DONKEY INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART (DICA): A PHOTO ESSAY

Yam Lau

This photo-essay documents the conception and realisation of a 'mobile display unit', a kind of cabinet of curiosities attached to a donkey, and made to travel through the streets of Beijing so that the texts, works and videos displayed there were accessible to passers-by.

Keywords: pavilion, contemporary, peripatetic, exhibit, mobile, display, site-specific, China.

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Abstract

This photo-essay documents the conception and realisation of a 'mobile display unit', a kind of cabinet of curiosities attached to a donkey, and made to travel through the streets of Beijing so that the texts, works and videos displayed there were accessible to passers-by.

DICA

DICA (Figure 13.1) is an itinerant contemporary art project based in Beijing, China. It adapts to the convention of the street peddler who meanders through Beijing neighbourhoods with a donkey selling his wares – a practice that continues today, albeit on a restricted scale. Faithful to this practice, DICA evolves 'organically' through its attempt to be responsive to the various situations that it encounters. Hence, the wisdom of DICA is gained through practical implementation instead of preconceived theoretical agendas. Looking back, I think DICA is about this meandering "passage" that weaves stories through its encounters. In this photo essay, I hope to offer the reader a taste of these encounters.

Beginning

The origin of DICA can be traced back to an afternoon in Beijing in 2008. Artist Michael Yuan and I had just met that summer and wanted to collaborate on some projects (Figure 13.2). Although of Chinese descent, we both grew up overseas (Australia and Canada, respectively) and were discovering contemporary China. At the time we were showing our work at the 798 Art District in Beijing. Tired of this gentrified area, we went across a dividing main road for an 'authentic' lunch in a traditional neighbourhood. We hung out in a makeshift type of local eatery. After having consumed quite a few bottles of beer in the intense heat of Beijing summer, Michael mentioned that he had seen street peddler with a donkey in the vicinity.

Michael's casual mentioning of the donkey must have no doubt impressed upon us as a moment of serendipity and recognition. Suddenly, an idea formed: 'Aha! A mobile art project space on a donkey'. So, The Donkey Institute of Contemporary Art (DICA) was born in a spirit of half-jest, drunken stupor, comic

Figure 13.1: DICA Logo. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.2: Michael Yuan and Yam Lau at one of DICA presentations. Courtesy of the artists.

defiance and friendship. Now, as DICA enters into its third anniversary, the project has certainly encountered a fair share of challenges and obstacles, some of which will be documented below.

Once we decided to establish DICA, it wasn't until a year later, in 2009, when I returned to Beijing to implement the project. Meanwhile, Michael had decided to settle in Beijing. Below is our manifesto, a launching of a sort of declarative idiocy that DICA stands by.

DICA Manifesto

The Donkey Institute of Contemporary Art (DICA) is an initiative dedicated to supporting experimental contemporary art on the back of a donkey. Established in the Beijing summer of 2009, DICA demonstrates a donkey's spirit of steadfast oblivion. The DICA and the donkey counter all forms of calculated intelligence, promotion and profit making within the market place of contemporary art. They do so with the slowest possible speed, the most idle tactics and wandering work ethics.

Obstinate, dumb and proceeding on blind faith, DICA meanders throughout cities to meet its potential audience, whoever that might be. Yet, DICA makes no claim or appeal for recognition in these encounters. The institute lives by the charm and rhythm that is unique to the donkey's soul. In this sense, DICA is the most inhuman and radical fulfillment of the avant-garde. It posits an almost complete sort of "standing-still" that refuses to concede to anything.

For its inaugural meandering exhibition, DICA will present video works on portable monitors attached on the back of the Donkey.

驢子當代藝術協會宣言

驢子當代藝術協會致力於在驢背上為當代實驗藝術提供支援。此協會於2009年在北京成立，宣導驢子所具備的一成不變的遺忘精神。協會及其驢子採用盡可能慢的速率、以最為懶散的策略以及游離不定工作規則來反對在當代藝術市場中的各種形式的蓄謀、促銷及盈利行為。

帶著倔強、木訥以及盲目的信仰，驢子當代藝術協會穿梭於城市之間，去邂逅其潛在的觀眾，不管其觀眾為何人。然而，協會並非要尋求邂逅者們的認可，它所賴以生存的魅力與韻律是驢子靈魂中所獨有的。從這個意義上來說，協會卻是最野蠻與激進的先鋒派。它幾乎是在用一種“原地踏步”的方式來拒絕任何讓步。

在這場創始巡迴展中，協會將在由驢子背負著的可攜式顯示器上展示出視頻作品。

Yam Lau + Michael Yuen
Beijing 2009

Before the First Outings

“... For its inaugural meandering exhibition, DICA will present video works on portable monitors attached on the back of the Donkey ...”

In effect, DICA is a work of assembly, of scouting and outfitting the necessary parts for the event. There is this causal, loose and contingent character to the project. In the outskirts of Beijing we met the donkey peddler Mrs Tang, who was interested in collaborating with us. Our first outing was a show of video works by Chinese and western artists. We needed to work out a number of technical challenges such as acquiring proper hardware, power supply, monitors, speakers (Figure 13.3), and mounting devices. All of which required customisation for the purpose of the project.

At the shops, I remember the incredulous faces on people when they learned about the intended use of our gears. We found Mr Ma, a leather craftsman who made saddles for horseback riding. He was involved in the design of a special harness for mounting the video monitors on the donkey. Apparently, his shop was the only saddle shop in Beijing and we found it completely by chance. I think we lucked out.

Finally, we were ready for the inaugural outing. Unfortunately, unforeseen obstacles happened and I

Figure 13.3: Speakers designed by Laoban Soundsystem. Courtesy of the artists.

began to see a different, unexpected 'dimension' of the project. The donkey and her handler Mrs Tang were 'arrested' on their way into the city to meet with us. The charge was trespassing. According to the authorities, the donkey had wandered into a prohibited area of the city. But who could say for sure? Everything, including the donkey, the cart and the goods were subsequently impounded. Even though donkey peddlers were common in Beijing and therefore this incident would have been rather routine, it was still something expatriate artists could not have anticipated. I realized that by adopting the donkey as our vehicle, we inadvertently became entangled with the sociopolitical dynamic between urban and rural Beijing. From the point of view of the donkey peddler, we experienced a taste of the daily struggle within the city. In time, we would also experience the hazard of staging (art) activities outside of official venues.

From the police station, the donkey peddler Mrs Tang called us to 'bail' them out. Based on what I witnessed at the station, I am almost certain that the arrest was a case of an arbitrary abuse of power that the authority was too happy to inflict on country folks. For despite China's recent rise as an economic power,

the distribution of wealth, knowledge and health care is extremely uneven. Privileges are mostly weighted towards urban centres. At the police station, I saw her treated almost as a second-class citizen who intruded into the city in order to get a share of the pie. On top of this, Mrs Tang was asked to submit an official written report of her activity. This demand presented yet another insult, as the authorities knew she was illiterate. In the end, I wrote the report with my passable Chinese, something I hadn't used for years. It took a while to write the two short paragraphs. Since Mrs Tang couldn't write her own name, I managed to do it for her. I remember that moment very clearly.

Later, we found out that the DICA website, designed to broadcast the itinerary of the project, was banned in China almost as soon as it was launched.

DICA 2009

After these initial hurdles, DICA was finally ready to go. We ended up working with Mr Wang (Figure 13.4), a donkey handler who lived three hours (donkey speed) Northeast of Beijing. Like many migrant workers, he came from a neighbouring province to look for work. Normally Mr Wang employed the donkey to pull bricks.

Figure 13.4: Yam Lau and Mr. Wang. Courtesy of the artists.

I liked Mr Wang a lot. He always seemed content, relaxed and stoic. I liked his nameless donkey as well. He was a healthy and well-treated animal: content, relaxed and stoic.

For our first outing, we started with a bit of meandering towards the neighbourhood where the idea of DICA was first conceived. We picked a lively intersection, a popular thoroughfare where one can find a variety of shops and small food stalls conveniently stationed. At around dusk, the traffic began to pick up when locals returned from work and residents came out to stroll after dinner. Crowds began

to gather around the donkey and the video monitors. Surely, most people were at first puzzled about the meaning of the activities. Fortunately this curiosity led them to start a discussion. At first, the locals and the people from the art-world who came to see the event formed two separate groups. Eventually a spontaneous street party broke out within the vicinity of DICA (Figures 13.5-13.6). The groups began to mingle. We ate barbecue-skewered meat with noodles and drank beer on the street well into the night. Later, I learned that quite a number of stalls had sold out their stock of beer. DICA had bolstered the local economy.

Figure 13.5 (above): DICA first outing. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.6 (right): DICA first outing. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.7: DICA mobile display unit drawings. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.8: DICA mobile display unit drawings. Courtesy of the artists.

While I returned to Canada after DICA's first outing in the summer of 2009, the project was kept active under the care of Michael. DICA was invited to participate in several notable exhibitions during this period, including the *798 Biennial* in Beijing and *Dong Xi Things* in Austria. Participation in official venues means DICA could indeed maneuver in and out of the art-world.

DICA 2010

As stated in the manifesto, DICA proceeds on 'blind faith'. It is an accumulative, work-in-progress. Since I learned that the presence of DICA could always draw a crowd that could benefit the local economy, I thought DICA could also help Mr Wang to sell things. Prior to my return to Beijing, I worked with Dahlan Gamblin back in Canada to design a set of four portable display units that can be easily mounted onto the donkey cart. This way, Mr Wang could also use two of the units to sell his wares while DICA would present small art objects. I envisioned a mutually beneficial mixing of local and art-world economies. For the 2010 iteration of DICA, Michael and I decided to display a selection of artists' bookwork. The project became a mobile library.

Given the rough and ready nature of the project, as well as the constant stream of harassment DICA had to face, we intended the units to assume a blunt

Figure 13.9: Mobile unit close up. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.10: Mobile unit assembled on trolley. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.11: DICA outing. Courtesy of the artists.

and militant appearance. Dahlan modeled them after WWII ammunition containers and I think they lend a combative spirit to DICA (Figures 13.7–13.8). Despite their rather austere appearance, the mechanism of the units is very refined and sophisticated. The four individual units and a transporting trolley are configured to fit onto the donkey wagon. The units can also be stacked on the trolley and transported easily as an independent structure.

The units were designed to be multifunctional, to be used as storage, display and support for the banner canopy (which was never built). All the equipment and content of DICA such as the monitors, speakers, batteries and artworks can be conveniently packed, stored away and transported in the units (Figures 13.9–13.10).

An Unexpected Guest

Outings were always a lot of fun. The sensation of moving through Beijing traffic on the donkey wagon was incredibly thrilling. A regular outing routinely alternated between wandering and stationing. Along the way DICA invariably created street parties, attracting people from all walks of life (Figure 13.11).

At our first 2010 outing, I noticed one local visitor being very curious, even scrupulous in examining all the art publications on display (Figure 13.12). He arrived alone but was very friendly to everyone, chatting up the scene. After the event, DICA hosted a dinner party on the sidewalk that was attended by a substantial crowd

Figure 13.12: DICA outing featuring a selection of artist's bookworks. Courtesy of the artists.

Figure 13.13: Yam Lau with a visitor from the 'Department of Culture'. Courtesy of the artists.

from the art community. This individual came along and happened to sit next to me. I struck up a conversation with him and asked what he did for a living. He told me he was a policeman. I laughed at his response. I was probably too drunk to take him seriously. But then he showed me his badge under the table. This very discrete act was enough to sober me up instantly.

Once his identity was revealed, he appeared at other DICA outings to monitor us. Although DICA meandered, he always knew where to find us. Apparently he is known to a number of art-world folks as a special policeman from the 'Department of Culture'. We saw each other a couple more times since that evening. In the image below we almost look like we are friends (Figure 13.13).

Future Projects

At this time of writing, I am not sure what the next incarnation of DICA will be. There are things about the geopolitics in Beijing that fascinate me. On the way to village where the donkey peddler Mr Wang lived, I saw a stretch of landscape that could not be classified as urban or rural. Features from both environments seemed to have been littered randomly without a sense of cohesion. Life seemed to have been evacuated as most buildings were abandoned. This long stretch of space looked like a series of disconnected ruins. Since this is the usual route of the donkey, I would like to investigate this environment further. Readers may visit www.donkeyinstitute.net for updates.