

Edited by Kevin Kwong kevin.kwong@scmp.com



Photo: Ricky Chung

Small towns are by definition provincial but in Germany they occasionally look even more parochial, as depicted in many of the short films by Franco-German artist duo Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer. Their works owe much of their tragicomedy to their portrayal of lower middle-class milieus – the petty bourgeoisie, as it is called, somewhat pejoratively, in French and German. Not much seems to be moving in these places, except the wind in the trees around a deserted town square or the sharp tongue of a plump hausfrau as she spreads gossip while sweeping the corridor in her apartment block.

So it is surprising that the couple should be invited by Hong Kong-based curator Cornelia Erdmann to come up with a show that explores the issue of mobility at 1a space gallery in To Kwa Wan, as part of this year's Le French May.

Instead of revelling in the usual Shanghai chic or the oft repeated theme of migrants in the Pearl River Delta, their video installation *Mobility – Chinese is a Plus* is set in Stuttgart in southwest Germany.

"What's interesting about mobility is not people moving around – that's just the surface – but rather why people move. We wanted to take a good look at the human beings behind the word mobility," says Westermeyer, 37.

They found them in a Chinese-language school in Stuttgart, where the couple are working as fellows of Akademie Schloss Solitude. The school offers two kinds of Chinese-language classes: one for Germans, mostly adults, and one for the children of Chinese migrants.

By taking these lessons, the older students feel they have moved a step closer to a land of opportunity while the children are brought closer to their ancestral culture.

"The children are learning their 'mother tongue' like a foreign language. You can see how aware they are of the importance of learning it," says 38-year-old Boisseau. "Meanwhile, the adult students, the Germans, want to fill themselves in with Chinese culture."

Mobility starts out with the Chinese adolescents telling their teacher – a stern-looking Chinese

matron figure – in halting Putonghua about the differences between their two countries. All of them say they feel fairly alienated in China; they'd rather stay in Europe.

But the lesson ends with a sermon by the teacher talking about the greatness of Chinese culture, and the children's obligation to be good mediators between the cultures. The students wear pained expressions, as though they are receiving a scolding.

In the second part of the film, jolly Germans are blundering heartily through the vicissitudes of the Chinese language. This is both funny and painful to watch for any foreigner who has struggled with Putonghua. The students are telling one another – in Chinese – why they are studying the language.

While Tibet remains a thorny issue, China enjoys a good image in Germany and, in the accounts of the adult students, the mainland

appears as a canvas to project ideals upon, both of ancient wisdom and unfettered business opportunities.

At 1a space inside Cattle Depot Artist Village, the two parts of the installation are beamed on two opposing screens, as befits the feedback of projections and counter-projections in the language school.

Neither part of the video installation overtly interferes with the class. There are no interviews,

just documentation of the lessons. "We work with *objets trouvés*, found objects," says Boisseau, referring to the Dada, surrealist and pop-art practice of removing trivial objects from their functional contexts. This way, aspects of their identity that are usually veiled by their use-value are revealed – as Marcel Duchamps did when turning a urinal into an object of aesthetic appreciation simply by placing it on a pedestal. Andy Warhol's

When you start speaking a new language, it is like you can become a new person

Sylvie Boisseau (top left, with Frank Westermeyer), co-creator of *Mobility – Chinese is a Plus*

painting of a can of Campbell's Soup is another case in point.

The couple is using this method of expression to emphasise how the shift between languages can alter a person's identity, especially when this person moves from a familiar cultural milieu to an alien one. "When you start speaking a new language, it is as though you can become a new person. We like to ask how identity is constructed, how it is built," Boisseau says.

The relationship between language and identity is something the couple is familiar with.

Paris-born Boisseau first studied art at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in the French capital and later earned her master's degree at Bauhaus University in Weimar. Westermeyer, originally from the German town of Essen, first studied visual communication in Wuppertal before attending his future wife's Ecole. Both now live and work in Geneva, and occasionally receive invitations for residencies in Stuttgart, Chicago and Berlin. Each place and, in some cases, different language has had an influence on their identity.

So the theme of identity – and how that changes in different social contexts – is a common topic for the two, as shown in their first joint film, *Meine Familie und Ich* (My Family and I, 1997). Westermeyer plays F – for "figure" – a phlegmatic, Buster Keaton-like character in half a dozen scenes and as many different families, from the working classes to the bourgeoisie and back again. F doesn't say a word and wears an expression of puzzled melancholia throughout. Yet the shifting class backgrounds in the various environments equip him with a new personality in each scene.

The approach of minimal interference with the objects and themes of their art is characteristic of Boisseau and Westermeyer: they tend to leave things alone. The same is true of *Mobility – Chinese is a Plus*.

"We let reality speak for itself," says Boisseau. "It's our *objet trouvé*."

Mobility – Chinese is a Plus, Tue-Sun, 2pm-8pm, 1a space, Unit 14D, Block C, Cattle Depot Artist Village, 63, Ma Tau Kok Road, To Kwa Wan. Inquiries: 2529 0087. Ends Jun 13

Much is gained in translation between Putonghua and German, artist duo Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer tell **Justus Krueger**

Read my lips

Sound bites

Staging a drama by French playwright Jean Genet is always a challenge. How has it been with putting on *Les Bonnes*?

Director Mike Ingham of Theatre Action:

"We decided to do something physical. There's no spoken language. We decided not to use surtitles because body language is very communicative. We're working on the play almost as a silent film. The main challenge when we devised this non-speaking play was how to tell the audience about what happened earlier. In body language, you can't do past tense.

"I've done a lot of shows in Hong Kong over the years, but this is the most original, different and exciting of them all. The original play is very wordy with a lot of tragic gestures and language. "Genet always dealt with

the theme of outsiders in society and subversives. In the original he imagined the maids played by two men in drag. We adopted the idea."

May 22-24, 8pm (Sat matinee 3pm), Fringe Studio, Fringe Club, 2 Lower Albert Rd, Central. HK\$100 (members, students, seniors) HK\$120 HK Ticketing. Inquiries: 9725 4386



Superhero style a fashion fantasy

Richard James Havis

Fashionably attired cartoon heroes on show in New York's august Metropolitan Museum of Art? Is the Met selling out to the public's current fascination with Spider-Man, X-Men, and Iron Man?

Not at all, says Harold Korda, curator in charge of the Met's Costume Institute. Introducing Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy in an exhibition hall packed with sculptures of Greek and Roman gods, he says: "It's entertaining to consider superheroes in the context of an institution which is filled with all the great mythical superheroes of ancient times. These classical deities inspired today's superheroes. You can see Superman in the show, and see what Superman has inspired the fashion industry to create. Then you go next door to find representations of Hercules, who was actually the inspiration behind Superman."

Superheroes, which opened at the Met last week with a star-studded gala, is more populist than the museum's usual erudite shows. It combines two modern forms of expression: comic books and high fashion.

The exhibition consists of riffs on American superhero costumes created by top fashion designers. There is a wildly colourful version of the Superman costume designed by Moschino, displayed next to the outfit Christopher Reeve wore in the movies. John Galliano and Thierry Mugler do strange and grim takes on The Punisher, while Dior creates a Wonder Woman costume which nestles next to the groovy original worn by TV's Lynda Carter.

Altogether, there are 60 outfits by designers and their costumier

counterparts in the movies. The idea, say the Met's curators, is to use the exaggerated costumes superheroes wear to illustrate how fashion can empower and transform the human body. Batman's armoured costume and The Flash's sleek red leotard help them achieve their superhuman powers.

"The original concept of the show was to look at clothing that would transform you literally into a superhero," says curator Andrew Bolton. "We wanted to show clothing that enables you to run faster, swim faster and even fly."

Comics and the films that are based on them allow readers to escape into fantasy worlds where men and women have the powers of ancient gods. Fashion, says Bolton, takes wearers a step further than pictures on a page. "Issues relating to the body, such as identity, and transformation, lie at the core of both fashion and comic books," he says. "But fashion does more than allow you to escape into your fantasies, as you do with a comic book. It allows you to actually act out your fantasies. You can use fashion to transform yourself into anyone and anything. That's what we explore in the exhibition."

Fashion and superheroes may seem an unlikely match, but they have a lot in common, says Bolton. Both offer an immediate reflection of the times in which they were created. The comic-book heroes of the 1940s were forthright and patriotic, while those of the post-Watergate 1970s were introspective and confused.

Comic-book heroes changed psychologies over the years. The post-1942 Batman was confident and self-assured – a far cry from Dick

Giordano's troubled 70s version. "On the surface, fashion and superheroes may seem like strange bedfellows but they share a surprising familiarity. Both are reflections of the zeitgeist. They are mirrors to our socio-political – and even sexual – realities," says Bolton.

The show is divided up to illustrate the different ways the costumes reflect the human form. The Hulk, the Marvel Comics character created in 1962, is a metaphor for both political and masculine virility, write the curators in a section marked The Virile Body. A creation of the cold war period, he expressed American power. But he was also a metaphor for masculine potency: "With his thick neck, bulging tendons, and throbbing veins, he suggests the turgidity of male arousal."

Although it's unlikely anyone's ever seen the monstrous green Hulk as a sex object, Galliano's fashion take is

provocative: "With its padded shoulders, fetishistic hardware, and enormous hosiery phallus, it represents the pulsing force of the virile body," reads the curatorial explanation.

Catwoman's tattered S&M inspired outfit – memorable for its appearance on Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns* – appears in a section entitled The Paradoxical Body. Creations by Mugler, Dolce & Gabbana, and Versace play up the torn and leathery look. "Like Catwoman, these designers have been attracted to the costume of the dominatrix and its associations with a liberated sexuality," the notes read. While presented blatantly, erotic energies, like the feral nature of Catwoman, are tamed, neutered and domesticated by fashion.

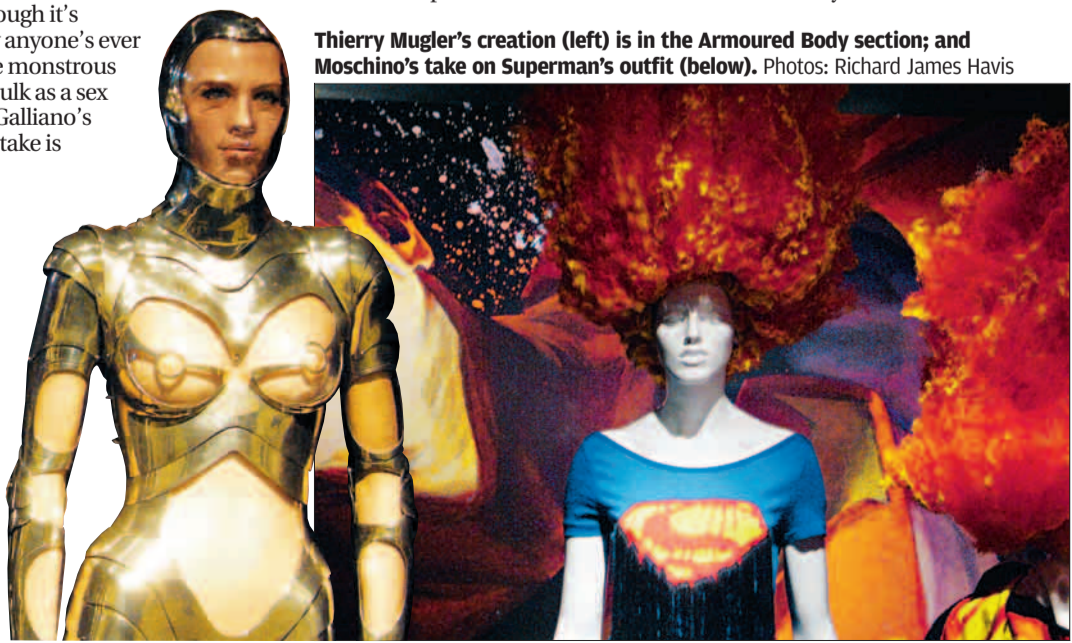
Some superheroes such as

Batman and Iron Man – who is presented in the Armoured Body section – don't have special powers: they are just supremely fit people who rely on gadgetry to give them an edge. Iron Man is encased in body armour and "this acts as metaphor for our social reality in which the distance between the body and technology is fast disappearing", the curators say.

Giorgio Armani, who sponsors the show, says: "My fashion is mainly made to be worn. So I think the contrast this show creates with the spirit of Armani is something that is quite special.

"I want to thank the designers of ... the 30s and 40s who created all these characters. They inspired us. Let's not forget that the homes we saw in *Flash Gordon* are the homes we love today."

Thierry Mugler's creation (left) is in the Armoured Body section; and Moschino's take on Superman's outfit (below). Photos: Richard James Havis



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