

典藏 國際版

YISHU: JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

MARCH / APRIL 2010



MARCH/APRIL 2010  
VOLUME 9, NUMBER 2

# Yishu

典 藏 國 際 版

Journal of  
Contemporary  
Chinese Art

## INSIDE

Artist Features:  
Zhong Biao, Will Kwan,  
Shen Chen

Guggenheim Museum's  
Asian Art Council

Interviews with Wu  
Hung, Hou Hanru,  
and Thierry Raspail

Permanent (R)evolution:  
Contemporaneity and  
the Historicization of  
Contemporary Chinese  
Art

Emporium: A New  
Common Sense of  
Space

1989: 365 Art Days in  
China and Germany

US\$12.00 NT\$350.00  
PRINTED IN TAIWAN



# OCAT

OCAT

is the Synonymy of  
Independent Art  
in China

# 是中国

# 独立艺术 时代名词

## January

January 9

Enter - OCAT Five Anniversary Celebration and the Initiation of Youth OCAT Project

January 9 to March 9

Go - the First Exhibition of Youth OCAT Project (Curators: Wang Jing, Man Yu)

January 17

Youth OCAT Project - Workshop: Research on International Contemporary Art Institutions (Hosted by Fang Lihua)

## April

April 10 to June 10

Youth OCAT Project - to See from the Film: the Film Trace of Contemporary Art and Self-construction (Curators: Dong Bingfeng, Du Qingchun, Huang Jianhong, Zhuzhu)

## May

May 15 to July 15

Ten-year Public Art Project in Pujiang OCT (2010) - China Park: The Art of Wenda Gu (Curator: Huang Zhuan)

## June

June 30 to August 15

Youth OCAT Project - Solo Exhibition of Jia Aili (Curator: Wu Wei)

## August

August 15 to November 15

The Fifth OCAT International Art Residency

## September

September 19 to November 19

Ink Alchemy: Experimental Ink Exhibition of Wenda Gu (Curator: Huang Zhuan, Feng Boyi)

September 21

International Symposium on Contemporary Chinese Ink and Perspectives on Art History (Hosted by Wu Hung)

## December

December 11 to 19

Crossing: OCT Contemporary Dance Festival 2010 (Curator: Wu Wenguang)

Collaborate with Peking University Editing and Publishing the Annual of Contemporary Art of China 2009 (2010) (Chief Editor: Lao Zhu)

please login <http://ocat.com.cn/> for the latest information

**OCAT**  
OCT Contemporary Art Terminal  
OCT当代艺术中心

2010.3.6 - 2010.5.16

# JUNGLE

A Close-up Focus on  
Chinese Contemporary Art  
Trends

**Artists:**

BI Jianye / CHENG Ran / CHEN Shaoxiong / CHEN Wei / CHEN Xiaoyun /  
CHEN Zhou / Colin CHINNERY / GUO Xi / HE An / HUANG Liang /  
HU Jieming / HU Xiaoyuan / JIA Aili / JIANG Zhi / JIN Feng / JIN Shan /  
JIN Shi / KAN Xuan / LIANG Shuo / LIANG Wei / LIAO Guohe / LI Dafang /  
LIN Tianmiao / LI Qing / LI Songsong / LIU Ding / LIU Weijian / LIU Wei /  
LI Yongbin / LU Chunsheng / LU Lei / LU Yang / MA Xiaoxiao / MADEIN /  
PAK Sheung Cheun / QIN Qi / QIU Xiaofei / SHI Jinsong / SHI Qing /  
SHI Yong / SHUANGFEI ART GROUP (LI Ming / LI Fuchun / YANG Junling /  
SUN Maoyuan / HUANG Liya / ZHANG Lehua / LIN Ke / CUI Shaohan /  
WANG Liang) / SUI Jianguo / SUN Xun / SUN Yuan & PENG Yu /  
TANG Maohong / VITAMIN CREATIVE SPACE / WANG Gongxin /  
WANG Guangle / WANG Jianwei / WANG Ningde / WANG Sishun /  
WANG Wei / WANG Xingwei / WANG Yin / XIAO Bo / YANG Fudong /  
YANG Zhenzhong / YE Linghan / ZHANG Peili / ZHANG Ding /  
ZHANG Enli / ZHANG Hui / ZHANG Liaoyuan / ZHANG Yuan /  
ZHENG Guogu / ZHOU Xiaohu / ZHOU Yilun / ZHU Yu

(more artists will join in later during the exhibition)

**Organizer:** Platform China Contemporary Art Institute

**Opening:** 2010.3.6 15:00

**Venue:** Platform China Contemporary Art Institute

**Address:** 319-1 Caochangdi Village, Chaoyang District, Beijing, China

站台中国  
PLATFORM CHINA

T 86 10 6432 0091 E info@platformchina.org www.platformchina.org



# ART HK 10

## HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR

香港國際藝術展

HONG KONG CONVENTION  
AND EXHIBITION CENTRE  
27-30 MAY 2010

Lead Sponsor

Deutsche Bank



## PARTICIPATING GALLERIES

10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong / 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok / acb Contemporary Art Gallery, Budapest / Galería Álvaro Alcázar, Madrid / Alisan Fine Arts, Hong Kong / Galerie Anhava, Helsinki / Arario Gallery, Cheonan/Beijing/ Seoul/New York / ARATANIURANO, Tokyo / Ark Galerie, Jakarta / Art Beatus Gallery, Hong Kong/Vancouver / aye gallery, Beijing / Aye • Eastation Gallery, Beijing / Ayyam Gallery, Beirut/Damascus/Dubai / Beck & Eggeling International Fine Art, Düsseldorf / Beijing Art Now Gallery, Beijing / Beijing Commune, Beijing / Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing / Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York / BREENSPACE, Sydney / Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong/London / CAIS Gallery, Hong Kong/ Seoul / Leo Castelli Gallery, New York / The Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong / Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami / James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai / The Columns Gallery, Seoul / CONTEMPORARY BY ANGELA LI, Hong Kong / Galleria Continua, Beijing/La Moulon/San Gimignano / Contrasts Gallery, Shanghai / Conny Dietzschold Gallery, Cologne/Sydney / DNA, Berlin / The Drawing Room, Makati City / Eastlink Gallery, Beijing/Shanghai / Thomas Erben Gallery, New York / Eslite Gallery, Taipei / F2 Gallery, Beijing/Los Angeles / Galerie Forsblom, Helsinki / Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco / Gagosian Gallery, Athens/Hong Kong/London/ Los Angeles/New York/Rome / GALERIST, Istanbul / Gana Art, Busan/New York/Seoul / Gandhara-Art, Hong Kong/Karachi / gdm, Paris / Robert Goff Gallery, New York / Galerie Grand Siècle, Taipei / GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney / Green Cardamom, London / Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York / Grotto Fine Art, Hong Kong / Hakgojae, Seoul / Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong / Hauser & Wirth, London/New York/Zurich / Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Zurich / Galerie Ernst Hilger, Vienna / Michael Hoppen Gallery, London / Galerie Caprice Horn, Berlin / Hwa's Gallery, Shanghai / GALLERY HYUNDAI, Seoul / Gallery IHN, Seoul / Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh / Taka Ishii Gallery, Kyoto/Tokyo / Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin / JGM. Galerie, Paris / Amelia Johnson Contemporary, Hong Kong / Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York / gbk - Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney / Keumsan Gallery, Beijing/Seoul/Tokyo / Tomio Koyama Gallery, Kyoto/Tokyo / Kukje Gallery, Seoul / Kwai Fung Hin Art Gallery, Hong Kong / L.A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht, Frankfurt / Langgeng Gallery, Central Java / Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York / Galerie Lelong, New York/Paris / LEVY, Berlin/Hamburg / Lisson Gallery, London / Long March Space, Beijing / Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Luxembourg / MEM, Osaka / Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo / The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow / Mori Gallery, Sydney / Nadi Gallery, Jakarta / NANZUKA UNDERGROUND, Tokyo / Anna Ning Fine Art, Hong Kong / ONE AND J. Gallery, Seoul / Osage Gallery, Beijing/Hong Kong/Shanghai/Singapore / Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo / Other Criteria, London / Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney / Pace Beijing, Beijing / Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing/Paris / PARK RYU SOOK GALLERY, Jeju/Seoul/Shanghai / Pékin Fine Arts, Beijing / Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Miami/Paris / Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong / Primo Marella Gallery, Beijing/Milan / Max Protetch Gallery, New York / PYO Gallery, Beijing/Los Angeles/Seoul / Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City / ALMINE RECH GALLERY, Brussels/Paris / Red Bridge Gallery, Shanghai / Red Gate Gallery, Beijing / Röntgenwerke AG, Tokyo / Galerie Stefan Röpke, Cologne/Madrid / Rossi + Rossi, London / Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai / SCAI THE BATHHOUSE, Tokyo / Schoeni Art Gallery, Hong Kong / SCHUEBBE PROJECTS, Düsseldorf / Michael Schultz Gallery, Beijing/Berlin/Seoul / ShangHART Gallery, Beijing/Shanghai / ShugoArts, Tokyo / Gallery Side 2, Tokyo / Silverlens Gallery, Manila / Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore / Soka Art Center, Beijing/Taiwan/Taipei / Sperone Westwater, New York / Star Gallery, Beijing / Starkwhite, Auckland / Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney / Sutton Gallery, Melbourne / Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok/Beijing/Hong Kong / Tokyo Gallery + BTAP, Beijing/Tokyo / Tolamo Galleries, Melbourne / WAKO WORKS OF ART, Tokyo / White Cube, London / x-ist, Istanbul / YAMAMOTO GENDAI, Tokyo / Galerie Zink, Berlin/Munich

## ART FUTURES GALLERIES

140sqm Gallery, Shanghai / AANDO FINE ART, Berlin / Galerie Lena Brüning, Berlin / Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai / Chi-Wen Gallery, Taipei / Pilar Corrias Gallery, London / Gallery EXIT, Hong Kong / Input/Output, Hong Kong / Langgeng Gallery, Central Java / Man&Eve, London / Ooi Botos Gallery, Hong Kong / Paradise Row, London / Project 88, Mumbai / Rokeby, London / Take Ninagawa, Tokyo / Y++/Wada Fine Arts, Beijing/Tokyo

Official Hotel Partner



Education Partner



T + 852 2918 8793

[www.hongkongartfair.com](http://www.hongkongartfair.com)





# Yishu

Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 2, MARCH/APRIL 2010

## CONTENTS

---

- 4 Editor's Note
- 6 Contributors
- 
- 8 Zhong Biao's Abstract Panorama  
*Paul Manfredi*
- 22 Shen Chen: In Thrall to No One  
*Jonathan Goodman*
- 32 Research in Motion: An Interview with Will Kwan  
*Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh*
- 44 Guggenheim Museum's Asian Art Council: Universalism, Cosmopolitanism, Glocalism, or Something Else? How is Value Constructed, Denoted, and Safeguarded in Contemporary Art?
- 65 Artist, System, Culture  
On the Anthropology of Contemporary Chinese Art: An Interview with Wu Hung  
*Winston Kyan*
- 74 Permanent (R)evolution: Contemporaneity and the Historicization of Contemporary Chinese Art  
*Paul Gladston*
- 81 The Spectacle of the Everyday: A Conversation with Hou Hanru and Thierry Raspail about the Biennale de Lyon  
*Keith Wallace*
- 96 Emporium: A New Common Sense of Space  
*Clara Galeazzi*
- 104 1989: 365 Art Days in China and Germany  
*Ellen Pearlman*
- 
- 109 Chinese Name Index



Cover: Yangjian Group, *Pine Garden—As Fierce as a Tiger*, 2009, installation and performance. Photo: Blaise Adion. Courtesy of Yangjiang Group. With the support of Youcast and Tang Gallery, Bangkok.

## Editor's Note

In *Yishu*, a variety of ideas weave and resonate throughout different texts in each issue. For example, in *Yishu 37* we are featuring three artists with unconnected backgrounds—Zhong Biao is from mainland China and still living in China, Shen Chen is from mainland China and has been living in New York for more than two decades, and Will Kwan, an artist from a younger generation, is from Hong Kong and now living in Toronto. Zhong and Shen both explore aspects of abstraction in their work but in different ways; Zhong has recently introduced it into his primarily figurative work, while Shen has taken a consistent, calculated approach to it for years. Shen, whose work is personal and meditative, and Kwan, whose work is more research-based and conceptual, both speak of, among other things, their experience as diasporic artists, how it plays into their understanding of artistic production, and how it can be both restricting and liberating.

In 2007, *Yishu* published selected panel discussions from the Guggenheim Museum's Asian Art Council. We are pleased to be publishing selections from the 2009 meetings in this issue as well as in the upcoming issue (May 2010). The panel published in this issue focuses on value—a much under-discussed idea within contemporary art—from its aesthetic, artistic, and market perspectives. While the presenters did not always address contemporary Chinese art directly, many of the issues raised affect various regions throughout Asia and are relevant within the evolution of contemporary art in China, importantly placing it in dialogue with cultures other than the West.

Aspects of curatorial practice also have a strong presence in *Yishu 37*. While the Asian Art Council serves as a theoretical think tank that feeds the curatorial programming at the Guggenheim, Winston Kyan's interview with Wu Hung, an important art historian, curator, and supporter of contemporary Chinese art, brings to light the inquisitiveness and thoughtfulness that characterize Wu's curatorial career from the 1980s to the present. Paul Gladston follows this interview with a healthy debate directed at an essay by Wu Hung included in the publication *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Contemporaneity*. Discussions about curating continue with my interview with Hou Hanru and Thierry Raspail about Hou's innovative and provocative curatorial proposition for the 2009 Biennale de Lyon; Clara Galeazzi's review of the exhibition Emporium: A New Common Sense of Space, an unusual project that integrated the physical, psychological, and sensual space of both the gallery and the artwork; and, finally, Ellen Pearlman's review of a new book by Huang Rui that is more visual than textual, and as much a curatorial project as it is a publication.

Keith Wallace

## YISHU: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art

**PRESIDENT**  
**LEGAL COUNCIL**  
Katy Hsiu-chih Chien  
Infoshare Tech Law Office,  
Mann C.C. Liu  
Ken Lum

**FOUNDING EDITOR**  
Keith Wallace  
**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**  
**MANAGING EDITOR**  
**ASSOCIATE EDITORS**  
Zheng Shengtian  
Julie Grundvig  
Kate Steinmann  
Chunyee Li  
**EDITORIAL ASSISTANT**  
**CIRCULATION MANAGER**  
**ADVERTISING COORDINATOR**  
**WEB SITE EDITOR**  
Larisa Brojde  
Ioulia Reynolds  
Chunyee Li

**ADVISORY BOARD**  
Judy Andrews, Ohio State University  
Melissa Chiu, Asia Society Museum  
John Clark, University of Sydney  
Lynne Cooke, Dia Art Foundation  
Okwui Enwezor, San Francisco Art Institute  
Britta Erickson, Independent Scholar & Curator  
Fan Di'an, National Art Museum of China  
Fei Dawei, Guy & Myriam Ullens Foundation  
Gao Minglu, University of Pittsburgh  
Hou Hanru, San Francisco Art Institute  
Hu Fang, Vitamin Creative Space and the shop  
Katie Hill, University of Westminster  
Claire Hsu, Asia Art Archive  
Martina Köppel-Yang, Independent Critic & Historian  
Sebastian Lopez, Critic and Curator  
Lu Jie, Independent Curator  
Charles Merewether, Critic & Curator  
Ni Tsaichin, Tunghai University  
Apinan Poshyananda, Ministry of Culture, Thailand  
Philip Tinari, Independent Critic & Curator  
Chia Chi Jason Wang, Independent Critic & Curator  
Wu Hung, University of Chicago  
Pauline J. Yao, Independent Scholar

**PUBLISHER**  
Art & Collection Group Ltd.  
6F, No. 85, Section 1,  
Chungshan N. Road,  
Taipei, Taiwan 104  
Phone: (886)2.2560.2220  
Fax: (886)2.2542.0631  
E-mail: coart@ms37.hinet.net

**VICE GENERAL MANAGER**  
Jenny Liu  
Alex Kao  
**MARKETING MANAGER**  
Joyce Lin  
**CIRCULATION EXECUTIVE**  
Perry Hsu  
Betty Hsieh

**WEBMASTER**  
**PRINTING**  
Website ARTCO, Taipei  
Chi Wei Colour Printing Ltd.,

**WEB SITE**  
**ISSN**  
www.yishujournal.com  
1683 - 3082

*Yishu* is published bi-monthly in Taipei, Taiwan, and edited in Vancouver, Canada. The publishing dates are January, March, May, July, September, and November. All subscription, advertising, and submission inquiries may be sent to:

**Yishu Office**  
200-1311 Howe Street  
Vancouver, BC, Canada  
V6Z 2P3  
Phone: 1.604.649.8187  
Fax: 1.604.591.6392  
E-mail: office@yishujournal.com

**SUBSCRIPTION RATES**  
1 year (six issues): \$84 USD (includes \$24 for airmail postage);  
in Asia \$78 USD (includes \$18 for airmail postage).  
2 years (twelve issues): \$158 USD (includes \$48 for airmail  
postage); in Asia \$146 USD (including \$36 for airmail postage).

**DESIGN AND PRODUCTION**  
**CREATIVE DIRECTOR**  
**ART DIRECTOR**  
**DESIGNER**  
Leap Creative Group  
Raymond Mah  
Gavin Chow  
Philip Wong

No part of this journal may be reprinted without the written permission from the publisher. The views expressed in *Yishu* are not necessarily those of the editors or publisher.

- 4 編者手記
- 6 作者小傳
- 
- 8 鐘飆的抽象全景  
Paul Manfredi (魏樸)
- 22 沈忱：不受約束  
Jonathan Goodman
- 32 研究在進行中：關威利訪談  
Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh
- 44 古根漢美術館亞洲藝委會討論：  
普世主義、世界主義、全球在地主義、  
還有什麼？—當代藝術的價值如何  
構建、標識和維護？
- 65 藝術家、體制、文化—當代中國藝術的  
人類學：與巫鴻的訪談  
Winston Kyan (釧嘉高)
- 74 永遠的革新（革命）：當代中國藝術的  
當代性和歷史化  
Paul Gladston
- 81 日常奇觀：與侯瀚如和Thierry Raspail  
談里昂雙年展  
Keith Wallace
- 96 商場：一種空間的新常識  
Clara Galeazzi
- 104 「1989：365中德藝術」書評  
Ellen Pearlman
- 
- 109 中英人名對照

封面：陽江組，松樹花園—如虎之猛，2009，裝置與行為  
藝術，攝影：Blaise Adion。陽江組，Youcast 及曼谷唐人  
畫廊提供

典藏國際版創刊於 2002年5月1日

社長：簡秀枝  
法律顧問：益思科技法律事務所 劉承慶  
創刊編輯：林蔭庭 (Ken Lum)

總策劃：鄭勝天  
主編：華睿思 (Keith Wallace)  
副編輯：顧珠妮 (Julie Grundvig)  
史楷迪 (Kate Steinmann)  
編輯助理：黎俊儀  
行政：藍立杉 (Larisa Broyde)  
廣告：雷幽雅 (Joulia Reynolds)  
網站編輯：黎俊儀 (Chunyee Li)

顧問：王嘉驥  
田濤宇 (Philip Tinari)  
安雅蘭 (Judy Andrews)  
巫鴻  
林似竹 (Britta Erickson)  
范迪安  
招穎思 (Melissa Chiu)  
洛柿田 (Sebastian Lopez)  
胡昉  
侯瀚如  
徐文玠 (Claire Hsu)  
姜苦樂 (John Clark)  
姚嘉善 (Pauline J. Yao)  
倪再沁  
高名潞  
費大為  
楊天娜 (Martina Köppel-Yang)  
盧杰  
Lynne Cooke  
Okwui Enwezor  
Katie Hill  
Charles Merewether  
Apinan Poshyananda

出版：典藏雜誌社  
副總經理：劉靜宜  
高世光  
行銷總監：林素珍  
發行專員：許銘文  
謝宜蓉  
社址：台灣臺北市中山北路一段85號6樓  
電話：(886) 2.2560.2220  
傳真：(886) 2.2542.0631  
電子信箱：coart@ms37.hinet.net

編輯部：Yishu Office  
200-1311 Howe Street,  
Vancouver, BC, V6Z 2P3, Canada  
電話：(1) 604.649.8187  
傳真：(1) 604.591.6392  
電子信箱：office@yishujournal.com

訂閱、投稿及廣告均請與編輯部聯系。

設計：Leap Creative Group, Vancouver  
創意總監：馬偉培  
藝術總監：周繼宏  
設計師：黃健斌  
印刷：臺北崎威彩藝有限公司

本刊在溫哥華編輯設計，臺北印刷出版發行。  
一年6期。逢1、3、5、7、9、11月出版。

網址：www.yishujournal.com  
管理：典藏雜誌社

國際刊號：1683-3082

售價每本12美元。  
訂閱：一年84美元，兩年158美元（含航空  
郵資）。亞洲地區一年78美元，兩年146美元  
（含航空郵資）。

訂閱單可從本刊網址下載。

版權所有，本刊內容非經本社同意不得翻譯和轉載。  
本刊登載內容並不代表編輯部與出版社立場。



## Contributors

### **Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh**

are a curatorial duo. Together with artists, curators, writers, and scholars, they engineer frameworks for artistic and discursive actions for organizations such as the Baltic Art Centre (Visby, Sweden), Index Foundation (Stockholm), Nordic Artists' Centre Dale (Dale, Norway), Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (Helsinki), Western Front (Vancouver) and YYZ Artists' Outlet (Toronto). They have written for *Art Lies*, *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Fillip*, *Konstperspektiv*, *Paletten*, and *Site Magazine*.

**David Elliott** is a curator, lecturer, publisher, editor, and writer focusing on non-Western modern and contemporary art from Russia, Japan, China, Latin America, and Africa. He studied history at the University of Durham and art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. He has served as Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1976–96), Director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1996–01), founding Director of the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2001–06), first Director of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art (2007), and Rudolf Arnheim Guest Professor of the History of Art, Humboldt University, Berlin (2008). He has written extensively on the role of modern art museums today and was President of the International Committee of ICOM for Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art from 1998 to 2004. Currently he is Artistic Director of the 17th Biennale of Sydney, which will take place in 2010, and is working on exhibitions of contemporary Japanese and East Mediterranean art.

**Clara Galeazzi** is a freelance art writer currently based in Milan and London. She studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, where she worked on the topic of contemporary Chinese art, documentary, and film.

**Paul Gladston** is Senior Lecturer in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies and Director of the Institute of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China. He studied fine art at Edinburgh College of Art and Yale University before receiving an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Critical Theory from the University of Nottingham.

His recent publications include *Art History After Deconstruction* (2005) and “Sublime Ruins—Monumental Follies: The Photo(historio)graphy of Erasmus Schroeter,” in *Post-Conflict Cultures: Rituals of Representation* (2006).

**Jonathan Goodman** studied literature at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania before becoming an art writer specializing in contemporary Chinese art. He teaches at Pratt Institute and the Parsons School of Design, focusing on art criticism and contemporary culture.

**Hongnam Kim** holds a B.A. in Aesthetics from Seoul National University and a Ph.D. in Chinese Art history from Yale University. She was Director-General of the National Museum of Korea, overseeing twelve national museums (2006–08). Kim began her professional career as a research fellow in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Asian Art Department (1980–81) and at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (1981–82). She was Curator of the Rockefeller Collection of Asian Art at the Asia Society, New York (1988–91). In 1991, she was appointed Professor in the Department of Art History at Ewha Womans University, Seoul, and from 1995 to 2001, she headed the Ewha Womans University Museum. Currently, she serves as Vice President and Trustee of the Korean Association of Museums. As Director of Historical Preservation at the National Trust (2002–04) and Trustee of the National Trust of Korea (currently), she has been committed to heritage preservation. She also serves on the board of the Executive Council of International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Council of Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Asia Society, New York. She was awarded Korea's Best Museum Professional in 2006 and received France's national medal Légion d'Honneur in 2008 for her contribution to French-Korean cultural exchange.

**Winston Kyan** was born in Rangoon, Burma, and raised in the United States. He received his B.A. in Comparative Literature from Brown University and his Ph.D. in Art History from the University of Chicago. He has lived for extended periods of time in France,

Taiwan, and Japan, and he regularly conducts research at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, China. Currently an assistant professor of art history at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, Kyan's research projects include the cultural reception of Buddhist art in medieval China and the historiography of contemporary Chinese art. His article "Family Space: Buddhist Materiality and Ancestral Fashioning in Mogao Cave 231" appears in the March/June 2010 issue of *Art Bulletin*.

**Paul Manfredi** is Associate Professor of Chinese and Chair of the Chinese Studies Program at Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington. His research concerns modern and contemporary poetry and visual art. He is the recipient of National Endowment for the Humanities, Chiang Ching-kuo, and other research grants as well as Freeman Foundation funding for academic and community programs relating to contemporary Chinese culture. His articles have appeared in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, and *Yishu*. His current research concerns intersections between contemporary poetry and visual art in China and Taiwan.

**Alexandra Munroe**, Ph.D., is Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Since joining the Guggenheim in 2006, where she heads the Asian art program for the Museum and its global affiliates, she has organized *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* (2009), which won the Best Thematic Exhibition in New York City by the International Art Critics Association (AICA), and co-organized *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe* (2008), which was among the best-attended exhibitions in the museum's history, and whose catalogue won the 2008 Wittenborn Prize for outstanding scholarship, design, and production. She publishes widely and lectures frequently on Asian art in Europe, North America, and East Asia. Her exhibition *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* was the first survey of postwar Japanese art ever presented in Japan or the U.S.. She serves as a trustee on the boards of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, the United States–Japan Foundation, and The Korea Society, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

**Ellen Pearlman** is a doctoral student at the University of Calgary, Canada. She lives among the art worlds of Beijing, New York, and Canada.

**Jack Persekian** is Artistic Director of the Sharjah Biennale and Founding Director of Anadiel Gallery and Al Ma'Mal Foundation for Contemporary Art, Jerusalem. Most recently, he curated *Dubai Next: Face of 21st Century Culture* at the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany, (ongoing) with co-curator Rem Koolhaas and Never-Part at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels. Other exhibitions include *The Jerusalem Show*, Jerusalem (2007), *Reconsidering Palestinian Art*, Cuenca, Spain (2006), and *DisORIENTATION—Contemporary Arab Artists from the Middle East*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2003). Additional productions and directing include *The Palestinian Cultural Evening* at the World Economic Forum in the Dead Sea, Jordan (2004), the Geneva Initiative, Public Commitment Event, Switzerland (2003), and the Millennium Celebrations in Bethlehem—Bethlehem 2000 (2000). Persekian also organizes The March Meeting, an annual meeting in Sharjah for arts/cultural institutions operating in the Arab world. Mr. Persekian is a member of the 2009 British Pavilion Advisory Committee for the Venice Biennale and the Chair of the Jury Committee for the Abraaj Prize, Dubai.

**Keith Wallace** has been a curator of contemporary art since 1979. From 1991 to 2001 he was Curator, then Director/Curator, of the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, where he developed a program of regional, national, and international exhibitions. He is currently an independent curator and has organized exhibitions for the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; The Power Plant, Toronto; Centre A, Vancouver; and the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. In 2004 he organized *InFest: International Artist Run Culture*, which brought together two hundred and fifty artists and administrators from twenty-five countries. Since 2004, Wallace has been Editor of *Yishu*.

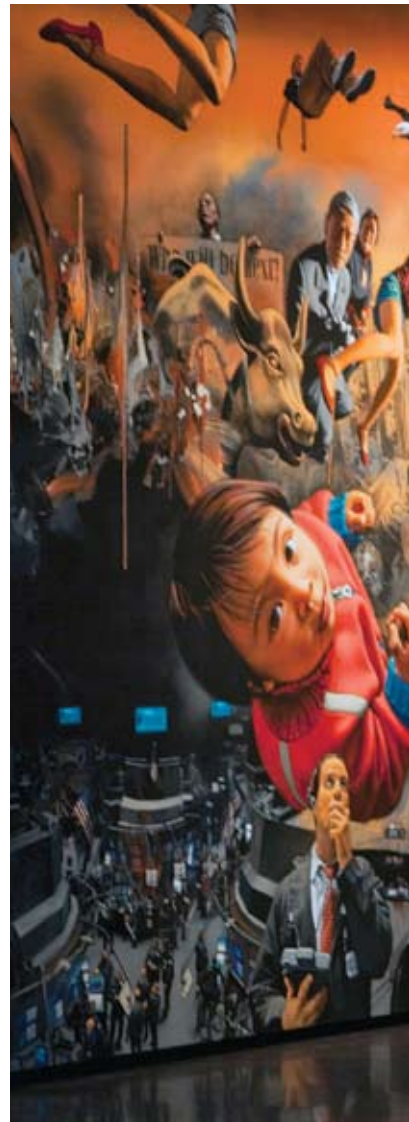


## Zhong Biao's Abstract Panorama

Zhong Biao is a Sichuan artist, albeit one who is skeptical of what he calls “geographical psychology.”<sup>1</sup> He is also a global artist, with solo exhibitions in galleries from Jakarta to San Francisco. But Zhong Biao, ultimately, is a Chinese artist, by which I mean one who bears a particular kind of witness to China’s current transformation, the kind that allows him license—and affords him necessary tools—to represent that transformation in his art. In order to do so, he adopts an expansive approach to his images, where entire cities or even world scenes are brought into view. The apotheosis of this approach is surely Zhong’s most recent work, *Mirage*, an eighteen-hundred-centimetre-wide canvas upon which appears a full view of the contemporary state of affairs, from specific reference to the 2008 stock market crash to more generalized militarism, terrorism, and turmoil. *Mirage* is more than mere “painting,” as a large segment of the canvas is devoted to projected, moving image which is itself intermittently enshrouded in mist mechanically produced. The scene is also aural, as a soundtrack of muffled sounds can be discerned, though set at a volume low enough to fade in and out of the ambient noise of spectators. Despite these media-based departures from Zhong Biao’s long-standing acrylic (and sometimes charcoal) on canvas products, the panoramic dimension of the work is still very much in effect and is still largely visual, as the vast quality of the image is most clearly reinforced by mirrors that frame one side of the canvas, thereby further extending the painting’s already considerable, indeed seemingly all-encompassing, “embrace” of a troubled world scene.

Yet also in Zhong’s recent work there has emerged a new element, abstraction, which suggests the possibility of a different kind of landscape. This direction, presented in the non-representational lines that began swirling around his canvases late in 2008 and became more prominent in 2009, suggests a fundamentally new orientation, one that engages for the first time the possibility of a visual exploration of the artist’s (or some sort of collective) unconscious. The trend stands in contrast to Zhong’s style otherwise, one that focuses, if this is possible, on panoramic vistas that are directed outward to often spectacular effect. The subject of this essay will be how Zhong balances the new visual exploration of his own psyche with his ongoing panoramic method.

Panoramic expressions like the one we see (and hear) in *Mirage*, though new in terms of the multimedia dimension, are long-standing in Zhong’s work. They should be understood, moreover, as panoramic in not only spatial/visual terms, but also conceptual and temporal ones: Zhong Biao,

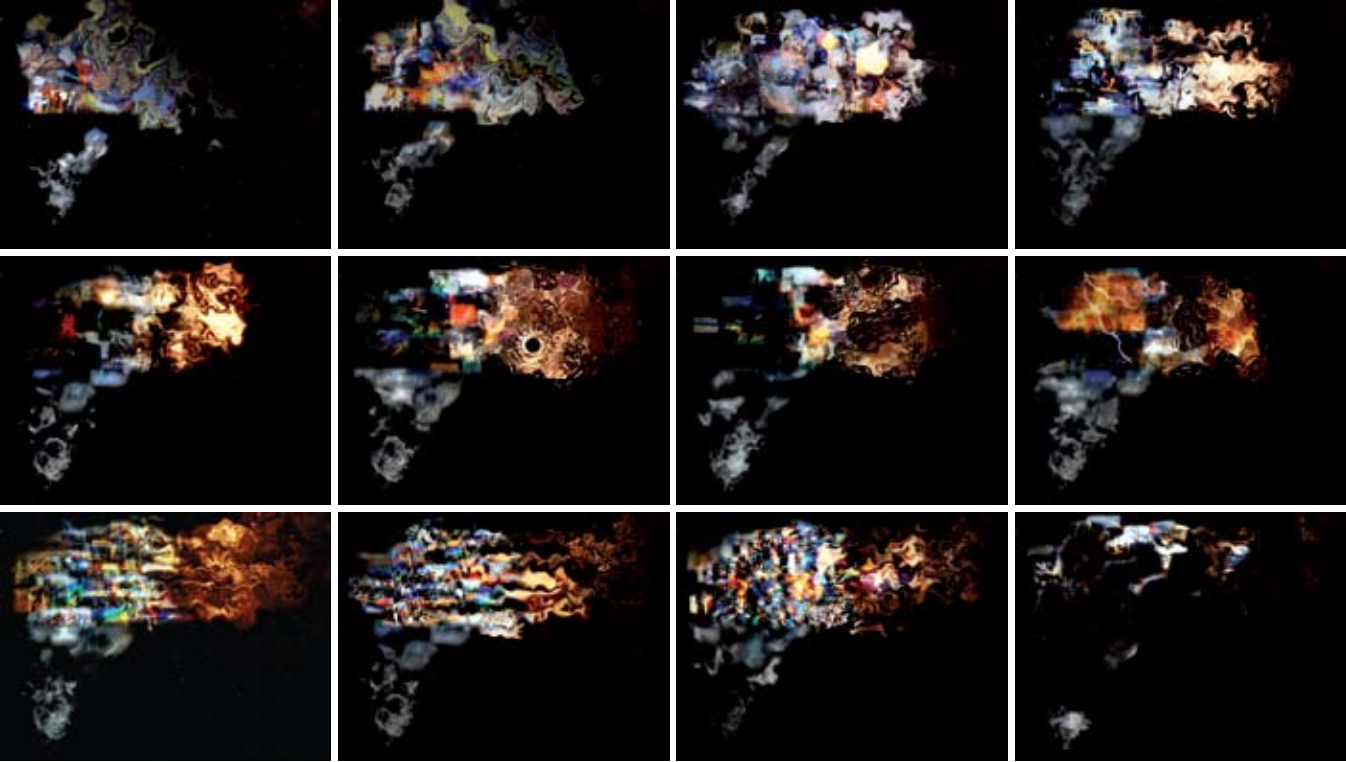


Top: Zhong Biao, *Mirage*, 2009, installation view at Denver Art Museum. Photo: Jeff Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Denver Art Museum.

Bottom: Zhong Biao, *Mirage* (detail), 2009, acrylic on canvas, video with sound, 5 mins., 4 x 18 m, 2009. Photo: Jeff Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Denver Art Museum.







by including historical fragments, is suggesting wide-angle encapsulations of different eras, even those that have not yet occurred. The view one is afforded in the painting is therefore from *above* in a profound sense; the “bird’s eye” view of the phenomenal world functions as recurring vantage point and as an over-arching metaphor for his work in general. Methodologically speaking, the vistas are a product of images selected from Zhong’s collection of digital photographs, images that are projected onto the canvas and then rendered by hand in, most commonly, acrylic paint and charcoal. The method is resonant with meaning, since the digital photograph is itself an often casual snapshot of some current state of affairs, an instant reality that is typically dynamic (figures in rapid motion) and intimate.<sup>2</sup>

Zhong Biao, *Mirage* (details), 2009, video with sound, 5 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Denver Art Museum.

Through this process, the people represented in Zhong’s paintings are typically caught in emotionally revealing or sometimes suggestive postures, gestures, or facial expressions that speak about their psychological condition. His art more generally involves an ability to take the raw material of these stand-alone figures, rooted firmly in the time and space of their capture, and draw them out into landscapes that encapsulate contemporary China in at once broad and at the same time uncompromisingly detailed form. Looking at a Zhong Biao canvas, the audience can see, in essence, what is *going on*. And seeing what is going on in China is, at the risk of hyperbole, one of the principal global media endeavours of the twenty-first century. At the very least, China is currently a major spectacle of world news, and a contemporary world picture will contain if not feature, for instance, a solitary man standing in front of a tank. The Chinese artist, in contrast to the Associated Press photographer, is more authentic, one with the experience—usually negative—to “back up” the picture. Nonetheless, both the artist and the photojournalist or other documentarians speak in a global language of “Chinasight,” a worlded spectrum of spaces (Great Wall, Forbidden City, quaint temples), as well as objects (construction cranes, scaffolding), to a myriad of victims of environmental degradation that collectively signify contemporary China.<sup>3</sup> An artist like Zhong Biao is

a major figure not because he responds to these “realities,” but because he composes this reality, supplying his part of the essential visual vocabulary for the articulation of the contemporary Chinese experience itself.

In interviews and short essays that he has composed for exhibition openings and the like, though, we learn that panoramic representation of contemporary China is not the goal of Zhong Biao’s work. His goal in fact is more ambitious still, namely, to discover and depict the underlying order of all things.<sup>4</sup> Zhong Biao elaborates on this goal in a November 2009 interview by using the Chinese word *xingtai*, typically rendered as “state of things.”<sup>5</sup> His explication of the term involves breaking apart its two components, the *xing*, which is the form that is visible to the eye in the phenomenal world, and the *tai*, which, in his description, is a kind of force that manifests itself in the *xing* but that is ultimately invisible and also constantly transforming. The focus is upon the “unknowable” cause or force that, once accorded with, makes the creative process a kind of natural and, as he points out in the interview, “effortless” extension of the flow of events/trends domestically and internationally. This extension is the work of the artist, both to put the *tai* into a form that can be seen at any given point in time, but also to keep one’s attention on the changes that are an inevitable feature of *tai* and to prepare oneself for subsequent transitions.

The *xingtai* dualism is characteristic of Chinese philosophy, most famously in the mutually informing and transforming *yin* and *yang* and all that flows from them in the phenomenal world. It would be a mistake to look at Zhong’s intellectual orientation as strictly Chinese, however, as he is drawing equally from Western aesthetic theory, particularly modernist. In a 1998 essay, Zhong recounts his reading experiences during the heady days of the mid 1980s, when he and other young artists and intellectuals were busily consuming entire cultural traditions from the West. Particularly in the year 1985, Zhong’s major influence was Hermann Hesse, specifically the novels *Steppenwolf* (*Der Steppenwolf*, 1927) and, more importantly, *The Glass Bead Game* (*Das Glasperlenspiel*, 1943). The prominent intellectual binaries of Hesse’s work, for example, reason and emotion, nature and civilization, restraint and abandon, etc., had a profound effect on Zhong’s development intellectually.<sup>6</sup> Zhong’s various intellectual influences, drawn from a wide array of sources, are all brought to bear both on the project of art itself—to bring about the revelation of the order that underlies myriad manifestations of material experience—and for the particular method of art that he adopts, that being a tapestry of individual, acutely real images cast in panoramic display of larger, artistically conjured “realities.”

Conspicuously absent from this rundown of conceptual dualisms is one other major force in modern art (among other human endeavours): Freud’s notion of the conscious and unconscious mind. Were it not for Zhong Biao’s recent move towards an abstract expressionist method, this omission would be entirely appropriate, as there is very little in Zhong Biao’s work to suggest the importance of a dream life or other unconscious processes (that is, repressed material) to his painting. The move toward abstraction and a non-representational method is thus either a major shift in Zhong Biao’s aesthetic interests or a major new synthesis of previously incommensurate



intellectual and visual devices. To put the matter a bit more crudely, the shift is also notable on two quite interconnected levels: one, Zhong Biao's status as a basically *Chinese* artist bearing witness to changes in Chinese experience is erased when representation becomes unidentifiable and, two, in the absence of China, the meaningfulness of the art endeavour—and financial gain from its commoditization in world markets both literal and non—evaporates. What is at stake when Zhong ceases to re-present is considerable and perhaps even materially quantifiable. And regardless of economic implications, how can a Chinese artist bear witness (through panoramic method) to China's changes if the record of that witness is too personal to be read as "Chinese"?

Zhong Bao, *Scarlet and Black*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 280 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



To address these questions, we need to look more carefully at Zhong's abstract method. To begin with, it must be noted that abstraction was frequently hinted at in Zhong's earlier work, with peripheral or marginal elements of canvases receding from representation into something, for lack of a better word, else. We see instances of this abstraction appearing as patches of clouds, sketchy details of clothing, or an obscure alley presumably too insignificant to render in Zhong's otherwise highly precise, even hyperrealist fashion. It is not until 2008, though, that a clear and rather sudden unraveling of visual sign function begins to take shape, and in 2009 a preponderance of non-representational imagery appears in his work. A characteristic example is *Scarlet and Black* (2009). Zhong's abstract images in many respects read like his other work, where isolated images operate metaphorically but where layers of such metaphorical maneuvers provide polyphonic statements that defy paraphrase or summary. *Scarlet and Black*, for instance, can be seen in almost still-life fashion as a flower in full bloom. The blooming flower, in turn, is easily connected to the traditional metaphor of schools of thought ("hundred flowers bloom"), with the school children in such a reading appearing as seeds of future development. Also, in such a reading, the young scarlet woman in a stamen-like position becomes the essence of the flower itself, and the flower's stalk jutting up a fulcrum for the rapid (blooming) development of material China recapitulated in the building at the back of the image. The painting, in short, reads well, with a sound symbolic architecture and clean linearity typical of Zhong's work. At the same time, the flower reading is aptly undercut by the wide-spread physical and spiritual demolition that accompanies in lock-step the building of contemporary China, perhaps one of Zhong's most eloquent themes. In this related idea the bloom of the flower is also an explosion, which it equally resembles.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of the abstract manoeuvre extends beyond either a flower or an explosion, though, even if such a reading fits well within Zhong's symbolic approach. Returning to Zhong's pursuit of an underlying or internal order mentioned above, we should see such a goal taking shape in the context of China's political history, with the Cultural Revolution, Maoism, and shift to market capitalism of the past three decades as prominent components of Zhong's meaning structure. Zhong's 1997 "autobiographical statement" (one of many) makes the historical-political orientation of his ideas particularly clear.<sup>8</sup> In that text, Zhong reviews the major events in his life, including marriage, divorce, schooling at the Central Academy in Hangzhou, and others leading to his first major one-person exhibition in Hong Kong in 1997. In this personal historical review, while Zhong manages to travel widely and easily from the quotidian of contemporary China to the summits of world power, the epistemological frame that holds the fragments together is assuredly contemporary Chinese history, a hierarchy of sense that renders world events readable, even weighable, in terms of China's specific gravity on a world stage. The act of selecting these events and pegging his development to them is akin to the act of acquiring "origin" images and placing them in paintings. In this respect, Zhong's ideas and his method of arranging digital photographs as sources in his paintings line up in a kind of historical-political arena, a world picture of his composing.

It should also be noted, however, that Zhong's demiurgic hand is one he would rather we not notice. In the above-mentioned interview, for instance, Zhong attempts to minimize his role in the specific deployment of images. He acknowledges that "at one time" he did in fact arrange and select individual images in order to achieve interesting contradictions, but in later work, he explains, the images themselves are no longer specifically relevant—there are no meaningful contradictions, notable paradoxes. The goal instead becomes to effortlessly allow the images to circulate through his work, even to emerge of their own accord from the canvases themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The minimization of Zhong's poesis in the process of his painting is one we could appreciate, particularly in light of Zhong's own claim to abide by principles of extracting *xing* from *tai*. Part of the goal of being so connected to the "flow of things," to return to Daoist-tinged metaphors, is that action in accordance with such forces requires relatively little effort on the part of the agent. A "tuned in" practitioner taps into an ever-emergent supply of, in this case, visual material and then, in a sense, gets out of its way. Whether this has been true with Zhong's work up until 2008 could be a matter of argument. What is clear is that a new abstract method makes such observations moot; these images appear from the matter of their texture to their specific location on the canvas, courtesy of the industry of the artist's hand. As such, the panoramic view of the world "at large" transitions, possibly, into an internally focused landscape, in which blooms or explosions of unconscious material are brought into the light of day. The fact that the new vista afforded in Zhong's recent work is suggested by the number of titles that have to do with psychological processes, particularly memory. A characteristic example is *Burning Memory* (2009).

The connection between the figure in this painting and what appears around her, then, constitutes the new step in Zhong's artistic process, where a precisely rendered female figure is surrounded by swaths of colour amounting, we presume from the title, to a mixture of unconscious and conscious material swirling about in her mind. Zhong's approach to the representation of the inner mind is to almost attack the canvas, with ample amounts of acrylic paint spilling out in all directions. The result is considerable bleeding of colours as well as the generation of a wide variety of textures, from the highly dense to the almost transparent. This again conjures the explosive quality, but now the explosions are redirected: it is the supine woman's own mind that combusts within her. Amidst this tangle of brushstrokes there also emerges in the clear grey at the upper left region of the canvas bare legs drawn with charcoal, and perhaps the torso of another figure started but not finished. While Zhong's canvases very often contain such sketches, they previously have been surrounded by two things—other more fully articulated human figures and/or the built environment. In this case, the addition of non-representational material to the equation changes matters entirely.

Another example, almost a corollary to *Burning Memory*, is *Overwhelming Bravery* (2009). Like *Burning Memory*, *Overwhelming Bravery* is a two-part composition: a solitary figure in a heightened psychological state is





Zhong Bao, *Burning Memory*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 280 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

surrounded by multiple swirls of non-representational markings. Working from the title, which in Chinese means literally “mist engulfing mountains and rivers,” (*qi tun shan he*) we can see something that seems like a landscape embraced by the figure. As a landscape, one could conceivably perceive the primary horizontal elements of the canvas as mountains that are bisected vertically by a lake, and perhaps even a river. A solitary black stroke intersected by paint drips and charcoal lines reveals the painter’s speed and randomness in the act of creation, and the figure falls into suggested but, again, undefined forms. This descent relates ironically to the four-character compound of the title, as this phrase is often used to describe an attitude of monumental bravery in the face of some daunting task.



Zhong Bao, *Overwhelming Bravery*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 280 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

What emerges with regard to the figures, though, is in many respects a conflict. Though Abstract Expressionism as an artistic movement is no doubt varied in terms of style, one clear attribute is the relative absence of the human figure. In observing the paintings just mentioned, we can see among other things the way the *view* of the human body entails a certain solidity of perspective—the shadows of the young woman’s boots as they travel up her legs and onto her lower back, her highlighted hair shining in the glimmer of light that unaccountably plays across her body, or the young man, illuminated from above as he plummets into a darkened region of the image below. The angles of view suggested by the human body amount as well to the viewer’s implied occupation of space, and both the human figure depicted and the suggested perspective from which one views it contend with the more open perspectival possibilities of the non-figurative elements, effectively limiting the impact of the painting by fixing the image within a specific point of view. In this respect, Zhong’s experiment with abstraction seems out of synch with his work as a whole.

*Overwhelming Bravery*, though, is also highly characteristic of Zhong’s painting iconographically, especially of his tendency to represent the human figure suspended in space. The theme of levitation pervades Zhong’s work, providing a kind of overarching metaphor for life and for art.<sup>10</sup> It also provides a convenient entry into analysis of the images in a more strictly

psychoanalytical fashion. Freud's analysis of flying in a dream state is legendary, first in association with male sexuality, and then with a surrender to erotic impulse.<sup>11</sup> We need not accept Freud's specific analysis, however, to observe the fact that Zhong is consistently concerned with the phenomenon of gravity-defying manoeuvres of all kinds. These appear in his paintings as winged flight, leaps, dives, and a variety of falls. Of the forty-two paintings the artist produced in 2008, thirty-one of them contain images of flying, whether human or otherwise, and of the twenty-five images from 2009, sixteen contain depictions of flight.<sup>12</sup> The overarching metaphor in such a case, and in characteristic Zhong Biao fashion, may be China's "Great Leap" from a communist to capitalist system, which in the case of many of his images, would explain the combination of elation and trepidation that his figures seem to exhibit once "launched" into the air. Regardless of any political overtones, though, when looking at the preponderance of flying images in Zhong's paintings, we are given further insight into the psychological dimension that is present in his painting.

This insight relates more broadly to his working method prior to the abstraction of his most recent painting. One of the major achievements of Zhong's work is his approach to juxtaposition. The collage-like assembling of disparate images is a common enough artistic strategy, but in Zhong's work, it takes on central importance in that bringing his panoramic cosmos together depends on his ability to draw from as far afield as possible, and yet provide the sense that the disparate elements belong to a single, fundamentally ordered universe. With such an accomplishment in mind, we may now reconsider the notion that Zhong's abstract work is a departure from before, at least in certain psychological processes. The underlying order that is of such interest to him, in other words, may not necessarily be external to the artist, but in fact might be unconscious material that has been repressed or displaced yet still remains connected in his psyche. Freud's word for the engagement with such material is "uncanny": psychic matter that is not on the surface recognizable, but when analyzed in the context of the subject's history becomes powerfully connected to decisive developmental stages.


A related Freudian concept at work in this process would be "repetition compulsion," a circumstance where the recurrence of various images stem from the subject's repressed memories of traumatic experience.<sup>13</sup> This seems an apt way to describe what Zhong Biao does with the digital images that over time re-emerge in his paintings. Indeed, even the act of painting these images from photographs he has taken himself or otherwise acquired is itself a kind of unconscious process, a way of taming and controlling unruly anxieties, of re-making desire and other unconscious forces into something orderly. The discovery of order in the outer world that, as mentioned earlier, Zhong names as a goal for his art could well be instead the imposition of the order of the conscious mind onto an unruly mass of "disorganized" unconscious material. The images of 2009 indeed seem to suggest a move in this direction.

For instance, in *Climax* (2009), the mind, unconscious or not, is figured almost explicitly, encapsulated as a square skull at the top of the painting,









the interior of which almost looks like brain matter. Other psychological or bodily correspondences flow dynamically throughout the canvas, with copious amounts of what appear to be bodily fluids (menstrual or—with the title in mind—seminal fluid) emanating from a shape-shifted female with something approaching a fish tail across her torso. Her warped body is both reminiscent of the image one sees of oneself in a funhouse mirror and a reference to Surrealist painting. In front of her is the figure of a falling or flying young man and his double, a reminder of Zhong's persistent theme of bodies moving through space.

The frame depicted within the frame of the painting is of central significance. Though the frame is not a new device (Zhong has been using frames within his paintings for years), it appears here with a completely abstract image depicted therein. The metaphorical value of the frame, then, is greatly accentuated. More than a comment on the art-making process generally, it emerges here as a depiction of the act of finding order, specifically, one that remains as elastic and incomplete as the black line that extends through the barrier of what is figured and what figures itself. Here we are seeing Zhong's engagement with the notion of *xingtai*, but he is approaching it in a completely new way. As *xingtai* is both of the external and internal world, the relationship between the two can become malleable. In fact, we can imagine a situation where the artist, through something approaching a miracle, dials back the artistic process itself, capturing less of the *xing* (that which we see) and more of the *tai* (that which both precedes and determines what we see) in his work.

What is more, the universalist quality of the claim that *xingtai* is not of Zhong Biao, or even of Chinese origin, but in fact is derived from human experience, is by far the most ambitious notion suggested by Zhong Biao's frame, as the artist in effect places himself in a position to capture fugitive *tai* for all people, not just himself or his compatriots. The transferability of the particularly emotional impact of his canvases, on a Freudian level, suggests a collective cultural anxiety that must reach global proportions in order to be effective. If Zhong's work truly resonates, it does so because of the universally uncanny quality of the fragments he brings to the fore, a globalized "repetition compulsion" which is both centred in China and always cast ever more broadly.

Again, the development of Zhong's abstract method shifts his aesthetic program to a new plane, one wherein the *recognizable* is increasingly sacrificed for the *possible*. The only canvas to commit entirely to this method, and one which also prominently features a frame, carries the appropriately ambitious title *Unrepresentable Possibility* (2009). In looking at such an image we may try to establish material connections: what look like bridges at the right and left of the canvas, for instance, suggest an urban scene, conjuring once again China's economic and material development. Such an effort, though, cuts against the grain of the work, which, strictly speaking, contains no "Chinasight," or even a contemporary world as its context. What is left out is Zhong's characteristic panoramic composition, an omission so extraordinary that one is inclined to do some accounting of what was lost in the process: gone are the automobiles, movie stars,



helicopters, world leaders, historical movements, and spectacular human figures. With these, the sense of the uncanny departs, the feeling that somehow the various image fragments of Zhong's paintings—the Temple of Heaven, Che Guevara, Monica Lewinsky, and Alfred Hitchcock—once together cumulatively suggest some internal order, whether that order be more present in the external world, or in the underlying anxieties in the artist's or even the viewer's mind. Gone, finally, and by far most conspicuously, is Zhong Biao's own name—there is no longer an artist's signature on the painting.

Previous Page: Zhong Bao, *Climax*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



On the positive side, the image is clearly a kind of liberation, the limitations presented by the human figure, or any other physical object, now no longer restrain the viewer's imagination. Here the canvas opens itself and the viewer entirely to *tai*, to the image that would be presentable to the human eye were it not in constant flux. It stands, in other words, as a momentary glimpse of the state of affairs prior to the moment when that state was manifest. Such a glimpse seems to afford something quite positive, a state of pure energy, explosiveness, and light. The torrents of colours, shapes, and forms affirm something fundamental, something with which the viewer can easily identify. Identification proceeds, of course, in psychological terms—the image is the very churning of unconscious drives themselves, prior to their condensation into image, dream, or thought. We must not lose sight of the frame, for the other part of the equation that Zhong rehearses in multiple contexts orally and in print is the fact that the underlying order is changeable, and that his relationship to it, as an artist, is precisely what is figured in *Unrepresentable Possibility*, a moving canvas hoping to capture the form of the essence precisely when the essence and the form are transforming.

Zhong Bao, *Unrepresentable Possibility*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 215 x 330 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Having arrived at this method, the question that emerges from such an image is: what is next for Zhong? Does the methodological pivot suggest movement further into the depths of his and the viewer's unconscious matter, or to ever more detailed panoramic representations of the Chinese "reality"? As an answer, we can take such an image as a statement—actually a reaffirmation—of Zhong's artistic intent all along—the search for an internal order. The abstract panorama that emerges is a characteristically effortless transgression of a boundary that seemed previously quite sound. As with so many other binaries simultaneously suggested and dismantled in the artist's work (East/West, contemporary/ancient, affluent/destitute, building/destroying, and the list goes on), the abstract/real dichotomy seems oddly less secure with each completed canvas.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The notion of "worlding," which concerns the circulation of third-world culture in the developed-world context, is developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in, among other places, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 896–912.
- <sup>2</sup> Zhong Biao's paintings feature human figures. The majority of these images—referred to as "origins" (*tu yuan*) in *Beyond Painting (chu shen ru hua)*—are derived from images he has taken himself (or commissioned people to take). I can attest to having seen Zhong Biao taking photographs in this casual manner and to noticing some of the resulting images appearing subsequently in numerous paintings.
- <sup>3</sup> This observation was made during an interview Zhong gave on November 5, 2009. The interview, which can be found on 99 Artnet (*99 yishu wang*) ([http://news.99ys.com/20091105/article-091105--32022\\_1.shtml](http://news.99ys.com/20091105/article-091105--32022_1.shtml)), is entitled "Discussing the Origin of Mirage: An Interview with Zhong Biao."
- <sup>4</sup> This idea occurs most repeatedly in Zhong's work. Most recently, it is on the inside cover of the booklet produced in association with his 2009 exhibition *The Tendency of Events (da shi)* at the Yuz Art Museum, Jakarta: "Zhong Biao's artwork searches for the omnipresent order behind life in all its colorful splendour." Similarly, in the catalogue for the 2004 exhibition *Ubiquity (wu chu bu zai)* at the Art Scene Warehouse, Shanghai, there appears an interview with Zhong Biao conducted by Gao Minglu and entitled "Looking for Order" (Shanghai: Art Scene China, n.d.), 5–8.
- <sup>5</sup> The interview took place on November 5, 2009. It is broadcast on the 99 Artnet.com under the title: "Discussing the Origin of Mirage: An Interview with Zhong Biao."
- <sup>6</sup> At root of this stream of polarities, for Zhong Biao and for Hesse, would be the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, in whose 1872 *Birth of Tragedy (Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik)* the dichotomous scheme of Apollonian and Dionysian impulses in society was elaborated, and in whose work more generally the death of God leads to the broader, aesthetically foundational observation that "only in the conscious dream [art] are human existence and the world eternally justified." This, according to Michael Bell, is one of the core ideas underlying the modernist movement. See Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.
- <sup>7</sup> Zhong's abstractions of 2008–09 typically resemble explosions and therefore resonate with, even if they do not actually quote, the work of Cai Guoqiang.
- <sup>8</sup> This is one of many such statements. Zhong often publishes these in conjunction with exhibitions. In this case, the text was shared electronically with the author in May 2005.
- <sup>9</sup> Zhong Biao, in Qiu Zhijie's estimation, is more a "collector of images," and individual paintings function as "valves," allowing fluid images of memory to flow through. Qiu's observations appear in an essay he wrote entitled "Visual Archaeology," (*shi jiao kao gu xue*), which appeared in conjunction with the *Beyond Painting* exhibition (Cheng Xindong Gallery). It appeared on August 30, 2005, on the ARTMAZ (*mai zi dang dai*) Web site ([http://www.artmaz.com/product/newsdetail.asp?news\\_id=2898](http://www.artmaz.com/product/newsdetail.asp?news_id=2898)).
- <sup>10</sup> Also worth mentioning is that Zhong cites the word "high" (*gao*) as his first identifiable word. The event is described in his "Autobiography, 1997" (February 1997, Chongqing), a text shared electronically with the author in May 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 315. Though I do believe this interpretation somewhat confining, Zhong's image *Unsteady Foothold (li zu wei wen)*, 215 x 330 cm, acrylic and charcoal on canvas) seems as close an imagistic representation of this developmental process as one could imagine.
- <sup>12</sup> These figures are derived from Zhong's collection of paintings on the Internet, [http://photo.163.com/photo/zhong\\_biaospace/#m=0&p=1&n=14](http://photo.163.com/photo/zhong_biaospace/#m=0&p=1&n=14). In Zhong's work as a whole, the other prominent flying objects are birds, especially eagles, and helicopters. It is notable that helicopters are far more common than jet airplanes, perhaps owing to the manner of ascent—namely, straight up.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 167. The editors provide valuable notes on Freudian terminology, beginning with the "uncanny" itself—*unheimlich*, meaning, actually, "unhomely." As "uncanny" has become a common word in the English language, however, as well as a common translation for *unheimlich*, it is the one I use it here.

## Shen Chen: In Thrall to No One

One of the most long-lasting, pernicious effects of Western culture's response to contemporary Asian painting is its tendency to see the work of Chinese and other artists as inherently indebted to the West. If there is a drip or spatter anywhere in an Asian painting, suddenly the ghost of Jackson Pollock appears, for he is the god of the drip. This is not so facetious a statement as it might seem at first—as an ongoing New York critic of Chinese art, and as someone who has given many critiques in college classes, I have found myself, despite my best intentions, subjecting foreign-born painters to interpretations that convey a bias toward the West. But what if such a reading were not true—what if Chinese painters actually were influenced more by their training in ink-and-paper painting and calligraphy than by twentieth-century American art? It is more than a bit imperial to read Chinese culture in light of foreign influence, especially when the tradition of Chinese painting is not only great (and itself imperial) but also has worked out, sometimes hundreds of years ago, a language that seems to anticipate the inflections of Abstract Expressionism without being beholden to it.

Of course, there are also instances when the reverse is true—we have only to think of Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline, who seems to have been taken with Chinese calligraphy even though he denied its effect on his art. Most likely, the problem lies with the *perception* of the influence rather than the influence itself. We may be looking at visual effects that resonate with both the artist's own culture and that of his current place of work; it makes sense, especially in New York, where so many artists come from other countries, that hybridity may best describe the current situation of most contemporary art. Of course, too, in a global culture, information travels easily all over the world, so that faraway places have access to images from major cities for art. (We remember that the noted Chinese artist Xu Bing wrote his master's thesis on serial repetition in Andy Warhol's art more than a generation ago; when I asked him how he got his materials, he replied that the Western art magazines were available at his school.) In fact, the term "hybridity" may already be shopworn by now—in shows of young artists these days, it has become increasingly difficult to know their nationality, especially when it appears to have no visible influence on their art.

That means most of the art world is pushing in the direction of an international style that is not indebted to any particular culture. Circumstances may, or may not, offer specific insights—sculptor Ming Fay, who has been in New York for more than twenty-five years, makes art that relates to his birth and upbringing in Shanghai, even though he sees



himself as a New York artist. There is no inherent contradiction in a double allegiance, especially when it reflects the lived experience of someone. What counts, finally, is the effectiveness of Ming Fay's or indeed any artist's work in question. Cultural bias has become something artists *consciously* decide upon. At this point in time, current awareness of differing influences is so high that we cannot say that a particular style is innocently assimilated—even when the artist claims that his bias is unconscious.



Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 10025-09*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 137.1 x 116.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Will we soon be hard pressed to say whether an artwork is Asian or Western? My own feeling is that these categories will continue to have force in differentiating works of art. But many of the smaller differences look as if they are going to fall away from artistic discussion. In the last twenty years, Chinese artists have reinvigorated Western art methods by infusing them with Chinese content. As a result, one can confidently say the work is Chinese, even if that work owes its form to another culture—for example, the performance art of Zhang Huan, whose processes go back to New York art of the 1960s and 70s, performance and conceptual art in particular.

In the case of someone like Zhang Huan, it is relatively easy to see how Western influence has modified Asian content. But in painting, we note that the traditions—indeed, the very materials—are so different that it proves hard to argue that Asian and Western painting can be merged. Even so, there are Chinese artists who have undertaken the arduous journey of working abstractly, both in Asia and in the West. New York-based artist Shen Chen is one of them. Now in mid-career, Shen has lived in New York for more than twenty years. He makes paintings that are subtle, often monochromatic. It would be easy to place him within the New York School, an affiliation the artist himself would not deny given his long stay in America. But is that the most accurate way of describing his aesthetic interests? Wouldn't it be better to place his art within the current experience of multiple cultural associations? If we look at the first part of his development, we see that Shen early on was interested in making art. He began painting while still a young child. In junior high school, during the Cultural Revolution, Shen helped his teacher paint big billboards and make slogans. In high school, he led an art group and regularly won first prize in the yearly exhibitions of student artwork. In 1973 he avoided being sent into a manufacturing job; instead, he enrolled in the Shanghai Art College, where he received some technical training. Although he worked very hard at his painting, inside and outside the academy, his focus on art was seen as politically suspect during the Cultural Revolution, a time when artistic expression was generally distrusted as being bourgeois.



Once the universities reopened after having been shut down for more than a decade during the Cultural Revolution, Shen returned to art school. He moved to the Shanghai Academy of Theater in 1978. There he found the time to curate and participate in a show, entitled *Wild Rose*, held in the school's auditorium; Shen describes it as one of the earliest experimental art shows in Shanghai. His work was also shown at the Shanghai Museum of Art. In 1981, Shen organized

Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 10221-09, 2009*, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 116.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

the show *New Painting* at the Ningbo Museum of Art. A year later, he received his B.F.A. and moved to Beijing, where he had solo shows in several different venues. Participating as well in many group shows, Shen became one of the most active and highly regarded “underground” contemporary artists in China during the 1980s.

As Shen's practice developed, the yearning to go abroad grew stronger and stronger, and, as he says, “One of my desires as an active young artist was to study and explore Western art in person,”<sup>1</sup> Ultimately he decided that leaving China was a necessity. In 1988, Shen received a fellowship from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, additionally receiving an exchange student scholarship from the New York Studio School. After studying there, Shen went to graduate school at Boston University, receiving his M.F.A. in 1991. Following his stay in Boston, he decided to move to New York, where he continues to work (in Queens)

Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 30191-09*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 167.6 x 121.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



to this day. When Shen went to Skowhegan in Maine, he was thirty-three years old, and he did not look back. Once in New York, he exhibited his ink paintings in a show called Beijing-New York Exchange, an exhibition of contemporary Chinese and American art held at Snug Harbor in Staten Island and at Nielsen Gallery in Boston. Under the advice of noted American painter John Walker, Shen began to work on paper and canvas with mixed media at the New York Studio School. Shen comments, “I was fascinated in learning new materials and exploring new methods in order to develop my ideas and direction.”

Shen’s long stay in America has had the effect of complicating his understanding of himself. As the artist comments:

Biologically, I am a Chinese person; however, I might not be a one hundred percent Chinese any more. The affiliations of my identity also are reflected in my paintings. Asked by an American friend where I stood, I told him that my works reflect mixed cultures—both classical Chinese painting (literati painting in particular) and Western art. At the same time, I’d say that my painting is very different from the so-called “Chinese” painting promoted by many today. It is also different from the Western painting we are familiar with.



It is complicated, and at times nearly comical, to contemplate Shen's identity as an artist—primarily because his independence can encourage absurd readings of his art. Easily misread by critics eager to categorize his work, Shen nonchalantly refuses to affiliate with a particular culture or past. Indeed, as Shen points out, most of the time he doesn't think it is necessary to identify himself:

I am more concerned that I am an artist in general. I may be Chinese by birth, but I did not choose my background. I am more interested in self-expression. Once when a friend of mine gave students two images, one by myself, one by Brice Marden. They thought my work was Western, and that Marden's was Chinese. This is a good example of misreading cultural identity; remember that I do not intend to deny my identity.




While Shen openly acknowledges his influences, he also realizes that he lost some part of himself. Yet he views the situation positively; he sees his lost identity as a step that enabled him to gain creative freedom. Like more than a few New York artists, he sees his situation as global: “I have always believed that genuinely contemporary or avant-garde art must be international in nature and transcend any culture.”

Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 20119-09, 2009*, acrylic on canvas, 172.7 x 121.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Abstraction has turned out to be Shen's predominant style. He began working with abstraction in 1982, at the age of twenty-six, when he had just graduated from the Shanghai Academy of Theater. He acknowledges that most of the works he produced in China are ink paintings; however, unlike other Chinese artists of that time, he was also studying Western painting. In a quotation that reflects the complex reality of his aesthetic, he observes: “Sometimes I deconstructed calligraphy and recomposed it with emotional action. Emphasizing the philosophy of ‘empty but full, full but empty’ in my work, I left a lot of open space [white paper] in my earlier works; later, I reversed the process leaving no air at all.”

Shen allows that, in his early years, he was “strongly” influenced by Abstract Expressionism; American artists he looked at, through reproductions, include Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Willem de Kooning. Yet Shen asserts as well that he got his inspiration through Chinese calligraphy, remarking that “the two groups of imagery [Asian and Western] were linked by colour, the emotional quality of the stroke, and the structure of the imagery.” While Shen's previous works are deeply rooted in calligraphic strokes—specifically, the rhythm of the brush—the two major legacies, one from China and the other from New York, were clearly influential in his development. Shen explains that his appropriations have more to do with spiritual than imagistic legacies: “Although I have had a long-term friendship with David Reed [the abstract painter in New York], as well as a short period of study with John Walker [another American painter], who gave me advice, I would say that their spiritual influence is stronger than their artistic influence.”



Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 30133-09, 2009*, acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 167.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

While Shen's technique demonstrates a thorough familiarity with Western and Asian painting, he is aware that his practice is idiosyncratic in the sense that it reflects the melding of different kinds of styles; at the same time, he makes use of what he learned in China:

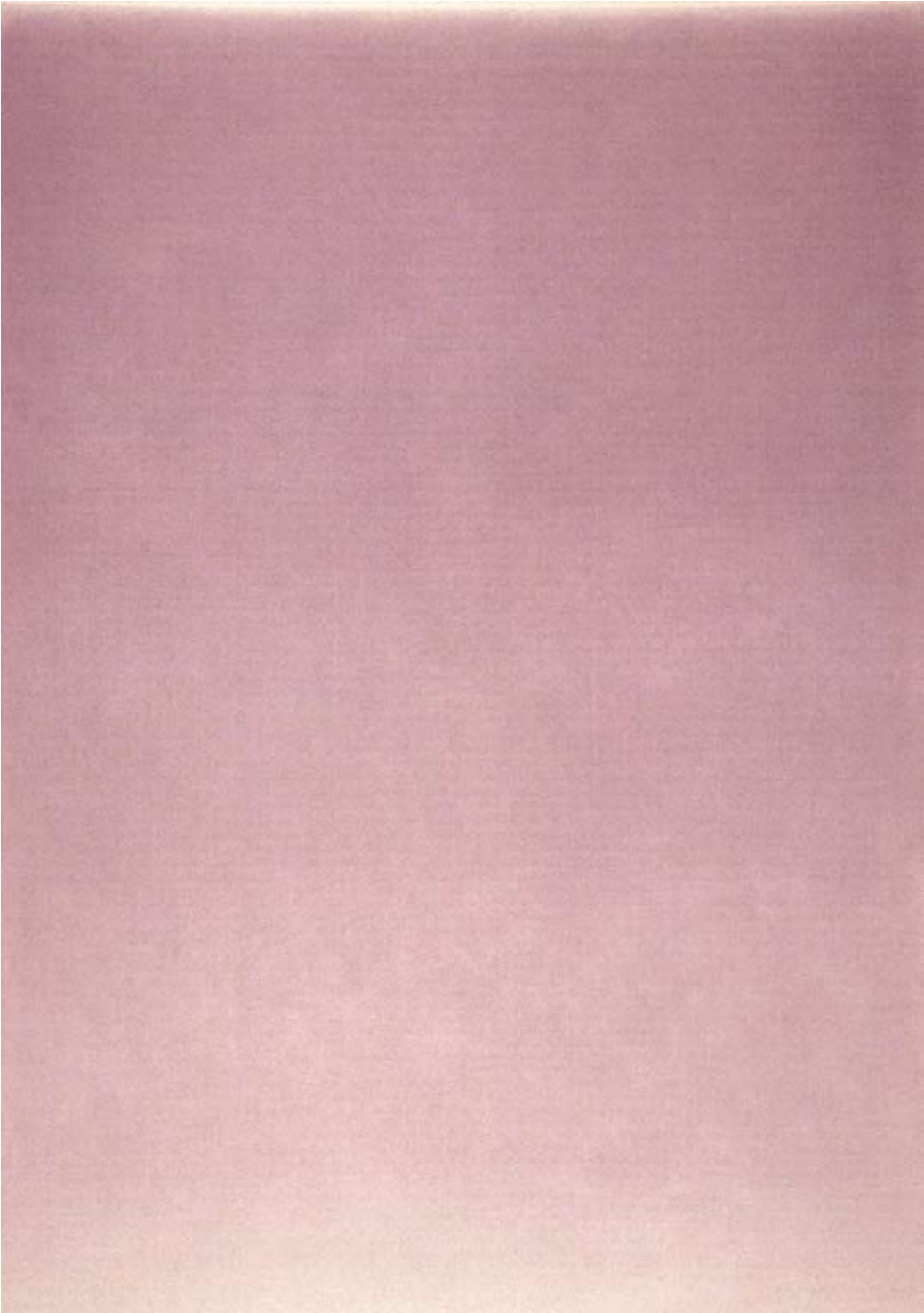
When I paint, I put my canvas down on the floor so that I can work on a flat surface. This is because I use flat Chinese brushes, which contain enough water to mix paints; thus, I am able to make big strokes. I make lines that are created by two strokes that overlap each other just beyond the edges, or the strokes are separated by a space. I use flat strokes and sometimes sidestrokes, which are made by using the side edge of the brush—this is a typical Chinese painting technique. The work embodies the continuation of time and the repetition of the brushstrokes.

The many layers—sometimes more than one hundred—Shen requires to make his painting lends a meditative calm to both the final product and the process responsible for it. Shen's procedure is subject to a Zen-like awareness, in which the artist takes note of the efforts leading to the finished painting; the steps necessary to completing the work of art become as important as what we finally see. Repetition results in heightened consciousness. According to Shen, the highest level of Zen aesthetics involves sensing the emptiness of our inner mind and entering a spiritual world. His system requires patience and considerable effort—qualities that register as desirable in their own right, as well as being in the service of art. Shen has to wait for each stroke to dry completely, and so it takes quite a long time to finish a painting—from three to five weeks, and in some cases even longer than two months. Because the layers of paint are so thin, mistakes cannot be corrected.



Working in abstraction for more than twenty years, Shen at first was considered an outsider. In China, he belonged to a small group, an “underground art salon” that included young artists, poets, musicians, and filmmakers who did not belong to the government-controlled art system. Interestingly enough, his situation in America is similar; Shen comments, “I still feel that I am in the same situation—far outside the mainstream.” Yet because painting is a personal, as opposed to public, activity, Shen asserts that he is not isolated in any way: “In some cases I want to be alone and to work away from the ‘big noise.’” He recognizes that his art is not for everyone; rather it exists only for those who can understand and appreciate

Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 20214-09*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 172.7 x 121.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



it. His paintings, which are minimal and abstract in equal measure, look at the American tradition of abstraction, which has been ascendant for over fifty years now. At the same time, twenty years ago, when Shen was living in China, abstraction had not been accepted by most people. Part of the reason he, and more than a few members of his generation, moved to New York was to find a situation in which he could freely work. When Shen left China, criticism of contemporary art was not only formal, it had a moral overtone.

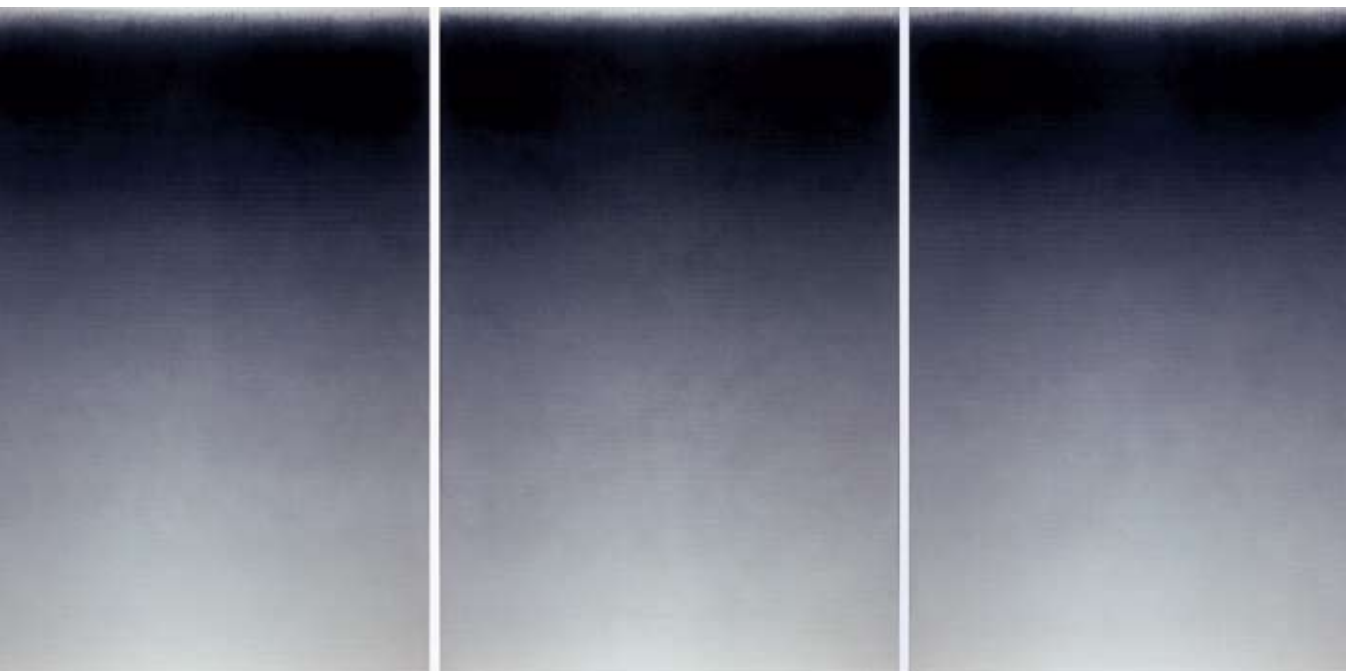
Aware of being pigeonholed by critics and viewers, Shen believes that his art cannot be described as originating from a specific ethnic or national base: “If my art is considered international, it could also be understood as belonging to the individual—to myself. When I paint, I never think what category the work fits into. I don’t care what people say; my painting is my own.” Interpretation may shoehorn Shen’s art into a space where the critic categorizes it in one way or the other, but this does not do justice to the particular attributes of his painting. Indeed, terms such as “international” and even “contemporary” may in fact hide an agenda that is commercial in nature. To see his art operating under the influence of painters like Mark Rothko or Ad Reinhardt misses the point. The art writer must come up with a reading that does justice to the specific aspects of Shen’s work, rather than simplistically comparing them to artists whose style superficially resembles his own.

It is clear Shen wishes to avoid categorizations in general. Labels get in the way of experiencing his paintings. His work yields simple as well as complex pleasures; it tends to give forth a quiet glow, a result of the many layers he applies to the canvas. Always working with acrylic paint, Shen creates paintings that consist of infinitesimal gradations of tone, which appear to his audience as transcendent applications of colour. In *Untitled No. 30191-09* (2009), a large dark-grey painting, the feeling of dark, atmospheric misting is created. The bottom of the painting is darker than the middle and top, but this is hard to see: the work’s method of preparation—its subtle changes—demands an ongoing involvement in viewing, often requiring us to be very close to the canvas. The painting suggests the great emptiness that space surrounds us with, enabling the viewer to contemplate the mythic power of art that is philosophically conceived. As we have noted, the New York critic, trained to see similarities in modern and contemporary Western abstraction, might easily affiliate Shen’s work with the New York School; however, the real challenge lies in perceiving the painting as occurring outside boundaries that take the form of cultural allegiances. Shen is right to establish his position as an individualist who leaves the definitions of his art alone. Too much explanation can result in an unnecessarily limited perception.

The painting *Untitled No. 20119-09* (2009) asserts principles similar to those informing the work just mentioned. But here the bottom of the canvas is lighter, and it seems that the top of the painting is very dark. Moving from light to dark, the piece suggests fog, mist, or a deep sea. Like many of Shen’s works, it proposes a primal, inchoate self originating out of absence and unknowing. The painting feels calm, but it is not without a hint of menace; if it is nature he is appropriating, we remember that the ocean, like the self,

is not always controllable. The notion of a visionary, ethereal atmosphere, central to Shen's practice, is also seen in the painting *Untitled No. 30133-09* (2009). Here the colour spectrum is wider: Shen begins at the bottom with a grey or slate blue, slowly moving upward to an orange that grows deeper as it nears the top of the work. This is expansive art that demands close scrutiny, in large part because the colour shifts are so very muted. *Untitled No. 20214-09* (2009) offers a slowly deepening pinkish red that, like the other canvases, grows darker toward the top of the painting.

Shen states, "A simple artwork sometimes contains multiple cultural elements, formed with several different techniques. My painting combines several kinds of influences: minimalism, abstraction, performance art, conceptual art." At the same time, his art refers to contemplation, calligraphy, woodcuts, watercolours. He is involved with a philosophical idealism that he has worked out for himself and, again, with Zen notions of enlightenment found in humble, reiterated activities. Ironically, Shen's Chinese audience sees his work as Western painting, while Westerners see



it as contemporary Chinese art. But the different views are not a matter of misreading; instead, they show how Shen is his own person, an independent in thrall to no one but himself. This does not mean that he is without influence: he cites the work of sixteenth-century painter Ba Da Shan Ren, whom he first encountered at the age of twenty, as inspirational: "I was absolutely speechless—with his marvelous brushstrokes, fish and birds come alive. I first learned about feeling for abstraction from his painting."

Shen Chen, *Untitled No. 11119-09*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, three panels 162.5 x 111.7 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

Shen's excitement on seeing Ba Da Shan Ren's work was a result of the abstraction he found in it. Describing Ba Da Shan Ren's work, Shen says, "In some of his works, open space is composed with very few brushstrokes, a practice characterizing the essential sensibility of abstraction." But historical figures are not Shen's sole interest; his style also reflects the influence of styles that have persisted into the twenty-first century from the century



before. And among the Western artists who especially move him is Agnes Martin, whose repetitive lines establish an idealized philosophy that is close to Zen in their subtlety and restraint. Shen also cites the experience of seeing a work, long before he began abstraction, by Jackson Pollock at the Shanghai History Museum:

Pollock had an Oriental style, with his freely spreading lines and drips. Like Chinese paintings, his work consisted of layer upon layer of paint on top of a flat canvas. The tangled skeins worked out a space comparable to inner workings of the mind.

It is fitting to end this discussion of Shen's art with an appraisal of his most recent painting, a gray-black triptych identified as *Untitled No. 11119-09* (2009). The work consists of three panels, each of which is 162.5 by 111.7 centimetres in dimension. The colour again moves upward toward a dark grey from a near white. Looking closely at the triptych, the viewer sees horizontal lines created by the edge of the brush. There are vertical lines as well, made by the gaps between two brushstrokes. The atmosphere of the painting relates generally to nature, specifically to a cloudy sky. Still, at the very top of each panel there is a thin band of white canvas, as if Shen were showing us that this is a *painted* reality, not the cloud itself. Monumental in scope and ambition, *Untitled No. 11119-09* feels like a vast expanse of space that fully comes into being only after the viewer spends time studying the work. Shen has found in this and other recent paintings the grace of incalculable space, which resonates with us without turning into a metaphor for something else. One feels as though it is possible to walk right into the triptych—largely because the mist and its effects are so skilfully handled.

Asked to comment on his future, Shen says: "I will continue to work on my own direction, however it may be read by my critics and audience. Looking at the big picture of contemporary art, I am sure I will make significant work that differs from that of other artists." But Shen also admits that he doesn't have a particular plan for the next few years, and that he can't predict how different his future work will be in comparison with past or current efforts. Even so, however, he believes his direction is clear: "I won't stop at any one point in my artistic life. I will move on without question." As Shen sees it, he wants to breathe outward, "get the *qi* [spirit] out." He believes that a large painting gives his viewers the chance also to breathe outward. Yet he also feels that he is absorbed by a painting; it is as if one were being sucked inward. It is not unusual that Shen describes his struggle and accomplishment in terms of breathing, for shaping the breath is central to meditation. This brings us full circle; just as the breath moves from emptiness to plenitude, so does our mind appreciate the void out of which all things originate. Shen's work makes this cycle remarkably clear.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from a written interview conducted by the author through email in October 2009.

## Research in Motion: An Interview with Will Kwan

**H**ong Kong-born Chinese-Canadian interdisciplinary artist Will Kwan has had a hectic year. In 2009, his first solo exhibition was curated by one of Canada's most respected curators, Barbara Fischer (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto), and his work was also the subject of a two-person show with Mieke Bal curated by up-and-coming curator Liz Park (Western Front, Vancouver). Kwan is currently participating in a residency at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, Ireland and developing a new commission for the 2010 Liverpool Biennial. In addition to his prolific practice, Kwan teaches at the University of Toronto.

*This diverse set of activities gives a glimpse into Kwan's practice, but there is little writing about his work to date. We predict that this will soon change and decided to seize the opportunity to conduct one of the first published interviews with Kwan. Together we discuss his impulses to make art, these new exhibition and production opportunities, the development of research threads in his practice over the last few years, the role of mobility and travel in his work, and his relationship to contemporary Chinese art.*

*It is useful to understand the role of research in Kwan's practice. He works with a number of materials and mediums, and his artistic iterations take various aesthetic, theoretical, social, and political shapes, but the core of his practice is an extended critical reflection and gathering of information before production. No doubt this ground was laid during his undergraduate studies at University of Toronto, crystallized throughout the processes of obtaining his M.F.A. from Columbia University, New York, and then further developed during his time as a Research Fellow at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, the Netherlands.*

**Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh:** Before engaging with specific questions, we feel the need to open the discussion by asking a simple and general question: When did you decide to become an artist, and why?

**Will Kwan:** The intellectual environment of the university was a big influence on me as a young artist. I studied visual art as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, but my studio courses were set within a much broader humanities and social sciences education. I was introduced to critical ideas about representation, identity, and culture through courses in political theory, cultural studies, and comparative literature in academic departments other than fine art.

Visual art was the discipline where I could take the theoretical content I was being exposed to and work through many of my confusions using visual,

physical, and experimental methods. The visual arts offered a whole set of strategies to present idiosyncratic research that wasn't limited to text, and I was very much drawn to those possibilities. Research is a significant part of my artistic practice. I develop a lot of work by sorting through existing visual and material culture and reconfiguring it to identify a trend or construct an argument about the world. In essence it is no different from conventional academic research. But at the same time, I am fascinated with seeing the material presented in a visual format, like a display of evidence.

The teachers I have had over the years have been tremendously supportive, and I feel that was a huge factor in helping me to decide whether I would pursue art in a serious way as a profession. I was given many opportunities early on to present work in professional venues, and it put me on a trajectory. Growing up in a working-class Chinese immigrant family, creative endeavours were peripheral to academic ones and, if anything, centred on trying to become a piano prodigy! It was incomprehensible to me that one would plan to be a visual artist—for me it was a much more tentative process that was about learning how to participate in a discipline. Even today I take a pragmatic approach to my art practice. I aspire to make work that is in some way a tangible contribution to the knowledge base about culture and society. I don't approach art as an activity of self-realization nor as an endless exploration of medium, material, or form.

Finally, my first experience exhibiting outside of North America during my graduate studies in New York also left an indelible mark on me. It made me think about community in a very different way. The colleagues and friends I have made travelling for research or exhibitions continue to inform the way I think about cultural and political issues.

**Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh:** You mention that you do not approach art as an endless exploration of medium, material, or form. We want to hear more about this because there appears to have been a shift in medium, material, and form in your practice the last few years. Your earlier works were fragile and performative, while your latest works are complex both in concept and execution. Can you talk about your relationship to materials in general and how this might have changed over time?

**Will Kwan:** I am interested in material culture rather than the technical or formal qualities of materials. While even the most basic raw materials carry implicit social meanings, I tend to be drawn to the culturally specific or culturally loaded. At the same time, I am interested in objects or symbolic materials that claim to be culturally non-specific or universal—things such as flags and maps, particular approaches to using language and information, certain kinds architecture or ways of representing landscape and geography. I find that this latter category of materials is what we use to construct our basic iconography of globalism, producing visual culture that perpetuates the myths of a synchronized, equitable, impartial, frictionless, and sanitized world economy.

Most of my work is about taking these two general categories and contaminating them. For instance, with works such as *Endless Prosperity*,





*Eternal Accumulation* (2009), a photo series of eighty hongbao—red envelopes—printed by transnational financial corporations, or *Shanghai Concession Camo* (*la longue durée*) (2007), a four-channel digital animation using tree bark patterns from Shanghai’s French Concession district to create slowly evolving camouflage patterns, I reconfigure culturally specific materials to highlight their complicity in global processes or their origins in colonial-era intercultural encounters. In works such as *Clocks That Do Not Tell the Time* (2008), *Flame Test* (2009), and *X-ray Yankee Zulu* (2009), I introduce layers or undercurrents of subjectivity and cultural perspective into what are ostensibly universal symbols such as clocks, national flags, and the NATO phonetic alphabet.

I think the earlier artworks I produced between 2002 and 2004 came out of a period when I was uncertain about what I wanted to say in my work and research, so I tended to fixate on the process as the material or the work. The pieces I made then were much more gestural, fleeting, and open-ended. For example, talking to people in Chinatown in Lower Manhattan became an artwork. Making a community newspaper in a row house neighbourhood in Leeds or interacting with animal rights activists in Venice became projects. I think that tendency was a symptom of my not

Will Kwan, *Endless Prosperity, Eternal Accumulation*, 2009, 80 lightjet prints, 30.4 x 43.1 cm each. Installation view at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist.



really understanding the cultural or political significance of the subjects or situations I was dealing with. I fetishized the process because I wasn't able to recognize the broader structural implications that would have allowed me to shape the process towards some kind of position or statement. I think this problem plagues a lot process-oriented, relational work—open-

Will Kwan, *Endless Prosperity, Eternal Accumulation* (detail), 2009, 80 lightjet prints, 30.4 x 43.1 cm each. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied. Courtesy of the artist.







Above: Will Kwan, *Flame Test*, 2009, digital study, 30.4 x 30.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Top right: Will Kwan, *Shanghai Concession Camo (la long durée)* (detail), 2007, 4-channel video installation, wall-mounted flatscreen displays, 14-minute looped animations. Courtesy of the artist.

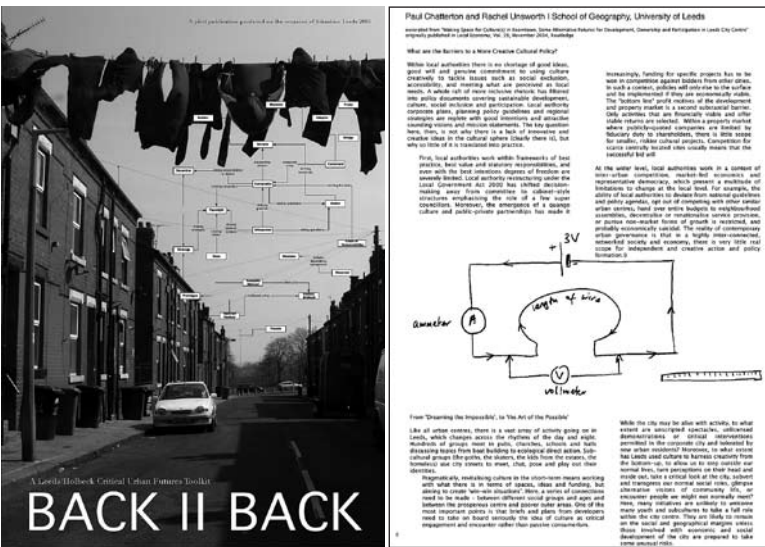
Bottom right: Will Kwan, *X-ray Yankee Zulu (WMD)*, 2009, neon, 3.65 x 2.43 m. Installation view at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist.



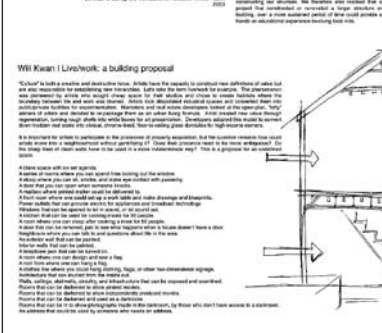
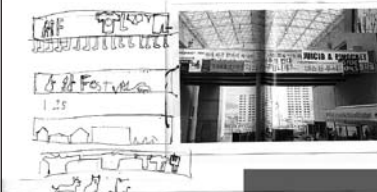




Will Kwan, *Learning from Chinatown* (detail), 2004, conversations, photographs, inkjet print composed of various hand-drawn maps. Photo: Aubrey Reeves. Courtesy of the artist.



Will Kwan, *Back II Back*, 2005, detail of prototype for community newspaper as part of *Negotiating Us, Here, Now*, Leeds City Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist.



endedness and indeterminacy masking an inability to make committed political statements.

**Alissa Firth-England and Johan Lundh:** The past year you have had several major exhibitions. Could you please tell us more about the works in these shows and put them in relationship to your practice to date?



Will Kwan, *GPS (EU Chinatowns)*, 2006, 160 photographic slides, two self-advancing slide projectors, timer. Installation view at Galleria Enrico Fornello, Prato, Italy. Courtesy of the artist.

**Will Kwan:** Multi-lateral at the Justina M. Barnicke in Toronto was my first significant curated solo exhibition. The show brought together seven projects from the past four years that I produced in places ranging from Shanghai and Hong Kong to Maastricht and London. Many of the works in the exhibition examine cultural and political geographies while appropriating the visual language of conceptual art. The earliest work in the show, *GPS (EU Chinatowns)* (2006), consists of two self-advancing slide projections that present one hundred and sixty simple text directions taken from *ViaMichelin*, a popular European online GPS route planner. The phrases “1 km along rue Antoine Dansaert,” “towards the 19ème arrondissement,” “0.8km west along via Paolo Sarpi,” and “left at Gerrard Street” hold no specific meaning until the viewer realizes—given some familiarity with a major European city—that these instructions mark a winding route through Europe and the U.K. that takes one on a grand tour of every single Chinatown on the continent, both present and historical. I made this work during my time in Maastricht, The Netherlands, where I became interested in the conceptual wayfinding projects of the Surinamese-Dutch conceptual artist Stanley Brouwn.

The exhibition also included *Clocks That Do Not Tell the Time* (2008), an installation of twenty-four wall clocks reminiscent of displays found in hotel lobbies, newsrooms, and airports. The conventional world financial capitals—London, New York, Tokyo, and Moscow—however, have been replaced by more obscure, peripheral locations that are central to the global economy or global civil society. These “other” sites include Sonapur, a district of austere, overcrowded dormitories housing Indian and Pakistani workers who toil to erect Dubai’s absurd skyline; Lampedusa, an Italian island near Sicily where migrants attempting to reach Europe by boat from North Africa are housed in a notorious detention center adjacent to sandy beaches where wealthy Italians sunbathe; Bethesda, a Maryland suburb northwest of Washington that is home to Lockheed Martin, a globally integrated weapons industry giant; and Map Ta Phut, an industrial zone in the southeast Thai province of Rayong where Dow Chemicals and BASF





Will Kwan, *Clocks that do not tell the time*, 2008, 24 wall clocks, 24 metal plaques, photocopies. Installation at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist.



Will Kwan, *Clocks that do not tell the time* (detail), 2008, 24 wall clocks, 24 metal plaques, photocopies. Installation at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist.

have established operations amidst heavily polluted air and waterways that have contaminated area towns and villages.

The centrepiece of the Multi-lateral exhibition is an installation consisting of video, photography, wall drawings, and works on paper entitled *Canaries (the bank and the treasury)* (2007–present). The project is an idiosyncratic and speculative research that attempts to link two seemingly disparate belief systems and cultural practices that have deep roots in the city of Hong Kong—the banking industry and Daoist funerary rituals. The bank in the title refers to the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation (now the financial services multinational HSBC), an entity that was founded in 1865, several years after the colonization of Hong Kong, in order to assist British merchants engaged in regional trading of various commodities including opium. The treasury refers to the Daoist concept of a spiritual “treasury” run by bureaucrats from which individuals obtain a loan at birth and must repay when they die in order to pass into the spirit realm. The bank and the treasury blur into one another in the context of Hong Kong through the shared language of “transactions, debts, currency” or when Daoists burn paper effigy money at funerals emblazoned with the HSBC logo (in Hong Kong, commercial banks print currency instead of a central monetary authority).

These types of interactions are further explored in the three-channel video component of the installation that focuses on the HSBC headquarters building in Hong Kong, an iconic skyscraper completed in 1985 by the British architect Norman Foster located in the historic core of the former colony on the original site of the bank’s previous two main branches. The tower’s large, stacking, modular components and signature structural beams were prefabricated by firms from across the world, shipped to the port of Hong Kong and assembled on site. Foster’s extravagant “global production



Will Kwan, *Canaries (the bank and the treasury)*, 2007–present, 48-minute, 3-channel video installation, 20 lightjet prints, drawings with ash on paper, wall painting, video stills. Courtesy of the artist.

Will Kwan, *Canaries (the bank and the treasury)*, 2007–present, 48-minute, 3-channel video installation, 20 lightjet prints, drawings with ash on paper, wall painting, digital study. Courtesy of the artist.

model” is mimicked in a set commissions I initiated, approaching effigy artisans in Hong Kong, London, Vancouver, and Toronto to reproduce sections of the HSBC tower, which were then shipped to my studio in Toronto, assembled, and burnt. This performative sequence is documented and weaved into the video along with historical and contemporary footage that reveals the bank’s ubiquitous presence in Hong Kong and London and its oblique connections to Toronto and even London, Ontario.

The video’s three channels are stacked in a vertical formation, adopting the compositional principles of traditional Chinese landscape painting that splits a single pictorial field into three seamless perspectives: a bottom third that grounds the image with an establishing element that brings the viewer into the image; a middle section that is dominated by a bold vertical element that thrusts the eye up to the top of the picture; and a top third that functions as a distant and more ethereal zone. This composition strategy allows me to work with numerous perspectives on a subject simultaneously, creating collages that mix locations, historical and contemporary scenes, and still and moving images, or construct a multiple-perspective depiction of a single figure, edifice, or landscape.

**Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh:** Your description of these works reminds us of a passage in art theorist Boris Groys’s “The City in the Age of Touristic Reproduction”: “. . . above all, it is today’s artists and intellectuals who are spending most of their time in transit—rushing from one exhibition to the next, from one project to another, from one lecture to the next, or from one local cultural context to another.”<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that you both engage with and reflect upon the transient nature of contemporary existence as well as the conditions of intellectual and aesthetic production. How have travel and residencies shaped your practice?

**Will Kwan:** Groys makes a number of interesting observations in that essay. From your quote above he continues, “All active participants in today’s cultural world are now expected to offer their productive output to a global audience, to be prepared to be constantly on the move from one venue to the next and to present their work with equal persuasion; regardless of where they are. A life spent in transit like this is bound up with equal degrees of hope and fear.”<sup>2</sup> There is definitely a pressure on artists and intellectuals to seek acknowledgment and legitimacy internationally, and with that pressure comes an ambivalence that all young artists need to

negotiate for themselves. My cynical side is forever irritated by the aspect of contemporary art that is a globe-trotting, over-capitalized (both cultural and financial), status-obsessed field epitomized by the party circuit at Art Basel Miami Beach, the society page coverage of Sotheby's auctions, and the traffic of institutional curators, art consultants, and star academics promoting their stables of validated artists.

In contrast, my hopeful side is drawn to Groys's statement that "... rather than the individual romantic tourist, it is instead all manner of people, things, signs, and images drawn from all kinds of local cultures that are now leaving their places of origin and undertaking journeys around the world."<sup>3</sup> I would expand upon this and say that processes of modern migration and intercultural encounter are already centuries old, initially a consequence of a colonial order and today a hybridity embedded in the genetic makeup of everything. Artists who are engaged in critical research about the continuous and accelerated circulation of people, power, and cultural forms often need to travel to witness and document these migrations. So could we imagine an alternate map of the art world based on participating and contributing to a public discussion about the globalization of culture, a network of practitioners and supporting institutions committed to producing public knowledge rather than the individual consumption of cultural products and amusements? Groys's critique concentrates on the latter at the expense of imagining the possibility of the former.

Travel and residencies have been a feature of my own artistic trajectory, and I have used these opportunities primarily to address specific research goals. The residencies I have participated in were not about "time in the studio" but instead occasions to work with particular communities, have access to resources such as archives and libraries, or to visit and document specific sites and locations. While I don't travel to fuel the romantic notion of inspiration, I am also cognizant of how my mode of travel for knowledge production may invoke conventions of connoisseurship or the anthropological gaze. I am constantly learning how to balance my interest in the world with these fraught histories.

**Alissa Firth-Eagland and Johan Lundh:** Your description of travel and residencies as occasions to work with communities, access resources, or document specific sites reminds us of something we discussed in a recent conversation—your relationship to Chinese art and Chineseness. You pointed out that the connection between contemporary Chinese art from the diaspora and contemporary Chinese art from China is being renegotiated. Perhaps an important question can be posed about "where" the works you make are created. How does your practice relate to the work of contemporary artists in China or Hong Kong? How do you participate [in the label of contemporary Chinese art] given that you are a Chinese-Canadian from the Hong Kong diaspora?

**Will Kwan:** The term Chinese art, like all labels that categorize art according to national, regional, or ethnic distinctions, is malleable and its capacity to be either inclusive and critical, or exclusive and opportunistic, depends on the user and the context. In the past few years the phenomenal wave of new art being produced by artists in cities in mainland China has resulted in many survey exhibitions organized by major Western institutions that delineate Chinese art as that which is produced, for the most part, by Han Chinese artists living within mainland Chinese borders (as opposed to



Greater China, which would include Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diaspora populations around the world) or émigrés in Paris or New York who can easily trace their roots back to the People's Republic of China. There have certainly been occasional exhibitions that have approached the definition more critically, but this institutional view is quite dominant. All this is not to bemoan my position as peripheral to all of the attention, but rather, to highlight the ghettoizing tendency of the art world's approach to new developments in non-Western art.

That said, I think overseas Chinese artists will necessarily be distinct from mainland Chinese artists for a number of reasons that have to do with a Western education in art, a hybrid identity, and a radically different daily lived experience. I find that overseas Chinese artists experience a greater degree of freedom to travel and are exposed to different sources of visual and material culture in spite of the homogenizing pressures of cultural globalization. In some ways, artists in the diaspora can have the best of both identities, and I can think of many artists—of South African, Palestinian, and Korean descent, to name a few—who have made incredible contributions to contemporary art and whose artistic identity and interests may or may not have anything to do with their cultural background.

I am influenced in general by art that is concerned with social realities and the state of the world, whether it comes from China, Mexico, Poland, Spain, or Canada. A lot of art being produced right now in China looks at the tumultuous condition of Chinese society, so there are many artists and artworks that interest me. While there are some undercurrents of self-Orientalizing and some reckless representations of migrant worker suffering, my perception has also been that many Chinese artists are documenting and questioning the injustices taking place in China with great sensitivity and courage. I am particularly impressed by those artists who are looking critically at Han chauvinism, the majority ethnic Han Chinese perception that they represent Chineseness, which marginalizes the dozens of large ethnic minorities—from Uighurs to Tibetans to Manchus—that make up a significant portion of China. Perhaps it is in this contempt for inequality that I see my real solidarity with a lot of contemporary Chinese art. I can identify with this oppositional and minoritarian perspective. It is also a position that raises an enduring issue that affects all overseas artists making art in a Western context—the matter of your cultural production being racially marked while white artists and their “interests” operate invisibly as the universal. Would we, for example, not be initially perplexed if an interviewer were to ask Edward Burtynsky if his camera took on a particularly Western way of seeing landscape, or Rodney Graham if his cast of characters amounted to some kind of deep appraisal of white identities? In my work I intentionally straddle the line between the culturally specific and the supposedly non-specific in order to highlight these implicit cultural perspectives that are embedded in the material around us.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

# Guggenheim Museums’s Asian Art Council: Universalism, Cosmopolitanism, Glocalism, or Something Else? How is Value Constructed, Denoted, and Safeguarded in Contemporary Art?

Introduction: Alexandra Munroe, Senior Curator of Asian Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

The following panel discussion on aesthetic value presents the edited transcript of a closed-door roundtable meeting of the Guggenheim Museum’s Asian Art Council held from May 31 to June 2, 2009 in Bilbao, Spain. The Council’s international community of some twenty curators, museum directors, cultural critics, and artists serves as a “think tank” for our curatorial program, and helps us articulate the key issues of research and debate in the field. Established in 2007, this advisory group guides and critiques the intellectual and strategic development of the Guggenheim’s Asian art exhibition, collection, and educational initiatives within an integrated context of a global museum of modern and contemporary art.

The Council meets biannually to discuss a range of issues. The first roundtable was held in New York in 2007; the second roundtable was hosted by our largest affiliate, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, where three relevant shows of Asian art were on view. The transcript of another panel discussion, “Contemporary Reflections on Modernity in Asia,” will appear in the next issue of *Yishu*.

The choice of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao for the site of our second meeting is significant on many levels. In 2008, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Over the last decade, the success of Bilbao has stimulated inquiries from over one hundred cities around the world seeking to build their own “Bilbao phenomenon” by inviting the Guggenheim to partner in new cultural developments that would transform that particular region, as the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has transformed the Basque region. Of these inquiries, a handful turned into feasibility reports. And of these, one has become the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Museum, scheduled to open in late 2013. The Council meetings come at a crucial moment in our development and planning of this project. We have found that several of the curatorial and critical issues that face modern and contemporary Asian art have relevance and even application to the Abu Dhabi project. A key area under review is the development of our modern and Middle Eastern art program, including issues of audience development, education, and reception. The Bilbao roundtable, and specifically the presence of our new member Jack Persekian, added richly to our planning discussions.

As curators of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Asian art team programs exhibitions for our network affiliates in Berlin, Venice, and Bilbao, and the shows on view in Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao building were the direct result of our Asian art initiative. Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe—the first show devoted to a Chinese artist in the Guggenheim’s history—occupied the second floor galleries while the touring Takashi Murakami retrospective organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, was on view in the third floor galleries. In addition, our

recent acquisitions of works by Mariko Mori and Cao Fei were featured in a collection show of new video installations on the ground floor. These shows, and the discussions around them, provided the context for our second Asian Art Council roundtable. Bilbao offered a wonderful setting in other ways, too. Guests quickly fell for Basque hospitality and the city's custom of long, late dinners with plentiful *vino tinto*.

We created the Asian Art Council to debate the key issues pertinent to the curatorial practice of modern and contemporary Asian art and specifically, to explore how such issues apply to the practice and curatorial culture of the Guggenheim Museum. The Asian art curatorial team—Assistant Curator Sandhini Poddar, former Asian Art Curatorial Fellow Yao Wu, and myself—have since produced several projects. We organized the Cai Guo-Qiang retrospective that toured New York, Beijing, and now Bilbao, complete with Chinese- and Spanish-language editions of the award-winning catalogue. We commissioned a new sculptural installation by Anish Kapoor, *Memory*, that opened at Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin and is now on view in New York. And, finally, we presented the monumental show, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, that has won International Association of Art Critic's award for Best Thematic Show in New York City. Each of these exhibitions was accompanied by a rich complement of public programming, including commissioned performances by Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, and Bob Wilson staged for *The Third Mind*. These initiatives reflect our strong commitment to work through the Guggenheim's unique platform to enrich the public and critical debate on Asian art.

Several of the key questions we discussed at our first meeting in 2007 remain relevant to our roundtable in 2009. We asked ourselves then, *Is regional expertise even relevant in today's transnational art world and global art market?* I still say yes. Knowledge of Asian languages, cultures, and political histories keeps the discourse on contemporary Asian art from becoming a matter of conjecture. We avoid the pitfall common to Eurocentric curators that limits their explorations to “contemporary Asian art.” Such a narrow focus assumes a historical vacuum and reinforces market forces as a marker of cultural meaning. Our thinking is grounded instead in modern intellectual history, local realities, and postcolonial theory. These interpretive tools need not build an argument of difference and Otherness—we are far beyond that stage. Rather, they help illuminate the evidence of a work of art on its own conceptual terms, and they open up meaning for the wide publics we serve.

Another critical topic of ongoing relevance is, *What models do we use for bringing Asian art into the fold of the Guggenheim, a staunchly Eurocentric museum?* Our approach has been to integrate Asian art into our Museum's overall curatorial practice—not to topple the canon but rather, as Arjun Appadurai suggests, to interrogate it. One of the recent acquisitions I am proudest of making is a 1962 white monochrome painting by Tadaaki Kuwayama, a Japanese-born and Nihonga-trained artist who lives in New York. This work, which was shown in historic shows of early Minimalist painting in New York, adds a critical dimension to the Guggenheim's rich holdings of Minimalist art. It expands and enriches our understanding of Minimalist aesthetics from a connected but distinct perspective; Kuwayama *interrogates* Ryman, and vice versa.

The decision to program the Cai and Murakami shows together in Bilbao was intentional despite some initial concern that it would be unbalanced, too much



Asian art for one venue. We argued with our colleagues that the educational opportunities were extraordinary: the juxtaposition of Cai and Murakami proves just how inadequate the monolithic descriptor of “contemporary Asian art” really is. Although these artists are of the same generation, their background, education, aesthetic styles, and strategies are as different as those of Beuys and Warhol. What they do share concerns a more sophisticated discourse, namely, the recuperation of their respective cultural nationalisms—state-repressed imperialism and anti-Americanism in Murakami’s case, re-interpreted Maoist tactics of spectacle and destruction in Cai’s case.

The 2009 Council roundtable consisted of nine presentations and panel discussions that relate to specific projects and exhibition ideas that are under development. But beyond this practical purpose, we used the topics as a threshold of philosophical, even ethical, speculation. Arjun Appadurai’s keynote lecture on “Risk and Uncertainty as Cultural Facts” set the parameters of our journey. He stated:

In the wake of the most recent global meltdown, the facts and languages of economic disaster saturate our consciousness. Their very ubiquity conceals the fact that for several decades now, economic models, policies, and realities, such as those that pertain to speculation, credit, insurance, and pensions, have moved into our everyday languages. Among these key words are risk and uncertainty. The distinction between them was originally conceptualized by Frank Knight in 1921. Since then, there has been a considerable body of work in financial circles on how to take risks and on how to manage them. And ordinary citizens, in spaces as diverse as foreign currency trading, pension plan adjustments, debt orgies, poker playing, and horse-racing have become fully embedded in these speculative spaces which are nevertheless mediated today by specialist languages of swapping, leverage, stress-testing, and the like. In this context, we could benefit by stepping back and looking again at how risk and uncertainty are staples of everyday life and are deeply inflected by our fears, our fantasies, and our hopes for wealth, for security, and for the very shape of our cultural futures.

This opening session seeks to reinstate risk and uncertainty as quotidian facts of human life that have been colonized by the financial imaginaries that surround us. To reclaim this terrain, and thus to become more active agents in a world of impending catastrophe, we need to ask what the artistic imagination, especially in Asia, could do to restore the cultural varieties of our experiences with uncertainty. We might thus open the door to more democratic and more imaginative solutions to the economic panic that threatens to engulf us. This can be seen as a project to convert the crisis of the global economy into a crisis of the borderless imagination.

The panel featured in this issue of *Yishu* explores how value is constructed in contemporary art, especially in the wake of market fever and its corollary, market collapse. Moderated by David Elliott, this panel explored such questions as: In this “transcultural” world order, how is artistic quality

constructed and transmitted, and by whom? Is aesthetic quality limited to particular cultures and times? If so, why? Is aesthetic quality predetermined by geo-political and economic power? The curse of modernism is the notion that there are universal standards, that an object can speak for itself. How can curators educate their publics about the contexts of vernacular/ local and international/global contexts? How are these contexts specific, how are they fluid? Can art have a discrete power that is separate from and independent of other forms of power?

The Council meetings are designed to explore these complexities—not to resolve them, but rather to shed light on some radical new logics of art criticism, art history, and curatorial practice that can adequately capture the psyche of our times, and that can interpret that psyche through the particular lens of Asia.

**Alexandra Munroe:** This panel discussion is moderated by David Elliott. I'm going to hand it over to him.

**David Elliott:** Thank you very much. Today I think that we're going to be talking about a rather different kind of value—hubris—and, in relation to this, I would also like to refer back to my earlier comments on quality and on how we construct it. In order to do this we have to go back, as with so many other things, to the beginning of the European Enlightenment. I'd like to begin this meditation on quality and hubris by reading two short poems. One, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is called “Kubla Khan,” or “A Vision in a Dream,” and he was probably on opium at the time. It was written in 1797, when the Industrial Revolution was just beginning to bite, when the first technology was coming on line; the demographic was expanding.

The second poem, “Ozymandias,” was written exactly twenty years later by Percy Bysshe Shelley and, in the face of this Brave New World, both poets were looking back at the past. Edward Gibbon had just written *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Looking forward, they were aware that the world could be their oyster but they were also terrified of it. . . . Here is a fragment of “Kubla Khan”:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. citation?

Let's hope that we should be all as exulted as that in our imagination of the “pleasure dome!”

In 1817, Shelley—his wife, Mary, was writing *Frankenstein* at the same time—penned a slightly darker view of a similar vision. He imagines a meeting with a lone figure who has traversed the desert, where he has encountered an antique sculpture—a fragment of a lost civilization. Here is the poem “Ozymandias” in total:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away. citation?

This desolate image of hubris is perhaps another way of saying *ars longa, vita brevis*—“art is forever but life and human vanity is short.” This is something we have to think about when we’re talking about art and culture today because it is the result of centuries, of millennia, of development. Culture does not grow on trees, and we don’t dream it overnight. It’s “slow food.” Here, I think that Oscar Wilde’s definition of a cynic as the man who knew the price of everything but the value of nothing has some relevance. How can we construct ideas of value when we start to think about art? We have to start with a number of things, I believe.

At the core of this question is the difference between what I describe as “cultural value” and “market value,” which is an encapsulation of the difference between ideas of “public” and “private,” in their present form also constructions of the European Enlightenment. The market invests in what it knows, and speculates on what it doesn’t know. It’s purely a mechanism with no intelligence other than its own internal logic. The market is Wilde’s cynic.

But there are other games being played here. There are more important things at stake than money. In this, tradition is very important. So is individualism, and it is the individual creative lust of the artist that must define anything of quality. Without this, even with things made four to six thousand years ago, there will be no quality.

Talent also is very important. Perspectives and viewpoints of one’s own are also mandatory. Like physical appendages, we all have them, and they might as well be used for our advantage.

*Numinous* quality. It’s a slightly an old-fashioned word, but very important. If art hasn’t got this—a quality that it actually emanates beyond itself—then forget it.

Cultural redolence is less fancy but also important, not only in relation to one’s own culture, but in regard to others.



And then, how do we appreciate all these different possibilities, how do we put them all together? The old word for this was “taste,” a word no longer much used but one that relates to the core meaning of aesthetics—the relationship between the quality of art and the quality of life. And this is a kind of distance, an area between what artists produce and all the experience and other stuff that feed into it. And in this aesthetic space you’ve got good art and a lot of bad art. And it’s a matter of discourse, of discussion, as to what actually is good and bad—about what quality really is—about what *qualities* really are.

And, thank goodness, I’m not frightened of that “Q” word because it’s redolent in so many ways. It refers to the art object itself, but it also relates to a moral field that in our modern world has become an integral part of art itself.

Now we can start to examine the authority or power of art. What kind of power can art have? It’s not the power to build cities or the power of secret policemen. It’s a kind of soft power, and I would characterize it as being expressive of three ideas: autonomy, freedom, and disinterestedness. Again, these all find roots in the European Enlightenment.

Autonomy is the idea that art is a field in itself, and that this field is actually a moral field (I don’t mean moralistic or moralizing). Once art had become established as an ethical activity, then goodness and quality start, in some way, to become synonymous, even though bad things may be represented.

Freedom. The idea of freedom as we know it today (again there are other ideas of freedom that are not relevant here) was articulated during the eighteenth century in *The Rights of Man* (and eventually woman); by now this idea has spread as far even as Afghanistan, where everyone has a right to vote although for many reasons they may be discouraged from using it. But at the beginning the protagonists of these new “rights” never imagined that they would stretch out so far. Politics and power were a rich man’s game. But such ideas are viral. They spread and cannot be limited. They might have taken two hundred and fifty years to move around the world, but once they’re out, they are virtually impossible to call back.

Disinterestedness is another aspect of this soft power. It’s the idea that artists do what they want because they actually want to. They’re not for sale. They work because there’s an internal logic in what they do. In virtually no other field, other than pure science, do you get that idea of freedom and disinterestedness coming together. And it’s not for sale. That is a very, very real power. I think good curators also have the same quality. It is why, for instance, when you have a very rough government, the very first thing that happens is that the good artists get phoned late at night. Why was Pasternak terrified by Stalin? Why was the *entartete Kunst* exhibition organized in Munich in 1938? These “good artists” actually expressed something that could not be controlled by any totalitarian government. Also, while we’re talking about Asia, there were very similar stories under Mao, Pol Pot, Kim Il Sung, and others.

So we’re not talking here about geopolitical or economic power, the hubristic hyperboles of yesterday. But Arjun Appadurai mentioned something very, very important in this context in our earlier discussion.

We're living in a world in which seventy percent of the population is below the poverty line. So what does this mean when we're talking about quality? Quality of life? This can no longer be about the domination and oppression of the many by a few, which I believe to be a major part of the story of the Enlightenment, but is actually a matter of survival for us all. Our world is so linked and our capacity for self-destruction so great that no one, however powerful they may be, can rest secure in the future. We need to rethink our ideas of happiness, to join up the dots of our lives in different ways. Perhaps we should revisit the ideas of Adam Smith and exercise some "enlightened self-interest" and realize that by alleviating poverty we make the world better for ourselves and our children as well as for others. But I think there are also other reasons to act positively. As we look into the future, maybe the most radical idea about quality within aesthetics is that everyone has to give something up. It is not about the seeking of obvious influence and power, but the reverse, and to realize that maybe the greatest happiness is to be found in the happiness of others. I would say that this is the most radical idea of all, more far reaching than anything that was mentioned yesterday, because it is open, non-possessive, and uncynical. I believe that such an approach is factored into the ways that many artists are working and thinking about their work now and to how they relate to their own cultures, and societies, as well as to the world at large. This is the kind of aesthetics that I'm particularly interested in.

Hongnam, let's get the presentations moving, and that will give us a good half-hour of discussion.

**Hongnam Kim:** Now, since I have the floor, I would like to thank Richard Armstrong, Juan Ignacio Vidarte, Alexandra and her Asian Art team, and all the participants here. It's quite a learning experience for me.

My training is in the history of traditional Asian art. But while working as a curator and director at various museums in the States and Korea, I came to have two strong beliefs. One is that the distance between the traditional and the contemporary in Asian art should be narrowed so that there is a sense of continuity in history and culture. I put this into action for each "traditional art" exhibition by inviting a contemporary artist to create a work in tune with that exhibition's overall theme. The second belief I came to have was that the cultural nationalism prevalent in contemporary Asia, a region once united spiritually and culturally to form a great civilization, should be resolved.

My presentation will proceed in response to the questions raised by David Elliott's "speaking points" that he circulated in advance. Questions are often more significant and meaningful than the answers, and this applies to David's questions here.

To your first question: "In this 'transcultural' world order, how is artistic quality constructed and transmitted, and by whom? Is aesthetic quality limited to particular cultures and times? If so, why?"

My answers: Transcultural world order, you say? Yes, but contemporary Asian art seems to have joined the global bandwagon, still pulled by Western institutions and curators. Notions of artistic quality seem constructed and transmitted through the collective effort of curators, art dealers, collectors, the art venues of biennials, triennials, and fairs, exhibitions at museums,

etc. Interestingly, here you speak of both “artistic quality” and “aesthetic quality.” May I ask what your distinction between artistic quality and aesthetic quality is? The former is more time-sensitive, volatile, and style/form-oriented, the latter more historical and more spiritual? My own distinction is that “artistic quality” is more easily transmitted, appropriated, and even creatively misinterpreted, whereas “aesthetic quality” is so deeply layered and rooted in culture that it is hard to decode. This is illustrated, for instance, by numerous cases of ink painting and calligraphy, a unique achievement of traditional Asia whose “artistic quality” has been appropriated creatively by some Western artists.

**Alexandra Munroe:** This was one of the points we made in our exhibition, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1960-1989* at the Guggenheim in the spring of 2009.

**Hongnam Kim:** Yes. Robert Motherwell, for example, was appropriating the artistic quality, but less of the aesthetic quality, history, and spirituality. His seems more graphic, and more aggressive; he ties it all to his background in Abstract Expressionism. A lot is left out. The art of ink is like a closed goldmine with still much to be excavated. I believe this cultural, artistic heritage of East Asia has been undervalued and misunderstood, sometimes creatively misunderstood.

It seems certain aesthetic qualities are respectively and admirably limited to particular cultures and times, thus expressive of cultural diversity. (I feel this especially keenly when I see Japanese art, both traditional and contemporary, especially the work of On Kawara and the films of Yasujiro Ozu and Miyazaki Hayao, all my personal favourites.) I believe that such value needs to be denoted and safeguarded so that the art world is much fuller and more interesting. Therefore it is important that museum exhibitions in the future use a more serious, holistic approach that touches upon both the artistic and aesthetic quality of a particular culture and time.

To your second question: “Is aesthetic quality predetermined by geopolitical and economic power?”

My answer is yes, as I see it in the rise and fall of leading centres of art and culture: in the West starting from Greece and Rome, then shifting to Paris, and then to New York. This is again well demonstrated by the growing geopolitical and economic power of the Gulf region and the birth of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Louvre Abu Dhabi, which we have discussed in these meetings. With the global economic development, the art market will necessarily be much more diversified and extremely competitive.

The economy of the Asian region (including China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, India and the Southeast Asian nations) and the Arab region is rapidly expanding and now creates a huge consumption base with a purchasing power for art. Within these regions each country tries to lay the groundwork necessary to gain the upper hand in competition and to expand its regional influence in order to reduce cultural marginality, to get a competitive edge within the region, and to gain world recognition. Internationalization of art is thus part of cultural nationalism and a long-term survival strategy; this is especially true of previously colonized nations. We should note that unlike Europe or America, where regional consolidation is predominant, Asia has not yet embarked on such a move. To Asian countries, modernization and



internationalization still seem to be perceived in direct link to the West, and not so much from within. This has a lot to do with the postcolonial psyche (this issue, along with that of strong cultural nationalism in each Asian country, has been a subject of interest since my time at the two national museums in Korea, but is too complicated to be dealt with here). Now, competition is so stiff in contemporary Asian art: there are about ten biennials in Asia, including Gwangju, Taipei, Shanghai, and Singapore. Okwui Enwezor, the 2008 Gwangju Biennale commissioner, said in an interview last fall: “I don’t think it is a competition among biennales. We have ten international art events opening in Asia this month. It is an immense privilege for this region to have so many exhibits open. There are very few artists repeated in the biennales, this is encouraging and it shows the diversity of the art and seems to shatter the notion that biennales are all the same.”<sup>1</sup> Okwui believes this is proof that the twenty-first century will be the Asian century. How would you react to this comment?

Your third question: “The curse of modernism is the notion that there are universal standards, that an object can speak for itself. How can curators educate their publics about the vernacular/local and international/global contexts? How are these contexts specific; how are they fluid?”

My answer is very simple. First of all, we need well-educated, mature curators, since only those curators can convey comprehensive knowledge of their subject with a sense of humanity and humbleness. I think they should be capable in all levels of communication.

Your fourth question: “Can art have a discrete power that is separate from and independent of other forms of power?”

My answer is: Was it ever completely separate from other forms of power? They have never been separate from each other. Please look at the Saatchi Collection and, in particular, the auction sale of Damien Hirst’s works. The recent success of Hirst’s direct auction sale gives a “go” signal to a possible new trend of shameless promotion and marketing done directly by artists who are ready to remove all discretion and to bypass the earlier channels that helped them appear as discreet as possible.

Thank you. That is the end of my presentation.

**David Elliott:** Thank you very much, Hongnam. We’ll pass it immediately to Jack Persekian, and then throw it open to discussion.

**Jack Persekian:** Curious, I was persuaded to go to one of Christie’s international modern and contemporary art auctions in Dubai, which took place on April 13, 2008. For the sake of full disclosure, I have to admit that it was my first time in a real auction event. I wasn’t sure what to look for, but one main objective of mine was to drum up as much of a public manifestation of support as possible for such an event because a couple of friends, Palestinian friends, artist friends, were exhibiting—or selling, I should say—their works in the auction. But this wasn’t like any other art event I’d ever been to before. There were hardly any artists there to see their works admired and acquired by collectors and the wannabes. All the artwork that was put up for sale lined the walls and foyer of the hall where the auction was taking place. They appeared hastily brought in and thrown up at the very last minute before the people attending were ushered in.

I'm sorry if this might seem banal to some seasoned-art-goers amongst you. I'm actually saying this for us novices who are not yet initiated into the art market and are just beginning to feel our way through its lurid labyrinth. The crowd seemed proper and prude. Everybody carried a catalogue with images representing the artworks on sale. There were dotted lines next to each picture for people to take notes even though a number of these images were unfaithful to the original object. (The catalogue designer was so focused on fitting all the images into as little space as possible that a number of vertical images were rotated horizontally in order to make room for more.) The auction visitors eagerly marked down the figure that each and every artwork went for, excitedly comparing it to the prices of other artworks and simultaneously making sure that their friends, companions, or simply the person next to them at that moment were taking note of how the whole thing was unraveling. I was not going to do what others were doing: that is, take notes of prices and go around, stretching muscles, trying to analyze trends, and explicating the inexplicable fluctuations in the prices amongst the various artists from the region and elsewhere. Yet I did go around looking for a copy of this catalogue just to keep track of the auction proceedings so as not to miss the moment when my friend's work came under the hammer.

So, sitting there, quite interested but not exactly capable of participation, I began to observe the lackluster enthusiasm for artworks from the Arab world, with very few people either in the hall or on the phones bidding against each other for the works, and very few works actually selling above the estimated sale prices printed in the auction catalogue. In fact, and to my dismay, I noticed that several artworks by Arab artists went for less than the lowest estimate in the catalogue. Yet it was only two years ago, around the time that this auction business had just started in Dubai, when these same artists, with very similar works, had garnered tremendous enthusiasm from the buying crowd and fetched significantly high prices never seen before in the Arab world and, in particular, for Arab art.

On the other hand, and in the same room, there was an uplifting and heartwarming euphoria for work from Iran, or from Iranian artists working abroad. Bidding ricocheted in the room, sending prices through the roof. No price estimate was sacrosanct. And no sound, prudent, economical advice, possibly from our good old friend the graphic designer, would have heeded that enthusiastic handful of people who were making this auction a worthwhile endeavour for Christie's and, of course, the artists. I waited for my artist friend's turn to come, hoping that my debut into the auction world would culminate in a windfall of cash for my artist friends. I crossed my fingers and convinced myself that I should think along the lines of what can be deemed beginner's luck. I have to admit that I considered the tactic of bidding against the collectors in order to jack up the prices, as I imagined that that must be the way some collectors and dealers orchestrate the appreciation of their collections. Idiotically, the crazy idea then crossed my mind that I should move around the room while bidding was underway in order to create a pretense that there were several people present, interested, and willing to spend money on my artist friends' works. Truthfully, however, I was frightened at the prospect of seeing the hammer land on me after busily scheming and underhandedly influencing other bidders to up the ante, ultimately leading to an artwork in my lap and a serious dent in my bank account. Consequently, I decided to dismiss all this nonsense and concentrate on what I do best: observe. There were two works, one for

each artist friend, and many people in the room. The first work came up, and the auctioneer started with an opening bid a couple thousand dollars below the lowest estimate in order to ensure, quite understandably, a lively auction. That notwithstanding, and so as not to be accused in the future of having had concealed my thoughts regarding the going prices from the region, I would like to simply state that for those artists who have not been around for more than a couple of years, particularly on the market, I cannot comprehend the logic or judgment behind their prices, which run in the tens of thousands of dollars, and some even in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Nevertheless, the bidding commenced. It went back and forth only once before the hammer went down. Wait. I could not believe it. Was that it? All my excitement and anticipation for an exhilarated auction where bidding would reach orgasmic proportions and the price sextupled, octupled, or decupled, as I indeed had witness minutes ago with several Iranian artists whose works fetched astronomic prices, was miserably smashed to smithereens against the solid, sad reality of not enough buyers and no real critical mass of collectors to give that leverage to art and artists from the Arab world.

I'm not construing this just because my friends' work didn't fare well on the auction floor, or to the fact that we Palestinians are somehow stuck in our Palestinian identity of self-pity, imagining that the entire world, let alone the Arabs, should rally to our support, wherever we are and in whatever we do. As *observing* was what I did best during those couple of hours, I can assert that many works by Arab artists did not fare well at the auction, fetching prices just at or below the lowest estimates. Some artworks did not sell at all. I'm not sure if prudence is the right word for it, but I can attest to the fact that there isn't anything close to an art market in the Arab world, particularly for contemporary Arab art. And there's no way to frugally gauge the value of the works by contemporary Arab artists, for there isn't enough buying and selling going on. Whatever is presented as achievements in price appreciation, sales, and demand is, in fact, camouflaged speculation by a handful of people, some connected with apparently streetwise dealers. This is really not how I imagined the budding art scene in the region would be handled and nurtured.

Nonetheless, the last edition of Christie's auction series was eagerly anticipated, as was their strategic move to Abu Dhabi in anticipation of a go at the huge market potential perched right next to an inexhaustible reserve of cash and prosperity. Quite suitably, the auction was titled "Best of the Best: An Exhibition of Magnificent Jewels and Watches alongside Impressionist, Orientalist Modern and Contemporary Masterpieces." This is the title. The rather strong input from the font size and the phrase "best of the best" leads me to wonder what their next auction will be titled. Perhaps "best of the best of the best," so as to convince those who didn't buy the first time that this might even be better? Worst of the worst is when one loses track of his or her references and misleadingly attempts to push art on people with one objective in mind: the bottom line. At this point, I have one question to ask. What will really be the title of the next auction in the Gulf? Thank you.

**David Elliott:** Thanks very much, Jack. That seems to focus back on what you were saying yesterday about the lack of critical mass in the region and the lack of public infrastructure, which makes it difficult to establish any kind of independent cultural value. If I understand you correctly, you're



really stuck with these auctions, and the market is the only denotation of value at the moment.

**Jack Persekian:** Basically, the speculation and the bidding circulates within an exclusive handful of people who have collections and want to maintain the price value fetched in the first auction. Beyond that, there's nothing. It's like there's a vacuum underneath it, with nothing to sustain either the value or the market.

**David Elliott:** It's one person's opinion against another. Without a public infrastructure to give some accreditation, I think this is one thing that museums can do, in that they are, or should be, disinterested. The staff is not being paid by anyone to put forward a particular view; their views are their own as professionals; none of them should be financially benefiting from any of the value judgments they make. And that independence is actually beyond price because it can't be bought; it's not for sale.

**Layla Diba:** I think it's very important to recognize the role of the auction houses in the creation of value; it's been much more important than any other forum in the Middle East for contemporary Middle Eastern art. I think you could have gone to the previous auction, Jack, or the one before that, and seen regional interests supporting one form of art. Say, one or two auctions previously, you had a lot of Arab art collectors bidding. Then Iranians came in, and at another point Palestinians will come in. That's one interesting aspect of where we are today in terms of the collecting and appreciation and what we need to get beyond. I think also what David said about the importance of institutions, public institutions, and of non-affiliated curators balancing the very negative impact of the auction houses in order to build up appreciation and a better understanding of contemporary Islamic art is very important. These regional interests you've seen also exist in the collecting; in the Middle East, there's no collecting across cultures. So I think here's where a museum, exhibitions, and biennales will play a very important balancing role.

**Sandhini Poddar:** We've been talking about auction houses creating value, but I think exhibitions create value also. Regarding contemporary Indian art, an exhibition like *The Indian Highway* at the Serpentine in December 2008 is important to talk about because although it was criticized in the London press, there's been very little critical discussion about it between curators and artists. You've got certain curators who are working internationally and certain platforms for expression like the Serpentine that are equally responsible for creating value. And now it's very difficult for us, as scholars and curators, to come in after six or seven years of this rampage of irresponsible contemporary Indian art exhibitions. I think it is a point of responsibility to create a fresh point of view that is both sensitive to the critical discourse that's been happening *within* India, and to marshal a response to the disservice to contemporary Indian art that many of these exhibitions have contributed during the last several years.

**David Elliott:** I agree with you, and you're implying that *The Indian Highway* was not a good show.

**Sandhini Poddar:** It wasn't researched. It was done in less than six months.

**David Elliott:** But what was really bad about it? What were the worst things about it?

**Sandhini Poddar:** There was no thesis. I also blame some of the artists and their desperation for this kind of international exposure that leads them to be hand-in-glove in this exploitation of their work. They really don't need to bow down. I find that ridiculous. I don't blame the problem purely on institutions or curators or museums; I think a large part of it is very much the decision of the artist to participate or to not participate.

**David Elliott:** Was there some good work in it? Was it just a lousy show?

**Sandhini Poddar:** It was a lousy show. It was a missed opportunity for the field. In terms of the individual artists and the choices within their body of work, that too was lacking. So it wasn't as if we were complaining only about the choice of artists; it's also the choice of work within their artistic production as such. I think it would be very helpful, when thinking about value, to consider the way in which Akeel Bilgrami understands it. There's value that exists in the world, and there's value that exists in objects. It's only in the perception of that value that agency is created. Concerning film and video, for example, these ideas prompt questions about the first-person point of view in relation to expression and artistic expression. How is it that one is presenting that first-person point of view? And who is that first person? Is that first person necessarily only the artist, or can an artist express another's point of view, through the first person? It's only in recognizing value that that attachment is created, that that feeling of participation comes around. Otherwise you don't really feel like you can enter a field. You don't really feel like you can enter a certain reality because you've already been cut out of that negotiation, cut out of that possibility.

**David Elliott:** In contemporary literature, this is quite normal, including Indian literature.

**Sandhini Poddar:** All of this goes back to the Enlightenment; Bilgrami talks about that, as do Gandhi, Marx, and Spinoza, this idea that there is this value that exists, and how one recognizes it, participates, and then makes the choices that are important.

**David Elliott:** I think that's a really good point because it also touches on what Hongnam was talking about in relationship to Eastern art. You were saying calligraphy in particular is very difficult for non-Chinese readers to have access to, so they'll inevitably look at it only formally. But of course there's a whole other representational work which is related to that or sometimes comes out of that and which is much more accessible. If you are going to appreciate such work on anything other than a formal level, you do have to have access to certain cultural ideas, some of which relate to religion or relate to ideas of harmony and balance within society, within the polity, within nature. You learn these as you grow up. But let's think about this. . . If you're Austrian, you're not born liking Mozart, and you may well never, ever like Mozart. But some learn to like it. It's the same for us all. I think if you have the desire, even if you're not born into a culture, you can learn about another culture quite quickly. Alexandra was saying yesterday that access to language is very important. In some cases, it's not always possible, but at some level you have to get engaged with language because otherwise

you're not going to get access to the unique concepts of a particular culture, which almost certainly have analogies in other cultures. Let's just bring this into the contemporary field regarding what Hongnam was saying: there are traditions of representation in East Asia which go through Japan, Korea, China and which contemporary artists are working with that are completely separate from a Western aesthetic. Kim Sunhee made an exhibition called *The Elegance of Silence* about five years ago at the Mori Art Center, which took just this idea as a premise. It was a brilliant exhibition. And it seems to me that the same approach is needed for India, that you have not one Indian culture but thousands of them: high culture, popular culture, low culture, so-called tribal culture, and so on. The whole thing anyway is a remix through millennia. How do you somehow begin to understand it, and then express it in an exhibition about the contemporary world? Because only when you have that purview, that breadth, are you going to actually represent something which is maybe worth being in if you're an artist.

You were right to say that in many cases, aesthetic quality is determined by geopolitical power, yes, because there was a history of big civilizations with large standing armies, wealth, and often slaves. But the Mongolians, though they were big and powerful, and established the largest land-based Empire in the history of the world, didn't have much material culture at all, so this is not always true. Recently I've been in New Zealand and Canada, and I've been looking at Maori art as well as that of Northwest American First Peoples. I saw there works of great power! But these people haven't had geopolitical power for three or four hundred years in some cases, and still they make great art. And it's contemporary, a lot of it, because people are working both inside and outside tradition in an innovative way. This brings us back to the Enlightenment, because it was the impact of its "modernity" that wrecked the lives of these peoples. The explorers and colonists, with their Western theories of property and power, thought they knew everything, could own everything, could take everything, take it back home, bits of animals, bits of plants, bits of people, and they thought they had the manifest destiny to change other people's lives for them. I think we now all realize that this is morally unacceptable. What do we do about it? Jack?

**Jack Wadsworth:** My comment will perhaps take us in a slightly different direction. This discussion raises a question in my mind about whether or not there is an ideal structure in the marketplace for creating the greatest likelihood that the best, if that's the right word, will be identified. It seems to me that in a contemporary art context, it's clear in hindsight that only a very small percentage of the art being produced at any one time lasts a hundred years. If that is a measure of quality, at least in the West, the relationship between the artist, the dealer, the scholar, the museum, the collector, comes together to forge a sort of conclusion, resulting in this incredible tension among these different players because of conflicts of interest. In Asia, and presumably in the Arab world, the ideas of structure are much more primitive. For example, many Chinese artists that we've known for years resisted the temptation to use dealers at all. There's very little in the way of a dealer community; they went directly to the market themselves. I presume in the Arab world, the market Jack describes is almost at a point where the artist, the collector, and the auction house are still in the process of determining these relationships. Is there any learning in the experience of those of you around the table that the Western model is as ideally suited to create the maximum possibility of extracting the best of the best?

**David Elliott:** Well, I think this list that you gave—artist, museum, dealer, collector—that’s good, but there’s one group missing, and that is the public, who aren’t stupid. Lots of curators believe, deeply, that the public are stupid. But it’s not true. We’re not to use the term marketplace anymore, but of course, there’s the marketplace, which is one denoter of value, but there’s also the agora, the forum, where people gather and they talk. And that can be the press, the media, dinner parties, the street. Word of mouth gets around very quickly, as I’m sure you know. It’s the quickest way of getting a good public for an exhibition. It’s not reviews so much; if the word of mouth is going so well, then people come out and they feel part of it. I think the museums are the most successful by not telling people what they should think, or feel, but actually giving them a toolbox of information to use themselves. And I think that’s what you’ve done with your education programme, your pedagogic thing here, giving people a toolbox, if they need it, to get further into the art. But the most special thing is to give them the experience of the art. And that’s unique to them; only they can have it, and they are free to do with it what they like.

**Susy Wadsworth:** But does that exist in the Middle East?

**David Elliott:** No. You don’t even have a concept of a public. And maybe in China, too. It’s very, very closely linked up.

**Susy Wadsworth:** But in the Middle East, Jack, is there any relationship at all with people from Lebanon, from Turkey, or from North Africa? Is there any formal infrastructure between artist and museum and dealer and audience and buyer?

**Jack Persekian:** No.

**Susy Wadsworth:** So how is the Guggenheim going to build a museum in Abu Dhabi?

**Dana Farouki:** It’s problematic also because the auction houses will have existed there for almost ten years before the Guggenheim has a permanent space, which is going to be difficult because certain artists do have a market—those are the modern artists, not the contemporary ones. Someone like Mona Hatoum, who has a market in New York, has zero market in the Middle East. The value is different; it’s remarkable. And they appreciate different things in a certain sense. So our challenge is to determine what we will show and what we will determine as valuable. Will that reflect the market that has been created by the auction houses, or will it be totally disconnected?

**David Elliott:** Oh, it shouldn’t be disconnected.

**Dana Farouki:** It shouldn’t be disconnected, but it’s going to be shocking to an audience who comes into the museum and sees something that they’ve never seen before, this thing that we are claiming is a masterpiece. This is extremely different from the Iranian example because there are certainly more masters in Iran that have more or less been accepted in the region and outside the region, than with Arabs.

**Alexandra Munroe:** Why is that?



**Layla Diba:** Iranian modernism is better known, but it's also had many ups and down in terms of its valuation. Artists that were being touted, as you said, as great masters in the last five years I've known since the seventies, and they had absolutely no value beyond a circle of connoisseurs for more than twenty years of their life, and all of the sudden they were elevated. I think the Iranian Saqqakhaneh school and the Arab Hurufiyya movement are the two movements that have attracted the most attention in terms of modern masters. I feel there's a balance, but as you said perhaps a little bit more in favour of Iranian artists, for various reasons.

**David Elliott:** Thank you. Uli.

**Uli Sigg:** I think we just faced one of several possible patterns for how a cultural space, an art operating system, can develop. If we look at China, it has been very similar. For a very long time there was an art operating system, very incomplete as measured, say, by a Western standard. In particular, there was no gallery system until the mid nineties. And there was nothing you would term a market. Actually, for years, I had been the market! This raises many, many questions that I will not go into here. You may term it a totalitarian system in terms of governance of a cultural space, as we see it in China, as we see it in the Arab world. The question is who is going to validate the art, the contemporary art. In the example of China, unfortunately, it's very much the market, and there is no balance to the market at present because the institutions that could balance the market as they exist in, say, freer countries, cannot work the way they're supposed to work. So in the end, it will be the auction catalogues that determine what is of value and what isn't. I think for a while we will face a similar situation in the Middle East.

**David Elliott:** Writers also contribute to valuation. I write a little bit about Chinese art, and who you choose to write about, what you write about them, does create this bedrock of criticism which you have to have, I think. It's absolutely vital. It's all part of this context and infrastructure creating these cultures that don't have a history. You could say there was no modern art in China until the mid seventies.

**Uli Sigg:** But there hasn't been independent art criticism. People like Hou Hanru had to go elsewhere to exert their profession. So independent art criticism would be one of these institutions to balance the market. It is not really at work in China at this very moment. There are many reasons why there is a dependence. It was previously more political; today it's more market dependent. But you find very little independent criticism.

**Hou Hanru:** I'll just add one thing. It's a really crucial point here that the main problem is political. It's the political system that has basically eliminated the intellectual class in recent Chinese history, modern history let's say, for more than sixty years now. Gradually, the intellectual class, along with the newborn middle-class bourgeoisie, has been erased from the public space. That poses a very serious problem today. China is experiencing economic speculation booms, and alongside that is a strong effort to reconstruct the middle class, but it will take a lot of time to achieve that. Even in the Chinese context, which is so intense with its complicated historical background, it will take a lot of desire, energy and, at the end of the day, a very long time to really build up a normal situation. But that doesn't mean it's totally impossible. A lot of attempts have been made in

the last twenty or thirty years, and this is why we are gradually seeing a lot of biennials and museum directors trying to come up with exhibitions. But inevitably they have to mingle with the market power, which also plays a role as a counter-political power that one cannot ignore. Just like Uli. For a long time, he was the only market, the one who brought not only money to the artists but also the possibility for them to have spaces to produce certain work independently. That is how the market works in the way of providing. So we cannot simply blame the market. Even though I'm very critical of it, I think the market power in some specific contexts would actually have much more importance. Perhaps it will be this way in the Middle East, especially in the Emirates.

**Jane DeBevoise:** Just one issue—and I think it's very much in line with what Hanru is saying and will perhaps expand upon it a little bit. I think we should caution people against demonizing the market because the market has actually been a destabilizing force in some ways and has undermined previous totalitarian, authoritarian, or rigid structures in a way that is very modern. And when you look at the migration of patronage (if you want to put it that way, to use an old-fashioned term which I think is problematic in itself), the system of support for the arts in China during the Cultural Revolution and during the more strident periods had a singular patron: the state. Within that, obviously the state is never monolithic; even during the Cultural Revolution, all this turbulence indicated it wasn't a monolithic state, but it was relatively singular. And during the eighties, in many respects the market—not the art market but market reform and the introduction of capitalist forces—provided spaces and the energy for artists and entrepreneurs and everybody else to break down old patterns and create new possibilities. I think one of the problems is how to react critically to these things. People get swept up in it. There were people who were painting for the great patrons, whether it was the totalitarian patrons or feudal patrons. But when things change, how do you maintain a certain independence and criticality to that? It's very easy to be lured into working for it. To the extent that there are these cells of independence in China and other places, there are these art spaces, art writers. I think in some ways our responsibility to those who perhaps can have the luxury to be independent—whether because we're financially stable, or outside the system, or have other forms of support—is to support and nurture those practices, even if they're momentary practices. I think so much of what happens in places like China and perhaps the Middle East is more of “watch what I do more than what I say,” because sometimes you can't say things. The press is very censored; it's dangerous. But just watch. There are curators in China, and museums even, from time to time, whose entire program may be deeply compromised, but once in a while they do a very interesting show. They kind of slide it under the radar, and it gets done. Those are the things that perhaps are our responsibility to identify and support. So I think it's a very interesting moment. We wouldn't be talking about Chinese art, let's face it, if we didn't have this market surge.

**David Elliott:** No, I didn't mean to demonize the market. Just making a distinction between market wealth and other types of wealth. It's very similar to the Soviet Union as well.

**Arjun Appadurai:** I'm reminded of, in this context, a book I edited many years ago, along with a group of people, called *The Social Life of Things*. It argues namely that art objects like other things, including human beings,

move through various states in various periods, sometimes that state being a commodity state and at other times not, as with human beings in slavery, and so on. So it's never a clean question of "is this a this" or "is this a that." I bring this observation up now because I am thinking about this issue of the market bubbling under the discussion: what is it, what does it do? It's always there, and has always been there; capitalism and the market are very old. One of its classic problems is that the market cannot, by its nature, deal with singularity. But art, by its nature, seeks to be about singularity. In order to cope, the market has to compare it to something else, and this is how pricing happens. The market does do a certain kind of valuation, and for that valuation to happen, whether it's in the Middle East, or whether it's in India or China or the modern U.S., where the institutional structure is very dense, the market requires typification. So, what ecology in any given historical moment does the market fit into? The market does its own kind of valuation; you can't ask it to do some other kind of valuation. But then we as critics, as viewers, etc., do other kinds of valuation which are not pricing activities, but which relate to pricing activities that have a place in the world and that are always there. So I've been contemplating this difficult, important question of how to create productive relations between market forms of valuation in a particular place at a particular time, because it's different of course in the contemporary Middle East than in India today, etc., in relation to other actually existing forms of valuation. And when they don't exist, you have to create them or have shadow versions of criticism or shadow versions of the market. Anyway, I think this is a wonderful question. It's not just an academic question but also a question of what you can actively produce. You can say because there's too much of this, let's do that. Or because the market was working without critics, let's have critics so that the market becomes more complex. Or if we are without markets, perhaps that's not good either because the painted word sets in, and so forth.

**Jack Wadsworth:** We come back to the Middle East again. Specifically, I wonder if there are any lessons in history—we have a lot of historians in the room—that might be applied to this evolving phenomenon of contemporary art in the Middle East. Let me pose a question. Along with Uli Sigg, there was Johnson Chang of Hanart Gallery in Hong Kong, at a moment when few people were thinking about contemporary Chinese art after Tian'anmen Square. I think even today, Johnson's China's New Art Post-1989 show, the catalogue, and the artists that were contained in it really established the beginning framework. Is there anywhere in the Middle East a Johnson Chang? The reason I mention him is that he is a scholar, a writer, a collector, a curator—a unique character. He is almost a museum. In other words, Johnson is not just a dealer. Where is the framework?

**David Elliott:** A few more questions. We're running out of time. Victoria?

**Victoria Lu:** When I first moved back to Shanghai almost six years ago, someone wrote a letter to the government saying that I'm a Taiwanese independent, possibly some kind of spy. The government became very suspicious of me, asking why this Taiwanese woman and American citizen was working in Shanghai; consequently it was very difficult for me to find a job, and I continued to have a difficult time even after starting work as a creative director for Shanghai MOCA. Then five years went by. During this time, for each exhibition shown at Shanghai MOCA, including the travelling Guggenheim show, we've sent to the propaganda office, two months in advance of the opening date, a report that includes every piece of

work, images, dimensions. As of today, none of our exhibitions have been rejected by the government because I pre-screen my submissions, and I know how to live with my reality. You cannot humiliate government leaders; other than that, standards have loosened tremendously in the last five years, and I've come to work more closely than ever with government officers. I'm now able to participate in many meetings that I was prohibited from before. It's very interesting that the new government officers today want to enter the art business and do the art fairs. They actually want to create some kind of business model; the last I heard, they are trying to establish a special tax zone in the Pudong area to help the art fair office, and there have been talks about establishing a government fund to purchase contemporary art. I've even been asked by the central foreign press bureau to write a book series on contemporary art and for the Frankfurt book fair. Shockingly, they said I could submit the list of artist names. The list included Ai Weiwei, but they didn't say no like they would have in the past. It's amazing that things in China are changing, although I'm not sure why. Perhaps I'm a good frontier for them. But my experience up until today is really progress rather than anything else.

**David Elliott:** Good. Thanks very much; that's very useful. Uli, and then, Alexandra, Apinan, and Jack.

**Uli Sigg:** We could go on much longer with market and all these issues, but we haven't touched upon universalism, which I think is maybe a more complex and more intriguing topic. David, you mentioned early on—and this has long been my belief also—that the gatekeepers to the global mainstream art are almost exclusively, formerly only exclusively, Western people. I remember many years ago reading about these islands in the Southern Pacific where the ideal of beauty is the obese woman. When I think of that, could we be wrong?

**David Elliott:** I think that's a good point. Alexandra?

**Alexandra Munroe:** I wanted to return for a moment to the idea of markets and then lead the discussion back to curatorial application. When we think of markets, we have to remember that there aren't universal markets either. We think of just Christie's and Sotheby's and maybe Philips de Pury, but actually those are not the single denoters of financial value, however contingent and transitional in the world, even when they're dealing with Chinese art or Iranian art. There are numerous local national art markets and auctions: there are seven auction houses within China, for example, the largest being the Guardian, and numerous such auction houses dominate whole areas of domestic art production within Japan, as well. What's interesting is the large discrepancy of taste between what dominates the domestic art market in China or Japan; and what dominates the Chinese and Japanese art market in the foreign auction houses. The domestic markets are overwhelmingly dominated by "traditional" style ink and/or pigment painting on paper or silk (known as *guohua*, *shuimohua* in China and *Nihonga* and *suibokuga* in Japan). A top-selling artist in Japan is the *Nihonga* artist Kaii Higashiyama. Yet Higashiyama and other *Nihonga* artists would unlikely be presented at contemporary art museums in the West because of the "conservative" and "academic" nature of their work, which runs counter to our Eurocentric mandate to present the new and innovative. So we need to keep in mind that even auction prices or the market mechanism are subject to volatility and are constructed by context and culture and national interpretations.



**Apinan Poshynanda:** In 1996, I did a show called Traditions/Tensions in New York. The artists that were selected, including Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Montien Boonma, and Chatchai Puipia, were shown at Asia Society, Queens Museum, and the Grey Art Gallery. The *Sunday Times* gave us a good review, but other reviews called it a hodge-podge. They really couldn't understand it; maybe they weren't ready. But after the show travelled for three years, the market back home really shot up, at least in Thailand anyway, and in India too. Even today, I would say, there's a cue to buy Chatchai Puipia's work. My point is that even one show can be consequential when it's at the right time at the right moment. It's like feelers. You curate a show, and obviously you don't know what will happen, especially with extremely unknown names in the arena of New York.

**David Elliott:** Thanks, Apinan. Jack.

**Jack Persekian:** Going back to your question, David, I'd like to remind us that we need to realize the amount of art that has been, and is being, produced in the Arab world vis-à-vis other places like China. It's very little. So it's not as though there are so many artists and so much work that needs to be collected, or can be collected. It's really a challenge to collect, as you can see, for instance, from the quality of production at the Emirati Expressions show that was presented in Abu Dhabi last year. First, as I read in my paper, the move by the two major auction houses (Christie's and Sotheby's) in the last couple years was a one- or maybe two-time event that died out because there's simply not much to offer. Second, with regard to collecting, the big question there is: Why should we collect? What's the reason for collecting? Some people like to own some work to decorate their houses, no more no less. The whole concept of collecting is not really part of writing history through the visual practice. Visual expression does not really factor in very much in how we represent or think about the Arab world and the region. Basically, what people can deal with—I'm generalizing here—is calligraphy and abstraction, at best.

**Dana Farouki:** The market.

**Jack Persekian:** Yes, people in general, whoever buys in the market. You mentioned Mona Hatoum earlier. Because I do these shows and put up installations and videos, people ask me, "Jack, if we buy this, what do we do with it, where can we put it? A video? How can we fit a video in a living room?"

**Hou Hanru:** This is not exclusive to that part of the world. I did a show at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2003. Everyone got so excited; there was noise, lights, everything. At the close of the show, I met a major museum delegation of collectors, trustees, and board members who asked me, "What can I buy here, can you tell me?" Nothing.

That brings us to the issue of being able to see the limit of the market itself, especially the immediate digestion of the market. Some galleries in Asia are very interesting because their marketing can be based on a very cynical philosophy of the market. For example, some of them are not marketing contemporary art; they are marketing the kind of image that they know the client will be projecting onto the art as "contemporary Asian art." So I think one has to be very careful when talking about the market, whether we are speaking of the good or the bad. I really think that what makes Chinese art

so dramatically interesting and sometimes disgusting has a historical origin, and that was one of those moments.

**Geeta Kapur:** I thought that David started the panel on a different note—where he indicated a relationship, or questioned the relationship, between value as it is created within the practice of art and aesthetics, and in the market. He deliberately made them into binaries in order to refer back to two sets of issues. But most of the discussion has been on market value. Let us take the example of the Middle East. (I must say I feel uncomfortable because the “Middle East” has a Western/Orientalist perspective; we should say West Asia, as you then get the entire spectrum, from West Asia, to South Asia, to Southeast Asia, to Northeast Asia, or East Asia.) Countries in West Asia have few institutional structures or museums of art—for that matter, even a big country like India, with a longer institutional history, has a meagre infrastructure for housing and displaying modern and contemporary art—but there is now a growing art market speculating on value. In another, foundational sense, value is being created on the ground. What Jack Persekian does in Al-Ma'mal in Jerusalem, or what Christine Tohme does in Beirut, and Vasif Kortun in Istanbul, the kind of struggle the Iranian artists put up, and what is happening in Cairo, and perhaps also on a minimal scale in Jordan, all this is on the ground, *creating value* precisely of the kind David spoke about. This has to do with the moral life . . . a difficult word to deal with, but, yes, a certain kind of moral value is being created through the groundbreaking work these small institutional efforts present. We needn't always only be concerned with museums and market, for then all the work that is being done with and through life and art—where interactions are taking place at great risk, where resistance is put up, where strategies and subversions and alliances have to be made, all these value-making projects get eclipsed. The structure of values for our purposes includes artistic practice and aesthetics, institutional validation, and market value.

**Shahzia Sikander:** I really appreciated Geeta's feedback. The reference to the larger region as “Middle East” is confusing. It could mean a host of places that are culturally and historically diverse. Istanbul is very different from Cairo, and Cairo from Lebanon. Discourse about “Middle East” should be full of depth and engage all the differences. For example, there is such incredible local literature that has always existed. How many people here even know about it? So unless and until there is an inherent structure created that informs other aspects of thinking, you will have a very hard time understanding the contribution that visual artists have been making.

**Geeta Kapur:** I forgot to mention the most important contribution—Jack Persekian's initiative in the Sharjah Biennale where there's not only discourse within the work but also a production of some kind of discursive *space* for West Asian art in the world.

**David Elliott:** Well, thank you very much. We made a bit apace there.

**Alexandra Munroe:** Thank you, David. Thank you very much.

*This transcript was compiled and edited by Nancy Lim, Asian Art Curatorial Fellow.*

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Rose A. Garcia, “Gwangju Biennale, Unbounded, Takes Off,” *Korea Times*, September 5, 2008.

Winston Kyan

## Artist, System, Culture On the Anthropology of Contemporary Chinese Art: An Interview with Wu Hung

**Winston Kyan:** As someone who has been involved for over three decades with contemporary Chinese art in both Asia and America, could you begin by describing your early experiences in these activities as you yourself emigrated from China to the United States?

**Wu Hung:** Even before I came to the U.S. in 1980, I was part of the modern art and literature movement in China. And when I began studying at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing before the Cultural Revolution, there were these underground art societies where we painted or wrote poetry in what we thought was a very “Western” way. Of course we suffered for that later. So the practice of contemporary Chinese art had always been in me both before and after the Cultural Revolution. But then I left to study ancient Chinese art at Harvard, and I sort of divorced that earlier engagement.

**Winston Kyan:** And then when did you resume that engagement?

**Wu Hung:** When I had finished my formal coursework and started to write my dissertation in 1984, I moved to Adams House at Harvard. So just as my time became more flexible after finishing coursework, several Chinese painters had also come to New York, among them Chen Danqing and Zhang Hongtu. The majority of these artists were very skilled realist painters trained in the academies, and we all got to know each other and established a very enjoyable relationship. We faced this unknown country and unknown future without money or status, but we were full of enthusiasm. So based on these relationships, I began to organize my earliest exhibitions at Adams House.

**Winston Kyan:** The Adams House exhibitions have acquired an almost mythic reputation as small but significant milestones in the exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in the U.S. Could you describe their reception at the time?

**Wu Hung:** As you say, the exhibitions were not very large in scale and Adams House is not a public museum or gallery, but there was this beautiful, classical lower common room that we used for exhibitions. In total, I did about ten exhibitions from 1984 to 1985. Each time there was no funding whatsoever, so we just tied the paintings to the car in New York and put them on the walls in Cambridge, then publicized them through handmade posters. It was all very primitive, but also very pure. There was no commercial pressure, no social prestige.

We mainly relied on the excitement surrounding the opening of a show to get people involved. After the opening not many people cared. Since the people who came were mainly professors and students, their reception to the works tended towards surprise at the level of the artists' painterly skills—they were realist rather than conceptual artists. People were also quite astonished by the themes. Chen Danqing's paintings of Tibetans, or Luo Zhongli's powerful portraits, or Mu Xin's personal landscapes just did not correspond to many viewers' notion of Chinese art as socialist or communist. So I view the reception of these shows as having small, personal impacts.

**Winston Kyan:** It seems that the curatorial decisions made during those early years were based on the personal relationships that you had with these artists. How do you see this interest in the individual artist as shaping your later curatorial practice?



Installation view of *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 1999, David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999. Courtesy of Wu Hung.

**Wu Hung:** Actually, the main intention of the *Transience* show (1999) was to study individual artists. I wanted to foreground the person, rather than basing the exhibition on certain movements or notions of “Chineseness.” And like the Adams House shows, I wanted to emphasize that I knew these artists and that their work meant something to me. So my intention was to introduce these individual artists and not just bring over their works. I feel that this is very important and might be related to my interest in anthropology. Even in my study of ancient Chinese art, the individual artists are very important despite the scarcity of information that is available to rediscover them. With living artists, however, I feel that the possibility to get to know them and to work with them is a privilege.

**Winston Kyan:** On this human level, how might you describe the impact of bringing these Chinese artists to the U.S. for the *Transience* show?

**Wu Hung:** Actually, I was very self-conscious about *Transience*, and I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to do this, I had to be really, really serious. Not just for me, but for the field of Chinese art history since there was this great opportunity in the 1990s to redefine what Chinese art history is in terms of its temporal scope. I wanted to show that Chinese art does not end with the past, but continues very actively in the present. So to put a contemporary face on Chinese art, I realized that I must address



the question of “what is an artist?” I basically think that contemporary art is about the work of an individual and only later does it become part of larger themes or trends. Even today, when people think about Chinese art, they bring up some big periods or overarching themes while the individual disappears. So I feel that the impact of *Transience* is in the catalogue and the interviews that help readers get a good sense of the artist as a person.

**Winston Kyan:** After *Transience*, you returned to Beijing from 1999 to 2000 on a Guggenheim Fellowship. How did this extended engagement with artists shape your curatorial practice?

**Wu Hung:** That year I was supposed to be writing a book on “ruins,” but what I found most exciting when I got to Beijing were all these activities related to organizing exhibitions. There was so much energy and so many underground exhibitions that I basically spent the whole year working on



Song Dong, *Father and Son in the Former Ancestral Temple (Chicago Edition)*, video installation in *Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 2000, David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. Courtesy of Wu Hung.

the theme of exhibitions rather than following individual artists. I wanted to explore how artists and curators use exhibitions to show their work, because the study of art is not just about artworks—art is about relationships, art is about systems—and I became very interested in the Chinese system of exhibitions and the exhibition itself as a form. I focused on canceled shows in China because around that time, many experimental art exhibitions had been canceled by cultural authorities, police departments, and neighbourhood committees; the reasons were complex and demanded careful investigation. I also began to think about how to use the form of the art exhibition as a way to explore this phenomenon. This led to the exhibition *Canceled* (2000), which I think is conceptually the strongest and most experimental of all of my shows, even though there are basically no artworks displayed in that show at all.



Wang Guangyi, *Materialist*, 2001, sculptural installation at the First Guangzhou Triennial, Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art, 1990–2000, Guangdong Art Museum. Courtesy of Wu Hung.

**Winston Kyan:** Since from the start you conceived of *Canceled* as something that would be realized in America, how did you then gauge the response of Chinese artists and critics to this show?

**Wu Hung:** There was very little reaction. In general, my American shows on contemporary Chinese art have not had a big impact in China. Maybe because they are not designed as blockbusters, but are more academic and intellectual? Also, the system of exhibiting art in China is very different in terms of speed and standards. Nevertheless, there is a process.

**Winston Kyan:** Could you elaborate on this process in light of your own experiences?

**Wu Hung:** The first show I did in China was also the largest I have ever undertaken. This was the first Guangzhou Triennial (2002). When Wang Huangsheng (then the director of the Guangdong Museum of Art) first approached me about how I would take charge of a big international show, I responded that a triennial of that scope would be very good for China, but biennials and triennials are nothing new as a form of exhibition. You have all these independent curators, international artists, major installations, and even though it would be great to bring this system to China to show that China is open to this system, it is nothing original. So I suggested that if a big triennial in China is meant to show that China is open to contemporary art, then we need to first make sure that there is a contemporary art in China. That's why the focus was totally on Chinese art and not on international art. So I selected two wonderful co-curators, Feng Boyi and Huang Zhuan, and we systematically went through the art of the entire 1990s in China. If my earlier shows mainly focused on individual artists, this show was historiographic.

**Winston Kyan:** It seems that with the Guangzhou Triennial, you realigned the relationship between China and contemporary art by focusing specifically on China and *its own* contemporary art. Did any of your other shows use exhibitions as a form to realign presumed relationships?

**Wu Hung:** One exhibition that comes to mind is the exhibition *Shu: Books in Contemporary Chinese Art* at the China Institute in New York (2006–07). In many ways, this exhibition was designed to help the China Institute make

Yue Minjun, *Garbage Dump*, 2005–06, installation in *Shu: Books in Contemporary Chinese Art*, China Institute Gallery, New York, 2006–07. Courtesy of Wu Hung.



the transition from an institution focused on traditional Chinese culture to one that also included the contemporary. This is a challenge faced by many similar institutions in the West today, but I feel that if the shift from the traditional to the contemporary is established too fast, then the institution risks losing its base and its audience. This is not practical. So ideally, the curator tries to find works that intrinsically reflect the negotiation between past and present, and between traditional aesthetics and contemporary expressions. So I was drawn to this theme of *shu*, or book in English, precisely because it is not a typical contemporary art concept. But if you study the overall works of the individual artists in the show, you see that the book is extremely important to both their practice and what has become their canonical works. Just to name two examples, I can think of Xu Bing's *Book From the Sky* (1987) and Huang Yong Ping's *A History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Western Art Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987).

Gu Wenda, *Ink Alchemy*, installation, 1999–2001. Courtesy of the artist.



But more than that, this show tried to ask what an object is and what a text is. In the Chinese tradition, books possess a strong sense of materiality and of reading habits. One of the things that I tried to do is to show how these traditional attitudes toward books provide a way to explain the thinking of contemporary Chinese artists. For example, Gu Wenda's *Ink Alchemy* (1999–01) and *Tea Alchemy* (2002) used hair to make ink and used tea to make paper. Of course, using some kind of unconventional

material to make ink and paper is found throughout Chinese history, but within Gu Wenda's contemporary practice, hair has a special significance, and to use it to make ink is very unusual.

**Winston Kyan:** You have mentioned the role of traditional history in the making of contemporary Chinese art. Could you describe how your own historical research informs your approach to the contemporary?

**Wu Hung:** You bring up the dilemma of historicizing the contemporary. When researching and writing on historical works, we know that the readership is very limited. We almost intentionally don't make our work popular because that is the nature of the field. Even when writing a broader survey, we don't worry about how many people will see it or how many people will read it. But in contemporary art it is almost a given that you have to reach a larger audience. It's totally a different game, and we can't treat it fully as a historical project with clearly defined terms and positions. For me, I try to study contemporary Chinese art with the goal of reaching a broader audience, but I still want to use some historical methodology or perception. For example, I still insist on following artists for several years, interviewing them to give them context, exploring their individual intentions, and looking at the human factors that shape their work. This way, I have a better sense of what for me is new and what is old. I know that other curators work in very different ways, often by simply assembling works that they find interesting, and in some ways, this can better capture levels of current excitement or new talent. In my own shows, I just want to find a middle ground between taking into account the present moment and developing a narrative that avoids historical determinism.

**Winston Kyan:** It seems that by combining conventional notions of the historical and the contemporary, contemporary Chinese art has the potential to challenge the chronological divisions typically reserved for the study of Western art and the geographic partitions used to study non-Western art. Could you comment on how your exhibitions have addressed these issues of time and space?



**Wu Hung:** This is a very complicated topic that involves several operative categories and multiple definitions. But I had to think seriously about what contemporary Asian art is when I co-curated the Re-imagining Asia show with Shaheen Merali for

Ujino Muneteru, *Ozone-So*, 2004, installed at Re-Imagining Asia, House of World Cultures, Berlin, 2008. Courtesy of Wu Hung.

the House of World Cultures in Berlin (2008). Finally, I came up with a conclusion that is rather radical. I decided to include Western artists as long as those artists in their particular works engaged Asian culture. I didn't say that the individual person is a contemporary Asian artist, but rather that the temporary engagement of the artist's work with Asia implies that his or her artistic subjectivity was momentarily defined as Asian. I feel that my current thinking is focused not so much on the permanent identity of the artist, but rather on how the artwork itself negotiates the shifting relationship between identity and terrain.

**Winston Kyan:** Now that you bring up the power of artworks to challenge preconceived notions about identity, could you speak to specific examples of contemporary Chinese art that are especially transformative in questioning cultural and national identities?

**Wu Hung:** At the highest level, there are works such as Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–96), which is very conceptual, but it also represents his practical philosophy that art can serve the people in a positive way.



It also represents Xu Bing's own artistic trajectory from the invented characters in *Book from the Sky* (1987), which nobody can comprehend, to the English in *Square Word Calligraphy* that everyone can understand. I actually brought *Square Word Calligraphy* to the Guangzhou Triennial to see how a work that is directed at the cultural assumptions of Westerners might play out with a Chinese audience. So we set up a classroom, and since people know the brush and know some English, they just loved it. In this sense, *Square Word Calligraphy* doesn't really represent Chinese art, but it clearly belongs in an international sphere.



Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy: Classroom*, installation/performance, 1994–96. Courtesy of the artist.

Another work that comes to mind is Song Dong's *Waste Not*. I first did that show with him in 1995, and it was most recently reinstalled at MOMA in the summer of 2009. It's basically 10,000 pieces from his mother's accumulation of junk. You know that his mother developed this pathological relationship with things and could not bear to throw away anything for the sake of memory, hardship, or whatever. She almost suffocated herself, and even after Song Dong moved her from her old home to a new apartment, the place immediately turned into a garbage can the very next day. The mother simply preferred to live in this cocoon. Song Dong finally realized that to save his mother, he had to turn her into an artist and to use these things to make an installation. And it worked, totally worked. The mother became involved in this project, and whether this work was shown in Gwangju, or Berlin, or New York, people have always reacted strongly. So although *Waste Not* is based entirely on a Chinese experience, it captures human relationships that are so universal that people can connect to it on a very basic level.

So just using these two works as examples, we see that Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy* was created in the U.S., but then engaged with China. And Song Dong's *Waste Not* was created in China, but then engaged with the international sphere. Both are works of contemporary Chinese art, but they imply very different ways of cutting across cultural and national identities.

**Winston Kyan:** In that sense, is it still useful to make the distinction between the contemporary in Chinese art and the Chinese in contemporary art?



**Wu Hung:** I feel that some works of contemporary Chinese art clearly belong to the sphere of international contemporary art found in the big biennials and triennials. But then there are other kinds of contemporary Chinese art, like contemporary ink painting or contemporary realist painting, that are closely associated with China as a particular place. If these works are brought to another place, then their meaning is immediately lost. So we need to separate out types of art that are part of a larger international network and types of art that are more intimately grounded in the Chinese context. The implication is that we need to be conscious that there is both a theoretical dimension that belongs to the global and a historical dimension based in the local. I feel that an awareness of this double direction is one way to approach contemporary Chinese art.

**Winston Kyan:** By situating contemporary Chinese art between the global and the local, how might this double direction shape notions of “Chineseness” in some artworks that verge on being nationalistic?

**Wu Hung:** First of all, nationalism is now a very dangerous word that most people avoid in favor of terms such as patriotism, which can be heightened at certain times due to particular events. In any case, we tend to call other people nationalistic, but we call ourselves patriotic. I feel that China now, at its own historical expense, is fixated on its status in the modern world. Since this fixation is shaped both by an inferiority complex toward the West and by a strong attachment to the West, I don’t reject that nationalism might develop in China.

As for contemporary Chinese art, works that display the overt political overtones of nationalism must be distinguished from works that play games of cultural perception. Of course, some artists use “China” as a strategy to satisfy some type of Orientalist desire, and I don’t like that level. Some Chinese artists and critics even go as far as to criticize the use of any traditional Chinese symbols such as medicine or *yin yang* in artworks, although some artists like Huang Yongping use these symbols in a very sophisticated way. I think that one work that successfully plays with the notion of “China” is Sui Jianguo’s *Windy City Dinosaur* (2009). You know that these dinosaurs are based on cheap toys, but he magnified them into huge monuments labeled “Made in China” that imply China’s status as powerful and even threatening. So I feel that this work is not simply a nationalistic representation of China, but plays a game with cultural perception that leads viewers to think about their own views of culture and nation.

Left: Song Dong and Zhao Xiangyuan, *Waste Not* (1995–present), installed at Re-Imagining Asia, House of World Cultures, Berlin, 2008. Courtesy of Wu Hung.

Right: Sui Jianguo, *Windy City Dinosaur*, Millennium Park, Chicago, 2009. Courtesy of Wu Hung.

**Winston Kyan:** Would you then say that exhibiting a work such as *Windy City Dinosaur* in such a public location as Chicago’s Millennium Park might lend itself to facilitating cultural communication?

**Wu Hung:** Before we talk about cultural communication, we need to establish what cultural communication is. When we talk about cultural communication, we tend to assume that there are cultural differences that must be overcome. Of course, there is some truth to these assumptions, but I would say that a way to help establish communication is to find points of similarity rather than emphasize differences or different origins. For example, the West has already bought into this perception that China is alien, but many Chinese don’t think that the West is so alien. So one way to help communication is not to think about the two parties as “the West” and some kind of “old China,” but rather as the modern West and modern China.

For example, the other day somebody asked me what is new in contemporary Chinese art, and I said that it was computer art. And that person said, but the computer is Western, how can Chinese art be computer art? And I said computers have been international from day one! Technology, industrialization, and science are thought to be Western, when they are in fact international. This is something that we have to struggle with constantly, and some artworks get to this issue very well. I can think of Miao Xiaochun’s recent work, such as *Microcosm* (2009), a very sophisticated new media work that demystifies the basis for asking questions of communication between China and the West in the first place.

**Winston Kyan:** You seem to suggest that Miao Xiaochun takes an almost conceptual approach to cultural communication that resonates with abstract ideas about the “global.” Since we began this interview with your very real experiences that straddle Asia and America, could we end it by returning to contemporary Chinese art as a concrete commentary on the specific relationship between China and the West?

Xu Bing, *The Invention of the Cigarette*, 2004, installed in the exhibition *Tobacco Project*, Shanghai Art Gallery. Courtesy of Wu Hung. Shanghai Art Gallery, 2005.



**Wu Hung:** Actually, early on I used the term global a lot, especially in contrast to the local as a type of pairing. In that type of usage, global is a neutral term that refers to the big context. But if the global implies globalization with its specific connotations of dominant commercial expansion and huge economic factors, then I try to avoid that word unless it is really relevant. For example, I curated Xu Bing’s *Tobacco Project* in Shanghai in 2005. This was his first solo show in China after his emigration to the U.S. in 1990, and it is appropriate that this show looked at the relationship between the British American Tobacco Company established by James Duke in the U.S. and its development into a huge presence in China in the early twentieth century. It was very clear with this project that it was about globalization, and not just about a simpler, more idealistic internationalism.

**Winston Kyan:** I think that is a wonderful way to bring the conversation full circle. Thank you.

## Permanent (R)evolution: Contemporaneity and the Historicization of Contemporary Chinese Art

### Part One

*The text presented here is the first part of a two-part essay that seeks to offer a critical commentary on recent attempts to interpret the historical development of contemporary Chinese art from the point of view of emerging debates relating to the concept of contemporaneity. In recent years, these debates have become increasingly influential in providing an intellectual framework for the diversified analysis of contemporary art within differing local and international settings. As a result, where there was once a tendency to interpret contemporary art either from the totalizing perspectives of a modernist world view or in light of the pervasive relativism of postmodernist theory and practice (which itself involves what is arguably a totalizing, anti-foundational vision of modernity), there is now an alternative position that embraces the concurrence of differing approaches toward the interpretation of contemporary art while “grounding” those approaches in relation to the experience and representation of geographically distinct para-modernities.*

*In part one of this essay, I give a brief overview of thinking associated with the concept of contemporaneity as well as how that thinking can be understood to have supplemented existing postmodernist readings of the experience and representation of modernity. I shall also give a critical reading of a recent essay by the historian and curator of contemporary Chinese art Wu Hung in which he maps out a new understanding of the historical development of contemporary Chinese art commensurate with the concept of contemporaneity.*

*Part two of this essay, which will present a critical reading of a text by the art historian and curator Gao Minglu as well as some first thoughts toward a more general critique of the concept of contemporaneity, will appear in a subsequent issue of Yishu.*

During the last decade, cultural theory has become increasingly imbricated in debates relating to the concept of contemporaneity. The concept of contemporaneity has emerged as part of a continuing internationalized critique of the underlying intellectual assumptions of Western modernism including, in this context, an Orientalizing Western belief both in the universal applicability of the values of Western modernity—principally the valorization of a secular-scientific rationalist world view—and in the moral authority of Western modernism as a necessary and progressive negation of the supposedly backward-looking irrationalism of pre-modernist tradition and non-Western otherness. As such, thinking associated with the concept of contemporaneity persists in upholding the now well-established postmodernist view that there is no single totalizing meta-



discourse that might be used to represent modernity, but, instead, differing representations of modernity (some central and some peripheral) each with its own socio-culturally inflected vision of the trajectory and significance of historical events.

Unlike a great deal of earlier thinking related to the internationalized critique of Western modernity, however (not least, postcolonialism's deconstructive invocation of third space and cultural hybridity),<sup>1</sup> that which is associated with the concept of contemporaneity has not sought to align itself unswervingly with the pervasive relativism of established postmodernist thought and practice. Rather, it has questioned the supposed immanence of that relativism by rethinking modernity as something experienced and represented differently in relation to differing, geographically located social, economic, and cultural circumstances, by no means all of which have wholeheartedly embraced established poststructuralist thought and practice. As an intellectual framework for the interpretation of the experience and representation of modernity, the concept of contemporaneity can thus be understood to have overwritten an established postmodernist critique of the totalizing perspectives of Western modernism by framing relativist uncertainty not as a universal condition of present (post)modernity (i.e., the "postmodern sublime"),<sup>2</sup> but, instead, as one possible reading of the experience of modernity contrasting with others that continue to uphold a rather more positivist view of linguistic representation. What is more, thinking associated with the concept of contemporaneity can also be understood to have added significantly to an existing postmodernist problematization of Western modernism's Baudelairean vision of the experience of modernity as a series of successive and fleeting "just nows" by upholding experiences and representations of modernity without the sequential unfolding of dominant modernist/postmodernist discourses in the West. This perspective not only suspends the apparent overcoming of Western modernism by postmodernism (something to which, as Jean François Lyotard has famously pointed out, the paradox of the prefix "post" in relation to the use of the term "postmodernism" performatively bears witness),<sup>3</sup> but, in addition, asserts localized conceptions of time that are radically different from the rationalist conception of past, present, and future that has prevailed historically as part of modernity in the West.

Among the outcomes of emerging debates relating to contemporaneity is a recently published collection of essays, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Contemporaneity*, which was brought together as the result of an interdisciplinary symposium convened at the University of Pittsburgh in 2004.<sup>4</sup> Contained within this book are texts on a wide variety of subjects that seek to reassess what it is to live within the conditions of modernity outside existing modernist and postmodernist discourses, including two that attempt to rethink the historical development of contemporary Chinese art in relation to a specifically Chinese vision of modernity—one by the renowned curator and historian Wu Hung, entitled "A Case of Being 'Contemporary': Conditions, Spheres and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art," and another by the equally renowned curator

and historian Gao Minglu, entitled “‘Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth’: Total Modernity in Contemporary Chinese Art.”

As anyone familiar with Chinese discourses on the subject of modernity since the emergence of the May 4th and New Culture movements during the early twentieth century will readily attest, within a Chinese sociocultural context arguments for the validity of differing experiences and representations of modernity are nothing new. Partly because of a persistent sense of the historical particularity of Chinese cultural identity, and partly because of a desire to resist a straightforward assimilation of Western modernity for fear of what the historian Michael Clarke has referred to as a “felt deracination,”<sup>5</sup> a displacement of cultural identity throughout the last ninety years. Chinese artists and intellectuals have constantly argued for a localized Chinese sense of modernity consonant with the distinctive horizons and developmental trajectory of Chinese history. It is, therefore, unsurprising to find Chinese writers associated with the theorization and historicization of contemporary Chinese art, such as Wu and Gao, contributing so strongly to emerging debates on the subject of contemporaneity.

In “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary,’” Wu makes four interrelated assertions about the development of contemporary Chinese art since its inception during the late 1970s. The first of these assertions is that contemporary Chinese art of the 1990s onwards has been received in relation to two differing settings: that of the autochthonous art world of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) with its inwardly focused view of contemporary Chinese art as part of an extended history of China’s national artistic/cultural traditions and that of the broader art world with its globalizing perspectives on the historical development of an internationalized contemporary art, both of which, Wu argues, stymie the other’s particular “local angles of observation.”<sup>6</sup> According to Wu, contemporary Chinese art of the 1990s onwards stands in a highly uncertain deconstructive relationship to any conception of a local/global dichotomy insofar as it can be understood to have been constructed simultaneously in relation to both local and global contexts, thereby problematizing the unduly simplistic notion that its significance derives principally from either one or the other of those contexts.

The second of Wu’s assertions is that the deconstructive positioning of contemporary Chinese art in relation to its showing within local and international settings has emerged as the result of a precipitous shift in attitude within the PRC toward the significance of contemporary art since 1989—one that has been marked by a localized move away from the use of the term *xiandai yishu* (modern art) to signify contemporary Chinese art of the late 1970s and 1980s and toward the now current use of the term *dangdai yishu* (contemporary art) to signify contemporary Chinese art as a whole and in particular that produced since 1989. While *xiandai yishu* can, Wu avers, be understood to have involved attempts to revive the Western influenced humanism of the Chinese modernist movement of the early twentieth century and so to have instigated a progressive, inward-looking

critique of Chinese culture, society and politics, *dangdai yishu* has not only presented a rather more cynical attitude toward Chinese life in the wake of the Tian'anmen incident of June 4, 1989, it has also brought that attitude to bear elsewhere as a result of the increasing internationalization of contemporary Chinese art during and following the post Tian'anmen period (not least because of the forced relocation of many Chinese artists, curators and critics to places outside the PRC as a result of the post-Tian'anmen crackdown). As Wu would have it, this change in attitude divides the development of contemporary Chinese art since its emergence at the end of the 1970s into two distinct periods each with its own prevailing view of what it means to be contemporary: in the case of the former, one that equates being "of the moment" with a modernist/utopian belief in the possibility of social, economic, and cultural progress coming after the destructive events of China's revolutionary past, and in the case of the latter, with a distinct sense of temporal dislocation and loss of historical direction. According to Wu, *xiandai yishu* and *dangdai yishu* should, therefore, be viewed not as consecutive parts of a single historical continuum, but, instead, as "disconnected endeavours"<sup>7</sup> whose particular significance has come about in relation to differing sociopolitical conditions before and after the momentous events of June 4, 1989.

The third of Wu's assertions is that the localized significance of the close relationship between contemporary Chinese art and the immediate conditions of its production and reception within the PRC has been powerfully "submerged" because of its showing within international contexts where there is, he contends, a rather more generalized/abstracted view of the localized functional significances of contemporary art. Indeed, Wu goes still further by arguing that this close relationship is something that distinguishes contemporary Chinese art from that of the West, which, he claims, has proceeded historically in a relatively more autonomous and far less discontinuous manner.

On this basis, Wu adds a further and final element to his vision of the historical development of contemporary Chinese art: that of the contemporary Chinese art worker as cultural mediator. According to Wu, one of the defining characteristics of the development of contemporary Chinese art since 1989 has been the building up of a complex network of global relationships involving not only contemporary Chinese artists, but also curators and critics who have been able to operate transnationally in multiple contexts both within and outside the PRC. In doing so, Wu maintains, these cultural workers have become actively involved in mediating the significance of contemporary Chinese art within both local Chinese and international settings. To reinforce this point, Wu makes specific reference to artworks produced by the Chinese artist Zhang Dali, whose approaches toward the making of art within and outside the PRC have, he argues, been markedly different. In Wu's view, while the "Oriental-style commercial paintings" produced by Zhang during his extended residence in Italy following the Tian'anmen killings of 1989 pandered strongly to Western expectations of exotic otherness, the site-specific graffiti works executed by the artist since his return to the PRC in 1995

have engaged closely with the specificity of localized experiences within contemporary Chinese urban life and its rapidly transforming cityscapes. As Wu would have it, by using the signature image of a spray-painted, bald-headed profile to intervene in uncertain or interstitial spaces such as building sites and derelict buildings, Zhang has not only marked out/dislocated those spaces from the continuity of their immediate urban settings, but in doing this he has also drawn attention to a wider sense of disjuncture now felt within the PRC as a result of the country's precipitous program of modernization; one that departs markedly from a conventional Western modernist understanding of the "present moment" as an intermediary or transitional stage between what has gone before and what has yet to come as the result of a violent severing of the present from any meaningful connection with an utterly ruinous past and an intransigently unknowable future. Wu goes on to contend that the experience of the contemporary engendered by Zhang's site-specific graffiti art is not one that can be readily extended to spaces outside the PRC since those spaces are governed by differing socio-economic and cultural forces that give rise to experiences of modernity divergent from those of the PRC.

Wu's attempt to rethink the historical development of contemporary Chinese art is, in some ways at least, a convincing one. While other commentators have tended to approach contemporary Chinese art as an object of historical analysis either from a predominantly Chinese cultural/theoretical point of view, or from the theoretical perspectives of international postmodernism, Wu is at pains not only to give a considered theorization of contemporary Chinese art's openness to interpretation from differing cultural viewpoints, but, in addition, to substantiate his theoretical position by closely analyzing the enabling structures/discourses contingent upon the production and reception of contemporary Chinese art within differing social, economic, and cultural settings. Not least among these enabling structures/discourses is the network of relations among transnational Chinese artists, critics, and curators.

Where Wu's theoretical analysis is less convincing, however, is in his insistence both on the historical discontinuity of *xiandai yishu* and *dangdai yishu*, and on the sharp categorical differences between contemporary Chinese art presented within an international context compared to its presentation within the PRC. Although Wu's assertion that the renewed political conservatism that took hold within the PRC in the aftermath of the events of June 4, 1989 was significantly influential in bringing about a widespread and precipitous change in outlook among contemporary Chinese artists and critics—one of retreating from what he considers the prevailing humanist enthusiasm of the 1980s—does, to some extent, strike a convincing historical note, the notion that contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s and that of the 1990s and beyond are entirely disconnected endeavours because of this change in outlook does not. Not only is it possible to trace the emergence of a skeptical anti-humanism within contemporary Chinese art to artistic events taking place before June 4, 1989, such as the exhibition and reporting of Geng Jinyi's prototypical "cynical realist" painting *Second State (Di'er zhuangtai)* during 1987–88<sup>8</sup> and Wang



Guangyi's highly incendiary call to "liquidate humanist enthusiasm" (*qingli renwen reqing*) at a symposium in Huangshan in November 1988,<sup>9</sup> it is also possible to see the emergence of an extended Chinese artistic diaspora, to which Wu refers as a defining feature of contemporary Chinese of the 1990s and beyond, as something that has its beginnings during the 1980s (consider here, for example, the geographical dispersal of members of the art group *Xingxing* [The Stars], many of whom left the PRC to live and work in exile after 1981).

Seen in the light of these historical "facts," it is perhaps better to consider the development of contemporary Chinese art from the late 1970s onwards not as one of two distinct and discontinuous parts divided sharply by precipitous sociopolitical and cultural change following the events of June 4, 1989, but as a relay in which traces of the contemporary Chinese art of the 1980s have been recontextualized and remotivated in relation to those events. Indeed, framing the development of contemporary Chinese art in this way arguably finds further credence in an analysis of the historical relationship between the socialist-realist art of China's revolutionary period and the art of the late 1970s and 1980s, where it is possible to view the latter both as a deferred critical engagement with the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution and as a reworking/disclosure of structures and attitudes—for example, collectivist ways of working and coded dissent—already in play prior to the emergence of contemporary Chinese art at the end of the 1970s.

A similar line of argument can also be extended to Wu's assertion that it is possible to distinguish the significance of contemporary Chinese art produced and received within the PRC from that produced and received in international settings. Such a view does not deal adequately with the undeniable deferral of contemporary Chinese art to attitudes and techniques historically associated with the Western historical and neo avant-gardes. While it would be wrong to assume that these attitudes and techniques—principally critical disaffinity and the deconstructive use of collage-montage—have simply been assimilated wholly intact and without the recontextualizing/remotivational effects of localized cultural translation, their traces can nevertheless be understood to have strongly inflected and to have given something of a shared identity to differing manifestations of contemporary Chinese art over time. Furthermore, the historical lineage of the Western historical neo-avant-gardes can also be understood as part of a more complex history of cultural interaction and exchange that includes the assimilation and translation of aspects of traditional non-rationalist Chinese culture by the Western historical and neo-avant-gardes as a critical foil to the supposed means-end rationality of modern life. In light of this, it is unconvincing to view contemporary Chinese art produced and received within the PRC as a wholly distinct cultural form. Rather, it should be seen as one that continually differs from, while deferring to, its Western counterpart along an extended chain of cultural differences and deferrals taking place historically in both directions between Chinese and the Western culture. One might also add the point that while contemporary art in the West can be distinguished to some extent from that of China by its relative

autonomy from political control, to see it as distinctively autonomous and historically continuous, as Wu suggests, is highly misleading.

What might also be argued here is that the framing of the historical development of contemporary Chinese art as an unfolding relay involving the continual recontextualization and remotivation of the traces of earlier historical events in a manner consonant with Jacques Derrida's conception of language as a constantly shifting trace-structure of prior acts of linguistic signification,<sup>10</sup> sits far more convincingly with Wu's conception of contemporary Chinese art as a deconstructive phenomenon poised uncertainly between Chinese and international cultural settings than his own view of the periodic discontinuity of contemporary Chinese art in that it envisions contemporary Chinese art as something that also sits deconstructively at the boundary between differing historical moments. In other words, it is possible to critique Wu's view of the development of contemporary Chinese art as one that is not only historically unsubstantiated, but that also promotes a theoretically inconsistent view of the deconstructive potential of contemporary Chinese art. This is not to reject out of hand Wu's assertion that the significance of contemporary Chinese art has shifted markedly in relation to the immediate conditions of its production and reception within the PRC. Instead, it is to see Wu's sharp periodization of the historical development of contemporary Chinese art, his categorical differentiation of contemporary Chinese art produced and received within the PRC from that produced and received elsewhere, and his assertion that all of this can be justified because of a causal relationship between contemporary Chinese art and prevailing socio-economic and political conditions within the PRC as unduly reductive.

---

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 71–82.
- <sup>3</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 71–82.
- <sup>4</sup> Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Contemporaneity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Clarke, "Revolutions in Vision: Chinese Art and the Experience of Modernity" in Kam Louie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 274.
- <sup>6</sup> Wu Hung, "A Case of Being 'Contemporary': Conditions Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art" in Smith, Enwezor and Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 291.
- <sup>7</sup> Wu, "A Case of Being 'Contemporary,'" 293.
- <sup>8</sup> Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989—A Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003), 61.
- <sup>9</sup> Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 25.
- <sup>10</sup> For discussions of the Derridean conception of the "trace," see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London & New York: Routledge, 1978).

Keith Wallace

## The Spectacle of the Everyday: A Conversation with Hou Hanru and Thierry Raspail about the Biennale de Lyon

Rigo 23, *Gauche Droite*, 2009, latex and acrylic on cement, installed at La Sucrière. Photo: Keith Wallace. Courtesy of the artist and the Biennale de Lyon.



2009 marked the Biennale de Lyon's tenth anniversary. Throughout the years, the exhibition has been innovative in exploring historical as well as contemporary art in order to explore what the contemporary moment means and how it has been informed by the recent past. Since its beginnings, the Biennale de Lyon has focused on three major themes that affect contemporary life: history, globalization, and temporality. It also has been among the first to bring the work of contemporary Chinese artists to a European audience. In 1997, Harald Szeeman brought the work of a significant group of Chinese artists to Lyon, preceding his more highly publicized version of introducing Chinese artists at the Venice Biennale in 2000. In 2009, Hou Hanru was selected as the Biennale de Lyon's curator, and he developed the thematic *The Spectacle of the Everyday*. In this exhibition, he also included works from the permanent collection of the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, the most notable being Fluxus artist George Brecht and Turkish artist Sarkis, whose large installation served as a site for discussions, lectures, and performances. The exhibition took place at the Musée d'art contemporain, La Sucrière (an abandoned sugar factory), the Bullukian Foundation, and the Bichat Warehouse, as well as numerous individual projects that were developed for specific neighbourhoods outside of the city centre. Keith Wallace met with Hou Hanru, Curator of the Biennale, and Thierry Raspail, Artistic Director of the Biennale and the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, to discuss the curatorial premise behind this biennale.





musée art contemporain lyon

musée art contemporain lyon



Opposite page: Huang Yongping, *Golden Head*, 2004, wood and gold-leaf pagoda installed at the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy Guy and Myriam Ullens Foundation, Switzerland.

Top right: Pedro Cabrita Reis, *Les dormeurs*, 2009, fluorescent tubes, electric cables, installed at the Bichat Warehouse. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist. With the collaboration of Haulotte France.

Middle right: Kin-Wah Tsang, *Let Us Build and Launch a Blue Rocket to His Heaven*, 2009, digital print on lino and lasercutting installed at the entrance of La Sucrière. Photo: Keith Wallace. Courtesy of the artist. With the support of ATC Groupe, Hong Kong Arts Development Council, and the collaboration of Haulotte France.

Bottom right: George Brecht chairs, with Dan Perjovschi, *The everyday drawings 2*, 2009, in the background. Photo: Keith Wallace. Courtesy of the Biennale de Lyon.



**Keith Wallace:** This particular biennale is dealing with the issue of the everyday; the title is *The Spectacle of the Everyday*. Could you discuss the context of that particular thematic as it relates to the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, the organizer of the Lyon Biennale, the fact that it has a strong representation of Fluxus artists in its collection, and how those two relate together, especially considering the installation of George Brecht's extensive body of work, *Chair Events*, that appear in the

various exhibition spaces? He seems to be a kind of ghost that haunts the premise of the Biennale.

**Hou Hanru:** Let's start with the fact that I have curated a number of biennials and other shows, but most of the projects I have done have attempted to relate to the historical, cultural, and social context, so you can see there is no one type of exhibition structure or curatorial strategy. The form of display, the form of presentation is all really related to the local conditions, and also what a biennial or what an exhibition can do to provoke some changes in thinking about the local conditions. For example, the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, which I co-curated with Charles Esche and



Opposite top: Adel Abdessemed, *Hot blood*, 2008, video projection, 27 mins. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York.

Opposite middle: Oliver Herring, *Waterloo Street 6*, 2007, video, 4 mins. 20 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Max Protech Gallery, New York.

Opposite bottom: Lin Yilin, *One Day*, 2006, video, sound, 5 mins. 24 secs., single channel. Courtesy of the artist.

Wan-Kyung Sung, was about self-organization. That was the moment when the so-called self-organization issue became very important for the region, and when the Gwangju Biennale was really trying to turn itself into a laboratory of research. And the 2007 Istanbul Biennial, which I also curated, was basically about the position of Istanbul as a kind of laboratory for urban modernization and non-Western modernity. And coming here to Lyon there are three very important things; one is that the Biennale has already twenty years of history, so it is the ultimate form of spectacle, among the most established, and its trajectory also has been going through a kind of accumulation of different possibilities for creating a festival of innovative artwork. And then the second thing is the history of the city, the history of the museum, and also the French art system, and the way the State or the institutional system has created for itself a spectacle of, let's say, the autonomy of art, which has been integrated into the heart of the cultural structure. So for me, these are things one has to question today. And a third thing is related to the French intellectual situation.

The museum has a relationship with Fluxus, and actually at the same time, of course, the Situationists and their critique of the spectacle. It is definitely the starting point for me. And everyday life is not only the arbitrary traces of things, but in itself it has its own world. It's a world that has been basically excluded from the representation of the spectacle. So, I think it is the moment to open up the spectacle to something that was excluded, and that is exactly where we can find out how contemporary art can still make sense in society. Especially in a European society where everything is so well ordered, so well organized, so highly categorized in a very stable way. And I think it is a crucial moment where we need to break this down and to accept a more complex situation, especially in terms of the so-called globalization process and how this society can catch up with the openness of globalization. So that was the first thought.

**Keith Wallace:** I noticed—speaking of the everyday—that a number of pieces in the biennale do in fact focus on small, seemingly insignificant moments, on peripheral kinds of actions. Within society today and within a capitalist structure that consumes us, do you see these as moments of liberation for the artists and for the viewers in recognizing them as something important within our everyday lives?

**Hou Hanru:** Yeah, but rather than liberation I would say emancipation maybe; liberation is a little too strong. Emancipation is more about coming from the interior. If you look at the catalogue it has four main themes, providing four different angles to examine the everyday. One is about the day-to-day intimate situation where artists turn the something familiar upside down, make it into something magical. And then of course another thing is how to introduce the street into the exhibition—that has been a long obsession for me, how urban life has been excluded from the museum space, from the art space, and how timely it is to actually bring it back in. And of course inspiration is very important. And then the others are more about how people in everyday environments organize alternative projects—social, personal, whatever—and small utopias, and in the end it is about how these people can live together, how these things can come together.

**Keith Wallace:** Is this why you did not separate the four thematics from each other? The thematics are all integrated throughout the exhibition spaces.





**Hou Hanru:** Basically, I always insist that artistic expression is not a simple representation of existing things, it is a process of production and presentation.

**Keith Wallace:** And do you also see the exhibition as an “experience” for the viewer in that they come away with a sense of having been involved as opposed to the kind of distancing that one often has when viewing art—the object is there and the viewer is here—that you are producing a more multi-sensorial, intellectual encounter with the art?

Michael Lin, *What a Difference a Day Made*, 2008, replica of a Shanghainese store, 17 crates, 5-channel DVD projection. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist and Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai. With the support of Council for Cultural Affairs, Taiwan, and the Taiwan Cultural Center, Paris.



**Hou Hanru:** Totally. For me an expression is never a display of “that” object, it is always a moment of revitalizing or bringing new life to existing things, or even to the artist. . . . It is much more performative than simply a display. La Sucrière was easy to do because there is nothing there. You can create whatever you want as long as you have the money and time, but the museum actually has a collection and also has clear significance in terms of its ideology, its institutional

Oliver Ressler, *What Is Democracy?*, 2009, 8-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

philosophy, and other things. So I wanted to turn the museum into two things. One, to articulate its function as a site of memory—but this memory always needs to be revitalized, so this is why we came up with the idea of including a few works that are in the collection, or have previously shown there, and reinstalling them, not only reinstalling them but using them. Such as the piece of Sarkis, which actually already functioned as a kind of platform for exchange—and we have tried to push this aspect even further.





Sarkis, *L'ouverture*, 2002, installation. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of Musée de l'art contemporain de Lyon.

It is a work that was specifically made for the space, and it's very hard for the museum to reinstall it without a particular reason; it's not like hanging a painting. And then of course there is the homage to Brecht, who represents the Fluxus kind of way of dealing with the everyday, and his work still functions like a living object. And then the second thing about the museum is how to make it into a place that is open to participation, so most of the works exhibited in the museum are about participation, democracy, etc. . . .

**Keith Wallace:** I found the relationship between the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon and La Sucrière very interesting, and the ways that one looked at the artwork within the physical and ideological surroundings they were placed in. And then there is the collective UN NOUS who are in the Sucrière, in the museum, and outside, and how one looks at that work differently in those different contexts. Do you want to talk about that?

**Hou Hanru:** Yes, actually, you know, in the suburbs we also have several projects like this that bring art to the street. So you have Rigo 23, who does a lot of urban interventions, and Barry McGee, who did this big installation inside La Sucrière and also outside he worked with the local graffiti community in the evening, so we don't even know where all these pieces are, but sometimes we would notice something new happening in the city. And the UN NOUS thing, actually, they started from La Sucrière and the streets, and then invaded the museum, almost at the last minute; it was very interesting to see how in the working process, how almost by necessity the thing grows, or invades, an enclosed space. And so basically, this group—they are between four and six guys, have been doing a lot of street posters in Paris over the last twenty years or so, and they have been doing a lot of interventions, and they are usually not considered museum type artists—they exist but are not visible in the art world. I worked with them a long time ago, and then three years ago I invited them to do an ongoing poster project, and so every week they changed the exhibition. So this time here in



Lyon they did two things; one is the poster project and the other is the piece in La Sucrière where you look into this box and you see this crazy, dystopian kind of city; it was a very condensed vision about what an urban scene would be, and then on the other hand they expanded this very utopian idea to invade the city. And also, the name of the collective is very interesting: UN NOUS, meaning “one us,” so it’s like a kind of very interesting identity of nobody being everyone.

Barry McGee, *Three Man Stack*, 2009, installation. Photo: Keith Wallace. Courtesy of the artist.

**Thierry Raspail:** Just a word, and we invited them to do anything they wanted in the suburbs—a workshop outside, whatever—so they worked a lot all during the biennale, and now we are discussing with them about keeping the work in the collection.



Right: UN NOUS (Antonio Gallego, Gonsalez Jose-Maria, Pinon Patrick, Martinez Roberto), *Espace UN NOUS*, 2009, installation. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of UN NOUS. With the support of Agnès B, Paris.

Left: UN NOUS (Antonio Gallego, Gonsalez Jose-Maria, Pinon Patrick, Martinez Roberto), *Espace UN NOUS*, 2009, installation (detail). Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of UN NOUS. With the support of Agnès B, Paris.



**Hou Hanru:** Actually, the biennial also has this section called Veduta, which Thierry has just referred to, something they have been doing for a long time. The museum, the biennial, always had a relationship with the surrounding suburbs. It has been a long-term program for the museum.

**Thierry Raspail:** But with Hanru it has become bigger and bigger. It's a new structure, with residencies, music, and festivals, which doubles the scale of the Biennale; we are now completing the publication for these events (March 2010), which will actually serve as a second volume catalogue for the Biennale.

**Hou Hanru:** Before it was smaller scale with people showing their work, but this time, when I learned of this program, I just thought it was a great opportunity to push this agenda further, so we invited three artists to do residencies and to realize a major scale public art project. So you have the lightbox installations by Robert Milin, a swimming platform in the lake by Bik Van Der Pol, and then a theatre piece by Eko Nugroho, who worked with suburban kids. And the most interesting thing is that suddenly the authorship can change—Eko's piece is clearly a collaboration, you have people who wrote the scenario and kids who contributed to the structure, so it's not only his work. That collaboration I think is really telling. I always think that in a biennale, whatever happens, it has to have a very direct connection with urban life.

**Keith Wallace:** Which you did with Istanbul in 2007. This may seem like an odd question, but I am interested in the way that people look at art. You talk about UN NOUS, about how they kind of invaded the museum, were there any works in the museum that you think would not work in La Sucrière.

Robert Milin, *Mon nom signifie septembre*, 2009, 13 light boxes. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist.





**Hou Hanru:** A very interesting question. Well, of course it is very difficult to say physically which ones would work and which ones would not work. But, I would say for example, Wong Hoy Cheong's work would be very difficult to show in La Sucrière because that work was a response to what the museum is. He came do to research and he went to see the Musée des beaux arts here in Lyon where he found these famous paintings and then he re-enacted these works with Malaysian people, and that was designed really as a reproduction of the museum situation, and that piece I would say is more relevant to show in the museum than anywhere else. And also of course Sarkis, whose piece was fabricated specifically for the museum.

Opposite page: Eko Nugroho, *L'arc en ciel sous la pierre*, 2008–2009, 40 puppets with articulated limbs, wood sticks attached to each puppet. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist.



**Thierry Raspail:** But, you know, we don't have any permanent walls. For each exhibition, biennial or not, we build the walls around the work. This system has allowed us to build a collection of exhibitions that were purchased in full. Sarkis's work is one of the numerous examples. But his work is also, above all, a site for a forum during the whole Biennale, with concerts, lectures, and performances involving a wide diversity of individuals. Issues raised by the Biennale, for example, were "the ethnography of globalization," and, within this scope, questions such as "can you still be a foreigner today?" or of the everyday, "of being common, a life discipline."

Wong Hoy Cheong, *Chronicles of Crime: Last Supper*, 2006, digital photograph. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist.

**Keith Wallace:** You made a point in your curatorial statement—and I think this was in respect to the artwork itself—about being open to all kinds of uncertainties. I believe uncertainty is important as it encourages aspects of questioning; it rejects the definitive. Do you see that as being an aspect of your own work as a curator?

**Hou Hanru:** I think so, yes. I really think for a long time I have been trying to understand why something is not art, why it is only an object, and how much you can really bring attention to art as a process of production, imaginative production, and dialogue, and how much you can bring real







life into it. So uncertainty is totally a part of this process. And also, I think it is a kind of economic and political statement, which is always interesting to me. How can you decide the value of one thing? Uncertainty is a kind of constant disturbance of this value system, and at the end of the day even human beings are so fragile—our life is so fragile. Why? We are so obsessed with something that has to be conserved, preserved, as a kind of insurance. So basically we are constantly negotiating with the idea of being immortal, why we have to face death everyday. That's why we have museums. Actually it is related to how the bourgeoisie became the main culture, because before bourgeois society the idea of conservation didn't exist, the concept of heritage didn't exist. It's all about possessing one thing and giving it to the next generation, so this is why we have museums, so I think it's time to really question this.

**Keith Wallace:** I have another question related to uncertainty, and this is about confusion. As a curator, I am beginning to find it more interesting if the viewer leaves an exhibition with some degree of confusion as opposed to answers, because for me they take away something that they can work with later.

**Hou Hanru:** Totally, and also I think it's a kind of intellectual dictatorship if you decide how the audience, the public, should read the work in a comprehensive way. I think it's really very dangerous to impose one linear form of reading or one interpretation, and basically human history has always been related to the history of interpretation and how politics has been constructed based on the control of reading of things. The whole idea of modernism itself is to some degree this utopia of control that has always been the foundation, and it is really important to look at not only how many different cultures can exist in the world, how many different approaches to creation, and if you really dig into it everything is so fragile, but it is also totally possible to open it up—that is the nature of art. If you want to render the intention of the artist visible, at least for me, a successful artwork should provide people with this space.

**Keith Wallace:** You also mentioned that you invited a few artists whom you had never met. I am wondering how you see that working in your curatorial

Dora Garcia, *Steal this book*, 2009, printed books on a plinth. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist and galerie Michel Rein, Paris. With the support of SEACEX, Madrid.



Laura Genz, *Sans Papiers, sans droits—des Journées de la Bourse occupée*, May 2008–ongoing, drawings. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist.

process. Is that an act of faith in the artist in terms of what you may know about their work, or is it taking a chance?

**Hou Hanru:** After so many years of work you develop a kind of intuition, you can smell it, and so it's a question of how to keep yourself fresh—it's really important. I had seen a number of works, but I didn't have a chance to meet the artists, although some of those artists I did manage to meet before the Biennale and talk to them, such as Oliver Herring, but basically I saw the file of his work, so I called the gallery and asked if I could meet this artist, so we arranged a meeting. Another was Takahiro Iwasaki. I had seen his work in a number of exhibitions, and I was very intrigued and impressed, and when I started thinking about the biennale project, I refreshed my memory and looked at more material and contacted him. So that was one case, but I had met with most of the artists, and some I had worked with before. And there are few, like Dora Garcia and Eulalia Valldosera, I had been wanting to show for a long time, but there was no proper context for it.

**Keith Wallace:** Another thing I found interesting in the biennale is that it was non-hierarchical in how the works were presented, there were no particular names that seemed emphasized over others, and you also showed a considerable quantity of work by each artist as opposed to one piece.

**Hou Hanru:** Because again I have never thought the artist hierarchy is anything meaningful to me, I don't care, I don't even want to know who is more famous than the other, and just like I bumped into this girl on the street named Laura Genz working with the *sans papiers* (undocumented immigrants) and asked if she wanted to be in the biennale, and that's how it happened. But of course there are some people I respect deeply like Sarkis, Huang Yongping, and Jimmie Durham; for me it is so natural to have these artists.

Again, for me an exhibition is not an illustration of a concept; it is a platform for production, it is a place where one should encourage the artist to perform the meaning as much as possible, as deeply as possible. This is why it is important for me if we have the means to show a larger, more





personal body of work. An artist is not an artist because he or she has a masterpiece—but it is about their life, so for me it is really important to display this duration, how the work evolves, how the artist is a thinker, and how the overall work has different aspects. This is why whenever possible we will try to provide a substantial representation. And again there is no hierarchy: whoever will have relevant works, we can show them.

**Keith Wallace:** I have a question for Thierry now. One thing I was really impressed with was the number of people I saw in the exhibition spaces, and this was two and a half months after the biennale opened. One often thinks of biennials being busy for the first week or two and then they just sit there. It was crowded. I lined up to ascend the staircase. How did you manage to do that?

**Thierry Raspail:** It was really hard at the beginning of the 1980s to try to set up something up like this in the provinces, especially in Lyon, which is a very conventional city. But since that time there has emerged a new generation. For example, we have between 48% and 52% of the population under twenty-six years of age. At the same time, if you compare us with London, we have the same type of audience. It's a new fantastic generation, and it is very important for us. It could be that, but I don't know.

But Lyon also has a lot to offer in terms of culture, so we are very lucky. For example, the attendance for a normal exhibition of contemporary art can have 40,000 people, so it's a very big audience; it is very high compared with Paris, for instance. It is just a matter of time; we need another ten years to be sure. For instance, in university, when I was a student, there were twenty people in my course; today there are five hundred, so the hero is no longer the guitar player, it is the artist.

Left: Sarah Sze, *untitled (Portable Planetarium)*, 2009, mixed media, overhead projector, photos. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

Right: Takahiro Iwasaki, *Reflection Model*, 2001, Japanese cypress, wire. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.



Regarding contemporary art in France, the question is not anymore that of the audience, which is large, young, and urban, but that of the export of works, ideas, curators, and, therefore, the immersion of this creation into the extraordinary globalized world, an area in which France is extremely limited. For example, the lack of space allowed for criticism or academic publishing is worrying. Regarding the audience, I think everything is alright; there is indeed great interest in artistic creation.

**Keith Wallace:** And Hanru, were you aware of the large audience that attends this biennale, and did that influence your conception of the exhibition?

**Hou Hanru:** I think so, in a way. Of course, I never think about the numbers in a concrete way, but the idea of having a larger-scale exhibition—by definition it has to be a public event. It has to be something responding not only to the need of the public but also to provide the public the possibility to go beyond their normal situations, so for me it is always a struggle in terms of curatorial strategy and also administration of the institution. How to manage the numbers of people while some works need to be seen in a more intimate context. It is always a very difficult thing, so in a way I try as little as possible to show very long documentary films, so you will find most of the videos have only five or seven or even two minutes duration, but it doesn't say that they have less meaning—they actually can mean something else. So in the selection of the work I have been quite careful not to show films that are too long, where you have to sit there for one hour, and other people have to queue up.

**Keith Wallace:** I have a question about aesthetics. I noticed the aesthetic of much of the work was quite rough, even provisional; it wasn't really refined and finished. Was that something conscious?

Yangjiang Group, *Pine Garden—As Fierce As A Tiger*, 2009, installation and performance. Photo: Blaise Adilon. Courtesy of Yangjiang Group. With the support of Youcast and Tang Gallery, Bangkok.



**Hou Hanru:** I think so, but there are some very meticulous kinds of things at certain points, so if you go through the exhibition, basically you can go through it very quickly, but at a certain point you have to stop and ponder, so that's how things have been organized. For example, Sarah Sze's piece and, for example, Iwasaki's piece, they took two end points of the exhibition, and you go there and you stop there, just like you go out on the street, and suddenly you see a very nice shop on a back street and

you want to stay for awhile and then return to the main street, so that has been a consideration. When you actually look at the floorplan there are some points that were organized in this way, stopping somewhere and then continuing. Basically for me it is almost like an urban planning process. The ground floor was like the street situation, and when you go up it becomes more open, and when you reach the top floor it is like a large garden.

**Keith Wallace:** There is a lot to think about from this conversation. Thank you Hanru and Thierry.

Clara Galeazzi

## Emporium: A New Common Sense of Space

National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo da Vinci, Milan

November 4–December 8, 2009

*We are confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on.<sup>1</sup>*

— Henri Lefebvre



**E**mporium: A New Common Sense of Space is a dynamic and multifaceted exhibition that investigates the various dimensions of space within processes of artistic production and representation and gives light to innovative readings of the “contemporary.” The works of twenty-seven artists from China, Japan, and South Korea, all with different artistic backgrounds, are superbly combined by Beatrice Leanza, curator of the exhibition. Recognizing the decision to put on stage and bring together diverse forms of art—photography, drawing, installation, video, and performance—is crucial to an overall understanding of the project. And by avoiding falling into banal generalizations linked to folklore and tradition, and refusing a simplistic mono-vision of the Asian region as a whole, the project argues against the “immediacy of today’s cultural internationalism, the unruly expansion of the market and its ill-fitting definitions of global art, which fundamentally problematize local criticism by removing the

Installation view of Emporium: A New Common Sense of Space. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo Da Vinci, Milan.

attention from the process of art making itself.”<sup>2</sup> And it is exactly in the process of art making, in the research leading to the tentative and incomplete quality of the works Leanza has chosen to exhibit, that the focal point lies.

Emporium thus suggests a production of space(s)—both non-sensorial and psychological spaces—that exalts the transiting condition of the contemporary state of being. The artists explore this process through works that take the collective past simply as a departure point and demonstrate continuous adaptation to the shifting cultural and social practices that inevitably generate new symbolisms and new aesthetics. As a result, the project does not seem to contemplate any form of discursive model, confuting any pre-existing limitations and appearing instead as an anticipation of the exhibition itself. In other words, the *raison d'être* of Emporium resides in the “conceptual interregnum where sensorial and psychological data precede the ordering of experience and therefore the



Installation view of Emporium: A New Common Sense of Space. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo Da Vinci, Milan.

aesthetic judgement.”<sup>3</sup> In this, Emporium enacts a clear-cut rupture with the modernist concept where subject/object stand in contrast to the artwork itself. Here, the visitor is involved in generating and producing meaning inasmuch as the space of the artwork exists in between psychological and phenomenological spaces.

How does “a common sense of space” emerge nowadays in the cultural territories of Asia? By exploring how artistic practices deal with transformative socioeconomic dynamics related to technological progress and urbanism, the exhibition documents the “materialization” of a non-deterministic territory, a non-representational space intended as a perceptual dimension where all static and established formulas governed by an ideological or historical authority are refused in order to focus on subjective orders of provenance.

Moreover, Emporium gives ground to exploring new critical hypotheses and correspondences established amongst artworks from China, Japan and, South Korea. This review attempts to address these questions by looking principally at three different aspects. First, the relationships that contemporary art practices and the notion of mobile, fluid space have within the main idea of Emporium and how its meaning and site have been investigated will be considered. Second, the specific relationship between space, artwork, and object in the precise context of the exhibition will be examined. Objects are different from artworks in the sense that the latter become tools for criticism that are embedded aesthetic strategies and subjective orders. Finally, the article will look for characteristics that the artworks share in this project.

The fact that Emporium takes place at the National Museum of Science and Technology makes clear the link between the notion of contemporaneity and rapid scientific evolution that has evolved through continuous experimentation. Thus, the location of the exhibition exalts progress as an incessant means of change that may lead to critical yet provisional or indefinite dimensions. The curator explains that the term Emporium translates as “a city of travelling goods and people” and in the context of this exhibition echoes the differing nature of the works shown and the various visual effects they generate. It also alludes to the cultural interconnections among the geographic realities represented. The Greek etymology of the term Emporium—*pèiro* (go through), *pòros* (transit), *èmporos* (traveller, voyager)—urges the need to reconsider spatiality as a concept that privileges the idea of a fluid and mobile identity. Consequently, the installation design itself does not suggest any forced relationship between space, artwork, and object. The curator and dotdotdot, a Milan-based architectural studio, have conceived a site-specific design where the artworks are arranged on platforms and staircases, or placed at angles, aimed at recalling the landscape of ancient ports stretched between permanence and repetition. Not even one work is traditionally mounted on the wall, not even one light is hung at ceiling height, and while the labels with information are usually attached to the museums’ walls, here, they dangle off the walls like labels on clothing, giving the impression of being in permanent transition. This curatorial intervention is perceived as a non-intrusive narration, a sort of train of thought that guides and accompanies the visitor through different “layers” of space, not only in terms of the physical space of the installation but also as a conceptual space of the mind.

The common denominators among the artworks are new patterns of identification that emanate a personal and highly intimate interaction with social and cultural realities. Why *common* sense of space, then? In this regard, Beatrice Leanza suggests that the projects in this exhibition manifest an intrinsic connection with the spatial and social conventions of their original contexts and are intended to provide an understanding of the way new processes of artistic production and representation extend themselves into the community by forging aesthetic assemblages that subtend reinvented meanings for the contemporary.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in one niche in the exhibition space, Korean artist Ahn Doojin has built an imaginary city in the installation *Appear and Disappear* (2009) by transforming found materials such as toys, plastic waste, paper, pop icons, and wood into tiny and fascinating fragments. The objects the artist has used have their contingent materiality abandoned, thereby developing



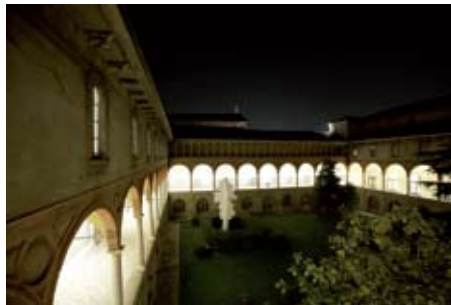
Ahn Doojin, *Appear and Disappear*, 2009, mixed-media, site-specific installation. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.



Left: Satoshi Hashimoto, *Moon Shadow*, remnants of performance, November 4–5, 2009. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Kimura Yuki, *About the table*, 2005, 3 lambda prints mounted on alpic, wood, 13 x 18 cm each. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist and Taka Ishii Gallery.



Naihan Li, *The Toy Series: The Tree*, 2009, site-specific installation, nylon cloth, 1.5 x 1.5 x 8 m. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.



and activating a language rich in new symbolisms, a sort of self-generating process for exchange and imagining. With similar intentions, Kimura Yuki's installation, *About The Table* (2005), abandons the "ruled," conventional space and enlarges its spatiality toward a non-instantaneous symbolism. Her photographs representing ordinary objects are "completed" by wood insertions. The wood elements do not figure as intrusions; on the contrary, they serve to "update" the image by making it three-dimensional. The artist affirms that although photographs are physical matter—images on paper—her aim is to counterbalance those images and the physical medium upon which they have been printed.

In Emporium, the activation of the space of the quotidian has its origin in the shifting and inconstant interaction between the subject and everyday life. If, on the one hand, it is the viewer him- or herself who establishes the degree of

engagement with the artworks produced, on the other, it is the artists who represent forms of spatiality that formalize structural references and build bridges between individual and collective perceptions of the space. The latter combination is made especially explicit with the site-specific artworks (by Megumi Matsubara, Yotaro Niwa, Ahn Doojin, Naihan Li, and Satoshi Hashimoto) presented in the exhibition. Different from the works placed on platforms, the installations produced in situ create zones of pause or areas of suspension, and they mirror an effort to adapt themselves to the specific/local environment. They constitute research into the unknown that, once again, highlights the production of non-deterministic places.

Megumi Matsubara's *Whereabouts* (2009) consists of four green-toned cast shadows projected on the wall at different angles. The artist herself defines her installation as ephemeral architecture, because even though three



out of the four shadows are fixed projections, her process of making them discloses a concept of fluidity and dynamic change. The shadows visible on the wall are the result of three different stages: Matsubara, a Japanese architect and designer, first took a picture of the object, then scanned it, and, subsequently, took a picture of the scanned image. The only moving image on the wall, animated by the silhouette and sound of people walking by, is conceived and perceived as an optic and audio infiltration amongst the other works in the exhibition.

Matsubara Megumi, *Whereabouts*, 2009, light projections, single-channel video with sound, 4 mins. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.



By examining questions of environmental displacement, Yotaro Niwa's installation *Untitled* (2009), made entirely with objects he found in Milan such as lamps, plants, wires, and chairs, reveals his reaction to a new environment. Interestingly, the work included a tiny yet actual aquarium, complete with live fish, which represents a paradoxical microcosm of reality. Yotaro suggests that in most cases, when exposed to confining spatial changes, people (as do the fish) end up having to adapt to different

Yan Jun, *Local Listening*, 2009, sound installation with 40 sound field recordings, mp3 players, headphones. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.

settings even though at first the settings are experienced as a temporary arrangement or a liminal space. As part of the sound installation by Yan Jun, the renowned Chinese sound artist and music critic, a “jungle” of headphones dangle from the ceiling and are set at different heights. Titled *Local Listening* (2009), it is composed of forty field recordings—self-assembled music, natural sounds, urban sounds, everyday sounds—that invite visitors to reflect upon the interaction between “movable sounds” and “changeable landscapes.” To some extent, this artwork can be considered to be at the core of the exhibition, the real “doorway” that introduces the viewer to an evocative politics of change and transformation.



The videos and documentaries included in the exhibition frame a pluralistic order where images, events, and social practices are revisited, thereby creating relationships between exclusion/inclusion and self/other. To some extent all the videos involve

Gao Shiqiang, *Revolution*, 2007, single-channel video with sound, 55 mins. 54 secs. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.

“public” reactions related to non-voluntary acts of relocation that are often determined by the politics of urban and social expansion. Gao Shiqiang's *Revolution* (2007) is an ironic video that depicts a theatrical experiment

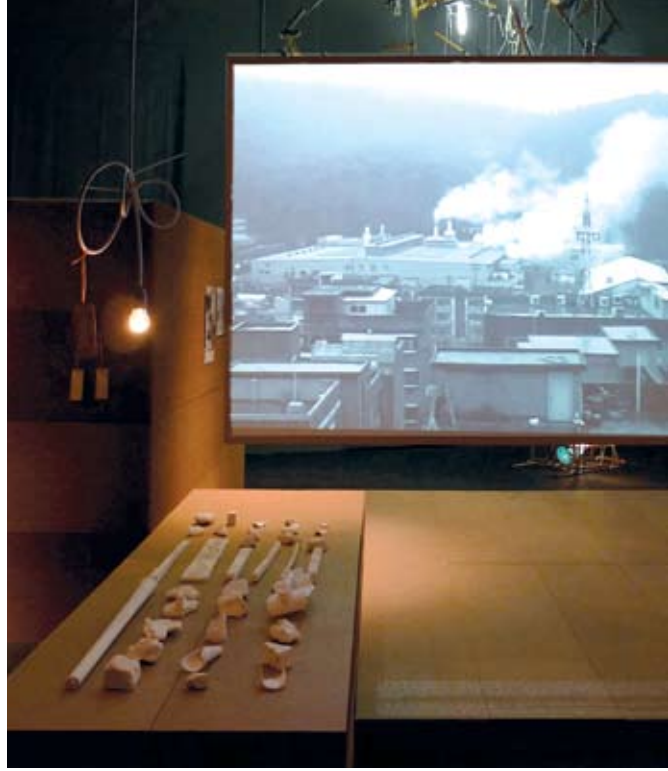
where young actors examine the changes concerning the decreasing availability of affordable and tangible living spaces. They do not discuss only the construction of new neighbourhoods and roads, they also consider social practices and conventions. The subtle yet clear political denunciation is also echoed in the angry tones the actors employ in order to complain about the dynamics that are leading to a depletion of both public and private territories.



Niwa Yotaro, *Untitled*, 2009, mixed-media installation. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.

Kim Sangdon recorded a hilarious performance he organized along the river bank in the city of Dongducheon, close to Seoul. In *Discoplan* (2007), the participants, using catapults, attempted to hurl rudimentary flying machines over the rusty razor wire separating them from the abandoned U.S. army base of Camp Nimble, although these homemade innocuous projectiles did not manage to go beyond the gate. While the performance did not imply any polemic form of expression, the video had a comic atmosphere, a collective, *common* attempt to take possession again of public soil, and a symbolic act of liberating the soil left behind by decades of military occupation.





The artwork *Dae Dan Ji* (2006), by Kim Gisoo, moves in a different direction from the previous videos by documenting an historical incident that occurred close to the city of Gwangju in 1971, when a large number of citizens attacked the local police station. The rebellion was caused by the internal policies the government adopted in the 1960s in order to “modernize” the nation. Approximately six hundred thousand people were forced by the Korean government to move from the South area of Seoul to Gwangju, to a housing complex with poor social infrastructure. The resulting insurgency was a result of the cancelling of talks between the leadership and the residents. Kim Gisoo dug into the facts and presented a project composed of different media that include drawings, video, and plaster casts. The casts are made from actual found objects that Kim retrieved from the area of the incident. Consequently, the work assumes an anthropological tone of recollecting and re-interpreting the dramatic event. But the aim of the artist is not to bring to light historical truths; on the contrary, *Dae Dan Ji* takes to heart the idea of a half-submerged reality. In other words, the drawing, touching, and examining of collected traces as though they were archaeological finds activates a reconstruction of the past where Kim’s memory is filtered with collective knowledge, evidence, and personal impressions.

Emporium promotes the idea of a spatiality in which subjectivity and contemporaneity prove to be simultaneously individual and collective. In this regard, Elaine W. Ho’s performance *Homeshop Hawking* (2009) is particularly meaningful. In the square in front of the museum, the artist reads aloud the articles written in *Wear*, the journal Ho published in occasion of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The publication reports on specific public events that occurred in the summer of 2008, including politics, ideologies, and economics related to the worldwide event, in addition to reflections upon contemporary issues involving art, media, and urban space in Beijing. In the performance, Elaine W. Ho plays the role of the transmitter, a carrier of contemporaneity. Here, the artist embodies the “common space” because she is the linking element between two different geographic realities.

Left: Liang Shuo, *I’m fucking beautiful No. 1*, 2007, mixed-media installation, 240 x 140 x 93 cm, and *I’m fucking beautiful No. 2*, 2007, mixed-media installation, 77 x 66 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and C5 Art, Beijing, (foreground); Jung Yeondoo, *Nostalgia*, 2008, HD video without sound, 85 mins., (background). Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of Kukje Gallery.





Middle: Kim Gisoo, *Dae Da Ji*, mixed-media installation, 2006, consisting of *Primitive Arms*, 33 plaster objects, dimensions variable, 3 digital colour prints, 120 x 120 cm, and *Recording*, 2006, single-channel video, 4 mins. 20 secs. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Kim Sangdon, *Discoplan*, 2007, mixed-media installation with hand-made flying objects, single-channel video with sound, 20 mins. Photo: Valentina Zanobelli. Courtesy of the artist.

When talking of a “new common sense of space,” it is opportune to question which characteristics the artworks share. What is the “new” sense of common space conveyed by the installations, videos, drawings, photography, and performances? All of the works are juxtaposed at the site of the exhibition in the guise of “performative” moments so that the connections between everyday objects and their symbolic weight is continuously delayed and interrupted.<sup>5</sup> Emporium reveals that a pragmatic exploration of finding ways to relate to an ever-changing reality in Asia prevails. This transforming landscape generates an infinite, unbounded production of space. The eighty-five minute long documentary titled *Nostalgia* (2008) by the South Korean artist Jung Yeondoo explores how a vacant room in the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul can be transformed into various spaces. The video, shot in only one take, features the museum staff outfitted in orange jumpers and rearranging six different sets. *Nostalgia* points to the process of making and reveals the back stage, what we usually see as motionless landscapes constructed in a studio, and alludes to ideas about urban dislocation and fantasy. As with the other artworks in the exhibition, *Nostalgia*’s visual literature is cast in a shifting, ephemeral site, somewhere in between real, perceptual space and psychological space. The various consequences the urban change that Asia is experiencing today lead these artworks beyond visible and tangible constructions and popular conventions. They question instead the contemporary logic that links living space to its representation. What is emerging is that the commonality conveyed by the relation between space, work, and object is the rhetoric of the unexpressed, a space impossible to determine because it is still in its making.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, tr. Donald Nicholson Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991), 8.
- <sup>2</sup> Beatrice Leanza, *Emporium. A New Common Sense of Space* (Beijing: BAO Atelier, 2009), 21.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Ellen Pearlman

## 1989: 365 Art Days in China and Germany

Thinking Hands Press, Beijing 2009



Huang Rui, one of the stalwarts of the 798 Dashanzi Art District in Beijing, was an original participant in the unauthorized open-air 1979 Stars Art Exhibition, which was hung on the front gates of the National Museum (formerly Gallery) of Art in Beijing and presaged the birth of the Chinese avant-garde. In typical fashion, the exhibition was shut down by the authorities, compelling him and others to

Cover, 1989: 365 Art Days in China and Germany. Courtesy of Thinking Hands Press, Beijing.

trudge off into a lengthy self-exile. Rui, who returned from his sojourn in Japan in the early 1990s with the street smarts of an exile, has garnered enough moral turpitude and sage aggression to contemplate the historicity and political aesthetics still reverberating in both China and Germany from the shockwaves of the tumultuous year of 1989. His tome includes 200 artists, 377 works, and 24 photo documents and assigns an East/West tag team of images to illustrate each day of the year. Rui believes in “memory as official record, [and] art as entry point for inquiry.”<sup>1</sup> But does anyone really care anymore about the daily progress of history imploding upon itself? Rui asserts unequivocally that, yes, he cares. His view of that span of time is vast, and his insight into how events pile up upon one another to produce profound and lasting cultural change is deeply contemplative.

Unlike his better known (in the West) counterparts like Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang, Rui is neither obsessed with overtly confronting the authorities (like Ai Weiwei, who received a subdural hematoma from a blow rendered by the authorities in Sichuan Province by attempting to prevent him from investigating earthquake victims) nor flashy firework spectacles celebrating China’s national Olympic goals (like Cai Guo-Qiang). He charts a completely different course, one of writing and preserving the radical birth and checkered history of the Chinese avant-garde, especially in regard to the English-speaking public. In 2007 he published the book *Huang Rui:*

Pages for Thursday, January 5,  
in 1989: 365 Art Days in China  
and Germany. Courtesy of  
Thinking Hands Press, Beijing.



*The Stars Times 1977–1984*, a serious examination of that first provocative exhibit and its heartfelt expression of the need for creative freedom that arose after the devastation wrought by the Cultural Revolution. Rui reaches back in time, quoting Laozi: “Dao begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets myriad things.” From such a small event, the entire contemporary art world in China has grown with astounding velocity and verve. Rui wants to make sure the facts of that growth don’t lie buried in some graveyard of history, but remain for all the world to see. This new book, *1989: 365 Art Days in China and Germany*, was written and photographed by those who were there and is not some revisionist interpretation used to enhance someone else’s political objectives in the distant future.

Although China and Germany were the locations of two defining events around the rise and fall of Communist Party power in 1989, those events resulted in two very different outcomes. In China’s case, the power of the state grew stronger and more sophisticated in manipulating the hearts and minds of the population. In Germany’s case, the entire empire of the Soviet Union collapsed, opening the floodgates for a reunification of East and West Germany. The fulcrum point in *365 Art Days in China and Germany* is both the tearing down of the Berlin Wall (and the subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union) and, as Rui slyly states, that infamous day at the beginning of June when “The political turmoil in China’s capital is calmed down.” That day is starkly represented in the book as a page with no image but just the statement “There is colour in emptiness.” The next page, mischievously, contains Song Haidong’s sculpture of an open Pandora’s Box, since what was opened can never again be closed.

Using photos showing instances of art, theatre, performance, daily life, and occasional mirth and tragedy for both Germany (mostly, and wisely, East Germany) and China, Rui dredges a selective, collective memory, which eventually led to the painful births of some nations (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Slovenia) and dissolution of others like Czechoslovakia, the healing of the split of the German motherland, and China’s use of the officially sanctioned, politically schizophrenic mantra “don’t ask, and certainly don’t tell” to justify its past and present crackdowns. Nowadays most young



people in mainland China are hardly aware of that fateful day in June, as its very mention is erased from every official source inside the country. If they do know about that precarious day, it is only through association with someone who was directly involved, or with someone who knew someone involved in the fracas. Germany celebrated and continues to celebrate 1989 as a time of liberation from Communist domination.

Until 1980, photography was banned by the Chinese government except for official purposes, or, as the book states, its use as “unconscious visual hygiene,” or propaganda. Individual documentary, art photography, and experimentation did not exist. When photography was once again allowed without overt punishment, just capturing everyday life was an implicit act against prevailing propaganda. Limited demand for images inside the country at that time made it extremely difficult for independent photographers to earn a living. Those who managed to survive had yet another challenge, one of internalized self-censorship and pre-emptive retaliatory strikes such as work being confiscated and possible jail sentences should any of their seemingly innocuous images irritate the authorities. It was against these obstacles that photography began to grow during the 1980s.

Alongside the plethora of visuals, important events are mentioned in barely noticeable typeface, like the creation of China’s first non-governmental writers association, demonstrations in East Berlin, and formerly forbidden exhibitions of oil paintings of the human body in Beijing. There are photos of people in both countries performing mundane tasks, such as visiting their doctors and receiving diagnoses, illustrating daily life



continuing alongside momentous historical events. The seminal China/Avant-garde exhibition at the National Art Museum opens in February and is immediately stifled by the authorities. A prescient photo of Wen Pulin's performance *Bunny 2000* displays a flaming bonfire of carts and wheels, indicative of tensions boiling beneath the surface. East German party leader Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev appear to French kiss in a news photo. Simpler images are included as well: a couple in East Berlin get married and a bicycle vendor in Shanghai delivers a cart of cabbages. Other events noted include Václav Havel being arrested, George H. W. Bush becoming U.S. President, and Surrealist master Salvador Dali passing away. A lone chimney belching smoke and a landscape snapped from the window of a moving train are bleak images that could have been



Pages for Sunday, July 23, in 1989: *365 Art Days in China and Germany*. Courtesy of Thinking Hands Press, Beijing.

taken anywhere. We see portraits of couples being painted and nudes lounging about, waiting to be sketched. The world's first satellite skyphone is released. Artists spray graffiti on the confining bulk of the Berlin Wall, German artist Eva Hesse creates an installation, and Boris Yeltsin is elected. Chinese crowds gather in April to read poems in the main national square. The mention of important events meshes with photos not directly related to those events as the visual and verbal narrative gathers intensity. Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan. On Thursday, November 9, the Berlin Wall falls. Nintendo is released. Mikhail Gorbachev meets with Deng Xiaoping as a curfew is imposed in Beijing. Mongolia becomes democratic. Former Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife are executed on Christmas day. Havel becomes President of Czechoslovakia. Chinese citizens line up to wait for a bus.

The pictures reflect a circumspect reality, one of the passing of daily life or the making of a single work of art. A Chinese couple lounge on a bed listening to rock music or someone creates a piece of art on rice paper from a brass rubbing. A village barber cuts a man's hair in the countryside, and the not-yet famous artist Fang Lijun draws a charcoal sketch of multiple faces. Individuals walk through a gate. Others pass a painting by Sakharov

joyously painted on the soon-to-be destroyed Berlin Wall. There are interior shots of a worker's home in Zhoukou City and a misty, crumbling courtyard in East Berlin.

What really underlies this approach is discussed in the book as a different sense of time and representation. The Western Gregorian calendar was adopted by the Chinese Communist Party only in 1949, to accord with its acceptance of Marxist doctrine. Previously, time was determined by the twelve-year cycle of divine animals in the Chinese zodiac, indicating the birth signs of a human life, as well as according to a lunar calendar focused



Pages for Friday, December 15, in 1989: *365 Art Days in China and Germany*. Courtesy of Thinking Hands Press, Beijing.

on agricultural changes and Imperial time denoting dynasties. One branch of earlier Chinese art was obliquely critical of officials, and “relied heavily on natural themes with temporal associations such as trees, rocks, snow, mountains, and plum blossoms in winter.” This type of art employed a sense of retreat from the problems of the world. Rui has emulated this style to say what cannot be said directly. In this way, he strives to produce a contemporary book using classical methodologies like the branch of art obliquely critical of officials. In conservative Chinese culture showing strife directly admits to the world’s imperfections. Admitting to imperfection is against the traditional approach to art, which is viewed as a representation of a loftier ideal.

Like a precision clock, one visual gear follows the next, gathering speed for the turn of the hands of the wheel of time. The implicit tension builds like a symphony. Tragedy or hope are not shown in a direct manner, yet there is a sense of a year passing through others’ eyes. At the end of the book you realize a tremendous year has passed. But those Chinese citizens are still in line waiting for that metaphoric bus. And Rui has obliquely made you sense that, all without saying or directly stating a thing.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from *1989: 365 Art Days in China and Germany* (Beijing: Thinking Hands Press, 2009).

## Chinese Name Index

Ai Weiwei 艾未未	Ho, Elaine W. 何穎雅	Miao Xiaochun 繆曉春	Yangjiang Group 陽江組
Ba Da Shan Ren 八大山人	Hou Hanru 侯瀚如	Mu Xin 木心	Yue Minjun 岳敏君
Cai Guo-Qiang 蔡國強	Huang Rui 黃銳	Shen Chen 沈忱	Zhang Dali 張大力
Cao Fei 曹斐	Huang Yong Ping 黃永祿	Song Dong 宋冬	Zhang Hongtu 張宏圖
Chang, Johnson 張頌仁	Huang Zhuan 黃專	Song Haidong 宋海冬	Zhang Huan 張洵
Chen Danqing 陳丹青	Kwan, Will 關威利	Sui Jianguo 隋建國	Zhao Xiangyuan 趙湘源
Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平	Kyan, Winston 釧嘉高	Tsang Kin-Wah 曾建華	Zhong Biao 鐘飜
Fang Lijun 方力鈞	Laozi 老子	Wang Guangyi 王廣義	
Fay Ming 費明杰	Li Naihan 李廌含	Wang Huangsheng 王璜生	
Feng Boyi 馮博一	Liang Shuo 梁碩	Wen Pulin 溫普林	
Gao Minglu 高名潞	Lin, Michael 林明弘	Wong Hoy Cheong 黃海昌	
Gao Shiqiang 高世強	Lin Yilin 林一林	Wu Hung 巫鴻	
Geng Jianyi 耿建翌	Lu, Victoria 陸蓉之	Xu Bing 徐冰	
Gu Wenda 谷文達	Luo Zhongli 羅中立	Yan Jun 顏峻	

# Art | 41 | Basel | 16–20 | June | 10

Vernissage | June 15, 2010 | by invitation only

Art Basel Conversations | June 16 to 19, 2010 | 10 to 11 a.m.

Catalog order: Tel. +49 711 44 05 204, Fax +49 711 44 05 220, sales@hatjecantz.de

The International Art Show – La Exposición Internacional de Arte

Art Basel US Office: FITZ & CO., New York

Tel. +1 212 627 1654, Fax +1 212 627 0654

usoffice@artbasel.com, www.artbasel.com



# pinta

THE MODERN &  
CONTEMPORARY  
LATIN  
AMERICAN  
ART SHOW



**LONDON 2010, JUNE 3-6**

WARWICK ROAD | [WWW.PINTAART.COM](http://WWW.PINTAART.COM)

**NEW YORK 2010, NOV. 11-14**

PIERS 92 & 94 | NEW YORK CITY  
711 TWELFTH AVENUE | [WWW.PINTAART.COM](http://WWW.PINTAART.COM)

# ART BEIJING 艺术北京

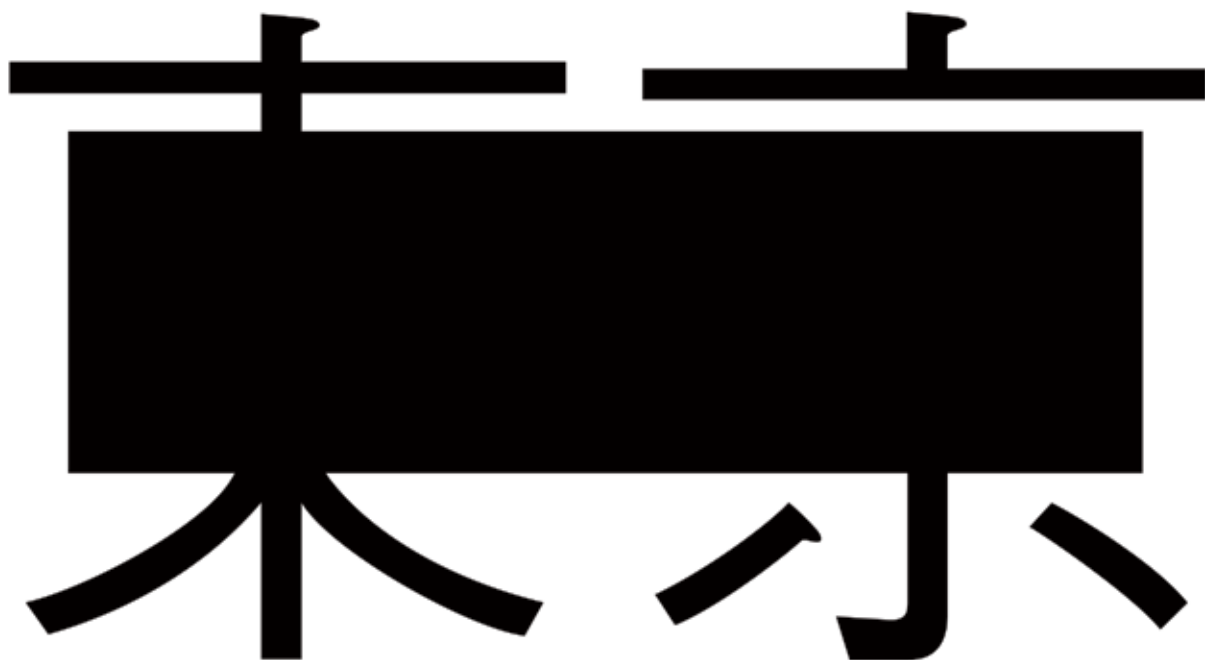
Art Beijing Contemporary Art Fair

2010.4.29-5.2



2010.4.29 VIP预览/VIP Preview  
北京·全国农业展览馆  
Agricultural Exhibition Centre of China, Beijing  
[www.artbeijing.net](http://www.artbeijing.net)





# ART FAIR TOKYO 2010

## April 2 - 4 Tokyo International Forum

Dates and Hours: Friday, April 2, 11:00-21:00 / Saturday, April 3, 11:00-20:00 / Sunday, April 4, 10:30-17:00

Venue: Tokyo International Forum Exhibition Hall 1, Lobby Gallery 1 & 2 (3-5-1 Marunouchi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-0005 Japan)

Ticket: 1 Day Free Pass 1,500yen Advance Ticket: 1 Day Free Pass 1,200yen

First Choice & Opening Preview (Invited guests and press): Thursday, April 1, 16:00-19:00 / 19:00-21:00

Organizer: ART FAIR TOKYO Committee / ART FAIR TOKYO Co., Ltd.

In Collaboration with: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan / Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry

Japanese Red Cross Society / Ambassade de France au Japon

Economic and Commercial Office, Embassy of Spain / Embassy of Canada

Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany / Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium

Embassy of the Russian Federation / Korean Cultural Center, Embassy of Korea in Japan

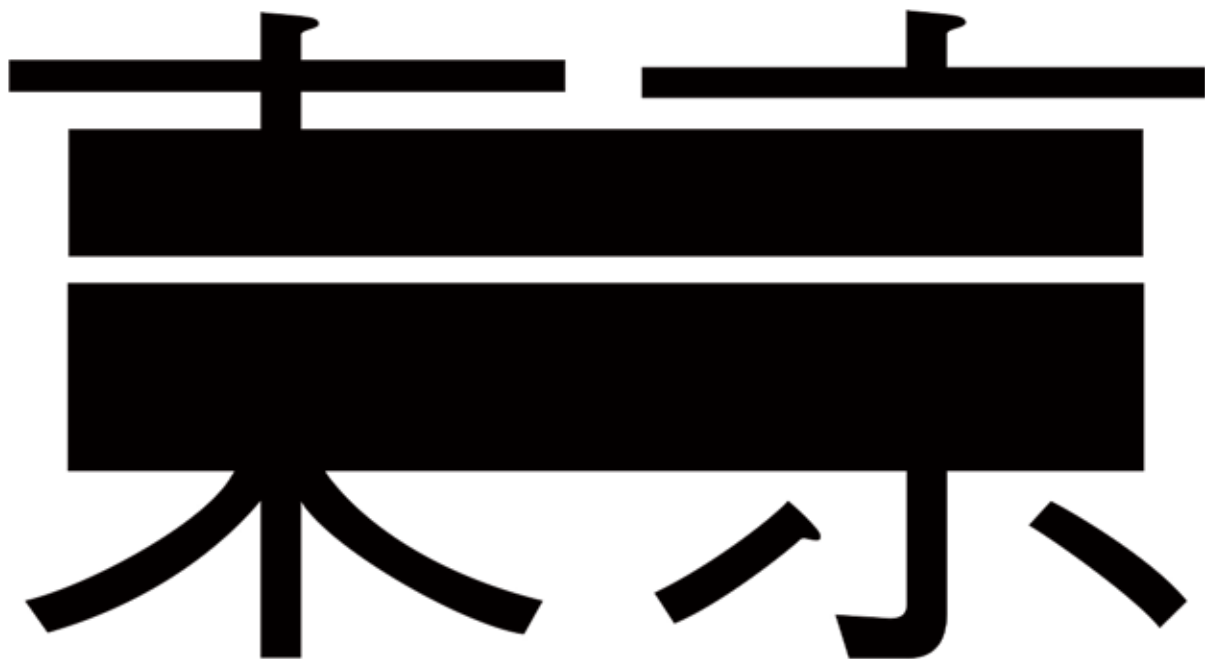
Supported by: Mori Art Museum / Suntory Museum of Art / MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART TOKYO

Toguri Museum of Art / The Pola Museum of Art Main Partner Hotel & VIP Lounge: The Peninsula Tokyo

Official Concierge Partner: Quintessentially Japan Inc. Main Media Partner: The Art Newspaper



[www.artfairtokyo.com](http://www.artfairtokyo.com)





# Yishu Art Editions

Limited edition prints  
and photographs by  
leading contemporary  
Chinese artists.

To purchase Yishu editions  
please send your request to  
office@yishujournal.com or  
call 1.604.649.8187 (Canada)  
or contact Katherine Don  
+86.135.2224.1948 (China)



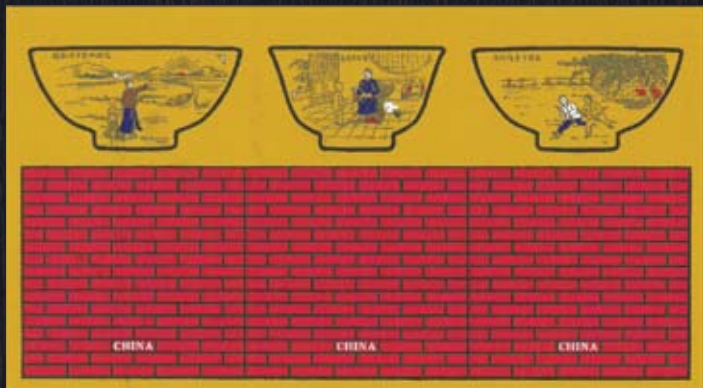
1

2



3

1. Rong Rong & Inri,  
*2004 No. 2 Caochangdi, Beijing*  
2008, Digital photograph on  
Hahnemühle rag paper  
Produced by Three Shadows  
Photography Art Centre, Beijing.  
Edition of 200.
2. Ding Yi,  
*Crosses 08*  
2008, Serigraphy,  
297 X 178 mm,  
signed by the artist.  
Produced by the artist.  
Edition of 200.
3. Xu Bing,  
*Book from the Ground*  
2007, ink on paper,  
29.7 cm x 35.6 cm,  
Produced by Xu Bing Studio,  
New York. Edition of 199.
4. Wei Guangqing,  
*Made in China*  
2008, Serigraph on paper,  
175 x 296 mm.  
Produced by the artist.  
Edition of 196.
5. Wang Guangyi,  
*Great Criticism — Wang Guangyi*  
2009, Serigraphy,  
210 X 295 mm,  
signed by the artist.  
Produced by A Space Art,  
Beijing. Edition of 200.



4



5