



'Utopian' hugging, Piazza del Popolo, Rome; photo: Luigi Ielluzzo



Image from Gao Brothers' Facebook site for *The Utopia of Hugging*, Rome; courtesy the artists

Gao Brothers:

The Utopia of Hugging for 20 Minutes

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Utopias are dangerous. Utopias are more dangerous underneath an obelisk where people are talking of the latest contestant into the *Big Brother* house (it already exists?) and Maria De Filippi's reality TV show. The Piazza del Popolo in Rome belongs to the people. Generally, utopias and the people do not match very well. This could sound a little bit snobbish, but if you give the people a utopia you rob them of a mainstream dream. Or at least in the Piazza del Popolo.

In the art world two Chinese artists, the Gao Brothers, have been wandering around the scene. Why have they chosen to call themselves artists? This is the million-dollar question. It seems they have made a recently opened exhibition at the Macro Testaccio (part of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome), entitled *(Un)Forbidden City: The post.revolution of new Chinese Art*. I admit I've never visited the Marco, but I wanted to ... well, before having seen the Gao Brothers' performance in the Piazza del Popolo.

It was a sunny day, I was listening to Exploited's *Sex and Violence*, and my telephone rings. It was a friend telling me there was an art performance by Chinese artists in Piazza del Popolo at 2:00, something dealing with hugging unknown people. I asked him for some more information but he wasn't very much help. Better this way: if you come to an exhibition or performance with no idea of what is going on, your mind is like a virgin. There's nothing between you and the artist's work, no expectations, no prejudices. Just you and your sensitivity, as it happens.

So, I arrived at 2:00 with no prejudices. You know, 'Gao Brothers' sounds like a name for a boy band, but I didn't mind. I swear I arrived in the square with all the best intentions, but I was suddenly overwhelmed by saccharine music, only good for pre-wedding films. Everyone is hugging. Utterly awful.

In the entanglement of bodies before me I spot my friend, Luigi, and his girlfriend. 'Tsk, tsk. You're not fair, Luigi. I thought the performance is about hugging someone you don't know. It's just too simple to bring your girlfriend. You're missing the point, my friend.' He shrugged, sad to have been caught. He bought my silence with a rare press release. I let the lovebirds be and went down to the obelisk to read it, surrounded by people arguing about Maria De Filippi's last stroke.

The Gao Brothers describe their embrace as 'an opportunity to reiterate the need to cling to each other, especially in tragic

circumstances such as those that hit the family of Zhou Zheng and the Chinese community in Rome.' Okay, it seems like another attempt to take advantage of tragedy.¹ Dear Gao Brothers, tell the story as it is: you came from the 'Free Hugs' experience (you know, people in the streets with those stupid billboards; generally stinky but with a big heart, as they say) and try to make an art performance from it. Sorry, it doesn't work – especially underneath an obelisk where people are talking about the latest entry into the *Big Brother* house and Maria De Filippi's new *tronista* (reality show). Art has to have more powerful devices than that of an advertising campaign, and a deeper message than '*Volemosse bene*' ('Love one another') – or no message at all. No message, but a meaning.

Eavesdropping on people's conversation under the obelisk, you get a sense of how they've taken to this performance.

Man in blue jacket: 'Nice kind of things, it's like this spontaneous ... Solidarity.' / (A moment of silence) 'Towards who?' / Photographer documenting the event: 'Eh ... towards people, towards embraces ...'

Months ago there was a 'Zombie Walk' which stopped at the Piazza del Popolo. You know, I hate people doing this dumb, nerdy kind of stuff, like live role-playing games and other sorts of fantasy disguises, except at Carnival time. But this time there was one zombie, obviously surrounded by other bloody ugly stinky zombies screaming loudly, and he was lifting a wonderful billboard: 'Free Hugs'. Forget about Gao Brothers, this was just cute.

The Gao Brothers are Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang. Their performance, *The Utopia of Hugging for 20 Minutes*, took place at the Piazza del Popolo, Rome, 28 January 2011, and is the latest in an ongoing series of related performances since 2000: www.gaobrothers.net *Un-Forbidden City: the Post-Revolution of New Chinese Art*, curated by Simona Ross and Dominique Lora in collaboration with the Gao Brothers, is showing at the Macro Testaccio, Rome, 25 January to 4 March 2012: <http://en.macro.roma.museum>

1. On January 4 2012, Chinese immigrant Zhou Zheng and his nine-month-old daughter were murdered in Rome as a result of a robbery that 'went wrong'.

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