Contemporary Art and Institutions: First Encounters

Contemporary Chinese art appears today as a complex system made up of numerous individuals, institutions, and practices, whereas only thirty years ago it manifested itself in a completely different fashion. There were no galleries or contemporary art museums, and systematic critical discourse did not exist, yet some artists began to experiment with new and unconventional aesthetic languages. Within this context, certain initial institutional changes gave birth to the current complexity.

Many art historians agree that Chinese artistic production of the 1980s and 1990s is characterized by two distinct realities: official art and unofficial art. The word “unofficial” describes the avant-garde art of the 1980s and the underground or experimental art of the 1990s, while the word “official” refers to institutional art. The difference between them is primarily the style of expression. Official art concentrated mainly on the use of traditional techniques and Soviet-style “realist” oil painting, while unofficial art focused on experimentation with new techniques inspired by Western contemporary art, such as installation, video, and performance, with the aim of challenging traditional aesthetic standards. Another element that differentiates the official from unofficial is context: official art was supported by state authorities and was therefore exclusively a prerogative of academies and government institutions, exhibited in places of great artistic consecration: museums and national art galleries. These kinds of exhibitions had a strictly educational purpose.

The official art system is, from an internal organization point of view, very strict and similar to an administrative hierarchy, divided into levels with a director at the peak of the institutional hierarchy, and with the government and its officials appointing the directors. Above this hierarchy sits the Ministry of Culture, on which the official art institutions depend; among these institutions there are: yishu jiaoyu xiehui (artists’ association), meishu xueyuan xueyuan (art education institutions), meishu chuangzuo yanjiu xueyuan (artistic research institutes) such as Zhongguohua yanjiuyuan (Chinese Painting Research Institute), art museums and galleries such as the National Art Museum of China, and publishing houses such as the People Fine Art’s Publishing House. All these institutions are non-profit, since they pursue a social mission for society and are economically dependent on the state. This sort of centralization was motivated by the government’s desire to control art and culture, which was perceived in a socialist manner as subordinate to politics.
All artists operating outside of this official environment were excluded by conventional artistic networks. In the 1990s, many started to commit themselves to the exploration of new spaces for the production and the exhibition of their works. They considered the exhibition space as integral with the artwork, and aside from gaining experience in new methods of artistic expression, they began to gather experience with unconventional locations for the production and exhibition of their artwork, for example, offices, apartments, open spaces, old and abandoned buildings, and isolated urban areas. Until the 1990s the official/unofficial dichotomy was still alive in the world of art: non-institutional artists generally met with opposition and hesitancy from government institutions, which often refused works of contemporary art to be exhibited, with only occasional periods of tolerance.

In 1989, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, presented at the China Art Gallery (now the National Art Museum of China), hosted unofficial artists for the first time, displaying performances, installations, and paintings. Unfortunately, the exhibition was temporarily suspended by the Public Security Bureau immediately after its inauguration on February 5, because Xiao Lu, a young artist from Shanghai, fired two shots from a pistol at her own installation, *Dialogue*. On February 10, the exhibition reopened after the “gunshot incident,” but it was shut down again for three days with a bomb threat used as an excuse. In the same year, following the student demonstrations in Tian’anmen Square, official bans forbade all unauthorized activities, including the exhibiting of contemporary art, to be held in public exhibition spaces, and slowly art started moving toward a more introspective approach, re-directing the attention of the artists away from politics and toward conceptualism and cynicism. This new situation led artists to retreat to more discrete places for the making and exhibiting of their work, such as those isolated areas mentioned above, inaugurating what came to be called "Apartment Art."

In the background of this tension between the official and unofficial art worlds, important changes in the economy, politics, and culture brought into play a re-evaluation of the whole traditional artistic system. This re-evaluation generated the birth of new institutions and the renewal of old ones. The most important change was the rapid economic development of the 1990s, when capitalist joint ventures and private companies developed so quickly as to put themselves in competition with state-owned enterprises. Among the official intellectual’s world, the awareness of this competition in the midst of continuous and extensive social and economic reform was in conflict with official views of culture and art, because the strategic
role of culture (and not solely the economy) began to be underlined by competition in the contemporary world, in China and globally. By the end of the 1990s, the “cultural industries” came to life, and in 1998 the Ministry of Culture officially established the Culture Industry Bureau, which was in charge of the politics of the cultural market. The government pushed cultural institutions to assume more of their own financial responsibilities and to answer directly to the demands of the market; thus the cultural world switched from being centralized to potentially becoming multifaceted.

The birth of the culture industry, in my opinion, was one of the most important innovations in the political and cultural sphere of contemporary China. Culture (and art) was no longer a franchise of political ideology. Finally there was an optional arena outside of the government in which artists could function. This of course did not necessarily allow unofficial art to start cooperating with the official institutions, but for the first time Chinese artists were able to make a living outside of governmental bodies and start developing autonomy. Traditional exhibition venues (like public museums), on the other hand, were starting a renovation process—they were becoming more and more financially independent (or semi-independent) and needed to attract visitors’ interest by promoting new kinds of programs and exhibitions to the public. Some of the oldest venues started assigning space for contemporary art to complement their long-running exhibitions.

This is the case with the aforementioned National Art Museum of China, which today is no longer just a repository of official art but is also starting to host Western exhibitions and is renting space out for short-term showings. Nowadays, this is a common practice in Asia, where many museums and galleries rent their spaces for exhibition rather than developing an overall curatorial vision. Following China’s economic development and opening up to the West, Chinese art has finally stepped onto the international scene and gained visibility abroad. Also, foreign curators have made their way to China, seeking to promote artists and doing research on contemporary Chinese art, which had started to flourish by the beginning of the new
millennium. Private Western art galleries blossomed in major Chinese cities, while many contemporary artworks moved out of the national setting to be displayed in, and collected by, some of the most important museums around the world, including those in Hong Kong, Berlin, and New York.

Some of the most important early exhibitions that brought contemporary Chinese art to the rest of the world include *China’s New Art: Post 1989*, at the Hong Kong Hanart TZ Gallery and Hong Kong Arts Centre (1993); Venice Biennale (1993); *China!*, in Bonn, Vienna, and Singapore (1997/98); and *Inside/Out*, curated by Gao Minglu and exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1998), as well as several other North American venues. During the same period, the number of galleries selling contemporary Chinese artwork increased, laying foundations for the new art market that was to arise in the years following. Some of these galleries were run by non-Chinese curators or owners; for instance, Red Gate Gallery, in Beijing, founded in 1991 by the Brian Wallace from Australia, and ShangART, in Shanghai, founded by Lorenz Helbling in 1996.

Thus the two main factors that helped shape the current situation for contemporary Chinese art are the development of the domestic market and China’s entry into globalization. The immediate effects of these phenomena have led to a proliferation of qualified professionals in the field of art and a change in the perception of art exhibitions by the artists themselves.

Until the 1990s, exhibitions in China consisted primarily of painting, sculpture, or calligraphy, and were organized by collective committees made
up of public officials and people in charge of different public art institutions. However, by the end of the century, institutional support had gradually waned, while the profiles of a number of new professional art-related individuals had come to light: these were mostly independent curators and artists who were not affiliated with any governmental institution.

Independent curators (duli cezhanren, 獨立策展人, or ziyou cehuaren, 自由策划人) first appeared as experts on international curatorial practices, brought into the country from Hong Kong and Taiwan, or were Western experts in the field. They were not connected with any gallery or official institution and organized exhibitions in line with their personal interests. They also supported artists in fund raising and looking for exhibition spaces. Some public museums began to give experimental artists the chance to enter the official circuit and to seek curatorial support. For example, in 1999 the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen held the Second Annual Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition, curated by Huang Zhuan. This exhibition included some young experimental artists such as Lin Tianmiao and the Gao Brothers. Curators used this opportunity as a way to fulfill their aspirations and to express their ideas, as well as a way to change the system from the inside. As for the independent artist, he or she was no longer considered unemployed (wuye renyuan, 无业人员) and his or her status changed to freelance professional (ziyou zhiye, 自由职业).

Alongside the development of independent curatorship, the idea of the exhibition itself evolved into a more modern concept—artwork was no longer randomly displayed in museums, but became part of narratives on contemporary questions or understandings of social and political reality. Beginning at the end of the 1990s, private galleries and semi-public or official spaces became venues for innovative collaborative projects, in which independent curators experimented with new forms of exhibition that were connected with the contemporary language of art internationally.

**Shanghai Biennale 2000: The Watershed**

The year 2000 represented a watershed in the evolution of contemporary Chinese art, as this was a seminal moment of change in the relationship between art and the institutions. Huang Zhuan, curator and former artistic director of the Shenzhen OCAT museum, notes: “Until the 1990s our identity was quite passive, meaning that contemporary Chinese art didn’t have its own interpretative system, but instead relied on Western points of view. However, since the year 2000 a few changes have happened, mostly for two reasons; the first one is that Western countries started to rethink their own artistic institutions and their attitude toward non-Western cultures, and at the same time economic growth made the country difficult to ignore or to neglect. Important changes concerning cultural and artistic policies were, by then, affecting the Chinese system.”

In my opinion, the third Shanghai Biennale (2000) embodies this change. The event was hosted by the prestigious Shanghai Art Museum and stands out for its political and cultural relevance—for the first time, foreign influences were allowed to enter Chinese museums. Sixty-seven artists
from eighteen countries took part in the Biennale, with more than three hundred artworks on display, including oil paintings, traditional paintings, sculpture, printed material, installations, video, and new media, some of which dated back to the 1990s. Among the most well-known international artists to attend the event were Pipilotti Rist and Anish Kapoor, as well as curators such as Hou Hanru (France) and Toshio Shimizu (Japan). Many of the participating artists were born in China and later emigrated abroad; thus they were able to act as a unifying force between Chinese and
Western culture. In this respect, the Biennale stands out as a milestone of contemporary art history in China.

The fact that Shanghai was the host city for the Biennale was no coincidence. The city has served as a bridge between China and the rest of the world since the end of the nineteenth century, when it became a “foreign concession”—a land of legal and illegal trade with the outside world. In the 1990s, it became one of China’s regions of major growth, where reforms for economic progress were strongly enforced. Today, Shanghai, alongside the Huangpu region in Guangdong province, is one of the richest economic zones of China and where the largest foreign investments are concentrated.

The 2000 Biennale’s name, *Shanghai Spirit* (*Shanghai haishang*, 上海海上, or Shanghai on the sea), embodied the city’s desire to obtain a prominent position internationally through its unique relationship with the sea, allowing it to be open to the influence of the outside world. Authors like David Barrett and John Clark have stressed the importance of this Shanghai Biennale, which they see as seminal in the history of relationships between China and the West. Wu Hung has defined the Biennale as a “historic event,” for it launched a new “global era” in contemporary Chinese art, revealing a reformist or even revolutionary impulse in the selection of artwork displayed.

However, in my opinion it is the institutional significance of the event that has not been discussed enough. In fact, the Shanghai Biennale after 2000 became a permanent part of the Shanghai International Art Festival, organized by the Shanghai Art Museum in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Shanghai’s Municipal Government. For the first time, Chinese authorities were listed as organizers of an international Biennale, and such innovation proves China’s desire to play an active role in contemporary cultural and artistic life, both in China and internationally. As Fang Zengxian, former director of the Shanghai Art Museum and director of the Artistic Committee of the 2000 Biennale, stated: “The significance of [the Biennale’s] success will transcend the exhibition itself. As an activity established on an international scale that seriously addresses the issues of globalization, postcolonialism, and regionalism etc., this Shanghai Biennale will set a good example for Chinese colleagues and is bound to secure its status among other world-famous biennale art exhibitions.”

Looking at these developments in a broader context, we can see that the Chinese government’s new attitude toward contemporary art was becoming more supportive, and this support consisted in promoting and investing in exhibitions. This innovation can be interpreted as a change in the government’s cultural agenda and as a part of a general plan for social and political reform.

China, which had become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000 and is now an important player in the globalized world, was also meeting new tolerance thresholds toward experimental art. Therefore, contemporary art, or what was once considered unofficial art, was no longer
segregated from the institutions since it perfectly fulfilled the demands of modern Chinese society, such as the building pressure from the market, the challenges of globalization, and an ever-growing cultural nationalism. As a consequence, the mutual diffidence of the past between artists and the authorities has become a relationship based on tolerance and coexistence. The inclusion of experimental art in public institutions reflects a political inclination to make it part of the official system, although currently contemporary art has yet to become a fundamental part of official culture. Many public museums, in order to become more competitive and attractive to visitors, started financing new programs to support contemporary art. Today, the biggest museums in China make biennials part of their agenda, a trend in contemporary Chinese art that perhaps was launched by the Shanghai Biennale in 2000. Such examples are: the Guangzhou Triennial, organized by Guangdong Museum of Art since 2002, and the Beijing International Art Biennale, founded in 2003 and held at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.

The Infrastructural Shift

The growth of these large-scale exhibitions hasn’t occurred only in China, but is evident across the whole international artistic scene, where, since the beginning of the 1990s, a sort of biennial fever began to spread. The worldwide propagation of this particular exhibition model can’t be separated from several historical, political, and economic transformations that took place between 1989 and 2000: “the end of the cold war; the fall of the Berlin Wall; the dissolution of totalitarian governments in Eastern Europe; the abolition of apartheid in South Africa; China opening up to the trade market and its relative economic spurt; the United Arab Emirates opening up to international tourism; and India’s exponential growth.”

In other words, the biennial has emerged as the inevitable result of the connection between contemporary art and globalization.

Organized every two, three, or five years in the largest cities, and now also in smaller cities of the world, these large-scale exhibitions—which, to be efficient, I will refer to all as “biennial”—differ from other exhibitions in the importance of there being a critical aspect within the exhibition thesis, and the international approach when choosing curators and artists. These aspects did not emerge with the first historical biennial that took place in Venice in 1895, but, rather, emerged later, when the concept of the biennial started to cross geographical borders and bring the world in line by incorporating the same exhibition model—periodicity and large-scale organization. These characteristics are essential for a biennial to relate to the contemporary era and its global range, offering different visions of the world. It is thanks to this flexibility that it soon turned out to be a perfectly valid model that was applicable to many cultural contexts.

This phenomenon has received a variety of analyses by international critics: from a more optimistic point of view, the biennial represents a site of experimentation in terms of exhibition, offering artists, curators, and visitors a vital alternative to traditional museums due to its flexibility and immediacy. A biennial can be easier to manage than traditional
institutions such as contemporary art museums, whose planning usually requires long periods of time. It can also have a huge impact on the cultural life of a city, but with decidedly lower costs and investments than other institutions. Moreover, when it comes to content, biennials are instrumental in investigating and critiquing contemporary society, because they make it possible to discuss topical themes like politics, racism, ethics, identity, globalization, and postcolonialism.

On the other hand, for the more skeptical critics, the biennial represents a spectacular cultural event, but at the same time is a symptom of reckless Western capitalism, which is creeping into all cultures. According to this train of thought, the biennial phenomenon would be nothing more than pure commercial or touristic entertainment.\textsuperscript{10} Both points of view, however, although divergent, highlight the importance of the biennial as a modern phenomenon around the world. It has given birth to multicultural artistic events enriched by the context of their domestic significance: many of these events are hosted alongside important local events, expressing cultural, political, environmental, or alternative needs that transcend the artistic event on its own.

How can we position these trends in the contemporary artistic system and, more importantly, how can we interpret the Chinese cases within an international context? In a recent study entitled \textit{Thinking Contemporary Curating} (2012), Australian art historian Terry Smith theorized the existence of an “infrastructural shift” within the contemporary art system. According to Smith, contemporary exhibition institutions vary between two apparently opposing extremes, a “concrete one” and an “auxiliary one.” By concrete he means museums, that is to say the go-to exhibition venue by default, while auxiliary refers to supplementary locations, for instance, kunsthalles, alternative spaces, foundations, and websites, which, lacking permanent collections, are devoted to temporary exhibition of works of art. Smith also identifies a third type of exhibition space, “temporary,” which has now spread itself around the world to become a structural institution itself: the biennial. Biennials have now become major vehicles for contemporary art, and in doing so they are challenging the museum, which has been the traditional venue for contemporary art and contemporary curating. Smith also wonders if this process can be seen as an “infrastructural change” in the contemporary art world or as an open challenge offered only by biennials. In describing the transformational process that is taking place today in museums and all across the art world, Smith also suggests that a similar transformational process may exist, even on a smaller scale, in countries that have recently opened up to economic development. He states that there is a “desire of museums of modern art to remain contemporary, as it does those museums of contemporary art (the majority) that see their role as updating audiences on the continuous output of art. [Private museum collectors] are drawn to spectacular art, and high-profile public shows of their collections, whether as part of well-known museums, grand renovations of older structures. […] This is echoed on a smaller scale by many newly rich in Russia, China, the Middle East and elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{11}
Having conducted detailed field research focusing on some of the most representative cities for contemporary Chinese art—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—and having paid attention mostly to Chinese contemporary art museums and biennials, I suggest that in China, a phenomenon similar to that described by Smith is indeed happening. Actually, the “infrastructural shift” happening today in the Chinese art world is very significant, as it is drastically transforming the Chinese artistic system as it has evolved over the past four decades. The above-mentioned example of Shanghai’s 2000 Biennale highlights how a deep rejuvenation of the traditional system is in progress and how the Biennale is taking its rightful place among new institutions involved in the promotion of contemporary art.

In China’s case, as well, we can identify these three types of exhibition spaces—concrete, auxiliary, and temporary—and among these places of artistic production we can select two of them, the museum (concrete) and the biennial (temporary), both of which are in permanent evolution and are creating a deep structural change in the artistic system.

In the last decade, biennials have become so popular as to call for real infrastructural change within the artistic system. The new and old institutions, biennial and museum, are not actually in opposition but are in constant interaction, creating a speedy proliferation of artwork and exhibition ideas.

The Art Museum
The museum devoted only to art is a relatively novel concept in China, and its history can be traced back to the 1940s, when the first art museums started to appear, such as the Jiangsu Art Museum (former Jiangsu
Povincial Art Gallery), founded in Nanjing in 1936. Nevertheless, following the reform of the artistic system described above, by the late 1990s the museum sector faced unprecedented development, and after the 2000s, thousands of contemporary art museums began to flourish all over the country, launching so-called “museum fever” (meishuguan re). The first wave of the “fever” took place in the 1990s, when most collectors started to establish museums in the biggest as well as in the smallest cities of China. One such example is Chengdu Shanghe Museum, opened in 1998, followed by two others—Shenyang Dongyu Museum and Tianjin Teda Museum. The second wave took place after the real estate overbuilding of the years 2001–04, when big buildings remained unsold and real estate companies decided to dedicate those spaces to exhibit contemporary art. Today Museum in Beijing and Himalayas Museum (former Zendai Museum) in Shanghai, for example, were established respectively by Anteo Corporation and Zendai Group.

As Yang Chao, director of the Xi’an Art Museum states, the two forces leading this growth are the Chinese government and the development of the private sector. Today, the state and private spheres have fluid and overlapping boundaries, and the Chinese museum system is a very complex one, but some different typologies of art museum can be identified as follows. The state-run museums (gongli meishuguan) include the aforementioned National Art Museum of China, in Beijing, the Shanghai Art Museum, in Shanghai, and the Guangdong Museum of Art, in Guangdong. The public museums (minban gongzhu meishuguan) are characterized by a complex mix of private and state management, such as OCT Overseas Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT) and Guangdong Times Museum. Private museums (sili meishuguan), established by domestic business interests and collectors, are exemplified by the Long Museum, Shanghai, and the Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, along with hundreds of others that have been built during the past decade. Lastly, there are museums established by foreign collectors, such as the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, founded by Guy and Miriam Ullens.

The majority of the new museums in China open their doors to the public and, not surprisingly, the long-lasting ones are few, while most have close after a few years or failed in their cultural mission. Generally speaking, this is due to structural problems within the museum sector. Many museums
do not have a long-term strategy, and the initial investment does not cover an overall curatorial plan for the future, focused, for example, on the preservation and research of the permanent collection. To collect contemporary art in China means to make an investment, representing more a status symbol than an act of art patronage; consequently, many museums act more as “for-profit” institutions than cultural institutions. Many works in the permanent collection are thus acquired randomly and following market value. This reveals a strong contradiction with the primary mission of the traditional museum, which is to research, collect, and display works of art, and to preserve them for the future generations.

The Biennial Model in China

In China, biennials started to appear in major cities around the mid-1990s and spread exponentially starting in the year 2000, surely as an effect of the success of the above-mentioned Shanghai Biennale of the same year. Today, almost all major cities have an important periodical manifestation: The Shanghai Biennale (since 1996), Chengdu Biennale (since 2001), Nanjing Triennial (since 2002), Guangzhou Triennial (since 2003), and Beijing International Art Biennial (since 2003). During 2005 alone, more than ten biennials and triennials were organized: the Guiyang Biennale, Chengdu Biennale, Guangzhou Photography Biennale, Beijing International Calligraphy Biennale, Shenzhen Biennale, Chinese Art...
Triennial, Guangzhou Triennial, Macau Design Biennale, and Shenzhen’s International Ink Painting Biennale, for example. Lately, local governments have begun to set up large art events in China’s western regions, such as the Xinjiang Biennale.

From a management standpoint one can identify two ways exhibitions are carried out in private galleries and museums today: there are exhibitions organized by private institutions in collaboration with museums or independent curators, and exhibitions directly or indirectly organized by the government. At government level, though, there are various kinds of support; for instance, the above-mentioned Beijing International Biennale has been entirely financed and promoted by the central government, while the Shenzhen and Shanghai Biennales (until 2012) received sponsorship from the government but not financial assistance. Guangzhou’s Triennial, instead, is organized by the Guangdong Museum of Art, which answers to Guangdong Provincial Government, whose financial help the museum receives. These events, both public and private, often also get substantial economic support from urban developers and real estate companies.

It should be noted that, although the international biennial model is generally linked to exhibitions of international contemporary works of art, Chinese biennials often reshape this formula: many of these manifestations remain local in the sense that the selection of artists, public participation, and national or international visibility can be quite limited. Only a few have managed to achieve any international visibility: this has been the case for the Shanghai Biennale and Guangzhou Triennial, which, since 2000 and 2003 respectively, have evolved from national to international events by opening up to global artistic and curatorial influences. This appears to be for obvious reasons involving the political, economic, and cultural role those cities play in the contemporary landscape.

The popularity of the biennial model on a global scale and its adaptation to China’s specific context raises some important considerations. First, globalization and the consequent deterioration of the centre-periphery and West-East dichotomies are reshaping the value systems of all national
cultures versus foreign cultures. This involves China as well, and if until the 1980s and 1990s Chinese artists perceived themselves as culturally isolated, today they try to gain the most from this decentralization and germinate ideas from a new value system based on the consciousness of the uniqueness of each culture—either in China or abroad—context, or person. Artistic elaborations are therefore developed on concepts theoretically in opposition to each other but representing a vital tension within contemporary cultural life, such as nationalism vs. transnationalism, local culture versus global culture, or physical labour versus technology. On a national level, the biennial model works as a means to communicate this new identity and its new value system, and for a culture like the Chinese, which has thus far had been considered at the margins of the cultural landscape, these manifestations represent an important occasion to promote their own visibility and play a part in the international cultural context. As stated previously, Chinese authorities from the beginning of the twenty-first century proved interested in shedding the cultural isolation that had been their mainstay in earlier centuries. Naturally, art is an excellent means of participating in international contemporary life; it is a means of bringing the world together in a way that is different from politics and economics.

Let's take into account the Beijing International Art Biennale, held in 2003 at the National Art Museum of China and promoted by the Chinese Artist Association (CAA). Wang Yong, a member of the CAA and deputy director of the Research Institute of Fine Arts, decided to present the pilot project for Beijing's Biennale after visiting Dacca's Biennale in Bangladesh in 2001 where he recognized the strategic importance of such an event. Approved by the CAA and the central government, the project became official. Wang Yong defines the Biennale as "an unprecedented international artistic event for China, of worldwide importance, a modern reason for pride in the ancient splendor of Eastern cultures and a prelude to China's national rebirth." This Biennale project was not only legitimized in this way, but also deemed a fundamental step for the cultural future of China since the country thinks of itself as the cradle of ancient Asian culture and a model to be imitated by others.
Furthermore, a temporary exhibition triggers a series of engagements within the host city’s political, cultural, and economic system: local institutions, critics, or scientific directors looking after it are involved in the organization; specialized editions of catalogues or artists’ monographs are published; and other collateral exhibitions are presented that serve to emphasize the importance of the biennial as a cultural catalyst. This kind of event also promotes a growth in tourism, business, and investments. More art is produced and, theoretically, there are more occasions for artists to get noticed and their names circulated, while at the same time there are more occasions for the public to experience art.

Many ambitious local governments are making great efforts to appear as if they are sponsors of new contemporary artistic practices while trying to turn cities in cultural hubs. One example of this is the Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum, also known as the Power Station of Art (PSA). Located in an industrial building and seat of Shanghai’s Expo in 2010, the museum is on the eastern bank of the Huangpu River, only four kilometres from People’s Square, the city’s commercial and political heart. The PSA has been called by the local press “continental China’s first public museum of contemporary art,” with its 160,000 square metres of exhibition space, dedicated to the origin of Chinese modern and contemporary art, artworks featuring Shanghai’s...
historical and cultural development, and artworks by noted painters representative of arts development in the new century. The size of the museum is a clear indicator of the local government’s aspirations. In August 2011, they aimed to turn the expo’s pavilion into a museum, poised to be the new location for the Shanghai Biennale. This historical Biennale changed location for the first time after eight editions hosted by the Shanghai Museum of Art. The move was justified by the great success of the previous editions, which also took into consideration the huge number of Chinese and foreign visitors that the event has attracted every two years.

In Shanghai’s case the Biennale is definitely part of the various events promoted by the local government to exemplify renewal and modernization, but it is not the only example in contemporary China, where biennials and museums have grown to be part of national-cultural politics. Biennials and museums give hosting cities visibility, and that is why they can count on official economic support, whether local or central. The marketing component is very strong: it is focused on expressing the cultural and economic potential of a city or an entire nation. The supposition here is that the infrastructural shift in contemporary art has been due partially to these new forces that have been challenging the whole system and are partially driven by forces outside of art itself, such local and central government.

The fast economic development of China in the 1990s, along with globalization, brought about a number of consequences within the Chinese artistic system: the renewal of traditional institutions, the birth of more specialized professions related to the art world, and a gradual dissolution of the distinction between official and non-official. These innovations also laid the groundwork for the greatest changes that took place after the year 2000. Current research and analysis I carried out between the years 2011 and 2013 in artistic centres such
as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen consider this phenomenon an ongoing “infrastructural change,” similar to that identified by Smith.

Starting with the third edition of the Shanghai Biennale, in 2000, the emergence of new venues and the renewal of traditional Chinese institutions—phenomena that had been percolating in the 1990s—became evident. This resulted in a new way of perceiving traditional art exhibitions, one that was flexible and not tied to standard (and monumental) architecture. The lack of flexibility and the emphasis on monumentality that had been a characteristic of traditional museums was challenged when the Shanghai Art Museum opened to international artists and curators and, thereby, to foreign influences. The exhibition was also supported by the authorities, marking an important reform at the institutional level. Contemporary art became official, a part of the system, as it was also locally promoted by political institutions.

Since then, biennials have blossomed in every major Chinese city, following a model that is strongly influenced by global trends but also increasingly aware of local cultural and strategic demands. This structural change brought a double boon for China: the first was the birth of the biennial as a new institution along with new curatorial concepts connected to the promotion of contemporary art; the second was the possibility for innovative art to become a part of the system and a very popular vehicle of national culture after being excluded for so long from official exhibition circuits.

Notes

2. An example of an isolated urban area is the Dong Cun (Beijing East Village), Beijing, active between 1992 and 1994, where some artists experimenting with performance and photography used to live. Among them were Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming.
3. Huang Zhan, interview with the author, Shenzhen, August 21, 2012.
7. China-Shanghai International Arts Festival (CSIAF) is the only public festival hosted by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and the Shanghai Municipal Government. Launched in 1999, CSIAF displays classical and modern artworks, and, so far, it has been held for thirteen editions.
15. The museum opened on October 1, 2012, China’s National Day, and the Biennale opened the following day.