

Wu Wenguang

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The idea of giving people who would not normally have the chance to represent themselves cameras—and sometimes training to use them—is an old one. It has been used for women in occupied Iraq (by Eugenie Dolberg) and for children in Sao Paulo favelas (by Julian Germain), to take a couple of many examples. In each case, the artist or activist who arranges the project acts as a curator, ordering and editing the results to present them to an audience very different from its makers: buyers of art books, film festival goers or Biennial visitors. In each case, a set of people who are not much subject to lenses (aside from the rare and perhaps unsympathetic intrusions of reporting and surveillance) open themselves to self-scrutiny, which allows them to stand back, frame and see themselves through the unfamiliar mechanism of lens and light-sensitive plate.

There are two distinct reasons which lend Wu Wenguang's project, in which ten farmers from around China were chosen for training to make documentary videos of the lives of their communities, added point and piquancy. The first is that, even by the usual standards of such projects, most of his subjects are very unused to being filmed or photographed, have never picked up a video camera, and are not surrounded by photography. Their visual environment is, in fact, remarkably free of representations, aside from a few political posters. In an age in which videoing and photographing—often the self, or the self in the act of buying or consuming something—is an insistent, daily habit for many, this project ploughs virgin soil with telling results. The entire project seems incredible to its subjects; some, on seeing the alien object, ask, 'is that really a camera?'; others convince themselves that the whole scheme (travel to Beijing, training, accommodation, the gift of the camera) is not a swindle. One farmer rejects the idea that it might be a people-trafficking scam with the grim and funny consideration: 'no one would want to buy me.'



The second is that many of the documentary makers focus on village self-governance which is meant to reintroduce political processes into areas which would otherwise be left solely to market forces, following economic liberalisation. These structures and the power that they endow have been the subject of a great deal of debate, and vary greatly from village to village, but what comes across

strongly from the films is the noisy, chaotic, discursive, sometimes good-humoured, sometimes fractious and bitter character of these local decision making processes, in which people becoming used to the exercise of some limited power over the lives and environments. So one question that may be asked is: does the self-representation of a people, and the evolution of an image of that people, bring about greater awareness of the exercise and the limits of democratic power? This is certainly a question for the farmers, but as much one for the other viewers of the films: how with the privileged viewer, carrying various image-making devices, surrounded by photography and video, and insistently representing themselves, does all this production and consumption of images and sounds relate to power, and the exercise of control over work , life and environment? Or is it merely launched into the echo chamber of commerce, and resound only in the targeting of adverts?