

## A MATCH MADE IN SHANGHAI

By John Di Stefano

"Matchmaking at Suzhou Creek" was an art initiative running concurrently with the Shanghai Biennale in Fall 2004, involving the participation of 22 overseas artists, including myself, invited to work with local artists for a two-week residency.

This was followed by a large-scale exhibition and the publication of a catalog. The project was organized by Eastlink Gallery in the Moganshan Lu complex, a former factory compound along Shanghai's historic Suzhou Creek that now houses contemporary art galleries and studios. "Matchmaking" provided a point of exchange between local and overseas artists within the context of Shanghai's rapidly changing urban landscape. Indeed, the urban transformation of Shanghai is alarming; along Suzhou Creek local communities are being displaced as large tracts of traditional housing and industrial buildings are razed and replaced by high-rises. This backdrop of radical urban and social change was the leitmotiv of many of the works produced by the artists involved in the project.

"Matchmaking" raised the question of how artists might respond to the developments taking place in Shanghai, and although the project was supported in part by the governments of Australia, Austria, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway, it was not driven by curators' choices but rather by the participating artists themselves. In this sense, the project served as a counterpoint to the Shanghai Biennale which focused on the "internationalization" of Shanghai rather than on local specificities and contradictions. "Matchmaking" took a different conceptual stance by avoiding the polemic of how to present itself to the world, an obsession shared by both the Shanghai government and local people. As some critics have noted, commercial galleries and the biennale have tended to shift away from creating nurturing environments for emerging local artists, preferring to showcase foreign works or works made by Chinese artists with international reputations.<sup>1</sup>

The Moganshan Lu complex is neither a pristine nor an officially "sanctioned" art space, and not surprisingly, the works resulting from "Matchmaking" tended to shy away from individual virtuosity and gravitate towards social commentary geared around site-specificity and site-responsiveness. To reflect this posture, the accompanying catalog was written during the residency, and contained transcriptions of artists' dialogues and discussions. Texts and images were collected, translated and edited daily.

To be sure, the utopian idea of the "Matchmaking" project was fraught with problems and challenges, some of them mundane and some of them virtually insurmountable. The language barrier was perhaps the main obstacle along with the strict time constraints of the residency period. These and other factors prevented many of the Chinese and overseas artists from collaborating despite their desire to do so. There were exceptions however, such as Australian artist Richard Thomas, who created a field of chrysanthemum flowers floating in water, which local artist Su Bing transformed from an installation into a performance by immersing himself naked in the water during the opening.

Australian Kylie Wilkinson created the poignant and gripping video *Search & Destroy/Xi Wang Yu Xie Mie*, with Chen Qiang. The work consisted of interviews with local laborers, artists and office workers who were asked to talk candidly about which structures they would destroy and/or build if they had unlimited power. German artist Tilo Kaiser and Wang Xingwei assumed the dual-persona of Wang & Kaiser (W&K) and created a bar and meeting place for the artists during the residency. Adjacent to the bar was a small office where W&K would confer privately—a mode of exchange that stood in contrast to the public encounters in the bar. Ironically, the W&K work was conceived solely for the residency period, after which its relevancy was exhausted.

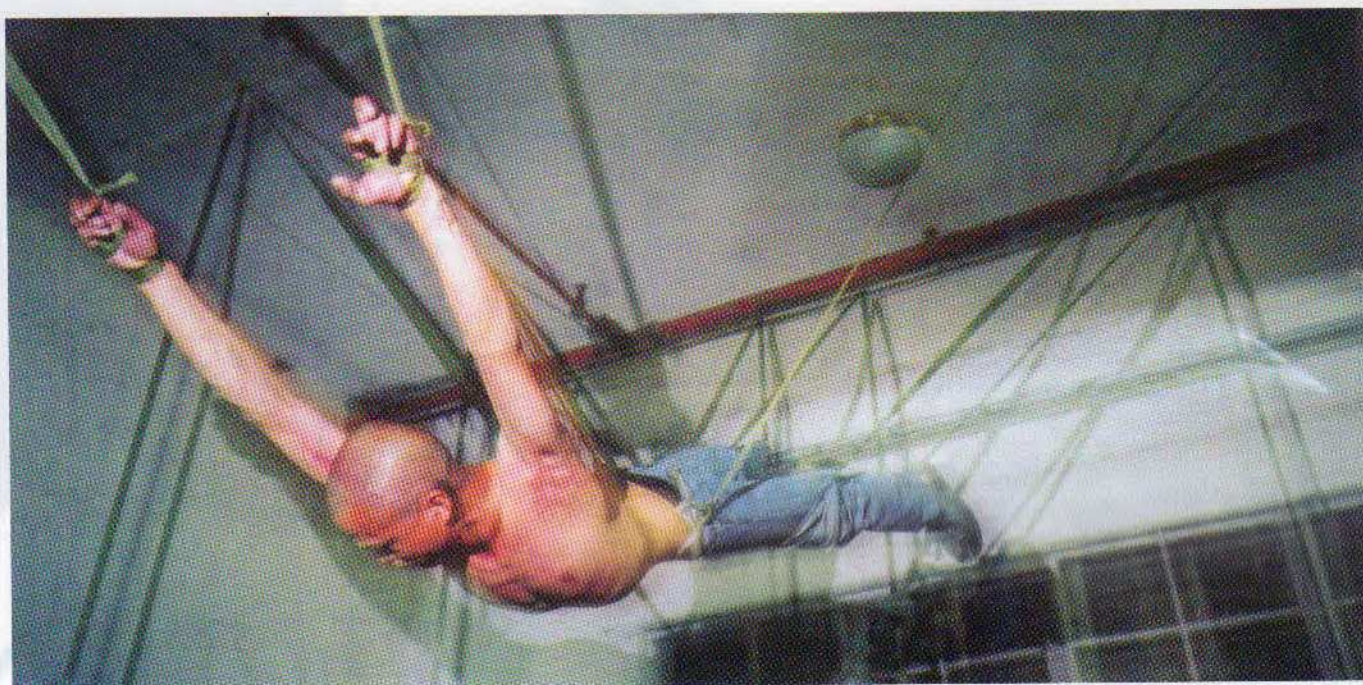
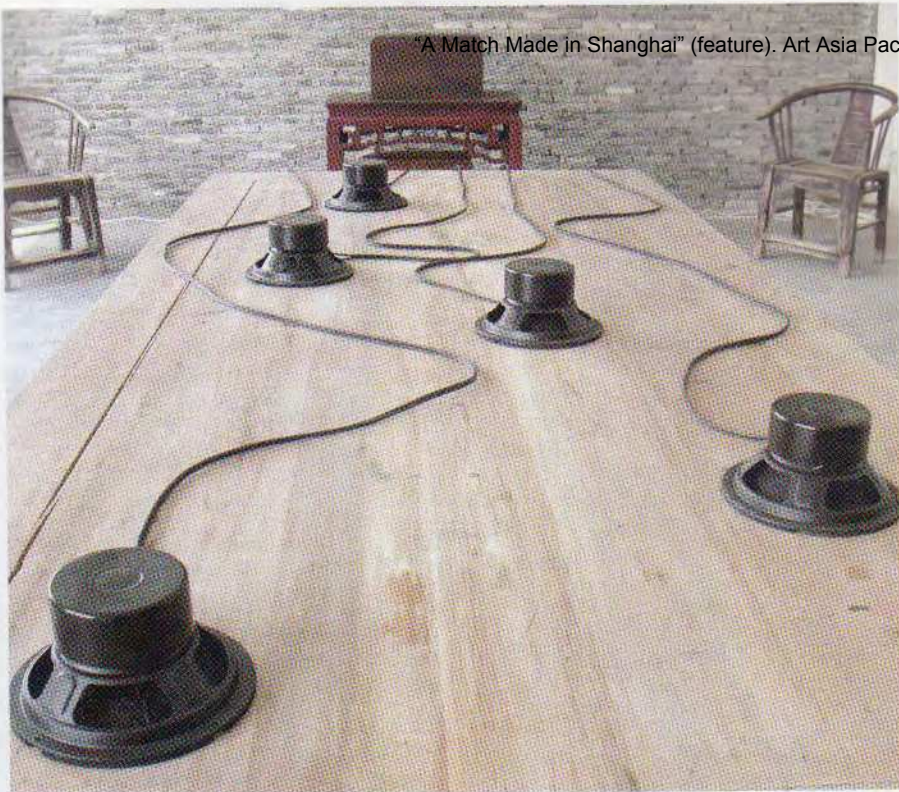
Most artists found common ground by sharing spaces and juxtaposing their works as a means of creating dialogue. My piece *WLG/AKL/HKG/PUD*, was installed in a space I shared with Beijing performance artist He Yunchang. The theme of water was both a physical and conceptual link for our respective works. I used audio that I recorded on my flights from Wellington, New Zealand (via Auckland and Hong Kong) to Shanghai's Pudong airport. The audio record of my journey, across various bodies of water, served as a foundation for my installation. I treated the airplane audio recording as a collection of sound waves. I then filtered these and retained only the hum of their low frequencies which were subsequently adjusted to permeate the gallery space. I also constructed a small wooden box that housed an LCD monitor visible only through a small opening at the top. Looking through the opening, an aerial image of waves appeared on the monitor. The interior of the box was mounted with mirrors creating the illusion that the water's waves extended to infinity within the small space.

He Yunchang's evocative and brutally physical performance on the opening night also used water. He suspended himself from the ceiling of the gallery using counterweights of huge jugs of water. The jugs were punctured and slowly spilled their contents onto the floor, while He Yunchang's body descended slowly and tortuously towards the gallery floor. Although radically different in style, our works engaged in a conceptual dialogue about displacement and change and overlapped metaphorically in the image of suspension over water.

Japanese artist Yuca Ishizuka also evoked suspension and displacement in her sculptural installation that dealt with the disappearance of an ancient language used only by women in a remote part of China. Ishizuka's work, made of crystal beads suspended on transparent thread, mapped the *Nüshu* language, which has only recently become extinct. Elaine Vis' work *Nest* superimposed a vernacular Dutch house with the changing and vanishing notions of



■ Participants of the "Matchmaking at Suzhou Creek" project. Courtesy Eastlink Gallery.



traditional Chinese domestic spaces. Belgian artist Eric van Hove created calligraphic street interventions in which he physically wrote a continuous sentence on the streets of Shanghai. Wang Shugang cast a red searchlight upon the only European-style building adjacent to the Moganshan Lu complex to survive the demolition of its surroundings. Li Juchuan painted a red line, evocative of those found on architectural building plans, across the actual buildings and structures of the Moganshan Lu complex. His work suggested the uncertain future faced by the complex.

From the outset, the goal of "Matchmaking" was to encourage artists to engage in a loose collective process around a set of issues and circumstances related to a specific place and time. It marked a moment in local history and suggested how a particular locale can

extend beyond its own geographical limits. As artists, we were offered more than a cursory glimpse. We were both tourists and participants with a vested interest in our surroundings, and with little room for egocentric creative engagement. The contradictions of this dual position, and its implicit immediacy and directness, is what, ironically, made "Matchmaking at Suzhou Creek" such a resonant event for the participants.

1. Lisa Movius, "The Shanghai Establishment: The City's Art Scene Doesn't Nurture Emerging Talent," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, January 7-9, 2005.

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Clockwise from top left ■ John Di Stefano — *WLG/AKL/HGK/PUD* (2004) Mixed media installation. Courtesy the artist. ■ Kylie Wilkinson and Chen Qiang — *Search & Destroy/Xi Wang Yu Xie Mie* (2004) Still from video. Courtesy the artists. ■ John Di Stefano — *WLG/AKL/HGK/PUD* (2004) Mixed media installation. Courtesy the artist. ■ Su Bing and Richard Thomas — *Untitled* (2004) Installation and performance. Courtesy the artists. ■ He Yunchang — *Untitled* (2004) Performance. Courtesy the artist.