

Labor Camp Orchestra:
Research by Means of Sound
(Notes on selected Labor Camp projects
by Piotr Szyhalski)

On lyrics of/by Mao Tse-tung

Labor Camp rejects the notion that cultural contribution is made only through material goods broadly defined as art. Direct and conclusive denotation of cultural worth of any artifact is in truth impossible. An artistic product may address an urgent need, convey messages of import, or provide an insight into an unspoken truth. But all these are fleeting concerns. They are important only now and only to some. Time erases. People forget. Things break down.

However: The forms developed in the process of artistic production do acquire an assessable value, but only inasmuch as they are the evidence of labor undertaken to construct them. The Labor itself is the only unchanging criterion of cultural merit.

Thus: Suspending all ideological banners, we work. Through the labor of our hearts, minds and hands we render useless the endless chatter of moral ambiguity.

Labor Camp celebrates beauty and dignity of labor: We Work All The Time.

Labor Camp promotes immateriality: It exists at no particular location, and has no fixed physical form.

Labor Camp encourages all forms of individualism: No man is equal.

Labor Camp belongs to no one, and belongs to all.

Labor Camp Orchestra is the Aural Branch of the Labor Camp. Since it's gradual inception between 1998-1999 Labor Camp Orchestra remains committed to construction of auditory experiences, which follow no singular philosophy, process or idea.

Labor Camp studies history. The contradictions, contrast, conflict: the tension between ideas—recovered from the past, or assimilated in the present—which produces a conceptual energy fueling the creative process within the Labor Camp.

In our ongoing search for such cultural artifacts we have discovered the powerful complexity of Mao Tse-tung's poetry. The beauty of language, profound love for nature, combined with matter-of-factness of revolutionary vocabulary, poetic contemplation of the magnificence of military movement... These are some of the characteristics of Mao's poems that prompted our initial experiments.

The very act of setting words of Mao Tse-tung within the language of contemporary popular musical vernacular properly reflects/embraces the kind of cultural clash thoroughly espoused by the Labor Camp.

Today Labor Camp approaches Mao Tse-tung thought in a number of ways:

1. As a metaphorical reference, and a way of analyzing love and intensity of other human emotions. (Cathartic nature of revolutionary movement and the catharsis of love. Furthermore it is our conviction that the "scale" of ideas affects our ability to distinguish the differences between them. The larger the concepts become, the more alike they appear.)
2. As a means of experimenting with historical time/space continuum. (Often it is easier for us to embrace the true nature of aberrant behavior from the "safe" perspective of time. This too has to do with the "scale" of thought. Distance of time perceptually diminishes, and makes accessible concepts which "up close" often appear incomprehensible.)
3. To simultaneously:
 - a/ provoke cultural discomfort in western listener by implementing original Chinese lyrics. (And therefore provide the experience of admitted ignorance: "I do not understand what is being said, but I am enjoying it.")
 - b/ address the Chinese audience by developing the work in the native language, inviting critical analysis of history, and it's contemporary local and global implications. (Just as building metaphorical/symbolic references to Cultural Revolution may be meaningful to American audience, constructing references to American or German history can be meaningful to Chinese audience.)
4. As an affirmation of power of art and culture. (Despite it's ultimate failure to build a better society, Cultural Revolution does in many ways present the evidence of the capacity of cultural devices to affect profound change in society.)
5. As a way of further exploring the concept of reverse psychology involved in communications charged with contradiction. (At times superficially negative in nature, ideas delivered by Labor Camp projects often resonate with the audience in an inverse manner: a mental afterimage emerging through the critical engagement of the user.)

America

Recognition of the familiar inverted parallel in the history of China and USA constitutes a substantial conceptual framework for many of the recent Camp projects such as “america”, “love letter”, or “this is labor camp”.

“America” is an example of mapping points of intersection in the history of the two countries.

The lyrics (and the archival recording) used in this project come from Chinese propaganda developed with the purpose of educating children about the injustices of capitalist society. This recording in itself presents a stunning combination of cultural contradictions. It comes from China: a country tormented by violent, often thoroughly and fundamentally unjust currents, yet it points to a different society’s ills. In addition, oddly, it delivers the message in English: in some ways “speaking the language of the enemy.” We at the Labor Camp found this cocktail of ideas inspiring and thought-provoking. Some alterations had been made to the original recording. Most notably, the references to “black people in America” had all been changed to “people in America.” We felt it important to expand the reach of these words to a broader population suffering from all types of oppression: economical, political, social, religious, cultural. (For the complete text see below.)

While the role of United States as the “leader of the free world”, in no uncertain terms, continues to deteriorate today, China asserts it’s position as a global superpower. While the republican “leadership” in the US squanders the economic, political, cultural and—most regrettably—ethical capital of the American People, China diligently works towards its better future. We understand that China’s past—or China’s present for that matter—is not perfect. For example one can not help, but reflect on millions of lives lost during the famine of 1958-62. This disaster of catastrophic proportions—resulting from a relentless implementation of Mao’s Great Leap Forward—is an illustration of the ultimate price paid in human life for a blind commitment to unrealistic ideas. Sadly, we recognize an analogous determination to pursue misguided ideas in the actions of current US “leadership”. Unjust war in Iraq and arrogant global policies of Bush administration are echoes of some of the most unfortunate historical models. Likewise “kisses of fire” (utilizing an archival recording of a hostage beheading in Iraq) points to a different all-consuming, fervent ideology and the blinding impact of religious extremism... Different People, different place, different time: same dynamic at work.

Our goal is never to glorify oppression, war, injustice, arrogance, and the suffering they cause. But we do not shy from handling these (and in fact any) ideas. As someone stated before: “the fear of handling shit is a luxury a sewer-man can not necessarily afford.” An earlier, visual work produced by another branch at the Labor Camp entitled “Electric Posters” series explored a similar conceptual dynamic, and attempted to create a sense of “mental afterimage” invoking positive concepts by confronting audience with decisively negative messages. Labor Camp Orchestra continues this line by means of sound.

Labor Camp aims to provoke a critical reflection (and therefore intellectual growth) on the currents in socio-political and cultural history, and the delicate yet omnipresent relationship between the individual lives entwined in the fabric of the world and time.

No End

During the Cultural Revolution in China among many “new” artistic forms emerged a trend to build popular musical compositions set to quotations from Chairman Mao (e.g. “It’s Right To Rebel,” “The Force at The Core Leading Our Cause Forward,” or a Mao essay set to music: “When We Die for The People, It Is a Worthy Death”). Similarly, many of the Labor Camp works take root in written or spoken word initially not intended for musical context. (And many of the projects do exactly that: set Mao’s words to music.

“Pests”, “mountain”, “advance / retreat” to name a few.) Lyrics in “no end” are an example of that. There are three textual threads here:

1. The main body of text is based almost entirely on a quote from Gershom Scholem (one of the most prominent scholars of Kabbalah): “The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me.” The text was quoted in the final chapter of “The Nazi Doctors; Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide” by Robert Jay Lifton, summing up his exploration of biological mysticism and medicalized nature of genocide concept as exemplified by the complexities of the World War II history. The suspicion that the potential of evil lurks in all of us was further reaffirmed at the Labor Camp by the study of Hannah Arendt’s “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.” Both of these books functioned as a foundation for this project.

2. The conclusion was reached at the Labor Camp that the perpetuity of the truth in Scholem’s quote resonated well with the “No End” concept invoked earlier in other LCO works. The “No End” idea originally emerged from the Love Songs Series (love being the never ending universality of mankind), but also from the formal investigation of generative and/or dynamic computational

composition strategies based on the premise of open work: artwork with no beginning and no end. “There Is No End To This. There Is No End. No End” thus constituted the second vocal layer. Voice of a young child delivers all the above texts, as children are our future, and indeed, assure that there truly is no end.

3. The last text component is an archival recording of the speech by Leonid Brezhnev: the leader of the Communist Party, and effectively of the Soviet Union in the years 1964—1982. The choice of Brezhnev, as a voice that re-contextualizes the specifics of the two other threads was not of the utmost importance: there are a number of corrupt, aberrant rulers whose voices could provide that reference to “reality” of the discussed ideas. Brezhnev was selected, however, due to personal historical linkage to the Labor Camp.

In the book of amazing photographs from the era of Cultural Revolution “Red-Color News Soldier,” Li Zhensheng recounts the sense of exhilaration and joy experienced on the occasion of smashing of the Gang of Four in 1976. A similar liberating feeling was felt in Poland (and one might assume in all Eastern Block countries) at the time of death of Leonid Brezhnev. The work was halted in factories, children at schools were made to watch the televised funeral proceedings. The country was in mourning, on the surface, underneath which the hope for freedom swelled.

There is a true contradiction in celebrating with joy anyone’s death. But the dynamic of the historical moment was such, that one perceived no real or imagined perversion in such celebration of death: other feelings, emotions, ideas took hold justifying everything.

We are reminded of these principles today, observing and contemplating the thirst to avenge the deaths of victims of 9-11, or the desire to see Osama Bin Laden brought to justice: killed.

Investigation of our ability to bend moral concepts, to adjust our ethical boundaries in relation to drifting political and cultural trends lies at the core of “no end,” and in fact provides conceptual framework for many of the research projects conducted at the Labor Camp. Thank you for taking your time to engage in it with us. “No end” is also an expression of reverence with which Labor Camp approaches our historically evident thirst for power, and inexhaustible inventiveness in asserting control and dominance over others. We recognize this rule to be just as true on a global and historical scale, as it is intimately within each and every one of us.

My Angel / Love Letter (declaration of love)

As part of the ongoing research of human feelings of love, we have utilized a popular Internet search engine called Google to search for “declaration of love.” It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, that the results centered around a popular Celine Dion song under such exact title. After all, we investigated the “declaration of love” precisely because of it’s mass appeal, relevance and glittering universality. Determined to reach for a more private, intimate expression of love, we searched past Celine Dion. Three documents caught our attention:

1. A Public Declaration Of Love

<http://greenfield.fortunecity.com/swallowtail/67/love.html>

created by Wyldman containing two poems which at the moment remain in the early stages of processing at the Labor Camp (especially poem entitled “These arms, These lips, These hands”);

2. A Sample PassionUp Letter

<http://db1.passionup.com/postcard/post27.htm>

A wonderful “fill in the blanks” declaration “form” letter:

Dear _____,

In my life I've never met another person who moves me like you. _____, you're the one who's right for me, and when you're away, I feel lost. I love and _____ you so much, that it's difficult for me to tell you just how much I _____ you. This weekend I'll try to prove my _____ for you. I want to make it a special time for us to share our _____ and explore our _____. Our love shall take precedence over all else, and we shall have _____ to the _____ in our hearts. I only feel complete when we _____ and _____ each other. I only want to _____ with you for the rest of my life. I _____ you more than anyone will ever _____ you. I _____ you more than _____.

Love,

This document had undergone a closer processing and analysis, resulting in “love letter” song, with a coda including a speech of Vladimir Illiyich Lenin dubbed in Chinese for a movie released by Shanghai Film Studio in the 1950s:

"Lenin: Let those bourgeoisie go crazy! Let those worthless souls sob! That is our answer to them, comrade workers! We will be doubly vigilant, careful and patient. We will guard our posts. Comrades, you must remember, we have only one way out, and that is victory! There is another, death. But death doesn't belong to the working class!"

The choral elements in this song are made of recordings of Red Guard crowds shouting slogans: "Long Live Communist Party! Long Live Chairman Mao! Long Live! Long Live!" (also recorded from a Chinese propaganda movie.) The blank spaces in the original text had been edited out from the main vocal recording. To our delight, this formal treatment suggested yet another popular culture reference to the practice of erasing "bad language" from aggressive rap songs to be played on a radio broadcast. This seemingly natural interchange between the "undesirable" content, and the specifics central to one's intimate declaration of love proved a satisfactory conclusion to this Labor Camp research project.

3. A declaration of love in a form of a letter from Zamida to Zarier was also found. Unfortunately, as of writing of this text, the original Web page does not seem to exist any more. This simple text offers a strikingly direct and sincere expression of utter capitulation in the face of love. The lyrics of "my angel" now bring this message to you.

Mountain

"Mountain" utilizes a poem by Mao tse-tung entitled "Three Songs" This is the English translation of the lyrics:

1 / Mountain. / I whip my quick horse and don't dismount / and look back in wonder. / The sky is three feet away. /

2 / Mountain. / The sea collapses and the river boils. / Innumerable horses race / insanely into the peak of battle. /

3. / Mountain. / Peaks pierce the green sky, unblunted. / The sky would fall / but for the columns of mountains. (1934-35) Also see: "as it should be" in this set.

Banners

A poem by Mao Tse-tung set to music.:

"New Year's Day"

Where are we going? / The road is narrow. Deep in the forest the moss is slippery / as we leave Ninghua, Ching, and Kweihua behind. / We head for the foot of the tea slope of Wuyi. / Below the mountain below the mountain, / wind blows our banners like a painting.

Child of Europe

"Child of Europe" has been concluded few years since the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz was first implemented by the Labor Camp. The text in this composition is an entire part 3 from the "Child Of Europe" series written by Milosz in 1944. Apart from the stunning beauty of Milosz's verse (both in original Polish and English translation), we at the Labor Camp were inspired by the curious reversal of ideas in this poem. Labor Camp does not ignore the tensions between the intimate, internal world, and the external reality. Indeed, these themes remain within the focus of the Labor Camp research, and the duality inherent in this text offers an important perspective on that conflict. As usual Milosz delivers these disarming truths with clarity and authority characteristic only of his brilliant mind. In this recording Labor Camp joins Czeslaw Milosz in recitation of the Polish text of his poem. The following is an English translation: "Love no country: countries soon disappear. / Love no city: cities are soon rubble. / Throw away keepsakes, or from your desk / A choking, poisonous fume will exude. / Do not love people: people soon perish. / Or they are wronged and call for your help. / Do not gaze into the pools of the past. / Their corroded surface will mirror / A face different from the one you expected." (New York, 1946)

Always

A brief study based on multiple telephone conversations with employees of local funeral homes. Reminder of the common, shared, constant and ultimate point of reference.

Carry Me

A new installment in the ongoing "Love Songs" series. Lyrical trio from the Labor Camp including confession of Jeffrey Dahmer intertwined with ruminations of a mechanical toy doll.

Advance / Retreat

This song is based on Mao Tse-tung's four principles of guerrilla warfare. Much like in "as it should be" Mao's words serve as a metaphorical proposition for contemplation of love. Labor Camp would like to take this opportunity to underscore, that our goal is never to glorify oppression, war, injustice, arrogance, and the suffering they cause. But we do not shy from handling these (and in

fact any) ideas. As someone stated before: “the fear of handling shit is a luxury a sewer-man can not necessarily afford.” An earlier, visual work produced by another branch at the Labor Camp entitled “Electric Posters” series explored a similar conceptual dynamic, and attempted to create a sense of “mental afterimage” invoking positive concepts by confronting audience with decisively negative messages. Labor Camp Orchestra continues this line by means of sound.

Labor Camp aims to provoke a critical reflection (and therefore intellectual growth) on the currents in socio-political and cultural history, and the delicate yet omnipresent relationship between the individual lives entwined in the fabric of the world and time.

You can listen to a complete archive of all Labor Camp Orchesra projects at;
<http://laborcamp.mcad.edu>

p.
Fall 2005