

## Catherine Yass

### *Lock*

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“China is now building about two power stations every week (BBC, June 19th 2007)”

This is one of many statistics that are regularly broadcasted about this vast and fascinating country, and remind listeners of its exorbitant scale. Like the West’s perception of the USSR during the Soviet era, the almost mythical or, legendary status of China’s size is probably partly to do with the lack of photographic images of this country. Catherine Yass’ latest work, *Lock* is a video installation with accompanying images, which examines part of the Three Gorges Dam that, when finished will be the largest hydroelectric power station in the world, which goes some way to illustrate the scale of this project, mirroring the magnitude of the country.

Yass’ twin-screen video projection (originally shot on 16mm film) transports the viewer through the three lock gates that allow vessels to travel along the Yangtze River. Yass has positioned the two cameras facing in opposite directions, so as one gate closes, another opens. The floor-to-ceiling projection is very well suited to this gallery space, whereby each film is project on opposite walls. The size of the gallery dictates that it is not quite possible to view both projections simultaneously, which encourages the viewer to wander around the space. This simulation feels as if one is wandering around on the deck of the barge as it slowly progresses through the lock. One of the most striking aspects of this work is the soundtrack, which particularly when the barge/ viewer enters the central lock, comes alive with the screeches of machinery, sirens and commotion of this incredible procedure, like the rumbling stomach of some great monster as it digests an unsuspecting meal.

Despite Yass’ rectilinear composition, and her static camera positions, there remains an element of ambiguity as to the actual mechanics of the lock gate process (which isn’t helped by the division of the film into three parts). Deep in the bottom of the lock, the viewer is cut off from the outside world.

Although the frame of the film seems to shift suggesting the rise of the water level, there doesn't appear to be any water filling or emptying from the lock. These two factors give the impression that you could be inside a magician's box of tricks that is sealed off from his audience as he waves his magic wand.

Accompanying the video work are four photographs on light boxes that were taken around the lock gates. These are not stills from the film but like the video work, they concentrate upon quite a restricted view. These studies exhibit Yass' trademark faux-solarization technique, whereby she merges a positive with a duplicate negative image. This method, which produces a vivid, surreal re-working of otherwise quite innocuous images, will not be to every viewer's taste, and I must confess, it didn't appeal to mine. In some cases the degree of manipulation is quite subtle and Yass simply intensifies the bleak concrete landscape that surrounds the Three Gorges Dam, but elsewhere it is too severe and unnecessarily over dramatizes an already epic location.

By the time the dam is expected to be fully operational in 2011, it will have been almost a century since its inception. As well as obvious green energy production, the dam has other benefits which include protecting agricultural land in the valleys below as well as connotation such as Shanghai, from flooding. However, the dam has received much negative attention, particularly due to the cultural, archaeological and environmental damage that has already been done due to the creation of the reservoir upstream, and the displacement of at least 1.5 million people. The scale of the Three Gorges Dam project is quite simply astonishing, and to attempt to represent this photographically is a great challenge.

While it might seem logical to photograph the whole object from a distance, thereby contextualizing it within the landscape, Yass' decision to focus instead on one very specific aspect and place the viewer at the bottom of one of the dam's locks has achieved this in a less obvious way. The pace of the whole piece, which is vary steady, is effective and allows the viewer time to appreciate the mass of the concrete structure that is absorbing them.

The open door and the closed door have various conceptual metaphors and connotations, which have been employed extensively throughout the history of art. The subject of this lock with its opening and closing gates that mirror one clearly seems to work and the installation is quite effective. It proposes and questions the conflict between the opportunities presented by

technical advances, and conservation of heritage and ecosystems that is an inescapable aspect of the Three Gorges Dam project, as well as the broader issue of technology verses nature.