

Yang Jiechang: 100 Layers of Ink, 100 Layers of Action



Yang Jiechang sitting on the floor at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989, surrounded by his installation at *Magiciens de la Terre*. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.

Layering is one of nature's most powerful tools of creation, the cumulative result of a repetitive action over time. We see this in the rings of a tree, denoting annual layers of growth, and in rock strata, as evidence of millions of years of geological change. In the realm of human activity, in an individual's psyche, and in art, layers create powerful presences. Life experiences compound to form the current state of an individual; multiple layers of music come together in a symphony; the majesty of an ancient city such as Rome derives from the millennia of layering new construction atop past ruins. Peeling back layers in search of the kernel at the heart of an individual, or work of art, or natural construct can reveal its structure and its history.

In the case of Yang Jiechang's long-lived painting series *100 Layers of Ink* (c. 1987–2000), core information is missing or inadequately understood. So we can begin to approach this work with a most basic question: how are these beautiful and compelling things made? The titles mention layers of ink, but, obviously, there is much more to the works. Next comes the crucial question of the nascence of the series: how did it begin, and what catalyzed Yang Jiechang's sudden production of many large *100 Layers of Ink* works, followed by an ongoing interest in producing the works in a range of sizes? Why did *100 Layers of Ink* become such an important part of the artist's oeuvre? Finally, we can understand the meaning of the series in a broader sense if we peel back the layers to get at the meaning beneath their mesmeric surfaces. Much of this essay relies on interviews conducted between author Susanna Ferrell, Yang Jiechang, and art historian Martina Köppel-Yang, in the Yangs's Paris studio, on January 24, 2017.¹

Yang Jiechang, *100 Layers of Ink: Self-Portrait*, 1990–95, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, triptych, each piece 50 x 48 cm. Yang Jiechang created a number of works that layer three *100 Layers of Ink* paintings; among them is this self-portrait. Courtesy of the artist.



Process and Concept Behind the *100 Layers of Ink* Series

Yang Jiechang is “a terrible artist for an art historian. . . . He does not only change the painting itself, but he also changes the name of the painting,” Köppel-Yang says regarding the difference between the Chinese title of the series, 千层墨 *qian ceng mo*, which translates literally to *1,000 Layers of Ink*, and

the English title, *100 Layers of Ink*. The disparity between the meanings of the Chinese and English titles does not reflect a disparity in the paintings themselves—the works, when shown in China, do not have ten times as many layers. The Chinese name is more of a fantasy, whereas the English name is more literal. “In Chinese, they say 百层墨不好听 *Bai ceng mo bu hao ting* (‘One hundred layers of ink does not sound good’). They say one thousand is much more rich, more cultural, more traditional. . . . the Chinese language is more fantastic,” counters Yang Jiechang. In reality, the paintings in the series have even fewer layers of ink than is reflected in their English title. After some discussion, Yang Jiechang breaks down some of the mystique behind the paintings, saying that usually there are thirty or forty layers of ink in each of the works. While he reflects that a mere ten layers would not create an adequate depth of blackness, one thousand layers, due to material costs, would not have been a financially viable option for him when he first began painting the *100 Layers of Ink* series in the early 1980s, especially given the immense scale of many of the early works.

A close-up of one of Yang Jiechang’s works drying at Parc de la Vilette, Paris, 1989. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.



The materials that go into the making of the *100 Layers of Ink* series also have, historically, been unclear. In different texts, they are described in different ways, from the incomplete “ink on *xuan* paper and gauze” to the more inaccurate

“ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas.” During my interview with him, Yang Jiechang describes the materials thus: primarily ink on *xuan* paper (often called rice paper) and gauze, later mounted on canvas; and, secondarily, glue, alum, dirty water, earth, and other unclear, natural elements for colour.

Because of the complexity and variability of the effects it creates, the alum—a salt employed by Song and Yuan dynasty painters to distort the appearance of wet ink—is an important element in Yang Jiechang’s paintings despite being left out of every list of materials associated with the works. Alum is a desiccant: depending upon the wetness of the ink and paper, the alum absorbs different amounts of ink and thus creates varied visual effects. On works with alum, Yang Jiechang says, “you cannot copy them because usually you don’t know” if the alum is added “when they are dry or when they are wet.” This understanding of alum and the unpredictability of such materials helped him to understand a quality he felt was missing when he



The carvings on Mt. Tai and a copy book based on the carved characters.



The carvings on Mt. Tai and a copy book based on the carved characters.

attempted to copy the works of China's old masters, who utilized the 三番九染 *san fan jiu ran* technique—a laying down of layers of colour repetitively to achieve a unique aesthetic. Even in his most skillful attempts, Yang Jiechang did not have the capacity to recreate these historical works with perfect accuracy. “It’s because of the time that has passed. A thousand or six hundred years may have passed since the making of those historical works, so I use alum to make new paintings that have the appearance that many centuries have passed. The passage of time obscures the use of materials, but also physically changes a painting itself. Referring perhaps to the first calligraphy model he chose to study, the *Diamond Sutra* carved into Mt. Tai in the sixth century,² Yang Jiechang relates:

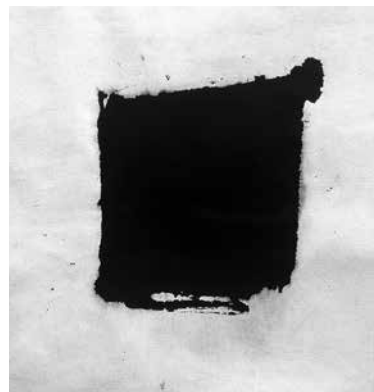
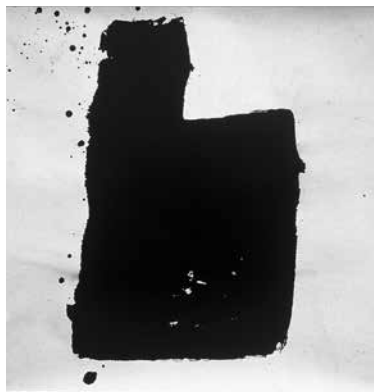
After two thousand years, the calligraphy is changed—it is not like it was before. Before, there was just the brush writing carved on the stone—not like now. A thousand years after, the stone has experienced degradation due to rain, sun, sometimes causing the stone to break. Now you copy the calligraphy and you mount it again. The calligraphy is changing, it’s not looking like the original. My painting is also like this.

Yang Jiechang may not be able to control the passing of time, but he does bring to his paintings a synthesized quality of aging. Ink, as a medium, is stable—it does not fade or distort—and thus fresh ink can have the same appearance as thousand-year-old ink. Paper, however, can discolour, degrade, tear, or become stained by water, all adding to the variability and unpredictability of an ink painting’s appearance over time. Yang Jiechang is careful to use materials that will preserve his works over time. His many layered washes of ink carry in them the suggestion of the wetting and drying of a century of rains; his use of earth as pigment alludes to the dirt and wear of a historical painting. However, Yang Jiechang seeks to freeze his paintings in time, and he prevents further signs of aging by carefully strengthening and stabilizing the works using the layers of glue and gauze.

Yang Jiechang’s awareness of the changeability of his materials is important to consider in the context of the works themselves. In the majority of his *100 Layers of Ink* paintings, he covers the entirety of his paper with ink, the unfading, unchanging element of historical paintings. However, the mystique—the quality of being impossible to copy—comes not from the ink, but from the other materials he uses in his layering—the glue, paper, and gauze that he folds, flattens, stretches, crumples, clumps, turns, and opens, that are then obscured by the top layers of ink. *Xuan* paper is the perfect ground for ink; its absorptive qualities capture every nuance of the brush. This is the medium that Yang Jiechang mastered over many years of rigorous training. Part of this training included learning traditional mounting processes: due to *xuan* paper’s essential fragility, paintings on this ground were mounted on a strong base of paper or of silk and paper, to create a stable work of art that could be displayed as a hanging scroll, handscroll, or album leaf.

Left: Yang Jiechang, *Ink Square*, 1987, ink on *xuan* paper, 67.5 x 67.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Yang Jiechang, *Ink Square*, 1987, ink on *xuan* paper, 67.5 x 67.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Because the *xuan* paper in *100 Layers of Ink* paintings becomes thin and fragile after being painted over many times, Yang Jiechang employed two methods in stabilizing these works of art. First, he used the silk or paper backing typical of traditional ink paintings. Second, following his move to Europe, he began to employ linen as an even stronger backing. When he found himself faced with creating a new set of works for the *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition in Paris in 1989, he realized that a dramatically larger scale than he had previously worked with was required by the setting of Centre Pompidou: thus he produced his first set of site-specific works (more on this below). For this new group of works, and for subsequent pieces,

he employed gauze to back his *xuan* paper; he then backed this layered assemblage onto a linen canvas, the ground historically used by European painters. His impromptu fabrication of this backing, created for *Magiciens de la terre*, is a novel hybridization of traditional Chinese and traditional European materials that afforded him the absorptive properties of *xuan* paper and the durability of stretched linen canvas. Through his novel combination of backing materials, Yang Jiechang prevented many signs of aging in his paintings, and thus created around them a sense of constant contemporaneity.

Telling the Stories

Yang Jiechang recalls the first pieces of the *100 Layers of Ink* series as much more modest in scale and materials than the glossy, textured, monumental paintings for which the series is now known. In fact, the series began with just one layer of ink upon his paper. He created *Ink Square* in 1987 using a single brush stroke, and for the artist this sufficed to make the painting complete.



Yang Jiechang, *Untitled*, 1983–85, ink on *xuan* paper, 67.5 x 67.5 cm. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

Although at first he was unsure of how to continue, he would later go on to make dozens more iterations of the ink square. At first, the paintings were all very similar, starting with inky black squares on white *xuan* paper; later, he added grey washes to infiltrate the purity of the white ground. Yang Jiechang thinks of his later *100 Layers of Ink* pieces as a variation on the original squares, realized through the repetitive layering of *Ink Square* forms, one atop the other. To understand his technique, and how it came to be, requires an understanding of Yang Jiechang's academic and independent education.

Yang Jiechang has been critical of his education at Guangzhou Fine Art Academy; he says that “to learn art in the academy was just to make portraits.” A subversive character by nature, he had different plans for his career as an artist. For his graduate exhibition, Yang Jiechang initially submitted a pair of works, *Massacre* (1982) and *Fire* (1982), the former depicting piles of corpses, the latter raging flames. Following the diptych's summary rejection by the academy, he quickly produced a painting with an acceptable—and deceptive—pastoral title, *Tibetan Earth, Sky, and People No. 1* (1982), to take its place. This new, eight-panel work was populated by a surging and mystical mass of aggressive yaks, but it was the title that allowed him to graduate. “Simple beauty”—like *Tibetan Earth*—“every artist can do,” said Yang Jiechang. Although *Massacre* and *Fire* were rejected by the academy, it marked the beginning of an ongoing effort by the artist to create a beauty that is difficult, with richness, liveliness, and an array of emotions that favour dark over bucolic aesthetics.

Following his graduation, Yang Jiechang removed himself for a time from the stifling art world of academia by studying Daoism under Master Huang Tao at Mount Luofu and Chan Buddhism at the Guangxiao Temple, both

Left: Yang Jiechang, *Massacre*, 1982, ink and mineral colours on *xuan* paper, 330 x 320 cm. Photo: Marc Domage. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Yang Jiechang, *Fire*, 1982, ink and mineral colours on *xuan* paper, 330 x 320 cm. Photo: Marc Domage. Courtesy of the artist.



in Guangzhou. During this period he did not paint (except for some decorative paintings the Guangxiao Temple had requested), seeking to clear his mind and find a way back to simplicity, with the trust that this would catalyze within himself a new kind of artistic expression. Following this period of study, he returned to Guangzhou Fine Art Academy as an instructor of Chinese painting, a position that he held from 1982 until 1989.

Other early experiments and precursors to the *100 Layers of Ink* series drew from Yang Jiechang's art history education, returning to traditional ink painting and calligraphic practices. Throughout Chinese history, artists have copied works of important ink painters and calligraphers in order to understand their techniques and to train their hands in the way of the brush. In the early 1980s, Yang Jiechang was inspired by a Xu Wei (1521–1593) painting of a lotus flower, and enlarged a detail of the painting to create a new, seemingly abstract work. This piece marked the beginning of a continuous theme in Yang Jiechang's artistic process—contemplation of what it means to create an abstract work of art.

Now, almost twenty years after the last *100 Layers of Ink* piece was created, Yang Jiechang is uncertain whether his works should be called abstract, even when they do not directly copy sections of other works. The artist remains elusive on the subject, saying at different times that abstraction is over, that his works are abstract once mounted, that his calligraphy is abstract, that he does not know how to make abstract paintings, and that his paintings merely look abstract.

The seminal exhibition for Yang Jiechang's *100 Layers of Ink* works was *Magiciens de la terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, which launched the series at the international level. Here, the first *100 Layers of Ink* pieces were born through stress and happenstance, and the result was eye opening for the artist. Martin selected the works to be included in *Magiciens de la terre* during a visit to Yang Jiechang's Guangzhou studio in 1987.³ While bringing the selected paintings with him to Paris, Yang Jiechang was stopped at Shenzhen customs—he assumed it was due to the large size of the paintings. In 1989, international travel by those living in China was uncommon, and the invitation to participate in a Western exhibition was even more rare. These special circumstances for shipping such large works were not something the customs agents would have been familiar with, but, equally, Yang Jiechang could not miss the opportunity to continue on to Paris. Thus, he was forced to leave his works at customs and travel to Paris empty-handed.⁴



Jean-Hubert Martin's visit to Yang Jiechang's Guangzhou studio in 1987. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.



This unfortunate incident, in addition to a shift in space—visiting Paris—were pivotal to the future development of Yang Jiechang's career. While recalling this time in his life, around 1989, Yang Jiechang brought up powerful themes of creation and redemption, emerging out of nothingness. He remembers having nothing during the Cultural Revolution—nothing to eat and nothing to study. In 1989, after building up a body of works in Guangzhou, he again had nothing when he moved to Europe, after leaving his artwork behind. Upon his arrival in Paris, however, he experienced, instead, excess. At the Centre Pompidou, the artist was given all the materials he required and, in addition, space to work *in situ* to create a new series of

Yang Jiechang, *Untitled*, 1989–1993, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 420 x 300 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

paintings for *Magiciens de la terre*. Still an up-and-coming artist who had received an exceedingly low salary as a teacher, Yang Jiechang was accustomed to conserving materials—for example, recycled *xuan* paper was incorporated into his crumpled paintings. In Paris, he was able to create works without frugally husbanding his materials, and the result was a series of approximately twenty paintings. “I put all the plastic on the floor . . .

and then I used all my paper.” Of the twenty paintings, he exhibited four of them in *Magiciens de la terre* and kept ten more for his own collection; what happened to the other six paintings is undetermined.

Yang Jiechang explored *Magiciens de la terre* as a space of excess—excess paper for excess paintings, excess ink for excess layering, excess space for painting actively. This was the first time that Yang Jiechang thoroughly explored the creation of texture through excess layering, and, thus, the first time his works garnered the title *100 Layers of Ink*.

Yang Jiechang in Paris, applying layers of paste to a painting in preparation for mounting at *Magiciens de la Terre*, Paris, 1989. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.



After arriving at Centre Pompidou, surrounded by the contemporary art of international superstars—Anselm Kiefer, Ilya Kabakov, Sigma Polke, Jeff Wall, Alighiero Boetti, and Nam Jun Paik—Yang Jiechang knew that he needed to create a powerful installation. He understood that he needed to rethink his approach and that the paintings he left behind at Shenzhen customs would not have made the impact he so desired. “I thought if I went ahead with the work I did in China, a dialogue with these artists would be impossible. I therefore returned to the basic elements I had distilled during my process of deconstruction in China.”⁵ Black ink, the most essential element of Chinese painting, became the focus for Yang Jiechang’s work. Installed in a small room in *Magiciens de la terre*, four of his large, black paintings were suspended from the ceiling, allowing visitors an immersive experience, pulling them away from the multiplicity of different aesthetics and perspectives just outside the walls of his space.

This experience not only marked a pivotal moment in his artistic career; it was life changing. The exhibition introduced him to his contemporaries in the art world and also afforded him greater understanding of the art market, the gallery system, and what it meant to be a contemporary artist. Yang Jiechang and his paintings were somewhat of a novelty to many of the artists and guests of the exhibition—Chinese art was generally understood in the West as historical ink painting. “After the *Magiciens de la terre* . . . they knew China’s art was contemporary art. So it changed my life, and I decided to stay in Paris,” he says.

Magiciens de la terre occurred at a particularly tumultuous time in Chinese political and cultural history. The exhibition opened in May; just one month later, on June fourth, the Tian’anmen Square Massacre would take place.



Yang Jiechang resting
between long bouts of work at
Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989.
Courtesy of Fei Dawei.

It's not only China that was changing, the whole world was changing. . . . my way is very simple. I don't change. I don't move. I'm just waiting for change. . . . But if at that time, I had followed to Tian'anmen Square, or followed to demonstrations, or if I had gone on to fight for the political issues, I feel I would have lost everything.

Martina Köppel-Yang reflected upon this as well:

You know, it's very difficult to imagine the situation at the time, because when the student demonstrations started they really thought they could change China. All the artists here in Europe, all the Chinese artists, they thought, "wow, great, finally we change something," and then when they started killing the students they all really were so shocked that they couldn't go home. You know, Huang Yongping, for example, his mother passed away, and he couldn't go back home. For him, this was one of the worst experiences ever. For Yang Jiechang too, you know, he knew "I can't go back home."

. . . You know, the Chinese artists, they really thought that the Chinese government in the 1980s believed them and wanted them to be part of the modernization of the country, and so they felt completely betrayed.

Surrounded by excess, by fantastic art, by the prospect of international success, Yang Jiechang was haunted by the chaos and restrictions within his homeland. For Yang Jiechang, Huang Yongping, and Gu Dexin—the second, third, and final Chinese artists invited to exhibit at *Magiciens de la terre*—being in Paris at this time held a unique meaning; the contrast of crushing turmoil and the bittersweet silver lining of a chance to escape it.

In the next exhibition Yang Jiechang participated in, *Chine demain pour hier* (*China Tomorrow for Yesterday*), curated by Fei Dawei in Pourrières, France, in 1990, *100 Layers of Ink* was an outlet for his emotions.

I wrote about the history of yesterday. Many, many layers of my calligraphy, of my ink. I was so powerful, so angry, and I don't know how to send the energy out, so everything just . . . hate and love, together.

This combination of hate and love reflects Yang Jiechang's conflicted state, being at once accepted by the Western art world and rejected by the Chinese government. For this exhibition, Yang Jiechang again worked in situ to create a layered work entitled *Pour Hier*, but the piece showed that his mind was elsewhere: "Because [it was] after the Tian'anmen Massacre, my feeling was to just make like . . . a monument or cemetery stone," representative of the loss China had experienced. Thus, the dark mass centred in Yang Jiechang's layered ink painting for the exhibition evokes the image of a gravestone.⁶

Yang Jiechang, *Pour Hier*, 1990, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 500 x 300 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Following *Magiciens de la terre*, Yang Jiechang was approached by designer Jean-Paul Goude to create a piece for the 1989 celebration of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. In a parade down the Champs Elysée, named "Marseillaise" after France's national anthem, groups of young artists and students from different countries shouted and played music

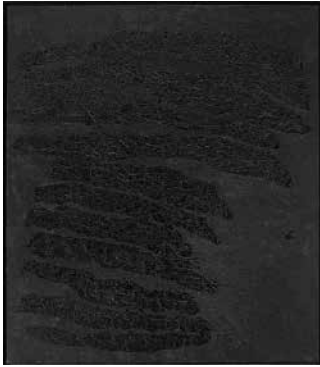


as they made their way to Place de la Concorde. Yang Jiechang played an integral part for the Chinese team, not only by creating one of the central features of their section of the parade, but by moving seamlessly into the sections of other nationalities. For the Chinese team, he painted calligraphy depicting *ziyou*—freedom—onto a white flag. He describes the Chinese section: "Very good, very powerful . . . there was a very big drum, a red drum, very huge. Much bigger than my room [at *Magiciens de la terre*]." The artist made a notable impact on the Italian team, as well, who came to him excited and enthusiastic, asking for him to paint calligraphy on their bodies. "This is action," Yang Jiechang said of the calligraphy. "The Italian team was first [in the parade], and our team was second. When our team passed the Champs Elysée, [we] had no voice. Every team had music, the Chinese had only the drummer, the 'ding ding ding ding,' [of bicycle bells] and then the wind." Not all of the political actions, however, were so subtle as the dinging of a bicycle bell:

It's a pity, during the demonstration, some students—they're very crazy, and this time they don't make art—they opened [some banners] and then they said "*dadao* Li Peng, *dadao gongchandang*" (down with Li Peng, down with the Communist Party), something like this. . . . It's really a political problem; it's not art.

These student activists were diverted so they would not be seen by the politicians attending the march. "There were presidents from Germany, from Japan, from America; there were many powerful chairmen there." Although wanting to avoid making direct political statements, Yang Jiechang

inadvertently assisted other artists in making bold political statements. “The problem is, I gave [the materials] to them. . . . we had about four hours to be waiting, preparing. So I gave them the cardboard, I gave them the ink, I gave them the brush, and then they wrote something about politics.” Köppel-Yang eloquently summed up a theme in Yang Jiechang’s work reflected in the actions of the march: “even though his works, the *100 Layers of Ink*, are supposedly abstract or concrete paintings, they are always linked to politics.”



Although Yang Jiechang clearly wants to distinguish his motivations from the political motivations of the other participants in the parade, on the surface, his actions are distinctly political. How can one claim that the writing of “freedom,” in a march for the political leaders of so many different nations, is without political intentions? In one sense, it inherently cannot, because the need to ask for, to demand, to even

Yang Jiechang, *Ladder of Knives*, 1992–96, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 200 x 175 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Each knife in *Ladder of Knives* is a specific type: butter knife, fruit knife, bread knife, razor, kitchen knife, butcher knife, sickle, chopper, folded chopper, axe, broadsword, or guillotine.

bring up the issue of freedom in the presence of these figures will be either lauding, condemning, or, at the very least, bringing the political statement into the same conceptual space as the politics of the attendant government leaders. If the politicians attending the march did not support freedom, or specifically Chinese freedom, then, in a way, these individuals become targets, dissenters toward a statement so publically represented in the celebration of the Parisian masses. However, the calligraphic characters written on Yang Jiechang’s flag are in a language very few in the Western world would understand. Thus, the message becomes cryptic to non-Chinese speakers, and the message of freedom was not communicated to most attendees, including the politicians.

Although Yang Jiechang was clearly a participant in what would be seen by Chinese-speaking onlookers as a political statement, and although he surely knew how his work would be interpreted, the artist focused on his personal feelings: “My process of creation is not based on philosophical theories. I react in a very instinctual and personal manner to the international political situation.”⁷ Therefore, rather than seeking to make a strong political statement, he merely felt the need to express his personal feelings toward China at the time—that the country should value and celebrate freedom. The simplicity of Yang Jiechang’s personal statement leaves room for others to interpret his work in their own way.

The meaning of the *100 Layers of Ink* series, equally, is open to such individual interpretation. These paintings act as a political gesture, a personal expression, a record, and an act of deceit (neither one flat layer as they appear, nor one hundred as the title of the series indicates). Thus, as much as one individual painting may have a specific meaning about, for example, the Tian’anmen Square Massacre, it acts in part as a chronicle of the artist’s life during an eventful and tumultuous decade. Nonetheless, Yang Jiechang insists it was a relatively happy decade in comparison to the catastrophe he experienced during the Cultural Revolution. “Happy

life can be beautiful art. Catastrophic life also can be beautiful art. So art is everything, art can make the human more powerful . . . my art is from the local. It's really from [death].” This personal philosophy, in addition to Yang Jiechang’s focus on individual understanding, is mirrored and manifested in a stele encountered in his youth.

Yang Jiechang, *Underground Flowers*, 1994–96, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 200 x 95.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist. The title of this work refers to bones, and in the painting we see the idea of a ribcage. Yang Jiechang developed a practice of commemorating every five years those killed in the 1989 Tian’anmen Square massacre, and *Underground Flowers* is a frequent theme.

While telling one of his tangential stories, Yang Jiechang recalls a trip to Xi’an as a student. When he was young, the artist visited the Qianling Mausoleum, the final resting place of the Empress Wu Zetian (624–705 CE), a ruthless Tang dynasty leader who would later become a fascination for him. What was most inspiring about this trip was the “Blank Tablet” or “Wordless Stele” (无字碑 *wu zi bei*) situated in the front grounds of the mausoleum. To Yang Jiechang, the blankness of the stele was an invitation for viewers to impart their own meaning. For him it was “Very conceptual. I visited so many stone writings [calligraphic inscriptions carved into cliff sides, as well as engraved stone stelae], and none except this one still influences to me today.” In its original form, the “Wordless Stele”—as it sounds—bore no inscription such as would be seen on a typical stele.⁸ “Just the stone, very dark stone. . . . The most powerful thing is nothing, you know.” When asked if *100 Layers of Ink* had the same nothingness, a vehicle onto which viewers can project their own meanings, Yang Jiechang brought up a comparison.⁹



For me, calligraphy is my action, so my painting is also action. It’s because my calligraphy is very active. So you cannot say that I have copied the blank stele in front of Wu Zetian’s mausoleum . . . but in the end the painting is still only black.

Wordless Stele (*wu zi bei*), Shaanxi, 7.53 m high. Photo: Maomao De Rijiben.



It is clear that Yang Jiechang’s paintings are a record of his actions, but they do not appear calligraphic in the traditional sense—the combination of action and writing. The missing element—the writing—is cultivated through repetitive action, often a daily practice of painting characters. Though they feature no characters, Yang Jiechang’s paintings in the *100 Layers of Ink* series can in this way be seen as calligraphic, as his layers of ink are both repeated actions and repeated

marks—a record of these actions. He brings up Qiu Zhijie’s *Writing the Lanting Xu One Thousand Times* (1992), a work of calligraphy in which Qiu Zhijie wrote *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion* (as it was written by Wang Xizhi, 303–361) 1,000 times on top of itself. Yang Jiechang says that his work is not a copy of Qiu Zhijie’s in its repetitiveness, nor of Wu Zetian’s, in its blankness, but, instead, his works gain their meaning from their repeated and recorded actions.



Yang Jiechang, *Bada Stone*, 1996, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 167.5 x 92.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

While Yang Jiechang lists his traditional Chinese influences—calligraphy, Xu Wei’s paintings, Wu Zetian’s stone stele—it is difficult not to think of the similarities between his works and those that are more contemporary to his practice. When Western artists Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935, Russian) and Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967, American) were brought up in an interview with Yang Jiechang, it was clear that he had discussed

these comparisons many times before. He recalls the time a journalist in Oxford asked him if he was imitating Malevich:

I didn’t even know who Malevich was . . . [Mark] Tobey [1890–1976, American] and [Jackson] Pollock [1912–1956, American] got their inspiration from East Asian art, adding some romanticism to it. When there is an artist from East Asia doing something similar, it is interpreted as imitation. This is wrong. Why not say those artists imitated me?¹⁰

Yang Jiechang’s question poses further questions: Where did he stand in relation to these Western artists? Where did his Chineseness situate him?

Yang Jiechang calls himself the “religious one;” not in the sense of being an artistic “god” like Tobey or Malevich, but in the instinctual, prayer-like repetition that he finds a personal necessity. His interest in repetitive, focused, and perhaps even compulsive action is in a way similar to that of prayer. These artistic “gods,” in their time, “used Asian art, they used Japanese art, and they used Chinese art to influence the mystery” of their work, whereas Yang Jiechang’s work was the mystery, a more direct channeling of the self. While Western artists were at this time incorporating historical Asian motifs and techniques into their work—in order to introduce an element of the *exotic*—contemporary Chinese art was, during the lifetimes of artists like Reinhardt and Tobey, more accessible than ever. Although to Yang Jiechang, his own works were clearly Chinese due to the very presence of ink, the exoticness of the works may not have been as apparent to Western viewers, who might have easily and superficially drawn connections between *100 Layers of Ink* and aesthetically similar all-black works by Western artists in which there was no obvious influence from Asia. Although no longer the “exotic” Asian aesthetic to which those Western artists like Tobey and Reinhardt were attracted, it is still clear that Yang Jiechang brought a unique technique and philosophy to *Magiciens de la terre*, ready to inspire his Western contemporaries.

Yang Jiechang recalls that at the time, in the 1980s and 90s, European artists garnered Asian philosophy only from texts and historical paintings, but a contemporary Asian life philosophy was still present in China. For Yang Jiechang, this contemporary Chinese philosophy was to be joyous in spite of hardships such as the Cultural Revolution. “The Chinese are alive, huh?” he teased. “Come on, we are really alive. That’s why we can be together.” For Yang Jiechang, the Cultural Revolution was a time of suffering, but he insists that his joyful liveliness does not arise from historical Chinese philosophy.

“I bring this to America, I bring this to Europe, this very important philosophy.” Although he does not directly bring it up in reference to the *100 Layers of Ink* series, suffering, and the defiance of suffering, is clearly persistent in Yang Jiechang’s mind.

His personal philosophy is aligned with that of Gilles Deleuze, who looked at the vigor of life as defiance of death—“the key lies in the possibility of extracting from this suffering the force of life it always, despite itself, also affirms.”¹¹ It is clear that Yang Jiechang’s *100 Layers of Ink* series draws upon this suffering—he says that his art comes from death; yet, despite this, the act of painting itself affirms his aliveness. Deleuze describes this as experiential painting or *la contre-effectuation* (counter-actualization): “to live actual suffering in such a way as to defy its deadening assault.”¹² As each of his many layers can be seen as at least one action, Yang’s *100 Layers of Ink* pieces can be seen as a compilation of defiances against death and suffering. In creating in this way, the artist seeks out “the moment of disorientation, the moment that ushers in disorder and chaos.”¹³

In their 1991 book *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? (What Is Philosophy?)*, Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that art is composed of “chaos, producing sensations that have something of its intensity and so help us not to fall into its abyss.”¹⁴ Although the darkness of Yang Jiechang’s *100 Layers of Ink* series may appear as an abyss itself, this is an interpretation of the colour black that is rooted deep in Western culture. At an international scale, a field of black is open to wide interpretation: the viewer can project freely. In 1998, when his *100 Layers of Ink* works were receiving increased international exposure, Yang Jiechang wryly commented that, “In France, people think it is ‘Oriental Black’ representing Nothingness and Nihilism. While in Japan, some critics judge this kind of painting as ‘very romantic.’ When my work was showing in the Kunstverein, Heidelberg, Germany, it was attacked as ‘full of Fascist violence!’”¹⁵ In China, instead of representing darkness, chaos, and nihilism, the blackness of ink represents the creation of a firm and lasting mark upon paper. Although these works are infinitely black—they are *made* of black—under certain light conditions their appearance flips to white, due to reflections. The *100 Layers of Ink* works’ high reflectivity renders them animated; they seem to shift unpredictably, like a part of nature. The sudden flip from deepest black to bright white renders inadequate interpretations founded in a view of the paintings as pure black.

The many implications of the color black raise the question: what exactly is Deleuze’s dark abyss? It is not merely the deep blackness of ink, or a state of nihilism without hope for return; to understand Deleuze’s abyss, we must first understand his definition of chaos. Deleuze’s chaos is a chaos of non-conformity, of interrupting an expected trajectory or way of being that differs from the norm.

In this context, chaos is not defined simply by how it contains (or complicates) differences, but by its infinite speed, such that the particles, forms, and entities that populate it emerge only to disappear immediately, leaving behind no consistency, reference, or any determinate consequences.¹⁶

Yang Jiechang's technique of layering paper, gauze, glue, alum, and natural materials embodies this disorderly chaos, defying an abyss that we might understand as inactive conformity. The artist works quickly to create each new layer of his *100 Layers of Ink* pieces, the shine of wet ink drying and disappearing, only to be replaced soon after by fresh ink. Yang Jiechang's chaos thus animates his life, and each layer of ink represents a new, active image telling his story.

In the moment prior to each instance of Yang Jiechang's layering of materials, he is allowed the chance to break from the pattern established in the previous layers to create a new layer entirely different from the others. Though he does create difference by adding a new layer, as each inherently cannot be exactly the same, Yang Jiechang's repetition shows a continuous focus on the technique, idea, and aesthetic that spanned the decade of his painting *100 Layers*. In a way, each painting is not, in itself, complete—after he ceases to paint on one piece, he progresses to another, continuing his repetition of layering black ink—continuing the same actions used to create every one of the *100 Layers of Ink* paintings, but merely in a different location and thus on a separate piece. As discussed previously, Yang Jiechang believes that the act of layering is in itself a work of art. Though his thoughts shift as he moves from one image plane to the next, his physical act of painting layers remains much the same. Clearly, the first few *100 Layers of Ink* works did not satisfy his desire to explore these actions, and thus he continued to return to or reiterate his layering for years afterward.

This exploration of the layering action can be seen as “pure experience” as proposed by Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). Nishida defines pure experience as a “body-based analysis of experience.”¹⁷ Through his definition of pure experience, Nishida explicates some aspects of his understanding of consciousness: first, that consciousness is equivalent to the experience of fact, and not the mental or emotional reaction to this fact; second, that the recollection of the past is itself a part of consciousness, but is not equal to the consciousness experienced during that moment in the past; third, that reflections upon pure past experiences may be tainted with judgment and meaning; fourth, that through reflection upon the past, consciousness is both instantaneous and non-instantaneous, and contingent upon the purity of the recollection of a memory. For example, if the recollector is able to return to a memory without imparting judgment upon it, this may reflect a non-instantaneous consciousness that can transcend linear time. Though Nishida seems hesitant throughout his text to believe that this is anything more than a theoretical possibility, one could suggest that Yang Jiechang embodies this principle throughout his work, returning to and re-experiencing the layering of ink with the creation of a new *100 Layers of Ink* painting.

Nishida poignantly differentiates perceiving and judging through the example of experiencing blue: judging the colour blue does not change anything about it, and purely experiencing blue can be separated from any meaning that it may imply (associations with masculinity, sadness, nature, etc.). Its existence and one's experience of its existence is the only concrete facet of blue. Equally, Yang Jiechang's layering is the only definite facet of

his works: the interpretations and aesthetics of them vary. “The first one I did in China, before I left, what I made is not abstract painting—I made the painting look abstract.” Despite at times referring to the works as abstract, Yang Jiechang later corrected himself: “It’s not only the form, they are not abstract. They are action. Calligraphy is action, my painting is action.” He emphasized at multiple points throughout our conversations that the paintings created in China were for him, and not his instructors or peers, and that he did not learn to paint abstraction.

I don’t know how to make abstract art. Everything, for me, like this, is not abstract. It’s calligraphy, it’s my spirituality. . . . It’s not abstract, because for more than five years, every day, all I did was to make a portrait for the people. To learn art in the academy is just to make portraits.

Thus Yang Jiechang differentiates between the appearance of his paintings—abstract—and his experiential interpretation—that they must be calligraphic because that is how he learned to paint. In addition, without stating this outright, perhaps because it might seem too obvious to him, he makes it clear that to learn painting at the academy is, essentially, to practice repetition. In considering his work, we can think about how his actions and the energy that he puts into his works reflect his history, his education, and his chaos.

Left: Yang Jiechang, *Ladder to the Sky*, 1992, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 190.5 x 127.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Yang Jiechang, *Ghost Chair*, 1989, ink, glue, alum, gauze, and *xuan* paper, 96.5 x 178 cm. Courtesy of the artist. The *100 Layers of Ink* series is punctuated occasionally by images that are abstract and poetic, such as *Ghost Chair*. There is a dark tone, a mystique, underlying these pieces. *Ghost Chair*, although painted in 1989, has taken on an association with a ghost that lives in a four-hundred-year-old mill that the Yangs have refurbished.



Since reaching middle age, Yang Jiechang has been engaged in painting a series of dramatic *gongbi* (fine line) self-portraits, for example, a many-paneled painting of himself falling through space, a portrait of himself as the Dalai Lama, and an image of himself as a Buddhist figure ensconced in a cave and bursting into conflagration. But we can look at the series of *100 Layers of Ink* works as a more subtle parade of unselfconsciously created self-portraits. Their changes follow the changes in his life. The crumpling, folding, and cutting of materials that began in 1989 and continued as a necessary and underlying part of the *100 Layers of Ink* series throughout the next ten years

is a kind of violence inflicted upon the materials in the act of creation. Of course, they evolved over time, their technique becoming ever more refined, and the visual content changing as the artist's psyche developed over the course of his life. While he speaks of the important positive aspects of his life during this decade of painting, notably moving to Europe, meeting his life partner Martina Köppel-Yang, and exhibiting at *Magiciens de la terre*, there were horrific and sad experiences that strongly shaped his way of performing his life, both at this time and during his youth.

While it becomes difficult to see the chaos of crumpled gauze and paper layered under Yang Jiechang's many coats of ink, it is clear that this chaos exists. By covering these materials in ink, he does not erase these chaotic actions—instead, the shine of his ink highlights the textural changes created by these layered materials, mirroring the changes in his own life that brought him to where he is today. Yang Jiechang is a recollector, a repeater, an inappropriate and chaotic ink artist who paints with experiences. His topology of chaos began in 1989, and, through layers and layers of ink, it is preserved in perpetuity as his legacy.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this essay are taken from the interview of January 24, 2017.
2. Because it is impossible to study calligraphy from a giant rock carving, scholars rely on books based on rubbings of the carved text, reduced in size and arranged in book format.
3. After visiting Yang Jiechang's studio, Jean-Hubert Martin wanted to see the artist's living space. "Martin noticed that I had a whole pile of stele rubbings, and he looked through them and asked me if my artwork had evolved from these. At the time I understood a little bit of English and I told him he was very observant. He realized that my paintings had come from the rubbings, and it was really weird because I didn't even realize that my paintings had anything to do with rubbings." "Yang Jiechang 2007-10-25, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts," *Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990*, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/12263/>.
4. Luckily, Yang Jiechang was able to recover these paintings just two years later and bring them back to Guangdong with the help of a friend. Returning to these works after two years of growth, experience, and developing his technique, he was convinced they needed to be changed. Driven to create something new from the old works, he cut, crumpled, and glued them between many layers of ink, creating a dramatically new composition.
5. Fritz Hansel and Yang Jiechang, "Republic of Fritz Hansel—A Dialogue," in *No-Shadow Kick* (Shanghai: Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, 2008).
6. This work is at times entitled *Pour Hier or Chine demain pour hier*, though M+, an art museum in Hong Kong that later collected the work, entitles it *Hundred Layers of Ink*.
7. Larys Frogier, "Eros . . . Global . . . Chaos," in *Nam June Paik's Belt* (Guangzhou: Liberia Borges Institute for Contemporary Art, 2011), 84.
8. The stele now features a number of inscriptions. Image sourced from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qianling_Mausoleum_38_2013-08.JPG/.
9. This is in dialogue with Roland Barthes's "Reader Response Theory," the death of the author and celebration of the viewer's interpretation. More on this theory can be found in Barthes's seminal essay "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
10. Li, Yu-Chieh, "Action Painting Is Not Calligraphy: A Conversation with Yang Jiechang," Museum of Modern Art, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/707-action-painting-is-not-calligraphy-a-conversation-with-yang-jiechang/.
11. This is as described by Martin Crowley, in "Deleuze on Painting," *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 67, no. 3 (July 2013), 374.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Frogier, "Eros . . . Global . . . Chaos," 84.
14. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991), 190-91. Martin Crowley, trans., "Deleuze on Painting," *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 67, no. 3 (July 2013), 374.
15. "Yang Jiechang Artist Statement," Art Beatus, <http://www.artbeatus.com/english.html/>.
16. Alberto Toscano, "Chaos," in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 48.
17. *Ibid.*