

Never Mind the Aura, Pass the Clone Review for Grapheion Magazine No 21

John Phillips, director of london**print**studio, reviews Sung Chun Mei's notorious installation at the 2028 5th Shanghai New Media Triennial, and reflects on the political storm that has shaken the world over the past ten days.

That artists provoke public outcry has been de rigueur for over a century and a half. That a somewhat nondescript artists' installation might incite a serious diplomatic row and threaten key talks on economic collaboration between China and the EU would, until last week, have seemed an improbable fantasy. But yesterday's announcement by Politburo Spokesman Lee Shui Bo, which stated that 'the second phase of the Collaborative Reconstruction Trade Negotiations between the world's two superpowers is consigned to the incinerator of history' has turned such fantasy to fact, and will inevitably lead to further diplomatic breakdown between the East and West. It is unlikely that the Sung Chun Mei Collective anticipated such fall-out from their contribution to the prestigious Shanghai Triennial, which this year takes the theme *'The Future in the Past'*. Sung Chun Mei's installation, entitled *The Death of the Aura: Let a Million Mona Lisa's Bloom* is at face value quite innocuous. The visitor enters through a long dimly lit and slightly chilly narrow passage, which presumably is intended to evoke the recently revealed servant's entrance to the First Emperor's Mercurial Chamber. Then he or she crosses the 'veil of light' to be confronted by a cavernous domed display in which 100,000 identical reproductions of da Vinci's famous masterpiece hang on some 4 kilometres of a curvilinear walled maze. One's first impression is of monumental banality tinged with the dread of becoming lost forever in ubiquity. (One visitor on the second day reputedly took ten and a half hours to find the exit). But all this is presumably well-intentioned irony from this group of artist-technocrats who delight in their reputation for double-entente and double dealing. As their first manifesto announced *'We are the subversive monumentalists, conceived in Chuang Tsu's dream, marrying Dada to the State, we belong to whichever side opposes us. Only those who embrace paradox can inhabit the space between our actions and their meaning'*. Last week's bout of diplomatic ear-tweaking stemmed neither from the egalitarian grandiosity of a 'democratised' masterpiece, nor from the verbose claims of Sung Chun Mei's press release – I quote *'Every day 1000's queue to see the Mona Lisa, but they do not go to see the painting. They travel in search of it's aura. But this aura does not belong to the painting. It belongs to its theft. We have re-stolen the Mona Lisa and returned it to its material self. Leonardo's portrait is identical to our 100,000 clones'* What seeming drew blood across the diplomatic table was the claim by Sung Chun Mei and its partners Shanghai-based Atomic Resonance Technologies, that their Mona Lisa's were indistinguishable from the 'original' and that any one of their 100,000 'unique creations' would produce an identical carbon dating result to the da Vinci 'model'. Needless to say no human, or electronic, eye can spot the differences either. But if this claim can be verified, presumably all treasures could potentially be cloned, rolled out willy-nilly and sold on the open market for the price of a second-hand eco car. And that, argued the EU ministers, would demolish all cultural values at a single stroke. The official Chinese Government's response that, *'artistic freedom is an intrinsic value, which we will eternally uphold'*, signalled the authority's refusal to censor the technology behind the exhibit and marked the escalation of a conflict that some now consider to be the start of a twenty-first century cultural revolution of seismic proportions. One can only await the outcome with the suspicion that nothing will be resolved, and a hope that the

political debate about the value and location of an 'aura' might prove to be more interesting than the installation that sparked it.

The editor's offer the following amplifications in accordance with Section 14, Sub Paragraph 3 of EU Directive: Marginalia 1789, which places the editorial boards of professional journals under the legal obligation to provide clarification and interpretation of all esoteric references and jargon in order to facilitate the non-specialist reader's access to the text.

Sung Chun Mei can be translated into English as New Artistic-Media Group

The phrase; The Death of the Aura: Let a Million Mona Lisa's Bloom refers to two separate ideas:

- 1) In attempting to qualify the distinction between a unique art object and a mechanically reproduced image, the early twentieth century Marxist theoretician Walter Benjamin borrowed the term 'aura' from the religious-philosophical teachings of the Theosophists, who considered the 'aura' to be an incorporable halo or colourful visualisation of the soul that could be seen only by the initiated. Benjamin identified this non-material essence with the unique qualities inherent in an authentic individual artwork. Thus 'The Death of the Aura' evokes both the triumph of mechanisation and the ascendancy of communist perfection over bourgeois and religious individualism.*
- 2) Let a Million Mona Lisa's Bloom makes ironic reference to an experimental policy (1956-1957) in which the communist party leadership encouraged open debate under the slogan 'Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend'. The movement was subsequently suppressed and dissenting voices eradicated.*

The suggestion that the Mona Lisa's aura belongs to the painting's theft refers to an incident in 1911 when it was stolen from the Louve. The image at once gained international fame, via reproduction in the press, and thousands flocked to view the blank wall where it had once hung.

Living sometime during the fourth century, the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tsu explored the paradox of dreaming that he was a butterfly and, on waking, pondering that in reality he might be a butterfly dreaming of being Chuang Tsu.

That the display stretches across four kilometres of wall space reinforces the presence of death in the installation as both the numeral '4' and the word 'death' are the same (Si) in both Mandarin and Cantonese.