

Back and forth: Examining a pair of artist books by Anne Graham and Allan Chawner

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THIS IS STILL WHAT MOST ARTISTS DO: they meddle with ordinary matter or moments, trying to wrinkle out ways to transform mundane stuff into something startling. Paper, for instance. What are its affordances? What can you make with it? A lamp? A shirt? A cup? A book? Art? All true. Now, what say you meddle with the book. Can you make something out of the ordinary? Or is it now an exhausted form, used up and outmoded?

There's a good argument for saying that paper-folio technology started in China. Which is where Anne Graham and Allan Chawner completed most of the work behind their large-format concertina books, *Constructed Memories* and *Constructed Cities*. (Published in 2010, each title is available in an edition of five.) Offering themes and approaches that include 'recto and verso', 'calligraphic and alphabetic', 'here and there', 'modern China and elsewhere', the Graham-Chawner books invite the reader to work back and forth within paradoxically robust yet delicate layouts. Or to be more precise, the reader gradually understands that these two books are objects focusing on objects – such as a millet-fibre broom or a tin toy devoid of scale – objects that are carefully chosen to focus our minds on the most subjective of all back-and-forth phenomena, namely our own oscillating impulses between memory and desire, between fate and hope.

Here's how Graham and Chawner made their books – in China they interviewed a select group of people who are living there now but who carry a personal history from somewhere else. For these people the past is not necessarily troubling the present, but it strums within all the interviewees, affecting how they interpret their lives in the booming Chinese society that presently seems to be all future. From the transcripts, Graham and Chawner have selected and printed, in both Chinese and English, two batches of statements from each person: on the one hand something steeped in memory, on the other something marked by urban experience. The first batch guides us through *Constructed Memories*. The

second yields *Constructed Cities*. Each statement forms a caption for an image of an object afloat on the heavy lush paper. The authors suggest that we think of the images as 'impermanent sculptural assemblages which now exist as photographs'. Depending on which book we're examining, each assemblage is a talisman that holds potent memories or an intensified sense of the urban experience. To appreciate a page, we need to delve into the three-dimensional intricacy of the concertina book so as to toggle cognition between the transcribed snippet of text and the alluring two-dimensional image of the ultra-resonant 3D assemblage. Of course, if we view the two books together, we can also counterpose each interviewee's remembrance against his or her urbanism.

Which returns me to the deft balancing act that Graham and Chawner perform. Their artistry comes from the endless shuttling that is afforded by these books. We can go from one edition to the other. Or we can confine ourselves to a single page and go from text to image and back to text and then over to our imagination where we strive to construe the hefty three-dimensionality of the object that has been flattened on the paper. There's a self-propelling endlessness in our aesthetic and semantic encounters with the books: we flit between pages; flick our eyes up and down, from image to text, from left to right. Just as yin and yang jostle each other without ever resting, so the books encourage a cognitive flow that is oddly soothing even as it can be gently befuddling – encouraging, perhaps, a little tai chi gesture with our wrists and hands as we negotiate the concertina folds and allow our senses and sense-making to expand and entwine.



Anne Graham (sculpture) and Allan Chawner (photography), digital prints from the book *Constructed Memories*, 2010

Traditional Chinese folding book, rice paper, rice glue, 23 x 32 x 2.3 cm
Book printing and mounting by ME Photo Art Gallery, 798 District, Beijing



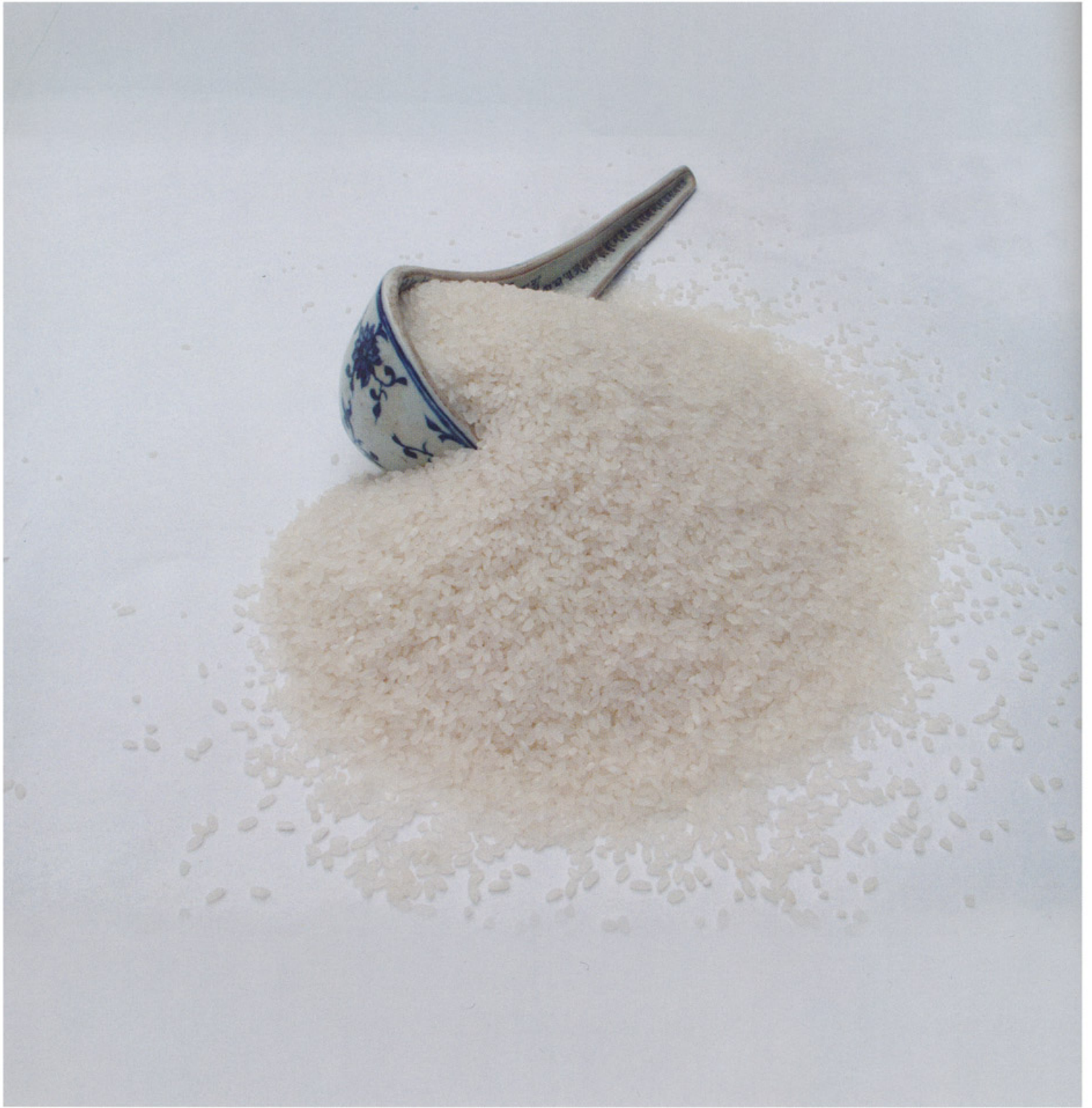
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