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# Yishu

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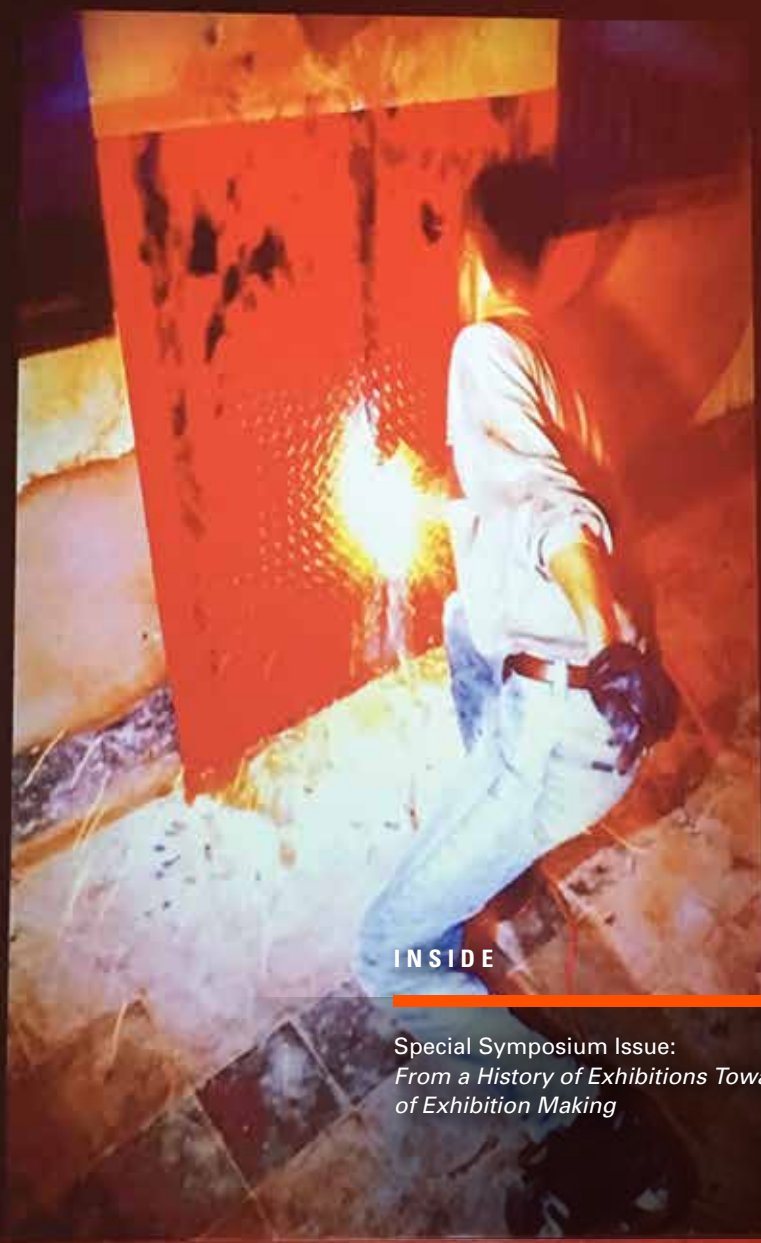

INSIDE

Special Symposium Issue:
*From a History of Exhibitions Toward a Future of Exhibition Making*

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Cover: Zheng Guogu, *Key Construction,* 1994, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows,* OCAT, Beijing, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

*We thank Bing Yang, Junjun Liu, Chris Mao, Runan Tongyan, Dazong Pan, Janey Song, Vivian Jianhui Zhang, Lin Li, David Chau, Kevin Daniels, Qiqi Hong, Sabrina Xu, David Yue, Andy Sylvester, Farid Rohani, Ernest Lang, Yin Qing, Chen Ping, Stephanie Holmquist and Mark Allison for their generous contribution to the publication and distribution of Yishu.*

# Editor's Note

*Yishu* covers many aspects of contemporary Chinese art, such as artists, exhibitions, and timely issues through essays, interviews, and symposia. *Yishu* 91 presents a selection of texts that were presented at the symposium *From a History of Exhibition Toward a Future of Exhibition Making*, hosted at the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, in November 2018. This symposium, one of three on this subject organized by curator and writer Biljana Ciric, explores the importance of the 1990s in establishing China and Southeast Asia's presence on the world art stage.

*Yishu* has worked with Ciric a number of times over the past two decades both as a writer, interviewer, and guest editor. She has been a central figure in rescuing the history of art and exhibitions in Shanghai, and has worked on exhibitions and projects in various parts of the globe.

The texts selected for this issue of *Yishu* directly address China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan and represent a variety of ideas and perspectives contributed by Ciric, Nikita Yingqian Cai, Julia Hartmann, Maggie J Zheng, Wang Ziyun, and Wei Yu. These are followed by a keynote address delivered by Qiu Zhijie summarizing some of his thoughts about the Chinese art world during the 1990s. We thank all of them for the diligent research they carried out in preparing and presenting their texts.

The early exhibitions discussed in the various texts in *Yishu* 91 exemplify a period prior to the art market boom and are in large part artist initiated or self organized. All this has changed in the past two decades as growing market interests and the establishment of institutions have shifted the cultural ecology to create a strictly managed environment that artists often feel they must adhere to in order to achieve recognition. The essays presented here serve as reminders of the possibilities of exhibition making, which can attain its integrity under the often challenging circumstances that have existed in the past, and undoubtedly will in the future.

Keith Wallace

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E-mail: coart@ms37.hinet.net

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謝宜蓉
地　址：台灣台北市中山北路一段85號6樓
電話: (886) 2.2560.2220
傳真：(886) 2.2542.0631
電子信箱：coart@ms37.hinet.net

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加中當代藝術協會

會　長：鄭勝天
秘書長：陰晴
地　址：200 - 1311 Howe Street,
Vancouver, BC, V6Z 2P3, Canada
電話: (1) 604.649.8187
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# Contributors

**Nikita Yingqian Cai** lives and works in Guangzhou, where she is currently Chief Curator at Guangdong Times Museum. She has curated exhibitions such as *A Museum That is Not* (2011), *Jiang Zhi: If This is a Man* (2012), *You Can Only Think about Something if You Think of Something Else* (2014), *Roman Ondák: Storyboard* (2015), *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows* (2016), *A Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (2017) and *Omer Fast: The Invisible Hand* (2018). Her recent curatorial research and practice focus on issues of gender, alternative modernity, and transnational trajectories between China and the global south, presented in the latest exhibition *Pan Yuliang: A Journey to Silence* (Villa Vassilieff in Paris and Guangdong Times Museum, 2017) and the research initiative *All the Way South*. She is also organizing the para-curatorial series at Guangdong Times Museum, which features an annual discursive platform and has covered topics such as *No Ground Underneath: Curating on the Nexus of Changes* (2012), *Active Withdrawal: Weak Institutionalism and the Institutionalization of Art Practice* (co-organized with Biljana Ciric, 2013), *Cultivate or Revolutionize? Life between Apartment and Farmland* (co-organized with Binna Choi, 2014), *Between Knowing and Unknowing: Research in-and-through Art* (2015), *Reciprocal Encounters: The Enactment of Collecting and Its Modes of Representation* (2016), and *In the Name of Archive_Re-imagining History as Contemporary Art Practice* (2017). Her writings have appeared in a number of publications and magazines, and she is a contributing writer to *LEAP*, *Artforum.com.cn*, *Arttime*, and *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.

**Biljana Ciric** is an independent curator. She was the co-curator of the 3rd Ural Industrial Biennale for Contemporary Art (Yekaterinburg, 2015), curator in residency at Kadist Art Foundation (Paris, 2015), and a research fellow at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Høvikodden, 2016). In 2013, Ciric initiated the seminar platform *From a History of Exhibitions Towards a Future of Exhibition Making* with a focus on China and Southeast Asia. The first assembly platform was hosted by St Paul St Gallery, AUT, New Zealand, and the second assembly, with a focus on the 1990s, was hosted by RAM in November 2018. She is currently working on the final assembly related to the period after 2000 and standardizations of exhibition making practice, which will be presented at Times Museum in 2019. A forthcoming publication related to this long-term project will be published by Sternberg Press. In 2018 she established the educational platform What Could/Should Curating Do. She was nominated for ICI Independent Vision Curatorial Award in 2012.

**Julia Hartmann** is an art historian and independent curator based in Vienna. She worked previously at the Secession and the Belvedere 21 in Vienna as Assistant Curator and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, with a research focus on an (all-female) exhibition history and "women's art" from China. Her curatorial work focuses on the intersection of digitization, feminism, and art, which she elaborates within the exhibition series *Search for . . . The more you search the less you find* initiated in 2016 (Sankt Poelten, Austria). Hartmann is the co-founder of SALOON Wien, an international network for women in the arts. Research for her essay in this issue has been supported by the Rockbund

Art Museum through a long-term research platform titled *From Exhibition Histories Toward the Future of Exhibition Making: China and Southeast Asia*, organized by Biljana Ciric and RAM.

**Qiu Zhijie** is a professor at the School of Inter-media Art at the China Art Academy, and Dean of the School of Experimental Art, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. Qiu Zhijie's artworks take a variety of forms, such as calligraphy, painting, photography, video, installation, and theatre. His solo exhibitions have been held in art museums and galleries internationally in Berlin, Beijing, Shanghai, Singapore, Rotterdam, Vienna, Hong Kong, Vancouver, New York, Zurich, Venice, São Paulo, and Paris. He has been teaching at the Total Art Studio since 2003, proposing ways to develop the concept of "total art" (an awareness that artistic creation cannot be uprooted from its historical and cultural background) in both formal academic and professional contexts. Qiu Zhijie has also curated numerous exhibitions, including *Image and Phenomena: '96 Video Art Exhibition* (1996), which was the first media art show in China; a series of exhibitions with the theme of *Post-Sense Sensibility* between 1999 and 2004; *Archeology of Future: The Second Triennial of Chinese Art* (2005); the 9th Shanghai Biennale (2012); and the China Pavilion, Venice Biennale (2017).

**Wang Ziyun**, an art critic and curator based in Beijing, is a doctoral candidate at the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University. He graduated from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2016, majoring in art criticism theory and practice. In the same year, he co-launched the Chaos Art Space in Chongqing. In recent years, his research focus has been the origin of western modernism, Walter Benjamin's thought and literary theory, and Chinese contemporary art history after 1989, as well as case studies on individual artists, trying to reconnect the ruptured historical traces beyond time, which fall into silence at present. Meanwhile, he devotes himself to the practice and writing of site-specific art to present the new context of social reality in the dynamic relationship between globalization and specific regions.

**Wei Yu** is an art writer, curator, and researcher based in Taipei. Yu obtained his M.A. in Art History and Art Criticism and served as an editor for *Artco* magazine in Taiwan from 2005 to 2007. Covering Taiwan's art scenes and visual culture in postwar era, he has written articles for various art journals and exhibition catalogues and participated in the exhibition *View–Point: A Retrospective Exhibition of Li Yuan-chia* (2014) as the UK research coordinator. Between 2015 and 2016, he curated *Shoot the Pianist: The Noise Scene in Taipei 1990-1995* at Peltz Gallery and organized the sound art event *Formless* (2016) in London. His recent curatorial projects include *Broken Spectre* at Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2017) and *The Alternative Guide of Time* at Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab (C-Lab) in 2018. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Humanities and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck (London Consortium), University of London, and the Head of Research Division of Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab (C-Lab) in Taipei.

**Maggie J Zheng** is an artist interested in the impending obsolescence of solely individual embodiments. She works between California and Yunnan in visual and performing arts education. The taste of mango makes her swoon.

Biljana Ciric

# From a History of Exhibitions Toward a Future of Exhibition Making— Second Assembly: An Introduction

You are holding a special issue of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* with texts related to exhibition histories from the 1990s in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. These texts are a selection from those presented at the second assembly (Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, November 24/25, 2018) of a long-term research platform titled *From a History of Exhibitions Toward a Future of Exhibition Making—Exhibition Making Practices in China and Southeast Asia.*

The research platform for *From a History of Exhibitions Toward a Future of Exhibition Making* began in 2013, with the first assembly presented by St. Paul Street Gallery in Auckland, New Zealand, and co-organized with curator Vera Mey and Gallery director Charlotte Huddleston. The assembly was presented at Auckland Art Gallery as a part of the public programs that accompanyied the Auckland Triennial in 2013, with this edition under the directorship of Hou Hanru. Participants of the first assembly included Patrick D. Flores, Rosemary Forde, Jens Hoffmann, Reuben Keehan, Caterina Riva, Seng Yu Jin, Simon Soon, Tran Luong, Luke Willis Thompson, and others. Participants of the second assembly included Zdenka Badovinac, Nikita Yingqian Cai, Patrick D. Flores, Julia Hartmann, Nathalie Johnston, Miao Zijin, Anderson Lee, Qiu Zhijie, Carlos Quijon Jr., Grace Samboh, Seng Yujin, David Teh, Nhung Walsh, Wang Ziyun, Michelle Wong, Wei Yu, Maggie J Zheng.

This initiative attempts to expand upon my research on the history of artist organized exhibitions in Shanghai from 1979 to 2006 into the larger regional network that will encourage research on exhibition histories and, at the same time, provide common ground for the knowledge that has been produced and preserve it as curatorial knowledge for the future.

The research platform for *From a History of Exhibitions Toward a Future of Exhibition Making* was established in order to pursue what I considered a few urgencies:

- As a self-learning process on art histories that are not yet written
- To acknowledge the importance of exhibition histories as an academic field within various regions that for an active curator offers me an important working tool in understanding local contexts

- To preserve exhibitions, temporal realities, and to rethink possible ways of actually archiving them
- To propose using exhibitions from the past and applying them to active curatorial knowledge today

It took a few years for the second assembly to happen. For me, symbolically, it was very important to have the assembly presented in Shanghai as my research on exhibition histories relates primarily to the specific context of Shanghai.

The relevance of the research includes not only looking at exhibition histories but also thinking about how the exhibition as a format is used today. Art historian and curator Dorothea Von Hantelmann smartly stated that only when we reconfigure the exhibiting ritual can we have new models of institutions. Within the local context of China and the rise of institutions—mostly museums—the exhibition as a format has been consumed largely without questioning its colonial origins and the problematic relationship that it proposes with respect to the art object.

I was fortunate that in 2018 the second assembly was hosted by Rockbund Art Museum (RAM), Shanghai, thanks primarily to the interest of Larys Frogier in exhibition histories and his understanding of the need to address issues related to this topic.

For the second assembly we established a more complex research structure that included a number of components: public talks during the year exposing research work in progress, including Eric Goh presenting groundbreaking research on the *Skin Trilogy* exhibition that happened in Kuala Lumpur with the lecture title "Investigating Time, Space and Community in the Skin Trilogy," Erin Gleensen's research presentation titled "Journey in the Dreams of the Children at the Border: The Exhibition at Site 2 Refugee Camp," which looked at the legacies of the Site 2 Refugee Camp exhibition within the contemporary art of Cambodia, and Lu Pei-yi's lecture on curatorial histories in Taiwan, among others.

The second part of the project was a reading room open to the public from June 2018 until March 2019 on the ground floor of RAM, which contained rare catalogues and artists' books from the 1990s. The reading room will turn into a mobile resource of knowledge, and from March 2019 onward will be hosted by OCAT, Beijing, for six months, and, later in 2019, move to the Guangdong Times Museum, where the last assembly will be hosted in December 2019, and where more publications will be added.

Many thanks are due to a very important grant provided by the Rockbund Art Museum that established support for research on exhibition histories in China and Southeast Asia. Together with the support of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and its staff, we have the opportunity to publish these selected texts before the final book covering the overall project is published later in 2019.

Biljana Ciric

# Hank Bull, Shen Fan, Zhou Tiehai, Shi Yong, and Ding Yi—*Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*

*Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition,* 1996, installation view at Hua Shan Art School Gallery. Courtesy of Biljana Ciric.

Small in scale and extremely modest in means, *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*, which ran from March 15 to March 25, 1996, was an innovative and important, if little known, example of the role of artists in developing exhibition practices in mainland China before its boom of museums, galleries, and the art market in general. The emergence of China's art system can be traced back to the period after the fall of the so-called Gang of Four and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, when there was a new wave of hope in China and, with it, a spirit of freedom.[1] This was accompanied by a strong urge to establish a public sphere for open dialogue, which led to such initiatives as the Democracy Wall, inaugurated in 1978 in Beijing. This wall was no more than ten metres in length, and it was closely monitored by the police, but it became a national symbol of freedom, particularly of free speech, and people pasted written materials onto it expressing their political views. These forms of expression were a manifestation of the youthful desire to speak out, to express ideas through poetry and other writings, which, although not necessarily critical in content, were political as a form of

public display. Artworks were hung with ropes from nearby trees, marking an early instance of strategies to temporarily occupy public space.

A number of exhibitions and artistic undertakings in the 1980s in China attempted to introduce new art forms and new practices—for instance, the '85 New Wave Movement—even though exhibitions were still characterized by fraught negotiations between artists and the government.[2] Then came the Tian'anmen Square incident in 1989, which led to a moratorium on any public actions by artists. Although on January 11, 1990, the state council explicitly lifted the short-lived but stringent blanket of martial law, its pernicious effects lived on, as artists avoided organizing public or semipublic events for fear of reprisal. An example was *Garage Exhibition*, held November 22 to 24, 1991, in the Shanghai Educational Hall; many artists remember that they were afraid to publicize it, and that it therefore had a very small attendance, even among their peers. The artist Shi Yong remembers:

> "Underground! Underground!" This word is used by many and is always associated with resistance, a backbone to stand for strong arguments. But, in actual fact, most of the time it was only because we didn't have a choice! During that time, the mainstream art scene saw the art we made as rubbish (and people who hold this point of view still exist, although they no longer have a monopoly on what is said about art). Those who did have control over the mainstream art scene did not provide us with any official kind of exhibition venues and we didn't have any money to rent decent places. The only choice we had was the underground exhibition hall at the school where I taught. This humid space with low ceilings was provided for free by the school and fulfilled the needs of many local Shanghai artists. I am still surprised at the openness the school had. This was almost unheard of at the time. They had no idea what kind of art we were making.[3]

The underground bomb shelter of Shanghai's Hua Shan Art School is the gallery that Shi Yong is referring to. It began its activities in 1992 with *October Art Experimental Exhibition*[4] and as a venue went on to host many other artistic experiments. As Shi Yong further recalls:

> Like adolescents looking for a piece of open turf to claim as their own, this underground exhibition hall became the stronghold for all the local experimental artists' and curators' activities, including the 1996 exhibition *Let's Talk About Money*. Now that I think about it, it really was a place where you could make all kinds of mess, but also somewhere where you could retreat into a corner and imagine a different world. Some meaningful things happened here, whereas some other things have been forgotten.[5]

This and other rare venues for artist-organized exhibitions were not white cube spaces. Generally they were either what were considered the "cultural palaces" of different governmental districts or university student clubs—facilities designed for students' leisure time. The Hua Shan Art School Gallery, of great importance in the early to mid-1990s, was one of the most experimental venues in the entire country.[6]

Artists temporarily occupying vacant spaces became a common approach in China in the years after martial law was lifted in 1990. Increases in the development of new real estate projects—which resulted in more and more vacant spaces—enabled artists to embrace these opportunities, and real estate companies even used the phenomenon for their own promotional purposes. All of this preceded the boom of real estate and art museums that began in the early 2000s.[7]

Thus, it came about that artist-initiated exhibitions, rather than museums, acted as sites for the production of knowledge. This was opposite to the situation in the West, where museums, the development of modern and contemporary art, and the study of art history were very much interconnected. Furthermore, the notion of the white-cube space that was introduced in the West after World War II was deeply linked to the institutionalization of art, whereas in China, the white cube would not be introduced until after the year 2000, and then it was closely linked to the commercialization of the art scene.

These conditions of production informed many artist-organized exhibitions and even artistic practice more generally. Artists were actively learning about these conditions while practicing art, and they began to make choices that would influence the public appearance of their work. Until the mid-1990s, there was almost no support for exhibitions: no market, no institutions, no platforms for critical discussion, no local collectors, and no connoisseurs to reinforce and follow the experiments that were taking place. The participating artists bore all the costs, and opportunities for shows were made possible almost entirely through established friendships, solidarity, and a strong belief in the work being made. Thus, many works did not survive, and today we feel an urgent need to uncover, preserve, and study whatever documentation might remain.

In the later part of the 1990s, many artists began to experience the professionalization of their role, which was followed by more frequent visits from foreign curators, collectors, museums, and gallerists.[8] They also experienced greater exposure abroad, finding themselves suddenly on the global stage where, at the same time, they observed the growth of a cult of "Chineseness" that in many ways still persists today.[9] Hank Bull, an artist long associated with and member of the Western Front, a nonprofit artist-run space in Vancouver, Canada, was one of those foreign curators interested in art from China. But his decision to show works by artists such as Shi Yong and Qian Weikang was atypical for that time, given that their work represented a significant move away from ideological imagery and the dogma of so-called social criticism. Bull, together with a group of Shanghai-

based artists, decided to curate together an exhibition of international ambition to take place in Shanghai. Artists Shi Yong, Ding Yi, Shen Fan, and Zhou Tiehai were instrumental in helping to conceptualize its protocols and form: Shi Yong arranged the venue and was also in charge of installation and Shen Fan wrote the texts, while Zhou Tiehai helped formulate ideas during meetings and assisted with installation. The artist Ding Yi explained in an interview later:

> We didn't have money or the right conditions to organize an international exhibition [of original works]. So the fax became a cost-effective way to do it. We just needed a venue to show the works that came by fax. Chen Yanyin, Zhou Tiehai, Shi Yong, Shen Fan, and I were the five key members [in Shanghai], as we took part in the discussions. I had a fax machine, and Shi Yong was the liaison with the venue. We had exhibited before in the underground gallery at the Hua Shan School.[10]


Left to Right: Ding Yi, Zhou Tiehai, Chen Yanyin, Shi Yong, and Shen Fan, Shanghai curators for *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*, 1996. Courtesy of Biljana Ciric.

With a scope (international), medium (fax paper), transmission means (fax machine), and venue (the Hua Shan Art School Gallery) thus chosen, a title was decided upon. *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition* was timed to coincide with the opening of the first Shanghai Biennale in 1996. A comparison of these two events is instructive: That year's biennial presented primarily oil paintings by local artists and no works from abroad (with the exception of the work of a few Chinese artists living and working outside of China, among them Chen Zhen and Gu Wenda), a far cry from the internationalism that has marked the Biennale in more recent years.[11] *Let's Talk About Money* was, in fact, one of the rare projects in China organized by artists that attempted to establish a dialogue among artists from both inside and outside the country.

For *Let's Talk About Money*, the Western Front (and Bull specifically) embarked on a great deal of promotional work abroad, inviting many international artists to participate. Locally, the team of curators heavily promoted participation in the exhibition not only within Shanghai's artistic community, but also in Beijing and other cities in China, primarily through word of mouth and the handing out of printed invitations. Artists and others were invited to send faxes to the exhibition starting two weeks before the opening date, and anything received then or during the ten-day run of the show was hung on the walls almost immediately. A total of more than one hundred contributions arrived. Ten days might seem relatively short, but it was typical for exhibitions at the time. What was not typical was the show's global scope.

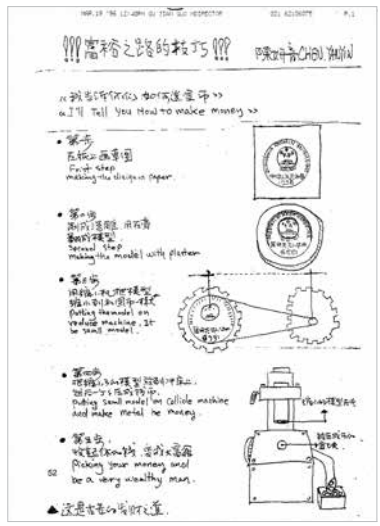
Seminar of curators and artists at *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition,* 1996, Hua Shan Art School Gallery. Courtesy of Biljana Ciric.

Contributions came in from Japan, the United States, Canada, Holland, Germany, France, Australia, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, Russia, Argentina, Uruguay, Austria, the Philippines, and China. Among the the artists and artist collectives were OBORO, Akihiko Morishita, Fei Dawei, Vladimir Mironenko, Xue Song, Ren Rong, Yin Jun, Santiago Bose, Xiang Nong, Chai Yimin, Lilian A. Bell, Ideal Copy, Art Pool, Guy Bleus, Zhang Ying & Shi Yong, Qin Yifeng, Pu Jie, Debi Hayes-Bartlett, Hanna Snyder, Ioe Bsaffort, Peggy Kames, Pietro Pllini & Yola Berbesz, Mauricio Guerrero Alercon, Jane Dyer, Guo Bin, Maris Bustamente, Martin Alejandro Fumarola, BBK*GSS, Szilvia Reischel, Nemeth Hogyal, Shen Fan, Ingo Gunther, Xiao Jun, Peter Fend, Yang Peiyun, Giovanni Nicolini, Marie-Josee LaFortune, Marten Winters, Peter Bothig, John G. Boehme, Chen Yanyin, Hao Jing, Tetsuo Kogawa, Chen Zhen, Robert Adrian X, Ding Yi, Zhou Tiehai, Monica Dematté, and Eduardo Kac. Some entries were submitted anonymously.


Fei Dawei, contribution to *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition,* 1996, fax.

In addition to contributions by artists, a number of local curators, including Fei Dawei and Zhu Qi, sent contributions. Individuals outside of the art world did so as well—for instance, the general manager of Shanghai Jinya Real Estate Consultants Ltd., who faxed in a work titled *In the Name of the Company Let's Talk About Money,* which included prices and locations of apartments available for sale as well as possible payment methods. His submission thus aptly interpreted the exhibition's stated theme and used it as an opportunity to literally advertise and promote a commercial enterprise.

The titular subject—money—provoked responses of all different sorts, including cheekily direct ones. The artist Chen Yanyin contributed two works, *I'll tell you how to make money* and *How to make a credit card*, which presented a DIY strategy for making counterfeit money, from initial design to final production. Szilvia Reischl's contribution announced: "Money would be oxygen . . . we should have it from the moment of our birth . . .





Left: Chen Yanyin, contribution to *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai Frist International Fax Art Exhibition, I'll tell you how to make money,* 1996, fax.

Right: Chen Yanyin, contribution to *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition, I'll tell you how to make a credit card,* 1996, fax.

money would be blood . . . no one would know how much she/he has . . . money would be like the number of hours in the rest of our lives." Giovanni Nicolini wrote in his fax: "Fashion and Innovation are Myths of the Financial-Industrial Apparatus."

The theme indirectly referred to the lack of financial support in China for exhibitions and advanced art practices in general, but, even more critically, it proposed a topic for discussion that was still very politically loaded at the time and almost never addressed openly. As the organizers fully understood, when discussing money, one can't avoid also discussing the economy, politics, and society's structure. The theme was a deliberate provocation.


Shi Yong, exhibition poster for *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*, 1996. Courtesy of Biljana Ciric.

The exhibition poster—drawn by one of the curators, Shi Yong—hinted at these other aspects. It bears a drawing of a fortune cat, a talisman very commonly seen at the entrances of restaurants, shops, and other businesses and stands for luck and prosperity. In the press release, the curators quoted both the poet Emmett Williams's phrase "Doctors talk about medicine, and lawyers talk about the law, but artists talk about money," and the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's famous saying "It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice"[12] (made in direct opposition to previous notions that "a socialist train coming with a delay is better than the capitalist one that comes on time"). Deng Xiaoping's quote and his support of a pragmatic logic were at the core of China's new social system, the values of which are still in place today. The opening up of China during the 1980s led to artists' enthusiasm in taking part in the construction of a new society, which continued even after the events of 1989. They emulated the leader's pragmatic stance, taking another of his famous lines—"Practice is the only criterion for testing truth" and the

"do it" logic that it suggested—as a model for their own practices, in which formats and approaches could be modest, simple, straightforward, and dedicated to making things happen.

In the mid-1990s, faxing and the Internet were in popular use in many countries, but not in China. The Internet would not enter the country's wider social realm until after 2000, which is amazing considering that today China is the largest iPhone market in the world. At the time, very few individuals owned fax machines; they were primarily used by companies and so-called *danwei*, or work units. For a private person to own a fax machine suggested that they were actively communicating overseas, and from the perspective of the state, even receiving letters from abroad was grounds for suspicion. Thus, to send and receive faxes as an individual was a political act and not just a convenient way of transmitting information.

Ding Yi was the only artist who had a fax machine at his home, and his fax number was advertised as the destination for submissions. He recalls that he bought the machine in early 1994, just after returning from the Venice Biennale in 1993—the first year that Chinese artists had participated in the Biennale—realizing that it would be an important tool for communicating with the rest of the world.


Ding Yi, contribution to *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*, 1996, fax.

In the course of researching this exhibition, I became curious about how, exactly, the participating Chinese artists submitted their contributions if no one had a fax machine. I asked a number of them about this small detail—from 1996, no less—and very few could recall. Qin Yifeng remembered that he sent his fax from the post office. In fact, his contribution was an unwitting homage to Conceptual Art practices: He faxed the receipt for the fee for sending the fax (here one cannot help thinking of Mel Bochner's inclusion of a photocopy of the blueprint of the Xerox machine that made the various photocopies in his 1966 show *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*). Qian Weikang sent his contribution after business hours from the advertising company where he worked at the time. His contribution offers a clue about the price of a fax machine then:

Yesterday, who saw a fax machine
priced at RMB 6225?
How could Qian Weikang be named after money? [*Author's note: The artist's last name shares the same Chinese character as that for money.*]
Some money ("钱," *qian*) is fake
Some money ("钱," *qian*) and objects are real

This and other submissions make clear that the participants understood that the pairing of the subject (money) and the means of transmission (fax) was deliberately provocative. And although it is tempting to read

Qin Yifeng, contribution to *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*, 1996, fax.

the exhibition in light of 1960s and 1970s practices predicated on replication, transmission, and information—for instance Bochner's aforementioned *Working Drawings*, or David Hammons's *Global Fax Festival* (2000), which similarly displayed faxes received from around the world as the "artworks"—*Let's Talk About Money* fundamentally must be seen in relation to China's particular political and economic context in the 1990s.

The use of the fax machine as the tool of transmission circumnavigated the obstacle of censorship, and as it was impossible to gain state sanction for any artist-initiated exhibition through official means, it obviated the need to obtain approval from the Cultural Bureau. Still, today, it is common that institutions preparing an international exhibition must apply for this approval. The process takes a few weeks and requires sending all of the materials related to the show for review, including the list of works and images of those works, with descriptions and artists' bios. Thanks to the fax machine, the organizers managed to skip this step and the exhibition remained on view for ten days without any intrusion from the authorities. Its curators retrospectively emphasized that had they not used the fax as the form of transmission, the exhibition would have never happened at all, simply because they wouldn't have received the permits for it. Even more crucial is the fact of the organizers' refusal of self-censorship—they demonstrated and openness in organizing this exhibition despite not having a clear understanding of whether it would be possible or not.

The fact that the installation was continually in progress was an important conceptual premise—although submissions were invited starting two weeks in advance of the opening, most were received after the show had begun—and made it different from the traditional idea of an exhibition as something complete and inflexible starting at the moment of its opening. Moreover, there was no clear, predetermined system for how the works would be presented in the space; instead, the installation was an organic process, partly related to the chronological order of receiving the faxes and partly according to chance. The only differentiation in the scale of each submission had to do with whether the fax was received as a single page or a continuous, uncut roll because the sender had submitted multiple pages.

The show received only a few reviews—or, more precisely, short reports in the local daily newspapers, which mostly focused on its innovative format rather than its political implications. Most Chinese newspapers were then (and still are) state owned, which restricts larger discussions around the role of art. At its core, *Let's Talk About Money* addressed China's economic boom and recent surge of development. Artists' concern with money, as Emmett

*Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition,* 1996, installation view at Hua Shan Art School Gallery. Courtesy of Biljana Ciric.

Williams had suggested, and its relation to economic growth with respect to the individual and the state would be further pursued in the much better known *Art for Sale* exhibition just a few years later in 1999. That show lasted only three days before the authorities closed it. Both exhibitions reflected the artists' struggle to gain recognition in a rapidly commercialized environment.

Today, it is hard to determine what impact *Let's Talk About Money* actually had. Very few people know about it due to a lack of systematic archiving related to artistic experimentation. The catalogue that Hank Bull designed and Western Front printed for the exhibition was issued as a limited edition and is now long out of print.[13] The faxes that were on view, although preserved, have long faded. That they survived at all is thanks to Shi Yong, who saved them despite their lack of commercial value and ephemeral form.

It is known, for instance, that the artist Xu Zhen pasted his own work on the gallery walls of *Let's Talk About Money* while no one was around, a sly act that recalls André Cadere's uninvited insertion of his *Round Wooden Bars* into exhibition spaces during the 1970s. This was one of the earliest exhibitions that Xu Zhen took part in as an artist, and he would go on to become pivotal in many artist-generated projects in the years following.[14]

*Let's Talk About Money* is also important for having introduced a crucial paradigm for other artist-organized exhibitions, and for exhibition-making practices in China in general—that is, experimentation with exhibition formats and methods. It was hardly what one might call visibly radical in appearance (one might note from the installation views that the faxes on the walls look somewhat like memos pinned to the walls of an office), but the project was conceived first and foremost as something deeply embedded in its own social reality and responsive to its surrounding conditions. It was precisely in this way that, through extremely modest means, certain values and concerns could be publicly debated, even at a certain risk. *Let's Talk About Money* thus ushered in a new understanding of what exhibition making could be and what it might mean to present work publicly.

This interest in the format of the artist-organized exhibition would be inherited by a younger generation of Shanghai artists who began organizing shows from 1998 on—for instance, the *310 Jin Yuan Road Exhibition*, which took place in an empty apartment wherein an artist occupied each room. There was the aforementioned *Art for Sale* exhibition in 1999, which was half supermarket and half exhibition venue. There were the noteworthy shows *Fan Mingzhen & Fan Mingzhu: Glad to Meet You* and *Twin Exhibition* in 2002, *Dial 62761232* in 2004 (an exhibition in a suitcase that was delivered to viewers if they called the titular phone number), and *38 Solo Exhibitions* in 2006, all of which strove to rethink the conventional rules of exhibition making. The same group of artists curated most of these, with Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Alexander Brandt as the core members. These artists

and others drew from the legacy of artist-curated exhibitions, including *Let's Talk About Money,* to forge creative practices that made the conception of exhibitions a fundamental part of being an experimental artist.


Zhou Tiehai, contribution to *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition,* 1996, fax.

This practice seemed necessary at a moment and in a culture where the position of contemporary art was not recognized and there were no official institutions to feature avant-garde exhibitions. But it seems urgent as well in the current moment. During the mid-1990s, the role of the curator emerged in China alongside the evolution of the artist-curator, but the two roles had somewhat different fates: Artist-organized exhibitions have mostly disappeared since 2007 or so, an outcome of an art system that became increasingly market-centric. Interestingly enough, *Let's Talk About Money* also marked the end of the Hua Shan Art School Gallery as a space for experimentation.

For this generation of artists, greater exposure to the international art scene, and their more frequent participation in exhibitions abroad, brought an end to their self-organized activities in the local scene. It seemed more imperative to exhibit outside of China than to innovate within it. As Shi Yong recently stated:

> We had the urge to go international in the 1990s. For us, going international didn't mean Africa or Latin America, but, very simply, only Western Europe and the USA. That was very clear. . . . Back then we didn't have any money. Our only chances were the opportunities abroad. Only by doing exhibitions abroad could you receive money. We were able to produce work with that money; otherwise we couldn't. . . . In the 1990s this was the only financial support that we could find. Today, of course, it is very different. It sounds brutal, but that was reality . . . it was pure pragmatism.[15]

And although the economic climate has vastly changed since, the perceived need for Chinese artists to find recognition in Western Europe and the United States, to the exclusion of the rest of the world, has not.

*Let's Talk About Money* served as a kind of warning about the direction that China's art world was taking. And it asked, precisely, that artists talk about it. The market became a regulating force of the art system, which changed both the focus and the inner dynamics of the field in significant ways. These conditions not only affected artistic practices but also curatorial involvement, exhibition-making practices, and the greater ecology of the system, all outcomes that this exhibition seems to have seen coming. *Let's Talk About Money* also raised important issues regarding the flow of communication and how dialogue is conducted. The need for dialogue among artists, without hierarchy and without regard for their nationalities,

not to mention solidarity within the field of art, is just as pressing today. Many exhibitions being made in China still follow the routine modus operandi and capitalist logic of exchange, and their format merely cultivates the sense of material objects as stand-ins for the accumulation of wealth. Other aspects of exhibition making—related to the production of experience or the possibility of new interpretations of artists' works through the relationships that an exhibition context produces—are seldom given much thought. As a result, exhibitions in China are rarely seen as historical agents in the production of discourse or as innovative platforms that can shift thinking—all of which *Let's Talk About Money* sought to do.

Notes

1. In May 1966, Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution with the intent to preserve what he considered to be "true" Communist ideology. During this period, millions of people were persecuted or harassed, and masses of urban youth were sent to re-education camps in rural areas, bringing the entire country's formal educational system to a halt. As a result, a whole generation of youth grew up without schooling while most of the artifacts related to the heritage of China (called the "Four Olds": old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas) were destroyed as symbols of an outdated society. After Mao's death, a political faction nicknamed the Gang of Four came to prominence and controlled the power organs of the Communist Party, prolonging the terror of the Cultural Revolution. Its members were later charged for their crimes.
2. Many exhibitions by Chinese artists during the early 1980s introduced painterly abstraction, performance, site-specific elements, installations, and, starting in 1988, video. Although the terminology of these forms wasn't defined while artists were doing them, these exhibitions and events were important beginnings for experimental art. Regarding the interaction between contemporary artists and the state before 1989, two notable events can be mentioned: The Last Supper Performance in 1988, held at the Shanghai Art Museum and censored twenty minutes after it began, made history as the first performance in a public art museum. There is also the better-known exhibition of 1989 called China/Avant-Garde, held at the National Art Gallery in Beijing.
3. This quote is from Shi Yong's 2014 artwork titled *Previously, form often originated from passiveness rather than resistance, like how we use umbrellas when it starts to rain. What about now?*
4. That December 1992 exhibition was organized by Qian Weikang and Shi Yong. The participating artists included Shi Yong, Qian Weikang, Yin Jun, Tao Huiping, Jin Lili, Wang Congju, and Zhang Zangwei.
5. This quote is also from Shi Yong's aforementioned 2014 artwork. See endnote 3.
6. As an educational institution, the school wasn't particularly experimental, but its gesture of letting contemporary artists use the basement for exhibitions makes it important. Two of the main initiators, Shi Yong and Qian Weikang, were working at the school and acted as mediators between the school's authorities and artists who organized exhibitions there. Shi Yong still has a teaching position there; Qian Weikang worked as gallery guard between 1992 and 1994.
7. On average, nearly one hundred new museums are being built annually across the country. During 2011, that figure reached a staggering 386—more than one per day. These figures are discussed in Jeffrey Johnson, "The Museumfication of China," *Leap Magazine* (May 2013), http://leapleapleap.com/2013/05/the-museumification-of-china/.
8. During the 1980s and early 1990s it was unheard of for an artist to make a living from making art. Starting in 1993, with the presentation of Chinese artists at the Venice Biennale, more and more foreign institutions and foreign collectors started to buy art from China, which led to great shifts in artists' practices, their understanding that the works could have monetary value, and the idea that being an artist could be a legitimate profession.
9. Curators would go to China and pick works for their exhibitions in which the selected artist and artwork were made to represent "Chineseness." The artist Zhou Tiehai, in his silent film *Will/We Must* (1996), represents this phenomenon as being like going to see a doctor: The artists would line up in front of a door and wait to be seen by the curator. This film reflects on an actual experience during a visit from a foreign curator.
10. The full interview with Ding Yi, conducted by the author in 2009, is published in Biljana Ciric, ed., *A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979–2006* (Manchester: CFCCA-Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014), 100.
11. The tradition of organizing exhibitions parallel to the Shanghai Biennale by local artists would continue from that moment forward.
12. Deng Xiaoping was leader of China between 1979 and 1992. He spearheaded many economic reforms and is credited for the fast-growing economy that we still are seeing today in China. He first used the "mice" phrase in 1962 during a Youth League Conference speech in relation to a new policy of agricultural production management.
13. The catalogue has been re-published as *Re-print #2: Shanghai Fax (1996) "Let's Talk About Money"* (Dja Dja Wurrung, Australia: 3-play, 2015). The Re-print series is an initiative by 3-ply to reintroduce out-of-print artist publications to a contemporary audience.
14. From an interview with the author in 2009, published in Ciric, ed., *A History of Exhibitions*, 354.
15. "Reflections on Artistic Practices Now and Then in Shanghai: A Conversation with Biljana Ciric, Hu Yun, Shi Yong, and Luke Willis Thompson," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 69, no. 4 (July/August 2015), 25.

Nikita Yingqian Cai

# Burn After Reading: The Transdualistic Resistance of Big Tail Elephants

In March 2017, *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows* opened, as scheduled, at OCAT Institute, Beijing. During the press conference, a journalist raised a question implying the avant-garde status of the Big Tail Elephants—Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, Lin Yilin, and Xu Tan—was inseparable from the context of Guangdong province's privileged position at the forefront of 1990s economic development. Xu Tan volunteered to respond, asserting that Big Tail Elephants's interrogation, far from being confined to the temporal axis of the 1990s or the spatial boundaries of Guangdong province, in fact arose from a nascent critique of the universal, modernist faith in economic development as a necessary means for social progress. Four decades into China's economic reform, a global north-south divide predicated on the assumption that a positive correlation exists between economic growth and cultural development and its ensuing stratification remains the primary standard by which Chinese mainstream media determines artistic value. Xu Tan was admitted to the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts as an undergraduate in the late 1970s. As he recalled that period in a 2007 interview:[1] "The focus of the late 1970s was Reform and Opening Up. After Deng Xiaoping assumed chairmanship, he set forth the additional goal of the "Four Modernizations."So, regardless of whether the teachers at the Academy were fond of modern art or not, modern art came to represent modernization, just as science—and culture, too—had to be modernized…."[2] Admittedly, the younger generation, fortunate to receive a college education after the Cultural Revolution, grew up with the objectives and slogans of socialist modernization. As an ideology, modernization is inextricably tied to the collective desire for national growth and social transformation. Meanwhile, the material reality of modernization, manifested in the myriad forms of consumer culture, urbanization, the technologicalization of agriculture and industrial production, and the digitalization of information and scientific progress, hastily drew regional and personal trajectories into the spatiotemporal concept of globalization.

In 1978, as an era of nation-wide economic reform dawned, "modernization" and "modernity" were reintroduced into China as bywords for progress: individual growth at home and social development at large. In the 1980s, Sichuan People's Publishing House released *The Modernization of Man: Psychology, Thought, Attitude, Behavior,* an edited translation of Alex Inkeles's seminal work *Becoming Modern*, as part of its "Towards the Future" series.[3] The book included a quiz about the individual modernity scale, composed of a rich slate of questions covering

a variety of aspects, including, among others, personal efficiency, political life, science, career choice, planning ability, time management, media literacy, expertise, women's rights, family life, education, religious beliefs, the elderly, traditional customs, and spiritual life. The portrayal of the modern person in this quiz reflected an extreme dualism that sought to replace the old with the new, tradition with revolution—a thorough rupture between past and future. Artist Chen Shaoxiong, who hailed from the circle of intellectuals associated with the Southern Artists Salon, established in Guangzhou in 1986, once observed that "the experience of confronting the alleged problems of "modernity" [in the 1980s] . . . was but a stage of falling madly in love."[4] Indeed, dichotomies like west/east, north/south, avant-garde/conservative, official/non-official, became popular vernacular among Chinese avant-garde and in experimental art circles. From the efforts made by Chinese artists and critics in this period to break down such concepts as modern art, modernism, and modernization, one can readily discern that modernity, as the very condition of the three above-mentioned concepts, and the historical plurality of modernism, have contributed to the transformation from an anti-Western-centric dualism to a non-binary de-Western-centric transdualism. The latter stage has remained in effect, even after the coinage "contemporary art" gained widespread currency.

Although contemporary artists rarely had any legitimate exhibition opportunities in official institutions following 1989, the vast speed and scale of China's economic growth gave rise to a considerable number of "middle grounds" that were either under government control or belonged to the market, the very spaces that artists seized in order to organize exhibitions with "guerrilla-style" spontaneity. "Guerrilla" connotes fluidity and is more in tune with the transitional reality of the 1990s than the oppositional undertone of "underground," but it also alludes to the precarious nature of these grassroots projects organized by self-contained artists who never became intermediary figures between their nation and society. As Guangzhou played a central role in the top-down political and economic reform of the Pearl River Delta, the artists who lived there became pointedly involved in capital exchange, economic relations, and the consumer culture of globalization, which allowed them to break away fairly early from the wishful idealization of the free market that plagued intellectuals of the 1980s. They learned how and when to take advantage of the system and urban spaces on the fringe of the market and managed to separate themselves from the collective desire for nation-wide modernization, instead placing their subjectivity at the centre of their creative endeavours. It may be convenient, for the sake of interpretation and classification, to project Big Tail Elephants's strategy of mounting impromptu exhibitions in various spaces outside the system, such as in bars or on the streets, against the antagonistic relationship between the production of global capitalist spaces and spaces inside the state system. However, as the members of Big Tail Elephants transformed materials and spaces time and time again, intervening in different social relations through their exhibition-making, they also changed themselves. Whether impelled by modernization, global capitalism, or the art market, the unceasing capitalization of an equally relentless artistic autonomy never

Xu Tan, *Allegory of Love, II*, 1993, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows*, Guangdong Times Museum, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

interacts with individuals in an abstract, omnipotent way. In the face of a rising critical attitude toward Western-centrism and modernity as the new consensus, it is especially crucial to re-examine the legacy of Big Tail Elephants from the vantage point of transdualism.

In the exhibition text accompanying the *First Show*, presented by Big Tail Elephants in January 1991, they wrote the following about their spontaneous use of tools and the creative purpose of them:

> Open up your skull, parse it little by little; you realize these are tools never used before, so you spontaneously pick some up to disassemble a steel-framed bed, only to piously piece it back together again, except you have now turned its head into its tail, feet into its back, bedplate into shoe rack; we are happy with the result. We will also destroy this result, and let every Tom, Dick, and Harry imagine themselves lying flat on this bed; we are continuously motivated by originality, picking up new tools when old ones are worn out.[5]

This jointly penned first-person statement presents a glimpse into these artists' quest; there is no clear demarcation between the artist and the object (the bed), between the artist and the tools, or between the artist and the anonymous audience; nor do they posit the work or the exhibition as the conclusion of their creative process, but, rather, as the beginning of another work cycle. "Cycle," in fact, succinctly encapsulates Big Tail Elephants's experimental penchant for trial and error. In the same exhibition, the late Chen Shaoxiong used his body as a tool to complete *Seven Days of Silence* (1991):

> I have designed and built a translucent maze to seduce the audience; in it, amidst crisscrossing gazes, the relation

> between inside and outside the work is upended, as well as the positions of material and spirit, work and author, audience and artist . . . fleeting changes and steady diffusion, like a process of fermentation, gradually fill the space and time, confusing reality with nothingness.[6]

Chen Shaoxiong also raised the concept of "site," although not in the sense of an objective, spatiotemporal dimension: "In my work, time creates an environment and system, into which one can escape to experience a stark distance from objective life, though I don't know which is more real."[7] Chen Shaoxiong's three major early works, *Seven Days of Silence*, *72.5 Hours* (1992), and *5 Hours* (1993), all refer to an objective time scale in their titles; however, from the vantage point of representation at the Times Museum in 2016, the body of the artist is no longer present; nor does it exist in a space-time that allows revisiting. Affected by the characteristic vacuity of the art system of the 1990s, the artists did not think of turning documentation material into work; nor did they consider the installation documentation the sole reference for future restoration. These conflicting forms of materialization permeate Big Tail Elephants's modus operandi, a means of resistance—informed by conditions both subjective and objective—that can be aptly compared to a kind of "burning after reading," safeguarding their work from the hands of the market and the fetishism of the art system.

Chen Shaoxiong, *Seven Days of Silence*, 1991, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows*, Guangdong Times Museum, 2016. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

Following the fall of the Berlin wall, the ideological rupture between socialism and capitalism began to collapse at the same time as the Gulf War lifted the curtain of the post-Cold War era, while a neoliberal network predicated on marketization and technologization also began taking hold of the globe. On January 29, 1992, when passing through the Shunde district of Foshan in Guangdong province, during a visit to southern China, Deng Xiaoping inspected the former Pearl River Refrigerator Factory (known for the Ronsen line of products) and gave a speech from which the quote "Development is the ultimate truth" was to become a national slogan. Deng Xiaoping's speech ushered in yet another wave of acceleration in the Pearl River Delta region. Such concepts as collapse, disintegration, war, freedom,

and acceleration quickly replaced erstwhile divisions based on the three-world model, absorbing different nations, communities, and individuals into an interrelation of entanglement. Though seemingly out of place, Lin Yilin's interest in and references to Joseph Beuys, like Xu Tan's connection to Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, can be seen as a conscious, local, even pragmatic appropriation of the emerging canons of Western art. While Theodor Adorno wrote extensively about the fatal interdependence of artistic autonomy and capital throughout the history of Western modernism, another camp led by art historian Benjamin Buchloh continued to idealize an art in opposition to the society of capitalist commodity by extolling the Western neo-avant-garde. The reality is that the transition from modernism to post-modernism failed to dismantle the tie between capital and art's self-determination. Meanwhile, in China, the legitimization, marketization, and social pervasiveness of art have shared a synchronous path since the very beginning of China's Open Door Policy, in a manner that does not resemble its Western counterpart enough to trace, in an abstract sense, a disintegration of art through capital, society, and system.

In October 1992, several participants in the *First Show*—Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, and Hu Zhiying—held a symposium, together with Xu Tan, Yu Lin, Chen Tong, Li Zhengtian, and Wang Huangsheng, to discuss the preparation of a second exhibition: *Big Tail Elephants: United Art Exhibition*. Xu Tan shared his observations on local pop art as a perfect mirror of the relation between consumer culture and Cantonese culture, with its close ties to the history and reality of the region. Lin Yilin, meanwhile, argued that any critique of Western contemporary art must operate on the basis of identity. Chen Shaoxiong defined Big Tail Elephants's organizational method as a collaborative action, rather than a movement, while Wang Huangsheng argued that any artwork bearing so much as a trace of consumerist culture is, by default, commercial art. Aside from a small group of educated elites enamored of philosophy, the artists and critics living in southern China in the 1990s experienced the shock of modernization first through changes in material life and consumer culture, phenomena that largely may be attributable to the region's booming economy and long history of global trade. At the time, Big Tail Elephants were themselves youngsters aspiring to stay ahead of the latest trends; they were influenced, whether consciously or inadvertently, by mass media—especially the dissemination of pop culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan via television and radio—in constructing their own image. This pop-cultural influence is most evident in artist Zhang Haier's photography work, as well as in a series of exhibition posters and photos he shot for Big Tail Elephants throughout the 1990s. As the archetype of a Western consumer culture with distinctly Cantonese traits, culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan imparted a new sense of identity to youth in Guangdong; as for the artists, the cultural avant-garde, they too became aware of their identity as the Other through this encounter with mass culture, again, especially that of Hong Kong and Taiwan. The embodied awareness of one's intrinsic Otherness is the crux of de-ideologization. On this observation, Xu Tan, who is not Cantonese, once shared a profound insight:

> I've always believed the differences between contemporary art from Guangdong and from the North are tied to the impact of Hong Kong's culture and lifestyle on the former. . . . When I first came here from the North to study, I found it difficult to understand the people here. They, the Guangzhou residents, had little interest in northern culture. . . . I couldn't really fit in at first; it took me a while to adapt and get used to it.[8]

Xu Tan enjoys talking about his early exchanges with Hong Kong people. These encounters—from watching Chen Tong debate a Hong Kong scholar on postmodernism and Hong Kong artists' idiosyncratic uses of immaterial concepts, to interacting as a research subject with sociologists from Hong Kong Polytechnic University—all helped Xu Tan appreciate the variety of vernaculars and dissimilar world views encompassed by Chinese identity.

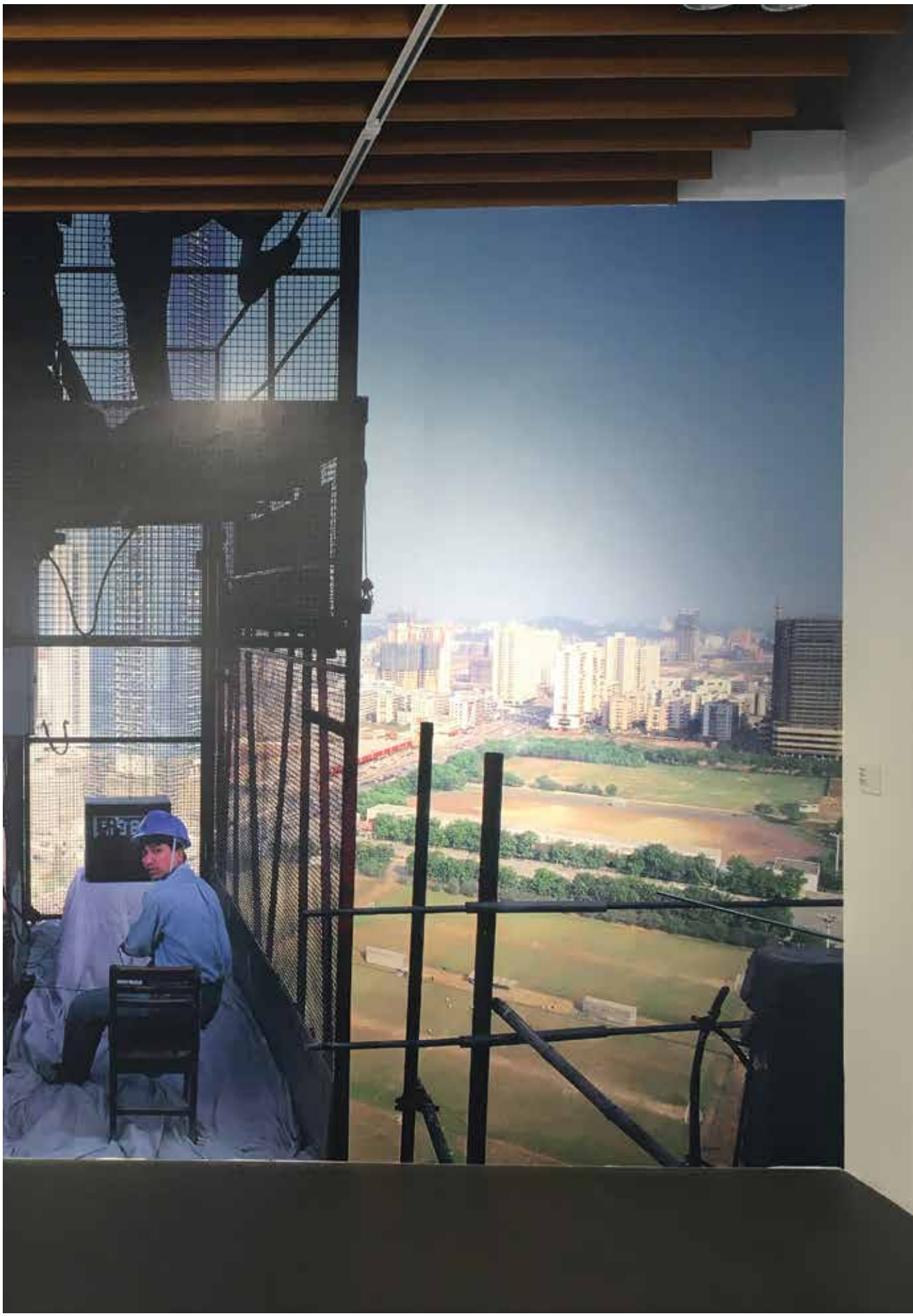
Compared to Xu Tan, whose speculative disposition evinces the outlook of an intellectual, or Lin Yilin and Chen Shaoxiong, who vigorously devoted themselves to media and conceptual maneuvers, Liang Juhui was different: he had never received any legitimate education from an art academy, but was working as an artistic director at the Guangdong Television Bureau, and—according to documentation both publicly available and yet-to-be-published—he was a man of few words. While Liang Juhui provided Big Tail Elephants with the most essential of (spatial, technological, financial) resources for preparing, executing, promoting, and documenting their projects, it should be noted that he did not solely reside in the art world, and, instead, navigated the frontier zone between the neighbouring spheres of art and commerce. Most of the documentation footage exhibited in *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows* consists of restored and digitally converted materials from Liang Juhui Memorial. In the exhibitions held by Big Tail Elephants, Liang Juhui's work often demonstrated a distinct technical rigour and consistency of craftsmanship, which would become extremely useful later on, as it made it possible for museums to reproduce the same materials and structures even in the absence of the artist. For instance, *Entering the Project* (1991), an installation impressive in scale, spotlights the dialectic of nihilism and reality as mediated by inside and outside; the artist's original notes, written while creating the work, include a comprehensive list of dimensions and technical specifications. From *Entering the Project*, exhibited in *First Show*, and *Movement, The Rudiments of Embryo* (1992), included in *Second Show*, to the participatory *Game of Numbers* (1996), exhibited in *Fifth Show*, and arguably his most widely known work, *One Hour Game* (1996), executed on the north side of Guangzhou's Tianhe district, Liang Juhui underwent a shift in focus from material-space to body-time. In the meantime, *Emptiness* (1994) and *Flower on the Human's Skull* (1995), two performance pieces created in the intervening period, revealed a blending of the ancient cosmologies underlying Buddhism and Daoism into "shrines" and "sanctuaries," spaces that exude a more pronounced Western impression. This juxtaposition can be interpreted as part of a process of externalizing his spiritual practice.

Liang Juhui's self-prescribed distance from the discourse of the art world, his self-discipline and quietude, have allowed him to sustain a lifelong practice without falling into the trap of being a "professional artist," wherein the fundamental nature of art as a form of labour becomes invisible. Liang Juhui's practice and contributions provide an idiosyncratic point of view that hints at possibilities for dissolving modernist dualisms: the artist and the craftsman, the professional and the amateur, the labour and the talent.

Chen Shaoxiong, *Five Hours*, 1993, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows*, OCAT, Beijing, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

Next page: Liang Juhui, *One Hour Game*, 1996, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows*, OCAT, Beijing, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

In 1993, while Liang Juhui was unable to participate and therefore could not help the group scout a proper exhibition venue, the other members took to the streets. In an article titled *5 Hours, Value of 1000 Yuan, Allegory of Love*, Italian critic Monica Dematté, a close friend of Big Tail Elephants, presents a comprehensive eyewitness record of *Third Show*, organized at the Red Ants Bar and around Guangzhou.[9] Despite the subtitle, "For Those Who were Not There," Dematté's article details encounters between attendees and the artists. In the performance *Allegory of Love* (1993), Xu Tan took the helm of a military vehicle to lead a cruise through the thoroughfares of Guangzhou, eventually arriving at the Red Ants Bar, where he unloaded a cargo of mannequins by the adjacent sidewalk food stand. "And when, later on, some students will throw rests [sic] of a meal on top of the models, the artist feels that his purpose is being nearly fulfilled."[10] In Dematté's opinion, while a citywide cruise may seem strikingly public, Xu Tan's performance was in fact an allegory of feeling outcast. On the one hand, the artist immersed himself in public spaces and gathering audiences; on the other, he hoped to record the event "to compensate people who were not there, mostly from the art world, for their inability to watch the whole process."[11] While Lin Yilin's *100 Pieces and 1000 Pieces* (1993) unsurprisingly aroused spontaneous audience reactions with his use of real money, Chen Shaoxiong did not anticipate that spectators on the site of *5 Hours* would ask to switch places with the artist: "It is actually the subversion of roles, together with the oncoming of the unforeseen, the unexpected, that thrills Chen; he is ready to give up his pre-planned event, and to enjoy the succession of happenings which will enliven his five hours."[12] In the documentation photos exhibited in light-box form at the Times Museum retrospective, we hardly notice any difference, aside from the uniforms, between the policemen and surrounding audience members: the policemen's facial expressions are just like those of the general public—perplexed and intrigued by the performance. Dematté's article does an excellent job detailing Big Tail Elephants's strategy for *Third Show*, which set out to combine planning and improvisation while capturing the at once lively and idle atmosphere of the event. At the end of the article, her review of Chen Shaoxiong's *5 Hours* reveals the intrinsic ambiguity of the artist's identity: "He has been playing both the part of the artist and the viewer, the creator and the created, the human being and the animal, the dispenser of electricity and its possible victims, the one who can decide the succession of events and the one who can do nothing but pack his stuff and quickly leave."[13]



Zheng Guogu, *Key Construction*, 1994, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows*, OCAT, Beijing, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

In stark contrast to the "pack-and-quickly-leave" mood of *Third Show*, Big Tail Elephants began to demonstrate a clear pursuit of institutionalization in their fourth exhibition. Curator Hou Hanru, after his move to France, suggested the theme "No Room" for the fourth show, setting it apart from then-prevailing generic titles along the lines of "archive exhibition" or "experimental art exhibition" to become what would be classified as a "thematic group exhibition" in exhibition studies. The opening date was deliberately chosen for two days after the inauguration of the second China Art Expo—the art-world equivalent of the "China Import and Export Fairs"—that so successfully seized the attention of mainstream media, even landing on the cover of *South China Market Post*. The members of Big Tail Elephants also participated in the *China New Art Exhibition*, organized by the Beijing-based Hanmo Arts Gallery and held in the China Import and Export Fair Building, in addition to their own, independently organized exhibition, held on No.14 Sanyu Road in Guangzhou. These peripheral exhibitions can be seen as strategic attempts at self-legitimization and constructing a regional ecology. Hu Fang, who was then a reporter at *GD-HK Information Daily*, described Xu Tan's work in his coverage as "a slightly embarrassing bit of indulgence straight out of the third world."[14] Some twenty years later, he wrote another essay, titled "The Room of N (2nd Edition)," for the catalogue of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows* at Times Museum. In this new piece, his recollection of the fourth show is tinged with a mysterious undertone, as if the strategies and aesthetics of the artists together released a magic that cancelled each other out, making it impossible to give a full, not to mention accurate, historical account.[15] While Zheng Guogu filled the site with sparks in the performance *Key Construction* (1994), Chen Shaoxiong's *Seesaw—The Way of Filming/Viewing by the Pivot of Pulmonary Activity* (1994) enacted a violent spectacle with mock rifles and broken glass, in a way unlikely ever to be recreated in another gallery or institution. As Liang Juhui's *Paradise* and *Goldfish in the Bathtub* (both from 1994) transformed the dim colonial architecture into what felt like the setting of a crime thriller scene, Lin Yilin mounted *Cages on the Ceiling*, a new installation that presented an overview of his past performance works. Ascending the narrow staircase, audiences would discover they had all arrived too late, missing their opportunity to enter the site of *The Alterations and Extensions of 14 Sanyu Road, Guangzhou*, which was now locked behind the door.[16] Xu Tan's work emphasized the significance of the exhibition as a historical event: not only did he turn to the building's architecture and history as subjects, inviting Chen Tong and Zheng Guoyu to take part in negotiations with the landlord and make a reconstruction proposal; he also hired prostitutes to appear in the video he created before realizing the proposal that would attest to the dual function of a hair salon as a brothel. Shortly after the exhibition, Xu Tan wrote

what could be considered a postscript, in a journalistic tone; titled "Some Explanations about *The Alterations and Extensions of 14 Sanyu Road*," the article touched on the failure of the Borges Libreria Bookstore in market competition and the eventual demise of the plan to transform the building into a hair salon due to a police crackdown on sex work.[17] From conceiving the concept and proposal design to preparing, performing, and exhibiting the work, then to "third-party" critique and reviews, the artist, in these layered performances, was at once both subject and object, accomplice and spectator. This profound irony revealed Xu Tan's ongoing, vigilant stance against any dualistic, oppositional political ideology, and also anticipated his gradual withdrawal from systematized visual presentation of his later work.

In July 1993, the four official members of Big Tail Elephants engaged in a conversation over the period between the third and the fourth show. As the main organizer, Lin Yilin raised a series of questions concerning the relation between Chinese contemporary art and the international milieu:

> There's a trendy topic in the Chinese art world nowadays: the relationship between contemporary Chinese art and international art. This so-called international art follows the paradigm and criteria of contemporary European and American art. This is where the debate comes in. What makes a piece of contemporary Chinese art valuable? Is a work of art that reflects China's current cultural background worth more? Or is more meaning to be found in a piece that conforms to the ideas of international art?[18]

Lin Yilin, *Safely Maneuvering Across Linhe Road*, 1995, documentation of performance, installation view of *Big Tail Elephants: One Hour, No Room, Five Shows*, Guangdong Times Museum, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou.

The word "parallel" can suggest keeping some distance for observation, and is perhaps related to Lin Yilin's participation in the exhibition *China Avantgarde*, held at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, in January of the same year. As the first member of Big Tail Elephants to exhibit in an exhibition abroad, Lin Yilin began to notice a resonance between allegories related to distance and speed in Western modernism and the great acceleration of China's modernization. His skepticism about the existence of a fixed Chinese identity arose precisely during the Big Tail Elephants years. His seminal work, *Safely Maneuvering Across Linhe Road* (1995) contains his own answer to the questions he raised during that conversation in 1993. Through hours of crossing and blocking, construction and demolition, the abstract speed of global urbanization is revised into a specific, local experience, allowing the audience to traverse generational and cultural differences and step into a time flow made concrete by the artist. From this vantage point, it seems only necessary for artists to come to terms with their own otherness, for this is how they relate to others, and consequently how new empathies and initiatives are formed. Lin Yilin's new work, *Monad* (2018), which forms part of the exhibition *One Hand Clapping*, held in 2018 at New York's Guggenheim Museum, uses VR technology to simulate

basketball movements. As curator Xiaoyu Weng observes, "this interchange of subjectivity and objectivity opens the possibility of an affective evolution in our relations with the 'other.' We can *be* the other, rather than simply express commiseration *for* the other."[19]

After 1995, the other members of Big Tail Elephants, namely Xu Tan, Chao Shaoxiong, and Liang Juhui, were all frequently invited to exhibit their work in myriad exhibitions, both at home and abroad. In Chen Shaoxiong's correspondence with Hou Hanru, written February 26, 1995, he mentions requests for Big Tail Elephants's portfolio from curator Catherine David, who was working on documenta X, and Kunsthalle Bern Director Bernard Fibicher. According to Chen Shaoxiong's article "The Possibility of Magnificence," published in *Galleries* magazine, Big Tail Elephant's fifth show was originally set to be held in 1995 but was postponed due to venue problems. In January 1996, they rented the basement of a newly opened hotel in Guangzhou; based on documentation photos, we can see that the space was dim and crude, with water still covering the floor beneath some of the works. On the exhibition theme, *Possibility*, Chen Shaoxiong observed: "Following the 1994 show, *No Room*, we, as Big Tail Elephants, decided to start using exhibition titles, replacing our old strategy of using no titles, as evident in the first three shows. *Possibility* is, possibly, the very meeting point of each of our interests. Our artistic practices in the last few years have allowed us to set out from each of our starting points, going further and further; as concept progresses along with logic, we are surprised to discover that even the ways we think are now completely different."[20] According to the rules set by the members of Big Tail Elephants at its foundation, the group must be premised on a respect for difference and equality in decision-making. However, as the four artists seized more and more individual opportunities, the need to organize exhibitions as a group gradually dissipated. The four artists of Big Tail Elephants have grown from their initial union in 1991 to a natural parting of ways, all the while continuously maintaining different levels of dialogue, collaboration, and mutual support in various exhibitions and projects after the last self-organized exhibition of group in 1996. A decade-long solidarity grown entirely from a conscious resistance to power and status. It seems crystal clear to them that the end does not mean it's all over. Although the fifth show only lasted two days, Chen Shaoxiong felt positive about Big Tail Elephants's future. At the end of his article he wrote: "What will be the title of the Big Tail Elephants's next exhibition? Where and when might it be? Which artists will collaborate with each other? I don't know. But I'm positive about one thing: there will be a next time, and then another."[21]

In 2005, on the occasion of the second Guangzhou Triennial, the four members of Big Tail Elephants sat down together for a closing talk. Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, while moderating the talk, also raised a question about the historical purview of the avant-garde:

> The avant-garde has often been created as a group of contestations in opposition to something. For example:

> Situationism is against the commodification of consumer society. Fluxus is against the idea of the object in art, and Dada is against many of the ideas surrounding art in general. . . . It's a quite complicated question, but I'm wondering how far the avant-garde pushed the envelope in the mid-1980s—did it stop in 1989?[22]

The answer, certainly, is no. New oppositions continue to come into formation, just as the dualistic reflections of modernism have never ceased to haunt the contemporary world—we are, to this day, still seeking warmth and refuge in its ashes.

*Translation by Alvin Li*

Notes

1. Interview by Anthony Yung, October 28, 2007, Asian Art Archive, "Materials of the Future: Documenting Chinese Contemporary Art from 1980–1990," http://www.asiaartarchive/china1980s.org/sc/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=69/.
2. Ibid. The Four Modernizations consisted of improving China's role in its development of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology.
3. In 1983, American sociologist Alex Inkeles visited the sociology department of Peking University, Beijing, where he gave a lecture that spawned the widespread dissemination of "Inkele's Modernity Scale" in China; in it, eleven clauses that separated a "developed country" from underdeveloped ones, including "GDP per capita over 3,000 USD" and "over 50% of national population living in urban areas," were adopted by China's socialist modernization project as standards. Alex Inkeles et al, *The Modernization of Man: Psychology, Thought, Attitude, Behavior*, ed. Yin Duanjun (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1985).
4. Interview by Phoebe Wong, May 28, 2007, Asian Art Archive, "Materials of the Future: Documenting Chinese Contemporary Art from 1980–1990," http://www.china1980s.org/tc/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=20/.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. From a discussion moderated and recorded by Lin Yilin, July 1993. Transcript posted in "Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art Around the Globe," on MoMA's website, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/466-big-tail-elephants-liang-juhui-xu-tan-chen-shaoxiong-and-me/.
8. Ibid.

   Archive scan of Monica Dematté, "Five Hours of 1000 Yuan Worth Allegory of Love (For Those Who Were Not There)" written by Monica Dematte on December 12, 1993 in Guangzhou. Courtesy of Lin Yilin.
9. From a discussion moderated and recorded by Lin Yilin, July 1993. Transcript posted in "Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art Around the Globe," on MoMA's website, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/466-big-tail-elephants-liang-juhui-xu-tan-chen-shaoxiong-and-me/.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Hu Fang, "A Report on *The Alterations and Extensions of 14 Sanyu Road, Guangzhou*," *GD–HK Information Daily*, December 17, 1994, 10.
14. Hu Fang, "The Room of N (2nd Edition)," article forthcoming in a monograph on Big Tail Elephants, to be published by Guangdong Times Museum in 2019.
15. According to Xu Tan, there were only about a dozen people on the site due to tightening censorship.
16. Archive scan of "Some Explanations About *Alterations and Extensions of 14 Sanyu Road*." Courtesy of Xu Tan.
17. From a discussion moderated and recorded by Lin Yilin, July 1993. Transcript posted in "Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art Around the Globe," on MoMA's website. https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/466-big-tail-elephants-liang-juhui-xu-tan-chen-shaoxiong-and-me/.
18. Xiaoyu Weng, "Poetry and Place Afar," in *One Hand Clapping* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2018), 27.
19. Chen Shaoxiong, "The Possibility of Magnificence," *Galleries* (April 1996), 24–25.
20. Ibid.
21. *Hans Ulrich Obrist: The China Interviews*, ed. Philip Tinari (Santa Monica, CA: Ram Publications, 2009), 43.

Julia Hartmann

# From "Women's Art" to All-Female Group Exhibitions: The Emergence of a Female Consciousness in 1990s China

In 2012, I finished my M.A. diploma thesis on contemporary Chinese art and its internationally successful genres, Political Pop and Cynical Realism, in which I focused on Chinese artists and their use of art to critique the Chinese political system. All of the artists I discussed were male. In retrospect, I have to admit that I did not recognize this fact until after I began work on my Ph.D. thesis. It needs to be said, however, that when I conducted my research I relied on theory found in books on Western and Chinese art history and on the general status quo of contemporary Chinese art established by museums, galleries, and archives globally, in which there was little discussion of women artists. As a result, my research included neither gender specific topics nor the presentation of works by female artists. I do not intend to blame my oversight solely on the gaps in the established canon, but, rather, to point out that female (Chinese) artists have long been underrepresented in local and global art histories.

A most recent case in point is the group exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, which opened at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in October 2017. The exhibition was praised for its overview of art production in China after the pivotal year of 1989; it failed, however, to include gender issues and women artists equally within the realms of a holistic representation. From a total number of seventy-one artists and collectives, only eight were female, which means that there was a mere ten percent of female participation in a large-scale group exhibition inside one of today's most renowned art museums.

A closer look into Chinese art historiography reveals that it has been focused mainly on those male artists, curators, and critics who led the dominant discourses on art production up to the early 1990s. A few exceptions like Lin Tianmiao, Yu Hong, and a handful of other female artists received critical attention, but in general art made by women was rarely associated with avant-garde movements or internationally acknowledged genres. They were either denied critical interpretation or subjected to an essentialized interpretation. If their art did manage to enter the main discourse, it was usually discussed in contexts within the realms of the domestic, of nature, or in relation to their emotional states; the personal was not political in the eyes of male curators and critics.

Consequently, the majority of female artists in the 1990s occupied a marginal position within the emergence of contemporary Chinese art through the use of labels like "women's art" or "feminist artist," and

many of these artists tended to publicly oppose being identified as such. Lin Tianmiao, one of the most outspoken artists on this topic, publicly stated her discomfort: "I am often called a Chinese woman artist. But I would rather say that "I am an artist, I am a woman, and I am Chinese."[1] Thus, my research on pioneering all-female group exhibitions and the development of so-called "women's art" in China since the 1990s should strengthen the argument that female art production must not merely be generalized as "women's art" or "feminist art." Instead, I propose that a female consciousness—an awareness among female artists of themselves as women and as individual beings—gained momentum in the 1990s due to various factors that led to an unprecedented enthusiasm for, and prolific art production by, female artists in China's emerging contemporary art scene. To do so, I will focus on the individual positions artists and curators took in the course of organizing all-female group exhibitions in China, as well as why and how artists, curators, and critics externalized gender issues and a female consciousness within their work.

I will first give a brief overview of how and when women's studies, female consciousness, and the public discussion of women's issues entered China in the early 1990s and of what lay the groundwork for it to influence art production and curating. Following that, I will introduce pioneering all-female group exhibitions curated by Yu Hong, Liao Wen, and Jia Fangzhou, which were among the first of their kind to profoundly change the image of "women's art" in China.

## Female Consciousness, Women's Studies, and the UN Women's Conference

On an academic level, China witnessed the first series of women's studies publications—aimed at advocating consciousness on gender issues—in the late 1980s. Li Xiaojiang, arguably the first scholar to bring women's studies to importance in post-Mao China, defined a "feminism with Chinese characteristics"[2] that emphasized the nation and women as the subject of their feminist values. She was one of the first voices to defend female consciousness, as well as women's active participation in society and their liberation from oppressive patriarchal structures. On a political level, the All-China Women's Federation, an organization established by the Communist Party in 1949 and still active, is the official organ that protects and promotes women's causes in China. Both Li Xiaojiang and the Federation were advocating for the official discourse of women's issues and rights, and, thus, contributed to the spread of a female consciousness and agency in 1990s China.

Min Dongchao, one of the first scholars to investigate how the concept of gender traveled throughout China, links the examination of why and how the discourse on women's issues traveled within China from the 1990s onward during the period of globalization that resulted from the open door policies of Deng Xiaoping that were put into place beginning in 1978. *Jie gui*, or "connecting to the international track," is based on the view that China had been outside the international community for a long time,


4th UN World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995. Photo: Joan Lebold Cohen. Courtesy of Joan Lebold Cohen Archive and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

and in order to connect with it, China had to change its stance on outside influences. Ultimately, the opening up of China also led to the staging of the 4th UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which lent authority to an emerging discourse on women's rights and gender equality as well as the development of a greater sense of "collective identity" among women, and, in particular, a greater sense of their own agency.

To sum up, the 1990s, and especially the years following 1995, were pivotal in propagating female consciousness and in spreading feminism as an idea in China. This is not to say, however, that Chinese women adopted Western feminist values or even thought of themselves as feminists. As I stated earlier, many rejected a feminist identity and showed no interest in feminism with its Western norms and values. Nevertheless, some immediate positive effects on the status of women in China were palpable, like the establishment of NGOs that supported women's rights issues and increased networking between Chinese women and women and feminist groups from around the world.

### The Perception of "Women's Art" in 1990s China

Many contemporary artists in the early 1990s joined in the search for a Chinese modernity and the quest for a new position for the self in society. Thus, subjectivity, self-consciousness, research into one's unconscious, and the expression of individuality were major new focal points for artists within the emerging art scene. Simultaneously, contemporary art from China began to receive unprecedented historiographical documentation and attention nationally and internationally, which also resulted in high sales in the art market, although primarily for male artists,.

Art produced by women, or what was generally designated as "women's art"—*nüxing yishu*—on the other hand, slowly started to gain visibility in

the early 1990s, steadily establishing itself following the year 1995 partly due to the ideas and sense of confidence that evolved out of the 4th UN World Conference on Women. Xu Hong, the first female art critic to write about the awakening of a female consciousness within Chinese visual art, stated in 1995: "After 1989, individual experimentation began to emerge in Chinese art, bringing to an end the relentless collectivist symbolism of previous years. Women's consciousness began to emerge and women began to explore their own experience and find an appropriate form of expression."[3]

Nevertheless, into the later 1990s the representation of works by female artists remained limited and was still subjected to a male-led discourse and the male gaze, which viewed "women's art" mainly, as I suggested earlier, from an essentialist perspective. In my view, this partly stemmed from a lack of vocabulary, knowledge, insight, and maybe even interest by male critics and curators in the art practiced by women, as well as, importantly, from a lack of female critics and curators.

The artist's gender was usually the sole defining feature through which to access and understand women's art practices. Women's art was never sincerely viewed as tackling political, philosophical, or critical issues, and women artists were not taken seriously when talking about their true emotional states and individual experiences. Gao Minglu, curator of many seminal exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s, stated: "The central issues of Chinese women's art are primarily those of housing, living quarters, marriage, children, and the harmonious cohabitation of couples—issues that arose in the face of the emergence of urban middle class and the stresses triggered by this social transition."[4] This perspective confirms the overall stance by men on the art made by women when women finally began to gain recognition in the 1990s. It was a natural consequence for the male curator that women artists favour domestic material, with which they can "effectively demonstrate an individual woman's emotions and interests."[5]

Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1989, installation and performance. © Xiao Lu. Courtesy of the artist.

One of the artists who I would argue has largely been subjected to these aforementioned interpretations within art historical discourse is Xiao Lu, who became known for her installation *Dialogue* (1989), one of today's most iconic works of contemporary Chinese art. In the course of the opening of the legendary group exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* in 1989, Xiao Lu fired a bullet into her own installation, which caused the exhibition to be closed down and led to her detention. Even though the artist was acting on her own, the work was also retrospectively attributed by critics to Tang Song, a male colleague who later became Xiao Lu's partner, and has been interpreted since as a collaboration between them. Fifteen years after the incident, however, Xiao Lu revealed that she was the sole creator of the work and not its co-author. Her coming out has initiated a discussion within the contemporary art world on her personal situation as a female artist within a

male dominated patriarchal society and, in my view, supports the argument that the discourse on female art production at the time was biased. The work spoke not only of her own frustration as a suppressed artist but also of her state of mind as a woman living in China. Moreover, she was dealing with personal internal turmoil, a result of being sexually abused by one of her parent's friends, which she remained silent about until revealing it in her memoir.[6] According to the art historian Shuqin Cui, the troubled artist found in *Dialogue* a means of emotional and psychological survival, where the expression of sexual issues was metaphorical, not explicit. After speaking out, Xiao Lu received further scrutiny within the art circle as having subverted the grand historical narrative of avant-garde art—she turned from an "artist heroine" to a "vindictive woman."[7]

Regarding the general situation of female artists in the 1990s, it must also be acknowledged that there were few female students enrolled at art schools, and they faced a long road to becoming artists. Many gradually dropped out of school after getting married and having children, being unable to accomplish the double burden of participating in a highly competitive art scene while fulfilling societal and familial obligations. Many thus missed out on opportunities that were given to their male colleagues, like traveling abroad and extending their network. Entering their works in exhibitions was not an easy achievement as, again, they were supposed to raise families. Many even quit pursuing careers as artists after art school. Moreover, those who were addressing female issues often faced difficulties in gaining recognition for their art as art, and if they entered museum and gallery shows their works continued to be interpreted from a biased male perspective.

### All-Female Group Exhibitions

As previously mentioned, many artists grew more conscious of themselves and their individuality in early 1990s China. Arising from this overall sentiment and the widespread emergence of a female consciousness, female artists, critics, and curators took the initiative and found the courage to express themselves differently from their male peers. They started to create their own language, to voice their own agendas, and to actively distinguish their artistic practices from those of their male colleagues.

Left: *First Oil Painting Nude Exhibition*, Shanghai Art Museum, 1988; Photo: Gong Jianhua. Courtesy of Biljana Ciric Archive, Shanghai.

Right: *The World of Female Painters*, first iteration, 1990, installation view at Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing. Courtesy of Yu Hong.

A case in point is the series of exhibitions curated by Yu Hong, a painter who graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), Beijing, at the end of the 1980s. After she was included as the only female artist in the popular *First Oil Painting Nude Exhibition* at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1988, she was invited to organize an exhibition solely with female artists. The organizers of the *Nude Exhibition* understood the potential of the

female subject as a guarantee of success for future shows. Subsequently, Yu Hong invited seven of her fellow CAFA graduate students and mounted an exhibition titled *The World of Women Painters*, which opened at CAFA in May 1990.

Artists in *The World of Female Painters*, first iteration, 1990. Left to right: Liu Liping, Ning Fangqian, Wei Rong, Li Cheng, Yu Hong, Jiang Xueying, Yu Cheng. Courtesy Yu Hong.

Left: Artists in *The World of Female Painters*, second iteration, 1995. Left to right: Ning Fang Qian, Yu Cheng, Yu Hong (standing), Lin Cheng, Shen Ling, Jiang Congyi, Chen Shuxia, Jiang Xueying. Courtesy of Yu Hong.

Right: Artists in T*he World of Female Painters*, third iteration, 2000. Left to right: Jiang Congyi, Cheng Shuxia (sitting), Ning Fangqian, Yu Hong, Yu Cheng, Xu Xiaoyan, Shen Ling (sitting), Li Cheng, Xia Junna. Courtesy of Yu Hong.

At a time when professional curators did not really exist and exhibition spaces were scarce, the organization of group exhibitions could be a difficult endeavour. Nevertheless, Yu Hong managed to present one of the first all-female group exhibitions inside China, which was a crucial and unique experience for both her and her female colleagues. She related to me in a discussion:

> After 1989, there was no cultural and exhibition activity in China. Many artists chose to leave and the ones who stayed wanted to continue with what they were supposed to do. So that's why our all-female exhibition was so important. It was really unusual for women to gather and organize something, especially an exhibition by just female artists. All of a sudden they realized that female painters are good painters too.[8]

*The World of Women Painters* was held in successive versions in 1995 and 2000 thanks to the initiative and collective efforts of female artists themselves; they could not rely solely on institutional support in order to be shown publicly.

Research into the exhibition history of 1990s China has thus far proven that, prior to 1995, only a handful of all-female exhibitions were organized, and

that in 1995, the year of the 4th UN World Conference on Women, seven "women only" shows were curated. The list goes on thereafter. Furthermore, Liao Wen and Jia Fangzhou were among the first curators to conceptualize all-female group exhibitions in China in official museum settings after the pivotal year of the 4th UN conference. Theirs are the first exhibitions to clearly externalize a focus on gender and present a concept that was meant to highlight art by women. Fortunately, their exhibitions are comparably well documented through catalogues, curatorial texts, bibliographical information, reviews in art magazines, and installation shots as they were increasingly aware of the exhibition's historical significance as well as of their importance for the artists. In my view, however, Liao Wen and Jia Fangzhou differ in their curatorial approaches and ideological incentives. Even though they both put female artists on the map of many curators and critics, I believe that Liao Wen's exhibition projects affected the emergence of a female consciousness within the art world most profoundly.

Liao Wen's career started in 1987, when she became a staff writer for *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo Meishu Bao*), one of the earliest publications to report on contemporary Chinese art. As she was witnessing firsthand the excitement of the early 1990s and was able to visit seminal group exhibitions herself, she developed a sensibility for detecting emerging new trends and artists. She started to cover unconventional or even politically controversial artworks and styles that she considered to be important. She recognized that pieces by young female painters of her own generation, who confidently portrayed themselves and their surroundings, were dramatically different from works by women artists who preceded them, who traditionally painted images of flowers, birds, and plants in the *guigehua* or Chamber Painting style, which reflected the idealized, sheltered life of women in dynastic China.

Seeing the need to bring attention to this new development within the contemporary Chinese art scene, Liao Wen curated the exhibition titled *Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art*, which debuted at the Beijing Art Museum in 1995. The show included oil paintings, sculptures, and conceptual and installation works by thirteen female artists who expressed individual feelings directly corresponding to life-related experiences of being a woman, a mother, a sexual being, an artist, or a Chinese citizen. Individuality, the expression of their own personal perspectives, and a female consciousness had entered their works, which, in this exhibition, was conceptualized by Liao Wen for the first time within contemporary Chinese art.[9]

*Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art* is thus the first exhibition in China to recognize and highlight the presence of the female artist and to question the influence of gender on artistic creation. In contrast to previous exhibitions, this was the first attempt to systematically conceptualize an exhibition with solely female artists, many of whom developed something that Liao Wen termed the "women's approach" or "women's method," which was a unique kind of artistic language that was in opposition to

the established canon. In the introductory text for the *Women's Approach* exhibition, Liao Wen stated that even though "women's art" in China had not formed its own language at the time of the exhibition's creation, the artists had already incorporated a distinct and unprecedented style.[10] In the following years, Liao Wen continued to work on tracing common characteristics and differences between women artists, which consequently led to more group exhibitions, catalogue essays, and books on the topic of women's art in China, and she also introduced works by feminist artists from the West to the Chinese public.

It was crucial for Liao Wen to allow deep and detailed observations of some new phenomena in contemporary art, and thus she followed up on her first show and mounted *Woman and Flower* in Beijing in 1997. As a sequel to the *Women's Approach* exhibition, it included five artists who had participated in the previous one, thus allowing viewers an opportunity to examine the development of their oeuvres. Moreover, by focusing on the subject of flowers (a metaphor for women) these artists could be understood as exploring their individual perceptions of being women as sexual beings in the contemporary world.


Billboard for *Century: Woman*, Beijing, 1998. Courtesy of Francesca Dal Lago Archive and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

In March 1998, *Century: Woman* was held at the National Art Museum of China, and curated by Jia Fangzhou. It included seventy-eight female artists, around five hundred works, and was held at various locations in Beijing, including exhibitions at the China Art Gallery—where art historian Tao Yongbai curated a photographic presentation of the history of women in art—at the Modern Art Museum, and at the International Art Palace. The show was the first large-scale, all female group exhibition, and it featured a curatorial program of unprecedented scale. According to Jia Fangzhou: "The exhibition entitled *Century: Woman* is not a group show of women artists in the general sense. The criteria for selecting the work was not determined by the fame or achievement of each individual alone, but focused on whether or not the artist's work demonstrated 'female characteristics' or was experienced from a 'woman's perspective.'"[11]

Jia Fangzhou thus clearly distinguished between genders in this exhibition. For him, the decisive difference was that the female artist was aware of her own perspective, experience, standards of judgement, specific concerns, and interests. He further asserts: "Even her approach to understanding the world, her ways of thinking about and experiencing it are different from those of men. The gender difference becomes the cornerstone upon which women's art makes its foundation and which characterizes its aesthetic independence and spiritual direction."[12] He further determined "The Essential Characteristics of Women's Art" in the exhibition catalogue as follows:

Installation view of *Century: Woman*, Beijing, 1998. Courtesy of Francesca Dal Lago Archive and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

- They don't care anything about things outside of themselves, things not related to their personal emotional life, paying more attention to intrinsic inspiration from personal experience and instinct.
- They very rarely use rational angles of analysis to involve a subject matter and grasp a theme, but, rather, emphasize the emotional characteristics of their artwork, and emphasize the importance of direct feeling, enabling base physical senses to emerge. Their creative works are more like childish illusions, like stealing things as one pleases, expressive in the unreasonable blurred appearance.
- They are not interested in politics, history, philosophy, but express a special concern for nature, life, humanity, and the question of existence. So much so that a dull ordinary life is paid close attention to, paying attention to tiny, petty, and ordinary things much more than seeking the sublime.
- Being generally uninterested in the men's world, they never depict the male body as object.
- Their methods of discourse are developed from traditional handicrafts, like stitching, weaving, and embroidery and turn it into a specific phenomenon in women's art as a whole.
- Materials are often chosen from daily life and a sense of propinquity. Material selected for art installations express distinct female characteristics: needles, thread, cotton, silk, gauze, and various types of fiber and light material.

To conclude, the juxtaposition of works by these two curators, Liao Wen and Jia Fangzhou, exemplifies how their incentives and reasons for mounting all-female group exhibitions differed in respect to crucially determining motives. Even though both opened up the chances for women artists to utter their voices and move from a marginalized position to a more visible one, they clearly had differing perspectives on what constitutes "women's art." *Century: Woman* was without a doubt a crucial experience for many female artists in accelerating their careers, a lot of whom are still well known today. What is more problematic in my view is how Jia Fangzhou and his male colleagues

Installation view of *Century: Woman*, Beijing, 1998. Courtesy of Francesca Dal Lago Archive and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

defined "women's art" as a category that merely perpetuated stereotypical and essentializing views on art produced by women.

On the contrary, Liao Wen's approach to curating all-female group exhibitions was not merely to group women's art together, but, rather, to highlight an emerging female consciousness within society and within art production. She gave voice to a new kind of artistic language that was specifically related to the understanding of the individual female body, of reproduction, personal experience, and emotions, and to a free use of form and materials. Above all, women's art could rid itself of stereotypical features with which it was too often associated. She emphasized that there was a female language and style developing that needed to be regarded, judged, and critiqued on its own terms. Future research into this matter may provide insight into how these exhibitions influenced following generations of artists and curators. For now it can be said only that we are still a long way from equally representing and treating contemporary artworks and from shaking off biased and oversimplified ways of interpreting art.

Notes

1. Lin Tianmiao, statement for the Feminist Art Base of the Brooklyn Museum, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/lin-tianmiao/.
2. Shuqin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 173.
3. Xu Hong, "Dialogue: The Awakening of Women's Consciousness," *ART AsiaPacific* 2 (April 1995), 44–51.
4. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 23.
5. Ibid., 24.
6. Xiao Lu, *Dialogue* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
7. Ibid., introduction by Gao Minglu to *Dialogue*.
8. Author interview with the artist, November 11, 2018.
9. Christina Yuen Zi Chung, "Liao Wen: Writing a New Chapter for Chinese Contemporary Art," in Michelle Vosper, ed., *Creating Across Cultures: Women in the Arts from China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan* (Hong Kong: East Slope Publishing, 2017), 32–51.
10. Liao Wen, introduction to Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art (Beijing: Beijing Art Museum, 1995).
11. Jia Fanzhou, *Century: Woman: Selected Works from the Exhibition* (Beijing: Publisher unknown, 1998).
12. Ibid.

Maggie J Zheng

# Inching Toward a Fire: A Museum Among Former Swiddens

If you haven't got something to put it in, food will escape you—even something as uncombative and unresourceful as an oat.

–Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*[1]

## I. Inversions: Why Swiddening?

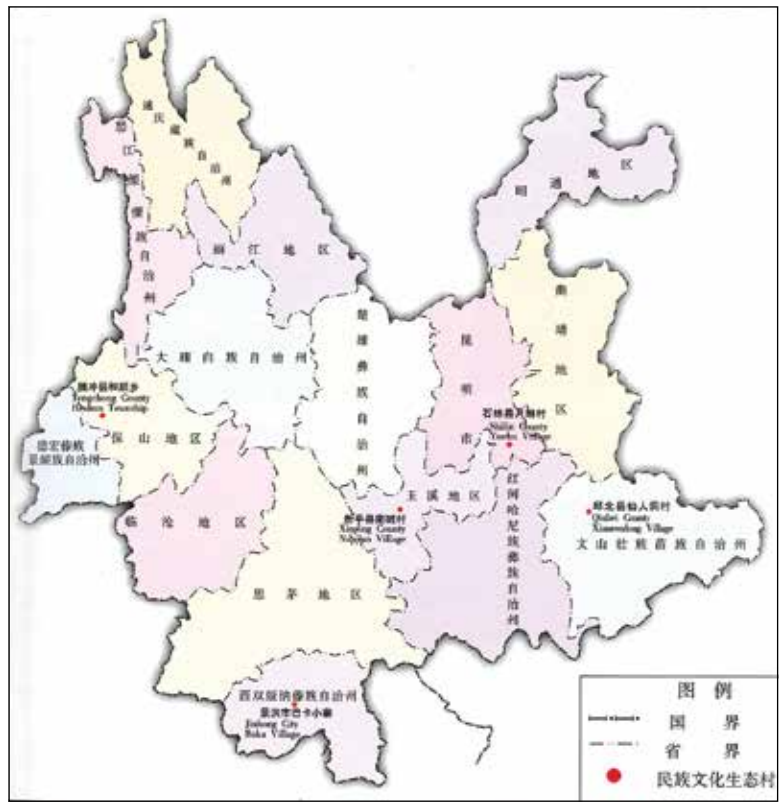
Sandwiched between swaths of protected forests, Baka Small Village (Baka Xiaozhai) lies midway up a mountain, on the outer edge of the tropical Xishuangbanna Dai autonomous prefecture in Yunnan. Up until around 2006, the Jinuo ethnic minority of this region had regularly practiced swidden agriculture—the burning of forest biomass to create fertile fields for food cultivation, later leaving the soil fallow to recover for the next cycle. Social organization, land tenure, and cultural traditions had been determined and adapted to the swidden system.


The opening ceremony of the Jinuo Eco-Museum, Baka Small Village, 2001. Courtesy of Chen Xueli.

Initially, I sought artistic or documentarian representations of swiddening practices; the essay that follows is an inversion and approximation of such a search. Swiddening, sometimes also pejoratively referred to as slash-and-burn, has been practiced well into the twentieth century in various places around the world particularly the highlands of southwestern China as well as in Southeast Asia. In Yunnan, its influence extended to various spheres of socio-cultural life in the hills, and had an importance beyond providing sustenance. Instead of inventing (non-existent) exhibitions about swidden systems, I found myself looking toward these former swidden lands in Baka Small Village where, in 1998, construction began on the Jinuo Eco-Museum—purportedly China's first rural museum.

## Diversity and Post-literacy

At the 1997 China Communist Party (CCP) meeting, Yunnan province was given the lofty task of turning into a "Great Cultural Province," along with other provinces like Zhejiang. Thus, during this period, the CCP turned even greater attention to the cultural and aesthetic production of Yunnan's twenty-six *minzu*, or officially recognized nationalities.[2] Within the province and abroad, ethnic minority exhibitions and performances had been held as early as the 1950s through the Yunnan Provincial Museum; however, during the period of the late 1990s, they were developed even more fervently in public and private sectors, citing the importance of cultural preservation




Sites for the Ethnic Cultural Ecological Villages (ECEV) project in Yunnan province, 1998–2008.

and poverty alleviation (*fupin)* efforts. Fast-forward to now: globalization and state power have opened up the region to increasing numbers of tourists and newcomers each year; in concert with these changes is the place Yunnan holds in collective cultural imaginations—a region of spiritual transformation or still-extant cultural diversity.

Prior to the 1950s, a majority of ethnic groups, including Han Chinese, living in Yunnan's highlands practiced some form of swidden agriculture. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, however, the practice died out for a variety of reasons. Swidden agriculture, with its polycropping (it does not look orderly) and uneven harvests (which make it difficult to tax), is decidedly difficult to appropriate or standardize. However, swiddening does not require much capital investment; where it does continue, increasing populations alongside the introduction of cash crops like rubber shortened the fallow periods of its cycle and caused the practice to become unsustainable. Furthermore, land divisions overturned indigenous forest management systems, and the Sloping Land Conversion Program made it illegal to farm on slopes steeper than twenty-five degrees. Nowadays, only a few signs of swidden practices still exist after a successful suppression campaign.

The practice has been vilified more than it has been praised due to concerns about fire and the misconception that it must be environmentally damaging; however, studies on swidden-fallow cycles integrating resource management accumulated over generations are worth more investigation. Finding sustainable swidden agriculture being practiced in southwestern China today is rare, thus existing studies are even more valuable. In Yunnan,

swidden agriculture has been championed most significantly by ecological-anthropologist and former Yunnan Nationalities Museum deputy director Yin Shaoting. Despite swidden agriculture being a basis for the cultural practices of at least nineteen of Yunnan's twenty-six *minzu*,[3] details about the practice of swiddening (which was basically banned, and has been researched by very few) would be difficult to find in museum exhibitions despite the deluge of ethnic minority exhibitions referencing fire, rituals, and other related aspects in Yunnan and beyond.

Museum staff, hired from different Yunnan nationalities and dressed in traditional clothing, pose with members from the political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and State Council as they inspect the Yunnan Nationalities Museum. Courtesy of Li Xiaobin.

A key point in Yin Shaoting's work is his insistence on how swiddening as an agricultural practice influences various branches of socio-cultural life. Yunnan's karst mountain topography was once relatively inaccessible and unsuitable for traditional Chinese agriculture—only about six percent of the land is considered arable by those standards. The highland ethnic groups of Yunnan understood how to best utilize the difficult terrain and its natural resources through swiddening, creating various rituals and practices related to it. Thinking from a cultural perspective, the lane-crossing political scientist James C. Scott refers to the region as Zomia, following social scientist Willem van Schendel's coinage of the term in 2002. Scott's Zomia region groups together the highlands of China's southwest, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and northeastern India; many exceptions are bound to arise when thinking only geographically, however.

Two swiddeners who have been practicing for several decades, even as it wanes. Courtesy of Xu Yunhua.

Zomians were for the most part swiddeners who created methods to maintain egalitarianism and were also without writing, and perhaps, as such, not illiterate but "post-literate."[4] Scott's formulation of post-literacy proposes that perhaps it may have been a critical adaptation in order to avoid statecraft, citing myths of once having writing but then abandoning it. In the oral history of the Jinuo, their writing was once on tasty oxhide sheets and, later, lost by way of being eaten. Aspects of culture such as not having writing, often considered a lack, might instead be pointing to an alternative framework. For example, older generations of Jinuo would give and receive "plant letters," whereby different species and parts of plants indicated certain meanings.

Links temporarily formed between the visitors and villagers were recorded in a documentary video by Chen Xueli.

Oftentimes, museum programs were limited to dances, folksongs, costumes, and performative rituals due to their popularity with outside audiences. Divorced from their original functions and framed as cultural heritage, complex negotiations took place between locals and outsiders on what constituted the best practices to be represented. Difference was applauded while at the same time swiddening was stigmatized as primitive and backward—a confrontation also confounded by the eroticization of minority women, commodification of once-sacred objects/rituals, and questions of cultural otherness. The type of diversity presented often offered innocuous, pleasing sorts of differences by which a certain "multi-culti"[5] feeling could be displayed, usually in a celebratory and uncritical manner. It brought in economic gains for the region, yet this type of display was not suited to every environment or practice.

### More on Swiddening and Museological Modernities

Both Yin Shaoting and James C. Scott acknowledge distinct historical and cultural differences between the hill people who practiced swiddening and those in the lowlands who did not. Swiddening would take forms specific to different groups accustomed to continuous and non-continuous cultivation with relocation patterns or permanent settlements. Dispersed across the hills, swiddening influences culture, and perhaps there is also a certain ethos associated with those who practice it. Indeed, curator David Teh summarizes its analogies to contemporary art. In his research on contemporary Thai art, he concludes that perhaps "Scott's 'anarchist' pre-nationals may be the truest ancestors of today's itinerant, ambivalent, preternational artists."[6] Such a formula may just as well apply to certain nation-crossing artistic institutions. But, instead of mapping swiddening onto artistic practice, what happens the other way around? What happens when a village that once rejected conventions that make exhibitions possible, such as textual discourse and an accessible location, becomes the site for a museum?

With the assistance of academics and foreign donors, this is what occurred in Baka Small Village with the Jinuo people. To examine it from the perspective of exhibition histories, I will outline how urban exhibitions were analogous to the Baka Small Village's exhibitions, as well as speculate what a counterpart to exhibitions within a swiddening culture could be. Video documentation of the museum's construction and opening ceremony, interviews with various people involved in the Jinuo Eco-Museum, as well as visits to the site inform the rest of this essay.

### II. Building a Museum Among Former Swiddens

Some people say that my home's swiddens do not have fine food.
As the sun sets behind the mountain, you use both hands to shield your eyes, peer out and see: Our poor people's children carry only three baskets of stalwart and palm-bark coats to pass our days, you rich people's children guard three barns that haven't yet been opened.

—Jinuo children's song "The Swiddens of My Home"[7]

During the late 1990s, Jinuo elders and scholars expressed anxiety over the survival of traditional Jinuo culture. Unsurprisingly, the shift away from swiddening practices resulted in the forgetting of certain songs, rituals, and knowledge, especially within younger generations. Optimistically seeking to counteract this trend, plans began for the funding, theorization, and implementation of an expansive and ambitious Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village (ECEV) project[8] spearheaded by Yin Shaoting. There were four goals: 1) it should not be artificially constructed, but display living culture and the ecological environment that gave birth to the culture; 2) cultural traditions would be maintained while modernization was accepted at the same time; 3) unlike the large museums managed by specialists in urban areas, an ECEV should be managed by local people independently; 4) the project would be linked to tourism development, and people's lives should be enriched. The double-bind in the last point is particularly interesting to consider in relation to the eco-museum[9] that would be built on Jinuo territory— a container for the knowledge that was slipping away rapidly. Ethnic groups with larger populations, such as the Miao, already began in the 1980s to enact certain types of ritualized objectification of culture for tourism in both Yunnan and Guizhou. The Jinuo, however, had a much smaller population concentrated in Xishuangbanna and were only beginning to delve into the tourism industry in the late 1990s. The first Jinuo tourist facility was built by a tourism company deliberately near the site of the local autonomous Jinuo government.

When scouting for locations for the Jinuo ECEV and its accompanying eco-museum, a site near the tourist spot was considered. However, project leaders decided the atmosphere of commercial tourism would be difficult to reconcile with their broader goals and, thus, Baka Small Village on the far end of Jinuo territory alternatively was chosen as the site for the Jinuo Eco-museum. Other literature that considers Chinese eco-museums often portrays China as pandering to tourism and commodification.[10] However, the situation was more complicated at the Baka site due to the potential of tourism and the decision to not promote it based on villagers' desires at the time.

The Chinese Academy of Science's famous Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Gardens, which are not far from Baka, received upwards of 500,000 visitors per year during the late 1990s. The hope had been to attract only 50,000 of these visitors per year to Baka; with a small ticket entrance fee, the museum could hypothetically sustain itself with the arrival of outside visitors and further fund projects benefitting the village. However, when guests were brought over in large groups, many villagers were unwelcoming, finding their presence annoying. Yin Shaoting noted the Jinuo of Baka were not too long ago "forest people," unaccustomed to commercialization and uninterested in learning about tourism. Furthermore, by that time, rubber and tea commerce were already well established and provided enough income to replace swidden agriculture. Two other sites of the ECEV project, Heshun and Xianrendong, were more willing to engage visitors, having histories in trade; now, both locations boast thriving tourism industries. During the late 90s, the impact of tourism

Top and Bottom: Jinuo Eco-Museum, Baka Small Village, not too long after its construction. Courtesy of Chen Xueli.

on small communities was still not well researched or understood, and project leaders respected Baka's desire to not engage in tourism. The Jinuo Eco-museum mainly advocated for the participation of the community as a whole in its construction and management. However, if the museum was not earning funds for the villagers, it had to find its value in other ways.

### Aesthetics and Use, Choosing and Dividing, Collecting Work

"Being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally; being displayed means being incorporated into the extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors. . . . that museal experience becomes mobile and takes the museum beyond its own walls."

–Susan Crane[11]

For state-run museums hoping to exhibit the work of ethnic minorities, county governments would first be approached by museum collectors with a referral letter in-hand. The local government officials would then introduce the collectors to specific villages and ask the village head for the items most representative of their cultural practices. Back then, items were given freely or bartered for usable goods. According to Wu Hua, who spent many years collecting for the Yunnan Provincial Museum, items collected were required to have a function in everyday life, though they did not necessarily have to be usable. A knife, for example, could be taken from the wall of someone's home to be placed in the museum. This knife could have been used over many years—to the point where it had lost more than half its surface area and was only hung ornamentally on the wall to protect it from damage from pests. The item was saved so the metal could be re-used someday, but casually during dinner a collector could inquire about it and the knife would be whisked off to the collections of the urban museum. For

valuable items—items with a ritual function, or items only used at a certain time of year—collectors would ask villagers to make a copy for the museum. Nearly every village would have crafts persons who could make the work at the state's request. These details are usually not mentioned on museum wall labels, and makers are referred to only by their *minzu* and not by their own name, as is customary in ethnographic exhibitions.


A selection of Jinuo Eco-museum exhibits, including "Village Life and Folk Houses" and "Foraging and Hunting."

Similar methods were used in the Jinuo Eco-museum's exhibition, despite lip service to not following the patterns of traditional urban museums since the museum was located in the village itself and independently funded by two Japanese donors. Beyond used or commissioned items, both types of museums also relied heavily on photographs. The exhibition space acted as a receptacle for art/work that once existed as part of everyday life—brought into the space of exhibition and hung on a wall or put under a glass case, split into distinct sections with didactic wall texts in Mandarin. Again, similar to urban museums, individual creators were not named; however, in this case the omission is even more striking as many of the museum visitors would have recognized the creators as members of their own communities.

In thinking about how the exhibition format could have been not transplanted, but, rather, rooted from the soil, it may be worth asking what it would look like if the frame of reference were the Jinuo people themselves. The question is tricky because, of course, there is overlap between Jinuo/highland culture and lowland/Han Chinese culture, especially now, while there also remains a clear distinction. The question is not: Was there a better way to transplant exhibition format, but, rather, was there a counter-role for an exhibition within highland culture? It does not necessarily need to be legible to an outsider's eyes as an "exhibition."

## Exhibitions in the Expanded Field

Without the assistance of academics, the exhibition within the Jinuo Eco-museum died an easy, natural death. Today, there is perhaps "nothing to see," although a large engraved stone still marks Baka as an "ethnic cultural and ecological village," and the museum's building still stands. Even though

I knew about the non-active state of the museum, I visited in October 2018. On the taxi ride over to Baka, the driver said that most of the visitors he takes to Baka today are artists. While in the village, I was asked if I was an artist and told that visiting artists like to draw the old houses. Most of them, I suspect, come from the nearby botanical gardens. I replied I was here to visit the museum, and many of the Baka residents told me to visit Zhimula, a former village leader who is currently recognized by the state as a provincial-level folk-artist.[12] Older villagers remember him making most of the items in the museum's collection.

Left and Right: Jinuo Eco-Museum was constructed without the use of nails, following Jinuo architectural techniques and using wood supplied by nearby forests. Courtesy of Maggie J Zheng.

In the early 2000s, a visual documentary of the construction and opening ceremony of the Jinuo Eco-museum was filmed by Chen Xueli, who was then a graduate student at Yunnan University. I projected this footage inside the now-empty museum to imagine what it might have been like. The mute, do-not-photograph, do-not-touch objects and photographs fill the eco-museum in an attempt to make Jinuo culture legible alongside discursive texts, but who, hypothetically, was the ideal viewer? On one hand, by placing the museum inside the village, the goal according to project leaders was to elevate these objects and uplift Jinuo culture for those living in Baka—so long as villagers would give authority to the museum as truly having the status to officially preserve cultural memory, a role once held officially by Jinuo elders but no longer. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, the museum was built for all sorts of *other* visitors—urbanites, foreigners, and neighbours of other nationalities. The mindset of looking in a museum site-specifically located in a Jinuo village would be different from the observing stance taken in most urban museums. Inside and outside of the Jinuo Eco-museum, one would seemingly be asked to contemplate Jinuo culture.

Isolating objects from "the vulgar flux of life,"[13] as museums often (in)tend to do, the longhouse-style Jinuo architecture employed by the museum confronts the village's ever-modernizing surroundings. The traditional architecture shows attention to its location in the tropics: similar to Dai-style architecture in Xishuangbanna, the first floor has no walls—allowing for shade, breeze, and an easy gathering place with neighbours. There are no large clans living in wooden longhouses anymore, as houses are rebuilt to be ever more nuclear and concrete. The museum sought to encompass a seemingly authentic and bygone space, where the site of documentable, preserved Jinuo culture begins to diverge from the literal space of current Jinuo culture—which was becoming increasingly similar to the lowland/Han culture. However, the village was still a village. The dogs would bark at guests, as Zhimula recalled, and bulls would roam around in the open-air first floor of the museum. Schematizing the relation between

container and content with respect to Baka, it is interesting to note that the Romanesque columns we often associate with Euro-American museums are now a common feature in the first floor of a few Baka residents' homes. Meanwhile, the traditional Jinuo longhouse form no longer functions as a home, but, rather, as an architectural style for the museum.

During the early days of the museum, visually stunning, participatory performances, along with other events such as embroidery competitions, took place in the open space in front of the museum; these events were funded by the Ford Foundation. Songs in Jinuo were sung, and courtship rituals were performed as demonstrations and not as the things themselves. Sensory saturations of music and dance presented in the open plaza right outside of the museum contrasted the sensory deprivations of the silent exhibition inside. These performances attracted scholars and neighbouring Jinuo, as well as Dai people from Xinping County who were preparing their own cultural preservation centre. At its height, the Jinuo ECEV was intended to set an example for future sites of cultural inheritance in Yunnan.

The idea of post-literacy might be worth considering in terms of an exhibition that moves beyond the wall text, acknowledging the rich orality of certain cultures as well as from the context it arises. Thus, how does re-contextualizing what once existed as part of everyday life into an exhibit change its meaning? Even with explanatory texts, is the relationship between the work and its new context a compromise, a travesty, a fiction—especially when the exhibit is self-contained and presented under the frame of ethnic "minorities"? Written material by project leaders acknowledged how the museum was exploratory and experimental for its time as well as place, with not everyone seeing eye-to-eye.

## An Exhibition that Is *Not*

In 2008, after ten years of work across six eco-villages, those involved in these projects moved on from the ECEV. The Jinuo Eco-museum's collection was relocated to other sites such as the nearby Tropical Rainforest Ethnic Culture Museum and some even made it to the new, state-funded Jinuo Museum in Bapo near Jinuo people's government. Some complained about the exterior of the brand new Jinuo Museum's lack of Jinuo architecture, built to look vaguely ethnic though not specifically Jinuo. Inside, it features a miniature but detailed wooden Jinuo longhouse constructed by Zhimula. During my tour, the two guides jokingly lamented the miniature should have been built actual size as the museum itself.

In 2017, even the unused Jinuo Eco-museum in Baka was remodeled: its original roof was replaced with glazed turquoise tiles. As of autumn 2018, the family of the former village accountant was living on the first floor of the museum—awaiting their new house to be finished. The original Jinuo Eco-museum transformed from a project of intensive labour to preserve and protect culture into emptiness. Its structure shifted from a place of cultural preservation to a shelter where people reside. Perhaps once it has completed its service as a site of temporary residence, it will shift again—will it be a

Social space in front of the now-empty Jinuo Eco-Museum, Baka Small Village. Courtesy of Maggie J Zheng.

place of education, leisure, culture, rest? There seems to be no pressure for it to be anything, but it still leaves questions. What would happen if swiddening culture were to become the frame of reference and not just the object that is to be preserved and transmitted for outsiders to see? And since swidden agriculture cannot be practiced openly in most places in China, what form could it take? If intangible forms such as myths are primary, how could there be common ground among people living inside and outside of a swiddening frame of reference?

### III. Cultural Carrier Bags

In understanding the ECEV project, it is also worth examining the uneven effects of state-orchestrated projects to "gift" development to a region.[14] The implementation of the Household Responsibility System after 1979 gave individual households incentives to produce cash crops, especially rubber, causing "increased differentiation between rich and poor,"[15] with some villagers adapting easily to the new economy while others struggled to keep up. The new museum also had some divisive effects as its creation also included a new road leading up to it—a great benefit to those villagers who live along its path. Some villagers who did not particularly benefit and also hoped for these transportation modernizations in their own areas as a result refused to participate in the museum's activities.

Another desire of Baka villagers was an irrigation channel, a marker of swiddening's end that scholars considered outside the scope of the ECEV project. I am reminded of a conversation I had with Guo Jing, a documentary filmmaker from Yunnan. "For villagers," he said, "sometimes it is not so much 'the art of not being governed,' it is the art of governing the government to your advantage."[16] And yet, as Louisa Schein has pointed out, "the suppressions of the Cultural Revolution . . . combined with the perceived emptiness of imported culture from abroad seem to have left a void at the core of Chinese ethno-nationalism, leading individual and state culture producers to turn to minority cultures as reservoirs of still-extant authenticity."[17] This search for authenticity, whether or not intended, creates pseudo-beneficiaries alongside pseudo-victims among individuals, the government, and the landscape.

### Self-determination as a Force, or Farce

Returning to the words of Ursula K. LeGuin, who is known for her speculative interplanetary anthropology, I wonder what kinds of containers might be able to hold and acknowledge all of these contradictions—if there might be space somewhere between the anthropological and the artistic. To re-work Miwon Kwon's seminal essay on site specificity,[18] if the critique of the cultural confinement of art/anthropology (and artists/anthropologists) via the institution was once the "great issue," a dominant drive of site-oriented practices today is the pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside

Social space in front of the now-empty Jinuo Eco-Museum, Baka Small Village. Courtesy of Maggie J Zheng.

world and everyday life. It follows that this project led by anthropologists and ethnologists not only relates to issues posited within the artistic field, but also seems to seek going beyond fieldwork toward changing the field itself. While the intent of the eco-museum was to encourage self-determination and participation among the community as a whole, it is acknowledged that this did not happen in the way scholars wanted it to. This rejection, however, can still be considered a decision.

### The Last Inheritance

A state-sponsored, multi-disk collection titled "The Last Inheritance" (*zuihou de yichan*) released in 2016 consists of high-quality recordings of hundreds of songs no longer regularly sung among the "eight small population minorities," including Bulang, Achang, Pumi, Nu, Deang, Dulong, Jingpo, and Jinuo—all of whom practiced swidden agriculture. Does the title, however, seem to set aside a grave for a still living body? Young kids in Baka still know how to sing many of the children songs from their village; many of the recorded Jinuo songs are also specific to certain Jinuo villages only. I want to return to the word "inheritance" to question its continued use. It seems prudent to acknowledge that Mao Zedong's aim for *General Survey on the Social History of Minority Nationalities (1954–64)* was to "rescue the backward" by recording and classifying so-called primitive social forms before the drastic socialist transformation, for the sake of their preservation in an archive or museum.

Inheritance might refer to the fact that some things are still in use, or they are no longer in use but still have value once passed down from the dead to the living. Inheritance implies notions of "value"—and if certain inheritances were formerly understood as involving kinship, cultural inheritances can now be continuously commodified. What can be received by whom, those who are the right kind, the Chinese nation as one and one-of-a-kind; inheritance is reworked, recontextualized, and reproduced.

In Baka, swiddening fires have disappeared, replaced by selling natural rubber and fresh fruit; meanwhile, elsewhere in Xishuangbanna, swidden upland rice is beginning to have its own small market, spurred by the idea of Yunnan as a "ecological state." Even as brand-new, state-run museums are built for each of Yunnan's ethnic minorities in formerly out-of-the-way places, subsistence agriculture will resume alongside new infrastructure

and profiteering. To look toward swiddening is not to hope for something "anarcho-primitive"; rather, it is to think more about these empty, burnt-out fields, where things might still grow. Only by asking individuals can a non-resident gather where the museum is, and some Baka residents deem the space haunted. As the terrain of exhibitions continues to be contested, the stink or fragrance of our times can still extend its tendrils here. A Baka resident of Wa nationality, who had married into the village, had previously worked as a performer in urban spaces. He told me he was interested in reviving the museum, to bring about new connections to landscape and culture, an iteration of original visions for the museum, and perhaps, an inversion of his previous time as a traveling performer. The Jinuo Eco-museum remains, lying fallow.

Notes

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places,* 1st ed., (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1989).
2. The Chinese term *minzu* (民族) is used at two different levels (of nation and ethnic group), and its usage has caused much confusion among both Chinese people and foreigners. For example, the English translation of Yunnan Minzu Bowuguan was formerly Yunnan Ethnic Minorities Museum but is now Yunnan Nationalities Museum. Furthermore, in an ethnic distribution map published in 1951 for internal circulation, the Yunnan Province Nationalities Affairs Commission listed a whopping 132 *minzu* before later cutting down to the current twenty six. Nowadays, certain ethnic groups such as the Kucong, who are grouped under the Lahu, are not officially recognized despite self-recognition.
3. Shaoting Yin and Magnus Fiskesjö, *People and Forests: Yunnan Swidden Agriculture in Human-Ecological Perspective* (Kunming: Yunnan Education Publishing House, 2001).
4. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
5. Referring to "multicultural diversity." This shortening has been used by Gayatri Spivak to describe the situation of multicultural diversity as a performance. In her usage, she refers to educational institutions in America practicing theme-parkesque "multi-culti" on their campuses without truly doing the difficult work of teaching or learning about other cultures.
6. David Teh, *Thai Art Currencies of the Contemporary* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017). "If the 'preternational' names that which is inexplicable by ordinary means, which lies beyond the natural and yet is not necessarily 'supernatural,' with the 'preternational' I posit a field defined in relation to nation, yet not reducible to its terms or logic," 175.
7. 《最后的遗产——云南8个人口较少民族原生音乐》：《基诺族原生音乐》. 云南民族文化音像出版社与云南省民族艺术研究院, 2016.(zuihou de yichan—yunnan ba ge renkou jiaoxiao minzu yuansheng yingyue : jinuozu yuansheng yingyue. Yunnan minzu wenhua yinxiang zhubanshe yu yunnan sheng minzu yishu yanjiuyuan). *The Last Inheritance—Music from Eight of the Smallest Population Minorities in Yunnan: Jinuo Original Music* (Yunnan Minzu Culture Audiovisual Publishing and Yunnan Province Minzu Arts Research Institute, 2016), lyrics translated into English by Maggie J Zheng.
8. 《民族文化生态村——当代中国应用人类学的开拓》丛书编委， 云南大学出版社, 2008. (mimzu wenhua shengtaicun—dangdai zhongguo yingyong renleixue di kaituo cong shubianwei, yunnan daxue chubanshe). *Ethnic Cultural Ecological Villages—The Development of Contemporary Chinese Applied Anthropology*, (Kunming: Yunnan University Press, 2008).
9. The eco-museum concept was first introduced by museologist Su Donghai in a 1986 issue of *China Museums* and implemented in Guizhou. Su Donghai did not have the same reservations toward tourism that Yin did.
10. Peter Davis, *Ecomuseums: a Sense of Place*, (New York: Continuum, 2011), 247.
11. Susan Crane, *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.
12. Textual display at the Jinuo Museum, which had its soft opening in 2017. China officially has different levels for recognizing artistry—national is the highest, followed by provincial then prefecture.
13. Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 15.
14. I use this term thinking of Emily T. Yeh's *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), where she analyzes how this gift has facilitated Han domination of new economic opportunities, leaving Tibetans marginalized economically as well as depicted as backward and underdeveloped.
15. Long Chun-Lin et al., "State Policies, Markets, Land-Use Practices, and Common Property: Fifty Years of Change in a Yunnan Village, China," *Mountain Research and Development* 19, no. 2 (1999), 133–39.
16. Author's correspondence with Guo Jing, November 6, 2018, Kunming, Yunnan.
17. Louisa Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China," *Modern China* 23, no. 1 (1997), 69–98.
18. Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80, (1997), 85–110.

Wang Ziyun

# An Art Project in Archives: The Becoming, Displaying, Condition, Context, and Historical Situation of Chinese Experimental Art[1] in the 1990s

## The Background after 1989: Reflection and Media Reform

In 1988, Italian curator Monica Dematté, who attended by chance the Huangshan Conference, an event that led to the conception of the seminal *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition of 1989, wrote a special edition of *Art News of China* entitled "Overseas People Talk About Modern Chinese Art." She said: "I believe that after a certain period of time, more and more artists will have a critical consciousness that allows them to face any external influence without imitation."[2] In any case, with the uproar around Tian'anmen Square and the closing the of *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, 1989 was an important turning point for contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s.

Looking back at contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s, it was not only a time when the Western art system was gaining entry, but it also witnessed the rise of the art market. Moreover, it was also a time in which exhibition planning and criticism began to take on more prominence, as well as the beginning of the curator playing an increasingly active role. After 1989, the younger generation of curators who entered the Western art system put into practice ideas that were different from what was found previously in Chinese exhibitions. Meanwhile, contemporary Chinese art also began to face the challenge of being seen in a global context. Fei Dawei organized *Chine Demain pour Hier* (1990) in France as the first modern Chinese art exhibition in Europe in the 1990s. And this also was the first time artists went abroad to participate in an international exhibition.

There is no doubt that 1993 was a turning point in the 1990s. In this year, two relatively large exhibitions were initiated internationally that focused on contemporary Chinese art—*China's New Art, Post 1989* was held at the Hong Kong Art Centre, and *China Avantgarde* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

In the same year, sixteen Chinese artists participated in an exhibition at the 45th Venice Biennale, organized by Achille Bonito Oliva with Francesca Dal Lago. This exhibition, titled *Passage to the Orient*, was part of a larger exhibition project, *Cardinal Points of Art*, which included Gutai artists from Japan as well as artists from the French Letterist movement. The selection of works in this exhibition showed a strong orientalist perspective, which made the Chinese art community feel misunderstood and uneasy. For example, Li Xianting said in a speech that Chinese art is the "Chun Juan," or spring roll, on the Western dining table. Wang Lin, a critic, pointed out in his essay "Oliva is Not the savior of Chinese Art" that it is necessary to

reflect on the criteria and value of the choice of Chinese avant-garde works in the Western art world.[3]

If exhibitions were one route for Chinese artists and curators to enter the Western world, then there was also a group of people in mainland China who were promoting the practice of exhibition making in the context of their own local problems. In 1991, critics Yin Jinan, Zhou Yan, Fan Di'an, Kong Changan, and artist Wang Youshen planned the *New Generation Art Exhibition* at the Chinese Museum of History. Concepts such as "myopia" and "close distance" were used to describe an artistic practice that was different from the grand narrative of the 1980s. In the same year, the *Garage Show* in Shanghai also turned its perspective to the reality of experiencing the present moment, the politics of daily life, which is different from the discourse around the politics of the image. The First 1990s Art Biennial Art Fair of the 1990s was organized in Guangzhou in 1992, and it attempted to motivate the development of contemporary art with the help of the market and capital.

In the first half of the 1990s, the international and the local moved in different directions and can be regarded as a reflection on the art trends in the 1980s and avant-garde art activity. At the same time, this reflection also included ideas about the relationship between the Western art system and contemporary Chinese art.

Wang Lin hosted the third edition of *Chinese Contemporary Art Research Document Exhibition* at the East China Normal University Library, Shanghai, in May of 1994. Taking the form of an exhibition, thousands of pictures, slides, and more than thirty videotapes of installation and performance art created by nearly one hundred artists at home and abroad since the 1990s were shown and discussed. Young artists and critics held a seminar focusing on the theme of Chinese Art in Transition.[4] Wang Lin acutely pointed out the how the revolution in media was an important turn in the mid-1990s. Literature on the exhibition not only included the art experiments of the same period, but also responded to the many new media methods and ideas. There is no doubt that in the historical situation at that time, the display and exchange of literature, research, and communication had a very important influence and was an inspiration to the artistic experiments that emerged in the late 1990s.

### Guo Shirui and Modern Art Centre

After 1992, economic reform in mainland China deepened, the emergence of a market economy system was gradually established within the government, and the argument of political ideology was gradually put aside and turned to economic construction. But relative to liberalization within the economic field, ideological controls were not relaxed, and the artists of experimental art had no space or opportunity to express themselves within the official system. In such an environment, some accidental factors caused Guo Shirui and his company to gain official status (the Modern Art Center, formerly the Art Center of the China National Foreign Trade Corporation). He participated in the 1990s experimental art activities and played an important role.

Song Dong was an art teacher at a middle school and Guo Shirui's son was his student. It was through meeting Song Dong in 1994 that Guo Shirui had his first contact with experimental art, when Song Dong was at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and there was an exhibition presenting installation and performance art. Although the exhibition was shut down within half an hour, it offered completely different ways for the audience to view and interact with artwork, which left a deep impression on Guo Shirui. After a period of time, he gradually participated in-depth in the exhibition practices of the 1990s.

When Guo Shirui was working with the Modern Art Center Co. Ltd., a commercial company affiliated with the State Press and Publication Administration, and most of the time he could get an official letter with an official certificate, which was a necessary condition for opening an exhibition. In addition to the *Wildlife* project discussed later in this essay, the Modern Art Center Co. Ltd. also supported the planning of the exhibition *96–97 Academic Invitational Exchange Exhibition of Contemporary Art* (although the exhibition was banned, with the help of the Guo Shirui, the exhibition title was changed and some of the work was exhibited at the Hong Kong Arts Centre). In 1998, when Leng Lin was planning an exhibition entitled *It's Me: A Profile of Chinese Contemporary Art*, there was no official organizer. At a loss, he was introduced to Guo Shirui by Song Dong and won approval for the work to be shown. Later, also because of Song Dong's relationship, Xu Zhen and Yang Zhenzhong, who came to Beijing from Shanghai, and after detailed communication with Guo Shirui, the two sides signed an agreement with the Modern Art Center Co. Ltd. to be the organizer of the 1999 *Art For Sale* exhibition.

Guo Shirui and the Modern Art Center Co. Ltd. played different roles with these exhibitions, sometimes by raising funds, sometimes by securing official seals, thus giving legitimacy of the exhibition activities. Guo Shirui, who worked within the official system, was well versed in the logic of art censorship and offered his own suggestions in good faith for adjustment. But it is because of this identity with the official system that he was often rejected in the eyes of some artists. After the *Art For Sale* exhibition, Guo Shirui was transferred to other departments in company and was not responsible for future exhibitions. But when asked if he would be willing to participate in contemporary art, he never hesitated to say "Let's meet." The role of Guo Shirui and the Modern Art Center Co. Ltd. was as Wu Hung put it: "Due to Guo Shirui's invitation and insistence, this national company became a major backer for the exhibition of experimental art in the late 1990s." This is an obscure story, and scholars of contemporary art often don't know the name Guo Shirui, but history is often written by unsung heroes.[5]

### As a Curator of the Artist

Even in the 1990s, when there was a mechanism in place for exhibition making, it was not a common choice to appoint a professional curator for an underground art experiment. Of course, these so-called professional curators were basically "non-professionals" who came from other professions—literary theory, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, etc. If you

wanted to implement a project, as long as the basic conditions of the venue and funding were met, the artist could give it a go. For example, Song Dong, the main artist responsible for the *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe* (Hereinafter referred to as *Wildlife*), as well as Qiu Zhijie, Geng Jianyi, Lin Yilin, and others, are themselves restless artists as well as organizers of artistic activities. More often than not, they served only as the organizers of an event, and not as decision-making curators. It is hard to say whether or not this approach was an artist-initiated, anti-curatorial practice, but it is true that many 1990s exhibitions were artist-centred. These types of projects often had a tendency to be both a product of artist creativity and a strong personal trait of the artist as an organizer.

This artist-centred approach also existed in artistic practices based on individuals and families, such as the now widely known "apartment art." Art historian Gao Minglu believes that "in the apartment art in the 1990s, daily life is the concept; it is an artist's identity, they retreat to a limited alternative space, create and display works in the apartment, small and inexpensive productions, and communicate with a limited group of artists. They do not copy or sell."[6] Strictly speaking, awareness of apartment art was built upon a non-public basis, restricted to private and internal sharing. Display and communication were also mainly carried out within the confines of this art scene. However, these artist-led exhibition practices shook the authority of the system and obscured the identity of art creators and curators. The *Wildlife* project discussed in this paper is also an activity dominated by the artist, and the premise of the artist Song Dong's idea was to work together.

## Origin and Opportunity

In the 1990s, in addition to Political Pop and Cynical Realism that had become the dominating trend at the time, as well as academic painting, a large number of artists created their works in the form of actions, video, and installations. But because of an official ban on this type of experimental art, it was not possible to display it publicly. On the other hand, there was also the "media revolution" mentioned earlier. This was not only a realistic factor, but also a technical factor. One of the specific problems facing artists was the lack of equipment. At that time, there were not many conditions for the presentation of images of works. Under official censorship, whether this work was audiovisual or artistic was uncertain, and is one of the many reasons why experimental art was excluded from being exhibited in official venues. Thus, artists had to find other ways to make and display their artworks.

Also in 1993, Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun plotted to publish the works of the artists in the form of documents, the *Black*, *White*, and *Gray Cover Books* 1994, 1995, and 1997 respectively). In fact, the books are a collection of documents about the works of Chinese avant-garde artists. They also provide a display platform for artists to communicate outside of a physical space.

In addition, in 1994 eleven artists from Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou organized by artist Geng Jianyi recorded in the form of postcards what they had done for the project *November 26, 1994 As a Reason*. With time as a

common starting point, this exhibition had no space for physical display, and the artists simply shared their work with each other through postcards. Based on the same idea, in 1995 *45 Degrees as a Reason*, again planned by Geng Jianyi, was presented in the form of text (manuscript, photo, work description), and thus related to physical, mental, emotional spaces as the starting point of the projects.

The above works were organized and produced as independent publications or texts, providing a discourse background and methodological reference for the subsequent *Wildlife* projects. In addition, there were two more direct incentives in promoting the implementation of the *Wildlife* project. After a long period of preparation, *96–97 Academic Invitational Exchange Exhibition of Contemporary Art* in 1996 at the Art Museum of China and Capital Normal University was cancelled because of "illegal procedures." Wu Hung noted that "this reality breaks curators and artists fantasies about normal exhibition channels and instead explores more experimental alternatives."[7]

In interviews and public statements, Song Dong and Lin Yilin, two key participants in the *Wildlife* project, both pointed out that in March 1996 they participated in the *Out of the Gallery* event held in Hong Kong. The implementation of the work they presented was related to the site and the surrounding environment and was not shown in a "white cube" gallery. This inspired them to explore different ways of carrying out their artistic practice and activities.

In addition, in the second half of the 1990s, there were some bolder experimental art activities that crossed Chinese and Western boundaries under new attempts at challenging common exhibition concepts. For example, *Let's Talk About Money: Shanghai First International Fax Art Exhibition*.[8] This was the first international exhibition in Shanghai, and artists from more than a dozen countries participated in it. They faxed their proposals from all around the world, and finally printed and posted them on display in the underground exhibition hall of Hua Shan Art School, Shanghai.

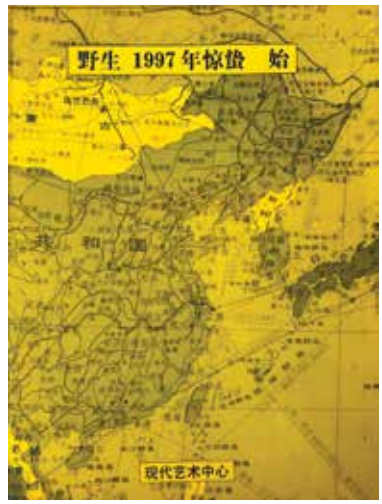
## Concept Formation and Implementation: How to Talk about the Project "On Paper"?

In the traditional context, the idiom of the armchair strategist (*Zhi Shang Tan Bing*) refers to empty talk without doing, thus taking on a derogatory meaning. But for the *Wildlife* project, the topic was related to the helplessness of the state of exhibitions at that time and the special working methods adopted by artists. With the work being "on paper," this exhibition mainly emphasized the art practice of textualization and archivization.

The opportunity to promote the *Wildlife* projects has been outlined above, and the organizer Song Dong envisioned three goals: "the first is to liberate experimental art and artists from museum and galleries. Second, he wants to break away from the existing art exhibition system. Third, in his vision, the project is a new type of public art display that is separate from the existing exhibition space and exhibition form."[9] At the beginning of the printed catalogue, they said:

> *Wildlife* is a 'non-exhibition space, non-exhibition form' art activity held by twenty-seven artists in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and other places. The event, hosted by the Center for Modern Art, began on March 5, 1997, and lasted a year. During this time, artists from different places held extensive discussions and exchanges, and formulated plans for this activity. The artists implemented their works in a relatively long and uniform period of time according to the different cultural context, natural environment, and their own different backgrounds in their respective regions.[10]

The theme of the project was *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, with wildlife literally meaning to grow naturally in the wild without being kept in captivity. The wild, in the context of that time, was a free state of getting rid of institutional discipline, so the concept has the tenor of criticism. Jingzhe is one of the twenty-four solar terms of the Chinese lunar calendar, meaning spring thunder awakens dormant animals and everything recovers. From the situation of art in China at that time, experimental needed some powerful voices to break the silence, and *Wildlife* is the beginning of that action.




Cover of exhibition catalogue for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe,* 1998.

As the *Wildlife* project did not rely on a physical space, the main expense was the printing of a catalogue. Artists from all over the country sent their project plans to Song Dong, who edited the text with Guo Shirui, and another participant, Pang Lei, designed the layout. Printing a total of 1000 copies, at a cost of more than 40000 RMB, some of it from Modern Art Center financing, and some of it at their own expense. Different from the general exhibition album, Song Dong emphasized process, description, and storytelling when communicating with the artists. Everyone had to use four pages to introduce the work, draw a sketch, employ a working photo, or provide a detailed description of the work.

Finally, from the point of view of time, 1997 was also a year of change in China. For artists, whether it was the Asian financial turmoil or the return of Hong Kong to mainland China, urbanization and population mobility, or an environment that was increasingly moving towards the logic of capital, they all resonated with the individual situation of each artist and their works as part of the *Wildlife* project.

### The Content of the *Wildlife* Project

A total of twenty-seven artists and twenty-seven artworks were produced for the *Wildlife* project, and in the course of the year, it had basically gone through the processes of submitting, discussing, determining,

Artist participants, inside pages of exhibition catalogue for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 1998.

implementing, recording, and archiving the mail. The following items are classified into four parts: urban guerrilla, physical fortress, social and psychological mechanisms, and actions in natural spaces.

1. Urban Guerrilla

In The *Concept of the Political*, legal theorist and political philosopher Carl Schmidt puts informal warfare and guerrilla tactics at the centre of political thinking.[11] In turn, the guerrillas are regarded as the "informal" forces distinguished from the "formal" nature of the state and the army. Positivity, flexibility, iniversal mobilization, and a high degree of consciousness are the characteristics of guerrillas. For the *Wildlife* project, the actions the artists carried out in the city were also guerrilla. China's rapid start toward urbanization in the 1990s had become the most external representation of globalization, while at the same time there were many undefined, unclear, chaotic spaces in the cities, providing freedom and conditions for artists to implement temporary works. As curator and critic Hou Hanru saw it, "It is in this way that artists developed various strategies to intervene in the temporary flow of urban voids and non-artist spaces."[12]

Song Dong and Guo Shirui working on catalogue layout for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 1998.

First of all, some of the works in the *Wildlife* project were implemented on the streets, in the context of urban space, urban landscape, urban traffic, and the functional structure of the city as the background, with artists temporarily occupying it through walking, recording, describing, and performing, etc. Among them, Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, and Xu Tan were all members of the collective Big Tail Elephants.[13] Chen Shaoxiong's work *Street View* proposed a new urban landscape and the people in it as the object of observation. He walked the streets with a small device made of photo cuts, while taking pictures of moments in which the

Chen Shaoxiong, working drawing for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 1997.

Chen Shaoxiong, *Street View*, Guangzhou, photo project for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 1997–1998.

photo cut image overlapped with real scenes. Lin Yilin still uses bricks as a way to intervene in urban space. In his 1995 work *Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road*, he moved a brick wall, piece by piece, across the busy road; in *Wildlife* he replaced the scene with a construction site. Also shuttling through urban space, Liang Juhui's *Traversing Time and Space* emphasized the changes in status between the old and new. As a tourist, he connected the two spaces in Guangzhou within three hours, "in order to find a state of harmony between the new public time and space and the process of movement of people in it."[14] Slightly different from those above, Chengdu artist Yin Xiaofeng's work *Day and Night Difference* had him performing different acts in the street at the police station as performance and then took photos.

Song Dong, *Transposition of the Center Axis*, Beijing, for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 1997.

Yin Xiuzhen, work scene with photographs placed on roof tiles, Beijing, for *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 1997.

Secondly, the "guerilla" in urban space was also reflected in the art practice of artists who deal with the relationship between the individual and daily life, history and reality (Song Dong, Wang Jin, Wang Gongxin, Yin Xiuzhen, Zeng Xun). These artists are sensitive to the ruins of the city, history, and culture brought about by the rapid changes in China in the 1990s, in which there are both personal and collective memories. They put private space and public space, fragments of personal memory, and the disappearance of tradition into a flowing moment. Song Dong's *Center Line Replacement* replaced the central line of his home with the central axis of the city in Beijing. The unique historical space of the city became a part of the home, and vice versa. The real life of the individual is connected with the unique historical space. Yin Xiuzhen took one year of photographs (animals, insects, human life) and put them on old tiles to hang on the roof of a courtyard house in Beijing. Wang Jin's work was more direct; he used PVC materials to make traditional Chinese clothing, and hung them in the promenade at the Summer Palace.

In addition, for artists, urban life itself was the source of artistic practice, and the experience and imagination of modern urban life was the source of the work, which could be presented in a romantic way. If the former artists were guerrilla within the urban context, other artists (Liu Chengying, Gu Lei, Pang Lei, Wang Huimin, and Zheng Guogu) moved toward city life from an emotional perspective. Liu Chengying, an artist living in Chengdu, tried to send earth dug from the wild to the world, in a time of growing logistics, to use in 139 years. Gu Lei's *Marriage Requisition* was trying to use the Internet, which had just appeared in China, to publish a marriage request notice in hope of finding a Hong Kong partner in response to the return of Hong Kong to mainland China. Similarly, Zheng Guogu, who lives in Yangjiang, made a model of a motorcycle for his friends in his work *Motorcycle Plan for Zhang Ge's Future Daughter-in-Law*. Motorcycles were a symbol of a new beautiful life and the best gift for young youth in a city.

A more open art practice can be seen in the following cases, which is the value of the *Wildlife* project to this day. As Hou Hanru noted, "the boundary between everyday life, intellectual reflection, and art as a cultural category is thus blurred and cut off, and this open strategy tranforms the lack of artistic space into an advantage. Artistic expression is now infinitely extended."[15]

2. Physical Fortress

In the 1990s, the expression of the body as a medium was often used by artists. For the following artists (Dai Guangyu, Ma Liuming, Qiu Zhijie, Shi Yong, Zhang Huan, Zhu Fadong), the body possesses the most unlimited language for artistic expression, and even if deprived of the possibility of public display, the body is their last fortress, "and regard the body as free to use as private property."[16] In this type of practice within the *Wildlife* project, it is, on the one hand, based on a physical "ritual sense," bodily experience and process, and gender. On the other hand, it is the body that bears etiquette and discipline, the identity of social attributes. Dai Guangyu's work *The Act of Making Imprint*s took place in a field during the hot summer field. He put himself underground as though in a grave, leaving traces of his body on *xuan* paper in a moment of natural reflection. Ma Liuming's self-portrait continued the physical illusion of gender so evident in his earlier work, "using his feminine facial features and the male body to create an image of gender illusion, and performing in this way."[17] Zhang Huan's work *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* is also based on the body. He continues the expression of the body as a yardstick as in his previous works. This time, he invited more than forty migrant workers to the raise water level in an anonymous pond in the suburbs of Beijing. Their power may be minimal in society, but it can change the depth of a pool at least with physical weight. Shi Yong's work *ABC Manners Etiquette* dressed up cultural identity in interpersonal communication. He put the image of the modern man in his suit and shoes in a series of civilized and polite bodily expressions, and satirized the self-discipline of taste and an ideal image that is based on capital logic.

3. Psychological Mechanism and Social Mechanism.

The situation of individuals and groups within social life and change is a concern of other artists involved in the *Wildlife* project (Weng Fen, Zhu Qingsheng,

Zhang Huan, *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond*, 1997, colour photograph of performance, Beijing, 105.1 x 154.9 cm.

Zhuang Hui). Behind the existing social and psychological mechanisms, their works question truth and the ways in which art shows its power. As the artist Zhuang Hui wrote in the *White Paper*, "transcendence is a way of criticizing social forces. Artists should answer questions about art so as to make art itself a force in society."[18] Weng Fen's work *Events or Communicators* records the process in which an event is changed after constantly switching the speaker. Zhu Qingsheng is a teacher at Peking University. His work, *Examination Art: My Personality is Different From Yours*, scores each participant in an interview, and the greater the difference between the personality of the participant and the teacher, the higher the score. In Zhu Qingsheng's view, exams can also become art, and the mechanism of students' personalities needs to be questioned. *My Photo With Other 318 Policemen in May 13, 1997* is group photo taken by Zhuang Hui for the *Wildlife* project. He created a complex process in getting the photographs, taking images of different identity groups in a purely objective manner. He seemed to be asking that if the group always has a face that does not need to project the characteristics of each individual, then what is the power that constitutes them?

4. Nature and Man

In the last part of the *Wildlife* project (Hu Jianping, Yu Ji, Zhang Xin), the relationship between humans and animals, the human and the natural environment, was also an angle of the artists attempt to intervene in society. In this respect, the artist's plan was not only about the destruction of the natural environment within social development, but also the position of both the human and the animal in nature. For example, Hu Jianping's *Future Movement (Phyto)* tried to present this issue in the course of a visit and discussion. At the same time, it also involved a Chinese view of nature. Yu Ji's *Playing Water on the Water* (1997) in Dujiangyan, Chengdu, reinterpreted the relationship between the individual and nature in a behavioural sense.

## "This is not an exhibition."

Although Wu Hung regards *Wildlife* as one of the most important experimental art exhibitions of 1990s in his book *An Exhibition about*

*Exhibitions*, can this project even be called an exhibition? If you set aside designating it an exhibition, how then can we view the project?

Diverging from conventional exhibition space displays, such as official museums, alternative spaces, or private galleries that sprouted up in China in during the 1990s (including those in Hong Kong and Taiwan), some artists have devoted themselves to a broader natural or social space and are looking forward to a kind of "unexpected encounter"; that is, when the artist in the implementation of the work has the viewer just happen to pass through, the display and acceptance of the link between the two is completed. This also can be seen as the artist's desire to work in public space, and not be confined to the relatively closed circle of traditional exhibition practices.

In general, *Wildlife* is not only a reflection of the artists' own artistic practice, but also a propositional action in trying to discover ways of expressing oneself freely under the special circumstances whereby Chinese experimental art could not be publicly displayed in the 1990s. Although the two principles of "non-exhibition space" and "non-exhibition form" are taken as the starting point, it is not entirely "anti-exhibition," but, on the basis of the difficulties of local display, it opened up alternative ways of surpassing the traditional exhibition format.

### Self-organization of Wildlife

In the artistic experiments of the 1990s, self-organization was not only a tradition going back to the 1980s, but also a change in collective practices for artists. In an interview, Zhuang Hui said: "the '85 New Wave Movement and the 1990s were already a beginning of new trends, but why did artists in the 1990s have a strong sense of self-organization? In fact, there is a lot of opposition to the power model that came into being between 1985 and 1989."[19] At the same time, in the absence of a relatively formal space and venue to display works at the time, artists could only display their works within private housing, commercial or manufacturing spaces, inviting their peers from within the art scene to visit and discuss the art. The situation represented not only a kind of helplessness, but also an escape from traditional forms of exhibition organization. This can also be said to be one of the important aspects of the *Wildlife* project that deserves to be explored.

After observing the contemporary Chinese art scene for some time, Pauline J. Yao points out in his article *Towards a Spatial Politics* that "the artist is eager to open up an abstract or conceptual autonomous space, which is reflected in their strong preference for self-organization; the term "self-organization" represents the ideals of grassroots organizations, or an organizational thinking run by artists and managed collectively. But to some extent, it is independent of the need for a fixed physical display space."[20] Two paths that advanced in the 1990s were self-organization and institutionalization, with the former being different from the group art movements that characterized the 1980s. Since the 1990s, the latter

became became a capital-led driving force in the art ecology, which made contemporary art different from the official art exhibition mechanism. However, that mechanism too would come to be swayed by the market. Self-organization in the *Wildlife* project, where artists implemented in their works wastelands, ponds, streets, roofs, etc., either randomly or at specifically chosen sites, a sense of flow is distinguished from stability, and the wild is different from the exquisite.

### Cross-regional Communication Space

Wildlife took place for a year (1997–1998), encouraging communication and interaction, with the results arising in different times and spaces, and then compiled in the catalogue. The participating artists came from different regions of China at that time. This regional difference resulted in the participating artists having different understandings of the artistic ecology at that time. For example, Dai Guangyu, an artist living in Chengdu at that time, yearned for the art centre of Beijing and the bustle of artistic exchange. By contrast, for Song Dong, an artist living in Beijing, where there is the air of noise and excitement, he craves the edge of the wild. The understanding of these two different regions prompted them to think about each other from different starting points and practice from a sense of consciousness that arises from the different problems they live with. In fact, even now these aspects of difference and dislocation still exist.

Artists in Beijing pay more attention to seeking conceptual intervention in everyday life, while also acknowledging strong traditional background of Beijing as the capital city. Artists in the Yangtze River Delta pay more attention to the existence of themselves in changing times, and the image and identity of urban construction and change. The artists of the Pearl River Delta, living on the front line of reform and opening up, were the first group of people to experience urbanization in the 1990s and were most sensitive to the changes in the city. On this basis, they launched their actions and were obsessed with the idea of the "guerrilla" on the street. Artists in southwest China are more marginal and unconstrained than the more centralized cities. These differences provide a broad context for understanding the art practice of the 1990s, and it has to be said that the practice of transcending the region is also the heritage of the art movements in the 1980s.

### Archives as Display

The *Wildlife* project eventually produced and printed a complete catalogue of works, including a detailed catalogue of Chinese experimental artworks since 1986, which undoubtedly is a valuable historical archive. From the point of view of presentation, these art practices are realized in the form of text and archival display. Artists have taken the initiative to archive their own works, and comprise archival characteristics of the project itself. A question that extends out of this research is whether to regard *Wildlife* simply as an art activity or as an archive. How do we view the archive as a way and a concept of display?

It is obvious that if the *Wildlife* project is taken as a system of historical statements, it presents the conditions, scope, and results of an art

experiment in a period of contemporary art history, from its germination to its implementation. It also reflects a special exhibition history of the 1990s and how artists deal with it in their own way. The artists who participated in the project archived their works, which is different display format. The archiving of artistic activities also enables the reorganization and creation of new meanings and clues. It is the display of *Wildlife* project, as a catalogue, that becomes an archive, which makes the practice and research of experimental art more possible.

### The History of Exhibitions in the 1990s and "Local Production"

Going back to the beginning of this paper, Monica Dematté's expectations have gradually become a direction and form of consensus for contemporary Chinese art. However, the new problem is that commercialization has become the norm and prerequisite everywhere, just like the nascent commercialization of art that artists face, whether it is the biennials or art fairs that are sweeping the globe, the growing number of art galleries and art institutions, or the sprawling super gallery. The *Wildlife* state of art, compared to the present art system, is so far away.

The history of the 1990s is becoming a kind of landscape and mirror image, and it may be possible to see a more real historical scenario only by going deep into individual practices. There are several criteria for judging the historical value of exhibitions that can be provided by the *Wildlife* projects: One, in the process of the globalization of art, does the exhibition project provide a unique perspective? Two, from the perspective of exhibition planning, is there a way to differ from previous curatorial practices, especially to the grand narratives that have been unique to China? Three, in the same type of exhibitions in the 1990s, the artists involved still continued to create after that.

Judging from the international environment at that time, the history of the Asian region after the 1990s has, according to Wang Hui, undergone a dual process: "one is the concentration of a new type of power network centered on the United States and concentrated in the process of proliferation. The other is the pace of regional cooperation in Asia that intensified in the wake of the 1997 financial turmoil. Under the aegis of neoliberalism, Asian countries began a period of joint development at a different pace."[21] Against this background, the experience of Chinese urbanization involved in the *Wildlife* project was undoubtedly unique. Urbanization not only brought about rapid changes in people lives, but also shocked the artists in the scene. They translated their "shock" experiences into actions and expressions in the form of artworks.

"Globalization is no longer an external issue in Chinese society, it is no longer a question of whether to join, but an internal question of society."[22] Where is the local position in the framework of globalization for exhibition practices in the 1990s? Discussions and exhibition practices carried out around the local, contemporary art scene in the 1990s are from the perspectives of localization, the relationship between the nation

and the world, and post-colonization. "I think the locality is mainly related, contextualized, not non-directional and spatial."[23] According to this statement by Arjun Appadurai, the *Wildlife* project can be seen as a local practice in which artists, as local subjects, become actors in a local situation. The uniqueness of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s is that, since then, it has been difficult to "produce locality." As a result of global integration and technological changes, the spatial and geographical relations of nation-states are changing, and the space-time relationship between the Internet and electronic media is confusing. There is strengthening of technological control, and the possibility of artists participating in social movements as the subject of their practice is very small. After the 1990s, it is not only the external realistic conditions that disintegrate, but also the cohesion within the art. However, it is difficult to determine whether this disintegration will be the basis upon which everything can continue?

Notes

1. The avant-garde nature of contemporary Chinese art has different designations at different stages. The "New Wave" art of the 1980s, the avant-garde art and avant-garde art borrowed from Western modernism, are now basically historical terms. These are some of the concepts of "family similarities" in the study of China's relatively short history of contemporary art. In order to clarify the problem situation, this essay uses Wu Hung's view that art practice in the 1990s is defined as "experimental art."
2. Monica Dematté, *Art: The Movement to Fight on Its Own,* trans. Luo Yongjin et al. (Hebei: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2008), 1. The original text was published in *Art News of China,* 20th issue, 1989, trans. Hou Hanru.
3. Wang Lin, "Aoliwa bushi Zhongguo yishu de jiuxing" (Oliva is not the saviour of contemporary Chinese art), *Dushu* 10, 1993.
4. *50 Critical Moments in the Process of Chinese Contemporary Art*, Art Archives (artda.cn).
5. Wu Hung, *An Exhibition about Exhibitions: Experimental Art Exhibition in the 1990s* (Beijing: China National Photography Press, 2016), 112.
6. Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2005), 56, 140.
7. Wu Hung, *An Exhibition about Exhibitions: Experimental Art Exhibition in the 1990s,* 149.
8. Biljana Ciric, *A History of Exhibitions Shanghai 1979—2006* (Manchester, UK: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014), 304.
9. Wu Hung, *An Exhibition about Exhibitions: Experimental Art Exhibition in the 1990s,* 162–63.
10. Song Dong and Guo Shirui, *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe* (Beijing: Center for Modern Art, 1998).
11. Carl Schmitt and Tracy B. Strong, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
12. Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground,* trans. Weng Xiaoyu and Li Ruyi (Beijing: Jincheng Press, 2013), 214.
13. Ibid., Big Tail Elephants was founded in the early 1990s and consisted of four members: Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Leung Kui-hui, and Xu Tan. They often enacted performance art projects or planned exhibitions in empty parts of the city, turning these areas into essential elements for the implementation of their ideas.
14. Song Dong and Guo Shirui, *Wildlife Starting from 1997 Jingzhe*, 20.
15. Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground, 217.*
16. Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art,* 56, 161.
17. Ibid., 173.
18. Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing, *White Book*, Beijing, 1995.
19. Zhuang Hui's comments in a 2016 forum.
20. Pauline J. Yao, *Towards a Spatial Politics: Alternative Space and Contemporary Art in China* (Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).
21. Wang Hui, *The Reconstruction of Publicity and Criticism,* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008, 405.
22. Ibid., 141.
23. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013), 179.

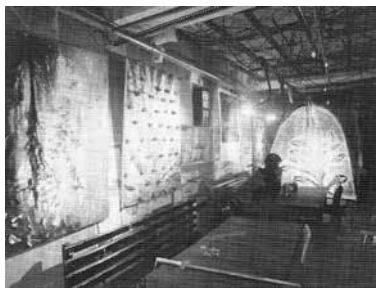
Wei Yu

# Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions

The early 1990s saw a few local fine arts exhibitions in Taiwan that represented a shift from traditional salon-based art competition toward a thematic show of contemporary art. As one of the earliest examples, the annual Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition (TCFAE) first launched an open call for "environmental art projects" in their 1994 edition. The role of curator was also introduced at this time to replace the jurying process, but it was only under a transitional name of "responsibility art critic." This reformation revealed the local government's keen interest in collaborating with artists and cultural workers who were active in the field of alternative culture, or the so-called "underground" art scene, at the time.

What emerged within this horizon were a series of interrelated cultural projects, including the alternative space Sickly Sweet, Taipei Breaking Sky Festivals, and the two editions of Taipei Broken Life Festival, among others. They were entangled with the radical experimentation of a local art exhibition series that happened at the periphery of the Taipei basin between 1993 and 1995. They also reflected a new type of cultural politics that emerged during that period in Taipei County (now New Taipei City), one of the few counties led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which struggled against the KMT-led central government. But what was the point of confluence among these different cultural projects? How did they relate to this new local art exhibition system? What kind of cultural politics did these engagements reflect? These are questions I endeavour to address in this essay.

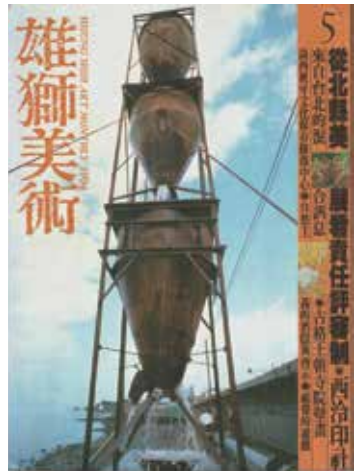
## The Reformation of a Local Art Exhibition



*Rejects of the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition*, installation view at Sickly Sweet, Taipei, April 1994.

In April 1994, four young artists, Yao Jui-chung, Lin Chih-feng, Hung Tung-lu and Peng Hung-chih, held a joint show at Sickly Sweet as a protest against that year's TCFAE, which was the major annual competitive exhibition for visual art in the Taipei County region. Each of the four artists had applied to participate in the exhibition and had been rejected. As a protest, they not only displayed their works, but also invited "all the failed participants" of this official art competition to display their works in their show, which was titled *The TCFAE's Exhibition of Rejects* (*Beixian meizhan luoxuanzhan*). This protest attracted the media's interest. A month after its opening, the exhibition was featured in a four-page article

published in the art magazine *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly* as part of a story that was included in a twenty-two-page special feature on the TCFAE.[1] According to the coverage in *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*, the Sickly Sweet exhibition questioned if the radical change of the competition scheme of the 6th edition of the TCFAE could lead to injustices, as the awarded works in the General Group, alongside the Exceptional Group, were now each selected by a single judge rather than a group jury as in previous editions.




Cover of *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly* 5, no. 279 (June 1994), featuring environmental artworks selected by the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994.

Wu Chung-wei, *Dig Head*, 1994, mixed media, selected as part of the General Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Courtesy of Taipei County Culture Centre.

This shift in selecting the art was a radical step, not only in terms of its own history, but also for the convention of "local fine arts exhibitions" (*difang meizhan*), to which the TCFAE belongs. "Local fine arts exhibitions" was the designation that had been used to refer to the competitive art exhibitions that were held each year by various county level and city level governments since the 1980s, and which served as the primary competitive platform for local artists. Although each exhibition series had slight differences in the details of its scheme or its name, their formats were similarly derived from the structure of the Taiwan Provincial Fine Arts Exhibition (TPFAE) that had been organized by the central government since 1946. This structure was borrowed primarily from the tradition of the French-style Salon—in particular, the official art exhibitions of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris held since 1667. With the TCFAE and TPFAE, the structure was defined by two major principles: first, the competition was categorized according to specific art media,[2] and second, any competitor who frequently won a prize was eligible to become a jury member.

On the one hand, these exhibitions created a hierarchy for local artists to gain a necessary reputation and reflected the development of local art practices; on the other, however, this type of hierarchy became problematic through its rigidity. The latter point was a concern for Liu Feng-sung, the former Taipei County Culture Centre (TCCC) director.[3] He criticized that the jury systems of these local fine arts exhibitions "are very problematic" as they have been "overwhelmingly influenced by the teacher and the style followed by the artist, the artist's qualifications and clique." As a result, they have become "uninspiring."[4]

Similarly targeting the system of local fine arts exhibitions, Ni Tsai-chin, who was one of the two judges for the 6th TCFAE, argued that "the previous results of multiple judges were usually a promotion for the most uninterest-

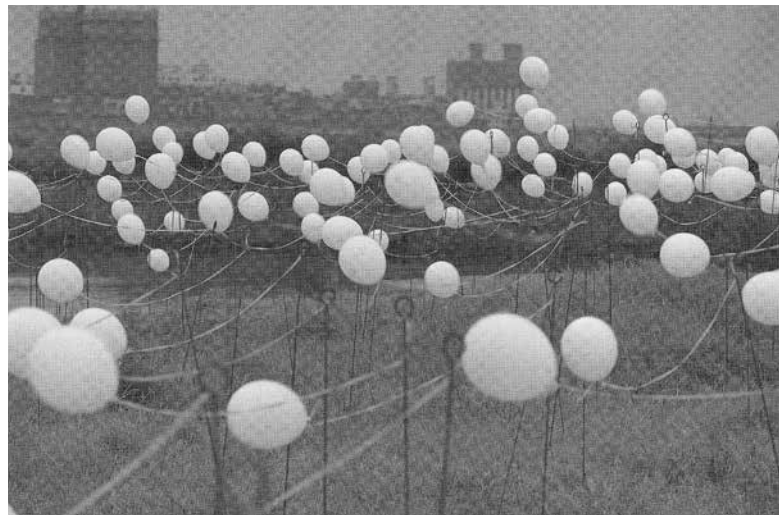
ing and mediocre works, which caused the decline of the exhibitions subsequently." Chien Ming-hui, the main organizer of TCFAE, also criticized the conventional structure of local fine arts exhibitions, which resulted in "wasting and duplicating art resources."[5]

These criticisms reflect a phenomenon in the early 1990s in which the system of local fine arts exhibitions became deeply entwined within the system of academic art and was regarded as inadequate for reflecting recent art developments. This inadequacy reflected a historical reality that Taiwan's modern art or its avant-garde art of the post-war period was driven largely by forces outside of academia, in which like-minded artists reached their positions in the field of art by founding art groups, holding private lectures, and using mass media to promote their ideas.[6]

As mentioned, the correlated system of academic art and local fine arts exhibitions shared the similar feature of multiple judges and medium-based categorization, in which the latter simply erected a barrier against those artworks that were made with media excluded from the competition rules. This problem became increasingly prominent after the mid-1980s when unconventional art forms, such as video art, performance art, and, most importantly, installation art emerged as new trends in Taiwan's art and were soon being promoted by the newly established art museums, especially Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). To respond to the unconventional art production emerging since the 1980s, the local fine arts exhibitions in different counties began to simplify or revise the categorization of works that could be included. The 6th TCFAE was one of the earliest examples in the context of local fine arts exhibition making this change, which makes it a significant case in the history of the shift of the institution of art in Taiwan during the 1990s.

In 1993, the TCFAE simplified the original seven categories into two new classifications, "two-dimensional" and "three-dimensional" work. The progress made in simplifying the idea of categorization within the exhibition was praised by the public in general. In 1994, the 6th TCFAE took further steps. First, any categorization was abrogated; thus the exhibition successfully attracted the participation of young artists and received a considerable number of artworks in different media. Second, a new curatorial project within the overall exhibition entitled "Environment Art" was added as an Exceptional Group (*tebie zhengjian zu*) alongside the pre-existing General Group (*yiban zhengjian zu*). Third, and most controversial, as mentioned previously the multiple-member jury was replaced by only two judges, namely Ni Tsai-chin and Lien Teh-cheng, who were given the title of "*zeren yiping*", literally "responsibility art critic." Retrospectively, this title should be better understood as denoting to the role of the curator-critic for an exhibition, especially an art competition. Both Ni Tsai-chin and Lien Teh-cheng played this curator-critic role, selecting works while considering the exhibition as a whole. The only difference is that they were responsible for the Exceptional and the General Group in the exhibition, respectively. It was this latter act of simplifying the jury that lit the fuse of the controversy

Hou Yi-ren, *Drop it in the River*, 1994, site-specific installation, selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Photo: Hsu Po-Hsin. Courtesy of the artist.



Chen Yan-ming, Lin Meng-ling, Chiang Ying-ting, and Su Yu-hua, *Tide*, 1994, site-specific installation, selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Courtesy of the artists and Taipei County Art Centre.

and prompted criticism from some artists. As a result, that year's TCFAE was described by one journalist as a "bomb" in Taiwan's art world.[7]

The thematic exhibitions and the curator-critic were the two most significant features that were expected by the TCFAE's organizer, TCCC, to "modernize" the system of local fine arts exhibitions. In an interview, Ni Tsai-chin asserted that "this kind of scheme was not invented by the TCFAE," before pointing out that "some famous exhibitions, such as documenta and the Venice Biennale, assign only one individual to choose all the works to display. The TCFAE has introduced the same idea, though on a smaller scale."[8]

Lee Ming-sheng, *Fireball or Circle*, 1993, installation/performance at *Aperto 93: Emergenza*, Venice Biennale, 1993. Courtesy of Wang Youshen.

It should not be surprising that these international art exhibitions were cited as exemplary by Ni Tsai-chin. In 1993, just a year before the 6th TCFAE, the artist Lee Ming-sheng was invited to participate in *Aperto 93: Emergenza* at the 45th Venice Biennale, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. Partly due to the fact that Lee Ming-sheng was the first Taiwanese artist ever to participate in this international art event, that year's Venice Biennale received extensive coverage from *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*, ensuring that the exhibition was thoroughly presented to Taiwan's art world for the first time. Coverage with similar weight for documenta appeared in the same magazine

a decade earlier; in 1983, *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly* published six monographs about the 7th edition of documenta by the critic Chen Chuan-hsing.

Documenta and the Venice Biennale should have provided an essential model upon which the TCCC could base a new type of exhibition to represent the latest art developments in Taiwan. This model, as Ni Tsai-chin argues in one interview, would not only encourage a single judge to "implement his/her criteria and take responsibility for them," but could also "cultivate art critics."[9] This was in the mid-1990s when the Western term "curator" was not translated specifically as *ce zhan ren* in Chinese, as it has been more recently, and I suggest that it is in this period that the role of curator emerged in Taiwan's art world. Interestingly, Ni Tsai-chin's opinion reveals a noteworthy phenomenon, which is that in the context of government-organized exhibitions, the emergence of the role of the curator in Taiwan was mainly derived from the role of critic and was also deeply engaged with the system of art competitions. This state of affairs was perfectly embodied in the so-called *zeren yiping*, or curator-critic.

As Ni Tsai-chin's role in the 6th TCFAE shows, the *zeren yiping* worked as a critic who was invited by public museums or government departments to select artworks and to generate a theme for an exhibition. This was a transitional and short-lived title for curators during the mid-1990s, when the role of curators had not been properly recognized or formalized by the Taiwanese art world. And its emergence cannot be isolated from the rise of thematic exhibitions. As bundled collections of artworks, thematic exhibitions are shaped by specific themes that are usually generated by the curator. This means a thematic exhibition, if compared to non-thematic ones, is more unified as a creative production of the curator. In this context, the *zeren yiping* was a new type of agent who mediated the content of contemporary art, or who created a new type of production, and it was this new type of agent-production that formed the essential factors for the emerging cultural politics in the Taipei region around the mid-1990s.

## The Rise of Thematic Exhibitions

The thematic exhibition, as a specific type of cultural production in art institutions, had emerged from the various efforts to represent, or to include, the latest art trends since the 1980s. Such efforts could be seen in a few of the art competitions that were held by TFAM to embrace the emerging forms of installation art—for example, the biennial Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C. that first began in 1984 and other thematic exhibitions that were curated by individual artists into the early 1990s. The growing scene of thematic exhibitions could hardly be seen as merely introducing a new way of representing art, but, rather, that it functioned as a rhetorical device of cultural identity in its formative phase. It was this function that allowed local governments to establish specific cultural politics. This was evident in both the reform of the Trends of Chinese Modern Art and TCFAE, in which the former evolved into the theme-oriented Taipei Biennial and the latter became an environmental art-focused festival, which will be examined later in this text.

The 6th TCFAE was in fact situated in this transitional state. Through launching the environmental art-focused Exceptional Group, curated by Ni Tsai-chin, the exhibition appeared to depart from the traditional salon-based competition toward a curator-oriented thematic exhibition. However, this thematic feature was not only balanced, but also challenged, by the General Group, which was dominated by the taste of its sole judge, Lien Teh-cheng. With different criteria for selecting works if compared to the thematic feature of the Exceptional Group, Lien Teh-cheng consciously focused more on the dispersed state of rhetoric formed by different works in a joint exhibition, which made the General Group more diverse in content.

According to his essay elaborating his criteria for the General Group, Lien Teh-chang regarded the critic Huang Hai-ming's advocacy of thematic exhibitions since 1992 as a starting point for his thinking.[10] As a result, the 6th TCFAE's General Group formed a critical response to the phenomenon of the thematic exhibition. By reviewing Huang Hai-ming's proposition, Lien Teh-chang critiques the way in which thematic exhibitions had been "overrated," as they "seemed to be regarded as a 'superior' form of exhibition" compared to solo or non-thematic shows.[11] Lien Teh-chang points out that "not only do public museums regard thematic exhibitions as a better way to represent contemporary art, but also commercial galleries see thematic exhibitions as a way to collaborate with academia and, therefore, to gain a better reputation."[12] He criticizes how their popularity represented an ideology of "cultural hegemony," which degrades the significance of artworks to merely "represented artefacts," thereby cutting off their connections with artists. Furthermore, Lien Teh-chang argues, the overemphasizing of the superior position of thematic exhibitions could be a form of repression to both non-thematic exhibitions, and also to any "voices" excluded from the theme of an exhibition.[13]

Based on these criticisms, he eventually formed the basic criterion of his task, namely to realize pluralist states of art.[14] Lien Teh-chang's strategy, according to his work report, one which formed his principal criterion, was to choose "the works with which he was unfamiliar."[15] He suggested that contemporary art is not only the artefacts that have been produced, but also those ongoing things that are "constantly transforming themselves and moving toward the unknown."[16]

Lien Teh-chang's criteria revealed in his work report previously had been mentioned by him in a post-exhibition interview published in *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*. Responding to dissent from art circles against his power in the TCFAE, Lien Teh-chang tried to defend himself by decentralizing his role, arguing that what he tried to do was to destroy the homogeneity of any aesthetic judgment he may have established. Although it could be difficult to make a case for whether Lien Teh-chang's strategy was successfully achieved, his efforts, as revealed in this interview, remain noteworthy. They imprinted a sense of institutional critique on the exhibition, in which the task of selecting artworks was, as he suggested, no longer a task of merely choosing a specific type of language, but also a task of creating a different

representative system. In this sense, the de-centralization of art language could be a method of de-centralizing an art institution.[17]

## Sickly Sweet

Based on Lien Teh-chang's criteria for the General Group of the 6th TCFAE, five artists were eventually selected as the award winners, namely, Wu Chung-wei, Lin Cheng-sheng, Wang Te-yu, Du Wei, and Lu Mi. Among them, only Wu Chung-wei and Lin Cheng-sheng were self-taught artists, while the other three and most of the other participants in the General Group were academically trained. Wu Chung-wei and Lin Cheng-sheng's status of being outside academia was given as much attention as their works in the exhibition. In Lien Teh-chang's working report, they are described as artists who "only have a senior high school degree, never received formal training in fine art and live in marginal living conditions in society."[18] In addition to addressing their backgrounds, Lien Teh-chang also defined their works as being against the commercial, the academic, and the institutional; examples of "the art of anti-art."[19] He suggested that their works rewrite the stereotype of so-called "amateur artists" in Taiwanese art, and that they challenge the qualified art forms through their "chaotic, non-limited, disordered, and carnivalesque state."[20] These characteristics "even led to the collapse of the value system [of the art]."[21] Lien Teh-chang's comments show the way in which he regarded Wu Chung-wei and Lin Cheng-sheng as perfect examples with which to illustrate his criteria for that year's General Group, although he put more weight on Wu Chung-wei for the impact the artist brought to the exhibition.

Retrospectively, Wu Chung-wei's participation in TCFAE and varied practices around the same period were meaningful examples to the entanglement between Taipei's alternative culture, or the so-called "underground," and the government-organized "official" institution of arts.

After the 6th TCFAE, it was evident that the TCCC showed considerable interest in Wu Chung-wei's practice, which included painting, sculpture, and installation, as well as, more importantly, the collective events he organized during this period. From 1993 to 1995, Wu Chung-wei was active in both the emerging alternative cultural scenes and the local fine art exhibitions in the Taipei region. His institutional engagements within these two realms marked a significant rise of the new cultural politics and its relationship to alternative culture and avant-garde art.

Wu Chung-wei's works first gained attention in Taiwan's fine art scene in 1993 as five of his works were selected by the 5th TCFAE and were displayed in the Two-dimensional Group, alongside the work of nineteen other participants. It was also the first time his works had been chosen for an official competitive art exhibition, although at the time they did not receive comments from either the judges or critics. In March 1994, Wu Chung-wei was invited to participate in the New Style of Southern Taiwan Biennial (*Nan Taiwan xin fengge shuang nian zhan*), accompanied by eight other artists. Soon after that, in the same year, he was chosen again by the TCFAE

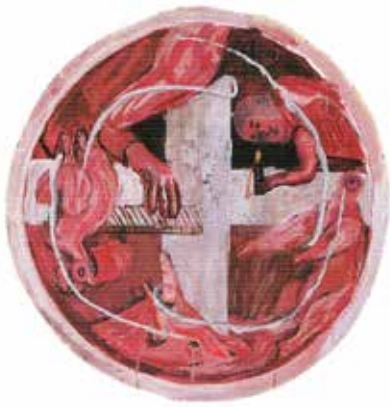
as one of the five award-winning artists in its 6th edition of the exhibition. These credits highlighted his works and background, and the Taiwan art world gradually began to take notice.

Wu Chung-wei's works during this period were mainly two-dimensional, mostly watercolour and sketches on found card and usually presented as a mixture of figures, landscapes, ordinary objects, geometrical forms, and architectural spaces. The way in which Wu Chung-wei constructed all these elements in a piece of work is similar to the practice of collage but with more of an organic quality. Some of his works, such as the 1993 *Tower of Landscapes II* (*Fengjing ta*), the 1994 *I Love the Office of the President* (*Wo ai zongtongfu*), and the 1994 *Accurate Knowledge and Outlook on Life* (*Zhengque de zhishi yu zhengque de renshengguan*), are embodied as a mixture of components suspended between a giant chunk of flesh and an architectural structure. In this flesh-like structure, all the motifs are metaphorical organs. *Big Sea Shell* (*Da hailuo*), from 1994, could be seen as a perfect example of this feature, in which different motifs—for example, a knife, a flower, and an infant—appear to be stuffed into a cavity. The suggestion of human flesh is often represented as a cluster of fragments blended with other elements, of which *Meat Grinder* (*Jiao rou ji*), from 1994, is a perfect example. Additionally, all of those elements are assembled into a self-contained epitome of the living world. However, it is difficult to define what the artist depicts in his paintings as a whole. Sometimes it is merely possible to recognize each of the elements within a painting. In this sense, the mixture Wu Chung-wei creates seldom projects a clear form in terms of subject, but rather an undefinable mass. When blended within such a mass, the human being loses its priority and is perceived merely as a fragment, analogous to any other object.

Left: Wu Chung-wei, *Tower of Landscapes II*, 1993, mixed media, selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Courtesy of Taipei County Culture Centre.

Right: Wu Chung-wei, *I Love the Office of the President*, 1993, mixed media, selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Courtesy of Taipei County Culture Centre.

In 1993, Wu Chung-wei with his partner, Su Ching-ching, opened the aforementioned alternative space Sickly Sweet in Taipei. The venue was often referred to as a café or a snack bar, while regularly holding multi-disciplinary art events. The Chinese name of Sickly Sweet, *tian mi mi*, literally "very sweet," was a pun for Taiwanese teenagers around that time. As a mainstream cultural reference, it was the name of a popular love



Wu Chung-wei, *Meat Grinder*, 1993, mixed media, selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Courtesy of Taipei County Culture Centre.

Wu Chung-wei, *Big Sea Shell*, 1993, mixed media, selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 6th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1994. Courtesy of Taipei County Culture Centre.

song in Taiwan dating from 1980, which later spread to China. At the same time, it was also the title of a censored pornographic publication, which was distributed secretly among the younger generations. The latter reference gives the name a lewd, sensual, and subcultural connotation, which is in contrast to the reserved platonic lovers suggested by the popular love song. Before it was adopted as the name of the café, it had been used in the title of two student-edited underground zines, *Sickly Sweet* and *Sickly Sweet Afternoon* (*Tian mi mi de wuhou*), which were distributed at the National Taiwan University (NTU) and Fu Jen Catholic University a few months before the venue opened. Some of the students who had previously participated in these two zines were friends of Wu Chung-wei and later became supporters or founding members of the café. Some were also previously members of a few left leaning cultural societies, especially the Lawn Literature Club at Fu Jen Catholic University.

*Sickly Sweet*, poster, designed by Wu Chung-wei, 1992. Courtesy of Lin Chi-wei.

Rooted in college-based underground culture, Sickly Sweet soon became a Cabaret Voltaire-like place, where various fringe theatre and noise performances, screenings, art exhibitions, and cultural events were occasionally staged. It was also where young cultural workers, artists, filmmakers, and performers gathered. At odds with the intellectual background of Sickly Sweet's college student-based members, Wu Chung-wei is rather "undereducated," as he did not even finish his secondary school studies. After leaving school, he was a vagrant, a junk collector, a vendor, a religious statue maker, and also worked as a labourer in a shoe factory, in the ship-breaking industry, and on construction sites.[22] In the early 1990s, he was regarded by the media as a self-taught art amateur although he has specifically denied that he was even an artist, claiming that he had "only made a painting twice."[23] The living skills he learned from different jobs and the habit of collecting junk reflect tangibly in Sickly Sweet. While physically the space was open, Wu Chung-wei continuously refurbished its interior by using recycled materials he had collected, but the work never seemed to be finished.[24]

Unlike most of the alternative spaces that emerged in Taiwan in the early 1990s, which were based on visual art, Sickly Sweet focused more on performance art. This is evident in the programs listed in its flyers. By providing a "budget and open-minded space without examination,"[25] Sickly Sweet mostly attracted young amateur performers from the circle of experimental film and music, noise performance, and the so-called "Little Theatre," a kind of non-mainstream theatre in Taiwan that emerged in the 1980s and that often adopted anti-narrative, multi-focus experiments as a way to challenge political taboo, traditional theatre, and culture. The space soon acquired a reputation for its diverse, lively, and daring body performances and was regarded as symbolizing the rise of "alternative performance" in Taipei.[26]

## Taipei Broken Life Festival

Sickly Sweet lasted only for one year. By January 1994, it had closed due to financial difficulties and a crisis of management. Some of the performers organized the Little Theatre Festival as a means of searching for other possibilities to extend its life. The venue was described by the theatre worker and critic Wang Mo-lin in an annual review of that year as "a phenomenon of alternative culture."[27] Having been taken over by art worker Lin Chih-feng, the original space for the Sickly Sweet experienced a period of transition, and was finally remodelled into a theatre café when it was handed over to Taiwan Walker Theatre in 1995.[28]

Taipei Broken Life Festival flyer, drawn by Wu Chung-wei, 1994. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

After the closure of Sickly Sweet in early 1994, Wu Chung-wei and his friends began to contemplate the idea of holding a festival that would "continue the spirit of the space."[29] They hoped to find a non-institutional outdoor site that could host the event so that they would not have to apply to the government for permission.[30] Nine months later, in September 1994, they co-curated a four-night outdoor festival on the banks of the Xindian River, which is located in a peripheral zone of Taipei City. A few drafts for its flyer show the event was initially titled *A Call From the Riverbank* (*Heti huhuan*), but was later renamed the *Taipei Broken Life Festival* (*Taipei po lan shenghuo jie*), in which the Chinese keyword *po lan* is literally translated as "broken and rotten." Its program was developed from various features of Sickly Sweet, and many of the participating artists had previously performed there; that is, Little Theatre groups, such as Moslar, Taiwan People Theatre (*Minzhong juchang*), and Pink Labyrinth (*Fenhong migong*),[31] and noise music performances that were supported by the LTK Commune and Z.S.L.O. (Zero and Sound Liberation Organization). Several foreign acts, including Monellaphobia (Japan), Phobia (US), Jobi Kobi (Taiwan/US), and others were also involved. In addition to live performances, the program also included a series of short film screenings, installation art projects, and exhibitions, alongside several market stalls.

Liu Hsing-yi of Z.S.L.O. performing on the stage in Taipei Broken Life Festival, 1994. Courtesy of Lin Chi-wei.

According to newspaper coverage, the festival took place without any commercial or government support, and most of the facilities needed were collected, or "stolen," by Wu Chung-wei himself.[32] Taipei Broken Life Festival's do-it-yourself ethos was specifically emphasized in the media in contrast to the increasing number of "major productions" in theatres, which were emerging in the field of the arts.[33] Wu Chung-wei was also sketched by journalist as an eccentric "who looks like a young junk collector."[34]


The special feature of Taipei Broken Life Festival on *Pots Weekly*, September, 1994. Courtesy of Lin Chi-wei.

By distributing flyers and through word-of-mouth, Taipei Broken Life Festival as a cult event ultimately attracted around two hundred attendees each night and received coverage in six newspaper articles and in a few noise zines.[35] Among them, only the non-mainstream *Lihpao Daily* made a special feature with fully detailed reports about the event.[36] The left-leaning *Lihpao Daily* was also the only newspaper that continually had been covering the practices of Wu Chung-wei and his group in the first half of the 1990s. As most of the performers were amateurs, Taipei Broken Life did not receive positive criticism regarding its performances, yet the liberal atmosphere and "anarchic pleasure" it created was praised by the media.[37] The significance of the festival was better indicated by some of the annual reviews in the later months of 1994, regarding it as a remarkable event for "the rise of alternative performance in the Taipei urban realm."[38]

The critic Wang Mo-lin suggests that since the early 1980s Taiwan's Little Theatre had gradually established itself as a non-mainstream theatre that was interwoven with sociopolitical issues that frequently merged with activism. It undoubtedly represented a form of political art under the repressed social atmosphere of the martial law era.[39] However, as Wang Mo-lin asserts, "the era of little-theatres-as-political-claims had ended,"[40] and this change can be epitomized by the Little Theatre Festival in 1993, which was presented by members of Sickly Sweet. For Wang Mo-lin, the aesthetic criteria revealed in this event tended to be blurred with that of the newly emerging Little Theatre, focusing more on transforming physical reactions into performances in a straightforward manner, rather than conveying ideas through narrative and gesture. By this token, it had become "a home for the body of revolt"[41] in Taiwan's post-martial law era. Wang Mo-lin developed his arguments in another article published later in the same month, in which he suggests that Little Theatre had already been incorporated into the realm of official culture since the early 1990s. The Little Theatre movement, as he

All images this page: Taipei Broken Life Festival, 1994. Courtesy of Lin Chi-wei.

points out, "had deteriorated into a political cliché, which referred to being either in opposition to the KMT-led government or to placing its emphasis on Taiwanese identity."[42] Moreover, it enjoyed increased engagement with the institutions of official culture as some theatres began to receive financial support and opportunities from the government. As a result, Wang Mo-lin argues that the previous incarnation of Little Theatre could no longer be seen as representative of non-mainstream culture. Alternatively, as he suggests, Sickly Sweet and Taipei Broken Life became a form of cultural production that could be regarded as "the true avant-garde theatre."[43]

## Junk Art

After receiving an award at the 6th TCFAE and having organized the Taipei Broken Life Festival, Wu Chung-wei proposed an environmental art project to the 7th TCFAE in April 1995 and was again chosen by TCCC. Following the reformation steps laid down in its 6th edition, the 7th edition extended the idea of the curatorial and thematic Exceptional Group and went even further, cancelling the previous General Group. As a result, the exhibition repositioned itself as a curatorial exhibition focused entirely on environmental art combined with a competitive structure. Under the title

*Resurgence on the Danshui River*, all the participants were required to propose an outdoor art project for the Danshui River basin as their artistic response to the environment. The proposed projects would be chosen by a single curator-critic, Lin Hsing-yueh, and subsequently would be realized in the exhibition.



Left: Chi Tieh-nan, *Black Cloud*, 1995, site-specific installation. Middle: Tsai Shu-hui, *Auspicious Cloud*, 1995, site-specific installation. Right: Peng Hsien-hsiang and Fang Wei-wen, *Seeding Plan*, 1995, site-specific installation. All artists selected as part of the Exceptional Group in the 7th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition, 1995. Courtesy of the artist and Taipei County Culture Centre.

As the river that defines the natural landscape of Taipei County, the Danshui River also had been designated as the exhibition site for the Exceptional Group component of the 6th TCFAE. For the 7th edition, Lin Hsing-yueh continued this design but required the participants to generate their projects based on the form of a common toy, a kite. By doing so, artists could respond not only to the local landscape but also to traditional culture. As a result, the nine projects awarded entry in the exhibition all were related to imagery of flying, floating, and suspension. Some projects combined sculptural objects with performance art. For example, the project *Black Cloud* (*Heise de yun*), by Chi Tieh-nan, presented a huge inflatable black cube floating in the air and a hole in the ground of the same size, accompanied by a ceremony of releasing the cube into the air in the presence of nearly one hundred participants. In *Seeding Plan* (*Bo zhong ji hua*) by Peng Hsien-hsiang and Fang Wei-wen, twenty thousand orange balloons with cards and seeds attached were released into the air as one of the performances at the exhibition opening.

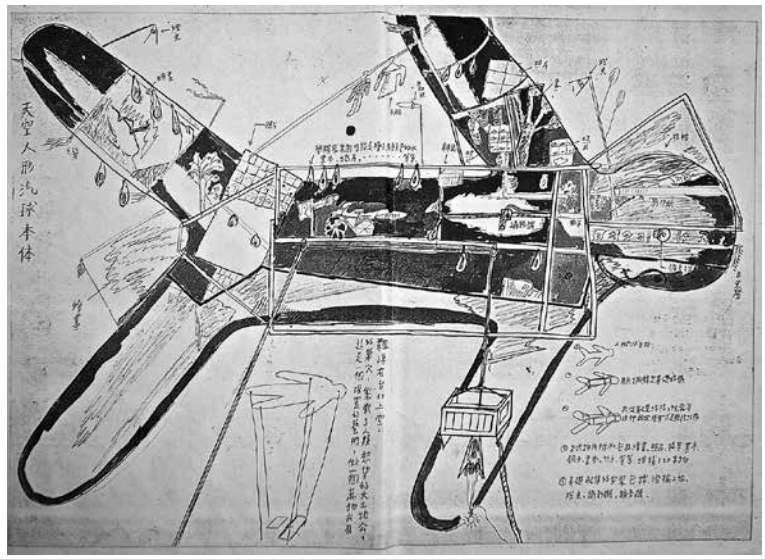
The project by Wu Chung-wei was in fact a festival in itself, titled Taipei Breaking Sky Festival, and it adopted a similar format to Taipei Broken Life Festival. It was not environmental art in the conventional sense, but an outdoor arts festival, in which "a group of people spent a month living on the riverbank, creating Little Theatre performances and music, building houses, farming, and setting up guidelines for this new type of society without any formal restrictions."[44] The main body of the project was a thirty-metre-long inflatable human figure, which was designed to carry found objects, such as "tables, chairs, refrigerators, or a boiling hotpot," and a container that "allows people to store some unexpected items like letters, eggs, and bicycles."[45] The inflated figure would carry these objects into the air and, according to Wu Chung-wei's proposal, deposit them at a specific location where they would pile up in a mound.[46] The gesture of lifting and destroying was essential to the artist, as he explains in Tseng Hsiao-yu's article:

> To lift these objects into the air is similar to the act of adding a bracket to them. This makes them noticeable and

> suggests that they will soon be destroyed. People will notice them because of their forthcoming disappearance.[47]

In Chiang Shih-feng's article, this gesture is described as an act of "throwing," and this idea was interpreted as follows:

> This throwing behaviour is continual. It symbolized the way in which all the existing things will be destroyed, whether they are refuse or not. The institutions are broken. Things are destroyed, becoming fragments and then cumulating into a mound, the excrement of a capitalist society.
>
> Since he has had this idea, Wu Chung-wei clearly discovered that what he planned to do was not only installations but also performances. What he would like to perform is not art, but a system, an experimental society. The act of rebuilding will be necessary since values and institutions have been broken.[48]



Taipei Breaking Sky Festival, project proposal, drawn by Wu Chung-wei, 1995. Courtesy of ET@T.

A stage alongside the inflatable figure launched the performance, or, more precisely, a series of happenings, in which a statue of Venus was smashed on the ground, noises were made, and a television set and a washing machine were lifted into the air by the figure.[49] Although a series of scenes were described in his proposal, most of them were not realized as expected. Not only was the "ceremony of floating" postponed due to the figure being damaged by heavy winds, but technical problems also prevented the figure from carrying the objects into the air smoothly. As a result, many related performances that were planned in Wu Chung-wei's original proposal were either cancelled or altered.

Nevertheless, Wu Chung-wei's Taipei Breaking Sky Festival did create a "temporary commune," in which a group of artists, performers, and cultural workers spontaneously lived on the site for a month.[50] This commune also led to "the first outdoor rave party in Taiwan" which was held at Taipei's

Left and Right: Taipei Breaking Sky Festival, 2015. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

Erchong Floodway, and which was mainly organized by DJ @llen and other DJs.[51] The party was later regarded by the music critic Jeph Lo as a decisive event in the history of Taiwan's music culture. "In the subsequent years [after this party]," as Jeph Lo recalls, "outdoor raves, large and small, invaded the riversides, hills, and other unused spaces of Taipei. Involving as few as a hundred people or as many as several thousand, most of these events took place without legal permits."[52]

Taipei Breaking Sky Festival, 2015. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

Following Taipei Breaking Sky Festival in the 7th TCFAE, in August 1995, Wu Chung-wei participated in the Religious Arts for the Ghost Festival, which was another annual festival that had been organized by TCCC since 1992. The festival was initially a cultural and religious event to celebrate Ghost Month, that is, the seventh lunar month in the Chinese calendar. That year's edition, however, strongly revealed the TCCCC's effort to reinterpret Taiwan's folklore and the Daoist religious tradition through contemporary theatrical approaches and artistic forms. Ten artists, including Wu Chung-wei, Cheng Wen-tsung, and others who were active in the circles of Little Theatre and alternative spaces at that time interpreted the traditional theme of *shi dian* (literally "ten palace halls") in the tales of Chinese Legendary Hell through installation works held in ten shipping containers. In the exhibition, traditional depictions of the scene of *shi dian* were replaced by ten installations that represented ten different problems in Taiwan's contemporary society.[53]

News coverage of Wu Chung-wei and his installation work in one of the ten shipping containers featured in Religious Arts for the Ghost Festival, 1995.

In the same month, Wu Chung-wei also joined the Taipei Scavenger Art Festival, which took place in front of TFAM. The event adopted the forms of installation art and junk art to interpret environmental issues. The mass media focused on these two festivals and, especially, on Wu Chung-wei's participation as representing the emerging "junk art" phenomenon. In Wu Ma-li's reviews, the artist is regarded as representing the emerging *po lan* (broken-and-rotten) culture, "having almost become an icon of shaggy and sloppy style,"[54] and he acted as a core figure in this phenomenon. "His attitude

toward life as associating with junk," Wu Ma-li writes, "is right against the way people used to praise cleanliness and order, which not only creates an impact on our experience, but which also caters to those new institutions that emphasize grassroots, marginality, and resistance"; thus, it "appears to be a mainstream of the alternative."[55]


Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival (2nd Taipei Broken Life Festival), flyer, 1995. Courtesy of Wei Yu.

## "ARE YOU ALL DEAD?"

The second edition of the Taipei Broken Life Festival was organized in September 1995, again by the supporters of Sickly Sweet although the members involved were varied. One of the most distinctive features differing from the previous festival is that the second edition was sponsored by TCCC, since the Centre had been keen on collaborating with emerging independent practitioners from the non-mainstream cultural realms, or the so-called "underground" during 1993 and 1995. With this sponsorship, the second Taipei Broken Life Festival was renamed the Taipei International Post-industrial Arts Festival (TIPAF), as a part of the multi-disciplinary New Formosa Arts Festival. Its site was moved from the riverbank to an abandoned brewery in one of Taipei's satellite cities, Banchiao City. The event was scheduled a few days before the factory was demolished. This soon-to-be-demolished industrial ruin strongly suggested a post-industrial imagery, which fit the government's branding of the event.

Under its more ambitious name, TIPAF inherited a similar do-it-yourself ethos and anarchist spirit from its predecessor. It became more international compared to the first edition, with the participation of over ten foreign industrial noise bands, including Con-Dom (UK), C.C.C.C. (Japan), Schimpfluch-Gruppe (Switzerland), ENDOXAN (France), among others, alongside L.T.K. Commune, Z.S.L.O., and other Taiwanese acts. Both Wu Chung-wei and the international musicians attracted a significant amount of attention, as most of them were visiting Taiwan for the first time. These foreign groups were invited based on the connections that mainly had been established previously by Wang Fu-jui with his label NOISE, which was the first Taiwanese label and zine to focus on noise, avant-garde, and experimental music.

Rather than a cult event, TIPAF was instead a media sensation receiving considerable coverage in the mainstream media, including some from MTV. One of the major film records of the event is the documentary film directed by Huang Ming-chuan.[56] According to Chiang Shih-fang's report, the first two days of the event attracted around "two to three hundred viewers," including "college students who were fascinated by noise music," contemporary art fans, Little Theatre-goers, and some filmmakers.[57] As the report described, attendees repeatedly "escaped" from the venue due to the deafening noise of some of the presentations but "returned when the next performance began."[58]

Audience members at Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival, former Banquio Brewery of Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corporation, September 1995. Courtesy of Lin Chi-wei.

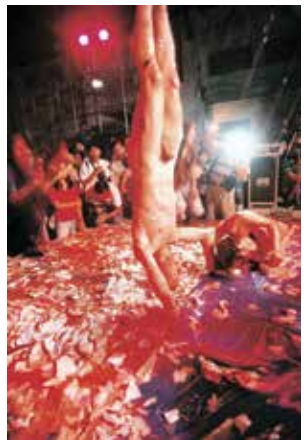
Although TIPAF became more official, it provoked even more controversy than its predecessor. On its second day, "a series of accidents occurred" between artists and attendees during the performances, including physical fights, arson, and offensive behaviour. According to Teng Chih-lan's report, "firstly, an audience member was angry with a photographer who had shot him too many times, so he grabbed the photographer's Leica camera and smashed it on the ground. Some of the crowd were terrified, while others were exhilarated."[59] Subsequently, performers Moslar insulted the audience by shouting "are you all dead?" as they ran into the crowd, but the "audience did not become angry but clapped their hands instead as they regarded this as part of the alternative performance."[60] During the performance of the UK-based one-man noise act, Con-Dom, the performer Mike Dando randomly assaulted audience members by touching their bodies. One female spectator eventually fought against his behaviour after Dando's sexual assault on her.[61] He was not the only performer who attempted to stimulate an audience's response through an aggressive attitude. A similar approach was also adopted by the LTK Commune and Z.S.L.O.

Con-Dom, the one-man industrial noise band of Mike Dando, performing at Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival, September 1995. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

With noise rock playing as background, the LTK Commune's performance, titled *Hydrocephalus Patient Little A Zhi and the Rise and Fall of the Revolution of the Third World*, involved a hospital bed, a female mannequin with her stomach being cut open, a young man tied with a dog chain as "Little A Zhi", and a "doctor" masturbating with a Taiwanese glove puppet. Following the disturbing scene when the "doctor" injected yoghurt into Little A Zhi's rectum, the performance ended with all the props being smashed and thrown onto the hospital bed before a fire was built and everything burned.[62] During the performance, the band members rushed

Z.S.L.O's performance at Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival, September 1995. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

into the crowd after having given themselves an enema on the stage, where they "randomly kissed female audience members."[63]



A scene from Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival, 1995. Courtesy of Lin Chi-wei.

Z.S.L.O. provoked the audience in another way, when band member Liu Hsing-i, disguised as a woman, was dragged by another member from the ground to a sickbed. Putrescent rotting food was later spread on his body before it was unexpectedly splashed onto audience members. "Disgusting smell which was soon present everywhere and which made attendees escape from the venue."[64] This incident also caused damage to some of the equipment on the stage, which belonged to the next performing group, C.C.C.C. As a consequence, C.C.C.C. protested by cancelling their upcoming performance.

Chiang Shih-fang, "Broken Life Art Festival Goes Insane, Noise Pushes Audience Out," *China Times*, September 10, 1995.

The chaotic atmosphere was not confined to the area around the stage. In a corner of the factory, a television set was hung in the air where people were allowed to destroy it by throwing stones.[65] Knowing that the venue would be demolished after the festival, some audience members also tried to destroy the facilities and structure of the building during the event. Due to the anarchic state of the festival, Wu Chung-wei and his fellow artists received several warnings from the police and the festival sponsor, TCCC. A few days later, the festival received a sensational write up in a newspaper, with the phrase "challenging the extremely disgusting" in the article's title.[66]

These unexpected events caused the cooperative relationship between the artists and TCCC to collapse at the end of the festival. After that, the coterie

of Wu Chung-wei and his friends largely dissolved. The former Taipei Broken Life Festival was never held again. Wu Chung-wei subsequently moved to a rural township of Taoyuan and squatted in an abandoned factory to generate his new project, Guishan Factory (*Guishan Gong Chang*). Although the project was based on similar thoughts of establishing a commune-like circle, as in his previous practices, it never received as much media attention as the Taipei Broken Life series.

### Bottom-up Strategy

Retrospectively, the 2nd Taipei Broken Life Festival was largely seen as the climax of Taiwan's alternative culture in the 1990s. The media sensation meant that the radical performance that merged forms of Noise and Little Theatre received unprecedented and considerable attention from the mainstream cultural realm. Nevertheless, it also marked an end to the noteworthy engagement between Wu Chung-wei and the local Taipei County Government.


Wu Chung-wei, 1999. Photo: Yao Jui-chung.

Wu Chung-wei's maximalist paintings and his "marginal" background were regarded by Lien Teh-chang as symbolizing the very spirit of the reformation of the 6th TCFAE, which was imprinted with ideas of pluralism and institutional critique. However, it has not yet been properly explained why this local cultural bureaucracy directed such a considerable level of interest at Wu Chung-wei and the later projects of other Sickly Sweet artists. Furthermore, what were the institutional conditions that supported the TCCC's incorporation with the alternative cultural realms during this particular period?

To answer these questions, it should first be explained that the political backdrop of TCCC was significant. In the first half of the 1990s, Taipei County was one of the six counties led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The party was the first political party in opposition to the dominant KMT in Taiwan after the lifting of martial law in 1987. The governance of the DPP is believed to have been a significant factor in the incorporation of alternative culture.

In an interview, the TCCC's organizer, Chien Ming-hui, mentioned how the idea of reforming a local fine arts exhibition could more readily receive support from the opposition party, because "the attitude of the party tends to encourage the breaking of conventions, getting rid of political ideological hegemony and adopting the principles of fair distribution."[67] As Lin Chi-wei noted in a 2005 interview: "It was the period that the DPP-led government was testing different possibilities [of their cultural policies] . . . It could be a triumph for the party if they supported those artists who would not be supported by the KMT at all."[68]

This cultural policy simultaneously related to the DPP's previous position, which had been rooted in the *tangwai*, or the "outside-the-KMT" movement of the martial law era,[69] while simultaneously allowing the Taipei County government to create its own cultural image, which was different to and more lenient than that of the KMT, and which, therefore, received more support from the younger generation. Within the fine arts system, this cultural policy specifically echoed both the geographical and cultural environment of the county.

Taipei County consists of several cities and towns that encircle Taipei City, the capital of Taiwan. Taipei City, as a special municipality is not administered by the county government but by the central government, which had long been led by the KMT until 1994 when the first public election for the mayor was held. As an administrative region, which is full of the suburban and satellite cities of a metropolis, Taipei County has an even higher population density, worse environmental pollution, and a more vigorous traditional folklore culture than Taipei City. This urban landscape motivated TCCC to develop their cultural policy in the first half of the 1990s. Its efforts were clearly represented in the festivals, exhibitions, and annual art competitions they organized. There were two significant features revealed in these events: on the one hand, the integration between folklore culture and unconventional art forms, such as Little Theatre, body art, and installation art was encouraged; on the other hand, the themes of refuse and environmental art had been specifically targeted and repeatedly adopted.

In 1992, TCCC launched an exhibition series, *Modern Art Joint Exhibition*, and began to provide spaces for young artists who belonged to the two alternative spaces, IT Park and Apartment No. 2, and the modern painting group, Taipei Art Group (*Taipei huapai*), to display their works. Retrospectively, this exhibition series can be considered a first step for the Centre to include those artists who had been active in the alternative spaces outside of academia, and a rehearsal for the subsequent reformations of TCFAE.

The first exhibition of the series, *Sixteen Ways of Disposing of Waste* (1992), was a response to the modern industrial society via the idea of refuse and readymades. However, this strategy was not realized as a large-scale event until the 6th TCFAE when, as pointed out earlier, the curatorial exhibition of environmental art was added to this art competition. Through the newly introduced thematic exhibitions and curator-critics, the idea of environmental art was highly focused and then formed a discourse, which placed its emphasis on locality and indigeneity in art. Again, this discourse was geographically connected to the basin of the Danshui River, which defines the eastern boundary of Taipei County (recent New Taipei City) and Taipei City, as it was twice chosen as the site for outdoor art projects in the 6th and the 7th TCFAE.

Environmental art, as a Western art movement, emerged around the late 1960s and 1970s, and was imprinted with a strong sense of realism in the above context, as Ni Tsai-chin suggested in the 6th TCFAE. His interpretation

of environmental art around that time was somehow hostile to the formalist approach of modern art, or, more specifically, the trend of minimalist art that had been regarded as avant-garde in Taiwan since the early 1980s.[70]

After the 7th TCFAE, TCCC organized the New Formosa Arts Festival in September 1995, which was motivated by similar environmental concerns and, again, used the theme of refuse to imprint the festival with a realist tone. Around that time, Chien Ming-hui, the main organizer of the New Formosa Arts Festival, who had also played a key role in bringing reformation to the TCFAE, published an article in *Culture News* (*Wenhua Tongxun*) to illustrate his idea. Chien Ming-hui asks the question "when can sophisticated visual experience exist in our daily life?." He suggests a bottom-up strategy. Believing that cultural policies should be shaped by people's everyday lives, he was fascinated by the idea of adopting artistic approaches to interpret the theme of refuse, especially that of industrial waste, and this eventually led to him using it as the subject matter of the New Formosa Arts Festival.[71] By inviting artists to use everyday objects to make works and encouraging viewer participation, Chien Ming-hui argued that people were able to both "rethink the negative effects of industrialized and urbanized life," and "reduce the feeling of distance and alienation when facing art." By doing so, "this kind of alternative art practice might be able to infiltrate people's life."[72] Eventually, the theme of refuse and audience participation were adopted as two main features of the New Formosa Festival.

The realist ideas promoted by TCCC during this period recall the shift in the cultural policy of Taiwan's local governments throughout the 1980s. Based on the idea of enriching people's cultural lives, in 1978 the cabinet-level cultural bureaucracy of Taiwan, the Council for Cultural Affairs, instructed every county and city-level local government to found their own culture centres, and all were subsequently established during the period from 1981 to 1986. Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwanese cultural identity gradually shifted from Chinese nationalism to Taiwanese autonomy. The latter emphasized the historical and geographical existence of the island, in the place of Chinese nationalism, which was haunted by the anti-communist ideology of the Cold War era. Paralleling this shift, from 1987, local governments had been required by the Council for Cultural Affairs to focus on promoting the distinctive features of their own local cultures. The way TCCC formed its realist and environmental aesthetics from the early 1990s reflects the above-mentioned official cultural politics.

## Conclusion

Since 1989, the DPP-led Taipei County government showed a strong inclination to collaborate with young artists and cultural workers who were working outside of the official or mainstream cultural realm. By organizing "alternative" art festivals, sponsoring underground cultural events, and promoting unconventional artworks and art amateurs, TCCC established its own cultural policies with an approach that was different to many other counties. These cultural policies, on the one hand, encouraged the integration between folklore culture and unconventional art forms; on the

other hand, they promoted the themes of refuse and environmental art.

Nevertheless, it is true that the central government-led Taipei City provided similar stages for unconventional artworks much earlier, since the first public modern art museum, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, was established in 1983. The Taipei County government, however, had more specifically focused on those practices that merged progressive art forms with folk culture, socio-political issues, and indigenous content.

Although the theme of refuse and its connotations formed TCCC's realist aesthetics, it was the strategy of embracing the symbols of alternative culture and non-mainstream artistic practices which allowed the Centre to alter its realist aesthetics into militant cultural politics. As shown in the historical trail of Wu Chung-wei's institutional engagements with TCCC, it was this cultural politics that supported the TCCC's interest in, and subsequent sponsorship of, the dynamic underground cultural scenes driven by the coterie of Sickly Sweet between 1993 and 1995.

Notes

1. Wang Hsiang-yun and Cheng Hsiu-chuan, "Nothing Personal: The Dilemma Between Responsibility System and Equality—Interview with the Participants of Exhibition of Rejects [*Duishi buduiren—Zerenzhi yu gongpingxing de liangnan—Fang "beixian meizhan luoxuanzhan" cenzhanren Lin Chih-feng, Hung Tung-lu, Peng Hung-chih, Yao Jui-chung*]," *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly* no. 279 (June 1994), 34–37.
2. The first edition of the Taiwan Provincial Fine Arts Exhibition had only three categories—Chinese Painting, Western Painting, and Sculpture. Other categories, such as Calligraphy, Photography, Print, Design, Glue Colour Painting, Seal Cutting, and a few others were added for different editions of the exhibition since 1967.
3. Lee Shien-wen and Wang Hsiang-yun, "Liu Feng-sung Discusses the Ideas of Taipei County Culture Centre [*Liu Feng-sung tan Taipei xianli wenhua zhongxin de gongzuo linian*]," *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*, no. 279 (June 1994), 16.
4. Wang Hsiang-yun and Cheng Hsiu-chuan, "Interview with Lien Teh-cheng and Ni Tsai-chin, the Responsibility Judges of Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition," *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*, no. 279 (June 1994), 30–33.
5. Wu Ma-li, "Everybody Do the Same Thing, I'd Make Something Different—Interview with Chieh Ming-hui [*Dajia dou zuo tongyang de dongxi, wo lai zuodian butongde—fang Chieh Ming-hui*]," *Artist* no. 253 (January 1996), 236–45.
6. This was evident in the Modern Painting Movement during the late 1950s and the late 1960s, which was led by two abstract painting groups, Fifth Moon (*Wuyue*) and Dongfong (Eastern), and the later "complex art" (*fuhe yishu*), which emerged in the late 1960s.
7. Wang Hsiang-yun and Cheng Hsiu-chuan, "Nothing Personal: The Dilemma Between Responsibility System and Equality—Interview with the Participants of Exhibition of Rejects," 34–37.
8. Wang Hsiang-yun and Cheng Hsiu-chuan, "Interview with Lien Teh-cheng and Ni Tsai-chin, the Responsibility Judges of Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition," 30.
9. Wang Hsiang-yun and Cheng Hsiu-chuan, "Nothing Personal: The Dilemma Between Responsibility System and Equality—Interview with the Participants of Exhibition of Rejects."
10. Lien Teh-chang, "He/She—1994 Taipei County Fine Art Exhibition [*Ta/ta 1994 Taipei xian meizhan*]," in *The Art Exhibition of Taipei County, 1994 [General Group]* (Banciao: Taipei County Culture Centre, 1994), 9–17.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Coloured with a sense of pluralism and institutional critique, the criteria adopted by Lien Teh-cheng for the General Group of the 6th TCFAE recalls his background and his engagement with alternative art spaces from the late 1980s onward. Lien Teh-cheng is a Taiwanese artist who received his MFA degree from the University of North Carolina in the U.S. in 1985, and who was influenced mainly by conceptual art in the post-war era. Following his return to Taiwan in the mid-1980s, Lien Teh-cheng became one of the founding members of the artist-run Apartment No. 2, which opened in 1989, and he soon became deeply involved in the nascent scene of alternative spaces. In April 1990, along with the artists Lee Ming-sheng, Hou Chun-ming, Wu Ma-li and others, Lien Teh-cheng founded the group Taiwan Documenta.

18. Lien Teh-chang, "He/She—1994 Taipei County Fine Art Exhibition," *The Art Exhibition of Taipei County, 1994 [General Group]* (Banciao: Taipei County Culture Centre, 1994), 9–17.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Chou Mei-hui, "Alternative Art, Fantastic Dreams: Wu Chung-wei Leaps to a Brand New Broken World [*Linglei yishu, qihuan zhi meng—Wu Chung-wei kuaru po-lan xin shijie*]," *United Daily News*, August 9, 1995; Chiang Shih-feng, "Taipei Breaking Sky Festival !? [*Taipei kong zhong polie jie*!?]," *Commercial Times*, April 29, 1995; Lin Chi-wei, "Underground Noise of Taiwan—The Student Movement Counterculture 1990–2000 [*Taiwan dixia zaoyin—Xueyun fan wenhua zhi sheng*]," *ACT* (*Art Critique of Taiwan*), no. 49 (January 2012), 50–63.

23. Chou Mei-hui, "Alternative Art, Fantastic Dreams: Wu Chung-wei Leaps to a Brand New Broken World."

24. The venue was similar to a giant assemblage. As the Sickly Sweet's programmer, Lin Chi-wei, recalls, any existing interior elements were continuously altered or obliterated by future additions, something similar to Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau, a space that constantly grew and changed in form. See Lin Chi-wei, "Underground Noise of Taiwan—The Student Movement Counterculture 1990–2000 [*Taiwan dixia zaoyin – Xueyun fan wenhua zhi sheng*]," *ACT* (*Art Critique of Taiwan*) no. 49 (January 2012), 50–63.

25. Huang Yung-chih, "1994: A Professional Audience's View [*Zhiye guanzhong kan yijiujiusi*]," *United Daily News*, December 31, 1994.

26. The emergence of Sickly Sweet, or the "noise culture," could relate to the rise of a relatively wealthy young generation in Taiwan after the lifting of martial law. The latter has been described by Huang Sun-chuan as "a generation of well-to-do youth." He argues, "In fact, they were the first generation in Taiwanese history to be unencumbered by the anxieties of work and putting food on the table. A prosperous economy and a gradually open-minded politics safeguarded the vibrancy of culture, which came to encompass people in rock and roll, small theater productions, women film festivals, or people beginning to make creative commercials." See Huang Sun-chuan, and Billy Tang, Connie Kang, trans., "If Noise Ever Was, It Was Far from Revolt," *Leap* no. 16 (n.d.).

27. Wang Mo-lin, "Wu Chung-wei, A Role in the Landscape of Theatre," *China Times*, December 17, 1994.

28. Founded by Chen Mei-mao (Chen A-mao) and Yang Chang-yen, Taiwan Walker Theatre was active in the Little Theatre scene during the mid-1990s and known for its "gaudy, variegated, rough, and bawdry style," as described by the media at that time. See Chiang Shih-fang, "A New York Style Exploration of Weekend Nights—Little Theatre's 'Fourth Class Super Stars' Challenge Taipei [*Niuyue shi tan xian zhou mo ye—xiao juchang "siliu juxing" tiaozhan Taipei*]," *Commercial Times*, May 6, 1995, 25.

29. Wu Chung-wei, draft for "Taipei Broken Life Festival," unpublished, 1994.

30. Lu Chien-ying, "Taipei Broken Life Festival, Staging on the Riverside Park Nearby Yong Fu Bridge [*Taipei po-lan shenghuo jie yongfuqiao pan hebin gongyuan dengchang*]," *China Times*, August 25, 1994.

31. Pink Labyrinth was a performance-duo formed by Tan Tang-mo and Chi Ta-wei. The two played significant roles in the emerging queer culture in Taiwan during the early 1990s. Tan Tang-mo and Chi Ta-wei were the guest editors and one of the contributors, respectively, for the special feature of Queer in *Isle Margin* in January 1994. Tan Tang-mo was also one of the founding members of AV Club in the NTU, from where the LTK Commune was derived.

32. An article published in *China Times* describes the way in which Wu found and repaired a generator for electric power, stole wires and bamboo poles from construction sites to build stages, and took public chairs from parks for the audience seating. See Chiang Shih-feng, "Taipei Broken Life Made a Splendid Taipei [*Taipei yin "po-lan" er canlan*]," *China Times*, September 24, 1994.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. One of the examples, *Noise*, was published by the artist Wang Fu-jui and Gwen Anes Kuo in 1993 as the first "noise zine" in Taiwan. The editorial work allowed them to establish connections with the international noise and experimental music scene. In the first edition of Taipei Broken Life Festival, most of the foreign artists invited were based on the connections established by *Noise* previously.

36. See the special feature "Dionysus Never Dies Only Being Filthier [*Jiushen busi, zhishi zhujian cubi*]," *Lihpo Daily* September 11, 1994.

37. Chiang Shih-feng, "Taipei Broken Life Made a Splendid Taipei."

38. Editorials, "1994 Annual Reviews of Culture: Theatre—Made in Taiwan Exported Successfully, 'Alternative Performances' Boom in Taipei [*1994 Wenhua huigu: juchang—Taiwan zhi, xiju waixiao chenggong, "linglei biaoyan" Taipei ge jiao luo yong meng "cuan chu"*]," *China Times*, December 29, 1994.

39. One of the famous early examples was the site-specific performance *Anti-Nuclear Report of Orchid Island* (*Lanyu fanhe baogaoju*), which was primarily organised by Wang Mo-lin and launched on Orchid Island in February 1988.

40. Wang Mo-lin, "Wu Chung-wei, a Role in the Landscape of Theatre' [*Wu Chung-wei zi cheng juchang hao fengjing*]," *China Times*, December 17, 1994, 43.

41. Ibid.

42. Wang Mo-lin, "Little Theatre Moves Out from Fringe [*Xiao juchang zi bianyuan chuzou*]," *China Times*, December 31, 1994, 44.

43. Ibid.

44. Quoted from the text on one of Wu Chung-wei's unpublished drawings made for the Taipei Breaking Sky Festival in 1995, from the collection of Yao-Jui-chung.

45. Wu Chung-wei, "Taipei Breaking Sky Festival (proposal)," in *1995 Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition* (Banciao: Taipei County Culture Centre, 1995), 137.

46. Ibid., 135–47.

47. Tseng Hsiao-yu, "A Man of the Crack Generation [*Polie yi dai nan*]," *Lihpao Daily*, May 1995.

48. Chiang Shih-feng, "Taipei Breaking Sky Festival!? [*Taipei kongzhong polie jie!?*]," *Commercial Times*, April 29, 1995.

49. Wu Chung-wei, "Proposal for Taipei Breaking Sky Festival: The 7th Taipei County Fine Arts Exhibition (Banciao: Taipei County Culture Centre, 1995), 135–47.

50. Lin Chi-wei, "Underground Noise of Taiwan—The Student Movement Counterculture 1990–2000."

51. Ibid.

52. Jeph Lo, "The Taiwanese Sound Liberation Moment," in *The Heard & the Unheard: Soundscape Taiwan*, ed. Wu Ruizhen, Liao Chun-ling, and Amy Cheng (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2011), 74–78.

53. Liu Feng-sung, "Cong Gui Dao Dao Ren Dao Shen Mi Bin Fen de Mín Su Zhi Mei," *Liberal Times*, August 10, 1995.

54. Wu Ma-li, "Let the Junk Being Creative! [*Laidian you chuangyi de lese ba*!]," *China Times*, September 4, 1995.

55. Ibid.

56. The film has never been broadcast publicly on Taiwanese television due to its provocative content and violent scenes, but it was shown at the Taipei Biennial in 1996, accompanied by photographs and documents relating to the festival. See Alice B. H. Lin, ed., *1996 Taipei Biennial: The Quest for Identity*, 2 vols. (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1996).

57. Chiang Shih-fang, "Broken Life Art Festival Goes Insane, Noise Pushes Audience Out [*Po-lan jie yishu ji ji feng you kuang, yipopo guanzhong bei hongchuqu*]," *China Times*, September 10, 1995.

58. Ibid.

59. Teng Chih-lan, "Broken Art Festival: Ended Peacefully in an Anarchical Condition [*Po-lan yishu jie—Wuzhengfu zhuangtai zhong pingjing luomu*]," *China Times*, September 11, 1995.

60. Chiang Shih-fang, "Broken Life Art Festival, Challenging the Extremely Disgusting [*Po-lan yishu jie, tiaozhan exin jixian*]," *China Times*, September 12, 1995. The subheadings include "Rebellious Taiwanese acts wreck the Festival?," "Insult the audience 'dead people', splash slops, forcedly kiss female audience members, smash photographer's camera."

61. The scene was documented in Huang Ming-chuan's 1995 documentary, *Post-Industrial Demolition 1995*.

62. Mao Ya-fen, "L.T.K. Commune in Context: A Critical Re-Evaluation." M.A. thesis, National Central University, 2007, 35.

63. Teng Chih-lan, "Broken Art Festival: Ended Peacefully in an Anarchical Condition," 1995.

64. Ibid.

65. Lin Chi-wei, "Underground Noise of Taiwan—The Student Movement Counterculture 1990–2000 [*Taiwan dixia zaoyin - Xueyun fan wenhua zhi sheng*]," *ACT* (*Art Critique of Taiwan*) no. 49 (January 2012), 50–63.

66. Chiang Shih-fang, "Broken Life Art Festival, Challenging the Extremely Disgusting," 1995.

67. Wu Ma-li, "Everybody Do the Same Thing, I'd Make Something Different," interview with Chieh Ming-hui, 1996.

68. Yu Wei, "Lin Chi-wei Interview—Intellectuals and a Group of Fearless Punks: Punk Culture and Student Movement's Counterculture in Taiwan," *Artco* no. 156 (September 2005), 94–95.

69. In September 1986, the previous *tangwai* opposition groups announced the formal organization of the DPP while it remained illegal under martial law at that time. However, the KMT government did not take formal action against the new party. According to A. C. Hsiau, "[t]he tolerance toward the DPP heralded a series of political reforms conducted in the following year by the KMT in response to the opposition's challenges. These reforms resulted in an environmental more favorable to political competition than before." See A. C. Hsiau, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 102.

70. Ni Tsai-chin, "Stride Forward a World Where Sky Is the Limit [*Maixiang wuxian kuanguang de shijie*]," *Artist* no. 229 (June 1994), 360–64.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

Qiu Zhijie

# Keynote Address: An Exhibition History of Contemporary Art in China in the 1990s

Qiu Zhijie, *Map of the Theater of the World*, 2017, ink on paper mounted to silk, six panels, 240 x 720 cm overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift of the artist with additional funds contributed by the International Director's Council, 2017.

I am honoured to speak here in the presence of Biljana Ciric and Larys Frogier, and at the invitation of my old friend, the Rockbund Art Museum. In 2012, when I served as Chief Curator for the Shanghai Biennale, I developed a city pavilion project in collaboration with the Rockbund Group, in a space that was a vacant shopping mall, as well as a scale model of Huqiu Road, near the Rockbund Art Museum, and its surrounding architecture. I was attempting to use my curatorial role to develop a different sort of platform. Today, four editions of the Biennale later, that dream seems to have crumbled, as has my vision for the idea of *Post-Sense Sensibility.* This makes me all the more happy to have the opportunity to share my work with you today. I must say I'm a lousy curator, though a decent artist, so it is my career as an artist that has supported my curatorial ambitions. During my recent six-week course for graduate and Ph.D. students, I said to them: if you are all like me, losing money on every curatorial project, curation as a profession will eventually disappear! I would like to use my failure to encourage them to become artists or curators, or both.

The image I'm presenting here is from *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, a retrospective exhibition held at the Guggenheim, New York, in 2018. I had been commissioned to contribute a map of contemporary Chinese art, which, I realized, gave me a great deal of power. The exhibition had its own agenda—it aimed to downplay certain practices while highlighting others. It excluded what I call the "Big Face" school, exemplified by Political Pop and Cynical Realism, from the realm of contemporary art, and highlighted conceptual practices from Hangzhou, including my own. I interpreted the message of the curators as: while some painters were riding the market rollercoaster, there were other artists in Shanghai and Hangzhou who were devoting themselves to artistic experimentation on the periphery,

which ultimately had a more lasting impact on ensuing developments in contemporary Chinese art.

Here, on my map, we can see a main river; above the river is Chinese politics, from the implementation of the Open Door Policy to the Three Represents; below is the progress of globalization, from Sino-US diplomatic relations to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City. Chinese artistic practices occur between these two mountain ranges, on this landmass between globalization and the development of Chinese politics. And this region is what my talk today will focus on. Here we have the history of modern Chinese art, close to the '85 New Wave Movement, and there is a spate of dams and reservoirs around them. This is the overall configuration. This map also encompasses curatorial practices in China and the rest of Asia during the 1990s, which is the focus of our conference today. I want to share this with everyone and highlight one thing in particular: Chinese curatorial practices do not merely belong to China, any more than Asian curatorial practices can be relegated solely to internal discussions in Asia. Rather, both China and Asia must be subjected to continuous repositioning within a global framework. Many such practices in China, carried out by curators like Biljana Ciric, have contributed immensely to this process of redefining Chinese art.


Qiu Zhijie, *Map of the Theater of the World* (detail), 2017, ink on paper mounted to silk, six panels, 240 x 720 cm overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift of the artist with additional funds contributed by the International Director's Council, 2017.

To me, the 1990s—sandwiched between the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the launch of the Global War on Terrorism that followed the 9/11 attacks—was a fleeting, disoriented decade of chaos. The Chinese art world witnessed the emergence of the grand narrative of globalization, which also ushered in concurrent waves of regional anxieties. We can see that artists from different geographical localities, be they Guangdong, Shanghai, or the southwest, all developed distinct ideological and expressive registers. Nonetheless, everyone was heartened by the fantasies of globalization. The 1990s saw the rise of a sense of mutual respect, evident in the general absence of hostility between pre-'85 artists and the new generation—however, there was also a widening gap between the rich and the poor

among Chinese artists. I was not from the north or the south, neither rich nor poor, somewhere between a painter and a media artist, but I personally experienced the remarkable rise of economic inequality in the art world. Radical and reactionary politics were both on the rise, together with emergent forces of capital.


Qiu Zhijie, *Map of the Theater of the World* (detail), 2017, ink on paper mounted to silk, six panels, 240 x 720 cm overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift of the artist with additional funds contributed by the International Director's Council, 2017.

Back then, the now prevailing new media reform had yet to erupt. While working on this presentation, I took some time to reflect on the past few decades. I would like to proceed via a mind map, and limit the scope of my presentation to certain events that took place in the past forty years, since 1978. The nodes marked in yellow represent social movements, and by clicking on them you will find more detailed observation of social practices. After 1978 we entered a period of collective reflection on the Cultural Revolution, followed by the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983. Then came the '85 New Wave Movement, the outburst of the intellectual maneuvers of the art community of the past seven years, which led to a brief period of reflection on the New Wave Movement. Both 1988 and 1989 were remarkably eventful. Aside from the Tian'anmen Square Protests, 1989 witnessed the abrupt opening up of art academies. While most scholars, curators, and researchers tend to overlook this movement, I find it extremely significant from a contemporary vantage point, for it sowed the seeds of contemporary art education. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping made his famous South China tour. Aside from the various post-'89 manifestations of Political Pop, two events are worth noting, one being the rise of the "Foreign Legion"—more than half the overseas Chinese artists that rose to prominence during this period were recent migrants who had also been involved in the '85 movement. Then, between 1994 and 1996, following the media reform, a new generation of artists emerged—these, unlike the '85 generation, dedicated themselves to video, photography, and performance. After 1997, there was a movement of independent curating, and independent art spaces mushroomed across China. In 2001, the year of China's successful Olympic bid and the 9/11 attacks, a sudden turn arose: the government began to support contemporary art and the infrastructural

growth of art education. This allowed scattered independent art spaces to develop into art districts. This policy change brought with it the first wave of local, state-owned art museums, private art museums, and biennials. Shanghai's exuberant private museum scene today should be seen as the second, if not the third generation of this. The earliest private museums include the Upriver Gallery, Chengdu, and Taikang Space, Beijing. The next major event was the financial crisis of 2008. Despite the difficulty of adequately parsing such recent history, we must nonetheless attempt to articulate it. Looking back, the 1990s was marked by an incipient historical awareness, an impulse to quickly locate one's own history. The case is decidedly different today, when one can hardly find anyone writing about events from the last decade. In the following section, I will discuss rural construction and social intervention, the influence of several artists, the rise of Ai Weiwei and the political division of the Chinese art world, as well as class rigidity and the impasse of artists today.

In my classes, I often talk about Chinese artists in generational terms, and by now there have been seven: first was the group from the period of reflection on the Cultural Revolution; next, there was the '85 New Wave generation; the '90s generation; the post-'89 generation; the ones devoted to installation, photography, video, and performance after media reform; the post-'99 generation, especially those involved with the series of *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibitions and the *Art for Sale* exhibition—and, then, after 2005, the latest bunch involved with the 798 Art District in Beijing and M50 in Shanghai. The *Post-Sense Sensibility* artists wanted to do something outrageous to seize visibility. A few years later, when galleries began to emerge, the artists involved were no longer interested in shock as an artistic strategy; instead, they opted for working closely with the galleries for self-promotion. That's why I call them the 798 Generation, or the Gallery Generation. Students in Chinese art academies today are all part of this generation. The main difference between us and them is that the latest generation studied contemporary art, in China or abroad, and half of them came from families of artists, while we received a traditional Chinese education and graduated from either classical painting departments or oil painting departments. This class division in the contemporary art world will raise a host of problems.

I was one of the youngest of the pre-798 Generation. After graduating from college and witnessing reform in the use of new media, I became a curator of video art, which was then something like the spearhead of the *Post-Sense Sensibility* movement. Therefore, my analysis is foregrounded in my personal involvement in these events. Before going into specific cases, I would like to briefly mention the emergence of the global arena around 1992. To be clear, the 1980s also saw a number of foreigners actively involved in the contemporary Chinese art circle. These included American art historian Joan Lebold Cohen, who wrote a seminal work on Chinese painting; then there was Andreas Schmid, who started out studying language in Beijing in the early 1980s before pursuing calligraphy at what was then the Zhejiang Academy of Art (now China Academy of Art).


Qiu Zhijie, *Map of the Theater of the World* (detail), 2017, ink on paper mounted to silk, six panels, 240 x 720 cm overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift of the artist with additional funds contributed by the International Director's Council, 2017.

There was also the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*, curated by Chang Tsong-zung and mounted at Hong Kong's City Hall. The year 1989 is regularly invoked to signify the phenomena of that generation, though many details have been left out; for instance, as a movement that took off after 1989, Political Pop is now completely discounted. Installation and other forms of art were often overlooked due to the immense popularity of Political Pop and Cynical Realism at the time. Chang Tsong-zung coined the phrase "longing and abuse" as a way to discuss the work of Zhang Xiaogang and Zhang Peili, but that too has been tossed aside. Some wanted to lead history that way, but did not succeed. Then there was *Passaggio a Oriente* (*Passage to the Orient*), a presentation of sixteen Chinese artists at the 1993 Venice Biennale that marked the Chinese debut in the history of the Biennale; the presentation, however, was largely dedicated to post-'89 Political Pop and Cynical Realism. *Magiciens de la Terre* was another seminal exhibition from that period, for it successfully popularized multiculturalism as a curatorial approach on a global scale. Invited by curator Jean-Hubert Martin to be part of the exhibition's first iteration, Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang finally stood before the Centre Pompidou, a museum they had long admired. Many artists from this generation ended up moving abroad, giving rise to the alleged "Foreign Legion" of contemporary Chinese artists, whose most notable members include Xu Bing (New York), as well as Huang Yongping and Yang Jiechang (Paris). In 1994, Chang Tsong-zung took Zhang Xiaogang to the the São Paulo Biennial, where he won the Bronze Prize. I have put the aforementioned exhibitions in the Post-'89 section of the map. The Tian'anmen incident here is illustrated here as a water dam, next to Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong Red Grid No.2 (1988)*. Here we have a highland named "Academic New Waves," referring to Hangzhou conceptualism. Then there's a series of exhibitions, for example, the New Generation Art exhibition, which was held in Beijing in 1991. The New Generation referred to the likes of Shu Xinping, Song Yonghong, Wang Huaxiang and Liu Xiaodong, artists who had attended school with Fang Lijun and Liu Wei but ended up staying in the Academy. Others, after graduation, became part of the Hooligan

movement *(Popi)*, the Cynical Realists. Both groups studied sketching together, were great at realist painting, and were equally impassioned; the only difference was whether they stayed in the Academy or not. After 1985, art academies entered a period of self-adjustment in order to prove they too had a place in contemporary art. This led to the exhibition of *Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing, also the exhibition *China Expressionism*. Yang Jinsong curated the second iteration of the New Generation Art series. These people were the forerunners of contemporary art education in Chinese academies. I believe we must give more weight to this series of events, for while they may have seemed rather conventional at the time, they helped build momentum for the events to come.

Marching forward, here we encounter the ascent of multiculturalism. Regarding the cultural war following the end of the Cold War, two theoretical debates are worth noting: the problem of cultural identity and the issue of the evolution of new media. When it became clear that an international arena was rising above the horizon, critics in Shanghai began writing acerbic commentaries on overseas Chinese artists' tactic of referencing imposturous Chinese calligraphy, paper cutting, and the Four Great Inventions in their work. Initiated by the magazine *Gallery*, a series of discussions was organized about how Chinese contemporary art can connect to the global milieu. A plethora of viewpoints grew around this, most notably Lu Shengzhong's "Spring Roll" theory. While *Gallery* framed its debate around the ascension to the global arena, investigating the problem of cultural identity for Chinese artists who were exhibiting abroad, *Jiangsu Pictorial* turned to the problem of value, confronting the reform of new media head-on. As installation art, video, and photography emerged one after another; having no idea what to do, these artists resorted to group discussion. Between the media reform and the new global landscape, two other forces entered the picture, namely urbanization and the growth of the market.


Qiu Zhijie, *Map of the Theater of the World* (detail), 2017, ink on paper mounted to silk, six panels, 240 x 720 cm overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift of the artist with additional funds contributed by the International Director's Council, 2017.

In the mid 1990s, the Chinese art world witnessed a rapid convergence of its various parties. The art market was still in its infancy, though I have many

wonderful memories from that period, such as the story of the rock star-cum-dealer, Feng Jiangzhou, and the Swiss gallerist Lorenz Helbling renting a tiny passageway in the Portman Ritz Hotel in Shanghai to show paintings, marking the beginning of his remarkable career. This period also presaged the ensuing establishment of the gallery scene in Hong Kong. Later on, Wang Lin, a critic from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts (representing the Research Institute of Fine Arts at the Chinese National Academy of Art in Beijing), organized a touring exhibition of Chinese art research documents. He traveled with a hundred sheets of black cardboard with photos on top to Guangzhou, found a venue to exhibit them, and it was as though everyone across China went to see it. The first exhibition was in Xisanhuan, Beijing, and the second one was at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Upon the recommendation of Fan Di'an, my work, *Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* (1990–95), was shown in the latter exhibition. For the fourth stop, the exhibition toured to the library of East China Normal University, organized by Zhou Changjiang and Chen Xinmao. People from all over the country came to the conference. It was basically an exhibition of photography on black cardboard sheets, and several days of slideshow presentations. The Shanghai iteration ignited fierce debates. My argument with an older generation of critics got so heated that they banned me from making further comments. Following the debate, we each turned our argument into writing, which stirred further discussions. At the time, the infamous *Black Cover Book* was still named *Red Flag*. I was not a fan of how they were blatantly endorsing Political Pop, so I didn't participate in the first issue, though I did in the *Grey Cover Book* and the *White Cover Book*. At the time, Ai Weiwei had just returned to China from New York, and started working on the *Black Cover Book* with Xu Bing. The first issue was about performance art from the East Village, as well as installation and video artists. Around the same time, Geng Jianyi organized the postcard exhibition, *45 Degrees as a Reason*, which brought artists together to explore alternative exhibition formats. Geng Jianyi's approach influenced Song Dong to put forward the traveling exhibition *Wildlife*, which reflected his take on alternative exhibition spaces and alternative exhibition formats.

At the beginning of January, 1997, Song Dong and Geng Jianyi travelled from Hong Kong to Guangzhou to meet Zheng Guogu, then to Hangzhou to meet Yan Lei and me. Through this trip they established a network among artists associated with conceptual photography across the country. Then, we started editing magazines, which made conceptual photography part of the everyday discussion within the Chinese art world. In 1993, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin held the *China Avantgarde* exhibition, and has remained a close partner ever since. After Asia Art Archive was founded in 2000, it too became an important base for conceptual photographers. Then, in 2002, Vitamin Creative Space opened its door in Guangzhou. By the turn of the decade, the scene had become really exciting, from East Village artists to the magazine *New Photo Copy*, and the exhibition *Image and Phenomena: '96 Video Art Exhibition*. At the time, we had no budget for a catalogue for this exhibition, so I edited two volumes of art documents. Since I had access to information about

international video art, I invited graduate students at Peking University to help me with the translation. I also translated some of them myself. These two issues of *Blue Cover Book* were widely circulated. The first generation Chinese video artists all referred to them as text books.

Popular narratives of contemporary Chinese art often begin with the '85 New Wave Movement, through 1989, then move directly to the 1999 *Post-Sense Sensibility* and *Art for Sale* exhibitions, thus overlooking the period in between. The fact is, each of the nodes in this period culminated in a series of outstanding installations, photography works, and videos, and together they should be considered a powerful collective force. It helped to propagate several artistic scenes based around different media. For instance, with the growth of video art, Lin Tianmiao's brother Lin Tianmu (also a key figure within the scene) opened a bar called The Loft, which in a few years turned into the Loft New Media Art Space. Alternative spaces began to mushroom across the country, such as BizArt, Shanghai (1998), Upriver Club (*Shanghe Huiquan*), Kunming (2000) through the influence of Ye Yongqing, and Art Gas Station (*Yishu Jinyouzhan*), Beijing. These spaces were scattered around and art districts like Shanghai's M50 had yet to come into shape. In 2000, I curated an exhibition titled *Home*, at the International Furniture Exhibition Center, which marked the first art exhibition on Moganshan Road. None of us expected that the area would develop into the M50 of today. 1998 also saw the founding of Art Now Live Studio, Beijing, by a guy named Cai Qing. Artists and curators began to utilize all sorts of alternative spaces; Leng Lin, for instance, mounted the exhibition, *It's Me! A Profile of Chinese Contemporary Art*, at the Imperial Ancestral Temple (*Tai Miao*) in the Beijing Workers' Cultural Palace.

In other words, a progressive wave of curatorial efforts emerged. Some of the most exciting exhibitions, like *Art for Sale* and *Post-Sense Sensibility*, were in fact curated by different but intersecting groups of artists. People often questioned my dual role as a media artist and a curator. To explain my motives, which were two-fold, let us again return to the two theoretical debates of the 90s, namely the question of value and the problem of catching up to the international milieu. While art predominantly remained underground in China, some artists honed a strand of work that appealed to certain stereotypical impressions of China—we called this "embassy art." The paintings often featured images like a red guard standing in front of Tian'anmen Square with a can of Coca-Cola in hand, or the face of a migrant worker, or any of the three stereotypical impressions of China—China in red, traditional Chinese culture, and a post-Reform China under construction—and towers of cranes would work, too. There was no way the painting wouldn't sell. We wanted to break away from embassy art, correct such stereotypes, and engage the Chinese audience instead. So we had to find a way to bring art to the public. As to the question of value, it gradually became clear to me that we must promote a more sensual form of art. I chose video following a thought experiment: if Chinese art academies were to establish a department for contemporary art, there was no way they would promote performance or installation first. What

medium would it be? Probably new ink art. Or environmental art? This couldn't have been possible; back then, I had no clue about the intricate ties between environmental art and corporate and governmental interests. Then, I thought about technology-related art—at this point, science and technology were already regarded as the primary forces of production—and video was considered a technology. My first video art show, *Image and Phenomena* (1996), was very well received. I wanted to mount the show in either Hangzhou or Beijing because I wanted to leave a mark on at least one of the two most prestigious art academies in China. The fact that the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, was less politically charged was the primary reason for choosing it over Beijing. It turned out that Hangzhou locals really enjoyed the show. Xu Jiang, then Assistant to the President, did not allow us to stay in the campus hotel due to potential risks, so he put us in the hotel of the People's Armed Police, which offered better facilities and a lower price. He told me that we will be remembered in art history as the hosts of the first video art exhibition in China, and maybe that would enable the Academy to form a new video art department. Five years later, the Academy accepted the first graduate class of the new media department; in 2003, seven years after the exhibition, they accepted the first undergraduate classes in the new media department and the intermedia/experimental art department.

Crucially, the exhibition led to a feud between two groups of artists, one headed by Yang Fudong and Gao Shiming, and the other by Wang Gongxin and Zhang Peili. While the former preferred sensual videos with intricate narratives, the other group enjoyed making really non-traditional work, such as rather mundane videos arranged in rows, bearing the appearance of conceptual art. They simply despised narrative. Their intentions were fascinating, but eventually led to a rupture. It became clear to me that these were two different generations, with Yang Fudong and Gao Shiming leading the former, and the split grew increasingly apparent. The first exhibition held at Cai Qing's Art Now Live Studio was titled *Trace of Existence* (1998). Meanwhile, another exhibition called *Corruptionists* was mounted by the other group, in the basement of No.10 Beisanhuan Road in Beijing. In January 1998, on the site of *Trace of Existence*, a young man approached me and asked me to have a look at his work—this turned out to be Sun Yuan—and I did. So, the core team of *Post-Sense Sensibility* was established: it included my fellow schoolmates at what was then the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, including Yang Fudong, Liu Wei, and Jiang Zhi, together with some from Central Academy of Fine Arts such as Sun Yuan, Peng Yu and Zhu Yu, and a few from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, like Zheng Guogu. Later, Cai Qing invited me to curate a second exhibition at his space. So I introduced him to this group during a meeting at my place. A few weeks later, Cai Qing apologetically called me: he did not want to proceed after all, because he thought the group was too young. But we had already started working on the exhibition, and there was no way we were going to cancel at that point. So we found a basement and set up a show. This show, the first iteration of *Post-Sense Sensibility*, included works by twenty-one artists; it became a foundational event that raised a generation of artists to prominence. The subtitle, *Alien Bodies and Delusion*, anticipated

a break into the two titular groups. We, the "Delusion" group, gravitated towards examining the institution of exhibition-making, and began to experiment with theatre and performance, what I call the scene. The other group, "Alien Bodies," went on to participate in the radical exhibition *Infatuated with Injury*, curated by Li Xianting, marching forward—and ever more cruelly—with their experimentations with the body. This eventually led to *Fuck Off*, an exhibition deliberately timed to run concurrently with and in defiance of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. Ironically, in Beijing, this exhibition was reported to be a Satellite Exhibition of Shanghai Biennale, mistranslating the gesture of resistance into sensationalist headlines like "Cannibal Art Exhibited at Shanghai Biennale." As the Alien Bodies further explored their controversial strand of art, they became known as the "Five Poisons." Meanwhile, the Delusion group launched a series of exhibitions including *Next Wave News*, the first contemporary art exhibition in China to include VJ performance; *Retribution*, a curatorial experiment where each participating artist used the materials provided by five others to produce work; *Inside Story*; and *Fearful*, the opening performance of the 2004 Shanghai Biennale. We developed an exhibition format that combined performance, media installation and curatorial experimentation. Such efforts went well until 2005.

I have left something out: for a few years after the 1996 *Image and Phenomena* exhibition, I was employed by China Academy of Art as the organizational head of the Media Art department. This involved such miscellaneous tasks as liaising with international media festivals and distributing screening honorariums to artists. In 2002, I decided to leave the job to pursue ink wash painting, asking Li Zhenhua to fill my position. However, my experiences in the Media Art department were just as significant as my work with the *Post-Sense Sensibility* exhibitions and the cultural research work I did for the *Long March Project* in 2002. The reason the *Long March Project* appealed to me was, in the later stages of *Post-Sense Sensibility*, my thoughts were already gravitating toward curatorial experimentation. So my combined experiences with cultural research, curatorial experimentation, media art, and *Post-Sense Sensibility* became the foundation for my establishment of the Studio of Total Art at China Academy of Art, as well as my current education program at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which combines technological and socially-engaged art.

The above is a brief overview of artistic development in the 1990s. This presentation takes the *Post-Sense Sensibility* movement as a point of departure: it rose from a generational divide and theoretical engagement, emboldened by an ambition for theoretical construction, was severed by competition within the art system, and finally ended with the emergence of the art market. The movement gradually lost its initial momentum, eventually becoming complicit participants in the market. As a movement, *Post-Sense Sensibility* failed; but, fortunately, art managed to survive the recurrent trials and errors of the 1990s.

*Transcription and translation by Alvin Li*

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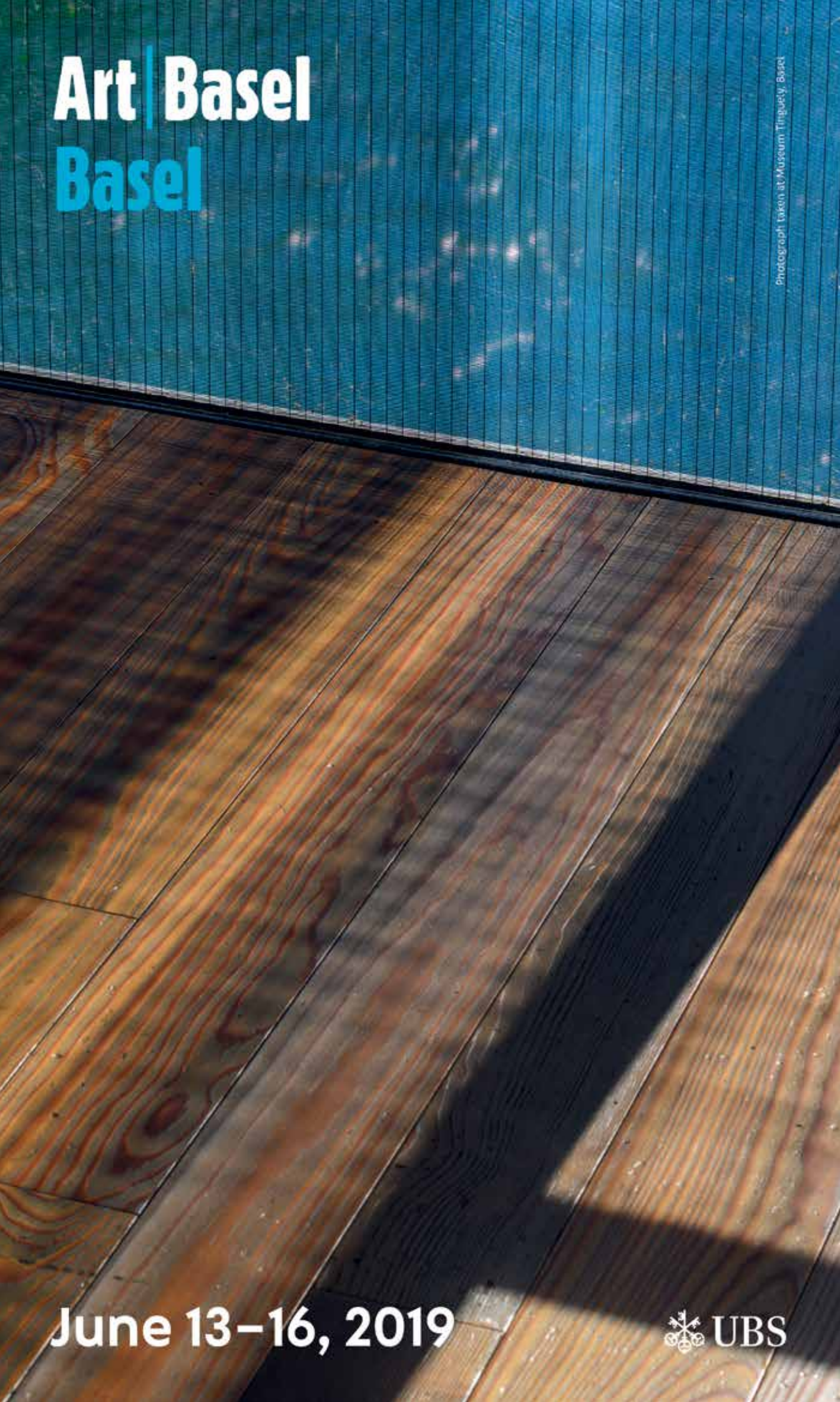

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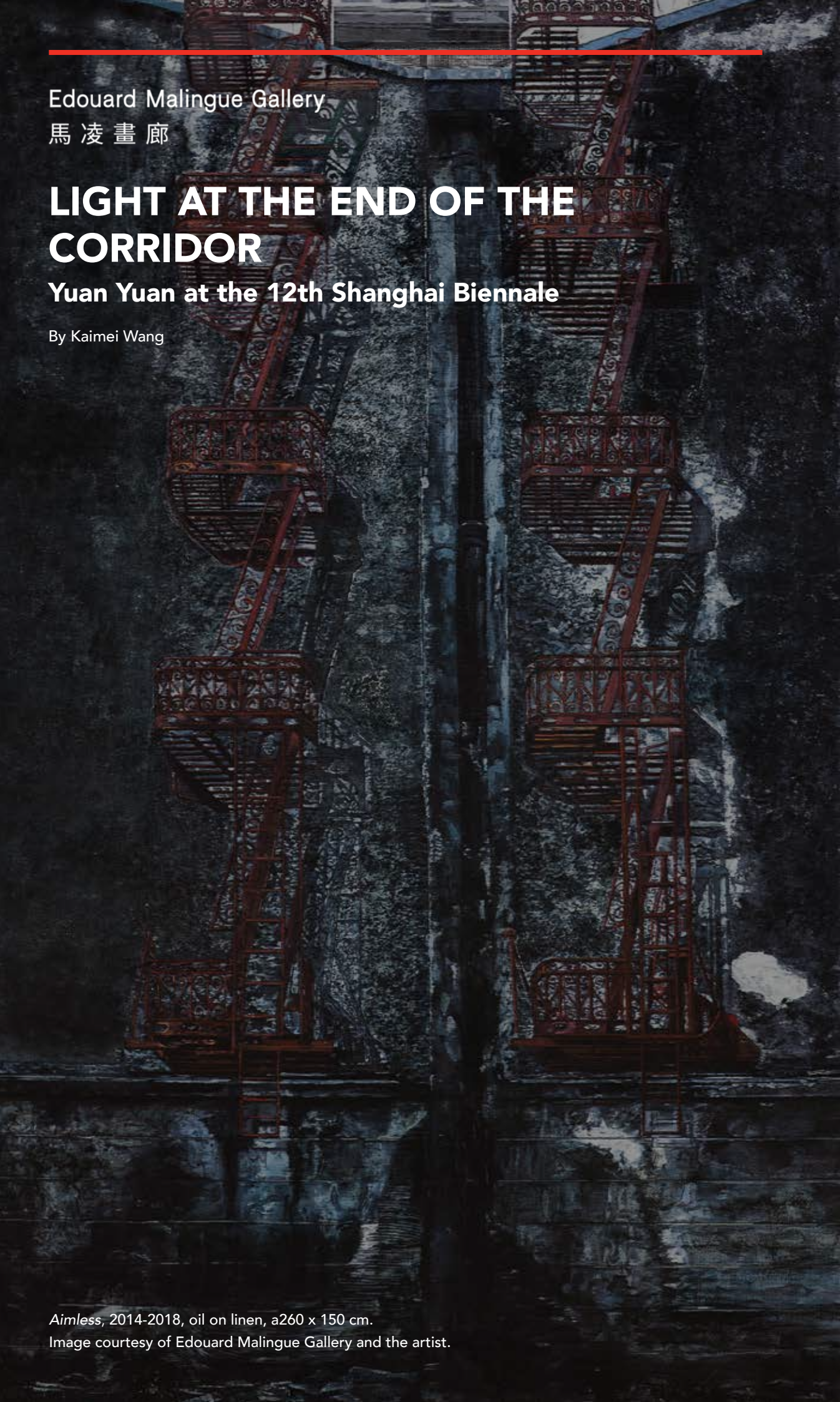
## Yuan Yuan at the 12th Shanghai Biennale

By Kaimei Wang



*Aimless*, 2014-2018, oil on linen, a260 x 150 cm.
Image courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

**For visitors of the 12th Shanghai Biennale, while walking around the venue viewing large-scale installations, spending time in dark screening rooms and browsing video archives and artists' research materials, it must come as a small shock when they stumble upon a room filled with paintings—only paintings—at the end of the first floor's corridor. The room is large and so are the paintings. The Chinese artist Yuan Yuan, known for his eerie and realistic paintings of the derelict and abandoned interiors, created a pictorial space titled *Bright Corners* at the 12th Shanghai Biennale.**

What am I looking at here? On each side of the room hangs only one painting albeit on the longer wall, there are two paintings hanging side by side. While I am surrounded by the walls, I feel like I am surrounded by the paintings depicting the grids and fences, to be precise. There are five separate paintings, all glimmer in a grayish and blueish hue and they all share a similar motif: huge iron-casted fences covered by myriad of grid with repetitive designs and patterns, all painted with meticulous precision.

*Free Fall*, 2018, oil on linen, 200 x 255 cm. Image courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

Where are these places on the paintings? *Escape from the Tunnel* (273 cm x 200 cm) could be at the backside of a malfunctioned elevator room; A place that is covered in dust and left in oblivion. *Invisibility* is a diptych (276 cm x 180 cm). They could be a wrack of a shipyard or a deserted factory warehouse. Behind the iron fences something humongous seems to have been locked in for too long. The bright and cold light source from the high ceilings inside the Power Station of Art which is the venue of the Shanghai Biennale cast a certain harsh and crude industrial look on the paintings. The only red color in the room comes from a painting called *Aimless* (260 cm x 150 cm). Here the artist painted a tall red fire escape stairway at the backside of a typical New York residence building. Again, a hidden place behind a civil architecture. There are traces of human inhabitants on all these paintings, but there is no human image on them.

The paintings are realistically painted with the details of every grid visible. In *Escape from the Tunnel*, behind the iron wire netting, one could peek in and identify staircases, windows and some unclear objects. As I get closer and feel the unresisting power of this enormous painting, a strange sensation of floating hits me, as if I am hovering above as well as inside these paintings, a sensation that one would encounter in a sci-fi film. As in *Free Fall* (200 cm x 255 cm), the iron fences cut the pictorial space on the canvas into several separated enclosed spaces. Each side of

*Invisibility, 2018, oil on linen, 276 x 180 cm each, diptych.* Image courtesy of Edouard Malingue Gallery and the artist.

the fence seems like its own mirror reflection. Between pictorial reality and artistic imagination, the viewers are trapped in the *matrix* of lines and grids, between the abstract 3-D networking in cyberspace and a 2-D presentation on canvas. Certainly I think of the 1999 cult film *Matrix* where simulated reality entangles with human minds and super humans' evil intention. Actually some years before the film *Matrix* was made, in 1984, the American science fiction writer William Ford Gibson talked about our dystopia future in his book titled *Neuromancer* and coined the new word "cyberspace" that fundamentally changed our relationship with our computers. Gibson's *Matrix* is an accumulation of all images roaming in the cyberspace of every computer in our human system. Its complexity is beyond human imagination and its beauty surprisingly poetic. Gibson wrote "lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding..."

It is this kind of mixed feeling of scare and fascination in Gibson's words on our future that one could experience when standing in the *Bright Corners* filled with Yuan Yuan's paintings. These five paintings were created by Yuan Yuan between 2008 up until the present. Although they were not made specially for the 12th Shanghai Biennale, they have never left Yuan Yuan's studio before mainly because of their enormous sizes. The Shanghai Biennale becomes a chance for Yuan Yuan to bring his biggest paintings to the public for the first time. It is also the first time that Yuan Yuan is participating a biennale. Among 67 artists/groups from 27 countries that are chosen to be in the 12th Shanghai Biennale, Yuan Yuan is one of the only two considered to be a traditional painter. The other painter is Mexican artist Yishal Jusidman whose series of paintings *Prussian Blue* address the Holocaust. The serious tone and conceptual approach in Jusidman's paintings stand as counter point to Yuan Yuan's image making which naturally also put pressure on him. In the art world, the distinction between biennale artists and gallery artists is still remarkable. Yuan Yuan is without question a gallery artist. He is represented by Edouard Malingue Gallery and his artwork are often seen in international art fairs and auction houses sales. His works fetch high prices among Chinese contemporary artists. The question

regarding who should be featured in the biennale should be determined by examining an artist's work and how it resonates with the theme of the biennale.

The 12th Shanghai Biennale led by the Mexican chief curator Cuauhtémoc Medina puts the focus on the ambivalence of the present age. Taken from an e.e. cumming's poem published in 1931, the title "Proregress," a juxtaposition of the two words "Progress+Regress" entailing opposite meanings, questions our view of framing the current global moment: technical development and economic growth versus political conservatism and environmental disaster, just to name a few. The social system in the world today, as Medina points out in his curatorial statement, shows a clear sign of the mixture of social and cultural progress and regress at the same time. Just what makes us human and what did we learn from the past? Contemporary art is considered to be a platform where the struggles and anxieties of the society find forms of expression.

For an artist like Yuan Yuan, he has found painting as a means to reflect on history and society. Yuan Yuan was born in Hangzhou in 1973. He spent his childhood in a compound with many other families. There were a lot of shared collectivism in Yuan Yuan's upbringing at a time when China was at the brink of social changes, from Mao's isolation to Deng's open door policy. Eventually the storm of economic reform would swash away the old system as Yuan Yuan grew up. "In the compound, all apartments looked the same and we all had the same furniture and interiors in every household," he recalled. Many years later, as an achieved artist from China, Yuan Yuan visited Cuba with his Cuban friend. He stayed in his friend's parents' apartment in Havana. At the Cuban collective compound, Yuan Yuan experienced a strange sensation of *deje vu*. His memory of growing up in the army compound found echoes in Cuba's socialism living situation, however, in Yuan Yuan's own hometown, his childhood houses have been torn down to leave space for new commercial real-estate development. After his return from Cuba to Hangzhou, Yuan Yuan made a painting which he named *Dear Neighborhood*. It was a painting of a kitchen lying in ruins and a Baroque style bedroom reflected through the mirrors on the wall. The painting bares many typical signatures of Yuan Yuan's personal style: the meticulous brush stroke, the complicated composition and various perspectives within one and the same painting, but most importantly, the painting is imbued in a mood that, despite of its bright color and gilded bed frame, feels sad and melancholic. Time in Yuan Yuan's paintings is the narrative threads that stitched together luxury with desolation, vitality with decay. In Amos Oz's half autobiographic novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, he wrote about how he as an adult revisited his primary school teacher and felt how everything still looked, felt and smelled the same despite that the color of the window frame has faded. Yuan Yuan needed to travel to Cuba to find the entrance to his memory and reconstruct the feel of his childhood kitchen and bedroom. As an artist, he has the privilege to visualize such discoveries.

Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer* predicted that technology will affect human psychology negatively and become the key factor for increasing anxiety among humans. It hasn't taken long before our social-media-obsessed society has claimed his general victory. We already live in the *Matrix* that our constant connected cyber network has trapped us in. Between advanced *Matrix* pointing to the future and memories lingering in the past, Yuan Yuan's art build a link that makes both future and past talk to us through his recomposition of images. In his paintings, the uncertainty about where it is and incompleteness on where it goes openly respond to the Biennale's focus on ambiguity. As Yuan Yuan's own understanding of the Chinese title of the Biennale, Yu Bu(禹步), the name of a step in Daoist ritual dance which moves both forward and backward, or a crowd of people walking their own steps, even the hesitation of taking these paintings to the public for the first time is an art of ambivalence.

From the *Bright Corners*, something glimmers at the end of the corridor.

**Edouard Malingue Gallery**
**馬凌畫廊**

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