

Fragmented Memory
The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile

支離的記憶

中國前衛藝術家四人展



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Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, guest curators

Wexner Center for the Arts
The Ohio State University
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Foreword/Acknowledgments

In 1991, Gao Minglu, one of the leading curators and critics of the avant-garde art movement in China during the 1980s, came to The Ohio State University as a visiting scholar, through the efforts of Dr. Julia F. Andrews, Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art. Together, Gao and Dr. Andrews, a highly respected scholar of Chinese painting with an interest in the modern period, possess expertise and resources in a body of art and ideas that are just beginning to gain critical attention in this country. A collaboration with the Wexner Center that would team the talents of the university with the Center's desire to bring forth and support critical new work seemed natural and obvious. Over the course of several months various ideas were explored, resulting in the proposal by Andrews and Gao that eventually became *Fragmented Memory*. Our goals were several-fold: to bring together four of the leaders of the avant-garde movement in China during the 1980s, to support their creation of new work, to provide a context for understanding the events and history surrounding and affecting their artistic development, and to provoke a discussion regarding the implications of defining an international aesthetic as either an expatriate view or an ideological hybrid. The project and its auxiliary programs also mark the continuation of substantive collaborations between the university and the Wexner Center, uniting scholarship and the artistic process.

The art and experiences of these four artists challenge American viewers' assumptions regarding Chinese culture and our expectations of what constitutes, formally and conceptually, an international rather than a national art. The late 1970s and 1980s, the formative years for these artists, witnessed a succession of political shifts in which periods of tolerance and even encouragement of intellectual and artistic individuality alternated with and eventually ended in repression of any ideas

outside the "official" language. This schizophrenic environment—caught between East and West, innovation and convention—is very much at the heart of the artists' developing visions. More than a mere hybrid of East and West, of tradition and the avant-garde, this art shows a clashing of forms and ideologies in interpretations that are inextricably tied to the many fragments that compose each artistic self.

During the past year of planning, we have been deeply indebted to Gao Minglu and Judy Andrews for their vision, perseverance, and dedication. Of course, we are especially grateful to artists Huang Yongping, Wu Shanzhuan, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda, who traveled from great distances, patiently worked and reworked their proposals (often via fax and various translations), and created the powerfully stunning exhibition that is *Fragmented Memory*. Many thanks also are due to Christine Verzar, Chair of the Department of History of Art, for support of this catalogue and to critic Zhou Yan for his essay contribution to it.

The creation of new works, especially site-specific works, is remarkably demanding for both the artists and the staff. The projects could not have been realized without the resourcefulness, talent, and good nature of the entire Wexner Center staff, especially the members of the education and communications departments, as well as the exhibition project staff listed at the end of this publication. Three individuals were especially pivotal: Assistant Curator Annetta Massie, Exhibition Designer Ben Knepper, and Editor Ann Bremner. I am indebted to them for their tremendous efforts and support.

Sarah J. Rogers
Chief Curator/Director of Exhibitions
Wexner Center for the Arts

What Is the Chinese Avant-Garde?

Gao Minglu

The art of the Chinese avant-garde might be considered alien in the context of Chinese society. Its formal terms are foreign to traditional art, official art, and academic art. Its social and political ideas also are alien to the status quo, as avant-garde artists pushed traditional political and social structures along a more progressive course. The Chinese avant-garde movement, then, throughout the course of its development, has faced in two directions: one toward society as a whole and the other toward the art world.

As used by the Utopian Socialist Henri de Saint-Simon in the early nineteenth century, the meaning of the term “avant-garde” referred not only to art, but also to a progressive social role for the artist. To Saint-Simon, the term described a new militant role: “It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde ... what a magnificent destiny for the arts ... of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties.”¹ In this original definition of the avant-garde, the artist was exhorted to become both priest and warrior and to spearhead human progress.

Since the early years of the twentieth century, however, the term “avant-garde” has often been used in the Western art world with a different sense: to describe ideas and forms that are radical in their departures from artistic traditions but that may have little connection to social progress. Thus, the original social and political meaning of the term has gradually been mislaid. When we use the term “avant-garde” to label the new art that appeared in China beginning in the late 1970s, we do not focus only upon radical novelty in artistic concept or form, although formal innovation did become important to some of the Chinese avant-garde artists. Instead, we revive the original meaning of the avant-garde.

The roots of the Chinese avant-garde movement may be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when some artists, particularly those of the Star Group, broke away from existing artistic structures through their challenges to the authorities and their rejection of approved artistic styles. Other artists who retained connections to the official art world, most notably the realists of the early 1980s, cannot really be considered avant-garde, but one can still find some challenges to the status quo in their themes.

The avant-garde movement flowered in 1985 and 1986, when a large number of young artists openly broke with traditional art and academic realism. The movement had both destructive and constructive aspects. Modern Western styles of art were adopted as a means of destroying China’s preexisting artistic structures, particularly the dominance of realist oil painting and traditional painting. On the constructive side, avant-garde artists often attempted to bring forth new art with new social values. In their works they particularly sought to emphasize the value of the individual in Chinese society. Many believed that respect for individual value was the crucial prerequisite for reforming Chinese society and nurturing the spirit. Indeed the Chinese avant-garde movement possessed, between 1985 and 1989, a strongly romantic flavor. Many of its artists believed that freedom for the individual must be the future of their society, that their ideals could come true, that they could express those ideals in their work.

Young artists, in particular, believed that new forms of art were needed to express new cultural values and feelings. As the rest of Chinese society began opening to Western values, artists found Western forms of art more appropriate for expressing their own psychological states. Consequently, the Chinese avant-garde, since the late 1970s, has absorbed some ideas and forms from Western modernist and postmodernist art, including dada, surrealism, and pop art. Combined with its Western forms, however, one may sometimes find innovative juxtapositions of traditional Chinese cultural

1. Quoted in Richard V. West, “The Avant-Garde: Marching in the Van of Progress,” in S. A. Mansbach, *Standing in The Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-Garde, 1908-1930* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 11, from Henri de Saint-Simon, *Opinions Litteraires, philosophiques et industrielles* (Paris, 1825).

ideas. And, while adding a new emphasis on formal innovations, China's avant-garde artists remained grounded in social or cultural concerns in a way that differentiated them from Western formalists. In its own context, that is to say, in the face of Chinese social, political, and economic pressures, Chinese avant-garde art was often passionate, highly charged, and genuinely radical.

After 1989, the avant-garde effectively ceased to operate as a movement. The artists, however, continued to work in two rather different directions. The pre-1989 avant-garde artists were primarily idealists who destroyed the old world to create a new one; they believed in an ideal truth, even if a truth not found in the real world. The constructive inclinations of the avant-garde were replaced, after June 4, by an approach the artists themselves describe as "deconstructive." Many of the artists who remained in China began making cynical images based on political propaganda of the Maoist period, in a trend known as Political Pop. Artists who left China, including the four men in this exhibition, carried on avant-garde principles, often continuing to make statements about larger social or cultural issues. Since going abroad, however, their concerns have gradually shifted away from purely Chinese socio-political issues to cross-cultural artistic and social questions. Simultaneously, as we see in this exhibition, they have begun using the language of contemporary international art to express their individual concerns in a more natural way.

Fragmented Memory: An Introduction

Julia F. Andrews

1. This information is largely taken from the text of a 1991 lecture by Gao Minglu, "The Chinese Avant-Garde." Mao Zedong explicitly condemned humanism in his 1942 "Yanan Talks on Art and Literature," the text of which became required ideological guidance for any artist or writer in China after 1949. A good translation may be found in Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies no. 39, 1980). An excellent study of debates on humanism, philosophy, and culture in the 1980s that sheds additional light on issues raised by Gao Minglu may be found in Bill Brugger and David Kelly, *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), especially chapter 6, "The Importance of Humanism."

2. The term "'85 Movement" was coined by Gao Minglu, then a recently appointed editor at *Art Monthly* (Meishu), and in use by the spring of 1986. After higher officials objected to this designation, the term "'85 Art Trend" was briefly adopted as a less objectionable alternative.

Fragmented Memory brings together four artists who were leaders of the Chinese avant-garde, an artistic movement that flourished in China between 1985 and 1989, but who now work in the West. Huang Yongping (b. 1954), who grew up in Xiamen (formerly known as Amoy), a city in the southern coastal province of Fujian, graduated from the oil painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1982. Since 1989, he has lived in Paris. Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1960), a native of Zhoushan, an island off the coast of Zhejiang, graduated from the art education department of the same academy in 1986. He travelled to Iceland in 1990 and now lives in Hamburg. Gu Wenda (b. 1955), from Shanghai, received his M.F.A. degree in Chinese painting from the Zhejiang Academy in 1981, studying under the traditionalist landscape painter Lu Yanshao. He served on the faculty of the Zhejiang Academy before coming to North America in 1987, and has now settled in New York. Xu Bing (b. 1955), who grew up in Beijing, graduated from the printmaking department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, in 1981 and joined the academy's faculty upon graduation. He continued to teach, even while returning to the classroom as a student, and received his M.F.A. in printmaking in 1987. He moved to the United States in 1990 as an honorary fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Although the four artists are quite different, their work has shared concerns. In China, all adopted confrontational attitudes toward their recent heritage, rejecting both dogmatic interpretations of Marx and formulaic uses of nationalism. Formally, they moved outside the strict distinctions of medium (oil painting, ink painting, printmaking) that dominated the institutional and exhibition structures of Chinese art in the 1980s, working in multimedia formats more common in contemporary Western art. Conceptually, their work

sprang from individualistic syntheses of various kinds of Western philosophy with Chinese Daoism and Chan Buddhism.

China's opening to the West in 1979 had led to a flood of translated publications on Western philosophy, aesthetics, art theory, and art history. Simultaneously, long-banned classics of ancient Chinese philosophy and religion became available to students for the first time. Seeking to overturn a cultural dogmatism that had failed to satisfy their aspirations, young intellectuals read, debated, and wrote about realms far beyond the Maoist ideology of their early educations.

Even within the Communist party, groundwork for a new movement was laid when, in 1981, party thinkers initiated a debate about an early Karl Marx essay, *The 1844 Manuscript on Economics and Philosophy*. They proposed that the young Marx emphasized humanism, not class struggle, and that he viewed society as the cause for human alienation. Their discussion of humanism broke the boundaries of orthodox Maoism, raising issues of human value, human position, human dignity, and even human rights.¹

In the art world, similar explorations of humanism exploded in the mid-1980s into a plethora of new styles. The new art was initially referred to as the "'85 Movement." When this term was prohibited by higher authorities, who detected in it an inappropriately political flavor, the official press began referring to such art as "new wave" or "avant-garde," a usage we follow here.²

The movement, actually a loosely connected effort using a wide variety of styles and forms, was aimed at bringing Chinese art into the contemporary international art world. It appeared rather suddenly in 1985, the result of hidden intellectual, social, and political ferment that took place in the early 1980s. At that time, the official rejection of Cultural Revolution ideology led some Chinese to an unapproved questioning of the foundations of Communist culture itself. The new art, practiced

mainly by young artists, was almost always oppositional in its forms and intent. Although it varied substantially in style and content from region to region and group to group—so much, indeed, that it is difficult for a Western observer to comprehend it all as part of a single trend or school—the new art was clearly unified by what it was *not*. Specifically, it rejected both socialist realism, which had dominated Chinese oil painting for thirty years, and the nationalistic transformations of traditional painting then practiced in the official art academies. The artistic language employed by the young artists aimed to be international; the themes they chose often stemmed from long-suppressed individualistic values.

The best works of the period operated at the intersection of Western and Chinese cultures, adopting forms of Western conceptual art for Chinese purposes. The artists asked agonizing questions about the value of their own culture in the modern world. The forms and content of their work challenged, in the most iconoclastic way, the authorities of the Chinese art world, but their attacks on Chinese culture raised questions about their own identities as artists and as individuals, questions that remain at the core of their work even after they move to the West.

The movement, somewhat surprisingly, achieved official recognition as part of an effort to speed China's modernization through freeing the minds of its intellectuals. This reluctant approval from party art officials offered adventurous young artists an unprecedented chance to make their work and ideas known throughout the Chinese art world, particularly during the two-year span of 1985 and 1986, and during a slightly briefer period in 1988 and 1989.

The significance of this change can be better understood by contrast with what came before. Until 1985, abstract art was largely prohibited, and any art with even slightly unorthodox political content might bring the artist a good deal of trouble. Episodic exceptions to this generalization may be found, most notably in the 1979–1980 period, during which open expression of discontent

with social and cultural policies of the Cultural Revolution was briefly permitted. In this atmosphere, amateur artists of the Star (Xingxing) Group commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China by hanging a modernist show in late September 1979, on the fence outside the Chinese National Art Gallery. The unapproved exhibition was closed by the authorities, but after some rather tense negotiations, the group was eventually permitted two formal showings. The second, in 1980, caused a scandal when Wang Keping, one of the participating artists, installed highly political sculpture that had not been approved by the responsible authorities. Wang and most other artists in the group were severely criticized, and they soon left for foreign countries.

Soon thereafter, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution movement was launched, part of a misguided effort to root out the contamination of Western culture by suppressing freedom of expression. Li Xianting, the critic at the official art journal, *Art Monthly* (Meishu), who had published articles favorable to the Stars and to abstract art, was fired from his post in 1983, and for the next year or two exhibitions and periodicals were dominated by old-fashioned propagandistic paintings. With this combination of official xenophobia, puritanical social and cultural controls, aesthetic conservatism, and the absence of a free art market, Chinese art remained isolated from trends in contemporary world art. The backward-looking tendency is believed by Chinese critics to have reached its apogee in October 1984, when realistic paintings on orthodox political themes dominated the National Art Exhibition (the sixth in the thirty-five years since 1949). Distaste with the exhibition was so widespread that it led to disaffection even among some older art professors who had made their earlier reputations as socialist realist painters.

It was against this background, a suppression of cultural freedom without any convincing benefit to either society or the individual, that the young rebelled. Their oppositional movement, which broke Chinese social and political taboos by implicitly criticizing their teachers,

the art world leadership, and the very society from which they sprang, was spurred on by sympathetic young critics, the most ambitious of whom sought to remake the landscape of Chinese art, art theory, art criticism, and art administration. This iconoclastic activity developed extremely rapidly in the super-heated cultural atmosphere between 1985 and 1989. Although official support for the avant-garde lasted a comparatively brief time, its influence was so strong that it continues to this day, not only among the young but also among older artists. A rather direct legacy may be found in the works of its artists now working abroad, including those of *Fragmented Memory*. A transformed and somewhat more limited inheritance may be found in the ironical works of the Political Pop movement, which has developed, largely underground, in China since 1989. Yet even among relatively traditional landscape painters, one will frequently hear that an artist began, in about 1986, an experimental phase, or a newly self-expressive phase, or a period of trying to integrate Western ideas into his or her art. Thus, the ideals of the avant-garde movement, especially the stress on creative freedom, individualism, and cosmopolitanism, permeated the entire Chinese art world. The persistence of these ideals even after suppression of the movement's most important spokesmen during the post-June 4 cultural repression, lends particular interest to the roots of the new art's development.

Whatever ideological, social, or aesthetic shifts might have taken place in the minds of individual artists between 1979 and 1985, they could not have manifested themselves in official venues without rather dramatic changes in the political terrain. Indeed, for an officially sanctioned art to be critical of China's communist society, as much of this art was, is a seemingly contradictory phenomenon. Was it the result of subversion within the Communist party, as some hard-liners believe, or an idealistic attempt to incorporate normal human concerns within the boundaries of acceptable culture?

3. "Promoting the Young to Leading Posts," *Beijing Review*, 1985, no. 9 (March 4), p. 15.

4. "Party Consolidation Enters Second Stage," *Beijing Review*, 1985, no. 10 (March 11), pp. 4-5.

5. "Writers Promised Free Expression," *Beijing Review*, 1985, no. 2 (January 14), p. 6.

6. Li Honglin, "Open Policy Essential to Socialism," *Beijing Review*, 1985, no. 13 (April 1), pp. 15-18.

Regardless of how one might answer this question, it is clear that one crucial administrative factor behind the establishment of the new artistic movement came from the personnel changes that took place in the mid-1980s. In a speech of October 22, 1984, Deng Xiaoping had declared that a key to China's success was to respect knowledge and talented people. He went on to specify that China should be "unhesitatingly promoting young and middle-aged cadres, especially those in their 30s and 40s..." and that older officials should be persuaded to vacate their posts.³ Party members were instructed to negate the "leftist" policies, theories, and methods of the Cultural Revolution through education, and officials who rose to prominence during the Cultural Revolution were to be removed from office.⁴ In the art world, these changes involved recruiting into the Communist party young people more notable for their scholarly and artistic talents than for their ideological orthodoxy, and a concurrent hiring of young critics and art professors who had no vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

A second key bureaucratic factor was that new cultural policies were set in motion by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist party in late 1984 and early 1985. In a speech to the National Writers' Congress, held between December 29 and January 5, a prominent party ideologist told China's literary leaders that Chinese society should guarantee writers freedom of expression.⁵ Articles appeared that further linked freedom of expression to economic progress. One, for example, argued that a narrow-minded, anti-foreign mentality was beneficial only to maintaining a feudal society. For progress to occur, it was necessary that China's economic, intellectual, and social life go from being closed to being open and from being national to being worldwide. The author concluded that socialism is never narrow nationalism.⁶

It was in such an atmosphere that an important official conference on trends in Chinese oil painting was held in Anhui in the spring of 1985. Subsequently known as the Huang Shan Meeting, it quickly developed into a

repudiation of the conservative and politicized standards that had dominated selections for the national exhibition of 1984. The prominent art professors and critics attending the conference rejected the previous emphasis on political correctness in theme as the criteria for evaluation; they discussed flaws in the well-established official standard of “nationalist oil painting” and urged individualism in artistic creation. The group reached a further consensus that, in accordance with the modernization of Chinese society, oil painting should develop in a modernist direction and art should seek to be cosmopolitan rather than national. Major figures in the official Chinese art world thus emerged from the meeting strongly committed to seeking innovation and to leaving behind propagandistic politics in art.

To some degree, the conference simply made public the private explorations of individual artists, but the open debate and subsequent publication of conference proceedings were important in making official the ever more widespread feeling that the past must be discarded.⁷ This commitment to change was strengthened by political circumstances within the art world. A full congress of the Chinese Artists Association (CAA), the fourth since 1949, was held immediately after the oil painting conference for the purpose of electing new officers. The CAA, the most prestigious professional organization for artists in China, is also an arm of the party’s propaganda mechanism, and its officers serve important symbolic and practical roles in promoting official art policies.

At the recently concluded meeting of the Film Association (a parallel organization for filmmakers), members had rejected the slate of officers sent down by the Central Propaganda Department and had elected a young film star as chairman instead of the old party leader who was expected to get the post. In alarm, the Central Propaganda Department sent several representatives to the CAA meeting to ensure that such an event would not recur. The authoritarian tone with which old party leaders announced the voting method, however, led young and middle-aged artists to complain that the

whole exercise was undemocratic, as they were expected to simply rubber stamp officials chosen from above. Discontent became so severe that a formal attempt to democratize the voting method was brought to the floor and passed.

The designated slate fought off this challenge in a most cynical way. Relying on their seniority within the Communist party, they persuaded local party officials to bring discipline to their delegations. The procedural motion was, to the distress of many delegates, withdrawn. Instead of following the new policies of promoting the young and encouraging creative freedom, the end result was that the party had invoked discipline from its members for the purpose of maintaining the personal power and position of the old guard. Many of those in attendance, and particularly the young and middle-aged, were disillusioned at being manipulated in this way and for this purpose.

This discontent seems to have opened up an ideological gap within the ranks of the official bureaucracy itself. Many newly appointed administrators, editors, and critics turned their backs on the standards of their elders and devoted themselves to promoting the art of the young, an art that overtly challenged the establishment.

They found many opportunities to express their views, as a wave of new periodicals appeared and old journals were revamped. *Art Trends* (Meishu sichao), a lively new journal founded in Wuhan in January 1985, began publishing theoretical articles favorable to the avant-garde as well as manifestos by its artists. *Jiangsu Pictorial* (Jiangsu huakan), published in Nanjing, was revamped and began publishing controversial articles on art. In July, the most significant new publication, *Fine Arts in China* (Zhongguo meishubao), a weekly newspaper that solicited articles from writers and artists all over China, was founded. Even the venerable Chinese Artists Association journal, *Art Monthly*, which had hired several recent graduates as new editors between late 1984 and mid-1985, began publishing articles about and by artists who were working in various previously banned styles.

7. The proceedings were published as “Welcome the Spring for Oil Painting Art—Summary of the Oil Painting Art Conference” (Yingjie youhua de chuntian—youhua yishu taolunhui jiyao) in *Art History and Theory* (Meishu shilun), no. 4. My summary of the conference is taken from Gao Minglu, et al, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986* (Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi, 1985–1986) (Shanghai People’s Press, 1990), pp. 61–67.

8. "Zhuhai Painting Institute's Founding; Zhuhai Painting Institute's first Exhibition; and '85 Youth Art Trends Large Scale Slide Show Opening," unpublished conference proceedings, Aug. 15–17, 1986, p. 4. Gao expressed similar ideas in an influential speech that was published by the CAA in its internal circulation *Artists' Newsletter* (Meishujia tongxun), no. 5, 1986, the text of which is translated in *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hongkong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), pp. cciv–cvii.

This enthusiasm on the part of the critics fanned the flames of any sort of modernist activity that might appear.

A direct inspiration for many of the young artists was Robert Rauschenberg's exhibition at the Chinese National Art Gallery, Beijing, in November 1985, which was part of the American artist's ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange) project, a multi-year travelling exhibition. Many of the works Rauschenberg showed incorporated found objects, both exotic and mundane, from his various international travels. Within a few weeks, the artists of the "Three-Step Studio" in Taiyuan, Shanxi, had attempted to hold an exhibition, closed before it opened to the public, that involved found objects from their locality. Slides of the installation were publicized by some Beijing critics, which negated the suppression of the show by local officials. A somewhat differently conceived exhibition by Xiamen Dada (a group in which Huang Yongping was a key figure) in 1987 was similarly closed because of its use of found objects. Nevertheless, the idea that an internationally oriented avant-garde could have a local flavor was extremely important in leading the better young modernists away from purely derivative forms.

By April of 1986, the phenomenon of new art by young artists had acquired the label "'85 Art Movement"; in July the official journal *Art Monthly* published its first profile of one of the artists, Gu Wenda. In August, under the sponsorship of *Fine Arts in China* and the newly founded Zhuhai (Guangdong) Painting Institute, a conference was held at which a group of about 100 critics and artists recapped the preceding year's activities. In his introductory remarks at the Zhuhai meeting, Gao Minglu defined the new art as having the following characteristics: 1. spontaneous, that is to say, self-organized, not run by official organizations; 2. group oriented; 3. widespread throughout China; 4. rebellious; 5. experimental and appropriationist in artistic form, and especially influenced by Western modernist forms. The artists' goals, in his view, were to find an artistic language that could express the psychology and emo-

tions of their generation. Gao identified several distinct stylistic or thematic trends within the movement; the one most pertinent to the artists of *Fragmented Memory* involved conceptual and performance art.⁸

Interestingly, most of the artists whose work developed in this direction came from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. Early in the 1980s, the director of the academy made a huge purchase of Western art books for the school library. Although access to such subversive literature was restricted to graduate students and faculty, the truly dedicated undergraduate could usually find a way to see them. According to Gu Wenda, who was then a graduate student, Hangzhou undergraduates in the late seventies and early eighties were extremely interested in contemporary Western art, even though it was largely banned by the authorities and criticized by their teachers. Students, particularly those in the oil painting department, such as Huang Yongping and Lin Ling (a.k.a. Billy Harlem, murdered in 1991 in New York) competed with one another in modernist artistic experiments. Both Huang and Lin suffered as a result of their independence: when they graduated, in the conservative period leading up to the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign, both were given poor permanent job assignments. Once this underground trend was established among the students, however, it was passed on from class to class, largely without the knowledge or interference of the faculty. Dispersal of its proponents to distant parts of China, as punishment, moreover, may have laid the groundwork for the nation-wide movement that subsequently evolved.

Among the conceptual pieces by students or graduates of the Zhejiang Academy that were publicized at the Zhuhai Painting Institute conference in August 1986 was an iconoclastic group installation entitled *75% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*, to which Wu Shanzhuan was an important contributor. Wu's work, part of his ongoing *Red Humor* series, juxtaposed fragments of text from religion, philosophy, politics, the news, and mundane life in a humorous or even absurd way. His installations resonated with a slightly threatening undertone,

however, because of their formal references to the palette and imagery of the Cultural Revolution.

The Zhuhai meeting was only one of the various formal gatherings of critics, professors, and art administrators at which the works of avant-garde artists were discussed during this period. Such activities served to produce a consensus that these artists formed a legitimate artistic movement. Indeed, the most frequently published of the avant-garde artists, most notably Gu Wenda, became, by late 1986, notorious throughout the Chinese art world.

The critics at the Zhuhai conference made plans to hold a retrospective exhibition of the avant-garde art movement in 1987. Unfortunately, the student demonstrations that swept China in late 1986 led to a short-lived cultural crackdown that made such an event impossible. Nevertheless, planning for an avant-garde exhibition to be held the following July went forward in a quasi-underground manner, disguised under the title "All-China Young Artists Scholarly Communication Exhibition." The authorities were less naive than the young critics hoped, for the Propaganda Department of the Central Party Committee responded within ten days of the planning meeting (held on March 25 and 26, 1987) by prohibiting all organized activities involving nationwide scholarly communication among young people.

In spite of official attempts to slow down the social and intellectual changes taking place among China's youth, a questioning of standard views of Chinese history and culture continued. Xu Bing, a well-known young woodblock printmaker who had served as a delegate to the disheartening CAA congress in 1985, emerged in October 1988, with a radically new kind of work, his *Book of Heaven*. He had spent the previous three years hand-carving 2000 completely illegible Chinese characters in a Song dynasty style. His installation in the Chinese National Art Gallery involved long printed scrolls of illegible words and boxed sets of illegible books bound in traditional blue paper covers. This questioning of Chinese culture is related to that of Gu Wenda and Wu Shanzhuan but, because of the agonizing intensity

of the artist's effort, possesses a different kind of power.

The cultural relaxation of late 1988 and 1989 permitted not only Xu Bing's exhibition, but the long-delayed avant-garde retrospective. On February 5, 1989, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition opened, only to be closed down three hours later by the public security bureau after a young artist converted her piece into a performance by shooting it with an illegal firearm. The publicity attracted not only criticism, but also notoriety, so that upon its reopening the exhibition was crowded with spectators. Cosponsored by a number of official art organizations and showing 297 works by 186 artists, the exhibition marked the apex of official recognition for the avant-garde movement.

After the June 4 massacre at Tianamen Square, the exhibition and its organizers became primary targets for a renewed and substantially more vigorous campaign to root out the evils of bourgeois liberal thought. Since 1989, the critics, publications, and exhibition spaces that gave the avant-garde its visibility have been suppressed. Some of its most active artists, including the four represented here, are now working abroad. Others have joined the somewhat cynical Political Pop painting movement that is more and more aimed at the Hongkong art market.

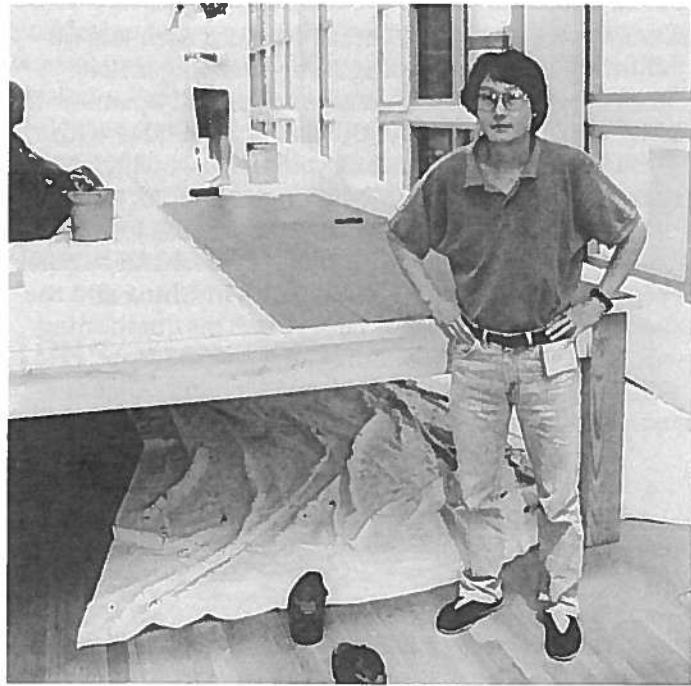
The *Fragmented Memory* exhibition brings together four survivors of the Chinese avant-garde, a movement shattered by political and cultural purges, and for me, the title evokes the historical circumstance of the movement's repression. As the new work for the exhibition has evolved, however, the title has turned out to be relevant in a more descriptive way, for an unsettling, somewhat disjunctive feeling, burdened by a slight melancholy, cuts into the viewer's consciousness from odd corners of the galleries.

Huang Yongping's gigantic trap comments upon the hollow seduction of the West, which has lured so many of his fellow Fujianese to enslave themselves to the gangsters who smuggle them into American waters on

rickety freighters. Wu Shanzhuan's *Missing Bamboo* comments directly upon the relationship between art and commerce, but the multilayered irony of his work, based upon his Chinese imagery, is charged by his combination of the mundane and the exotic. Gu Wenda's piece juxtaposes a sterile, formally beautiful installation with shockingly real materials derived from the joyous, mundane, and horrific occurrences of human life. Xu Bing, in a work that combines parts of his *Book of Heaven with Post-Testament*, an unreadable English book, comments on cultural conflict, not only between cultures but within them. His texts, quite literally, are fragmentary, but by their illegibility they fragment his Chinese heritage, the Western traditions of the world in which he now lives, and various layers of cultural intercourse in much more complicated ways.

Artists
Huang Yongping
Gu Wenda
Wu Shanzhuan
Xu Bing
at work on their installations at
the Wexner Center for the Arts.





Chronology of Chinese Avant-Garde Art, 1979–1993

Gao Minglu

The Cultural Revolution, a period when selfless devotion to Mao Zedong and his ideology dominated Chinese art and life, ended in 1976 when Mao died. But the change in leadership did not immediately result in new cultural values or art styles. In the years 1977 and 1978, most mainstream artists continued to use the hyperbolic style of the Cultural Revolution, substituting only some new leaders, historical figures, and revolutionary heroes for the characters seen in paintings from the time of the Cultural Revolution. (We have dubbed this tendency “Post-Cultural Revolutionism.”) During this two-year period, only a few small-scale shows were held in which artists displayed apolitical works such as landscapes and portraits and so challenged previous conventions that demanded political subject matter in art.

An important period of political change began late in 1978 when leaders including Deng Xiaoping initiated reform programs that emphasized increased openness to the West. Intellectuals and the public responded with the “Beijing Spring” Democracy Movement, which flourished from November of 1978 to March of 1979. At this time, intellectuals began questioning the foundations of Maoist ideology with philosophical and cultural debates regarding the nature of reality in China and the value of the individual human being. This questioning spirit and the concurrent influx of Western ideas influenced the occurrence and development of Chinese avant-garde art.

1979

The two most important trends in contemporary art in 1979, Scar Painting and the activities of the Star Group, both involved political choices of subject matter and were intended to criticize the realities of contemporary China. Scar Painting was a form of critical realism that took its name from a related literary movement named after a short story, “Scar,” by Lu Xinhua. The term refers to the emotional wounds inflicted on the Chinese populace, especially intellectuals, students, and some old cadres, by the Cultural Revolution. Artists and writers alike often chose subjects that allowed them to portray the Cultural Revolution in a negative light. Cheng Conglin’s painting *A Certain Month of a Certain Day in 1968* and the illustrations by Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Ben to Zheng Yi’s short story “Maple,” for example, describe the tragic results of Red Guard battles during the Cultural Revolution.

The main intent of the Stars was to criticize the Cultural Revolution and the continuing oppression of citizens by the authorities. Members of the group worked in previously forbidden modern Western styles, ranging from post-impressionism to abstract expressionism, and the decision to use these styles in itself implied criticism of the cultural status quo. The Stars’ first, and most notorious, exhibition took place in late September 1979, when members hung their work on the fence outside the Chinese National Art Gallery without prior permission. After this display was disrupted by the police, the artists posted a notice at Democracy Wall and held a protest march. Their first formal exhibition was held in Beihai Park in Beijing between November 23 and December 2, 1979, with 163 works by 23 unofficial artists. In August 1980, they exhibited at the Chinese National Art Gallery, this time with official approval. Even so, the exhibition became controversial after the authorities criticized some works for their political

content. Wang Keping's wooden sculpture *Idol*, which turns the image of Mao Zedong into a Buddha and so criticizes the seeming deification of Mao by his successors, is typical of these artists' works. Soon thereafter the Star artists began leaving China.

A significant point in the development of apolitical approaches to artmaking came in September 1979, when several murals were unveiled at the Beijing International Airport. Yuan Yunsheng's *Water-Splashing Festival: Ode to Life*, one of the airport murals, included nude female figures, and this triggered a serious controversy over nudity in public art. After an extended debate, the controversial section of the wall was boarded over in 1981.

1980–1981

A new trend, Rustic Realism, appeared in 1980. The artists who developed this tendency produced unidealized images of the daily lives of ordinary poor people from the countryside and border regions of China. Chen Danqing's *Tibetan Series*, exhibited in October 1980 at the Central Academy of Fine Arts graduation exhibition, and Luo Zhongli's *Father*, which won first place in the *Second National Youth Art Exhibition* in December, are particularly influential examples of Rustic Realism. Some filmmakers, such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who emerged in the mid- and late 1980s were affected by this movement and incorporated influences from its imagery in their work. Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) have recently been distributed widely and critically acclaimed in the West.

The liveliest artistic activity in the period between 1979 and 1981 took place in a limited number of unofficial and quasi-official art groups that developed in various parts of China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, and Kunming. Most of the artists involved in these groups devoted themselves to formal questions, particularly problems of abstract beauty.

1982–1984

An anti-Western political movement known as the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement was launched in early 1982. Intended to counteract the Western influences that authorities feared were "polluting" the Chinese people's spirit and commitment to communism, the movement continued until late 1984. In the fields of philosophy and literature, the movement criticized humanism. In the art world, the authorities condemned what they saw as three faults that had developed since the end of the Cultural Revolution: Western individualistic values, "art for art's sake," and abstract art. Some articles discussing abstract art in neutral or positive terms that had been published in *Art Monthly*, the official art journal, were attacked by the authorities as examples of "spiritual pollution."

The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement had a chilling effect on all forms of experimentation in art. The authorities responsible for official art exhibitions, like all officials in the country, responded to this conservative political movement, and its influence was evident in the works chosen for exhibitions. For example, many of the works included in the National Exhibition of October 1984 (the sixth held since 1949) resurrected the political themes of the Cultural Revolution. The extraordinarily backward appearance of this exhibition caused a widespread psychological and political backlash in the Chinese art world.

1985

1985 was the most important year for the Chinese avant-garde art movement. Reflecting the end of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Movement, the art world began to react against the restraints on artistic practice imposed during the previous three years. The most important change was the widespread appearance of lively unofficial groups, in which artists met, talked, and exhibited. Moreover, the activities of these artists and groups were promoted by newly established art maga-

Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin, "Maple," illustrations to a short story by Zheng Yi, 1979.

Wang Keping, *Idol*, wooden sculpture, 1980.





Ren Jian, *Primeval Chaos*, ink on polyester, 1987.

Geng Jianyi, *Second Situation*, oil on canvas, 1987.

zines and newspapers, such as *Fine Arts in China* (Beijing), *Artistic Currents* (Hubei), and *Painters* (Hunan). The editors of these publications often were young critics who were sympathetic to avant-garde art, and they published information about the avant-garde groups and supported their activities.

Between 1985 and 1987, more than 80 unofficial artistic groups sprang up in 29 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions of China. This sudden and widespread phenomenon, which came to be called the "'85 Movement," was part of a broader movement that involved all areas of contemporary culture. The artists and their supporters sought to emphasize the value of individual human beings in Chinese society, freedom of creation in art, and a radical overhaul of artistic concepts and forms. The artists criticized both Chinese traditional art and realist art. To do this, they selected ideas from Western modern and postmodern art, such as surrealism, dada, pop art, and conceptual art. In 1985 and 1986, these informal artistic groups held at least 149 avant-garde exhibitions and meetings, and at least 2250 young artists participated in such activities. The rapid and unofficial expansion of styles new to China created controversy among artists and was criticized by conservative Chinese authorities.

Among the many groups that played a role in the avant-garde art movement was the Art Group of the North, founded in March in Harbin, Heilongjiang—the area formerly known as Manchuria. This group promoted a "Civilization of the North," which its artists believed would surpass both Western and traditional Chinese civilization. Their paintings, similar in style to surrealism, often involved landscape elements and abstract forms suggested by the glacial north of China. Ren Jian's *Primeval Chaos* is an example. The Art Group of the North remained active until 1987.

In May the *Exhibition of Young Artists of Progressive China* took place in Beijing. The most remarkable works in this show might be described as a kind of "neo-realist" painting. This approach, typified by Meng Luding's *Enlightenment of Adam and Eve in the New Age*, used realistic techniques but was intended to convey and inspire individual spiritual awakening.

Another group of artists was the Pond Society, which was based in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, a port city in eastern China. The works in its first show, the '85 *New Space Exhibition*, had a biting spirit and an absurd and humorous side, which one could call "gray humor." The group continued to be active through 1987, and Geng Jianyi's *Second Situation* is an example of a later work by a prominent member.

Three other particularly influential avant-garde groups founded in 1985 were the Red Brigade, the Art Group of Southwest China, and the Three-Step Studio. The Red Brigade organized the *Large-Scale Modern Art Exhibition* in Nanjing in July. The Art Group of Southwest China exhibited in Shanghai and Nanjing in September. The Three-Step Studio held its first exhibition in Taiyuan in Shanxi province in December. Some of the works in the Three-Step Studio exhibition were installations formed from parts of tools used by peasants in everyday life. Other activities by this group included sound installations and performance pieces. The Three-Step Studio remained active through 1987.

In November, Gu Wenda exhibited his work in the *Exhibition of Recent Works of Traditional Chinese Painting* in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in central China. He combined traditional techniques and Western modern art styles, such as surrealism, to express his desire to surpass both traditional Chinese art and Western art. One work consisted of a calligraphic “dismemberment” of Chinese characters into different parts, separated in order to form new characters. The artist continued this direction in works such as *Stillness Begets Inspiration*, which was shown in a solo exhibition displayed privately in the Gallery of Fine Art in the north central city of Xian, Shaanxi, in May of the next year.

1986

In April 1986 and May 1987, Wu Shanzhuan and his fellow artists in Hangzhou held two private exhibitions of installations titled *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White* and *Red Humor*. Wu himself created a related series entitled *Red Characters* in 1987.

Xiamen Dada, a group led by Huang Yongping in Xiamen, a port city in the southeastern coastal province of Fujian, held an exhibition titled *Xiamen Dada: Modern Art Exhibition* in September 1986. At the same time, Huang published an article titled *Xiamen Dada: Postmodernism?* in which he proposed combining dadaism and Chan (Zen) Buddhism. He also made a series of roulette wheel-like compositions based on the *Yi Jing*, or *Book of Changes*, which he used to direct his painting.

In August 1986, the first symposium about the '85 Movement and the Chinese avant-garde was held in Zhuhai, Guangdong in southeastern China. One feature of the meeting was a slide display. Participants at the meeting decided to hold a national avant-garde art exhibition, the first show of that kind, and began planning for it. In November, the Chinese Modern Art Research Group, an association of about thirty critics,

was established in Beijing, in part to organize this exhibition.

Student demonstrations took place in various Chinese cities in late 1986. In response, the authorities launched a campaign against “bourgeois liberalism,” targeting all Western trends. The campaign continued until mid-1988, significantly hampering the activities of the avant-garde art movement.

1987

An organizational meeting for the national avant-garde art exhibition was held on March 25 and 26. The exhibition was given the working title “All-China Young Artists Scholarly Communication Exhibition” and scheduled for July 1987. However, in the atmosphere created by the ongoing campaign against bourgeois liberalism, government officials responded on April 4 by issuing a document prohibiting all organized activities involving nationwide scholarly communication, especially among young people. As a consequence, organizational work for the exhibition and the activities of the Chinese Modern Art Research Group were forced to stop.

In August, a solo exhibition of Gu Wenda’s work opened at the University Arts Gallery of York University in Toronto. The artist left China at the time of this exhibition and subsequently settled in New York City.

1988

Following the end of the campaign against bourgeois liberalism, some avant-garde activities resumed or began anew in autumn and winter.

In October, Xu Bing held a solo exhibition of his woodcuts, including his *Book of Heaven*, at the Chinese National Art Gallery in Beijing. *Book of Heaven* consists of many books and scrolls of printed text fabricated

using traditional Chinese techniques and papers and classical typographic styles. The thousands of hand-carved characters, however, were made up by the artist and so are completely unintelligible to anyone.

In November, the 1988 Chinese Avant-Garde Convention opened in Tunxi, a famous scenic site in the province of Anhui. About a hundred artists and critics from all of China participated in the convention.



The Chinese National Art Gallery on the occasion of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, Feb. 5, 1989.

Xiao Lu firing a gun at her installation, *Dialogue*, which resulted in the police closing the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, Feb. 5, 1989.

1989

Delayed by political circumstances, financial problems, and the forces of tradition, the first nationwide avant-garde art exhibition (originally scheduled for July 1987) finally opened, as *China/Avant-Garde*, on February 5 at the Chinese National Art Gallery in Beijing. A total of 293 paintings, sculptures, videos, and installations by 186 artists—including Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, Huang Yongping, and Gu Wenda—were displayed. Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong, No. 1* was one of the most notorious works in the show, and this artist's pop art-derived style became very influential. Unfortunately the exhibition was closed by the authorities twice during its two-week run. The first closing, three hours after the

opening, was the result of artist Xiao Lu converting her installation into a performance by firing two gunshots into it. The second closure resulted from anonymous bomb threats sent to the gallery, the municipal government, and the Beijing Public Security Bureau.

An installation by Huang Yongping was included in *Magiciens de la Terre*, a major exhibition organized by the Pompidou Center in Paris. The artist left China to attend this exhibition and has subsequently lived in France.

With the cultural crackdown that followed the June Tiananmen Square demonstrations, the national avant-garde exhibition was castigated in the press as a typical example of bourgeois liberalism. Also as a result of the crackdown, art activity in China diminished drastically.

1990–1992

Xu Bing and Wu Shanzhuan left China during 1990. Many of the Chinese artists living in Europe or the United States developed active international careers, participating in a variety of solo and group exhibitions.

The *Chine Demain pour hier* exhibition took place in Pourrières in southern France in 1990. Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping—with his outdoor installation *Fire Ritual*—and five other artists participated. *Exceptional Passage*, an exhibition of Chinese avant-garde artists, was held at the Fukuoka Museum in Japan during 1991. Gu Wenda's *Vanishing 36 Pigment Golden Sections*, Huang Yongping's *Emergency Exit*, and works by three other artists were included.

In 1990, Xu Bing held a solo exhibition at Lung Men Art Gallery in Taipei, Taiwan. In 1991, his *Book of Heaven* was exhibited at Tokyo Gallery, Japan, and at the Elvehjem Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where the artist was a visiting fellow. *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, the exhibition at the University of Wisconsin, also included *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, the artist's rubbing of a section of the Great Wall.

Huang Yongping participated in the *Carnegie International* exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Gu Wenda participated in the exhibition *New York Diary: Almost 25 Different Things* at P.S. 1 in New York City.

In China in 1991, an exhibition of works by two avant-garde artists, Feng Mengbo and Zhang Bo, at Central Academy of Fine Arts Middle School Contemporary Arts Gallery in Beijing, was closed by the Public Security Bureau.

In November 1992, the *China Oil Painting Biennial Exhibition* took place in Guangzhou. Some artists displayed works exemplifying the dominant trend in China after Tiananmen, Political Pop. An important goal of the exhibition, which was developed under official policies urging economic expansion, was to strengthen the position of the avant-garde movement in the art market .

1993

In China, a performance titled *Great Expense* that was to include rock music, painting, and a fashion show was planned by an artists' group, known as the New History Group, led by Ren Jian, who had been active in the Art Group of the North during the early years of the avant-garde movement. This event was scheduled to take place at the new McDonald's restaurant in Beijing on April 28. At midnight on April 27, the Beijing Public Security Bureau summoned the artists for questioning and informed them that the activity could not take place.

Many avant-garde artists, including Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, and Gu Wenda, exhibited in *China's New Art, Post-1989* at Hanart TZ Gallery in Hongkong. The show then traveled to the Contemporary Art Museum in Sydney, Australia. Although the exhibition included a range of work, the dominant trend represented was Political Pop. The artists of Political Pop present political irony instead of reality. The most prevalent mode is a



Wang Guangyi, *Coca Cola* from the *Great Castigation* series, oil on canvas, 1989.

style that combines socialist realist or Cultural Revolution imagery with the irreverent characteristics of American pop art. Most of the Political Pop artists were previously idealistic participants in the '85 Movement; their new iconography is mainly based on China's best-known portrait, that of Mao Zedong, on official political slogans, on political events, or on themes and images from the cultural Revolution. The show also displayed the works of some younger artists who deal only with the most boring aspects of personal lives in which they appear to have lost all faith; their themes often take the form of bitter mockery or self-mockery. Thirteen artists from this exhibition, including Wu Shanzhuan and Xu Bing, were selected for the Venice Biennale.

Gu Wenda's Oedipus

For artist Gu Wenda, Oedipus has become an interiorized symbol of the expedition of his own life and art, the vehicle Gu has used to chronicle a spiritual journey permeated with paradox, enigma, and even danger. The mythological character serves as a metaphor through which the artist explores social, political, ethical, and aesthetic realms, attempting to penetrate the sensitive nerve center of culture in a critical way.

Gu's *Oedipus Refound* is an ongoing series of projects with roots in work the artist began in 1984, when he was in China. He started using this series title, with its explicit reference to the mythological figure, in 1989, and has since noted connections between the works of this series and *The Pseudo-Characters*, a group of paintings he had created between 1984 and 1986 by splashing ink on rice paper. With *The Pseudo-Characters*, the artist rejected the traditions of Chinese calligraphy and painting in which he was trained, trying to disrupt the aesthetic and ideographic attributes of the written language. Red and black crosses and circles that form upside-down, reversed, wrongly written, and restructured characters pour down the surfaces of huge sheets of Chinese paper, although elements of calligraphy remain here and there in the paintings. The action of producing these works clearly showed both Gu's rebellious temperament and his suspicion of language and written culture—in a sense, his suspicion of civilization itself. His doubts had specific applicability to Chinese culture, which has a long and continuous history written down in thousands of sophisticated characters that are ideographic rather than alphabetic. Gu believes that the Chinese have learned of the world, history, and themselves primarily through their written language, instead of relying on more authentic intuitions and insights based on physical experiences (as might have been true in the prehistoric period, for

example). As a result, writing is imbued with the essence of the material universe to a far greater extent in traditional Chinese culture than in other societies, both because of the ideographic nature of Chinese written language itself and because of the role such language has played in preserving and relating history. With *The Pseudo-Characters* Gu sought to destroy the system of characters, syntax, and grammar that carries so many aesthetic and cultural connotations in traditional Chinese society.

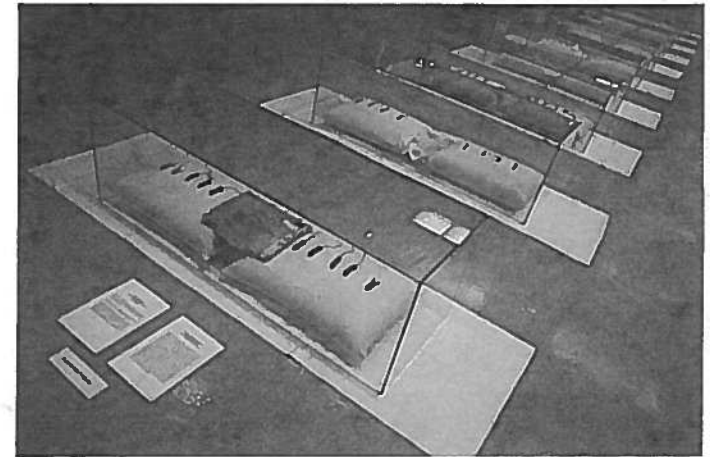
In describing his aims, the artist has written "The written language that we call 'aesthetic process' is a perverse interpretation by religious fanatics of the inherent nature of things, which is beyond comprehension. From this point of view, there is no difference between fable, mythology, and science." (It's worth noting that his original Chinese text is punctuated at random, in a conscious departure from conventional literary practices.) Gu's investigations in *The Pseudo-Characters* reinforced his skepticism regarding man's ability to encompass the essence of nature or of things in any language or thought process. This in turn led him to rethink the tale of Oedipus.

To the artist the most significant revelation of the Oedipus story as told in Sophocles' tragedy comes from its theme of conflict between knowledge and ignorance. Being totally unaware of the identity of the man and the woman he met, Oedipus killed his father and married his mother in an ostensibly "normal" way based on his instincts and behavioral imperatives. For the artist, the conflict of knowledge and ignorance in Oedipus is an allegory for the reality of human existence, where the "unknowing" is more essential in nature than the "knowing." Seeing a clear correspondence between this idea and the situation he created in *The Pseudo Characters*, Gu reworked his earlier drawings and proposed a new project (one of his earlier ideas for the Wexner Center), which he titled *Oedipus Refound #0: The Forest of Language Death*.

In modern times, Oedipus became a central symbol in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories of the human subconscious, and the action of the tragedy was reinterpreted as a metaphor for an unconscious sexual desire for the mother combined with hatred for the father. Sexuality came to the fore in the associative references of the classical story, and this too has had implications for Gu Wenda and his work. Gu has continued to investigate questions of material and human "essence" and has sought ways to encompass these qualities in his work, but he has shifted his focus to issues of sexuality and associated social taboos.

One aspect of these interests has been his obsession with menstruation, one of the final taboos of contemporary culture. The object of celebration in the rituals of some so called primitive cultures, menstruation is a most intimate matter in contemporary society, and one seen in only negative terms. The artist considers this an artificial attitude imposed by modern civilization in both the Oriental and Occidental worlds. As a person conditioned by ancient Chinese philosophies, which emphasize the unity of nature and mankind, Gu takes it for granted that there is a natural linkage between the cycles of menstruation and the cyclic rhythms of the universe. *Oedipus Refound #1: The Enigma of Blood*, the first work in his *Oedipus* series, involves used tampons and/or sanitary napkins arranged in grid-like, minimalistic installations, which have been shown in the United States, Poland, Hongkong, and Australia in various configurations. The artist collected the material for the project from women from fifteen countries, and the installations are shown with letters from the contributors. His intent in this work is to set an extremely private experience before the public in a way that encompasses psychology and physicality and injects both with the subjectivity of human existence.

It is tempting to relate Gu's projects in this vein to those of the many other contemporary artists who have chosen the human body as the focus of their work. Yet the artist sees significant differences between what he calls his "material-analysis" and the approach of Kiki



Smith, for example, who has replicated body parts in inanimate materials such as bronze or porcelain and made reference to body fluids without using the fluids themselves. Gu's work, by contrast, is composed of real physical substances that almost retain the warmth of the human body. This material is the "silent-self" (in the artist's words) that relates an individual's story in his or her own way. When viewers enter the carefully arranged and situated spaces of Gu's installations, they can perhaps hear the call of each animate individual and become involved with him or her psychologically, and even physically. The separation or opposition between subject and object melts in the shared experience of viewers and those who contributed the original material, and in the shared identity of the physical, psychological, and spiritual.

The artist has developed his ideas further in *Oedipus Refound #2: The Myth of Birth Material*, a project originally shown in the 1993 *Silent Energy* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England, and *Oedipus Refound #3: The Enigma Beyond Joy and Sin*, in this exhibition. One of the *Enigma of Blood* projects was specifically titled *2000 Natural Deaths*—perhaps an allusion to menstruation as a function of the absence of pregnancy. In these most recent works, Gu looks instead at the aftermath of pregnancy, birth, and the subject/

Gu Wenda, *Oedipus Refound #1: The Enigma of Blood*, installation, Hanart TZ Gallery, Hongkong, 1993. The artist began this ongoing ceremonial and memorial project with original writings and menstrual blood from 60 women participants in 1989; it also has been exhibited at Hatley Martin Gallery, San Francisco; The Artists' Museum, Poland; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; and Melbourne International Festival, Melbourne.



object of his “material-analysis” is placenta powder, ground from dried human placentae and categorized as from “healthy,” “abnormal,” and stillborn babies.

A facet of the Oedipus story that has particular significance for these works is the theme of tragic birth, the idea that Oedipus was born to his tragic fate, that the unrecognized seeds of his downfall were present at the very moment of his birth, even at the moment of his conception. The “enigma” explored in Gu’s projects involves the uncertainty that accompanies any pregnancy, that can change the happy event of birth into tragedy. And, as in the Oedipus story, there is also an underlying question of culpability: whether the human tragedies recorded in the artist’s material have traceable causes or are simply a matter of fate.

In *The Enigma Beyond Joy and Sin* the placenta powder is scattered on three extremely elongated steel beds (each holding 5 regular-sized mattresses placed end to end); an identical bed, the second in the row of four, is empty, to signify abortion. (A potentially interesting topic, although one the artist has not addressed explicitly, is how the issue of abortion involves quite different conflicts in China and in the West.) Hanging above the beds is a canopy-like installation, on which is stretched a sheet marked with virgin blood and sperm from a first episode of intercourse. With this work’s sensational material and undisguised display, the artist rushes (and leads viewers) into the restricted spaces of the delivery room and the boudoir.

Gu has often cast himself in the role of troublemaker, whether working in his own country or in the West, and a kind of iconoclastic provocation certainly continues in *The Enigma Beyond Joy and Sin*. But this is not his only goal; his aim is to show us the eternal enigmas of life and death, existence and propagation. The atmosphere in the gallery where the work is shown is solemn and dignified, an effect intensified by the grand scale and minimalistic treatment of the installation as a whole. As at a sacred sacrificial site, the surrounding canopy marks a special precinct, the sheet above flutters like a totemic

flag, and the placenta powder from tens (or hundreds?) of mothers and babies lies quietly on the beds as if on altars.

Where the material of Gu’s menstruation projects was derived only from women, here he extends his reach to both genders with the placenta powder presumably derived from the births of male as well as female infants and, even more graphically, with the blended body fluids on the sheet above. Perhaps as a result, the “silent-selves” in this installation present their own stories with more resonance than in his previous work. The viewer can identify with them more quickly and deeply, because of the universal associations of the materials and their applicability to conscious and unconscious, physical and spiritual, experiences and perceptions. The intensity of both subject matter and morphology are so powerful that the viewer reacts physically, with palpitation or nausea.

The conflicts aroused by Gu’s works are likely to be not only empirical or psychological but also, and more significantly, cultural. This is particularly true for *The Enigma Beyond Joy and Sin*. In China, placenta or its powder has served as a traditional tonic medicine for centuries; in the West, the concept of eating placenta powder might be shocking. In the most general terms, each of these attitudes might relate to the overarching ideas regarding, for example, the relationship between nature and mankind, that govern each culture. The tension raised by these contrasting attitudes towards the physical material of the work reflects the tension between cultures. To this artist, tension-making could be seen as an alternative strategy of art-making, as well as a mode of transcendence.

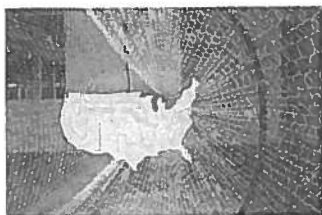
Zhou Yan

Opposite and details below:
Gu Wenda, *Oedipus Refound #3: Enigma Beyond Joy and Sin*, installation, Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts; collection of the artist.



Art in its Environment: Huang Yongping's Installations

Huang Yongping, *Human-Snake Plan*, installation, Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts; collection of the artist.



1. The name of the insects in question, locusts, is homophonous in Chinese with “yellow,” so that “yellow peril” sounds somewhat like “plague of locusts.”

The title of Huang Yongping's *Human-Snake Plan* is a literal translation of *renshe jihua*, a term from the Chinese press that refers to the lucrative enterprise of smuggling illegal aliens from China to the West—a term that encompasses both the gangsters and their human cargo. The potential immigrants, dazzled by the lure of the West, risk their lives at sea and take on such a burden of debt that, in the event their landing in North America succeeds, they and their families in China remain hostages to organized crime for years.

The installation takes the form of a human-scale trap, some 70 feet long, constructed of three huge iron rings, cables, and hundreds of yards of netting. At the entrance to the gallery, two wide pillars made of rusty oil drums and old tires evoke wharfs, presumably those in Fujian, the artist's native province and the point from which the smugglers' rickety freighters embark on their perilous journeys. The wires suspending the entrance to the trap are draped with tattered laundry, an image that moves the viewer subtly from the wharf to the sweltering journey itself.

From the point where one enters the enormous iron ring that serves as the entrance to the trap the beckoning, but almost hallucinatory, glow of a flashing map of the United States may be seen. Responding to the odd triangular shape of the Wexner Center's gallery space, Huang extends his conical trap to the acute angle of the gallery's tip, as though to exaggerate the perspective and thus expand the vast distance between the immigrant's pathetic reality and the golden bait at the opposite end of the installation.

Huang Yongping's initial image for the installation came from his Chinese national registration card, the official proof of his own identity (or that of any Chinese

person). The surface of the photo-ID is covered with a net-like pattern that proceeds out from a small outline map of China. Depending upon how one looks at the pattern, the gaping blankness of China is a mouth that might swallow anything that falls into the net, or perhaps a hole from which everything tumbles out. The image of a net extending from the contours of a map inspired the artist to contemplate the nature of national borders: in particular, their functions as barriers to those wishing to enter and to leave, and at the same time, their inevitable semi-permeability.

Human-Snake Plan represents the tragic folly of the would-be immigrant in an almost narrative manner; it surrounds viewers and forces them to identify with the somewhat surrealistic point of view of an ignorant but willing victim. Nevertheless, it retains a good deal of ambiguity. Perhaps the most basic question is: who has set the trap? Is it the gangsters? Is it the greed of the victims? Is it the passion for wealth in today's China—a psychological state encouraged by the authorities as an alternative to disruptive political activism? Or is it in some way the West itself?

This installation is far more immediately engaged with social and political issues than most of Huang's earlier work. Two other 1993 installations, however, similarly deal with questions of immigration, national boundaries, and otherness. *Yellow Peril*, an installation at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, that contained battling insects, raises issues of racism and cultural conflict.¹ A piece installed at the entrance to the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, Scotland, required viewers to walk through one of two openings, one labelled “EC Nationals” and one labelled “Others.” Huang thus forced each visitor to declare a self-identity (whether actual or fictional)—and to choose between being an insider and an outsider—as a prerequisite for entering the gallery.

Huang's earlier work, particularly that made in China, was not overtly political and dealt instead with questions about the basic nature of art. His pulped paper installation for the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition,

for example, *A History of Chinese Art and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, is a castigation of art history, but also comments upon, among other things, the choices and conflicts confronting a Chinese artist in the late 1980s. To Huang, however, there is no dramatic change in his work; he points out that his installations have always been extremely closely tied to the local environment and that the social situation is a part of this environment. In this light, his 1989 piece might also be seen as an ironic remark on the weighty curatorial intent behind the *China/Avant-Garde* retrospective.

The connection to environment Huang mentions as integral to his working methods renders his work site specific on several levels, as can be seen in *Human-Snake Plan*. From the initial planning stage of *Fragmented Memory* he intended to fabricate his piece entirely on site, and, as noted above, the final physical structure of the work is closely linked to the architectural setting. Incorporating materials from the local environment also was significant to him, and the laundry he uses to suggest the shipboard ambience is clothing found on the streets of Columbus or obtained from local Chinese. Conceptually, his focus on the dangers of immigration is directly relevant to the position of any Chinese artist abroad and so to the gathering of expatriate artists described by this exhibition's subtitle: *The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile*.

Huang's 1982 graduation paintings from the Zhejiang Academy, his earliest published pieces, provide a first hint of the environmental, or site-specific, interests that have assumed such prominence in his later art. Like all art students, he was sent to "experience life" during his senior year (a vestige of the Maoist practice of educating intellectuals to serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers), and he prepared these paintings at an industrial complex. Rather than simply adopting motifs from factory life, however, as was expected, he borrowed factory tools and materials to make his paintings, immersing himself in the processes of this industrial environment. Perhaps most revealing of Huang's nascent concerns are his

comments about this experience in an essay published soon after his graduation. He claimed that industrial parts in mass production were far more truthful and powerful than any fashionable artwork. For him, airbrush replaced paintbrush, industrial materials replaced oil paint, and the factory replaced the studio.²

At least one of Huang's graduation paintings depicts the politically correct theme of workers, although unheroic and seen from behind, but most are fuzzy or completely abstract. To the Chinese art world of the time they seemed dangerously radical, and Huang was punished by a lowly postgraduate job assignment: teaching in a provincial middle school rather than in a prestigious college or art school. In subsequent works, he went on to reject the distinctions of medium that then dominated the Chinese art world. Moreover, he left behind the romantic or even melodramatic self-expression to be found in many works of the early 1980s to seek a postmodernist effacement of the artist.

His *Roulette Wheel* series tried to replace the artist with the functioning of chance; Huang applied paint and ink to paper in a random manner determined by spinning a wooden wheel. The wheel was inscribed with various numbers and symbols, including the hexagrams from the *Book of Changes* (Yi Jing), which were coded to specific pigments and to specific parts of pieces of paper attached to the walls. The way in which Huang began to think of painting as a three-dimensional activity foreshadows his later interest in site-specific installations.

By 1986, Huang was writing openly of the influence of Marcel Duchamp and dadaism on his work; he also referred with some enthusiasm to Robert Rauschenberg's ROCI show in Beijing. Like most young artists of the period, Huang worked in the company of like-minded friends, forming a group called Xiamen Dada. In December 1986, the group installed an exhibition of found objects in the Fujian Provincial Art Gallery. Closed by the authorities immediately after the opening, the artists returned the objects to their original loca-

2. Huang Yongping, "On a Few of My Paintings" (Tan wo de ji zhang hua), *Art Monthly* (Meishu), January 1983, pp. 22 and 26. A good survey of Huang's early development by Wang Xiaojian may be found in Gao Minglu, et al, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985-1986* (Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi, 1985-1986) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1990), pp. 337-352. I have relied on that essay and an interview with the artist for this entry.

tions, satisfied that their activity was complete: they had come to the site empty-handed and would leave in the same way.

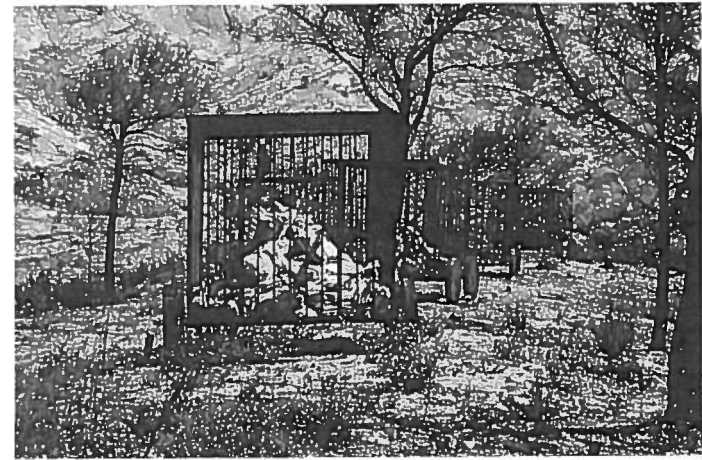
The transitory nature of such work, including the making of uncollectible art, has continued since his emigration to France in 1989. Chance, often interpreted through the mediation of the *Book of Changes*, but reflected also in his interest in found objects, remains an important element in his conceptual process. Even in his large pulped-paper projects, an ongoing aspect of his work, the contents and sources of the books and newspapers he destroys possess an element of chance, since they are largely determined by availability and vary from newspapers in the local language or in Chinese to discarded exhibition catalogues. Usually, however, the result of simply accepting the local situation, in a rather Daoist manner, will be an interaction with or comment upon the circumstances of the work's making.



Opposite and detail:
Huang Yongping, *Human-Snake Plan*, installation, Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts; collection of the artist.

Huang's current interest in cultural interactions and his frequent references to his Chinese heritage have been important since he arrived in Europe. His *Fire Ritual*, an outdoor installation/earthwork constructed at Mont Sainte-Victoire in southern France in 1989 and 1990, was inspired by a destructive forest fire that had swept the area not long before. Huang used traditional Chinese religious symbols, such as fire-protecting talismans from the Daoist text *Baopuzi*; elements of Chinese cosmology related to fire, including the elements wood and earth; French religious elements, in the form of small shrines; and emblems of modern culture, such as newspapers and fire extinguishers, to comment upon cultural differences in human responses to natural events, including disasters. He relates that the ambiguity of the work led some people to criticize him for what they misinterpreted as lack of sympathy for the human and animal victims of the fire. Such ambiguity or authorial neutrality is also at the core of Huang's work, however, and is equally evident in his *Human-Snake Plan*.

Julia F. Andrews



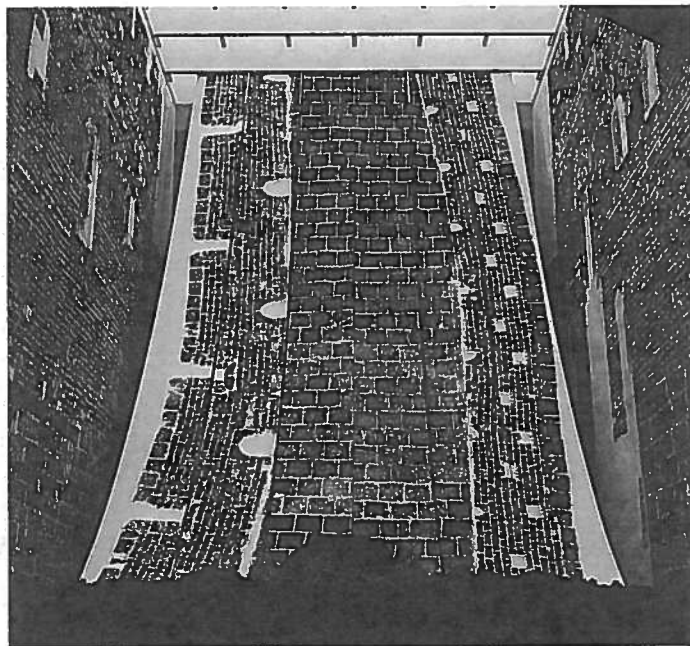
Huang Yongping, *Fire Ritual*, installation, Mont Sainte-Victoire, Aix-en-Provence, France, 1989–1990.



Meaninglessness and Confrontation in Xu Bing's Art

Meaninglessness and confrontation, the most important presuppositions of Xu Bing's art, are both exemplified in *Cultural Negotiation*, an installation in which several hundred unreadable books in English and Chinese cover the surface of a gargantuan conference table. Xu claims meaninglessness as the goal of his art, a function all the more contradictory because he uses language or symbol-laden monumental imagery as the basis for his work.¹ When he establishes a space without meaning in his work, Xu believes, viewers will fill it with their own readings of the confrontations that occur between different cultures and eras.

Well-established as a print-maker in the early 1980s, Xu Bing shifted his attention to the making of installations in 1985. His first major piece of this kind, *Book of Heaven*



1. Several earlier discussions of meaninglessness may be found in the Chinese art press, including articles by Cheng Weihe, Jia Fangzhou, and Yin Jinan.

2. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), p. 148.

Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, installation, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991.

(sometimes translated as *Book from the Sky*), was completed in 1988; the work comprises long scrolls of printed text, strips of text that may be pasted on the wall to resemble monumental steles, and boxed sets of books bound in blue paper covers that perfectly resemble traditional Chinese books. First exhibited in 1988 at the Chinese National Art Gallery in Beijing, and subsequently shown in a number of venues in Asia and the West, this extraordinary piece was the product of three years of intensive labor. Xu hand-carved over two thousand pieces of wooden type to print what look like Chinese characters in the Song dynasty style. None of Xu Bing's characters can be pronounced or understood, however, since each is invented by the artist, composed of rearranged elements from real Chinese characters.

By his complete avoidance of legibility in the text, Xu removed all semantic significance from the work itself, and thus erased all traces of his own ego as the creator of the work. The viewer is free to invest the piece with meaning and to create a new mental space in the space of the installation. Xu's work seems to exemplify in quite literal terms Roland Barthes's concept that after the author has finished his or her work, the "reader is the space. . . on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed. . . a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."² That is to say, the explanation of a work should not be sought in the artist who produced it, but in the reader.

The space created in Xu Bing's work relates also to a Chinese concept, the idea of "emptiness," that is crucial in Chan Buddhism. In Chan thought, a realization of the concept of "emptiness" is the moment in a person's experience when the mind is opened to discover a much richer and more certain truth, namely, enlightenment. Xu's illegible *Book of Heaven* provides for the viewer a meaningless text that can serve a role similar to the space of "emptiness."

Xu Bing's second major installation was his *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, a three-story-high ink rubbing taken from a section of the Great Wall. As displayed in the

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Elvehjem Museum at the University of Wisconsin in late 1991, the work involved massive black and white scrolls hung from ceiling to floor across the building's central court. At the lower end, a mound of dirt that looks like a tomb pinned the scrolls to the floor.³

Xu Bing and his crew labored in the mountains for twenty-four days in 1990 to make impressions of the surface of the Great Wall, using a technique traditionally employed for reproducing fine carvings of calligraphy. Over the course of several months, the ink-smudged sheets of Chinese paper were reassembled and mounted. For Xu, the expenditure of utmost effort was necessary to create an imposing psychological and physical space similar to the space of the Great Wall itself. Yet, the piled earth of the tomb at the foot of Xu's paper Great Wall is an obvious symbol of death. The confrontation between the splendid if ghostly paper representation of the Great Wall and the nihilistic physical presence of the earthen grave mound raises doubts about the purpose of human effort, not only questioning the artist's replication of the rough and inelegant surface of the Great Wall, but questioning more generally all human effort, including construction of the original Great Wall.

The powerful image of the Great Wall has become a symbol of the Chinese nation in the twentieth century, believed, as it popularly is in China, to be the largest construction on the world and to be the product of two thousand years of labor. Scholarly research suggests, however, that the wall actually was built over a much shorter period and that it was strategically useless as a border defense in its own day.⁴ In his simulation of the Great Wall, Xu Bing embodies the meaninglessness of its construction through his own exhausting activity of pounding the wall with ink-drenched wads of cloth. Even the title conveys the meaninglessness of human effort, relating as it does to a popular Chinese folktale in which a traveler, lost in the middle of the night, kept walking in circles as if ghosts had built a wall around him to prevent him continuing in his chosen direction.⁵ In spite of its purported meaninglessness, however, the work echoes with meanings related to China's politics

and its reality. Who are these ghosts, the ancients who built the wall that still restricts the direction in which Chinese might choose to go? The artist seems to mock himself and the futility of his own exertions; he is unable, even with extraordinary effort, to do anything about his own circumstances and environment, like his ancestors confined by the barrier of the real wall or the traveler surrounded by an imaginary one. The meaninglessness of the Great Wall here evokes cultural confrontations of various kinds: between the real creative power of China's ancient people and its simulation by the contemporary artist; or between China's heritage of national greatness and its current reality.

After Xu Bing emigrated to the United States in 1991, he began to respond to new cultural confrontations, shifting his concern away from the conflicts internal to China and examining instead those between Chinese and Western cultures and identities. He continued to use language, expanding beyond Chinese characters to manipulate English letters.

In San Diego in 1991 Xu exhibited a set of ceramic sculptures resembling pieces of moveable type. The words on the tops of the blocks were Chinese characters that, if read aloud, sound like the English alphabet. Used to approximate English sounds, the words are supposed to be meaningless. Chinese characters, however, bear their meaning in their forms, and the words Xu chose echo with painful or absurd semantic resonances. Often, when foreign words are transliterated in Chinese, the original meaning will be transformed in the new cultural background; one cannot but think that the work expresses the discomfort of an adult forced to learn a new language, who brings to simple linguistic facts a complicated cultural baggage.

Cultural Negotiation, Xu Bing's installation in the present show, continues these linguistic explorations. The work consists of a huge conference table, ten oversize chairs, and some four hundred large volumes from two sets of books. The first set consists of about 290 identical copies of an English-language text, *Post-Testament*, which was

3. My discussion of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* is indebted to that in Britta Erickson's essay, "Process and Meaning in the Art of Xu Bing," in *Three Installations by Xu Bing* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991; exhibition catalogue Nov. 30, 1991-Jan. 19, 1992), pp. 18-23.

4. Andrew Waldron, in his *The Great Wall of China, From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), provides evidence that the Great Wall, as we now know it, is entirely of Ming dynasty (1368-1644) date and discusses the strategic failures of the wall as a border defense (see especially ch. 9, pp. 140-164). Xu Bing notes that the seventeenth century historian Gu Yanwu also remarked on the ineffectiveness of the Great Wall in closing China off from the rest of the world. See Britta Erickson, "Process and Meaning in the Art of Xu Bing," in *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, p. 23.

5. The title of the folktale is perhaps more accurately translated as "Ghosts Building a Wall."

hand-printed using lead type and then bound in leather like an antique European tome. The second set comprises over 100 Chinese-style books from the *Book of Heaven*. Like the volumes from *Book of Heaven*, *Post-Testament*, which was specifically prepared for this exhibition, initially seems conventional and readable. On closer examination, however, it is not. Xu merged two preexisting texts, the King James version of the *New Testament* and a contemporary pulp novel, alternating words so that nothing can really be read. The nonsense text that resulted has a bizarre effect on the reader, for as one's eyes move across each line of type, elegant Biblical phrases confront coarse fragments of erotic or violent language. *Post-Testament* makes clear the misunderstanding and miscommunication that are inevitable when two different kinds of content and systems of discourse meet, but the misunderstandings further suggest confrontations between different cultural, social, moral, religious, and political standards. Going a step further, or perhaps taking a step back, Xu's juxtaposition of *Post-Testament* with *Book of Heaven* symbolizes the confrontation of Eastern and Western culture. Copies of both could be perused by viewers as they walked the fifty foot length of the black table, but in the work's inaccessible center, the heavy leather-bound English books seem to crush the *Book of Heaven*. Over the scene looms a large "quiet" sign, a feature of many public settings in China.

Xu Bing chooses the written language as his medium and the most traditional form of disseminating it, the hand-printed book, as the object of his representation. Indeed, his labor-intensive techniques are the most traditional of those to be found in this exhibition. His meaningless books, however, may be seen as questioning not only the relationships between traditional and contemporary culture, or between East and West, but also as allegories of contemporary representations of reality.

Brian Wallis, in summarizing the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, points out that "media-derived representations are more real to us today than reality.... Certain forms of imagery and narrative strategies in the media,

having no basis in fact, have warped our definition of and access to material reality."⁶ Xu Bing's simulated books challenge our access to reality in a similar way. Indeed, Xu's representations of books, which are not really books, obscure our apprehension of reality even more obviously than most representations. The meaninglessness of Xu Bing's text, to borrow Wallis's phrase, exposes the "gauze of representation" that inevitably mediates our access to reality. His fake characters, then, reveal the deceptiveness of all representation.⁷

Gao Minglu



6. Brian Wallis, "What's Wrong With This Picture? An Introduction," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. xvii.

7. Brian Wallis, p. xv. Xu's work seems to exemplify Roland Barthes's statement, quoted by Wallis on the same page, that "representations are formations, but they are also deformations."

Opposite and details:
Xu Bing, *Cultural Negotiation*, installation, Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts; collection of the artist; books from *Book of Heaven*, collection of the artist and courtesy of Granary Books, New York.

The Context in the Text: Meaning in Wu Shanzhuan's Work

Unlike Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan makes no lofty conceptual claims for his installation/performance in this exhibition, nor for any of his art. "The panda is just a panda," he says of *Missing Bamboo*. Similarly, according to the artist, this title is provided for viewers to interpret in any manner they like. Yet, as one talks to Wu, reads his writing, and experiences his work, his humorous and seemingly unsystematic comments begin to make sense. Wu's use of simple aphoristic statements and obvious images may be seen as part of an ironic strategy that pushes the viewer to a non-linear, slightly fragmented, almost intuitive chain of responses that continues well after leaving the gallery; thus he asks the viewer to experience a series of interlinking meanings rather than to directly read any one of them.

Missing Bamboo, built in the Wexner Center's performance space lobby, resembles a toy store in which 1000 identical battery-operated stuffed pandas were put on display for purchase by viewers (with a sign announcing, "Sale! \$5 each, 2 for \$8; dual-function, batteries not included"). During the opening reception, the artist demonstrated and sold these walking toy pandas. After the artist's departure, the viewers interacted with the piece alone, paying for their toys on the honor system and gradually reducing the panda-lined walls of the installation to bare wooden shelves. The mural at the back of the gallery space depicts a Chinese political convention at which a resolution is being passed by hand vote; the national seal above the stage has been replaced by a portrait of a genial panda. On the soundtrack, computer music by Julian Boyd accompanies Wu, who sings, in a slightly melancholy voice, well-known Chinese songs, including those from his childhood during the Cultural Revolution, and Western cocktail lounge standards such as "Feelings." Color postcards of Wu's various projects, including the *Missing*

Bamboo mural, were for sale on a rack at the entrance.

There is a pronounced pop art flavor to this piece, a vein that has always been strong in Wu's art, beginning with his *Red Humor* installations in Zhejiang in 1986 and 1987. He often uses ready-made objects in his work or simulates the appearance of objects from daily life. Both his 1986 exhibition, *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*, a collaborative project installed in an old temple, and his 1987 *Red Characters (Big Character Posters)* play with text, specifically with fragments of popular language. The former juxtaposed neatly printed phrases and slogans from advertisements, newspapers, classical poetry, Chinese religion, politics, and the discourse of daily life in startling ways. One painting takes the form of a sign, "Cabbage, three cents a catty." Another says, "Garbage, garbage, garbage..." written to resemble a pile, on top of which perches the word "Nirvana!" The ratio of colors specified in the title, however, immediately evokes the tensions of Chinese political confrontations, particularly those of the Cultural Revolution, with, in general terms, red representing good Communists, black representing enemies of the people, and white representing the non-aligned.¹

Red Characters (Big Character Posters), installed the following year in the artist's studio, resembled a chaotic scene from the Cultural Revolution, except that the contents of the hand-written posters ranged from fragments of political phrases, such as "class struggle" to mundane statements from daily life, some actually written by ordinary local people: "Mr. Wang, I went home," and "No water this afternoon."

In his theoretical writings of the time, Wu expressed greater interest in the sounds and outward forms of Chinese characters than in their function as language. Yet, because of the rich eclecticism of the popular language he adopted, the viewer naturally associates the images with many aspects of his or her own experience. Each phrase means something different depending upon its social, cultural, or political context. Most installations from his *Red Humor* series create a political atmosphere

1. The Cultural Revolution reference was suggested by Zhou Yan in his section on Wu Shanzhuan in Gao Minglu, et al, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985-1986* (Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi, 1985-1986) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1990), p. 193. Zhou's essay, pp. 191-206, is an extremely helpful summary of Wu's early work, with extensive references to Wu's published and unpublished theoretical writings.

without stipulating any concrete political content. The result is a mockery of the government, of society, and perhaps even of the artists themselves. Going one step further, one could say that Wu's games with the visual language of Chinese politics reduce the deadly phenomenon of the Chinese political movement to nothing more than "red humor."

Wu, as the first artist to juxtapose the patterns of Chinese political culture with the forms of Western pop art, was a formative figure in the Chinese Political Pop movement. The conceptual qualities of his art are even stronger, however; questions about the nature of art have been a constant theme in his work. He describes the relationship of the artist and his work in terms of that between the soil and the plant. The earth is necessary to the growth of the plant, but the soil does not determine the species of the plant; evolution has already made that selection. Similarly, according to Wu, the artist cannot determine the result of his work.

The artist's intentions or methods of working, for Wu, are far less important than the work itself. Indeed, without mentioning European theory, Wu seems to echo Roland Barthes's idea of the death of the author. "In the end," Wu wrote in 1985, "the art work uses a concrete person (the artist) as a means. The concrete person will die, but the work may continue to exist."² In some of Wu's work, the artist becomes an object, as though he stands outside himself. More recently, Wu wrote in "Tourist Information: Alphabetical Aphorisms" the seemingly neutral statement, "Wu is an example of material. Nothing can escape from material."³ Such a stance, however, appears to be an aspect of the self-mockery with which he regards the art world and himself as an artist.

Selling Shrimp, Wu's installation/performance in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989, was his first work to completely replace political imagery with that of daily commerce. The piece involved personally carrying 30 kilograms of live shrimp from Zhoushan, the island where he lived, to Beijing, where he sold them at the



opening. After the opening, with official enforcement of the prohibition against performances, he marked his shrimp stand "closed." His explanation, typically terse, was that art is big business.⁴ In "Alphabetical Aphorisms," he wrote "Debt: Wu was selling shrimps at the National Gallery in the name of art. As an artist he is in debt to the shrimp seller at large."

After leaving China for Europe in 1990, Wu's writing and art began to demonstrate more explicit concern for his personal situation, his racial and sexual identity, his social and economic position, and his role as an artist. His irony in such pieces, many of which center around his own physical person, is no less intense than that of earlier work that might criticize Chinese political or social institutions. He has continued to exhibit as "Red Humor International"; his various statements and contracts generally use a letterhead that reads, "Tourist Information." According to his "Alphabetical Aphorisms," Wu is an example of a tourist.

Wu Shanzhuan began a series in 1992 called *Labor at Large, Putting the Money for Art-Material in the Bank*, a project in which he performs manual labor as his work of art at an exhibition site. When acceptable to the sponsoring institution, he simply deposits his materials fee in the bank as his pay and works for the coffee shop, ticket booth, security office, or preparation team. His

Wu Shanzhuan, *Selling Shrimps*, performance, Chinese National Art Gallery, Beijing, 1989.

2. From Wu's unpublished essay, "The Material Work of Art," quoted in Zhou Yan's essay in Gao Minglu, et al, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1985-1986*, p. 201.

3. Wu Shanzhuan and Inga Svala, "Tourist Information: Alphabetical Aphorisms," a selection of writings distributed by the artist and Red Humor International, 1992-93.

4. Wu Shanzhuan first mentioned such an idea at the 1988 Chinese Avant-Garde Convention ("Conference on Contemporary Chinese Art") in Tunxi, Anhui province. He repeated it in his "Tourist Information: Alphabetical Aphorisms." "Audience: Wu is surrounded by the audience at his working place. Wu deals with and serves for the audience. By this, the audience changes into specified customers," and "Borrow: Wu borrowed the behaviour of a shrimp-seller for one day, while Wu's performance was on at National Gallery of PR China."

idea is that everybody (even an artist) has the right to earn a living by working, which for him, as an artist, is an activity of exchange which is named "art." Twice in 1993, he sold his right to exhibit to other artists. In one case, three Dutch artists jointly purchased the right to show their work in his stead in an exhibition of work by Chinese avant-garde artists.

Missing Bamboo brings the political and economic sides of his earlier work back together. He says that his only interest is in doing business, bringing exotic goods for sale to the citizens of Columbus, Ohio, just as Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's have brought exotic cuisine to Beijing. He sells toy pandas rather than something else because they are, like his 1989 shrimp, easy to obtain in his hometown. Buying and selling are life-affirming activities, being a kind of human intercourse, requiring the consent of both buyer and seller.

On another occasion, however, Wu said that the Chinese artist is a panda. Such a self-identity is made explicit in this piece by his panda costume. Indeed, if the toy panda is only a kind of goods, perhaps so is the artist, or even the viewer. All are equal, in his view. *Missing Bamboo* might refer to the status of the Chinese artist abroad, but when asked, Wu deflects the question, to point out that while real pandas cannot survive without bamboo, his toy pandas don't need to eat.

At this point, the viewer provides the meaning, and even supplies the context, for the piece. The panda has become almost as important a symbol of the Chinese nation as the Great Wall, presenting not an image of power, but its benign opposite, one of harmlessness, even helplessness. By replacing, in his mural, the Chinese national seal or the portrait of Mao Zedong with a panda, Wu laughs, bitterly, at Chinese politics. If all Chinese are part of these politics, perhaps everyone in China is a panda.

The logo for the 1990 Asian Olympics, which decorated all shop fronts and major thoroughfares in Beijing on the first anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre, was a

smiling panda in front of the Great Wall. The uses to which such appealing imagery is put by both Chinese propagandists and Western marketers is another subject Wu has left unstated, but which his viewers inevitably think about.

Gao Minglu and Julia F. Andrews

Opposite and details:
Wu Shanzhuan, *Missing Bamboo*,
installation, Wexner Center for
the Arts, The Ohio State
University, 1993. Commissioned
by the Wexner Center for the
Arts; collection of the artist;
audiotape of computer music
composed by Julian Boyd with
vocals by the artist.





MISSING BAMBOO



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