

# Yishu

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# Framed Authors: Photography and Conceptual Art from Dafen Village

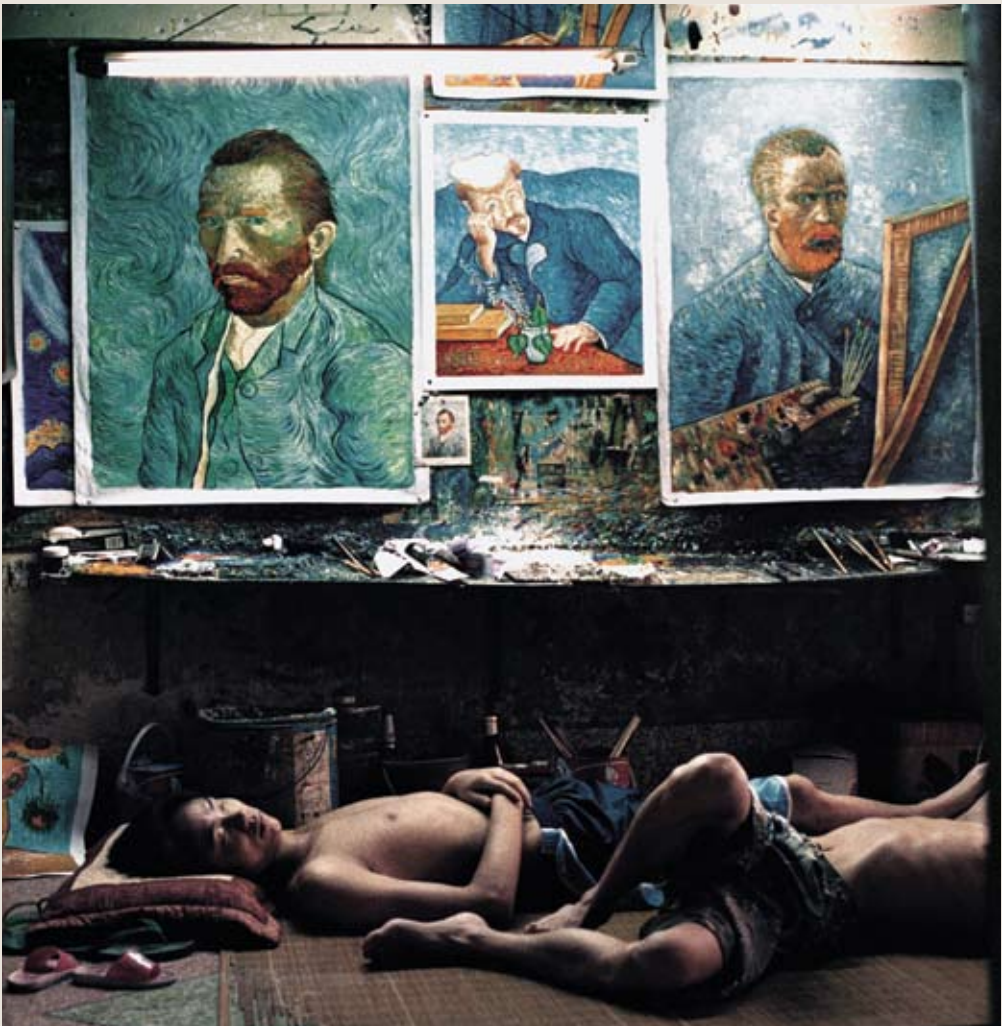
Winnie Won Yin Wong



Yu Haibo, from *Shenzhen Economic Daily* article, October 31, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Originality is central to modernity's artistic practices as well as its commercial ones. Through originality, artistic developments are marked, creativity is recognized, and innovation commodified. Yet it is through copies that we consume the original, and, hence, to tell the story of an original object is also to tell micro-histories of its multiple, repeatable, and dis-singular origins. Since 1989, Dafen village, located outside the border of China's Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, has been the global production center for handmade oil paintings, supplying Western consumer markets with mass-produced copies of paintings sourced from the Western canon. More recently, assisted by governmental policies promoting cultural industries, Dafen's painters, entrepreneurs, and administrators have embarked upon a transition towards original and creative production. The drama of originality and the copy play out in the scene set by today's Dafen village.

A 2005 series of images on Dafen village from the *New York Times* uses visual tropes common in Western journalistic portrayals of factory work in post-Mao China.<sup>1</sup> They are images of faceless workers in meager circumstances, doggedly churning out the products of mass culture. Here, the



Yu Haibo, from *Shenzhen Economic Daily* article, October 31, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

imitative painting is figured as a mockery of the West's canons, of its histories, and its institutions of taste. These photographs present a narrative of the native's mimetic desire in the face of neoliberal transformation, and fits safely within a leftist critique of cultural globalization and third-world commodity production.

Another photojournalistic series from 2005, from Shenzhen's *Economic Daily*, won a World Press Photo award and thereafter were published and exhibited internationally.<sup>2</sup> These photographs, taken by Shenzhen photojournalist and artist Yu Haibo as a documentary project over the course of eight months, depict dark-skinned labourers working under the gaze of a slightly psychotic Western father, Vincent van Gogh. Yu is careful to frame the visual symmetry between the faces and bodies of the migrant workers against the van Gogh self-portraits; the workers are remade in his image, as they are laboriously remaking him. In them, the bemusement of the *New York Times* narrative is replaced with sympathy for the conditions endured by the ethnic others who enter culture and capital through the already and overly "Westernized" West.

The rhetorical puzzle posed by these two series of photographs juxtaposes the high cultural value of the canonic work of art against the "mechanical reproduction" effected instead through devalued human labour. The gulf between these two categories of value was noted by the classical economist David Ricardo, who, in the very opening of *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, isolates a particular type of goods—"objects of desire"—from his labour theory of value:





Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art #11, Ed Ruscha, \$7*, 2005, photograph. © Michael Wolf. Courtesy of Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, California.

There are some commodities, the value of which is determined by their scarcity alone. No labour can increase the quantity of such goods, and therefore their value cannot be lowered by an increased supply . . . Their value is wholly independent of the quantity of labour originally necessary to produce them, and varies with the varying wealth and inclinations of those who are desirous to possess them.<sup>3</sup>

By Ricardo's definition, Dafen village can never "reproduce" a van Gogh painting, no matter what quantity of labour is put into it. But if it does not threaten the value of the original, the industrialization of copying in post-liberalization China opens up a new set of questions about the status of "originality" and the globalizing conditions of its production and consumption.

In 2006, the Hong Kong-based, German-trained, American photographer Michael Wolf released a large series of photographs taken at Dafen village.<sup>4</sup> A twenty year veteran of photojournalism, Wolf became later known for his large-scale documentary photographic projects in China, each themed by an exclusive focus on objects of everyday life in vernacular settings, often found in abused,



Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art #7, Francis Bacon, \$102, 2005*, photograph. © Michael Wolf. Courtesy of Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, California.

misused, or makeshift condition. In their grand seriality, his photographs critique in appealing detail the impoverishment and brokenness of contemporary China.

Unlike the earlier photojournalistic portrayals of Dafen, Wolf's images focus not on masses of unidentified labourers, but, rather, seem to enumerate with precision a world of individual specialities and skills. Nearly all the images depict one individual holding a painting while standing in an alleyway or before storefront in Dafen. In his near-unflinching adherence to a single compositional form, the series presents a presumptive logic: that each of these pictured painters specializes in copying for a vast market the strikingly contemporary works of art that appear in the photographs. In contrast to photographs that have focused on Mona Lisas or Van Goghs, Wolf has documented a seemingly endless parade of paintings after works by Gerard Richter, Neo Rausch, Loretta Lux, On Kawara, and so on, that suddenly place Dafen village not in a pre-industrial workshop setting, but in the "shared" contemporary time of the West. The more up-to-date and recondite the painting reproduced, the more Dafen village seems to speak of the anachronistic backwardness of modern China.





Liu Ding, *Samples from the Transition C Products Part 1*, 2005, 40 paintings, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm each. Painted by 13 painters from Danfen village. Presented at the 2nd Guangzhou Triennale, November 18, 2005, from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. Courtesy of the artist.

By staging formal congruencies between the postmodern painting-in-the-picture and the everyday setting of Dafen village, the photographs furthermore shroud the depicted copyist in mystery. They raise questions about the identities, status, and training of these “forgers,” “copyists,” or “appropriators.” Illicit reproduction here is magnified through documentary seriality—the greater the number of Wolf’s photographs, the more the notion of a whole village of Chinese copyists appear fascinating and surreal.

Kenneth Baker, art reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, has written of the “formal intelligence and acuity of observation” in Wolf’s previous work, aspects of which are clear here in the compositional dialogue Wolf creates between the high value canonical work and the exotic banality of its Chinese setting.<sup>5</sup> It is also reinforced by Wolf’s use of a realist style that, coupled with an ethnographic structure, permits the repeated registration of incidental variation. In a quasi-archival mode, each of his exhibited photographs are coded by a number, by the name of the canonical Western painter copied, and by the price of the reproduced painting. One is titled #11, *Ed Ruscha*, \$7, another, #7, *Francis Bacon*, \$102. Although such titles record certain historical specificities, this accumulation of individual facts overlaid upon a documentary aesthetic pointedly stops at naming the copyist portrayed. As such, Wolf suggests that his subject is not the copyist-painter, whose identities remain unrecorded, even though the price for his or her labour is carefully reported. As in Ricardo’s bracketing off of plentiful reproductive labour from the value of a work of art, Wolf’s photographs contrast image with value, and render the labour required to reproduce the image unknowable.

As a dutiful historian seeking to redress such a gap in knowledge, in February 2008, I requested from Michael Wolf contact information for the individuals who appeared in his photographs. The artist replied that he had lost interest in Dafen village because all the buildings he once found interesting had been torn down and replaced.<sup>6</sup> Hence, he had lost all contact with the painters he photographed.<sup>7</sup> Wolf was only able to confirm that, of those who appeared in his photographs: “some . . . are the painters themselves and some are people who work at the galleries.”<sup>8</sup>



Liu Ding, *Samples from the Transition C Products Part 2*, 2005–06, 40 paintings in gilded frames, 66 x 99.5 cm each. Courtesy of L. A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht, Frankfurt.

Exhibited at the Robert Koch gallery in San Francisco in 2007, where the photographs are sold in editions of nine, the gallery’s press release announced: “The series uncovers the odd and subtle interplay between capitalism and the Chinese tradition of developing artistic skill by copying the works of master artists.”<sup>9</sup> The statement sums up a new narrative of Dafen village, standing in for the China that makes and fakes. Mimicry of the West, ignited global capital, can be quaintly localized through an essentialist call to Chinese tradition.

Concurrent with growing photojournalistic attention on Dafen village, contemporary artists from China and the West have also taken up Dafen village as source, subject, and readymade factory. “Contemporary” (that is, cosmopolitan) frameworks for consuming works of art carry with them the rhetoric of “appropriation,” which by definition renders the transfer of property in itself an aesthetically meaningful act. In Dafen village, painting for elite artists who sign their names on the canvases after delivery has been common practice for nearly twenty years. In some respects, conceptual artists are simply new clients with new sales tactics.



Leung Mee-ping, *Made in Hong Kong*, 2007, DVD, 11 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

For the 2005 Guangzhou Triennial, Beijing-based conceptual artist Liu Ding hired thirteen assembly line painters from Dafen village. Paying what he understood to be the standard wage, Liu selected a factory sample he found the most “banal,” and had the painters jointly execute forty copies by an assembly line process.<sup>10</sup> The painters were presented on a stepped pyramidal platform for a four-hour performance marking the opening of the Triennial. Later, Liu Ding exhibited the paintings in a generic nineteenth century European interior at the L. A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht in Frankfurt, Germany.



Leung Mee-ping, *Made in Hong Kong*, 2007, oil on canvas paintings of various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2006, Hong Kong-based conceptual artist Leung Mee-ping, a graduate of Paris' Ecole Nationale Superior des Beaux Arts, apprenticed with a commercial painter in Dafen village. At her master's studio, she and her fellow painter-apprentices produced a series of multiples based on Leung's fabricated tourist images of Hong Kong. Her training is recorded by video as a performance and is exhibited alongside the paintings that must be purchased in minimum sets of two.<sup>11</sup>

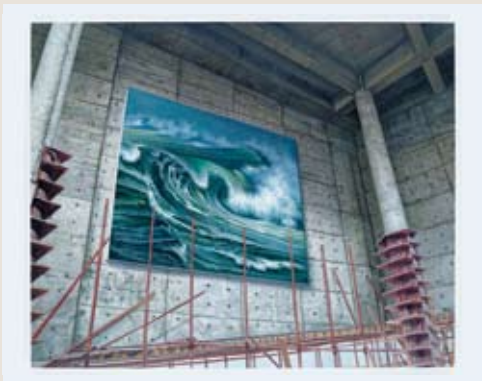
In Leung's and Liu's projects, we see thus not only versions of post-studio authorship collapsed onto a living readymade, but also a specific slice of China's productive, transitional economy reframed as a transnational object of aesthetic desire. Their messages depend on the conceptual and formal disparities between the industrial, quasi-mechanical labour of the Dafen painters, and the post-industrial exhibition setting arranged by the appropriating artist. The interdependency of high and low culture, and of mechanized imitation and true art, is here enacted between China's export manufactures and the post-facture context of Western modernism. Their Dafen paintings are not just reproductions, but are fixed markers of the distance between imitation and appropriation, between classes, modes, and markets of production and consumption. The central question that China's painting factories raise, then, is not whether China's export art products are mere copies of objects of another origin, whether Western, traditional, ethnic, or native, but, rather, why and when the layering of origins is important to the consumption and production of the work of art in the globalizing frame. Instead of asking what China reproduces, we may ask, through what operations and in what conditions can originality be made into an unfixed, reproducible, and mobile commodity?

In 2007, German-born, New York-based conceptual artist Christian Jankowski travelled to Dafen village after reading about it in a Hong Kong newspaper.<sup>12</sup> Learning of a new state-run Dafen Museum of Art then under construction, Jankowski toured the construction site and took photographs of the museum's unfinished interior. Aided by Shenzhen interpreter, Lisa Liu, and later, Hong Kong curator Christina Li, Jankowski conducted a broad survey of the galleries at Dafen village. They conversed with painters and dealers, trying to ascertain their self-perception as artists, and asked each an ultimate question: If you had the choice, what work of art would you most like to see exhibited in the new Dafen art museum?<sup>13</sup> Based on their answers, Jankowski





Installation view of Christian Jankowski exhibition Super Classical, at Maccarone Inc., 2007. Courtesy of Maccarone Inc., New York.



Christian Jankowski, *The Wave*, from the *China Painters* series, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 177.8 x 144.7 cm. © Christian Jankowski. Courtesy of Maccarone, Inc., New York; Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin; Lisson Gallery, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Christian Jankowski, *Antique Jade*, from the *China Painters* series, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 149.8 x 167.6 cm. © Christian Jankowski. Courtesy of Maccarone, Inc., New York; Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin; Lisson Gallery, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Christian Jankowski, *Three Leaders*, from the *China Painters* series, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 104 x 90 inches. © Christian Jankowski. Courtesy of Maccarone, Inc., New York; Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin; Lisson Gallery, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Christian Jankowski, *Group of Naked Women*, from the *China Painters* series, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 182.8 x 160 cm. © Christian Jankowski. Courtesy of Maccarone, Inc., New York; Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin; Lisson Gallery, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

commissioned the painters to compose paintings that place their answers to the question within the photographs of the unfinished museum interiors taken by Jankowski. The final paintings were exhibited in Jankowski's Super Classical show for the March 2007 opening of the new gallery Maccarone Inc. in New York. Though each painting is signed on the back by the Dafen painter, each is also issued with a certificate authenticating it as a Jankowski work of art.



Christian Jankowski, *The Chair*, from the *China Painters* series, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 533.4 x 683.2 cm. © Christian Jankowski. Courtesy of Maccarone, Inc., New York; Klosterfelde Gallery, Berlin; Lisson Gallery, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Jankowski's *China Painters* broaches the question of authorship by the numerous visual framing devices that allow each of the multiple authors within the series to appear in nested form. First, there is the frame of the referenced image, the source painting reproduced by the Dafen painter. Second, there is the painted frame of the museum-under-construction that gives utopian breathing space to an ongoing local redefinition of "art" spurred by the construction of the new museum. Third, there is the framework of the New York installation, in which Jankowski is the author of a series of paintings. As assisted readymades, each painting is securely fastened within a triple frame of the series, the museum institution, and the cosmopolitan gallery system, each holding in check the fading localism of a singular expression.

Of all the painters that participated in Jankowski's project, it is Yin Xunzhi whose contribution has been most noted. Yin surprised the Jankowski team by the incredible range of paintings he could copy with ease. In his studio, they found painting reproductions that span the history of Western visual art up to the present day, including an impressive collection of contemporary works that they had not seen anywhere else in Dafen village.<sup>14</sup>

Yin is a veteran of the Chinese commercial painting industry, and is a painter with great artistic ambition. After studying oil painting at a polytechnic school in Heilongjiang, he visited Beijing's illegal avant-garde artist village in the Yuanmingyuan in the early 1990s. He found the lives of artists there too extreme and impoverished, seeing in them a bohemian cliché. Hearing of Korean commercial painting companies operating in Xiamen, in Fujian province, Yin travelled there with just a backpack, he remembers, the furthest south he had ever been in China. After working



eight years as a commercial painter in Xiamen, Yin moved again, this time to Shenzhen's Dafen village in 2000, "dreaming," he says "the artist dream."<sup>15</sup> Yin opened up a gallery in Dafen village with some friends and, like most artists in Dafen village, receives painting orders from Dafen companies and directly from clients who visit his gallery. He currently shares a gallery space with a multidisciplinary team that consists of an abstract painter, a sculptor, and a graphic designer. But Yin constantly plans to leave Dafen village in order to become a "real artist." Although he has been actively doing his own creative work, he has shredded all of his original paintings because he has never been fully satisfied with a single one. Thus, Yin says that he is not a "real artist" because he has no works.<sup>16</sup>

Jankowski's team ordered two paintings from Yin Xunzhi—one based on Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, and a second based on a photograph of a broken chair. Believing the photograph to be an "original" work by Yin, Jankowski's team ordered a painting from the image of the broken chair. Understanding that this was just another commercial order (*dingdan*) that standardly requires direct copying, Yin painted the photograph straightforwardly, with none of the added content or stylistic treatment that appears in his creative works-in-progress that reference the same image.

When I met Yin Xunzhi in order to interview him about the Jankowski project, I recognized him, and his friends, as individuals who appear in more than one Michael Wolf photograph of Dafen Village. Indeed, according to Yin Xunzhi, the vast majority of paintings that appear in Wolf's photographs were painted by Yin himself, all for a single client who selected each image and supplied the source.<sup>17</sup> This client was, of course, Michael Wolf. No other clients had ever ordered these kinds of paintings from Yin prior to Wolf, and, indeed, in my experience, by and large these paintings cannot be found elsewhere in Dafen village.<sup>18</sup> By Yin's account, over the course of nearly two years, whenever he finished one of these paintings, Wolf would come to Dafen village to collect it and organize a photo shoot.<sup>19</sup> Yin had strong memories of these photo shoots, recalling how he assisted by gathering props and asking his friends to participate.<sup>20</sup> Certain vernacular details, such as the vegetables hanging on the window bars of #83, *Gerhard Richter, \$38*, Yin remembers, were purchased in the village and arranged in a pre-designed setting.<sup>21</sup> According to Yin, each of the individuals in the photographs were asked to voluntarily pose with the paintings, but neither Yin nor the sitters were aware that the photographs were taken with the intention of exhibiting them as art photography.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the documentary aesthetic of Wolf's photographs is produced not via "acute observation," but, rather, by elaborate planning and compositional staging.

If practiced as photojournalism, Wolf's intricate directorial procedure might well be considered unethical, but as an artistic practice, it raises new questions about the global practice of documentary photography that can also be viewed in the register of conceptual art documents. The differences between Yin's and Wolf's accounts of their collaboration speak to the different registers of viewing and making that artist, photographer, and historian bring with them. For example, contrary to Wolf's recollection, few, if any, of the buildings in the photographs had been torn down, but, as of March 2008, many were standing within a few hundred metres of Yin's gallery. Proud of his close involvement in the project, Yin arranged the study prints of the Wolf photographs I had with me and took me on a reprisal tour of the village. At each site, he posed for a photograph, holding the print as "evidence" that we had found the correct site. Seeing in me a potential customer, Yin remarked that I could also order paintings from him and make some new photographs *à la* Wolf. Seeing in him a potential artist, I was wondering whether or not Yin was reenacting a work of performance art.



Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art #46, On Kawara, \$4.75, 2007*, photograph. © Michael Wolf. Courtesy of Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, California.



Yin Xunzhi with copy of Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art #46, On Kawara, \$4.75*. Photo: Winnie Won Yin Wong, February 4, 2008, Dafen village.

Yin Xunzhi admires his client Michael Wolf a great deal, and the current series of original paintings he is working on is inspired by a photograph by Wolf of a broken chair. The photograph is published in Michael Wolf's *Sitting in China* from 2002, and is the singular image described in an anecdote introducing the entire publication.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this is the photograph that is the source of Yin's "original" painting in Jankowski's *China Painters*.

Reactions to conceptualist works that use Dafen village as a source of readymade paintings tend either to charge them with exploitation, or praise them for their engagement with contemporary Chinese capitalism. Such responses, I submit, are already encompassed by journalistic representations that decontextualize histories of production into images of industrial sweatshops or romantic workshops.

Wolf's Dafen village project, because it is staged photography that can be presented as documentary photography, highlights a new set of problems enabled by the use of Dafen village as an open and global source of readymades. By serving as client, set designer, and documentary photographer, Wolf creates the very market he is documenting. Yet when exhibited in the cosmopolitan context, its mode of production, and the participation of a shadow artist, are erased. "Appropriation" is here indexed as a direct transfer of authorship through the transfer of ownership. As Yin Xunzhi told me, he certainly cannot prevent Wolf from taking photographs of paintings that belong to Wolf himself.<sup>24</sup> What is perhaps unexpected is the ease with which the authorship of Yin Xunzhi is both denied under the guise of conceptual art and at once made central as content and subject matter under the guise of documentary photography. Institutional structures that conceal information across global transfers of knowledge, power, and capital seems quaint in the so-called information age, but the reigning aesthetic value of partial knowledge speaks to the asymmetries of art making and art consuming within the globalizing frame.

To what extent is Wolf's directorial mode any less ethical than Christian Jankowski unknowingly re-authoring his name over that of a Yin Xunzhi painting sourced from a Michael Wolf photograph? Such a claim *could* be made less problematic through a construction of intentionality. Yet if we criticize Wolf but praise Jankowski for their ethics of collaboration, we risk confining ourselves to the role of legal advisors, demanding "fair" contracts that would pre-register artistic subjectivity in a legal mode. I would submit instead that in both projects, the forms of modern artistic production privileged as original—if sometimes serial, multiple, referential, and editioned—are carefully set apart from the forms of reproduction that are rendered authored but anonymous. Reproduction matters precisely as a stage upon which originality can be re-authored as global, investigative, and contextual.





Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art #51, Neo Rauch, \$176, 2007*, photograph. © Michael Wolf. Courtesy of Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, California.



Yin Xunzhi with copy of Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art #51, Neo Rauch, \$176*. Photo: Winnie Won Yin Wong, February 4, 2008, Dafen village.

For Yu Haibo, the Shenzhen artist-photojournalist sympathetic to the underprivileged conditions of Dafen village's painters and their potential victimization by Sino-Western intellectual property law enforcement, Wolf's quasi-journalistic production can be likened to a "frame-up": one that "frames" innocent Dafen painters as committers of copyright infringement in the most sophisticated of art markets.<sup>25</sup> But the crime is already found in the narrative that drives the archive. Consistently represented as laborers of reproduction in photography and in conceptual art, Dafen painters can hardly enter that privileged stage of original and creative production in the globalizing frame. "Framed" with authors and yet author-less, the Dafen readymade, nonetheless, enters the global fray.

#### Notes

- 1 Keith Bradsher, "Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!," *New York Times*, July 15, 2005.
- 2 Yu Haibo, "Dafen cun, ba qian huashi shuangzhong shixian," in *Shenzhen Economic Daily*, October 31, 2005, B04.
- 3 David Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, (London: John Murray, 1817; 3rd ed. 1821).
- 4 Published on the artist's Web site as "China Copy Artists," [http://www.photomichaelwolf.com/china\\_copy\\_artist/index.html](http://www.photomichaelwolf.com/china_copy_artist/index.html) (accessed March 2008).
- 5 Kenneth Baker, "Introduction," in Michael Wolf, *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 11.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Michael Wolf, email exchange with author, February 3, 2008.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Robert Koch Gallery, Michael Wolf, press release for "Michael Wolf," May 3–June 30, 2007, [http://www.kochgallery.com/exhibitions/pr\\_MW007.html](http://www.kochgallery.com/exhibitions/pr_MW007.html) (accessed March 2008).
- 10 Liu Ding, interview with author, October 7, 2007.
- 11 Exhibited at Blue Lotus Gallery, Hong Kong, in Fair Enough, January 19–February 24, 2008.
- 12 Christian Jankowski, interviews with author, February 25–28, 2008.
- 13 Lisa Liu, interviews with author, February, 4, 26 and 29, 2008.
- 14 Christina Li, interviews with author, January 24, and February 12, 2008, and Christian Jankowski, interviews with author, February 25–28, 2008.
- 15 Yin Xunzhi, interview with author, February 9, 2008.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Yin Xunzhi, interviews with author, February 4, 9, and 12, 2008. Yin's account of his participation in the Wolf photographs is corroborated by others who posed for the photographs, and by photographs taken by Yin's other clients in 2006–07. Their photographs show Yin's studio space with numerous paintings that appear in the Wolf photographs. In February 2008, a Durer copy and a Chuck Close copy from the Wolf photographs were also hanging in Yin's gallery. Paintings that appear in the Wolf series that are not painted by Yin Xunzhi are those commonly found in Dafen village, including, for example, the *Mona Lisa*, *Sunflowers*, and other genre paintings of unidentified source. According to Yin, the paintings he painted can be identified as those on stretched canvas unframed.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Michael Wolf, *Sitting in China* (Goettingen: Steidl 2002), 88.
- 24 Yin Xunzhi, interview with author, February 29, 2008.
- 25 Yu Haibo, interview with author, February 24, 2008.