



# CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

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Cover: Mao Tongqiang. *Tools* (detail). 2005-8. Installation with found objects, 3,875 square feet (360 square meters). Installation view, Beijing, 2008

Inside covers: Hong Hao. *Selected Scriptures*, Page 331, *The Strategic Defense Order* (detail). 1995. Screenprint, 22 × 30<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (56 × 78 cm). Guangdong Museum of Art, China. See pl. 46

Title page: The first *Stars Art Exhibition*, outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing, on opening day, September 27, 1979. Photograph by Li Xiaobin

Pages 2-3: The Stars demonstration on October 1, 1979. Detail of photograph reproduced in *Newsweek*, October 15, 1979. See p. 9

Pages 150-51: Zhuang Hui. *Shooting a Group Portrait* (detail). 1997. Color photograph, 3'4" × 24'11" (101 × 760 cm). Collection the artist. See p. 227

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# 1

## CONTEMPORARY ART AS DOMESTIC MOVEMENT, 1976 – 89

### I. THE BEGINNING OF CONTEMPORARY ART: 1979 – 84

5 INTRODUCTION

6 UNOFFICIAL ART GROUPS AND EXHIBITIONS

7 PREFACE TO THE FIRST NATURE, SOCIETY, AND MAN EXHIBITION (*ZIRAN, SHEHUI, REN*) (1979)

By Wang Zhiping

7 PREFACE TO THE FIRST STARS ART EXHIBITION (*XINGXING MEIZHAN*) (1979)

By Huang Rui

8 A LETTER TO THE PEOPLE (1979)

By Xu Wenli and Liu Qing et al.

11 ABOUT THE STARS ART EXHIBITION (1980)

Compiled by Li Xianting

14 A DEBATE ON "FORMAL BEAUTY" AND OTHER ISSUES

14 FORMALIST AESTHETICS IN PAINTING (1979)

By Wu Guanzhong

17 EMOTION, INDIVIDUALITY, FORMAL AESTHETICS (1979)

By Liu Shaohui

19 NEW DIRECTIONS IN REALIST PAINTING

**Scar Art**

19 SOME THOUGHTS ON CREATING THE PICTURE-STORY BOOK *MAPLE (FENG)* (1980)

By Chen Yiming, Liu Yulian, and Li Bin

22 MAN'S RATIONAL MEDITATION: A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF CHENG CONGLIN'S THEMATIC OIL PAINTINGS (1970S/1994)

By Deng Pingxiang

**Native Soil Art**

23 A LETTER FROM THE ARTIST OF *FATHER (FUQIN)* (1981)

By Luo Zhongli

25 MY SEVEN PAINTINGS (1981)

By Chen Danqing

**Melancholy Youth and "Contemplative Painting"**

29 EXPECTING HER TO WALK ON THE MAIN ROAD (1981)

By Wang Chuan

30 "CONTEMPLATIVE PAINTING" IN CHINA AND ANDREW WYETH (1985)

By Ruan Xudong

### II. THE ARRIVAL OF AN AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENT: 1985 – 86

35 POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXTS

36 ENLIGHTENMENT OF A NEW ERA: ON *IN THE NEW ERA (ZAI XINSHIDAI)* (1985)

By Zhang Qun and Meng Luding

38 PIONEERS OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART — A CRITIQUE OF THE *PROGRESSIVE YOUNG CHINESE ARTISTS EXHIBITION* (1985)

By Zhao Jinghuan

42 BEIJING THEORISTS' REACTIONS TO THE ART OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG (1985)

Compiled by Zhu Ye

- 45 FOREWORD TO *FINE ARTS IN CHINA* (1985)  
 45 APPENDIX A NATIONWIDE FORUM AND MODEL: ART MAGAZINES AND SYMPOSIA (2003)  
 By Martina Köppel-Yang
- 51 **'85 ART NEW WAVE**  
**General Discussions**
- 52 THE '85 ART MOVEMENT (1986)  
 By Gao Minglu
- 62 THE SIGNIFICANCE IS NOT THE ART (1986)  
 By Li Jiatus [pseud. Li Xianting]
- 63 A SUMMARY OF EVALUATIONS OF THE '85 ART MOVEMENT (1986)  
 Compiled by Gao Minglu
- 66 APPENDIX THE LANDSCAPE OF CHINA'S MODERN ART MOVEMENT (1991)  
 By Tong Dian
- Writings by Members of Selected Art Groups**
- 78 WE — PARTICIPANTS OF THE "'85 ART MOVEMENT" (1986)  
 By Wang Guangyi
- 79 AN EXPLANATION OF THE NORTHERN ART GROUP (1987)  
 By Shu Qun
- 83 ON NEW SPACE AND THE POND SOCIETY (1987)  
 By Shi Jiu
- 89 NEW FIGURATIVE: MANIFESTATION AND TRANSCENDENCE IN FIGURATIVE PATTERNS OF LIFE (1987)  
 By Mao Xuhui
- 94 RED BRIGADE PRECEPT (1987)  
 By Ding Fang
- 95 STATEMENT ON BURNING (1986)  
 By Huang Yong Ping
- 96 INTRODUCTION TO THE EVENTS EXHIBITION THAT TOOK PLACE AT THE EXHIBITION HALL OF THE FUJIAN ART MUSEUM (1986)  
 By Huang Yong Ping
- 97 TOWARD A PHYSICAL STATE OF CONTEMPORARY ART ITSELF (1986)  
 By Wang Du

### III. FROM COLLECTIVITY TO INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY: 1987 – 89

- 99 INTRODUCTION
- 100 **RETHINKING THE MOVEMENT**  
 100 RETURNING TO ART ITSELF (1988)  
 By Jia Fangzhou
- 101 **RETHINKING ART**  
**Purifying Artistic Language**  
 101 A FEW THOUGHTS (1988)  
 By Zhu Zude and Liu Zhenggang
- Absurdity and Irrationality**  
 103 NON-EXPRESSIVE PAINTINGS (1986)  
 By Huang Yong Ping
- Art as Process**  
 105 LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN A QUIET PLACE (1989)  
 By Xu Bing
- 106 REGARDING "ANALYSIS" (1989)  
 By Chen Shaoping
- 106 CHALLENGING MODERNISM — AN INTERVIEW WITH WENDA GU (1986)  
 Conducted by Fei Dawei
- Against the Public**  
 112 THE POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR ART PROJECT NO. 2 (*YISHU JIHUA DI ER HAO*) (1988/2008)  
 By Zhang Peili

## 113 THE CHINA / AVANT-GARDE EXHIBITION

### The Exhibition

- 114 BACKGROUND MATERIAL ON THE CHINA / AVANT-GARDE EXHIBITION (1989)  
By Zhou Yan
- 116 CONFESSIONS OF A CHINA / AVANT-GARDE CURATOR (1989)  
By Li Xianting
- 121 A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CHINA / AVANT-GARDE (1989)  
By Hang Jian and Cao Xiao'ou

### The "End" of the New Wave

- 127 FACING THE END OF THE NEW WAVE: AN INTERVIEW WITH FINE ARTS IN CHINA (1989)  
By Peng De
- 128 THE MODERNIST DILEMMA AND OUR OPTIONS (1989)  
By Yi Ying

## 134 ILLUSTRATIONS

# 2

## GLOBALIZATION AND A DOMESTIC TURN, 1990 – 2000

### 152 INTRODUCTION

## I. INTRINSIC PERSPECTIVES

### 154 ARTISTIC TRENDS IN THE EARLY 1990S (1990 – 93)

- 155 NEW GENERATION AND CLOSE UP ARTISTS (1992)  
By Yin Jinan
- 157 APATHY AND DECONSTRUCTION IN POST-'89 ART: ANALYZING THE TRENDS OF "CYNICAL REALISM" AND "POLITICAL POP" (1992)  
By Li Xianting
- 167 APPENDIX THE MISREAD GREAT CRITICISM (DA PIPAN) (2008)  
By Huang Zhuan
- 171 TENDENCIES IN CHINESE POP (1996)  
By Gu Chengfeng
- 179 A SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PERFORMANCE ART (1999)  
By Gao Ling

### 184 MAJOR TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART OF THE MID- TO LATE 1990S

#### 185 Identity and Experience

##### Self

- 185 A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF 65 KG (1994/2000)  
By Zhang Huan
- 187 FOUR NOTES (1994)  
By Ma Liuming
- 188 THE BOUNDARY OF FREEDOM: A PERSONAL STATEMENT ON ASSIGNMENT NO. 1 (ZUOYE YIHAO) (1994/2003)  
By Qiu Zhijie
- 190 REPORT FROM THE ARTIST'S STUDIO (1996) INTERVIEW WITH ZHANG XIAOGANG  
by Huang Zhuan
- 192 PREFACE TO IT'S ME! (SHI WO!) (1998/2000)  
By Leng Lin

##### Feminism and Women's Art

- 193 WALKING OUT OF THE ABYSS: MY FEMINIST CRITIQUE (1994)  
By Xu Hong
- 194 TOWARD A FEMALE INITIATIVE (1996/2003)  
By Tao Yongbai

197 WRAPPING AND SEVERING (1997)

By Lin Tianmiao

198 CLOTHES CHEST (YIXIANG) (1995)

By Yin Xiuzhen

198 **Engagement with Social Transformation**

**Gaudy Art**

199 LIVING IN KITSCH — THE CRITICAL "IRONY" OF GAUDY

ART (1999)

By Liao Wen

**Urban Destruction and Construction**

205 "CHANGCHUN, CHINA": A REPORT ON A PERFORMANCE  
OF MAKING RUBBINGS FROM BUILDINGS SLATED  
FOR DEMOLITION (1994)

By Huang Yan

206 '94 ACTION PLAN FOR DEBRIS SALVAGE SCHEMES FOR  
IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS (1994)

By Zhan Wang

207 NEW MAP OF BEIJING: TODAY AND TOMORROW'S  
CAPITAL — ROCKERY REMOLDING PLAN (1995)

By Zhan Wang

208 ONE HOUR GAME (YOUXI YI XIAOSHI) (1996/1997)

By Liang Juhui

209 REPORT ON ZHANG DALI'S DIALOGUE (DUIHUA) (1998)

By Jiang Tao

212 A DIALOGUE ON DIALOGUE (2000)

Conducted by Gou Hongbing with Zhang Dali

**Sociality in Contemporary Art**

213 STATE OF EXISTENCE (1994)

By Zhu Fadong

214 12 SQUARE METERS (12 PINGFANG MI) (1994)

By Zhang Huan

215 ICE • '96 CENTRAL PLAINS (BING • 96 ZHONGYUAN) (1996/2000)

By Wang Jin

216 ON PAINTED SCULPTURES (1995/1997)

By Liu Jianhua

217 STANDARD FAMILY (BIAOZHUN JIATING) (1996/1997)

By Wang Jinsong

217 WHY DO I WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH THE STREETS OF  
GUANGZHOU? (2002)

By Chen Shaoxiong

219 **Experimental Photography and Video Art**

**Photography**

219 TRENDS AND STAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHY'S DEVELOPMENT  
IN MAINLAND CHINA SINCE 1976 (1994)

By Li Mei and Yang Xiaoyan

224 APPENDIX ZERO TO INFINITY: THE NASCENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART OF THE 1990S (2002)

By Karen Smith

227 I ONLY CHOSE THE "GROUP PORTRAIT" (1997)

By Zhuang Hui

230 FRAGMENTS (1998/2004)

By Rong Rong

231 A FEW WORDS ON THE PHOTOS (2002)

By Hai Bo

**Video Art**

232 APPENDIX THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEO ART  
AND THE MATURITY OF NEW MEDIA ART (2002)

By Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie

238 SELECTED VIDEO WORKS OF THE 1990S (1992-97/2008)

By Zhang Peili

242 SIX VIDEO WORKS (1997)

By Wang Jianwei

246 AN ARRANGEMENT OF A FEW IDEAS AND SOME WORK (2002)

By Zhou Xiaohu

248 **Overseas Chinese Artists**

249 ENTROPY, CHINESE ARTISTS, WESTERN ART INSTITUTIONS:  
A NEW INTERNATIONALISM (1994)

By Hou Hanru

- 252 **DOES A CULTURE IN EXILE NECESSARILY WITHER? — A LETTER TO LI XIANTING (1991/2003)**  
By Fei Dawei
- 254 **ON WORDS (1999/2000)**  
By Xu Bing
- 257 **face the new millennium: the divine comedy of our times; a thesis on the *united nations* art project and its time and environment (1995/2003)**  
By Wenda Gu
- 260 **WILD FLIGHTS OF FANCY (1998)**  
By Cai Guo-Qiang
- 266 **AI WEIWEI DIALOGUE WITH ZHUANG HUI (1995)**
- 269 **STATEMENT (1989)**  
By Hung Liu
- 269 **ABOUT *RESIDENT ALIEN* (2000)**  
By Hung Liu
- 270 **Debates over Using Animals and the Human Body in Making Art**
- 271 **POST-SENSE SENSIBILITY: DISTORTED BODIES AND DELUSION (1999)**  
By Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun
- 274 **REFLECTIONS ON PERFORMANCE ART (2002)**  
By Chen Lüsheng
- 276 **MINISTRY OF CULTURE NOTICE (2001)**
- 277 **ZHU YU'S *SKIN GRAFT (ZHI PI)* (2000/2003)**  
By Zhu Yu, with introduction and commentary by Wu Hung

## II. EXTRINSIC PERSPECTIVES

- 288 **INTRODUCTION**
- 289 **ESTABLISHING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART**  
**Contemporary Art and the Market**
- 290 **HEADING TOWARD THE MARKET (1992)**  
By Lü Peng
- 291 **WHO IS GOING TO SPONSOR THE HISTORY? (1991)**  
**INTERVIEW WITH HUANG ZHUAN**
- The First 1990s Biennial Art Fair**
- 298 **CATALOGUE PREFACE: OPENING UP THE 1990S (1992)**  
By Lü Peng
- 299 **NOTES ON THE SELECTION PROCESS (1992)**  
By Chen Xiaoxin
- 303 **REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS RAISED AFTER THE *FIRST 1990S BIENNIAL ART FAIR* (1993)**  
By Lü Peng
- The "System" of 1990s Contemporary Chinese Art**
- 307 **FROM "SYSTEM" TO "CIRCLE": AN ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF AVANT-GARDE ART IN THE LATE 1990S (2003)**  
By Wu Hong
- Art Medium and Criticism**
- 310 **CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART MEDIA IN THE 1990S (1999)**  
By Pi Daojian and Pi Li
- 316 **CRITICISM ON CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL ART IN THE 1990S (2002)**  
By Yi Ying
- 324 **MY OUTLOOK ON CRITICISM (2003)**  
By Yin Shuangxi
- 325 **MY VIEW OF ART AND CRITICISM (2003)**  
By Huang Du
- 326 **EXPERIMENTAL ART EXHIBITIONS AND THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE**  
**Experimental Exhibitions**
- 327 **"EXPERIMENTAL EXHIBITIONS" OF THE 1990S (2002)**  
By Wu Hung
- 337 ***SUPERMARKET (CHAOSHI ZHAN)*: INFORMATION FOR SPONSORS (1999)**  
By Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Alexander Brandt

- 338 **THE PATH TO TRACE OF EXISTENCE (SHENGCUN HENJI): A PRIVATE SHOWING OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART (1998)**  
By Feng Boyi
- 343 **POST-SENSE SENSIBILITY (HOU GANXING): A MEMORANDUM (2000)**  
By Qiu Zhijie

### **The 2000 Shanghai Biennale**

- 347 **TRANSCENDING LEFT AND RIGHT: THE SHANGHAI BIENNALE AMID TRANSITIONS (2000)**  
By Zhang Qing
- 351 **CHINA'S FIRST LEGITIMATE MODERN ART EXHIBITION: THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE (2000/2003)**  
By Zhu Qingsheng
- 353 **THE SHANGHAI ART MUSEUM SHOULD NOT BECOME A MARKET STALL IN CHINA FOR WESTERN HEGEMONY – A PAPER DELIVERED AT THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE (2000)**  
By Wang Nanming
- 354 **PREFACE TO FUCK OFF (BUHEZUO FANGSHI) (2000)**  
By Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi

### 356 **CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

#### **Contemporary Chinese Art in the West**

- 357 **THE RECEPTION IN THE WEST OF EXPERIMENTAL MAINLAND CHINESE ART OF THE 1990S (2002)**  
By Britta Erickson
- 363 **ENTROPY, CHINESE ARTISTS, WESTERN ART INSTITUTIONS: A NEW INTERNATIONALISM (1994)**  
By Hou Hanru

#### **Questions about the "International Identity" of Contemporary Chinese Art**

- 366 **OLIVA IS NOT THE SAVIOR OF CHINESE ART (1993)**  
By Wang Lin

#### **The Rent Collection Courtyard Controversy**

- 368 **THE RENT COLLECTION COURTYARD COPYRIGHT BREACHED OVERSEAS: SICHUAN FINE ARTS INSTITUTE SUES VENICE BIENNALE (2001)**  
Introduction by Britta Erickson
- 371 **THE REPRODUCTION OF RENT COLLECTION COURTYARD AND POSTMODERNISM (2000)**  
By Dao Zi
- 377 **QUOTING DOES NOT EQUAL PLAGIARISM (2000)**  
By Liu Xiaochun

### 380 **ILLUSTRATIONS**

### 396 **CODA: ENTERING THE NEW MILLENNIUM (2000 – 2008)**

408 **CHRONICLE 1976 – 2006**

437 **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

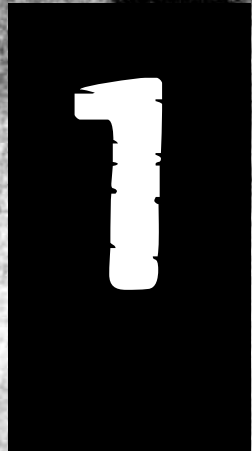
441 **INDEX**

456 **THE TRUSTEES OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**





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**CONTEMPORARY ART AS**

**DOMESTIC MOVEMENT 1976-89**

# I. THE BEGINNING OF CONTEMPORARY ART: 1979-84

When the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began in 1966, it had an instant impact on the existing Chinese art system. Mobilized by Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the political campaign suspended all courses in art academies, shut down all art magazines and periodicals, persecuted nine out of ten famous artists and professors, and condemned individual artistic expression as counterrevolutionary bourgeois garbage. The attack on the Four Olds — old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits — also rendered exhibitions and discussions of ancient and Western art non-existent. All of this was done under the name of the “proletarian dictatorship,” an extreme means of political control instigated by Mao to safeguard the purity of Communist ideology. The result was a total politicization of art. Mao, now nearly deified, became the central figure of innumerable paintings, sculptures, and prints. Other popular subjects of visual representation included images of the revolutionary masses, the history and current policies of the Chinese Communist Party, and Mao’s poetry. Highly formulaic in form and content, these images filled exhibitions throughout the country.

Whereas such extreme political and ideological control characterized the Chinese art scene throughout the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976,<sup>1</sup> it began to foment opposition toward the latter part of that period. Particularly after 1973, many young artists, both inside and outside of art schools,<sup>2</sup> became increasingly frustrated with the emptiness of Cultural Revolutionary art and began to secretly explore alternative modes of artistic expression. Some of them reembraced the idea of art-for-art’s sake, eagerly absorbing inspiration from Western modern art, including Romantic, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist paintings. Their works, often small, poetic landscapes, demonstrated a radical departure from the idioms of orthodox revolutionary art. In Beijing, for example, some twenty to thirty like-minded young men and women gathered around the little-known painter Zhao Wenliang and created a large body of oil paintings depicting almost exclusively scenes from nature. They later called the group the No-Name Painting Society (*Wu ming huahui*), when they held their first public exhibition in 1979.<sup>3</sup>

Another important phenomenon at the end of the Cultural Revolution was the appearance of alternative political art. By the mid-1970s, Premier Zhou Enlai had become the remaining hope for many Chinese, who saw him as the only person able to save China from the disasters of the Cultural Revolution. With Zhou’s death in January 1976, this hope seemed to vanish. Even worse, the extreme leftist leaders headed by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, condemned Zhou and prohibited people from mourning him. All these factors triggered the April Fifth Incident, a mass demonstration in Tiananmen Square which was suppressed by the government. A group of young amateur photographers recorded the incident from beginning to end and hid the negatives in spite of threats of government persecution. After 1976, they formed an underground network and compiled their private records into volumes for public circulation.<sup>4</sup>

The Eleventh Party Congress in August 1977 officially ended the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping returned to power the same year and began to implement a series of political and economic reforms. In art, many artists who had been purged over the past twenty years under Mao’s rule were rehabilitated. Art colleges were restored and started to admit students on all levels in 1978. Mainstream art magazines, some of them reestablished as early as 1976, began to feature Western, contemporary Japanese, and classical Chinese art. A result of these changes was the reemergence of academic art, now eager to regain its independence by distinguishing itself from propaganda art. In politics, the April

Fifth Incident was redefined as a “revolutionary event.” The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress, held in December 1978, further declared an end to class struggle in favor of shifting “the emphasis of the Party’s work to socialist modernization.” This provided crucial political sanctioning for the economic reforms that would soon dominate the post-Maoist era.<sup>5</sup>

Partly owing to the new political atmosphere, a vibrant democracy movement surfaced in late 1978 and early 1979. Young activists, many of whom had just returned from the countryside to the cities, organized quasipolitical societies and published a variety of political and literary journals. Whereas most of these groups advocated antiauthoritarianism, some of them went so far as to reject the Party’s leadership. Deng’s government responded by banning unofficial organizations and activities, revealing the limitations of his “socialist democratization and legality.” Sympathetic to the dissidents but fearful of chaos returning, most Chinese intellectuals and artists accepted Deng’s reasoning for the crackdown: the country’s newly regained stability required such governmental intervention. For all these reasons, 1979 is remembered in modern Chinese history as a year flooded with intense hope, anxiety, and pent-up emotion. Not coincidentally, this year also witnessed the emergence of contemporary Chinese art, most clearly signified by the first group of unofficial art exhibitions in public spaces.

#### Notes

1. The Cultural Revolution officially ended by the Eleventh Party Congress in August 1977. But, in fact, it concluded with Mao’s death and the purging of the Gang of Four in the fall of 1976.
2. The Cultural Revolution prevented the graduation of several classes in art colleges. Students remained in these schools to participate in political activities. Starting in 1973, some schools admitted students selected from “revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers.” A “May Seventh Art University” was established in the old Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.
3. For a history of the No-Name Painting Society, see Gao Minglu, ed., “*Wu ming*”: *Yige beiju qianwei de lishi* [*The “No-Name”: A History of a Self-Exiled Avant-Garde*] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007).
4. *Yongyuan de siyue* [*Eternal April*]. Also see Wu Hung, “Between Past and Future: A Short History of Contemporary Chinese Photography,” in Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips et al., *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago; New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl Publishers; in collaboration with Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Asia Society, New York, 2004), 12–16.
5. For Chinese politics in the post-Cultural Revolution era, see Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 448–85.

## UNOFFICIAL ART GROUPS AND EXHIBITIONS

**I**n 1979, for the first time in the history of the People’s Republic, unofficial art exhibitions became an important phenomenon and attracted broad attention from society at large. Three such shows were held in Beijing, the country’s political center: the first *Nature, Society, and Man* (*Ziran, shehui, ren*) exhibition organized by the April Photography Society (opening April 1), the first exhibition of the No-Name Painting Society (opening July 7), and the first exhibition of the Stars Art Society (opening September 27).

Most members of the three groups were young amateur artists who had never received formal art training and were not affiliated with any art institution. Among the three exhibitions, the first two were deliberately “apolitical.” Or rather, they realized their political agenda by rejecting political propaganda and advocating “pure” art.

In contrast, some works in the *Stars Art Exhibition* (*Xingxing meizhan*) were explicitly political, shocking the viewers with a fierce attack on Maoist ideology.



The first *Nature, Society, and Man* exhibition at Sun Yat-sen Park, Beijing, 1979

**Echoing the democracy movement, the members of the Stars group also organized the exhibition as a public declaration of their "outsider" position by staging the show on the street outside the National Art Gallery, the headquarters of official art. The police interfered and canceled the exhibition two days later. The Stars responded by holding a public demonstration on October 1, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.**

### **PREFACE TO THE FIRST NATURE, SOCIETY, AND MAN EXHIBITION (ZIRAN, SHEHUI, REN) (1979)**

By Wang Zhiping

News photos cannot replace the art of photography. Content cannot be equaled with form. Photography as an art should have its own language. It is now time to explore art with the language of art, just as economic matters should be dealt with by using the methods of economics. The beauty of photography lies not necessarily in "important subject matter" or in official ideology, but should be found in nature's rhythms, in social reality, and in emotions and ideas.

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— Originally published in *Yongyuan de siyue* [Eternal April] (April 1979): 88–89. Translator unknown.

### **PREFACE TO THE FIRST STARS ART EXHIBITION (XINGXING MEIZHAN) (1979)**

By Huang Rui

We, twenty-three art explorers, place some fruits of our labor here.

The world leaves unlimited possibilities for explorers.

We have used our own eyes to know the world, and our own brushes and awls to participate in it. Our paintings contain all sorts of expressions, and these expressions speak to our own individual ideals.

The years come at us; there are no mysterious indications guiding our action. This is precisely the challenge that life has raised to us. We cannot remove the element of temporality; the shadow of the past and the glow of the future are folded together, forming the various living conditions of today. Resolving to live on and remembering each lesson learned: this is our responsibility.

We love the ground beneath our feet. The land has nurtured us, we have no words to express our passion for the land. Seizing this moment of the thirtieth anniversary of the nation's founding, we give our harvest back to the land, and to the people. This brings us closer. We are full of confidence.

---

— Text translated from a poster at the exhibition, September 1979. Reproduced in *Huang Rui: The Stars Times 1977–1984* (Beijing: Thinking Hands + Guanyi Contemporary Art Archive, 2007). Translated by Philip Tinari.

## A LETTER TO THE PEOPLE (1979)

By Xu Wenli and Liu Qing et al.

October 1 of this year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. In order to champion the civil rights conferred by the Constitution of the People's Republic, all of Beijing's unofficial press organizations demonstrated against the illegal act that the Public Security Bureau of the Dongcheng District of Beijing committed when they forcibly shut down the unofficial outdoor *Stars Art Exhibition* (*Xingxing meizhan*). The oppressed organized a gathering in front of the Democracy Wall in Xidan. After assembling, they marched toward the [offices of the] Municipal Committee of Beijing, seeking to further urge the Municipal Committee to deal seriously with the affair of the *Stars Art Exhibition*.

Organized by the masses themselves, the Stars' outdoor exhibition opened on September 27 in the street-side park to the eastern side of the National Art Gallery. The eastern and southern sides of the exhibition site were both dozens of meters away from the street. The western side of the site was the eastern wall of the museum, and in the northern part was a small stand of trees. In total, the exhibition presented the works of twenty-three young artists. The works both inherited [from tradition] and broke through [that tradition], striking people like a breath of fresh air.

The exhibition was open for two days, from September 27–28. [All] was orderly, the spectators were enthusiastic, and [the exhibition] was filled with the cultural life [brought by] the visitors to the street-side park. Throughout the show, it received the support and praise of earlier generations of artists.

But it was precisely this kind of wonderful exhibition that met the misfortune of being forcefully shut down. Early in the morning on September 29, the Dongcheng Public Security Bureau mobilized nearly one hundred policemen, who seized all of the exhibited works left in the care of the National Art Gallery. There was also a group of unidentified people who gathered together in an organized way to cause a commotion and to harass and abuse the exhibition's personnel; they also made trouble with foreign reporters for no reason.

The *Stars Exhibition* absolutely should have received the protection of the Constitution. As an exhibition of artworks, it is not at all like those propagandistic works, or those big- and small-character posters that are pasted throughout all of the city's streets and alleys. It is not affected by the restrictions of the Six Announcements. Thus, the pretext [that the Public Security Bureau was] upholding the Six Announcements is completely untenable sophistry.

This is an affair that was maliciously engineered by the Dongcheng Public Security Bureau before National Day [October 1]. It has aroused the intense discontent of the general public and of leading figures in every field. After all of the capital's unofficial press organizations had heard the news, they unanimously condemned the illegal actions of the Dongcheng Bureau, and they fiercely demanded that the Beijing





The Stars demonstration on October 1, 1979. Photograph reproduced in *Newsweek*, October 15, 1979

Municipal Committee personally redress the Dongcheng Bureau's mistaken behavior. At 1:00 a.m. on September 30, they drew up a proclamation, which they jointly posted on the Democracy Wall at 9:45 a.m. At the same time, they made a copy for Comrade Lin Hujia, the First Secretary of the Beijing Municipal Committee. They sent this as an urgent dispatch to the Confidential Communications Office of the Municipal Committee at 10:45 a.m. on September 30. It seems that Comrade Lin Hujia read this letter very quickly. Thus, the unofficial press organizations originally hoped to be able to receive the Municipal Committee's response soon. Unfortunately, the two comrades who had been dispatched from the Municipal Committee and who were welcomed at the predetermined meeting point at four in the afternoon of the 30th merely listened to the complaint once more and promised to report to their leader. But by 9:00 a.m. on October 1, no response had yet been heard. Thus, the oppressed unofficial press groups could not help but organize an assembly of the masses in front of the Democracy Wall at Xidan at 9:15 on October 1. The general public participated in this activity despite the heavy rain. At the assembly, representatives from the *Stars Art Exhibition* recounted how the incident had come to pass, and they read aloud the preface to the exhibition, as well as the Indictment Filed against the Public Security Bureau of the Dongcheng District of Beijing at the Supreme People's Procuratorate. Afterward, representatives from the unofficial press organizations one by one made reasoned, well-supported addresses, and they read aloud the collective proclamation. At that time, the crowd was becoming impassioned, applauding ceaselessly. When the assembly was concluding, the leader of the convocation explained that because the Municipal Committee had still not replied to our demands, we had no choice but to, on this National Day, exercise the rights conferred by the Constitution. We would collectively go to the Municipal Committee to hear their response, and we would make use of a parade to declare to the people of the whole city our decision to defend our civil rights resolutely.

Before the march, the leader announced six rules for the march, particularly emphasizing that we must "not strike back when hit, must not shout back when cursed" by people who intentionally harassed us. After the assembly, fliers were also disseminated.

The march advanced under the lead of large red horizontal banners reading "March to Uphold the Constitution" and "[We Want] Political Democracy, [We Want] Artistic Freedom!" Throughout the procession, slogans periodically rang out, and the marchers sang the mighty revolutionary songs *Unity Is Strength*, *March of the Volunteers* [the national anthem of the People's Republic of China], and *The Internationale*. When they had reached Liubukou, a picket line of several hundred policemen suddenly appeared across Chang'an Avenue. The marchers very self-consciously crossed the street at the crosswalk. Deferring to the route defined by the policemen, from Beixinhua Avenue they crossed the subway and set out toward the [offices of the] Municipal Committee. Thus, they lost the chance to march on Chang'an Avenue. Under the direction of the assembly's picket squad, the marchers advanced in an orderly manner in the slow-car lane, and along the way the leader explained to the crowd the reasons for the march. They gained the sympathy and support of the general public, and the followers of the procession came to exceed one thousand people. When the team passed through the entrance to the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau, slogans like "The Dongcheng Bureau's illegal banning of the Stars exhibition is [an act of] trampling on the Constitution," "The Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau must protect citizens' rights," and "Long live the people! Long live democracy!" resonated conspicuously.

All of these activities were documented at large by our country's unofficial reporters, photojournalists, news reporters, and photographers, as well as reporters from our country's [official] news agencies and from many other countries.

After an hour, the team safely reached the entrance to the Municipal Committee. The leader of the assembly again recounted to the crowd the reasons for this march. Then, six representatives engaged in negotiations with clerks from the Office of Letters and Calls of the Municipal Committee and from the Propaganda Department. The clerks were still unable to deliver the Municipal Committee's response. Again, they simply listened to how the affair came to pass and promised to report to their leaders, but regarding the timeframe for the response, they gave no limit.

In order to take into account everyone's interests, the representatives who participated in the negotiations gave the leaders of the Municipal Committee sufficient time to think, and they again conceded to wait for a response. But they declared that they retained the right to further action should they not receive any response or should they not receive a satisfactory response.

Launched by the united unofficial press organizations, this collective parade for upholding the Constitution did all that one could hope in attempting to realize political democracy and artistic freedom in our country.

Long live democracy!  
Long live the people!

Organizers of the *Stars Art Exhibition*; editors of *Search (Tansuo)*; editors of *Today (Jintian)*; editors of *Beijing Spring (Beijing zhi chun)*; Fertile Soil art group (*Wotu*); editors of *April Fifth Forum (Wusi luntan)*

Beijing, October 1, 1979

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— Text translated from a poster, October 1979. Reproduced in *The Stars: Ten Years* (Hong Kong: Hanart 2, 1989). Translated by Phillip Bloom.

## ABOUT THE STARS ART EXHIBITION (1980)

Compiled by Li Xianting

The *Stars Art Exhibition (Xingxing meizhan)* took place from November 23 to December 2, 1979, and became a major topic of discussion among viewers, in art circles, and particularly among younger people. Although opinions differed — some endorsed it while others opposed it — the reactions were all very intense.

The exhibition comprised 23 individuals, most of them young amateur artists, and exhibited 163 works, including ink-brush paintings, oil paintings, prints, wooden sculptures, etc. The works can be divided into two categories: those that delved into life, and those that explored form.

How did the exhibition come about? What was the intent behind some of the more provocative works? How did audience members ultimately view the exhibition? These are all questions that help to evaluate the exhibition, and explore the circumstances behind the intense reactions. With these questions in mind, I sat down to talk with Wang Keping, Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, and Qu Leilei.

My first question to them was: "Following your preface, discuss some of your thoughts behind the organization of this exhibition as well as your artistic viewpoints." Below is a summary of their answers:

The preface marked the central themes of the exhibition, including two main aspects: first, artists must become involved with the society they live in. Only by identifying with the fate of people can our art have any real vitality. A line in the preface says, "the shadow of the past and the glow of the future are folded together, forming the various living conditions of Today. Resolving to live on and remembering each lesson learned: this is our responsibility." We love life, but the very practical lessons of the last few decades — particularly what took place during the Gang of Four years — have taught us not to look at life through rose-colored glasses, nor to embrace childish romantic ideals. This is what our encounter with society has taught us. Most of us were born after the liberation in 1949, and played different roles during the Cultural Revolution. But, as Chinese society evolved, we gradually realized what our mission in life was: to record with our pens and brushes what was taking place before our eyes, and to do this with clear points of view. We resolved to follow in the footsteps of [the humanitarian artist] Käthe Kollwitz [1867–1945]. Why do you think our exhibition set off such strong sympathetic reactions in people? People came to the exhibition with their own scars and wounds: our immature paintings and sculptures were hardly powerful enough to inspire such deep feelings in them. It is our love of life that has given us the courage to break out of the prolonged silence imposed upon us and cry out, in the language of art, from our wounded souls.

The second point concerns the search for new forms of expression. During the Gang of Four period, if you started talking about form, you were immediately slapped with the charge of "formalism." As culture and science develop, it's only natural to seek new forms to express new ideas and feelings. In many countries in the current world, there has been constant renewal in the forms of architecture, fashion, and art; this is a general tendency that no one can stop. In the preface, we wrote: "The world leaves unlimited possibilities for explorers." Artists should provide a constant stream of novelties for their audience. We should follow Picasso's example, never ceasing our exploration of the world. Our works are still quite childish. And since most of us have had no formal training in art, we must first go through the process of learning something new; only then can we talk about finding some sort of Chinese identity. It is critical for us to be able to express the thoughts and feelings of the Chinese people in our art, even if the form we use is indiscriminately borrowed.

Wang Keping concluded by saying, "Käthe Kollwitz is our banner, and Picasso our pioneer." But, for us, Kollwitz is more important. Unlike the literati of the Ming [1368–1644] and Qing [1644–1911] dynasties who pursued art for art's sake, we have no desire to run away in order to avoid the complexities of and struggles taking place in society.

I then asked the four artists, "How do these ideas manifest themselves in your works?"

Wang Keping: I do sculpture in wood for no other reason than to express my pent-up feelings. I was a Red Guard at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. All those countless "acts of rebellion" were manipulated by a bunch of conspirators who turned a vast amount of human energy to their own advantage. Thus, I hate Lin Biao and the Gang of Four with a passion, and hoped to get it off my chest. I never studied sculpture and can't paint. I was a playwright before I started with sculpture and have only been at it for a year. My major inspiration was the French Theater of the Absurd. I don't hold that art must obey any objective laws, and as the forces of production develop in a society, people will naturally search for new means of expression. I found a medium for myself that is not limited by any rules of outward form that leaves me totally free to express my feelings. The result is what I call "absurd" sculpture. In *Long, Long Life (Wanwansui)*, I started out with a small rectangular piece of wood, and planned to make a sculpture of a person holding high Mao's *Little Red Book* and shouting slogans. I was having trouble rendering the hand and arm in a natural manner, and then something in the wood itself gave me a hint about how to proceed. I ended up having the arm growing out of the head, and though this was absurd it conveyed the idea of "holding high" in a graphic manner.

I had a similar experience with *The Backbone of Society (Shehui zhongjian)*. At first I planned to make a figure with lips but without a mouth, eyes without eyeballs, and a nose with no nostrils; that's the way I visualized incompetent bureaucrats who were always screwing things up. But when I was working on the piece I discovered a hole in the top part of the hunk of wood I was using, and that gave me a new idea: a head without a brain. Some of my sculptures are premeditated: I get an idea, and try to find a piece of wood to match it. But at other times the wood itself inspires my creation. *Silence (Chenmo)* [pl. 1] is an example of the latter process. I had a piece of wood with a big knot in it and was planning to sculpt a human head. I started working on the mouth in a realistic manner, but suddenly noticed that the knot looked like a mouth plugged up with a wooden stopper. When I was working on the eyes, one of which was closed, I felt that this wasn't exactly what I wanted. Closed eyes give the impression of a reluctance to see what is going on. Then I came up with the idea of deception: hadn't the Gang of Four tried to pull the wool over the eyes of the Chinese people and cut China off from the rest of the world? How could I express that? I could wrap the eyes with gauze, but gauze wouldn't look good with wood, and so I thought about exploiting the contrast between natural wood and carved wood, and finally came up with the idea of carving some X's where the eyes belonged, to show that they had been sealed with tape.

Ma Desheng: There is a footnote to my painting *Rest (Xi)*: "He came into the world in silence, and departs again in silence, having left behind millions of drops of sweat on the earth." Every year when I went back to the countryside, I would watch the peasants doing their mindless and primitive physical labor, realizing how poor they were in material and cultural terms, compared with the people in the cities. Yet they never complained, and went about their work in silence. Then I went back to the city and saw how different things actually were. Some Party cadres were always

ranting on about how poor China was, and how everyone had to tighten their belts, but they did nothing of this kind. Even as thousands of people had no place to call home, they were busy building luxury flats for themselves. I had great sympathy for those hardworking peasants and workers, and wondered how such inequality could exist in our society.

Huang Rui: The subject of my paintings *Last Will and Testament (Yizhu)* and *New Life (Xinsheng)* was Beijing's Yuanmingyuan Old Summer Palace Gardens, past and present. I was trying to depict the past as bleak and desolate, with the sky permanently overcast. I painted a green sky and red clouds to show that there was a debt of hate that has to be repaid. There was a warning there to the younger generation: never forget the destruction that took place in the past! With new life there was hope. Though struggling out of the darkness was painful, we were not attempting it alone and finally managed to regain our footing. In *Space (Kongjian)* I tried to depict our desire for democracy. I had once seen a photograph of a jet plane set against a background of blue sky. Inspired by this memory, I painted a blue sky and a red earth, and curved white lines crossing the patterned frames in the background. The lines seemed to have a will of their own, with nothing to inhibit their movements. Expressing myself in this way made me feel quite happy.

Qu Leilei: I think that the essence of painting as an art is the expression of the artist's inner personal feelings. He has to paint from his own experience, be it painful or pleasurable. My set of paintings *Train of Thought (Sixu)* is an attempt to depict the painful thought process under the fascist, autocratic Gang of Four. The first painting represents contemplation, an individual thinking about himself and the world. The second painting depicts consternation, frustration, and contradictions. In the third painting, I tried to suggest seeking, yearning, struggle, disappointment, and the will to overcome obstacles. The fourth painting presents the individual's failure to come up with an answer, his being struck down, and his persistence in trying to regain his footing and go on thinking. In *We Don't Want Laws Like This (Buyao zheyang de falü)*, I tried to show the many masks behind which "the law" was masqueraded during the Gang of Four period. To some people, the law presented an ingratiating smile, to others it showed an angry face. The torture device worn on the head gives an idea of how savage and terrifying the legal system was during these years. The overall effect of the painting suggests hypocrisy, a person with one eye open and one eye shut. This painting was an attempt to express my outrage at the way the Gang of Four enforced "the law," and my sincere hope that the principle of "equality before the law" could be realized.

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## A DEBATE ON "FORMAL BEAUTY" AND OTHER ISSUES

**B**eginning in 1979, a heated debate took place in the mainstream journal *Meishu (Art)*. The participants included professional artists, critics, and theorists and focused on the relationship between content and form in artistic representation. The debate was triggered by Wu Guanzhong's essay entitled "Formalist Aesthetics in Painting," in which this French-trained art professor challenged the official doctrine of "content determining form" and encouraged artists to discover abstract beauty in nature and real life. His propositions provoked numerous responses in *Meishu* and other journals over the next several years. Related to this debate, some artists and critics also tried to associate artistic creativity with individual originality, rather than the collective ideology sanctioned in official aesthetic theory. These theoretical discussions were echoed by changes in art practices and exhibitions: a small exhibition of reproductions of Impressionist paintings took place in Beijing in June 1979, introductions to Western modernist art increasingly appeared in published materials, Yuan Yuansheng's formalist portrayals of minority women in the new Beijing Capital International Airport provoked major controversy, and the unofficial *Twelve Men Exhibition (Shi er ren huazhan)* held in early 1979 in Shanghai featured mainly formalist works. Together, these phenomena reflected an effort to reestablish formal qualities as the foundation of art criticism and art creation.

### FORMALIST AESTHETICS IN PAINTING (1979)

By Wu Guanzhong [p. 2]

#### CREATIVE COMPOSITION AND DAILY PRACTICE

Since liberation, we have very clearly and mechanically forged oppositions between "creative composition" (*chuangzuo*) and "daily practice" (*xizuo*). When I first returned to China, I was very against this distinction. I thought it was a mistake, utterly unjustifiable, and incongruous with the rules of artistic creation. The act of producing art is a complete entity, where the product and the process are simply two concepts and can be seen as two sides of one issue. Yet, in our actual praxis, sketching from life and depicting specific characters are all considered "practice" (it is precisely because these are considered "practice" that one can capture the object without subjective intervention). Only when depicting an event, a scenario, or a narrative is a work considered a "creation." In creative art, other than "representing something," the problem of "how to represent" tugs deeply in the minds of many artists and is also a central question in art history. The Impressionists' advancements and use of color are undeniable: can you call their sketches mere practice? To call pretentious narrative paintings "practice" would actually be more appropriate.

Of course, we hope to see masterpieces that possess the strong artistic ability to present grand themes. Yet how can *The True Story of Ah Q (Ah Q zhengzhuan)* or the story of Jia Baoyu [i.e., the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*] not be considered national treasures? When we think about art, to put it more concretely, we are making considerations about form. Formalist aesthetics are a critical link in artistic creation and our unique way of serving the public. Once when I was sketching in the fields of Shaoxing, I came upon a tiny pond. In the middle were red duckweed and green moss. Throughout the night, the eastern winds blew them into each other, entangling them

into a rhythmic pattern. Spread across the top was an uneven layer of canola flowers, echoing the darkness of the reflections in the water. The sullen beauty caught my attention, and for a while I could not take my eyes off it. But, if I were to paint this kind of "non-thematic art," I would be criticized to no end! On the way back, I was deep in thought. Suddenly, I thought of a trick: to paint a group of people hard at work and a red flag at a distant corner of the reflections in the water, with the subject being "on the shore, the east wind blows," in order to defend myself against criticism! The next morning, I carried my paint box and hurried to the pond. Goodness! One night of the western winds destroyed the composition on the water. The same red duckweed, green moss, yellow flowers . . . the contents did not change, but their compositional relationships had been transformed. Once the form changed, it lost its rhythm, it lost its beauty! I didn't want to paint it anymore!

I don't think the moon in foreign countries is rounder than in China, but an introduction of their creative methods should be permitted! In the 1950s when I was pursuing my education in Paris, our studio was commissioned by the Paris Music Academy to make four wall paintings about different types of music: classical, midcentury, romantic, and modern. When making sketches, I initially rendered rhythmic abstractions of the unique attributes of these four types of music, such as using a balanced and harmonious composition to display the elegance of classical music, an unrestrained and vigorous group of lines to praise romantic passion. . . . Then, I constructed figural forms: the dancing girls, musicians playing stringed instruments, the poet Homer . . . , yet the groupings of these figures and their relationships with each other were based on height, length, angles, curvature, and linearity. I had to strictly follow an abstract linear composition of the primary forms in order to ensure the unique rhythm of each work.

#### **PERSONAL FEELINGS AND ARTISTIC STYLE**

When children make art, they follow their feelings and senses. There is an important element within sensory perception: misconception. Big eyes, black braids, pine trees, and birds, these objects' unique attributes are greatly differentiated in a child's mind. What they feel and express often exceeds the limits of objective observation, and thus can be called "misconception." But it is often assaulted and murdered by art teachers upholding the so-called cudgel of objectivity and realism.

I often like painting the rows upon rows of densely packed city houses or slightly uneven clusters of mountain villages. Their beauty is located in the variances between the evenness and unevenness of the tight clusters. Sometimes when I have extra time, I think, "Oh! This time, I will paint strictly with precision and accuracy." But the outcome turns out not to be as rich and multifaceted as when I follow my senses, because some aspects of the latter focus on irregularity and repetition in layering. If we compared this with examinations using photography or perspective, it would far exceed those boundaries.

Emotions and logic are not only in opposition, but are often antagonistic to each other. I was professionally trained. When I first began to learn how to sketch, I also used visual measurements, proportions, linear examinations, and other such methods to strictly capture the object. Artists must at least possess the ability to sketch objects, but the critical question is whether or not s/he is able to capture the object's beauty. Logic requires pure objectivity; emotions tend toward personal feelings, nurturing misconception. Strictly requiring training for objective pictorialization does not always lead to art; it is sometimes actually the wrong route, the lost route, or even the route that runs in the opposite direction from art.

When I was a student, I once sketched a female nude model. She was a large, middle-aged woman, who, when seated, had a body that appeared especially stodgy and a head that looked comparatively small. The teacher said that from the sitter, he could feel the Notre Dame of Paris. What he was referring to was a medieval Gothic architectural style. His words stimulated the students' feelings and skewed their perceptions.

Differences in personal feelings are also one of the reasons for the development of personal style. Pissarro and Cézanne once sat side by side painting the same subject. Two French farmers who were passing by stopped and watched for a long time. As they were leaving, they gave one line of critique: "One chisels (referring to Pissarro), the other cuts (referring to Cézanne)." Yet an assignment completed by a class of a dozen or so students is not allowed to display a single bit of difference. This has been an enduring phenomenon!

The formation of style certainly cannot be feigned; it is the natural outcome of a long-term faithfulness to one's own feelings. Individual feelings and preferences often shape the artist's area of expertise. People enjoy Zhou Xinfang's [1895–1975] strong expressions when he chases, runs, beats, and kills, but they also enjoy Cheng Yanqiu's [1904–1958] sad and tragic tones [both are famous Peking Opera performers]. The feeling of "reinforced concrete" in Pan Tianshou's [1897–1971] paintings and that of "universal harmony" in Lin Fengmian's [1900–1991] works all emerged after decades of training.

Style is precious, but it often makes the artist a prisoner to praise, bound to a style and afraid to forge new territory.

#### THE ANCIENT AND THE MODERN, EAST AND WEST

Aesthetics — formal aesthetics — is already a science that can be analyzed and dissected. Analyses of the models and methods of successful artists or artworks have long been standard content in Western art schools. But in our nation's art schools, they are still prohibited. The ignorance that young students have about this fundamental knowledge is astonishing! It's worth considering the discontent that erupted in the art world when nineteenth-century French pastoral landscapes were first exhibited. Why is it that we must, in an age when satellites are orbiting the skies, only show foreign steamers! Many art workers hope to show European modern painting in order to fully engage with the science behind formal aesthetics. This is the microscope and scalpel of art. We need to use them to culminate our tradition, to fully develop our tradition. Oil painting must become Chinese; Chinese painting must modernize. It seems that only after seeing Higashiyama Kai's explorations have we begun to awaken to the question of integrating East and West.

#### SPIRIT CONSONANCE AND "UNTITLED"

Visual art has successfully portrayed touching themes and moving epics, such as the stone sculpture *Horse Trampling a Hun Warrior* (*Mata xiongnu*) in front of Huo Qubin's grave, Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*, Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios*, and many others. These examples are innumerable in Chinese and foreign art history. Art directly and closely collaborates with politics, literature, etc., such as in propaganda posters, book illustrations, and narrative paintings. There are many examples of successful partnerships, and these works serve enormous social functions. At the same time, I also hope to see more independent works of art, which possess their own "spirit consonance" of formal beauty and aren't saddled with added obligations to preach. When I see some of the frescoes by the French painter Chavannes, I am drawn into their image of a silent world: a forest, people lost in thought, flocks of sheep, and a light boat gently



floating across a small stream. . . . I have entirely forgotten the topic of each work, and at the time, I didn't want to understand them either, but rather reveled in the image of the artist's spirit consonance. I call these works "untitled." In Chinese poetry, there are also many pieces that are labeled as "untitled." Untitled does not necessarily mean without thought, but rather implies a profound poeticism that cannot be generalized by a simple topic. The "untitled"-ness of a painting is easy to understand: because the beauty of an image often cannot be substituted by language, why must one use language to interfere with the silence of beauty?

#### BEGINNER'S PATH

After being an art teacher for decades, I have taught many students, but what concerns me is how many young people I have harmed! Art teachers mainly teach artistic methods, relating the rules and regulations of formalist aesthetics. During the past decades, however, in a hostile environment, where anyone who speaks of forms would be criticized as being a formalist, who wishes to be Prometheus! The teaching content becomes no more than pure techniques that entail sketching while staring at a subject; and this is grandly called "Realism!" Well-intentioned teachers think that in the upper-level courses, they can discuss a bit about form — this is just like only being able to taste coffee or ice cream after one is full from a meal! But, I don't know if there is a bridge that links "realistically" copying an object to the artistic beauty in expressing emotions! I believe that formal aesthetics should be the main component of art education and that the ability to depict an object is only a kind of painting technique; it is ultimately just a means to assist in capturing the aesthetic feeling of the subject, thus occupying a subordinate position. As to how to recognize and understand the subject's aesthetic feeling, analyzing and having a strong grasp of the formal elements that make up aesthetic feelings should be a vital link in art teaching, a staple for students in art school!

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Huihua de xingshi mei" in *Meishu [Art]* 138, no. 5 (1979): 33–35, 44. Translated by Michelle Wang.

### EMOTION, INDIVIDUALITY, FORMAL AESTHETICS (1979)

By Liu Shaohui

One of the restrictions imposed on artistic creation by the Gang of Four was the effacement of both individual artistic creation and the artist's individuality. As a result, everything became identical and conformist.

The Gang of Four treated artistic production as mechanized manufacturing; they treated artists as cameras that worked by hand. This was the crudest humiliation wrought against artistic creation.

Without originality in artistic creation and without artistic individuality, there could be no artistic styles and schools, and there could be no true "blooming of a hundred flowers."

Leafing through the pages of the histories of Chinese and world art, [we must ask]: What artist — from Gu Kaizhi [348–406] to Qi Baishi [1864–1957], from Michelangelo [1475–1564] to Picasso [1881–1973] — has been recorded in the annals of history not because of his artistic originality and his strong individual style?

Modern landscape painting master Huang Binhong [1865–1955] once said: "Painting human figures requires the breath of the spirit; painting landscapes requires the breath of the soul. Painters must possess the ability to pan for gold among the sand. They must

be courageous; they must have resolve. They must pan away all the sand in order to find the gold. Even this is not enough. Artists also must draw forth all of the gold that they store on their own bodies, and they must combine it with the gold they have sifted from the sand. In so doing, the breath of the spirit and the breath of the soul will be vivified."

Here, Huang Binhong speaks eloquently of the relationship between life and art, between subjectivity and objectivity. Of course, in the eyes of the Gang of Four, life was not necessary, and they were indifferent to "sand" and "gold." On the painters' bodies, there could not possibly be any gold; there was only sand. Thus, they were all part of the "stinking ninth category" [a type of class enemy during the Cultural Revolution referring to "bourgeois intellectuals"]; and they all had to engage in "transforming their worldview." Consequently, "worldview transformation" became a bludgeon to obliterate artistic individuality.

Should artists transform their worldview? Of course! But what are the criteria for this? In the eyes of the Gang of Four, as long as you ran along with them and respectfully offered paintings of the "will of officialdom," you could be held up as a "red painter whose worldview had been well transformed."

I think that since artists are spokesmen for the people, since they are engineers of the soul, they share the same breath as the people. They can share their fate. They can understand and empathize with the emotions of the people, and they can understand and empathize with their needs. This worldview seems to be transformed pretty well [already].

But, even when an artist's worldview is transformed satisfactorily, it still cannot replace his individuality or originality in art. Because what makes an artist different from normal people lies in his being able to "pan gold from among the sand" in life. He can discover the uncommon within the common. This ability to "pan gold from among the sand" is inseparable from the "gold stored" on his own body. One could also say that if an artist stores no gold on his body, then he cannot possibly "pan gold from among the sand" in life. Besides his ideas, this "gold stored on the body" also includes his emotions, his artistic training, and his individual means of representing life. Together, these things constitute the artist's individuality.

Only in possessing individuality is he able to use his own vision and spirit to examine life; only thus is he able to use his own means to give expression to life or to have originality in art.

Some of our leaders in [the field of] artistic creation have also become used to ordering painters what to paint and what not to paint. The baneful effects of the Gang of Four run deep. They do not understand the objective law of artistic creation. They do not respect the individuality of the people who create art. They are not good at making use of the strengths of the art workers. They insincerely call for the liberation of art workers' thought, but in truth, they simultaneously make use of every rope to fetter the art workers' individuality.

It is time to change this situation. Otherwise, "let creation flourish" and "let a hundred flowers bloom" are simply empty phrases.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Ganqing, gexing, xingshimei" in *Meishu [Art]* 134, no. 1 (1979): 9–10, 12. Translated by Phillip Bloom.

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN REALIST PAINTING

**A**longside the pursuit of formal beauty and abstraction, Scar Art and Native Soil Art emerged at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s as two main directions in post-Cultural Revolution academic art. Both trends insisted on realism. But, instead of following the orthodox Socialist Realist art characterized by highly idealized images of revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers, their advocates resurrected "critical realism" and humanism from early-twentieth-century Chinese art and literature.

Exemplified by the picture-story book *Maple (Feng)* and Cheng Conglin's oil painting *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968 (1968 nian X yue X ri xue)*, works of Scar Art restaged tragic moments from the Cultural Revolution: the suffering of individuals, the meaningless sacrifices and self-sacrifices, and the general apathy and ignorance toward the victims.<sup>1</sup> A particular trend of Scar Art, represented by works of He Duoling, Wang Chuan, and some other Sichuan oil painters, focused on a "lost generation" of Chinese youth, expressing their melancholy and rekindled hope. Native Soil Art instead advocated realistic portrayals of ordinary people (albeit still often in a romanticized manner). The most influential works in this trend included Luo Zhongli's *Father (Fuqin)* and Chen Danqing's Tibetan series. Unlike the "avant-garde" Stars group, the supporters of these two trends remained inside established art institutions and generally avoided direct confrontations with the authorities. They also paid much greater attention to technique and the aesthetic appeal of painting, and in so doing eagerly sought inspiration from modern Western art, especially Photorealism and the nostalgic paintings of Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009).

### Note

1. For discussion of this movement, see Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 393–96; and Geremie Barmé and Bennett Lee, trans., *The Wounded—New Stories of the Cultural Revolution, 77–78* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1979), 77–78.

## Scar Art

### SOME THOUGHTS ON CREATING THE PICTURE-STORY BOOK MAPLE (FENG) (1980) [pl. 3]

By Chen Yiming, Liu Yulian, and Li Bin

After the publication of the novel *Maple*, we quickly accepted the request by the *Picture Stories (Lianhuan huabao)* editorial board to turn the text into a set of narrative pictures.

The writing in the novel is realistic and moving, as if recorded on-site at the moment of the armed attacks. It immediately brings people back to that unprecedented era, making them recall and feel once more the severe impact of it all. These things still remain fresh in people's memories, and for those who, like Danfeng, experienced the activities of the Red Guards, the pain is probably especially poignant. Only now, after a decade, have we realized that it was with our own two hands that we forfeited our futures and brought grave consequences onto our entire nation. But, back then, we firmly believed that we were destroying the Old World. The Red Guard movement attacked the existing order, from schools to society, destroying and impacting all that we once respected and pursued. And, all of this stemmed from

primarily selfless and pious motivations to resolutely serve an unprecedented force of spiritual energy.

This is perhaps the tragedy of our generation. In using painting to reinterpret this subject matter, an immense fervor drives us to factually show the purity, sincerity, bitterness, and sweetness of the young people of this generation; to use forms and color, and the starkness of reality, to rip apart the most glorious things of our generation for all to see.

The images of Lu Danfeng and Li Honggang are representative of the Red Guards at that time. In our memories of the past, we can find many of these distinct figures. They were raised through an orthodox, positive education; they were sincere and simple, studious yet ignorant. Numerous young people are like Danfeng, who moved from being token good students to Chairman Mao's Red Guards, using a sort of passionate fanaticism to devote themselves to a movement of unprecedented magnitude, even willingly sacrificing their own lives to be entrenched in the cruelties of armed confrontations. These images are specific, vivid, corporeal embodiments. They do not fit into the Gang of Four's heroic models of great bravado. Nor do they conform to some newer models of terrifyingly brute thugs. They were just students from the 1960s, educated and contemplative, with distinct personalities and delicate emotional attachments. Although we were ultimately unable to fully portray the multidimensionality of these people, we did feel that it was necessary to strive to show their individual personalities.

For the figures and environment, we arranged for some contrast in their juxtaposition in order to create a dramatic effect. For example, formerly quiet and calm schools have become smoky and deadly war zones, with ruined desks and teaching materials piled together to form fortifications during the armed attacks. Slender female students from the 1960s wear mismatched military clothing from the forties; sprawling beneath a portrait of a smiling "Executive Vice Premier" (i.e., Lin Biao) are the bodies of young people who suffered a brutal death. These images have always remained in our memories. Back then, we were cold and indifferent to them, but looking back now they appear especially heart-wrenching.

Compared with the narrative pictures *Scar (Shanghen)*, we used more slogans this time. Slogans were an indispensable component of the Cultural Revolution, and their images help enhance our representation of the atmosphere of that time. Also because people nowadays have become so familiar with slogans, using only a few of their words can evoke endless associations.

As for the treatment of Lin Biao, the Gang of Four, and others, we had some different ideas in the beginning, but we didn't think they would cause such an uproar. However, later on, the views of several comrades confirmed that our approach was correct. In this series of paintings, we didn't add embellishment to Lin Biao and the Gang of Four. We presented them in a straightforward manner in order to expose the deception they propagated during the nascent years of the Cultural Revolution. Such deception was the indispensable precondition of this historical tragedy (of course, other people can use other methods to deal with this issue).

But the significance of this is that it touches upon an artistic problem that has yet to be resolved — the problem of how to depict historical protagonists and antagonists. As a result, *Maple* attracted a great deal of attention from the art world.

We have always been interested in historical subjects, but often after developing general compositions for the paintings, we are plagued with the thought that we cannot historically and accurately portray these subjects.

The one hundred years of revolution in our country merit our artistic efforts, and many aspects of our five thousand years of history also deserve our excavation and

re-presentation. But, as a nation with such a massive and long culture, how is it that the kinds of historical paintings we offer her for the thirtieth anniversary of the People's Republic are so unbecoming! Perhaps it's due to the political need to gloss over, fabricate, or distort, or perhaps it's the repeated, unpredictable changes in policy (fortunately canvas is easier to alter than marble). The oil painting *The Founding of the Nation* (*Kaiguo dadian*) has suffered this kind of fate, not knowing how many times it has to be changed. Because of this lack of respect for history and the proliferation of works that speak to a distortion of history, many people see this as being normal, and are ignorant of real history, or instead see it as a distortion.

There is no lack of artists who yearn to realistically and historically represent history. But, without logically discussing these issues, this infuriating phenomenon will not be solved.

After the publication of the narrative paintings *Maple*, one mother wrote a letter to the editors, talking about how after children read it, they asked their teacher: "If Lin Biao and the Gang of Four were all bad people, then why were they all so handsome?" She even asked the editors not to publish such pictures again in order to avoid poisoning children such that they are unable to tell the difference between good and evil. We don't know why this mother didn't tell her children that sometimes wolves disguise themselves in sheepskins, and at times even dress up like grandmothers. But, what is even more lamentable is that there are still so many men and women who wish that the Chinese people could be like naïve children, always believing that a pleasant demeanor necessarily signifies a benevolent person, and that a villain necessarily bears an ugly face. It seems as if learning this allows people to tell the difference between good and bad, ensuring that they will never be poisoned again. This standard of artistic creation flourished under the Gang of Four and seems to have dragged the entire nation's abilities to think and appreciate back to childhood. This has already caused alarming consequences. Around us, it has created so many dogmatic and simplistic works, and so many viewers who can only accept this kind of work.

The magazine *Picture Stories* that published *Maple* halted all sales for a while, but has now restarted its publication. Yet, many urgent problems in artistic creation still have not been resolved. Take for example this set of pictures. Many aspects of it are quite immature, and with a little time, one could easily discover its limitations, from its initial plans to its eventual presentation. To speak of it as "groundbreaking" is guilt-inducing. In terms of creativity, we have learned very little, and especially in terms of artistic presentation there is little that is new. What is considered "forbidden territory" is actually a result of the years we have spent on a path of realism that has become increasingly narrow. Even today, the artist still needs to be careful all the time, wasting much energy to embellish and evade while being on guard and holding one's tongue. This is because one doesn't know when the different levels of departments of inspection will suddenly impose restrictions. This is very far removed from the spirit of the Third Plenary Session and the demands of our fellow countrymen. With regard to the current in-depth discussions about the standards of truth, we hope that the art community can be involved in many of the related questions and proceed with a series of broad discussions, in order to take a step toward liberating thought and clearing away obstacles. This is truly the antidote that would allow our nation's artistic creativity to flourish.

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## MAN'S RATIONAL MEDITATION: A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF CHENG CONGLIN'S THEMATIC OIL PAINTINGS (1970s/1994)

By Deng Pingxiang

Cheng Conglin's work *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968* (1968 nian X yue X ri xue) [pl. 4], which established his position in contemporary Chinese art, emerged from this kind of historical background: at the time, in the field of art, most of the subject matter relayed life during the Cultural Revolution. But, most works took the form of political criticism and lacked artistic style and independent artistic value. They were superficial and crude. There was once a very famous oil painting titled *Why* (*Weishenme*). An analysis of the successes and failures of this work is significant in understanding the art and literature of this period. To be fair, the techniques used in the painting have attractive qualities. The theme unquestionably exposes the armed confrontations between factions during the Cultural Revolution, and yet the artistic dimension of the work is shallow and unsubtle, resulting in a work that has thematic content but lacks artistic content. The artist was clearly eager to imbue his work with an unmistakable [political] inclination (i.e., a psychology of content determinism), and therefore rushed to question why there were such armed confrontations. Here, the artist violated historical authenticity and profundity by applying current knowledge (after the fall of the Gang of Four) to the people then (living within the context of political fanaticism). At the time, young people were unable to conceive of the events as being futile self-destruction. Clearly, this kind of simple solution cannot answer to the tragedy and social and historical reasons of the Cultural Revolution, which lasted ten years, catastrophically implicating the entire nation and mobilizing billions of people.

Yet, Cheng Conglin appears to take this one step further. His *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968* realistically, profoundly, and representatively re-creates a scene of armed confrontation from the Cultural Revolution. It is a winter's day with heavy snow. After enduring the bloodshed of knives and guns, the blanket of pure white snow and fresh red blood shines on the faces of these naïve, passionate young people, both those held captive as well as the valiant victors armed with guns. In the center of the painting is a young woman wearing a blouse, bringing to mind the Soviet Union's Zoya [Kosmodemyanskaya]. These images compose a dense picture that is both solemn and stirring yet provokes a sense of sympathy. The young men and women in the painting are all in the best years of their lives; under normal circumstances, they should be relentlessly pursuing and thoroughly enjoying romance and sunshine. In the work, Cheng Conglin neither praises nor disparages; he uses serious strokes to lay bare this historical tragedy before viewers. "Let people see the destruction of beautiful things" — Cheng Conglin relied on his own artistic talent and acute intuition to internalize and accurately portray the characteristics of *people* during the Cultural Revolution, deepening this nation's catastrophe to a "human" level, successfully enriching the meaning of the work. This is the fundamental secret to Cheng Conglin's success. Some say that Cheng Conglin was deeply inspired by the Russian master artist Vasily Surikov [1848–1916]; this is well founded. If we compare Cheng Conglin's *Snow* and Surikov's *Boyarinya Morozova*, we can observe several similarities, such as the snow, the dramatization, etc. But these are still secondary factors. Cheng Conglin's excellence lies in his ability to deeply penetrate into the depths of reality, fully realizing the profundities of Surikov's art. From a historical perspective, Boyarinya Morozova's protests against Peter the Great's religious reforms — which were also aimed at political reform — forced the czar to oust her because of her substantial social influence. In his treatment of this subject matter, Surikov did not forget that he was an artist. He did not begin from a

simple historical critique or straightforward evaluation, but rather used a "human" perspective and emotional angle to expose profound historical nuances in society.

From the painting, we can see the dual existence of Surikov as an individual and as [the embodiment of] an emotional world. Using intense emotions, he invites people's sympathy and compassion through his portrayal of Boyarynya Morozova's feverish, faithful conviction as well as her solemn relentlessness. It is from behind this emotion that a profound sense of historical tragedy naturally wells up from the depths of people's hearts. It is here that people can see the strength of Surikov's humane character and moral qualities. Surikov enlightened us: art can only speak to emotions and spirit, its principal ability is making determinations about emotions and spirit. Thus, we cannot say whether an artistic image is correct or incorrect, but only whether it touches people. The forms of artistic meaning and social meaning are different, yet we often mix the two together. As a progressive intellectual, Surikov's ideas exemplified his support and understanding for social advancement. He revealed to people the formidable forces of conservatism that necessarily face a developing society and showed that these forces are not in the hands of groups of evildoers but are rather complex social and cultural formations. Surikov's firm grasp of historical topics in art endows his series of historical material with a lasting vitality. Soviet art, because of the deep legacy that Surikov and his generation of masters established, has been able to maintain a group of artists who adhere to a strict tradition of realism that consistently turns art toward people and life and is pierced through with a thread of humanitarianism.

If we compare Cheng Conglin's *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968* with Surikov's work, we will discover that if we disregard the differences in content and style, their representations of human beings and history are congruent. Cheng Conglin's rational meditations on people has made his *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968* a historically significant work in representing the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution. We could say that among the works of this theme, there are none that can compete with this painting. The success of *Snow* clearly proves Cheng's leading position in advancing into the realm of rationalism. Through visual images, he points out to people the depth and complexity of the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution, and reminds people that in order to reflect upon reality they need to develop a genuine humanist approach.

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— Excerpted from a text written in the 1970s and later published as "Ren de lixing chensi: Luelun Cheng Conglin de zhutixing youhua chuanguo" in Deng Pingxiang, *Lun di san dai huajia* [Discussing the Third Generation of Painters] (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Art Publishing, 1994). Translated by Michelle Wang.

## Native Soil Art

### A LETTER FROM THE ARTIST OF *FATHER (FUQIN)* (1981) [pl. 5]

By Luo Zhongli

Comrade X,

Hello. After you left Chongqing, the provincial young adult art exhibition also came to an end. During this time, I have continually received letters from various comrades, whom I do not know, enthusiastically supporting me. Among the letters I received, many used their personal experiences and thoughts to dissect and understand this painting, with many people discussing the work with more rational explanations than

myself. Many other letters simply related the viewers' plain responses to the painting. Comparing the two types of reactions, I am more receptive toward the latter because I never gave much thought to abstract ideas and didn't start off with theories. Essentially, this painting resulted from my strong, enduring feelings toward peasants, and I wanted to say something honest on their behalf. Thus, with great enthusiasm, I was able to paint the work in thirty-seven, thirty-eight degree Celsius weather wearing only a pair of shorts in a fifth-floor attic. I used my greatest efforts to portray everything I was familiar with — all of the unique characteristics and details of the farmers. This was the only thought I had during the entire process of painting this piece.

I never thought about technique. I just wanted to paint every detail as meticulously as possible. I once saw some portraits by an American Photorealist painter, and the impression I had of the paintings dictated the form of my work because I felt that this form could most forcefully convey all of my emotions and thoughts. Eastern and Western art have always fed off of each other and borrowed from each other. Form and technique are merely the language I use to communicate my thoughts, emotions, etc. If using this language allows me to speak my mind, then I will draw lessons from it.

In addition to my understanding of farmers and my interactions with them, the idea for my painting emerged from the moment I saw a peasant standing guard over nightsoil. The output from public toilets in Chongqing is distributed among the farming villages in nearby counties. In order to prevent farming teams from stealing nightsoil from each other, each toilet has a farmer who stands guard. The larger lavatories even have farmers who pitch tents in order to do their duty over a long period of time. However, even with such precautions, fights still break out caused by people stealing nightsoil. It was Chinese New Year's Eve of 1975, rain pressed in from all sides, and snow kept whipping down onto people; it was terribly cold. At a public toilet near my home, a middle-aged farmer was standing guard. I had already noticed him in the morning planted frigidly among the slush. He was in a typical farmer's stance, with his basket pole leaning upright on a chair beside the manure ditch. His body leaned over the pole, with both of his hands tucked inside opposite sleeves. He numbly, stoically, and silently stood there with a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. Until the night, he stood there, with only his posture changing. The happiness and joy of the New Year's Eve night descended upon the town. The surrounding buildings and flats all emitted a warm glow of light, laughter, music, and the sound of firecrackers, occasionally interrupted by outbursts from drinking games . . . all combined into one resonating sound. Yet this farmer, who had left his home to stand guard, seemed like a forgotten man. His numb and stoic demeanor was starkly juxtaposed against his environment. He also has a family; his children are still eagerly awaiting his return home. At this moment, what is he thinking about? Perhaps he only has one thought — that the nightsoil ditch could be filled quickly in order to accumulate more work points, which in turn could bring in more food in order to feed his family and support the people . . .

As the night progressed, the sounds of a joyous New Year's Eve also began to dissipate. The last time I went to the toilet, in the dim light I saw him still there. The cold wintry night had cornered him against the wall by the manure ditch, leaving his body shriveled into a tiny bundle. Yet his eyes, as large as a sheep's or ox's, were still fixated on the manure ditch. He was just like a man forced into a corner and not allowed to react unless out of self-defense. At that moment, I suddenly felt a strong surge of trembling sympathy, compassion, and emotional excitement attacking me from all sides. Old Yang, Ms. Xianglin, Runtu, Ah Q . . . these figures from life, from literature, and from abroad all crowded before my eyes. I never knew what he ate that day to sustain himself, so I went home and grabbed two mooncakes for him. For a long while, he



didn't say a word. He truly was an honest farmer. This must have been the reason why he was chosen to do this hard work. This is often the case: honest farmers always get the short end of the stick; this I know well. "I want to scream for them!" This was the original impulse behind this painting. Initially, I painted the farmer guarding the manure, then I painted a farmer who was originally a member of the Red Army at Bashan, and then finally I painted *Father*. The painting was originally called *Hardships with Each Grain* (*Lili jie xinku*). Then, a teacher suggested that I change it to *Father*, at which point I suddenly felt that this title expressed all of my thoughts and feelings.

Everyone standing in front of *Father's* enormous portrait would be able to feel its strong visual impact. This is why I increased the size of the painting. If this painting were half its current size, its effect would be completely different. Therefore, scale is also one of my languages. Only as such, in front of this enormous head, can I feel the pressure from his kind, ox- or sheep-like eyes, hear his heavy breathing, see his pulsing veins and his racing bloodstream, smell the odor of tobacco and sweat, and feel his skin trembling with sweat beads oozing from his pores. His dried lips, with only one tooth in his mouth, leaves viewers asking what he could have eaten — how many bitter herbs and how much white rice. . . . *Father* — this is indeed the father who birthed and nurtured me. Standing in front of such a humble, kind, and hardworking father, who cannot but be moved? What kind of reflections [do people have when they confront this painting]? And who are those people who do not understand or love this kind of father?

Some people have written in their letters that *Father* made them cry. One farmer wrote that the man in the painting is actually a farmer on his team and said that the people would support this kind of work. These words solidified the path that I want to take — to portray farmers, to paint the ordinary life of the Dabashan farmers that I know so well, to paint their sadness, happiness, anger, love, hate, life, and death.

I feel that artwork must maintain an affinity with the people. Artwork should communicate and echo the people's emotions. In order to achieve this, it is important to have a solid foundation in life and real emotions.

By next year's graduation, I plan to paint a series of "farmers." I now have the sketches. Unfortunately, you were unable to give me advice last time. Next time, I will listen to your suggestions.

Sincerely,  
Luo Zhongli, December 14, 1980

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— Originally published as "Wo de Fuqin de zuozhe de laixin" in *Meishu [Art]* 158, no. 2 (1981): 4–5.  
Translated by Michelle Wang.

## MY SEVEN PAINTINGS (1981)

By Chen Danqing

I traveled to Tibet for half a year, where I completed *Mother and Son* (*Mu yu zi*) [pl. 6] as well as five other paintings in Lhasa. After I returned to Beijing, I painted *The Shepherd* (*Muyang ren*). When the paintings were exhibited, a lot of people didn't understand the way I painted. My thinking was as follows: the current fashion privileges innovation, nationalization, and modernization. As soon as people jumped on the bandwagon, however, I had the opposite urge to escape. It is necessary to have an assessment and understanding of oneself. Perhaps in finding one's qualities and preferences, it is also possible to discover one's strengths. I adhered strictly to the rules

when I studied painting, as I naturally lacked a romantic temperament. My acute sensitivity was only realized through direct observation and concrete objects. In life, I enjoy the banal details. My mind brims with the different impressions I have accumulated from having lived among ordinary, lower-class people. When I depart from these impressions, my imagination also vanishes. I prefer these artists: Rembrandt, Corot, Millet, and Purastof (I've discovered that no matter how unique an artist's style is, it always maintains countless ties with those artistic predecessors that s/he prefers). [To me,] these names are synonymous with a passion for everyday life, human relations, and emotions. They imply an artistic method that is at once unadorned, penetrating, cultured, and restrained. This is precisely the realm to which I most aspire. I work hard to imitate them, and I am not ashamed of this. When I faced the simple and natural human emotions and scenes in Tibet, I naturally chose to use the language of these artists' oil paintings. That kind of intimacy and austerity, that form of meticulous portrayal, that sense of antiquity that engenders pursuit, I cannot imagine a more suitable language to express my feelings. I know this kind of pursuit may at present appear outdated, and I know that I may not avoid accusations of imitating and picking up foreigners' used goods. I have to disregard all of that. Art itself is indifferent to what is old and what is new, not to mention the fact that modern artists often borrow from prehistoric art. My choices and imitations aren't worth much. In reality, purely original creations are not easy to find. Over the course of two thousand years, how many methods haven't already been employed by others? I might as well put conscientious effort into the quality of my art, so long as my emotions are pure and honest and the language I use is appropriate. My work may exhibit less individual features, but this is not something that I can force. Some people say I use classical oil painting techniques; I cannot admit to this. I have never seen original works of classical oil painting, I merely learned superficial techniques from the last century of European painters, and painted slightly more meticulously and smoothly. I developed a strong interest in the small, exquisite paintings of some European art exhibitions. We have seen quite a few large compositions, so I painted these seven small paintings.

#### MOTHER AND SON

Not long after I arrived in Lhasa, I developed several themes and made some sketches, including those for *Men of Gangba* (*Gangba hanzi*) and parts one and two of *Entering the City* (*Jincheng*). Because these sketches were based on memory, they appeared insubstantial and hollow, so I put the sketches aside. Anything worth looking at in the seven paintings, including the figures' movements and appearances, was all directly derived from sketching. *Mother and Son* was one such painting where my inspiration was triggered through a number of quick sketches. Although I didn't plan to paint this theme, it turned out to be the first painting I did. When these shepherdesses, carrying their children in their collars, sprawl across the ground to nurse, they appear especially beautiful. Among them, one shepherdess appeared utterly honest; she looked so naïve. When the child forced his head further into his mother's collar to breastfeed, her facial expression — as if lost in thought — left a profound impression on me. I thought of the many women who spend their entire lives laboring away and how people like to portray them beaming and full of energy. But, in real life, they are usually exhausted and silent. This is what touches me. I repeatedly painted this shepherdess and another mother-and-son duo; the mother in the center of the painting and the one with bare shoulders to the left are both based on this woman. They were with a group of people, all taking refuge outside someone's tent. At the time, this image didn't form as a painting in my mind. A few days later, when flipping through my

sketches, the image of that group of people disappeared. All that was left in the book was that woman — a few frontal and profile pictures of her — and another mother-and-son pair. They seemed to have run on their own into the frame of my composition. Nothing had to be changed; I only needed to compose these three mothers more naturally and it would be enough. In composing the seven paintings, I strove to maintain simplicity and stability, and not excessively emphasize spatial perspective. I preferred to fill the composition with people, even making the paintings seemingly monotonous and symmetrical. I didn't pursue dramatic changes, and avoided traces of manipulating, filling in, or cutting-and-pasting images. In the past, I painted picture stories, book illustrations, and also oil paintings. I paid more attention to the sense of composition in the scenes, making the tableaux more vivid and refined, and closer to the characteristics of modern compositions. But, this time, I sought to do something different because if I treated these paintings in the previous manner, the picture's harmony and simplicity would be jeopardized. *Mother and Son* was the first painting I executed. Many areas were painted with nervousness and overt caution. But, because of this, sincerity emerges from the brushwork. Looking at it now, I still quite like it.

Many colleagues think that *Mother and Son* and other paintings in the series were painted directly from life and don't think that they can be my graduation work [which should be a "creative composition"]. When I say that these are indeed my graduation works, they still don't understand the meaning behind my paintings. Now there is a new theory that explains why these paintings do not qualify as "creative compositions." [To people holding this theory,] *Mother and Son* is too much like a sketch, simply using a few sheets of sketches to construct an oil painting. Yet, this is precisely what I sought to do. If Rembrandt's *Night Watch* is a creative composition, then must his self-portrait be considered an "exercise" (*xizuo*)? Michelangelo's *David*, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Velazquez's *Aesop*, Impressionist landscapes, Chardin's still lifes — should they all be considered exercises or sketches? I don't know if the ancients differentiated between sketches and creative compositions, but they treated each painting as a serious artwork. The inherent mission in painting is to depict form, to relate the interaction among the eyes, the mind, and nature. Encapsulating and refining the content of the so-called composition should not be complex. It is only a choice on the part of the artist. Among the innumerable images from life, Millet chose the evening prayer and feeding because these two both aroused his emotions. If we were to criticize *Feeding the Young* (*Wei shi*) for not being able to summarize and distill the essence of life as well as *The Angelus*, and if Millet were to follow these conventions, then we wouldn't be able to witness his incomparably intimate images of a child learning to walk, urinating, etc. Art has come full circle, and we realize once again that one can just "paint what one sees with one's eyes." Only now do I understand the paramount importance of these words that Courbet proclaimed a century ago. Since here [in China] we praise these Realist painters, and since their works actually don't support the prevailing theories, I should no longer have to worry about whether or not my paintings can be considered creative compositions. Moreover, many works and exhibitions in the art world have already proven that the parameters drawn around the term "creative composition" are no longer that effective.

#### **PILGRIMAGE (CHAOSHENG)**

Early on, I didn't really think about painting *Pilgrimage*. Daily activities like walking, nursing, etc. can be used as significant material in art. But, the spectacle of the pilgrimage is so extraordinary and rare to witness that it actually made it more difficult for me. I kept hesitating as to whether there was a need to paint this. As a work of art, I wasn't satisfied with just painting a few scenes of kowtowing and calling it a day. If I were

only trying to make known rare religious activities from this century, then documentary films or photojournalism would be much stronger mediums than oil painting. Yet, photographs seem to lack a certain power of expression when directed at everyday life. I initially planned on placing a sheep in the corner. It's true that old dogs and sheep often mingle in the crowd during a pilgrimage, as if they were in the know. But, I felt as if there was still something missing. I once saw a child lying beside a pilgrim's feet. Around the child were piles of boots and garments cast off by the adults, and though people were coming and going all around him, he stayed sound asleep. I recalled my life in the rural countryside, where children are invariably tossed on the ground because their busy mothers don't have time to take care of them. They cry, play, sleep, and crawl on the ground until they grow up. Last year I had a daughter, and I like to watch her endearing image as she sleeps in awkward positions. I could not imagine letting my daughter sleep on the streets. Yet, the numerous Tibetans who come to Lhasa for pilgrimage find shelter on street corners and in alleyways. Children who are too young are strapped to their mothers' backs as they kowtow. Slightly older children can be placed to the side. And children old enough to kowtow do so with the adults. I knew of a little girl like this, who did not have parents and walked alone to Lhasa for her pilgrimage. Suddenly, in my heart, I heard a language that spoke of life and human emotions. This is the language that I strove to communicate in all of my paintings. Children lying sound asleep can pull people's drifting thoughts back to life. Only when I'm able to relate this indescribable kind of life with this manner of passionate devotion are my paintings capable of possessing a certain deep and subtle meaning. That night I made a sketch. The next day, I drafted a composition using a thin layer of oil paint. Secretly, I do like my design of the child, but I don't admire this painting as a whole because it doesn't convey the intense emotions I felt when I set eyes on the tens of thousands of pilgrims in Lhasa.

Some people want me to discuss how I depict my emotions toward people and their lives, or how I focus on social phenomena or ethnic groups. If I were to really elaborate on these topics, I could probably write several pages. But, this is precisely what I'm unwilling to speak more about. I depend on my artwork to speak, so I hope people will pay attention to the work — it's as simple as that. I also feel that when a work tries to intentionally show how much the artist cares about people and attempts to depict their livelihood, then the work will no longer move people because the life represented in the painting will appear too forced. My greatest wish is that the audience can inadvertently and unexpectedly be moved by the works' realism and humanism, feeling that: "This is life; these are human beings." I also don't want people to casually expound upon my intentions or tendencies. Some people say the paintings are good because I expose and condemn this social phenomenon as being frighteningly backward and ignorant. My response is to deny this. I hate using painting to expose anything. Some people say that I express sympathy and pity for my subjects, but this is also not necessarily the case. I don't want a painting to simply appeal for pity, like how people would react if they went to an exhibition on natural disasters. But, I cannot deny that this phenomenon [depicted in the painting] engenders complex and confused emotions in everyone, including myself. But none of this accounts for the basic impulse for my work. When I was in Sichuan, I also heard about thousands of common people who flocked to worship the Buddha, but I won't go and paint this. As an artist, there is a point that I must emphasize, and that I hope others will also take notice of, which is that this kind of a scene [of pilgrimage] is not simply meant to send people into deep thought, but it is actually beautiful, even majestic. These kind people who prostrate themselves on the ground, they don't know how

bitter their own lives are, nor do they know how beautiful they are. This is the reason why I wanted to paint them. As for viewing the paintings, each person can have his/her own feelings and understandings of them. That is a different story.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as “Wo de qi zhang hua” in *Meishu yanjiu* [Fine Arts Research] no. 1 (February 15, 1981): 49–51. Translated by Michelle Wang.

## Melancholy Youth and “Contemplative Painting”

### EXPECTING HER TO WALK ON THE MAIN ROAD (1981)

By Wang Chuan

Our generation is a generation that works hard and passionately pursues a better tomorrow. I, along with my peers, continue to fervently explore the question of how we should live our lives. Ultimately, what are we after? What will we lose during the process? When I follow this meandering trail of thoughts looking for my future, I am confused, distraught, and hesitant . . .

Along this rugged and ruthless trail, I read through my mind's eye the old chapter of the Ten-Year Calamity [the Cultural Revolution], which chronicled all of our sweet smiles and bitter woes. It broadened the horizons of my creative field of vision. It made me realize that thousands of young men had valiantly bidden farewell to the past and got on with their new lives. But, I still feel the lonely soul that wanders and grieves. She lacks the courage to utter the word goodbye to her past. She waits and expects the future to call on her. She is in deep misery for the past as well as the present. She finds no joy or delight. I experience a wave of profound internal agitation, feeling a deep sense of responsibility to take social morality and artistic conscience as my priority and serve as an ardent advocate for those unfortunate youth who so earnestly chased a better tomorrow. I face the discrepancies between the ideal and reality. I take as my theme the kind of mental anguish one experiences when pursuing the light at the end of the tunnel while immersed in utterly dark uneasiness. I utilize it to convey to my audience the picture of truth, good, and beauty through the medium of art. Only pain can be bartered for the beauty of the soul. I started to paint.

When I stand on the narrow trail, I see the young woman's bewildered soul through her sorrowful eyes. Filling her eyes are bitter tears shed not only for the angst in the past but also for the humiliation in the future. I want to wipe her tears for her. But her tears deep down in her heart are beyond anyone's reach. She has no courage to say “Farewell, narrow trail!” (*Zaijian ba xiaolu*). But she is already awake. I start to feel the insurmountable pain of this exploring soul. I wander in the garish colors of sunset, looking for her future . . .

This trail, mysterious and ambiguous, rugged and tortuous, wears her down. Her soul is exhausted. How soothing it would be, if she could pause for a moment and take a drink of spring water from her hometown! It is not the pallor of her face that is cast in silhouette, but rather her inveterate dependence on the trail. Why are her hands trembling and powerless? Because she is telling us: “Goodbye, lonely thatched cottage; goodbye, virgin soil that has been reclaimed.” At that moment, she is not sure whether to cry for you or rejoice for you. Her eyes are fixated on you, motionless. What do you give back to her? You deprive her of her naïve and joyful smile. You inflict wounds on her heart! She is ready to depart. She beseeches us not to abandon her, but to bring her along onto the highway.

When I was conceiving this work, I was oblivious to the garish colors in life and the oceans of people in society. I was obsessed with the lonely soul on the narrow trail. Her awakened self-consciousness was filled with complaint, repulsion, and remorse. She begged us to find a bright road for her leading to the future.

I believe that feelings differ. Due to different personal experiences, young people develop disparate outlooks depending on their emotional circumstances. Even for one who is very sensitive to life, it is not hard to realize that the beauty of melancholy and suffering, complete with her protest against her wasted youth on this narrow trail, is overwhelmingly contagious for the audience. It is much more powerful than smiles and joy for bringing out a person's compassionate soul, when the soul has struggled against the fetters imposed by ten years of misery. She is nothing but power. She is the leading soul of our generation!

In exploring the creation of realist paintings, we should follow our truthful feelings in life in order to bring out full-bodied emotions in front of our audience, and to cause a larger audience to closely experience what lies inside artistic representation. Only through this can a work gain its own life. We should all respect our conscience as artists and cherish the candid and truthful dialogues with our inner minds. No pretension. No distortion of life. I have but one nice wish: more young people should have second thoughts as to how to live their lives and how to safeguard the dignity of our lives today. This age endows us with individual rights and responsibilities, the spirit to travel freely on the highway of knowledge, and the opportunity to realize our own values of existence and to perfect ourselves. We should be prepared to fully live up to the expectations and sense of glory this age gives us.

I believe that the majority of our young people in the New China are ready to devote themselves to the pursuit of truth. I wish we would all explore a bright highway for "her," give her courage and power, and allow her to say this: "Farewell, narrow trail!"

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— Originally published as "Qiwang zhe ta zou zai dalu shang" in *Meishu [Art]* 157, no. 1 (1981): 46. Translated by Kela Shang.

## "CONTEMPLATIVE PAINTING" IN CHINA AND ANDREW WYETH (1985)

By Ruan Xudong

A child sticks his head out from behind a high yellow clay wall, gazing ahead and contemplating, with traces of melancholy and expectation in his eyes. Perhaps this ancient wall blocked his vision, separated him from the outside world, and restricted his naiveté as a child. Perhaps, he will respond to the call of the spring breeze, muster the courage and strength of a seven- or eight-year-old, leap over this ancient wall that has confined him for far too long, and walk toward the new world waiting outside of the wall. Such is the painting *Ancient Wall* (*Lao qiang*), by the young Chinese oil painter He Duoling.

On the opposite side of the Pacific Ocean, in America, there was a young girl who suffered from polio. On a withering meadow in winter, situated in the barren field, she crawls toward a faraway house on the horizon. Even from her back one reads hope and aspirations. She clenches her teeth, parts the overgrown thickets, and crawls toward her destination. . . this is *Christina's World* by the American oil painter Wyeth.

Like an overshadowing supernova in our nation's art community, this is a brand-new type of oil painting — contemplative painting — arising a few years following the introduction of Wyeth's works into our country. It is so named after Wyeth's "pensive



He Duoling. *Spring Breeze is Awake*. 1981. Oil on canvas, 50 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 38 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (129 × 97 cm). National Art Museum of China

paintings." They demonstrate certain ties with Wyeth's works, but are also distinguishable. In comparison, their characteristics are listed as follows:

- (1) Regardless of what the work depicts, one can always feel the presence of a thinker. Such is the intersection of the two types of paintings, and their most fundamental feature. Figures in the works are mostly taciturn and introspective, and to some extent are probably all pondering over something. In *Christina's World*, the girl pensively faces the house on the horizon. In *A Faraway Place*, the young boy is fascinated by and meditates over what he believes are mysterious places. In *Barn Swing*, Wyeth himself is sitting in his childhood swing, reminiscing about his bygone childhood years. And so on and so forth. What is more intriguing is the contemplation over these contemplations, which is more profound than the figures in the paintings because it is a contemplation of all of society, the universe, and life. There is no denying that a thinker resides in the painting, yet this thinker cannot be identified with any specific image within the painting. To the same group should be added the child in *Ancient Wall*, the old farmer in *Father (Fuqin)*, the armed "soldier" in *Why (Weishenme)*, the Tibetan girl in *The Faraway Horizon (Yuanfang de dipingxian)*, the country girl in *Spring Breeze Is Awake (Chunfeng yijing suxing)*, night college students in *The Third Generation (Disandai ren)*. . . . In these silent people, artists of "contemplative paintings" have injected sober reflections on society and history. All in all, every contemplative painting and each of Wyeth's works have a thinker persona within it. The thinker expresses rich yet veiled sentiments, without which these two types of paintings would not exist. However, their kinds of thinking ultimately diverge. That is, the thinking in contemplative paintings intends to proactively change the world, whereas Wyeth's works carry more passive and sentimental traces. In *Ancient Wall*, the boy aspires to destroy the old wall, a symbol of the remnants of a feudal society. The work demonstrates a desire to escape poverty and ignorance. But, in *A Faraway Place*, the child seems satisfied just to be removed from society and the crowds and enjoy himself in leisure and peace. The girl in *Farewell, Narrow Trail (Zaijian ba xiaolu)* bids farewell to the memorable past, in pursuit of a better tomorrow. In contrast, the young man in *Barn Swing* is engrossed in reminiscing over his childhood, and takes emotional solace from the swing. The old farmer in *Father* has never been rich in his life despite his continued industrious

cultivation. But, he never gives up his dream for a life of abundance, and he seems to be able to smell the fragrance coming from the newly harvested crops. In contrast, the old man in *Lonely Old Man (Gudu de laoren)* is solitary, friendless, and hopeless. Both works attempt to expose and point to certain aspects of society. The former reveals the outdated practices and the damages inflicted on China by ultraleftist politics, whereas the latter uncovers the loneliness and agony of farmers in a capitalist society. The former is premised on advancement and development, yet the latter highlights hopelessness. The thinker in the former work is mindful of progress, whereas in the latter he is obsessed with despair and dejection. The former is closely based on society, the latter on nature. These differences bring about the distinct kinds of inspiration that the two thinkers are capable of bestowing on viewers.

...

- (3) The two types of painting share similar meticulous execution and linear pastel tones. Wyeth's works that have been introduced into this country, almost without exception, are done with detailed description and austere tonality. This technique is quite unique. It is free of the dreariness and monotony seen in some classical paintings. It has no Post-Impressionist boisterousness and raucousness. It is also more velvety and steady than the current Soviet Russian style. Thus, it serves as an excellent example for us to learn from. It's no accident that contemplative paintings should be so strongly influenced by it. Juxtaposed against each other, the four works *Spring Breeze Is Awake*, *The Faraway Horizon*, *Christina's World*, and *A Faraway Place* are extremely similar in terms of the techniques they employ and the stylistic decorum they observe. The withered grass, the locks of hair, the texture of the clothing, the feel of the flesh — all are naturalistic and credible. At the same time, the paintings are enveloped in a general tonality of subdued ocher, which adds to their solemn yet stirring feel. Had the classical style been adopted, the paintings would have been more dull and depressing. Conversely, contemporary styles would have made the works more abstract and less amiable, and a Soviet Russian style would have failed to convey the profound emotional subtext. When we look back at *Ancient Wall*, the meticulous depiction of the wall, damaged yet entrenched, reminds us of the corruption and resoluteness of feudal doctrines. The artist painstakingly rendered the child behind the wall. He has disheveled hair and wears wrinkled clothes. His filthy little face and hands evidence malnutrition. His eyes evince mixed feelings of agony and hope. All these hint at the excruciating pain and suffering from poverty and ignorance under extreme leftist ideology. These details symbolize people's aspirations for material and spiritual riches. The painting also depicts a spirited cat with lustrous fur, in stark contrast to the child, providing a comparison that accentuates the symbolic meaning of the work. It should be noted that artists working with contemplative paintings did not completely and indiscriminately copy when learning from Wyeth's techniques. Instead, they made their own discoveries in the direction of integrating national and ethnic elements into their pieces, seen in works such as Cheng Conglin's *A Summer Night in 1979: Around Us, We Feel the Aspiration of Our Nation (1979 nian de xiaye, women gandao minzu de kewang)*, and the series of paintings by Luo Zhongli. Explorations such as these are commendable.

The driving force behind the rise of contemplative painting was the artists' discontent with certain aspects of reality. They are the generation that came of age during the Cultural Revolution and are thus deeply prone to self-reflection. They share the same qualities of youth, ebullience, prudence, liberalness, progressiveness, and the sense of responsibility in contributing to the betterment of society through their brushes. Over the course of ten years of upheaval, their rich personal experiences of



agony and suffering familiarized them with people's lives and drew them closer to the people. Their wasted youth and the tragedies they witnessed, together with the poverty and ignorance of many regions of the country, compelled them to combat the glorification of individual leaders and extreme leftist ideologies. They made up their minds to effect change with their brushes, and devoted themselves to building "Two Cultures" [i.e., material and spiritual riches]. In comparison, Wyeth's "pensive paintings" were generated through his fundamental dissatisfaction with social reality and his helplessness to change it. He can only sympathize with the farmers and express his personal sentiments and melancholy. Wyeth was born into a humble American family. Throughout his life, he lived in the countryside. He also frequently took part in agricultural activities along with other farmhands. Therefore, he has a profound understanding of farm life and has created a large number of paintings focusing on farmers. The paintings represent, on the one hand, the farmers' benevolence, diligence, and austerity, and, on the other hand, the poverty and misery in their personal lives. They more or less point to the blight of American society by embedding the invisible persona of thinker who contemplates the problems that farmers encounter in their lives.

All in all, even though "contemplative painting" and "pensive painting" are very different in terms of their countries of origin, social backgrounds, and the specific reasons that engendered them, they are both prominent forces in the world of contemporary art among various artistic schools, East or West. Other artists whose works are in the same vein include the Canadian artist Alex Colville, whose exhibition recently toured China. Both Wyeth and "contemplative artists" have made remarkable achievements in symbolic content and in artistic styles. Their influence will continue to be felt over the long term, in the art of painting in general and in oil painting in particular.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Zhongguo de sisuo hua yu huaisi" in *Meishu sichao* [*The Trend of Art Thought*], 1985: no. 3, 10–12. Translated by Kela Shang.

## **II. THE ARRIVAL OF AN AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENT: 1985--86**

Fearing the spread of Western liberal ideas due to the recent Open Door policy, the Communist Party Propaganda Department mobilized the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign from 1983 to early 1984; the targets of attack included any manners of "bourgeois imports," from erotica to existentialism, that ran counter to the country's socialist system.<sup>1</sup> In art, discussions of formal abstraction were forced to stop, exhibitions of Western modern art were suspended, and some contemporary art exhibitions, such as the *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* (*Basannian jieduan: Huihua shiyan zhanlan*) in Shanghai, were canceled and criticized.

While this official campaign halted the development of contemporary art temporarily, it also fueled a stronger desire in many younger artists to pursue alternative routes. Two events in 1985 signaled their responses to the official campaign. The first was their public denunciation of the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition* (*Diliujie quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan*), a government-sponsored showcase at the end of the previous year which reembraced the Maoist doctrine of art serving politics.<sup>2</sup> The second was the installation of the *Progressive Young Chinese Artists Exhibition* (*Qianjin zhong de Zhongguo qingnian huazhan*) in Beijing's National Art Gallery, whose participants openly embraced modern Western art. Among the works on display was Meng Luding and Zhang Qun's *In the New Era: Enlightenment of Adam and Eve* (*Zai xinshidai: Yadang Xiawa de qishi*), which was taken as a symbolic statement for the arrival of a new "enlightenment movement."

The rapid development of contemporary art in the mid-1980s was nourished by an information explosion: all manner of "decadent" Western art forbidden during the Cultural Revolution was introduced to China through reproductions and exhibitions; hundreds of theoretical works were translated and published in a short span of time. It was as if a century-long development of modern Western art was simultaneously restaged in China. The chronology and internal logic of this Western tradition became less important; what counted most was its diverse content as visual and intellectual stimuli for a hungry audience. In particular, Robert Rauschenberg's 1985 exhibition at the National Art Gallery had a strong impact on young Chinese artists, inspiring them to reconsider received notions of art and artistic creativity.

An important channel of disseminating information and ideas was a host of new art publications established around the mid-1980s, the three most influential ones being *The Trend of Art Thought* (*Meishu sichao*), *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*), and *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*Jiangsu huakan*).<sup>3</sup> Their editors and main contributors belonged to a new generation of art critics who took upon themselves the mission of promoting contemporary experimental art. Holding positions in important art schools and research institutes, they also developed close ties with experimental artists and organized important exhibitions and conferences in different cities. Through these activities, they played a key role in connecting scattered experimental art groups into a nationwide avant-garde art movement.

#### Notes

1. Words of Deng Liqun, then the Communist Party Propaganda Chief, quoted in Pico Iyer and David Aikman, "Battling 'Spiritual Pollution,'" *Time* 122, no. 23 (November 28, 1983), 45.
2. Fei Dawei, "Zhongyang meishu xueyuan shisheng guanyu diliujie quanguo meizhan zuotan jiyao" ["Summary of discussions between teachers and students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts on the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition*"], *Meishu sichao* [*The Trend of Art Thought*], 1985: no. 1, 11–12, 16.
3. Founded in 1974 as a bimonthly popular art magazine, *Jiangsu Pictorial* [*Jiangsu huakan*] transformed itself in 1985 into a monthly journal with the mission to promote contemporary art.

**ENLIGHTENMENT OF A NEW ERA: ON *IN THE NEW ERA*****(ZAI XINSHIDAI) (1985)** [pl. 7]

By Zhang Qun and Meng Luding

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Bible). Adam and Eve's rebellious act of eating the forbidden fruit caused a revolt. Thereafter, obscurity was replaced by civilization, neutral mankind became carnal creatures, and incarceration in the Garden of Eden ended, ushering in a free world. Their story of breaching heaven's doctrines and restrictions invites us to reflect deeply on the past, the present reality, and the future.

Words cannot capture the capacity of a work of visual art. All visual techniques are merely channels for bridging the gap between the artist and his audience. Any interpretations by the author would limit the audience's understanding of the work. Here, we can only introduce our original concept, prior to venturing into uncharted territory.

For young people, all conclusions are dubious. The pressure of our time compels us to reflect on the past. The preexisting order is becoming less and less suitable for us. We are not satisfied with the past. We demand further adventure and expedition. Development means destruction. Destruction means creation. Continued creation propels human civilization to move forward.

The "freedom to create" reinvigorates us. It encourages us to boldly wage wars against established artistic modes and conventional restrictions.

In recent years, the sheer number of realistic works makes clear the memories of trauma and agony that the past has inflicted on the bodies of our artists. We acknowledge the weight of these works. However, their approach is geared toward direct representation and literal description. The limited scope of their subject matter blunted their creative edge.

Based on the skewed principle that art originates from life, the sole yardstick for art became its resemblance to nature. This led to a single path for artistic creations. Styles seen in artists' works under this homogenizing model are merely the results of different "mirrors" reflecting the same subject matter. This common way of thinking caused people to gradually slip into a trap of standardization. A new age, new concepts, and new ideas constantly stimulate our minds, and compel us to fundamentally restructure our artistic ideas and to explore new paths in approaching art.

We find that we used to take visual representation as reality — a so-called objective reality — as the source for art. What we failed to realize is that mental activities going on in our brains are also reality, a sort of invisible reality, but reality nonetheless, capable of being ascertained. Artists not only can observe the world "proceeding from reality," but also can sense the world we are living in by "following the heart." For different people, there are different worlds. Why, then, should we limit our senses to a certain model? "Subjective" reality accessed through observing the mind will necessarily bring about new ideas and new perspectives, claim new artistic territories, and effect a revolutionary change in artistic concepts. [We should] move on from reflecting objective reality to representing the invisible world, focused not on conforming to the external surface but more on the internal integrity of the individual, in pursuit of a spiritual realm, toward an artistic approach that marks a determined departure from previous paths.

This approach of artistic production is premised on mental raw materials. Rationality and subjectivity are its main thrust. It relies on intuition and the subconscious to restructure visual phenomena. Channeling a philosophical theory, it breaks away from

an image's own original meanings to derive new ones. It breaks free from natural spatiotemporal restrictions and goes beyond the world where direct senses are capable of cognition. This mental activity can give rise to supernatural imagination and thinking, hence achieving the spiritual realm of mental sensibility only when independent of direct senses. Thinking can be both direct and derivative, flat and multidimensional. Thinking can be pursued both from the macrocosmic level as well as from the microcosmic level. In life, stimuli to trigger artistic creativity are everywhere. Therefore, the source of artistic production is infinite. In addition, its composition can be even more liberal and open-ended. All phenomenal elements can be selected, including objects that are not mutually connected. Through restructuring, they can be adapted into the orchestration of a new order within the frame. In *In the New Era: Enlightenment of Adam and Eve* (*Zai xinshidai: Yadang Xiawa de qishi*), the grouping of Adam, Eve, and modern youths, the contrast between the Great Wall and skyscrapers, the blue sky and the horizon, the forbidden fruit running through the center, the clock and the ambience, all combine to represent a universal idea of eternity.

This approach should be distinguished from conceptualization. Conceptualization has tendencies toward formulation and limitation. In contrast, this approach has particular bearings on emotional and mental activities.

This approach is not baseless. The ideas it conveys have their own directions. They do not limit the audience's free imagination. This approach differs from the undercurrent of Freudian dreams, which cuts down the brain's consciousness and reduces it to fantastic and preposterous absurdity, as opposed to the deliberation of space and time evident in the new approach. [The new approach] consists of the trajectory of thinking and projection of assumptions. What it represents stands out from didactic paintings, which are primarily for illustrative purposes. The new approach is also to be distinguished from paintings that are imbued with stronger flavors of literary logic, or works that focus narrowly on visual stimulations which merely emanate physical impetus and appeal to sensuous pleasures. This approach, through weaving together various elements, leads the viewers to think and to imagine. If we give this notion a name, we may tentatively call it "art of the mind." (This must be distinguished from "Conceptual art" as the term is understood within the context of modern Western art.)

*In the New Era* is an experiment aimed at testing new ideas and new perspectives. Although it caused controversy, praise as well as condemnation, the impact itself attests to its vitality. The era created us, distinct from both the past and the future. The tide of our time triggers our self-discovery, self-creation, and self-transcendence. It encourages us to face reality and to design the future as individuals. This way, there will be no ossified models and formulae limiting artistic production. It will necessarily bring about a diversified and individualized new world. Contemporary artists must explore themselves, seeking meaning in their existence, meanwhile jettisoning outdated doctrines inherited from the past and inscribed on our consciousness.

The [nude] human body can be a great source of inspiration for artists. Due to its moralistic teachings from a feudal society, China cannot face nudity, and instead misconstrues it and attempts to nip it in the bud. Artwork featuring nudes has never appeared in major national art exhibitions, not because of contrary aesthetic values, but because of a misunderstanding of human nature. Such misunderstanding tries to interpret nudity in terms of lasciviousness, which only evinces ignorance. *In the New Era* is meant to be a trailblazer, formally setting forth a nude figure in front of the Chinese art community. Fortunately, this painting can now be accessed by the public.

Of course, we are young and still exploring. But, we believe that the meaning of this work lies not only in its novel formal components, but also in its attempt to break

free from preexisting frames of reference and restrictions. We hope that this somewhat premature work will act like a pebble cast into water causing a ripple effect.

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## **PIONEERS OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART — A CRITIQUE OF THE PROGRESSIVE YOUNG CHINESE ARTISTS EXHIBITION (1985)**

By Zhao Jinghuan

The current *Progressive Young Chinese Artists Exhibition (Qianjin zhong de Zhongguo qingnian huazhan)* displays six hundred works of different forms and styles. Not only are the contents of the pieces dynamic and inspired, and not only do these works demonstrate a departure in artistic ideology from extreme leftist clichés such as "thematic determinism" and "content preceding [form]," but they also display a spirit of creative freedom in their investigation of artistic forms and styles, revealing unprecedented dimensions of innovation that have produced a wealth of creative results. The significance of the exhibition surpasses [the exhibition] itself. In my opinion, in terms of exploring new ideas, this exhibition has the following three characteristics.

### **1. NEW SPATIOTEMPORAL CONSTRUCTS**

Many young artists have abandoned the conventional methods of composing figures and the environment based on photographs. Instead, they consciously search for possibilities in combining images and backgrounds from different times and spaces, resulting in fresh concepts and ideas. In terms of the degree of depth and vividness of the artistic themes and imagery, such attempts allow audiences to develop freer associations and form lasting impressions. This is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of this exhibition.

Yu Xiaofu's oil painting *Gently, the Children Perform for Picasso's Doves (Qingxie, haizimen zhengzai wei Bijiasuo de gezi yanzou)*, based on a true story, is a work with an unconventional style and rich with profound meaning. The artist transposes a group of children, who should be performing indoors around tables and chairs, and places them unexpectedly in the open countryside. This draws a relationship among Picasso's doves that were killed by Fascists, the consolation offered by the children, and the open space. In turn, viewers can make free associations between this painting and the clash of war and peace, Picasso, these children, and all of mankind's hopes for peace. The fields, the doves, the people, and the small watering can placed beside a chair — these objects that once occupied different times and spaces are now organized within a single frame that seems to capture one place at one moment. According to convention, this would be considered "irrational," and yet it is only with this "irrationality" that the work can depart from photography and approach the essence of painting.

Wang Xiangming and Jing Lili's *Longing for Peace (Kewang heping)* is clearly a conglomeration of different moments in time. In one corner of the oil painting stands a tall, thin girl, who appears malnourished from war and misfortune. She faces the viewer with her eyes wide open, anticipating and pleading. Next to her, occupying the majority of the canvas, is a large frame containing numerous renowned paintings of world wars, their victims and their survivors, the most prominent being Picasso's *Guernica*. This frame appears suspended among the clouds, while the grassy terrain below is painted like a carpet with severed tree stumps and sprouting rubber tree

shoots. The innovative design of these images alone reveals the painting's theme, and was the key to its winning first place. Zhang Rongfu's *Childhood Memories (Tongnian de huiyi)*, Li Di's *Doves (Gezi)*, Zhou Changjiang's *Window (Chuangkou)*, and a nude painting that adopts Dali's style of Surrealism, all possess their own individual attributes in their explorations in spatiotemporal construction.

In the printmaking category, Zhang Jun's *April 5, 1976 (1976 nian siyue wuri)* is a striking new work. The artist cut out a horizontal strip from a photograph of a young military troop marching shoulder-to-shoulder. Using this as a basic unit, he added the text "April 5, 1976," and repeatedly positioned it throughout the work like a pattern. He made copies of the collaged pieces with a photocopy machine and added a bright red bloodstain on top. The entire surface possesses a vibrant energy. This method of using collage and duplication to form an overlapping spatial composition — similar in appearance to Pop art's transcendence of realism, while also recalling the vigorous impact of the Futurists — is new and unique, and succeeds in foregrounding the weight of that historical era. As a result, it piqued the audience's curiosity and appreciation, and was rewarded with first place in prints. Interestingly, the artist attached a real mirror to the painting. Through this mirror, viewers could see themselves become a part of the composition, thus provoking an even deeper reflection.

The first-place winner in traditional Chinese painting was Hu Wei's *Li Daozhao, Qu Qiubai, Xiao Hong*. The artist refrained from making a generic group portrait and instead arranged the three figures into discrete spaces. When viewing the three incongruous parts within this one painting, viewers are struck by a sense of geographical and historical distance.

## 2. NEW METHODS OF MODELING

The "new" here, including the aforementioned "new" forms of spatiotemporal construction and the "new" techniques that are to be discussed below, are relative terms. Some have already appeared historically or elsewhere in the world, and thus cannot be considered absolutely "new." Even so, given the way we perceive it, it feels new.

Over the past two years, among artists who admired and followed the styles of Millet, Wyeth, and Photorealism, there emerged some new talent and a large number of futile imitators. A number of those styles were still exhibited, and there were some fine representative works, but they no longer hold a prominent position. The diversification of methods makes it difficult to pigeonhole these artists, which is a positive development.

Qin Ming's oil painting *A Procession Praying for Rain (Qiyu de hanglie)* still retains elements of European realism, but it has its own creativity. Its style is concise, inclusive, and similar to printmaking in that it does not seek to display an external light source or meticulously rendered details. Instead, it uses blurred brushstrokes and a brown monochromatic color palette to delineate authentic images of ancient people under the streaming sunlight. From the artist's visual exploration, we can see the unique characteristics of these illuminated figures and the expressive power of the scattered light. Zhang Rongfu's second-place work *Childhood Memories (Tongnian de huiyi)* draws viewers into a dreamlike realm through crude and childish modeling methods. Awkward, blocky limbs and phalanges, ill-proportioned facial features, emotionless faces, and haphazardly scattered and magnified scarabs, frogs, birds, and water grass, strange insertions of drawing techniques, irrational color combinations . . . all make me think back to my naïve and innocent childhood. Like meeting after a long separation, I feel all the more attached to these images. He Gong's *The Story of Flower-Planters (Zhonghuaren de gushi)* uses broad strokes to casually sketch the contours of

the figures and plants. The interior spaces are filled with beautiful, lush blocks of color. Without additional embellishment, the artist lets things take their own course. It could thus be considered a freehand sketch for the oil painting. The artist's intentions are solely directed at creating an image that connotes sweetness and fruitfulness, suggesting the merits of the flower-planter, and thus establishing a unique style. In the exhibition, there were also some abstract or semiabstract works. Zhou Shaoli's abstract work *Death Breeds New Life* (*Siwang li yunyu zhe xinsheng*) recalls China's ancient stone-carvings or wall paintings. Though suggesting figuration, it is a symbolic work with deep and mysterious meaning. Using archaic and abstruse symbols, the work radiates new life and hope, echoing the universal principle "the new are born, and the old will die."

Among the prints, Chen Haiyan's award-winning work *On the Horizon* (*Dipingxian shang*) uses geometric lines, circles, and crosshatched lines to express the characteristic nature of modern industry. Fundamentally a semiabstract work, it shows new visual explorations influenced by the artist's sensitivity toward the aesthetic and stylistic capabilities of technology. Her woodcut *Herd of Sheep* (*Yangqun*) starts in a realistic style but adds black-and-white abstraction and is treated with a carving knife. Here, the black-and-white and carving blade techniques are no longer means of scientific modeling. Instead, they form an indispensable element to symbolizing the misty and mysterious poetic sentiment of the grasslands. In Wang Lan's award-winning recut of *General Store* (*Zahuodian*), the figures and objects are all made in the naïve style of folk paper-cuts. It is certainly "a good work with an unusual taste." In *Footsteps of Giants* (*Juren de zuji*), the exaggerated, distorted bodies of the figures combine with the elasticity of the cloth surface, giving viewers a sense of compatibility between the two components.

### 3. THE PRACTICE OF NEW TECHNIQUES

As young artists have the opportunity to develop their individual personalities and independently conduct artistic explorations, they inevitably experiment with new methods and techniques that are outside of fixed convention. The term "experimentalism" in our artistic critique can no longer be criticized as "formalist trickery." All of the works in this exhibition are particularly dynamic in this regard.

Among the oil paintings, Cao Liwei's *White Ox* (*Bai niu*) (second-place winner) uses a blanket of pure blue as its sky, a single hue of green for the ground, and only white for the ox. The simplicity of the white and green colors gives the ox a "spiritual" appearance. Similarly, the rocky texture of the fortress in the background is rendered using only brown. This simple, purified technique — contrary to the Impressionists' dots of color or the heavy realist strokes in Chen Danqing's Tibetan series — conveys the sacred and lofty realm of the Tibetan plateau. It brings viewers into a solemn and poetic atmosphere, and allows them to ponder over history and religion. Liu Qian's *Alley* (*Xiaoxiang*) instead successfully uses thick, relieflike images to depict a rhythmic, three-dimensional alley in a unified bluish gray. The alley seems to overflow with a dreamlike past, and through the simple color palette, viewers can sense its rhythmic cadences. The painting *Lost* (*Mitu*) seems to have a layer of sand sprinkled across its surface. Through its uneven distribution of light and shadow, the work imparts a feeling of blurred disorientation. The oil painting *Homeland, Honor* (*Zuguo rongyu*) uses Pop art methods, where news photographs have been screenprinted on top of a vibrant background, thus displaying characteristics of images from the mass media. *Spring in Ruoergai* (*Ruoergai de chuntian*) deliberately uses a style similar to fresco painting, exposing unpainted patches of reddish-green-like rough layers of dirt. There are also paintings that use layers of paint, producing an effect similar to lacquer paint-



ing and inviting a different kind of interest. Some paintings were constructed by combining found materials, such as colorful cloth, pieces of paper, plaster, sand, and even data sheets, some are as thin as watercolor, and some appear like patterns designed with drafting tools. Some pieces were made using "spontaneous techniques" showing whimsy and indeterminacy, while others employed spray paint or more meticulous methods to emulate lighting effects or photorealism. In short, the choices of materials, tools, and techniques already exemplify myriad variations in appearances, with no trend toward one dominant method.

Among the traditional ink paintings, many works used "spontaneous techniques," such as dyeing crinkled paper, utilizing resist-dye techniques, crackle techniques, making rubbings, etc. Dun Zhen's *Yearning (Xiangwang)* uses this technique to create a natural background, onto which he has painted an outline of a girl's face in ochre using an ancient fresco style. The result is elegant and fresh. Several paintings had spontaneous color choices, and some even used chalk. Quite a few works are painted on silk or polyester, such as Lin Wei's *Angel (Tianshi)*. In this painting, in order to depict the white-cloaked emissary, the artist sprinkled white powder on a subtle yellow silk ground. The angel's hair is painted gray, and the entire surface is as spotless as a blanket of snow, producing the feeling that both the images within the painting and the thoughts outside the picture frame are lucid and pure. *Spring Breeze in a Small Town (Xiaozhen chunfeng)*, though categorized as a traditional painting, also has white powder spread across its background with ink applied onto the surface, resembling a mural painted on a white-powdered wall. The effect is very unusual. *Nostalgia (Liulian zhi qing)* uses watercolor techniques to produce ink painting effects. Though without the traditional ink brush process, it is still full of energy and does not lack in technique or substance. *Mother, Wisest of All Creatures (Muqin, wanwuzhiling)* breaks through the boundaries between what is considered traditional painting and what is not. Using an almost dry brush and adopting sketching and printmaking techniques, the artist has created the image of a divine mother of humankind. Liang Jiuqing in *The Far Away Sail (Yuanqu de fengfan)* boldly used metallic silver colors to paint an entire canvas full of silver fish. This fresh approach achieves an apt effect. With regard to the exploration of techniques in traditional painting, the aforementioned examples are those that diverge from tradition, but this does not imply that the traditional ink brush method is outdated or that it should be disregarded.

In the category of prints, there were also numerous breakthroughs. Many people showed interest in *April 5, 1976* because it is still rare to see reproduced images in prints. However, there are people who object to this, believing that at this rate, as soon as one takes a photograph and replicates it, it can be considered a print. Wouldn't this just turn into chaos? I think that at the moment we can leave the matter open since artistic viewpoints are never unified to begin with. Besides, at the international printmaking exhibitions there have already been artists, such as Takamatsu Jiro from Japan, who have been awarded prestigious awards for their color reproductions. *Footsteps of Giants* reveals innovations in its base material, using coarse canvas as its printed substrate and using dying instead of printing. On a light grayish brown cloth, the artist has dyed earthy tea colored images. *Blue Dream (Lanse de meng)* exhibits the actual woodblock used for printing, rather than the resulting prints, providing viewers with a simple yet profound sense of beauty. Compared with the *Eighth National Print Exhibition (Dibajie quanguo banhua zhanlan)* two years ago, it is clear there has been a great breakthrough in the technique of printmaking. As the number of "non-wood carvings" has increased, what is most noteworthy is the variety of "textural" ideas that have come to replace the previously dominant "woodcut" method.

Through the three aforementioned elements — spatiotemporal construction, modeling methods, and representational techniques — we can see the success of this exhibition. But, this doesn't imply that there weren't any flaws. First, there are still many artists who don't know how to pursue independent thinking and are unable to discover and recognize themselves. Instead, they resort to simply imitating famous foreign artists. From early on, young artists should find their own path. Second, a lack of artistic training has prevented some artwork from achieving their intended choices and treatment, thus resulting in works that appear affected, immature, or brash.

Nevertheless, with the increasing diversification and interpenetration of different structures, modeling methods, and representational techniques, boundaries between different paintings genres and forms are becoming blurred. This complicates the jury's standards in selecting and evaluating paintings. How should we respond to the new situation? How do we, in theory, embrace diverse styles and methods? By including judges with knowledge of contemporary art? How can we, in practice, eliminate the outmoded rules and regulations that obstruct artistic development? These issues all need to be dealt with from now on. Finally, we should commend the judging this time, although not flawless, it was basically solid and fair. Their work was meticulously executed. And, as the decisions were announced by the time the exhibition opened, the audience was allowed to publicly examine them.

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## BEIJING THEORISTS' REACTIONS TO THE ART OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG (1985)

Compiled by Zhu Ye

Since its opening on November 18, 1985, at the National Art Gallery, the exhibition of works by the artist Robert Rauschenberg — as part of his *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI)* — has elicited a series of strong and mixed reactions from viewers. For this reason, *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) organized a symposium, composed of a group of young and middle-aged theorists. The following is a summary of their statements.

**Shui Tianzhong** (Research Institute of Fine Arts, Chinese National Academy of Arts): This exhibition of Rauschenberg's works is the first solo exhibition of a Western modern artist to be prepared and designed by the artist himself. This exhibition opens a window through which we can have a deeper and more objective understanding of styles of Western modern art. The ways in which Rauschenberg pursues the techniques of making art and the aesthetic beauty of materials are certainly an inspiration to us. The emergence of a new artistic style is more often than not accompanied by new materials and techniques. By comparison, among our painters, many experiment with modern art using only classical techniques, traditional tools and materials [of Chinese painting]. This invariably limits any kind of breakthroughs in form.

**Chen Zui** (Research Institute of Fine Arts): The Rauschenberg exhibition without a doubt provides an intense visual stimulus to many of the viewers. Regardless of whether viewers feel confused or happy, the exhibition excites an irresistible curiosity. If when faced with this modern art, including Pop art, one tries to search for traditional



Poster produced on the occasion of the *Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange* exhibition in Beijing and Lhasa, November 18–December 8, 1985 (National Art Gallery, Beijing); December 2–23, 1985 (Tibet Exhibition Hall, Lhasa)

meanings, one will only be greeted with exasperation. If we surpass this conventional notion of art, approach its meaning through a less *utilitarian* method, and search for the artist's emotions and temperament, perhaps then we can receive a certain aesthetic satisfaction. Quite a few viewers made comments like: "I could do that, too!" Well, maybe this is one of the achievements of the exhibition. After all, art is about how everybody recognizes his or her own value in the process of objectification.

**Ge Yan** (Research Institute of Fine Arts): Rauschenberg is widely acknowledged as a renowned artist in the West. His works allow us to perceive transformations in the idea of art. In the most avant-garde art, man's most carefree ideas are expressed. As a matter of fact, his works echo the most natural features of human beings. By breaking through formulaic patterns, they create another new art form in the new era.

**Gu Shangfei** (Graduate Student in Marxist Cultural Theory): The works of Rauschenberg do not contain any trace of an aristocratic spirit. They are concerned with the everyday life of common people. He uses the most ordinary materials to create aesthetic forms. His art reaches into every sphere of life, thus reducing the distance between art and life. Rauschenberg's work demonstrates a mutual creation between subject and object. It has important implications in aesthetic education, emphasizing that everybody can be creative and be empowered through this creativity. This reminds me of a quote by Auguste Rodin: "There is no lack of beauty in life, there is only a lack of discoveries."

**Liu Xiaochun** (Research Institute of Fine Arts): The large scale of the exhibition, and its location in the main exhibition hall [in the National Art Gallery], were unprecedented. The department and personnel that sanctioned this exhibition have made a great contribution. Rauschenberg's works are certainly understandable. One of the pieces in the exhibition involves a rope threaded through a trashcan, which reflects an American sense of humor. There is another animal assemblage piece depicting ecological balance. If Chinese artists addressed this same topic, they would treat it in a much more serious manner. Although our artists now stress individuality and self-expression, prior to their really reaching the realm of freedom, their expressions of individuality and self often place restrictions on creativity.

**Fei Dawei** (Central Academy of Fine Arts): The works of Rauschenberg can be enlightening to artists and perplexing to non-professionals. Some viewers even attacked the exhibition as "decadent" or "ridiculous," as if taking it as an irreconcilable enemy. Today, even outdated art from the West still has such a strong impact on us. This shows how limited our knowledge is regarding Western concepts and ideas. What has been introduced to China to a certain extent remains at the surface level.

**Yin Yanjun** (Special Reporter, *Fine Arts in China* [*Zhongguo meishu bao*]): Rauschenberg is a serious, encyclopedic painter. His paintings sincerely express what he sees and knows about the world. He respects his viewers and is willing to share his experiences with them regarding his encounters with different regions and ethnicities.

**Meng Luding** (Central Academy of Fine Arts): As a painter, it is relatively easy to experience the work through form, color, and visual effect. Rauschenberg's point of departure is countering tradition, and he breaks through restrictions imposed by three-dimensional space and materials. His representational techniques are also very different from those found in traditional painting. Some say that "his paintings are sincere." I am not sure about that. His paintings have stirred up a lot of reactions among Chinese painters. We need to find our own representational methods.

**Lü Pintian** (Graduate Student in Art Theory, Chinese National Academy of Arts): Rauschenberg demonstrates his environment and state of mind through all forms of visual vocabularies. I feel an indescribable power and emotion when looking at the specific formal relationship constituted by the visible lines, colors, and structures. His works are macroscopic and multidimensional. But it seems that no narrative logic can be found among the wide variety of materials, the choices of which are more likely accidentally and subconsciously made. In many cases, the artworks have no particular connection with their titles either. This kind of illogicality is completely different from traditional art. It provides the viewers with a great deal of freedom, allowing them to perceive and conceive of artistic practice with no constraints.

When Rauschenberg places an abandoned water bucket in a museum, a sacred place for art, questions such as "what exactly is art" are raised. Any attempt to find an absolute and unified answer would be a mistake. Perhaps answers only exist vis-à-vis specific time periods or certain groups of people. As such, art criticism today should be open-minded rather than totalizing. The development of Western art is not only about form, but also, and more importantly, about concept. The emergence of a variety of genres and styles actually demonstrates the artists' recognition of their self-worth.

**Liang Jiang** (Graduate Student in Art Theory, Chinese National Academy of Arts): Rauschenberg's art combines vibrant brushwork, photographs, serigraph prints, and even collages of ready-mades to collapse the boundary between art and life, and between painting and sculpture. He often chooses common materials from everyday life, and organizes them in a rather rational manner. But, symbolism, metaphor, and other narrative structures are rarely seen in his works. This represents another concept of art, a concept that is produced against a crosscultural background.

**Zhang Xiaoling** (Graduate Student in Art Theory, Chinese National Academy of Arts): Whether art is good or bad is determined by particular aesthetic ideals. Without these aesthetic ideals, there is no way to evaluate art. In fact, the reason that many viewers

are having trouble understanding Rauschenberg's works is precisely due to the diverse and paradoxical nature of aesthetic ideals, which prevents them from receiving an "equivalent" excitement from the art.

Rauschenberg's works show two trends in modern art: the increasingly blurred boundary between art and non-art, and the growing indistinctness among different genres of art.

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## **FOREWORD TO FINE ARTS IN CHINA (1985)**

Art is infiltrating the field of production and the sphere of our lives. At the same time, production and life are orienting themselves toward art. Art in a broad sense not only encompasses painting, sculpture, crafts, and architecture, but also bears countless connections with the basic necessities of life. It is in this sense that art supplies our newspaper with far-ranging topics and subjects.

Time is life. But only reform can help to win more time. We are implementing a system of independent accounting as well as an editorial system with responsibilities undertaken by the proprietor, the editor-in-chief, and the associate senior editor, respectively. We expect this system to be productive and effective, and help to bring us in close cooperation and communication with our readers.

Our publication will appeal to both refined and popular tastes, providing readers with high-quality topics while explaining profound issues in plain and simple terms. We strive to cover subjects ranging from the most pressing issues in the art world to the most tangible aspects in our practices of beautifying life.

Breadth, Depth, and Individuality — this is our pursuit.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **A NATIONWIDE FORUM AND MODEL: ART MAGAZINES AND SYMPOSIA (2003)**

By Martina Köppel-Yang

The avant-garde of the 1980s was not a homogeneous movement. Pluralism, propagated by the campaign of the Two Hundreds, initiated a decentralization and thus regionalism. Communication between the regional artists' groups was made possible by regional and national art magazines and symposia that thus played a major role in the propagation of the artistic movement of the 1980s. Magazines and symposia exerted influence in three ways. First, they were a powerful and immediate factor in the development of avant-garde art through reviews of exhibitions and single works of art and through their reports on artists' groups and events. This not only constituted a pool of mutual information, but also created a kind of snowball effect. The artists took the works they saw in those magazines and symposia as a reference. According to Gao Minglu, many works of that period would not have been realized without this source of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Second, they shaped art world opinions. Many debates were initiated

by controversial articles in those magazines. An important example is the controversy concerning the modernization of traditional Chinese painting, initiated by Li Xiaoshan's article "My Opinion on Contemporary Chinese Painting," published in *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*Jiangsu huakan*) in July 1985.<sup>2</sup> Third, art magazines and symposia generated a general picture of the contemporary art movement. This picture, even though diverse and varied, created a kind of group consciousness and propagated certain concepts with which young artists could identify.<sup>3</sup> As Gao Minglu states, art magazines and symposia "generated a co-operating general structure; and they spurred the art world to enter the avant-garde of the new Chinese culture."<sup>4</sup>

Confronted with the constant changing of political campaigns and directives, it was important to report in writing the events of the avant-garde art, and to create documents of a modernist, alternative trend as a way to secure its evidence, and confer upon it a sense of autonomous validity and substance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in China "art history always was made first on paper."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it not only seemed necessary, but also very natural to artists and art critics to create documents of the artistic movement.

The function of magazines and symposia was not limited, however, to information gathering, communication, the shaping of opinion, and the identification and documentation of artists and works of art. Magazines extended their responsibilities to intervene directly through the organization of events, exhibitions, and symposia. Symposia often were conceived as preparative rounds for exhibitions, such as *China/Avant-Garde* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) in the National Art Gallery in Beijing (February 1989).<sup>7</sup> Interesting is the change in the role of art critics and art historians, evident here, as well as in the flood of art historical writing. Starting from the late 1970s, the art world was no longer administered solely by ideological working cadres. Specialists with a master's or doctoral degree in art history often occupied important positions in the art bureaucracy, and they supported the avant-garde movement out of personal motivation.<sup>8</sup> They not only propagated its events but also documented them, and thus wrote an unofficial history of the art of the 1980s. The most influential and active of these art critics were Fan Jinzhong, Fei Dawei, Gao Minglu, Hou Hanru, Huang Zhuan, Lang Shaojun, Li Xianting, Li Xiaoshan, Liu Xiaochun, Peng De, Shao Dazhen, Shui Tianzhong, Wang Lin, Wang Xiaojian, Yan Shanchun, Zhang Zhiyang, Zhu Qingsheng.

#### ART MAGAZINES

In the People's Republic of China, art magazines, like all publications, are strictly controlled. In certain periods, however, control has been loosened. An example is the time directly after the Cultural Revolution during the period of the so-called Beijing Spring, when "freedom of speech" was the official slogan.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1980s, even the private financing of magazines and newspapers — and thus their independence from official institutions — was admitted. These sporadic periods of relaxation account for the flourishing of the magazines and for their influence. Similarly, new restrictions explain setbacks and difficulties. Magazines that existed before 1965, like for example *Art* (*Meishu*), were reorganized immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, new ones, such as *World Art* (*Shijie meishu*) were established, reflecting the Open Door policy.<sup>10</sup> The relaxation of press and publication in the mid-1980s again stimulated the establishment of numerous new magazines.

The reorganization of old magazines often was often linked to the reorientation of their content. The monthly magazine *Art*, established in 1954, resumed publication in 1976. In the years from 1976 to 1983 and from 1985 to 1987, with He Rong as editor-in-chief, it reflected the liberal atmosphere of the art scene.<sup>11</sup> As the organ of the Chinese Artists' Association, the magazine functioned as a barometer of the ideological climate.

Also, because of the wide range of the public it reached — from cadre to avant-garde artists and art lovers — it played a major role in the art scene throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s. Even though it was required to follow official directives closely, many articles crucial to the development of the avant-garde were published in this magazine. A few of the most important such articles include the review of the picture story *Maple (Feng)*,<sup>12</sup> reports on [some of the] first semi-official exhibitions, such as *Spring Tide (Chunchao)*, or the *Stars Art Exhibition (Xingxing meizhan)* in Beijing,<sup>13</sup> reviews on Scar Art<sup>14</sup> the detailed review and critique of the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition (Diliujie quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan)*,<sup>15</sup> and numerous events of the New Wave. The magazine further organized discussions on various subjects, for example content and form, self-expression, realism, and nude painting.<sup>16</sup> Beginning with the July 1985 issue, the column "Innovate Our Concepts of Art" discussed experimental trends of the '85 Art Movement.<sup>17</sup>

The weekly paper *Fine Arts in China (Zhongguo meishu bao)*, which Liu Xiaochun, former editor-in-chief, called China's first professional art magazine, occupied a top position among the Chinese art magazines of the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> New and unusual were the organization of the editorial staff, as well as its profile and its goals. Published by the Research Institute of Fine Arts of the China Arts Research Academy, the paper was official. From the inaugural issue published on July 6, 1985, through the paper's closure on official instruction four and a half years later, 229 issues were published. Significantly, *Fine Arts in China* was the first privately financed art magazine in China. Actually, the inaugural members privately lent the initial capital of 200,000 yuan from the institute.<sup>19</sup> Even though this was an internal agreement, the international press got wind of it and suspected fundamental changes were on the way with the admission of a first private magazine.

The editing of *Fine Arts in China* was also organized according to a new system, with internal and external editors responsible for different columns or even entire issues. This kind of system allowed the editors, most of whom were art historians of the middle and young generations, to focus on their research work and their personal fields of interests. The system of editing as well as the weekly and detailed reports and reviews on the New Wave contributed to the diversity of *Fine Arts in China*. Aside from diversity, the declared aims of the magazine were competition, the reporting of current events and new trends, the scientific review of works of art and theoretical topics, as well as a balanced professional profile. Balance was to be guaranteed by the division into various columns, including traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy, architecture, sculpture, and art education. The reports on the New Wave occupied a quarter of the four-page magazine. The notion "scientific" here is to be read in the sense of not ideologically motivated. Liu Xiaochun thus touches on "advocating the democracy of science" as another important goal.<sup>20</sup> The magazine was supposed "to provide an unvarnished report of the scientific conflicts and controversies of the art world."<sup>21</sup> For this reason, delicate questions and subjects were picked up. This provocative and inflammatory attitude is particularly evident in the example of Li Xiaoshan's article "My Opinion on Contemporary Chinese Painting" that was reprinted in *Fine Arts in China* under the title "Chinese Painting Has Reached a Dead End."<sup>22</sup> The magazine's outstanding profile, which can be subsumed under the notions modern, scientific, inflammatory, and provocative, as well as its exceptional design,<sup>23</sup> explain its great influence despite its relatively small print runs of 100,000 copies. Another important factor is the comprehensive weekly reporting of the current events of the New Wave. The magazine was, as Gao Minglu mentions, the most important forum and means of communication for the regional artists' groups: "Nearly every New Wave artist had an

issue in his hands."<sup>24</sup> The magazine's high professional standard further functioned as a kind of quality certificate for works of art and events of the avant-garde movement. Even more influential, however, was its direct intervention into the art scene through the organization and co-organization of extremely important events, including the *Zhuhai Symposium (Zhuhai huiyi)*,<sup>25</sup> and the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, and the so-called *Xishan Symposium (Xishan huiyi)*, a critical retrospective of the '85 Movement.<sup>26</sup>

*The Trend of Art Thought (Meishu sichao)*, with a similar far-reaching influence, was published by the Artists' Association of Hubei Province. The monthly magazine was first published in October 1984 and appeared bimonthly from 1986. It focused on the "reporting of news from the front line of contemporary art theory,"<sup>27</sup> and emphasized competition (*zhengming*), renewal (*qingnianhua*), a scientific, non-ideological approach and philosophical flavor (*zhexue yiwei*). More than two-thirds of the articles were written by young art critics, supposedly guaranteeing competition and innovation. Art historical reviews and philosophical essays both focusing on works of the avant-garde, as well as the discussion of innovative trends of Western and Chinese art theory, stood for "philosophical flavor." In the 1980s such a concept was noteworthy, and *The Trend of Art Thought* was therefore highly welcomed by art critics, artists, and art students. The magazine's focus on the contemporary and the art of the New Wave further guaranteed a wide readership.<sup>28</sup>

*Compilation of Translations in Art (Meishu yicong)* was a magazine that mainly translated and discussed Western art theory. It was published by the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (later, China National Academy of Fine Arts) in Hangzhou, with young art critics dominating its readership. In spite of its small circulation, its influence was considerable.<sup>29</sup>

Two other magazines that basically presented works of art, single artists and artists' groups were *Jiangsu Pictorial (Jiangsu huakan)* and *Painter (Huajia)*. Founded in 1974, *Jiangsu Pictorial* has appeared monthly since its reorganization in 1985. Aside from a scientific approach, modernity and a national influence were the aims of this magazine that, particularly in 1985 and 1986, vigorously supported the art of the New Wave, both in print and by organizing symposia and exhibitions.<sup>30</sup> One of the most influential controversies of the 1980s, the controversy on the modernization of traditional Chinese painting, was initiated by the above-mentioned article by Li Xiaoshan, originally published in *Jiangsu Pictorial*. *Painter* was founded in November 1985 by the Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House. The magazine focused on the detailed presentation of single artists and cared for high-quality reproductions; therefore, although it focused on the regional art scene, it drew a wide readership. Financial difficulties caused the magazine to publish irregularly.<sup>31</sup>

## SYMPOSIA

The late 1970s and the 1980s saw the organization of numerous symposia, particularly during the years from 1985 to 1988. The official publication *Yearbook of Chinese Art 1949–1989 (Zhongguo meishu nianjian 1949–1989)* records for each of these years ten to fourteen regional and national symposia. (This does not include talks that were spontaneously organized on the occasion of exhibition openings.)<sup>32</sup> These symposia were official or semi-official events, organized by the Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Artists' Association, fine arts academies and, as mentioned above, by art magazines. In 1982, for example, when the graduation works of the students of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute caused a sensation all over China, the magazine *Art* and the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute co-organized national symposia on the subject of arts education, on the instruction of the Arts Education Office, a branch of the Ministry of Culture. On those occasions, the



former head of the Academy, Ye Yushan, introduced his new methods to the public and thus initiated an influential discussion on the reform of teaching methods in general.<sup>33</sup>

Among the numerous symposia are three that played a decisive role in the development of the New Wave art movement, the two so-called *Huangshan Symposium* (*Huangshan huiyi*) and the *Zhuhai Symposium*. The first *Huangshan Symposium*, originally called the *Symposium on Oil Painting* (*Youhua yishu taolunhui*), was held in Anhui Province near Mount Huang in April 1985. It was organized by the Art Research Institute of the Province of Anhui, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and the Painting Institute in Beijing, and the magazine *Art History and Theory* (*Meishu shilun*) as a reaction to the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition*. Around seventy art critics and artists of the young and middle generation<sup>34</sup> openly criticized the exhibition and recounted recent developments. They formulated common points of view and goals, such as "freedom of artistic creation and freedom of criticism," the symposium's motto.<sup>35</sup> For the first time, the slogan "conceptual innovation" (*guannian gengxin*) was formulated, comprising innovation within the nature and function of art as well as in artistic methods.<sup>36</sup> The participants unanimously refuted the theory of the primacy of subject matter (*tikai jue ding lun*) and agreed that technical, formal, and stylistic pluralism was essential. Art should be considered from the perspective of aesthetics to prepare a broader acceptance of abstract art. Gao Minglu called this symposium "an important factor for the promotion of the development of a pluralist art world."<sup>37</sup> A collection of forty articles, including those of old masters like Wu Guanzhong, was compiled as the symposium's output.<sup>38</sup>

The *Zhuhai Symposium* was organized by the Painting Institute of Zhuhai and *Fine Arts in China* on the initiative of artist Wang Guangyi. On August 15, 1986, the most active artists of the '85 Movement and representatives of the most important artists' groups, of artists' associations, art institutes and art academies, as well as chief editors of the most influential art magazines from all over China met in the provincial town in the Zhujiang delta.<sup>39</sup> At the symposium, originally called *Grand Slideshow and Symposium on the Art Trends of '85* (*85 Meishu sichao daxing huandeng zhanlan lilun yantaohui*), 324 slides representing new trends were shown.<sup>40</sup> For the first time, this most comprehensive and influential symposium of the 1980s provided young artists and critics with the opportunity to discuss their concepts and works publicly. Essential and controversial subjects were the growing conceptual trends of the New Wave art movement, Dadaist trends that were mainly criticized by artists and critics of the older generation. The idea to organize the exhibition *China /Avant-Garde*, also *Modern Chinese Art Exhibition*, originally planned to be held in the Agriculture Exhibition Hall in Beijing in 1987, was probably born on the occasion of this symposium.<sup>41</sup>

The second *Huangshan Symposium* met from November 22 to November 24, 1988, in Tunxi, near Huangshan. It had been organized by the Art Research Institute and the Institute for Painting and Calligraphy of the City of Hefei, its goal was to provoke a reorientation and renewal of the avant-garde and, of course, to prepare the exhibition *China /Avant-Garde*.<sup>42</sup> More than one hundred artists presented their recent works, and Wang Guangyi formulated his slogan, "Purge humanist enthusiasm" (*qingli renwen reqing*), a slogan that strongly influenced the art world at least until mid-1989.

#### Notes

1. Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi, 1985–1986* [*Chinese Contemporary Art, 1985–1986*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991), 495.
2. Li Xiaoshan, "Dangdai Zhongguohua zhi wojian" in *Jiangsu huakan* [*Jiangsu Pictorial*] no. 7 (1985), 2–3. See also Hans Van Dijk, "Die traditionelle chinesische Malerei ist am Ende ihrer Sackgasse angekommen" in *Drachenbrücke*, ed. *Gebrochene Bilder. Junge Kunst au China. Selbstdarstellungen* (Bad Honnef: Horlemann,

- 1991), 102; and see Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979–1989, A Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 66–74.
3. See also Perry Link, *Roses and Thorns* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984): p. 39 and chapter 2.1. The development of a group consciousness and the need for identification is evident in numerous readers' letters.
  4. Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 495.
  5. The fact that many Chinese art critics had already, in the 1980s and early 1990s, written a history of modern Chinese art, as well as the often strategic position of many artists should be understood in this sense.
  6. See Igor Golomstock, *L'art totalitaire. Union Soviétique, III Reich, Italie Fasciste, Chine* (Paris: Editions Carré, 1991), 216.
  7. See Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 58–65.
  8. See Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 216; Liu Xiaochun, *Dui Zhongguo meishu bao de lishi jishu* [*Historical Record of Fine Arts in China*] (1994), manuscript. Translation by Köppel-Yang in *Semiotic Warfare*, 196–99. See also Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999), 176, 177.
  9. This was also the period of the Democracy Wall at Xidan in Beijing and the period of the big-character [posters] (*dazibao*). See also Oscar Weggel, *Geschichte Chinas im 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart: Kröner, 1989), 314.
  10. *World Art*, a magazine of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, was established in 1979.
  11. Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 495.
  12. Chen Yiming, Liu Yujian, Li Bin, "Guanyu chuanguo lianhuanhua *Feng de yixie xiangfa*" in *Meishu* [Art] no. 1 (1980): 34.
  13. Li Xianting "Guanyu *Xingxing Meizhan*" ("About the Stars Art Exhibition") in *Meishu* [Art] no. 3 (1980): 8–9. Also, see Gao Yan "Bushu duihua shi tanxin" ("It's not a dialogue, it's a heart-to-heart") in *Meishu* [Art] no. 12 (1980), 33.
  14. Fan Pu, "Chuangzuo xuyao yongqi, Sichuan meiyuan xuesheng de jijian zuopian" ("Creating requires courage: A few works by Sichuan Fine Arts Institute students" in *Meishu* [Art] no. 1 (1980): 37–38.
  15. See the column *Bitan* in *Meishu* [Art] no. 1 (1985): 4–13; Ye Qianyu, "Liu jie quanguo meizhan de qishi" ("Inspiration for the Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition") in *Meishu* [Art] no. 2 (1985): 3–9.
  16. See also Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 496.
  17. *Ibid.*, 496–500.
  18. Liu Xiaochun, *Dui Zhongguo meishu bao*.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. In his article on the paper *Fine Arts in China*, Liu Xiaochun explicitly criticizes the solution of scientific problems through political critique.
  21. Liu Xiaochun, *Dui Zhongguo meishu bao*.
  22. This title was chosen by Li Xianting, editor of the issue, according to a quote of the article. See *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*] no. 14 (1985). The article, reprinted under this title, caused much stronger reactions than when it was first published in *Jiangsu huakan* [*Jiangsu Pictorial*].
  23. See Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 496–500.
  24. *Ibid.*, 503.
  25. The exact title of the symposium is *85 qingnian meishu sichao daxing huandeng zhanlan xueshu taolunhui*, literally *Grand Slideshow and Symposium on Young Artistic Trends and Theories of '85*.
  26. See interview with Shui Tianzhong in Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 192–96.
  27. Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 504.
  28. *Ibid.*, 504–7.
  29. *Ibid.*, 509.
  30. *Ibid.*, 507–9.
  31. *Ibid.*
  32. See Liu Xilin, ed., *Zhongguo meishu nianjian 1949–1989* [Yearbook of Chinese Art, 1949–1989] (Nanning: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 1993), 18–47. One can suppose that the official yearbook does not record all symposia.
  33. The exhibition of the graduation works of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute was held in the National Art Gallery in Beijing on January 19, 1982. The symposium organized by *Meishu* [Art] took place shortly after the opening. The one organized by the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute was held in Chongqing on March 3, 1982. See: Liu Xilin, *Zhongguo meishu nianjian*, 28. See also Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, chap. 2.3.
  34. Young and middle generation are terms used by Chinese art historians to describe artists born in the 1950s and in the 1940s.
  35. See Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi*, 61–63.
  36. *Ibid.*, 61.
  37. *Ibid.*, 67.
  38. *Ibid.*, 61.
  39. *Ibid.*, 331.
  40. These 324 four slides had been chosen out of 1100 entries.
  41. Interview with Shui Tianzhong in Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 192–96.
  42. *Ibid.*, and *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*] no. 46 (1988).

## '85 ART NEW WAVE

Numerous unofficial art groups appeared spontaneously from 1984 to 1986, lending the name '85 Art New Wave to this exuberant period in the history of modern Chinese art. According to one statistic, more than eighty such groups, all of which emerged during this period, were scattered across twenty-three provinces and major cities.<sup>1</sup> Their members were mostly in their twenties; a considerable number of them had just graduated from or were still studying in art schools. No coherent artistic ideals or theoretical approaches united these groups or collectives, and their members also favored diverse art mediums and styles. Some of the groups, such as the Northern Art Group (*Beifang yishu qunti*) and the Pond Society (*Chi she*), had steady membership and articulated a set of guiding principles, while others were event-based, loosely organized collectives. A few groups, such as the Xiamen Dada, developed a radical approach toward art that verged on iconoclasm, while others continued to explore the potential of painting in expressing the artists' visions of the universe and mankind. But, generally speaking, compared with the unofficial artists of the late 1970s, experimental artists of the 1980s were more knowledgeable about recent developments in Western art, and they viewed themselves as participants in a historical struggle to revolutionize Chinese art.

Although the contemporary critics held different opinions about the nature and merits of the '85 Art New Wave,<sup>2</sup> most of them theorized it as a delayed modernization movement, which aimed to reintroduce humanism and rationalism into the nation's consciousness.<sup>3</sup> When they called avant-garde Chinese artists of the 1980s "modern" (*xiandai*), they identified them as participants in a broad historical movement that started in the early twentieth century but was interrupted in China from the 1940s to the 1970s. According to these critics, to regain the spirit of a genuine cultural revolution, artists should not only uphold humanism as their fundamental ideology, but also take upon themselves the role of cultural critic, "reexamining the relationship between art and society, religion, and philosophy in all possible ways."<sup>4</sup> This explains why avant-garde Chinese artists of the 1980s saw themselves as direct followers of great modernist philosophers and artists in the West. A historian of Western contemporary art may be surprised to find that among the most influential figures for these artists were Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Albert Camus, and T. S. Eliot.<sup>5</sup> But it makes perfect sense if we understand these artists' longing to rediscover their modernist roots.

This section consists of two groups of documents selected from a vast body of materials.<sup>6</sup> Those in the first group outline the '85 Art New Wave or critique this movement from different perspectives. The second group contains writings by members of six avant-garde groups located in China's northeast (Northern Art Group), southeast (Pond Society), southwest (Southwest Art Research Group [*Xi'nan yishu yanjiu qunti*]), mid-south (Red Brigade [*Hongse lü*]), lower southeast [Xiamen Dada], and south (Southern Artists Salon [*Nanfang yishujia shalong*]). Often employing philosophical language and charged with a sense of mission, these manifestos, position statements, and pronouncements of art projects convey a feeling of fervent artistic experimentation. Members of these groups include Wang Guangyi, Huang Yong Ping, Zhang Xiaogang, Zhang Peili, Wang Du, and many others. These texts thus signal the coming of age of a new generation of Chinese artists who would eventually expand their careers into the international sphere.

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### Notes

1. The most detailed account of this art movement is provided in Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi, 1985–1986* [*Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991).
2. See the translation below of Li Xianting's "Zhongyao de bushi yishu," "The Significance Is Not the Art," in which he argues that the '85 Art New Wave is essentially an ideological movement, not a modern art movement.
3. For example, Gao Minglu, a key organizer of the avant-garde movement in the 1980s, describes this movement in humanist terms. See his *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi, 1985–1986*.
4. Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 1979–1989* [*A History of Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989*] (Hunan: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1992), 2–4; quotation from 4.
5. Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 1979–1989*, 4.
6. Some of these materials have been published in Chinese compilations such as Gao Minglu, ed., *85 Meishu yundong lishi ziliao huibian* [*The '85 Art Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*], 2 vols. (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008); Fei Dawei, ed., *'85 Xinchao dang'an* [*Archives of '85 New Wave*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2007).

## General Discussions

### THE '85 ART MOVEMENT (1986)

By Gao Minglu

#### (1) ORIGINS

The cultural history of humankind is a course of constant self-liberation. It is only through activities of cultural production that people can become genuine human beings, and it's only through such activities that people can achieve true freedom. Moreover, these activities of cultural production are manifested within continuous and progressive degrees of cultural movements. In 1985, years after the May Fourth New Culture Movement, yet another culturally transformative movement took shape throughout mainland China.

In the world of painting, an art movement arose bringing together the fundamental characteristics and principal issues of the '85 cultural movement. It was an integral component of the cultural collision between China and the West taking place that year.

Generally speaking, movements always possess a certain confrontational and directed nature. The focus of the '85 Art Movement was aimed at the impact of Western culture following China's opening and reform. It also reconsidered tradition and examined the previous period of artistic creation (the former movement). Its directive was the modernization of Chinese art. The movement also exhibited its own distinctive characteristics, namely, theoretical purposefulness and partisan practices. Theoretically, in one very short year, it reenacted the basic content and three phases of the May Fourth Movement's struggle between China and the West, and between ancient and modern. The three phases could be described as, "the pros and cons of China and the West, the similarities between China and the West, and the cultural trends of China and the West." The contents of the movement were divided along the lines of national essence, foreign affairs, and the coming together of China and the West. They intersected at issues of nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernism, etc., and offered different options and understandings of each of these concerns. In practice, the dominant trend was toward indiscriminate borrowing. Within the brief space of a year or so, throngs of styles and techniques from various schools of Western modernism (including a section of postmodernism) all sprang forth in great numbers. The ferociousness of its force could match that of the impact of Western art during the May Fourth Movement. And, since young artists comprised

the majority of the members of this movement, the '85 Art Movement could also be considered a young artists' movement.

How can we evaluate and understand this movement? We must first face it head-on, and then analyze and dissect it. We must grasp and understand it at deeper levels, such as through the social transformations in contemporary China and the world and through the changing psychological structures of the Chinese people. By positioning it within the history of modern Chinese cultural development, we can use comparative studies to shed light on its true nature and significance.

In so doing, we can raise some issues that merit deep contemplation. When we simply criticize the movement as a repetition of its predecessors or an imitation of the West, we fail to recognize that the entire history of modern Chinese culture (we can go so far as to say of the entire East) is a history of continuously admitting and integrating with Western culture (including the thirty years following the founding of the nation). When we view predecessors like Lin Fengmian [1900–1991] and Xu Beihong [1895–1953] in a positive light for courageously drawing upon foreign culture, we must remember that they were regarded negatively at the time. We should think about the object and outcome of their artistic absorption, and the degrees of difference between then and now. We should also think about whether the particular goals that they initially struggled for were ultimately achieved. And, even if they achieved their goals, is it an invariable pattern for the future?

In truth, the momentous May Fourth Movement prematurely concluded its historical mission and left its onerous historical tasks for later generations to resolve. Years later, we have yet to rethink, to a significant degree, the past and present of human culture and furthermore use this introspection to build the future. Instead, more attention has been paid to specific cultural components and certain cultural spheres. This has caused the self-regulation of our art to only develop within a narrow scope. The desire to reflect on culture and tradition has been exceedingly weak. The production of culture is precisely based on rebellious reflection, which in turn is grounded in the judgment of subjective, man-made contemporary cultural developments. Therefore, different cultural periods and intellectual circles are founded upon different principles, and naturally each makes distinct cultural selections. Regardless of whether these are complementary collaborations or redundant similarities, all have their specific needs and directives.

Since the May Fourth Movement, through more than half a century of vast changes, major schools of modern Chinese art — such as Xu Beihong's school of painting guided by Western scientific realism (including Russian critical realism, which was actually a school of idealized realism), the painting schools of Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu [1896–1994] which sought to develop the unique sentiments of Chinese expression through the integration of China and the West, and the painting schools of Huang Binhong [1865–1955], Qi Baishi [1863–1957], and Pan Tianshou [1897–1971] which sought the revival of a national essence — all find their places within a general category of traditional literati painting that promotes a refined temperament. These schools went through ups and downs during the first few years of the new era, and all faced an intense challenge in the mid-1980s. In this sense, they have again appeared to be reaching the same place through different paths.

After "Scar Art," "Aestheticism," "Current of Life," "Mannerism," and other small artistic movements, the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition (Diliujie quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan)* — the largest exhibition in China in thirty years — took place to showcase these new painting trends alongside long-established realist styles. The reconciliation between the different styles seemed to embody the pluralism of modern Chinese

art. The *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition* basically provided an overarching summary and broad overview. Regardless of whether or not the experience itself was positive, it was of profound significance. Stimulating the imagination of Chinese contemporary painters, this exhibition was one of the direct causes of the '85 Art Movement.

The ongoing, theatrical repetition of history, combined with contemporary socio-economic material conditions, prompted a careful examination of culture. These aspects represented the climate and soil that cultivated the '85 Art Movement.

## (2) THE PHENOMENA

A prominent feature of this movement has been the rise of numerous group exhibitions. After the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition*, dozens of art exhibitions emerged on different scales in various locales. The overwhelming majority of these were spontaneously initiated by groups of young artists, with a few organized as activities for the International Year of Youth. There were even exhibitions by groups of middle-aged artists, such as the *Half Generation Painting Exhibition (Banjiezi huazhan)*, which were particularly conspicuous due to their taking place among the clamor of the young artists. For the most part, the exhibitions did not last long, at most just a few days. In Shenzhen, street exhibitions also emerged and made a considerable impression. The exhibitions were quite controversial and several were prematurely shut down. This kind of ubiquitous enthusiasm for exhibitions throughout the country was rarely seen in previous years and undoubtedly marked a rare and positive phenomenon for the new era.

From the objectives, group slogans, and artistic perspectives guiding the creation of the works, the trends of these exhibitions can be divided roughly into the following three tendencies:

### 1. PROMOTION OF A RATIONAL SPIRIT

The Northern Art Group (*Beifang yishu qunti*), the '85 *New Space* exhibition (*85 Xin kongjian*) in Zhejiang, and Jiangsu Youth Art Week's *Modern Art Exhibition (Daxing xiandai yishuzhan)* all demonstrate this trend. Their creations were guided by ruminations over specific theoretical ideas. Consider the Northern Art Group: this was the spontaneous organization of ten or so young people who specialized in painting, literature, social sciences, and the natural sciences. They established artistic positions using concepts of "Culture of the Post-Arctic" and "Culture of the North." Culture of the Post-Arctic was a symbolic concept that confronted two trends: the northward shift in global culture and the present cultural structure centered on the temperate zone. The Northern Art Group believed that contemporary culture in both the East and the West was facing unprecedented difficulties. In this moment, their desire for a rational, sublime, dignified, and solemn art form gave rise to the Culture of the North. They created a series of works for this purpose, which attempted to demonstrate the glorious, eternal, and immortal nature of the world without assuming a superstitious spirit or blind faith. Their works concerned the movement of the world and the rapid shifting of its structures, and positioned these concepts amid a space of vastness and coldness (as represented by the northern polar regions). In so doing, they displayed their ideas in "grand solemnity" and "frozen sublimity."

A group of young painters in Zhejiang also advocated a rationalist spirit. However, their rationalism occurred in the process of contemplation prior to artistic expression, while the creative process itself stressed intuition. For instance, Wenda Gu believed that rationality was historical and linear, and intuition was paramount to creation. He used Freud's "id" and "ego" to resolve the connection

between these two tendencies. He believed art to be visual expressions of the human spirit, with its realm bordering on the theory of man's integration with nature. He opposed self-expression, believing it to be too individual. Instead, one needs to sublimate secular sentiments. Transcending the worldly required a certain kind of spirit, a spirit that doesn't rely on the visual experience, and instead is obtained by deducing spiritual forms outside of the visual. Strictly speaking, Wenda Gu actually should not be classified in a school of rationality but in a school of spirituality. He should be situated between rationality and intuition, similar to Ren Jian from the Northern Art Group.

The average age of participants in the '85 *New Space* exhibition in Zhejiang was 27. For the most part, it was conducted by the Society of Young Artists, which, in turn, was organized by graduates of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. Their works vigorously avoided the idyllic sentiments of pastoral poetry, yet also differed from the Current of Life painting style that had been fashionable in previous years. Instead, these artists excavated a modern consciousness from within everyday scenes in urban life, pursuing honest, rigorous, and still compositions. They adopted the techniques of the New Realist School. Based on their own interests, they also studied Kant, Heidegger, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, although not in an in-depth way. They adored South American novels and worshipped Marx. For example, Geng Jianyi's *Haircut No. 4 (Lifa sihao)* deliberately complicated a "mundane" title by conflating it with a seemingly extraterrestrial figure. It was humorous, yet also evoked certain philosophical associations for people. Or, perhaps influenced by aesthetics, the artists emphasized the participation of subjective appreciation. During the process of creation, they paid attention to the viewer's thoughts and imagination as components to complete the work. This strengthened the untranslatable elements in the image. Since artists pursued the visual experience of both modern production and urban civilization, they abandoned the natural and poetic sentiments found in an agricultural economy. They attended to systematization and orderliness, wherein machinery and architecture conspired with geometric decoration to produce static effects through cold, indifferent, and lonely exteriors. After the exhibition, these kinds of works stimulated intense debate. Some criticized the artists by saying, "The characters in the images are so numb, so eccentric; is reality really like this, or is this the artist's cold treatment of reality?"

Like the '85 *New Space* exhibition, the Jiangsu Youth Art Week's *Modern Art Exhibition* also began with a rethinking of Current of Life painting. The difference is that this group of artists focused more on humanity and employed a diachronic perspective that compared dynamic trends, while '85 *New Space* painters compared static trends from a synchronic perspective. Naturally, we cannot use this characteristic to summarize the entire exhibition. In terms of the more important and more representative works, it is clear that the artists attempted to unfold the scenes, images, and compositions within a certain cultural context. The scenes and images served only as symbols of underlying spiritual implications. Moreover, the cultural context was an interwoven web of tradition and modernity, East and West. Within this specific time and space, they sought to position both individuals and this generation of people, and they searched for grounds for making judgments. They believed that Current of Life paintings did not truly engage in the introspection of man himself, but rather demonstrated resentment and grievances, without any spirit of repentance. As a result, they abandoned any theatrical nature or appeal, and instead proposed realism and rationalization. They suffered from a lack of theoretical guidance and, at times, the artists themselves

had to fulfill the duties of the theoretician. Although theory has enriched painters' minds, they are still troubled by how to objectify their own ideas. Nonetheless, this kind of anxiety was a positive phenomenon, because it showed a self-consciousness toward the deliberate integration of oneself into the torrent of cultural development.

In Shanghai, there was also a group of young and middle-aged painters who followed the path of rationalism. They diligently perused Eastern and Western philosophy, anthropology, and modern physics, and believed that tradition should be discussed from the perspective of all of humanity. Viewed in this way, regardless of whether a painting was Chinese, Western, ancient, or present-day, it only expressed the "human." Zhang Jianjun's *Humanity and Their Clocks* (*Renlei yu tamen de zhong*) positioned people of different races in outer space, inverted time, and as the stars shifted, revealed that humans unceasingly assault their own cognitive abilities by seeking thoughts that "surpass knowledge." Li Shan similarly recounted the eternal concept — as it has passed from ancient to modern — that "existence and nothingness engender each other" as demonstrated through the continuity of his tangible yet indeterminate "circle."

A trend toward nationalism in 1985 originated during the International Youth Year art exhibition [*Progressive Young Chinese Artists Exhibition* (*Qianjin zhong de Zhongguo qingnian huazhan*)]. Works in that exhibition, such as *In the New Era: Enlightenment of Adam and Eve* (*Zai xinshidai: Yadang Xiawa de qishi*), *Longing for Peace* (*Kewang heping*), *Studio* (*Huashi*), and *Spring Has Come* (*Chuntian laile*), emphasized a conceptual framework that abandoned aesthetically determined compositional styles. The partitioning and placement of things in the picture plane mostly accorded to ideas of subjective creation, and much less to life's temperaments or realistic scenes. Nonetheless, compared with the trend of nationalism in the '85 Art Movement, the rational spirit in this show only reflected a stage of awakening; it placed more emphasis on rethinking painting styles and individuality. Although it implied cultural reflections, this was by no means its primary objective.

Shortly after the *International Young Artists Exhibition* (*Guoji qingnian meizhan*), artwork by graduates of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts propelled this trend forward. They shared the basic aim of the former but used different means. However, their works gradually and increasingly conveyed a religious atmosphere with a grave, mystical overtone.

This current of rationality also spread throughout exhibitions of artist groups from all over [China]. For example, some artists in the Anhui Provincial Oil Painting Research Association sought to conceptualize the composition by disassembling its theme into various conceptual elements. Then, adhering to some kind of image or plot, they would be pieced together while retaining a fragmentary feeling. Additionally, the *Second Young Artists Exhibition* (*Di er jie qingnian meizhan*) in Jiangxi and the group exhibition of the "Zero" art group in Hunan had similar creative pursuits, but some artists had already shifted toward a certain degree of cultural reconsideration. Although exhibitions were often isolated in a locality or region, when we view them overall and in relation to each other, each appears as part of an organic whole.

Along with this interest in rationality, a new attention to religious spirit and atmosphere also emerged. Because rational paintings mostly employ still compositions and orderly arrangements, and because the images and scenes emphasize symbolic functions, they succeed in conveying the quiet and forlorn atmosphere of



Surrealism. This kind of atmosphere fits perfectly with their grand objectives of creating sublime and eternal subjects. It also coincides with their advocating contemplation, negation, and the courage to rebel in their search for exceptional determination. Thus, their pursuit of spirituality and religious tone was actually not about religious belief. For example, one young Jiangsu painter said, "China has never had religion and it has no consciousness about original sin or repentance; these are the most honored aspects of religion." We can see in this artist's remarks about spirituality a correlation to reconsiderations of culture and tradition. In fact, the spirituality that most painters describe concerns a non-specific spirit. To them, spirituality in this case is only an outpouring of unpurified secular emotions (self-expression) or a rebellion against the persistence of romanticism and poetic revelations to explain reality. The surreal, superego, and super-human elements in their works — this idea of surmounting the secular and real — is identical to the core of religious doctrines. Thus, all the terms used to describe the external form of religion — detachment, loneliness, mysteriousness, numbness, and so on — can also be used to critique these paintings' appearance. However, real analysis must penetrate into the level of their philosophy, psychology, and social consciousness; only then can we unravel the nature of their fascination with religion.

## 2. INTUITIONISM AND A SENSE OF MYSTERY

This tendency figured rather prominently in exhibitions such as Beijing's *November Painting Exhibition* (*Shiyi yue huazhan*), the *New Figurative Exhibition* (*Xin juxiang huazhan*) in Shanghai and Yunnan, the *Zero Exhibition* (*Lingzhan*) in Shenzhen, the *Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition* (*Shanxi xiandai yishuzhan*), etc. However, it also existed in other exhibitions, even in those where rationalist tendencies were relatively strong. Just like the tide of rationalism, it didn't just exist in a few exhibitions, but rather was a universal phenomenon.

The belief in intuitionism didn't just appear in recent years; it flourished along with the slogans of self-expression. On the one hand, the '85 Art Movement veered toward extreme rationalism; on the other, it also strengthened elements of intuition, and moved from emotions to impulse, from being gentle to coarse, and even introduced the scent of blood and disorder through masses of lines and colors. For example, in paintings by Song Yongping, Wang Jiping, et al. at the *Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition*, the thickness and intensity of color and the brutal clash between lines and color caused the works to gush forth with a primitive and wild nature. The artists declared that they sought to pursue the straightforward nature of the northwestern people and should be distinguished from the mild spirit of the Jiangnan region. The preface to the *New Figurative Exhibition* in Shanghai and Yunnan stated, "[It seeks] first to shake people's soul, not entertain their eyes. It's not a game of color and composition." They emphasized truth and a return to childhood, even going back to the beginnings of life — the origin of being [pl. 8]. The artist Li Jin of Tianjin created a group of paintings of people and animals called *Impressions of Tibet* (*Xizang yinxiang*). In his works, animals and people were treated as equal species. Humans had lost their nobility and grace, while animals had been assigned intelligence. Humans had become animalistic and animals had been humanized. This reflects these artists' philosophies on life. In the *New Figurative Exhibition*, the artist Mao Xuhui of Yunnan and his companions painted with movement to capture variations and expansions in volume. As Mao Xuhui saw it, this was simply the instinct and courage of man; it was synonymous with life. He recalled the words of Ivan Alekseevitch Bunin [1870–1953]: "Art is the

prayer, music, and song of man's soul." Thus, they were self-confident and believed that art is the soul's own movement and that all external forms were marks of the soul — the "realization" of the soul.

Wang Chuan and other young artists at the *Zero Exhibition* in Shenzhen created works such as *Hanging Coffins (Xuanguan)*, *Rubbings (Ta)*, and *Infinite Time and Space (Wuxian de shikong)*, which conveyed a kind of restless temperament. Through these works they intended to unearth a consciousness of life within the cyclical struggles between life and death, in humans, nations, and even the animal world.

The *November Painting Exhibition* in Beijing was much milder in comparison. Here, the artists' expressions were based on certain notions of detachment. They advocated pure art and rejected societal influence. This was contrary to the *New Figurative Exhibition* in Shanghai and Yunnan, the *Zero Exhibition* in Shenzhen, the *Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition*, and others, all of which opposed detachment from society and instead upheld the notion that art should touch on life and do as [Vladimir] Mayakovsky [1893–1930] wrote in *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*. Meanwhile, the painters of the *November Painting Exhibition* in Beijing further emphasized consummation of the self. They stressed inner purification and opposed outward emanation. Cao Li was guided by true sentiments that could not be expressed verbally. Xia Xiaowan sought his own position and individual will, and tried to convert these notions into religious terrain. His paintings thus all embodied a mystical tone. From heaven, earth, sun, and moon to humans and demons, they all grew increasingly spiritual. Shi Benming's series of sketches seemed as if he was narrating a fragment of a love story from deep within his own mind. The artist noted that the work arose from a certain inner demand and unintentionally revealed the emotional and psychological depths that he was experiencing at that moment in time. Thus, the work is not directed at a social meaning, and society naturally could also reply with complete indifference. Ding Pin stressed the intuitive relationship between musical rhythm and a painting's lines and colors. Of course, there was also a certain restlessness at the works' core, as in Ma Lu's painting, which used abstract blocks of color (he described them as symbols) to portray contradictions in the social psychology of society and destroy notions of diffusion and mediocrity.

Among young painters, therefore, it was not only the trends of rationality and intuitionism that formed differences in creative objectives. Within the school of intuitionism and antirationalism, there was disagreement about the ultimate reasons for the existence of painting. These perspectives came together under the banners of self-expression and anti-self-expression, individuality and anti-individuality. The former emphasized excavating the individual's soul and returning to the primitive naiveté that exists within the subconscious. This focused on the individual. They first attended to the nature of art and painting, emphasizing harmony between methods and the mind. The latter believed that expressing the intelligence and actions of humans and their lives was the ultimate reason for artistic creation. This was anti-individual, and moreover they were sentiments that transcended humans and the secular world. Through form, they manifested their restlessness and the outward expansion and distortion of "force" to embrace and integrate into an even greater spiritual meaning. [The artworks'] transcendence and extent of force seemed to demonstrate the enormity of their meaning. Thus, compared with the former's spiritual intuition, they had more thoughts and ideas about intuition. The former believed that the latter (including the rationalist school) had overstepped the category of art, while the latter believed that the former was too playful and lacked spiritual substance.

The *Half Generation Painting Exhibition* in 1985 was a representative exhibition. Although this kind of exhibition of middle-aged artists was rather unique, the mentalities, creative objectives, and aesthetic concepts of the ten painters represented the majority of middle-aged painters. After having undergone the ideological cleansing by the left, they prized truth to the extent that they should probably be categorized as a school of soul and intuition. However, the appearance of their works differed significantly from that of the young artists, since they emphasized artistic technique and craftsmanship. Compared with the young artists, they seemed much more comfortable and at ease; this is the ease that follows arduous hardships. Guang Jun's paintings seemed almost like a humorous game, while Wu Xiaochang sought a natural and content mode of expression. Cheng Yanan searched for simplicity and profundity, while Zhan Hongchang pursued an interest in the innocence of folk life.

There is still another category of interest in intuitionism that explores and captures apparitions between disappearance and emergence, but without the absurdity of Dalí's style or Freud's interpretations of dreams. This kind of faint apparition conforms to visual prototypes, but its quest is not a narration of some philosophy on life or the direct expression of personal secrets (like sexual desire). Instead, it expresses some aspect of the creator's temperament. Perhaps it is a distaste for former symbolic and literary modes, and is unearthing the appeal of these "little mysteries" tacitly understood by the individual.

Despite the differences among the various types of intuitionism, they all present a sense of mystery and awe. This is because, first, most of them employ undecipherable abstract forms, and second, they are similar in representing emotional conditions, thoughts, and spiritual substance. Whether these apply to the individual, to humanity, or to the universe, all are founded upon some unknowable premise. Even if they have intense objectives and an ultimate form, it is even more difficult for the viewer to grasp the subject's intentions because of the emphasis on transcendence during the creative process. Both individual microcosms and the greater universe appear within a state of disassociation and ambiguity. This kind of interaction, according to reception theory, should take shape as dictated by the viewer. This underscores the fact that there is no way, and no need, to return to the original intention behind the creation of the work. In reality, the creative work itself cannot necessarily return to its original condition. As a young painter from Anhui said, "I only want to draw out my expression, and hope it is enough to see myself. Although I have appeared, [the work] seems to be lacking something. She is looking at me with anxious judgment, as if anticipating that I will pursue it once more. But, it's already past." This quote is similar to what Comte said, "All the observations of the so-called mind (which has been regarded as independent, unrestrained, and innate) are all pure delusion." Therefore, despite everything that we often say about needing to express oneself, we must recognize that subjective consciousness is not the emotions or consciousness of an individual, but rather should be a universal subject. Humanity should not be explained through people; rather people should be explained through humanity. Thus, pure individual qualities (one's real sentiments) don't exist. What exists is only the historical and cultural extension of humanity. From this perspective, we should consider the reasoning and value of the viewpoint held by many young artists today who oppose self-expression, believing it to be "individual" and "secular emotions," and instead advocate expressing the excavation of the eternal flow of the human spirit.

### 3. THE RENEWAL OF CONCEPTS THROUGH BEHAVIORISM

1985 was the most strident year of the slogan, "renewal of artistic concepts." Chinese art, faced with Western styles, contemplated how to move toward modernity. It first emerged in the world of theory and criticism and then painters — young, middle-aged, and elderly alike — all became captivated by it. However, these concepts were initially a manifestation of the cognitive standards of a specific intellectual circle. When discussions of these concepts did not reach the levels of culture and history, confusion and misunderstanding naturally arose regarding the cultural context, meaning, and directed focus of the "concepts." In so doing, they easily devolved into a generalized, hollow swell of cultural discussions about tradition and culture.

However, as for those who practice these ideas, in particular for the young painters, the renewal of concepts still had enormous appeal.

In the creation of art, this renewal first emerged as an attempt to shatter our former visual models. It comprises the following aspects:

#### 1. EMPHASIS ON THE VALUE OF THE PROCESS OF MANUAL CREATION AND THE OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

By weakening the emphasis on the independent artwork and its individual capacity, they approach the work as a specific and partial method of a creative purpose and not as the ultimate goal or outcome. As a result, one exhibition consisting of works by several people could be considered a single work, with the paintings and sculptures positioned in the exhibition hall (or room) serving only as its integral elements, not as independent works themselves. Therefore, the arrangement of the exhibition hall became even more important than the rendering of the works, since it manifests the overall volition. In an exhibition hall, material objects are heaped together and pieces of Pop art flow in, one after another, all with the help of acoustics, video recordings, lighting, etc. Prominent examples of this include the *Exhibition of Three People (Sanren zhan)* at the Central University for Nationalities, the *Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition*, and the group exhibition of the Zero art group in Hunan. Furthermore, many young painters made series of works that also seemed to harbor these intentions. These artists believed that it was very difficult to depend on a single painting to achieve a large capacity of thoughts.

#### 2. BEHAVIORISM

Due to these concepts of manual work, artists came to believe that the process of making art was more important than its result, and that the work's ambience was more important than the work itself. Moreover, it was as if the outcome was already anticipated early on, such that the result was in advance of its creative reasoning. This inversion of cause and effect was certainly a mode of behaviorism, but it differs from Pollock's action art whose ultimate goal was still the artwork. Nonetheless, exhibitions of this kind of behaviorism would often receive the anticipated "effect." Thus, this type of renewal of concepts could actually be described as a kind of destruction of concepts. But, it was also believed that renewal was not possible without destruction. Action and demeanor were therefore attributed the greatest importance. Since this kind of performance could be quite provocative, most of these exhibitions met an early end. Even so, on some level, this was also the result that the artists sought. Undoubtedly, these exhibitions provided an extreme demonstra-

tion of reverse psychology; they were directed assaults. Whether or not they were for social approval, they all produced a psychological impact.

### 3. POP WAS HOT

The most provocative foreign exhibition in recent years was the Rauschenberg exhibition at the National Art Gallery at the end of last year. No matter whether one responded to his work with the anger brought on by humiliation or sighs of admiration, one could not help but respect the artist's expansive breadth of thought. And, in turn, one could never again consider this school of modern art irrelevant. At a time when Chinese painters strenuously searched for new ideas within a pitifully narrow space for thought, this exhibition was undoubtedly a breath of fresh air. Although in the West it was an old "thing" that had appeared in the 1960s, it was still new to China. Subsequently, in every region, groups of "little Rauschenbergs" soon emerged, who were by no means ashamed of this designation. An artist at the *Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition* said, "We are copying Rauschenberg; and, as for 'copying,' who can avoid it?" Actually, in the year or two prior to the Rauschenberg exhibition, similar material collages and assemblages had already begun to appear in various regions. It seemed inevitable that this stage would be reached, and the Rauschenberg exhibition was only a random catalyst.

Some people sought a renewal of traditional modeling styles and compositional patterns to transform the monotony and deficiencies of the language, while others believed that it was this so-called language that needed renewal. [It is such that] while the former discussed the many ways of composing a vase and achieving the desired results, the latter proposed replacing the vase with a urinal. As for artists with the latter perspective, the issue was no longer located in the style of the vase or the urinal, but in the action of exchanging it. Young artists who were deeply committed to Pop art followed these same lines; they did not necessarily understand that the string, cardboard, paper cartons, and cloth curtains were all things long ago exhausted by others. However, they saw that countless painters still used oil paint everyday. Whether or not the string, cardboard, paper cartons, and cloth curtains were "exhausted materials" thus depended on the [art's] narrative needs in a specific cultural context. This seemed to be their original intention.

The phenomena that I have summarized above still cannot fully illustrate the complicated and abundant differences among the diverse regions and art groups, or even among artists. Sometimes, these factors can infiltrate into or drift free from each other, as if there were no barriers to speak of. It also seems as if there are some exceptions, such as the *Miyang Painting Society Exhibition (Miyang huashezhan)* in Hebei that focused on discrepancies between the Chinese cultural (literati) tradition and the folk traditions. Within this relationship, they attempted to determine their own value and creative direction. Looking at it from this angle, it seems to have overflowed beyond the current of the contemporary young artists' movement. But generally speaking, deep down it still shared the spirit of the movement.

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE IS NOT THE ART (1986)

By Li Jiatun [pseud. Li Xianting]

The "'85 Art Movement" is not an art movement.

The reason for this is because China basically lacks the social and cultural background for modern art. Modern art evolved after Western humanism established a solid social foundation and after the concept of the subjective consciousness had emerged in modern philosophy. It forged a path from two different sides. One side strengthened the nature of perception by exposing the inner complexities of the modern person, while the other side strengthened rational nature by discovering man's ontological language in a world of signs and information structures. During the Scientific Revolution, developments in psychology and semiotics directly inspired modern art by drawing a relationship between the mind and external signs. Then, the Industrial Revolution prompted the development of modern design, and it is precisely design consciousness that is the kernel of the language of modern art. The transformation of different value systems brought a series of distinctions into the aesthetic consciousness of both modern and traditional art. These precedents provided the conditions for the birth of modern art. However, whether it's because China lacks the feudal tradition of humanism or because of interference by the far left since the Republican era, the recovery of Chinese art was launched within a political climate, and culled from the chaos of low-level philosophy and economics.

Furthermore, the innate laws governing the development of Chinese art do not demonstrate trends of modern art production. After the Renaissance in the West, realism became a kind of linguistic model and reached a zenith with its combined functions, values, etc. Consequently, the search for unique value in visual art itself became the symbol of modern art. This is a time of analysis, a period in which linguistic models are being constructed anew. In the last century of modern art, artists have set foot in nearly every field of modeling and possibility for expression, including form, color, line, the creative process, materials, etc. As for the background of Chinese art, on the one hand, it emphasizes poetic grace, the expression of subjective consciousness, the drawing process, etc. On the other hand, it has been influenced by the Soviet Union, emphasizing re-created scenes, literary flavor, and the social function of art in contemporary circumstances. While the former shares certain similarities with Western modern art, it was simply not possible that a trend equivalent to modern art could emerge from this counterdevelopment. In fact, in modern times, it was Xu Beihong [1895–1953] who introduced realism into the Chinese artistic tradition, a tradition that reached the extremes of counterdevelopment. Because its appearance was realistic, it melded with the Chinese artistic tradition into a single artistic state during the Republican era. So, the current situation is characterized by the synthesis of such trends. Nevertheless, realism was never completely absorbed into the artistic condition, so our primary task in the recovery of art is simply to bring realism into the artistic condition rather than transforming realism itself or using it as a kind of linguistic model. Its degree of realistic portrayal, its synthetic ability, and its aesthetic characteristics still have yet to match those that preceded Western modernism.

Thus, the recovery of art is by no means the engaging of art itself in the revolution of linguistic models, but rather is a movement of ideological liberation. For instance, a group of Sichuan artists launched "Scar Art" in their stance against the "red-bright-brilliant" painting style and the custom of singing praises to the authorities, while Chen Danqing popularized "Current of Life" art in his critique of "false, grand, and empty" words and "important themes." The [Beijing] airport mural, highlighting "decorative fashion," reacted against the subordination of art to politics and the championing of

content. All of these trends arose from a kind of reverse psychology. Social consciousness, politics, and utility are at the heart of change.

The '85 Art Movement is the deepening of this ideological liberation movement and not a nascent modern art movement. Individual consciousness is an important characteristic of modern art. But, the things which have emerged during the '85 New Wave — from spiritual consciousness to the language of painting — are surprisingly similar. The strident appeals in previous years for self-expression throughout the art world are abandoned here, because artists no longer want to express their individual moods. Instead, they yearn to express the sentiments of an entire generation. Actually, from the moment that the idea of self-expression was raised, the art world has never completely engaged in this trend toward true individual consciousness. Artists' interests in the collective social consciousness inevitably cause their work to appear rather uniform. The substance of this slogan is no more than a reaction against falsity and an emphasis on sincerity. That is all. Modern art belongs to an analytical period during which new linguistic models are constructed; it is therefore not purely spiritual, but is open, multilayered, and pluralistic. However, the '85 New Wave takes place in conditions that lack the social background of modern science, and the participating artists also lack knowledge about a variety of disciplines. They borrow the external façade of Western modern art, to harbor their own weak and nervous "pure spirit." Therefore, work from the '85 Art Movement is basically either Surrealist or in the style of Rauschenberg, because these two artistic languages are most suitable for transmitting the artists' philosophical sentiments. Throughout numerous works, we can see the artists' anxieties and ignorance amid their reconsiderations of concepts of human value. This makes them enjoy Western modern philosophy even more. They love to write essays, and, furthermore, they like the obscurity of abstract expression. Their interests reveal that this ideological liberation movement has begun to penetrate the layers of philosophy. But, it is not a modern art movement itself; at best, it is a stage of ideological preparation. The backwardness of science and economics has prompted artists' further migration toward the salons amid the poverty of philosophy, and has made it so they cannot help but masquerade as philosophers. The poverty of thought has made it so that their artworks cannot help but bear the responsibility of their weighty thoughts. This is precisely the pride of Chinese contemporary art and, at the same time, it is also the pity of Chinese contemporary art.

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## **A SUMMARY OF EVALUATIONS OF THE '85 ART MOVEMENT (1986)**

Compiled by Gao Minglu

The art world has followed the '85 Art Movement with increasing interest. At present, newspapers and journals have yet to gather and systematically discuss this topic, however many different opinions have already emerged about it. They are summed up in the following:

### **I. OBJECTIONS TO THE CONCEPTS "'85" AND "MOVEMENT"**

1. Bringing up "movements" easily gives people the impression of political movements.
2. It's unscientific. This kind of thinking has been around for a few years.
3. It's not comprehensive. 1985 cannot be summed up strictly by these young artists'

groups. There are also many middle-aged and older painters who are engaged in artistic investigations. And, among the young people, there are many different channels of exploration.

4. The "'85 Art Movement" is actually an academic movement limited within the confines of art theory. It only has meaning within public opinion and lacks practical significance. (Jian Shi, Shenyang)

The '85 Art Movement is a concept that was posed by Gao Minglu. Before this, *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) referred to it as a "youth movement."

Gao Minglu and others believed:

1. Cultural movements are common occurrences in history. It is a misconception that they are the same as political movements.
2. It is a temporal concept, and also has idiosyncratic characteristics. It is important to note that the abrupt changes brought about by the emergence of art movements in recent years converged in 1985.
3. In 1985, artwork by young artists undoubtedly constituted an aggressive trend. Other, previously existing types and levels of exploration, pursuit, and creation were all of secondary importance that year.

## II. EVALUATIONS ACCORDING TO SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

1. Most people consider this [movement] to be a positive phenomenon emerging out of the opening [and reform movement]. They believe that its essence lies in awakening people, deepening levels of thinking, and transforming value systems. They view it as a historical necessity. Regardless of whether or not one acknowledges this, it already occupies a page in history and has become a part of tradition.
2. A minority opinion contends that this is not a positive phenomenon. [They believe] that it plagiarizes and indiscriminately copies from the West, and even signifies an opportunistic means of easily becoming a great master [artist]. "It is distant from the cultural standards of socialism."
3. There are those who approve of the phenomenon, but believe that it is divorced from reality and detached from life, that it has a cold and aloof tone, and lacks both enthusiasm and a sense of social responsibility.

A contrary belief is that the young people's pursuits to awaken the rational spirit demonstrate a self-examination of society and life, and as such possess a very profound sense of mission.

## III. EVALUATIONS FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Some uphold the belief that this is a process of complete Westernization — even more absolute than Taiwan's — that draws us closer to the West and farther away from China. It lacks a distinct national position. It is a kind of naïve imitation. For Chinese art to have genuine value, it should possess national characteristics.
2. [This is a] repetition of tragedy. In the 1930s, many from that older generation already engaged with these modernist schools. When we look at their work now, it is still excellent. Young people today are shallow. They don't understand this period of history, and don't regard these historical repetitions as meaningful. Or, they only perceive their significance in terms of their sociopolitical attacks, and not for its artistic value. (See Ba Huang, "'Chongfu' yu 'beiju'" ["Repeat and Tragedy"] in *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*], July 14, 1986 [no. 28].)



The opposite of the above opinion:

1. The so-called complete Westernization is a conscious choice. According to some, this is a choice made by courageous people, to accept challenges and make sacrifices. It is prompted by a sense of disparity in position and time. The tragic consciousness induced by this way of thinking has value. It is a necessary step in the march toward modernity. (See Hong Zaixin, "Yonggan de xisheng" ["Sacrifice of the Courageous"], in *Zhongguo meishu bao*, May 5, 1986 [no. 2].)
2. The so-called repetition is a repetition on a different level. There are differences in what the artists have borrowed and selected. In the 1930s, there was concordance between the nature of their expression and their attachment to emotional sentiments. Contemporary art is characterized by polarity, cold detachment, and restless movement. The differences are rooted in artists' divergent ways of thinking. (See Lang Shaojun's speech at "Quanguo meishu lilunhui" ["National Art Theory Conference"], "Jinxiandai yinru xifang meishu de lishi jingyan" ["Drawing Historical Lessons of Western Art in Modern Times"].)

#### IV. CONCERNING ARTISTIC QUALITIES

Some people believe that the '85 Art Movement is not a modern art movement.

1. [They believe this] because presently China still doesn't have the social and cultural background for modern art. This background should include: philosophical systems of intuition and reason, the enlightenment of modern art and a corresponding linguistic structure and spirit, consciousness toward modern design, and transformations in value systems. Presently, China's social and cultural background lacks a humanist tradition. Instead, it is influenced by an ultraleftist ideology. Thus, all artistic activities derive from the political atmosphere, and attempts to bring order out of this chaos are based in low levels of philosophy and economy. Thus, the present series of art revolutions and revivals are not "revolutions in linguistic models," that is, transformations in artistic language. It is only a movement of ideological liberation. The '85 Art Movement is only a deepening of this movement of ideological liberation, and not a new movement of modern art. (See Li Jiatus [pseud. Li Xianting], "Zhongyao de bushi yishu" ["The Significance Is Not the Art"] in *Zhongguo meishu bao*, July 14, 1986 (no. 28) [Translated above — Ed.] .)
2. Without individual consciousness, there is an alarming similarity in [artistic] language, basically following Surrealism and Rauschenberg's style. What is expressed is no longer an individual's sentiment, but the thoughts of an entire generation.
3. Conceptual art alienates art from itself; it is overloaded. It excessively prosecutes philosophical theory, concepts, and knowledge. This is a new kind of unilateral philosophical analysis.
4. Some believe that those who uphold intuition, particularly those with a violent, sanguinary overtone, bring in chaos. They are in violation of harmony and against aesthetic rules, to the point of being against society. (See Ma Nanchi's writing in *Meishu [Art]* 222, no. 6 [1986].)

There are also disputes among the participants [of the movement] between those who advocate reason and those who advocate intuition. Their specific points of intersection are: a sense of mission versus aesthetic play, one's true feelings versus forced consciousness, the intelligence of artistic expression and depth of spiritual meaning, etc. [See essays in *Meishu* and *Zhongguo meishu bao* by Wenda Gu, Shu Qun, Li Luming, Ding Fang, Zhang Qun, Ma Gang, et al.]

The opposite of the above evaluations:

1. The '85 Art Movement is an art movement, and also marks the beginning of Chinese modern art. If we view this kind of modern art as a glass half full, then we should encourage it because this means we already have half a glass. We shouldn't belittle it for its emptiness. (See the essays by Zhu Qingsheng and Wang Xiaojian in *Zhongguo meishu bao*, September 22, 1986 [no. 38]).
2. Being overly critical about the art movement — expecting it to be identical to Western modern art and voicing disdain and mockery at any discrepancies — is utterly unjustifiable. We shouldn't use the Western modern art movement as a yardstick for making demands on China's art movement. Furthermore, artists can't just sit back and wait for a modern social environment and cultural background to develop. (See the letter from a student studying abroad in Japan in *Zhongguo meishu bao*, September 15, 1986 [no. 37]).
3. People who take an approving attitude toward the '85 Art Movement's two extremes of advocating reason and intuition believe that by expanding our former unilateral artistic thinking, we can transform nationalism. Philosophical theory, philosophical thinking, consciousness, and concepts can all enter into the field of artistic expression. (See Gao Minglu, "Guanyu lixing huihua" ["Concerning Rational Painting"] in *Meishu* 224, no. 8 [1986])

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## **APPENDIX**

### **THE LANDSCAPE OF CHINA'S MODERN ART MOVEMENT (1991)**

By Tong Dian

In this section [of a historical survey book], we examine contemporary art using sociological methodology. This examination will further prove that modern art became a major trend in 1985 and 1986. As such, we will also be conducting an investigation of the development of China's modern art movement over the past decade.

Here, we need to explain: What is Chinese modern art? Given that it is *Chinese* modern art, it cannot be completely dependent on Western modern art as a frame of reference. But, at the same time, it cannot be independent of the many concepts and styles that Western modern art offers. This [dilemma] was determined by the cultural characteristics of the time period. Chinese modern art here is not an abstract concept, but rather a [real] artistic phenomenon that has already happened and a concept that integrates both the [specificity of the] time and artistic viewpoints. More specifically, "modern art" refers to all those who have proposed new concepts (or revealed them in their artwork) distinct from past artistic phenomena in China, and formed trends and movements in art circles. For example, over the past decade in the Chinese art world, Luo Zhongli's *Father* (*Fuqin*), Chen Danqing's Tibetan paintings series, the debate initiated by Wu Guanzhong's article "Formalist Aesthetics in Painting," and the mural in the Beijing Capital airport can all be seen as part and parcel of the development of Chinese modern art. However, after 1985 and 1986 they were no longer regarded as modern art. By then, Luo and Chen's Native Soil naturalism was already passé, and Wu Guanzhong's formalist aesthetics had become institutionalized as part of the academy, set in opposition against another new, formidable trend of thought. Hence, the definition of Chinese modern art possesses different meanings and implications during

different time periods. The same holds true for academic art, which generally refers to an artistic phenomenon that is stable, neutral, has a purist tendency, and neither intervenes in nor strongly opposes ideological trends. Its definition, although relatively simple compared with that of modern art, also changes according to the times.<sup>1</sup>

In previous chapters, we have seen the increase in the influence of the modern art movement in art circles. As it started to attract a great deal of attention, artists were compelled to turn their interests toward modern art. Therefore, to examine this movement we have to investigate the circumstances surrounding first, the shift in interest toward modern art among fine art circles, and, second, the gathering of modern art activities.

## I. THE SHIFT IN ATTENTION IN THE CHINESE ART WORLD BETWEEN 1977 AND 1986

### A. THE DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT TOWARD MODERN ART FROM 1977 TO 1986

First, we need to evaluate the rise of modern art from a demographic standpoint. Through an examination of an artist's activities, artwork, and opinions expressed in his writings, we can make determinations about his modern art tendencies. If an artist had modern art ideas, but didn't publicize them in any form, then we have no way of making any evaluations about them. Thus, our statistics for the number of people who converted to modern art in a given year are based on calculations by organizers of modern art activities (including exhibitions, symposia, conferences, workshops, publications, important documents, etc.)

Source materials:

- The majority [of information] is derived from empirical investigation and numbers submitted by artist groups.
- A portion is from published reports about the modern art movement in publicly circulated periodicals. It is important to note that our study focuses on cases of Chinese domestic artists active in China. Foreign artists' activities in China are not included in our statistics.

Year	No. of participants	Age					
		55 & over	%	36-54	%	35 & under	%
1977	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1978	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1979	37	1	2.7	1	2.7	35	94.6
1980	201	30	14.9	30	14.9	141	70.1
1981	56	0	0	20	35.7	36	64.3
1982	56	0	0	0	0	56	100
1983	60	16	26.7	15	25	29	48.3
1984	6	0	0	0	0	6	100
1985	926	10	1.0	40	4.3	876	94.6
1986	3475	45	1.3	147	4.2	3283	94.5
Total	4817	102		253		4462	

Chart 1. Participants in modern art activities, 1977-1986

From Chart 1, we can see:

- The total number of participants in modern art over the past decade is 4,817. The annual average  $X = 4817 / 10 = 481.7$ , which means that there was an average of 481.7 participants per year in modern art activities.

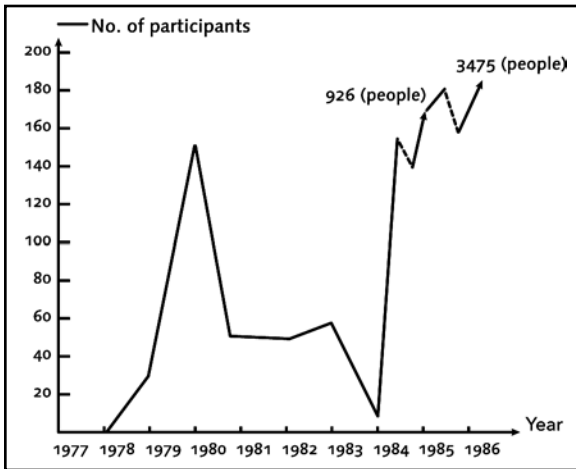


Fig. 1. Changes in number of participants in modern art activities, 1977–1986

- b. 1986 was the year with the most participants: 3,475 in total. Also, between 1985 and 1986, there was a total of 4,401 participants in modern art activities, constituting 91.4% of the sum total of participants during the decade. This means that most artists shifted their artistic leanings during these two years.
- c. The number of participants in modern art fluctuated continually throughout the decade until the last two years, when it showed a steady rise. Figure 1 shows zero total participants in 1977 and 1978. Within the short period of one year, it rises to over 20, but then falls again to below 20 in 1984. 1980 sees the first peak before 1985, while 1984 marks the lowest point. 1985 signals the turning point when the numbers start to rise again, reaching the decade's highest point in 1986.
- d. The age distribution of participants in modern art can be seen in Figure 2. We divided all of the participants into three age groups: elderly (over 55), middle-aged (36–54), and young (below 35). The results show that there were only 102 elderly participants, making up 2.1% of the total; 253 middle-aged participants, making up 5.3%; while young participants, boasting a sum of 4,462, claim 92.6%. These figures and charts show very clearly the constituency of the movement: young artists dominated, while elderly and middle-aged participants together make up less than 10% of the total. Figure 3 shows that the elderly and the middle-aged groups shared the same rate of development and similar numbers. The two groups together seldom surpass even half of the total. Throughout the decade, their involvement saw only a small surge in 1980, 1981, and 1983. But, in all of the other years, they did not exceed 10% of the total.

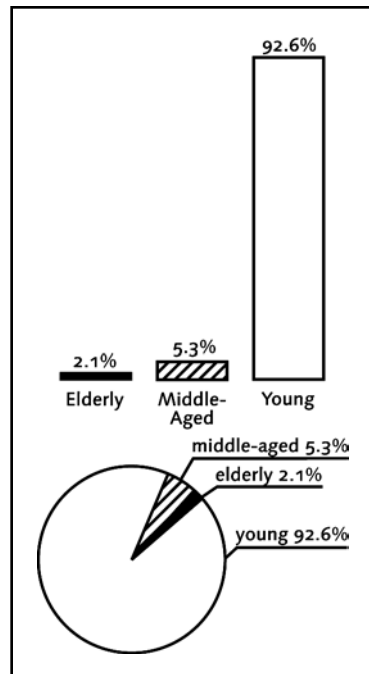


Fig. 2. Age distribution of participants

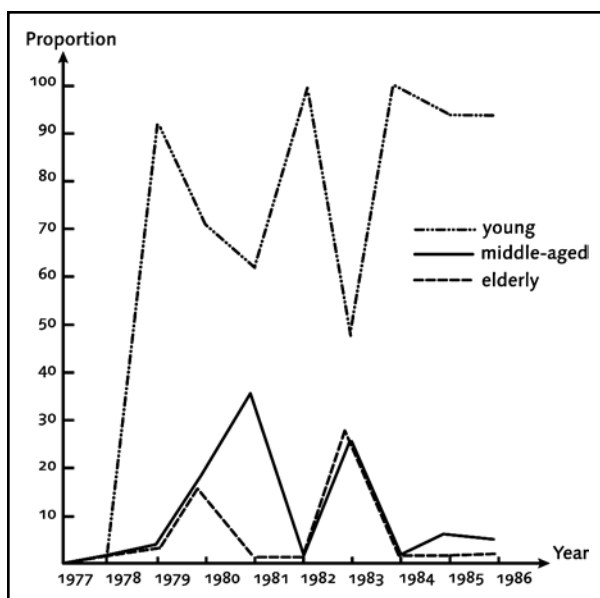


Fig. 3. Proportion of artists who are elderly, middle-aged, and young (%)

#### B. THE SHIFT IN INTEREST TOWARD MODERN ART FROM 1977 TO 1986

Artists' gradual gravitation toward modern art and the increase in participants [in modern art activities] all indicate that the general shift in interest in art circles was already taking place. The following is an investigation of the circumstances surrounding this shift in interest. We use *Art (Meishu)* as a primary resource, categorizing all of the articles published in this journal in the past decade. From this, we can illustrate the general change in interest in the art scene by mapping the proportional changes of each category. The indication of interest is obtained by dividing the number of articles in a certain category in a certain year by the total number of articles published in the same year. *Art* is a nationally circulating journal as well as the official publication of the Chinese Artists' Association. It has records of all of the most important events in art circles throughout the nation and offers detailed reports and discussions about the scholarly developments in the fine arts as well. That is why we chose *Art* as our basic source instead of other local journals, which can exhibit particular biases. Here, it is necessary to note: 1) the statistics do not include news briefs, and instead focus on theoretical articles and artists' notes written from a definite artistic viewpoint; 2) we divide all of the articles into seven categories: "academic art" (please refer to its definition earlier in this section); "political art" specifically refers to articles which argue that art serves politics; "techniques" are writings only on painting techniques; "modern art" (please see definition earlier in the section); "overseas" refers to articles that translate or introduce foreign art; "ancient Chinese art" refers to studies of Chinese art history prior to the May Fourth Movement [in 1919]; "Chinese folk art" refers to all studies of folk art; "other" refers to writings that belong to none of the above categories and are not journalistic reports (for example, the regulations of the Chinese Artists' Association).

The bottom row in Chart 2 shows that over the past decade, most articles have been written about academic art, totaling 676. Next is the Chinese modern art category, with 295 articles. In third is the political art category, with 220 articles. Meanwhile, there have been 135 articles introducing modern art from overseas.

Topic Year	modern art	political art	overseas art		ancient Chinese art	Chinese folk art	academic art	techniques	other	total
			ancient	modern						
1977	0	46	2	2	4	0	6	5	17	82
1978	0	44	3	1	8	9	3	4	11	83
1979	13	57	12	4	10	0	47	1	10	154
1980	19	21	2	10	5	7	77	4	16	161
1981	35	3	4	28	8	10	85	5	20	198
1982	35	13	2	22	0	19	79	5	15	190
1983	30	23	9	21	3	20	89	9	25	229
1984	15	10	4	10	3	17	144	10	39	252
1985	48	2	1	18	8	16	81	5	30	209
1986	100	1	3	19	2	18	65	2	12	222
Total	295	220	42	135	51	116	676	50	195	1780

Chart 2. Change in interests in the art world

Topic Year	modern art	political art	overseas art		ancient Chinese art	Chinese folk art	academic art	techniques	other	total
			ancient	modern						
1977	0	56.1	2.4	2.4	4.9	0	7.31	6.1	20.7	100
1978	0	53	3.6	1.2	9.6	10.8	3.6	4.8	13.3	100
1979	8.44	37.01	7.8	2.5	6.4	0	30.5	0.6	6.4	100
1980	11.8	13	1.2	6.2	3.1	4.3	47.8	2.4	10	100
1981	17.7	1.5	2	14.1	4	5.05	42.9	2.5	10.1	100
1982	18.4	6.8	1.05	11.57	0	0.1	41.6	2.6	7.9	100
1983	13.1	10	3.9	9.2	1.3	8.7	38.9	3.9	10	100
1984	5.95	4	1.5	4	1.2	6.8	57.1	4	15.5	100
1985	23	1	0.5	8.6	3.8	7.7	38.8	2.4	14.4	100
1986	45	0.5	1.4	8.6	0.9	8.1	29.2	0.9	5.4	100
Mean	14.32	18.3	2.5	6.8	3.5	5.2	33.8	3.1	11.5	100

Chart 3. Change in interests in the art world

If we add up all articles about modern art, including both original writings and translations, and divide by the sum total of articles, the ratio is  $(295+135)/1780=21.2\%$ . By the same token, the academic art category has a ratio of  $676/1780=38\%$ , political art  $220/1780=12.4\%$ , folk art  $116/1780=6.5\%$ . This is a general view of the interests in art circles over the past decade (see Fig. 4). We have yet to conduct a year-by-year analysis of each category, but we can tell that in the past decade art circles showed the most interest in academic art, then modern art, political art, folk art, ancient Chinese art, techniques, and foreign classical art, in that order.

Figure 5 maps out the changes in interest in the past decade. The four lines represent four different categories. Generally speaking, there has been a rise in interest in modern art and academic art, but a decline in interest in political art. To further illustrate this point, we made an adjustment to the previous categories: we combined the categories about [articles regarding] domestic and foreign modern art (see Chart 4). The justification for doing so is that Chinese modern art can be seen as having established itself on experiences drawn from foreign modern art. It is fair to say that introducing foreign art activities also indicates Chinese art's interest in modern art.

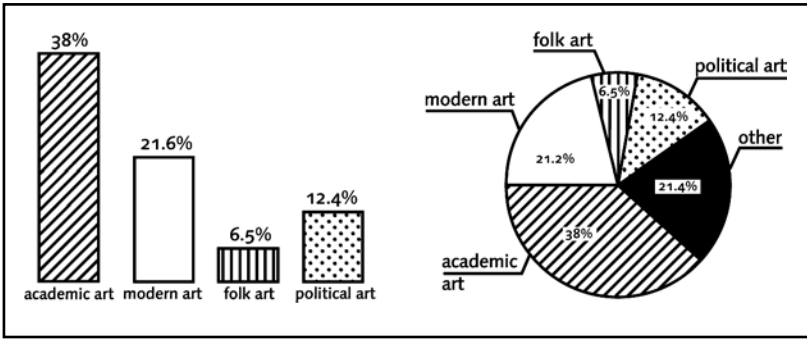


Fig. 4. Division of interests in art

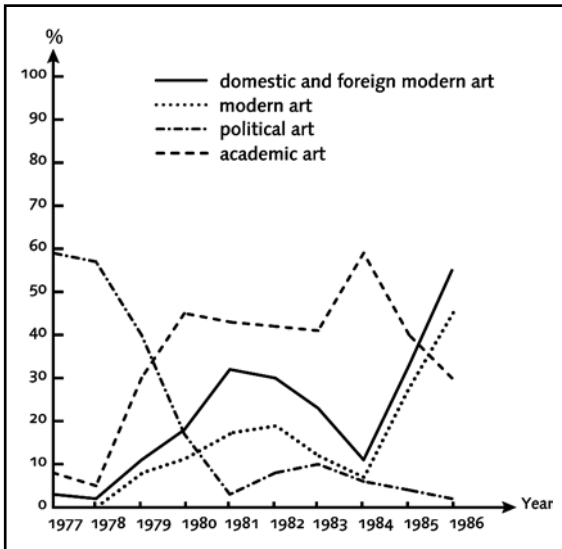


Fig. 5. Changes in interests in art (%)

Year \ Topic	Modern Art (%)	Academic Art (%)	Political Art (%)
1977	2.4	7.31	56.1
1978	1.2	3.6	53
1979	10.94	30.5	37
1980	18	47.8	13
1981	31.8	42.9	1.5
1982	30	41.6	6.8
1983	22.3	38.9	10
1984	10	57.1	4
1985	31.6	38.8	0.95
1986	53.6	29.2	0.45

Chart 4. Division of interests in art

Judging from the changes in interests through the decade, the interest in academic art remained at a position of steady dominance since its rise in 1979. Although it experienced a slight drop after 1980, it rose again in 1984, peaked and constituted more than half of the interest shown in national fine art circles. Starting in 1985, however, it declined dramatically and in 1986 reached its lowest point since 1979. The interest in political art occupied more than half of the total interest at the end of the 1970s, but after 1980 it plummeted, and within a year it reached its first low point, only claiming 1.5% of the national interest. After that, it had a minor rise and reached a small peak in 1983 with 10%, but that still represents the least amount of interest compared with the other categories. It continued to fall after 1983, and within three years it comprised less than 1% of the national interest; artists' interests in serving politics was reduced to a minimum. In comparison, the interest in modern art started off at almost zero, rose to 11% in 1979, reached its first small peak in 1981, but progressively declined at an annual rate of 10% between 1982 and 1984 and fell to its lowest point since 1979 in 1984. 1985 sees a dramatic turn toward modern art, when its number doubled that of 1984 and more or less returned to the levels enjoyed in 1981. In 1986, it continued to rise and reached its second peak, also the highest point of the decade, constituting more than half of the national interest.

If we compare the fluctuation of interest in the three categories, we find that academic art and modern art shared a similar trend before 1984, although modern art still lagged behind academic art. After 1984, the two diverged and reached their highest and lowest points, respectively: 1984 was the peak year for academic art but the lowest point for modern art, while 1986 was the opposite. Thus, starting in 1984, academic art and modern art began to rival each other. The interest in political art, however, followed a different direction: if the previous two categories saw a rise, then political art necessarily saw a fall, and vice versa, except in 1984. They seem to have a converse relationship, which also suggests that the revitalization and development of the two former categories depend on the cessation and diminishing of the latter.

A cross-sectional view of 1977, 1981, 1984, and 1986 shows the starting, ending, highest, and lowest points of the decade (see Fig. 6). In 1984 and 1986, academic art and modern art switched their leads, and in 1977 and 1986—the beginning and end points of the decade under investigation—there was also a trade-off in dominance between modern art and political art. In the middle of the decade, however, academic art always remained in the lead.

From these statistics we can see:

- a. There has been a stable rise in interest in academic art, while interest in modern art has not been stable, and interest in political art has seen a stable decline.
- b. The increase in interest in modern art seems to have met some difficulties and experienced substantial fluctuations. Its rapid growth and stabilization only occurred in the final two years.
- c. Academic art enjoyed the majority of interest in the past decade, making up an average of 33.8%, while modern art occupied only 14.3%.
- d. In Chinese art circles, 1980–81 and 1984–85 marked the two turning points in interest when all of the categories experienced large fluctuations.
- e. 1983–84 saw a decline of interest in all categories except for academic art. One of the reasons for this seems to be the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign launched in the same year. All categories except political art peaked in 1980–81, during the two years considered to be the first opening-up period after the Third Plenary



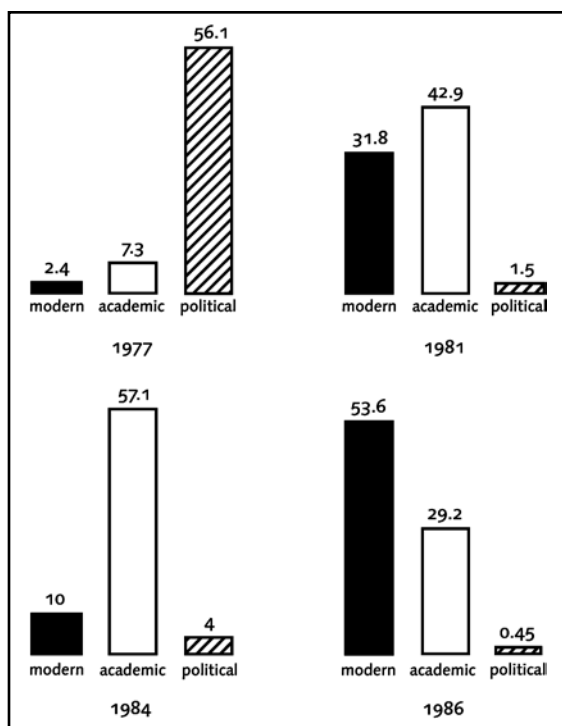


Fig. 6. Proportions of interests in art (%)

Session of the 11th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee. We can suppose that fluctuations in the orientation of artistic value are closely correlated with changes in China's political climate.

## II. GATHERINGS OF CHINESE MODERN ART ACTIVITIES FROM 1977 TO 1986

### A. THE "EXHIBITION RATE" OF MODERN ART ACTIVITIES

"Exhibition rate" is just a convenient term because in the art world the most common form of artistic activity is an exhibition. But, modern art has already broken this convention and explored many other forms, for example, involving audience participation in outdoor spaces, performances, and all kinds of workshops and symposia. We use the term "exhibition rate" to represent the frequency of modern art activities staged. We draw statistics from the same source as those of the demographic studies above. However, we need to note that there have been many events all over the country assuming different forms and styles, and sometimes multiple events were simultaneously conducted in different cities at a number of venues; as a result there are possible omissions in our statistics (see Chart 5).

In the past decade, modern art activities were mostly concentrated in 1985 and 1986, totaling 149 and claiming 79.7% of the total activities in the decade. The year with the most activities was 1986, with a tally of 110. The average annual exhibition rate was 18.7 [activities per year], which means that every year there were nearly 19 modern art activities, which is not a low number. There are also fluctuations in frequency during different times (see Fig. 7).

The fluctuations in the exhibition rate are very similar to those shown by interests in art. Any discrepancies between the two occur only within the span of

Year	exhibition rate (%)	mean
1977	0	
1978	1	
1979	5	
1980	11	
1981	4	
1982	6	
1983	10	
1984	1	
1985	39	
1986	110	
total	187	18.7

Chart 5. Rate of modern art exhibitions

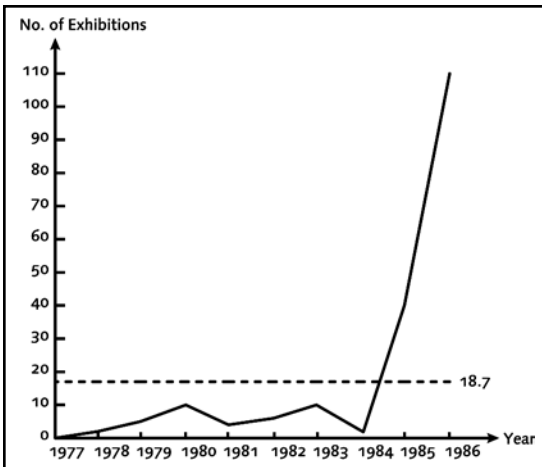


Fig. 7. Modern art exhibitions

a year, which also suggests that theoretical interest perhaps often develops later than art practices. But, there are times when theory and practice completely overlap: in 1984, modern art exhibitions and writings fell to their lowest points since 1979 and again skyrocketed in 1985. The qualitative change in 1985 seems to be the result of the previous eight years' incubation of numerous artistic events. Enough time had passed for modern art to lay its groundwork.

#### **B. THE GATHERING OF ARTISTS THROUGHOUT THE NATION: THE FOUNDING OF NUMEROUS ARTISTS GROUPS**

In the above analyses, we have shown that more and more artists began to be involved in modern art, and by 1986 their numbers were upwards of 4,000. These were representatives of new artistic concepts, and their social communication was achieved through small groups. Thus, studying these groups can help us analyze the circumstances surrounding artists' gatherings in the past decade (see Chart 6). Our source materials include: a) field investigation, statistics submitted by artists groups; b) art journals. (The same note applies here that there must be omissions in these statistics, too.)

Between 1982 and 1986 there were 79 young artists groups with varying artistic objectives, scattered in approximately 23 provinces, cities, and autonomous regions. They held 97 art events of various sizes with 2,250 direct participants, making up 46.7% of the total participants in modern art across the entire nation. This suggests that these groups make up almost half of the modern art population, serving as the backbone of the whole modern art movement and ardent promoters of modern art throughout the nation. Hubei, Beijing, and Jiangsu had the largest numbers of groups, while Jiangsu, Beijing, and Hubei had the most members respectively. It is worth noting that artists groups even emerged in remote western and southwestern regions such as Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, and Gansu, which is a telling sign of the popularity of the small group format.

### C. THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF MODERN ART

Chart 7 is from data supplied by art journals, art groups' own records, and the internal documents of the Chinese Artists'

Association. We have recorded here all the provinces, cities, and autonomous regions that have held modern art events, including exhibitions, symposia, workshops, and others. We also recorded the frequency of the events (see Chart 7).

This chart tells us that 25 provinces, cities, and autonomous regions (including Special Economic Zones such as Shenzhen and Zhuhai) — that is, 83.3% of Chinese provinces (excluding Taiwan) — have held modern art events.<sup>2</sup> The geographic spread is vast, even reaching overseas. In fact, the Xinjiang region also had artists who held modern art exhibitions in other areas. The *Xinjiang Art Academy Exhibition (Xinjiang huayuan zuopin zhan)* in Beijing in August 1986 demonstrated modern styles. It is worth noting that modern art exhibitions reached soaring heights, such as when the renowned American modern artist Robert Rauschenberg had his solo exhibition there [in Beijing]. It was truly a rare occasion with international significance. Also, among the 187 modern art events in the nation there were 17 important foreign artists' exhibitions, claiming 9% of the total of national exhibitions. These exhibitions by famous modern artists directly influenced the development of the modern art movement in China.

The following are detailed analyses of the spread of modern art in China (see Chart 8 and Chart 9). It seems that the areas with the most concentrated artistic activities are central China, northern China, and eastern China. Taking a look at the specific provinces and cities, we can see that modern art activities tended to concentrate in areas that are more economically and culturally developed and equipped with convenient transportation. They also tend to be areas that have opened up earlier and more rapidly with regard to the modernization process (see Fig. 8).

place	no. of groups	no. of activities	no. of participants	participants nationwide
Shaanxi	2	2	14	
Guangdong	3	3	55	
Shanxi	1	2	8	
Shanghai	4	6	76	
Tianjin	2	1	30	
Tibet	1	1	5	
Jiangsu	6	7	1102	
Beijing	9	10	249	
Inner Mongolia	3	5	60	
Qinghai	1	1	20	
Zhejiang	4	9	32	
Shandong	1	1	7	
Hunan	5	7	78	
Hebei	1	1	3	
Henan	2	2	22	
Fujian	5	8	61	
Jilin	1	1	8	
Sichuan	4	4	133	
Yunnan	3	6	38	
Hubei	17	17	167	
Heilongjiang	1	1	50	
Anhui	2	3	27	
Gansu	1	1	5	
total	79	97	2250	4817

Chart 6. Art groups nationwide

Year Region	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	total
Liaoning										1	1
Beijing		1	4	8	1	1	4		10	16	45
Zhejiang									1	8	9
Shanghai			1				1		2	9	13
Shandong									4	1	5
Yunnan				1	1					1	3
Tianjin										1	1
Sichuan				1					3	3	7
Shanxi									1	2	3
Inner Mongolia				1		1				3	5
Jiangsu									4	6	10
Anhui					1	1					2
Shaanxi					1				4	1	6
Hunan						1	1		2	2	6
Tibet									1	1	1
Fujian							1		1	6	8
Jiangxi									1	1	1
Guangdong							1		1	4	6
Qinghai										1	1
Hubei							1		2	38	41
Heilongjiang							1				1
Jilin									1		1
Hebei										1	1
Gansu								1			1
Henan										2	2
overseas						2			1	4	7
total	0	1	5	11	4	6	10	1	39	110	187
no. of regions	0	1	2	4	4	4	7	1	16	20	

Chart 7. Nationwide expansion of modern art activities

region	no. of activities	mean	ranking
central	54	13.5	1
northern	55	11	2
eastern	43	7.2	3
southwest	11	2.8	4
northwest	8	1.6	5
southern	6	3	6
northeast	3	1	7
total	180		

Chart 8. Distribution of modern art activities

region	no. of activities	ranking
Beijing	45	1
Hubei	41	2
Shanghai	13	3
Jiangsu	10	4
Zhejiang	9	5
Fujian	8	6
Sichuan	7	7
Shaanxi	6	8
Hunan	6	8
Guangdong	6	8
Shandong	5	9
Inner Mongolia	5	9

Chart 9. Number of modern art activities

The emergence of modern art activities spread further throughout the country with the passage of time (see Fig. 9, which was drawn based on Chart 7). Similar diagrams have already appeared several times earlier in the section. It shows that the spread of modern art has been in sync with the general interest in modern art, the participants' demographic changes, and the frequency of activities. The year with most geographic coverage since 1979 was 1986, when modern art reached 20 provinces; the year with least coverage was 1984, when there was only one prov-

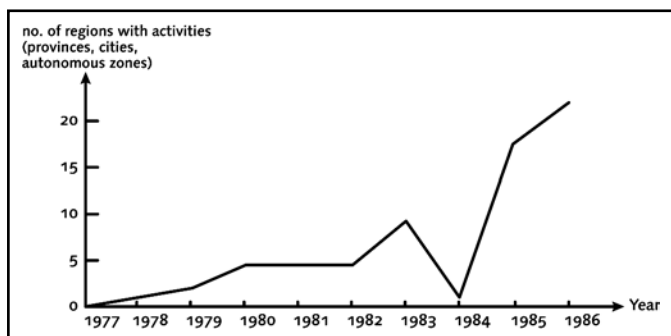


Fig. 8. Geographic expansion of modern art activities

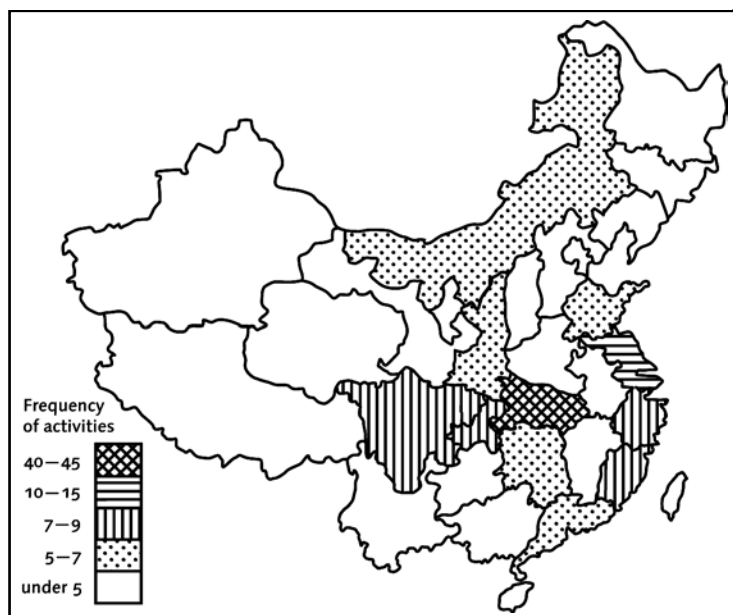


Fig. 9. Geographic division of modern art activities

ince, the remote Gansu province, that had an event. Also, the overall spread in the past decade has not been a steady and continuous rise, but has seen two sizable fluctuations.

So far, we have examined modern art from the perspectives of artists' demographics, shifts in interest, geographic spread, and frequency of activities. We have reached the following conclusion: Chinese modern art had a breakthrough in 1985 and 1986, rising to dominance in art circles after ten years of exploration and artists' efforts. These two years not only mark a peak in modern art activities, but also a turning point in Chinese art. After 1986, an era of one doctrine, one school, and one guiding thought ended, while a new prospect of pluralism and stylistic diversity was ushered in. We have to ask: Why did such a "modern" trend appear in Chinese art only after the Cultural Revolution? Why did the general shift in interest among artists happen in the 1980s instead of the 1930s? (There were artists who advocated modern art in the 1930s, but they failed to make a lasting social impact and, in the end, disappeared from the scene.) Why did the interest in modern art peak in 1985 and 1986?

We all know that the decade after the Cultural Revolution was the [country's] most open period in every respect. Our society and culture underwent tremendous transformations. The changes in these sociocultural factors undoubtedly gave rise to the "modern art" movement. Thus, we posit that the changes in social and cultural values led to interest in the modern art movement, while the social and cultural background prepared the ground for its growth. Therefore, modern art did not appear in China by accident, but rather necessarily possesses a deep social foundation. We ought to find the social and cultural agents that motivated its rise and development.

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#### Notes

1. See the first section in Chapter 7 in Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi, 1985–1986* [*Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991).
2. Addendum: due to delays in receiving information and statistical omissions, we failed to include the Ningxia region's "Rich Soil Oil Painting Research Association" (Houtu youhua yanjiuhui) and its *Yitai Exhibition (Yitai huazhan)* in Guangxi, and Guizhou Province's exhibitions of Yin Guangzhong, Wang Ping, and others. Therefore, counting Xinjiang, the modern art movement reached 29 provinces and regions in China.

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— Originally published as "Zhongguo xiandai meishu yundong zhi jingguan" in Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi, 1985–1986* [*Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991), 606–27. Translated by Yinxing Liu.

## Writings by Members of Selected Art Groups

### WE – PARTICIPANTS OF THE "'85 ART MOVEMENT" (1986)

By Wang Guangyi [pl. 9]

Life's inner drive — the underlying power of culture today has arrived at its supreme moment! We thirst for and "happily embrace all forms of life" by giving rise to a new, more humanistic spiritual model, to bring order to the evolutionary process of life. To this end, we only oppose those morbid, rococo styles of art as well as all things unhealthy and detrimental to the evolution of life. Since these arts abet man's weaknesses, they cause people to be far from health and far from life. As we see it today, the ideas of art have already exceeded its [traditional] conceptual definitions. Although Conceptual art is regarded as art's alienation from itself, before a new culture of art arrives, we can only accept this kind of alienation. In this way, we can use the alienation of art to express the concept of antialienation.

It is exactly in this sense that the participants of the '85 Art Movement are not engaged in creating art for art's sake, but rather in advancing a process of articulation and behavior that is not merely the philosophy of a philosophical concept. This is similar to the peculiar qualities of uncertainty found in art at the beginning of the European Renaissance. The reason that Renaissance art has historical value is not because it perfected artistic models, but rather because it conveyed the revelatory expression of non-philosophical philosophy and gave rise to humanist thought. This, in turn, prompted Europe to depart from the difficult conditions of the Middle Ages, to discover humanity and the value of human nature.

It is precisely this significance that the '85 Art Movement shares with the earlier Renaissance. However, the difference is that the importance of Renaissance art lies in its discovery and awakening of human nature, while the '85 Art Movement is grounded in the context of modern civilization and is intent on elevating humankind's sublimity and health.

We oppose speculation over so-called pure artistic forms because excessive discussion of these kinds of questions will lead to the unchecked spread of a morbid state of formalism. This will then cause humanity to forget its own difficult conditions. Therefore, we once again propose the ancient proposition, "content determines form." What our images articulate is not art! They prophesy a new culture, the Culture of the North. The reason that we choose painting as the medium for transmitting our predictions is because the act of painting itself possesses an unknowability in its deeply layered semantics that approaches the ultimate essence of existence.

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## **AN EXPLANATION OF THE NORTHERN ART GROUP (1987)**

By Shu Qun

The essay "The Spirit of the Northern Art Group" served as a manifesto for this group [see *Zhongguo meishu bao* (*Fine Arts in China*), November 23, 1985 (no. 18)]. The value of a "Group" lies in the fact that each member's cultural orientation belongs to a completely new domain. In other words, in contrast to the collectivity of all the rest of humanity, these must be people who stride forth at the forefront of history. They are people who have caught a glimpse of a new culture that is more ideal than the current cultural models accepted by the masses. But, if we wish to clarify the intuitive images of this new culture emerging in each person's mind, then we all must come together to discuss and debate it. Because of this, the activities of the "Group" will appear all the more necessary and valuable. Our practice has proven that the "new culture" as it was initially formed in our minds was ambiguous. Only through discussion, debate, and experimentation with the creation of artistic schema did this become clearer. Ultimately, differing opinions were gradually brought together, yet this did not mean that a single individual's ideas simply supplanted other people's thinking; rather, each individual's ideas repeatedly collided, dissolved, and verified the conclusions on which the group ultimately agreed. Such a relatively ideal conclusion necessarily represents the crystallization of the wisdom of the "Group"; it could not possibly be realized by a single person. Given this, the hypothetical concept of a "Culture of the North" or a "Culture of the Post-Arctic"<sup>1</sup> should definitely not be seen as some random person's groundless imagination run wild; instead, they are the loftiest ideas and images to permeate the current age, summaries and conclusions that acute people have perceived and mutually identified. The significance of the "Group" thus lies in the fact that when people identify with one another, they sense that they aren't alone, consequently assuring each person that their own thinking has value. At the same time, upon this foundation of mutual self-identification, the group is able to eliminate falsehoods and preserve truths through criticism, countercriticism, argument, and debate, ultimately bringing forth a type of cultural model that is universally effective for all of human culture. This is the new cultural model: the "Culture of the North" or the "Culture of the Post-Arctic."

It was precisely through these various methods that we were able to better define our artistic stances (clarifying what we needed) — namely, to revive *the reason of the Middle Ages and the passions of the primeval period*. But, in art, we have tended more toward reason. Feelings of solemnity, loftiness, detachment, and stillness will constitute the meaning that we strive to express in our art, for the origin of these feelings lies



Shu Qun. *Absolute Principle No. 1*. 1985. Oil on canvas, 78¾ × 63" (200 × 160 cm).  
Private collection

in a reverence and yearning for the world on the far shore. When captivated by this sort of emotion, people experience a sacrosanct, lofty spiritual outlook in which "man and nature become a single unity." This is precisely the kind of social life on which humankind relies in order to elevate itself, to transform aimless human existence into a society characterized by the common, ultimate goal of striving toward the far shore, and to transform the unspiritual people of today into a fundamental site for spirituality. Indeed, within all of humankind, those who are truly able to appreciate and perceive this spiritual outlook are rare. Particularly at the present moment, in an era that is spiritually bankrupt, such people are especially few. But it is precisely this sort of historical circumstance that has caused virtuous artists to feel a sense of responsibility and mission — to awaken human rationality and to encourage the pious, earnest, kindhearted, chaste, and good-natured character of the medieval period to return once again to humankind. Of course, although we are clearly pointing out that we are *striving to revive the spirit of reason of the Middle Ages*, we are hoping that the reader will not mistake us as promoting some sort of regression. For today, especially in China, *the spirit of the Middle Ages* that we propose to revive means something very different from the "spirit of reason" typical of the merciless slaughters undertaken by the Christian church in medieval Europe. Indeed, the darkness of the European medieval period lies in its having been a time when "divinity" was raised to soar over a foundation of radically devalued humanity;<sup>2</sup> today, however, the "spirit of reason" that we are proposing is one that raises "divinity" to soar over a foundation of affirmed humanity. This is a fundamental sign of the difference between the new culture (a healthy culture) and the old cultures of any time period. The creeds upheld by the radical, bigoted, sickly society of the Middle Ages were long ago shattered by the social revolutions fomented from the Renaissance onward. From that moment, the West escaped from that cage of "reason" and promoted an instinctual spirit of primeval wildness. All traditional cultural models were impacted. People were no longer willing to handle affairs according to any random credo. Humanity, as well as the *basest force* (animality) within humanity, both long repressed, finally burst forth. This energy and



passion caused Western society to develop vigorously and healthily, but now — that is, at this late moment in capitalist society — this "liberation" has become uncontrollable. Perhaps this is because the Middle Ages oppressed this downward force too severely.<sup>3</sup> The post-Renaissance West certainly did not develop based on a stable relationship between reason and instinct, intellect and emotion; rather, the West has continued to decline, ultimately reaching the state in which it exists today, a state in which spirit is universally lacking and in which material goods are overabundant. (The pursuit of materialism has become skewed, it has transformed the individual into a slave ruled by his relationship to goods, and caused him to lose all power over himself.)

This is the plight of the contemporary West. However, the difficulties that China faces are impacted from two sides: the first is spiritual poverty, the second is material poverty. Contemporary China has been assaulted by materialism, a phenomenon that is not unrelated to the superficial tendencies of the contemporary West. But, like the small number of philosophical thinkers in contemporary China, wise Westerners are also arduously working to resurrect the spirit of reason of the Middle Ages. Such efforts are not fruitless. When these few wise people established their convincing theories, the number of people who identified with these ideas increased, and gradually they formed influential philosophical schools, like New Thomism, Christian Spiritualism, etc. And love of religious philosophy and belief in New Thomism are currently becoming an indispensable part of many Westerners' cultural lives. From this one can see that the reestablishment of *the spirit of reason* is not only a problem for China but also a global challenge. *Facing the feeble tradition of rationality in our nation*, we are all the more obliged to promote and build such a spirit, for only in so doing will our lives become brighter, loftier, more chaste, and more spiritual. Of course, at the same time we are also promoting intuition and primitive passion and making our vitality more vigorous and passionate. This is the foundation on which spiritual production depends. It is precisely in order to advance humanity's spirituality and originary nature that we have put forth this artistic principle of building a "Civilization of the North." The "Culture of the North" or "Culture of the Post-Arctic" are, in fact, simply symbolic terms for a rational culture. Moreover, we have also proposed a cultural development model jointly dependent on reason and intuition, a model in which priority is given to the "spirit of reason" and in which "intuition" is seen as supplementary. This is to say that at the same time that we are building a "Culture of the North," we are also promoting a corresponding development for a "Culture of the South" (a symbolic term for "intuition"). We seek to use them as a replacement for traditional culture and its unhealthy lack of both reason and intuition. It is precisely based on these two needs unique to humans of our era that we are calling this an age of collaboration between the "Cultures of the North and South." We are using this concept to rid ourselves of the increasingly frail, corrupt ethos of the cultures of the East and West (cultures of the temperate zones). For this, we advocate that in the present era we ought to develop toward the two poles as much as possible; that is, we ought to develop simultaneously toward a high degree of reason and a high degree of intuition. This is just as Nietzsche said: "Let the loftiest powers and the basest powers of humankind collect together and flow swiftly from a single fountainhead." This is, on the one hand, to reinforce humanity's spirituality, and on the other hand, to strengthen humankind's physicality (physiological needs). Thus, in our artistic creations, we try to eliminate all tender, weak, and diseased art forms. Instead, we try to build a lofty, stately, healthy cultural model, and we try to make people here feel the insignificance of the individual and the greatness of the human spirit. In our lives, we have chosen a lifestyle that is dedicated more to humanity and health and that is governed by free will. A self-confident personality and an enthusiastic sense of reason

are the criteria that define the "new man" that we seek. Only in this manner can people newly revive the spirituality of the Middle Ages and the health and might of ancient Greece and Rome.

Indeed, all of these ideals that we hold are perhaps merely built on the "utopia" of the far shore. But the effort that we expend on behalf of this goal is necessary; for in doing this, although we cannot expect that every member of humankind will become an ideal, healthy person (a paragon), at the very least we can make ourselves move more toward being healthy. The whole meaning and value of human life lies precisely in this process of fighting toward health and perfection. In one's continual exertion in the pursuit of perfection, one discovers beauty; one gains spirit and strength. Moreover, if we look at all of this from the perspective of social reality, we will see that to promote the struggle for such spirit is a key to advancing the quality of our nation. Perhaps the efforts of our generation will bear no fruit for us (that is, in our lifetime, we won't be able to witness the emergence of an ideal social order), but we cannot say that this kind of effort will not build for later people a foundation somewhat better than that which existed in the past. Thus, those people who continue our work will further develop our progressive thinking; one day, they may even develop this into an ideal universally pursued by all humankind, as well as a fine tradition among our own nation.

The ultimate realization of this sort of societal ideal depends on the cumulative efforts of humanity. In order to achieve this, we are determined to overcome the faulty, deep-rooted idea of turning our hopes to the future generation. Our predecessors always clung to such ideas, and they continually pushed the troubles of one generation onto the next, up to today. Thus, we resolutely oppose this sort of escapist mentality. A person with this mentality does not transcend others; rather, he is cowardly and indolent, and his base tendency to covet comfort and pleasure dominates his soul. A virtuous person, a person filled with reason, would spurn this sort of base feeling and this wormlike soul that makes a pretense of detachment from the world! This is just as Nietzsche said: "I love those who do not first seek a reason beyond the stars for going down and being sacrifices, but sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth of the Superman may hereafter arrive." In order to make human society healthier, loftier, more ideal, and more vigorous, we will expend all of our energy in dedicating ourselves to a *new civilization*—to building a "*Civilization of the North*." We transform the earth of humankind into a "*Land of the Hyperboreans*,"<sup>4</sup> a *land of Supermen!*

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#### Notes

1. Here, we can only simply explain the images that it represents within the realm of visual culture; we cannot touch upon its production and origins.
2. Divinity: refers to humankind's *a priori reason or highest reason*. In this essay, "reason" always holds this meaning. It is distinct from "typical reason," for it is an invariable spiritual principle, whereas "typical reason" refers to the process and approach leading toward this principle.
3. "Downward force" and "basest force" mean the same thing — namely, the physical force of the human body.
4. The phrase "*Land of the Hyperboreans*" comes from Nietzsche's book *The Anti-Christ*. It means: *the place in which the Supermen live*.

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Pond Society. *Work No. 2: Walker in Green Space*. 1986. Installation and performance

### ON NEW SPACE AND THE POND SOCIETY (1987)

By Shi Jiu

We can still recall the kind of joy and excitement in our hearts that was sparked by the exhibition *'85 New Space (85 Xin kongjian)*. We received a tremendous satisfaction from undertaking such an important experiment for the first time. One year later, for us *New Space* is already a thing of the past. During the following evolution and reflection, we continued to discover meaning in new actions, hence the continued sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

From *New Space* to the Pond Society (*Chi she*), it was a process of overcoming our own constraints and scrutinizing ourselves. This process compelled us to seek out a brand-new meaning of art, and thus reevaluate and rectify formerly established principles.

It was a positive transcendence of the self.

The *'85 New Space* exhibition was, in some sense, experimental. It was based on an impetus, that is, a desire for self-awakening through action. The invitation letter stated: "The value of life lies in the occupation of space." It was also founded on a discontent, an extreme disgust and aversion toward the dominant fad. We attempted to promulgate, through an apposite approach, an aesthetic value that runs counter to the fad.

Most of the artists featured in *New Space* graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. They all had, to varying degrees, some knowledge about the thought of Sartre, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, among others. Therefore, they had a certain affinity and shared a kind of tacit agreement among themselves. Strictly speaking, however, their ideas were divergent, which was more than evidenced in their diverse individual interests toward the various aspects of modern art. In terms of the way they worked with forms, the disparity was all the more pronounced. But the important part was to "realize the value," and the most powerful approach to "realizing the value" was to "unite."

The *'85 New Space* exhibition started on December 2, 1985. The audience response was particularly fervent.

The public's general impression of *New Space* was that it featured a sort of aloof transparency. However, diverse opinions exist as to the particular responses and evaluations of the exhibition. What we received were these: first, more latitudinal coverage and less longitudinal pursuit; second, more influence from Pop art and less from Native



Geng Jianyi. *Haircut No. 3: Another Shaved Head of Summer 1985*. 1985.  
Oil on canvas

Soil art; third, more descriptive elements and less philosophical insights; fourth, more cold treatment and less warm treatment; fifth, a tendency toward homogeneity. Some audience members reported that the paintings were too opaque; others expressed aversion to the "coldness" of the exhibition; yet others, who were more sensitive, believed that "the basic tone of the exhibition was not very healthy and in need of correct guidance." Plans to travel the exhibition outside the province were also stricken down because it was "less than perfect and in need of improvement."

In 1986, media such as *Art (Meishu)* [vol. 218] (no. 2) and *Fine Arts in China (Zhongguo meishu bao)* [May 5, 1986] (no. 18) introduced the '85 *New Space* exhibition. They featured the articles "Sacrifice of the Courageous" ("Yonggan de xisheng") by critic Hong Zaixin, "We and Our Works" ("Women ji women de chuangzuo") and "Responses to the Exhibition '85 *New Space*" ("Guanyu 85 *Xin kongjian* huazhan de fanying") by Bao Jianfei, and also published the most controversial artworks of *New Space*, such as *Haircut No. 3: Another Shaved Head of Summer 1985 (Lifa sanhao: 1985 nian xiaji de you yige guangtou)* and *Adagio of Symphony No. 5, Second Movement (Diwu jiaoxiangyue dier yuezhang kaitou de rouban)*. Through these publications, the influence of the *New Space* exhibition reached every corner of the country.

Generally speaking, the tendencies of the *New Space* exhibition were socially conscious and humanistic. Many works reflected contemporary people's psychological states and the relationship between people and the space of their habitats, all positioned against the backdrop of contemporary society. Notable works abounded, such as the *Haircut* series by Geng Jianyi; *Midsummer Swimmers (Zhongxia de yongzhe)* [pl. 10], *Pause (Xiuzhi yinfu)*, and *Please Help Yourself to Some Jazz (Qingni xinshang jueshiyue)* by Zhang Peili; *White Tube (Baise guandao)* and *Human Tube (Ren guandao)* by Song Ling; *Adagio of Symphony No. 5, Second Movement* and *Amateur Painter (Yeyu huajia)* by Wang Qiang; the *New Space* series by Bao Jianfei; *Rejecting Perspective (Jujue toushi)* by Cao Xuelei; *12:00 a.m. (Lingdian)* and *Dialogue (Duihua)* by Xu Jin. To a large degree, these works determined the basic tone of the exhibition. Artists seemed to be trying to publicly and unabashedly position routine and everyday "phenomena" under the purview of art. Even so, their paintings were all markedly flat, no brushwork and no gloss, bearing some resemblance to advertisements. No wonder audience

members would reference the descriptiveness and the influence of Pop art. Figures in Geng Jianyi's Haircut series are tightly fitted into the composition, appearing to be colossal in stature. These figures are like robots subject to external constraints, completely lacking autonomy, and thus transforming a familiar scene into something different and strange. We can read a profound mockery and veiled derision in the topics of Geng Jianyi's works, their compositions, the color, and the component forms. The four works by Zhang Peili depict scenes which people usually consider joyful; yet within an ambience that is solemn, fixated, and devoid of life, they reveal a faint sense of tragedy. The figures are stiff, and every one of them looks gravely ahead, as if in anticipation of something. Song Ling seems to be more interested in industrial scenes. His paintings are usually done in ink, but they don't have the techniques or "spirit consonance" conventionally related to traditional ink paintings. They feature a stark contrast between light and dark, like a paper-cut silhouette. Coupled with the contrast between gigantic industrial tubes and human figures, his paintings appear mysterious and frightening. The printed New Space series by Bao Jianfei and Cao Xuelei's oil painting *Rejecting Perspective* are more focused on symbolic languages. The New Space series consists of four prints, produced with materials of various textures, such as film, iron wire, and plywood. The works are distinct due to the artist's excellent control of the materials in representing the mysterious relationship between human and space. Cao Xuelei's works strive to approximate Surrealism, yet their component parts betray some traces of reality. His paintings emanate a certain "modern wildness." *Adagio of Symphony No. 5, Second Movement* is one of Wang Qiang's five sculptures, but it is the most controversial one. The five works are different in form, giving the sense that the artist intended to showcase the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of his sculptural techniques. Yet, *Adagio of Symphony No. 5, Second Movement* stands out from the other four. It is a floppy plaster body cast from a live model. Because it is without head and limbs, viewers can see the inside of the shell through the openings. Instead of the sense of eternity common to sculptures with such volume, it is more reminiscent of a piece of discarded waste. Meticulously encased in an exquisite huge glass display case, it also looks like a specimen. Its tongue-twisting title also adds to viewers' confusion. Other works such as *Liberal Melody (Ziyou xuanlü)* and *Photographer (Sheyingzhe)* also contributed to the impact of the *New Space* exhibition.

All in all, in terms of technique, the above-mentioned artists continued and developed the individual styles and interests that took shape while they were in school. Conceptually, they were influenced by modern philosophies and aesthetic values. Thus, some members of the audience detected a "student flavor" in their work.

The idea for the '85 *New Space* exhibition originated a year before. In July 1984, Zhang Peili and Zha Li discerned a sign of deterioration in the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition (Diliujie quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan)*, despite its seemingly overwhelming scale. They predicted that a new wave of art would critically challenge the Chinese cultural establishment in the near future. An age of confrontation, rebellion, and reconstruction was imminent. They believed that the best way to promote the emergence of the new art would be to form an organized art collective. Thereafter, Bao Jianfei, Song Ling, Wang Qiang, and Xu Jin successively joined the debate. They held impromptu meetings to further the discussion. The first formal gathering was held at Gushan (the Lonely Hill) in Hangzhou in October.

Among the dissatisfaction and reprobation expressed against the *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition*, the authoritative establishment in the art world started to pay attention to young artists. The Zhejiang chapter of the Chinese Artists' Association took the initiative to contact them, expressing its intention to hold an unofficial

exhibition of young artists, to be sponsored by the Chinese Artists' Association. Thereafter, Zhang Peili, Song Ling, and Zha Li solidified the details of the exhibition during a working lunch and named it the '85 *New Space* exhibition. In the meantime, they decided to found an association called the Society of Young Artists (*Qingnian chuangaoshe*).

In December, the Zhejiang Artists' Association paid to rent two residential houses on the outskirts of the city and provided art supplies, such as frames, paint, canvas, etc., . . . for the Society of Young Artists.

At the end of February 1985, other young artists continued to join the Society of Young Artists. In March, the first plenary meeting was held at the office of the Zhejiang Artists' Association, where artists discussed the mission and plan for the '85 *New Space* exhibition and a schedule of events for the Society of Young Artists. The meeting appointed Song Ling, Zha Li, and Zhang Peili as the organizers for the exhibition. Because of disagreements within the Society of Young Artists with regard to ideas, methods, and preferences, Zha Li, Zhang Peili, and others clarified a principle, that is, the central direction of the '85 *New Space* exhibition would be to convey the "sense of modern" through strengthening formal languages and restricting [explicit] expression. The first newsletter on *New Space* was also printed soon after.

In May, Zha Li enrolled in the overseas graduate studies program at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and gradually withdrew from activities.

In July, Geng Jianyi graduated from the Zhejiang Academy, joined the Society of Young Artists, and took part in preparations for the *New Space* exhibition. His presence added a sense of wholeness to the exhibition.

In one of its executive meetings, the Zhejiang chapter of the Chinese Artists' Association listed *New Space* as one of the programs on its agenda for the year, marking a transformation in the Zhejiang Artists' Association's work.

In October, some exhibition items were already finished. At the end of November, organizers of *New Space* did a round of screening of these works. Directors from the Chinese Artists' Association then inspected the exhibition during the preview.

After a whole year of preparation, the '85 *New Space* exhibition finally opened as scheduled, under the co-sponsorship of the Society of Young Artists and the Zhejiang chapter of the Chinese Artists' Association.

Nonetheless, from an objective standpoint, at the very moment that *New Space* took shape, the seed for its future fracturing was already sown.

The value of *New Space* lies in its experimentalism and pragmatism. In terms of its experimentalism, different creative ideas were tested despite the lack of a unified theme or theory. In terms of its pragmatism, *New Space* offered artists an opportunity to take part in and to join hands in showing their vitality. However, precisely because of this, it could never be a neatly formed and sustainable team of artistic creation. Its eventual rupturing and ending were inevitable. However, as part of the new cultural wave, it offered an opportunity for others to improve and develop.

After the exhibition, besides the critical attention from the media, the *New Space* participants themselves also started to calmly reflect on it.

In 1985, various regional art groups mushroomed throughout the country, contributing to a new crop of avant-garde works that started to fundamentally change the structure of the art world in China. Such a closed and monotonous situation no longer existed. This is what later came to be known as the '85 Art New Wave. Faced with reality, we, as participants of the '85 Art New Wave, had the responsibility to reconsider our work in light of social and cultural evolution. In addition, out of the need for improvement and development, we also understood that '85 *New Space* arose from

discontent directed at certain [social] phenomena. This discontent was productive at that particular stage. However, if we only rely on this sentiment, then we cannot make meaningful contributions with our artistic activities. This kind of a creative activity could only be realized with an understanding of its essence, yet, at the same time, we gradually grew tired of the aesthetic attitude and formal elements that were pervasive throughout *New Space*. Its excessive and heavy-handed hermeneutics also started to backfire and make us uncomfortable.

Then and there, Polish dramatist Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Toward the Austere Theater* provided us with significant inspiration, that is, after conquering the obstacles imposed by the world and by the self, the subject enters an involuntary and meditative experience, which is a sort of intoxication miles away from norms and the pursuit of material benefits. At such a moment, an actor "is compelled to act in a particular way, even if he does not intend to do so." Kieslowski pointed to such a model for the purpose of not allowing artists to gratify their [tendency toward] self-aggrandizement. On the contrary, he intended to promote a "genuine art" to combat the growing epidemic of "prostitution art." He believed that the artist should be on an equal footing with the viewer in a sincere dialogue, instead of the singular relationship between the appreciator and the appreciated. Art should be a solemn and sublime activity instead of a decoration for poseurs. An artist's techniques are meaningful only when they help the artist participate in a dialogue. From our perspective, "prostitution art" is the sign of the alienation of art and the alienation of the human being. The reason for such alienation lies in the many benefits that art brings to artists, the inherent glamour and seduction of techniques, or alternatively, the self-conceit an artist is filled with once he masters the techniques. All in all, a whole variety of incentives eventually encourages the artist to forget about the original mission of art. In feudal society, art was a servant to politics. As such, one of our long-term agendas, an agenda of profound significance, is to change and eradicate the unhealthy phenomena in artistic life.

In April 1986, Zhang Peili, as a delegate from Zhejiang, participated in the "Symposium on Oil Painting" ("Youhua yishu taolunhui") held in Beijing. A preliminary idea about establishing the Pond Society started to form. In fact, after *New Space*, the Society of Young Artists had already begun to lose its original momentum. It was neither possible nor necessary to reorganize the society, so it became imperative to establish a new art organization.

In mid-May, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, Bao Jianfei, and Wang Qiang, among others, met several times to talk about the possibility and necessity of restructuring the Society of Young Artists. After heated debate, a rough agreement was reached.

Thereafter, Zhang Peili drafted, while the rest discussed and revised the manifesto for the Pond Society. The manifesto emphasized the purity and solemnity of art and the significance of "immersion." The meaning of "pond" gives a nod to the notion of "immersion," the only way through which "true meaning" can be realized for both the subject of the artistic creation as well as the participants. We also attempted to use "pond" to indicate the unknowable nature of art itself. The Pond Society gave up the mastery of techniques as an objective. Easel painting, which we conventionally take as sacrosanct, is not the only medium for communicating ideas. We strove to break down the boundaries between languages, and proposed instead an undefined form, an exciting "artistic activity" that could move people. Here, painting, performance, photography, and environment (these are the categories of forms in our minds), and so on and so forth, are to jointly construct an organic and systemic relationship through the unique characteristics of visual language.

On June 1, the Pond Society's first bulletin was printed, and it was distributed across the country along with the manifesto. At that moment, the Pond Society pronounced itself formally founded. Its members at the time included Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, Bao Jianfei, Wang Qiang, and Wu Ying.

On June 2, the Pond Society held its first event following its official establishment. It was a group event, titled *Work No. 1: Yang-Style Taichi Series (Zuopin yihao: Yangshi taiji xilie)*. Phase one of the work was carried out in a gymnasium at a middle school. From 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., a group of twelve figures, each three meters high, was completed. They were a collage of recycled newspapers. At 2:00 a.m. the next day, Geng Jianfei [*sic.*: Jianyi], Song Ling, Zhang Peili, and Wang Qiang put up the collage on a brick wall sixty meters long and four meters high near the Zhejiang Academy. The display was continued until 4:30. This event was full of tension and passion from beginning to end. It was solemn but it was also casual. The "work" drew different imagined associations among the audience. Some took it as part of the natural environment; others believed it was a type of esoteric and eerie symbol. The "work" was damaged two days later, and gradually disappeared.

The second bulletin of the Pond Society briefly introduced this event, and was distributed across the country together with reproductions of photographs of the "work."

Zhu Qingsheng from the Department of Art History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts thoroughly recorded his feelings and thoughts as a participant of the activity. This letter was later published in the magazine *Art* 227, no. 11 (1986), 56. *Fine Arts in China* also reported the event.

After September, the Pond Society entered a new phase. Gatherings among members started to be held on a weekly basis. We had the opportunity to clarify a few misunderstandings through heated debate and candid conversations.

We believed that the key to strengthening the Pond Society was to make up for its inadequacy in theories. Theories are part of the "immersion," an effort at reaching the nebulous state of arousing passion. It wasn't necessary to strive for clarity in narration and expression, because the most important narrative is conveyed through the visual.

We are not afraid of facing the tragic thinking that has followed the slippery slope of relativism in our value systems. Mankind has passed the point where a return to the heroic age can still be objectively feasible. Moreover, due to the restrictions that mankind has imposed on itself, it is impossible to build an ideal paradise by ourselves. Thus, we don't want to turn our art into a tool for promoting idealism. What we want to do is this: on the one hand, we should control the everything-goes attitude and self-conceit; on the other hand, we ought to protect ourselves against doctrines that might lead to self-constraint. The function of ideals is to dull pain and to hypnotize, to give us courage to live when we are lost. We should not abuse the use of ideals. Our art should give such effects to ourselves and to others: to inspire people to establish a new perspective and to face the world in an objective and apropos manner. Thus, we need to free ourselves from our inveterate biases and keep distant from ingrained prejudice. We despise the "experimental" and the art "play," but also disapprove of subjecting art as subordinate to philosophy. We strive to uphold a type of art that is between philosophical and non-philosophical, between religious and non-religious, between artistic and non-artistic, and between commonplace and ideal. It does not matter whether this art is of a rational or emotional, or even neutral, nature.

On November 2 and 4, the second collective work was completed, *Work No. 2: Walker in Green Space (Zuopin erhao: Lüse kongjian zhong de xingzhe)* by Geng Jianyi, Zhang Peili, Song Ling, and Bao Jianfei. This piece bears a resemblance to the *Yang-Style Taichi Series* in that it was also prefabricated and installed at a predetermined location.



What is different is that *Walker in Green Space* suspended nine figures cut out of cardboard, each measuring three meters, in a forest. All the figures were identical, but suspended from different heights, thus giving rise to a sense of space. After the work was finished, fewer than ten viewers came, all of whom had been invited to see the result.

At present, members of the Pond Society are all working on their new series. These series are both independent and mutually interconnected as a whole.

The history of *New Space* to the Pond Society has already spanned two years, and our efforts continue. Like other art groups, we frequently find ourselves bogged down, both from within and without. But the process of overcoming obstacles itself is where the meaning of life lies. Therefore, today, we are adopting a self-confident outlook for treating the unpredictable future.

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## **NEW FIGURATIVE: MANIFESTATION AND TRANSCENDENCE IN FIGURATIVE PATTERNS OF LIFE (1987)**

By Mao Xuhui [pl. 11]

### **A. THE ORIGIN OF THE QUESTION**

During June and July of 1985, the *New Figurative Exhibition* (*Xin juxiang huazhan*) was held in Shanghai and Nanjing. The exhibition foreword states:

Art (noun) is the material manifestation of man's great, powerful, and intimate spiritual activities.

New Figurative Art can also be called organic. It denies all those masquerading as art. Its main feature is a combination of sincerity, passion, and prowess.

[It seeks] first to shake people's soul, not entertain their eyes. It is not a game of color and composition.

Wisdom, color, pictured objects, titles, words. . . . These are all tools and servants — servants of [our] great emotion and rationality.

New Figurative Art has tremendous capacity.

Art is never abstract. (Drafted by Hou Wenyi)

The term "New Figurative" attained its real significance through the *New Figurative Exhibition*. It is no longer a vague notion. Like the terms Dada, Fauvism, and New Realism, it possesses particular significance and meaning.

New Figurative proposes to redirect art away from being a tool of vulgar sociology — and away from its subsequent monotonous and artificial mode and social taste — and instead turn art to art itself. It intends to liberate artists from their subsidiary and subservient status and restore their lofty ontological status as human beings.

New Figurative, first of all, refers to today's art and aesthetic views. It makes known the existence of modern Chinese art. It rises from the backdrop of the dilapidated cultural scene in the aftermath of the Gang of Four, and from the ecstasy, bewilderment, self-consciousness, introspection, and sense of disparity brought on by the saturation of information following the Open Door policy. Fending for ourselves to combat emptiness and ignorance, we actively take part in resolving contemporary problems, constructing a cathedral of intellectual civilization to get rid of spiritual deterioration, and fostering an art which is truly social, practical, and humanistic.

## B. THE FIGURATIVE PATTERNS OF LIFE

Life is the original source of creativity and spirit. Only when proceeding from its specific spatiotemporal context, and carried out through movement, can [art] converse with the world and possess the potential to transform it. In this sense, art, as a synonym for life and creativity, must be free from any utilitarian and functionalist purposes other than itself. When it emerges from an individual's life, and safeguards that life, it can unfurl and spread its wings. Only when it finds itself can it find the possibility to transcend itself. When it sincerely and passionately expresses its emotions and voluntarily exposes its inner core, it will undoubtedly touch upon the "public's secret," that is, mankind's secret. Because what art "moves is the innate part of our life, not the part acquired after birth; art is our instinct for happiness and surprise . . . it conveys our compassion and suffering, and connects us with all living things, along with the unfathomable and invincible belief that we share in each other's joys and sorrows. It is this very belief that brings countless souls together. . . . It makes human beings inseparable — the dead and the alive, the alive and those to be born."<sup>1</sup>

At this moment, art is no longer a self-secluded mind, it is no longer private property. It breaks out from the womb and starts to live independently, becoming mankind's necessary spiritual desire and realization. What it betrays is a profound revelation of mankind itself, a self-emancipation of the human spirit. From the perspective of modern philosophy and anthropology, man is both part of humankind as well as individualistic. New Figurative follows this exact principle for breaking into the core of that dark and chaotic world of the "inner image." Thus begins its adventure to inject its organic and open system into the entire course of life. [We] attempt to give form to those things existing in the murky limbo, welcoming them into an artistic semiotic system that is correspondingly precise, lucid, and cogent. We can call it the figurative pattern of life — the sense of concreteness in life.

The figurative exists in the visual, and the light of this pattern reflects its origins. Through this kind of man-made release and regulation, one's spirit evolves and continues. Life is finite after all, suppressed by the ultimate void of death. For every individual existence, death is eventually inevitable. Through the creative activity of art — the unfolding of figurative patterns — "fear is eradicated" (Zhang Xiaogang), "[one is] fearless" when confronted with death (Hou Wenyi). It is retaliation against death and a rebellion against destiny. Using the figurative representation of life as a vehicle, mankind extends itself into a vast and expansive eternity — the incessant generation and evolution of human life. Here, we discern man's common destiny, the timeless principles of the past, the present, and the future. Here, the human race shows its unity. It is no longer an isolated, singular, and parochial phenomenon. It eradicates the uneasiness and fear. It engenders mankind's warmest, most honest, most natural, and most sublime feelings. This is mankind's mutual faith, understanding, and compassion. Could we summarize it in the sacred word: "love"? Here, art reveals its complete moral virtue, and it is only at this juncture that art can be said to be returning to itself, to be realizing itself. In this sense, we can say that art does not originate from art. Art also does not exist for the sake of art. Art is not art itself. New Figurative, as the figurative pattern of life, will faithfully return to the recesses of the heart, to the origin of life. In the world, where it is at once the origin and the object, and within the universal expansion of the self, it seeks to recover the appearance of "man" and attend to "man's" questions. It brings art into every corner and every blind spot. New Figurative is thus the reassurance of heart and life.

### C. THE REALIZATION AND MANIFESTATION OF THE FIGURATIVE PATTERN OF LIFE

The specific perception and manifestation of New Figurative is complicated and dialectical. From rational empiricism to intuitive impulse; from metaphysical meditation to unconscious catharsis; from classical sublimity to Dadaist cynicism; from drawing upon modern design to admiring primitive art, it embraces a whole variety of interests and contains complex "significance and implications." It possesses a quiet, solemn cosmic spirit that spreads in a dream; it allows one to fantasize in front of a chair, a window, a light bulb, or a wall. It may develop a penchant for garbage and refuse; it can also indefatigably depict one's own face a hundred times, locating every slight move of the nostril and the lips, seeking out the different shades and expression of the eyes. When enraged, it can distort life into a monster and evaporate it into a ball of gas; it expands, rolls, and negates every equilibrium and open space on the canvas, ridiculing all laws and rules. When it is calm, it embarks on a voyage, like a pirate or a vagrant setting out on risky business; it can dismember itself like a toy and be caged in a zoo for others' amusement. It confronts death on the canvas, or rather memorializes death, erecting a monument in the name of death. When it feels elated by life, it gallops like a wild horse, chasing after clouds in the sky; it pays homage to [Henry] Moore, sprinkling water down from the blue sky; it witnesses David's and Venus's chance encounter on the street; it runs into a blue-faced demon on its way home. It thus practices calligraphy on the canvas, adds illustrations to music, keeps a diary for the soul.

Yes, art is the first step toward saving oneself in a pitch-dark night. "I picked up my brush perhaps to relieve my loneliness. Here, I find my own language — a language capable of communicating between the inner world and the outer world — a space of the self" (Zhang Xiaping). "From despair begins the soul's intake, this tension is what painting is about. Not just representation, not just a release, but instead a kind of control, a criticism, a moral quality, a direction, and a state of mind" (Hou Wenyi). When this innate power explodes from the origin of life, "it is as if a heated desire from outside of life holds up; it wakes us up to do, and not just to merely think about doing. It compels the mind to strike the strongest note within the remote, nebulous disturbance. When you are confronted with a canvas, what you feel is the stimulation and challenge against life, a fight to the death, a moment to prove yourself, a point in time to compel yourself, to struggle to think, and strive to do. What is imperative is to do, to act, and act" (Pan Dehai). Following this strong impetus, replete with all the colors in life, art ascends to the world stage, "a kind of spontaneous act that makes us take part in life and society" (Zhang Fuping).

To exist and to prosper, mankind needs to continuously present itself and its potential. "It endeavors to pursue the human race as a whole, it must talk to mankind as a whole, and must adapt to this rich and homogenous whole, this monotonous multiplicity."<sup>2</sup> When revelations continue to emerge from itself onto this great tree that we call New Figurative, we see the concrete manifestations of the reality of the human spirit — all the enticing images from the figurative patterns of life. It seems to be too naked and too primitive. It accidentally becomes its own touchstone and slaughterer. It relentlessly exposes the fragments of a spinning life. That spear of incisive intuition continues to target the future and ignorance. Like "a poet recalling his life, to speak out what is beyond description yet living among us."<sup>3</sup> Thus, it accidentally becomes a traitor of reality, perceived by people as a demented lunatic, or a crazy man. This is destiny. It must provide a clear-cut image for the age. It must awaken and strengthen people's aesthetic consciousness through a superhuman and non-human approach of genuine visuality. This museum of signs of life provides people with new

evidence and frames of reference for their very existence. It has become an important venue for mankind to approach the truth and the future. As William Butler Yeats put it, people cannot understand truth, but they can embody truth.

#### **D. NEW FIGURATIVE: COMPOSITE HYBRIDIZATION**

As for the question of form, New Figurative takes mankind's history of art as an evolving history of the spirit. It is a history of "the perception of human nature," a concrete representation of spiritual reality. It is not a history of techniques and craftsmanship. In the greatest artworks, we see the soul's stirring words and the sudden revelation of the mind. Through the so-called form, we see the profound mysteries of our own minds, the inner truths to be distinguished from the outer world, the specters that drift behind us like shadows. In this sense, form and content are one and the same. Form is content, and content is form. From our perspective, form is the figurative scheme of life, because only the successful expressions can exist, and successful expressions are the manifestation of life itself. It is creation embedded in reality. It is reality, and nothing else outside of reality.

New Figurative asserts that this is a functionalist age, which exists in an ocean of information. It is also a comprehensive and relativist age. If figurative painting appears insincere and full of deceit, then abstract painting's excessive pursuit of purity leads to coldness and indifference. Where figurative painting's lifelike images often tire viewers with their tendency to be illustrative, explanatory, descriptive, abstract painting also deflects tentative exploration into the mind through its excessive subjectivity and overly physical stimulation to the retina. New Figurative endeavors to represent the world more fully — a "reality" crisscrossed, percolated, misplaced through interaction between the subjective and the objective. It approximates today's diversified world — it can no longer be expressed through conventional logic. New Figurative shows vast potential. It is like a large container, which from the outset does not reject any achievements from any historical period, regardless of whether it is from the East or the West. We will use any achievement so long as it fits our purpose. We are receptive to a *mélange*, a fusion, and then we use the mixture of categories to shatter those categories' boundaries, and from there we achieve a new typology (Li Hongyun). This new type embodies the convoluted relationship between the objective and the subjective. Here, Classicism and Romanticism, the abstract and the figurative, are all in rapport with each other in the New Figurative kitchen, enjoying equal privileges. This is akin to the avenue of pragmatism. In this art, there is no absolute truth, and paths leading to the other shore present themselves in every corner of the world. Every part and every unit is full of hope, full of possibility and unpredictability. They are all seeds leading to the future.

#### **E. NEW FIGURATIVE: INTUITION — INTEGRAL EXPRESSION**

Today, New Figurative is peppered with a strong regionalist flavor (yet it is not a mouthpiece or postcard for the region). It came from the South's profound natural consciousness, the mystery of heat, and the obsession with commotion. Sharp, zealous, and purely intuitive, it escapes the prison of rationalism and dives deep into the chaotic "inner image" of the unknown world, completely engaging itself in the phantasmal space, emanating all signs of life — discovery, that is. The union of mankind and the universe, the communication between people and things is achieved through this spontaneous and accentuated release and representation. When all power, all organizational compositions, lucid or murky, breathe freely, expand, select, and compete, the world enjoys an integrated, pluralistic, and rational coexistence. It salvages the world from

the misery of isolation and constriction. It alleviates the world from the pain arising from misunderstanding and separation. It restores the healthy progress of the spirit and leads mankind to generosity and tolerance. When it offers to people a series of figurative patterns of life — the prototype of figurative patterns of the world — this is by no means an arbitrary or carefree emotional release or [demonstration of] insanity. It attempts to enlist more people to seek out the meaning of life and the world.

New Figurative is synonymous with today's art, today's life, and today's humanity. It sends art back to people. It exists as a companion to people. When art materializes as spaces of feelings, spaces of the mind, spaces of the "inner image" world, spaces of the universe, spaces of the unknown, it is the New Figurative space. When it comprises various types, various compositional elements, multiple languages, multiple structures and dimensions, it is the New Figurative type. When all kinds of elements interact and crisscross, exclude and include, when they are unique yet comprehensive, and when they are New Figurative, it is more of an apocalypse "communicating knowledge from different fields and connecting polarized human characteristics such as intuition and rationality, and chaos and order."<sup>4</sup>

#### F. NEW FIGURATIVE: ACTION — TRANSCENDENCE

New Figurative is foremost a life attitude and a consciousness of action. Mankind is the subject of the world, as well as the subject of ourselves. [Mankind] is the inner core, the bottom of all mysteries, Kant's Noumenon, Plato's Idea, Hegel's Absolute Idea. Things develop, and New Figurative is a developmental concept, a marathon and competition against death. It conquers death and wins eternal value for life. It is more interested in the process than the result, experiences are more meaningful than outcomes. An era is a process, not a result. The process is eternal. Continuous action will open up new territories. When it is persistent but not extreme, inclusive and not exclusive, the world becomes all the more lucid. In this sense, as New Figurative is being realized, it is at the same time overwhelmed by an expansive mindset. Here, we never doubt the value of our own existence. "At this point, we examine the value of our paintings relative to the world of art; on a higher level, what we offer to the exploration of our common issues, such as the value of life and the diversity of the people and the world art, is comparable to contemporary masters' endeavors" (Pan Dehai).

The foreword of the *Third New Figurative* [exhibition] says: eternity is to be achieved by the whole human race, not any individual. The world ought to be restored to its original condition. Every age features particular styles. If you fail to realize that the apex of life is action, then you cannot act better. When art is externalized from our lives, life is continued at its highest level, when life itself is forgotten. Therefore: action, expression, and transcendence.

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#### Notes

1. Saul Bellow, *Herzog*, 479 (quoting Joseph Conrad).
2. Zhu Guangqian, *Meixue shisui ji* [Gleaner of Aesthetics], 14. 5 [sic] (quoting Goethe).
3. Words of Vicente Aleixandre.
4. Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, 177.

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**RED BRIGADE PRECEPT (1987)<sup>1</sup>**

By Ding Fang [pl. 12]

- In the solemnity of self-sacrifice, we find common points of support.
- We thirst to re-create life in the depths of our hearts.
- In the course of our journey to the other shore, we reach the sublime.
- When we collide with eternity, we sense the call to mystery.

On that mountaintop, while the flame propelled us to continue on the path toward rebirth, it also never ceased in diverting our steel hammer to the rocks.

One can conceive of how wise and intelligent the Earth is within the Universe; but at the same time, one can also imagine its loneliness. For humans, this loneliness is innate, for, in the end, there is nothing that can engage with it in a "final" dialogue.

Everyone on Earth is shrouded in loneliness. Because of this lack of a "possibility for a final dialogue," history can only become a "process." In the eternity of space and time, they [these processes of history] "accumulate" and "regenerate," without beginning and without end.

When we pursue the sublime, we feel the aforementioned "accumulation." This not only indicates to us the paths of human creativity that have already been laid out in this infinite time and space, but also makes clear our mission in this eternal existence.

The various things described above accumulate in the deepest reaches of our spirit and cohere in a tragic consciousness. This consciousness not only encompasses the specific temporal and cultural orbits in which we find ourselves, but also embraces those feelings of difference between cultures, times, and places that are necessarily produced when we encounter another great cultural formation. Consequently, long before performing an action, we realize, *a priori*, the "meaninglessness" of that "action" within history itself.

This sense of tragedy is also manifested as a "tragic consciousness in painting." It involves not only our concern for the fate of common "people," but also a profound concern for their orbiting, without beginning or end, as destined through this eternal existence. It makes visible this kind of fate. Even "life," which [seems] so permanent, is also a mere "process," for it eternally lacks a "goal." Its course merely involves a certain "superposition" over the "tracks of past courses"; thus, any of its essential meaning that [might seem to constitute an] "advance forward" is in actuality a "superposition" of the "common," "great dreams" [shared across] "dissimilar" space-times.

Our "astonishing imagination" today is also a flame that recalls "the originary flame." This is a soul that roams forever in nighttime musings. It is like an intense wind that blows across the lowlands, chasing a brilliance than can never be attained. In spite of this, our innate will still chooses to "push rocks up the mountain."<sup>2</sup> Such an action originates in this kind of hope — in the hope that one gazes up to from the abysses of despair.

The essence of this "act of climbing the mountain" could be described as "using art forms to rebuild a vital creation." Because of the light that it gives off when it is being composed, it also becomes a new "religion." At the same time, this great "vital creation" is necessarily structured from every angle. It is not that one's "choice can be free" but that it "must be free." Because the fate of "people's creative behavior" is a refusal of the will of "existing gods," when "he" is reborn like a phoenix from the ashes of history, a "new god" is also born following him; and he says: "You must raise up the 'newly born' will of the 'newly born' man."

We tread along our journey, and in the darkness we thirst for the brilliance of fire. When it burns brightest, we unexpectedly discover that this flame is actually ourselves. That color like blood is smeared on the emergent will in the fire of the self.<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

1. "Red Brigade" — the journey of life, that is, our appreciation of the course of history, culture, and life.
2. The story of Sisyphus's pushing the rock up the mountain is found in "The Myth of Sisyphus" (Albert Camus): "Sisyphus met with the punishment of heaven: the gods ordered him to push a boulder up a mountain day and night. When he reached the mountain peak, because of the boulder's own weight, it would roll down again. He would again summon all his body's strength to roll the boulder, and his face pressed against it, he would begin again to push. At the end of that long travail, he would reach his goal. However, Sisyphus would then again look on helplessly as the boulder rolled back down the mountain with the quickness of lightning; he would again have to start from the bottom and push upwards, striving toward the peak. He repeatedly returned to the limitless countryside at the mountain's bottom. Whenever he left the mountaintop and walked alone toward the residence of the gods, he transcended his fate. This constituted the lucidity in his torture, yet it also gave his crown of victory."
3. After Jiangsu Youth Art Week's *Modern Art Exhibition (Daxing xiandai yishuzhan)*, the primary participants founded a "Surrealist Group" based on their painting style and called it the "Red Brigade." Now there are seven members: Ding Fang (Nanjing Arts Institute), Yang Zhilin (Nanjing Normal University), Shen Qin (Chinese Painting Institute of Jiangsu), Cao Xiaodong (Changzhou), Chai Xiaogang (Lianyungang City), Xu Lei (Chinese Painting Institute of Jiangsu), Xu Yihui (Nanjing Arts Institute), Guan Ce (Nanjing), and Yang Yingsheng (studying abroad in England).

— Originally published as "Hongse lü zhenyan" in *Meishu sichao [The Trend of Art Thought]*, 1987: no. 1, 14–15. Translated by Phillip Bloom.

## STATEMENT ON BURNING (1986)

By Huang Yong Ping

The works shown in the exhibition held from September 28 to October 5, 1986, were burned on the afternoon of November 23 at the new Xiamen Art Museum plaza.

The exhibition no longer exists. Any praise, support, doubt, or criticism toward it has lost meaning.

We could not decide whether the works in the exhibition were in their final forms — they could be improved or become worse. We also could not decide where these works eventually should be stored to avoid human or natural damage. For these reasons we decided to carry out a project to consecutively reconstruct, destroy, and burn the exhibited items. All of these activities were photographed and videotaped.

It is always believed that works of art are the fruit of artists' painstaking labor and thinking. Once a work is created, the artist always takes great care to protect it from



Xiamen Dada. *Burning Works*. 1986. Group performance, Xiamen Art Museum, Fujian, China, November 23, 1986. Photograph by Wu Yi Ming

any possible damage. Only through their works can artists demonstrate their technical virtuosity and greatness. People ask us, "Let's have a look at your works." And we say, "They have been burned."

Collecting art does not exist in China, and this may be a good thing, because artists can do whatever they like with their own works and do not have to be careful with them. The attitude an artist has toward his works indicates the extent to which he can liberate himself. He may pay them no particular attention or may even treat them in unconventional ways.

Works of art are for the artist what opium is for men.

Before art is destroyed, life is never peaceful.

Dada has died. Beware of the fire.

Xiamen Dada

November 24, 1986

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— Text from "Fenshou shengming," typescript copies distributed by Xiamen Dada. Translated by Wu Hung.

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE EVENTS EXHIBITION THAT TOOK PLACE AT THE EXHIBITION HALL OF THE FUJIAN ART MUSEUM (1986)**

By Huang Yong Ping

What is shown here consists of no painting or sculpture; it is an exhibition of an art event characterized by self-definition, offensiveness, and continuity. All works on display must come from the various materials stocked in the open air around the museum. These materials are not used as "art mediums" to be decorated or constructed from, but are simply displaced to the exhibition hall. Lying on the floor or standing vertically, leaning against walls, or piled up, they are just as they were in the outdoor space. The difference is that these materials are now treated in the same way as works of art found in previous exhibitions — furnished with labels, visited by an audience, supported by art theories, and completed by artists. Moreover, since the entire project takes place in an art museum, it can be called an "art event." That these materials suddenly were rushed into the exhibition hall generates a sense of assault. This assault, however, is not aimed at the visitors, but at their views of "art." Similarly, the target of the attack is the exhibition hall as a model of the art system, not the exhibition hall itself. This art event continues the Xiamen Dada exhibition in October and the reconstruction, destruction, and burning of the exhibition items in November. It implies a certain radically changed concept, as well as the urgency to put this concept into practice. Whether works formally shown in an art gallery are [automatically] "works of art," the participants of this event consider this an unnecessary question. They feel that it is meaningless to label the exhibition items as works of art.

In this exhibition, we come empty-handed and return empty-handed. This is an art exhibition without works of art.

December 1986

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— From text posted in the exhibition hall. Translated by Wu Hung.



## TOWARD A PHYSICAL STATE OF CONTEMPORARY ART ITSELF (1986)

By Wang Du

When the term "modern art" was still featured as a hot topic in journals, the *First Experimental Exhibition* of the Southern Artists Salon (*Nanfang yishujia shalong*) used the physical state of the new plastic arts to reveal their reflections on contemporary art [pl. 13].

Today, it seems that art neither represents spiritual life in its entirety nor neutralizes material life. Rather, it is a continuous creative process that enables the purification of all human life. It goes beyond the spiritual and the corporeal; it affirms the sublime realms of life and death. This is the essential spirit of art.

The new plastic arts embody this kind of spirit. They believe that artistic creation is necessary for life, a necessity that one cannot help but pursue. Many types of artwork from the past cannot be substituted because they are historical "facts." Certain types of artistic vocabularies have exhausted their "veracity" to the extent that they have become no different from a skill, a continuation of a kind of handiwork. One must see the limitations of this type of language. The primary impetus behind the new plastic arts is to rethink the entire meaning of art and extricate it from all limiting frameworks.

When one becomes accustomed to acknowledging labels, one invariably loses the capacity for understanding. The new plastic arts regard reason and emotion as commonplace; the former has become restricted to semantic interpretation, while the latter has become a superficial sign devoid of content. Only the realization gained from the complete, collaborative use of the head and the body can allow art to attain real value.

The new plastic arts seek to discover the worldly nature of art itself, and the differences in physical structures; to tear down the frameworks that position East and West, North and South, etc.; to seek the interaction of heaven and earth; and to dissolve into the unbounded world of everything and nothing.

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— Originally published as "Quxiang dangdai yishu benti de wutai fangshi" in *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*], October 20, 1986 (no. 42), 1. Translated by Phillip Bloom.

# III. FROM COLLECTIVITY TO INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY: 1987--89

Even during the heyday of the '85 New Wave, some artists and critics had already begun voicing their reservations about the social agenda and movement/*yundong* mentality of this nationwide project. *Yundong*, which means a large-scale political "campaign," had been a fundamental concept and instrument in modern Chinese political culture since the early twentieth century. Especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party mobilized various campaigns to realize short- or long-term plans, and to unify the "revolutionary masses" against internal and external enemies. Three major characteristics of a government-sanctioned campaign were gradually defined, including a clear and often practical agenda, a propaganda machine which helped articulate and spread this agenda, and an organization that aimed to forge a cohesive front of participants. The *yundong* became a central element of social life and continued to control people's thinking even after the Cultural Revolution was over. The persistence of a movement/*yundong* mentality was clearly visible in the '85 New Wave: while attacking official ideology and art policies, its advocates tried hard to galvanize avant-garde artists into a unified front and to develop contemporary art into an organized "movement." In fact, they called such collective activities a *yundong*.

The '85 New Wave, however, was never a top-down, univocal political endeavor. From the start it had multiple facets and shifting boundaries. As it continued to develop in 1986 and 1987, it also produced internal opposition: some avant-garde artists and critics made an increasing effort to free artistic creation from collective activities motivated by sociopolitical goals. They argued that it was wrong to use art as a practical tool in any kind of social revolution, and that the true value of modern art resided in its intrinsic creativity and spirituality. They criticized the New Wave movement for its lack of artistic standards and art historical vision, for its indulgence in pseudophilosophical discourses, and for its uncritical borrowing of modern Western styles. Some critics encouraged artists to purify artistic language; others envisioned a modern Chinese art that combined Western modernism with Chinese cultural traditions.

Whereas these critics' ideas of modern Chinese art remained vague, some individual artists and small cooperatives initiated art projects with a more specific orientation. A common tendency in these projects, as reflected in the statements translated below, was to abandon a grand sociopolitical vision and to relocate the meaning of art in the creative process and experience. Xu Bing compared his making of several thousand fake Chinese characters to a madman collecting wastepaper and washing it clean. Huang Yong Ping deepened his search for illogicality, hoping to eliminate the artist's subjective intervention in art production. The Analysis (later New Measurement) group developed a system of art making based on mathematical measurements and calculations, to avoid emotional interference and a predetermined conclusion. Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi designed works to transform viewers into images, in order to liberate art from social control. These artists found theoretical support from Marcel Duchamp and the notion of anti-art, rejecting conventional definitions of art but not art itself. Combining conceptual radicalism and original artistic experimentation, their inquiries produced a group of exciting, sophisticated works, exemplified by Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* (1987) [originally titled *A Mirror to Analyze the World – Fin de Siècle Book (Xi shi jian – Shijimo juan)*], Wenda Gu and Wu Shanzhuan's pseudo-Chinese writing (1985–1988), and Huang Yong Ping's *The History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Western Painting Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987). The trends introduced by these and other works were extended into the 1990s.

## RETHINKING THE MOVEMENT

### RETURNING TO ART ITSELF (1988)

By Jia Fangzhou

A profound concern for human destiny has produced a deep sense of anxiety among Chinese artists. But, always feeling that art should undertake something else often weakens one's own artistic mission.

Art history proves that in any period, the value of art can only be truly demonstrated through its own artistic evolution and transformation. From painted pottery to bronze vessels, and from Classical antiquity to modern art, there are no exceptions. Art, as "humanity's most explicit evidence of itself" (Imamichi Tomonobu), develops in accordance with humanity. Art's transformations and expansions are a "proof of self" of humankind's endless evolutions in the realm of perception. Thus, each artistic evolution is a very significant event. On this level of inference, nothing that our era anticipates and calls forth is a magnificent "masterpiece" or "the great spirit's passion for life" (*Fine Arts in China* [*Zhongguo meishu bao*] September 12, 1988 [no. 37]). Rather, it is the continuous evolution and expansion of art itself, the incessant optimization of art (*benti*), and the constant renewal of form.

As for the artist, if he is creating art not merely for fun but harbors a sense of mission, then he is certainly conscious of his making a contribution to the advancement of art. If he enters a vehement state of existence as a result of intense concerns for human destiny, then he is invariably trying to think of how to transform the condition of "man" into "art." If he directly participates in transforming reality as a result of his great interest in human destiny, his choice is irreproachable, but it is not related to art. I see no relationship between Courbet's status as a "great master" and his participation in the political movement of the Paris Commune. Thus, an artist can never completely sink into the predicament of humanity; he needs to maintain a certain relationship to social reality while also maintaining a certain distance from it. Otherwise, it would be difficult for him to devote himself to art. This is because art does not have the fundamental ability or responsibility to transform the fate of humanity. This is just like Rembrandt: although he made many excellent works depicting beggars, these works had no practical significance to beggars. Yet as the thinker Michel de Montaigne said, "One writes only when one fails in doing other things." If things are going smoothly, one would not take writing and the arts as one's career. This is because Montaigne understood that only "real action has an inestimable value." If a painter has no way of extricating himself from an excessively grave sense of anxiety and enters the "ivory tower" of art, then he need not waste away his time at the canvas, for the universe "beyond the artwork" is far broader than the work itself. He can wholly throw down the brush to take part in politics, and use socially transformative, "real action" to relieve humanity's predicaments, to create a "masterpiece" that "could rival any of Rembrandt's work" and have even more practical value.

However, an artist who truly has a sense of mission should devote himself to the transformation of art itself, and should make its development and evolution the goal of his life. The value of an artist lies not in whether he participated in the political activities of society or whether he aspired to change the fate of humanity. An artist's contributions to humanity are not determined by whether he depicts these kinds of "changes." An artist's true mission is to change the stagnation and fossilization of artistic predicaments, and not the predicaments of humanity. It is precisely in light of this understanding that Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* possesses greater value compared with his

*Guernica*. This is because the former divided modern art from classical art while the latter only perpetuated a new language. Despite the importance of its subject matter, *Guernica* does not possess any particular significance to the expansion of art itself.

In the past few decades, our approach to art has been controlled by a traditional, functional mentality, always using art as a practical tool, and not treating it as a symbol of humanity's unceasing evolution in the spiritual realm. Thus, over these years, Chinese art existed amidst the heavy burden of functional use, but from this lack of opportunity, it brought about its own change, perfection, and development. Even so, for art to be a kind of cultural phenomenon with an "inner drive," it must do its utmost to dispel "the limiting barrier of functionality," and cause itself to "rise from pure method to unhindered goals." Only when "the method rises to meet its objective, will it most effectively demonstrate its purpose" (Xu Jilin, "Shedding the Limiting Barrier of Functionality in Academia"). Chinese art has not yet achieved progress in this direction; it has not truly realized its ontological significance. Until now, we have still been unwilling to allow it to unload the burden of functionality, and to fully cultivate or contemplate itself. As early as the beginning of the century, Liang Qichao [1873–1929] called China's academics "careless and superficial" based on the psychological "motivation to pursue studies." He suggested that the cause of its disease lay in "not taking academics as an objective but as a method." Thus, he proposed, "learning for its own sake; not to supply a method beyond learning" ("Liang Qichao on the Academic History of the Qing"). Thinking back, does contemporary Chinese art's situation of carelessness and superficiality not stem from the same disease? Thus, artists can only take the evolution and transformation of art itself as their objective. Only then can they achieve "an honest nature and single-minded leadership, even if it has little practical use, the progress of each culture must depend on this kind of person" (ibid.). Only when artists also have this kind of scholarly character to transcend utilitarian purposes will they finally be able to advance Chinese art to a new level.

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— Originally published as "Huidao yishu benti shanglai" in *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*], December 5, 1988 (no. 49), 1. Translated by Kristen Loring.

## RETHINKING ART

### Purifying Artistic Language

#### A FEW THOUGHTS (1988)

By Zhu Zude and Liu Zhenggang

The Chinese modern art movement is at a relatively quiet moment now as many artists are reflecting on the past three years of excitement. Thinking about our own works, we offer these thoughts:

#### 1. THE NEED TO PURIFY ARTISTIC LANGUAGE AND ELEVATE ARTISTIC VALUE

When the first light of modern civilization came in through the cracks of the window, our country's venerable culture, accumulated over thousands of years, suddenly looked decrepit. Young people picked up modern artistic vocabularies to project their voices. They repudiated the disregard for individual values and rejected artistic models that turned art into didactic illustrations for vulgar sociological purposes. But, modern art was too new and too alien for every Chinese. Thus, when these young

artists hastily announced their concepts, they were unable to discover their own artistic language. Artwork from this period often took abstract signs as substitutes for true emotions, turning art into a mere vehicle for the artists' sociological concepts. Some works were not only clumsy and unbalanced but also unknowingly stumbled into a realm that they had vowed to steer clear of — art as illustrations for political indoctrination. Accordingly, purifying artistic language and elevating aesthetic values are among our highest priorities today.

## **2. [THE NEED] TO TAKE A PRAGMATIC STANCE TOWARD EASTERN AND WESTERN CULTURES**

Over our several thousand years of history, almost every generation has made important commentaries on the philosophical theories in our traditional culture. In this way, the same sage has acquired extremely varied appearances. In this sense, "history" is always contemporary, that is, the shape of history is always altered and adapted for the purposes of any given age. The earliest and most profound philosophical ideas in a traditional culture were formed at the moment when people exited the primitive age, when they made suppositions and realizations about myriad things in the universe. The core of such philosophy refused logical deduction. There were also so many vague areas that later generations were free to fill in the gaps. Therefore, "traditional culture" is to be distinguished from "cultural tradition." The former is an existing reality, whereas the latter is an evolutionary process. The question does not lie in whether traditional culture is good or bad, which has been debated over hundreds of years, but rather in what has compelled Chinese people from different ages to make different choices. We still cannot explain this mechanism of cultural selection, this "cultural tradition" which has made specific selections from hundreds of Chinese philosophical systems and the rich teachings under each philosophy. On the one hand, it is exactly this mechanism that gave rise to the glorious Han and Tang. On the other hand, it brought about the catastrophes at the end of the Qing and the Republican period.

We believe that the objective in understanding Eastern and Western cultural paradigms is to know how to choose for oneself. We should adopt whatever fits our needs. It's pointless to segregate the choices along geopolitical lines. We are drawn to the humanistic aspect of the Western culture that respects individual values, and we are enamored with the elegant philosophical thinking in the Eastern culture. A better way is to exercise pragmatism in choosing between the two cultures. While fond of modern abstract art, we also love the Eastern philosophical spirit, because as Chinese people we cannot possibly be isolated from the influence of Eastern philosophies. In this day and age, however, we cannot follow the deliberate pace of "chanting verses and picking chrysanthemums under the Eastern fence." Through abstract art, we can understand the mysterious universe by cultivating our spiritual selves, and express the great sense of awe experienced by people within the universe.

## **3. [THE NEED] TO RESPECT OUR INTUITION**

Einstein once said that there are three kinds of people in the pantheon of science. The first type consists of those who engage in the profession for the common good. The second type wanders into it due to personal interest. The third type is in it for selfish purposes. Einstein believed that the second type was closest to being a pure scientist.

Art is just like this. Artistic creation is an activity of experiencing. What is important is the process itself. During this process, artists integrate their inner imagination with the external world at the moment that they are inspired. At this moment they lay bare their essential nature as they refract the radiating glow of the universe through

their representations of an austere and pedestrian reality. At the same time, artists are continually pursuing more liberating and dynamic languages. Art is an earnest pursuit of life. It is life itself. Artists explore the inner reality and the inner spirit through intuition. If one does not conduct his artistic activities in this fashion, he is not a pure artist. He is playing some other role.

I paint because I want to paint. I paint the way I do because I love to paint this way. There is nothing else. When every artist has truthfully revealed his throbbing heart and honors his own intuitive feelings in his works, then a healthy artistic space will come into existence, in due course.

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— Originally published as "Jidian xiangfa" in *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*], August 13, 1988 (no. 33), 1. Translated by Kela Shang.

## Absurdity and Irrationality

### NON-EXPRESSIVE PAINTINGS (1986)

By Huang Yong Ping

From March to April 1985, I worked on paintings that were carried out using a procedure (determined by me) and yet were unrelated to me (non-expressive). I meticulously chose a medium whose application, however, would render "meticulousness" and "choice" null through "chance" and "randomness." When I surrendered the power to make decisions to randomness, I wasn't doing this to serve my own needs, nor was this out of a need to obey certain so-called rules that transcend the individual. When I limited decision-making to randomness, this negated to a large degree the existence of "things that had been decided." Attributing all decisions to chance made the decision to rely on chance even more natural.

I first selected the medium, which to a certain extent could replace myself: I made a roulette wheel equipped with bearings and divided it into eight fan-shaped sections.

I then drew eight sections on a canvas that potentially corresponded to those on the roulette wheel.

I numbered every pigment found in my studio: green (coating paint): 1; emerald green (mixture of colored powder and resin): 2; sienna (mixture of colored powder and resin): 3; green (ink): 4; red (mixture of colored powder and resin): 5; black (mixture of colored powder and resin): 6; red (mixture of colored powder and resin): 7; medium yellow (mixture of colored powder and resin): 8; black (ink): 9; ultramarine (mixture of colored powder and resin): 10; fire-engine red (ink): 11; light yellow (coating




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Huang Yong Ping with his *Roulette Wheel: Four Paintings Created According to Random Instructions* (detail). 1985. Artwork: wood, paint; oil on canvas; roulette 36 × 36 × 36" (91.4 × 91.4 × 91.4 cm); each painting 84 × 60" (213.4 × 152.4 cm). Collection Annie Wong Foundation

paint): 12; black (nitrocellulose lacquer): 13; blue (oil paint): 14; white (oil paint): 15; yellow (ink): 16; red (acrylic paint): 17; used brush cleaner: 18; used brush cleaner: 19; dark blue (acrylic paint): 20; red ocher (ink): 21; orange-yellow (acrylic paint): 22; white (ink): 23; white (coating paint): 24; white (mixture of colored powder and resin): 25. The numbers of these pigments were all assigned in a random way.

Then I made twenty-five dice, each with a number that corresponded to a pigment: pigment (1) — dice (1).

I used the roulette wheel to decide how to develop the composition of the painting.

And I chose the numbered pigment by tossing dice.

In all, I turned the roulette wheel sixty-four times (that is, eight times eight) to complete the composition and thus resolved the problem of when to stop working on a painting (that is, to complete it). The number sixty-four was decided entirely by me: there was nothing absolute about it.

Using this random method to select pigments and composition, and to determine the final look of a work of art allowed me to deal exclusively with numbers, which are non-visual and non-aesthetic, and thus enabled me to get away from personal preferences for certain colors and compositions, to regard all pigments as being one and the same — regardless of the different colors, warm or cold, oil- or water-based — and to consider all compositions as good, that is, to make no distinction between good and bad compositions. Both color and composition thus lost their meaning.

For example, chance led me to the following orders:

Numbered codes (A): 9 — 13 — 18 — 20, and actual pigments (B): black (ink) — black (nitrocellulose lacquer) — used brush cleaner — green (acrylic paint). The codes in the A sequence don't show any contradictions, nor do they pertain to any sense of good or bad or reflect any preference. When I thought in terms of the B sequence, however, I started wondering whether it was really necessary to put black on top of black; whether it would be difficult to add a water-based paint on top of an oil-based one; whether an oil-based nitrocellulose paint being smeared onto normal ink would cause cracking, blistering, and peeling of the paint; or whether it was not going to be unsightly to paint the green color onto the dirty used brush cleaner.

Thinking about B resulted in a painting process full of psychological obstacles; in contrast, thinking about A allowed me to use a particular red without considering it as that particular red and to paint without seeing it as painting.

The numbers randomly appointed by the roulette wheel when it stopped spinning would dictate the potential composition of the canvas. They also let me overlap coats of paint in the bottom right section of the canvas:

1 — 2 — 3 — 4: order of spinning

8 — 8 — 8 — 7: numbers on the roulette wheel

8 — 8 — 8 — 7: corresponding numbers on the canvas

All concepts of harmony, variation, void, and unity — the formal rules of composition — completely disappear. The aesthetic consciousness a person normally has when working on a painting is reduced to such a great extent that painting is now considered a natural thing to be carried out.

In the process of making a painting, the coded numbers for the composition and color (photographs 1, 2, 3, 4) [ not illustrated ] chosen by the roulette table were recorded in a table. These recorded numbers and the final product can be said to have the same value. This is because ultimately the result isn't what's important to me. What's important is how this final result came about.

Generally speaking, when calculating probabilities using a roulette wheel one usually harbors some sort of expectation. Gamblers place their hopes and expectations into a



roulette wheel. When I use the roulette wheel, however, I don't have any expectations, because all of the numbers that the needle could possibly land on signal my hope for getting some kind of a definitive answer, regardless of what that answer may actually be.

This randomness makes me shift toward a kind of intangible, non-baroque, non-symbolic, unapplied, non-technical, simple, non-individualistic reality, even if this reality makes people uncomfortable.

What propels me to produce this kind of idea is partly due to inspiration from John Cage; partly due to the experience that the tenets of pure, abstract form have increasingly become restricting dogmas; and partly due to a deep suspicion toward the possibility that individuals can freely and independently control painting. What kind of inspiration can John Cage give us? Cage is to music what Duchamp is to painting; they both adopted chance as their primary principle. They were the first to see through artists who, in the name of art, said that they were creating new worlds, but were in fact destroying the existence of nature. Rather than saying that artists have special talents, it would be more accurate to say that this kind of talent causes art to degenerate. An effort to eliminate the pursuit of profundity and innovation, as well as artistic interests and aesthetic emotions, will cause art to naturally appear and disappear in a state of disregarding meaning and result, just like life itself.

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— Originally published as "Fei biaoda de huihua" in *Meishu sichao [The Trend of Art Thought]*, 1986: no. 4, 2–4. Excerpts translated as "Paintings Made Following a Procedure (Determined by Me) and Yet Unrelated to Me (Nonexpressive)" by Yu Hsiao Hwei in *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, ed. Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 65–66. Remaining sections translated by Peggy Wang.

## Art as Process

### LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN A QUIET PLACE (1989)

By Xu Bing

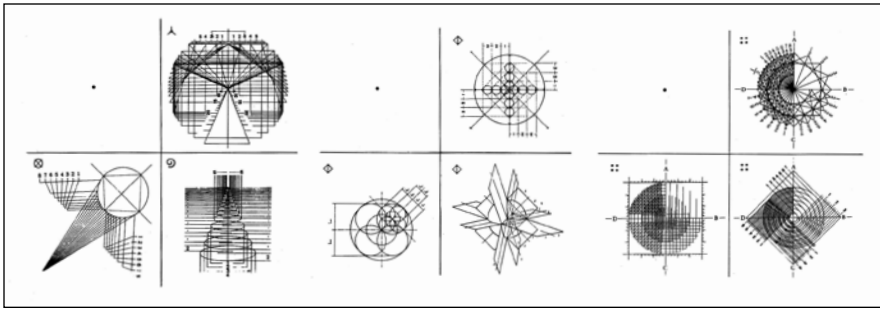
For more than a year I ceaselessly invented, carved, and printed a set of twelve volumes of *A Mirror to Analyze of the World—Fin de Siècle Book (Xi shi jian—Shijimo juan)* [pl. 14], which no one in this world can understand. The unbelievable amount of work threw its audience into confusion.

One of my painter friends once told me about a "crazy" guy in his home village, who always went out to collect wastepaper at a certain hour, washing these papers in a river, carefully mounting them piece by piece, and then storing them under his bed after they had become dry and flat. I thought quite a long time about this person's behavior. Finally I realized that it was a kind of *qigong* — a kind of cultivation of the Tao. It was indeed a very powerful kind of *qigong*. [It exemplifies] an Eastern way of achieving true knowledge — obtaining sudden enlightenment and correspondence with Nature by endlessly experiencing a fixed point. . . .

Nowadays the art world has become an arena. What do I want from it? Handing one's work to society is just like driving living animals into a slaughterhouse. The work no longer belongs to me; it has become the property of all the people who have touched it. It is now concrete and filthy. I hope to depart from it, looking for something different in a quiet place.

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— Originally published as "Zai pijingchu xunzhao yige biede" in *Beijing qingnian bao [Beijing Youth Daily]*, February 10, 1989. Translated by Wu Hung.



Analysis Group. *Measuring Dots*. 1989. Ink on paper. Reproduced from Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishushi, 1979–1989* (Hunan: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1992), ills. 497–99

## REGARDING "ANALYSIS" (1989)

By Chen Shaoping

The distinctive trait of using intuitive experience in traditional Chinese epistemology has paired with the irrational elements in Western modern culture to place dual restrictions on modern Chinese artists, disabling them from transcending the value of their own self-experience and presenting them with a world that, as a whole, is unfamiliar and chaotic. The absurdity of identity has caused Chinese modern art to enter into an endless, reverse cycle as a method of "escape."

Computers and space stations already constitute the only authentic material premise of the human spirit. Artists need to extract themselves from the difficulties of "spiritual self-examination," and through the efforts of "spiritual self-awareness" make determinations about the real world according to the intrinsic nature of things.

"Analysis" starts from the individual and utilizes the achievements of all human knowledge to form a hypothetical premise. First, one estimates the quantitative relationships within each individual's material reality. Based on this, one can extend a new supposition that applies to the whole, thereby determining the essential significance of individual existence. In its continual recognition and understanding of its objective counterpart, the human spirit in turn adds to its own essential nature.

Analysis adopts methods of measurement as its fundamental artistic vocabulary. This eliminates any direct emotional interference while also refusing to yield to any conclusions. Instead, in this process of searching for precise quantitative relationships, it leads to greater thought and imagination, thus logically approaching the essence of the world.

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— Originally published as "Guanyu 'Jiexi'" in *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*], March 13, 1989 (no. 11), 2. Translated by Peggy Wang.

## CHALLENGING MODERNISM — AN INTERVIEW WITH WENDA GU (1986)

Conducted by Fei Dawei

In late April, I went to Hangzhou and had a conversation with Wenda Gu [pl. 15] in a big studio at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, where he answered a few of my questions. Below is an edited transcript of the interview.

**Fei Dawei:** Can you talk about the circumstances surrounding how you began to learn to paint?

**Wenda Gu:** I made a completely unconscious decision to paint. When I was in elementary school, I would simply scribble and draw for fun, for instance, scenes of revolutionary model operas. In middle school, I was the head of propaganda in the school's Red Guard organization [during the Cultural Revolution]. I learned artistic calligraphy and also painted a little bit. I was assigned to work at a farm (after graduation), and not long after that I gained admittance into the woodcarving department of the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts.

**Fei:** So, you didn't receive any art education before that?

**Gu:** Yes. I just followed my own interests. Of course, my family environment might have influenced me in one way or another. My older sister was a musician. My paternal grandfather's field was drama: he was actually one of the instigators of the modern drama movement and one of the earliest organizers of modern drama in Shanghai. I began to receive a more standardized art education after I entered the Shanghai Arts and Crafts Institute. I specialized in woodcarving, but I had no interest in it. At the time, I met a professor who was a landscape painter. So, I learned to paint landscapes in the traditional style by pure chance. I didn't plan to do this.

**Fei:** And, at that point, you chose the career path of a traditional painter?

**Gu:** Absolutely. At the time, when I did landscape painting, I primarily followed Li Keran's [1907–1989] style. But, after I entered the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, my view of art totally changed. I realized that what I had done in the past was totally wrong. I had been painting blindly and what I had produced didn't count as real art. After I enrolled in the academy, I basically stopped painting. I mainly read books about Western and East Asian philosophy, aesthetics, and religion. I basically read all the time and didn't paint much . . .

**Fei:** But, I heard that you showed amazing proficiency in traditional ink painting skills when you were at the Academy . . .

**Gu:** I was not a big fan of direct copying when I learned traditional painting techniques. I put the ancient painting to one side and then simply painted whatever I felt like painting and borrowed whatever elements I needed. The curriculum at the academy required us to learn by copying ancient models. Probably because of my personality, I quickly became bored after copying only one rock. I would change to a new piece of paper and copy another detail, but soon lost interest. During the two years of coursework, I only completed one copy of an ancient painting, Wang Meng's *Living in Seclusion in the Qingbian Mountains* [*Beixia yinju tu*]. I spent most of my time reading books and brainwashing my thoughts and ideas. In those two years, it seemed like I turned into an entirely different person.

**Fei:** Which books influenced you the most?

**Gu:** I read books in the same way that I copied paintings: I read extensively and yet without seeking to understand things thoroughly. I would read several books at the same time. Nietzsche's philosophy influenced me the most. Scientific philosophy and analytical philosophy seemed removed from real human beings. But, Nietzsche's philosophy is humanistic. It undoubtedly makes a strong impression upon people, and for

that reason one might find a certain expansive power embedded in my paintings. I also liked books by Schopenhauer and Freud. But, overall, I didn't make selections according to particular theories as my interests were varied and my readings were quite diverse.

**Fei:** Please tell us about your "study methods."

**Gu:** I made note cards. There were two ways of doing this. One was taking excerpts; another was formulating my own thoughts based on others' ideas. To start with, I put together a whole box of excerpts. But, later I found them all useless. Now I write down my own thoughts, which is constructive even though my understanding can sometimes be mistaken and immature. I go through phases of reading, sometimes I like reading and sometimes I don't. Nowadays, I am reluctant to sit down and engage in scholarly work, pedantically researching something. I would rather do something intensely free, direct, and provocative. It is already quite different from my last stage when I wrote "notes on art" — at that time I still felt like doing some research. Now, I believe that the best method for accomplishing an artwork is through intuition. The more my art is theoretically charged and textually based, the less it expresses the pictorial in a visual form. In addition, I need to fight against myself. Generally speaking, paintings are carried out until one feels satisfied with what's been done, but I force myself to stop working even before I get to the point of feeling satisfied with my work. In this way I have the opportunity to ask myself if there is something here that is different from my previous work and if there are any new changes. If I continued to paint [without such reflection], I would probably repeat something I've done in the past. Therefore, nowadays I often stop painting when I reach an uncomfortable feeling about my work. In doing so, I learn something new through self-denial.

**Fei:** What mediums and genres do you work in?

**Gu:** I began working with oil painting in 1981, and gave it up at the end of 1983. Although I was a graduate student in traditional Chinese painting before 1981, I came into contact with a lot of different aspects of painting. I did oil painting at the same time as Chinese painting. I used to think it was important to grasp the materials and medium of Chinese painting because they are so exceptional. No one had been able to completely infiltrate Western modernism through this medium. Materials can influence [artistic] concepts and substance. There is neither a hierarchy nor separation between form and content. From 1981 to 1984, I basically painted Western-style paintings on rice paper.

However, following the *Invitational Exhibition on New Works of Chinese Painting (Guohua xinzuo yaoqing zhan)* that was held in Hubei (in 1985), I experienced a conceptual shift. I recognized that purely studying Western modernism might be valuable in China, but seen from a global perspective, this was still repeating the same old path that Western art had already traversed. That was my second turning point. I realized that many young artists had become captives of Western modernism. I needed to change. Besides, I had a strong rebellious mentality and I didn't want to become a part of the trend. I would escape [the modernist movement] once it became a trend. Maybe this was a kind of "consciousness of the counterculture"! There weren't that many artists involved in modernism around 1980, but now it has become a trend. I have no intention to follow it. Besides, I think that my current works are more significant than my earlier ones. Before, I used Western contemporary art as a reference point to impact

Chinese painting. Now, I feel that this is insufficient. My reference system should encompass the entire world. What I painted in the past now seems worthless.

At my recent exhibition in Xi'an, I presented a series of works based on Chinese writing. In these works, I planned to include artistic calligraphy, misspelled words, and missing characters. I de-emphasized the technical aspect while attempting to carry out some essential changes. I deconstructed and synthesized Chinese characters, because to me, characters can be seen as a new form of representation. When abstract paintings are combined with characters, the result is abstract in form, and yet, the characters still possess specific content. As a result, the pictorial content based on this combination is not conveyed through natural images but through language, thus transforming the conventional ways of representation. At the same time, the content of this abstract painting becomes even more specific.

**Fei:** Do you think this is a way of being distinct from Western modernism?

**Gu:** Subjectively, I hope for such a distinction. But, formally, it is still a trial. Maybe the result will turn out to be something neither Western nor traditionally Chinese, but something that falls between the two. It is not necessarily a bad thing to create a "neither/nor" situation. I don't want to pursue my own maturity because once that stage is reached, one will move in the opposite direction. Immaturity, conversely, implies continuous development. I try to position myself in a state of uncertain and ambiguous exploration, and let intuition lead the way. What is grasped by intuition is "real and true." Reasoning, meanwhile, always comes after the creative process and constitutes the past. I believe in agnosticism. Tragic consciousness and comic consciousness coexist in me. I think the human world is fundamentally a tragedy, and it's impossible to ultimately know the essence of the world. The twentieth century witnessed two great discoveries in physics: Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. But, even Einstein himself considered his theory to be a hypothesis. I believe that before reaching the ultimate truth, all knowledge is false, differing only by degree. Human beings maintain their existence or spiritual equilibrium via hypotheses, and use concepts and systems to support the entire culture. The more precise that science becomes, the more inexplicable things get. It seems to me that fuzzy numbers have illustrated that fuzziness can be more accurate than exactness. In the same way, I cannot explain my own paintings.

**Fei:** It seems then that you are not striving for perfection when you paint.

**Gu:** Right. Through the eyes of modern people, there is some art from ancient to present times that is right, some of it that is wrong, some of it is beautiful and some of it is hideous. I hope to integrate "the wrong" and "the hideous" into an aggregate, and to discover new aesthetic concepts therein. Fundamentally speaking, there is no such thing as ugly art or incorrect art. So, why can't I express such things? What I have been exploring thus far seems to be all paradoxes. I'm unable to teach because how do I distinguish "bad" from "good" in teaching? In fact, students always learn what is bad, and creativity is impossible to teach.

**Fei:** What are your views on religion?

**Gu:** I have a strong sense of religion. Of course this religious sense does not necessarily pertain to belief in any specific religion. A religious sense is the source of my creative

activity. One cannot live without belief. The further ahead you get — the more you distance yourself from society and the present, and the more you are in need of a belief to remain strong and steady when facing difficulties and pressures.

**Fei:** Can you tell us what you strive for in your art?

**Gu:** I seek something imposing, mysterious, unknowable, and a little bit repulsive. I find myself averse to lyricism. Instead, I love grandeur and magnificence, which may have something to do with my training in landscape painting. By the water or atop a mountain, I truly feel the smallness of human existence. Nature is veiled in mystery! Even modern science cannot comprehend nature's complexity. . . . Now, I am beginning to fall into the trap of agnosticism (*laughs*).

**Fei:** What is taboo in your work?

**Gu:** That would be working in the shadow of someone else. Originality cannot be measured according to "correctness." Whether or not something is correct, it can only be defined through accumulations in history and culture. However, when something new is just emerging, it is difficult to use "correctness" to evaluate it. I hope that there is originality in each of my paintings. As soon as I discover even the vague impression of anyone else, I feel disgusted. Of course, as an educated man, it is difficult for me to be completely free from the influence of others. I hope my body can consciously produce an antibody to resist knowledge from external sources lest I become submerged in the vast sea of "culture."

**Fei:** However, even the idea of originality has become outdated in the West. The so-called Neo-Avant-Garde in southern Europe precisely proposes the opposite of originality.

**Gu:** Opposing originality is also a kind of originality. What this opposes is originality formed in the past while also approaching originality from another perspective. I think Marcel Duchamp is the greatest artist in Western contemporary art. He was the gravedigger of modern art. What I aim to accomplish right now is to push the time-honored art of Chinese traditional painting to an extreme, such that it is unable to move any further. Perhaps at that point I will stop painting. To me, this kind of work is crucial for the future. I have already shattered a number of traditional Chinese concepts of painting and calligraphy. Of course, this was accomplished with the aid of ideas borrowed from the West.

**Fei:** Do you see yourself in the shadow of Duchamp?

**Gu:** Yes, that is because I worship him (*laughs*). Since he pushed art to its limit, it's hard to overthrow him. Actually, while many artists in the West try to move beyond him, they are in fact only repeating what he has done and thus praising him. To me, China is a plot of land on which modern art has yet to be reclaimed. In the next couple of years, I plan to fuse the distinctive materials and medium of Chinese painting with Western modernist concepts, and push their synthesis to an extreme.

**Fei:** Pushing traditional Chinese painting to its limit sounds like a good idea. But, can you move away from Duchamp's ideas? Is it possible to do this without following his train of thought?

**Gu:** Of course, that would be even better. I am very conscious of not using readymades, as this would be too similar to what Duchamp has accomplished and thus be meaningless. It is difficult to avoid Duchamp while making modern art. I often worry about this.

**Fei:** What is the most urgent problem that you face?

**Gu:** I think the most important thing for me right now is not to subvert tradition, but rather to challenge modernism and dig its grave. In the past few years, I have used Western modernist concepts to wage a war against (Chinese) tradition. But, after a period of time, I felt that tradition had already collapsed within me. Right now, it is time for a revolt against modernism. There is a strange phenomenon: one borrows Western modernism to attack (Chinese) tradition, and now one needs to use Chinese tradition to strike against Western modernism. But, there is a difference between the tradition that I previously opposed and the tradition that I now employ. It is also different from the tradition used by the older generation of artists to fight against modernism. While all use tradition, their angles of understanding diverge. After Western modernism's entry into China, such interaction with tradition is actually productive.

**Fei:** How would you evaluate the recent creative production in China?

**Gu:** I think we are living in the best time for art since the liberation [in 1949]. But, what we are experiencing is merely a process instead of a milestone. The artwork by the younger generation that is challenging tradition is significant but ephemeral. But, this is a necessary process to go through. It will probably take a long time before a great master emerges, and nobody can foresee that. What happens now is only a process of reintroducing foreign culture. It is an assault. However, after the shock wears off, we will find that the number of artists who can hold their ground in art is far too few.

**Fei:** The general trend is good, but the level (of the art) remains low.

**Gu:** Yes, you are right. Those representatives of innovative work will go down in art history, but not everything written into art history is necessarily good. From the global perspective, we have not yet reached a high enough level. Let's hope the [art] trends continue.

**Fei:** Do you think it is necessary for Chinese art to display national characteristics?

**Gu:** When advancing toward the world, Chinese art should embody its national character. However, this national character needs to be raised to an international level and march in the front ranks of world culture. One cannot simply assume that [the level of] "the national" is necessarily equivalent to "the international." Not every nation's music and art can pass beyond its national boundaries to influence and even guide the development of world culture. It is essential for Chinese art to have its own national characteristics when it enters the global space, but these cannot be simple, conventional "national characteristics." It has to endure a complicated process before Chinese artists develop a genuine national character.

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## Against the Public

### THE POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR ART PROJECT NO. 2 (YISHU JIHUA DI ER HAO) (1988 / 2008)

By Zhang Peili

[Ed. note: *Art Project No. 2* consists of a nineteen-page mimeographed document that provides concrete rules and regulations for how the project is to be conducted. Its numerous directives assign detailed roles, conditions, restrictions, and actions for those involved. However, the artwork itself — dated December 15, 1987 — is intended to be read as a text by the audience rather than actually implemented as an event.]

An artist intent on casting off all restrictive conditions can only do so after he has clarified the relationship among artistic activity, artwork, and the public. It is impossible for him to realize his ambition before he has solved this problem. The key isn't to alter one's language or the public's involvement, but rather to change the artistic relationship between viewing and being viewed. As long as the audience remains in a carefree and relaxed state of viewing, then, regardless of how the artist changes his attitude or language, there is no way for him to subvert the audience's subjective position; anything gained would only be an illusion. Everyone knows that pulling a person's tooth out, or watching someone else's tooth get pulled out, differs from having one's own tooth pulled. What the dentist values is the scientific diagnosis; he doesn't need to take the patient's expectations into consideration. If the artist hopes to build a kind of dentist-patient relationship with the public, then he must consider how to evoke a certain sense of restriction and compulsion for the public through his works. Such restriction should result from eliminating feelings of numbness and repulsive pleasure, similar to those experienced by onlookers watching another person's tooth being pulled. In other words, artists must find a juncture where both the art and the public are relevant and mutually accountable to their vital interests. In this kind of relationship, all attempts to use art simply to derive honor, pretentiousness, or pure amusement will be severely punished. Any issues about language and form will be emptied; what is left is only the direct and the essential experience of both parties.

Such emphasis on conditionality is the main issue I have been dealing with recently in my art creation. This is also the starting point for my *Brown Book No. 1 (Hepi shu yi hao)*, which I completed at the end of 1987. In my new work, I establish a stringent artistic system of rules and procedures, thus making the aspects of its restrictive nature even more evident. The idea of conditionality becomes even more obvious. Here I also want to emphasize that I do not think that *Art Project No. 2* surpasses visual categories because it uses writings to empty a visual medium. On the contrary, I believe that because it enables a complete return of visual experience back to concept, it could be said that the depth of the visual image is even more real and richer. Furthermore, because of this, it is no longer important to consider whether a systematic hypothesis in the work is necessary or can be put into practice. One could say that because there is a kind of theory on the prevention of tooth disease, this can lead to a series of concrete methods of treatment. As for whether or not a patient must have a tooth pulled or by whom the tooth must be pulled, this then becomes a simple problem.

Of course, just like any dental patient who, even when it is necessary, does not gladly accept the reality of having one's tooth pulled, the public who is used to calmly and blithely viewing art would undoubtedly feel that it is torture to be restricted by



some new artistic form that has done away with all enjoyment in viewing. They forget that nothing in this world is unconditional; and yet they haven't posed a question about this reality. Why should artists be an exception?

Now is the time for settling debts left over from the historical past. The days of making art based on the audience's reaction or to satisfy the audience's needs should have ended long ago. Art is, first and foremost, the artist. And, it is up to the artists to seize back the authority that they surrendered.

1988.11.20

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— Excerpted from a text originally titled "Yishu jihua di er hao de chufadian." Published in Gao Minglu, ed., *85 Meishu yundong 2, Lishi ziliao huibian* [The '85 Art Movement, Vol. 2, An Anthology of Historical Sources], (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), 214–16. Translated by Kristen Loring.

## THE CHINA / AVANT-GARDE EXHIBITION

**T**he idea of organizing a large-scale exhibition in Beijing to showcase New Wave art first emerged in 1986, during a large conference on the state of Chinese avant-garde art that took place in the southern city of Zhuhai in Guangdong. The plan to hold the exhibition in 1987, however, was interrupted by the Against Capitalist Liberalization campaign the Party mobilized that year. When the political campaign subsided, organizers of the 1986 conference returned to the drawing board and envisioned an even larger national exhibition to be held in the National Art Gallery. Because of this delay, conflicting notions of the event arose: some organizers envisioned it as a comprehensive retrospective of the New Wave movement, whereas others considered such a review too academic and hoped to use the opportunity to launch a new wave of avant-garde assaults against the art establishment. Differences in approach also emerged between artists who insisted on the political function of new art and those who opposed the *yundong*/movement aspect of this art. Moreover, for many New Wave artists, the prohibition of staging performances during the exhibition—a compromise reached between the preparatory committee and the museum—seemed a step backward from the original position of the avant-garde movement.

Despite all these limitations and internal conflicts, however, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in February 1989 is remembered as one of the most important events in the history of contemporary Chinese art, not only because of its unprecedented size and comprehensiveness in showcasing avant-garde art, but also for its enormous social impact. In spite of the museum's preconditions, several artists staged challenging performances in the gallery, including a shooting event, which instantly caused the exhibition to be suspended. The show generated a strong sense of happening. The National Art Gallery was transformed into a solemn installation: long black banners, extending from the street to the exhibition hall, bore the emblem of the exhibition—a "No U-Turn" traffic sign—signaling "no turning back." The feeling of tragic heroism was closely related to the political situation of the time: three months later, student demonstrations broke out in Tiananmen Square. Because of the radical redirection of Chinese contemporary art in the aftermath of the demonstrations, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition represented both the climax and the end of the avant-garde art movement in 1980s China.

Two groups of documents are translated in this section. The first group includes a record of the preparatory process of the exhibition by a member of the organizational committee, a candid reflection by a principal organizer on the dilemmas he faced in curating the exhibition, and an eyewitness account by two visitors. The two texts in the second group discuss the conditions and limitations of New Wave art of the 1980s. Written in 1989, both texts announced the end of this art movement while reconfirming its historical significance.

## The Exhibition [pl. 16]

### BACKGROUND MATERIAL ON THE CHINA/AVANT-GARDE EXHIBITION (1989)

By Zhou Yan

Around 1985, numerous young people in the art world formed nearly a hundred avant-garde art groups throughout China and presented a great deal of exploratory artwork in a phenomenon that theorists call the "'85 Art Movement." The newspaper *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) and the journals *The Trend of Art Thought* (*Meishu sichao*), *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*Jiangsu huakan*), *Painter* (*Huajia*), and *Art* (*Meishu*) gave the situation a tremendous push forward by providing publicity and a medium for exchange. In August 1986, *Fine Arts in China* and the Zhuhai Painting Institute sponsored the "Grand Slideshow and Symposium on the Art Trends of '85" ("85 Meishu sichao daxing huandeng zhanlan lilun yantaohui") in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, in which they collected nearly a thousand slides of "New Wave" artworks from each region to exchange and compare notes. It can be said that this symposium provided a thorough examination and summary of the movement. Because of the limitations of using slide projections in lieu of artworks, several delegates proposed organizing a national modern art exhibition to show original works. This motion was immediately passed and preparations were divvied up. After a period of preparation, plans were underway for the *Young Artists' Academic Exchange Exhibition* (*Gedi qingnian meishujia xueshu jiaoliu zhan*) to be held in July 1987 at the Beijing Agriculture Exhibition Hall. But, due to certain reasons, the plans for this ran aground.

From that moment on, New Wave art entered into a relatively quiet period, in which both artists and theorists began to calmly rethink and summarize, making every effort to push the newly emerged modern Chinese art to a deeper, more mature level. A compilation of related monographs and essays appeared in *Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986* (*Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986*). Comprising fifty thousand characters and nearly three hundred images, this book offered a relatively comprehensive and objective description of the conditions of the art world during this approximately two-year period.

Henceforth, a group of young theorists and artists again proposed organizing China's first large-scale exhibition of modern artwork. Through their diligent efforts, it was finally decided that the first *China/Avant-Garde* art exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) would open on February 5, 1989, at the National Art Gallery in Beijing.

Participating institutions included the editorial committee of *Culture: China and the World* (*Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie*), the Chinese National Aesthetics Society, *Art* magazine, *Fine Arts in China*, *Reading* (*Dushu*) magazine, the Beijing Arts and Crafts Company, and the publications *Cityscape in China* (*Zhongguo shi rongbao*) and *Free Forum of Literature* (*Wenxue ziyou tan*). To prepare for the theoretical premises of the

exhibition, the Research Institute of Fine Arts of the Chinese National Academy of Arts and the Hefei Painting and Calligraphy Institute held the "'88 Symposium on the Creation of Chinese Modern Art" ("88 Zhongguo xiandai yishu chuanguo yantaohui") in late November 1988 in the town of Tunxi at the base of Huangshan [Mount Huang], Anhui Province.

In October 1988, the organizational committee for *China/Avant-Garde* was established in Beijing with seventeen members: Gan Yang, Zhang Yaojun, Liu Dong, Liu Bochun, Zhang Zuying, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Tang Qingnian, Yang Lihua, Zhou Yan, Fan Di'an, Wang Mingxian, Kong Chang'an, Fei Dawei, Hou Hanru, Zeng Chaoying, and Liu Min. Gao Minglu served as the head of the committee. The committee also invited the following people as consultants: Ru Xin, Li Zehou, Liu Kaiqu, Wu Zuoren, Shen Changwen, Shao Dazhen, Tang Kemei, Jin Shangyi, Ge Weimo, Wang Zhen, Wu Jucai, and Feng Jikai. Ling Huitao, Wu Xiaolin, Gao Ling, Wang Birong, Chen Qiqi, Wu Guangyao, and Qin Wenna constituted the secretarial board for the exhibition. The painters Ling Huitao and Zhu Mo undertook organizational work during the exhibition.

Through discussions, the objective of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition was determined to be: to offer the first relatively large-scale and comprehensive display of modern art concepts and spirit directed at [all of] society as well as domestic and foreign cultural spheres. It would assemble the interests, disputes, and evaluations of the major trends in artistic thought and practice in recent years. This would reveal the value and significance of modern art to the development of contemporary Chinese culture. The exhibition would act as a high-level activity for the interaction and study of modern art while promoting the pluralistic development of Chinese art.

From the time that the first exhibition announcement was sent out to the domestic art world in October 1988, the organizational committee received slides, photographs, creative designs, and even originals of nearly three thousand artworks either sent or personally delivered by artists from every region. Of these, the committee carefully selected about 250 works by approximately 100 artists. Together with invited judges, including Ge Weimo, Shao Dazhen, Jin Shangyi, Zhan Jianjun, Zhang Qiang, and Lang Shaojun (Dong Xiaoming and Shui Tianzhong were invited but unable to attend), the members of the original organizational committee constituted an evaluation and selection committee to evaluate and approve this group of works for the exhibition.

The exhibition was held in the eastern hall on the first floor of the National Art Gallery and extended to both the second and third floors, spanning six exhibition halls and occupying a total of 2,200 square meters (approx. 23,681 square feet). The exhibited art forms included painting, sculpture, installation art, photographic documentation of performance art, etc. The plan was to display research materials in the forms of video recordings and slide shows. To prompt modern art in China to strive for a deeper and more sophisticated theoretical level, and to enhance more effective communication among this newly emerging field, academic circles, and the general public, the organizational committee also planned to organize a series of activities for artists, critics, and the public; these included the "*China/Avant-Garde* Symposium" ("Zhongguo xiandai yishu yantaohui") (attended primarily by exhibiting artists and theoreticians), the "My View of Art" forum ("Wo de yishu guan") (attended mainly by participating artists and theorists), and academic lectures (given by young art theorists and artists).

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**CONFESSIONS OF A CHINA/AVANT-GARDE CURATOR (1989)**

By Li Xianting

After 1987, regardless of whether artists were emphasizing the trend of counterrationality or purifying language, they all demonstrated that New Wave art had already moved on from the meanings and styles of '85. Yet, none of these tendencies demonstrated a definite direction for future trends. Thus, I believed that February 1989 would not be a suitable time for the exhibition: it was too late to summarize '85, and it would certainly be difficult to reach a consensus on selecting a new trend. In fact, the organizational committee reestablished in October 1988 essentially continued the 1986 committee, and the thinking behind the exhibition was just to attempt to realize the previous conference's unfinished tasks. From the preparation to the opening of the exhibition, aside from establishing a standard for "modern art," discussions among the organizers never exceeded the scope of exhibition planning, nor did we ever really have any substantive discussion about the premise of the exhibition. I felt that if it was to be a modern exhibition, then it should have a vanguard spirit. The exhibition itself should launch an active attack on reality rather than serving as a passive summary. This kind of attack is not based on groundless design, but is rather based on sensitivity toward emergent trends. When Gao Minglu negotiated the date and conditions of the exhibition with the National Art Gallery — for example, only five months remained until the opening when [it was determined that] performance art and works with sexual content would not be permitted in the exhibition — at that point, I already felt that it would be impossible to realize an avant-garde approach. Although I was conflicted in my mind, I still felt that since I had joined the organizational committee, I had a responsibility toward the committee and society at large. As a result, throughout the entire exhibition process, I felt myself in an awkward predicament.

With no way of realizing an avant-garde spirit, the only significance remaining for the exhibition was to confront society. Moreover, since the '85 New Wave came about within the art world, it was still unfamiliar to society at large. Although its meaning fundamentally arose out of ideological liberation, it was unlike the early stages of the ideological liberation movement, such as of the Stars art group, which directly instigated a strong social backlash. In this sense, the exhibition could acquire a practical angle, and correspondingly I began to shift my inner battlefield toward society. So, from the beginning, I wasn't too concerned about the individual works and details of the exhibition. Instead, I attempted to build a certain atmosphere with a sense of freshness and provocation unlike that of any exhibition the general public had ever seen. As decades of cultural traditions and exhibitions have formed the aesthetic taste of several generations of people, the emphasis on "provocation" has far more practical significance than emphasizing "scholarly academicism." The transformation of these aesthetic tastes is not the same as Western Romanticism's attack on classicism, which was simply a change in the aesthetic veneer. In China, these kinds of aesthetic tastes are predicated on an entire cultural value system as well as the firm constraints of fixed cultural mores. It is very difficult to dislodge the inertia of these kinds of cultural mores without some strong provocation.

The above reflects my basic mindset. In the first exhibition hall, I assembled several Pop art and installation works. I selected these works — distinct from traditional painting styles — for this space in order to give people a strong first impression. Before the exhibition, I followed several major works closely. One of them was Wu Shanzhuan's *Big Business (Da shengyi)*. Initially, based on the basic notion of a retrospective, I gave Wu a partitioned exhibition space for installing his Red Humor series (*Hongse youmo*)

[pl. 17], but after frequent long-distance phone calls, he proposed the idea of selling shrimp. Though I was not entirely clear on his idea in the beginning, I was really excited as soon as I understood. However, the museum had already stated that it would not permit performance art in the gallery. In order to ensure that Wu's work would not meet a premature end, I helped him devise a series of covert measures to mask its appearance as a "non-performance" work and gain entry into the museum. He would then suddenly begin the performance. Even if he could sell shrimp for only a minute, he would still have completed the work. Despite the fact that some members of the organizational committee had written letters to discourage this project and to persuade him to still exhibit the Red Humor works, I urged him several times during our long-distance calls not to deviate from his original intention, for his work would not only have a forceful impact on society, but also be an avant-garde performance for the art world. In the case of Xiamen Dada's plan for *Haul Away the Museum* (*Tuozou meishuguan*), Gao Minglu later tried to negotiate with the museum, but, ultimately, the work was not permitted. Since that performance would have been especially large, I also couldn't think of a way to hide it. I regret that this work could not be realized. The committee did reject one plan for inflatable sculptures from Shandong. After I discovered it among the rejected works, I immediately sent a telegram and a letter urging that the project be completed, and later obtained the committee's approval by presenting it as a commissioned project. With regard to performance art, I gave my consent — behind closed doors — for works such as Kang Mu's plan of walking around the gallery and Zhang Nian's project of hatching eggs. However, I felt that Wang Deren's performance of scattering condoms as a form of blasphemy was an imitation of Duchamp's urinal. Furthermore, since China is particularly sensitive about issues of sexuality, the use of condoms as the core language of the performance could easily give way to misunderstanding and shift the work's original intention. Thus, I wrote a letter urging Wang Deren to change his proposal or make some revisions. Performance art has been an especially important phenomenon in recent years, and it is absurd to keep it out of museums. This was not the organizational committee's original plan, but was rather the committee's compromise. I didn't discuss or seek the consent of any of the other organizers [to surreptitiously include performance art], since confidentiality and concealment were the only means through which these projects could be accomplished. This exhibition wasn't the private work of our organizational committee. Its objective was to effect change in the aesthetic standards of society. Once, in 1983, upon organizing an issue of *Art* (*Meishu*) to advocate discussions of abstract art, I was dismissed from the [editorial] office. But, I've unexpectedly discovered that since then abstract concepts are no longer forbidden territory in the art world. Consequently, I realized that we cannot wait until the populace is ready before presenting it with new concepts. In fact, new ideas have always been imposed by a small minority upon the large majority who then slowly accustom themselves while also developing new powers to adapt. History endlessly repeats this cycle. In the ten years that I was an editor, I constantly sought to find critical points to impose upon society. Thus, my methods of introducing performance art into *China/Avant-Garde* also arose from this conviction.

The central gallery on the second floor emphasized a lofty, somewhat religious atmosphere. In the western wing were assembled the "cold" trends of rationality and absurdity. The eastern wing, in contrast, emphasized the "warmth" of emotional expression. Altogether, the layout of the three halls offered a summary of the basic artistic trends since '85. In the December 1987 issue of *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*Jiangsu huakan*), my article, "What We Need Most Is a Thoughtful Critique of Our Cultural Values" ("Women zui xuyao dui minzu wenhua jiazhi tixi de pipan he zixing"), discussed these three trends

in detail. These trends continued after 1987 and were further developed by some artists such as Zhang Peili, whose artwork with latex gloves is a logical extension of his X? series. This project demonstrates his increasingly close proximity to the essence of his pursuit, whether by offering a revelation on the harmful effects on one's life brought about by one's living environment or by engaging in the fragile internal monologue of life. And although Zhang Xiaogang's recent despondent and sentimental paintings are a departure from the painful mystery and fear of '85, their yearning for life has been consistent throughout. Ding Fang's later works show stronger expressive elements, but his inclination toward religious beliefs is just as persistent as before.

Nineteen eighty-eight witnessed a strong anti-New Wave trend, most evident in the effort to purify language. This trend was most prevalent among the young professors and students at art academies, called by its advocates the "New Academic School" (*Xin xueyuan pai*). While it advocated the autonomy of art as a distillation of language, this school is really still a product of a social trend. In *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*), September 12, 1988 (no. 37), I published an essay analyzing the adversarial mindset of this trend "The Era Awaits the Great Spirit's Passion for Life" ("Shidai qidai zhe da linghun de shengming jiqing"). Actually, this phenomenon revealed an increasing refinement in New Wave art. It derived a certain consciousness and style from the early stages of New Wave art and used its excellence in craftsmanship to attempt a conversation with Western modern art. But, the work often failed to display the *élan vital* of the New Wave, and it had no way to truly achieve the purity of Western modern art. The result appeared contrived, as if it were feigning cultivation. Its effort to cast off society's ideological trends, however, reflected a certain progression. Throughout the past decade, art has evolved through the infiltration and distillation of external factors. For example, the 1979 trend of Aestheticism distilled serious political factors in art, Scar Art was heavily politically influenced, and the Current of Life was again a distillation of political elements. The permeating and distilling of philosophical trends in 1985 again showed history repeating itself. In 1979, art rallied around its "autonomy" as a slogan and banner. In the past decade, this emphasis on artistic autonomy has followed in the wake of social and ideological elements, the two lines of thinking that have influenced art. This kind of artwork was placed in the third-floor exhibition hall. Because of its size, Xu Bing's piece was moved to the western wing of the second floor. Xu Bing's work is a typical example of this phenomenon of refinement in New Wave art. His work is inspired by the New Wave's utilization of writing, but disposes of the anti-imagery of New Wave writing and its more brutal features. Some critics consider it a representation of an anti-culture phenomenon, but, actually, this work has taken the stylistic features of traditional woodblock printing and abstracted them. It is a kind of abstract art, fastidious about its material tactility and in line with abstract painting.

The ink paintings in the eastern wing of the third floor also displayed paradigmatic styles from the past decade. The period from the May Fourth Movement [in 1919] until the Cultural Revolution was characterized by an effort to absorb the styles and concepts of Western classical art, and was dominated by realistic ink painting as represented by Xu Beihong [1895–1953]. After 1979, on one hand, artists reflected on the revolution in ink painting of the past seventy years and emphasized the reemergence of traditional currents, such as in New Literati painting. On the other hand, drawing lessons from Western modernism, they surpassed Xu Beihong's response to Western classical traditions. At the same time, they recognized the abstract elements of traditional brush and ink and created a new form of ink painting. As I discuss in my article "The Logical Development of Ink Painting" ("Shuimohua de heli fazhan") in the January 1986 issue of

Art [vol. 217], the inevitable conclusion to modern ink painting is pure abstraction. In contrast to New Literati painting, which still maintained a close connection to tradition, modern ink painting increasingly displayed the constraints, hardship, and restless nature of modern people while language became more unrestrained and dynamic. Thus, from meaning to language, ink painting grew even closer to ministering to the demands of this turbulent and restless modern era.

In terms of the design and arrangement of the exhibition hall, I emphasized a sense of "intensity." I had asked Zhang Zhilin from Nanjing to design a symbol for the exhibition, and when he told me that he wanted to appropriate the "No U-Turn" traffic sign, I was thrilled. This symbol for the exhibition exceeded mere design by introducing a Pop art color scheme with some unforeseen implications. The result was very striking. As Wang Jiong, Fan Weimin, and Cao Biao of the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts used black as the central color scheme, the red and white of the symbol took on an even stronger and more solemn meaning. Because of interference from the National Art Gallery, however, the original design had to be revised considerably.

Since we were pressed for time, we could only rely on slides and photographs during the initial selection process. As a result, a considerable portion of the original works that were sent to the exhibition turned out to be unsatisfactory. Moreover, we underestimated the size of the exhibition hall and found that there was no way to select works from among such a limited number. So, we placed our emphasis on building the atmosphere of the exhibition. However, we still managed to emphasize the most representative artists and works since 1985. It was inevitable that the newly emerging artists and their works would be uneven in artistic quality. To a certain extent, this also reflects a phenomenon that is common to New Wave itself, as well as to artistic trends in general.

In addition to emphasizing the provocative nature of the works, I had planned to write explanatory texts to accompany the key artists and works to better communicate with the public. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and other circumstances, I was unable to realize this idea. China's New Wave art all along has marched forward amid an extremely difficult environment, enduring the shackles of both spiritual and material conditions. When art authorities and lofty scholars accuse New Wave art of being crude, have they ever considered the environment in which these works were produced? And have they considered the lack of financial resources and the time constraints under which *China/Avant-Garde* had to be completed? Yet perhaps it is precisely due to these conditions that New Wave art and the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition maintained a certain kind of dynamic energy. This is the fundamental standard upon which I will not waver.

On the day of the opening, I had originally planned to use balloons to float the black fabric banner featuring the exhibition symbol and slogan. But, for unforeseen reasons, it was laid out in the plaza instead [pl. 16]. Looking at it now, I think the effect worked out well in the end. When laying out the black cloth, the atmosphere in the plaza was intense, and my mind was full of thoughts about the impact that this exhibition would have on society. The intensity made for an exciting, explosive atmosphere. The two unexpected gunshots added to the intensity. Since Tang [Song] and Xiao [Lu] had not informed me before their performance, they managed to conceal their plans; and it was precisely the work's secrecy that engendered its sudden shock. At that time, I was unaware of the circumstances surrounding the gunfire, but it matched my psychological state. When the gunfire occurred, I became immediately conscious of the sensitive social psychology that these gunshots embodied. After having been constrained for so long, a new mentality yearned to be set free (see my

article "Two Gunshots: The Curtain Call of New Wave Art" ["Liang sheng qiang xiang: Xinchao yishu de xiemuli"] in *Fine Arts in China*, March 13, 1989 [no. 11]). After the gunshots rang out, members of the organizational committee became extremely anxious and convened a meeting of all the participating artists in Beijing. The meeting occurred on the second day of the exhibition's closing, which was the day of the Chinese New Year. In the wake of the gunfire, there were vast differences between my frame of mind and that of the other members of the organizational committee. As a result, I didn't attend this meeting. It was said that in this conference, key committee members rudely admonished the artists. Actually, throughout the entire exhibition, I couldn't bear to watch the commanding attitude that a few critics on the committee held over the artists. They treated the exhibition as if it were a gift to be graciously bestowed on the artists, as if they were presenting them with the opportunity to enter "history." Thus, a few of these critics were flustered and frustrated at the mischievous performances carried out during the exhibition; they were simply too focused on the exhibition as a historical activity. In fact, the exhibitions with true historical significance had already occurred during the early days of the New Wave, when the original group activities took place. By the time they were re-exhibited as part of this retrospective, that kind of historical originality was already past. All that remained was an opportunity to influence society. After the exhibition was closed, negotiations continued among the Public Security Bureau, the museum, and the organizational committee. One member of the Public Security Bureau suggested shutting down the entire exhibition. In response, I impulsively penned and displayed the notice, "The *China/Avant-Garde* Exhibition Is Suspended for [Unspecified] Reasons" ("Zhongguo yishu zhan yingu zanting"). I wrote this on the belief that suspension would bring an even more forceful meaning to the exhibition. Because of China's culture of "reverse psychology," shutting down the exhibition would serve to further provoke society, and hasten their ability to fearlessly face fear.

Although the exhibition was suspended twice, it was still reopened and carried out as planned with the support from various sectors. Interestingly, when people attended the exhibition after the reopening, they became even more attentive to the details, increasing the stark contrast between the tremendous rumors surrounding the show and the traditional elements in many paintings. This created some disappointment on the part of the general public. In all fairness, though, the fact that the exhibition was able to represent aspects of the past three or four years of New Wave art and exhibit work by some of the important artists was already a considerable achievement. It is incomprehensible how some critics compare *China/Avant-Garde* to the retrospective *The Stars: Ten Years* (in Hong Kong and Taiwan) and belittle our exhibition. *The Stars: Ten Years* was completely lacking in any thought. And, to borrow a phrase that Wang Keping wrote to me, "Your exhibition thwarted the Stars' return to their homeland." No matter how we evaluate *China/Avant-Garde*, it was a milestone for Chinese art, one that advanced new art to another level and endured great hardship to be a pioneer.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Wo zuowei Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan chouzhanren de zigongzhuang" in *Meishu shilun [Art History and Theory]*, 1989: no. 3. Translated by Kristen Loring.



## A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CHINA/AVANT-GARDE (1989)

By Hang Jian and Cao Xiao'ou

### FEBRUARY 5

For many people today marks a long-awaited day.

Although February 5 is Chinese New Year's Eve, quite a few visitors attended. Famous figures in the literary field arrived, such as Tang Dacheng, Feng Yidai, Yuan Kejia, Feng Jikai, and Zhang Kangkang. Along with the people from the art world, they brought a genuine, spirited interest to the whole scene.

Enormous black flags were displayed throughout the central exhibition hall. On the flags was an emblem similar to a "No U-Turn" sign, which was particularly eye-catching as it contrasted starkly against the white background. The colors of the design — black, red, and white — appeared solemn and stirring, although they are also representative colors from Chinese tradition.

I spent some time navigating my way around the Gao Brothers' *Inflatable Installation* (*Chongqi diaosu*), Xiao Lu's [and Tang Song's] *Dialogue* (*Duihua*), and Li Weimin's House series (*Fangwu*), and then stopped to chat with some friends. While we were talking, we suddenly heard two loud bangs. Some people assumed that the *Inflatable Installation* had exploded.

We quickly learned that Xiao Lu, a young female artist from Shanghai, and her boyfriend Tang Song, had opened fire and taken two shots — with a real gun — at their own work *Dialogue*. Both bullets struck their installation, a mirror flanked by two phone booths.

The police from the Beijing Public Security Bureau arrived. The atmosphere in the exhibition halls turned instantly from playful fun to nervous tension. According to the regulations prescribed by the exhibition's organizational committee, Conceptual art and performance art are prohibited on the exhibition site. As a result, not long after the opening ceremony, performance pieces by Wu Shanzhuan, Wang Deren, and other artists were immediately brought to a halt.

The exhibition was temporarily suspended. The participating artists and viewers swarmed the area in front of the museum. By then, the museum's iron gates had already been shut. While some people on the street, busy with Chinese New Year festivities, hurriedly stopped and then left, crowds of onlookers continually formed outside of the iron gates.

In the conference room next to the central exhibition hall, the exhibition preparatory committee and officials from the Public Security Bureau urgently discussed the



Xiao Lu and Tang Song, *Dialogue*. 1989. Installation and performance. Color photograph of performance, February 5, 1989, National Art Gallery, Beijing. Installation 7'10" x 8'10" x 3' (240 x 270 x 90 cm). Installation collection Taikang Life Insurance Company



Gao Brothers. *Midnight Mass*. 1989. Rubber inflatable installation, height 13'2" (400 cm)

situation. Foreign news reporters and journalists were extremely eager and continually interviewed people in the museum plaza. Chinese reporters were sensitive to the situation as well. The assembled crowds were like a floating cloud, drifting toward wherever news was breaking.

Around 2 p.m., when a car full of armed riot police rushed to the spot, people were in an uproar. Journalists' camera shutters continually clicked away and flashes went off, and the police car quickly left the scene. When a few independent vendors brought fruit, soda, and bread to the artists, their supportive gestures were greeted with cheers by the artists.

The exhibition flag covering the ground in the museum plaza had to be removed. The artists seemed to have a premonition of things to come, as one after another they took photos in front of the flag as souvenirs.

For the sake of "security," the museum was shut down for three days. By 5 p.m., the artists began to scatter. That night, when an artist called his wife — an overseas student in Hamburg, Germany — she immediately asked, "Did something happen over there?"

#### **FEBRUARY 10, EXHIBITION REOPENS**

The "gunshot incident" led to sensational reactions and caused the exhibition's second opening to draw even greater crowds. The reopened *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition attracted not only cultural elites, but also common people. The preparatory committee members originally planned on a retrospective modern art exhibition that would be academic in nature. However, the state of the exhibition changed after the two gunshots, and the new situation reached far beyond the committee's expectations.

The "media" aspect [of the gunshot incident] drew wide public attention. Enthusiastic viewers spontaneously debated about what happened at the exhibition even before leaving the museum. Public perceptions were mixed. The news media swung into action immediately; some dispatched reporters [to cover a contemporary art exhibition] for the first time, while others presented continuous coverage of the event. As artists faced formidable social value judgments and opportunities provided by the media, they found themselves under assault and on trial.

At the opening of the exhibition, Wu Shanzhuan carried out a "shrimp selling" activity. He stated: "Since the museum has become a court for judging artwork, I want to cre-

ate a black market for art, even though it will only last a minute." Selling out of a certain amount of shrimp, he took pleasure in claiming, "I approached shrimp-selling at the museum with good intentions. I told an art critic, 'Before, you made me famous with your reviews of my work. Today, you can buy my shrimp and take them home with you!'"

Wang Deren, the artist who once did a performance piece above the snowline of Mount Everest, scattered condoms and coins at the opening. His actions drew protests from the viewers and garnered resentment from Huang Yong Ping, the founder of the Xiamen Dada art group. Huang Yong Ping, sharing the same exhibition space with Wang Deren, complained that because his work was covered with too many condoms, it was rendered almost unrecognizable. In response, Wang Deren criticized: "Huang Yong Ping is a fake Dadaist!"

Due to his impermissible performance art activity, the organizational committee requested that Wang Deren turn in a self-examination report. However, what he wrote down was: "The fact that the ubiquitous coins-for-condoms exchange was replaced by free give-aways showed a playful mistreatment of the artistic concept." I thought that "playful mistreatment" was a typo for "playful mockery," but I was told that I was incorrect.

Some of the viewers today said, "China is in urgent need of modern art!" Others stated that they experienced "an unspeakable feeling of disgust and anxiety." Some wrote "Save art!" in the visitors' book. Some shouted, "We salute you!" And some teased that, "The lousy paintings in this exhibition are not as good as my son's scribbles."

And, there were still others looking for nude portraits or expecting something more to follow the gunshots, etc.

#### FEBRUARY 11

A forum titled *My View of Art (Wo de yishu guan)*, a gathering specifically for the artists, was held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Various "immortals" came together and expressed a range of viewpoints.

The lecture hall was packed. Every seat was taken and even the aisles were filled with people.

Before attending the forum, I read "The Hundred-Word Discussion by Nine People" ("Jiuren baizi tan"), published in *Beijing Youth Daily (Beijing qingnian bao)*. From there, I learned that Wang Guangyi's "primary job this year is to straighten out the mess in the art world caused by illogical humanist enthusiasm." Zhang Peili regards the direct interaction of artwork and audience as analogous to "pulling teeth." Geng Jianyi sees "a mouse passing right in front of him," but "because he has no strength, he can't do anything about it."

I have been puzzling over Huang Yong Ping's words. He proposes that "the concept of creation must be baked over and over again. This is neither creating nor being created. Henceforth, that which is something else is not mine." This sentence is so much more difficult to comprehend than Meng Luding's idea, "We need to confront those contradictions that vex artists."

After taking a seat in the lecture hall, I began to notice that the atmosphere seemed somewhat oppressive. I'm not sure what happened to those artists who are normally casual and unaffected.

Someone passed a note to Xu Bing, asking him to speak.

Not long before, Xu Bing and his colleague at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Lü Shengzhong opened an exhibition at the National Art Gallery. Xu Bing's woodblock-printed *A Mirror to Analyze of the World—Fin de Siècle Book (Xi shi jian—Shijimo juan)* earned him high regard, and he was showered with praise by artists from both older and younger generations.

Xu Bing recalled [a story about a "crazy" person who collects and cleans old, discarded papers. This story is recounted by Xu Bing in his "Looking for Something Different in a Quiet Place" on page 105 above. — Ed.]

As soon as Xu Bing finished talking, a man with a cloth on his head and sword in his hand stood up and said loudly, "I severely dislike Xu Bing's work, because he is too traditional."

Xu Bing responded, "Yes, I pursue the classical ideal."

Another person questioned Xu Bing: "In the story of collecting and washing old papers, the old man left the papers under his bed, and his actions were thus considered by you as an ascetic exercise. Compared with that, you exhibited your fake characters when you only finished half of them. So, what level of the spiritual realm have you reached?"

Xu Bing answered calmly, "I am inferior to him."

The atmosphere of the forum became increasingly heated. In the audience, the supporters of both sides argued with each other.

Later, however, there were no more discussions as intense as that. Oddly, some influential artists chose to remain silent at the forum. Why?

### FEBRUARY 13

The "China/Avant-Garde Symposium" ("Zhongguo xiandai yishu yantaohui"), an important academic event associated with the exhibition, was held today. Art theorists and historians from all over the country came to the symposium, including Wu Jiafeng, Shao Dazhen, Li Song, Lang Shaojun, Xue Yongnian, Liu Xiaochun, Zhang Qiang, Zhai Mo, Pi Daojian, Peng De, Deng Pingxiang, Li Zhengtian, Wang Lin, and Yuan Baolin. Art critics such as Zeng Zhennan, Ye Tingfang, the writer Li Tuo, Dong Xiuyu from the Sanlian bookstore in Hong Kong, and Suo Fei from the Jiangsu Fine Arts publishing house also attended the symposium. Gao Minglu presided over the discussion.

Before the opening of the exhibition, I heard some of the evaluation committee's opinions as they cast their eyes around. The committee was composed of artists and art critics.

"There is some progress."

While pointing at an oil painting titled *My Interpretation of the Judgment of Paris* (*Wo shuo jin pingguo de gushi*), someone asked, "Is the female frontal nude allowed?" And, someone else answered, "It was not, but nowadays young people paint whatever they want."

"Are there any portraits of 'real people' in that mouth?" The question was referring to a painting exhibited on the second floor, which had a number of distinctive portraits inside a monster's open mouth. "It would be an unauthorized use of those images if they were real portraits." "Only if the painter makes profit with this work," somebody chimed in.

"It seems like the piece is missing some parts. Maybe they got lost in transit." Another responded, "Well, in terms of contemporary art, there is no such thing as lost parts. The artist wouldn't admit it even if something were missing." Then, they all laughed.

These fragmented yet direct observations, to a certain degree, represent some of the viewpoints of authorities in the field as well as those of artists from the older generation. Then, what are the opinions of the artists and theorists among the younger and middle-aged generations?

"This exhibition is primarily a summary, and for the individual artists, their force of impact isn't great because everyone is already quite familiar with many of the artists and works." "Modern art should not merely emphasize national characteristics, rather, it should focus on keeping in step with art movements in the world." (Wang Lin, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute)

"Many pieces in the exhibition are too crudely made and bear strong traces of imitation." (Li Zhengtian, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts)

"Modern industrial society is reproducing, not copying. Copying is already at a more complicated level than reproduction." [Gu Mengchao, *Journal of Architecture (Jianzhu)*]

"Is our life modern, or is the exhibition modern?" (Sun Jin, Lu Xun Academy of Literature)

"This exhibition reminds me of the 1913 Armory Show. Modern art manifests modern man's cries and escape from the crushing power of traditional civilization. We must place a great emphasis on 'localness.' Modernism is a cultural phenomenon and not simply an artistic genre." (Li Tuo, Beijing Writers' Association)

"Art should be superior. Art should not just, as Mao Zedong proclaimed, serve the toiling masses. Art should be refined, appealing to whoever may understand it." (Su Liqun, Central Academy of Art and Design)

"The vocabularies of modern art should be international. This exhibition was a success. I don't think the entire show can be simply termed an imitation. Throughout the world, modern art can only be developed one region after another." "Pay tribute to the artists!" (Ye Tingfang, Institute of Literature at the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing)

"China doesn't have modern art. Right now, China only has a few art profiteers that are playing with their so-called modern art." (Wang Ruiting, *Fine Arts in China*)

"You (referring to Wang Ruiting) wouldn't have gotten this far without the atmosphere generated by modern art. If you call them art profiteers, then I'm willing to call myself that. I don't see why we can't 'profit' since we've never done this before!" (Su Liqun, Central Academy of Arts and Crafts)

"We should admit that some phenomena in the world and in humankind are incomprehensible. Being incapable of grasping some of the artworks also involves a form of understanding." (Zeng Zhennan, Institute of Literature at the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing)

It also needs to be mentioned that a fair number of exhibited artists either didn't participate in the discussion or didn't express their views at the symposium, because they assumed it was a meeting only for theorists.

## FEBRUARY 14

I had separate conversations with Xu Bing, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Peili today.

Xu Bing told me that he felt rather sad after the "My View of Art" forum. He said, "The current level of Chinese avant-garde art is still superficial. And, in contrast, I myself am too bookish and serious."

There is something elusive and indefinable about Xu Bing, and I find that quite appealing. The way he talks seems a bit gentle, which is nothing like Wang Guangyi and Zhang Peili. While Wang speaks in a straightforward manner with a sense of humor, Zhang Peili's talk reveals that he is intelligent and unassuming, like a typical southerner. But, I feel that the three of them share something in common — their success is based on the discovery of a fitting and subtle "point," such as inventing and cutting by hand authentic-looking Chinese characters, borrowing and reconstructing well-known icons and images, or using strange latex gloves. This is the outcome of their natural talents transcending concepts. Perhaps this is precisely what will be preserved in art history.

I told them that I looked forward to hearing some of their "theoryless" views.

Xu Bing said, "I feel satisfied when I am in the process of carving characters. I am drawn into a feeling of being closed off and a sense of sublimity. It nearly intoxicates me.

"I was relatively calm in 1985 and 1986. But now it feels like in one fell swoop I was dropped into a turbulent whirlpool, and it's really difficult for me to adapt to this.

I can't even answer questions like: Why do I keep cutting these characters? And what is the meaning of cutting these characters? . . .

"I'd really love to keep cutting Chinese characters, to not think too much and do purely technical work. I wouldn't have to indulge in wild flights of fancy; it feels much more grounded."

Wang Guangyi stated that, "I am not rational. When I flipped through Western classical painting catalogues, I didn't feel like there was anything left to paint, I just wanted to modify them a bit."

"I was 'restoring' them to conform to their original ambience. For instance, *Death of Marat* actually conceals a number of things. Its tragic nature requires a certain level of ambiguity in order to deepen its meaning. This is a form of cultural modification."

Zhang Peili told me that he had been looking for a form that would provide the visual impact to smash the inertia fostered by the classics. Later, in the bathroom, he found a pair of latex gloves that his mother used when cleaning the room, and in them he experienced a profound unfamiliarity.

#### FEBRUARY 17

On February 15 and 16, the exhibition was shut down for three days. It was said that the National Art Gallery, the *Beijing Daily* (*Beijing ribao*), and the Beijing Public Security Bureau received the same anonymous letter made from cutout letters from newspapers stating that "*China/Avant-Garde* must be immediately shut down; otherwise we will detonate the three bombs that we've installed in the museum." After inspection, it turned out to be a false alarm.

Today again is the first day following the reopening of the exhibition. A long line extended from the bag check at the entrance of the museum, and more security was added to guard the gate. I remember that someone from the preparatory committee sighed with emotion, "*China/Avant-Garde* has truly been slow to emerge!"

The earliest "troublemaker," who played the lead role in the gunshot event, Xiao Lu, had already departed and returned to the south with her friend Tang Song. They left a note as a public announcement:

"As the people involved in the handgun incident at the opening of *China/Avant-Garde*, we believe this to be a purely artistic event. We believe that art naturally carries with it the artists' different understandings of society. But, as artists, we are not interested in politics. Rather, what interests us is the artistic and social value of art itself, as well as the way in which we can use a suitable form to create and to extend and deepen our understanding of art."

We perhaps need to wait until the distant future before evaluating Xiao Lu and Tang Song's actions. But the social reality in China has made them the focus of the media. I don't know whether or not this coincides with their original intentions.

Throughout the exhibition, we have sensed the flavor of the era and a variety of emotions. Here is a brief passage from Fan Di'an, whose pertinent words bring out a great sense of mission:

"In a nation plagued by so much hardship, and engulfed by dizzying competition over material comforts, we still have a group of artists who persistently devote themselves to finding a spiritual dwelling place. This exhibition was a critical reminder to society. Even if it is passé to talk about a so-called sense of mission."

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## The “End” of the New Wave

### FACING THE END OF THE NEW WAVE: AN INTERVIEW WITH FINE ARTS IN CHINA (1989)

By Peng De

*Fine Arts in China (Zhongguo meishu bao)*: In your interview “The Art of the New Wave in Mainland China” (“Zhongguo dalu xinchao shu”), you suggest that New Wave art has already concluded (April 10, 1989 [no. 15]). What is your reasoning behind this statement?

**Peng De:** First of all, New Wave art is the result of influence from abroad. It was not a spontaneous movement, but rather was initiated by the outside. On the surface, the involvement of New Wave artists was voluntary but, behind this, there was already the influence of a foreign cultural background that they had to involuntarily receive. Anthropologists point out that when one particularly isolated society encounters another stronger and more technologically advanced society, the two will form a relationship of subordination and domination, with the subordinate force adapting to the dominant one. Less seriously, this relationship is manifested in adaptation (such as in Asia and Africa); more seriously, it is reflected in the entire substitution of an indigenous cultural system by a foreign cultural system (such as in America and Australia). Over the past few years, New Wave artists have read works by modern and contemporary philosophers of the West and followed Western schools of modernism. They even coincidentally employed the same methods as Dalí and other artists to create Freudian snakes, caverns, staircases, and distorted dreams. New Wave artists have grown weary of all this and are already rethinking and transcending it.

Second is the general weakening of the critical spirit. The [original] artistic concepts and practices of New Wave art were full of an intense critical spirit. Its spearhead points not only to an impasse — closed aesthetic thoughts as well as obsolete artistic positions — but also points directly at a series of absurd phenomena in society and human life. However, the awakening of society cannot linger on an artist's intuition; it may be that only politicians, thinkers, and even writers have the ability to rationally and concretely contemplate and resolve the questions that were swiftly proposed by the artist. Although new questions will continue to arise, it is important to note that when socialization of the critical spirit is already consciously established, the New Wave can no longer be considered a new wave.

Third is the transformation of the avant-garde. The cries of New Wave art to surpass the present have grandly filled the National Art Gallery with the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*). [Consequently] this art has become a new tradition openly recognized by public opinion, whether by their recognition or denial. When the entire Chinese art world is willing to view the New Wave as a fulcrum point, and when New Wave art has produced groups of legitimate practitioners at major Chinese academies, then its own counterconventionality — the soul of the avant-garde — has become conventionalized. Initially, it was the intervention and attack that seemed to be the indomitable impulse of the New Wave painter's existence. Now, having progressed from intervening to being tolerated, the art of the New Wave has followed its historical mission to the end and has arrived at its conclusion. Aside from a few individuals who may continue to pursue the avant-garde, the majority of New Wave artists will set a general pattern of moving toward a livelihood, the

market, salons, and institutions. As a result, the New Wave will naturally disintegrate amid this pluralistic condition.

It should be mentioned, however, that the end of the New Wave is by no means the end of modern art. The New Wave is the prologue to Chinese modern art; modern art is a rational extension of New Wave art.

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— Originally published as "Miandui xinzhao de zhongjie" in *Zhongguo meishu bao* [*Fine Arts in China*], May 8, 1989 (no. 19), 1. Translated by Kristen Loring.

## THE MODERNIST DILEMMA AND OUR OPTIONS (1989)

By Yi Ying

- ...
- II. From its initial emergence, contemporary Chinese art has been doomed to occupy its current position: its origins and development were not premised on the internal demands of art, nor were they the result of the transformations in visual culture brought about by the appearance of modern industrial society [see my article "Contradiction Between Form and Spirit" in *Art (Meishu)* 250, no. 10 (1988)]. Instead, it was a by-product of the intellectual liberation movement and a method borrowed from Western modernism. It was used as a weapon against the bulwark of traditional artistic doctrines and it was adopted as a barometer for testing the openness of a society. Its explosive social impact created an illusion, as if it signaled the direction along which Chinese contemporary art would proceed. In fact, compared with Western contemporary art, we did not even catch the last train. What we copied from Western modernism in the '85 New Wave consisted mainly of its early styles, which had already become academic relics in the history of modern art. Nevertheless, certain activities of Conceptual art, which have appeared since 1986, also became neglected orphans due to the decline of the New Wave and the change in the social ethos. There's no denying that since the reform period, our art production has undergone fundamental changes. These changes emerged through the intellectual liberation, the Open Door policy, and the impact of New Wave art. In this regard, New Wave art is not the only determining factor, and it cannot represent either the whole picture or the basic trajectory of contemporary art in China. The current situation is that traditional art, realist art, and modern art all coexist and enjoy critical attention from their respective audiences and critics. Maybe out of historical coincidence, this situation mirrors the trajectory of Western modern art. What is different is that after a century of development, the Western modernist movement has started a historical return owing to the limits of formalist exploration. Of course, this return is not degenerative, but rather demonstrates new discoveries in previously adopted forms (such as the three Italian "C"s [Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi] and German Neo-Expressionism). The result is a genuine pluralism devoid of a singular standard of the avant-garde. In China, however, largely because of the innate inefficiency of modern art and the immense and long-lasting influence of traditional art, there has appeared an equilibrium resulting from a deadlock. We should accept that this standstill is normal. If not for modern art, we would lose sight of the most sensitive and nuanced changes in our modern life and modern visual culture. Entangled in traditional models and the imitation of nature, we run the risk of being cut off from imagination and originality, and of being suffocated. Moreover, traditional art and realist art are necessary checks on New Wave art, providing balance so that we don't follow Western modernism in lockstep and produce



monologues in a language we ourselves cannot even understand. It is only in this sense that we don't hope for modernism to become an all-encompassing youth movement, but rather hope to find a small number of explorers trekking through rough terrains off the beaten track.

Therefore, as modern art enters a period of self-reflection and finds its appropriate position in the general social and cultural context, as a by-product of this art, modernist criticism should study and critique its forms, motives, and models, as well as its connection to the historical tradition and the current cultural condition. Directed at the audience, this criticism should also interpret the advanced characteristics of the art's form and content, and should serve as a conduit into the field of aesthetic consumption. This will guarantee that modern art will attend even more closely to questions regarding art itself rather than merely acting as a method of rebelling against tradition. Of course, such a phenomenon may also be understood as part of the process of Chinese modern art's departure from its early state of blindness and subsequent move toward maturity.

- III. Only through this way of thinking can we assess the current state and future prospects of modernist [Chinese] art. From the Stars to the '85 New Wave, modern art's most daunting challenge was not yet the audience's indifference or political interference, but rather its own inadequacy in creating new languages and methods — it plagiarized and reenacted Western modern art, running almost the whole spectrum from Post-Impressionism to Conceptual art. Western modernism takes formal creation as its guide and theoretical foundation. After its heyday, modernism fell into an impasse, and we are copying this move as well. Of course, imitation is a necessary process in developing human civilization, and closed cultures always remain passive within bilateral exchanges. Imitation is a means of awakening from this and a starting point for self-criticism. All new ideas and thoughts may find their genesis in imitation. Moreover, an art movement that has strong social efficacy usually doesn't put too much thought into whether the weapons are smuggled contraband or manufactured domestically.

The waning of the New Wave illustrates two points. First, imitation cannot replace creation. When people gradually learn about Western modern art, their interests in the "counterfeits" fade, and New Wave art correspondingly loses its impact. Second, although New Wave art has some derivative elements in it, it promulgated a consciousness that has led to a modernist art concept, i.e., regardless of whether one opposes New Wave art or stands aloof from this debate, one necessarily ruminates over the question of what constitutes art. As a matter of fact, prior to this, people had already been copying, either from nature or preexisting artworks. It was because New Wave art went so far as to copy from "decadent capitalist culture" that it was regarded with suspicion as a terrible offense.

After New Wave art subsided, modern art began to march toward maturity, completely mindful that it could only occupy a limited space in the history of Chinese modern art. In addition, New Wave art also taught traditional art and realist art a lesson, forcing them to abdicate their traditionally dominant status and clear the way for others. This created a genuinely pluralistic situation, where all kinds of art styles and schools formed a "cultural chain" from the traditional to the avant-garde according to the aesthetic needs of all of society. In this chain there is no hierarchy, as every link has its own irreplaceable values and standards. Precisely because of this situation, modern art can use not only Western modern art as a frame of reference, but as part of modern Chinese art, it also remains constrained by traditional and realist art, either consciously or unconsciously revisiting traditions and contemplating the reality in China,

instead of competing for novelty as Western modern art did. This is also an important prerequisite for modernist art to reach maturity. I should also point out that Western modern art remains the most important frame of reference, because modernist art attends to the interactions between modern society and human psychological and visual experiences. Our experiments are hardly all absolutely new, because we are undergoing a process which Western developed nations have already gone through.

IV. The waning of the '85 New Wave is not equal to the decline of modernism. Only when New Wave art weans itself from imitation can it truly enter the "modern" and "avant-garde" phase. In other words, only when Chinese artists soberly reflect on the present state in China and its contrast with the reality of Western modern art can the modernist process finally start. As mentioned above, modernist art is not the standard for artistic development, nor does it mean to interfere with social and cultural life. On the contrary, modernist art stems from artists' sensitivities toward contemporary society and contemporary life, and toward the circumstances and experiences of contemporary people. It is art's intrinsic demand to create new forms. It is to satisfy our own needs.

The key to developing modernist art is to nurture its independent character. Reflections focused exclusively on forms are inadequate. Forms should be approached in conjunction with reflections on people living in contemporary society and their conditions of existence. Thus, we return to the age-old duality of form and content. But, our understanding of "content" has undergone a fundamental change from its traditional interpretation. Content no longer refers to any particular subject matter or incident. It refers instead to the overarching cultural concept, or the spiritual significance of an artwork. Based on looking at recent artworks, we can discuss the relationship between form and content from three aspects. These three aspects should be recognized as the basic direction of contemporary Chinese modernist art at this moment.

(1) The combination of modern consciousness and national culture. Whether or not Chinese modernist art can have a place in the global art scene depends on if it can find its own unique language. Going global does not refer to the "*Red Sorghum* phenomenon." Nor is it putting on a couple of commercial blockbuster exhibitions in New York City. Being global depends on whether we have the capacity to hold a dialogue with the international art community, and whether we can proceed at the same pace with them, all the while maintaining our own independent character. Many artists have long pursued the integration of modernist art and Chinese traditional art in a coherent system. But, for a long time they have been fixated on the idea of seeking roots and have been beating around the bush. Lacking modern concepts to reflect on our tradition, they have only been able to make some exhibitions of folk art and totemic art; such a result is miles away even from the Primitivist pursuit of early Western modernists that was used to destroy the classical tradition. Conversely, when many young artists became obsessed with performance art (which one might consider the remaining legacy of the '85 New Wave), others were inspired by formalized Conceptual art (i.e., preconceptual art) and discovered symbols from traditional art to facilitate their Conceptual art projects. Lü Shengzhong's exhibition of paper-cut images is one good case in point. His masterly paper-cut skills materialized as combinations of symbols. The whole exhibition constituted a single coherent work. Paper-cutting represents a specific cultural affiliation. Each separate paper-cut in the show is not an independent work, but rather compelled the audience to go beyond individual symbols to understand a new kind of relationship between artistic expression and traditional culture from an integral perspective. For the design of the exhibition, he adopted the styles of



Lü Shengzhong. Paper-Cut Installation. 1988.  
 10' 2" × 23' 3" × 13' 2"  
 (310 × 710 × 400 cm).  
 Installation view in *Lü Shengzhong Paper-Cut Art Exhibition*, National Art Gallery, Beijing, October 1988. Collection the artist

environmental art, and plugged in Dadaist elements through collages of paper remnants and other unanticipated paper-cut configurations. Lü Shengzhong's art was based on his in-depth study of and experience with folk art. It started from utilizing large-scale paper-cuts to embody his philosophy of life, and has gradually morphed into a style integrating both Conceptual art and folk art.

- (2) Articulation from a conceptual level to a technical level. The creation of modernist forms embodies a complex duality. On the one hand, it emphasizes a change in concepts and the destruction of tradition. Through seemingly cynical moves, it gradually undermines preexisting artistic mindsets. On the other hand, it is mindful of the visual transformations ushered in by a hi-tech society and uses these technologies to create new forms. At present, the latter situation prevails, as seen from the trends in Western avant-garde art. China obviously has no capacity to demonstrate these hi-tech conditions in its art yet. However, compared with the shoddy skills displayed in modernist sleights-of-hand, [experiments carried out] on the technical level undoubtedly signify more advanced pursuits. As New Wave art wanes, such pursuits demonstrate the artists' steadiness, not driven by trends. Lü Shengzhong's paper-cutting shows his ability to utilize folk art forms. Xu Bing's prints attest even more to the worship of techniques. In the process of realizing pure technical methods, Xu also pushes the language of prints to its purest state. In modernism, technique is often a mark of an artist's individuality, a kind of ability no one else is capable of reaching. In terms of social consciousness, it also reveals the psychological infiltration of a modern industrial society. In contrast, collective projects and conceptual projects that focus narrowly on the conceptual level cannot manifest such individuality even if the participating artists are unusually talented. Although these projects harbor a serious creative consciousness, they are still pursuing a type of art that has already been "patented" by Western modern art

and is being incessantly mass-produced by numerous "art groups" in China. As Western modern art tells us, conceptual innovation is extremely flexible when it comes to forms. It has eventually become a routine game that everybody is capable of playing. It is exactly under such a crisis that modernism starts to reorient itself again toward techniques, which in a sense is a return to negating negation.

- (3) Rational reflection and critical spirit. The value of the '85 New Wave lies also in its anxious mentality and critical consciousness, echoing the sense of responsibility prevalent in the New Culture Movement. However, the forms it adopted to support itself failed to accommodate the magnitude of its thinking. The rationalism that modern art embraces is neither straightforward quotation nor blatant reference, but unconscious percolation into the question of form. Take Xu Bing's *A Mirror to Analyze the World—Fin de Siècle Book* (*Xi shi jian—Shijimo juan*), for example, its exhibition raises both aspects discussed above — traditional cultural symbols and the application of pure techniques. Behind these two aspects lies rationalism, a reflection upon the meaning of existence. The result of such a rigorous reflection forms a contrast with the painstaking technical process. The thousands of manipulated characters evidence not a Dadaist attitude of cultural mockery, but rather a reflection of the way the artist exists, and in extension the way in which other people exist. That is, the question: What is the meaning of existence? Disillusioned and experiencing the vicissitudes of the world, people always pass through life as if burdened by original sin. Who can explain the meaning of existence? But even facing such hardship and confusion, people still struggle to live, like in the Greek myth of Sisyphus, endlessly pushing a giant rock uphill every day. Fully aware of its futility, he nonetheless chooses to exert himself. Likewise, Xu Bing hand-cut thousands of characters that no one can read. Life is like an indecipherable text. It is not enough just trying to read the surface meaning of the words or to understand the technical process of carving. The key to understanding this work lies in the metaphysical values embodied by the action itself. Certainly, an artist's philosophical thinking is often direct and intuitive, and ultimately needs to be realized by expressive forms. Because Xu Bing imbues his thoughts into the process of design, configuration, carving, rubbing, production, and installation, people can grasp the anxiety of modern-day people through this kind of modernist form.

Strictly speaking, Chinese modernist art has only just taken its first step. But just as it would be hard for us to say whether today's Chinese art has reached a state of freedom, it is hard to tell to what extent modernist art has achieved its independent character. But, from our cultural heritage and our artists' attention to society, we see modernism's opportunity and options in China. Once it starts, it will continue to grow. Following the arrival of a modernized and open society, it will necessarily bring itself to fruition.

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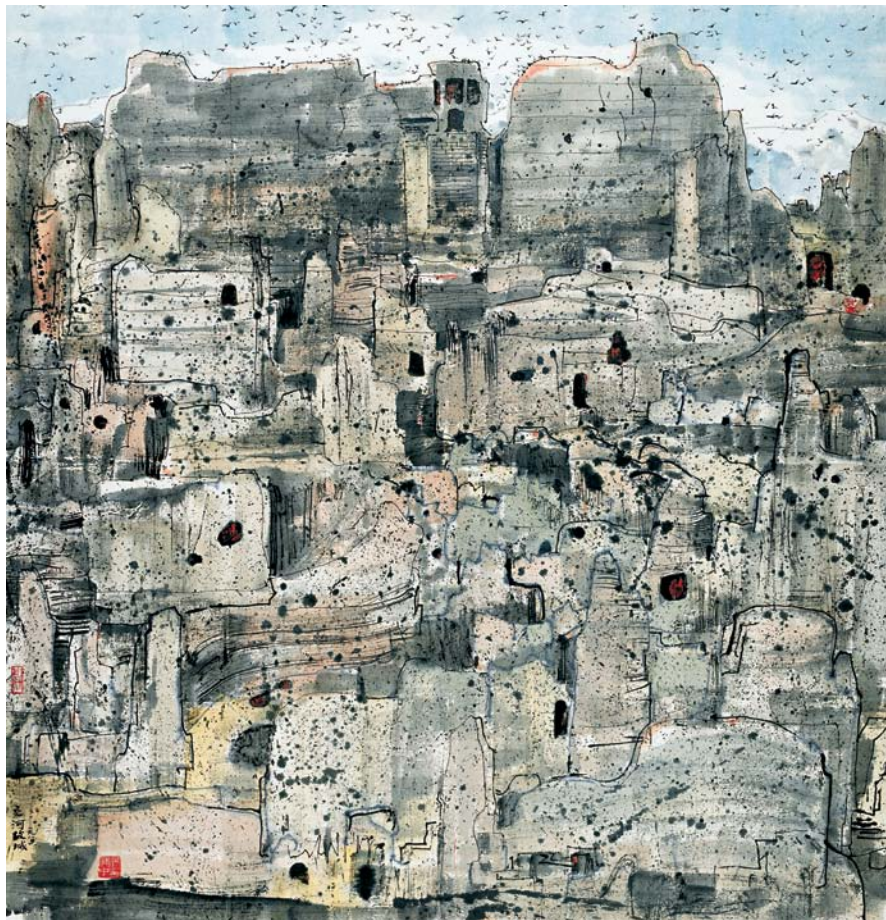
— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Xiandai zhuyi de kunjing yu women de xuanze" in *Meishu [Art]* 256, no. 4 (1989): 10–13. Translated by Kela Shang.

# ILLUSTRATIONS



1

**Wang Keping**  
*Silence*. 1978. Birch,  
18 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (48 cm) high.  
Collection the artist



2

**Wu Guanzhong***The Ancient City of Jiaohe*. 1981.Color on paper, 41 × 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"(105 × 100 cm). Private  
collection



3/4

**Chen Yiming, Liu Yulian,  
and Li Bin.** *Maple*. 1979.  
Illustration from the serial  
publication *Picture Stories*,  
1979: no. 8

**Cheng Conglin**  
*Snow on X Day X Month*,  
1968. 1979. Oil on canvas,  
6' 5" x 9' 8½" (196 x 296 cm).  
National Art Museum of China







5/6

**Luo Zhongli**

*Father*. 1980. Oil on canvas,  
7'3" × 61" (222 × 155 cm).  
National Art Museum of China

**Chen Dangqing**

*Mother and Son*. 1980.  
Oil on canvas





7

**Zhang Qun and Meng Luding**

*In the New Era: Enlightenment of Adam and Eve.* 1985.

Oil on canvas 6'5" × 65"  
(196 × 164 cm). Collection  
Taikang Life Insurance Company

8/9

**Ye Yongqing**

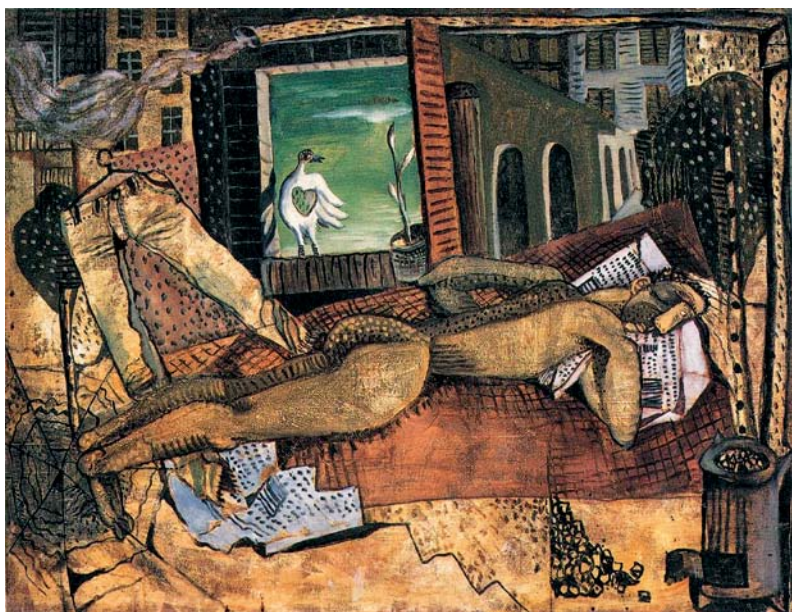
*Awaken in Spring from Hibernation.* 1986.

Oil on wood, 39¾ × 27½"  
(100 × 70 cm). Collection  
the artist

**Wang Guangyi**

*Post-Classical — Return of the Great Sorrow.* 1986.

Oil on canvas, 59" × 8'6"  
(150 × 250 cm). Private  
collection





10

**Zhang Peili**

*Midsummer Swimmers*. 1983.

Oil on canvas, 66 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 67 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
(172 × 170 cm)

11

**Mao Xuhui**

*Shepherdess and White*

*Goat*. 1986. Oil on canvas,  
33 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 35 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (86 × 90.5 cm).  
Private collection





12

**Ding Fang**

*City*. 1985. Oil on canvas,  
23 5/8 x 35 1/2" (60 x 90 cm)

13

**Southern Artists Salon**

*First Experimental Exhibition  
of the Southern Artists  
Salon*. 1986. Photograph of  
a performance, Sun Yat-sen  
University, Guangzhou.  
Collection the artists





14/15

**Xu Bing**

*Book from the Sky (A Mirror to Analyze the World — Fin de Siècle Book)*. 1987–91. Hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls, printed from wood letterpress type using false Chinese characters, dimensions variable. Installation view in *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1991

**Wenda Gu**

*Wisdom Comes from Tranquility*. 1985. Mixed-media installation with ink, rice paper, lacquer, bamboo, and woven materials, 16'5" × 26'3" × 32" (500 × 800 × 80 cm). Originally commissioned by Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, China. Artwork not extant

16/17

Opening day of the  
*China/Avant-Garde* exhibition,  
February 5, 1989, National  
Art Gallery, Beijing

**Wu Shanzhuan**

*Red Humor — Red Characters.*

1986. Mixed-media  
installation, dimensions  
variable. Installation view,  
Hangzhou, 1986





18

**Sui Jianguo**

*Earthy Force*. 1992–94. River rocks and welded steel, 26 pieces, each approx.  $19\frac{3}{4} \times 23\frac{3}{8} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$ " (50 x 60 x 70 cm). Collection the artist

19

**Liu Xiaodong**

*Joke*. 1990. Oil on canvas, 5'10 x 70" (180 x 195 cm). Collection Mr. Lawrence Wu







20

**Fang Lijun***Series 2, No. 2. 1991–92.*

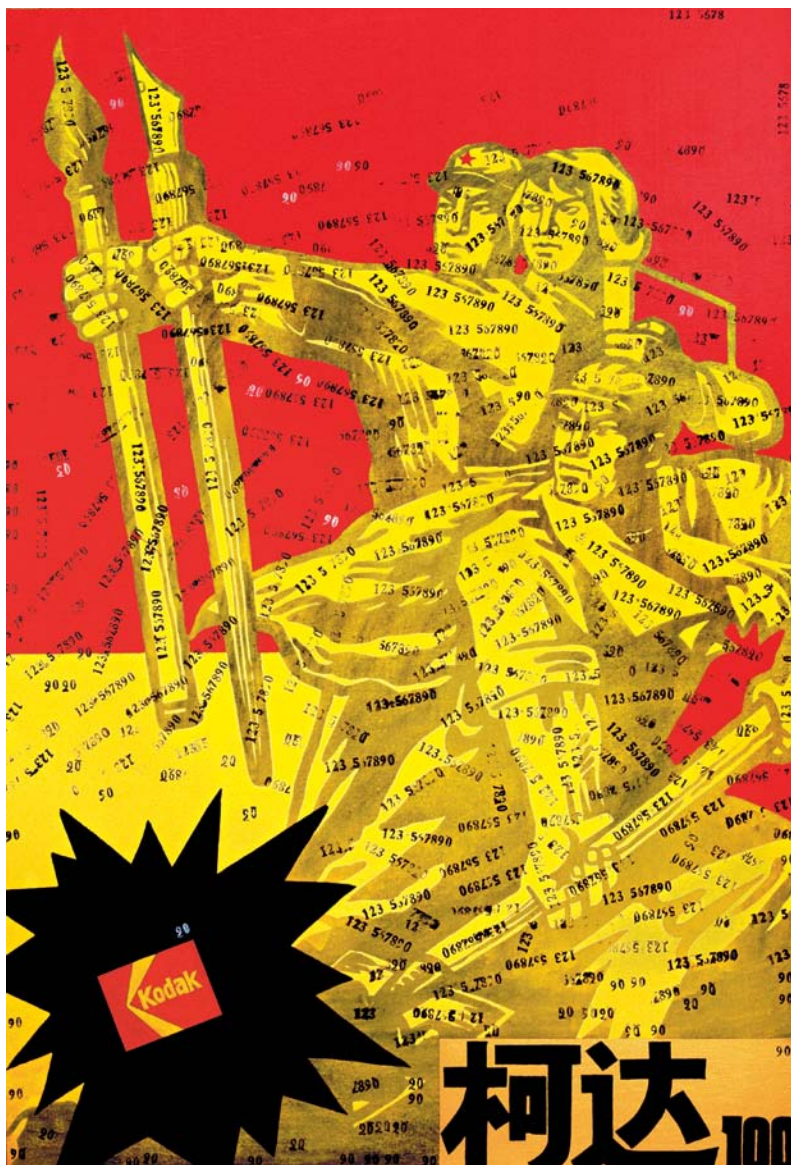
Oil on canvas, 6' 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " × 47 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  
(200 × 120 cm). Museum  
Ludwig, Cologne, Germany

21

**Liu Wei**

*Spring Dream in a Garden:  
Dad in Front of the TV. 1992.*  
Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
(100 × 80 cm)





22

Wang Guangyi  
*Great Criticism — Kodak*. 1990.  
Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 × 59"  
(100 × 150 cm). Private  
collection



23

**Zeng Fanzhi**

*Mask Series No. 8.* 1996.

Oil on canvas, 70 × 55 1/8"  
(170 × 140 cm)



24

**Zhang Xiaogang**

*Bloodline — Big Family*, 1994.

Oil on canvas, 59 × 70<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
(150 × 180 cm). Collection  
the artist



25

**Yue Minjun**

*Sky*, 1995. Oil on canvas,  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (100 × 80 cm).  
Collection the artist



2



**GLOBALIZATION AND A  
DOMESTIC TURN, 1990-2000**

China underwent a profound transformation in the 1990s, when economic reforms and the Open Door policy began to produce full-blown consequences. Major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai were now completely reshaped. Numerous private and joint-venture businesses, including commercial art galleries, emerged. Foreign goods and domestic copies flooded the market. Educated young men and women moved from job to job in pursuit of personal well-being, and a large floating population entered metropolitan centers from the countryside to look for work and better living conditions.

Equally important to the development of contemporary Chinese art, China entered a new stage of globalization during this period. If 1980s "modern art" was predominately a domestic movement linked to the country's internal political situation at the time, "contemporary art" of the 1990s unfolded across multiple geographical, political, and cultural spheres, including a domestic art world, a multinational contemporary art world, and linkages created by independent artists and curators between the two. Each of these spheres had its own history and posed different problems. During the 1990s, these spaces overlapped but did not provide a fixed framework for a single narrative; their relationships were subject to continuous negotiation and transformation.

To better reflect this complex situation, the texts in this section are grouped under "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" perspectives on contemporary Chinese art. Intrinsic perspectives proceed from artists and art projects; the foci include the artist's self-identity and experience, the introduction of new art mediums, the changing content and function of artworks, the variety of stylistic pursuits, and debate about using taboo materials such as animals and the human body. The translated documents demonstrate that these issues, rather than being purely formal and aesthetic, were closely related to the artists' intentions and social contexts.

Extrinsic perspectives mainly concern the factors surrounding and influencing the development of contemporary Chinese art during this period. The foci include specific historical circumstances of this art, the changing social and economic environments, the living and working conditions of the artists, different kinds of "experimental exhibitions" organized by independent artists and curators, the effort to bring contemporary art into a normal social framework and its backlash, and debate about the identity of overseas contemporary Chinese artists. Although this line of investigation seems to have its point of departure in art itself, it must be remembered that the scope of contemporary Chinese art vastly transcends the narrow confines of concrete works and art projects. Such perspectives are especially important to this period, during which Chinese artists, curators, and critics struggled to forge an extended field of contemporary art, not only through making works, but also by establishing a new system of art exhibition, education, and the market.



# I. INTRINSIC PERSPECTIVES

## ARTISTIC TRENDS IN THE EARLY 1990S (1990 – 93)

Compared with the exhilarating 1980s, contemporary Chinese art of the early 1990s has a somber and even cynical feel. The New Wave's idealism, heroism, and yearning for metaphysical transcendence had almost completely vanished, and the emerging tendencies in the late 1980s toward conceptualization and image-making now prevailed [pl. 18]. Multiple factors contributed to this change. One was China's political situation and its psychological impact: the crackdown on the 1989 student demonstrations was followed by official bans on unauthorized public activities, including contemporary art exhibitions and publications. Realizing their impotence in the face of real politics, many young artists turned to sarcasm. Another factor was the rapid commercialization of Chinese society and the globalization of contemporary Chinese art. Both developments encouraged new types of images as well as different relationships between artists and their audience. A third factor was the coming of age of a group of academic painters and sculptors, represented by "New Generation" artists who held a major exhibition with this name in 1991.

Mostly trained at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, New Generation artists made a conscious shift from representing "depth" to "surface." For many years Chinese artists had been schooled to inject deep meaning into their works; this doctrine was now rejected by these artists, who instead were fascinated by meaningless details of ordinary life. The critic Yin Jinan characterized them as having a "close up" vision, which separated their work from both the grand narratives of Socialist Realism and newly imported Western Conceptual art. Many New Generation paintings verged on sarcasm. The more extreme examples, labeled Cynical Realism, expressed the artist's boredom with the surrounding world or mockery toward authority figures.

Another major trend in the early 1990s was Pop art, which evolved in two different directions but employed similar visual tactics. Political Pop signified a deepening deconstruction of previous political visual culture: images from the Cultural Revolution were recycled and combined with heterogeneous signs found in the marketplace. In contrast, Cultural Pop focused more exclusively on the present, deriving images and styles from divergent fields of popular visual culture, especially commercial advertisements.

Cynical Realism and Political Pop are the styles of contemporary Chinese art best known in the West. Li Xianting's 1992 essay, "Apathy and Deconstruction in Post-'89 Art: Analyzing the Trends of 'Cynical Realism' and 'Political Pop,'" played a key role in defining both trends. Some recent studies have questioned Li's formulation. Huang Zhuan, for example, argues that the labeling of some representative artists of this period (such as Wang Guangyi) as Political Pop disregards both their individual development and the complexity of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s.

There were two lesser-known aspects of contemporary Chinese art during this period. The first is the continuous development of Conceptual art, represented by the experiments of the New Analyst group and artists like Zhang Peili and Qiu Zhijie (see texts in the section "Experimental Photography and Video Art"). The second is performance art, which was at the time frequently conducted in rural areas, historical sites, and public spaces. Although these performances attracted less attention at the time, their growing focus on social issues would herald a "domestic turn" in contemporary Chinese art of the mid- and late 1990s.

## NEW GENERATION AND CLOSE UP ARTISTS (1992)

By Yin Jinan

Modern Chinese art in the early 1990s possesses a certain temporal significance. At the moment when historical memory collides with reality, anyone can directly observe the fundamental source material belonging to the scope of art history. The literary world's "age of prose" corresponds directly with the art world's period of manifesto-free realism. Settling into their peaceful lifestyles, these artists have created an enormous cultural rift from the maddening infatuation with the explosive and dysphoric concepts that preceded them. This reexamination and questioning of traditional artistic values and New Wave art did not initially arise from within the theoretical world, but rather from the creative one. A few conspicuous solo and group art exhibitions that took place in 1990 and 1991 silently expressed a very confident artistic attitude. A group of young artists born in the 1960s thus emerged onto the scene. The age of these creative protagonists also became an important aspect of how we characterize the current art praxis. When I began to conscientiously employ the two concepts, "New Generation" (*Xin shengdai*) and "Close Up" (*Jin juli*), I considered the fact that these terms possess dynamic implications of subtle spatiotemporal variations. The term "New Generation" was not my own invention, I'm making use of it, in the same way the first people to use it borrowed the term from geography and embedded it within the coordinates of contemporary art's composite complex. The turning point for this entrenchment began in May 1990 at two oil painting exhibitions held in Beijing: Liu Xiaodong's solo exhibition (*Liu Xiaodong huazhan*) [pl. 19] and *World of Female Artists (Nü huajia de shijie)* (participants: Yu Hong, Wei Rong, Chen Shuxia, Li Chen, Liu Liping, Ning Fangqian, Jiang Xueying, and Yu Chen). These artists quietly dealt with issues of cultural pertinence and distilled the artistic trends emerging from the various artistic languages, and thus attracted my continued interest. I have previously made it clear that these two exhibitions symbolize the true beginning of art's New Generation. Later painting exhibitions by Wang Huaxiang, Yu Hong, Shen Ling, Zhao Bandi and Li Tianyuan, and the *New Generation Art* exhibition (*Xin shengdai yishu zhan*) (including Wang Hao, Wang Huaxiang, Wang Yuping, Wang Youshen, Wang Hu, Liu Qinghe, Zhou Jirong, Wang Jinsong, Song Yonghong, Zhan Wang, Zhu Jia, Pang Lei, Yu Hong, Wei Rong, Shen Ling, and Chen Shuxia) one after another pronounced the values of this New Generation.

Most New Generation artists are concentrated in Beijing. Born in the 1960s, none among this group was a Red Guard or "sent-down youth," and because they lack profound historical memories or mental scars they embody a distinct spiritual fracture from the generation born in the 1950s. Their collective consciousness has been diluted, and there are no life principles or artistic views that they unanimously uphold. The concept of a "new generation" is based on age, while that of "close up" is based on artistic posturing. The latter comes from the title I have chosen for Wang Huaxiang's exhibition this March in order to differentiate him from the "grand concept" art of the New Wave artists. "Close up" implies a closing of the spiritual gap among art, concepts, and life. Life and concepts, as deliberated by Chinese artists, have always been at opposite ends of the spectrum. In the past, placing importance on daily life resulted in different styles of realism. After 1985, people began to place importance on grandiose concepts. The conclusion of the 1980s also signaled an end to the artistic New Wave in China. New Generation artists enjoy depicting trivial matters from daily life, often making the people most familiar to them central subjects in their works. Liu Xiaodong and Wang Huaxiang both use friends and coworkers within their social circles as models for their paintings — they've even painted me. Wang Hao and Wei Rong

are more accustomed to choosing a relatively more objective gaze to record familiar urban life and everyday street scenes in Beijing. Shen Ling, Chen Shuxia, Wang Yuping, Liu Qinghe, Zhao Bandi, and Li Tianyuan, et al., like to execute scenes from everyday life directly on the canvas. At first glance, this artistic phenomenon seems obviously inclined toward realism, but compared with China's previous incarnations of realism (such as classical painting, Andrew Wyeth's style, or Regionalism), it has distinctly unique conceptual elements; this is a relatively new art form in China.

The trend of New Generation or Close Up art often rejects explicit declarations. The artists conceal their individual attitudes about life behind their representations of it, instead allowing these attitudes to permeate through their works little by little. It's easy to understand why New Generation artists don't like to issue formal manifestos. They often lack interest in grand theoretical concepts, and construct their egos through creative practice rather than a vast theoretical system on art. Because New Generation artists generally don't like to dabble in obscure and abstruse philosophical questions, philosophical issues naturally are not the motivating principles behind their works. They frequently capture life's realistic experiences while executing their art, beginning from a very practical, very concrete personal episode they project what can definitely be called both emotional and conceptual elements of their psyche.

The New Generation artists make use of their superior technical skills and place a great importance on the creative process, paying attention to distilling artistic language and personal symbols. They essentially place themselves in the position of artist, and not philosopher. A statement from one artist among them clearly illustrates this issue: "Painting means to paint; the job should be done well." They feel fundamentally the same kind of distance from grandiose concepts. This aspect marks an obvious distance from New Wave artists. New Generation artists occasionally reflect concepts but they never strive to manifest them.

The cultural backdrop of the early 1990s directly constitutes an important condition for the emergence of New Generation artists. This is not so much to say that these artists chose the 1990s, but rather the 1990s chose them. Owing to the general spiritual fatigue caused by an overheated economy and culture, "conceptual things already make people weary, artists want to return to their own specifically unassuming lives" (to quote Wang Huaxiang). Particularly in their appreciation of ordinary states, for these artists quiet and refined experiences have replaced patience for provocative turmoil. This kind of Close Up art and the reciprocal choice the painter shares with each specific subject are also expressed in the fact that New Generation artists objectively avoid the trends of New Wave art.

New Generation and Close Up artists accompany the rise of a new type of Chinese realism. Different forms of realist art suddenly emerged in a jumble: Photorealism as practiced by Wei Rong, Wang Hao, Zhan Wang, and Zhang Defeng; Expressionist-realism from Shen Ling, Wang Yuping and Chen Shuxia; and Conceptual-realism by artists like Liu Qinghe, Wang Jinsong, Rong Yuanhong, Zhao Bandi, Fang Lijun [pl. 20], Liu Wei [pl. 21], Li Tianyuan, Liu Xiaodong and Wang Huaxiang.

At the present, New Generation and Close Up art is not quite a national artistic phenomenon, but a localized one limited to certain cultural areas of Beijing. This group of artists by and large graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Urban life serves as their creative backdrop, and the intersection between their opinions on life and on art shapes their fundamental viewpoints. New Generation artists present life, highlighting its internal logical and integral nature. They exploit the most familiar corners of their lives to represent allegorically life's limited experiences and points of view. The spiritual elements that permeate their works are a miscellany of trivial and frivo-

lous matters, and in no way do their works emphasize or hypothesize on the spiritual direction of any unified concept.

At present, the few attempts at theoretical explanation of their works either show different understandings or embody individualistic interpretations. Some observers characterize the content of New Generation or Close Up art as "ridicule and self-mockery," others call it a "rogue consciousness." Ultimately, in terms of a broader conceptual significance, these interpretations provide these artists with a definite psychological position. This kind of thinking also influences our cultural judgment as to whether Close Up art has emerged as a result of historical fortuity or historical necessity. Believing this existing art to be an accidental phenomenon, these critics imagine a non-existent art to be an "inevitable" one because it "should" emerge. This is actually an issue of whether art should accord to historical fact or historical logic. Of course, interpretations of and value judgments on the psyche of New Generation and Close Up artists are bound to become an interminable argument; following the transformation of cultural circumstances and issues to come, the axis and focus of this debate will shift. It is not my intention to avoid discussion on the level of significance, but my main purpose is to identify the existing and relational facts on the state of this art in the early 1990s.

Just as the 1990s are beginning, New Generation and Close Up art is merely in its early phase. These artists have attempted to use relatively conventional and stylized artistic language, and integrated the personal life experiences buried inside of each of them, to begin their artistic practice. Among them, already a few works exhibit a distinct cultural pertinence. The significance of New Generation and Close Up art itself, just like our theoretical attention, must pass the merciless test of history.

October 1991

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— Originally published as "Xin shengdai yu jin jūli" in *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 133, no. 1 (1992): 16–17. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

## **APATHY AND DECONSTRUCTION IN POST-'89 ART: ANALYZING THE TRENDS OF "CYNICAL REALISM" AND "POLITICAL POP" (1992)**

By Li Xianting

The notion of "Post-'89" implies the approach of taking the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition as a closure of 1980s New Wave art in mainland China, and refers to art phenomena that emerged in opposition to precisely this 1980s New Wave art.

The hallmark of 1980s New Wave art was its manifestation of the contemporary tumult of social and ideological trends. This art was positioned against a cultural background that encompassed the loss of value systems at two historical moments: first, after Western powers forcibly opened China's doors, the traditional literati culture was forsaken during the antitraditional May Fourth New Culture Movement; and second, in the wake of the 1978 Open Door policy and amidst the influx of Western modern culture, the revolutionary realist tradition established during the Cultural Revolution was likewise abandoned by many young artists.

Therefore, a continual pursuit of new spiritual pillars to support art was unavoidable. The impetus for New Wave art originated in intellectual thinking, from art philosophy to social consciousness. However, subsequent to the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing, when all manner of art concepts from the past century of Western

art history were exhausted, a crisis of conception came to light. Nobody was able to provide a safe harbor for art, not Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, nor Camus.

Especially after entering the 1990s, people started to question the idealistic belief that Western modern intellectual history could be utilized to rescue and reconstruct Chinese culture. Without prospects for a perfect world, people were forced to face the hopeless landscape of spiritual fragmentation.

It was against this backdrop that the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition lowered the curtain on the 1980s modern art movement.

In fact, initial inklings of the "Post-'89" phenomenon had appeared in the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. First, as a precursor to Political Pop, Wang Guangyi, one of the most representative artists of 1980s modern art, showed his work *Mao Zedong*. Second, a new generation of artists who would constitute the main force of Cynical Realism,<sup>1</sup> such as Liu Xiaodong [pl. 19], Fang Lijun, and Song Yonghong, also presented their early works.

In their minds, "participation in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition spontaneously gave rise to a sense of alienation." They "stopped trusting the efficacy of established art concepts in resolving artists' problems of inspiration" and instead turned to "the burning realities sensed through their intuition" (excerpted from Song Yonghong's diary).

Some remarkable new works and emerging artists in exhibitions from recent years attest to a state of mind distinct from that of the 1980s New Wave movement. To cite but a few: Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong's exhibition at the beginning of 1990 in Beijing; Song Yonghong and Wang Jinsong's exhibition at the end of 1990; Fang Lijun and Liu Wei's exhibition in early 1991; the *New Generation Art* exhibition (*Xin shengdai yishu zhan*) in mid-1991; Zeng Fanzhi's exhibition in Wuhan in early 1991; fledgling Sichuan artists who have recently entered the limelight such as Shen Xiaotong and Xin Haizhou; and the "culture T-shirt" by Kong Yongqian, the success of which swept through cities like Beijing during the summer of 1991. All of these have called our attention to a new trend quietly underway, which possesses a powerful centripetal force both in terms of its language and psychology — the sense of apathy, roguish humor, and a cynical style of realism. When viewed in comparison with Wang Shuo's "hooligan literature," the "new realist literature" by writers such as Liu Zhenyun, and the "post-Cui Jian" rise in rock-and-roll music, the characteristics of this new trend become readily apparent.

#### **APATHY AND THE THIRD GENERATION OF POST-CULTURAL REVOLUTION ARTISTS**

The artists in this trend belong to the third generation of artists since 1979. The first generation consisted of "intellectual youths" [i.e., students who were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution], who suffered from psychological trauma and received a revolutionary modernist art education. Their mindset and art leaned toward austere realism, with key figures championing "Scar Art," "Native Soil Art," and "Root-Seeking" schools of thoughts. Their art featured a strong focus on truth and compassion as core elements of artistic beauty, as well as sympathy for ordinary people and sensitivity toward the dark side of reality. The second generation is a group arising from the mid-1980s and nurtured in modern thought. Most of them were born in the mid- to late 1950s, and their college years in the early 1980s coincided with the tremendous flood of Western modernist thought. They shared varying degrees of life experiences with the intellectual youth generation. However, their memories served not as sources of heart-felt consideration, but rather as points of entry and objects of introspection in their reflective acceptance of Western modernist thought during the early 1980s. This constituted their artistic characteristics, that is, borrowing critical perspectives and artistic vocabularies from Western modernist art and thought, and focusing on mankind's meaning of existence from a metaphysical point of view.

The third generation was composed of "rogue" artists. They were born in the 1960s and graduated from college in the late 1980s. Their childhoods and educational backgrounds contributed to a striking departure from the previous two generations. Just as the end of the Cultural Revolution was the catalyst for the maturity of the intellectual youth generation, the introduction of modern Western thought served as the background for the coming of age of the '85 New Wave. Whether in pursuit of compassion or Western modernist thought, art by the first two generations was born from the same effort to construct an idealistic social environment for a new Chinese culture. In contrast, members of the third generation of "rogue" artists have been thrown into a society of rapidly changing ideas since birth. Their childhoods overlapped with the opening up of the nation. Their graduation from school in 1989 coincided with the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, which represented the 1980s modernist movements and imitated various Western artistic models. Whether in the name of society or art, the ideal of salvaging Chinese culture became sheer fiction. Whether in life or in art, reality left the "rogue" artists only a few fragmentary pieces. Almost no social event, artistic style, or value would leave an eternal or profound influence in their minds.

Thus, apathy became the most real perception for them with regard to their current state of existence.

Almost all sensitive artists face a common dilemma regarding the problem of existence. That is, after the reality of existence has lost the meanings previously assigned to it by former cultural models and values, this powerful system of meanings that has heretofore reigned over their lives doesn't succumb to change simply because of these losses. But the "rogue" artists have adopted an approach to this problem that fundamentally differs from the previous two generations of artists. They reject both the predominant system of meanings as well as any effort to restructure it according to oppositional meanings, which they find to be equally delusional. Rather, what they believe to be most tangible and most authentic is a confrontation with the self. Salvation can only be achieved through rescuing the self, and apathy is the "rogue" artists' most forceful solution to dissolving the shackles imposed by all meanings.

Moreover, when reality fails to provide a spiritual support, the meaning of the meaningless becomes their channel for assigning new meanings to art and existence. This is both their most desperate approach to entrusting new significance, as well as their most promising avenue toward self-salvation. They disavow the idealism and the heroics seen in previous art. They lower the commanding perspective that Scar Art and the '85 New Wave adopted in looking at life, and instead return to a level viewpoint, scrutinizing fragments of their mundane, inane, accidental, and even absurd surroundings as rogues. Such change in perspective brilliantly captures the collective sense of senselessness and roguish humor in their perception of the world.<sup>2</sup> According to Fang Lijun, "Only a bastard will be swindled again after being cheated a hundred times. We'd rather be looked upon as the lost, the inane, the ones in crisis, the rogues, and the disorientated, but we will never be cheated again. They better not use the same old shenanigans to educate us, because all doctrines will be stamped with a big question mark, negated, and thrown into a pile of garbage" (excerpted from Fang Lijun's notes).

Their roguish humor and apathy means meaninglessness. The significance of their sense of apathy lies in dissolving the reflection of the real world in our minds and feelings. Since the real world is meaningless, one need not treat it seriously, which is the essential rationale behind the rogue artists' cynical and mischievous style, as well as the reason for dissolving the solemnity arising from the responsibilities borne by the previous two generations of artists.

In Wang Shuo's famous text *Playing for Thrills* (*Wanr de jiushi xintiao*), frightening events turn out to be a senseless joke. It hints at the fact that many high-profile events in modern society are no more than jokes. Almost all of Wang's works poke fun at the respectable writers and heroes from the past, and even the human race, evidenced in the titles of his novels: *Please Don't Call Me Human* (*Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren*, lit., please don't take me as a human being) and *An Attitude* (*Meiyou yidian zhengjing*, lit., never taking anything seriously), among others. In rock-and-roll music, the "post-Cui Jian" group replaced Cui Jian's previous strong sense of participation and political aspiration with disdain and indifference. One of the most prominent musicians among them, He Yong, chants in his song "Garbage Dump": "The place we're living in is like a dump. People shit like pests. They feed on conscience and defecate with their thoughts. The place we're living in is a slaughterhouse. But you are o.k. if you know shit is dirty."

Works by representative rogue artists deploy a sense of humor from two selective perspectives. The first consists of segments from life that are "ridiculous," "senseless," or "mediocre"; the second approach parodies originally "serious" and "significant" objects and events.

Examples of the first perspective include Fang Lijun's meticulously executed "yawning" portraits of his friends, which at the same time created a unique linguistic sign: the image of the bald rogue [pl. 20]. Song Yonghong is good at assuming a callous, sneering, and voyeuristic attitude, unearthing the utterly mundane, nauseating, pretentious, and comic scenes from everyday life, and disclosing its trivial, despicable, and laughable behaviors. Yu Hong's young women are mostly in an idle trance, whose facial expressions betray an apathetic attitude toward life. Among them, Liu Xiaodong is the most devoted and attentive artist whose works bear the most tragic character. He often captures group portraits of city youths as his subject matter and represents their unresponsive and uncaring states. Liu's paintings are replete with contradictory elements: individual worries within social settings, and happy expressions masking grief. Particularly in pictures filled with roguish ridiculousness, there is an indescribable, awkward air of attempting to transcend and escape the current situation, which also marks the artist's remarkable achievements in capturing the essence of art and life. Works by these artists share a tendency toward introversion and self-mockery. They create in their pictures a sense of contradiction through rendering ultrarealistic segments from life with a remote and lifeless flavor.

The emotion in a picture does not solely come from the flavor of life inherent in the fragments of existence. Instead, the artist injects an emotion, a reluctant emotion, into every figure, every touch of color and every brushstroke, and creates what Liu Xiaodong calls "the ambiguous thing" or "dual structure." This twofold composite of contradictory factors is mostly manifested in the use of the form of a roguish comedy in representing an inescapable and ridiculous tragedy. For instance, in Liu Xiaodong's *Pastoral* (*Tianyuan muge*), a couple on an outing appears lost and awaiting a hopeless outcome. The composition and the brushwork strive to capture the power of tragedy, in contrast to the pastoral lightheartedness. The figures in the painting are of the artist himself and a female companion, presenting a portrait of introspective self-mockery. Song Yonghong's *Tranquil Environment* (*Qingjing huanjing*) represents a fixated moment of turmoil and reveals the humorous anxiety and absurdity in repressing sexual desire under a necessary calm. Yu Hong portrays young women in the mode of commercial advertising, which uses a sense of fashionable trendiness to embed beauty within transient happenstance. Fang Lijun treats all of his bald figures in a poetic way — inserting these homely yet amusing characters into the lyrical realm of a



blue sky, white clouds, and the vast ocean — and achieves an effect that is sarcastic, ludicrous, and humorous.

Artists who follow the second strand include, for instance, Wang Jinsong. Each one of Wang's works mocks and teases all manner of worldly affairs, particularly those supposedly serious and momentous events that are nonetheless also clichés. Liu Wei portrays honorable soldiers and revolutionary families in compositions resembling family photographs whose solemn and dignified nature has been rendered in a somewhat comical and clumsy way [pl. 21]. These unattractive and uninviting personas are the artist's signature figures. Clearly, works by these artists direct ridicule at the outside world. Their pictures are like caricatures, both more theatrical and lighthearted than the internal tensions felt in the first group of artists' works, which flow from their introverted inclinations toward self-mockery.

Taking Wang Jinsong's caricaturized characters for instance, their effortless lines and blank faces "encourage a conspiratorial relationship between the audience and the artist, the meaning of which resides not within the picture but in a shared cultural background — and shared attitude toward this background — rooted in reality. From a theoretical perspective, it's a representation of the pale and lifeless side of the human psyche. At the same time, it also comes from my personal anxiety and insecurities with my abilities, thus leaving behind an incompleteness in the empty blanks. This kind of a sense of powerlessness is a kind of cultural phenomenon." This wan lifelessness is evident in Wang's works such as *Big Chorus (Da hechang)* and *Big Qigong (Da qigong)*. Conversely, Liu Wei's roguish mentality comports perfectly with the composition, color, and brushwork in his paintings, as if the latter elements record his mischievous and tongue-in-cheek humor throughout the process of image-making.

#### THE REALISM MODEL

Idealism brought a sense of mission and participation to intellectual youths and members of the '85 New Wave movement. It permitted them to take a lofty stance toward reality and endowed their work with solemnity and gravity. It also nurtured an inclination to scrutinize the meaning of reality outside oneself and ask questions of an eternal, final, and metaphysical nature. All these dissolved, however, in the wake of the rogue artists' realization of their own powerlessness, a loss subsequently conveyed in their artwork. The loss of the artists' professional sanctity and sublimity marked a revolutionary change. Pursuant to Wang Shuo's notion of "hooligan-turned-writer," artists are, in turn, no more than a bunch of illiterates. "It is said that the artist is the engineer for the human soul. But aren't all souls born equal? This claim is too pretentious, too heavy-handed, and too self-aggrandizing. Others say that artworks are artists' mere excrement. Crude as it may sound, it has some truth to it. People can see from the excrement whether you're healthy or plagued with diseases, similar to the way doctors make diagnoses based on their patients' excrement" (excerpted from Fang Lijun's notes). Since art no longer possesses a sacred social function, the surrounding reality has become the focus of the artists' visual perspective as well as their soul. Moreover, their extensive training in mimetic art techniques provides a natural foundation for pursuing realist styles. This educational background also explains two characteristics of their art; the first is to select and scrutinize the mundane, pedestrian, and even ridiculous segments of life, and the second is to utilize themselves and the people around them as their painting subject. As Song Yonghong notes: "The focus of my attention is the interest I take in my surroundings. Transcending the habitual force of reason is indeed an exciting matter, as my living environment confers the basic elements of my creativity" (excerpted from Song Yonghong's notes). Liu Xiaodong proposes this even

more clearly in his essay "Respecting Reality" ("Zunzhong xianshi"): "In life, I'm a realist. Therefore, I believe art ought to be realistic." "My insistence on realism derives from my conviction that realism is all about documentation and immediacy. My heart is assured when I rely on the solid foundation of realism" [see *Meishu yanjiu (Fine Arts Research)* no. 3 (1993)]. For this very reason, most of these artists abandoned the imitation of Western modern art languages typical of the 1980s. Instead, they initiated a fresh start on realism — the now dominant style of realism that was itself introduced from the West in modern times — to locate new possibilities.

Granted, the reality within their realism is disparaged, ridiculed, and mocked by these artists. In actuality, "realism" is the most complicated and multivalent of all artistic phenomena as well as the term that is most often misused. In fact, all types of reality under the rubric of realism result from a selective process based on one's era, environment, cultural climate, and social psychology. As the most mainstream artistic style in modern China, realism has focused more on the realistic elements in terms of artistic language. The post-1949 revolutionary realism influenced by the Soviet Union concentrated on social events and the documentary narratives of particular personages. The revolutionary realism during the Cultural Revolution underscored the realism of the "tall-grand-complete" and the "red-bright-brilliant," akin to a sort of religious idealism. The Scar Art movement realigned realism's field of vision toward the dark side of social reality.

The realism espoused by the rogue artists rectifies the excessively grandiose philosophical questions raised by the '85 New Wave. Their realism directly tackles the current collective psychological state of loss and apathy. Discarding the inclination toward social participation felt by previous generations, they transformed the formerly aloof attitude into that of an equal bystander of reality, experiencing the conditions of existence of themselves and of those around them. Only by means of this attitude of an equal bystander can one take up an unruly and roguish stance and feel the ludicrous aspects inherent in reality, the intrinsic complexity and perversity in people, and the meaninglessness in life. Wang Jinsong aptly summarized: "Once I turned myself into a bystanderlike author, I started to see that the shortcomings we all possess are actually a hidden channel connecting us together. It's like a tentative point of entry through which I can place myself into the real cultural ambience, where people's various pitfalls foreground some tragic elements of theatricality." "Experiencing the most appealing mental phenomenon through an onlooker's excitement enables me to adopt a detached, relaxed, and humorous way of representing the true psyche of real men." Liu Xiaodong also believes that "these objective phenomena themselves radiate a brilliance. I insert the 'contents' from my heart into them." "This posits some discrepancies with traditional realism, and — following an initially humorous impression — leaves a lingering fear behind in the audience" (from the same essay cited above). For these reasons, I call their art Cynical Realism.

We may approach Kong Yongqian's "culture T-shirt" from the same angle. Through catchphrases such as "annoyed — leave me alone," "complete loser," "burned out," and "ball 'n' chain," and stereotypical signs of Chinese society such as the residence registration booklet, ID card, and food ration stamps, Kong's work reaches the same goal of a roguish realism through mockery, but also through an avenue that is truly Pop: consumerist culture. It became an instant hit in Beijing and other cities, and attracted widespread attention from international media as well as domestic government agencies. Kong accurately and powerfully captured the universal apathy and roguish attitude toward life in modern-day Chinese society.

### PRECEDENTS: NEW LITERATI "ART GAMES" AND THE "ABSURD TRENDS" OF THE '85 NEW WAVE

The psychology and vocabulary of the so-called rogue artists were not accidental by-products. "New Literati" painting and the "'85 New Wave" served as the basis for their ascent onto the social stage.

In 1985, the Nanjing-based artist Zhu Xinjian painted classical women with big heads and tiny feet, idling nude. Through wantonly exaggerated lines borrowed from brushstrokes in literati art, the patchwork of inscribed poems jumbled in both classical and modern Chinese, the naïve-looking and tipsy disposition of calligraphy, and the use of seals such as "playboy" and "vanity fair," Zhu charted a new direction for New Literati painting featuring a roguish and comical style. This style immediately introduced a wide and profound change in contemporary Chinese art.

The tenet "art for fun's sake," as Zhu Xinjian puts it, captured some of the core strands of the contemporary Chinese spirit, namely, the crisis of faith disguised under the individual pursuit of liberty. This mentality encouraged subsequent popular fads such as "the future for fun's sake," "life for fun's sake," and ". . . for fun's sake." On the one hand, before an individual's sense of self and privacy gain wide acceptance and respect from society, an unfathomable psychological burden is imposed on the artists. This, in turn, drives their art toward a roguish and comical dimension, mocking both themselves and society at large. On the other hand, in Nanjing, where traditional art enjoys a long and established genealogy, artists' aversion to New Wave art induced them to take up traditional literary "ink play." This choice not only alleviated a hefty social burden in favor of "art for fun's sake" but also steered clear of the protests against the imitation of Western art. Nonetheless, when they took up traditional ink painting, they saw their inadequacy in light of the insurmountable height of the tradition, in all aspects including their state of mind, their training, techniques, and even their calligraphy which they used to inscribe their works. Their embarrassment, whether self-conscious or not, pushed them toward a cynical path.

To a certain degree, the roguish humor of New Literati art was born from a kind of "cultural aberration," formed by the pressures of social psychology and cultural modes. Because New Literati artists are unable to confront reality, they can only amuse themselves by looking back at historical subject matter and artistic forms, making only a small splash through lightweight, playful works.

Compared with New Literati art, rogue artists are largely free of such an anomalous psychological state. They started off from self-reflection and tackled and represented the reality as they saw it collectively, which is healthy and powerful. Nonetheless, as an artistic trend, the New Literati "art for fun's sake" broke new ground for latecomers in terms of both their state of mind and artistic language.

Rogue artists and the '85 New Wave have a closer genealogical relationship. Rogue artists did not completely extricate themselves from the overarching '85 New Wave framework of life's absurdities. Instead, they replaced empathetic heroism with the role of a cynical bystander. The switch from relating to mankind through a metaphysical perspective to contemplating the self and one's immediate surroundings allowed rogue artists to transcend cultural limitations. They observe physical reality from a more intimate vantage point and grab hold of ordinary people's common state of existence, thereby stripping off the shroud of modern philosophy enveloping the '85 New Wave. Rogue artists have benefited more, in terms of artistic language, from the '85 New Wave's experimentation with surreal and alien contexts. However, they have now eradicated the latter's deliberate obscurity and esoteric language. Instead, they focus on themselves and their surroundings to experience and represent extant strangeness and absurdity.

#### POLITICAL POP AND A DECONSTRUCTIVE ATTEMPT

Since 1989, without coordination, some leading artists from the '85 New Wave have one after another abandoned their metaphysical stance and headed toward Pop art. Because the majority of their works deconstruct the most influential personages and political events in China in a humorous way, I call them "Political Pop." Examples include Wang Guangyi's Great Criticism (*Da pipan*) series [pl. 22], which he created after *Mao Zedong*, Ren Jian's Siphon Off (*Chou gan*) series, Shu Qun's  $+ - \times \div = 0$  series, Zhang Peili's *Chinese Bodybuilding* (*Zhongguo jianmei*) and *1989 Standard Pronunciation* (*1989 Biaozhun yin*), among others, and Geng Jianyi's *Group Portrait* (*Heying*) and *Books* (*Shu*).

Political Pop is another phenomenon that shows a strong homogeneous direction. Compared with Cynical Realism's focus on apathy, the two are twin brothers in contemporary Chinese culture. They are both interested in the dissolution of certain systems of meaning and both attend to reality. Cynical Realism focuses on the senseless reality of the self, whereas Political Pop directly portrays the reality of dissolved meanings. Both adopt a comical approach yet are distinguishable in their sources of inspiration. Cynical Realism tends more to the experience of the artist's surrounding reality, while Political Pop experiences reality within the expanded framework of society and culture. Accordingly, some works of Political Pop carry influences from the dogmatic tendencies of '85 New Wave's rationalism. This is particularly prominent in works by former members of the Northern Art Group who proposed "rationalist painting" and "Arctic Culture of the North," most of whom relocated to Wuhan. They were accustomed to following the most prevalent international trends. In 1989, when deconstruction was most popular in China, they published numerous lengthy articles and artworks in magazines and newspapers. With a revolutionary momentum resembling that of the '85 New Wave, these artists raised the flag of Western deconstruction and rallied under slogans such as "purging humanist enthusiasm" [coined by Wang Guangyi, discussed in publications such as *Beijing Youth Daily* (*Beijing qingnian bao*)], "cleansing and dissolving," "using new signifiers to revive the brilliance of the ancient spirit" [Shu Qun, see *Art Panorama* (*Yishu guangjiao*) no. 2 (1991)]. They stripped the lofty veil off the metaphysical '85 New Wave and attempted to give rise to a new movement through the "materiality and immediacy" of Pop art. But their art was crippled by excessively schematic tendencies, such as the mathematical signs in Shu Qun's  $+ - \times \div = 0$ . Wang Guangyi continued to develop the style he started with the 1987 *Mao Zedong* in a black grid. Now he combines propaganda prints typical of the Cultural Revolution with contemporary Western commercial signs. These new works are transparent in signification and more accurately represent the style and characteristics of his Political Pop painting.

In comparison, Shanghai-based artist Yu Youhan's *Mao Zedong* series incorporates elements from Chinese folk art, such as New Year's pictures and printed cloth. Inspiration from the latter ranges from fabric patterns to colors and printing techniques, thereby grasping some distinctly Chinese cultural symbols. Art serving political needs and art in the service of workers, peasants, and the masses constitute the basic elements of the Maoist theory on art and literature. In terms of artistic styles, all art movements after Mao's address at the "Yan'an Conference of Art and Literature" have centered around elements of folk art, such as folk music in the *Yellow River Cantata* (*Huanghe da hechang*), and the influence of New Year's pictures on the oil painting *The Founding of the Nation* (*Kaiguo dadian*). Therefore, Yu's *Mao Zedong* transcends a simple cultural critique, as its folk-art elements encompass cultural implications that are far richer and more profound.

Zhang Peili's *Chinese Bodybuilding*, and especially his 1989 *Standard Pronunciation*, incisively and accurately grasp contemporary Chinese culture to an even greater extent. The psychological mindset of Westerners is crippled by commercialization, whereas that of the Chinese people is more constrained under the pressures of political propaganda. For this reason, Andy Warhol was able to depict American culture through a series of Coca-Cola bottles and the image of Marilyn Monroe, yet in China no image is more prevalent than that of the anchor broadcasting CCTV [China Central Television] news. There, Zhang Peili found the "national face" of China — the face, countenance, and voice that best represent the entirety of the Chinese national ideology.

Geng Jianyi's work at the *Garage Art Exhibition (Cheku yishuzhan)* in November 1991 in Shanghai consisted of bookcases holding books which had been repeatedly printed over. Although the amount of information increases with each printing, the overlap of each repeated print cancels each other out. The setup entails enlarged headshots printed over each other. These types of portraits are ubiquitous in China, such as on public announcements, ID cards, and all kinds of one-inch hatless head-shots for purposes of political background checks. Every Chinese person, from his or her birth, will have to fill out countless forms and will have to endlessly deal with this type of portrait. Through these head-shots, Chinese people are irrevocably tied to politics. Ren Jian's installation *Archives (Dang'an)* addresses the psychological complex that Chinese people have regarding "archives" and targets his mockery by publicizing secret records. The series *Siphon Off* and *Stamp Collecting (Jiyou)* take the state itself as the subject of dismissal. The *Siphon Off* series is a topographical map of the country in a seemingly lifeless sandbox. The *Stamp Collecting* series consists of postage stamps of national flags, "the postal cancellation marks provide a visual fluidity, and it is within this fluidity that the national flag is about to be dissolved" (excerpted from Ren Jian's notes). Zhou Xiping used the forms of old accounting books to record the entries of the historical vicissitudes of personages in recent history. Liu Dahong comes closest to the roguish and comical feel of Cynical Realism, yet his rereading of portraits of revolutionary visionaries such as Karl Marx in the form of the guardian-kings in folk art does not venture too far from Political Pop.

The emergence of Political Pop marked a significant turning point in modern Chinese art history. It was a turning away from the close attention paid to Western modern ideas and art — a sober awakening from the grandiose questioning of man and art — and a turning toward the real space of Chinese existence. Through a humorous approach, Political Pop takes up the trend of deconstructing the self and one's psychological complex toward politics. It is also a milestone indicating the starting point of Chinese modern art in a direction of its own choosing.

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#### Notes

1. The closest English counterpart to *wanshi* (lit., to play with the world) is "cynical." The difference is that the Chinese expression of *wanshi* is often used in conjunction with *bugong* (disrespect), whereas the English word, aside from its connotations of sneering and mocking life, retains some implications of seriousness in dealing with the world. In terms of respect, Chinese Cynical Realism is respectful at times, and disrespectful at other times, respectful toward certain people, and disrespectful to others. It is nonetheless disrespectful to the established mainstream culture and societal value systems, although varying in degree and manner.
2. "Roguish humor." Humor in modern art and literature is even more indescribable than in traditional art and literature. It is often modified in phrases such as "black humor." In comparison to black humor, Chinese Cynical Realism is less poker-faced and instead appears to be scathing, wayward, unscrupulous, and disillusioned. like a spiritual vagrant. Zhou Zuoren talked about such mental inclinations in his article "Broken Leg" from 1924: "A 'broken leg' is also known as a rascal and a ruffian in more standardized parlance. In premodern Chinese, it's called rogue and down-and-out. It's called scoundrel in Shanghai, and vagabond or 'blue skin' in Nanjing. Japanese call it scamp, and it's rogue in English." Zhou juxtaposed it with the Spanish *novelas picares* and cited examples such as the rogue Niu the Second in the novel

*Water Margin*. Lin Yutang even "sang great praises for vagabonds and tramps," believing that "in today's China when democracy and individual freedom are threatened, perhaps only the spirit of the vagabonds and tramps can liberate us and prevent us from becoming disciplined, obedient, and controlled soldiers in an infantry that is reduced to a statistic," and that "vagabonds are the last-standing and fiercest enemies of the authoritarian institution," "upon whom the whole system of modern culture will have to rely" (Lin Yutang, *The Art of Living*).

I am attempting to introduce this attitude toward life as a cultural concept.

This phenomenon is hardly unique. The founders of New Literati art, Zhu Xinjian and Zhou Jingxin, painted the belligerent character from *Water Margin*, the rogue Niu the Second, at an artists' get-together on the occasion of the "*Chinese Paintings* exhibition in Hubei Province." The character was comical and the brushwork was light-hearted. Since then, this rogue, Niu type of humor has ushered in an era of "life for fun's sake" in all of society. In recent years, many academics in China have liked using the concept of the 1960s hippie from the West. In fact, although there are some similarities between the Western hippie culture and the abovementioned Chinese counterpart in terms of the antimainstream cultural tendencies, the state of mind is quite different. The hippie culture is extremely simple and naïve with idealistic features, whereas the Chinese roguish humor is anti-idealistic and claims to "have seen through everything." Antimainstream culture is a value judgment, yet the method of opposition is a tactical call. As for art, it's a judgment in style and artistic language.

The famous sinologist John Minford also posited similar thoughts: "On this post-Mao wasteland a strange new indigenous culture is evolving, which could, perhaps a little provocatively, be called the culture of the *liumang* (an untranslatable term loosely meaning loafer, hoodlum, hobo, bum, punk). . . . The original *liumang* is to be seen cruising the inner city streets on his Flying Pigeon bicycle, looking (somewhat lethargically) for the action, reflective sunglasses flashing a sinister warning. *Liumang* in everyday speech is a harsh word. It is the word for antisocial behavior, a category of crime. But the *liumang* generation as I see it is a wider concept. Rapist, whore, black-marketeer, unemployed youth, alienated intellectual, frustrated artist or poet. . . . It is an embryonic alternative culture, with striking similarity to the American and European culture from the 1960s" [Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times, 1991)].

Postscript (2000):

This article was initially drafted in March 1991 under the title "The Sense of Apathy in Art Today: An Analysis of Cynical Realism" ("Dangqian yishu zhong de wuliaogan: Wanshi xieshizhuyi chaoliu xi"), which was published in *Twenty-First Century* (February 1992) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The article attracted critical attention from overseas academics, and excerpts were published in some overseas journals.

The first draft only mentioned some Pop tendencies in passing. In December 1991, I was invited to curate an exhibition for the [Sydney,] Australia Museum of Contemporary Art, Hong Kong Arts Centre, and Hanart TZ gallery. The exhibition planning report is the first instance of the exhibition title *China's New Art, Post-1989*, and also when the concept of Political Pop was first positioned as a subcategory of "Pop art." At around the same time, I was invited to found the magazine *Art Trends (Yishu chaoliu)* for the Suiyuan Art Foundation of Taiwan. In its inaugural issue, I put in some additional material in the Political Pop part based on the previous draft of "The Sense of Apathy," and completed the article published in this book.

Subsequently, *Twenty-First Century* solicited new articles, and I adapted the part on Political Pop in this article into a separate essay titled "Political Pop and the Image of Consumption" ("Zhengzhi bopu yu xiaofei xingxiang"), which was published in *Twenty-First Century* in its fourth issue of 1993. Afterward, the Australian English-language publication *Art Asia Pacific* invited me to write on Political Pop, and I wrote an essay titled "The Imprisoned Heart: Ideology in an Age of Consumption" (April 1994, vol. 1, no. 2). During this time, I also wrote a few short essays on the two schools of art for the *Shanxi Daily (Shanxi ribao)* and *Genesis (Chuang shiji)*, among others.

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— Originally published as "'Hou bajiu' yishu zhong de wuliaogan he jiegou yishi — 'Wanshi xieshizhuyi' yu 'Zhengzhi bopu' chaoliu xi" in *Yishu chaoliu [Art Trends]* 1992: no. 1. Translated by Kela Shang. Reprinted with postscript in *Zhongyao de bushi yishu [Art Is Not the Significant Thing]* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu Art Publishing, 2000), 291–306.

**APPENDIX****THE MISREAD GREAT CRITICISM (DA PIPAN) (2008)** [pl. 22]

By Huang Zhuan

From art criticism to mass media, from art-history literature to the art market, Wang Guangyi has always been seen as a poster boy for Chinese Pop art. This classification can be traced back to the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuang-nian zhan)* held in Guangzhou in 1992. At that exhibition, he won the highest academic award from Chinese art critics for his work *Great Criticism*, the Document award. The award comments read:

In *Great Criticism*, familiar historical forms have been deftly linked to what were once irreconcilable popular contemporary icons, sending a hopelessly tangled metaphysical problem into suspension. With the language of Pop Art, the artist has opened up a contemporary problem: so-called history is a linguistic prompt that connects with contemporary life; *Great Criticism* is one of the best examples of such a linguistic prompt to arise in the early nineties.<sup>1</sup>

While this was a somewhat sketchy appraisal, the art exhibition *China's New Art: Post-'89*, held in Hong Kong the next year, unequivocally bestowed *Great Criticism* with the label of "Political Pop." Li Xianting, who discovered Political Pop, describes it thusly: "Since 1989, without coordination, some leading artists from the '85 New Wave have one after another abandoned their metaphysical stance and headed toward Pop art. . . . The majority of their works deconstruct the most influential personages and political events in China in a humorous way." He believed that for the then-current Chinese deconstructionist culture, Political Pop was identical to "Cynical Realism," except that the former found its inspiration from "reality within the broader social and cultural frame" and the latter "more from an experience of the reality pertaining to the self and its immediate surroundings."<sup>2</sup> Here, Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong* and *Great Criticism* came to be seen as the representative works for this style of painting. Ever since then, Wang Guangyi's 1989 *Mao Zedong* and 1990 *Great Criticism* have come into play within this system of explanation. In 1992, the authoritative Western art magazines *Flash Art* and *ARTnews* gave prominent coverage to *Great Criticism*, which led to Wang's inclusion in the *Cocart International Art Invitational* held in Italy and in the 45th Venice Biennale. Ever since, Political Pop as represented by *Great Criticism* not only became the main route through which Westerners came to know Chinese contemporary art, *Great Criticism* became the main reference through which the critical field would judge the success or failure of Wang Guangyi's art. Critics felt that "this artwork, in terms of art, is just a low-value double copy," reflecting that "as China passes its political peak and moves toward its economic peak, the impetuous creative state of artists is the illness of the period where our history develops into a commercial society."<sup>3</sup> Another criticism was that Political Pop pandered to America's Cold War strategic need to suppress China.<sup>4</sup> *Great Criticism* became famous because of its classification as Political Pop, but it inevitably paid the price of such fame: a misreading of its methods based on an old methodology.

One could venture that this classification and critiquing of *Great Criticism* mostly result from extracting Wang Guangyi from the developmental logic of his own art history as well as from plucking him from the context of modern Chinese art development. In an article discussing the cultural development and nature of the emergence of Chinese Pop art, I proposed that:

The Pop art that arose in postwar America had two backgrounds, one in cultural history and one in art history. The former refers to the nourishment it gained from the mass-popularization and utilitarian aesthetic pedigree of American culture, and was also a physical reaction to the fragmented, superficial, and sensory consumer culture that emerged after World War II. The latter refers to the refutation of elitist strains of modernism such as "abstract expressionism." Andy Warhol's visit to China in the early 1980s, and more importantly Robert Rauschenberg's solo exhibitions in Beijing and Lhasa in 1985, kicked off the spread of American Pop ideas to China. This moment just happened to arrive at the peak of China's '85 modernism movement, which was marked by the themes of enlightenment and rebellion. It was this set of circumstances that produced such a bizarre short-fall in meaning: Pop was lackadaisically understood to be a Dada-style, destructive kind of art, and its deconstructionist underpinnings were poorly understood. For political reasons, Chinese society quickly completed its transformation from an enlightened culture to a consumer culture in the early 1990s, and Chinese artists, still stuck in a tragic mood by the failure of cultural enlightenment, suddenly realized that they were buried in a completely unfamiliar economic world. The loss of ideals and the death of the critical identity left thought in a chaotic mixture of modernist enlightenment construction and postmodernist deconstructionist concepts, which made Pop a natural stylistic choice for the period. Of course, this choice was based on a clear misunderstanding of Pop: it was both seen as a weapon of critique and used as a tool for deconstruction.

...

Early Chinese Pop art clearly contained mutations that were wholly different from Western Pop ideas. First, the appropriation of readymade images was "historicized" and definitely not limited to that which was "current." This differed markedly from the "random" or "neutral" image selection method in the West.

Second, the linguistic strategy of "removal of meaning" was replaced by an attitude of rearranging meaning as a result of the abovementioned appropriation method. This formed the most bizarre and contradictory semantic and cultural traits in Chinese Pop art: it deconstructed the original images by reconstructing the meaning of the image, and it removed the cultural burden through a culturally critical attitude. Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* rearranged the highly different images of Chinese political history and Western consumer history such that the image produced a new form of critical power.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, without seeing the dual nature of the cultural qualities in Chinese Pop art and simply seeing it as a direct product of Western modernism, it would be difficult to make faithful judgments about its logical relationships to the cultural enlightenment and social criticism aspects of the 1980s.

Also, appraisals of *Great Criticism* should place it within the artist's artistic methods and historical logic for decoding before a rational conclusion can be drawn.

For a time in the early 1980s, Wang Guangyi was a utopian, believing that a healthy, rational, and strong civilization could save a culture that had lost its beliefs. His early artistic activities with the Northern Art Group and his early Solidified Arctic Region series (*Ninggu beifang jidi*) all displayed a passionate and delusional pursuit of culture. This kind of civilization style is marked by order, coldness, and succinctness. This idealized style was quickly replaced by a strongly analytical form of image, and in his Post-Classical series (*Hou gudian*), which he initiated in 1987, he began to discard his humanist sentiments and began to use a method of revising the manuscript of



history to complete his work of "cultural analysis" and "schematic critique." If we say that in *Black Rationality* (*Heise lixing*) and *Red Rationality* (*Hongse lixing*) the subject of analysis was still limited to classical art and literary classics, then it was with the Mao Zedong series that he first began using political images as the material for "analysis." Maybe we shouldn't put too much stock in this term "analysis," because the marks and letters on the surface of the leader's image were not truly analytical results, nor did they indicate any "political" standpoints or attitudes. They had only one function: to break off the established expectations of significance and aesthetic judgments that people had toward these kinds of political images.

In 1989, he classified the image concepts and methods that were produced during this period as "purging humanist enthusiasm" (*qingli renwen reqing*). We can understand it as a desire to maintain tension between abstract and hollow humanist passions and a cold, rational attitude critical of realism. It should be pointed out that during this period, whether he used classical art, literary classics, or political images, it was mainly directed at the "deficit" of meaning created by the universal humanist passions of the '85 New Wave movement; it was not a "political" stance, and was wholly unrelated to the Pop strategy of deconstructing the meaning of images, even though it made use of readymade images. Wang Guangyi once described his motives behind using political images such as that of Mao Zedong:

I had wanted to provide a basic method for purging humanist enthusiasm through the creation of *Mao Zedong*, but when *Mao Zedong* was exhibited at the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, observers multiplied the humanist passions by a hundredfold to imbue *Mao Zedong* with even more humanist import. . . .

*Mao Zedong* touched on the question of politics. Though I was avoiding this question at the time, it really touched on it. But, at the time I wanted to use an artistic method to resolve it; a neutral attitude is better, as a neutral attitude is more of an artistic method.<sup>6</sup>

What should attract our attention here is the way he proposed a "neutral attitude," because we can see his "neutral attitude" toward politics and ideology in his later art. This neutral attitude is not detachment; instead, it indicates that art can only make effective judgments about political events and history after it has removed specific political standpoints and humanist passions, so that it can naturally present its inherent significance and value. This forms the basic methods of Wang Guangyi's "visual political science," and it is an effective means for us to understand his "political nature"; this method has its roots in his appraisal of "classical" and "contemporary" art.

The Post-Classical period was an important stage in Wang Guangyi's transition from modernism to contemporary ideas. In this period, the artist clearly divided "classical art" from "contemporary art," believing that the former included "art of the classical period" and modern art: "They draw their meaning from the overarching classical knowledge structure, they are natural arts that are the product of a projection of humanist passion." What they express are mainly mythological illusions, religious passion, and the common and mundane emotions of the individual; contemporary art discards its dependent relationship to "humanist passion" and its quest for the meaning of art; it "enters into a relationship of resolving the problems of art and establishes a logically verifiable linguistic background which uses the past cultural facts as experiential material."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, what really brought about Wang Guangyi's transition from being a modern artist to a contemporary artist and gaining recognition in art history was his

1990 *Great Criticism*. It seems that it was here that he finally found an image method that both "used past cultural facts as experience" and was "logically verifiable." With *Great Criticism*, he also discarded all efforts toward perfecting a consummate artistic style, and directly positioned two materially distinct images — "Cultural Revolution" — style political posters and Western consumer advertisements — together in the same picture, a method which seems more like a stylistic gamble, using a contradictory attitude to narrate the empty state that culture faced within this bizarre landscape, where the enlightenment era was replaced by the consumer era. It appears that if we view the "politics" of *Mao Zedong* as nothing more than an image arrangement method, then it was with *Great Criticism* that the "politics" truly became the experiential material for logical verification. But, it differs from the narrow sense of political realities, political events, and political authority in the original meaning of "Political Pop," because the collocation of "images" from the materialist age and "signs" from consumer culture is not necessarily in order to make a value judgment about the two, but instead to construct an imagined relationship that can be explained in multiple ways. To put it simply, if *Great Criticism* "deconstructed" or "criticized" something, then what it deconstructed and criticized was merely the mode of political conception that lays within the humanist passion; if it created something, perhaps it merely created a "neutral" image method, a method that could continuously attract attention and explanation. He is often pleased by this:

I think the reason that people remember *Great Criticism* — even if they don't like it — the reason they remember it might be linked to the term non-standpoint (*wu lichang*). I use this term now, but back then I didn't know this word: it is determined by the "neutral standpoint." Everyone thought I was "criticizing" something, that I had a clear standpoint, but they slowly realized that I hadn't really done anything. Perhaps *Great Criticism* drew its meaning from all of these serendipitous reasons. Later I happened upon a conversation with a philosopher, and he said that in philosophy this attitude was called the "non-standpoint."<sup>8</sup>

The "non-standpoint" does not indicate "not having a standpoint," but rather a repudiation of set modes of thought and biases, using a kind of "neutral" relationship to make the object present a more varied and open "potential." Zhao Tingyang, the philosopher friend whom Wang Guangyi just mentioned, describes the "non-standpoint" thusly: "The non-standpoint says that every standpoint has its useful place, so different standpoints are used in different places, and no standpoint is denied. That is to say, the non-standpoint merely strips away the absolute values or values priority of any viewpoint . . ." "'Non-standpoint' thinking first resists one's own biased thinking. Only when one's own biases are closed off and prevented from becoming the basis of evidence can he see others, hear others, and understand others."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps we can trust in art critic Yan Shanchun's "psychoanalysis" of *Great Criticism*:

Wang Guangyi ingeniously grasped the tension between Warhol's [artistic characteristic of being] "clear and easy to understand" and Beuys's [characteristic of being] "abstruse." I think that this kind of artistic taste is most suited to his personality: agile and adaptive like the monkey — Warhol's "acceptance with pleasure," and fierce as a tiger — Beuys's "merciless criticism." To place these mutually contradictory art images together is just the kind of "humor" that he created for contemporary art.<sup>10</sup>

Another art critic, following the same lines, proposed that the works from this period manifested "the idea of bringing Gombrich's image form revisionism together with Derrida's deconstructionism."<sup>11</sup>

These are all logical considerations to take into account in our observations of Wang Guangyi's "visual political science."

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### Notes

1. Lixiang yu Caozuo: *Zhongguo Guangzhou—Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan (youhua bufen)* [*Ideals and Operation—The First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Oil Painting Section), Guangzhou China*] (Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House, October 1992), first edition, 104.
2. Li Xianting "Hou '89 yishu zhong de wuliaogan he jiegou yishi — 'wanshi xieshi zhuyi' yu 'zhengzhi bopu' chaoliu xi" [Apathy and Deconstruction in Post-'89 Art: Analyzing the Trends of Cynical Realism and Political Pop], in *Piping de shidai [Era of Criticism]*, vol. 1, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), 386.
3. Duan Lian, *Shiji mo de yishu fansi [Rethinking Turn-of-the-Century Art]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art and Literature Publishing House, May 1998), first edition, 142.
4. Ibid., p. 12.
5. Huang Zhuan, "Wei Guangqing: yi zhong lishi hua de Bopu Zhuyi" [Wei Guangqing: His Historicized Pop Art], in *Zuo tu you shi [Interplay of Images and History]* (Guangdong: Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House, November 2007), first edition, 1.
6. Lü Peng, "Tuxiang xiuzheng yu wenhua piping" ["Image Alteration and Cultural Criticism"], in *Dangdai yishu chaoliu zhong de Wang Guangyi [Wang Guangyi within the Trends of Contemporary Art]* (Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House, October 1992), first edition, 36.
7. Wang Guangyi, "Qingli renwen reqing" ["Purging Humanist Enthusiasm"] in *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 118, no. 10 (1990).
8. Wang Guangyi and Wu Shanzhuan, "Guanyu yixie wangshi de fangtan" ["A Discussion about Some Things from the Past"], Asia Art Archive (unpublished).
9. Zhao Tingyang, *Lun keneng shenghuo [On Possible Lives]* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2004), first edition, 7; and *Meiyou shijie guan de shijie [No Worldview for the World]* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2003), first edition, 3.
10. Yan Shanchun, "Dangdai yishu chaoliu zhong de Wang Guangyi [Wang Guangyi within the Trends of Contemporary Art]", in *Dangdai yishu chaoliu zhong de Wang Guangyi [Wang Guangyi within the Trends of Contemporary Art]* (Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1992), first edition, 20.
11. Lü Peng, "Tuxiang xiuzheng yu wenhua piping," 42.

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— Excerpted from Huang Zhuan, ed., *Shijue zhengzhi xue: ling yige Wang Guangyi [Visual Polity: Another Wang Guangyi]* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing, 2008), unpaginated. Translated by Jeff Crosby.

## TENDENCIES IN CHINESE POP (1996)

By Gu Chengfeng

### I. THE INEVITABILITY OF POP'S EMERGENCE IN CHINA

...

Although giving a complete definition of the following is certainly not easy, we can still identify several aspects of Chinese Pop by referring to the standards of Western Pop art and to actual conditions in China.

- 1) The great use of visual signs so familiar to the public that they are tacitly understood. These signs may simply be depictions of readymade objects or may involve some sort of formal alteration.
- 2) The search for metaphors in reality. Satiric allegory extends beyond glorifying culture. It often uses the canvas to unleash a certain defiant mocking of authority.
- 3) Departures from traditional aesthetic categories. The degree of a work's success is determined by how well it expresses its [underlying] concepts.
- 4) Graphic simplicity and quick execution. By abandoning a sense of the eternal, [Pop] pursues efficacy for a given period of time.

What is described above merely includes generalities about Chinese Pop. Because of the particular [cultural and political] environment in China, many artists first fashioned

a certain style and [only] later came to experiment with Pop. Certain works embody tendencies that are only partially Pop. For the convenience of our study, using "Pop tendencies" as a descriptive term seems most precise. Not only can "tendency" include the results of creative [activity] that verges on the condition of pure Pop, but it can also encompass "generalized phenomena" that already display a will toward Pop. The artists and works mentioned below are divided according to "tendency."

## II. THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE POP

### 1) From the individual to the part to the whole

By and large, one can divide Chinese Pop into several periods: namely, pre-1989, the era of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*), 1990, and 1992. These divisions are determined according to the number of works that appeared and the important events that occurred during each period.

It is very difficult to trace who produced the earliest Pop work in this country. In truth, even though some Pop works had already been produced between 1985 and February 1989, there were very few; and because the media at the time was not yet sensitive to this [style of work], it was difficult for Pop works during this period to come face-to-face with the public. For example, in 1987, Wang Ziwei of Shanghai had already transferred images of Mao Zedong onto his canvases, but, at the time, it had no impact.

The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition of 1989 was the germinal exhibition for Chinese Pop tendencies. Because they had relatively more exposure to material from outside China, a number of art academy graduates felt the possibility early on for the imminent emergence of a new influential style. The showing of Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong AC* was a particularly significant event. I myself wrote in a letter thereafter, "What I really want to do is to focus people's attitudes about culture, particularly their suspicion of news, through artistic means; and I want to express these attitudes properly." "The creation of *Mao Zedong* allowed me to further clarify the issue of what we mean by 'avant-garde art'; namely, [I realized that] 'avant-garde art' is predicated on its critical relevance to its particular culture."<sup>1</sup> Wang Guangyi's works were the first to push the image of Mao Zedong toward viewers, an image that had been silenced in the fine arts for some years; but also, Wang's works used others means, such as imposing a grid and adding letters, to defy purely historical retrospection and to point instead at the present. Consequently, although people were still temporarily unable to mull over the work's "critical relevance to culture," no one, be they artist or viewer, approached the work with their former reverential frame of mind. Their earlier mentality was replaced with a complex mindset that synthesized historicism and reality. From today's perspective, one still cannot but feel the deepest respect for these artists' keen powers of perception, even though the artists themselves may not have realized this style's important inspirational function at the time.

In comparison to the explicit graphic forms of Wang Guangyi's works, Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor* (*Hongse youmo*), which was also included in the exhibition, used different means to attempt to arouse people's memories. The many slogans, texts, and red-flag images in this installation were all selected from the visual signs deeply ingrained in people's memories from the previous decade; but the Pop meaning of the work was limited. Conceptually, it focused on rethinking a past era. In temperament, it still perpetuated the passion of the '85 New Wave.

In terms of arousing the audience's participatory consciousness and engendering a feeling of completeness with regard to the work's conceptual form, Xu Bing's large-scale installation *A Mirror to Analyze the World* (*Xi shi jian*) [later renamed *A Book from*

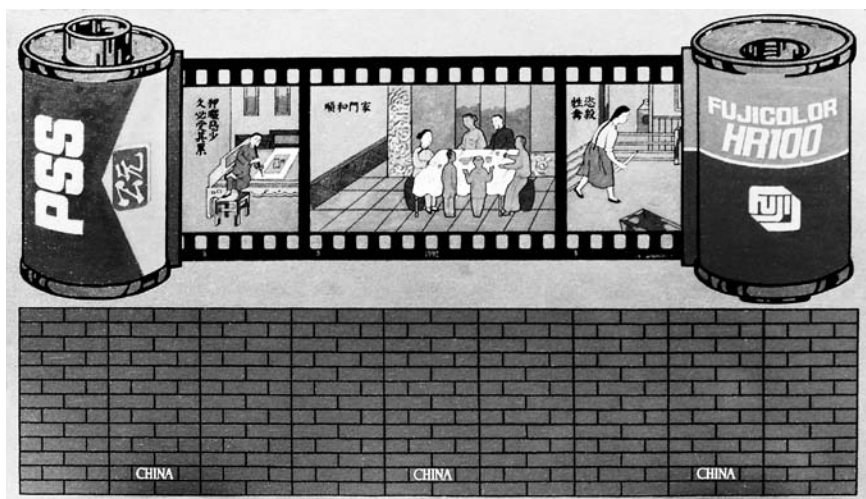
*the Sky (Tianshu)* [pl. 14] was, without a doubt, the most influential artwork at the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition; discussions after the exhibition have often centered on this work. In the work, we see a large number of wood-cut letterforms, unidentifiable yet seemingly familiar, closely adhering to the most important medium in traditional Han Chinese culture — Chinese characters. They form a link between the historical and the contemporary. Every viewer could develop a completely different evaluation of the meaning of the work. Although the artist's intentions were deeply hidden, the spectators' act of judging resulted in a form of conceptual participation that completed the work in a fresh new way. Given this, *A Mirror to Analyze the World* can be said to have had a certain Pop impact; and precisely because of this, the work has been able to take a canonical place within the history of Chinese contemporary art.

The sudden closing of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition and the major changes that occurred in society shortly thereafter led to the rapid suppression of Xu Bing's explorations of modern art. The dissolution of [artists'] collectives, the rapid decrease in opportunities for public display [of artworks], and the increasing individualization of artists' attitudes toward creation were the hallmarks of this period. Public opinion mostly centered around themes such as "New Literati painting," "New Academic painting," and "New Classical literature." These trends certainly lacked any sense of the avant-garde, and in terms of their exploration [of the realm of art], they lacked anything worthy of praise. But during this period, the defined focus and cultural nature of "New Realist painting" attracted people's interest. Although the number of people participating in [creating] Pop works was increasing, their works still had not attracted the attention of theory and criticism.

After his Mao Zedong series, around 1990 Wang Guangyi began his Masterpieces Covered by Industrial Quick-Drying Paint series (*Bei gongye kuaiganqi fugai de shijie-hua*), his Mass-Produced Holy Child series (*Piliang shengchan de shengying*), and his Great Criticism series (*Da pipan*) [pl. 22], which has developed almost uncontrollably since its inception. If we think of the two series Masterpieces and Holy Child as more engaged in "rational" elements and as attempts to use deconstruction as a starting point, then we can see the Great Criticism series as more dependent on Pop to expose contemporary sociocultural issues.

Several other artists who were together with Wang Guangyi in Wuhan during this period also selected [their material from among] visual images in the public [sphere]. They successively set aside their past methods of [artistic] exploration, which emphasized rationality and spiritual consciousness, and turned their attention to Pop. For example, after abandoning his Suicide series (*Zisha*), Wei Guangqing puzzled over his Thumb (*Damuzhi*) and Red Wall (*Hongqiang*) series; Ren Jian began creating his Stamp Collecting series (*Jiyou*) after leaving behind his work *Primordial Transformation* (*Yuanhua*); and Shu Qun created the work *Cui Jian* as well as his Complete Collection of World Art series (*Shijie meishu quanji*). These changes all involved [the artists'] transforming their enthusiasm for philosophy and self-expression, turning instead to the popular and coolly executing images familiar to the public. The Pop tendencies that their works exhibited established a foundation for the "Hubei Pop Wave" that subsequently followed.

In Hangzhou in 1990, Zhang Peili created *Chinese Bodybuilding—Expressions of 1989* (*Zhongguo jianmei—1989 nian cuoci*) and *1990 Standard Pronunciation* (*1990 Biaozhun yin*) [Should be *1989 Standard Pronunciation—Ed.*]. From their plans to their titles, his works all make a fairly clear declaration about contemporary sociocultural phenomena. Shanghai's [Yu] Youhan also created *Mao Zedong Era* (*Mao Zedong shidai*) and a subsequent number of works that took Mao Zedong's image as their theme.



Wei Guangqing. *Red Wall—A Harmonious Household*. 1992. Oil on canvas, 5'9" × 9'11" (175 × 300 cm). Collection Donghui Co., Shenzhen, China

The works described above all use images, words, and titles to directly reference the present environment. All of these works already completely possessed the formal traits and impact of Pop. At the time, not only was it difficult to publicly exhibit such works, but newspapers and journals also remained silent about them. People's reactions to this style were complicated. Disregarding the political critique, some people, speaking from a purely artistic perspective, believed that this form of expression had a very low level of creativity. Some believed that Pop was [merely] a temporary stylistic transition. Still others believed that this was evidence of avant-garde art's having reached a dead end. Regardless, no one could conceal his or her reaction — be it astonishment or disgust — upon first seeing Pop works. This feeling was one that the viewer lacked when facing works of New Literati painting and New Classical painting. And, as its imitative quality increased, New Realist paintings also failed to garner this kind of reception.

While the majority of critics still had not yet had time to carefully mull over the phenomenon of Pop, artists, always more sensitive, had already successively seized inspiration from it. In late 1991 and in 1992, Chinese Pop had already become a trend; it was simply awaiting a suitable opportunity to ascend to dominance in the painting world.

This opportunity finally arrived in October 1992 with the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* (*Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan*), which focused on oil painting. This exhibition was privately funded, and it was curated by several critics who had conducted research on Chinese avant-garde art. Under these basic preconditions, Hubei Pop was brought together and made a collective appearance. People saw that [artists in] Hubei had followed earlier influential explorers of the language of Pop, with a group of powerful experimenters emerging in large numbers.

A slide show assembled and shown at the [*Second*] *Modern Chinese Art Research Documents Exhibition* (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu yanjiu wenxian ziliao zhan*) (Guangzhou), which was organized at the same time as the Biennial, was titled "Pop — Abstract" ("Bopu — Chouxiang"). Although the tendencies of the exhibited works were not completely identical, fundamentally one could see the slide show as a panorama of Chinese Pop. At the symposium organized in conjunction with the exhibition, ten or so Chinese critics initiated a discussion about the phenomenon of Chinese Pop. Chinese

Pop finally marched forth out of obscurity and onto the stage. Its journalistic effects, which had previously attracted such excessive attention, receded from view, and the cultural issues that it faced and exposed, as well as the possibilities that it brought for modern art, became the principal topics of discussion. At this moment, everything — from the number of people involved in creating Pop works to the scale of exhibitions, from the impact that Pop was making to the disputes that it was instigating — could be seen as sufficient to indicate that the height of Chinese Pop art had arrived.

## 2) Regional traits and age groups

Simply describing the distribution of Pop phenomena according to region does not seem entirely appropriate. Nevertheless, attentive people will realize that artists active during Pop's most dynamic period largely resided near the shores of the Yangzi River in cities such as Hangzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Chongqing, and others. Among these, the Pop collective in Hubei left the most profound impression on people. The word "influence" might explain their relationship. During the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* in Guangzhou in 1992, Wuhan's Li Bangyao, Yang Guozhang, Shi Lei, Fang Shaohua, and Chen Lüshou all individually produced Pop works that showed a great departure from their previous art. People could not help but compare their earlier works with those that they exhibited. Such comparisons could result in two outcomes. First, [one might conclude that] the majority of the explorers of Pop tendencies in China were veterans of the '85 New Wave. In people's memories, there still remained impressions of their earlier styles. Did this [new] style and transformation derive from the individual's strong appreciation of [such a form of] expression, or did it derive from a stylistic evolution? Perhaps one cannot completely separate these two issues. In the end, this is a question worthy of investigation. Second, [one might conclude that] because Pop art was something imported from abroad, its indiscriminate application could yield effective and powerful effects in the short term, distinguished from surrounding works which were either excessively sweet or pretentiously bitter. Nevertheless, all of this still lacked an appropriately prepared and established foundation. Our painters were, without exception, the products of art academy curricula and lacked the conditions that naturally generated American Pop art. Andy Warhol, for example, first painted popular illustrations; James Rosenquist was initially a painter of advertisement imagery; Roy Lichtenstein painted comic book images; Tom Wesselmann also went through stages of [creating] comic book images and collage paintings; and, of course, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat began with graffiti. But, in China, the first to use the Pop language was a group of "veterans" of the painting world, and they [only] succeeded under [privileged] conditions of being able to refer to a large body of foreign visual materials. This both determined the rapid spread of Chinese Pop and predetermined the limits that necessarily appeared. Thus, more natural conditions of development still remained to be seized by the younger generation.

What was worthy of our delight was that there was already a new group to carry on. Many of them also had recently graduated from art academies, but in terms of their lifestyles and trends of thought, they belonged to a new generation. These were people like Qiu Zhijie and Gong Jiawei, who graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts [Hangzhou]; Chen Wenbo, Zhang Bin, Feng Zhengjie, and Yu Ji, who were graduates of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts [Chongqing]; and Feng Mengbo and Zhang Bo, graduates of the Central Academy of Fine Arts [Beijing]. Their works already embodied interests and styles different from those of the previous generation. Below, we will touch on this issue further.

## III. THE IMAGERY AND SPIRIT OF POP

With regard to imagery, there are two types of Chinese Pop: one concentrates relatively more on the figure of Mao Zedong and popular images from the Cultural Revolution, and the second takes contemporary culture, as well as commodity culture, as principal sources of imagery. I ought to point out that I do not agree with allowing Chinese Pop to be called only "Political Pop." China is a country that has been rather sensitive to political content [in artworks] for a long time. It is true that Chinese Pop also bears the mark of this specific culture. But politics cannot be all-inclusive, just as politics cannot replace art. Particularly given this current backdrop of opening up and immersing ourselves in a commodity economy, pop culture and commodity culture have come to occupy increasingly important places in people's lives. As the most direct and most sensitive medium for representing changes in our society, Pop art should be seen as a sort of barometer of art, publicly declaring artists' psychological mindsets. This is something that the word "politics" is far from ever being able to encompass. Western Pop art also arose from commodity culture. The unique history of China caused Chinese Pop art to assume a particular political meaning, but this alone is certainly not everything. Moreover, the visible development of Pop art can bear further witness to this point.

## 1) The Mao Zedong motif and themes of the Cultural Revolution

The figure of Mao Zedong and images of the Cultural Revolution such as model operas and Red Guards easily arouse people's memories of the not-too-distant past. Although many artists did not necessarily originally intend to provoke people to simply criticize the past, their works could produce quick effect on the audience with the help of this type of image. Yu Youhan's method of placing flowers throughout [his works] *Mao Zedong Era, Portrait of Mao Zedong with Flower (Jia hua de Mao Zedong xiang)*, and *Great Beckoning (Da zhaoshou)* shares a certain similarity with Wang Guangyi's method of superimposing a grid in *Mao Zedong AC*, for they both create a certain effect of obstructing or blocking. Wang Ziwei's *Great Beckoning (1992)* uses bright, subjective colors and negative images to achieve a similar goal. The portraits of Mao Zedong that often appear in Li Shan's *Rouge (Yanzhi)* series incorporate the fluttering pink lotus blossom decorations of his earlier works to create a distant, mysterious visual effect; this precisely corroborates the author's statement that "here, sex and power construct a grand, sweeping, yet absurd scene."<sup>2</sup> In *Reference News (Cankao xiaoxi)*, Yang Guozhang uses screenprinting to arrange multiple portraits of Mao Zedong. This, combined with the use of different kinds of newspapers, produces an effect that simultaneously looks back on the past and exposes today's state of affairs. In Liu Dahong's *Sweet Day (Mi ri)* and *Model Opera (Banhua xi)*, through the figure of Mao Zedong and the [images of the] model operas, heroic personages of the past era are brought together and, like a kaleidoscope, exhibit a certain magical charm. With their cartoonlike sensibility, Gong Jiawei's *Happy Moment (Xingfu shike)* and *Invitation Song (Yao ge)* splice together dislocated images of the Red Guard and, not without mocking, depict a state of dislocation. Zhang Bin's *Model Opera (Banhua xi)* series also shares a similar cleverness.

In order to treat the dislocation of past eras, some painters have used "graffitilike" methods. For example, in their *Scribbles on Newspaper (Baozhi shang de tuxie)*, Shanghai's Yang Xu and Zhou Tiehai smeared images and popular slogans of the Cultural Revolution era over newspapers. Comparatively speaking, the use of images and slogans in Ye Yongqing's *Big Poster (Da zhaotie)* emphasized aspects of execution and tended toward a sort of "elegant roughness."



On the one hand, an artist's use of the figure of Mao Zedong and of images of the Cultural Revolution expresses a psychological complex related to the past; even more importantly, this constitutes a cultural declaration aimed at the contemporary societal environment. Such a manner of declaration draws on political metaphors, yet works that metaphorize politics are those that are most easily reproached. For the moment, we will not discuss the censure that comes from people of opposing political views. Rather, [we should note that] in the art world, people that champion the purity of art are also very influential. This, of course, is because, ideologically, the spiritual wounds that these artists evoke remain fresh in people's memories. In fact, our understanding of "politics" only as "ideology" is too one-sided. Metaphorization of politics is also a major trend in Western modern and postmodern art; however, they understand the meaning of "politics" to be much broader than we do. English Pop artist [Richard] Hamilton was once so moved by the arrest of members of the rock group The Rolling Stones on suspicion of dealing drugs that he created *Swingeing London*. Another artist, Joe Tilson, gave the title *Is This Che Guevara?* (Guevara, Cuban modern revolutionary hero — author's note) to a work that became famous in the 1960s. In today's Western art, labor-capital conflicts, the women's rights movement, the antinuclear movement, Greenpeace, election disputes, and environmental protection are all issues that can be included within the realm of politics. Western artists largely depict the attitudes of the artist-as-citizen toward societal life, as well as his desire to participate within it; people cherish their rights. Together with the gradual opening of society, modernization at both the material and the cultural level is causing people's attitudes to become more normal in China. The range of topics that artists choose for their works will continually expand. The development of Chinese Pop, in breadth and depth, will allow it to exceed its earlier, narrower relevance with regard to political thematics; and against this broader background, each will reveal its differences.

## 2) Themes of contemporary popular culture and commodity culture

Popular culture has broad parameters. It includes popular visual images, and it is a direct, surface-level manifestation of the mindset of society. Through reception, people are influenced by their surroundings, and often feel an intimacy toward celebrities, advertisements for goods, social praise, and even things that society has abandoned. This is precisely one of the reasons why artists choose such themes. But if [an artist] fails to move beyond "showing," then he loses [any sense of] his subjective understanding of society, as well as his function as a critic. Yet if [an artist] is too anxious to declare a position, then he necessarily weakens the purity of the work. Grasping the appropriate "degree" of the two is precisely the point at which the artist can make a breakthrough.

The themes of such Pop works are diverse. For example, in Ren Jian's Stamp Collecting series, even though the artist has attempted to depict "globalization's tendency to dispel national elements,"<sup>13</sup> the overall effect still employs the formal and stately images of stamps and national flags to express this sort of cultural "dispersal." Although Wang Guangyi's Great Criticism series primarily utilizes Cultural Revolution imagery, the appearance of foreign logos on the paintings frames the primary content of the works within the environment of contemporary commodity culture. Wang Ziwei's images of poker cards and certificates seem to joke with viewers, but his choice of these mediums clearly has a certain significance and a feeling that is difficult to express fully. Zhang Peili's *Chinese Bodybuilding—Expressions of 1989* appears rather reserved, and it seems to have reached a delicate point of agreement with popular commodity culture. In contrast, Li Bangyao's *Product Trust (Chanpin tuolasi)* is rather

frank: commodities fill the space, blanketing everything. People enjoy material abundance but must simultaneously pay the price of being enslaved to these material things. The title of the work does not cover anything up. Other [works] like Yang Guozhang's *Mrs. Lida Prepares Powdered Milk for Her Grandson* (*Lida shiren gei sunzi zhunbei naifen*), Shi Lei's *Prenatal Education—Pavarotti Who Forgot the Song Lyrics* (*Taijiao—wang le geci de Pawaluodi*), among others, all must face different contemporary issues. Fang Shaohua's *Wind from Eight Sides* (*Bamian laifeng*) has a more relaxed mood; the components of this kind of lightness largely derive from elements related to a literati frame of mind.

Another variety [of Pop art] that deals with popular culture starts with themes from historical tradition. A representative [example] is Wei Guangqing's Red Wall series. In the works, the sturdy, indestructible walls are combined with woodcut book illustrations like "Peaceful Doors to the House," "Flatter the Rich, Bully the Poor," and "Never Forget a Favor Received" [chosen from *Master Zhu's Maxims for Managing the Household* (*Zhuzi zhijiageyan*)]. Together, they represent tradition and a kind of ancient, unchanging meaning. The artist uses these images to point to the inveterate nature of these traditional concepts so deeply ingrained within the people's consciousness, and draws upon this to formulate a theme of rethinking and introspection.

An even younger generation has chosen [to make use of] images that are closer to their lifestyles. For example, in order to communicate feelings that are even more personal and direct, Gong Jiawei and Feng Mengbo both use video game images as their medium. At the level of popular culture, there are many themes that can be chosen, it is simply a question of "to what degree" they will be grasped.

Another impact of popular and commercial culture [can be seen in] Pop art's departure from the picture frame, as installation and performance art have risen to the top. After conducting their performance *Disinfecting* (*Xiaodu*) at the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair*, Ren Jian and several others planned an event called *China 1993 Big Consumer Products* (*Zhongguo 1993 da xiaofei*) [the actual title is *New History 1993 Big Consumer Products* (*Xin lishi 1993 da xiaofei*) — Ed.], thrusting images of national flags from earlier eras into society, creating an even broader social effect. About the intention behind this experiment, [Ren Jian] said: "1) [Let us] radically desublimize Pop art and make it an art of products of everyday consumption; 2) [let us] build an artistic language that is made completely quotidian, completely living, completely popular; 3) [let] artists, theorists, and entrepreneurs join hands, do solid work, and change the means of artistic and societal effectiveness." One should say that these means of penetrating into commerce possessed a much stronger, more defiant significance than that of flat, framed Pop, which was inherently mild and risked little; too, [these new means] better accorded with Pop's popularized, consumerist nature. Another artist, Sun Ping, conducted an activity in which he sold stocks [*Issuing Shares* (*Faxing gupiao*)] during the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* and the *Art Research Documents Exhibition*, which was another meaningful experiment in which Pop moved from text to action.

Compared with Pop tendencies of a political nature, Pop experiments that attend to popular culture and commodity culture seem to possess a much broader social foundation as well as a greater possibility to produce results. Looking at the spiritual tendencies that such works reflect, the allegorical nature of Pop art is quite evident, which, of course, is consistent with the mentality that Chinese avant-garde artists have held all along. Actually, Pop art not only has the function of allegorizing and criticizing societal pop culture, but it also ought to possess a comprehensive position. The contemporary English critic [Edward] Lucie-Smith once said: "Pop art also is very

complimentary. Artists like the society that they depict — the delights for contemplation that it gives them. They like it because it represents the many special traits that they love in the surrounding culture: its speed, its energy, its libido, its zeal for the new and novel.<sup>44</sup> With regard to this, the Chinese Pop tendencies of today are already revealing certain new inclinations. For example, certain artists' depictions of video games betray a sort of relaxed attitude. Cultural developments during the Han Dynasty allowed the scope and spread of information to far exceed traditional criteria of good and evil and standards of aesthetic judgment; this act of stepping beyond past standards must have been built on artists' systems of knowledge, the breadth of their interests, and the degree of their sensitivity to the time period. Of course, given that intellectuals always unconsciously assume the post of society's conscience, as far as artists and intellectuals are concerned, the right for artwork to reveal the details of life and the absurdity of reality is eternal. We simply hope that in the midst of transforming society, the spiritual tendencies of artists and artworks can and must enrich all things.

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#### Notes

1. *Dangdai yishu chaoliu zhong de Wang Guangyi* [Wang Guangyi amid the Currents of Contemporary Art] (Sichuan meishu chubanshe), 16, 82.
2. See Li Shan, "Yanzhi xilie yu wo" ["The Rouge Series and Me,"] in *Yishu chaoliu* [Art Trends] no. 2 (1993).
3. Gong Ke, "Shijimo — zuowei fuchanpin Jiyou" ["End of the Century: Stamp Collecting as a By-Product"] in *Dangdai yishu* [Contemporary Art] no. 1 (1993) (Hunan meishu chubanshe).
4. [Edward] Lucie-Smith, *Western Contemporary Art*.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Zhongguo bopu qingxiang" in *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo meishu 1990–1992* [1990s Chinese Art, 1990–1992], ed. Zhang Qing (Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts and Photography Publishing House, 1996), 90–97. Translated by Phillip Bloom.

## A SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PERFORMANCE ART (1999)

By Gao Ling

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### II. PERFORMANCE ART AS OBJECTIFICATION

Since its inception, the rise, dissemination, and development of 1990s performance art in China have followed a path from performance based on conceptual objectification to performance centered on conditions of existence. Performance art by Chen Shaoxiong, Sun Ping, and the Lanzhou Art Legion have yet to demonstrate a linguistic breakthrough. They reveal, instead, an objectification of the artists' subjective attitudes and ideas concerning social and cultural phenomena. This marks [only] the first step after breaching the limits of lending linguistic expression to static, two-dimensional planes and objects. These are amplified by artists into dynamic and multifaceted elements from nature and society — both intangible and tangible — such as people, facilities, objects, social relations, and so on. Through this art form, artists' mental concepts are consigned to objects outside of themselves (these objects entail all of the social and natural factors stated above). This is primarily evident in the practice and development of performance art between 1993 and 1994.

Two performances, *Countryside Project 1993* (*Xiangcun jihua 1993*) and *New History 1993 Big Consumer Products* (*Xin lishi 1993 da xiaofei*), are representative of this period. Since October 1992, Song Yongping from Shanxi and Wang Yazhong, Liu Chun, and Liu Chunsheng, among other artists from Taiyuan, were determined to find a starting point

for an artistic revival. They felt that intellectual circles in the early 1990s suffered from an excessively self-indulgent cosmopolitan malaise and tended to be overly obsessed with Western rules of engagement. This generated in them an intense desire to return to the native roots of their lives and the essential nature of art. They made plans, raised funds, and bid adieu to the glamour of city life. In the spring of 1993, they left for the remote and impoverished village of Xijucha in Liulin County in Shanxi's Luliang region. They set up their easels on the villagers' *kang* [heatable brick beds] and painted directly in order to ignite their most primitive creative passions. Their activities in the countryside differed from routine sketching trips in that their work did not attempt to re-create rural life, but rather reflected their mentalities, as contemporary people, within a certain cultural environment. Thus, it was precisely rural life that became a restorative measure to help them recover their self-consciousness, natural feelings, and state of mind. They found fertile soil in which to plant a spiritual center of support. Afterward, they printed a collection of written reports, photographs, and documents of their activities, and even produced a documentary film. Along with the artwork that they created in the village, they held an exhibition at the National Art Gallery and China Daily Gallery titled *Countryside Project 1993* from August 20 to 26, 1993. From Song Yongping and other artists' plans to paint in the rural countryside to the extension, transformation, variation, and enrichment of this original artistic concept, a piece of performance art eventually took shape, encompassing both the created artwork as well as unexpected events. For example, the National Art Gallery announced the closing of the exhibition on the very afternoon of its opening. The next day, Song Yongping publicly shaved his hair and beard in the gallery. It is not difficult to see that the subjective structure of the performance was a series of acts extending and transforming the artists' conflicts with commercial culture; these activities are performances of objectification.

After the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*), and alongside profound sociopolitical changes, the state of Chinese art started to exhibit post-ideological symptoms. The full-scale expansion of the market economy propelled unprecedented social, economic, and cultural transformations. The social problems confronting art, and the cultural responsibility it assumed, underwent clear shifts as well. Precisely at this moment, around May 1992, the New History Group (*Xin lishi xiaozu*) was formally founded in Wuhan, consisting of Ren Jian, Yu Hong, Zhang Sanxi, Zhou Xiping, Wang Yubei, Ye Shuanggui, Zhu Xikun, Daozi, and Fu Zhongwang. In October, at the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* (*Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan*), its members acted as custodial workers, sprayed the floor with Lysol, and scrubbed the artworks in the exhibition hall, making the space smell like a hospital. Before and after their acts they handed out a folder labeled "Disinfecting" (*Xiaodu*) that contained flyers such as "Synopsis of the Biennial's Academic Symposium," "Reports of Evaluation and Selection," as well as notes, announcements, and acknowledgments. This "disinfecting" performance was not intended as a mockery of the market manipulation of art, but rather signaled the New History Group's attempt to dispel Chinese art of the lingering effects of the previous ideology. They were preparing a clean slate for the birth of post-ideological art. One of the most noted features of post-ideological art is that it does not exclude market manipulation, and instead promotes an integration between art and the processes of social life. It stands against the view that considers art to be a mere reflection or criticism of ideologies, and the postcolonial cultural mentality that such a mode provokes.

Having finished the "disinfecting" performance, the New History Group launched another experiment of post-ideological art in an attempt to construct a new humanist

art. This was implemented in their *New History 1993 Big Consumer Products*. They were convinced that Chinese society in the 1990s had marched into an era of great consumption. In order to secure a place of relevancy in such an era, art had to enter life, become products, be consumed, and consume everyone in turn. This concept considers artworks as products, set to adjust the entire process of art creation to that of production and circulation. As a product, the artwork is created, transformed, and dissolved within the process of circulation. In other words, the relationship among artists, work, and spectator overlaps and intersects with that among producer, product, and consumer. The artist is no longer a pure artist because he needs to act out a variety of roles in the circulation process; artwork is no longer unique, but can be mass-produced; the spectator is no longer passive, but an active user. Thus, art-as-product thoroughly deconstructs aesthetic non-utilitarianism; art is no longer for art's sake, but returns to the material itself. Hence, art returns to life, and enters plebian dimensions. The members of the group went to factories to transform their respective artistic ideas from the two-dimensional picture plane into three-dimensional industrial products. Ren Jian made large quantities of *Stamp Collecting Jeans (Jiyou niuzai fu)* and *Stamp Collecting Printed Fabric (Jiyou dahuabu mianliao)*; Zhou Xiping made a Grand Portrait series (*Da xiaoxiang xilie*) featuring portraits of twelve noted entrepreneurs as advertisements; Liang Xiaochuan made ceramic artillery shells, while Ye Shuanggui's Grand Ceramics series (*Dao taoyi xilie*) transformed three-dimensional pottery objects into two-dimensional paper cut-outs and movable cartoon greeting cards, using the forms of world-renowned ceramic works and a simple decorative motif based on contemporary cartoons. After half a year of negotiation, these works/products were scheduled to be exhibited at the McDonald's in Beijing's Wangfujing on April 28, 1993. But, the exhibition was closed and censored by the police on the evening of April 27. According to Ren Jian in a later account: "During the fifteen days around this exhibition I encountered many problems of a political, personal, business, and artistic nature. I was extremely exhausted. Having my creativity truncated was one of the most painful experiences in my artistic career." Between June and September of the same year, Ren Jian's *Stamp Collecting Jeans* were on sale in Wuhan's department stores and expos. Many pedestrians were seen wearing the jeans in Wuhan. It seems the two cities, Beijing and Wuhan, harbored completely different attitudes toward artists' groups and their performances aimed at "transferring" art to life. In conjunction with the experiences of Shanxi's *Countryside Project* group in Beijing, it is not difficult to see that artistic ideas and concepts often face a profound dilemma once they depart from the conventional easel form and enter into the processes of daily social life: either artists completely surrender their own artistic ideas to cater to the practical needs of society, market, and authority, or they choose to interact only with a small like-minded group, forfeiting communication with the masses. Therefore, if artists choose social-life processes as their channel to turn artwork into objects and products, the activities intended to dominate and control the production process of their work are necessarily under the purview of social laws and regulations. In reality, for such performances, one must carefully deliberate and prepare for how to coordinate social regulations, laws, and public acceptance and how to utilize and elevate them through the artists' own practice. Presently in China, it is hardly possible for performance art to assume a grand public scale facing social reality and its regulations without undermining its own artistic concepts.

Because of so many obstacles and difficulties, '93 *Zheng Lianjie Simatai Great Wall Performance Art (93 Zheng Lianjie Simatai changcheng xingwei yishu)*, considered one of the larger-scale solo performance art pieces of the 1990s, was located at the Simatai

region of the Great Wall, at the border between Beijing and Hebei, a hundred kilometers away from Beijing. Independent artist Zheng Lianjie, the chief engineer and principal performer, created and completed performance and installation work based on four themes — *Grand Explosion (Da baozha)*, *Black Cola (Heise kele)*, *Door God (Menshen)*, *Lost Memory (Mishi de jiyi)* — along the unbroken stretch of the Great Wall, atop its debris-strewn summit, and with the participation of noted photographers, writers, poets, journalists, amateur artists, college students, international friends, and local villagers. In *Grand Explosion*, with the cooperation of more than fifty villagers in five days, Zheng used a strip of red cloth more than three hundred meters long to bind tens of thousands of broken bricks found scattered along the Great Wall, and paved them on a two-hundred-meter stretch of the Wall that spanned three beacon towers. It was duly recognized as the most time- and labor-intensive, physically consuming, and arduous performance in contemporary Chinese art. Zheng believes that "performance art can directly influence the spirit of the era and the people because it communicates through the language of the human body and specific mediums to produce intense visual effects. I chose the Great Wall as the location and medium of my performance art not just because of its iconic status, but even more so due to its open and expansive natural environment. Here, I felt the continuity of tradition and the future — the 'energy field' that is lacking in the urbanization process — which is invaluable for the emancipation of one's soul."<sup>1</sup>

Implementing one's artistic ideas in the fields, woods, and rivers far away from the city allows for the distinct advantage of avoiding artificial interferences and social constraints. However, while embracing the natural scenery, one also risks neglecting the visual stimulation and inspiration of the performance and instead becoming blindly obsessed with transforming the grandiose landscape. This leads to a slippery slope, threatening to slide into the domain of Land art (or Earth art). However, Zheng Lianjie managed to keep control and maintain the orientation of the work — to reflect the chaotic mentality of modern man and the search for the lost souls — without sacrificing the richness and the impact of the visual language. (In *Black Cola* he climbed a ladder stark naked — defying the gravity of the commercialized world — above a ground covered by disposable cola cups; in *Lost Memory* he bound his whole body with black cloth, leaving only his lips exposed, gasping for breath. Both were intense and enlightening acts during the Simatai performance.) Strictly speaking, this performance contained both the general objectification of ideas into organized activities that incorporated many people, the location, and the landscape, and the subjective participation and coordination of the artist's own body language. Therefore, it is a performance that is both generally intangible and partially tangible. In particular, Zheng's naked act in *Black Cola* was one of the first body art performances in the 1990s.

Between 1993 and 1994, other performances similar to the above-mentioned appeared, all trying to objectify concepts into external social activities, for example, the works of Wang Jianwei, Song Dong, Huang Yan, Geng Jianyi, Ni Weihua, and others. In October 1993, Wang Jianwei went to his home village Unit One in Wenjiang County's Yongquan Township, located at the outskirts of Chengdu in Sichuan Province. He signed a contract with farmer Wang Yun to plant one *mu* (Chinese acre) of wheat for a season, and to observe and record the comprehensive system of the planting process, in order to prove the concept that all information in this world (including that which is tangible, natural, and physically exists, as well as spiritual consciousness, which is unnatural and intangible) is within the continuous cycle of input and output. As a consequence, this performance was titled *Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting (Xunhuan — zhongzhi)*. It was said that under the collaborative efforts

of the artist and the farmer, the land yielded 700 *jin* of grain. Also in October 1993, Geng Jianyi invited twenty interested spectators to fill out the questionnaire form called *Marriage Law (Hunyinfa)* in a classroom in Moganshan Middle School in Hangzhou, but none of them could complete all the entries. Many thought that this event was more like an examination, and it sparked a debate on law, marriage, and family. Ni Weihua, in the same year, in Shanghai executed an event titled *Continuously Diffusing the State of Affairs, No. 2 — '93 Placard (Lianxu kuasan shitai xilie zhi er — '93 zhaotie xingwei)*, modeled after popular street advertisements. However, the text on these posters — which were usually reserved for missing persons ads, want ads, advertisements for curing sexual diseases, wanted posters, etc. — was arranged according to an errant logical sequence. The text, which was input using a single-byte character set, was structured according to normal line and paragraph formatting, but because of the "displaced" characters was completely illegible. These "displaced posters" were posted everywhere and were tracked and videotaped to record pedestrians' reactions. Starting from May 25, 1993, the artist Huang Yan from Changchun formulated a ten-year plan to make rubbings of parts of buildings from a variety of periods and styles that were scheduled for demolition. This long-term performance was named *Collection Series — Demolished Buildings (Shoucang xilie chaiqian jianzhu)*. On April 6, 1994, Song Dong had a groundbreaking exhibition event called *One More Lesson, Do You Want to Play with Me? (You yi tang ke, ni yuanyi gen wo wan ma?)* in the gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. The gallery was transformed into a classroom, where middle school exam papers covered the walls and floor. There was also a sink, faucet, and paper strips as metaphors for the influx and flow of information. The artist himself instructed a group of middle school students to read "wordless textbooks" in a serious manner. It was an obvious satire on current educational methods. This event was canceled by the Academy within a half hour of its opening, citing three reasons: it was thought to be frivolous, agitating, and destabilizing.

Performance art that objectifies concepts and ideas into social, interpersonal, natural, tangible or intangible events and relationships, is not measured by its scale, but how the artist's personal concepts interact with public discourse or even governmental mechanisms, how they influence and mobilize all kinds of conventional social and human norms to serve the realization of their ideas. It does not matter whether the performance happens in the city or in the country, whether it has a public audience or is performed for a private circle. In this regard, Di Naizhuang's *Walk Red (Zou hong)* event is a controversial example. In 1992, Di launched an event to unfurl ten thousand red umbrellas; the event lasted three to four years and traveled to public spaces in many Chinese cities, ultimately involving more than five million participants. It also attracted continuous press attention and became the subject of hundreds of news items, which in turn reached an audience of four hundred million. Most of the people in the art world and academia believed it was a very successful social performance art piece. By penetrating into society, it effectively changed contemporary Chinese art's usual separatist stance. But, there were also many who criticized it as a misappropriation of Christo's yellow [and blue] umbrella land art and lacking the critical creativity of a cultural concept. In his own defense, Di held that society is made up of a number of programs and procedures that control people's behavior and language. If artistic creation can be used not only to express visual language, but also to design social programs, artists can formulate programs and procedures that are symmetrical to the structure and "standards" of social reality. They can integrate their artwork into the corresponding social schemas, and eventually have their own projected "image" emerge within society. To this end, Di posited the concept of "post-visibility," an

attempt to transfer visual images from isolated conditions of aesthetic appreciation to a position within a comprehensive program that would follow tangible beauty to create a grander intangible beauty. The controversy surrounding Di's project touched on the problems that performance art centered on objectification encounters in Chinese reality. It draws a line between two different understandings of it that can only be tested and verified through practice.

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**Note**

1. Cited in "To Bind Lost Souls" (Dialogue between Gao Ling and Zheng Lianjie), published in *Hong Kong 1990s Monthly* (April 1995).

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Zhongguo dangdai xingwei yishu kaocha baogao" in *Jinri xianfeng* [*Avant-Garde Today*], 1999: no. 7, 62–68. Translated by Yinxing Liu.

## MAJOR TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART OF THE MID- TO LATE 1990S

**T**hroughout the 1980s, Chinese avant-garde artists and critics habitually called the newly emerging contemporary art "modern" (*xiandai*), a term which readily identified them as participants in a delayed modernization project. During the 1990s and especially from 1994 onward, however, many of them preferred the term "contemporary art" (*dangdai yishu*) or "experimental art" (*shiyan yishu*) instead. Rather than a simple alteration in terminology, this change indicated a major shift in conceptualization: if the notion of "modern" is temporal and diachronic, then that of "contemporary" is spatial and synchronic. Not coincidentally, it was exactly during this period that new Chinese art became a branch of international contemporary art. While a considerable number of leading Chinese artists emigrated to the West and Japan, those who remained at home also had increasing opportunities to travel to overseas exhibitions and workshops. Contemporary Chinese art was no longer a purely domestic phenomenon, but began to develop in different places and contexts.

The concept of "experimental" had broad implications at this time. The 1980s "avant-garde art" (*qianwei yishu*) had been strongly political; but in the 1990s artists experimented with everything from medium, style, and content to the systems of exhibition, education, and the market. Underlying this range of experiments was an intensified search for *contemporaneity* (*dangdai xing*), understood as the intentional construct of a particular subjectivity. To achieve this, the artists bestowed the present with individualized contemporary references, languages, and points of view.

The documents in this section are mainly written by artists and reflect experiments in five areas: (1) self-identity, gender, and historical memory; (2) China's social and urban transformation; (3) emerging fields of photography, video, and multimedia art; (4) art by overseas Chinese artists; and (5) debate on the use of animals and the human body in making art. These original proposals demonstrate that fifteen years after its inception, contemporary Chinese art had now developed into a mature field energized by creativity and inventiveness.



## Identity and Experience

A crucial aspect of 1990s contemporary Chinese art is a serious probing into the notion of the self. Beginning with Cynical Realism and throughout the 1990s, many self-portraits showed a voluntary ambiguity in the artist's self-image, as if the best way to realize individuality was to make themselves simultaneously visible and invisible. Paintings by Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, and Zeng Fanzhi, among others, expressed heightened anxiety about the possibility of maintaining an authentic self in a rapidly changing society.

Body-oriented performance art thrived in the mid-1990s and was most intensely conducted in the so-called East Village near Beijing. Dealing with similar issues about the self, Ma Liuming invented a female alter ego, Fen-Ma Liuming, as the central character in his/her performances. Masochistic endurance is a trademark of Zhang Huan's art: as he states in the document translated below, through the simulated self-sacrifice in the performance *65 Kg* he explored his inner potential. Also during this period, the definition of the artist's self was extended to include his or her cultural background, education, and memory. Works created in this vein often simultaneously examine selfhood and deconstruct historical authority. Qiu Zhijie's *Assignment No. 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times* can be considered a postmodern deconstruction of the art of calligraphy, the core of China's literati culture and an art form that Qiu had studied from childhood. Zhang Xiaogang, conversely, invested his *Big Family* series with memories of the Cultural Revolution. Inspired by old photos, he explored deeply the dialectic between collectivity and personhood in Chinese society.

One of the most important events in Chinese art around the mid-1990s was the birth of feminist art criticism and related exhibitions and publications. In her 1994 article "Walking out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critique," the critic Xu Hong sharply criticized the Chinese art world as "a narcissistic abyss of homogeneous magnetism" dominated by men. She challenged both female and male artists to emerge from this abyss, because, in her words, "modern art, without sober and self-knowledgeable feminist art, is only a half-baked modern art." Following her call, a heated discussion unfolded around feminist art and aesthetics; and several large exhibitions of works by women artists were organized in the following years. Around the same time, artists such as Yin Xiuzhen and Lin Tianmiao created installations with a distinct female sensibility, adding a new dimension to enrich contemporary Chinese art.

### Self

#### A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF *65 KG* (1994/2000)

By Zhang Huan

I remember it was in December 1993 that I had the idea for the *65 Kg* experiment. On a day no different from any other, I was alone, partially lying on my bed in the deep of the night, my mind in an agitated daze. It was pitch-black outside; occasionally I could hear the sound of dogs barking. The lamp at the head of my bed illuminated the framework of the angled iron rafter beams in a peculiar way, and their shadows were mysteriously projected across the ceiling like some kind of perilous and disastrous omen. Facing upward, I gazed at the single most important horizontal rafter beam supporting my studio. Looking



Zhang Huan. *65 Kg.* 1994. Color photograph of performance, 40 × 60" (101.6 × 152.4 cm)

at it. . . . I already began to have fantastic ideas, seeing the rafter beam as a "hammock" suspended in the air. Thus, the idea of relaxing on this "hammock" was born.

Originally, I had wanted to use iron chains to hang my naked body parallel to the iron rafters, with my suspended body facing the floor. I would experience that state for as long as I could, enduring it for as long as I could hold out, and when I could no longer handle it, friends would take me off the rafter, at which point the work would be over. I entertained a momentary thought of hanging from the rafter face-to-face with a woman and conducting the project together, but I quickly decided against that idea.

Later, I added new content to my initial concept: drawing 250 milliliters of my blood and distributing it in drops over 100 white cotton-padded mattresses. Two days before the performance I decided against this. In the end, I decided to drip the entire 250 milliliters onto a large medical pan, below which would be installed an electric hotplate. In this way, this performance as a work of art was even closer to me, more pure, and more rational. At the same time, it would also bring olfactory sensations into the work, without which the work might have appeared differently.

The total area of my studio was approximately 32 square meters, it was 6.5 meters long, 5.5 meters wide, and 5 meters high. The iron rafter was 3 meters away from the floor. Of the one hundred cotton mattresses, eighteen were spread precisely on the floor with a distance of 3 centimeters between them. Twenty mattresses were neatly piled together like a twin-sized bed, set up parallel to and just below my body. After that, the electric hotplate and pan were placed in a central location on the "twin-sized bed." The remaining cotton mattresses were all placed at the wall behind my feet, neatly piled up against the wall. To bind my body I used ten iron chains, a leather belt for my head, a wooden plank measuring 175 by 50 centimeters, and two ladders. The temperature that day was 32° Celsius. These were the basic tools and conditions of the performance.

On the day before the performance, I did some necessary trials, resulting in the discovery that some of the details were not at all what I had imagined. I could barely lie facing down on the iron chains for a few seconds: my head and body were slipping toward the ground. Later, I added four more chains, fixing their location and applying some talcum powder, this was the only way that I could strain to hang for a longer period of time. The trial lasted about five minutes. This way, I had some grasp of the performance. Sometimes trials are necessary, otherwise on the day of the performance

there will be unanticipated problems or accidental occurrences during the course of the work. Perhaps in this particular circumstance, there could have been difficulties drawing blood or I could have gone into shock midway through, and the authorities might have prematurely stopped the performance, which would all have resulted in failure. At the time, I was mentally confident that I was in excellent form and entirely capable of executing the work smoothly. During the course of its execution I was nonetheless unexpectedly treated to some intuitive experiences. At the time, I was completely enshrouded by the smell of burning blood, and this unbearable odor filled the entire space. Blood and sweat dripped endlessly, and because the upper torso is where the body's weight is concentrated, my chest was the most painful place and in pain for the longest time. My two hands were numb to the point that they were unresponsive, each finger felt bloated ten times its size; my body increasingly ached to change position, but that only amplified the pain. Finally, it proved best to not move, my whole body and mind were engrossed with experiencing each part of the body, for each second. Approximately one hour passed from the beginning to the conclusion of the work, until I felt I could no longer stand it. It was endless; time all but congealed. In the few minutes before the work concluded I was enduring, experiencing the authentic existence of adaptability and endurance.

I believe that *65 Kg* was completed successfully; everything seemed like providence, and it was executed without a hitch. As an artist, it is important to use your own standards in choosing things, and to do things that you are most interested in and most familiar with according to your personal circumstances, to continuously discover the insignificant aspects of everyday objects, and then to use your own means to bring them into art.

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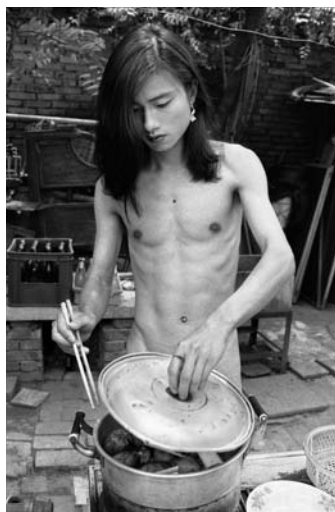
— Originally published as "Guanyu *65 Kg* de zishu" in Leng Lin, *Shi wo [It's Me]* (Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing, 2000), 150–52. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

## FOUR NOTES (1994)

By Ma Liuming

In *Something Happened*, Joseph Heller wrote, "I think that maybe in every company today there is always at least one person who is going crazy slowly."

In today's society in which nothing can surprise people, artistic form has already developed to its limits and artists have performed acts of self-injury, masochism, and even suicide. Despite all of this, I still believe that art, especially Conceptual art, has not yet met the kind of finality that people have predicted. The real future of Conceptual art lies in its reverent mentality, in the maturity of the work's concept, and in the fineness of its clear and creative direction.




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Ma Liuming, *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II*, June 12, 1994. Black-and-white photograph of performance. Collection the artist

The concept of "mid-sex" (*zhongxing*) aims to reveal this kind of awkward circumstance: people's judgments of others are based on clothing and other so-called cultural attributes, and not on the actual person. The manner in which material objects are treated often indicates the manner in which we treat the spirit.

The person positioned in a concrete situation — in spirit and flesh — is himself already an outstanding work of art. The reason I select this particular style or medium is because I believe that it is the only real option.

When I play a role, I am completely immersed in it.

To the artist, any artistic performance is like a member of the opposite sex who is familiar yet also a stranger. The two carefully examine one another.

Art and artists should share a relationship like "lovers." Art should constitute an important component upon which the spiritual life of the artist relies.

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— Originally published as "Biji siti" in *Heipishu [Black Cover Book]* ed. Zeng Xiaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, with Feng Boyi (Beijing: privately published, 1994), 35. Translated by Kristen Loring.

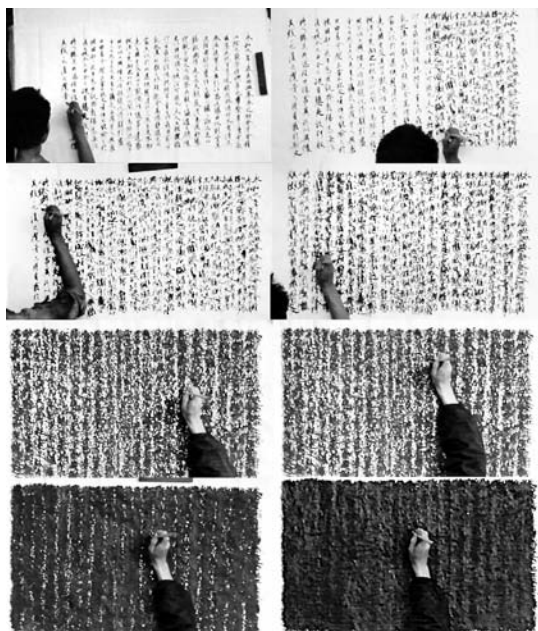
## **THE BOUNDARY OF FREEDOM: A PERSONAL STATEMENT ON ASSIGNMENT NO. 1 (ZUOYE YIHAO) (1994/2003)**

By Qiu Zhijie

Since 1990, I have been influenced by the Fluxus movement and concerned about the issue of time in the production of the plastic arts. Along with this, I call the group of performances [that I executed] concerning process in art the Assignment series (*Zuoye xilie*).

I initially launched an archaeological study of the principles of calligraphy, using an approach like peeling an onion to gradually remove the insubstantial elements of traditional calligraphy. The first item to eliminate was the literary nature of calligraphy in order to return calligraphy to its original activity of modeling or, specifically, composing ink traces, to arrive at pure visual abstraction. The second step was to return writing to the original act of writing itself without producing the formal traces of the brush. In abandoning these formal traces, one listens attentively to how the activity of writing is guided by the subject: writing is the excuse for the writer's tiny dances of the brush; the primary value of the subject is ultimately achieved in the disappearance of its formal traces. Repetitive writing on an ink background strictly observes the classical standards of Chinese calligraphy and strengthens its innate meaning as a form of "written meditation." The daily repetition of this activity turns part of the calligrapher's life into play. The insipid re-creation of playing further stimulates the transformation of the individual state of the writer. Thus, the act of writing the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (*Lanting xu*) a thousand times, in terms of its medium, is a return to the original mode of Chinese calligraphy and not an innovation in any sense.

For the classical literati, calligraphy was never a cause for establishing oneself, yet it reveals the temperaments of their lives. Within the classical forms of calligraphy, the original hand of the literatus is a kind of measure of one's artistic identity and attainment of internal perfection. For this reason, the text of the *Orchid Pavilion* is presented as an unsurpassed classic that epitomizes the value of a certain unself-conscious, care-free spirit that ultimately denies formal elaboration. As a verb, writing does not denominate a particular thing, but rather is a recollection of a certain state of the body and soul. Through reconstructing this state, the practice of calligraphy has been simplified into copying characters, so that the marks of the ink are simply created by blind



Qiu Zhijie. *Assignment No. 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times.* 1990–95. Single-channel video and ink on paper, paper 29½ × 59" (75 × 150 cm). Collection Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong

movements of the brush tip, and the ink traces change from the purpose of writing to the consequence of writing. In this way, writing becomes an endless self-investigation into the limits of the imagination. This investigation causes one to forget the routines of daily life and almost entails a slight mania. This marks an escape from the excessive sense of purpose in modern affairs and, therefore, relates to imagination.

Thus, what is actually unpacked is a flexible understanding of information in the act of writing. Again and again, information copies itself and is unceasingly lost amid infinite multiplications; this is addition and subtraction existing in the same hermaphroditic body. Within this concentration of tightly knit forms, each individual calligraphic shape becomes invisible, and, ultimately, all these forms become invisible. Qualitative changes within the forms of the writing process are guided by the restless movement of information. The flexibility in understanding raised by this existing dual-directionality actually produces the impossibility of understanding: only after the formal traces are concealed will the image of calligraphy itself appear. If there are no formal traces of writing, only then will a consciousness of classical standards truly attain clarity. The existence of these rules indicates the basic function of art: to divide life into goal-oriented work and insight-oriented work; divided between rationality and non-rationality. The subject, in its pursuit of rules, proposes self-positioning as a kind of necessary death, a foothold for rethinking imagination. At this time, writing the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* a thousand times is proof of the ontology of art.

One thousand is a random target [number] that I chose. In terms of function, the number may be arbitrarily extended or combined.

The selection of *Orchid Pavilion* does not stem from a special recognition or feeling toward the culture of the motherland. This work was selected for its famous name. Because the corpse of an acquaintance is more captivating than that of a stranger, it further recalls the conduct exemplified during the life of the deceased.

— Published as "Guanyu Zuoye yihao de ziwu chenshu" in *Ziyou de youxianxing* [*The Boundary of Freedom*] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2003), 293–94. Translated by Kristen Loring.

**REPORT FROM THE ARTIST'S STUDIO (1996)** [pl. 24]

Interviewer: Huang Zhuan

Interviewee: Zhang Xiaogang

Date: August 2, 1996

Place: Shaziyan, Chengdu City

**Huang Zhuan:** *Big Family (Da jiating)* signals a fundamental change in your work since the *Chinese Experience* exhibition (*Zhongguo jingyan zhan*). The charcoal-like painting technique and the typical Chinese group portrait format provide a new iconography for the visual style and mode of meaning for contemporary Chinese art. Did this change happen mainly at the conceptual or linguistic level? What does it signify?

**Zhang Xiaogang:** Thank you for your high opinion of my recent work. I think these past few years have been perhaps the most awkward time for Chinese artists. At present, as various artistic styles have become saturated, we have never felt so keenly the importance of making a choice, a choice that often itself reflects some personal artistic sense. Meanwhile, what else is left for painting to do today? If we consider the matter from the "revolutionary" perspective of material and style, painting perhaps really has nowhere left to go. The meaning of "avant-garde" seems to have become something forced upon painting against its will. After entering "postmodernism," easel painting has again become involved as if to dissolve the "revolutionariness" of the "avant-garde" as well as providing new fodder for international art circles. If examined from the angle of visual language and concepts, what painting can still do, or should do, is consider how to change the conventional mode of painting language to express a contemporary feeling. In other words, painting will no longer enter the arena under the "identity of painting," but reinvent itself as a visual mode to express ideas that can intervene in contemporary issues. As far as I am concerned, the key point that I have to grasp is not to paint according to the "standard of painting." This might be seen as a failure or a mistake according to convention, but I intend to put the "failure" to work in order to achieve a purity of sensations. This is perhaps one of the basic reasons why I use charcoal-like rendering and the group portrait format as the important reference points for my painting. Besides, I always feel that when an artist is creating a work, it is very difficult for him to think dualistically about concept and language. It is impossible for an artist to be a philosopher first, and then search for certain art forms to substitute for his concepts. People may often share similar concepts, but there are big differences in their feel for language. I believe that painting ultimately still rests on a linguistic level, which enables us to make proper judgments regarding the proficiency and profundity of expression. In other words, what matters to artists is what kind of language they authentically have a feeling for and whether they have entered a desirable linguistic state. To me it is far from sufficient if a work is merely conceptual symbols. I think concepts and language often emerge simultaneously; sometimes the feeling for a certain language even triggers the recognition and determination of an idea. It is through such a process of give and take between the two that their culmination is gradually reached. Specifically speaking, I began to paint "family portraits" in 1993 because I was moved by old photographs. It is hard for me to explain which nerve of my soul was touched by these carefully polished old pictures. They stirred random recollections. I could not let go of them. After a while, I gradually realized that in those standardized portraits, besides the historical background behind the pictures, what touched me was precisely the formulaic "polished-ness" about them. It embodies an age-old, particular aesthetic of Chinese

popular culture, namely indistinct individuality, a "poetic" beauty of gender neutrality, etc. Moreover, family portraits should be categorized as symbols of privacy, but they have instead been standardized and turned into ideology. As we are keenly aware of in reality, we truly all live in a "big family." In this "family" we need to learn how to face all kinds of "bloodline" relationships: familial, social, and cultural. Through all kinds of "heredity," the idea of "collectivism" has in fact already burrowed deep into our consciousness and formed a certain unshakable complex. In this "family" where both standardization and privacy convene, we counterbalance each other, dissolve each other, and depend on each other. This ambiguous "familial" relationship became a theme that I wanted to express. In my specific approach, I tried to highlight the "retouching" process, and I had to stay on the surface of a certain mental state, repetitively drawing formulaic and "beautiful" faces one after another. The surface is as tranquil as water, but all kinds of internal complexes swarm underneath.

**Huang:** How did you choose your pictures for *Big Family*? How did you create them step-by-step?

**Zhang:** In the beginning I was somewhat faithful to the things I got from the original pictures, including different images of people and details of the apparel. Since 1994, I have realized that I only need to paint "one person." It could be a man or a woman, defined only by the hairstyle and clothes. In this way the theme of "family" and sense of gender neutrality are better highlighted. So from then on the photographs only provided a reference for composition and ambience. I divided photographs into "family portraits," "comrades' portraits," "lovers' portraits," and "standard portraits," and then used one person's face as a model and repeated it on different paintings. Some call me an "anti-painting" painter and an "anti-portrait" portraitist, and such an impression is perhaps based on precisely this reproduction of a lifeless state. Some have suggested that I should adopt other methods to achieve the effect of precise reproduction, but I prefer the feeling of "deviation" created by manual painting, because in this way a sense of "inbreeding" is intensified. In order to create an illusory and cool detachedness and aloofness, I have to follow very strict steps: first I must flatly brush on very thin colors layer after layer, and each layer is a repetition of the previous layer. On average a face needs four to five layers. Finally, I use very dry colors to paint the light spots on the face, which creates a contrast between the two textures. To sum up, what I have done in these years in terms of painting has been a constant "reduction," abandoning almost once and for all certain "painterly effects" that used to intoxicate me into self-complacency. My painting methods can be said to be very plain, and I do not seek some unique "specialized skill" to call my own, because what I value is the quality of the painting surface, and I really do not set out to be a "good painter."

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— Excerpted from an interview with Zhang Xiaogang by Huang Zhuan, originally published as "Yishujia gongzuoshi baogao" in *Hualang* [Art Gallery] 1996: no. 5/6, 8–10. Translated by Yinxing Liu.

**PREFACE TO *IT'S ME! (SHI WO!)* (1998 / 2000)**

By Leng Lin

The exhibition *It's Me!* is conceived based on observations of the following two conditions of contemporary Chinese art:

First, from the early 1990s, contemporary Chinese art has been closely associated with artists' images of self [pls. 20, 23, 25]. This is partly due to the widening gaps among artists, critics, and the art management during the 1990s, and partly due to artists' isolated penetration into the international art scenes. With an unimaginable speed, Chinese artists have begun to traverse their own national border to participate in the process of globalization. This has caused subtle yet substantial changes in artists' relationships with their regional reality. While artists during the 1980s willingly assumed the burden of regional history and social responsibility, artists of the 1990s have instead been trying to join the globalization process, and, as a result, have been rediscovering and reaffirming their self-identity in a global sphere. In Chinese art of this period, we find a great many self-referential expressions by artists. Such expressions can be considered, on the one hand, as an instinctive reaction against the pressures of globalization. On the other hand, they also reflect a conscious effort made by artists to ease this pressure by developing a new, transnational subjectivity. The concept of "region" has been changing in the 1990s as well. While a region in a traditional sense is frequently associated with the history and identity of a nation and often defined by the closed borders of the nation, this concept has been challenged and replaced by that of an unfettered, synchronic, and spatially expansive global "place."

As part of this change, individual artists and curators have increasingly been participating in transnational and transcultural activities, resulting in the abandonment of their regional burdens and historical responsibilities. Their more frequent participation in these activities must also anticipate their new roles as the organizers and initiators of these activities. We can no longer restrain such activities within a state or a nation. Rather, they are part of a new culture and are produced by a new situation that can be comprehended only from a global perspective. Although national and historical vestiges remain, this new culture breaches the formative conditions of a nation and its history and transforms these conditions into a basis for an artist's self-identification in today's global world. The self-referential works in this exhibition symbolize a global attitude in the artists' own expressions of self-affirmation.

Second, in recent years, exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art have been held in venues both inside and outside China. Often these exhibitions, especially those held outside China, approach and introduce contemporary Chinese art as an objectified other. But I want to point out that it would be a futile attempt for a curator to objectify his exhibition, because the two constitute an indivisible whole. As the curator of this exhibition, therefore, I identify with the theme of the show and also align myself with the artists participating in it. I share these artists' claim: "It's Me!" This preface is therefore both an introduction to this exhibition and a self-statement. To curate this exhibition attests to my desire to approach art in the 1990s through a new perspective, and to my endeavor to reject the method of studying this art by simply periodizing it.

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— Originally published in Leng Lin, *Shi wo [It's Me]* (Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing, 2000), 293–95. Translation from Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000), 107.



## Feminism and Women's Art

### WALKING OUT OF THE ABYSS: MY FEMINIST CRITIQUE (1994)

By Xu Hong

Modern art in China ebbs and flows: the Beijing *Critics' Nomination Exhibition* (*Pipingjia timing zhan*) is over and will soon start again, the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* (*Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan*) is also beginning its second cycle. Although these exhibitions differ from official nationwide fine arts exhibitions in both their organizational structure and in the mechanisms through which they select works, they are essentially still a continuation of obsolete and sexist traditions. A group of men sit around and discuss what artwork by which female artist is up to their standards for participation, or which aren't. In the end, they choose a work by the female artist who most closely abides by their standards and tastes, then they attach their preposterous critique to the artwork.

This is not to mention whether or not this method of selection conforms to artistic principles — what standards are these methods and their implementation based on? Does art's development rely on the creation and execution of such guidelines? In fact, such a coarse attitude in the treatment of female artists is an extension of a longstanding patriarchy. When this disregard for the very essence of art is visited upon the female sex and her art, female artists are actually confronting a dangerous situation — they must eradicate their selves and put their trust into predetermined artistic regulations, allowing men to take the place of women, to ensure this world's standard of a singular male voice. If female artists attempt to alter these circumstances, or use their own voice to speak the truth, then those parties who do not understand the female language — those who disdainfully chastise the language of female artists and criticize their display of the "excessively personal" (perhaps they are basing their opinions on a more masculine language) — will deny the female voice. They chastise with comments such as: "female painters don't concern themselves with culture at large or society, they are only concerned with the trivialities that surround them and personal emotions" (in a society controlled by men, women have only been permitted to do so). Such arguments are used to negate works by female artists and to dismiss their voices, to place them in a state that makes it impossible to find their own footing — suspending them in a state of confusion somewhere between person and object.

Today, this kind of preposterous situation has not been eliminated in the least. Real circumstances discriminate against the female sex, and people who magnify gender differences continue to offer to fill their "fatherly" roles, restricting and stipulating what determines the nature of art.

What cannot be denied is this: almost all institutional criteria, including the establishment of philosophy, language, and imagery, are in accordance with rules set by gender. Even women's own language and patterns of thought have involuntarily conformed to these standards; all of which were tainted early on by gender discrimination. When we attempt to validate ourselves, we are unconsciously applying the model set by others to ourselves. Now, as we regain consciousness and are attempting to use our own language and voices to confront the irrationality that has been imposed upon us and that we habitually exist within, we lose ourselves, and for all practical purposes become mute.

Although we cannot rewrite history — because we have vanished from history — as history has progressed up to today, a reflective opportunity presents a new prospect

to us. Under the domination of sexism, humankind has performed various villainous and foolish acts that deviate from fundamental human interests. But, following this, people have sobered up to realize that women will ultimately make this world a more beautiful place. This will be increasingly borne out by the facts. Therefore, as we diligently search for a language belonging to ourselves and delve into our consciousness and thought — although they will no longer emerge from a purely female nature, elements of a uniquely female spirit will always exist. Female participation will transform women's current predicament, and it will transform human culture, including the plight of art and in other facets of society.

Art, as the conscience of humankind, should naturally take the initiative to remove the shackles of male supremacy; the current state of Chinese art is not at all optimistic, it has plunged into a narcissistic abyss of "homogeneous magnetism" from which it is unable to extricate itself. Although the art world bestows upon itself many handsome laurels, including various "-isms," at every opportunity, it is the first to take the lead recklessly to become king of the mountain. The country's various exhibition juries are oftentimes "homogeneous gatherings," and its many sects and organizations have become "homogeneous clubs." Occasionally, one or two women are invited merely for show, but even so these women are excluded from all substantial verdicts and declarations (in contrast, our female compatriots are often extremely respectful of the proposals made by male authorities). This, as ever, is a routine preserved from many centuries ago; if we allow this outdated method to continue to exist and cut across centuries into today, this superficial modernism — what is essentially patriarchalism — will eventually fragment our bodies from our minds. Such a fracture would ultimately cause the true downfall of art.

For this reason, China's female artists and critics should make efforts to eliminate these schizophrenic symptoms, in order to allow the "other sex" to read and to understand a language that belongs to them, to listen and clearly hear their own voice (most women can understand the male language, from the moment women are born they are indoctrinated with this language), and they must work tirelessly to achieve this. China's male artists and critics also must strive alongside women if they hope to emerge from the abyss they have created for themselves. We should realize that modern art, without sober and self-knowledgeable feminist art, can only be a half-baked modern art.

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— Originally published as "Zouchu shenyuan: Wo de nüxingzhuyi piping guan" in *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 163, no. 7 (1994): 17. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

## **TOWARD A FEMALE INITIATIVE (1996/2003)**

By Tao Yongbai

After the Chinese art world underwent the surge of the '85 New Wave, the breakdown of the "unified" norms [of the art establishment], and the curtain call of the "Post-'89" era, painting extricated itself from a dependence on concepts, but also lost the guidance of a mainstream artistic navigator. This has resulted in an ambiguous artistic direction for the individualized state of the painting world, and has revealed the patch of dreariness that follows the heat wave. However, women painters have used their female initiative to make an unexpected arrival in art circles. In 1990, the *World of Female Artists* exhibition (*Nü huajia de shijie*) marked the arrival of a "New Generation," referring generally to the fifth generation of painters; it also symbolized

the beginning of a move by female painters toward self-awareness. They often appear as a collective face, while each of them also draws the attention of painting circles with their individual personalities and strong feminist consciousness.

Yu Hong's series on her female friends comprehensively uses techniques of contemporary photography, design, and advertising. With groundbreaking designs, her portraits possess an abrupt sense of freshness and stunning distinctness. They use an exaggerated vision corresponding to today's "contemporaneity," and depart from traditional formulaic portraiture to appropriately show the spirit and style of a younger generation of women. Yang Keqin avoids the fetters of grand themes, and through a uniquely female point of view and awareness of women's lives, she passionately depicts wine bottles, iron locks, even her two feet — unpicturesque objects — as her main subjects. The giant dimensions of her canvases are awe-inspiring and subvert the intrinsic schema of the depicted still lifes.

The harmony between ornamentation and sketchlike strokes in Chen Shuxia's works composes her uniquely luminous, elegant, and tranquil, but nonetheless illusory, world. Her works are also a manifestation of her inner feelings for an outside world. Li Yan moves from landscape paintings of her native Yimeng Mountain to rational paintings that take her native landscapes as linguistic signs. She not only goes beyond general models of landscape paintings but also demonstrates a feminine space for thinking about her homeland, people, and the vast universe, things imbued with profound philosophical significance. The works of former writer Li Hong and Yuan Yaomin, whose background is in oil painting, employ different techniques to articulate the lives of contemporary women. Li Hong was once a journalist, and uses her own personal experiences to reveal the distorted and abnormal existence of lower-class women, thus conveying the artist's sisterly affection and sympathy. Yuan Yaomin instead stresses pictorial language and form. She borrows from folk-art symbols, and uses a Pop art modality to express or allegorize the many societal issues contemporary women confront about men and women, marriage, family, and the like.

Jia Juanli is enamored with the tranquility and idle aloofness of women in ancient times. From her series of freehand (*xieyi*) portraits of boudoir-bound women to the dreamlike Kingdom of Heaven series (*Tianguo xilie*) and In the Palace series (*Gongnei xilie*), she reveals the impatient apprehension and lonely, oppressed psychology of modern people and a sentimental attachment to lost elegance, calmness, and ease. Yan Ping's series of mother-and-child imagery is teeming with motherly love and uses lucid and lively colors to interweave a mother's sweet affection and kindness toward her children. Xu Xiaoyan's series on cornfields employs her feminine sense of the ordinary to discover beauty in the croplands and rubbish piles that surround her. In her cornfield paintings, she affords us with the awareness of the significance of existence and human life, thus linking Xu Xiaoyan's very name with the sight — when we see cornfields we can't help but recall her paintings. Shen Ling is a preeminent representative of the new expressionist painting movement, she uses brushes dipped in life's passion to record her personal life experiences; in her art there is a purity of painting and human sincerity.

We can also see the pioneering developments of women painters by observing the theme of "flowers" in their work. Flowers have long been a popular theme for female painters. Since ancient times, flowers and women have forged an inseparable bond. In traditional Chinese thought, flowers are women, women are flowers — the two have already become a set. Painting flowers has also become a traditional technique through which female painters represent their emotions and thoughts; painting the beauty of flowers, their vibrancy, elegance, radiance, and loveliness, endows

feelings and love, praise, and tribute. Each flower is truly its own world, and history has left us with many excellent works. But almost no one has made dried and withered flowers their primary object of praise. And, in painting circles, Xu Min is not the only one painting such flowers, there are also Li Hongfeng and Lei Shuang. Under their brushes, these dried, withered flowers have long ago lost the delicate expressions of their former days. Under the tender gazes of these female painters, we see eternal life solidified in the shape of dried and withered flowers; they seem to be telling us that it is the flowers who offered themselves to the world, who endured the process of desiccation, and who emerged as a kind of immortal spirit.

If we were to thoroughly scan the body of painters today, we could cite a long list of names demonstrating the distinctive mien of female painters, such as Cai Jin [pl. 26] and her banana series, or Liu Liping and her rural series, Chen Xi's realistic series depicting social phenomenon, and Xu Hong's edgier works. They demonstrate that the 1990s is the decade for female artists in China to carve a niche for themselves. In their search for the female, they have interwoven the modern woman's self-affirmation and transcendence, her identification of and exclusion from the world of men, and her participation in or escape from the outside world along with various spiritual contradictions. All of these strengthen the self-awareness of the female subject, and their arrival at the forefront by surpassing traditional male styles of painting. These women artists take their profound concern for women's topics as the entry point for their creative practice. They utilize their pain and "pity complex" to empathize with conditions of female existence and life values, and pursue a more perfect human nature. All the artistic sincerity and confidence expressed in their persistent pursuit bring the advantages of female emotions into full play, thus entering an unrestrained artistic state. By perfecting the composition and enriching the meanings, we arrive at a definitive artistic orientation and position. Compared with the oil painting exhibitions today — which emphasize execution, lack genuine feeling and spiritual meaning, and have been called "masquerades" — the continuous appearance of extraordinary exhibitions by female artists has, contrary to expectations, become the new prospect injecting life into painting circles.

In their new book *Megatrends for Women*, John Naisbitt, the rather influential author of *Megatrends*, and Patricia Aburdene use the concept of "critical mass" from physics to illuminate how women are transforming the world: "Critical mass can be compared to an avalanche, at first only a snowflake moves, it seems like nothing will happen, but millions of snowflakes change into billions, at the turning point, they will burst with a 'boom.'" When critical mass appears, this is the moment when tendencies change into "megatrends," the moment when new social standards replace the old. They believe the 1990s to be the era of women's liberation, when a critical mass for gender equality has already arrived, or when women and men can equally progress to mold the future of humanity.

The prospect of such a global megatrend is alluring, but this depends on women's efforts to strive for it. Today, female artists are showing strength and competence in liberal and enlightened painting circles, but truly moving toward a feminine initiative is an ever-demanding process. Many female artists hope that people will see them as a painter, not as a "female" painter, and indeed art transcends gender just as brilliance transcends gender. No matter male or female, genuine artists surely have their artistic originality. They do not easily submit to any nature of collective attributes, and still are able to create their own independent style. Even so, so many women artists harbor a gender inferiority complex, it is almost as if terming someone a "female artist" is suspect of belittling her artistic standards.

Such slandering of one's own identity continues to have roots in the traditional modes of thinking of a male-centered cultural authority. Under the influence of thousands of years of being treated as inferior to men, women have developed an inferiority complex. Consequently, they seek confirmation of their own value through identification with men. Women first deny the social discrepancies between the two genders, forfeiting their own subjective consciousness in what appears to be a concept of "gender equality," but in essence is dependence on the male gender.

We can say that the liberation of women is in fact also a revolution in ideological culture — women need [to undergo] a process of self-recognition. In reflecting on the history and status quo of women, to fully realize that women not only need to share with men the burden of that heavy responsibility which is driving the arts into a modern era, they need to preserve the autonomy of a female subjective consciousness. Women painters need to overcome this twofold difficulty, if they are to participate in the building of human culture and realizing its ultimate goal of equality between men and women.

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— Excerpt from a text originally published as "Zouxiang zijue de nüxing huihua" in *96 Shanghai meishu shuangnian zhan lilun yantaohui lunwenji* [*Collected Essays from '96 Shanghai Biennial Symposium on Theory*], revised version in *Piping de shidai* [*Era of Criticism*] vol. 1, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), 138–41. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

## **WRAPPING AND SEVERING (1997)** [pl. 27]

By Lin Tianmiao

After selecting this kind of activity for myself — wrapping everyday objects in thread — I began to think of it as a real kind of "corporal punishment." Moreover, I kept saying to myself, "abandon this, give it up . . ." Later, I slowly became accustomed to it. Every day, I would wrap a little, and with each passing day like this, I felt perfectly calm and psychologically at ease. The concept of "corporal punishment" also changed: was I being punished or did I go looking for this punishment?

Actually, all women experience this kind of "corporal punishment" in their daily housework: if she were to end this situation, a new "corporal punishment" would await her. Is it possible to sever oneself from these tangled circumstances?

After nearly a decade of shuttling back and forth between New York and Beijing, it's easy for me to compare old and new lifestyles, particularly with the everyday objects that I'm able to see and touch. Old pots, metal basins, coal-burning stoves, sewing machines, thimbles, water ladles, backscratchers, knitting needles, jars for pickled vegetables, etc. . . . have all been replaced by lighters, electric ovens, microwaves, etc. . . . The natural, familiar, and warm rhythms left behind by old utensils and appliances will gradually be superseded by trendy, modern ways of life. New value systems negate old ones, making it difficult for people to make wise choices and judgments. I, also, can find no way out, so I might as well wrap them entirely in thread. New, old . . . after they are all wrapped up, they will cease to have any utilitarian function, and cease to have any attributes.

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— Originally published as "Chan yu jian" in *Huipishu* [*Gray Cover Book*] ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1997), 87. Translated by Peggy Wang.

**CLOTHES CHEST (YIXIANG) (1995)** [pl. 28]

By Yin Xiuzhen

I love remembering things. From my childhood until now, I've left behind many clothes at the wayside. What they record is even richer than photographs. After a period of time, I began to think of them as my artwork. Although they can be categorized as personal things, they also manage to resonate with a lot of people.

I've folded each item of clothing and sewed them all together using a needle and thread. I've placed the clothes into a chest that I've had for a long time. I then poured cement into the chest, and allowed it to solidify. The contrasts between hard and soft, cold and warm, reason and perception evoke a kind of indescribable feeling.

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— Originally published as "Yixiang" in *Baipishu* [*White Cover Book*] ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1995), 35. Translated by Peggy Wang.

## Engagement with Social Transformation

By the mid-1990s, most contemporary Chinese artists had freed themselves from the baggage of the Cultural Revolution. Their art now responded directly to issues in contemporary Chinese society [pl. 29]. In the field of painting and sculpture, Gaudy art developed into a formidable force. Combining visual elements from earlier Cynical Realism and Cultural Pop, it simultaneously satirized and embraced the "vulgar" taste of commercial culture. Favored by gallery owners and foreign collectors for its brilliant coloration and exaggerated imagery, the fate of Gaudy art seems doubly ironic: in critiquing consumerism and material desire, it was itself willingly commercialized.

In contrast, a group of performance and installation artists developed non-commercial art projects to interact with society. As revealed by some of the texts translated below, what fascinated these artists most was China's mind-boggling transformation: the rapid disappearance of the traditional city and its neighborhoods (Zhang Dali, Huang Yan, Zhan Wang, the Three Men Studio), and the changes in human relationships, lifestyles, taste, and values (Zhu Fadong, Wang Jin, Zhang Huan, Wang Jinsong, Chen Shaoxiong, and Zeng Hao). Instead of representing society objectively as did the New Generation painters, however, they attempted to capture their own responses to the social transformation, including their confusion about place in a rapidly changing environment.

A striking aspect of Chinese cities in the 1990s was the never-ending destruction and construction. Old houses were coming down every day to make room for new buildings, and thousands of people were relocated from the inner cities to the outskirts. These conditions were the background of several projects documented in this section. Zhang Dali, for instance, created over two thousand graffiti images of his own head all over Beijing from 1994 to 2000. Sprayed or carved on half-demolished traditional houses, these images enabled the artist to engage the city in a "dialogue," and in fact became the focus of the first public discussion in China about the concept of contemporary public art.

## Gaudy Art

### LIVING IN KITSCH – THE CRITICAL “IRONY” OF GAUDY ART (1999)

By Liao Wen

The time is 1999, the final few months of the twentieth century. The place is Beijing, China's capital, the heart of the nation, the window to the outside world. As a perfect example of modern life and culture, this is what meets the eye: city blocks filled with concrete buildings, capped with pseudo-glazed rooftops, covered by bathroom tiles and tinted glass windows. Squeezed in between them are small guesthouses, restaurants, bathhouses, hair salons, and karaoke bars, screaming for clients by means of lanterns and Christmas lights during all seasons, banners, balloons, and even inflated plastic rainbows. (Even if we drive miles into the countryside, we can find the same buildings splashed across the natural landscape.) Our eyes are assaulted by the chaotic world of kitsch. We are surrounded by instant millionaires with cheap products; affluence without foundation.

We are submerged in kitsch, an unstoppable mainstream Chinese culture at the end of the century.

#### THE NEW: A ROMANTIC IDEAL FOR THE LATTER HALF OF THE CENTURY

The romantic “ideal” is a dream that has been pursued by Chinese for the past fifty years. To do away with antiquity, to build “new” things, to forget about tradition, let's “destroy the old world and build a new China.” Our forefathers worshipped nature, prayed for celestial and earthly harmony. They feared nature's forceful revenge. Today, we believe in man's power and practical achievements; we want to prove that we can “conquer the sky.”

Beijing is a perfect example of this pursuit of the new. The city was built seven hundred years ago in the Jin dynasty. Until 1949, it was a center of consumption. After the revolution, Beijing became an industrial center for iron, steel, coal, petrochemicals, machinery, textile, printing, etc.<sup>1</sup> With amazing speed, a seven-hundred-year-old capital was transformed into an industrial hub. Beijing's skyline is one of puffing chimneys and crisscrossing electric wires. This same scenery has been the subject of propaganda posters from the 1950s to the 1980s.

The romantic ideal has inspired the Chinese to dismantle the past. The commercial culture of the 1990s has escalated the ferocity of this destruction. Antiquity has vanished, even the “old” new of the 1950s is being taken down at great speed. The Beijing of the 1990s is a permanent construction site. We are not only in the business of transforming the old, we also want to miraculously transform something entirely into the “new.” I am not sure whether man has the ability to forget that “man has harbored a desire to edit one's own records, to change the past, to erase traces of relationships.”<sup>2</sup> But, what I do know is “idealism that is fused with goals and the possibility of realization”<sup>3</sup> has become reality.

The Chinese bulldozer has swept across the nation under the banners of “modernization” and “ethnic culture.” It has cleared away all remnants of previously established social value systems and aesthetic standards. And, along with them, a lifestyle and art form also met their demise. What appeared afterward was a self-professed “new, miraculous modernization” that arose from the debris, to claim and reinforce the “Romance of the New” to our children. Unfortunately, all of this “newness,” “miracle” and “modernization” is not what is needed for a “modern civilization.”

**THE UGLY: ALL CHINESE AESTHETIC TASTE**

"New" cannot be "modern" unless supported by an aesthetic value system. If we build with a modern straight line but add to it curves of antiquity, if we allow ourselves to replace the gentle sloping of a classic wooden roof with plates of hard concrete, if we imitate the graceful arch of glazed tiles with bent metals, we are destroying aesthetic values. We have uprooted the simplicity, the straightforwardness, and the functionalism of the straight line. At the same time, [we have] distortedly plagiarized the sumptuous elegance of classical Chinese architecture and misinterpreted the emphasis on the decorative. Whether it is a bank or a public toilet, any public building in China is most likely to have a pseudo-red wall, fake glazed tiles, stone lions, or red lanterns (perhaps even some Roman images as well). These features are unforgivingly combined with green or blue glass, shiny copper-plated columns, and aluminum window frames. It is a cheap scenery hastily constructed on the bankruptcy of an aesthetic system.

To plagiarize tradition, to interrupt cultural continuity, to copy without understanding are habits which inevitably lead to the new aesthetic of ugliness. The "New Ugliness" is not only an aesthetic judgment, it is a testament to the dilapidated state of moral standards and human dignity. This is the age in which media indulges in mutual flattery, the age of advertisement with the same stupid smile in every form; the age when Faust becomes a moral role model for the young, and the desire to reshape nature is handed such an awesome tool. . . .

There are two reasons why the ugliness of kitsch can be termed an aesthetic interest. First, the interest is a result of the pursuit of the New: the "Romance of the New" is a popular movement. It is hackneyed and appeals to the masses. To a large extent, it stirs up dreams of what is "good"; kitsch is ugly, but merry. Secondly, I am not sure how many people can still detect the ugliness. It could be that everyone is living happily in this environment. People have forgotten the desire to admire beauty and lost the ability to enjoy it. When a phenomenon becomes phenomenal, it ceases to be an issue. However well trained he is, one man's show cannot outwit the onslaught of millions. The ugliness is irresistible, it describes an unavoidable reality. It is all powerful.

**DESPERATE COMEDY: THE "IRONIC" CRITICAL GESTURE OF GAUDY ART**

For an artist who lives and breathes in kitsch, but still feels some responsibility toward culture, the situation is at best awkward. I do not want to argue that art can change society, but at least art can disclose a reality so as to remind all of us to be critical and independent of our environment. This is the aspiration of Gaudy art (*Yansu yishu*).

Gaudy art in China was born in the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> In May 1996, there was a flurry of Gaudy art exhibitions: *Popular Model (Dazhong yangban)*, *Gaudy Life (Yanzhuang shenghuo)*, followed by *Damaged by Affluence (Fuhua de shanghai)*, and *Narrative of Skin (Pifu de xushu)*.<sup>5</sup> Concentrated together, they led to an artistic hot spot, and critics, including myself, have already written about their academic value in great detail.<sup>6</sup> At the time, I was of the opinion that Gaudy art directly targeted the current culture. The sarcasm is clearly expressed through an exaggerated imitation of kitsch.<sup>7</sup> But, problems remained in the artworks: first, the vocabulary was repetitive, and symbols such as cabbages, flowers, and girls kept reappearing in different works. Even the technique, an exaggerated, flat, shiny surface in the mode of advertisements, was similar among different artists. Second, the language of Gaudy art was still insufficient: it was still modeled on kitsch, but in reality seemed indistinguishable from it. This was potentially damaging to the implied sarcasm in the artwork.

Today, three years after Gaudy art first appeared, our exhibition is replenished by new works, and a new concept is presented by artists who have continued to explore



Gaudy art. While some artists left the group to find other forms of expressions, others joined its ranks.

In comparison with the works presented three years ago, these works show different levels of maturity, presenting a more personal perspective and vocabulary. These works intelligently borrowed aspects of the kitsch format, and demonstrated the artists' talent in using techniques of Chinese folk art.

*Art History (Yishushi)* by Xu Yihui cleverly uses the homonym "shi," which can mean either history or shit. Hence "yishushi" can mean either art history or artistic shit. Xu uses colorful flowers and a heavily decorated trophy to elevate this fly-catching "shit" on the altarpiece. His use of gold in the "shit" hints at dreams of fabulous wealth. Surrounding the altar are classical Chinese couplets, which usually are used to decorate doorways in rural China.<sup>8</sup> The horizontal banner reads "art shit." The two vertical stanzas read "Art is a flower / Master of the home." This is a further pun or a popular slogan from the fifties. The original two stanzas were "Grain is a flower / Fertilizer is the master." Again, Xu makes a play on words, exchanging "shit" for "fertilizer." Xu's work is both serious and humorous, meticulous and superficial, elegant and grotesque, creative and greedy. *Art History* is an expression of the artist's helplessness in the face of an art which is becoming base; it is his own reflection on art becoming kitsch, as well as his serious doubts about the value system for art and art history today. "*Jinqian*" is another pun. It means literally "gold money" but also implies "wealth" in Chinese. Gold money, which is used only for decorative and symbolic purposes, is often burned in folk ceremonies to pray for wealth. (The Chinese also make dolls to pray for a baby, grain to pray for a good harvest, the dragon for rain, etc.). *Jinqian* reveals the illusion of wealth as well as the desire and need for the illusion. Xu Yihui is one of the earliest artists to use folk-art techniques. He has now perfected his skills in porcelain as well as his personal vocabulary. The relief on the trophy, with complicated porcelain letters and an explosion of gold "shit" and gold money, perfectly expresses the strength of the author in his use of sarcasm.

*Dream Plants (Lixiang zhongzhi)* by Hu Xiangdong includes "crystal cabbages." The work evokes the folk tale about the greedy man who planted seeds in hopes of growing gold and jade. Hu originally wanted to use traditional craft techniques to make sculptures called "jade cabbages" as well as employ cheap fake jade to make "imitation jade cabbages." Although jade cabbages are symbolic of overnight wealth, they were ultimately too expensive to be made. After several experiments, he chose resin as his material, as this is close to jade in appearance. As the work evolved, natural materials were replaced by industrial materials, delicate carving was substituted with simple molding, miniature jade objects were replaced by larger-than-life cabbages. The final work and its evolution is an accurate statement of the desire for wealth among Chinese peasantry. Planted in the ground, the resin cabbage takes on an additional level of sarcasm posing as the symbol and dream of a good harvest.

*Happiness (Xingfu)* and *Romantic Trip (Langman lücheng)* by Feng Zhengjie are series of works that thematically take Chinese wedding photos as their subject. Feng's criticism points at the commercial manipulation of the desire to feel good and romantic, which has greatly cheapened the human pursuit of happiness. His work reveals to us that the need to appeal to vulgarity is not merely a form, but also a matter of taste and a behavioral pattern. "The kitsch-man's (*Kitschmensch*) need for kitsch: it is the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one's own reflection."<sup>9</sup> As a painter, Feng is in the minority within the Gaudy artists. His figures wear a visage of happiness that is more than a blush, it is almost purple. In the background are images of amusement parks, World Park (*Shijie gongyuan*),<sup>10</sup>



Feng Zhengjie. *Romantic Trip*  
No. 21. 1997. Oil on canvas,  
59 × 74<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (150 × 190 cm).  
Private collection

and other popular leisure destinations. The surfaces of his paintings have the smoothness and brightness of a calendar poster. Through this combination, Feng has arrived at a personal style with a technique that comes from but also escapes the cliché of traditional paintings

Lu Hao's *Flowers (Hua)*, *Birds (Niao)*, *Fish (Yü)* and *Insects (Chong)* recall four popular playthings for Chinese people who reside in the city [pl. 30]. Lu Hao has removed these playthings from their usual cages and put them into symbols of Beijing's architecture. The Great Hall of the People is a vase, the National Art Gallery is a birdcage, Tiananmen is a fishtank, and Xinhua Men [Gate of New China] is an insect jar. This dislocation illustrates the separation of urban living from nature. On the one hand, the fact that natural objects have become playthings is itself a distortion of nature, it takes nature out of nature. On the other hand, these distorted playthings are admired by city dwellers, which further separates the people from nature. Plexiglas is a perfect material to express such a state of solid separation, but apparent transparency.

*Models (Dianxing)* by Zhang Yajie has a firm grip on the concept of the role model in Chinese society. These unified, regulated models of conformity, from Young Pioneers to exemplars from different professions, are not only measured by their behavior but are also required to look the same. They must display the same attitude: easygoing, happy-go-lucky, pleasant with no trace of personality. Zhang used traditional folk methods for inlaying doll's eyes and stylized plastic extrusions to create that sameness, a uniformity that is sad and comical at the same time.

In *The Thinker (Sixiang zhe)* and *Thousand Hand Buddha (Nalai qianfoshou)*, Wang Qingsong digitally superimposes himself into his works. The artist mimics meditative positions with a visage of sincerity. Yet, the McDonald's logo is carved onto his chest, and in his hands are luxury-brand items. This kind of religious "worship" is a clear statement that consumerism, along with fashion, have not only impacted people's daily lives, but have also contaminated their souls. With the image of a man in his underwear, with his cabbages and garbage heap, and a computer spray-painted onto velvet and brocade, this kind of worship is given a peasant flavor.

In the works of the Luo Brothers, the artists are telling us that we have been bought and conquered by name brands. In *Welcome World-Famous Brands (Huanying shijie mingpai)*, the artists have created a montage of widely disseminated symbols from different eras, from New Year's pictures illustrating sayings such as "May you be happy and prosperous," "May you have a surplus year after year" and "Wishing you

fortune and happiness" to current commercial advertisements. All of these are completely shrouded under a huge ray of light. The Luo Brothers were among the earliest Gaudy artists to experiment with folk-art techniques. Their works push the brilliant color and shine of traditional lacquer paintings to an extreme, thereby further emphasizing the flashy atmosphere of the nouveau riche.

*Copying a Calendar (Fang yuefenpai)*, *Love of Lushan (Lushan lian)* and *Fashion Girl (Shimai nulang)* are all works by Liu Zheng. The brocade quilt-cover has been a traditional gift at Chinese weddings for half a century. Liu has embroidered beads on the covers, together with calendar girls from the 1920s to the 1940s, movie starlets from the 1970s and 1980s, and supermodels from the 1990s. The work is a reflection of a state of mind: pretty things, loud things, empty things.

Shao Zhenpeng imitates classical Chinese mahogany furniture in his work *Made in China (Zhongguo zhizao)*. He fuses the classical shape of the chair with revolutionary red flags and stars, sunflowers and pines, as well as beauty queens. *Made in China* is not only a statement on China's development from a classical traditional society to a revolutionary society and finally a consumer market economy, but it also expresses how China has gradually become a source of cheap commercial goods for the West.

*Shit with Long Hair (Zhangman maofa de dabian)* and *Shit with a Dream (Manhuai lixiang de dabian)* are works by Yu Bogong. He uses gold-colored brocade, which was specially reserved for the emperor's clothing, and folk fabric to sew piles of soft, plush, and fluffy "shit." He has also draped them with hair like a woman's fashionable veil or attached pink, cushy wings. His work is ridiculous, amusing, and nauseating; even the pinned-on fly is wearing a mask. The author is laughing at the nouveau riche, for whom money can easily substitute elegance and intellect.

*Classics (Jingdian)* is a denunciation of the new cultural hypocrites and their pretension of having class. Liu Liguang uses a folk technique of making carvings and reliefs in porcelain to depict kitsch symbols of prestige such as dragons, phoenix, cranes, and lotus blossoms, combined with base images of buttocks.

Li Luming's work *Chinese Hand Gestures (Zhongguo shouzi)* is a play on Buddhist mudras. He has distorted the sacred positions by making them erotic and common. What was previously a symbol of elegance and mystery is transformed into the fashionable gestures of starlets. Not only has he degraded the gestures, he has also placed kitsch objects, such as high-heeled shoes, into these hands. Li's work shows the current cultural circumstances of contemporary China's transformation of the elegant into the vulgar.

The term "Miss" (*xiaojie*) has become a popular and overused designation for addressing a woman in market economy China (in all corners of urban China, one can hear someone calling "Miss!" — a sure sign of an overdeveloped commercial culture). Sun Ping has chosen this word to represent his works: *Miss Fashion (Shishang wenhua xiaojie)*, *Miss Service (Wei ni fuwu xiaojie)*, and *Miss Avant-Garde Art (Qianwei yishu xiaojie)*. He has also used objects directly associated with "Miss": fashion garments and accessories, as well as those overly sweet greetings such as "at your service," "endless enjoyment," "have a nice dream," "live it up," and "I love you," etc.

*I Love McDonald's (Wo ai Maidanglao)* and *Live Broadcast (Xianchang zhibo)* have completely captured the most prevalent symbols of kitsch: the repetition of the same family eating hamburgers or in a supermarket-style broadcast program, thereby emphasizing the pervasiveness of such cultural trends. The artists Zhao Qin and Liu Jian have repainted the same scene with people from all walks of life, peasants, students, businessmen, male, female, old, and young, and cloned them, giving them the same ecstatic expression. The authors humorously ridicule the "go with the flow"

mentality and give a serious subject a sense of lightness (a phenomenon unique to artists born in the 1970s).

Although Yin Qi has spent the last few years in China, his residence in France has given him a different perspective on kitsch. Yin has carefully photographed a selection of small kitsch objects, such as bright butterfly hairpins, pink plastic houses, the Statue of Liberty bearing a strange expression (Yin claims it is a look of disgust). The photos are shot like advertisements, beautifying the objects and making these "cheap" goods into delicate, pretty things. When these items are enlarged, the effect is such that these small objects are blown out of proportion and lose all sense of reality. Yin's work glorifies small kitschy objects, and to a certain extent demonstrates a romantic French humor.

Wow! Gaudy art is a comedy: lively, happy, humorous, but like all good comedies it possesses a critical sense of sarcasm. It reads the absurd side of our existence. What we see on television, comedies such as *Story of an Editorial Office* (*Bianjibu de gushi*), *I Love My Home* (*Wo ai wo jia*), and even the talk show *Be Honest* (*Shihua shishuo*) use this kind of critical stance to achieve the same result as Gaudy art.

As in all good comedies, at some point a sense of sadness creeps in. "The longer and more deeply we appreciate a joke, the more we can feel sorrow."<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, Gaudy art is a desperate comedy for the end of the century.

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#### Notes

1. "Beijing" entry, in *Cihai Dictionary* (Shanghai: Shanghai Encyclopedia Publishing House, 1979).
2. "Forgetting," in Milan Kundera, *Sixty-Three Words*.
3. "Ideal" entry, in *Cihai Dictionary*.
4. See Li Xianting, "Youguan yansu yishu chengyin de buyi" ["An Addendum to Contributing Factors to Gaudy Art"].
5. In 1996, Li Xianting and Liao Wen curated two exhibitions on Gaudy art in Beijing, and two successive solo exhibitions of Gaudy artists.
6. See Li Xianting, "Bopu zhihou: Yansu huayu yu fanfeng mofang" ["After Pop: Gaudy Discourse and Satirical Imitation"]; and "Dui 'nongminshi de baofa quwei' de fangfeng — Zhongguo yansu yishu yujing shuping xubu" [Parodying 'Peasant Style Get-Rich-Quick' Taste"]; and see Liao Wen. "Pingmin de shidai de guizu bujing — 'yansu' de wenhua pinwei he yishu pinzhi" ["The 'Noble' Composition of the Generation of the Common People"].
7. *Ibid.*
8. Using flowers, and birds-and-flowers as words [i.e., homonyms expressing good wishes], using figures as words, or drawn or embroidered on. These were used as sites of celebration and well-wishing.
9. "Kitsch," in Milan Kundera, *Sixty-Three Words*.
10. An amusement park that features the world's scenic spots and historical sites proportionally reduced in size.
11. Hu Yongfen, "Taiwan yansu — shenghuo shi ruci zhuangban" ["Taiwan Gaudy — Boorish and Vulgar as the Makeup of Life"].
12. "Laugh," in Milan Kundera, *Sixty-Three Words*.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Shenghuo zai yansu de wangyang dahai — yansu yishu 'fanfeng' de pipan zitai" in *Kua shiji caihong — yansu yishu* [*Ouh La La, Kitsch! — Gaudy Art*], ed. Liao Wen and Li Xianting (Hunan: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing, 1999), 2–7; translation, 8–11. Originally translated by Hong Huang, with proofing by Lucy England.

## Urban Destruction and Construction

### "CHANGCHUN, CHINA": A REPORT ON A PERFORMANCE OF MAKING RUBBINGS FROM BUILDINGS SLATED FOR DEMOLITION (1994)

By Huang Yan

- A. The concept and plan for making rubbings from buildings slated for demolition
- a. Architectural materials to be made into rubbings:  
These include the buildings' exterior walls, doorways, windows, stairways, corridors, interior floors and walls, as well as the everyday items and appliances that were abandoned in the relocation of the inhabitants.
  - b. Three stages of making rubbings:  
The first is to make rubbings before the building is demolished; the second is to make rubbings during the process of demolition; and the third is to make rubbings after its demolition.
  - c. The types of buildings being made into rubbings:  
Qing-dynasty-style architecture; architecture of the Republican period; Russian architecture; Japanese architecture; architecture of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution; architecture after 1978, and so on.
  - d. The period of making rubbings:  
The duration of making rubbings is unlimited; for now, it will last ten years, from 1993 through 2003.



Huang Yan.  
*Changchun — China*. 1994.  
Rubbing on rice paper,  
39 3/8 x 79 3/4" (100 x 200 cm).  
Collection Hanart TZ Gallery,  
Hong Kong

B. Implementation of the plan to make rubbings of buildings slated for demolition

a. Preface:

On May 25, 1993, there were clear skies with scattered clouds, light breezes, and the conditions were favorable for making rubbings. From around 9:00 to 10:30 in the morning, Huang Yan made three rubbings in the Railroad Hospital at the intersection of Wusong Road and Dong'er Tiao Street in the Kuancheng District; the rubbings measured 1000 mm by 530 mm.

b. The areas indicated on the map:

On June 9, demolition would begin in the areas from Shengli Avenue to Dongsan Tiao Street and from Shanghai Road to Ningbo Road. On June 2, Huang Yan made rubbings of this area, which included the exterior walls, inner walls, floors, and some items from the interior spaces. The rubbings are currently underway, covering approximately one hundred square meters. Photographs, slide film, video recordings, and audio recordings documented the entire process of making the rubbings. Additionally, some of the materials that rubbings were made of, such as house numbers, bricks, etc., were collected.

c. A comparison chart of the sizes of rubbings from black and red bricks:

Type	Length	Width	Height	Length	Width	Height
Red Brick	7.5 in.	3.6 in.	2 in.	240 mm	116 mm	55 mm
Black Brick	8 in.	4 in.	2 in.	242 mm	121 mm	61 mm

d. From May 25 through July 16, the artist catalogued the rubbings from demolished architecture.

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— Originally published as "Zhongguo, Changchun: Jianzhuwu chajian yu tayin xingwei baogao" in *Heipishu [Black Cover Book]* ed. Zeng Xiaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, with Feng Boyi (Beijing: privately published, 1994), 101–2. Translated by Kristen Loring.

## '94 ACTION PLAN FOR DEBRIS SALVAGE SCHEMES FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS (1994)

By Zhan Wang

Date: October 12–14, 1994

Location: Region east of Wangfujing Street, where the buildings were to be demolished

The commercial area in Wangfujing Street is funded by businessmen from Hong Kong, where the old, small, and simple houses have experienced the vicissitudes [of time]. Although they were beautiful buildings that combined Chinese and Western styles of architecture, they could not escape the fate of being demolished because the capital needs modernization and a commercial district.

On October 12, I had decorated the half-torn-down debris for a whole day.

The objects and the ways I saved them:

1. What was left in the debris was only one red pillar with a joist. First, I brushed the pillar with a brush to make it clean, then I painted the joist with red paint.
2. Then I cleaned the half-leftover white door frame and painted it with white paint.



Zhan Wang. *Ruin Cleaning*.  
1994. Color photograph of  
performance and installation

3. I cleaned the decorative ceramic tiles with a piece of cloth.
4. I decorated a wall with indoor coating materials.

Tools I used: Brushes, detergent, broom, cloth, trays, various color paints, indoor coating materials, etc.

Partner: An assistant.

Results: Late afternoon that day, bulldozers began to tear down those houses, and a few days later, there appeared a devastated tract of land.

Zhan Wang  
1994.10.14

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— From an unpublished manuscript provided by the author.

## **NEW MAP OF BEIJING: TODAY AND TOMORROW'S CAPITAL — ROCKERY REMOLDING PLAN (1995)**

By Zhan Wang

Every corner of the capital city today already displays characteristics of the industrial age, but traditional "artificial rockery" (*jiashanshi*) still appears here and there. It used to be that these small pieces of natural rockery — as artificial mountains — would be sufficient for satisfying people's needs and desires to return to nature. But, because of the changes in the built environment, this traditional ideal is becoming increasingly ill-suited for our time. I have therefore chosen a kind of man-made, mirrored surface with a stainless-steel material [for my project]. Duplicating and remolding the natural rock, and utilizing the shiny, flashy features of its exterior, I hope that this can supersede and perhaps temporarily furnish a medium for a new dream. The plan for remolding is as follows:

1. Use the city of Beijing as the site of experimentation. Select samples — several existing "artificial rockeries" in front of modern buildings — and transform them. The places I have chosen include the Beijing Trade Center for Science and Technology, Beijing Tibetan High School, the Kunlun Hotel, the Tuanjiehu residential compound, China Photo Service at Xuanwumen, the Baizhifang Road overpass, and the empty plaza in front of Beijing's West Railroad Station.

2. Use imported stainless-steel plates (0.9–1.2 mm thick) to directly copy the original rock. First, forge small pieces and then weld them together, forming a complete copy identical to the original rock. Buff the surface and make it mirrorlike. Replace the original rock with the copy.
3. A transformed stainless-steel rock has the following characteristics:
  - (1) After buffing, the stainless steel will never rust. This will satisfy people's desire for an ideal material.
  - (2) After buffing, the stainless steel will reflect the colors of its surroundings. Nearly colorless itself, the rock will change its colors according to the environment.
  - (3) After buffing, the mirrorlike surface of the stainless-steel rock will show the minute details of the original model. Anything it reflects will be distorted and turned into fragmentary images. This will inspire people's dreams and new hopes.
  - (4) Compared with gold and silver, stainless steel is vastly cheaper. But because it contains a tiny amount of gold, it appears brilliant, lustrous, and glamorous. Using this material one can "pay less for more."

In sum, the most important thing about the stainless-steel rock is that it will be in harmony with the environment, and it will always keep up with the times [because it is only a reflecting surface]!

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— Originally titled "Beijing xintu: jintian he mingtian de shoudu — jiashanshi gaizao fang'an" (unpublished manuscript). Partially translated in Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, and University of Chicago Press, 1999), 135. Remaining part translated by Peggy Wang.

### **ONE HOUR GAME (YOUXI YI XIAOSHI) (1996 / 1997)**

By Liang Juhui

On a high-rise construction site, I sat inside the workers' suspended elevator cage and spent a frenzied hour playing an electronic video game. At the same time, the cage moved up and down at a high speed. Through the course of the game, I realized the infiltration of the expanding public space into the individual private space, and furthermore searched for a means to reconcile the passive and active conditions.

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— Originally published as "Youxi yi xiaoshi" in *Huipishu [Gray Cover Book]* ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1997), 99. Translated by Peggy Wang.




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Liang Juhui. *One Hour Game*. November 1996. Color photograph of performance at skyscraper construction site, Tianhe, Guangzhou





Newspaper articles written about Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*, 1998

## REPORT ON ZHANG DALI'S *DIALOGUE (DUIHUA)* (1998) [pl. 31]

By Jiang Tao

### NO PERFORMANCE/CONDUCT SHALL BREACH THE LIMITS OF THE LAW

*Contemporary art is miles away from the narrowly defined concept of traditional art. Contemporary art is closely connected to all aspects of society. For this reason, our reporter interviewed Wang Dalun, commissioner of the Beijing Municipal Commission on City Appearance. According to Wang, the numerous classified ads plastered all over the streets of Beijing have already exhausted their energies. Now, there's the emergence of "graffiti," such as the image of a head. All of this qualifies as illegal conduct.*

**Reporter:** After the "Ma Gen Ma" event, city residents have started to notice the image of a head scrawled everywhere on the street. Some believe that the image of the head is an artistic performance to be distinguished from the little ads on the street.

**Wang:** As far as we are concerned, the two are the same. Artistic performance should be conducted in galleries and not on public structures. No performance/conduct shall breach the limits of the law. Therefore, we are certain it is illegal conduct.

**Reporter:** How will you handle it?

**Wang:** Pursuant to Section 17 of China's City Appearance, Environment, and Sanitation Regulations, "No individual or entity shall scrawl or carve upon buildings, facilities, and trees." Chapter 5 of the Beijing Municipal Appearance, Environment, and Sanitation Regulations also expressly stipulates: "Those who shall scrawl and carve on buildings and other facilities are ordered to erase their markings and shall be admonished and fined." Accordingly, we will demand him to clean up [his graffiti] and will subject him to a fine within the range of 200 to 500 *yuan*.

**Reporter:** People usually have to go through a process before being able to understand avant-garde art, beginning initially with antipathy and gradually moving toward

appreciation. Perhaps people haven't realized its value and will tolerate and understand it in the future.

**Wang:** It's hard to say at this stage. Perhaps the law will change in the future, but again it depends on the situation at that point. We enforce the law. Whatever the law allows, we do; whatever the law forbids, we take as illegal. Regardless, graffiti violates relevant administrative regulations. Before the return of Hong Kong, relevant municipal departments organized people to clean up the image of the head under the overpasses of the Second and Third Ring Roads.

**Reporter:** Could you please estimate the amount of manpower spent and the fiscal burden incurred by the cleanup of the images of the head?

**Wang:** We haven't tallied the numbers, and can't give you a random figure.

#### PEOPLE BELONG TO SOCIETY, AND HAVE TO LIVE IN SOCIETY

*Specialists from within the art world harbor as much admiration as resentment with regard to the images of the head, but they all share the same understanding: contemporary art has walked out of the ivory tower and is receiving increasing attention from society . . .*

**Deng Fuxing (Director, Research Institute of Fine Arts, Chinese National Academy of Arts):** As a form of contemporary art, it is somewhat close to the relatively well-known work *Red Umbrellas (Hong san)* [title is actually *Walk Red (Zou hong)* — Ed.] from a couple of years ago. Because it's painted on the street, it's very pedestrian, very pop. "Pop" means pedestrian and popular. The hallmark of contemporary art is interpretation, including the motive and goal of creation. It's more widely practiced in the West. These head images are close to the series of little figures you see in the New York subway. They are symbolic. But the symbol in *Dialogue (Duihua)* is simple. The head images are painted alike, and the artist is very proficient in what he does. Here, what's important is not the image itself, but the universality of its extension and the impact to the public space. Moreover, the majority of his head images are done on dilapidated walls on the street, the conduct of which is itself quite eerie. All in all, it belongs to the category of Pop art, but it also includes elements from Conceptual art, performance, and installation.

**Yang Yongshan (Vice-President, Central Academy of Arts and Crafts):** I have a negative viewpoint on this incident. It damages the image of our city and falls far short of being art. Art has to be beautiful, but this has no aesthetic effects at all and instead invites disgust from our city residents. Therefore, I believe its location and the method in pursuing artistic expression are inappropriate. An idea is an idea, but you've got to consider it in its entirety. In San Diego, in the United States, there's a place where graffiti is allowed. I once paid a visit just to see it. Some of it is to protest racial discrimination; some of it just consists of abstract patches of colors. This is normal and within the limits allowed in public space. If a painter has some ideas and a desire to create, he can go paint some frescoes. Rock paintings from ancient times also bear images. But, what do these bald heads stand for? Some say it's a skinhead. Also, the images use a lot of spray paint. If only he could've used it in proper places! So, somebody better tell the artist not to continue. It's senseless.

**Zhang Zuying (Secretary, China Association of Oil Painting):** I believe it's performance art in terms of the artistic conduct, but when artists create, they ought to limit themselves to what's allowed by law, and should not scrawl on the street. It's the same overseas as well. If one wants to decorate a building, he has to submit an application to the local government, and can only proceed when his application is granted. The performance art of *Red Umbrellas* [*Walk Red*] a couple of years ago in China, for instance, was permitted by the Department of Forestry and Parks.

People belong to society, and have to live in society. Individual creation and the sanitation of an entire city need to be moderated. It's not permitted to damage the look of the city in order to satisfy some individual predilections. Furthermore, [it] doesn't have much value from an artistic perspective.

**Yin Shuangxi (art critic):** This is a contamination of the environment. Scrawling one's signs in front of a captive audience is an affront to our vision, and an invasion of individual conduct into the public space.

**Ai Weiwei (avant-garde artist):** An artist can't really be faulted for wanting to express his opinion through a certain means. The artist believes that his works need to be painted on the street to be contrasted with commercial ads in order to arouse anger, displeasure, confusion, or sympathy. Expressive graffiti like this is commonplace in the West, but is also limited by the law. It's hard to judge art with the yardstick of the law, and it's hard to effect change in the law by means of art.

#### MODERN CITIES ARE VERSATILE AND TOLERANT

*Do Beijing residents actually like it?*

**Wang Xiaohong (corporate clerk, 20 years old):** When I first saw them, I was repulsed. I didn't understand what it meant — the bald head. I didn't know who painted it or for what reason. Later, a colleague told me that it's a sort of art called graffiti and it's very popular abroad. Then I thought about it, and it doesn't feel that odd. Since anyone can sing whatever song he likes on the street, why can't artists paint a few things? When you get used to it, it's not that bad. The formalistic signs are kind of hip.

**Liu Zhiwei (worker, 25 years old):** Those heads on the street, they are quite boring. What the heck is it? A head. What on earth is it for? All the streets are filled with it. I bet the guy has too much time on his hands and was trying to come up with ways to amuse himself. Probably a nut job too. I have no idea what's so good about those heads.

**Unnamed government official (40 years old):** Whether it's a street ad or it's performance art, as a city resident you've got to observe the most basic rules of conduct. These heads obviously harmed the look of our city — Beijing — and damaged the image of our capital, and this is an uncivil act. I suggest relevant government agencies find the artist as soon as possible and direct him to clean it up. The city of Beijing promulgated the Convention of City Residents a long time ago. I believe the key point is enforcement. Everybody should maintain good manners and bear public responsibilities.

**Gao Quanxi (scientific researcher, 35 years old):** From the perspective of society, these head images are at odds with some [social] requirements. But, from an individual

perspective, I understand this type of conduct. They are different from those trashy little ads on the street. We should acknowledge that it's a type of performance art. Artists paint outdoors on the walls of buildings to express their particular feelings. They have their creative inspirations. I feel like artists are usually individualistic and even naïve. We should be more tolerant. However, artists should also have some self-discipline and shouldn't be too unscrupulous. They should do what they can to make their works prettier. If artistic graffiti expressed their creative sincerity and beauty, it would become a cultural attraction for a city.

**Maomao (newspaper reporter, 28 years old):** I'm fine with it. Every day on my way to work when crossing Sanlitun, I enjoy the way these images of heads complement the gray tone of the walls. I find the modern city to be versatile and tolerant. The art of graffiti may very well be one type of city culture.

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— Excerpts originally published in *Lantian — Zhongguo minhang bao* [*Blue Sky: Civil Aviation Administration of China Newspaper*], March 27, 1998. Translated by Kela Shang.

**A DIALOGUE ON *DIALOGUE* (2000)** [pl. 31]  
 Conducted by Gou Hongbing with Zhang Dali

**Gou Hongbing:** I would like our conversation to unfold starting from some detailed, even [seemingly] trivial issues, because that may be the most effective way to approach the truth. Would you mind if we start with some more penetrating questions?

**Zhang Dali:** Certainly not, because conversation is an experience in its own right.

**Gou:** Let's talk about the signs you use. We already know what they stand for, such as money and violence, and the head represents conversation, but do others understand your signs? How do they interpret your symbols?

**Zhang:** I believe that I used some of the most simple and obvious symbols, like signs used in the airport, waiting rooms, and other public spaces. You don't need to think about it — they provoke an immediate reflex. They even stimulate the central nervous system in people's brains, telling you their meanings and blatantly demonstrating their force. In particular, when they appear repeatedly in a tumultuous city that is full of dramatic changes and unrestrained expansion, they cast a stark contrast with this changing backdrop. They hint at their *raison d'être*. I want to tell the public that what I mean is exactly what they see. The profile of this face is a mirror reflecting the city we're living in — it reflects the city's psyche and the people's appearances. I also want to tell everybody how — in this most despicable and profit-seeking environment, in a place filled with red slogans — you can control yourself and not be ruined by prostitution.

**Gou:** You must want to impact society through your signs. What might that impact be? A realistic, for example, critical meaning? Through your long-term artistic performance, do you mean to point to a specific kind of ethics within the repetition of your performance? Because the meanings of the signs are definite, your art — at least as the formal medium of your artistic vehicle — returns to strong social action; then what about art?

**Zhang:** Right, it has already had an impact, at least on everyone who has seen it. At this stage, I particularly emphasize the public aspect in my work. For instance, I call my performance *Dialogue* so that at the very least it's not a sole individual's affair. Contemporary Chinese avant-garde art needs to join the masses and become part of people's lives. This is a problem of our era. Actually, the content of art today reveals artistic initiative. Art should no longer hide itself in an obscure realm like an illegitimate child. It should make its stance known. Of course, it definitely has moral and critical obligations. The foremost feature of contemporary avant-garde art is its critical potential. Its target may be art itself, or it could be matters outside of art. Because artists don't concern themselves only with the internal laws of art, things happening outside of art necessarily find their way into artists' creative ideas. The concern and emphasis of avant-garde art is on people's real-life experiences and existence. It's closer to our internal world. Since the day it broke free from aesthetic formalism, it's been a sword that makes some people and some groups anxious and uneasy, the most direct objections being "don't understand it," "it's not art," "this is a bad influence," "it's not pretty," so on and so forth. This kind of childish judgment is nonsense and makes one sound like an imbecile. Contemporary art doesn't care what is beautiful and what is ugly. In our society, questions of confusion, violence, and cultural inheritance that impact our existence cannot be answered in terms of what is beautiful or ugly. What we see today cannot be explained by past aesthetic experiences. Artists must take powerful measures to intervene in society and make art that's no longer dull and vapid. Artistic initiative must truly be controlled in the hands of artists, rather than continuing to serve as manuals for state apparatuses. The long-bygone ivory tower, after undergoing demolition and restructuring, can no longer offer us a place of shelter. Likewise, the notion of art ought to be redefined accordingly.

— Excerpted from an interview originally published as "Guanyu Duihua de duihua" in *Wenhua yu daode* [*Culture and Morality*], 2000: no. 4, 35–36. Translated by Kela Shang.

## Sociality in Contemporary Art

### STATE OF EXISTENCE (1994)

By Zhu Fadong

Presently, art has become a state of existence. To recount or reflect upon this, an artist must eliminate texts and foreground his own conditions of existence.



Zhu Fadong, *Zhu Fadong, Missing Person Announcement*, 1993. Collage of ready-made paper materials. 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (30 × 42 cm). Collection Mr. Huang Liaoyuan, Beijing Art Now Gallery

I always seek a mode of performance that fosters a relationship between art and the public. This kind of relationship does not refer to the issue of whether or not the work suits the public's taste, but whether an artist has found some medium for conveying his art to the public. The medium also makes known the artist's persistent attitude and state.

In 1993, I completed the performance *Missing Person Announcement* (*Xunren qishi*), in which I used my conditions of existence as the subject of my art, and attempted to make it the medium itself.

In 1994, I began the performance *This Person Is for Sale* (*Ciren chushou jiage mianyi*) in Beijing, which was another experiment in my understanding of this issue. This project will continue for one year.

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— Originally published as "Shengcun zhuangtai" in *Heipishu* [*Black Cover Book*] ed. Zeng Xiaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, with Feng Boyi (Beijing: privately published, 1994), 57. Translated by Kristen Loring.

## **12 SQUARE METERS (12 PINGFANG MI) (1994)**

By Zhang Huan

The source for my creative inspiration comes from the most inconspicuous aspects of daily life, the matters that are easily neglected. For instance, in the common activities of everyday life, such as eating, working, resting, and defecating, one experiences the most essential aspects of being human while also experiencing a kind of contradiction between human nature and the environment in which we live. *12 Square Meters* was produced in this way.

One afternoon, I went to a public restroom in the vicinity of the village. I discovered that there was really no way of planting a foot in there, so I tried to shift my position but, even so, I decided that I had better ride my bike to the lavatory in the village office. When I entered the restroom, all of a sudden there were countless flies swarming everywhere. I immediately came up with the idea for this work.

I try my best to experience an extant reality throughout the process of my work. Only when I finish a work can I finally realize what I have achieved and what I have expressed. I loathed the performance element within the work.

1994.6

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— Originally published in *Heipishu* [*Black Cover Book*] ed. Zeng Xiaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, with Feng Boyi (Beijing: privately published, 1994), 71. Translated by Kristen Loring.




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Zhang Huan. *12 Square Meters*. 1994. Photograph of performance. Chromogenic print, 40 × 60" (101½ × 152.4 cm). Photograph by Rong Rong



Wang Jin. *Ice · '96 Central Plains*. January 28, 1996. Photograph of performance, Zhengzhou, Henan. 72<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 50<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (185 × 129 cm). Sigg Collection, Switzerland

### **ICE · '96 CENTRAL PLAINS (BING · 96 ZHONGYUAN) (1996 / 2000)**

By Wang Jin

Upon seeing *Ice · '96 Central Plains* in Zhengzhou in the midst of the trade wars in central China, one could say that the semantics of this work are complex and multilayered. It's not important to categorize it as a particular style of art; it is merely an attempt to initiate a new artistic concept through a mode of direct communication with the audience. This prompts the audience's critical participation while also revealing their evaluations of preexisting experiences and the rules governing their living spaces.

In my view, the importance is not in the size of the ice wall, nor does it lie in the manpower, resources, and scale utilized in the implementation of the work. Rather, the significance of the work is in whether or not it accurately grasps the various relationships that culminate from the form of the work. This means the possibility for extending and expanding upon the effect produced by the collision of thoughts between the artistic subject and the audience. The significance is not in the transparency of the ice, but in our ability to grasp the power of these materials and the act of freezing popular consumer goods within the ice. There is a certain critique behind this action; it reveals our attitudes and positions while giving the audience an opportunity to soberly and rationally reflect on their true values. This is not only accomplished by the visual effect of ice, nor is it completely an allusion to ice (water) subduing fire. Instead, it seeks to use the ice to publicly declare a kind of [voice of] reason, like going through a baptism, using a rational approach to address the present trade wars and rampant consumerism in China. The significance is not in the duration of this work of ice, but rather in the moment of reemergence of the consumer goods that have been baptized by frozen water. It is precisely the intersection between the execution of this work and the trade war that intensifies the power of expression and dissemination of *Ice · '96 Central Plains*.

*Ice · '96 Central Plains* is groundbreaking in its controversial concept, the participation of the audience, and the public's intimate experiences with the on-site realization of the work. The very nature of the work surpasses the formal properties of its sculptural and installation materials. However, the objective is not to surpass, but only to provide a space to carry out *Ice · '96 Central Plains*. I place more emphasis on the commonalities between the characteristics of ice and the spirit of the artistic subject. As long as the work radiated the spirit of its subject, its content could be extended even more broadly, and the material environment would manifest the state of its spiritual environment.

This particular mode of performance brings forth new perspectives on examining life. It is precisely this mode that expands upon this concept; it does not relate to a particular theory. In this context, art finally has similarities to science and philosophy. *Ice · '96 Central Plains* takes on the weight of materialism and unpacks it, yet it is ultimately unrelated to its material constitution; it is not lipstick or nail polish; not perfume or a mobile phone; not a handbag or a television; not a wristwatch or a gold ring; not powdered milk or shampoo; not an abacus or a retiree card; not a photograph or a fire extinguisher.

April 1996, Sanlihe, Xicheng District, Beijing

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— Published as "Guanyu Bing · 96 Zhongyuan zuopin." Reprinted in Leng Lin, *Shi wo [It's Me]* (Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing, 2000), 136–37. Translated by Kristen Loring.

## ON PAINTED SCULPTURES (1995 / 1997)

By Liu Jianhua

In the latter half of 1995, I began the Discordant series (*Bu xietiao xilie*) and the Concealed series (*Yinmi xilie*) (materials include: fiberglass-reinforced plastic, cloth, acrylic, and wax) to reflect my internal psychological state and uncover more about "performance." These works possess a greater sense of contemporaneity (compared with former works) and criticality (reality), since the joys, sorrows, etc. of our lives, at this moment and in this space, are all embodied in the works' "motifs." Through three-dimensional, colorful, and emotionally provocative forms, these carefree "releases" express and reveal an [artist's] individual emotional realm. This experience differs from the exhaustion of public city sculptures. At the moment, public sculptures don't give voice to the free expression of individual emotional meaning. Thus, individual artistic performances outside of public city sculptures are entrusted with issues and questions related to society and life.

In recent years, with the great advances in the economy, people's external appearances have significantly transformed from former times. It is worth questioning whether or not internally people have changed correspondingly. The plethora of unstable factors in society may also be revealed within behavioral norms. All types of volatile situations occur in every kind of social environment, and the resplendent pretenses of external appearances cannot conceal inner emptiness and frailty. We now occupy this kind of incomprehensible, inescapable, extremely susceptible reality in which everyone feels insecure.

I have always believed that any material at one's fingertips could be made into the medium and method for one's artwork. However, what is critical is whether or not one uses it to express one's own ideas. In the Discordant series, an incomplete portion



of a human body and outdated, traditional, popular clothing seem unsuitably matched. This causes visual discontent and strengthens its hidden nature, all of which occurs in reality. Here, the traditional technique of glazing and the physical form seem unrelated, and it is this point of contradiction that will make people raise realistic topics for discussion.

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— Originally published as "Guanyu caisu zuopin" in *Huipishu [Gray Cover Book]* ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1997), 45. Translated by Kristen Loring.



Wang Jinsong, *Standard Family*. 1996. Color photographs of 200 families, dimensions variable

### **STANDARD FAMILY (BIAOZHUN JIATING) (1996/1997)**

By Wang Jinsong

The creation of *Standard Family* is based on a specific and real cultural background. I selected three-person families — each having a set of parents with only one child — as the subject matter and adopted a photographic method of direct observation to portray the most-popular family archetype of this generation. I also investigated numerous aspects of this archetype, including attire, occupations, life experiences, genetic information, and even the reality and future of the family structure.

I have adopted a bystander's position to follow all of the interesting and intriguing spiritual phenomena within the real lives of the subjects. Through straightforward and matter-of-fact "descriptions," I create theatrical spectacles beyond what one may have expected and endow them with a kind of intelligence and distinctive charm. This approach facilitates an entirely new sense of possibility aimed at establishing new connections to cultural meaning.

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— Originally published in *Huipishu [Gray Cover Book]* ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1997), 33. Translated by Kristen Loring.

### **WHY DO I WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH THE STREETS OF GUANGZHOU? (2002)**

By Chen Shaoxiong

#### **HOW DO I GO ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHING THE STREETS OF GUANGZHOU?**

The invention of photography followed the image principles of the Western traditions of painting, that is, the world is looked upon as though through a window. So classical painting and modern photography both require a picture frame (similar to a window



Chen Shaoxiang. *Street — Haizhu Square*. 1999. Color photograph, 35½ × 47¼" (90 × 120 cm). Collection the artist

frame), and everything else that is going on in the surrounding area is unimportant, apart from the instant taken by the camera shutter. No responsibility can be taken for the before and after development of the event. In this way, photographs are just stills from the drama of human life, with its very complex plot.

In order to seek out these interesting processes, I invented a type of photographic collage whose characteristics are: the spatial surface of the picture can be infinitely extended, and its temporal capacity is exactly the time that I am watching the great drama of human life. Out of respect for every individual being, everyone is a leading actor in this play. Specifically what I do is photograph each person, every street sign, every vehicle, every object no matter how small or insignificant, like the rubbish bins in the streets of Guangzhou, make them into photographs of different sizes according to their proportions, then cut around the outline of these images to make them into 3D card figures, and reconstructed the street scenes at home. This Lilliputian photographic narrative is my interpretation of reproducing real-life images.

#### **AND NOW WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE STREETS OF GUANGZHOU?**

I feel that the speed at which I photograph the streets of Guangzhou will never catch up with the speed at which the streets of Guangzhou are changing. I originally wanted to re-create a Guangzhou out of photographs, documenting item by item, object by object. (People have already pointed out to me that a lifetime would not be long enough to complete this.) But, because the city is not a static object, the actualization of this desire can only be thoroughly realized in a dream. This is indeed the limitation of a person's temporal and spatial existence. For this reason, I don't dare to leave Guangzhou for long, but this is also a paradox, for my living space has become even more restricted.

Recently I was away from home for three weeks, and on taking a taxi back from the airport I saw many young people by the side of the road sitting on plastic chairs and holding iron pipes more than a meter long in their hands. They were dressed in uniform, and behind each person was a large sunshade, with a signboard. They were very much alike in appearance. A big question mark suddenly appeared in my brain: What's happened to Guangzhou?

I remember one summer I was suffering from mild agoraphobia and stayed at home all day watching VCDs. Then, one day I went out into the street and noticed that all the women were wearing much more revealing clothes than before (and regretted my ill-timed phobia). Again, I thought to myself what's happening to Guangzhou? I really have no idea. But I will work hard at this "memorial" to every entity in Guangzhou that I want to set up, for it is certainly much better than traditional photography, which only selects one single thing and leaves out tens of thousands of others!

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— Excerpted from a text originally published in *Chinese Artists, Texts, and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998–2002* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 95–96.

## Experimental Photography and Video Art

An important change took place in Chinese photography around the mid-1990s that redefined it in the world of Chinese art. Before this, independent photographers who had emerged since 1986 basically followed the path of documentary photography (*jishi sheying*) and favored the kind of realistic or romantic representation easily observable in mainstream photography. From the mid-1990s, however, "experimental photography" (*shiyan sheying*) flourished and became a vital component of alternative contemporary art. A new generation of independent photographers who embraced ideas of Conceptual art appeared and forged a strong alliance with contemporary artists working in other mediums. Around the same time, video art also developed from a few isolated projects into a sub-branch of contemporary art practiced by an increasing number of artists.

Documents translated in this section are grouped into two clusters: one on photography and one on video art. The first two essays in the photography grouping describe and contextualize the emergence of experimental photography. After that, statements by some leading artists in this field highlight their interest in photography as a visual technology and in the relationship between photography and memory. The same bipartite structure is repeated in the video grouping: the opening essay by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, who were instrumental in popularizing video art, recalls the development of this art in the 1990s. Project descriptions by several leading video artists follow.

### Photography

#### TRENDS AND STAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHY'S DEVELOPMENT IN MAINLAND CHINA SINCE 1976 (1994)

By Li Mei and Yang Xiaoyan

Nineteen seventy-six was an extremely important year in Chinese history. During that year, Mao died, the Gang of Four fell into disgrace, and the Cultural Revolution came to an end. Fundamental changes began to take root all over China. Without exception, Chinese photography also developed with a strong impetus.

In view of the trend of development, the post-1976 period of Chinese photography can be divided into three stages:



Luo Xiaoyun. *Mainstay*. 1976. Black-and-white photograph

## I. A STARTING POINT: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA FOR CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY (1976–84)

### 1. Photography in the April Fifth Tiananmen Movement

The death of Premier Zhou Enlai provided an opportunity for thousands of Chinese to vent their discontent. During the April Fifth Incident, a number of young participants consciously and bravely documented this important political event. They left behind volumes of valuable images to history. Their wish was very modest: just to record the touching moments right before their eyes. Having experienced the Cultural Revolution themselves, they had a strong sense of social responsibility. Political consciousness was their prime motive to get involved in the movement and record it realistically. Photography was not a pursuit of aesthetics for them. Rather, it was a means to record history for future witness. By doing so, they marked a new era for Chinese photography.

This new era of documentary photography originated from politics. It reflected the complexities of cultural development in China. Prior to 1976, given China's particular social structure, politics was the underlying theme of every aspect of people's lives. It was a shadow people could not shrug off. The heavy political undertone in photography was natural. We could hardly imagine that documentary photography, which originated from the 1976 historical movement, could break away from its own limitations. From 1949 on, the history of photography was merely a history of political propaganda. In-depth documentation, responsible reporting, or professional integrity never got a chance.

### 2. The April Photography Society and the *Nature, Society, and Man* (*Ziran, shehui, ren*) photography art exhibition

Three years after the April Fifth Movement, an unofficial photography art group "April Photography Society" was set up in Beijing. Its members mainly comprised those who had participated in photographing the movement. On April 1, 1979, the April Photography Society held the *Nature, Society, and Man* photography exhibition in Beijing's Zhongshan Memorial Park. It stirred up a tremendous response. The exhibition went on tour in major cities through the help of local community organizations and photography clubs. The quest for a Chinese photographic aesthetic took off.



Some publications of the second *Nature, Society, and Man* exhibition, 1980, Beijing

It was the first time in history since 1949 that photography openly positioned itself in an autonomous domain. The works in the exhibition also reflected such aspirations. This indirectly and strongly protested obsolete “political propaganda” which had dominated Chinese photography for many years. Most photographers in the exhibition showed their passion for ordinary people and their humble livelihoods. They captured their personal serenity, grace, and beauty. At that time, pure aesthetics was highly valued.

Once photography was no longer just a political instrument, it became a pure art form employed by photographers. The learning and adaptation of linguistic approaches from fine arts soon became overdone. With the popularity of a formalistic and pretentious salon style as well as images awkwardly packed with philosophy, photography wandered astray from spontaneous personal feelings into another conceptualization. Many factors led to such an outcome. The most obvious one was people's repulsion toward political dogmatism. A deeper explanation could be the impatience of photographers searching for an appropriate position in fine arts. To explain the phenomenon further, it might be due to the fact that people still could not distinguish between the charm of commercial photography and the genuineness of documentary photography. However, the real reason was the long-standing isolation from trends prevalent in the rest of the world. They lacked a reference system and a valid photographic tradition. So, in their search for an art form, consciously or not, they embarked on a salon style. All at once, petty salon photography became the mainstay of Chinese photography.

## II. THE SEARCH: CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY IN A PLURALISTIC DEVELOPMENT (1985–88)

This was a time when China underwent the most active development in society and culture. It was also the Deng Xiaoping era. In photography, a group of young and middle-aged photographers emerged, most of them turning professional. At that time, the salon style could no longer meet the growing expectations for the medium. People began to hastily adopt, borrow, or even imitate foreign ideas. The quest for change and individualism infused the spirit of photography. All of a sudden, various schools and groups emerged, creating a cultural excitement not seen before.

### 1. Creation and Praxis

After the natural disintegration of the April Photography Society, the Modern Photography Salon (*Xiandai sheying shalong*), established in 1985, took the leading role in photography.

Having reconsidered the status quo, a group of young and middle-aged Shanxi photographers took up the slogan "back to realism." They believed that going back to realism was a prerequisite for developing the diversities of photographic art in this new age. The fine qualities of photographic realism should embrace life, witness history, and propel living. Under the influence of such thinking, in 1987 a national competition, *Journey of Hardship (Jianju licheng)*, was organized. It aimed to make a comprehensive summary of photography over the last ten years to serve as a basis for encouraging people to make reconsiderations from a historical perspective. As a result, they realized their situation and paved the way ahead.

At the same time, motivated by even more controversial concepts, photographers of the new generation took photography through intense experimentation. They were less shackled by historical and cultural burdens, unlike those who had experienced the Cultural Revolution. They emphasized deriving creative passion from personal sentiments or the ever-evolving Western modern art for inspiration. Being extraordinary and outrageous, they again changed old photographic practices. However, they invariably displayed a lack of maturity. It was hard to come across any realized works. Among these photographers, the Rupture Group (*Liebian qunti*) was more self-conscious and mature. They emphasized intuition, improvisation, and the anxieties of irrationality and the subconscious. Their compositions were bizarre and created awkward visual effects.

The League of North River (*Beihe meng*) from Shanghai expressed the solitude and stress of modern cities through various themes. Their photographs created a kind of absurdity and alienation.

Gradually, a new breed of photographer emerged from Sichuan, Hunan, and the northeast. Among them were some fine arts students. They borrowed a more forward-looking perspective from fine arts to stimulate the monotonous photography scene.

## 2. Theory Construction

Strictly speaking, theories of Chinese photography only really came into being during the 1980s. Up till that point, there had been no theoreticians of Chinese photography. Photographic theories were built upon a barren land.

At that time, a lot of photography periodicals, for example *InPhoto (Xiandai sheying)* magazine, started a more systematic and contemporary dialogue. They discussed issues of photographic art across a wide spectrum.

### III. THEORY CONTEMPLATION: TOWARD NEW SOCIAL DOCUMENTATION (*SHEHUI XIN JISHI*) (1988 TO DATE [1994])

From 1988 to 1989, photography was basically at a low point. Many once-active photographers were estranged and at a dead end. By that time, they had to confront their limitations. Some people suggested two directions for changing the situation. One was to learn from the history of photography: seeking a firm foundation for long-term progress. The other was to study the language of photography: positioning photography back at its origins — "photography for photography's sake" — with the camera serving as a simple extension of the eye.

Many photographers turned from exotic elements to their own life. Photography changed from social critique to concern for humanity, and as it became a calm exploration with a historical perspective, it dropped its opportunistic fervor in due time. With individualistic visual efforts, Chinese photography entered into the world arena.

In 1988, the French Arles Photography Festival first organized a *China Special Exhibition*. Besides holding a solo show for veteran photographer Wu Yinxian, five



Zhang Haier. *Self-Portrait*. 1987. Black-and-white photograph, 23  $\frac{3}{8}$   $\times$  19  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (60  $\times$  50 cm). Collection the artist

infamous young photographers were invited. This move shook up the established order in photography, popularizing styles not favored by the *National Photography Exhibition*. Among these photographers, Zhang Haier from Guangdong was especially outstanding.

Zhang was a photographer with a personal style. When he first took up photography, he deliberately looked for his own standpoint. At that time, a group of more mature photographers with distinctive personal styles surfaced. Each one had his own way. They were: Lu Nan, Lin Yonghui, Hou Dengke, Xie Guanghui, Peng Zhengge, Xiao Quan, Yong He, Han Lei, Wu Jialin, Shen Jianzhong, Lu Yuanmin, and Gu Zheng. Together, they became a strong current heading for New Social Documentation, adding substance to Chinese photography.

The trend for Social Documentation embraces the following characteristics: first, photographers became very individualistic, looking for their own stylistic specialties, minimizing imitations; second, social reality became their focus. They tended to use handy cameras to take snapshots, trying to create an image culture with humanistic essence; third, they gave up using a single frame to express an idea. Instead, they used multiple images to depict a theme, reinforcing their personal views through expression.

Strictly speaking, the trend is still evolving and it is difficult to make a conclusive judgment at this stage. However, in the history of Chinese photography, the trend of New Social Documentation, emerging after 1988, attracted global attention. And, it constructively paved the way for Chinese photography to enter the world.

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— Originally published in *Three Photographic Perspectives: Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1994), 13–16. Translation by Guo Da-Nian.

**APPENDIX****ZERO TO INFINITY: THE NASCENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART OF THE 1990S (2002)**

By Karen Smith

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**DOCUMENTING PERFORMANCE**

As I have suggested, [through the first half of the 1990s] even where artists were beginning to employ photographic elements in their work, no one thought of being a photographer. Not even Rong Rong, who [was] initially determined to be an oil painter. Three failed attempts to enter art school persuaded him otherwise, and following experiments with a rented medium-format Seagull camera — the domestic Shanghai brand — he put canvas aside in favor of light-sensitive paper [pl. 32].

When moving to Beijing to begin photography studies at the Central Institute of Art and Design, student poverty brought Rong Rong to an impoverished place, but social comment did not yet interest him. He was drawn to the creativity that the environment spawned in the artists living there. The village was home to Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, Cang Xin, the poet/singer Zu Zhou, and numerous others, who collectively christened it the East Village. The artists were almost entirely unknown. Publicizing events was not a sensible option. Thus, with only a limited audience to spread the word, Rong Rong's photographs became testimony to the East Village "movement." His stills successfully captured the tense anxiety and bated silence that underlay all gatherings and the darker reality which these artists faced every day. Each of these artists eventually achieved recognition, but external awareness of their art was undeniably fast-tracked via the images taken by Rong Rong and Xing Danwen.

Ma Liuming later used a camera in his performances with a self-timer that allowed him to photograph himself with his audience, but his work, like that of Zhu Ming and Zhu Fadong, was primarily about performance, not photography.

The performance art movement gained currency with the East Village's group ethic from early 1994. That did not mean that other artists were not experimenting with performance, nor with photographic documentation of their endeavors. Here, Wang Jinsong, Liu Anping, and Zhang Shaoruo stand as early pioneers of performance photography. Wang Jinsong and Liu Anping recorded their joint performance pieces in images of varied quality. Where one was immediately aware that the photograph is of an act, the act took precedence over the "photograph" [pls. 33, 34, 35].

Wang Jinsong acquired a camera in 1992, but it did not occur to him to use it to make "art" until 1996, when he produced *Standard Family* (*Biaozhun jiating*), which we will look at later. He had a fabulous eye and would be asked by many artists to capture their performances, like Wang Jin's *Red Train Tracks* (*Hongse tiegui*), in 1994.

Zhao Shaoruo's early experimentation with photography followed in the well-trodden footsteps of official practice of rewriting pictorial history by reordering political line-ups. He appropriated known images of Mao amongst the people, which he re-created, inserting himself as the radiant heart of the crowd. While this was not great art, it was in line with the mood of the times. In commandeering the same type of political and cultural signifiers, Zhao Shaoruo's photomontages paralleled the growth of Political Pop in painting. The technique was instantly apparent to a non-Chinese audience, which delighted in avant-garde works loaded with readable, daring iconography. Especially as the artist could have a cameo in his own photographs.

In summer 1994, at the home of artists Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, Wang Jin presented a test print of *Red Dust* (*Hongqi qu*), hot from the darkroom. It was a stun-





*New Photo Magazine*. 1996–98

ningly arresting image of the artist standing on an idyllic stone bridge above a gently meandering stream, flanked by lustily vegetated banks somewhere deep in China's agricultural heartland. Wang Jin's then-long hair echoed the flow of water, and the red dust he was emptying from a sack in his hands descended to the tributary's surface like a delicate autumn mist.

Lin Tianmiao was moved to question the artist's motive for what appeared a deliberate desecration of the environment. Wang Jin, ultimately concerned with making a visual impact, denied desecration. The ensuing discussion illustrated the varying attitudes towards environmental issues amongst artists. Blissful ignorance lay in provision for what seemed almost moral anarchy in photo works of the late 1990s.

In 1994, Wang Jin — also a graduate of Zhejiang Academy — used photography to record an event in step with East Village performers.<sup>1</sup> He continued with works like *To Marry a Mule* (*Gen yitou luozhi jiehun*) (1995) and *100%* (*Baifen zhi bai*) (1999). The success of these, particularly *To Marry a Mule*, added fuel to the fire that claimed the photographic "record" as the all-important cash cow.

It was another exhibition in 1995 that effected the next alteration in views held of photography. Almost no photo works had yet been exhibited in China although several had been published at home and abroad.

This "first" exhibition highlighted the Beijing art circle's conservative perceptions of the medium but did precipitate a degree of change.

In October 1995, Yan Lei — and the fact that he too graduated from Zhejiang Academy suggests a pattern here — showed photographs of two performance works in his solo show *Invasion* (*Jinru*). The performances were done in private without an audience, so the photographs were the artworks.

If photography purveyed truth, then mightn't it be capable of capturing images of reality stranger than fiction? East Village performance works were not always accorded credibility as art, but the photographs that documented them were compelling for the "truth" they depicted. However, the opening of Yan Lei's exhibition produced an outcry against "performances fabricated for the camera." It was curious given that photographer-artists like Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura were at that time riding high on the success of imitating and re-creating familiar scenarios for the camera. There would be a 360-degree turn around in attitudes in 1998, but in 1995, "standards" set by the brute actuality of East Village performances, meant that to be credible an act had to be authentic, no "cheating" allowed.

Yan Lei's actions were real enough yet the works were intended to convey more than the document of an event. He was deliberately tampering with "truth," what it

was and how it was appraised. The aim was to play with audience perception. Unfortunately, at that moment, no one wanted to be toyed with. Artists did not wish to be challenged by other artists. Tolerance was low.

The breakthrough in altering attitudes was wrought by Zheng Guogu, whose series *The Life of Youth in Yangjiang* (*Yangjiang qingnian de shenghuo*), begun in 1995, validated play-acting to the hilt. Anyone who took these images for real was plain naïve. Zheng Guogu's native town was a stone's throw from Guangzhou, where the Big-Tailed Elephant group (*Da wei xiang*) resided. The group was a primal influence in the region, forward-looking in concept and diverse in use of materials, which often included photography, primarily as stills. It was present in their collaborative and independent activities as documentation and an element of a piece like Xu Tan's *Prostitute* series (*Jinü*) or Chen Shaoxiong's projection works. The geographical location provided a specific set of influences for artists within its sphere. It was just over the border from Hong Kong and part of the Pearl River Delta region, a special economic and trade zone. Daily issues were more localized than the politically driven ones that manipulated agendas in the north. Guangzhou's youth were particularly conscious of the unsupervised squandering of cash and time enjoyed by the progeny of the Hong Kong elite.

Exploiting local responses in deliberately obvious parodies of dressing up and grown-up make-believe, Zheng Guogu relayed the narrative of his stories through negative-sized contact prints placed in rows on a single sheet of paper like a storyboard for a film. Cruel mockery was made to appear as heaps of fun. He even enacted his own ideal wedding suffused with the idealized romance promoted on every billboard on every corner. The practice of using multiple images to complete one work created rhythmic flows that reinforced the farce of the romp. But soon his frames started to appear like real life. Or was it that real life had grown increasingly fantastical and performed in line with his photographed performances? The mood became cynical as he manipulated fragmented porn images, making ugly distortions of that which was meant to excite. Whilst the police dealt with the nastiness of vice, Zheng Guogu's subject paralleled an official campaign to oust distributors of pornographic material. The artist hinted at the nastiness of minds that thrilled to manufacture stimulation.

The issue could have been interpreted in many ways. Zheng Guogu was just making art. 1990s Chinese art played with racy topics in a syncopated fashion, groomed and combined for immediate impact, a momentary jerk of emotion and a lingering nod to the gray matter that never quite explained itself. Zheng Guogu's photography was ahead of itself, and his work inspired a bevy of followers dedicated to youthful fantasy, like that subsequently employed by Yang Yong, whose photographic documentation of "twenty-four hours in the life of bored but cute twenty-something Shenzhen girls of dubious employment" owed much to the narrative style evoked in Zheng Guogu's work. Perhaps the most important contribution Zheng Guogu made to the advance of contemporary art photography in China was in evacuating the sense of preciousness that had crept into overly posed images of artists performing. It was an awareness that both he and Yan Lei would continue to exploit though not always via the medium of photography. And he made the multiple key.

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**Note**

1. Department of Chinese Painting, 1987.

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— Excerpted from *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 39–50.



Zhuang Hui. *Shooting a Group Portrait*. 1997. Color photograph, 3'4" × 24'11"  
(101 × 760 cm). Collection the artist

## I ONLY CHOSE THE "GROUP PORTRAIT" (1997)

By Zhuang Hui

### CAMERA

1. Actually, I am not that sensitive to [differences among] cameras. Since I have very poor eyesight, all I see through the viewfinder is a blur.
2. I recall meeting some photographer friends at an exhibition; one of them, Mr. F, pulled out a Leica camera that he just bought. They enthusiastically chattered on about this camera's shutter, speed, aperture, etc.; they made me feel as if I had bumped into a group of technicians from the state-owned factories. However, there was a time when I had a fondness toward a camera, a palm-sized Olympus, small but very heavy. My friend Ai purchased it from an antique dealer.
3. I still do not have a camera of my own as of today.
4. The camera I used to shoot the group portrait works was originally a rental from The People's Photo Studio (*Renmin zhaoxiangguan*), which is a famous photo studio. In the early 1930s, a photographer, Mr. Wang from Shanghai, traded an American ten gold bars for this authentic American item. Later it switched hands several times and ended up with Mr. Mai. Although the camera is very old and shabby now, Mr. Mai treats it with great care, as if it were his own eyes. It is a rotatable camera equipped with an adjustable wooden tripod. On top of the tripod there is a motorized head (to facilitate the rotation) with a level at the center. The photographer adjusts the level to the tripod support, positions the camera, assembles the back and parts, uses the handle to fine-tune everything, arranges the people to be photographed according to the proper alignment (a 360-degree arc centered around the camera), and presses the shutter. The camera pans from left to right until done. The camera exposure uses a thin thread [of light], and the mechanized head rotates with the camera synchronously to expose the film. It is said that Shanghai Camera Factory manufactured similar products in the early 1960s, but stopped because of low demand. The Tianjin Camera Factory had a similar experience. However, presently there is a master in Houma in Shanxi Province who reworks old cameras into this model, and the rotation of his product is battery operated. Even though the rotation speed of his cameras can be uneven because of the voltage instability, many who want this type of camera place their orders there. And each machine only costs several thousand RMB [*renminbi*].

5. The film is 8 inches wide, and the length can be extended up to 3 meters if needed. The traditional developing techniques dictate that the negatives cannot be enlarged or reduced, the prints will be true to the size of the negative.
6. After shooting, I plan to use color ink-jet printing technology to enlarge the prints to 1 meter in height, and extend the length accordingly. Then I will exhibit them in different cities in China and abroad. The questions can be intensified only when these different group portraits are placed in the same space.

#### GROUP PORTRAITS, AUTHENTICITY, NEW REALITY

1. My father had a bright and cheerful personality and was a hardworking professional photographer. In the early days of postliberation China, he traveled with his camera to shoot portraits for local people. In the mid-1950s we relocated from Henan Province to the remote Northwest, Yumen, allegedly in order to escape bandits. Later my father opened a very small photography studio, the only one in town. But, it did not last long as it was absorbed by the state during the Great Leap Forward. I can still recall, when I was old enough to begin remembering things, my father was often invited to go to places far away to shoot portraits for the Agricultural Reclamation Regiments stationed at the northwestern border. He often took me with him. I always sat in an old jeep, peering around. It often took several hours on dirt roads in the Gobi Desert for us to reach a group of barracks. These places are all similar. Everything seemed to be scorched by the sun's fire; a dull barrenness everywhere save for the rare green of a few rows of poplar trees. In a temporarily vacated office, my father would cover all the windows with black cloth. Those young fathers, mothers, and children were buzzing with excitement, as if it were the New Year. When the shooting started, the adults would be given a number and called on by a cadre in a four-pocket suit. It took a long time, usually from noon till dusk, to finish photographing the regiment. I often watched my father sticking his head into the black cloth, squeezing the brown rubber ball in his hand. Then the flash glared, followed by darkness. All these moments, like a series of mysterious signs, eventually became the permanent memory my father left with me, as he departed from us in the winter when I was seven; he died of septicemia.
2. I often revisit the pictures that my father left; there are group portraits of my mother, my sister, my brother, and of himself and his friends.
3. I am moved by the tranquil and solemn composure of the people in these portraits. Why would people have such an intuitively calm reaction when facing the camera? When a friend from the United States, Mr. W, paid his first visit to my studio to talk about my work *One and Thirty (Yige he sanshi ge)* we discussed some topics related to this question. The very instant when one faces the camera lens, there is a transitional process from psychological activity to spiritual activity, because once the photographic image is developed and printed, signs of an individual's image and identity are fixed in the frame. This is a process where the material world is spiritualized, a ritual in which people encounter the material world face-to-face. Essentially, it directly stems from existing primitive religious emotions. This is all closely related to people's reflections on experiences with life and death.
4. Then what about the group portrait? It is a display of public relations. For example, when I choose different groups of people to make the portrait, first I have to deliberate on the plausibility of this group being a group. A group of peasants can never have a group portrait photographed with a group of scholars or a group of factory workers (although it was possible during the Cultural Revolution), because differences in their division of labor, lifestyles, and worldly status are too drastic. Meanwhile, a group portrait with more than a hundred participants reflects a familial relationship among

contemporary people. This type of group portrait, I suppose, is hardly achievable in the United States. Mr. W replies, this is of course due to differences between social systems. The American individualist spirit stresses independence, while Chinese society is based on and guided by a proto-group-oriented concept. Although things have changed significantly since the opening and reform movement, I believe this mode of the group portrait is to become a peculiar feature of the current social structure, but won't survive too long into the future.

5. I was asked by my friend Gao to join two other photographers on a trip to the countryside of the ancient city of Daming. That is the village where Gao grew up, and everyone there knows him very well. It took the chief of the village quite a long time on a loudspeaker to gather the villagers (about 400 people in total) into an empty space in the local primary school compound. It was rather difficult to pose this group because there were many unresolved feuds and fights among the families, neighbors, and lovers. Some even quit because of dissatisfaction with the positioning. After several hours Master Li called for the shot to start, and the machine started to rotate. Then I saw the camera skip a few times during the rotation, and my heart was in my throat during the whole process.
6. I did not anticipate that afterward the village cadres, several elders, and thirty-some other people would be waiting for me to have dinner with them. I asked Gao to help take care of this matter. The only pub in the village had prepared food for all these people on the chief's orders before our arrival. Fortunately, prices are very low in this part of the country; after Gao helped arrange the matter, I left the money and fled in haste. Frankly I usually love to drink, but I anticipated grave consequences if I stayed there, leaving myself in the hands of all those people. It reminded me of the time when I shot in Beizhi Village where during lunch I drank with a few local cadres, hoping to settle the arrangements for the afternoon shooting. My assistants failed to stop them from endless toasting (if I refused to drink a toast, it would be deemed impertinence). I begged them to have mercy on my drivers and photographers. But myself: we called each other brothers, cups went bottoms up, bottles went bottoms up; I can't remember how many bottles of liquor were consumed. I don't even remember the shoot at all. The initial plan was to shoot the workers from the small local coal mines, but it was impossible to gather all these people, so we changed plans to shoot the local *shehuo* (Shanxi's local traditional folk performance) group. I was in a fog and can only faintly recall the booming sounds of some cannons being set off. Later, Mr. Mai told me I almost died that day.
7. When Mr. Gao saw these pictures, he asked, is this realism? I told him it is not realism in the conventional sense, because the conventional understanding is that artists are nothing but instruments to represent and "create" reality. How to plunge deeply into life, depict life, and reflect life is the theoretical platform for realists. However, my work is simply to document directly and show real objects and events; thus, I think, I avoid the biased error of personal experience to achieve a more objective presentation of reality. If one wants to emphasize the realist significance of my work, then [you could say that] I have a different approach to understanding reality, a neo-realist perspective.
8. I had an argument with Mr. Zhao during his visit. He said, if you are a realist, then why did you painstakingly gather a group to shoot a portrait? This action itself violates the real-life situation of objective reality. I answered that I think your argument is based on a misconception. Some think a photographer could precisely and without error reflect reality by simply pointing and shooting; documenting life with a camera in hand. However, the real situation is not so simple. We can analyze this as follows: at the instant when a photographer presses the shutter, the space that used to be three-dimensional and fluid has actually already been turned two-dimensional and reified.

When the negatives are developed, printed, and cut, the act of photography itself has already been transformed into a process that turns reality into concepts and abstraction. Therefore, some understanding of the meaning of reality or even truth is dependent on the photographer's personal taste and determined by the depth of his understanding of things. I personally think the independence and authenticity of one's mental state is where the nature of truth resides. Therefore, I deliberately arrange all of my group portraits.

9. The complexity of modern multimedia. The transition between ideas old and new. In fact, photography has long lost its original function. I emphasize the independent, irreplaceable, and proto-functions of the material and medium. I am concerned with the primal reality of things.
10. Up to now, I still have not photographed a single one of my works with my own hands. I only chose [the mode of] the "group portrait."

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— Originally published as "Wo jinjin xuanze de shi 'heyings'" in *Huipishu* [*Gray Cover Book*] ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1997), 57–60. Translated by Yinling Liu.

## FRAGMENTS (1998/2004)

By Rong Rong

In the summer of 1998, on the morning of one of Beijing's hottest days, exhausted but unable to fall back asleep, too lazy to move, I started dreaming again. Hazily, I don't know when, my body was once again covered in sweat, all I could do is get up, sternly telling myself, I can't sleep anymore. What's that in my head? I can't remember, there are just some noises from outside, the sounds of Beijing, nothing special, anyway for the past few years there's been construction going on day and night . . .

But there was one thing, it made me tremble. That summer in 1998 I walked aimlessly into an empty house, the owner had moved away long ago . . . and I saw something unexpected . . .




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Rong Rong. From the Fragments series. 1998. Hand-dyed gelatin-silver print, 20 × 24" (50.8 × 61 cm). Collection the artist

In a corner of the empty room I found a pile of negatives, cut into tiny pieces and wrapped in some paper. My heart shuddered, why would somebody want to destroy them? I looked closely at the negatives; not one remained whole. I held the negatives to the sun in curiosity — I wanted to see the pictures. But the pieces were too small. My naked eye could not distinguish the images. I secretly took them home, where that night I couldn't help myself from putting one of the pieces of negatives into my enlarger, turning on the light. Although I had thought about it, I was still surprised to see the images — a breast in one fragment, an upper thigh in another fragment . . . all from some dismembered bodies. There was not a single complete image, but blowing them up in my enlarger I could tell that it was a man and a woman. I stayed up all that night going over the hundreds of pieces of negatives. I was both exhilarated and uneasy. I was discovering traces of something . . .

These fragments, destroyed and thrown out, they would never dream this could happen: they have fallen into my hands, and I have exposed them to the world . . .

— Originally published in Wu Hung, *Rong Rong & inri: Tui-Transformation* (Hong Kong and Beijing: Timezone 8, 2004), 78–79. Translated by Wu Hung.

## A FEW WORDS ON THE PHOTOS (2002)

By Hai Bo

Recollecting bygone days is one of my most frequent pursuits. This purely private and indescribable state has become an important part of my spiritual life. As time passes, the power of recollection has become so strong that I've had no choice but to find a way to express such memories.

These photos are the result of my work over the past few years. Most of the people in them are my friends, my parents, and myself. By recomposing old photographs and strictly adhering to the way that they look (for example the people in them must stay in the same positions), I mean not only to show the changes that have taken place in people and society, as well as the passage of time; even more importantly, I mean to re-create the past, if only for the moment the shutter snaps, I am enchanted by the fragrance of time.

These photographs are obstinate re-creations of past times. Maintaining this kind of unrealizable dream is my understanding of what art really is. To look for and find a meaningful photograph, then to seek out the people in it, is in one respect a more meaningful process than the actual making of the photograph itself. When you are



Hai Bo. *They No. 6*. 1999. Black-and-white photograph and color photograph, each 16 × 24" (40 × 60 cm). Collection Getty Museum, Los Angeles

immersed in life and time, art is actually very insignificant. Also, I am captive to an indescribable desolation. This style of direct expression without regard to "photographic technique" or "aesthetic taste," without deep consideration, is the way I like to work today.

I mean to take photographs that exist on the line between art and life.

I found a picture totally by chance and in the left corner were the words: "For the future 1973.5.20." Suddenly, a not-so-distant generation became so familiar that it seemed to be engraved on my bones. Those girls in the photograph whose hearts were full of longing. What were they doing and where were they now? Then I thought of the idea to bring them all back together again, and photograph them all in the same position as they were in the original, and take them and myself back to 1973 for 1/125 of a second.

I like concise and simple works of art, some of which even fuse with the ordinary. I believe good art is born on the line between art and non-art. These photographic works are the product of this belief. I hope that they approach my ideal through penetrating the theoretical fog and presentational technicalities and enter into people's hearts.

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— Originally published in *Chinese Artists, Texts, and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998–2002* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 101–2.

## Video Art

### **APPENDIX**

#### **THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEO ART AND THE MATURITY OF NEW MEDIA ART (2002)**

By Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie

We can say that, across the board, Chinese art carries enormous vestiges arising both directly and indirectly from concerns present within society through the 1990s. These were compounded by the artists' instinctive responses to the allure of commercial culture and the popularity of postmodern theories. Against this, individual preferences for video art in China sprang up in a fragmented way, being neither conjoined to, nor bereft from, the social environment. On occasion, works proved to be quite successful. Video art might appear to have flourished in recent years, yet one must recognize that there was a great deal of ersatz work produced. Success is achieved only when the conditions are ripe, and a certain level of progress has been reached.

In 1990, Professor Mijka of the Hamburg Institute of Art brought to China a number of videotapes that had been shown on German television to mark the nine-hundredth anniversary celebrations of the city of Cologne. The video works were shown during two lectures to the teaching staff and students at [Hangzhou's] Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (renamed the China National Academy of Fine Arts in 1995). This was the first time a meaningful connection had been made between video and art in China. In a striking contrast, representatives from provincial television stations across China were simultaneously holding a meeting at Huajiashan Hotel in Hangzhou, during which the videotapes were also shown. The industry professionals showed not the least bit of interest in the works, and the screening was abandoned after one hour.

These events were a springboard that was responsible for structuring the basic development of video art in China. Video art was immediately accepted and utilized by artists. It was never employed as an actively political medium as was the case with early Western video art. Unlike The Street Video Group in Germany in the 1960s,



Chinese artists were not interested in documenting news, recording social reform, or fighting the museum system. On the contrary, Chinese artists took video as a new mode of individual expression, placing emphasis on its aesthetic value.

In 1991, Zhang Peili, one of the organizers of the *Garage Art Exhibition (Cheku yishu-zhan)* in a storage space in Hengshan Road, Shanghai, showed the work *Document on Hygiene, No. 3 [(Wei) zi 3 hao]*. This was the first showing of a video work produced by a Chinese artist in China. It showed the artist repeatedly washing a chicken with soap and water in a basin. In the exhibition space, Zhang Peili placed several rows of red bricks in front of the television monitor to evoke the sense of a meeting. This corresponded to "Political Pop," which had not yet become a recognized genre; yet it was more devious and ingenious in its use of language. Zhang Peili produced three video works in 1992: *Assignment No. 1 (Zuoye yihao)*, *Children's Playground (Ertong leyuan)*, and *Water: The Standard Version Read from the Cihai Dictionary (Shui — Cihai biao zhun ban)*.

*Assignment No. 1* was an installation consisting of six videotapes showing blood samples being taken from human fingers. It was similar in tone to the breaking of glass in *30 × 30* (1988), and the chicken-washing exercise in *Document on Hygiene, No. 3*. *Water* showed a professional news broadcaster from CCTV (China Central Television), reading every explanation of the character "water" from a dictionary.<sup>1</sup> Zhang Peili recreated the same lighting, background, setup, and "face of the nation" as an actual news broadcast, but with the content replaced by a non-expressive and neutral lexicon. Mockery is the timed spirit of 1992, further demonstrated in the way that Zhang Peili synthesized the filmed sequence of washing the chicken to a soundtrack of ancient music entitled *Chun jiang hua yue ye (Blossoms in the Moon over Spring River)*.

After graduating from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Yan Lei came to Beijing, where he produced the works *Dissolve (Huajie)*, *Clear Away (Qingchu)* (1993), *1500 cm* and *Beijing Haw (Beijing hongguo)* (1994). *Dissolve* showed two hands repeatedly playing variations of cat's cradle. *Clear Away* followed the artist as he bent his head in concentration while plucking armpit hair with tweezers. *1500 cm* was shot in four segments, each focusing on a specific yet mundane act of human behavior. The act employed 1500 cm of rubber bands, which he washed, measured, forced into his mouth, and then pulled back out again as magicians do with handkerchiefs. In a similar style to Zhang Peili's *Assignment No. 1*, Yan Lei's three video works were all compiled of long shots taken with a fixed focus from a single camera position. There was almost no narrative within these events because with the aim of recording fact, truth itself was demonstrated to have no obvious process. Conversely, where the mere record of an object is meaningless, action becomes "truth" on the screen. In this regard, the single, fixed-focus, close-up shot then is a compelling medium.

If this interesting approach was found in the work of two artists alone, we might suppose some kind of collaboration or aesthetic influence to be at work between them. Yet, it soon became clear that more and more artists were also exploring this approach. In 1994, *Living with Jika (Yu Jika tongju)* by Li Juchuan, and *Watched Sleep (Bei zhushi de shuiyan)* by Tong Biao, among others, revealed that this phenomenon was the result of a problem: the lack of any other personal inclination. At the same time, if we take a wider view, the situation of that moment largely denied the artists ready accessibility to editing and postproduction equipment. Cameras themselves were often borrowed, so the original concept of these works was aimed at avoiding the subsequent problems of editing. This was a smart move. Unavoidably, the deliberate and repeated paring down of technical elements under these difficult conditions resulted in unbearably simplified work. A love of minimalism, an interest in extreme simplification, and an obsession with process further provided a seemingly profound and self-confident basis for this.

Video art had just colonized an area within visual awareness when it came up against limitations within technology and material. More creative artists actively engaged in the medium by exploiting the circumstance that they found themselves in.

The element of timely relevance has always been key to Qiu Zhijie's approach. In 1992, after three years of continuous work, he completed the piece *Assignment No. 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times* (*Zuoye yihao: Chongfu shuxie yiqian bian* Lanting xu). This was a video recording of fifty overwritings of the famous text. A hand-held brush was delicately moved across a sheet of paper, which was increasingly blackened as multiple layers of the text built up. It engendered a strange, disturbing tension. Following this, sensitivity towards the images became a particular feature of his video works: intense movement, dramatic altering processes, life experience evoked from the physicality of a recorded object, etc. The interests revealed in his works demonstrated less about contemporary concepts than about his broader awareness. Qiu Zhijie's installation works were often pivoted on concept and notable for their philosophical inspiration and inference. These aspects of the works reflect the diorama of his spiritual life. By the time he saw *Buried Secrets* by Bill Viola, whose work represented the US at the 1995 Venice Biennale and who would quickly become the main force inspiring and driving video art in China, video art had become the central focus of his art.

As the 1990s progressed, video art flourished in the Western world, and became embraced by audiences as an independent medium. However, it was something quite beyond the imagination of ordinary Chinese people. Although the circumstances of the moment were difficult, an exhibition of video art seemed necessary. By 1995, the growing practice around the country, albeit scattered, indicated the importance video art was beginning to assume. At the end of 1994, Zhu Jia produced his ingenious work *Forever* (*Yongyuan*), executed by fixing a small camera to the edge of a flatbed bicycle's wheel as the artist pedaled through the streets of Beijing. The image of the streets ceaselessly spins round and round with the changing speed of the flatbed bicycle. When *Forever* was later exhibited in Hangzhou, the images were accompanied by a soundtrack of loud snoring.

In 1995, Li Yongbin finished his first video piece by projecting color slides of his deceased mother onto buildings and trees immediately outside his apartment in the early hours of the morning. As the dawn broke, the image faded and eventually disappeared. His second work, *Face No. 1* (*Lian 1*), was shown at a group exhibition in Hangzhou the following year. Here, a videotaped image of an old man's face is projected onto the face of the artist. The two superimposed faces sometimes coincide and sometimes dislocate. Within the realm of video works composed of long shots, Li Yongbin evolved his own rationale and would continue experiments with projections.

Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao lived in New York for ten years prior to their return to Beijing in 1995. Wang Gongxin produced his first video installation work, *Sky of Brooklyn* (*Bulukelin de tiankong*) [pl. 36], soon after his return. For this, he dug a well within their courtyard home and placed a television monitor at the bottom, which showed the videotaped image of a blue sky over Brooklyn. A voiceover says: "What are you looking at? There's nothing to see here!" in a strong Beijing accent. The underlying metaphor of the work illustrated China's curiosity about the West and the element of desire inherent to that attitude. It appealed to the audience to draw near and then repelled them with a jolt.

In September 1995, Yan Lei held a solo show titled *Invasion* (*Jinru*) in Beijing. The video works *323 cm<sup>2</sup>* and *No. 031007* were less about art than his *Clear Away*. These largely functioned as documentation, relaying on the process of an event that had already taken place.

Chen Shaoxiong, an active member of the Big-Tailed Elephant group (*Da wei xiang*) in Guangzhou, has a unique approach to working with the video medium. With a strong capacity for logistical organization, his work is characterized by two tendencies. His video installations are tight contrapositions of images combined with lambent editing. This is counterpoised by his awareness of the physicality of visual experience. The former impels him to create intricately configured installation works, to frequently use elements to create a kind of rationale, or to follow his preference for forms like word games. The latter allows him to successfully translate what might originally have been relatively uninteresting epistemological issues into a direct, easy language and actual physical experience. Chen Shaoxiong began work on the Sight Adjuster series (*Shili jiaozhengqi*) in 1994, and has persistently pushed the subject to its limit, as demonstrated in the work presented for the exhibition *Image and Phenomena* (*Xianxiang, yingxiang*) in 1996.

In September 1995, Weng Fen and female artist Yan Yinhong held an exhibition titled *A Talk Between a Man and a Woman* (*Nanren dui nüren shuo, nüren dui nanren shuo*) in Haikou. This contained elements similar to a work of Chen Shaoxiong's, *The Bride Changes Her Mind When the Television Channel Is Changed* (*Gaibian dianshi pindao bian gaibian xinniang de jue ding*) (1994). Liu Yi from Shenzhen showed her work *Who Am I?* (*Shei shi wo*) in Beijing. It showed a number of the artist's friends talking about her, which placed an overriding focus on linguistics within the work. The problems that underlie the works by these artists indicate a similar crisis: that their authors were content to focus on terribly simple ideas of little significance.

We find a similar problem in the work of Beijing artist Song Dong, but his obsession with tiny details comes closer to being Zen. Song Dong held a solo exhibition titled *Uncovering* (*Xiankai*) in Beijing. The work shown took the form of projected scenes or close-up shots of lifting a cloth covering various objects. This straightforward methodology became a fertile ground for his work. The installation *Shut Up and Listen to Me* (*Bishang zui, ting wo shuo*) carried a social metaphor. Song Dong placed two television monitors face-to-face, each one playing footage of a close-up shot of one mouth that appeared to be speaking to another, one in English, one in Chinese. His approach was similar to that of Weng Fen but the effect was more concise.

In 1994, Shi Yong and Qian Weikang gained recognition through a series of exhibitions in Shanghai. In Qian Weikang's installation works he often juxtaposes an object with the image of it on the screen, portraying the actual object as a simple physiological phenomenon, or even physical phenomenon. He was not inclined to make explorations of society, culture, and politics. Compared with him, Shi Yong was more of a humanist, although his work exhibited the same kind of straightforward form, smooth surface, and diverse processes. The materials he chose often imbued the work with metaphor. For instance, he approached film and sound based on his attitude toward the mass media. This engendered an independent relationship with electronic media.

As we approached the mid-1990s, Zhang Peili's persistent efforts in the field of video art were paying off. He had gained an increasing number of opportunities to exhibit internationally. As compared with the instinctive spontaneity in his earlier practice, his works now revealed the greater input of researched techniques from Western video art. Zhang Peili regularly used multiple screens in exhibiting his works as an installation in a gallery space. Compared with the close-up shots, fixed camera angles, and repeated movements that characterize his earlier works, he began to create a direct visual impact across the screens. If he merely arranged the monitors and electrical components of his installation to construct the desired effect, then obviously it would be more difficult to imbue the work with historical context and the thrill that

derives from the integration of other objects. These generally appeared to be more delicate. As an excellent artist, Zhang Peili frequently breaks ground with his instinctive sensitivity and accurate grasp of technique and motion, creating a sensation of life with the simplest equipment. A representative later work of this period by Zhang Peili is *Uncertain Pleasure* (*Bu queqie de kuaigan*), produced in 1996.

After moving to Beijing in 1994, Qiu Zhijie spent much time thinking about his earlier work in Hangzhou, which was a series of conceptual works, focused only on pure academic notions. He reduced the enormous volume of content about social culture, at the same time trying to differentiate his work from other small-minded approaches to video, so that his works began to emphasize certain physical sensitivities, as in *Washroom* (*Weishengjian*) and *Hands of Escher* (*Aishe'er de shou*). This tact clearly runs through Zhang Peili's works, whereas Qiu often takes pains to avoid blankness in his video work, and turns the process to focus upon the body, or impels the body to adopt the gestures suggesting a more dramatic plot when the characters perform in front of the camera.

Experimental video as a medium emerged nationwide in China around 1996, and on the odd occasion was included in exhibitions. It was evident that more people were becoming interested in this field. The exhibition *Image and Phenomena* arose from this situation.

When Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun decided to take up this challenge, the biggest problem confronting them was funding. They had absolutely no experience of fundraising, yet through the friendship and trust of their friends Lin Shiming and Hong Lumei, who were doing business in Shanghai, they found sponsorship committed to the event. Without their generous act, we would have had to wait a couple of years to continue the story. As it was, we were able to realize it in April 1996. Artists collaborated to produce two catalogues that were translated into English, but the most important work was to procure the equipment required and to insert an academic structure into the exhibition.

In a non-publicly distributed exhibition catalogue, exhibition curator Wu Meichun outlined her thinking on academicism in *Image and Phenomena*: What possibilities does video art bring to contemporary art? Does video art exist as the image of the phenomenon or the phenomenon of the image?<sup>2</sup>

When everything was prepared, the group of artists participating in *Image and Phenomena* included nearly the entire roster within the field of video art at that moment. "We wished to take a more active stance in facing reality. We could not sit back and wait for a general elevation in the quality and quantity of video works. We decided to take an exhibition as the starting point for exploring video in art. Neither the works nor the act of organizing an exhibition itself was a response to reality."<sup>3</sup> Such zeal tended to spoil things with its excessive enthusiasm and idealistic outlook that refused to acknowledge the reality. Following the exhibition, the exploration of video became a hot topic nationwide. Meanwhile the structural defects and difficulties that were exposed during the preparation for the exhibition provided an impetus for further efforts. The exhibition itself and the response to it became a landmark in establishing a healthy system and environment for creativity that is little more than the predetermined goal of the curator.

The works in the exhibition may be divided into two groups according to trends exhibited. First, the works that were introspective in regard to the medium itself, and which were generally simple in structure. Second, the intricately structured scenes, which pushed at the boundaries of the video's image by adding rich layers and a finer perception. Representative of the first were works such as *Uncertain Pleasure* and *Focal Distance* (*Jiaoju*) by Zhang Peili, *Breath/Breath* (*Huxi huxi*) by Qian Weikang, *Forever* by

Zhu Jia, *Face* by Li Yongbin, *The Afternoon of August 30th (8 yue 30 ri xiawu)* by Tong Biao, and *Absolutely Safe (Juedui anquan)* by Yan Lei. Representative of the second, installation works, were *Present Progress (Xianzai jinxing shi)* by Qiu Zhijie, *Baby Talk (Yingyu)* by Wang Gongxin, *Fish Tank (Yugang)* by Yang Zhenzhong, and *Integrated World (Wanzheng de shijie)* by Geng Jianyi.

*Image and Phenomena* showed a group of unforgettable video works and initiated a series of research and exchange activities. The two catalogues produced, *Documents of Video Art (Luxiang yishu wenxian)* and *Art and Historical Consciousness (Yishu yu lishiyishi)*, presented a compendium of important information about video art in China and abroad. The popularity of the two catalogues demonstrated the impact upon people's understanding and acceptance of video over the next few years.

Following *Image and Phenomena*, which was held at the art gallery of the China National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou in 1996, many high-quality solo exhibitions sprang up in Beijing, such as Wang Gongxin's *Myth Powder No. 1 (Shenfen yihao)*, Song Dong's *Look (Kan)*, Qiu Zhijie's *Logic: Five Video Installations (Luoji: wuge luxiang zhuangzhi)*, and so on. This indicated that Chinese video artists had not only become focal points within the artistic community but had also started to use more mature and individual methods to redraw the map of contemporary culture. Within China, people from different backgrounds such as documentary filmmakers, writers, and those engaged in experimental music or drama began to venture into video art, and various new possibilities for the art form began to develop. Equally, equipment became more affordable with each technological advance, and artists were able to achieve richer effects using their own PC to carry out postproduction — if determined to do so. With the renovation of and change in video technology, this became a trend, along with the use of domestic digital cameras and non-linear video editing systems.

The results were displayed in *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China (97 Zhongguo luxiang yishu guanmozhan)*, an exhibition curated by Wu Meichun. In the catalogue essay "Curator's Thoughts," she wrote: "The real question we face concerns the uses to which video art can be put, not what video art is. It is too early to define. Although standards for video art appear to be falling into place, they are not accepted by everyone. The inherent characteristics of the medium make it powerful yet cheap, intimate yet easy to copy and disseminate. It can expose the truth and be sensitive to the imagination. This exhibition is an attempt to show everything and not to select work to illustrate a specific theme. It is broadly inclusive in its selection and indicates our courage to exist in the world of media."<sup>4</sup>

Wu Meichun mentioned that standards for video art are constantly challenged by a multitude of experiments. At the end of 1998, Huang Yan curated *0431 — China's Video Art (0431 — Zhongguo luxiang yishuzhan)* in Changchun. And, in 1999, Chang Tsong-zung curated *Fast Shots: China, Hong Kong and Taiwan Video Art (Kuajing: Zhong Gang Tai luxiang yishuzhan)* in Macao. The core elements took their lead from *Image and Phenomena*.

The activities of Chinese video artists had begun to attract the attention of international art circles. In 1997, new media works by Wang Jianwei and Feng Mengbo were exhibited in *Documenta X* in Kassel. In 1998, Qiu Zhijie participated in the Berlin video festival *Transmediale '98* and the *Esperanto '98* exhibition in New York, and received invitations from important video festivals in Bonn, Helsinki, and various other places. Chen Shaoping and Qiu Zhijie both participated in *Videos from International Artists* held at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne; Song Dong and Wang Jianwei both participated in *Infoart* in the Kwangju Biennale, curated by Nam June Paik. In 1999, Zhu Jia and Li Yongbin attended the *Worldwide Video Festival* held in Amsterdam. New

media art festivals and institutions worldwide were expressing strong interest in holding an exhibition of Chinese video art. The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Berlin Video Forum each collected video works by Zhang Peili and Qiu Zhijie, and the works of China's new media artists began to appear frequently in festivals of new media art all over the world.

Meanwhile, members of the international art world made frequent visits to China. Rudolph Filindas, director of the New Media Art Center in Germany, gave several lectures introducing new developments at the Goethe Institute in Beijing and Shanghai. Robert Karn, the poetic master of French video art, visited the China National Academy of Fine Arts twice, and left a profound impression on the students. Barbara London, curator of film and video at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, traveled to China in the fall of 1997. She was amazed that China not only had excellent video artists, but also absorbed information at a very rapid speed. An essay of hers was later translated into Chinese, commenting that "the flourishing of China's video art is the starting point of a new circle since the circumference was already closed around new media art in the West."

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#### Notes

1. *Cihai* (Sea of Words) is the name of the best-known and most-complete Chinese dictionary.
2. Wu Meichun, "Image and Phenomena," in a privately published exhibition-related book.
3. Ibid.
4. Wu Meichun, "Curator's Thoughts," in *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China* [97 Zhongguo luxiang yishu guanzhazhan], exhibition catalogue, [Central Academy of Fine Arts], 1997.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 52–60. Translated by Karen Smith.

## SELECTED VIDEO WORKS OF THE 1990S (1992–97/2008)

By Zhang Peili

### ***Water: The Standard Version Read from the Cihai Dictionary (Shui – Cihai biao zhun ban)***

1992

Video recording

Sound, color, 19:35 minutes, PAL system

Project summary: This work shows the Chinese official media newsreader Xin Zhibin reading all of the entries beginning with the word "water" ("shui") from the *Cihai* dictionary at a standard pace from beginning to end. The image is based on the typical




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Zhang Peili. *Water: The Standard Version Read from the Cihai Dictionary*. 1992. Single-channel video, color, sound, 19:35 mins.

portrait seen in Chinese news broadcasts. The Beijing Media Television Center was entrusted with manufacturing the shot.

Exhibition method, one of the following three options:

- a. Wall or screen projection (the width of the projection is at least 1.6 meters)
- b. Broadcast on a 29- to 32-inch CRT video monitor
- c. Broadcast on a 29- to 32-inch LCD video monitor

Equipment needed, one of the following three options:

- a. One projector of 2500 lumens or higher; one DVD player; one audio system
- b. One 29- to 32-inch CRT video monitor; one DVD player
- c. One 29- to 32-inch LCD video monitor; one DVD player; preferably a monitor with a black exterior

Specifications: a video aspect ratio of 4:3; continuous broadcast

### ***Document on Hygiene, No. 3 [(Wei) zi 3 hao]***

1991

Single-channel video recording

No sound, color, 24:45 minutes, PAL

Project summary: This is a video recording of washing a chicken: placing a wet chicken in a washbasin, and then endlessly scrubbing it with soap and water. This action is performed for 150 minutes, until the videotape runs out. The scene is the same.

Film segment: Non-stop recording; interior space with natural lighting; close-up shots; the camera and lens shift positions and are accompanied by sound.

Filming equipment: Panasonic VHS-M3000 camera

Filming location: An office in the Hangzhou School of Arts and Crafts

Filming personnel: Li Jian (teacher)

Postproduction: The recording was cut from 150 minutes to 24 minutes, 45 seconds; hard cut; sound was removed

Editing equipment: VHS recorder/VHS recorder; Betacam editor; Apple computer G5

Editing software: Final Cut Pro 4.9

Output medium: VHS tape; DVD

Editors: The artist and Huang Qiguang

Exhibition method, one of the following three options:

- a. Wall or screen projection (the width of the projection is at least 1.6 meters)
- b. Broadcast on a 29- to 32-inch CRT video monitor
- c. Broadcast on a 29- to 32-inch LCD video monitor

Equipment needed, one of the following three options:

- a. One projector of 2500 lumens or higher; one DVD player; one audio system
- b. One 29- to 32-inch CRT video monitor; one DVD player
- c. One 29- to 32-inch LCD video monitor; one DVD player; preferably a monitor with a black exterior

Specifications: A video aspect ratio of 4:3; continuous broadcast

**Best Before 8/28/1994 (Baoxianqi — 8/28/1994)**

1994

Video installation with 4 videos, 20 televisions

Sound, color, 10–80 minutes, PAL

Project summary: There are four video components in this work: a) dissecting the chicken and getting rid of the internal organs: after cutting the feathers off of the body with scissors, the internal organs are removed, and then the wings, legs, and head are dismembered; b) continuously tearing apart the meat; c) continuously licking the meat; d) continuously stuffing one's mouth full of meat and chewing. The installation includes: suspended television sets, chicken soup boiling in aluminum pots, and electric stoves. The pots and stoves are placed in front of the televisions. From the opening of the exhibition, the stoves are set to low heat to boil the chicken soup. Water is added every day until the exhibition concludes (the date is indicated in the title of the work).

Film segment: Single camera, interior lighting, close-ups; fixed camera locations; camera lens does not zoom in or out; no sound

Cameraperson: Fan Li

Postproduction: Taking parts a, b, c, d, and making them all slow motion

Background audio: *Blossoms on a Spring Moonlit Night (Chun jianghua yueye)*

Editing equipment: Sony U-Matic SP

Editing software: None

Output format: VHS videotape

Exhibition method: Television monitors are placed in the middle of the space and suspended approximately 40 cm from the ground. DVD players, power supplies, and cords are spread out underneath the televisions.

Equipment needed: 20 20-inch television sets, 4 DVD players

Other materials: 8 electric stoves that are equipped with temperature control, 8 aluminum pots, chicken drumsticks, seasoning

Technical needs: Each DVD player is hooked up to 5 television sets; videos are broadcast in a continuous loop, with different start times; televisions sets showing different contents are evenly dispersed across the ground, and the audio on each television should be very faint, barely audible to a viewer standing directly in front of it

**Opposite Space (Xiangdui de kongjian)**

1995

Surveillance video installation

"Room" dimensions: 5 m (l) × 2.8 m (w) × 3.5 m (h)

Project summary: Two "rooms" are divided out of one space and share a correlative relationship of "seeing and being seen." The "rooms" are built from wooden planks; the dimensions of the two spaces are the same; a surveillance video camera is installed in each side of the wall separating the rooms; 14-inch television sets and motion-sensor spotlights are installed on the walls. When viewers enter a room, the spotlights turn on; through the surveillance video camera and television set, the people in one room can inspect [what is happening in] the other room. At the same time, they are being viewed [in the other room]. The doors to the rooms have special bolts. After



one enters, if no one else enters again from the outside, then the door will remain locked for one minute. The content displayed on the television is the audience in one room looking at the audience in the other room; the contents are broadcast in real-time, not videotaped.

Exhibition method: Build a space, divided into two equal areas, according to project specifications. In the two spaces, install identical equipment; according to the conditions of the site, the dimensions of the "room" can vary.

Equipment needed: 2 surveillance video cameras, 2 14-inch television sets, 4 motion-sensor spotlights, 2 numerically controlled door locks

Exhibition history: 1995, *Art from China Exhibition*, Santa Monica Art Center, Barcelona, Spain

### ***Uncertain Pleasure (II) [Bu quejie de kuaigan (II)]***

1996

Video installation with 10 television sets, 10 videos

No sound, color, 30 minutes, PAL

Project description: The work shows videos of different itchy body parts being scratched: shoulder, back, waist, leg, neck, foot, hand, etc . . . movements are carried out with uniform speed, continuous, repeated, and with force. The images on the television sets flicker.

Film segment: Single camera, interior lighting, close-ups, various fixed locations, no audio

Filming equipment: Sony 900E camera

Shooting locations: Hangzhou School of Arts and Crafts dormitory where the artist resides; Zhejiang School of Silk Engineering (now the Zhejiang School of Science and Engineering) dormitory where Geng Jianyi resides

Cameraperson: The artist

Postproduction: 10 sets, each television set will show two [different videos of] different body parts being scratched, between the different videos (shown for 30 seconds), the monitor will be black (10 seconds, the videos fade in and fade out)

Editing equipment: Betacam SP

Editing software: None

Output format: VHS tape, DVD

Editor: Huang Qiguang

Exhibition method: Arrange television sets together as a video installation: remove the outer casing of the monitors (showing exposed interior circuit boards and electronic components), distribute [television sets] across the floor within a 10-square-meter parameter, the screens should be facing in different directions, with different distances between the sets.

Equipment needed: 10 14/20 inch television sets; 10 DVD players

Technical requirements: Every DVD player is connected to one television set; loop each video, stagger start times.

**Diary (Riji)**

1997

3 multimedia slide projections

Sound, color, approximately 3 minutes

Project summary: A slide show of a variety of personal everyday items (tongs, scissors, toys, photographs), public items (fire extinguisher, dentist's chair), public spaces (airport waiting area, airfield, cityscapes, etc.), natural environment (sky with clouds, etc) . . . the slides are shown at a set pace, edited together with audio. These unrelated scenes and objects are assembled together to create some kind of narrative connection, creating an audio-visual "diary."

Film segment: In one day, [the artist] continuously shot photographs in personal and public spaces of various unrelated objects and settings; collected discarded photographs (negatives) from other people

Photographic equipment: Pentax 135 camera

Photographed locations: Hangzhou, Beijing

Cameraperson: The artist

Postproduction: Used a computer to collect the various photographs, edited them together, and added audio

Equipment needed: Multislide system

Editing software: None

Editor: Japanese P1+ASE film and audio company

Output format: Slide show

Technical needs: 3 screens for projection, simultaneous montage, size of the screen should not be smaller than 3 meters

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— Excerpted from *Zhang Peili yishu gongzuo shouce* [Artistic Working Manual of Zhang Peili] (Guangxi: Lingnan Art Publishing, 2008), 152, 154, 188, 194, 214, 238. First two translated by Kristen Loring, final four translated by Peggy Wang.

**SIX VIDEO WORKS (1997)**

By Wang Jianwei

**Reproduction (Zai chansheng)**

October 1995

*Kwangju Biennale (InfoArt)*, Kwangju, Korea

Video recording, television, computer, cycling installation, model

600 cm × 350 cm × 100 cm

*Reproduction* comprehensively utilizes an array of divergent natural resources of "production." While on the one hand, it doesn't change the material attributes of "production," on the other hand it causes them to achieve an integrated output of "increased mass" within a mutually exploited space.

The array of production includes: the human body and elements of its productive capacity (physiological gestation data, records); functional elements of knowledge and technology (the certainty of reproductive knowledge, designations of the body's condition); elements of everyday life (conditions for marriage, family makeup). Humans as humans, or defined as "other" (culture, society, symbols, relationships), make produc-

tions on this foundation of comparative mechanisms, and use modes of information within a state of compound masses. [In this state] the parallel development of different masses, different substances, and homogeneous transformation provide a "temporary" "site." Occasionally, an ambiguous composite body emerges from organism and concept, biological phenomena and design. The "future tense" product of a kind of integrated discourse; simultaneously, "contingency" provides a progressive, indeterminate verbal relationship and cognitive state.

***Incident — Process, State (Shijian — guocheng, zhuangtai)***

1993

Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong

Video recording, television, glass, pipes, inorganic matter, organic matter, text

600 cm x 400 cm x 180 cm

*Incident — Process, State* takes our everyday behaviors within a fixed period of time and through an apparatus "randomly samples" them and transforms them into elements. These elements are quantified and input into a system which separates them into two sections: 1) the material, composed of transmitted or load-bearing media; 2) the regulated, composed of procedural and functional settings. The two sections simultaneously use a fixed process to evolve and transform the input material into a continuous state that is controlled by the system.

*Incident — Process, State* is a hypothesis on potentiality, and uses process and state — namely, the integral "reading" of process and state — as a means of testing each target, attempting a process of synthesizing "objectification" and the potential interpretation of its entirety. The goal is to confront the dissimilarity of mutual correlation produced between identical targets (judgment, value, significance); the unique "incident" given rise to by the simultaneous continuity of the two, through the "texts" recognizable by the medium, uses a comparative method to collectively interpret the realized portion of identical qualities shared by the two.

***Import <-> Export (Shuru shuchu)***

August 1995

New Asian Art Show, Osaka, Tokyo, Japan

Plastic and metal whistles, television, scientific chart, action of exchange

Method:

- 1) Fabricate the mold of an ear (13 cm x 0.8 cm x 0.3 cm), based on this mold, produce 1000 plastic ears
- 2) Mount a metal whistle on each ear
- 3) In a public space, the audience can exchange any article for an ear. With regard to organisms and the rationality of fabricated skills, established on the common mechanisms of communication and modes of information delivery, *Import <-> Export* provides a metaphor for production through process and transformation. It is a symbiotic "expansion" in a biological and cybernetic sense. In the process of communication (facilities and information) many paths produce *Import <-> Export*. Consumption and symbols, meaning and existence are interchangeable during utilization; interchange causes the nature of matter to become indefinite.



Wang Jianwei. *Circulation—Sowing and Harvesting*.  
October 1993–May 1994.  
Performance

### ***Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting (Xunhuan — zhongzhi)***

October 1993–May 1994

Beijing and Sichuan

In one corner of China — Yongquan Township, Wenjiang County, Sichuan Province — I agreed on and signed a contract with farmer Wang Yun to collaboratively plant wheat, to observe and record the comprehensive process of planting. In terms of the *Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting* project's correspondence to art, its implementation is an "ahistorical" deduction, namely an experiment in the reversibility of entropy. The openness of an "unbalanced state" thoroughly tears down any empirical evidence with regard to general illusion and dominant logic.

Through the development and deduction of a comprehensive system and the overlap between process and method (the contrast between fieldwork and the text), *Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting* simultaneously pushes art's method of production and means of existence into an action space of a composite nature. In a concrete relationship and concrete material state, the isomorphic biological significance of production and development, all the systems (biological and cognitive) tend toward an "entropy" of time, the internal system's individual and organization come to a dead stop, the network of mutual dependence disappears, and new possibilities for exis-

tence are produced. Through this structure, *Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting* "shares" this process. Art and ecology are mutually systematized by "design" and the "coalition" of biology (society, culture, organic body, organization).

### **Model (Moxing)**

October 1996

*The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane, Australia

Video, projector, television, medical equipment, circular power installation, mold  
500 cm × 200 cm × 200 cm

*Model* comprises three parts:

Video: A) reproductions of Chinese and Western scientific instructional films on human development and physiology, medical scenes of physical examinations and tests. B) At the same location, documentation of the daily life of a living organism (fly). [C] Medical equipment: previously used medical cart (gurney) provided from a hospital of the exhibition location (Brisbane, Australia).

The exhibition space (Queensland Art Gallery) provides a "structure" (cast iron frame 400 cm × 200 cm × 200 cm), the medical cart (gurney) pulled by the force of the installation moves back and forth within the frame, the "body" on the gurney (the intermediary of a physiological and technological body) experiences limited change and is controlled by the stipulated directions (engineering and manufacturing intervene). At the same time, the activity of the living organism (fly) enters this physical space through a reproductive medium (projector).

*Model* takes a step toward confronting "complexity" by using concept and method. The efficacy of the "work" is synchronically restricted to the simulated appearance of a "target." Through the use of "phenomenological" materials/matter and correlation (non-correlation?), diachronism and contingency, the individual and the universal are integrally channeled into the totality that the "model" emphasizes (totality is questioned). An objective is established on the general sense of the prerequisites of human knowledge and everyday modes of discourse, with methods that conform to "amplified" experiential patterns deduced at the exhibition scene. The game becomes the participants' sole reason for participating, while it simultaneously "exposes" the rules of the game. Naturalization loses its foundation, any legitimacy is called into question. The approach of *Model* is: right here, right now . . .

### **Production (Shengchan)**

October 1997

*Documenta X*, Kassel, Germany

Video

*Production* chooses the immediacy of "other" "on-site materials" and "on-the-spot production" methods. "Copying" a production line that manufactures meaning, namely through modes of production (the masses, news media, manufacturing techniques and methods), manufacturing (places, everyday life, pillars of discourse), consuming (exchange and location), and simulating the overall dynamic response of man-made manufacturing. In the applied process based on these limited resources, the most economical means of production (transformation) are the foundation and mechanisms, equipment and products of repetitive manufacturing.

*Production* uses the most minimal language to create "scenes" highlighting the circumstances of linguistic impoverishment. *Production* is an "investigation" into cultural and artistic modes of production, a universal repetition that uses "otherness" to intervene, an "artwork" that also imports its "economizing" principals, and exports the "evaporation" of the process.

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— Originally published as "Wang Jianwei zuopin zishu" in *Yishu jie [Art Life]* 1997: no. 11–12, 38–41.  
Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

## **AN ARRANGEMENT OF A FEW IDEAS AND SOME WORK (2002)**

By Zhou Xiaohu

001. Two problems face the experimental methods of new media: one is the creativity, enlightenment potential, and development of the methods of new technology; the second is the reality of the questions it is aimed toward. The adjustment to the use of new media tools will most likely create a new visual experience, a new virtual form, and new political connections. From this we will also gain new paths and new methods. This can help me successfully present a few issues: I can take everyday life, social life, and historical events and turn them into stagelike street performances, change them into a puppet show that can be manipulated and controlled.
002. I like the concept of "everything's politics." I take this to mean all sorts of complicated mutual relationships: the inner relationships of the artwork, the relationship between the artwork and the audience, and the relationship between personal psychological space and social psychological space. In the field of art, I can establish relationships between my personal fantasies and society, historical events, or culture and economics. I can show the conflicts of arrangement, status and power, and control in the work, and moreover I can use this to discuss the staying power or something of the desires and excitements that arise from people's state of existence. When artists use an attitude of "appreciation" to look at a series of political events, they will be deceived. The only thing artists can do is use artistic methods to "alienate" and surprise; this can probably be described as a kind of "social aesthetics."
003. I believe that the power of expression is contained in the method of expression. My art usually comes from the excitement of a fantasy or idea, or confusion surrounding a certain problem; this will become the fundamental motivation for my shooting a piece. I can use the work to contemplate these things, if the problem has a concrete answer, then there is no need for experiment. I think the methods of experimentation in artistic work are similar to the original artistic games. At that time there were no burdens of knowledge background, expression was a vessel, and now the birth of new methods of discourse and new rules for the game are born from new methods of thinking. Artistic games can help us advance and widen our self-knowledge and understanding, and also our understanding of the limits of human life. If we can provide a new experience, a new way of self-examination, and an understanding of the methods we use to create the world, then that is wisdom and a contribution.
004. If you keep persistent, even cruel, attention on problems of humanity, social life, and history, this will help in the dynamics of artistic thinking and revelatory methods. In my installation *The Age of Lies (Huangyan shidai)* (1990), I used models of



Zhou Xiaohu. *Face-Lifting Arch Veranda*. 1997.  
Video installation and interactive performance,  
installation 7'3 × 4'7 × 9'11"  
(220 × 140 × 300 cm).  
Collection the artist

electric chairs, they were placed in the formation of a meeting room, the Plexiglas under electric lights was flashing and blurry, but this was a "beautiful trap." The video installations *Plastic Surgery Hallway* (*Zhengrong gonglang*) and *Listening in on the Plastic Surgery Hallway* (*Lingting zhengrong gonglang*) (1997) were a form of "self-imposed closed circuit." This work needed an audience before it could be complete: viewers entered the operating chair under the monitor but the audience member couldn't see himself in the monitor. The sounds from the arched hallway were transported to a different space; the audience could listen through headphones to hear what had been recorded. I kept taping the messages up around the space and by doing this I got two scenes, one of *Plastic Surgery Hallway* and one of *Listening in on the Plastic Surgery Hallway*. In the video installation *Really Not Evil Intentions* (*Bingfei eyi*) there were two monitors facing each other, playing a tape of two boys expressing their views on women in China. There was a large leather trunk on the floor that had women's accessories scattered all over inside it, and there was a monitor inside broadcasting a girl going about her private business every day.

005. The video *Beautiful Cloud* (*Meili yuntuan*) was an observation of "observation." In the video I used 3D-animation software to create a group of naughty children and had them watch a movie that showed the mushroom clouds created by nuclear and chemical weapons and the cruel aftereffects. The beautiful clouds looked sort of like expressions of human dreams, but they were real. Having a group of young children watch the game of self-destruction created by man is cruel, but is their fear, avoidance, and mistrust due to the training they've received, or is it natural? The video *Children's Rhymes* (*Tongyao*) filmed children playing a game called Passing Words: the game pushed forward the idea of the uncertainty of the future, containing hints of the fact that we can never return to the starting point in life. The conflicts that develop in the children's games also bring in grown-up thought and behavior, making political games more gamelike.

006. The idea for creating *Travel in Desire* (*Xinyu zhi lü*) (1999) came from clothes hanging out to dry. They don't have the 3D feeling of clothes when they're up against people, but they still preserve the shape of the human body. Their reality was sucked out of them. The feeling of having human behavior without souls excited me; they pointed to some states and memories that are very hard to describe. The whole film of the animation *The Goopy Gentleman* (*Mitang xiansheng*) was completed on a human body. A mutual relationship was formed between the body of the model and the images in the animation. They interfered with and harmed each other. The video *Parasite* (*Qisheng*) (2001) was a group of scenes of people's pleasures in life, but in the end everybody finds out that it has all been taking place on an enormous steel frame that had been hung up, and their happy lives became a performance on a stage.
007. The collage video installment *Wax Museum* (*Laxiangguan*) (2001) was an interesting "play within a play" performance. It was also a stage performance—like derision of historical memory. My image kept reappearing, with a female model that was performing all sorts of symbolic roles in a group of wax figures. I no longer represented myself; instead it was all sorts of puppetlike roles and refractory vessels. The series *Form and Shadow Aren't Separated* (*Xing ying buli*) (2001) came from the game kids play when they imitate the speech and behavior of another person. The game usually ends up making the other person feel embarrassed and awkward. When I started facing another "me" all day, it led me into an unbearable hysteria. After I filmed the live imitation of my own behavior and then turned the film into large images and put these pictures in the area where I had taken them originally, I once again filmed the same thing. In the end I achieved the effect of shadow of a photo and form of the place, because I couldn't completely get them straightened out, it gave the illusory feeling of looking in a mirror.

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## Overseas Chinese Artists

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, several thousand young Chinese artists emigrated abroad. Among them were some luminaries of the 1980s contemporary Chinese art movement: Chen Zhen (1986, to France), Wenda Gu (1987, to America), Cai Guo-Qiang (1987, to Japan), Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang (1989, to France), Xu Bing (1991, to America), Wang Du (1991, to America), and Wu Shanzhuan (1991, to Germany). They soon established themselves in their new environments and began to appear in numerous exhibitions. From the mid-1990s onward, they received many honors and awards, and were often considered by international curators and critics as the best "Chinese artists."

Two factors separated this group from those artists who remained in China. First, whereas the most famous overseas artists of the 1990s came out of the 1980s avant-garde movement, the most active domestic artists in the 1990s belonged to a younger generation. These two groups were therefore divided not only by geography and culture but also by a generation gap. Second, after emigrating abroad, overseas artists directly participated in international contemporary art, and they developed projects in accordance with their new environments and audiences [pl. 37]. Many such projects had a strong international flavor (like Wenda Gu's *Monuments of the United Nations* series) and derived philosophical



concepts from Eastern philosophy (like Cai Guo-Qiang's *Project for Extraterrestrials* series). Others aimed either to harmonize different cultural traditions (like Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy*) or to highlight global political and economic issues (like Huang Yong Ping's *Bat Project* and Xu Bing's *Tobacco Project*). Such special foci began to define a branch of contemporary Chinese art which transcends strict national borders. Other overseas Chinese artists developed closer ties with their specific environment and participated in debates concerning race, multiculturalism, and the Chinese diaspora, a trend exemplified by a series of works that the San Francisco-based Hung Liu has been creating in the United States since the late 1980s.

### **ENTROPY, CHINESE ARTISTS, WESTERN ART INSTITUTIONS: A NEW INTERNATIONALISM (1994)**

By Hou Hanru

...

III

It is true that the discussions of the relationships between the self and the other, as a central topic of "multicultural" studies, have often been seen as research into national and traditional identities. A discovery of self-esteem for the repressed Other. But this has sometimes been exaggerated to become a refusal of the possibilities and necessities of international exchange and influence. In other words, the relations between the "West" and the "Non-West," between the colonial "master" and "slave" have been increasingly broken down, rather than positively adjusted to building up a new and constructive internationalism. An extreme example of this tendency is that some Black Power activists declared that only black people can write their history, and vice versa, that the only good and imaginative art is made in the Western/Eurocentric cultural arena. In both these cases, multiculturalism has led to the risk of falling into a religious fundamentalism.

By contrast, most contemporary Chinese artists consider cultural identity as an open process. They are developing their own cultural tradition by means of accepting influences from other cultures with considerations of contemporary and individual contexts. Cultural identity is constructed with creative reviews, and interpretations of one's own culture and that of the others in real life. It is a kinetic shifting between identification, non-identification, and re-identification. It goes beyond the historical limits of national cultures and is seen by certain artists as a positive improvement and contribution to international exchanges in art. It is with such a common understanding in mind that some artists have decided to leave China and settle abroad where they can understand the problems of identity in a more profound way and with a wider cultural perspective. Chen Zhen, one of the most active artists involved in the '85 "New Wave" Avant-garde movement of Chinese contemporary art, has been living and working in Paris for years and exhibiting in different Western art institutions [pl. 38]. He argues:

It is interesting to withdraw from one's own usual context and meet a new world, especially today, when cultural and ideological Hybridization has become an irreversible fact. The problem is not just that of understanding the work of art superficially, but also to try to effectively understand it with maximum clues. A quote from Chinese army strategy techniques and symptomatic of my attitude is often used in different contexts: "The winner is the one who masters the two sides of the battlefield."

He goes on:

Part of my research is in rereading Chinese culture in a Western context. It is not at all a nostalgic review of my grandfather's heritage, but a research of "contemporary genetic elements" in traditional culture and of the "primary elements" in human development seen from an ontological point of view. What is interesting is to expose various relationships and contradictions between tradition and reality.

Another artist, Huang Yong Ping [pl. 39], who was equally a leader of the Chinese Avant-garde movement and now lives and works in Paris, has expressed a similar attitude:

In my eyes, interactions and mutual influences between different cultures are very important. "West," "East," "I," "Other" are not fixed concepts; they can shift. I was very interested in the West when I was in China. I considered it as something outside me and it provided a source for my imagination. On the contrary, I talk more about China now that I am in the West. This is probably because of the Western context.

#### IV

To consider identity as a process of cultural evolution in a living context does not imply that artists abandon their own cultural heritage. They always keep a critical eye on the tradition itself. It is in the process of international dialogue that they become aware that among the most important questions they are facing are not only the possibility of realizing dialogue but also, the question of discursive power, or the political problem in international cultural-artistic exchanges. Until now, the mainstream of international culture and art has been West-centric. This situation should change in view of current global cultural developments. It is why "construction" of a "New Internationalism," which should take the place of all the previous forms of "West-centric Internationalism" or "Universalism," becomes urgent and absolutely necessary. It is also accepted by the Chinese artists as a new starting point to develop their work at an international level. Huang Yong Ping is one of the most representative among them. In his work he often introduces the ancient Chinese divination system, the *Yi Ching* (The Book of Changes) which has been an important resource for traditional Chinese philosophy. It not only suggests a process of constant change in the universe, the duality and interconnectedness of necessity and chance, of the rational and irrational, culture and anti-culture, but also a strategy to launch "attacks" on the legitimacy of the West-centric monopoly in intellectual and everyday life. In his comments on his work "Should We Construct Another Cathedral?" which aims to question the political power enjoyed by such art world "super stars" as Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis, Enzo Cucchi, and Anselm Kiefer, Huang Yong Ping explains:

however, *Yi Ching* has provided me with the reason of creation in order not to fall into the difficulty of personal choice. Divination plays a decisive role here. It lets me be guided by itself instead of being guided by the taste or ideas of myself and those of the others. . . . In fact, today, "freedom of art" is no longer possible. One has to identify with certain criteria. Then, bow to continue to work. We have to face the choice of others and ourselves. The process that I resort to, the *Yi Ching*, in terms of thinking about how to make "choice" has brought the *Yi Ching* into contemporary problems . . . In contemporary times, The *Yi Ching* provides us with alternative information that is beyond the "reality" created by contemporary mass media and factual "reality." It is another "reality."<sup>1</sup>

By introducing an "alternative reality," Huang Yong Ping provides a resistance and alterity to the existing concept of "reality" founded on a West-centric ideology. In his more recent work, he raises questions of artistic-linguistic and political power to confront international political repression in social life. He systematically questions the established concepts of knowledge and politics, institutions and violence, freedom and repression. For example, in his installation at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow (1993), he "reconstructed" an airport passport control point in order to question the meaning of national-cultural borders. At the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1993), he installed a tent in which viewers witnessed a battle between different insects as a challenge to the colonialist preoccupation with Asian people. In the Wexner Arts Center, Columbus, Ohio (1993), he exposed the reality of "Chinese Boat People," an event unfolding on the American West Coast at the same time as he was preparing his exhibition.

Equally, Chen Zhen, Wenda Gu, Yang Jiechang, and Wu Shanzhuan, among others, have, directly or indirectly, challenged the global-scale oppressive influences of Western consumerism and other ideologies by resorting to their own cultural heritage, and proposing possible alternatives to Western-centrism. Their work is often provocative and even subversive. They open themselves up to a kind of chaotic vision of the world, or more exactly, the world based on the order of Western-rationalism. Such a common strategy, rooted in the dialectics of Chinese philosophical ideas of the world, is also directed towards the development of international communications. Towards finally revealing the truth that the future world order will be born out of a certain entropic rule; that a new internationalism will replace the existing West-centric domination.

If the main embodiment of visual arts are the modernist-postmodernist discursive systems and their institutions, then to impel the system and institutions to fall into disorder is a constructive process to break down West-centrism and to realize an alternative new order. Huang Yong Ping's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Prato, Italy, in 1992, is in this sense a perfect example. In the central room of this postmodern museum, he constructed a wooden container-like passage in which he placed 450 kg of cooked rice along the 14 meter long floor. It showed the transition of rice from fresh to rotten. Naming this work *An Indigestible Object*, the artist revealed a provocative dialectic that implicated the work itself. Cooked rice, the most digestible and common Chinese food becomes an indigestible object for the art institution once it is brought into a museum. In contemporary art discourses and institutions a line separating the art object from everyday objects continually exists. Material such as rice, that engages in various processes from uncooked to cooked, fresh to rotten, digested to excreted, is usually rejected by the highly codified construct of art discourses and institutional practices. It is also discriminated against as "non-art," and so in bringing this "non-art" object into the most glorious palace for "art," it performs a subversive challenge.

Huang Yong Ping attacks with a two-edged sword since, while questioning the definition of art in Western contemporary discourses and institutions, he also proposes an alternative project to the institutional system itself. The work has a double functional structure. It can be used as a vessel and as a passage. It offers the possibility of extending time while enclosing and fixing an object. The passage becomes a metaphor for transformation, a process in which all those who pass through experience not only the alteration of the material itself but also a change in their assessment of both art and institution. This transformation is an irreversible process. It is an entropy to create a disorder and breakdown of the existing cultural-artistic system. If the function of the contemporary art museum is usually to separate artworks from the progress of time in order to define, evaluate, and legitimize them in the rationalist culture, then Huang

Yong Ping's work has exerted a double deconstructive function. By demonstrating its intention to surpass an established art system and to go beyond West-centricism itself, his work eventually provides an opening towards a New Internationalism.

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**Note**

1. Hou Hanru, "An Interview with Huang Yong Ping" in *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 132, no. 12 (1991): 19.

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— Excerpted from a text first published in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 79–88. Reprinted in Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground: Selected Texts*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Wei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 54–63.

## **DOES A CULTURE IN EXILE NECESSARILY WITHER? — A LETTER TO LI XIANTING (1991/2003)**

By Fei Dawei

Greetings! I have read the letter that you sent. Thank you!

I have already completed the draft that is to be given to the Japanese journal *Art Notes [Bijutsu techō]*. It would definitely not be suitable for *Art Trends [Yishu chaoliu]*. Since the journal's readership is different, the writing style should also be different. The draft that I am sending to Japan primarily serves as a broad outline introducing China's "New Wave" art and the situations of the five artists participating in the exhibition. In it, I do not give an introduction to the circumstances surrounding this exhibition, nor do I put forth any particular viewpoint. Such [a draft] cannot reflect the conditions of the exhibition, so I can only write a separate draft for you.

In your letter, you showed a certain degree of apprehension about our activities abroad, and you expressed your opinions about a few issues. I feel that we have quite a few differences in our views. The current environments in which we are respectively situated are completely different. Our differences of opinion are definitely related to the discrepancies that exist in our individual experiences and surroundings. In order to discuss our viewpoints with some depth, it might be interesting for us to focus on a few specific issues. Hoping to learn from you, I would like to discuss here my own cursory thoughts about the issues that you raised.

In your letter, you argued that "if art leaves its cultural motherland, it necessarily withers." In saying this, I think that you are pointing to the unfortunate experiences that have befallen many artists who have left China in recent years. It is just like the popular saying from several years ago: The whole army was completely annihilated. After moving abroad, a large group of artists who had formerly enjoyed great prestige in China has made no headway in their art. But, can this fact lead us to a universal verdict that denies the possibility of artists from China (or of other countries) working as artists in foreign countries? I believe that the majority of Chinese artists who go abroad cannot display their skills in the West as well as they were able to do at home. Besides the questions of language and daily life, the main reason for this lies in the fact that the particular quality of thought and the manners of thinking with which the artists were raised in their "cultural motherland" prevent them from engaging in contemporary cultural questions in their new environment.

This kind of "withering" of creativity is the result of artists lacking the means to transform the things that they learned in China into something that can cross cultural boundaries while still remaining valid and effective. And this "lack of means" is a

consequence of the artists' having been inculcated over a long period of time within the particular closed and conservative cultural spirit of Chinese society. Thus, I think that your words could be completely reversed: "If art does not leave its cultural motherland, it will necessarily wither." Of course, what I mean by "leave" is that it is only in having some trait that transcends local culture that art is able to develop. The world today is currently experiencing an age of globalized culture. Only by perceiving and becoming involved in common issues that transcend cultures and that possess a certain universalism can we discover our own uniqueness; and only in doing so can we ensure that our local culture achieves vitality.

Relying on closed doors as a self-reference is just like a person spending all of his time gazing at himself in a mirror. No matter how he might judge himself, in the end, he only convinces himself of himself. Although one may gloss over such a phenomenon as "preserving local culture," when one shuts one's eyes and closes one's ears for a long time, this becomes a self-destructive habit. I think that now only by allowing "local culture" to walk away from "local culture" can it become true "local culture." In the 1930s, Lu Xun proposed the slogan "the more national, the more international"; but we could invert this motto to say instead, "the more international, the more national." The world is changing, and so is the nation. We only have to observe the scale of international cultural interactions, the depth of their influence, the number of foreign artists working in every country in the West, the diversity of nationalities, and the infinite changes that are appearing in creative activities, then perhaps we would not reach such a hasty conclusion as the notion that "if art leaves its cultural motherland, it necessarily withers." However, "withering" is a universal, normal phenomenon. Do not both China and the rest of the world have a number of artists who are currently "withering"? Maintaining the vitality of one's creative forces does not primarily depend on whether one is at home or abroad. Although the difficulties and problems that one encounters in these two places are extremely different, the fundamental questions of artistic creation transcend national boundaries. No matter where they might be, good artists can make use of the unique characteristics of their environment, causing these special traits to serve their own creative activities as much as possible. Changes in the cultural environment can themselves become fountainheads of inspiration.

...

In the past few years, our activities abroad have not embodied any sort of pursuit of nationalism, but we have not eliminated the use of our national culture. After disentangling ourselves from decades of being closed to the outside, what we first focused on doing was diligently eliminating the closed nature that contemporary national culture had formed within us. If we were to ask what problems cultural contemporaneity has raised following the second half of the twentieth century, I would say that one of the most important has been the issue of overcoming years of nationalist biases in order to create new dialogues. We have already reached the irreversible phase of a global collective life. What we want to destroy are not the traditional cultures of different peoples; rather, we want to destroy the concept of inequality among all races, as well as the related issues of cultural egotism and narrow-minded nationalist prejudices. We, as elements of non-Western cultures, are melding into the process of the ever-increasing opening up and deconstruction of Western culture. Our activities are enriching the twin movements of the internationalization of Western art and the internationalization of Chinese art. We are changing; the West is changing. In this process, we are certainly not merely being passively and simplistically dissolved. When we compare cultures, working under different cultural conditions can help us to discover the limits of each particular culture, and it can gradually help us to cast off the

prejudices that form within a particular culture (be it the country in which we were born or the country in which we currently find ourselves). Thus, we neither want to "oppose tradition," nor do we want to pursue "Westernization"; rather, we have a foothold in pursuing the commonalities among contemporary cultures. As I understand it, this is also one of the preconditions for the modernization of national culture. In other words, what we want to do and what we are doing is using dynamic and creative means to take the problems produced within our Chinese context and gradually transferring them into the broader field of international culture. We will cause them to undergo a process of "universalization" or "expansion." This is a necessary process for clearing away the detritus that has accumulated atop national cultural traditions; also, it is necessary for resuscitating our national culture. After the twentieth century, the arts in many of the countries of the West will have experienced this process of "expansion," but the art worlds of many Eastern countries will still cling to themselves, unable to understand what "nationality" is, remaining a hindrance to themselves.

...

No need to waste paper [in response],

Paris, 7 December 1991

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— Originally published as "Liuwang wenhua biran kujie? — Gei Li Xianting de yi feng xin" in *Piping de shidai* [*Era of Criticism*] vol. 1, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), 153–62. Translated by Phillip Bloom.

## ON WORDS (1999/2000)

By Xu Bing

What most interests me now is staying at home to practice my own calligraphy and to study copybooks of earlier calligraphers. If I did not always have to go out to deal with exhibitions, I really could become someone like a character-writing master, concentrating on calligraphy and welcoming those who came to my door to seek my inscriptions. In fact, from the time that I began writing those strange, yet legible, English word-characters, more and more people have asked me for them. Besides creating my calligraphic works, I also sometimes inscribe signs or nameplates for certain organizations, and I periodically brush the titles for exhibitions or catalogues; I even have written lines for advertisements. I find this phenomenon interesting, for the concept of "inscribing" did not exist in the West in the past.

Because I have "borrowed" the precious spaces of art museums, galleries, and public television stations around the world in order to teach my English calligraphy to the local people, this has generated some feedback. Thus, I often receive letters written with these word-characters, or I get to see the results and experiences of people's practicing [my English calligraphy]. Some people have said, "Your [exhibitions] are quickly becoming study classes"; I say this is as it should be. This is much more interesting than creating that kind of so-called art that is made only for use in exhibitions. Art fundamentally ought to be for the masses. It originates in life; even if it transcends life, it still originates in life. This was Mao Zedong's philosophy, and this was the earliest education that I received in artistic thinking. Today, I still believe that it is a sensible proposition, particularly with regard to targeting the maladies and faults of contemporary art now. Currently, there is too much contemporary art that is standardized, that



Xu Bing. *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy: Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*. 1994–96. Mixed-media interactive installation: desks, chairs, copy and tracing books, brushes, ink, video, and chalkboard. Installation view at the *Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (1999)

is executed too finely, and that is impossible to understand. There is no need for me to do more of this kind of work. I hope that the things that I make are approachable and are beneficial to society. I also hope that they are unique and that they peacefully encourage people to embrace the unusual elements within the works.

In a certain sense, I would be more willing to say that the creation of my *New English Calligraphy* (*Xin yingwen shufa*) was a matter of a typographer's completing a set of new English letterforms and that it was a matter of general education. These were the most meaningful parts of the work. You might say that I have begun to leave the domain of contemporary art, yet I feel that I am finding a new path for this seemingly boring domain. The further one gets away from a system, the closer, perhaps, one comes to the goal of true art.

Establishing rules for a new set of character-forms and ensuring that comprehensible standards are laid out for the placement of each character, these are not only ideas, but also concrete tasks. Our predecessors did not leave behind their references for scripts like [those used in] the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* (*Lanting xu*) or the *Prabhutaratna Pagoda* [*Stele*] (*Duo baota*). Last year, during the colloquium at the Taipei Biennial, an old man criticized me, saying: "That guy who does calligraphy — his characters are so unsightly, yet they have been selected for exhibition!" I think that it may have been that the old man still had not understood my new kind of calligraphy, for there is no way to find a corresponding referent by looking in the model books that we have now. Later, I once joked that through years of practice, I have become the person who currently can write these word-characters better than anyone else in the world. But in the future, there undoubtedly will be people who write better than I, and there may, in fact, come to be many people who write in this style of script.

When I was cutting the type for *A Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu*) [pl. 14], friends said that I was crazy; now, when I write these word-characters that seem to be a bit off-track, they all say that it feels right, that it's like something I would do. Bowing my head in reflection, I realize that in fact, throughout my life I have always been entangled with writing, but my relationship with writing has not always been normal. The crop of us [artists and intellectuals] who emigrated from mainland China would never dare to say that we are literati; we were born in rather unfortunate times, and our education had certain deficiencies. But the absurdity of my own life lies in the fact that even though I am not a cultured person, I have brushed more than just a few characters. As a child, I was taught by my father, who had me trace characters every day;

later, this became a habitual activity for me, though it was interrupted when I was forced to go work in the countryside. Yet in all that time, I had never done any calligraphic creation, for tracing characters was simply a means of practicing writing, of receiving the lessons of systems of cultural ritual. I had never felt it was art. But this bit of craftsmanship was put to use during the Cultural Revolution: "Pick up your brush to use as a weapon / Concentrate your firepower to sweep away the 'Black Party.'" My father was a "Black Party gangster," and my class status was not good, but my characters were; consequently, with some difficulty I became a useful person — a "character-writing tool" within the "machine of the whole revolution." With regard to politics, I was completely bemused, but I worked as hard as I could. Writing characters or painting continuously for seven or eight hours in the political works office was commonplace for me. The characters that I engraved for newsletters looked like printed type. The characters I painted for posters were done in one shot, and I never had to bother to do drafts. Indeed, I wrote too many characters. I even found that if I took the character "qi" [amazing] in Liu Shaoqi's name and put it on its side, it could be written as the character for "gou" [dog] but could still be read as "qi." This was not my discovery; no, it was the creation of the revolutionary masses as they determined whom to love and whom to hate. At that time, compiling a handbook of practical artistic calligraphy was what I dreamed in private of doing.

During the latter part of the Cultural Revolution, I was sent down to a farming village, and it was that remote, backward place that transformed me into an "intellectual." Besides banners and posters, there were also various assignments for [inscribing] things for weddings and funerals, New Year's and other festivals, and public proclamations. Some of the peasants wanted me to create a single made-up character from the four individual characters in the expression "ten thousand taels of yellow gold" and another made-up character from the four in the expression "beckon fortune and enter into treasure." This, too, was not my own discovery; it was the creation of the wisdom of laborers.

Calligraphy and artistic writing do not count as my specialty; I studied printmaking. Eventually, I used a great quantity of type to print characters and books. Copying characters and cutting type for books is my "profession," but because I fundamentally had nothing really worth writing, I created what became *A Book from the Sky*.

*A Book from the Sky*, which I created a few years ago, and my later *New English Calligraphy* are like half-brothers: they appear similar, yet are completely different. Every "character" in *A Book from the Sky* has a familiar face, but I am unable to say their names. They treat every person equally; they do not engage in any sort of "cultural bias," since no one, not even I, is able to read them. Strictly speaking, we must not pay attention to the fact that they are called [a form of] "writing," even though their exterior is that of completely common, typical writing; for this "writing" does not possess the essential characteristic of writing — namely, the ability to transmit information through particular word-meanings. *New English Calligraphy* is true writing, but these words have passed through a certain kind of disguise, through a form of extreme duplicity, as their thoroughly Eastern appearance actually exists at the service of completely Western content. Appearance and essence contradict each other, causing us to have difficulty in defining the status of these word-characters. They are familiar yet foreign, foreign yet familiar. When writing, we do not know what kind of words or characters we are writing.

These "word-characters" that wear a mask — these things that are characters yet are not characters — are like viruses inside a computer: they intercept the part of the brain that people are used to using; with these indeterminate concepts the system is



disrupted, creating hindrances that are connected to expression. Becoming accustomed to certain concepts and styles is in fact the result of laziness. Periodically, one needs to destroy and re-create [convention] by opening spaces that history has never touched and by retrieving the points of origin of thought and cognition.

Coming to such a conclusion, this thing about writing characters has become complicated again.

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— Originally published as "Guanyu "zi" de zishu," in *Wenhua yu daode* [Culture and Morality], 2000: no. 4, 19–21. Translated by Phillip Bloom.

## **FACE THE NEW MILLENNIUM: THE DIVINE COMEDY OF OUR TIMES; A THESIS ON THE UNITED NATIONS ART PROJECT AND ITS TIME AND ENVIRONMENT<sup>1</sup> (1995/2003)**

By Wenda Gu

### **introduction: an ongoing worldwide art project: united nations (1993– )**

*united nations* is an ongoing, worldwide art project initiated early in 1992. from that point until late 1993, i developed the original concept and created an executive plan forming a complex strategy and methodology. during this long meditative period, i had immense doubts concerning my personal abilities to successfully develop and execute this conceptually, physically, timely, politically, and racially difficult art project. however i firmly maintained my vision as i clearly foresaw the profound nature and challenge of this project for me and for related races and their civilizations. i also felt that as a result of the inordinate risks that i would be taking with the *united nations* project, it could provide an extraordinary opportunity for me as an artist.

for its duration, the *united nations* art project will travel throughout five continents, to approximately twenty different countries which i have selected due to their historical and political importance. by utilizing the hair of the local living population, i strongly relate to the historical and cultural contexts to create monumental installations and land art to capture each country's identity. the monuments draw from profound events in each country's history. these installations are each individual national monuments of the united nations series which explores such notions as transculturalism, transnationalism, and hybridization that will be manifest in the final ceremony of the project. constructed in the twenty-first century, the final monument will be a giant wall composed of pure human hair integrated from all of the monuments in the series. the woven human hair and world pseudolanguages will coexist on the wall as a great "utopia" of the unification of mankind, a utopia which probably can never exist in our reality but will be fully realized in the art world. paradoxically, the human wall will not only maintain ethnic identities, but also a coexistence of different cultures through the creation of pseudo world languages incorporated into the hair wall. from china's great wall to the berlin wall, walls have been a metaphor of separation, but the implications of the united nations art project will be a true unification of mankind. at the final realization of *united nations*, there will be thousands and thousands of different living races present on the hair wall, supported by many cultural institutions, local barber-shops, and most of all, living populations around the world.

the following are excerpts from monique sartor's and kim levin's essays in the catalogue for *united nations — italian division* (renamed *united nations — italy monument: god and children*) which was exhibited in milan at enrico gariboldi arte contemporanea in 1994:



Wenda Gu. *The United Nations Monuments: Babel of the Millennium*. 1999. Installation of human hair, glue, rope with pseudo Chinese, English, Hindi, and Arabic languages, 75' high × 34' diameter (22.9 × 10.4 m). Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Vicki and Kent Logan

This new issue leads to new artistic issues, provoked by the expansion of a trans-cultural reality in our world. Once again, mankind is entering a new age, a new historical time, which now can be actually defined as "planetary," and Wenda Gu's project *united nations* is clearly symptomatic, maybe in a temporary anticipation, of the entering of this new conception and elaboration of culture and cultural differences, that he punctually defines as "transculturalism."<sup>2</sup>

Is this another dawning of the age of Aquarius? A multicultural update on the altruistic impulse that over decades has spawned such artistic events as "the family of man" and "we are the world"? or is it a reexamination of the late twentieth century's intensified and rapidly mutating concept of ethnicity and nationalism?<sup>3</sup>

**concept, strategy, methodology: otherness/alienation/difference, bio/geo/cultural fusion**

the monuments of the *united nations* series become a forum, a physical and psychological space that invites a conversation on the many cultural and artistic issues of our times, which are of growing intensity in our global reality. from the beginning, the project has attempted to be a three-dimensional mirror reflecting global/bio/geo/culturally shifting environments. from the long developmental process of the project's globalization, its aim is to sum up all of the possible phenomena resulting from the monuments and unite them, bringing them to our common destiny based upon our modern humanity.

it is such a special journey to create the worldwide art project *united nations*. a journey that has developed through cultural, political, ethnic, and artistic experiences: as a red guard who painted revolutionary posters during mao's cultural revolution; for more than ten years working in china; and sixteen years in the rest of the world as an individual artist. encountering diverse races and world cultures while reshaping their monuments, this path has given me a chance to confront what i have always been fascinated with: the egyptian pyramids; the myths of africa; the roman empire; the american adventure; the berlin wall; and china's silk road and great wall. these spirits have always been the sources of my inspiration.

this concept has brought about several intense dramas along the project's journey in different countries. i like to equate some of my experiences to two famous chinese historical references. once when china was made up of many individual countries, confucius wanted to publicize his doctrine throughout the land; he traveled around these various countries spreading his idea of how to govern until his beliefs were advocated. mao repeated this strategy in his red army's infamous military milestone known as, "the twenty-five thousand kilometer long march," through endless grasslands attempting to escape the pursuit of the formal party's army. along the way, he convinced thousands and thousands of peasants to believe and support his revolution. thus he explained, "the long march is a propaganda team; it is like a seeder. . . ." these two historical references serve as an even more important metaphoric methodology for today's bio/geo/cultural environment.

with the *united nations* project and its many monuments, i want to push the opposite extremes: personal and political, local and global, and timeliness and timelessness. based on rapid global/bio/geo/cultural transitions that are fast approaching our new millennium, the conception, strategy, and methodology of united nations sets up several formulas.

- #1 the entire project is divided into two parts: national monuments and the *united nations* final monument.
- #2 each national monument is divided into two parts: local people's hair and local historical context (concept).
- #3 it provides direct physical contact, interaction, integration, and confrontation with the local population (collecting hair) and their cultural histories (conceptual reference). instead of imagining or reading about cultures and then working from that information in the private studio, i strongly believe that actual physical experiences are far more authentic and important than literary interpretations.
- #4 "i" as the initiator and executor. my bio/geo/cultural identity becomes the device that shapes the cultural dialogues, confrontations, and possible battles. this position constantly creates "who i am" to "who i am not" whenever i am buried in a monument with the exception of the united nations china monument. it also provides an international "expatriate" for everyone to relate to in every corner of our planet.

all four formulas have created an absolutely authentic situation which precisely fits our bio/geo/cultural transition which goes beyond "otherization," "regionalization," "transculturalization," and so on. under this conceptual working process, the identity of the local race and its culture is being "otherized" by me as the "stranger." at the same time, my own identity is being "otherized" and in so doing, merges with the "strangers" and their culture: a double "otherness."

one of the striking challenges of the *united nations* project is that it uniquely delivers an intense historical and cultural, psychological paradox for me and the local audience. when the local audience is before the monument, composed of their hair and in their historical context, there is on one side a deep sense of national pride, and on the other a feeling that their culture is being "invaded" and "occupied" by a "stranger." this brings about a deep contradictory and paradoxical dialogue and a redefinition of the "self" between the local viewers and my position as the creator that is very significant and intriguing. an unusual interaction is unveiled. thus, as one art critic explained in a positive tone, the "*united nations* project is parodying the role of the cultural colonialist."<sup>4</sup> as the whole working process charts its course with its extremely diverse races and cultural environments, the intellectual and physical working situations will be defined as: "in" and "out"; "inwards" and "outwards"; "integration" and "separation"; "identity" and "otherness"; "respect" and "attack"; and "paradox" and "harmony."

in one particular instance, a *united nations* audience member suggested, "it is our people's hair, it should be done by our hands." these simple words clearly present both sides as the local culture and i are "otherized," just like being in a pure "oxygen box"; both sides become identity-less on a psychological level through the creation of the new. it also leaves a very strong desire to redefine identities — a wonderful and exciting paradox. there is the contrast between this singular body material, "hair" and plural racial "identities" throughout the whole project; and yet, this single body material will be transformed into "multicultural hair." i call this a "great simplicity" which will transcend to a "universal identity." it is great because of its diverse richness; it is simple because it uses the single material of human hair.

moreover, the *united nations* national monuments are not totally separate entities. They are like a "chain" with each successive monument building upon the previous ones. each becomes more complex and diverse eventually reaching a finalization that will unite all of the national monuments. occasionally i "link" two or three of the monuments together to heighten the disparities concerning certain world issues. for instance, the combined swedish and russian monument addressed the building confrontation between eastern and western europe in the post-cold war era as part of stockholm's international exhibition "interpol" (1996). a triple-focused egyptian / chinese / italian monument could make strong reference to three distinct religious and cultural milestones of civilizations. and a mighty china–usa coupling could broach the paramount ideological and sociological structural oppositions between two world powers. ultimately however, all of these monuments and their respective concerns will blend together in the american-based finale of the *united nations* project.

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#### Notes

1. This is an updated version of Wenda Gu's (1998) thesis statement on the *united nations* project "The Divine Comedy of Our Times," which was originally written in 1995. The artist chose to present his written words entirely in lowercase letters.
2. Monique Sartor, "United Nations," in *United Nations — Italian Division* (Milan, Italy: Enrico Gariboldi Arte Contemporanea, 1994), unpaginated.
3. Kim Levin, "Splitting Hairs: Wenda Gu's Primal Project and Material Misunderstandings," in *United Nations — Italian Division* (Milan, Italy: Enrico Gariboldi Arte Contemporanea, 1994), unpaginated.
4. Danielle Chang, "United Nations — American Division," in *United Nations — American Monument* (New York: Space Untitled, 1995), unpaginated.

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— Excerpted from Wenda Gu, "face the new millennium: the divine comedy of our times; a thesis on the *united nations* art project and its time and environment" in *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, ed. Mark H. C. Bessire (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003), 30–33.

## WILD FLIGHTS OF FANCY (1998)

By Cai Guo-Qiang

I want to thank Cherng Pin Gallery in advance for giving me this opportunity to review some of my unrealized projects from the past few years. I use the phrase "in advance" because prior to this, I had already started to make plans to publish a small book called *The Unrealized Century at the Turn of the Millennium*, at the invitation of Japanese friends. I want it to be a book for people to read on the commuter train, helping to alleviate the ordinary viewer's fears about approaching modern art and to encourage them to partake in the thrill and audacity of the artist's flights of fancy. I didn't expect that I could use my mother tongue to do this in advance. Nevertheless, limited by time, I haven't been able to carry it out in a systematic and comprehensive manner; these fragmentary thoughts serve as a start. Anyway, my original plan to calm my mind

and conduct a comprehensive review at the turn of the millennium was in fact just a flight of fancy as well. For I know that by that time I will be just like I am right now, busy realizing my fantasies while making new ones.

Of course, everyone knows an artwork cannot be made by flights of fancy alone. The artist has to dare to implement, and implement with precision, resolution, ingenuity, pain, aggression, etc. This is another topic. And I cannot really express it well.

I lived in my hometown Quanzhou for more than twenty years. It is on the opposite side of the Taiwan Straits. When I was a little boy, I used to indulge myself in wild flights of fancy. The more forbidden and unattainable, the more irresistible it became. I even thought of plans to stow away for Taiwan. (I didn't know what I wanted to do in Taiwan, maybe just take a look there.) Now, although I have been to many countries and passed through customs many times, I don't think it gives me the excitement and thrill of being a stowaway. Several years ago, the international highways in Western Europe abolished their customs [checks]. I used my leisure time to drive from one country to another several times, risking being arrested. However, I got little from this "illegal journey." One of the few impressions which still remains in my mind is that there are far fewer highway lights in Holland than in Belgium. Over the years, I have produced a lot of supranational projects.

When I was in mainland China, I could do nothing but dream. With my hands and pockets empty, dreaming was also all I could do in my first years in Japan. When I learned the language, I began making friends with people, including astrologers, seismographers, experts of life sciences, fishermen, divers, etc. Of course, I also became acquainted with some gunpowder experts and artists. We dreamed dreams together, and many have been made into reality. So, when I immigrated to the United States, I was able to bring many portfolios of my work with me. But, I could hardly speak any English. Though there were translators to help me at work, most of the time I just watched and thought.

Some fantasies have come true, some are to be realized, and some have been tried but failed. And there are still some projects which are unrealizable, such as the ones that I plan for outer space or other planets. Maybe in the distant future, they will be realized. I have only partial knowledge about Eastern cosmology and Western astrophysics. I have been obsessed with superluminal speed, black holes, and especially extraterrestrials, for whom my fascination knows no bounds. I hope to be freed from Earth's gravity, to detach myself far from the human world in order to think in a greater scale of time and space (*Earth SETI Base Project*). Sometimes, I dreamed of the Olympic Games held on another planet . . . Dreams do sometimes transform into reality, I actually did make several projects concerning athletic gatherings. The project for the opening of the Asian Games Hiroshima was to use a strong fuse to connect the torch stand with the helicopter 600 meters above. Through TV, people could see live the moment when the player ignited the fuse in the helicopter. Then, a ray of flame would drop down from the sky at the speed of one hundred meters per second. Six seconds later, the torch on the stand would be kindled. The human fire descending from the sky could give the city a narrative of destruction or beauty. However, after numerous public and private debates, the project was aborted due to some complicated political considerations. Among the opinions from both the pro and con sides, the most impressionable arguments were: "This project is a chance for Hiroshima to shed the painful shadow and embrace a rebirth," and "However theoretically persuasive, the fire from the sky, even just fireworks, will cause physiological pains." Later, the project *The Earth Has Its Black Hole Too* was realized and performed at the old site of the previous Japanese Landforce Command headquarters under the auspices of artistic abstraction, ambiguity, and within the artistic institution. In the projects for the Olympic Games in Sydney, I planned to use a flying

balloon carrying a bird or a heavenly steed soaring across the skies, or a tiger with two wings. And I also planned to have a shower of "25K gold medals" falling from the sky (with a helicopter) in the closing ceremony to let all participants have some fun. Perhaps the fake gold medals would have more significance than the real ones.

Some projects are temporal. The one I have worked on for the turn of the century, *Placid Earth*, is a case in point, as well as the project to make a mushroom cloud in all the countries which own nuclear weapons. If I miss the right time, I will become less enthusiastic. Many artistic works gain the reputation of being "timeless," but the author himself is a product of his age and social background, from which he obtains stimulation and nourishment.

Some projects are less temporal but need a specific location, for example, the *Sinking and Rising* project at the Piazza San Marco, Venice; the *Time/Space Reversion Project* at Sakurajima Volcano, Japan; and the *Air Pyramid* project at Mount Fuji. After thirty years, the rubbish dump at Hiriya, Israel, accumulated into a hill (80 meters in height and 2 kilometers in diameter). The Israeli government decided to stop using it, but the "hill" remained unsightly, especially to the international airliners that passed right over it. Therefore, they expected to transform the "hill" into an artistic work. When I went to survey the dump site, my first words addressed to the media, including those from the military, were that "artists can also do garbage." My project was to avoid simply using an artistic work to cover up the fact that it was a hill of refuse. The general plan was to cultivate on the hill all the plants and herbs that Jesus had used for medicinal purposes, thus creating a "hill of herbs" for a country that practices modern medicine today. Visitors to the hill would be able to read the Biblical records about each herb and its curative effects; they could pluck some herbs, concoct them into a potion and drink it, or purchase them to take home. Moreover, the hill would provide artists with the opportunity to produce some more concealed works. One of my projects was to dig out an "inverted obelisk," which would require visitors to lower their heads in order to view it, and the lighting would be such that the fault of the thirty years of dumping would be revealed. Then, the exhumed garbage would be erected into a "trash obelisk" on the hill of the National Museum in Jerusalem. (The earliest obelisks were built by the ancient Egyptians several thousand years ago. One of them was taken away by Napoleon and reinstalled in Paris. There is also one outside the White House, Washington, D.C. Obelisks are everywhere in Rome. They are monumental symbols of human civilization.)

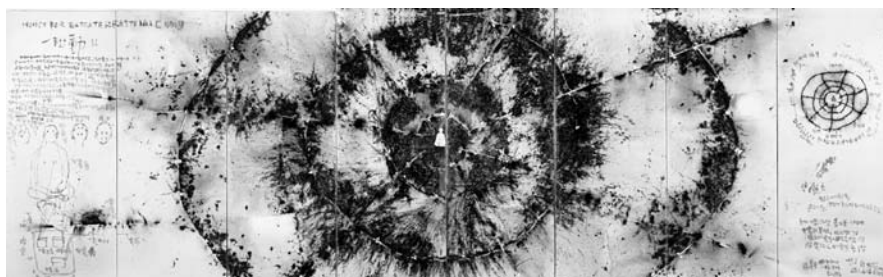
Some projects are both time and location specific, for example, the plan *Rebuilding the Berlin Wall* at the fall of the real wall and the *Project to Extend The Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters*. If this plan were to be realized now, it would be far less risky and lose much of the original tension, and it would be glossed over by the drive to promote Chinese culture and advertise tourism. The same rings true for the project titled *Obelisk of Tolerance* intended for the European Academy of Sciences and Arts last year. It was an unprecedentedly ambitious project. The sponsors included artists, architects, and mostly politicians. They intended to emulate the Statue of Liberty and provide a memorial for this century haunted with disasters and animosity while also looking ahead to a new epoch; it could also be understood as a token of reconciliation with the Jewish people. The site was intended to be Mozart's hometown. In order to be visible from both downtown and the airport, the 60-meter-high obelisk would be built on the top of one of the peaks of the Alps. At the very beginning, I explicitly expressed my opinion that it is very difficult for an object of such height to express the spirit of tolerance; therefore, I proposed the project *Peaceful Clouds*. I don't understand how the accepted project expresses the idea of tolerance persuasively. Though I am often invited to participate in conceiving projects, I understand well that important projects frequently

involve substantial problems far beyond the category of art, and the deciding factors are often very complicated. I am always very complacent about an interesting proposal and don't care whether it is realized or not. Whether it is something that I planned myself, like the *Extend China's Great Wall* project, or something that I was committed to do, like the *Tolerance* project, I give 100 percent and follow where the projects take me. I wander all over the world, everywhere I go I am taken care of and blessed with wise guidance. For example, when I was in Israel, they designated a rabbi to give me lessons. I put down my roots in the soil all over the world, and find that every road leads to the same fundamental truth, as if I have never departed.

For some projects, the right opportunity is far more important than the right time. My first proposal for the Guggenheim Museum's *China: 5,000 Years* exhibition was *Yu Gong yi shan (The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountain)*. I intended to use a crowd to carry rocks down a hill in China, then pack them and ship them to New York along with the national treasures and exhibit them side by side. After the exhibition, they would be shipped back to China and restored to the original hill. This proposal was very thought-provoking, prompting questions like: who is Yu Gong? what was moved? what is a mountain? Thoughts could run all over the place. The curators and I had been moved by this foolish idea for more than one year, until later they decided to remove the contemporary art section from the Guggenheim exhibition site, and as a result, this proposal lost its significance.

Some ideas originated in my "opponent" — the curator. In 1992, when I performed my *Fetus Movement II* at a military base near Kassel, Germany, I visited Jan [Hoet]'s Documenta exhibition. I thought then that if I had been invited to that exhibition, my project would have consisted of fishing by a stream. Later, I collaborated with Jan on several exhibitions. At one exhibition, I made a bamboo bridge. The visitors were to mount the bridge at a kindergarten, go over a wall, and descend from the bridge into a graveyard. When Jan saw the bridge, he told me that it had been constructed too well, and he felt that I had ruined the project. He was only reassured when he himself crossed over the bridge and felt the anxiety of the experience (our little debate even made the news on TV). Another time, he invited me to his museum to make a project there. I used explosives to make a fifty-meter-long "dragon" on the wall of his collection room, for my work titled *True Collection*. No sooner had the smoke disappeared, I began to bargain with him in public, we signed a contract on the price of this work, and he agreed that it could not be loaned out. He offered me an opportunity in 2000, which overlapped with the opening of this exhibition at the Cherng Pin Gallery. He wanted me to see the potential site for my performance, but the trip would have been just a few days before the opening of this exhibit. I could not make the trip, and as a result I have yet to start concocting some ideas about this proposal. Jan's confidence and ambition about art often make the artist's fancies even bolder and wilder.

Some projects were made possible by the confluence of the right time, right place, and right people and factors. For example, the theme of the 1995 Venice Biennale — which coincided with the 700th anniversary of Marco Polo's journey home from my hometown Quanzhou — happened to be "transculture." Both the curators and the sponsors had strong transcultural intentions and sophisticated organizational abilities. The Quanzhou local government also fully understood the significance of releasing a small sailboat out of its harbor. Consequently, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* entered the canals of Venice on time like a UFO. I was sitting on the boat without sweat and was delivered to the exhibition site like a tourist. Before this performance, I had several proposed collaborations with the curator Fumio Nanjo that had never been realized. In 1994, he had an exhibition called *Seascape*. My proposal



Cai Guo-Qiang. *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9*. 1991. Gunpowder and ink on paper, mounted on wood as eight-panel folding screen. 6'7" x 22'4" (200 x 680 cm). Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

Cai Guo-Qiang. *Fetus Movement II: Project for Extraterrestrials No. 9*. June 27, 1992, 9:40 p.m., 9 seconds. Gunpowder (90 kg), fuse (1,300 m), seismograph with nine sensors, electroencephalograph, and electrocardiograph. Land area 15,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Realized at Bundeswehr-Wasserübungsplatz military base, Hann. Münden, Germany, for the exhibition *Encountering the Others*, Kassel

was to make a ring at the bottom of the sea resembling a meteor landing or a crater, which would be visible above from the museum on a clear day. Nanjo said that to use dynamite under the sea would kill many fish, and the public accused us of potentially carrying out environmental damage. I explained that it was precisely my intention to showcase the beauty of the natural environment through the clear visibility of the air and seawater. This year's biennial exhibition in Taipei is my second collaboration with him. He told me that in spite of my claims to express the rise and fall of Asia's economy, the viewers would inevitably associate my performance with mainland China's missile maneuver. I answered that it was the very missile maneuver that gave me inspiration for this project. He asked, how do we reassure Taiwan's public that these missiles were indeed not from the mainland? I said that I would write on the missile "this is not a missile from mainland," which made him roar with laughter. Later on, I found that these missiles already bore the original insignia, "Made in Taiwan."

Sometimes I find it difficult to stick to my original ideas. Before I had gone to Barcelona to survey the site for an upcoming performance, I already had an idea: to "draw" a small transient halo with smoke above the cross on the top of a small country chapel. The halo would then softly float into the sky and become a cloud. But, when I got there, I was entranced by the white cathedral on the mountain near the city. The cross on the top of the cathedral was in the shape of Jesus extending his hands. Owing to its enormous size (the statue was eleven meters high), it could be seen from the city. I changed my original idea and decided to make a large "halo" project there. The curator Rosa [Martínez] was also excited about this idea. When we visited the cathedral, I was surprised that the archbishop also approved of this project. Both Rosa and I were exhilarated and concluded that this place was the only choice. However, so many troubles and difficulties followed, as the project had to go through many authorities. As far as artistic performances are concerned, if the preliminaries are too complicated, it is usually difficult to perform the project naturally, if realized at all. In retrospect, I



should have adhered to my original idea of a small country church. Later, when I collaborated again with Rosa at the Istanbul Biennial, she showed more prudence about my interest in the Euro-Asian strait. In fact, I intended to understand the realistic condition of this Biennial through a huge and difficult project. The result was that I gained tremendous respect for the sponsors of the Biennial for the difficulties and risks they have to face as the pioneers of modern culture in the Islamic world. I made two videotapes. One was *Floating*, in which I skipped tiles on water from Europe to Asia, and in the other I skipped tiles from Asia to Europe. I also let the viewers throw self-made paper planes freely in the great sanctuary of a deserted Roman church. Conversely, there have also been projects encouraged and emboldened by the sponsors. For example, initially in my project to blow up the power station in Johannesburg, I made a cautious proposal to blow up only the obsolete factory walls. To my surprise, the municipal officers asked me, wouldn't it be more meaningful to also blow up an operating power station? I certainly couldn't refuse that. When a concept resonates with the local people, it will in turn go even crazier.

*Shifting Continents* proposes an idea that is restricted by technical limitations, and thus can only be forever admired in secret.

But, the limits imposed by natural conditions can be even more discouraging. In 1994, the project *Making a Ladder to the Earth* was such a case, even more so than the recent project in Sweden titled *Parting of the Seas*. In 1993, my project with David [Elliott] in Oxford titled *The Oxford Comet* ended in a terrible failure. After he became the director of Stockholm's Moderna Museet, he invited me to give it another try at the opening exhibition of the museum. This time, I set my sights on the ice on the sea outside the museum. I plotted to make a light beam resembling Moses's "parting of the seas" in the icy seas of Northern Europe. Unfortunately, who would have expected that this year there would be no ice on the sea? Shortly before the opening, we changed the plan to conduct the performance on water. But, I did not promptly adapt myself to the new situation and ignored many technical problems. On the day of the opening, it was raining and the site was overwhelmed with a huge crowd of spectators. When it was time for the explosion, I counted down with David through mobile phones: 9, 8, 7 . . . Ignite! But, the gunpowder on the sea simply would not explode. The 300 kilograms of gunpowder and the 7000-meter-long fuse we ordered from the prestigious Nobel Company had been soaked through. We were all very grateful that David dealt with the spectators with such great composure, and asked us how soon we could give it another try. Five days later, equipped with a whole new set of techniques that we had developed, we went back to the site. It was a sunny day, but the sea was roiling. Finally, it calmed down a little at sunset, but by then clusters of ice had floated over and were hitting against our boats. Although it was a good idea to have the boat rocking along with the floating ice and the work, and the work was finished at last, David's guests were not present. What was most devastating is that I did not manage to give his museum an "auspicious" opening. I indeed have much to reflect on!

There are many proposals that evolve unexpectedly. When Iwaki City Art Museum invited me to an exhibition, I had nothing in mind. I found the sunken ship, dredged it up, but I still didn't know what to do with it. When the exhibition began, *Forest of Towers* made of the ship's hull became *San Jō Tower*. Then the tower flew up to the sky and became a "rocket." I told the collector of this work — a foundation in Greece — that the work could be further developed in every exhibition according to the situation of the site. It was also in Iwaki that the residents volunteered a suggestion: during the minute when my *Horizon Project* was performed, all the residents along the river would turn off their lights to participate. This suggestion helped me to

conceive of the *Placid Earth* project. As for the Taihu garden rocks, I've long been charmed by their fantastical nature and their ethereality, but I had no idea how to use them. Then, I found the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art had a gardenlike layout, so I decided to insert "my garden" into "its garden," inadvertently launching a pure experimentation of installation language. Later, in New York, when the retired American warship needed for the *Trap* project couldn't arrive in time, and my interest in Taihu rocks was growing stronger, I worked out the *Cultural Melting Bath* with a high-tech American Jacuzzi bath. Recently, those rocks were moved outdoors to the seashore and became a public artwork. It seems as if ideas for works have their own destiny, unfolding step by step. In fact, my pursuit for the freedom of creation — so called "ruleless rules" and "alchemy" — also has its own rules.

It is a great fortune to be an artist, for he can have wild flights of fancy regardless of his age, and speak or act them out at will. I often tell my daughter about my various imaginings first. If she doesn't have any reaction, then I am disappointed. I think when I run out of dreams, I will try to find work at a primary school, where I can always listen to the children telling me their flights of the imagination.

1998.4.20

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— Originally published as "Husi luanxiang" in *Cai Guo-Qiang: Day Dreaming* (Taipei: Cheng Pin Gallery, 1998), 4–17. Originally translated by Wu Chang-Jye, revised by Yinxing Liu.

## AI WEIWEI DIALOGUE WITH ZHUANG HUI (1995) [pl. 40]

**Zhuang Hui:** Had your personal style fundamentally taken shape following your experiences in the United States?

**Ai Weiwei:** When I realized the issues of art's metaphysical existence, I gradually became interested in artistic languages. After that I made some works related to this. For example, under what circumstances will a shape or a state of being serve a function, and why will it have a function? Why do we feel differently when we see a work of art and a commonplace, everyday object? What occurs when we see this difference, and what kind of experience accompanies this? I was experimenting with these ideas.

**Zhuang:** In your works from this period — such as the deconstructed shoes, in which you removed a part of the shoe, and then sewed it together again — you took ordinary, public visual forms and changed their basic quality, and the result forced viewers to realize a change in their mode of thinking.

**Ai:** The power of art is a psychological one: powerful art is not about the size of your work, how old it is, or how far it has come. The question is how does this thing function in our mind. This is because no matter what you say about art, it is always about the human act of thinking, and the power of thought can be infinitely great (at least that's what we think). The importance of anything is also determined based on whether or not we believe it is important.

**Zhuang:** What kind of role do you believe artists should play in society?

**Ai:** In a rational social system, artists should play the part of a virus, like a computer virus. A small project has the ability to effect definite change in a rational society, and

the chaos that results from such a change is the process of making a rational world more alert. That is an important function in art today. Otherwise, if art were merely reflecting public morals, then its outcomes would be far inferior to scientific activities. Art is one of humankind's inordinate ambitions. We live amidst a series of ideologies, all of which were created by fixed concepts. For example, a building may have ten thousand floors, but it still requires a standardized brick to build it; a good project is able to change one brick, and transform the building's entire composition. This kind of subversive consciousness, in terms of culture and psychology, is the strength of an artwork.

**Zhuang:** Artists should have this subversive mentality, and subversion doesn't merely imply destruction, it provides people with new possibilities.

**Ai:** The formidable system surrounding us is just now taking shape. With the entire world falling within its parameters, this system's standardization of language and hopes, and its monopolization and systematization of information, will lead to the overall disappearance of the strength in the value of personal will and individual spiritual existence. The speed at which these are disappearing is faster than the extinction of jungles and the endangered animals within them. This is a problem that should strike terror among the human race.

**Zhuang:** Do you believe that the avant-garde still exists? If so, where does it manifest?

**Ai:** I believe that significant avant-garde movements in China are nearly non-existent, because China hasn't formed a strong base of support on the home front. Any ideology, if it features new and independent opinions, is avant-garde. However, China's cultural situation has been outside of the economic perplexities and the heavy weight of its own cultural burdens over the last century, and it still has trouble dealing with other issues. This makes for the peculiarity of Chinese artists. The problems that Chinese artists face are not only cultural, they must fight for a string of issues: freedom of expression, a space in which to exist, etc. China lacks a true class of intellectuals. It lacks a populace that has received a good education. Talking about Chinese art, we must include a discussion of its cultural milieu, and conditions for survival; this is because we have already clearly felt that the safeguards for the artist's most basic lifestyle are problematic, which has a direct result on the moral character and thinking of most artists.

**Zhuang:** You've placed many issues within very concrete parameters to recognize and implement ideas; this is a very effective method.

**Ai:** Contemplating what I truly want to say and what my ideas truly are, in most of my art there is a definite language that belongs to me. My work *Fur (Pimao)* was a kind of experiment, I placed two different-colored pieces of fur on a small surface; it was a traditional method that evoked the familiar feeling of when an audience confronts a painting. Making the audience believe it is an artwork, and not a so-called Readymade is at once an extremely natural and extremely unnatural thing; natural things must be surrounded by an extremely unnatural environment. I also did a number of paintings, all of which were based on this idea. Our pace of life is too fast, and this has blurred concepts of big and small. We should learn carefully from our own life experiences, and begin with art's fundamental problems, resolving one or two small problems, and devise a style. If everyone wanted only to be the minister of culture or guide trends, then our society would be rather boring.

**Zhuang:** How do you see the issue of the so-called center and periphery?

**Ai:** The so-called center and periphery are relative. If a person already does not acknowledge the existence of god, then the individual is central.

**Zhuang:** Many problems arise from here, we are always concerned with irrelevant issues like East-West dialogue, nationalism, etc., but we do not focus on ourselves. Certain people are always attempting to grasp the trend toward uniformity of different societies, and after reworking certain topics they use methods of commercial manipulation to try and make them into trends, which at its very essence is castrating the artist.

**Ai:** Societal disputes have their own respective objectives, and can often bring a practical benefit to people. The obligation of the artist is to use a process of self-criticism and self-negation to gradually arrive at a correspondingly harmonious and rational method. Other people aren't able to provide you with an answer. Always distrust authority, be suspicious of centralist theories, doubt your alleged cultural influences.

**Zhuang:** Is culture eternal and unchanging? If your answer is no, I would have a very difficult time understanding that; many artists put the majority of their energy into the recent upsurge of searching for roots, isn't this advantageous for the construction of today's Chinese culture?

**Ai:** There's no need to excessively discuss cultural problems. China's cultural history doesn't have any beneficial outcome on our actual conditions, and humanity no longer needs to flaunt its impressive cultural history to achieve success. This point has already been discovered and demonstrated by many nations and peoples. We are a pragmatic people, and owing to many years of unfortunate encounters, most people do not disdain to even consider things that don't immediately produce a beneficial result. Forgetting about cultural issues and paying more attention to the surroundings we exist in, seeing how other peoples reflect on their problems, will perhaps have an enlightening effect on us, bringing us back to our problems in the fastest way possible.

**Zhuang:** We all know Warhol was the most influential artist after the 1960s, to the point that people have prophesied that Warhol's emergence would cause contemporary art to be faced with a profound revolution.

**Ai:** Warhol was an enlightened person, and he understood the arrival of the commercial society. Individual personalities disappeared and value could be repetitively manufactured and produced afresh, people's increased demands caused the lowering of standards of quality. For example, if she uses a perfume, you also use it; he drinks this brand of cola, you also drink this brand. Warhol grasped this kind of vanishing of the individual in modern society, he never considered himself to be an individual, he gave you whatever you liked, whatever you wanted. "I'll produce as quickly as possible whatever you think is trendy"; his entire mode was the negation and omission of individualism.

Warhol turned himself into an all-absorbing sponge; he wanted to be permeated by everything in his surroundings. No matter who or what, he would photograph and record them — his life was like an eternal dinner party, where anyone could show up. Warhol created an American kind of mythology, absurdity, and boredom, but the American lifestyle itself was absurdist and very boring. Because of him, that absurdity

and boredom became enriching. Looking back on twentieth-century art, I believe that Warhol is the primary spirit continuing the work of Duchamp. His popular style, standardization, and commonality became the main characteristics of art in this period. So-called Pop art is something popularized, it is a different concept from China's "Pop."

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— Excerpted from "Fang Ai Weiwei," in *Baipishu [White Cover Book]* ed. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei (Beijing: privately published, 1995) 11–15. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

## STATEMENT (1989)

By Hung Liu

Five-thousand-year-old culture on my back. Late-twentieth-century world in my face. Capp Street near Mission. My alien number is 28333359.

Being a "resident alien" is like trying to watch a movie while reading subtitles; one is positioned in the place, time, and action (the dramatic unities) of a new environment which is both constantly changing and requires endless concentration on its particulars. In my *Resident Alien* installation, done for the Capp Street Project in 1988, I tried to represent this split consciousness in the form of a Tai Chi dancer, drawn directly on the walls and repeated in a chain of stop-action poses around a room which included mural-scale paintings and ceremonial Chinese artifacts. A kind of unifying frieze, the dancers symbolized the tension between the continuity of movement and the fixity of single moments, and felt like the difference between cinema and photography, between the currents of history and the documents by which we fix and remember them

Such ongoing action, as it cuts through time and place, is a metaphor for the migration of people, languages, and customs. Yet one can identify certain crucial moments of pause and focus in a historical chain which give history its face and its human scale. For Asian immigrants to America, those moments can be seen in family and historical photographs, passport and Green Card mug shots, government re-entry papers, political cartoons, the artistic idealization of the homeland, and even in the bilingual street signs which mark Chinatown.

My responsibility as a classically trained Chinese artist in America is not to assimilate, but to express my Chineseness as clearly as I can. By doing so, I hope to contribute to my new home, which is a land inhabited by old and new resident aliens.

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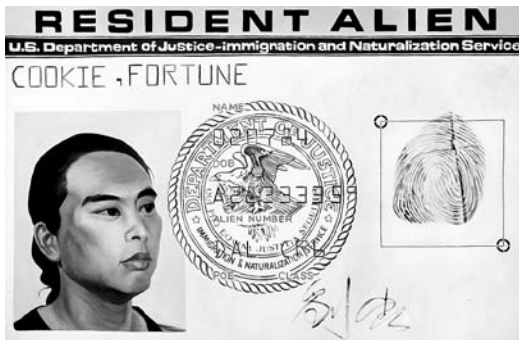
— Originally published in *Visions* (Fall 1989): 34.

## ABOUT RESIDENT ALIEN (2000)

By Hung Liu

I see myself as a witness to history: current events, rights, and injustices all concern me. I am a citizen first and an artist second. It is not enough that an artist can portray something, paint a portrait or a model. That's too shallow. . . . I research and recover materials; I recycle old images and then reuse them in my works.

*Resident Alien* [1988] was painted before I returned to China to locate old historical photographs. It is my self-portrait on an enlarged "green card." I substituted Fortune Cookie for my name, a sexual slang term for Chinese women and also the dessert cookie served in Chinese-American restaurants. I saw the fortune cookie as a hybrid and a



Hung Liu. *Resident Alien*.  
1988. Oil on canvas, 75 × 90"  
(178 × 228 cm). San Jose  
Museum of Art, California

metaphor of my situation at the time — existing between cultures, not Chinese and not American. I also reversed the last two numbers in my date of birth, making it read 1984, the year that I immigrated to the United States.

— Originally published in *Revealing and Concealing, Portraits and Identity* (Los Angeles: Skirball Cultural Center, 2000), unpaginated [There was a misprint in the text's title as originally published. — Ed.]

## Debates over Using Animals and the Human Body in Making Art

This controversy emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s in reaction to a series of unofficial exhibitions in which animals, corpses, and the artist's own body were used as art materials.<sup>1</sup> The curators of and participants in the exhibitions defended these projects for exploring the boundaries of contemporary art, arguing that such "taboo" materials provided the most effective means to challenge conventional definitions of art that were bound to unexamined morality. Not all artists shared this view, however; and the art establishment found this a good opportunity to condemn the "immoral" nature of contemporary performance art in general.

Examining these exhibitions in the context of contemporary Chinese art, we find that they appeared as counter-actions to an effort to "legalize" this art. As will be discussed in the "Extrinsic Perspectives" section, this effort intensified in the late 1990s as a growing number of artists and curators explored various possibilities to work with government institutions and private sponsors, in the hope of bring contemporary art to the public. Against this tide, some radical artists and curators insisted that efforts to popularize contemporary art would inevitably compromise its experimental spirit, and organized unofficial exhibitions to showcase "extreme" and challenging works. Their experiments with using live animals and human corpses to make art were part of this counter-movement. Since these experiments would almost certainly be prohibited by the government and denounced by the public, they justified the necessity for alternative exhibitions planned exclusively for insiders within the experimental art circle.

The texts translated in this section reflect three different views. Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun organized and supported such experiments. In sharp contrast, Chen Lüsheng lists ten reasons to condemn these art projects; such criticism is given legal authority in the Ministry of Culture document. The last text, by Zhu Yu and Wu Hung, focuses on a single project, in which Zhu used his own body as the site of performance. Through reconstructing and analyzing the project's concep-

tualization and realization, the text provides a detailed account of a representative work in this trend.

#### Note

1. These exhibitions include *Culture. Life (Wenhua shenghuo)* (1999), *Supermarket (Chaoshi zhan)* (1999), *Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion (Hou ganxing: yixing yu wangxiang)* (1999), *Art as Food (Yishu dacan)* (2000), *Infatuated with Injury (Dui shanghai de milian)* (2000), and a series of *Man and Animals (Ren yu dongwu)* exhibitions (2000 onward). For an introduction to these shows, see Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000), 164–208.

## POST-SENSE SENSIBILITY: DISTORTED BODIES AND DELUSION (1999)

By Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun

"Distorted bodies" are the consequences of physical mutations, caused either by natural diseases or by artificial transformations. Diseases such as cancer, sarcoma, and birth defects may all produce aesthetic sensations; while artificial transformations such as cosmetology, plastic surgery, tattooing, and genetic control always heighten the subject's insecurity. When these two kinds of transformation coincide, their unpremeditated meeting inspires artists to make "distorted bodies" through their artistic experimentation.

"Delusion" means the mutation of the mind. In recent years, artists have frequently and delicately staged psychological dramas in their works — dramas related to syndromes such as voyeurism, exhibitionism, masochism, and paranoia. In so doing, they have transformed mental syndromes into artistic representations, and have blurred the boundary between normal and abnormal psychology. Thus, when "delusion" becomes artistic illusion, it also becomes a means of healing and ridding of evil. "Distorted bodies" and "delusion" are the main tendencies in this exhibition. [The original English translation of the Chinese title in the exhibition's catalogue is *Post Sense-Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion*. The editor has changed "alien bodies" to "distorted bodies" because the latter term more precisely conveys the meaning of the original Chinese term *yixing* — Ed.].

The most intense and direct representations of "distorted bodies" utilize human corpses as material, deliberately transgressing the dividing line between reality and artistic representation:

In Zhu Yu's installation, an arm cut off from a dead body is suspended from the ceiling, holding a long rope that winds and winds to bury the entire floor of a room. To cross the room, members of the audience have to walk through the sea of ropes, feeling the ground disappearing beneath their feet and themselves suspended in the air. This work seems to pull spectators in two different directions that keep negotiating with each other: while they must respond to the installation's material (i.e., the human arm), their response must also be destabilized by their imagination inspired by the installation's form.

Sun Yuan has frozen a dead fetus in a huge "ice bed," which can be associated with a tomb, the womb, or both. The shocking contrast between the enormous bed and the tiny fetus mesmerizes the audience, who experience sharp pain in their hearts but cannot take their eyes away. Qin Ga's sculpture — a flattened horse lying in a bed facing up — employs an expressionist mode. What it expresses is paradoxical: there is a life-and-death struggle and an outburst of energy, and there is helplessness and despair. This emotional drama is intensified by the horse's black shape being made of human hair. Xiao Yu has constructed a fictional creature by sewing together parts of human and



Sun Yuan. *Honey*. 1999.  
Bed, ice, specimen of a  
dead fetus and a dead man's  
face, 6'7" × 9'10" × 4'11"  
(200 × 300 × 150 cm).  
Collection the artist

bird skeletons; Zhang Hanzi has used pigskin to construct a human form. What these two works express is a profound mistrust of the notion of a natural body.

Wu Ershan deliberately positions various kinds of fruit, vegetables, and live animals together to compose different images of sexual intercourse. The involvement of animals heightens the revelry in this sumptuous banquet of sex and materials to another level of primal roughness. Shi Qing's 1999 directly uses images of numbers to obliterate and rewrite people's handprints. The abrupt break in the life line evidences a conspiracy between prophesying misfortune and new media. Behind it lies an anxiety-ridden self-examination.

Pushing toward the perversion of bodily experience, one can't be satisfied with the material aspect of "distortion." Instead, one must use a "distorted" viewpoint to gauge the body. In Jiang Zhi's humorous vision, the chin has become a space for imaginative expression. This strange game is at once naïve and vicious. In Liu Wei's absurd viewpoint, small, pitiful bodies tear about like wild beasts; they wrestle and struggle, always busily scurrying along like insects, completely lacking in self-awareness — and thus lacking meaning. The eye that peers over this scene is not necessarily consciousness either. Differing from Shi Qing, Wang Wei's self-scrutiny positions the human body in an environment of almost intolerable extremes. Beneath the viewer's feet are images of people pressed up against the floor gasping for air [pl. 41]. They serve as the unstable ground on which the viewer stands. This is not only a self-examination. This mode of installation also urges others to carefully examine us. Through this kind of dynamic reconstruction of the relationship between the self and other, we discover that the "distorted body" has already entered [a state of] "delusion."

"Distorted bodies," in fact, are delusions of the body; or we can say that these are a kind of physical, corporeal delusion. But bodily delusions do not necessarily use the corporeal form. Strewn all over Yang Yong's bathtub are razor blades, causing an immediate reaction of anxiety and tension in one's skin. The installation is a kind of instrument of torture, which has emerged from the artist's calm, dispassionate delusion. Chen Lingyang suspends an old-style coffin within a tunnel, dripping with some kind of a thick mysterious fluid. Gao Shiming, Gao Shiqiang, and Lu Lei together installed a private space replete with a sense of instability — a room covered with traffic signs and streets densely filled with tire marks. Feng Xiaoying similarly describes an illusory individual existence. He combines it with absurd material objects to create a delusional everyday life: a toilet composed of a television screen and a floating goldfish. In this work, the reference to the body isn't directly through the physical body itself, but rather through the utensils and apparatuses that the body employs. Yet, it is the plasticity of the space that is even more organic, its site-specificity is even more distinct; the form



and structure of its model don't exhaust the imagination, instead, the artist has thrown most of his energy and sensitivities into constructing an atmosphere that references the phenomena of existence.

In 1994, Yang Fudong was still a student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He suddenly announced that he was going to suspend all use of language as a medium for interactive exchange. After three months, the palm of Yang's hand was covered with different substitutes for words. This kind of loss of language is not a natural phenomenon, but rather is a man-made design directed at the vivid experience of "life elsewhere." This kind of perplexity toward the body is also distinctly evident in Feng Qianyu's photographs. Interpreting an inversion of the positives and negatives of the composition leads to a repeated expectation of negated details. Within a flattened time and space, illustrated figures have secret, ungraspable identities. In Weng Fen's video installation, bodies take flight in trees and in the city; their wings are made from plastic and cloth. Why not make a hovering superman using the sophistication of computer technology, why toil away at making a kind of crude pseudo-self? Simple and crude materials give prominence to allowing delusion to run wild. In Chen Wenbo's paintings, the hands that suddenly appear in the frame seem not to belong to the painted bodies. This creates an "othering" quality to the main figures. Although these outstretched hands intervene with the figures, the figures also acknowledge their presence.

Qiu Zhijie's work *Evil Heart (Xin mo)* centers mainly around a feeling of weightlessness. Torsos separated from their bottom halves use antigravity to float in the space. Pig intestines filled with hydrogen float in the air, making this scene of weightlessness the target of a "wait and see" attitude, all the while encircling the viewer's space. Distorted aluminum tubes transmit "electronic voices" like cell-phone rings and answering-machine messages. The various elements in this space are brought together, not by form, structure, or semantics, but rather by a collective sense of weightlessness, unrealness, a feeling of non-being and fragmentation.

We have sensed this feeling of non-being before in Yang Yong's work, in which an obscure body rocks in a bed. The feeling of weightlessness has greeted us before in Weng Fen's flying figures and Chen Lingyang's coffin. We have also experienced that sense of fragmentation in Gao Shiming's art, where the smell of asphalt invades the bedroom. Unrealness penetrates every single work in the exhibition: in Xiao Yu's mysterious things, in Jiang Zhi's "denial of the body," in Liu Wei's surreal channels and caverns, in Wu Ershan's bodies made from fruit . . .

After having seen so many different trends of contemporary art exhibitions — like a selection of appetizers — the kernel of our curatorial thinking is located in demonstrating a kind of distinctive standpoint. The works in this exhibition all stress the intensity of perception: distorted works emphasize a strike against the senses. The works related to delusions seep into, invade, and harass the mind. Successful works achieve both of these in a single body. These artists are all relatively removed from heavy and complicated sociocultural critique. Instead, their attention is concentrated on the lowest, most basic level of physiological and psychological experience. From a revival [of these experiences], they are trying to draw forth a more personal and direct cultural attitude. Our standards of values are: first, it must be a stimulus. But, it can't merely stimulate, it must also be unusual. But, it can't only be unusual, it must in the end be rich in the post-sensibility of imagination.

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— Originally published as "Yixing yu wangxiang" in Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, *Hou ganxing: Yixing yu wangxiang* [*Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion*] (Beijing: privately published, 1999), 1. Translated by Wu Hung and Peggy Wang.

## REFLECTIONS ON PERFORMANCE ART (2002)

By Chen Lüsheng

Performance art in China emerged in the mid-1980s. The earliest performance art emulated popular Western patterns, and participants in the movement did not pay much attention to its cultural significance or academic value. But in the year 2000, the abnormal development of performance art presented the world with staggering challenges in legal, ethical, humanistic, cultural, and public interest domains. Those Western observers who advocated performance art in its nascent stages became scandalized by certain extreme displays; when animals were killed in the name of art, the first observers to object were not of Chinese background, but Western. Chinese people often invoke the saying "the pupil surpasses the teacher," and declare that "performance" as "art" needs to possess some cultural prerequisites against an "integrated" or "globalized" cultural background.

If we say that in the late 1980s, self-orientation became an important characteristic of performance art, then through its working in concert with places possessing historical cultural value, such as the Great Wall, the Yuanmingyuan Old Summer Palace, or the Ming Tombs, it was still able to express the practical significance of cultural introspection. In the 1990s, when methods of self-abuse presented us with scathing visual scenes and stimulated thoughts on an alleged "sense of survival," it became difficult for people to understand performance art through typical modes of thinking.

Value judgments based on their daring to be "industry leaders" misdirected the decision making of Chinese performance artists; however, extreme displays by these performance artists have presented society with many worthwhile issues for consideration:

- 1) This is an attempt to use vulgar imitations to blend into global trends. The extreme behaviors of performance art reflected a pursuit of Western culture, and not only does it lack the spirit of creativity, it displays an utmost immaturity arising from a childish, imitative psychology. For example, in the so-called breakthrough into the forbidden territory of "employing corpses," we can see its origins in the exhibition of corpses [*Body Worlds*] by a German surgeon [Gunther von Hagens]. However, that surgeon intertwines the sciences of art, anatomy, museology, ethics, and law. When Chinese performance artists follow in his footsteps, where is the "breakthrough"? Another example is "bloodletting." The artist Frank B stabbed himself in the presence of an audience, entreating them to this bloodshed and the appreciation of his swooning as a result of blood loss. In Chinese performance art, I haven't heard of any swooning as a result of "bloodletting," but this highest attainment among imitative approaches demonstrates a direct line of descent from Western contemporary art. Cultural colonialism has already become the opiate poisoning Chinese art and artists in the new millennium.
- 2) So-called cultural positions are merely cultural antagonism at its most superficial level, and so-called vindication of cultural meaning is merely the simplest explanation. Taking the "classic" account of the *Cultural Animal* (*Wenhua dongwu*) exhibition [Xu Bing, 1994] as an example: the artist chose two pigs, a male and female, and covered their bodies in text, the male bearing English letters and the female covered in Chinese characters. They were placed in a pen littered with textual documents in both English and Chinese, and went about their wanton copulation in the presence of the audience. Certain theorists have interpreted this as: "An intention to show Western civilization's rape of Oriental culture," or "rethinking the possibilities and impossibilities of East-West contact and interchange." These childish cultural deductions, despite their artistic mode, cannot promote the cultural status of this work, because it is essentially lacking in any cultural significance.

- 3) The confusion of the relationship between artistic concepts and linguistic logic produces absurd "art" performances. Because the world is filled with violence, cruelty to animals, environmental pollution, apathy, panic, and irritation, art will employ methods of violence, animal cruelty, and environmental pollution to warn us. It will also use the language of apathy, panic, and irritation to critique society — this is the most commonly seen logical relationship between concept and artistic language used by performance artists. Naturally, such a logical relationship will extend to frightening consequences: murdering to counsel us on murder, committing disturbances to advise against disturbances. Artists are using the name of art to do as they please.
- 4) Overemphasis on art's social introspection and social significance counterproductively demonstrates antisocial behavior. It seems that performance artists are all model performers whose eyes are open to the entire world, and whose interest in human society surpasses that of the average person. However, these artistic methods express something incompatible with society, and these so-called introspections often feign profundity, seeming like child's play. Such methods of social concern are disassociated with art itself, and only exist in the name of art.
- 5) A blind infatuation with injury displays the leanings of a paranoid psychology. "Injury" has become a mainstream pattern for performance art; those terrifying and bloody, intolerable and hair-raising acts are testing our psychological capabilities. The sites of these performances border on hospital surgery rooms and morgues. In performance art, the more audacious and more cruel have inexplicably become the standards for evaluation. Audaciousness and cruelty have their limits; if these limits are one day broken, and personal injury is transformed into harming another person, it would be uncontrollable (according to those theorists, causing injury to others could possibly become art).
- 6) The challenging of physiological limits has lost its artistic significance. This was once a means of performance art, for example when one Taiwanese artist [Tehching Hsieh] spent a year of his life sealed in a dark, airtight room, and severed relations with the outside world. The same artist then spent a year of his time living outdoors, and did not enter any kind of sheltered space for the entire period. These performances "were all completed with an extremely reasoned attitude, he knew what he was doing. He wanted to challenge the limits of the human. Through this he would prove that the human spirit can prevail above the formidable power of flesh and blood." Such challenges can be found in abundance in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, but sometimes such challenges seem to be completely unrelated to art because the feats recorded by Guinness were not done in the name of art. Artists' abilities are extremely limited: they cannot walk tightropes, or swallow fire, they don't associate with bodybuilders, and even less can they be compared to miracle workers. They can only invoke the name of art. When those tightrope walkers, fire-eaters and bodybuilders begin to perform in the name of art, these performance artists will certainly be out of a job.
- 7) The slaughter of animals in the attempt to reveal human cruelty has caused animal protection groups to react against these avant-garde performances. Artists using animals as material in their art "have revealed the absolute, high-handed power of human society over animals, and put humans at the center of an unnatural relationship between human and animal kingdoms," but these people should not be forgiven for slaughtering animals in order to demonstrate this relationship. The authors of some such works forcefully advocate, "it serves as a reduction of the original and real condition of society,

civilization, and intellectuals," perhaps that simplistic idea in the *Three Character Classic (Sanzijing)*, the idea that "people are born innately good," has been conversely adopted in an artistic demand for "goodness." However, not only is the slaughter of animals unkind, it is extremely cruel.

- 8) Propelled by economic interests, performance art has become possessed. The rotted corpses, conjoined fetuses, skinned human bodies of the German doctor's exhibition of corpses caused every viewer to endure both physiological and psychological provocation. It spurred a great debate in Europe, the media fueled the flames, and this attracted even more viewers, which in turn produced healthy economic benefits. It was said that, "The thematic, social, and media gains of this exhibition are all unprecedented." Thus, the similarly extreme exhibitions of Chinese artists have a market, and beyond a doubt, have economic interests. "I've heard that Westerners in Beijing are buying photographs of these works with opening bids of US\$1000–2000. To see strange things in unusual countries truly comes at a high cost, and such acts have been relegated to the Chinese. If we labeled them differently, for example, 'French soy sauce' or 'American soy sauce,' would the price tag be so high?" Extremists in Western society use economic means to lure Chinese performance artists into realms into which they don't dare to venture themselves.
  
- 9) Theorists and curators are fanning the flames, not only are they acting as "directors" of these farcical performances, but they are also irresponsibly generating problems to be handed down to contemporary society. Looking at the development of performance art, every activity or every era is marked by the participation of a theorist (art critic) in a guiding role. Performance artists and art theorists (critics) are integrated into an inseparable entity. Certain theorists are in the process of establishing false reasoning and spreading heresy in favor of extremist performance art, they are establishing a theoretical basis for extreme individual performances.
  
- 10) Manifesting extremes in the name of art not only ruins art's reputation, it blurs the boundary lines between what is, and what isn't, art. One theorist said: "Any action that generates a relationship with society can be called art." It can be understood in this way. But, what human action doesn't generate a relationship with society? When all manner of actions have been transformed into art, does art still have meaning?

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### **MINISTRY OF CULTURE NOTICE (2001)**

The Ministry of Culture's Notice on Its Resolution to Cease All Performances and Bloody, Brutal Displays of Obscenity in the Name of "Art":

Demands that every locality put a resolute end to the harmful appearance of these bloody performances and atrocious displays of obscenity [that are performed] in the name of "art." This notice states that in recent years a small minority of people have — in public places — been self-mutilating and abusing animals, exhibiting human and animal remains, etc., in performances or displaying bloody, brutal, and obscene spectacles under the pretense of "art," and further propagating these performances through

unlawful channels of communication. Such repulsive behavior violates national law, disturbs public order, undermines social conduct, and injures the sound mind and body of the masses, and spreads its vile effect on society. In order to uphold social order, purge our cultural environment, and eliminate cultural rubbish, we present the following related items in notification:

- 1) It is prohibited to perform or display bloody, brutal, or obscene spectacles in public places, and it is likewise prohibited to display the human body or engage in any other pornographic acts that may harm social decency.
- 2) It is prohibited to engage in the mechanical reproduction or transmission in any shape or form of audiovisual materials, texts, or images related to the aforementioned performances or displays.
- 3) Reinforce positive dissemination and guide social masses by improving the ability to distinguish and appreciate art; deliberately boycott degenerate, negative artistic concepts, and the unlawful practice of performances and displays of bloody, brutal, obscene spectacles; uphold regular public order and social stability. Reports of such activity should be prevented from inflating or extending their influence.
- 4) Work units relevant to art creation, art education, or art research must strengthen the propaganda of and education in Marxist aesthetics and in the general and specific art and literature policies of the Party, and reinforce supervision of creative production, education, and research activities to prevent a small minority from making performances and displays of bloody, brutal, obscene spectacles in the name of "art."
- 5) Cultural administration departments at all levels must reinforce their supervision of the examination and approval of all manners of performance and exhibition projects in public spaces, and shall impose strict censorship on performances, exhibition content and form. Censors will be held accountable for any adverse effects due to relaxed checks or oversights.
- 6) With regard to the variety of performances and displays of bloody, brutal, obscene spectacles in the name of 'art,' [punishment will be] according to the relevant provisions of state laws and regulations, to resolutely prevent and punish violators; parties involved will be assigned responsibility for their crimes and punished.

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— Originally promulgated April 3, 2001, as "Wenhuabu guanyu jianjue zhizhi yi 'yishu' de mingyi biao'yan huo zhanshi xuexing canbao yinhui changmian de tongzhi." Reprinted in Chen Lüsheng, *Yi yishu de mingyi* [*In the Name of Art*] (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2002), 178. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

### **ZHU YU'S SKIN GRAFT (ZHI PI) (2000/2003)** [pl. 42]

By Zhu Yu, with introduction and commentary by Wu Hung

**Wu Hung:** The use of the human body and animals in art is currently one of the most debated issues in Chinese experimental art. Indeed several works in what has been, thus far, the most contentious exhibition this year — a private showing of experimental art called *Infatuated with Injury (Dui shanghai de milian)* in Beijing — made use of these kinds of materials. I am not opposed to discussing such works from an ethical perspective (and

I disagree with art experiments that cause harm to animals in the name of art). But, I also feel that there is little to be gained from a judgmental approach that simply approves or disparages these works based on morality. Ultimately, I think that when addressing these issues, art critics still need to operate outside the conceptual framework of a political campaign (*yundong*) and, instead, base their analyses on artists and their works.

To take the *Infatuated with Injury* exhibition as an example, some works in this show were simply substituting materials: the "found object" of a corpse replaced the "representation" of a sculpture. There is nothing innovative about this kind of substitution in modern art; thus there is no longer any value to experimenting with such techniques. But, a performance/installation by Zhu Yu entitled *Skin Graft (Zhi pi)* (2000) at the same exhibition did shake me in a way I rarely experience. The Website Tom.com describes the work: "A side of a pig is placed on a white single bed. A small piece of Zhu Yu's own skin is sewn onto it. The artist arranged the piece of pork to resemble the way a person lies in bed. The light in the room is quite dim and a television above the bed shows footage of Zhu Yu undergoing surgery in a hospital." We should also add that a large photograph of Zhu Yu undergoing surgery hung above the bed, and that Zhu Yu is himself present during the exhibition, occasionally lifting his shirt at the request of friends to expose the already healed surgical scar on his belly.

The basic components of this installation consist of two sets of corresponding images. One set — the video and photograph — reproduces scenes of Zhu Yu's skin-removal surgery; the other set — the pork carcass with Zhu's skin — strips any significance of the skin-graft surgery. The relationship between these two sets of images astonished me with its deliberate bluntness and crudity. But, I was also left dissatisfied because the pairing, while highlighting the basic logic of the performance project, simultaneously destroyed the project's intrinsic continuity. Absent from the installation were the events leading up to and following the acts of skin removal and grafting. In the course of those events, Zhu Yu moved from being the planner of the performance (the artist) to the subject of an action (having his skin removed by a surgeon) and then to the performer of another action (grafting the skin onto the piece of pork). It must be said that this absence of continuity is regrettable.

Thus, in a discussion with Zhu Yu after the exhibition, I suggested he produce a text about the whole process, and have it be an organic part of the *Skin Graft* project. Zhu Yu agreed and, in the following month, wrote two different versions — the second was more detailed than the first. The final version records changes he made to his original plan in the course of designing and implementing the project. As such, it reveals a deeper layer of the performance that is not shown in the installation, and thus carries special importance in understanding the project as a whole. This essay takes the form of a textual dialogue — my annotations are interspersed within Zhu Yu's text.

### **The process of creating the work *Skin Graft* by Zhu Yu**

*Prior to December 1999 [Zhu Yu's text is in italic type — Ed.]*

*Concentrating exclusively on my spiritual nature and failing to understand human nature had made me an unsuccessful Christian. Moreover, as an artist, my conscience told me that respecting the corporeal was morally virtuous.*

*When I had completed my 1998 work *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (Quanbu zhishixue jichu)<sup>1</sup> in the anatomy room of China Medical University, I felt a kind of sadness looking at the dissected corpse, now completely shapeless. I had an urge to restore the corpse and a fantasy to use my own organs to make the corpse whole again. It was from this point that I began to think about what part of my body I could use to restore a corpse.*

**Wu:** The ideas Zhu Yu expresses here differ from those associated with the two "corpse" works that preceded *Skin Graft*. One of these was his *Pocket Theology* (*Xiuzhen shenxue*) in the *Post-Sense Sensibility* (*Hou ganxing*) exhibition (Beijing, 1999): a severed arm hung from the ceiling, a long rope gripped in the hand fell to the floor and covered the entire floor. The other work was his aforementioned *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*. Made for the *Supermarket* exhibition (*Chaoshi zhan*) (Shanghai, 1999), it consisted of bottles containing a paste made of human brains. Zhu Yu offered the following explanation of these two works: "A corpse, the separation of flesh and spirit; a dead brain, the end of thought. I grip a very long rope with a withered arm and seek the spirit that has been separated from the flesh. I slice open brain after brain, bringing to an end all those meaningless associations, seeking a new spiritual impulse from the unknown." So the idea behind these two pieces is to dispel the superstitions surrounding death and to provide an opportunity to experience death through art. Through these experiences, a human body now bereft of life is reinvested with spiritual worth. But Zhu Yu's explanation of *Skin Graft* seems to show this purely rational contemplation giving way to more emotional impulses. What the disfigured corpse evoked was no longer a calm contemplation of or scientific inquiry into death but sorrow and a strange urge to use his own body to make the corpse whole again.

*I read a lot of medical books. In an encyclopedia of surgery, I found writings about the technique of skin grafts. Immediately, I was seized by the idea of taking skin from my own body. My earliest plan was: (1) to find a corpse with damaged skin from a medical facility; (2) to set the exhibition space up as an operating theater with the corpse laid out on an operating table; (3) during the exhibition to surgically remove a piece of skin from my inner thigh; (4) to sew the piece of skin onto the injured part of the corpse. Once this initial plan was formed, I continued to think about the details and also asked doctors about the feasibility of conducting the surgery on myself.*

*In these discussions, I encountered the same reactions as I had when first using corpses to make art — the doctors I talked to were shocked and I had to explain very carefully why I wanted to do this. I had to maintain a very normal countenance — because once I'd finished explaining my plans, I could see in their eyes they were checking to see if I had mental health issues. One older female doctor earnestly told me to see a psychiatrist. She was keen to help me make an appointment with the appropriate specialist. None of the doctors I met with responded to my plans with any enthusiasm, and most did not give me a second meeting.*

*While meeting with these doctors, I constantly thought about how to explain my project. As a result I kept repeating one idea: "The people you, doctors, cure are all living and have intrinsic worth. The person I will repair with my skin is dead. It's an absurdist act of healing. It's art, action without real world significance."*

**Wu:** This passage records Zhu Yu's earliest plan for *Skin Graft* and contains three essential components of the work. The first is the proposed operation: surgically removing a piece of his own skin in a public space and transplanting it to a corpse. The second is the proposed actor: the artist, who himself will perform the surgery both to remove his skin and to transplant it. The third is the link between the actor and the content of the actions: the artist learning how to surgically remove and transplant a piece of skin. Although no part of this last element was evident in the final installation, it is in fact the key to understanding the whole work and it is from here that Zhu Yu's experiment began. Because the artist must learn how to perform the required surgery from doctors, and the performance has to be open in nature, the artist is obliged to negotiate with society and, moreover, attain its understanding. This understanding is

not part of an "identification" process: the artist has no ambitions to become a doctor; what he pursues is the social acceptance of a different set of values. Because this set of values is both personal and absurd (*jiusi fushang* — an absurdist act of "healing"), it is particularly difficult for others to accept, and it is because of this difficulty there is the necessity for artistic experimentation.

*Prior to February 22, 2000*

*After Chinese New Year, a friend found a heart surgeon. After listening to an explanation of the project, he expressed an understanding of what I proposed. However, he said that as a doctor he could not participate, since doctors have their own ethical standards to uphold: their work is to heal the sick, not to damage the healthy. He did however agree to assist me so long as it did not violate his medical ethics.*

*February 23*

*The doctor took me to a burn unit at the hospital where he worked so I could inquire about the technical aspects of skin grafting. He also arranged for me to watch surgical procedures at the outpatient surgical clinic, in order to improve my empirical knowledge about operations.*

*February 27, afternoon*

*I watched four operations at the hospital, two of which were the removal of a subcutaneous cyst and a circumcision. Afterward, a nurse provided me with a list of the instruments required for skin-removal surgery. I then spoke with the two surgeons I had just watched. One of them, a brain surgeon, said to me, "If it's art you're doing, why not fake it a bit? So long as the meaning is there, that'll be enough, like making a movie — if people in movies really died that'd be horrible. If you removed some skin and gave it to someone who needed it, that would be very meaningful, but what's the point of sewing it onto a corpse?" The other doctor, a urologist, on hearing my plans, said, "It's not really possible for you to perform surgery yourself at the exhibition because you haven't had the strict training required and you can't guarantee a sterile environment in the exhibition space. Since you lack these two conditions, you wouldn't be able to genuinely say what you are doing is surgery, it would just be an act of self-harm."*

*March 1 to March 5*

*I visited medical suppliers to purchase surgical equipment and practiced at home on a piece of pork. After several days of practice, I realized that it was going to be difficult to acquire the ability to perform surgery that would not take a long time and still look good. I have no clinical experience. If I can't precisely control the depth of my incision and end up damaging an artery, the surgery would be a failure and the audience will draw the erroneous conclusion that my intention was self-harm. I waved the scalpel above my skin, and imagined what might happen when I actually use it. I began to feel afraid, not because I feared pain, but because I worried that the failure of the surgery would create a big mess. An out-of-control situation like that could perhaps be very exciting, but it would only be an impetuous and uncontrolled excitement; it would lack any notion of intelligent purpose. Fears of this nature caused me to rethink my plan. I started to wonder if there might be some other method of performing this piece that didn't involve skin-graft surgery, which was too technically difficult for me, yet was still capable of expressing my original intent. I thought about the blood donations I'd seen during college. Taking 200 cc of blood would not harm a person, and the process of extracting it was far easier to perform than removing skin. This led me to come up with a different plan: to have a doctor come to the exhibition administer a blood transfusion from me to the corpse. As I considered this, I had the sudden notion*



*to combine blood transfusion and skin grafting: if a doctor could come to the exhibition space to perform the transfusion, then I could also have the doctor do the skin-removal surgery for me too. During the exhibition, all I would have to do is sew the removed piece of skin onto the corpse. Having settled on this plan, I called a blood transfusion center for help. They asked me to come and talk to them about it in a couple of days.*

**Wu:** The negotiations of the artist with society gradually deepen: although a certain understanding between Zhu Yu and the doctors is beginning to emerge, the professional and technical standards of surgical procedures are also beginning to affect and even control the artist's thinking and actions. The concept of "self-harm" is introduced and accepted by the artist. In order to avoid the appearance of self-harm, we see the first major revision to the performance method: the artist switches the subject and object of his planned performance. In the revised plan, the artist is no longer performing surgery himself; it is now a doctor who will wield the scalpel. The doctor would also carry out the newly added blood transfusion. These two changes imply the changing status of the artist from the actor to an object. On a deeper level, these changes further imply that in the course of his negotiations with society, the artist is affected by external elements and has shifted his personal identity.

*March 6*

*I went back to the hospital where I watched the operations to tell the doctors about the changes in my plan. I asked the doctors to come and perform the surgery during the performance. But, they all refused because there are rules and regulations that stipulate the venues where doctors can practice.*

*March 7*

*I visited the blood transfusion center to meet with two of its directors. After hearing my project, one of them — the male director — responded coldly, saying that regardless of my plans, there was no way they would send someone to draw blood as part of a performance — that would be against regulations. Moreover, as doctors, they were acutely aware of how precious blood is in preserving life and regarded not using healthy blood to save a patient as wasteful. After I explained my project again, the female director also said that my plan was impossible to realize for practical reasons. She said that blood being extracted from me would not flow into a corpse; sticking a needle into a dead body was the equivalent of stopping it up and the blood would not flow. She finished by saying that if I wanted help extracting blood there at the center, they could consider it. I told them I would go home and think about it.*

*March 8 and 9*

*I made no further progress in these two days in finding a doctor willing to come to the exhibition space to do the operation or draw blood. I thought about the suggestion made by the blood bank director: to have blood drawn at the hospital, and also have a piece of skin surgically removed at the hospital's operating theater. But, at the same time, I felt that while it wasn't so obvious with the blood, having my skin removed at the hospital would be very different from cutting the skin off myself in the exhibition space. This would be a serious departure from my past works, which have been characterized by a kind of experiential quality.*

**Wu:** The focus of negotiation between the artist and society shifts to the relationship between actions and their location. One significant aspect is the relationship between professions and social spaces. If the affiliation among artists, artworks, and

exhibition spaces is relatively relaxed and based on informal agreements, the relationship among doctors, medical practice, and clinics is highly regulated. In other words, although for Zhu Yu the drawing of blood and surgical removal of skin in *Skin Graft* are artistic activities, and thus can take place in an exhibition space, when a doctor performs these actions, in keeping with medical guidelines, they are no longer artistic activities, but constitute the practice of medicine ("surgery") and thus must only take place in a clinic. Since the view of the doctors represents the view of the law and leaves no room for compromise, Zhu Yu's revision — changing the location of the drawing of blood and removal of skin from the exhibition space to the hospital — feels more obligatory. He perspicaciously senses the implications of such a change; as he writes, these alterations differentiate *Skin Graft* from his previous experimental work. Actually, this revision was based on a [mutual] misapprehension: the artist sees the operation in a hospital as part of an artistic experiment, whereas the doctors see this as a medical procedure. The shift from the exhibition space to a clinical space thus imparts *Skin Graft* with a variety of interpretative possibilities and erases the unidirectionality of the original plan.

March 10

*I visited a medical university to acquire a corpse. Since I have collaborated with them on two previous works, they expressed support for my current project and agreed to help me find a corpse with damaged skin.*

Prior to March 13

*I was determined to find a hospital that would surgically remove my skin. I want to distance myself from any notion of self-harm and want the removal process to be carried out in full compliance with medical practice. I want to ensure that the material for my work, the skin removed from my body, conforms to standard medical procedure, and thus is both safe and scientific. In this way, I differ from Rudolf Schwarzkogler and his [Viennese Actionist] school. They used their bodies as materials and experimented on their own bodies with an aim of harming themselves, leading ultimately — in Schwarzkogler's case — to his death. I visited a military burn research clinic and inquired about having a piece of my skin surgically removed. The director of the clinic suggested I go and ask a smaller hospital instead, since military medical institutions have strict regulations.*

March 14

*I found a burn unit at a hospital near Jishuitan. The director of this unit is the first doctor I have met who completely approves of and supports my plan. After a conversation lasting just a little over half an hour, he arranged the surgery for me. However, the operating staff would not agree to having a photographer and videographer present during the operation, as hospital rules forbid this. Over the next two days, I worked to get hospital authorization. This resulted in everyone at the hospital, senior and junior staff alike, becoming aware that a person in good health wanted to undergo surgery; and they began to wonder why I would want to do this. My final meeting with the director took place in the staff cafeteria. He said that everyone has been asking him about this when they see him, and it's putting him under too much pressure. He no longer felt able to perform my surgery and hoped I could understand why.*

March 20

*I visit the plastic surgery department at the clinic attached to a medical university and discuss my project with its director. The director was unperturbed and had no opinion about my proposed work. He said it was possible to have the surgery, if the hospital authorized it.*

*I visited the hospital's medical and surgical affairs office to explain what I want. They said they've never had a request of this nature before, but were willing to provide technical support for an artistic endeavor, if I obtained a support letter from my work unit (danwei).*

*March 23*

*I send in a formal written request to the hospital, with the institution where the exhibition was to take place, as my official affiliation. The head of medical and surgical affairs at the hospital called the number on this document to confirm my identity. Afterward, he agreed to work with me and drafted an agreement concerning the surgery, which reads as follows:*

*Party A: Zhu Yu (hereafter Party A)*

*Party B: The clinic attached to a certain medical university (hereafter Party B).*

*After amicable negotiations, Party A and Party B have agreed to the following:*

- 1. Party A will conduct an act of artistic creation with the technical support of Party B within a period of time no later than one week after this agreement takes effect;*
- 2. Party B will conduct all clinical procedures in strict accordance with sterile standards;*
- 3. Other than that which occurs because Party B fails to comply with normal medical standards, Party A will accept full responsibility for all risks and any physical harm resulting from the creative making of an artwork;*
- 4. Party B will charge Party A for services provided during the artistic work in accordance with standard medical fees;*
- 5. Party A will keep all matters pertaining to the involvement of Party B in this artistic work confidential;*
- 6. Any matters not covered by the specific provisions of this agreement are to be resolved by further negotiation between parties A and B in a spirit of amity and cooperation;*
- 7. Two copies will be made of this agreement, one each for both parties.*

*That afternoon, I discussed the details of the surgery with the director of the plastic surgery department. In the end, we decided to remove a rectangular piece of skin (including the subcutaneous layer) 12 cm long and 4.5 cm wide from my stomach. The fee for this surgical procedure was 1,500 yuan.*

*March 24, 4 p.m.*

*I laid on the operating table at the plastic surgery clinic. Photographer Zou Shengwu recorded the event according to our prearranged plan. Artist Zhan Wang made a video recording. At 4:15 the surgery began. Each time the anesthetic needle pierced my skin, after a sharp pain, I felt a tingling comfort. As the scalpel cut into my belly, I felt no pain; the feeling was rather refreshing, as if a breeze was blowing on my stomach. The surgery was a pleasurable experience. Finally, the surgeon began to stitch me up. I was almost falling asleep. The surgery took about fifty minutes and was a great success. I had no adverse reactions. I went out to dinner with Zhan Wang and Zou Shengwu. Lastly, I talked with other artists participating in *Infatuated with Injury* about matters concerning the exhibition. I went back to Tongxian at 3 a.m. Before I fell asleep the wound began to ache.*

*The removed piece of skin was placed in a saline solution and kept refrigerated at -10°C. It can be kept like this for about two weeks.*

**Wu:** The changes to the actor and location of the art performance formed a new basis for negotiations between the artist and society. From this point on, the search for "understanding" was bound to the scope of what the law would permit. Yet this search still continually conflicted with the more specific aspects of social contracts, be they

the limitations imposed by the special rules governing military hospitals or the constraints of staff opinions at a smaller hospital. The ultimate resolution was attained under a legalistic rubric: the identity of the artist was confirmed by a state institution, and the participation of the plastic surgery clinic took place under the protections of a written surgery agreement. Yet, these documents represent more than just societally imposed limitations, they also reflect a tacit agreement between the artist and hospital achieved through negotiation. Of particular note is that the written agreement recognizes the operation as "an act of artistic creation" and that it defines the role of hospital as merely providing "technical support." Also worth noting is that this same agreement requires the artist to keep the identity of the hospital secret; strictly speaking this is a private contract establishing an alliance between the two parties to jointly engage in a non-public experimental project. All of this can be seen as outcomes of the difficult dialogue Zhu Yu engaged in with society in the process of realizing *Skin Graft*. Cooperation from the hospital made the photographing and filming of the surgical procedure possible. Zhu's "pleasurable experience" during the surgery may be understood as a reaction to such tacit cooperation.

*March 25*

*I spent a week at home recovering from the operation, all the time thinking about the performance. I was constantly concerned by the thought that the relationship created by taking skin from a living person to sew onto a dead one or to transfuse blood from the one to the other is perhaps too logical. Is it perhaps imbued with a spirit of what may be called "performative sacrificial martyrdom," as I have learned [from Buddhist Jataka stories] — feeding hungry tigers or ravenous birds of prey with one's own flesh? I should not completely lock down the concept of the work; at a certain level, I need to allow it to reveal itself. In the process of removing the piece of my skin, my attention shifted from a mad impulse to restore a corpse to the joy of seeking out materials, a joy akin to what I felt in trying to find corpses for my earlier works. My wound no longer hurt during these days, but began to itch — a pleasure unlike any other physiological sensation and an indication that the wound was healing.*

*April 3*

*I went to Beijing No. 3 Hospital to rent a hospital bed, a stand for an intravenous drip, and an operating table. That afternoon, I called the blood transfusion center and told them that, after considering the matter, I decided to have my blood drawn, a decision I hoped they would support. They reluctantly agreed, and we finally settled on my going to the center's blood donation clinic on the afternoon of April 6 to have blood drawn.*

*April 5*

*I went to hospital to have my stitches removed. When the thread was pulled out, the feeling was like having a fingertip drawn through the gap between your toes, a tickling sensation that goes right to your heart. Not all the stitches were removed because the doctor worried the wound would open; only every other stitch was taken out. I needed to return two days later to remove the remaining stitches.*

*April 6*

*At 1:15 p.m. I went to the blood transfusion center and had 200 cc of blood drawn. This takes a very short time, which flustered Zhan Wang and Zou Shengwu, who were present to help with taking photographs and video.*

**Wu:** Zhu Yu's experiment has entered a new phase. Once the surgery to remove the skin at the hospital was complete, the artist was free of the various restrictions he had been forced to consider and once again took on the status of the main actor. His focus naturally shifted to the next step, grafting the skin onto the corpse. But, because of his experiences as an "object" undergoing skin-removal surgery, his current concept was completely different from his original plan. The pleasurable feelings he experienced as his skin was removed were not a factor in his original plan, but had now become crucial to his thinking and were beginning to influence the rest of the project. One of the major changes that this produced was a rethinking of the rational explanations posited in his original scheme for the work: both transplanting skin and transfusing blood to a corpse now seemed to be attempts to illustrate some kind of abstract doctrine, whose cold hardness contradicted what the artist had actually experienced. Before finding a solution to this problem, Zhu Yu could only carry out the original plan. Thus, his going to the clinic to have blood drawn is not a reflection of dynamic thinking taking place in the process of experimentation, but rather is representative of Zhu Yu continuing with his original plan.

*In the period leading up to the opening of the exhibition, I was faced with an extreme dilemma—whether skin and blood should be used on the corpse—and this weighed heavily on me, stifling me. It seemed that I had been forced to display a seriousness the whole time, and this made me very tired. Actually there was nothing new for me in using a corpse, and this idea had become a burden. The corpse made the paths for creativity even narrower. I wanted to do away with this kind of inhibiting feeling and set about creating a more relaxed frame of mind. It was at this point that I first thought of using a piece of pork—a piece that still had the skin, bought at random at the morning market. I would sew my skin onto this piece of pork and stick the blood transfusion tube into it. The pork would lie calmly on a hospital bed made up with clean white sheets. Having thought of this, a sudden sensation of relaxation came over me. For me, this method was absurd and interesting, a kind of vivid senselessness that excited me. But, another problem steadily became clear; it seemed that skin removal and blood transfusion were two separate works. The act of having skin removed was one of losing control; it was senseless. But, for others, blood transfusion has an existing significance. Perhaps transfusing blood into the pork would appear too much like a performance.*

**Wu:** This is the third major change in Zhu Yu's thinking: the corpse was replaced with a piece of pork that could be bought anywhere. This resulted in nullifying the original meaning of the whole experiment. The removal of skin and drawing of blood were no longer invested with any real or symbolic functions, becoming instead a sort of unimaginable waste—a purer absurdity that was more satisfying for the artist.

*April 13 to 17*

*The exhibition was postponed by a week; I used this time to go to Shanghai with a friend to make a bas-relief. When we were not working, we relaxed and chatted on the banks of the Huangpu River, which flows by the factory. When our conversation turned to my skin graft and blood transfusion project, my friend said that skin grafting was too boring and he had no idea what I was up to; merely making something's skin whole was absolutely useless and had nothing to do with life and death; it was the very definition of superficial. He said the idea of the blood transfusion was okay. At the very least other people would have some kind of clue what I was getting at. I immediately had a premonition that there was something wrong with doing a blood transfusion, because the fixed meaning of the act was of absolutely no importance to me.*

April 21

*I visited the home of Mr. Li, the curator of the exhibition, to discuss my plan. He also felt that removing skin and blood transfusion seemed to be two separate things, and like me was more inclined toward the skin removal. There really had been quite a few artists working with blood. I decided at this point to wait until we start installing the exhibition — to see what the circumstances surrounding the skin removal and blood transfusion would be — before making my final decision.*

April 22, morning

*A butcher carried a side of pork on his back into the exhibition space. I had an assistant carefully wash the pork, then carry it over to the hospital bed. I then hung the bag of blood on the transfusion stand, and as predicted, when the needle was inserted into the pork the blood would not flow. I brought out the tracheal suction catheter I prepared and inserted it inside the piece of pork. I attached a balloon to the other end. Now when the needle was inserted into the catheter that was concealed in the pork the blood started to flow. But as this began to happen, I felt it was meaningless, this flow was manufactured. A problem arose with the concept behind its irrationality. So I thought no more about it and poured the 200 cc of blood down the sink. I then took out the surgical equipment and began to sew the piece of skin taken from my body stitch by stitch into the piece of pork. At 3 p.m., the exhibition opens.*

**Wu:** With this we can see that what Zhu Yu underwent a series of self-negations, after having the piece of skin removed. He first began to have doubts about the rational basis of his original plan, then decided against using a corpse, and finally abandoned his plan to perform a blood transfusion. As I see it, if we take his decision to substitute a piece of pork for a human corpse as bringing the whole performance to a climax, then his act of casually pouring away the 200 cc of blood was a declaration of the completion of the experiment. These two decisions both embody the purpose of the whole experiment, which is what Zhu expressed as "I should not completely lock down the concept of the work; at a certain level I need to allow it to reveal itself." Although many other artists could have spoken these words, Zhu Yu's experiment had an intensity that few works of art are able to achieve. Intensity of this sort did not come about because Zhu had perfectly realized an extraordinary plan, but because right from the beginning he rejected any pursuit of complete success. In order to realize a bold, strange impulse beyond the understanding of most ordinary people, he invested himself in negotiations with society. Then, to remain true to himself, he let a still bolder and more absurd notion replace his original one. *Skin Graft* begins with distress felt for a corpse and ends by putting aside the corpse. Its meaning lies in the continual negation of its originally intended meaning; its intensity is felt at every step of negation and being negated.

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**Note**

1. This is the title of a famous book written by Johann Gottlieb Fichte in 1794; the English title is *The Science of Knowledge*.

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# **II. EXTRINSIC PERSPECTIVES**

**M**any changes in the world of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s were related to China's enormous transformation during this period. Four changes in particular gave the art world a different outlook. First, many contemporary artists chose to become freelance "independent artists" (*duli yishujia*) with no institutional affiliations — a move which altered not only their career paths but also their social status and self-perception. But, if this new status allowed these artists to disassociate themselves from old liabilities, to make a living and support their art experiments, they had to submit themselves to other rules. It was in the 1990s that contemporary Chinese artists learned how to negotiate with art dealers, collectors, museums, and Western curators. Quite a few of them developed a double career, supporting their unsaleable experiments with money earned from selling paintings and photographs.

Second, starting in the late 1980s and particularly during the 1990s, a large number of contemporary artists moved from the provinces to major cultural centers, especially the capital. The result was a situation that differed markedly from the 1980s. Most avant-garde art groups during the '85 Art New Wave emerged in the provinces and were active on the local level. But in the 1990s, Beijing became the unquestionable center of contemporary art, as it attracted talented young artists from all over the country. A direct consequence was the emergence of residential communities of contemporary artists known as "artists villages" (*huajia cun*).

Third, "independent curator" (*duli cezhanren*) became a new profession. Although many of these curators had been active as critics and organizers of contemporary art activities in the 1980s, they now assumed a new professional identity based on an international model. A principal role which they now took upon themselves was to invent an infrastructure for contemporary art, including regular channels for exhibition, collecting, education, and the commercial circulation of artworks. Many of them believed that only by establishing such channels could contemporary art gain a strong foothold in China and be connected with the public. They thus initiated a "normalization" movement of contemporary Chinese art, hoping to transfer this art from a small group of avant-garde artists to society at large.



Xu Zhiwei. *Yuanmingyuan Village*. 1993 (published 1995). Black-and-white photograph, 12 × 16" (30.5 × 40.6 cm).



Fourth, the globalization of contemporary Chinese art was now in full swing. Starting from the early 1990s, contemporary Chinese artists entered the most privileged international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta, and foreign curators went to China regularly to search for new talent. More artists went abroad, but even those who remained at home made frequent trips to international exhibitions. This globalization process was coupled with the commercialization of contemporary Chinese art: from the early 1990s, privately owned art galleries, often backed by foreign capital and aimed at a foreign clientele, appeared in major Chinese cities. Some individuals and institutions in Hong Kong, Japan, and the West began to systematically collect contemporary Chinese art; their interest encouraged the market for this art and directed international attention to contemporary Chinese artists.

These four changes constitute the background for this section, which addresses issues concerning the infrastructure, criticism, exhibition, and global connections of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s.

## ESTABLISHING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

In February 1992, after two years of conservative fiscal policy introduced following the 1989 student movement, Deng Xiaoping embarked on what would become his famous "Southern Tour" to promote renewed economic liberalization. During the tour, he criticized those who harbored doubts about the opening and reform policy, and stressed the importance of fast-paced economic development. A massive mobilization campaign then broadcast his call for a new round of reforms around the country, initiating a period of rapid economic growth. This campaign received official sanction later that year, when the Fourteenth Party Congress adopted a new platform calling for the creation of a "socialist market economy."

Even before Deng's Southern Tour, a group of art critics had published a new contemporary art journal called *Art • Market* (*Yishu • shichang*) in early 1991. The editors announced in their inaugural editorial that contemporary Chinese art was entering a period of global circulation, and that the purpose of the journal was to facilitate this transformation. According to them, only by establishing a set of unambiguous rules governing this circulation could artists work together with museums, commercial galleries, collectors, and publishers to build an economic foundation for contemporary art, and only with this foundation could contemporary art flourish in China.

This idealistic approach was shared by many advocates of experimental art in the 1990s, who believed that their most urgent challenge was to develop a "system" (*ti zhi*), especially an economic mechanism, for this art. To launch a formal campaign to establish such a system, they organized the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* (*Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan*) in Guangzhou in October 1992, which showed more than 400 works by 350 artists. Sponsored by private entrepreneurs, the exhibition's "academic standards" were safeguarded by a team of critics, who were entrusted to formulate criteria for evaluation and to select award-winning works.

The twin foci of the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* — to establish a financial operating system and a system of art evaluation — anticipated many projects in the following decade. In the same spirit, this exhibition also redefined art critics, who

now assumed the additional roles of exhibition curator, event organizer, and art agent. While continuing to comment on the state of contemporary art, they increasingly became dealmakers and developed close ties with various sectors in the art world, including official and foreign institutions. If in the 1980s these critics had galvanized avant-garde artists to form a self-sustaining movement, they now devoted their energy to bringing together contemporary artists (who now formed many small "circles," as Wu Hong observes in his essay) and the world at large.

## Contemporary Art and the Market

### HEADING TOWARD THE MARKET (1992)

By Lü Peng

The focus on the development of art according to a metaphysical framework is rapidly coming to an end. That is to say, that 1990s Chinese art is in the process of heading full-force toward the market.

There is no doubt that the basis of art's orientation toward the market is a search for financial support. This kind of argument inevitably encounters intense moral reproach. Even so, money itself has no *a priori* moral quality. Since its very beginning, its moral definition has fluctuated according to varying social strata. Today, this view of money as evil should yield to a recognition of it as the basic premise for contemporary cultural development. The financially fueled market is not a corrupting environment for arts and culture. Instead, it is an apparatus for determining cultural production. In contemporary society, the "success" of a work of art is inconceivable without the direct or indirect support of the following: gallery management, the practices and operations of agents and middlemen, the pounding gavel of the auction house, the interrelated functions of the financial banking system, not to mention publishing houses, legal structures, insurance mechanisms, and tax administration for industry and commerce. People once believed that the independence of a work was based on the "thing-in-itself." But, for an artwork situated within society — which needs its position to be confirmed by society — this abstract "thing-in-itself" has never existed. A work of art can only emerge when it "becomes effective," that is, when it has passed through the different fixed regulations of various social organs. Moreover, the oil lubricating the apparatus of the market is the money generated through wealth.

The essential meaning of heading toward the market is this: art ought to be produced for the purpose of sale. The immediate critique against this view is that to do so invariably leads to a deluge of bad art of unbearable shoddiness and vulgarity. The problem of such a critique, fully exposed in its narrow moralistic presentation, lies in its ignorance of humankind's mainstream pursuit of a lofty and healthy culture. In other words, it disregards the existence in society itself of an irresistible pursuit toward creating a high-class market in order to supply refined tastes. This critique also overlooks the fact that this kind of "creating" and "supplying" relies on monetary assistance. The transformation of market tastes and the criteria of commodity evaluation are eventually influenced and determined by intellect, but the production of intellect cannot be separated from material and monetary conditions. In short, an artist's work can only be truly and effectively sustained when sales are made.

The basic requirement for art to head toward the market is to realize investment instead of sponsorship. In contemporary society, to seek sponsorship is a vestige of classicism. It is a practice established on a psychology of begging and searching for alms, while

market exchange has become the prerequisite for contemporary cultural production. "Investment," therefore, is a practice that conforms to contemporary moral standards, because "investment" signifies an up-front affirmation and commitment toward the value of another person's labor. Precisely because investors express their respect for artwork and its production in monetary terms, it is very reasonable for them to again exchange artists' works for money, thereby submitting their respect for value to an empirical examination. If a person seeks to obtain others' money without delivering his own product of labor, he is negating the value of his own labor and positioning himself as a parasite.

Art heading toward the market also means heading toward order. An artistic environment without a market is a primitive wilderness that is actually harmful to the development of art, where art can be "disfigured" at anytime by boorish administrative opinions or orders via an impromptu phone call. The market, in contrast, is a safe operational mechanism that abides by laws. The production and "success" of an artwork according to the market are affirmed and protected by factors in those market regulations. We know very well that a regulated and orderly art market has yet to be established in China, but this is no excuse for us to relinquish our responsibility, to drift along, or even to despair or harbor "a resigned attitude." On the contrary, in order to facilitate the truly healthy development of contemporary art, it is necessary and significant that we make every effort to construct an art market.

Ultimately, art heads toward the market to sufficiently and effectively unseal and unfold an inner, spiritual world. We have heard enough about the age-old van Gogh myth, making even clearer to us now the significance of the astronomical prices that van Gogh's art fetches in the contemporary market. Admittedly, a soul need never be valued in terms of money, but in a commercial society monetary pricing is the most effective means. With no God to provide a decree over endless academic debates, money becomes the most effective referee. Artists use their art to disclose the secrets in their souls, while society uses money to affirm the value of these "secrets." If someone says that the value of an artwork is still independent of the market, a retort to such a soul-oriented supremacy is this: without the market, the value of artwork has no choice but to remain contained in the soul of the artist, and then society will never have a chance to know those secrets within.

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Translated by Mia Liu.

## WHO IS GOING TO SPONSOR THE HISTORY? (1991)

Interview with Huang Zhuan

**Huang Zhuan:** Up until now, the history of modern Chinese art has basically still been a journalistic history; a history almost without rules of artistic competition, without anyone to arbitrate art, even without a legitimate arena for artistic activities; a history replete with a Courbet-complex [of rustic realism]. In this kind of setting, art employs a distorted method that renders it incompatible with society; its reliance on the political climate already indicates its immaturity and frailty. Clearly, to us, the most pressing problem is: should we change our method of writing history, cast off the state of an excited movement, and use a more realistic means to reconstruct our history?

**Question:** Is this "realistic means" that you refer to the establishment of a Chinese art market?



Cover of the first issue of *Art • Market* (1991: no. 1) (Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, Changsha)

**Huang:** Yes. Actually, many of our friends have already begun making preparations for this work. In the south, there are decent journals like *Art • Market* (*Yishu • shichang*) as well as a kind of embryonic, first-level market [this term is addressed later in the interview] like Guangzhou Art Galleries (Guangzhou yishujia hualang). I believe that the commercialization of serious artworks, which is to say the establishment of a real art market, will enable our modern art history to achieve substantial international significance.

**Q:** Is the market really that effective? China lacks the economic background necessary for establishing an art market with international standards and, moreover, would be reproached from an ethical standpoint. I've heard from many New Wave artists — even though this name itself is already very commercial — who refuse commercial evaluations of their work to the point that they even express disgust toward other artists who do seek commercial results.

**Huang:** This kind of attitude makes us easily recall van Gogh. During his lifetime, this cynical, dejected artist was only able to sell his works at low prices. But today he has become the most expensive artist in the Western art market, and the way that history acknowledges him is through nothing but money: an eight-figure sales price. Of course, you can say that without the eight figures, van Gogh is just as great, but I think that without a specific artistic context, discussions on the greatness of the artwork or the artist are not very reliable. During Michelangelo's era, it would have been impossible for van Gogh to be great. This is not only because different periods of art history set out to resolve different problems, but also because different time periods have discrepancies in their values. There are also differences in the socialization and historicization of artists and their work. Today one could embrace van Gogh's attitude toward creating and living (actually, among van Gogh's many anxieties was not selling his work), and even hope that one's work will achieve recognition after one's death. But, even so, reality cannot be denied: in this era of art history, commercialization is the most basic

means for artists and artwork to enter history. For a long time, our art history has fabricated myths about great artists developing from their innate, lofty dispositions, but rarely have they mentioned that each artist's fame was the result of complex opportunistic means, including the influence of underlying and surrounding political and religious powers, different interest groups, agents, dealers, commissioners, collectors, and critics, all of which produced subtle, inestimable functions in the process of historicizing art. It ought to be said that all of these powers are sponsors of art history, and are, without a doubt, constituent components of art history. In the past, I have expressed interest in this issue, that is, what specific methods artists have used to achieve fame and ensure a legacy in different eras and countries. (Remember, in the Qing dynasty, Zhang Dai divided painters in his *Exploring the Delicacy of Painting* [Huishi Fawei] into "those whose names become known because of their paintings" and "those whose paintings become known because of their careers and personalities.") I even plan to write *A History of How Artists Became Famous* (Yishujia chengmingshi) to examine this question. Recently, I read Otto Kurz and Ernst Kris's famous *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, in which they completely and splendidly describe how authors of classical art history used different kinds of myths to mold cultural heroism in their imagination. I think every artist that aspires to achieve success or fame would do well to read this book, it can help us to redress some of the stories and knowledge that have been misunderstood and mythologized in our art historical education.

**Q:** Can you describe the current ways through which artworks and artists enter history?

**Huang:** People interested in this question should probably read magazines like *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, *Artists* (Yishujia, published in Taiwan), etc. . . . to understand gallerists like Leo Castelli and entrepreneur-collectors like Morishita Yasumichi. Even though Castelli's identity is as an art dealer, he has been considered in the Western art world to be "the pope of contemporary art" and a "person who writes history." This is not only because since the 1950s his gallery has promoted artists like Rauschenberg, Stella, Lichtenstein, Warhol, and other great masters who are able to represent their respective eras, but also because he successfully created a model to consolidate the historical position of artworks and artists through commercial resources. Obviously, to write about postwar art and not mention Castelli would be like writing about art of the Middle Ages and not bringing up Christianity, writing about Michelangelo and not mentioning the Medici family, or writing about Chinese literati and not noting leaders of literati taste such as Su Shi [1036–1101] and Dong Qichang [1555–1636] — all of these are inconceivable. Fundamentally speaking, I think that the emergence today of sponsors of art history such as Castelli is related to the economic bases of people's lives. It is just as Marx said: we should consider reality starting from an economic foundation. During an era of high industrialization, people's economic and business activities have even more significance to human civilization and human behavior than [at] any previous time. The biggest difference between modern economics and classical economics is that the former studies economic activities, in particular man's pursuit of profit, through his entire cultural behavior, rather than simply through a profit-oriented relationship between people and things. In Ludwig von Mises's *Epistemological Problems of Economics* (1933), he handles the maximization of economic goals, rational choice, etc. . . . within the "basic logic of human behavior." In Lionel Charles Robbins's *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1932), he believes that what is researched in economic studies is not confined to the field of economics but rather studies one aspect of human behavior, the relationship between purpose and methods. Clearly, commercial activities in the field of

modern economics have become an increasingly effective means to harmonize the contradictions between people's different cultural activities and the orientation of their values. It constitutes a major impetus driving people's rational decisions. Put simply, commercial activities and market competition today are no longer simply about seeking profit. Instead, an entire set of rules of competition established by such activities has increasingly become the behavioral criteria shared by human civilizations and a unique aspect of the human value system. Marx believed that man's transformation of all his power into monetary power was a major advancement in human history. Friedrich A. von Hayek has noted that of all of man's inventions, money is one of the greatest as a tool of freedom. I think if we understand these words not simply from a traditional ethical viewpoint, and instead as methods of rational choice within all of human culture, then we will acknowledge this reality: compared with political power and individual volition, money and market can surely provide human culture with more rational and fair competitive opportunities. I think that it would not be too difficult to understand the commercialization of man's artistic acts if we put it against this background.

**Q:** In your opinion, at this point, what is the possibility of establishing an art market within the current Chinese economy? In other words, in China, who has the possibility of supporting this kind of art history?

**Huang:** Who is to support history is a bigger cultural topic; to use a popular term, it's a synthesized project. It can't just be up to just a few galleries, dealers, and art investors to solve the problem. Nonetheless, according to the present circumstances, we can put forth efforts from three angles.

First, we need national art legislation that references international standards and addresses the quality of artwork, art investment, the art market, and art brokers, collectors, dealers, etc. It must concretely and meticulously define rights and interests and provide legal safeguards. In the recently announced copyright laws, determinations regarding artwork were overly simple and extremely rough, and obviously insufficient for the needs of establishing an art market. And, without the guarantee of legislation, an art market cannot develop healthy and normal operations, nor can it attract the investment and interest of the international market. As a matter of fact, over the past few years, in the business of buying and selling art, something has been asked: low, mediocre imitations have made a profit while genuine artworks lack regular channels for becoming commodities. Of course, drafting national art legislation requires an unimaginably long time, and the conditions surrounding the establishment of art markets vary region by region. In my view, art legislation can probably begin with the institution of laws and regulations for regional art markets, and then gradually experiment with extending its reach. And, since some regions have commercial activities like stamp auctions, they are already equipped with regional standards. Thus, striving for standards in the buying and selling of artworks should not be a difficult task.

Second, of course, is establishing an art market of international standards. This kind of market is usually composed of two levels. The first-level market consists of "artists," "galleries," and "collectors." When an artwork leaves the artist's hands, passes through a gallery transaction, and enters a collector's hands, it completes the activities at the first level. The second-level market indicates artworks that leave a collector's hands and reenter the market by way of a broker, intermediary, auctioneer, etc. . . . once again or repeatedly becoming commodities. In this process, the value of an artwork is newly evaluated and demonstrated according to commercial pricing. Because the process of closing a transaction is often controlled by academic circles, critics, and news

media, etc., and thus under the influence of many social factors, this is also a process through which an artist receives social approval via commercial methods and becomes firmly established in art history.

Postwar New York art dealers went through the world art market (where Paris was the center) to first buy fine European artworks, and then utilized their own actual economic strength to advocate native painters like Jackson Pollock and de Kooning. This, in turn, allowed New York to leap forward to rival Paris as the world's art center. At present, with China's economic strength, it's of course still not possible to enter the international art market, even though first-level markets of varying quantities and qualities have appeared in Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and other regions. There are also a few irregular commercial activities of the second-level market (for example, visiting businessmen from overseas who go through galleries to buy works). But, because this kind of activity has still not entered into a regular trajectory of legalization, and also because transactions give priority to pure commercialization, we should not overestimate their future development. I think that the most fundamental means for establishing a Chinese art market is still first to raise consciousness toward cultural strategies for managing artworks, and then — through legal methods and public opinion — put existing galleries in order by differentiating between those engaged in the business of serious artworks and those managing pure commercialization.

On the topic of the art market, I would also like to talk about issues of art investment. In terms of the financial state of China's galleries, most are still small businesses with limited capital. Although they make the occasional international transaction, these are mostly deals involving high volume with relatively small profit. This situation is naturally related to the purchasing power of the domestic market, and is also because these galleries have not yet developed connections with substantial economic entities. Based on the recent situation, as well as over a longer period of time, the main investors in Chinese art markets will be various businesses and economic entities. A business's role, in relation to its art investment, can be purely as a sponsor, a collector, or even as a profiteer. From the perspective of pure sponsorship, China at present has some economic entities — middle- and large-size businesses — particularly from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and developing cities along the southeast coast. They invest more than 100 million yuan in cultural sponsorship (including education, physical education, and various public charities). We only have to be willing to make an effort to draw a portion of that into art investment. This is not impossible.

Of course, as a long-term goal, our strategic objective should be to establish businesses that specially manage art, in order to create a positive mode of circulation for the art market. Internationally, since the mid- to late 1980s, investment in artwork has continually been on the rise. Art investment has already been classified as the third-best investment opportunity after real estate and stocks. John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends 2000*, has even predicted that in the 1990s artwork will replace sports in industrial symbolism and will become the most fashionable hot-spot for investment. In 1970, the British Rail Pension Trust bought twenty-five Impressionist paintings for 5.8 million US dollars. Three years later, they successfully sold the art for 59.6 million dollars. In one year, the price appreciated by 20.1 percent. In three years, their income from the investment had tripled [*sic*]. Since spring 1989, Japan's Aska International — the art subsidiary of Aichi Corporation — headed by Morishita Yasumichi, has ascended in the international art auction market. By that fall, Morishita had become the second largest shareholder of Christie's. In three years' time, he planned to expand the scope of his investment to 20 billion yen. According to the investor's appraisal, every year this investment should earn profits of 1 to 1.5 billion yen.

I think that these facts will undoubtedly be inspiring to those businesses interested in investing in art. Domestic investment in art can be divided into two steps: first, investing in artists and galleries with artistic strength and latent commercial potential. For example, supplying them with necessary creative conditions, managing these conditions, purchasing artwork, and helping news media (newspapers, journals, television stations, etc.) to promote the above-mentioned artists and galleries. Of course, before the selection of these artists and galleries, investors need to first draw support from critics and [their] rational methods in order to ensure reliable authentication; I will discuss this problem in more depth later. From a short-term perspective, this kind of investment might still count as "support" and seem non-profit in nature, but from a long-term viewpoint, regardless of whether one sees it as advancing business or views it purely economically, it will all be recompensed. If this kind of investment can receive preferential governmental legislation (e.g., tax reductions on art investment), then this process can be accelerated.

Second, in terms of the probable scope of funds needed to participate in the international art market, in 1990, Taiwan's Taiwan China Trust Corporation purchased an Impressionist painting for 6.6 million US dollars. This action elevated the image of the investment company's strength, and became a fixed profit-earning investment for the company. As far as I know, cities such as Chengdu, Guangzhou, and others are already home to a few economic entities with foresight and wisdom, and that have already begun to experiment with investing. This undoubtedly is encouraging news.

**Q:** So, it's about time you discussed the third aspect of who sponsors art history.

**Huang:** That would be criticism and critics. This is also the weakest and most disheartening part of constructing the Chinese art market. In the beginning, I raised the issue of art arbiters. I think that in a sound art market, critics ought to serve as arbiters. "Arbiters" is a term that easily gives rise to antipathy in art, particularly in "anything goes" modern art. Discussing arbitration seems to spoil people's appetites. But, I have always considered such views about artistic valuation to be antihistorical. In this respect, I see things objectively — I am among those who believe that, at the very least, works of art reflect higher and lower tastes, and good and bad quality. I don't want to go too much into this. I just want to define the implications of "arbiter," so that there won't be any kind of misunderstanding. I think that "arbiter" mainly points to the capacity and authority to make judgments on artistic quality and changing art trends for those involved in the business of art.

In China, art criticism has never been an occupation with professional authority. It is either that kind of rambling spiritual analysis by philosophers and aestheticians, or — in most situations — a secret, friendly exchange of favors between the critic and the artist. Those kinds of flattering essays written for particular social occasions are the main indicator that art criticism in China has not reached maturity. It cannot suit the needs of the development of modern art, and furthermore obstructs Chinese art from achieving international recognition.

This is why places like Sotheby's — in the international art market — are not interested in auctioning modern Chinese art. To some extent this is because China lacks a tradition of influential criticism that addresses artwork from the dual standpoints of historical positioning and commercial value. Art criticism, established within the conditions of the art market, requires the art critic to possess multiple professional skills: the ability to historically locate a work's style; the ability to judge artistic techniques, quality of materials, and authenticity; the capacity to predict the temperament of domestic



and international art markets; the ability to expound and prove possible influence from the surrounding social environment and its artistic trends. . . . For this purpose, the art critic needs a strong grasp of knowledge from multiple disciplines such as art history, social psychology, market management, law, and others. Of course, of chief importance is that he or she must possess good judgment — abilities to appreciate and discriminate — in order to determine a work's quality and class (it is unfortunate that at present in China's world of art criticism, it is precisely this good judgment that is lacking). I think that only within this kind of context can critics perhaps really become what Gombrich refers to as "professional problem seekers."

**Q:** What about the position of the artists? Will artists, due to the pressures and anxieties produced by the market, lose their state of creative freedom? It seems that you have already idolized the market. Is it possible that the mythology of the market can give us a set of regulations for fair play?

**Huang:** The mention of the market easily makes people recall the moral reproach levied against the contract farming system implemented a decade ago in rural villages. Everyone says that contracting made certain peasants wealthy — particularly those who were shrewd and goal-oriented — whereas simple, naïve peasants remained poor. Nowadays, I don't think that anyone would — because of this kind of moral issue — deny the historical gains brought to us by the reformed rural economy. I agree with Wang Guangyi's opinion of those peasants who could not adjust to market competition, seeing them as "the morally handicapped and the sacrificial lambs necessary in the course of historical progress." As for those who criticize historical progress from a moral standpoint, we can only sympathize with them, but then we must leave them behind. Artists are the starting point and endpoint for the art market, thus the artists' qualities directly influence the market's qualities. This is the position of artists in the market. For example, imagine if 90 percent of artists in the country depended on "Yunnan painting" to make a living. If that were the case, do you think there could be a healthy art market?

As for artists' anxieties and pressures in the market, I believe that this is both inevitable and necessary. In fact, any time period free of external pressures — a state of creation under absolute free will — is a Kantian fantasy. In history, various kinds of religion, politics, commerce, and pressures of taste only added to art's interest and glory. It is precisely these kind of pressures that give genuine masters free rein to develop their abilities to compose, design, and artistically experiment, thus producing a culture and society even more suited to their own artistic existence. Genuinely mature artists should be those people who are able to clearly understand their own environment, and utilize this kind of environment to make efforts toward resolving artistic dilemmas.

**Q:** Your words have the flavor of behavioral psychology.

**Huang:** Yes, the psychology of our modern art is mostly in the vein of Freudian and Jungian "depth psychology." It has fostered a number of people obsessed with lionizing themselves and accustomed to indulging in self-admiration. But, I believe that entrusting the future to understand one's art by making art that completely disregards the existing context is a form of deceit. For example, Skinner opposes depth psychology's "theory of internal causes of behavior," that is, the notion that people's behaviors are fixed in their internal psychological states and processes. He emphasizes that behavior is not only conditioned by the environment but also fundamentally by "reinforcement," namely, the influence and outcome of behavior. Through changing the environment

and using various methods of reinforcement, we can completely transform and control people's behaviors and redesign our culture and society. It is from this reasoning that he opposes "absolute freedom" and "dignity."

In terms of the environment, I'm not saying that the art market is art history's only, or even most fair, means of competition. But I do believe that in our present cultural circumstances, it is perhaps a relatively reasonable and realistic method. Compared with the "non-competitive" artistic life of the past few years and the "free" state of affairs of having no legal constraints, I think the art market is more suited to the value principles of modern culture. If we say that artists' successes cannot be separated from various contingent factors and conditions, then I think that contingency within an ordered state is more reasonable and rational than fortuity within a state of disorder. In terms of our artists, I believe that they should prepare themselves well, mentally and operationally, for the arrival of the art market. In fact, in this era, the ability to balance the tense connections between artist and the market, between artist and critics, news media, art agents, dealers, buyers, etc. . . . can be seen as a significant mark of whether or not an artist is mature.

I believe that the art market will not only *not* smother the artist's individuality but, on the contrary, can only enrich this kind of individuality, making this kind of individuality possess an even more forceful creative power. Of course, this only applies to those artists who truly possess individuality and who have the latent capacity to be great masters. As for those artists who lose their "individuality" in the pressures of the art market, perhaps they didn't have any individuality to begin with. Lastly, it's still that same line: we need a new art history, and if we're lucky, each of us has the possibility of becoming a sponsor or author of history.

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## The First 1990s Biennial Art Fair

### CATALOGUE PREFACE: OPENING UP THE 1990S (1992)

By Lü Peng

History does not exist as an *a priori* text. It must be written by human beings. However, what people care about nowadays is not only who is writing history, but also how it is written.

The Biennial is different from any other exhibition ever held in China. In terms of economic operation, "investment" has replaced "endorsement"; for sponsors, enterprises have replaced cultural organizations; for procedure, legal contracts supersede official "notices"; for academic operations, a critic-organized jury has replaced the past "selection committees" consisting mainly of artists; for operational objects, "efficacy" in the economy, society, and academy substitutes the singular, narrow, and endlessly debated field of artistic "success." All of these characteristics of the Biennial evidence that 1990s Chinese art history has already truly started to unfold.

The penetration and development of reform have led to changes in the style of writing history. When the old principles no longer meet the needs of the new era, it is imperative to set up new ones. The real meaning of the new rules is that culture must be created for sale, which is directed against the classic mode of "creating culture only for culture." It runs counter to the mode of cultural creation that indulges in self-

admiration, has no law to reference, or acts as a political instrument. It requires the support of elements of contemporary market mechanisms, such as law, taxation, insurance, and further social division of labor. This is surely an arduous and complicated task for a country without a tradition of the market. By participating in the Biennial, businesses, critics, artists, editors, and even lawyers and journalists are beginning to seek proof and solutions to the historic task of how to establish a contemporary art market. More and more people have realized that in 1990s, market issues are cultural issues.

The process of the establishment, development, and perfection of the new rules also marks the birth, execution, and maturation of art operations. With the death of the classic agricultural society and the decline of sentimentalism's romantic culture, the idea that there exists an independent "perfect art" is no longer glamorous or convincing. Present society recognizes or believes more in a culture that is effective in society itself, and that is furthermore generated by a synthesis of social forces. Therefore, history in the new period requires us to possess the tactics and skills of operating upon culture, to know how to apply and adjust new rules, and to master the rhythm and orders of the operating processes. The organizers of the Biennial have conducted the first trial in this respect, furnishing valuable lessons and experiences for the development of 1990s Chinese art history.

The concept of cultural effectiveness is not vulgar. It is a requirement of contemporary culture in the development of human society. Establishing "principles" and executing "operations" is not an aimless game, its to make culture a historical fact. This is the impetus and incentive for further human development. Thus, "effectiveness" is a strategic goal for those engaging in cultural and artistic undertakings. If every participant of the Biennial — acting in his respective social capacity — tries his best to complete his duties, and wisely make his work correspondingly effective, then an overall cultural efficacy will invariably become a historical fact.

Whether or not the Biennial proves to be a cultural phenomenon and have a profound influence on the development of 1990s art will become clear in time. What we are clear about now is that we have made memorable efforts for opening up 1990s art history.

Director of the Organizing Committee: Luo Haiquan

Chief curator of the Biennial: Lü Peng

May 11, 1992

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— Originally published in *Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan (youhua bufen)* [First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Oil Painting Section)] (Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing, 1992), 9. Translation published therein, edited by Peggy Wang to better correspond to the original Chinese.

## NOTES ON THE SELECTION PROCESS (1992)

By Chen Xiaoxin

In Guangzhou, after the end of the hottest part of summer, the sun was still scorching and a heat wave rolled in. It was at this moment that the selection and evaluation for the Biennial began. One could also use the term "hot" to describe it.

On August 23, all those participating in the Biennial's selection and appraisal of artwork convened in Guangzhou. This included: chairperson Lü Peng, members of the Evaluation Committee — Huang Zhuan, Zhu Bin, Yang Xiaoyan, Yi Dan, Shao Hong, Yan Shanchun — as well as members of the Academic Appraisal Committee — Pi Daojian (chief inspector), Peng De, Yin Shuangxi, Yi Ying, Chen Xiaoxin, Gu Chengfeng, Yang Li — legal counsel Wang Qi, academic secretaries Zhou Yubing, Chen Xiaoyi, Shi

Yasong, et al., and on-site photography was provided by *Art • Market (Yishu • shichang)* editor He Changlin. The members met in room 210 of a guesthouse in the military region of Guangzhou.

On that day, Lü Peng called everyone together to review the document "Rules and Regulations for Selection" ("Pingxuan gongzuo tiaoli"), which had been prepared in advance by the Organizing Committee, as well as a report provided by Peng De (head of the Appraisal Committee) titled "The History and Current State of Chinese Oil Painting" ("Zhongguo youhua de lishi ji xianzhuang").

On August 24, fourteen members of the Evaluation Committee and Academic Appraisal Committee (including the chairperson) officially began the selection process. The work would continue for three days. In total, there were 600 artworks to review, so on average, they looked through 200 pieces a day. It was regularly 36–37° C on-site, and some of the younger male members of the committee took off their shirts. Their attitudes were serious and earnest, and the atmosphere was both anxious and enthusiastic. After initial review, the number of works under consideration was narrowed down to 400. This number was restricted to works that were submitted before August 25, and did not include the 200–300 works that arrived afterward.

From August 27–28, the Evaluation and Appraisal Committees began their respective duties. The Evaluation Committee began to look into putting forth a list of twenty-seven works to be given awards (including two Document awards, five Academic awards, and twenty Outstanding awards) [pl. 43]. For each, they filled out "Academic Opinion" cards. The Appraisal Committee organized academic discussions, and gave academic assessment and analysis on style, school, form, language, etc. for each selected work. A relatively unanimous view was that Hubei "Pop" and Hunan "New Design" (*Xin tushi*) were the most important parts of the Biennial, that is, they had the most distinguishing features. Second to that were the synthesized materials of New Realism (*Xin xieshi*) (abstract or expressed). Overall, the level of the artwork was first-rate.

On the afternoon of August 29, Li Xiaoliang and Zhang Yu, notaries from the Guangzhou Haizhu district, and legal counsel Wang Qi notarized and supervised the voting over nominees for the twenty-seven awards. Besides chairperson Lü Peng, six members of the Evaluation Committee and three members of the Appraisal Committee cast votes. After three rounds of voting, fifty-four names were officially nominated (every category of award maintained a 2:1 ratio). The list of nominees was handed to the chairperson Lü Peng on-site.

From August 30–31, Lü Peng, after receiving the list of nominees, listened to the suggestions of the committees (in particular, the Appraisal Committee) before making the final decision and determining the Biennial's twenty-seven award winners. At the same time, he consulted with Pi Daojian (chief of the Appraisal Committee) on the final academic verdict of the twenty-seven awarded artworks. He then signed the Academic Opinion cards of each.

During the entire duration of selecting the works, ample discussion produced the following seven academic documents:

1. Pi Daojian's "Academic Appraisal of the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Oil Painting Section)* in Guangzhou" ("*Guangzhou shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan (youhua bufen)* xueshu guji")
2. Peng De's academic background report "The History and Current State of Chinese Oil Painting" ("Zhongguo youhua de lishi ji xianzhuang")
3. Academic Opinion cards ("Pingshen yijian shu") signed and initialed (seven copies) by the chair and all members of the Evaluation Committee

4. Yin Shuangxi's "Opinions on Determining Prices and Selling Biennial Artwork" ("Shuangnian zhan zuopin de dingjia yu xiaoshou yijian")
5. Yi Ying's "The Position of Art Critics in the Art Market" ("Yishu piping zai yishu shichang zhong de weizhi")
6. Chen Xiaoxin's "Summary of the Selection Work at the First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Oil Painting Section) in Guangzhou" ("*Guangzhou shoujie 90 niandai shuangnian zhan (yuhua bufen)* pingxuan gongzuo zhongjie baogao")
7. Legal counsel Wang Qi's "Report on the Legal Supervision over the Biennial's Selection Process" ("Dui shuangnian zhan pingxuan gongzuo jinxing falü jiandu de baogao")

The above-mentioned documents will be gathered along with notes taken by Yang Li during the selection process. They will be compiled into a collection, edited by the Organizing Committee, and published.

On September 1, the Biennial's selection process was brought to a successful close. This work writes a new page in the history of art exhibitions in China. Its most notable new features include:

1. The art chairperson is given authority while the two committees serve an auxiliary function in the selection process  
For the Biennial, the Organizing Committee invited Lü Peng to be the chairperson and granted him the corresponding authority, for example presiding over the selection, making the final verdict in determining the award winners, balancing the authority of the two committees, etc. One could say that through his academic position and capacity to judge, the chairperson oriented the Biennial's direction in the academic realm as well as the market. The fact that the "chair is given authority," however, does not make this a dictatorship. To a certain degree, the "two committees" set up by the Organizing Committee limit the chairperson's authority. They prevent the chair from unscrupulously using his authority to create biases, thereby ensuring that the Biennial's selection is academically rigorous, impartial, and objective. During the Biennial's selection process, the roles of the chairperson and two committees developed, and together they assured a high level of effectiveness.
2. Critics hold key roles  
The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) was the first case where critics were allowed to play lead roles. But, at the time, this way of working still lacked systematic guarantees; its methods were still imperfect. The Biennial has developed upon the *China/Avant-Garde* methods, and perfected its system (for example, the above-mentioned). The critics involved in the Biennial were mostly middle-aged individuals who have been critically active in recent years. They are well-trained, perceptive, and possess an avant-garde consciousness. To a large degree, this guaranteed the quality of the selection. There was also another special significance to granting critics a key role in the Biennial: this helped to push art criticism into the market, developing its function as a guiding force in the market, and endowing criticism with a dynamic purpose.
3. Regulations before operations  
The Biennial's Organizing Committee believed that without clear, reliable, reasonable regulations, there would be no way to have an effective selection. At the same time, if the regulations could not be implemented throughout the entire process, it would all be moot. Before the selection process even began, the Organizing Committee laid

out a complete set of regulations, and this included principles to guide the selection mechanism (such as legal principles, academic principles, principles of equality, responsibility, confidentiality, etc.), procedural order for selection, demands of those involved, etc. Once these were made into clear stipulations, they guided the selection process step-by-step and provided a firm, yet effective, rhythm to the work.

#### 4. Democratic and transparent

The democratic aspects were mainly realized in the following ways: 1) after the rules and regulations were set, repeated discussions were carried out, and adjustments were made; 2) during the initial critical evaluations, minority opinions were fully respected; 3) through the process of nomination and writing Academic Opinion cards, the Evaluation Committee's function was given free rein; 4) by providing academic background materials, the Biennial's academic appraisal of style, form, etc. . . . developed the Appraisal Committee's function; 5) before the chair made his final decision, he repeatedly solicited suggestions from the head of the Appraisal Committee as well as the two committees themselves. In this way, specific problems were repeatedly and critically consulted about.

The transparent aspects were clearly evident in the following instances: 1) from start to finish, legal counsel was present on-site as a participant. An official notary was present during the voting process. At any level of society, it is understood that if any problems arise, law enforcement officers are on hand — this was the relationship that we had during the selection activity; 2) all of the written documents from the selection process, records from meeting, and academic verdicts for awarded works (including the Academic Opinion cards for the nominated works) will be made known to the world so that they can be examined and discussed by society; 3) the Organizing Committee presented a large number of photographic materials of the on-site selection to the public in its report on the selection process.

#### 5. Embodying legitimacy

A professional lawyer and notary were invited to be on-site to supervise the selection process. This was the first time that this has happened in Chinese exhibition history. They were present to witness that no corruption occurs and to ensure the legality of the selection process.

The above-mentioned points make sufficiently clear that the Biennial's selection process created a new model for modern art exhibitions.

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## REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS RAISED AFTER THE *FIRST 1990S BIENNIAL ART FAIR (1993)*

By Lü Peng

Two months have passed since the conclusion of the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair*. Looking back on the Biennial's entire preparatory, organizational, and operational processes, I find that there are many experiences and lessons worth summarizing. To serve as a reference for future art exhibitions that need to confront this phase of building an art market, and to serve as a concrete lesson for the healthy development of art, I will detail a number of the problems raised by the Biennial.

### HOW TO CORRECTLY TREAT BUSINESSES INVESTING IN ART

In recent years, the art world has been concerned with business investment in art as a means of promoting the healthy development of the enterprise of Chinese art within the market economy. The *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* was China's first bold attempt in having domestic businesses conduct large-scale investments in art. Regardless of whether the Biennial will be viewed as a success or failure, naïve or crude, history will always remember the corporations that invested in the Biennial.

The problems that Chinese businesses often face in art investment:

First, they don't know the market conditions for managing art. Strictly speaking, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan don't have a real art market. There are no collectively observed operational principles or legal bases. Over the past two years in Asia, the buying and selling of art has been very active, but how do you actually sell a work and what market conditions can assure changes in performance? Companies that have never invested in art don't know these things. Because information about the market lacks a channel for communication in China, buying and selling, to a large degree, is governed by chance. So, initially, businesses investing in art face a market that lacks definite assurances. Therefore, investors' understandings of market circumstances relied wholly on artists and critics, who were not completely reliable. As a result, business investment in art from the very beginning had a tremendous risk factor.

Investors in the Biennial made policy decisions that depended largely on a few critics' suggestions. But, actually, these critics' opinions were only the synthesis of some secondhand, piecemeal information, without very rigorous grounds for argument. Of course, another important factor in the Biennial policy decisions was the guiding concept of consciously stimulating business investment in art. The imagination had an important role to play within this.

Second, businesses investing in art don't know its operational methods. Although in many respects managing artwork is similar to managing other commodities, artwork also has its peculiarities. These include: One can't be too eager for immediate success and instant profit. To the manager, economic effectiveness is the basis for evaluating the continuity or success of the investment. If engaging in art doesn't yield a profit, certainly this will lead to the investor's loss of confidence. But, the price of an artwork is generated through the synthesis of many operations: academic criticism, exhibitions, publicity, etc. . . . thus, there is an operational process. Aside from the pure "love" of a work, a buyer's judgment is assisted by academic appraisal, exhibition results, and referencing news media. So, an investor needs to have sufficient capital prepared. The Biennial investors and organizers didn't adequately fulfill this aspect. Given their lack of experience, the immense difficulties in reaching the desired amount of money, and complete changes to the original work plan, the operators (involved in the exhibition) couldn't evaluate the outcome and to what degree it should have related to the

original budget. Which is to say, when we investigate the outcome, we cannot base the verdict on the plan. For example, when we closed the deal with Shenzhen Donghui Ltd. (to purchase the twenty-seven awarded works) at 1 million RMB [yuan; about US\$182,175], the design of the original program called for more than 1.5 million RMB. Actually, the same day that Western Sichuan Art Company and Donghui Ltd. signed the contract, another company wanted to purchase the twenty-seven works for 1.5 million RMB. Ten days later, another company wanted to purchase the works for 2 million RMB, but because the amount of funds for (exhibition) preparation wasn't sufficient, and in order to resolve our funding problems as quickly as possible, Western Sichuan could only hastily sign the contract with Donghui Ltd., promptly closing the deal. If the Western Sichuan Art Company had had sufficient funds, and wasn't so anxious to sell the works, then would the amount have been more than 1 million RMB? Because the capital didn't reach the desired goal, and there were changes in our plans, we have no way of evaluating, purely from an economic standpoint, whether this transaction was a success or failure.

Third, it is difficult to handle the relationship between economic performance and academic standards. Because investing connotes economic profit, it makes sense to people if we exhibit those works that would be easy to sell. In fact, the Biennial organizers did put a large number of this type of work on exhibit. This initiated debates within the art world among people who believed that this move ruined the whole form of the exhibition. But, we are clear that a work considered of value in the academic world today doesn't necessarily have a good market [value]. If we based the exhibition of works purely on an academic view, then the number of works exhibited would drastically decrease, while also adding difficulty to the exhibition realizing any kind of economic profit. I believe, at this turning point, if we want businesses to have more confidence in art investment, then we have to fight for more opportunities to exhibit in order to effectively educate people about art. Art critics should have a tolerant and understanding attitude. We only need to have continuous opportunities to exhibit, so that we can gradually change people's aesthetic tastes.

If, in the selection of works to be awarded, we maintain an independent academic attitude, we can change art's academic orientation. Following the Biennial, my view is this: people in the art world need to fully recognize people's knowledge and level of art, they shouldn't be impatient for success, let alone conclude if a work has artistic value or not; some works' problems fall under the purview of academic discussion.

#### **WHAT EXACTLY IS THE POSITION OF THE CRITIC?**

Generally speaking, we can think of critics as appraisers of art quality. But, because [opinions on] academic issues in art are all "to each his own," and not everyone involved in art criticism possesses acute and advanced insight, investors and artists harbor doubts [about critics' abilities]. Some artists expressed unease toward the Biennial's panel of jurors. But, no critic-organized jury is going to comprise only investors and artists. If that happens, we discover investors who don't understand art can only rely on their own determination of what is good and bad. The poor quality that can result from this is evidenced by the 1991 Hangzhou West Lake exhibition. Artists' individual biases invariably lead to biased results (to artists, this kind of bias is necessary). A critic, regardless of whether his academic level is high or low, will always act as an arbiter that stands in the middle. He won't look at things from a completely economic standpoint, nor will he start from an entirely stylistic standpoint.

As for the critics' proficiency in art, this can only be tested and improved through continuous experience. Actually, in China, the identity of the art critic is extremely



ambiguous: sometimes he stands in place of the artist proposing prices to the dealer; sometimes he positions himself from the standpoint of the dealer counseling the artist if his asking price is too high, and sometimes he stands solemnly as an arbiter with the authority to make academic statements. This kind of unclear situation emerged as a necessary phenomenon in an imperfect art market: critics are doing the best they can based on economic operations that they don't understand, doing some humanitarian work of an economic nature; this hasn't just influenced his image, but also his actual academic work.

The critics who participated in the Biennial had almost no discussions and no involvement in business strategies. I was the only one who worked with the investors to carry out business plans and operations. This was because the investors had no knowledge of managing art and weren't familiar with artists. But, I ultimately don't have experience in financial operations, and investors after all work outside of the world of art. This brought some difficulty to the job of selling work during the exhibition. Practically and realistically speaking, I played two concurrent roles during the Biennial: I was an economic operator and a critic, so in terms of how to view the exhibition, this needs to be considered and discussed.

Looking at this soberly, there are still very few critics in the country. Given that their financial situations are quite poor, it's likely that there will be an enormous decrease in the number of critics in the coming generation. It's not hard to understand why, given the difficulty of writing routine pieces while concurrently holding down other jobs. In the long run, the situation of Chinese critics isn't going to change. Resolving this situation contributes to the need for establishing a healthy Chinese art market system. The Biennial gave each member of the Jury and Evaluation Committees compensation of 3,000 RMB. In China, this isn't a small amount, but this kind of compensation isn't part of an instituted system, it's still conditional. In other exhibitions or activities hereafter, how will critics be remunerated for their knowledge? It's hard to predict. In any case, following penetration into market-related work, the value of critics' work will become even more evident. Recently, critics discussed and even drafted their own pact: this is an initial step in critics protecting their own rights and interests, confident that not too far into the future, a corresponding organization or mechanism will be formed to do so. Of course, through business needs, an organization of galleries or association of art dealers may form; it will develop according to the market's demands.

#### **HOW SHOULD ARTISTS VIEW THEMSELVES?**

There were a lot of different artistic styles at the Biennial. Ninety-five percent of the artists decided the prices for their own work. This showed that the majority of artists are already facing problems with the market. Many artists priced their work on the high side, sometimes shockingly high. Judging from letters and telegrams from participant artists, and the circumstances surrounding how they set the prices of their work, this was because of the media surrounding the market, the artists' own sad financial conditions, and the myth that price itself can lead to success. They only occasionally receive news [about art prices], most of which is incomplete and unreliable information. They then mistakenly take their artwork and see it in conjunction with this information. They seldom consider their own artistic level, the scope of circulation, and to what degree the price of one's work is in line with the exhibition itself. Of course, determining the price of an artwork is extremely complicated, and it's my understanding that the realization of a sale is sometimes based on elusive factors. We, of course, can only follow experience to evaluate the range of pricing. But, for artists who have seldom, or even never, sold a work before, it's inappropriate to set a price that people cannot accept.

Artists always regard the value of their works very highly, and thus hope to have a correspondingly high price. As a result, the value and price of an artwork are both tested in the market. If the price is set too high, it can't sell, and the work in the end is just a piece of canvas, with some colors and forms on it. When that happens, a work's value is only realized in the studio.

In actuality, to a large degree artists sell their work so they can sustain their practice. In the beginning, they only need compensation so that they can continue living and working for a little while, and that's enough. Only through continual sales can the value of an artist's work gradually be understood by society, and the price will continually rise through the combined work of academic appraisal, exhibition, news publicity, etc. . . .

Thinking back, the majority of artists firmly believe that the principal reason for doing art is a kind of spiritual creation, and many artists still persist in making work even under extremely difficult conditions. But, under the influence of the wave of business, some artists have relaxed in their thinking about this, and instead blindly haggle financially over gaining and losing: this is utterly wrong. In *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*Jiangsu huakan*) and *Art • Market* (*Yishu • shichang*), I published the article "Art Needs to be Produced to Sell" ("Yishu bixu wei xiaoshou er chansheng"), which gave some artists the wrong impression. People mistakenly thought that I was advocating the need to make art for money. My meaning was this: our art should be geared toward society, it's wrong if we only use it to amuse ourselves. In a commercial society, the market decides whether a work has the opportunity to enter society and have influence. At the same time, it reflects, in the end, whether a work has any recipients. Making work that has no recipients is itself worthy of introspection. As for new art that can't be immediately accepted in society, its effectiveness in the market requires a certain amount of time. But, this is different from "self-amusement." No matter how, artists should always be responsible for their art.

People need art. If your work is good, it will definitely have the opportunity to be sold. Throughout his entire life, van Gogh wanted to sell his work. No one accepted it, and this was van Gogh's fear, not his intention. For some artists who participated in the Biennial, they went to the other extreme, forcing the organizers to raise the sales prices, making them incompatible with the actual situation. Here, I want to also raise an issue: in the past, we were more prone to critiquing professional painting as garbage and emphasizing a work's academic quality. In the Biennial, there was still a fair amount of "avant-garde garbage": appearing like new art, but actually reflecting the artist's ignorance toward art, and lack of understanding about creating art.

The Biennial raised a lot of problems, such as reforming exhibition operation processes and methods, systems of legal tax revenue, investment, evaluation . . . these all need to be discussed and researched and worked at over a long period of time. We don't have a tradition of an art market, so establishing a perfect art market is not a three- or five-year job; this needs several decades or even longer of hard work. From this situation of the Biennial, it's apparent that Chinese businesses still have an extremely poor understanding of art investment. This is particularly the case in Guangdong, the province with the longest track record of opening-and-reform, where many businesses have strong economic power, but due to their viewpoint and character, fear entering this field. Purely economically speaking, people are still anticipating, hoping that one day after the art market has been established, they will then take a step into this field. But, they don't realize that if they don't participate, this market will never be formed; without their sacrifice, there will be no real development for Chinese art. So, who will be the hero to take on this grand pursuit? He needs to have intelligence and can't be afraid

of sacrifice. He needs to produce material and spiritual wealth for the country. On this point, Western Sichuan Art Company can always be proud that even if they didn't realize any economic profit, they already made sacrifices.

January 3, 1993

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## The "System" of 1990s Contemporary Chinese Art

### FROM "SYSTEM" TO "CIRCLE": AN ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF AVANT-GARDE ART IN THE LATE 1990S (2003)

By Wu Hong

One of the results of China's twenty years of avant-garde art practices has been the formation of a group of so-called independent, professional artists divorced from the structure of the state administration. In a general analysis of this phenomenon, people often believe that this stems from the artists' pursuit of a free, independent state of mind: in their search for a kind of ideal utopia, they have entered into a spontaneous "self-imposed exile" outside of the system. This kind of idealized explanation actually originates from the simplified revolutionary impulses of 1980s New Wave art.

If we were to strip off the idealistic facade and take a closer, more realistic look at this transformation, we would discover that the marketization of art truly played a decisive role in the process. This was particularly the case from the mid- to late 1990s. During the 1990s, Chinese avant-garde art was increasingly subjected to market forces. At the same time, the number of "illegal" artists and related independent professionals grew to unprecedented amounts. The causal relationship between the two factors is fairly evident.

If we use the "marketization of art" to examine 1990s Chinese avant-garde art, we discover that many of the circumstances surrounding 1990s art differ completely from those of the previous decade. First, the principal players of 1980s avant-garde art were artists associated with the state administrative system. They graduated from state-run art academies in the late 1980s, and later taught at these institutions. This resulted in the focal point of 1980s avant-garde art being either pure artistic language concerning so-called new creative "exploration," or obscure expressions of some abstract philosophical issues. At the same time, because the identity of these participants was already determined, avant-garde art of the 1980s actually maintained a close connection with official art administrative bodies and institutions.

When we objectively analyze the development of the 1980s avant-garde art movement, the above-mentioned relationship between its participants and the state administrative system seems self-evident. At the same time, the development of the art movement was inseparably linked to academic journals and specialty publications that essentially fell within the scope of the state system. In addition, owing to the identities of the movement's participants, a number of symbolically significant movements and exhibitions of 1980s avant-garde art could not have taken place without the involvement of state administrative bodies. In a [centrally] planned system, only those social activities that are endowed with official characteristics can be considered "legiti-

mate." And, to participants in the movement, the function of their actions would only be realized if they entered into official and mainstream domains. Thus, we find that various levels of the state-run Chinese Artists' Association had a hand in many 1980s avant-garde exhibitions and scholarly activities. Until recently, some of the so-called Chinese exhibitions of avant-garde art could still be read as a continuation of this kind of earlier mentality.

To sum up, we can see that although there are apparent differences between the 1980s avant-garde art movement and the art activities run by the traditional state system, we should also pay particular attention to the countless ties connecting the development of 1980s New Wave art and the mainstream system. This lukewarm relationship is maintained in the achievements of so-called art educational reforms that continue to exist in art institutions today and the "experimental art" practiced and recognized within the mainstream system. On the one hand, to make known their "modern" disposition, artists painstakingly maintained a certain distance from the official art system. On the other hand, defined and mediated by their own identities, they couldn't stray too far. This "lukewarm" relationship became the ideal status quo. In the future, we have reason to believe that such art may, with the support of the official system, act against everything they dislike, in particular art forms that they believe to be excessively radical and thoughtless.

Compared with the obvious "academic" background of the 1980s avant-garde art movement, we can see the remarkable "grassroots" character of artists who began to practice avant-garde art in the 1990s.

First, if we look at the upbringings and intellectual backgrounds of avant-garde artists who emerged in the 1990s, particularly those from the mid- to late 1990s, we find that many did not receive "professional training." Second, the majority of this group of artists neither had regular jobs nor "legal" identity statuses. With the marketization of avant-garde art in the 1990s, these artists no longer had to put all of their efforts into entering the mainstream art system. In relation to this, while we can easily trace the trajectory of the 1980s New Wave art movement, avant-garde art from the mid- to late 1990s has an awkward "untraceable" nature and diverse standards of evaluation. Today, debates on "good art" versus "bad art" eventually center on particular artists or particular works of art. This, from a certain perspective, in fact accounts for "malfunctions" in our existing knowledge base and critical experience with current art phenomena.

When attempting to explain the intricacies of avant-garde art phenomena from the mid- to late 1990s, because our experiences already lack an explicit focus, we need to refrain from using a personal, subjective perspective to understand and make judgments at a "macroscopic" level. When we conduct concrete analyses of some specific cases, we find that the "formation of an inner circle" was a conspicuous feature of mid- to late 1990s avant-garde art.

"Forming an inner circle" does not merely refer to the artists' conditions of existence. Since these artists were no longer associated with or supervised by any organizations or institutions, the "inner circle" became one of their platforms for exchanging information. It was also their sole method for maintaining the "industry" connections needed for handling exhibitions and sales. In the 1980s, and even earlier, there existed some "non-mainstream" art groups, but these were distinctly different from the "inner circle" that we are looking at now. In fact, one of the principal characteristics of this "inner circle" is its non-organizational and non-institutional nature, which is a consequence of the artists' abandonment of a "systemized" lifestyle. The "inner circle" is premised on a high degree of freedom for each individual. This is the reason why a few artists' groups, who embodied some of the traits of the state system, existed in the

1980s, but dissolved in the more flexible social environment of the 1990s. This also illustrates how the existence of an "inner circle" can be sensed, but not traced. Like air, it can be perceived yet can't be seen.

As mentioned above, avant-garde art in the latter half of the 1990s has pushed us to face an awkward state of "untraceability" along with diverse criteria for evaluation. Today, when judging a piece of art, we no longer have widely acknowledged, critical standards of assessment, like those previously used to approach traditional easel paintings. This necessarily raises questions such as: What can be called art? and Who can be called an artist?

Based on traditional experiences, when answering questions like these, we all follow a certain line of reasoning. That is to say, first if a piece is regarded by some privileged minority as art, then the author of the piece is probably considered an artist. This temporal sequence demonstrates that you must first have a publicly acknowledged artwork before you can have an "artist." However, when analyzing avant-garde art from the mid- to late 1990s, we find that we need to follow a complete "reversal" of this logic. When we consider whether something is a piece of art or not, we often try to figure out whether the person who created the work is an artist. Even though Joseph Beuys claimed that "everyone is an artist," we are still reluctant to place artists on an equal plane with the masses. This is because artists are assumed to have a privileged "Midas touch," the ability to turn ordinary things into gold. When facing censure like: "Anyone can make this 'art'" or "How can something made by an ordinary person also be called art," we often resort to the following grounds for argument: "An 'artist' made this. If you don't like it, that's fine, but there is no doubt that this is 'art.'" The fact is, that when evaluating a specific object, we begin with the assumption that the object is "art." Only then will our critiques and analyses have the possibility of circulating "within the inner circle." In other words, we need to acknowledge a seemingly paradoxical fact: "only when the critical object is 'art' will the commentary on it be 'art criticism.'" This, in turn, is founded on the premise that "the person who created the piece must be an artist."

Then, who has the right to designate an "artist"? The inner circle!

If art movements before the 1980s were attached to sociopolitical movements, then artists could only gain recognition from the official system by positioning their practices within these [same] sociopolitical movements. During the 1980s New Wave and even through the early 1990s, art movements were closely associated with new ways of thinking in philosophy and sociology. The artwork coming from this period often attempted to illustrate or "reflect" the different ideological trends in social sciences and humanities in order for artistic representation to keep pace with objective social reality. The very goal of the 1980s art movements was to obtain approval from academic circles; indirectly, this was still seeking approval from the official system. In the mid- to late 1990s, as the marketization of Chinese avant-garde art became possible, artists began to stop regarding official recognition as the ultimate objective of their endeavors. Instead, the "inner circle" came into being and took its place. As art dealers, galleries, curators, and art critics constituted every sector of the new ecology, designating "artists" as such was the result of a "collaborative" process.

A prerequisite for being identified as an "artist" is having a notable presence at various events, including exhibition openings and gatherings where one can meet different types of people. If mentored by a senior person from "within the inner circle," then one can get twice the results for half the effort. Once one becomes a fixture within the circle, if you're not a curator or an art critic, then you must be an artist. Once identified as an artist, whether or not one is a *good* artist is determined by the frequency with which one's work is exhibited. Next, if an agent takes a liking to one's work, then one no

longer has to worry about "food, shelter, and clothing." Here, a cycle can take form: while newcomers often try to expand their circle, more established artists prefer to reformulate and tighten their own circle into a smaller one.

Molded by market forces, the formation of the "inner circle" can be used to explain the overall situation of Chinese avant-garde art in the mid- to late 1990s. As stated above, the formation of "circles" leads to the emergence of "smaller circles." As a result, large-scale art movements that once emerged in the 1980s could not do the same in the 1990s. With art marketization, the distance between individual artists is increasingly widened. This has resulted in the continuous formation of "inner circles" and individualization among artists.

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— This text is the transcript of a speech delivered by the author at the 2003 "Di yijie Shenzhen Meishuguan luntan" ["First Shenzhen Art Museum Forum"] originally titled "Cong tizhi dao 'quanzi': 20 shiji 90 niandai houqi yilai qianwei yishu zhuangtai fenxi." Translated by Jiayun Zhuang.

## Art Medium and Criticism

### CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART MEDIA IN THE 1990S (1999)

By Pi Daojian and Pi Li

#### III THE INTERNAL CONDITIONS OF ART MEDIA IN THE 1990S

Positioned under new social circumstances, the 1990s art media appears to have a relatively pluralistic structure. This pluralism refers not only to more diverse editorial concepts, but also financial and editorial operations. The early 1990s saw a drastic reduction in the media all over China, which had a corresponding effect on the rather bleak state of art publications at the time. Among the famous "two journals and one paper" of the 1980s — *Jiangsu Pictorial* (*Jiangsu huakan*), *The Trend of Art Thought* (*Meishu sichao*), and *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) — only *Jiangsu Pictorial* survived. With a new editor in chief, *Art* (*Meishu*) underwent fundamental changes. Whereas before the journal used to provide objective reporting, it now engaged in hostile critiques of new art. Besides the above-mentioned factors, the depression among art media was caused by other factors as well. The political turmoil of 1989 cast active individuals in art circles into a state of ideological chaos. Some started to reflect on successes and failures since 1985; some attempted to clear up long-standing mistakes resulting from trends in metaphysics; some who were disappointed in the political environment joined the exodus overseas to seek a new life; while still others kept silent under the pressure of state policy and complex interpersonal relationships. The younger painters and critics, however, keenly picked up on these changes in social reality and offered their responses. These were ultimately reflected in the creative field as a transition from an interest in philosophical ideas and cultural constructs toward a concern for contemporary existence.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, aside from *Jiangsu Pictorial*, *Art Trends* (*Yishu chaoliu*) and *Contemporary Art* (*Dangdai yishu*) were two journals that set a clear agenda for introducing contemporary art. *Art Trends* was funded by the Suiyuan Art Foundation from Taiwan. Edited by Ding Fang and other painters, in the beginning it focused on introducing the group of mainland artists represented by the foundation. Later, it evolved into a cultural magazine that covered theater, film, photography, and fine art. While the magazine was edited in mainland China, it was published in Taiwan, and then brought to the mainland and circulated among the inner circle of the art world. Due to regulations on the

import and export of publications, its influence remained limited and could not compare to the reach of earlier journals. However, as a case study on media, what *Art Trends* reflects is precisely the chaotic state Chinese art found itself in during the early 1990s. Its editorial concept has, in fact, undergone a tremendous change. In the first issue it introduced Cynical Realism, a style that later proved to be highly influential. It also published in subsequent issues some theoretical articles corresponding to contemporary situations, for example, thoughts on the internationalization of Chinese art (1992.1) and on criticism (1993.4). However, as time passed, it became less and less responsive to reality. Judging from the layout of its columns, *Art Trends* seemed to set out to simultaneously take on the mission of introducing world culture while also promoting Chinese contemporary art. Later, however, the focus of the journal shifted. The international happenings it introduced seemed to have little relevance to the contemporary development of Chinese art, and the majority of the articles were on theology and poetry. Evidently, the editors lacked the acute sensitivity needed toward the reforms that were underway in the 1990s, and instead submerged themselves in their devotion to grand theories, much like the state of things in 1985. We cannot but consider this a grave editorial error. Since *Art Trends* itself was a product of a gallery-run operation, most of the painters it introduced had some relationship with the gallery; therefore, it was naturally biased in its introduction to Chinese art. As a result, it eventually became a peer journal, losing its significance as media.

*Contemporary Art*, published by Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, mostly followed the "executive editor system" popular among fine art journals in the 1980s [in which each issue would be overseen by an executive editor]. But, since most of the editors were commissioned from outside sources, the journal did not have a clear and unified style. The appearance of each issue unfolded around a certain style, since the invited [guest] editors were mostly critics or painters whose individual interests were in their respective styles. The early phase of *Contemporary Art* showed an unfortunate absence of a screening mechanism regarding the artists it promoted, and it failed to report promptly on contemporary art phenomena and events. Moreover, judging from the artists it showcased in 1993, it didn't reflect the changes happening at the time in art creation and criticism. This was perhaps precisely where it failed as media. In this sense *Contemporary Art* lacked both timeliness and perspicacity, the basic features of media; hence, as a publication it is more like magazine of compiled data or studies on specific styles.

After 1991, the issue of the market received a great deal of attention from art circles and was, occasionally, even the topic most talked about. At the time, almost every journal had a column on the art market. On the surface, the market seemed to be a purely economic issue, but, in fact, it had its theoretical roots in the hope that art could achieve autonomy and independence from politics through the intervention of economic power. However, in reality, to open up art to the market was not as simple as letting businesspeople pay money for artwork; on a less obvious level, it concerned many factors, such as state cultural policy and tax policy. Before these preconditions were even established, some critics were already concocting elaborate, though impractical, plans for guiding [the building of] art collections.<sup>2</sup> *Art • Market (Yishu • shichang)* was started in the 1990s and was closely related to the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan)*. If we recognize the significance of this biennial to 1990s Chinese art and consider the art market fever at the time, this journal was without a doubt a very timely publication. Besides following the Biennial, it also published a great deal of information about the international art market and musings on the domestic art market, such as how to enter the market, how to establish the

market, what would become of criticism once art enters the market, and other issues. Since the art market was a popular topic at the time and was relevant to the direction of Chinese contemporary art, when we look back, it's clear that this journal provided valuable theories. The problem with this journal, however, was in its inherently tragic nature. The market for Chinese contemporary art has always been a question of strategy, and not an essential problem. As a result, once people discovered that the art market could not solve the fundamental problems in Chinese art, this journal had to report only practical information on the market itself, and thus lost its theoretical and critical aura. Sadly, the Chinese art market was born with deficiencies and has continued to suffer from malnutrition. Once the hopes that were pinned to the art market turned out to be mere illusion, *Art • Market* could not survive either. As a journal, it took on an awkward mission — to show off the capabilities of the market while also showing how the market could testify to the value of art — only to find the developments in Chinese art and the realities of Chinese society eroded its reasons to exist.

The above analysis demonstrates what a challenging time the early 1990s were for the art media. Failure could befall those who were overly keen to respond to changes as well as those who were overly slow. In contrast, *Jiangsu Pictorial* and *Art Gallery (Hualang)* displayed a more sober and precise grasp of artistic realities. *Jiangsu Pictorial* was one of the few journals that survived the 1980s and still remains active today with an impressive influence in fine art circles. Its influence derives certainly from the fact that it dates back to the 1980s, but also because it displays an ability to quickly recognize issues prevalent among art circles, isolate them, and consolidate them to attract more widespread attention. The 1989 exhibition *China/Avant-Garde (Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan)* along with the systematic introduction of Western art theory and methodology by journals such as *World Art (Shijie meishu)* and *Compilation of Translations in Art (Meishu yicong)* since the 1980s led art criticism to enter into a period of introspection. In June 1989, *Jiangsu Pictorial* launched a special column called "Contemporary Art Theorists and Critics," which conducted studies and discussions on important concepts and critics. Starting in 1989, *Art and Art Panorama (Yishu guangjiao)* also presented discussions on criticism.<sup>3</sup> But, eventually *Jiangsu Pictorial* became the host for all these discussions. In the following years, this journal organized not only studies and introductions by critics but also a discussion called "criticism comes to the stage." Even though the quality of these articles was varied — some even seemed quite random or one-sided — they played a big role in elevating the status and influence of critics and helped artists to recognize the function of critics from a theoretical perspective.

*Jiangsu Pictorial* was also able to promptly discover new phenomena in art creation, for example, its discussion on New Literati painting (*Xin wenrenhua*) in 1990 and its earlier introduction to the New Academic School (*Xin xueyuan pai*). The editors' keen sensitivity was especially apparent in their introduction of important young artists such as Liu Wei, Fang Lijun, and Zeng Fanzhi. *Jiangsu Pictorial* was also able to wield great influence in critical debates on hot issues during the first half of the 1990s. Its usual method was to assemble a number of different critics to discuss one issue. Such a group-style criticism managed to highlight the popular issues in art creation. During the bleakest period in art media, *Jiangsu Pictorial* undoubtedly made significant contributions to the continuity of contemporary art criticism. Since 1995, it has again invested much effort in investigating new art phenomena such as Conceptual art and has organized corresponding discussions. Among these, the most animated and enduring was the debate over "meaning" in art. It is necessary to point out here that purely as a topic, the question of "meaning" itself was not really that popular, as



anyone with a basic knowledge of art history and art theory can make a reasonable judgment on this topic. The articles it organized did not constitute a real debate either, as there was a visible imbalance between one side, which was rigorously and aggressively on the offensive, while the other side remained stubbornly reticent, and bystanders successively drew their own conclusions. The discussion was in fact a literary crusade triggered by a short 1,000-word essay. In other words, it was a game of words and theories. However, the context of this discussion reveals more fascinating things: since 1995, the status of media in art circles has been overtaken by sales and exhibitions; aside from advertisements, people were already rather indifferent toward the media. This "debate" did not really reflect any issues in the art world, rather it was a media strategy which attempted to draw some attention back to the media. From the perspective of media operations, this was a savvy move. But, from the academic angle it very likely paved the way for criticism to be manipulated by the logic of a vanity fair and thus obscured some real issues. Seeing the overall picture of art criticism in the 1990s, we discover that besides criticism and discussion in the domain of academics and ideology, art circles still find themselves engaged in frivolous squabbles. How to discern and understand the nature of these different debates is a new problem that the media has to face.

*Art Gallery*, published by Lingnan Fine Arts Press, went through editorial changes in 1994, which proved to be a highly significant event in the development of 1990s art. Judging from appearance alone, it led all its peers at the time with its fine design and printing. But, even more important were the design and content of its columns, which signaled a new way of thinking about publications. The most engaging examples of this are its reviews of artists. There are two columns in the journal that serve this purpose, one titled "Report from the Artist's Studio" (*Yishujia gongzuoshi baogao*) which introduces painters who have more mature styles, and the other "Painter's Notes" (*Huajia shouji*) which presents painters whose personal styles are still in the formative stages. The articles in Report from the Artist's Studio run longer than the average critical essay, the illustrations tend to be more complete, and they provide an in-depth analysis of the artist. The journal also required authors to address the technical aspects of the works, which was well received by painters. One of the best indicators of this strategy was when the artist Shi Chong won the gold medal at the *Annual Exhibition of Chinese Oil Painting (Zhongguo youhua nianzhan)* in 1995. *Art Gallery* immediately published a report on him that not only provided scholarly analysis, but also contained a detailed account of his technical process. This satisfied the general curiosity about Shi among art circles and made *Art Gallery* famous nationwide. Besides its attention to painters, *Art Gallery* also has a clear take on a variety of theoretical issues and art trends. Its open-mindedness toward artistic development is especially evident in its continual reporting on Conceptual art as it has emerged in recent years. The journal's review of installation art in every issue marks a first for China: the first time that detailed interpretations of individual cases of installation art have been carried out. Judging from its growth over the past few years, *Art Gallery* seems to continually be looking to strike a balance between academics and commerce, art and theory, easel art and Conceptual art. Like other journals, it also imposes publishing fees on some artists, but their guidelines are more tightly controlled. They have mechanisms in place to screen artists so that fee payment is not the sole basis for publication. While critics serve as the editors of the journal, the main audience consists of artists. For this reason, while it focuses on theoretical issues, it does not abandon the technical aspects that artists are interested in either. As this is the journal's selling point, it furnishes the space for the journal's theoretical inquiries. While easel painting is the basis for its

readership, Conceptual art represents developments in art trends. It has to look after both sides, making the journal readable and sellable while also showing academic vision. In a word, the dilemma *Art Gallery* faces is a microcosm of contemporary Chinese art media. As media, its meaning lies in a search for a coordinating mechanism that is able to balance all the above-mentioned interests and relationships, while maintaining academic force and sustainability.

*Arts Circle (Meishujie)* is a brand-new contemporary art journal published in Guangxi. Its editors claim to embrace challenges and strive to study how to synchronize with contemporary art.<sup>4</sup> We are not going to discuss it here as it just started, and we shall wait and see since we hardly know anything as of yet except that it focuses on contemporary art.

If the existence and development of *Jiangsu Pictorial* and *Art Gallery* symbolize the transition and exploration of modes of media in the 1990s, then *Fine Arts Literature (Meishu wenxian)*, published by Hubei Fine Arts Press, and *Art Life (Yishu jie)*, published by Guangdong Modern Huabao Press, are two publications that have been somewhat eclipsed. Even though *Fine Arts Literature* has good printing and design, its editorial policies seem to be overly stringent in adhering to certain formulae. In every issue, it uses a theme to group some artists' works and organize materials such as critics' recommendations, artists' self-accounts, and illustrations. This method can certainly further studies and deepen readers' understanding of the artists, but the chosen theme often lacks the necessary theoretical background and relationship to reality, which in turn makes the journal appear to be a thoughtless pastiche. Moreover, their recommendations of artists also seem somewhat forced and affected, like recommendations for the sake of recommendation.<sup>5</sup> Its themes are mainly designed around the iconography, style, or material of the works of art. This often creates a wide discrepancy among the quality of the selected artists, and moreover goes against the trend in contemporary art circles that boundaries and categorization are to be challenged and defied.

*Artists (Yishujia)* is rated the most lavish journal in art circles today, and claims to be the best-selling fine art journal. However, it imposes the highest publishing fees (for important artists, they can reach five-digit figures). When popular media invest in specialized media, it could mark a turning point in the latter's growth. However, it appears that this didn't happen with *Artists*. It was originally designed to represent the trend of collaboration between specialized media and popular media, and was supposed to have a natural advantage because of its familiarity with media's commercial operating mechanisms. Unfortunately, without a solid intellectual background, it was eventually reduced to serving as a packaging factory for some popular and renowned artists, warping the pioneering nature of contemporary art to cater to the popular. In the end, it instead obscured some real issues in cultural development and has been reduced to the level of white-collar leisure reading. Of course, we cannot demand too much of journals like *Artists* because after all it represents the beginning of Chinese popular art reading matter. Since it is not based on a foundation of professional knowledge, its advances must depend on improvements in cultural education in the country.

When analyzing art media in the 1990s, we certainly cannot ignore the influence of the academic journals published by fine art institutions, among which the most outstanding are *World Art* and *Fine Arts Research (Meishu yanjiu)*, both published by the Central Academy of Fine Arts. As academic journals, they have their own characteristics. In particular, they focus on analysis and studies instead of mere information. It is precisely because of this that we can often discover in-depth studies in these journals. *Fine Arts Research* has been paying attention to contemporary art since 1985 and was

very influential in its evaluations of the '85 New Wave. Since 1990, it has also had its positive effects in presenting academic art and especially New Generation art. In recent years, *World Art* has been providing a comprehensive introduction to international contemporary art. What is noteworthy is that this kind of introduction, unlike the aimlessness displayed in these types of endeavors in the past, is more systematic, comprehensive, and timely. It includes easel painting and also touches on Conceptual art and art theories. This is highly vital for the establishment of basic fine art theory and serves as an important resource for art creation and criticism. It is also worth noting that *Art Garden (Meiyuan)* by the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts recently also started to be involved in contemporary art events and displays an open attitude toward non-academic artwork and theories, which is undoubtedly a heartening sign. The Chinese Artists' Association puts out a small volume with somewhat shabby printing called *Artists Newsletter (Meishujia tongxun)*, but because it is circulated internally within art circles, its influence cannot be overlooked. Recently this journal has tried to provide objective and fair reporting on happenings in art circles, and is noticeably attempting to expand its capacity for information.

One of the differences between the 1990s and 1980s is that in the 1990s art circles have been isolated from other cultural domains. They have remained ignorant of each other's work, projects, and meanings. This problem has not been recognized and addressed by the media. However, in some cultural media a few art critics have made contributions to help remedy the situation. Even though insiders in art circles have reservations about the acrimony present in Yin Jinan's column in *Reading (Dushu)* titled "Knocking at the Door Alone" (*Duzi koumen*), Yin's style of writing still has its own charm. It surely will play a special role in communicating between art and other cultural spheres. *Avant-garde Today (Jinri xianfeng)* is an all-around publication in a series about avant-garde literature and art. Even though the critics who preside over this journal tend to be very subjective and sometimes one-sided, it nevertheless serves to integrate contemporary Chinese art with exploratory efforts in other cultural disciplines, thus engaging in a mutual pursuit for a more open vision and expanded field. In the future, this kind of work will perhaps call for participation from art circles in order to encourage greater interdisciplinary communication.

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#### Notes

1. See Pi Daojian, "Shuangnian zhan zuopin de jiben guji" ["General Assessment of the Participating Works of the Biennial"], in *Lixiang yu caozuo [Ideals and Operation]*, ed. Lü Peng (Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Press, 1992).
2. See Yi Ying, "Meishu piping de jinzhuan he paihuai" ["The Progress and Hesitation of Art Criticism"], in *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo meishu 1990–1992 [1990s Chinese Art, 1990–1992]*, ed. Zhang Qing (Urumqi: Xinjiang Fine Arts and Photography Publishing House, 1996), 142–44.
3. See "Dangdai meishu piping bitan" ["Conversations on Contemporary Art Criticism"], *Meishu [Art]* 262, no. 10 (1989); "Piping wuren tan" ["A Five-Person Discussion on Criticism"] *Meishu [Art]* 269, no. 5 (1990); and *Yishu guangjiao [Art Panorama]* 1990: no. 1.
4. See *Meishujie [Arts Circle]*, 1997: no. 4, 3.
5. In fact, if we take into consideration that *Contemporary Art (Dangdai yishu)* and *Fine Arts Literature (Meishu wenxian)* were under the pressure of limited ISSN and had to adopt the expediency of "replacing journals with books," the above criticism is obviously too harsh, because some material problems place clear limits on their normal editorial practices.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published as "Jiushi niandai de Zhongguo dangdai meishu chuanmei" in *Dangdai yishu yu renwen kexue [Contemporary Art and Humanities]* (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1999), 227–39. Translated by Yinxing Liu.

**CRITICISM ON CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL ART IN THE 1990S (2002)**

By Yi Ying

Criticism on experimental art in China through the 1990s began with a reflection upon its own history. The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) held in early 1989 pushed the avant-garde art movement that emerged in the mid-1980s to a peak. The event also marked the end of a historical era. At that point the most practical question to ask was where modern art in China would go from there. An obvious superficial characteristic of the modern art movement was the imitation of modern Western art, regardless of one's own cultural background or the thinking or motivation as to why one should imitate Western art. But the movement did have both historical and social significance. It radically changed the shape of modern art in China, introducing more open ways of thinking and directing the awareness of the artists toward the international scene. More importantly, it made a positive contribution to the ideological emancipation movement and to social democracy within Chinese society. It had just one fatal weakness: it replaced criticism's tools with weapons inflicting criticism, directly borrowing from various forms of modern Western art indiscriminately. It might have exerted a great impact, but it did not create a localized language of modern art, nor did it address real issues pertaining to China. But this phenomenon of rushing to the opposite extreme was somehow creating an *a priori* ideological model for a preindustrialized society, and once modernization got underway, there was no longer any need to seek a modern language.

At the end of the 1980s, avant-garde art criticism contained two main streams of thought about the development of modern art in China. One was combining modern approaches with traditional Chinese elements to arrive at a modern art with Chinese characteristics; and the other was engaging with the international scene, skipping modernism and leaping straight into the embrace of postmodernism. Both attitudes/theories were in step with the mood of the 1980s, and assisted in promoting the development of avant-garde art. This development was abruptly terminated by the political turmoil in late spring and early summer of 1989, and along with the avant-garde art movement, its associated field of criticism was hushed temporarily. In fact, it was during this sudden historical turn that the modern art movement experienced a profound change.

As the critics became puzzled about the direction modern art would take from there, the art was already changing and developing after its own fashion. Art criticism was both fast and slow in reacting to the change. It was fast because it quickly sensed the change; and slow because it did not respond in terms of theory. So the theory began to lag behind the movement. In the early 1990s, avant-garde art criticism made little progress in grasping/reflecting the reality. Under the pressure of another round of antiliberalization, criticism retreated into itself, producing only abstract discussions about the fundamental goals and methodologies of critical discourses, which were certainly significant as theoretical reviews, as a summary of art criticism in China in the 1980s, or as theoretical preparation for the further development of criticism.

In April 1990, two exhibitions were held at the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. One was a solo painting exhibition by Liu Xiaodong; the other, *World of Female Artists (Nü huajia de shijie)*, was jointly organized by eight women artists. In comparison with the avant-garde art styles of the 1980s, the works of those young artists displayed an obvious academic tendency. The majority were born in the 1960s and did not experience the Cultural Revolution or work in rural areas as educated youth. They were university students in the 1980s, when the ideological emancipation and the avant-garde art movements were at their height. Their art conveyed new signals. First,

it was a direct reflection of real experience and a direct depiction of the situation people found themselves in as China began to experience a period of social transformation. Second, it was an important symbol of modern society — their works showed urban culture and life, which were also important symbols of social transformation in China. Third, the presentation of individual experience showed the surfacing of individual value as collectivism dissolved in the 1980s, and the tradition of heroism and beliefs were lost. To some extent, these factors indicated the path of development that experimental art would embark upon in China in the 1990s.

In March 1991, the Institute of Fine Arts at the China National Academy of Arts sponsored a seminar reviewing the fine arts in China during the 1980s. In addition to summarizing the '85 New Wave art movement, the seminar anticipated the further development of avant-garde art in the 1990s. The emerging new academic-styled art naturally drew the attention of critics. The emergence of this style was intricately tied up with the unique political background of that time, when the avant-garde was losing its momentum and coming under criticism as being capitalist liberalization in essence. It provided an opportune moment in history for a new academicism to emerge as a stopgap. New academicism was a temporary term, for the artists had just graduated from academies, and their works carried an obvious tinge of the campus. Yet their natural styles were hinged on academic and realistic approaches, which were vastly different from the main style of the avant-garde art of the 1980s. In July 1991, an exhibition called *New Generation Art (Xin shengdai yishu zhan)* was held in the Museum of Revolutionary History in Beijing, which was a concentrated display of the new academic school. Thereafter this artistic trend was referred to as "New Generation." This reveals that the New Generation not only represented a style, but also a new trend in art, the influence of which extended over the entire 1990s.

In Beijing, the New Generation attracted attention with a style that itself was at once supplement and reaction to avant-garde art. In his article "A Strong Focus on Reality," Xiao Chen expresses his understanding of the academic art: "They were reestablishing general principles for easel painting and realism . . . extra close observation of details and a subjective shaping of language, a deepening of the spirit of realism and a free use of expressionism form the wings of their arts." Yin Jinan, however, emphasizes the New Generation's relationship with urban culture: "Urban life serves as their creative backdrop, and the intersection between their opinions on life and on art shares their fundamental viewpoints."<sup>1</sup> In Beijing, criticism on the new academic school was relatively specific, but lacked theoretical depth. Analyses of the new academic school were inseparable from those of the particular historical conditions and background of that time. However, most critics, consciously or not, avoided that issue. This further reflected the fact that, faced with the question of the relationship between art on one side and social and historical conditions on the other, many critics had not fully mastered the method of microanalysis.

A typical example of this complex was Li Xianting's evaluation of the "rogue art" of Fang Lijun and others. He said, "By grasping a sense of meaninglessness, the rogue humorous realism is significant in terms of how it deconstructs the world. It dissolved the significance of the value systems that had controlled the people and their entire social reality for many years."

Lü Peng opposed this by saying: "In the present age, it is really ridiculous to believe the cultural force of a certain mentality, that is, to believe that a primitive garden can be built in a modern cosmopolitan environment." But, what was puzzling was that Lü Peng's refutation was not based on the concrete changes in Chinese society after 1989. Instead, it started from a fabricated argument, which was "the deconstruction project

in the new historical stage." If from 1985 the avant-garde to a great extent blindly accepted the control of Western modernism and its theories, after 1989 it was clear that Chinese critics remained under this influence. While the artists were being transformed by real life, the critics were often blind to concrete social reality. To get rid of the "1985 complex" and reconstruct modern arts, Lü Peng created the task of "ideological criticism," which was like building a house on sand.

The development of art did not stop because of critics' misreading of it. In 1992, the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan)* was held in Guangzhou, and was the first large-scale exhibition of modern art in the 1990s. Works with urban subjects dominated the exhibition, but there were three different approaches to expression, which again hinted at the direction Chinese experimental art would take in the 1990s. These were realism, of which the New Generation was representative; Pop art, mainly seen in the work of artists from Hubei Province; and experiments with language by artists from Hunan and Jiangsu Provinces.

The first tended to use abstract languages, while the latter mainly used materials and devices. No matter how different the three were in their form of expression, they had something in common, which was a localization and individualization of experimenting with art. The artists no longer had their sights focused on modern Western art or indiscriminately imitative forms of modern Western art. Instead, they focused on China's reality and their own personal experience. Even their experiments with language sought individual means of expression. In 1993, following the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, the pairing of Pop painting styles and political elements, known as Political Pop, gained much attention both within China and abroad. In this way, the progress from the urban realism of the New Generation to Political Pop formed the main trend of experimental art in China in the early 1990s, and the focus of art criticism finally switched from the extreme in the 1980s to reality in the 1990s.

In 1994, in my article "The Meaning of Work Should Be Clear," I summarized this new trend in a theoretical manner: "It was the so-called New Generation artists who first dissolved the obscurity of the period around 1985. They directly portray their own life-style in such a simple, flat way that viewers find it easy to understand their works. And because of this the meanings of their works are obvious. From their depiction of everyday life, one can clearly feel the coldness and dullness of life. Lacking the sense of responsibility and rationality that characterized works produced after 1985, these paintings reveal the loss of social beliefs and central values among this generation. A mental state of lacking ideals, beliefs, and pursuits has become a theme behind the paintings."<sup>2</sup> Prior to this, Li Xianting had presented the concept of "meaningless realism." The "meaning" here had two meanings. First, it referred to the modernist spirit during the period around 1985, which was the embodiment of humanistic ideals through forms of art. Second, it referred to the significance of traditional realism, such as revolution, ideals, and sentiments.

In his article "On Cultural Idealism," Huang Zhuan pointed out: "Modern Chinese art in the 1990s is being formed in a healthy framework with a certain cultural quality and in a unique state. However, to one's disappointment, the decadent, dejected, cynical attitudes shown in this process, and the direction toward pan-politics shown by the *fin de siècle* cultural pessimism in various international occasions have become forces that have the potential to impede this positive development. What is especially embarrassing to us is the fact that where our ideal, healthy art market has not yet been established, the worship of money, egoism, and opportunism that is fashionable for the sake of fashionableness — none of which has a cultural quality — now occupies the market. Having abandoned idols, we are even abandoning basic values and ideals, therefore faced with a great sense of loss."<sup>3</sup>

The speeches made by Deng Xiaoping during his tour of southern China were an important turning point in China's reform, opening, and restructuring of its economic system that was implemented in the early 1980s. In the process of transformation from a planned to a market economy, Chinese society modernized rapidly to match the high-speed economic development. In the same manner as modern Chinese art within a preindustrial society was confronted by the challenge of modernism in the 1980s, in the 1990s, we felt the pressure of postmodernism, which was reflected by the New Generation phenomenon. The loss of cultural idealistic values is not a rational discarding of what was or was not healthy or good, but a product of reality. Economic development gave rise to a wealthy middle class against rising unemployment among workers and peasant workers. The entire nation was experiencing either prosperity or poverty. On one hand, the recreational culture of middle-class and petty bourgeois culture become fashionable; on the other, vulgar mass culture spread unchecked. In the age of market economy, mass culture is not only overtaking avant-garde art and elite culture: as a subject and object at once, mass culture provides new visual experience and a new world of images. In this way, new meanings and forms of language have been derived, deeply changing avant-garde art and experimental art.

Yang Xiaoyan's "The Cartoon Generation — A Report on the Survival of Consuming Culture in Southern China" reacted sharply to this issue through the significance of the Cartoon Generation: "First, the sprightly nature and frankness of the Cartoon Generation ended aesthetics that emphasized formalism, such as modernism and even postmodernism. Popular taste entered the field of art, and artists finally realized that the high wall between popular and individual tastes is actually surmountable through the work style of the Cartoon Generation, and that the key is to find a place to join the reality, and a unique form of language. Second, as art is never limited to one form in expressing thoughts, we can work with various forms, including equipment and comprehensive media, to express a new aesthetic appeal, ideas, and knowledge. Third, different choices of art forms reflect different people's pursuits. Their healthy contents are not necessarily to be expressed with classical forms."<sup>4</sup>

Zou Yuejin, editor-in-chief of *Contemporary Art (Dangdai yishu)*, also talked about this in the magazine: "Having arisen rapidly, and relying on the forces of market economy, cultural industry, mass media, and commercial operations, mass culture with its relaxing, exciting, entertaining, commercial, and flat characters has become a major means of recreation for the masses. Once silent in front of the power of mainstream and elite culture, the masses have obtained unprecedented space for self-imagination in today's mass culture. This means that, within the context of contemporary culture in China, mass culture, which was marginal in the 1980s, has come to the fore, standing together with mainstream and elite culture. In China's fine art community, 'Gaudy art,' thus named by critics, was the first to react to the mass culture."<sup>5</sup>

The entangled question of avant-garde art was then faced with the challenge of postmodernism, but Chinese society was far from entering a real postindustrial age or postmodern society. The overlapping of preindustrial society, industrial society, and postmodernism formed an important aspect of Chinese society in the 1990s. As mass culture spread unchecked in cities, the most basic of communication projects were under construction in villages in suburban areas. Experimental art chose mass culture as its breach. Was this the avant-garde's response to the mass culture, or a strategy for producing avant-garde art? In fact, it was Political Pop, not Gaudy art, that was the first to respond to mass culture. But Political Pop did not respond to Chinese mass culture itself, but marched toward the world, that is, the Western world, using a form of mass culture. Consciously or unconsciously, Political Pop used strategies that catered to Western styles

of interpretation, which was the only way to enable the West to exercise its power of speech over Chinese art.

Since the 1993 exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, contemporary Chinese art has been present at large international exhibitions, and Western museums, galleries, art critics, and art collectors have begun to pay attention to contemporary Chinese art. This attention is both unidirectional and colonialist. In his speech at the "Symposium on the Current State and Trends in 1990s Chinese Art" ("Jiushi niandai Zhongguo meishu xianzhuang yu qushi yantao hui") held in 1998, critic Feng Boyi said: "Since the beginning of the 1990s, many Chinese artists have introduced elements of traditional Chinese culture into their work, such as *fengshui*, Taoist magic figures and incantations, divination, Chinese medicine, Zen, and Taoism. It was the naturally formed habit of doing the exact opposite of what they should in China that drove them consciously to use those mysterious, not-understood elements of their own culture, achieving their integration into the new environment by way of invasion. Contemporary Chinese artists on the mainland create works using the cultural elements of the current reality, focusing on the natural flowing state of life experience, tracing memories and impressions of existence, and integrating these with the everyday life of the common people. As artists remolded daily life, viewers' participation and the process of dialogue are transformed into certain clever devices and behaviors."<sup>6</sup>

As Feng Boyi has pointed out, from cultural subversion in the 1980s to cultural utilization in the 1990s, Chinese artists, both in China and abroad, were "supported by a well-organized international network." The "cultural utilization" of contemporary Chinese artists, or utilization of traditional and contemporary cultural symbols, has been supported and used by this "international network." And the so-called "international recognition" has in turn promoted the "internationalization" of contemporary Chinese art, and encouraged more Chinese artists, especially marginal artists, to create works according to the standards of this "international network" in order to enter further into international exhibitions and the international market. From Political Pop to Gaudy art and then to an "underground avant-garde," we can see that there is an invisible hand controlling contemporary Chinese art. Cultural power and colonial language are not individual phenomena, but are closely connected to the post-Cold War cultural strategy of Western countries, and fit the political need of the Western media to demonize China. They are grave threats to the serious exploration of contemporary Chinese art. Discussions about the power of speech became a hot topic in fine-art criticism after the mid-1990s. We should point out that critics are not in agreement on this question.

As Huang Zhuan said, they are against cultural monopolies within China and at the same time criticize the cultural "colonialism" of foreign countries. This is a question that has been recognized theoretically but is hard to identify and solve in practice.

Zou Yuejin said, "Faced with the present culture and art in China, we often find ourselves facing a difficult dilemma, a contradiction. That is, on the one hand, we wish we could create more forms and works of art that belong to our own nation, and be influenced by Western culture as little as possible, so as to prove our identity as a nation. On the other hand, we wish China would catch up with developed countries in terms of material wealth, and be prosperous and strong enough to rival any world power. And this requires us to learn more elements beneficial to modernization from Western civilization and culture."<sup>7</sup>

Sun Xinmian, who sees no crisis in cultural colonialism, said, "Faced with the post-colonial cultural hegemony and awareness of the power of speech, we need not become emotional and hold up the banner of nationalism. As China has lagged behind



the West in the progress of modernization since the dawn of the modern era, there has been 'a crisis of existence' among the Chinese people. As a 'crisis of existence' is in nature a 'crisis of culture,' the only way out of the crisis is to open to the world and learn from foreign cultures, which is called 'cultural revolution.'<sup>8</sup>

Wang Nanming, while criticizing postcolonialism, stressed the relationship between language and subject. In his opinion, it was due to double standards on the part of the West that art criticism in China gradually left the motif of art language and focused on social and cultural themes. Although this shift of attention cannot be totally attributed to double standards from the West, Wang's criticism on postcolonialism was to the point. He said, "Chinese art does not draw attention as art. To Westerners, Chinese art needs only to provide a kind of ideological proof, and this is the reason why Cynical Realism drew attention. So, when we discover such dual standards, we should replace our delight with a sense of crisis concerning art. We have been told of the true colors of Western double standards, that is, Westerners use a standard of artistic supremacy that they have used since ancient times when judging their own contemporary art, while using a standard of how much they can learn about the present situation in China when judging Chinese art. In other words, Westerners are interested in contemporary Chinese art merely out of a partiality for novelty."<sup>9</sup>

In general, the discussions on the power of speech and the criticism of postcolonialism did not go very deep, nor did they analyze or study the various concepts and terms. The key problem is that criticism itself is a disadvantaged part of culture. In the tide of globalization, and under pressure from advantaged cultures, art criticism expresses only intellectual concerns, having no power to change the status quo. However, as Wang Nanming realized, postcolonial criticism has brought about an important change in criticism, which is a switch from formal criticism to social criticism, or a switch from modernism to postmodernism. And he has expressed his worries about it. "Back to Society: A Reflection on Contemporary Chinese Art" by Pi Li clearly shows this attitude:

The influences of illiberal nationalism and the view of the West as the center have resulted in the fact that "contemporary Chinese art" emphasizes "Chineseness," while the ideas of the disguised new formalism focus on "art," trying to achieve development in art through studies of the genealogical system of the language. In fact, against the background of globalization, the two of them can hardly lead to any equal-dialogue relationship about value. Perhaps we can only deduce our standpoint by putting "Chinese," "contemporary," and "art" together for study. Such pairings of the words as Chinese contemporary, contemporary Chinese, Chinese art and contemporary art make it inexorable that we should regard popularization of forms, democratization of tastes, diversification of languages, and socialization of exchanges as the basic orientation of value in Chinese art creation and research in the new century, so as to lead contemporary Chinese art back to Chinese society.<sup>10</sup>

The switch from formal criticism to social criticism does not represent a development of art criticism as a field of study, but rather that the status quo of contemporary art has made critics pay attention to elements beyond art movements and works of art, such as the context, background, and social conditions that have informed a work of art. An individual critic may not belong to any school or use any fixed means. As in the case of contemporary Chinese society, the rapid development of which has resulted in a high degree of complexity and diversity, contemporary Chinese art does not have a

certain means or school that could challenge the complex reality and rapid change alone. In fact, this is part of what led to the formation of social criticism. In contemporary Chinese art criticism, social criticism emerged in the mid-1990s. Although we can understand it as a means of criticism, it has been most efficient in its involvement with the status quo of art, adapting itself to mainstream developments in contemporary art. Besides postcolonial cultural criticism, in the mid- and late 1990s, realistic criticism and theoretical discussions on a series of issues and phenomena such as publicness, experimental ink and wash, globalization, and new media art showed a more and more obvious tendency toward social criticism. Here, social criticism is embodied in two tendencies. One is context, with postcolonial cultural criticism as an example. This analyzes the conditions that surround the creation of works of art from social, historical, and cultural angles, and ignores the subjective intentions of the artist or what the works imply. The other tendency is studying cultural conditions without consideration of individual works and movements. An example of the second tendency is the study of publicness and globalization, which was still driven by necessity. In the late 1990s, discussions about publicness formed a major topic in fine arts criticism.

Discussions about publicness originated from the development of contemporary Chinese sculpture. The late 1990s saw unprecedented activity in contemporary Chinese sculpture. A series of activities, such as *Invitational Exhibition of Sculptures by Young Artists (Qingnian diaosujia zuopin yaoqingzhan)* in Hangzhou, the exhibition *Modern Sculptures* in Qingdao, and the *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture (Dangdai diaosu yishu nianduzhan)* held at Shenzhen's He Xiangning Art Museum, broke the mode of exhibiting sculptures on pedestals and brought contemporary sculpture into the public domain. Sun Zhenhua and Gao Tianmin remarked in a survey they wrote that "the question of publicness in contemporary sculpture is a question of how to publicly transmit the artist's personal experience in creating the sculpture, which is a new question that has emerged within the contemporary cultural situation. Its essence is that, with the rise of mass culture in contemporary society and the transfer of the power of art to the public, traditional elitist modes of sculpture are being called into question. In the past, there were distinct modes, wherein [elitist] sculpture was positioned as the sole domain of the sculptor, while public art was held in disdain. The development of contemporary culture requires us to reconsider this problem."<sup>11</sup>

In Huang Zhuan's opinion, "China's traditional system of art has always been based on a kind of administrative power that extends beyond publicness. The New Art movement has not radically undermined the power. On the contrary, because of its elitist tendency, it has made the question lack the basis of social practice. And this has been aggravated by the all-round interference of the Western contemporary art system into contemporary Chinese art."<sup>12</sup> Publicness is a modernist mode of existence. We are faced with two extremes. On the one hand, there is the popularization of art, commercial oil paintings, vulgarly luscious ink and wash, and calligraphy in political and commercial communities. On the other hand, we have the colonization of avant-garde art, embassy art, underground avant-garde art, and marginal artists, and a formless controlling hand behind them all. The former caters to public taste and stunts the spirit of art, while the latter is kept out of the public domain, in spite of its modern form. Li Gongming mentioned publicness when talking about the power of speech: "Should exhibitions be for an elite or for the common people? We are faced with the attitude of the public in regard to the question of publicness, which is a very practical question. The origin of the question of publicness and the shift of social structure in the new age have led to discussions in the public arena. In the past, there was state versus individual, and there was no platform of equality between the two."<sup>13</sup>

Yin Shuangxi pointed out another aspect of publicness: "Contemporary art should not become an underground art exclusive to a few artists and stay in a half-concealed state, for that is not a healthy mentality toward the public. We should seek possible channels and use various ways to communicate with the public and win their understanding. We should regard the healthy development of contemporary art as an essential part of modernizing the Chinese nation and constructing an advanced culture and actively promoting it in a dialogue between world cultures. The publicness of contemporary art should include actively and discreetly pushing forth the course of diversification and democratization of China's contemporary art system."<sup>14</sup>

The question of publicness involves various aspects, such as the lowest moral standard of art, popular art and elite culture, public images, and mass media. Discussions about publicness have extended into the new century. From the discussions one can see that, at the turn of the century, contemporary Chinese art has a different situation than it did in the early 1990s, being more open. As a large country with a rapidly developing economy, China must meet the challenge of globalization with a more open attitude. This is also an opportunity for contemporary Chinese art to develop. Criticism can perceive things beyond the movements, and show an unprecedented depth. The first decade of the new century is very likely to witness a restructuring of theory, a deepening reflection in the field of art criticism. With rich experience from the previous decade, when criticism was so close to movements that it was unavoidably influenced by them, in this decade we should usher in an age of real criticism as a science by means of observation, analysis, and critique.

#### Notes

1. *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 133, no. 1 (1992), 16–17. [Article translated in this volume as "New Generation and Close Up Artists" by Yin Jinan. — Ed.]
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3. *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 157, no. 1 (1994), 43–44.
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11. Sun Zhenhua and Gao Tianmin, "Di er hui dangdai qingnian diaosu jia yaoqing zhan zongshu" ["A Survey of the Second Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary Young Sculptors"], *Jiangsu huakan [Jiangsu Pictorial]* 241, no. 1 (2001).
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13. Taken from a speech given at the conference "Xin Shixian, Xin Meiti" ("New View, New Media"), May 2002.
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## MY OUTLOOK ON CRITICISM (2003)

By Yin Shuangxi

Art criticism has different academic layers; at the forefront of these [layers] is a critical practice in which the critic employs various methods in carrying out appreciation, analysis, judgment, and description of artworks. The second academic layer is the criticism of criticism, which probes into the background and cultural space of criticism, as well as the critic's intellectual composition, theoretical background, critical standards, artistic criteria, and methodological principles; it even delves into the critic's personal character, charm, and professional ethics. And, confining and influencing the "criticism of criticism" is the third academic level — critical philosophy, namely reflections on critical ontology, which touches upon "criticism" as the basic behavior for expanding human knowledge, advancing intellectual civilization, and philosophically reflecting on modes of thinking.

Critics today should willfully abdicate their law-making power and judicial authority over art, for this power and authority derives from two presuppositions that have not been earnestly examined. The first is the belief that all art can, and must, be judged and selected through unified mainstream standards. The second is the belief that critics are truly able to understand and command such a unified standard, and likewise have the responsibility to guide artists toward a realm of perfection.

Contemporary artists are in the process of abandoning their recitation of macrocosmic social myths and heroic epics, and are changing direction to move toward the identification and expression of their individualistic, immediate experiences. The artist is becoming an eyewitness to the times, analyzing one's individual, inner experiences and identifying realistic matters and relationships. "In the name of art" they reorganize and restructure existing or preexisting people and objects, freely identifying and ceremoniously endowing them with meaning. Confronting the reality of contemporary art, the critic's main role is to focus on the creative process, to analyze the creative psychology and the artist's mode of thinking. Here, the critic becomes a "guesser," one who attempts to "rename" the work, and reidentifies it, endows it with significance; the function of criticism is not to determine whether or not art creation has developed in the "correct" direction, but to endeavor to understand in which direction the artist is developing.

The "intellectual resources" and "academic methods" available to criticism are exceedingly rich, as every resource and methodology since the beginning of time can be employed for one's purposes. A critical attitude should be open-minded, unfettered, and independent. We advocate "pluralism" but should still believe firmly in the existence of truth and universalism, it's simply that we need to make clear the finite nature and imperfections of our understanding of truth, and acknowledge the existence of many kinds of truths and their different expressions. A "pluralist coexistence" is similar to the concept of ecological balance; it implies nature's peaceful coexistence and peaceful competition. It allows for the possibility of artistic, ideological, and conceptual dialogue within the cultural space, conditions for dialogue, or cultural context of a certain era. At the same time it reminds us to respect each independent character (the artist, artistic concept, artwork, art style), and not to demand artistic unification, or crusade against dissidents.

In the twentieth century, the century of criticism, art criticism and theory assumed an important duty in fostering the development of modern art, more often expediting its delivery than following in its wake. According to structuralist theory, thought depends upon discursive systems and structures. Critics, when facing the conflict between new artwork and traditional art standards, come to find through their own

interpretations that traditional norms do not possess an unquestionable validity. This [conclusion] generates in them an intolerable sense of alienation and unfamiliarity toward the art criteria to which they have been accustomed.

In this age of transitioning norms, the tasks that art criticism must engage in are the investigation of the artist's mode of creative thinking and the structural changes in that thinking. These changes need to be approached from a specific human environment and historical context rather than seeking the direction or potential of artistic transformation from a seemingly inevitable unified "core idea" or "essential discourse." When confronted with opinionated artists and opportunistic acts, criticism must not abandon its responsibilities. An interactive relationship exists between "academic" or "theoretical" criticism and the artist's conduct and art's mode of existence. Therein, by virtue of the pluralism and variations of the objects in question, criticism itself will likewise demonstrate its plurality and variation, there is no longer "mainstream criticism," there is only "pluralist criticism." From Kant's point of view, personal dignity implies a respect for all individuals and their principles. Critics should strive to allow the free flow of thoughts from all potential tributaries, and prevent any person or type of person from enjoying an artistic monopoly, above all a monopoly on interpreting art.

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## **MY VIEW OF ART AND CRITICISM (2003)**

By Huang Du

Contemporary art today — from concept to medium — has undergone fundamental changes. Artists no longer adhere to linear ways of thinking, and instead utilize a non-linear, subjective imagination to continually shatter and negate different kinds of fixed conventions. In their practices, artists view constrained and orderly concepts as challenges and targets for deconstruction.

Although some contemporary art bears no relevance to ethics, artists still have to maintain a moral responsibility to society as well as their own human conscience.

Today, artists synthesize all manner of concepts and objects. The principal styles and methods in art are no longer about harmonizing form and aesthetic beauty. Instead, art now emphasizes interdisciplinary cultures. As meanings and denotations of artistic concepts undergo vast changes, the boundaries of art have become increasingly blurred while the problems it faces have become even more complex and diversified.

Art should not only transmit individual experience and independent judgment, but should also present an analysis of the cultural context of its object. The realistic problems generated by mutually opposed vocabularies reveal hidden contradictions and conflicts [in those cultural contexts]. I like artists who uncover those hidden meanings concealed in the unremarkable, seemingly inconspicuous aspects of everyday life, in particular when their focus and interpretation concern marginalized or disadvantaged communities.

Art is as risky as walking across a tightrope. This kind of risk knows no bounds. And because the steel wire is joined to the subject, if the artist cannot find balance, then he will invariably fall. In fact, this kind of balance refers to an integrating whole, embodying the interrelated nature of social problems, art concepts, and formal vocabularies.

I don't celebrate cleverness in trivial, suddenly brainstormed Conceptual art creations. I prefer art that has a more social nature, and where the artist's concept has upheld a continuity and coherence.

Art is the coding and decoding of our social system and everyday life. It continually challenges and questions the social structures and levels of daily life that we often overlook, even when they are directly in our line of sight.

I'm more inclined to independent, practical art criticism, namely criticism that acts as a dialogue between the artist and the public and remodels the sociocultural space. At the same time, the independence of criticism not only requires casting off any compliance to the market, but also resisting control leveraged by political discourse. This necessitates an even more fervent critical consciousness.

"Subversion" in contemporary art practice means reorienting culture. Thus, the nature of contemporary art possesses a distinct ideological flavor and pronounced political characteristics.

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## EXPERIMENTAL ART EXHIBITIONS AND THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE

**T**he issue of exhibitions loomed large in the world of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s. Never before had Chinese artists paid so much attention to the location and form of an exhibition. As some documents in this section demonstrate, they held exhibitions not only in museums and galleries but also in the countryside, shopping malls, subway stations, construction sites, restaurants, basements, and on the street. What was experimental in these shows was not only the artwork, but also the exhibition concepts and methods.

This phenomenon was closely related to the backward exhibition system in China. In sharp contrast to the popularity of contemporary Chinese art among foreign curators and collectors, this art was still struggling for basic acceptance at home, as state-run museums and schools still rejected politically sensitive works and contemporary art forms such as installation, video, and performance. Governmental control over art also resulted in the cancellation and early termination of many contemporary art exhibitions.

Whereas small experimental exhibitions often took place in private homes and diplomatic quarters in the early 1990s, many exhibitions were organized from the mid-1990s onward for the larger goal of transforming the existing exhibition system. Some organizers devoted themselves to establishing regular venues to show contemporary art publicly, and for this purpose they cultivated supporters among officials and entrepreneurs. Others resisted such efforts to "legalize" experimental art, and showed controversial works privately to keep the avant-garde edge. The result was the further marginalization of "closed" exhibitions.

Against this background we can understand the significance of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, the first "true" Chinese biennial based on a prevailing international model. Reformist curators and critics saw this Third Shanghai Biennale as a major breakthrough, because it broke some long-standing taboos in China's official exhibition system: not only were installations, video, and multimedia works featured prominently, but the collaboration between a major public museum and foreign guest curators was also unprecedented. Precisely for these reasons, however, the Biennale was attacked from two opposite directions: conservatives in the

Beijing-based Chinese Artists' Association watched the events in Shanghai with open hostility, while some independent critics and artists also saw the Biennale as a threat to the experimental spirit of contemporary art. They thus organized their own exhibitions concurrent with the Biennale to consolidate their alternative stance.

## Experimental Exhibitions

### "EXPERIMENTAL EXHIBITIONS" OF THE 1990S (2002)

By Wu Hung

#### NEW CONDITIONS FOR EXHIBITING EXPERIMENTAL ART

My survey of the exhibition spaces of experimental art in 1999 and 2000 yielded the following varieties:<sup>1</sup>

1. Spaces for public exhibitions (or "open" exhibitions) of experimental art:
  - a) Licensed exhibition spaces
    - 1) Major national and municipal galleries (e.g., the National Art Gallery in Beijing, the Shanghai Art Museum, the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen)
    - 2) Smaller galleries affiliated with universities and art schools (e.g., the Art Museum of Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Art Museum in Beijing)
    - 3) Semiofficial art galleries (e.g., Yanhuang Art Gallery in Beijing, Art Gallery of Beijing International Art Palace, and Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum)
    - 4) Versatile exhibition halls in public spaces (e.g., the Main Hall of the former Imperial Ancestral Temple in Beijing)
  - b) Privately owned galleries and exhibition halls
    - 1) Commercial galleries (e.g., the Courtyard Gallery, the Red Gate Gallery, and the Wan Fung Art Gallery in Beijing)<sup>2</sup>
    - 2) Non-commercial galleries and exhibition halls (e.g., the Design Museum in Beijing, the Upriver Art Gallery in Chengdu, and Teda Contemporary Art Museum in Tianjin)<sup>3</sup>
  - c) Public, non-exhibition spaces
    - 1) Open spaces (e.g., streets, subway stations, parks, etc.)
    - 2) Commercial spaces (e.g., shopping malls, bars, supermarkets, etc.)
    - 3) Mass media and virtual space (e.g., TV, newspapers, and Websites)
2. Spaces for private exhibitions (or "closed" exhibitions) of experimental art:
  - a) Private homes
  - b) Basements of large residential or commercial buildings
  - c) "Open studios" and "workshops" sponsored by individuals or institutions
  - d) Embassies and foreign institutions

The main exhibition channels of experimental art in the early 1990s were private or closed shows, whose audience was mainly the artists themselves, their friends, and interested foreigners. Terms such as "apartment art" and "embassy art" were invented to characterize these shows. Starting from 1993, however, exhibitions began to be held in various public spaces.<sup>4</sup> Commercial galleries started to appear; some of them supported experimental art projects that were not aimed at financial return.<sup>5</sup> Some university galleries, such as the Art Museum of Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts became major sites of experimental art in Beijing, mainly because their directors — in these two cases Yuan



Xu Tan. *New Order*. 1994.  
Installation in Guangzhou

Guang and Li Jianli, respectively — took on the role of supporting this art. Sympathizers of experimental art also emerged in state-run exhibition companies. For example, one such individual, Guo Shirui, then the director of the Contemporary Art Centre under the National News and Publication Bureau, began in 1994 to organize and sponsor a series of influential experimental art exhibitions.<sup>6</sup>

"Experimental exhibitions" of the late 1990s continued this tendency. Their organizers focused on the three types of public spaces listed above, and tried to develop them into regular meeting places of experimental art with a broader audience, thereby cultivating public interest in this art. Their basic means to realize this goal was to develop exhibitions of experimental art in these spaces. Following this general direction, independent curators could still work with large or small licensed "official" or "semiofficial" exhibition spaces, but tried to convert their directors into supporters of experimental art. Alternatively, they could devote their energy to help privately owned exhibition spaces to develop interesting programs. A third strategy was to use "non-exhibition" spaces to bring experimental art to the public in a more flexible manner.

#### EXPANDING EXISTING SPACES: EXHIBITING EXPERIMENTAL ART IN PUBLIC GALLERIES

Let's take a closer look at these efforts and their conditions. First, important changes had taken place in many licensed public galleries, thus creating the possibility to bring experimental art into these spaces. Traditionally, all these galleries were sponsored by the state, and their exhibitions served strong educational purposes. Although this was still true in theory in the late 1990s, in actuality most of these public galleries had to finance their own operations, and for this and other reasons had to modify their image to appeal to a wider audience. As a result, their programs became increasingly poly-functional. Even the National Art Gallery in Beijing routinely held three different kinds of exhibitions, which were more often than not ideologically self-contradictory. These





Poster produced on the occasion of *Exhibition of Recent Works by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi*, May 29, 1991, Diplomatic Missions Restaurant, Beijing

Yin Xiuzhen. *Ruined Capital*. 1996. Installation of furniture and cement at the Art Museum of Capital Normal University, Beijing



included: (1) mainstream exhibitions organized by the gallery to support the government's political agendas and to showcase "progressive" traditions in Chinese art, (2) imported exhibitions of foreign art, including avant-garde Western art, as part of China's cultural exchanges with other countries, and (3) short-term and often mediocre "rental" exhibitions as the main source of the gallery's income (the gallery collects a handsome fee for renting out its exhibition space and facilities). It became easily questionable why the gallery could show Western avant-garde art but not Chinese avant-garde art, and why it willingly provided space to an exhibition of obviously poor quality but not to an exhibition of genuine artistic experiment.

Unable to respond to these questions but still insisting on its opportunistic practices, the National Art Gallery — and indeed the whole existing art exhibition system — was rapidly losing its credibility. It is therefore not surprising to find that the position of the National Art Gallery was not always shared by other official art galleries. Some of these galleries, especially those newly established and "semiofficial" ones, were more interested in developing new programs to make themselves more cosmopolitan and "up-to-date." The He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, for example, advertised itself as "a national modern art museum only second to the National Art Gallery in Beijing."<sup>7</sup> Instead of taking the latter as its model, however, it organized a series of exhibitions to explore "the complex relationship between



Gao Brothers, *Prophecy*.  
1999. Found objects,  
stainless steel. Installation  
view at the *Second Year-Long  
Contemporary Sculpture  
Exhibition*, He Xiangning Art  
Museum, Shenzhen

experimentation and public function, academic values, and visual attractiveness" in contemporary art.<sup>8</sup> A similar example was the Shanghai Art Museum, which assembled a collection of contemporary oil painting and sculpture in less than five years, and organized *Shanghai Spirit: The Third Shanghai Biennale* (2000) to feature "works by outstanding contemporary artists from any country, including Chinese experimental artists."<sup>9</sup> The organizers of this exhibition placed a strong emphasis on the relationship between the show and its site in Shanghai, a city which "represents a specific and innovative model of modernization, a regionally defined but globally meaningful form of modernity that can only be summed up as the 'Shanghai Spirit.'"<sup>10</sup> Some independent curators were attracted by the opportunities to help organize these new programs, because they saw potential in them to transform the official system of art exhibition from within. In their view, when they brought experimental art into an official semiofficial exhibition space, this art also changed the nature of the space. For this reason, these curators tried hard to work with large public galleries to develop exhibitions, although such projects often required delicate negotiation and frequent compromises.

Generally speaking, however, national and municipal galleries were still not ready to openly support experimental projects by young Chinese artists. Even when they held an exhibition of a more adventurous nature, they often still had to emphasize its "academic merit" to avoid possible criticism. Compared with these large galleries, smaller galleries affiliated with universities, art schools, and other institutions enjoyed more freedom to develop a more versatile program, including to feature radical experimental works in their galleries for either artistic or economic reasons. If a director was actively involved in promoting experimental art, his gallery, though small and relatively unknown to the outside world, could play an important role in developing this art. Examples of such cases include the Art Museum of Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which held many original exhibitions from 1994 to 1996. If an independent curator wanted to propose to stage an exhibition for a short period and to keep it low profile, he was more likely to use such exhibition spaces.

Exhibitions housed in universities and art schools became prevalent around the mid-1990s, although some curators and artists made a greater effort toward the end of the decade to attract official sponsorship and to make an exhibition known to a larger audience. One such example was the recent 2000 *China: Internet, Video, and Photo Art*, held in the Art Gallery of the Jilin Provincial Art Academy. As many as fifty-two artists from throughout the country participated in this exhibition; their works were grouped into sections such as "conceptual photography," "multimedia images," and "interactive Internet art." The sponsors of the exhibition included the Jilin Provincial Artists' Association and Jilin Provincial Art Academy, which provided the exhibition not only with an exhibition space but also computer equipment, supporting facilities for Internet art, and a fund of 50,000 yuan (about US\$3,900). An additional fund of 50,000 yuan was raised from private businesses in Changchun. The exhibition attracted a local crowd, and also linked itself with artists and viewers far away through the Internet.

#### FORGING NEW CHANNELS: EXHIBITING EXPERIMENTAL ART IN SEMI-PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GALLERIES

From the early 1990s, some advocates of experimental art launched a campaign to develop a domestic market for experimental art. The first major initiative in this regard was the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* in October 1992, which showed more than 400 works by 350 artists and was supervised by an advisory committee formed by 14 art critics. Unlike any previous large-scale art shows, this exhibition was sponsored by private entrepreneurs and with a self-professed goal of establishing a market system for contemporary Chinese art. Its location in an "international exhibition hall" inside a five-star hotel was symbolic. The awards set aside for several prizes was 450,000 yuan (about \$120,000 at the time), an unheard of amount of money for any of the show's participants. Suffering from the inexperience of the organizers as well as antagonism from the more idealistic artists, however, this grand undertaking ended with a feud among the three major parties involved in the exhibition: the organizers, the sponsor, and the artists.<sup>11</sup>

Two exhibitions held in 1996 and 1997 were motivated by the same idea of developing a market system for experimental art, but had a more specific purpose to facilitate the earliest domestic auctions of experimental art. Called *Reality: Present and Future (Xianshi: Jintian yu mingtian)* and *A Chinese Dream (Zhongguo zhi meng)*, both events were curated by Leng Lin and sponsored by the Sungari International Auction Co. Ltd., and both took place in semipublic art galleries. The location of the 1996 exhibition was the Art Gallery of Beijing International Art Palace located inside the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza Hotel in central Beijing. Established in 1991, this gallery was funded by a private foundation, but obtained the legal status of a "public exhibition space" from Beijing's municipal government largely because of the political connections of the gallery's founder Liu Xun, who was the head of the semiofficial Artists' Association before he created this place and became its first director. The Yanhuang Art Gallery, location of the 1997 exhibition/auction *A Chinese Dream*, was the most active semiofficial exhibition space in China in the early 1990s. Founded by the famous artist Huang Zhou in 1991 and supported by two foundations, it was a private institution affiliated with an official institution, first with Beijing's Municipal Bureau of Cultural Relics and then with the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.<sup>12</sup>

The semipublic status of these two galleries gave them greater flexibility to determine their programs. This is why each of them could hold an exhibition/auction as a joint venture among three parties: an independent curator, a semipublic gallery, and an auction house. The position of the auction house in this collaboration was made clear by its vice chairperson Liu Ting, a daughter of the late Chinese President Liu Shaoqi: "At

present, as a commodity economy continues to expand in China, how to build up an art market for high-level works has become one of the most pressing issues in cultural and artistic circles. The current exhibition, *Reality: Present and Future* sponsored by the Sungari International Auction Co. Ltd., represents one step toward this goal.<sup>13</sup>

Another noticeable example of a semipublic gallery is the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, founded in September 1999. Large enough to contain several football fields, this enormous gallery is part of an even larger architectural complex including two luxury hotels (one five-star and one four-star). The whole project is financed by Chengdu's municipal government and a Chinese American joint venture company called the California Group (*Jiazhou Jituan*). Deng Hong, the museum's director and the chairman of the group's board of trustees, states the purpose of the museum:

Twenty years after China opened its doors and began to undertake a series of reforms, the achievement of our country in the economic domain is now recognized by the whole world. But we must also agree that progress in the cultural sphere, especially in the area of cultural infrastructure, falls far behind our economic growth. Since the mid-1990s or even earlier I have been thinking that we should not only build a large-scale modern art gallery with first-rate facilities, but, more importantly, need to introduce more advanced operating mechanisms and new modes in curating exhibitions, in order to facilitate and promote the development of Chinese art. . . . This is the fundamental and long-term goal of the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum.<sup>14</sup>

The museum's inauguration coincided with an enormous exhibition. Called *Gate of the New Century* (*Shiji zhi men*), this exhibition included a considerable number of installations and some performance pieces — content which would normally be omitted in a mainstream, state-run gallery. But the exhibition as a whole still followed the mode of a synthetic, anonymous National Art Exhibition. Partly because of such criticism, the museum decided to sponsor versatile exhibitions of more experimental types.

Unlike the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, which is partially funded by the local government and is thus defined here as "semipublic," some art galleries are entirely private-owned. A major change in China's art world in the 1990s was in fact the establishment of these private galleries, which far outnumbered semipublic galleries and provided more opportunities to exhibit experimental art outside the official system of art exhibition. Commercial galleries first appeared in the early 1990s, and by the end of the 1990s constituted the majority of private galleries. Strictly speaking, a commercial gallery is not a licensed "exhibition space." But because it is a licensed "art business" (*yishu qiye*), its space can be used to show artworks without additional official permissions. In the middle and late 1990s, quite a few owners or managers of these commercial galleries took a personal interest in experimental art, and supported "non-profit" exhibitions of installations, video art, and performances in their galleries. Maryse Parant, who interviewed a number of such owners or managers in Beijing, noted that "these galleries are also precursors. They not only sell, they also serve an educational purpose, digging a new path for art in China, shaping a market so that artists can continue their work and be seen."<sup>15</sup> While mainly offering "milder" types of experimental art to Western collectors, these galleries occasionally held bolder shows organized by guest curators. One such show was the *Factory No. 2* exhibition held in Beijing's Wan Fung Art Gallery in early 2000. Curated by three young students in the Department of Art History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, this impressive exhibition featured installations and works with explicit sexual implications seldom seen in a commercial gallery.

Non-commercial, privately funded art galleries were an even later phenomenon in China. These were galleries defined by their owners as "non-profit" (*fei yingli*), meaning that they supported these galleries and their operations with their own money, and that the art works exhibited there were not for sale. Although most of these owners did collect, the main program of these galleries was not to exhibit private art collections but to hold a series of temporal shows organized by guest curators. These galleries thus differed from both commercial galleries and private museums, and had a greater capacity to exhibit more radical types of experimental art. For this advantage, some independent curators devoted much time and energy to help establish non-commercial galleries.

There had been no precedent for this type of exhibition space in Chinese history. Nor was it based on any specific Western model, although its basic concept was certainly derived from Western art museums and galleries funded by private foundations and donations. Because China did not have a philanthropic tradition to fund public art, and because no tax law was developed to help attract private donations to support art, to found a non-commercial gallery required originality and dedication. It was a tremendous amount of work for curators and artists to persuade a company or a businessman to establish such an institution to promote experimental art. But because a gallery like this did not belong to a government institution and was not controlled by any official department, some curators and artists saw a new system of exhibition spaces based primarily on this kind of private institution. Their hope seemed to be shared by the owners of some of these galleries. Chen Jiagang, the owner and director of Upriver Art Gallery in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, made this statement:

The rise of great art at a given time originates not only from the talented imagination and activities of a few geniuses, but also from the impulse and creativity of a system. To a certain extent, an artistic work completed by an individual needs to be granted its social and historical value by a system. After the sustained efforts and striving of several generations, contemporary Chinese art has made remarkable progress. But the system of contemporary Chinese art still remains mired in its old ways. Art galleries, agents, private-owned art museums as well as a foundation system have not yet been established, which, as a result, has obstructed the participation of contemporary Chinese art in contemporary Chinese life and establishment of its universality to a certain extent. As an important part in the contemporary art system, the function and development of art galleries is urgent.

The Upriver Art Gallery has been established to provide the finest Chinese artists, critics, and exhibition planners with a platform in order to support experiments in and academic research on contemporary Chinese art. In this way, it hopes to stimulate the achievement of first-class art and its dissemination in society at large and the selection of works on academic merit.<sup>16</sup>

It is unclear how many galleries of this kind were established in the 1990s; the best known three were respectively located in Chengdu, Tianjin, and Shenyang.<sup>17</sup> Each of them had a group of independent curators and experimental artists as advisors. Some of the most original exhibitions of experimental art in 1998 and 1999 took place in these and other private galleries. Because the owners of these galleries were either large companies or rich businessmen, their influence and relationship with local officials helped protect the exhibitions held in their galleries. In addition, their connections with local newspapers and TV stations helped turn these exhibitions into public

events. Several shows held in the Upriver Art Gallery, for example, supplied the media with sensational materials and attracted people of different professions and classes to the exhibitions. Encouraged by such attention, some curators took public interaction as their goal, developing exhibitions around themes that would arouse public discussion and debate. However, there was a serious drawback to this type of gallery and exhibition space: its operation and existence relied on the financial situation of its owner. It was not uncommon that when a company began to lose money, it immediately stopped supporting art exhibitions and even closed down its exhibition hall.

#### CREATING VERSATILE EXHIBITION SPACES: BRINGING EXPERIMENTAL ART TO THE PUBLIC

A significant effort made by independent curators and artists was to hold experimental art exhibitions in versatile, non-exhibition spaces. Instead of using either official or private regular exhibition channels, these were "site-specific" exhibitions that served two interrelated purposes: they brought experimental art to the public in a dynamic, guerrilla fashion, and in so doing transformed non-exhibition spaces into public exhibition spaces. The organizers of these exhibitions shared the belief that experimental art should be part of people's lives and should play an active role in China's socioeconomic transformation. Because these curators often wanted to demonstrate an unambiguous relationship between an exhibition and its social environment, most of these projects were strongly thematic and centered on certain public spaces. It was also common for these curators to ask artists to submit site-specific works for their exhibitions, and in this way encourage these artists to contextualize their art within a public space.

This direction was exemplified by a number of original projects developed in 1999 and 2000. For example, the exhibition *Supermarket (Chaoshi zhan)* was actually held in a supermarket in downtown Shanghai; the fashionable bar Club Vogue in Beijing became the site of the exhibition *Art as Food (Yishu dacan)*; upon the opening of the largest "furniture city" in Shanghai, customers had the opportunity to see a huge experimental art exhibition, called *Home? (Jia?)*, on the store's enormous fourth floor. The fact that a majority of these shows used commercial spaces reflected the curators' interest in a "mass commercial culture," which in their view had become a major force in contemporary Chinese society. While affiliating experimental art to this culture, their exhibitions also provided spaces for artists to comment on this culture, either positively or critically. Practically speaking, an exhibition held in a commercial space often involved a nuanced negotiation between the curator and the owner or manager of the space. Only because the latter saw benefit from the proposed exhibition — the prospect of bringing in more customers or gaining the image of being a "cultured" businessman — could the negotiation reach a happy conclusion. On the part of the curator, however, this negotiation was approached as an integral component of the experiment, because only through this process could a commercial space be transformed into a public exhibition space.

Related to such experiments in expanding public exhibition spaces was the effort to adapt popular forms of mass media to create new types of experimental art. The artist Zhao Bandi, for example, not only turned his conceptual photographs into "public welfare" posters in Beijing's subway stations, but also convinced the directors of CCTV [Central China Television] to broadcast these photographs for similar purposes. Other experimental artists created works resembling a newspaper. The most systematic undertaking along this line was a project organized by the art critic and independent curator Leng Lin. Here is how he described this experiment:



Wang Jin. *To Marry a Mule*.  
July 28, 1995. Photograph  
of performance, 109 × 71½"  
(277 × 182 cm)

This project was put into practice in July 1999. Called *Talents* (*Yibiao rencai*), it initially consisted of four artists: Wang Jin, Zhu Fadong, Zhang Dali, and Wu Xiaojun. Its purpose was to explore a new way of artistic expression by adapting the form of the newspaper. Derived from this popular social medium, this form combines experimental art with people's daily activities, and brings this art into constant interaction with society. This project produced a printed document resembling a common newspaper. Each of its four pages was used by one of the four artists to express himself directly to his audience. In this way, these artists' final products became inseparable from the notion of the newspaper, and the idea of artistic creativity became subordinate to the broader concept of mass communication. . . . We put *Talents* in public spaces such as bookstores and fairs. People could take it free of charge.<sup>18</sup>

But for some artists and curators, the newspaper was already too traditional a mass medium, so they began to explore newer information technologies such as the Internet. It became a common practice in the 1990s for Chinese experimental artists to build personal Web pages to feature their artworks. But independent curators also discovered this space to organize "virtual exhibitions." For example, supported by the Website Chinese-art.com based in Beijing, these curators took turns editing the "*Chinese Type*" *Contemporary Art Online Magazine*. Each issue of the magazine, primarily edited by an active independent curator of experimental art, integrated short pieces of writings with many images; the form was more like an exhibition than a conventional art journal. The significance of such "virtual exhibitions" could also be understood in a more specific context: when public display of experimental art became difficult in the early 1990s, some art critics curated "document exhibitions" (*wenxian zhan*) to facilitate communication between experimental artists. Consisting of reproductions of works and writings by artists scattered throughout the country, these traveling shows provided information about recent developments of Chinese experimental

art. These "document exhibitions" were replaced in the late 1990s by "virtual exhibitions" on the Internet, which served similar purposes in a new period.

### Notes

1. I should emphasize that this survey only covers spaces that have been used for experimental art exhibitions in recent years. The varieties listed here thus do not represent all types of exhibition space in China.
2. The Red Gate Gallery was one of the earliest privately owned art galleries in Beijing. Its owner, Brian Wallace, an Australian, became interested in contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s, and began to organize exhibitions in Beijing's ancient Observatory in 1988. He subsequently opened the Red Gate Gallery in 1991. The Courtyard Gallery, located in a spectacular location across the moat from the East Gate of the Forbidden City, was established in 1996 by Handel Lee, a Chinese American lawyer. The Wan Fung Art Gallery is also located in a formal imperial building, in this case the former Imperial Archives. A branch of a Hong Kong art gallery, it was established in 1993.
3. It is important to note that the "non-profit" status of these galleries is defined by their owners, who fund the galleries and their activities by using part of their business income. A gallery in this category usually does not have an independent license, and should be considered a "non-profit" enterprise within a larger licensed "business for profit" (*qiye*) sector.
4. It is true that some public exhibitions before 1993 featured experimental artworks. For example, the influential *New Generation* exhibition was held in 1991 in the Museum of Chinese History. But participants of this exhibition were all academic artists, and the show was sponsored by the official *Chinese Youth Daily* as part of the anniversary celebration of the May Fourth Movement that year.
5. One such project was Xu Bing's *A Case Study of Transference*, held in 1994 at the Hanmo Art Center, one of the first commercial galleries in Beijing.
6. These exhibitions include *Now, Dream of East: '94 Beijing, International Com-Art Show, Beijing-Berlin Art Exchange* (1995), *The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art* (1997), *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China, It's Me!* (1998), and *Art for Sale* (1999).
7. He Xiangning Art Museum, brochure of the gallery.
8. Ren Kelei (director of the He Xiangning Museum), "Social and Academic Goals of the Second Annual Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition," foreword to *The Second Annual Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition*, at He Xiangning Art Gallery (Shenzhen: He Xiangning Art Gallery, 1999), 8. (The venue has since changed its name to He Xiangning Art Museum.)
9. Zhang Qing, an organizer of the exhibition, told me this during an interview I conducted in April 2000.
10. Shanghai Art Museum, "Announcement of Shanghai Biennale 2000."
11. For a critique of this exhibition, see Gu Chengfeng, "Lixiang zhuyi degangfen yu pipei — Guangzhou shuangnianzhan, wenxianzhan textie" (The Excitement and Exhaustion of Idealism — A Close-Up Observation of the Guangzhou Biennale and the Research Documents Exhibition), in idem., *Ganshou youhou — Zhongguo dangdai yishu jingguan* (*Experiencing Temptation — A Quiet Observation of Contemporary Chinese Art*) (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 1999), 7–13. For an introduction to this biennale, see Lü Peng, *Zhongguo dangdai yishushi 1990–1999 ('90s Art China)* (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000), 124–33.
12. For a brief introduction to these and other semi-official galleries, see Ma Hongzeng, "20 shiji woguo meishuguan de fazhan guiji yu sikao" ("Outlining and Reflecting on the Development of Art Galleries in China in the 20th Century), *Meishu guan* (*Art Observation*), no. 4 (2000), 58–61.
13. *Xianshi: Jintian yu mingtian* (*Reality: Present and Future*) (Beijing: Sungari International, 1996), "Foreword."
14. Deng Hong, "Cujin he fanrong Zhongguo bentu yishu" ("Promoting Native Chinese Art"), *Meishu guan* (*Art Observation*), no. 53 (April 2000), 11–12.
15. Maryse Parant, "Foreigners Define Market: City Galleries Compete to Supply Contemporary Works." *Beijing This Month*, no. 77 (April 2000), 42–43; quotation from 42.
16. *Zhuanshi shidai* (*Time of Revival*) (Chengdu: Upriver Art Gallery, 2000), Chen Jiagang 6–7. English translation revised based on the original Chinese text.
17. These are the Upriver Art Gallery in Chengdu, Teda Contemporary Art Museum in Tianjin, and Dongyu Museum of Fine Arts in Shenyang. Among them, Dongyu Museum focuses more on building up a private collection of contemporary Chinese art. See Robert Bernell, "Interview with Wang Yigang, Managing Director of the Dong Yu Museum of Fine Arts in Shenyang," *Chinese Type Contemporary Art Online Magazine* 2, no. 3 (May–June 1999), 19–22.
18. Leng Lin, "Yige zhide zhuyi de dongxiang" ("A Noticeable Tendency"), in idem., *Shi wo* (*It's me*), (Beijing: Zhongguo Federation of Literacy and Art Circles Publishing, 2000), 67–81, quotation from p. 69.

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— Excerpted from *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 83–97.





Song Dong. *SONGDONG Art Travel Agency*. 1999. Performance during the exhibition *Supermarket*, April 1999, Shanghai

### ***SUPERMARKET (CHAOSHI ZHAN): INFORMATION FOR SPONSORS (1999)***<sup>1</sup>

By Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Alexander Brandt

#### **WHO ARE WE?**

Who are we? A group of young curators with the ambition to bring new life into Shanghai's contemporary art scene by making art shows originating from the spirit of our time.

In May '98, we opened the doors to a first group show entitled *Jinyuan Road no. 310 Exhibition*. The name of an ordinary street and a contemporary art show exhibited in just as ordinary living spaces.

Now — encouraged by this show's success — we continue this research: We are planning the confrontation of art and commerce: we are planning a "supermarket"!

#### **THE IDEA BEHIND *SUPERMARKET***

Commerce has become the predominant religion in Shanghai since the economic reforms of the 1980s. Shopping centers are now erected everywhere and in fact have become the city's new temples. Everything is for sale. Consumption has become the key mechanism of life in this city. Everyone is relocated in this consumer society: "Feel free to choose whatever role you want from salesperson to consumer!"

How are art and artists going to function within this system? How is the making of art going to interact with this business-minded era? Can a piece of art really be "owned" through purchase?

There is only one way to find out: To operate the way commerce operates. To look into the act of consumption and to look where it happens. To meet the public in their consumer role. And to consider us artists as salespeople.

It is through the act of purchasing that a piece of art becomes part of the real world. This principle now is pushed even further:

*Supermarket (Chaoshi zhan)* is the aperture through which consumers and audience enter into the space of art and become art consumers.

We want this exhibition to be a critical reflection on how to live with the commercial nature of our city, a discussion about what makes a broader audience experience an exhibition, and an evaluation of what it means for art to adjust to the working of commerce.

#### WHY SPONSOR THIS EVENT?

##### 1. Setting a milestone . . .

This exhibition will be an unparalleled event: never before in Shanghai have so many installation, video, and performance artists come together to display and evaluate contemporary life.

##### 2. PR beyond convention . . .

Invitation mailing, posters, radio advertising, and preopening press releases will attract a broad public, further increased by the large clientele of the JUSCO shopping mall (fifteen thousand customers per day on average). Print, radio, and television coverage will further support the event throughout its duration, while articles in the professional art press and a color catalogue will extend this event beyond its initial duration.

Last but not least, unlike other art events, to us sponsorship is not just a way to provide financial support but part of the subject itself. This means that in the presentation and on all levels of communication our sponsors will have a front-row seat.

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#### Note

- [1. This text is part of a printed prospectus for potential sponsors of the exhibition, which also included a detailed budget for construction, installation, equipment, mailing, poster, catalogue, press conferences, Internet, preview events, media coverage, and other items omitted here. This is a revised version of the original English translation based on the Chinese text. Moreover, although the curators gave the exhibition the English title *Art for Sale*, here the exhibition is called *Supermarket* because this is the literal translation of the Chinese title of the exhibition — Ed.]

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— Originally published as “*Chaoshi zhan: zhi zanzhu shang*” (Shanghai: privately published, 1999). Translation from Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000), 174.

### THE PATH TO TRACE OF EXISTENCE (SHENGCUN HENJI): A PRIVATE SHOWING OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART (1998)

By Feng Boyi

It is not uncommon for global cultural communication to enhance the particularity of a participating culture. In a new East/West dichotomy, China is perceived as the embodiment of Eastern “otherness,” thereby attracting attention and validating its existence. Since the opening of China in the late 1970s, the impact of Western art on Chinese art has not only been unstoppable, but it has turned Chinese art into grist for its own mill. Chinese art is taken as an alien system, and is given a place as such in a global system of cultural and commercial production. A by-product of this global communication is that the gaze of contemporary Chinese artists must be continually fixed on Western models. Even when Chinese artists occupy the international spotlight, a Western curatorial bias interferes with their ability to communicate with a Western audience as equals. As long as this situation prevails, Chinese artists must pander to the sensibilities of Western curators and adhere to a Western image of what “Chinese contemporary art” should be. Despite the many circumstances inhibiting the development of contemporary art within China, this Western approach to exhibiting Chinese



Wang Gongxin. *Shepherd*.  
1998. Single-channel video,  
color, sound, 3:20 minutes;  
installed with sheep in  
*Trace of Existence*, Art Now  
Studio, Beijing, room  
19' 8" x 11' 6" x 7' 3"  
(6 x 3.5 x 2.2 m). Collection  
the artist

contemporary art is no less harmful. The aim of this exhibition is to situate contemporary Chinese art in its social context of production, i.e., China, in order to further the development of an independent art.

There are two reasons why *Trace of Existence* (*Shengcun henji*) was chosen as the title of this exhibition. First, people leave traces of their existence everywhere. These traces delineate the space in which the individual exists. We find traces of an artist in his or her life and works, and we can follow how these traces emerge and are then covered and buried. Traces of various artists overlap and interact; their meaning is reflected in their transformation and transmutation. Second, in an even broader sense, the phrase "trace of existence" embraces an individual's life experience, the relationship between an individual and the world, and the cultural trends shaped by this individual's experience. The manifestations of these traces provide a multitude of creative possibilities for artists.

As the curators of this exhibition, we did not want to impose our artistic vision onto the participating artists and to inhibit their freedom in designing their projects. Rather, we extended invitations to eleven artists, who are established members of the Chinese art scene, to produce works in a variety of media. We chose only eleven artists because financial reasons limited our selection to artists currently residing in the Beijing area. These artists had their own individual concerns about a variety of cultural and social issues. The materials they chose to use also demonstrated a strong creative initiative. The result was a highly conceptual, yet personal, artistic language designed to represent both the pluralistic and synthetic character of Chinese contemporary art and its underlying unity as a way of further developing a foundation for future cultural exchange and dialogue.

Because experimental art does not have a proper place within the framework of the official Chinese art exhibition establishment, it is difficult to exhibit this art openly and freely. We have therefore selected an abandoned private factory in the east suburbs of Beijing as our exhibition site. We hope to transform this informal and closed

private space into an open space for creating and exhibiting experimental art. This location allows our exhibition to make the transition from urban space to countryside in a geographical sense and from center to border in a cultural sense. This location mirrors the peripheral position of experimental art in China. This exhibition adopts the customary working method of contemporary Chinese experimental artists, whereby they have to make use of any available place to create art. The initial point of reference for most of the artists was their own social environment, which they attempted to explore and interpret through their work. This experience was used as a way of further exploring their self-image and status. The result was a series of works as diverse in perspective as they were in media. Through a variety of installation and performance pieces, the artists not only showed how individuals have been transformed by the great social and economic changes of the 1990s, but also attempted to grapple with and explore the theme of the show: their own traces of existence.

The artist Song Dong used the factory canteen for the setting of his installation. He videotaped himself making over 1,250 kilograms of pickled cabbage in twelve large vats and replayed the video during the exhibition on monitors mounted in the windows of the canteen. On the walls, he hung illustrations of the traditional methods of pickling cabbage, long a winter staple in northern China, showing the way it was used and eaten. At the opening, Song Dong pickled more cabbage, inviting the audience to have a taste. Pickled cabbage has special significance among northern Chinese, and particularly for Beijing residents, as a symbol of the old planned economy and agricultural policies of Maoist China. Many Beijing residents can still remember a time when eating pickled cabbage was promoted by the government as a kind of patriotic activity. Although the flurry surrounding pickled cabbage has subsided in recent years, it remains a potent symbol of past experience.

When social ideology is given an "image" in installation art, it is difficult to separate such imagery from politics. Such was the case with Gu Dexin's installation. In this work he used a white curtain, a large table covered with a red tablecloth, and flaglike wall hangings made of red cloth. On the table he placed approximately one hundred kilograms of pig brains dripping with blood. The smell was overwhelming. He seemed to be representing a moment or setting for some kind of personal experience. This work evoked disgust, terror, and aversion in the spectator, but it was also a deliberate bad joke, an assault on the senses, and a critique of conventional symbols of power.

Zhan Wang, a sculptor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, re-created an academic sculpture studio in his section of the exhibition space. The space was furnished with ten plaster figures. These plaster figures remind one of the rigid training of Chinese art education. Zhan Wang invited viewers to participate in this installation by claiming "you need only five minutes to achieve the glory of the masters and produce a masterpiece yourself." By actively recruiting the passive viewer as an active participant in the production of an artwork, Zhan Wang not only blurred the line between audience and artist, but also expanded the range of his so-called *New Crash Course Art Studio* (*Xin yishu sucheng chejian*). Perhaps there is no quintessential art but only the process of constantly deconstructing established art. The effect of this particular deconstruction exposed the reliance of Chinese artists on the models of Western art.

In *Plow and Sow* (*Geng zhong*), Cai Qing imitated real life by plowing the earth and sowing it in traditional agricultural fashion, but instead of seeds he used hundreds of coins. Playing with the dream that these coins might grow into money trees, Cai Qing highlighted the human desire for wealth. The aim of this performance piece was to underscore the "root" desire that drives people to struggle through life. A video by Wang Jianwei entitled *Membrane* (*Mo*) is another work related to planting. In 1993 on

the Sichuan plateau he worked on a project for one year entitled *Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting* (*Xunhuan zhongzhi*). As a continuation of that project, Wang Jianwei glued the corn harvested from *Circulation — Sowing and Harvesting* on the windows of a bus that was used to transport people to the exhibition. When passengers stepped onto the bus, they entered a part of Wang Jianwei's work. On the way to Yaojiayuan Village, the location of the exhibition, passengers could not see anything from the windows clearly. By denying the audience a direct visual experience of the place, passengers had to rely on imagination to create an exterior landscape. Through his art, Wang Jianwei draws attention to the arena of social rules and interaction with the environment. Along the 6.4-kilometer route to the exhibition, Zhang Defeng placed eleven markers on the side of the road. As the audience traveled to the exhibition, passing by these markers made them active participants. Entitled *Distance (Juli)*, this work alludes to the separation between city and countryside, center and periphery, and aimed both to dispel and foment the underlying anxiety that permeates the notion of distance.

The two women artists in this exhibition, Lin Tianmiao and Yin Xiuzhen, further developed concepts already present in their earlier work. Yin Xiuzhen cemented shoes into a brick path as a way of emphasizing the "realness" of this path, that is, as a space that has been walked upon. The old shoes now cemented in the path mirror the footprints of those who have walked on it. In this sense, they confirm the traces that are left in daily life. Confirming and repeating the activities of existence is also a way of validating loss. But what is loss? It is the void, the opposite of existence. The artist confirms these individual memories of existence in her installation, bringing them into being. Experience is the point of loss. Sometimes we lose our faith in life just as we lose the ground beneath our feet. Lin Tianmiao evokes a feminine sensitivity toward daily life in a huge ball of cotton thread measuring 250 centimeters in diameter and a cloth embroidered with the characters "Not Amusing" hung on the wall. The artist uses repetitive and quotidian handiwork to convey the sheer effort involved in transforming the unbound object into a bound object, revealing the effort involved in the quiet and seemingly pliant work of women.

Qiu Zhijie used the scientific-sounding title *Yaojiayuan Archaeology Pit No. 1* (*Yaojiayuan yihao keng*) for his two-part installation project. The first part was a simulated archaeological site measuring four meters wide, five meters long, and fifty centimeters deep. Three television monitors placed at the bottom of the pit broadcast images such as a rose in bloom, flying birds, and a blue sky. The second part of the installation displayed objects actually found during the process of digging the pit. These objects and shards were exhibited in a museum display case, accompanied by music mixed by the artist himself. In postmodern fashion, this work did not attempt to present history in the conventional sense, but instead proffered a new meaning of history as something manufactured by the artist.

Wang Gongxin showed a video work in a room 6 meters long, 3.5 meters wide, and 2.2 meters high. In front of the screen was a live sheep. On the screen was shown a sequence of images: the artist tending a sheep in a dump and catching and killing the animal. It appeared to be more allegorical than documentary, attempting to highlight the twisted relationship between man and nature. Confronted with this work, the human audience felt uncomfortable but the sheep felt nothing. Are humans indeed humane? This question haunts this piece. The architect Yung Ho Chang, however, created a work so subtle that few visitors even recognized this gate was art as they passed through it. The work remained relatively faithful to the basic function of a gate, while, at the same time, it introduced a fantastic design and structure. Forming the entrance

to the exhibition, this evocative gate may be viewed as a metaphor for exploration and communication.

At the opening, two artists staged spontaneous performances. Liu Fenghua, disguised as the well-known revolutionary hero Lei Feng, helped people in need throughout the exhibition. This Lei Feng double distributed leaflets claiming that "due to the degeneration of moral and spiritual values in today's world, it has become an urgent matter to 'clone' Lei Feng through cultural means." Meanwhile, the second performance artist, Tang Cheng, paraded about with a broken umbrella and a placard that read, "Our home is like an umbrella. Let the whole country be mobilized to protect our environment." Although these artists had not been invited to participate in the exhibition, their spontaneous appearance was just like those unexpected events that always crop up in life.

All the works in this show emphasized the artists' memories of ordinary experience and the fluidity of daily life. By allowing the audience to participate in their installation and performance pieces, their work was given a "present tense." This exhibition also reflected a deep suspicion toward traditional approaches to the relationship between art and reality, and represented the artists' attempt to transcend these approaches by exploring their own personal traces of existence. These artists often included themselves in their works and thus deconstructed the separation between the subject and object. By assuming the double role of author and work, artists could better reveal their subjective perspectives as well as their objective existence. In this respect, this show stressed the social and historical values of the artists, who served as mediators, negotiating the many attitudes percolating through society.

The emphasis on personal experience in experimental art is closely related to two current phenomena in China: the rapid development of a commercial economy and people's growing lack of interest in political ideology. Art increasingly becomes a "collage" of life itself. In particular, experimental art obfuscates the boundary between art and life to merge with a mass visual culture. This new trend promotes a role reversal between art and reality, creating a new independent space for the interaction of audience and artists. This exhibition attempts to regain the connection with reality that has been lost in mainstream art. In this exhibition, artists and audience entered into a communion that allowed them to experience life and art anew.

*Trace of Existence* was the first performance and installation art exhibition of 1998. If it has had some resemblance to the actual situation of contemporary China, if it has reflected the problems confronting society and has given some direction to the future of contemporary art, then I may be justified in claiming this show has made some contribution.

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**POST-SENSE SENSIBILITY (HOU GANXING): A MEMORANDUM (2000)**

By Qiu Zhijie

We actually formed our basic ideas for the *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibition as early as 1997. At that time, new art forms such as installation, performance art, video art, and conceptual photography had been widely embraced by contemporary Chinese artists. Art trends that were popular in the early 1990s, such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism, had passed their heydays; their derivatives, such as Gaudy art and Cartoon art in the south, had also failed to make a real impact on Chinese art. Together with the acceptance of the aforementioned new art forms, ideas supplied by Conceptual art had prevailed since the mid-1990s and gradually came to dominate contemporary Chinese art.

I wrote a series of essays in 1994 and 1995 to argue with Wang Lin and Yi Ying, whose art theory was based on a vulgar sociological interpretation. The central issue of this debate was whether a work of art should externalize some intrinsic "meaning," or whether it should be the construction of certain "effects." By "effects" I mean a real situation created through a formal experiment, not an author's inward intentions and concepts. By taking this position I could counterattack the then-popular notion that art is determined by its content.

By 1997 this determinism was bankrupt and was no longer worth arguing about, but I realized that another dangerous tendency had begun to control the creative activities of contemporary Chinese artists. This was the popularization and standardization of so-called Conceptual art, which had degenerated into a stereotypical taste for minimalist formulas and a penchant for petty cleverness. The results were manifold: intellectual pursuit overpowered spontaneous feelings for art; verbal explanations became indispensable; and a work was often created to impress the audience with the artist's mind, not to move people with its visual presentation. Following this direction, the whole art world was engaged in a crazy quiz show. I started to criticize Conceptual art from the time Wu Meichun and I organized the video exhibition in 1996 in Hangzhou. But, I found that only some younger artists accepted my ideas; among them were the members of a video art group led by Gao Shiming, whose works were shown in that exhibition.

In 1997, I created several works including one titled *Things (Wu)*, which emphasized the "perceptibility" of real situations. Wu Meichun and I began to envision an exhibition to foreground this direction. We believed that this exhibition should only include younger artists, as established artists had been too poisoned by Conceptual art and were hopeless. But, where were those young artists who could understand us? When would they emerge in China's art scenes? We had no clear answers to these questions. I was excited, however, by the phrase "post-sense sensibility" (*hou ganxing*), with which I hoped to label the kind of art which I foresaw for the future. But I was upset when I traveled to Europe in the autumn of 1997: I heard about the *Sensation* exhibition and cursed the Brit who had beat us to the punch to use the concept first.

Around that time, Jiang Zhi, Yang Fudong, and Liu Wei — junior schoolmates of mine in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China National Academy of Fine Arts) — began to develop their art projects after graduating from the school. We also became quite close to Wu Ershan, a student in the Central Academy of Film, whom we got to know through the 1997 video art exhibition. Sheng Tianhong, a younger brother of my college schoolmate Shen Tianye, was then studying in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Through him I met several students in that school, including Yang Sen, Fang He, Wang Wei [pl. 41], and Zhang Fan. In January 1998, Feng Boyi organized the *Trace of Existence (Shengcun henji)* exhibition in Cai Qing's Art Now Studio at Yaojiayuan Village in Beijing's eastern suburbs. My work in that show attracted a group of young artists,

including Sun Yuan, Zhu Yu, and Qin Ga; they thought that I could be one of them. Around April 1998, they approached me through Ma Xin, Sun Yuan's girlfriend at that time, who worked for the Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and invited me to visit their studios. So one night I went to see works by Zhu Yu and some others. I was glad to know them. These artists were either slightly younger than me or my own age; they seemed junior to me only because I had started early as an independent artist. Like me, they intuitively disliked the kind of Conceptual art that was dominating China's art world and considered this art unimaginative and suffocating. But they didn't know where to go. They were not mature yet. But if they developed their art, they could give the art world a big shock one day. They became the first readers of an article I wrote for a conference in Shenzhen's He Xiangning Art Museum. It was called "Concept: A Place Where Art Goes Astray."

We began to discuss the exhibition more actively. Cai Qing, who had just helped organize the *Trace of Existence* exhibition, wanted to do another show and invited Wu Meichun to curate it in his place. Wu Meichun told him that we wouldn't be interested unless the show would feature only the group of younger artists we had gathered. We accepted Cai's invitation because we knew that no one would finance a show featuring a group of unknown artists, but Cai Qing volunteered to provide 20,000 yuan [about US\$2,250 at the time] to print a catalogue for the exhibition. On May 3, 1998, we organized a gathering at my place to introduce Cai Qing to the artists and also to provide an occasion for the artists to meet one another. In that gathering, we tentatively decided to title the show *Not Alternative (Fei linglei)*. It would reflect these artists' living conditions: because none were professional artists, to them art wasn't a means of livelihood, but either a spiritual need or a vehicle for social recognition. Without commercial motivation, they didn't pursue aestheticism through their works, but tended to be blunt and even brutal. For me, this feature of their work could be very effective in attacking the gentility of prevailing Conceptual art.

Zheng Guogu was another artist on my wish list. This was because I found a certain "antiworkmanship" (*fei zouping gan*) in his work that was quite attractive. I myself have often been criticized for my lack of interest in producing polished "works of art." In that gathering we also discussed an alternative title for the exhibition: *Bastards Everywhere (Zazhong congsheng)*. It was based on the same idea mentioned above. Cai Qing stayed on after the meeting and told us that we should screen our artists. That night Wu Meichun and I talked till 3:00 a.m. She felt that this group of people was too eager for fame and concrete gain and felt hesitant to organize the exhibition. But it was too late to pull out — the project had reached the point that we should soon consider the installation of the show. Because it would take a full month for Sun Yuan to complete his piece on site, he was also anxious to start working immediately. On June 29, Cai Qing phoned us and said that because he was short of funds, the exhibition had to be postponed till the winter vacation. Even today I still suspect that he didn't tell us the real reason; rather, he got cold feet because he didn't have enough faith in those beginning young artists. Afterward, Cai fell ill, so the project was left on the shelf. We began to think about funding the exhibition ourselves.

It was Sun Yuan who solved the problem of the exhibition space: he found some empty basements in the Peony residential district where he lived and also tracked down the real estate company that owned these spaces. One day in November he and I went to the company's headquarters next to the Puppet Theater and signed a contract with the person in charge of the property, renting a basement in one of the buildings. We got the key and went to see the place; it consisted of seventeen or eighteen compartments of various sizes. Although the ceiling was not high, the rent was



reasonable — only a little more than 2,000 yuan [about \$225] for a whole month. We told the company that the reason we were renting the place was to prepare works for an art exhibition that would be eventually held in an art gallery and that some members of the exhibition committee would come in time to see these works. Sun Yuan got an official letter from the Research Institute of Sculpture in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Zhan Wang did the good deed of providing this letter. The exhibition was scheduled to open toward the end of the rental period, on January 8; this would give us enough time to prepare for the exhibition. I suggested that every participating artist contribute 1,000 yuan [about \$112] toward the printing cost of the catalogue and that those living in Beijing also share the rental fee for the exhibition space. This was because artists in other places had to finance their travel to Beijing. By paying the rent, the Beijing artists could show their hospitality as hosts. There were altogether a dozen Beijing artists; each of them paid an extra 200 yuan [about \$24] to cover the rent.

There was about six months time between Cai Qing's disengagement from this project and the opening of the exhibition. During this period the artists made impressive progress. Sun Yuan and his friends had a show in the Passageway Gallery (Tongdao hualang) in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. They called this show *Inlaid (Xiang qian)* and invited Pi Li to be the curator. The night before the exhibition, about 1:00 a.m., three of them ran to my apartment, telling me that Zhan Wang had predicted that they would be condemned for using live animals as materials. I told them that they should do whatever they had planned and that I would defend them and help pacify their critics. The next day during the exhibition, some people commented how cruel the works were and that they would surely evoke protests if they were shown in the West. I responded that it was fortunate that we Chinese were not yet that stupid. People laughed, and the intense moment passed.

When Zhu Yu made his bottled human brains for the *Supermarket (Chaoshi zhan)* exhibition in Shanghai, I videotaped the process and edited the footage into a documentary. Zhu's project marked the beginning of the use of human corpses as art materials by this group of artists. Wu Meichun worried that such pursuit of unrestrained cruelty would lead to a second East Village [a small village in east Beijing that became the home of an artistic community in the early and mid-1990s]. Other people also had their own opinions about these works. My view was that artists in both the East and the West had placed much emphasis on "sensibility" in their works; but such "sensibility" was still based on ordinary experiences and had not gone beyond them. For example, skeletons were used to scare viewers and rotting stuff was employed to disgust the audience — these were all still based on ordinary sensual reactions.

I nevertheless also had difficulty defining "post-sense sensibility" — the concept I had invented for our forthcoming exhibition. At that time, Wu Ershan was developing a project combining various sensual effects of light, sound, smell, and taste. Liu Wei showed an increasing interest in video, and I helped him make a video for the *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibition. As for Zheng Guogu, we told him: "Your work was originally 'raw' and experimental, but lately it has been transformed by the art dealer Hans into commercial art. You once showed a good performance piece in an exhibition with the Big-Tailed Elephant [an experimental art group based in Guangzhou]. Are you still capable of creating a piece like that?" Zheng proved himself to be a remarkable artist who hadn't been ruined by commercialism. He proposed an excellent project and also recommended that the young woman artist A Jue — a junior schoolmate of his — join the exhibition. In early December, the *Counter-Perspective (Fan shi)* exhibition was held at Guangzhuang Village. An artist in that show named Shi Qing came to talk to me and joined our group. We also took in some artists, including Feng Xiaoying, Chen Lingyang, and Xiao Yu. Shi Qing's participation

turned out to be quite important. Because he worked for the Ao Mei Advertising Company, he designed the exhibition catalogue after hours. He was mainly responsible for the catalogue's style. He was a guy obsessed with his own ideas. We first all agreed that the catalogue should have a bright and colorful cover — something really sensual and stimulating. But he changed everything to black-and-white before the catalogue was sent to the printer. Zhu Yu and I oversaw the printing process in the factory.

By the time we finally decided to call the exhibition *Post-Sense Sensibility* (*Hou ganxing*), we had stopped worrying that the word "sensation" was the title of a British show. I reached this decision after seeing Chang Tsong-zung at a conference at Shenzhen in December. Chang speaks good English and told me that the word "sensation" has connotations of "excitement" and "exaggeration." After listening to our explanation of the show, he suggested that we might consider entitling it "Post-Sense Sensibility" to distinguish it from the British exhibition. His advice solved a problem in my mind. I decided that I shouldn't avoid an existing title, but should feel free to use any word that could best convey my true feeling. But this decision also put pressure on us to produce really good works, because people would definitely say that we got our idea from Damien Hirst. We had to prove that we didn't copy him and that we had actually gone beyond him. We had surpassed him not because we had simply followed his direction and had gone further, but because we had developed a different aesthetic orientation on our own. Thinking back, however, this goal may have been too lofty for a group of artists who were still so young.

As curators of the exhibition, Wu Meichun and I felt that some artists in our group relied too much on using animals and corpses in creating their works and that their use of these materials was too literal. Their works sometimes aimed merely at evoking fear and disgust, not at inducing genuine emotional responses. Reacting to our opinion, Sun Yuan and some other artists who used such materials began to see differences from us and realized that they were looking for different things. To make such differences explicit, we supplied the exhibition with a subtitle: *Distorted Bodies and Delusion* (*Yixing yu wangxiang*). In our deep thinking, "distorted bodies" is only one expression of "delusion" — a type of "delusion" concerned with the body; both "distorted bodies" and "delusion" are manifestations of "post-sense sensibility." The concept "post-sense sensibility" indicates a larger ambition on our part to define an artistic category.

Wu Meichun and Sun Yuan got into an argument during the installation of the exhibition. We first put Sun Yuan's work and Chen Wenbo's painting in a single room. Sun insisted on adding a partition wall to divide the room into two spaces, and demanded that Chen split the cost with him. The financial issue was less important; what was serious was that this argument reflected different concepts of the exhibition. Clearly Sun Yuan was now preoccupied with the notion of producing a work that was self-contained and self-sustaining. He told me that Zhan Wang had advised him that he should keep his style consistent during the next few years. I was finally able to persuade him to forget the partition wall. This was not because he accepted my concept of experimental art, but because he felt obliged to give me respect. It was sad to see that under some wrong guidance, an excellent young artist like him had departed from the path of artistic experimentation and had placed career success first. Compared with the power of the established art system, what we can change with our ideas is really miniscule.

Because of the cancellation of the exhibition *It's Me!* (*Shi wo!*), we tightly controlled information about our show. Only on the morning of the opening day did we tell people in the experimental art circle about the time and location of the exhibition. That whole afternoon I was using my cell phone to give directions to people who were looking for

the place. The audience was unexpectedly large. We printed 1,000 copies of the catalogue; 700 copies were taken away on the spot, so at least 600 to 700 people showed up that afternoon. After the participating artists took their copies, only a very limited number of catalogues were left. These copies have become quite precious nowadays.

Reactions to the exhibition were not far from our expectations. Everyone was talking about the "distorted bodies" aspect. Li Xianting said that the show indicated the appearance of a "violent" tendency in Chinese art. These opinions and interests should please those artists who favored "distorted bodies" — now their art seems to have become the "reality" of contemporary art. But I worry that by winning such an immediate reality, they have lost the possibility for future development, as well as a chance of going beyond Hirst. When I first became an independent artist, I was favored by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting, who put me in the category of Political Pop in their *Post-1989* exhibition. But it was fortunate that I didn't take their favor as everything, otherwise I would have become a "faded star" myself.

In any event, there is little doubt in my mind that in organizing this exhibition we reached our goal: to counter the cult for cleverness initiated by Conceptual art. But this exhibition also introduced a new cycle of competition in Chinese art: a competition for being "cool."

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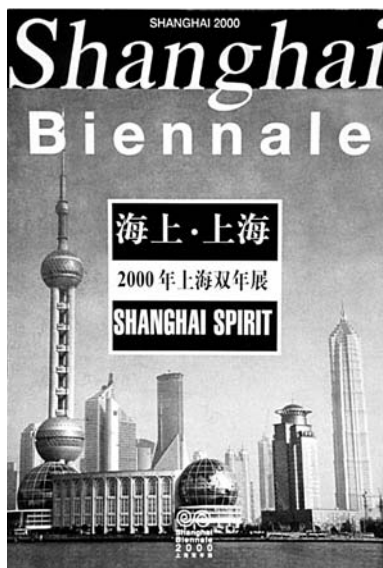
— Originally written in 2000 as "Hou ganxing zhanlan shimo." Published in Qiu Zhijie, *Gei wo yige mianju* [*Give Me a Mask*] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2003), 63–70. Translation from Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000), 167–71. Translated by Wu Hung.

## The 2000 Shanghai Biennale

### TRANSCENDING LEFT AND RIGHT: THE SHANGHAI BIENNALE AMID TRANSITIONS (2000)

By Zhang Qing

Along with the transitions in Chinese society at the beginning of the 1990s, Chinese art has gradually shifted from blindly imitating Western modernist art toward possessing a consciousness of its own culture. At the same time it has also moved from the metaphysical to the physical, from grandiose heroism or utopian narratives to specific experiences in contemporary life and culture. Political discourse has already been deconstructed by the discourse of the everyday, as concretely embodied in the evolution from the New Generation, Political Pop, and the Cartoon Generation to various artistic experiments. At the same time, the art market took off throughout China, courting the aesthetics of Westerner-run galleries and embassy culture in Beijing and Shanghai. This has profoundly influenced the creative tendencies of Chinese contemporary artists. For their livelihood and profit, group after group of artists diligently produced "new export paintings," which has had an astonishing influence. If we were to excavate the meaning hidden within this artistic phenomenon, we would discover that not only was this controlled by supply and demand within the Western art market, but it also conformed to the imagination and discourse of cultural colonialism. Moreover, it was immediately appropriated for use in the 45th through 48th Venice Biennales. At the same time, foreign curators — rallying behind internationalism, postcolonialism, and regionalism — entered China to collect specimens of art "made in China" both inside and outside the Great Wall, and north and south of the Yangzi. They took this art as fresh cultural commentary from the Third World. But, China suffered from a lack of opportunities for legitimate,



Poster produced on the occasion of the Third Shanghai Biennale, *Shanghai Spirit*, November 6, 2000–January 6, 2001, Shanghai Art Museum

scholarly, international biennial exhibitions of contemporary art. Given such a context, many artists successively tried to cater to others' preferences. Whether actively or passively, again and again they remained silent as they ventured out into the West.

Why would one want to have biennial exhibitions in China? Not only for the sake of making apparent one's international influence or just to join the ranks of international biennials, but also because the one-hundred-year history of modern art in China has already engendered unique indigenous experiences. In particular, Chinese art of the 1990s has brought together various experiences in art, exhibitions, and dialogues. Within this present reality in which we confront Western cultural-centrism, the "discursive power" of contemporary art — its power to evaluate and to choose — is particularly important and prominent. If China did not have the type of internationalized and legalized contemporary art exhibitions exemplified by the Shanghai Biennale, then the power to evaluate and choose would have remained in the hands of foreign biennial curators. Chinese contemporary art would always be like an Echo Wall for Western contemporary art, or even become something like a collapsed tomb figurine, and standards for Chinese contemporary art would have never been forcefully, explicitly, and objectively disseminated in the international art world. Yet, the Shanghai Biennale's function of fighting to promote and guide mainstream contemporary Chinese art has persistently bolstered artists' self-confidence and has created a system of values and standards for Chinese contemporary art. Through this, it has been able to continually acquire authority over art and the selections. The contemporary Chinese art to which all of this has given form will become an important constituent component of the international art world. If we were to say that cultural modernity and contemporaneity are synonymous with the internationalization and globalization of culture, then drawing on the "Shanghai spirit" to build a contemporary culture with Chinese characteristics may be precisely the ultimate scholarly aspiration of the Shanghai Biennale.

Over the past fifty years, the art exhibition system in China has taken as its norm national art exhibitions organized by the Chinese Artists' Association. They have continually followed traditional means of classification — namely, separating mediums such as ink painting, oil painting, prints, sculpture, New Year's pictures, and picture storybooks — that are commonly accepted and recognized by both Chinese society and people. The content

[of such exhibitions and their included works] focuses on extolling bright, shining lives, giving expression to the sentiments of a blessed life, and depicting the great beauty of landscapes. But, besides the aforementioned types of artworks, the present Shanghai Biennale also includes installation art, video art, film, [new] media art, photographic art, architectural art, and participatory art, and thus it seeks to explore and investigate broader transformations in contemporary artistic thinking and their related questions. Under the theme *Shanghai Spirit*, it brings together arts of different cultural content and contemporary realities created by artists from eighteen different countries and regions. Thus, this biennale will mark a new initiative in elevating the academic nature of contemporary art and reforming the concept of the exhibition in China's art museums.

In the international relations of this era of globalization, we not only face the economic monopolization of the Third World by the First World, but also the First World's cultural postcolonization and Westernization of the Third World. We must also deal with the First World's attempts to infiltrate cultural forms and ways of life by promulgating Western consciousness and customs at every level. All of this weakens the national consciousness and cultural forms of Third World countries. Often using the excuse of helping the Third World to implement economic modernization, the First World gradually transforms the [process of the] modernization of the Third World into a copy of the process of modernization in the First World. Therefore, in Western biennials, questions about art seem to be becoming less important. Instead, everything from the scholarly focus [of the exhibitions] to the artists' views all turned to international politics, Orientalism, issues of race and history, questions of class, identity, and gender, financial issues, transnational capital, questions about resources, world superpowers, and issues of regionalism. Artists have made these questions into universal phenomena of contemporary artistic expression; this is precisely the new cultural ecology and landscape of globalization and colonialism. The scholarly themes of Documenta in Kassel, the Venice Biennale, the Lyon Biennial, and other Western biennials have no way of avoiding the aforementioned questions. Yet, at the same time, these questions are also shaking up the realms of thought and culture in the West. The control over culture is causing the world of Western thought to reconsider how to treat its own culture and how to value the cultures of the Third World. Myriad scholarly topics all expose to different degrees the reality of the suffocation of Third World cultures by Western cultural standards. Thus, one can clearly see: Western biennials are nothing more than First World international cultural strategies to rebuild and control the world; indeed, they even involve the process itself of implementing such strategies. Because the one-hundred-year history of Shanghai is arterially linked to these questions, Shanghai was once the epitome and quintessence of the semifeudal colony in China. In the course of its advancement and modernization, it mixed together peculiar cultural characteristics with experiences of colonial culture. But, what is even more important is that over the past decade Shanghai has become an international financial, commercial, and business center. Thus, when facing the aforementioned questions, Shanghai has [always] possessed a certain irreplaceable sensitivity and connectedness [to such questions]. As the Shanghai Biennale has faced this international cultural environment, it, too, has not simplistically engaged in cultural criticism but instead has penetratingly observed the changes in the discourses of Western globalized culture and postcolonialism, as well as their influences on each other. Moreover, through its scholarly themes, the Shanghai Biennale has produced a [form of] cultural criticism that originates from China, and it has broadcast the voices of the arts of China.

Along with the abrupt economic rise of the Asia-Pacific region — and in particular, the rapid development of the Chinese economy over the past ten or twenty years —

Asian culture has also continually explored new possibilities within the international cultural environment. To this end, exhibitions have emerged throughout the Asia-Pacific region in great numbers. From their respective viewpoints and using their own individual means, the Yokohama Triennale, the Fukuoka [Asian Art] Triennale, the Gwangju Biennale, the Biennale of Sydney, the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, the Singapore Biennale, and the Taipei Biennial all investigate the relationship and possibilities arising between Asia-Pacific cultures and internationalization. Such a vigorous atmosphere is an irresistible appeal to people, even in spite of themselves. This provides a good opportunity for introspective retrospection on all aspects of Asian culture and for seeking new directions for [future] development. At the same time, while facing issues of internationalization and local culture, globalism and nationalism, tradition and modernity, East and West, center and periphery, colonizer and colonized, and peace and war, the countries and regions that have organized biennial exhibitions have produced timely and substantial responses. These different voices will gather to become a new initiative for Asian culture and serve as a conscious, collective response. In particular, their function in combating Western-centric biennials cannot be ignored. Although in the next ten years, the various biennials in Asia will enter a period of fighting for dominance, the rapid rise of biennials in Asia is like the rise of Asian economies: it indicates that Asia is currently producing a new kind of cultural tendency and is forming a correspondingly new relationship with Western contemporary cultural trends. Asian thinkers and Third World intellectuals have been considering and researching these questions for a century. Yet in the next ten years, what is especially urgent is the issue of whether or not Asian curators will be able to carry out a redefinition of the cultural spirit of the East and thus cause the ethnic cultures of Asia to become a "primary" discourse in a globalized era. I think that this represents not only the thinking and pursuits of Asian culture but also the ideals and pursuits of the Shanghai Biennale.

The Shanghai Biennale, carrying on a dialogue amid these transitions, has already arrived at a new crossroads. As it faces Chinese traditional culture, the Shanghai Biennale objectively combs through the origins of Eastern culture, refusing to be limited by tradition's complacent, conservative, and neoconservative inclinations. At the same time, it actively transforms the essence of traditional culture into something that conforms to trends in the development of Chinese culture and the contemporary artistic context. As it faces an international art world dominated and influenced by Western-centrism, the Shanghai Biennale opposes blindly following Western culture. In particular, it is against losing one's national positions and attitudes due to opportunistic tendencies to trawl for fame and defraud for profit. At the same time, it encourages effectively drawing on and learning from the philosophy and spirit of Western cultural humanism and absorbing the outstanding cultural achievements of foreign countries. While blending all of this to accord with the curatorial conceptions of core biennials, it gradually reveals the independent character of Chinese contemporary culture. Consequently, the Shanghai Biennale, which "faces modernization, faces the world, and faces the future," is representative of the special characteristics of Chinese contemporary culture and ideas, as well as the voices of the East. Atop this foundation, it actively investigates and creates theoretical systems and critical standpoints for Chinese culture, building a self-conscious, independent, and completely new Eastern cultural spirit and consciousness. If this is the case, then the significance of the Shanghai Biennale lies in: "transcending left and right."

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## CHINA'S FIRST LEGITIMATE MODERN ART EXHIBITION: THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE (2000/2003)

By Zhu Qingsheng

The Shanghai Biennale was China's first public, legitimately organized exhibition of modern art.

From the perspective of biennial exhibitions, the Shanghai exhibition was neither better nor worse than the Venice or São Paulo biennials, or even Documenta at Kassel. It was simply a "biennial." However, considering this exhibition with regard to its sociocultural environment and its historical significance, it was a particularly unusual cultural event.

### AN ART-HISTORICAL EVENT AND CONCLUSION

November 6, 2000, marks a watershed moment in Chinese art history. After twenty-two years of opening and reform, twenty-one years of practical exploration (beginning with the Stars' exhibition), and sixteen years of public propagation (since the "National Fine Arts Exhibition Symposium on Theory" in October 1984), modern art was finally legitimized and publicized. Despite the momentousness of the event, even the staff of the Shanghai Art Museum maintained a degree of restraint. Thus, in the written propaganda for the exhibition, there was no emphasis on this aspect of the exhibition, which could be a result of careful instruction or, perhaps, modesty. Thus, when [one of] the curator[s], Fang Zengxian, invited me to write an essay on the exhibition for the general visitor, the above-outlined evaluation was deleted.

Nonetheless, the event did not come about easily. Rather, it resulted from the struggles of countless artists, critics, theorists, curators, and organizers. Theoretically and practically, the exhibition could be a success only through the gradual step-by-step laying of this foundation. In particular, Zhang Qing should be especially commended for overcoming many humiliating challenges in order to bring about this particular exhibition. In 1998, Zhang Qing had already completed preparations for China's second modern art exhibition (the first was the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989), but since modern art was not legal, it fell short. Thus, by the time the Shanghai Biennale came about, issues of quality, methods, style, and organization were of secondary importance. What was most important was that it was a modern art exhibition and, furthermore, it was a legitimate Chinese modern art exhibition. Since it had the support of the government, the public media reported on it, and international figures discussed it publicly; it also opened in a public place to the entire populace, and even offered [educational] talks. Additionally, it prompted six or seven satellite exhibitions (though they were modern art exhibitions with different concepts and methods) [p. 44]. As these satellite exhibitions could all be carried out normally at the same time, this swept away the "underground" or "secret" conditions under which these exhibitions used to operate. Zhang Qing had to deal with so many challenges: he needed to declare the significance of this exhibition, convince the policymakers, ease the negative reactions to modern art, and comply with the agendas of the various curators. He knew how far to go and when to stop. He contacted various artists and critics, and could not avoid offending numerous people who were either overlooked or excluded. Regardless, he pledged to bring about the successful completion of the exhibition. At the celebration for the exhibition, Zhang Qing wondered how the next Biennale would be approached, and I felt that the next time would be a different matter since there will be different ways of viewing things and standards for the evaluation of modern art and its exhibition. So, I replied that on June 23, 323 BCE, Alexander the

Great lay on his sickbed, gazing toward the heavens. He was surrounded by his military officers, who asked him who would inherit his throne. Alexander simply replied, "the most outstanding person." After his death, the independent warlords all strove for supremacy, and the world divided. The Shanghai Biennale legitimized China's modern art; this matter has concluded. But, from this point forward, the development of modern art will not necessarily be associated with Shanghai since modern art has entered a new stage.

To me, this Biennale marks an endpoint to a stage in my life. When I returned to China in 1995, our foremost objective was to struggle to legitimize modern art in China within the next five years, or by the year 2000. Thus, I began by sorting out the fundamental theory [my book *Meiyou ren shi yishujia ye meiyou ren bushi yishujia (No One Is an Artist and No One Isn't an Artist)* was published by The Commercial Press]. To bring the Ludwig collection to China, I conducted research and wrote explanations. I also tried my best to participate in those modern art experiments rooted in traditional Chinese culture (such as modern ink painting and modern calligraphy). While publicly defending and arguing for modern art, in practice, I also curated, organized, and tried to convince and educate people. I fought bitterly, faced ridicule, and worked hard but accomplished little. With the preparation of the Biennale, I sensed a gleam of hope in this desperate situation. After November 6, I no longer had to explain modern art or do the work of disseminating it. I did not need to constantly defend it because it had already achieved the basic right to exist. Prior to this, I had never criticized any exploration or experiment of modern art, because it had still not obtained the right to exist in China. My approach could be described as "restraining the powerful to aid the weak" in order to ensure the survival of modern art. Although this was not a matter related to art, I could not forget this spirit of justice. Although others harshly criticized my stance as "unrefined" or "harboring ulterior motives" [see Xiang Nan's essay in *Meiyuan (Art Garden)* 2000: no. 4], I really did not feel any shame. Since I took this stance for the sake of argument, critics often regarded my defensive language as my own idea of art, evaluated my work according to it, and denounced it even more. From now on, I no longer need to speak on behalf of modern art, but may simply speak my own ideas about art. In so doing, I can fully support and develop my own creativity. This kind of feeling is a huge relief.

"Legitimized" means something that is normal and public. However, this does not mean that all experiments in modern art can be carried out publicly after the Shanghai Biennale, or that all modern artists can gain social recognition. Not at all! It simply means that from here on out, modern art is no longer illegal or a "crime." It will no longer be denounced or protested against or refuted in the public media. It will no longer stand for the objectionable practices of museums of not displaying installation art, and it will no longer appease the magazines that slander modern art.

Modern art is a legitimate reflection of modernization. It was born legitimate, so the symbol of "November 6" does not actually have any significance, for this inevitable event was simply postponed until this particular day. Nonetheless, if the exhibition had not come about, the problems would have become quite severe, and the conflict would have grown bigger and more obvious. Therefore, the opening of the Shanghai Biennale on November 6, 2000, is a significant symbol of the beginning of China's history of modern art.

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— Published as "Zhongguo di yici hefa de xiandai yishuzhan: Guanyu 2000 Shanghai shuangnianzhan" in *Piping de shidai [Era of Criticism]*, vol. 2, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), 347–352. Translated by Kristen Loring.



## THE SHANGHAI ART MUSEUM SHOULD NOT BECOME A MARKET STALL IN CHINA FOR WESTERN HEGEMONY – A PAPER DELIVERED AT THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE (2000)

By Wang Nanming

There is a position in my art criticism that I have always maintained. I am opposed to standards placed upon Chinese contemporary art that are defined by Western hegemony and are derived from a forced distinction between Eastern and Western art, as well as the classlike distinctions inherent therein. Based upon such distinctions, Chinese art is confined to creating art that looks "like this and not like that." If art conforms in this way, then it gains admittance into Western exhibiting systems. It is just such imposed standards that distort the development of Chinese contemporary art. Chinese artists living abroad are a case in point. Their work conforms to the "Chinese characteristics" mandated by the West. But in as much as the West seems to be completely ignorant of recent developments in contemporary Chinese culture, its evaluation of Chinese contemporary art is, at best, based on outdated and rarefied stereotypes, perpetuated by cultural studies and in the media.

The preservation of local identity through special classifications is traditionally the method by which the colonizers have gotten along with the colonized, a method that has persisted until this day in the form of neocolonialism. This is particularly the case with overseas Chinese artists. By appropriating simple motifs or symbols left behind by tradition, they formulate these motifs into some "essential" markers of Chinese-ness. Such artists have developed a strategy, seeking to carve out a niche in order to survive within the order of the dominant culture. This strategy, whereby one finds space for existence at the margins of society, has emerged as the neo-Confucianism of a Chinatown culture and theory. On the one hand, this "Chinatown culture" is characterized by artificial distinctions between Chinese culture and Western culture; on the other hand, it is also completely removed from the dynamic environment of China's cultural present. It essentializes some old symbols from China's past to advertise a kind of ossified Chinese-ness. Just as New York-based artist Wenda Gu has not forgotten to add classical characters in his hair installations, Huang Yong Ping's site-specific installation in Venice used an allegory from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing*), and Chen Zhen invited four Tibetan lamas to beat drums and bells and to chant mantras [pl. 38], etc. Cai Guo-Qiang's cultural strategies are also pregnant with such strange offspring [pl. 45]. When people see his works, they are awed by the scale and expense of his so-called artworks, so much so that they forget to examine the meaning underlying his "conceptual" approach. It can be said that the so-called concept in Cai's art is just like that which we have found in works by other overseas Chinese artists. It is nothing but a commitment to an outmoded culture which ultimately becomes a supplement to Chinatown culture. For example, he employs gunpowder to make images of a dragon, he imports giant *taihu* rocks into America, he fills a giant bathtub with Chinese medicine and then invites Chinese and people of other nationalities to take a bath together. All these and other art projects are at best only on par with mass recreational activities in China's tourist industry, the culture of street stalls and ethnic performances made for tourists. Even his *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows* (*Cao chuan jie jian*) is merely a physical illustration of a Chinese proverb, a simple allusion. Aside from illustrating a traditional Chinese story, it is little more than a superfluous comment otherwise unrelated to either contemporary Chinese or Western culture.

Cultural exchange has already become an integral part of today's everyday life as contemporary culture has already entered the age of the Internet. What matters is not

how we consume cultures of the past. Rather, we need to examine ways in which we might give a new lease on life to culture in a new age. The symbols employed by overseas Chinese artists, including Cai Guo-Qiang, have nothing whatsoever to do with breathing life into today's cultural reinvention. The kind of East and West referenced in their discourse is based on methodologies provided by early cultural anthropologists and their ethnographical collections, classifications, and rudimentary comparisons of different ethnic cultures. This kind of cultural study is actually a product of colonialism and has been replaced by newer theories. A crucial difference in these new theories is their conversion of "culture" from a noun used by early cultural anthropologists to a verb. Culture is no longer a fixed ethnographical symbol, but rather a dynamic process.

Leaving the realm of one's own evolving culture and appropriating cultural symbols as "nouns" for one's artistic material has become a common thread running through overseas Chinese art. The West also has a rich heritage of symbols and allegory. If such things were brought to China, naturally they would also interest Chinese audiences. But, symbols and stories in the West are generally reserved for use in traditional holidays and festivals or as memorials to remember one's forefathers. They are not areas of focus in contemporary culture. Yet, the use of fixed symbols from Chinese culture is somehow considered by the West to be contemporary art. This reinforces the use of characteristics from Chinese culture as static "nouns." The "Chinese fable" created by a Western hegemony has already led to a definition of Chinese contemporary artists as mere craftsmen of products for foreign tourism. Almost as if taking orders at a trade fair, China's local curators, critics, and artists busily vie for a way into this kind of trade fair, believing somehow that this is the road to success for Chinese contemporary art. This should serve as a wake-up call to all of us. China's exhibition system and cultural policies should take the position that the art of a people should be created first for its people, that contemporary art should spring from its own dynamic cultural realm and breathe new life into that realm. Quite the opposite occurs when so-called contemporary art from China's tourist culture has departed from its own audience and culture, largely to offer Western audiences the romance of exotic, imagined lands. China's art museums should take the initiative to develop issues that are most relevant to our experience, to set right the distortions of Chinese contemporary art and, above all, to not become a market stall in China for Western hegemony.

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— Published in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Art Media; London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001), 265–68. Translated by Robert Bernell.

## **PREFACE TO *FUCK OFF (BUHEZUO FANGSHI)* (2000)**

By Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi

This volume is a compilation of contemporary Chinese art documents sorted out during the activities of *Fuck Off* (*Buhezuo fangshi*, meaning literally *Ways of Non-Cooperation*).

*Fuck Off* is an event that is [based on] the mutual identification and joint participation of its organizers and artists. In today's art, the "alternative" is playing the role of revising and criticizing the power discourse and mass convention. In an uncooperative and uncompromising way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and vulgarization. A cultural attitude that takes a stand against power and makes no compromises with vulgarization is — together with independent, individual experiences,



Interior view of the *Fuck Off* exhibition, November 4–20, 2000, Eastlink Gallery, Shanghai

feelings, and creations — what extends the pursuit and desire of art for spiritual freedom, an everlasting theme. Such a cultural attitude is invariably exclusive and alienated. It aims at dealing with themes such as cultural power, art institutions, art trends, communications between East and West, exoticism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, etc.

*Fuck Off* emphasizes the independent and critical stance that is basic to the existence of art. Within a state of countless contradictions and conflicts, it maintains its status of independence, freedom, and plurality. It tries to provoke an artist's responsibility and self-discipline, and searches for a way in which art lives as "wildlife," and raises questions about some issues of contemporary Chinese art.

Allegory, direct questioning, resistance, alienation, dissolution, endurance, boredom, bias, absurdity, cynicism, and self-entertainment are aspects of culture as well as features of existence. Such issues are re-presented here by the artists with unprecedented frankness and intelligence, leaving behind fresh and stimulating information and traces of existence.

In this exhibition, participants and their works are not objects of choice, identification, and judgment. They have no quest for any kind of excuse. Group identification and inner difference are both so fully respected and encouraged that it may be doubted if there is even the need for the presence of an audience.

On-site ambiguity and uncertainty forces one to seek meaning and satisfaction only in the form of proliferation and postponement. Perhaps there is nothing that exists "on-site," but what will last forever is this uncooperativeness with an authoritative discursive system.

October 2000

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— Published in *Buhezuo fangshi* [Fuck Off] ed. Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi (China: privately published, 2000), 9.

## CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Contemporary Chinese art was “discovered” by Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Western curators and dealers in the early 1990s. A series of events in 1993, including the beginning of the world tour of the *China's New Art, Post-1989* exhibition organized by Hong Kong's Hanart TZ Gallery, the appearance of young Chinese “avant-garde” artists in the 50th Venice Biennale, and cover articles in *Flash Art* and *The New York Times Magazine*, introduced this art to a global audience. Throughout the 1990s, contemporary Chinese artists attracted growing international attention. To list a few facts: solo exhibitions of Cai Guo-Qiang's work were held in both America and Europe in 1997;<sup>1</sup> two survey exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art took place in the United States in 1998 and 1999;<sup>2</sup> Xu Bing received a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award in 1999, and Wenda Gu was featured on the cover of *Art in America* that same year (March 1999); twenty Chinese artists were selected to present their work in the 1999 Venice Biennale, more than the combined number of the American and Italian participants; and Huang Yong Ping represented France in the same Biennale and made an imposing installation for the French Pavilion.

The success of selected Chinese artists in the international arena, however, also triggered strong reactions, even resentment, in China. If most Chinese artists and critics in the early 1990s assumed that the globalization of contemporary Chinese art would strengthen their standing domestically, toward the later part of the decade such optimism increasingly gave way to disappointment and suspicion [pl. 46]. Some Chinese critics raised questions about the standards used by Western curators to evaluate Chinese art and criticized works by overseas Chinese artists, which in their view catered to foreigners' penchant for Oriental exoticism and Cold War sentiment. The copyright dispute surrounding Cai Guo-Qiang's prize-winning piece in the 48th Venice Biennale, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, highlighted many internal contradictions in contemporary Chinese art. It would be too simplistic to attribute this dispute merely to the nationalistic sentiment of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, which threatened to sue not only Cai Guo-Qiang but also the Venice Biennale and its curator Harald Szeemann. Rather, centered on the authorship of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* — a Cultural Revolution “masterpiece” — this dispute revealed growing tension between Chinese artists and critics associated with the domestic sphere and those associated with the international sphere.

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### Notes

1. These are *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* at Queens Museum of Art, New York; and the *Flying Dragon in the Heavens* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark.
2. These are *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, co-organized by the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and opening in New York at the Asia Society and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, before an international tour; and *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the 20th Century*, organized by and opening at the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, which toured nationally.

## Contemporary Chinese Art in the West

### THE RECEPTION IN THE WEST OF EXPERIMENTAL MAINLAND CHINESE ART OF THE 1990S (2002)

By Britta Erickson

#### INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, the overseas profile of the Chinese art world increased dramatically, as the number of overseas exhibitions and publications focusing on — or featuring — Chinese art grew year by year. At the same time, the relationship between Chinese artists and overseas art workers and consumers evolved from one of keen but largely uninformed interest to one that was both better informed and more self-conscious. By 2000, Chinese art had achieved a sustainable profile on the international art circuit, and scholars, critics, curators, and collectors had begun to treat it as part of the general scenery, rather than as an exoticism. The artist Zhou Tiehai has famously stated in his 1997 painting *Press Conference* that “The relations in the art world are the same as the relations between states in the post–Cold War era.” I would say that the art world relationship between China and the outside world, particularly the West, developed more like a romantic relationship during the 1990s: at first, both parties were curious about the newly discovered other, and wondered what could be gained from a connection. By the end of the 1990s, the heady excitement had gone, replaced by a sustainable long-term association. Although there is now a deeper understanding, there are still areas of uncertainty, moments of idiocy, and room for enjoyable flirtation.

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, this essay consists of separate histories of the profile of art by mainland Chinese artists as it appeared in exhibitions, publications, and scholarly research in the West, with an additional small section about strategies. The reception of Chinese art in other parts of Asia, particularly Japan, is a separate and rich story revolving around different shared interests and different misperceptions, and will not be covered in this essay.

#### EXHIBITIONS

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary Chinese art was featured in a few exhibitions in the West, either small exhibitions at minor venues, or as a minor element of a large exhibition. In North America, for example, the first exhibitions of avant-garde Chinese art were held in colleges in the 1980s and were not widely publicized. These include *Painting the Chinese Dream: Chinese Art Thirty Years after the Revolution*, curated by Joan Lebold Cohen at the Smith College Museum of Art (1982)<sup>1</sup> and *Artists from China—New Expressions* at Sarah Lawrence College (1987).<sup>2</sup> In Europe, Chinese art was featured as a minor element in Jean-Hubert Martin’s 1989 exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*,<sup>3</sup> at the Centre Georges Pompidou, which introduced the young avant-garde artists Gu Dexin, Huang Yong Ping, and Yang Jiechang (and other Third World artists) to an important center of the contemporary art world. Ten years later, avant-garde Chinese art was in demand for major exhibitions.

The 1990s witnessed both rapid globalization and the artistic results of China’s policy of “striding to the world.” This confluence of circumstances implied an interest on the part of the West in other cultures and the production in China of art intended for consumption overseas. Particularly a decade ago, to introduce an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art into the schedule of a museum or public gallery required determination, leverage, and strategy. Over the years, the strategizing has become

more sophisticated, and more effective. The other side of the coin is the fact that some Chinese artists have set out to design works of art to suit overseas consumption, often laying their machinations bare as part of the work.

Three issues colored Western reception of Chinese art at the beginning of the 1990s, and endure to this day: first, vestiges of the colonialist search for exoticism in "the other" persisted; second, June 4[1989] dominated Western perceptions of China; third, Western art experts frequently had difficulty seeing beyond the surface appearance of contemporary Chinese art, with the result that they perceived much as derivative. The first two issues have surfaced in exhibitions, and may have been exploited as points of accessibility for the art, particularly in group shows where there is a need for a unifying theme. Critics accused *Magiciens de la Terre*, for example, of fostering the perception of Chinese artists as shamans.

Early solo exhibitions launched the overseas careers of outstanding émigré artists. In 1987, Wenda Gu installed a major show, *Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground*, in the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto.<sup>4</sup> Yang Jiechang exhibited in Paris and London in 1990 and 1991, and Chen Zhen had shows in those same years in Paris and Rome. Xu Bing's first solo exhibition in the West was *Three Installations by Xu Bing* in Madison (Elvehjem Museum of Art) in 1991.<sup>5</sup> Huang Yong Ping and Cai Guo-Qiang began to have major solo exhibitions in the West slightly later. In the early 1990s Cai lived in Japan, where he was a resounding success. *Flying Dragon in the Heavens* (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, 1997) was Cai's first solo exhibition in Europe,<sup>6</sup> and *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* (Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1997) his first in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

This group of exceptional artists was drawn on as a core for several group exhibitions, including *Art Chinois, Chine Demain pour Hier* (curated by Fei Dawei, Pourrières, 1990),<sup>8</sup> *Silent Energy* (curated by David Elliott and Lydie Mephram, eight artists, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1993),<sup>9</sup> *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* (curated by Julia Andrews and Gao Minglu, four artists, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 1993),<sup>10</sup> and *Out of the Centre*, curated by Hou Hanru, five artists, Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland, 1994).<sup>11</sup> These artists became integrated into the fabric of the international realm of Conceptual art, appearing in such important exhibitions as *Heart of Darkness* (an exhibition of artists from throughout the world), curated by Marianne Brouwer (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, 1994).<sup>12</sup>

In general, Australia and Europe proved to be open to experimental Chinese art earlier than the United States. While for decades Australia had considered itself culturally linked to Europe and the United States, during the 1990s it increasingly recognized ties to its neighbors in Asia. This mindset launched the Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT), originally planned as a series of three exhibitions to be held at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1993, 1996, and 1999, under the direction of Caroline Turner. The exhibitions' success has resulted in the triennials' continuation into the twenty-first century. Although the art included in the APT exhibitions was not limited to China (the first, second, and third triennials featured eight, six, and eleven Chinese artists, respectively), the exhibitions are nevertheless significant for Chinese art because of the idealism behind their organization, including the minimal influence exerted by commercial galleries and collectors in the selection process. As the triennial's Senior Project Officer, Rhana Devenport, stated, the APT core principles include: "the desire to enhance cultural understanding through long-term engagement with contemporary art and ideas from Asia and the Pacific; a commitment to co-curatorship and consultation; and the location of the artist and the artist/ artwork/ audience relationship as central to the entire process."<sup>13</sup> What set this series of exhibitions apart from all others were the extreme

lengths to which the organizers went in their efforts to be open to new kinds of art. For the first triennial, a conscious decision was made to not organize the exhibition according to an overall theme — a method that had become *de rigueur* for large periodical exhibitions — but rather to allow multiple curators to select art representative of the area for which they were responsible. The second triennial sought to avoid a Euro-American perspective, first, by convening a series of forums to discuss issues relevant to the curatorial process, and second, by forming fifteen curatorial teams each of which included a curator native to the country whose art the team was selecting. For the third triennial, fifty-three curators and researchers worked with seventy-seven artists, ensuring a plurality of vision. While the curatorial process became cumbersome, it encouraged the emergence of artists who would not have otherwise achieved recognition. The east coast of Australia also saw the first significant Australian exhibition devoted exclusively to Chinese art: Claire Roberts's small but powerful *New Art from China: Post-Mao Product*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, in 1992 (seven artists).<sup>14</sup>

During the mid-1990s, Europe produced a flurry of group exhibitions focusing on contemporary avant-garde Chinese art, beginning with *China Avant-garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 1993 (sixteen artists).<sup>15</sup> In 1995, *Change — Chinese Contemporary Art*, organized by Folke Edwards, opened at the Konsthallen in Göteborg, Sweden (seventeen artists);<sup>16</sup> and *Des del Pais del Centre: avant-gardes artistiques xineses (Out of the Middle Kingdom: Chinese Avant-garde Art)*, curated by Imma Puy, was exhibited at the Centre d'Art Santa Monica in Barcelona (thirty-four artists).<sup>17</sup> The next year, *China! Zeitgenössische Malerei*, curated by Dieter Ronte, Walter Smerling, and Evelyn Weiss, opened at the Bonn Art Museum (thirty-one artists).<sup>18</sup> An almost identical exhibition, "*Quotation Marks*": *Chinese Contemporary Paintings*, opened at the Singapore Art Museum in 1997, with twenty-seven artists.<sup>19</sup> Many others followed.

Probably the most influential of all the early 1990s exhibitions of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art was the 1993 blockbuster, *China's New Art, Post-1989*.<sup>20</sup> Co-curated by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting, *China's New Art, Post-1989* opened at the Hong Kong Arts Centre and City Hall, and featured fifty-four artists, most of whom had drawn attention at the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) at the National Art Gallery in Beijing.<sup>21</sup> *China's New Art, Post-1989* went on to tour the globe for several years, and had a long-lasting impact, shaping the overseas roster of important Chinese artists. A pared-down spin-off of this exhibition, *Mao Goes Pop, China Post-1989* (with twenty-nine artists), appeared at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in 1993.<sup>22</sup>

Group exhibitions from the first half of the 1990s introduced contemporary Chinese avant-garde art to the West. Typically the catalogue texts accompanying the exhibitions located the art in terms of its political and sociological background, and sometimes explained its historical development. Some catalogues included comments from the artists. Once contemporary Chinese art had been thus introduced, however, exhibitions in this vein became redundant, except to the local populations.

Important exhibitions of the later 1990s provided new angles or introduced new materials. Examples include *Die Hälfte des Himmels: Chinesische Künstlerinnen*, organized by Chris Werner, Qiu Ping, and Marianne Pitzener at the Frauen Museum in Bonn in 1998 (twenty-four artists from mainland China).<sup>23</sup> This exhibition of female artists' works was a direct reaction to *China! Zeitgenössische Malerei*, which had appeared in Bonn two years earlier, purporting to present a comprehensive view of Chinese painting but including no women among its thirty-one artists. The under-representation of female artists is a pervasive problem in the field, and *Die Hälfte des Himmels* made a decisive statement.



Poster produced for the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*. Exhibition organized by Hanart TZ Gallery, tour opening in Hong Kong, January 31–February 14, 1993 (Hong Kong City Hall), February 2–25, 1993 (Hong Kong Arts Centre)

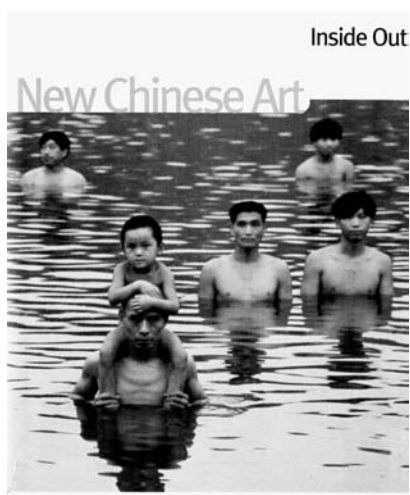
Some exhibitions explored particular media. In 1997, *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*, curated by Chris Dreissen and Heidi van Mierlo (eighteen artists; Fundament Foundation, Breda, the Netherlands) focused on installation and performance art.<sup>24</sup> That same year saw a major exhibition of contemporary Chinese photography, *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der Volksrepublik China*, at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (sixteen artists).<sup>25</sup>

Other exhibitions brought out particular themes. *Im Spiegel der Eigenen Tradition: Ausstellung Zeitgenössischer Chinesischer Kunst*, curated by Eckhard Schneider at the German Embassy, Beijing (technically German territory; thirty-four artists) in 1998, showcased modern expressions of traditional artistic practices and aesthetics.<sup>26</sup> Three exhibitions focusing on language appeared in 1999 and 2000: *Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China*, curated by Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, Lehman College Art Gallery (ten artists; 1999);<sup>27</sup> *Power of the Word*, curated by Chang Tsong-zung and circulated by Independent Curators International, New York (six mainland Chinese artists; 2000);<sup>28</sup> and *Word and Meaning: Six Contemporary Chinese Artists*, curated by Shen Kuiyi, for the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (five mainland Chinese artists; 2000).<sup>29</sup> *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, curated by Wu Hung for the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago (twenty-one artists; 1999) broke experimental art into several thematic divisions, "Demystification," "Ruins," and "Transience."<sup>30</sup>

Regionalism proved a viable angle for the exhibition *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River*, organized by Hank Bull, David Chan, Zheng Shengtian, and Xia Wei, exhibited in various Vancouver venues (eighteen contemporary mainland artists; 1998).<sup>31</sup> Another angle was painting genres: in curating *Representing the People* for the Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester (ten artists; 1998), Karen Smith focused on figurative paintings.<sup>32</sup> All of the focused exhibitions provided their audiences with a view of China as a multifaceted culture, breaking down the notion of China as a homogeneous monolith, and encouraging a more nuanced appreciation of Chinese art.

The second blockbuster exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art (after *China's New Art, Post-1989*), *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, was curated by Gao Minglu in association with the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (forty-two mainland Chinese artists/groups).<sup>33</sup> Although its core consisted of the major artists of the '85 Art New Wave movement, its scope was widened to include younger artists, as





Front cover of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; New York: Asia Society; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998). Exhibition organized by Asia Society Galleries and San Francisco Museum of Modern art, tour opening in New York City, September 15, 1998–January 3, 1999 (Asia Society Galleries and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center)

well as artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan. After opening at the Asia Society and P.S. 1 in New York in 1998, the exhibition traveled to other American venues and several countries. This exhibition brought wide attention to Chinese art, and encouraged a debate on the viability of considering artists from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as a unit. The exhibition's presence in New York had the side effect of temporarily heating up the market for contemporary Chinese art.

The end of the decade saw two shows that made creative use of the exhibition format. Wu Hung's *Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 2000) conjured a canceled Beijing exhibition as an opportunity to address the special issues surrounding the display and reception of art in China.<sup>34</sup> *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing*, featuring many works created during the 1990s, was the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery's (Washington, D.C.; 2001) first major exhibition of contemporary Chinese art. Through the juxtaposition of early Chinese art with Xu Bing's works, I intended the exhibition to establish a provocative tension that led viewers to question whether the contemporary pieces drew on the superficial appearance of the traditional art, or made a deeper connection.

The 1990s saw the increasing inclusion of Chinese artists in group exhibitions of international artists. For the 1993 Venice Biennale, curator Achille Bonito Oliva (consulting with Francesca dal Lago) included fourteen Chinese artists in a section titled *Passaggio a Oriente*.<sup>35</sup> *Cities on the Move*, an innovative evolving exhibition curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, opened at the Wiener Secession, Vienna, in 1997, with works by nineteen mainland Chinese artists.<sup>36</sup> Twenty Chinese artists appeared two years later in the 48th Venice Biennale, curated by Harald Szeemann.<sup>37</sup> In 2000 Jean-Hubert Martin selected sixteen for *Partage d'Exotismes: The Fifth Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art*.<sup>38</sup> In choosing twenty percent Chinese artists, Szeemann shocked many people yet twenty percent of the world's population is Chinese, and we can guess that a similar proportion of the world's artists are Chinese. Many accused the curator of "playing the China card," particularly when he chose only three Chinese artists for the following biennial. The same was thought of Jean-Hubert Martin, who selected several artists who created shocking works from animal or human body parts — supposedly "exotic" works that were created in an "exotic" land. Conflicting feelings surround the selection for important overseas exhibitions: the desire to be included, plus an insecurity concerning the motivations for inclusion.<sup>39</sup>

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**Notes**

1. Joan Lebold Cohen, *Painting the Chinese Dream: Chinese Art Thirty Years After the Revolution* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Smith College Museum of Art, 1982).
2. *Artists from China-New Expressions* (Bronxville, New York: Sarah Lawrence College, 1987).
3. Jean-Hubert Martin et al., *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989).
4. Bruce Parsons, comp., *Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1983).
5. Britta Erickson, *Three Installations by Xu Bing* (Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1991).
6. Anneli Fuch and Geremie Barmé, *Flying Dragon in the Heavens* (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1997).
7. Jane Farver (curator) and Reiko Tomii, *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1997).
8. Fei Dawei, *Art Chinois, Chine Demain Pour Hier* (Paris: Carte Secrete, 1990).
9. David Elliott and Lydie Mephram, eds., *Silent Energy: New Art from China* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993).
10. Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1993).
11. Jari-Pekka Vanhala, ed., *Out of the Centre* (Pori, Finland: Porin Taidemuseo, 1994).
12. Marianne Brouwer, ed., *Heart of Darkness* (Otterlo: Stichting Kröller-Müller Museum, 1994).
13. *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1999), 25.
14. Claire Roberts, *New Art from China: Post-Mao Product* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1992).
15. Jochen Noth, et al., eds., *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993).
16. Folke Edwards, *Change — Chinese Contemporary Art* (Göteborg, Sweden: Konsthallen, 1995).
17. Imma González Puy, et al., eds., *Des del País del Centre: Avantguardes artístiques xineses* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Cultura, 1995).
18. Dieter Ronte, Walter Smerling, Evelyn Weiss, et al., *China! Zeitgenössische Malerei* (Bonn: Dumont, 1996).
19. Dieter Ronte, Walter Smerling, Evelyn Weiss, et al., "Quotation Marks:" *Chinese Contemporary Paintings* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1997).
20. Chang Tsong-zung, et al., *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993).
21. *China/Avant-Garde* (Guangxi People's Publishing House, 1989).
22. Nicholas Jose, ed., *Mao Goes Pop, China Post-1989* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993).
23. Chris Werner, Qiu Ping, and Marianne Pitzen, eds., *Die Hälfte des Himmels: Chinesische Künstlerinnen* (Bonn: Frauen Museum, 1998).
24. Chris Dreissen and Heidi van Mierlo, eds., *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties* (Breda: Fundament Foundation, 1997).
25. Andreas Schmid and Alexander Tolnay, *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der VR China* (Berlin: Edition Braus, 1997).
26. Eckhard R. Schneider, et al., *Im Spiegel der Eigenen Tradition: Ausstellung Zeitgenössischer Chinesischer Kunst* (Beijing: Botschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1998).
27. Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China* (Bronx, New York: Lehman College Art Gallery, 1999).
28. Chang Tsong-zung, *Power of the Word* (New York: Independent Curators International, 1999).
29. Shen Kuiyi, *Word and Meaning: Six Contemporary Chinese Artists* (Buffalo, New York: University at Buffalo Art Gallery, 2000).
30. Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999).
31. Hank Bull, ed., *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River* (Vancouver: Annie Wong Art Foundation and Western Front Society, 1998).
32. Karen Smith, *Representing the People* (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 1999).
33. Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
34. Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2000).
35. *La Biennale di Venezia, XLV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte*, vol. 2 (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1993).
36. Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, eds., *Cities on the Move* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997).
37. Harald Szeemann and Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, eds., *La Biennale di Venezia, 48th Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1999).
38. Thierry Prat, Thierry Raspail, Jean-Hubert Martin, et al., *Partage d'Exotismes: 5e Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon* (Reunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000).
39. For more information about the inclusion of Chinese artists in major international periodical exhibitions, see Francesca dal Lago, "From Crafts to Art: Chinese Artists at the Venice Biennale, 1980–2001," unpublished paper.

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— Excerpted from a text originally published in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art, 1990–2000*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 105–12.

## ENTROPY, CHINESE ARTISTS, WESTERN ART INSTITUTIONS: A NEW INTERNATIONALISM (1994)

By Hou Hanru

...

II

Obviously, there is in the West a lack of knowledge and understanding of contemporary art of China. This is in a way understandable. There are some essential differences between China and most "Third World" countries in a historical, political, economical, and cultural sense. For although struggles against all kinds of imperialism have been one of the most important aspects of modern Chinese history, China as a whole has never been colonized by any imperialist power, even during the eight years of Japanese occupation. Whilst facing dangers of being colonized and half-colonized, as Mao Zedong had often warned, the very centre of modern history of culture in China has been occupied by debates and explorations of the relationships between East and West culture. Modernization of national and traditional culture and, moreover, a certain idealism of bridging Western and Eastern cultures by no means implies a simple claim of a single national cultural identity. This situation cannot be included in the discussions of the colonialism-postcolonialism problem and is, of course, not covered by Western anthropological research, which has provided the modern antiracist and anti-colonialist movements with scientific justifications. This fact also helps us to understand why there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of Chinese contemporary art in the West.

I generalize here, because during the past few years the Western art world has begun to be aware of Chinese contemporary art. There have been several exhibitions of "Chinese Avant-garde" art in museums and galleries in France, Germany, Great Britain, the US, Holland, Denmark, Poland, and Italy. This interest in Chinese "Avant-garde" art is not coincidental. It is connected to the West's sudden interest in China during the 1989 Tiananmen event. In other words, the event itself exposed the reality of a political violence and a totalitarian ideology in the country, which awakened the humanist conscience of Westerners. The "miracle" of China's economic boom during the last few years has also attracted Western interests, although these have quickly expanded into cultural-artistic domains. What is interesting is how often, although of course not always, one can detect these facts. In organizing Chinese contemporary art exhibitions in Western institutions, a certain ideological superiority on the part of the West can be traced back to Cold War ideological competitions between the West and the East, and to nineteenth-century exoticism. Sometimes this is the very motivation for organizing these exhibitions.

Most work by contemporary Chinese artists chosen by Western institutions and galleries come from two groups of painting that have been coined by some critics as "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism." For the most part, these paintings appeared after the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) and the Tiananmen event. They are actually reflections of a cynical mentality among some young people who have failed to discover imaginative solutions to the dramatic social-political and cultural shifts facing contemporary Chinese society. The only thing they have found interesting and useful is to play cynically with the status quo by manipulating or combining images of official propaganda with the signs of a growing popular culture, one created by a newly born consumerism in the country. The artistic language of these paintings is often derived from Chinese Socialist Realism and American Pop art. These kinds of cynical games of "anti-official propaganda" satisfy a Western

public's expectation for their own ideological superiority as mentioned above. Their artistic value can be compared to many of the supposedly objective reportage about China that one finds in *Time* or *Newsweek*, which explicitly propagates this ideological preoccupation. In other words, the kind of Chinese painting largely welcomed in the West is actually another form of political propaganda.

The Western professional art press has not been able to avoid this propaganda cliché. The writers of most articles on Chinese contemporary art, instead of discussing the artists' creative efforts and the cultural-intellectual values of the work, concentrate their energies and interests on revealing how "unofficial" artists suffer from political pressure in the country, as if the significance of both artists and work can only be found in ideological struggles. This recalls the methodology of the Western official ideological propaganda during the Cold War.

Lynn MacRitchie's recent article "Precarious Paths on the Mainland" (*Art in America*, March, 1994), which reports on the present situation of the Chinese art world, is summed up with the following sentence: "While today's Avant-garde Chinese artists have had some success abroad, they continue to face unpredictable governmental reactions at home." In this article, which occupies five pages of the magazine, one can find hardly any detailed information or interpretation of the work itself. Instead, it is full of descriptions of how the artists are enduring official censorship and feeling unsafe in their country. What is particularly worth noting is that her article begins with a report on Gilbert and George's exhibition in China, accompanied by a color photograph of them posing with a couple of Chinese opera singers. The exotic, *The Last Emperor*-type photo itself tells us clearly why the artists decided to show their work and themselves in China! MacRitchie admits it was because of Gilbert and George's show that she went to China in the first place, and one easily understands the purpose of her article as an extension of the myth that the artists as well as the people of China are still the exotic other in both the cultural and ideological senses.

I have pointed out that most of the "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realist" work has nothing to do with real Avant-garde research in Chinese contemporary art, which has too often been ignored. One should not forget that these "Political Pop" or "Cynical Realist" artists have benefited from the present market economy to enrich themselves and they have rarely been banned. A new situation appearing in the country is a social compromise between official political power and intellectual claims for freedom, enacted by replacing the ideological conflicts with materialist values. And these artists are those of the typical "nouveaux riches," the very products of the social compromise. Consciously or unconsciously, they have become the best tools of both official Chinese and Western Propaganda. Western interests in these artists' recalls the vogue for the unofficial art of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Komar and Melamid's "success" in the West is a typical example of this phenomenon. The Polish-born artist Krzysztof Wodiczko's comment on these artists can provide us with a relevant reference to "today's Avant-garde Chinese artist's success abroad":

. . . But, in fact, Komar and Melamid are not clearly critical of either system. They submerge themselves with perverse pleasure in the repressive realities of both Soviet and American existence, wallowing in what they see as the equivalent decadence of both empires. They perform art-historical manipulations to support their political nihilism, creating, for example, pop-art versions of socialist realism. I question the political clarity and social effectiveness of adopting pop-art strategies for the critique of Soviet culture. Even though they developed a powerful humor, which would have been a liberating experience in intellectual circles, it

would hardly have been so liberating for anyone who did not enjoy the privileges granted to artists in the Soviet Union. There is a similar problem in the reception of their work here in the United States, where people only have the most general notion of socialist realism and of the Soviet reality.<sup>1</sup>

This Western political propaganda, which has framed Chinese contemporary art as "other," is connected to conventional West-centric and colonialist cultural viewpoints. Its inner logic is that Chinese artists as the "other" are purely "aestheticized" [as] an exotic object, rather than an individual whose contribution to international cultural exchanges is approached in an active and most valuable way. Such a preoccupation can also be detected in many other writings on Chinese contemporary art. For example, for some Western writers, it is unacceptable to express the "Oriental mind" with the "Occidental" language of Avant-garde art. The value and significance of a Chinese artist can only be legitimized through their use of "ink-wash" or "calligraphy." One can never find anything more naive and narrow-minded than such an assumption. Of course, its result is the discrimination of the "other." This naiveté can be found in two reviews of the exhibition *Silent Energy* held at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, published respectively in *frieze* (October 1993) and *Art Monthly* (October 1993). It seems that the authors failed to understand the importance of critically reviewing the cultural tradition and Chinese identification with the real Avant-garde spirit historically initiated in the West for the individual creations of artists in both the Chinese and international contemporary contexts. Ignoring the fact that works by Huang Yong Ping, Wenda Gu, Chen Zhen, Cai Guo-Qiang, Yang Jiechang, Xi Jianjun, and Wang Luyan are actually concerned with the urgent problems of international life, their critique is that these artists only imitate Western art (in Huang Yong Ping's case to Arte Povera, and here, I really cannot understand this attribution, when looking into the work itself!) and have betrayed multicultural principles. The problem is that the authors understand multiculturalism as a kind of "regionalism" or "nationalism" while the artists understood it as internationalism, never refusing international exchanges and mutual influences! One writer complains that the artists have been influenced by Western sources, even asking, "How much of the Heavenly Kingdom remains?" (*frieze*). He is ignorant of the fact that Chinese people have buried the "Heavenly Kingdom" for almost a century. The logic in this criticism and mode of thinking should lead one to conclude that John Cage and Robert Filliou, among many others, won't cost a penny?

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#### Notes

1. "A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko," in *Discourse: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

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— Excerpted from a text first published in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 79–88. Reprinted in Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground: Selected Texts*, ed. Yu Hsiao-Wei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 54–63.

## Questions about the "International Identity" of Contemporary Chinese Art

### OLIVA IS NOT THE SAVIOR OF CHINESE ART (1993)

By Wang Lin

In 1993, Achille Bonito Oliva, the director of the 45th Venice Biennale, came to China to select artwork. Although his local Chinese contact provided him with detailed materials and forcefully advocated a more comprehensive introduction to the present conditions of avant-garde Chinese art, Oliva ultimately still just selected the things that interested him: Political Pop and Cynical Realism. Disputes over authority in the end became the right to rule. Li Xianting, the person who assembled everything for the China side, stated: "We have no choice, we need to adapt to their rules because this is a Western exhibition."

The first ascent of avant-garde Chinese art to a large-scale international exhibition, and moreover its position as a featured highlight, is naturally an occasion worthy of celebration. We cannot deny that Mr. Oliva has incisive foresight. After the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty, he rapidly turned his attention to China, although he claims, "Conflicts in the international arena have already been reoriented from the East-West to the North-South axis, the structure of opposing ideologies has been superseded by problems in economic conditions (the rich and the poor)." Although the pressures [previously shaping] art all over the world have dissipated, China is still ripe with ideological antagonism. Oliva firmly believes that the [inclusion of] unofficial Chinese avant-garde art is explosive news for the Venice Biennale.

In Westerners' eyes, China is the last fortress for the opposition between East and West (despite being so unevenly matched) and a living fossil of the Cold War (although it's in the midst of transforming). Thus, Chinese artists (on principle) are all products of the Mao Zedong era; they are bearers of ideological burdens and embody powers of resistance. In contrast, Chinese Political Pop and Cynical Realism utilize the influence of the Mao Zedong era: Political Pop makes a show of vilifying political myths using canonical Cultural Revolution imagery, while the grinning faces and everyday scenes depicted in Cynical Realism mock a hollow idealism. Thus, avant-garde Chinese art is doomed to be a contemporary resolution for its Mao Zedong complex, a shift from the regions of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Actually, Chinese Political Pop and Cynical Realism are artistic languages not only deeply influenced by Warhol and Freud, but also very similar to the content of [art from] the former Soviet Union, for example Stalin and Marilyn Monroe toasting, Lenin facing a Coca-Cola sign and speaking, etc. Oliva believes that warfare in the Middle East has opened up never-before-used channels for communication, and initiated a moment in Third World countries in which technological revolution and cultural revitalization will go forth hand in hand, demonstrating the instrumental capacity of the mass media. This kind of understanding has potentially formed a tremendous interest in art trends that borrow mass media and symbolic forms, particularly in a Third World country like China.

My intention is not to deny Oliva's choices. I only want to point out a possible consequence that can result from this kind of selection. When one group of trendy artists board Oliva's international train to Venice, a large group of people imitating these trends will subsequently swarm the station, awaiting a train that will never return. The limitations of Oliva's selections are not only due to the contingent and opportunistic nature of his engagement with avant-garde Chinese art, but are also located in the

covert Eurocentrism concealed in his standards of evaluation. Profound transformations in 1990s avant-garde Chinese art not only entail the resolution of a "Mao Zedong complex." The fundamental issues of China's contemporary cultural revitalization are taking place in a context in which ideological burdens have already necessarily been eliminated. More and more direct connections are being made with contemporary cultural issues in the world, for example confronting the extensive commercialization of society, an increasingly superficial cultural state, and inquiries into and resolutions for man's most basic problems of existence — the preservation of individuality, spiritual autonomy, and the rehabilitation of relationships between people, social groups, and nations. The particularity of Chinese art is located in its complexities and dilemmas, and not in its detachment from these problems. The burden of ideology, a precapitalist mentality, and the deconstructive function of popular culture together constitute the power of an alienated avant-garde art. The true independence that Chinese intellectuals have achieved in the 1990s conflicts with these [aforementioned] alienating forces, causing them — like intellectuals the world over — to experience the real trials of post-modern culture. Chinese Political Pop and Cynical Realism came into being through a state of compromise between a spiritual push ahead and forces of alienation. They no doubt presented the actual situation of China's post-'89 cultural reality and mindset (the 45th Venice Biennale broadcast these conditions, which is irreproachable), but this kind of emergence is obviously eclectic and flexible. It contained the participants' opportunistic mentality, and it is precisely this kind of opportunism toward material gain and fame that has prevented them from addressing the real predicaments in Chinese people's lives: the gap between the rich and the poor produced by the market economy is shaking up the ideological system of egalitarianism, the spiritual pillar propping up all of China and her history. Facing the end of the century and the genuine collapse of the old and new traditional spirit, how do we look for a foothold to revitalize contemporary culture? This is precisely the spiritual and cultural problem that avant-garde Chinese art must confront today. It belongs to a time of openness in China and is not part of a closed era; this is the contemporaneity of avant-garde Chinese art. If we don't want to shallowly approve of the West's outdated (or currently in the process of becoming outdated) value system, if we are conscious that this problem has actually already reached beyond the historical demarcations of Eastern and Western culture and formed a new artistic pursuit for art's valuing of human existence, then we won't put so much stock in this kind of limited "approval from other countries" or "international connections." A true connection is constituted by mutual selection, and not approval granted from a commanding height and "turning a crude essay into a literary gem."

To tell the truth, when I heard the following dialogue I found it very funny: An interviewer said to a Chinese artist famous for his Political Pop, "It's very clear that in 1992 Political Pop has already become mainstream in China, when it becomes professional political painting, this will signify that class is over." This artist replied, "Then I will take it to start a class in Paris!"

I don't believe that something that is "finished" in China will become content for something to "begin" in Paris, I only believe that it serves as proof of the doctrine of Western power. Perhaps it's necessary to furnish this kind of proof, but it is not the true mission of contemporary Chinese art, particularly avant-garde art. I submit to everyone a statement that Mr. Oliva made on another occasion, which I hope people will remember: "An artist needs to give his art a kind of dignity, since it does not seek or accept external collusion" (*The Enemy of Art*).

What's worth celebrating is the fact that there are still many avant-garde Chinese artists who have maintained their independence and critical spirit. Against a

background where a new culture is replacing the old, not only are they reflecting on traditional culture, but they are also on guard against the mainstream. They fully realize the relationship between Chinese art and ideology, but don't peddle ideological or anti-ideological products. Rather, their ideas penetrate even more deeply into hidden historical issues in Chinese society, and reflect on the cultural constraints that one must squarely face within the finite course of one's life. They accept influences from Western modern and postmodern culture, but at the same time are conscious that the radicalism opened up by modern civilization's rebellion and pluralism is no more than an individual's sanctuary. And, this has led to the loss of extensive relationships between man and society, others, and nature. They are also conscious of the superficialization, popularization, and commercialization of postmodern culture, and that its mass hedonism is a "smiling fascist" banning the individual spirit. They are not yes-men of the world, but are critics. Regardless of whether the world is considered Eastern or Western, whether it's considered an ideological or commercialized culture, their absence illustrates how Mr. Oliva is combating North American hegemony and has not yet cast off his Eurocentrism. This is the historical flaw of the 1993 Venice Biennale. And, real art precisely testifies to these historical shortcomings.

In his essay "After Art: 21st Century Art," Mr. Oliva notes: "Art originally developed from an experimental spirit produced through a parallel experiment with economics. It began in the West, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall it appeared in the East." I support this kind of viewpoint, that is, art criticism should select those artists possessing an experimental and creative spirit based on the logic of Chinese art's own development. And, those Chinese art critics conversant with this context have the authority to do so. Final jurisdiction over Chinese art does not lie with Oliva or Venice, but in how Chinese art critics truly and persistently present Chinese avant-garde art's creative spirit and cultural value. I am always imagining another possibility: if Chinese art critics organized a large-scale international art exhibition, what would that situation be like?

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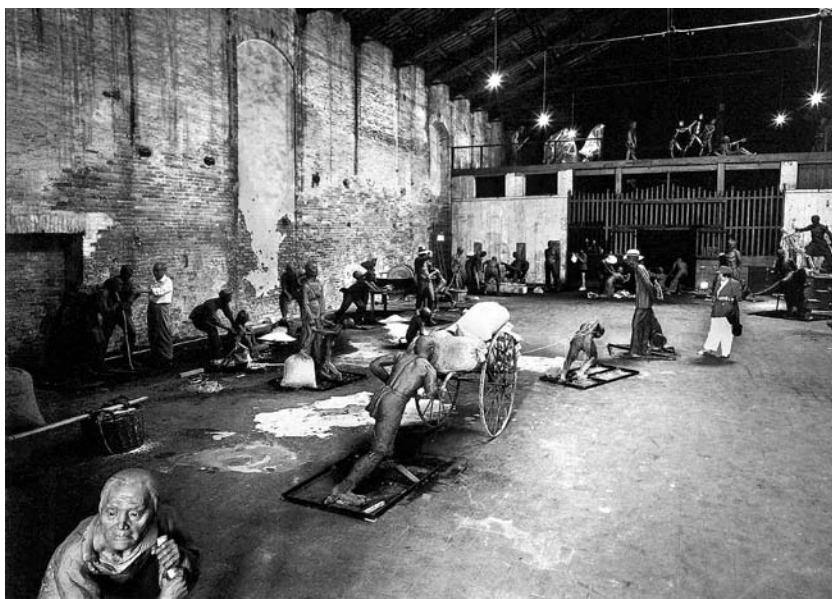
## The Rent Collection Courtyard Controversy

### THE RENT COLLECTION COURTYARD COPYRIGHT BREACHED OVERSEAS: SICHUAN FINE ARTS INSTITUTE SUES VENICE BIENNALE (2001)

Introduction by Britta Erickson

The *Rent Collection Courtyard* is a sculptural installation of life-sized clay figures, arranged in a series of tableaux throughout the former property of Liu Wencai, the pre-1949 landlord of Sichuan's Dayi District. In 1965 Wang Guanyi, an instructor from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, and some students from the institute constructed an early version of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*. Employing found objects such as farm tools, tables, and chairs, the tableaux depicted starving peasants forced to turn over their last grain, beaten or enslaved when the amount failed to meet the landlord's expectations. The purpose of the sculptures was to remind viewers of the terrible life peasants faced before the Revolution. The *Rent Collection Courtyard* won the approval of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and was subsequently replicated in Beijing, first at the National Art Gallery and then at the Palace Museum (1965–66). Similar sculptural groups were constructed in other areas of China. The Three Stones Museum in Tianjin, for example, included life-sized clay sculptures (date of their addition to the museum





Cai Guo-Qiang. *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*. June 1999. 108 life-sized sculptures created on site by Long Xu Li and nine guest artisan-sculptors (60 tons of clay, wire-and-wood armatures), other props and tools for sculpture, four spinning night lamps, facsimiles and photocopies of documents and photographs related to *Rent Collection Courtyard* (dated 1965). Realized at Deposito Polveri, Arsenale, Venice, Commissioned by the 48th Venice Biennale. Artwork not extant

unclear) grouped in tableaux depicting the terrible living and working conditions of indentured factory laborers. One hundred and six life-sized clay figures formed the *Wrath of the Serfs* (created c. 1973–75) at the Tibet Museum of Revolution in Lhasa.

In 1972 the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute built another clay copy of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, this time in Chongqing. Finally, in 1974–78 the government awarded the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute a very large sum of money (320,000 yuan) to create a fiberglass version; henceforth, it would be relatively simple to make additional copies for other parts of China, or for friendly nations such as Vietnam.

During the Cultural Revolution, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* was acclaimed as a model sculpture. To fulfill the Maoist ideal, individual artists subsumed their identities in the interest of the collective and acknowledged peasant advisors. Now those same individual artists are emerging to argue over who deserves credit for the original conception and creation of the sculpture. Ironically, other myths have been shattered, too: the reviled landlord, Liu Wencai, was not an ultrasinister individual, as represented in the *Rent Collection Courtyard*.

The press release, translated below, was issued three months ago, when the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute threatened to sue the Venice Biennale for exhibiting a copy of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* in 1999 as a work of art by Cai Guo-Qiang, who had no connection with any earlier versions of that sculptural installation. While it no longer seems likely that the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute will sue the Venice Biennale, the Biennale's curator Harald Szeemann, or Cai Guo-Qiang, the sensation surrounding the press release has brought attention to the institute and, no doubt, to the law firm representing the institute. The threat to sue is indicative of the rise of nationalistic sentiment in China over the past few years. But attacking a successful Chinese artist living overseas and the Western art institution that has accorded him exceptional recognition (Cai won an International Award at the 1999 Venice Biennale) will not serve the

best interest of the Chinese art world. A lawsuit would be doomed to failure, only serving those who would benefit from the notoriety gleaned in the process.

**PRESS RELEASE, SICHUAN FINE ARTS INSTITUTE, CHONGQING, 20 MAY 2000**

The world-renowned large-scale sculpture project, the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, was first created in 1965. At the time, it was intended as both a harsh reminder of the past and a ray of hope for the future in the country's class education program. The Gallery of the Dayi County (Sichuan) Landlord's Manor had invited the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute to support the effort. Shortly thereafter, the Sichuan Provincial Bureau of Culture issued an official letter requesting the institute to participate. The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute decided it would make completion of the project a graduation and teaching exercise for its teaching staff and the graduating class that year. Using clay for the Dayi Landlord's Courtyard version in 1965 and fiberglass in 1974 — for a reproduction intended for international exhibitions and now part of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute's collection — the institute formed the central force in the collective creation of both projects.

The *Rent Collection Courtyard* is a massive-scale sculpture project comprising 114 figures and 108 found props, stretching almost 100 meters from end to end. It can be subdivided into seven tableaux: *Bringing the Rent*, *Examining the Rent*, *Measuring the Grain*, *the Struggle*, *Calculating the Rent*, *Forcing the Rent*, and *Revolt*. There are over twenty-six scenes. It remains a sculptural work unprecedented in China's art history.

Upon completion, the work achieved extraordinary success and national acclaim. In a report by the Chinese Artists' Association about the Beijing exhibition, it was reported that "From December 24 to March 6, the exhibition of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* has counted more than 473,500 visitors, total. It is estimated that the exhibition will be seen by over two million visitors." The national media, cultural leaders, and artists of the time all hailed it as "a nuclear bomb," "an important beginning," "a revolution in the history of sculpture." In the 1960s and 1970s, word spread across the country. Everyone knew of it.

The *Rent Collection Courtyard* has been exhibited overseas on numerous occasions, where it drew broad international attention. At Kassel University, a professor organized a research task force to study the work, advocating education and art reform and eventually sparking a student rally. In 1972, Harald Szeemann, curator of the internationally renowned *Kassel Documenta* exhibition, which takes place once every five years, invited the *Rent Collection Courtyard* to participate in that year's exhibition. The plan never came to fruition as China was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution at the time.

As a political work of art, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* is powerful, profound, and full of visual and emotional force. As an antifeudal work created for the masses, it is significant both historically and practically. Even today, it remains a first in the internationalization of political art and art's politicization.

As a sculptural work, its emphasis on environment and realistic portrayal marks an important step forward in the progression of classical Socialist Realism. Its significance and influence in China's history of sculpture continues to be far-reaching. The work has also proven to be a fountainhead for environmental sculpture in southwest China.

As a hyper-realist work of art, the *Rent Collection Courtyard* is still the most unique, vibrant, and largest scale work of its kind ever done. Its complex organization of so many figures into a unified work gives it qualities that are highly literary, borrowing especially from the narrative techniques of illustrated history. It remains perhaps the only work on Chinese soil that is free of Western modernist influences, but still highly progressive and creative. Its significance, however, is not limited just to China, but is worldwide in nature.

So it was that this unprecedented, grand work of art was appropriated by Cai Guo-

Qiang, an overseas Chinese artist, domiciled in Japan, and then subsequently reproduced and renamed *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard for the 48th Venice Biennale*, without copyright permission. Represented as his work, it then went on to win the top prize at the *Venice Biennale*. The exhibition curator was none other than the Harald Szeemann, who had invited the *Rent Collection Courtyard* to be exhibited in Kassel in 1972. The *Venice Biennale* is an important international art event. The fact that the organizers, the curator Szeemann, the panel of jurors, and the artist Cai Guo-Qiang ignored international copyright laws and copyright conventions has sparked a furor in the academic, media, and cultural worlds. In as much as China is a signatory member of the Berne Convention, the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, together with some of the original authors of the work are now filing a lawsuit against the Venice Biennale exhibition, its curator Harald Szeemann, and the artist Cai Guo-Qiang. This lawsuit not only concerns and involves copyright protection and legal standards; it also involves issues of academic standards in contemporary art. We hope this matter will receive the attention and concern of all elements of society.

For more information, contact the Art Museum of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, (86-23) 6851-0473, or the Fine Arts Studies Department of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, (86-23) 6850-5423.

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— Published *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Art Media; London: Institution of International Visual Arts, 2001), 52–55. Press release translated by Robert Bernell.

## THE REPRODUCTION OF *RENT COLLECTION COURTYARD* AND POSTMODERNISM (2000)

By Dao Zi

The 48th Venice Biennale, under the theme "d'APERTutto" ("Openness over All"), was held in Venice, Italy, from June 12 to November 7, 1999. On the day of the opening ceremony, curator Harald Szeemann declared on behalf of the Biennale Committee that U.S.-based artist Cai Guo-Qiang the winner of the Biennale's "International Award." Cai's work was a performance-based reproduction of *Rent Collection Courtyard* (*Shouzuyuan*), the famous 1960s sculpture from China.

News of Cai's award-winning reproduction of *Rent Collection Courtyard* at the Venice Biennale instigated widespread debate in art, academic, and legal circles in mainland China and abroad. Some believed that by re-creating the process of producing *Rent Collection Courtyard*, Cai was challenging the function of official history and epic tradition in art. Moreover, the performance art aspect of this replication precisely captured the characteristics of modern and postmodern art. As this commonly occurs in Western modern art, it should therefore not constitute copyright infringement or plagiarism.

However, others believed that Cai Guo-Qiang's work, which relocated the thirty-year-old *Rent Collection Courtyard* from China to Italy and added the word "Venice" to its title — was nothing but pure theft, delusion, and commercial manipulation. The buzzword connecting Cai's work to modern art, "reproduction," has touched upon legal issues. The so-called performance was merely a pretext for saving on shipping fees and other costs. The merry-go-round lanterns [in the installation] were directly purchased as readymades from the market. And, the sketches for the images used inside the lanterns had already been drawn thirty years earlier at the time that *Rent*

*Collection Courtyard* was created. When Cai replicated the sculpture, he deliberately hired more than ten sculptors from mainland China to work for him as hired laborers, all of whom were artists well trained in academic realistic representation. There's a difference between Cai hiring people to make *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* and [someone] copying works by Michelangelo and Auguste Rodin. It is also different from Marcel Duchamp adding a mustache to da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. The term of protection for artwork by Rodin and other great masters has already expired, and the readymade urinal in Duchamp's *Fountain* was a mass-produced commodity that the artist had personally purchased from a store. Cai claimed that his idea was to change the notion of "looking at sculpture" to "looking at the making of sculpture."<sup>1</sup> However, immediately after the opening day of the Biennale and Cai's receiving of the award, the sculptors that Cai hired stopped their replicating, while Cai himself left the exhibition hall entirely five days later. His work utterly failed to demonstrate the manufacturing process behind the creation of the sculptures.

Taiwan's *Yishu xinwen* [Art News] magazine challenged Cai's work, noting that the entire artwork seemed to lack any bodily involvement by the artist (i.e., Cai). Not only were the sculptures made by the eleven sculptors, and the merry-go-round lanterns bought from the market, but even the sketches within the lanterns were also taken from elsewhere. Cai seemed to have only been playing the roles of the playwright and the producer. Obviously, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* epitomizes the problems concerning the nature of artistic creation raised in the contemporary artistic practices of performance and replication, along with various attendant copyright and legal issues. This article does not intend to take part in this debate, but instead discusses the peculiar significance of the reproduction of *Rent Collection Courtyard* from the perspectives of art history and cultural studies.

The large-scale group sculpture *Rent Collection Courtyard* marks an extraordinary milestone in Chinese modern art history. The work offers a visual case study in the diverse values represented in the blending of art, historiography, political science, sociology, and even law. Today, the dynamics of world culture have undergone fundamental changes. The emergence of deconstructionism startled structuralism from its dreams and shattered any remaining confidence it might otherwise have. Reflections on this artistic heritage, laden with heavy memories and complicated discourses, not only touch upon the question of how to rewrite and rescrutinize modern art history, but also denote a starting point for considering the future of a Chinese modern art, which has already weathered so much. Ultimately, it signifies the true meaning behind the process of constructing a "Chinese cultural identity."

## II. THE PROPHECY OF REPRODUCTION: FROM THE POLITICIZATION OF ART TO THE POLICING OF ART

Studying *Rent Collection Courtyard* as a closed text necessarily leads to common pitfalls associated with a text-centered methodology: namely, severing all ties between art and society (ideology, politics, ethics), history, reality, and even connections to the original author, the audience, copiers, plagiarizers, the antitext, the apocryphal text, and the pretext. To get an understanding (free of suppositions) of *Rent Collection Courtyard*, we ought to place it back in its relevant context in twentieth-century world art history and analyze, compare, and seek out its underlying meanings. By perhaps expelling the contamination of nihilism, utilitarianism, and postcolonialism, one can reveal its inherent existing values and features as well as dimensions to its interpretations and meanings.

*Rent Collection Courtyard* was originally created in 1965. At the time, it was commissioned for the Communist social class education program of "longing for the sweet

through remembering the bitter." [Here, the author cites the press release at length, which has been translated in full in the text above, "The *Rent Collection Courtyard* Copyright Breached Overseas: Sichuan Fine Arts Institute Sues Venice Biennale." To save space we have omitted it here. — Ed.]

Interestingly, *Rent Collection Courtyard* seems to have been put under a spell of reproduction since its birth. Its fate has been intertwined with the process of reproduction as it has fallen under the divergent values of different time periods. In December 1965, *Rent Collection Courtyard* underwent four reproductions following the success of its exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The original work commenced its fate of repeated reproduction through historical "deconstruction."

In March 1966, *Rent Collection Courtyard* was moved from the National Gallery to the Palace Museum, because the gallery could not accommodate the tens of thousands of daily visitors, both in terms of its space and its human resources. After a few months, the audience requested a complete "reproduction." At the time, with the rapid approach of the Cultural Revolution, the strained atmosphere presaged the eruption of conflict on the horizon.

In September 1966, a group consisting mainly of professors and Red Guards from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts (with the participation of only three artists who took part in the original editions) replicated the *Rent Collection Courtyard* in its entirety at the Ancestors Palace of the Palace Museum. The Red Guard rebels, in order to highlight the idea of "revolution is blameless, and rebellion is righteous," changed the composition particularly toward the end of the sculpture. Under the flag of the Chinese Communist Party, it was revised to represent "snatching the regime, fighting in the mountains, and carrying forward the revolution." That incident laid the precedent for distorting the original *Rent Collection Courtyard*.

In March 1967, the Foreign Cultural Connection Commission of China organized another project of reproducing the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, this time in order to "export revolutionary art" to the "comrade-cum-brother" socialist countries of Vietnam and Albania. Sculptors from Sichuan, Beijing, and Shanghai executed the reproduction in the Hall of Literary Glory of the Forbidden City. By that time, the Cultural Revolution practice of resorting to violence had spread nationwide, and the ultraleftist ideology had reached its peak. The theory of "class struggle" infiltrated the work down to every figure and every detail. The landlord Liu Wencai, who had died before the Liberation (1949), was depicted as being "captured alive." The background of this revolution was a blinding red sun — Mao Zedong — and the whole work was heavily laden with political slogans and excerpts from Mao's treatises. After the "reproduction" which was completed in half a year, the sculpture was cast in plaster and shipped on a chartered boat to Albania for exhibition. The ensemble never returned to China. In Vietnam, the work was exhibited through a few sculptural figures while the rest consisted of photographs.

In 1970, when the rebels in the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee learned of the potential for obtaining "revolutionary capital" through international touring exhibitions, they immediately assembled sculptors to alter the original work at the Landlord's Manor. According to the new directives, they emphasized "rebellious *coup d'état* and continued revolution." Pursuant to the doctrines of "tall, grand, and complete," the rebels created additional scenes of "bright lamp guiding the way, the rebel army, opening the shackles and liberation, capturing tyrants alive, establishing a political state, and continuing revolution."

In 1972, a fourth reproduction project of *Rent Collection Courtyard* was carried out at the Working People's Cultural Palace in Chongqing. The stated reasons for this were

that the Landlord's Manor's edition was subject to the exhibition hall's spatial limitations and failed to fully represent "the Party's rule and the peasants' struggle." Therefore, the alterations were concentrated at the end of the sculpture: "Maoist philosophy leads the way, under the leadership of the working class, rebellious destruction, military struggle against Rent Collection, capturing Liu Wencai alive, and the Liberation Army freeing imprisoned women. . . ."

In 1974, just before the end of the calamitous Cultural Revolution, artists from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute obtained the right to restore *Rent Collection Courtyard* back to its original form. The edition in copper-plated glass at the Sichuan Institute's art gallery and the clay edition are both equally regarded as original editions and are entitled to copyright protection. However, *Rent Collection Courtyard's* fate of reproduction did not end there, it only changed form.

Along with the advent of the industrial age, reproduction has eliminated the fetishistic aura previously emanating from artworks. The unique existence and mystery inherent in the original artwork's "worship value" shifted to an "exhibition value." This engendered a transformation in the concepts and social function of art. Functional sea change such as this allowed the process of reproduction to move from producing ideological symbols to deconstruction performance.

In fact, the functional change in reproduction is also part and parcel of the transformation from modern art to postmodern art. As we know, during the first half of this century [the twentieth century], Western modern art was like *Rent Collection Courtyard* in its fervent emphasis on ideological functions. To name but a few: since the 1920s, Soviet Russian avant-garde stemming from Futurism and Constructivism and Mexican frescos of liberation theology alongside Latin American Magical Realism; in the 1930s, Salvador Dalí's subconscious illusions critiquing realism in the prophetic *Premonition of Civil War* (1936), Picasso's politically allegorical *Guernica* (1937), which protests war and calls for world peace, and Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938), which incorporates political, historical, and religious narrative contexts and reveals the political persecution imposed upon the Jewish population. In mainland China in the 1930s, Lu Xun proposed the "New Woodcut Movement" and introduced the spirit of "enlightenment and salvation" in modern art. The deconstruction of political ideology was a significant impetus behind postmodern art. Therefore, reproduction used as a performance for deconstruction purposes provided an important means for postmodern art to tackle the preexisting ideologies that were channeled through symbolic art forms. The *Rent Collection Courtyard* from last year provided but one additional example.

### III. POSTMODERN ELEMENTS GONE AWRY

The author of *Rent Collection Courtyard* was Cai Guo-Qiang, but the man behind the project was the curator Szeemann. Born in 1933 in [Bern], Switzerland, Szeemann was looked up to as the "guru of independent curating," who proudly considered his artistic preference to be "aesthetics of chaos" for having internalizing Maoist, Dadaist, and anarchist philosophies. Szeemann's curatorial motto is "Museum of Obsessions." He adheres doggedly to the belief that "in the past as well as at present, the bottom line for curators is anarchy and sexual revolution."<sup>2</sup> This "obsession" in the aesthetic sense runs across all of his social activities and curatorial strategies. In the 1960s, Szeemann took part in the Fluxus movement in the US and Europe. In 1972, he directed the Kassel's Documenta 5 and based it on art that was "universally exalted." In 1980, Szeemann joined the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva in organizing the 40th Venice Biennale. This trajectory led to his curating of the last Venice Biennale of the twentieth century.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the global antiestablishment movements engendered two types of antiestablishment culture. One consisted of career politicians who directly involved themselves in democratic movements and organized traditional voters using new methods. The other type inherited the traditions of Gustave Courbet's era that tied the notion of the avant-garde to radical art and radical politics and made art an instrument for subverting society and reforming ideas. For them, artistic experiments were not any less of a political movement than sexual revolution and anarchism. Apparently, Szeemann belongs to this latter type of artistic revolution and aesthetic rebellion.

Szeemann's complex for *Rent Collection Courtyard* (similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's complex for the newspaper *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily] which was sold on newsstands in Paris during May 1968) presumably originated from an ideological angst and a cultural misunderstanding (from 1968 until the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Foreign Languages Press published albums of *Rent Collection Courtyard* in English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, and Albanian). Meanwhile, Western modern art also encountered the crisis in representation of "representing the unrepresentable." Super-Realism emerged on the horizon and, in conjunction with other postmodern forces, ended the status quo which had existed for more than half a century. For instance, George Segal's theatrical figures cast in plaster and shrouded in a melancholic air, Duane Hanson's life-size figures, made from glass-reinforced polyester, and clad in real clothes, and John de Andrea's three-dimensional photorealistic figures all reflect the true conditions of existence of the "little people" living on the margins of society. This allowed curators to metaphorically project their experiences from well-trodden territory into a curious terra incognita — guided by the Eurocentric light and through the magnifying lens of "obsession," curators sought out "common" objects that were "universally exalted" to fill the exhibition space.

In terms of artistic language, *Rent Collection Courtyard* materialized artistic ideas through tangible readymade objects, adopted a narrative rhetoric of visual expression using high art and basic natural resources, and emphasized the *in situ* aspect of the scenes. The work furthered the creative language of sculptural realism for both Eastern and Western traditions, and highlighted the idiosyncratic characteristics naturally derived from Western modern art (the hallmarks of mainstream Western modern art after 1945 were popularization, physicality, and grassroots efforts).<sup>3</sup> Even more remarkably, the work revised the status of political art as a simulacrum for the propaganda machine. It went a step further in making political art rely on aesthetic forms to restore people's (historical) memories, and represented the widespread desire among the peasant class to revolt against their typically abject lives. *Rent Collection Courtyard* thereby offered a site where critical exchange, independent of the aesthetic experience, could be conducted.

The point of departure for *Rent Collection Courtyard* was not its realist forms; they did not act as *a priori* models and molds for casting. Instead, they were a measure of the intrinsic void, they were the people's "political unconscious," and they were ultimately an explicit expression of the content's depths of logic. Suffice it to say, *Rent Collection Courtyard* has a truly and profoundly revolutionary content that has already taken over and become its form, and its power to rouse resonates with trends in spontaneous postmodern art.

Thus, it can be seen that realism is a relative mindset corresponding to changes in concepts and ideas, the essence of which is an artist's surging instinct to pursue the truth within the process of realistic representation. In the coordinates of the vertical dimension of time and the horizontal dimension of space, realism always materializes

in the form of a non-rhetorical continuous body of change, incessantly expanding and morphing, sometimes hidden and sometimes visible. During the mid-nineteenth century, realism depicted the life of proletarian society and reflected the true existence of the weak and impoverished. In the 1930s, realism focused on exposing the dark side of society. After the age of Stalin, realism's prefix "socialist" was replaced in favor of "heroic," and realism was recruited to systematically promulgate "Heroic Realism" for the Third World. The [historical] materialist theory of "art reflecting life" and theory of class struggle seriously underestimated realism's intrinsic revolutionary nature and aspirations for human liberation, and subsequently surrendered it to its opposing idealist doctrines. The "three prominences" (*san tuchu*) born during the Cultural Revolution were another version of this "heroic" model, which also served as this period's theoretical basis for altering *Rent Collection Courtyard*.

What one may find solace in, however, is the fact that although *Rent Collection Courtyard* was born to a sermonizing and moralizing mission, it intuitively and effectively committed itself to a comprehensive proposition for humanity (inclusive of particular social classes in local areas), and naturally embodied connotations of cultural political criticism, that is, an allegory of saving mankind from a miserable existence, a manifestation of liberation, and the indictment of a feudalist, inhuman "cannibalistic history." In light of such significance, *Rent Collection Courtyard* may be comparable to its contemporaneous art forms from the US and Europe, such as New Realism, Neo-Dadaism, Super-Realism, and even Pop art, among others. The British artist Adrian Henri once weighed in on the comparable traits in these artistic phenomena in his treatise *Total Art*.<sup>4</sup> He was amazed how, under the conditions of a closed society, one was able to initiate and develop elements of postmodern art. It all boils down to the primal realistic spirit — an exiled "specter." Its interference and transcendence in the continuity of a contradictory modern human history determined the cultural mutation of various systems. In other words, the mighty modernist "specter" would forever activate more complex dimensions of meaning and through the density of time, would increase an artwork's space for information. To put it more bluntly, it was precisely due to the work's ideological particularities that *Rent Collection Courtyard* came to carry distinct characteristics during the process of its deconstruction. Such may be the implications of an art-philosophical reading of the 1999 *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* event.

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#### Notes

1. "Wenhua zhijian de yaobai: Cai Guo-Qiang fangtanlu" (Vacillations in Culture: Interview with Cai Guo-Qiang) in *Diaosu [Sculpture]* no. 1 (2000).
2. Heinz Norbert-Jocks "Iche liebe stets mehrere Dinge gleichzeitig: Ein Gespräch mit Harald Szeemann" ["I Always Love Several Things at the Same Time: A Discussion with Harald Szeemann," *Kunstforum International*, no. 147 (1999).
3. The original clay sculptures in *Rent Collection Courtyard* derived from the folk tradition of sculpting in clay, and used materials and a manufacturing process similar to that of people's [folk] "sculpture." According to trends in sculpting, the sculpture was first erected in wood and iron wire, it was then bound in straw rope, and then a fine mixture of mud made from sand and cotton was used for depicting details. Specially fired glass balls were used as eyes, lending the figures an even more lifelike demeanor and expression. Readymade objects included, among other things, large wicker baskets carried on a shoulder pole, vehicles, fans, tables and chairs, screens, abacuses, straw hats, and railings.
4. Adrian Henri, *Total Art: Environments, Happenings, and Performances* (New York: Oxford University of Press, 1974), 57. This text carries out parallel comparative studies of the content and methods of art from different countries. It also touches upon the interrelationships between art and other branches of learning. It surpasses those studies which only emphasize what is emitted from the art and neglect the influence on the receiver as in so-called reception theory.

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— Originally published as "Shouzuyuan de fuzhi yu houxiandai zhuyi" in *21 Shiji [Twenty-First Century]* no. 8 (2000). Translated by Kela Shang.



## QUOTING DOES NOT EQUAL PLAGIARISM (2000)

By Liu Xiaochun

How should one regard Cai Guo-Qiang's work at the 48th Venice Biennale, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (*Weinisi shouzuyuan*), whose award [of the International Prize] quickly prompted an international lawsuit?

According to the news on May 25, the Chinese Communist Party Ministry of Propaganda of the Chongqing Municipal Committee and the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute jointly convened a news conference on the copyright issues surrounding *Rent Collection Courtyard* (*Shouzuyuan*). Luo Zhongli, president of the academy, solemnly announced, "From today, the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute and some of the artists who took part in this work will formally open a lawsuit against the organizing committee of the Venice Biennale and its director Harald Szeemann, as well as the winner [of the International Prize], Cai Guo-Qiang." He continued, "As for the lawsuit that we have initiated, no matter how long it takes or how difficult it proves to be, we are confident that we will be victorious."

The root of this matter lies in the success of the work, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, by the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang at the 1999 Venice Biennale. At this most authoritative of international exhibitions, the artist captured one of the Biennale's three highest awards. However, *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* simply reproduced the clay sculptures of *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a work familiar to everyone in China. This not only caused the original artists to angrily denounce it as "plagiarizing, copying, and a copyright infringement," and critics to resolutely refer to it as, "ingratiatingly catering to the Western discourse," but it also ultimately led [Sichuan Fine Arts Institute] President Luo Zhongli to issue his own vehement views.

Since the issue of "law" is best resolved in the judicial realm, this essay will primarily focus on the issue of "principles."

Cai Guo-Qiang's work is not an ordinary sculpture. Instead, it is an installation that also incorporates performance; he himself has called it a "fluid installation" (*liudong zhuangzhi*). The appropriation of readymades is not only a conventional method in installation art, but can even be considered its most significant innate characteristic. This "axiom" of installation art was put forth by its originator, Marcel Duchamp, and has been widely accepted and adopted.

Duchamp raised two points: (1) All readymades are art objects, our attitude toward artistic function determines how we treat them. This point is most readily demonstrated by *Fountain* (in which the artist changed the location of its installation, and the direction of its display); (2) All art objects are readymades, our attitude toward readymades determines how we treat them. This point is most recognizable in *L.H.O.O.Q.* (in which the artist added a mustache onto a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*). The previous *Rent Collection Courtyard* was simply appropriated by *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* as a "readymade."

The most thorough [act of] appropriation is achieved without any reworking. For instance, the model and design for Duchamp's ceramic urinal *Fountain* was certainly not created by Duchamp himself, but rather presented his concepts of appropriation and the "readymade."

Cai Guo-Qiang did not directly relocate *Rent Collection Courtyard*, but instead he carried out a non-reproducing reproduction. Thus, it differs from what is usually considered appropriation. I prefer Fei Dawei's view of it as, "quoting." At the Venice Biennale — within this typical Western context — he quoted something Eastern; in a purely capitalist context, he quoted something socialist; in a context full of postmodern

concepts, he quoted something classical, realist, and narrative; in today's post-Cold War present, he quoted a fiercely antagonistic ideology from the Cold War era. . . . This kind of quoting spans a broad spatiotemporal transformation, causing *Rent Collection Courtyard* to produce complex meanings and an intense impact that were not [originally] part of *Rent Collection Courtyard*. In this way, the four lanterns installed on-site suggest an additional layer of meaning outside of *Rent Collection Courtyard* itself.

In order to emphasize that the work was not his own, but rather citing the work of another artist, Cai Guo-Qiang placed photographs of the original work along with ten thousand booklets of the originally distributed propaganda throughout the exhibit for the audience to freely peruse.

To highlight the act of "quoting," Cai Guo-Qiang reproduced the original work without directly reproducing it, and adopted a rather lukewarm attitude toward the original. On the one hand, he invited one of the original artists to participate in the manufacturing, so that every effort was made for the reproduction to "resemble" the original. On the other hand, he reduced the one hundred or so original figures into eighty-one skeletons of iron and steel. After the opening of the exhibition, there were a number of complete or nearly complete figures, including fifty clay figures with differing degrees of finish, while the remaining ones had wood or cross-shaped patterns affixed to their wire frames. However, the "Rebellion" and "Seizing Power" sections still retained the partially abstract modeling of the iron-and-steel skeletons. The work does not exhibit a complete reproduction, but instead shows the reproduction process. It does not exhibit sculpture, but shows the concept of "the process becoming the work." The audience is also positioned to view this as a process of transforming the final result into what is concealed behind it.

There is one more significant aspect of *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, which is that the clay that Cai Guo-Qiang used was not highly processed, so that when they began working on the rear, the front had already begun to split and flake. Thus, besides seeing a continuously fluid process from beginning to end, the audience was barred from seeing a completely intact *Rent Collection Courtyard*. Cai Guo-Qiang refused to allow the work to be collected, so when the exhibit closed, the artwork departed along with the departure of the exhibition, thus emphasizing the meaning of the concept of "quoting."

Under what circumstances should one quote a specific object, and in what particular style should one quote it? What kind of impact does "quoting" have on thinking and conceptual inspiration? These are the main points of *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*. The artist's creativity, imagination, wisdom, and insights are found in this very specific and particular [act of] quoting.

If we acknowledge that installation art is an extremely important mode of creation today, then we also acknowledge the rationality of appropriation. If we acknowledge the rationality of appropriation, then we also acknowledge that appropriation within installation art cannot be negatively treated as "plagiarizing or copying."

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— Excerpted from a text originally published in June 2000 as "Yinyong ≠ Chaoxi" on Century Online China Art Networks (*Shiji zaixian Zhongguo yishu wang*), cn.cl2000.com. Reprinted in *Piping de shidai* [*Era of Criticism*], vol. 1, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), 218–20. Translated by Kristen Loring.

# ILLUSTRATIONS



26 / 27

**Cai Jin**

*Canna 106*. 1997. Oil on bicycle seat,  $9\frac{7}{8} \times 5\frac{7}{8} \times \frac{1}{4}$ " ( $25 \times 15 \times 0.5$  cm). Collection Chang Tsong-zung

**Lin Tianmiao**

*Bound Unbound*. 1997. Installation of cotton-thread-wrapped household objects and video projection, 656 ft.<sup>2</sup> (200 m<sup>2</sup>). Collection Hong Kong Arts Centre





28

**Yin Xiuzhen**

*Clothes Chest*, 1995.

Installation of wooden box,  
concrete, and the artist's personal  
garments, 19 3/8 x 19 3/4 x 29 1/2"  
(50 x 50 x 75 cm). Collection  
the artist

# The First Intellectual



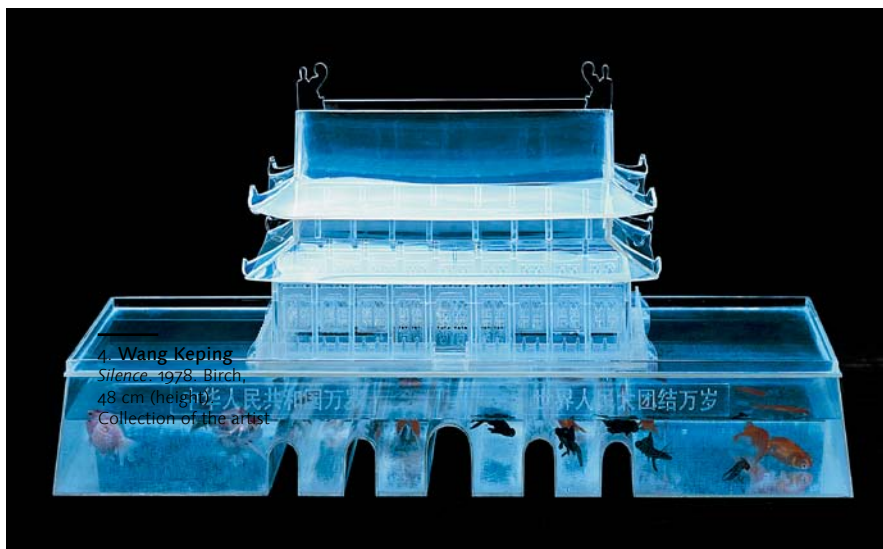
29/30

**Yang Fudong**

*The First Intellectual*. 2000.  
Chromogenic print, 76 × 50"  
(193 × 127 cm)

**Lu Hao**

*Flower, Bird, Insect, Fish —  
Fishbowl*. 1999. Plexiglas,  
water, and goldfish, 35 × 24 × 11"  
(90 × 60 × 28.5 cm)



4. **Wang Keping**

*Silence*. 1978. Birch.

48 cm (height)

Collection of the artist



31

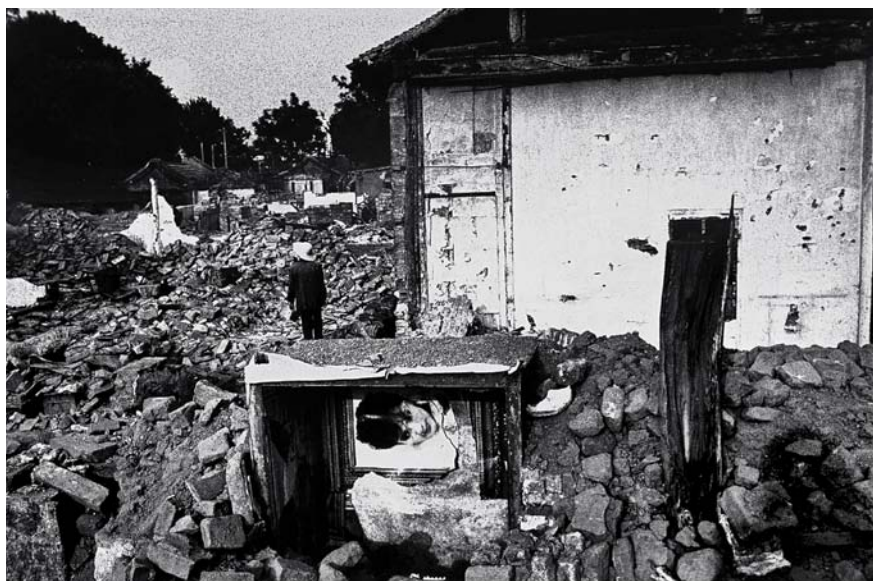
**Zhang Dali**

*Dialogue*. 1998. Black-and-white photograph, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 59" (100 × 150 cm). Collection Larry Warsh / AW Asia

32

**Rong Rong**

*1997 No. 1(1) Beijing*. 1997. Gelatin-silver print, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 59" (100 × 150 cm). David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago





33/34

**Song Dong**

*Stamping Water*. 1996.  
Chromogenic prints, each  
24 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (62 × 42 cm).  
Collection Artur Walther

**Hong Lei**

*After Liang Kai's (Song-Dynasty)  
Masterpiece "Shakyamuni  
Coming out of the Mountains."*  
1999. Chromogenic print,  
39 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (100 × 81 cm)





35/36

**Gu Dexin**

*October 31*, 1998.

Chromogenic prints, each  
49½ × 39⅝" (125.7 × 100.6 cm)

**Wang Gongxin**

*Sky of Brooklyn*, 1995.

Installation with television  
set and videotape with sound,  
depth of well 11'6" (3.5 m).  
Collection the artist





37

**Qin Yufen**

*In Between*. 1998. Outdoor  
installation with silk, 328'  
(100 m). Collection the artist



38

**Chen Zhen**

*Jue Chang, Fifty Strokes to Each.* 1999. Installation and performance at the 48th Venice Biennale

39

**Huang Yong Ping**

*Theater of the World — Bridge.* 1993–95. Cages of metal and wood, bronze sculptures, turtles, snakes, and insects, 34' × 10' 6" × 69" (10.4 × 3.2 × 1.8 m). Collection Guy & Myriam Ullens Foundation, Geneva





40

**Ai Weiwei**

*Han-Dynasty Urn with  
Coca-Cola Logo.* 1994. Ceramic  
with paint, 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 11 × 11"  
(25 × 28 × 28 cm).  
Sigg Collection, Switzerland

41/42

**Wang Wei**

*1/30th of a Second Underwater.*  
1999. 8 photographic  
transparencies, each 48 × 48"  
(122 × 122 cm), sound (4-minute  
loop on CD)

**Zhu Yu**

*Skin Graft.* 2000. Color  
photograph of installation  
and performance, Beijing





43

**Zhou Chunya**

*Black Lines, Red Torso*. 1992.  
Oil on canvas, 6' 7" × 63"  
(200 × 160 cm). Collection  
Shen Manyuan

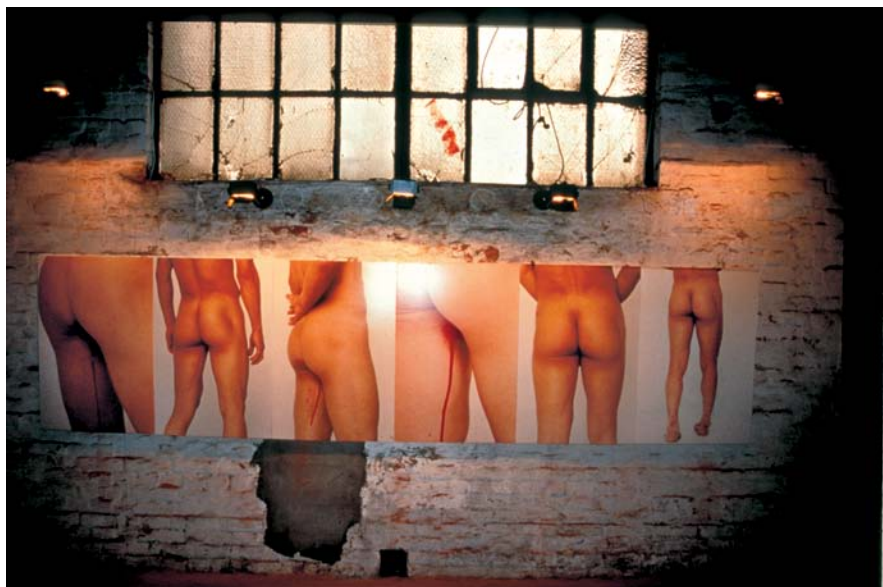
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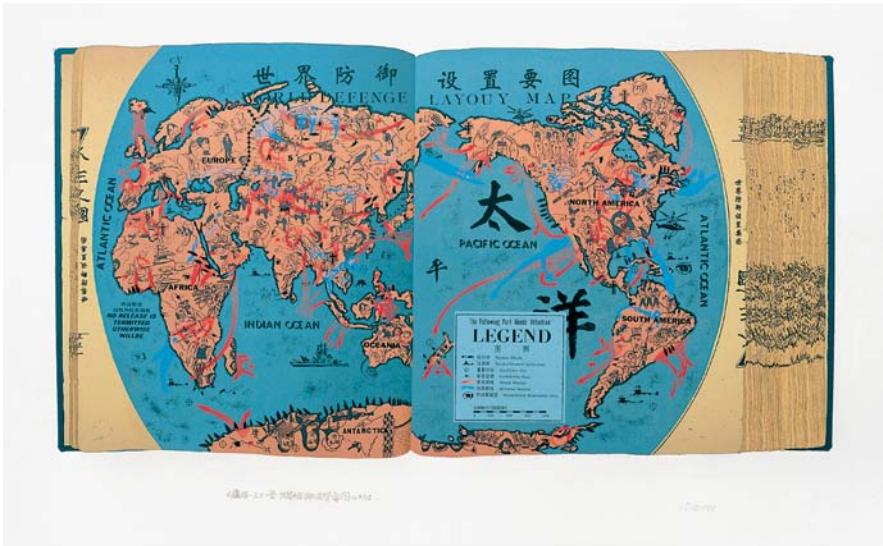
**Xu Zhen**

*The Difficulty with Colors*. 2000.  
Chromogenic prints, overall  
35' × 11' 10" (90 × 360 cm)

**Cai Guo-Qiang**

*Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot*. 1995. Installation incorporating wooden fishing boat from Quanzhou, Chinese herbs, earthen jars, ginseng beverages, bamboo ladles and porcelain cups, ginseng (100 kg), handcart, and other works by the artist presented as components: *Acupuncture for Venice* (1995), *Water, Wood, Gold, Fire, Earth* (1995). Dimensions variable; boat: 23' × 31' 2" × 5' 11" (700 × 950 × 180 cm). Commissioned by the 46th Venice Biennale; installation view there. Collection the Museo Navale di Venezia (fishing boat); private collections (other components)





46

**Hong Hao**

*Selected Scriptures, Page 331,  
The Strategic Defense Order.*  
1995. Screenprint, 22 x 30 3/4"  
(56 x 78 cm). Guangdong  
Museum of Art, China

47

**Cao Fei/China Tracy**  
*RMB CITY: A Second Life City  
Planning.* 2007. Internet project.  
Collection the artist, courtesy  
Vitamin Creative Space







48

View of the *Rong Rong and inri Tui — Transfiguration* exhibition at Dayaolu Workshop, Factory 798, Beijing, 2003. Photograph by Rong Rong

49

**Wenda Gu**  
*Forest of Stone Steles — A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry*, 1993–2005. Installation of 50 stone steles and 50 ink rubbings, each stele 8" × 3'7" × 6'3" (20 × 110 × 190 cm). Installation view of six stone steles and six ink rubbings at the University of North Texas, Denton, USA





50

**Xu Bing**

*A Window facing Pudong.*  
2004. Wall drawing of early-  
20th-century view of Pu Dong  
district, Shanghai, dimensions  
variable. Installation view at  
Shanghai Gallery of Art, 2004

# **CODA: ENTERING THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

The Third Shanghai Biennale (2000) marked the end of 1990s contemporary Chinese art, just as the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in 1989 brought a kind of closure to the 1980s avant-garde movement. A brief comparison of these two exhibitions highlights the many important changes that took place in the intervening ten years.

*China/Avant-Garde* was an unofficial exhibition that resulted from a grassroots movement. It followed the logic of a political campaign called *duoquan* — “taking over an official institution” — that derived from the Cultural Revolution. The show was a purely domestic event: it featured works only by Chinese artists, contemporary Chinese art had not yet become a part of the global art scene, and it was intimately related to China’s internal political situation at the time. The exhibition realized its avant-garde intent in positioning itself as a collective “art happening.” It was shut down three times by the authorities, but such disturbances only served to unite artists with different intentions and stylistic identities. As a collective social/artistic experiment with a common agenda and shared excitement, the exhibition transcended individual expression.

The Third Shanghai Biennale also realized its significance by billing itself as a historical event.<sup>1</sup> But the engineer of this event was a state-run institution, and the project’s major purpose was to make itself into “an established activity of international scale and academically addressed to the issues of globalization, postcolonialism and regionalism, etc.”<sup>2</sup> This goal determined not only the exhibition’s content but also its curatorial method. It featured transnational contemporary art represented by carefully selected examples from different countries, along with contemporary Chinese artists who were for the first time official representatives in a multinational gathering. Following the convention of international biennials, the museum invited two independent curators to design the show. But, because many compromises had to be made among the curatorial team, the museum, and the city of Shanghai, no clear lines could be drawn between independent decisions and government directives. This Biennale marked a new stage in the normalization of contemporary art in China, but it also threatened the independence of the art by placing it under state patronage. In a more profound sense, this exhibition indicated the main directions of contemporary Chinese art in the following decade, which would be characterized by depoliticization, commercialization, and heightened productivity, as well as an emerging historical consciousness about its own origin and developmental logic.

#### DEPOLITICIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Following the Third Shanghai Biennale, a host of large-scale biennials and triennials emerged in major Chinese cities, signaling the country’s entry into an era of mega-exhibitions. The year 2005, for example, saw the staging of a dozen or so such shows, including the Chengdu Biennale in Sichuan, Guiyang Biennale in Guizhou, Shenzhen Biennale in Guangdong, Chinese Art Triennial in Nanjing, Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou Photography Biennale, Macao Design Biennial, Shenzhen International Urban Sculpture Biennale, Beijing International Calligraphy Biennale, and others. Many of these exhibitions were sponsored by provincial or municipal governments, whereas others were collaborative undertakings of entrepreneurs, independent curators, and artists. Some of these exhibitions displayed contemporary art in an encyclopedic manner; others focused on a particular visual form. Despite such differences, the buzzwords “biennale” or “triennial” in their titles testified to an urgent desire to be contemporary. By transplanting international-style biennials and triennials to Chinese cities, they also began to feature a large number



Front cover of *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou, China: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002). Published on the occasion of The First Guangzhou Triennial—*Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art 1990–2000*, November 18, 2002–January 19, 2003 (Guangdong Museum of Art)

of installations and multimedia works — art forms which defied a rigid cultural identity. Painting and sculpture remained, but increasingly echoed the most fashionable styles in the West. By adopting a globalized artistic and exhibition language, these China-based international exhibitions confirmed the country's newly gained status as a future-oriented contemporary nation in the making.

The penchant for the contemporary also explains an interesting phenomenon in the early 2000s: although the Chinese cultural authorities had been known for their open hostility toward contemporary art throughout the 1990s, they began to send contemporary art exhibitions abroad soon after the new millennium began. The two earliest such shows were *Living in Time* in 2001 at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin and *Alors la Chine? (Well Then, China?)* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 2003. The former featured twenty-nine artists, the latter, fifty; the list of participants in both shows reads like a Who's Who of contemporary Chinese art. In explaining the second exhibition, Fan Di'an, the curator of the show and the director of the National Art Museum of China (formerly the National Art Gallery), was quoted as saying: "We hope that, via the artists we selected and their works, we will be able to demonstrate the changes and major features of Chinese art at the turn of the century, so that French — or Western — audiences will better understand what's in the minds of Chinese artists in this rapidly transforming society due to the increasingly fast pace of globalization in the 21st century."<sup>3</sup> The same intention led to the establishment of the Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005, which officially clinched China's participation in global contemporary art.

It would be wrong to see these events — both the domestic biennials and the officially sponsored overseas exhibitions — simply as a kind of window dressing to showcase China's progressive image. They signaled more fundamental changes in the world of contemporary Chinese art. One of these changes was the transformation of public museums, which began to embrace not only contemporary art forms but also the concept and function of the contemporary art museum. The Shanghai Art Museum, Guangdong Museum of Art, and He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen spearheaded this trend in the early 2000s. Their examples have been followed by many other public museums. While these museums cannot go too far because they still remain within the official system, they have experimented with different possibilities to balance political demands with creative artistic and

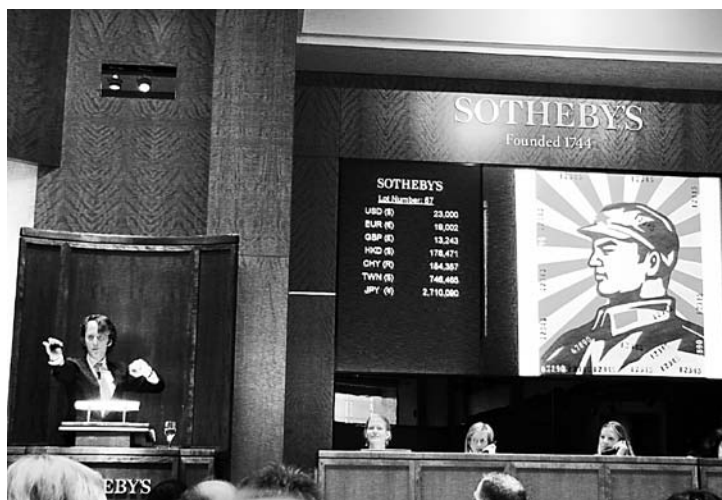
educational programs. A relatively more progressive example can be found at the He Xiangning Art Museum, which has established an experimental "terminal" to develop exhibition and research programs centered exclusively on contemporary art.

Then there are new museums and exhibition spaces funded by private companies and individuals, which first appeared in the late 1990s and have become a regular feature of cities like Beijing and Shanghai. The heated art market in recent years has definitely played an important role in attracting entrepreneurs, often real estate developers, to establish such institutions. But with their impressive size, skilled curatorial staff, and ambitious programs, these museums have shown a serious commitment to promoting contemporary art in Chinese society. After an initial period of development, some of them have emerged as the most dynamic contemporary art spaces in China. Beijing's Today Art Museum, for example, is situated in the central business district in Chaoyang District and features an impressive 2,500-square-meter exhibition space. Established in 2002, it "aims to promote Chinese contemporary art based on an internationalized vision and a contemporary ideology. As the first not-for-profit, non-government-run art museum in China, it is dedicated to exploring an appropriate development strategy for museums of its kind within a Chinese context."<sup>4</sup> Shanghai's Zendai Museum of Modern Art and Nanjing's Square Gallery of Contemporary Art (both established in 2005) have invested heavily in building their facilities to rival the Today Art Museum in scale and ambition. The opening of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art and the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in 2007 — both located in Beijing's Dashanzi-Caochangdi art district — further added two new types of private exhibition space, the former founded by a foreign collector and the latter by independent artists.

It is unclear at this point how these non-official institutions will develop in the future. Lacking foundation support and vulnerable to any financial crisis, the ideal of a truly non-profit and independent contemporary art museum must still overcome many obstacles. But the appearance of these museums and art spaces, along with the transformation of public museums and the flourishing of commercial galleries, has fundamentally changed the meaning of contemporary art in China. If this art was largely synonymous with unofficial or alternative art throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, it entered mainstream culture in the 2000s, promoted not only by foreign curators and galleries, but also by domestic supporters and even the government. Some artists still insist on maintaining an unofficial stance, using art to comment on social and political issues. But, they have become increasingly isolated, struggling against both official censorship and the irresistible tide of commercialization that has made 1990s contemporary Chinese art a gold rush.

#### COMMERCIALIZATION AND THE ART DISTRICT

A few facts suffice to demonstrate the extraordinary rise of the contemporary Chinese art market in the 2000s, which has become the single fastest-growing segment of the international art market during the past five years. Nothing is more astonishing than the spectacular appreciation of prices: a painting in Zhang Xiaogang's *Big Family* series sold for US\$76,000 in 2003 when it first appeared at Christie's Hong Kong; the price for a work of his jumped to \$2.3 million in 2006 and again to \$6.1 million in 2008. A set of fourteen gunpowder drawings by Cai Guo-Qiang sold for \$9.5 million in 2007; similar works had brought less than half a million dollars only a year before. Other luminaries in this field include Yue Minjun, Liu Xiaodong, Liu Ye, and Zeng Fanzhi. The 2008 auction of Zeng's *Mask Series No. 6* for \$9.6 million at Christie's Hong Kong remains the record for contemporary Chinese



Sotheby's, New York, auction, March 31, 2006

art at the time of writing. According to the Art Price Index, Chinese artists took thirty-five of the top 100 prices for living contemporary artists at auction in 2007, rivaling Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and other important Western artists.<sup>5</sup>

The rapid ascension of art prices also meant record earnings for auction houses and commercial galleries. In a comprehensive review of the contemporary Chinese art market, Barbara Pollack notes that in 2004 Sotheby's and Christie's together sold \$22 million in Asian contemporary art, most of it Chinese. But, two years later, gross sales of the two auction houses in this area had leaped to \$190 million, a spectacular rise realized through a series of record-breaking auctions in New York, London, and Hong Kong. In China, as many as 1,600 registered auctioneers, most of whom appeared after 2000, competed to sell art. The two flagships are the Poly International Auction Company and China Guardian Auctions Company, which generated a combined \$67 million in contemporary art sales in spring 2007, including the \$8.2 million fetched by Liu Xiaodong's *Hotbed No. 1*, a record for a domestic sale.

Similarly, there has been a huge explosion of commercial galleries in Beijing and Shanghai. Before 2000, Beijing had only five galleries specializing in contemporary art; by 2008 there were more than 300. At least 100 new galleries also opened their doors in Shanghai during the same period. These numbers include both domestic galleries and foreign dealers, such as Continua from Italy, Urs Meile from Switzerland, Arario and PKM from South Korea, Beijing Tokyo Art Projects from Japan, and Tang Art from Indonesia. In 2008, two major New York galleries, PaceWildenstein and the James Cohan Gallery, opened branches in Beijing and Shanghai, respectively. PaceWildenstein boasts a 22,000-square-foot space in the center of the 798 art district, redesigned at a cost of \$20 million by the architect Richard Gluckman. The James Cohan Gallery Shanghai is located in a picturesque Art Deco building in the old French Concession. These international galleries handle both Chinese and Western contemporary art — a direction which is also encouraged by the proliferation of large-scale art fairs, another new phenomenon in China in the 2000s. Represented by Beijing's China International Gallery Exposition (CIGE) and Art Beijing, Shanghai's ShContemporary, and Hong Kong's ART HK, these international art fairs have generated much excitement, attracting an increasing number of young people to China's urban centers. These events are thus important not



Poster in the 798 art district advertising an independently organized exhibition during the 2003 Beijing Biennial

simply for conducting commercial transactions but also for creating a multifaceted contemporary art scene that defines Beijing and Shanghai as emerging hubs in the global space of contemporary art.

Another aspect of contemporary Chinese art in the 2000s is closely related to the trend of commercialization: the emergence of a new type of urban art district. Unlike previous "artists villages" which were often located in cheap, semirural areas, this type of district is geographically and culturally connected to the expanding downtown of a major city, and integrates previously separate art and entertainment spaces into a single, highly concentrated area. The most famous among such spaces is Beijing's 798, a Bauhaus-style former munitions complex that has become the capital's hottest art center. The transformation of the decayed industrial complex took merely five or six years to complete. The first art gallery opened its doors there in 2002; by 2008, the district was filled with 150 galleries and exhibition spaces, including big names such as PaceWildenstein and the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. In a SoHo-like fashion, various kinds of showrooms, design centers, bookstores, gift shops, fashion studios, trendy cafés, music bars, and cool restaurants also mushroomed, attracting tourists and a large crowd of urban youth year-round.

Although people often directly attribute the emergence of 798 and similar art districts to China's social transformation and the booming art market, the establishment of these spaces in fact owed much to artists' initiatives. In Beijing, the artist Huang Rui and his friends started the project *Remaking 798* as early as 2003, to preserve the old factories in the area and to transform them into a contemporary *yishuqu* (art district) [p. 48]. They imagined the future of this space in a manifesto: "Here, the ideal of the avant-garde will coexist with the flavor of the past, the notion of experimentation will be emphasized together with social responsibility, and spiritual and financial pursuits will prevail simultaneously."<sup>6</sup> These words recall a previous episode in the history of contemporary Chinese art. In a similarly idealistic spirit, a group of art critics campaigned in the early 1990s to establish a market system for contemporary art because they believed that laying an economic founda-





Poster produced on the occasion of the art event *Reconstruction 798*, April 13, 2003, Beijing

tion was indispensable to the development of this art. Their goal was fully realized a decade later. But, by then, these critics had become disillusioned with the outcome of their campaign and had abandoned their naïve views of the market. Following a similar logic but in a much shorter period, the *Remaking 798* project blossomed, but the overwhelming success of the initiative has also driven artists away to cheaper and quieter spaces.

#### HOMECOMING FOR OVERSEAS ARTISTS

The sweeping commercialization, globalization, and depoliticization of contemporary Chinese art in the 2000s have redefined the field. The rivalry between domestic and overseas artists has considerably subsided, largely due to the increased intermingling of the two camps: they now deal with the same museums and galleries, and show works in identical spaces. For one thing, both groups are eagerly pursued by Western galleries. As a consequence, by 2008, almost every major New York gallery had signed one or more Chinese artists: Zeng Fanzhi with Acquavella, Zhang Xiaogang and Zhang Huan with PaceWildenstein, Yan Pei Ming with David Zwirner, Xu Zhen with James Cohan, Huang Yong Ping with Gladstone, Yang Fudong with Marian Goodman, Liu Ye with Sperone Westwater, Ai Weiwei and Liu Xiaodong with Mary Boone. One can hardly distinguish which of these artists live abroad and which in China.

Indeed, hundreds of overseas Chinese artists have been going back to China on short- or long-term visits for different purposes. This trend started in the 1990s with Ai Weiwei, Wang Gongxin, and Lin Tianmiao returning from the United States, and Zhang Dali from Italy. But at the time such a move was considered a permanent decision, and could never close the gap between domestic and overseas artists. Starting from the early 2000s, however, well-known overseas artists frequently held exhibitions in Chinese museums or received commissions to conduct art projects in China. Cai Guo-Qiang, for example, had mainly showed his works abroad before 2000 and earned international fame. Some Chinese critics labeled him a “banana” (*xiangjiao ren*, meaning “yellow on the outside and white on the inside”) and

severely criticized him for appropriating the *Rent Collection Courtyard* in the 48th Venice Biennale. But, from 2001, a series of domestic engagements indicated a new direction in his career and a reconnection with his homeland. These activities started with a high-profile art project in Shanghai, commissioned by OTV (Oriental Television) for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2001. It was a spectacular display of fireworks along the Huangpu River in front of world leaders. Accompanied by Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, the show was perceived by many as an affirmation of China's aspirations to become an economic superpower. The next year Cai held his first solo exhibition in China, at the Shanghai Art Museum, in a city where he had attended college twenty years before. He had participated in the Venice Biennale several times and received the International Golden Lion Prize in 1999. When he returned to Venice again in 2005, however, it was no longer as an independent artist, but as the curator of the newly established Chinese national pavilion. In 2008, he famously designed the fireworks for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Also in that year, midcareer retrospective organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum traveled to China and was exhibited in the National Art Museum of China.

Other overseas artists have followed suit, but in varying degrees and different ways. Huang Yong Ping has basically kept his main residence in Paris, but his retrospective organized in 2005 by the Walker Art Center, *House of Oracles*, traveled to the Ullens Center in Beijing in 2008, after appearances at the Walker in Minneapolis and at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. In a much-publicized action in early 2008, Xu Bing accepted the invitation of Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts — his alma mater — to become the school's vice president. He thus drastically changed his position from independent artist to leader of China's higher art education. Zhang Huan returned to China in 2005 and established an enormous workshop in Shanghai, employing some 100 young artists, craftsmen, and technicians to realize his various painting, sculpture, print, installation, and performance projects. The workshop's products, impressive in both conception and scale, appeared in multiple shows around the world in the following years. This mode of art production and exhibition is shared by many other "*hai gui*" (slang for "returnees" from abroad) artists, who use cheap Chinese labor and materials to produce works for an international audience.

It is interesting to speculate about what has attracted these artists, who had left China in the 1980s and 1990s to seek artistic freedom in the West, to reembrace their homeland in the 2000s. The reasons must be complex and include China's deepening social transformation and rise as a major global economic power, the enormous changes in living conditions and the cultural scene in large Chinese cities, the growing domestic interest in contemporary art and the unprecedented open atmosphere, the social privilege and financial well-being enjoyed by famous artists, curiosity for the new in the society at large, the exhilarating speed of construction and manufacturing which stimulates artistic imagination, familiarity with the mother tongue and the ease of living among other Chinese, and, as mentioned above, the cheap labor and materials which facilitate ambitious art projects. For thoughtful artists, however, homecoming is never a simple matter of changing addresses, but rather provides an occasion to reimagine globalization and cultural negotiation. This subject is at the heart of two important works realized by Wenda Gu and Xu Bing in the 2000s.

Wenda Gu conceived his *Forest of Stone Steles — A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry* in the 1990s and took twelve years to complete it. Consisting of fifty

solemn stone slabs, each 190 centimeters (75 in.) long, 110 centimeters (43 in.) wide, and 1.3 tons in weight, the creation of this mammoth work parallels his *United Nations* project in time and visual splendor [pl. 49]. But if *United Nations* focuses on the world, the *Forest of Stone Steles* is a personal tribute to Chinese culture. The two inspirations for this project — the Forest of Stone Steles, a repository in Xi'an which houses the largest collection of steles in China, and Tang-period poetry — both symbolize China's glorious past; and Gu employed traditional techniques of stone-carving and ink-rubbing to produce the work. Instead of passively revering tradition, however, he questions its current state in a global context. The fifty steles, each bearing four different forms of a Tang poem achieved through semantic, ideographic, and phonetic translations of the original Chinese-language version, highlight the impossibility of reaching genuine understanding between cultures. Thus the *Forest of Stone Steles* is on the one hand imbued with a deep sense of history, amalgamating Gu's traditional education with his respect for the Chinese past, and on the other hand a deconstructive work that reflects his profound questioning of global communication. The result is an ironic integration of idealism and cultural criticism on a monumental scale. This work was shown in its entirety in 2005 at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen, followed by a symposium entitled "Translating Visuality."<sup>7</sup>

Xu Bing's *Tobacco Project* consists of two site-specific exhibitions. The first, *Tobacco Project: Durham*, took place in 2000 in Durham, North Carolina. The second, *Tobacco Project: Shanghai* [pl. 50], in 2004, continued the project on the other side of the Pacific. The move from America to China mirrored the expansion of the American tobacco industry in the early twentieth century: starting from Durham, James B. Duke eventually built a cigarette empire in China. In a mere ten years from 1905 to 1915, his company's investments in China increased sixfold, from \$2.5 million to \$16.6 million, and its sales skyrocketed from 1.25 billion cigarettes in 1902 to 80 billion cigarettes in 1928. From 1915 through the 1920s, United States companies sold more cigarettes per year (with one exception) in China than to the rest of the world combined. Duke's firm alone amassed a profit of over \$380 million between 1902 and 1948.<sup>8</sup>

Because of its location, *Tobacco Project: Durham* naturally focused on the relationship between James B. Duke and the local American economy, politics, and education. Following the exhibition's relocation to Shanghai, the central concept of the project subtly shifted to the Sino-American relationship and globalization. Some works in the show evoked memories of the past; others interacted with the present. These images mixed and overlapped, generating confusion in a visitor's historical perception, as if past and present were staged simultaneously by means of the cigarette. The sites of the exhibition — the Shanghai Gallery of Art in the fashionable Three on the Bund building — further enhanced such confusion. Just as foreign economic invasion helped turn China into a semicolonial society a century ago, so too the current Chinese "economic miracle" relies heavily on foreign investment and is a by-product of globalization. Viewers of this exhibition seemed to hear constant echoes between the past and the present: once again there is the transmission of foreign money, technology, and management, and once again China provides the world with cheap labor as well as an oversized market. In a way, this exhibition was "historical" in both content and presentation. A similar sensitivity to history also characterizes the scholarship on contemporary art in the 2000s. In it, the origins and development of contemporary art itself have become the subject of historical research and reflection.

## TOWARD A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Even in its early days, contemporary Chinese art showed a strong tendency to construct its own legacy through historical writing. The first major book on this art, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986*, was completed in 1988 and published in 1991.<sup>9</sup> Whereas this volume edited by Gao Minglu focused only on the '85 Art New Wave movement, Lü Peng and Yi Dan's *A History of Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989*, which appeared the following year, provided the first comprehensive account of contemporary Chinese art in its first decade.<sup>10</sup> The authors of these and other early histories of contemporary Chinese art were without exception active insiders, and their work combines historical reflection with critical evaluation and mission statements.

Although these pioneering publications often amassed a rich body of information from the authors' close contact with artists, their purpose was not to produce detached scholarship based on systematic analyses of archival materials. This style of historical writing continued into the 1990s, as testified to by a ten-volume series on major trends in recent Chinese art.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the establishment of the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in 2000 marked a turning point in the study of contemporary Chinese art. Based in Hong Kong, the primary goal of this non-profit organization was to lay a foundation for studying contemporary Asian art in general and contemporary Chinese art specifically. By 2009, the AAA had built one of the most comprehensive collections of primary and secondary source materials on contemporary Asian art, with more than 20,000 titles accessible to researchers and the general public (the majority of holdings focus on mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). More than a passive repository of books, exhibition catalogues, and documents donated by artists, the archive has initiated various research and educational programs. With an academic advisory board made up of active critics and curators in the field, and with research posts in China and other Asian countries, AAA also acts as an "idea center" and provides a platform for scholarly communication.<sup>12</sup>

Differing from the global coverage of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, the First Guangzhou Triennial in 2002 focused on China. The rationale was that in order to become a vital component of world contemporary art, contemporary Chinese art should first establish its own historiography and analytical framework. The title of the exhibition — *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)* — summarizes its purpose: it aimed not only to showcase a group of seminal works from the 1990s, but also to reach a historical interpretation. The various means employed to achieve this goal by the curatorial team, which consisted of Wu Hung, Feng Boyi, and Wang Huangsheng, included selecting the works for the exhibition through a comprehensive review, developing an interpretative structure, and compiling a massive catalogue to frame individual artists and their works within a series of interpretative texts. The catalogue starts with Wu Hung's overview of 1990s Chinese experimental art, followed by fourteen essays focusing on various aspects of this art, from art medium to artists' status, and from exhibition channels to overseas reception. Written by international scholars, together these essays depict a large and rich picture of contemporary Chinese art in this important decade.

A surge of historical research on contemporary art was published in 2007 and 2008. The focus was on the '85 Art New Wave. At the center of the activity were two sets of publications, both devoted to collecting and presenting primary data on this past avant-garde movement. The first set, edited by Gao Minglu and titled *The '85 Movement*, consists of two companion volumes.<sup>13</sup> Volume one, *The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, is an updated version of Gao's 1991 book *A History of*

*Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986*. Volume two, *An Anthology of Historical Sources*, contains 1,000-plus documents written mainly by avant-garde artists, including manifestoes of art groups, letters between artists and critics, and unpublished essays, poems, and notes. Matching the structure of volume one, these materials are associated with twenty-six avant-garde groups and divided into six chapters on specific trends and activities around the mid-1980s. Organized in this way, the documents vividly reflect interactions between artists and the feverish idealism during that period. Gao Minglu emphasizes in his preface that in order to preserve historical authenticity, the volume contains first-hand materials by both well-known and obscure artists. He hopes that widely inclusive data will encourage new research on contemporary Chinese art, and will also stimulate researchers to conduct further “archaeological excavations” to discover unknown historical evidence for the early history of contemporary Chinese art.<sup>14</sup>

The second set was compiled by Fei Dawei under the title *Archives of the '85 New Wave*. It will eventually consist of six volumes; but so far only the first two have come out.<sup>15</sup> Like Gao Minglu, Fei also emphasizes the importance of primary sources, which according to him constitute the foundation of historical research. Unlike Gao, however, he has structured the series primarily around a dozen or so artists. Volume one is devoted exclusively to Wenda Gu, Wu Shanzhuan, and Xu Bing; and volume two to Huang Yong Ping and Xiamen Dada. Artists covered in the next two volumes will include Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Gu Dexin, Lü Shengzhong, and the members of the Analysis group. While the groupings of the artists reflect similar artistic orientations (for example, the three artists in Volume 1 were all engaged in “pseudowritings” in the 1980s), these connections are not spelled out in the volumes. Rather, as Fei states in his preface, his duty is to provide original materials as objectively as possible, creating an open field for future research. Nevertheless, his emphasis on individual artists reflects a particular notion of art history. Not coincidentally, the first publications in the series coincided with the inaugural exhibition of the Ullens Center in 2007, titled *'85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art*. As the curator of the exhibition (as well as the first director of the Ullens Center), Fei Dawei selected 137 works by 30 of China's best-known artists. The lavish show was accompanied by a catalogue with separate Chinese and English versions; the texts and images were again structured around individual artists.

One may consider Gao Minglu's approach “sociological” and Fei Dawei's “art historical.” Beyond this difference, however, both of their compilations have contributed to laying a basis for studying the history of contemporary Chinese art. As important advocates of the New Wave movement, both author/editors have realized the importance of preserving historical evidence; both have also developed a constructive distance from the past, which allows them to observe history with more detachment. Their difference in methodology is actually a sign of the maturity of this field, which is no longer dominated by a single ideology but has begun to generate different modes of historiography.

This “historical turn” in research is also evident in many case-oriented exhibitions and research projects, and in databases developed by museums and research centers. At Peking University, for example, Zhu Qingsheng established an archive of modern and contemporary Chinese art in 2005. In collaboration with the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen and the Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago, his institute at Peking University has also begun to publish a series of *Contemporary Chinese Art Yearbooks*, envisioned as a documentary resource as well as an index to theoretical development. In south China, continuing

the momentum of the First Guangzhou Triennial, in 2006 the Guangdong Museum of Art decided to develop a series of exhibitions and symposia on important artistic phenomena since the '85 Art New Wave. So far, three such exhibitions/symposia have taken place, focusing on three "cradles" of contemporary art: the northeast, the southwest, and Guangdong. In Shenzhen, the He Xiangning Art Museum and its OCT Contemporary Art Terminal have organized retrospectives of contemporary art on various scales. Their 2006 *Creating History* exhibition provided yet another survey of the '85 Art New Wave. The more recent *Visual Polity: Another Wang Guangyi* (2008), instead reexamined the career of this important artist and proposed a revisionist interpretation. Both of the exhibitions were curated by Huang Zhuan. While the earlier exhibition investigated the history of contemporary Chinese art through a macroscopic lens, the latter scrutinized microscopically.

The present sourcebook carries this "historical turn" beyond China's borders. As mentioned in "About this Volume," in compiling it we consulted numerous Chinese publications and also discussed its content and structure with Chinese art historians and critics. Because of its specific purposes and readership, however, this sourcebook differs from all data collections and archives published to date in China. Most importantly, unlike the exhaustive archives compiled by Gao Minglu and Fei Dawei, it contains only the most representative texts, so that it can survey the thirty-year history of contemporary Chinese art in a single volume. As such, this sourcebook is envisioned as an initial step toward more comprehensive compilations and translations, which will present increasingly detailed historical information on contemporary Chinese art to the English-speaking world. Like any field of historical research, the study of contemporary Chinese art must go through a process of collecting, disseminating, and interpreting primary evidence. This process has started. We hope that this volume, while being a result of the process, will also push it forward.

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#### Notes

1. See Wu Hung, "The 2000 Shanghai Biennale: The Making of a Historical Event," *ArtAsiaPacific*, no. 31 (2001), 41–49.
2. Fang Zengxian, "Preface," *Shanghai Biennale 2000* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Publishing House, 2000), unpaginated.
3. [www.chinaembassy.org.np/culture/features/respect\\_grows.htm](http://www.chinaembassy.org.np/culture/features/respect_grows.htm).
4. From the museum's Website: [www.artnow.com.cn](http://www.artnow.com.cn).
5. For these and the following figures, see Barbara Pollack's informative report on the market for contemporary Chinese art, "The Chinese Art Explosion," *ARTnews* 107, no. 8 (September 2008), 118–27.
6. See *ibid.*, 40.
7. See the exhibition catalogue *Wenhua fanyi: Gu Wenda Beilin — Tang shi houzhu [Translating Cultures: Wenda Gu's Forest of Stone Steles — A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry]* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing House, 2005).
8. See Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890–1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). See also Wu Hong (Wu Hung), *Xu Bing: Yancao jihua [Xu Bing: The Tobacco Project]* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2006), 23–24.
9. Gao Minglu, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986 [Contemporary Chinese Art 1985–1986]* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1991).
10. Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 1979–1989 [A History of Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989]* (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1992).
11. Zhang Xiaoling, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai meishu xianxiang piping wencong [Collections of Critical Essays on Chinese Contemporary Art Phenomena]*, 10 vols. (Jilin: Jilin Fine Arts Press, 1999). Written by different authors, the ten volumes in the series focus on New Generation art, women's art, abstract art, New Literati art, Pop art, Conceptual art, New Ink Painting, and other subjects.
12. Asia Art Archives Website: [www.aaa.org.hk](http://www.aaa.org.hk).
13. Gao Minglu, ed., *'85 meishu yundong: 80 niandai de renwen qianwei; Lishi zhiliao huibian [The '85 Movement: vol. 1, The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde; vol. 2, An Anthology of Historical Sources]* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2007).
14. *Ibid.*, 2:11.
15. Fei Dawei, ed., *'85 xinzhao dang'an [Archives of the '85 New Wave]*, vols. 1–2 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2007).



[Information on important sociopolitical events in China between 1976 and 2006 is printed in **bold type**.]

## 1976

**March:** The journal *Art* (*Meishu*) resumes publication.

**April:** Spontaneous activities memorializing Premier Zhou Enlai in Tiananmen Square are suppressed. This event has since been historically referred to as the "April Fifth Incident" (see illustration p. 220).

**July:** The journal *Art* (1976:3) publishes several artworks on the theme of Counterattacking the Trend to Reverse the Anti-Rightists Movement (*Fanji youqing fan'an feng*).

**September:** Mao Zedong dies of illness.

**October:** The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dismantles the "Gang of Four," ending the decade-long Cultural Revolution.

## 1977

**February:** The National Art Gallery, Beijing, holds the *National Art Exhibition to Enthusiastically Celebrate the Inauguration of Comrade Hua Guofeng as the Chairman of the CCP and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission and to Enthusiastically Celebrate the Great Triumph of Smashing the Gang of Four's Scheme to Usurp the Party's Power* (*Relie qingzhu Hua Guofeng tongzhi ren zhonggong zhongyang zhuxi, zhongyang junwei zhuxi, relie qingzhu fensui "sirenbang" zhuandang duoquan yinmou de weida shengli quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan*).

**May:** The *Art Exhibition to Commemorate the 35th Anniversary of Mao Zedong's Talks at the "Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art"* (*Jinian Mao Zedong "zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua" fabiao 35 zhounian meishu zuopin zhanlan*) opens at the National Art Gallery, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture.

**July:** The Third Plenary Session of the 10th Central Committee of the CCP passes the *Resolution to Reinstate Comrade Deng Xiaoping*.

**August:** The 11th National Congress of the CCP is held in Beijing, and passes the new Constitution of the Communist Party, elects Hua Guofeng as chairman and Deng Xiaoping as vice chairman of the Central Committee. Hua delivers a political report on behalf of the CCP proclaiming China's entry into a new era of development.

**September:** Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) sponsors an exhibition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Romanian paintings at the National Art Gallery.

**October:** The State Council formally announces that the National College Entrance Exam, interrupted for ten years, is to be resumed.

**December:** The Ministry of Culture announces that the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, Beijing; Beijing Film Academy; and other art institutions are to be reopened.

## 1978

**January:** The journal *Review of Foreign Art* (*Guowai meishu ziliao*), renamed *Compilation of Translations in Art* (*Meishu yicong*), begins publication at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou; it starts public circulation in 1980.

**February:** *Series on Art* (*Meishu congkan*) begins publication in Shanghai.

**March:** *Nineteenth-Century French Rural Landscape Painting Exhibition* (*Faguo 19 shiji nongcun fengjinghua zhan*), sponsored by CPAFFC, opens at the National Art Gallery.

**April:** The CCP decides to reinstate all rightists.

**May:** The China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (*Zhongguo wenxue yishujie lianhehui*) resumes and establishes preparatory committees for various affiliated societies.

*Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*) publishes the editorial "Practice Is the Only Criterion of Truth" ("Shijian shi jianyan zhenli de weiyi biaozhun"). Reprinted in *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) the next day, the article starts a national debate over "criteria of truth."

The journal *Art* publishes Xin Bingmao's article "The Preface to the 1976 Inaugural Issue of *Art* Ought to be Criticized" ("Meishu 1976 nian chuangkanci bixu pipan").

**August:** Lu Xinhua's short story "Scar" (*Shanghen*) is published in *Literary Daily* (*Wenhui bao*) and coins the term Scar Literature (*Shanghen wenxue*). Later, Beijing's *Picture Stories* (*Lianhuan huabao*) arranges for Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin to create an illustrated story version of "Scar."

**November:** The Xinhua News Agency reports the Beijing Municipal Committee's resolution to redress the April Fifth Incident of 1976.

**December:** The Ministry of Culture issues *Notes on Art Institutions' Use of Models* (*Guanyu meishu xueyuan he meishu chuanguo bumen shiyong mote de tongzhi*), which allows art institutions to use nude models for teaching and creating art.

**China and the U.S. issue the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People's**



Republic of China and the United States of America.

The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP convenes in Beijing to establish a political position centered on economic construction and organizational principles based on democratic centrism. This firmly establishes a new path to socialist modernization through opening and reform, a new theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, and a new generation of CCP leaders with Deng Xiaoping at its center.

The *Art Exhibition Commemorating the 85th Anniversary of Chairman Mao's Birthday* (*Jinian Mao Zedong danchen 85 zhounian meizhan*) opens at the National Art Gallery.

## 1979

**January:** The Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, resumes publication of its journal *Fine Arts Research* (*Meishu yanjiu*). For the first time, the journal *Art* publishes artworks reflecting on the April Fifth Incident. *Art* returns from being a bimonthly publication to a monthly publication schedule.

**February:** *New Spring Landscape and Still Life Paintings Exhibition* (*Xinchun fengjing jingwuhua zhan*), also called the *New Spring Painting Society Exhibition* (*Xinchun huahui zhanlan*), is held in Sun Yat-sen Park in Beijing.

*Twelve Artist Exhibition* (*Shi er ren huazhan*) is held at the Huangpu District Children's Palace in Shanghai.

The Shanghai Painting Society (*Shanghai huayuan*) holds the *Welcoming Spring Painting Exhibition* (*Yingchun huazhan*) in which the sculpture *Wounds* (*Chuangshang*) is the first nude artwork on public display since 1970.

**March:** In his speech at the Party's conference on theory, Deng Xiaoping advocates the position that "in order to realize the Four Modernizations in China, we must uphold the four basic principles."

**April:** The photography exhibition *Nature, Society, and Man* (*Ziran, shehui, ren*), sponsored by the April Photography Society, is held at the Orchard Room in Sun Yat-sen Park, Beijing (see p. 7).

*Art* (135:2, 1979) publishes summaries of a group of speeches, including Liu Kaiqu's "One Must Abide by the Laws of Art" ("Yao an yishu guilü banshi"), Jiang Feng's "Democracy Cannot be Given, It Must be Fought for" ("Ninzhū yao zhengqu, buneng kao enci"), and Fang Cheng's "Without Democracy, There Are No Caricatures" ("Meiyōu minzhū jīu meiyōu manhua").

**June:** The journal *World Art* (*Shijie meishu*) begins publication and publishes Shao

Dazhen's article "A Brief Introduction to Modern Art Schools in the West" ("Xifang xiandai meishu liupai jianjie"). The journal *Chinese Art* (*Zhongguo meishu*) begins publication. *Art* (138:5, 1979) publishes Wu Guanzhong's article "Formalist Aesthetics in Painting" ("Huihua de xingshi mei"), which triggers an extensive debate.

**July:** The No-Name Painting Society (*Wuming huahui*) holds its first public exhibition in Huafang Studio in Beijing's Beihai Park.

The Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council decide to establish Special Economic Zones in designated areas in Shantou, Shenzhen, Xiamen, and Zhuhai.

*Japanese Modern Painting Exhibition* (*Riben xiandai huihua zhanlan*) opens at the Working People's Cultural Palace in Beijing.

**August:** Chen Yiming, Liu Yulian, and Li Bin's *Maple* (*Feng*) (pl. 3) is published in *Picture Stories*. It becomes a representative work of Scar Art (*Shanghen meishu*), and starts an enduring debate over "truth in art" (*yishu zhenshi*). This group of works wins first prize at the *National Fine Arts Exhibition Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo chengli 30 zhounian quanguo meizhan*).

**September:** Large-scale murals are completed at the new terminal of the Beijing Capital International Airport, among which Yuan Yunsheng's *The Water Splashing Festival — Song of Life* (*Poshuijie — shengming de zange*) sparks fierce controversy and ultimately has to be covered.

The exhibition *Paintings by Hirayama Ikuo* (*Pingshan Yufu huazhan*) is held at the Working People's Cultural Palace in Beijing.

On September 27, The first *Stars Art Exhibition* (*Xingxing meizhan*) opens in a small garden to the east of the National Art Gallery, featuring more than 150 works of oil painting, ink painting, woodblock prints, and wood-carving. It is banned on September 29. On October 1, some members of the Stars (*Xingxing*) convene in front of the Xidan Democracy Wall and begin to march in the streets (see p. 9). Between November 23 and December 2, the exhibition is moved to Huafang Studio in Beihai Park under the support of the chairman of the Chinese Artists' Association, Jiang Feng, and the leader of the Beijing Artists' Association, Liu Xun.

**November:** The Third Conference for members of the Chinese Artists' Association is held in Beijing, where they pass a new Constitution of the Chinese Artists' Association, from which leftist content

has been removed. Jiang Feng is elected as the chairman of the association.

## 1980

**January:** *Wild Grass — Peer Exhibition* (*Yecao tongren huazhan*) is shown in Shapingba Park in Chongqing, Sichuan province. Later in the year, in November, the Chongqing Wild Grass Painting Society (*Yecao huahui*) is founded.

**Deng Xiaoping declares at a CCP meeting, "We cannot settle down to engage in construction without political stability and unity."**

**February:** The *National Fine Arts Exhibition Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of New China* (*Qingzhu Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo chengli 30 zhounian quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan*), aka *The Fifth National Fine Arts Exhibition* (*Di wujie quanguo meizhan*) opens at the National Art Gallery as the first national art exhibition since the Cultural Revolution. Cheng Conglin's oil painting *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968* (1968 *nian X yue X ri xue*) (pl. 4) and Gao Xiaohua's oil painting *Why* (*Weishenme*) win honors.

The Grass Society (*Caocao she*) organizes the *1980s Painting Exhibition* (*Bashi niandai huazhan*), held in the Luwan District Cultural Center in Shanghai.

**March:** *Art* (147:3, 1980) publishes five works from the first *Stars Art Exhibition* as well as Li Xianting's article "About the Stars Art Exhibition" ("Guanyu Xingxing meizhan"). Artist Qu Leilei argues "self-expression" is the nature of art, and subsequently triggers a debate that lasts for several years.

**April:** *Art* publishes a column "Give Nude Art a Fair View" ("Zhengque duidai renti meishu"), which instigates a debate on the topic.

The second *Nature, Society, and Man* photography exhibition is held in Huafang Studio in Beihai Park.

**June:** The Stars art society formally registers with the Beijing Artists' Association.

**July:** The journal *Art* launches a debate on realism.

*Contemporary Generation Oil Painting Exhibition* (*Tongdai ren youhua zhan*) is held at the National Art Gallery.

The art group Shen Society (*Shen she*) is founded in Kunming, Yunnan, and holds their first exhibition at the Yunnan Museum.

**August:** The second *Stars Art Exhibition* is held, at the National Art Gallery.

**October:** The *1978 Graduation Exhibition of Graduate Students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts* (*Zhongyang meishu xueyuan 1978 ji yanjiusheng biye zuopin zhan*) is held in the exhibition hall at the academy. Chen Danqing's Tibetan Series (e.g., pl. 6) and other works create great impact.

The publication of Wu Guanzhong's "On Abstract Aesthetics in Painting" ("Guanyu chouxiangmei") in *Art* (154:10, 1980) incites widespread discussion in art circles on issues concerning content and form, formalism, and abstract aesthetics.

**November:** The Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP convenes nine times, and advises the selection of Hu Yaobang as the chairman of the Central Committee, and Deng Xiaoping as the chairman of the Central Military Commission.

The Beijing Oil Painting Study Society (*Beijing youhua yanjiuhui*) opens its third exhibition at the National Art Gallery. Their diverse styles and emphases on formal elements of painting attract extensive attention.

## 1981

**January:** The State Council issues *Temporary Regulations Regarding Self-Funded Study Abroad* (*Guanyu zifei chuguo liuxue de zanxing guiding*) clearly stating that self-funded study abroad is one channel for fostering talent.

**The Supreme People's Court Special Session holds trial of ten leading members of the Lin Biao and Jiang Qing Anti-Revolutionary Clan.**

*Art* (157:1, 1981) publishes Chen Danqing's Tibetan Series and Luo Zhongli's *Father* (*Fuqin*) (pl. 5).

The *Second National Young Artists Exhibition* (*Di er jie quanguo qingnian meizhan*) opens at the National Art Gallery. Luo Zhongli's oil painting *Father* wins top honors.

**March:** *Art* (159:3, 1981) publishes Wu Guanzhong's article "Content Determines Form?" ("Neirong jue ding xingshi?") which not only questions this theory but is also met with intense debate.

The *First Exhibition of Modern Art in Xi'an* (*Xi'an shoujie xiandai yishu zhan*), Xi'an, Shaanxi, is held and attended by more than 60,000 people.

The Beijing branch of the Chinese Artists' Association and the Beijing Oil Painting Study Society cosponsor a symposium on Beijing oil painting studies, discussing the current situation and development of the medium as well as issues such as localization and the relationship between content and form.

**June:** The Sixth Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP passes the *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic*, reaching some conclusions about key historical events in the previous 32 years, especially the Cultural Revolution.

**September to November:**

*Important Original Works from the Collection of American Paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (*Boshidun bowuguan cang meiguo minghua yuanzuo zhan*) is held in Beijing and Shanghai, the first large-scale American painting exhibition in China since the resumption of China-U.S. relations.

**November:** The Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting (*Zhongguohua yanjiuyuan*) is founded in Beijing.

**1982**

**January:** *Art* starts to publish in serial form Joseph-Emile Muller and Frank Elgar's *A Century of Modern Painting*.

**February:** *Oil Paintings from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute* (*Sichuan meiyuan youhua zuopin zhan*) opens at the National Art Gallery, an important exhibition for the Sichuan painting school.

**The State Council issues Regulations Regarding the Prohibition of the Import, Duplication, Sale, or Broadcast of Reactionary Pornographic Audio or Visual Material** (*Guanyu yanjin jinkou, fuzhi, xiaoshou, bofang fandong huangse xialu luyin luxiang zhipin de guiding*), a prelude to the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign.

**March:** *The Hammer Collection from the U.S.: 500 Years of Important Works* (*Meiguo Hanmo canghua: wubainian mingzuo zhanlan*) is shown at the National Art Gallery.

**April:** *Expressionist Paintings from Germany* (*Deyizhi liangang gongheguo biaoxian zhuyi huihua zhanlan*) is held at the National Cultural Palace in Beijing.

**June:** The "National Symposium on Art Theory" ("Quanguo meishu lilun taolunhui"), sponsored by the journal *Art*, is held in Shennongjia, Hubei.

The Leishi Painting Society (*Leishi huahui*) is founded in Hunan. The *First Exhibition of the Leishi Painting Society* (*Leishi huahui shouzhan*) held at the Children's Palace in Changsha during the same year is one of the first modern art exhibitions in China.

**September:** The 12th National Congress of the CCP is held in Beijing, stating its aim "to build socialism with Chinese characteristics."

**1983**

**January:** *Art* (181:1, 1983) triggers debates by publishing articles about abstract paintings and discussions on abstract art.

**May:** *Original Paintings by Picasso* (*Bijiasuo huihua yuanzuo zhanlan*) is held at the National Art Gallery.

*Five Artists Exhibition* (*Wuren xiandai huazhan*) is held in Xiamen, Fujian; partici-

pants include Huang Yong Ping. Because of the content, the organizing work units (*danwei*) don't allow the exhibition to be opened to the public, although Huang Yong Ping documents its contents and proceedings later in *The Trend of Art Thought* (*Meishu sichao*) (1985:6).

**September:** *Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage 1983* (*Basannian jieduan: Huihua shiyuan zhanlan*) [later called the *Ten Artists Exhibition* (*Shi ren huazhan*)] is held at Fudan University in Shanghai, but is banned in four days.

*Paintings by Zao Wou-ki* (*Zhao Wuji huazhan*) is held at the National Art Gallery.

**October:** The Second Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee of the CCP is held in Beijing, launching the campaign to "Cleanse Spiritual Pollution."

*Paintings by Edvard Munch* (*Nuowei Mengke huihua zhanlan*) is held at the National Art Gallery and later travels to Chengdu, Sichuan, and Kunming, Yunnan.

**1984**

**January:** Deng Xiaoping inspects the Special Economic Zones of Shenzhen and Zhuhai.

**March:** The Secretariat of the Central Committee and the State Council decide to open up fourteen coastal cities to foreign investment: Beihai, Dalian, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Lianyungang, Nantong, Ningbo, Qingdao, Qinhuangdao, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wenzhou, Yantai, and Zhanjiang.

The series *Marching Toward the Future* (*Zouxiang weilai*) begins publication by Sichuan People's Publishing House and includes translated works and original writings. By 1988, it has published 74 writings.

**July:** Rudolf Arnheim's book *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* is published by Chinese Social Science Publishing Press.

The Wild Grass Painting Society (*Yecao huahui*) of Xiangtan, Hunan, is founded. Its first exhibition is held in February during the following year.

**July to September:** The Northern Literature and Art Information Exchange Center (*Beifang wenxue yishu xinxi jiaoliu zhongxin*) (later renamed the Northern Art Group [*Beifang yishu qunti*]) is formally established in Heilongjiang province. Meanwhile, the Northern Way Art Alliance (*Beifang daolu yishu lianmeng*) is founded in Changchun, Jilin province.

**November:** A new translation of Freud's *Psychoanalysis* is published by Commercial Press.

Works by Canadian Painter Alex Colville (*Jianada huajia Yalikesi Keerweier zuopin zhan*) is held at the Beijing Exhibition Center.

**December:** The painting exhibition *Exploration, Discovery, Expression (Tansuo, faxian, biao xian)* is held in Lanzhou, Gansu.

**China and Britain sign a joint declaration for Hong Kong to be handed over in 1997.**

The *Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition (Di liu jie quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan)* is held at the National Art Gallery.

## 1985

**January:** *The Trend of Art Thought (Meishu sichao)* begins publication in Wuhan, Hubei. Initially a monthly journal, it changes to a bimonthly in 1986. The editor-in-chief is Peng De. Pi Daojian, Yan Shanchun, Lu Hong, Huang Zhuan, Li Xianting, and others participate in the editorial work. This journal ceases publication in 1987, after 22 issues.

The journal *Art* goes through editorial changes. Shao Dazhen becomes editor-in-chief; the editorial staff includes Gao Minglu, Wang Xiaojian, and others.

The journal *Jiangsu Pictorial (Jiangsu huakan)* changes from a bimonthly to monthly publication and begins to pay close attention to Chinese contemporary art.

The *First Exhibition of the Northern Way (Shoujie beifang daolu zhan)* is held at Changchun Art Middle School. Participants include Ding Defu, Du Yuechun, Gao Yang, Guan Dawo, Hai Bo, Han Xiao, Han Xuanzhong, Lu Ming, Wang Changbai, Yu Jianyou, Yu Mingde, Zhang Xizhong, Zhu Fang, and Zuo Yingxue.

**March to April:** Professor Roman Verostko from Minneapolis College of Art and Design is invited to give a six-week series of talks on the history of modern art in Western society at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou.

**April:** The "Symposium on Oil Painting" ("Youhua yishu taolunhui") (usually called the "Huangshan Symposium" ["Huangshan huiyi"]) is held in Jingxian, Anhui, near Mount Huang. The symposium is organized by the Research Institute of Fine Arts at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing, the Anhui branch of the Chinese Artists' Association, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the Beijing Fine Art Academy, and the editorial board of *Art History and Theory (Meishu shilun)*. More than 60 young oil painters and theorists from across the country participate in the symposium and engage in discussions about renewing artistic concepts and developmental trends in Chinese oil painting.

The art group New Wildness Painting School (*Xin yexing huapai*) is founded in Nanjing, Jiangsu.

The British rock band Wham! performs in China.

**May:** The *Progressive Young Chinese Artists Exhibition (Qianjin zhong de Zhongguo qingnian meizhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery; some unorthodox works in the exhibition provoke intense reactions.

**June:** *Art* (210:6, 1985) publishes a column to introduce the 41st Venice Biennale.

*Fine Arts in China (Zhongguo meishu bao)*, sponsored by the Research Institute of Fine Arts at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, holds an opening ceremony and starts weekly publication on July 6. Zhang Qiang is the chairman, and Liu Xiaochun is editor-in-chief.

The first *New Figurative Exhibition (Xin juxiang huazhan)* is held in the Cultural Hall of Jing'an District, Shanghai; participating artists include Mao Xuhui and Zhang Xiaogang. *Exhibition of Works by Young Artists from Fujian and Shanghai (Minhu qingnian meizhan)* is held at the Yushan gallery in Fujian province; participating artists include members of the Fujian M Modern Art Research Association (*Fujian M xiandai yishu yanjiuhui*) such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Huang Yong Ping from Fujian, and Shanghai artists Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen, and others.

**July:** *Jiangsu Pictorial* (55:7, 1985) publishes Li Xiaoshan's article "My Opinion on Contemporary Chinese Painting" ("Dangdai Zhongguohua zhi wo jian"), which argues that Chinese painting has reached a dead end. It is reprinted in *Fine Arts in China* (1985:14) on October 26 and sparks extensive debates in art circles.

The Department of Art History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts celebrates the graduation of the class of 1985, whose undergraduates include Hou Hanru, Wen Pulin, and Fei Dawei. Graduate students Zhu Qingsheng and Yi Ying play important roles in the '85 Art New Wave movement.

The *Graduate Exhibition of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (Zhejiang meiyuan biyesheng zuopin zhan)* is held. Works by Geng Jianyi and other artists receive a great deal of attention.

**September:** *The Trend of Art Thought* holds the first awards ceremony for art theory since the founding of the People's Republic. Young painters and theorists such as Chen Danqing, Chen Yungang, Cheng Xiaoyu, Deng Pingxiang, Wenda Gu, Li Xiaoshan, Lu Meng, Tan Liqiang, Wang Lin, Yin Shuangxi, Zhang Zhiyang, and Zhu Qingsheng receive honors.

The Northern Art Group holds an academic symposium titled "Retrospect and Prospects for the Northern Art Style" ("Beifang yishu fengge de huigu yu zhanwang") at the Heilongjiang Art Museum.

*French Impressionism and Early-Twentieth-Century Art (Faguo yinxiangpai ji 20 shiji chu zuopin zhan)* is held in Beijing.

**September to October:** The first *Shenzhen Art Festival (Shenzhen meishujie)* is held at Shenzhen, Guangdong province, and carries out discussions on Western modernism, abstract art, and more.

**October:** The *First National Art Exhibition of the No-Name Painting Society (Zhongguo wumingshi huahui shouci quanguo meizhan)* is held at the exhibition hall in Nanquan Park, Chongqing.

*Half Generation Painting Exhibition (Banjiezi huazhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery. Participating artists are mostly a generation of young professors from art institutions.

The founding ceremony for four Chinese Artists' Association committees — oil paintings, murals, prints, and illustrations — is held in Beijing.

*Jiangsu Youth Art Week's Modern Art Exhibition (Jiangsu qingnian yishu zhou — daxing xiandai yishuzhan)* is held at the Jiangsu Art Museum in Nanjing. Afterward, primary participating artists, such as Ding Fang, found the art group Red Brigade (*Hongse lu*).

The art creation and study group Space Art Base (*Taikong meishu jidi*) is founded in Lianyungang, Jiangsu.

**November:** *Invitational Exhibition on New Works of Chinese Painting (Guohua xinzuo yaoqing zhan)* is held in Wuhan; participating artists include Wenda Gu, Liu Guosong, and Wu Guanzhong.

The journal *Painter (Huajia)* starts publication in Changsha, Hunan, and becomes an important journal in the '85 Art Movement. The artists' group based around this journal is called the *Painter Group (Huajia qunti)*.

The Shandong Southwestern Group (*Lu xinan qunti*) is founded in Heze, Shandong. It disbands after June 1986. In July 1987, Dong Chao and other artists regroup as Black Alliance (*Heise lianmeng*).

*November Painting Exhibition (Shiyiyue huazhan)* is held at the Palace Museum in Beijing.

**November to December:** *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI)* exhibition is held at the National Art Gallery, and has a significant impact among Chinese contemporary artists. During his stay in Beijing, Rauschenberg is invited to lecture

at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts. The exhibition travels to Lhasa, Tibet.

**December:** The '85 *New Space* exhibition (*85 Xin kongjian*) is held at the exhibition hall at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts; participating artists include Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Bao Jianfei.

The "National Working Conference on Art Theory" ("Quanguo meishu lilun gongzuo huiyi"), sponsored by the Chinese Artists' Association, is held in Beijing.

The group exhibition of the Zero art group in Hunan (*Hunan o yishu jituan zuopin zhan*) opens at Fuxiangyiyuan at the Martyr's Park in Changsha, after which some members of the group start their performance art activity of marching toward Lhasa.

*Untitled Painting Exhibition (Wuti huazhan)* is held at the exhibition hall of the Art Department at the Central University for Nationalities, Beijing; the exhibition utilizes many material objects.

The *First Exhibition of Three Steps Studio (Sanbu huashi di yi ci zhanlan)* is held at the Working People's Cultural Palace in Taiyuan, Shanxi.

## 1986

**January:** Artists Gallery (*Yishujia hualang*) opens at the new Beijing Music Hall. It is the first professional gallery in Beijing dealing contemporary painting since the Cultural Revolution.

*Last Exhibition '86 No. 1 (86 nian zuihou huazhan No.1)* opens at the Zhejiang Exhibition Hall, Hangzhou. The exhibition is initiated by young teachers at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts: Sun Baoguo, Wenda Gu, and others. It is ordered to close in three hours.

*Zero Exhibition (Lingzhan)*, initiated and organized by Wang Chuan and others, is held on the busy streets of Shenzhen.

*New Works of the Miyang Painting Society (Miyang huajia xinzuo zhan)* is held in Shijiazhuang, Hebei.

**February:** *Works by French Painters Henri Cueco and Ernest Pignon (Faguo huajia Cueco he Pignon zuopin zhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery. The two artists also give lectures and engage in discussions at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, in Guangdong, and Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts.

The *First Group Exhibition of Works by the Nanjing Oil Painting Art Group (Nanjingren youhua yishu qunti shouzhan youhua zhan)* is held at the Cultural Hall in the Gulou District of Nanjing.

The group Red Humor (*Hongse youmo*) is founded, consisting of 1983 graduates from the Education Department at Zhejiang

Academy of Fine Arts, including Wu Shanzhuan, Ni Haifeng, and others.

**April:** The Oil Painting Art Committee of the Chinese Artists' Association holds its first "National Symposium on Oil Painting" ("Quanguo youhua yishu taolunhui") near Mount Huang in Anhui, where three academic talks are given: Gao Minglu's "85 Art Movement" ("85 meishu yundong"), Zhu Qingsheng's "Contemporary Paintings of the West Viewed from this Side of the Ocean" ("Dangdai xifang huatan ge'an guan"), and Shui Tianzhong's "Chinese Oil Painting under the Impact of Western Art Ideology" ("Xifang meishu sichao chongji xia de Zhongguo youhua"). The symposium also studies the artwork of young artists' groups since 1985, some modern and contemporary works from the West, and slides of works by Chinese artists exploring modern art. Some participants of the symposium make plans to organize a national slide show.

The first *Grand Exhibition of Shanghai Young Artists' Works* (*Shanghai qingnian meishu zuopin dazhan*) is held at the Shanghai Art Museum.

*Ether Painting Exhibition* (*Yitai huazhan*) is held at the July First Open Theater at Chaoyang Square in Nanning, Guangxi. Later, another young artists' group exhibition called *Beginning Exhibition* (*Kaishi huazhan*) is held at the exhibition hall at People's Park in Nanning.

*Xuzhou Modern Art Exhibition* (*Xuzhou xiandai yishu zhan*) opens at the Xuzhou, Jiangsu, Exhibition Hall. Participating artists are mostly members of the Sunday Painting Society (*Xingqitian huahui*) in Jiangsu and young graduates from art institutions.

**April to May:** In Zhoushan, Zhejiang, the artist Wu Shanzhuan works on *Some Passages from the Second Chapter of the Novel "Scarlet Letter"* (*Changpian xiaoshuo Chi Zi di er zhang ruogan ziranduan*), the first group of artworks from the Red Humor series (*Hongse youmo*).

**May:** The *First Exhibition of Young Artists in Zhengzhou* (*Zhengzhou shi shoujie qingnian meizhan*) is held at the Henan Agricultural Exhibition Hall.

*A Contemporary Chinese Painting Exhibition* is held at Hong Kong City Hall.

The Southern Artists Salon (*Nanfang yishujia shalong*), organized by Wang Du and Lin Yilin, is founded in Guangzhou; other members include Liang Juhui and Chen Shaoxiang.

The *First Exhibition of Works by Members of Beijing Young Artists' Painting Society* (*Beijing qingnian huahui shoujie huiyuan zuopin zhan*) is held at the National Art Gallery.

The Pond Society (*Chi she*) is founded in Hangzhou, Zhejiang. This art group consists

of major participants from the '85 *New Space* exhibition, including Wang Qiang, Bao Jianfei, Song Ling, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Guan Yin, and others. It holds four consecutive art events.

The Red Humor group's private exhibition *70% Red 25% Black 5% White* (*Hong 70% hei 25% bai 5%*) is held at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.

The *Horizon Painting Exhibition* (*Haipingxian huazhan*) is held in Shanghai, during which the "Shanghai Painting Symposium" ("Shanghai huihua chuanguzuo yantaohui") also takes place.

The Central Academy of Fine Arts formally opens an art gallery; it exhibits many avant-garde artists' works over the years.

**June:** Young factory workers Wan Junyan and Zhu Changyan hold the *Non-Figurative Exhibition* (*Fei juxiang zhanlan*) in Shanghai.

*Red, Yellow, and Blue: Modern Paintings by Young Sichuan Artists* (*Sichuan qingnian "honghuanglan" xiandai huihua zhan*) is held in Chengdu. Later in November, some participating artists found the Red, Yellow, and Blue Painting Society (*Honghuanglan huahui*).

The "Academic Symposium on Issues Regarding Tradition in Chinese Painting" ("Zhongguohua chuantong wenti xueshu taolunhui") is held in Xi'an, during which Wenda Gu's first solo exhibition — *Wenda Gu's New Ink Painting* (*Gu Wenda guohua xinzuozhan*) — is also held. Gu's exhibition is divided into two parts, one part is public while the other is restricted.

*New Wildness Painting Exhibition* (*Xin yexing zhuyi huihua zuopin zhan*) is held in Nanjing's Gulou Park.

**July:** The "National Art Theory Conference" ("Quanguo meishu lilun huiyi"), sponsored by the Chinese Artists' Association, People's Fine Arts Publishing House, and the Shandong branch of the Chinese Artists' Association, is held in Yantai, Shandong, to discuss "Chinese Art under the Impact of Western Culture."

The exhibition *Avant-Garde Chinese Art: Beijing/New York* opens at the City Gallery, New York, then goes to Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY; participating artists include Ai Weiwei and other members of the Stars.

**August:** "Grand Slideshow and Symposium on the Art Trends of '85" ("85 qingnian meishu sichao daxing huandeng zhan ji xueshu taolunhui") is held in Zhuhai, Guangdong, often known as the "Zhuhai Symposium." Representatives of art groups from across the country introduce their perspectives,

objectives, and works-in-progress, while also studying selected works. During the symposium, Gao Minglu and Zhu Qingsheng give lectures at the Changsha Artists' Association. Meanwhile, Gao, Zhu, Zhou Yan, Li Luming, Wang Xiaojian, and Shu Qun start to make preparations for the "Symposium on Modern Art" ("Xiandai yishu yanjiuhui").

Art publishes Gao Minglu's "About Rational Painting" ("Guanyu lixing huihua"), which summarizes the main trends in the '85 Art Movement.

Southwest Art Research Group (*Xi'nan yishu yanjiu qunti*), composed of participants in the *New Figurative Exhibition*, is founded in Kunming. Its members include Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, Ye Yongqing, and others. This group ceases activity in 1986 after the *Fourth Exhibition of the New Figurative Society* (*Xin juxiang di si jie zhan*).

The Salon of Chinese Contemporary Architectural Culture (*Zhongguo dangdai jianzhu wenhua shalong*) is launched in Beijing. It is organized by Gu Mengchao and Wang Mingxian.

**September:** The *First Experimental Exhibition of the Southern Artists Salon* (*Nanfang yishujia shalong di yi hui shiyan zhan*) is held at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou (pl. 13); participating artists include Wang Du, Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiang, and others.

The large-scale art event *Basking in the Sun* (*Shai taiyang*) is held in the covered corridor and lawn at Xuanwuhu Park in Nanjing, Jiangsu. The event is repeated once, in October.

*Fine Arts in China* starts the column "Notes on New Trends" (*Xinchao ziliao jianbian*), introducing exhibitions and activities of young artists' groups from across the nation.

**September to October:** *Xiamen Dada — Exhibition of Modern Art* (*Xiamen dada — xiandai yishuzhan*) is held at Xiamen Art Museum; afterward, in November, participating artists set fire to a pile of some of their works in the square (see p. 95).

**October:** Zhang Guoliang, Ding Yi, and Qin Yifeng from the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University carry out their performance *Cloth Sculpture* (*Bu diao*) on the Wusongkou dock in Shanghai.

**November:** The *Hubei Young Artists Festival* (*Hubei qingnian meishujie*) is held in nine cities simultaneously, including Wuhan, Huangshi, Shashi, Shiyan, Xiangfan, and Yichang. Fifty organizations and groups participate and exhibit about 2,000 works at 28 exhibition sites. Meanwhile lectures and slide shows are also offered. In December,

as a finale to the festival, the premier exhibition of the group Tribe Tribe (*Buluo buluo*) is held at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan. The group consists of young faculty members at the academy.

*Modern Art Exhibition* (*Xiandai yishu zhan*) is held at the Working People's Cultural Palace in Taiyuan, Shanxi, during which Song Yongping and Song Yonghong present their performance art.

'86 *Concave-Convex Exhibition* (*86 ao tu zhan*) is held in the Cultural Hall of Xujiahui District in Shanghai; participating artists include Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Ding Yi, Wang Ziwei, and others.

*Group Exhibition of Young Hunan Artists* (*Hunan qingnian meishujia jiqunzhan*), sponsored by *Fine Arts in China*, Chinese Artists' Association, and Hunan Young Artists' Association, is held at the National Art Gallery. Participating art groups include the Leishi Painting Society, *Painter Group*, Zero Art Group, Wild Grass Painting Society, Overpass Painting Society (*Lijiaoqiao huahui*), and Huaihua Group (*Huaihua qunti*).

**December:** *History of Chinese Modern Painting* (*Zhongguo xiandai huihua shi*), co-authored by Li Xiaoshan and Zhang Shaoxia, is published.

The event *Concept 21, Performance Display* (*Guannian 21, xingwei zhanxian*) is held at Peking University.

*M Art Group Performance Art Exhibition* (*M yishu qunti xingwei yishu zhan*) is held at the No. 2 Working People's Cultural Palace in Hongkou District, Shanghai.

## 1987

**January:** The Central Committee of the CCP issues a Notice Regarding Issues of the Current Opposition to Bourgeois Liberalism (*Guanyu dangqian fandui zichanjieji ziyouhua ruogan wenti de tongzhi*).

The art group The Rhinoceros Painting Society (*Xiniu huahui*) in Xuzhou, Jiangsu, holds the *Xuzhou '87 Art Exhibition* (*Xuzhou '87 yishuzhan*).

**February:** The Northern Art Group holds its first "biennial" at Jilin Art Academy in Changchun, as well as a symposium on the topic "Rational Painting" (*Lixing huihua*).

**March:** The preparatory conference for the first nationwide modern art exhibition is held in Beijing. In early April, the Ministry of Propaganda issues an order prohibiting national academic events — as a result, the exhibition originally intended to open on July 1 is canceled.

*Contemporary Oil Paintings from the People's Republic of China* opens at Harkness

House in New York. Some of the works from the exhibition are also shown in the Ninth International Art Expo in New York.

**April:** *A State of Transition: Contemporary Paintings from Shanghai* is held at the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

**May:** *The First Posthouse Painting Exhibition (Di yi yi huazhan)* is held at the Nanjing Arts Institute, featuring work by the members of the Red Brigade.

**June:** The book series *Culture: China and the World (Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie)*, edited by Gan Yang, starts publication by SDX Joint Publishing, Beijing.

Wenda Gu and Shi Hui participate in the 13th International Biennial of Tapestry organized by the Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland.

**October:** *Toward the Future (Zouxiang weilai huazhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery.

**December:** *The First Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition (Shoujie Zhongguo youhua zhan)*, cosponsored by the Oil Painting Committee of the Chinese Artists' Association and the Shanghai Affiliation of the Chinese Artists' Association, opens at the Shanghai Exhibition Center.

The Chinese United Overseas Artists Association, comprising expatriate artists in Europe and America, is founded in New York City by Yuan Yunsheng, Wang Keping, Ai Weiwei, and others.

## 1988

**April:** Shanghai Art Museum holds its first *Art Today Exhibition (Jinri yishu zhan)*, mostly consisting of abstract works.

**June:** "Contemporary Chinese Architecture Heading Toward the World: Cultural Scholars Academic Symposium" ("Zouxiang shijie de dangdai Zhongguo jianzhu: wenhua xuezhe xueshu yantaohui"), sponsored by the Salon of Chinese Contemporary Architectural Culture and the editorial board of the journal *Reading (Dushu)*, is held in Beijing.

**September:** The TV series *Great Earthquake (Da dizhen)* — sponsored by 21st Century Academy, written and directed by Wen Pulin and produced by Ding Bin — starts production. Activities filmed include rock music performances, modern drama performances, speeches, and performance art. For various reasons, the postproduction of the series is never finished and the staff is dismissed in June 1989.

*Fine Arts in China* (1988:37) publishes Li Xianting's (under the pen name Hu Cun) article "The Era Awaits the Great Spirit's Passion for Life" ("Shidai qidai zhe da linghun

de shengming jiqing"), provoking reflections and debates about the "great spirit."

**October:** The preparatory committee for the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) is founded in Beijing, headed by Gao Minglu. Meanwhile, the first announcement regarding its curatorial preparation (*Chouzhan tonggao di yi hao*) is released.

A symposium titled "Trends in the Development of Contemporary Art" ("Dangdai meishu fazhan qushi") is held in Nanjing. Nanjing's Red Brigade coordinates with the symposium to hold *The Second Posthouse Painting Exhibition (Di er yi huazhan)* in the exhibition hall of the Jiangsu Publishing building.

Two exhibitions, *Prints by Xu Bing (Xu Bing banhua yishu zhan)* and *Paper-Cut Art by Lü Shengzhong (Lü Shengzhong jianzhi yishu zhan)* (see p. 131), are held at the National Art Gallery. For the first time, Xu Bing shows his installation work *A Mirror to Analyze the World — Fin de Siècle Book (Xi shi jian — shijimo juan)*, later known as *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* (see pl. 14).

*Beijing International Ink Painting Exhibition (Beijing guoji shuimohua zhan)*, sponsored by the Chinese Artists' Association and the Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting, is held in Beijing.

**November:** *North Star Exhibition (Beidouxing huazhan)* opens in Nanjing.

*The First Exhibition of the New Academic School (Xin xueyuanpai di yi hui zuopin zhanlan)* opens at the exhibition hall of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.

The "'88 Symposium on the Creation of Chinese Modern Art" ("88 Zhongguo xiandai yishu chuanguo yantaohui"), cosponsored by the Research Institute of Fine Arts at the Chinese National Academy of Arts and the Hefei Painting and Calligraphy Institute (*Hefei shuhuayuan*), is held at Tunxi, at the foot of Huangshan (Mount Huang), Anhui province. The main objectives are to present and share information about activities surrounding exploratory artwork since 1985, and to examine the developmental trends in modern Chinese art by integrating issues of cultural development, contemporary artists' thoughts and concepts, the opening up of an art market, and so on.

**December:** *The Last Supper — the Second Concave-Convex Exhibition (Zuihou de wancan — di er jie ao tu zhan)* is held at the Shanghai Art Museum.

The *Grand Exhibition of Figure Painting (Youhua renti yishu dazhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery and attended by more



than 200,000 visitors. A "Figure Painting Symposium" ("Renti wenhua yantaohui") is also held.

In this year, Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House releases a collection of Lang Shaojun's writings, *On Chinese Modern Art* (*Lun Zhongguo xiandai meishu*). By 2000, its series *Chinese Contemporary Art Studies* (*Zhongguo dangdai meishu yanjiu*) includes collections of writings by these critics: Peng De's *Visual Revolution* (*Shijue geming*), Liu Xiaochun's *Disintegration and Reconstruction* (*Jieti yu chongjian*), Deng Pingxiang's *On the Third Generation Painters* (*Lun di san dai huajia*), Wang Lin's *The State of Fine Art in Contemporary China* (*Dangdai Zhongguo de meishu zhuangtai*), Tao Yongbai's *The Painting Circle: A Female Critic's Reflections* (*Huatan: Yiwei nü pinglunzhe de sikao*), Jia Fangzhou's *Diversity and Choice* (*Duoyuan yu xuanze*), Pi Daojian's *The Condition of the Fine Arts in Contemporary China* (*Dangdai Zhongguo de meishu zhuangtai*), Gao Minglu's *Chinese Avant-Garde Art* (*Zhongguo qianwei yishu*), and Li Xianting's *The Significance Is Not the Art* (*Zhongyao de bushi yishu*).

## 1989

**January:** *The Stars: Ten Years* (*Xingxing shi nian*), the third exhibition of the Stars, is held at Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong.

Salon 49 (*Shalong 49*) is founded in Wuhan, Hubei; its members come from numerous disciplines such as philosophy, art, literature, and architecture.

**February:** *China/Avant-Garde* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*), an exhibition comprising 293 works by 186 artists, opens on February 5 at the National Art Gallery (pl. 16). It is the first large-scale national modern art exhibition and is sponsored, funded, and organized by non-official academic groups. It is also the first large-scale art exhibition curated by critics. On the opening day, the "gunshot incident" occurs, resulting in the first closing of the exhibition. On February 10, the exhibition resumes. On February 11, the forum "My View of Art" ("Wo de yishu guan") is held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. On February 13, the "China/Avant-Garde Symposium" ("Zhongguo xiandai yishu taolunhui") is held at the National Art Gallery, on the second floor. On February 14, the *Beijing Daily* (*Beijing ribao*), the Beijing Public Security Bureau, and the National Art Gallery all receive anonymous hoax letters claiming bombs are set in the museum, and the exhibition is closed again. On February 17, it reopens.

**April:** *The First Exhibition of Chinese New Literati Painting* (*Zhongguo xin wenrenhua di*

*yi hui zhan*), cosponsored by the Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting and the Research Institute of Fine Arts at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, is held at the National Art Gallery, during which the "Chinese New Literati Painting Symposium" ("Zhongguo xin wenrenhua yantaohui") is also held.

**Hu Yaobang, member of the CCP Central Committee Political Bureau, dies in Beijing. The public organizes spontaneous large-scale memorials.**

**May:** The TV documentary *Chinese Modern Artists* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishujia*) starts shooting; the final production is called *Modern Artists in Southwest China* (*Zhongguo xinan xiandai yishujia*). It is written and directed by Lü Peng and Yi Dan.

**On May 4, college and university students organize demonstrations in Beijing in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, an anti-imperialist movement in 1919 that called for reform through the adoption of modern ideals such as science and democracy.**

Huang Yong Ping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang go to Paris to participate in the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. Fei Dawei is a consultant for the Chinese portion of the exhibition.

*Fine Arts Research* (1989:2) publishes Lang Shaojun's article "Rebuilding Elite Art: Reconsidering Changes in the Structure of Twentieth-Century Chinese Art" ("Chongjian Zhongguo de jingying yishu: Dui 20 shiji Zhongguo meishu geju bianqian de zairenshi"). The article incites vigorous debates.

**Dawn of June 3 – June 4: Martial law enforcement troops enter Beijing to suppress student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. The violent crackdown on protestors continues through June 4, ending in bloodshed.**

**August:** The Chinese Artists' Association's leading CCP group announces reforms to the editorial board of the journal *Art* and dismisses Shao Dazhen from the post of editor-in-chief.

**December:** *Fine Arts in China* ceases publication.

In this year, the Wu Zuoren International Foundation of Fine Arts is founded in Beijing — the first art foundation in China — and issues the first "Young Artist Award."

## 1990

**January:** *The State Council lifts martial law on January 11.*

**April:** *Salon de la jeune peinture* is held at Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris,

during which Geng Jianyi, Guan Wei, He Jianguo, Mao Lizi, Shen Chen, Wang Guangyi, Wang Luyan, Ye Yongqing, and Zhang Peili's works are exhibited.

**May:** The exhibition *Liu Xiaodong's Paintings* (*Liu Xiaodong huazhan*) is held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts gallery.

Xu Bing carries out his project *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (*Gui da qiang*) at the Jinshanling portion of the Great Wall in Hebei.

*World of Female Artists* (*Nü huajia de shijie*) is held at the exhibition hall at the Central Academy of Fine Arts gallery.

**June:** The *Journal of Literature and Art* (*Wenyi bao*) publishes Yang Chengyin's article "The Outline of New Wave Art" ("Xinchao meishu lungang"), a total repudiation of the '85 Art Movement.

**July:** The outdoor contemporary art exhibition *Chine demain pour hier* opens in Pourrières in southern France, curated by Fei Dawei. The Chinese expatriate artists invited to exhibit include Chen Zhen (France), Wenda Gu (U.S.A.), Huang Yong Ping (France), Cai Guo-Qiang (Japan), Yang Jiechang (Germany) and Yan Peiming (France). During the exhibition, the symposium "Malentendu culturel" ("Cultural misunderstanding") is held.

The Chinese Artists' Association, Chinese Calligraphy Association, and Photographic Society of China cosponsor a forum on the issues of creative concepts, discussing how to further cleanse and rectify the effects of bourgeois liberalism and correct the orientation of literature and art.

**September:** *Yu Hong's Oil Paintings* (*Yu Hong youhua zhan*) is held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts gallery.

The *Group Exhibition of Chinese New Literati Paintings* (*Zhongguo xin wenrenhua lianzhan*) is held at the Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting, Beijing.

**September to October:** The 11th Asian Games is held in Beijing.

**October:** "Chinese Painting Studies Symposium" ("Zhongguohua xueshu yantaohui") is held in Changping, Beijing, mainly to discuss the achievements and problems of painting in the 1980s.

The leadership of the Chinese Artists' Association is restructured. Wang Qi is added as the vice chairman of the association.

**November:** The Shanghai Stock Exchange is formally established as the first stock exchange in mainland China since the founding of the People's Republic.

Since the end of the 1980s, freelance artists have gradually gathered around Fuyuanmen Village near the Yuanmingyuan Palace in Beijing. Within two to three years,

dozens of artists live there, such as Ding Fang, Fang Lijun, Wang Ying, Yi Ling, and Tian Bin. These artists organize group exhibitions, which are noticed by the media, art dealers from overseas, and the cultural circle.

## 1991

**January:** "*I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*" and *Other Works: Selections from the Chinese "New Wave" and "Avant-Garde" Art of the Eighties* is held at the Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, curated by Richard E. Strassberg. Exhibited artists include Geng Jianyi, Lü Shengzhong, Mao Xuhui, Xu Bing, Ye Yongqing, Yu Hong, Zhang Peili, Zhang Xiaogang, and Zeng Xiaofeng, among others. A series of lectures and discussions about Chinese contemporary art is held in conjunction with the exhibition.

*Big-Tail Elephant Group Art Exhibition* (*Dawei xiang gongzuoshi lianhe yishuzhan*) is held at the Guangzhou Cultural Palace, and includes works by Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, and Liang Juhui.

**February:** The State Council holds a conference in Beijing on reforming the national economic system. It states that the general objective for reform in the 1990s is to lay down the basic framework of a new socialist planned commodity economy and the operational mechanism for integrating the planned economy with market regulations.

**March:** *Close Up: Wang Huaxiang's Art* (*Jin juli — Wang Huaxiang yishu zhan*) is held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts gallery.

**April:** The Research Institute of Fine Arts at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing, holds a symposium on "The New Era of Artistic Creation" ("Xin shiqi meishu chuanguo yantaohui"), often called the "Xishan Symposium" ("Xishan huiyi"). The symposium acknowledges achievements in art since the opening and reform, and focuses on new art trends in the early 1990s.

**June:** The *Beijing Xisanhuan Art Research Documents Exhibition* (*Beijing xisanhuan yishu yanjiu wenxian ziliao zhan*) is held at the gallery of the Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting, curated by Wang Lin. It is later renamed the *Modern Chinese Art Research Documents Exhibition* (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu yanjiu wenxian ziliao zhan*) and travels to Nanjing, Chongqing, Kunming, and Shenyang.

**July:** The *New Generation Art* exhibition (*Xin shengdai yishu zhan*) opens at the Museum of Chinese History, Beijing, sponsored by *Beijing Youth Daily* and curated by Wang Youshen. During the exhibition, a symposium is also held to discuss issues such

as the current state and future trends of so-called New Generation artists, the path for Chinese contemporary art to enter the international art scene, etc.

Wu Guanzhong receives *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* from the French Ministry of Culture.

**August:** The exhibition *Exceptional Passage* is held indoors at Mitsubishi-jisho Artium, Chuo-ku, and outdoors at the former Kashii railway yard in Higashi-ku, Fukuoka, Japan, with Fei Dawei acting as chief curator. Participating artists include Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, Wenda Gu, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Wang Luyan.

**September:** Yanhuang Art Gallery opens in Beijing.

Works by Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong are included in Christie's Hong Kong auction of Chinese Contemporary Oil Painting. This marks the first time a group of contemporary Chinese oil paintings enters international auction market.

**November:** The *First Annual Exhibition of Chinese Oil Painting (Zhongguo youhua nianzhan)* is held at the Museum of Chinese History and Beijing Oriental Oil Painting Art Gallery.

*Three Installations by Xu Bing* is held at the Elvehjem Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, curated by Britta Erickson. It presents *Book from the Sky (A Mirror to Analyze the World — Fin de Siècle Book)*, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, and the print-work *Five Series of Repetitions*.

*Garage Art Exhibition (Cheku yishuzhan)* is held in Shanghai.

**December:** The journal *Painter (Huajia)* ceases publication.

In this year, Australian Brian Wallace establishes the Red Gate Gallery (*Hongmen hualang*), the first foreign-funded commercial gallery in Beijing.

## 1992

**January:** Deng Xiaoping inspects Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai and issues his Southern Tour Speeches (*Nanxun jianghua*), which plays a key role in propelling economic reform and social progress in the 1990s.

**April:** *Liu Wei and Fang Lijun's Paintings (Liu Wei, Fang Lijun huazhan)* opens at the Beijing Art Museum.

**May:** To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Mao's Yan'an Talks, the journal *Art* publishes Cai Ruohong's article "There Is No End to the Combat" ("Zhandou zheng wei you qiongqi"), which argues that bourgeois liberalism has inflicted disasters among art circles and notes that a peaceful evolution

can only be achieved by being on guard against the field of plastic arts.

**June:** *Encountering the Others* is held concurrently with Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany. Chinese artists participating in *K-18* include Li Shan, Lü Shengzhong, Ni Haifeng, Sun Liang, Cai Guo-Qiang, Qiu Deshu, and Wang Youshen.

Chen Zhen solo exhibition at Magasin, Centre national d'art contemporain, Grenoble, France.

**September:** The *Invitational Exhibition of Young Contemporary Sculptors (Dangdai qingnian diaosujia yaoqing zhan)* is held at the gallery at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.

**October:** The 14th National Representative Conference of the CCP is held in Beijing, during which Jiang Zemin delivers a speech titled "Hasten the Steps of Reform, Opening Up, and Modernization, Strive for Even Greater Success in the Cause of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" ("Jiakuai gaige kaifang he xiandaihua jianshe bufa, duoqui you Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi shiye de gengda shengli"), clearly stating the objective of Chinese economic system reform is to build a socialist market economy mechanism.

The *Second Modern Chinese Art Research Documents Exhibition (Zhongguo dangdai yishu yanjiu wenxian ziliao di er hui zhan)* opens at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangdong.

The *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair (Oil Painting Section) (Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan [youhua bufen])* opens at the exhibition center at the Central Guangzhou Hotel, sponsored and funded by the Western Sichuan Art Company. The sponsors champion the exhibition with the slogan "China's first art fair." The chief curator is Lü Peng, and the jury is composed of art critics. During the exhibition, the New History Group (*Xin lishi xiaozu*) from Wuhan carries out a performance art piece, *Disinfecting*, in the exhibition hall.

**December:** Invited by the 1990s Society (*Jiushi niandai she*) of Peking University, a group of Yuanmingyuan village artists holds an open-air modern art exhibition on campus.

The "Second National Symposium on Oil Painting" ("Di er ci quanguo youhua yishu taolunhui") is held at Zhongyuan Hotel in Beijing.

More than 30 art critics convene in Beijing and reach a consensus on protecting intellectual property rights and institute an agreement clearly stating that any solicited writing should be paid with a rate ranging from 300 to 800 yuan per thousand characters. This agreement is published

in *Jiangsu Pictorial* (148:4, 1993), and is met with controversy in art circles.

*A History of Chinese Modern Art: 1979–1989* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi: 1979–1989*) by Lü Peng and Yi Dan and *Chinese Contemporary Art Documents '90–'91* (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu wenxian 90–91*) are published by Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House.

As at the artists' village near Yuanmingyuan, a group of artists gathers around Dashanzhuang and Siluju on the eastern outskirts of Beijing. They are often referred to as "East Village" artists, the best-known being Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming.

## 1993

**January:** The group Lanzhou Art Legion (*Lanzhou yishu juntuan*) carries out performance art in Lanzhou, performing funeral activities for a fictional character called Zhong Xiandai.

The *Countryside Project 1993* (*Xiangcun jihua 1993*), organized by Shanxi artists, begins its first activities. These include investigating the banks of the Yellow River in the Lüliang region of the province, completing a group of paintings and photographic works in the countryside, making TV series, music videos, and collections of documentary literature, all under the title *Countryside Project 1993*. In August, they hold the exhibition *Countryside Project 1993* at the National Art Gallery and the gallery of *China Daily* simultaneously.

The exhibition *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture* opens at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, later traveling to the Kunsthal Rotterdam, the Netherlands; Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, UK; and Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik, Odense, Denmark. Sixteen Chinese artists participate in the exhibition, including Huang Yong Ping, Wenda Gu, Fang Lijun, Gu Dexin, Geng Jianyi, Ni Haifeng, and Zhang Peili.

*China's New Art, Post-1989*, organized by Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, and curated by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting, is held at the Hong Kong Arts Centre and Hong Kong City Hall. It includes 54 artists from the mainland in an exhibition of more than 200 works. That year a smaller version (29 artists) travels to Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, and then from 1995 to 1997 a form of it travels to the Vancouver Art Gallery, BC, Canada, and five venues in the United States. A large-format book with genre-defining texts by Chang Tsong-zung, Li Xianting, and others is published in conjunction with the exhibition.

**March:** *Contemporary Oil Paintings from the Northeast* (*Dongbei dangdai youhua zhan*) is held at the Liaoning Museum, Shenyang, curated by Gu Zhenqing and Yang Li. At the same time, the symposium "Experiences of Oil Painting in the Northeast" ("Dongbei dangdai youhua jingyan") is convened.

The film *Unfinished Documentary* (*Wei wancheng jilupian*) documenting the lives of Yuanmingyuan artists is completed.

**April:** The Hubei New History Group's exhibition *Big Consumer Products* (*Da xiaofei yishuzhan*) is held at McDonald's in Wangfujing in Beijing. It is suspended partway through.

**May:** China Guardian Auctions Co., Ltd., is founded, the first comprehensive auction house specializing in Chinese cultural objects and artworks. It holds its first special auction for oil painting and sculpture in 1994.

**June:** The 45th Venice Biennale opens, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. In the exhibition *Passaggio a Oriente*, the curatorial consultants for which include Li Xianting and Francesca Dal Lago, 13 Chinese artists — Zhang Peili, Yu Youhan, Yu Hong, Xu Bing, Wang Ziwei, Wang Guangyi, Sun Liang, Song Haidong, Liu Wei, Li Shan, Geng Jianyi, Feng Mengbo, and Fang Lijun — participate. Wang Youshen and Wu Shanzhuan participate in Aperto '93, which Kong Chang'an helps to curate.

A smaller version of *China's New Art, Post-1989* is exhibited as *Mao Goes Pop* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

The *Annual Art Critics Nomination Exhibition (1993, Ink)* (*Meishu pipingjia niandu timing zhan [1993, shuimo]*) opens at the National Art Gallery. The chairperson for the exhibition is Lang Shaojun. A symposium accompanies the exhibition.

**July:** *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* is held at the Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus, curated by Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu; the artists included are Wenda Gu, Huang Yong Ping, Wu Shanzhuan, and Xu Bing.

The *First Chinese Oil Painting Biennial* (*Shoujie Zhongguo youhua shuangnian zhan*) is held at the National Art Gallery, a partially non-governmentally organized national exhibition.

**September:** The *First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* is held at Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia. A symposium titled "Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific" is held. The Chinese artists included are Ding Yi, Li Lei, Shen Haopeng, Shi Hui, Sun Liang, Xu Jiang, Yu Youhan, and Zhou Changjiang.

*Gilbert & George China Exhibition (Yingguo yishujia Jierbote yu Qiaozhi zuopinzhān)* is held at the National Art Gallery and later travels to Shanghai.

**October:** Peng De, Li Mei, and Yang Xiaoyan create the weekly pictorial *Focus (Jiaodian)* in Shenzhen.

The *October Art Experimental Exhibition (Shiyue yishu shiyanzhān)* is held at the underground exhibition hall at Shanghai Huashang Art School.

**November:** The *First Chinese Art Exposition (Di yi jie Zhongguo yishu bolanhui)*, organized by the Ministry of Culture, is held at the China Export Commodities Trade Fair Building in Guangzhou.

**December:** Art critic Gao Ling organizes the forum "Contemporary Art Salon" ("Dangdai meishu shalong") with the objective to "study, explore, and exchange information on the cultural value and creative state of current Chinese avant-garde art."

*Contemporary Chinese Art* is held at Z Gallery in the SoHo district in New York.

**Andrew Solomon's article "Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China" is published as the cover story of a *New York Times Magazine*.**

The exhibition *Red Star Over China: Tenuous Peace* is held at the Keen Gallery, New York.

*Chinese Fine Arts in the 1990s: Experiences in Fine Arts in China (90 niandai de Zhongguo meishu, Zhongguo jingyanzhān)* is held at Sichuan Art Gallery, Chengdu.

## 1994

**January:** Xu Bing's experimental exhibition *Cultural Animal (Wenhua dongwu)* is held at Beijing's Hanmo Art Gallery. It is Xu Bing's first exhibition in China since he left for the United States in 1990.

*French Abstract Painter Pierre Soulages (Faguo chouxiang huajia Sulare)* is shown at the National Art Gallery.

**March:** *Italian Trans-Avant-Garde Painter Mimmo Paladino (Yidali chaoqianwei huajia Baladinuo)* is held at the National Art Gallery.

**April:** *Fine Arts Literature (Meishu wenxian)*, a periodical compiled by Peng De, begins publication by Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House.

Wu Guanzhong sues Shanghai Duo Yun Xuan and Hong Kong Yong Cheng Antiques Auction Company for auctioning a forged *Bombarding the Headquarters (Pao da silingbu)*. The case comes to trial at a mid-level People's Court. It is the first lawsuit in China of a domestic painter suing an auction company, and Wu eventually wins the case.

**May:** The journal *Avant-Garde Today (Jinri xianfeng)* begins publication by SDX Joint Publishing.

The *Third Modern Chinese Art Research Documents Exhibition (Zhongguo dangdai yishu yanjiu wenxian ziliao di san hui zhan)* is held at East China Normal University in Shanghai. The theme is *Installation, Environment, Performance (Zhuangzhi, huanjing, xingwei)* and explores the issue of "shifts in media in avant-garde art."

**July:** The avant-garde *Black Cover Book (Heipishu)* is privately published and circulated underground, edited by Zeng Xiaojun, Ai Weiwei, and Xu Bing, with Zigong (Feng Boyi) as text editor. Zeng Xiaojun and Ai Weiwei subsequently edit and privately publish the *White Cover Book (Baipishu)* and *Gray Cover Book (Huipishu)* in 1995 and 1997, respectively.

Wang Jinsong and Liu Anping screen their video work *MW — Good Morning Beijing (MW — Beijing ninzao)* at Dahua Cinema in Beijing. During the screening, Zhao Shaoruo and Liu Anping splash ink onto the audiences, later referred to as the "ink-splashing incident."

**August:** *Experiments in Tension — '94 Expressive Ink Painting Exhibition (Zhang li de shiyan — 94 biaoxianxing shuimo zhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery. It is curated by Chen Tiejun with Liu Xiaochun as the exhibition's academic chairperson.

**September:** Liu Haisu Art Gallery in Changzhou, Jiangsu, opens.

**October:** The *Annual Art Critics' Nomination Exhibition (1994, Oil Painting) (Meishu pipingjia niandu timingzhan [1994, youhua])* is held at the National Art Gallery. It is sponsored by the Metropolitan Art Center (*Beijing daduhui meishu zhongxin*) and Chongqing Huaren Dangdai Art Company. Shui Tianzhong serves as the chairperson of the exhibition. During the exhibition, a symposium is also held at the State Council Hostel.

Fang Lijun, Li Shan, Liu Wei, Wang Guangyi, Yu Youhan, and Zhang Xiaogang participate in the 22nd Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil.

**November:** The "Symposium on Theories of Chinese Art Creation in the 1990s" ("Jiushi niandai Zhongguo meishu chuanguo lilun yantaohui"), sponsored by the journal *Art* and commissioned by the CCP group, the Chinese Artists' Association, is held in Longshan, Guangzhou.

**December:** The *Eighth National Exhibition of Outstanding Artwork (Di ba jie quanguo meizhan youxiu zuopinzhān)* is held at the National Art Gallery.

*Jiangsu Pictorial* (168:12, 1994) publishes Yi Ying's article "The Meaning of Work Should be Clear" ("Liqiu mingque de yiyi"), which provokes extensive discussions on the issue of "meaning."

## 1995

**February:** *Foeraendering/Utveckling (Change)* is organized at Konsthallen, Götaplatsen, Göteborg, Sweden, and assisted by the Cultural Emissary of the Swedish Embassy in China.

**March:** The Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai, opens.

The group performances *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain (Wei wumingshan zenggao yimi)* and *Nine Holes (Jiugedong)* are performed on Beijing's Miaofeng Mountain, by performance artists mostly from the East Village.

**June:** *Configura 2 — Dialog der Kulturen* is held in Erfurt, Germany. The Chinese section is curated by Hans van Dijk from New Amsterdam Art Consultant Company and Juliane Noth, a long-time resident in China. Participating Chinese artists include the New Measurement Group (*Xin kedu xiaozu*; formerly the Analysis Group, *Jiexi xiaozu*), Ai Weiwei, Jiang Jie, and Liu Anping.

*Des del país del centre: Avantguardes artistiques xineses* is held at Centre d'Arte Santa Mónica in Barcelona, Spain, as part of the exhibition *Aperto '95*, funded and sponsored by the Barcelona government's cultural organizations. Huang Du participates in the curatorial work.

The 46th Venice Biennale opens. Chinese artists include Liu Wei, Zhang Xiaogang, and Yan Peiming. One of the exhibitions, *Asiana: Contemporary Art from the Far East*, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva and Gino di Maggio, comprises artists from China, Japan, and Korea, and participating Chinese artists include Gu Dexin, Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Yang Jun.

**July:** The first international environmental art exhibition titled *Keepers of the Waters* is held in Chengdu, Sichuan. It is initiated and organized by American artist Betsy Damon. This art event is organized three more times, in 1996, 1997, and 2000.

The Central Academy of Fine Arts moves out of the Wangfujing district of Beijing.

**August:** The Female Art and Cultural Society (*Nüxing wenhua yishu xueshe*), affiliated with the China Arts Research Academy, is founded. Tao Yongbai is appointed director.

The *Invitational Exhibition of Chinese Women Painters (Zhonghua nühuajia yaoqing-zhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery,

curated by Jia Fangzhou and Deng Pingxiang. The 39 participating female artists come from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and overseas. Lin Tianmiao and Jiang Jie's installation works fail to pass the censors and therefore are removed.

The Three Men Studio (*Sanren lianhe gongzuoshi*) (Sui Jianguo, Zhan Wang, and Yu Fan) carries out activities on the ruins of the original site of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Later, they organize an exhibition called *Women. Site (Nüren xianchang)* is held at the contemporary gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts High School. It is specifically directed at the United Nation's Women's Congress audience.

**The United Nation's Fourth International Women's Congress is held in Beijing.**

*Der Abschied von der Ideologie* opens at Kampnagel Halle, K3, Hamburg, Germany, sponsored by the Cultural Bureau of Hamburg, and curated by Shan Fan and Li Xianting.

**September:** The First Kwangju Biennale opens in Kwangju, Korea, with the theme *Beyond the Borders*. Participating Chinese artists include Fang Lijun, Feng Mengbo, Lü Shengzhong, Song Dong, and Wang Jianwei.

**October:** The most famous oil painting during the Cultural Revolution, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan (Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan)*, is sold for 5.5 million yuan (US\$659,844) at the 1995 China Guardian autumn auction.

**November:** *Tension and Expression — Ink Painting Exhibition (Zhangli yu biao xian — shuimo zhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery, curated by Chen Tiejun with Liu Xiaochun as the exhibition's academic chairperson. The participating artists are mostly young painters engaged in modern ink painting. This exhibition is a follow up to the gallery's 1994 ink exhibition.

*Open Your Mouth and Close Your Eyes — Beijing-Berlin Art Communication Exhibition (Zhangkai zui, bishang yan, Beijing-Bolin yishu jiaoliu zhan)* is held at the Art Museum of Capital Normal University, Beijing. The exhibition is cocurated by Huang Du and Angelika Stepken.

**December:** The *Annual Art Critics' Nomination Exhibition (1995, Sculpture and Installation) (Meishu pipingjia niandu timing zhan [1995, diaosu yu zhuangzhi])* holds only a nomination event, chaired by Liu Xiaochun, as insufficient funds are raised. The results are published in *Jiangsu Pictorial* (183:3, 1996).

## 1996

**March:** *In the Name of Art — Chinese Contemporary Art Exchange Exhibition (Yi yishu de mingyi — Zhongguo dangdai yishu*

*jioliuzhan*) is held at Liu Haisu Art Museum in Shanghai, curated by Zhu Qi.

The First Shanghai Biennale (*Shanghai meishu shuangnian zhan*) is held at the Shanghai Art Museum with the theme *Open Space (Kaifang de kongjian)*. The exhibition is cosponsored by the Shanghai Cultural Bureau and the Shanghai Art Museum. A symposium on the "development and possibilities of foreign artistic styles in China" is also held.

**April:** An "International Academic Symposium on the *Rent Collection Courtyard Sculpture*" ("*Nisu Shouzu yuan guoji xueshu yantaohui*") is held at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing.

**May:** The magazine *New Photo (Xin sheying)*, self-funded by artists Liu Zheng and Rong Rong, starts publication and circulation. By 1998, four issues have been produced by hand and photocopied, and circulated privately.

**June:** The "Chinese Contemporary Ink Art Heading Toward the 21st Century" symposium ("*Zouxiang 21 shiji de Zhongguo dangdai shuimo yishu yantaohui*") and exhibition are held at Huanan Normal University in Guangzhou, with Pi Daojian as the exhibition's academic chairperson. The central topics for the symposium are: "the trend of deconstructing easel painting and contemporary ink art, cultural collisions in contemporary ink art, and the contemporaneity and internationalness of ink art in the 1990s." Participants demonstrate diverse opinions on how to position contemporary ink and sort out relevant theoretical issues.

**July:** *The Current State of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting (Dangdai Zhongguo shuimo xianzhuang zhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery.

**September:** The video art exhibition *Image and Phenomena (Xianxiang, yingxiang)* is held at the gallery of the China National Academy of Fine Arts — formerly called the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts — Hangzhou, curated by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie. Participating artists include Zhang Peili, Zhu Jia, Yan Lei, Yang Zhenzhong, Wang Gongxin, Tong Biao, Qiu Zhijie, Qian Weikang, Li Yongbin, Gao Shiqiang, Gao Shiming, Chen Shaoping, Chen Shaoxiong, and others. During the exhibition three symposia are held: "Art in the Age of Reproduction" ("*Yingxiang zengzhi shidai de yishu*"), "Image and Phenomena" ("*Xianxiang, yingxiang*"), and "The Possibilities for Video Art" ("*Luxiang yishu de kenengxing*"). Two texts — *Documents of Video Art (Luxiang yishu wenxian)* and *Art and Historical*

*Consciousness (Yishu yu lishiyishi)* — are privately published in conjunction with the exhibition and distributed during its run.

The *Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* is held at Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Participating Chinese artists are Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Yanyin, Wang Guangyi, Wang Jianwei, Wang Luyan, and Zhang Xiaogang.

**October:** The Sixth Plenary Session of the 14th Central Committee of the CCP is held in Beijing, and passes The CCP'S Resolution on Several Issues Regarding the Strengthening of the Development of a Socialist Spiritual Civilization.

**December:** *Reality: Present and Future — 1996 Chinese Contemporary Art Exhibition (Xianshi: jintian yu mingtian — 1996 Zhongguo dangdai yishuzhan)* is held at the Beijing International Art Palace gallery in the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza Hotel. Leng Lin acts as the chief curator. The exhibition is sponsored by the Sungari International Auction Co., Ltd., and is followed by an auction.

The multimedia *First Exhibition of the Cartoon Generation '96 (Katong yi dai 96 di yi huizhan)* is held at the exhibition hall of the Art Department at Huanan Normal University in Guangzhou.

The *First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art 96–97 (96, 97 shoujie dangdai yishu xueshu yaoqingzhan)*, originally intended to open at the National Art Gallery on November 31, 1996, is canceled the day before. It is sponsored by Hong Kong's China Oil Painting Gallery and the journal *Gallery (Hualang)* from Guangdong. The chief academic curator is Huang Zhuan. The painting and sculpture section is held at the Pao Siu Loong Gallery at the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

*Returning to the Visual — Figurative Paintings by Five Artists from China National Academy of Fine Arts (Huidao shijue — Zhongguo meishu xueyuan juxiang biaoqian huihua wuren zhan)* is held at the exhibition hall at the China National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou.

## 1997

**January:** The Annie Wong Art Foundation is founded in Vancouver, BC. It is dedicated to "promoting and expanding international recognition and understanding of contemporary Chinese art."

*Floating: '97 Fuzhou Contemporary Art Exhibition (Piaoyi: 97 fuzhou dangdai yishu lianzhan)* is held at the Fuzhou Fine Arts Academy, Fujian.

**February:** Deng Xiaoping dies.

*Paintings by Chen Yifei, a Chinese Artist Living in the U.S. (Lumei huajia Chen Yifei huazhan)* is held at the National Art Gallery.

**March:** Cai Guo-Qiang's first solo exhibition in Europe, *Flying Dragon in the Heavens*, opens at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark.

**April:** The exhibition *Red and Grey — Eight Avant-Garde Chinese Artists* is held at SooBin Gallery in Singapore. It includes Liu Wei, Mao Xuhui, Wang Guangyi, Wei Guangqing, Ye Yongqing, Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang, and Zhou Chunya.

The He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen opens.

**May:** **The Spiritual Civilization Steering Committee (Zhongyang jingshen wenming jianshe zhidao weiyuanhui) is founded in Beijing.**

**June:** The 47th Venice Biennale opens. Cai Guo-Qiang exhibits in the *Future, Past, Present* exhibition in the Arsenale.

Documenta X opens in Kassel, Germany; Feng Mengbo and Wang Jianwei participate.

**July:** **The British handover ceremony of Hong Kong to China takes place. Hong Kong is established as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic.**

The Ministry of Culture sponsors the *Grand Exhibition of Chinese Art (Zhongguo yishu dazhan)*, multiple exhibitions throughout China to celebrate the return of Hong Kong. Liu Xiaochun and Deng Pingxiang assume the positions of secretary general and deputy general, respectively, of the preparatory committee. Pi Daojian serves as the chairperson of the Chinese painting section in Shanghai, while Jia Fangzhou chairs the Chinese contemporary oil painting section in Shanghai.

The Fourth Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon opens in Lyon, France, curated by Harald Szeemann. The Chinese artists included are An Hong, Chen Zhen, Feng Mengbo, Pu Jie, Wang Xingwei, Xu Yihui, Yan Pei Ming, and Zhang Peili.

**August:** Thirteen art publishing firms and Xinhua Bookstore sign on to collaborate on the publication of the 48-volume *Collected Works of Chinese Modern Art (Zhongguo xiandai meishu quanji)*, as part of the larger collection *Classification of Chinese Fine Arts (Zhongguo meishu fenlei quanji)*.

*Demonstration of Video Art '97 China (97 luxiang yishu guanmozhan)* opens at the art gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, curated by Wu Meichun, and including works by more than 30 Chinese artists. Qiu Zhijie's solo exhibition *Logic: Five Video Installations (Luoji: Wuge luxiang zhuangzhi)* takes place there at the same time.

Cai Guo-Qiang's first solo exhibition in the United States, *Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century*, is held at the Queens Museum of Art in New York.

**September:** The preview of *New Image: Art Exhibition of Conceptual Photography (Xin yingxiang: guannian shiying yishuzhan)* and "Symposium on Theories of Conceptual Photography" ("Guannian sheying lilun yantaohui") are held at the main hall of the Beijing Theatre. Both are sponsored by the journal *Modern Photography (Xiandai sheying bao)* and the Beijing Visual Art Center, and curated by Dao Zi.

*Zeitgenossische Fotokunst Aus der VR China* is held in Germany at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, including 16 experimental photographers' work. It is an important show for Chinese experimental photography.

*Stir-Fry: A Video Curator's Dispatches from China*, a Web site by Barbara London, a curator at MoMA New York, chronicles her travels and encounters with media art and artists in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou.

**October:** *A Chinese Dream: '97 Chinese Contemporary Art (Zhongguo zhi meng: 97 Zhongguo dangdai yishu)* is held at the Yanhuang Art Gallery in Beijing, curated by Leng Lin, and after which an auction takes place.

**December:** *Bloodline: Big Family — Zhang Xiaogang's Oil Painting Exhibition (Xueyuan: da jiating — Zhang Xiaogang youhua zhan)* is held at the contemporary art gallery at the Central Academy of Fine Arts High School.

*Photography and Video Art from China* exhibition at Max Protetch Gallery in New York includes work by six artists, Wang Jinsong, Zhang Peili, Zhuang Hui, Ma Liuming, Yang Zhenzhong, Li Yongbin.

## 1998

**January:** *Trace of Existence — A Private Showing of Contemporary Chinese Art '98 (Shengcun henji — 98 Zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmozhan)*, curated by Feng Boyi and Cai Qing, is held at Art Now Studio in Yaojiazhuang, Beijing. Artists create works on-site.

**March:** The art exhibition *Century, Women (Shiji nüxing)* is held in Beijing at the National Art Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Beijing International Art Palace gallery located inside the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza Hotel simultaneously. The exhibition is curated by Jia Fangzhou and sponsored by the Center for Comparative Studies at China National Academy of Fine Arts. The accompanying symposium is called



"Gender Perspective: Women's Art and Artistic Feminism in Cultural Transformation" ("Xingbie shijiao: wenhua bianqian zhong de nüxing yishu yu yishu nüxing").

*Mondrian in China — A Documentary Exhibition with Chinese Originals (Mengde li'an zai Zhongguo — Mengde li'an wenxian yu Zhongguo yishujia zuopin)*, sponsored by China Exhibition Exchange Centre and the Netherlands Embassy in China, is held at the Beijing International Art Palace.

*Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art Exhibitions and International Symposium* is held in various venues in Vancouver, BC, organized by Hank Bull, Zheng Shengtian, David Chan, and Xia Wei. Structured around the "Jiangnan" region south of the Yangzi River and the cultural background of the participating artists, the project's exhibitions include: two-person shows of Xu Bing and Huang Yong Ping, Zhou Tiehai and Geng Jianyi, Chen Zhen and Ken Lum, Wenda Gu and Zhang Peili, Johnson Su-sing Chow and Chen Feng-Tze, solo exhibitions or performances by Gu Xiong, Hu Jieming, Chen Yanyin, Yang Zhenzhong, Shi Yong, Paul Wong, a group exhibition of Ding Yi, Shen Fan, Chen Haiyan, Shi Hui, and Liang Shaoji; and the exhibitions *Three Generations of Modernism: Qiu Ti, Pang Tao, and Lin Yan*, and late works by Pan Tianshou (1897–1971). A related symposium on Chinese art is held at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

**April:** Internal documents from the experimental art event *Wildlife: Starting from Jingzhe Day, 1997 (Yesheng — 1997 nian Jingzhe shi)* are published. *Wildlife* is sponsored by Beijing Contemporary Art Center and curated by Song Dong and Guo Shirui. Starting on March 5, it lasts one year and 27 artists from across the nation participate.

*Video and Computer Art Exhibition (Luxiang, diannao yishu zhan)* is held at Jilin Provincial School of Industrial Design in Changchun.

**June:** *Die Hälfte des Himmels — Chinesische Künstlerinnen der Gegenwart/Half of the Sky: Contemporary Chinese Women Artists* opens at the Frauenmuseum Bonn, curated by Chris Werner and Qiu Ping.

The Fourth Taipei Biennale *Site of Desire (Yuwang changyu)* is held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan, curated by Nanjo Fumio. Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen, Gu Dexin, Lin Yilin, Xu Bing, Xu Tan, Wang Qingsong, Zheng Guogu, and others participate.

**August:** *Persistent Deviation/Corruptionist (Pianzhi)*, curated by Xu Ruotao and Xu Yihui, is held in the basement of Building 3, no. 10,

East Third Ring Road, Beijing. An avant-garde "underground" exhibition, it is closed down by authorities the next day.

The exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* opens at Asia Society Galleries and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. Organized by the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and curated by Gao Minglu, it includes 58 artists from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and expatriates living overseas. A three-day symposium, "Pushing Boundaries: New Directions in Chinese Art," is held. The exhibition goes to SFMOMA and the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; and then travels to Monterrey, Mexico; Seattle and Tacoma, Washington; Hong Kong; and Canberra, Australia. The catalogue, edited by Gao Minglu, gives an overview of the subject since 1984 and is copublished with University of California Press.

**October:** The '98 *Asia-Pacific Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition (98 yatai dangdai yishu yaoqingzhan)* takes place at the Fuzhou Fine Arts Academy and Yushan Hotel, Fujian, curated by Fan Di'an. The invited artists are from Canada, U.S., Japan, and China.

A "Symposium on the Current State and Trends in 1990s Chinese Art" ("90 niandai Zhongguo meishu xianzhuang yu qushi yantaohui") is held in the Museum of Chinese Art at the Wang family courtyard in Lingshi County, Shanxi province. The symposium is sponsored by the Central Academy of Fine Arts and its journal *Fine Arts Research*. Fan Di'an and Yi Ying serve as academic chairs.

The first Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) is awarded to Zhou Tiehai (US\$3,000), Yang Mian, and Xie Nanxing. This award is funded by the Chinese Contemporary Art Association in Switzerland to recognize artists under the age of 35. The jury this year includes Yi Ying, Ai Weiwei, collector Uli Sigg, and curator Harald Szeemann.

The Second Shanghai Biennale takes place at the Shanghai Art Museum and Liu Haisu Art Museum with the theme *Inheritance and Exploration (Ronghui yu tuozhan)*. A symposium on "Ink Art in the Contemporary Cultural Environment" ("Dangdai wenhua huanjing zhong de shuimo yishu") is also held during the exhibition.

**November:** *Reflecting on Their Own Tradition: An Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art (Chuantong Fansi — Zhongguo dangdai yishu zhan)* is held at the German Embassy in Beijing and curated by Eckhard R. Schneider.

*It's Me! (Shi wo!)*, curated by Leng Lin, is slated to open at the Main Ritual Hall in the former Imperial Ancestral Temple in Beijing, only to be cancelled by authorities the day before the opening. The reason cited: "failure in completing the required procedure for approval."

The *First Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture (Di yi jie dangdai diaosu yishu nianduzhan)* opens at the outdoor space at He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen. The duration of the exhibition is one year.

*Counter-Perspective: The Environment and Us (Fan shi: zishen yu huanjing)* takes place at Construction University in Tongxian, Beijing, with Jia Fangzhou as art chair and curated by Lin Lin, Zhou Yibin, and others.

**December:** The First International Ink Painting Biennial of Shenzhen (*Di yi jie Shenzhen guoji shuimohua shuangnianzhan*), sponsored by the Shenzhen municipal government, is held at the Guan Shanyue Art Museum. Talks on the exhibition are also held.

The first "He Xiangning Art Museum Academic Forum — Contemporary Art and Humanities" ("Shoujie He Xiangning meishuguan xueshu luntan — dangdai yishu yu renwen kexue") is held at the museum in Shenzhen, with Huang Zhuan as academic curator. During the forum, an exhibition of the *Upriver Gallery Collection (Shanghe meishuguan shoucang zhan)* also takes place.

## 1999

**January:** *Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion (Hou ganxing: yixing yu wangxiang)*, curated by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, is held in the basement of Building No. 202 in the Shaoyaoju neighborhood in Beisihuan, Beijing. The exhibition includes some works made from human body parts.

**February:** *Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, is organized by the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Illinois, curated by Wu Hung. The 21 artists in the exhibition include Wenda Gu, Sui Jianguo, Cai Jin, Wang Jin, Xing Danwen, Xu Bing, Yin Xiuzhen, Zhan Wang, and Zhu Fadong. On April 17, a symposium on "Global Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Art" takes place. It travels to the University of Oregon Museum of Art, Eugene, and the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

China Art Archives & Warehouse (*Yishu wenjian cangku*), created by Ai Weiwei, Hans van Dijk, and collector Frank Uytterhaegen, is

completed, transforming an old warehouse in Longguashu Village in the southern outskirts of Beijing into an art space, where they hold the exhibition *Innovations Part I (Chuangxin)*.

**April:** *Street Theater*, curated by Hou Hanru and Evelyne Jouanno, takes place at apexart, New York.

*Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s*, organized by the Queens Museum of Art, opens in New York and begins a national tour. Gao Minglu is one of the eight curators.

The exhibition *Supermarket (Chaoshi zhan)*, curated by Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Alexander Brandt, takes place on the fourth floor at Haoshanghai Plaza, 138 Huaihai Road, Shanghai. It is an experimental exhibition that rethinks the entire exhibitionary format. Partway through, it is shut down by the authorities.

The exhibition *Departing from China (Cong Zhongguo chufa)* is intended to open at the Design Museum in Beijing, curated by Zhang Zhaohui, but is banned before its opening.

**May:** "Developing a New Network of Asian Art: An International Conference on Asian Art Curatorship" ("Faxian Yazhou yishu xin hangxian: Yazhou meishu cezhanren huiyi") is held in Taipei; participants include Chang Tsong-zung, Fei Dawei, and Hou Hanru.

Dongyu Art Museum in Shenyang is founded with Wang Yigang as director. It holds the exhibition *Open Channels: First Exhibition of the Dongyu Art Museum Collection (Kaiqi tongdao: dongyu meishuguan shoujie shoucangzhan)*, with Li Xianting as the academic chair.

*Ouh La La Kitsch (Kua shiji caihong zhan)* opens at the Teda Contemporary Art Museum in Tianjin, curated by Liao Wen and Li Xianting.

**June:** *Extraordinary Space — Experimental Works by Young Chinese Architects (Feichang kongjian — Zhongguo qingnian jianzhushi shiyan zuopin zhan)* takes place at the exhibition hall of the Beijing International Convention Center, curated by Wang Mingxian.

At the 48th Venice Biennale, Huang Yong Ping is one of two artists representing France in its pavilion. Cai Guo-Qiang shows *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (p. 369) and receives a Golden Lion Award. More than 20 Chinese artists exhibit at *d'APERTutto* curated by Harald Szeemann, including Lu Hao, Ma Liuming, and Yue Minjun.

**August:** The exhibition *Life and Culture (Shenghuo yu yishu)*, curated by Li Zhenhua, in the basement of the Association of Chinese Literature building in Beijing is banned.

**September:** The *Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* is held at Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, with the theme *Beyond the Future*. Chinese participants, including expatriate artists listed under "Crossing Borders," include Ah Xian, Chen Zhen, Guan Wei, Li Yongbin, Sang Ye, Shi Yong, Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing, Xu Tan, Yin Xiuzhen, and Zhang Peili.

**October:** *Visions of Pluralism: Contemporary Art in Taiwan 1988–1999 (Fushuyuan de shiye: Taiwan dangdai meishu 1998–1999)* is held at the National Art Gallery, curated by Victoria Lu (Rongzhi). During the exhibition, there is a symposium titled "Regional Art and Globalization — A Dialogue on a New Century of Prospects for Contemporary Cross-Straits Art" ("Diyu yishu yu quanqiuhua — liang an dangdai yishu zhanwang xin shiji de duitan").

The *Second Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture (Di er jie dangdai diaosu yishu nianzhan)* takes place at Overseas Chinese Town in Shenzhen; curated by Huang Zhuan, its theme is *Balanced Existence: Future Plans for the Eco-City*.

**November:** Xu Bing creates a banner for The Museum of Modern Art, New York, with his original "New English Calligraphy" as part of *Projects 70*.

*Food for Thought: Chinese Contemporary Art* takes place at De Witte Dame in Eindhoven, as part of the Chinese Karakters Festival in the Netherlands.

**December:** *Chinese Artists in the World — Installation and Documentary* is held at Art Commune, Hong Kong, curated by Ma Qinzong.

*Gate of the New Century: 1979–1999 Chinese Art Invitational Exhibition (Shiji zhi men — 1979–1999 Zhongguo yishu yaoqing zhan)* is held at the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum at the Chengdu International Convention Center, sponsored by the Municipal Government of Chengdu. It is curated by Lang Shaojun (Chinese painting), Shui Tianzhong (oil painting), Liu Xiaochun (sculpture and installation), and Qiu Zhenzhong (calligraphy).

#### China resumes sovereignty over Macao.

This year, *Collections of Critical Essays on Chinese Contemporary Art Phenomena (Zhongguo dangdai meishu xianxiang piping wencong)*, edited by Zhang Xiaoling, is published by Jilin Fine Arts Publishing House. It comprises 10 volumes, e.g., *Abstract Art, Pop Art, Feminism, New Art, Neo-Classical Art, New Literati Art*, and so on. Contributors include more than 10 historians and critics, such as Zhang Xiaoling, Yu Ding, Sun Jin, Lü Pintian, Liao Wen, and Hang Jian.

The exhibition *Images Telling Stories — Chinese New Conceptual Photography (Yingxiang zhiyi — Zhongguo xin gainian sheying yishu zhan)* travels to Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, Changchun, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong.

## 2000

**January:** *2000 China: Internet, Video, and Photo Art Exhibition (2000 nian Zhongguo wangluo sheying yingxiang yishu zhan)* is held at the exhibition hall at Jilin Provincial Academy of Fine Arts in Changchun, curated by Huang Yan, Hai Bo, and Jiao Yingqi. Featuring mediums such as the Internet, multimedia, digital imagery, and photography, it is the first avant-garde art exhibition to use the term "Internet" in its title; 48 artists from across the country participate.

**February:** *Mingling under the Spring Moon — A Sino-German Painting Exhibition (Jiaorong zai chunyu xia — zhongde huihua jiaoliu zhan)* takes place at the German Embassy in Beijing, curated by Eckhard R. Schneider.

The exhibition *Back-Forth and Right-Left (Qinhouzuoyou)*, curated by Wang Mai, is held at Hechang Garden in Majuqiao, Tongzhou, Beijing.

**March:** The Third Kwangju Biennale opens with the theme *Man + Space*. Participating Chinese artists include Ma Liuming, Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Qingsong, Yan Peiming, Wenda Gu, and Guan Wei.

The Shanghai Art Museum moves to a new site on 325 Nanjingxi Road.

**April:** Sponsored by ShanghART Gallery and Bank of China, the artist Zhao Bandi presents *Zhao Bandi and the Little Panda (Zhao Bandi he xiongmao)*, large-scale conceptual art light-boxes in the form of public service announcements, at the new Shanghai Pudong International Airport. This is the first event integrating art and advertisement in Shanghai.

An international delegation of curators, including Zheng Shengtian, Yao Shouyi, Leung Kit Wah, Sarat Maharaj, Ken Lum, Sebastián López, Susanne Ghez, Okwui Enwezor, Chris Dercon, Lynne Cooke, and Jessica Bradley, conduct a 15-day tour of Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Taipei, and Hong Kong, where they interact with Chinese artists, critics, and curators.

The exhibition *Home?: Contemporary Art Proposals (Jia?: xiandai yishu ti an)*, curated by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, takes place at the Star-Moon Home Furnishing Center in Shanghai.

The exhibition *Infatuated with Injury (Dui shanghai de milian)* takes place at the

Research Institute of Sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, curated by Li Xianting. Some works in the exhibition use corpses and animals as material and thus provoke heated debate.

*Man and Animals (Ren yu dongwu)*, a series of performance events curated by Gu Zhenqing, takes place over a period of five months in different locations in Beijing, Chengdu, Guilin, Nanjing, Changchun, and Guiyang.

A comprehensive Chinese Web site on art, Tom.com, launches in Beijing, created by Feng Boyi, Pi Li, and Hua Tianxue.

"Facing the New Century: The Opening Ceremony of the Qingdao Sculpture Art Museum and Academic Events on Sculpture" ("Mianxiang xinshiji: Qingdao diaosu yishuguan luocheng qingdian ji diaosu xueshu xilie huodong") takes place in Qingdao, Shandong.

**May:** Curated by Jia Fangzhou and others, the *Opening Exhibition of Shangyuan Artists' Studios (Shangyuan yishujia gongzuoshi kaifang zhan)* takes place in Shangyuan Village in Xingshou, Changping District, Beijing. Artists residing here hold open studios for the public to visit. During the exhibition, a "critics' tea party" is held to discuss the phenomenon of Chinese artists relocating from the city to the countryside.

The 12th Biennale of Sydney takes place; Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing participate in the exhibition.

**June:** The Seventh Venice Architecture Biennale opens with the theme *Less Aesthetics: More Ethics*. Yung Ho Chang is the only Chinese architect invited.

Luo Zhongli, president of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, sues Harald Szeemann, curator of the 48th Venice Biennale, and Chinese expatriate artist Cai Guo-Qiang for copyright violation, charging that Cai's work at the 48th Venice Biennale plagiarizes the group of clay sculptures *Rent Collection Courtyard (Shouzuyuan)*. This unleashes controversy in China on the boundaries between copyright infringement and now-common contemporary art methods such as reproduction and appropriation. On June 20, the journal *Avant-Garde Today* holds a "Symposium on *Rent Collection Courtyard* and Contemporary Art" ("*Shouzuyuan yu dangdai yishu zuotanhui*") discussing a series of important problems in Chinese art history and new issues regarding contemporary art and copyright. Wu Hung, Li Xianting, Liu Xiaochun, and Sui Jianguo participate in the symposium, and attorney Ma Jianjun

from Huadong Attorney Firm in Shanghai, Fei Dawei, Zhu Qingsheng, and Gao Ling provide written speeches in absentia.

The 31st Art Basel opens; Shanghai's ShanghART Gallery is invited to attend.

The Fifth Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon takes place, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, with the theme *Partage d'exotismes*. Participating Chinese artists include Wenda Gu, Liang Shaoji, Lu Hao, Peng Yu, Qin Ga, Cai Guo-Qiang, Sun Yuan, Sui Jianguo, Xiao Yu, Yan Peiming, Zhang Hanzi, Zhang Huan, Zhu Yu, and Zhuang Hui.

**August:** *Documentation of Chinese Avant-Garde Art in the 1990s* is held at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, curated by Feng Boyi and Hua Tianxue. A symposium on "Chinese Avant-Garde — Current State and Prospects for the 21st Century" is also held.

**September:** The 18th World Image Festival is held in Amsterdam. Chinese artists Wang Gongxin, Wang Jianwei, and Song Dong are invited.

"Retrospect and Prospect — Symposium on the Historiography of Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century" ("Huigu yu zhanwang — Zhongguo ershi shiji meishu shixue xueshu yantaohui") takes place at Jintai Hotel in Beijing.

The *Second Invitational Exhibition of Young Contemporary Sculptors (Di er jie dangdai qingnian diaosujia yaoqing zhan)*, sponsored by the Department of Sculpture at China National Academy of Fine Arts and the Shenzhen Institute of Sculpture, is held at West Lake Art Museum in Hangzhou, the Museum of Sculpture Art in Qingdao, and the exhibition hall at Shenzhen Institute of Sculpture.

**October:** *The Third Sex — Internet Art. China (Di san xing — wangluo yishu. Zhongguo)* takes place in Beijing, curated by Huang Yan, Cang Xin, and Wang Guofeng.

**November:** The Third Shanghai Biennale opens at the Shanghai Art Museum with the theme *Shanghai Spirit (Haishang, Shanghai)*, curated by Hou Hanru, Toshio Shimizu, Zhang Qing, Li Xu, and Fang Zengxian. It is the first time for an official Chinese museum exhibition to adopt an international curatorial system. In addition to traditional art forms, it includes installation, video, film, media, photography, architecture, and Conceptual art.

The exhibition *Fuck Off/Buhezuo fangshi*, curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi in defiance of the Third Shanghai Biennale, takes place in Donglang Gallery in Shanghai (p. 355), provoking a grand discussion over "performance art."

*Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* is held at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, curated by Wu Hung.

**December:** The *Third Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture (Di san jie dangdai diaosu yishu niandu zhan)* is held at the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, curated by Yi Ying and Yin Shuangxi.

Chen Zhen, expatriate artist, dies in Paris.

The exhibition *Contemporary Chinese Painting* takes place at the Villa Breda Museum in Padua, Italy.

In this year, *Selected Works of Fine Arts of the 20th Century (20 shiji Zhongguo meishu wenxuan)*, edited by Shui Tianzhong and Lang Shaojun, is published by Shanghai Fine Arts Publishers, a work of 1,280,000 characters, collecting more than 190 articles on modern Chinese art from the early twentieth century to the 1990s.

The Central Academy of Fine Arts and Zhejiang People's Publishing House collaboratively edit and publish a catalogue comprising 6 volumes, *1979–1999 Chinese Contemporary Art (1979–1999 Zhongguo dangdai meishu)* with Fan Di'an as editor-in-chief.

## 2001

**January:** *Journal of Literature and Art (Wenyi bao)* publishes the article "In the Name of Art: The Dead End of Chinese Avant-Garde Art" ("Yi yishu de mingyi: Zhongguo qianwei yishu de qiongtumolu") criticizing and triggering discussion over avant-garde art and performance art. On April 3, the Ministry of Culture issues a notice to cease all performances and bloody, brutal displays of obscenity in the name of art. In April, the journal *Art* conducts "Discussions on Performance Art" ("Guanyu xingwei yishu de taolun"). On November 22, the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Laws and Regulations cosponsor a "Symposium on Implementing the Central Committee of the CCP's 'Outline for Civic Morality'" ("Luoshi zhonggong zhongyang 'gongmin daode jianshe shishi gangyao' zuotanhui"), once again criticizing a few people for violent, cruel, and pornographic conduct in the name of art and proposing to tackle problems with performance art in a comprehensive way.

**March:** The exhibition *Post-Sensibility: Spree (Hou ganxing: kuanghuan)* is held at the Beijing Film Academy, curated by Qiu Zhijie.

*2001 Beijing New Century International Women's Art Exhibition (2001 nian Beijing xin shiji guoji funü yishu zhan)* opens at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing —

heretofore called the National Art Gallery — curated by Tao Yongbai.

**June:** The journal *New Wave (Xinchao)* begins publication, well-known artists and curators such as Li Xianting, Wu Wenguang, and Qiu Zhijie take part in editing. Deng Xubo is the editor-in-chief.

**July:** The *Second Northern China Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition (Di er jie beifang dangdai yishu yaoqingzhan)* is held at Dongyu Art Museum in Shenyang, curated by Wang Yigang.

**Beijing succeeds in its bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympic Games.**

*UP-ricing*, a traveling exhibition, begins circulation to seven Asian cities: Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, Chiayi (Taiwan), and Beijing. The chief curator is Andrew Lam of the Museum of Site, Hong Kong, while Zhu Qi participates in curating the Beijing stop.

**September:** *Reshuffle: In the Name of Ink and Wash (Chongxin xipai — yi huimo de mingyi)* is held at the exhibition hall of Shenzhen Institute of Sculpture, curated by Lu Hong and Sun Zhenhua.

**The United States suffers a terrorist attack, which receives widespread attention in China.**

The first *Pingyao International Photography Festival (Pingyao guoji sheying jie)* is held in the ancient city of Pingyao, Shanxi.

The *First Independent Film/Video Festival (Zhongguo shoujie yingxiang jie)* opens at the Beijing Film Academy, curated by Dong Bingfeng, Yangzi, Zhang Yaxuan, and Yang Chao. Its significance lies in that it is the first attempt to research and summarize more than 10 years of Chinese independent video-making.

**October: The Ninth Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting is held in Shanghai.**

*Reel China — New Chinese Documentary Festival* takes place in New York City.

**December: China joins the World Trade Organization (WTO).**

*Transplantation in situ — The Fourth Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture Art Exhibition (Bei yizhi de xianchang — di si jie Shenzhen dangdai diaosu yishu zhan)* is held at the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, showing public sculpture by Chinese and French artists. Huang Zhuan is the curator for the Chinese side.

The contemporary Chinese art exhibition *Dialogo — Others* takes place in Bari, Italy.

The First Chengdu Biennial (*Di yi jie Chengdu shuangnianzhan*) is organized by the Museum of Modern Art in Chengdu,

curated by Liu Xiaochun, Gu Zhenqing, Huang Xiaorong, and Feng Bin, and funded by Jiazhou California Industrial, Ltd. The theme is *Model, Easel (Yangban, jiashang)*.

The 16th Asian International Art Exhibition is held at the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou.

*Xi'an Contemporary Open Art Exhibition (Xi'an dangdai yishu kaifang zhan)* takes place at Dongyang Primary School in Xi'an.

*Knowledge Is Power (Zhishi jiushi liliang)* is sponsored by and held at the Beijing Books Building in Xidan, Beijing, curated by Feng Boyi and Hua Tianxue.

## 2002

**January:** *The Allure of Tradition — International Art Exhibition of the Contemporary Art Collection at the National Art Museum of China and Work Donated by Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig (Chuantong meili — Zhongguo meishuguan diancang dangdai meishu zuopin ji ludeweixi fufu juanzeng guoji yishupin zhan)* opens at the Museum of Modern Art in Chengdu.

**February:** *The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang (Cai Guoqiang de yishu)* is held at the Shanghai Art Museum; a symposium on the exhibition is also held.

*2002 Shanghai Abstract Art Group Show (2002 Shanghai chouxiang yishu quntizhan)* takes place at the Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai.

Wang Bing's documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* wins the grand prize at the Lisbon International Documentary Film Festival in Portugal.

**March:** The thematic art exhibition *Beijing Youth Daily — Media and Art (Beijing qingnian bao — chuanmei yu yishu)* is held at the China International Exhibition Center; the exhibition chair is Yang Jun.

**April:** *A Journey into Fantasy — Interactive Exhibition of Salvador Dali's Works (Kuangxiang de lücheng: dashi Dali huzhu yishu zhan)* takes place at the Guangdong Museum of Art.

The symposium "Chinese Oil Painting and the New Century" ("Zhongguo youhua yu xin shiji"), sponsored by the Chinese Oil Painting Society, is held in Beijing.

**May:** The symposium "Retrospective of 100 Years of Chinese Ink Painting and Its Development in the New Century" is held in New York, sponsored by the Association of Modern Chinese Art.

The Chinese contemporary art symposium "New Vision, New Media" ("Xin shixian xin meiti") is held in Duncun, Xinzhou, Shanxi province, moderated by Fan Di'an and Yi Ying.

**June:** The *Academic Exchange Exhibition of Contemporary Prints (Dangdai banhua xueshu jiaoliu zhan)* and corresponding symposium, curated by Chen Xiaoxin, are held at Chengdu Academy of Painting.

**September:** *Bridge — Changchun Contemporary Art Annual Invitational Exhibition (Qiao — Changchun dangdai yishu niandu yaoqing zhan)* takes place in the Changchun Far East Art Museum, curated by Wang Jianguo, Zhao Shulin, and Huang Yan.

The *First Triennial of Chinese Art (Shoujie Zhongguo yishu sannianzhan)* is held at Guangzhou Art Museum, curated by Peng De and Li Xiaoshan.

**November:** *Beijing Afloat (Beijing fushihui)*, the opening exhibition of Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, curated by Feng Boyi, is held in the Beijing 798 Dashanzi Art District. Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, sponsored by Tokyo Gallery, is the first foreign gallery business to open in the new Dashanzi Art District.

The 16th Congress of the CCP is held in Beijing, which issues the important decree "Three Represents" (principles for continued progress). The First Plenary Session of the 15th Central Committee of the CCP elects Hu Jintao as the General Secretary of the Central Committee.

The Fourth Shanghai Biennale opens at the Shanghai Art Museum with the theme *Urban Creation (Dushi yingzao)*, curated by Xu Jiang, Fan Di'an, Alanna Heiss, Wu Jiang, Klaus Biesenbach, and Yuko Hasegawa.

The First Guangzhou Contemporary Art Triennial, *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000) (Shoujie Guangzhou dangdai yishu sannianzhan — Chongxin jiedu: Zhongguo shiyan yishu shinian 1990–2000)* opens at the Guangdong Museum of Art, with Wu Hung as the chief curator; other curators include Wang Huangsheng, Huang Zhuan, and Feng Boyi. During the exhibition, a symposium titled "Place and Model" ("Didian yu moshi") is held. *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art 1990–2000/Chongxin jiedu: Zhongguo shiyan yishu shinian 1990–2000* is published in both Chinese and English versions, offering a comprehensive overview of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s.

## 2003

**January:** The exhibition *Junction: Architectural Experiments of Chinese Contemporary Art (Jiedian: Zhongguo dangdai yishu de jianzhu shijian)* is held at the Lianyang Architecture Art Museum, curated by Ai Weiwei and Zhang Qing.

**March:** SARS breaks out in China, creating widespread social panic.

*Chinese Maximalism (Zhongguo jiduo zhuyi)* organized by the Millennium Art Museum, Beijing, and University of Buffalo [New York] Art Galleries, SUNY Buffalo, curated by Gao Minglu, opens in Beijing.

*Text & Subtext: Contemporary Asian Women Artists* is held at X-RAY Art Center in Beijing, curated by Binghui Huangfu.

An event titled *Transborder Language: Poetry/Performance Art (Yuejie yuyan: shi/xingwei yishu de xianchang)* takes place at the Beijing Tokyo Art Projects.

Asia Art Archive (AAA), dedicated to documenting the recent history of visual art from the region in an international context, opens in Hong Kong.

**June:** The 50th Venice Biennale opens. Five artists were chosen to represent China at the first ever Chinese national pavilion, however, due to SARS, their participation is canceled.

*Alors, la Chine?* opens at Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the first large-scale Chinese contemporary art exhibition in France to be prepared in association with the Chinese government. It is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and curated by Fan Di'an.

**July:** An exhibition to celebrate the completion of the renovation of the National Art Museum of China and commemorating the 40th anniversary of its founding is held. The exhibition, *Experiment and Exploration (Shiyan, tanxun)*, includes Chinese avant-garde art.

**September:** The *2003 Shanghai Spring Art Salon (Art Shanghai) (2003 Shanghai chunji yishu shalong)* opens at the Guangda Exhibition Center, during which Wang Lin presides over the "First National Forum of Young Art Critics" ("Shoujie quanguo qingnian meishu pipingjia luntan"). Its proceedings are published in *Critics' Criticisms and Self-Criticisms (Pipingjia de piping yu ziwo piping)*.

The first Beijing International Art Biennale (*Zhongguo Beijing guoji meishu shuangnian-zhan*) takes place at the Millennium Art Museum and the National Art Museum of China, sponsored by the Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the Beijing Municipal Government, and the Chinese Artists' Association. The theme is *Originality: Contemporaneity and Locality (Chuangxin: dangdaixing yu diyuxing)*.

During the Beijing International Art Biennale, a number of avant-garde satellite exhibitions take place; two share the 798 furnace factory transformed into an art space: *Left Hand, Right Hand — A Sino-German*

*Exhibition of Contemporary Art (Zuoshou yu youshou — Zhong De dangdai yishu lianzhan)*, curated by Feng Boyi, and *Tui-Transfiguration: The Image World of Rong Rong and Inri (Tui: Rongrong and yingli)*, curated by Wu Hung (pl. 48).

The first Dadao Live Art Festival (*Dadao xianchang yishujie*) is held in the Dashanzi Art District in Beijing.

*Turnaround — the First Annual Invitational Exhibition by the journal Contemporary Artists (Zhuanxiang — 2003 Dangdai yishujia shoujie niandu yaoqingzhan)* is held at the Chongqing Museum of Art.

**September:** *2003 Microwave International New Media Arts Festival* opens at Hong Kong City Hall.

The *2003 Chinese Cartoon Industry Forum and Qingdao International Cartoon Art Week (2003 Zhongguo katong chanye luntan ji Qingdao guoji katong yishuzhou)* takes place in the International Convention Center in Qingdao.

**November:** *Double Time: Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary Asian Art (Shuangchong shijian: Yazhou dangdai yishu yaoqingzhan)* opens at the art gallery of the China National Academy of Fine Arts.

*Hello, Comrade Mingong — Contemporary Art Exhibition (Mingong tongzhi — dangdai yishu zhan)* is held at Today Art Museum, Beijing, curated by Yang Xinyi. It includes 14 artists, such as Song Dong, Qiu Zhijie, Wang Jin, Yang Fudong, and Zhang Nian.

**December:** The *Fifth Shenzhen International Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition (Di 5 jie Shenzhen guoji dangdai diaosu zhan)* takes place at Overseas Chinese Town in Shenzhen, curated by Hou Hanru and Pi Li. The theme is *The Fifth System — Public Art in the Age of Post-Planning (Di wu xitong — hou guihua shidai de gonggong yishu)*.

The photography exhibition *Humanism in China — A Contemporary Record of Photography (Zhongguo renben — jishi zai dangdai)* opens at Guangdong Museum of Art, curated by An Ge, Hu Wugong, and Wang Huangsheng. A symposium of the same title also takes place.

The international traveling exhibition of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, collection *Encounters with Modernism (Quanshi xiandai)* opens at the Shanghai Art Museum.

*Image of Images — 2003 Chinese Contemporary Oil Painting Invitational Exhibition (Tuxiang de tuxiang — 2003 Zhongguo dangdai youhua yaoqingzhan)* opens at Shenzhen Art Museum.

The first forum of the Shenzhen Art Museum, "Symbiosis and Interaction —

Contemporary Art Criticism and Contemporary Art" ("Gongsheng yu hudong — dangdai yishu piping yu dangdai yishu"), is held at the conference hall at Beilingju Hotel in Shenzhen. It reflects on Chinese contemporary art criticism and 20 years of contemporary art, and conducts a comprehensive critical review of the achievements and problems of 20 years of art criticism.

## 2004

**February:** *Zooming into Focus: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Video from the Haudenschild Collection (Jujiao Zhongguo dangdai sheying he luxiang — laizi Haudenschild fufu de shoucang)* opens at the Shanghai Art Museum.

**March:** *Chinese Digital Art Exposition (Zhongguo shuma yishu bolanhui)* is held at Haidian Theatre in Beijing.

Xu Bing's installation *Where does the dust itself collect? (He chu ruo chen ai)* wins the Artes Mundi 1 Prize in Wales.

**April:** The first *China International Gallery Exposition (CIGE) (Zhongguo guoji hualang bolanhui)* is held at the Chinese International Science and Technology Convention Center in Beijing.

The first *Dashanzi International Art Festival (DIAF) (Dashanzi guoji yishujie)* takes place in Beijing's Dashanzi Art District, curated by Huang Rui.

**June:** *Le Moine et le démon: Art contemporain chinois* is held in Lyon, coproduced by Guangdong Museum of Art, Lyon Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Guy and Myriam Ullens Foundation, and curated by Fei Dawei. This is the last and the biggest Chinese contemporary art exhibition in the "Year of China in France."

*Between Past and Future — New Photography and Video from China*, co-organized by the International Center of Photography (ICP) and the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, in collaboration with the Asia Society and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and cocurated by Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, opens in New York at the ICP and Asia Society Galleries, then travels to Chicago, Seattle, London, and Berlin.

**July:** The closing ceremony for the "Year of China in France," *China, Imagination: Chinese Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition (Zhongguo, xiangxiang: Zhongguo dangdai diaosu zhan)* is held at Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, curated by Fan Di'an and Yin Shuangxi.

**August:** The first phase of the *Tenth National Art Exhibition (Di shi jie quanguo*

*meizhan)* is held in 10 sites: Hangzhou (Chinese painting), Guangzhou (oil painting), Chengdu (prints), Shantou (watercolor, gouache), Changchun (sculpture), Xiamen (sculpture), Guangzhou (murals), Nanjing (lacquer painting, New Year's painting, propaganda art, illustration, picture books, cartoons), Shanghai (art design), and Shenzhen (special invitational works from Hong Kong and Macao).

Following on the 2000 exhibition *Tobacco Project: A Series of Installations Created by Xu Bing* at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, *Tobacco Project: Shanghai (Yancao jihua: Shanghai)* opens at Shanghai Gallery of Art, curated by Wu Hung, and with an accompanying symposium.

**September:** The *2004 Nomination Exhibition of the Journal "Fine Arts Literature" (2004 niandu Meishu wenxian timingzhan)* is held at the gallery at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, curated by Liu Ming, with Pi Daojian, Wang Lin, Feng Boyi, and others presiding over the nominating process. During the exhibition, the "Fine Arts Literature Forum" is convened and a *Fine Arts* prize is awarded.

The first *Architectural Biennial Beijing (Zhongguo guoji jianzhu yishu shuangnianzhan)* is held at the National Museum of Art and other sites.

*Shanghai Duolun Exhibition of Young Artists (Shanghai duolun qingnian meishu dazhan)* is held at the Duolun Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai, curated by Jin Feng and others.

The Fifth Shanghai Biennale is held at Shanghai Art Museum, curated by Xu Jiang (chief curator), Zheng Shengtian, Sebastián López, Zhang Qing, and Gao Shiming; the theme is *Techniques of the Visible (Yingxiang shengcun)*.

*Odyssey(s) 2004 (Aodesai)*, an exhibition of expatriate artists living in France, is held at the Shanghai Gallery of Art, curated by Martina Köppel-Yang; participants are Chen Zhen, Du Zhenjun, Huang Yong Ping, Lin Minghong, Shen Yuan, Wang Du, Yan Peiming, Yang Jiechang, and Adel Abdessamed Maimaiti.

**October:** The academic forum "Public Art in China" ("Gonggong yishu zai Zhongguo") is held in Shenzhen, curated by Sun Zhenhua and Lu Hong; the proceedings are published under the same name.

**December:** The Fourth International Ink Painting Biennial of Shenzhen opens at Guan Shanyue Museum, Shenzhen Fine Art Institute, and Shenzhen Museum of Art, curated by Dong Xiaoming, Yan Shanchun, Lu Hong, and Gao Minglu.



## 2005

**January:** *Re(-)viewing the City — 2005 Guangzhou Photo Biennial* (Chengshi, Chongshi — 2005 Guangzhou guoji sheying shuangnianzhan) opens, curated by Gu Zheng, Alain Jullien, and An Ge.

The He Xiangning Art Museum Advisory Committee convenes in Shenzhen for its first annual meeting, presided over by Wu Hung, and participants include Ai Weiwei, Fan Di'an, Fei Dawei, Feng Boyi, Gao Minglu, Huang Yong Ping, Huang Zhuan, Le Zhengwei, Karen Smith, Wang Guangyi, Wang Jianwei, Xu Bing, Xu Jiang, Yan Shanchun, Yi Ying, Yung Ho Chang, Zhang Peili, and Zhu Qingsheng. The meeting passes the Constitution of the He Xiangning Art Museum Advisory Committee, the Plan for the International Residency Program at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, and the proposal for the Sixth Shenzhen Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition. Wu Hung heads the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal Advisory Committee.

The OCT Contemporary Art Terminal of the He Xiangning Art Museum (OCAT) opens in Shenzhen with the exhibition *Taking Off: An Exhibition of the Contemporary Art Collection in the He Xiangning Art Museum and Contemporary Art Terminal* (Qifei: He Xiangning meishuguan ji OCAT dangdai yishu diancang zhan). OCAT also holds "The First Voice: Forum of Chinese Contemporary Artists" ("Di yi zhong shengyin: Zhongguo dangdai yishujia luntan"); the proceedings are published under the same name.

**March:** *Body Temperature — Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the Birthday of Hans Christian Andersen: Invitational Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art* (Tiwen — jinian Antusheng Danchen 200 zhounian Zhongguo dangdai yishu yaoqingzhan) is held at the Millennium Art Museum. Fan Di'an is the chair of the art committee.

The exhibition *About Beauty* and its accompanying symposium open at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, curated by Wu Hung. Participating Chinese artists include Wang Gongxin, Lin Tianmiao, Qin Yufen, Zhu Jinshi, Liu Zheng, Liu Dan, Rong Rong, Shi Chong, and Zhuang Hui.

To regulate the business of the Chinese art market, the China Commercial Alliance Art Market Federation (*Zhongguo shangye lianhehui yishu shichang lianmeng*) is founded in Beijing.

**May:** Chinese Modern Art Archives at Peking University, OCAT in Shenzhen, and the Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago agree to collaborate

on editing the *Contemporary Chinese Art Yearbook* (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu nianjian*).

The Second Triennial of Chinese Art, *Archeology of the Future* (Weilai kaoguxue), is held at the Nanjing Museum; the curators include Qiu Zhijie, Zuo Jing, and Zhu Tong.

The *First China International Animation Festival and Exposition* (*Shoujie Zhongguo guoji dongmanjie*) is held in Hangzhou.

**June:** At the 51st Venice Biennale, for the first time, China has a national pavilion (at a temporary site). The theme is *Virgin Garden: Emersion*, curated by Cai Guo-Qiang, and it includes five artists.

One hundred artists sign the petition to save the Beijing International Art Camp (*Beijing guoji yishu ying*) in Suojia Village, Cuigezhuangxiang, Beijing.

*Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* opens simultaneously at Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland, and the Holderbank exhibition hall of Holcim AG, near Zurich.

The First Biennale internationale d'art contemporain chinois opens in Montpellier, France, curated by José Frèches. The opening ceremony is held simultaneously in Montpellier and Chengdu.

**Time magazine features Chinese contemporary artworks on the cover and publishes more than 20 pages of related articles on the topic of "China's New Revolution."**

The 36th annual congress of the Bund Freischaffender Foto-Designer (German Association of Freelance Photographers) discusses the topic *China — Fotografie, Kunst & Werbung heute* (*China — Photography, Art & Advertising Today*) in Hamburg, Germany.

**July:** The Second Chengdu Biennial, on the theme *Century and Paradise* (*Shiji yu tiantang*), is sponsored and held at the Chengdu Century City — New International Convention & Exposition Centers, curated by Fan Di'an, Yin Shuangxi, Feng Boyi, Huang Xiaorong, and Feng Bin.

*The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Qiang: Zhongguo dangdai yishu ershinian de lishi chonggou), organized by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and the University at Buffalo Art Galleries, curated by Gao Minglu, opens at the Millennium Art Museum, Beijing, and then is seen in Buffalo at the Albright-Knox and the University Galleries.

*Hans Hartung in China* opens at the National Art Museum of China, curated by André Kneib, Zhu Qingsheng, and Jean-Charles Agboton-Jurmau. The exhibition travels to the Nanjing Museum.

**September:** The large-scale public welfare activity *Journey of the Big River* —

*Eco China 2005, Ten Thousand Miles on the Yellow River* begins. Under the direction of Professor Zhu Qingsheng, members of the Modern Art Studies society and students from the Department of Digital Art at Peking University present work titled *Washing the Yellow River (Xi huanghe)*, participating in this experimental art event in the form of purely Internet art.

The second Beijing International Art Biennale is held at the National Art Museum of China.

The 16th Congress of the International Plastic Artists' Association (*Di shiliu jie guoji zaoxing yishujia xiehui daibiao dahui*) is held in Beijing and Hefei.

The large-scale multimedia exhibition *Plato and His Seven Spirits (Bailatu he ta de qi zhong jingling)* is held in Beijing and Shenzhen, curated by Huang Zhuan.

*The Century of Chinese Characters — Grand Exhibition of the Art of Chinese Characters ("Hanzi shiji" — hanzi yishu dazhan)* is held at the Millennium Art Museum, curated by Luo Li.

**November:** *Cultural Translation — Wenda Gu's Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry (1993–2004)* (*Wenhua fanyi — Gu Wenda Beilin — Tangshi houzhu [1993–2004]*) (see pl. 49) is held at OCAT in Shenzhen along with an international symposium "Translating Visuality" ("Fanyi yu shijue wenhua"), curated and hosted by Wu Hung.

The 2005 China Beijing International Calligraphy Biennial (*2005 Zhongguo Beijing guoji shufa shuangnianzhan*) is held.

*Zooming into Focus: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Video (Jujiao: Zhongguo dangdai sheying he luxiang)* is held at the National Art Museum of China, the first special survey exhibition of the subject at the museum.

*Sculpture: A Century — the Opening of Shanghai Sculpture Space & Exhibition (Diaosu bainian — Shanghai chengshi diaosu yishu zhongxin kaiguan dazhan)* is held on the opening day of the center, curated by Fu Zhongwang. The exhibition is divided into three parts: *Centennial Classics — Masterpieces of Chinese Sculptors (Shiji jingdian — Zhongguo diaosu mingjia mingzuo guanmozhan)*; *Opening Up — Invitational Exhibition of Famous Sculptors in the New Era (Kaifang zhi lu — Xin shiqi diaosu mingjia yaoqingzhan)*; and *Heading Toward the Future — A Group Exhibition of Outstanding Works by Young Sculptors (Zouxiang weilai — dangdai qingnian diaosujia youxiu zuopin lianzhan)*.

The Second Guangzhou Triennial (*Di er jie Guangzhou dangdai yishu shuangnianzhan*) is held at the Guangdong Museum of Art, curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Guo Xiaoyan.

"The Sociological Turn in Contemporary Art — Critics' Forum and Second Shenzhen Art Museum Forum (Shenzhen and Macao)" ("*Dangdai yishu de shehuixue zhuanxing — zhongqingnian pipingjia luntan ji di er jie Shenzhen meishuguan luntan*") is held at the Shenzhen Art Museum.

**December:** The 2005 Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture, with the theme *City, Open Door! (Chengshi, kaimen!)*, is held at OCAT, curated by Yung Ho Chang.

Song Dong's solo exhibition *Waste Not (Wujinqiyong)* opens at Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, curated by Wu Hung. In the exhibition, Song Dong collaborates with his mother Zhao Xianglan, using objects Zhao has collected over 50 years.

## 2006

**January:** After being shown in Taipei and Beijing, the exhibition *Fiction@Love (Xuni de ai)*, curated by Victoria Lu, is shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Bund 18 Creative Center, both in Shanghai. It then travels to the Singapore Art Museum.

*Contemporary Image — First Contemporary Chinese Art Almanac Exhibition and Zhong Hongxin International Auction Company Contemporary Chinese Art Auction (Dangdai shixiang — shoujie Zhongguo dangdai yishu nianjian ji Zhonghongxin Zhongguo dangdai yishupin paimaihui)* is held at the Millennium Art Museum, curated by Fan Di'an.

The international touring exhibition *Asian Traffic (Yazhou jiaotong)*, curated by Huangfu Binghui and Huang Zhuan, is shown in Shenzhen at OCAT, the sixth stop on its tour (2004–6).

**February:** *The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now* is held at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in New York, cocurated by David Thorp and Sun Ning. In July, the exhibition travels to Platform China Contemporary Art Institute in Beijing.

**March:** *Documents on Drifting: Exhibition of Hu Min's Photography and Hu Jie's Documentary Film of Yuanmingyuan Artists (Piaoliu dang'an: Hu Min Yuanmingyuan yishujia qunluo sheying zhan ji Hu Jie Yuanmingyuan yishujia qunluo jilupian zhanying)* is held at Today Art Museum, Beijing, and curated by Yang Wei.

**April:** *Special Exhibition of Early Contemporary Chinese Art from the Fischer Collection (Feishe'er fufu zaoqi Zhongguo dangdai yishupin*

*shoucang tezhan*) is held at the Beijing Imperial City Art Museum, including 300 works collected by Swiss collector Jürgen Ludwig Fischer between 1990 and 1993.

The *Third China Independent Film Festival (Di san jie Zhongguo duli yingxiang zhan)* is held at the RCM Art Museum, Nanjing, curated by Cao Kai, Zuo Jing, and Zhu Rikun. The festival carefully selects important independent works by cutting-edge directors in China between 2004 and 2005 and includes three types: feature film, experimental shorts, and documentaries.

The opening ceremony and press conference for the Artist Pension Trust (APT) are held at the Long March Space in Beijing. APT (Beijing) is created by Mutual Art, a firm dealing in new monetary services in the art domain, whose headquarters are in New York.

The interdisciplinary symposium "Modernity and the Transformation of Twentieth-Century Chinese Art" and the exhibition *The Road of Chinese Modern Art: An Exhibition of Historical Literature (Xiandaixing yu 20 shiji Zhongguo meishu zhuanxing qua xueke xueshu yantaohui ji Zhongguo xiandai meishu zhi lu wenxianzhan)* take place at City University of Hong Kong, curated by Pan Gongkai.

Adopting the theme *Beijing/Background (Beijing/Beijing)*, the 2006 *Dashanzi International Art Festival* takes place in the Dashanzi Art District, curated by Huang Rui and Li Jing.

*Stay Put (Liushou)*, the opening exhibition of the Suojia Village International Art Camp, Beijing, is held.

**May:** The "Symposium on Humanistic Olympics and Public Art" ("Renwen aoyun yu gonggong yishu jiaoliu zuotanhui"), cosponsored by the National City Sculpture Construction Advisory Committee and Beijing City Sculpture Construction and Management Office, provides a platform to exchange views on the meaning of public art, to conduct comparative studies between public art and city sculpture, and to discuss the execution of public art and city sculpture for the promotion of civic virtue and humanist values. Experts on public art from other countries introduce their managerial systems and experiences with public art in developed nations.

*Revival: New Ink Art Shanghai 2006 (Shuimo zaisheng: 2006 nian Shanghai xin shuimo yishu dazhan)* is held at the Zhu Qizhan Art Museum and Duolun Museum of Modern Art, both in Shanghai, curated by Gu Zhenqing.

The creation, exhibition, and symposium events of the *Long March Project — Yan'an*

(*Changzheng jihua — Yan'an*) take place in Yan'an, curated by Lu Jie.

The 2006 *Shanghai Spring Art Salon (Art Shanghai) (2006 Shanghai chunji yishu shalong)* is held at ShanghaiMart.

**June:** The *Exhibition of Proposals for the Beijing Olympics: Public Art, Environmental Facilities, and City Sculpture (Beijing Aoyun gonggong yishu huanjing sheshi ji chengshi diaosu fang'an zhan)* is held at the Beijing City Planning Exhibition Hall.

The *Zhengzhou International City of Sculpture & Cultural Year: First International Sculpture Exhibition (Zhongguo Zhengzhou guoji chengshi diaosu yishu nian — shoujie guoji diaosu jingpin zhan)* opens at the Zhengzhou International Convention and Exhibition Centre, in Henan.

The 2008 *Olympic Landscape Sculpture International Exhibition (Aoyun jingguan diaosu fang'an zhengji dasai)* starts to tour the country.

A "Symposium on Performance Art" ("Xingwei yishu yantaohui") is held in Beijing, hosted by Zhu Qingsheng.

**July:** *Code: Blue — Confluence of Currents (Daima: lanse — chaoliu huiji)*, the *Third Beijing International New Media Art Exhibition*, and its accompanying symposium take place at the Millennium Art Museum and Beijing Cubic Art Center, curated by Zhang Ga and Timothy Druckrey.

The exhibition *One Time Consumption — OCAT in Renovation (Yicixing xiaofei — zhuangxiu OCAT)*, curated by Huang Liaoyuan, is held at OCAT, one of the sites for the 2006 China Shenzhen Overseas Chinese Town Tourism Carnival and the first Chinese Contemporary Art Festival (2006 *Zhongguo (Shenzhen) Huaqiaocheng luyou kuanghuanjie ji shoujie Zhongguo dangdai yishujie*).

**August:** *From Polar Region to Tiexi District — Contemporary Art in Northeastern China 1985–2006 (Cong jidi dao tiexiqu — dongbei dangdai yishu zhan 1985–2006)* is held at the Guangdong Museum of Art, the first in the exhibition series *Phenomena of Art Since 1985 ('85 yilai xianxiang yu zhuangtai xilie dazhayan)* organized by the museum.

The "First Asian Art Museum Directors Forum: ASEAN + 3" is held at the National Art Museum of China.

**September:** *The Twelve: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards Exhibition (Shier: CCAA dangdai yishu jiang)* is held at the Zendai Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai, curated by Pi Li; it is the first CCAA award exhibition.

The Sixth Shanghai Biennale, *Hyper Design (Chao sheji)*, is held. The curators include

Zhang Qing, Huang Du, Lin Shumin, Wonil Rhee, Jonathan Watkins, and Gianfranco Maraniello.

The Sixth Gwangju Biennale opens, with the theme *Fever Variations*. Wu Hung is the chief curator of the "First Chapter." Participating Chinese artists include Hong Hao, Qiu Zhijie, Song Dong, Xu Bing, Zhang Dali, Zhang Huan, and others.

*Entry Gate: Chinese Aesthetics of Heterogeneity (Rujing: Zhongguo meixue)* is held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai, the first in a series of biannual "Envisage" exhibitions at the museum. Curators include Ye Yongqing, Uli Sigg, Sunhee Kim, and Victoria Lu.

*A Yellow Box in Qingpu: Art and Architecture in a Chinese Space (Huang hezi, Qingpu, Zhongguo kongjian li de dangdai yishu zhan)* is held at Xiaoximen, Qingpu District, Shanghai, curated by Gao Shiming, Chang Tsong-zung, and Hu Xiangcheng.

The 10th Venice Architecture Biennale takes place, and for the first time China participates in its national pavilion, at which Fan Di'an is curator.

*Size Decides Attitude: First 5x7 Pingyao Picture-Taking Biennale Project (Hua fu jue ding taidu: shoujie 5x7 Pingyao zhaoxiang shuangnian zhan)* is held in Pingyao, Shanxi, curated by Wu Hong.

The second *Architectural Biennial Beijing* takes place at the National Museum of China, Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall, and China Millennium Monument.

*Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art*, organized by the China Institute in New York, curated by Wu Hung, opens. It travels to the Seattle Art Museum and the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

**October:** *The Blossoming of Realism — The Oil Painting in Mainland China Since 1978 (Zhankai de xianshizhuyi — 1978 nian yilai de Zhongguo dalu youhua)* is held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, curated by Fan Di'an.

The *Second Songzhuang Culture and Art Festival (Di er jie Zhongguo Songzhuang wenhua yishujie)* opens at the Xiaopu Commercial Plaza in Songzhuang, Beijing, curated by Yang Wei. Its academic theme is "opening Songzhuang."

**The Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the CCP is held, passing the Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on Major Issues Regarding the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society.**

"Xi'an: Symposium on Models for Contemporary Art Criticism" ("Xi'an: Dangdai meishu piping moshi tantaohui") is held at the gallery at the Xi'an Academy of Fine

Arts. The three topics under discussion are criticism and exhibition, criticism and media, and art criticism.

**November:** *VITAL 06: International Chinese Live Art Festival* is held at the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester, UK, sponsored by the Live Art Development Agency. Participating artists include He Chengyao, He Yunchang, Dai Guangyu, and others from China and the diaspora.

*Coming from Daily Life: First Documentary Exhibition of Academic Experimental Art (Yuanyu shenghuo: shoujie xueyuan shiyan yishu wenxianzhan)* is held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Zhu Lou art space, curated by Wu Jian'an. This is the first large-scale academic exhibition with the theme of experimental art at CAFA's School of Fine Arts.

**December:** *2006 Annual Lianzhou International Photo Festival (2006 Lianzhou guoji sheying nianzhan)* takes place at the Cultural Plaza in Lianzhou, curated by Duan Yuting. The academic theme is *Origin: Between the Observer and the Observed (Yuandian, guancha yu beiguancha)*.

The Fifth International Ink Painting Biennial of Shenzhen, *Design and Ink Painting (Sheji shuimo)*, is held at Guan Shanyue Art Museum, Shenzhen, curated by Dong Xiaoming and Wang Xu.

*Documenta Mobil*, a retrospective exhibition in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Documenta in Kassel, Germany, travels to the Chongqing Art Museum and the gallery at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute.

*Aftershock: Contemporary British Art 1990–2006* takes place at the Guangdong Museum of Art and the Capital Museum in Beijing, curated by Pi Li, Colin Chinnery, Guo Xiaoyan, and Lizzie Carey, and organized by the British Council and the two museums.

*2006 China Contemporary Art Document Exhibition (2006 Zhongguo dangdai yishu wenxianzhan)* is held at the Millennium Art Museum. Jia Fangzhou is the chief curator.

*2006 Chinese Art Today (2006 jinri Zhongguo meishu dazhan)* is held at the National Art Museum of China, curated by Guo Xiaochuan.

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- Note: Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations.
- '98 *Asia-Pacific Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition*, 425
- 2000 *China: Internet, Video and Photo Art Exhibition*, 427
- 2000 Shanghai Biennale (*Shanghai Spirit*), 326–27, 330, 347–55, 348, 396, 404, 428; as China's first legitimate modern art exhibition, 351–52; and transitions, 347–50
- abstract expressionism, 168
- Aburdene, Patricia, 196
- "Academic Symposium on Issues Regarding Tradition in Chinese Painting," 414
- aesthetics, 16, 17–18, 53
- Against Capitalist Liberalization campaign, 113
- Ai Weiwei 艾未未, 211, 401, 404, 425, 426, 428, 430, 433; "Dialogue with Zhuang Hui," 266–69; *Fur*, 267; *Han-Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, Pl. 40
- Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, on *Fuck Off* exhibition, 354–55
- Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 433
- Alexander the Great, 352
- Alors, la Chine?* exhibition, 431
- An Ge (pseud.), 安哥, 431, 433
- Analysis Group 解析, 99, 154, 405; *Measuring Dots*, 106; as New Measurement Group 新刻度小组, 422
- Andrea, John de, 375
- Andrews, Julia F., 358, 420
- Anhui Provincial Oil Painting Research Association, 56
- animals, slaughter of, 270, 274–76, 278, 345–47, 361
- Annual Art Critics Nomination Exhibition*, 420, 421, 422
- Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture*, 322
- Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign, 35, 72, 411
- antirationalism, 58
- April Fifth Incident (1976), 5–6, 220–21, 408, 409
- April Photography Society 四月影会, 6, 220–21
- Architectural Biennial Beijing, 432, 436
- Armory Show, New York (1913), 127
- art: abstract, 102, 117; academic, 5, 19, 66–67, 69–72, 154; animals used in, 270, 274–76, 278, 345–47, 361; for art's sake, 5, 78, 181; autonomy of, 118; Cartoon, 319, 343, 347; collective activities, 99; Conceptual, 37, 65, 129, 343–44; contemporary Chinese, 6, 65, 152, 184, 288–91, 307–10, 403–6; and creativity, 99, 102–3, 111, 129; death experienced through, 279–86; flowers as theme in, 195–96; folk, 164, 201, 203; freelance "independent artists," 288; funding of, 333; Gaudy, 199–204, 343; "genuine" vs. "prostitution," 87; history of, 100, 102, 403–6, 412; human body used in, 185, 270–86, 345–47, 361; independent curators, 288; international, 152, 154, 289, 349, 356; intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives on, 152; Land / Earth, 182; Maoist theory on, 164; market for, 398–401; of the mind, 37; Ministry of Culture Notice, 276–77; moral virtue of, 90; objective reality as source of, 36; performance, 116, 117, 119–20, 121–23, 121, 154, 178, 179–84, 224, 274–76, 342; politicization of, 5, 102, 152; as process, 105–11, 181, 340; propaganda, 5, 8; purifying language of, 101–3; readymades, 168, 372, 377; realism, 410, 436; rethinking, 101; search for new forms, 11; taboo materials in, 270–71; teaching of, 17; traditional, 101; unofficial groups and exhibitions, 6–7; "untitled," 17
- Art (Meishu)* 美术, 14, 46–47, 69, 84, 117, 310, 312, 408–12, 414, 417, 419, 421
- Art Market* 艺术市场, 289, 292, 292, 300, 306, 311–12
- Art as Food*, 334
- Art Asia Pacific*, 166
- art criticism, 324–26; feminist, 185, 193–98
- Art Gallery* 画廊, 312, 313–14, 413
- Art Garden* 美苑, 315
- Art History and Theory* 美术史论, 49
- Art in America*, 293
- Art Life* 艺术界, 314
- art magazines, 46–48, 310–15
- Art Panorama* 艺术广角, 312
- Art Trends* 艺术潮流, 310
- Artists* 艺术家, 293, 314
- Artists Newsletter* 美术家通讯, 315
- "artists villages," 288, 400, 418, 419, 420, 422, 434
- ARTnews*, 167, 293
- Arts Circle* 美术界, 314
- Asia Art Archive (AAA), 404, 431
- Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, 420, 423, 427
- Asia Society, 425, 432
- avant-garde, 45, 48, 51, 86, 174, 190; *China / Avant-Garde* exhibition, 113–26; and modern art, 184; Neo-Avant-Garde, 110; and New Wave, 127, 128, 129, 288; "system" to "circle," 307–10; underground, 320
- Avant-Garde Chinese Art: Beijing / New York*, exhibition, 414
- Avant-Garde Today* 今日先锋, 315, 421, 428
- Bao Jianfei 包剑斐: *New Space* series, 84, 85, 413; and Pond Society, 88, 414; "Responses to the Exhibition '85 *New Space*," 84, 85

- Basquiat, Jean-Michel, 175  
 behaviorism, 60–61  
 Beijing airport mural, 62, 66  
 Beijing Olympics, 402  
 Beijing Spring period 北京之春, 46  
 Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, 430, 431, 434  
*Beijing Youth Daily* 北京青年报, 418, 430  
 Beuys, Joseph, 170, 250  
 Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, 424, 428  
 Biennale internationale d'art contemporain  
 chinois, 433  
 Biennale of Sydney, 428  
 Bienal de São Paulo, 421  
 Big-Tailed Elephant group 大尾象, 226, 235,  
 345, 418  
 Brandt, Alexander, 337–38, 426  
 Brouwer, Marianne, 358  
 Bull, Hank, 360, 425  
 Bunin, Ivan Alekseevitch, 57–58
- Cage, John, 105, 365  
 Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡国强: 412, 418, 419, 422, 423,  
 425, 426, 427, 428, 430, 433; *The Earth Has  
 Its Black Hole, Too*, 261–62; *The Oxford  
 Comet*, 265; *The Unrealized Century at the  
 Turn of the Millennium*, 260–61; *Air  
 Pyramid* project, 262; *Bringing to Venice  
 What Marco Polo Forgot*, 263, 353; *Pl. 45*;  
*Cultural Melting Bath*, 266, 358, 424; *Earth  
 SETI Base Project*, 261; *Fetus Movement II*,  
 263, 264; *Floating*, 265; *Flying Dragon in the  
 Heavens*, 358, 424; gunpowder drawings,  
 398; *Horizon Project*, 265; *Making a Ladder  
 to the Earth*, 265; *Obelisk of Tolerance*, 262,  
 263; as overseas artist, 248, 354, 356, 365,  
 401–2; *Parting of the Seas*, 265; *Peaceful  
 Clouds*, 262–63; *Placid Earth*, 262, 266;  
 Project for Extraterrestrials series, 249, 264;  
*Project to Extend the Great Wall by 10,000  
 Meters*, 262, 263; *Rebuilding the Berlin  
 Wall*, 262; *Shifting Continents*, 265; *Sinking  
 and Rising*, 262; *Time/Space Reversion  
 Project*, 262; *Trap*, 266; *True Collection*, 263;  
*Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, 356,  
 369, 369, 371–72, 374, 377–78, 402; 426,  
 428; "Wild Flights of Fancy," 261–66  
 Cai Jin 蔡锦, 426; Banana series, 196; *Pl. 26*  
 Cai Qing 蔡青, 343, 344, 345, 424; *Plow and  
 Sow*, 340  
 calligraphy, 185, 188, 254–57  
 Camus, Albert, 51, 158  
 Cang Xin 苍鑫, 224, 428  
 Cao Biao, 119  
 Cao Fei 曹斐/China Tracy, *RMB City: A  
 Second Life City Planning*, 397; *Pl. 47*  
 Cao Li 曹力, 58  
 Cao Liwei 曹力伟, *White Ox*, 40  
 Cao Xiaodong 曹晓冬, 95n3  
 Cao Xiao'ou 曹小鸥, on *China/Avant-Garde*,  
 121–26
- Cao Xuelei 曹学雷, *Rejecting Perspective*, 84,  
 85  
 Castelli, Leo, 293  
 Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, Beijing,  
 408, 413  
 Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, 154,  
 156, 408, 409, 410, 412, 413, 414, 417, 418,  
 422, 424, 425, 428, 429, 436; High School,  
 422, 424  
 Centre Georges Pompidou, 417, 431  
 Cézanne, Paul, 16  
 Chagall, Marc, *White Crucifixion*, 374  
 Chai Xiaogang, 95n3  
 Chan, David, 360, 425  
 Chang Tsong-zung, 346, 347, 359, 360, 426,  
 436; and *China's New Art, Post-1989*  
 exhibition, 359, 420; *Fast Shots: China,  
 Hong Kong and Taiwan Video Art*, 237  
 Chardin, Jean-Baptiste, 27  
 Chen Danqing 陈丹青, 412; and Beijing  
 airport mural, 62, 66; *Entering the City*, 26;  
*Men of Gangba*, 26; *Mother and Son*, 25,  
 27–28; *Pl. 6*; "My Seven Paintings," 25–29;  
*Pilgrimage*, 27–29; *Shepherd*, 25; Tibetan  
 series, 19, 40, 66, 410; *Pl. 6*  
 Chen Haiyan 陈海燕, 425; *Herd of Sheep*, 40;  
*On the Horizon*, 40  
 Chen Jiagang 陈家刚, 333  
 Chen Lingyang 陈羚羊, 272, 273, 345  
 Chen Lüshou 陈绿寿, 175  
 Chen Lüsheng 陈履生, "Reflections on  
 Performance Art," 274–276  
 Chen Qiqi, 115  
 Chen Shaoping 陈少平, 237, 423; "Regarding  
 'Analysis,'" 106  
 Chen Shaoxiong 陈劭雄, 179, 198, 226, 235,  
 414, 415, 418, 423; *The Bride Changes Her  
 Mind When the Television Channel Is  
 Changed*, 235; *Street—Haizhu Square*, 218;  
 "Why Do I Photograph the Streets of  
 Guangzhou?," 217–19  
 Chen Shuxia 陈淑霞, 155, 156, 195  
 Chen Wenbo 陈文波, 175, 273, 346  
 Chen Xi 陈曦, 196  
 Chen Xiaoxin 陈孝信, 430; "Selection  
 Process," 299–302  
 Chen Xiaoyi, 299, 412  
 Chen Yanyin 陈妍音, 423, 425  
 Chen Yiming 程宜明, Liu Yulian, Li Bin:  
*Maple*, 19–21, 47, 409; *Pl. 3*; *Scar*, 20, 408  
 Chen Zhen 陈箴, 248, 249–50, 251, 358, 365,  
 412, 418, 424, 425, 427, 429, 432; *Jue Chang*,  
*Fifty Strokes to Each*, 353; *Pl. 38*; solo  
 exhibition, Grenoble, 419  
 Chen Zui, 42–43  
 Cheng Conglin 程丛林: *A Summer Night in  
 1979*, 32; *Snow on X Day X Month*, 1968,  
 22–23, 410; *Pl. 4*  
 Cheng Yanan 程亚楠, 59  
 Cheng Yanqiu, 16



- Chengdu Biennial, 429, 433  
 Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, 332, 427  
 Chia, Sandro, 128  
 China Art and Archives Warehouse, 426  
*China: 5,000 Years* exhibition, 263  
*China: Internet, Video, and Photo Art*, 331  
*China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, 113–26, 363, 417; background material on, 114–15; brief account of, 121–26; curator confessions, 116–20; and end of New Wave, 157–58; gunfire, 119–20, 121, 122, 126; idea for, 49, 113, 127; "No U-Turn" sign, 119, 121; objective of, 115, 117; opening day, 114, 119, 417; *Pl. 16*; and Pop art, 172–73; and role of critics, 301, 312; preparatory committee for, 416; social impact of, 113, 180, 316, 396; suspension of, 120, 121–22, 126, 173, 417; symposium on, 46, 48, 124–25  
 China National Academy of Fine Arts (formerly Zhejiang Academy), 232, 423, 424, 238, 431  
*China's New Art: Post-1989*, 167, 318, 320, 347, 356, 359, 360, 360  
 Chinese Artists' Association, 46, 69, 75, 85–86, 348–49, 409, 410, 412, 413, 415, 416, 417, 418, 421, 431  
 Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA), 425, 435  
*Chinese Dream, A* (exhibition), 331  
*Chinese Experience* exhibition, 190  
 Chinese identity, search for, 11  
 Chinese Modern Art Archives, 433  
 Christie's Hong Kong, 398–99, 419  
 Christo, 183  
*Classic of Mountain and Seas*, 353  
 Clemente, Francesco, 128  
 "Close Up" artists 近距离, 154, 155–57  
*Cocart International Art Invitational*, 167  
 Cohen, Joan Lebold, 357  
 Colville, Alex, 33, 412  
 Communist Party (CCP), 5–6, 35, 99, 113, 408, 409, 410, 411, 415, 417, 419, 421, 423, 429, 430, 436  
*Compilation of Translations in Art* 美术译丛, 48, 312, 408  
 Comte, Auguste, 59  
 "conceptual innovation," 49  
 "conceptual-realism," 156  
 contemplative painting 思索画, 29–33  
*Contemporary Art* 当代艺术, 310, 311, 319  
*Contemporary Chinese Art, 1985–1986*, 114  
*Contemporary Oil Paintings from the People's Republic of China*, exhibition 415–416  
*Counter-Perspective* exhibition, 345, 426  
*Countryside Project 1993* (performance), 179, 180, 181, 420  
 Courbet, Gustave, 27, 100, 375  
*Critics' Nomination Exhibition*, 193  
 Cucchi, Enzo, 128, 250  
 Cui Jian, 158, 160  
 Cultural Revolution: art politicized in, 5, 157, 170, 256; beginning of, 5, 118; "bourgeois intellectuals" in, 18; coming of age in, 11, 12, 32–33; end of, 5, 159, 198, 219; modern trends afterward, 77–78; most famous oil painting of, 422; post-revolutionary art, 158–61, 162; recycled images from, 154, 176–77, 185, 396; and Scar Art, 19, 22, 23, 408; as Ten-Year Calamity, 29; Western art forbidden in, 35  
 Current of Life movement 生活流, 53, 55, 62, 118  
 Cynical Realism 玩世现实主义, 154, 157, 158, 161–62, 164, 167, 198, 311, 321, 343, 363, 364, 366–68  
 Dada 达达, 49, 51, 89, 132, 168  
 Dal Lago, Francesca, 361, 420  
 Dali, Salvador, 39, 59, 127; *Premonition of Civil War*, 374  
*Damaged by Affluence* exhibition, 200  
 Dao Zi 岛子, 424; and New History Group, 180; "Reproduction of *Rent Collection Courtyard* and Postmodernism," 371–76  
 Dashanzi Art District, Beijing, 430, 431, 432, 435  
 David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 426, 429, 432  
 deconstructionism, 168, 169, 170, 173, 185, 340  
 Delacroix, Eugène, *Massacre at Chios*, 16  
 Delusion, 271–73  
 democracy movement, 6, 7, 10  
 democratic centrism, 409  
 Deng Fuxing, 210  
 Deng Hong 邓鸿, 332  
 Deng Pingxiang 邓平祥, 124, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 417, 422, 423; "Man's Rational Meditation," 22–23  
 Deng Xiaoping, 5, 221, 289, 319, 408, 409, 410, 411, 419, 423  
 Derrida, Jacques, 171  
 Di Naizhuang 邸乃壮, *Walk Red*, 183–84  
 Ding Fang 丁方, 118, 413, 418; *City, Pl. 12*; "Red Brigade Precept," 94–95  
 Ding Pin 丁品, 58  
 Ding Yi 丁乙, 415, 420, 425  
 Documenta, 419, 424, 436  
 Dong Qichang, 203  
 Dong Xiuyu, 124  
 Dreissen, Chris, 360  
 Duchamp, Marcel, 99, 105, 110–11; *Fountain*, 117, 372, 377; *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 377  
 Dun Zhen 敦桢, *Yearning*, 41  
 Edwards, Folke, 359  
 '85 Art Movement '85美术运动, 51–63, 413, 415, 418; age of participants, 55; and art magazines, 47, 48; behaviorism, 60–61;

- causes of, 54; '85 *New Space* exhibition, 54–55, 83–87, 413; evaluations of, 63–66; intuitionism, 57–59; origins, 52–54; participants of, 78–79; phenomena, 54, 114; promotion of a rational spirit, 54–57; rethinking, 100–101; *see also* New Wave
- Einstein, Albert, 102
- Eleventh Party Congress, 5, 6
- Eliot, T. S., 51
- Elliott, David, 265, 358
- Erickson, Britta, 419; "The Reception in the West of Experimental Mainland Chinese Art of the 1990s," 357–62
- experimental art exhibitions, 326–36, 415, 421, 424, 426, 429; biennials and triennials, 396–98, 400, 404; in commercial galleries, 399–400; creating versatile spaces for, 334–36; funding for, 344–45; in public galleries, 328–31; in semipublic and private galleries, 331–34, 398; virtual (Internet), 335–36, 353; in the West, 357–62
- Experimental Painting Exhibition: The Stage* 1983, 35, 411
- Factory No. 2* exhibition, 332
- Fan Di'an 范迪安, 115, 126, 397, 425, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 436
- Fan Jingzhong 范景中, 46
- Fan Weimin, 119
- Fang Lijun 方力钧, 158, 159, 161, 185, 317, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422; *Series 2, No. 2*, 156, 160, 192; *Pl. 20*
- Fang Shaohua 方少华, 175; *Wind from Eight Sides*, 178
- Fauvism, 89
- Fei Dawei 费大为, 44, 46, 115, 358, 377, 406, 412, 417, 418, 419, 426, 428, 432, 433; "Challenging Modernism," 106–11; "Does a Culture in Exile Necessarily Wither?," 252–54; ed. *Archives of the '85 New Wave*, 405
- feminist and women's art, 185, 193–98, 316, 341, 359, 422, 424–25, 429, 431
- Feng Bin 冯斌, 430, 433
- Feng Boyi 冯博一, 320, 354–55, 404, 424, 428, 430, 431, 432, 433; on *Trace of Existence*, 338–42, 343
- Feng Jicai, 115, 121
- Feng Mengbo 冯梦波, 175, 178, 237, 420, 422, 424
- Feng Qianyu 冯倩钰, 273
- Feng Xiaoying 冯晓颖, 272, 345
- Feng Yidai, 121
- Feng Zhengjie 冯正杰, 175, 201–2; *Happiness*, 201; *Romantic Trip*, 201, 202
- Filliou, Robert, 365
- Fine Arts in China* 中国美术报, 35, 42, 45, 47, 49, 79, 84, 88, 100, 114, 118, 127, 310, 412, 415, 416, 417, 420
- Fine Arts Literature*, 314, 421, 432
- Fine Arts Research* 美术研究, 314–15, 409, 417, 425
- fireworks, 402
- First 1990s Biennial Art Fair*, 193, 298–307, 318; and *Art · Market*, 289, 300, 311–12; catalogue preface, 298–99; documents produced for, 300–301; economic system of, 289–90, 298, 331; and performance art, 178, 180; and Pop art, 167, 174, 175, 300; reflections and questions raised, 303–7; selection process, 299–302
- Flash Art*, 167, 356
- Fluxus, 188
- formal beauty, debate, 14–18
- Founding of the Nation, The*, 21, 164
- Four Olds, 5
- Freud, Sigmund, 51, 54, 59, 108, 158, 366, 411
- Fu Zhongwang 傅中望, 180, 434
- Fuck Off* exhibition, 354–55, 355, 428
- Fujian Art Museum, 96
- Gan Yang 甘阳, 115
- Gang of Four, 6n1, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 89, 219, 408
- Gao Brothers 高氏兄弟 (高舛, 高强): *Inflatable Installation or Midnight Mass*, 121, 122; *Prophecy*, 330
- Gao Ling 高岭, 115; 428; "Contemporary Art Salon," 421; "Survey of Contemporary Chinese Performance Art," 179–84
- Gao Minglu 高名潞, 45, 46, 47, 49, 412, 415, 417, 420, 431, 432, 433; and *China / Avant Garde* exhibition and symposium, 115, 116, 117, 124, 416; ed. *An Anthology of Historical Sources*, 404–5; ed. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 403–5, 406; and *Fragmented Memory* exhibition, 358; and *Global Conceptualism* exhibition, 426; and *Inside Out* exhibition, 360–61, 425; "The '85 Art Movement," 52–63, 64, 404, 414, 415
- Gao Shiming 高世名, 272, 273, 343, 423, 432, 436
- Gao Shiqiang 高世强, 272, 423
- Gao Tianmin, 322
- Garage Art Exhibition*, 165, 233
- Gate of the New Century* exhibition, 332, 427
- Gaudy Life* exhibition, 200
- Ge Weimo, 115
- Ge Yan, 43
- Geng Jianyi 耿建翌, 86, 88, 99, 123, 165, 329, 405, 412, 413, 414, 418, 420, 425; *Group Portrait*, 164; *Haircut No. 3: Another Shaved Head of Summer 1985*, 84, 84; *Haircut No. 4*, 55; *Haircut series*, 85; *Integrated World*, 237; *Marriage Law*, 183
- German Embassy, Beijing, 425, 427
- Gluckman, Richard, 399
- Gombrich, Ernst, 171

- Gong Jiawei 龚嘉伟, 175, 178; *Happy Moment*, 176; *Invitation Song*, 176
- Gou Hongbing, "A Dialogue on *Dialogue*," 212–13
- Great Leap Forward, 228
- Great Wall Performance Art*, 181–82
- Gu, Wenda 谷文达, 54–55, 251, 412, 413, 416, 418, 419, 20, 425, 426, 427, 428 434; and *Archives*, 405; *Dangerous Chessboard Leaves the Ground*, 358; *Forest of Stone Steles—A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry*, 99, 402–3; *Pl. 49*; interview with, 106–11; *Wenda Gu's New Ink Painting*, 414; *United Nations series*, 248, 257–60, 258, 403; and Western art, 356, 365; *Wisdom Comes from Tranquility*, 106; *Pl. 15*
- Gu Chengfeng 顾丞峰, 299; "Tendencies in Chinese Pop," 171–79
- Gu Dexin 顾德新, 340, 357, 405, 417, 420, 422, 425; *October 31*, 224; *Pl. 35*
- Gu Kaizhi, 17
- Gu Mengchao, 127, 415
- Gu Shangfei, 43
- Gu Zheng, 223, 433
- Guan Ce 管策, 95n3
- Guan Shanyue Art Museum, Shenzhen, 426, 432, 436
- Guan Wei 关伟, 418, 427
- Guang Jun 广军, 59
- Guangdong Museum of Art, 246, 430, 431, 432, 434, 435, 436
- Guangzhou Triennial, First (2002), *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art*, 397, 404, 405, 430
- Guo Shirui 郭世锐, 328
- Guo Xiaoyan 郭晓彦, 434, 436
- Hagens, Gunther von, *Body Worlds*, 274, 276
- Hai Bo 海波, 427; *They No. 6*, 231–32, 231
- Half Generation Painting Exhibition*, 54, 59, 413
- Hälfte des Himmels*, Die, exhibition, 425
- Hamilton, Richard, 177
- Han Dynasty, 102, 173, 179
- Han Lei 韩磊, 223
- Hanart TZ Gallery, 356, 360, 417, 420
- Hang Jian 杭间, 427, on *China/Avant-Garde*, 121–26
- Hanson, Duane, 375
- Haring, Keith, 175
- Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 420, 433
- He Changlin, 300
- He Duoling 何多苓, 19; *Ancient Wall*, 30, 31, 32; *Spring Breeze is Awake*, 31, 31, 32
- He Gong 何工, *The Story of Flower-Planters*, 39–40
- He Rong 何溶, 46
- He Xiangning Art Museum, 424, 426, 429, 433; OCT Contemporary Art Terminal of, see OCAT
- He Yong, 160
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 93
- Heidegger, Martin, 55, 83
- Heller, Joseph, 187
- Henri, Adrian, *Total Art*, 376
- Higashiyama, Kai, 16
- Hirst, Damien, 346, 347, 399
- Home?* exhibition, 334, 427
- Hong Hao 洪浩, 436; *Selected Scriptures, Page 331, The Strategic Defense Order*, 356; *Pl. 46*
- Hong Kong Arts Centre, 416, 420, 423
- Hong Kong City Hall, 414, 420, 431
- Hong Lei 洪磊, *After Liang Kai's (Song-Dynasty) Masterpiece "Shakyamuni Coming out of the Mountains"*, 224; *Pl. 34*
- Hong Lumei, 236
- Hong Zaixin, 84
- Horse Trampling a Hun Warrior* (stone sculpture), 16
- Hou Dengke 侯登科, 223
- Hou Hanru 侯翰如, 46, 115, 358, 361, 412, 426, 428, 431, 434; "Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions," 249–52, 363–65
- Hou Wenyi 侯文怡, 90
- Hsieh, Tehching, 275
- Hu Jintao, 430
- Hu Wei 胡伟, *Li Daozhao, Qu Qiubai, Xiao Hong*, 39
- Hu Xiangdong, *Dream Plants*, 201
- Hu Yaobang, 410, 417
- Hua Guofeng, 408
- Hua Tianxue, 428, 430
- Huang Binhong, 17–18, 53
- Huang Du 黄笃, 436, 422; "My View of Art and Criticism," 325–26
- Huang Rui 黄锐, 7–8, 11, 432, 435; *Last Will and Testament*, 13; *New Life*, 13; *Space*, 13
- Huang Xiaorong 黄效融, 430, 433
- Huang Yan 黄岩, 182, 198, 427, 428, 430; 0431—*China's Video Art*, 237; *Changchun, China*, 58, 205–6, 205; *Collection Series—Demolished Buildings*, 183
- Huang Yong Ping 黄永砵, 51, 99, 123, 250–52, 353, 411, 412, 417, 418, 419, 420, 422, 425, 426, 432, 433; and *Archives*, 405; *Bat Project*, 249; *The History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Western Painting Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 99; *House of Oracles* retrospective, 402; *An Indigestible Object*, 251; *Magiciens de la terre*, 417; "Introduction to *The Events Exhibition*," 96; "Non-Expressive Paintings," 103–5; as overseas artist, 248, 356, 357, 358, 365, 401; *Roulette Wheel*, 103; "Statement on Burning," 95–96; *Theater of the World Bridge*, 250; *Pl. 39*
- Huang Zhou 黄胄, 331, 412
- Huang Zhuan 黄专, 46, 154, 299, 320, 322, 406, 412, 423, 426, 427, 429, 431, 433, 434;

- "On Cultural Idealism," 318; "The Misread *Great Criticism*," 167–71; "Who Is Going to Sponsor the History?," 291–98
- Huangshan Symposium*, 49
- humanism, 19, 49, 51, 123, 164, 169
- Huo Qubin, 16
- "*I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*" exhibition, 418
- Idealism, 154, 159
- Impressionists, 27, 129
- Infatuated with Injury* exhibition, 277–78, 427
- Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, exhibition, 360–61, 425; catalogue, 361, 425
- International Center of Photography, 432
- International Ink Painting Biennial of Shenzhen, 422, 426, 432
- International Year of Youth, 54, 56
- International Young Artists Exhibition*, 56
- Internet, virtual exhibitions on, 335–36, 353
- intuitionism, 57–59, 65–66, 81, 102–3
- Invitational Exhibition on New Works of Chinese Painting*, 108, 413
- Invitational Exhibition of Sculptures by Young Artists*, 322
- It's Me!* exhibition, 192, 346–47, 426
- Jia Fangzhou 贾方舟, 417, 422, 426, 428, 436; "Returning to Art Itself," 100–101
- Jia Juanli 贾鹂丽, 195
- Jian Shi, 64
- Jiang Feng, 409, 410
- Jiang Qing, 5, 410
- Jiang Tao, "Report on Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*," 209–12
- Jiang Xueying 姜雪鹰, 155
- Jiang Zemin, 419
- Jiang Zhi 蒋志, 272, 273, 343
- Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art Exhibitions and International Symposium*, 425
- Jiangsu Pictorial* 江苏画刊, 35, 46, 48, 114, 117, 306, 310, 312–13, 314, 412, 420, 422
- Jiangsu Youth Art Week, 54, 55, 95n3, 413
- Jin Shangyi 靳尚谊, 115
- Jinyuan Road no. 310 Exhibition*, 337
- Jiro, Takamatsu, *Blue Dream*, 41
- Jung, Carl, 51
- Kang Mu 康木, performance art, 117
- Kant, Immanuel, 55, 93
- Karetzky, Patricia Eichenbaum, 360
- Kiefer, Anselm, 250
- Kieslowski, Krzysztof, *Toward the Austere Theater*, 87
- Kitsch, 199–204
- Kollwitz, Käthe, 11, 12
- Kong Chang'an 孔长安, 115, 420
- Kong Yongqian 孔永谦, "culture T-shirt," 158, 162
- Koons, Jeff, 399
- Köppel-Yang, Martina, 432; "Nationwide Forum and Model," 45–50
- Kounellis, Jannis, 250
- Kurz, Otto, and Ernst Kris, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, 293
- Kwangju (Gwangju) Biennale, 422, 426, 436
- Lang Shaojun 郎绍君, 46, 115, 124, 417, 420, 427, 429; "Rebuilding Elite Art: Reconsidering Changes in the Structure of Twentieth-Century Chinese Art," 124
- Lanzhou Art Legion, 179, 420
- Lei Feng, 342
- Lei Shuang 雷双, 196
- Leishi Painting Society, 411, 415
- Leng Lin 冷林, 331, 334–35, 423, 424; "It's Me!," 192, 426
- Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 27
- Li Bangyao 李邦耀, 175; *Product Trust*, 177
- Li Bin 李斌, 19–21, 47, 409
- Li Chen 李辰, 155
- Li Di 李迪, 196, 39
- Li Gongming, 322
- Li Hong 李虹, 195
- Li Honggang, 20
- Li Jianli, 328
- Li Jiatur (pseud.), "The Significance Is not the Art," 62–63
- Li Jin 李津, *Impressions of Tibet*, 57
- Li Juchuan 李巨川, *Living with Jika*, 233
- Li Keran, 107
- Li Luming 李路明, *Chinese Hand Gestures*, 203
- Li Mei and Yang Xiaoyan, "Trends and Stages in Photography's Development," 219–23
- Li Shan 李山, 56, 415, 419, 420, 421; Rouge series, 176
- Li Song, 124
- Li Tianyuan 李天元, 155, 156
- Li Tuo, 124, 127
- Li Weimin 李为民, House series, 121
- Li Xianting 栗宪庭, 46, 115, 167, 252, 317, 318, 347, 410, 411, 420, 422, 426, 428, 429; "About the Stars Art Exhibition," 11–13, 410; "Apathy and Deconstruction in Post-'89 Art," 154, 157–66; and *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, 116–20; and *China's New Art, Post-1989* exhibition, 359, 420; and *Fine Arts in China*, 50n22, 416; "The Significance is Not in the Art," 62, 65, 417; and *The Trend of Art Thought*, 412; and Venice Biennale, 366
- Li Xiaoliang, 300
- Li Xiaoshan 李小山, 430; "My Opinion on Contemporary Chinese Painting," 46, 47, 48, 412; *History of Chinese Modern Painting*, 415
- Li Yan 李燕, 195
- Li Yongbin 李永斌, 423, 424, 427; *Face No. 1*, 234, 237

- Li Zehou 李泽厚, 115  
 Li Zhengtian, 124, 125  
 Liang Jiang, 44  
 Liang Jiuqing, *The Far Away Sail*, 41  
 Liang Juhui 梁钜辉, 414, 418; *One Hour Game*, 208, 208  
 Liang Shaoji 梁绍基, 425, 428  
 Liang Qichao, 101  
 Liang Xiaochuan 梁小川, ceramic artillery shell project, 181  
 Liao Wen 廖雯, 426, 427; "Critical 'Irony' of Gaudy Art," 199–204  
 Lichtenstein, Roy, 175, 293  
 Lin Biao, 20, 21, 410  
 Lin Fengmian, 16, 53  
 Lin Hujia, 9  
 Lin Shiming, 236  
 Lin Tianmiao 林天苗, 185, 224, 225, 234, 341, 401, 422, 433; *Bound Unbound*, 197; *Pl. 27*; "Wrapping and Severing," 197  
 Lin Wei 林微: *Angel*, 41  
 Lin Yilin 林一林, 414, 415, 418, 425  
 Lin Yonghui 林永惠, 223  
 Lin Yutang, 166n2  
 Ling Huitao 凌徽涛, 115  
 Liu, Hung, 249; *Resident Alien*, 269–70, 270  
 Liu Anping 刘安平, 224, 422  
 Liu Bochun, 115  
 Liu Chun 刘淳, 179  
 Liu Dahong 刘大鸿: *Model Opera*, 176; *Sweet Day*, 176  
 Liu Dong 刘东, 115  
 Liu Fenghua, 342  
 Liu Haisu, 53; Art Gallery, 421; Art Museum, 422, 423, 425, 430  
 Liu Jianhua 刘建华, "On Painted Sculptures," 216–17  
 Liu Kaiqu 刘开渠, 115, 408  
 Liu Liguang 刘力国, *Classics*, 303  
 Liu Liping 刘丽萍, 155, 196  
 Liu Min 刘敏, 115  
 Liu Qian 刘谦, *Alley*, 40  
 Liu Qinghe, 155, 156  
 Liu Shaohui 刘绍荟, "Emotion, Individuality, Formal Aesthetics," 17–18  
 Liu Shaoqi, 256, 331  
 Liu Ting, 331  
 Liu Wei 刘炜, 158, 272, 273, 343, 345, 419, 420, 421, 422, 424; *Spring Dream in a Garden: Dad in Front of the TV*, 156, 161; *Pl. 21*  
 Liu Wencai, 368, 369  
 Liu Xiaochun 刘骁纯, 43, 46, 47, 124, 417, 421, 422, 424, 427, 428, 430; and *Fine Arts in China*, 412; "Quoting Does Not Equal Plagiarism," 377–78, 412  
 Liu Xiaodong 刘小东, 158, 160, 161–62, 316, 398, 401, 418, 419; *Hotbed No. 1*, 399; *Joke*, 155, 156, 158; *Pl. 19*; *Pastoral*, 160  
 Liu Xun, 331, 409  
 Liu Ye 刘野, 398, 401  
 Liu Yi 刘意, *Who Am I?*, 235  
 Liu Yulian 刘宇廉, 19–21, 47  
 Liu Zheng 刘峥, *Copying a Calendar*, 203; *Fashion Girl*, 203; *Love of Lushan*, 203  
 Liu Zheng 刘铮, 423, 433  
 Liu Zhenggang, 101  
 Liu Zhenyun, 158  
*Lonely Old Man*, 32  
*Long March Project*, 435  
 López, Sebastián, 427, 432  
 Lu Danfeng, 20  
 Lu Hao 卢昊, 426, 428; *Flower; Bird; Insect; Fish*, 202; *Pl. 30*  
 Lu Hong 鲁虹, 412, 429, 432  
 Lu Lei 陆磊, 272  
 Lü Nan 吕楠, 223  
 Lü Peng 吕澎, 317–18, 417, 420; "Art Needs to be Produced to Sell," 306; and *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair*, 298–99, 300, 301, 303–7, 419; "Heading Toward the Market," 290–99; "Opening Up the 1990s," 298–99  
 Lü Peng and Yi Dan: *A History of Modern Chinese Art: 1979–1989*, 404, 420  
 Lü Pintian, 44, 427  
 Lü Shengzhong 吕胜中, 123, 405, 419, 422; *Paper-Cut Installation*, 130–31, 131, 416, 418  
 Lu, Victoria (Rongzhi), 427, 434, 436  
 Lu Xun, 253, 374  
 Lu Yuanmin 陆元敏, 223  
 Lucie-Smith, Edward, 178–79  
 Lum, Ken, 425, 427  
 Luo Brothers 罗氏兄弟, *Welcome World-Famous Brands*, 202–3  
 Luo Xiaoyun 罗小韵, *Mainstay*, 220  
 Luo Zhongli 罗中立, 32, 377, 428; *Father*, 19, 23–25, 31–32, 66, 410; *Pl. 5*  
 Ma Desheng 马德升, 11; *Rest*, 12–13  
 Ma Liuming 马六明, 185, 224, 420, 424, 426, 427; *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch II*, 187; "Four Notes," 187–88  
 Ma Lu 马路, 58  
 Ma Xin, 344  
 MacRitchie, Lynn, "Precarious Paths on the Mainland," 364  
*Magiciens de la terre* exhibition, 417  
 Mannerism, 53  
 Mao Xuhui 毛旭辉, 57, 412, 415, 419, 424; "New Figurative," 89–93; *Shepherdess and White Goat*, *Pl. 11*  
 Mao Zedong, 5, 20, 127, 164, 172, 173, 176–77, 219, 254, 363, 366, 367, 373, 408  
 Maomao, 212  
 Martin, Jean-Hubert, 357, 361, 417, 428  
 Martínez, Rosa, 264–65  
 Marx, Karl, 55, 165  
 May Fourth New Culture Movement, 52, 53, 118, 157, 417  
 May Seventh Art University, 6n2

- Mayakovsky, Vladimir, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, 58
- Meng Luding 孟禄丁, 35, 36–38, 44, 123
- Mepham, Lydie, 358
- Michelangelo Buonarroti, 17, 292, 372; *David*, 27
- Middle Ages, 80
- Mierlo, Heidi van, 360
- Millennium Art Museum, 431, 433, 434, 435, 436
- Millet, Jean-François, 27, 39
- Minford, John, 166n2
- Ming Dynasty, 12
- Ministry of Culture, 408, 419, 421, 424, 429, 431; Notice, 276–77
- Miyang Painting Society Exhibition*, 61
- modern art, 97, 101–3, 129–30, 152, 184, 316
- Modern Chinese Art Exhibition*, 49
- Modern Chinese Art Research Documents Exhibitions*, 174, 178, 418, 419, 421
- Modern Photography Salon, 221–22
- Modern Sculptures* exhibition, 322
- modernism, 51, 52, 99, 108–9, 111, 168
- Montaigne, Michel de, 100
- Moore, Henry, 91
- Morimura, Yasumasa, 225
- Municipal Committee, 8–10
- Museum of Chinese History, 418, 419
- Museum of Modern Art, Chengdu, 429, 430
- Museum of Modern Art, New York, 424, 427
- My Interpretation of the Judgment of Paris*, 124
- Naisbitt, John, 196, 295
- Nanjo, Fumio, 425; *Seascape*, 263–64
- Narrative of Skin* exhibition, 200
- National Art Gallery, 328–30, 359, 408–17, 420–24, 427, 429; and see National Art Museum
- National Art Museum, 397, 402, 411, 429–31, 433–36
- National Fine Arts Exhibition, 409, 410, 412
- Native Soil Art, 19, 66, 83–84, 158
- Nature, Society, and Man* exhibition, 6, 7, 7, 220–21, 221, 409, 410
- Neo-Expressionism, 128
- New Academic School 新学院派, 118, 173, 416
- New Art movement, 322
- New Classical Movement, 173, 174
- New Culture Movement 新文化运动, 132
- New Design, Hunan, 300
- New Figurative 新具像, 89–93
- New Figurative Exhibition*, 57, 58, 89, 93, 412, 415
- New Generation 新生代, 154, 155–57, 194, 198, 317, 318–19, 347, 419; *New Generation Art* exhibition, 155, 158, 317, 418
- New History 1993 Big Consumer Products* (performance), 178, 179, 181
- New History Group 新历史小组, 180–81, 419, 420
- New Literati painting 新文人画, 118–19, 163, 173, 174, 417, 418, 427
- New Photo* magazine, 225, 423
- New Realism, 55, 89, 173, 174, 300
- New Wave ('85 Art New Wave '85新潮), 47, 48, 49, 252, 308; anti-New Wave trend, 118, 163; *China / Avant-Garde* exhibition, 113–26; in '85 Art Movement, 51–52, 63, 85, 86, 99, 116, 128, 129, 132, 159, 162–64, 175, 288, 317, 360, 404–6; "end" of, 127–28, 129–30, 154, 155, 157–58; reexamination of, 155, 157–58
- New York Times Magazine, The*, 356
- Ni Haifeng 倪海峰, 414, 419, 420
- Ni Weihua 倪卫华, 182; *Continuously Diffusing the State of Affairs*, No. 2—'93 Placard, 183
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 51, 82, 107, 158
- Ning Fangqian 宁方倩, 155
- No-Name Painting Society 无名画会, 5, 6, 409, 413
- Northern Art Group 北方艺术群体, 51, 54, 55, 79–82, 168, 411, 413, 415
- Northern Way Art Alliance, 411, 412
- November Painting Exhibition*, 57, 58, 413
- Obrist, Hans-Ulrich, 361, 434
- OCAT, 433, 434, 435
- Oliva, Achille Bonito, 361, 366–68, 374, 420, 422
- Open Door policy, 35, 46, 89, 128, 152, 157
- overseas Chinese artists, 248–70, 401–3
- Paik, Nam June, 237
- Painter* 画家, 48, 413, 419
- Painter Group*, 413, 415
- Pan Dehai 潘德海, 91
- Pan Tianshou, 16, 53
- Pang Lei 庞磊, 155
- Passaggio a Oriente* exhibition, 420
- Peking University, 415, 419, 433, 434
- Peng De 彭德, 46, 124, 299, 300, 417, 430; on the end of New Wave, 127–28; and *Fine Arts Literature*, 421; and *The Trend of Art Thought*, 412
- Peng Zhenge 彭振戈, 223; see also An Ge
- photography, 219–32; April Photography Society, 6, 220–21; *China Special Exhibition*, 222; documentary, 220, 222–23; *Journey of Hardship* competition, 222; *National Photography Exhibition*, 223; *Nature, Society, and Man*, 6, 7, 7, 220–21, 221; New Social Documentation, 222–23; Rupture Group, 222; video art, 232–48
- photorealism, 19, 24, 39, 156, 375
- Pi Daojian 皮道坚, 124, 299, 300, 417, 423, 424, 432; and *The Trend of Art Thought*, 412
- Pi Daojian and Pi Li, "Contemporary Chinese Art Media in the 1990s," 310–15
- Pi Li 皮力, "Back to Society," 321, 428, 431, 435, 436

- Picasso, Pablo, 11, 12, 100–101, 411; *Guernica*, 38, 101, 374; *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 100, 101  
*Picture Stories* 连环画报, 19, 21, 408
- Pissarro, Camille, 16
- Pitzenar, Marianne, 359
- Plato, 93
- pluralism, 45, 49
- Political Pop 政治波普, 157, 158, 164–65, 167, 170, 224, 233, 318, 319, 343, 347, 363, 364, 366–68
- Pollack, Barbara, 399
- Pollock, Jackson, 60
- Pond Society 池社, 51, 83–89, 414; manifesto of, 87–88; *Work No. 1: Yang-Style Taichi Series*, 88; *Work No. 2: Walker in Green Space*, 83, 88–89
- Pop art 波普, 83, 85, 116, 119; allegorical nature of, 178; American, 363; consumerist, 162; Cultural Pop, 154, 198; development of, 172–75; emergence of, 171–72; Gu Chengfeng on, 171–79; Hubei Pop Wave, 173, 174, 175, 300; imagery and spirit of, 176–79; Political, see Political Pop; regional traits and age groups, 175
- Popular Model* exhibition, 200
- Post-Impressionism, 129
- Post Sense-Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion* exhibition (后感性), 271–73, 279, 343–47
- postmodernism 后现代主义, 190, 319, 321
- Progressive Young Chinese Artists Exhibition*, 35, 38–42, 56, 412
- Puvis de Chavannes, Pierre, 16
- Puy, Imma, 359
- Qi Baishi, 17, 53
- Qian Weikang 钱喂康, 235, 423; *Breath/Breath*, 236
- Qin Ga 琴嘎, 271, 344, 428
- Qin Ming 秦明, *A Procession Praying for Rain*, 39
- Qin Wenna, 115
- Qin Yufen 秦玉芬, 433; *In Between*, 248; *Pl. 37*
- Qing Dynasty, 12, 102, 293
- Qiu Ping, 359, 425
- Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, 154, 175, 232, 237, 238, 423, 424, 427, 431, 433, 436; *Assignment No. 1: Copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times*, 185, 188–89, 189, 234; *Evil Heart*, 273; *Hands of Escher*, 236; *Logic*, 237; "Post-Sense Sensibility," 343–47, 426; *Post-Sensibility Spree* exhibition, 429; *Present Progress*, 237; *Things*, 343; *Washroom*, 236; *Yaojiayuan Archaeology Pit No. 1*, 341
- Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun, "Distorted Bodies and Delusion," 270, 271–73, 346
- Qu Leilei 曲磊磊, 11; *Train of Thought*, 13; *We Don't Want Laws Like This*, 13, 410
- Queens Museum of Art, 424, 426
- Queensland Art Gallery, 420, 423, 427
- rationalism, 54–57, 58, 132, 164
- Rauschenberg, Robert, 35, 42–45, 61, 63, 65, 168, 293, 413
- realism 现实主义, 27, 317, 318; in Chinese artistic tradition, 62; conceptual, 156; critical, 19, 53; Cynical, see Cynical Realism; debate on realism, 410; expressionist, 156; ink paintings, 118–19; in literature, 158; model of, 161–62; and New Generation, 156; New Realist School, 55; photorealism, 19, 24, 39, 156, 375; revolutionary, 157, 162; scientific, 53; Socialist, 19, 154, 363; Super-Realism, 375
- Reality: Present and Future*, 331, 332
- Red Brigade 红色旅, 51, 94–95, 413, 416
- Red Gate Gallery, 419
- Red Guard movement, 19–20, 155, 176
- Red Humor 红色幽默, 413, 414
- Regionalism 地域主义, 156
- relativism, 88
- Remaking 798*, 400–401, 401; *Pl. 48*
- Rembrandt van Rijn, 100; *Night Watch*, 27
- Ren Jian 任戡, 55, 180; *Archives*, 165; *New History 1993 Big Consumer Products* [with others], 178; *Primordial Transformation*, 173; Siphon Off series, 164, 165; Stamp Collecting series, 165, 173, 177, 181
- Renaissance, 78
- Rent Collection Courtyard*: Cai Guo-Qiang's Venice version of, 356, 369, 369, 371–72, 374, 377–78, 402, 426, 428; original version of, 368–71, 423; quoting vs. plagiarism, 377–78, 428; reproduction of, 371–76; Sichuan Fine Arts Institute press release on, 370–71
- Republican era, 62, 102
- Research Institute of Fine Arts, 412, 416, 417, 418
- Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting, 411, 416, 417, 418
- Roberts, Claire, 359
- Rodin, Auguste, 372; *The Burghers of Calais*, 16
- Rolling Stones, 177
- Rong Rong 荣荣, 224, 423, 433; Fragments series, 230–31, 230; *1997 No. 1(1) Beijing*, 224; *Pl. 32*
- Rong Rong and inri, *Tui — Transfiguration* exhibition, 400; *Pl. 48*
- Ronte, Dieter, 359
- Root-seeking artists 寻根, 158
- Rosenquist, James, 175
- Ru Xin, 115
- Ruan Xudong 阮旭东, "Contemplative Paintings," 30–33
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 425
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 51, 55, 83, 158
- Scar Art 伤痕美术, 19–23, 47, 53, 62, 118, 158, 409
- Schneider, Eckhard, 360, 425, 427

- Schopenhauer, Arthur, 51, 108  
 Scientific Revolution, 62  
*Second Young Artists Exhibition*, 56  
 self-identity, 185–92, 195–97  
 sexual content, restrictions on, 116  
 ShanghART Gallery, 427, 428  
 Shanghai Art Museum, 330, 414, 416, 423, 425, 427, 428, 430, 431  
 Shanghai Biennale: Fifth, 432; First (1996), 423; Fourth, 430; Second, 425; Third, see 2000 Shanghai Biennale; Sixth, 435–36  
*Shanxi Modern Art Exhibition*, 57, 58, 60, 61  
 Shao Dazhen 邵大箴, 46, 115, 124, 409, 412, 417  
 Shao Hong, 299  
 Shao Zhenpeng 邵振鹏, *Made in China*, 203  
 Shen Changwen, 115  
 Shen Jianzhong, 223  
 Shen, Kuiyi, 360  
 Shen Ling 申玲, 155, 156, 195  
 Shen Qin 沈勤, 95n3  
 Shen Xiaotong, 158  
 Sheng Tianhong 盛天泓, 343  
 Sheng Tianye 盛天晔, 343  
 Sherman, Cindy, 225  
 Shi Benming 施本铭, 58  
 Shi Chong 石冲, 313, 433  
 Shi Hui 施慧, 416, 420, 425  
 Shi Jiu 石久, "On New Space and the Pond Society," 83–89  
 Shi Lei 石磊, 175; *Prenatal Education—Pavarotti Who Forgot the Song Lyrics*, 178  
 Shi Qing 石青, 272, 345–46  
 Shi Yasong, 299–300  
 Shi Yong 施勇, 235, 425, 427  
 Shu Qun 舒群, 405; + - x -: = 0 series, 164; *Absolute Principle No. 1*, 80; Complete Collection of World Art series, 173; *Cui Jian*, 173; "Explanation of the Northern Art Group," 79–82  
 Shui Tianzhong 水天中, 42, 46, 414, 421, 429; Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 411, 423, 428, 436  
 Sigg, Uli, 425, 435, 436  
*Silent Energy* exhibition, 365  
 Sisyphus, myth of, 95n2, 132  
 Six Announcements, 8  
*Sixth National Fine Arts Exhibition*, 35, 47, 48, 53–54, 85, 412  
 Smerling, Walter, 359  
 Smith, Karen, 360, 433; "Zero to Infinity," 224–26  
 Social Documentation, 222–23  
 Society of Young Artists, 55, 86  
 Solomon, Andrew, 421  
 Song Dong 宋冬, 182, 237, 340, 422, 425, 428, 431, 434, 436; *Look*, 237; *One More Lesson, Do You Want to Play With Me?*, 183; *Shut Up and Listen to Me*, 235; *SONGDONG Art Travel Agency*, 337; *Stamping Water*, 224; *Pl. 33; Uncovering*, 235  
 Song Ling 宋陵, 85–86, 88, 414; *Human Tube*, 84; *White Tube*, 84  
 Song Yonghong 宋永红, 155, 158, 160, 161; *Tranquil Environment*, 160  
 Song Yongping 宋永平, 57, 179, 180, 415  
 Sotheby's, New York, 399  
 Southern Artists Salon 南方艺术家沙龙, 51, 414; *First Experimental Exhibition*, 97; *Pl. 13*  
 Southwest Art Research Group 西南艺术研究群体, 51, 415  
*Spring Tide* exhibition, 47  
*Stars Art Exhibitions*, 6, 7–10, 9, 11–13, 47, 120, 409, 410, 414  
 Stars Art Society 星星, 6–7, 19, 116, 129, 410, 414, 417  
 Stella, Frank, 293  
 Street Video Group, 232  
 Su Liqun, 127  
 Su Shi, 293  
 Sui Jianguo 隋建国, 422, 426, 428; *Earthly Force*, 154; *Pl. 18*  
 Sun Jin, 127  
 Sun Liang 孙良, 419, 420  
 Sun Ping 孙平, 179; *Issuing Shares*, 178; *Miss Avant-Garde Art*, 203; *Miss Fashion*, 203; *Miss Service*, 203  
 Sun Xinmian, 320–21  
 Sun Yuan 孙原, 344–45, 346, 428; *Honey*, 271, 272  
 Sun Zhenhua 孙振华, 322, 429, 432  
 Suo Fei, 124  
*Supermarket* exhibition, 279, 334, 337–38, 345, 426  
 Surikov, Vasily, *Boyarynya Morozova*, 22  
 Surrealism, 39, 57, 63, 65, 85  
 "Symposium on Implementing the Central Committee of the CCP's 'Outline for Civic Morality'," 429  
 Szeemann, Harald, 356, 361, 369, 370, 371, 374–75, 377, 424, 425, 426, 428  
 Tang Cheng, 342  
 Tang Dacheng, 121  
 Tang Dyansty, 102  
 Tang Kemei, 115  
 Tang Qingnian 唐庆年, 115  
 Tang Song 唐宋, and performance art, 119, 121, 126  
 Tao Yongbai 陶咏白, 417, 422, 429; "Toward a Female Initiative," 194–97  
 Theater of the Absurd, 12  
 Third Plenary Session, 21, 72–73, 409  
 Three Men Studio, 198  
 Tiananmen Square, 113, 220, 363, 417  
 Tilson, Joe, *Is This Che Guevara?*, 177  
 Today Art Museum, 398, 431, 434  
 Tom.com, 428  
 Tomonobu, Imamichi, 100  
 Tong Biao 佟飏, 423; *The Afternoon of August 30th*, 237; *Watched Sleep*, 233



- Tong Dian, "The Landscape of China's Modern Art Movement," 66–78  
*Trace of Existence* exhibition, 338–42, 343–44, 424  
*Trend of Art Thought* 美术思潮, *The*, 35, 48, 114, 310, 411, 412  
 Turner, Caroline, 358  
*Twenty-First Century* exhibition, 166n2  
 Two Hundreds, 45
- University of Buffalo Art Galleries, 431, 433  
 Upriver Art Gallery, 333–34, 426  
 urban destruction and construction, 205–13
- van Dijk, Hans, 422, 426  
 van Gogh, Vincent, 291, 292, 306  
 Velazquez, Diego Rodriguez, *Aesop*, 27  
 Venice Biennale, 167, 234, 263, 347, 349, 361, 366–68, 371, 374, 397, 402, 412, 420, 422, 426, 428, 431, 433  
*Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*, 356, 369, 369, 371–72, 374, 377–78, 426  
 Verostko, Roman, 412  
 video art, 232–48, 340, 341, 343, 345;  
 aesthetic value of, 233; *Art and Historical Consciousness*, 237; *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China*, 237; *Documents of Video Art*, 237; funding, 236; *Image and Phenomena* exhibition, 235, 236–37; international festivals, 237–38; postproduction, 237; standards for, 237  
 video game images, 178  
 Viola, Bill, *Buried Secrets*, 234
- Wang Birong, 115  
 Wang Chuan 王川, 19, 413; "Expecting Her to Walk on the Main Road," 29–30; *Farewell, Narrow Trail*, 29, 31; *Hanging Coffins*, 58  
 Wang Dalun, 209–12  
 Wang Deren 王德仁, 117, 121, 123  
 Wang Du 王度, 51, 248, 414, 415, 432; "Toward a Physical State of Contemporary Art Itself," 97  
 Wang Gongxin 王功新, 224, 341, 401, 423, 428, 433; *Baby Talk*, 237; *Myth Powder No. 1*, 237; *Shepherd*, 339; *Sky of Brooklyn*, 234, *Pl. 36*  
 Wang Guangyi 王广义, 51, 125, 154, 297, 418, 420, 421, 423, 424, 433; and *Archives*, 405; *Black Rationality*, 169; *Death of Marat*, 126; *Great Criticism—Kodak*, 164, 167–71, 173, 177; *Pl. 22*; *Mao Zedong*, 158, 164, 167, 169, 170, 172, 176; *Mass-Produced Holy Child* series, 173; *Masterpieces Covered by Industrial Quick-Drying Paint* series, 173; *Post-Classical—Return of the Great Sorrow*, 78; *Pl. 9*; *Post-Classical* series, 168; on purging humanist enthusiasm (清理人文热情), 123, 164, 169; *Red Rationality*, 169; and *Rent Collection Courtyard*, 368; *Solidified Arctic Region* series, 168; as utopian, 168–71; and *Visual Polity*, 406; "We — Participants of the '85 Art Movement," 78–79; and *Zhuhai Symposium*, 49  
 Wang Hao 王浩, 155, 156  
 Wang Hu 王虎, 155  
 Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, 404, 430, 431  
 Wang Huaxiang 王华祥, 155, 156  
 Wang Jianwei 汪建伟, 182–83, 237, 422, 423, 424, 428, 433; *Circulation—Sowing and Harvesting*, 182–83, 244–45, 244, 341; *Import <-> Export*, 243; *Incident—Process, State*, 243; *Membrane*, 340–41; *Model*, 245; *Production*, 245–46; *Reproduction*, 242–43; "Six Video Works," 242–46  
 Wang Jin 王晋, 198, 421, 424, 426, 431; *Ice · '96 Central Plains*, 215–16, 215; *Red Dust*, 224–25; *Red Train Tracks*, 224; *To Marry a Mule*, 225, 335  
 Wang Jinsong 王劲松, 155, 156, 158, 161, 162, 198, 421, 424; *Big Chorus*, 161; *Big Qigong*, 161; *Standard Family*, 217, 217, 224  
 Wang Jiong, 119  
 Wang Jiping 王纪平, 57  
 Wang Keping 王克平, 11, 12, 416; *The Backbone of Society*, 12; *Long, Long Life*, 12; *Silence*, 12; *Pl. 1*  
 Wang Lan 王兰: *General Store*, 40  
 Wang Lin 王林, 46, 124, 343, 412, 417, 431, 433; "Oliva Is Not the Savior of Chinese Art," 366–68  
 Wang Luyan 王鲁炎, 365, 418, 419, 423  
 Wang Meng, *Living in Seclusion in the Qingbian Mountains*, 107  
 Wang Mingxian 王明贤, 115, 415, 426  
 Wang Nanming 王南溟, 321; on art markets, 353–54  
 Wang Qi, 299, 300, 301  
 Wang Qiang 王强, 85, 88, 414; *Adagio of Symphony No. 5, Second Movement*, 84, 85; *Amateur Painter*, 84  
 Wang Qingsong 王庆松, 425, 427; *The Thinker*, 202; *Thousand Hand Buddha*, 202  
 Wang Ruiting, 127  
 Wang Shuo, 160, 161  
 Wang Wei 王卫, 272; *1/30th of a Second Underwater*, 343; *Pl. 41*  
 Wang Xiangming 王向明 and Jing Lili, *Longing for Peace*, 38, 56  
 Wang Xiaohong, 211  
 Wang Xiaojian 王小箭, 46, 412, 415  
 Wang Yazhong 王亚中, 179  
 Wang Youshen 王友身, 155, 418, 419, 420  
 Wang Yigang 王易罡, 426, 429  
 Wang Yubei 王玉北, 180  
 Wang Yun, 182–83  
 Wang Yuping 王玉平, 155, 156  
 Wang Zhen 王振, 115  
 Wang Zhiping, 7  
 Wang Ziwei 王子卫, 177, 415, 421; *Mao Zedong* series, 172

- Warhol, Andy, 165, 168, 170, 175, 268–69, 293, 366
- Wei Guangqing 魏光庆, 424; Red Wall series, 173, 174, 178; Suicide series, 173; Thumb series, 173
- Wei Rong 韦蓉, 155, 156
- Weiss, Evelyn, 359
- Wen Pulin 温普林, 412, 416
- Weng Fen 翁奋, 273
- Weng Fen and Yan Yinhong, *A Talk Between a Man and a Woman*, 235
- Werner, Chris, 359, 425
- Wesselman, Tom, 175
- Western art: forbidden in Cultural Revolution, 35; imitation of, 163, 316, 347; modernist, 158, 162; Pop in China compared to, 171–72, 175, 176, 180
- Western art theory, 48, 158, 318
- Western Conceptual art, 154
- Western influence, 16, 19, 35, 65, 66–67, 99, 102, 118, 127, 128–30, 159, 163, 170, 319–20, 322, 333, 338–39
- Western propaganda, 364–65
- Western reception of Chinese art, 357–65
- Why*, 22, 31
- Wild Grass Painting Society, 410, 411, 415
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 55, 83
- Working People's Cultural Palace, 409, 413, 415
- World Art* 世界美术, 46, 312, 314, 315, 409
- World of Female Artists* exhibition, 155, 194, 316, 418
- Wu Ershan 乌尔善, 272, 273, 343, 345
- Wu Guangyao, 115
- Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中, 49, 410, 413, 419, 421; on the ancient and modern, East and West, 16; on a beginner's path, 17; on creative composition and daily practice, 14–15; "Formalist Aesthetics in Painting" (形式美), 14–17, 66, 409; on personal feelings and artistic style, 15–16; on spirit consonance, 16–17; *The Ancient City of Jiaohe*, 14; *Pl. 2*; on untitled works, 17
- Wu Hong 吴鸿, 290, 404, 436; "From 'System' to 'Circle'," 307–10
- Wu Hung 巫鸿, 360, 361, 428, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 436; "Experimental Exhibitions' of the 1990s," 327–36; 361, 426, 428, 429, 432, 433; and *Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 361, 429; and *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art*, 397, 430; and *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 360, 426
- Wu Jiafeng, 124
- Wu Jialin 吴家林, 223
- Wu Jucai, 115
- Wu Meichun 吴美纯, 236, 237, 271, 343, 344, 345, 346, 423, 424, 426, 427
- Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, "The Rise and Development of Video Art and the Maturity of New Media Art," 232–38
- Wu Shanzhuan 吴山专, 99, 121, 248, 251, 405, 414, 420; *Big Business*, 116; performance art, 122–23; *Red Humor—Red Characters*, 116–17, 172; *Pl. 17*
- Wu Xiaochang 吴小昌, 59
- Wu Xiaojun 吴小军, 335
- Wu Xiaolin, 115
- Wu Ying 吴颖, 88
- Wu Zuoren 吴作人, 115; foundation, 417
- Wyeth, Andrew, 19, 30–33, 39, 156; *A Faraway Place*, 31, 32; *Barn Swing*, 31; *Christina's World*, 30–31, 32
- Xi Jianjun, 365
- Xia Wei, 360, 425
- Xia Xiaowan 夏小万, 58
- Xiamen Art Museum, 95, 415
- Xiamen Dada 厦门达达, 51, 123, 405; *Burning Works*, 95; *Haul Away the Museum*, 117
- Xiang Nan, 352
- Xiao Chen, "A Strong Focus on Reality," 317
- Xiao Lu 肖鲁, 119, 120, 126
- Xiao Quan, 223
- Xiao Yu 萧昱, 271, 273, 345, 428
- Xidan Democracy Wall, 409
- Xie Guanghui, 223
- Xin Haizhou 忻海舟, 158
- Xinjiang Art Academy Exhibition*, 75
- Xishan Symposium*, 48
- Xu Beihong, 53, 62; ink paintings, 118
- Xu Bing 徐冰, 99, 118, 123–24, 125–26, 131, 132, 248, 274, 356, 402, 405, 418, 421, 425, 426, 427, 428, 432, 433, 436; *A Book from the Sky (A Mirror to Analyze the World—Fin de Siècle Book)*, 99, 105, 123, 132, 172–73, 255, 256, 256, 416; *Pl. 14*; *Cultural Animal*, 274, 421; "Looking for Something Different in a Quiet Place," 105; *New English Calligraphy*, 255, 256, 427; "On Words," 254–57; *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, 255; Square Word Calligraphy series, 249, 255; *Three Installations by Xu Bing*, 358, 419; *Tobacco Project*, 249, 403, 432; *A Window facing Pudong*, 403; *Pl. 50*; *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing*, 361
- Xu Hong 徐虹, 196; "Walking out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critique," 185, 193–94
- Xu Jilin, 101
- Xu Jin 徐进, 85; *Dialogue*, 84; *12:00 a.m.*, 84
- Xu Lei 徐累, 95n3
- Xu Min 许敏, 196
- Xu Tan 徐坦, 425, 427; *New Order*, 328; Prostitute series, 226
- Xu Wenli and Liu Qing *et al.*, "A Letter to the People," 8–10
- Xu Xiaoyan 徐晓燕, 195

- Xu Yihui 徐一暉, 95n3, 424, 425; *Art History*, 201
- Xu Zhen 徐震, 337–38, 401, 426; *The Difficulty with Colors*, Pl. 44
- Xu Zhiwei 徐志伟, *Yuanmingyuan Village*, 288, 288
- Xue Yongnian, 124
- Yan Lei 颜磊, 423; *Absolutely Safe*, 237; *Beijing Haw*, 233; *Clear Away*, 233, 234; *Dissolve*, 233; 1500 cm, 233; *Invasion*, 225–26, 234; No. 031007, 234; 323 cm<sup>2</sup>, 234
- Yan Peiming 严培明, 401, 418, 422, 427, 428, 432
- Yan Ping 阎萍, 195
- Yan Shanchun 严善錚, 46, 170, 299, 412, 432, 433
- Yan Yinhong 严隐鸿, 235
- Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art, 164, 408, 419
- Yang Fudong 杨福东, 273, 343, 401, 431; *The First Intellectual*, 198; Pl. 29
- Yang Guozhang 杨国章, 175; *Mrs. Lida Prepares Powdered Milk for Her Grandson*, 178; *Reference News*, 176
- Yang Jiechang 杨诩苍, 248, 251, 357, 358, 365, 417, 418, 419, 432
- Yang Jun, 422, 430
- Yang Keqin 杨克勤, 195
- Yang Li, 299
- Yang Lihua, 115
- Yang Sen 杨森, 343
- Yang Wei, 434, 436
- Yang Xiaoyan 杨小彦, 219, 299; "The Cartoon Generation," 319
- Yang Xu 杨旭 and Zhou Tiehai, *Scribbles on Newspaper*, 176
- Yang Yingsheng 杨迎生, 95n3
- Yang Yong 杨勇, 226, 272, 273
- Yang Yongshan, 210
- Yang Zhenzhong 杨振忠, 337–38, 423, 424, 425, 426; *Fish Tank*, 237
- Yang Zhilin 杨志麟, 95n3
- Yanhuang Art Gallery, 331, 419, 424
- Yasumichi, Morishita, 293, 295
- Ye Shuanggui 叶双贵, 180; Grand Ceramics series, 181
- Ye Tingfang, 124, 127
- Ye Yongqing 叶永青, 415, 418, 424, 436; *Awaken in Spring from Hibernation*, 57; Pl. 8; *Big Poster*, 176
- Ye Yushan, 49
- "Year of China in France," 432
- Yearbook of Chinese Art 1949–1989*, 48
- Yeats, William Butler, 92
- Yellow River Cantata*, 164
- Yi Ching*, 250
- Yi Dan 易丹, 299, 404, 417, 420
- Yi Ying 易英, 299, 301, 343, 412, 422, 425, 429, 430, 433; "The Meaning of Work Should Be Clear," 318; "Criticism on Chinese Experimental Art in the 1990s," 316–23; "The Modernist Dilemma," 128–32
- Yin Jinan 尹吉男, 315, 317; "New Generation and Close Up Artists," 154, 155–57
- Yin Qi 尹齐, 204
- Yin Shuangxi 殷双喜, 211, 299, 301, 323, 412, 429, 432, 433; "My Outlook on Criticism," 324–25
- Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍, 185, 341, 426, 427; *Clothes Chest*, 198; Pl. 28; *Ruined Capital*, 329
- Yin Yanjun, 44
- Yong He, 223
- Yu Bogong 于伯公: *Shit with a Dream*, 203; *Shit with Long Hair*, 203
- Yu Chen 余陈, 155
- Yu Hong 喻红, 155, 158, 160, 180, 195, 418, 419, 420
- Yu Ji 余极, 175
- Yu Xiaofu 喻晓夫, *Gently, the Children Perform for Picasso's Doves*, 38
- Yu Youhan 余友涵, 415, 420, 421; Mao Zedong series, 164, 173, 176
- Yuan Baolin 袁宝林, 124
- Yuan Guang, 327–28
- Yuan Kejia, 121
- Yuan Yaomin 袁耀敏, 195
- Yue Minjun 岳敏君, 185, 398, 424, 426; *Sky*, Pl. 25
- Yung Ho Chang 张永和, 341–42
- Zeng Chaoying, 115
- Zeng Fanzhi 曾梵志, 158, 185, 401; *Mask Series No. 6*, 398; *Mask Series No. 8*, 192; Pl. 23
- Zeng Hao 曾浩, 198
- Zeng Xiaojun, 421
- Zeng Zhennan, 124, 127
- Zero art group, 56, 60, 413, 415
- Zero Exhibition*, 57, 58, 413
- Zha Li 查立, 85–86
- Zhai Mo 翟墨, 124
- Zhan Jianjun 詹建俊, 115
- Zhan Wang 展望, 155, 156, 198, 345, 346, 422, 426; "Debris Salvage Schemes," 206–7; *New Crash Course Art Studio*, 340; "New Map of Beijing — Rockery Remolding Plan," 207–8; *Ruin Cleaning*, 207
- Zhang Bin 张灏, 175; Model Opera series, 176
- Zhang Bo 张波, 175
- Zhang Dai, *Exploring the Delicacy of Painting*, 293
- Zhang Dali 张大力, 198, 335, 401, 436; *Dialogue*, 209–13, 209; Pl. 31
- Zhang Defeng 张德峰, 156; *Distance*, 341
- Zhang Fan 张帆, 343
- Zhang Fuping 张复平, 91
- Zhang Haier 张海儿, *Self-Portrait*, 223, 223
- Zhang Hanzi 张涵子, 272, 428
- Zhang Huan 张洵, 198, 224, 401, 402, 420, 428, 436; 12 *Square Meters*, 214, 214; 65 *KG*, 185–87, 186

- Zhang Jianjun 张建军, 412; *Humanity and Their Clocks*, 56
- Zhang Jun 张骏, *April 5*, 1976, 39, 41
- Zhang Kangkang, 121
- Zhang Nian 张念, performance art, 117, 431
- Zhang Peili 张培力, 51, 85–86, 87, 88, 99, 123, 125, 126, 154, 235–36, 238, 413, 414, 418, 420, 423, 424, 425, 427, 433; and *Archives*, 405; *Art Project No. 2*, 112–13; *Assignment No. 1*, 233; *Best Before 8/28/1994*, 240; *Brown Book No. 1*, 112; *Children's Playground*, 233; *Chinese Bodybuilding*, 164, 165, 173, 177; *Diary*, 242; *Document on Hygiene*, No. 3, 233, 239; *Focal Distance*, 236; *Midsummer Swimmers*, 84; *Pl. 10*; 1989 *Standard Pronunciation*, 164, 165, 173; *Opposite Space*, 240–41; *Pause*, 84; *Pleasant Help Yourself to Some Jazz*, 84; *Uncertain Pleasure*, 236, 241; *Water*, 233, 238–39, 238; X? series, 118
- Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, *Exhibition of Recent Works*, 329
- Zhang Qiang 张蔷, 115, 124, 412
- Zhang Qing 张晴, 351, 428, 430, 432–436; "The Shanghai Biennale Amid Transitions," 347–50
- Zhang Qun 张群 and Meng Luding, *In the New Era: Enlightenment of Adam and Eve*, 35, 36–38, 56; *Pl. 7*
- Zhang Rongfu 张荣富, *Childhood Memories*, 39
- Zhang Sanxi, 180
- Zhang Xiaogang 张晓刚, 51, 90, 118, 401, 412, 415, 418, 421, 422, 423, 424, 427; *Big Family series*, 185, 190–91, 192, 398; *Pl. 24*
- Zhang Xiaoling, 44–45, 427
- Zhang Xiaping 张夏平, 91
- Zhang Yajie 张亚杰, *Models*, 202
- Zhang Yaojun, 115
- Zhang Yu, 300
- Zhang Zhilin, and *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, 119
- Zhang Zhiyang, 46, 412
- Zhang Zuying, 115, 211
- Zhao Bandi 赵半狄, 155, 156, 334, 427
- Zhao Jinghuan, "Pioneers of Contemporary Chinese Art," 38–42
- Zhao Qin 赵勤 and Liu Jian, 203–4; *I Love McDonald's*, 203; *Live Broadcast*, 203
- Zhao Tingyang, 170
- Zhao Wenliang 赵文量, 5
- Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (later China National Academy of Fine Arts), 55, 56, 83, 86, 107, 232, 408, 412, 414, 416, 419
- Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 429
- Zheng Guogu 郑国谷, 344, 345, 425; *The Life of Youth in Yangjiang series*, 226
- Zheng Lianjie 郑连杰, performance art series, 182
- Zheng Shengtian 郑胜天, 360, 425, 427, 432
- Zhou Changjiang 周长江, 420; *Window*, 39
- Zhou Chunya 周春芽, 424; *Black Lines, Red Torso, Pl. 43*
- Zhou Enlai, 5, 408
- Zhou Jingxin, 166n2
- Zhou Jirong 周吉荣, 155
- Zhou Shaoli 周少立, *Death Breeds New Life*, 40
- Zhou Tieshai 周铁海, 176, 425; *Press Conference*, 357
- Zhou Xiaohu 周啸虎: *The Goopy Gentleman*, 248; *Beautiful Cloud*, 247; *Children's Rhymes*, 247; *Face-Lifting Arch Veranda*, 247; *Form and Shadow Aren't Separated series*, 248; *Listening In on Plastic Surgery*, 247; *Plastic Surgery Hallway*, 247; *Really Not Evil Intentions*, 247; *The Age of Lies*, 246–47; *Travel in Desire*, 248; *Wax Museum*, 248
- Zhou Xinfang, 16
- Zhou Xiping 周细平, 165, 180; *Grand Portrait series*, 181
- Zhou Yan 周彦, 115; on *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, 114–15
- Zhou Yubing 周玉冰, 299
- Zhou Zuoren, *Water Margin*, 165–66n2
- Zhu Bin 祝斌, 299
- Zhu Fadong 朱发东, 198, 224, 335, 426; "State of Existence," 213–14; *This Person is for Sale*, 214; *Zhu Fadong, Missing Person Announcement*, 213, 214
- Zhu Jia 朱加, 155, 423; *Forever*, 234, 236–37
- Zhu Ming 朱冥, 224
- Zhu Mo 朱墨, 115
- Zhu Qi 朱其, 423, 429
- Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生, 46, 88, 405, 412, 414, 415, 428, 433, 434, 435; on the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, 351–52
- Zhu Xikun 祝锡琨, 180
- Zhu Xinjian 朱新建, 163, 166n2
- Zhu Ye, "Beijing Theorists' Reactions to the Art of Robert Rauschenberg," 42–45, 43
- Zhu Yu 朱昱, 271, 344, 345–46, 428; *Pocket Theology*, 279; *Skin Graft*, 277–86; *Pl. 42*
- Zhu Zude 朱祖德, 101–3
- Zhuang Hui 庄辉, 266–69, 424, 428, 433; *One and Thirty*, 228; *Shooting a Group Portrait*, 227–30, 227
- Zhuhai Painting Institute, 114
- Zhuhai Symposium, 48, 49, 414
- Zou Yuejin, 319, 320
- Zu Zhou 诅咒, 224
- Zuo Jing, 433, 435

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