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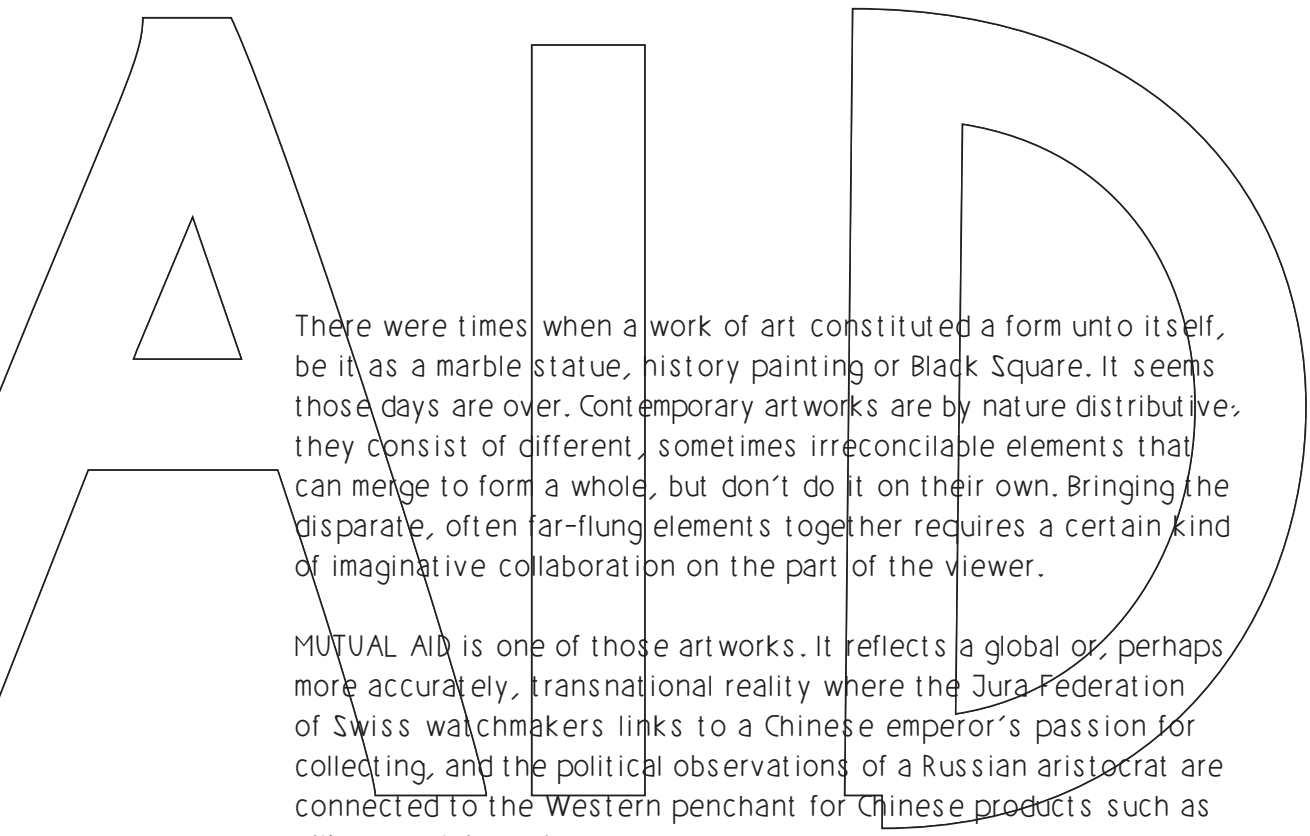
MUSIKER

MUTUAL

AID



MUTUAL AID



There were times when a work of art constituted a form unto itself, be it as a marble statue, history painting or Black Square. It seems those days are over. Contemporary artworks are by nature distributive, they consist of different, sometimes irreconcilable elements that can merge to form a whole, but don't do it on their own. Bringing the disparate, often far-flung elements together requires a certain kind of imaginative collaboration on the part of the viewer.

MUTUAL AID is one of those artworks. It reflects a global or, perhaps more accurately, transnational reality where the Jura Federation of Swiss watchmakers links to a Chinese emperor's passion for collecting, and the political observations of a Russian aristocrat are connected to the Western penchant for Chinese products such as silk, porcelain and tea.

A "scattered" artwork can be demanding because there is no neat, step-by-step way to untangle its knots of meaning. All the references and allusions are present simultaneously, pointing to one another in a hermeneutic circle. And yet the simultaneity part is not entirely true. A film in MUTUAL AID titled "The mountains are high and the emperor is far away" uses quiet, constructive images and a melodious-sounding, but unintelligible voice to tell a strange story. The story bears some parallels to that of artist couple Zhang Mahler. The duo has already exhibited at Johann Jacobs Museum, showing work that had to do with current trade relations between Africa and China (A SEASON IN SHELL, 2014).

Rather than document these trade relations with the pleasing, hackneyed video typical of the art world, the two decided to make the museum itself the site of a transaction. They purchased two tons of abalone shells from a Somali asylum-seeker in Hong Kong, redirected the goods from Somalia to Zurich, stored them in the museum (that was the exhibition), before selling the shells to a factory in Guangdong that specializes in separating the shiny, pearl surface from the calcareous outer shell. This mother-of-pearl, also known as nacre, is in turn being sold to and reworked by the Swiss watch industry, among others. And it is precisely here, at this backflow of mother-of-pearl, that MUTUAL AID begins ...

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Zheng Mahler tracked the nacre to La Chaux-de-Fonds, a hub for the local watch industry. Their research took them to the production halls of the watch company Tag Heuer, among others, where they stumbled on the history of the Jura Federation. Founded in 1871, the Jura Federation was a co-working, cohabitating community of watchmakers whose social order observed the anarchic tenet of a life lived “without laws and authority.” Production followed a strict division of labor: rather than assemble a whole clock from beginning to end, each Federation member diligently crafted only one element, produced at home. This principle not only saved time, it also distributed the business risk to the entire community.

The Swiss social experiment that successfully combined work, life and self-determination appealed to intellectuals and activists from all over Europe. Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), a Russian aristocrat, biologist and geographer, traveled to the Jura highlands in 1872 and was deeply impressed by the anarchist idea. His experiences in the Jura came to bear in “Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution” (1902). This book, which would become one of the most important texts of the anarchist movement, challenges Darwinian “survival of the fittest” evolution to identify human solidarity as the actual civilizing basis instead.

Zheng Mahler stumbled on a Chinese edition of Kropotkin’s book at the Centre International de Recherches sur l’Anarchisme (CIRA) in Lausanne. The translation dates from the early 20th century, a key era in modern China when the collapse of the empire stirred an enormous hunger for new ideas and alternative models of society. This phase of democratic experiments, wars and civil wars ended with the triumph of the Communist Party in 1949. Nevertheless, Kropotkin’s paradigm of “mutual aid” has withstood all historical reversals and continues to influence Chinese economic and development policies, especially towards Africa.







“The mountains are high and the emperor is far away” is an old Chinese proverb that effortlessly echoes the Jura Federations’ mindset and ideals of freedom. And yet the high mountains also supply the special raw material for porcelain, China’s number 1 export product for centuries. This raw material (called kaolin) is named after Gaoling, the place where it was found, which translates roughly to “high mountains.” With the associative leap from Jura to Jingdezhen, the former porcelain capital in China’s Jiangxi province, we arrive at the next level of narration. This next level deals with the European fascination with a material whose aesthetic quality can be pushed to almost intangible heights, as evidenced by the virtuoso pieces from the Song Dynasty (960-1276), which use the kinds of shells featured in MUTUAL AID as well.

Though explorers had been bringing Chinese porcelain to Europe as early as Marco Polo (ca. 1254-1324), its basic composition eluded Europeans for centuries. The material basis for porcelain was initially thought to be the similarly-translucent shell of a certain type of sea snail. The misunderstanding carries on in the snail’s undeservedly grand Italian name – the porcellana.

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Responding to rising European demand for Chinese porcelain, Chinese manufacturers in Jingdezhen started fulfilling orders and realizing designs by Dutch and British commercial companies – an arrangement that regularly led to formal translation problems, for windmills as flowers or princely rulers as winsome ladies. According to Jesuit reports from the early 18th century, output for manufacturers in Jingdezhen was up to one million pieces – per day! One problem for the parastatal European trading companies was that the Chinese had no particular interest in trading goods, and only accepted silver and gold as payment. This resulted in huge trade deficits on the European side, which were eventually “settled” by the mid-19th century Opium Wars and Western colonization of port cities (such as Hong Kong or Shanghai).



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But for all the snubbing, it wasn't entirely true that the Chinese were completely indifferent to Western products. One product did hold up to their strict functional and aesthetic criteria, namely mechanical clocks in every size and shape. Emperor Qianlong was particularly taken with French and Swiss clocks, and his lavish clock collection can be admired at the Palace Museum of Beijing. So the Chinese price tags you see in clock stores on Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse are no coincidence...

In another aesthetic leap, Zheng Mahler commissioned a workshop in Jingdezhen to replicate enlarged versions of the individual components of a clockwork (wheels, cylinders, enclosure, etc.) in porcelain. While some of the replicas have a strange, iridescent surface that is vaguely reminiscent of mother-of-pearl, most are crusty on the outside. The organic texture stems from the calcium carbonate extracted from the Somali abalone shells of *A SEASON IN SHELL*, which Zheng Mahler added into the glaze.

It's probably impossible to say whether these objects could be called aesthetically successful or are more akin to an ugly vase in a nursing home. Fortunately, we don't have to decide either way. The anti-aesthetic component of the porcelain objects is a testament to the conceptual intelligence that went into these things (art would rather be anything than just "beautiful," and also knows why).

Finally, the interstices of *MUTUAL AID* have documentary material as well. We see a Chinese poster from the 1960s advocating the principle of mutual assistance as part of a Maoist campaign to optimize agriculture. The pages showing bees and marmots come from Kropotkin's book on mutual aid in the animal kingdom.

Reproductions of European-commissioned gouaches made in late 18th century China show the various steps of pre-industrial porcelain production in Jingdezhen, from the removal of kaolin to the shipping of goods. The highly efficient manufacturing processes depicted in these documents inspired European entrepreneurs, particularly Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95), who managed to mass produce porcelain in England and thus undermine the Chinese export monopoly (the black lid comes from a Wedgwood service installed in the Johann Jacobs Museum hall).



Anarchie.

