

# ArtReview Asia



**Wolfgang Tillmans**

**What's on during Art Basel Hong Kong  
Shanzhai special**



# Reflect

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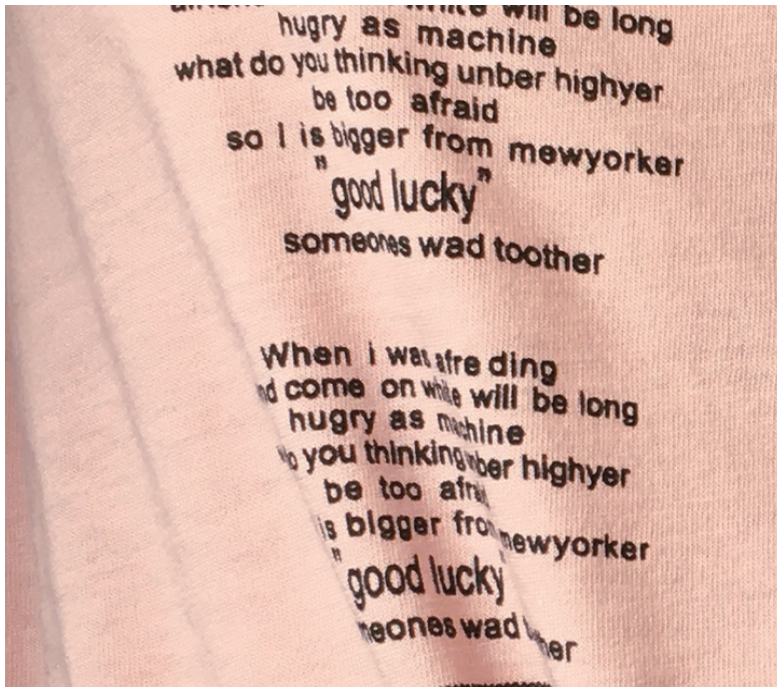
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Who is she? Ensconced in a sea of rupturous text, mired somewhere along the Gulf Shores, where numerous dollars have been lost to bogus claims, she emerges defiant. Glamorous, even. ‘Reflect’, she says, lowering her aviator shades, and ‘ARE U READY 4?’ before trailing off into an oblivion of keyboard commands and erratic punctuation.

In the Pearl River Delta, where an abundance of the world’s goods are made for export, alternate markets circulate counterfeit goods known as shanzhai. As the existing literature notes, in Chinese shanzhai originally referred to a mountain hamlet where outlaws would stockpile their goods, alluding to both a subversive rebelliousness and a playful rejection of the very notion of a single, original owner or author. Consider that these ‘fakes’

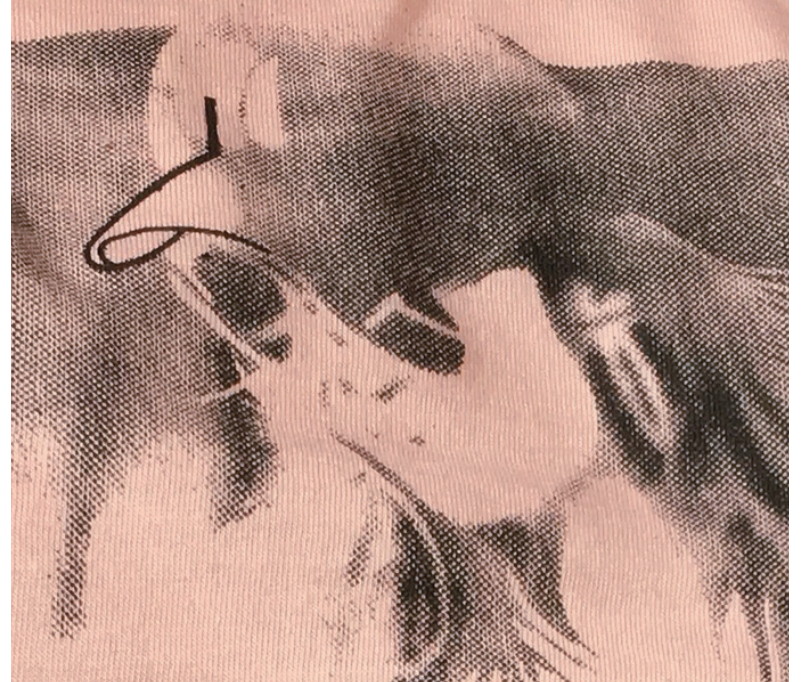


might themselves be constructed in the very same factory as their ‘real’ counterparts — with language more original than the ‘original’.

On this shanzhai T-shirt, a drama of the global supply chain unfolds alongside supra-sensical musings on ownership, victimhood and gossip. In the cacophonous valley of the counterfeit, other tales of satisfaction and desire are spun from the webbed tangles of power and production protocol. Reflect. The shanzhai garment demands a moment for floating contemplation amidst swimming

signifiers, revelling in the imaginative potential of the bootleg encounter.

Following Byung-Chul Han’s recent analysis of shanzhai as witnessed extending into ‘all areas of life in China’, we here focus on one aspect in particular: the global proliferation of the language of the shanzhai garment. In its mimicry and mutation of name brands, shanzhai text

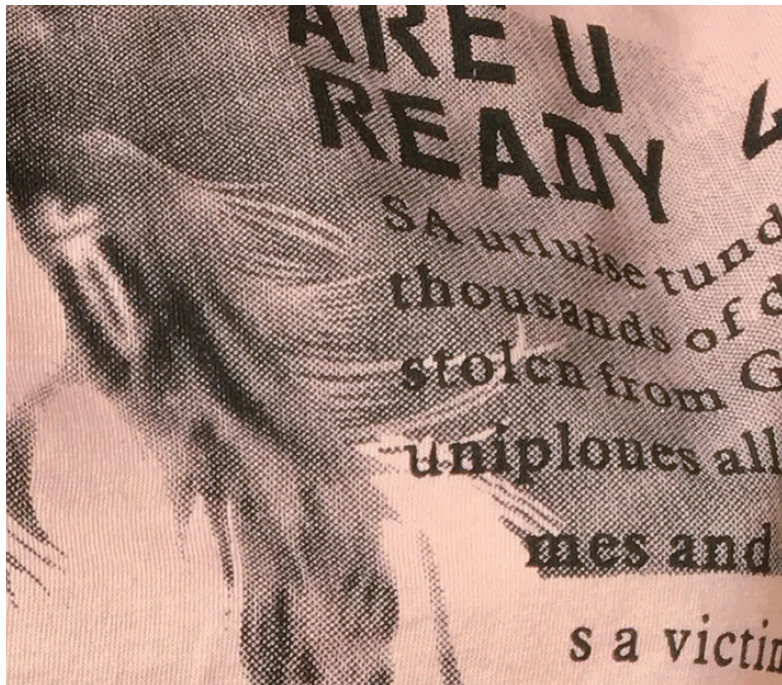


purports to consummate a fantasy of luxury, while the material of its fabrics and phrases, interwoven with a seeming nonsense of textual allusions, indicates a more complicated tapestry of relations. The Shanzhai Lyric project is an attempt to situate this errant text within discourses on postcolonialism, pleasure and failure, and to find a place among a constellation of artists and thinkers pursuing liberation from the coercion of capital and joy in the illegible.

In *The Racial Imaginary* (2015) Farid Matuk asks, ‘How might a poet occupying an othered position today use such strategies to focus their texts, and us, on “what is at issue”?’ and points towards the principle of *kairos* as ‘a visionary strategy in that it requires one to step, if only slightly, outside of the ideology of dominant modes of perception in order to make these into tools’. The Greek term *kairos* finds its roots in both weaving and archery, referring to the moment that allows one to effectively make



use of an opening. Just as the shuttle of the loom awaits a gap in the threads of a growing textile to slip through, and ‘the archer cannot aim directly but must instead calculate an arc that will bend, eventually, to her target’, so



the shanzhai text(ile) activates the literal material of its circumstances with finesse to navigate a ‘chaotic accumulation of positions’ towards the completion of its own project. This mode harkens back to an art-historical lineage within Chinese culture rooted in a conception of law as a tactical response to a constantly shifting situation rather than a single, static position. In this way, the shanzhai lyric unsettles Western definitions of authenticity, obsessions with individual authorship and emphasis on the primacy of an original.

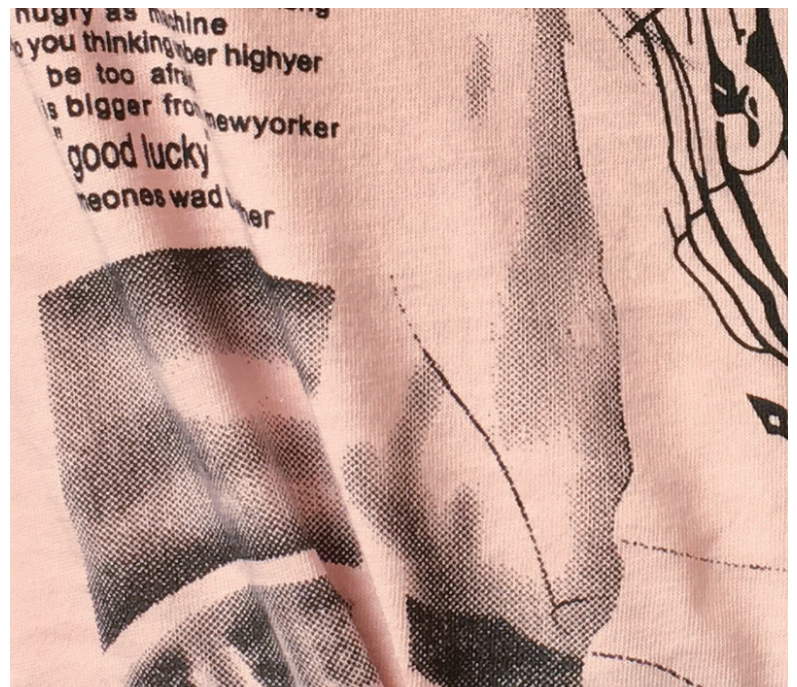
The strategies of the shanzhai lyric mirror this shared root in both weaving and archery: knitting together strategies of communication with strategies of resistance (à la Robin Hood’s preferred technique of taking down the rich and powerful by arrow from an outlaw hamlet), the kairotic imagination of the shanzhai lyric bends the language of dominant ideologies and modes of perception so as to demonstrate both the appeal and the contradictions of capitalist production.

In contrast to the more audible contradictions of other ideological jargons, Roland Barthes writes that ‘the

(thereby much higher) pressure of capitalist language is not paranoid, systematic, argumentative, articulated: it is an implacable stickiness, a doxa, a kind of unconscious: in short, the essence of ideology’. The shanzhai lyric makes palpable this implacable stickiness, makes conscious the ideological contradictions of capitalism embedded in its tongues. Further, the synthetic stickiness of the materials used in shanzhai garments betray something of their provenance and the artifice of their heavily manufactured claims.

The shanzhai lyric is a poem written out of necessity from an economy of means. The shiny letters that make it so attractive also serve to shield it. A protective gloss both attracts and deflects attention from a content that thwarts sense, in whose fractured words and symbols a ‘mortality resides’.

For artist Paul Chan, kairos is not only the will to seize an opportunity for radical imagining, but, vitally, it occurs at a point of utmost vulnerability. For the arrow to enter, it must pass through a space where aliveness is most vibrant



in its proximity to the end. Drawing attention to the conditions of labour that are intrinsic to the fabrication of fashion fantasy, shanzhai phrases break through the codes of hierarchy, revealing the capacity of language to bend and to be reconfigured.

Sustained engagement with the resultant illegibility is a practice of radical empathy, of opening towards the seemingly nonsensical as a guide in new modes of becoming. As Gavin Jantjes writes in *A Fruitful Incoherence* (1999), ‘Art offers an adventure into the unknown, or an engagement with the unfamiliar, in order to disclose, discover and disseminate information about the here and now... The harvest we reap from these incoherent encounters is a form of knowledge about, or empathy with, the strange, the different, the new.’ ‘In order to bring colonialism to an end,’ writes theorist Jack Halberstam, ‘one must be willing to inhabit the crazy nonsensical ranting of the other.’

Shanzhai lyrics often have the quality of crazed love song crossed with an urgent, manic rant. They express a devotion to alterity and love for the other, which relies upon maintaining a certain distance and difference to allow for this unceasing reaching. A constant resistance to crystallisation in a fixed form becomes an antidote to capitalism’s will to commodify. Barthes recognised mass media’s impulse to narrativise love stories as an attempt to close the gap between difference and distance, ultimately reconciling the lover with his/her Other, and therefore with society, as a pacifying antidote to the madness that being in passionate love truly is. In its fragmentary and disordered prose, the shanzhai lyric composes a broken love sonnet of utter madness. That we are able to witness in shanzhai garments points of rupture in language is to get a literal glimpse into the gaping insufficiency of rational meaning.

Shanzhai text imprinted upon shanzhai textile is an accumulation of traces in which design comments on content literally on its content. Continually altering or adding to its appearance, the shanzhai lyric can be understood as an ever-evolving text that grows and changes over time as numerous voices continually reinscribe the site, refusing the idea of a single author or owner. This collaborative project engenders an experience of pure pleasure in text, a mode of reading that itself becomes a form of authorship by further inscribing meanings from and into the ambiguous cross-section of voices, a productive ambiguity in the space between intention and interpretation.

Barthes writes of taking pleasure in literature where ‘two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, the compromise they bring about, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so... everything is attacked, dismantled: ideological structures, intellectual solidarities, the propriety of idioms, and even the sacred armature of syntax (subject/predicate): the text no longer has the sentence for its model; often it is a powerful gush of words, a ribbon of infra-language.’

In the shanzhai lyric we find our kairotic entryway, our pleasure is the pleasure of the ever-moving text. What is this queer jouissance offered by the gush of words at the seam of culture and its destruction, language and its own death, trampling of sacred syntax, bliss in the stumbling, an erotics of erring? The apparent mistakes of the shanzhai text forge a carnivalesque English where high and low are inextricably intertwined and the jester takes joy in aping the self-seriousness of the king. The audience takes joy in the jester’s gibberish, a gibberish that rings more truthful than the king’s static law. Halberstam again:

‘While her failure could be the source of misery and humiliation... it also leads to a kind of ecstatic exposure of the contradictions of a society obsessed with meaningless competition.’ Our shanzhai cover girl plays witness to this ecstatic exposure. Hugry as machine, she navigates the detritus of her environment in which consumption, corruption, warships and longings linger. Boats splinter on the shores of fast fashion. The floating shards of hysteric glamour emit a wail that is at once a guttural battle-cry and blissful Babel.





*The Shanzhai Lyric* is a theoretical inquiry and curatorial project that takes inspiration from the experimental English of shanzhai T-shirts to pursue a larger aesthetic strategy of apparent nonsense as a way to disrupt the relentless forces of commodification and make space for hybrid, liminal and illegible futures. Subsequent installations in *ArtReview Asia* will think through shanzhai as a framing device to look at an array of contemporary artists working with an aesthetic, political and philosophical orientation that embraces a commitment to mutation, error and hybridity, refusal of fixed categories, playful subversion and resistance to global hegemony through humour and slipperiness. These works highlight and elaborate different aspects of what we might call shanzhai tactics by subverting hierarchy through exaggerated mimicry, the poetic juxtaposition of distinct aesthetic traditions and devoted irreverence. This project has previously taken the form of poetry-lectures, publications, installation and archive: @shanzhai\_lyric