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## 2008 BIENNALE OF SYDNEY CRITICAL RESPONSE SPECIAL ISSUE

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Artspace Gallery Program  
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BY AINSLIE MURRAY

Mimi Tong, *Unfolding Ground*, Artspace, Sydney, 23 November to 15 December 2007

# Unfolding ground

Folding has been an integral part of contemporary architectural language for at least fifteen years. Greg Lynn's influential 'Folding in Architecture' issue of *Architectural Design* in 1993 announced a major shift in the methodology of architectural design practice, and has since been reinforced by innumerable publications and a host of the world's more spectacular practices including those of Daniel Libeskind, UN Studio and Peter Eisenman. Folding as an architectural strategy has been successful because it propels benign architectural form into an architectural force that generates specific kinds of habitation in buildings.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, folding is not simply another method of designing or constructing a building, but is actually an architectural ethos that conditions a mode of being-within-space. Folding affects the way a building looks and the way

a building is constructed, but more importantly it affects the way a building is inhabited. Folding causes ambiguities and makes it more difficult to restrict architecture to function as a container. The simple gesture of a fold enables a series of potentially complex architectural transformations to take place: floors become walls, walls become ramps, ramps become ceilings, ceilings become floors.

This interest in folding springs perhaps from the degree of complexity that the simple gesture of a fold produces. Individual spatial elements are subdued because the architectural possibility comes not from the autonomy of individual elements, but from the disparity and in-betweenness in which the elements exist. John Rajchman tells us 'it is not a matter of finding the unity of a manifold but, on the contrary, of seeing

unity only as a holding together of a prior or virtual dispersion.' As such, the complexity of a folded structure lies not in its visual or geometric convolution, but rather in its potential for further divergences or foldings, and thus new meanings. Our engagement with the folded structure comes from it being a space of *possibility*, and it is in this respect that Mimi Tong's recent major work *Unfolding Ground* properly engaged folding in architecture for the first time.

*Unfolding Ground* was an arresting sight, both bold and delicate, and somehow fleetingly stable. Two parallel translucent veils moved independently through the gallery, turning elegantly against oblique stays anchored between ceiling and floor. Photographic images were printed onto the veils, one scene hard up against another in a series of almost violent collisions. As with Tong's previous Artspace installations, the architectural language of the Gunnery building was once again integral to the work.<sup>2</sup> Again, folding emerged as Tong's signature spatial language, building directly upon previous folded works including *Folding Cities* (2007), *Box Folding* and *Folding Interface* (2005), *Geometric Folding Experiment* (2003) and the *Squarepusher Experiment* (2000) as well as a range of individual folded works appearing in group exhibitions since 2000. In the same manner that architects use folding to reconfigure the way one might inhabit space, so too does Tong use folding as a generative tool of spatial transformation.

*Unfolding Ground* was an installation of spatial, temporal and imaginative potential. The potential was captured in the possible reconfigurations of past moments represented as individual photographic images of journeys Tong made through China. These

journeys were made in receipt of the Freedman Foundation travelling scholarship, which took Tong to the Red Gate residency in Beijing and on a meandering trail through Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. En route, she took thousands of photographs, and one can imagine the touristic experience that preceded these individual photographic moments. Tong herself, camera in hand, a lone traveller, silent and watchful, stopping on the side of a busy street hypnotically surveying a distant building. A sudden glimpse of a strangely out of scale urban space from the window of a train, and the artist's sleuth-like retracing of passage to find it again. A pause mid-stride, a moment of recognition, and the time spent awaiting the sunset for a scaffold to reflect the setting sun amidst urban chaos as it did the evening prior. Here, in this literal unfolding of *Unfolding Ground*, the first phase of Tong's fold was that of the travelling artist as observer; a Chinese-Australian returning to an unvisited place, an inside-outsider.

For an artist, observation is an active process and in Tong's own journey it is clear that there was an extended process of collection at work arising directly from that observation. In the second phase of Tong's fold, observation gave way to the interpretative act of photography. This act involved the 'taking' of moments to be transported from one time to another. This lens-based negotiation of a territory in turn created a new territory—a territory once-removed, a fold that removed the travelling artist from one reality and placed her firmly within another, the reality of being conscious of that reality, and of consciously 'recording'. This is a removal of sorts, a fold between simply moving through space and observing, to

gathering the here and now for some time in the future. As such, this second fold was a temporal fold, one that linked this moment now with some yet-to-be-known moment in the future when the images would be examined. This sense of transportation fuelled other aspects of movement evident in the work, movement between two countries, two cultures, two languages, and Tong's fractured attempts at returning to a foreign homeland charged with the loss of speech, history and place.

Once back in Australia and back in the studio, the third phase of Tong's fold was enacted through her reflection on the vast series of images 'taken' from her journey. Again, one can imagine the artist sifting through thousands of photographs, remembering with different levels of intensity the moments depicted in each image, perhaps seeing some for the first time as records of an instant in which she was forced into absence by the physical device of the camera. The images were sifted, perhaps clinically at first according to composition, scale, and depth and then rescaled, enlarged to rest somewhere between remembered real life and the scale of a printed photograph. In this systematic expansion of each image, the scenes change from being 'real' recordings of prior moments in actual places to imaginary landscapes that challenge the memory of the body in their reconfigured scale. The artist reinhabited a moment in time, not once-removed as when the image was taken, but now twice-removed, looking at the re-sized image itself in a different time and place at a scale that is larger than a photograph but smaller than a reality. This shift was further compounded when the images were placed against each other, sometimes

quite antagonistically with sharp diagonal seams, and printed on two long rolls of polyester voile.

It was Tong's fourth fold in *Unfolding Ground*, however, that demanded the most attention, as it was the most complex, the most generative and ultimately the most significant in architectural terms. It was in the fourth fold that the work found its true complexity in the way the observational, interpretative, and reflective folds were organised spatially within the challenging architectural environment of the gallery. The Gunnery presents a heavy, rigid and dominant architecture that demands direct engagement, and Tong has never shied away from that in previous Artspace shows. Here, however, there was a sense that the geometry of the space had actually become a generative force for her work—she did not seek simply to make the best of the space, but rather, to use the geometric and material challenges of the space as counterpoints within the installation. *Unfolding Ground* did not simply respond to the architecture of the gallery; it was generated by the gallery as Tong used the existing architecture as a ground for offering an altogether new reading of the photographic series.

*Unfolding Ground* stratified the gallery space by allowing the two long rolls of printed voile to unravel parallel to the floor, and to each other, in a dynamic and erratic horizontal dance in which the voile approached and retreated from the architectural elements of the space both playfully and provocatively. This configuration appeared to extend the volume of the gallery space vertically, creating a space of possibility for the structure's meanderings within. Vertically, *Unfolding Ground* was quieter, not changing direction

in obliging vertical lines, but at subtle angles conditioned by the oblique stays – neither flashy, nor oppositional, but as gentle disruptions to an overbearing architecture. Tong took every opportunity to gently provoke the architecture of the gallery through the careful and strategic use of geometry and in doing so firmly declared her architectural intent.

*Unfolding Ground* could not be adequately described as being ‘sculptural’ or ‘visual’ – it was not an installation to be admired from a few limited viewpoints. Its architectural character demanded that it be viewed in motion, as one might view architecture by moving and being within it over time. In this sense the work was filmic, forcing an architectural promenade that commanded motion and a constant variance in vantage point; getting down low or standing on tiptoes, an approach and retreat, an acceleration and a slowing down with eyes fixed upon a single changing scene. Then, and only then, did the work come alive as the photographic images shifted suddenly from inert scenes to curiously juxtaposed impossibilities in which the multiple layers of the installation were visible through one another, a fictional navigation connecting distant moments and far-apart places.<sup>3</sup> A lone cyclist pedalled forlornly through vast concrete skyscrapers, endless homogenous housing was woven within Herzog & de Meuron’s Olympic stadium, and the Great Wall of China dissolved into a twilight sky. Windows became doorways, walls became balconies, the gallery lights illuminated Tiananmen Square, and the streets of Shanghai were paved with Gunnery brickwork.

In the way the work moved through the gallery, creating new narratives as the pho-

tographic images were read against the gallery architecture, it became clear that the fourth fold was actually a new kind of folding more sophisticated than the other folds within the work. The collapse of one space into another, photograph into architecture, Shanghai into Sydney, was not a two-dimensional fold of an idea, transition or surface to another, but a more complex ‘perplication’. ‘Perplication’ is a Deleuzian term referring to a cross-folding or folding-through that exposes an intensive multiple complexity in the fabric of things, like one might find in a folded concertina book that can be read and handled in many ways.<sup>4</sup> In a structure like a concertina book, the multifarious readings cause complexity through contradiction, and it is in this sense that Tong’s own description of *Unfolding Ground* as a large-scale concertina book seems most compelling.

The presence of one cross-folding alone brings with it the possibility of others, and here *Unfolding Ground* revealed itself as a work that genuinely engaged with architectural folding in bringing about a space of potential in which an endless number of possible readings were presented. This space of potential was ultimately a fictitious architecture as the images of China overlapped with the architectural surfaces and elements of the Gunnery, one architectural truth challenging another.<sup>5</sup> *Unfolding Ground* presented an environment of physical impossibilities, contradictions and revelations – the architectural reality of a work that caused an oscillation between imagination, documented memory and an ambiguous reality.

## NOTES

1. John Rajchman, *Constructions*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1998, p. 14.

2. See Richard Dunn, 'Mimi Tong & Nuha Saad: Intersecting Geometries', in Reuben Keehan, ed., *Artspace Projects 2005*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, 2005, pp. 36-43.

3. Giuliana Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2007, p. 19.

4. Rajchman, *Constructions*, p. 18.

5. Stephen Walker, 'Four Times Fictitious Architecture' in *Exit Imagen y Cultura 6: Arquitecturas Ficticias Fictitious Architecture*, May 2002, p. 110.



**Mimi Tong, *Unfolding Ground*, installation view, Artspace, Sydney, 2007**