

8 Arts

SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2008 SUNDAY MO

Edited by Kevin Kwong kevin.kwong@scmp.com



Photo: Ricky Chung

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

Read my lips

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 adults, 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,

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*

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

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

The couple is using this language of expression to emphasise the shift between languages and the 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 become a new person. We live in a world where identity is constructed, 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 Germany, moved to Essen, first for visual communication in Wuppertal before attending the future wife's Ecole. Both now live and work in Geneva, and occasionally receive invitational residencies in Stuttgart, Chicago, Berlin. Each place and, in some cases, different language has had an influence on their identity.

So the theme of identity – how that changes in different contexts – is a common topic for the couple. As shown in their first joint work, *Meine Familie und Ich* (My Family and I, 1997), Westermeyer plays the role of a phlegmatic, Baudelaire-like character in half scenes and as many different family members, from the working class to the bourgeoisie and back again. "We don't say a word and wear an expression of puzzled melancholy throughout. Yet the shifting backgrounds in the various scenes are revealing of the various backgrounds in the various environments equip him with a personality in each scene.

The approach of minimal interference with the objects and the themes of their art is characteristic of Boisseau and Westermeyer: they tend to leave things alone. This 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 2pm-8pm, 1a space, Unit 14D, Cattle Depot Artist Village, 63, Tau Kok Road, To Kwa Wan. Inc 2529 0087. Ends Jun 13**