

Alexandra Grimmer

## About Pinwheels and Treasure Maps: A Conversation with Birdhead

**B**irdhead (Song Tao b.1979 and Ji Weiyu b.1980) have been working and debating together daily since 2004. Each of them takes more than 10,000 photos every year, which are then scanned and archived before reappearing, in small numbers, in their work. No one—except for the two of them—has an understanding of the Birdhead archive. All that counts for the artists is the act of combining the individual photographs, for only then can they claim them to be artworks.

Birdhead does not want to be considered a photo-based artistic duo; photography should be merely the starting point of their work. The niche created by photographic art is, for them, far too narrow and even outdated. Birdhead see themselves more as a duo of artists who have demonstrated their diversity through highly distinct installations and an international presence.

Originally emerging from observations of their native city of Shanghai, the work of Birdhead has developed in a number of directions and now forms a complex oeuvre that is characterized as much by its dynamism and sustainability as by its spontaneity and creative aggressiveness.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** In a video interview that accompanied your participation in the *Living Cities* exhibition at London's Tate Modern in 2017, Song Tao referred to “eight characters”<sup>1</sup> that are central to your work: love, hate, emotion, anxiety, life, aging, illness, and death. What exactly did you mean by this?

**Song Tao:** I think that we must speak about what it means to grow up, and, when we do so, the focus of our work becomes clear. We focus only on ourselves. This is all that is important to Birdhead.

Only by exclusively focusing on oneself can you understand what it means to age and to feel that you are older than you were last year or five years ago. And only then, when you look back, will you understand: That was my life between the age of twenty-nine and thirty-nine.

Everybody has their own way to go. If you look back over the centuries, the great Chinese masters of art asked themselves the same questions about life, and their own work is prompted by not only positive experiences, but also, equally, strokes of fate and the incomprehension of others. Yet at exactly the same time they created an extraordinary oeuvre that is as ageless today as

it was then. For example, when you see a thousand-year-old work, you can feel its impact.

Ji Weiyu and I talk a lot about how we perceive our daily lives, and we also discuss history. For me, the important thing about our work is that it enables me to overcome the feeling of loneliness. The situation for Ji Weiyu is possibly different, but for me the question of loneliness—and also of helplessness—often arises. But if I then study the writings of the old masters, such as the calligraphy of Su Shi (1037–1101), a poet of the Song dynasty, I find that his poems and his life story help me to conquer my own loneliness.

**Ji Weiyu:** I believe that history can help us to understand and, hence, deal better with our own situation.

**Song Tao:** It's like being able to say “hello” to these historical figures, smoke a cigarette with them, and have a good chat. Of course, given that Su Shi died a thousand years ago the idea of communicating with him is one that you keep to yourself, but it's a great source of energy.



Birdhead, installation view at *ILLUMInazioni 'ILLUMInations*, 54th Venice Biennale, 2011. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Following your participation at the Venice Biennale in 2011, you began to travel widely in a way that you hadn't before. I get the impression that this has resulted in the traditional elements in your work becoming much stronger than they were earlier when you were still focused on the more limited surroundings of Shanghai.

**Ji Weiyu:** That is certainly the case. After the Biennale our idea was to get out of Shanghai more often. In the same year we accompanied a friend, a musician, for several months in the furthest-flung provinces of China, in connection with a project in which we recorded and documented the trip. That was the first time that we left Shanghai for a long period.

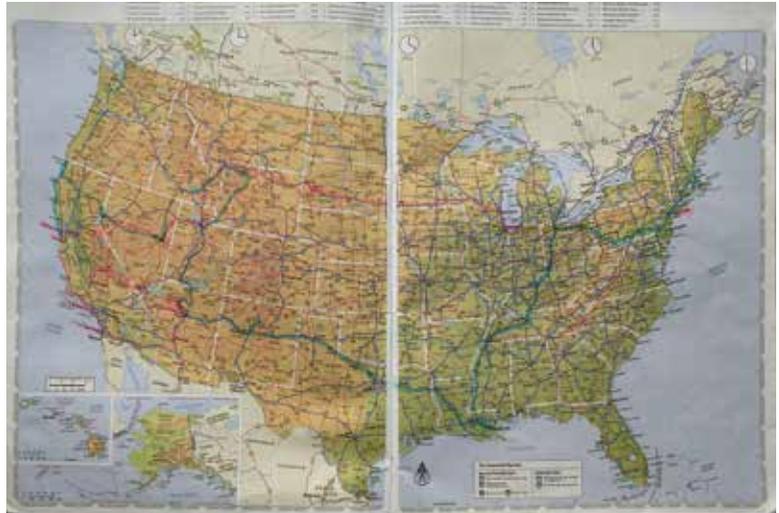
After the trip we understood more about the historical context in China and about why the people of the country are as they are. One can generally say that one's own history only becomes properly understood when one understands the history of others, in China or elsewhere.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** We Europeans often have preconceptions about other European countries or, for example, America— notions about how people of a certain nationality behave and about their customs. Of course such preconceptions can limit one's awareness much more than they help

in a certain situations. You, on the other hand, are very open. You arrive in a country without any plan apart from seeing how that country affects you and by taking photographs.

**Ji Weiyu:** As we did, for example, in the USA in 2017. Our plan was simply to cross the country. [Laughs.]

Birdhead, driving route through USA, 2017. Green line: Song Tao; Red line: Ji Weiyu. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** And then to translate all that you had observed into what you call your Birdhead World.

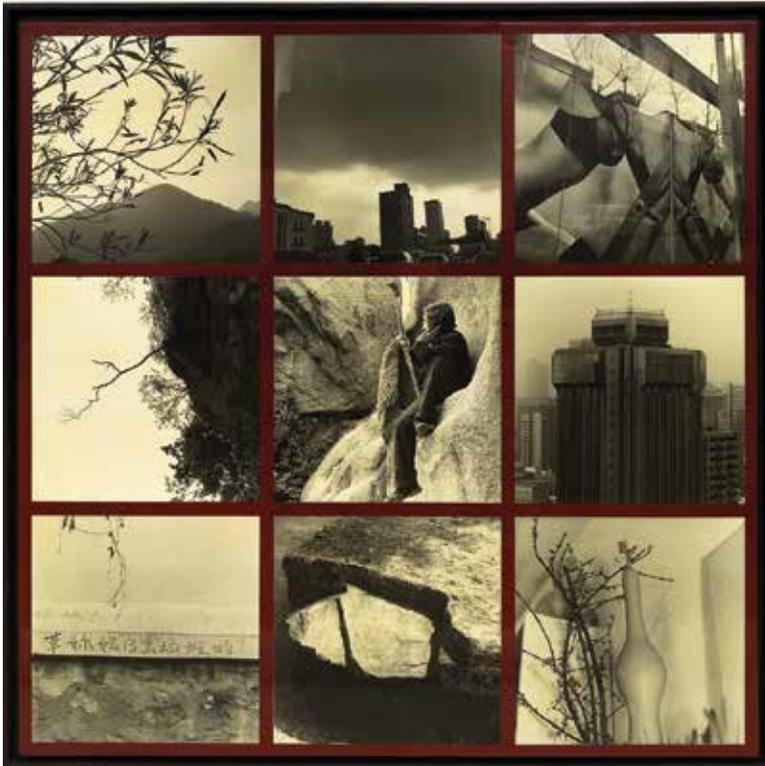
**Ji Weiyu:** Ideally, yes!

**Alexandra Grimmer:** In reality, the heroes of your photos are always people from your milieu— friends, artist colleagues. Why is this? The streets of Shanghai would also offer you a wealth of interesting faces.

**Ji Weiyu:** We aren't documentary photographers and the faces in the street don't represent the subject of our work. It is much more likely to be the trees in the street. We don't use the camera in the same way as a professional photographer. But, more than anything else, the faces of strangers in the street have yet to awaken our interest.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** When other artists photograph people and places this is often considered a form of documentation in which it is possible to follow a certain narrative. In your case there is no such logical derivation. The only trace that can be found is the relationship with you yourselves. Hence, all that you are translating into the Birdhead World is your own particular perspective of something. This means that the exhibition title *Welcome to Birdhead World* is a logical consequence. When did you first use this title?

**Ji Weiyu:** It has existed since the first Birdhead exhibition in ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai, in 2005.



Birdhead, *For a Bigger Photo*, 2015, gelatin silver print, lacquer, grass cloth, ramie cloth, paint, wood, 125 x 125 cm. Courtesy of ShanghART Gallery and Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** Your most recent series of works are the collages, which you began in 2016, and which you have since intensively developed further. Some of the images in these collages already appeared in earlier pieces such as in the series of lacquer works *For a Bigger Photo* (2015) or *The Century's Last Two Heroes* (2018).<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that in these works you developed your own prints in the darkroom, some many years

Birdhead, *The Century's Last Two Heroes*, 2018, gelatin silver print, acrylic colour, wood frame, Plexiglass, 13 x 19.5 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.

ago, these new works bring together much of the oeuvre produced by Birdhead since its beginnings in the early 2000s.

The vintage prints are enhanced in the collages with the addition of new elements—calligraphy, colour, or a wide range of materials and special surfaces. What led you to produce this series of works?

**Song Tao:** In these works we are happy to cut or tear up our own photos and insert them into a new context with other photographs that can often be derived from a completely different situation, or from another year or location. If you examine them more closely many of the details in the photos you will see that none are completed works; some show blemishes caused by imperfect rinsing in the darkroom. But for us they are also perfect and very beautiful as they are. These details also could have been fully intentional back then as part of an experiment—or they can be individual details from a photo that we over-dimensionally enlarged in order to investigate the resolution. All these photos are the result of our long experience in hand developing images and of experimentation in the darkroom; they come from a large drawer full of rubbish in which we have always thrown our test prints.

Birdhead, *No. 2019-SS-028-B012*, 2019, gelatin silver print, Chinese ink, acrylic paint, copper ink, staples, resin, wood frame, 24.8 x 29.5 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



In the early years we spent a lot of time experimenting in the darkroom. We didn't know back then that we would use these test prints to later make new works. Our assistants have always known that we never throw anything away. This is why we still have every test print that we have made since the first time we worked in a studio with a darkroom back in 2005.

Birdhead, *Crazy Bird-No. 44*, 2017, gelatin silver print, calligraphy and ink stamp, wet mounted on basswood, elmwood frame, 26 x 19 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** In the work, for example, that includes the image of a beautiful woman: is that a photo from the *Today* series?

**Ji Weiyu:** No, it's from the rubbish. This photo doesn't just come from *Today*.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** Am I right in saying that it comes from another period around 2013?

**Ji Weiyu:** Yes, more or less, but there is no particular reason why the collage contains this photo. It simply comes from the rubbish drawer—which contains a lot of stuff!

**Alexandra Grimmer:** But in that case why did you choose to use it now?

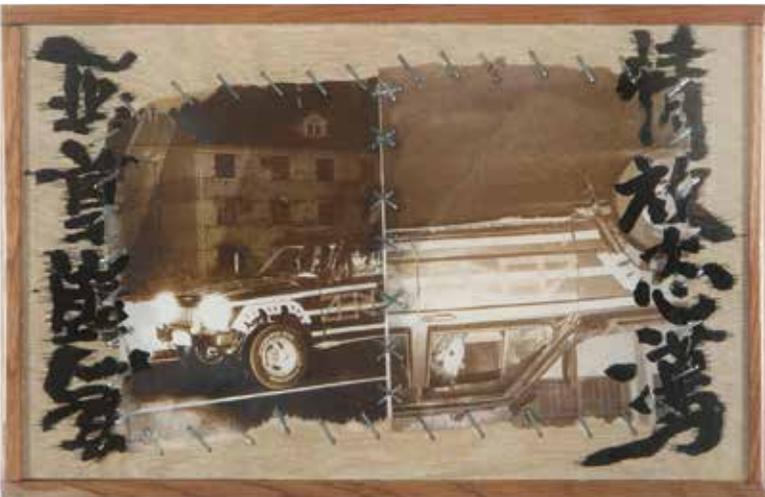
**Ji Weiyu:** It's just like with red wine: when the right moment has arrived you open the bottle. [Laughs.]

**Song Tao:** Yes, that's exactly how it is!

**Ji Weiyu:** Sometimes things simply emerge over a certain period and then we decide. For example, one of us might combine two photographs in an open frame (in a certain format) and then, the next time the other one of us passes by, sees the arrangement, and maybe makes a change or two. It's like a



Birdhead, *Crazy Bird–No. 2019-SS-034-B018*, 2019, gelatin silver print, acrylic paint, copper nails, staples, wood frame, Plexiglass, 24.5 x 29 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



Birdhead, *Crazy Bird–No. 2019-SS-014-A010*, 2019, gelatin silver print, Chinese ink, staples, resin, wood frame, 17.5 x 26.5 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.

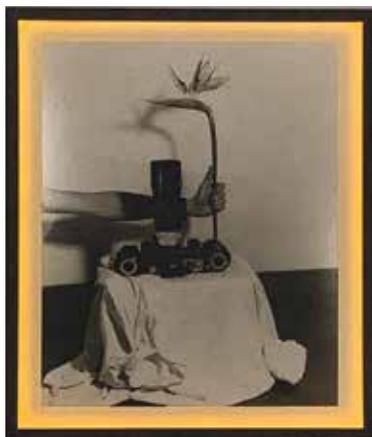
silent dialogue within the studio that can last several days. It means that the eventual outcome is the perfect coordination of all the various elements that comprise the image and the result of the work of two pairs of eyes.

**Song Tao:** We like experimenting with the confrontation between works of different types, such as the combination of objects like the works with a lacquered surface—which have emerged from long processes—with other objects like the small collages, which can be the product of short and spontaneous moments. It is the mixing of these works that for us creates suspense. This is exactly how we approached the exhibition at Schiffamtsgasse 11 in Vienna, *Welcome to Birdhead World Again. Vienna 2018. I Dream of Pinwheels.*<sup>2</sup>

These perfectly arranged photographic portraits, for example, are the result of extensive studio sessions and complex settings, and were presented here in metal frames with LED lighting strips, or, for example, the lacquer work showing the woman whose arm we interrupted and embellished with a piece

of a plant. When hanging the exhibition we combined these objects with the small collages that had been created in a punk style; we superimposed the individual elements upon each other by deciding about their format and even by adding elements such as acrylic paint or calligraphy.

Birdhead, *Dreamed Breeze-10* (detail), 2018, black-and-white print and silk mounted on aluminum, iron frame with black varnish, LED strip lighting, 68 x 52.5 x 4.8 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



It's like confronting punk or rock music with a piece of classical music that has to be studied and that can be interpreted only via a process of refining. Rock music isn't improved by being worked on for three months. It has to be there in its immediacy. In the case of classical music, on the other hand, time is clearly required for both rehearsal and preparation. The Birdhead World is home to both punk and

classical. It is precisely this multi-layered quality that we are seeking to achieve in our work.

We don't want to create something one-dimensional, but, rather, something that enables all these layers to take form. This is like calligraphy, which is only effective when seen in its entirety: The removal of a single character reduces the expressiveness and the work has its full impact only when seen as a whole.

Birdhead, *Crazy Bird-No Jing Zhe-07*, 2018, gelatin silver print, calligraphy and ink stamp, copper nails, Plexiglass, elmwood frame, 26.5 x 33 cm. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



**Ji Weiyu:** It is not a question here of whether something requires three months or three minutes—that is completely unimportant. The fact is that something created in three minutes can be just as perfect as another work that has emerged over a period of three months.

The starting point for the lacquer work of *Dreamed Breeze-11* was that we found this photograph of the woman<sup>3</sup> and this led to the question of the surface: This object was covered with a coat of lacquer while the photograph itself was laminated onto a wooden panel with the help of a special textile material. This is a traditional Chinese technique that goes back over a thousand years: to a time when photography didn't exist.<sup>4</sup> What we are doing here is combining this old technique with photography and, hence, with our current era, with today. This process-based work and this relationship with historical time, with time itself, is a direction that has become very important to us.

The drying of the various layers of the lacquer works alone requires three months. But for the collages we might only need three minutes; we use acrylic adhesive and the works quickly reach the stage at which just the frame and the Plexiglas still have to be added.



**Alexandra Grimmer:** You started to develop these collages during a period when you were travelling widely—you showed a 15-metre-long work at Art Basel Unlimited in June 2016,<sup>5</sup> the solo exhibition in Zurich, our Swiss project in the former baroque cloister,<sup>6</sup> the residency in Milan, combined with your exhibition in Gluck 50, also in Milan, in May 2017, the studio residency and exhibition in Belgrade,<sup>7</sup> Serbia, after which each of you crossed America by car, and

the participation in the Shenzhen Biennale. That all happened in a period of less than two years between June 2016 and the end of 2017 and was followed in 2018 by our residency project in Austria with the road trips in January and June and then the exhibition in November.

**Song Tao:** In 2017 we also had to move out from our old studio. Such a lot was happening, and it is perhaps precisely for this reason that we had the idea of looking back on earlier times with the help of the old photographs from the darkroom. This helped us to “find back to life again” and refocus on Birdhead.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** It was also during 2016 and 2017 that we started to talk about the *Off Space* project in Vienna. You only saw the exhibition space

*Birdhead, Passions Bloom Ambitions from Vagina-23*, 2016, black-and-white inkjet photographs, tilia plywood, grass cloth, lacquer, gold foil, Chinese traditional wet mounting technique, 502 x 1502 cm (in 138 pieces); main image 240 x 480 x 6cm (in 4 pieces); small images 61 x 92 cm (in 134 pieces), installation view at Art Basel Unlimited, 2016. Courtesy of ShnghART Gallery and Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.

Left: *Birdhead, Dreamed Breeze-11*, 2018, gelatin silver print, lacquer, grass cloth, ramie cloth, 65 x 32 x 2.5 cm; pinwheel, silk print on transparent acrylic sheet, ink and calligraphy on wood box, intake fan, LED light, tripod, 70 x 33 x 33 cm, installation view at Schiffamtsgasse 11, Vienna. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.

Birdhead, *Dreamed Breeze-8*, 2018, gelatin silver print, lacquer, grass cloth, ramie cloth, 68 x 52.5 x 4.8 cm; pinwheel, silk print on transparent acrylic sheet, ink and calligraphy on wood box, intake fan, LED light, tripod, 70 x 33 x 33 cm, installation view at Schiffamtsgasse 11, Vienna. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



Birdhead, *Dreamed Breeze-3*, 2018, gelatin silver print and silk mounted on aluminum, iron frame with black varnish and LED strip light, 65 x 32 x 2.5 cm; pinwheel, silk print on transparent acrylic sheet, ink drawing and calligraphy on wood box, intake fan, LED light, tripod, 70 x 33 x 33 cm, installation view at ShanghART Beijing. Courtesy of ShanghART Gallery and Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



in Schiffamtsgasse once during your visit to Vienna in April 2017. You sat down and had one of your meetings in Shanghainese. After just a couple of minutes you explained to me that you wanted to stage an exhibition there. What made you sure about that decision so quickly?

**Song Tao:** We both like Vienna and found the space interesting. You know that my first visit to the city was back in 2007 for the exhibition at mumok,<sup>8</sup> Vienna is a good place for Birdhead.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** You developed a completely new type of work for this recent exhibition in Austria. Objects rendered visible by their own light and the projection of their shadows on the wall. The result was a group of electrically driven, folded pinwheels that transmitted their message via the wind, generated shadows, and subdivided the walls through their movement.

The pinwheels are made from Birdhead photos printed on transparent, coloured two-millimetre acrylic sheets, which encircle the images on the wall and their surrounding shadows and bring the wall to life through their pre-programmed cycles of movement and gentle LED colours. The result is a highly sensual installation. How did you arrive at the idea?

**Song Tao:** Above all, we didn't have a large budget so the exhibition had to be cheap. Hence, we knew that we could only make small works that could easily be transported to Europe yet would still have a significant impact on the fourteen-metre-long and eight-metre-high wall. It was this that led to the idea of the pinwheels.



In contrast to the work at Art Basel Unlimited, where the long wall could be seen from a distance and, as a result, the work could be considered as a whole, the space in Vienna had the same large wall but the maximum distance between wall and viewer was five metres. Even if one stepped out into the courtyard this distance would remain inadequate. This is why small works was such a

suitable concept—the details could be inspected from close up combined with the shadows of different sizes that connected the ceiling with the walls.

*Birdhead, installation view of Welcome to Birdhead World Again. Vienna 2018. I Dream of Pinwheels, Schiffamtsgasse 11, Vienna. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.*

**Ji Weiyu:** Everyone has personal associations with the works in Vienna—to which we added other elements: The question of whether the pinwheels turn faster or slower or the sound of the wind as it is captured by microphones built into each individual object and directly reproduced via small loudspeakers. All of this is capable of awakening emotions in the viewer.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** In a text from the 1970s about the works that he created jointly with the German/Swiss artist Dieter Roth, the Austrian painter Arnulf Rainer writes of the luxury of being able to pass the work on to another artist when one is unable to find a solution oneself.<sup>9</sup> Given that something perceived by one artist as a problem is not usually perceived as such by another is a simple way of resolving the situation and then the work finds its way back to Rainer.

You two have already worked together for over fifteen years without a break. Are you using the possibility of sharing each other's problems, or have you already known each other so long that the problems of one Birdhead automatically also become the problems of the other Birdhead? Do you spend much time discussing such things?

Birdhead, installation view of *Welcome to Birdhead World Again. Vienna 2018. I Dream of Pinwheels*, Schiffamtsgasse 11, Vienna. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.



**Ji Weiyu:** Of course we discuss a lot! The motivation behind this cooperation between the Austrian and the German artists is equally relevant for us. But it is also possible that, unlike in our case, the Austrian painter had set himself the task of solving the problems in his work as a result of which he was open to the experiment. We started to work together for reasons of mutual friendship and appreciation and without already having any sort of formal problems in our artistic practice, let alone the need to search for a solution. Of course there are always problems, whether one works together or alone, but these simply have to be solved on the basis of the same values of friendship and respect.

**Song Tao:** Each of us has a highly complex personality and the fact that our personalities come together in our work means that this complexity is multiplied. There are so many elements in our work, from humour to satire or elegance, because it is fed by both our personalities.

**Alexandra Grimmer:** There are three very special and expensively produced Birdhead books. These are purely photographic books, which are completely devoid of text and which you designed yourselves. Why do you enjoy producing photographic books?

**Ji Weiyu:** We take so many photos. Producing a book is a wonderful opportunity to use them.

**Song Tao:** Producing a book is also a good way of working that allows me to organize my ideas. To organize my ideas as a means of knowing how the photos can be used and, subsequently, how they can be used to produce works.

**Ji Weiyu:** A book is also one of the best platforms for photography. We are actually working on a new America book after our road trip in autumn 2017.<sup>10</sup> The starting point was a wall of photographs, which were arranged in a way that they mimicked the form of a mountain reaching into the sky.<sup>11</sup>



Birdhead, sixty-two photographs from the unbound USA book arranged on the wall, 2017–19. Courtesy of Birdhead Studio, Shanghai.

The pages of the book are arranged in the same order as the photographs on the wall, from top left to bottom right. Each double-page spread contains just half of each photograph. This means that, firstly, the layout of the book is the result of this restricted and, at the same time, random sequence of pages and, secondly—and equally—that the book is an independent work.

**Song Tao:** The matrix that was created in the first step provides both the constraints and, at the same time, the challenge as we structure and condition or develop the book further. We are very interested in the notion of editing such “randomness” and “restriction.” Now, for the first time, we have a book that links the matrix-based work to the book itself. It is the act of bookbinding that best enables one to understand what Birdhead is seeking to achieve in this work. Once the book has been returned to individual pages (or unbound) it can be laid out again as the matrix and one can see what the images look like next to each other.

**Ji Weiyu:** After disassembling it (the book), it feels as if one has put together a treasure map. This is funny, right?

#### Notes

1. Eight written characters, each of one syllable, and each of which in this case signifies a word in Chinese.
2. Schiffamtsgasse 11 is the former Kunstraum Bernsteiner (the exhibition space by the Viennese collector Alois Bernsteiner), and today the studio of the photographer Lies Maculan, who offered her space in exchange for an exhibition that took place in March 2018 in Shanghai.
3. The portrait of a woman is from a series Birdhead conceived of in Milan, Italy, during their 2017 residency at Gluck 50. 我梦有风 (Dreamed Breeze) literally translates as “In my dream there is wind.”
4. In earlier times all better-quality crockery was produced using a lacquer technique in which the surface is very hard and resistant. Only later, with the development of ovens in which objects could be baked at very high temperatures, did the manufacture of porcelain become much simpler and possible in greater quantities than permitted by the time-consuming lacquer technique.
5. Art Basel Unlimited 2016, Basel, Switzerland.
6. *The Crocodile in the Pond: 11 Artists from Shanghai* at St. Urban Abbey, Switzerland, June 2016.
7. *When the Other meets the Other Other*, Cultural Center of Belgrade, Serbia, curated by Biljana Ciric.
8. *China Facing Reality*, mumok, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2007–2008.
9. Arnulf Rainer, “Duetto, Duette und so weiter,” in *Hirndrang*, ed. Otto Breicha (Salzberg: Verlag Galerie Welz, 1980), 132–136.
10. Ji Weiyu drove from San Francisco to New York, where he met Song Tao, who then drove the car back to San Francisco.
11. Birdhead likes to arrange their photographs in large groups in the form of wall-mounted matrices. This results in formations that merge from one photograph to the next to create a choreography of moments of greater and lesser density and intensification.