

Jin Feng: Art Is a Way of Life A Case Study from 2003 to Today

Jin Feng has been an active participant in many ongoing projects, exhibitions, and discussions about art since he moved to Shanghai in November of 2003. During these years he has also been able to maintain a unique role as a person working at the margins, both inside and outside the inner art circle, who continues to have a profound influence in Shanghai. The sense of belonging and the strong community atmosphere that exists in Shanghai has allowed Jin Feng to play the role of a catalyst, someone who tries to bring different people together and initiate new dialogues. Many in Shanghai refer to this kind of activity as *jianghu*, but Jin Feng also plays the very important role of mediator and spokesperson, which he also handles very well.

When Jin Feng moved to Shanghai, he left behind his teaching position at Changzhou Teacher's University of Technology and began working as director of the Academic Department of the Duolun Museum of Modern Art to develop the exhibition and education program. In his position as Academic Director, Jin Feng worked to institute basic museum working standards and to establish himself within this new environment. At that time Jin Feng was known for his mixed-media works and photographs; *My Vanishing Portrait 1 to 6* is one of his most representative works of art from the late 1990s. The days of museum work were important for him, and it was during that time that he began the writing projects that later became one of his major contributions to the art world through his blog and other arts-related Web platforms. Jin Feng's critical discourse and perspectives expressed through the written word have been a crucial contribution to contemporary Chinese art as there are few critics who follow the most current and experimental artist practices.

During his time at Duolun, he established strong relationships with the local art community through various discussions and a number of curated projects, among them the Shanghai Duolun MoMA Exhibition of Young Artists in 2004. At the same time, Jin Feng kept working on his own artistic production, but he kept it out of the limelight during this period, a time that could be considered transitional for the artist. Rarely showing his work at that time, Jin Feng made only one piece for the Shanghai Duolun MoMA exhibition of young artists, a sculpture of Saddam Hussein entitled *Shaking Hands* (2005), which was inspired by the scene of Saddam's statue being dismantled in Baghdad. Although this piece has somehow gone relatively unnoticed in recent years, it was an important challenge for the artist to turn to other media rather than his previous photography and video work. Also, *Shaking Hands* is one of the first works in which he uses news events from everyday life as a point of departure; this emphasis on social issues later became one of the most notable characteristics of his approach to art making.

Jin Feng left Duolun MoMA in early 2005 and directed all of his attention to making art. The piece that finally drew attention to his practice, and that is still today discussed



Jin Feng, *My Vanishing Portrait 3*, 2000, colour photographs, 120 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

in artistic circles, was for a very short time shown in the exhibition *Asia Traffic* at the Zendai Museum of Modern Art in late 2005. This sculpture, *Kneeling for 492 Years (We Stood Up to Take a Breath)* (2005), represents Qin Hui and his wife in upright positions. Qin Hui was a chief counselor of the Southern Song dynasty: he maintained security within the region by signing a peace treaty with Juchen (Jin), who controlled the north. Yue Fei, a general of the Southern Song, didn't abide by the treaty, and so Qin Hui executed him. Because he relinquished Northern China to Juchen and executed Yue Fei, Qin Hui is known as a traitor within Chinese history. In present-day Hangzhou, once the capital of the Southern Song, there remains a sculpture near the West Lake that shows Qin Hui and his wife kneeling in front of Yue Fei's tomb asking for forgiveness. Jin Feng made his sculpture in the likeness of the original, but he shows the couple standing instead of kneeling. For the opening of the exhibition, Qin Hui's descendant, Qin Shili, was invited by the artist to write an inscription, and he wrote: "The beautiful country can't compare with the past. For truly great men look to this age alone." Jin Feng's piece attracted a great deal of media attention and much debate over the Internet. Many people criticized Jin Feng for allowing the traitor to stand up. Citizens in Shanghai threatened to gather in front of the museum and protest, asking for the artwork to be removed from the museum. In consequence, the piece was removed before the exhibition officially ended, but the issue remained a topic of hot debate.

In this work, Jin Feng achieved two primary goals: to shift the work's meaning beyond the spaces of the gallery by bringing forth an issue that echoes throughout Chinese society and to create a work that would allow him to finally make an impact in contemporary art circles who have their own level of critical discussion. Another important strategy for Jin Feng was to search out resources for creativity that have a strong resonance within the Chinese community and meanings that non-Chinese audiences, who in many cases do not possess the same background knowledge, might have a hard time understanding.

Another piece is *Appeal Without Words* (2006), which Jin Feng showed in the 38 Solo Exhibition in Shanghai for a very short period of time during the opening. Jin Feng invited one hundred people painted in gold to stand in the exhibition space as live sculptures. Referring to the local phenomenon of soundless protests in Beijing, where thousands who are petitioning the government for justice but are not heard, the artist invited actual protesters to the exhibition site.

After the Qin Hui piece, Jin Feng did not exhibit again for awhile; instead, he developed new strategies for exhibiting his work by sharing his projects and ideas on the Web. The isolation he experienced during this period and his urge to speak inspired him to find his own way of showing his work. In this way, his blog as well as Web sites like art-ba-ba (www.art-ba-ba.com) became very important. Through his blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/jfeng>) he attracted considerable attention; so, although he was barred from regular exhibitions, Jin Feng continued with this new strategy of creating work and announcing it on the Net. He constantly tracks people's comments about his work and practice on his blog, and he replies to everyone, thereby further spreading his socially oriented approach to art making. During his period of isolation which continues till today, Jin Feng's primary approach to exhibition making was presenting living sculpture, that is, enlisting people from real life, usually people who have had very strong issues mark their lives in one way or another. These issues are well known to the Chinese public and are incorporated into the concept that Jin Feng stages with the actors he involves.



Right: Jin Feng, *Insult Art*, 2007, performance. Courtesy of the artist and BizArt, Shanghai.

Left: Jin Feng, *Kneeling for 492 Years (We Stood Up to Take a Breath)*, 2005, sculpture. Courtesy of the artist

Following page: Jin Feng, *Appeal Without Words*, 2006, performance. Courtesy of the artist.



Jin Feng's performance piece *Insult Art* can be considered a new step in this approach. The event was presented at the BizArt Center in Shanghai in 2006. He staged the event for two hours and moved his daily working environment into the exhibition space, revealing his ideas and thoughts through news images, blog content printouts, his daily research on the Internet, and information that he might use as material for his future works. The gallery walls were covered with images and texts printed on A4 paper. Jin Feng invited the Shenzhen-based Insult Company, who can be hired to harass and insult individuals one doesn't like, to the site along with a lawyer whose role it was to protect the interests of the artist. The Insult Company had the task of doing research on Jin Feng himself, and "insulting" his art, his process, and his character. As Jin Feng was not present at the site during the event, the lawyer stood by. Led by his experience in recent years and by the attacks on his work arising from public opinion, Jin Feng made this event an example of some of the reaction to his artistic practice. The event consisted of a mixture of preconceived actions and totally out-of-control situations, which made it difficult for the audience to distinguish when the artist had determined what was happening and when it was spontaneous. This work, and others that followed it, were important in the maturation of his concept of art becoming a way of life.

Each year Jin Feng presents about seven new works, which are mostly self-produced and promoted. Because of his persistence, he has gained a great deal of recognition in the Chinese art world. Jin Feng's efforts to push further and build new channels of communication are not possible to accomplish in every work. But he continues to struggle with himself as an artist and as a contributor to society, and is compelled to discuss such matters through his work and his blog. Jin Feng is one of the rare artists from his generation who has managed to overcome his own barriers and move forward. He is able to actively work outside of the commercial gallery circuit, as he doesn't really think of pursuing the commercial world, or, if he does, then he considers how to make such endeavours more complicated and challenging.

On the other hand, while Jin Feng has received considerable attention within China, he hasn't achieved much visibility at an international level. One of the main obstacles in this regard is the strong local context for much of his work and the lack of exposure that relates to the difficulty of presenting his work within the gallery system and international exhibition platforms.







Top left: Jin Feng, *The Soles of Ma Zhongxin Belong to Me*, 2006, photograph, 120 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Ma Zhongxin is a world-famous global traveler. I signed a contract with him in which we both agreed that conceptually, the soles of Ma Zhongxin's feet belonged to me. I tattooed a stamp saying "Jin Feng Guo Shou" (handled by Jin Feng) on his soles, which accompanies him during his global travelling. As long as Ma is travelling, it will be an ongoing project. Only when Ma finishes with world travels will the work be deemed fully complete.



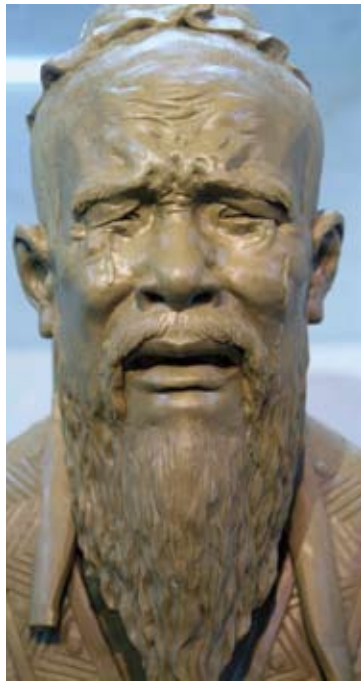
Bottom left: Jin Feng, *File for Old Lady Wang Xiaoliu*, 2007, installation, 800 x 600 x 500 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Wang Xiaoliu is widely known in Danyang City, Jiangsu province. The kind old lady has brought up over two hundred disabled children abandoned by their families. All the possessions of old lady Wang Xiaoliu, including furniture, daily necessities, and household appliances, were bought by the artist, placed into different categories, and put into glass cases specially made according to their sizes. Figures of Wang Xiaoliu and three of the abandoned children brought up by her, Wang Xisheng, Wang Guoxian, and Wang Guoping, were also placed the glass cases.

Left Jin Feng, *Confucius is Crying!* (detail), 2006, plasticine and interactive Web site, 185 x 70 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Confucius is Crying! is both a sculpture and an interactive Web work using a blog. I try to explore communication between artists and the general public as well as new channels of communication. There are two steps to completing *Confucius is Crying!*: first, the sculpture of *Confucius is Crying!* is exhibited at the studio of the artist. Materials used include plasticine sent from Guangzhou via express service. Under certain temperatures, plasticine can be used to reshape sculptures. The second step is to invite the audience to wipe away Confucius's tears, and thus re-create the image of Confucius. What kind of image will show up in the end?

Right: Jin Feng, *Confucius is Crying!*, 2006, plasticine and interactive Web site, 185 x 70 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



In 2006, Jin Feng proposed to Zendai MoMA in Shanghai the following project: a solo exhibition of work by Sun Zhigang in which Jin Feng would perform the role of the curator. In 2003, an infamous event, in which Sun Zhigang was arrested and beaten to death in Guangzhou for not carrying a temporary resident permit or valid ID, put an end to the history of detention and repatriation, and his death pushed the justice system forward in the handling of migrant workers. Sun majored in art and design at Wuhan University of Science & Technology and completed courses in 2001. He was fond of painting, design, and sculpture. Jin Feng's proposal was to memorialize the deceased through the curation of his artworks. This project has since remained in proposal form.

In 2008 Jin Feng did have a solo exhibition at Zendai MoMA titled *Site/ Problem—A Case of Jin Feng*, but it presented a challenge for the artist: how to break away from the retrospective presentation of his work that we are all now very familiar with. We have come to expect some surprise from Jin Feng that will undoubtedly also be a surprise for the artist himself, a project that will be hard to judge or criticize with our existing value systems.

The failure of many retrospective presentations is the result of framing the artist within a certain identifiable *oeuvre*. This kind of categorization is something that Jin Feng is still not ready for, or maybe it's too early, or maybe he will never be ready. No matter what, Jin Feng will continue on in his own particular path. As he has said: "Art is a way of life, so it's almost impossible to frame [my work] into a retrospective notion of presentation, because my approach to making art is a dynamic idea in motion that questions itself at every moment."