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A Crisis of Contemporary Art in China?

People normally consider the period from the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 to the present day a thirty-five-year stage of contemporary art in China. This stage corresponds with postmodern or contemporary art in the West. If we consider contemporary art in China as a mirror image of that in the West, we risk isolating it from its larger historical context. On the other hand, it is because of contemporary Chinese art's connection with the West that we must place it in the bigger picture of contemporary art around the world. If, for example, we try to understand art in China during the past one hundred years in light of concurrent developments internationally, what conclusions will we draw? China's art history cannot be understood through a logic of linear development divided into modern, postmodern, and contemporary periods, a periodization that applies to art history in the West. How do we construct and write about our contemporary art history then? This is a question that has been lingering in my mind, and it can be traced back to the 1980s, when the first book on contemporary Chinese art was written.[1] In subsequent books such as *Inside Out: New Chinese Art, The Wall: Reshaping Chinese Contemporary Art*, and, especially, in the recently published *Yipailun: A Synthetic Theory Against Representation*, I tried to answer this question through historical case studies.

Arguably, one basic fact of contemporary art in China is that its styles and concepts are mostly imported from the West rather than developed on native soil. But the same could be said of Buddhism. It was introduced to China from India some two thousand years ago, and it rooted and grew into a complete system and finally bore the fruit of *Chan* or Zen, a native Buddhist branch in China, as well as that of a system of scriptures and related philosophy, culture, and art. So it might still take awhile before China's contemporary art develops into an autonomous system—the present effort of narrating, reflecting on, and comparing contemporary Chinese art against the backdrop of art around the world being the premise for its future development. In fact, during past decades, or even the past century, art in China has assumed its own internal logic and pattern, leading to a structure of art that is now visible.

But neither aesthetic nor sociopolitical logic alone suffice in bringing about a comprehensive understanding of contemporary art in China. The essential aesthetic debate in the West is between materialization (modernism and postmodernism) and dematerialization (after postmodernism), with the aesthetics of representation and counter-representation being the opposing forces in art in the West since modernism. This, however, can hardly be used

to describe the scenario in China. We can't apply the convenient aesthetic logic of an opposition between tradition/contemporary to contemporary Chinese art.

In addition to this, in its social dimensions, art in the West since modernism has taken an ideological position of being anti-capitalist and anti-market. In China there is not the same capitalist system to fight, although ideology-charged malcontents constituted the mainstream of artists in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Alongside rapid and fundamental economic transformations in the 1990s, contemporary art in China has been placed in an ecological system that is far more complicated than that of any other country or region. Today, if an artist attempts to take a stand against political ideology and its systems, he or she will probably make compromises with capital and the market, even to the extent of sycophancy. At present, the pursuit of economic interests tends to conflict with ethical judgment, the reason for which partly lies in the intertwining of social factors (which are the basis for art) whose complexity resists any one-dimensional or linear approach.

This intertwining of ecology, aesthetics, and individual intentions defines the character of the stage on which Chinese artists perform. This stage is not solely aesthetic or social and is far from being the artists' own. So we must assume a dynamic and changing perspective that will facilitate our understanding of art and art history[2] and further reveal the nature and *raison d'etre* of contemporary art in China.

Dong Xiwen, *The Grand Ceremony of the Founding of the People's Republic of China (revised version)*, 1953, oil on canvas, 230 x 405 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

Take the repeatedly discussed revolutionary art of the 1950s and 60s as an example. China imported Socialist Realism from the Soviet Union, but the process and purpose of this import has never been described in detail. In fact, what most interested both Chinese art students in the Soviet Union and artists in China was not Socialist Realism proper, which was popular in the 1950s, but the art of the Wanderers before the October Revolution in 1917 and the art of Critical Realism in the late nineteenth century.

Quan Shanshi, *Heroic and Indomitable*, 1961, oil on canvas, 233 x 217 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

This focus results from the lack of Western classic academism as a reference and model of art-making in China. The influence of Parisian academism promoted by Xu Beihong and his contemporaries, who traveled and studied in France in the 1920s, was too remote to have effect on the younger generation. To pick up where the pioneers of modernization of art in China had left off, Russian academism was taken as a model. We can see that this evolution has its own history and logic, going beyond the determinism of socialist ideology. This spatial connection between China in the 1950s, the artists in the age of Mao Zedong, and the realist tradition in Russia in the late nineteenth century already existed and therefore was not affected by political ties between China and Soviet Union in the 1950s. Furthermore, because the art of the Wanderers was more academic and romantic than the earlier Critical Realism, Stalin designated the former as the origin of Socialist Realism and consequently showed less interest in Critical Realism. Chinese artists in their studies did not share Stalin's bias; in the 1950s and 60s, many works and albums on Critical Realism were published, and many books were translated into Chinese.

Cheng Chonglin, *The Snow on a Certain Day of 1968*, 1979, oil on canvas, 202 x 300 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

In the years immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Russian realist style was the only point of departure for China's modernization in art. We can detect, for example, in representative works of Scar Art such as Cheng Chonglin's *The Snow on a Certain Day of 1968*, the influence of Wanderer artist Vasily Surikov's *Boyarina Morozova* and *The Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy*. The rhetoric is similar: The emphasis is placed on the depiction of the real and dramatic expressions among the individuals against a historical background. There is a huge difference between the social and historical context of the two, yet we can't say that the similarity between the two is just a product of imitation of style. If we bear in mind the core value of the "Revolution in Art" in China at the beginning of the twentieth century, we shall know that realism is far more

than just a style. It has a deep connection with the modern value of "art for life's sake." The progressive mode from realism to abstract art, and, further, to conceptual art that summarizes art history in the West is not necessarily valid for art in China.

We will be able to discover the real history only when we arrive at the boundary beyond which one entity ceases to maintain its identity. Before thoroughly apprehending what happened in China then, we need to see that artists in China in the 1950s and 60s learned not from the Soviet Union but from the Russian art tradition of which the art of the Soviet Union is but a component.

Another example for this is the similarity between the "Red Pop" movement of the Red Guards in the early Cultural Revolution period and postmodernism in the West, which I discussed at length in *On the Mode of Mao Zedong's Popular Art*.[3] Such Red Pop (Red Guards referred to themselves as "red sea"):

> eliminated the autonomy of art and aura of masters completely, made the best of art's social and political function, broke the boundaries between different mediums, and incorporated as many publicizing forms as possible, from radio broadcasts, movies, music, dance, war reports, caricature, to commemoration medals, flags, propaganda posters and big-character posters to make a comprehensive, revolutionary, and populist visual art. The study of art in that epoch should never focus solely on the easel paintings made by professional artists; in terms of publicizing efficiency, commemoration medals, badges and propaganda posters are as effective as advertisements for Coca-Cola. The worship for revolutionary media and political leaders exceeded that of commercial media and celebrities in the West.[4]

Although both Red Pop and Pop art in America are mass-produced, the products of the former are handmade and ideologically charged rather than stimulated by capitalist market demand, as is the case of the latter. But both represent belief in the reality created by mass media, a truly ideal reality.

Politically speaking, Red Pop reflects the blindness and anti-humanity of the Red Guards. But this conclusion no longer stands when viewed from a cultural and personal perspective. It is a complicated phenomenon, and the study of it should entail a careful examination of the international context. Uprisings and turmoil were seen everywhere around the world in the 1960s. There were anti-war demonstrations, the hippie movement, and the Civil Rights movement. In France, there was the May 1968 revolution, during which the generation born in and after World War II went to extremes in rebelling against their society and the legacy of their parents. In Canada, some young artists in their political caricatures imitated the style of propaganda posters created by the Red Guards. In East Asia, there was a reaction against the Japanese-American treaty, along with the avant-garde art, such as that of Gutai Group, and with Metabolism in

Unknown photographer, *Anonymity Take Brushes as Arms*, 1966. Published in *The Art History of the People's Republic of China, 1966–1976*, China Youth Press, Beijing, 2000.

architecture. In Taiwan, in the 1960s, Dadaists, who were more radical, replaced conservative art groups such as the May Painting Association and the Eastern Painting Association. Hong Kong saw the first strike against the colonial government in the 1960s, which was under direct influence of the Cultural Revolution in mainland China.

These movements are of course not homogenous, but they should be taken into consideration when we study Red Pop. The Red Guards were also a victimized generation. In the beginning they organized spontaneously to participate in the movements of the Cultural Revolution, serving as the political leverage of Mao Zedong, and ended up being sent to rural and frontier regions to receive a ten-year-long "re-education." All the pathetic and helpless songs and literature about "intellectual youth" are the origins of underground poems and art movements after the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, the Red Guards also have had a certain influence on avant-garde art since the 1980s. So whether we set the starting point of contemporary art in China at the end of Cultural Revolution or in the middle of the 1980s, we can't dismiss an analysis of Cultural Revolution art, especially the Red Pop of the Red Guards.

In the second half of 1987 and first half of 1988, in the book I refered to earlier that I wrote with Zhou Yan, Wang Xiaojian, Shu Qun, Wang

Mingxian, and Tong Dian, titled *Contemporary Chinese Art 1985–1986*, I stated that "all history is contemporary history." I quoted Croce to justify the new art then, namely the '85 New Wave Movement. The proposition that all history is contemporary history comes from the discipline of historical philosophy and hermeneutics, which means that writers of history should first of all acknowledge contemporary consciousness and values, although such consciousness and judgment would always remain hidden while he or she writes about history.

In this book we acknowledged the "contemporaneity" (or modernity as it was called in that context) that was enthusiastically pursued by the '85 New Wave Movement. This contemporaneity was embodied in the following statements:

Wang Guangyi, *The Frozen North Pole No. 30*, 1985, oil on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy of Gao Minglu.

Geng Jianyi, *Two People Under the Lamplight*, 1985, oil on canvas, 117 x 154.5 cm. Courtesy of Gao Minglu.

Ren Jian, *Primeval Chaos* (detail), 1986–87, ink on polyester mounted on paper, 150 x 3000 cm. Courtesy of Gao Minglu.

Art is a process of comprehensive cultural enlightenment, no longer limited to the debate on specific issues such as realism versus abstraction, politics and art, beauty and ugliness, whether art should be used to serve society, etc. What is of top priority is to expand the boundary of art (counter-art). The participation of "folk artists" and the reading public. "Folk artists" are similar to "layman artists," a concept in traditional Chinese literati painting that means being contrary to skillful painters (especially those serving the imperial court). In the 1980s, "folk artists" implied a trend against the academy and its style.

To transcend the gap between the modern and oriental traditions, fuse the contemporary (or the postmodern) and traditional Chinese philosophical thinking, such as Zen, to realize the art of the future.

But this concept of "contemporary art" was never meant to be seen as another replica of modernist, postmodern, or globalized contemporary art in the West. First, it doesn't tend towards independence and isolation, which, to put it simply, is the essence of modernist art in the West, where people resorted to originality (or aesthetic disinterestedness)—they resisted the alienation of society (capitalist commercial system) by staying away from it. Second, the '85 New Wave Movement did not have the deconstructive philosophy that characterized postmodernism. Postmodernists in the West cast doubt on the legitimacy of personal expression in modernism and deconstructed the idealism and elitism of modernism in philosophy, aesthetics, and sociology. Contrary to that, artists in China in the 1980s advocated the establishment of an elitist and ideal culture. The '85 New

Huang Yongping, *Non-Expressive Painting Roulette Wheel Series*, 1985, performance installation. Collection of Annie Wong Foundation, Hong Kong.

Wave Movement was multi-faceted and loosely organized, but its value and direction was clear; hence the consensus among artists and critics in China that it was the first contemporary art movement in China.

As analyzed above, a spatial structure replaces the leaner temporal structure in shaping contemporary art history in China. Many factors and relations were combined to form a net of influences. Unlike the contemporary art in the West that solely acted against (or in accordance with) the market or the avant-garde art of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 80s, which was solely initiated by resistance to official ideology, contemporary art in China was formed within a more sophisticated social mechanism under the influence of various movements of correspondence, displacement, and separation. This explains the need to avoid the isolated and static historical narrative of schools and representative phenomena in art within a given period. Instead, such a narrative should be placed within the interaction of spatial structures.

Wang Yidong, *Portrait*, 1986, oil on canvas, 60 x 55 cm. Courtesy of Gao Minglu.

The art world in China since the late 1990s has developed an ecology in which various forces support and contradict one another. This is quite unique and is not found in contemporary art of the West. Three types of art—academic art, traditional ink and brush art, and contemporary art (or avant-garde art)—coexist. Today, this interaction no longer takes the form of debate on pure aesthetic, political, or philosophical terms, but takes place through competition, dialogue, or collaboration between

institutions, markets, and events. But this is not to be understood as evidence that there is no aesthetic logic in contemporary art in China; in fact, it means that if we stick to the dualistic discourse featuring opposition between politics and aesthetics in explaining the art in the 1990s, we end up coming to conclusions far less persuasive and reliable than before. The "politics versus aesthetics" narrative was once quite persuasive in its interpretation of art after the Cultural Revolution, in the late 1970s, and in the art of the 1980s it was the awakening of humanity and its liberation of the mind. But these narratives will be unable to map the art in China of the past decade.

As pointed out by some major theorists from the West, the avant-garde came into being as a counterforce to the capitalist system. It has been fulfilling its duty for over a century. China is also facing this potent capitalism, but some artists and critics here may still believe that the capital that failed to liberate art in the West will bring freedom to art-making in China because it is a force oppositional to the political system. But as it turns out, capital never fails to erode and jeopardize contemporary art. The avant-garde art of the past three decades in China has already lost its critical dimension and instead has engaged in the pursuit of profit and celebrity.

So the quality of contemporary art in China must be built on self-criticism, even though individual artists are more or less subjected to the influence of capital. This self-criticism is exactly what is absent now; that is the origin of the crisis of contemporary art in China.

Translated by Chen Kuangdi

Notes

1 In 1987, Zhou Yan, Wang Xiaojian, Shu Qun, Wang Mingxian, Tong Dian, and I wrote the first book on contemporary Chinese art history. See Gao Minglu et al., *Contemporary Chinese Art 1985–1986* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1991). Our original plan to publish the book in 1989 was delayed by the Tian'anmen Square protests of the same year.

2 I discussed the total modernity of art in China in "Toward A Transnational Modernity: Contemporary Art in Mainland, Taiwan And Hong Kong," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also *Total Modernity and The Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2011).

3 Gao Minglu, "On the Mode of Mao Zedong's Popular Art," *Twenty-first Century* (December 1990).

4 Ibid.