

ASPECT Magazine: Ma Yongfeng's The Swirl 2002

Voiceover Text

by Edward Sanderson



What we are watching here is a video work from 2002 entitled *The Swirl* by Chinese artist Ma Yongfeng. This 15 minute video is one of Ma's very first works at a point where he was displaying an interest in using what might be seen as futile behaviours, as a means of pricking the fabric of reality, and questioning its assumptions. Ma has more recently become known for his minimal interventions in daily life and socially aware services, but at the point at which this video was produced, these interests were still nascent.

Well, I can't ignore the video anymore, and that of course is its problematic – this traumatic activity which is presented to us – these fish which are due for quite a ride, as we will see.

As the commentator for this work, and ostensibly representative of it and of the artist, the unfolding of the piece makes it tempting to expound my own strong opinions about the treatment of animals, which could come into conflict with my respect for the artist. But neither Ma, nor—I guess—you, as the audience, will thank me for making such apologies. What's done is done, and we (the audience as well as

the artist) must deal with the consequences.

I have known Ma and his work for a few years now, and the work I have seen produced by him and which I have written about over that period initially has seemed formally very different from this early piece.

Ma now works less with video and more with events and situations. He aims to formalise a set of projects, which seek to work directly with social reality. He is, for instance, undertaking an ongoing project called forget art, an adaptable undertaking that takes many forms, including exhibitions, art fairs, interventions, online social networks, etc. but aims to play with these institutions and find new ways to turn them to social use.

How then does one get from these fish to an interest in working with the forms of society?

Taking a step back, what is happening in this video? Six live golden Koi fish have been placed in a top-loading washing machine and the washing cycle is set off. As an aside, the top-loading style of washing machine is a very common element in Chinese apartments – perhaps because this top-loading aspect saves space over their front-loading brethren.

So the wash cycle starts innocuously enough with the bright metal drum filling with water, the water falling from all sides to douse the fish. Once filled, the drum begins to turn clockwise, then anticlockwise agitating the water and the fish in the process. This continues, back and forth, for about 10 minutes. The water then drains out of the drum, leaving the fish high and dry on the metal base of the machine. Followed by a fade to black.

But such a cold description of the facts of this video leaves out the affective aspect of the action, both on the fish in their tormenting and violent situation, and on the audience with their feelings when placed in front of such an act by the artist.

It is probably best if I say at this point, that the fish were relatively unharmed after their washing, living out the rest of their natural lives with a friend of the artist's.

So what causes an artist to undertake such an action on these helpless animals? What does it mean?

Ma's other works of video and photography at that time were concerned with the place of "nature" in our understanding of the world, and nature's place and use value in our attempts to understand the world through our depictions of it. This would appear as Ma's own creations or by his filming of natural history museum

dioramas and reconstructions, sometimes with subtle interventions and changes by the artist, sometimes simply re-presenting the facts in front of us. Equally these constructions—with their original didactic purposes and the artists own twisting of them—serve to point up the arbitrary and fake nature of the presentation, a nature which often blatantly ignores the real needs of the animals and plants contained therein, giving the presentation for the audience priority over any welfare issues.

The Swirl presents a demonstration of a completely man-made, machine-like setting in which nature is placed to face its fate. The piece's apparent simplicity leads to some broad claims about its significance. Is it possible to see The Swirl as a piece of social criticism, or a commentary on the artist's existence, as critic Dorothée Brill has suggested? Are these claims a step too far?

Symbolic meaning is a well-developed part of culture. Especially in the visual arts, objects and scenes are interpreted based on their symbolic status, various objects have deep and significant meanings developed over the course of centuries, which the enlightened viewer can piece together as a further layer of meaning for the image.

So what can be said about these fish? Koi have value in Chinese tradition as symbols of abundance and prosperity. Traditional Chinese paintings will include Koi to represent these values within the overall symbolic schema they present. In neighbouring Japan, the meaning of Koi fish is slightly different, where they present an ideal of strength of purpose, and perseverance in adversity. A meaning that seems particularly appropriate to this artwork and a meaning the artist may well have been aware of when putting the fish into this predicament.

Does the washing machine have a symbolic meaning and value in itself, which when combined with the fish creates some new, composite symbolic value, designed to enlighten us as to the piece's "higher" meaning? By placing them in a washing machine and subjecting the Koi to the swirling of the drum, what does that mean for this set of values?



The round opening of the washing machine could be said to have some formal connection with a common way of framing scenes with wall openings in Chinese gardens. These openings take various shapes, but are all designed to provide a viewpoint out into the landscape which presents the scene as an aid for contemplation. The video work titled *Beijing Zoological Garden*, produced by Ma a couple of years after *The Swirl*, makes reference to this technique as the artist wanders the animal houses of the eponymous Zoo presenting the animals and spectators therein through this idealising, round vignette.

So, is it fair to make comparisons between the roles of Koi or these framing methods in the Chinese view of landscape, with Ma's work? How about our modern interpretations of animals and landscapes, which we present in our museums and in our imagery?

In his works Ma seems to be picking up on these traditional tropes of the role of these animals and settings, while putting them in new contexts to play with their ultimate meanings when they come into contact with their audiences, a context which also alters with time and knowledge.

However once stepping beyond the highly codified set of symbols which make up the various cultural systems, symbolic value becomes something of a futile task, as the values become arbitrary and open to re-interpretation at any point. Any value can be read into anything – with a bit of effort. Indeed, artists have a tendency to

reinterpret symbols, and twist meanings to reveal hidden factors within their assumed status. Ma Yongfeng in particular playfully questions many of these assumptions in his work, playing off the symbols against each other to open up the possibility of new meanings to appear.

In his latest works, where Ma has taken on the social aspect of art as his tool, although his intentions are sincere in his attempts to engage and create an effect on society, I cannot help but notice that in every case the subjects are not dealt with as hard and fast rules, but with a canny sense of humour which lightens the tone and prevents them from becoming too sterile.

So Ma's fish may or may not mean abundance, and the washing machine may or may not refer to traditional scenery; the action may mean many things which we can read into the video from our position of safety away from the actual creation of the work, a point from which we can make judgements about the responsibility of the artist that perpetrated such an act.

The relatively simple set up in this video allows one to look beyond the reality of the situation and try to piece together some kind of symbolic meaning behind it. But the piece never makes it too easy to remain focused on one or the other, the reality or the symbol. The Koi's predicament is never far from our minds – nor should it be if we have any sense of empathy in us. But then neither should the reality that this is just a video of an incident which took place almost ten years ago, and which can now be looked at with some perspective and from many other points of view besides the shock value that the activity immediately proposed.

Inevitably Ma's work reflects aspects of the artist's experiences and is an expression of his thoughts and ideas about the world. But how far one should go to create a symbol out of this very real action seen in the video? Keeping these two readings in process is important I think. Certainly the fish are being tormented. But equally they come to represent something beyond themselves in the process. Being able to keep those two readings in view perhaps can prevent lapsing into an essentialist reading of the piece as either a brutal mistreatment of animals or an aesthetic display divorced from real-world travails.

The Swirl forces me to never to forget the reality of the fishes' dilemma, but at the same time to hold that reality as one amongst a number of readings of the work, which makes the work important as going beyond itself, to take on a wider significance within the artist's work and in society at large.