

Neglected Objects, Neglected Reality Made in China by Johan Nieuwenhuize

By Gu Zheng, June 2009

This is a material world. In a rich, materialistic society, objects provide approximations of our understanding and judgment of the world. Objects determine our attitude towards reality. Of course, objects also attract our eyes.

Made in China, created by the Dutch artist, Johan Nieuwenhuize, was shot and first exhibited in China. This series demonstrates the existence and influence of everyday objects made in China, objects that perhaps have the subtlest influence. The exhibition title, *Made in China*, at the very least comprises two levels of meaning. First, this photographer's work was shot in China; secondly, the objects shown in these works were produced, sold and used in China. So, how does the artist interpret these objects that have attracted his eye, these objects of China?

The objects in Nieuwenhuize's photography result from his visits to the homes of some of China's lowest social classes living on the periphery of Beijing. The ways in which Chinese people treat objects and the place objects hold in their lives have become aspects of his perception of China. The photographs of these objects can be interpreted as scenes of the marginalized areas of Beijing, which are incomparable to the luxurious and extravagant parts of the city. In these places, the objects and their treatment more genuinely reflect the reality of daily life in China. The objects appearing here (in the photographs) are usually simple, crude, and overlooked by our eyes. Yet objects such as luxury goods in certain parts of the city already far exceed the requirements of modern city life and are seen as symbols of consumption. To some extent, they also embody the success of China's globalization. Yet if the objects in Nieuwenhuize's photographs are placed alongside the objects used by China's middle and upper classes, we discover that the disparity reflected in these objects represents the disparity between the two kinds of modern society in China.

The objects found in a place not only represent the material standard of that place, but also present its standards of production and culture. Simultaneously, due to the way these objects are owned and used, they possess both sociological and anthropological value and significance. In Chinese, the word 'object' in some circumstances connotes certain value judgments. It is often linked with negative judgments. Currently, people also often use the phrase 'material desires' to describe the rapacity for material possessions. They use 'material desires' to describe people's appetite for objects, as well as illustrate their desires through the pursuit and possession of objects. An era where materials hold supremacy can also be described as a 'materialistic' era. However, the objects in Nieuwenhuize's photographs have little to do with these 'material desires'. They are merely basic necessities, a simple and crude return to the most basic functions. His photography makes us see how objects fulfill the needs of both life and work, and also by their very essence articulate people's lives, presenting people's ways of life, and verifying people's standards of living. The existence of these objects not only demonstrates the relationship between people and objects, but also suggests certain realities of Chinese society. Through these photographs, we discover people whose existence depends on these most basic, simple and crude objects. They are placed in contrast with those who do not appear in Nieuwenhuize's photographs – China's new rich, who have already become the greatest purchasers of Western luxury goods. Objects represent the social, political and economic positions of their owners. Social distinctions are manifested through the objects that one possesses. In a certain sense, the stratification of society is also manifested through 'objects'. The type of person and their possessions also belong to particular social strata. In China, the objects that Nieuwenhuize has seen and shown simply do not belong to the category of consumer goods and their owners have simply not entered into present-day China's consumer system. They only purchase (and sometimes, not even through purchasing, somehow manage to gain), possess and use basic necessities. Consumerism does not matter to these people. The Chinese whose existence and means of making a living is dependent on these objects are only revealed through the arrival of Nieuwenhuize. Through his discovery and revelation of objects, the social stratification of China appears visually. From neglected objects, he encourages us to see the neglected reality.

Through his examination and gaze, these objects gain a performative nature. What photography possesses is the capacity to pare the object off from its surroundings and reveal its specificity as an independent entity. Whilst verifying and displaying the owner's way of life, the photograph also reflects the value of the object's existence in its own right. In Nieuwenhuize's photographs, the objects come to exist as the objects with a photographic aesthetic. In this exhibition, the artist also interposes a series of self-portraits and photographs of the sky. This encourages us to think of another Chinese word: 'renwu' (figure), where 'ren' means people and 'wu' means object and 'renwu' combines these meanings. In Chinese, the word 'renwu' (figure) can refer to a person. However, this word in fact holds connotations of a relationship between people and objects. When he places images of people (his self-portraits) and objects in the same exhibition space, in the space between these photographs, the word 'renwu' is inadvertently reified. At the very least, people act as the examiners, discoverers, and users of objects. Whilst developing a relationship with objects, they are also captured as the objects of the gaze. Yet the detached view manifested in Nieuwenhuize's self-portraits makes us feel his attitude towards objects and of course perhaps towards reality -- to look on and maintain a distance.

Holland is a country of great photography with many exceptional photographers. Their photography reveals a specific style in both the handling of subject matter and the grasp of the object. This exhibition, brought to us through the belief of the young Dutch photographer, Johan Nieuwenhuize, offers us grounds for enlightenment.

Translated by Nicola Kielty