

## Look at 'Her'... and You See 'Them'

Stanley Ng Wai Cheong    May, 2007 China, Hong Kong

"Self-portraits? No?"

"Is this a picture or two?"

"What on earth is she shooting?"

"Why does she shoot people and also scenery? What is she trying to shoot?"

"I have some feelings towards it...but I don't know what she wants to do!"

"It's so casual, just like Lomo Snap Shot..."

"Umm, I think it's about herself and her minds. If not, why is it called '**Divided Minds**'? Of course it's about minds."

I am not sure how the artist will respond to such comments. It is interesting that the series of photographs which bring about such comments are placed in the middle of traditional salons and old photographs, making it outstanding and at the same time amazing. At the entrance of the exhibition, looking from the 'traditional' old photographs and old cameras, you just turn and will suddenly see this set of photographs which is entirely different from other photos. On the one side, there are scenery photographs; on the other are the self-portraits which are so natural that they do not look like self-portraits (Many visitors do not know they are self-portraits until they read the introduction!) Two photos are displayed side by side and become a piece of work. Eight of such set photos and three independent big photos are exhibited along a dark corridor which deviates from the environment of the whole exhibition. These works are quite out of tune with the surrounding area, the old photos and cameras. It sounds more interesting when you hear how visitors comment on the works. What I am talking about is Lam Wai Kit's display of her series of works: **Divided Minds** in the exhibition **Cameras Inside-out** in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum from 3/2 to 3/9, 2007.

**Cameras Inside-out** is one of the largest exhibitions of the Photograph Festival in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum. The whole exhibition focuses on cameras of different ages and brands, displaying works of photographers of different ages using various cameras, trying to record and show personal thoughts, emotions and the society or space-time condition of an era. In the same exhibition, apart from old photographs and valuable classic cameras, there are also displays of works done by five contemporary Hong Kong artists who regard Photographing as a creative media, showing the diversity of Art of Photography. (For details, please refer to the official website of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum

[http://hk.heritage.museum/chinese/exhibition\\_exid.asp?exid=96&Status=2](http://hk.heritage.museum/chinese/exhibition_exid.asp?exid=96&Status=2))

I have visited this exhibition a couple of times. What is strange is that there were many visitors and discussions. Most of them took photos there. Old cameras were of course the main focus.

To be extreme, Hong Kong's 'Mammonism' appears in stock and property markets and later becomes worship of valuables. Now even culture and art cannot escape. People love antiques but not the history and culture behind. Their pursuit of instant pleasure brought by camera flashes intensifies in the age of digital photographing. There were people and discussions everywhere but in fact they just glanced over the works and few of them stopped and really looked at the works in details or listened to the audio guides. In the exhibition hall, I heard not only the comments on the works of the contemporary Hong Kong artists but also their doubts after listening to the audio guides and speeches between friends. Lam Wai Kit's works were included in those comments. The quotes at the beginning of this essay in fact are questions not only to works in ***Divided Minds*** but also to other works, especially those of the contemporary artists.

When we enter the exhibition areas of contemporary artists, we have to make ourselves clear about this: whether photography is aiming at photography itself or is treated as a creative media. To many of us, photography is simple, with no room for reflection. Especially when the use of digital cameras and mobiles with cameras is so popular nowadays, anybody can take photos of anything at any time, without caring about others' feelings and regulations. In those times with insufficient resources, the fees for photographing devices, films and development were really expensive. The cost of taking a photo was high so photographers would think twice before they press the shutter, fearing for serious mistakes. Yet, now is the age of digital photographing, photography aiming at photography itself is promoted under wide advertising of the digital product markets. People take photos whenever they want. What they have to think about is the expenditure they should spend on the devices and memory cards. Before pressing the shutter, few people think, "Why should I shoot?", "Why should I take photos that somebody else has already taken?", "When will I see the photos I have taken today again?" and "Whom are those photos of the blog shown to? Why should I put them there?" Well, it does not matter how it is photographed. There is no need for development and even if it is badly photographed, it can be modified by computers, or you can simply delete it. You do not need to pay much and it is free for you to save the photos and share them with others. There is no threat of making serious mistakes, so why should we think twice? "Photograph as you like". You just follow your feelings and do it. The rational way of photographing is a nuisance. Thoughts before photographing become the burden of 'free creation'. Before taking photos, we do not think, we need not think and we are not used to thinking. Everything is decided by something external, like skills and composition. Who cares about internal meaning?

Photography as a creative media is another kind. To be frank, it is a creation of art, but not photography. So if artists do not think before they take photos, how can they express their messages through their works? It is the same as painting. Its purpose is to express messages but not to show the action of painting, or to tell people, "See how valuable my painting brush

is!" Photography here in fact is the process or procedure of creation which is done for Art, but not for recording. Lam Wai Kit, who always regards the self-exploration of female identity as a subject matter, portrays the state of her/our brains in this exhibition **Divided Minds**. It is not her first time combining environment and things with self-portraits, and it is not her own style. Yet she tells us how 'she' exists in different environments. The corresponding mental state can be shown by related scenery photos. From her self-portraits, visitors know where 'she' is, what 'she' sees and thinks. 'She' makes use of images to show 'them' 'her' thinking. To tell 'them' 'her' thoughts, she has to think before that. If not, how can there be the arrangements and display of photos? How can it be 'casual' photographing?

When 'they' see, on the one side, 'her' existence in the external environment, they think 'she' is thinking about the scenery of the other side. It seems that 'she' just exists in a certain place at a certain time, and 'her' thoughts are just images in 'her' mind. Yet, have they ever thought that in fact, to 'them', 'she' has never ever existed. 'They' never know 'her'. 'They' are never 'her' friends and 'she' does not know 'their' names. 'They' see **Divided Minds**, assuming what 'she' thinks must be reflected by those images. Yet, images about environments are in fact objective. 'They' just suppose the objective environments must represent 'her' thoughts, but they may not know that objective environments have to exist in real life but 'her' self-portraits may not be real---they may just be a reflection on the glass or another 'her' in other lens. They may be reversal and unreal. People just wishfully take it for granted that self-portraits must be real and the scenery and things must reflect her thoughts.

When taking photos, which special skills to use, what subject to focus on and even the concept of 'Photograph as you like' are taken for granted. People think it takes nothing to take photos so they need not be so serious about the creation, manipulation and explanation of images. They can just click 'delete' and restart again until they are satisfied---that means, they 'make' a piece of work which echoes with photo-takers' will by using digital photographing and they do believe that they are right. 'Photograph as you like until you get satisfied' and the low costs behind are the greatest advantages of digital photographing but then we forget that the creation and explanation of images are not as simple as what we think. One of the values of art creation is that people can think and reflect themselves in artistic works. If creations lose room for thinking, or are taken for granted, they will lose their values. **Divided Minds**, as this essay has said, is an art creation with photography, but not just a series of photos. From her works we can see not only 'her' and 'her' images from her brain but also introspection of 'their' attitudes towards images.

*Translated from Chinese to English by Kriss Wong.*