



# THE REAL THING

contemporary art from china

## *Whose Utopia? What are you doing here?* 2006

*Whose Utopia? What are you doing here?* was produced as part of the Siemen's Arts Program, 'What are they doing here?', in which the company invited Chinese artists to make work as part of a residency within various sectors of its manufacturing plants across China. Cao Fei chose the Osram lighting factory located in Foshan, near her home in the south, where she filmed the work between October 2005 and April 2006.

Cao Fei explains the reasons for her choice: "In terms of the economic development of the Pearl River Delta, factories like Osram are creating a new arena and playing a role in the reform process and China's integration within the global system. Simultaneously, the force of the global market is making itself felt in China through these types of joint-ventures. As a result, the local economy is acquiring a role in the international scene on the backs of products created by a young labour force from the inland provinces, which in turn makes the location an equitable choice for manufacturers..."

*Whose Utopia?* 2006  
video installation



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It is quickly apparent in *Whose Utopia?* how intimately Cao Fei knows this world of industry in the PRD, from the nature of the society it engenders to the impact it has upon the workers themselves, who are today by far the greatest proportion of its demographic make-up. *Whose Utopia?* paints a poignant and insightful portrait of the individuals who make up this rapidly expanding sector of contemporary Chinese society. From the young, wide-eyed country girls, and a generation of young men who were born to be farmhands, but who are today being replaced by modern mechanisation, to those who are slightly older, and who, once employed by the state, and having been made redundant, are now on their second or third careers. The work is at once an indictment of the socialist dream, and a conflicted tribute to those employees who, by dint of being employed, might just see a better tomorrow, and the future they dream of become reality. While other nations rail against China's ever-increasing manufacturing prowess, protesting against jobs that will be lost and income that will be diverted, the reality of the factory workers' existence gets ignored. It is worth remembering that they represent the very same class of workers that Mao set at the top of the social ladder in his attempts to impose his own version of a Marxist state. Cao Fei's response goes to the heart and soul

of the system, flawed and inefficient in Mao's time and yet, ironically today, this workforce is truly the engine Mao envisaged. It drives an economic reality, of which everyone wants to be a part. But even as the new social realities profoundly change lives, Cao Fei reminds us that people might sell their skills and labour, but ultimately not their souls.

Again, the concerns and emotions portrayed in *Whose Utopia?* do not belong to China alone, for they match the experience of factory workers everywhere where the individual is required to perform one task in a chain of actions along a production line, repeated shift after shift ad infinitum.

*Whose Utopia?* begins by following the entire length of the various production lines that produce the Osram range, through a multitude of processes that assemble the numerous components of every individual light bulb. We see how molten glass is blown, pulled, and flooded with neon coatings, how the electrical elements are fitted with surgical precision, and the tungsten and daylight bulbs, and lengths of neon tubes are tested in a mesmerising carnival of light, all engineered to afford their end-users optimal choice. Cao Fei then takes us into the private fantasy world of the individual workers, whom we see dance through the warehouse.

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pirouetting along conveyer belts, like the ballerina one dreams of becoming, or shadowboxing in the packing plant like the martial arts expert another once wished to become, or another who strums a guitar to the rhythm of light industry in the manner of a true would-be rock star.

The finale builds around a succession of long motionless frames held on the faces of these workers, who we now see anew for having shared their personal aspirations and dreams. These faces stare at the camera with extraordinary directness, an unflinching gaze that connects them to the external world, issued almost as a challenge to the viewer to defy to see them as the people they are, or assume that their dreams are any less real than the world they inhabit. The film ends with Mao's famous assertion that the future he promised was not simply a dream, an ironic, humorous, bitter, yet poignant comment upon the life of the worker as an individual in the China of today.

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