

in conversation

Birdhead

WITH CHARLES SCHULTZ

Song Tao and Ji Weiyu go by the moniker Birdhead. Known widely in China and Europe, Birdhead's first major exposure in the United States came this fall when they were included in MoMA's annual *New Photography* exhibition (October 3, 2012 – February 4, 2013). After the opening, the artists came out to the *Brooklyn Rail* headquarters to talk with Managing Art Editor Charles Schultz about photography, Shanghai, and the ancient warrior poet Cao Cao. Their conversation was co-translated by Jesse Coffino-Greenberg and Birdhead's friend Jimmy.



Birdhead, *Welcome to Birdhead World Again*, London, 2012 (Installation Image). Image courtesy of Paradise Row.

CHARLES SCHULTZ (RAIL): Let's start at the beginning. How did you two meet?

BIRDHEAD: We were classmates at Shanghai Technical College in 1998.

RAIL: How did you start collaborating?

BIRDHEAD: Not long after we met, we became very good friends. We graduated from the school in 2000. Then Ji went to London, and I stayed in Shanghai. Four years later, Ji returned and showed me some of the secondhand cameras that he bought there. Right away we started collaborating. It was very simple: we liked taking photos; we liked playing with cameras.

RAIL: Did you study photography at the technical school?

BIRDHEAD: It was really an arts and crafts school—they maybe taught us some technique but nothing more. I looked up a lot of information online and I studied books, mostly from the New York Academy of Photography. There's an anthology, a two-volume set, it's very thick.

RAIL: Did you have any teachers or mentors that helped you on your way?

BIRDHEAD: Not really. We helped each other.

RAIL: What kind of cameras were you using when you began collaborating?

BIRDHEAD: All film cameras. We like using beautiful cameras. [Laughs.] But our definition of beauty is very wide. Ugly to a certain point is also beautiful. Ugly to a certain degree is a kind of beauty.

RAIL: Do you still use any of the same cameras?

BIRDHEAD: We use some of them. But you know, we started off shooting only 35 millimeter when we didn't have any money, and then we moved on to 120, and then to 4 by 5. When we got to 4 by 5, we stopped. 8 by 10 is too big! [Laughs.]

RAIL: I understand you print your own pictures. How does the darkroom process work for you?

BIRDHEAD: Standard. The more that we use it, the more annoying that it becomes. We're actually thinking about finding someone else to do it. But our requirements for a darkroom are very standard. We don't need complex technology. We take a negative, we project it onto the surface, and we print it in a very standard fashion. No retouching. A lot of people, when they print, think: This area needs more light; this area needs less light. They burn and dodge. We just give it all to the chemicals. Whatever the chemicals think is the way it should be, that's the way it is. [Laughs.] There's a specific amount of time and a process, and then whatever comes out is the way it should be. And if what comes out is not something that looks good, or it's not right, then we choose a different negative.

RAIL: A different negative altogether?

BIRDHEAD: Yes. Because we take so many pictures—too many pictures, we have many to choose from. That's the way the darkroom works for us.

RAIL: It doesn't seem like you think of your prints as very precious objects.

BIRDHEAD: No. Some photographers treat pictures very precious, but their way of working and our way of working are different. They might take days to get what they consider an okay print. It could take 50 test prints before they make "the good one." But their standard is different from ours. What they consider a good photo is different from what we consider a good photo.

RAIL: What do you consider a good photo?

BIRDHEAD: Take you, for example. If I took a picture of you and showed it to people that knew you, and they knew that it was you; that would be a good photo. That's perfect.

RAIL: Let's talk about your piece in the *New Photography* show, "The Song of Early Spring" (2012). It's composed of 71 black-and-white prints arranged in a grid pattern. They're all the same size except for the large self-portrait in the middle, which is also the only image that includes text. In addition, a pair of rectangular mahogany panels

hangs vertically on top of, and actually obscuring, some of the prints. How did you select these images? Can you tell me about your editing process?

BIRDHEAD: We've always felt that the information in one photograph doesn't satisfy the emotional content that we feel is necessary for a work of art. A lot of photographers oftentimes put a lot of emotion into a single photograph. They'll take objects and arrange them—a bottle here, an apple there—and they'll set it all up so that everything fits into one photograph. Basically, they put the emotional content into one photograph and we put it into many. We react to what we see and there's a reflection—it's almost like a mirror—where we feel a certain thing, then we put that feeling into the photo, and we spread it across many photos. There's a process of what's left on us, is then put back into the photograph, into the group of photos.

RAIL: "The Song of Early Spring" has a lot of emotional content, but the emotion is complex. It isn't just joy and happiness; there's an element of sadness, a sense of despair. Would you agree?

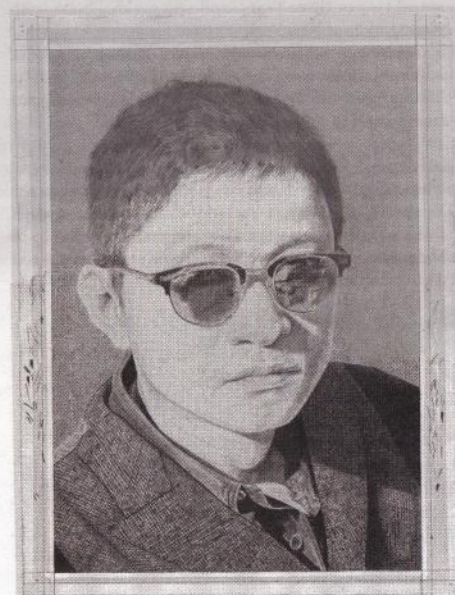
BIRDHEAD: Absolutely, it seems we haven't come to know you in vain! [Laughs.]

RAIL: And, of course, these emotions are rooted in your hometown, Shanghai. Can you talk about how this affective quality occurs in your photographic process, or perhaps in relation to your principle subject, Shanghai?

BIRDHEAD: Everybody has the same emotions. We happen to live in Shanghai, that's where we're from, so our emotions are engaged with that place. When I first started having contact with photography and cameras 10 years ago, and I started looking at photos, I realized that every city has their great photographer. Thinking about it now, it seems natural that in a city of 10,000 or 10,000,000 people, there will always be a few who use one form or another to express their emotions—a poem, a movie, a photograph. Only poetry has a long history, maybe also music and poetry and painting, but photography—like cinema—is very young by comparison.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: That's interesting, one of the things I really appreciated in your piece at MoMA that I had not recognized in your earlier work is the relationship of poetry and music to your pictures. Is this something you tried to establish with "The Song of Early Spring"?

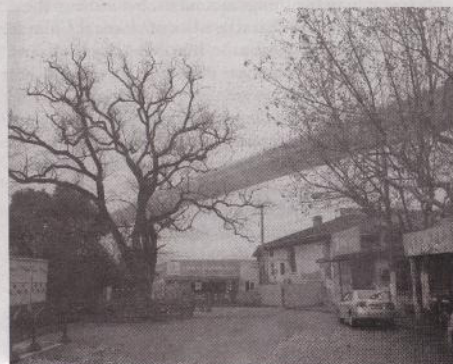
BIRDHEAD: It is something that has gradually become part of our work, yes. We only discover ourselves gradually. When we were young, we had no idea that girls could be known in such a nice way. [Laughs.] We gradually came to understand that too.

RAIL: Can you tell me about the poem that is framed in the mahogany panels? I know it is from a poem by the ancient warrior poet, Cao Cao. What drew you to this poet and what is significant for you about this particular poem?

BIRDHEAD: Cao Cao is very fierce—very great, very fierce. We chose these couple of lines because we felt that they are really appropriate for what we are doing. They come at the end of the verse, and basically say "I was really happy, that's why I wrote this poem." [Laughs.]



Birdhead, *Welcome to Birdhead World Again*, London, 2012 (Installation Image). Image courtesy of Paradise Row.



Birdhead, Image from *The Song of Early Spring*, 2012. Gelatin silver print. Image: 35 7/16 x 42 1/2" (90 x 108 cm). Courtesy the artists and ShanghaiART Gallery, Shanghai.

They're the concluding lines, like a refrain, and it's the same for us. "Today I'm really happy; I'm going to take your picture."

RAIL: Right. But my feeling, as I mentioned earlier, was that the emotional content was more complex than simply saying every picture equals happiness.

BIRDHEAD: There's a discrepancy in the translation between English and Chinese. It doesn't always mean that kind of joy that you would understand. "Shing," is more like a feeling of elevation or pride. It's not that simple as "happy" or "joy." It's kind of a certain emotion reaching a certain point. It could be physical, like the feeling one has right before ejaculation. [Laughs.]

RAIL: Like the threshold between getting drunk and being drunk—up to a point your spirit seems uplifted and then suddenly you're dizzy and sick.

BIRDHEAD: Yes. You haven't reached the climax. But this is just talking about the character "Shing." When you talk about "Shing Xun," that's when you've just ejaculated. That's when you sing those last two lines, "Shing Xun!"

RAIL: Right. So if you've got 71 individual photographs in your MoMA work, I guess that's 71 times you got to sing "Shing Xun!" [Laughs.] Can you tell me about how you arranged these pictures? To me, it looked like there were essentially three distinct formations: a left, a right, and a center.

BIRDHEAD: Yes. The left side is more introspective, it's a little quieter than the right side which is much more extroverted. The center portion is where these two mix.

RAIL: I noticed that on the left side there are close shots of little trees and sticks and things. The right side is where you see big buildings and expansive vistas. There are shots of people too, but the largest print in the whole work is of you two and it's smack in the center. Is this the only photograph of you both in the entire composition?

BIRDHEAD: There are other images with us in them, but we're not together.

RAIL: What about the calligraphy on the wall behind you. Did you write that? And what does it say?

BIRDHEAD: It's our slogan. When we did our first solo show in Shanghai in 2005 the title was *Welcome to Birdhead World*. After that, all of our solo shows are titled *Welcome to Birdhead World Again*. Again and again and again. [Laughs.] The idea came from Marlboro. "Welcome to Marlboro World." [Laughs.] After 2005, the title is always the same, "Welcome to Birdhead World Again." Only the date and location changes.

RAIL: You mentioned earlier that every city has its great photographers. Do you see yourselves as becoming Shanghai's great photographers?

BIRDHEAD: Fuck. Now you've put me in a place where I've got to think of something to say. All I can say is fuck; what's next? [Laughs.] Our luck is pretty good.

RAIL: Well, you've been photographing Shanghai ever since you began Birdhead, right?

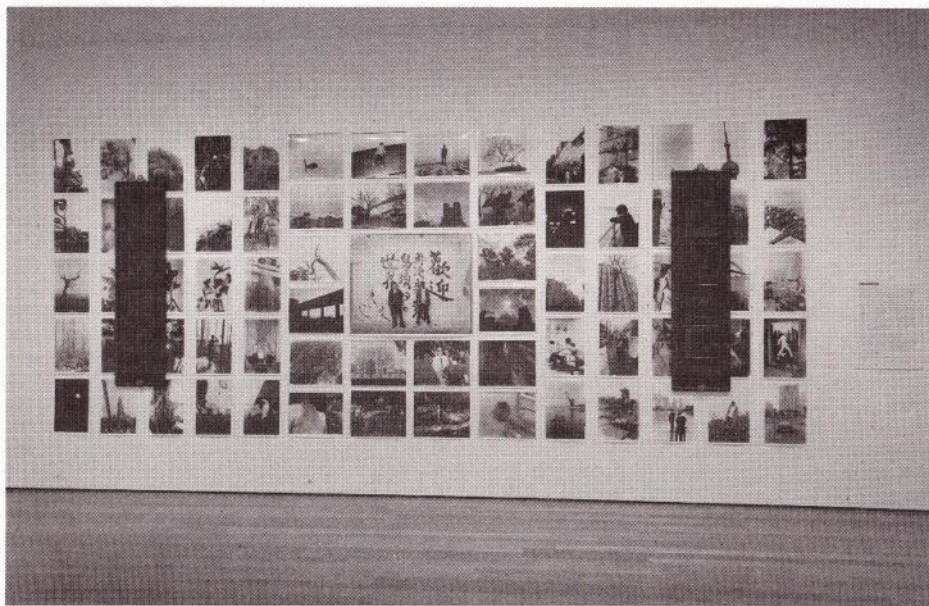
BIRDHEAD: Yes.

RAIL: And do you see yourself continuing to document Shanghai throughout the rest of your career?

BIRDHEAD: Yeah, we will. But whether or not we're documenting Shanghai is actually not that important. We're really just interested in ourselves. So we live in Shanghai, there's nothing Shanghai can do about it. It's really sad for Shanghai. [Laughs.]

RAIL: You've been photographing during an important time in the city's history. There has been intense growth and change as the old city evolves into a modern metropolis. Would you agree?

BIRDHEAD: Of course, that's why I said our luck is pretty good. We live in this time, and so the city is changing



Birdhead, *Welcome to Birdhead World Again*, London, 2012 (Installation Image). Image courtesy of Paradise Row.

around us. From 1949 to 1980, Shanghai didn't really change. It was like somebody said, "don't move," and the city was just frozen. When the reform and opening policy began, Shanghai and Shenzhen were targets for this development, and there was no choice. As we see it, this change is physical, the physical change is happening around us, so that's a physical change for us. If you use that approach to understand yourself, there's nothing that you can change. To work that way, to photograph that way, to look at ourselves that way is like a mirror into ourselves. We've taken a photo in the end as ourselves. At the MoMA opening there was a five-minute introduction and that's what I said, the pictures behind us are us.

RAIL: Are you ever surprised by the pictures you've taken?
BIRDHEAD: Sometimes, yeah. Because the photographic process is fairly lengthy. Sometimes it's two or three months between taking the photo and developing and processing it and then finally seeing the image. If I were to take a picture of you right now taking a breath or smiling, and I were to go back later and look at the photo and it's exactly what I remember, that's the way it should be. If I'm surprised, then there's a little difference between photo memory and my mind's memory.

RAIL: Memory seems like an important aspect of your work. In a city that's transforming as rapidly as Shanghai I would think that the cultural memory would be operating on many different levels. When you photograph your parents or grandparents—older generations—do you sense a difference in their perception of the city, in how they remember and interact with certain places?

BIRDHEAD: Absolutely. My mother and father, if we go to more central areas they'll talk about how the entire architecture has changed even down to the little alleyways. They've all disappeared. The memories of this thing, and the tools we use in our work, there's so much connection. Whatever we photograph is memory.

RAIL: The old mahogany frames, the calligraphy, and the reference to Cao Cao all seem to link your work into a deeper cultural memory, not just of Shanghai, but of China. Do you think this is true?

BIRDHEAD: Yeah, absolutely. Talking about an interest in ourselves again, using only our pictures doesn't satisfy that requirement for a mirror that we're after. We're only

photographing the things around us, but some of these things embody the characteristics of classical Chinese traditions. It's the same as in life; every day has many layers. You experience these periods of incredible—not agony—tragedy? Extreme sadness. You experience extreme sadness or extreme joy, almost succeeding, or getting close to succeeding. These experiences leave a trace on you. And your physical state—the change between the physical state when you're 20 and when you're 30—this is something that everybody must encounter. Many times you'll feel there's nothing you can do to face these things, but you have to continue living. Life has to continue. Regardless, you still have to ejaculate. [Laughs.]

RAIL: I thought it was interesting the way you put the mahogany board over the top of your pictures. That aspect of layering reminded me of the way one poster is put right over another on the street. In New York that's just part of the city's visual fabric.

I'm curious what your thinking was for those pieces.

BIRDHEAD: For a while we have been overlapping photos. For example, at a solo show in London last march we showed "Jingzhe". It includes four photos overlapping. The man says, "Welcome again"—world again. With these, we used thumbtacks to tack them to the wall. Just like people do on the street, just like we did with our work at MoMA.

RAIL: It's been some time since I've seen that kind of casual attitude on display in a *New Photography* exhibition. Typically the photographers that are selected display their work in the conventional museum format: serious, formal, framed, and perfectly mounted.

BIRDHEAD: Photography is basically a technique of "copy, copy, copy." We can make another good print right away; it's not like painting. Photography's core is very different from drawing and painting. It's only when you take advantage of this that photography becomes interesting; that's what's so fun about it.

RAIL: And yet, the piece itself is a unique thing. With that in mind, I'm really curious about the title of the work, "The Song of Early Spring." Can you tell me about it?

BIRDHEAD: Early autumn. It literally translates as "The Thousand Lights of Autumn." No, no, "Thousand Years of Light." No, "A Thousand Autumns of Light." Basically it's meaning is "The Light of Eternity."

RAIL: That sounds like a classical title. Would you say that in some ways, the work is a self-portrait?

BIRDHEAD: From when we began in 2004, it always has been. At first we just took pictures of each other. Basically we like to shoot ourselves, that's just what we're most interested in.

RAIL: The curator, Eva Respini, picks up on this in the wall text she wrote to accompany your piece. She relates your work to the Facebook and Instagram generation. Do you participate in those social networks?

BIRDHEAD: Facebook doesn't work in China. [Laughs.] But what she's saying is correct; that's this age, this era. I have been thinking about this question myself; it's pretty interesting. If you check our page you don't see any of our photos, very very rarely will you see our photos on one of these platforms. We don't use them. We won't expose ourselves on Twitter, but in a much larger scale we're exposing ourselves at MoMA. In the end I can only admit that we're two people living in this era. Putting us in this larger context is necessary.

RAIL: You've spent so much time in Shanghai, what is it like to be in New York City? First time here, right?

BIRDHEAD: Great. Empire.

RAIL: Do you find it's difficult to photograph in New York?

BIRDHEAD: No. Everywhere is American flag; too easy to take photos of New York. You spend half a day or you spend two or three years, and you make a book with photographs of New York, it's hard for people to say that it's not New York. There's only this city that has that kind of atmosphere where you definitely have a New York quality. The spirit in your eyes as a New Yorker is very different from people in London.

RAIL: I agree, I think each city has its own character, and when you grow up in that city it informs your character. You eventually become part of the city, and that's why I think you guys—being part of Shanghai—growing up in Shanghai, all your life taking pictures of the people and the city around you. Your relationship with Shanghai seems very symbiotic.

BIRDHEAD: Yeah, there's a symbiotic element to it, that's true. If you're with a girl for a long time you begin to become similar. If you live with a dog for a long time, you also develop similar characteristics.

RAIL: It seems that your art and your life are completely intertwined.

BIRDHEAD: Yes, it can be a huge pain in the ass.

RAIL: When I visited you in 2010 your darkroom was in your apartment. Do you still sleep with the smell of photo chemicals?

BIRDHEAD: No, we have money now! [Laughs.] We have our own studio in Shanghai, but it's very far away. [Laughs.] Not enough money to be in the city center, but we have three floors, two parking spots, and a garden, in a townhouse.

RAIL: Jesus! Well, I know where I'm staying next time I go to Shanghai.

BIRDHEAD: Yeah, you can stay there! In the afternoon you can drink some coffee and beer and you can sit in the garden and then you can fry some pork, do your writing.

RAIL: Sounds good to me. Well, last question. What are you guys looking forward to in the future? I know you've come off a very busy last couple months. Do you have things you're looking forward to doing in 2013?

BIRDHEAD: Let's get through 2012 and then talk. ☺