

InnerScapes: Nurturing the Self in a High Speed World

By Manuela Lietti

According to the philosophical precepts that have formed the basis of Chinese thought since the dawn of time, when rulers were mythological rather than historical figures, good health is not merely the absence of disease. More importantly, it is a state of harmony that guides your behavior. As stated in the Yellow Emperor's *Classic of Internal Medicine IV*, a healthy life "seeks harmony, in the hope of achieving peace of mind". As a result, "a peaceful man will not get sick". Much of Chinese philosophical thought on health in subsequent centuries was based on this evident yet unobservable maxim. It focused on the ability of a balanced and harmonious life to prevent disease, rather than on the ability of strictly scientific methods to cure disease (Image 1). The legendary Yellow Emperor, who decisively contributed to the development of Chinese medicine with a mixture of medical knowledge and popular wisdom, addressed this balance in his writings, which are rooted in the awareness that each individual is not a discrete entity acting independently. On the contrary, the individual, his body, and his organs are nothing but reflections and extensions of the natural order of the universe; any human action has to reflect the individual's bond with the outside world. Although the individual is an active player and not just a passive carrier of meaning, balance and the health that it engenders are preserved when the individual acts in harmony with the outside world; illness occurs precisely when an individual rejects the idea that he is a part of the cosmos and must adhere to its rules. Therefore, the equilibrium that an individual must ideally pursue has two parts. One must seek balance within one's own body, the perfect and unified functioning of every part. On a larger scale, one must also seek the integration of man and the cosmos according to a basic principle of Chinese culture, *tianren heyi* (the oneness of man and the cosmos). According to the Chinese, balance is also the result of the synergy between mental and physical fitness and the interdependence of inner and outer forces. Having survived the attacks of time and the one-way development of Chinese society through the centuries, these precepts represent the core of the Chinese notion of health and offer a viable path for contemporary people of different generations. More than any other civilization, the Chinese people have devoted their energies to a body of knowledge on preserving good health. This knowledge has encompassed both profound ontological investigation in the philosophical arena and practical implementation in the realm of daily life. As a result, nurturing life and the development of life in tandem with the pulse of the universe is an issue still worth investigating.

The project *InnerScapes*, a public intervention specifically conceived for Asia Pacific Weeks in September 2011 in Berlin, stems from the beliefs described above and tries to act as their visual transposition both in terms of philosophy

and personal wellbeing. *Innerscapes* revolves around the photographic series *Rising* shot by photographer Marike Schuurman during her time in Beijing in 2008. A Dutch-born, Berlin-based photographer, Schuurman is not new to the Chinese capital and its urban and anthropological texture. She has captured multiple visions of the ever-changing Chinese megalopolis throughout her career and time in China, focusing especially on Beijing's evolving architecture, a metaphor for the human condition in our contemporary epoch. In the series *Plots* (Image 2), for example, Schuurman vividly portrays the temporary walls around construction sites, poetically decorated with idyllic yet inaccessible natural visions. They are visible all around Beijing, and they multiplied especially before the 2008 Olympic Games. They are symbolic getaways within a city developing without control or proportion, transient borders through which the real exits and the ideal enters. In the series *Rising*, on view in Berlin, Schuurman once again addresses the notion of space, but in a more subtle and lyrical way. The space she portrays is not that of the physical city; it is the mental space created by the bodies and gestures of those who inhabit the city physically but find a daily escape from the frenzy of development through their mental strength and discipline. *Rising* consists of colored photographs that realistically document the Chinese elderly exercising, practicing *taiqi*, meditating, and striving to find a space of their own within the heavily populated urban environment. If in *Plots* the construction sites' walls were the amulet that granted passage between the harshly factual (the real) and the poetically fictional (the ideal), in *Rising* it is the potential energy hidden in the mind of each individual that, once activated, allows the body to become the vehicle through which that individual reaches another dimension. Thus, the individual creates a space belonging more to the mental than the physical realm. The elderly people portrayed in Schuurman's photographs are simply practicing what the Yellow Emperor suggested to their ancestors several centuries before; they are finding harmony on both the microcosmic and macrocosmic scale by reconnecting with their true selves and with the Other *par excellence*, the cosmos. This is in fact complementary to and necessary for one's affirmation. Relying on the "ready-mades" of tree branches and stones that nature has bestowed upon them, they gather in small green spots scattered around a city destined to be submerged by concrete and high-rises. Whether in small groups or alone, these people dare to commit an outrageous crime in a city with an insatiable thirst for speed; they stop and look around, savoring their own pace. They accomplish this by sinking deep into their inner beings, withdrawing from social and cultural obligations and the values implied by society and culture. They surrender to their finiteness when they are detached from the universe, and because of their awareness of the necessity to re-connect to something larger than themselves, they embark upon a new journey towards infiniteness. Their postures are simple, but imbued with the natural touch of gestures that have been passed down generations in an interiorized way. They are mantras that

mirror the calm of their minds and their ease with themselves and the world they inhabit. The protagonists of Schuurman's photographs are able to reach this dimension because they put into practice the Chinese principles of *yangsheng* (nurturing life) through a process of self-discovery. Paradoxically similar to self-denial, this process allows the individual to step back, give up his primacy over the universe, and re-situate himself within a broader context. By stepping back and daring to stop, they actually move forward. For this reason, exercising is never a matter of merely keeping fit (*jianshen*), or adding muscle to the body, as in most of concepts of health in the West. Exercising is indeed a way to leave behind the burdens imposed by society or civilization and accept one's own nature and the rules of nature in general terms.

The Rising series will be complemented by the display of fitness equipment inspired by the tools commonly available for use free of charge in public places in China, especially in areas lacking green space (Image 3). These fitness pieces, almost identical to their equivalent Chinese versions, are an example of "cultural borrowing", successfully taking from China not merely a product but a *modus vivendi* (way of life), a social behaviour, designed to create new patterns in an individual's daily experience. The tools, which are both functional and highly sculptural, are aimed at stimulating the curiosity of viewers, who will ideally become users as well, with their bright, cheery colors and unusual, amusing shapes. Installed directly onto the ground, they seem to sprout freely and spontaneously like wild plants and flowers, but they also seem anomalous, like objects from another planet. Due to the activities they represent and their amusing undertones, they offer a balancing counterpart to the highly meditative mood of the photographs exhibited on the same site. Even though the two parts of the work seem extremely different and almost antithetical at first glance, with one body of work focusing on introspection and contemplation while the other centers on movement and stimulating interaction, they actually share the same intent and offer two approaches to the same issue. These tools provide something more than exercise, they create a kind of oasis detached from the high speed of the city, where people can keep fit, communicate, exchange ideas, and enjoy the freedom of being subject only to one's own will and notion of time. If Schuurman's images invite the viewer to look into himself to discover the essence of the universe, the equipment on site encourages the viewer to look outside himself to share a collective feeling with the people around him. Thus, he re-discovers a sense of belonging, as part of the community or as part of the universe. The microcosm and the macrocosm and the individual and the societal share the same playground; it is up to viewer to move from silent contemplation to active participation.