

# Making and remaking history: categorising 'conceptual art' in contemporary Chinese art

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After contemporary Chinese art leapt off the canvas in the 1980s, the succeeding decade witnessed the maturation of numerous artistic forms and visual languages. Labeled variously as 'experimental' and 'avant-garde', performance, installation, photography, and new media posed a challenge not only to existing art practices, but also existing methods of interpretation. As critics and curators struggled to find suitable frameworks for evaluation, 'conceptual art' emerged as an enticing category for containing and championing these new art forms. Inside of China, it offered a means to address the explosion of disparate art. Outside of China, it was mobilised to critique Western assumptions about contemporary China. In both cases, curators and critics harnessed the capacity to name artworks as 'conceptual art' to put forth new claims on history.

This paper examines how curators and critics of contemporary Chinese art utilised the category of 'conceptual art' to intervene in developing contemporary Chinese and global art narratives. Conceptual art's insistence on concept over object made it an ideal candidate for cross-cultural assimilation during an era of post-colonial anxieties over 'imported' terms and ideas. Not only did this category possess a storied place in the Euro-American paradigm of avant-garde art, its critical cachet was also significantly free of an established visual tradition. Curators and critics saw conceptual art's lack of attachment to specific artistic styles and schools as a possible way out of the dominant centre-periphery paradigm. This was premised on the belief that conceptual art's emphases on enacting critique and deconstructing assumptions were universally relevant characteristics that could also be locally situated. The possibility of labeling art as 'conceptual', while still respecting cultural and geographic specificity, offered new terms for inclusion in a global community. For those asserting these claims, this also marked a similar bid to be acknowledged among the ranks of those who could make such determinations.

Anxieties over how to historicise new experiments in Chinese art were motivated by an underlying concern for prevailing biases in the global art world. Curators and critics drafted conceptual art as a category to alleviate these circumstances. They grabbed a hold of conceptual art's ambiguous parameters; variously interpreting it as a global artistic language, a geo-historical phenomenon, a critical attitude, and a smattering of specific mediums, formats, and strategies. Some broadly glossed it as artists' self-conscious destabilisation of art's histories and traditions, while others saw it more specifically historicised as the termination of modernism. Such a variety of interpretations speak to not only the malleability of the category, but also the geo-cultural initiatives that authors sought to animate with its application.

Beyond orchestrating the terms of Chinese art's global acceptance, critics were also attracted to the category's status as a marker of contemporaneity. Conceptual art's insistence on oppositional stances and self-reflexive critique allowed for even the newest trends to enter into its fold. Its continuing relevance—as a label and as an art form—gave it the temporal and artistic distinction of being seen as critical and progressive. As a category, 'conceptual art' thus offered an ideal vehicle for legitimising Chinese art as both global and contemporary in domestic and international discourses.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of new criteria for interpretation ignited difficult ontological questions about what art should be and how it should be understood. It furthermore exposed the insufficiencies of existing systems of classification based on medium, region, format, and style. In spite of these challenges, champions of contemporary Chinese art mined what they considered productive about the category in their urgency to chart new ways of thinking about contemporary art and, by extension, the writing of its history. Their historiographical negotiations demonstrate the challenges that critics and curators faced in their attempts to accommodate new definitions and categories for contemporary Chinese art in the service of global parity.

### **International agendas**

From participation in the seminal 1989 global exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* to the Venice Biennale and São Paulo Biennial, the 1990s witnessed an accelerated rise of contemporary Chinese art worldwide. The resultant media and curatorial attention on particular styles, however, led to uneven exposure of only a small segment of contemporary Chinese artworks.<sup>2</sup> Concerned by the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of Chinese art, curators outside of China marshaled conceptual art as a corrective measure against dominant ways of thinking about non-Western contemporary art. As part of their defensive strategy, curators' claims for Chinese art incorporated a larger reorienting of the developing relationship between global art and its treatment of local histories.

In 1997, Marianne Brouwer and Chris Driessen organized the exhibition *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties* in Breda, the Netherlands. By presenting works that appeared 'so atypically "Chinese,"' Brouwer and Driessen set out to complicate Western expectations of contemporary art from China.<sup>3</sup> To the organizers, the international popularity of Cynical Realism and Political Pop in the early 1990s had created

<sup>1</sup> Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds. *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, 9.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* graced the cover of the January/February 1992 issue of *Flash Art* vol. XXV, no. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Brouwer and Chris Driessen, "Another Long March" in *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*, Chris Driessen and Heidi van Mierlo, eds, Breda, The Netherlands: Fundament Foundation, 1997, 11.

histories of contemporary Chinese art that were incomplete at best, and Orientalist at worst.<sup>4</sup> These objections aligned with many voiced by critics inside of China.<sup>5</sup> They were concerned that these particular selections were not only made by global curatorial authorities, but that they also seemed to simply confirm Western post-Cold War readings of China. Beyond the reduction of contemporary Chinese culture to a story of Western superiority, Brouwer and Driessen objected to this viewpoint at two further levels: firstly, the favoring of Chinese artworks that were quickly legible as 'dissident' unfairly eclipsed many other kinds of artworks, and secondly, this bias impeded the Western public from seeking a more complex understanding of the socio-political contexts in which contemporary Chinese art was created.

To rectify this, the authors appealed to history to demonstrate a more nuanced relationship between art and politics in China. In their historical account, they set up two parallel strands of art that each proposed a distinct motivation for production: on the one hand, Political Pop, and on the other hand, conceptual art. To the organisers, the latter—unlike the former—continued the noble goal of upholding the 'desire for a free and authentic Chinese contemporary art'.<sup>6</sup> That is, in spite of changing historical conditions from the late 1970s through the 1990s, the exhibited artists represented the 'real heirs of the heroic '85 Movement'.<sup>7</sup> Referring to the idealistic efforts for cultural and ideological emancipation in the 1980s, the authors utilised this legacy to distinguish conceptual artists from practitioners of Cynical Realism and Political Pop. This distinction also made clear that while Chinese conceptual artists also negotiated with political restrictions, this virtuous historical lineage rescued their works from being roundly reduced to 'protest art'.

This argument is notable given how visually and conceptually distinct works of the '85 Art New Wave are from the artworks in the exhibition, and in how many active members of the New Wave actually pioneered or took up Political Pop and Cynical Realism in the following decade. Rather than tracing particular artistic styles or artists' oeuvres, the authors' focus on the continuity of a 'heroic spirit' constructed an alternative logic for evolution. While the '85 Art New Wave is often regarded as being completely separate from artistic activities of the 1990s, the authors' identification of strands of idealism proposed an important localised past for conceptual art in China.

The linking of conceptual art to a local history was important for the authors' contention that these works be recognised as both globally significant and culturally specific. Expectations of explicitly dissident art had led to a neglect of Chinese conceptual art in international exhibitions. While the curators corrected this with their selections, there was still an underlying

<sup>4</sup> Coined by art critic Li Xianting, the painting styles Political Pop and Cynical Realism first garnered international acclaim at the exhibition *Post 89: China's New Art* at Hanart TZ gallery in Hong Kong. Subsequent representation at the 1993 Venice Biennale secured its international popularity with foreign publics and collectors.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Wang Lin, "Aoliwa bushi Zhongguo yishu de jiuxing" [Oliva is not the savior of contemporary Chinese art] *Dushu* 10, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Brouwer and Driessen, "Another Long March", 19.

<sup>7</sup> Brouwer and Driessen, "Another Long March", 11.

concern that precisely because the exhibited work lacked an expected Chinese character, they could just as easily be dismissed as derivative of Western counterparts. The authors' insistence on a historical lineage was thus a way of affirming the originality of these works. This protective posturing continued into their claims for conceiving of the global as comprised of many local histories.

The insistence on a distinctly Chinese past and present played a key role in their framing of conceptual art as a vernacular language. Any perception of a Western claim on conceptual art, historical or otherwise, was suppressed by the authors' argument that the art on display was actually free of culturally entrenched connotations:

These tools have not simply been 'borrowed' from the West. They belong to the vocabulary of international contemporary art and are just as much within reach in China as anywhere else...The visual language is not identical to that of the West, the themes and concepts are difficult to place or allow a literal, superficial interpretation only, when analyzed solely on the basis of a Western art model.<sup>8</sup>

As the prospect of 'borrowing' appeared to deny the borrower any possibility of originality, the authors were quick to guard against such an accusation. This was premised on their claim for an 'international contemporary art' language and was furthermore made possible by their reduction of art to 'themes and concepts'. Rather than artistic styles or mediums that could possess more visibly embedded histories in particular cultures, these 'tools' floated in a global reservoir primed for creative and original usage. As a defensive response to uneven power relations, the organisers' effort to see the global only in terms of the local set out to prevent the reproduction of these same hierarchies. As a tactic to combat Western hegemony, however, this effort to free conceptual art from allegations of borrowing seemed to paradoxically conceal the complexity of power structures that triggered its application.

This dehistoricising denial of a singular 'Western art model' was a means of breaking down the centre-periphery paradigm of the global art world. The insistence on localised histories, however, also reinforced culturally contained narratives of artistic development. By renouncing any trace of 'borrowing', they stripped Chinese conceptual art of the fractious cultural resonance and resistance that transpired through the dynamics of trans-lingual practice.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the borrowing and subsequent translating of particular concepts was an important part of the invocation of this particular category and art form in China. However, the need to see contemporary Chinese art as internationally valid required a local heritage that could not be impugned.

This kind of manipulation of historical evidence can also be found in other writings in the *Another Long March* catalogue. While the organisers argued for a recent history, Fei Dawei's essay 'When we look...' proposed a more far-reaching lineage. As an independent curator

<sup>8</sup> Brouwer and Driessen, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937*, California: Stanford University Press, 1995.

residing in France in the 1990s, Fei Dawei was especially attuned to how Western audiences received Chinese art. In his essay, he raised the possibility of using conceptual art as a foray into cross-cultural dialogue. However, according to Fei, this dialogue was premised on acknowledging the validity of a specifically Chinese framework for understanding the development of conceptual art in China. Or, as Fei writes, 'dialogue that no longer focuses on explaining the Chinese perspective within a framework of Western thought and vocabulary'.<sup>10</sup> Like the organising curators, Fei Dawei pushed for a de-centring of conceptual art, thereby treating it as an international language. His interpretation, too, focused on sourcing not only localised cultural contexts, but also alternative historical influences. His account, however, traced this history to much further back in time. Maintaining the liberating effects of conceptual art, Fei positioned this constructed history as the basis for contemporary Chinese art's originality in category and content.

Fei's narrative attributed conceptual art's turn against formal realism to both the influence of Western modern art as well as a historical tendency within Chinese art. His essay situated experiments during the 1980s as the most recent iteration in a long tradition of resistance to 'form-likeness' dating as far back as the Tang dynasty.<sup>11</sup> He continued this emphasis on preserving a tradition of opposition through continued invocations of Zen and Taoist thinking in works by Xu Bing, Huang Yong Ping, and Wenda Gu. For Fei, the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue started with a recognition that the groundwork for conceptual art in China need not be seen as wholly indebted to Western avant-garde movements.

Akin to the exhibition organisers, Fei was invested in using history to guard against accusations of Western imitation. Rooting the idea of resistance to mimesis within China's past, he appealed to historical time to showcase a comparatively earlier recognition of the value of this resistance long before its appearance in the West. The excavation of a usable past incorporated both the construction of a lineage and the presentation of such as incontrovertible fact.<sup>12</sup> While historical references could demonstrate a basis for Chinese conceptual art's originality—as category and content—there was also a danger that this continued invocation of the past could be misinterpreted as backward-looking archaism and a sign of delayed development.

As an exercise in balance, Fei's argument showcased the challenges that champions of contemporary Chinese art faced at the time. Calling upon history to prove Chinese art's originality demanded an interpretation of contemporary Chinese art that was both steeped in tradition as well as startlingly innovative. By writing a history constituted by artistic acts of resistance, Fei presented a thread of continuity joined by moments of rupture. More significantly, this characterised Chinese art history as a dynamic continuum comprised of ever

<sup>10</sup> Fei Dawei, 'When we look...' in *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*, Chris Driessen and Heidi van Mierlo, eds, Breda, The Netherlands: Fundament Foundation, 1997, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Fei Dawei, 'When we look...', 39.

<sup>12</sup> This term 'usable past' dates back to Van Wyck Brooks's 1919 "On Creating a Usable Past" *The Dial* (April 11, 1918), 337–341.

more progressive changes.<sup>13</sup> This unbroken trend of resistance framed Chinese tradition as a regenerative force for innovation and critique. This, in turn, afforded an understanding of Chinese conceptual art as being 'Chinese', without being regarded as comparatively static.

As Brouwer and Driessen's essay revealed, the status of resistance was in itself controversial. However, by locating 'resistance' in relation to 'form-likeness', Fei argued for a tradition of art that critiqued itself and not simply politics. Contemporary 'opposition' was thus more than a knee-jerk response to either Communism or capitalism, but rather part of a deeply rooted history of culturally embedded critique. Indeed, the need to boast both a strong cultural lineage and an avant-garde disposition required contemporary Chinese art to be rooted in tradition without being 'traditional', resistant without being 'dissident'.

These tactics showcase the careful maneuvers that curators felt were necessary in order to satisfy the requirements for globally equitable status. Contorting the past to confound Western expectations may be seen as still kowtowing to values and standards maintained by Western cultural authorities. Indeed, the desire for 'legitimacy' and 'credibility' in a global sphere seems born from both cultural pride and fears of cultural inferiority. However, these tactics can also be more charitably interpreted as efforts to change the status quo. That is, in order to realistically open up the terms of global acceptance, it was necessary to confront and correct Western misinterpretation at every turn.

Even as Fei Dawei situated the development of conceptual art within a pre-existing tradition, when it came to delineating what conceptual art actually entailed, he wrote: 'Admittedly, it would be too easy to lump various forms of expression in Chinese contemporary art into one category and call it *conceptual art*. For the sake of convenience, however, we will use this term at present to refer to all methods that fall beyond the scope of traditional painting and imagery'.<sup>14</sup> Fei recognized the dangers of defining conceptual art so broadly that it became a category for miscellany, but did so largely for efficiency. Although he discussed it in terms of artistic method, it wasn't always clear in his account if artists sought to deliberately counter 'traditional painting and imagery' or if they simply fell 'beyond the scope' of it. Fei's examples from the 1980s suggest a conscious effort by individual artists that aimed at 'doing away' with painting. But, he also conceded that this contrast between formats began to fade by the mid-1990s. It's possible to read this as evidence of the obstacle of giving any kind of definition to the recent past, or perhaps conceptual art's own nature as an ever-moving target. Regardless, given Fei's acknowledgment of his rather imprecise explanation of the category, it's clear that this was ultimately secondary to using conceptual art as a heuristic device for promoting pluralism in cultural forms and understandings.

While *Another Long March* aimed to rectify misconceptions about contemporary Chinese art, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* attempted to correct a Western-centric understanding of contemporary art at large. The exhibition and catalogue, both from 1999,

<sup>13</sup> The tendency to view the history of Chinese art as static and archaic in relation to a dynamic Western art history has been discussed by Craig Clunas, "What about Chinese art?" *Views of Difference, Different Views of Art*, ed. Catherine King, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Fei Dawei, 'When we look...', 35.

incorporated Chinese art into an ambitious effort to 'revise conventional historicizations of conceptual art' by unseating the idea that its origins could only be found in the West.<sup>15</sup> Organisers used the term 'conceptualism' instead of 'conceptual art' to imply an attitudinal shift rather than a strictly morphological change. In this way, they conceived of conceptualism as a questioning of artistic conventions, a critique of dominant institutions and ideologies, and the effort to tie art more intimately to daily life. The organisers argued that while conceptualism was centred around an emphasis on idea over object, its emergence from local socio-political contexts accounted for its multiple forms and conflicting intentions around the world.

The organisers asserted the validity of different forms of conceptualism in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Soviet Union, and the Pacific Rim. While each point of origin responded to its own localised circumstances, conceptualism was also set in motion by global historical events since the mid-twentieth century and more recent possibilities for an increasingly interconnected world. As such, conceptualism across the globe could be seen in relation to modernism's legacy without needing to be defined as proceeding from 'modernism' itself. Its worldwide legacy thus stood significantly as an origin point rather than an endpoint—that is, a point from which creativity could emerge.

This is significant for art historian Gao Minglu's discussions of Chinese conceptualism in the catalogue. He states: 'It is important to note that, unlike its Western counterpart, this anti-art project did not develop from a logical historical progression of aesthetic avant-gardism'.<sup>16</sup> Gao noted the distinct differences in background and form between Chinese and Western cases. And, like Fei Dawei, he emphasised the significance of Chan Buddhism to the birth of Chinese conceptualism. Citing Huang Yong Ping's art and writing in the 1980s, Gao based his definition of conceptual art in China on the Chan-influenced philosophy of 'art as "nothing" that creates nothing'.<sup>17</sup>

Like Brouwer, Driessen, and Fei, Gao set out to construct alternative histories for conceptual art in the service of rescuing the present from being further subsumed by a Western hegemonic canon. In all of these cases, history—both recent and remote—was presented as unassailable evidence of contemporary Chinese art's status as unique yet equal. The need to recognise multiple histories, born of multiple origins, was a way of recognising the validity of Chinese experience while avoiding markers of 'otherness'.

Observing from afar, expatriates Fei Dawei, Gao Minglu, and others used conceptual art to remedy contemporary Chinese art's global reputation. These collective efforts demonstrate that in order to challenge audiences' expectations of what they assumed to be Chinese, they also needed to reorient what was perceived as Western. Injecting Chinese art sources into what was

<sup>15</sup> Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, "'Foreword' in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999, xi.

<sup>16</sup> Gao Minglu, 'Conceptual art with anticonceptual attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong' in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999, 127. This exact phrase is repeated in Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011, 200.

<sup>17</sup> Gao Minglu, 'Conceptual art with anticonceptual attitude', 127.

largely perceived as a Western art trend, they sought to expand the geographic and cultural applicability of the existing category of 'conceptual art'. As Terry Smith argues, the very use of the term 'conceptualism' in 1999 shows that conceptual art already had, by that point, an established history in the West.<sup>18</sup> Given the malleability of conceptual art's parameters, however, curators and critics saw the possibility of writing China into the past and future of this history in order to globalise ways of defining contemporary art.

### Domestic critiques

Even while a 'big tent' mentality of inclusiveness was important for a truly responsible conception of global art, this also threatened to remove conceptual art's critical significance. Would the term become so broadened that it would cease to be meaningful at all? This possibility for expansion represented both the great appeal and burden of conceptual art as a category as it gained currency in China.

Its productive uses in China differed from those outside of China. At the most rudimentary level, the use of the term 'conceptual art' in writing throughout the 1980s and 1990s was part of critics' attempts to showcase how well versed they were with Western theories. At the same time, the growth of new forms of art presented a real and pressing urgency to locate possible models of interpretation. During the 1980s and 1990s, even while art criticism was still in a nascent stage, the anxiety to historicise and interpret the present prevailed.

Efforts to rewrite history can perhaps best be seen in the retrospective constructions of a narrative development for conceptual art in China on the part of Chinese critics. During the 1980s, the idea of conceptual art entered China alongside a torrent of other possibilities. Through the country's Opening and Reform movement, artists and writers embraced a breadth of ideas. With the vast influx of translated philosophical texts and art catalogs, conceptual art was but one of many strands of idealistic thinking available to artists and writers. Their fascination with Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg went hand-in-hand with interests in Vincent Van Gogh, Sigmund Freud, and D.T. Suzuki. This all-inclusive enthusiasm encouraged cursory readings rather than systematic, contextualised examinations. In November 1986, the magazine *Meishu* published translations extracted from Ellen H. Johnson's collection *American Artists on Art* from 1982.<sup>19</sup> This included Sol Lewitt's 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' and an excerpt from Joseph Kosuth's *Art After Philosophy*.<sup>20</sup> These kinds of publications, in tandem with Huang Yong Ping's Dadaist practices, would seem to suggest the birth of a real conceptual art movement. Indeed, many art historians trace conceptual art in

<sup>18</sup> Terry Smith, 'One and three ideas: conceptualism before, during, and after conceptual art', *e-flux* 29, November 2011, n.p.

<sup>19</sup> 'Gainian meishujia lun gainian meishu', *Meishu* 11, 1986: 58–62. Excerpted and translated from Ellen H. Johnson, *American Artists on Art: from 1940 to 1980*, Westview Press, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> Sol Lewitt's 'Sentences on conceptual art' was first published in *Art-Language*, 1, no. 1, 1969. Joseph Kosuth's *Art After Philosophy* was first published in *Studio International*, October 1969.



China back to Huang Yong Ping's activities with the Xiamen Dada group.<sup>21</sup>

These neatly organised retrospective views, however, need to be contrasted with the situation at the time. Many artists look back on this time as a period of exploration where possibility was prized over deep comprehension—that is, the value of these texts was in their function as catalysts, and as openings into realms of possibility. The translations of Lewitt and Kosuth, for example, were not accompanied by published critiques or further discussions of their significance. Even scholars who have historicised conceptual art from the 1980s acknowledge that these works 'were not, by any means, the product of a true understanding of Western conceptual art...'<sup>22</sup>

Efforts to craft these unruly circumstances into a coherent history can be most readily observed by the ways in which critics have rendered the various translations of the term 'conceptual art' into a productive art historical discourse. When writings on conceptual art first entered China, the term 'conceptual art' was alternately translated as '*gainian yishu*' (概念艺术) and '*guannian yishu*' (观念艺术). Gao Minglu, in his recent publication *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-century Chinese Art* made the following distinction between the two: *gainian yishu* is 'concept art' while *guannian yishu* is 'idea art.' He elaborates:

*Guannian* carries with it a much broader set of connotations than *gainian*. The former refers to the general meaning of mind-based or thought-based practice in a particular context, while the latter has a narrower definition of a specific notion. Chinese conceptual art is more defined as idea art (*guannian yishu*), because the artists working in this vein were committed to examining broader cultural and social issues, rather than focusing on the internal concerns of art itself.<sup>23</sup>

Starting out with this division in terminology, Gao Minglu deftly set up the terms as marked by difference; narrow versus broad, and internal versus external concerns. Without elaborating on what these 'internal concerns of art' refer to, *guannian* still avoided the 'narrower definition' ascribed to *gainian*. Moreover, with just a suggestion of being 'mind-based' and 'examining broader cultural and social issues', Gao detached *guannian* from a Euro-American context while also leaving its actual description quite open. Although *gainian* and *guannian* were initially signs of the chaos of the discourse in the 1980s, Gao's configuration gave these terms the illusion of an organised division. While the initial fluctuation in language revealed the complexity of cross-cultural and linguistic translation, these instabilities were smoothed over as art historians crystallised their distinctions to show a logical progression towards *guannian yishu*, the term that critics and scholars eventually focused on.

Gu Chengfeng, writing in 1997, made similar divisions between the two, but located both definitions within Western art history. He identified *gainian* specifically with a canonical

<sup>21</sup> For example, Bingyi Huang, 'Vertical: On Wang Luyan, Chinese conceptualism, and the New Analyst Group' in *Wang Luyan: Sawing or being sawed?*, Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2007, 194–208.

<sup>22</sup> Fei Dawei, 'When we look...', 35.

<sup>23</sup> Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 199.

history of conceptual art starting from Marcel Duchamp. He then framed the introduction of *guannian* as an aspect of *gainian*:

Land art, performance art, installation, etc. all fall under the scope of *guannian* art. The meaning of *guannian* art surpasses that of *gainian* art. It largely includes: 1) emphasis on thought and critique, 2) opposition to objectification, 3) opposition to form and even aesthetics, 4) abandonment of style, 5) opposition to collection.<sup>24</sup>

In this definition of *guannian* art, the author synthesised key characteristics of conceptual art, learned from a Western context. This is especially apparent given the final point regarding collection, when such an activity for contemporary Chinese art was still a rarity at the time of Gu's publication. This retrospective framing of *gainian* within *guannian* as a linear trajectory was again a way of ordering history. This strategy allowed Gu to accomplish three objectives. First, this justified his usage of *guannian* rather than *gainian* in his historical account; second, with a broader definition, it could be more readily accepted by readers as appropriate for a Chinese context; and third, it asserted conceptual art as historical fact complete with its own evolution. When written back into histories of conceptual art in China, with one defined against the other, these terms gave the impression that the author's choice of *guannian* was logical and accurate.

### Conceptual art and its histories in China

Gu Chengfeng's writings during the 1990s offer fascinating insight into how Chinese critics called upon different frameworks for asserting agendas for conceptual art. His 1997 article, 'Conceptual art and artistic concept', cited the importance of art as idea rather than just as a physical object.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, however, he emphasised how concepts originate from an individual's thought processes. In this way, the significance of conceptual art pivoted on the artists' address of localised social issues through the lens of personal experiences and ideas. This equivalence of concept with individuality allowed the author to make the claim that conceptual art marked an important departure from the content-driven determinism of China's past political art. To locate its significance to Chinese art history, Gu emphasised how this premise of individuality created a distinction between a work's concept and its theme or topic. As such, conceptual art offered a reversal of hierarchy: rather than thematic art emerging from Mao's dictates, conceptual art began with the individual, his thoughts, and experiences.

In addition to maintaining the significance of conceptual art in relation to the domestic art context, Gu also moved the discourse in a global direction. To do so, he turned to a Western historical framework grounded in a teleological trajectory. He explains: 'the difference between the modern and postmodern is that the former is in the industrial age and the latter is a product

<sup>24</sup> Gu Chengfeng, 'Guannian yishu yu yishu guannian', *Meishu Guan*, no. 5, 1997: 57–58.

<sup>25</sup> Gu Chengfeng, 'Guannian yishu yu yishu guannian', *Meishu Guan*, no. 5, 1997: 57–59.

of the information age'.<sup>26</sup> Gu celebrated the information age for its accessibility and communication, viewing it as the home to both postmodernism and conceptual art. Citing an increase in speed and connectivity across cultures, he furthermore characterised the information age as a new global era. It was this correspondence between art and a designated time period that Gu used to argue for synchronicity between China and the West. With China in the mid-1990s also in the information age, the presence of conceptual art could evidence the country's global synchronicity. This, in turn, could register the contemporaneity of Chinese contemporary art.

Although Gu argued for how conceptual art could be seen as marking a radical shift from the Cultural Revolution to the present, it was China's global cultural standing that haunted him. Concerns over contemporaneity ran deep, as critics worried about being marginalised and perceived as 'backwards' by a global community. Even as Gu suggested the possibility for synchronicity, he cautioned that this prospect might very well be fictitious: 'We are only in the initial stage of an information society...we are destined to have no choice but to mull over the surpassing achievements of Western culture, we have no choice but to endure the so-called choices of cultural 'postcolonialism'.<sup>27</sup> With a continued insistence on using history as a calculus for cultural equivalence, critics' anxieties about China's global positioning refused to abate. Indeed, equal footing with their Western counterparts was still on shaky ground.

Rather than chartering an entirely new course in order to show equivalence — such as that done in *Global Conceptualism* — Gu saw China as a 'beneficiary of global culture' rather than as a producer in its own right. Moreover, the idea that conceptual art had to be tied to a mature information age reveals the conditional nature of art production. Thus, although conceptual art arose from the individual, its evolution and categorisation were still contingent on historical circumstances.

During the 1990s, the specter of progress loomed large over discussions of contemporary art. In fact, anxieties over advancement cast a long shadow over the field of art criticism itself. As a critic and editor-in-chief of the periodical *Jiangsu Pictorial*, Gu Chengfeng was acutely aware that conceptual art's epistemological shifts affected not only those creating art, but also those interpreting it. Theories about conceptual art were thus conceived as opportunities for shaping inherited histories. This acknowledged conceptual art's effects on how critics conceived of artistic language, its premises, and parameters.

Like Gu, fellow art critic Yi Ying was particularly attuned to the effects of conceptual art on critical methodologies. By the mid-1990s, Yi Ying had already translated Roger Fry's *Vision and Design* and authored anthologies on Western contemporary art criticism. It's not surprising then that his writings on conceptual art traced a series of Western modernist critics' stances. Thus, rather than an account of artists and works, his writings recounted how they have been

<sup>26</sup> '...hou xiandai yu xiandai shidi de zui zhuyao qubie shi: houzhe shi gongye shidai de chanwu er qianzhe shi xinxi shidai de chanwu', Gu Chengfeng, 'Guannian yishu yu yishu guannian', 58.

<sup>27</sup> 'Women zhishi chuyu xinxi shehui de chubu...women zhuding budebuzai ci jujue xifang wenhua de chaoyuexing chengguo, women budebu renshou suowei wenhua shang "hou zhimin zhuyi" de xuanze', Gu Chengfeng, 'Guannian yishu yu yishu guannian', 58.

understood.

Through this narrative, Yi Ying identified and adhered to a strict historical trajectory. He writes: 'conceptual art's appearance quickly brought a loss of efficacy to the language of modernist criticism because the explanation of that pure form or pure spirit could no longer explain these kinds of actions'.<sup>28</sup> While describing historical challenges faced in the West, this inadequacy of language paralleled the situation confronted in China. During the 1990s, art critics were sensitive to the nascent state of their field.<sup>29</sup> Yi's focus on a history of Western criticism certainly stemmed from his own academic interest. But, more importantly, it offered him a vocabulary, set of theories, and critical authority for approaching new 'kinds of actions' in art. In this way, Western art history, criticism, and historical junctures were not just metrics for progress, but also viewed as instruments for helping to explicate and clarify what was happening inside of China. In his writings on conceptual art, Yi Ying set out to map out ways of, first, making sense of these Western sources, and second, making them productive to Chinese artists' local experiences.

Yi Ying's arguments began with a linear historical trajectory in which conceptual art emerged as an antithesis to modernism. Given his previous work on Roger Fry, it's unsurprising that Yi repeatedly took formalism-as-modernism as the touchstone for his narratives. As the title of his article suggests, Yi Ying bookended modernism within a turn and subsequent 'return to description'. The first case of 'description' referred to classicism and the elements of painting associated with content and emotional evocation, such as plot and narration. These were, however, jettisoned in favor of modernist critiques that Yi Ying related through Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried's treatises on the autonomy of form. He then followed this focus on 'pure form' with Harold Rosenberg's interpretations of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Dadaism. Signifying a break from medium-specific evaluations, Rosenberg's emphases on dismantling the division between art and life set up an opposition between formalist criticism and social critique wherein the latter emerged with the demise of the former.

Yi Ying built upon this schema in other essays. In 'Conceptual art and the disintegration of the avant-garde system', he discussed how, in the West, an established system of exhibition, circulation, and public expectation collapsed under the spread of conceptual art.<sup>30</sup> Informed by George Dickie's 1972 article 'What is Anti-Art?', Yi Ying used these shifts in infrastructure to reinforce his organisation of art from classicism to modernism/formalism to postmodernism. In the author's account, postmodernism 'dissipated any center, creating an open system through

<sup>28</sup> 'Guannian yishu de chuxian henkuai dailai le xiandai zhuyi piping yuyan de shixiao, yinwei nazhong chun xingshi he chun jingshen de chanshi zai ye wufa jieshi zhe xie xingwei', Yi Ying, 'Miaoshuxing de huigui—jiantan guannian yishu de piping zhunze', *Hualang*, 1996, no. 2, 51–52.

<sup>29</sup> Yi Ying reflects on this in his article from 2002 'Criticism on Chinese experimental art in the 1990s'. Translated in Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, New York: MoMA, 2010, 316–323.

<sup>30</sup> Yi Ying, 'Guannian yishu yu qianwei zhidu de jieti', *Hualang*, 1996, no. 2:

mass communication...its objective was in communicating information and meaning'.<sup>31</sup> Reminiscent of Gu Chengfeng's discussions of the information age, Yi used this emphasis on communication to explain art's shift from painting to conceptual art, which he then tacked to a shift from the industrial to post-industrial age.

Yi Ying's historical framework attached art trends, institutional structures, and theoretical concerns to particular historical eras. With this in mind, Yi Ying defined conceptual art as a way of binding artistic forms to the contemporary through its references to 'extant reality'. For example, the 'return' that he referenced in 'Return to description' was not to the narrative art forms of before. Instead, it invoked new ways of describing reality: 'this includes several layers of meaning, for example, directly using popular culture or commercial images, and facing a large public space for exhibition and not like modernist art only directed towards a high social stratum'.<sup>32</sup> The author subsequently treated this notion of reality referenced in art—made manifest in artistic content, reception, and publicness—as the basis for his discussion of conceptual art in China.

In his article 'The transformation of media', Yi Ying used the above conditions to identify Chinese conceptual artists working in the mid-1990s. While detailing changes in medium and form, he ultimately isolated artists' concerns for 'reality' as the most important result of the historical shift from modernism to postmodernism, and from the industrial age to the information age. He writes:

In the 1990s, Chinese society began to develop in the direction of a modern society, just like Western society. It also faced the problems of modernism, and began to produce the conditions for conceptual art. Conceptual art tries to use the information age's methods of communication and propagation, tries to present imminent social problems for the public, even allowing the public to participate in it.<sup>33</sup>

He put forward Song Dong's *Another Class: Will You Play With Me?* as a prime example of this confluence between artistic concept, social issues, and personal experience. In this account, Yi Ying highlighted how Song Dong drew on his position as a teacher to produce a critique of education through his artwork. This emphasis on artists' personal experiences was already

<sup>31</sup> 'Hou xiandai zhuyi chedi xiaosan le renhe zhongxin, gouzao le yige you dazhong chuanbo wei yinxing zaiti de kaifang xitong...qi mudi zaiyu chuanbo de xinxi he yiyi', Yi Ying, 'Guannian yishu yu qianwei zhidu de jieti', *Hualang* 1996, no. 3, accessed on-line: [http://www.mitbbs.com/article\\_t/Arts/1151306.html](http://www.mitbbs.com/article_t/Arts/1151306.html)

<sup>32</sup> '...ta baohan le jiceng yisi, ji zhijie liyong dazhong wenhua huo shangye wenhua de xingxiang, yiji mianxiang yige gonggong changhe zhanke, er buxiang xiandai zhuyi yishu zhi mianxiang yi ge jingshen guizu de jieceng', Yi Ying, 'Miaoshuxing de huigui', 52.

<sup>33</sup> 'Dao 90 niandai, Zhongguo shehui ye kaishi wang xiandai shehui fazhan, he xifang shehui yiyang, ye mianlin zhe xiandai zhuyi de zhuduo wenti, ye kaishi chansheng le guannian yihsu de tiaojian. Guannian yishu litu youxiao di liyong xinxi shidai de chuanbo shouduan, litu ba jinpo de shuhui wenti chenxian gei gongzhong, bing rang gongzhong canyu qizhong...'. Yi Ying, 'Meicai de biange', *Meiyuan* 1997, no. 3, 36.

widely discussed as a trend in Chinese art.<sup>34</sup> Yi Ying inserted conceptual art into this discussion by positioning this tendency within a specific historical framework, marked by a transition from modernist to postmodernist conditions.

'Conceptual art', much like 'postmodernism', was a term that was widely adopted but tenuously defined in critics' writings. By tethering these terms to each other, Yi Ying attempted to provide some stability to these complex ideas. For example, in the 'Transformation of media,' he cites Lü Shengzhong's incorporation of paper-cutting into installation as an example of conceptual artists' dissatisfaction with the expressive capabilities of traditional forms. He insisted: 'postmodern society itself includes a re-recognition of the value of traditions, searching for the spiritual homeland that industrial society abandoned'.<sup>35</sup> One of the consistent ways in which authors attempted to define conceptual art was as a departure from existing mediums and formats. Yi Ying's version of this asserted that such a departure was a function of postmodern society and the information age.

Much as Gu Chengfeng saw conceptual art as a marker of contemporaneity, references to 'postmodernism' and 'conceptual art' were perceived to be signs of being *au courant* in contemporary art discourse. Convinced by their applicability, critics faced the problem of how to translate and employ these ideas. As Yi Ying shows, one way of wrangling more concrete parameters for the application of terms such as 'postmodernism' and 'conceptual art' was through historical scaffolding. As such, discussions of specific artistic strategies were often secondary to efforts at interpretation through periodization. And, it was through periodization that critics made a case for contemporaneity. By using these terms and categories, authors like Yi Ying argued for the advancement of both contemporary Chinese art and criticism.

Some of these same authors went on to carry out their fixation with self-historicization in more lengthy accounts. For example, published in 2000, Lü Peng's book *90s Art China* recounted the previous decade with scant historical distance.<sup>36</sup> Much like Lü and Yi Dan's *Modern Chinese History of Art: 1979–1989* published in 1992, this text signalled an impulse to not only document and interpret, but to do so swiftly.

Due to this need for almost immediate historicization, authors faced awkwardness in arranging the decade into a logical sequence. With chapters devoted to 'New Generation and Cynical Realism', 'Pop Art', and 'Gaudy Art', Lü's book tracked particular styles and cultural phenomena throughout the decade. The third chapter deviated from this focus on style by turning to the 1992 exhibition *The First 1990s Biennial Art Fair Guangzhou* alongside another seminal exhibit *China's New Art: Post-1989*. This is unsurprising given that Lü himself had organised the former. This not only archived his contributions to the recent past, but also spoke to the importance of art critics in actively organising and charting new paths for contemporary

<sup>34</sup> For example, in Yin Jinan's coining of the term 'close up looking' in 'New generation and close up artists'. Originally published in *Jiangsu huakan* 133, no. 1, 1992: 16–17. Translated in Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*: 155–157.

<sup>35</sup> '...hou xiandai shehui benshen ye baohan zhe dui chuantong jiazhi de chongxin kending, xunzhao bei gongyehua shehui yiqi de jingshen jiayuan', Yi Ying, 'Meicai de biange', 36.

<sup>36</sup> Lü Peng, *90s Art China, 1990–1999*, Hunan Meishu chubanshe, 2000.

art. The chapter on 'Feminine Art' used artists' gender as a dividing line, but Lü's account could also be considered informed by stylistic concerns. The most anomalous chapter, then, was 'Conceptional [sic] Art.'

While all of the earlier chapters covered painting with just a few instances of sculpture and installation, Lü situated non-painted media in this final chapter on conceptual art. The chapter was organised largely according to format, starting with installation and performance, and proceeding into dedicated sections on 'Video' and 'Conceptual Photography'. It also followed a chronological pattern, with sections devoted to before and after 1994. Discussions of the art proceeded in successive detailed descriptions of the artists and key artworks. In this art historical category, Lü treated each artist and work individually with little thematic or interpretative connectivity between the explanations. If one was to locate an overarching trend throughout the book, it was in Lü's concerns for the rapid trend towards commercialisation in the 1990s. In his account, conceptual art stood as a holdout in this market-oriented decade. Lü's overall historical framework thus argued for a shift from idealism and transcendence to commercialism. In addition to capping off this evolutionary narrative, 'conceptual art' also functioned as a site for positioning 'other' art forms. Avoiding a thematic and issue-based approach, Lü's address of non-painting in this chronological, medium-, and artist-specific approach revealed the awkwardness critics were confronted by in their efforts to utilise new terms within existing historical schemas.

Lü's history demonstrates the ways in which 'conceptual art' was used as a convenient catchall for work that deliberately resisted existing standards and expectations. While it was a method for categorising the undefinable, this meant that conceptual art was premised on what it wasn't rather than what it was. Thus, it was variously described as 'not painting', 'not commercial', and 'not like the 1980s'. Throughout the 1990s, critics attempted to give greater context and meaning to the term. Some specifically drafted conceptual art into debates as a foil against conventional definitions and practices. Others unreservedly classified artwork from the 1990s as conceptual art with little concern for its Western counterparts. Still others found it useful as a bridge to Western histories and critical methodologies.

Treated as artistic category and historical artifact, these descriptions of conceptual art speak to the urgency in the contemporary Chinese art discourse towards developing a critical vocabulary. Throughout the 1990s, critics adopted and 'auditioned' different terminologies, theoretical approaches, and historical frameworks. Whether through invented designations or translated terms, critics revealed a continual need to name styles and phenomena as they appeared. This emerged from the desire to not only figure standards for evaluation, but also to validate one's own voice in the developing discourse. Thus, as artists rampantly experimented with new forms and formats throughout the decade, critics and art historians concurrently wrestled with how to interpret and historicise them.

## Conclusion: A Legacy of Conceptual-ness

Perhaps the most telling tactic for history-writing can be seen in art critic Zhu Qi's essay, '1990s Conceptual Art and artistic conceptualization'.<sup>37</sup> In this writing, Zhu held back from issuing a clear definition of 'conceptual art' and instead repeatedly used 'concept' in a variety of ways: from 'conceptual manner' (*guannian xingtai* 观念形态) to 'conceptual nature' (*guannian xing* 观念性). By appending '*xing*'—used to describe the essence or nature of something—Zhu Qi changed the category of 'conceptual art' into 'art with a conceptual nature'. As his essay insisted on using a Chinese context for understanding conceptual art, this entire change in terminology subtly showed his resistance to being beholden to established Western definitions or even long-running Chinese debates. That conceptual nature could be more accurate than conceptual art or idea art continued the challenge of wrestling with encumbered historical baggage.

This paper argues that the intersection of history-writing and conceptual art served as a pivotal site for understanding the domestic tumult and global ambitions of categorising and making meaning for contemporary Chinese art. This paper does not argue for a correct or incorrect definition of 'conceptual art', but rather traces how and why it was utilised or considered useful to Chinese critics and art historians. As an accomplice to different critics' and curators' varying histories, the category of 'conceptual art' offers unique insight into the strategies, agendas, and challenges of art critics and art historians during the 1990s. Whether because of its ambiguity or its privileged place in Euro-American art, conceptual art was regarded as uniquely positioned to legitimise contemporary Chinese art abroad and contemporary art critics at home. The strategies for doing so reveal the importance of history to creating an evidentiary response to anxieties around validation and misrepresentation.

In their invocations of history, curators and critics worked to affix the category of conceptual art to a particular time—the contemporary—rather than a singular place. Both globally and domestically, this entailed not only writing new histories for Chinese art, but also maneuvering around conceptual art's existing historical narratives from the United States and Europe. Indeed, their efforts to appropriate and disavow, erase and charter anew show the extent to which they were willing to construct lineages for conceptual art in China. Outside of China, this was governed by the sense that inclusion in global art could be done through alternative histories of conceptual art. Inside of China, critics worked more to compare and align Chinese art with Western histories. Both domestically and internationally, curators and critics accepted the unique applicability of 'conceptual art' as category, as a way to assert contemporary Chinese art's belonging to a global space and contemporary time.

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<sup>37</sup> Zhu Qi, '1990s Conceptual art and artistic conceptualization' in *Reinterpretation: A decade of experimental Chinese art (1990–2000)*, Wu Hung et al. Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002: 20–27.



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