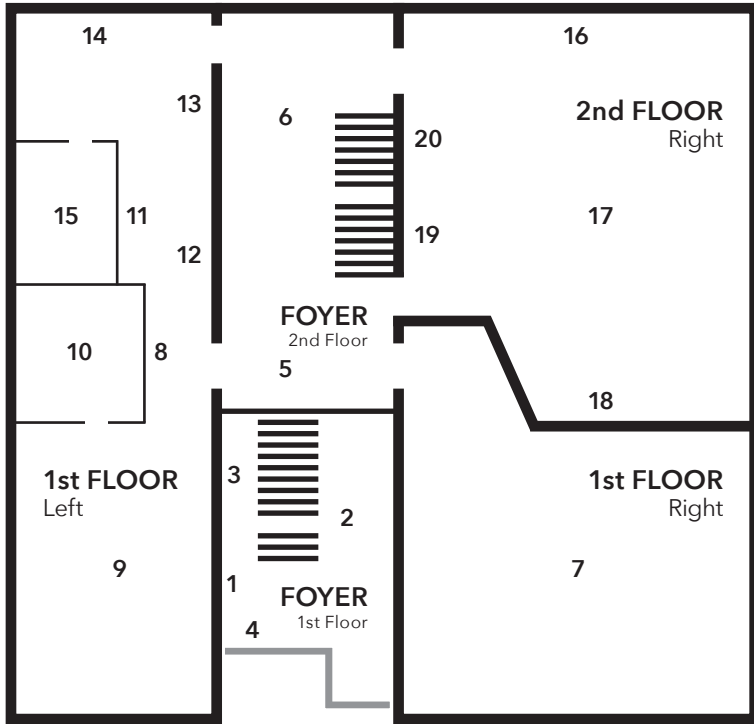


SONG DONG

6 December 2015 to 13 March 2016



 KUNSTHALLE
DUSSELDORF



SONG DONG

6 December 2015 to 13 March 2016

INTRODUCTION

SONG Dong (b. 1966, Beijing) is among China's best-known internationally active artists and is considered one of the most important protagonists of Chinese Conceptual Art since the 1990s. His artistic practice encompasses numerous mediums and experimental working methods. Many of his installations and videos, performances, drawings as well as photographs and sculptures have an ephemeral character, employing mostly simple materials drawn from everyday life.

Born and raised in a densely populated Beijing neighbourhood within a community that held to traditional values, Song explores in particular the realities of everyday life in his works. Like many artists

of his generation, he was classically trained in painting (1985 – 1989 at Capital Normal University in Beijing). He stopped painting after the bloody suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests on June 4th, 1989, only to take up more experimental art forms several years later. The political repression of individual development and individual needs, the effects of politics on both private and societal life are SONG Dong's most important themes.

The self-fulfilment of the individual within a community is at the core of his artistic work. Even the most trivial episodes from his immediate surroundings serve as the starting point for works, from which larger, more universal meanings ensue. As a conceptual artist Song explores such topics as time and transience, memory and loss, the past and the present as well as the relationship between emptiness and abundance, the inner and outer world. Special significance is given to Taoism, which focuses on the inescapability of change and the here and now.

Many of SONG Dong's works address traditional Chinese family structures. In *Touching My Father* (1997 – 2011), the artist explores his relationship with his father that was shaped to a large extent by the generational conflict. Developed together with his mother ZHAO Xiangyuan, his installation *Waste Not – wu jin qi yong* (since 2005) is devoted to the everyday objects assembled by his mother over a period of some fifty years.

SONG Dong visualises the consequences of the rapid political and societal changes in China that can be sensed on a daily basis and which each generation experiences differently. He sees no difference between art and life and realises his own personal experiences

and conflicts in the form of art, often integrating the exhibition visitors as well.

SONG Dong is married to the artist YIN Xiuzhen. They live and work in Beijing together with their daughter amidst their art that sometimes even serves as their furniture.

TEXTS

about the works

1 *Bicycle*, 2004

Video, 60'

“Ten years ago I went for a spin through Beijing on my bike, with two video cameras attached to the handlebars. I started out from my home, in an old hutong (alley). The two cameras recorded everything I encountered on the way. Now, ten years later, it is a kind of eyewitness account of places and neighbourhoods that no longer exist because they have all been replaced by new buildings.

The locations in the videos are: hutong, morning market in the hutong, the old Beijing Library, Zhongnanhai (Central Government Offices zone), Beihai (Royal Gardens Park), the Forbidden City, Nanchangjie (residential area for officials), Tiananmen Square, Xidan (a shopping street), a hutong being pulled down, the CPPCC auditorium, the Imperial Temple (where my secondary school was), and a street of upholsterer’s shops.”

2 *The Wisdom of the Poor, Living with the Tree*, 2005

Mixed media

The Wisdom of the Poor, Living with the Tree reflects the resourcefulness of Beijing's poor inhabitants in expanding their own living space as much as possible. Many of Beijing's residents live in traditional houses with courtyards. Once built for a single large family, under MAO Zedong (1949 – 1976) they were often inhabited by numerous families at the same time. There was no place to take refuge; everyone could hear everything and private matters were inevitably shared publically with the neighbours. Faced with this problem, the ingenious inhabitants developed means of acquiring more space and hence more rights for themselves. The shared courtyards, for example, were used for living purposes. In many cases a tree stood in the middle of the courtyard that could not be cut down according to city ordinances. This was the only spot in the courtyard that was not actively inhabited. Although the families weren't officially entitled to the tree, it became a part of their environment, growing with them over the years.

In *The Wisdom of the Poor, Living with the Tree* SONG Dong constructed a kind of dream house out of old doors, relicts from former living structures. Each door can be opened and closed, thus capturing the character of the space that oscillates between the public and the private.

3 *Crumpling Shanghai*, 2000

Video, 9'

SONG Dong deals with the radical urban demolition carried out in his native city of Beijing and how the inhabitants of the megacity were affected by the drastic changes. China's urban structures have been drastically altered in recent years; historical town centres disappeared and consequently traditional lifestyles as well. Entire districts were more or less voluntarily resettled in order to modernise the city. While such measures were urgently needed, they also created new social problems, namely the increasing alienation of the inhabitants from their city.

With *Crumpling Shanghai* SONG Dong critically comments on the unbelievable dynamism of such megacities as Shanghai and points to the fragility of traditional urban structures. We see the artist holding a sheet of paper in his hands, on which a series of Shanghai street scenes are projected. Skyscrapers and excursion boats, pedestrians and automobiles are visible on the paper for a brief moment. SONG Dong then crumples the paper, causing entire streets to vanish.

***Frying Water*, 1992**

Video, 1'40''

Frying Water, SONG Dong's first video, was filmed on February 18th, 1992, his wedding day. He borrowed a camera to document the ceremony and the festive banquet. He had wanted to experiment with this medium for a long time but this was his first opportunity to hold a camera in his hands. The video shows how water is "fried" in a pan with oil and ultimately evaporates. Like many of his other performances, this one is also concerned with an explicit action from which in the end nothing is left.

4 *Policemen*, 2000

Mixed media

SONG Dong became pretty nervous while driving along the highway for the first time, shortly after getting his driver's licence. Was he doing everything correctly? He was terrified when he suddenly saw a policeman in the distance. Driving past him with extreme care, he realised that it was not a real policeman but only a dummy. Astonished, but primarily relieved, he drove on. The incident made him conscious of the fact that many people have often internalised the rules imposed by the system quasi as inner policemen. How liberating it would be if we could free ourselves from these policemen in us. The *Policemen*, which are self-portraits of the artist, humorously symbolise this pursuit of autonomy and freedom. SONG Dong began with a single figure as an alter ego, but new ones were quickly added for various exhibitions.

5 *My First Home*, 2012

Mixed media

"My first home was a part of a traditional house in a hutong (alley) in the old City of Beijing. It only had 62 square feet of floor space for my family of four. My mother used to call it 'our tiny mini-home'. I don't have any pictures of it, all my memories come from what my sister and my parents told me about it. The house was pulled down long ago. But fortunately, thanks to my parents' frugal lifestyle, many objects from that time have been preserved. I made my own, portable model of the house from an old, left-over chest. This way I can always carry my home with me, wherever I go. I use it as a base for my meditations on the concept of *Waste Not*, when thinking about the past, the present and the future."

6 *Eating the World, Changing the World*, 2015

Candy, wooden tables

Food can regularly be found in SONG Dong's works: landscapes made of raw fish, pastry cities and a world constructed from candy. In these works the artist is concerned with the immense growth of cities, particularly in Asia, and their drastic impact on the inhabitants.

The tables in the shape of a world map are covered with candy which the visitors are allowed to eat. In the course of the exhibition this space will be used for workshops for children.

7 *Waste Not – wu jin qi yong*, 2005 – ongoing

Mixed media

ZHAO Xiangyuan (b. 1938, Beijing, d. 2009, Beijing)
and SONG Dong (b. 1966, Beijing)

Waste Not is an installation encompassing over 10,000 objects. It is the result of fifty years of diligent collecting on the part of the artist's mother, ZHAO Xiangyuan. One thought manifested itself in particular during years of great deprivation that were accompanied by a shortage of the basic things of everyday life, namely that every object has its value and is only waiting to be put to use again. Her passion for collecting things became something of an obsession after the death of her husband SONG Shiping in 2002. Her whole home was overrun with everyday objects; her life was governed by collecting and conserving. After the passage of several years SONG Dong and his sister SONG Hui were finally able to convince their mother to translate her "collection" into a work of art that bore witness to her life and that of her family against the backdrop of age-old traditions as well as current events in China – and thus relieving her of this burden.

SONG Dong makes use of his mother's entire collection with *Waste Not*, shedding light on the relationship that people have to objects. Memories manifest themselves in objects and objects testify to life events. A pair of shoes represents a long-deceased, fervently missed person; a tea kettle reminds us of cheerful moments. These objects furthermore connect people to the extent that they enable the sharing of memories and can bridge cultural differences. All the

objects are meticulously categorised and arranged according to function in the installation. The individual sections within the collection are grouped in rows and stacks around the wooden framework of a house. This building once stood adjacent to SONG Dong's childhood home in Beijing, but was demolished in conjunction with the modernisation measures carried out in advance of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games.

The installation was first shown in 2005 at the Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, a gallery in the Art Zone in Beijing's Dashanzi district, where SONG Dong prepared it together with his mother.

ZHAO Xiangyuan died from falling off a ladder in 2009 while attempting to rescue a wounded bird. After her death SONG Dong toured diverse prestigious international art institutes with *Waste Not – wu jin qi yong*. The piece is now the connecting link between the family members who travel to each presentation in order to continue examining and arranging the items, the unpacking of which is far from complete.

8 *House Doorplate*, 1997

Mixed media

House numbers hang on the wall which SONG Dong collected in Beijing's traditional Chinese hutongs. They had been torn off in conjunction with the large-scale urban renewal plan that was carried out over the previous years. SONG Dong mounted the signs featuring the numbers on small boxes which he filled with building rubble and nails from demolished houses. For him they represent life in

the alleyways of his childhood. Throwing stones at house numbers was once a very popular means of amusement. The houses to which the numbers belong vanished long ago. The boxes are a kind of reliquary shrine. They memorialise the former houses and the social life that took place in them.

9 *Father and Son Face to Face with a Mirror*, 2001

Video installation

“Father and I stood face to face. There was a double-sided reflective plastic sheet between us. We each saw our own images on the plastic. Then we set it on fire, and looked at each other’s images as they burned away. When the sheet burned down, we were truly face to face. I videotaped the process from both sides and then projected them onto two silk screens (both 59 inches in diameter). When I, on one side of the plastic sheet, and my father, on the other side, were looking at each other burning, the images of my father and me reflected in the plastic were facing their own images on the wall, watching themselves burn.”

10 *Touching My Father Part 1–3*, 1997 - 2011

SONG Dong in his works regularly occupies himself with the immediate impact of cultural conventions and social norms on the members of his family and on his own person. In *Touching My Father* the artist deals with his repeated attempts to establish physical – and ultimately also emotional – closeness to his father SONG

Shiping. “I suddenly sensed the need to touch my father,” the artist explains. Physical contact, especially between men of different generations, is not self-evident in Chinese culture. The effects of China’s Cultural Revolution (1966 –1976) on his family are also addressed. Condemned as a counter-revolutionary, his father was sent to a reeducation camp while SONG Dong’s mother cared alone for the family. SONG Shiping died in 2002.

In *Touching My Father* the artist projects a video image of his own hand onto his father’s body, thus creating a previously unimaginable intimacy between the two men. In doing so Song puts the traditional father-son relationship up for discussion and addresses the generational conflict in Chinese society. Using his first video (1997) as a starting point SONG Dong subsequently realised two further versions of *Touching My Father* (2002 – 2011).

11 *36 Calendars*, 2013

Pencil on paper

SONG Dong was Artist in Residence at the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong in 2011/12. While rummaging through the archives he thought about the meaning and purpose of archiving and arrived at the idea of establishing an archive of his own. The Maya calendar ran out in 2012, leading to speculations about the end of the world. SONG Dong decided to produce thirty-six calendars for the years 1978 to 2013. Based on commercially available household calendars, he filled them with drawings reflecting his view of things from those years.

To complete the project SONG Dong invited over 400 persons to register at a website and comment on, add to or alter the version of the calendar drawn by the artist according to their own personal perspectives. An entity came about in this way that encompasses diverse interpretations of the historical occurrences.

12 *At thirty, I wasn't established*, 1996/1997

Yuanshu paper

“In 1996 when I was thirty, I asked my mother ZHAO Xiangyuan to tell me something about each year since I was born. I wrote down her stories and my own personal memories on Yuanshu paper using a brush dipped in water. This is paper made from bamboo used especially for calligraphy. When I had filled one paper, I put a new one on top of it and continued writing. All the stories my mother told me took almost a year to write, and in the end I had 30 little piles of writing, one for each year.”

The title is the antithesis of a well-known expression from the Analects of Confucius (circa 551 – 479 B.C.):

Confucius's own account of his gradual progress and attainments:

At fifteen, I was fond of learning.

At thirty, I was established.

At forty, I did not waver.

At fifty, I knew my sacred mission (or the objective law).

At sixty, I had a docile ear.

At seventy, I could do what I would without going beyond what is right.

13 *Eating the City*, 2015

Video, 2'35”

Together with his assistants, SONG Dong installed a city built from bonbons, cookies and various other sweets for *Eating the City*. The construction work involved arduous labour that lasted days on end. At the exhibition opening the visitors were set loose on the city and devoured it like hungry hordes within a few minutes.

The artist carried the initial work here and then handed it over to the visitors, who were the ultimate repositories of the piece as they absorbed its components into their metabolism. The act of eating is consequently an integral element for the completion of the installation. The visitor receives the work both physically and mentally.

14 *A Blot on the Landscape*, 2010

Video installation, 7' / 4'17” / 3'21” / 5'30”

The traditional style of landscape painting known as shanshui [literally: mountain-water] is regarded in China as the highest form of painting. The skilfully arranged miniature tray landscapes and potted scenery called shanshui penjing likewise belong to this tradition. The miniatures attempt to depict the quintessence of landscapes in the spirit of Tao, working with the contrary forces of yin

and yang: light and dark, high and low. They are not seen as something fixed but rather as something that is constantly in motion. Even though the landscapes might appear static, they are based on the notion of permanent change.

SONG Dong offers a satirical commentary on this tradition. The meticulously arranged trays with food recall idyllic and elegant landscapes with hills made out of smoked salmon and pork and trees formed from broccoli. Food is simultaneously a material and immaterial cultural heritage and is one of the essential features of everyday Chinese culture. In one series of photographs the *A Blot on the Landscape* are brutally destroyed with a cleaver. But there are also subtler variations in which the landscape is also eaten. It is not difficult to draw parallels between these works and the effects of global environmental catastrophes. Perhaps this piece is also to be understood as a deep sigh about how China is treating its own natural treasures.

15 *Original Fake, Cream Grass*, 2009

Vegan cream, food colouring

***Original Fake, Chocolate Eclipse*, 2010**

Chocolate, acrylic

Whereas great emphasis is placed upon concepts such as authenticity and originality in the West, especially in the art world, contrary words such as ‘fake’, ‘copy’ or ‘imitation’ in China have a much more positive connotation than their Western counterparts.

To indicate that something is exceptionally beautiful, the word ‘fake’ can be used, which stands for the almost unachievable ideal of pure perfection. SONG Dong has been working for quite some time on a series that deals with the field of tension between original and imitation. He depicts grass and the solar eclipse, two natural phenomena that cannot be imitated by human action, in materials such as chocolate and vegan cream, which are not commonly used in art. The result is a landscape that is just as artificial as it is alienating. SONG Dong seems to be hinting at current developments in China, where outward show appears to be becoming increasingly important.

16 *Stamping the Water*, 1996

36 Colour photographs

SONG Dong’s seemingly Dadaistic actions visualise his sense for the absurd in addition to the significance of physical as well as spiritual fitness in his work. His performance *Stamping the Water* took place in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. For a whole hour SONG Dong ‘stamped’ the water’s surface with a large wooden stamp bearing the Chinese character ‘water’.

17 ***Metal, Wood, Fire, Water, Earth***, 2012

Mixed media

SONG Dong expanded *Water Diary* (20) in recent years into a public performance. On the one hand, the photographs document the ritual, making the hidden visible for a moment. They also function as a manual that intends to encourage the visitors to share the ritual as well as the experience of presence and absence with the artist.

The title references to the five elements of Chinese philosophy that recur in the materials used in the installation: metal (inkwell), wood (wooden box), water (ink), fire and earth (stones). The writer makes up the sixth element that simultaneously combines all the other elements.

18 ***Touching 100 Years***, 2010

Video installation

The installation encompasses 100 monitors, each of which shows an image from an event in world history taken from the time between 1919 and 2010. SONG Dong researched the images online and selected photographs he found particularly moving. A hand appears on the screen from time to time that seemingly wants to touch the image. But the clear image is destroyed as soon as the hand approaches the picture. A wavy motion is created, as if a layer of water has been inserted between the hand and the picture. Every attempt to approach the history of the world, to take hold of it, only seems to demonstrate the incomprehensibility of the past.

19 ***Breathing***, 1996

Colour photographs

For his performance *Breathing* he lay face down in Tiananmen Square for forty minutes on an ice cold New Year's Eve. His warm breath inscribed a thin layer of ice on the cold asphalt. He repeated this action on the frozen artificial lake at Houhai, north of the Forbidden City, this time without visible traces. The 'breath drawing' in Tiananmen Square had also vanished by the following morning. His efforts are documented solely on the photographs of the performance.

20 ***Water Diary***, 1995 – ongoing

Colour photographs

A considerable part of SONG Dong's artistic practice are performances. Through these he explores the fleetingness of thoughts and feelings as well as time and states of being. He constantly searches for possibilities to hold on to the ephemeral, without haptic proof or visual signs.

As in so many of his works in *Water Diary* SONG Dong also deals with Taoist teachings. Writing with water represents one possibility of not remaining tied to the past but to instead concentrate on the here and now. The result itself is not important but rather the act of writing and the attention one devotes to this activity. As such, the element of water symbolises the incomprehensible. It is odourless, neutral in taste and transparent, which gives it poetic qualities. It is the origin of life, but can also destroy life.

Water Diary has its origins in an incident from SONG Dong's childhood. Because Song's family was not very well-off, his father urged him to save costly paper and ink by doing his calligraphy exercises with water on stone. However, he did not concentrate on perfecting his calligraphy skills but rather on the playful qualities of such exercises. He observed how the water and the characters he wrote slowly evaporated, leaving no visible traces.

In 1995 he began writing his diary with water on stone. Over the course of the years, this ritual which he still practices today, became an essential component of his artistic work and consequently of his personality. *Water Diary* represents a meditation and self-reflexion that does not manifest itself in a tangible form – with the exception of the photographic documentation consciously selected and authorised by the artist. It thus stands for an artistic practice that eludes the viewer and even the artist himself both physically and substantially: the written characters evaporate and consequently the content as well.

PROGRAM

Thursday, January 14th, 2016, 4.30 pm

Guided tour with the curator Gregor Jansen (in German)

Admission: 6 Euros / reduced 3 Euros

Thursday, January 28th, 2016, 6 pm

Dialogic tour with Heinz-Norbert Jocks (author and correspondent of the art magazine *Kunstforum International*) and Gregor Jansen (in German)

Admission and tour free

Thursday, February 25th, 2016, 6 pm

Guided tour with the curator Gregor Jansen (in German)

Admission and tour free

FINISSAGE

Sunday, March 13th, 2016, 3 – 6 pm

3 pm: *obsolescent* – concert by *zo-on slows aka Echo Ho*

Free admission

Public tours:

every Sunday, 1.30 pm

Information and dialogue:

every Sunday, 2.30 – 5.30 pm and

every last Thursday of the month, 6 – 8 pm

Family days:

always 11 – 6 pm:

Sunday, December 13th, 2015

Sunday, January 10th, 2016

Sunday, February 14th, 2016

Sunday, March 13th, 2016

Free admission

More information regarding the programme and workshops for children and adolescents is available on our website: **www.kunsthalle-duesseldorf.de**.

Curators of the exhibition:

Mark Wilson, Sue-an van der Zijpp and Gregor Jansen

The exhibition is accompanied by the first monographic catalogue in English featuring SONG Dongs complete works, published by Hatje Cantz, with numerous texts, descriptions and images of the works. 298 Pages, Price: 35 Euros.

© for all works SONG Dong

The exhibition is funded by

Ministerium für Familie, Kinder,
Jugend, Kultur und Sport
des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen



The exhibition was realised in cooperation with



Kunsthalle Düsseldorf is funded by



Landeshauptstadt
Düsseldorf

Permanent Partners of Kunsthalle Düsseldorf



Hans Böckler
Stiftung

Fakten für eine faire Arbeitswelt



Imprint

Kunsthalle Düsseldorf

Director: Gregor Jansen

Managing Director: Ariane Berger

Curators: Anna Brohm, Jasmina Merz

Assistant Curator: Anna Lena Seiser

Assistant to the Director and Education: Claudia Paulus

Press and Communication, Education: Dirk Schewe

Administration: Lumnije Sturr

Head of the Installation Staff: Jörg Schlürscheid

Building Services: Arno Götzen

Layout: Sandra Rüttger



Kunsthalle Düsseldorf gGmbH

Grabbplatz 4

D-40213 Düsseldorf

Tel. +49 (0)211 89 96 243

Fax +49 (0)211 89 29 168

mail@kunsthalle-duesseldorf.de

www.kunsthalle-duesseldorf.de



Kunsthalle Düsseldorf gGmbH
Grabbepplatz 4
D-40213 Düsseldorf
Tel. +49 (0)211 89 96 243
Fax +49 (0)211 89 29 168
mail@kunsthalle-duesseldorf.de
www.kunsthalle-duesseldorf.de