

OVERGADEN.

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9 NOVEMBER, 5-8PM

Through a division of sound and image Stefan A. Pedersen focuses on China as projection surface for the West's imagination and fascination.

INTERVIEW

Post-production (2012)

By Sidsel Nelund

Sidsel Nelund Your exhibition at *Overgaden* is part of a larger project that you started in 2008, which deals with the visual representation of China. What is the background to this project, and what has it consisted of so far?

Stefan A. Pedersen My interest in image production and in the journey as phenomenon began on a working trip to India. I had brought an old SLR camera along with me that I rarely took out of my bag. For me it was not just a camera, but also the bearer of a particular Western photographic tradition, in which the camera represents a colonial gaze and a particularly assertive, proactive subject with a penetrating mission. Another important starting-point for the project has been that when my father died over 20 years ago, he left behind what seemed to be a number of open stories. One of these was his trip to China in 1972, which I understood had meant a lot to him. This group trip was organised by the psychology students' travel club at the University of Copenhagen, and can be seen as part of a larger Western European movement of partly politically-motivated young people who were fascinated by the developments in China and wanted to see the country for themselves. During their trip they took a lot of photographs, and my father also left behind parts of an unfinished 16mm film. The film was an attempt to describe the socio-economic changes that China had experienced during the Cultural Revolution. This aroused my interest in both the photographs and the film, as a kind of location-displaced form of image production. The first exhibition in the project, *Souvenir*, involved my father's old camera as a hub through which the specific story about the students' journey and the intensified interest of those days in images from China could unfold. Later on, I made the exhibition *Instructions (Single Lens Reflex)* about the inherited camera and the question of the extent to which the image regime that goes with it is associated with the technology itself. The next exhibition, *Produktion (1972)*, was based on the unfinished film. Here I was interested in the instability of representation that the images in the film display. It was also a first attempt to mirror elements from the film in the exhibition space - an aspect which I have developed further in *Out of, In, On, and Off*.

SN In addition to the unfinished film, you also focus on other themes, influenced by the fact that in July of this year, you travelled to China to repeat your father's journey. The exhibition consists of three

parts: image, sound, and a series of curtains. There is a point in keeping these three parts separate, so let's examine them one by one - starting with the curtains, which are the first thing that meets the audience.

SAP For me, the curtains have many meanings. In my father's film, the students visit a hospital to have acupuncture demonstrated on one of the tour participants, and in the background some blue curtains are partly drawn across a window. This prevents you from seeing where it has been recorded - you can only imagine what might be on the other side. The blue curtains became important to me, because they act as a kind of metaphor for things that are there, but which you cannot see. They create a visual distance between the observer and what is on the other side, and I try to recreate this in the exhibition space.

SN The curtains separate sound from image in the exhibition - why?

SAP The video is silent, and the sound was recorded afterwards. This separation is inspired by the first time I saw my father's films, when I saw the pictures first as the sound was on a separate magnetic tape. That made me interested in the relationship between image and sound. When I heard the sound and saw the pictures separately, a deficit arose, which caused me to begin to create my own version. It gave me the idea for a 'disassembled film' that the viewer can piece together.

SN Shall we move on to the next element, the video projection?

SAP My father's film from 1972 was made in 4:3 format, while my own footage from China this year is in 16:9 format. Both formats are common in their time, and to emphasise the historical gap between the two formats, film and video, I have chosen to make the screen, on which the video is projected, in 4:3 format and keep the video in widescreen. This means that not all of the video picture fits the screen, so it spills out into the space on either side.

SN The images one sees are reminiscent of living still images, or *tableau vivants* and could be described as visual field notes, with a relatively raw, uninterpreted character. They are almost meditative images, in which you can contemplate the small changes in the picture. Why have you chosen this kind of image, with a low level of information?

SAP The idea of creating open images is based on the fact that there are already many pictures from China in circulation today, thanks to the digital image paradigm in which we live. I was therefore interested in creating some low-key images, which do not necessarily provide a counterbalance to the images that circulate in the Western media, but which lie somewhere between information and non-information.

SN There aren't many people in the pictures, either ...



16mm film, recorded in China, and 16mm magnetic audio tape, 1972

SAP That is perhaps the only explicitly anti-representational aspect of the exhibition. To represent China as a country full of people has itself become a stereotype.

SN The visual note format brings us to the final element: sound. The audio track is also based on notes?

SAP Yes, the soundtrack consists of the recitation of a number of more or less reformulated quotes from people who live or have lived in Europe and North America, all of whom have had a relationship with China, in connection with either image production, ideas or specific trips. The manuscript is a compilation of these notes, together with my own and my father's notes.

SN And I suppose you have also chosen these quotes because the persons who wrote them were in the same situation as you are right now? For instance the author and filmmaker Susan Sontag, who imagines travelling to China as a child;

the philosopher and literary critic Roland Barthes, who writes about the loss of his mother, and the filmmaker Joris Ivens, who travelled there in the 1930s and 1970s to make films. This mixture of I-persons who coalesce into a kind of transcendent 'I' with various positions produces the feeling that you maintain the composite, while at the same time the composite is not entirely precise or easy to take over?

SAP There is clearly a link between these various I-persons, and moreover, I wanted to place the audio track in a historical context, in order to create a narrative about a particular approach to producing impressions and pictures of China. It's one of the things I am fundamentally interested in, also in a historical sense; the way in which China, through the Orientalist approach, has become a kind of projection surface, an object. I have repeated, in a way, the Orientalist approach in the images in the exhibition, but this is simultaneously

an attempt to draw attention to the fact that a surface is not a fixed object, but can be worked on.

SN Given that both image and sound are at note level, one might say that they remain superficial - that it is a superficial approach to another culture, because how deeply can you actually penetrate? At the same time, the surface can also be regarded as a border?

SAP Yes, even a surface has at least two sides. This is interesting both in relation to mediality and to the East/West juxtaposition, which historically has been constructed again and again, and is still being constructed today. I therefore think that it is appropriate to continue to investigate these constructions, and enquire into whether they are as stable as they are presented as being.

Sidsel Nelund is an art writer and PhD student at the University of Copenhagen with a focus on knowledge production in contemporary art.

The Visible and The Invisible

By Judith Schwarzbart

Stefan A. Pedersen's exhibition at Overgaden is the result of a long period of research, and took shape during a trip to China earlier this year, during which the artist followed the same route as his late father, 40 years earlier. The artist's father travelled to China with the psychology students' travel club from the University of Copenhagen, and his diary and photographic negatives, together with some unfinished film footage that he had produced in collaboration with one of his fellow students, were among the materials he left behind. This material has provided the starting-point for Stefan A. Pedersen's research, which has so far resulted in a number of works. The journey to China and the exhibition at Overgaden are therefore just the latest parts of a project extending over several years. The material that his father left behind piqued the artist's curiosity on several levels. On the one hand they related to his father, of whom he has only childhood memories, while on the other they included film footage taken in the early 1970s of China, which was then a closed country, and which today has become a major economic power by which we are still greatly mystified. In short, a father figure and a country, both of which are subject to a strong projection of ideas - the first on a personal level, and the other at a more general level. Although the students' film recordings from the 1970s had a documentary aim, and despite the fact that the exploration of documentary methods has been quite prevalent in the video art of the past 15 years, Stefan A. Pedersen's project and exhibition does not have a documentary character. He seems to be more concerned with the statement potential, or lack of same, of the actual medium.

Although we speak of 'taking pictures' when we photograph things, it has long been clear that the photographer (whether a visual artist, journalist, portrait photographer or otherwise) actually creates images. The photograph, then, is not just an index, an imprint of the world, but also a visual statement. A representation does not only reproduce a reality, but creates reality through the act of capturing and identifying our view, and thereby our understanding of the world. This idea is of course in no way new in the history of art. Any reproduction of the world is an interpretation and a statement, with formal choices, which goes far beyond the actual motif. Just as, historically, libera-

tion from the motif has itself been a project in abstract art, the investigation of this complex relationship with the motif and the visible, material world has been the focal point for most art in the twentieth century. Questions arise about the extent to which the work primarily refers to the world, is a concrete object in the world, or helps to create a reality through our perceptions and language. In recent years, many artists have concentrated on creating a counter-discourse, i.e. creating representations other than those you typically see. By photographing motifs other than the usual, they challenge the dominant view of the world's composition. Another strategy is to show that gaze and perspective are never neutral and objective, for example by turning away from an exoticising view of non-Western cultures, or by taking a feminist perspective. Stefan A. Pedersen's exhibition also challenges our perspective - not by establishing counter-images, but by presenting images that are just as much about what we do not see.

The exhibition is an installation, consisting of a video projection, a separate audio track, and curtains. The images in the video are almost stationary and draw more upon the tradition of still photography than on the cinematography of the moving picture. The scenes in the video are characterised more by timelessness, by a state or a being, than by a movement towards something. Outside the train window, housing projects and factories flicker past in the endless intermediate space that lies between the dense city and the countryside. The city is represented through architecture, modernist blocks and skyscrapers that are shot from a distance, and which thereby appear deserted. We observe architecture in changing relationships with the landscape and the sky, but for the most part the clarity is lost in fog, smog or twilight. On a promenade beside the river, the view disappears behind a large screen, which simultaneously conceals the opposite bank and enables a projection. What we see is a city that provides the framework for a possible life, a superficial backdrop. A park literally comprises a location for a film or advertising shooting, the content of which is only hinted at, since we can only see what is going on behind the camera. The few people who appear in the video are mostly passive, enjoying a view, or are curious spectators to the recordings. They are in no way active individuals - they do not represent an actual lived life. We might sense a slight hint of development through the cranes on the horizon, or a small awkward excavator working its way through mounds in a landscape of



Stefan A. Pedersen: *Out of, In, On, and Off*, 2012. Video still

rubble - here probably rebuilding outdated industrial plants into new skyscraper landscapes.

But what is it we do not see? What story is not told by the pictures? There is always a great deal that pictures do not show. These images are in no way trying to capture something essentially Chinese, or to document life in China or any of the things we constantly hear about, such as rapid economic growth, human rights violations or nascent attempts at democratisation. The architecture reveals very little about what lies beneath the surface; neither concretely, in terms of the life it contains, nor more implicitly, in terms of the political and economic structures that underlie the booming cities. Just like the screen on the riverbank, the pictures both cover something up and enable the projection of personal and collective notions of what we see. Here, China is both imagination and discourse. The pictures co-exist with us as viewers, and with all the other pictures and pieces of information that detachedly circulate in print and the digital media, and which today are almost constantly present and available for a large proportion of the world's population. In the exhibition, the mismatch between the size of the projection and the free-standing projection screen marks a difference between the format that video typically has today, and the format in which the artist's father's film was recorded. A more decisive difference between the two films, however, lies not so much in the change of format as in the belief in or understanding of what visual media can reveal. The recording device itself is already equipped with a discourse, an ordering and colonising gaze, because it always turns the depicted 'other' into a passive object within a system created by an allegedly omniscient, neutral and scientifically Western subject. But is any other kind of gaze possible, when someone from Denmark travels through China? Is it possible to create other images?

Like collage, or for that matter the assemblage of sculpture or the montage of film and radio, the composite and the actual composition have an influence on how art creates meaning - and not only in an iconographic sense. The experiments in collage by the Dadaists and Cubists at the start of the 20th century represented a means of breaking free of the centralised

perspective which had been the dominant image-organising principle in visual art since the Renaissance. As construction and convention, the geometric perspective may be advantageous because it creates a stable and unambiguous space; but with modern life, which was experienced as fragmented, chaotic and complex, it has been challenged as an organising principle, particularly by Modernism. However, from the end of the 20th century and up to today it has been the ordering of the world by the photographic lens that has caused us problems. The media today is full of the allegedly objective framing of the world that the camera lens promises: the privileged angle and the privileged moment. But the authority of that one-eyed master, the lens, and the demand for truth in the voice-over of documentary film is now being challenged from many

sides. We see this in the post-structuralism of philosophy, the post-colonialism of the cultural sciences, in art, and in this exhibition. With so many artists currently working with multi-screen installations, or, like Stefan A. Pedersen in this exhibition, significantly making visible the physicality and mediality of the projection in the way it encounters the architecture of the exhibition space, and when sound is separated from image, then a break is created with the ordering principle found in the lens of the camera. Several voices mingle in the voice of the soundtrack, which no longer possesses any clear identity. This installation has many horizons. There is no favourable point where the audience can obtain an overview of the work, and through it, of the world.

Judith Schwarzbart is an independent curator and PhD fellow at Roskilde University.

CV

Stefan A. Pedersen (b. 1979) is educated at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. He has had a number of solo exhibitions, most recently *Produktion (1972)* at Koh-i-noor, Copenhagen, 2011, and *Instructions (Single Lens Reflex)* at Atelier Atelier, Copenhagen, 2009. Furthermore his work has been included in several group exhibitions in Denmark and abroad, among these *Kunst am Bau* at Rescue Coordination Center in Feldkirch, 2010; *Rewind The Script To*, Demoraum, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2008, and *Not Sheep* at ArtSpeak Gallery, Vancouver, 2006. In 2002 he participated in the film screening *Repeat & Rewind* at Overgaden. He has received a number of grants and residencies, most recently he was artist-in-residency at Capacete in São Paulo and Rio, 2012. Stefan A. Pedersen lives in Copenhagen.

PERFORMANCE: SETTING THE SCENE

Thursday 22 November at 5pm you can join a visualization exercise in Stefan A. Pedersen's exhibition, when a choir of readers will recite scene descriptions from the opera *Nixon In China*. The opera from 1987 is an interpretation of Richard and Pat Nixon's legendary visit to Beijing in 1972 and is composed by John Adams with libretto by Alice Goodman.

GUIDED TOUR

Sunday 2 December at 3pm Overgaden invites you to a guided tour of the current exhibitions in the company of Karen Mette Fog Pedersen, a member of Overgaden's curatorial staff. Afterwards we will serve coffee and cake. The event will be in Danish.

DIAS SHOW: PICTURE IF YOU WILL

Thursday 10 January at 7pm Stefan A. Pedersen adds new layers to his exploration of the relationship between sound and image in a dias show, which focuses on Western notions of China as the 'other'. The images are accompanied by recitation of travelogues and other stories by Victor Segalen, Julia Kristeva, Susan Sontag and Arthur Koestler among others.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 8 Februar 2013 Overgaden presents the exhibition *Medium Large* by Jesper Dyrehauge and a duo exhibition by Thorbjørn Bechmann and Sofie Thorsen. The last day of the exhibitions is 7 April 2013.

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Translation: Billy O'Shea

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from www.overgaden.org



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Stefan A. Pedersen: *Out of, In, On, and Off*, 2012. Video still