

Curator's Key

A curator talks about an artwork they keep coming back to

Qu Chang on Marge Monko's *Dear D* (2015)

In the winter of 1991, the airing of the indoor TV drama *Ke Wang* swept the entire country of China. It was an early collective obsessions in China created by mass media, operating at full speed with the economic reforms that followed the 1989 protests. Among the then-limited number of TV shows mostly reminiscent of the emancipatory revolutions, *Ke Wang* was one of the first melodramas that told the story of ordinary people's desire for genuine love, happiness, and family life – heralding another revolution where personal dreams and the value of everyday life were warmly embraced by an emerging market and its new consumers. The title *Ke Wang* was translated by a 1991 *New York Times* article as *Aspirations*, pointing perhaps to the “aspirational” western influence that created structural change in Chinese society. Anthropologist Lisa Rofel, on the other hand, in her 2007 book *Desiring China*, gave the title a painfully itchy twist: *Yearning*. I prefer the lighter yet more perpetual sentiment of the word “longing”, which speaks softly and humbly to an insurmountable distance and a never-ending wait.

“I'm intoxicated. I long for you every day.”

Dear D is a love letter. The kind I often composed in my teenage years, most of which were addressed to no one. The infinite space of a sheet of A4 paper is an insatiable vessel for self-confession and forlorn scribbles. The lyrical sentiments of a classic romance novel were often invoked in these writings, stoked by the remoteness of an imaginary receiver. It was quite magical that the aching pleasure of longing never diminished with the vigorous outlet of writing; the words fed on themselves. I was obsessed with Anni Baobei at the time, a popular fiction writer who gained widespread attention in China during the 2000s. Her writing, under the influence of Marguerite Duras, calmly and sharply renders urban women's undaunted desire for independence and love, accompanied nevertheless by a persistent nihilism. The women in her stories are often on the road alone, writing, searching truth in life, with longer relationships to material belongings than to any lover. These women epitomised a generation of Chinese urban female readers' desires: to own Anna Sui's perfume, Canon's

cameras, and cashmere sweaters, to travel, work, write, and love by one's lonesome – preparing perhaps for a soon-to-come era of the gig economy and internet dating.

I never asked Marge Monko whether D, the receiver of the confession, really existed, nor about any personal details connecting the artist to the work. *Dear D*, to me, is surely another letter to no one. In this eight-minute screen recording of videos, texts, images, and sound montage, Monko wanders through the manifold space of emotional abundance: a Gmail window where the love letter is transcribed from the voice-over; a miniature vitrine display referencing Émile Zola's 1883 fictional department store for women, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Delight*); a YouTube video of The Beatles' classic “Something”; the *New York Times*' “Modern Love” column dotted with holiday sale ads; Google search results for names (“siri hustvedt, paul auster”), articles (“letter to d andre gorz”), and books (“chris kraus i love dick”). These omnipresent discourses, productions, and transactions of love compose a visual/textual dissection of the making of perpetual longing. As scholar Friedrich Kittler pointed out, “there are of course media technologies without love, but there's no love without media technologies.” Romantic love is an entirely calculable invention.

“It's a bit weird that I'm writing it in English which is not my mother tongue and neither is yours. But it feels so natural. Maybe because most of the books I've ever read about love are in English?”

The voice-over in *Dear D* has an English accent. With her mild tone and almost whispery softness, she reads the letter tenderly, invoking a faint ASMR-like sensation. It seems that women are always the best narrators of love and desire. The absorption of romance novels and chick flicks, the seduction of diamonds and roses compel them to internalise and to be indoctrinated by love. I am constantly struck by *Dear D*'s conflicting characteristics: it is on one hand a discourse machine of love and intoxication, and on the other a sharp analysis of the grammar and rhetoric of longing and love. The indulgence of emotion and detection of entrapment reveals such a modern symptom. I am, therefore, constantly inspired to compose my exhibitions

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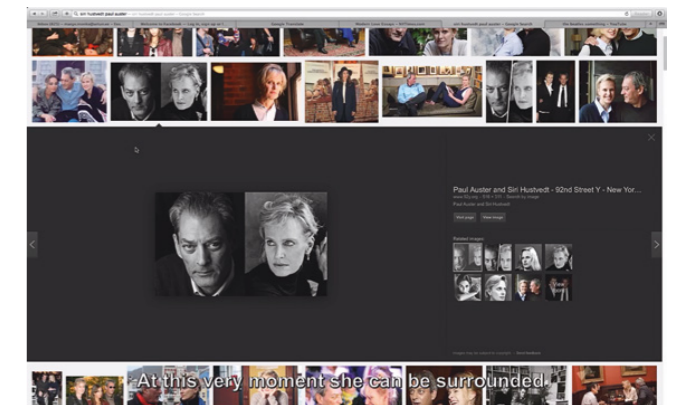


Marge Monko, *Dear D*, 2015, screencap video with voiceover, 8 min. 10 sec.
Installation view “Sometimes I can see it all perfectly”, Galerie Soy Capitán Berlin, 2018–19

following the ambiguous dynamics imbued in *Dear D*: to be discernible, but never forfeit the power of being a romantic. Monko's criticism of the fabrication of desire is rooted in consumerism and women's rights. Her recent reflections on the myth-making of the diamond ring and the legalisation of the contraceptive pill present another insightful observation on neoliberalism's permeation into women's bodies and hearts. Still, I can never get the longing of *Dear D* out of my mind. It just so happens that I am drafting this piece on the date of 11

November, the beginning of the shopping season in China. This unofficial holiday previously known as the Singles' Day, where singletons celebrate their celibacy, was soon turned into the most frantic shopping spree of the year – after all, love might not be around the corner, but it is certainly produced, packaged, and shelved somewhere in the department store.

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Stills from Marge Monko, *Dear D*, 2015
Screen capture video with voice over, 8 min. 10 sec.