

Norman A. Spencer, an Anonymous Presence in the Global Village

Lu Peng

Notice the movement of each particle.

Notice each traveler who's just arrived.

Notice that each of them wants to order a different dish.

Notice how stars set, how the sun rises, and how all the rivers and creeks

Rush towards the sea.

--- Rumi

Paris teems with *flaneurs* of all kinds. Maybe we should say that Baudelaire has provided a vision and lifestyle of such persons. *Boulevardiers* roam through the byzantine streets of the city, circling around café tables and engaging in an endless dance, as in the revue at Moulin Rouge. Norman is no doubt an interesting example of this type, except that he is no longer living in the 19th-century Montmartre, but in an increasingly globalized global village. Norman provides a new perspective to looking at globalization. His experiences illustrate his works well. Maybe we should say that his works are footnotes to his experiences, rather than the other way around. Norman is not just a photographer, but a globalized *flaneur* who is ready to devote his life to the sort of moveable feast that characterized Paris in the late 19th century. Therefore, it is definitely intriguing that he went back to Paris to take photographs in that hometown of *flaneurs*.

Norman's career seems to indicate that his life is composed of numerous temporal fragments, which appear disintegrated and radically misplaced. Exile, drinking, dropping out, slum, African Americans, witchcraft, political leftism, arrest, public toilet, and public bathroom---none of these keywords is essential. These adventures have given a special shape to his life. He shows up at every unlikely venue to witness political activities and radical cultural and structural changes. Such important moments used to be triggered by the

collective unconsciousness and recorded afterwards, but Norman wants to be a witness and even to intervene.

Life presses us to think profoundly about what kind of a world can bring together the life experiences of someone like Norman. In Ulysses' Greece, sirens marked the edge of the imagination of wanderers. In 19th-century Paris, Gauguin rested his eyes on Tahiti, the far end of the French Empire's global colonies. There is no doubt that the doings of *flaneurs* have redefined the human world. This is not just about borders that have been trespassed; it is more about the essential quality hidden in his vision, the innate secret of the new world created through his eyes.

Norman cannot explain his infatuation with Asian art, especially China's contemporary art world, but such infatuation has sensitively taken place at the right moment. His photography records each precious moment and attaches his memories to that moment. Every important moment in the whirlpool of his memory forms a part of the unbroken sequence of this new world: the '85 New Wave Movement, the Stars Group Movement, the 5th generation (independent) film directors, an anonymous Tibetan musician, a fragment of a performance art activity, an anonymous man and his wife, and so on. It is in Roland Barthe's sense that he recalls and re-experiences each moment captured by his photographs. He regards a photo as a proof of existence or even existence itself. There is no connection between fragmentary images; there is only potential for poetic quality or nonsense. According to a slightly mystical conviction, a fleeting event crystallizes some kind of energy at the moment a photograph is taken. (At least this was the case in the silver salt era, whereas today's photography stores information.) That's why he regards the re-experiencing of a photograph as travel back in time. The richness of each photograph, its sense of existence, and its theatrical feel are not inferior to those of the real world he experiences, *longeurs* and all. Sometimes we cannot tell whether Norman is more infatuated with China's contemporary art or more engrossed by the process of photographing it. If the latter is true, it means that Norman stores his life experiences in a holographic way. Life is a museum, and he categorizes his experiences in an indexed form rather than according to their essence, because his philosophy leaves no room for essentialism.

Globalization started much earlier than it became a catchword. It has brought about various unexpected impacts, and countless emergencies have shocked the world. In a time of waves and bubbles, cultural *flaneurs* appear hopelessly maladaptive, but they can appear or disappear anywhere more quickly than others. Communication increases exponentially, and we may soon say goodbye to a diversified world. Norman's efforts are to record each bubble before it explodes. Thanks to his presence and gaze, each transient bubble becomes unique and may bear witness to the time. Norman seems to be looking at "the other" in a global vision, but, in another sense, he longs to be "the other." Maybe we should rather say that his career has been transforming him into "the other." He quotes Bob Dylan in his memoir: "You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." Likewise, you don't have to break yourself away from the outside world. No need to worry about what will happen in any case. The global current carries Norman toward the Far East. He welcomes it and follows the current, and that is the true color of a *flaneur*: forget about what is under your feet, but look into the distance.

"A sense of freedom and spontaneity permeated their lives. They were young, and reckless, lived for the moment, unafraid, and life seemed open ended," writes Norman in an article dedicated to members of the Star Group. This is not only a description but also a self-evaluation and expectation. Yet this presents a fundamental contradiction, namely the secret interweaving of boundless life-force and endless fragmentation. When Norman follows the footsteps of "the other" and dances, "the other" quickly breaks up, changes, and disappears like bubbles. In a sense, Norman throws his life into infinite impossibility. Such a paradox may help define the nature of global conflicts. One needs endless life experiences on the one hand and a bordered self on the other, but boundless life-force means endless fragmentation and the ultimate dissipation of one's self.

Norman was involved in quite a few cultural events in China, like the Star Group Movement, the Today Poetry Movement, and the '85 New Wave Movement. Like the way African Americans needed the streets as their stage, Norman tries to plunge into these events. He has become close friends with a group of intellectuals, artists, and movie

directors like Yan Li and Jia Zhangke. Globalization is quickly rooting out local cultural and political utopias. Abhorring the mediocrity and homogeneity brought along by globalization, artists constantly call for the return of elitism. It is known that *flaneurs'* visions are excoriated in these movements, but after many travails they eventually achieve some sort of self-fulfillment. This represents the victory of democracy and public vision in the cultural arena.

Many of those he photographs have become his friends, like Jia Zhangke and his wife (in 2003). This enables us to capture a message of self-realization in the cultural circles of that time. Norman looks into a cultural circle from a peripheral standpoint and fixes his eyes on the cultural participants of that time. This usually gives us a panoramic view of a new era. Devoted attention is paid to their emotions, activities, and each quiver of a facial muscle. A number of details point to Jia Zhangke's busy life: leather watch belt, rolled-up sleeves, the way he smokes, turtleneck sweater, fluffy hair, and ragged goatee. His gaze into the distance indicates a state of felicity where hope is unfolding.

Norman participates in such struggles at any moment, in any place, and under any circumstance. Psychologically, he dissolves the cultural complexity of a given place and changes it into a round coffee table where any angle is random and homogeneous. For an outside observer, the round coffee table seems to be the best choice for the middle class and democracy, but this is only a superficial impression. Deep inside, Norman breaks away from classical elitism, but he cannot wish away the cultural option which threatens engulfment by the middle class. This is precisely why a global *flaneur* has to seek swifter escape. Only through constant struggle and breaking away, facing moments of quivering intensity, can Norman avoid falling into a vulgar fissure.

That is the reason why Norman is inclined to take photos in various party settings which allow for immersion into a roundtable culture. He attempts to participate in the parties of each distant culture, and tries to enable free emotional expressions of those he photographs. It is interesting that such parties do not always take place within the geographical borders of China. For instance, he once photographed Gao Xingjian in Paris. To participate in a

Chinese party in a western country means that escape involves not only a geographical dimension but also a cultural-psychological dimension.

Norman's infatuation with China is in many ways connected to such escape. He talks about living in the *hutongs* and the exotic experience of bathing in a Chinese public bathroom. We can see how such minor cultural experiences bear upon him: they help him escape globalization. He attains a sense of being only in a massive cultural world that is sufficiently complex. Small countries and societies have already been dissolved in the early stages of globalization. In the faraway land of China, however, there is still room for classical elites and Bohemian *flaneurs*, with all sorts of devils incarnate, whether they have found spiritual asylum or not. This provides possibilities to all spiritual *flaneurs*. This internal logic finally brought Norman to China, which means he was predestined to arrive at this world of infinity.

Indeed, China provides totally different dancing steps as well as a totally different and heterogeneous life; it provides endless revolutionary waves in art. The details and sense of being included in these events are infinite. This is the best predestination a *flaneur* can hope for. His presence in a perpetual drama may be trivial, but he can nonetheless play a role at will, and forever stay away from the possibility of being planned, defined, or engulfed by the middle class.

It's hard to tell to what extent Norman has overcome the paradox of globalization. He takes photos and escapes; he is involved and exiled. Much of this process is dependent on the efficiency and consensus provided by the express train of globalization. Eventually, all those he witnesses are becoming more and more globalized, but he continues to linger outside the home of "the other." We don't know if Norman will win this endless race, a race between Achilles and a turtle. The world of elites has toppled and the middle class is taking control. *Flaneurs* fight back and escape, but their shouts and cries are not heard. Thirty years have passed, and many of those artists, directors, and curators photographed by Norman have become great masters and have largely entered into the international art world. Norman's photography doggedly brings us back to the loneliest historical moments which are full of

possibilities. We may say that such memory is doomed to be engulfed by globalization. We should rather say that there is a moment when Achilles has not overtaken the turtle, and when the *flaneur* is care-free and self-sufficient. Images of that moment have become part of the classical memories of China's contemporary art. That moment once existed and will continue to exist. It bears witness to the fact that we existed and we were free. It will serve as a mirror for us no matter where we are tomorrow and no matter what we will degenerate into.

Our identity is not long-lasting. That's why we need Norman A. Spencer, an anonymous presence in the global village, to provide us with moments that we may forget or remember forever.

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Translated by Wang Hao