



POP-UP ART

TWELVE ARTISTS IN A TENT

by Jennifer Conrad

In a city where new buildings spring up seemingly overnight and an entire block can be transformed in the course of a week, the organizers behind “Cou Huo” are adding one more insta-structure to the urban landscape.

Couhuo 凑合 translates into English as “makeshift” or “to improvise” – it connotes a hasty way of doing things. At its best, the organizers of this exhibition believe, it’s about the act of getting things accomplished in the only way possible. “*Cou hu*o is a positive energy,” says Chen Xinpeng, the curator and a local mixed-media artist. “It’s how we get our shit done.

“Look at this,” he says, gesturing towards the expanse of Guomao and Soho New Town, visible from the office where we met, near the Today Art Museum. “Five, ten years ago, this was nothing.”

Similarly, “Cou Huo” appears to pop up from nowhere. The exhibition is housed in an inflatable gold 20sqm tent that will travel to three locations around Beijing on weekends throughout the month. Neville Mars, the Beijing-based architect who founded the Dynamic City Foundation, consulted on the tent design.

Chen commissioned 12 works to address the concept of *couhuo*. The artists are a mix of Chinese and foreigners – from Austria, Chile, Scotland, Switzerland and the US – who have a connection to the Beijing art scene. The outdoor tent setting creates some parameters: The works include installations, videos and sculptures, but no paintings or delicate pieces that can’t stand up to the elements.

“There’s a larger context for this concept in Beijing. A lot of things spring from nowhere, and don’t always stand up to scrutiny,” says Michael Zheng, a participating artist who splits his time between Beijing and San Francisco. “There’s a seeming compromise, but nonetheless you achieve things. China probably wouldn’t have gotten so far if things weren’t done this way.”

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The objects on display – and the moving exhibition – reflect this spirit, centered on the notion that “through a seemingly casual approach, it ends up interesting,” says Zheng. His work depicts the bottom portion of a doorway leading to a carpet with shadows cast by unseen objects and is based on a memory he can’t place.

Chilean duo nicoykatiushka present a video installation called “Genograma,” in which 12 screens show their family members going to bed at the same time. “A genogram is a pictorial display of a person’s family relationships and medical history,” they explain. “It goes beyond a traditional family tree by allowing the user to visualize hereditary patterns and psychological factors that punctuate relationships.” They add that the *couhuo* nature of the exhibition – especially the limits of a non-traditional space – affected the creation of the piece. “We have been traveling with the tapes for a while and never

found the right moment to put the piece together. Under this improvised or makeshift exhibition, we believe this is a perfect moment to put together the pieces.”

Rutherford Chang, an American artist working in Beijing, presents a sound installation using loudspeakers bought or bartered from their previous owners. The speakers retain the original recordings, which hawk items like newspapers and bottled water. Another American, Johnston Foster, uses plastic items bought at 99-cent stores to form a colorful rainbow made from consumer junk. Giant skulls anchor the rainbow at each end.

“We don’t think of it as an exhibition, but an event in a tent,” says Katherine Don, whose Red Box Studio organized the traveling event. The choice of an unconventional venue is intended to create an experience different from shows in institutions and commercial galleries. “In the last couple of years, when you talk to artists, it’s like, ‘How much do you sell? How much do you make?’” says Chen. Thus, presenting outside of the gallery system and showing works that aren’t meant to be sold or collected offers a chance to change that vibe.

Don adds, “The focus of the exhibition is on the space and the experience it creates for the viewer. We want to take that next step and contribute something different to the art landscape.”

“Cou Huo” makes its first stop in the parking lot by the south gate of the 798 (Oct 9-11). Its second stop will be at Solana Mall (Oct 16-18). The third location was still TBD at time of press. For updates and more info, visit www.nicouhuoma.com.