

David Tomas

Lots 15 & 21, 2015-2016

***One sale, three lots, three iterations,
to mark the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising, Ireland,
April 24-29, 1916.***

La Mirage April 24-29, 2016

The set of works that are presented under the title *Lots 15 & 21* acknowledge the brief existence of a utopian period of hypothetical contact between two singular twentieth century historical documents. The documents—Lots 15 & 21, or the 1916 Proclamation of Independence of the Irish Republic and a 1937 letter by Mao Zedong, co-signed by Zhu De—co-existed in proximity to one another for a few days before being separated, on economic grounds, to continue on their own autonomous historical trajectories. Co-existence, and a possibility of contact, took place during a Sotheby's auction, London, in December 2015.

Both historical documents were the product of a desire for revolutionary change. They bear witness to the complexities of political action *in the field*, and to that field's extension into mundane systems of communication (posters and private, hand delivered letters). If they can also still function as effective emissaries of revolutionary ideals, then this is because they continue to generate questions about the ambiguous, complicated and often unfulfilled potentials of revolutionary action and its hidden paradoxes.

Lots 15 & 21 explores the historical and visual/conceptual relationships that might exist between the 1916 Proclamation (the ill-fated founding symbol of a free and autonomous Ireland) and Mao Zedong/Zhu De letter requesting assistance in countering Japanese imperialism, which was addressed to the leader of the British Labour Party, and later Prime Minister of Great Britain (1945-1951), Clement Attlee.

Each element of *Lots 15 & 21* acknowledges the existence of multiple levels of violence associated with processes of revolutionary change. These elements are the products of a strategy of automated 'deconstruction' which generates a random form of visual comparison according to which a 'desire to acquire' on the part of buyers, and therefore a 'desire to own' and to 'control what one owns' is historically reconfigured through the 'desire' for new social forms and projects. Key historical artefacts associated with twentieth century revolutionary movements simultaneously occupy their own present and their future: one leading to tragic failure, the other to limited historical and political success; while both, subject to local bidding wars, are transformed into valuable commodities whose contracted exchange value is an absolute guarantee of their transcendent, post-revolutionary economic and cultural status.

Lots 15 & 21 reformats and recirculates history and its visual tropes (proclamations of independence and private letters of significant historical importance) through the

translational process of commerce, and its specific codes in the case of the auction process, back into the art world in the form of an experimental political work. *Lots 15 & 21* acknowledges its dependence on the commercial power of the auction's logic of exchange value which is fueled by the fetishized 'aura' of the *original* that guarantees the authenticity of an artwork or document—an *actual* example of 1916 Proclamation of Independence of the Irish Republic (sold for 305,000 pounds sterling in December 2015), or the Mao Zedong/Zhu De typed and signed 1937 letter—the handwritten matrix having been lost (sold for 605,000 pounds sterling on the same day). However, each component of *Lots 15 & 21* uses this dependence as an excuse to explore of its own political and socio-cultural potential. Instead of circling around the question of authenticity, it uses this question as a fulcrum to reinvent itself—the product of a specific tactic of post-capitalist decolonization: a deconstructive appropriation of on-line auction catalogue information and on-site saleroom activity. Once subject matter has been doubled (original artefact versus Lot number, illustration versus information on the artefact to be sold—plus final sale price), a space is opened up in-between the 'original' artefact (and its history) and a contemporary one represented by a meta-economic work. This is the space in which a parallel economy of 'soft violence' is enacted by the post-cultural, post-historical mechanics of a market economy, as represented by the auction of iconic revolutionary documents ... or radical, politicized contemporary art.