

### **Analysis (2.1.3.)**

Ghost Choir Karaoke was the first of the 9 performances comprising this project to be performed. It was done before the format of the sense-event and the following discussions was developed. The figure of the artist/researcher wasn't in place either. The two parts of this performance was performed at two separate sites. The first part, Great Ghost Ground was only performed for the camera and the voice-over of the artist/researcher was added much later in the editing of the video. The status of the performances and the resulting video is thus quite different from the other 8 performances.

The idea of a straight video-documentation of the performances, that the other video-documentation is based on, is not possible here. The video, included here as Appendix 2.1.5.1., is an edited version of the two performances that goes beyond the concept of documentation and becomes the art-work in itself. The performances and the video must be considered as different art-works; they are separate entities with each their characteristics.

In this sense Ghost Choir Karaoke is an exception from the defined format of the sense-event. I have decided to include it anyway; as an elaboration on the the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement it serves a vital function in the overall argumentation, even if it is an aberration from the research method employed in the other 8 performances/sense-events in the project. The character of the performances was vital for the formation of a research method as well; this was the performance, where the first shape of the sense-event appeared.

This analysis is different too, it has to criss-cross between the performances and the video, which is the result of an editing; reducing and adding to the original performance.

The story of how the two performances were developed is long and rambling. They were done as part of the 10th anniversary of the 10<sup>th</sup> OPEN Performance Art Festival in Beijing, China, but in my internal working process, they were also an answer to a question of how to commemorate the 20-year anniversary of the 1989 Democracy Movement and the so-called Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989. A question that had arisen in connection with my participation in the exhibition 'Kina Hus', at Overgaden in Copenhagen earlier that year.

Going to Beijing and taking part in the OPEN Festival revealed how big the difference in talking about 1989 and Tiananmen Square was in Europe and in China. In China these events are a real political taboo, something one has to be careful to deal with in a precise and well-considered manner. The conceptualisation of Ghost Choir Karaoke was clearly influenced by this context. I had to find a way of dealing with this content in a manner that would make sense in Beijing in 2009.

The first performance – scene 2 in the script and in the video - took place at the Blue Sky Karaoke Club (RO JI GAO LAN TIAN CLUB) in Beijing. It was planned as a discreet, subdued commemoration of the 1989 events. The audience was given no hint of the content of the performance, and it was only as slogans were shouted out, and the final song, Tiananmen Moon, evolved that direct references to the original event became obvious. As one spectator remarked afterwards:

”At first sight the scenario looked humourous and somewhat silly, it was only as the performance evolved, as the mood became massively sad, that one realised that this was serious, that something very heavy and very crucial was at stake.”<sup>1</sup>

This strategy of 'the hidden content' can of course be discussed. Had it been better to confront the situation and do a provocative, direct statement on the 20-year anniversary of the 1989 Democracy Movement? Being in the situation, I realised I had no intention of provoking a direct discussion, probably involving some kind of authorities, about how and why this historical event was such a taboo. A discussion of censorship and reclaiming history. I had the feeling that my position as an European, a Western artist, was somehow too obvious. The risk I would be taking, wouldn't be my risk, rather it would be my hosts, the organizers of OPEN Festival, I would put at risk by such an act. In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't be such a surprise either. Rather, such a gesture would somehow be in the framework of 'what is to be expected'. The outcome would be in the line of what a massive array of Western media had tried out on June 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> earlier that summer. A small provocative gesture on my part, 3 months later, generating the expected reaction from the authorities, wouldn't really add anything, but stating the obvious.

As said, I opted for a more discreet version of a commemoration. What interested me was not so much the massacre on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 and the obvious censorship it is now guarded with; it was rather the intriguing cloning that the 1989 Democracy Movement used as their strategy to critique the oppressive Communist Party and the manner in which the activists used the occupation of a central public square, Tiananmen Square, as a platform for protest and as an image of 'another society'. These themes are developed further in the commentary below. Realizing the immensity of especially the latter theme, I chose to limit the performances to deal with the first theme, cloning.

A string of coincidences influenced the choice of venues for Ghost Choir Karaoke. I visited the Blue Sky Karaoke Club by chance an evening two days prior to the performance. Completely fascinated by the extravagant, completely over-the-top décor, I realized it could be a relevant setting for the performance; the fact that this was a karaoke club would place the ghosts of the student activists of 1989 in a contemporary setting, not only representing the total sell-out to capitalism of the Chinese Communist regime, but also thematizing the cloning I was trying to focus on. Re-enacting a political demonstration with ghosts in a karaoke club, seemed the appropriate way to commemorate a movement that used the cloning of the features of its enemy as one of their main strategies.

Later, we went to Inner Mongolia with the intention of bringing the ghosts out into the grasslands - these immense prairies in the border region between China and Mongolia. The idea was to give the activist-ghost some kind of release in a spiritual landscape, but we were obstructed; set at halt by a banal language barrier. Instead of the endless grasslands, we opted for the immense building-site across from our hotel in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia. This large hole in the ground became the site for the second performance, Great Ghost Ground, scene 1 in the script and in the video. Like the karaoke club, the building site became a symbolic representation of contemporary Chinese society at large; a figuration of the collective amnesia that Chinese neo-capitalism seems to revel in these years.

The sites of the performance thus play an important role as contextualizations of the content. These are the sites from which we are now looking at the events in 1989. This is the society that evolved from the dismissal of the Democracy Movement by the regime back then. This is the society that evolved out of the Ground Zero of June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989. This is where the ghosts of the Democracy Movement are left to wander. In Ghost Choir Karaoke the sites have clear symbolic functions – in the following performances the choice of site plays an equally important part, but it is not necessarily as symbolic as here.

The ghosts have a similar symbolic function. Using ghosts to represent the activists of the Democracy Movement is a way of hinting at their status as rejected, tabooized and ‘illegal combatants’, not only condemned and prosecuted by law, but simply rejected from their place in history, written out of the official version of Chinese history, as if they never existed, as if their acts never happened. They are thus un-released, condemned to wander like ghost. Like a psychological trauma, their story are repressed, unresolved, as long as their acts are not given the proper place in history.

Injected into the two performances are various quotes from the 1989 events: The slogans shouted by the ghosts are the real slogans used by the 1989 Democracy Movement, most of them again quoted from slogans used by the 1919 May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement. The text of the song Tiananmen Moon is written by the American journalist Philip J Cunningham as he was taking part in the occupation of Tiananmen Square. The initial dialogue between two of the ghosts at the karaoke club is taken from the novel, Beijing Coma. These quotes all refer back to the events 1989, more or less directly. In the performance, though, they are presented as karaoke with all the *Verfremdung* inherent in this genre.

Karaoke was invented in the early 1970s by the Japanese drummer, Daisuke Inoue, who invented a tape recorder-like machine that played pop-songs without the lead vocal track. A microphone made it possible for members of an audience to sing the song themselves with the original music as backdrop. The technique quickly developed into a popular kind of entertainment, spreading fast, first in Asia and later all over the world. Inoue was later heralded for ‘providing an entirely new way for people to learn to tolerate each other’.<sup>2</sup>

In karaoke a member of an audience steps up and sings a well-known pop song to the rest of the audience. By inducing her song into the soundtrack a kind of identification takes place. For a moment the person becomes a singer herself. She is re-enacting the song and with it the emotional spectrum it represents. In this sense karaoke makes it possible for the karaoke-singer to rehearse a certain set of emotions, most often in front of a group of friends. Even though it takes place in a joyful, party atmosphere, karaoke has this undertone of group therapy. The karaoke-singer reveals an emotional aspect of herself in front of her friends, and together they incorporate this new aspect of her identity in their social interaction. Each taking their turn to be the singer, each taking their turn to reveal new sides of their personalities, the group of friends little by little ‘learn to tolerate each other’.

This therapeutic aspect of karaoke is one of the inherent proposals in ‘Ghost Choir Karaoke’. If the 1989 Democracy Movement, the occupation of Tiananmen Square and the massacre on June 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> 1989 are repressed historical events - a historical and political taboo – some kind of political therapy is needed. Such a process is

painful, even scandalous, for all parts involved. It has to happen over a long stretch of time, as a slow process of reconciliation. By commemorating 1989 Democracy Movement as ghosts in a karaoke setting, the performance proposes some kind of collective reconciliation therapy. This therapeutic process doesn't have to take place in the form of karaoke; karaoke is rather the aesthetic form in which this idea is proposed. On a metaphorical level, though, karaoke works as a metaphor for the general cultural and political reconciliation needed. Chinese society at large needs to reconcile these events, in a collective process of 'learning to tolerate each other'.

The therapeutic aspects of karaoke resembles another interesting aspect of the cloning used by the 1989 Democracy Movement. What the movement offered China in 1989 – what the unrest, the demonstrations, the occupation of the square and all the cloned Communistic imagery offered to the regime – was exactly such a therapeutic process of reclaiming past ideals and past moral standards. The 1989 Democracy Movement wasn't a revolutionary movement struggling for a new society; what they offered was, on the contrary, an outstretched hand to the regime – a chance to reclaim true Communist glory; a chance to once again become the power of the people. On the night of June 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> this offer was rejected in the most brutal manner possible. The outstretched hand was cut off, and the very idea of such an offer was repressed.

In Ghost Choir Karaoke, 20 years later, the offer is still rejected. The activists are left to wander as ghosts; left to sing their songs and shout their slogans, now as karaoke, in a completely estranged society, as far from reconciliation as ever. On the contrary, Chinese society seems engaged in a massive collective process of amnesia, here symbolized by the immense building-site in Great Ghost Ground. In this sad terrain, the two ghosts shout their futile Communist slogans into a void:

“Seize the hour! Seize the day! Wake up! China! Wake up!”

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Undocumented remark by an unknown member of the audience at at the Blue Sky Karaoke Club (RO JI GAO LAN TIAN CLUB)

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karaoke#cite\\_note-ignobel\\_2004-5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karaoke#cite_note-ignobel_2004-5)