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Installation view of "After party: Collective Dance and Individual Gymnastics" at Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2017. Courtesy Blindspot Gallery.

AFTER PARTY: COLLECTIVE DANCE AND INDIVIDUAL GYMNASTICS

YE EUN NAM
BLINDSPOT GALLERY

HONG KONG CHINA

Still wrestling with the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the burdens present in modern China are reflected upon in Blindspot Gallery's latest group exhibition "After Party: Collective Dance and Individual Gymnastics." Five contemporary artists look into China's rapid development and resulting social changes through explorations of dance, both collectively and as an expression of individuality.

The principles of collective dance and individual performance were surveyed through Leo Li Chen's curatorial inspiration taken from the French philosopher, semiotician and theorist, Roland Barthes (1915–1980). Community dance scenes were recounted in Barthes' diary entries written while in Beijing on a government-organized tour in 1974, two years before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Posthumously published in 2011, "Travels in China" reveals Barthes' comments on witnessing communal dance in public parks, factories, town square and schools as a residual activity harking back to the days of the Cultural Revolution.



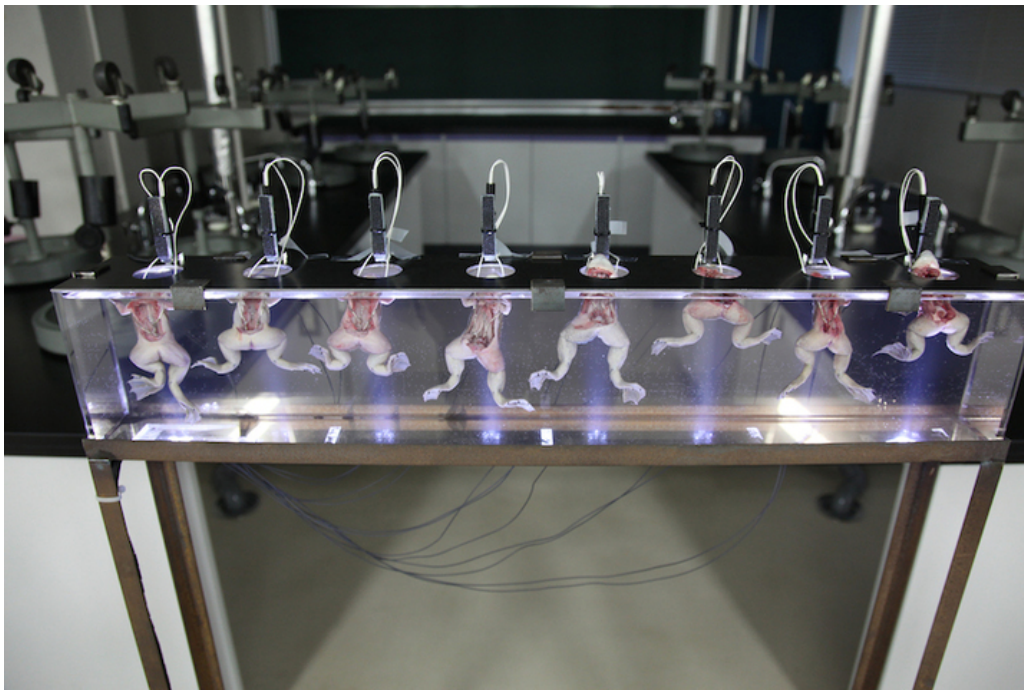
HAO JINGBAN, *Off Takes*, 2016, still from single-channel video: 21 min 18 sec. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.

Hao Jingban's new video work *Off Takes* (2016) closely examines the correlation between dance and moments in China's history. The piece is divided into three thematic fragments: a birthday party, outtakes from her previous project "Beijing Ballroom" (2012–15) of archival dance tutorial footage and clips of a routine carried out by two contemporary dancers directed and recorded by the artist. Hao examines deeper implications of dance in China as it was historically used to reflect political agendas. The discarded video footage used in the work is extracted from the Republic era (1912–49), particularly during the two waves of ballroom dance that occurred in the 1950s and late '70s. Later on, ballroom dancing was deemed forbidden by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the Cultural Revolution as it was seen as decadent and unproductive. One of the archival dance tutorials features a middle-aged couple practicing a routine that seems rigid and artificially buoyant; this was contrasted with the carefree body movements of people attending a present-day birthday party. Hao's video comments on how this leisure activity became a propaganda tool for the Chinese government.

Re-interpreting the opera ballet "The Red Detachment of Women" (1964) popularized during the Cultural Revolution, New York-based artist Jen Liu staged an adaptation of the story in her single-channel video, *The Pink Detachment* (2015). The original opera tells the story of a peasant girl who flees her village and oppressive landlord, and goes to join the Red Detachment brigade—an all-female extension of the communist Red Army. She rises up to defeat her former aggressor and liberates the people. In an attempt to bridge "The Red Detachment of Women" with contemporary audiences, Liu reframed the original opera, while keeping portions of the original music and choreography in tact. For the present-day viewers, the blood red emblem of communist China has been diluted with white, the color symbolizing capitalism; the resulting pink hue, as referenced in the work's title, alludes to the notion that the strict ideology of communist China has indeed softened. Reflecting current issues of capitalism, the video's narrative focuses on a worker's efficiency within a meat factory that results in unethical handling of the product. Liu highlights the way in which both the factory and the country's ideology have been compromised due to neoliberalism.



JEN LIU, *The Pink Detachment*, 2015, still from HD single-channel video: 19 min 39 sec. Courtesy Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, and Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam.



LU YANG, *Reanimation! Underwater Zombie Frog Ballet!*, 2011, still from single-channel video: 6 min 6 sec. Courtesy Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, and Beijing Commune.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, violent jolts from frog corpses are seen in Lu Yang's video mischievously titled *Reanimation! Underwater Zombie Frog Ballet!* (2011). The frog cadavers are suspended in a tank, evocative of a science experiment. The lifeless creatures dance to a rhythm sent via manual electric shock to synchronize their movements manipulated by the beat of a MIDI (Music Instrument Digital Interface) controller. The electronic composition that the frogs convulse to can be heard via headphones available for the visitor. The inescapable sound within the earpiece along with the grotesque visual created an uncomfortable viewing experience. The visitor becomes a witness to an act that similarly resembles that of an unwillingly political participant.

Like Barthes, these artists have used their own creative methodologies to comment on the ideological framework instilled by China. Barthes, however, only had a brief encounter with the complex and developing nation, whereas these contemporary artists come from and continuously engage with its collective history, and the psychological leftovers from its rapid modernization.

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"After Party: Collective Dance and Individual Gymnastics" is on view at Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, until March 4, 2017.

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