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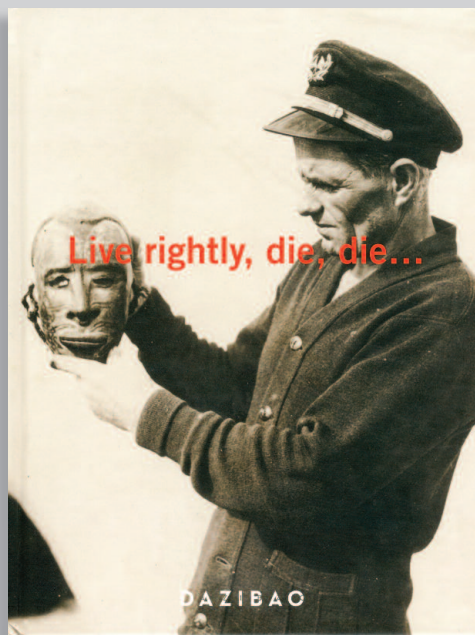
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Live rightly, die, die . . .

David Tomas

Les éditions Dazibao, Montréal, 2012, 177 pp.

Live rightly, die, die . . ., the book that accompanies the two-part exhibition organized by the artist-curator David Tomas at Dazibao, is no ordinary exhibition catalogue with its requisite visual documentation and explanatory theoretical essay. *Live rightly, die, die . . .* does in fact contain ample visuals and a lengthy essay, but instead of cataloguing and contextualizing the exhibition the book is an experimental extension and integral part of the overall *Live rightly, die, die . . .* project. The unusual nature of the publication is made immediately apparent as one opens the book and flips to the page facing the title page. Instead of the colophon usually printed here, the page carries a full-page *e-flux* announcement of the *Live rightly, die, die . . .* exhibition and book project. The book cover image, replicated in small format, creates an embedded doubling that is indicative of the terrain one is about to traverse. Through the essay and a comprehensive visual documentation of the two-part exhibition, the book opens up an elaborate visual and theoretical itinerary that is articulated around the notions of tourism and the exotic. The self-referential use of the *e-flux* announcement both signals and questions the project's inscription within the global information circuits of the art world. This reflexive approach is applied throughout the project, in which Tomas

addresses two fundamental questions: "Are artists now engaged in a new professionalized form of artistic tourism and amateur ethnography? And what is the relationship between tourism, information gathering and reception, and the exotic in contemporary art?" Through the intricate essay, aptly titled "Live rightly, die, die . . . Anatomy of an Exhibition," and the two-section layout of the visual material culled from the exhibition, the publication provides multiple entry points to offer exploratory responses to these queries.

In the essay, Tomas expounds on the unconventional curatorial strategy that he adopted in order to mobilize notions of tourism and the exotic, rather than merely illustrating these notions through a set of self-standing works. It is through the resonances between the essay's theoretical excursions and the presentation of the heterogeneous visual and textual elements that this strategy is played out. The book's compositional and formal structure creates a situation in which the reader/viewer is implicated as an involuntary tourist who is led through a multilayered territory of visual and textual representations anchored in the tourism-exoticism dyad. In this regard, the essay is not a theoretical and explanatory overlay to the visual material but a guide to the exhibition itineraries that it investigates.

Like the physical exhibition, the essay is structured according to a repeated doubling that proceeds from the project's very title. The title's first two words, "Live rightly," are thus used in the essay's opening paragraphs to introduce a broader discussion on the circulation of transnational artistic information within its contemporary historical, social, and economic context. In the following section, "die, die . . . The Exhibition," Tomas points to the crucial role of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, which serves as an "inspiration" and "template" for the exhibition. Not only is the title *Live rightly, die, die . . .* a quotation from the novella, the entire unfolding of the project is guided by Conrad's tale of colonial excess, transcultural transgression, and moral decay. Through the lens of this nineteenth-century literary reference – and its twentieth-century filmic embodiment in *Apocalypse Now* – Tomas constructs an overarching historical and narrative framework from within which to examine how the contemporary art world continues to be entangled in a "web of inherited economic and colonial values." He argues that this approach allows him to situate the exhibition against the backdrop of its nineteenth-century "socio-cultural and economic underpinnings" and to take a distance from contemporary curatorial methods that apply academic theories, usually without scrutinizing or acknowledging their university origins.

Central to Tomas's unorthodox exhibition process is the aforementioned doubling, which is expressed through an in-depth analysis of two "master" documents that guide the respective exhibition sections. The introductory document of the "Tourism" section – a nineteenth-century photograph of an eighteenth-century handbill titled *Four Days Stage-Coach* – serves to examine how a visual artefact can encapsulate the notion of travel not only in terms of transportation per se, but also as speculative travel across historical periods via a media interface. An 1890 photograph of a Chinese *lingchi* execution and a Hong Kong *Telegraph* article, which transmits a descriptive second-hand account of the gruesome scene in the photograph, are used to extrapolate the translatability of the exotic in various media and cross-cultural modes. In working through images and texts within their wider historical and socio-cultural ramifications, the essay is itself a sort of intellectual travelogue that reveals the various paths of thought that were travelled to arrive at this singular exhibition.

The two-part exhibition is well transposed into the catalogue through a presentation of the displayed works according to their

original subdivisions. In particular, the exhibition's use of *e-flux* announcements instead of traditional labels works quite well in the book format. Through various indexing and referencing functions, the print version makes it easier for a reader/viewer to follow the "lines of flight, and lines of sight" insinuated between the highlighted *e-flux* texts (and their exhibitionary contexts) and the displayed works and artefacts of both exhibition parts. The works (some of which are original works, whereas others consist of artefacts such as letters, post cards, photographs, and books) displayed in the catalogue variously invite one to trace itineraries and connect routes on a perceptual and conceptual level. However, faced with what is at once unsettling and disorienting material, it quickly becomes apparent that such travels may have unsuspectingly taken one to a strange place. Reading through *Live rightly, die, die . . .* can at times give one the sense of having veered off course and being lost in a plethora of intertwined tracks – of being a hapless tourist caught in a dangerous, exotic place. Yet, this disorientation appears to be precisely what the compelling *Live rightly, die, die . . .* project seeks to induce by proposing an alternative exhibition practice that revalorizes art's capacity to be a vehicle of the "unknown, the opaque, the treacherous and unstable" all the while critiquing contemporary art's apparent complicity in a homogenized global culture that has its roots in the brutality and exploitation of colonial history.

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