

Testing the Waters: A Video Installation by Ellen Zweig
—Corina Larkin

...the listener retains only the words he is expecting...
It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.
—Italo Calvino¹

Like Calvino, Ellen Zweig understands that a person's own experience and culture determines his or her perceptions. With this in mind, she thoughtfully examines her interaction with Chinese culture. *Testing the Waters*, the installation currently on view at the CUE Art Foundation, adds to an existing body of work that explores Western perceptions of China. This work offers new perspectives on the theme of learning about another culture through imitation. Zweig's witty observations and attention to minor details of daily life also effectively counter the deluge of stereotypical images of China in the mass media.

Zweig was a poet before becoming a performance and video artist. Childhood memories of Pearl Buck novels, ink paintings, Buddha statues and Chinese restaurants – some of these in and of themselves clichés – fed an adult fascination with China and inspired this ongoing series of videos. *HEAP*, a video installation at the DDM Warehouse in Shanghai in April 2006, was a humorous piece on the idea of a Westerner bringing images of China to China. Other related work included a non-narrative investigation of how intellectuals like Ernest Fenollosa, John Searle and G.W. Leibniz interacted with Asian cultures. *Testing the Waters* comes from the Chinese phrase “*tou shi wen lu*,” meaning literally “throw rock ask road,” or more loosely, “testing the waters.” The phrase fittingly describes the new direction of this installment in the series, which is a more personal exploration of cross-cultural interaction.

At the entrance to the exhibition is a small monitor displaying the title of the show and the beautifully striped, eponymous rock of “throw rock ask road.” Inside the darkened space, three walls display large video projections that investigate different metaphors for the experience of learning about

¹ Italo Calvino, trans. William Weaver, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), p. 135; quoted in Spence, Jonathan, *The Chan's Great Continent* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 241.

another culture. Each projection is to be taken as an equal part of a whole, rather than as a sequential narrative. Ambient sound tracks in different locations play a muted selection of noises heard on the street, including the sounds of rice pouring, rain, footsteps, birds singing or a sonorous gong. The footage comes from many hours that Zweig spent in urban parks, on city streets and in rural areas during three trips to China since 2000 and from constructed scenarios of an imagined China at home in New York. As she reviewed her spontaneously filmed observations, Zweig became fascinated with the subtle gestures made by her subjects in the course of mundane activity. Faced with the mystery of such nuance, she decided to “imitate the unconscious gestures of a culture in order to understand it.”

On the left wall, two sizeable projections exemplify the variations Zweig plays on the theme of imitation. A musician and a singer perform excerpts from archetypical examples of each culture’s theatrical tradition – Beijing Opera and Shakespeare. In one panel of the diptych, an American dresses as a traditional Chinese opera singer and sings a few lines by Judge Bao (a popular character appearing in many operas). In the other panel, a young Chinese opera singer recites one of Viola’s speeches from *Twelfth Night*. Perhaps the confusion from the ambiguity of appearances in *Twelfth Night* is analogous to the confusion of one culture imitating another. Later, as the Westerner mimes the footwork of the opera character, Chinese couples dance a waltz. Partly by copying and partly through intuition, each person gains insight into the refined body language of a different culture.

On the opposite wall, footage of quotidian but sensual moments of activity on the street is interspersed with the artist’s own sincere attempts to copy these movements. In good weather, Chinese parks fill with people escaping the confines of small, crowded homes. All the arts find expression. It is not uncommon to find musicians playing traditional instruments or artists practicing calligraphy, either with actual ink and paper or with water and a brush on the sidewalk. Zweig focuses on the hand of one experienced artist as he lightly paints a single character with water on the pavement. Later, she awkwardly traces the same character on a New York street, learning with practice how much water the brush holds. Entranced by the movement of a woman swirling her hand unconsciously in a bag of rice, Zweig sets up a bag of rice in her kitchen and moves her hand through the rice in the same way.

Zweig hopes to gain enough insight to experience the world from the same perspective as the calligrapher in the park or the woman in the street market. But she casts a bemused, critical eye over her

own actions and poses the question of whether experience can be replicated. The story of an encounter between the philosophers Zhuang Zi and Hui Zi comes to mind. Walking in a park, the two pause on a bridge over a stream. Hui Zi observes that a fish dances happily in the water below. Zhuang Zi says: “You are not a fish. How can you know a fish’s happiness?” Hui Zi counters: “You are not I. How do you know that I do not know a fish’s happiness?” And so it goes....

Another device that Zweig uses is props that emphasize how cultural history shapes perceptions. Boxes of Uncle Ben’s Rice in the background of one of the sequences trigger specific associations for Americans – the Deep South, slavery and plantations, the outdated idea of comfort food prepared by a kindly black servant, or perhaps an example of processed food so typical of the American market. In China, however, the word rice (fan) can be used literally as the food or metaphorically for an entire meal, a means of livelihood or the idea of job security for life.

Zweig is also interested in the experience of communication, or as the case may be, the lack thereof. Fragments of a language lesson can be heard on the ambient sound track. A small wall monitor alternates between footage of a silent close-up of a woman speaking and a person marking out the strokes of a Chinese character on her hand. The latter practice is commonly used in China to differentiate between words that sound alike but have different meanings. Alluding to the frustration of not being able to understand a foreign language, the installation also emphasizes the extent to which communication relies on so much more than words. Zweig is attuned to how visual stimuli such as context, body language, and shared practices also play an important role.

Zweig deploys unexpected imagery of a real and imagined China to raise questions about the veracity of any individual’s preconceptions. But because much of her footage is actually shot in contemporary China, her work invites comparison with others who have formed a record of the country. Historically, Western perceptions of China have been shaped by reports from travelers, missionaries, journalists, and diplomats, and their personal, religious and political agendas played a role in defining the public’s view of China. Their writings, as well as photographs, television and film contributed to romanticized stereotypes. Clichés abound – Charlie Chan, *The Good Earth*, Mao’s oversize portrait in Tiananmen Square, fervent young Red Guards waving their Little Red Books during the Cultural Revolution. Today, reports of China’s explosive economic growth, paired with images of rapidly rising

skyscrapers or factory workers turning out Nike shoes, are commonplace. A few Western artists have contributed to a more subtle vision of China, notably Henri Cartier-Bresson, who photographed the communist takeover of China in the late 1940's and the Beat poet Gary Snyder, who translated the poetry of the Tang Dynasty hermit Cold Mountain. But for the most part, our view of China comes from the mass media.

At times, Zweig films contemporary China in a manner that might match the headlines on cable television or any major newspaper. In a shot of a demolition site, the camera pauses to make sense of the pattern of rubble and underscore the rapid destruction of traditional architecture across the country before shifting focus to a new construction site. The video loops in the same cycle of destruction and new building that has characterized the rapid pace of economic growth in the last two decades.

But the majority of the images Zweig recorded in China counterbalance the iconic or stereotypical images of the mass media. She wanders the streets, focusing on the ordinary or seemingly inconsequential. Yet her choice of subject is fresh and revealing. A lone middle-aged woman participates in the type of outdoor dance lesson that is so common in urban parks. With her purse tucked firmly under one arm, she gracefully extends her other arm and inclines her head, stopping just short of full exaltation. No doubt she will soon continue on, perhaps to finish her shopping or return to her office. A private moment of pleasure is stolen in the park between errands. In a few brief moments the artist has shown the degree to which life in a densely populated country is conducted in close view of other people. Privacy is found in the anonymity of the crowd.

Through the use of images and sounds that are both sensuous and immediate, Zweig succeeds in highlighting the potential deceptions and misinterpretations that sometimes occur when two cultures meet. In the artist's words: "I'm not exploring China. I'm exploring my own and other Western attempts to understand China. That's the only stance I can take."

It is a stance worth taking.

The writer, **Corina Larkin**, is a painter and writer based in New York. She holds a Master's degree in Chinese Studies from The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), a division of Johns Hopkins University and lived in Asia for five years.

The mentor was **Avis Berman**. Berman, author of *Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art* and *Edward Hopper's New York*, and editor and co-author of *My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator*, is an independent writer and art historian who has contributed essays and reviews to many newspapers, journals, anthologies, and exhibition catalogues. Since 2001, she has directed the oral history program of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation. She is now working on book about the murals of New York City.