Although she belongs to the avant-garde generation of the 1980s and 1990s that has done well within China and internationally, Xiao Lu is different from many other recognized artists. Contradictions abound in her career. Despite having shunned publicity for many years, she is a famous art persona, and is considered a major artist on the basis of a very small body of work. In her installations, performances, and photographs, she insists on art’s connection to life and emphasizes the constrained circumstances of women in China—circumstances that have made her vulnerable as a person despite her heroic actions as an artist. Xiao Lu is famous for having fired two shots in 1989 into her large installation titled *Dialogue* (1988), a gesture that presented the public with an example of undeniable rebellion. At the same time, however, she was hesitant for a long period to speak about the meaning of her actions; now, as she has matured (and after a long stay in Australia), she has become less diffident, even providing the details of her historic 1989 performance for the popular press.

Yet it cannot be said that Xiao Lu is an outsider; she comes from an influential art family. Her father, Xiao Feng, a well-known painter who studied in Russia in the early 1950s, was first a professor and then, from 1983 to 1996, the president of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art). Her mother, Song Ren, was a professor at the same academy. Xiao Lu was not interested in art when she was young; she comments: “As a child I liked ballet, and if I hadn’t broken my foot at the age of twelve, I might never have started drawing and painting.”

Xiao Lu goes on to say, “My career started in the passive mode.” Despite her slow beginnings, she would go on to study at excellent schools: from 1979 to 1984, she attended the Middle School of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, one of China's best art schools, and from 1984 to 1988, she was enrolled in the department of oil painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, from which she graduated with a B.F.A. degree.

Like many artists who belong to China's avant-garde, as well as for the international avant-garde since the early years of the twentieth century, Xiao Lu is devoted to blurring the gap between art and life. Asked why she makes art, Xiao Lu is characteristically blunt: “I don’t even know what art is, but I know why I do it. When your heart reacts to some person or emotion, regardless of whether it is good or bad, if you put something intense into it, the experience that you get back will also be intense. The link between myself and my work is not a concept but a true experience of life.” In fact, most of her work corresponds to events in her life, from the famous *Dialogue* to her most recent, unfinished installation piece, which is the result of a doomed love affair. According to Xiao Lu, *Dialogue* has to do with "certain vexations and perplexities I had to deal with in puberty." For this installation, the artist had two telephone booths made; one shows a life-sized, black-and-white photograph of a woman talking into a telephone, with her back to the viewer, while the other presents a man doing the same thing. Linking the two booths is a mirror, before which a telephone with a fallen receiver sits on a pedestal.
In 1988, Xiao Lu, in a conversation with Song Jianming, a teacher at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, had come to the conclusion that the piece, created as her graduation work at the academy, needed something to offset its careful construction. She writes that Song’s “first impression was that it was too clean, that it needed to be broken somehow. We talked about how to break the mirror and discussed using a gun.” As a result of the conversation, Xiao approached a friend, Sha Yong of the Zhejiang Shooting Team, to borrow a pistol. He agreed to help her, but he didn’t get to the graduate school’s art opening in time for her to shoot the work: as a result, Xiao asserts, “No gunfire was heard in 1988.” But then, a year later, Dialogue was accepted for the exhibition China/Avant-Garde at the National Art Museum in Beijing. As Xiao writes, “This time I got a gun [from a friend, Li Songsong] and fired it.” Tellingly, what began as a work documenting what the artist calls a “personal emotional clash” took on epic, and public, significance because of the political events of the time. Xiao comments: “For me personally, the gunfire of 1989 was no different from that intended in 1988 . . . . But because the gun was fired in 1989—a critical moment in Chinese history and in the history of art in China—its effect would spread beyond the original work.” In other words, “a deeply individual cause produced an effect which took on social and political dimensions. This was due to an accident in history.”

The curator of China/Avant-Garde, Gao Minglu, has pointed out that the action was a symbolic suicide: Xiao Lu fired twice in rapid succession at the mirror, which reflected her image. According to Xiao Lu, her eventual lover Tang Song, who claimed equal responsibility for the piece, was merely an acquaintance and fellow student at Zhejiang at the time, and the original decision to fire the gun—even in 1989—had nothing to do with him, although he was fascinated by the idea and was by her side at the shooting incident, urging her to do it. Seemingly oblivious to the consequences, Tang Song himself was arrested by police, and later Xiao Lu turned herself in to authorities. The exhibition closed for five days, ostensibly for the Spring Festival. Then, on February 14, the museum and the police department received threatening phone calls, whose
caller claimed he would cause an explosion in the gallery if the show went public again. On February 17, the show opened again, only to close two days later. Shortly thereafter, beginning on April 15, the demonstrations for democracy at Tian'anmen Square took place. Even though for Xiao Lu the gunfire of 1989 was identical to that intended in 1988, her extravagant gesture was popularly considered a blow for the democracy movement in China in large part because it so closely preceded the demonstrations. This claim was grafted onto the installation and action by others, rather than the artist herself. (Tang Song had also been invited to submit work of his own to the China/Avant-Garde exhibition, but instead he limited his participation to suggesting a red cloth backdrop to Xiao Lu's installation [Xiao Lu rejected the proposal] and being present for the shooting. It was in the aftermath of these events, after the two were released from detention, that Tang Song began his own promotion of the political interpretation of Dialogue.)

Taken aback by the journalistic response to her action—Xiao Lu made the front page of several Western newspapers—she decided to go to Australia in December 1989. (She returned to Beijing in 1997.) Earlier, before her trip to Australia, but after the Tian'anmen Square incident, political activists had been arrested in a number of Chinese cities. Tang Song, active as an orator and organizer in Hangzhou, went into hiding in Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. Xiao Lu sought ways to get him out of the country, managing to get a temporary visa to Australia for herself, with a view to being able to help Tang Song get to Australia as well. Shortly after that, he succeeded in making a clandestine passage to Hong Kong, and, impatient with the process of attaining refugee status, eventually stowed away and arrived in Australia in mid 1991. He then spent some months as an illegal alien at the Villawood Detention Centre before being released around Christmas. Meanwhile, Xiao Lu was somehow getting by in Sydney.

Relations between the two declined, in large part because Tang Song would neither marry her nor father her child. The couple remained together in Australia, but when Xiao Lu returned to China and settled in Beijing, she ended the relationship and faced life without many prospects as an artist. This was largely due to her extreme hesitance about making work again. All the attention had the effect of disorienting her, and she did not make work for more than a decade. Asked about her lapse into inactivity, Xiao Lu replies, "It is very hard to explain briefly why I stopped producing artworks, just as it is very hard for me to explain in a word why I didn't speak out after firing the gun in 1989." Yet she sees her stay in Australia as essentially a private struggle, fostered by what she calls "the demon in my heart." Her conflict is rooted in her integrity, which derives from her willingness to take on her "demon." She writes, "My actions were controlled by an intangible force. The truth of life and the truth of art formed a whole which was impossible to separate . . . . When I couldn't face myself, I made art, and when I couldn't face society, I fell silent. When I could neither face myself nor society, I did nothing at all." Although some may see Xiao's silence as a fault, her statements support the notion that she did what she has always done—proceed according to the feelings that led her.

As for Xiao Lu's Dialogue, the installation languished in storage in Beijing until the fall of 2006; on November 22 of that year, the China Guardian Auction Company held a special auction entitled Twenty Years of Chinese Contemporary Art, which included Dialogue. In honour of the piece, curator Gao Minglu, Xiao Lu's friend and supporter, wrote an article entitled "The Sound of Gunshots—Half a Lifetime of Dialogue." Dialogue sold for 2,310,000 yuan, or, more than 300,000 USD. After checking all the documents on the Web and all the publications about Xiao Lu's case, the lawyer representing the Guardian Auction Company regarded Dialogue as Xiao Lu's work rather than Tang Song's, despite the claims of the latter that he was a co-author of the installation.
For all her autonomy and independence, Xiao Lu also believes in the truth of a specifically female identity, one that embraces the supposedly feminine, and Chinese, virtues of modesty and restraint. She believes in female intuition and relies on it as the source of her creativity, yet her emotional affiliations are complicated. The scenario concerning Dialogue outlined above might sound like a soap opera, but the implications of Xiao Lu’s act may be most powerful when they are considered in light of feminism: Xiao Lu’s refusal to be “nice,” as we can tell from the aggression enacted through the two shots fired at Dialogue, may be categorized as an action of willfulness. It would be easy to cast her in a feminist role, yet Xiao Lu denies feminism’s effect on her and on society in general. She comments, “Feminist art has not yet formed a movement in China; it is still in a marginal condition. The situation of female artists in China is, speaking about my personal case, a major factor in the misreading of works. This is because the right to speak about art in China is mainly controlled by men, and judgment about the value of art created by women, and the explanation of art created by women is still largely in the hands of men.” This sounds very much like a feminist statement, but by comprehending it in this way only, we deny the personal element, which is central to Xiao Lu’s artistic practice. Xiao Lu’s art always originates in private experience rather than in public events.

“If,” the artist writes, “we look at work created by women as a whole, it is often in a state of having lost its voice. Add to this the characteristic cultural upbringing of women in China—‘Be gentle, good, respectful, restrained, and submissive’—with the household as your foundation and your husband as your glory, and you find that you have to support a ‘good’ family and maintain a low profile in public and in private.” Xiao Lu finishes her point, however, with a statement that is true biographically as well socially and politically: “When strong women show a little independent awareness, they mostly end up single.” Given the fact that the artist herself is single, it is hard to see the comment as a social statement alone. Interestingly, Xiao Lu argues for a gendered imagination, believing that women should be the ones to address female concerns: “The sensitivity and intuition characteristics of women are lacking in men. Any artistic or literary talent characteristic of women must rely on female consciousness to come to fruition.” Asserting that “in China, there is as yet no feminist movement in any true sense,” Xiao Lu goes on to delineate her position vis-à-vis the struggle between the sexes: “In my opinion, relations between men and women are not based in mutual submission, but in mutual understanding. Antagonism is for the sake of dialogue, and a true liberation of women in China . . . should be founded in mutual respect between men and women.”
So, despite her act of violence, which tellingly only hurt her ability to continue working, Xiao Lu chooses to emphasize “mutual understanding” as central to improving relations between the sexes. At the same time, however, she contributes to the notion that she is a victim by continuing to make work involving her troubled personal life. Her photographic series entitled 15 Gunshots... from 1989 to 2003 consists of photographic life-sized self-portraits in which the artist points a gun at the viewer. Each image is covered by a sheet of Plexiglas that Xiao Lu has fired at, leaving a small hole in the material. (Xiao Lu went to a military base to shoot the individual images.) As the title suggests, Xiao has remained involved with not only the meaning, but also the actions of Dialogue. Once again we see the artist recapitulate her decisive choice, although she makes it clear that the new piece is both about firing the gun and the sterility of Xiao Lu's relationship with Tang Song. Describing 15 Shots, Xiao Lu states, "Fifteen years ago, I fired the gun in the National Art Museum of China. When I walked out of the detention center in Dong Cheng District, Beijing, I was drawn to him [Tang Song] by an invisible power that pulled us through for fifteen years. Today, I aimed the crosshair again, only this time at myself. One shot for each year, fifteen shots in a row. We are over."

The 1960s saying that “the personal is political” has had a long and rather controversial life in the actions of artists in the West, even recently, when artists have concentrated on the attributes of their identity—their ethnicity, race, or sexual preference. Now, with Xiao Lu’s aesthetic, and public, repudiation of her former lover, it seems that the artist herself is making good on the statement, working outward from her experience toward a striking public action. Unfortunately, the shots are once again self-directed, demonstrating Xiao’s difficulty in remaining true to herself and not being self-destructive, especially when facing the consequences of a failed relationship. Her assertions prove that she is driven by emotions rather than by ideas: "I’m not good at theoretical explanations, let alone making art critique. I just want to live up to my feelings. The means of art serves only to satisfy my inner desire, no matter whether it demands a painting, a poem, or a gun. All in all, it boils down to my mood at that particular moment." Both Dialogue and 15 Shots, like Xiao Lu’s art generally, “cannot be interpreted by the term ‘art.’” Given Xiao Lu’s highly personal, idiosyncratic outlook, art is made as a result of “a survival instinct.” She ends her expressive statement with a comment not on what art can do but rather what experience means to her; she writes that creation “is what life is all about.”


All this rhetoric might strike some as burdensome, but Xiao Lu also possesses a sense of humour, which saves her from an excessively grim attitude. *Sperm*, the installation/performance that took place at the Kangda Hotel in Yan’an in May 2006, addressed the more than forty artists and several dozen experts and scholars who came together to study, debate, and create exhibition proposals in a project that examined the Long March of Mao and his followers. (Lu Jie, founder of the Long March Foundation, was the curator of the project.) Xiao Lu came along for the three-day forum, with the specific goal of getting pregnant. Armed with a temperature-control machine, twelve bottles in which to place sperm, and a rack to hold the bottles, the artist interpreted literally Mao’s dictum that “the Long March is a sower of seeds.” Xiao Lu sees pregnancy as biological, resulting in what she calls the “essence,” which is engendered when a male sperm and female egg meet; as emotional, when a male and female mind meet and create “spirit”; and as a way of life, when essence, energy, and spirit come together in harmony. In her commentary, she describes herself as seeking all three, but sadly there were obstacles: “No time, too old, no luck.”

Faced with an inharmonious situation, Xiao Lu retreated, choosing only “essence” as her goal. *Sperm* was required. Her performance consisted of setting up the machine and the deposit jars in a lounge adjacent to the meeting. All male visitors, symposium participants and visitors alike (there was no age limit), were asked to participate in the project, which required that the sperm be deposited in the collection jars and then returned to the refrigerator (to keep the sperm from degrading, they must be frozen). For her part, Xiao would undergo artificial insemination during her fertile period each month, using the sperm that had been collected. The first attempt to collect sperm failed: no one volunteered to deposit it. But Xiao Lu clearly intends to repeat her performance again. She recorded her effort with a wonderful photograph, taken during the meeting, in which she stands demurely surrounded by the paraphernalia necessitated by her request. Asked to explain the event, Xiao Lu produces a number of insights regarding love: “There are a myriad different kinds of love between people. For me, love is the affirmation and appreciation by one person of the value of the existence of a certain other person. It is premised on desire but goes beyond desire itself.” Feeling as she did that her time, age, and luck were “insufficient” to achieve the differing categories of pregnancy, she chose essence—yet no child resulted from her tragicomic efforts.

Without a child, Xiao Lu sees her life as unfulfilled. Yet she continues in her artistic pursuit of meaningful encounters. In her most recent piece, begun in New York in 2006, unfinished and not yet titled, she addresses the emotional consequences of a brief love affair with a Westerner. The partial progress of the installation indicates that the artist is taking a step forward; its complexity, its verve, and its anguish show that the artist, now in her mid-forties, continues to develop. The piece’s large elements may be seen in Xiao Lu’s studio. They consist of a very large metal construction in the form of an X; in its crux are apples that have been allowed to rot. On either side of the giant letter (which according to Xiao Lu stands for the x, or male, chromosome) are paintings made with Chinese medicinal herbs; these works include writings taken from Xiao Lu’s and a friend’s email correspondence. Beautifully painted, the English words and Chinese characters encompass a brief relationship that nonetheless has been highly meaningful to the artist. In some ways the most important part of the work is its aural element; asked to demonstrate his own feelings, the Westerner, a musician, poured his emotion into a composition recorded on a CD, in which he played variations on Beethoven—the piano part of the scherzo of the A-major Sonata for Cello and Piano, opus 69. Accompanying the classical music are electronically generated heartbeats and gasps or, possibly, moans and cries.
As he passionately expresses himself on the piano, the gasps, indicative to Xiao Lu's audience of lovemaking, slowly grow louder in the background of the music. The feelings indicated by the sound sculpture demonstrate an equality that supported the complex relationship—a relationship very different from the one she had with her previous boyfriend, Tang.

Like many independently minded artists, Xiao Lu is a creature of contradictions; she cannot be categorized. Yet, upon study, her seeming inconsistencies stand out as evidence of a unified sensibility; it is even possible for her art to be described as logically coherent, despite its embrace of emotional, as opposed to intellectual, truths. Now that she is beginning to work again, in a large studio in the outskirts of Beijing, she holds dinner meetings best described as salons, in which her friends—writers, artists, and curators—sit and drink tea and eat as they discuss the fate of contemporary art in China. Within her studio, Xiao Lu is a redoubtable presence, presiding over the groups that gather at her home. She speaks her mind freely; her pointed remarks concerning such topics as the art world, the general value of men, and her own career demonstrate a sharp tongue. Yet beneath the mask of irony, it is also clear that she cares deeply about the role of women in Chinese culture and life.

Indeed, Dialogue, so central to the public’s perception of her as an artist, shows that Xiao Lu has always been concerned with the boundaries limiting women artists. Breaking the law by firing a handgun, she struck a blow for psychic freedom that was more than rhetorical. Her subsequent stay in prison, lasting three days, also made it clear that the price to be paid for so violent a gesture was genuine. We know, though, that Dialogue occurred a long time ago; the installation Xiao Lu fired upon was work done for her graduate degree. Yet in her most recent, unfinished piece, we see Xiao still searching for a way to make sense of the vagaries of life as well as art. She has the following to say about art and experience: “When I get an idea, I may think of many different results, but I don’t hypothesize in definite terms about those results. As happened with the work Dialogue, the true significance of my work Sperm continued on, beyond the time during which it was displayed. The continued existence of one’s life in itself is the best work of art.”

Xiao Lu’s romantic assertion about life being “the best work of art” summarizes an attitude, by now a tradition, in which she sees life not only as equivalent but even superior to her vocation as an artist. Many contemporary artists share this attitude, but they do not substantiate it with art that lives up to their high rhetoric. Xiao Lu is different because her art respects the theoretical equivalence of experience and images, which result in an unusually balanced sensibility despite the sometimes-outrageous nature of her acts. Dialogue began as a psychologically driven tableau, until a political interpretation of the shots placed her in a public position—which she did not want. Notoriety seems to have regularly accompanied her career, but the supposed willfulness of Xiao Lu’s aesthetic distances her from her public’s approval or adulation or criticism. Xiao Lu is an artist whose ability to find the right symbolic tableau for a complex array of emotions raises her work to a high level. Her achievement, at once naïve and jaded, innocent and culpable, is central to the furious outpouring of Chinese art in the last twenty years. Because of her determination to be herself, she has easily swung into a position of mastery and independence. We are lucky to have so talented and inspired an artist.

Notes
1 All of Xiao Lu’s quotations are taken from an interview conducted in the fall of 2008.