



TRANSIENCE

Chinese Experimental Art
at the End of the Twentieth Century

Wu Hung

The David and Alfred Smart
Museum of Art
The University of Chicago

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FOREWORD

The Smart Museum is pleased to present *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, an exhibition that is both groundbreaking and timely. Over the past decade, here in the United States as elsewhere in the world, there has been a rapidly increasing interest in the practice of contemporary artists in China. Since the Tiananmen incident in 1989, witnessed on live television all over the world, we have thirsted for more knowledge about how the generation of Tiananmen has been able to express itself culturally and artistically, in the wake of this event, the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall, and the perceived weakening of Communist systems in favor of increasingly capitalist economic (if not social and political) systems in every corner of the globe.

The exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, which traveled in this country in 1994–97, gave us our first large-scale introduction to Chinese art made after 1989. Many other smaller shows, both group and individual, have since increased our knowledge of what is going on in the People's Republic of China. This activity has now culminated in the comprehensive *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Asia Society, which as I write is on view in New York and has been hailed by Holland Cotter in *The New York Times* as “a benchmark achievement on which future exhibitions will build.”

Our exhibition has been organized by Wu Hung, the Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor in Chinese Art History at the University of Chicago, and one of the world's leading experts on both ancient and contemporary Chinese art. While serving as consultant to both the 1997 Guggenheim Museum survey of Chinese art through the ages and the current Asia Society exhibition of contemporary art, Wu Hung conceived a desire to present his own curatorial statement about certain trends in contemporary Chinese art, and the Smart Museum jumped at the chance to aid in this endeavor. The result, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, is a thoughtful and tightly focused exploration of certain themes—“Demystification,” “Ruins,” and “Transience”—which Wu Hung has identified as critical to a broader understanding of artistic production in China now. It is through this focused approach, we believe, that Western audiences can better develop

a contextualized understanding of contemporary Chinese art and can connect that understanding to an international discourse about the nature of contemporary art in this postmodern age. In its focus on individual artists, their lives, and career trajectories, and on close readings of individual works, all in the context of the exhibition's organizing themes, *Transience* constitutes a new voice in the current fast-paced discussion about contemporary Chinese artistic practice and its place in a broader, post-national scheme of cultural understanding.

The Smart Museum is immensely grateful to Wu Hung, whose knowledge and enthusiasm fueled what has been for us a massive international effort. We also thank the artists and lenders, without whom there would be no exhibition, for their generosity and cooperation. Smart Associate Curator Courtenay Smith has directed the project with great style and competence; without her, it could not have been realized. Also, Curatorial Intern Kris Ercums assisted with every aspect of the exhibition and wrote both appendixes for this catalogue. Other Smart staff members, including Curator Richard Born, Registrar Jennifer Widman, Preparator Rudy Bernal, Education Director Jacqueline Terrassa, and Events Coordinator Julie Freaney have assisted in many ways, large and small, and we thank them. Other individuals who have contributed to the realization of this project include Chang Tsong-Zung, Mary and Roy Cullen, Vishakha Desai, Joan and Robert Feitler, Katherine Mino, Mary Smart, Karen Smith, Joel Snyder, Priscilla Yu, and Judith Zeitlin. Finally, we are most grateful to the funders of this project, the largest and most ambitious exhibition yet undertaken by the Smart, who made it all possible. These include the Smart Family Foundation, Inc., Lannan Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, with the support and encouragement of Mrs. Beatrice Cummings Mayer, Mary and Roy Cullen, and the John Nuveen Company. Partial funding for this project also was provided by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

Kimerly Rorschach
Dana Feitler Director
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art
The University of Chicago

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The possibility of organizing an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art at the Smart Museum first emerged in my conversations with Kimerly Rorschach back in 1995, soon after we both moved, simultaneously and coincidentally, to the Midwest to assume posts at the University of Chicago. After three years, this possibility has become reality—a transformation made possible by the collaboration of many people to whom I am deeply grateful. The person most responsible for this transformation is Kim. The show will be presented by the Smart Museum largely because of her vision of expanding the museum's program to include contemporary Asian art. It is also she who drew up the exhibition's general plan and has overseen every step in its preparation, from fund-raising to transporting the exhibition items to the compilation of the catalogue. The show also owes much to Smart Associate Curator Courtenay Smith, who has been involved in the entire process of the project and is especially responsible for putting together the catalogue and designing the exhibition installation. She has constantly impressed me with her insightful suggestions and efficiency. Smart Curator Richard Born has given the exhibition his strongest support and has been indispensable to its realization. My student Kris Ercums, who serves as an intern in the museum, assisted with the exhibition's preparation and is responsible for the appendixes in the catalogue. I also want to thank Eugene Wang, who participated in the initial planning of the exhibition when he was a faculty member at the University of Chicago.

The exhibition would also be impossible without the help of many Chinese art critics and artists, many of whom are old friends. Gao Minglu, the guest curator of the comprehensive exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York, shared much of his knowledge of contemporary Chinese art with me in our frequent discussions. In China, Du Zheshen, Gu Chengfeng, and Xia Shuoqi helped to advertise our "call for submissions" in the three art journals for which they serve as chief editors. Feng Boyi and Wang Mingxian were enormously helpful in introducing me to many younger artists. I also benefited from discussions about the current state of Chinese experimental art with a number of critics and artists, including Ai Weiwei, Chang Tsong-zung, Dao Zi,

Huang Du, Leng Lin, and Song Xiaoxia. I would like to thank all of the artists who submitted works to this exhibition, and would especially like to express my gratitude to the twenty-one artists featured in the show, each of whom spent hours with me in interviews and also provided me with their works and writings—materials indispensable for my preparation of the catalogue.

My deepest appreciation goes to my wife, Judith Zeitlin, a scholar of Chinese literature. To some extent this exhibition is our shared project: together we visited artists in Beijing and were excited by our findings, and she was always the first reader and critic of the essays I wrote for the catalogue. Many ideas in the exhibition grew out of our discussions of contemporary Chinese art, culture, and society. Without such intensive discussion the exhibition and the catalogue might exist, but would definitely not be the same.

Wu Hung
Exhibition Curator
Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor
in Chinese Art History
The University of Chicago

INTRODUCTION

PUSHING

THE LIMITS

CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL ART
FROM 1979 TO 1999

MAJOR TRADITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

The end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 marked an entirely new stage in modern Chinese history. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the Gang of Four,¹ a new generation of Chinese leaders made a dramatic turn to develop a capitalist market economy under the name of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Over the next ten to twenty years, foreign investment and technology poured into the previously tightly insulated country. A by-product of this development was the Communist Party’s rapid loss of control over cultural affairs.² Although in theory Marxism still guided official cultural policies, and although the government still periodically mobilized campaigns against “bourgeois spiritual pollution,” the Chinese art scene was no longer dominated by a central political authority. Rather, contemporary Chinese art in the post-Cultural Revolution era has emerged as a constant interaction and negotiation between five traditions or realms. These are: (1) a highly politicized official art directly under the sponsorship of the party, (2) an academic art that struggles to separate itself from political propaganda by emphasizing technical training and higher aesthetic standards, (3) a popular urban visual culture that eagerly absorbs fashionable images from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West, (4) a vanguard Chinese experimental art that consciously tries to link itself to various forms of Western modernist and postmodernist art, and (5) an “international” commercial art, that, though often initially part of experimental art, eventually devotes itself to an international art market after finding sponsorship from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or foreign galleries. Except for official art, none of these traditions is directly controlled by the Communist Party. On the other hand, none of these traditions is overtly anti-Communist, a political orientation that is still largely forbidden in China. Although some experimental art conveys political criticism and intends to challenge official ideology, as exemplified by works in this exhibition (especially in Part One, “Demystification”), such challenges are subtle, realized mainly through deconstructing typical images in official art.

Moreover the boundaries between these traditions have never been stable. Many artists belong to more than one tradition, while the definition and content of each tradition are constantly changing. Popular art is the most metamorphic, the most sensitive to fast-changing cultural

1 “Gang of Four” refers to the ultra-left political faction in China’s Communist leadership, which at the time consisted of Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and her three key associates. They were arrested a month after Mao’s death in September 1976 and were put on trial in 1980. Jiang Qing received the death sentence on charges of persecution or killing hundreds of thousands of people during the Cultural Revolution.

2 China’s political situation after the Cultural Revolution is complex and cannot be fully addressed here. For a concise summary of this situation, see Jonathan D. Spence and Anping Chin, *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: Random House, 1996), 219–57. For changes in China’s cultural scene in the post-Cultural Revolution era, see Zha Jianying, *China Pop* (New York: New Press, 1995).

and commercial stimuli. Art academies, though still generally upholding the models of classical Chinese painting and realist Western art, have gradually expanded their repertoire to include certain modernist art styles. Some teachers and students in important art schools, such as the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (originally the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts) and the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, have gone further to challenge socialist realist doctrines and have become influential experimental artists.

Even official art has increasingly become a dynamic entity rather than a solid monolith. Although the party has never intended to give up its control over artistic affairs, its cultural policies have been oscillating between extremely strict and relatively relaxed depending on the political situation. Moreover, the party controls the art world mainly through the National Association of Chinese Artists, an organization that is responsible for organizing official national art exhibitions and heads an enormous administrative network consisting of provincial associations and associations on even lower local levels. The four national exhibitions held during the Cultural Revolution forged a monotonous, symbolic Communist art (fig. I.1). But the content of such exhibitions has changed greatly during the two decades since the Cultural Revolution. Many members of the Association of Chinese Artists (including some judges of national exhibitions) have been increasingly attracted by new art styles and commercial interests; their changing tastes have directly influenced the actual production of official art, although the institutional mechanisms for this art have remained basically unaltered.

This general understanding of Chinese art during the post-Cultural Revolution era helps clarify some misconceptions concerning the tradition I have termed “experimental art.” In many books and articles aimed at a Western audience, the authors often correlate this art with notions familiar to the West, resulting in misinterpretations of its specific historical



FIGURE I.1
Zhao Shuqiao, *Spring Willow Trees*, 1974, oil on canvas on paper, 52 x 75 in. (132 x 190 cm), National Art Gallery, Beijing.

nature and characteristics. Sometimes this art is labeled “underground art” in a totalitarian society. It is true that even in recent years the Chinese government has sometimes continued to implement harsh measures against “decadent bourgeois art,” including banning certain art exhibitions, harassing experimental artists, and punishing those suspected of involvement in antigovernment activities. But such practices often have been linked with specific political situations, such as the June Fourth Movement of 1989, after which experimental art was largely banned for a year or two. Generally speaking, the official censorship of artistic production has loosened tremendously over the past twenty years, especially in the 1990s. Although direct criticism of the party and the government is still forbidden, artists are now basically free to experiment with various art forms and styles. If extreme political control made experimental art nonexistent during the Cultural Revolution, this art became possible after the Cultural Revolution (and in a more general sense, after the Cold War) because of the loosening of such control.

The political orientation of contemporary Chinese experimental art is complex. There were moments when experimental artists assumed an active role to change the social and political system. For example, the Stars exhibition in 1979 sharply attacked official ideology, and the enormous *China/Avant-garde* exhibition in 1989 was closely linked to the June Fourth Movement that year. But these moments did not constitute a general antagonism between experimental art and the contemporary sociopolitical system. From the late seventies to the mid-nineties, a majority of the “political works” produced by experimental artists actually were targeted at the bygone Cultural Revolution. The fact that these works could be exhibited and published in China and abroad was itself proof of a more open political atmosphere. This is not to say that contemporary Chinese experimental art has lost its independence to become part of official art. While experimental artists rarely have aimed at social revolution, they have made the greatest effort among all contemporary Chinese artists to challenge official taboos and to test the limits of artistic freedom; in so doing they have contributed most to the opening of the Chinese art scene.

We find a similarly complex situation in the education and occupation of experimental artists and their aesthetic choices. Many of them were trained in art academies; a smaller number of them never received formal art education. Some of these artists are now professors in prestigious art schools, while others are freelance artists without steady jobs or incomes. Their works also show a wide variety of media and styles. Even in 1989, the 297 works featured in *China/Avant-garde* included not only easel paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances, but also drawings and calligraphy in the traditional Chinese medium of ink on paper. Almost all major styles of Western modern art invented over the past century could be found in this exhibition. Such stylistic pluralism—one of the most important features of post-Cultural Revolution experimental art—was closely related to an “information explosion.”

From the early eighties, all sorts of “decadent” Western art forbidden during the Cultural Revolution were introduced to China through reproductions and exhibitions; hundreds of theoretical works, from authors such as Heinrich Wölfflin to Jacques Derrida, were translated and published in a short period. These images and texts aroused enormous interest among younger artists and greatly inspired their work. It was as if a century-long development of Western art was restaged in China. The chronology and internal logic of this Western tradition became less important; its diverse content as visual and intellectual stimuli for a hungry audience counted most. Thus, styles and theories that had long become past history to a Western art critic were regarded as “contemporary” by Chinese artists and used as their models. In other words, the meaning of these “Westernized” Chinese works was located not in the original historical significance of their styles, but in the transference of these styles to a different time and place.

Because of this experience of contemporary Chinese experimental art, it is only natural that this art cannot be interpreted according to a ready-made Western model. This recognition underlies an ongoing debate concerning the so-called Chinese avant-garde: some scholars argue that historical avant-gardism was strictly a Western phenomenon; other scholars hope to apply the concept of avant-garde to Chinese art by revising the definition of this Western term.³ Instead of following either argument, I prefer to employ an alternative term—“experimental art” or “experimentalism”—which is often used by contemporary Chinese artists and art critics themselves.⁴ Renato Poggioli states in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that the “experimental factor” is crucial to any invention of avant-gardism.⁵ But the desire to experiment is certainly not limited to avant-garde artists, nor must an experiment result in a revolutionary style or concept. Thus Poggioli also distinguishes avant-garde experimentalism from other kinds of experimentalism. Similar differences are found within contemporary Chinese experimental art. Some artists exhibit more antagonism and nihilism toward society and fit a Western notion of the avant-garde more closely; other types of experimental art may simply focus on stylistic or technical matters, including “experimenting” (i.e., imitating) with newly introduced Western art forms.

Moreover, an “experiment,” or *shi yan* in Chinese, can be undertaken either by individual artists or by groups of artists. In the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition, for example, artists of different intentions and stylistic identities found themselves in a single camp and shared the excitement of experimentation. These and other events, actually large-scale social/artistic experiments, transcended individual expression. Such events are often characterized by a paradox: while asserting a collective marginality, the participants also demand society’s acceptance. The defining factor of contemporary Chinese experimental art, therefore, is neither stylistic nor political, but the artist’s own self-positioning and re-positioning in a changing society. Experimental artists place themselves at the *border* of contemporary Chinese society and the art

3 For these different opinions, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China* (Tokyo: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1971), 196–213; Gao Minglu, “Toward a Transnational Modernity,” in *idem*, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco and New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, 1998), 15–40; Norman Bryson, “The Post-ideological Avant-garde,” in *ibid.*, 51–58.

4 For example, the art critic Gao Ling characterizes some major installations and performances in China as “experimentations without ideology.” Gao Ling, “Zouchu pinmian di zhuangzhi yishu – jiushi niandai di shiyan yishu” [Three-dimensional installations – Chinese experimental art in the 90s], *Xiangshi meishu* no. 297 (November 1995), 62. In my interviews of the artists in this exhibition, Sui Jianguo, Zhu Fudong, and other artists frequently referred to their works as *shiyan yishu* (experimental art).

5 Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 131–37.

world. On the other hand, by taking up the mission to enlarge frontiers and open new territories, they also constantly challenge their own marginality and must thus constantly reposition themselves on the *border* in order to be continuously “experimental.”

The notion of “border” is thus crucial for understanding contemporary Chinese experimental art. Here a “border” refers to a political, geographic, or ideological space around which problems of identity are thematized.⁶ A border evokes self-consciousness. By placing themselves at a cultural and political frontier, experimental Chinese artists identify themselves as an oppositional force against cultural hegemony. While official art or even academic art relies on fixed agendas and guarded territories, experimental art favors pluralism and cultural crossing; the borderland it opens up “deterritorializes” conventional cultural and political spheres. It is thus understandable why this art presents a constant threat to an established artistic institution such as official art or academic art, which more than often responds to such a threat with open suspicion and hostility. “A border maps limits,” writes Alejandro Morales. “It keeps people in and out of an area; it marks the ending of a safe zone and the beginning of an unsafe zone. To confront a border and, more so, to cross a border presumes great risk.”⁷ A border is policed, and those who cross it face the danger of repudiation or recapture. But as explained earlier, a self-imposed marginalization is one of the most important characteristics of contemporary Chinese experimental art; the sense of danger inspires a sense of heroism and camaraderie among experimental artists.

Although in theory experimental artists must constantly reposition themselves to escape from becoming mainstream, only very few artists can continually meet such a challenge. In many cases, experimental artists of a given period lose their edge and join academic art or commercial art after establishing themselves as major figures in contemporary Chinese art. As a result, the development of Chinese experimental art during the past twenty years has produced four “generations” of artists, whose works responded to major tasks at different times, and whose activities were associated with four historical phases of contemporary Chinese experimental art. These four phases are: (1) the emergence of unofficial art (1979–1984), (2) the '85 Art New Wave movement and the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition (1985–1989), (3) the post-89 period and the internationalization of Chinese experimental art (1990–1993), and (4) a domestic turn—art as social and cultural critique (1994–present). The first three phases were intimately connected with the Cultural Revolution and can be considered internal stages of a post-Cultural Revolution art. The fourth phase, on the other hand, represents a recent and ongoing development that no longer reacts against the Cultural Revolution and is thus no longer part of post-Cultural Revolution art. Many experimental artists have freed themselves from the past, and their works increasingly respond to a rapidly changing Chinese society. This recent development, which is still in full force in China, is the main topic of this exhibition.

6 The rising field of “border studies” has produced many scholarly works. For some recent theoretical reflections on the basic concepts and issues related to borders, see Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson, eds., *Border Theories: The Limits of Cultural Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

7 J. A. Gurpegui, ed., *Alejandro Morales: Fiction Past, Present, Future Perfect* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Review, 1996), 86–98.

POST-CULTURAL REVOLUTION EXPERIMENTAL CHINESE ART (1979–1993)

The exhibitions of the Stars group in 1979 and 1980 marked the beginning of post-Cultural Revolution experimental art by defining an unofficial position in the Chinese art world. Most members of the group were high-school students during the Cultural Revolution who were sent to work in the countryside. Most of them never received formal art training and were not affiliated with any art institution even after the Cultural Revolution. Their exhibitions served as a public declaration of this “outsider” position. Most characteristically, the first Stars show, which began on September 27, 1979, in Beijing, was staged on the street outside the National Art Gallery. A big crowd soon gathered. Police interfered and canceled the show two days later. The Stars responded by holding a public demonstration on October 1, the thirtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The Stars also made their unofficial position known through the works of art they produced, some of which are explicitly political. The audience was shocked by Wang Keping's portrayal of Mao Zedong, which satirizes the Father of Red China as an unfeeling religious idol (see fig. 4.2). Another of his sculptures—a man with his mouth blocked and one eye blinded—symbolizes the condition of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution (fig. 1.2). Most of the works in the Stars exhibitions, however, were much milder and distinguished themselves from official art mainly through their choice of subject and pictorial style. Rejecting the highly polished socialist realist style, they derived pictorial vocabularies from modern Western art and were especially attracted by post-impressionism and expressionism. Instead of depicting important historical and political events, they tried to express their personal feelings and taste in painting. But at this point, the line between these works and academic art became blurred, not only because some academic artists had experimented with similar styles even before the Cultural Revolution, but also because from the late seventies academic art itself underwent important changes. New types of academic painting, including new formalist art, scar art, and native soil art, emerged to challenge official art.⁸ But unlike the Stars, who publicly declared their “oppositional” position through a street show, the supporters of these new academic styles remained inside established institutions and generally avoided direct confrontations with the authorities.

8 For a concise introduction to these movements, see Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), x–xxii.

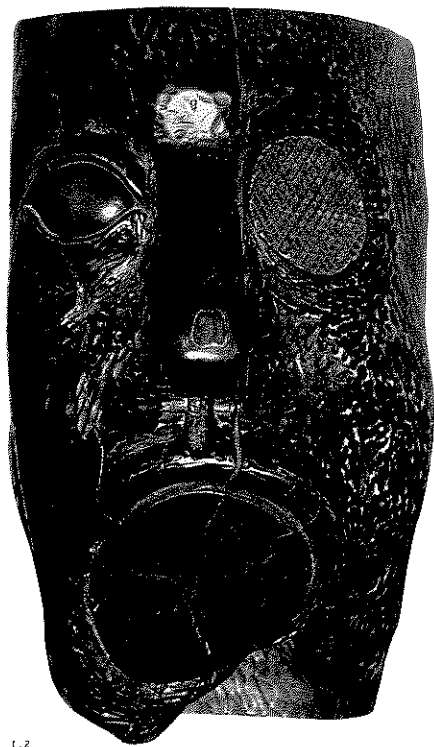


FIGURE 1.2

FIGURE 1.3

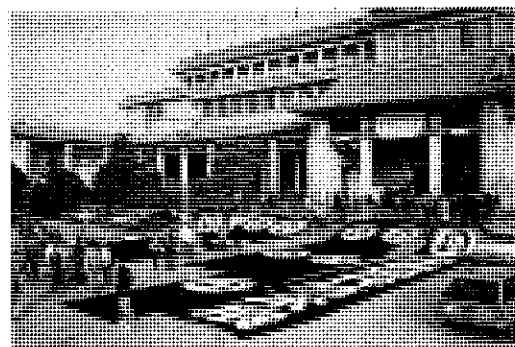


FIGURE 1.2
Wang Keping: *Silence*, 1979,
wood sculpture. Hanart T Z
Gallery, Hong Kong.

FIGURE 1.3
The National Art Gallery,
Beijing, on the opening day of
the *China/Avant-garde*
exhibition, February 5, 1989.

9 Liu Xun, the director of Beijing's Artists' Association, was sympathetic to the Stars and provided them with an exhibition site in a quiet courtyard inside the famous scenic park, Beihai. The exhibition sold about 8,000 tickets in ten days.

10 There are other clear signs of this transformation: in March 1980, the authoritative *Meishu* magazine published some works by Stars artists, accompanied by a sympathetic article. In the early summer, the members of the group formally established the "Stars Painting Club" (Xingxing Huahui) and registered with Beijing's Artists' Association. Finally, the National Art Gallery opened its doors. The third Stars exhibition was held there from August to September. More than 80,000 people went to the show in a period of just sixteen days.

From its very beginning, therefore, post-Cultural Revolution experimental art had a shifting boundary. The changing position of the Stars further exemplified the unstable identity of experimental artists. While the first Stars exhibition openly opposed official art, this opposition began to lose its edge in the second Stars show, held in one of Beijing's most beautiful parks in March of 1980. Through the help of some open-minded individual officials, the show was now legalized, but it still was not recognized by the all-powerful Ministry of Culture and the Artists' Association.⁹ This situation changed again before the third Stars exhibition, which took place inside the National Art Gallery later that year, thus transforming the Stars from "outsiders" to "insiders."¹⁰ Their compromise with the authorities raises questions about their general identification as an avant-garde group. The Stars shows shook Beijing not because they introduced a revolutionary art style, but because they voiced strong political criticism and were the first unofficial art exhibitions in the PRC. Once the exhibitions were admitted into the National Art Gallery, once even Wang Keping's view of Mao Zedong was shared by a majority of people, however, the Stars' marginality disappeared and the group was no longer oppositional. Consequently, most of the Stars' members emigrated abroad in the early 1980s and disappeared from the Chinese experimental art scene. Their place was filled by a new generation of young artists, whose emergence around the mid-1980s signified the arrival of a nationwide movement of experimental art in China.

11 The most detailed account of this art movement is provided by Gao Minglu's *Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi 1985-86* [Contemporary art of China, 1985-86], [Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991].

12 See Gao Minglu, "Bawu meishu yundong di 'qianwei' yishi" [The 'avant-garde' consciousness in the '85 art movement], *Xiangshi meishu* no. 297 (November 1995), 16-21.

13 In September 1986, for example, a number of groups in Nanjing organized a joint activity called "Baking under the sun" (Shai taiyang). More than a hundred young painters, sculptors, and performance artists gathered in the Xuanwu Lake Park to show their recent works and to stage performances. The slogans of the activity included "The sun is the only energy source that cannot be polluted; the sun is just about to break through the clouds." The next month, many artists traveled to Nanjing from other cities, and on October 5 more than a thousand of them appeared in the park. This kind of spontaneous gathering also happened in other cities.

14 This exhibition was first planned for July 1987 but this plan was interrupted by the "Against Capitalist Liberalization" campaign mobilized by the party that year. But when the political campaign subsided, organizers of the 1986 conference returned to the drawing board and envisioned an even larger national exhibition of experimental art. A planning conference was held in October 1988 at Huangshan. The proposed location of the show was changed from the Agricultural Exhibition Hall to the National Art Gallery. Most of the seventeen members of the preparatory committee of the exhibition were young art critics, with Gao Minglu as the chief coordinator.

This movement, known as the '85 Art New Wave (*85 Yishu Xinchao*), emerged partly as a reaction to *The Sixth National Art Exhibition* held in 1984, which led to a direct confrontation between the official and unofficial positions. Artists whose works were rejected criticized the exhibition committee for its unfair selection process and went on to hold their own show entitled *Exhibition of the Works that Have Failed to Enter the Sixth National Art Exhibition*. In this case the hard-core official position created its antithesis: it destroyed the illusion that compromise was possible and forced even "neutral" artists to take more decisive steps. Numerous unofficial art groups appeared spontaneously in 1985 and 1986: according to one statistic, more than eighty such groups scattered across twenty-three provinces and major cities appeared during these two years.¹¹ The members of these groups were mostly in their twenties; a considerable number of them had graduated from or were still studying in prestigious art schools. Compared with the Stars, this new generation of experimental artists were more knowledgeable about recent developments in Western art, and their opposition to official art was more radical, sometimes verging on iconoclasm. Their works, as well as their speech and writing, often consciously demonstrated an "avant-garde intent."¹² For example, the members of "Xiamen Dada" (Dadaists of Xiamen) publicly burned their works at the end of their first group exhibition; the group's name and its anti-art activities signal an unmistakable desire to link itself to a famous predecessor in the Western avant-garde. Other artists, such as Wang Guangyi and Wu Shanzhuan, restaged images from the Cultural Revolution, but instead of praising Mao Zedong or propagating Communist ideology, their works aimed to demystify established political icons (see figs. 4.3 and 9.2). This tendency toward iconoclasm was closely related to experiments with deconstructing the Chinese written language, exemplified by a series of powerful installations staged in 1986 and 1987 by Wenda Gu and Xu Bing—two artists featured in this exhibition (see pl. 2).

From 1986 on, local and individual groups of experimental artists began to communicate with one another to organize joint exhibitions and activities.¹³ This cooperation then paved the way for a nationwide network of experimental artists. In August 1986, *Chinese Fine Arts Weekly* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*), a newspaper published by a group of Beijing art critics to advocate experimental art, organized an important conference on the state of Chinese experimental art, which took place in the southern city of Zhuhai in Guangdong. Participants from various regions reviewed more than a thousand slides of recent works of experimental art and proposed to organize a national exhibition of experimental art in Beijing.¹⁴ But when the show, known as *China/Avant-garde*, finally took place two and a half years later, there was little feeling of celebration; instead the exhibition was inspired by the sense of a final struggle. The artists turned Beijing's National Art Gallery into a solemn site resembling a tomb: long black carpets, extending from the street to the entrance of the exhibition hall, bore the emblem of the show—a "No U-Turn" traffic sign signaling "There is no turning back" (fig. 1.3).

This feeling of tragic heroism was closely related to the political situation of the time. A heightening pro-democracy movement was preparing itself for a major confrontation with the party's hard-liners, and no one could predict the outcome of the struggle.

Hoping to shock society, the organizers of the exhibition put works with explicit avant-garde tendencies on the first floor of the gallery, including a number of installations and performances directly attacking Communist ideology and official art policies.¹⁵ Works displayed on the second floor were divided into categories of expressionism, symbolism, religious mysticism, and conceptual art; those with exclusively formalistic concerns, including abstract ink-paintings, found their place on the third floor. Most of these works were not new and reflected confusing artistic directions (as mentioned earlier, an essential characteristic of post-Cultural Revolution experimental art is its thematic and stylistic diversity or hybridity). But the arrangement of the exhibition did signify a rebellion against the established order in Chinese art. In this sense, this exhibition should be viewed as a coherent work in its own right. It was staged as an extraordinary performance and realized its avant-garde intent in its layout. Three months later, many organizers and artists in this exhibition participated in the pro-democratic demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, which ended in the bloody massacre on June 4, 1989.

Looking back at the '85 Art New Wave movement and the *China / Avant-garde* exhibition, some participants have commented on the idealistic tendencies of these events and have contrasted this exhilarating but chaotic period with the development of Chinese experimental art that followed.¹⁶ According to them, experimental artists of the eighties "believed in the possibility of applying modern Western aesthetics and philosophy as a means of revitalizing Chinese culture." From the early nineties on, however, many of them turned "against heroism, idealism, and the yearning for metaphysical transcendence that characterized the '85 New Wave movement."¹⁷ Multiple factors contributed to this crucial change. One of them was China's political situation: the official crackdown on the student movement was followed by the government's banning of unauthorized public gatherings, including the exhibitions and publications of unofficial art. Another factor was psychological: as Chang Tsong-zung has remarked, "in shock, artists came to a sudden realization of their impotence in the face of real politics. The idealism and utopian enthusiasm so typical of new art in the 1980s met its nemesis in the gun barrels in Tiananmen."¹⁸ As a consequence, the iconoclastic tendencies of the eighties turned into sarcasm and found their major expression in satire. This new development is best exemplified by the two major trends in post-1989 experimental art, "cynical realism" and "political pop."

Although having different emphases, both cynical realism and political pop protested against ideology and ideological commitment. The former, as scholars have observed, was advanced by artists in their twenties. Having received solid training in art academies, these young artists used their superb skill for realistic representation to express a profound sense

of boredom (as exemplified by Fang Lijun's egg-headed young men making funny faces, fig. I.4) or to mock authority, including one's parents (as exemplified by Liu Wei's satiric portrayals of his father, an official in the military forces). In contrast, political pop attracted artists from various age groups. Although inspired by Western pop art, Chinese political pop identified itself as an integral part of post-Cultural Revolution experimental art, as it represented a deepening stage of deconstructing a previous political visual culture. Unlike Wu Shanzhuan's "big-character posters" and Wang Guangyi's Mao images created in the eighties, the recreation of Cultural Revolution images in the nineties no longer provided definite references for their prototypes, but aimed to complicate or disguise such references by distorting them and combining them with signs from heterogeneous sources: commercial trademarks and advertisements (Wang Guangyi, fig. I.5), textile patterns (Yu Youhan), sexual symbols (Li Shan), computer images (Feng Mengbo), figures from folklore and legend (Liu Dahong), and family portraits (Liu Wei and Zhang Xiaogang). Although largely mixing and appropriating existing images, these works should not be simply equated with Jamesonian pastiche.¹⁹ In these works the Cultural Revolution images remain central, and artists are still trying to forge a distinct style and an artistic individuality.

Among various styles of Chinese experimental art in the nineties, cynical realism and political pop are best known to the West. Again, this phenomenon was associated with China's sociopolitical situation after 1989. While tightening its control in domestic politics, the Chinese government continued Deng Xiaoping's "open door" policy in the economic

15 These works included, among others, examples of installations and performances such as Huang Yongbing's *History of Chinese Art and History of Modern Western Art Have Been Put in a Laundry Machine for Two Minutes*; Wenda Gu, *Untitled*; Zhang Nian's *Sitting on Eggs - No Theory During this Period in Order to Save the Next Generation*, and Tang Song and Xiao Lu's *Dialogue*.

16 See, for example, Gao Mingtu, "From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China," in *idem*, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art, 149-66*, especially 154-56.

17 Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art" in *China's New Art Post-1989*, xx.

18 Chang Tsong-zung, "Into the Nineties," in *idem*, i-vii, quotation from i.

19 See Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August 1984).

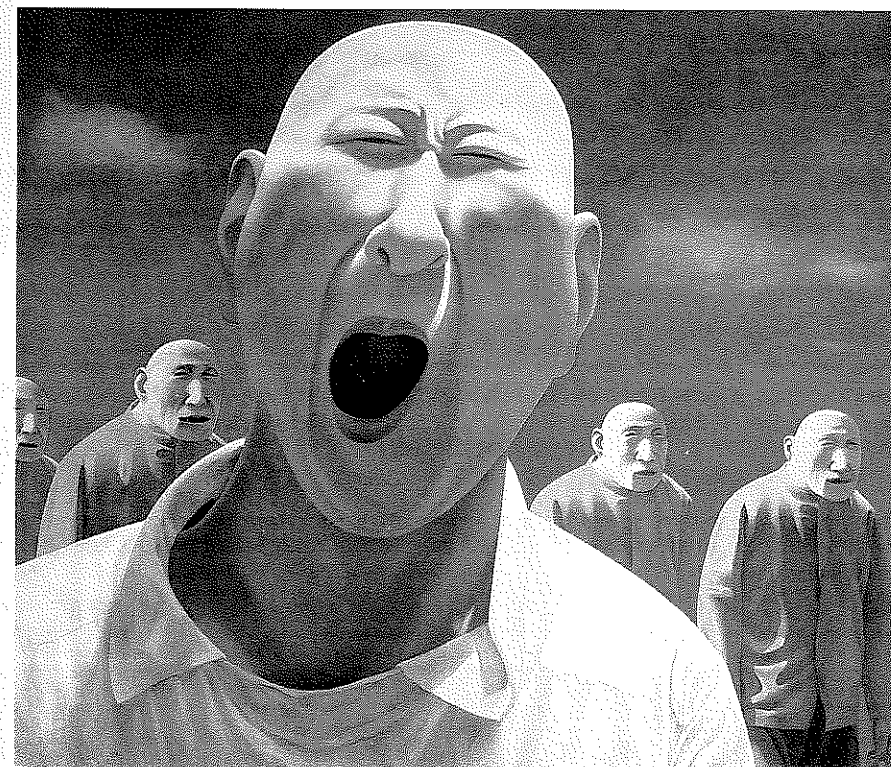


FIGURE I.4
Fang Lijun, *Series 2: No. 2*,
oil on canvas, 79 x 79 in.
(200 x 200 cm), Ludwig
Museum, Cologne.



FIGURE I.5
Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism:
Nikon*, 1992, oil on canvas,
58 x 47 in. (148 x 119 cm).

sphere. These two conditions then greatly contributed to the internationalization and commercialization of Chinese experimental art. Since the early nineties, increasing numbers of talented Chinese experimental artists, many of whom specialized in the styles of political pop and cynical realism, have “gone commercial.” They have been represented by foreign, Hong Kong, and Taiwan galleries, which have helped organize their exhibitions and managed sales of their works. This development has had a mixed impact on experimental art. On the one hand, it has brought this art to an international audience and thus helped establish it in a global context. On the other hand, it also has uprooted some of the most talented Chinese experimental artists from Chinese society and blurred their distinction from commercial artists. It is not rare now to find some successful “experimental” artists in China, who live an affluent lifestyle in tightly guarded villas outside a Chinese city, painting largely for international exhibitions and an unfamiliar, overseas audience.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL ART SINCE 1994

20 Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 45.

The fate of political pop seems an irony. Hoping to respond critically to increasing consumerism in China, it was itself willingly commercialized. Geremie R. Barmé thus sees it more as a “consumer irony” than a social critique.²⁰ In terms of style, its further fragmentation of Cultural Revolution images exhausted the source of its pictorial vocabulary and reduced itself to a number of preconceived compositional formulas. The historical role of political pop was therefore to conclude post-Cultural Revolutionary Art and to usher in an important change in the Chinese art world beginning around the mid-nineties: many artists finally hid farewell to the Cultural Revolution and its visual and mental baggage. A related change is that these artists also disengaged themselves from *yun dong*, the Chinese term for large-scale political, ideological, or artistic campaigns or movements.

Although seldom analyzed, *yun dong* has been one of the most fundamental concepts in modern Chinese political culture. From its establishment, the Chinese Communist Party mobilized various *yun dong* to realize short- or long-term projects and unify the “revolutionary masses” against internal and external enemies. Three major characteristics of a *yun dong* include a definite and often practical agenda, a propaganda machine that helps define and spread this agenda, and an organization that helps forge a cohesive front of participants. Until the 1980s, every Chinese was routinely schooled in this political culture, while those who went through the Cultural Revolution received the most intense training in such a program. *Yun dong* became part of people’s normal life and way of thinking. It is not surprising that it would continue to control people’s thinking even after the Cultural Revolution was over. The persistence of a *yun dong* mentality is clearly seen in the Chinese experimental art of the eighties: while attacking official ideology and art policies, the advocates of the ’85 Art New Wave tried hard to galvanize experimental artists into a unified front and to develop this art into an organized movement. (In fact, they called their collective activities a *yun dong*.)

It took a while for this *yun dong* mentality to lose its appeal. Political pop of the early nineties, though never conceived as a movement, was still promoted by some powerful critics and attracted a large number of artists in a short period. Only in the mid-nineties were experimental

artists finally freed from the concept of *yun dong* to function on a predominately individual level. The twenty-one artists featured in this exhibition, for example, have been working individually or in small groups during the past four or five years.²¹ Many of these artists refuse a single artistic identity and social role. Sui Jianguo, for example, states explicitly that a creative artist in contemporary China must assume “multiple identities and functions.”²² As a well-known professor in a prestigious art academy, he has been developing an alternative identity as an active experimental artist, addressing social issues with a consciously chosen nonacademic style. Many other artists, such as Zhang Huan, Xing Danwen, and Zhu Fadong, distinguish their “commercial” work from their “experimental” work. Unlike artists of the early nineties who often “wholesaled” their art and ended their creative careers prematurely, here we find a new generation of experimental artists who have made conscious decisions to protect their creativity and their identity as experimental artists.

As viewers will find in this exhibition, the works of these artists are not mobilized by a shared political agenda, and these artists have shown little interest in affiliating themselves with any current political or ideological trend. Although most of them have shown works abroad, and some of them are represented by overseas galleries, their works do not follow the formulas provided by political pop or other recognizable styles. These artists’ avoidance of an immediate stylistic or thematic identification signifies an effort to disassociate themselves from a prevailing consumer culture based on recognizable brand names. Instead, they have been working hard over the past four or five years to develop an individual artistic language.

In terms of content, their works directly respond to China’s current reality and thus demonstrate a *domestic turn* in contemporary Chinese experimental art. They are most fascinated by China’s transformation: the rapid disappearance of the traditional city and its neighborhoods and the changes in human relationships, lifestyle, taste, and values. Their works rarely represent these changes realistically, however. Instead the artists are often inclined to develop symbolic images, which help them capture their own fresh responses to such changes, including their confusion about their own place in the fast-changing environment. Their works raise questions about the stability of history and memory, the conflict between cultural mythology and individuality, and the meanings of fragmentation and disappearance. Many of these questions have been at the heart of contemporary Chinese experimental art since the late seventies; by refocusing on these questions and linking them to social reality, these artists are trying to regain the pioneering spirit of experimental art.

It is perhaps still too early to summarize this development and determine its historical significance. The present exhibition does not aim to label these artists—to propose certain schools or styles—but attempts to understand them and, through their work, to understand the current stage of Chinese experimental art. The exhibition consists of three sections, each focusing on a central theme. The theme of the first section, “Demystification,” has been a major concern of contemporary Chinese experimental artists. By challenging established cultural and political myths they have been able to pronounce their own ideas and feelings. The eight works featured in this section both continue this tradition and signify new directions. One of these new directions is the incorporation of real people’s experience, including the artists’ own experience, into an iconoclastic work.

The second section of the exhibition, “Ruins,” forms a counterpart to “Demystification” and documents the fascination contemporary Chinese artists have with various kinds of destruction. Unlike Western art, architectural ruins were never represented explicitly in traditional Chinese art. Only now have images of ruins attracted artists’ full attention. In the half-demolished residential buildings, dilapidated public spaces, and ruined human beings they find the victims of the economic boom and social restructuring in today’s China. Works in the third and last section, “Transience,” are the artists’ direct observations and critiques of new social spaces now emerging in China’s urban centers—spaces of commodity, interiority, and hybridity. Related to this new social landscape are changing conceptions of time, place, and human interaction, which are given visual images in this group of works. Taken together, these three sections look at a changing society increasingly driven by market forces and sliding into an ideological vacuum, yet at the same time rich with possibilities for creating new human values and aesthetic standards. This complex situation will be discussed more fully in the essays in this catalogue.

This catalogue consists of three sections. The introduction provides a general account of contemporary Chinese art over the past twenty years as a background for the current exhibition. The second section catalogues the works in the exhibition. The short essay accompanying the illustration of each work of art explores the work’s significance in relation to the artist’s life and ideas, the development of contemporary Chinese experimental art, and China’s changing social and political context. In other words, the main purpose of these essays is not to immediately connect these works to a global development of contemporary art and to identify them with certain art styles in the West. Recent studies of contemporary art have shown an encouraging tendency to pay increasing attention to various regional traditions and contexts. It is understood that only by taking such regional contexts into account can we understand contemporary art in different parts of the world. In his review of the recent North Asian Biennial, therefore, Andrew Solomon asks a series of questions: “How does each [Asian] country combine its own

21 Commenting on this phenomenon, the Chinese art critic Gao Ling writes: “On the one hand, artists have paid more attention to the specific response of individuals to the social and material environment; on the other, their works can hardly be exhibited in China or abroad. Because of the restraints in funding and exhibiting these works, their shows are often small scale and short-term. Consequently, their works largely serve the communication between artists themselves.” “Zouchu pingmian di zhuangzhi yishu – Jiushi niandai di Zhongguo shiyan yishu [1],” *Qiongsi meishu* no. 297, 62.

22 Sui Jianguo’s letter (October 1995) to *Gu Chengfeng*, an editor of *Jiangsu huakan*. Provided by the artist.

23 Andrew Solomon, "As Asia Regroups, Art Has a New Urgency," *The New York Times*, August 23, 1998. Section AR 31.

artistic traditions with the modernist idea of internationalism? What constitutes originality in these cultures, and what is the status of originality in each one? How much is it possible or desirable for these societies to escape from their long histories?"²³

These questions also underlie my essays in this catalogue, which provide a close look at contemporary Asian art by focusing on a group of experimental Chinese artists who share a single cultural, political, and artistic context. Almost all the works in this exhibition were created in Mainland China, and most of the artists still work there. In a variety of media and styles, their works address related issues but give different answers. I hope that by documenting the different backgrounds and experiences of the artists, these essays will gradually construct an "interiority" for contemporary Chinese experimental art. To this aim, I draw on the artists' published or unpublished writings (often provided directly by the artists), as well as on extensive interviews conducted specifically for this exhibition. The coda that follows these essays briefly reflects on the development of an "unofficial history" of experimental art during the past twenty years.

Appendix One provides short biographies of the artists. Appendix Two summarizes a survey conducted in conjunction with the preparation of this exhibition. In order to determine the major directions and concerns in today's Chinese art, in 1997 we advertised this exhibition and called for submissions in three leading Chinese art journals. Over the course of two months (May and June 1997) we received 126 submissions from more than 30 cities all over China. Containing information about these artists and a summary of the projects they proposed for the exhibition, this appendix provides further information for the study of contemporary Chinese art at a specific moment in history.

PART ONE

DEMYSTIFICATION

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PART ONE

DEMYSTIFICATION

Demystification has been an important component of China's modernization project throughout the twentieth century. Under the slogan of *pochu mixin*—literally “to destroy and eradicate superstitions”—generations of reformers and revolutionaries challenged old conventions and dogmas in Chinese culture and thought; they believed that only through such housecleaning could new social and political ideals be realized in China. The initial appeal of the Communist Party to a majority of Chinese owed much to this revolutionary approach. But after taking over the country in 1949, the party itself became the major source of dogmas and superstitions. Its political ideals demanded believing and submission, and its leaders increasingly detached themselves from reality and turned themselves into political idols. This mystification process reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution, when Mao Zedong was made into a god and his words into religious doctrines, worshipped and memorized by millions of Chinese unified by faith and loyalty.

This background explains why *demystification* became such an urgent task to a new generation of reformers and revolutionaries after the Cultural Revolution. In China's art world, demystification has been a continuous process in experimental art since the late 1970s, where it has developed into a major strategy of isolating, emptying, and recycling canonical signs and images, often even sacred political symbols. These include, among others, images of Mao (sacred icons in the PRC), Tiananmen and Tiananmen Square (the most sacred place in the PRC), the Great Wall (the national symbol of China), and, on a deeper level, the Chinese written language, which has facilitated both classical writings and Communist propaganda. Two installations in this part of the exhibition, Xu Bing's *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990) and Wenda Gu's *Pseudo-Seal Script* (1984), are among the most powerful iconoclastic works created from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.

It should be noted, however, that this strong interest in political symbols had its direct origin in the Cultural Revolution itself, which over a decade produced innumerable copies of a few sets of images and texts—mainly Mao's portraits, his writings, and his sayings—in every written and visual form. The chief technologies of cultural and artistic production during that period were *repetition* and *duplication*—two essential

methods used to fill up time and space with a limited range of images and words, thereby creating a coercive, homogeneous verbal and visual language in a most static form. Consequently, this homogeneous language both provided the basis for and became the chief target of the iconoclasm mobilized by experimental Chinese artists in the era following the Cultural Revolution.

From the late 1970s to mid-1990s, young artists systematically fragmented the visual language of the Cultural Revolution by extracting individual symbols from their original context, distorting them for formalist or ideological reasons, and mixing them with signs derived from heterogeneous sources (such as commercial advertisements or images from Chinese folk art). Such practices became so common in Chinese art in the early and mid-nineties that they transcend the differences between individual artistic trends taking place at the time, such as political pop, cynical realism, or critical symbolism. At the same time, as such works were increasingly created for foreign and overseas Chinese collectors, they were detached from the local Chinese reality, becoming increasingly “image plays” staged for a non-Chinese audience.

But genuine effort to demystify the official visual language and symbolism (which is still all-powerful in China) also has continued since the mid-nineties and is represented by works in this section. While political pop and cynical realism mainly satirize a bygone political culture, these works often address contemporary issues in Chinese society from an individual's point of view. One such issue concerns the relationship between the past and the present. Several works, including Song Dong's *Breathing* (1996) and Mo Yi's *Made by the Police Department* (1997) derive their subject from the memory of the June Fourth Movement of 1989, whose tragic ending still haunts contemporary Chinese artists. Other works, such as Xing Danwen's *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995–96) and Yu Fan's *My Mother* (1995) explore a more complex relationship between individual and collective identities in Chinese society. The styles of these works are more diverse; the artists' deconstruction of conventional symbols becomes subtler and is carried out on an ideological as well as aesthetic level, as in Sui Jianguo's *Earthly Force* (1990–92) and Zhang Hongtu's *Studs* (1992). In general, these works reflect a current tendency toward diversity and individualization. Most notably, their direct engagement with personal experience often is absent in “political” works by the previous generation of Chinese experimental artists.

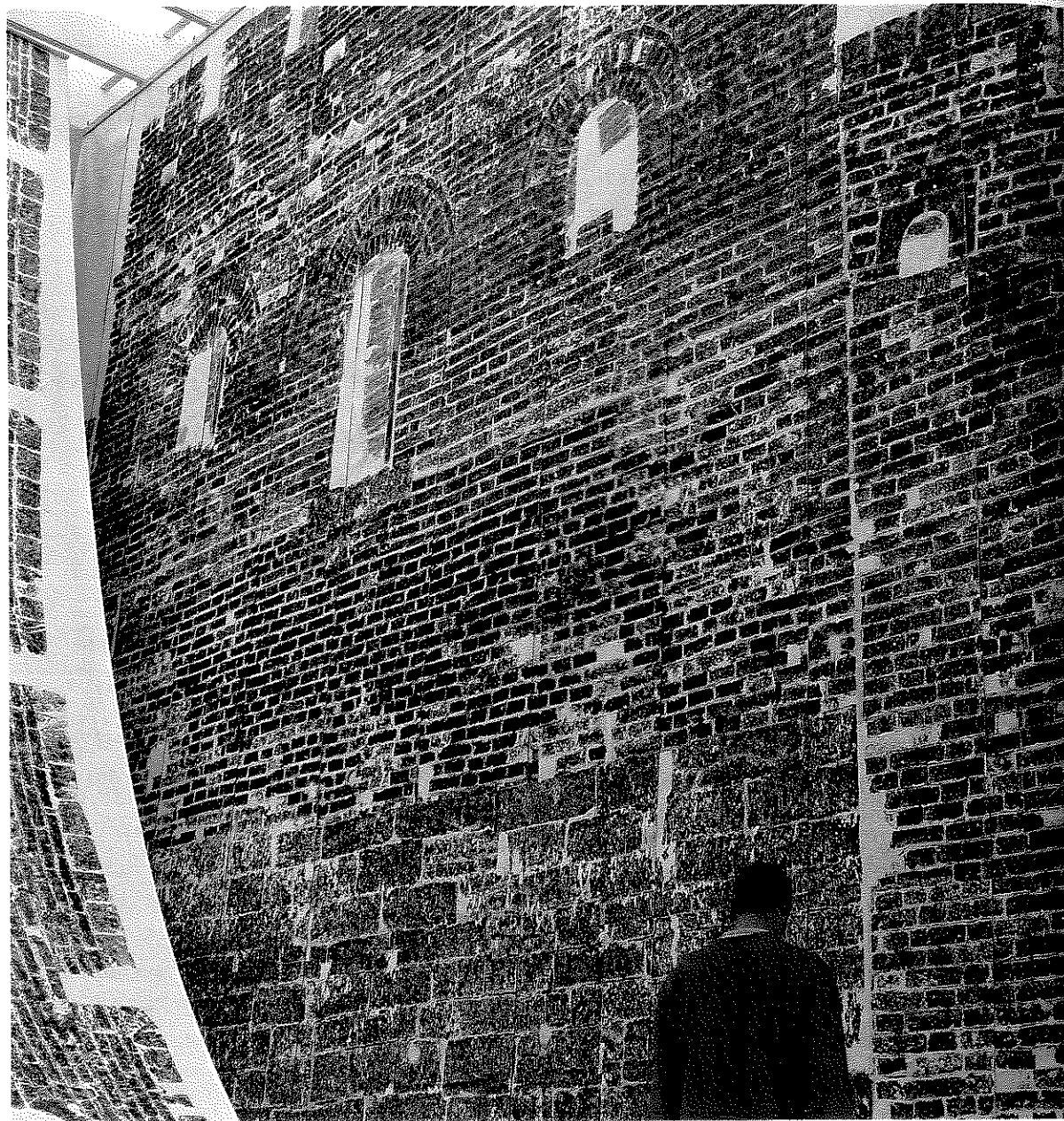


PLATE 1
 Xu Bing: *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990, mixed-media installation, 108 x 204 in. (274.3 x 609.6 cm), collection of the artist.

COUNTER-MONUMENT

1 Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6.

2 See Sima Qian, *Shi ji* (Historical record), (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), *juan* 88, 2,565. Scholars have questioned the reliability of this record. They have asked, for example, why such an enormous project was not mentioned in Qin documents; why no one has ever described in detail the wall's construction; why the wall was called a "long wall"—a generic term rather than a specific name; and how a "ten-thousand-*li* long wall" could be completed in two years, from 214 BC to 212 BC. Responding to this last problem, Jonathan Fryer has commented that "Ssu-ma Ch'ien (treats) the building of the Great Wall like a summer picnic." *The Great Wall of China* (London: New English Library, 1975), 50.

3 Translation from Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), vol. 1, 151-52.

4 This folk song was probably written in the second or first century BC. Translation by Anne Birrell, *New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry. Translated with Annotations and Introduction* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 49.

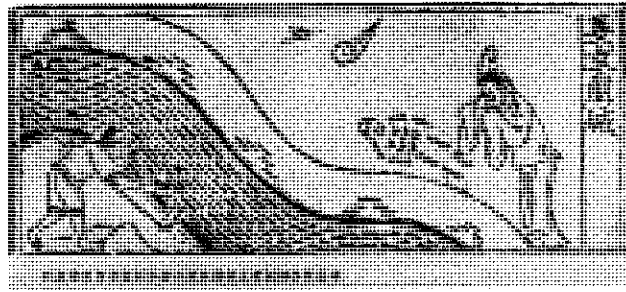
The Great Wall is an English term; it is called "The Long Wall" (*Changcheng*) in Chinese. According to the author Arthur Waldron, the notion that a single Long Wall encircles China is nothing but a cultural myth.¹ This myth began to dominate the historical imagination soon after the First Qin Emperor unified China in the third century BC. The emperor, who may have only repaired and connected some existing "long walls" from earlier periods, was instantly credited with the establishment of a *Wanli Changcheng*, or a Ten-Thousand-Mile-Long Wall.² The reason for such attribution seems transparent: prior to the unification various feudal lords built individual walls to defend themselves from their neighbors, yet only a single frontier wall was necessary to protect and identify the unified Chinese empire. Consequently, the concept of a single and superior Long Wall appeared. The second-century BC writer Jia Yi wrote that within this "wall of iron," the First Emperor "had established a rule that would be enjoyed by his descendants for ten thousand generations."³

It is ironic, however, that when the Long Wall became a national symbol, the real Chinese people—those supposedly protected by the wall—sensed little benefit from its construction. Indeed, none of the emperors, generals, and historians actually built the wall; the Qin and the Han dispatched several hundred thousand men to work on the frontier, and more people were engaged in building the Ming dynasty Long Wall in the fifteenth century. In historical records these men only formed an anonymous corvée labor force, but to individual laborers and their families the Long Wall was imbued with memories of endless suffering. Folk songs were created not long after the Long Wall myth began:

*If a son is born, mind you don't raise him!
 If a girl is born, feed her dried meat.
 Don't you see just below the Long Wall
 Dead men's skeletons prop each other up.*⁴

A legend also circulated telling of an ordinary woman, Mengjiang, whose husband had been sent to the wall construction site. In winter, worrying about his welfare, she set out to take him warm clothes, only to learn after the long journey that she was too late: her husband had already perished and his body had been buried under the wall. Overcome, the

FIGURE 1.1
Anonymous, *The Story of Meng Jiang*, wood-block illustration, Jiaqing era (1522–66), Ming dynasty.



woman knelt down and cried. Her grief miraculously caused the wall to break open and reveal her husband's bones (fig. 1.1). As this story gradually developed into one of the country's most popular tales, a folk tradition was invented in opposition to the official glorification of the Long Wall. Whereas the government continued to build and praise the wall, Mengjiang and millions of men and women cried out for the wall's destruction.

Neither of these two traditions identified the wall as an "intentional monument," however.⁵ The Long Wall finally became such a monument only during the modern era when it ceased to play any practical role. Its military significance vanished when bombers and battleships could cross the sky and oceans; its repair was intended to preserve the wall as a national treasure. From the early twentieth century on, the Long Wall was considered the prime symbol of China as an emerging modern nation-state. Sun Yat-sen, the Father of Modern China, claimed that the wall was a mighty creation of his people, which had preserved the Chinese race since the third century BC.⁶ On the other hand, he also took the wall as the monument of a future new China, a modern nation freed from foreign invasions and internal turmoil. His rhetorical use of the wall became an important part of nationalist and then Communist propaganda. A song written during the Sino-Japanese War called upon all "who will not be slaves to take our own flesh and blood, to build a new Long Wall!" This song was adopted in 1949 as the national anthem of the People's Republic of China; the old myth of the Long Wall was thus sanctioned as an essential element of Chinese Communist ideology. The wall became a favorite motif of paintings, photos, and Chairman Mao buttons during the Cultural Revolution. Every foreign leader who visits China is led to the wall to experience China's mighty power.

On the other hand, Mengjiang's legend never died; it was only updated. Even though Sun Yat-sen had affiliated the wall with the future new China, some critical writers, including the essayist Lu Xun, compared it to the enclosure of an enormous prison. The wall, he wrote in 1925, "surrounded and enclosed the living, and suffocated and killed them." It was composed of "both old and new bricks;" it stood for the Chinese nation at the expense of individuals; it was, in his words, "the mighty and accursed Great Wall."⁷

5 Alois Riegl defines an "intentional monument" as a monument constructed exclusively for commemorative purposes. See "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," Trans. K. W. Forster and D. Chirardo. In K. W. Forster, ed., *Monument/Memory. Oppositions* special issue, 25 (1982), 20–51. The Long Wall was not an intentional monument in traditional China because the government-sponsored wall construction still served military functions, while commoners cursed this monstrous structure and prayed for its destruction.

6 Sun Yat-sen, *Sun Wen xueshu* [Teachings by Sun Yat-sen] (Taipei: Yuantong, 1957), 38–39.

7 Lu Xun, "Changcheng" [The Long Wall], in *Lu Xun quanji* [The complete collection of writings by Lu Xun] (Shanghai: Xinhua, 1981), vol. 3, 58–59.

8 From an interview conducted by the author in 1991 in Beijing.

9 Detailed documentation of this project can be found in *Xiongshi meishu*, no. 235, 124–235.

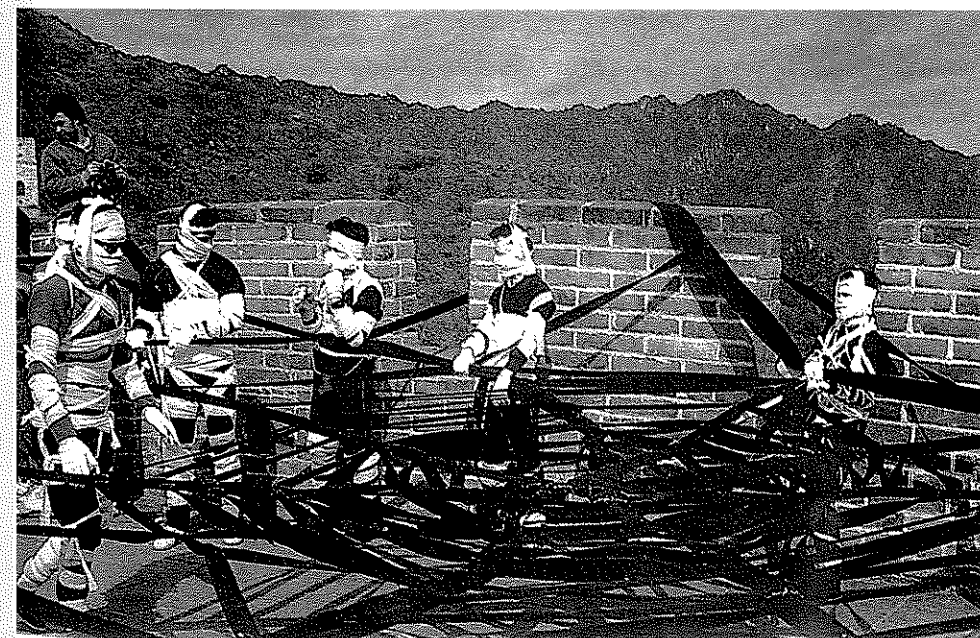
10 Yang Chengyin, "An Essential Critique of 'New Wave' Art," *Literature and Art Newspaper* [Wenyi bao], June 2, 1990. Partially translated by Britta Erickson in *Three Installations by Xu Bing* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1992), 15.

Only by reviewing these two traditions can we understand a counter-movement in China around the mid-eighties. In September of 1984 Deng Xiaoping launched a campaign: "Let us love our country and restore our Long Wall." The campaign involved both restoring the wall's national symbolism and its physical presence. Books and articles were published to trace the wall's glorious history, and scientists and archaeologists were sent to survey its present condition and to excavate its buried foundations. Experimental artists challenged this official effort. In 1988, they staged a series of large performances on the Long Wall, wrapping their bodies and a whole section of the wall in white bandages (fig. 1.2). A young man wrapping himself with bandages became a recurrent image in the '85 Art New Wave movement. "We are injured, tied up by tradition," an artist explained, "these are our true images."⁸

The same movement also produced Xu Bing's *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, included in this exhibition (pl. 1).⁹ With a crew of students and peasants, he labored for twenty-four days to make ink rubbings from a thirty-meter-long section of the wall. The project was planned and conceived as a grand performance. Every stage of its process was meticulously documented, including the endless, monotonous sound and motion of "pounding the wall," which was recorded on film and video. The crew members wore special uniforms printed with characters from one of Xu Bing's previous works, the monumental *Heavenly Book*, also known as *A Book from the Sky* (1987), suggesting the intertextuality of the two projects (fig. 1.3).

Ironically, the connection between Xu Bing's two projects was finally sealed by a spokesman of the minister of culture, whose vicious attack on experimental art came out in an official newspaper two days before the first anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.¹⁰ In his article he condemned Xu Bing's *Heavenly Book* (a "book" written with some two thousand "pseudo" characters) as *gui da qiang*, a folk idiom meaning a

FIGURE 1.2
Sheng Qi and others, *Concept 21. Taiji*, 1988, performance on the Great Wall, Beijing.



11 He first exhibited this work in 1991 in the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin at Madison.

12 Cited in Yin Ji'nan, "Gui da qiang 'yu wu yiyi'" ["Ghosts Pounding the Wall" and meaninglessness], *Xiongshi meishu*, no. 235, 125.

wall (*qiang*) built (*da*) by a ghost (*gui*) to encircle a night traveler. No matter how fast the traveler runs, he is actually going in circles within the wall's invisible confines. This analogy gave Xu Bing's ongoing Long Wall project a new significance. (When the article appeared, Xu Bing was working on a scaffold to make rubbings from the wall.) Because this project aimed to reconstruct the Long Wall in ink-rubbings, it could be called *da qiang* (to build a wall). Alternatively, since the character *da* also means "to beat" or "to pound," the act of making rubbings by repeatedly pounding an ink pad over a sheet of paper held on the wall could be described as *da qiang* (to pound a wall). Such a realization then inspired Xu Bing to entitle his project *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.

Approached in this context, this title has unmistakable political implications. "Ghost" was a political term in contemporary China; in particular, it was a common label for counter-revolutionaries during the Cultural Revolution. Once declared an "ox-ghost" or a "snake-demon" (*niu gui she shen*), a person became an outcast from the "bright, confident people"; his identity as a political alien and creature of darkness became public knowledge. Growing up on the campus of Beijing University, Xu Bing had repeatedly witnessed such persecution. He knew too well its language, logic, and victims. When his turn seemed to have finally arrived (while calling his work "ghost pounding the wall," the official critique also condemned him as a representative of "anti-art," "anti-tradition," "anti-intellectual," and "anti-social" tendencies), he voluntarily named himself a "ghost" and went to "pound the wall."

Xu Bing was never able to show his paper Long Wall in China; it was first presented to a foreign audience after he emigrated to the United States in 1990.¹¹ We may call it a "still life" of his Long Wall Project. Back in China, Xu Bing had described this project as a work whose significance "lies in transformation." He had belittled the significance of any possible final product, instead emphasizing the importance of the production process. (In his words: "I hope to experience the process of expending great effort for a 'meaningless' result."¹²) To realize this idea, the "effort" was exaggerated and artistic creation was equated with an ascetic practice. The making of the rubbings concealed any trace of spontaneity but took the form of a single motion endlessly repeated—pounding the Great Wall a million times.

This primary meaning of the project becomes implicit when the paper Long Wall is shown in an art gallery. What we encounter now is the final consequence of a transformation: the solid brick-structure is transformed into its volumeless shadow; the national symbol is transformed into an installation by an individual artist; and the Long Wall—a prime monument of China—is transformed into a *counter-monument*. I call it a counter-monument because its violation of a conventional monument is still measured against the conventional monument, and this violation has resulted in a new monumental form. Like its creator, this paper Long Wall has been dislocated, but its significance still lies in its juxtaposition with its origin.

FIGURE 1.3
Xu Bing and his team making
rubbings from the Great Wall,
1990.



ANTI-WRITING

The traditions of writing and anti-writing run through Chinese history, from the mythological past to the present day. One of the most powerful myths from ancient China describes the moment when Cang Jie, an ancient sage, invented written characters and "all the ghosts wailed in the night." Later interpreters have speculated on the reason for the ghosts' cries. Some attributed the ghosts' anguish to their loss of control over the universe's secret; others find the source of agony in their anticipation of the numerous lies that Cang Jie's invention would facilitate. Each reading has its point, but the story's lasting power resides in a single image: the ghosts wailing in the darkness. They wailed because they had no words; they cried in the night because they had lost their share of the day. Cang Jie's invention and the ghosts' wailing thus signify simultaneous victory and loss and further constitute a fable for the separation of human history from pre-history. But once history began, it is by no means clear whether the entire human race uniformly benefited from the knowledge of writing. It is commonplace that throughout history, writing has inevitably become a privileged means for power and dominance; its form and content are constantly manipulated for such purposes. The Chinese, the only people in the world to have an unbroken written history for three thousand years, are perhaps most sensitive to writing as a mixed blessing. An indispensable means for self-expression, writing has also facilitated propaganda.

Anti-writing has different meanings and manifestations. It can mean suppression—the use of writing is tightly controlled for certain purposes. Almost all political and religious authorities have produced canonical writings; at the same time they have also destroyed other writings that they no longer found useful. The First Qin Emperor, for example, left commemorative inscriptions on sacred mountains while reducing most ancient books to ashes. More recently, the destruction of millions of books during the Cultural Revolution led to the worship of a single book, *Chairman Mao's Selected Writings*.

What the First Emperor and Mao did exemplified the crudest cases of simultaneous writing and anti-writing. In both situations anti-writing took the form of physically destroying books, and each destruction was exclusively based on the books' content. But anti-writing also has a



PLATE 2
Wenda Gu, *Pseudo Seal-Script*,
1984, ink on rice paper, each
piece 26 x 38 in. (66 x 96.5 cm),
Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

FIGURE 2.1
Wenda Gu, *A Game in Which the Audience Serve as Chessmen on a Suspended Chessboard*, 1987, installation, York University, Toronto, Canada.

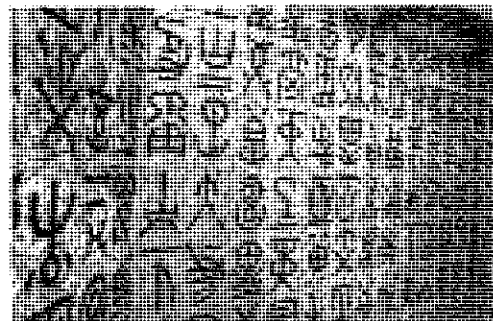


FIGURE 2.2
Wenda Gu, *The Historical Clash, United Nations—Hong Kong Monument*, 1997, installation with screens of human hair, Hanart T Z Gallery, Hong Kong.

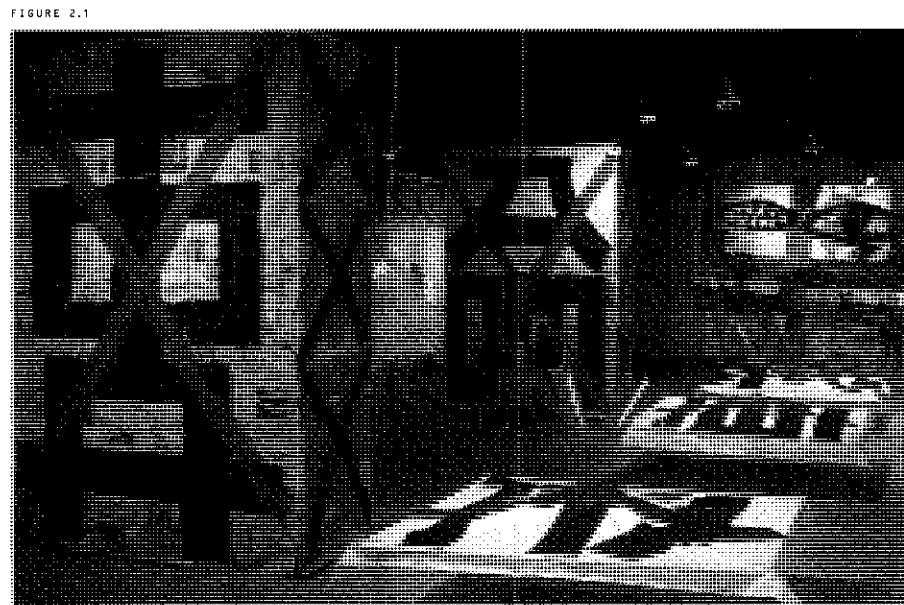


FIGURE 2.2

different and, in fact, positive meaning in Chinese culture: by subtly suppressing the content of a handwritten text a writer can emphasize the aesthetic value of his brushwork. From this negotiation between the form and content of writing emerged the art of calligraphy, often hailed as the most fundamental to literati aesthetics and the most individualistic of all traditional arts. On the one hand, a piece of calligraphy is a text—a eulogy, a poem, or even a personal letter. On the other hand, it always debases its identity as a text. Sometimes the brush moves so swiftly that its traces become illegible. Other times, only fragments of a text have survived to testify to the style of a master calligrapher. In both cases, the artistic value of writing overpowers its literary content. Calligraphy thus transforms brushwork from a signifier of literary meaning to a signifier of visual meaning.

It can be said that all traditional calligraphers conducted this transformation in one way or another, but none of them tried to completely divorce form from content. A radical departure from this ancient tradition only occurred in contemporary Chinese art. Starting from the early and mid-eighties, a number of influential experimental artists, including

1 Wang Lin, "Fānxing shufa jiqi zhuyi" [Reflective calligraphy and its "ism"], *Meishu jie* [Artscircle], 1997.6, 44–48. Wang Lin believes that a fundamental characteristic of modern calligraphy is its separation from practical writing. He notices that many experimental artists, including Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Wu Shanzhuan, have been engaged in various experiments with written forms and link these experiments to conceptual art and action art.

2 Carol Luffy, "Asian Artists in America: Wenda Gu," *Atelier*, November 1996, Tokyo, Japan, 53.

3 *Meishu*, 1986, no. 7, 53. For an analysis of Gu's approach, see Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi 1979–1989*, 288–95.

Wenda Gu, Wu Shanzhuang, Xu Bing, and others, produced a large body of pseudo-calligraphy and fake texts, in which they not only consciously distinguished form from content, but tried to jettison content altogether, leaving form as the sole signifier of meaning. Although people still call these works "writing" or "calligraphy," these two words acquire entirely different definitions in these works. Once a piece of writing is intentionally unreadable, it has become a purely calligraphic work. The subtle negotiation between writing and anti-writing has turned into an antagonism against literary signification altogether.¹

Interestingly, this group of artists is best known for its familiarity with traditional arts and aesthetics; their experiment with nonsense calligraphy thus appears as a rebellion within traditional Chinese art. Xu Bing, for example, grew up in an academic family on Beijing University's campus and received an MFA from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Wenda Gu also comes from an intellectual family. His grandfather was an important film director in the 1920s and 1930s, and his sister was a cellist and musicologist in Shanghai. Gu himself graduated from the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts and the Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy, where he studied traditional landscape painting with the master artist Lu Yanshao. Upon graduation both Xu Bing and Wenda Gu were hired as assistant professors by their respective schools.

Under normal circumstances, such education would prepare a student to become a sophisticated technician in academic art. But Wenda Gu and Xu Bing, like other experimental artists of their generation, were also under two other influences no less powerful than their family backgrounds and school training. The first was the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution: they grew up in an age when every Chinese was surrounded by "big-character posters" on the street and in school. A high-school student in the early seventies, Wenda Gu joined the school's "propaganda team" to paint revolutionary posters. This was not because he had any special feeling for the subject of such posters. As he recounted later, "any sense of fervor I ever felt for the revolution had subsided by that time."² He made the posters because this was the only way to practice painting. Even before entering art school, therefore, he had already experienced a split between form and content; this experience had profound impact on his later works.

Both Wenda Gu and Xu Bing also were strongly influenced by the experimental art movement in the eighties. But they also consciously kept a distance from the mainstream of this movement. While embracing the avant-garde spirit advanced by the '85 Art New Wave, they were dissatisfied with the direct borrowing of imported Western styles and concepts, which was widespread practice among experimental artists in this movement. Wenda Gu, in particular, voiced his strong rejection of such transplanted avant-gardism in a 1985 interview.³ His solution was to derive visual idioms from China's own traditions as the material for an avant-garde rebellion.



FIGURE 2.3
Wenda Gu sitting among his
Pseudo Seal-Script in
calligraphic copy book format.

Deeply committed to traditional aesthetics yet profoundly skeptical of any “content” or doctrine, Wenda Gu and Xu Bing were attracted by an extreme form of anti-writing: in subverting regular writing codes, reversing and disfiguring graphs, and forging “fake characters” they found effective ways to use an age-old tradition for self-expression. Wenda Gu was the first contemporary Chinese artist who seriously created and showed pseudo-calligraphy; for this reason, this exhibition includes one of his works to represent this trend. The stylistic range of his writing (or anti-writing) is also unmatched by his comrades. Some examples of his pseudo-calligraphy “reverse” typical images from the Cultural Revolution. For example, in his 1987 installation *A Game in which the Audience Serve as Chessmen on a Suspended Chessboard*, large black graphs resembling the characters *ge* and *ming* were reversed and crossed out by red lines (*ge ming* is the Chinese word for “revolution”) (fig. 2.1). His 1986 solo exhibition, held in conjunction with a conference on “the future of traditional Chinese painting” in Shaanxi, inspired the following comment from a critical viewer:

Entering the exhibition hall, one's eyes are filled with random splashes of ink and water, deformed and backward characters, and illegible texts mixing modern printing types with old-fashioned “running” calligraphy. The artist's ideas of “spirit,” “time,” and “space” have little to do with reality. Here art imitates religion, enveloping the audience in a drowsy atmosphere. I heard someone say that it is like a funeral prepared for a psychopath. I wouldn't go so far but I would at least say that it is nothing like the usual kind of experience one gets from viewing an art exhibition.⁴

Criticizing Gu's imitation of religion, the writer of this passage senses a distinctive aspect of Gu's pseudo-calligraphy, that his artificial graphs help forge new myths, a tendency that has become increasingly dominant in the artist's more recent work (fig. 2.2).⁵ While destroying “the system of characters, syntax, and grammar that carries so many aesthetic and cultural connotations in traditional Chinese society,”⁶ Wenda Gu's pseudo-calligraphy constitutes a mystical visual environment, frequently compared to a Taoist temple with a strong atmosphere of ritual and worship. He found the best material for myth-making in ancient seal-script, a type of archaic writing that is so old and difficult to read that it has become a mystery in itself. Wenda Gu wrote:

Most Chinese people, even educated ones, are unable to read seal-style characters. This idea of “unreadability” conveyed a mythical sense of infinity and eternity to me. It inspired me to complete a series of giant wall paintings using fake Chinese characters between 1983 and 1987. In their outright rejection of classical Chinese traditions and in their suggestion of something clandestine, the Pseudo-Characters Series represented my first brush with a societal taboo.⁷

Wenda Gu's pieces in this exhibition are from the *Pseudo Seal-Script* series mentioned in this passage (pl. 2). While the balanced structure and smooth strokes of the characters indicate the artist's superb calligraphic skills, the text is meaningless because it is composed of fake characters. What Wenda Gu has done here, therefore, is a “double negative”: he has subtracted the content from a writing system that had long become incomprehensible anyway to most people. Finally, Wenda Gu has written his pseudo seal-script in the format of a traditional calligraphic copybook. Contained in individual frames, the (fake) characters do not suggest any reading sequence, but can be endlessly copied (as a calligraphic copybook would be) to form an infinitely expanding visual field (fig. 2.3).

4 Yan Min, “Shimao' di yishu” [A “fashionable” art], *Zhongguo meishu bao* [Chinese fine arts weekly], no. 33 (1986), 2.

5 Gu's exhibition of his ink paintings and pseudo-calligraphy in 1997 in Hong Kong, for example, was called “The Mythos of a Lost Dynasty.” It was part of his seven-year project *United Nations*, a project Wenda calls “The Divine Comedy of our times.”

6 Zhou Yan, “Wenda Gu's Oedipus,” in *Fragmented Memory* (Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1993).

7 Quoted in Carol Lufty, “Asian Artists in America: Wenda Gu.”

NOTHING BEYOND THE GATE

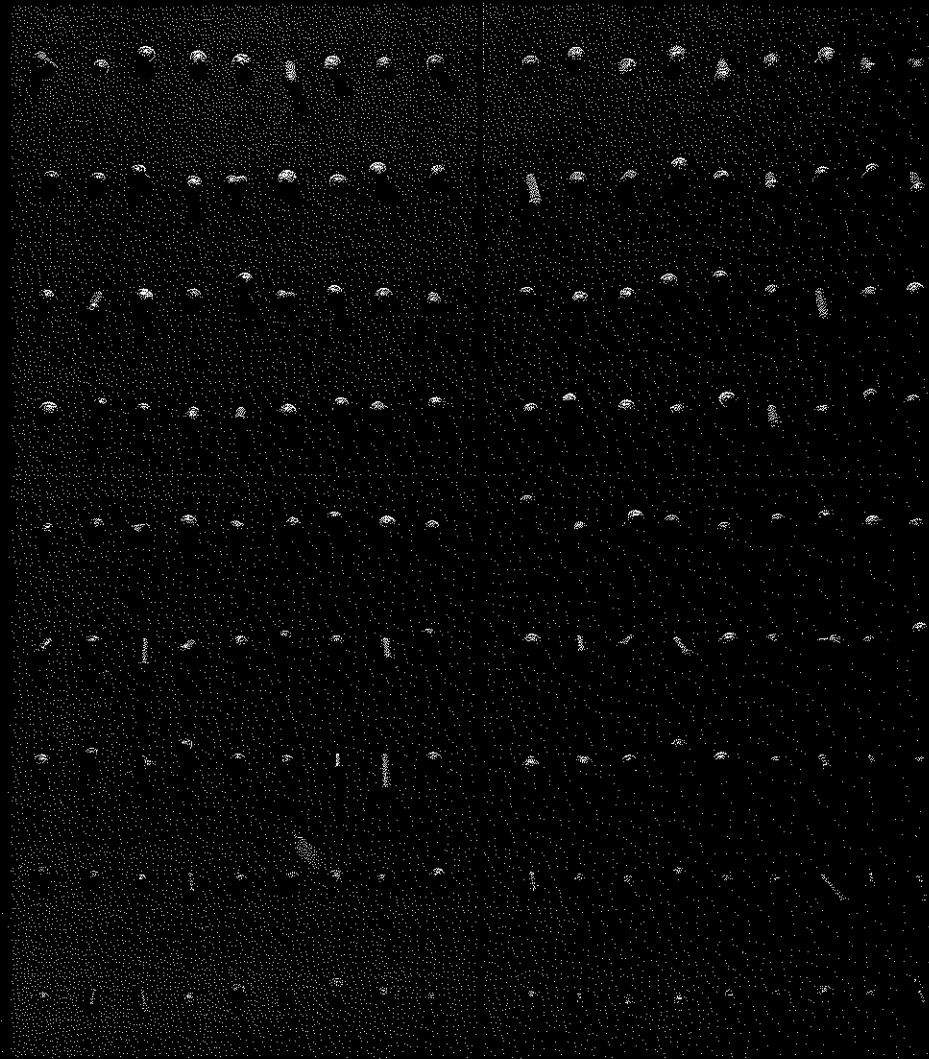


PLATE 3
Zhang Hongtu, *Studs*, 1992, metal,
wood, and paint, 96 x 86 1/2 x 6 in.
(243.8 x 219.7 x 15.3 cm), collection
of Guy Ullens, Artal, Belgium.

1 Lydia Yee, "An Interview with Zhang Hongtu," *Zhang Hongtu: Material Mao* (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1995), 6. Translation slightly edited by Wu Hung.

2 Burton Watson, *Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 17–18.

In a 1995 interview Zhang Hongtu discussed the symbolism of the door in Chinese culture:

The door is a very meaningful object in China. You can tell people's position in society by the image of their doors. For example, only a door in the Forbidden City can have 162 decorative studs, which constitute a symbol of power, authority, and dictatorship. . . . The emperor lived behind the doors of the Forbidden City, but after 1949 Mao and his government also lived behind these big red doors with 162 studs. People feared these doors, but at the same time they desired to know what was going on behind the doors.'

The fear and fascination with a closed gate—the chief significance of the door Zhang describes here—is not new, but is rooted in traditional Chinese political philosophy. In a famous passage, the third-century BC writer Han Fei teaches kings and emperors that power must be generated by secrecy:

The Way [of the ruler] lies in what cannot be seen, its function in what cannot be known. Be empty, still, and idle, and from your place of darkness observe the defects of others. See but do not appear to see; listen but do not seem to listen; know but do not let it be known that you know. . . . Hide your tracks, conceal your sources, so that your subordinates cannot trace the springs of your action. Discard wisdom, forswear ability, so that your subordinates cannot guess what you are about.'

Han Fei's teaching was faithfully practiced by the First Qin Emperor in the third century BC and again by Mao Zedong, an admirer of both Han Fei and the First Emperor, some 2,200 years later. Mao's growing mystique during the Cultural Revolution was closely related to his withdrawal from public view. From unknown places he issued endless "supreme orders" (*zuigao zhishi*) for political persecutions. The whole population was increasingly controlled by fear, for anyone could be the next enemy of the people and be turned in by his closest friends or relatives. Only when the Cultural Revolution was over did this fear gradually subside, and artists began to search for visual images to convey their memories of this period. It is therefore understandable why so many images of the gate were created in post-Cultural Revolution art. On the one hand, a closed gate provides the most succinct analogy to two essential

features of an autocratic political tradition: its obsession with self-concealment and pompous self-presentation. By portraying a decaying but tightly closed Forbidden City gate, the painter Li Kai could thus allude to the persistence of an old feudal mentality in contemporary China.

On the other hand, the gate of an ordinary household may only highlight the family's vulnerability. In a work by Mao Lizi, for example, the white paper strips crossing the panels of a humble wooden door indicate that the house has been sealed by the authorities and the residents are gone (fig. 3.1). Even behind such a private door one cannot feel safe. In the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition, the artist Geng Jianyi constructed a room inside the National Art Gallery and invited the audience to go inside. Having entered the room, however, one found oneself exposed under the watchful eyes of those who remained outside the room. Framed by small openings in the walls, these disembodied eyes pertained to secret and alienated gazes. The room and its door did not provide its inhabitants with security, but only generated fear.

Such fear also inspired Zhang Hongtu to create an installation called *Front Door* (1995) shown in *Material Mao*, his solo exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995. This door is equipped with multiple false locks (cut-out photographic images) and a real peephole. A hidden tape recorder repeats the sound of someone rhythmically knocking on the door. Responding to the knock you look through the hole to see who is outside, and you confront Mao Zedong's waiting eyes (fig. 3.2). As in Geng Jianyi's installation, here the artist/viewer is in an interior space. Although the peephole in the door is designed for him to look out, his view is deflected by a more powerful gaze from outside, which transforms him into a passive object of looking. While this installation clearly conveys Zhang's experience in China, another of his door installations in the same exhibition is much more optimistic. Called *Red Door* (1995), its front panel bears a crack. Peeking through the crack one finds a TV screen playing a film clip of Mao Zedong dancing with a young girl at a Communist Party gathering. (Later in the film the chairman is seen sitting in an enormous armchair surrounded by a bevy of young women.)

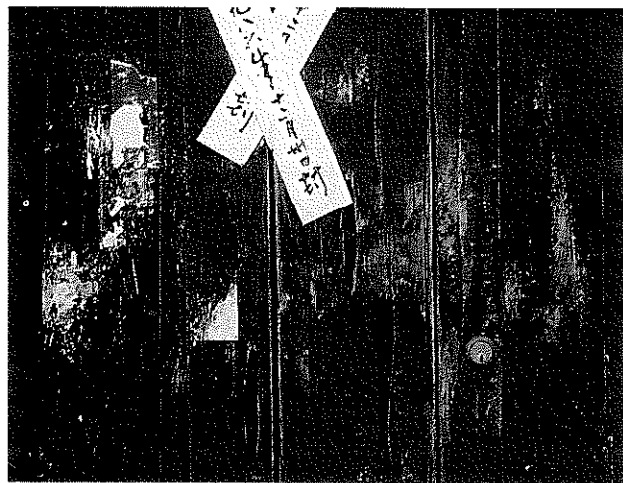


FIGURE 3.1
Mao Lizi, *Door*, oil on canvas,
size and collection unknown.

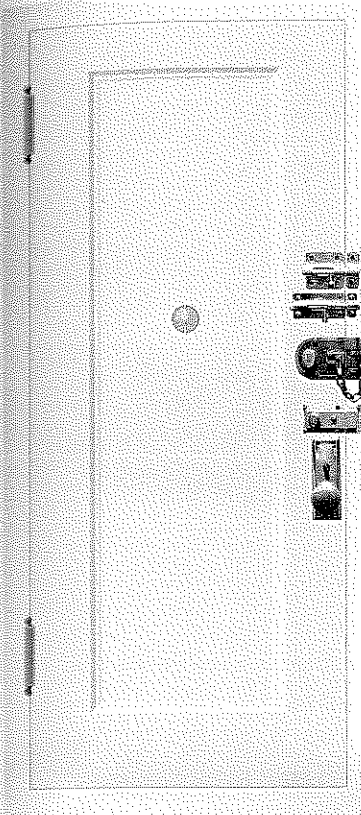


FIGURE 3.2
Zhang Hongtu, *Front Door*
(details), 1995, mixed-media
installation with audio tape,
84 x 32 in. (213.3 x 81.3 cm.),
collection of the artist.

3 Lydia Yee, "An Interview with Zhang Hongtu," 5. For a discussion of the relationship between Zhang Hongtu and Political Pop, see Geremie E. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 46.



Red Door thus reverses *Front Door*: not only has the artist/viewer moved outside the door, but he has turned Mao into a passive subject of *his* look. This reversal, in fact, characterizes a major theme of the artist's work after he emigrated to the United States in 1982. Trained in Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, Zhang Hongtu studied Chinese calligraphy, traditional ink painting, Buddhist art, and socialist realist art in China. During his early years in New York, he began to "reverse" himself in his painting: by portraying the back of his head on a canvas he gained a point of view that had always evaded him (fig. 3.3). But soon the subject of reversal changed from himself to a famous icon. When he painted a Mao cap onto the Quaker Oats man on an oatmeal carton in 1987, he almost accidentally created perhaps the first work of Chinese political pop, which would become an extremely influential artistic genre in China in the early to mid-nineties. But Zhang has been consciously keeping a distance from political pop, partly because of its rapid commercialization and partly because of its ambiguous political stance. The political pop artist Yu Youhan, for example, was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying "if we reject Mao, we reject a part of ourselves." Zhang Hongtu responded sharply: "So what if we [must] reject part of ourselves?"



FIGURE 3.3
Zhang Hongtu, *Self-Portrait—
The Back*, 1987, mixed media on
canvas, 73 x 81 in. (185.4 x 205.7
cm), collection of the artist.

This approach has made Zhang Hongtu one of the most politically committed Chinese artists abroad. Especially after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, he has consistently used his art to make political statements.⁴ Created immediately after the massacre, his *Last Banquet* replaced all the figures in Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting *The Last Supper* with multiple guises of Mao, with the "Christ Mao" in the center speaking into a microphone, and the "Judas Mao" holding the little red book. *Material Mao* is a large group of hollow images of Mao that Zhang created between 1991 and 1995. Using various materials ranging from brick, corn, fur, and metal to paper soaked in soy sauce, he made large and small frames to outline Mao's famous silhouette. In Jonathan Goodman's words, here "Mao, or rather his absence, becomes the means for an experiment in formal application. Through repetition, the content of Mao's form is rendered meaningless."⁵ Another method he used to "empty" Mao—to remove mystique from an idol—was to simultaneously satirize and commercialize the great leader. The *Mao Dresses*, on which he collaborated with the Hong Kong designer Vivienne Tam, were worn by fashionable Hong Kong ladies in 1997, partly because glamorous international super models promoted the dresses. From all these works one detects a deep obsession with and fixation on Mao—a kind of love-hate relationship that is explained by the artist himself:

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, like everyone of my generation, I completely trusted in Mao. Yet, what Mao did during the Cultural Revolution changed my mind. I saw art and culture being destroyed by the Red Guards. I saw people dividing into different groups, fighting and killing each other, but everyone—killers and victims—declared they were on the side of Mao's revolution. I found that all the young people, including myself, were all fooled and used by Mao.⁶ . . . For me, Mao's image was god-like in China. What I have done is pull down this image from the pantheon to reality. Working on Mao is one way to extricate myself from the nightmare; first I felt sinful and fearful, now I feel nothing.⁷

4 For further information about Zhang Hongtu's work and ideas, see *Works by Zhang Hongtu* (Hong Kong: HKUST Center for the Arts, 1998) and "Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang: An Interview," (Interviewed by Jonathan Hay), in John Hay, ed., *Boundaries in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 280–98. For a series of T-shirt designs he made before Hong Kong's handover to China, see Wu Hung, "Hong Kong 1997—T-shirt Designs by Zhang Hongtu," *Public Culture* 9.3 (Spring 1997), 417–21.

5 Jonathan Goodman, "Zhang Hongtu at the Bronx Museum of the Arts," *Asia-Pacific Sculpture News*, Winter 1996, 58.

6 Lydia Yee, "An Interview with Zhang Hongtu," 3.

7 *Ibid.*, 2.

Here Zhang Hongtu reveals his fundamental technique to destroy the Mao myth, which is to turn a sacred icon into "nothing." In this sense, what Zhang Hongtu intends to create are not *counter-monuments* but *anti-monuments*. A counter-monument, as exemplified by Xu Bing's *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (pl. 1), rebels against a traditional monument and this rebellion results in a new monumental form. An anti-monument, on the other hand, negates the very notion of a monument as a supreme embodiment of history and memory. Like his hollowed Mao images, Zhang Hongtu's *Studs*, seen in this exhibition (pl. 3), transforms a serious political symbol into a joke. The artist has retained (and to some extent exaggerated) the shining red door panels of an imperial gate in the Forbidden City, but has replaced its glamorous, golden bosses with ugly metal rivets, which are like rows of phalluses in various degrees of inadequate erection.

The humorous effect of these "studs" cancels the sense of secrecy. As mentioned earlier, the traditional symbolism of the gate is rooted in its separation of interior and exterior spaces, and its power lies in its concealment of the space behind it. In retrospect, we realize that Zhang Hongtu's two earlier door installations (*Front Door* and *Red Door*) still rely on this symbolism. Both works emphasize the interplay between the spaces and gazes divided by a gate; and both address issues of political dominance, the empowerment or disempowerment of the gaze, and the exercise of power of one subject onto the other. These are not the purposes of *Studs*, which is a straightforward political satire. The phallus-like studs *are* the secret that the gate is supposed to hide. The gate's mystique vanishes when this (unimpressive) secret exposes itself to the outside. A similar idea underlies another installation by the Beijing artist Song Dong, whose work *Breathing* (1996) is included in this exhibition. Song's house is next door to a high government official's residence, whose tall, thick walls are guarded by security guards day and night. Jokingly, Song hung a row of cotton bags filled with water on the walls (fig. 3.4). Calling this 1995 work *Leaking* (*xie lou*), Song again successfully demystifies the "secret space" behind the walls.

FIGURE 3.4
Song Dong, *Leaking*, 1995,
mixed-media installation,
Bansang Lane, Beijing.





PLATE 4.1



PLATE 4.2

PLATE 4
Xing Danwen, *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, 1995, three black-and-white photographs, each 24 x 20 in. (60.9 x 50.8 cm), collection of the artist.

1 Su Ya and Jia Lusheng, *Buluo di taiyang* [The never falling sun]. (Zhengzhou: Zhongyuan nongmin chubanshe, 1992), 29. Cited in Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 7–8.

The preceding essay on Zhang Hongtu naturally leads to the present reflection on images of Mao Zedong in contemporary Chinese art, for Zhang's "obsession" with Mao is only an individual manifestation of a broad, national phenomenon. This phenomenon has been closely linked to Chinese experimental art over the past two decades, and the various appropriations of Mao's image have been the most sensitive indicators of the different methods and intentions of experimental artists. Xing Danwen's three photographs in this exhibition (pl. 4), each juxtaposing a pregnant young woman with Mao's portrait and other Cultural Revolution memorabilia, continue this tradition while reflecting upon it critically. To understand these pictures we need to briefly survey the history of Mao's images in China's changing political context.

It is difficult to pin down the exact moment when Mao entered Chinese art. There is little doubt, however, that the popularity of Mao's image increased together with the heightening "personality cult" (*geren mixin*) of the Great Leader. If in 1948 only a few badges bearing Mao's image were made in the Communist base Yan'an, an astonishing 2.2 billion portraits of the chairman were produced between 1966 and 1976, the decade of the Cultural Revolution—three for every person in the whole nation (fig. 4.1).¹ This was the time when Mao finally achieved the status of a national myth, hailed as the "Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, and Great Helmsman." Daily rituals of worship were practiced by all citizens before Mao's portraits amidst golden sunflowers (symbols of loyalty). All "revolutionary" artists in the country were engaged in painting Mao, including both his "standard portrait" (*biaozhun xiang*) and his appearances in various important historical situations. Such a privilege was denied to artists who were considered politically unreliable or oppositional.

This situation changed dramatically in the late 1970s. The Cultural Revolution was officially over; the new generation of Chinese leaders turned away from ideological campaigns to economic reforms; intellectuals and artists regained a certain measure of confidence. A nationwide reaction against Mao and the Cultural Revolution surfaced. It seems that after so many years of silence, for the first time people could talk to each other about their painful experiences and the terrible things they heard or saw during the Cultural Revolution. The demand for Mao's portraits



2 Sun Jingxun, "A Specter Prowls Our Land," in Barmé and Minford, eds., *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2nd ed., 1988), 121–29.

3 In Wang Guangyi's words, his art aims "to serve as a clearing-house for the dire straits resulting from the lack of logic, a consequence of the widespread humanistic zeal in our artistic circle." See Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi 1979–1989*, 167.

4 For some of these examples, see *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), 4–9.

5 Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, 15–16.

dropped drastically; the removal of Mao monoliths from schools and factories stirred up considerable excitement. This anti-Mao movement was pushed to extremes by radical intellectuals; some of them became political activists who publicly challenged the mandate of the Communist Party (as in the Democracy Wall Movement of 1978–79). In literature, the poet Sun Jingxun likened Mao to an omnipresent specter who "clutches the country with invisible claws."² In art, the sculptor Wang Keping made a satiric portrait of Mao in 1978 and entitled it *Idol* (fig. 4.2). The image combines Mao's face with a traditional Buddha statue. With one eye open and one eye half closed, the Great Leader seems both a benevolent deity and a trickster. His Russian-style Bolshevik cap, too narrow for the plump face, appears as an afterthought. The glossy surface of the sculpture adds an unpleasant feeling of sleaziness. Unlike Sun Jingxun's direct attack on Mao, however, Wang Keping's iconoclasm was realized through caricature and humor.

Wang Guangyi's series of Mao portraits (fig. 4.3) represents the next model invented by an experimental artist to deconstruct Mao's iconic image. Created in 1988, these were mature products of the '85 Art New Wave. Instead of caricaturing Mao as Wang Keping had done a decade before, Wang Guangyi's goal was to "rationalize" the icon.³ His large oil paintings of Mao faithfully copy a "standard portrait" (*biaozhun xiang*) of the Great Leader during the Cultural Revolution—a portrait that (after much refinement) was formally provided by the party to the whole country for duplication. To this archetypal image Wang made two revisions: he painted Mao in black-and-white and framed the picture with a grid of red or black lines. The monochromatic image appears as a shadow of the original colorful portrait, and the surface grid distances the viewer from the image. Interestingly, a similar grid was actually used widely during the Cultural Revolution in duplicating Mao's portrait: the painter

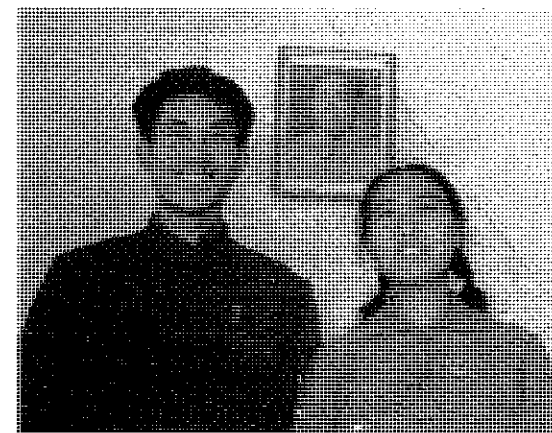
first drew such a grid on a canvas and then copied the portrait to scale. What Wang Guangyi did, therefore, was to bring this grid hidden underneath every Mao portrait to the surface, thereby "rationalizing" the image's historicity and artificiality.

Some scholars have taken Wang Guangyi's manipulation of Mao's images as an early example of political pop, which became extremely popular in the early 1990s. Created before the 1989 Democratic Movement, however, Wang's *Mao Zedong* showed much more originality than the quick production of political pop, including some of Wang's later works, which employ the formula of mixing typical Cultural Revolution images with logos of Marlboro, Coca-Cola, and other famous consumer brands (see fig. 1.5).⁴ Just as his earlier Mao series was part of a movement desecrating Mao's image in the late eighties, political pop was part of a popular Mao craze in the early nineties, which revived the Mao cult as a contemporary expression of political criticism, popular fantasy, and consumer desire.

As Geremie Barmé has indicated in his *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, a major condition of this popular movement was a mounting political crisis in the late 1980s. The economic reforms had reached an impasse, because for many Chinese these reforms had led to inflation, corruption, and egregious nepotism among high cadres. "Mao, a strong leader who in the popular imagination was above corruption and a romantic unfettered by pettifogging bureaucratic constraints, was for many the symbol of an age of economic stability, egalitarianism, and national pride. Gradually, the image of Mao, long since freed from his stifling holy aura and the odium of his destructive policies, became a 'floating sign,' a vehicle for nostalgic reinterpretation, unstated opposition to the status quo, and even satire."⁵ Under the political suppression following the June Fourth Movement in 1989, the nostalgia of Mao provided a coded language for the heightened dissatisfaction with the current Communist leadership.

Unlike an officially sanctioned political campaign, however, this new Mao cult was from the very beginning part of a consumer culture that had been developing in China with full force since the mid-eighties. Mao's images regained popularity, but these were now consumer goods and lucky symbols, not sacred icons inspiring awe. From the mid- to late eighties, Mao-period mementos, including the famous Mao buttons, became collectors' items; calendars, New Year paintings (*nian hua*), and

FIGURE 4.1
Wu Hung, *Taking a Picture in Front of Chairman Mao*
(the author and his sister in 1971, Beijing).



postcards began to feature Mao's images regularly from the early 1990s.⁶ According to an official statistic, "In 1989 a mere 370,000 copies of the official portrait of Mao were printed. In 1990 the number rose dramatically to 22.95 million, of which 19.93 million were sold. In 1991 the number hit 50 million."⁷

It was exactly at this moment that political pop became a major artistic genre and developed the strategy of "marketing" Mao as a pop icon. The supporters of political pop see it as a continuing desecration of a Communist idol: "It [political pop] is a form of irony that takes as its basic strategy an inversion of Maoist language and symbolism . . . [and] represents a massive shift away from the days when Mao was a solemn and awe-inspiring god."⁸ Other critics, however, argue that the "irony" of political pop was itself "commodified and used to grease the wheels of commerce."⁹ Although this debate has not reached a conclusion among art historians, a recent development in Chinese experimental art seems to support the second view: unsatisfied with the formulas of political pop and its lack of a subjective voice, some artists have turned to real individuals to explore these people's complex relationships with Mao. Xing Danwen's photographs in this exhibition are representative of this trend.

Xing Danwen, who became a professional photographer after graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1992, was born in 1967 at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Her three photographs in this exhibition are chosen from *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, a large series of portraits featuring people born around the same time. The series is therefore a study of the photographer's own generation and in this sense it is autobiographical. The pregnant woman in the three photos is one of Xing's close friends, herself an experimental artist and an amateur collector of Cultural Revolution mementos. As their title shows, these images are about the woman's relationship with the bygone Cultural Revolution. This relationship is complicated by the fact that the Cultural Revolution should have left the photographer and her friend with *little* memory: the political campaign ended when they had barely reached their teens. On the other hand, the photos clearly testify to their attachment to the Cultural Revolution: the friend decorates her private room with Mao buttons and Mao's standard portraits, and the photographer is obsessed with the idea of documenting this generation of people "born together with the revolution." Both women are thus bearers of the memory of the Cultural Revolution, and in this way they are agents of the past and are responsible for its continuing legacy and renewal.

Their memory, however, differs much from what is being remembered, and the bearers of this memory are nothing like those fanatic Red Guards who danced and cried in ecstasy in front of Mao's portraits in the 1960s and 1970s. In the photos, Mao stares from the stark walls at the naked woman in the room and also at us, the onlookers beyond the picture frame (pl. 4.1). But this once-dominating gaze has lost much of its power: the woman is uninhibited before it and, in fact, totally indifferent to it. The sacred image of Mao we find here has been domesticated to

6 Some of these examples are reproduced in *ibid.*, figs. 1-43; see Barmé's discussion in the same book, 39-43.

7 Cited in *ibid.*, 9.

8 Li Xianting, "Zhengzhi bopu—bei 'xiaofei' zhedi yishi xingtai" (Political Pop—an ideology for consumers), partially translated in *ibid.*, 215-20, under the title "The Imprisoned Heart: Consuming Mao." This quotation is from 217.

9 *ibid.*, 45.

FIGURE 4.2

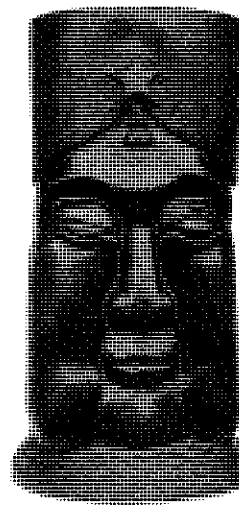
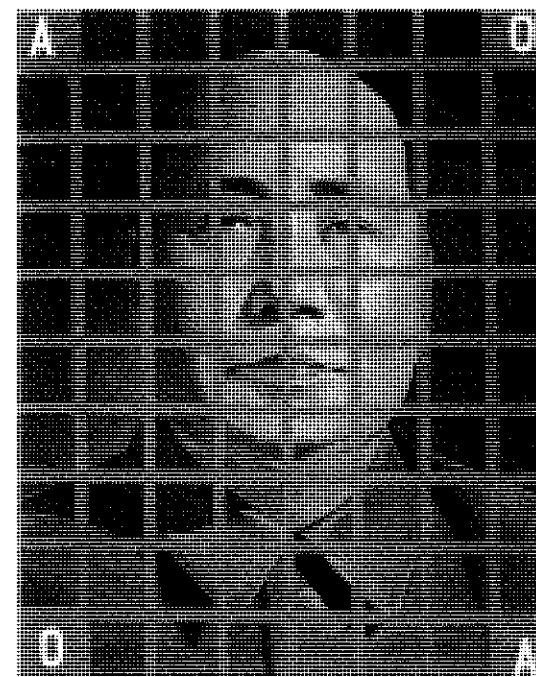


FIGURE 4.2
Wang Keping, *Idol*, 1979, wood sculpture, Hanart T Z Gallery, Hong Kong.

FIGURE 4.3
Wang Guangyi, *Mao Zedong* no. 1, 1988, oil on canvas, 59 x 47 in. (150 x 120 cm), private collection.

FIGURE 4.3



become a fixture of an intimate private space, in the same way that the Cultural Revolution is no longer real history but has become the subject of personal recollection.

Representing the interior of a personal space, these photos strike us with a psychological dimension rarely seen in contemporary Chinese art. There is no question that the woman's passion for Cultural Revolution mementos follows the fashion at the time. But it is also clear that to her Mao is not just the object of a collective cult. Displayed in her room, Mao seems to function as a personal guardian deity, warding off the intruding voyeuristic gaze of the onlooker toward her naked body. (The woman actually looks relaxed and safe under his protection; it is we the viewers who are disturbed by the combination of the woman's body and Mao's gaze.) She is pregnant and about to give birth to a new life—a son or daughter who will have no personal memory of the Cultural Revolution. While the absence of such memory promises final liberation from the past, it also will separate the unborn child from its mother: they will belong to different generations, and there is no guarantee that the mother's memory will be transmitted to her child. There are therefore three characters in the pictures—the woman, Mao, and the unborn child—whose interplay animates these images. The first two photographs focus on the woman's relationship with Mao (pl. 4.1-2), but in the third picture her face evades the camera lens (pl. 4.3). Mao's portrait is now placed next to her swollen belly. The woman's individual identity disappears, and her role is reduced to bridging the past and the future. Perhaps here lies the hope offered by the photograph. As a saying goes: "Those who were born with the Cultural Revolution can never escape it!"—but her child will not live under this burden.

STILL BREATHING

Many works of post-Cultural Revolution art depict Tiananmen and try to demystify this most sacred symbol of Communist China. Some of them, such as Wang Jinsong's *Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen* (1990), refashion a socialist realistic masterpiece into a fake stage set. Others, like the anonymous *June* (1994) (fig. 5.1), evoke absurdity: the female exhibitionist and the crippled man on the motorcar have no relation either to each other or to the place. In both cases, however, Tiananmen's towering silhouette fills the pictures' backgrounds, and the reduction of the foreground heightens the disharmony between the solemn monument and the disillusioned crowd. Both works, therefore, follow the basic strategy of political pop to invert Maoist symbolism while satirizing contemporary life.¹ Song Dong's *Breathing*, a performance project he carried out in front of Tiananmen in 1996 (pl. 5), shares the iconoclastic intent of these works but also distinguishes itself from them. First, the artist shifts his focus from Tiananmen to Tiananmen Square—the vast ground before the sacred monument; second, the performance is presented as the artist's direct engagement with the square; and third, while political pop rejects idealism and heroism in favor of irony and absurdity, Song Dong's project is deeply moving.

It was New Year's Eve, 1996. Holiday lights outlined the familiar contour of Tiananmen in the distance; the temperature was minus nine degrees centigrade (about sixteen degrees Fahrenheit). Song Dong lay motionless face down in the deserted Tiananmen Square, breathing onto the pavement for forty minutes. A thin layer of ice gradually formed on the ground before his mouth, which seemed to increase in thickness and solidity with each breath. When he left the square, the ice was still shimmering like an elusive islet in an ocean of concrete. It disappeared before the next morning, leaving no visible trace.

By shifting his focus from Tiananmen to Tiananmen Square, Song Dong departs from the formula of blaspheming a famous icon. The target of demystification in his work becomes much more complex, involving not just symbols but also an actual space, where real historical events take place. To comprehend Song Dong's project we must thus understand the history and the myth of Tiananmen Square.² Many Westerners perhaps only learned its name after the June Fourth Democratic Movement in

PLATE 5
Song Dong, *Breathing*, 1996,
performance, Tiananmen
Square, Beijing.

1 For these basic characteristics of political pop, see Li Xianting, "Zhengzhi bopu—bei 'xiaofei' zhede yishi xingtai" [Political Pop—an ideology for consumers], partially translated in Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, under the title "The Imprisoned Heart: Consuming Mao." (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 215–20.

2 For a discussion of the history and significance of Tiananmen Square, see Wu Hung, "Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments," *Representations* 35 (1991), 84–117.

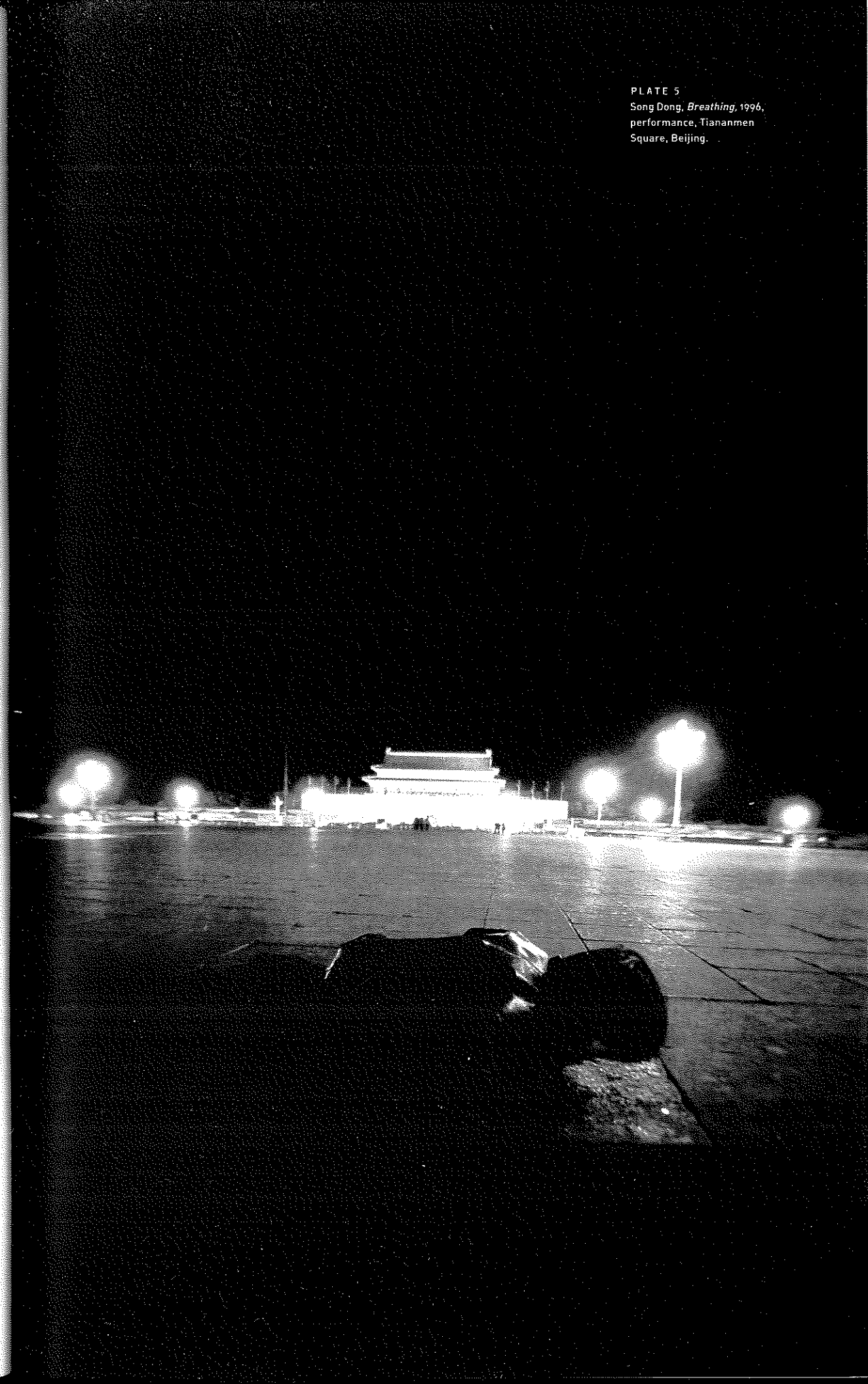


FIGURE 5.1



FIGURE 5.1
W. A., June, 1994, black-and-white photograph.

FIGURE 5.2
The 1959 National Day rally; original caption read: top left, "Chairman on Tiananmen is waving his hand to the 400,000 people in the rally"; middle left, "Chairman Mao sees the young generation"; bottom left, "Chairman Mao sees the growing force of peace"; right, "Chairman Mao sees the masses who are waving their hands at him." From *Renming huabao* (People's Pictorial), no. 1 (July 1950).



FIGURE 5.2

1989, but to every Chinese, from a commoner to the country's paramount leader, the square had always been the center of political attention and tension. A series of mass movements taking place there have become landmarks in modern Chinese history: the demonstration on May 4, 1919 protesting the Treaty of Versailles, which handed over Chinese lands to Japan; the patriotic march on March 18, 1926; the demonstration on December 9, 1935, which started the resistance movement against the Japanese invasion; the anti-autocratic movement during the Civil War on May 20, 1947; the mass memorial to the former prime minister Zhou Enlai on April 5, 1976; and finally the 1989 student uprising.

Parallel to these grassroots movements runs another sequence of "demonstrations" mobilized by authorities to display power: the Victory March in 1900 by the Allied Army celebrating their occupation of Beijing;

3 Quoted in Wu Liangyong, "Tiananmen Guangchang de guihua he sheji" [The plan and design of Tiananmen Square], in *Jianzhushi lunwenji* [An anthology of writings on architectural history], (Beijing: Department of Architectural Engineering, 1979), vol. 2, 26.

General Zhang Xun's grand ritual in June 1917 to commemorate his restoration of the imperial order; the establishment of the puppet regime under Japanese patronage; the parade celebrating the recapture of Beijing by the Republican troops; the founding of Communist China on October 1, 1949; and more recently, the elaborate National Day parades after the People's Liberation Army bloodwashed the square in 1989. As these two chains of events are tied to Tiananmen Square, everything there partakes of the fate of the state and its one billion people. Correspondingly, the square partakes of every event and consequently keeps changing its meaning.

The meaning of a "square" in contemporary China is political: it is always conjoined with a "platform" for the leaders to review mass assemblies. Among all the platforms none is more privileged than Tiananmen, the stand of the country's paramount leader. Logically, there must be a square—in fact *the* square—of unmatched status for the public. Shortly after the establishment of the PRC, Mao ordered a new square built in front of Tiananmen, a square "big enough to hold an assembly of one billion."³ Mao's ambition was never realized. Despite all efforts, the new square completed in 1959 could only (!) hold 400,000 people, and, rather ironically, it was only after the chairman's death that the square was further expanded to hold 600,000. But either way, this was quite enough for the Chinese government to boast that Tiananmen Square was the largest square in the world.

Meetings between the people and Chairman Mao in the square took the form of endless celebration parades, when the enormous square was covered with revolutionary masses. As seen from Tiananmen's balcony, a half million men and women must have formed a vast ocean; on its surface red flags and slogans waved and floated. Looking up from the square, anyone in this crowd would hardly be able to make out the chairman's tiny silhouette in the remote distance. Yet they cried out with joy and excitement, because the chairman was there above Tiananmen looking at them (fig. 5.2). For more than two decades such rituals continued year after year; the endless pageants in the square presented a disguised reality of a contented people cheering their leaders. Then, in 1976, everything suddenly changed: the chairman died; Tiananmen was empty; the heated Cultural Revolution had turned into a nightmare; it seemed that the Gang of Four was about to seize power. From all directions people came to the square, of their own will and to express their own will. When they tried to speak out and prove they were "the people," they were arrested and beaten.

This was the mass mourning for Premier Zhou Enlai, who died in January 1976. Zhou, who seemed to have become the only hope for rationality and peace, was condemned, and people were prohibited from mourning him. All the anxiety, frustration, disillusionment, and anguish that had troubled Beijing residents for more than a decade, merged into shared grief, and from this shared feeling a grassroots movement began to take shape. On March 23, a single wreath of white paper, the traditional symbol of mourning, was placed at the foot of the Monument to the People's Heroes at the center of the square. The government's prohibition

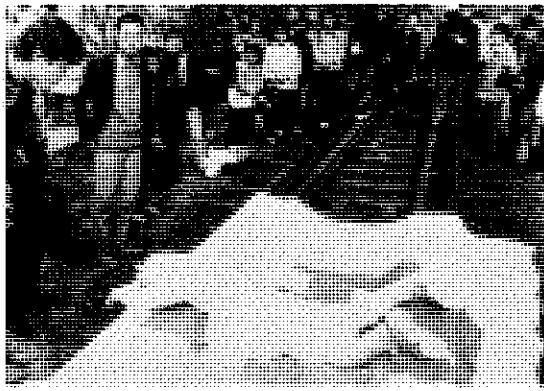


FIGURE 5.3
Wei Guangqing and others,
Suicide Project No. 1, photograph
exhibited at the *China/Avant-
garde* exhibition in the
National Art Gallery, Beijing,
February 1989.

only brought more wreaths, people, and finally the protest on April 4, the day of the Qingming Festival (the day for holding memorial services for the dead in traditional China). Without an organizer or plan, one hundred thousand people came on this and the following days, covering the square with white paper flowers. Then, on the night of April 5, the bulbous lights around the square suddenly flashed on the demonstrators. Armed police rushed into the square, beating the demonstrators and taking them away. Before dawn the stains of blood on the square were carefully cleansed. The meaning of the square, however, was never the same.

The June Fourth Movement in 1989 repeated the sequence of events in the 1976 demonstration, starting with mass mourning for a hero (this time Premier Hu Yaobang) and ending with bloodshed. The 1989 demonstration, however, was of greater magnitude (two hundred thousand people joined the demonstration on a single day) and a clearer ideological agenda ("democracy" and "freedom" were the most frequent catchwords). It also left a much more painful wound in China's national psyche, and its memory still haunts Chinese people, including many intellectuals and artists.

Song Dong's *Breathing* can be viewed as a tribute to this memory, but it also offers hope. In a strange way, it reminds me of another performance staged by the experimental artist Wei Guangqing in 1988 before the June Fourth Movement (fig. 5.3). Titled *Suicide Project No. 1*, the artist swathed himself in white bandages to look like a wounded man and lay across railroad tracks. As I have suggested in a previous article, this and other incidents in the late eighties indicated a particular psychological state of young Chinese dissidents, the feeling that only by self-sacrifice could they actively influence the future.⁴ Lying on the ground in a similar gesture, Song Dong is no longer staging a real or pretend suicide in *Breathing*. Instead he tries to inject life into the deserted square, thereby bringing us back to those brief moments in history when the square was transformed into a "living place." It reminds us that in 1996 the square still remained an unfeeling monolith. *Breathing* not only represents a continuing effort to challenge this monolithic power but also demonstrates the extreme difficulty of making any change: all Song Dong's effort produced was a tiny pool of ice, which disappeared before the next morning.

⁴ See Wu Hung, "Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments," 113.

Breathing is a two-part project. Part Two took place on the frozen Back Sea—a large pond in the old quarter of Beijing (fig. 5.4). A summary of the project provided by the artist highlights the intended parallels and differences:

Part One: Tiananmen Square, temperature minus 9 degrees centigrade. Breathing onto the ground for about 40 minutes, *producing ice on the cement surface of the square*.

Part Two: frozen Back Sea, temperature minus 8 degrees centigrade. Breathing onto the ice for about 40 minutes, *ice remaining as ice*.

As my italics suggest, what is important is not the change in location but the differing results of the same action performed in similar climatic conditions: the artist could actually produce ice by breathing onto the cement ground, but on the frozen Back Sea his action had no effect. These different results seem to imply different relationships between the artist and these places. In Tiananmen Square this relationship is antagonistic, and hence Song Dong's effort, no matter how small, was effective and meaningful. His relationship with the Back Sea is naturally harmonious, and the frozen pond absorbed Song Dong's breath into its very existence.



FIGURE 5.4
Song Dong, *Breathing*, part 2,
1996, Back Sea, Beijing.
Photograph by Yin Xiuzhen.

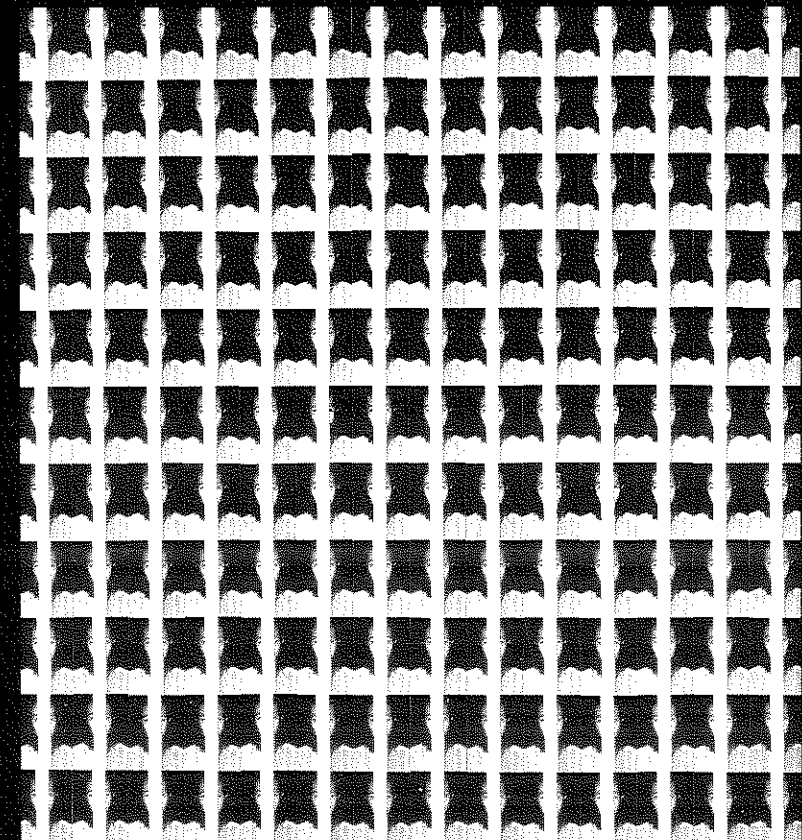
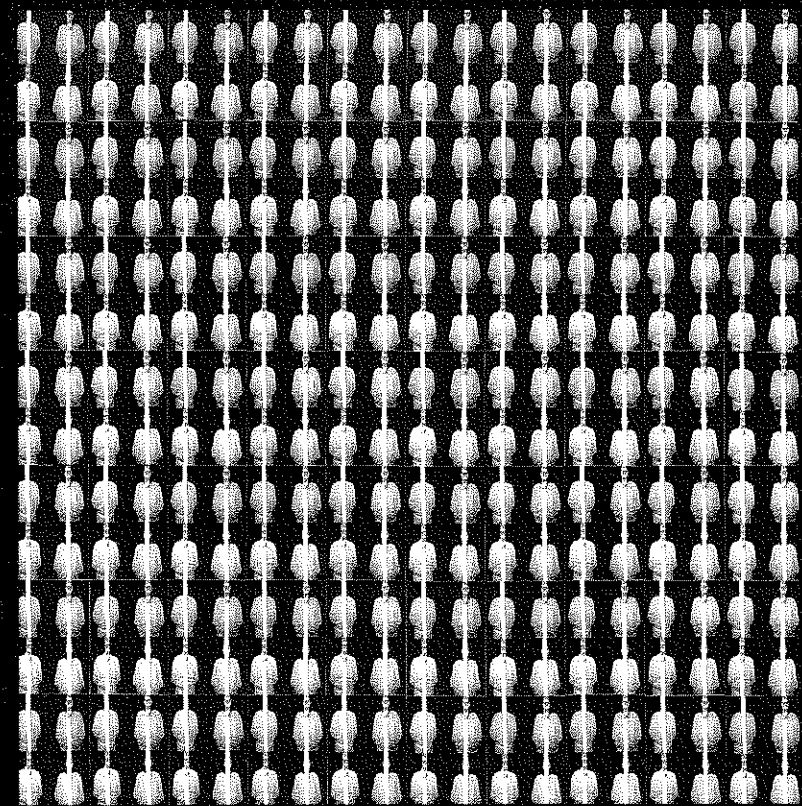
REMEMBERING

If Song Dong's *Breathing* is a tribute to the memory of the June Fourth Movement through metaphor, this memory is repeated in Mo Yi's *Made by the Police Department* (1997) (pl. 6). The two photographs in this series are constructed from some basic image-units, small repeated compositions that show self-portraits at a particular moment in his life and in the country's history. In the first picture (pl. 6.1), two image-units alternate, showing the front and back of the photographer, but both views are obstructed by a white column in the middle. We see four black Chinese characters printed on the column—*gong an ju zhi* (made by the Police Department)—when the figure behind the column faces inward, away from us. But when the figure turns around to face us, the column also turns, concealing the inscription.

These two views are therefore not simply “front” and “back” images of the same scene, but represent two different juxtapositions of the portrait, the column, and the inscription. Although the excessive repetition of the image-units in the picture seems to reject any sequence of reading, their individual pictorial or verbal elements are often comprehended in a hierarchical order. As an experiment, I asked six Chinese viewers on separate occasions what they saw in this picture. Without exception their eyes were first caught by the inscription “Made by the Police Department.” A majority of them then tried to explore the figure: the hidden face here and the blurry hair there. Some commented on the striped shirt, which reminded them of a prisoner's uniform. Only as an afterthought did they point out the digital date in each tiny image-unit, but this discovery often led to a dramatic change in their reaction. This date was first ignored because, in one viewer's words, “it is not really part of a photo—it is only a mechanical imprint by a ‘blockhead camera’ (*shaqua xiangji*—the Chinese term for a simple automatic camera).” Then his eyes suddenly shone when he absorbed the meaning of the date: “89-6-4.” To him the picture seemed to have suddenly gained an entirely different meaning.

I learned three things from this experiment. First, the viewers unconsciously read the picture's two image-units in sequence, from the one with the inscription to the one without it. Second, multiple factors (such as the overtly reduced size of the image-units and the deliberate obstruction of pictorial details) make the picture a puzzle and encourage viewers

PLATE 6
Mo Yi, *Made by the Police Department 1 and 2*, 1997, two color photo collages. Each photograph (pls. 6.1 and 6.2), 15 1/2 x 14 1/2 in. (39.4 x 36.8 cm), collection of the artist.



to discover its hidden meaning. Third, the delayed discovery of the June Fourth date installs the picture into a common historical framework. These features, however, are largely absent in the second picture in the series (pl. 6.2), though the two pictures resemble each other in their overall design. This second picture only repeats a single image-unit, and it no longer contains an inscription or date. But because we have studied the first picture, we now supply the necessary information when countering the absence of such verbal information. A quick comparison of the two pictures further establishes that the single image-unit in the second picture is actually a close-up of the “front view” in the first picture and the blank vertical band crossing each frame in the second picture is actually the white column (whose details are washed out by the camera’s flash). We also know that this column bears the inscription “Made by the Police Department” on the other side, and we even know the date when this picture was supposedly taken.

The puzzle in the two pictures concerns the photographer’s life, simultaneously veiled and revealed in the images. It is also about the style of the pictures: Why does Mo Yi repeat all these tiny images a hundred times? Do his other works share this idiosyncratic design? Answering my questions about his life in an interview, Mo Yi identified himself as “basically a Tibetan,” although neither of his parents are Tibetan, and he did not grow up in Tibet. During the Cultural Revolution his parents both worked in Lhasa. Late in her pregnancy with Mo, his mother was traveling in a truck that fell into a gorge. Most of the passengers died but she (and he) survived. When he was fifteen Mo Yi was recruited by the soccer team of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. He played professional soccer on and off for twelve years (from 1973 to 1985), first representing Tibet and then the city of Tianjin. In 1982 he became fascinated with photography

FIGURE 6.1
Anonymous, *It's Gone* (Mo Yi
on June 4, 1989), black-and-
white photograph, collection
of the artist.



1 Mo Yi's resumé identifies *Que ye* (It's gone!) as a "performance."

2 Cited in Du Jianfeng, "Zoujin Mo Yi" [Entering Mo Yi], *Renming sheying* [People's Photography], no. 558 (June 28, 1995), 1.

and traveled around Tibet to take pictures with a blockhead camera. Around the same time he also tried to enter college, but this goal proved to be a fantasy for a person who never even finished junior high school. When he retired from professional soccer he asked to work “anywhere that needed a photographer.” He was assigned such a job in one of Tianjin’s children’s hospitals.

Neither in our interview nor in his writing has Mo Yi shown a strong interest in politics. His involvement in politics has been spontaneous and intuitive. For example, he learned about the suppression of the 1976 demonstration in Tiananmen Square while attending a soccer competition in Shijiazhuang. He was “terribly upset and angry” when listening to a party secretary’s condemnation of the demonstrators as “traitors and counter-revolutionaries.” When the 1989 democratic movement burst out, he participated in the movement despite his lack of knowledge of politics: “I was moved by the situation in Tiananmen Square and was enraged by the party leaders’ antagonism toward the students. I felt that I was cheated. I finally lost my faith in the government.” He designed a “performance,” marching through Tianjin’s streets as a mourner holding a funerary banner (fig. 6.1).¹ On his white robe he wrote a couplet: “Laughing, I mourn for the death of the feudal system. / Crying, I am greeting the birth of democracy.” He also wrote two large characters on the banner: *Qu ye* or “It’s gone!” Mo Yi explains: “What is gone is my earlier blind faith and so I am laughing. I also cry because it is so difficult for democracy to arrive.” A big crowd gathered around him, cheering and taking pictures. This performance made him a household name in Tianjin but also one of the “Ten Big Criminal Cases” (*shi da an*), handed over to the city’s police department after the crackdown on the June Fourth Movement. Mo Yi lost his job, was under house arrest for several years, and in 1998 is still living in fear.

By Mo Yi’s own account, his direct involvement in politics is largely an accident, but his interest in society has stayed at the center of his art. He is deeply fascinated by the city—not a city’s architecture but its “expression,” which he finds on people’s faces and in their clothes, movements, and living spaces. This fascination, on the other hand, also leads him to question the accuracy of photography in documenting reality. His 1988 project *Expression of the Street* is an experiment in which he tried to free photography from the photographer’s subjectivity:

In an exhibition in 1987 I showed a series of photographs called City Dwellers. Afterward many viewers wrote to me blaming me for photographing people only at “detached, lonely, and suspicious” moments. These comments made me wonder whether I had psychological problems—whether the world was actually fine and everyone was happy, but my “sick eyes” selected only those “false and distressed” scenes. I was scared by such thoughts and decided to undertake an experiment, separating the camera lens from my gaze and employing the camera only as a mechanical instrument for recording. My method was to tie the camera behind my neck or to hang it behind my waist. Using an extension cord I took a picture every five steps when walking on the street. I wanted to see what people and their city look like when they were not selected by my eyes.²



FIGURE 6.2

FIGURE 6.2
Mo Yi, *Expression of the Street*,
no. 4, 1988, black-and-white
photograph, 10 x 12 in.
(25.6 x 30.4 cm), collection
of the artist.



FIGURE 6.3

FIGURE 6.3
Mo Yi, *A Swaying Bus*, 1990,
black-and-white photograph,
10 x 12 in. (25.6 x 30.4 cm),
collection of the artist.

This experiment initiated many projects Mo Yi has undertaken over the past ten years. The result of these projects has often been twofold: on the one hand, he has gained confidence about his “eyes” from his experiment. For example, as he describes them, the majority of images captured by his camera in the 1988 project “document an ‘expression’ of expressionlessness and apathy; people’s gazes are cold and detached; they seem to have no desire to be related to one another and seem to be separated by invisible walls” (fig. 6.2).³ On the other hand, the significance of his experiments is never limited to the images they capture; the act of obtaining such images takes on its own meaning, so that to him photography becomes a form of performance and active thinking. He continued his *Expression of the Street* project into the nineties; the numerous photographs he took in those years have helped him construct a “history of collective subjectivity” in a major Chinese city.⁴ He began another project, *A Swaying Bus*, in 1990, taking pictures of fellow passengers and outside scenes (fig. 6.3). “It is strange,” he said, “that people in the same bus would feel that they share the same destiny.” This then led to a sister project, *Landscape Outside a Public Bus* (1995).⁵ In the project *Photos Taken Through a Dog’s Eyes*, of the same year, he lowered the camera to near ground level; the randomly taken pictures show various kinds of movements and mannerisms.

The art critic Wang Rui has characterized a central motivation in Mo Yi’s experiment as “the photographer’s self-suppression of his subjective intervention.”⁶ This leads Wang to explain Mo Yi’s art as the rejection of any “constructed composition” that aims at “a typical image in a typical environment.”⁷ While this is clearly true of Mo Yi’s numerous photographs of the city, *Made by the Police Department* is a deliberate (and forced) reversal. Unlike his other pictures, here the photographer becomes the subject of photographing, and the circumstances are documented by inscriptions. Also unlike his other pictures, this group of photographs has a rigid composition; spontaneity is rejected. The “subjective intervention” of the photographer is still suppressed—his self-image is blocked and obstructed. But this erasure results from the violence of an external object—the column with the inscription “Made by the Police Department.” This external violence and the photographer’s obstructed self become the content of memory—a “stamp” repeated again and again in the two pictures.

3 Ibid.

4 For example, Mo Yi divides this history into before and after 1992, the year which, according to him, “witnessed a major change in people’s facial expression.” Interview with Mo Yi conducted by the author, May 15, 1998. Unpublished record.

5 This is the title of a series of photos Mo Yi made in 1995. He uses the word “landscape” in a personal way. To him, “people’s faces in a city constitute a landscape of human society.”

6 Wang Rui, “Jianshi Mo Yi” [Examining Mo Yi]. Unpublished manuscript.

7 Mo Yi considers the representation of “a typical image in a typical environment” the goal of photojournalism. He told me that because he could not combine photojournalism with his experiment, he has turned down offers from some major international news agencies.

SILENCE

The creation of *Earthly Force* (1990–92)—a group of heavy stone boulders, each embraced by an iron net (pl. 7)—is also related to an artist's reaction to the tragedy of the June Fourth Movement. But as Sui Jianguo recalled later, in this case the reaction occurred mainly in the aesthetic realm and resulted in a work whose political message, if there is any, is quite subtle when compared with Song Dong's *Breathing* or Mo Yi's *Made by the Police Department*:

Until 1989 I was studying in the master's program of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and made the sculptures in the Balancer series and the Hygiene series. The second series is so called because all those egg-shaped heads in it are white (fig. 7.1). Sculptors have always used white plaster as an intermediary material, but I used plaster, along with paper pulp and cotton bandages applied on metal meshes, as the final material of these heads. My pursuit for a radical art style during that period became increasingly violent. I had a plan of making thirty to forty such heads, installing them on sticks as tall as real people and arranging them into a military formation. But that was around the time of the June Fourth Movement; this plan could not be realized [because of its possible political implications].

So like everyone else I was quite hotheaded during the '85 Art NewWave but was also rather superficial. After the June Fourth I calmed down and became more serious, and I hoped to find a new way of making sculpture that would help me develop a more solid and down-to-earth style and eliminate personal sentiment. I made a breakthrough almost by accident: after graduating from the master's program I stayed on to teach in the Central Academy. My first teaching assignment, in the fall of 1989, was to lead students to carve stone in a mountain area. Once I began to carve stone I instantly felt the endurance and reserved strength of this material. This was exactly the kind of feeling I was looking for at that moment.¹

In another interview Sui Jianguo tries to describe his feeling at this moment more precisely:

At that time I was quite depressed but also unusually sensitive. From early morning I started to silently carve stone. A whole day flew by, and before I raised my head the sun had already set. I worked like this for twenty days; the stone material in my hand began to gain shape. I think that it was actually a process of exchange: gradually and silently my experiences entered stone, while in the same process stone became part of myself.²

1 Interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by Liu Xiaochun [November 10, 1996, Beijing]. *Meishu wenxian* [Art literature] no. 8 (1997), 4–8, quotation from 4.

2 Interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by the author, May 14, 1998, Beijing. Unpublished record.



PLATE 7
Sui Jianguo, *Earthly Force*, 1991,
iron and granite, each piece
approximately 23 1/2 x 27 1/2 x
19 1/2 in. (60 x 70 x 50 cm),
collection of the artist.

This was the beginning of a large group of stone works that took Sui Jianguo several years to accomplish. These works represent a radical departure from the sculpture he created prior to the June Fourth Movement. The earlier *Hygiene* series (1989) (fig. 7.1), for example, employs unconventional materials and pursues abstract shapes, but it still basically follows the tradition of representational art, and a figure wrapped in bandages was a sculptural rendering of a popular image in the '85 Art New Wave (see fig. 1.2). But his post-1989 stone carvings testify to an entirely "different perspective in thinking and making sculpture."³ In making these works not only did Sui Jianguo abandon representational forms, he approached stone as a substance with its own life and spirit. Sui attributed this approach to a revival of his attraction to Zen and traditional Chinese philosophy—ideas that had had a strong impact on him during his college years. These ideas once again dominated his thinking after the June Fourth Movement. The art critic Ma Qinzong has suggested yet another reason for Sui's new sculptures. In Ma's view Sui Jianguo was a "slow starter." Many experimental artists of his generation had quickly made their names in the 1980s "avant-garde" movement. But Sui was slow in following popular trends, and this helped him avoid imitating fashionable Western art styles.⁴ His delayed artistic maturity seems to attest to a classical Chinese motto: "A grand vessel takes time to make (*da qi wan cheng*)!"

Sui Jianguo grew up in an ordinary working-class family in the old colonial city of Qingdao (known to many Westerners as Tsingtao). During the Cultural Revolution he was a teenager. Like Mo Yi, he left school after the second year of junior high school and never entered high school. His mother retired from a textile factory and one of her children was allowed to take her place. So Sui Jianguo, who was then sixteen and weighed less than 100 pounds, became a full-time worker for the next seven years in a state-owned factory. His art education began with lessons at night school. As his interest in art grew, he volunteered to run the local Cultural House, organizing spare-time education and art programs for factory workers and local residents. He also used this opportunity to learn from professional artists who were invited to teach in the programs. (His first sculpture teacher was Yu Fan's father. Yu, who will be introduced in the following essay, became Sui's student and collaborator ten years later.) Although he never received a high-school education, Sui Jianguo was able to pass the entrance exam of the Shandong Provincial Academy of Fine Arts in 1980. The parallels between him and Mo Yi thus ended: entering the academy meant that he had finally left amateur status behind and was on the way to becoming a professional artist.

While in the academy, Sui Jianguo became a passionate follower of the "Searching for Roots" (*xun gen*) movement, a nationwide intellectual trend in the early and mid-eighties. Although his major was sculpture, he spent many hours copying traditional Chinese paintings. He was also fascinated by Zen, Taoism, and other types of Asian mysticism. But he abandoned such pursuits, at least for a while, after he entered the master's program in Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1986. The late

3 Sui Jianguo's words, in the interview conducted by Liu Xiaochun, 6.

4 Ma Qinzong, "Kaituo Zhongguo dangdai diaosu di wenhua yujing: Guanyu Sui Jianguo zuopin di lenxi baogao" [Broaden the cultural language of contemporary Chinese sculpture: an analysis of Sui Jianguo's works], *Yishu jie* [Artlife], no. 49 (July and August 1997), 4–21, especially, 6.

5 According to interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by the author, May 14, 1998, Beijing.

6 In his conversation with Liu Xiaochun, Sui Jianguo stated that he derived the idea for the "formlessness" of his stone from Taoism, and he cited Taoist theories that a "great image" transcends shape, 4.

FIGURE 7.1

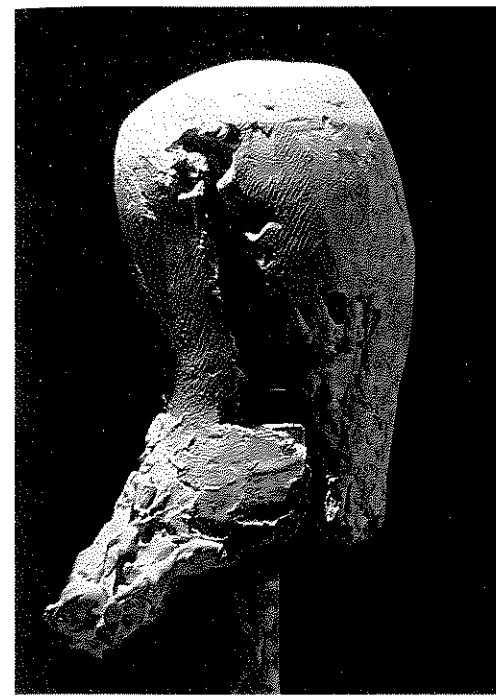
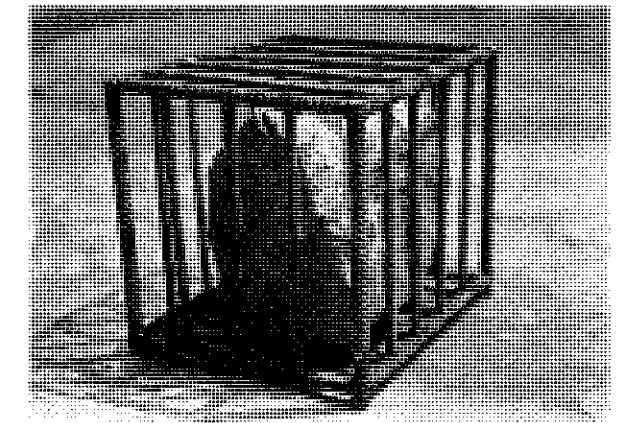


FIGURE 7.1
Sui Jianguo, *Hygiene*, 1989,
plaster, fabric, and metal,
approximately 11 1/2 in. (30 cm)
high, collection of the artist.

FIGURE 7.2
Sui Jianguo, *Structure no. 2*,
1990, iron and granite, 13 1/2 x
13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (35 x 35 x 35 cm),
collection of the artist.

FIGURE 7.2



eighties was a period of social uncertainty and revolution, and Beijing was the center of all the most important events and debates. In art, the ideal of avant-gardism spread like brush fire, challenging every experimental artist to make his or her personal mark on art history. The silent spiritual practice of Zen and the Taoist doctrine of "non-action" seemed pale and incompatible with the times. Sui Jianguo's *Balancer* (1988) and *Hygiene* series made during this period did not reflect Taoist ideas but were imbued with the radicalism of the contemporary social and artistic upheaval. But when he reflects upon this period, Sui feels that the most important thing he learned in the late eighties was still the classical tradition of Western sculpture, which gave him "a clear sense of form" and "a desire for perfection."⁵

This brief review of Sui Jianguo's life and education leads us back to the new sculpture he developed after 1989. We can see now that this development was far from accidental. Essential elements of these new works can be found in his interest in Taoist mysticism and naturalism,⁶ in his desire for formal and technical perfection, and in a tendency toward asceticism that he had acquired from his early experiences as a factory laborer. These elements were fused together during his self-exile after the tragedy of the June Fourth Movement: day after day he silently worked with stone, and in this process, as cited earlier, he felt that his experiences gradually merged with his sculptural material.

FIGURE 7.3

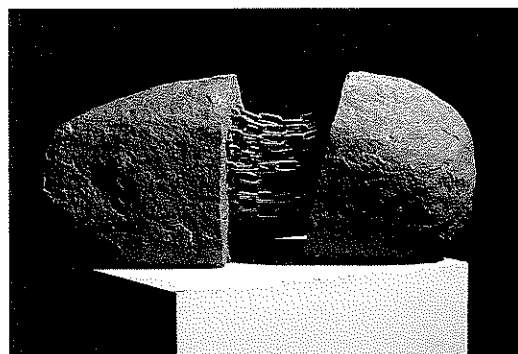


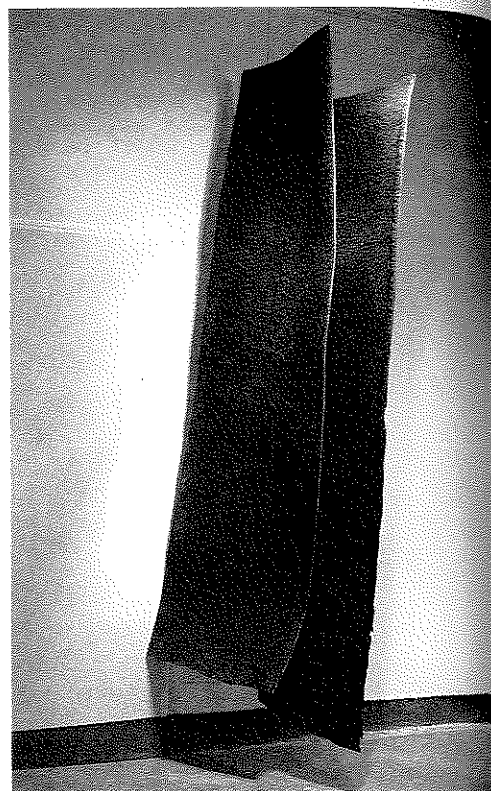
FIGURE 7.3
Sui Jianguo, *Structure no. 9*,
1991, iron and granite, 23 1/2 x
12 x 10 in. (60 x 30 x 25 cm),
collection of the artist.

FIGURE 7.4
Sui Jianguo, *Thunderbolt*, 1996,
rubber, metal, and wood
installation, 71 x 90 1/2 in.
(180 x 230 cm), collection of
the artist.

The idea that stone is a living material led him to embrace conceptual art—a shift exemplified by his *Sealed Memory* (1989)—a metal case containing a piece of unseen stone. But the desire for a more explicit engagement between the container and the contained prompted him to create a group of different works in 1990. Each sculpture in this group has an iron cage (which he made by welding together heavy bars) containing one or more pieces of unpolished stone (fig. 7.2). A major breakthrough in this series of experiments, however, only arrived when he finally eliminated the separation between the container and the contained. He describes this progress as the “shrinking” of the iron cage onto the surface of a stone: it now both “embraces a stone boulder and is shaped by it.” This concept is best realized in *Earthly Force* (1990–92), an installation of twenty huge boulders, each inlaid with a network of iron bars and weighing about 100 kilograms (or approximately 220 pounds). (Only twelve boulders are shown in the present exhibition.) This work took him two years to create. When it was first exhibited in 1992 in Beijing, it became an instant classic in contemporary Chinese sculpture.

Two important features of Sui Jianguo’s experiment are multiplication and self-reversal. Through multiplication, a single sculptural form takes over a large space and forms a monumental complex. His creation of *Earthly Force* followed this logic and was related to one of his earlier plans to remake a modern Forest of Steles (*Bei lin*).⁷ His most recent work, a tribute to modern Chinese history called *The Shadow of the Century* (1997) consists of ten identical metal “Mao jackets.” On the other

FIGURE 7.4



7 He told me that he made this plan in the early nineties and made a sketch for it. But the plan was finally abandoned because he could not raise enough funds—his budget for a single “stele” was RMB 50,000 (about US \$6,000).

8 Interview with Sui Jianguo conducted by Liu Xiaochun, 8.

hand, self-inversion creates intertextuality among his various projects. *Earthly Force* has at least two “reversals.” The first, *Structure No. 9* (1990), is a much smaller stone boulder without metal work obstructing its natural surface. Instead, Sui Jianguo cut the boulder open to expose its interior (fig. 7.3). The work seems especially sinister if one connects it to a traditional Chinese myth about jade: this most beautiful stone can only be found inside an ordinary-looking stone boulder. But instead of finding jade, Sui Jianguo found iron chains in his stone.

Earthly Force can also be paired with his 1996 installation *Thunderbolt* (1995), whose centerpiece is a fifteen-meter-long (about 49 feet) rubber sheet bearing 300,000 nails (fig. 7.4) Like *Earthly Force*, this work is about abuse and resistance, and it likewise contrasts and negotiates two kinds of objects and materials. But here the strength lies in the rubber’s pliability and toughness. As Sui Jianguo has commented on this work,

It surprised me that even a small piece of rubber can bear a great many nails without altering its shape and qualities. What is more, by incorporating so many nails into its own body, the rubber sheet has changed from a passive and receptive object to an active and aggressive object. This makes me think about our nation and myself. For all this time in this century—since the establishment of the PRC, the opening up after the Cultural Revolution, and the June Fourth Movement—the Chinese people have shown great strength of endurance. But pliability also means alienation; we all have this ability to survive.⁸

This statement seems to show Sui Jianguo’s changing attitude toward social and political engagement: he has emerged from self-exile and speaks openly about the social implications of his work. A brief comparison between Sui Jianguo and Xu Bing may illustrate different choices made by two talented Chinese experimental artists with similar backgrounds. Both Sui Jianguo and Xu Bing received MFAs from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and upon graduation became teachers in that school. In searching for their artistic languages, both of them rejected orthodox academic styles as well as a straightforward imitation of Western modern art. In the late eighties and early nineties, they both positioned themselves at the periphery of academic art and also kept a distance from the “avant-garde” movement. Both of them had profound interest in ancient Chinese cultural traditions and forged their styles based on these traditions. Both favored metaphors and developed symbolic languages in their art. Both were perfectionists and emphasized technical training, and their work often involved extensive labor. In 1990, while Sui Jianguo was silently carving stone, Xu Bing made rubbings from the Great Wall (see pl. 1). But the subsequent development of these two artists followed different paths. Xu Bing emigrated to the United States in 1990 and has been interacting with the Chinese art world from an outside position. But Sui Jianguo has remained inside. As I will discuss in the following essay, recent projects developed by him and his collaborators have become increasingly engaged in social issues, often serving as critical commentary on contemporary events.

REPRESENTING THE ORDINARY

In August 1995, three young faculty members in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, including Sui Jianguo, Yu Fan, and Zhan Wang, announced the establishment of their Three Men United Studio (*Sanren Lianhe Gongzuoshi*). The written announcement was distributed in both Chinese and English and contained a manifesto of the group (here I follow the group's own English version): "They [the group's members] regard the whole society as their experiment room and give quick response to the public-concerned problems through their own experience. They also insist on public demonstration and try to experiment with different artistic languages in communication with society."¹ These ideas underlay the first two "public demonstrations" offered by the studio, both advertised at the time of the group's establishment. The first, called *Property Development*, reflected the artists' sentiment against selling the campus of the Central Academy of Fine Arts to Hong Kong real estate developers. Held in the debris of the former site of the academy in central Beijing, this show also served as a bitter comment on the invasiveness of commercialization in contemporary Chinese society. (For a discussion of this project, see my essay accompanying Zhan Wang's *Temptation* in this catalogue.)

The second show took place in the Contemporary Gallery inside the Central Academy of Fine Arts high school (fig. 8.1). Located in a narrow alley, this gallery had become by the mid-nineties an important site for exhibiting experimental art in Beijing. Like *Property Development*, this show mixed installations with a performance. The main exhibition space was divided into two rooms of equal size. The lefthand room was occupied by a few folding chairs with red cushions, lined up in rigid rows and facing a small TV set. The walls were bare, the room was empty, and the TV was broadcasting domestic news—the Fourth International Women's Congress held in Beijing that summer (fig. 8.2).

In sharp contrast to the minimalist arrangement of the lefthand room, the room to the right was crowded with images and words (fig. 8.3). On three walls, large exhibition boards displayed family photos, private letters, medicine bills, diaries, and certificates of merit. Three-dimensional objects such as personal notebooks, needlework, and toys were placed on stands below the boards. Each of the walls was designed by a member of the studio, who compiled a "biography" of his mother (or his wife or

¹ The translation of the last sentence is changed to reflect the original meaning of the Chinese text. [The original English translation is: "They also insist on public demonstration and try to increase the possibility of the appearance of artistic language in the communication with the society."]

PLATE 8

Yu Fan, *My Mother*, 1995, mixed-media installation, Beijing (part of the group installation *Woman/Here* by the Three Men United Studio), three panels, each 47 x 71 in. (120 x 180 cm), collection of the artist. The main titles on the three panels read (from left to right): "Girlhood," "Young Adulthood," and "Middle Age," collection of the artist.

ex-wife in some cases) by piecing together whatever he could find in a family's archive. The fourth wall featured a chronological chart, which united the individual women's lives into a single history.

No door connected the two rooms to allow the audience to travel back and forth. The doors of these two rooms were placed side-by-side toward the lobby; the audience entered either door randomly. Instead of a flowery introduction to the show's content and significance (as is usually provided for exhibitions in China), "A Brief Explanation of the Exhibition," written in a terse, semi-legal style was available in the lobby:

1. The original materials in the exhibition are voluntarily provided by Lan Fengying (Sui Jianguo's mother), Pu Shuping (Zhan Wang's mother), Qu Shuyun (Yu Fan's mother), Li Aidong (Sui Jianguo's wife), and Wang Yang (Zhan Wang's ex-wife).

2. As the persons concerned in the exhibition, these women will be present during the show. (Because of serious illness, Lan Fengying will not be able to attend.)

3. The exhibition is planned to be held on the last day of the Fourth International Women's Congress.

4. The video material was recorded from CCTV's broadcasting of the congress.

5. The show and publication rights belong to the Three Men United Studio. The original materials are personal belongings of the women featured in the exhibition.

This statement tried to "explain," therefore, the subject of the exhibition (the most important women in the three artists' lives), the manner of the exhibition (the direct participation of the women), the social context of the exhibition (the ongoing International Women's Congress), and the legal rights of the exhibition (the ownership of the show and the exhibited items). No conventional artistic issues were addressed in this statement, which focused the viewers' attention on the relationships between men and women and between women themselves in a politicized and commercialized society.

FIGURE 8.1
Woman/Here poster, 1995.
Beijing.

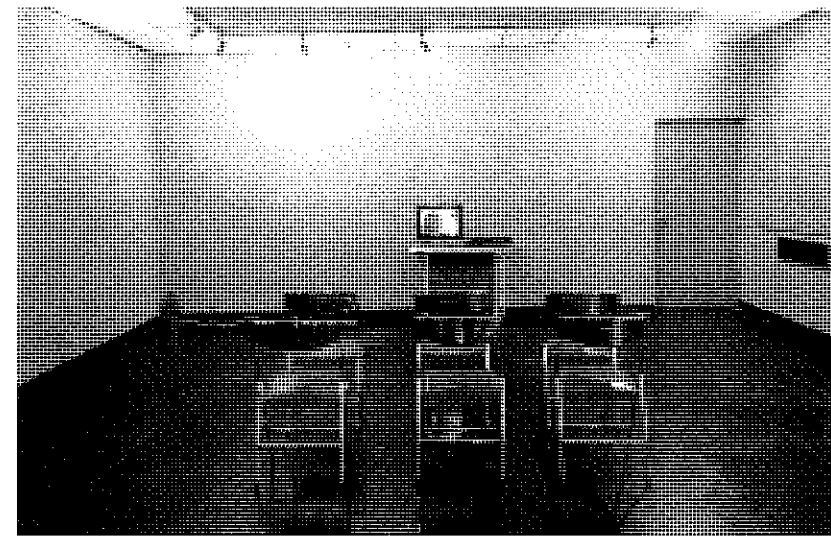


FIGURE 8.2

FIGURE 8.2
The Three Men United Studio,
Woman/Here, mixed-media
installation, Gallery one, 1995.
Beijing.

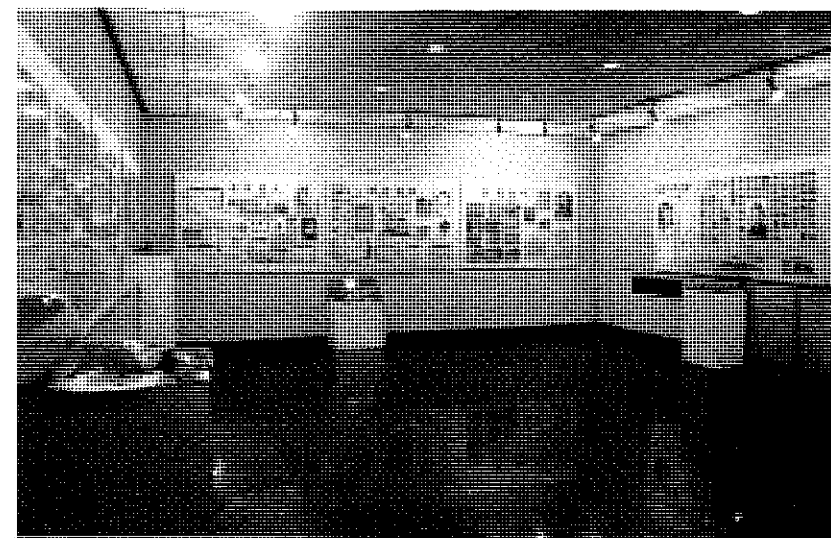


FIGURE 8.3

FIGURE 8.3
The Three Men United Studio,
Woman/Here, mixed-media
installation, Gallery two, 1995.
Beijing.

FIGURE 8.4
Artists and their subjects in the
exhibition *Woman/Here*. From
right to left: Qu Shuyun (Yu
Fan's mother), Sui Jianguo, Li
Aidong (Sui Jianguo's wife),
Zhan Wang, Yu Fan, Pu Shuping,
(Zhan Wang's mother), Wu Yang
(Zhan Wang's ex-wife).

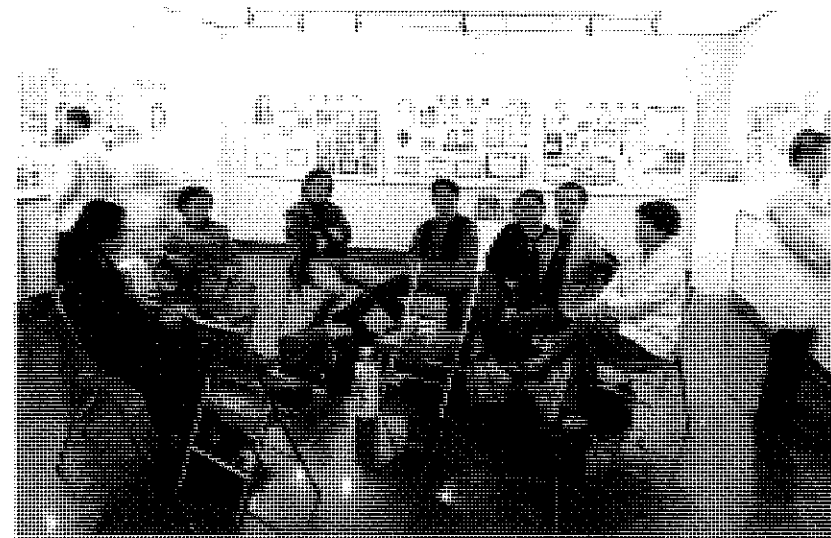


FIGURE 8.4

2 Among these works is a group of sculptures, called collectively *Posthumous Plans for Wood*. Like some of Sui Jianguo's works, each of these "plans" includes a piece of wood sealed inside a cage.

3 For example, Yu Fan believes that while Sui Jianguo's deep interest in traditional Chinese culture guided his experiment with materials, Yu's own experiment with materials served a greater emotional need.

4 Interview with Yu Fan conducted by the author, May 14, 1998. Unpublished record. For a similar statement, see Tang Di, "Xunqiu chuantong cailiao di xiandai biaoda—Yu Fan di qingting diaosu" [Searching for a modern expression from a traditional material—on Yu Fan's bronze sculpture], *Hualang* (Art Gallery Magazine), no. 57 (1996), 20.

5 Sui Jianguo's letter to the art critic Zhang Qing, October 1995. Unpublished manuscript.

6 *Ibid.*, slightly paraphrased. Sui made similar statements in his October 1995 letter to the art critic Gu Chenfeng (in which he suggests that Gu, an editor of the influential *Jiangsu huaken*, write an article on the Three Men United Studio) and also in several conversations with the author in 1997 and 1998.

7 Sui Jianguo's letter to Gu Chenfeng.

The Three Men United Studio is an important phenomenon in the history of Chinese academic art, not because this is the first unofficial art group organized in a Chinese art academy, but because it has a specific, timely agenda: to provide a workable solution to a dilemma increasingly faced by some academic artists in the 1990s. On the one hand, having gone through the '85 Art New Wave and the June Fourth Movement, these artists have developed a deep sense of social responsibility and share the rebellious spirit of experimental artists outside academies. On the other hand, they also are conscious of their responsibilities within the academy. They believe in the importance of technical training and formal perfection, and they often view themselves as modern interpreters—not rebels—of classical art traditions.

The three members of the studio share the same educational background and hold similar academic positions. They all received their classical sculpture training at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Upon graduation Sui Jianguo and Yu Fan stayed on to teach, while the academy hired Zhan Wang as a full-time sculptor. Among the three, Sui Jianguo is the oldest and was the first to join the faculty. Partly because of his influence, the three artists' works in the early nineties already showed many connections. In particular, Sui Jianguo's experiment with forms and materials also characterized Yu Fan's sculptures and installations in 1993 and 1994.² But these were not collaborative works; on the contrary, each person's experiment was an inward search and only found its meaning in a personal interpretation of media and form.³ Such single-minded experimentation became increasingly unsatisfactory, however. As Yu Fan reflected later, the experiment was motivated by an insistence on self-discovery, so there was little concern with the audience or with the social environment. He asked, for example, "Is it really worthwhile to think and talk about oneself all the time?" His answer is that self-expression should not be the absolute purpose of art; an equally important function of art is to establish the artist's "contact" with the outside world.⁴ While this idea is hardly original, the subsequent effort of Yu Fan and his comrades to develop "a variety of artistic languages" in order to establish the "multiple contacts" between themselves and the world is new, at least in contemporary Chinese art. This idea was most clearly stated by Sui Jianguo in 1995:

Three of us firmly believe that an artist is never single-dimensional. Today's China should recognize the multiplicity in one's personality and identity. We are teachers who train students, professional sculptors who work on commissions, experimental artists who hope to pursue original goals, and simple human beings who have to sleep and eat. These multiple identities have always been hidden behind our art—we have always hoped that people would identify us with our "pure" art. Now that we have realized the falsehood of such pretense, we must find a way to dismiss the conflict between our art and our actual life. The only way to do this is to expose the multiplicity and impurity in us by bringing our life into our art. Probably what comes out of this attempt will not be considered "art," but it will at least demonstrate our serious reflections upon ourselves and society.⁵

The Three Men United Studio was founded to realize this goal. Again Sui Jianguo wrote:

This studio is our most recent experiment. We will no longer tolerate the self-isolation of the academic art world, and especially in sculpture circles, and we no longer want to continue the exclusiveness of our own work. Although self-isolation may sometimes be connected with our genuine feeling and may even stimulate our work, this is only one aspect of our personality, not the whole. There must be a more open and active way in our artistic creation. To pursue this we must break our isolation and develop a conversation with society (and with one another). The studio's first two shows have served to demonstrate this active attitude.⁶

According to the members of the group, as artistic experiments these shows have a twofold significance: while offering opportunities for developing a specific "language" in communicating with society, they also encourage a dialogue between this language and the language that the artists employ in their more academic or "artistic" works. This idea leads us to revisit Sui Jianguo's *Thunderbolt* (see fig. 7.4). Also created in 1995 but with much stronger formalist concerns, this sculpture delivers a social message through a purely symbolic language.

The Fourth International Women's Congress created considerable excitement in Beijing, but all on the most superficial levels and in the most rigidly controlled ways. The city was hurriedly beautified; the traffic regulations were severely enforced; musical and dance performances were prepared specifically for the congress; and exhibitions by women artists were held in the National Art Gallery for the first time. Government-run newspapers and TV broadcasts were filled with stories of exemplary women in Chinese history, but the international delegations to the congress were kept largely separate from their Chinese sisters for "security reasons." They, as well as those honored guests invited to the congress, including Hillary Rodham Clinton and celebrities from all over the world, were installed in secluded hotels, from where they were transported daily to a remote suburban town to attend the panel meetings. "For every ordinary Chinese," Sui Jianguo commented, "this congress seems to be held in a different world, not in Beijing. . . . It has been made into an entirely insulated space; a congress meant for every woman has become a twenty-minute news broadcast in daily TV programs." The official propaganda surrounding the Women's Congress, in his view, only concealed the many problems in China concerning "women and women's rights, women and society, women and men, women and women, individual women and women's organizations, and others."⁷

The response of the three artists was to hold a different sort of "congress" in the form of an art exhibition. As they specified in their "Brief Explanation," this exhibition coincided with the final assembly of the

8 Ibid.

official congress, held in the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square. Called *Nüren. Xianchang*—a title that has been translated variably as *Women/Now, Women/Here* or *Women/Site*, the primary purpose of the exhibition was to present what was missing in the official extravaganza—ordinary Chinese women “here and now.” The exhibition’s general design reinforced this message: the juxtaposition and separation of the two rooms symbolized the juxtaposition and separation of the two worlds of women, one staged in a conference hall and publicized on TV, the other hidden in innumerable ephemeral traces of a private life—pictures, writings, and objects that have little significance to people not intimately related to the subject. The aim of the show was thus not just to criticize or satirize an official showcase, but was also to create an alternative space, where “an ordinary Chinese woman could somewhat become part of the international event and become part of the contemporary movement of women’s liberation.”⁸

To realize this goal each of the three artists reduced his role in the exhibition to that of an editor of ready-made materials, mostly private belongings and mementos of a particular woman, preserved by her for their personal significance. Compiled into chronological sequences and displayed on three walls, these fragmentary materials tell the stories of three different women. Largely because of the deliberate absence of authorship, each woman’s story or biography has the quality of a documentary. The collection of materials was unromantic and accidental. The women were not idealized; in fact their stories were framed by common political events and told through conventional idioms. In Yu Fan’s case, his mother was a model teacher in an elementary school for many years. Her “biography” consists of seemingly endless certificates of merit; only different dates distinguish these otherwise identical official documents (pl. 8). On the other hand, she also is unmistakably a real person, and the installation evokes sympathy and understanding. Her yellowish photos in the family’s albums reflect subtle changes of fashion, and some photos on a page are suspiciously missing. (To people of her generation, a “missing photo” often had serious political implications: the image may have been destroyed because the subject, either a family member or an acquaintance, was condemned as a counterrevolutionary.)

But this “real woman” seems to gradually vanish in her biography, as her life becomes increasingly represented not by her own images but only by official certificates. Perhaps unconsciously, this representation of a real Chinese woman also questions the very notion of “a real Chinese woman”: Could such a woman have existed in Maoist China? Where can we find her and her individuality? The displayed materials fail to provide answers. In the exhibition these questions were answered by the woman herself: Yu Fan’s mother not only supported this “counter congress” of women but also traveled all the way from her hometown of Qingdao to meet the audience (fig. 8.4).

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RUINS

8 Ibid.

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RUINS

¹ For a fuller discussion of ruin images in Chinese art, see Wu Hung, "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern," in Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco and New York: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, 1998), 59-66.

Contrary to the persistent interest in depicting ruins in European art, there was a taboo in pre-modern China against preserving and portraying architectural ruins: although abandoned cities or fallen palaces were lamented in poetry, their images, if painted, would imply inauspiciousness and danger.¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, European photographers made the first serious effort to document architectural ruins in China. Beginning early in the twentieth century, some young Chinese artists studied in Europe, where they absorbed the prevailing "ruin" aesthetic and pictorial formulas for representing ruins. Upon returning to China they found similar inspiration in old temples and pagodas. Such picturesque and sentimental images never gained real life, however. A different kind of ruin image became influential and finally became part of a modern visual culture in China. Instead of inspiring melancholy and poetic lamentation, these images, including images of wars, the Cultural Revolution, and large-scale demolitions of traditional cities, evoke pain and terror. They shook their audience because they register, record, restage, or simulate *destruction*—destruction as violence and atrocity that left a person, a city, or a nation with a wounded body and psyche.

Ruin images in modern Chinese art have thus been intrinsically connected to important political and social events. From the beginning of this century, representations of war ruins played an important role in promoting nationalism and China's transformation into a modern nation-state. Such representations provided the most concrete and direct proof of foreign invasions and could most effectively accelerate nationalist sentiment. Because of its assumed documentary value, the photograph could play this role better than any traditional art form such as painting or sculpture, especially when news photos became a regular feature of the newspaper. Perceived as reality itself, a "ruin" photograph constructed an "observed" world in print for paintings to represent. Depicting devastated fields during the civil war or destroyed cities after a Japanese bombing, these paintings often re-create the scenes based on historical photos.

Representations of ruins again became an important phenomenon in Chinese art in the 1970s and 1980s. A type of painting known as "scar art" (*shanghen yishu*) depicted tragedies of the Cultural Revolution. While such paintings were often created by academic artists in a realistic style,

young experimental artists used installations and performances to "restage" their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Instead of representing a past era realistically, they often evoked a chaotic environment typical of the Cultural Revolution—ruined big-character posters, tattered papers and broken objects, dilapidated layers of writing and painting. As its name suggests, the Cultural Revolution started in the cultural, ideological, and political spheres. The targets were not cities and villages, but "old" ideas and cultures. New ideas were communicated not through grand monuments but with a visual environment comprised of revolutionary images, colors, and slogans. Consequently, works by experimental artists in the postrevolution era represent the destruction or self-destruction of this environment.

Images related to destruction, fragmentation, and ruins continue to be an important component of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s. These images do not constitute a single trend or development, however. As reflected by works grouped in this part of the present exhibition, some artists continue the deconstruction of the socialist visual language, but the fragmented images they create are much subtler and are imbued with personal experience. For example, Cai Jin's *Beauty Banana Plant No. 48* (1994) transforms the revolutionary color red into a personal symbol, and Sbi Chong's symbolic painting *The Stage* (1996) employs a supra-realistic style to evoke a sense of violence and vulnerability. Other artists represent "wasted" environments and people in contemporary China. Their works, such as Yuan Dongping's *Sisters* (1989-90) and Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (1994) continue a realistic/humanistic tradition advanced by critical Chinese writers and artists throughout the twentieth century. With their strong political and social implications, these works link "Demystification," the previous part of this exhibition, with the current theme, "Ruins."

The last three works in this part are related, in one way or another, to the transformation of the city during China's drastic modernization and commercialization. A striking aspect of Chinese cities over the past five years has been a never-ending destruction and construction: a forest of cranes and scaffolding, the roaring sound of bulldozers, the dust and mud. Old houses are coming down everyday to make room for new commercial buildings, often glittering high-rises in the so-called "Chinese postmodern" style. Thousands of people have been relocated from the inner city to the outskirts by official decree. These conditions imply changing conceptions of temporality and spatiality and supply both the context and the content of the three works in this group. Zhan Wang's *Temptation* (1994) is linked to his other projects on demolition; Rong Rong's *Untitled* (1996-97) studies abandoned images in demolished buildings; Yin Xiuzhen's *Suitcase* (1995) defines the artist's position in a "ruined city." Taken together, these artists have shifted their focus from past to present. Their works transport a startling sense of absence and loss in a contemporary Chinese urban environment.



PLATE 9
Cai Jin, *Beauty Banana Plant*
No. 48, 1994, oil on canvas,
79 x 75 in. (200.7 x 190.5 cm),
collection of the artist.

1 Chen Lei, "Hongse di tuwei"
[A break-through of Red].
Huanqiu Qingnian [Global
youth], 1995.12, 52.

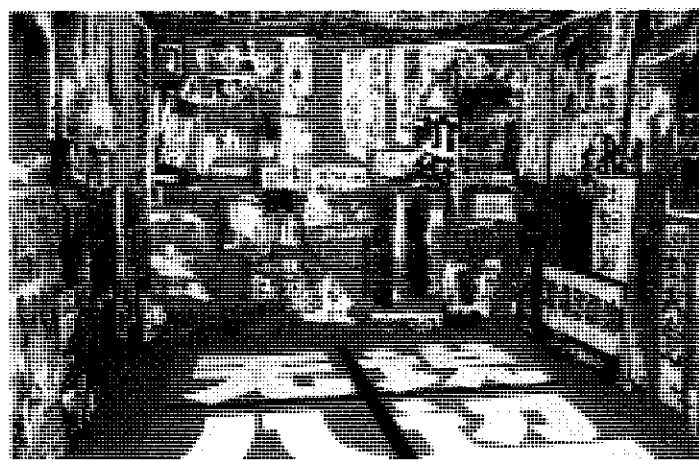
2 From Cai Jin's letter to the art
critic Li Xianting, cited in Yu Jin
[Li Xianting], "Qingjie yixiang yu
Cai Jin di 'bajiao'" [Images of
emotional complexes and Cai
Jin's "Banana" painting].
Jiangsu huakan, 1993.2, 22-23.

"Red," says the contemporary Chinese writer Chen Lei, is "the color of authority and subjectivity: it transcends the things that bear it and evokes intuitive responses in us."¹ The "us" mentioned here pertains to the generations of Chinese youth who, as the saying goes in the People's Republic of China, "grew up under red flags." In a more general sense, they grew up in a "red" culture: the first song they learned was "East is Red"; the first story they heard was about the heroic Red Army; they were given the "little red book" even before they could read; and they painted both the sun and stars red. To them "red" meant, simply stated, revolution and a bright, Communist future. Now that the Cultural Revolution is long over, and they are no longer young, this color still possesses an ineffable power to them. What is this power? Is it totally repressive or does it also come from one's inner self? Can one discover in this "revolutionary color" an individual subjectivity and be empowered by this discovery? Answers to these questions by experimental artists differ, but all result from their continuous engagement with the color red.

Beauty Banana Plant No. 48 (1994), the painting by Cai Jin in this exhibition, offers perhaps the most personal interpretation of this color (pl. 9). As its title indicates, this is one of a large group of "Beauty Banana" (the Chinese name for the canna plant) images by the artist. For five years, from 1991 to 1996, this plant was the subject of numerous paintings and drawings by her, including seventy large oil paintings on canvas. She herself explains this obsession with the Beauty Banana, when she recalls the moment of her discovery of the plant, an experience that she equals to the discovery of self:

Suddenly I saw a withered banana tree jumbled up with grass. Its big leaves were wrapped around the reddish flesh of its body. The plant had lost much of its original green, but its decaying shape and color captivated me, as if the dying leaves and stem were still faintly breathing. In that instance I was struck by a nameless sensation, which continued in the following days, intoxicating me with its uncertainty and unpredictability. One day I picked up a brush and started to paint the banana tree on a one-square-meter canvas. The sensation was suddenly intensified: it seems that something familiar was coming out of me when the sticky paint began to move, invading the canvas of its own accord.²

FIGURE 9.2



3 Chang Tsong-zung, "Eros in Red," in *Cai Jin* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1995), 3.

4 Interview with Cai Jin conducted by Xu Xiaoyu on February 22, 1997 in Tianjin. Unpublished manuscript. A related statement by Cai Jin is quoted in *Cai Jin*, *ibid.*, 4-5: "What have really influenced me are things like traces of rainwater and mildew on the old buildings in my hometown, as well as the buildings' sculptured decoration and patterned windows. When rainwater had dried up [on the walls] it left traces; this seemed quite mysterious to me. . . . Things like these are more important to me than the influences of the painters I like the most, Van Gogh and Dürer."

As implied in this passage, what Cai Jin discovered was not just a banana plant, not even a withered one, but a host of sensations connected with death, decay, and survival. Likewise her numerous paintings of the Beauty Banana are not scientific studies of specific conditions of the plant, but records of her insistent effort to capture such sensations in paint. The example in this exhibition depicts a dense formation of banana leaves. The shapes of the plants are only vaguely defined; their withered forms and broken edges strangely contradict their titillating color—vermilion, alizarin, and cadmium—in an intense plane of red. For art critic Chang Tsong-zung, "[The artist] put so much pressure in these bodies [of bananas] that they seemed to vaporize; their molecules ionized and diffused by an excess of internal energy. One could smell the odor of life primitive and raw, driven by an inner furnace of anxiety. This fascination with the material energy of living bodies, sexual and biological, confused and yet highly self-conscious, borders on an obsession."³

It is legitimate to interpret Cai Jin's *Beauty Banana* paintings in terms of sexual awakening and self-exploration. Such interpretation, however, should be complicated by two other factors—her fascination with traces of the past and the color red—both predating her discovery of the Beauty Banana. Asked about what kinds of artistic influences she received, Cai Jin always mentions childhood memory in the South: the dampness of the "plum rain" season, the mildew, the water traces on old walls "things like that which have always been in me but which I haven't always been aware of."⁴ She has the same feeling toward the color red, a color she has used extensively, even in her early works.

FIGURE 9.1



FIGURE 9.1
Cai Jin, *Story of the Red Lantern*, 1991, oil on canvas, 67 x 67 in. (170 x 170 cm), collection of the artist.

FIGURE 9.2
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor*, 1986, paper installation in Hangzhou, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.

5 Interview with Cai Jin conducted by Xu Xiaoyu.

6 From Cai Jin's letter to the art critic Li Xianting, cited in Yu Jin [Li Xianting], "Qingjie yixiang yu Cai Jin di 'bajiao,'" 23.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Liu Xiaochun, "Huihua yu huihua di jieti—ping Cai Jin di yishu" (Painting and the destruction of painting—on Cai Jin's art), *Yishu jie* (Artlife) 1996.1, 68-69.

Born in Tunxi in Anhui province, Cai Jin graduated from the province's Normal University in 1986 and then taught studio art in a high school until 1989. Her father was the director of the local Peking Opera troupe. This connection may explain why she later painted a scene from *The Story of the Red Lantern*, one of the "model operas" performed during the Cultural Revolution (fig. 9.1). This is by no means an idealistic portrayal of the opera's hero and heroines, whose faces are distorted in a manner derived from Francis Bacon. The painting's most striking feature is its intense use of red; in particular, the "red lantern" envelops the figures with its bloodlike light. Around this time, in 1990 and 1991, Cai Jin also began to paint different subjects entirely red, as if these subjects—nudes and twisted violins—were merely pretenses for her experiment with this color's range and variations. When an interviewer asked her whether she had this fascination with red from her childhood, she answered, in almost identical words to her recollection of her old southern home: "Maybe. It is possible that it had always been there but I was not aware of it."⁵

But once she became aware of her feelings, she released them with intensity: "I am infatuated with red. In the unifying field of this color my strokes become especially sensitive. This infatuation comes from my internal need for life. It motivates yet controls my sensibility with its elusiveness and unpredictability."⁶ When she paints in the field of red, she feels that she "smells blood, a smell that penetrates my senses and mind, finally streams out from my painting brush."⁷ Cai Jin has avoided a rational analysis of such feelings and has been resistant to any hard-and-fast political or psychological interpretation of her work. To her, the discovery of the Beauty Banana was such an important moment in her life that it brought out several hidden dimensions in her—her fascination with red, with ruins, and with the organic body—into a single focus. On the other hand, the discovery of her individuality (including her sexuality) in the color red also means the negation of the collective ideology and identity imbued in this color.

The art critic Liu Xiaochun sees paradoxical sides of life in Cai Jin's Beauty Banana paintings: "It is brilliant but also malignantly invasive; it energizes myriad creatures but also destroys the whole environment; it is like life-giving blood but is also rotten and smelly; it is beautiful like embroidery but also festers like a spreading wound; it brings to us the fire for life as well as a fatal cancer."⁸ As with Mao Zedong and the notion of revolution, here again we detect a love-hate relationship with red. (Liu, an influential contemporary critic in China, is older than Cai Jin and was in college during the Cultural Revolution.) The positive aspect of this view, however, is that it evaluates nothing in absolute terms: the meaning of any phenomenon, including a terrible event like the Cultural Revolution, must be found in its complexities.

One such complexity concerns the problem of memory, which always survives an actual situation and continues to generate meaning. Experimental artists' insistent engagement with the color red owes

9 Lu Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi 1979-1989*, [A History of Contemporary Chinese Art, 1979-1989], (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1992), 298.

10 See Wu Shanzhuan's own interpretation of his art in *Meishu* 1986.8, 61, *Meishu sichao* 1987.1, 23, and *Zhongguo meishubao* no. 40 (1987), 40.

11 Zhang Kang, "Bishang yan-jing du Wang Jin" [A meditation on Wang Jin's art], *Mingbao yuekan* [Mingbao monthly], 1996.12, 62.

12 Wang Jin, "The 'Beijing-Kowloon' Project." Unpublished manuscript. The last sentence parodies the official propaganda that current Chinese leaders are applying Marxist-Leninist principles to Chinese's specific situations in this period. For discussions of Wang Jin's project, see Chen Lei, "Hongce di luwei" and Zhang Kang, "Bishang yanjing du Wang Jin."

13 Matei Mihalca, "Passion Statement: Avant-garde Artist Concocts Social Commentary From Art," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Dec. 29, 1994/ Jan. 5, 1995, 106.

much to their awareness of this problem. To them this color must have its meaning simultaneously "then" and "now," and they find a visual trope for this temporal continuum in ruins. On the one hand, ruins are always fragmentary and their incompleteness registers the gap between the past and the present. On the other hand, ruins always connect the present with the past, and this connection evokes recollection. Such implications of ruins explain why, in Cai Jin's painting, the symbolic color red is combined with decaying forms and turned into a rotten mass. But she is not the only contemporary Chinese artist who has made red a subject of ruination. The first major work attesting to this effort was Wu Shanzhuan's 1986 installation *Red Humor* (fig. 9.2).

Wu's installation is a simulated ruin of a typical environment during the Cultural Revolution. It shows the interior of a windowless room covered by layers of torn paper and pieces of writing. The color is dominantly red; the writing on the walls alludes to big character posters. Other connections with the Cultural Revolution include the medium of writing and painting (ink and poster paints on paper), manner of production (including random participation of the "masses"), and psychological impact (a sense of suffocation produced by chaotic signs in a sealed space). Wu was not simply restaging a vanished historic episode, however; instead, his images are forms that have been removed from their original context to convey new social meaning. As Lü Peng and Yi Dan have observed, the words on the walls are not the revolutionary slogans fashionable during the sixties and seventies, but commercial advertisements that began to fill Chinese newspapers from the mid-eighties.⁹ In Wu's simulation of a Cultural Revolution visual environment, therefore, ruins as remains of the past have become part of the present.

Compared to Cai Jin's autobiographical paintings, Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor* has explicit political and social implications.¹⁰ His ironical deconstruction of and experimentation with the color red has been continued in recent years by the Beijing artist Wang Jin (more fully discussed later in this catalogue). Wang's 1994 environmental project *The Red Flag Canal* brought people back to this once-famous canal in mountainous Shanxi, an irrigation project that was hailed by the party during the Cultural Revolution as a supreme proof of the people's revolutionary spirit. Wang's project included pouring 25 kilograms (about 11 pounds) of red mineral pigment into this canal. "About the same age as the artist," the novelist Zhang Kang writes, "the Red Flag Canal becomes literally 'red' thirty years after its birth. It is ironic that this only happens now when China is no longer a country of red flags."¹¹

If *The Red Flag Canal* project linked the present with the past, another of Wang Jin's environmental projects in 1994, *Beijing-Kowloon*, extended this link to the future. The location of the project was shifted from an enclosed agricultural area to an open industrial site, where a railroad was being constructed to connect Beijing directly to Hong Kong. The railroad's symbolism was transparent: its completion would coincide with China's takeover of Hong Kong in 1997; the first train arriving at

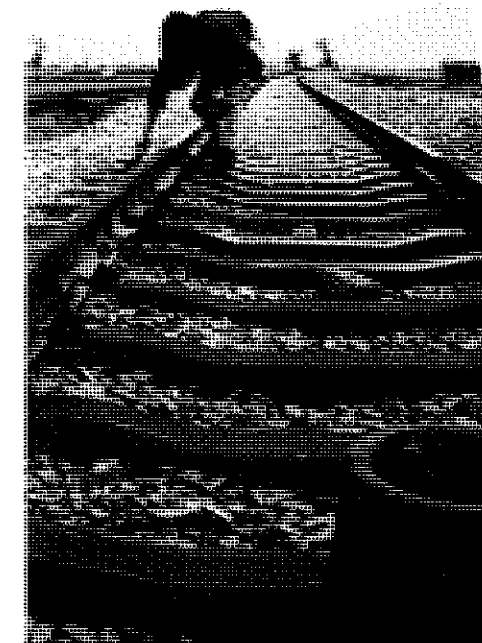


FIGURE 9.3
Wang Jin, *Beijing-Kowloon*,
1994, performance, Beijing.

the former British colony from China's socialist capital would most concretely testify to the country's reunification. Wang Jin planned to paint a 200-meter section (about 656 feet) of the railroad outside Beijing completely red (fig. 9.3). The color he used, however, was not any commercial paint, but had to be mixed by him on the spot. The ingredients he selected for the paint included dozens of different materials: medicine (both "Western" medicine and traditional Chinese drugs), cosmetics, a large variety of drinks, printed materials, paints and ink, shampoo and detergent, and other substances. While mixing his paint Wang distributed a "statement of purpose" written in the style of a Chinese rap song:

"Poster red" alone is short on thickness and intensity. "Oil-paint red" is too reflective and smelly. A dose of "red erythromycin" cannot cure this disease. "Red ink" fades easily and reminds me of my childhood anxiety. The proof of "red wine" is too low. The effect of "red mercurochrome" is not guaranteed. "Lipstick red" is much too show-offy. "Red Bird" shoe polish is annoyingly shiny. "Nail-polish red" blinds your eyes. "Red" brand zippers lack reliability. "Five Red Stars" beer seems all right. But "red" Coca-Cola only makes one even thirstier. . . . It's really hard to mix a genuine red color. No matter how hard I try I still fail to get a good consistency. This color changes every moment and in every place. But the color I will use to paint the railroad with must be just right—from its purity to its brightness, from its chemistry to its spirit, it must demonstrate "the general significance of the color red in this specific historical period!"¹²

When asked to explain his project further, Wang Jin said: "Red is the color of the revolution, but also that of lipstick and nail polish. It is also the only [color] trains are scared of."¹³

FRAGMENTATION AS CREATION

The Stage, Shi Chong's 1996 supra-realistic portrayal of a female nude, which is included in this exhibition (pl. 10), is a complex work that requires explanation from at least three angles: its creative process, its intertextual relationship with the artist's other works, and the paradoxical relationship between its technical perfection and the deliberate fragmentation of images.

This painting was created as the last stage of a lengthy process consisting of making objects, staging a scene, and transforming the scene onto a canvas. This process thus integrates five different forms of visual art—sculpture, installation, performance, photography, and painting—into a single artistic production. Before creating *The Stage*, Shi Chong made paintings entirely based on his own sculptures (figs. 10.2 and .3). Although *The Stage* uses a real woman as its model, the painted image also includes a mask that Shi Chong made from the same woman's face. Other small objects attached to the woman's body were either made or found by the artist. This initial stage of making and finding individual objects was followed by the second stage of the project, a performance during which the objects were assembled around the model, while the model herself was also transformed into an object. This performance thus produced an "installation"—a still-life scene conceived as the third stage of the project. This scene was exhibited, photographed, and made into a painting.

The translation of the scene from a three-dimensional presentation to a two-dimensional representation is facilitated by a supra-realistic pictorial style. Instead of mimicking nature, however, here realism serves to reproduce a manufactured form by the same artist.¹ Shi Zhong has explained his ideas in staging these linked activities:

In the process of employing figurative forms to represent a "secondary reality," I try to incorporate the creative process and concepts of installation and action art, creating what I call "unnatural artistic copies." The incorporation of these concepts and techniques, as well as the employment of a supra-realistic painting style, not only increases the amount of visual information in a two-dimensional painting, but also injects the spirit of the avant-garde into easel painting.²

1 Shi Chong's art has been the subject of many articles published in Mainland China. Three representative discussions are Yin Shuangqi, "Chaoyue yuyang" (To go beyond language), *Meishu wenxian* (Art literature) 1994.2, 3-12; Peng De, "Shi Chong jijie" (A comprehensive interpretation of Shi Chong's work), in *Shi Chong* (Guilin: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 1996), 2-9; and Huang Zhuan, "Shi Chong yishu zhong di gudian yichan yu dang-dai wenti" (The Classical heritage and contemporary issues in Shi Chong's art), *Yishu jie* 1998. 1/2, 4-19.

2 Cited in *Zhoujie dangdai yishu xueshu yaoqing zhuan 1996-1997* (The first academic exhibition of Chinese contemporary art, 1996-1997), (Guangzhou: Guangdong lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1996), 58.

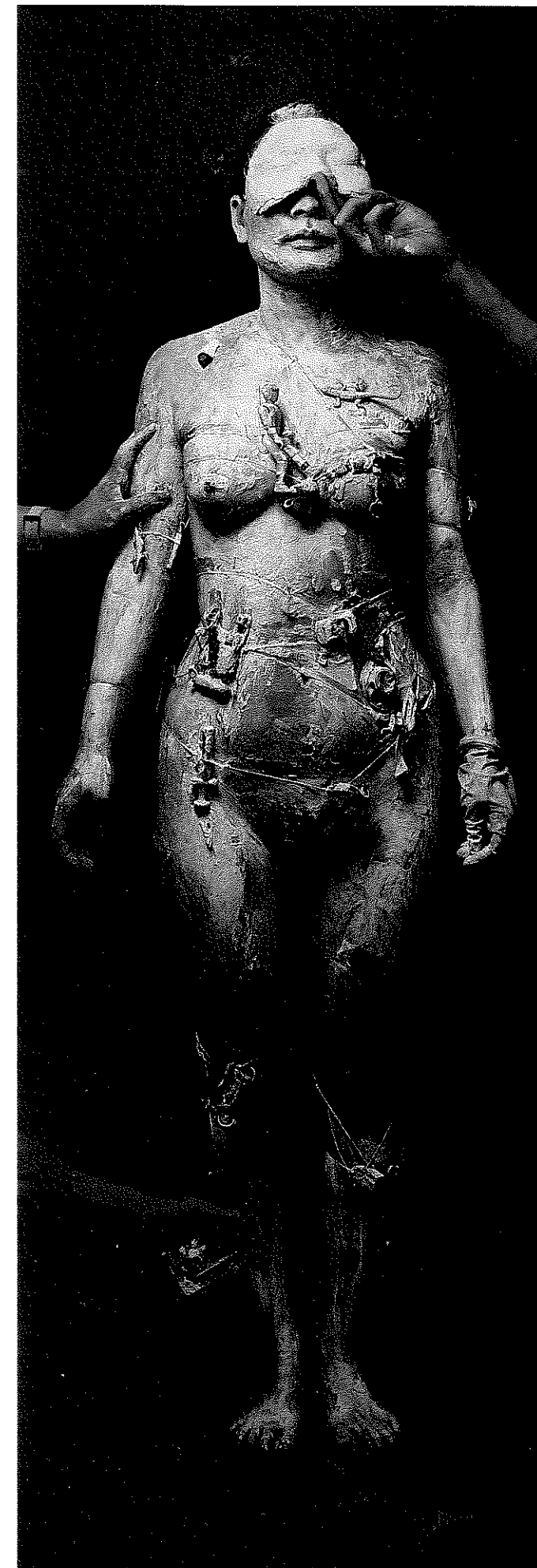


PLATE 10
Shi Chong, *The Stage*, 1996,
oil on canvas, 94 x 36 in.
(238.8 x 83 cm), collection of
the artist.

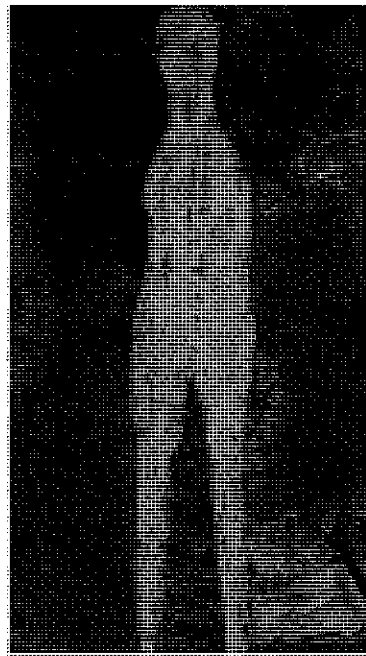


FIGURE 10.1
Shi Chong, *Image of Life*, 1992,
oil on canvas, 67 x 47 in. (170 x
120 cm), collection of the artist.

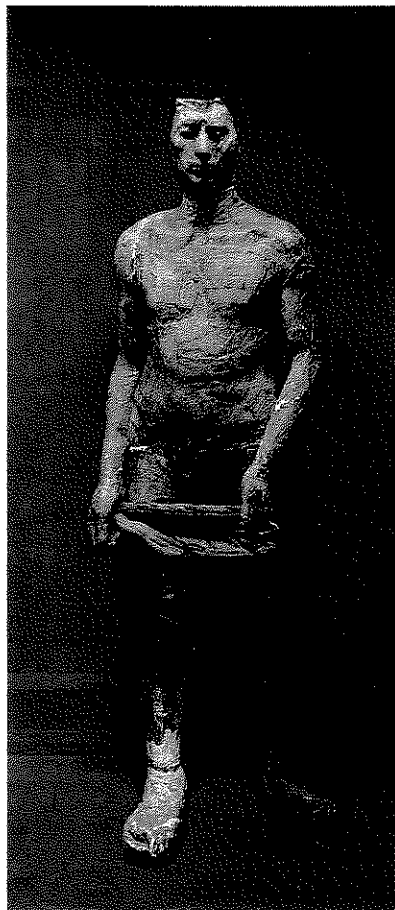


FIGURE 10.2
Shi Chong, *A Waking Man*, 1993,
oil on canvas, 71 x 31 1/2 in.
(180 x 80 cm), collection of
the artist.

This process of making “unnatural artistic copies” thus serves to gradually distance art from reality by creating layers of artificial forms of increasing abstraction. Shi Chong designed this project also to challenge the notion of a self-contained artistic work. For him, all the visual forms produced during the project result from linked actions and reactions; to frame an individual form as a work extracts an integral part of the creation process for the sake of exhibition. According to this view, therefore, the painting in this exhibition both alludes to and violates the project as a coherent creative process.

The Stage continued a series of earlier experiments that Shi Chong had been undertaking for more than ten years. Trained in Hubei Provincial Academy of Fine Arts, Shi spent his school years perfecting his technique of oil painting based on European classical models. A breakthrough in his career was a project called *Fish* (1990–92), which led him to develop a variety of techniques to transform one type of image into another type. First he worked on a real fish, gradually replacing its body

3 Interview with Shi Chong conducted by the author, May 15, 1998. Unpublished record.

4 Ibid.

5 See *Meishu* 1995.2 (special issue on *The Eighth Annual National Art Exhibition*).

with nonorganic materials while keeping the original form intact. He then made rubbings from this transformed fish and used the rubbings to make another transformed fish. Around the same time, he became fascinated with a sheet of rusted steel he found in a factory junkyard. “I felt that I wanted to touch its rusty surface,” he told me later, “but only with my eyes, not with my hand. So I mounted a piece of rice paper [in the shape of a standing figure] on it as if I was about to make a rubbing. Several weeks later the rust had penetrated the paper and left its marks. I finally completed this process of transformation by transmitting all the marks from the sheet [and on the paper figure] into an oil painting” (fig. 10.1).³

Differing from pictorial illusionism, therefore, Shi Chong’s basic techniques of image-making are *transformation* and *substitution*—transformation of one kind of material into another kind of material, and substitution of one kind of sign with another kind of sign. As a result, he believes that his paintings retain not only the appearance but the “organic qualities” of their models. His image of the rusted sheet of steel, therefore, “still has the sense of decaying, as if the rusting process continues. It seems to belong to a decaying environment, and it reminds us of a polluted living space and even skin diseases. But all such ‘information’ is now conveyed by painted signs; I have no idea where the original steel sheet is.”⁴

Following this logic, it is only natural that Shi Chong would use his own artistic products, whether a dried fish or the painted sheet of rusted steel, as ready-made materials in further artistic production. His statement cited above (which relates his painted rusted steel to environmental problems) also shows that his experiments are not always purely aesthetic inquiries but can convey strong social and political messages. These two aspects of his art are reflected in his projects *A Waking Man* (1993) and *A Synthetic View* (1994). The painting produced by the first project shows a male nude walking forward (fig. 10.2). Covered with white plaster and having a broken face, the figure seems to be a lifeless statue. But his gentle expression and the elasticity of his muscles produce the opposite impression that this is a real, but wounded, person. The man holds a dried fish—again we have no idea whether it is a real fish or one of Shi Chong’s transformed fish images. The red wall behind the man bears scratches and indentations, reminding us of the painted sheet of rusted steel from the previous year.

The mild tragic feeling in *A Waking Man* is amplified to a great degree in *A Synthetic View* (fig. 10.3). This painting, again utilizing sculptured models combined with ready-made and found objects, was shown in *The Eighth National Art Exhibition* held in Beijing from December 27, 1994 to January 8, 1995.⁵ It won a prize, but the judges were divided, not by different opinions about its artistic merit but by different views of its political content: the painting is an obvious tribute to the students massacred in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Three months after winning the prize, the painting was bitterly attacked in an article signed with the pseudonym Wei Gong (literally “For the Public”) in the semiofficial magazine *Meishu* (Fine Arts). Ironically, this attack provides a close and accurate reading of the work:

What is depicted here seems part of a mass grave viewed from above. Around the center are innumerable human body parts, broken and piled in layers; their faces have Chinese features. They include both men and women, the young and the old. Their expressions are detached, peaceful, or sad. All of them are represented as if they are plaster models. In the middle of the picture is a pile of male and female clothes, seemingly soaked with blood. Some of them look like cowboy jeans. There are also a handgun stained with blood, a thick black leather belt, a crushed soft-drink can, a transistor radio, a portable calculator, a hypodermic needle, an electric razor, a water faucet, a translucent plastic glove, and other objects. An open book at the center of the painting seems to be a copy of *The Dictionary of Common Characters in Classical Chinese*. On its pages are carefully drawn characters, including *gui* [ghost], *gui* [track], *hai* [corpse], *hai* [meat paste], and others. The overall color of the painting is deep violet-red. The painting is enveloped by a gloomy and ghostly atmosphere, like a huge grave pit containing a mountain of corpses that has just been opened after a period of time.

The painting's original title was *The Story of the Red Wall*, and it had won an award in a certain provincial-level exhibition [under this title]. It is said that because of a controversy around this work when it was submitted to the National Exhibition, the artist made an instantaneous decision to change its title to *A Synthetic View*. It is clear that the original title should attest to the artist's intention and the painting's real meaning; the changed title is only a forced solution. The artist does not depict a "red wall" but mentions a "red wall" in the title, which surely serves to bring out the painting's essential implication. To be sure, the image of a "red wall" has a clearly defined significance in contemporary China and is a political symbol [of the Chinese government] in international affairs. So what does the artist want to do when he connects the painted scene with a "red wall"?⁶

The answer to this question is, of course, implied in the question itself: the artist wants to tell the story of the June Fourth massacre as "the story of the red wall." The author of the article stops only one step short of calling the artist counterrevolutionary. For those who grieve over the dead and are familiar with Shi Chong's painting, however, it is impossible to see the red wall of Beijing's Forbidden City any longer without imagining the broken limbs in the painting; and in their mind's eye they also see those blood-stained clothes forming a wreath hanging on the red wall. But for Shi Chong, this painting prepared another group of ready-made images to be reused in his future works, including *The Stage*.

Completed one year after the *Meishu* article, *The Stage* clearly refers to *The Story of the Red Wall* (or *A Synthetic View*, as it is formally known) by restaging certain images: again we find broken objects including a hypodermic needle, and again there are a translucent plastic glove and a mask of a face with closed eyes. The female figure is not mutilated, but a strong feeling of disfiguration is generated by the thin threads that are tied around her body and cut into her flesh. She is powerless, as suggested by her still, motionless pose, the white substance randomly smeared over her naked body, and the hands that control her from beyond the painting's frame.

The painting's title is ambiguous. It can mean that the woman's body is a stage—a theater of miniature figures and an object for manipulation. It also can mean that the whole painting is a stage, which both displays and veils an ongoing event. The representation is fragmentary on multiple levels. The composition is incomplete; the three hands are bodiless; the woman carries broken figures and objects; she wears a single glove and a partial mask; and her face and body are simultaneously exposed and concealed.

Such fragmentation *within* the painting is linked to the fragmentation of a larger art project, of which the painting is but a piece. As mentioned earlier, the exhibition of this painting as an independent work extracts it from a coherent creative process. It is here that we reach a deeper irony designed by the artist: although the painting proves his astonishing ability to produce a "classical" pictorial illusion, it debases the classical ideal of a self-contained and superlative representation, affiliating itself to a more general process of fragmentation—an artistic program that is equal to artistic creation.

6 Wei Gong, "Yifu feijie di hua— jiantan youhua 'Zonghe jingguan'" [A puzzling painting—brief comments on *A Synthetic View*], *Meishu* 1985.5, 40.

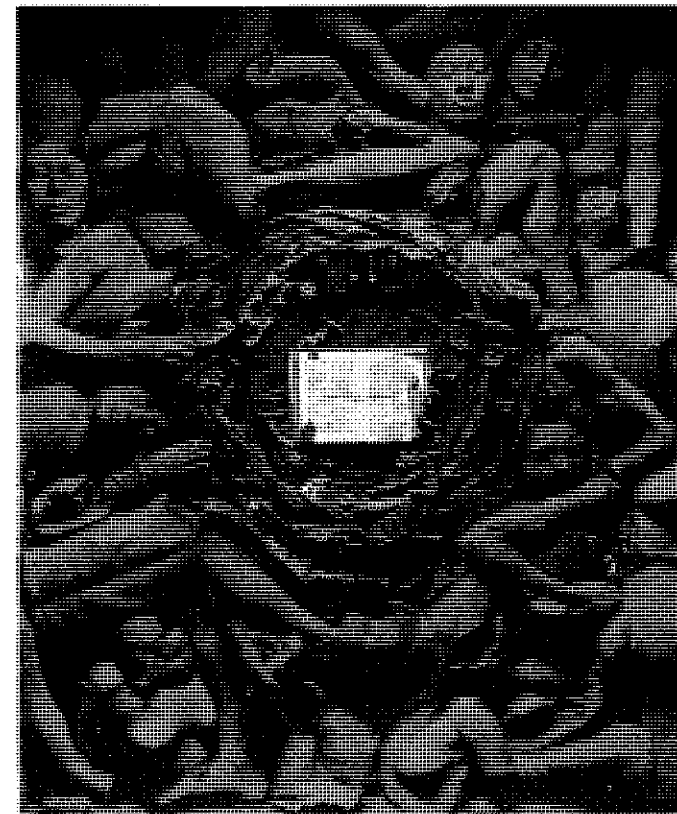
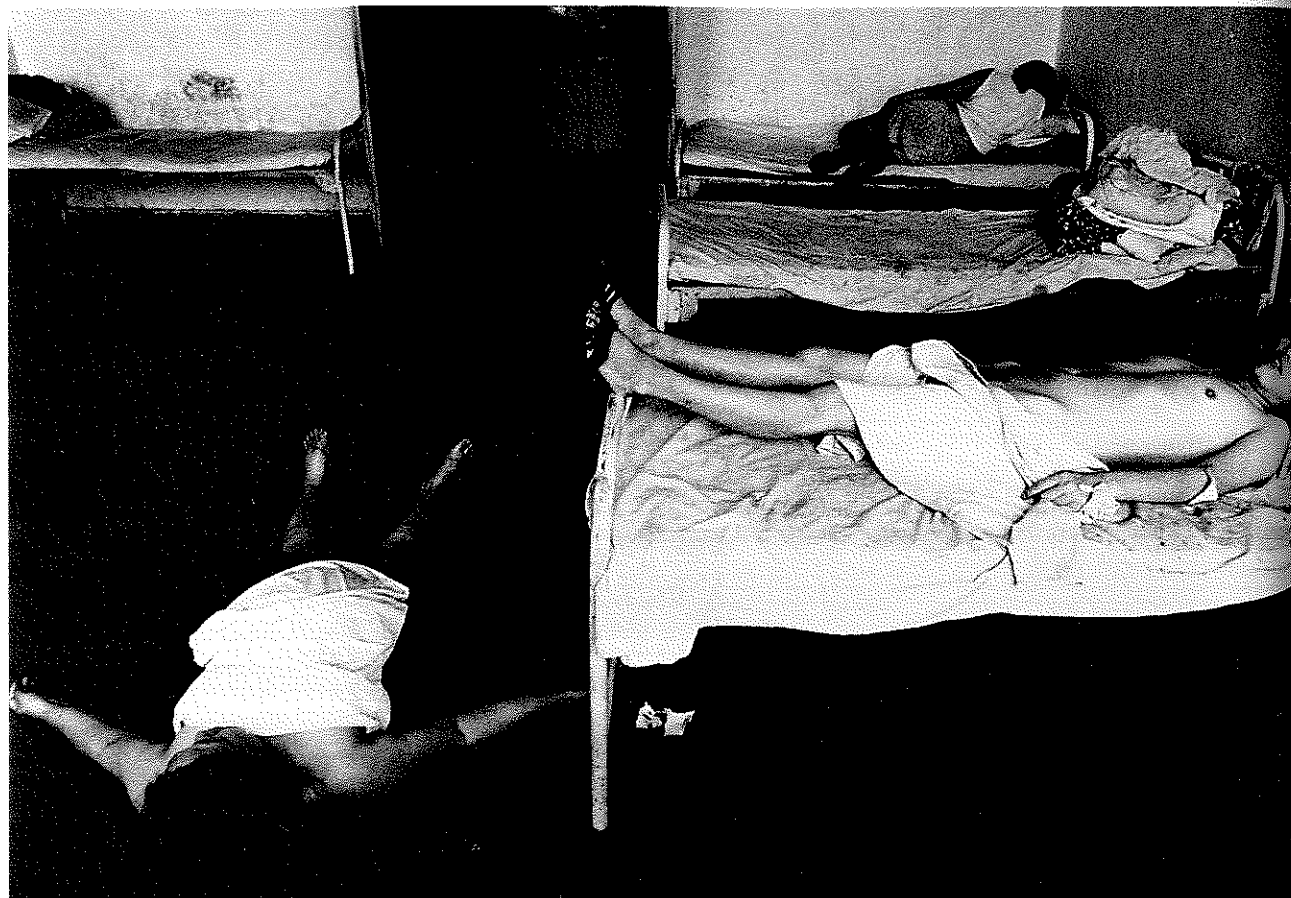


FIGURE 10.3
Shi Chong, *A Synthetic View*
(*Story of the Red Wall*), 1994,
oil on canvas, 67 x 61 in. (170 x
155 cm), collection of the artist.



HUMAN WASTE

Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Yuan Dongping joined the People's Liberation Navy after graduating from high school. Four years later, in 1980, he left the navy and entered Beijing's Normal University. In college his major was Chinese history, but his interest lay in photography, which had fascinated him since his high-school years. He joined the college's photography society and became its chairman. Like other members of the society, his pictures of people and landscapes in "soft and arty styles" (as he puts it) imitated works by some popular Chinese photographers at the time. As his interest in photography grew, he petitioned the college before his graduation to be assigned the job of a photographer instead of history teacher. As a result he was sent to the propaganda department in Chairman Mao's Memorial Hall. This was considered a special favor because, as he was told, he could surely find many opportunities to take pictures in a propaganda division, and as a history student he ought to have a deep respect for the Memorial Hall, itself one of the most important monuments in modern Chinese history. Yuan reported for duty at the Memorial Hall in Tiananman Square, but found that his main responsibility was the routine reception of foreign and domestic visitors. To him the hope of becoming a photographer remained as elusive as ever. An opportunity finally emerged two years later: he heard that there was an opening in the *Minorities Pictorial* magazine and applied for the position. He got the job and, as an editor, was given a camera and encouraged to take pictures for the journal. One of his first photographs was published and became *Pictorial's* "best picture of the year." Since then he often has served as both the editor and cameraman for a report, and his duty and interest have led him to many remote "minority areas" all over the country. He has now been with *Minorities Pictorial* for more than thirteen years.

There is little one can learn about Yuan Dongping's growth as a photographer from his quiet narrative of his seemingly uneventful life. His description of his photographs of mental patients, some of which are featured in this exhibition (pl. 11), is equally understated. But here we recognize the strength of such understatement because the photographs, with their mixture of tragedy and humor, hope and despair, tell much about the intensity of the photographer's engagement with his subject.

PLATE 11

Yuan Dongping, *Sisters*, six black-and-white photographs, each 11 x 17 in. (27.9 x 43.1 cm). Pl. 11.1, 1989, Tianjin; pl. 11.2, 1989, Tianjin; pl. 11.3, 1989, Tianjin; pl. 11.4, 1990, Sichuan; pl. 11.5, 1990, Sichuan; pl. 11.6, 1989, Guizhou. Collection of the artist.

This engagement began by chance: the sister of a friend, who worked in a mental hospital, invited him to the hospital's 1989 New Year's party and there, for the first time in his life, he entered a "lunatic asylum" (*Jingshenbing yuan*, as it is called in China) and saw a performance by the patients. He returned a few days later with his camera. To many people, including some of his friends and colleagues, he was intruding into a secret, forbidden territory. But he believes that he was brought back to the hospital by a mutual attraction: "In my contacts with the patients I found them eager to be understood by the people outside. . . . These invalids have such earnest, vulnerable hearts. This awareness grew as my contact with them increased. They are human beings as well, but most people ignore this."¹

In the following years Yuan Dongping visited many asylums all over China, in Beijing, Tianjin, Sichuan, Hunan, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Xinjiang. He became a friend of the people living behind the high walls and took their pictures not only for himself but also for his subjects.² As a former history student he also began to read anything he could find about these "crazy" people and the hospitals that housed them. As there was so little published information about this taboo subject, he searched archival materials and interviewed psychiatrists, nurses, and patients, as well as administrators in public health bureaus and police departments. He was astonished to learn that there were 12 million "seriously ill mental patients" in China. He also learned that the country had only 444 mental hospitals and asylums, with 86,000 beds and 11,000 licensed psychiatrists. A quick calculation told him that this meant that there was one bed for every 140 patients, one doctor for every 1,100 patients, and one hospital for every 27,000 of them.³

Among the asylums scattered throughout the country, the worst conditions were in those run by local welfare departments, funded by limited government support but crowded with neglected patients.⁴ Called *yuan* (asylum) instead of *yi yuan* (hospital), these are places for "crazy people" (*feng ren*) to stay forever. There is a belief that serious mental disorders, including schizophrenia, can be temporarily controlled but cannot be cured. As a result many patients are left by their families or by government agencies in these asylums until they die. Their bedrooms and common rooms contain few objects except for the most essential furniture, partly for safety and partly because of poverty. Life in these places repeats itself endlessly, and isolation from the outside world is a given reality. Every asylum has high walls, and some of them are also equipped with barbed wire. These confined places are not much different from jails either in appearance or in people's perception: the common Chinese word for the hospitalization of a mental patient is *guan*—"to be locked up" or "to be put behind bars." In many cases these patients are deliberately forgotten, or resurface only as a bad memory that occasionally disturbs normal life. In this public perception they have thus become "human waste," like the decaying refuse in a forgotten dump yard. (For a discussion of the concept of "waste" and "wasteland," see my essay accompanying Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* in this catalogue.)

1 "Beyond the Mental Hospital—A Conversation Between Sun Jingtao, Liu Zheng and Yuan Dongping," in *Jingshen bingyuan—Yuan Dongping sheying ji* (Mental hospitals—a collection of Yuan Dongping's photos). (Beijing: Zhongguo sheying chubanshe, 1996), 7.

2 His friendship with various mental patients is described in a moving article by Zhang Jian and Wang Binghu, "Boai zai jingshen di huangmo—ji qingnian sheyingjia Yuan Dongping" (Sowing love in a spiritual desert—on young photographer Yuan Dongping).

3 Chen Xiaopo, "Duo yifen guanhuai he qinggan, shengming jihui bian de gengningzhong gengchonggao" (Life will increase its weight and meaning in giving out more love and sympathy). *Zhongguo sheyingbao* (Chinese photography), March 9, 1993.

4 According to Yuan Dongping, mental hospitals and lunatic asylums in China belong to three different systems of administration. In addition to those of local welfare departments, other mental hospitals and asylums are administered either by the Ministry of Health in Beijing or by security departments on various levels. Hospitals and asylums belonging to the Ministry of Health and the security system have better conditions. Interview with Yuan Dongping conducted by the author, May 14, 1998. Unpublished record.





5 See *Jingshen bingyuan*—Yuan Dongping sheying ji, op. cit.

6 Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 54.

7 *Ibid.*



Yuan Dongping has said many times that he hopes that by recording these mental asylums his photographs can help improve their conditions. But his relationship with the mental patients has led him far beyond this practical (though perhaps still most important) goal. His photographs focus on the patients—not just on their physical condition but on their social and spiritual world, and in discovering this world he identifies them as human beings and brings them back into public consciousness. He has taken hundreds of pictures in these asylums and his subjects include both men and women.⁵ I have selected six pictures from this large group for the present exhibition, because they form an independent series with a coherent focus on the sisterhood of some female patients. I disagree with the impression of some previous critics, who see “indifferent, stiff, or absent-minded expressions” and “a sensation of absurdity” in these photos. Rather, I am struck both by the inhuman conditions of the asylums (pl. 11.2) and by the women’s sensitive and even witty faces (pl. 11.4), their enjoyment of life and their sense of humor (pls. 11.5–6), and the deep bond that links them into a mutually protective relationship (pls. 11.1 and 11.3). One of these women, according to Yuan Dongping, returned to the asylum after having been released: she missed her sisters in the asylum, among whom she was a “normal person.”

Taken from eye level and deliberately unpolished, these photographs convey humanism and social criticism in a realistic style. In this way Yuan Dongping follows a long tradition in twentieth-century Chinese art and literature, and his images are among the best examples of this tradition after its revival in the post-Cultural Revolution period. His portraits of mental patients are thus influenced by historical and ideological forces very different from those that have informed other photographers of similar subjects, such as Mary Ellen Mark and Raymond Depardon.

To understand Yuan Dongping’s work one must trace the Chinese realistic/humanistic tradition back to the May Fourth Movement, which started in 1919 as a powerful pursuit for social justice, vernacular language, and realistic representation that never reached a final conclusion in China. The best representative of the May Fourth spirit in literature is Lu Xun. His short stories, written in the 1920s and 1930s, include some of the most famous portrayals of “human waste.” As Leo Ou-fan Lee has pointed out, “The Madman’s Diary” consists of a fragmented diary by an insane person, whose “central message is that for four thousand years Chinese history has chronicled the unfolding of a cannibalistic culture.”⁶ Here the Madman represents a “counter-perspective” and a “purposeful reversal of values: what had been viewed in official history as civilized could, in fact, be barbaric, and what had been disdained or ignored would prove, on the contrary, to be of more enduring value. The Madman is regarded as insane [only] by conventional society.”⁷

While the Madman is a symbolic representation of an alienated dissenter or a doomed prophet, Xianglin’s Wife, the central character of Lu Xun’s short story “New Year’s Sacrifice,” remains one of the most intensely wrought portraits of a tragic heroine in modern Chinese

literature. The story's theme is again group persecution of its own members. Xianglin's Wife, an ordinary woman in a small village, was punished both by fate and by her fellow villagers. A widow twice over who had lost her child, she was an accursed being, blamed for having caused her husbands' deaths, who would be tortured for infinity in hell. This social stigma drove her, step by step, to insanity and finally to death.⁸ Xianglin's Wife thus represents the numerous Chinese men and women who submitted themselves to the persecutions of their own culture without realizing the extent of their oppressor's brutality.

This realistic/humanistic tradition, however, was largely banned after 1949. In line with Mao Zedong's view that socialist literature and art should educate and inspire people about the revolution and Communist ideology, literature and art were required to integrate "revolutionary realism" with "revolutionary romanticism." While literature and art were to portray life realistically (from the standpoint of the revolutionary proletariat), they should do so in a heightened, idealistic form. Literature and art that exposed the dark side of people were considered anathema to the socialist system, and champions of humanism were purged in various political campaigns.⁹ These policies had a twofold impact on figurative representations: the heroic and the positive were highlighted; the problematic and troublesome were deliberately ignored. This situation continued until the mid-1970s. We can thus understand the importance



FIGURE 11.1
Yuan Dongping, *The Poor*, 1995,
black-and-white photograph,
Sichuan, collection of the artist.

8 For a discussion of this short story, see *ibid.*, 74-75.

9 For such persecutions, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, ed., *Lu Xun and His Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. xiv-xv.

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

of the resurfacing of the realistic/humanistic tradition in contemporary Chinese art and literature. As soon as the Cultural Revolution was over, there emerged a new literature and art of the "scar."¹⁰ Works in this genre deal with the tragic consequences of the Cultural Revolution: the violence and lawlessness of the period, the suffering of individuals, the meaningless sacrifices and self-sacrifices, and the general apathy and ignorance toward the victims.

Works made by Yuan Dongping and some other contemporary Chinese artists in the 1990s grew out of both scar art and "native soil art" (*xiangtu yishu*), another important artistic genre in the 1980s that advocated realistic portrayals of ordinary people (albeit still often in a romanticized manner). These new works also indicate a significant departure from both scar art and native soil art in theme and artistic treatment. The subjects of these works—mental patients, blind and retarded children, dysfunctional elderly people, and homeless people—are ordinary, but they are also wounded and ignored (fig. 11.1). Their problems are not caused by particular political or social events; in fact the reasons for their injuries have become relatively unimportant in these works. One can no longer find in them the tension-ridden scenes of confrontation that characterize scar art, and the romantic aestheticization of the ordinary in native soil art also is firmly rejected. The artist has moved away from earlier narrative or poetic modes and relies instead on a straightforward presentation of images. In Yuan's portraits of mental patients, the viewer is not allowed an invisible, voyeuristic position. His existence is always acknowledged by the pictures, as he often finds himself face to face with the patients. This direct encounter serves the purpose of these pictures because it poses a blunt question to the viewer: Are you my friend or persecutor? There is no way to escape the patients' searching gaze: the viewer must make his or her own choice.

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

¹ Cited from Rong Rong's unpublished letter. This translation is based on an English version provided by the artist to the author.

Rong Rong, who photographed the still shots of Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (pl. 12), wrote the following letter to his sister on June 3, 1994, the day after Zhang's action project took place:

Younger Sister:

What's going on here is just unthinkable. Let me tell you why.

We were planning an action project. Zhang chose to do this piece of work in a public toilet in the Village (the dirtiest and smelliest in the world). This is what he was going to do: He would place himself in the middle of the loo, naked, with some foul-smelling substance and honey covering his body. As a result, a swarm of innumerable flies would stick to his body. He would sit still for an hour.

At 11:30 am yesterday, Zhang began this while [our friends] Curse, Ma, and Terror were witnessing the whole event. We even had a man with a video camera on the scene. Terror spread the stuff on Zhang's body. In no time at all flies were attracted. I had a rag to cover my mouth and nose (quite like a gas mask). You know how it stinks in the loos here, and the temperature then was F 100°. The bugs soon covered Zhang's body, his face, penetrated his nostrils and ears. Everything was so still, one could only hear flies flapping their wings and my camera clicking.

The news [of what we were doing] then got out and led to a public outcry. After Zhang had finished he stepped into a small pond behind the toilet. Lots of dead flies floated on the water, moving slightly with the smooth circular waves around Zhang's straight body. Zhang called the whole thing 12 Square Meters, which is of course the size of the public loo. He said that the squalid condition of the toilet and the army of flies in it gave him the inspiration. Some local "Villagers" voiced their concerns by calling what we did yesterday pornographic.¹

The Village, the location of the public toilet and the site of Zhang's performance, stands for the "East Village," (*Dong cun*) a garbage-filled district on the east side of Beijing. Mainly because it provided some of the cheapest housing in the city, it had become home to budding performance and action artists by 1993. Zhang Huan was among the earliest members of this artistic community. When he moved there in 1992 he was still registered as a student in the Oil Painting Department in the Central Academy of Art. But moving into the Village marked an entirely new beginning in his artistic life.

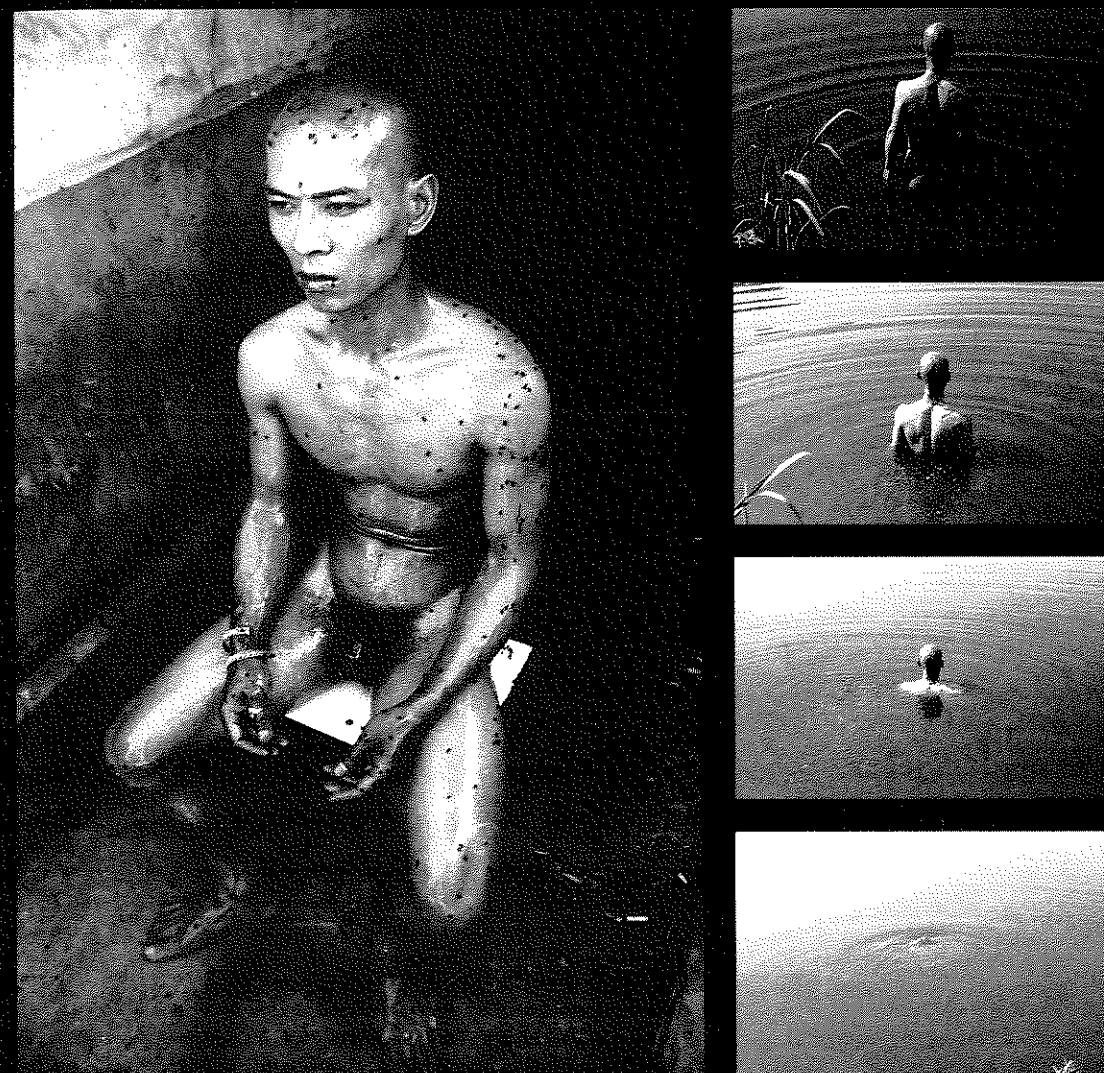


PLATE 12
Zhang Huan, *12 Square Meters*,
1994, performance, Beijing,
photographs by Rong Rong.



FIGURE 12.1
Zhang Huan, *Weeping Angels*,
1993, mixed-media installation,
collection of the artist.

2 Interview with Zhang Huan conducted by the author, July 13, 1998. Unpublished record. This performance was staged in Beijing's National Art Gallery on October 26, 1993. Zhang Huan first unwrapped layers of black clothes to expose an urn and poured the bloodlike paint in the urn over his own head. The urn fell and broke; fragments of a plastic baby, originally placed in the urn, were scattered on the ground and mixed with the red paint. Finally, Zhang, who was basically naked, brought the broken plastic baby into the gallery and hung it on a string against a black canvas on the wall.

Born in a worker's family in Anyang, Henan province, Zhang Huan spent his childhood in the countryside. Although he received some poor grades in humanities and science courses (which he attributes to his "backward" background), his artistic talent was recognized even in elementary school. In high school he spent hours and hours painting plaster statues and still lifes. After graduating from high school he applied to the Art Department of Henan Provincial University, but was able to pass the entry exams only after two failed attempts. In college he found his artistic ideal in Jean-François Millet's portrayals of ordinary lives, paintings in which humble people radiate classical beauty. The most serious work Zhang Huan made under such influence was his graduation painting *Red Cherries* (1988), which depicts a mother peacefully nursing her baby with a bowl of cherries nearby. This penchant for classical beauty persisted when he advanced to a two-year training program in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which attracted him mainly because of its strong emphasis on the European classical tradition. The director of the academy, Jin Shangyi, had been Zhang's hero for many years. Jin's portraits and nudes from the 1980s and early 1990s integrated French academic influence with Russian realism, with the self-confessed goals of emotional balance and technical perfection.

Nothing in Zhang Huan's life before he reached age 27, then, seems to have prepared him for his sudden change in 1992: he abandoned the noble art of oil painting and began to stage the series of violent and masochistic performances that have become his trademark. He seems unsure about the reasons for this drastic change. When I asked him what caused him to turn against classical art, he pondered the question and then said, rather unexpectedly:



FIGURE 12.2
Zhang Huan, *65 Kg*, 1994, per-
formance, Beijing. Photograph
by Ai Weiwei.

Maybe it was because of the poor countryside in Henan where I grew up. There everything was colored by the yellow earth. I got hepatitis—because I had nothing to eat. There were many deaths and funerals. I can never forget the funerals of my grandmother [who raised Zhang Huan] and other relatives. Maybe it was also because of my personal life in Beijing. You could not keep your child when your girlfriend was pregnant. . . . Girls of my generation have to go through many abortions; some have done it twice or three times, some five or six times. Many unborn babies died. This is the situation of the nineties. I am not clear about the seventies and eighties. But I know my own generation of people well. My first performance was called Weeping Angels.⁷

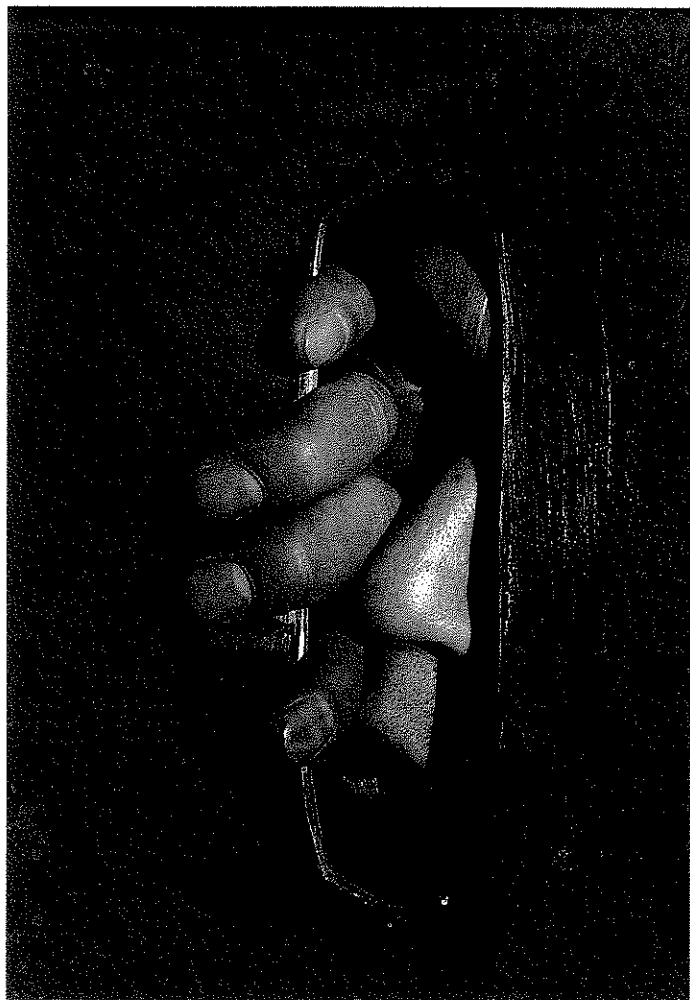


FIGURE 12.3
Zhang Huan, *Metal Case*,
1994, performance, Beijing.
Photograph by Rong Rong.

The two different experiences mentioned here are apparently connected by death, and one can find solid ground for interpretation of Zhang Huan's art by linking his masochistic actions with his guilt toward the dead. The performance *Weeping Angels* (1993), which involved symbolic abortion and death, was related to his installations of broken baby dolls (fig. 12.1). Almost every performance he has undertaken since then simulates self-sacrifice. In some of these projects he offers his flesh and blood (fig. 12.2);³ in other projects he tries to experience death, either locking himself inside a coffinlike metal case (fig. 12.3) or placing earthworms in his mouth and allowing them to escape. It is equally important, however, to realize that to Zhang Huan "death" has another meaning, manifested not in human lives but in the social environment. These are places of death that I have termed "wastelands": abandoned public spaces filled with refuse; graveyards of dead things that resist quick disintegration;

3. Some of Zhang Huan's action projects are extremely violent. In the 1994 performance *65 kg*, for example, he hung himself naked on chains from the ceiling and let blood drip from his wounded neck onto an electric burner placed below him.

4. Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 2.

5. Karen Smith, "Rong Rong—Records of the Observer," Beijing, 1998. Unpublished manuscript.

6. In Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Xu Bing, ed. An untitled book with a black cover, private publication, (Beijing: 1994), 71.

sources of polluted food and water as well as poisonous fumes and smells; "black holes" in an urban or rural landscape that absorb time and escape change. Differing from ruins of a classical monument, these wastelands contain no "fragment[s] from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality."⁴ Such a place does not inspire sentiment or stir up memory. Instead it is a contagious corpse that suffocates people with its deadly excrement. The masochism in Zhang Huan's performances often forces him to experience such a space or to reduce himself to part of it.

From this point of view, his moving into the tumbledown East Village was already an act of self-exile. Karen Smith, a writer and art critic based in Beijing, records the village's environment in the early nineties: "In the shadow of the metropolis, many of the village's indigenous population scrape a living by collecting and sorting rubbish. Waste accumulates by the side of the small ponds. This pollutes the water, generating noxious fumes in the summer. Raw sewage flows directly into the water. Slothful, threadbare dogs roam the narrow lanes between houses. People stare with the blankness of the illiterate and benighted."⁵ As I will discuss later in the essay on Rong Rong, another member of the village's artistic community, the artists living there were fully conscious of the hellish qualities of the place in contrast to the "heavenly" downtown Beijing. This contrast energized them, however, for they and their art were also condemned as "garbage" and "hellish," even by other experimental artists.

This ambivalence toward the place and themselves is best captured by Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters*, described by Rong Rong at the beginning of this essay and shown in a video in this exhibition. On the one hand, by subjecting himself to an unhearably filthy public toilet for an hour, Zhang identifies himself with this place and embraces it. On the other hand, he was clearly suffering during the whole ordeal while struggling to keep his composure in the inhuman environment. He says in a "self-statement" that this project allowed him "to experience his essential existence" reduced to the level of waste.⁶ But the same "self-statement" links his own existence to a general "relationship between people and their environment" in contemporary China, where numerous public toilets in similar conditions continue to exist in large and small cities and towns, hidden in dark alleys in the most densely populated areas and in the shadow of glamorous skyscrapers. It is in this sense that Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* combines personal experience with a social critique—two essential elements of his performance art.



PLATE 13

Zhan Wang, *Temptation*,
1994, mixed-media installation,
138 in. (350.5 cm) diameter,
collection of the artist.

1 Zhan Wang said in an interview conducted by the author, May 11, 1998: "These forms of mine realized an idea I had acquired from my childhood, that when the useless skin of a cicada falls down from a tree trunk it registers the dramatic struggle during which a new life emerges from its old body. . . . But the new body is nowhere to be seen. We have no idea what it has become—either dead or reborn, in heaven or in hell." Unpublished record.

2 Zhang Lin and Lin Song, "Shengcun kongjian" [Space of living], *Hanmo yixun* [Art news], 1994.1.9.

3 Ibid.

4 Karen Smith, "Contemporary Rocks," *World Sculpture News*, 30 (Winter 1997), 32.

Zhan Wang links his *Temptation* (1994), a group of bodiless figures frozen in dramatic poses (pl. 13), to the cicada sloughing its skin. Climbing slowly out of the earth, emerging painfully from its former body, shedding an empty shell and flying into the sky, the cicada became the most celebrated metaphor for *transformation* in ancient China. In tombs, numerous cicada carvings made of stone and jade symbolize the most desirable consequence of any transformation—the state of immortality wherein a body transcended its former being and became eternal. But what inspired Zhan Wang to create *Temptation* was not the outcome of the winged insect's transcendence, but the translucent skin left behind. As the only evidence for the cicada's metamorphosis, this skin can never really guarantee the result of the metamorphosis.¹ What the skin registers is the pain of rebirth and what it offers is an illusive hope. To Zhan Wang, this combination of hope and pain makes the cicada skin a perfect signifier for *desire*: "It has no life, but it gives the hope of a better life—from here comes seduction or temptation."²

Zhan Wang is also struck by the emptiness and immateriality of the cicada skin: "It is hard to believe that a thing with so many grave implications to the Chinese can be so weightless!"³ His *Temptation*, actually a group of "human shells" made of clothes and glue, tries to capture the same contrast: he molded a "Mao suit"—once the uniform of every Chinese—to a human form and then removed the inner mold. The result is not only a sculpture without substance but also a bodiless torso. The extremely contorted gesture of each torso gives the impression of passion, pain, torture, and a life-and-death struggle. But there is neither a subject nor an object to struggle against. "Contorted clothing writhing in empty agony," Karen Smith remarked on these figures when they were first shown in an exhibition called *Kong Ling Kong* in Beijing, "*Kong*, meaning emptiness, refers not only to the surrounding space of the gallery but the space within the hollow suits of clothing."⁴

Empty and suspended, these human forms were created not as self-contained sculptures, but as individual "signs" (*fu hao* in Zhan Wang's terminology) of desire and loss that have the infinite potential to be installed in different combinations and in various environments. A specific installation in a specific place will provide their general signification of desire

5 Interview with Zhan Wang conducted by the author, May 11, 1998. Unpublished record.

6 Zhan Wang, "Property Development"—The First Public Exhibition of the Three Men United Studio." (Beijing, 1995). Unpublished manuscript.

and loss with a specific content.⁵ Suspended on a scaffolding these forms gain a heightened instability and anxiety. Placed on brown dirt they seem to form an immediate relationship with the dirt, a relationship that reminds Zhan Wang that a person's body is returned to the earth after death. But the most dramatic installation is placing these human shells among a half-destroyed building in central Beijing (fig. 13.1). Suddenly the ruin and the shells become one and together emphasize a profound absence of the human subject. They also testify to fascination with torn and broken forms and a shared attraction to destruction and injury, although it is by no means clear what is actually wounded other than the buildings and the empty shells themselves.

Zhan Wang staged this last installation in 1994. Its ambiguity regarding the "missing subject" was partially clarified by the artist himself the following year, when he and the other two members of the Three Men United Studio organized their group installation/performance called *Property Development* in "the debris of the former Central Academy of Fine Arts." The Three Men Studio developed a series of projects in 1995 as the artists' direct engagement with society; its purposes included developing alternative artistic languages to communicate with a mass audience. (For the Three Men United Studio, see the essay accompanying Yu Fan's *My Mother* in this catalogue.) Zhan Wang's installation in *Property Development* was a simulated "ruin" whose "missing subject" was himself.

The Central Academy of Fine Arts, the country's top art school, where the three artists held teaching positions, used to be located near Wangfujing, the most famous commercial district in Beijing. In 1994, the



FIGURE 13.1



FIGURE 13.2

FIGURE 13.1
Zhan Wang, *Temptation: An Outdoor Experiment*, 1994, environmental installation, Beijing, collection of the artist.

FIGURE 13.2
Zhan Wang, *Classroom Exercise*, 1995, part of the group installation *Property Development* by the Three Men United Studio, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.



FIGURE 13.3
Sui Jianguo, *Ruins*, 1995, part of the group installation *Property Development* by the Three Men United Studio, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

school was informed that it had to move to a new location within the next few months because its campus had been sold (or "rented") by the municipal government to real estate developers and would soon be demolished. Mainly funded by the Hong Kong magnate Li Jiacheng, this multi-million-dollar project would incorporate the land of the former academy into a "City of Commerce" (*Shang cheng*).⁶ This plan led to an outcry not only from the school's teachers and students but also from Beijing's many artists and intellectuals, to whom the forthcoming demolition of the academy would symbolize the complete defeat of art and education under the invasion of a market economy. There was some organized protest by members of the academy, and some famous painters appealed to the central government to intervene. But before long the school's northern section, where the Department of Sculpture had its classrooms, was demolished.

Two days after the academy was forced to move out, Zhan Wang, Sui Jianguo, and Yu Fan held their exhibition in the old classrooms of the Department of Sculpture, where they had studied and taught. Zhan Wang's installation included a mass of rubble and dirt pouring into his former classroom through a broken window (fig. 13.2). On top of the rubble lay small clay figures—classroom exercises left by students. Through the window one could see the rising buildings of the future City of Commerce. Combining abandoned human figures with an architectural ruin, this installation recalls the *Temptation* figures displayed in a half-destroyed bouse (fig. 13.1). But here the "missing subject" is clearly identified as the teachers and students in the classroom. The same message became even more explicit in Sui Jianguo's installation: he cleared and paved the ground of a no longer existing classroom, then arranged rows of chairs, a desk, and two bookcases filled with broken bricks (fig. 13.3).

The forced relocation and demolition of the Central Academy of Fine Arts was one of thousands of similar cases in Beijing and other Chinese cities in the mid-nineties. Such demolition projects had started to become part of the city's normal life in the early 1990s. Following China's "economic miracle," investment poured into the country from Hong Kong,

7 See Seth Faison, "Jailing of Ex-Mayor Shows a Tougher China," *The New York Times*, August 1, 1998, A4. According to this article, Chen "was also implicated in a series of far larger financial schemes that may have totaled as much as \$2 billion."

8 See Hou Hanru, "Towards an Un-Official Art: De-ideologicalization of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s," *Third Text* 34 (Spring 1996), 37-52.

9 This unpublished text was written on October 14, 1994.

Taiwan, and the West. Old houses were destroyed to make room for glimmering hotels and shopping malls. Rumors circulated that Chen Xitong, then the mayor of Beijing, benefited hugely from the deals he made with foreign investors. This has been proven true: as the man with final control over building permits from the early to mid-nineties, Chen personally amassed a fund of \$24 million, as well as an extensive collection of private homes where he had a taste for entertaining young female television presenters.⁷ On the other hand, although complaints and disputes about the forced relocation abounded, large-scale protests seemed absent. One reason was the lack of consensus: to some residents relocation meant forced departure from old homes; to others (including some teachers in the Central Academy) it promised a larger apartment, albeit in a remote suburban area. In theory, demolition and relocation were conditions for the capital's modernization. In actuality, these conditions brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents: they no longer belonged to one another.

This situation supplies both the context and the content of Zhan Wang's *Temptation* and *Property Development*. As a result, these works exemplify a sensibility toward a particular kind of modern ruin that I have termed "demolition." Unlike the visual representations of war ruins, images of demolition do not focus on human tragedies from a retrospective view. Instead they respond to a dramatic change in the environment caused by an ongoing process of destruction/construction. During a demolition, the human subjects are not destroyed, but debased; their experiences are confusion and disorientation, not a collective tragedy. Although large-scale demolition is a regular feature of any metropolis in the world, the enormity of the demolition China has experienced in recent years has had profound psychological impact on city residents. Such demolition has been continuing for more than a decade and has kept major cities like Beijing in a state of perpetual destruction and disruption. Although in theory a demolition project always promises



FIGURE 13.4
Zhan Wang, *Ruin Cleaning*,
1994, performance, Beijing.

renewal, numerous demolition sites in Beijing have been left in a demolished state for several years. These places lie outside normal life not only spatially but also in a temporal sense: time simply vanishes in these black holes. The past of these places has been destroyed and no one knows their future. Inspired by this situation, "demolition" images created by Zhan Wang and other contemporary Chinese artists attest to a distinct sense of contemporaneity—a suspended present resulting from the breakdown of a conventional temporal scheme.

To capture this sense of temporality and instability, Zhan Wang designed a performance called *Ruin Cleaning Project* (1994), in which his art was itself the subject of demolition. He chose a section in a half-demolished building for "restoration." He washed it carefully and then painted windowsills and filled chinks with fresh mortar (fig. 13.4). But scarcely had he finished, when the building was razed to the ground.⁸ Here is his own English summary of this project:

'94 ACTION PLAN FOR DEBRIS SALVAGE
SCHEMES FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS

Time: Oct. 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 had undergone vicissitudes. Although they were beautiful buildings with Chinese and Western styles of architecture combined, they could not escape from the fate of being demolished. Because the capital needs modernization, needs a commercial district.

On Oct. 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.*
- 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.⁹

RUIN PICTURES

More than any other photographs of the subject, Rong Rong's images of demolished houses in Beijing capture the anxiety and silence adrift in these modern ruins. *Untitled*, Rong Rong's three photos in the exhibition (pls. 14.1-3), were taken in 1996 and 1997 in China's capital, one of the fastest developing cities in the world. The scenes are terrifying: hundreds of houses were turned into rubble, and a whole area in the inner city suddenly became a no-man's-land. What has happened? Where are the residents? The pictures offer few clues to answer these questions. What they offer, at the center of one image (pl. 14.1), is an abandoned illusion: a pinup nestled inside a wooden niche that has somehow survived the destruction. The picture is torn, but the woman keeps her composure, staring sweetly at the surrounding bricks and dirt with an unchanging expression.

Rong Rong is one of the young experimental artists who emerged in the mid-nineties. To this generation of artists, the 1960s and 1970s has become the remote past, and their works often respond to China's current transformation, not to history. This is especially true of Rong Rong, a farm boy turned avant-garde artist. Growing up in the Fujian countryside, he was skilled in farmwork but failed almost every course in elementary and junior high school except for studio art. This was followed by three failed attempts to enter a local art school. By chance he discovered photography, and he developed a passion for it. First he rented cameras to take portraits and landscape shots. He then bought his own camera after working for three years in his father's grocery store. Equipped with this camera and what little remained of his savings he went to the capital. In Beijing he took several photography classes while making friends with experimental artists and musicians. When his savings were gone he tried his hand at various odd jobs, including taking passport pictures in a photo studio. He moved from one place to another, often guided by whatever housing was cheapest. In 1993 he moved into a tumbledown village on the city's east fringe. Later known as the East Village, this artists' community produced some of the most daring works of contemporary Chinese art (mainly performance art and photography) before it was closed down by the police in June 1994. (For more information about the East Village community, see my essay accompanying Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* in this catalogue.)

PLATE 14.1



PLATE 14.1
Rong Rong, *Untitled*, 1996-97,
three black-and-white photo-
graphs, each 20 x 24 in. (50.8 x
60.9 cm). Pl. 14.1, *Untitled No. 1a*;
pl. 14.2, *Untitled No. 2a*; pl. 14.3,
Untitled No. 3a. Collection of the
artist.



PLATE 14.2

Coming from a remote southern province, Rong Rong was both amazed and disgusted by Beijing: "It is merely a fifteen-minute bicycle ride from the center of the city to my place—from the light-illuminated Great Wall Hotel to the pitch-black East Village: the experience is like traveling from heaven to hell." But he soon found out that places even darker and more desolate were everywhere in Beijing, often next to those glimmering high-rises. These were demolition sites: empty lots occupied by half-destroyed houses with garbage scattered among the rubble. Nothing remotely valuable could be expected to have remained there; the only thing left by the former residents were the torn pictures covering the broken walls. With their mixture of beauty and vulnerability,

1 Interview with Rong Rong conducted by the author, May 11, 1998. Unpublished record.

2 *Ibid.*

these ruined pictures—mostly portraits of famous movie stars and fashion models—captured Rong Rong's eye and were superimposed upon another image in his memory:

I remember I was in love with a picture in a calendar. That was a portrait of [the Taiwan popular singer] Deng Lijun. I was small, not yet ten years old. Her songs were forbidden at that time [because of their "bourgeois" flavor]. People told me that her songs were obscene (huangse). This calendar was given to my father by one of his friends from the South. It was hung upstairs, in my bedroom. As a boy I was rather timid and was often scared when sleeping alone. But I felt safe when I saw the portrait. Everyone said she's beautiful and I also thought so. Her eyes followed me around and to me she was actually living. I often asked myself why her songs were forbidden. Later, such feelings came back to me when I saw the torn pictures on those broken walls.²

This personal experience helps explain an intrinsic contradiction in Rong Rong's ruin pictures: on the one hand, they record a brutal invasion of a private place, on the other, they convey little feeling of calamity or tragedy. A dispassionate viewer might even claim that the scenes are actually quite peaceful: the sun is bright, a man strolls at ease among the ruins, and the pinup continues to smile at us (pl. 18.1). Like any representation of ruins, the subject of these photographs is the absence or disappearance of the subject. But Rong Rong fills the vacancy with *images*. Torn and even missing a large portion of the composition, these images still exercise their alluring power over the spectator—not only with their seductive figures but also with their seductive spatial illusionism. With an enhanced three-dimensionality and abundant mirrors and paintings-within-paintings, they transform a plain wall into a space of fantasy, even though this wall is all that is left of a house (pl. 14.3).

To Rong Rong these images are imbued with his own memory; he thus substitutes himself for their original owner in his imagination. But to us, these photographs continue to pose questions about the missing subjects of the ruined houses. The place shown in the picture could be any demolished site in Beijing, and the pinup pictures are too superficial to allow us to recognize any individuality (and this is probably exactly why they were left behind). In other words, the ruin and the ruined posters do not register a specific past, nor are they associated with the present or future. What they help construct in these photographs is a breakdown between private and public spaces. The house has been turned inside out, and its interior decoration has become part of the city's exterior spectacle. Ruins like these are places in Beijing that belong to everyone and to no one. They belong to no one because the breakdown between private and public space does not generate a new kind of space. Ruins form "blind spots" in an overly crowded city. People walk by half-destroyed houses in their neighborhood without looking at them, because they seem simply "not there." These ruins are therefore "non-spaces."

Rong Rong's ruin pictures include a number of mini-series, each consisting of two photographs of the same scene but taken from different distances. In one case, one of the two photographs shows a surviving wall of a ruined house, whose exposed wooden skeleton (which curiously resembles a Christian cross) is accentuated by peeling paper and dilapidated pictures (pl. 14.2). The other photo is a close-up of the dilapidated pictures on the post (fig. 14.1). We can now differentiate Marilyn Monroe from Chinese fashion stars. We also recognize the various degrees of damage the images have suffered, as well as traces of absence: the thumb-tacks on the bare wall indicate the former existence of other images, which are now gone.

In another case, the close-up (fig. 14.2) again focuses on a ruined pinup image in a larger view (pl. 14.1), and it again turns our attention from panorama to detail: the fake frame of the image, the slashes on the woman's face, and the dirt pouring out from behind the torn poster. The perceptual change produced by each of these two photo series, therefore, is a shift from ruins to ruined pictures, from architecture to image, and from context to content. A panoramic view includes ruined pictures as an integral element, but the ruined pictures become the sole content

PLATE 14.3



FIGURE 14.1



FIGURE 14.2

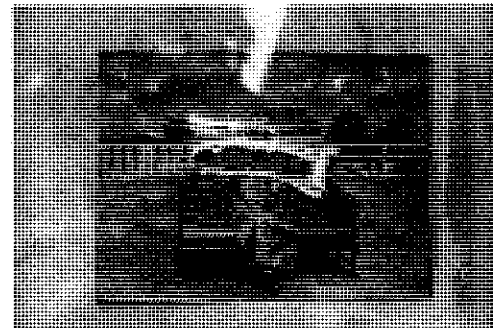


FIGURE 14.3

FIGURE 14.1
Rong Rong, *Untitled No. 2b*, 1996–97, black-and-white photograph, 20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 60.9 cm), collection of the artist.

FIGURE 14.2
Rong Rong, *Untitled No. 1b*, 1996–97, black-and-white photograph, 20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 60.9 cm), collection of the artist.

FIGURE 14.3
Rong Rong, *Ruined Photo*, 1997, black-and-white photograph, 20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 60.9 cm), collection of the artist.

3 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 57.

4 Interview with Rong Rong conducted by the author, May 11, 1998.

of the close-up photograph. Each series, therefore, produces a shift in the viewer's perception from a "photo" to a "photo-within-a-photo." This shift is realized by redefining the relationship between a photograph and its subject matter. By filling the second photograph with a printed image, Rong Rong identifies this photo as a "meta-picture" which, in W. J. T. Mitchell's words, "explain[s] what pictures are—to stage, as it were, the 'self-knowledge' of pictures."³

"To explain what pictures are" is also the purpose of another group of photos by Rong Rong. A study of the "mortality" of photographs in Beijing, pictures in this group document the "fate" of commercial or propaganda photos displayed in various public spaces—on the street, in parks, and in exhibition windows (fig. 14.3). Faded and discolored, these are "ruins" of photographs. "Photos are such vulnerable things," Rong Rong murmured while looking at these photos.⁴ It is unclear whether he was commenting on his own photos or on the ruined images within them.

SEALED MEMORY

¹ Translation by Stephen Owen, *Remembrances* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 82. "The age of Getian" refers to a mythical golden age in China's prehistory.

Yin Xiuzhen and her husband, Song Dong (the artist who made *Breathing*, which appears in this exhibition), remind me of another couple: the poet Li Qingzhao and her antiquarian husband Zhao Mingcheng, who lived almost a thousand years ago. Married in 1101, Li and Zhao were united by, among other things, their shared passion for collecting, as Li reminisced twenty years later, after her husband had passed away:

On the first and fifteenth day of every month, my husband would get a short vacation from the academy: he would "pawn some clothes" for five hundred cash and go to the market at Xiangguo Temple, where he would buy fruit and rubbings of inscriptions. When he brought these home, we would sit facing one another, rolling them out before us, examining and munching. And we thought ourselves persons of the age of Getian.¹

The result of this collaborative activity was the famous *Records on Bronze and Stone* (*Jinshi lu*), which catalogued two thousand inscriptions with Zhao's comments. Li's afterword contains the passage cited above.

Yin Xiuzhen and Song Dong also collect "traces of the past." What they have been gathering, however, are not ancient inscriptions documenting a remote history, but material fragments of a vanishing present. Since 1997 the couple have been collecting such things along the construction site of the Grand Avenue of Peace and Well-being (*Ping'an Dadao*), an enormous architectural project with a total budget of two billion RMB (or \$350 million in 1998) funded collectively by the Chinese government and individual investors. Envisioned as the second widest east-west road across central Beijing, the avenue will cover a broad strip of land, some 30 meters wide and 7,000 meters long (98 by 22,965 feet), in the most populated section of an overcrowded city. The "relocation" phase of the project was swiftly completed, and within several months in 1997–98, the site was emptied and the old houses destroyed. No published statistics are available to tell us how many households and families were relocated. They seem to have just suddenly disappeared; their streets and lanes simply vanished from the city's map.

Song Dong has been saving "door plates" (*men pai*) from demolished houses. Issued by the government over the past several decades, these small metal plates are all identically shaped and colored bright red but

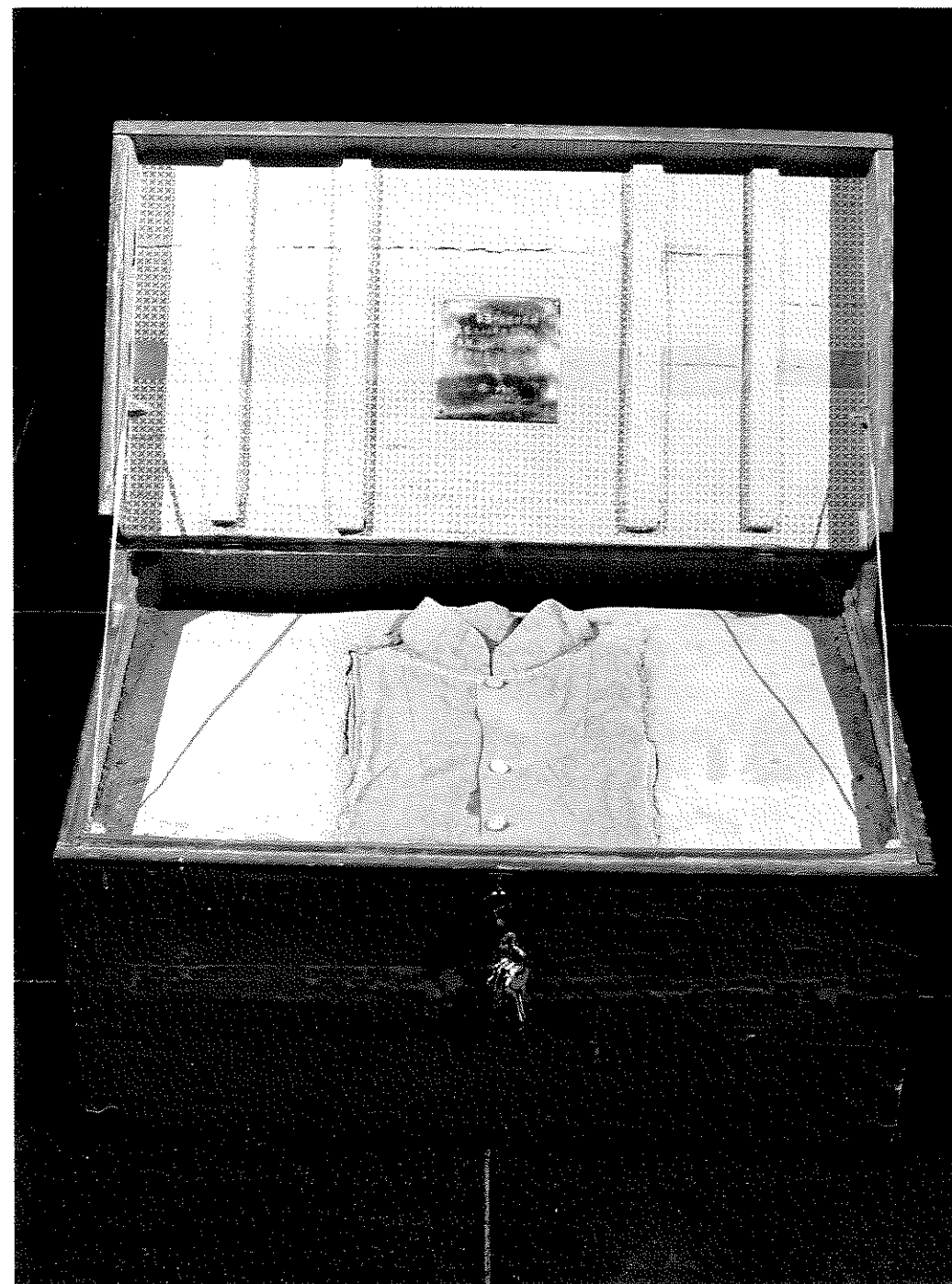


PLATE 15
Yin Xiuzhen, *Suitcase*, 1995,
mixed-media installation,
Beijing, collection of the artist.
Photograph by Song Dong.

FIGURE 15.1
Yin Xiuzhen, *Transformation*,
1997, installation of tile and pho-
tographs, Beijing. Photograph
by Song Dong.

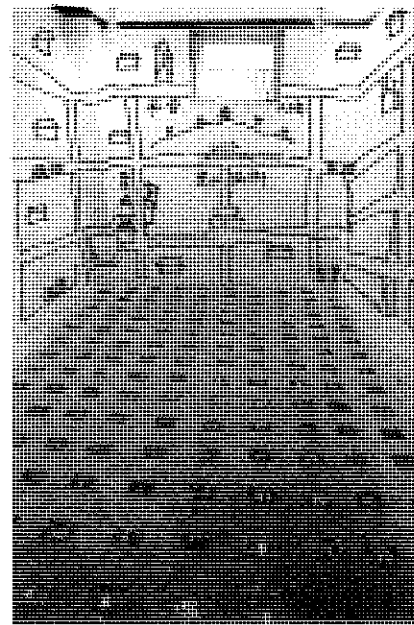


FIGURE 15.2
Song Dong, plan for an installation
of door plates from demolished
houses in Beijing.

bear different addresses. Until recently each of these plates pertained to a group or several groups of people, their home(s), and their lives. Now they mean nothing. Yin Xiuzhen has been saving roof tiles left on the demolition site. Made of gray clay and often irregular in shape, these tiles originally belonged to individual houses built over the past several hundred years in this ancient city. But when the houses are gone the tiles show little difference in age; instead they remind us of the instantaneous loss of the houses they once were attached to.

Both Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen collect these materials to make installations. Yin Xiuzhen exhibited her installation *Transformation* in 1997, soon after the Ping'an Avenue project began (fig. 15.1). She lay the roof tiles in rows in a courtyard not far from the construction site (the exhibition could be seen from the street). To the tiles she attached black-and-white photos of the demolished houses from which the tiles came. Song Dong continues to collect the door plates and plans to use them eventually in an installation, with a map on the background wall to indicate the plates' no longer existing addresses (fig. 15.2). His plan shows

2 Interview with Yin Xiuzhen
conducted by the author, May 13,
1998. Unpublished record.

parallels with Yin Xiuzhen's installation in general layout, and both in turn bear an uncanny resemblance to a graveyard, in which rows of gravestones identify deceased individuals. In fact, we may think of both installations in terms of a mass-grave, because here the "dead" also are victims of a single holocaust. The two installations differ from a graveyard, however, in the identity of the "dead" and the means of commemoration: both works commemorate the death of places, not those who lived there, and both works feature relics from these places, not human remains.

Yin Xiuzhen's 1997 *Transformation* was a sequel to an earlier installation that she showed the previous year (fig. 15.3). Called *Ruined City*, it filled a 300-square-meter (984-foot) exhibition hall with a collection of fragments gathered from various parts of Beijing. These included found objects—used furniture and 1,400 roof tiles—as well as items from her own family and neighborhood. (A set of four chairs in the installation, for example, was among the first family possessions she and Song Dong owned.) These anonymous and personal objects were unified by the omnipresence of dry cement. Despite the gallery director's protest, she managed to dump four tons of cement powder into the exhibition hall and spread it over the furniture and tiles. To Yin Xiuzhen, cement powder best conveys the feeling of fineness and softness of dust—the dust everywhere on Beijing's streets, dust falling from the sky and delicately covering the city's exterior and interior. Dust thus conveys a sense of intimacy and is emotional, too. "I like to watch how dry cement changes," she told me, "if you leave it there without doing anything, it absorbs moisture in the air, and gradually covers itself with a hardened surface."²²

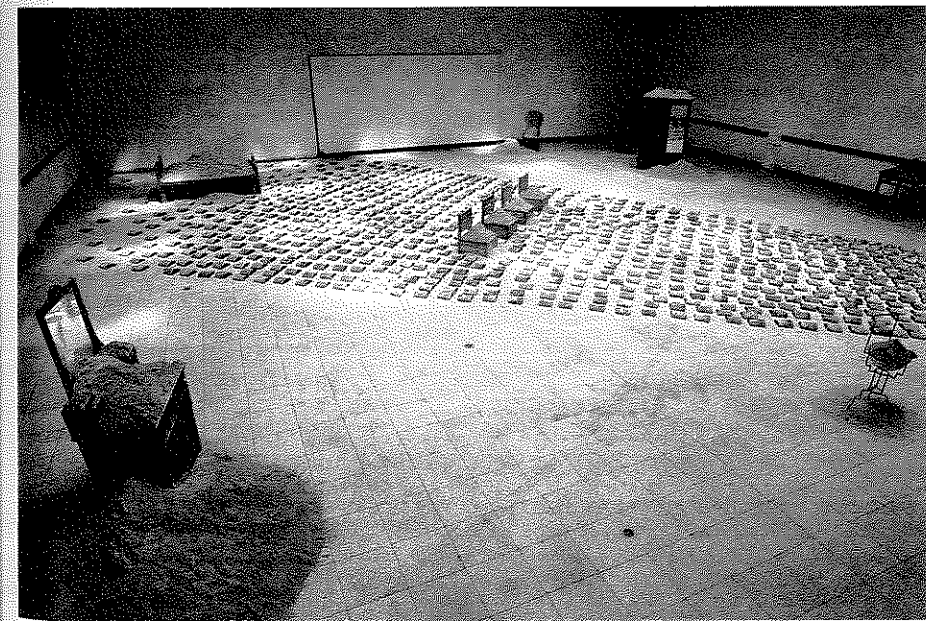


FIGURE 15.3
Yin Xiuzhen, *Ruined City*, 1996,
installation of furniture and
cement, Beijing. Photograph
by Song Dong.

The purpose of Yin Xiuzhen's *Ruined City* and *Transformation* is not commemoration; neither of these two projects led to a mental reconstruction of Beijing's past image. Rather, each installation is about loss and survival; their common subject is the fragmentation of the artist's physical world and the insistence of her memory of this world. No matter how enormous the installation or how many different materials and images it incorporates, it remains on the level of fragments and pertains to a current condition of incompleteness. This world of fragments is comprised by *yi wu*—the Chinese term for “leftover things” that often refers to possessions left behind by the dead. The ancient Chinese imagined that a *yi wu* retained the “moisture” of its former owner: a “leftover” cup had moisture from the mouth of the dead and a personal letter had moisture from the hand of the dead.³ From this we can understand the meaning of those “used” and “found” objects in Yin Xiuzhen's installations: these are all *yi wu* conveying feeling and emotion; even the cement dust gains life from absorbing moisture in the air.

Yin Xiuzhen's installations do not chronicle a history of Beijing's changing environment and architecture, rather they record the artist's continuous engagement with her city. This engagement, both contemporaneous and personal, becomes her memory of Beijing. According to Pierre Nora,

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic—responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism.⁴

Nora's discussion throws much light on the fragmentary and contemporaneous nature of Yin Xiuzhen's *Ruined City* and *Transformation*. It also leads us to Yin's *Suitcase* in this exhibition (pl. 19): although much smaller, this installation belongs to the same system of representation. In fact, it completes this system of representation because it defines the vantage point from where the memory of the “ruined city” is recollected and preserved.

From ancient times the Chinese developed two different approaches in remembering and describing a ruined city. In one approach, the city is an externalized aesthetic object for contemplation and longing; in the other approach, the viewer stays inside the city and constantly experiences its decay. The first approach juxtaposes a present gaze with a past city and evokes lamentation; the second approach frames the viewer within a city

that continues its ruination in the present. Many famous poems and paintings were composed from the first approach, which is essentially retrospective and historical. From the third century, if not earlier, poets routinely spoke about “looking at” a ruined city. Thus Cao Zhi started his famous lamentation on the abandoned capital of Luoyang: “On foot I climbed up Beimang's slopes / And gazed afar on Luoyang's hills.” And Bao Zhao ended his “Rhapsody on a Ruined City” with these lines: “For a thousand years and a myriad generations, / I shall watch you [the ruined city] to the end in silence.”⁵

Examples of the second approach are far subtler and cannot be classed in the general poetic genre *huaigu* (“lamenting the past” or “meditating on the past”). In most cases they cannot be recognized based on an immediately “past-present” dichotomy, because this dichotomy is rejected by the basic premise of the approach itself. Likewise, the position of the writer/artist is not defined by her juxtaposition with the ruined city because she is still part of it. Her insider's position can only be revealed by her constant negotiation with her environment, often through a series of works that disclose the various moments and experiences in this negotiation.

Yin Xiuzhen used a metaphor to describe to me her relationship with Beijing: “My feeling is like that of a small seedling that has sprouted but has not yet emerged above the ground. I imagine that when the seedling grows it must press the earth surrounding it and that the earth must also press the seedling back. I feel that this is just like my relationship with my surroundings—a relationship of squeezing and pressing.”⁶ In reality, she is surrounded by the city of Beijing with its vanishing enclosures, half-demolished residences that expose their interiors to street onlookers, her rambling neighborhood of low, decaying houses, her own tiny room inside a multifamily compound, and personal belongings from different periods in her life. She represents her engagement with this layered environment through installations with different frames. While the frame of both her *Ruined City* and *Transformation* is the city at large, other works focus on her neighborhood or her own home. With the gradual narrowing of the frame, the artist herself increasingly becomes the focus of representation and finally becomes the content of a single work: *Suitcase*.

This installation is the product of a performance. The action starts as Yin Xiuzhen unpacks her old clothes, including those she wore when she was a baby. She folds the clothes into flat rectangles and lays them on the ground in rows (fig. 15.4). She then begins to painstakingly pack these folded clothes into an old suitcase of her own, making sure there is not the slightest disarray. When all the clothes are packed she seals them inside the suitcase with mortar cement.

Here Yin Xiuzhen again employs cement and worn objects as the basic materials of the installation. Lying in straight rows on the ground, the old clothes remind us of the roof tiles in her *Ruined City* and *Transformation* (figs. 15.1–2). It seems that here she is again arranging a grave or conducting a funeral, but a funeral of her own because all the

3 See Judith Zeitlin, “Shared Dreams: The Story of the Three Wives’ Commentary on *The Peony Pavilion*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 54.1 (July 1994), 127–79, especially 144–45.

4 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 20 (Spring 1987), 7–26, quotation from pp. 8–9.

5 Cyril Birch, ed., *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, 2 vols. (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 1: 193.

6 Interview with Yin Xiuzhen conducted by the author, May 13, 1998. Unpublished record.

"leftover things" in the ritual display are from her own past. In other words, these things have her own "moisture" and are imbued with her own memory, which is encoffined when the clothes are put into the suitcase and sealed with cement. This symbolic burial can signify both the artist's self-denial and her yearning for survival. As for this second significance, it seems that when the whole world is falling to pieces, the only way to keep oneself intact is to gather one's own "fragments" together and to secure them as tightly as possible. In my imagination, therefore, I put Yin Xiuzhen's *Suitcase* in the center of her *Ruined City* (fig. 15.2), where her memory of her city and herself is both buried and preserved for eternity.

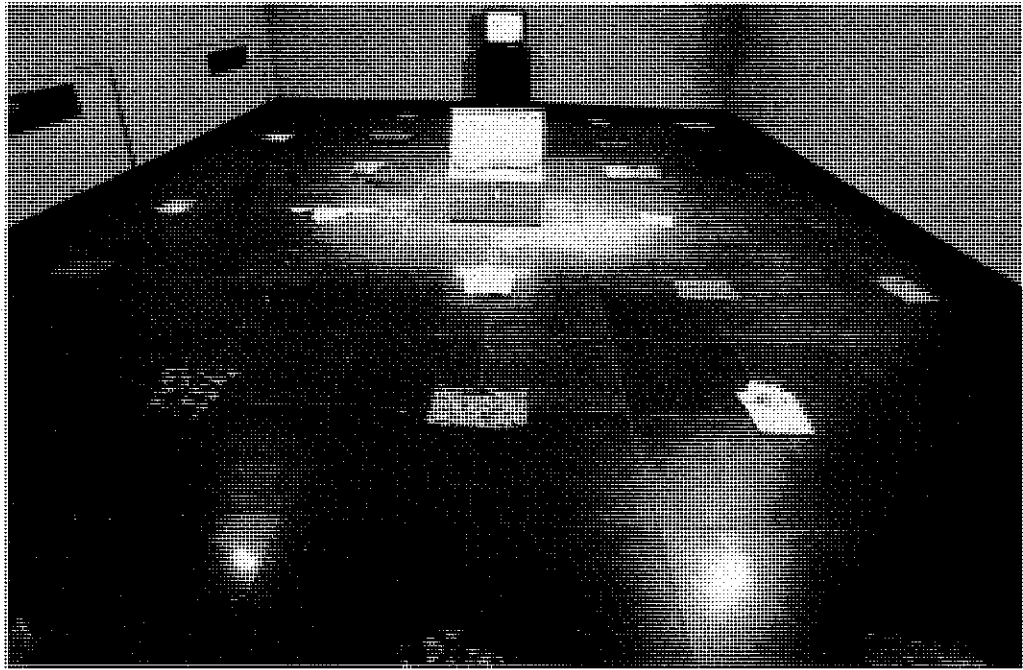


FIGURE 15.4
Yin Xiuzhen, *Suitcase*, 1995,
performance and installation,
Contemporary Art Gallery,
Beijing. Photograph by Song
Dong.

PART THREE

TRANSIENCE

"leftover things" in the ritual display are from her own past. In other words, these things have her own "moisture" and are imbued with her own memory, which is encoffined when the clothes are put into the suitcase and sealed with cement. This symbolic burial can signify both the artist's self-denial and her yearning for survival. As for this second significance, it seems that when the whole world is falling to pieces, the only way to keep oneself intact is to gather one's own "fragments" together and to secure them as tightly as possible. In my imagination, therefore, I put Yin Xiuzhen's *Suitcase* in the center of her *Ruined City* (fig. 15.2), where her memory of her city and herself is both buried and preserved for eternity.

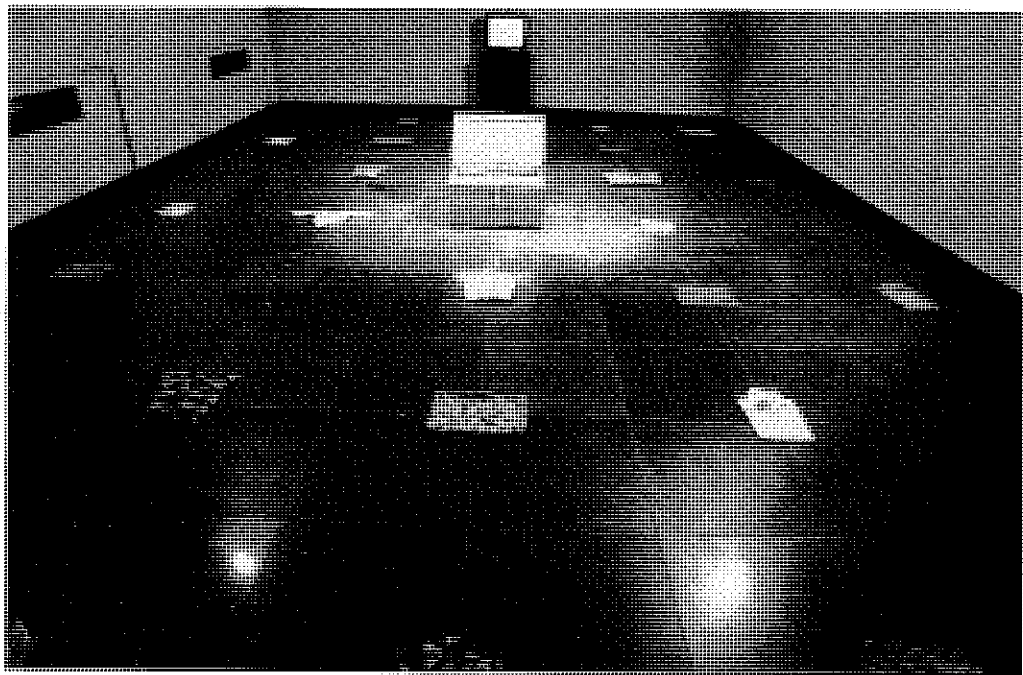


FIGURE 15.4
Yin Xiuzhen, *Suitcase*, 1995,
performance and installation,
Contemporary Art Gallery,
Beijing. Photograph by Song
Dong.

PART THREE

TRANSIENCE

SURFACE

1 In fact, Zhan Wang's most recent project is to make a series of full-size, screenlike mirrors, whose mirroring panels are made of stainless-steel sheets molded on rock surfaces. For a discussion of this and other works by Zhan Wang, see Karen Smith, "Contemporary Rocks," *World Sculpture News*, 30 (Winter 1997), 30-32.

2 This exhibition was held at the Art Museum of the Capital Normal University in Beijing in November 1995.

3 K. Smith, "Contemporary Rocks," op. cit., 30.

4 For illustrations of these works, see *Meishu wenxian* (Art literature), no. 8 (1997), 46-47.

Zhan Wang's *Temptation* (pl. 13) is a group of bodiless figures frozen in dramatic poses; they signify the emptiness left by the missing subject. (See the essay "Demolition Project" in this catalogue.) The idea of emptiness again underlies his *Ornamental Rock* (1996) (pl. 16). But this stainless-steel sculpture only copies the "facade" of a traditional rock; it is open at the back. In this case "empty" is the space around the object reduced to pure surface.

Temptation is about the state of transience: the hollowed human shells register the torture and pain at the moment of the subject's disappearance. Transience is again the theme of *Ornamental Rock*, but it has become an intrinsic quality of the object. The glittering surface of the rock reflects ever-changing images and further distorts them. Like a magic mirror, it does not confirm what is already there, but has the power of generating new illusions.¹ In this way the rock acquires materiality and subjectivity. Zhan Wang can thus conceive his stainless-steel rock as a postmodern "monument" whose surface accounts for everything.

Temptation is one of a series of works by Zhan Wang concerned with urban ruins in contemporary China. The series has evolved without an initial master plan. While an earlier work often led to a later work, the evolving project also reframes the existing pieces and reinterprets them. This is also true of the project to which *Ornamental Rock* belongs. During the past three years, this large project has gradually unfolded from a smaller piece first shown in the 1995 Beijing-Berlin exhibition.² A stainless-steel rock sat on a tripod; underneath it lay scattered fragments of the original rock, which had served as the mold. As Karen Smith has observed: "Here the emphasis was on contrast, one that could be seen and made by the audience, for once the molding of the replica had been completed, the original stone used to form the steel skin was smashed and laid in pieces at the foot of the man-made imitation."³

The relationship between the stainless-steel rock and its stone model absorbed Zhan Wang in 1995 and 1996. By applying a pliable sheet of steel over an ornamental rock and hammering it thoroughly, he could achieve a form that reproduced every minute undulation on the surface of the stone. A large group of such imitations were made. Their models ranged from geometric granite blocks to intricate ornamental rocks;⁴ the



PLATE 16
Zhan Wang, *Ornamental Rock*,
1996, stainless steel, 81 1/2 x 47
x 47 in. (207 x 120 x 120 cm),
collection of the artist.
Photograph by Zou Shengwu.



FIGURE 16.1
Zhan Wang, *Ornamental
Rockery in Front of Beijing's
West Train Station: A Proposal
(elevation)*, 1995. Computer-
generated image by Zhu Yu.

piece in this exhibition is one of the ornamental rock types. Meanwhile, Zhan Wang also began to produce a growing body of documents—statements, project proposals and summaries, interviews, and short essays—to accompany actual works. One of his earliest discussions of these rocks contains this statement:

Placed in a traditional courtyard, rockery satisfied people's desire to return to Nature by offering them stone fragments from Nature. But huge changes in the world have made this traditional ideal increasingly out of date. I have thus used stainless steel to duplicate and transform natural rockery into manufactured forms. The material's glittering surface, ostentatious glamour, and illusory appearance make it an ideal medium to convey new dreams [in contemporary China].⁵

We must realize that to Zhan Wang, “glittering surface, ostentatious glamour, and illusory appearance” are not necessarily bad qualities, and that his stainless-steel rocks are definitely not designed as satire or mockery of contemporary material culture. Rather, both the original rockeries and his copies are material forms selected or created for people's spiritual needs; their different materiality suits different needs at different times. The problem he addresses is thus one of *authenticity*: Which rock—the original or his copy—more genuinely reflects contemporary Chinese culture? Interestingly, the Chinese call natural rockeries *jia shan shi*, or “fake mountain rocks.” According to Zhan Wang, such rocks, even if made of real stones, have truly become “fakes” when used to decorate a contemporary environment. But his stainless-steel rocks, though artificial, signify the “genuine” of our own time.⁶

Gradually the focus of his experiments shifted from the relationship between the stainless-steel rocks and their models to the relationship between these stainless-steel rocks and their environment. From the beginning, his making of these rocks was connected with his critique of Beijing's urban planning and construction. Beginning in the eighties and especially during the nineties, the many high-rises built in Beijing have rapidly transformed the appearance of this ancient city. Mostly adapting Western modern or postmodern styles, these structures also have incorporated certain native elements to make themselves look Chinese. Such “incorporation,” however, is often superficial and stereotypical; the two most frequently used formulas are topping a building with a Chinese tile roof or adding some traditional ornamental rocks in the yard. Zhan Wang disagrees with the opinion that Beijing should be kept in its old form, but he is also dissatisfied with the random and undigested borrowing of Western or traditional forms. He hopes to create art forms that can genuinely reflect changes in a traditional Chinese city—works for “today's fast-paced and competitive society,” in which “insatiable lust for material wealth takes the place of the detached leisure and comforts favored by intellectuals who adhere to their traditional heritage.”⁷

5 Zhan Wang, “Jia shan shi” (“Ornamental rock”), cited in *Shoujie dangdai yishu xueshu yaoqing zhan* (The first academic exhibition of Chinese contemporary art), (Hong Kong: China Oil Painting Gallery, 1996), 114. A manuscript dates this writing to November 26, 1995.

6 Zhan Wang, “Dui ‘jiashan shi’ xianxiang di pingshu” (Some comments on the phenomenon of “ornamental rocks”). Unpublished manuscript. Translation here is based on an English translation provided by the artist.

7 *Ibid.*

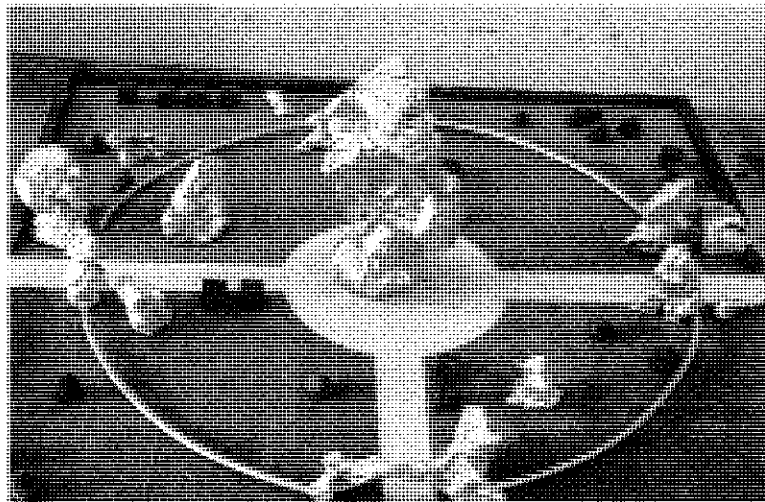


FIGURE 16.2

FIGURE 16.2
Zhan Wang, *Ornamental Rockery in Front of Beijing's West Train Station: A Proposal* (floor), 1995. Computer-generated image by Zhu Yu.

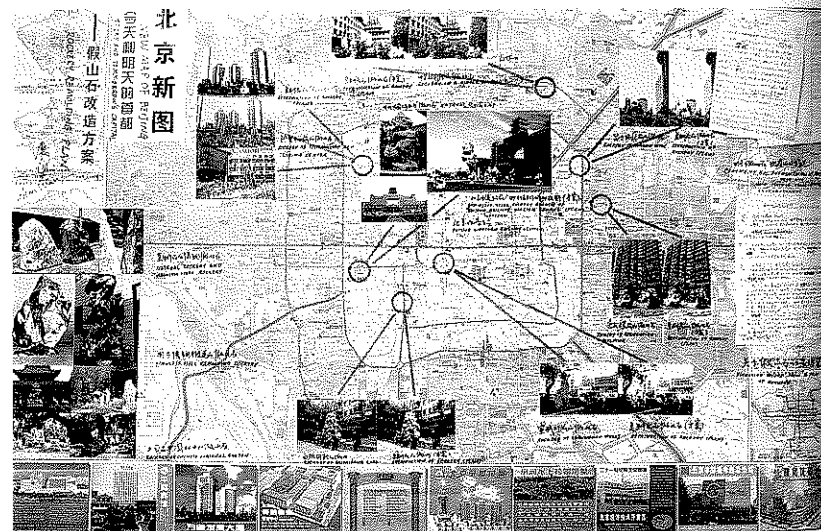


FIGURE 16.3

FIGURE 16.3
Zhan Wang, *New Map of Beijing: Rockery Remodeling Plan*, 1997. The map shows the places where Zhan Wang proposed to install stainless-steel ornamental rocks.

8 Zhan Wang, "New Map of Beijing: Today and Tomorrow's Capital—Rockery Remodeling Plan." Unpublished manuscript.

Believing that his stainless-steel rockeries represent "authentic" Chinese culture in the postmodern condition, Zhan Wang then developed a plan in 1997 called *New Map of Beijing: Today and Tomorrow's Capital—Rockery Remodeling Plan* (fig. 16.1–3). According to this plan, he will replace the natural rocks in front of a number of modern buildings with stainless-steel rocks made from the natural rocks. One of these buildings is the much debated New Beijing Railroad Station, a giant monolith in the shape of a large arch topped with a traditional pavilion. The arch symbolizes the station's role as Beijing's main gate; the pavilion is modeled upon an old wood-framed structure on Coal Hill in the former imperial complex. Many people have criticized the building's hybrid style and wasteful design. But Zhan Wang argues that one should not dismiss this and similar buildings, because hybridity and irony are necessary expressions of contemporary life. The important task is to make a genuine effort to refine such expressions in art. His solution is to replace the natural rockeries in front of the railroad station with stainless-steel copies (figs. 16.2 and .3). Half-genuine and half-mocking, his project proposal lists the following reasons for the copies' superiority:

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 the 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]!*⁸

STATE OF BEING



Today's art is everything about the artist's state of being [shengcun zhuangtai]. The artist should therefore reflect upon and elucidate his state of being in his art. I believe that experimental art should try to dismiss the concept of the "work" and foreground the artist. His state of being will then become the subject as well as the medium of his art.¹

1 Zhu Fadong, "Yishu chengwei shengcun zhuangtai—maixiang tixiang di zhengtu" [Art as a state of being—toward an ideal]. In Zhuang Hui, ed., *Zhongguo zhanxian* (A Chinese front), [Beijing: private publication, 1994].

2 Interview with Zhu Fadong conducted by the author, May 13, 1998. Unpublished record.

With this declaration, Zhu Fadong demands that any discussion of his art begin from an investigation of his "state of being." Born in a small town in the southwestern province of Yunnan, he became an amateur artist in high school. After graduation he worked as a farmer and then as a gardener, while painting portraits in local tea houses as part of his preparation for taking the entry exams of the Yunnan Provincial Art Academy. He was finally admitted after three failed attempts. But he got little there: the academy's curriculum focused exclusively on technical training in realist representation, and almost no information about the experimental art developing in China's metropolitan centers had reached this remote provincial college. Upon graduation he got an editor's post with a newspaper in Zhaotong, a city in Yunnan. A year later he left his job. Like many young people in Yunnan, he decided to seek opportunities in the Special Economic Zones—regions in the country where the Chinese government permitted the free development of a market economy.

Zhu chose the southern city of Haikou on Hainan Island. He later recalled,

It was 1988. Haikou had just begun to develop and everything was very exciting. The place was filled with people and had become even more crowded than Shenzhen [the first Special Economic Zone near Hong Kong]. There were farmers, merchants, college students, etc.—everyone was looking for opportunities to make a buck. At that time the market economy had not started on a nationwide scale. Haikou was an exception and had developed a social system that people called "a large society with a small government." It was very educational: everyone had to earn one's living through hard work.²

PLATE 17
Zhu Fadong, *This Person Is For Sale*, 1994, performance, video documentation [completed in 1998], collection of Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

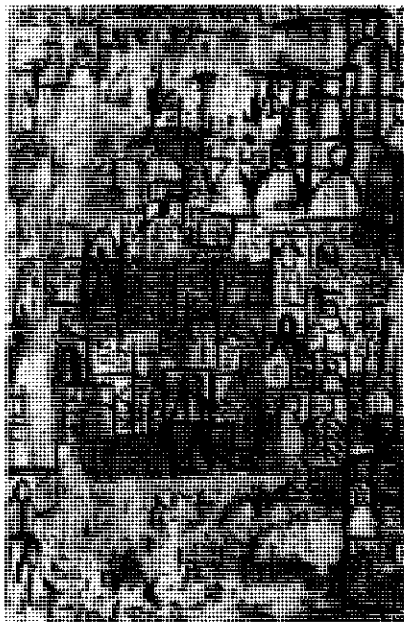


FIGURE 17.1
Zhu Fadong, *Missing, Missing*,
1993, oil on canvas, 47 x 71 in.
(120 x 180 cm), collection of
the artist.

3 Ibid.

4 See, Ye Yongqing and Wang Lin, "Jiushi niandai chu yishu shichang xunti" [A survey of the art market in the early 1990s], in Zhang Qing, ed., *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo meishu 1990-1992* [Chinese art in the 1990s: 1990-1992], [Wulumuqi: Xinjiang meishu sheying chubanshe, 1996], 155-69.

5 "Jinri xianfeng. Shiyen yishujia Zhu Fadong, Zhuang Hui tan-hua" [Today's pioneers: a conversation between experimental artists Zhu Fadong and Zhuang Hui], November 16, 1994, Beijing. Unpublished manuscript, 2.

Zhu Fadong tried various jobs there but failed to prosper. When he returned to Zhaotong in 1989 he had lost his editor's position as well as his apartment; this was the time when he finally decided to become an "avant-garde" artist. This meant that he would have to continue to make use of any available financial opportunity, including making commercial pictures and working in advertising companies, to support his art.

Zhu Fadong's "state of being" can thus be summarized by the phrase *da gong* (literally, "hit a job"). A colloquial idiom without a standard dictionary definition, *da gong* refers to at least two interrelated activities: wandering around searching for odd jobs and working like a dog to survive. The visual signs of *da gong* in a Chinese city include the long line of people outside a "Labor Market" (*Laogong shichang*) and the accumulation of personal advertisements posted along the streets, on telephone poles, and in shabby lanes. Mixed with these advertisements are notices of missing persons—people who came to the city to seek their fortunes but have not been heard of since. These random advertisements and notices were the basis of Zhu Fadong's paintings in 1990 and 1991. Entitled *Black Squares* and *Missing, Missing*, these are compositions filled with tiny squares, each containing figures and words rendered in an extremely sketchy manner (fig. 17.1). He was dissatisfied with these works, however, because "the images were still not crowded enough," and because these oil paintings were somehow less powerful than the original street notices, although he had tried hard to violate the realistic style he had learned in school.³

Another problem with these paintings is the abstraction of the figures, which are nearly reduced to graphic signs. But the whole point of a missing person notice lies in looking for a *real* individual. A breakthrough in Zhu Fadong's art was his identifying this missing subject as

himself. Indeed, who could be "realer" than oneself when one was trying to locate a "real individual"? Moreover, wasn't Zhu Fadong among those "missing" fortune seekers when he was wandering Haikou's streets?

His next project was *Big Business Card* (1993), actually a missing person notice with himself as the subject (fig. 17.2). Glued on a commercial poster are his ID photo and printed words cut from magazines. The notice reads:

NOTICE: LOOKING FOR A MISSING PERSON

Zhu Fadong, artist, male. Missing on December 3, 1993, on the Beijing Road in Kunming.

Features: long, soft and thin hair reaching the shoulders; eyes slightly close to each other; slightly raised eyebrows; long and thin eyes; straight and not-too-long nose; wearing a dark blue hat.

The missing person is a native of Dongchuan near Kunming. Any information appreciated. No visitors please.

Mailing address: Box 273, Mayuan, Kunming.

Zhu Fadong's *Big Business Card* appeared at a moment when Chinese experimental art was facing a grave challenge from commercialization. Starting in the early 1990s, many commercial art galleries were established in China and many experimental artists turned commercial, acquiring representation by Hong Kong or Western dealers. Some large exhibitions, such as the 1990 Guangzhou Biennial, were funded by businessmen and served commercial purposes.⁴ These factors helped blur the boundaries between experimental art and commercial art. *Big Business Card* was a self-conscious effort made by Zhu Fadong to resist this commercial trend. His next project, *Looking for a Missing Person*, represented his denial of the pop style, whose popularity in the early nineties was largely due to its commercial success. He stated in a conversation with the artist Zhuang Hui:

The void and senselessness [in contemporary Chinese art] after the [Guangzhou] Biennial forced me to seek a more direct way to express myself. This offered a new possibility to make a breakthrough. I began the Big Business Card project and made many paper copies. While this work still had a certain pop flavor and still relied on manipulating words, it gave birth to my next project, Looking for a Missing Person, which represented the shift of my focus from myself to society.⁵

Here Zhu Fadong clarifies a misconception in the discussions of his art, which often equate his *Big Business Card* to *Looking for a Missing Person*. According to the artist himself, the latter was developed from the former and represented another crucial leap in his conceptualization of art. The shift "from myself to society" means that he stopped making the *Big Business Card* as a self-contained representation of himself (as the missing subject), but went further to stage a social event, in which this and other images (as

FIGURE 17.2

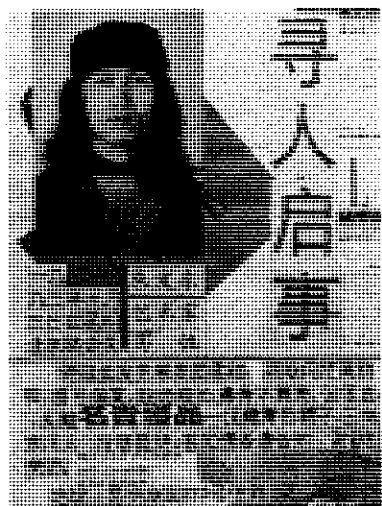


FIGURE 17.2
Zhu Fadong, *Big Business Card*,
1993, collage, size unknown,
collection of the artist.

FIGURE 17.3

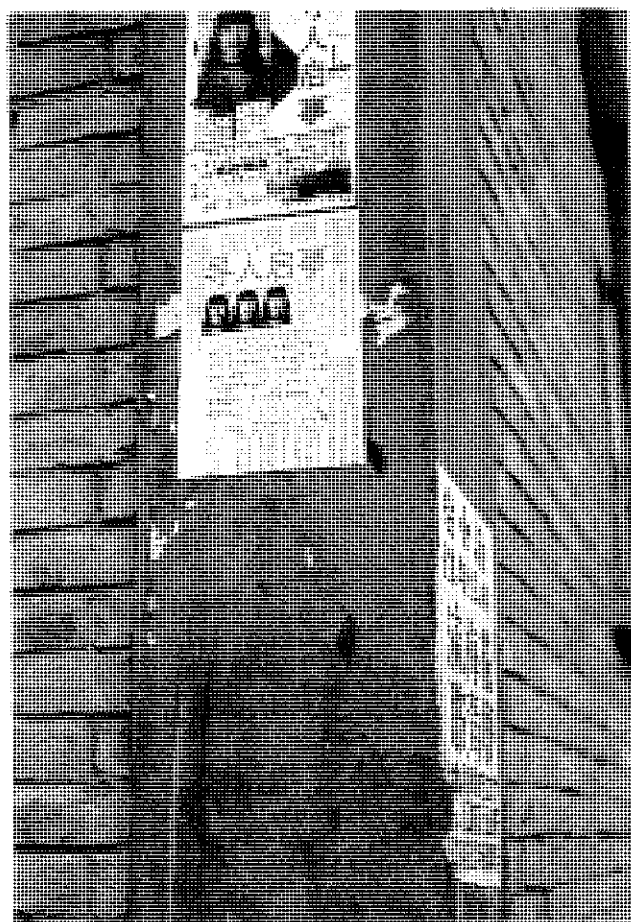
Zhu Fadong, *Looking for a
Missing Person*, 1993, installa-
tion and performance,
Kunming, Yunnan province.

well as the artist himself) were delivered to society. He acted as if he were someone anxiously looking for a lost relative who had gone to the city to look for work; only in this case the missing person was himself. The content and form of this performance were both intimately associated with his experience as a wandering laborer in a Chinese city. By staging this performance he was thus another step closer to the goal of making his "state of being" into "the subject as well as the medium of his art."

The artist made several thousand copies of two different versions of "Notice: Looking for a Missing Person" and, with the aid of his friends, posted them all over Kunming between March and May of 1993 (fig. 17.3).⁶ The idea of a person looking for himself seemed bizarre and frightening, and the varied responses to this event reflected the viewers' different backgrounds and mindsets. The most literal-minded ones asked him whether he was looking for a lost twin; the most religious ones were scared to tears; and the most poetic ones found the performance a profound metaphor for the "self" in a postmodern society.

The video *This Person Is For Sale* (1994) in this exhibition (pl. 17) records Zhu Fadong's next major project, conducted in 1994 in Beijing. Again, the artist provides the best explanation for the subject and the historical background of this work:

FIGURE 17.3



6 See Jia Wei, "Xingwei di Meili—Ji yishujia Zhu Fadong" [The power of action—on the artist Zhu Fadong], *Shidai fengcai* [Modern elegance], no. 43 (1994), 43–45.

7 Zhu Fadong, "Ciren chushou, jiage mianyi: shishi fangan" [This person is for sale; please discuss price in person: a proposal], 1994. Unpublished document.

8 "Jinri xianfeng. Shiyao yishujia Zhu Fadong. Zhuang Hui tanhua," 4.

People's lifestyles and behavior have changed greatly since the 1970s. One of the most fundamental changes has been the large-scale migration caused by the restructuring of the country's economy from an ideologically controlled central planning system to a market controlled modern system. A huge agricultural population has left home and entered large cities to look for jobs. Neither the municipal governments nor the state have been able to control this powerful movement, which has dramatically altered the scale and structure of the urban population. According to an official statistic, the floating population in Beijing [people without city "residence identification cards"] has reached 350 million. A small portion of these emigrants are from cities in the provinces. I am one of them.⁷

The video synthesizes a number of walking trips Zhu Fadong made in Beijing during 1994. In the morning he went out, carrying a briefcase and wearing a clean Mao suit and black leather shoes—a style that could be interpreted variously by fashion-conscious Beijingers as signifying backwardness, eccentricity, or a provincial origins. Attached to his back was a rectangular piece of white cloth, on which two lines of characters were written in red paint: "This person is for sale; please discuss price in person." He always started from Beixinqiao, where he was living, but walked in a different direction each day (fig. 17.4). These journeys had neither systematic plans nor specific designations. He was just wandering alone in an enormous city. He visited various places and buildings in Beijing, buildings traditional or modern, grand or humble. We see in the video the Drum Tower, a MacDonal's restaurant, the National Art Gallery, the former Soviet Union Exhibition Hall, Beijing University, Tiananmen and Tiananmen Square, the East Village of experimental artists, and many other locales. One place he visited was the Labor Market near Chongwenmen, where he mingled with other people who also were "for sale."

Zhu Fadong feels that there is little to be explained in this project: it is transparent and self-explanatory. Here is one of the few comments he has made:

I want to stress [the ironic relationship between this project and commercial culture]. On the surface I identify myself with this culture. But this identification is itself a critique. My criticism is expressed directly through my bodily behavior and thus implies the materialization of my ideas. This is my strategy: to reject an identification by identifying myself with it.⁸

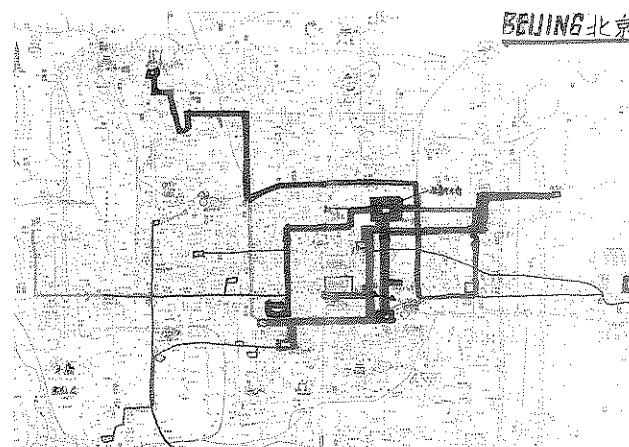


FIGURE 17.4

Zhu Fadong, a Beijing municipal
map showing the routes Zhu
Fadong took in performing *This
Person Is For Sale*.

ZERO GRAVITY

Yu Hong, who painted *Flying* (1997), included in this exhibition (pl. 18), talked about herself in a factual and understated manner in our interview. Only later did I realize that her straightforward account of the “new realists,” a group of young academic painters who came to define the dividing line between experimental and conservative art in the nineties, is very illuminating:

My mother Gao Zhenmei was a student in the class of '64 in the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Under her influence I started to study painting early at Beijing's Youth Palace. I entered the Fine Arts High School [the High School attached to the Central Academy of Fine Arts] in 1980 and was exposed to various kinds of art styles. I then entered the Oil Department of the Central Academy in 1984. When the '85 Art New Wave swept across the country I was rather quiet and withdrawn. Students in the academy were relatively conservative during that period. Many adopted a wait-and-see attitude.

The academy's curriculum placed a heavy emphasis on technical training and “theme painting.” We had to complete many studio assignments, while painting for personal interest only in our leisure time. I spent many hours in the studio drawing plaster or life models—nothing about this is very interesting. I was not a top student in the Fine Arts High School because I was two or three years younger than my classmates. Only after entering the academy did I become aware of what was going on. One of the best things the academy gave me was confidence. I felt that because I could enter the best art school in China and could enter the most sought-after oil painting studio [the Third Studio in the Oil Painting Department], I was considered among the best art students and I should have to paint well [to meet this expectation]. This confidence was crucial to me, otherwise I would have always had to worry about other people's opinion about my work. That would be the end of an artist.

Among the three studios in the Oil Painting Department, the First Studio was founded by professors trained in France [before the 1950s] and the Second Studio was founded by those who studied in the Soviet Union [in the 1950s to 1960s]. But the founder of the Third Studio, Dong Xiwen, never studied abroad. Dong was an open-minded artist, not only emphasizing basic training but also hoping to forge a national oil painting school. He absorbed elements from Dunhuang Buddhist art, but also made some modernist paintings in the



PLATE 18
Yu Hong, *Flying*, 1997, oil on
canvas, 61 x 68 in. (155 x 172.5 cm),
collection of the artist.

1940s and 1950s. I remember that the first classroom assignment I did in the academy, a drawing of [Michelangelo's] David, won praise from teachers. Later I became increasingly interested in everyday scenes of social life and began to paint them: beauty salons, night markets, and others. When the time came for us to prepare our final graduation work, most students wanted to travel to remote minority areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang. But I had really grown to like painting the glamorous yet chaotic urban life scenes. I had lived all my life in [the famous commercial district] Wangfujing at the center of Beijing and was sensitive to any change in fashion. My graduation paintings depicted a crowded escalator and a street scene.

After graduation I stayed on to teach in the academy. I drew a dozen or so female portraits and showed them in The World of Women Artists exhibition in 1990 (fig. 18.1). I also had my first solo show that year. These portraits incorporated many elements from advertisement and costume design. When painting them I did not have a particular artist as my model. I just wanted to make the images really pretty: girls all like pretty colors and hope to be pretty. But ironically this effort made the paintings seem empty; there was something about the figures that made them detached from their environment. I showed such portraits again in the 1991 New Generation (Xin sheng dai) exhibition. All the artists in this show were from art academies, but we did not belong to the [orthodox] school of academic art. To me, this was an exhibition of a group of professional artists of similar age. During the '85 Art New Wave people focused on social and political issues and were rather impetuous. After that period and especially after the June Fourth Movement, people became calmer and deeper and began to pay more attention to actual life and to themselves.¹

Although seldom discussed by art historians, the *New Generation* exhibition in 1991 was a very important event in contemporary Chinese art. It was one of the first major exhibitions mounted after the June Fourth Movement. Taking place in the Museum of Chinese History next to Tiananmen Square, it attracted much attention from artists as well as the general public. Works in the exhibition were markedly different from government-commissioned propaganda paintings, but they also were not the sort of installations and performances seen in the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* show. The paintings' styles departed considerably from the socialist realist model, but all the artists still insisted on figurative images, not abstract patterns. The dominant subjects of these works are mundane scenes of daily life: beauticians with exaggerated smiles, lonely men and women in a public bus or a sleeping car on a train (fig. 18.2), a group of Chinese yuppies taking a picture in front of Tiananmen, and so on. There were different opinions about this show and some sympathizers worried about possible government intervention. But the exhibition ended peacefully, and all the artists went on painting more such works and teaching in their respective schools.

1 Interview with Yu Hong conducted by the author, May 13, 1998. Unpublished record.

FIGURE 18.1
Yu Hong, *Purple Portrait*, 1989, oil on canvas, 51 x 38 in. (130 x 97 cm), collection of the artist.

FIGURE 18.2
Song Yonghong, *Riding in a Bus*, 1991, oil on canvas, 39 x 39 in. (100 x 100 cm), collection unknown.

FIGURE 18.3
Liu Xiaodong, *A Joke*, 1991, oil on canvas, 73 x 71 in. (185 x 180 cm), collection of the artist.

FIGURE 18.1



FIGURE 18.2

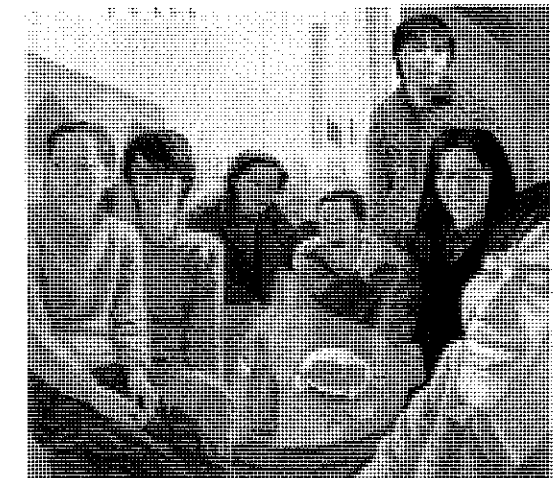
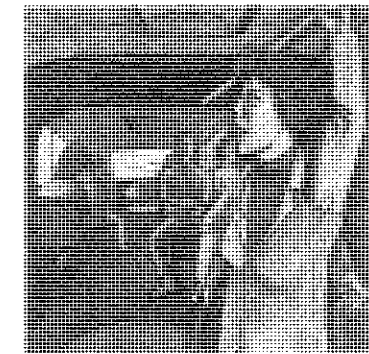


FIGURE 18.3

This exhibition was important for two reasons. First, it announced the coming of age of a group of young academic artists who would soon play a major role in contemporary Chinese art. Second, it defined a new position in Chinese art beyond the dichotomy of orthodox academic art and rebellious "avant-garde" art. It is incorrect to view this position as a simple compromise. Rather, it provided a *real* solution to problems faced by many young Chinese academic painters who shared Yu Hong's educational background and experience. This position was not a political or ideological one but was largely defined in technical and stylistic terms. In fact, contrary to the participants in the '85 Art New Wave, members of this "New Generation" (a term generally referring to academic artists born after 1960) had little interest in group activities. They viewed themselves as individual artists and teachers, not political activists, and they defined their art accordingly.

2 For example, the academic painter and art critic Li Luming wrote in 1991: "Now we have come to realize a simple principle, that the freedom of artistic creation is destined to be restricted. This is an effective rule for an artist in contemporary art. Following this rule an artist should draw a boundary for his or her chosen field of visual imagery, and should try hard to develop his or her art based on logic. —This will demonstrate that this artist has transcended the Art New Wave and has entered a state of scholarly seriousness." Cited in Lü Peng, "Guanyu 1990 nian lai di yishu" (About post-1990 art), in Li Luming, ed. *Zhongguo dangdai yishu wenxian* (Documents on contemporary art, 1990–1991), (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1992), 1–6, quotation from 3.

3 Nan Sha, "89 yihou—Zhongguo zhizao?" (Post-89—Made in China?), in '89-'92 *Zhongguo xiandai yishu* (1989–92 Contemporary Art of China), (Shanghai: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1994), 7–10, quotation from 8–9.

4 Ibid.

5 Liu Xiaodong, "Zunzhong xianshi" (Honor the real), cited in *ibid.*, 9.

6 In fact, some new realists such as Liu Xiaodong are classified as cynical realists, though they have never identified themselves with this particular trend. See *China's New Art, Post-1989*, (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), 92.

7 Yu Hong, "Once More, Painting from Photos," in Akbar Abbas, *Chen Danqing: Painting After Tiananmen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1995).

In terms of medium, these artists insist on conventional materials and methods in traditional artistic genres such as oil painting, sculpture, or prints. If some of them had taken to the street and made some installations in the late eighties, they now returned to the studio and the exhibition hall. In terms of style, they were all "realists," though a wide variety of styles existed to reflect the artists' individual orientations. But whether influenced by Lucian Freud or Balthus, these artists all emphasize technical standards and a logical development of style. Their art thus shows much stronger continuity than works of nonacademic "avant-garde" artists, which often show sudden shifts and rifts in medium and style. Technical professionalism and perfectionism gives these academic painters a kind of quiet superiority. Only occasionally do they stand up to make their position known;² usually they talk little about their works and thus again distinguish themselves from the more "noisy" avant-garde artists. As the art critic Nan Sha has observed:

They do not boast of their art as representing the public's collective experience, but only pursue specific goals in a well-defined area. They do not choose their artistic language based on its "shocking" effect, but prefer to quietly discover their own potential. . . . These "New Generation" artists seem to have most radically abandoned the idealism [of the '85 Art New Wave], as well as the sense of mission and public responsibility. Or perhaps they still believe in these but only act differently.³

Nan Sha suspects that these new realists (also called "new academic artists" are still secretly idealistic because of their shared effort to discover the "spirit of our time" (*Shidai jingshen*) in life;⁴ their art is thus still based on the concept of mimesis and the belief in collectivity. What distinguishes them from orthodox socialist realists, then, is their specific understanding of the "spirit of our time." Instead of depicting revolutionary masses and a broad historical drama, these new realists invariably derive their materials from personal experience and have developed a penchant for the subject of urban life. Their works generally reject narrative and symbolism, but, as attested to by Liu Xiaodong, a representative of new realist art (and Yu Hong's husband), they rely on the artist's minute yet fragmentary observations of life and on his restructuring these observations into a realist representation (fig. 18.3).⁵ Works created through this process often show both the artist's attachment to and detachment from life. While their paintings indeed depict familiar scenes and ordinary people, the artists have modified them into particular images that reflect their strong subjectivity. The colors are often artificial, the figures' expressions exaggerated, their proportions altered. On a deeper level, the ordinariness of the subject matter is equated with the *superficial*; the figures and scenes lend themselves to the artists' representation of this concept.

Yu Hong's self-introduction cited earlier exemplifies a typical attitude of new realists toward their art: these are works without deep meaning because life itself has no deep meaning. The superficial thus becomes the real subject of their art and is pursued through both content and style. The painted scenes—beauty salons, escalators, night markets, public

vehicles—are the most common "surface" phenomena in a metropolis. They are selected not just because they are scenes from daily life but also because they best signify the concept of the superficial.

The figures in these scenes are always engaged in trivial matters and often seem at a loss (fig. 18.3). The superficial is also understood in terms of emotion and mood. New realist paintings neither represent nor demand strong feelings like love or hate. Some of them are lightly humorous or gently affectionate; others carry darker connotations of resentment or indifference. The boundary between new realism and cynical realism is thus a blurry one. In fact, although cynical realism is much better known in the West, it actually is a specific branch of new realism.⁶ Cynical realist artists like Fang Lijun and Liu Wei have the same educational background as new realists and similar painting styles. The difference lies in their self-identification as *liumeng* (rogues) and their extreme attitude of malaise (see fig. 1.4). Both factors helped the cynical realists advertise themselves as "outsiders," while Yu Hong and other new realists remain advantageous "insiders" in the academic world.

Yu Hong's *Flying* is an emblematic example of new realism (pl. 18). The three figures in the painting are suspended in the air, their bodies leaning at various angles and their arms stretched in different directions. Although they seem to be flying, their movements are rigid and their faces tense. About to fall onto one another, they are nevertheless self-absorbed, paying no attention to the others. Against the blue sky, their black-and-white silhouettes are like their own shadows.

Yu Hong told me that this seemingly allegorical painting was based on real life: there are many places in Beijing's public parks where children can play on Beng Beng Beds—a kind of large trampoline on which one can jump over two meters (more than six feet) into the air. She was especially fascinated by the grown-ups who were playing this game, which seems to have offered them a way to release their deep feeling of rootlessness and precariousness. But they did not have to realize this, because it was just a game. They tried to jump higher and higher, and they screamed when they were in the air. They imitated birds flying. They imagined they were no longer subject to gravity. They were excited to experience the sense of danger. While listening to Yu Hong I saw more and more in this painting the essence of new realist art: its reliance on close observation of life, its emphasis on restructuring the artist's experience into a representation, its interest in both reality and subjective experience.

But I was most surprised to learn that this and many of Yu Hong's new realist paintings are actually based on photographs, though at the academy she was most praised for her life drawings. The reason perhaps, as I have discussed elsewhere, is that when used this way, photography inserts a layer between painting and observed reality and is thus able to distance the two.⁷ So once again we return to the entangled intentions of attaching oneself to life and detaching oneself from it, which seem to lie at the heart of new realist art.

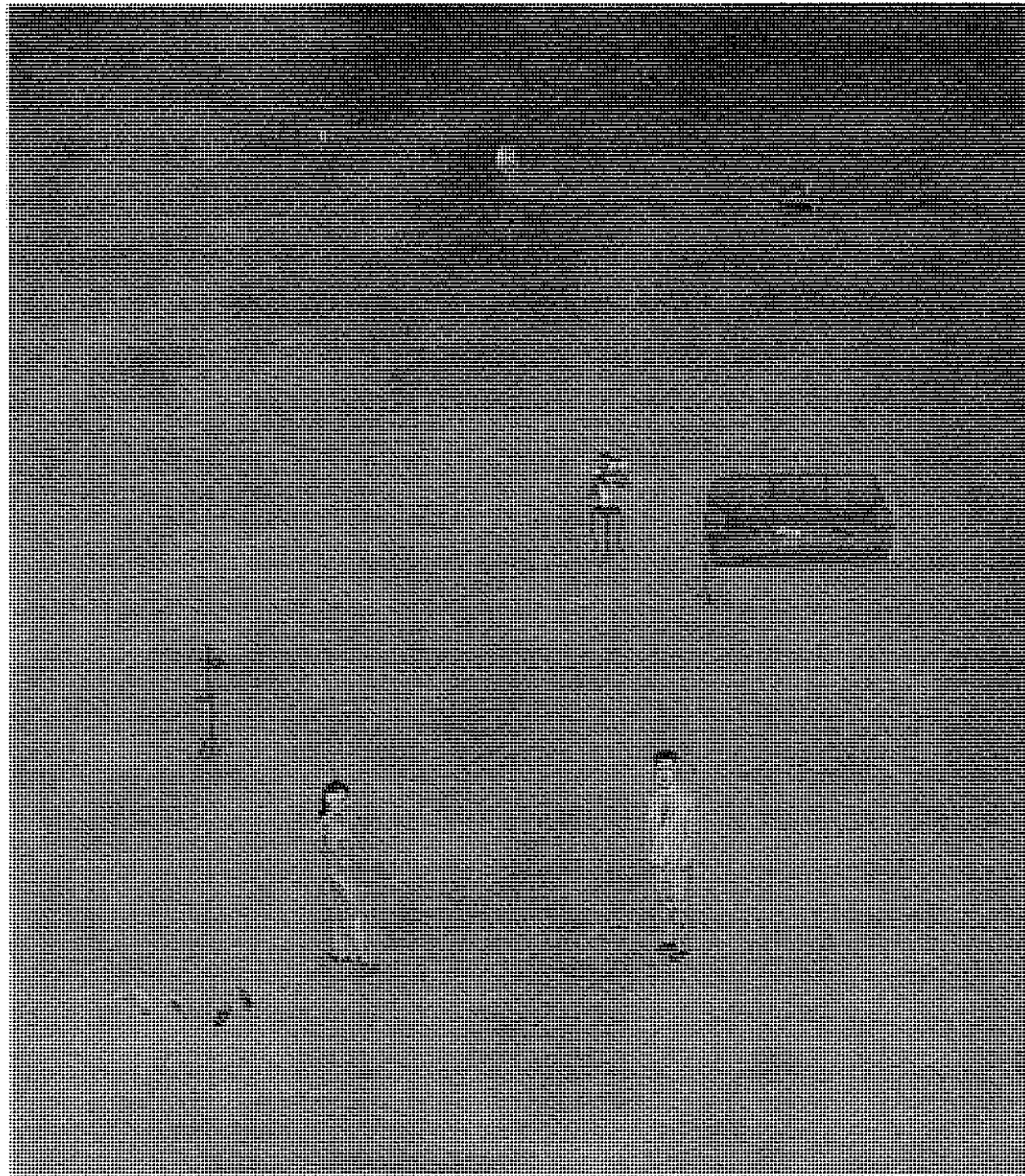


PLATE 19
Zeng Hao, *5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon*, 1996, oil on canvas, 78 1/2 x 68 1/2 in. (200 x 175 cm), collection of the artist.

1 Hu Tu, "Zouxiang biao-mian-hua—Zeng Hao zuopin di shenxexing di dianfu" [Toward the superficial—the subversion of profundity in Zeng Hao's works]. *Hua lang* (Art Gallery), 10–11.

2 Lu Hong, "Panni di tuxiang—wo kan 'xin xingxiang huihua'" [Rebellious images—my reading of "New Image" painting]. As the author of this article indicates, other names for "New Image" painting include "New Imagery" painting [*Xin yixiang huihua*] and "New Expressionist" painting [*Xin biao-xian zhuyi huihua*].

Zeng Hao studied oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts around the same time as Yu Hong. But the two artists have followed quite different routes since their graduation. Yu Hong, as discussed in the previous essay, has insisted on following a realist style and is identified with the New Generation of realists. Zeng Hao, on the other hand, has been challenging not only orthodox academic art, but also the very notion of realist representation.¹ The art critic Lu Hong has thus distinguished him, as well as some other painters showing similar tendencies, from new realists and labeled them "New Imagist" (*Xin Xingxiang*) artists:

It is obvious that "New Imagist" paintings differ markedly from "New Generation" paintings. Their main difference lies in the latter's preservation of traditional concept of realist representation and its strong attachment to the academic world; but "New Image" painters take the traditional realist representation as a taboo or even as a target of subversion. Their "images" often seem strange and abrupt; their colors restless and unrefined; their brushwork rough and sketchy; and their composition absurd or amusing.²

Here Lu Hong defines New Image art primarily in nihilistic terms, but the broad character of this trend may stem from its cultivation of negativism as a strategic disguise for a program of positive restructuring. It is in this light that we can understand Zeng Hao's *5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon* (1996) in this exhibition (pl. 19). The painting portrays two figures—a young man in a yellow suit and a young woman in a blue dress—among scattered objects, including: a red leather sofa, a floor lamp, a night table, a wall clock, and a clothes tree. All these things belong to an interior space, suggesting that this is a private home, probably an apartment in a modern building. But this space is only implied, not represented. No architectural forms—neither walls nor doors nor windows—are shown. The figures and objects seem suspended on an empty surface, a murky void colored a greenish hue.

Equally confusing is the relationship between the two figures and the surrounding objects. Every piece of furniture is brand new and impersonal. Scattered and isolated, these are fragments of a hypothetical whole. The fashionable Western-style clothes identify the man and woman as successful young urban professionals; nevertheless it is strange even for a

“yuppie” to be dressed up while at home. Nor do they seem to be preparing for a business meeting. The painting offers some clues to help us reconstruct their activities: the open book on the sofa seems to belong to the man, and the woman may have been shining her shoes. But for unknown reasons they have simultaneously stopped their activities and come to the foreground. Presumably a couple, they stand far apart and pay no attention to each other; instead, both are absorbed only in *posing* for an external gaze.

The relative size of the figures and things is seriously skewed. But what makes the viewer most uncomfortable is the disproportion between the images and the ground. The painter deliberately leaves a great deal of empty space surrounding the images and is thus able to generate the visual effect of *miniaturization*. In other words, the viewer feels that the figures and things are “miniatures” not because the images are physically small in relation to his own body (as often implied in the notion of miniature), but because of the particular image-ground relationship within the painting. It has been suggested that “there are no miniatures in nature; the miniature is a cultural product, the product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to the physical world.”³ In Zeng Hao’s case, *miniaturization* is produced both in a single pictorial representation and between a series of pictorial representations.

In a single painting like *5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon*, as I have observed, the miniaturization of images results from their skewed spatial relationship within an overwhelmingly empty environment. In a series of paintings Zeng Hao created from 1995 to 1997, we find a gradual intensification of this skewed relationship: images become increasingly smaller in relation to the ground. The painting *Thursday Afternoon* (fig. 19.1), which he made

3 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 55.

4 *Ibid.*, 61–64.

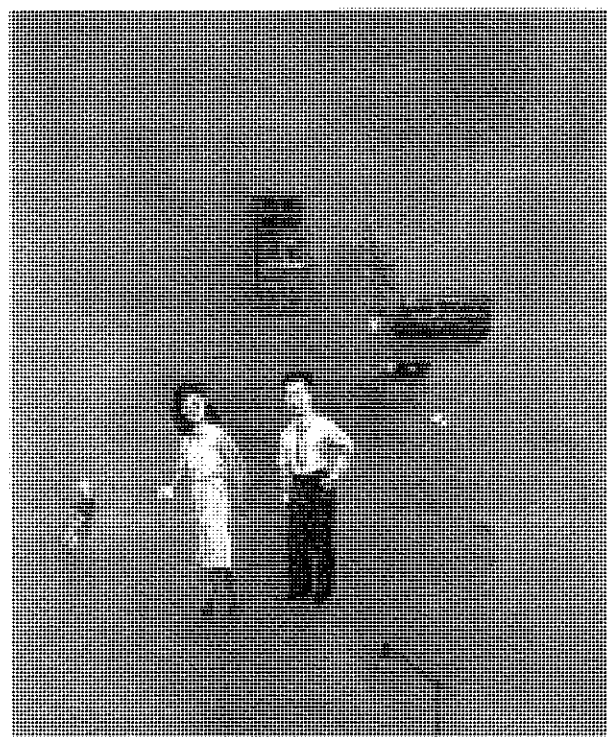


FIGURE 19.1
Zeng Hao, *Thursday Afternoon*,
1995, oil on canvas, 71 x 59 in.
(180 x 150 cm), collection of
the artist.



FIGURE 19.2
Zeng Hao, *September 12th*,
1997, oil on canvas, 71 x 59 in.
(180 x 150 cm), collection of
the artist.

in 1995, can be taken as a direct predecessor of *5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon*. The two paintings employ similar images, but the figures in the earlier work are bigger and are given much more individuality, and the groupings of furniture still hint at a three-dimensional space. The development from the earlier painting to the later painting is thus itself a process of miniaturization—the reduction of images and the expansion of the ground. This development further leads to his 1997 *September 12th* (fig. 19.2), in which the figures and objects have not only shrunk further, but have become completely isolated and fragmentary. The artist has scattered all the images on a flat, opaque field, making only a minimal effort to associate them into any conceivable homogeneous relationship.

Miniaturization is linked to the phenomenon of *objectification*: when images are made miniature, our transcendent viewpoint makes us perceive them—both the figures and their material belongings—as pure objects. In real life, this miniaturization/objectification process is best exemplified by a dollhouse, in which furniture and figures make up the diminutive world of childhood.⁴ Zeng Hao’s toy furniture and toy figures are not made for children, however, and they are made for display, not play. What his paintings display is a distinct *interiority* that has become increasingly typical in contemporary China. Two essential characteristics of this interiority are, first, the independence of an interior space from the external space, and, second, the substitution of things for an interior space. These features are again related to a fragmented inner sense of time.

A common situation today in China is the dramatic contrast between a private interior space and a public exterior space. This interior space has a most concrete definition: the door of one's apartment. Outside the door, even in a new building belonging to a school or an institute (such as the faculty housing of the Central Academy of Fine Arts near Wangfujing), the staircases are rarely cleaned, the walls are dusty and scratched, the corridors are filled with coal briquettes, the lightbulbs are missing. The unsightliness is no different from a Chicago housing project. But one enters an apartment to find another world. The space is small but carefully arranged and decorated; some apartments are equipped with expensive furniture, high-tech machines, and souvenirs from foreign countries. Such contrast between the two spaces has been intensified during recent years by various factors. Until recently the Chinese were not allowed to purchase real estate, but there has been a change in property ownership, and a privately owned apartment has become the ultimate proof of a person's social and financial status. A rapidly growing urban middle class is now passionate about interior decoration as a demonstration of an affluent lifestyle and refined taste. Another factor is a pervasive uncertainty about the public environment (including the never-ending urban destruction and construction), which forces people to turn to smaller, private spaces. Finally, there is the lack of maintenance of public properties: while the government tries to save money by reducing such services, a new system of maintaining common spaces by residents themselves has not yet been developed.

Related to all these factors is the business of "interior furnishing" (*shinei zhuangzhi*), which has recently become one of the most profitable businesses in China. New shops selling Western-style furniture, modern kitchen and bathroom equipment, and fancy light fixtures are seen everywhere in Chinese cities, and one can find all sorts of interior decoration guides in bookstores (fig. 19.3). The common wisdom of interior furnishing, however, still centers on the notion of *jian* or "piece." A "big *jian*" means a piece of furniture or equipment that has acquired a conventional social meaning: it not only fulfills the need for convenience or comfort, but demonstrates the owner's sophistication, social connections, and financial security. A well-furnished apartment is essentially a collection of such "big pieces," which are sought after but often prohibitively expensive for an ordinary family. The accumulation and exhibition of these "pieces" thus serve to construct a particular interiority and subjectivity—a private environment in which men and women are linked with (and identified by) their collections of furniture and other objects.

This kind of interiority and subjectivity is the content of Zeng Hao's painting. In an interview the artist related the isolated objects in his works—stylish furniture and audio-video equipment—to his experience in Guangzhou: "Everyday you see, in home after home, everyone is filling his (or her) home with fancy stuff. It feels weird in such an environment."⁵ His paintings do not portray these homes realistically, however. Rather, they heighten the sense of insecurity associated with the homes.

This insecurity is generated within this kind of interior space, which has no personality, intimacy, or even secrecy. It is, in fact, a void, in which well-dressed young men and women stand amidst their enviable collections of *things* while staring blankly at the space before them. This space is, therefore, not really an "interior" space after all, because everything in it represents knowledge shared by the society at large. As represented in Zeng Hao's painting, this space has no set boundaries, only stereotypical images. It is thus both closed and open, both personal and collective, both a microcosm and a macrocosm, both a fact and a fiction.⁶

This interior space has its own temporality. The miniaturization of figures and things produces a compressed "private time" that is disconnected from an external "collective time." According to Susan Stewart:

The miniature does not attach itself to lived historical time. Unlike the metonymic world of realism, which attempts to erase the break between the time of everyday life and the time of narrative by mapping one perfectly upon the other, the metaphoric world of the miniature makes everyday life absolutely anterior and exterior to itself. The reduction in scale that the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its "use value" transformed into the infinite time of reverie.⁷

Stewart's discussion helps explain the titles Zeng Hao gives to his miniature imagery. Each of his paintings has a title that indicates a moment: *December 31st*, *Thursday Afternoon*, *Yesterday*, *Friday 5:00 p.m.*, or *17:05, July 11th*.⁸ There is no continuity between these moments, and we do not even know which moment is earlier or later because the year is never given. These titles thus function as fragmented signifiers that fail to link situations into a coherent sequence. As a result, his interior space, with its isolated figures and things, is always in a perpetual present.

5. Quoted from Li Xianting, "Pingmian er shuti di richang jingguan: Zeng Hao zuopin jiqi xiangguan huati" [Flat and detached scenes in ordinary life: Zeng Hao's work and some related topics], in *Zeng Hao* (Beijing: Zhongyang meishu xueyuan hualang, 1996), 1.

6. This and the previous paragraph are reprinted with slight modifications from my essay "Ruins, Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/Postmodern." In Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1998), 64–65.

7. S. Stewart, *On Longing*, 65.

8. For illustrations, see *Zeng Hao*.



FIGURE 19.3
The cover of *Jiaju yu huanjing*
[Furniture and environment]
magazine (1998. 3).

TRANSLUCENCY

Translucency differs from *transparency* in its partial “see-throughness.” Unlike a transparent object, which can be totally or nearly invisible, a translucent object has the ability to make itself both exist and not exist. When seen it never volunteers to leave your view, but simultaneously pretends to guide your gaze to something else behind it. (I say “pretends” because it does not really allow you to see that “something else” clearly either.) *Translucency* thus also means the reluctance either to make the object the viewing focus or to yield it for other purposes. The results are the object’s partial disappearance and the viewer’s lack of commitment.

Such ambiguity in a translucent object can become a calculated act, however, as in Wang Jin’s *A Chinese Dream* (1996–97) in this exhibition (pl. 20). This work consists of two faithful copies of Peking Opera costumes but substitutes uniformly translucent plastic sheets for the colorful silk and satin materials. The fanciful embroidered patterns on the original costumes are retained, but they become patterns of nylon thread. Slightly bluish, the objects look illusory and weightless. (Each is actually much heavier than a real silk costume.) Wang Jin once hung such a plastic costume in the famous Long Corridor in Beijing’s Summer Palace amidst hundreds of tourists (fig. 20.1). Some tourists paused to admire it; others walked by without noticing it at all. It received a similarly mixed reaction when it was first shown in Beijing. Some people considered it a work of art while others labeled it craft. But this debate is beside the point. Wang Jin first made a plastic costume for a special exhibition and auction in Beijing. Organized by the art critic Leng Lin, this 1997 auction was conceived as a joint venture of scholars and businessmen to test the social mobility and commercial viability of art in contemporary China. When invited to submit a work for the event, Wang Jin made the first of a series of plastic drama costumes and titled the whole series *A Chinese Dream* (a title that has a strong commercial flavor and implies the non-Chinese identity of a potential customer). This first work sold for \$10,000.

Viewed in this context, the subject of Wang Jin’s drama costumes is the commercialization of traditional Chinese culture represented by the fate of Peking Opera. While this old dramatic genre has never died in China, it now serves two distinct audiences with vastly different tastes



PLATE 20

Wang Jin, *A Chinese Dream*, two costumes. Front costume, 1997, polyvinyl chloride, 71 x 78 x 11 in. (180 x 198 x 28 cm); rear costume, 1998, polyvinyl chloride, 65 x 43 x 18 in. (165 x 110 x 45 cm), collection of the artist.

and expectations. No longer in Beijing can one find the large Peking Opera houses that regularly attracted huge domestic crowds in the 1950s and 1960s. These have disappeared, replaced by exquisite “miniature” theaters inside old gardens or five-star hotels. Today these new theaters charge a steep fee of some \$30 per person for two hours of “authentic cultural experience” and serve foreign tourists exclusively. The authenticity of the theater and performance, however, is all about *surface*. The theater is always freshly decorated with all-too-colorful patterns. The plays are selected to satisfy the audience’s fascination with acrobatic fighting scenes and especially with the exotic face painting and beautiful costumes of the characters.¹ Meanwhile, native Peking Opera lovers continue an old tradition of meeting in open public spaces, watching performances by amateur actors. There is no theater, no stage set, no lighting, no makeup or costumes, nor even any acting. To this audience, Peking Opera is exclusively about singing.

What Wang Jin tries to capture in *A Chinese Dream* is exactly the kind of authenticity one finds in a tourist Peking Opera theater, which in a broader sense is also the authenticity of Chinese culture in an increasingly

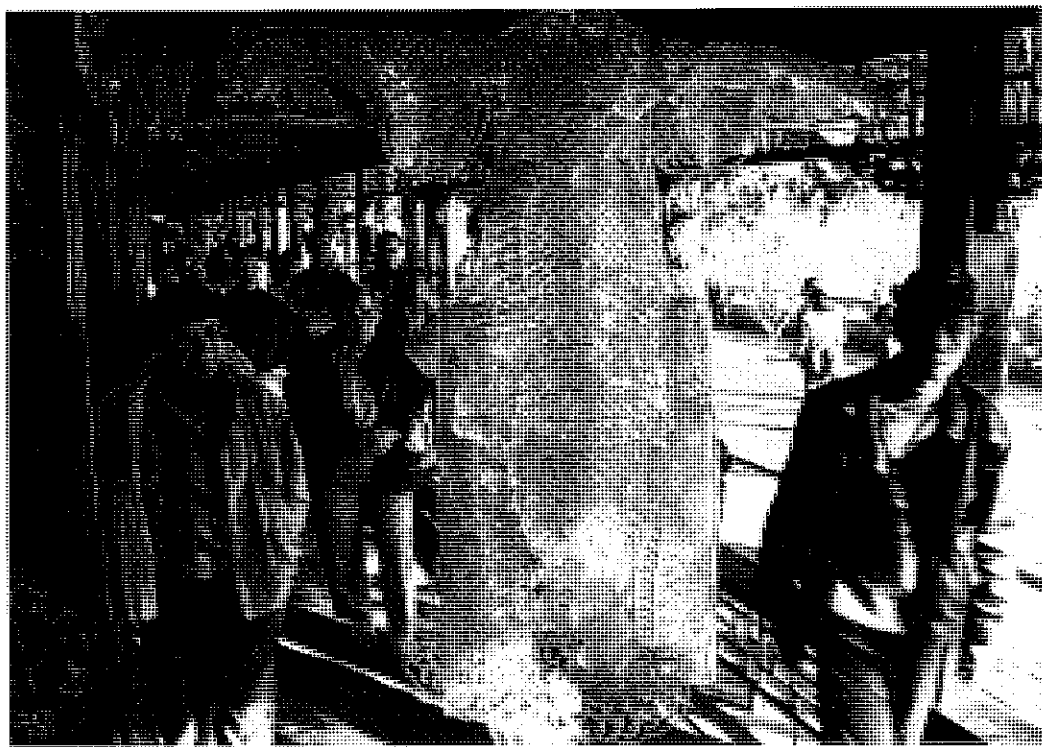


FIGURE 20.1
Wang Jin, *A Chinese Dream*
installed in the Long Corridor in
the Summer Palace, Beijing,
1997. Photograph by the artist.

1 Occasionally, with luck, however, one can still run encounter “real” performances by serious actors.

2 Cited in Matei Mihalca, “Passion Statement: Avant-garde Artist Concocts Social Commentary From Art,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Dec. 29, 1994/Jan 5, 1995, 106. Translation slightly modified.

3 Interview with Wang Jin conducted by the author, May 13, 1998. Unpublished record.

4 M. Mihalca, “Passion Statement,” *op. cit.*, 106. Interview with Wang Jin conducted by the author.

5 For a brief English introduction to these works, see Sue Dewar, “In the Eye of the Beholder: The Art of Wang Jin and Feng Jiati,” *Art Asia Pacific* 15 (1997), 66–73.

commercialized society. By making the costumes translucent, he is able to define this culture as both there and not there. Like the theater, these costumes are all about surface and not at all about substance. They copy traditional drama costumes but actually make the models disappear. The copies replace colorful and fragile fabric with a “cool” industrial material that will never dissolve. They are see-through and empty and perfectly frank about their emptiness. In fact, these costumes *advertise* their emptiness as a virtue because the viewer is released from a serious commitment to them, in the same way that tourists at a Peking Opera house feel perfectly free to leave in the middle of a play.

The son of an army officer, Wang Jin grew up among uniformed soldiers in a military compound in the northwestern city of Datong. He remembers the first drawing he made after taking a shower in a public bathroom with his father and other army men. “Stripped of their uniforms they were so different from real life,” he recalled. “But I discovered that, when naked, everyone’s the same.”² The logic seems somewhat twisted here, because the four-year-old boy equated the uniform with real life but separated the naked from the undressed. The subject of his first drawing was nakedness—male genitals that he painted on the walls in the army base.³

Until 1992 Wang Jin followed the conventional path to become a state-employed artist: showing early talent in painting, entering the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts to study traditional Chinese drawing, graduating from the academy, and receiving a teaching post at the Beijing Fashion Institute. But in 1992 he resigned his post and became a freelance artist. While supporting himself mainly by selling paintings in traditional styles, he has developed many performance and environmental projects, which have made him one of the most socially engaged experimental artists in China. As I have discussed earlier in this catalogue, his two environmental projects *Red Flag Canal* and *Beijing-Kowloon* (see fig. 9.3) focus on the relationship between the past, present, and future in modern Chinese political history. (See the essay accompanying Cai Jin’s *Beauty Banana No. 48*.) He also was one of the earliest to respond in his art to the large-scale demolition in Beijing. *Walls* (1992), his first performance project as an independent artist, was staged in a demolished traditional house next to the new Beijing Amusement Park. He painted chairs, tables, and vases on the walls and then burned down the structure. “I can’t rebuild the past,” he remarked, “but I can evoke it.” (For experiments with “ruin” images in contemporary Chinese art and their relationship with demolition, see my essays accompanying Zhan Wang’s *Temptation*, Rong Rong’s *Untitled*, and Yin Xiuzhen’s *Suitcase* in this catalogue.)

A large group of his projects responds to the rapidly growing capitalist economy in China.⁵ Some of these works comment on the clash—and fusion—of new and old values by creating ironic combinations of foreign and Chinese symbols. *Knocking at the Door* (1993), for example, consists of seven old bricks from the walls of the Forbidden City, each bearing on its uneven surface a supra-realistic depiction of an American currency

FIGURE 20.2



FIGURE 20.3



FIGURE 20.2
Wang Jin, *Ice, 96 Central China*, 1996, installation and performance, Zhengzhou, Henan province.

FIGURE 20.3
Audience breaking Wang Jin's ice wall. *Ice, 96 Central China*, 1996, installation and performance, Zhengzhou, Henan province.

note. He continued to paint such “cash bricks” in the following years and used them to “restore” damaged sections of the palace wall. Other projects in this group express, again in exaggerated and ironic forms, the growing material desire in contemporary Chinese society. For example, a new catchword in colloquial language for “making a fast buck” is “stir-frying money” (*chao qian*). Making the verbal expression literal, Wang Jin rented a space in the night market on Dong’anmen Avenue (a famous place for street food in central Beijing) in 1995, and set up a food stand. With all the aplomb of a master chef he fried a wok-full of coins for his customers. This project was called *Quick Stir-Frying Renminbi*.

In Wang Jin's view, this and other of his performance projects “are his response to and/or his solution of complex dilemmas in modern civilization.”⁶ It is worth having a closer look at his 1996 project *Ice, 96 Central China*. Although this project was again about commercial culture and material desire, it had a much more ambitious plan, and its quality of translucency anticipated *A Chinese Dream*.

The context of this project was a commercial scheme. In 1995 a major department store in central Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province, burned down. The new shopping center was completed a year later and the manager planned to make its opening a grand event, including not only various commercial promotions but also artistic activities. Through personal connections Wang Jin was hired to make a sculpture in the square in front of the store. What he created was a thirty-meter-long (98-foot) wall of ice composed of more than six hundred individual ice blocks. Over a thousand individual objects were frozen inside the translucent ice. Song Xiaoxia's report describes the nature of these objects and the sensation they caused:

These included bottles of perfume, cellular phones, leather goods, TV sets, watches, and gold rings—things that would excite a contemporary shopper most and things that best symbolize an urban lifestyle. But the artist froze these desirable goods in ice blocks. At the time when a “commercial war” between investors had become white-hot in Zhengzhou, he built this ice wall in the heart of the city's commercial district. The day when the wall was unveiled, many people heard about it and rushed to the site. They crowded along the wall in thick layers; such a scene was truly unheard of (fig. 20.2). The publicity this installation created helped the investors [in the new shopping mall] to achieve their goals. The excited public then competed to break open the ice to take away the things inside (fig. 20.3). Their desire had been heated up by the commercial promotion campaign. The goods in the ice wall were full of seduction, not just because of their practical value but also because they symbolized a perfect lifestyle advertised by the commercial culture.⁷

Fig. 20.2 shows the crowds gathered along Wang Jin's ice wall. This picture strikes me most not for the mass participation in this artistic event, but for the audience's unusual relationship to an art object. Rarely do we find such a situation, in which a massive installation attracts viewers to come so close to it, to the extent that they press their faces to the surface of the object. We can try to reconstruct the visual experience of these viewers: when they walked into the square they first saw the wall of ice and were amazed by its scale and appearance. When they came near, however, the translucent wall gradually disappeared from their field of vision; their eyes fixed on the commercial goods suspended in the ice blocks, which drew them closer and closer. But their desire to possess these goods was temporarily denied: the wall was still there and would block the visitors' physical contact with the objects. (In other words, the wall contained the objects and had turned them into sheer images.) The only way to possess the objects—to transform them back from images to material things—would be to destroy the wall.

Wang Jin did not plan the destruction of the ice wall. When it did happen he wished that the objects, even having been taken away by people as commercial goods, had been “purified by the ice.”⁸ But as Song Xiaoxia has argued, this hope may only testify to the artist's own idealism. When the ice wall was smashed, any effort to transform material desire into artistic desire was rejected by the consumer/audience itself.⁹

6 Zhang Kang, “Bishang yanjing du Wang Jin” (A meditation on Wang Jin's art), *Mingbao yuekan* (Mingbao monthly), 1996.12, 64.

7 Song Xiaoxia, “Xiaofei shidai zhong di shijue yishu” (Visual art in a commercial era), *Ershtyi shiji* (The twenty-first century), 1997.12, 102–104, quotation from 104.

8 Wang Jin, “Guanyu ‘Bing, 96 Zhongyuan’ zuopin” (About my work *Ice, 96 Central China*), *Dangdai yishu* (Contemporary art series), no. 11 (1996), 39.

9 Song Xiaoxia, “Xiaofei shidai zhong di shijue yishu,” 104.

FALLEN ANGELS

The two photographs by Liu Zheng in this exhibition represent scenes from two Peking Opera plays, *Legend of the White Snake* (*Baishhe zhuan*, pl. 21.1) and *The Monkey King Defeats the White-Boned Demon Three Times* (*Sun Wukong sanda Baigujing*, pl. 21.2). Although the female characters in both plays are nonhuman, the first play is a moving romance about the burden of love; the second, based on an episode in the novel *Journey to the West*, belongs to a "martial" genre (*wu xi*) and dazzles the audience with acrobatic fighting scenes.

Legend of the White Snake revolves around a white snake that transforms itself into a beautiful lady and descends to the earth with a green snake that also changes itself into a pretty maid to serve as her companion. In the scenic city Hangzhou, the White Snake meets a handsome young man, Xu Xian, and falls deeply in love with him. Without knowing she is a snake, Xu marries her, but their happy marriage is disturbed by a Buddhist abbot, who recognizes her as an alien being and persuades Xu Xian to reveal her true form. In the play the White Snake is cast as a sympathetic character with womanly virtues. The abbot's incantations and magic enable him finally to imprison her under a pagoda. Liu Zheng's photograph represents a dramatic moment in the play: Xu Xian meets the White Snake again after he has betrayed her. The impetuous Green Snake wants to kill him, but the White Snake stops her and lets her lover go.

In sharp contrast, the White-Boned Demon in the other play is an evil figure who schemes to capture the handsome monk Tripitaka on his journey to seek Buddhist scriptures in India, not only to satisfy her lust but also to bring her immortality: she will live forever if she can eat his flesh. Three times she transforms herself to deceive Tripitaka—into an old man, an old woman, and a young maiden—but each time her scheme is exposed by Tripitaka's loyal guardian, the Monkey King. She eventually manages to capture Tripitaka after the monk has driven the Monkey King away. But the Monkey King saves his master just before he is put in a boiling cauldron. The scene represented in Liu Zheng's photograph takes place in the White-Boned Demon's Cave, where the demon and the Monkey King are engaged in their final struggle.

Both plays are among the regular repertoire of any Peking Opera troupe and have been made into movies, TV series, and cartoons. Their



PLATE 21
Liu Zheng, *Peking Opera Scenes*, 1997, pl. 21.1, "The Legend of the White Snake" and pl. 21.2, "The Monkey King Defeats the White-Boned Demon Three Times," two black-and-white photographs, each 39 x 39 in. (100 x 100 cm), collection of the artist.



1 *Legend of the White Snake*, for example, is traditionally performed on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

2 Rey Chow, "A Souvenir of Love," in *idem.*, *Ethics after Idealism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 133-48, quotation from 133. Here Chow focuses on Hong Kong, but her discussion can largely be applied to Mainland China as well.

3 *Ibid.*, 134.

4 See Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Susan Stewart, "Notes on Distressed Genres," in *idem.*, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 66-101.

5 Reproductions of historical photographs are among the most popular publications in recent years and take various forms from cheap postcards to expensive multivolume series. Among them, a small pamphlet called *Vintage Photos* (*Lao zhaopian*) has developed into a serial journal with a regular print run of more than 100,000 copies.

plots, characters, costumes, and stage sets have become stock materials in contemporary Chinese visual culture. The historical provenance of the plays, however, has largely disappeared in this cultural circulation: only scholars are interested in their origins and development; to the mass audience they are timeless fables and seasonal entertainment.¹ Liu Zheng's photographs are both connected to and separated from this popular theatrical tradition. While employing many stage conventions, including costumes, paraphernalia, and dramatic gestures, the photographs distinguish themselves from stage stills by two means—the figures' nudity and the pictures' "antique" finish. These two factors dismiss the importance of the plots of the historical drama, and give the timeless plays a distinct 1990s temporality, signified simultaneously by nostalgia and kitsch.

Anyone visiting an antique shop in China during the 1990s would find a jumble of old printed images: posters, advertisements, postcards, magazines, comic strips, and photographs. Mostly dating from the first half of this century, these yellowed images sealed in plastic folders are mixed with more recent "antiques" from the Cultural Revolution, such as images of Mao and propaganda posters. Rey Chow rightly sees in these commercial goods that "strong feelings of nostalgia are at work."² But nostalgia, or *huai jiu* (literally "missing the old"), means something more specific in this context than a general "longing for the past."³ In particular, the concept of *huai jiu* should be distinguished from that of *huai gu* ("contemplating the past," also the name of a traditional poetic genre). Although *jiu* and *gu* can both be translated as "old" in modern Chinese, *jiu* means a more recent and reachable past, while *gu* refers to an ancient time or antiquity. *Jiu* describes things faded and worn; *gu* pertains to things buried or fragmented. Although both *huai jiu* and *huai gu* imply "a gap of time, effacement, and memory," the size of the gap differs vastly in each case. *Huai gu* often laments a past dynasty, but *huai jiu* is about recalling one's own childhood or youth. The Chinese concept of *huai jiu* thus differs from the kind of nostalgia described by Caryl Flinn or Susan Stewart, both of whom relate nostalgia to a longer time span.⁴

The particular conception of *huai jiu* explains why old photographs have become the primary site of nostalgia in China. Far more powerful than old architecture, films, fashion, or even other forms of printed images such as posters and advertisements, "historical photographs" have captured the imagination of society at large, collected with great enthusiasm and reproduced in large volumes.⁵ The past registered in these images is not that of antiquity, but must be defined by the technology of photography itself: it is the modern past of a postmodern society (just as *huai jiu* is about one's own childhood or youth). This specific past is best represented by Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, when the city grew into an international metropolis with a booming entertainment business and a host of movie and opera stars. This "past," however, was largely erased from the official history of modern China after 1949, mainly because it was identified with China's shameful colonial period in

FIGURE 21.1



FIGURE 21.2



FIGURE 21.1
Anonymous, "The Legend of the
White Snake," played by Mei
Lanfang, circa 1930.

FIGURE 21.2
Liu Wei, *You Like Pork?* 1995.
oil on canvas, 79 x 59 in. (200 x
150 cm), Hanart T Z Gallery,
Hong Kong.

Communist historiography. Only from the late 1970s did the memory of this past resurface. First a few old musicians began to play thirties jazz in Shanghai's art deco International Hotel. Gradually all old calendars, posters, and photographs became collectable. People were astonished by how many of these fragile materials had survived the official campaign of "Eliminating the Four Olds" (old ideas, costumes, culture, and beliefs) during the Cultural Revolution.

Unlike a ruined palace or a rusty bronze, an old photograph does not have to be torn or covered with dirt to signify the past. Its bond with nostalgia lies in its particular materiality: while extremely ephemeral, the image on paper is still *intact* and hence *intimate* to us; its *jiu*-ness (old-ness) is implicit in the age of the paper and in the old-fashioned photographic style. A popular type of old photographs, Peking Opera stills, is often made from large glass negatives, which have a very fine

texture. Because of the limitations of early technology, most of these stills were taken in studios (fig. 21.1). The compositions show a frontal and balanced tableau. The actors, often the most renowned of the time, pose in dramatic but frozen gestures against a painted backdrop that provides a stylized and weightless scenery. It is obvious that Liu Zheng's two photographs imitate the theatricality of this type of visual representation. Both photographs are likewise taken in a studio; they show tableaux that are deliberately static and artificial; and their brownish tone and fine texture further add a vintage flavor. Liu Zheng told me that he had tried to produce "scratches" in other pictures. For this he had to destroy the negatives because "otherwise the effect would not be real."⁶

Liu Zheng's effort to "imitate the old and worn" (*zuo jiu*) seems to identify his works, in Susan Stewart's term, as products of a "distressed genre"—"new antiques" made through simulation and "affliction."⁷ Unlike a distressed object, however, Liu Zheng's pictures recapture *only* the nostalgic "period feeling" of old photographs but not their iconography. In other words, if a distressed work, as Stewart has argued, negates the contingencies of its immediate history by inventing a replica of the past in the present, Liu Zheng never intends to reject such contingencies or to identify himself completely with the past. Rather, he redefines the nostalgic imagery of the historical photograph strictly as an art *style*, not as a stimulus for a real return to a vanished historical moment. To this effect, the nudity of his Peking Opera photographs instantly destroys any *huai jiu* possibility, but bolds the viewer in the present through a kitsch aesthetic. Contrary to the delicate nostalgic sentiments of loss and longing, the naked breasts and hairy legs in the photographs are uninhibited and unimpassioned; figures in the "White-Boned Demon" scene roll around in clumsy and vulgar gestures. Normally veiled in old Chinese photographs, these crude and mundane images cancel the refined nostalgic sentimentality with their explicit erotic force.⁸

After a long period of prohibition, nudes were finally allowed in the late 1970s, and soon Chinese art and visual culture were flooded with a variety of such representations. This movement started with the "rehabilitation" of artistic renderings of nudes in academic art. A *Grand Exhibition of Nudes (Renti dazhan)* in Beijing attracted a huge crowd. Quite contrary to the artists' intention, their "classical" female figures were welcomed by the public as erotic art.⁹ The meaning of these images thus lay precisely in a moment of undressing: for the first time in the PRC the female body, no matter how impersonal and idealized, was stripped naked before the public eye. Other nude images, including commercial and pornographic types, entered mass culture during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, quite a few artists began to paint nudes in a deliberately "kitschy" style. This trend is epitomized by the cynical realist artist Liu Wei, whose 1995 *You Like Pork?* (fig. 21.2) is a series of large erotic paintings, in which a naked woman "is portrayed as an icon of worship, looming large and proud in a sea of rotting flesh."¹⁰

6 Interview with Liu Zheng conducted by the author, May 10, 1998. Unpublished record.

7 S. Stewart, "Notes on Distressed Genres," 67–68.

8 To my knowledge, there was no tradition of erotic photography in early twentieth-century China. Photographs of nudes were limited and often employed a self-conscious "arty" style.

9 See Yin Jinan, *Duzi koumen: Jinguan Zhongguo dangdai zhulin yishu* [Alone knocking on the door: A close observation of some major trends in Contemporary Chinese art]. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1993), 185–203.

10 Chang Tsong-zung, "The Other Face," in *L'altra Faccia: The Artists Cinesi* (Milan: Zanzibar, 1995), 3.

FIGURE 21.3
Liu Zheng, *Three Actresses*, 1995,
black-and-white photograph,
39 x 39 in. (100 x 100 cm),
collection of the artist.



In retrospect, we realize that the popularity of nudes in post-Cultural Revolution China exactly parallels the popularity of nostalgia images, including historical photographs. What Liu Zheng has done in his photographs is to mix these two separate cultural expressions and to superimpose them onto the traditional art form of Peking Opera. These photographs are thus collages of images and styles. Shrouded in the dust of a nostalgic illusionism but invaded by a contemporary kitsch, these simulated theatrical stills have no real connections with stage performances and have “no explicit appeal to return, no acute sense of loss, and no reference to embodied memory.”¹¹ If nostalgia offers a way of imagining an alternative identity to the one imposed by the present, Liu Zheng’s photographs testify to an effort to escape nostalgia itself.

The two photographs are part of a tripartite project, to which Liu Zheng plans to devote his entire life. Images in the project’s three parts will reexamine, respectively, China’s people, myths, and history. He has done many portraits for the “People” section, which, in his words, “will include only those individuals who are simultaneously real and surreal, contemporary and transcendent.”¹² One of these portraits shows three aged amateur actresses posing inside an underground tunnel; their affected mannerisms enhance their yearning for sympathy from the viewer (fig. 21.3). The two Peking Opera photographs in this exhibition belong to the “Myth” section, which is developed around the central theme of “lust.” Significantly, Liu Zheng identifies China’s entire premodern phase as a “mythical period,” known to us only through symbols, including Peking Opera imagery. His “historical period” is thus tied to modernity and the invention of photography. For this last section in his trilogy, he told me that he wants to remake the most famous historical photographs with as much accuracy and authenticity as possible, and he will then tell people that these pictures are actually fakes. Photographs in the “History” section will thus undermine the naive belief in any historical factuality. His plan reminds me of Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of the spectatorship intrinsic to a nostalgic retro-film: “The real object of fascination [of watching such a film] is not the displayed scene but the gaze of the naïve ‘other’ absorbed, enchanted by it.”¹³ This naïve “other” is the subject that Liu Zheng’s retro-style photographs aim to invent and then destroy.

11 Marilyn Ivy’s words to describe a type of “nostalgia” representation in modern Japan. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 56.

12 Interview with Liu Zheng conducted by the author.

13 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awary: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

14 Quoted in Rey Chow, “A Souvenir of Love,” 147.

INVISIBILITY

1 See *China's New Art, Post-1989*, [Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993], 62.

2 Qiu Zhijie, "Jintian di xianshi he xianshi zhuyi" [Today's reality and realism], 1994. Unpublished manuscript, 34. In another occasion he explained *Homage to Vita Nuova*: "My overall inspiration stems from my interest in the factors of chance, time, and dissonance. Glass offers me the possibility of creating mobile and accidental compositions. Moreover, it allows me to combine varying elements and styles, for example representative images, calligraphy, and cartoons, and to merge them into narrative accounts that act as backgrounds for one another." Cited in *China's New Art, Post-1989* (ibid.), 62.

3 Interview with Qiu Zhijie conducted by the author, May 11, 1998. Unpublished record.

Qiu Zhijie graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1994, a year after Wang Jin entered the school. His graduation work, *Homage to Vita Nuova* (1994), was a large installation consisting of twenty-six glass panels, each 2 meters tall and 1.5 meters wide (about 6 by 5 feet) (fig. 22.1). Silk-screened and hand-painted on these panels was a kaleidoscope of images that had accidentally entered the artist's life: half-naked swimmers, solemn Tibetan monks, uniformed PLA soldiers, and his academy schoolmates. Seemingly suspended in the air, these images formed many layers to overlap and intersect with one another at shifting angles, destroying any sense of scale and depth. When viewers moved between the glass panels they saw other viewers intermingling with the images. They could even see people on the street through the gallery's large glass windows. Scholars have found in this installation a strong feeling of "disunity and discord" generated by the "excess of information."¹ It is equally important, however, to keep in mind that all these compelling images were united in one space by a single factor: the invisible glass. As pointed out by the artist himself:

It is fortunate that I have this uniquely transparent material, which alone enables me to bring every image into a single space. In this space my existence is comprised of others. It is impossible to avoid participating in this space: the huge glass panels hold [me] and the external world together in their invisible embrace.²

Transparency is a form of *invisibility*, a phenomenon that fascinated Qiu Zhijie early on. Growing up in a scholar's family in Fujian, he studied calligraphy when he was a boy, but he often spent hours preparing ink for his private calligraphy teacher. "While I was rubbing an ink stick against an ink stone round and round," he recalled later, "my teacher was leisurely chatting with some learned monks. He often did not have time to use the ink and simply threw it away."³ Many years later Qiu Zhijie undertook a project entitled *Assignment No. 1: Copying "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times* (1992–95). For three years he kept writing "Orchid Pavilion Preface," the most celebrated masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy, on a single piece of paper, and continued to write on it even after the entire paper was pitch black. This project was thus an antipode to

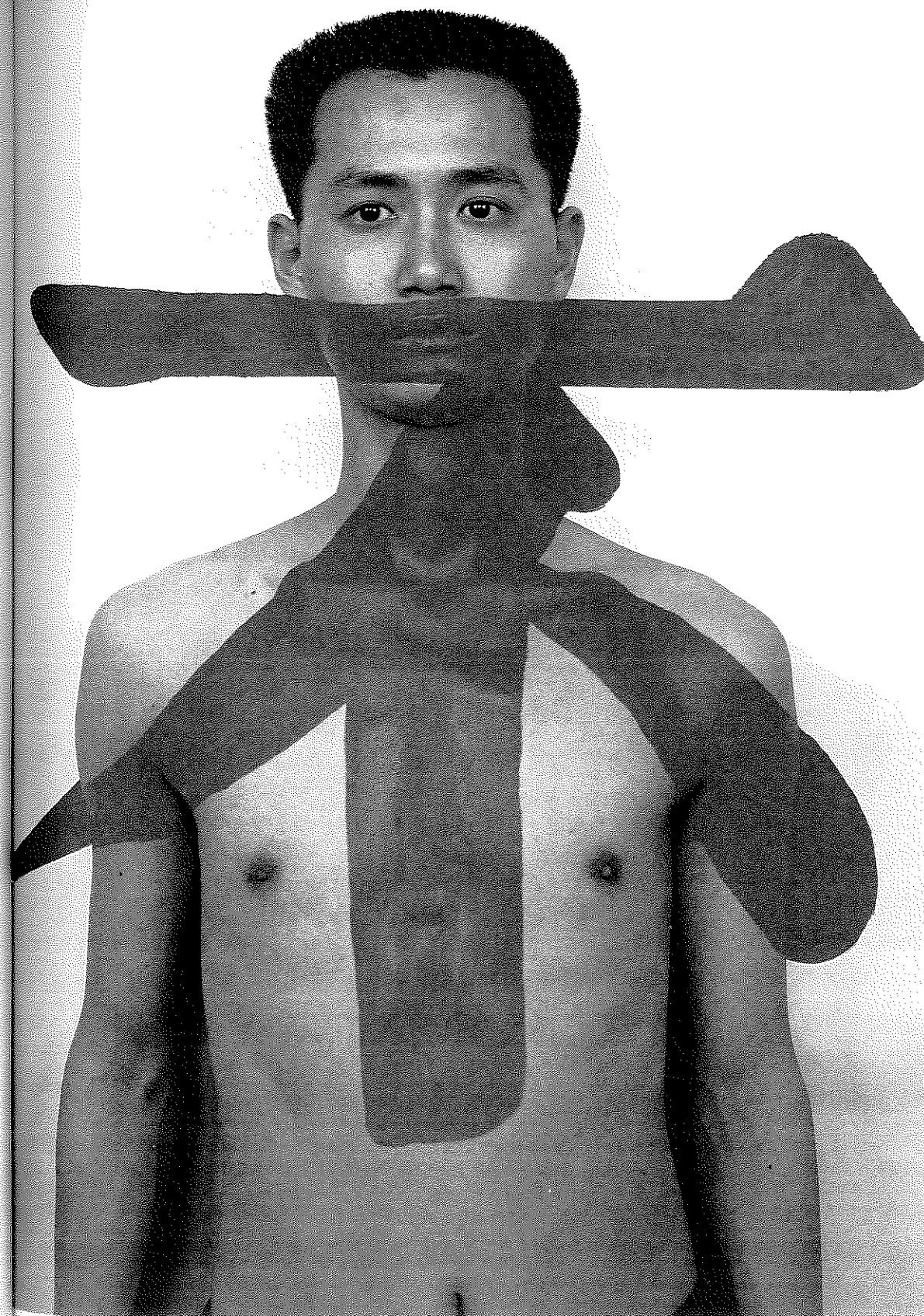


PLATE 22
Qiu Zhijie, *Tattoo 1 and 2*, 1997,
two color photographs, each
40¹/₂ x 31 in. (102 x 79 cm),
collection of the artist.

Homage to Vita Nuova: what was transparent in one case was completely opaque in the other case. The central idea, however, remained: experimenting with the possibility of making things invisible.

Qiu Zhijie entered the Zhejiang Academy with the highest marks on both the cultural and studio art exams. He soon became a star student, mainly because he could easily accomplish any classroom assignment and satisfy any technical requirement. He was selected as a candidate to study abroad. But this plan was canceled after the June Fourth Movement, and Qiu Zhijie returned to reality with little purpose in art or life. Since his high-school years he had been reading widely, from Lu Xun and Marx to Sartre and Nietzsche; now he embraced postmodern deconstructionism and read whatever he could find on the subject. Encouraged by these readings he discovered his own "invisibility": all that had made him a star student had also made him disappear as an individual. Yet his response to this discovery was not to attempt to regain his individuality. Together with some friends he started an "anti-individualism" campaign in 1991 and 1992, deliberately erasing personal marks from his work. For this purpose he painted in the different styles of all his classmates to make himself "truly disappear." Around the same time he began to use glass sheets as canvases. After finishing such a glass painting he would wash off the images and sell the clean glass back to the school's service department.⁴ Even today he still separates his artistic experiments from a pursuit of individuality. To him, individuality is only an external projection of one's ego; the real self is always invisible:

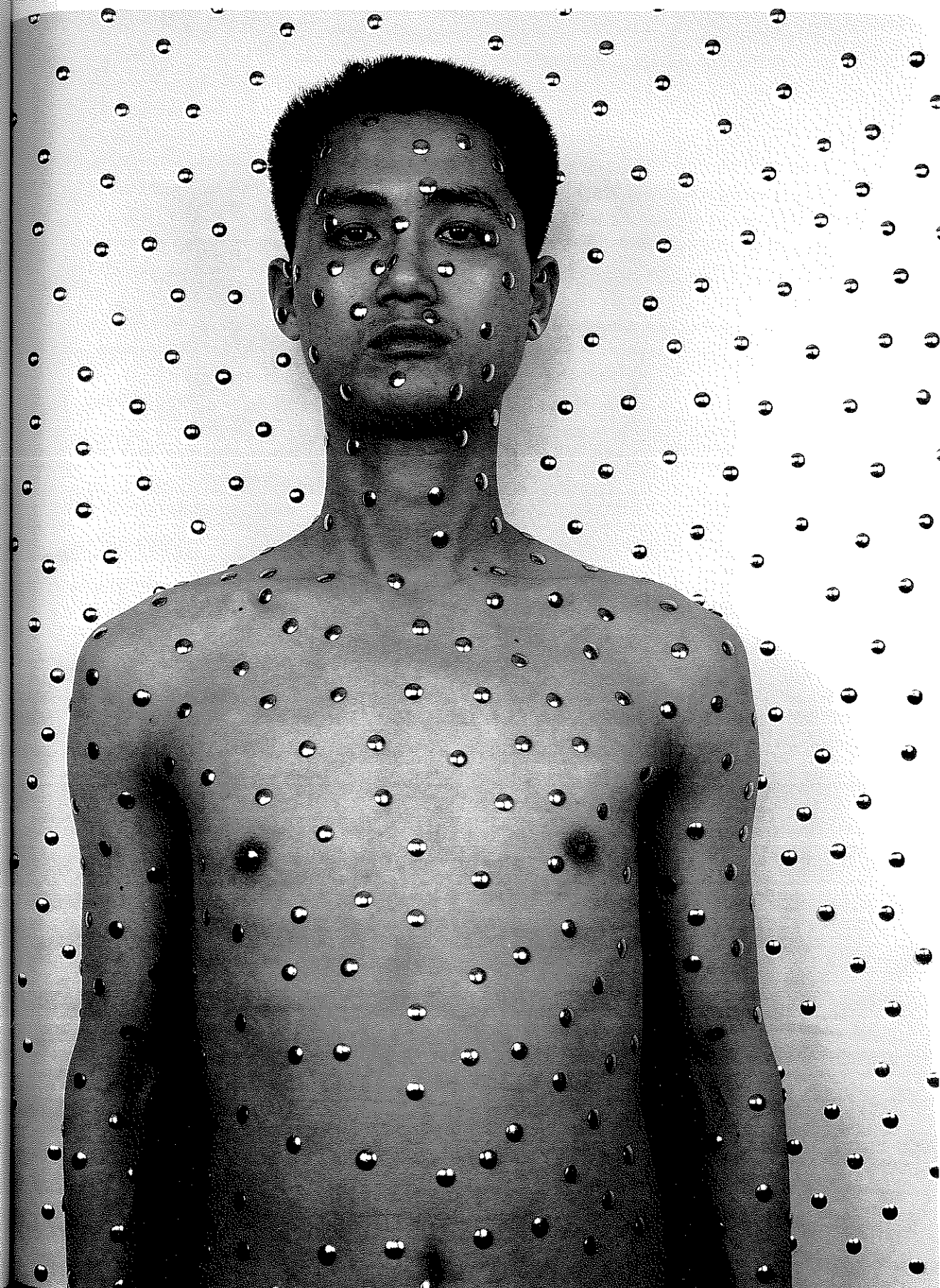
I envy Kafka and Jackman who had an external reality to oppose and who felt the force of alienation pressing upon the Self. . . . But I have lost such an external reality to press against. My environment and I are one, and nothing—neither movement nor alienation—can take place in this harmony. "I" is the name of an invisible man, and it will soon vanish even in my own memory.⁵

4 Ibid.

5 Qiu Zhijie, "Ziyou di youxianxing—'Wo' di wenti ji" [The limit of freedom—Questions about 'I'], 1994–96. Unpublished manuscript, 7.



FIGURE 22.1
Qiu Zhijie, *Homage to Vita Nuova*, 1992, installation of painted and silk-screened Plexiglas, Zhejiang, The Chinese Academy of Fine Arts.



6 Ibid., 3.

7 Qiu Zhijie used this expression in my interview with him.

8 Qiu Zhijie, "Ziyou di youxianxing—'Wo' di wenti ji," 6.

But precisely at this point Qiu Zhijie reached a dilemma: since he wrote this passage in 1994 he has been persistently testing the tension between subject and environment. These experiments prove his obsession with the possibility of making images invisible, rather than creating a natural harmony between himself and external reality. A brief survey of some of these projects during the past five years will reveal the various dimensions of his experiments.

Related to *Copying "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times* was the 1994 environmental project *A Quiz of Memories Before the Spring Festival of 1994* (fig. 22.2). This second project also obscured verbal signifiers with opaque materials. The signs being obscured, however, were identifications of real people, not an ancient masterpiece. It is a nationwide custom in China to visit the graves of one's deceased family members on the day of the Spring Festival. Qiu Zhijie's project took place in a public cemetery near Hangzhou. Right before the Spring Festival in 1994, he covered the names inscribed on the tombstones in the cemetery with black tape. This caused major confusion the next day: when the visitors came they could not locate their family tombs; they had been able to recognize the graves only because of the inscribed names. In other words, they had no memories that linked the dead to the *place* except for the verbal identifications. The erasure of the names was thus equivalent to the erasure of those being remembered.

His study of the relationship between the human subject and the environment takes two other routes. In one type of experiment he has tried to dismiss the boundary between ground and image. As early as 1993, he created paintings such as *An Investigation Report*, in which a single pictorial element is used to represent both the figure and the ground, and thus blurs the distinction between them. The figure merges into the ground and becomes, in Qiu Zhijie's concept, "invisible" (fig. 22.3).⁶ The other type of experiment makes the subject disappear by means of a grid. Inspired by an old ethnographic technique for measuring and classifying human bodies, he began in 1994 to paint grids of ink lines on people's faces. In this way he could transform individuals into quantifiable "data." A related experiment took place in 1995. Calling it *A Sufficiently Demonstrated Physical Existence*, Qiu Zhijie first tied metal wires around a large piece of sponge, making it into a tight little "package." He then burned this package. While the sponge was reduced to ashes its former shape was still indicated by the empty wire cage (which was equivalent to a grid). The sponge was thus both there and not there, "like the memory left in an empty house."⁷

These two types of experiments were combined in his 1996 video installation *Washroom* (fig. 22.4). On multiple TV screens appears a person (Qiu) with a grid painted on his face. An identical grid covers the wall behind the person. These two grids are perfectly in line with each other when the person has "zero" expression—he thus "disappears" in a unified field of a single sign. In Qiu Zhijie's words, in this field "the outlines [of the subject] have vanished or nearly vanished. Information flows

in and out. The boundary of an individual has disappeared. Separation is replaced by continuity."⁸ The problem, however, is that the artist Qiu Zhijie once again rises to challenge the theorist Qiu Zhijie: his video program not only presents a "still life" but also shows actions and movements. When the person begins to smile, weep, or frown, any such active expression distorts the grid on his face and destroys its harmony with the ground grid. The experiment thus challenges Qiu Zhijie's argument that invisibility of the subject is mandatory in the information era. Instead, it proves that invisibility is a specific state of existence, and in the case of his art, it is a specific goal of representation.

Qiu Zhijie's two photographs in this exhibition, *Tattoo 1 and 2*, continue this sequence of experiments (pls. 22.1 and .2). The man standing erect in a frontal pose in both pictures is the artist himself. In one photo, a large character *bu*—meaning "no"—is written in bright red across his body and the wall behind him (pl. 22.1). In actuality, different parts of the character are painted on his body and on the wall. When these parts connect to form the character, they create the illusion that his body has

FIGURE 22.2



FIGURE 22.2
Qiu Zhijie, *A Quiz of Memories Before the Spring Festival of 1994*, 1994, performance, Hangzhou.

FIGURE 22.3

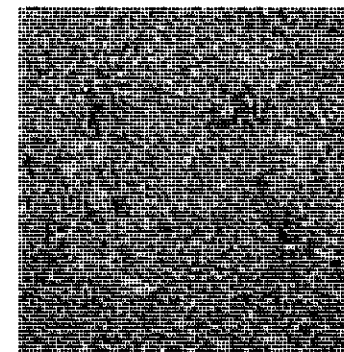


FIGURE 22.3
Qiu Zhijie, *An Investigation Report*, 1993, oil on canvas, size unknown, collection of the artist.

FIGURE 22.4
Qiu Zhijie, *Washroom*, 1997, video installation, Beijing.

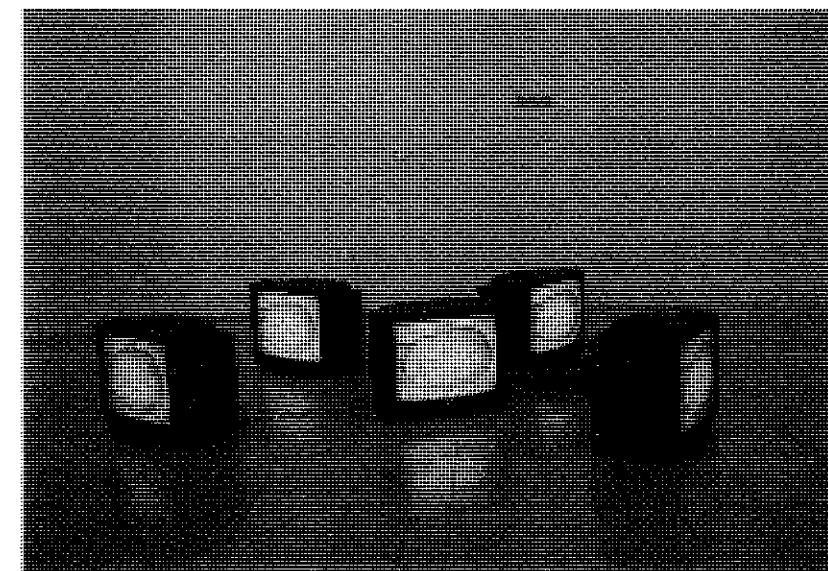


FIGURE 22.4

9 Ibid., 5.

10 A work closely related to these two photographs is Que Zhijie's 1994 project *Standpoint*. He stands behind a wire cage, whose upper edge reaches his chin. Seen from the front his body seems to have become transparent (it is unclear whether he stands inside or outside the cage). The sign on the cage reads: "Every cage shuts the external world outside one's body."

11 Interview with Qiu Zhijie conducted by the author.

strangely disappeared, and the character has become independent, detached from the body and the wall. In other words, this character rejects the ground and makes the person invisible. The other picture employs a similar technique, this time with metal dots attached to both the body and the background (pl. 22.2). While the body again seems to vanish, the repetitive dots do not provide a definite literary meaning as the character does in the first photo. Instead they form an ever expanding visual field, with neither set boundaries nor clear signification.

Compared with the earlier *Washroom* (fig. 22.4), these two photographs are more specifically concerned with the visual identification of an individual. The figure's unnatural pose and expressionless face make the photographs look like ID pictures. As an artist well versed in post-modern theories, Qiu Zhijie believes that in this world "individuals have been completely transformed into an information process. Signs and codes have overpowered actual human beings, and our bodies have become merely their vehicles."⁹ For him, the question then becomes how to make such signs and codes—passport photos, archives, etc.—disappear for a second time in an artistic representation. And these two photographs illustrate his answer.¹⁰

One of the most active and prolific experimental artists in today's China, Qiu Zhijie sees himself as part of a world in a state of flux. For some ten years he has been arguing that his works are true "realist art" because they are "simultaneous reflections of reality." On the other hand, we may say that this reality is actually his own creation because he identifies it with himself. He is enthusiastic and persistent: he feels that the world is exciting because there are so many problems waiting to be clarified; Beijing is wonderful because it offers him a place in which he can contemplate and experiment. He reminds me of an unworldly farmer he once told me about.

In a way, this story can be taken as a fable for the experimental artists featured in this exhibition and discussed in this catalogue:

I heard this story about a farmer. A few years ago he came to Beijing from the countryside and found a piece of wasted land next to a public park. He reclaimed the land and planted crops there. He was an experienced farmer and his crops attracted those "nature lovers." He even put out some benches around the field. But later he was driven away by local cadres. He then reclaimed another piece of land near the Film Academy and built a canal to water it. This made the people in the Urban Beautification department really mad and they broke his legs. Now the only thing he does is to curse the Communist Party. Some students in the Film Academy wanted to make a documentary film of him. When he saw the camera he shouted abuse. Now he is asking everyone why so much land is wasted in Beijing. This kind of crazy thing probably can only be found here. Beijing is a great place. Everybody can carve a corner for themselves and do whatever they want.¹¹

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214	CHINESE NAMES AND TERMS

9 Ibid., 5.

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One of the most active and prolific experimental artists in today's China, Qiu Zhijie sees himself as part of a world in a state of flux. For some ten years he has been arguing that his works are true "realist art" because they are "simultaneous reflections of reality." On the other hand, we may say that this reality is actually his own creation because he identifies it with himself. He is enthusiastic and persistent: he feels that the world is exciting because there are so many problems waiting to be clarified; Beijing is wonderful because it offers him a place in which he can contemplate and experiment. He reminds me of an unworldly farmer he once told me about.

In a way, this story can be taken as a fable for the experimental artists featured in this exhibition and discussed in this catalogue:

I heard this story about a farmer. A few years ago he came to Beijing from the countryside and found a piece of wasted land next to a public park. He reclaimed the land and planted crops there. He was an experienced farmer and his crops attracted those "nature lovers." He even put out some benches around the field. But later he was driven away by local cadres. He then reclaimed another piece of land near the Film Academy and built a canal to water it. This made the people in the Urban Beautification department really mad and they broke his legs. Now the only thing he does is to curse the Communist Party. Some students in the Film Academy wanted to make a documentary film of him. When he saw the camera he shouted abuse. Now he is asking everyone why so much land is wasted in Beijing. This kind of crazy thing probably can only be found here. Beijing is a great place. Everybody can carve a corner for themselves and do whatever they want.¹¹

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A BRIEF REFLECTION ON THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL ART

In the introduction to this catalogue I have traced the development of an unofficial art in post-Cultural Revolution China. To close, I want to reflect upon an "unofficial history" of contemporary Chinese art that has developed alongside this unofficial art. The dividing line between this unofficial history and the official one is most decisively measured by different attitudes toward experimental art. With its predetermined political agenda, the official history of contemporary art follows the general historiography of the Chinese Communist Party; its self-confessed goal is to forge the genealogy of a "revolutionary art" under the party's leadership. Advocates of this official history are not only hostile to experimental art—an art that is by nature antiauthoritarian and non-mainstream—but try hard to exclude and destroy experimental art with all the means at their disposal. Starting from the Stars exhibitions and the '85 Art New Wave movement, all the trends and phases of experimental art have been viciously attacked by official art historians and critics; articles published in official art journals such as *Meishu* tirelessly condemn experimental artists as "cheap imitators and stooges of decadent imperialist Western art styles." (One such attack is translated in the essay accompanying Shi Chong's *Stage* in this catalogue.) Experimental artists are often under tremendous pressure to abandon their avant-garde intent and styles, sometimes at the risk of losing their livelihoods. This situation still holds true in the late 1990s, even though the party has loosened its cultural policy considerably. Zeng Hao, the artist of the painting *5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon* in this exhibition, was dismissed by the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1997 because of the "unhealthy" subject matter and style of his painting. Yin Xiuzhen, another artist in this exhibition who created *Suitcase*, has been prohibited from teaching for the past year.

On the other hand, if this official, autocratic position in art criticism was all powerful during the Cultural Revolution, it no longer dominated Chinese art after the late 1970s. One of the most important changes in the Chinese art world during the past two decades has been the appearance and strengthening of a group of art historians and critics who take upon themselves the mission of promoting and studying contemporary experimental art. The first generation of these scholars entered graduate

school in the late 1970s and graduated in the early 1980s with masters or doctoral degrees in art history or art criticism. While holding positions in important art schools and research institutes, they also developed close ties with experimental artists outside these institutions and shared their views. The most influential figures in this group include Liu Xiaochun, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Peng De, and Wang Lin. One of their major contributions to the experimental art movement was to organize exhibitions and conferences. In the mid and late eighties, such activities helped connect scattered experimental artists and art groups into a large network, finally leading to the huge *China/Avant-garde* exhibition in 1989. Another of their contributions to the experimental art movement was to publish a number of art journals and weeklies in the eighties, including *Chinese Fine Arts Weekly* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*), *Trends in Art Theory* (*Meishu sichao*), and *Jiangsu Fine Arts Magazine* (*Jiangsu huakan*). As editors of these publications and major contributors to them, they reported and commented on the recent development of Chinese experimental art, supplied theoretical and historical evidence for this art, and introduced contemporary Western art and art theories. These journals provided crucial links between experimental artists in different places in China and between artists and theorists.

Unofficial art critics have continued to play important roles in the 1990s. The June Fourth Movement in 1989 created a break-point in contemporary Chinese history, allowing these critics to look back at the experimental art of the eighties and to summarize their experiences. Several important books on this subject appeared in the early nineties, including Gao Minglu's *Contemporary Art of China, 1985–86* (*Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi, 1985–86*, published in 1991) and Lü Peng and Yi Dan's *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art, 1979–1989* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 1979–1989*, published in 1992). Other publications, such as Yin Ji'nan's 1993 *Alone Knocking on the Door: A Close Observation of Some Major Trends in Contemporary Chinese Art* (*Duzi koumen: Jinguang Zhongguo dangdai zhuliu yishu*), expanded their focus to include the more recent development of experimental art in the early 1990s.

While the two most influential journals of experimental art in the eighties, *Chinese Fine Arts Weekly* and *Trends in Art Theory*, were banned shortly after June 4, 1989, several new journals appeared in the mid-nineties to advocate experimental art. But these new publications, including *Art Literature* (*Meishu wenxian*), *Art Gallery Magazine* (*Hua lang*), and *Artlife* (*Yishu jie*), have largely lost the critical edge of the two earlier journals and often exhibit interest not only in experimental art but also in mainstream academic art and even in commercial art. By comparison, a series of three untitled volumes compiled by Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, Zhuang Hui, and Xu Bing since 1994 (often known informally as "the black, white, or gray book," depending on the color of each volume's cover) have carried on the pioneering spirit of experimental art and been instrumental in introducing some of the most daring contemporary Chinese artists to the world. Some experimental artists have also published

private serials to facilitate artistic communication; one such publication is *New Photo*, compiled by Liu Zheng and Rong Rong, two artists featured in this exhibition.

Responding to the official prohibition of experimental art instituted immediately after the June Fourth Movement, the Sichuan art critic Wang Lin invented the format of the *Document Exhibition* (*Wenxian zhan*) in 1991. Consisting of reproductions of recent works by experimental artists and their writings, these shows traveled to different cities and provided an important channel of communication between experimental artists. The Beijing art critic Li Xianting, on the other hand, was instrumental in introducing contemporary Chinese experimental art to the international art world. Collaborating with Chang Tsong-zung of Hong Kong's Hanart T Z Gallery, he co-organized the influential exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989* in 1993. This show can be considered a watershed in the study of contemporary Chinese experimental art for three reasons. First, by sending some of the most powerful examples of this art to many countries around the world, it proved to a global audience the undeniable importance of Chinese experimental art in the general realm of contemporary art. Second, it set up a precedent for collaboration between Mainland Chinese art critics and foreign institutions in promoting contemporary Chinese experimental art. Third, by shifting its focus from periodization to artistic trends and movements, it testified to a deepening scholarship on contemporary Chinese experimental art. Many exhibitions organized after 1993, both in China and abroad, have continued in these directions.

As Kimerly Rorschach notes in her foreword to this catalogue, in the West there has been an increasing interest in contemporary Chinese experimental art, coupled with a deepening understanding of its history. The first major effort to introduce this art to the West was represented by Joan Lebold Cohen's 1987 book *The New Chinese Painting, 1949-1986*. Although this book covers a wide range of art styles over a long period, it demonstrates the author's overwhelming interest in the avant-garde experimentation of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Cohen's book was followed by several important exhibition catalogues, each with a more precise chronological focus and serious scholarly dimension. These exhibitions and catalogues were joint ventures between international scholars and institutions, and the scholarship they represented was no longer confined within national boundaries. Two developments in the 1990s have further encouraged the collaboration between Chinese and Western scholars: a number of influential Chinese art critics, such as Fei Dawei, Gao Minglu, Hou Hanru, and others, emigrated to the United States and Europe and established bases there, while an increasing number of Western art historians now focus their studies on contemporary Chinese experimental art. The collaboration between these two groups of scholars has begun to change the field of Chinese art history in the West by expanding it from a study of almost exclusively traditional art to include the contemporary period.

After the *China's New Art, Post-1989* exhibition, a large exhibition catalogue, *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, was published in 1994 in Berlin and Hong Kong. Including essays by Western and Chinese scholars, it systematically reviews the history of contemporary Chinese experimental art since the 1970s and relates this art to other "avant-garde" movements in contemporary Chinese music and theater. This type of comprehensive survey is also represented by the current exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. But several recent exhibitions, mostly taking place in Europe and China (including Hong Kong), have developed more specific focuses on particular artistic genres, artists, and problems. For example, a large exhibition catalogue, *Die Hälfte des Himmels* (Half of the sky), concentrates on women experimental artists, and *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der Volksrepublik China* (Contemporary Photography in the People's Republic of China) is the first major catalogue of contemporary Chinese experimental photography. In China, almost all important scholars in contemporary experimental art contributed to the catalogue for *The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art*, 96-97. The show was called "academic" because the organizers envisioned it as a serious research project on the current state of Chinese experimental art and its relationship to contemporary Chinese society and culture. Originally planned to be held in Beijing's National Art Gallery, however, the exhibition was canceled at the last minute by the authorities, leaving the catalogue as the sole record of the project.

Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century aims to contribute to this deepening process of introducing and studying contemporary Chinese experimental art. Including works in various media, it is organized around some general themes that are shared by many works of Chinese experimental art created during the past five years. In particular, these works signify a "domestic turn": after the commercialization and internationalization of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s, experimental artists have tried to regain the avant-garde spirit by refocusing on current social issues and experimenting with individual artistic languages. The general themes of the exhibition thus encourage an investigation of the individual artists, each of whom has had different experiences and has developed a distinct artistic style. This emphasis on artists distinguishes this catalogue from, but also makes it complementary to, previous exhibition catalogues on Chinese experimental art, which have often been more interested in charting collective activities and styles. By closely analyzing the works in the exhibition, this catalogue seeks to focus attention on the originality and individuality of the artists. Such focused analyses are intended to provide a broader picture of Chinese experimental art at the end of the twentieth century, for any kind of experimental art must be recognized as an individual endeavor defining a specific time and place.

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ARTISTS

Compiled by Kris Imants Ercums

CAI JIN

Cai Jin was born in 1965 in Tunxi, Anhui, where her father was the director of a local Peking Opera troupe. Her first academic training in the visual arts was in 1982 when she entered the Department of Art at Anhui Normal University. During her third year, in 1985, the woodblock print *Life* was included in her first public exhibition, *The International Year of Youth Exhibition*, the National Gallery, Beijing. A year later, in 1986, she completed her requirements for the BFA and was assigned to teach art at the No. 4 Engineering School of the Railroad Department. In 1989, she moved to Beijing to participate in the Advanced Oil Painting Program at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. This program allowed her to concentrate on painting full-time. In 1991, after two very prolific years, Cai's work was featured in the solo exhibition *Cai Jin's Oil Painting*, the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, and in *The First Annual Exhibition of Chinese Oil Painting*, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing. With her newfound reputation, she was offered a position on the faculty of oil painting at the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts in 1991. That same year she embarked on the *Beauty Banana Plant* series. For the next five years, from 1991 to 1996, she produced seventy paintings in this vibrantly colorful series, which explores the meaning and significance of color on a myriad of levels. The first painting in this series was exhibited in 1992 in *24e Festival International de la Peinture*, Cagnes Sur-Mer, France. Six more paintings from this series were featured in the seminal exhibition *New Art from China: Post-1989*, which, from 1993 to 1997, traveled from the Hong Kong Art Centre to venues in the United States and abroad. *Beauty Banana Plant No. 48*, featured in this exhibition, was first exhibited at *The Art Critics' Choice Exhibition*, National Gallery, Beijing (1994). By 1995, this series had been widely exhibited in such distant places as Göteborg, Sweden; Fukuoka, Japan; and Atlanta, Georgia. Cai's most recent shows include *Against the Tide*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (1997); *Four Chinese Female Artists*, Worth Ryder Gallery, the University of California, Berkeley (1997); *Between Ego and Society: An Exhibition of Contemporary Female Artists in China*, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago (1997); and *Women and Flowers*, the

Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (1997); as well as a solo exhibition, *Cai Jin—Chinese Hand: Studies from Life*, Ethan Coben Gallery, New York (1997). Currently, Cai Jin lives and works in Tianjin.

GU, WENDA

A native of Shanghai, Wenda Gu, born in 1955, began his artistic training at an early age. With schools closed during the Cultural Revolution, Gu's grandfather, an important film director during the heyday of Shanghai cinema from the 1920s to the 1940s, took it upon himself to teach his grandson calligraphy and poetry, while Gu's sister, an accomplished cellist, filled the house with music. In high school, despite his lack of ideological fervor, Wenda Gu satiated a desire to paint by producing political posters. This experience served as an entree into the Shanghai Academy of Applied Arts where Gu studied traditional woodblock printing. After completing his BFA in 1976, Gu continued his artistic training at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou. It was here that he studied with the twentieth-century master of traditional Chinese landscape painting Lu Yanshao, and he immersed himself in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Sigmund Freud. Upon receiving his MFA in 1981, he was invited to join the faculty of traditional Chinese painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. Taking advantage of the liberal policies of the eighties, Wenda Gu turned his artistic energy to a poignant criticism of the establishment. His fascination with the forbidden first surfaced in the *Pseudo-Character* series (1983–87), a linguistic criticism of traditional Chinese aesthetics and culture that employs unreadable characters to baffle and bemuse. Gu also was a leader in the "scholarly painting" movement, which strove to universalize Chinese art and is best exemplified in his work by the two paintings *Contemplation of the World* (1985) and *The Silent Door* (1986).

Since moving to the United States in 1987, provocative and often-times controversial large-scale installations have formed the core of Wenda Gu's oeuvre. Through an admixture of traditional metaphors and contemporary installation techniques, works such as *Oedipus Refound* (1990–96)—a series in which bodily discharges such as menstrual blood, placenta, and semen serve as the principal media—Wenda Gu has actively imbued his striking visual creations with philosophical undercurrents. The *Oedipus* series of installations includes *Two Thousand Natural Deaths* (later re-titled *Oedipus Refound #1: The Enigma of Blood*), Hatley Martin Gallery, San Francisco (1990); *Oedipus Refound #2: The Enigma of Birth*, the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England (1993); and *Oedipus Refound #3: Enigma Beyond Joy and Sin*, Berlin Shaire Gallery, New York (1994). In the ongoing installation series *United Nations* (1993 to the present), Gu has planned installations for twenty-five different countries. In this series, he utilized a host of ethnic hair samples to manufacture hirsute components for each installation. Major exhibitions of this project have been *United Nations—Polish Monument: Hospitalized History*

Museum, History Museum, Lodz, Poland (1993); *United Nations—Israeli Monument: The Jews*, created in the Mitzpe Ramon desert (1995); *United Nations—American Monument: Post-Cmoellotniinaglpriiostm*, Space Untitled Gallery, New York (1995); *United Nations—Temple of Heaven (Africa Monument)*, Second Johannesburg Biennale (1997). The latest installation in this series, *United Nations—Temple of Heaven (China Monument)*, was installed as part of the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). Mimetic of the national monument, each installation ironically reveals the shared, mundane aspect of hair in order to further deconstruct and expose the absurdity of national boundaries and taboos. Gu has expanded his use of hair in the recent installation *DREAMERICA*, Steinbaum-Krauss Gallery, New York (1997). His self-proclaimed aim to challenge “ready-made” culture has brought Gu into the arena of multiculturalism, where, rather than serving as a spokesman for his ethnic Chinese background, he operates as a commentator on human civilization as a whole. Wenda Gu continues to live and work in New York City.

LIU ZHENG

Liu Zheng was born in 1969 in Wuqing county, Hebei; in 1973 his parents moved to Datong, in northern Shanxi province, where they worked in the local coal industry. Although Liu enjoyed painting as a child, in 1987 he moved to Beijing to pursue a degree in electrical engineering at the University of Science and Engineering. It was in college that Liu became increasingly interested in photography, taking his first photography course in 1990. After graduating in 1991, Liu secured a position as a photojournalist for the newspaper *The Worker's Daily*. He was assigned coverage of the Bureau of Minerals and Ores, and in order to experience working conditions firsthand, worked for one year in the coal mining industry. After Liu was promoted to associate photographer in 1993, he began to explore alternatives in photography. Together with several other artists Liu established the TOPIC photography group and later that year began work on the series *Countrymen*. Unlike many photographers charmed by the exoticism of China's ethnic minority regions, Liu traced the plight of the Han worker in a hyperrealistic, photojournalistic style perfected during his nascent years at the *Daily*. The success of this series, which was exhibited as part of the TOPIC group's first exhibition in 1995, encouraged Liu to expand his photographic repertoire with a series of ambitious projects. In 1996, together with Rong Rong and Jin Yongquan, Liu began work on publishing *New Photo*, a privately printed serial dedicated to conceptual photography. More important, Liu focused his resources on the *Three Realms* series. In this series, Liu ponders China's mythical, national, and geo-historical heritage. In 1997, not long after completing the initial works in this series, Liu left the *Daily* in 1997 to become

a freelance photographer, devoting his full attention to the *Three Realms* series, of which *Peking Opera* is a part. His latest work from this series was included in *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, New Berlin Art Association (1997). Liu Zheng continues to live and work in Beijing.

MO YI

Mo Yi was born in 1958 in Lhasa, Tibet, where his parents were both employed by the University of Tibet. Although ethnically Han, Mo Yi, who spent the later years of his childhood in Shaanxi province, was still technically a resident of Tibet. Therefore, in 1973, at the age of 15, the Athletic Committee of Tibet selected him as a player on the Tibetan Autonomous Region's soccer team. For the next twelve years, from 1973 until 1985, Mo Yi traveled throughout China playing soccer. Then, in 1982, mounting disillusionment with his soccer career combined with a growing interest in art induced Mo Yi to take up photography. Lacking a high-school diploma, Mo Yi could not realize his ambition to enter college, but he was determined to learn photography any way possible. Initially he traveled through Tibet, snapping his first photographs with a simple, automatic camera. After he returned to Tianjin, Mo Yi accepted a position at the Municipal Pediatrics Hospital, which allowed him to pursue his new photographic interests. From 1982 to 1986, Mo Yi sought out teachers and read extensively about photography. Experimenting with different cameras and techniques, he embarked on *Father*, a series of portrait studies focusing on older men.

Continuing to experiment, Mo Yi moved into the studio in 1988 to explore new possibilities. He quickly abandoned the contrived, hazy glow of his initial studio experiments for a hyperrealistic style set outdoors. Mo Yi surreptitiously positioned cameras at different locations in Tianjin to document the urban environment with unfettered candor, a technique that he first employed in the series *City Dwellers* (1988) and *Expressions of the Street* (1988). Although uninterested in politics, Mo Yi sympathized with the student protest in June of 1989 and quickly joined the protests in Tianjin. His contribution to these protests was the performance piece *It's Gone*. Wearing a white funerary robe, Mo Yi paraded the streets, mourning the death of his faith in the Communist Party and government. Although his actions endeared him to his fellow protesters, Mo Yi was detained for three days and subsequently lost his job. Under house arrest until 1993, Mo Yi remains under close surveillance by the government in 1998. For his next series, *City Space*, begun in 1990, Mo Yi meticulously investigated the realities of Chinese urban life as seen from a public bus. The completed series is comprised of *A Swaying Bus*, *Photos Taken Through a Dog's Eyes*, *Landscape Outside a Public Bus*, and *Intersections*, which were collectively exhibited in *Twenty City Spaces*, ZeitFoto Gallery, Tokyo (1995). Moving away from a studied observation of others, in 1997 Mo Yi focused on his own experiences of detainment and suppression in *Made by the Police Department*,

included in this exhibition. With increased international recognition, Mo Yi has recently been included in exhibitions such as *Documentary Photography-Modern China*, held in Funabashi, Japan (1997), and *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, organized by the New Berlin Art Association (1997). Mo Yi continues to work in odd jobs and lives undercover in Tianjin.

QIU ZHIJIE

Qiu Zhijie was born in 1969 in Fujian province. His earliest artistic instruction—conducted almost entirely by his learned grandfather—was in Chinese calligraphy. In the eighties, as a high-school student, his intellectual interests turned to the newly available foreign literature, yet while the scope of his reading included the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Chinese novelist Lu Xun, Qiu's consuming interest remained painting. In 1988, Qiu began course work in printmaking at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. A versatile artist, Qiu had received faculty support to travel abroad in 1989, but travel restrictions imposed after the June Fourth Movement soon deposed this ambition. Turning his energies to school, together with his newfound friends Wu Shanzhuan and Zhang Peili, Qiu began a series of "antiestablishment" activities designed to eradicate personal traits in their artwork. The culmination of this experiment was Qiu's graduation work, *Homage to Vita Nuova*, a large pastiche of images installed on six glass panels and presented in a solo exhibition at the Gallery of the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou (1992). Since receiving his BFA in 1992, Qiu has experimented in a wide variety of media and styles. *Assignment No. 1: Copying "Orchid Pavilion Preface" a Thousand Times* (1986–97) was a long-term performance project in which Qiu repetitively filled a single page of paper with the literary passage "Orchard Pavilion Preface." The resulting paper panel, blackened with ink, and a video of Qiu writing the preface were featured in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). His painting was highlighted in *New Art from China: Post-1989*, which traveled from Hong Kong to Australia and Europe, ending its tour in the United States in 1997. Qiu also has been featured in several photography exhibitions, such as the *Second and Third Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art Documentation* in 1992 and 1994 respectively. In 1994 he staged the environmental installation project *A Quiz of Memories Before the Spring Festival 1994*, which obfuscated names on grave markers during a "tomb sweeping" festival, resulting in chaos for both the living and the dead. Since 1995 his works have been featured in a number of international exhibitions including *Chinese Avant-Garde Art Since 1976*, the Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona (1995); *Der Abschied von der Ideologie—Neue Kunst aus China*, Kunstfabrik Kampnagel, Hamburg (1995); *In The Name of Art* video exhibition, Liuhaisu Museum, Shanghai

(1996); and *Phenomenon and Image: Video Art in China*, Gallery of the Chinese Academy of Fine Art, Hangzhou (1996). In 1997, Qiu Zhijie was featured in *Faces and Bodies of the Middle Kingdom*, Gallery Rudolfinum, Prague; *Video Art '97*, the Gallery of Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; and *New Image: Conceptual Photography*, the Beijing Visual Arts Center. Qiu Zhijie currently lives and works in Beijing.

RONG RONG

Born in 1968 in Zhangzhou, Fujian, as Lü Zhirong, Rong Rong changed his name shortly after moving to Beijing in the 1990s. Despite his early interest in painting, Rong failed to gain admission to the local art academy. Instead he turned his energy to teaching himself photography. From 1989 to 1992, while Rong was employed in his father's grocery store, he spent his spare time roaming the local villages with a rented camera recording the bucolic life of peasants. Eventually Rong saved enough money to purchase his own camera, and with the remainder of his savings, set out for Beijing. He drifted from school to school, and after a series of odd jobs that included a position as a passport photographer, Rong moved to the East Village, a budding artistic community outside Beijing. With the relaxation of residential restrictions, some experimental artists from different provinces all over China began to flock to this place. Rong seized the opportunity to document the vibrant artistic activities of this art community in his series *Artists in Exile*. Yet in 1995, after several artists were arrested and quarrels erupted over copyright issues regarding Rong's photography, he decided to leave the community. These documentary photographs of the East Village were featured in Rong's inaugural photography exhibition, *The Witness of Contemporary Art in China*, Tokyo Gallery, Japan (1995).

In 1996, Rong established RR Photo Studio and exhibited his new work in *China Avantgarde*, Gallery Q, Tokyo (1996). Shocked by the unmitigated destruction inflicted on old Beijing by the progress of economic reform, Rong recorded these devastating effects in his next series of untitled works, sometimes referred to as the *Ruins* series. Like his earlier series, *Ruins* is a personal response to the verisimilitudes of Rong's artistic environment. The haunting fragments of pasted-up posters of fashion models, used to decorate the now-ravaged walls depicted in this series, capture a childhood fascination with a pinup poster of the popular singer Deng Lijun, whom Rong fantasized about as a child. Since 1997 Rong's international reputation has grown. After Jean-Louis Drohin curated a solo exhibition of his work at the French Embassy in Beijing in 1997, Rong's photography was included in *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, Berlin New Art Association (1997), and a solo exhibition mounted by Galerie H.S. Steinek, Vienna (1998). His most recent works include *Lives of Photographers* (1996) and *Wedding Gowns* (1997–98). Rong Rong currently lives and works in Beijing.

SHI CHONG

Shi Chong was born in 1963 in Huangshi, Hubei, where his father worked as a coal miner. As a child, Shi was entirely surrounded by the scenery of the coal mining industry: surreal industrial imagery and a glimmering black landscape. Not until high school, after meeting several artists sent to live in coal towns by the provincial government to "experience" the working class, did Shi become determined to study painting at the academy. After several attempts, he was offered admission to the Department of Oil Painting at the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts in 1983. Despite a conservative emphasis on academic styles such as Soviet realism, the influx of Western art historical and philosophical material streaming into China's tertiary institutions suggested several alternatives for Shi Chong to explore. In 1986, witnessing the lives of Tibetan nomads and other minority groups in China's remote regions firsthand, Shi captured the spirit of this trip in his painting *Blind Women*. After graduating in 1987, Shi volunteered briefly as an art teacher in a rural outreach program. Then in 1988, he went to work for the Hubei Music and Dance Troupe, where he created the stage designs for *Dancing with the Ancient Bells* (1988), an historical ballet set in ancient China. After completing the *Portraiture* series of mixed-media compositions in 1989 and a series of six works titled *With and Without Order* in 1990, Shi started work on another series of mixed media compositions based on fish bones, which was included in the *First National Exhibition of Oil Painting*, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing (1991).

The human body—manipulated and altered—became the principal feature of Shi's painting after the completion of *Image of Life* in 1992. Constructing a rough plaster cast of the body and then rendering it in a realistic, academic style, Shi merged sculpture and painting in his 1993 creation *A Walking Man*. Completed in 1994, *Mirror* and *The Story of the Red Wall* (later renamed *A Synthetic View*) represent his most intricate creations in this mode. Shi's early figural paintings were featured in several exhibitions: *Change—Contemporary Chinese Art Exhibition*, Göteborgs Konstmuseum, Sweden (1995); *Chinese Avant-Garde Art Since 1976*, Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona (1995); and *The Third Annual Oil Painting Exhibition*, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing (1995). In his next series, Shi used live models in laboriously staged environments. Intricately planned paintings like *Today's Scene* (1995) —a nude woman half submerged in water—and *Gratified Youth* (1995) —a seated nude male model smeared with white paint, holding a cooked baby chicken by the wings—are tantamount to installation pieces and demonstrate Shi's flair for the theatrical. These works were included in *Chinese Avant-garde Art*, Kunstmuseum, Berlin (1996). His latest works, rendered in this realist manner, include *The Surgeon* (1996) and *The Stage* (1996), the latter of which is featured in this exhibition. Shi Chong continues to live and work in Wuhan, Hubei.

SONG DONG

Born in Beijing in 1966, Song Dong displayed a consuming interest in painting at a very early age. Not long after his birth, his father, due to an unsuitable class background, was labeled a counterrevolutionary and sent to work in rural Hubei. When the family finally joined him in south central China, Song's stubborn refusal to attend kindergarten forced his mother to find creative ways to keep him occupied. She placated her son by pasting rousing biscuit wrappers on windows, leaving Song at home to quietly draw the day away. Yet by 1977 the family had returned to Beijing, and Song resumed elementary school. A teacher who recognized his artistic promise helped transfer Song to a school that provided better painting classes. Song's high-school enchantment with pastoral romanticism and post-impressionism fomented his ambition to study painting at the academy, but his father was resolute that Song pursue a career in the sciences. In the end, his parents relented and allowed Song to study painting at Capital Normal University in 1985. Although Song's primary instruction was in the orthodox academic style, the '85 Art New Wave movement exerted great influence on the young artist. After the events of the June Fourth Movement in 1989, while many of his disillusioned classmates eschewed politics and opted to enter the business world, Song locked himself in his studio. When he emerged in 1994, it was to stage the performance-based installation *Another Class, Do You Want to Play with Me?* at the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. Reacting to the conformity encouraged by the Chinese academies of art, Song spread thousands of test papers on the floor, lined the ceiling with faucets and pipes, and invited students to participate by reading wordless books and drawing freely on blackboards. Song expanded the use of text further in *Culture Noodles* (1994), in which he shredded books into the shape of noodles, and in *Chinese Medicine* (1994), a performance piece that transfigures books and rubbings into medicine and pharmaceutical paraphernalia. Also in 1994, Song experimented with the medium of video, exhibiting his work at the *Video Art Group Project*, Contemporary Art Museum, Beijing, and in 1995, producing *Instructions for Dealing with an Emergency*, which was later screened in Tokyo. Works like *Breathing* (1996), in which Song created a patch of ice in Tiananmen Square using only his breath; *Water Writing Diary* (1995–present), a daily activity of keeping a fleeting record written in water on a rock; and *Printing on Water* (1996), performed in a river near Lhasa, exemplify the patience and diligence that permeate Song's performative discourse, which fosters a private world discrete from an external, material one. In recent years, Song has increasingly collaborated in important performance exhibitions, such as *Open Your Mouth, Close Your Eyes: Beijing-Berlin Art Communication*, Art Museum of Capital Teaching University, Beijing (1995); *Original Sound*, a group of ten artists who engaged in performance pieces at Dongbianmen, Beijing (1996); *Documents from Chinese Avant-Garde Art*, Gallery Q, Tokyo (1996); and *Out of Galleries* experimental exhibition in Hong Kong (1996). In response to Hong Kong's return to China in 1997,

Song performed *Sixty Minutes: From June 30, 1997 to July 1, 1997* and *One Hundred and Fifty-Seven Pieces of Submerged Rocks*, both in Shenzhen, China, a Special Economic Zone near Hong Kong. His video art was featured in *Look: Song Dong's Video Installation*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Beijing (1997) and in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). Song Dong continues to live in Beijing, where he works as a middle-school teacher and is married to artist Yin Xiuzhen, who is also represented in this exhibition.

SUI JIANGUO

Sui Jianguo was born in 1956 in Qingdao, Shandong. His father was from a peasant background, while his mother was from a landed family. Although Sui began to paint as a child, his education was interrupted in 1972 when he took over his mother's job at the Qingdao No. 1 National Textile Factory. He was later transferred to the factory's propaganda department. In 1979, Sui left the factory to assume a position at the Area No. 4 Municipal Cultural Palace as a tutor in the applied arts. Here Sui became acquainted with Yu Fan, with whom he would form a strong artistic alliance. A year later, in 1980, Sui gained admission to the Shandong Academy of Fine Arts to specialize in sculpture. Like many post-Cultural Revolution intellectuals, Sui began to delve into the past, drawing heavily from religious sources like Zen Buddhism as well as from his training in the *Guohua*, the national school of traditional Chinese painting. Sui's graduation series, *Sun Island*, was exhibited in the *Shandong Youth Art Exhibition* in 1986, the same year Sui gained admission to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing as a masters student in sculpture. Throughout his career, Sui has balanced a bold experimental approach to materials with his own subdued, personal introspection, first noticeable in the novel mixture of plaster and other media for the *Balancer* (1988) and *Hygiene* (1989) series.

In 1989, after completing his MFA, Sui was invited to join the faculty of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. One of his first responsibilities was to accompany a group of students on a trip to quarry stones in the countryside. Sui was impressed with the versatility of rock, both as material and metaphor. He began to experiment with natural materials, which resulted in his *Structure Series* (1990–94). In this series, Sui manipulated river stones, transforming them into monumental, oftentimes belabored reconstructions of nature. Several of these pieces were included in *New Art from China: Post-89*, which toured Asia, Europe, and the United States between 1994 and 1997. *Earthly Force*—a group of boulders encased in a mesh of corrugated steel rods completed in 1994 after two years of work—exemplifies this series and was first exhibited in *Chinese Avant-Garde Art Since 1979*, Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona (1995). In contrast, *Remembrance of Space*, also completed in 1994, uses wood as the medium. Joining old planks of wood with thick iron clamps to form a horizontal

wall of wood, it was first shown in *Remembrance of Space: The Works of Sui Jianguo*, Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (1994). In 1995, Sui was awarded a United Nations Artistic Fellowship to study in New Delhi for three months. Drawing on this experience, he created the *Sedimentary and Rupture* series (1995), which is derived from his earlier *Sealed Memories* series and explores the human obstructions placed on nature. After returning from India, Sui, in conjunction with Yu Fan and Zhan Wang, established the Three Men United Studio. This collaboration produced two large-scale installation works, *Property Development* (1996) and *Woman/Site* (1996). In 1996, Sui began work on the *Thunderbolt* series, comprised of wood, nails, and rubber mats, which was first exhibited as part of *Crossing Points: Contemporary Chinese, Japanese and Korean Art*, Seoul, Korea (1996). His most recent work has turned away from unrefined material like river stones and aged wood, to historically grounded components, as demonstrated in *Uniform* (1997)—a series of aluminum Mao jackets placed in shadow boxes that refer to China's recent revolutionary past. Sui Jianguo continues to live and work in Beijing.

WANG JIN

Soon after Wang Jin's birth in 1962 in Datong, Shanxi, his parents were transferred to the 65th Regiment of the Beijing Garrison. In 1983, Wang gained admission to the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, where he chose to specialize in traditional figurative painting. He was first exposed to the Beijing art scene in 1985, when his painting *April Fifth*, commemorating Premier Zhou Enlai, was included in the *International Year of Youth Exhibition*, National Gallery, Beijing. After graduating in 1987, Wang was assigned to teach fine arts at the Beijing Institute of Fashion Design. For several years Wang did not produce or exhibit works, but in 1992 he quit his teaching job to launch a career as an independent artist. His inaugural performance piece was *Family* (1992). Wang followed this with *Knocking at the Door* (1993), which refers to the work of Andy Warhol by using the ubiquitous imagery of American currency, painted on original bricks from another cultural icon, the wall of the Forbidden City. This work juxtaposes the dichotomous tension inherent in China's surge toward market reform. Although completed in 1993, the "brick notes" were later installed in the ruined east wall of the Forbidden City and exhibited as part of *The 3rd Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition*, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing (1995). Wang approached monetary issues differently in *Quick Stir-Frying Renminbi* (1995), in which he cooked a kilo of domestic coins at the Donganmen night market, Beijing.

In his 1994 performance *Red: Beijing-Kowloon*, Wang concocted a red melange from a variety of materials such as shoe polish and medicine in order to color a section of the new rail link between Beijing and Hong Kong, thus anticipating the reunification of Hong Kong with China. And in *Fighting the Flood: Red Flag Canal*, performed in 1994 in

Lin county, Henan, Wang flooded the canal with red dye, coalescing kinetic performance and conceptual intent through the color red. It is the "wall," however, that remains Wang's most potent visual trope, as seen in *Ice*. 96 *Central China* (1996), in Zhengzhou, Henan. This work, commissioned by the municipality to commemorate the opening of a shopping complex, combines more than six hundred ephemeral ice blocks—each of which contains an assortment of consumer goods—to create a 30-meter (98-foot) wall. Eventually onlookers looted and destroyed the wall with pick hammers. Photographs of this work and the performance *To Marry a Mule*, performed in Laiguanying village (1995), are included in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). Since 1996, Wang has increasingly shifted from outdoor venues to museum settings. His performance works have been featured as part of *Contemporary Chinese Art 1997*, Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1997), and *The Chinese Dream* was exhibited at the Yanhuang Museum of Contemporary Art, Beijing (1997). Two works from this series are included in this exhibition. Wang lives and performs in Beijing.

XING DANWEN

Xing Danwen was born in 1967 in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, during the initial years of the Cultural Revolution. From an early age, Xing exhibited strong artistic inclinations, but as the daughter of engineers, she was encouraged to pursue painting as a hobby, not a career. Nonetheless, in 1982, Xing drew on years of self-instruction and successfully gained admission to the high school of the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts. Yet after graduating from high school in 1986, waning support from faculty at the academy, coupled with misguided preparation for the exam, resulted in Xing's unsuccessful bid to formally gain admission there. After sitting for subsequent national examinations, in 1988 she was admitted to the Department of Oil Painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. During her student days, Xing eschewed involvement in political activities, choosing instead to leave Beijing in July of 1989 to travel to Xinjiang in Central Asia. She also decided to launch a new direction in her art by concentrating on photography. Since her academic training centered on oil painting, Xing was left to teach herself photography. As part of her graduation requirement, Xing painted a series of works that drew on Tibetan ethnographic images and folk songs, loosely basing many of the works on photographs she had taken during her travels. After graduating in 1992, unwilling to assume a government position in the Xi'an Bureau of Culture, Xing opted to brave the Beijing art scene, relying on the generosity of her friends for survival as she drifted between odd jobs. In 1993, she went to Germany to find work, and after a German photographic magazine published photographs from her series *Kaomaji* and *Tibet*, Xing received a commission to return to China to photograph, resulting in the *Coal Mine* series. In 1994, Xing exhibited her work in *With*

Chinese Eyes, Gallery Grauwert, Hamburg, and shortly afterward, in 1995, joined the photography agency FOCUS, also in Hamburg. Xing's *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995) is a fusion of personal experiences with materials gathered from interviews she conducted with more than thirty film directors, performers, artists, and feminists. Xing Danwen recently moved to New York City to study photography.

XU BING

Xu Bing was born in 1955 in Chongqing, Sichuan. At an early age his family moved to Beijing. Xu's mother worked as a secretary and his father was the administrative head in the Department of History at Beijing University, where as a teenager, Xu attended high school. In 1974, as part of the Communist Party's punitive policy to "reeducate" intellectuals, Xu Bing was sent to the Yanqing region outside Beijing, where he labored in the fields. This experience endeared him to the rustic life of the peasant and instilled an enduring bond with the quintessential spirit of the Chinese people. After several years of sketching scenes from rural life, Xu Bing took up woodblock printing, drawing inspiration from the work of GuYuan to create his own tableau of peasant life. Then in 1977, Xu Bing returned to Beijing to enroll in the Department of Printmaking at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Thriving under the strict regimen of this academic training, upon graduating in 1981, he received a faculty appointment in the Department of Printmaking. Several years later, in 1984, Xu Bing continued his studies at the Central Academy, completing his MFA in 1987, and was once again retained by the academy as an instructor.

As the philosophical writings of Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Wittgenstein inundated academic circles, a "cultural fever" swept Chinese academia along with an influx of art historical materials, greatly affecting Chinese artists who were discovering parallels in traditional aesthetics with Western modernist movements such as minimalism. Xu Bing was particularly impressed with the work of Andy Warhol, whose ideas on imagery, process, and repetition provided fertile inspiration. As the '85 Art New Wave gained momentum, however, Xu Bing withdrew from public participation in this "avant-garde" movement. In 1987, he retired to the seclusion of his studio, where, drawing on his own erudition and talent as a woodcutter, he created *Heavenly Book*, also known as *A Book from the Sky*. Composed of thousands of contrived and meaningless characters, this monumental series of prints took over three years to complete and was briefly exhibited at the National Gallery, Beijing. Since this initial showing in China, government officials have banned this work, and for this reason, it has only been seen in the West, where most recently it was included in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). One Mainland Chinese critic compared this work to the futility of a "ghost pounding a wall," an appellation that Xu Bing appropriated for his

next monumental installation project, *Ghosts Pounding a Wall* (1990). As it became more apparent that the restrictions imposed on Xu Bing's artistic career would not soon be lifted, he accepted a fellowship in 1990 from the Department of Art at University of Wisconsin, Madison. The university's Elvehjem Museum of Art was instrumental in funding the completion of this project, which was exhibited there in his inaugural solo exhibition *Three Installations by Xu Bing* (1991).

For *Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989*, a Hong Kong exhibition, Xu Bing continued his unbridled assault on language with *Brailiterates* (1992), an installation using braille and written text to blur distinctions between sight and non-sight. In *Fragmented Memories: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile*, Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, Columbus (1993), Xu Bing created *Cultural Negotiations* by amassing unreadable text written in pseudo-Western and Chinese words on a massive conference table. In a performance-based installation entitled *A Case Study of Transference* (Beijing, 1994), Xu Bing lined the floor of an animal pen with books, as two pigs—one stamped with Western-style text and the other with Chinese characters—mated in front of an audience. The juxtaposition of text and creature—this time silkworms—continued with *Language Lost*, installed at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston (1995). Xu Bing's critique of language was extended to the Roman alphabet in his next project, *SquareWord Calligraphy* (1997). This didactic series provides interactive instruction for learning to read and write composite characters formed from Roman letters but rendered according to Chinese calligraphic principles. First exhibited in 1997 at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London, this installation was also featured in *Jiang Nan: Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art for the South of the Yangzi River*, Art Beatus Gallery, Vancouver (1998). Xu Bing lives and works in New York City.

YIN XIUZHEN

A native of Beijing, Yin Xiuzhen was born in 1963. Although her early education prepared her to study science, after graduating from high school in 1981 Yin was determined to study the arts. During the day she painted interiors for an architectural firm, which also employed her father, and in the evenings studied painting in preparation for the entrance examination, so that by 1985, she was enrolled in the Department of Fine Arts at Capital Normal University, Beijing. When she graduated in 1989, she joined the faculty at the High School of the Central Academy of the Applied Arts, also in Beijing. Yin's early exhibitions were in official venues that tended to exhibit works made in the orthodox, academic style she had studied in college. However by 1994, her dwindling interest in painting led Yin to experiment with installation art. Her first major installation work, *Door*, as part of the exhibition *Post October 1st*, Zhaoyao Gallery, Beijing (1994), blurs societal distinctions such as gender as well as conceptual ones such as interiority and exteriority by placing outline sketches of a male and female figure on either side of a common household door. The tension between

"separation" and "connection" also surfaces in her next installation, *A Set Time for Demolition*, featured in 12-12, an exhibition presenting the work of women artists at Zhaoyao Gallery, Beijing (1994). Ropes became a potent symbol in the outdoor installation *Demolition*, in which Yin suspended mirrors from branches of a tree. In the performance piece *Suitcase* (1995), re-created for this exhibition, Yin sealed her own clothes in a suitcase with cement, while in *Woolen Sweaters* (1995) she deconstructed clothing by unraveling and reknitting male and female sweaters.

In 1996, she inaugurated the collaborative series *The Chinese and American Artists Group Project: Protectors of Water Source*. The first work in this series—designed to heighten environmental awareness in China—was performed in cooperation with Betsy Damon on the banks of the polluted Funan River, outside of Chengdu, Sichuan. The polluted ice bricks used in this installation contrast with the pristine waters used to bathe and wash clothes in the second installment of this series, which took place in 1996 outside Lhasa. In *Butter Shoes* (1996), also titled *Mud Shoes*—references to the life of a Tibetan nomad—Yin collected and displayed shoes from family, friends, and a variety of places in Tibet. Evoking the atmosphere of an archeological site, Yin installed *Ruined City* in 1996, in which she filled a 300-square-meter (984-foot) space with decrepit gray objects, thus evoking the dusty urban chaos of contemporary Beijing. Since 1997, Yin's performance-based installations have gained an international audience, as she has been included in *Immutability and Fashion: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Midst of Changing Surroundings*, shown in Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka; *Another Long March*, Chasse kazerne Breda, The Netherlands; *Between Ego and Society: An Exhibition of Contemporary Female Artists in China*, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago. In 1998, she was featured in *Vestiges of Existence: Chinese Contemporary Art* and *A Century: An Exhibition of Female Artists* both held in Beijing, as well as in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). Yin Xiuzhen continues to live and work in Beijing, where she is married to artist Song Dong, whose work is also included in this exhibition.

YU FAN

Yu Fan was born in 1967 in Chaoyang, Shandong. As a child, he studied art with his father, an amateur sculptor. An early education in the visual arts provided a smooth transition for his entrance into the Shandong Academy of Fine Arts, where Yu Fan began his formal studies in 1984. Immediately after receiving his BFA in 1988, Yu Fan enrolled in the Department of Sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. At the academy, Yu Fan independently studied eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western sculpture, finding inspiration in the work of Auguste Rodin. He eventually created an equestrian statue of Genghis Khan, which was loosely based on these studies. After completing his MFA in 1992, Yu Fan was retained by the Central Academy as a faculty member in the Department of Sculpture. Although continuing to produce main-

stream works for exhibitions like *The Third National Athletic Arts Exhibition* (1993) and *The Eighth National Fine Arts Exhibition* (1994), both at the National Gallery, Beijing, Yu Fan had already begun to test the limits of his academic training by experimenting with new materials in projects such as *A Posthumous Plan for Wood* (1993–94). In this series, Yu Fan scavenged lumber yards for rotten wood, placing the discarded scraps in cages to accent the life force still inherent in them.

By 1994 Yu Fan had joined Sui Jianguo, a long-time friend from Shandong, and Zhan Wang, a classmate from the academy, to establish the Three Men United Studio. Together the group staged a series of installations, *Property Development*, made from the rubble of the demolished former campus of the Central Academy, and *Women/Site*, in which Yu Fan created *My Mother*, included in this exhibition. Yu Fan has exhibited widely since 1996 in a variety of venues including *The First Mountain and Forest Exhibition at Huairou*, *An Academic Exhibition of Sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts*, and *The Nanshan Sculpture Exhibition* in Shenzhen. In 1997, after a year of work, Yu Fan, as the coordinating head of the state supported project to commemorate the beginning of the Second World War, installed a series of statues on the historic Marco Polo Bridge, where war officially broke out in 1937 with Japan. Yu Fan continues to live in Beijing, where he teaches at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

YU HONG

Yu Hong, born in 1966, had an early start as a painter. Her mother, Gao Zhenmei, who had graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1964, instilled enduring artistic sensibilities in her daughter. In 1971 her parents were sent to the countryside, and as a result Yu Hong began school three years before many of her peers. By the time she entered high school in 1980, despite her comparative youth, Yu Hong was already a surprisingly independent and mature painter. When she entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1984, New Wave art was beginning to make an impact on the Beijing art scene. Despite the emphasis placed on technical mastery and productivity at the academy, Yu Hong managed to merge academic requirements with her own creative insight. With the support of her teachers she studied the works of Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso. After completing her BFA in 1988, Yu Hong remained at the Central Academy as an instructor, teaching students in realistic and perspectival techniques. Despite trips to the placid environments of Tibet and Xinjiang, her proclivity for the chaotic dynamism of metropolitan life in Beijing—a persistent theme in her oeuvre—has not abated.

Yu Hong has been exhibiting internationally since 1989, when her painting *Hair Salon* (1988) was included as part of the *23rd Monte Carlo International Painting Exhibition*, Monte Carlo. In 1990, when she was included in *The World of Modern Women Artists* at Beijing's Cultural Palace of Minorities, she came to national prominence. In 1991, her two paintings *Beginner* (1991) and *Portrait with Gloves* (1991) were included in *New*

Generation, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing. Despite her use of a vibrant palette, these large paintings of figural groups evince desolation. In 1993 she traveled to Germany and the United States, where she lived for a year, participating in two gallery exhibitions in New York City: *Red Star Over China*, Keen Gallery, and *Contemporary Chinese Oil Paintings*, Gallery Z. That same year she was included in the seminal exhibitions *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*, Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, and *New Art from China: Post 1989*, which traveled from Asia to Europe and ended its tour in North America in 1997. Her experiences abroad inspired *Sunny Day* (1992) and *SleepWalking* (1997), two paintings that exemplify an enduring fascination with the unstable, almost dangerous uncertainty of urban life in China. Through a mindful use of a realistic and seemingly traditional style, Yu Hong displays a heedful disconnection from her environment. Shortly after her return to Beijing in 1994, Yu Hong enrolled in the masters program at the Central Academy, receiving her MFA in 1995. In 1997, she exhibited *Yellow Flower Portrait* (1997) in *A Century of Chinese Oil Painting*, National Gallery, Beijing. Yu Hong continues to live and work in Beijing.

YUAN DONGPING

Yuan Dongping was born in 1958 in Guangzhou but moved with his family to Beijing when he was two years old. The Cultural Revolution served as background for much of his primary and secondary education. Yuan first became interested in photography in 1973, after his father managed to procure a camera. After graduating from the high school of Beijing University in 1976, Yuan entered the armed forces, serving four years in the navy. Discharged in 1980, he entered the Department of History at Beijing Normal University, where he served as the chair of the university's photography club. Completing his BA in 1984, Yuan was assigned to the propaganda department at the Chairman Mao Zedong Memorial Hall. Dissatisfaction with this work quickly set in, and in 1987, Yuan went to work as a photographer for *Minorities Pictorial*, a government publication that focuses on China's ethnic minorities. In conjunction with his colleague Lü Nan, Yuan roamed the back alleyways of Beijing, documenting the lives of common people with a Nikon camera in a series of photographs published under the title *Beijing Streets* (1987–88). In search of a new topic, Yuan turned from the everyday life of Beijing's alleyways to the sequestered life of China's blind children, and the misunderstood, hidden realm of mental illness in China. After two years of collaboration with Lü Nan on the mental hospital series, monetary conflicts caused a rift in their relationship. As Yuan's duties shifted more toward editing and administration at *Pictorial* he drifted away from photography, but in 1994, he resumed his work on the series, reading the latest journals and books on the subject and visiting hospitals and doctors in central and south China. Also in 1994, Li Mei, editor of the influential publication *Modern Photography*, published several of Yuan's photographs, and the art

critic Xiao Jiaqing praised his work in *The Journal of Chinese Photography*, much to Lü's chagrin. Yuan also won an Award of Excellence at the 1993 Grand Competition of News Photography, an important international competition organized by the Association of American News Photographers that received more than 1,600 entries. In recent years, Yuan has devoted his energy to documenting the plight of the rural poor in China's remote regions such as Qinghai and Yunnan. Yuan Dongping resides in Beijing where he continues to work for *Minorities Pictorial*.

ZENG HAO

Zeng Hao was born in 1963 and grew up in Kunming, Yunnan, where both of his parents taught chemistry at local high schools. He received little support for his artistic interests at home but took advantage of the informal painting classes taught at his junior high school. In 1979, Zeng gained admission to the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. He was befriended by experimental artists Zhang Xiaogang, Ye Yongqing, and Mao Xuhui, all of whom had begun their studies a few years before. The deluge of art historical material flooding the academies at this time exposed Zeng to a wide variety of Western art. He was particularly drawn to the pastoral imagery of post-impressionists such as Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh. Disputes with a faculty member thwarted Zeng's early attempts to escape the provincial locale of Sichuan, but by 1985, a year after receiving his BFA, Zeng moved to Beijing to study in the Third Oil Painting Studio at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. With the '85 Art New Wave movement in full swing, Zeng concentrated on Western artistic styles like cubism and abstract expressionism. In 1989, Zeng returned to Kunming to teach painting at the Kunming College of Education, where he remained until 1993. During that time Zeng participated in several exhibitions held in Guangzhou; among them were *Guangzhou Oil Painting in the 1990s* and *The Second Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Gallery of the Guangzhou Academy of Art (1993). These exhibitions facilitated Zeng's transfer to the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1993 as a professor in the Department of Oil Painting. His work was included in the *Exhibition of Contemporary Art from Zhuhai, China* (1993) and *The Second Exhibition of the Department of Oil Painting*, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (1994). Then in 1995, Zeng embarked on a new series, including *Thursday Afternoon* (1995) *Friday 5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon* (1996), and *September 12th* (1997). Works from this series were exhibited in *China Heute-Aktuelles aus 16 Ateliers*, Kunstmuseum, Munich (1996) and *The First Academic Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Gallery of Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (1996). Since joining the faculty at the Guangzhou Academy in 1993, Zeng's unorthodox style has been severely criticized by the conservative senior faculty. Tensions peaked in 1997 when Zeng was dismissed by the academy, which cited his unconventional, "unhealthy" painting style as grounds for dismissal. Zeng Hao moved to Beijing, where he continues to paint.

ZHAN WANG

Zhan Wang was born in 1962 in Beijing. His art education began at the Beijing College of Applied Arts, which he attended from 1978 to 1981. After working at the No. 3 Jadeware Factory for two years as a jade carver, in 1983 Zhan entered the Department of Sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Graduating in 1988, Zhan traveled, choosing an itinerary that contrasted the economic growth and new wealth of places like Shenzhen with the penury and isolation of Qinghai province. He returned to Beijing as a full-time sculptor employed by the Central Academy of Fine Arts. His first faculty work, *Streets* (1990), mixes observations from his travels with Western technique, to create a group of amorphous, figural shapes emblematic of the unbalanced modernization occurring in contemporary China. In 1991, Zhan began work on *Seated Girl*, which was exhibited later that year in *New Generation*, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing (1991). His next series of sculptures, *Weightlessness* (1991), deals with the anxiety and displacement engendered by China's socioeconomic development. Expanding on this theme, Zhan began work in 1994 on the *Temptation* series, later exhibited as *Vacant Spirit-Vacant: The Temptation Series*, Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. In this series, Zhan used compressed, malformed Mao suits—the ubiquitous, revolutionary garb of revolutionary China—to serve as a metaphor for a loss of identity and ideology in post-Mao China. This was followed by the performance piece *The Ruin Cleaning Project* (1994), in which Zhan carefully cleaned and painted a building slated for demolition. A year later, after establishing the collaborative studio Three Men United with Sui Jianguo and Yu Fan, Zhan began work on *Property Development*, an installation dealing with ruins. This piece, assembled from the debris of the Central Academy, contemplates the urban reality of a Beijing transformed into an endless construction site. Later that year, the three-artist group launched another installation titled *Women / Site* at the Beijing Contemporary Art Gallery. Since 1995, Zhan has been developing the *False Ornamental Rock* series. This series of highly polished steel sculptures, modeled on actual *taihu* rocks found in traditional Chinese gardens, is a reaction to the hybridization of Chinese and foreign styles. It is featured in *New Map of Beijing: Today and Tomorrow's Capital Rockery Remolding Plan*, an imagined plan of the city with Zhan's false ornamental rocks installed at various sites. Since 1995, selections from Zhan's oeuvre have been included in numerous exhibitions such as *Open Your Mouth, Close Your Eyes: Beijing-Berlin Art Exchange*, Art Museum of Capital Teaching University, Beijing (1995); *The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Artist*, Hong Kong Art Centre, (1996); *Contemporary Chinese Art, 1997*, Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1997); and *Movement in the City*, Vienna Art Museum and the Contemporary Museum of Art, Bordeaux (1997–98). Zhan Wang continues to work in Beijing.

ZHANG HONGTU

Zhang Hongtu was born in 1943 in Pingliang, Gansu, but grew up in Beijing. As a Muslim, Zhang Hongtu has, from an early age, operated as an outsider within the relative homogeneity of Han society. From 1964 to 1969, Zhang studied at the Central Academy of Applied Arts, where he was instructed in socialist realism. After graduating, he took a job as a jewelry designer in Beijing. In 1982, Zhang moved to New York City in order to pursue a career as an artist and shortly after his arrival there was featured in his first major exhibition, *Painting the Chinese Dream*, the Brooklyn Museum of Art (1983), followed by *The New Generation*, the Hammerquist Gallery, New York (1984). From 1985 to 1986, Zhang exhibited his work in *Roots to Reality I and II*, Henry Street Settlement, New York. From 1985 to 1989, as a member of the Epoxy art collective, he worked on the *Back of the Head* series—a highly personal series of self-portraits featuring the back of his head. It was also during this time that Zhang became interested in the iconic imagery of Mao: one day he spontaneously transformed a carton of Quaker Oats by painting a Mao cap on the central image in a work later entitled *Long Live Chairman Mao* (1987). With the work of pop artists like Andy Warhol in mind, Zhang began to explore the imagery of the preeminent leader Mao Zedong. After hearing of the June Fourth Movement in 1989, Zhang produced a series of paintings employing Mao as the central image. His Mao works have been featured in exhibitions such as *Syncretism*, Alternative Museum, New York (1991); *Four Artists from China*, American Museum of Natural History, New York (1992); *Teddy Bear, Potato, Lipstick and Mao*, Art in General, New York (1993); *Beyond the Borders: Art by Recent Immigrants*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (1994); *Other Choices/Other Voices*, Islip Art Museum, East Islip, New York (1995); and *Icons of Power*, Eighth Floor Gallery, New York (1996); as well as the solo retrospective *Zhang Hongtu: Material Mao*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (1995–96). Addressing issues such as the interrelationship between national and cultural identity, the power and authority of images, and the merger of Chinese and Western artistic traditions, Zhang Hongtu has constantly reinvented his artistic vocabulary through an exploration of different media and subject matter. Zhang Hongtu continues to live and work in New York City.

ZHANG HUAN

Zhang Huan, originally named Zhang Dongming, was born in 1965 in Anyang, Henan. The son of factory workers, Zhang was sent to live with his paternal grandmother in rural Henan at the age of one, but he returned to Anyang to attend elementary school. When he was fourteen, he began to study drawing and painting and in 1984 gained admission to the Henan Academy of Fine Arts in Kaifeng. Concentrating on painting, Zhang's early works show the influence of artists such as Jean-François Millet and Rembrandt. After graduating in 1988, Zhang taught art history

at the Zhengzhou Institute of Education. In 1991, he moved to Beijing and enrolled in the graduate program at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. A year before graduating from the academy, Zhang moved to the East Village artists' community. For his master's work, *Weeping Angel* (later renamed *Angel*), Zhang suspended a plastic child on a wall covered in black felt. Authorities at the academy fined Zhang and threatened to close the exhibition if he did not submit a written apology; he capitulated but the show was closed nonetheless. Under increased persecution from the police and government officials, Zhang only intensified his performance art activities. In 1994, he began to translate his inner turmoil into a self-inflicted masochism displayed in a series of performance-based works. In *12 Square Meters* (1994), featured in this exhibition, Zhang sits naked in the East Village public toilet before ending the performance by submerging himself in a polluted river nearby. In *65 Kilograms*, performed on June 11, 1994, he suspended himself 3 meters (almost 10 feet) in the air and slowly dripped his own blood into a metal bowl placed atop an electric stove.

Expanding beyond such singular body experimentations to collective ones, Zhang Huan and nine other artists stacked their naked bodies on top of each other in the performance *Making the Anonymous Mountain One Meter Higher* (1995). Other collective experiments in performance art have included *Nine Caves*, *Encounter of the Third Kind I & II*, and *Original Sound*, all performed in 1995 at outside venues in and around Beijing. Although Zhang's performance art has largely been scorned by officials in China, he has received considerable international attention. In 1995, *65 Kilograms* was included in *Configura 2*, Erfurt, Germany. Zhang's works were given a comprehensive showing in *Art Material of China's Avant-Garde*, Fugang, Tokyo (1996), as well as in *Chinese Contemporary Art, 1997*, Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1997). Zhang's recent performance *Raising the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) was performed at Nanmaofang fishpond and is documented in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York (1998–99). *Pilgrimage—Wind and Water in New York* (1998) was performed at PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York in October 1998, while another performance is scheduled for April 1999 in San Francisco. Video from the New York performance and many of Zhang's conceptual photographs, such as *Foam* (1998), will be featured in a solo exhibition, *Zhang Huan* (1999), Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Zhang Huan continues to test the limits of self-expression from his studio in Beijing.

ZHU FADONG

Zhu Fadong was born in 1960 in the rural village of Dongchuan in the southwestern province of Yunnan. By high school, Zhu had demonstrated a strong interest in painting but was unprepared to enter the academy after graduation. For nearly two years, Zhu worked as a farmer and then

spent almost a year as a gardener, using his free time to paint portraits of friends and patrons in local tea houses to prepare for the academy entrance exam. After three attempts, Zhu was finally accepted to the Yunnan Academy of Fine Arts in Kunming. At this provincial institution Zhu was insulated from the experimental art in China's metropolitan centers and instead received a conservative, technical education in the visual arts. Completing his degree in 1985, Zhu took a position as a newspaper editor in the city of Zhaotong, but in pursuit of economic opportunities, Zhu left for the newly established Special Economic Zone on the tropical island province of Hainan. After a string of jobs, the economic reality of Hainan—a stark contrast to the state-supported jobs in the rest of China—forced Zhu to return to Yunnan a year later, jobless and without an apartment. While financial realities have since made it necessary for Zhu to produce works with a commercial value, this experience committed Zhu to the “avant-garde” movement. His first show was an ad hoc experimental exhibition of paintings held in the kiosk of a local park. The ramifications of this nascent venture outside the realm of the official art world were far reaching. Drawing on his own economic experiences, Zhu produced the paintings *Black Squares*, *Missing, Missing*, and *Big Business Card* in 1990 and 1991, chronicling the search for his own self lost in the midst of commercialization. In 1993, Zhu expanded on this theme with the performance piece *Looking for a Missing Person*. In this work, Zhu posted thousands of missing person notices featuring himself throughout Kunming during a three-month period. For his next project, *This Person Is For Sale*, Zhu moved to Beijing in 1994. Dressed in a Mao jacket, Zhu wore on his back a sign reading “This person is for sale, price negotiable.” As he traveled the streets and alleyways of the capital, Zhu evoked a myriad of responses not only from passing pedestrians, but from the art community as well. Zhang Xuejun documented the event and, in conjunction with Zhu, later filmed his next project, *His Upbringing Has to Do with Doors* (1994). In 1995, Zhu's early paintings were exhibited in *The Second Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition*, Museum of Chinese History, Beijing (1995) and *Chinese Avant-Garde Art Since 1979*, Centre d'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona (1995), and photographs of *This Person Is For Sale* were featured in *Documents of Chinese Avant-Garde Art*, Gallery Q, Tokyo (1995). In 1996, Zhu participated in the group performances *No. 13* and *Original Sound*, Beijing (1995). That same year, a series of prints based on *Looking For a Missing Person* was included in the exhibition '96—*Contemporary Prints* in Beijing. Exploring new venues for performance, Zhu has recently created *Uncultivated* for the *Anti-Exhibition Space* project. His recent work *Welcoming Your Gracious Presence* (1997) uses computer technology. Zhu Fadong continues to live and work in Beijing.

A SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Compiled by Kris Imants Ercums

In preparation for this exhibition, the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, in cooperation with the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago, issued a general call for works, *Rethinking the 20th Century: A Chinese Perspective—An Exhibition Call for Entries*. While the primary aim of this call was to determine current trends in the shifting field of Mainland Chinese contemporary art, the resulting data from the call was further used to evaluate the prevalent artistic concerns, formal means, and demographics of contemporary Chinese art and artists. We invited artists to reflect on what it has meant for the Chinese to experience the twentieth century. The scope of entries was not limited to the representation of a specific historical event, but rather artists were encouraged to explore the primacy of historical reflection through distinct visual vocabularies, a diversity of media, and a range of topics including but not limited to colonialism, postcolonialism, modernism, and post-modernism. Particularly welcome were those works created specifically for this exhibition. As part of their submission, artists were asked to include slides or a draft proposal, a brief explanation, a curriculum vitae, and representative slides of past work.

The call was advertised in three leading Mainland Chinese art publications chosen for their different audiences and varied reputations within the Chinese art world. *Fine Arts*, the first of these publications, has the widest circulation of any art journal in China, and as the official journal of the National Association of Chinese Artists, enjoys government support. The second of these publications, *Research in Fine Arts (Meishu yanjiu)*, the journal of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, is an academic, research-oriented publication. The third publication, *Jiangsu Fine Arts Magazine*, which is based in Nanjing, maintains a contemporary focus, making it the “cutting edge” art publication in Mainland China.

Over the course of two months, from May through June 1997, we received 126 proposals, from more than thirty cities all over China. The artists who responded included men and women, ranging from prominent instructors in major art schools to painters working in remote areas. The submissions provided valuable information about the current state of Chinese art and artists in Mainland China and constituted an important component in determining the content and structure of this exhibition.

The results of this call have been surveyed and are presented in this appendix. Containing statistical data and summaries of selected proposals, the appendix has been divided into two sections. The first section is a quantitative breakdown of the information received in the proposals and is divided according to six broad criteria. This section is followed by a detailed examination of selected proposals, which, in keeping with the experimental theme of this exhibition, further explicates the diversity of contemporary Chinese art.

A BRIEF SURVEY

The following is a statistical breakdown of the information submitted in the proposals. Of the twenty-one artists whose work is featured in this exhibition, none is included in this survey; however each category treats the proposal information comprehensively. The first category is the geographic distribution of the entries according to ten regional distinctions. This is followed by broadly configured statistics of age and gender. The education level and profession of each artist include all entries regardless of previous criteria. The final portion of this survey considers the artwork itself by looking at the principal medium and type of work submitted.

Geographic distribution was determined using the current residential status of the artist. Distribution can be configured according to ten regional distinctions: 10% from Northeast China (Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning provinces); 17% from North China (Shaanxi, Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi provinces, as well as the municipality of Tianjin); 9% from Central China (Hubei, Hunan, Anhui, and Jiangxi provinces); 12% from the Eastern Coast of China (Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, excluding Shanghai); 9% from South China (Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi provinces and Hong Kong); 15% from Southwest China (Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces); 5% from Inner Mongolia and Western China (Qinghai and Gansu provinces and the autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang); 7% from the municipality of Beijing; 9% from the municipality of Shanghai; and 7% from Chinese artists residing and working outside China including those from Canada, the United States, Japan, and Switzerland.

Age was broadly configured according to the decade in which the artist was born, ranging in date from the 1930s to the mid-1970s. The majority of artists were born just prior to or during the early years of the Cultural Revolution with 50% of all entries from artists born between 1960 and 1969. Artists born in the early years of the People's Republic of China, between 1950 and 1959, constituted 20% of the submissions; 18% of the artists were born between 1970 and 1979. Those born prior to 1949 composed 12% of submissions.

Gender remained the most disproportionate category considered in this survey. Only 4% of the entries submitted were from women, with the remaining 96% of the proposals from men.

Education level was divided between secondary or high-school graduates and tertiary or college graduates. Artists who graduated from secondary institutions but did not advance to tertiary institutions comprised 8% of the entries. Artists who completed tertiary degrees totaled 92% of the entries. Those who graduated from tertiary institutions can be further distinguished according to three institutional types: academies of fine and applied arts, "normal" or teacher-training institutions, and universities. Graduates of art academies comprised 55% of the entries, while those who received artistic training at teaching institutions made up 24% of the entries. Graduates of universities comprised 13% of all entries. Of these college graduates, only 7% of the applicants indicated that they majored in non-art related fields of study. The remaining 93% of the artists graduated with degrees specifically related to the visual arts.

Profession is defined as the current livelihood of each artist. In keeping with current trends in China, 49% of artists surveyed have eschewed state patronage, choosing instead to work as independent artists. This classification includes artists who survive by selling their art commercially while working at odd jobs, which in turn provide them with the means to continue producing art. A substantial number, 32%, have retained affiliations with educational institutions as either instructors or administrators. This affiliation often provides assistance in the form of materials, studio space, and exhibition opportunities. 15% of the artists hold positions that do not directly relate to the visual arts. The remaining 4% are students currently involved in fine arts programs at the tertiary level.

Medium was divided into seven categories: oil painting, ink on paper, mixed-media painting, prints, installation-based work, sculpture, and photography. Only one medium was considered per artist. With 46% of all entries, artists working in Western-style oil on canvas painting ranked first. Traditional Chinese media such as ink on paper counted for 21%, followed by 10% of all entries submitting prints. Mixed-media compositions comprised 10%, while installation-based works provided 8% of the entries. The remaining entries included: two of photography, two of sculpture, and a single video of performance art.

Styles varied widely. Works in oil on canvas tended to be aligned with many post-1989 art movements such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism. Historical styles from the West, such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and Post-Impressionism were also represented. A small minority of oil paintings used Academic Realism. *Guohua*, or the National School of Painting based on the Pre-Republican literati brush and ink tradition, also was well represented among the entries. The most comprehensive project proposals were submitted in the format of mixed-media, installation-based work.

PROPOSALS

In keeping with the original aim of the call for entries to reflect on the Chinese experience during the twentieth century, the seven sample proposals featured in this section posit unique artistic solutions to this historical problem. Furthermore, they reflect many of the experimental trends presented in this exhibition. Whether commenting on historical events such as the Cultural Revolution, addressing the role of women in modern and traditional Chinese society, deconstructing the Chinese language, or reappropriating the past for contemporary use, the thematic heterogeneity and uniquely formulated artistic vocabularies exemplified in these six proposals represent a profound departure from the recent past, in which a single approach to art prevailed and an official interpretation of history was dictated by the Communist Party.

Zhao Baokang, a Shanghai-based artist, conflates notions of history with concepts of time in *A History of Time No. 3* (fig. 1). The third in a series of installations, this proposal is based on an initial experimentation with flowers, *A History of Time No. 1*. In this installation, first exhibited at the Shanghai Museum of Fine Arts in 1996, Zhao hermetically sealed a selection of flowers—chrysanthemums, roses, rape flowers, and sunflowers—in narrow cases made of paraffin wax and transparent rub-

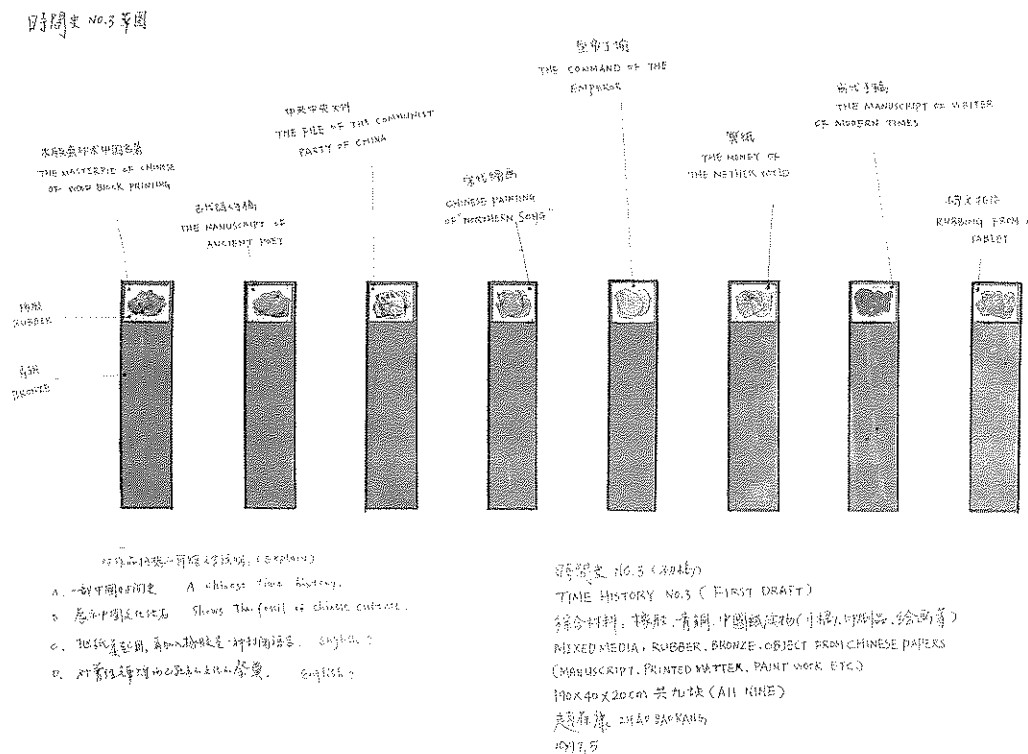
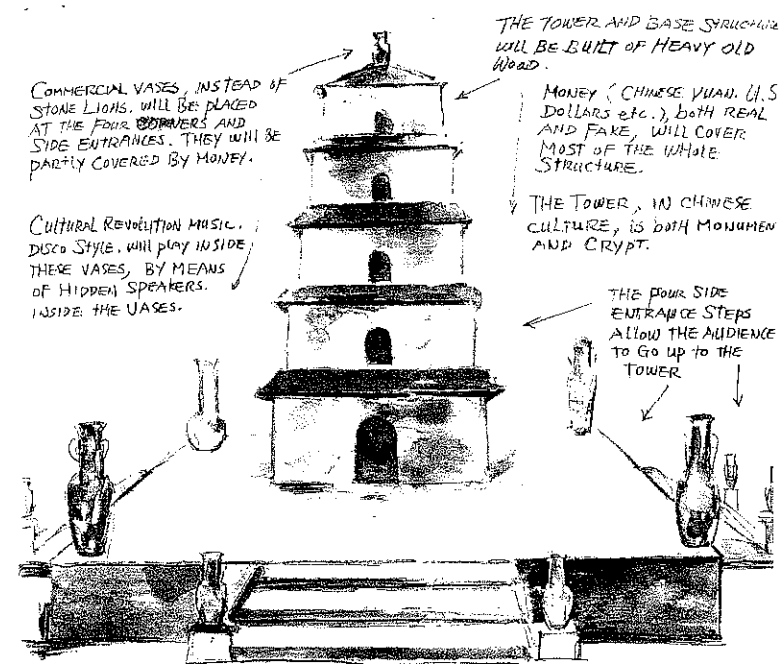


FIGURE 1
Zhao Baokang, proposal for *History of Time No. 3*, 1998, pencil and acrylic on paper, 13 x 21 in. (32.5 x 52.5 cm).



THROUGH THE WINDOWS ON ALL FOUR SIDES OF THE TOWER, THE AUDIENCE WILL BE ABLE TO VIEW THE INTERIOR. THE INSIDE WALLS WILL BE COVERED BY BURNED BOOKS. AT THE INSIDE BOTTOM OF THE TOWER, REAL ANTIQUE VASES, SOME BROKEN, WILL BE PLACED UNDER BURNED BOOKS, ASH AND EARTH. CULTURAL REVOLUTION MUSIC WILL BE PLAYING IN ITS ORIGINAL VERSION.



TOTAL: TOWER, 1997.

FIGURE 2
Zhang Jianjun, proposal for *Tower*.

ber. By thus preserving the flowers' blooms, Zhao imposed stability on the ebb and flow of time. Turning from a history of the natural world to that of the "text," *A History of Time No. 3* uses similarly elongated units made of rubber and bronze to convey a compartmentalized, static sense of time. In each of the nine units, Zhao exerts his own authority over history by crumpling a selection of text and containing it in a separate, modular display case. Each case contains disparate genres of writing and the visual arts, taken from a range of physical and historical contexts including woodblock prints, ancient poetry, Communist Party files, paintings from the Northern Song dynasty, an imperial decree, "spirit" money used in funerary rites, modern fiction, stela rubbings of ancient Chinese monuments, and slogans from the Cultural Revolution.

In the project proposal for the installation *Tower*, Zhang Jianjun, an artist based in New York, views the endemic materialism fostered by recent economic reforms in China as the direct result of the Cultural Revolution (fig. 2). Zhang explains the conceptual background for this project:

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) caused irreparable damage to the Chinese nation. All things suggesting “tradition” were burnt or destroyed. At the moment, China is witnessing a rapid growth in the economy, and with it comes unbridled greed and materialism. The idealism and altruism that once guided the Chinese conscience are gradually eroding. Like what the Cultural Revolution did, the money-centered mentality of today has threatened to destroy Chinese culture.

Several large vases punctuate the corners of a multitiered platform, the steps of which are covered with an assortment of international currency. The initial grandeur of the installation is quickly dispelled as the onlooker approaches the large pagoda dominating the center. Looking inside, one quickly discovers that the monumental structure is hollow, filled only with burnt books and newspapers, fragments of antique vases, and blaring music from the Cultural Revolution.

In the installation piece *The Victim of Feudal Ethics*, Li Tie, a San Diego-based artist, approaches the legacy of the Cultural Revolution from a different perspective (fig. 3). In this very personal work about the suicide of his cousin, Li Tie expounds on the futility of the Cultural Revolution, and the failed attempt by its proponents to address and correct traditional gender inequality in China. In his statement, he explains the installation:

FIGURE 3



FIGURE 3
Li Tie, *Victim of Feudal Ethics*, 1997, mixed-media installation (drawing, photographs, glass bottles, and flour). 42 x 50 in. (106.7 x 127 cm).

FIGURE 4
Bai Chongmin and Wu Weihe, *Guo Shang—Her Story No. 25*, 1996, mixed media on canvas, 46 x 29 in. (116 x 73 cm).

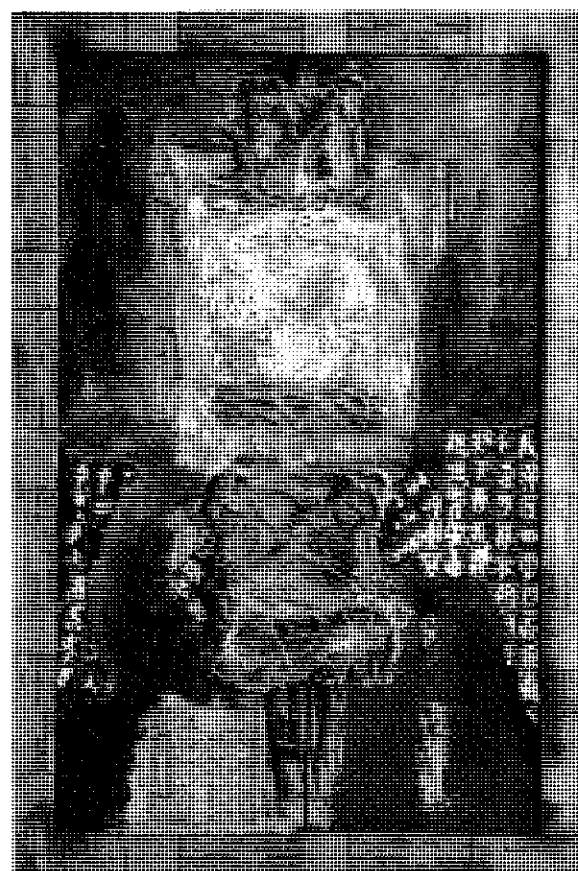


FIGURE 4

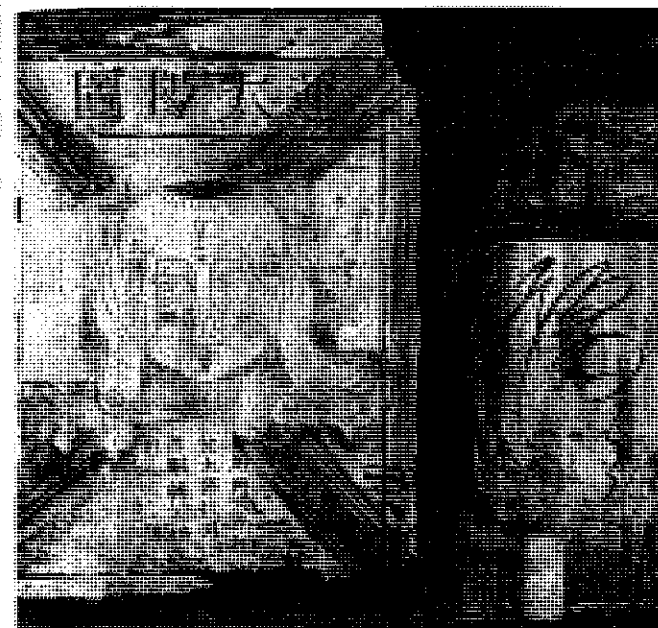


FIGURE 5
Cheng Xiangjun, *Medical Book no. 4*, woodcut print, natural lacquer paint, 18 x 15 in. (45.5 x 38.5 cm).

The Victim of Feudal Ethics is dedicated to my cousin who committed suicide almost fifteen years ago in my parents' hometown. The reason for this tragedy was that her parents, my uncle and aunt, arranged a marriage for her to someone she did not want to marry. Next to the photograph, there are seven bottles of poison, each with names reflecting the different reasons why, under feudal ethics, Chinese women would feel forced to kill themselves. By doing this, I am trying to question those moral values which have typically been honored by traditional Chinese society and which have supposedly been eliminated in the People's Republic. But the fact is that these ideas have not only not died out, but in many places have become even stronger. So what the Cultural Revolution really did for our culture and value system is really questionable.

In the multimedia series *Guo Shang—Her Story* (fig. 4), Bai Chongmin and Wu Weihe, a team of women artists, launch a feminist critique on the *Lie Nü Zhuan* or *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, a Confucian classic. Originally from the northeastern province of Liaoning, the two artists have been working on this project in their Beijing studio since 1996. In a written statement they explain the historical basis for their work:

Our creation stems from an ancient book, Lie Nü Zhuan, which eulogizes the virtues and achievements of Chinese women in feudal society through an account of their exemplary lives. . . . These women were acclaimed by the ruling class and received the admiration of the whole nation for their utter devotion to family and a self-sacrificing spirit. But in actuality they did not enjoy a social status equal to men. Under the patriarchal system, these so-called outstanding women were just tools to earn royal honors for their clans.

The series uses an interplay of text and paint so as to, in the words of the artists, “blend the static nature of words with the dynamic media of paint to break the limitations of the former.” Torn textual fragments and painted passages from the *Biographies* are juxtaposed against a colorful background of thickly applied paint.

Textual interplay is also evident in the work of Cheng Xiangjun, a professor at the Central Academy of Applied Arts in Beijing. In his series *Medical Book*, Cheng merges traditional lacquer painting with excerpts from medical texts in a *chine collé* process to create this series of hybrid works (fig. 5). He explains his choice as a reaction to the frenetic development occurring in China: “I enjoy using the uniqueness of indigenous artistic languages to create a discourse with Western techniques, therefore the works [in this series] use ancient medical texts to explicate the inherent contradictions and obstacles extant in the development of contemporary society.”

Huang Rui, an artist based in the Japanese city of Osaka, also transposes traditional media with contemporary context in his large-scale installation *The New Silk Road* (fig. 6). The imagery of a journey, evident in the title, permeates the conception, layout, and execution of this installation as the audience is invited to walk through a series of rows of suspended clothing. By using old and new clothing from Han Chinese and other ethnic groups in modern China, Huang demonstrates the multicultural character of the “New Silk Road.” The journey progresses via a long tubular tunnel made of silk, ending on the roof of the installation venue. In an earlier version of this work, audience members emerged

FIGURE 6
Huang Rui, two drawings from
the proposal for *The New Silk Road*.

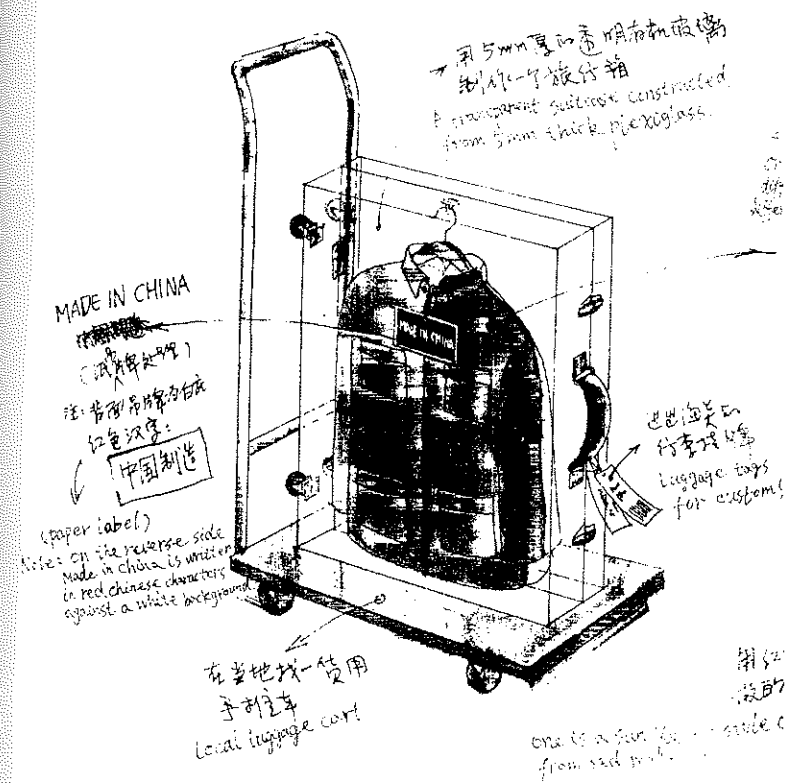
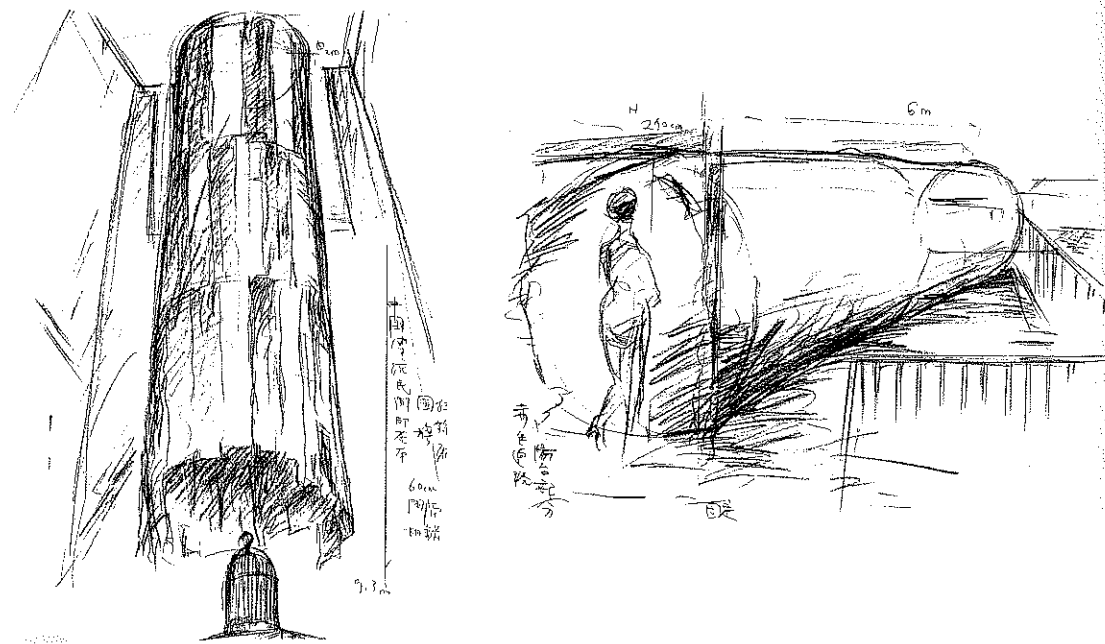


FIGURE 7
Shi Yong, proposal for *Made in China*.

from the confined space of the tunnel into a lofty square enclosure (see fig. 6). Positioned in the middle of the enclosure was a large birdcage over which hovered a silk cylinder.

Made in China, a sculptural-installation proposal for a work by Shanghai-based artist Shi Yong, employs the imagery of the “journey” in a very different manner (fig. 7). In this work, a red Mao suit is encased in a transparent suitcase made of Plexiglas and mounted on a luggage cart. A large bilingual sign hanging from the Mao suit reads: “Made in China.” Simultaneously evoking the imagery of movement and travel, Shi has ironically contrasted historical legacy, as represented by the Mao suit, with the metaphor of baggage and all its burdensome connotations.

In the six proposals described in this section, each artist has grounded his or her exploration of a discrete, oftentimes personal interpretation of history within an equally unique artistic vocabulary, revealing the diversity of formal means, conceptual problems, and thematic concerns currently engaging artists working within the protean arena of contemporary Chinese art. As a burgeoning field—one that is increasingly captivating the international art world—contemporary art in China is still in an embryonic state. This appendix is an attempt to facilitate a greater understanding of this field while recording specific trends shaping Chinese visual culture at the end of the twentieth century.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are listed in inches followed by centimeters in parentheses; height precedes width.

PART ONE: DEMYSTIFICATION

Xu Bing
Ghosts Pounding the Wall
1990
Mixed-media installation
108 x 240 (274.3 x 609.6)
Collection of the artist

Wenda Gu
Pseudo Seal-Script
1984
Ink on rice paper
Each piece 26 x 38 (66 x 96.5)
Collection of Hanart T Z Gallery,
Hong Kong

Zhang Hongtu
Studs
1992
Metal, wood, and paint
96 x 86 1/2 x 6 (243.8 x 219.7 x 15.3)
Collection of Guy Ullens, Artal, Belgium

Xing Danwen
Born with the Cultural Revolution
1995
Three black-and-white photographs
Each 24 x 20 (60.9 x 50.8)
Collection of the artist

Song Dong
Breathing
1996
Color transparency, audio tape
48 x 96 (122 x 244)

Mo Yi
Made by the Police Department
1 and 2
1997
Two color photo collages
Each photograph, 15 1/2 x 14 1/2
(39.4 x 36.8)
Collection of the artist

Sui Jianguo
Earthy Force
1991
Iron and granite
Each piece approximately 23 1/2 x 27 1/2 x
19 1/2 (60 x 70 x 50)
Collection of the artist

Yu Fan
My Mother
1995
Mixed-media installation, videotape
Three pieces, each 47 x 71 (120 x 180)
Collection of the artist

PART TWO: RUINS

Cai Jin
Beauty Banana Plant No. 48
1994
Oil on canvas
79 x 75 (200.7 x 190.5)
Collection of the artist

Shi Chong
The Stage
1996
Oil on canvas
94 x 34 (238.8 x 83.8)
Collection of the artist

Yuan Dongping
Sisters
1989-90
Six black-and-white photographs
Each 11 x 17 (27.9 x 43.1)
Collection of the artist

Zhang Huan
12 Square Meters
1994
Videotape
Running time: 15 minutes
Collection of the artist

Zhan Wang
Temptation
1994
Mixed-media installation
138 (350.5) diameter
Collection of the artist

Rong Rong
Untitled
1996-97
Three black-and-white photographs
Each 20 x 24 (50.8 x 60.9)
Collection of the artist

Yin Xiuzhen
Suitcase
1995
Mixed-media installation, videotape
35 x 18 x 20 (88.9 x 45.7 x 50.8)
Collection of the artist

PART THREE: TRANSIENCE

Zhan Wang
Ornamental Rock
1996
Stainless steel
81 1/2 x 47 x 47 (207 x 120 x 120)
Collection of the artist

Zhu Fadong
This Person Is For Sale
1994
Performance
Photo documentation completed 1998
Running time: 8 minutes
Collection of Smart Museum of Art,
University of Chicago

Yu Hong
Flying
1997
Oil on canvas
61 x 68 (155 x 172.5)
Collection of the artist

Zeng Hao
5:00 p.m. in the Afternoon
1996
Oil on canvas
78 1/2 x 68 1/2 (200 x 175)
Collection of the artist

Wang Jin
A Chinese Dream
Two costumes
Polyvinyl chloride
Front, 1997, 71 x 78 x 11 (180 x 198 x 28)
Rear, 1998, 65 x 43 x 18 (165 x 110 x 45)
Collection of the artist

Liu Zheng
Peking Opera Scenes
1997
Two black-and-white photographs
Each 39 x 39 (100 x 100)
Collection of the artist

Qiu Zhijie
Tattoo 1 and 2
1997
Two color photographs
Each 40 1/2 x 31 (102 x 79)
Collection of the artist

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CHINESE NAMES AND TERMS

85 Yishu xinzhao
Baishe zhuan
bei lin
Bei hai
biaozhunxiang
Cai Jin
Cang Jie
Cao Zhi
chang cheng
Chang Tsong-zung
chao qian
Chen Lei
Chen Xiangjun
Chen Xitong
da gong
da qi wan cheng
Deng Lijun
Dongcun
Fang Lijun
Feng Mengbo
feng ren
fu hao
Gao Ling
Gao Minglu
Gao Zhenmei
ge ming
ge tian
Geng Yanyi
geren mixin
Gongan ju zhi
Gu Chenfeng
guan
gui
gui
gui da qiang
guo hua
hai
hai
Han Fei
huai gu
huai ju
Huang Rui
huang se
Huang Yongbing
jia shan shi
Jia Yi
jian
Jiangsu huakan
Jinshi lu
Kong ling kong
laogong shichang
Li Jiacheng

85 藝術新朝
白蛇傳
碑林
北海
標準像
蔡錦
蒼頡
曹植
長城
張頌仁
炒錢
陳雷
陳向君
陳希同
打工
大器晚成
鄧麗君
東村
方立鈞
馮夢波
瘋人
符號
高嶺
高名潞
高振美
革命
葛天
耿建翌
個人迷信
公安局制
顧丞峰
關
軌
鬼
鬼打牆
國畫
醜
骸
韓非
懷古
懷舊
黃銳
黃色
黃永
假山石
賈誼
件
江蘇畫刊
金石錄
空靈空
勞工市場
李嘉城

Li Kai
Li Qingzhao
Li Shan
Li Tie
Lie Nü Zhuan
Liu Dahong
Liu Wei
Liu Xun
Liu Zheng
liumeng
Ma Qizhong
Mao Lizi
Meishu
Meishu sichao
men pai
Mengjiang
Mo Yi
Nan Sha
nian hua
niu gui she shen
Nüren. Xianchang
Ping'an dadao
pochu mixin
Qiu Zhijie
qu ye
Renti dazhan
Rong Rong
San ren lianhe gongzuo shi
shagua xiangji
Shai tai yang
shang cheng
shanghen wenxue
shanghen yishu
shengcun zhuangtai
Shi Chong
shi da an
Shi Yong
shinei zhuangzhi
shiyuan yishu
Song Dong
Sui Jianguo
Sun Wukong sanda baigujing
Tang Song
wan li changcheng
Wang Guangyi
Wang Jin
Wang Jinsong
Wang Keping
Wang Lin
Wenda Gu
Wu Hung
Wu Shanzhuan

wu xi
Xiamen dada
xiangtu yishu
Xiao Lu
Xin sheng dai
Xin xingxiang
Xing Danwen
Xingxing hauhui
Xu Bing
Xu Xian
xun gen
yi wu
Yin Xiuzhen
yiyuan
Yu Fan
Yu Hong
Yu Youhan
yuan
Yuan Dongping
yun dong
Zeng Hao
Zhan Wang
Zhang Hongtu
Zhang Huan
Zhang Jianjun
Zhang Nian
Zhang Qing
Zhang Xiaogang
Zhao Baokang
Zhao Mingcheng
Zhongguo meishu bao
Zhu Fadong
zuigao zhishi
zuo jiu

武戲
廈門達達
鄉土藝術
肖魯
新生代
新形象
邢旦文
星星畫會
徐冰
徐賢
尋根
遺物
尹秀珍
醫院
于凡
喻紅
余友涵
院
袁冬平
運動
曾浩
展望
張鴻圖
張涇
張健君
張念
張晴
張曉剛
趙保康
趙明誠
中國美術報
朱發東
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