RAGPICKING AS METHOD

An eleven-year-old girl, small for her age, cuts out a picture of shiny red ballet flats from a French fashion magazine. She displays them on a grubby cushion at her feet, alongside a dozen other pairs of pink, red, and gingham-checked paper shoes, similarly scissored out of glossy magazines (fig. 1). Her own sandals, made of dirty yellow plastic, are several times the size of the sleek magazine cut-outs. But they don't fit her feet properly anyway. The magazine, with its fashion spread of high-end footwear, is rare bounty for the girl, scavenged from the vast plastic dump in which she lives and works alongside her parents and four siblings.[1] The family are migrants from Sichuan casually employed at a plastics recycling workshop in Shandong, one of hundreds of informal businesses that process the mounds of plastic waste that China imported from Japan, Europe, and the USA up until 2018. They sift through the mass of the identifiable (butter cartons, mineral water bottles, DHL banners, dog food sacks, hospital IV drips and blood bags) and the far vaster mass of the unidentifiable to claim the plastic matter that can be shredded, rendered into slurry, and finally kernelled into small hard pellets that are then sold on to local plastics manufacturers. As her special "find" shows, the girl – whose name is Yi Jie 依姐 – is both a recycler and a ragpicker: a *chiffonier* of the kind that Baudelaire romanced in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the scavenger who is bent double by "the jumbled vomit of enormous Paris," but is still able to "Bring glory to the love-drunk folks at home" with tiny treasures foraged from the mire. More than this, Yi Jie is an

I am very grateful to Carlos Rojas and Xavier Ortells-Nicolau for their help in the preparation of this article.

[1] For a resonantly similar ethnographic narrative of the role played by fashion in the emotional life of waste pickers, see Wu and Zhang, *Feipin shenghuo*, 133–134.

artist of the dump. She is just as creatively alive as the activist documentary-maker Wang Jiuliang 王久良, whose film *Plastic China* (Suliao Zhongguo 塑料中國, 2016) tells her story.

As Walter Benjamin observed, Baudelaire's poem "The Ragpicker's Wine" is more about the poetic process than 19th-century dumpster-diving: it reads the *chiffonier* as a dirty double for the writer, since both spin gold from bits of scrap. Baudelaire writes:

> Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste.[2]

To this, Benjamin responds with the following gloss:

> This description is one extended metaphor for the poetic method, as Baudelaire practiced it. Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping; they even move in the same way … this is the gait of the poet who roams the city in search of rhyme-booty; it is also the gait of the ragpicker, who is obliged to come to a halt every few moments to gather up the refuse he encounters (48)

Benjamin goes on to observe that "There is much evidence that Baudelaire secretly wished to develop this analogy" (48), but not, it seems, by broadening the metaphoric operation to acknowledge that if the poet is a ragpicker, the ragpicker may also be a poet. Yi Jie proves this point again later in the documentary, when she fashions a computer monitor from a Japanese advertisement for weight-loss pills, and a keyboard from the tiny milk pots served at hotel breakfasts; and then in a stunning scene towards the end, in which she decorates her family's shanty

[2] Quoted in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 48.

with artisanal wallpaper crafted from taped-together KitKat wrappers (fig. 2). These activities are more than just a diligent re-use of materials, what Susan Strasser calls the appropriate "stewardship of objects".[3] They constitute focused artistic endeavor.

The dump is a slur on all taxonomic systems, a "cemetery for lost objects that never made it to the world of categories," as Michael Taussig puts[4]. To process garbage is to face down that affront to order through the tactile labor of sorting. So as waste besieges us, hemming in whole cities like ringroads, it is perhaps unsurprising that the arts of assemblage – variants on the sorting impulse – are now in the aesthetic ascendant. Many artists are ragpickers now: so much so, in fact, that some art critics wonder if the use of garbage-as-bricolage has hardened into something canonical, as "rubbish becomes a strange vale of soul making and creativity" now that nature is being forced to evacuate the terrain.[5] Euroamerica may apparently have reached "peak stuff," but as the dumping ground for so much foreign waste until recently, China is still very much processing the consequences of disposability as a socio-economic cult. This is partly why the art of waste has also become a surging aesthetic movement in Chinese art in recent years, via the work of artists such as Xing Danwen 邢丹文, Han Bing 韓冰, Du Zhenjun 杜震君, Yang Yongliang 楊泳梁, Yao Lu 姚璐, Jiang Pengyi 蔣鵬奕, Xu Bing 徐冰, Wang Zhiyuan 王智遠, and others. Their works are often taken as exemplars of eco-art, since they engage directly with issues of contamination and sustainability. Ultimately, though, it is the scavenging impulse – ragpicking-as-method – that reigns in many works which explore waste in China. And scavenging is nothing if not a precarious practice, a practice of the precariat. Yet precarity remains a near-absent, or at best incipient, discourse in the

[3] Strasser, *Waste and Want*, 21–69.

[4] Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum*, 182.

[5] Yaeger, "Editor's Column," 325.

study of contemporary China, with the result that the symbolically dense role of waste in Chinese life and art has not been probed with the same depth that the theme has received in other places.[6]

In this article, I explore the relationship between precarity, waste, and the ragpicker in contemporary Chinese visual culture. My aim in what follows, though, is to think beyond the waste-picker as a literalized embodiment of precarity. I begin instead by considering instead the ways in which precarity and waste are organically linked. Next, I explore why precarity has come so little and so late to the theoretical scene in China, a society in which precarious experience is so rife as to be almost endemic, and in which this pain feels sharper for many as the security blanket provided, for some at least, by socialism has been rolled back or snatched away. I then go on to show how some of China's leading artists now work profusely with refuse – building site debris, dumpster trash, e-waste – while noting the strange anomaly that their works offer up scant if any space for the figure of the waste picker. The artist, instead, has taken over her mantle as the sifter and sorter of garbage, which itself has assumed a symbolic cast. This missing human figure matters, in part because waste is always about people – and never more so than now, as its rising volume becomes a cipher for precarity as a mode of existence that threatens everyone. As materiality of a grossly abject kind squeezes Anthropos out of aesthetic space, it shows, on one level, that precarity is impacting the forms of art as much as the art form is having any measurable impact on precarity as a state of life. Even more than this, the "thingly turn"[7] as it manifests in Chinese visual culture might seem to suggest that art is responding to a felt sense that personhood is coming under assault as basic life sureties fray. These missing human figures are symbolic victims of a new ontological order, in which waste rules and is arrogating the privileges of subjectivity to itself.

[6] An exception is Wu and Zhang's illuminating study of 2016.

[7] Verbeek, *What Things Do*, 3

Yet the garbage takeover, I argue here, is also part of a sustained practice of appropriation, effacement, even cruelty in the artistic representation of precarity in China. Over the last couple of decades, art-world treatments of precarious people have proliferated in China, and many have won international recognition. But what surprisingly many of these works lack, despite their sustained focus on the beleaguered body, is a discernible will to realize the subjecthood of fragile lives both in art, and through art-making – as *Plastic China* demonstrates via its against-the-grain depiction of the ragpicker as artist. This absence is curious. Surely it should be a clear imperative for artists who publicly identify themselves as *engagé* to create representations that grant maximal agency to precarious people. So why do so many fail or decline to do so? I conclude by suggesting that the awkwardness of China's dump art, in which artists dabble at waste-picking rather like Marie Antoinette played at being a shepherdess, speaks of more than just appropriation. It also discloses a deeper anxiety over where brittle life experience begins and ends in a social world in which precarity is generating suppressed class strife – as opposed to the overt class struggle of the Maoist period – as much as any sense of common ground in uncertainty. It is in this sense that ragpicking reveals itself not just as an artwork trait or aesthetic practice, but as a method that discloses some of the fraught and ugly contours of the present. China's wasteworks are frictive forms born at the tense interface between different class actors, as part of the push and pull of social mobility in a society which has tried to eliminate class as a category of political action and analysis. Such works do not simply register experiences of uncertainty, disposability, and vulnerability as artistic themes. Rather, they are places in which precarity can be felt as an atmospheric trepidation, as a force that can change our social point of origin, and thus as a zone of mounting inter-class conflict.

CONDITIONS OF OUR TIME

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, her study of what the complex global trade in matsutake mushrooms reveals about ecology, capitalism, and survival amid the ruins, Anna Tsing writes

> We hear about precarity in the news every day … But most of the time we imagine such precarity to be an exception to how the world works. It's what 'drops out' from the system. What if … precarity is the condition of our time – or to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?[8]

Here, I am interested in a further connected question: what if we were to substitute the word "waste" for "precarity" in this quotation – or rather better, what if we were to consider the ways in which precarity and waste constitute, in fact, an organically linked method for coming to terms with the present, in China as much as in other places? To consider precarity and waste as indissociable forces in the making of the present is to notice their many zones of overlap. To be precarious is to feel futureless. It is to live at the mercy of other people and greater powers, occupying transient ground and subsisting without a forwards direction. This is also the space-time of the dump, whose locations shift arbitrarily and whose temporality is at best cyclical rather than teleological – and often simply stalled. When Nicolas Bourriaud writes that "An object is said to be precarious if it has no definitive status and an uncertain future or final destiny,"[9] he could just as easily have been describing waste. Yi Jie's father makes this same point in *Plastic China* when he describes how he and his family moved from Sichuan, where they lived at the "mercy of nature" (*kaotian chifan* 靠天吃飯), to Shandong, where they now live at the mercy of refuse, their futures suspended in limbo.

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[8] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

[9] Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions," 32.

Precarity, just like garbage, is also growing. It encompasses more and more of us in its orbit of uncertainty, just as landfill swells and the oceans clog with non-degradable trash. Relatedly, precarity and waste are yoked in their relation to the natural world. As waste runs wild, it heightens our precariousness as a species. But circling things around, precarity is also the hallmark of a society without decent stewardship of objects, driven by what Zygmunt Bauman calls "the horror of expiry".[10] The contents of the dump are precarious – stuff on the verge, about to crumble, to decay, to turn effluent – just as precarious experience is so often characterized by a sense of waste, as talent and opportunity are kept in a state of perpetual abeyance. Precarious labor – work that is casualized, unwaged, informal, irregular – mirrors the lawlessness of the dump and its lack of classificatory order. Yet at the same time, this parallel also works inversely, since waste connotes an excess of materiality while precarity refers to a brittle thinness in human lifeworlds. Finally, both have imprinted themselves on public consciousness more or less simultaneously as immanent perils. Thus it is that the ragpicker, as a combinant identity in which waste and precarity meet, is a methodological archetype for our age. She is not simply an icon of poverty in the Global South, but a personage in which "the condition of our time" is crystallized.

PRECARIOUS CHINA

In a world rife with precarity, in which "we are all precarious now," China has remained oddly absent from the vast academic literature that has built up around the theme of fragile life and labor since the millennium. China is in many ways prime precarious, yet it has barely been named as such. Why so? Perhaps the first answer is that precarity – and most particularly its partner political concept, the precariat – has struggled to throw off its origins in the European protest movements of

[10] Baumant, *Liquid Life*, 3.

the early 2000s. Thus to apply it to China may seem at first sight historically and politically anachronistic, or worse. Certainly, precarity to date has most commonly been taken to mean "economic and existential experiences of risk and uncertainty" within post-Fordism,[11] most specifically within liberal-democratic experiences of the contracting welfare state, where its pain is felt as a sharp "adjustment" against a long backdrop of stability. Precarity, born as a justice movement to battle so-called "flexploitation," was rooted in a deep sense of rupture – in the notion that a once-tightly woven social contract was being unpicked and workers were being cast into freefall. The problem here, as Neilson and Rossiter note, is that "precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm" (54). They argue further that "if we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization" (54). This recognition that labor security within the welfare state was just a spatio-temporal blip has gained broad currency as scholars have begun to argue that the precarian is essentially the new subaltern: a broad personhood encompassing all those whom power excludes and betrays, and whose existence long predates the coining of the term.

Yet this notion of precarity as an ineluctable historical norm often hits the theoretical buffers precisely as researchers seek to apply it in more lateral ways across wide global spaces. As Ronaldo Munck puts it: "is the term novel or even relevant, for the millions of workers and urban poor in the global South for whom precariousness has always been a seemingly natural condition?"[12] Precarity, for Munck and others, is a term overdetermined and undermined by "a totally Northern sensibility" which is narcissistically blind to the fact that work in the global South "has always-already been precarious" (752). The axe this argument grinds is about the "breathless" sense of the new on which

[11] Neilson and Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept," 54.

[12] Munck, "The Precariat," 747.

discussions of precarity and the precarian seem to rest. Precarity has many asynchronous modes, and for Munck and others the discourse that grabbed attention in the early 2000s was not novel so much as unacceptably belated. For the "global informal working class," which stands a billion-people strong, what can this sudden attention to a perennial reality offer?[13] Even when theorists of precarity recognize – as do Neilson and Rossiter, amongst others – that precarity is the standardized and age-old reality for so many of the world's workers, its discursive roots as a term which articulates nostalgia for an era that the Global South never got to enjoy excludes it from real political consequence.

Does this, though, hold entirely true of China? Here, we might legitimately argue, the notion of precarity does carry at least some palpable novelty power. The rolling back of the socialist-era command economy that occurred during the reform period in China is, of course, no precise parallel for the passing of Fordism. Yet it was a bonfire of the certainties for many Chinese urban workers nonetheless – even if the ructions of repeated political campaigns meant that not everyone who experienced the Maoist era felt nostalgic at its passing. As free market economics took hold, the iron rice bowl was smashed, factories were decommissioned, and their workers were laid off. This process and its ructions have been researched exhaustively, yet there has been little space given in the vast literature on this topic to the idea that such conditions make precarity not just a plausible but a necessary conceptual construct through which to read the experiences of significant cohorts in Chinese society. What gave the term "precarity" its edge and its rallying power in early millennial Europe was precisely a sense of incinerated sureties, of a security blanket gone up in smoke as one era gave way to another. This mood of epochal change has been felt as pain among city-based

[13] Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 178.

workers in China, too, and to an extent it obviates Munck's broadbrush claim that work outside the North has "always-already been precarious".

A key stumbling block here is that this sense of aftermath quickly acquired the name "postsocialism"; and as such it has gone on to dominate the theoretical landscape entirely, eclipsing from view the precarity that should arguably be its core partner term. Indeed, if one of the implied arguments of Nancy Fraser's work on postsocialism is that this condition goes far beyond the Soviet Union and other former communist states in its scope – that we are all postsocialist now – then the same is self-evidently true of precarity, which in many ways is as pertinent to China as postsocialism is to the contemporary US.[14] Precarity and postsocialism are twin conditions – partner plights – yet for the most part they have been theorized as discrete entities, across a stark spatial divide.[15] A quantity of scholarly work has been produced over the last twenty years to explain China's long goodbye to socialism within multiple domains. But in overlooking the fundamental intersection between this condition and the state of precarity that has been theorized so extensively in Europe and America over the same approximate period, postsocialism as a method for making sense of lifeworlds in contemporary China lacks full intellectual coherence. A two-way conduit is needed, one that not only opens up precarious Euroamerica to its identity as postsocialist, but which also expressly names postsocialist China as precarious. And as part of this process, precarity itself requires theoretical modification – it will need to be decolonized and "provincialized" – so that the

[14] Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*.

[15] This is not to suggest that postsocialism should only be understood in its harsher neoliberal dimensions. Rather than marking a sharp caesura with the socialist period, postsocialism as a term also signifies the extent to which the legacies of the Maoist era – state interventionism chief among them – have persisted into the reform and post-reform eras.

experiences of precarious people in China can feed into and thus reshape how this crucial experience of our present time is understood. Or to put this another way, if modernities are well understood to be multiple, then so too are the norms and forms of precarity.

This is by no means to suggest, however, that experiences of so-called "aftermath" are uniform in China. Against the decisive sense of epochal shift identified by many Euroamerican theorists of precarity stands, most notably, the argument that China's vast migrant workforce, as it has streamed into the cities from the countryside, has simply swapped older forms of uncertainty for newer variants. Rural conditions under Maoism were predicated on systemic risk and poverty, rather than on the iron rice bowl associated with much urban work, with famine an ever-looming hazard. In this sense, migration to the cities promised a measure of relief – even the whisper of deliverance – from the still more acute uncertainties of rural life; at the very least, the risks of relocation may have seemed more bearable since they also contained the kernel of hope. Yet to argue that precarity as a construct for understanding China's "floating population" is invalid because there was no "good life" for these migrants to mourn is to assume that precarious experience is always rooted in longings for paradise lost. On the contrary, such fantasies are projected into the future as often as they linger on the past, as Lauren Berlant has argued,[16] and the chimaera of the good life may be all the more seductive to those who have never seen and felt it in the flesh.

This chimaera has, however, infamously failed to take concrete shape. Under the iniquitous *hukou* 戶口 system, China's new urban workforce has found itself forced to endure exclusion from core benefits – including pension, health care, and education – that those with an urban "birthright" enjoy, while working in industries that often lack safeguards, contracts, and guaranteed wages. For

[16] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

many migrant workers, therefore, precarity is precisely the nervy apprehension that their hopes are brittle, which is, of course, why oneiric propaganda – the China dream – is plastered all over the building sites on which many of these migrants work. More than this, rural life, however grueling, was a life determined (over-determined, even) by roots. By contrast, a lack of place-based identity, aggravated by prejudicial outsider status in China's big cities, induces in China's migrants an embodied sense of drift and dislocation, which brings the meaning of the term "precarity" back to its own etymological roots: not securely held in position, liable to fall, unmoored. Indeed, rather than being entirely peripheral to the Euroamerican discourses of precarity that have gained hard currency across the world since the millennium, migrant experiences of being and feeling precarious should by rights be at the very core of those discussions, since what we see in China is a vast experiment in the strategic incitement of unrealizable desire – "cruel optimism," in Berlant's terminology – within a context of mass territorial-emotional displacement.

A final potential sticking point for "precarious China" relates to precarity's partner concept of the precariat: the idea, first trialed in the work of Guy Standing, that those who work under conditions of informal, casualized, and piecemeal labor constitute an emergent, and insurgent, political class.[17] The interchangeability with which these two terms are often invoked is a problematic slippage in the case of China, most obviously because tight political control, in the form of the stability maintenance (*weiwen* 維穩) apparatus, effectively roadblocks the formation of the kind of insurrectionary groupings that the term "precariat" now evokes elsewhere. Here again, though, we might argue that a precariat without potent representation, possessing only the weapons of the weakest – despite its vast human scale – is a political category which theories of precarity

[17] Standing, *The Precariat.*

should scrutinize most closely rather than overlook. This, in a sense, is Wang Hui's pertinent question when he asks: "Why in early twentieth-century China, when the working class was small and weak, did proletarian class politics sweep the entire region? And why has China today, the 'world's factory' with almost 300 million workers, been unable to generate a working-class politics of the sort?"[18] His explanation is that class "vagabondage" – in which well-born social actors who had fallen through the cracks during the Republican era linked up with the aspirant poor to foment insurgency – has waned into apathy in 21st-century China.[19] Class disunity is the new norm.

Smith and Ngai, in one of the few scholarly studies that tests out the workability of precarity as a keyword for understanding contemporary China, go further. As they put it:

> The idea central to the precariat thesis, that there is a class divide in terms of the employment conditions of the salariat and precariat, falls at the first hurdle. All workers are insecure in China, and precariousness is not evidence of a separate class, but part of the general condition of waged labor in the country … non-standard forms of employment are recognizable across work with different forms of status, from unskilled to more white collar and professional occupations.[20]

Their point that precarity is also "white collar" and professional is hardly specific to China, even as the country's vast insecure graduate class gives this notion of cross-caste labor volatility a sharper theoretical edge. But the broader argument here – that precariousness "is part of the general

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[18] Wang, *China's Twentieth Century*, 215.

[19] Another explanation may be that bitter memories of class struggle between intellectuals and the anointed "workers, peasants, and soldiers" (*gong-nong-bing* 工農兵) during the Maoist period may be inhibiting this kind of vagabondage. I am grateful to Chen Ziru for helpful discussions on this point.

[20] Smith and Ngai, "Class and Precarity in China," 47.

condition of waged labor in the country" – is in many ways a still more essential and evocative one. It alludes, through its sheer scope, to precarity as an ambient, wraparound experience. If all waged labor in China is insecure, and all workers are precarians (if not members of the political precariat, as the term is defined elsewhere), then precarity becomes a force profoundly constitutive of Chinese social reality. In particular, as I argue below, it is a force with the capacity not just to disunify, but to sow active class division.

Indeed, this notion that precarity is now a forceful life mode is gathering pace wherever fragile lifeworlds are studied. While it has long been common to argue that precarity signifies "both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity",[21] precarity's conceptual reach has expanded as it has become widely normalized as an experiential condition. Precarity as something systemic, as what Isabell Lorey refers to as an entrenched vulnerability, means not just "destabilization through wage labor," but also a "destabilization of ways of living and hence of bodies".[22] Precarity, in short, is a matter of affect. On one level, this is the dissolution of dreams identified by Berlant, and the incorporation of people into an emotional regime that tethers like a dead weight whilst giving them something deceptively promising on which to cling. But here I also explore the notion that precarity is an invidious thing, a set of affects that pits class actors against one another in a climate of fear and fretfulness. I undertake this exploration within the realm of culture, using waste – a material and abstract force closely tied to brittle life – as a method. More particularly, I use the art of the dump, and the notion of the ragpicker as artist, to explore the often tense politics of representing the condition of precarity in contemporary China.

[21] Gill and Pratt, "In the Social Factory," 3.

[22] Lorey, "Governmental Precarization."

ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MINERAL

So what does it mean, then, for the ragpicker to declare herself an artist? To answer this question, we might usefully turn first to some artists who have declared themselves ragpickers. China has seen increasing numbers of these in recent years, as waste has emerged as a major aesthetic topos. A notable example is Xu Bing and his *Phoenix Project* (Fenghuang 鳳凰, 2010). This work consists of a pair of giant birds, each nearly 100 feet long and weighing 16 tons between them, welded entirely from debris gleaned from building sites across Beijing: helmets, shovels, pliers, hammers, rivets, drill bits, broken wheels, corrugated metal, fire extinguishers, hooks, rods, tubes, cogs, and bolts (fig. 3). Originally commissioned as a statement piece that would ornament the atrium of the World Financial Center building, the *Phoenix Project* began to diverge from its brief as Xu Bing contemplated the fissures between the low-rent labor of the migrant construction crews and the high-spec corporate steeple that they were building. These disparities, Xu states, made his "skin quiver".[23] Enlisting the help of the laborers, Xu salvaged over a thousand pieces of detritus and used this ragpicker's feast to assemble his phoenixes from the flames, which seem to soar forth from the ashes of hardscrabble toil. The project's backstory is compelling, even more so since the buyers withdrew the commission, finding it too political. But Xu Bing declined to compromise and stuck to his vision of the aestheticized leftovers of neoliberalism. Later, the pieces were purchased by Taiwanese art collector Barry Lam, who allowed the birds to be exhibited in both Beijing and New York before adding them to his private collection. They also live on in beautiful book form, via a Thircuir edition that brings together Xu Bing's sketches, portraits of individual pieces of scrap metal, and photographs of the phoenixes at various sites of display.[24]

[23] Quoted in Vogel, "Phoenixes Rise in China and Float in New York."
[24] Xu Bing, *Phoenix*.

Despite their stated humanism, though, the phoenixes are never anything other than bird-like: there are no actual ragpickers in this installation about the intersection of waste and precarity. In fact, even their avian character has something formalistic or even incidental about it, since the force that really defines the *Phoenix Project* is its materiality, both as an effect of the overwhelming size of the sculptures and of their patchwork density. Something similar is at work in another piece that purports to offer an animalistic allegory of waste: Wang Qingsong's installation "Poisonous Spider" (Du zhizhu 毒蜘蛛, 2011). In this work, Wang spins a spider's web of barbed wire, on which are suspended items of banal daily trash: a Styrofoam cup, a scratched disc, a discarded shoe, a bunch of bananas, a wilted lettuce, plastic bags, odd socks (fig. 4). Conceptually, the garbage might be both lure and prey, and as such is already suggestive of unsettled ontological relations. But this point comes over more strongly when the installation is contrasted with an apparent partner piece of 2005, Wang's earlier digital print of the same name. This photograph is well-nigh identical to its three-dimensional successor – except for the worker who lies trapped at the heart of the web, limbs splayed in a pose of helpless capture (fig. 5). As the concept for the piece moves through time, transitioning from one medium to another, it sheds its human presence, seemingly surrendering that space to proxies from the natural world. Just like the *Phoenix Project*, however, it's not the spider's web so much as the gross materiality it ensnares that provides the central logic of the installation. Whether bird or arachnid, the creatures who provide the structural morphology, the exoskeleton, of these works are simply platforms for the artistic display of waste. Both works are instances of scavenger art, in which foul or discarded matter is reclaimed to prove Claes Oldenburg's claim that a "refuse lot in the city is worth all the art stores in the world."[25] In both, a surfeit of gross, abject

[25] Quoted in Rose, *Claes Oldenburg*, 191.

materiality crowds out the animate subject of representation, and the artist is the only ragpicker whose presence a spectator might directly sense.

On one level, it might seem logical to understand these works as renderings in art of the evolutionary fact that cities are altering species at speed. As Menno Schilthuizen has shown, urban spaces do not simply serve as sites of biological extermination. They are also crucibles for genome development, as "city pigeons develop detox plumage" and the common-or-garden blackbird becomes the *turdus urbanicus*, a mildly mutated version of the original avian that is beautifully synched to the megacity habitat.[26] Schilthuizen also references the work of arachnologists, who have shown that the urban spider *Larinioides sclopetarius*, which builds its webs in the spaces between handrails on pedestrian bridges, overwhelmingly gravitates towards spaces near fluorescent lighting, where insect pickings are richer (138-9). Schilthuizen doesn't dwell on refuse in his study, perhaps a strange omission given that the dump is arguably the most materially volatile zone in urban space, and thus a locale very likely to catalyze genetic change. Viewed through this lens, Xu Bing's phoenixes have their own kind of "detox plumage," via the red hardhats arrayed like crested feathers atop each bird's head; and Wang Qingsong's light-seeking spider's web serves to magnetize trash, pulling it by force into its orbit. But rather like Schilthuizen, who spares only a few paragraphs for the idea that urban life is changing *human* biology, both artists eliminate the human subject in their explorations of how waste is producing novel ontological states.

ANYTHING BUT HUMAN

This tendency, I should say early on, is not restricted to China. Commentators on the so-called "toxic sublime," for example, have noted the routine absence of humans in these landscapes.[27]

[26] Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town*, 203–216.

[27] See, for example, Peeples, "Toxic Sublime."

Art forms such as these, often photographic, acknowledge that the sites they represent are often contaminated beyond salvage, but cannot help but express their wonderment at iridescent oil slicks and chemical spills. Humans, though, are mostly missing in the work of toxic sublimists such as Edward Burtynsky and Chris Jordan. Viewers understand, of course, that human agency crafted these environments, but Anthropos vanishes from sight amidst Jordan's statistical renderings of plastic beverage bottles, for example. To an extent, this might be because the waste picker is so fraught a figure to aestheticize. As Katherine Boo notes in her personalized ethnography of waste-pickers in a Mumbai slum, work of this kind "could wreck a body in very short time. Scrapes from dumpster-diving pocked and became infected. Where skin broke, maggots got in. Lice colonized hair, gangrene inched up fingers, calves swelled into tree trunks" (2012, 35). Keeping the ragpicker out of art could be construed, then, as a gesture of delicacy.

Certainly, it is true that the figure of the waste picker has seemed more graspable within the hard-core documentary mode in China. Productions such as *Along the Railway* (Tielu yanxian 鐵路沿線, dir. Du Haibin 杜海濱, 2000), *Street Life* (Nanjing lu 南京路, dir. Zhao Dayong 趙大勇, 2006), *Heavy Metal* (Huxiao de jinshu 呼嘯的金屬, dir. Jin Huaqing 金華青, 2009), *Ragpicker* (Shihuangzhe 拾荒者, dir. Zhong Yanshan 鐘延山, 2010), *Trashy Village* (Laji de cunzi 垃圾的村子, dir. Zou Xueping 鄒雪平), and *When the Bough Breaks* (Weichao 危巢, dir. Li Dan 李丹, 2012) all seek, with greater or lesser success, to realize the lives of waste pickers on screen. They do so, however, in ways rather different from Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China*, as will become clear. These works adhere for the most part to the now-canonical *xianchang* 現場, or "on-the-spot," style of documentary filmmaking, within which a deliberate kind of deskilling takes place as muddy audio, clunky editing, and handheld camerawork are made to serve as tokens of authenticity. As such, these are works possessed of a certain anti-aesthetic drive; their core currency is informational indexicality. And by showing

repeatedly that the waste picker is an acceptable subject for reportage, they obliquely draw attention to the absence of this figure from the less literalized, more evocative spaces of art. Evidently, this is a far cry from Yi Jie in *Plastic China*, who amply corroborates Patricia Yaeger's remarks about "the power of waste" in American culture. As Yaeger puts it, "not only does detritus replace nature, but waste managers and garbage haulers are its poets and purveyors, its historians and makers" (331). But what makes this latter point telling is not just the usurpation of the earth by trash, but the idea, once again, that garbage haulers are the poets of the contemporary. They are not just the subjects of works about refuse, but the "purveyors" of truth about where and what we are in the present. In this sense, artworks (whatever their provenance) that deanthropomorphize waste in the age of the Anthropocene – and in which refuse itself becomes the reigning presence – are suggestive of certain realities. They tell oblique stories about humans, almost despite themselves.

This anomaly of the missing human figure in so much dump art from China becomes more politically pressing when we think again about the nexus between precarity and waste, and most especially about the status of the ragpicker as a personage who brings these forces together in ways that constitute a method for our age. To put this another way, waste is always about people; in waste we find out exactly who we are, unfiltered and unperfumed. Waste lives right alongside us, which partly explains "the disturbing extension of its characteristics to human beings when they themselves have become disposable".[28] What's more, the carelessness with which so many 21st-century people continue to discard things belies the intimate secrets that refuse always harbors. Indeed, the very process of waste is predicated on a reckless suspension of disbelief. Even now plenty of us remain invested in the idea that there are no comebacks from rubbish, otherwise dumpsters would not keep on yielding bank statements, medical records, criminal evidence, plutonium, pets and even

[28] Boscagli, *Stuff Theory*, 230.

abandoned infants. As Robert Stam puts it, "the truth of a society is in its detritus. The socially peripheral points to the symbolically central."[29] So what does it mean not just when waste becomes a canonical mood in art, but when garbage emerges as a stand-alone pictorial subject, and when the waste picker – a figure crucial to understanding why detritus is so "symbolically central" – is simply an identity slipped on and off at all will by the artist?

MATERIAL WORLD

Here, it may be instructive to look briefly at the work of Chinese artist Xing Danwen. In her series *disCONNEXION* (Jueyuan 絕緣, 2002-3), Xing herself effectively assumes the role of ragpicker. Across 40 chromogenic color prints, the artist maps a taxonomy of the e-waste that until recently lapped China's southern shores from the US, Europe, and Japan: telephone wires, circuit boards, shattered casings, silicon chips, computer cables, defunct keyboards, cellphone cases, and obsolete chargers. Each category of e-trash becomes the subject of its own portrait, a point so obvious that critics haven't paid it much attention, focusing instead on what the series says about globalizing China and ugly aesthetics. But the sorting impulse – the gathering, sifting, dismantling, and pigeonholing of miscellaneous waste – constitutes the deep meaning of the series. Xing's prints are the final fruits of extreme labor, the toil of the precarious waste pickers of Guangdong province who tear various electronic devices into their component parts while toxifying their own bodies. The artist's statement about the work posted on Xing's website reads as follows:

> In *disCONNEXION,* her critical eye and sharp lens examine the aesthetics of technological waste, reflecting environmental concerns, but more importantly, an anxiety about changes in

[29] Stam, "Hybridity and the Aesthetics of Garbage."

> the lives of workers along the south coast, whose ghosts can be sensed despite their absence from the frames.[30]

Perhaps these ghosts are sensed by some viewers; but the classificatory order imposed on the electronic detritus in *disCONNEXION* inevitably ends up looking much more like the handiwork of the artist, whose "sharp lens" beautifies the debris, thus "owning" it still further. And as part of this artmaking process, the series as a whole comes over more forcefully as hostage to its own charismatic materiality than as a testimony to precarious lives.

The cables in figure 6, for example, are lithe and serpentine: they have a strong agency as they squirm around the frame; the tiny nuts and bolts in figure 7 look like woodlice swarming; while the smashed keyboards in figure 8, concertinaed up against each other, are reminiscent of Bill Brown's point that

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.[31]

These photographs also share a lineage with Xu Bing's *Phoenixes* and Wang Qingsong's *Poisonous Spider*, discussed already in terms of their overt materiality. They also resonate closely with the work of Han Bing, whose photographs in his series *Urban Amber* (Dushi hupo 都市琥珀, 2005-2011) are all shot from reflections in cesspools, and succeed via this technique in turning the scum and detritus that float on the surface of these waters into the super-subjects of these images. In figure 9, for example, the discarded bottle and plastic bag enjoy a remarkable aesthetic subjectivity as they hover in the middle of the frame. Han's camerawork creates a superimposed look, as if he had

[30] Xing, *danwen.com/web/*.
[31] Brown, "Thing Theory," 4.

literally plucked the garbage and pasted it digitally over the landscape, a sense heightened by the dark shadow that trails the objects. Once again, the artist becomes waste picker while creating a topography that is populated by trash and emptied of people. This process becomes still more vivid in the many wasteworks of Yang Yongliang, famed for his tonally textured digital collages, which arrest the eye initially as latterday reincarnations of the Chinese landscape tradition, with mist-clad mountains and cascading waterfalls that undulate across the three grounds of pictorial space, and are denuded of humans. But zoom in closer, and it becomes clear that the *shanshui* 山水 aesthetic has been subverted by ruination and garbage: the foreground of Yang's composite photographs emerges as a terrain of demolished structures, effluent waste, tilting pylons, and rebar (fig.10). Yang's identity as waste picker is, though, even more hygienically removed from the grime of e-waste than that of Xing Danwen, since he uses Google Tilt Brush, a software tool, to "sort" and "sift" the detritus with which he composes the image.[32]

This material turn can be detected more broadly elsewhere, too, as precarity increasingly drives new genres of object-oriented aesthetic form in China. An obvious example is Jia Zhangke's 賈樟柯 *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren 三峽好人, 2006) and its meticulous fixation with the daily emblems of a hand-to-mouth existence, the glue and grit of precarious living: the hessian sacks, thermos flasks, bottles of liquor, and packets of tea that merge into a shared object ecology for people under duress and thereby acquire an increasingly visible subjectivity. A similar elevation of object to subject is also on show in Jia's next feature film *24 City* (Ershisi chengji 二十四城記, 2008), where prosaic

[32] The work of Wang Zhiyuan, in particular his garbage installation *Thrown to the Wind* (Long juan feng 龍捲風, 2010) – an 11-meter-tall tornado of entirely depersonalized trash – provides still further examples of the artist as waste-picker.

items – a portable IV drip, a battered ID card, a tear-off wall calendar, a patched bedspread, a strategically-positioned glass on a table – join the film's much-discussed *tableaux vivants* as subjects for the camera's intent gaze. The IV drip, which character Da Li 大麗 holds above her head as she walks around her residential compound, seems to live again in the early moments of Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China*, when the camera zeroes in on a similar piece of medical detritus, now lying redundant on the dump. Objects, it would seem, have come to assume a kind of personhood within Chinese visual culture, tossing down a gauntlet to Baudrillard's claim that "we have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object."[33] As materiality surges as a theme in contemporary Chinese visual culture, and then turns steadily to waste, it begs questions about the changing form and praxis of visual culture under the regime of precarity.

THE SUSCEPTIBLE ARTS OF PRECARITY

To be more precise, the notion that art can intervene in unsteady lives – that art about precarity can provide some sort of fix for situations – needs to be overhauled, or at the very least supplemented by a closer focus on what endemic uncertainty has done to the nature of aesthetic form. I have already alluded to the ways in which a mood of risk and jeopardy has produced, in pre- and post-millennial China, a huge corpus – pun intended – of what might be called bodyworks. This is art that uses the human form in postures of barely-clothed duress to bid for visibility and as an apparent call to political arms. These representations of what Wang Hui calls China's "new workers" – those who engage in *dagong* 打工 (working for the boss) rather than *laodong* 勞動 (the more elevated toil of working for the socialist state) – have oscillated between a range of forms.[34] One category comprises works in which the artist claims close kinship with the urban underclass and

[33] Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, 141.

[34] Wang, 193–195.

presents himself as a precarian, or member of the precariat class, such as in Zhu Fadong's 朱發東 work *This Person is For Sale* (Ciren chushou jiage mianyi 此人出售價格面議, 1994) and Luo Zidan's 羅子丹 *Half White-Collar/Half Peasant* (Yiban shi bailing, yiban shi nongmin 一半是白領, 一半是農民, 1996). Another is a practice of delegated performance, in which the artist enlists the "labor" of semi-naked, often load-bearing, almost clone-like and undifferentiated migrant workers – supporting a massive infrastructure (in the work of Wang Jin 王晉), raising the water level in a fishpond (in the work of Zhang Huan 張洹), hung upside down from the ceiling (in the work of Zhang Dali 張大力), suspended by their fingertips from high building (in the work of Chen Chenchen 陳陳陳),[35] or squeezed into suffocating rabbit hutches (in the work of Wang Qingsong 王慶松).[36] A third typology encompasses the wastescapes I discuss here, in which real-life waste pickers are kept out of sight entirely while the artist sifts junk herself.

Inevitably, perhaps, critics have read these various bodyworks in terms of their interventionist potential. But they can equally be understood as works that show the corporalization of art and the aesthetic encounter in China, a move no less remarkable for the long-standing prudishness over the nude image in Chinese art. Experiences of precarity – migration, the factory regime, lives suspended in limbo amongst the so-called "low-end population" (*diduan renkou* 低端人口) – have turned the endangered body into the subject and medium for art in ways that have little precedent in the Chinese pictorial tradition. This deployment of flesh, bone, blood, and sweat marks how precarity has arguably changed the praxis of contemporary art a good deal more than this prodigious quantity of works has succeeded in heightening awareness of precarious conditions, let

[35] For a discussion of this work by Chen, see Yomi Braester's essay in this special issue.

[36] For more on the first two categories, see Eschenburg, "Fixing Identities".

alone actually improving them. Social jeopardy has produced a genre of art in which bodies are squeezed, racked, burdened and suspended, and whose forms – performance art, participatory art – also incline increasingly towards impermanence. Precarity has made Chinese art more bodily in its substance, and more ephemeral in its praxis. It is becoming a method for cultural making itself.

If endangerment is a keynote of precarious experience, then so – as suggested earlier – is waste. Indeed, the two may exist dialectically in visual culture. As the human body is stress-tested to the point of self-harm in art, so does refuse rise to prominence as a parallel aesthetic mode. Again, this shift marks a formational change in the substance and praxis of art. Just as the naked, imperiled body that toils is barely a feature of the Chinese pictorial tradition,[37] so too does waste register a radical departure from the Chinese non-figurative tradition, which finds its roots and blossom in landscape painting. The rise of waste as a dominant aesthetic signature reverses many of the conventions of the landscape tradition, which typically took nature as a place of solace rendered via the medium of paint. In wasteworks, the external world is more commonly represented in sculpture, composite photography, and installation: modes of art overtly concerned with relations of materiality. And in these highly materialized works, the natural world as a site of meditative succor has been usurped by landscapes of toxicity. Thus these two movements in Chinese visual culture – the strained human subject, the rampant waste object – can be read together as tandem impacts on art by the precarious condition. This resonates with Andrea Muehlebach's point when she notes anthropology's changing relation to precarity: "What we have seen building in the last few years is a radically transforming discipline – or, rather, a discipline being moved into transformation by the

[37] During the socialist period, of course, the worker reigned dominant in poster art and official visual culture as a muscular and luminous figure.

very forces it seeks to describe."[38] Precarity, she suggests, "has inserted itself into the very heart of anthropology itself" (298). While art has attempted to take on the condition of the present, often expressly with the intention of "making things right," precarity has more forcefully worked its way into art, bringing forth new methods of making art and being an artist.

GETTING WASTED

But garbage is also, of course, political, and the rise of the wastescape needs to be parsed for its ideological meanings too. To an extent, the material turn that Chinese visual culture has taken in recent years can be read as a symptom of the quest for solid bearings that precarious people undertake as life is suspended in a state of deferral and uncertainty. Objects, especially prosaic and comforting ones, can be stitched into a kind of affective safety net that offers a handhold of sorts for those tumbling through the time of the present: in small things shall we trust and have our being. As mentioned above, we see this process at work in Jia Zhangke's cinema, as items of sustenance take on talismanic status, operating as the last vestige of stabilizing hope for those excluded from the social safety zone. Wasteworks ramp up this process, but they also push it in new directions. Specifically, their effaced human presence begins to suggest that the enthronement of the defunct object has come as the corollary of a creeping kind of dehumanization. In this sense, the interplay in Chinese visual culture over the last two decades or more – between the imperiled body and the impermanent artwork on the one hand, and the exuberance of waste as a subject in projects marked by a firm materiality on the other – may also gesture towards a shifting of ontological ground under conditions of precarity. Which is to say, the spaces of art may be responding, intuitively, rhetorically, and perhaps predictively, to a sense of threat. This jeopardy is that the central experiences of

[38] Muehlebach, On Precariousness and the Ethical Imagination," 298.

precarity in contemporary China – migrancy, the factory regime, subsumption into the "low-end" of the population – are causing definitions of personhood, and who or what can possess it, to fray.

The stress-tested human body and the new resplendence of trash may, accordingly, have a consecutive relationship. First comes the objectification of the human body by trials and tests (how much load can it bear, how long can it be suspended mid-air, how tightly can it be squeezed before its physical integrity collapses), and then as a natural segue to this comes the subjectification of waste, its rise into something close to personhood within the spaces of art. At first sight, the strained human body might seem like the most eloquent site on which to inscribe this political message. Certainly, it is true that China's bodyworks coin an arresting visual idiom for the physical toll taken by precarity. But waste, I would suggest, is an even more appropriate method through which to explore the notion of ontological sureties in freefall under the regime of risk and uncertainty. Waste is emerging as a signature in Chinese visual culture because it is a space in which subject/object, human/non-human relations exist in a state of unusual suppleness. It is well understood that the dump is a crucible for this kind of symbolic change, which is why so many theorists of new materiality have turned to waste as a core case study. The ontological turnover of recycling, the dump's dematerialization and then rematerialization of the object, the plasticity and shapelessness of waste, its excessive volume, the way this size and scale can give refuse the power of a live threat, the impact that garbage has on the personhood of the human subject who toils with it: these all make trash crucial to the so-called "thingly turn".

SUBJECT/OBJECT, OBJECT/SUBJECT

More than this, in fact, the dump belongs to what Nicholas Bourriaud calls the "realm of the *exformal*: the site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted," between what is human and what is not. He continues:

> *Exform* designates a point of contact, a 'socket' or 'plug', in the process of exclusion and inclusion – a sign that switches between center and periphery, floating between dissidence and power. Gestures of expulsion and the waste it entails, the point where the exform emerges, constitute an authentically organic link between the aesthetic and the political.[39]

In many ways, this statement can be read alongside Michel Serres' well-known concept of the quasi-object and the quasi-subject. In its original formulation, Serres sets out this idea via a sporting analogy. He writes:

> The ball isn't there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. Skill with the ball is recognized in the player who follows the ball and serves it instead of making it follow him and using it. It is the subject of the body, subject of bodies, and like a subject of subjects. Playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance. The laws are written for it, defined relative to it, and we bend to these laws. Skill with the ball supposes a Ptolemaic revolution of which few theoreticians are capable, since they are accustomed to being subjects in a Copernican world where objects are slaves.[40]

Here, the scene of a football game becomes a time-space wherein the hierarchical "Copernican" rules between players and ball collapse into flattened, fluid relations, as agency shifts and the humans bend so obediently to the physics of the object that Serres calls it a "Ptolemaic revolution". Rather than strict "subjects" and "objects," the actants in the game share a state of intersubjectivity, but one in which the ball arguably calls more of the shots.

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[39] Bourriaud, *The Exform*, x.

[40] Serres, *The Parasite*, 223–224.

Turning back to *Plastic China* throws further light on this notion of quasi-subjects and quasi-objects. The camera repeatedly closes in on plastic waste in the process of metamorphosis: rendered down in huge vats, oozed out of pipes, squeezed into filaments, and shredded into pellets. This is the story of the life cycle of garbage, its matter made vibrant as it moves through solid and liquid states, in ways that at moments feel uncannily like a wildlife documentary (figs.11-14). This life cycle is mirrored by that of the waste pickers, who are shown in positions of naturalized subservience to plastic trash as they work, forage, eat, rest, play, and, most extraordinarily, give birth amid the waste. In figure 15, they labor waist-high amid Sisyphean piles of plastic; in figure 16, they catch a fish for supper from a river rank with polluted waste; in figure 17, they share a meal at a small outdoor table encircled by sacks brimming over with waste; and in figure 18, the children try to scale the mounds of refuse as part of a game. Yi Jie's mother even gives birth to her sixth child on the premises of the recycling workshop, her cries of labor echoing amongst the serried ranks of plastic. This charting of life rhythms, and the way that they proceed – to paraphrase Yi Jie's father – at the mercy of garbage, suggests the extent to which the dump, like the football field, is a space of quasi-object, quasi-subject relations in which waste is increasingly calling more of the shots. Indeed, it is in this sense that Bourriaud's "realm of the *exformal*" becomes telling. As a "site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted," the dump, and working at the dump, applies pressure to personhood and objecthood. This is a pressure that art can elucidate, and thereby constitute "an authentically organic link between the aesthetic and the political".

In her study of *catadores*, or waste-pickers, in Rio de Janeiro, Kathleen Millar argues that working with waste generates new forms of being. As she puts it:

> Just as the transition to wage labor in industrial capitalism entailed the creation of new worker-subjectivities, the transition to precarious labor in contemporary capitalism is also a process involving the transformation of desires, values, and arts of living. In other words,

> like wage labor, work on the garbage dump is a site of subject-making, which catadores experience and express as transformative of their inner dispositions.[41]

In a sense, Millar's point here is precisely the one made earlier: namely, that the waste picker is an archetype for our age, whose "desires, values, and arts of living" require exploration in art as much as in anthropology. It might seem logical to expect, therefore, that artwork about the dump, set on establishing "an authentically organic link between the aesthetic and the political," would naturally seek to represent the garbage dump as a "site of subject-making". But Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China* is unusual – exceptional, even – in its sustained effort to realize the subjectivity of the waste picker in visual culture. In particular, the film's frank yet delicate treatment of quasi-object, quasi-subject relations at the plastics recycling workshop – its self-consciously *ontological* exploration of what it means to live and work with waste – sets it apart from the slew of other artworks and documentaries whose makers have felt the gravitational pull of garbage.

A further exception may be the artist Li Jikai 李繼開, to my knowledge the only contemporary painter to represent waste pickers in his work, who also alludes to deep ontological shift in his *The Waste Pickers* (Shihuangzhe 拾荒者, 2014). This series of acrylics on canvas represents the dump as a dwelling place where life runs through its cycles. The figures are shown clothed, naked, reading, sleeping, resting, working, thinking, praying, cooking, having a haircut, and, once again, giving birth. Life goes on; but it also shifts at the genome level. The limbs of several figures are malformed or mutated, their gender is indeterminate, their sizing is disproportionate (some juxtaposed figures are huge, others tiny), their faces are blank and puppet-like, and some bodies even show stitch marks to reinforce their identity as quasi-subjects or marionettes (figs.19-21). Wang Jiuliang goes rather further even than Li, though, in his approach to subjectivity. The

[41] Millar, "The Precarious Present," 45.

methodological shift that *Plastic China* makes – however utopian it may seem – from the artist as ragpicker to the ragpicker as artist marks, to my mind, a crucial and singular transition in the Chinese representation of precarious lives.

HYPERVISIBLE, INVISIBLE

So far, I have discussed wasteworks firstly in terms of what they tell us about the impact of precarity on the art form, and next as a kind of bellwether about the state of personhood within a regime of "entrenched vulnerability". But these are also works about social relations. They are spaces in which precarity as a structure of feeling – and as a sometimes *ugly* structure of feeling – is made tangible. As such, they emerge as a salient method for grasping the contours of the present. Commentators on the bodyworks mentioned earlier have certainly noted that they perhaps veer into indelicate terrain. Thus the close kinship that some artists claim with China's urban poor – as Zhu Fadong put it in 2007, "I am one of them"[42] – has been seen as facile or disingenuous, since many such artists come from affluent homes, are recipients of tertiary education and pass only briefly

[42] Quoted in Parke, "Migrant Workers," 230. Elsewhere, Zhu reinforces his claim to subaltern status when he states that his aim was to use "my conditions of existence as the subject of my art" in works such as *This Person is For Sale* (quoted in Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 214). Zhang Dali makes a similar point in interview. In response to the suggestion that he has now "gradually become estranged from lower-class life, with his Italian nationality, professional artist status, connections with art museums and galleries, and improved material conditions," he states that "because of my past experience, I have not changed in the least, and spiritually still retain memories of life at the bottom" (Zhang, "Zai huati yu zhengyi zhong xunzhao 'Zhongzu' mima.")

through the vale of social endangerment.[43] Similarly, critics have charged that Chinese artists who deploy the strained and stressed bodies of the precariat in delegated performance art are practicing forms of aesthetic exploitation, deliberate or otherwise[44] – not least since often they seldom pay workers wages for services that on some occasions have catapulted the artist herself or himself into global fame.[45] These are not new arguments, nor is the worry over how best to represent class others a fresh type of angst. At root, it is the hyper-visibility of the "poor" body in such works that threatens to compromise the ethics of their makers. If precarity is "the condition of our time," not just the plight of those who "drop out" from the system, but that system's actual mechanism – the very rails on which it runs – then the voyeurism that seems an inalienable premise and effect of these bodyworks is both exploitative and out of synch with the present. A political art of precarity that operates via othering, which shows mainly that some people are more precarious than others –

[43] See, for example, Eschenburg, 31. More common, however, are treatments of such work which either ignore the problematic elements of this claiming of kinship (Bian, "Zhu Fadong", 74–77), or which see nothing troubling in the equivalence of identities. This is Parke's point when she argues that Zhu Fadong's "adoption of the identity of a migrant is confirmed by his biography and it is not just an identity he was performing for this piece" (231). The difficulty here is the assumption that China's nearly 300 million-strong migrant population is homogeneous in terms of class origin and class destiny, and that an artist migrant with an international reputation is experientially co-terminous with an economic migrant with no escape route from precarious labor.

[44] See Parke, 233–4; and Eschenburg, 36.

[45] Zhang Huan is the stand-out example here. As he puts it, "I received the most benefit from the fish pond piece (To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond). This piece changed my situation, my life. Everybody likes this piece" (Borysevicz, "Before and After: An Interview with Zhang Huan," 61).

or that precarity is someone else's problem – can induce at best a brief and passing pity. It cannot act politically. As Rancière argues of horror as a spectacle:

> If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies … (but) we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak.[46]

A parallel problem of (in)visibility is also at work in representations of waste. The human figure that is visualized to voyeuristic excess in the genre of bodyworks which emerged in China in the late 1990s is entirely effaced in many of the works I have referenced in this article. The result is that waste – the effluvium of precarity, in both physical and metaphysical ways – is also partially demobilized as a subject for political art. This is not to say that works such as Xu Bing's *Phoenixes* lack political meaning. On the contrary, some aspire to and may well attain the heights of the toxic sublime, in which "trash has become a material for enacting the exultations"[47] once associated with nature, and thus offers a narration on the state of late capitalism. But as Yaeger notes

> Our society creates and then disavows rubbish in excess. Detritus is objects – both natural and artificial – that have reached the end of their life of value. Given this opposition, why should the dominant aesthetic response to trash suggest that we need to revalue it, to soak up its numina, its radioactive glow? (335)

The effacement of the human that occurs in work which is hostage to these "numina" undertakes a transposing move that is ideologically similar to the displacement of precarity onto the urban poor that we see in China's bodyworks. Waste is othered. It is disassociated, via art, from the humans

[46] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 96.

[47] Yaegar, 330.

who are fundamentally indissociable from it. These wasteworks, like the bodyworks I discussed earlier, profess to be the arts of the precarious, as evinced by the statements that artists themselves make about them. Yet in many ways their aesthetic strategies are digressive, arguably even hostile.

IN ART SHALL WE ASPIRE

It is in this broader, global context that a work like Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China* acquires political value. The documentary commits itself to delineating the subjectivity of Yi Jie, as a ragpicker-cum-artist, in ways that press for her personhood amidst the ontological quagmire of the dump. As such, *Plastic China* stands in radical contrast to a work such as Zhang Dali's *Chinese Offspring* (Zhongzu 種族, 2003) for example, in which the artist made resin casts of the bodies of migrant workers, and then strung these life-size casts, each tattooed with an issue number, upside down from warehouse ceilings for the purposes of exhibition. The point and power of the work is, of course, its visual rendering of China's migrant labor force as indecent puppets, as closely identical to one another as clones. Like the resin casts, they exist in strung-up, subject-less suspension. As Wu Hung notes,

> … this approach entails risks for the artist – not only does the temporary employer-employee relationship created between himself and his migrant laborer models reproduce the social power relations and economic operations he aims to criticize, but the act of producing a model of the subject in plaster also evokes the utility and brutality of these power relations and economic structures.[48]

Wu Hung reads Zhang Dali's studied response to this risk positively, arguing that the artist's decision to photograph and publicize his aesthetic process both lays bare these "operations of power" and also reframes "a potential issue of artistic morality into the self-marginalization of avant-

[48] Wu, "Instantaneous Copying and Monumentality," 13–14.

garde art" (14). This, however, is an argument made from the perspective of Zhang-as-subject, which revolves around an exclusively artist-based dilemma: namely, is his aesthetic personhood an exploitative one? Can it be redeemed if Zhang is upfront about it? Meanwhile, the migrants are "voyeurized" twice: first, during the artistic process of producing the casts when they are suffocatingly swathed in plaster and resin; and second, during the exhibitionary process, as their naked, number-stamped casts are dangled from the rafters. Their subjectivity exists in entirely objectified form. As such, they take their place alongside a significant cluster of similar works (such as Liang Shuo's 梁碩 *Trendy Peasants – Eight Brothers* [Shishang nongmin ba xiongdi 時尚農民八兄弟, 2002] and his *Urban Peasants* [Chengshi nongmin 城市農民, 2007], for example) that deindividuate or massify migrant workers, casting them – often as statues or molds – in postures that are passive, inert, and hapless.

As Lisa Richaud and Ash Amin note, a core focus for researchers who study precarious lives should be to "reconsider the affective and psychological dimensions of urban stress and uncertainty …by exploring the active management of subjectivity by individuals."[49] Against the understandably dominant narrative of Foxconn suicides, PTSD in the aftermath of factory fires, and "travelling psychosis" among those who have to cross a vast continent to see their families for the briefest of annual visits, the role of ritualized resilience and "situated endurance" – how to bear the quotidian across an accumulation of perilous days – is a story that also needs telling, and in art, again, as much as in anthropology. For Richaud and Amin, it is specifically via what might be called the arts of the everyday ("the effervescence of a card game, the laughter exchanged during chitchat, the rituals of living normally") that the "moments of relief" on which an actively managed subjectivity depends can be grasped (2). These routines are the mechanism through which

[49] Richaud and Amin, "Life amidst Rubble," 1.

precarious people go about "rejecting abjection by staying active, purposeful, sane" (11). But *Plastic China* extends this notion of the arts of the everyday into something much more explicitly aesthetic. It is via the making of art – the cut-out shoes, the improvised home computer, the chocolate-wrapper wallpaper – that eleven-year-old Yi Jie not simply manages her subjectivity, but arrogates to herself a personhood on a par with that of the documentarist who films her. As such, the film presents what Arjun Appadurai calls the "capacity to aspire"[50] as a specifically aesthetic quantity that enables Yi Jie to assert and exercise her personhood within a domain that consistently threatens to reduce her to a quasi-subject.

The artists discussed in this article, I should say again, see themselves as political. Their express aim is to undo the "us" versus "them" distinctions that are so rife in mainstream discourse on the urban poor in China, and which typically blame migrant workers for "rising crime rates, moral depravity, public health and hygiene concerns, and many other contemporary social ills."[51] We know this not just from the visual codes via which the works of these artists communicate, but from their own paratextual musings and media interviews.[52] And although I have described their waste-

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[50] Appadurai, "The Capacity to Aspire," 59–84.

[51] Dooling, "Representing *Dagongmei*," 137.

[52] See, for example, Zhang, "Zai huati yu zhengyi zhong xunzhao 'Zhongzu' mima"; and Wang Qingsong's commentary on his work, available at http://www.wangqingsong.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=96&Itemid=17. In this artist's statement, he writes "I am empathetic to this "migrant" population. I think they hold on dearly to their dreams and like to be recognized for their contribution to the constructions of China's cities as they attempt to fulfill their dreams of improving their lives … In 1993, I moved to Beijing, also from a faraway place, from Jinzhou, in Hubei Province. Jinzhou is a very small city. I

picking practices as borderline exploitative or appropriative, likening them to the faux-milkmaids of Versailles, most would probably either refute the suggestion that their art crosses the line, or at the very least strategize that step as does Zhang Dali. In a sense, though, this dissensus merely heightens the anomaly of an art practice that says it wants to intervene for precarious people, and yet ends up, in spite of itself, so visibly effacing their agency. What makes this anomaly happen? Appadurai notes that we need "to ask how the poor may be helped to produce those forms of cultural consensus that may best advance their own collective long-term interests in matters of wealth, equality, and dignity" (64). This strategy does not obviate the role of the artist – far from it. But it does very much foreground the importance of training and toning what Appadurai calls the "voice" of the poor as a "cultural capacity". This capacity functions by "those levers of metaphor, rhetoric, organization, and public performance that will work best in their cultural worlds" (67), and it is a process in which artists, particularly those who have lived among extremely precarious people, can become instrumentally enabling. Yet voice – which represents a transformative shift from looking at precarious people to hearing them – is what is absent from so many of China's bodyworks and wasteworks alike. This aphasia seems to ask for an explanation because, on the surface, it appears so counter-intuitive within such consciously *engagé* practices of art-making.

CRUEL GAZING

The condition of precarity, as many theorists have made clear, is transversal, cutting across class and race, gender and nation. It has been a driving mission of the European precarity movement

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also had my big dreams despite being surprised by the huge scale of the city of Beijing, a capital city with a population 100 times larger than the population of my hometown … I survived because of the realization that my situation was not special and there were tens of thousands of people just like me pouring into China's cities hoping and trying to realize their dreams."

to broker alliances between these diverse cohorts: between creatives and factory workers, between artists and migrants, and so on. Theorists of precarity have been keen to show that even as endemic uncertainty smothers life chances it can "hold the potential to contribute to a political composition of the common"[53] by fostering new ways and means of being political together. The devil, though, lies in the detail. As Gill and Pratt put it, the

> The appeal of the notion of precarity is precisely in this potentiality, yet it also produces tensions common to all forms of transversal politics: how to deal with differences, how to find 'common cause', how to build solidarity while also respecting the singularity and specificity of the very different experiences of (say) janitors, creatives and office temps… Not least is the question of whether there are *grounds* for such solidarity in a global frame characterized by enormous disparities in wealth and power (12).

In short, precarity's cross-cutting does not necessarily breed effortless solidarities: this is Angela Mitropoulos' point when she asks if it really favors "the maquiladora worker to ally herself with the fashion designer?"[54] Her question meshes with the practices discussed here, in which it is sometimes hard to see what material or even abstract benefits accrue to the waste-picker whose anonymized toil makes it into a photographic series by a big-name artist – even if that artist started out as a migrant, has lived in a migrant village and shared in its patterns of sociality, and has long experience of unsteady work with low or no pay.

Yet it seems insufficient simply to critique the relationship between artists and waste-pickers, to pull up the former for exploitatively annexing the identity and labor of the latter. Rather, what these artworks require is a closer look at how the tensions of transversal politics actually play out

[53] Neilson and Rossiter, 55

[54] Mitropoulos, "Precari-us."

within aesthetic space, at how waste-picking reveals itself as a method for navigating the strains of the present. Or why it is, more precisely, that so many practitioners of the arts of precarity create a representational language which shoots for solidarity but ends up visually reproducing the "enormous disparities in wealth and power" referred to above? Earlier, I suggested that these artistic practices tend towards the digressive. Either arrogating the positionality of the precarious subject to themselves, or presenting precarity as someone else's problem, they effectively decline to take part in the important work of mentoring what Appadurai calls voice among the poor. As mentioned above, a more or less Rancièrian view has prevailed amongst commentators who have noted this tendency in China's arts of precarity. Lily Chumley summarizes the prevailing take when she argues that such works "appear to viewers as images of others, recruiting viewers to roles of sympathetic objectification rather than empathetic identification."[55] According to this "best case" interpretation, artists and their spectators are sometimes misguided, but fundamentally benign. They mean well even when they misfire.

But what about a "less good" or even "worst case" scenario? What about the possibility that art of this kind "manages" the threat that precarity now poses to so many constituents of society – effectively boxing it into the rabbit hutches of the urban poor, as in the photography of Wang Qingsong? Even as this art appears to be politically radical, in other words, its strategies of "othering" may also be socially reassuring. More than this, in fact, when parsed on the structural plane, the visual language of this art arguably displays an investment in keeping the poor silent. In this sense, such practices suggest that the transversal nature of precarity, rather than fostering a natural solidarity, may instead breed fear over fluid social status and the ever-present possibility of a sudden plummet downwards. Activists want to believe that precarity is furnishing the grounds for

[55] Chumley, *Creativity Class*, 101.

new experiences of the common, and many contemporary people want to believe these arguments. But the closeness of the artist and the precarious worker may also be a space in which anxious processes of social differentiation are staged at the very same moment that allegiance is staked. Precisely because precarity is so big – inducing what Lauren Berlant calls "a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness'" (10) that shrouds so many in its heavy uncertainties – it may well be a condition less, not more, likely to incite a new politics of the commons. Moving on from this, perhaps we also need to consider the possibility that artworks which depict precarious people in postures of punishment, degradation, and strain may also call a cruel or disdainful gaze into being; and the related possibility that artworks in which the role of precarian is assumed by the artist may possess a rivalrous or controlling drive alongside the stated urge for solidarity. This, I should say, is not to "accuse" particular artists, nor their audiences, but rather to drill down into the visual language of these works and parse them for their syntactical meaning.

What used to be called *jieji* 階級– or "class" – in Chinese has become something of an outlawed term in recent years. Society, as Hu Jintao famously declared, is harmonious now (*hexie shehui* 和諧社會), and so a different term – *jieceng* 階層, or stratum – has been coined to indicate differentials in income, equality, and opportunity. These gaps are glossed as gulfs that social mobility can supposedly bridge rather than as the expressions of a caste system which class struggle should violently dismantle. Yet all the while China's Gini coefficient has shot through the roof, a middle-class with clear but anxious wants has emerged, pressure on space and resources in China's cities has intensified, and the media is saturated with stories about vicious verbal and even physical clashes between migrants and permanent urban residents. This tension, moreover, often mingles with an awkward sense of resentment: many urban dwellers rely all too heavily on the labor of migrant workers even as some evidently begrudge these subalterns' claims on the city. Labor activists such as Shen Mengyu 沈夢雨, who graduated from the elite Sun Yat-sen University and went straight to

Shenzhen to work at a car parts factor where she began mobilizing her fellow-workers,[56] are the poster people for the power of solidarity between different constituencies within a precarious social world. But the practices of ill-use, imperilment, appropriation, rivalry, and effacement which recur across so many artworks about China's most vulnerable people suggest that art is a zone in which fraught, inadmissible, and ugly feelings also play themselves out. Even if not outright cruel or disdainful, at the very least these bodyworks and wasteworks enable a conflicted gaze: one that can profess, and even feel, a politically correct sympathy for class others, but one which may also derive an illicit sense of reassurance, even gratification, as these same others are kept visibly in their subaltern place – or are simply wiped from the picture altogether. In this sense, the missing waste picker becomes a disappeared person whose lost voice speaks volumes, and Yi Jie's on-screen passage to artistic personhood becomes a methodologically significant act.

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[56] Xu, "Guangzhou nü shuoshi chengwei gongren weiquan daibiaohou zao kaichu."

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