This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30025586

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2008, The Author
Visions of Utopia

a collaborative exhibition
presented by Deakin University

First showing at Shang Gallery
Shanghai, China
November 2008
New Worlds for Old: Visions of Utopia

Dr. Leon Marvell
While it is certainly possible to conceive of the turbulent 20th century as one characterised by “perpetual war”, as urbanist Paul Virilio has famously characterised it, the 21st century began with a very short-lived millennial hope, a hope that in the World of the Future (the 21st Century of countless science fiction stories), life would be very different, perhaps a world in which violence was minimised or relegated to the junk-pile of barbarism. Within two years or so this dream was dashed when the president of the United States of America initiated a war against the “Axis of Evil”. Clearly the era of perpetual war continues, and in the early 21st century the dream of Utopia seems further away than ever before.

Conservatives and the world-weary will say that this is as it ever was: utopian dreams of a better world are regularly announced by revolutionary Romantics only to be countered by the superior forces of the state: 1789 is followed by the Reign of Terror; European states violently quash uprisings in Italy, France, Germany and Poland in 1848; the revolutionary councils of Lenin’s socialist utopia are eventually decimated by Stalin’s merciless ‘Great Purge’; the Siren Bang (Gang of Four) end the Cultural Revolution with a new wave of revolutionary violence… At the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution a poster from 1966 cries, “Smash the old world / Establish a new world.” It is indeed passing strange that the methods of the old world (statist violence) should even be considered to be applicable in engendering a new world, but it seems that smashing has ever been a part of revolutionary thinking.

When will the new world begin? It is in the nature of Utopias that they are always in the future; just like the end of the rainbow, we seem never to be able to reach the promised land of plenty. For all great Utopians, Plato, Thomas More, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Utopia is “nowhere” (the etymological meaning of “utopia”) precisely because it lies waiting for us to catch up with it: we will never find it today. Revolutionaries are always Utopians, because they are always futurists.

For a certain generation of contemporary young Chinese artists the visual imagery of Cultural Revolution propaganda has become their “popular culture”. While young artists in the West have at least a century of consumerist advertising, products and imagery to plunder, relocate and re-imagine, many Chinese visual artists have to call on the propaganda
of their youth to come to an understanding of where they are now. The present generation of emerging young Chinese artists live in another world entirely however, that of saturation advertising. Here a new form of Utopia is promised: the ‘Dream of Plenty’, of luxury cars, designer clothes and high-tech gadgets that will deliver us from petty labour and fulfil all our desires—in effect a nouveau-riche conception of Utopian Socialism that would without doubt make Charles Fourier (perhaps the most passionate of Utopians) turn over in his grave.

In the aforementioned poster from 1966 the young worker has his sledge-hammer raised high, a gesture that echoes Delacroix’s *Liberty at the Barricades*, where the communards (and Liberty herself) wield their weapons in revolutionary defiance. Yet not all propaganda utilises images that privilege violent gestures and thus a particular revolutionary intent. From the late 1950s onwards, many Chinese propaganda images where directed towards a much more obviously utopian sensibility, pointing towards a future communist society, a state of abundance seemingly for all.

It is at the perverse intersection of these two radically different visions of Utopia—a future communist society of abundance and the consumerist utopia of material fulfilment—that the work of Lisa Scharoun and Frances Tatarovic finds its articulation.

The purpose of visual propaganda is of course purely rhetorical, it is designed to persuade, to convince. It is only with a certain ironic detachment, an irony that Kant insisted was a prerequisite for all aesthetic experience, that the images of the original Chinese posters can be considered of aesthetic value. It is this deliberate aesthetic distancing that allowed Andy Warhol to produce his *Campbell's Soup Can* and *Mao* series of prints, for example. In a similar manner Scharoun and Tatarovic have selected certain iconic poster titles from 1958 to 1983 and reworked the associated imagery to produce new images displaying a high degree of irony in their juxtaposition of signifying elements. This appropriation of the mass-produced, industrial kitsch of propaganda imagery serves to provoke questions about the utopian dreams of “Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought”, the Western cockroach capitalism of the early 21st century and the strange amalgamation of both found within contemporary P.R. China.
In this series of images, Scharoun and Tatarovic’s revolutionary/utopian youths, a boy and a girl, have been replaced by empty ciphers. As such they have become free-floating signifiers, able to stand-in for smiling young revolutionaries, future utopian workers or the faceless citizens required for capitalist consumption. Cut out from the various scenarios of abundance, perhaps they have already been excised from Utopia?

We also observe our two ciphers floating in an indeterminate space, catching lotuses, symbols of purity, and sitting astride Mandarin ducks, symbols of fidelity. In another image, within a similarly artificial space, they pick gigantic tomatoes, perhaps symbols of plenty from the “New World” yet-to-come as opposed to the New World from which they originally came, South America. Unfettered from any reference to real-world space, these images simultaneously gesture towards the artificial manipulation of signifying elements made possible by digital technology and the “shallowness” of the promise of abundance. Images of a future Cornucopia remind this writer of a city farmers’ market in Australia, where, above a grand entrance, one can see a quotation from the Bible, (Psalm 24:1): “The Earth is the Lord’s and the Fullness Thereof.” Looking at Scharoun and Tatarovic’s images, the cynic within is inspired to reply with a refrain from the great American revolutionary folk-singer Woody Guthrie: “you’ll have pie in the sky when you die.”

These works and the propaganda posters that inspired them serve to remind us that the moment of utopia—of whatever political colour—is always in deferral, yet always on the horizon, drawing us towards that vanishing point where the our lives as political beings... disappear.