan.

MP: Yes, this is true. Another example of the vitality of public life that I encountered was Cindy’s English Corner. The British Council suggested we should visit Cindy's English Corner to recruit volunteers to help with the exhibition. Mei and I both assumed this was a cafe or a building and we were surprised to find that it was literally a corner of the street with a telephone box with the words ‘Cindy's English Corner’. This is where about forty Chinese people meet to speak English together. They are a strongly knit community of all ages, from teenagers to grandmothers. It's incredible how dynamic this bit of street corner is. This is the antithesis of the sanitised public space that we were speaking of. How do you squat, how do you occupy and make a place of this non-place? You put up a sign and it becomes Cindy’s English Corner. There are no facilities, no walls, no toilets and no drinks. There’s nothing other than people standing around and talking and yet the relationships between these people are incredible. You have the physical layer of people’s feet on the pavement and then you have the virtual layer through WeChat. They're always talking on WeChat, so they are highly mobile and able to respond really fast through social networking. But they still have the physical moment of meeting on the street, which goes together with the dancing on the street.

HR: Did you come across a lot of the public dancing?

MP: I often saw shop workers going outside and practicing dances, which makes the public spaces very vital.

HR: When I was in Chongqing, my hotel was near a big plaza and every day from early lunchtime into the evening people would come with their sound systems to dance. It was magical. There were couples who you feel have been dancing together for a really long time, young people, some older, some dancing in groups.

MP: In the West that would be need to a flash mob event. In China it is just daily life.

HR: I felt it stemmed from a real sense of being part of the collective. Maybe it is coming from the positive side of communism. While I'm sure there are many prohibitions around the body in China, there is also a kind of comfort let's say with dancing in public. Or when I had my ears picked by an ear cleaner in public. These public manifestations of being at ease in one's body I found unexpected.

MP: After we did the first piecing together of 'A Stitch in Time', one participant said ‘I found that really moving because it was a collective action that led to this final result’. It touched a deep nerve because of the psychology of collective action. Maybe this is associated with another age and has negative connotations, but perhaps now needs to be revisited in a post-communist light and not be lost to the private consumerist-driven individualism that they are aspiring to in those images of the West. It would be terrible if they lost that collective interest.

HR: This question of what constitutes the public, with an implicit belief in it as an active space, seems central to your work.

MP: I am interested in terms of looking at boundaries, barriers and limits, and changing the purpose of the ways we demark the public realm. It's the nature of those social external spaces that are the focus and the content of my work.

HR: It's both the form and content.

MP: Because I got involved in the public realm as the content of my work, my projects shifted into the public realm. But actually the gallery is a good place to situate those conversations in. What's been satisfying about this show is the opportunity to work both inside and out of the gallery. The exhibition anchors my work in way that would be a struggle to achieve out there in the public.

HR: Competing with the rest of the sensory overload.

MP: When you put a piece of work out there in public you're basically throwing it into this hurricane with everything else going on: cars, people, vandalism, weather, signage. So it's hard to maintain a mental space around the work in which people can consider the work's meaning. If you play between the gallery space and the outside storm, people can consider the work's more subtle dialogues. It was rewarding not only to see the number of people visiting the show, but also seeing people watching every single piece for their whole duration and studying the drawings. I think it's partly because when people do things they have traveled for many hours. Going back to Cindy's English Corner, you may think they meet there because they live nearby, but in fact they are travelling from far away.

HR: Everybody visiting the show seemed to love the video with the transport, *Moving On*.

MP: It's a piece that I did a decade ago in Indonesia but it raises issues that are pertinent to Chengdu now. Twenty years ago Chengdu’s beautiful tree-lined streets were full of people cycling and walking. Now it's choked with traffic and has terrible pollution.

HR: You can't even see the sun.

MP: I chose *Moving On* as an opening piece because people have probably arrived at the gallery by motorbike or by car. It's unlikely that they've arrived by bicycle and extremely unlikely that they walked. And yet they walk into this piece where they see an elegant procession accompanied by Gamelan Music transform into the cacophony of motorised transport.

When you walk into the gallery the first view is *Viral Planting*. You see this beguiling image, which is playing with the beauty of the flowers, but is horrifying in terms of being a virus. *Moving On* is hidden until you enter the space but you hear its soundtrack, which you associate at first with the flowers. I consider the soundscape as much as the visual elements of the show. I like sounds to bleed from one piece to another. I don't want the works to be seen in a sequence. I want people to flow freely between the works.

HR: It’s one big entity, which also connects what’s outside with what’s inside the gallery, such as in *A Stitch in Time*, which for the opening visitors had assembled at the start of the show, and then they would see on the ground floor of the gallery.

MP: With *A Stitch in Time* I was originally going to have it lying on the ground, but there was no vantage point from which to view it. So I pitched up one end of it. You could walk around it and get a good sense of the pattern. It became sculptural and occupied the space in a more cohesive manner. When you went behind the work there was an intimate projection of people putting the piece together. I didn't want the film to compete with the actual work. It’s like the backstory, the backdrop, going behind the scenes.

HR: Then with *Transparent Room*, which also brought the outside in, I know that was tricky both to film and install.

MP: Usually I would have filmed that piece well in advance but in this caseI filmed and edited it in the week proceeding the show. That was tight, to the wire. *Transparent Room* was a turning point for me because at that time I was showing in galleries but I had become more interested in what was happening outside the gallery. This piece became a physical manifestation of that. So people coming inside are seeing is what’s outside. They have to reconsider the spaces they've just walked through.

HR: So that is very much in sort of Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham mode.

MP: Yes, the structure is an illusionistic mirror of what’s outside. I speed up the day and I keep focusing further into the film. So it's also looking at the image itself. Even though the first views are in high definition, they break down and as the film speeds up you have a sense of falling into space, of the space collapsing onto itself. People asked *'Why aren't you filming the famous sites of Chengdu? This isn't distinctively Chengdu.*'

HR: You weren’t filming the pandas.

MP: But that's not the point, I had to explain. '*This has to be just here'*.

HR: So it was literally just the street outside?

MP: It was literally the specific angle. It's even filmed at a 45° angle because the view is at 45°. So if you did a Gordon Matta-Clark on the space and cut a hole through the walls that’s the view that you'd see.

HR: I don't think I quite twigged it was in that kind of minimalist legacy.

MP: When I started being interested in art I was obsessed with the minimalists. I still borrow from that formal language, but my work functions in a completely different way. It merges the aesthetics of minimalism with the principles of socially-engaged practice. With a lot of socially-engaged practice the work can be engaging in terms of its narrative, but the objects that are left can be haphazard and visually uninspiring.

HR: Even anti-illusionist. There’s not really anything to look at.

MP: And anti-spectacle. That's fine, but it is somehow disappointing when you go to an exhibition and it feels like an extension of a book.

HR: Or you could see it online.

MP: It's an academic experience, a textual experience. I try with my work to develop those narratives and those points of engagement, whilst still being interested in spectacle and an aesthetic conclusion. The experiential level is crucial.