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Mark Harris  
Utopian Bands and Related Works  
The Weston Art Gallery, Cincinnati  
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Attempting to jump-start a better world, if not a better music scene, artist Mark Harris and alternative music promoter Yang Licai convened a night of bands at 2kolegas club in Beijing on Bastille Day 2006. Harris's video "Utopian Bands" shows him introducing that night's upcoming festivities, citing the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century writers on utopian communities, though there is no mention of event participants appreciating the same texts. While watching documents of that memorable evening and listening to dozens of Chinese songs accessible on a C.D. sampler wall, one is immediately transported via *their* high-tech exports to *their* region of the world, which seems eerily familiar. Viewers cannot assume, however, that these musicians join bands and perform publicly in order to taste freedom or to express individuality, lest one risk continuing the narcissistic Orientalist's tendency of confining Others to the observers' categories. Most likely, these Chinese musicians have their own reasons for playing gigs or participating in one another's bands, which elude any we're likely to infer by watching them perform.

Trapped as we are in our mindset of liberty, it's difficult to imagine that music, however western or typically Chinese (whatever "Chinese" could mean to one billion plus people), could be cherished for reasons other than its libratory powers, such as music's cognitive benefits (enhances mathematical aptitudes) or its value as a breathing exercise (akin to T'ai Chi). Research shows, however, that those values we Westerners most admire are often unacceptable elsewhere, so there's no good reason to imagine their utopia as resembling ours, even as we admire their outfits, hairdos, accessories, hand gestures, musical attitudes, dispositions, and instruments. Could this be mimicking run amok? It thus remains to be seen whether Chinese musicians seek autonomy or just enjoy performing: manipulating people's emotions, attracting greater audiences, feeding fan frenzy, or "playing out" among friends.

In the absence of an anti-institutional DIY mindset, making music and organizing gigs may have little political import as it would for young Western musicians. If this were Latin America, ca. 1970, we could credit their efforts as courageous acts of defiance in the face of autocratic governments, especially since they described their projects that way. I'm not so sure that those values which westerners happily project onto everything that looks "freeing," work here. I don't mean to downplay this event or to spurn its ensuing video, but to recommend viewers brainstorm alternative motivations which are veiled by band members who appear to travel in the same fashion loop as we do. Perhaps we are rather moving in their loop, sporting *their* look, just as we unwittingly adopt Japanese fashion trends. Either way, "Utopian Bands" conveys Harris's keen visual sense, as he trains the camera's lens on the suburban motel-like site, the bands' instruments, parked cars, beer kegs, participants' outfits, and body art. So what was Harris's artistic role? Part impresario, part promoter, part party planner, and part liberator, he clearly aimed to document a memorable gig.

For over a decade, Harris has veiled his paintings in hand-cut paper, so it's not surprising that China's hand-cut artistry fascinates him. For this exhibition, Harris presented his notable collection of vintage Chinese paper-cuts in a vitrine. Harris also tried his hand at Chinese paper cutting. He hand-cut images of the six bands (from video stills), four at a time out of red paper (Chinese artisans routinely cut 100 sheets at a time). He also scanned video stills into a computer that laser-cuts printing plates, enabling him to print these same images with red ink.

In recent years, there has been no shortage of artists filming exposés of urban youths' escapist activities. One immediately recalls videos by Rineke Dijkstra, Gillian Wearing or Phil Collins documenting young club goers. Unlike those artists who reduce their subjects to objects,

Harris shows the bands intent on making something happen, detailing their activities from set-up to last gig. Rather than shine a bright light on them, inviting his audience to "laugh at" or "applaud" their efforts, as the case may be, Harris went so far as to pair Beijing's enormous population with the enormity in popularity of its "unsigned" musical groups, who completely fill the wall's CD sampler. Harris is clearly amazed by the quality of local bands, the sheer volume of unsigned groups managing to survive without record deals, as well as the variety of musical styles. This exhibition is thus a kind of contemporary musical journey through Beijing, a view no tourist would have the chance to experience, unless his/her purpose were to curate a night of bands, as Harris did. Struck by their endurance and sense of community, he located a utopia.