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VOLUME 13, NUMBER 6

Yishu

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Journal of
Contemporary
Chinese Art



INSIDE

The Challenges and Possibilities of Public Art
in Shanghai

Artist Features: Liu Ding, Wang Wo, Zhang Dali,
Huang Zhiyang, Fong Chung-ray

Asia Art Archive's Mapping Asia

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CONTENTS

- 2 Editor's Note
- 4 Contributors
-
- 6 Being Out There: The Challenges and Possibilities of Public Art in Shanghai
Julie Chun
- 28 At the Heart of the Battle: The Creative Thinking and Practice of Liu Ding
Su Wei
- 44 Wang Wo: Not a Gaze but a Concerned Glance
Alice Schmatzberger
- 56 Zhang Dali: Square
Jonathan Goodman
- 63 Restless Arrays and Psychological Landscapes
Viewing Huang Zhiyang's *The Phenomenology of Life: Chapters in a Course of Study*
Huang Hai-Ming
- 74 Fong Chung-ray at Eighty: Between Modern and Contemporary
Mark Dean Johnson
- 82 Mapping Asia
Iftikar Dadi
-
- 90 Chinese Name Index

Cover: Zhang Dali, *Square No. 2*, 2014, fiberglass, varnish, 154 x 70 x 70 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

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Editor's Note

Yishu 65 opens with a text that examines the relatively short history of public art in Shanghai and the challenges, on bureaucratic and financial levels, that such projects can face. Public art in Shanghai is realized through various sources—from government support for exhibitions, to shopping mall extravaganzas, and DIY collective projects that avoid the market system altogether. This text critiques some projects that are perhaps too ambitious and brings to light others that, while still having the public interest at heart, are more modest in their intentions.

This issue also offers features on artists Liu Ding, Wang Wo, and Zhang Dali, who work in very different ways, employ different media, and represent different generations. But there are threads that weave together aspects of their work. They each make reference to the idea of collectivity in mainland China, the reality of censorship, the politics of the art system, and the lack of independent thought; although none of them address any of those topics in overt or didactic ways. Instead, their work is subtle and evocative, reflective of the artist's search for ways to plant these ideas in the mind of the viewer. Liu Ding and Zhang Dali are aware of the seduction of the art market, and are cautious about their relationship to it while, at the same time, participating in it. Both Wang Wo and Zhang Dali bring into their work allusions to how difficult it is, in a society that still seems to find comfort in collective thought, to express opinions that might not conform to what is considered the norm.

Also in this issue are texts on two other artists who embody different generations but who have pushed the idea of traditional ink and scroll painting into new realms. Huang Zhiyang, a Taiwanese artist now living in Beijing, and Fong Chung-ray, born in Henan province and now living in San Francisco, have found their own independent aesthetic voices, derived from very different sources and histories, yet are making strong contributions to a long evolving tradition.

In conclusion, we have a look at the Asia Art Archive's ambitious project, Mapping Asia, presented in its Hong Kong research library. This is one among a series of ongoing events AAA organizes in an effort to dig deeper into the complexities that constitute Asia and to view the region from a contemporary perspective while respecting its histories. Projects such as this also expand upon the idea of what an archive is and how its vast repository of information and knowledge can be brought to life in provocative and engaging ways.

Keith Wallace

Erratum:

On page 28 of *Yishu* 64, in the text on the Long Museum by Julie Chun, endnote number 1 is incorrect and not part of her essay. It mysteriously found its way into her text from a previous text in a previous issue.

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- 2 編者手記
- 4 作者小傳
-
- 6 上海公共藝術的挑戰和機會
田珠莉 (Julie Chun)
- 28 戰役的中心：劉鼎的創作思考與實踐
蘇偉
- 44 王我：關切的一瞥而非注視
Alice Schmatzberger
- 56 張大力：廣場
Jonathan Goodman
- 63 躁動部署與神經地景——看黃致陽
作品展《工·課》
黃海鳴
- 74 八旬馮鍾睿：在現代與當代之間
Mark Dean Johnson
- 82 拼湊亞洲
Iftikar Dadi
-
- 90 中英人名對照

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Contributors

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Iftikhar Dadi is Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art and Chair of the Department of Art at Cornell University. His research interests include postcolonial theory, modern art, and urban and popular culture, with an emphasis on South and West Asia. His recent book is *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010, and Munshiram Manoharlal, 2012), and his essays have

appeared in numerous journals and edited volumes. Exhibitions he has co-curated include *Lines of Control* (2012), which examined partitions and borders. As an artist, he collaborates with Elizabeth Dadi and has shown widely internationally.

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

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Art Biennial at the Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taipei. He has curated several art projects, including the Huashan Creative Park Biennial: Moving City—Creative Space Network (Taipei, 2000) and the Outdoor Art Project: Land, City, Harmony of the Taiwan Outdoor Installation Art Exhibition (Taiwan, 1997).

Mark Dean Johnson is Professor of Art and Gallery Director at San Francisco State University, where he curated the exhibition *The Moment for Ink* (2014). He was a co-curator of the exhibition *Asian/American/Modern Art: Shifting Currents, 1900–1970* at the de Young Museum (San Francisco, 2008) and *China’s Changing Landscape: Contemporary Ink Today* at the Nordic Watercolour Museum (Sweden, 2014). He was also the Principal Editor of the reference book and anthology *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970* (Stanford University Press: 2008).

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artists’ selves in contemporary Chinese photography, video, and digital art.

Su Wei is an independent art critic and curator based in Beijing. His writing has appeared in various local and international art journals and publications. The focus of his work is theoretical practice and writing on contemporary art. He participated in the 2012 Curatorial Intensive of ICI (Independent Curators International), in New York. He has also curated several art projects, including the 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale, *Accidental Message: Art is Not a System, Not a World* (OCAT Shenzhen, 2012) and *Keep the Modern Going: Immersion, Awaiting and Idealism* (OCAT Shenzhen, 2014).

Being Out There: The Challenges and Possibilities of Public Art in Shanghai

“The predicament of public art emanates from problems of categories, of content, systems of reference, and conditions of events.”

–Siah Armajani¹

“Where there is no struggle, there is no strength.”
(Permanently etched onto the tallest public mural in Asia,
Busan, South Korea)

–Hendrik Beikirch²

While the production and placement of art in public spaces is generally founded upon utopian ideals that seek to bridge art and the community, the realities of seeing such projects to completion are often riddled with contention. Public art often requires district, city, and state permits. Large national memorials must go through a series of public hearings before work can commence. Even while the installation of the work is in middle of production or after full completion, public opinion can further alter its course. History reveals the heated debate provoked by Maya Lin’s abstract design for the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial (completed in 1982) in Washington, D.C. which was placated by the subsequent placement of the figurative bronze sculptures *The Three Servicemen* (1984), by Frederick Hart, and the *Vietnam Women’s Memorial* (1993), by Glenna Goodacre. Moreover, we need only be reminded of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), sited on Foley Federal Plaza in New York City, which came under attack by the public for almost a decade and in 1989 was eventually removed in response to this outcry.

If these cases represent complex challenges in a democratic society like the United States, are obstacles inherent to public art more or less difficult to negotiate in a single-party state like the People’s Republic of China? The notion of supporting public art in a collective society should hardly seem paradoxical. As exemplified in well-documented accounts, the totalitarian imperatives for literary and visual arts established by Mao Zedong in 1942 served as the vehicle for propagating his hard line policies, which lasted into the years following his death.³ To note, we have been so over-conditioned by the ubiquitous phrase “Cultural Revolution” (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966–76) that we neglect to stop and consider what ought to

be termed “Political Revolution” was indeed achieved through the radical eradication of China’s long-standing legacy of artistic and traditional culture.

Consequently, the visual language that took full force following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 was none other than the alien style of socialist realism imported from Soviet Union. This explains in part why heroic depictions of proletariat-centred statues, paintings, and posters commemorating martyrs and revolutionaries became the dominant vocabulary for art in China for over thirty years.⁴ Thus most of what constitutes “public art” in China tends to be historic sculptural monuments venerating nationalist figures. Within the past decade, prompted by high-profile events that drew broad global attention such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, decorative sculptures entered the realm of public art and were erected en masse in urban centres as part of civic gentrification agendas.

Despite these commemorative and cosmetic gestures, public art initiatives in China involving the cooperation of artistic and local communities remain few and inchoate. This lack appears rather dissonant in a nation where communal identity is highly prized and upheld by both state and society. What accounts for this absence? It is obviously not due to a scarcity of talented artists, and it is surely not because of insufficient government funds or material resources. Thus, a pressing question arises: Why aren’t there more public art projects in China?

First, we cannot discount the greatest impediment complicating and problematizing the case for public art: omniscient government intervention through censorship. Further entangling the issue is the aforementioned deep-seated tradition of collectivism, an entrenched sociocultural value that many Chinese artists extoll but are simultaneously frustrated with. More pragmatically, for millions of the populace still trying to sustain a daily living, there is a general lack of awareness and interest in supporting public art programs. Also, given the enormity of China’s geography and the localized characteristics of its various regions, the notion of “public art” can become mired in debate—who is the public, where is the public, who “speaks” for the public—that is greater in China than possibly anywhere else.

Thus, as a starting point, this article will explore the microcosm of Shanghai as the focus of one, albeit prominent, site for the production and installation of public art. For the purpose of this discussion, “public art” will be defined as a cross-section of visual signifiers, both tangible and ephemeral, created and placed since 2010 in venues easily accessible by the public and devoid of entry fee. By focusing on a selection of public and private pursuits ranging from a district-commissioned sculpture project and exhibitions held at an ancient water town, to quotidian expressions unfolding in a local market stall and basement happenings, this article seeks to answer some questions and provoke new ones in order to address a much-neglected category in the field of Chinese contemporary art.



Manifesting Public Pride: Jing'an International Sculpture Project

On September 20, 2012, the 2nd Jing'an International Sculpture Project, under the theme "Pride of City," commenced and lasted until November 20, 2012. Fifty-nine sculptures by eighteen artists from ten countries took centre stage on the grounds of Jing'an Sculpture Park, located near Puxi city centre on 128 Shimen 2 Road in Shanghai.⁵ The project is an on-going endeavour to introduce sculpture by international artists to the local community. The 1st Jing'an International Sculpture Project and the establishment of the park was initially inaugurated on September 1, 2010 as part of the city's urban revitalization program to support the 2010 Shanghai World Expo campaign "Better City, Better Life."⁶ Since their inception, world expositions have historically set the precedent for rehabilitation of urban spaces and its degenerating architecture. For example, the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago, was the inspiration behind the "City Beautiful" movement that extended its reach far beyond Illinois to Washington, D.C.⁷

The open-air exhibitions of the Jing'an International Sculpture Project were considered a success by the organizers for generating civic pride. Unlike in Western nations, public art projects in China are not financed or steered by third-party advisory committees or non-profit foundations. Rather, they are commissioned and funded publicly by the district or the municipal government or through private resources. Both the 2010 and 2012 Jing'an projects received the unified support of Shanghai's former mayor Han Zheng (in office from February 2003 to December 2012), the Jing'an District People's Government, the Office of the Shanghai Urban Sculpture Committee, and the Purple Roof Gallery (a private commercial gallery).

Encompassing 110 acres (72,000 square metres), this project, which takes place every two years, has been coordinated fluidly as a result of concerted

Joy Brown, *City Fantasy*, 2010, bronze sculptures, Jing'an International Sculpture Project. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

efforts by various contingents seeking to highlight Jing'an District as a site of prestige and affluence. Zhao Yongfeng, Deputy Chief Executive of Jing'an District, stated,

Although the area [of] Jing'an District is not big, it has the cultural heritages [sic] of vivid regional characteristics. The occurrence of cultural events and cultural phenomena here for over a century is a main spindle of the culture of Jing'an. The Second CPC National Congress was held in Jing'an and the Secretariat of China Labor was also located here. Besides, there are up to twenty-one former residences of celebrities in Shaanxi North Road.⁸

Arman, *Music Power*, 1988, bronze, Jing'an International Sculpture Project. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



Zhou Ping, Chief Executive of Jing'an District, reinforced the message by emphasizing, "The Shanghai Jing'an International Sculpture Project . . . will be a brand in Shanghai's public cultural life and continue to tell the stories of the city to the world."⁹ Zhou Ping's proclamation supports observations made by Karen Fiss, professor of visual studies at the California College of the Arts. In her current research, Fiss notes that when countries with

emerging economies surmount the struggles to achieve "nation building," the next trajectory is to foster "nation branding," a phenomenon in which promotional branding practices are applied to shape the country's social, cultural, and built environment.¹⁰ The challenge for many non-Western nations has been, and still is, to enter the mainstream of globalism's claim to universality by homogenizing its culture while simultaneously striving to retain their unique local sensibilities through the marketing and packaging of indigenous music, art, architecture, clothing, and culinary cuisine, to name a few. With both large and small-scale cities in postmodern societies worldwide soaring vertically and encroaching horizontally, distinct markers are being sought to differentiate one place from another.

In their mission for achieving continuum, the 3rd Jing'an International Sculpture Project opened on September 19, 2014 with the theme City Paradise, and shares the Jing'an Sculpture Park site with the newly relocated Natural History Museum scheduled to open at the end of 2014. Fifteen artists from eleven countries have been invited to install their sculptures in situ, once more as a grand cultural gesture.¹¹ Mao Wencai, founder of the Purple Roof Gallery, believes the sustainability of the Jing'an International Sculpture Project is a result of a highly organized collaboration by professionals from across various sectors to truly

benefit the local community.¹² According to Mao Wencai, most public art projects in China carried out by the government do not necessarily involve a creative team, and she applauds the foresight of the officials of the Jing'an District in seeking out and investing in the curatorial expertise of gallery professionals.¹³ It was under Mao Wencai's direction that the independent curator and art critic Huang Du was invited as the artistic director, and Gerardo Mosquera, the senior curator of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, was brought on as foreign advisor in 2012. Long-term planning and cooperative teamwork had begun as early as 2008 with proper attention given to every aspect of the project, from landscaping to lamplights, and from the placement of sculptures to surveying park visitors to record public reception.



American artist Barbara Edelstein participated in the 2010 inaugural project with the placement of her bronze and water sculpture *Elemental Spring Harmony* (2010) at one of the park's main entrances. Even today, she is pleased with the high level of care and maintenance provided by the district for not only the sculptures but also the park grounds. Edelstein's intricately coiled and gleaming spiral form rises gently out of a small pool like an abstracted Venus from the sea and is presented to the public in as pristine condition today as the day when the water was first turned on. Edelstein divides her time between Shanghai and New York; thus she is familiar with the challenges involved in public art in the East as well as the West. While many locals and foreigners are familiar with China's worsening problem of air and water pollution, Edelstein alludes to another form

Barbara Edelstein, *Elemental Spring Harmony*, 2010, Jing'an International Sculpture Project. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

of degradation currently taking place in Chinese society— “public art pollution”—referring to the abundance of bad art in public places. “This pollution usually results from competing debates about who chooses what and in making those choices in haste.”¹⁴ She believes the organizers of the Jing’an International Sculpture Project acted in the best interest of the people. Censors did not intervene, and artistic liberties were not curtailed. In Edelstein’s view, “The Jing’an International Sculpture Project has been successful each time because much attention is given to connecting the artistic objects to the landscape, environment, and, most importantly, the public who make use of the site.”¹⁵

Dai Yun, *The Saloon Car*, 2010, brick, cement, steel, 250 x 500 x 160 cm, Shanghai Sculpture Space. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



The comment rings true because a simple comparison can be made with another open and accessible sculpture space in the vicinity of Puxi city centre at Red Town, an industrial complex of a former steel company. Amid an array of art galleries, commercial offices, and beauty academies, a small collection of sculptures is scattered on the grassy central lawn in front of the privately established Minsheng Art Museum. While the Shanghai Sculpture Space was instituted by the Shanghai government as a public space with an interior exhibition hall and an outdoor sculpture park conveniently located next to the Hongqiao subway station on Line 10, the upkeep over the years has been inconsistent. Encroaching grass and weeds have hidden some of the statues from view, and increasingly paint has been peeling and flaking from many sculptures with each passing season. Washed by Shanghai’s frequent rains, many of the label placards are no longer legible. Within the

interior sculpture space, layers of city dust have amassed on the statues, giving them the appearance of relics from an ancient past. Such is the fate and condition of many public sculptures in Shanghai that do not dwell within the boundaries of upscale commercial or corporate precincts. In this regard, the Jing'an Sculpture Park deviates from prior established standards governing public art. Just as Shanghai's brand identity is forged by Pudong district's financial skyline that represents a vision of the future, and the recontextualized colonial Bund as its nostalgic past, the Jing'an Sculpture Park embodies current trends in international art and generates a civic pride that reflects Shanghai's cultural prominence.¹⁶



JR, *The Wrinkles of the City*, 2010, poster. Courtesy of Magda Danysz Gallery, Paris and Shanghai.

Independent Visionaries: Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition

In 2010, it took an independent foreign artist to stir up an awareness of public art in Shanghai. In fact, the locals were mystified as to why a *laowai* (outsider or foreigner), sporting a hat and sunglasses at night, was covering crumbling buildings marked for demolition with what appeared to be large panels of posters imprinted with faces of Chinese people. The locals found this act so baffling that they contacted the police, who were immediately dispatched to take the French artist JR, who was responsible for placing these images, down to the station. Claire Crozel, former manager of Magda Danysz Gallery, Shanghai, recounts how JR contacted the gallery staff in the middle of the night because he couldn't speak Mandarin. "We had to go down to the police station not once but a few times because each time he was released, he would lie low for a day or two and then would be out on the streets again pasting up portraits of Shanghai's residents as part of his public art endeavour."¹⁷ JR's project, which he financed mostly on his own, was titled *Wrinkles of the City* (2010). To translate his artistic vision into public discourse, the undaunted JR would return again four years later to a place where he knew he would have to jump over visible and invisible obstacles to see his participatory art come to full completion.

Is the case of subversive public art in Shanghai instigated only by outsiders? Is courage isolated to renegade artists? The answer is a gentle and quiet “no,” according to independent curator Jia Bu, who, with curator An Ni, navigated and mounted an annual public art project at Zhujiajiao beginning in 2012. Located in Qingpu district, on the outskirts of Shanghai, about an hour’s drive by car, the picturesque water town purportedly dates back to the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Poetically titled *Overlapping Reflections*, the 2nd Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Exhibition from October 26 to 31, 2013, brought together a luminous cast of thirty-four Chinese and international artists, the local community, and wayward tourists. The curatorial concept sought “to highlight the symbiosis between the artworks and Zhujiajiao local cultural ecology.”¹⁸



Top: Liu Jianhua, *Shadow in the Water*, 2002–08, porcelain relief, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition.

Right: Chen Hangfeng, *Constructed Shadows*, 2013, cut-out plastic shopping bags, lace pins, site-specific installation, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



By collaborating with the Zhujiajiao Watertown Music Festival, which directly preceded the exhibition, Jia Bu allocated vendor stalls, open courtyards, and empty lots for artists to enact their creative magic. Inside a quaint coffee shop, Liu Jianhua’s iconic porcelain relief of the undulating Pudong skyline, *Shadow in the Water* (2002–08), melded with the wall, inviting viewers to come closer and determine if the image was a painting or a sculpture. Down the canal, in the interior courtyard of a tiny boutique hotel, a small patch of bamboo groves opened the vista for Chen Hangfeng’s classically rendered and ecologically contested *Constructed Shadows* (2013), a stone mural painted in the literati

manner and affixed with fragments of black plastic bags. The remote, solitary set of stairs in the serene Kezhi Garden led to a balcony strewn with mesmerizing chunks of large wax shards entitled *Chui* (2013), by Yu Jing. All throughout the hamlet, artistic expressions abounded to offer a



divergent visual panorama to the otherwise banal tourist stalls filled with kitsch souvenir trinkets and Chinese snacks.

Yu Jing, *Chui*, 2013, wax, mixed media, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition. Photo: Julie Chun.



Looking back eight months after the project's completion, Jia Bu sighed with relief. "The Zhujiajiao public exhibition has been the most challenging assignment of my life," she stated.¹⁹ As a former journalist, she is accustomed to meeting deadlines, managing multiple assignments, and handling different personalities. Before taking on curatorial projects, she spent her time conducting interviews with artists and writing reviews of exhibitions. Yet, the more she wrote about contemporary art, the more

Lu Pingyuan, *A Ghost Story*, 2013, performance, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition.

she realized there was a significant gap between works of art and people's perception of them. The visual encounters with contemporary art by Chinese viewers consistently pointed to a pressing problem: unfamiliarity and a lack of understanding by the general public. She started to realize why, aside from industry insiders, most Chinese shied away from contemporary art. Contrary to its agenda of engaging the viewer and instigating a dialogue, oftentimes the rhetoric of contemporary art had the adverse affect of alienating the very people it desired to entice. The sense of helplessness was personal to Jia Bu because at certain times even she did not always understand the meaning of the artwork. "I believe creating and placing art is the easy part. Having people understand intuitively what it is about is the greatest challenge."²⁰ Therefore, while still continuing to report on the art scene for Chinese magazines, she took on the added role as an independent curator in mounting exhibitions at public venues in order to help the general public close that gap of unfamiliarity.



Daun Lim, *Poetry Boat*, 2013, installation, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition.

The 1st Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition (October 19–21, 2012) was a short weekend affair, but Jia Bu nonetheless believes that first year was meaningful. The public art project was granted formal approval by the town of Zhujiajiao, and because Jia Bu was personally acquainted with the organizer of the Zhujiajiao Music Festival, it was relatively easy for her to present the public art exhibition in its wake. “Since music and art can be complimentary, it was not difficult to convince the music festival organizer to bring the two artistic events together. The music festival had a budget for marketing and advertising to which we added our project since An Ni and I had no such funds, so the cooperation worked out quite well.”²¹

Jia Bu and An Ni also received minor sponsorships from local restaurants in Zhujiajiao as well as a contribution from a developer who was refurbishing parts of the water town. Most importantly, established and emerging artists who took part in the program gave liberally of their time to support the vision of bringing art to the public. Noting the buzz generated around the success of the first event, the local government promised to allocate money for the second year. Yet, as time approached closer to the date of the opening on October 26, 2013, the funds did not materialize. In the short span of a year, the local government had gone through personnel changes, and without continuity of support from one administration to the next, the fiscal promise was never fulfilled.

Hu Jieming, *Afterimage*, 2013, video installation, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition.



“My biggest question was how to hold an exhibition with a zero budget. Without financial resources, the project took on a sense of greater urgency and became an extremely personal undertaking,” explained Jia Bu.²² She used every *guangxi* (connection and network) and appealed to artists to donate their precious time for the cause once again. To the relief of the curators,



many artists came through and enabled a larger cast of participants for the second year with well-regarded talents such as Yang Zhenzhong, Hu Jieming, Ji Wenyu + Zhu Weibin, and the collective Polit-Sheer-Form-Office. Despite

Polit-Sheer-Form-Office,
Mr. Zheng, 2013, Zhujiajiao
Contemporary Public Art
Exhibition.

ensuing challenges for funding, the 2nd Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition in 2013 ran for an even longer duration of a week, rather than a weekend.

When asked how the preparations for the 2014 Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition were coming along, Jia Bu fell silent. Despite the efforts by the two-woman team, financing remained problematic. Unable to locate a major sponsor, Jia Bu was hesitant about approaching the artists for a third year in a row without a secure budget. Yet funding does not seem to be the sole solution to resolving the issue. Instead, it could also complicate: “If we receive a large budget from either public or private sponsorship, they will likely dictate the direction of the exhibition and the choices of the artworks. I might be faced with an obligation to compromise the scope and the objective of the public art exhibition,” concluded Jia Bu.

For independent visionaries like Jia Bu and Ani Ni, a fundamental criterion for bridging art and the public, especially when the public is hesitant in seeking out art, is the support, cooperation, and participation of artists. However, the concept of charitable contribution from artists is only just gaining awareness and remains still nascent to China. With many Chinese artists in emergent stages of their careers, few are willing to work without a fee or budget to cover production costs. For established artists who have achieved financial stability, time becomes a precious resource. Clearly, the ambition of the Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition is admirable for its grassroots efforts, yet there were still gaps that could not be closed in the project’s execution in 2013. With the exception of a rudimentary map, only a few inconsistently placed wall texts provided information about the artwork. Some areas were completely devoid of any labels (and in some locations even the artwork was missing as well), leading the viewer to wonder whether what was on view was in fact an installation or just the commonplace objects that constitute the city. A handsome spoke wheel, for example, that lay on the grounds at the Kezhi Garden indeed turned out to be just a wooden wheel that had fallen off a small watermill and lay waiting to be repaired.

This parallels the bewilderment of the locals who witnessed JR’s *Wrinkle in Time* project. The artist knew exactly what he wanted to achieve, while many of the locals who encountered it were clueless. While there is no single way of instituting comprehensive education about public art, we cannot deny that the placement of each artwork in the public arena has the effect of activating a generally passive space and creating awareness through

JR, *Inside Out: The People's Art Project*, 2014, posters.
Courtesy of Magda Danysz
Gallery, Paris and Shanghai.



provocation and even amusement. There will always be independent visionaries who refuse to be deterred by conventional challenges. When JR returned to Shanghai in May 2014 to inundate the city by pasting up many more visages of Chinese residents for his *Inside Out: The People's Art Project*, he was no longer arrested and taken to the police station. On the contrary, he was funded and even provided display spaces by China Xintiandi, a real estate development firm under the auspices of Shui On Land, which owns and manages prime commercial and residential properties. It remains to be seen whether new contenders like Jia Bu and An Ni can achieve the same level of support and success in the future, but JR stands as the archetype for those desirous of finding a way to put art out there in public spaces.

This Modern World? An 'Art as Billboard' Project, 2010.
Left to Right: Heidi Voet, *If I Was Beautiful, If I Had The Time*; Chitra Ganesh, *The Vultures*; Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung, *Siddhartha Obama*. Courtesy of Mathieu Borysevicz.



Interrogating the Quotidian Place: Bazaar Compatible Project

As mentioned above, the Shanghai 2010 World Expo proved to be a major impetus for citywide urban revitalization and transformation. As part of the program—sponsored by the Shanghai Shentong Metro Cooperation and the Shanghai University Public Art Creative Centre—the South Railway Metro Station (where Lines 1 and 3 intersect) became a site for eye-catching display of public art in the existing light boxes normally reserved for advertisements. Entitled *Invisible City*, the project brought together students from the Fine Art College of Shanghai University with six Chinese and three foreign artists to augment the quotidian lives of subway commuters and Expo visitors.²³ Capturing the ever-shifting daily activities taking place on the streets of Shanghai, the artists produced photographic and two-dimensional iterations of the varied and colourful life of this dynamic metropolis.

In a more critical vein, Shanghai-based curator Mathieu Borysevicz initiated the *Art as Billboard* public art project, also during the Shanghai Expo, utilizing the platform of advertising to interrogate the neocolonial conditions of excess consumer culture. Engulfing a large area of the southern-flanking street of a harbour known to locals as Cool Docks, south of the Bund, the project spanned the entire length of Xin Matou Road.

Twelve artists were provided large-scale billboard spaces in which to create messages and images that explored what it meant “to be modern in a world that is beyond modernity.”²⁴ The project was aptly titled *This Modern World?* Each artist was asked “to inquire what global capital [had] done to psychologically shape an international urban public intoxicated by material desire and bent on more consumption.”²⁵

Regrettably, no physical traces of either project can be witnessed today. The Shanghai South Railway Station has regressed back to hypnotizing the subway commuters with advertisements for Lancôme cosmetics and Samsung smartphones in its radiant light boxes. The Cool Docks billboards that attempted to critically provoke Shanghai urbanites have been dismantled. It is to the city’s loss that these spaces have failed to continue as sites of interstice. By attracting the viewers via the readily recognizable formats of the billboard and backlit advertisement cases, the intervening spaces served as user-friendly sites for the production and reception of socially engaging relational art.



One of the rare public art projects in Shanghai that has defied being a short-lived or one time project is the Bazaar Compatible Program that began in September 2011. Located on 98 Anshun Road (near Dingxi Road) in midst of a local market in an enclosed alleyway bustling with a wide array of small shops, the unmarked vendor stall #26 has become a site for critically interrogating the space and lives of the everyday. Ever-shifting visions are presented by artists from China and various other countries in this innocuous kiosk, which otherwise would appear no different in size and form than those inhabited by the neighbouring merchants. Adjacent is a tiny mahjong hall where shopkeepers and local residents congregate to play and chat. A few stalls down, there is a yarn shop where two Chinese grannies frantically knit baby sweaters while carrying on a heated conversation about the various uses for bok choy. Directly across is a “hardware” store crammed with everything from electrical extension cords to toilet plungers within its over-crowded confines. A few stalls down, one can find a half-exposed dental office using the same kind of reclining chair as the one in the hair salon/barber shop nearby. This enclave is indeed a city within a city. With a meat and fish market a few stalls up selling every conceivable part of pig and cow, and kiosks just around the corner offering dried noodles, nuts, rice,

Left: Anshun Market, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

Middle: Yarn shop, Anshun Market, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

Right: Hardware store, Anshun Market, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

Left: Gao Shan, *21:15*, 07/08, 2014, 2014, installation, Bazaar Compatible Program. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



Right: Bazaar Compatible Program, Anshun Market, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



and tofu, one can manage to be sustained in this alley of local commerce without even venturing out to Anshun Road.

Thus, there is an element of surprise for anyone walking into the alley looking for baby sweaters or ground pork and encountering a space unlike any of the other stalls. The aspect of displacement that causes alarm or amusement in this odd corner of the universe is the driving force behind the concept of Bazaar Compatible Program. Amidst the clacking of mahjong tiles and *xiangqi* (Chinese chess) pieces, vendor stall #26 exudes its own unrivaled identity. The confines of the open white cube has been reinterpreted as a frame and structural support for constantly changing exhibitions of painting, sculpture, video, and performance installations between the hours of 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. daily, the same hours of operation as all other shops in the market. Simultaneously, the space of the Bazaar Compatible Program is and is not a white cube. The diminutive 2.50 by 2.50 metre stall is almost always painted white and exists as an exhibition space for showing works of art, but the space has also managed to dissolve into its surroundings to evoke familiarity despite its blatant unfamiliarity. Labeled bcp #1 (bazaar compatible number one), each exhibition is sequentially enumerated, and the space serves to interject art into the lives of the local people with new exhibitions every two weeks.

Xu Zhifeng, *Butterflies*, 2012, installation, Bazaar Compatible Program. Photo: Paul Devautour.



The concept of each installation is unique, linked to other installations only by the physical space of the stall and the daily lives of the Anshun market merchants and local shoppers. Some installations are spare and captivate viewers to stop, enter, look around, touch, and sometimes to sit (on a given plastic stool, for example). Conversely, some installations are highly conceptual or abstract yet nevertheless remain inviting. For bcp #21, the Algerian artist Djamel Kokene created the *Museum of the World (extract)* (June 18–July 2, 2012). A distinct homage to Duchampian ideals, the exhibition of readymades on institutional pedestals offered a condensed taste of a contemporary museum experience to the community of passers-by. Simple and accessible, bcp #8 was fabricated with red plastic colanders hung like winged insects in *Butterflies* (Feb. 14–27, 2012) by the Chinese artist Xu Zhifeng. For bcp #35, *Paper Shark* (Dec. 31, 2012–Jan. 13, 2013), French origami artist Etienne



Clément de Gaulejac,
Téléphone Arabe, 2012,
installation, Bazaar
Compatible Program.
Photo: Paul Devatour.

Cliquet brought all the way from Toulouse, France a forty-metre-long roll of paper used for wrapping fish to construct a full set of shark teeth. Usually after two weeks, all the contents of stall #26 are swept away and replaced by new interventions. The only exception is the permanent installation of Clément de Gaulejac's neon-studded sign, bcp #10, *Téléphone Arabe* (2012), which acts to identify the site of Bazaar Compatible Program while simultaneously subverting this distinctly Chinese environs with its jarringly out-of-place Arabic-looking script.

The Bazaar Compatible Project was founded by Xia Yilan and Paul Devatour, and initiated by XiYiTang Shanghai International Art Graduate School and its joint research project, *Creation and Globalization*, in collaboration with the National Superior School of Art of Nancy in France. The program was slated to run for one year. According to Devatour, the mission of Bazaar Compatible Program is a literal exploration beyond the white cube and it “aims to explore and develop the ‘compatible’ art formats by the artists that connect with the social environment.”²⁶ The rent and electricity is covered by DeYi Culture Consultants, a small company created by Xia Yilan. Because there is no fee for the use of this non-profit exhibition space (rental of exhibition spaces is a common practice in China), the site has become a viable solution for many artists in Shanghai seeking a place to show their work. Through encounters with various local and visiting foreign artists, Xia Yilan and Devatour invite those whose timing and desires run parallel with the spirit of the program. Without an available budget for materials or publicity, the artist is required to finance his/her own production and the program is completely sustained by word of mouth among the artistic community. Due to the relatively small scale of the project and voluntary participation, the program is now embarking on its fourth year, three years beyond its intended duration.

The project's unexpected staying power is owed in part to its compatibility with its surrounding environment and the local community. In one way or another, each artistic concept forms a holistic and natural dialogue with the merchants and shoppers of the bazaar. “It is nice, this art place,” comments the forty-nine-year Mrs. Hang, who works near stall #26 almost every

day. “It’s amusing to have many *laowai* come here and set up art. It causes distraction and breaks up the monotony around here. I like it that they provide something different for me to look at.”²⁷

Bazaar Compatible Program is a paragon about foregrounding the shared and collective experience of social art as envisioned by Joseph Beuys and articulated by Nicolas Bourriaud.²⁸ From a more critical perspective, it suggests ways of inserting art as a daily phenomenon within any level of society.

There is also another subtle paradox at work with Bazaar Compatible Program. Unlike the stalls offering commodities for purchase in the surrounding market, stall #26 is the only site of non-monetary exchange. Mrs. Hang comments, “I don’t know why they pay rent for a good stall and not sell anything. These artists must be rich.” Despite the attraction of social engagement and visual aesthetics, the local Chinese would probably never give any thought to acquiring any of the non-essentials displayed in stall #26. This juxtaposition distinctly challenges and even renders mute the commodification of art within elite collecting cultures and underscores the value of art as a social rather than commercial exchange.

In Defiance of Conventional Sites: Art in Malls and Basements

An art exhibition mounted at a local market implicates one strand of thought concerning postmodern conditions. So does art in the commercial realm of urban shopping malls. But how does the meaning change for a work of art when it is transferred from a local market to the interiors of a climate-controlled mall? This question is worth asking since Shanghai reveals no sign of halting its current trend of megamall construction. Consequently, marble-floored shopping centres are not only being filled with high-end clothing, handbags, and shoes but also with an eclectic array of paintings, sculptures, and video installations. Expanding the definition of public art, commercial developers have been inserting “fine art” into the realm of popular culture to cause museum envy. While these expensive artworks have the effect of visually upping the cultural ante in the public domain, they nonetheless poignantly allude to art as a luxury commodity in their direct placement in a context where materialist culture is endorsed.

Showcasing art in department stores is hardly new, especially in Asia. It has historical precedent reaching back to Japan’s Meiji era (1868–1912), when regular art exhibitions were held in department stores.²⁹ According to Japanese scholar and literary translator Edward Seidensticker, department stores in Tokyo took the form of a “cross between a museum and an amusement park.”³⁰ In Japan, and later Korea and Taiwan when Japanese colonial powers were in place, the department store was not an ancillary site for art exhibitions; it was the only place available outside venues of official art.

In Shanghai, one of the first instances of art being placed in the environs of a shopping district was with the Zendai Himalaya Museum, established in 2005 by the Zendai Group. The privately financed museum had a lively past

as the Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art. It had relocated from the shopping district of Thumb Plaza to the visibly upscale Zendai Himalaya Centre, designed by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, which incorporates a high-end hotel, a shopping mall, and a theater. Yet by 2012, the museum had fallen into a slump because of short-lived and uninspired exhibitions. It seemed an omen that perhaps art did not belong between H&M stores and Crystal Jade Chinese restaurants—at least until the art-themed K11 mega-malls, constructed by the Hong Kong based New World Development Company, started making their grand appearances in Hong Kong and mainland China, confounding many skeptics and critics.



Left: Damien Hirst, *Wretched War*, 2007, cast copper, K11 Mall, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

Right: Sui Jianguo Studio, *Butterflies*, stainless steel, exterior of K11 Mall, Shanghai.

The brilliant premise behind K11 Art Foundation Limited is not simply inserting eye-catching sculptures and digital light boxes in and around a shopping venue. Instead, the concept is about adopting the successful business model of fostering brand recognition. Conceived as his empire and “kingdom,” Adrian Cheng (Zheng Zhigang), the thirty-four-year old Harvard-educated Executive Director of New World Development Company, directly approves many aspects of the commercial and artistic contents of K11, even curating some shows himself.³¹ Attempting to revolutionize the “boring retail world,” Adrian Cheng established the flagship enterprise in Hong Kong in 2009 with a second branch opening in Shanghai in 2013. Additional K11 mega-art malls are scheduled to open in eleven cities across China.³²



Not to stand aside passively, Shanghai Xintiandi (a subsidiary of China Xintiandi) mounted the summer blockbuster, *Traces: Contemporary Public Art Exhibition*, which ran from July 10 to August 31, 2014, and included sculpture, painting, and digital projects placed throughout the interior and exterior locations of the Xintiandi Style Mall. Recognizable icons displayed at the 2012 Jing’an

Exterior view of Xintiandi Style Mall, Shanghai, with announcement of *Traces: Contemporary Public Art Exhibition*. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

International Sculpture Project, such as Ding Yi's *Tai Ji* (2012), stainless steel sculptures composed of his signature crosses, and Huang Zhiyang's stone creations, *Possessing Numerous Peaks* (2010), occupied prominent positions on the mall's north and south entrances.

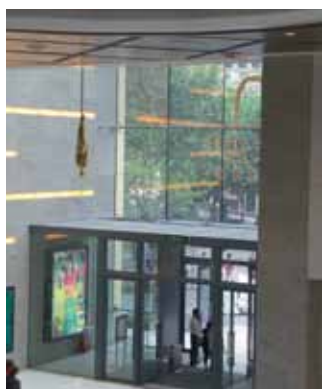
Ding Yi, *Tai Ji*, 2012, stainless steel, Xintiandi Style Mall, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



Claudio Colucci, *Love-Star*, 2012, resin, paint, Xintiandi Style Mall, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



Xiao Min and Gao Shan, *Gravity*, 2014, fiberglass, steel, electrical components, Xintiandi Style Mall, Shanghai. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



Art in malls hints at a provocative social condition of consumer culture—the yearning for individual singularity in a homogenous urban society. In a global market infused with mass-produced goods (many made in China), the notion of art signifies the individual hand of the artist and its status as one-of-a-kind. Even though some Chinese artists employ a crew of assistants in factory-like complexes, the quintessential lure of art for much of the public is its unique, unparalleled, singular identity. It gives pause to witness the juxtaposition of rare works of art amidst mass-manufactured goods. Yet, as more sculpture, painting, and digital displays enter the spheres of even more shopping complexes such as the malls at the Jing'an Kerry Center and Henderson Plaza (both on Nanjing Street), questions emerge as to whether these conspicuous displays that combine art and commerce are statements about

global contradictions or are collaborations to appease a new sector of the Chinese society with an insatiable appetite for entertainment and spectacle.

In stark contrast to the perfumed and brightly lit malls, there is a remote underground space generating unexpected attention in Shanghai. Nestled between towers of grimy local high-rise apartments on 1643 Huashan Road (near Middle Huaihai Road), a rusty door opens onto a set of dark, dank stairs that lead down to a resolutely independent artistic enclave known as Basement 6 Collective. Forged by a blend of artists from varying parts of North America, the collective is a raw, experimental playground for young radical artists.³³ The space is a free-for-all open studio that Anneliese Charek, a dancer from the Los Angeles area, and Katy Roseland, a multimedia designer from Kentucky, founded in 2013 for just “hanging out” and practicing and showcasing *No Lights No Lycra*, freestyle dance happenings held on the first and third Wednesday of each month.³⁴ Gathering attention through social media (via the popular Chinese Weixin and Wechat) and word of mouth, this alternative space serves as an embryonic site for exhibiting art, photography, and performances as well as other diverse creative undertakings by artists who wish to protest, be heard, and make a mark while in Shanghai.



Shared art supplies, Basement 6 Collective space. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

With their individual day jobs as media designers, event planners, and English teachers, the members share in the payment of rent and electricity for the use of the basement. While there is a dilapidated remnant of what appears to be a couch, no one technically lives there, for pragmatic reasons. “There’s no shower,” admits Roseland.³⁵ That, however, does not prevent a constant stream of young Chinese and foreigners passing through or stopping by at all times of the day and night. The basement is well stocked with art materials. Neatly arranged cans of spray paint dominate one wall from floor to ceiling, and stretched canvases are available for the asking. There is also an abundance of mannequin body parts ready for immediate creative deployment. There is no fee for anybody wishing to enter, view, or exhibit at the basement. Charek explains, “Initially Katy and I had conceived this place as individual artist spaces but then we met Sophia Lin, a Canadian-Chinese through Craigslist who suggested that we converge as a collective. Initially we didn’t know if anything would happen. And then all of a sudden, this momentum grew.”³⁶



Founding members of Basement 6 Collective space Anneliese Charek and Katy Roseland with new member MELS. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

MELS, a street graffiti artist and a media designer from Minneapolis, is relatively new to the collective, although he has been in Shanghai longer than the other members. He notes, “We lose money, but in exchange, we get to have endless creative freedom.

For those of us who have never shown our art, we can display it here. When we have an idea for a performance, along with the members, people are willing to come together to network and execute them. Projects in my head have been miraculously happening here.”³⁷ Roseland concedes, “Not only do our disciplines vary but so do our attitudes and social circles. This gives Basement 6 Collective differing and overlapping characteristics.”³⁸



Shared art supplies, Basement 6 Collective space. Photo: Ruth Thompson.

The one-night-only solo or group events are as wildly varied as the range of artists themselves. On August 29, 2014, the 23-year-old Dutch photographer Marc Ressang held a never-before-seen exhibition, entitled *When the Sun Goes Down in the East*, featuring raw party photos he had taken of the nightlife while in Shanghai over the course of three years. His uncensored, uncut, and hedonistic displays rendered in black-and-white

resonate with the nostalgic vibe and vibrant images of reckless party-revelers at Studio 54 in New York in the late 1970s.

Interior view, Basement 6
Collective space. Photo:
Ruth Thompson.



With events that usually draw packed crowds from the local Chinese and the international community, it was only a matter of time before acknowledged talents like Lu Yang, Chen Tianzhuo, Wang Yiquan, and the global curator Li Zhenhua decided to take part. The appeal of the liberal environment in which one can express oneself with abandon might have been the reason that Li Zhenhua presented the project *Useless* between November 9 to 12, 2013, and not in his usual role as a curator of video and digital art, but as an artist in which he filled one large room of the basement with a giant ball of trash. Charek notes, “We haven’t really sought out the ‘big names.’ They have actually just spontaneously come to us. I think they are amazed that we fund everything ourselves, and we are very open to experimental ideas. We collaborate and give a chance to people who have solid ideas without a focus on who they are in the art world.”³⁹ Furthermore, Charek acknowledges, “This is a real community space.”⁴⁰ The single-night exhibitions are complemented by regularly held sessions of open-microphone storytelling TMAI (Tell Me about It) and Drink and Draw sessions where illustrators exchange and draw in each other’s sketchbooks. “We are here also to push and encourage each other in a welcoming environment of spirit and fun to try a different medium and explore something new. If you have been working with photography, we want you to pick up dance,” Roseland emphasizes.⁴¹ All of these creative liberties may be the reason why a long roster of twenty established and up-and-coming Chinese video artists signed onto part two of Charek’s TEP (The Exchange Program) this past June. The opportunity to exchange video works between Shanghai and AVIFF (Art, Video and Film Festival) in Cannes, France, must have been an irresistible offer for those Chinese artists who have not had the opportunity to show their work abroad.

In Shanghai, the quest to produce and secure art in public places presents challenges similar to those establishing new art museums across China. Whether in public or private spaces, the arbitration of who places what, where, and for whom can be contentious. Moreover, as Chinese society moves away from traditional types of figurative commemorative sculpture to more conceptual propositions, one of the sustaining criticisms about art in public spaces is that the content is no more accessible than that of contemporary art found in galleries and museums.

Yet, the enduring appeal of public art is its singular ability to transcend boundaries of cultural elitism and to breach the walls that confine many works of art in the cloisters of galleries, museums, and even worse, locked storage belonging to collectors and various cultural institutions. The sustaining power of art in the public sphere is the real, and even imagined, promise of egalitarian accessibility and the annihilation of discriminatory conceit. Public art invites young and old, rich and poor, and everyone in between to feel, climb, traverse, and experience the object or the space of the artwork.

This discussion of public art in Shanghai from 2010 to today represents but only a small cross-section of endeavours by public entities and individual artists to locate their places within this city. Given its historic importance as one of the major port cities in China, Shanghai has been, and will continue to be, highly regarded as a site of international influence and commerce. In an ideal world, public art in Shanghai would be achieved through effective modes of collaboration among government officials, architects, landscape architects, artists, and the local community. Yet the lack of a supporting framework and the presence of competing interests brings to a halt many promising projects. The good news, however, is that the imperative to bring art into the public domain remains stronger than ever, and collaborative efforts have been achieved with varying degrees of success, as noted in this discussion. Another pivotal aspect that unifies the public projects described in this study is, whether as permanent or ephemeral place markers and makers, these public art projects add a dynamic dimension to the prosaic lives of ordinary citizens by effectively transforming an otherwise static or empty space. Independent undertakings in local areas such as the Bazaar Compatible Program, Zhujiajiao Contemporary Public Art Exhibition, and Basement 6 Collective, as well as JR's citywide projects, attest to a desire to include art in daily life. The needs and scope of public art projects in Shanghai will constantly evolve, like the city itself. In the years ahead, the challenges will continue to be numerous, the possibilities immeasurable.

Notes

1. Janet Kardon, *Siah Armajani: Bridges, Houses, Communal Spaces, Dictionary for Building* (Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985), 77.
2. Martin Shulze, "Asia's Tallest Mural, By Hendrik Beikirch," Public Delivery, <http://publicdelivery.org/asias-tallest-mural-hendrik-beikirch/>.
3. For an art-historical analysis and visual evidence of art produced under Mao Zedong, see Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian, *Art and China's Revolution* (New York: Asia Society, with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008). See also Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
4. In 1934, the Congress of Soviet Writers approved the theory of socialist realism, a radical concept steeped in revolutionary ideals as the foundation for literary and visual arts. Endorsed by many heavyweights including Joseph Stalin and Maxim Gorky, it demanded that all art focus on man's struggle toward social progress, which was believed to ultimately lead to an auspicious collective life. For an account of the origins of socialist realism in the visual arts, see Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
5. Invited artists for the 2nd Jing'an International Sculpture Project were (in alphabetical order): Chen Zhiguang, Dai Yun, Wim Delvoeye, Ding Yi, Subodh Gupta, Deborah Halpern, Huang Zhiyang, Ram Katzir, Byounggho Kim, Melanie Maclou, Kumari Nahappan, Jaume Plensa, Fatih Semiz, Vanessa Stanley, Kemal Tufan, Robin Yakinthou, Wong Tinyan, and Hugo Zapata.
6. The theme of the 1st Jing'an International Sculpture Project was City Fantasy. The project included sculptures by the following artists (in alphabetical order): Arman, Alexandre Arrechea, Joy Brown, Chen Wenling, Wim Delvoeye, Jim Dine, Barbara Edelstein, Jan Fabre, Jean-Michel Folon, Gao Xiaowu, Philippe Hiquily, Rachid Khimoune, LplusL, Jaume Plensa, Antoine Poncet, Arne Quinze, Unmask Art Group, Hans Van de Bovenkamp, and Peter Woytuk. Artists who participated in the offsite venues were: Paul Suttman, Yip Kam Tim, Val, Wang Kaifang, Xie Chunyan, and Dong Yang.

7. Harriet F. Seine, *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6–7.
8. "Interview with Zhao Yongfeng Deputy Chief Executive of Jing'an District," *d.Plus022: Architecture, Interiors, Design, Art 22* (May 2013), 65.
9. Zhou Ping, "Editorial," *d.Plus022: Architecture, Interiors, Design, Art 22* (May 2013), 4.
10. The working title of Karen Fiss's book project is "From Nation Building to Nation Branding." <https://www.cca.edu/academics/faculty/kfiss/>.
11. Invited artists for the 3rd Jing'an International Sculpture Project were (in alphabetical order): Bahk Seonghi, Wim Delvoye, Jimenez Deredia, Cristóbal Gabarrón, Nadim Karam, Verjinia Markarova, Ju Ming, Alfio Mongelli, Alex Rinsler, Niki de Saint Phalle, Wang Luyan, Wang Yaxin, Ronald A. Westerhuis, Xia Yunfei, and Yan Shilin.
12. Mao Wencai, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, June 20, 2014.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Barbara Edelstein, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, June 19, 2014.
15. *Ibid.*
16. The largest sculpture park in Shanghai is the Shanghai Sculpture Park, which is located about 100 kilometers away from the city center, in Sheshan, Songjiang District. Inaugurated in 2005, the park encompasses an area of 86.7 hectares and hosts a collection of sculptural works by international artists. The relative remoteness of the site and the high entrance fee of 100–120 yuan per adult (and 30 yuan for dogs) have kept this park from entering the discourse of public art in the current article.
17. Claire Crozel, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, June 30, 2014.
18. Jia Bu, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, June 19, 2014.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Participating artists included (in alphabetical order): Anna Boggon, Anna Forlati, Gao Fu Yan, Tim Gruchy, Jin Jiang Bo, Li Xiao Fei, Luo Ming Jun, Ailine Veillat, and Bignia Wehrli. Wang Dan, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, July 4, 2014.
24. The artists who were invited were (in alphabetical order): Jean Christian Bourcart, Olaf Breuning, James Carl, Chen Hangfeng, Christoph Draeger, Chitra Ganesh, Hu Jieming, Huang Xiaopeng, Kenneth Tin-King Hung, Marc Lafia, Langlands and Bell, Lian Dongya, Euan Macdonald, Madeln, Eva and Franco Mattes, Lore Vanelslande, Heidi Voet, Lawrence Weiner, Yang Zhenzhong, and Zhou Xiaohu. In the end, because of space limitations, only twelve artists were able to display their work. Mathieu Borysevich, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, June 24, 2014.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Paul Devautour, unpublished e-mail interview with the author, Shanghai, August 27, 2014.
27. Mrs. Hang (first name not provided), unpublished conversation with the author, Shanghai, August 20, 2014.
28. Beginning in the early 1960s, Joseph Beuys advocated the concept of "social sculpture" and integrated his artifacts into actions to be understood as social exchanges and not merely as passive, objectified commodities. Jonathan Harris, *Utopian Globalists: Artists of Worldwide Revolution, 1919–2009* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). It was Nicolas Bourriaud who was to later provide the term "relational aesthetics," which propounded a theoretical basis for socially engaging art. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).
29. Discussions of art exhibitions in the history of Japanese department stores include the following: Jinno Yuki, *Shimi no tanjō: Hyakkuten ga tsukutta teisutto* (The Birth of Taste: The Taste that Department Stores Created) (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 1994), and Brian Moeran, "The Birth of the Japanese Department Store," in Kerrie L. MacPherson, ed., *Asian Department Stores* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 141–76.
30. Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake* (Rutland, VT, and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1984), 112.
31. "Zheng Zhigang Kingdom Bianshen K11," *Sing Tao Daily*, November 30, 2009.
32. James M. Bradburne, interview with Adrian Cheng in "Reinventing the Shopping Mall: The K11 Experiment," *LEAP: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China*, March 28, 2014, <http://leapleap.com/2014/03/reinventing-the-shopping-mall-the-k11-experiment/>. See also the official K11 website, "About the Chairman", <http://hk.k11.com/en/About-K11/About.aspx/>.
33. Basement 6 Collective members include Anneliese Charek, Katy Roseland, Sophia Lin, Megan Dodd, Sean Kelly, and MELS. Those who have since left Shanghai are Kate Manire, Rebecca Diaz, and Arlene Fiddes. Anneliese Charek, Katy Roseland, and MELS, unpublished interview with the author, Shanghai, August 22, 2014.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*

At the Heart of the Battle: The Creative Thinking and Practice of Liu Ding¹

I did not know much about Liu Ding before he came to live in Beijing in 2001, after having moved there from Nanjing. I have tried to get closer to that earlier Liu Ding based on a few words snatched here and there from other people, on his work, and on information gleaned when someone launched a deliberate online attack against him (which I will return to later in this text). I have asked Liu Ding many times to see his earlier paintings, so that I might search for elements among them that may have informed his later work. His works composed of nail polish painted onto stainless steel plates—the *Uncertain Metaphor* series (2006), *The Remaining Landscape* series (2006), and the *Incident* series (2006)—told me far less than what I was expecting. Going back to the time when Liu Ding was beginning his artistic career, I found that those paintings, which linger between the experimental and the emotions of the individual, didn't allow me to identify what Liu Ding's work is about, specifically.



Liu Ding, *Incident 1*, 2006, nail polish on aluminum board, 60 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Liu Ding and I often have talked about the foundation of artistic practice, and we rarely confined the issue to the framework of individuality. In fact, we mistrusted the way art has been universalized because of the undue emphasis placed on the individual. More importantly, within our current context, the identification and exploration of the foundation of artistic practice is taking place within the norms set by the narrative of Chinese contemporary art history. Such norms make such issues as modernism in China and the West, the individual and the collective, form and value, and the mediocre and the valid relevant for a given time only, so we avoid discussing any questions arising within art through a discourse that tends toward compromise and consensus. Therefore, when discussing the foundations of artistic practice with Liu Ding, I recognize that it is those histories that happen during moments of change that became the real point of our discussion.

When looking at Liu Ding's early paintings, with their gorgeous colours, I can detect a faint aroma of the artist's mood when he was making them. It's difficult to clearly say what this mood may have been or from where it came. One fact, however, is that these works were made at a time when



Liu Ding, *Uncertain Metaphor 11*, 2006, nail polish on aluminum board, 100 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

contemporary Chinese art was at its peak in terms of both international recognition and the strength of the market. It was also a time when exhibitions, commissions, seminars, interviews, and so on began to occupy a large portion of artists' time. Liu Ding himself was constantly taking part in such activities, observing the way other people participated in them, while attempting to expand his own artistic space beyond them.



This is completely different from the situation when he first arrived in Beijing, in 2001, a time when there were few exhibition opportunities for a young, unknown artist. Following initial difficulties, however, the blessing of opportunity did arrive, with the sudden boom of the market. Yet, while he was making his paintings, the thought “what will come of all this?” had already germinated in his mind. This question was a natural outcome of how, in the 1990s, some Chinese artists were abruptly faced with attention and acknowledgment from the West. In Liu Ding’s own words, facing this situation, “there was also some sense of disillusionment, that all of this cannot last.”²² While he had not yet found an appropriate way to investigate and reflect upon the symptoms of that time, he followed his intuition and embedded the result of those symptoms cryptically and in a labyrinthine fashion into his paintings. Perhaps this is why he deliberately chose to create an effect that was like fireworks bursting in his early paintings on stainless steel.

Liu Ding, *The Remaining Landscape 1*, 2006, nail polish on acrylic plate, 90 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Liu Ding was the first in China’s art world to bring the word “context” to the forefront through his artistic work and curatorial practice. Context has become the repeated target in his contemplations on art, and in our many discussions we have tried to define this idea of “context.” In Liu Ding’s mind, concepts such as context, the art industry, the art system, and reality overlap. In actuality, they make up the “setting” of art practice, a reservoir of signifiers where social, political, and aesthetic realities intertwine. Such settings can be interior or exterior, or they can be hard or soft; it depends on

how perspectives change and how specific issues are understood. Liu Ding's various forms of practice embody different levels of dialogue between his art and the setting. For example, when he served as co-curator of the research and exhibition project *Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art*, first presented at OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), Shenzhen, September 10–November 10, 2011, the setting was clearly within the art system. Faced with the reality of an art world that was becoming increasingly commercialized and with sales being a key barometer, Liu Ding rejected adopting a default non-intervention, non-judgmental attitude. He stressed the need to reflect on the existing power structures and discourses and made several radical, theory-laden proposals that included exercising equality within the art industry and following a self-determined methodology in developing an art practice. In *Little Movements'* presentation at OCAT Shenzhen and then Museion, Balzano, Italy (June 29–November 3, 2013), collective and individual practices were brought together from around the world, and practically all of them had an intense spirit that was both wild and romantic. These artists examined from various perspectives issues that included self-organization, a spiritual legacy, the development of an individual practice, educational strategies, and alternative spaces. This important exhibition reflected many of Liu Ding's deeply held artistic views.

Before *Little Movements*, Liu Ding's art was already showing signs of investigating these kinds of relationships between the individual and his or her setting. The work *Traces of Sperm* (2008) was my first contact with his artwork. For this highly sexualized piece, Liu Ding put together a whole range of different styles of furniture, utensils from daily life, painted erotic images, and several handwritten inscriptions. The furniture was spray-painted in solid colours so that their styles became indistinct and homogenous. The inscriptions were in the form of diary entries—records of sexual fantasies from various eras—that were written randomly on the furniture, and it became evident that a sexual fantasy from 1960 was not very different from one from 1990. Here, Liu Ding's calm and ironic style is plainly visible, and what is ridiculed is not sexual desire itself but, rather, the way we describe it. If we say that pornography is a way to fill a void, then aren't these descriptions also empty and therefore pointless? Or shall we suggest they are the same? The chairs bear hazy traces of their eras, and the dishes, clothes hangers, lanterns, and wine glasses that focus attention on the conflict and ambiguous relationship between historical narrative and the generation of meaning. These relationships are extremely important for Liu Ding's own thinking and later curatorial work.

A few years earlier, from *Samples from the Transition—Products* (2005–06) to the later ongoing project *Liu Ding's Store*, Liu Ding made a series of works that debated the idea of value as it pertains to art. These works tended to establish a running commentary on the economic value of the artwork and alluded to the artistic environment of that time, while simultaneously and thought-provokingly appealing for utopia. For the *Samples from the Transition—Products* project, first presented at the 2005



Guangzhou Triennial, Liu Ding hired thirteen painters from Dafen village, Shenzhen, which is famous for making imitations of Western oil paintings. Forming what looked like an assembly line, they each painted a single element—a tree, a section of sky, etc.—while standing on a pyramid-shaped stage that Liu Ding had built within the exhibition space; thus each painting was completed collectively. In the presentation of *The Utopian Future of Art, Our Reality* (one section of the larger ongoing *Liu Ding's Store* project), which he initiated in 2008, artworks, handicrafts, and design products were arranged indiscriminately in display cases of the kind one usually sees in grocery stores and were sold as if they all had the same worth. Their differences in grade, classification, and nature were ignored—the

Liu Ding, *Traces of Sperm*, 2008, installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Liu Ding, *Products*, 2005, installation/performance at 2005 Guangzhou Triennial. Courtesy of the artist.

concepts and experience of art and non-art, a finished product and an unfinished product, a design product and an everyday utensil, a product of regional specificity and a common global item (such as an electronic device), a unique object and a mass-produced object, were thus equalized. Liu Ding designed a special pricing system: The total cost of all the items placed in one cabinet was added up, that total was divided by the number of items, and the resulting number was then the price given to every item in that cabinet. This eliminated any differences in value among the objects, particularly those hidden labour costs that are normally added once the object has been made.



Liu Ding, *Products*, 2005–06, 40 paintings in gilded frames, 69 x 99.5 cm each, furniture. Courtesy of the artist and L. A. Galerie, Frankfurt.

Next page: Liu Ding, *Liu Ding's Store*, 2011, installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Liu Ding, *Liu Ding's Store—The Utopian Future of Art, Our Reality: A Container of Experience*, 2009, 210 x 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Liu Ding was certainly not the first to conduct artistic investigations into art production and distribution. Artists like Zhou Tiehai, who appropriated for his paintings in the mid-1990s the Camel cigarette icon Joe Camel, or Yan Lei, who has been producing massive paintings by assembly line over the past decade, are companions in this respect. What I found really appealing about Liu Ding's work in particular was his classless utopian ideal, and to some extent this has gone beyond a narrow discussion of the value of artworks and the art system, to gradually penetrate the question of the "politics" of art. Here one can detect the origins of the thinking behind Little Movements. *Liu Ding's Store's* self-constructed context, its ambiguous allusion to the setting of art practice between 2001 and 2008, when the recession set in, and even today, projects an intense desire to exercise resistance and to engender political awareness. Artists yearn for freedom, but how one pursues and expresses freedom within an intransigent system varies from person to person. *Liu Ding's Store* seeks to eliminate existing powers and hierarchies, and from Liu Ding's current work we can see that the discussion around the value of artworks is that the project's subject can be both explicit and implicit. I prefer to interpret it as a creative



A Container of Experiences
It is this... that...

individual's battle with concealed powers, an unrefined system of values, defined histories, and various hierarchies. Liu Ding's proposal to appeal for equality carries with it poetic elements, and while appearing to call for equality between different creative subjects, his ideas also can generate other exchanges and dialogues.



One will have a biased understanding of the “politics” that Liu Ding respects in art if we look at them only from the perspective of individual struggle. On the contrary, addressing the individual is just one aspect of his work and is not even the most important. In his later work he gives much

Liu Ding's Store, Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

more prominence to a critical approach toward intellectual history. Liu Ding prefers to look at politics from the perspective of coexistence. This coexistence can be between the artist and the art system, within the art world, between culture and history, or between artists from different times and places. Similarly, it can be coexistence between different ideologies, forms of expression, and art. In this way, the politics of coexistence is explored from an artistic point of view in the richness of Liu Ding's practice; it has an answer to the philosophical question of the relationship of self to other.

In China's art world, politics has always been present, but it's rarely accurately expressed or discussed in depth. Questions of politics are usually attached to discussions about culture, society, or political evolution. Mixed up like this, the political is not always easy to identify, and sometimes it will be overshadowed by various trends or eager anticipation for alternative theories. Questions of politics are rarely investigated on the level of art practice itself, while people in the art world are often too busy or engaged in other forms of celebration—being rewarded an established position in art history, enjoying record sales at auction, or presenting exhibitions in important museums in China or elsewhere. Liu Ding again uses the idea of coexistence, here as a way to interpret politics, and his devoted “immersion” (in practice and situations) and unceasing sense of reflection has endowed his practice with intensity, persistence, and strength. In Liu Ding's work, coexistence is connected with loneliness and independence, and symbolizes a way for form to exist in art, or any other kind of creative work. With coexistence, there are no boundaries among utopian ideals, reality, future aspirations, and possibilities, which exist side by side.

Liu Ding uses the word “dilution” to describe the situation of China's art world after 2000, in which art history has become relaxed, resulting in a lack of accurate or deep reflection. This is similar to the fracturing of history. If we want to go back in history, we need to look for those overlooked clues, or to observe and examine again transformations within

so-called established history and its narrative. Historical archaeology is not a new thing in Liu Ding's work; its presence is full of relevance and urgency. On the one hand, people are alarmed by the stagnant, "following the herd" mentality of the art world; on the other hand, the interruption of historical reflection endangers individual work in the way that it reduces itself solely to visual language experiments in a globalized world. By examining dialogue and reflection within a fixed range of possibilities, Liu Ding is able to put forward his reading of art history, one that has been simmering away for a number of years—in this case it is the practitioner of art who narrates history. This started his campaign against the accepted narrative of Chinese contemporary art history over the past thirty years—its cultural labels, social labels, and so-called offshoots coming from theoretical models on classifying and categorizing practitioners—thus offering a forceful response to the categorization and simplification of individual works. Again, his view of history is devoted to redefining fixed values and to breaking down hierarchical and authoritarian relationships, such as the art historian's dominance over artists, in order to create equality among all art practitioners.

Liu Ding, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 2007, installation of 43 paintings of various sizes, mirror. Courtesy of the artist.

In one of our most recent conversations, we proposed using a "low voice" to describe those who have been belittled and overlooked within the excessive powers of historical narrative and historical transformation, those whom historians perhaps have been unable to describe or define. Microscopic, organic, eluding description, vividness, context: This is how Liu Ding understands artworks and the work of artists. *Welcome to the Jungle* (2008) is a typical example. The walls of a fairly small space were covered with paintings, each of which represents part of the old interior of Liu Ding's apartment, and their reflection was cast over the entire mirrored space of the floor—part virtual, part reality. This virtual spiritual space was laden with dynamic energy; the images were both symbols of the artist's personal experience before they took form, and also indistinctly conveyed the artist as real and virtual, visible and changeable through the tensions between the present and the past.



After receiving an invitation from BMW Tate Live curator Catherine Wood, Liu Ding created *Almost Avant-garde* (2013), a performance for an online audience that was broadcast live on YouTube and that took place within a lounge-like enclosed space that he created at Tate Modern. He then invited staff from Tate Modern, as well as colleagues, to sit in the lounge. The room was decorated with cardboard reproductions of modern works of art from the museum's permanent collection, but on the live YouTube Broadcast, one could not hear what was being said because a soundtrack of baroque melodies that had been subtly altered by Liu Ding was being played so that



Liu Ding, *Almost Avant-garde*, performance, May 17, 2013, Tate Modern, London. Courtesy of the artist.

one could hear only the ambient sound of the music, which drowned out people’s voices entirely. Also, intermittently, the YouTube broadcast—the live performance—was interrupted by projections of texts selected from Liu Ding’s conversations with Chinese artists active in the 1990s. “Avant-garde” was a term widely used in the 1980s and 90s in China’s cultural world, and it referred to all kinds of experimental creative practices that were inconsistent with the national ideology. An ambiguous concept at best, “avant-garde” embedded itself in a fantasy of a better future and rarely provided profound reflection in terms of its historical and intellectual roots in China. Things are always almost “avant-garde,” with new historical goals, one after the other, always waiting for us ahead. Liu Ding’s work questions this ambiguous reality within art and the attitude of universality that is reflected in it. He attempts to look at things on the microscopic level, including those things that barely can be identified or clarified, just like the lounge in *Almost Avant-Garde*, and even though we cannot clearly describe what is happening, all the associations still provide an intense sense of time, motivation, and the possibilities of truth.

The Un-erasable, presented together with *Almost Avant-garde* and *I Simply Appear in the Company of . . .* in his solo-exhibition titled *Three performances* (March 8, 2014 –April 20, 2014), at Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, finds Liu Ding in a space where the walls are covered with artworks he has collected over the years and that evoke common aesthetic experiences. He invited an art historian and an artist to sit in the exhibition space to talk about the relationship between art and experience. Intentionally, no microphones were used in this performance, so the audience was able to catch only fragments of the barely audible conversation. These performances did not take place in isolation; they arose out of specific situations. *I Simply Appear in the Company of . . .* was a performance that took place during a one-day symposium held at Tate Modern’s Oil Tanks, while *The Un-erasable* was shown at the 8th Taipei Biennial and was

Liu Ding, *I Simply Appear in the Company of Other Things*, 2009–ongoing, readymades, wooden frames, lights, plaster walls, copper plates. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing.



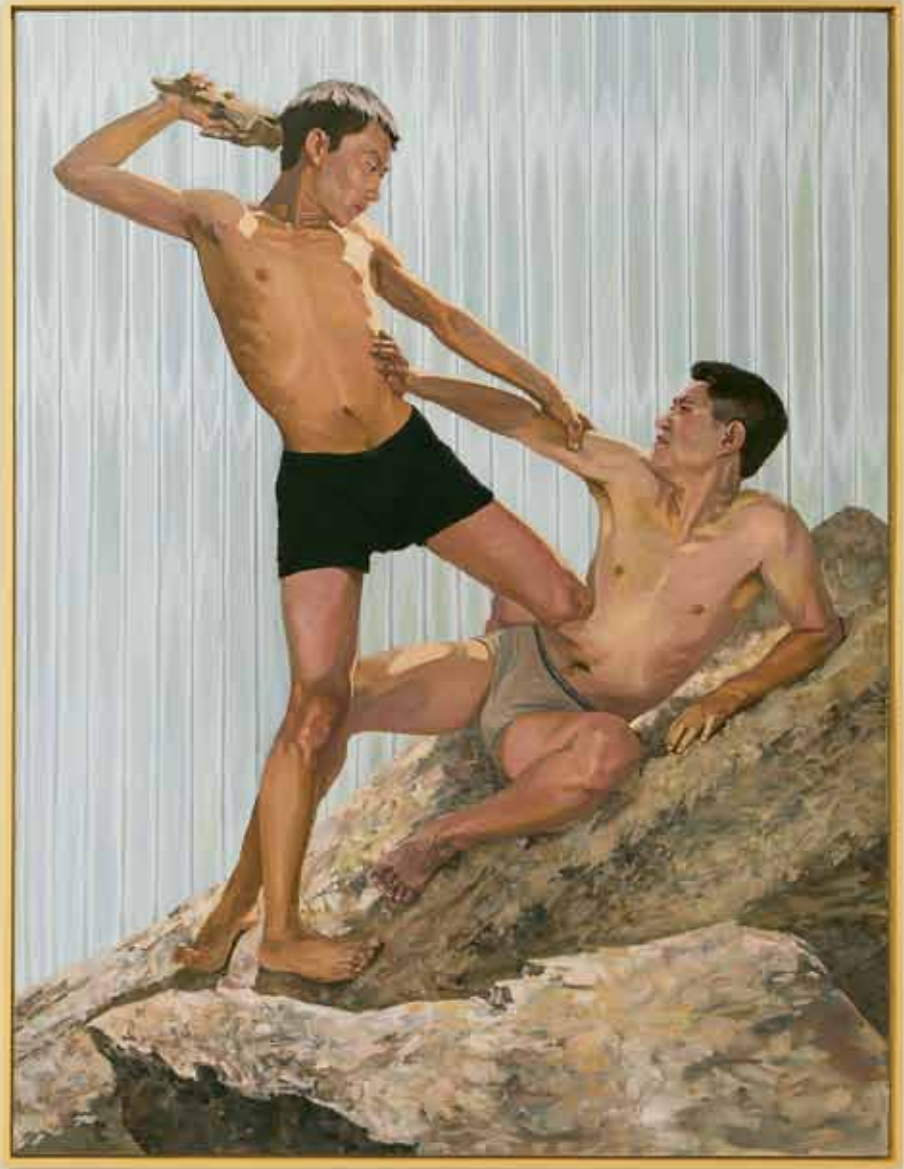
Liu Ding, *The Un-erasable Part 1*, performance, installation with Liu Ding and Li Ran, September 28, 2012; Part 2, performance, installation with Liu Ding, Li Ran, and Meiling Cheng, September 29, 2012, both at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan. Courtesy of the artist.



composed of two performances, one on the day before the opening and one at the opening ceremony. For Liu Ding, what he calls “weak performance” is not an art form that requires strict definition. Compared with performance art, which involves developing highly symbolic personas or narratives, Liu Ding plays himself, and candidly opens himself up to others, revealing his true thoughts.

In his recent solo exhibition at Antenna Space, Shanghai, Liu Ding presented his newly developed project, *Lake Washington* (2014), which evolved around the working tradition and artistic consciousness of socialist realism—yet another artistic approach to the art historical context whose legacy is denied, according to Liu Ding, due to political correctness. As a former artistic ideology, socialist realism has not only shaped a strongly politically oriented aesthetic, but has also left behind a certain kind of rigid political consciousness that has its epiphany in the behavioural and intellectual ecology of China’s art world. The exhibition begins with a lake-view picture of Lake Washington Liu Ding took in Seattle. During his stay there, he learned that Lake Washington was not in Washington, D.C., but in Seattle. Even though his local friends kept telling him that Lake Washington was in Seattle, he realized that it was a “misunderstanding” of his own that he was not in a rush to correct. When cruising on the lake, he captured scenes of middle-class white people partaking in leisure activities: yachts on the water, girls in bikinis sunbathing, and playing with pets, etc. He became





aware that the solidity of ideology would be more un-erasable than these pleasant scenarios.

The centre of the exhibition consisted of a set of two paintings titled *A Message* (2013), both paintings done in a “socialist realist” style. The painting on the right shows the image of two topless men engaged in an act of violence against each other with a pattern of silver strips in the background, while the painting on the left shows a pot with one yellow chrysanthemum flower. About this work, Liu Ding wrote:

A Message consists of two paintings in dialogue with each other. I chose the chrysanthemum, being inspired by the chrysanthemums that appeared in the painting *Founding Ceremony*. It was a painting made by Dong Xiwen in the 1950s as a revolutionary mission. In Dong Xiwen’s painting, the flowers are concerned with two layers: the first is the discussion about nationalization of art, which is represented by the use of the highly ornamental pure-yellow flowers as well as other parts of the painting executed in the same style; the second is the discussion on how to modernize art, which has been a question in China since the 1950s and is one that is still worth paying attention to. Several years after the painting was completed, purple-red colored chrysanthemums were painted in the painting, as substitutes for the original mighty figures in political battles, replacing the figure of Gao Gang on the original painting. This kind of replacement and rewriting of history and reality in paintings, driven by various motivations still exist today. Arbitrariness plays a significant part in China’s modernization progress. When depicting two figures battling with each other, the artist applied Soviet realist painting style, which has been well known since the 1950s and 60s to depicting the figures. Tensions of the moving bodies and muscles are not exaggerated, and the expressions on the faces of the two figures as well lessen the dramatic sense and stress that would have been expected in conflicts. The two characters are suspended in a fixed pose. I try to use this fixed pose—neither moving forward nor backward, to exemplify the meaning of emptiness. This emptiness has been repeatedly “purified” for revolutionary purposes since the 1950s, when painting again became a tool for revolution, mingling styles of realism and romanticism. This mixture of styles that has been gradually vacuumed and it was called into question and resisted by artists for doubts about its power of expression. The art that has been emptied of meaning in the Cultural Revolution is not merely an issue concerning visual appearance. The socialization and politicization of art leaves behind its political baggage and

Previous page: Liu Ding, *A Message*, 2013, oil on canvas, 160 × 180 cm (flower); 160 × 210 cm (figures). Courtesy of the artist.

logic in the discourse of art, the historical narrative of art, and the art industry. In my view, our contemplation and questioning of these issues is far from enough. . . .”³

Other works in Lake Washington are more like products of time travel in which Liu Ding is not a bystander, but, rather, a companion in various ambiguous stories. Although he is frustrated by the lack of an intellectual foundation in China’s art practice, he does not end up taking a critical position as an outsider. He is willing to place himself into the very context he is questioning and exposes himself with a self-descriptive as well as a self-critical approach. Thus, his critical approach to the intellectual history of art can be seen as an outlet for his own art practice, one that should not be regarded as individual visual expression or an experiment in formal language, but, rather, as one that manifests itself in its political reflection of art.

Reality and history are the battlefields, and thought advances with difficulty from battlefield to battlefield, but Liu Ding has always put himself at the heart of the battle. With this in mind, let us go back and look at the 2008 online attacks against Liu Ding, which accused him of plagiarizing of certain Western artists’ renowned works. It would have been well worth the effort if the art industry had reflected on Liu Ding’s response, but this attack had nothing to do with any discussion of art. It was full of malicious speculation; it was immoral opportunism, and an extreme personal insult. Liu Ding responded gravely and calmly to his anonymous attackers. He collected all their posts and used them in the artwork *Gravestone for Rumor Monger* (2008). The anxiety that art practitioners feel when faced with competition was on show for all of us to see. Liu Ding’s battle has always been unrelated to revelry or games; he believes in serious reflection on art. Only this kind of confrontation awards us with the fun of creative practice, spiritual joy, and a small valuable intellectual contribution.

Notes

1. This essay is based on an earlier text of mine with the same title (translated from the Chinese by Dinah Gardner) in *Liu Ding: Three Performances*, exh. cat. (Beijing: Galerie Urs Meile, 2014).
2. Quoted from a conversation between Liu Ding and the author on January 12, 2014 in OCAT Shenzhen, shortly before the exhibition opening date of his latest project *From the issue of art to the issue of position: The echoes of socialist realism*.
3. Wall text in exhibition of *Washington Lake* at Antenna Space, Shanghai, 2014.

Alice Schmatzberger

Wang Wo: Not a Gaze but a Concerned Glance¹

Wang Wo,² independent filmmaker, artist, and teacher, came to Beijing in 1990 in order to complete a bachelor's degree in the Department of Interior Design at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. After several years working in the design and advertising business, he entered the master's program in the Department of Interior Design at Tsinghua University and received his degree in 2001. Afterward, he taught in the Department of Design Art at Xu Beihong College of Fine Arts, Renmin University of China.

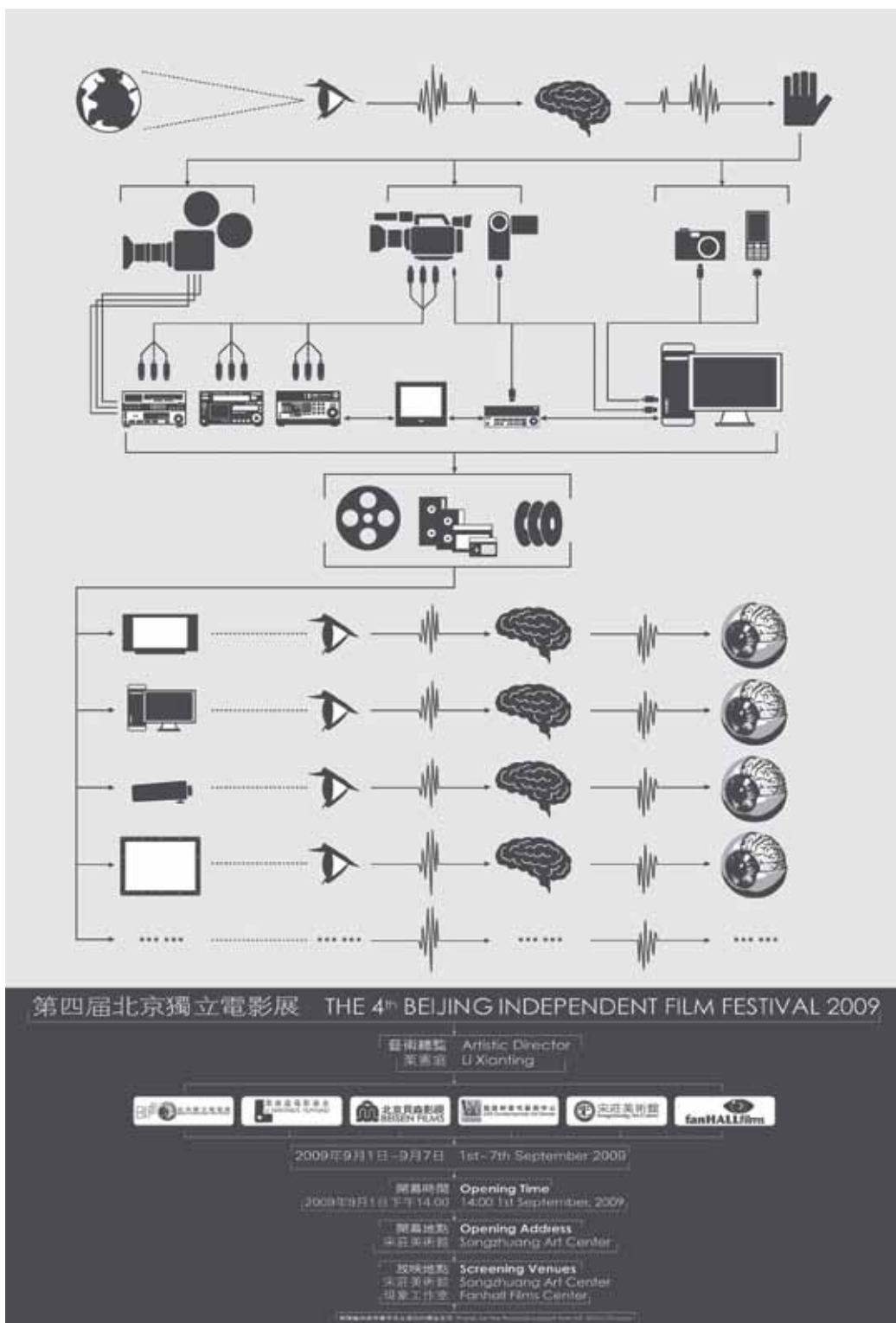


Wang Wo, *Time* magazine cover, June 17, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Since 2006, Wang Wo has acted as Fine Art Director of the Li Xianting Film Foundation,³ and since 2008, he has additionally served as a lecturer at Li Xianting Film School, the first independent film school in China. In a 2011 article about the school, Wang Wo (together with Ying Liang) was labelled “one of the major pedagogical voices of the program,” one who speaks to the type of intellectual environment they hope to foster at Li Xianting Film School.⁴ “As far as independent thinking is concerned, I feel that everyone has a natural ability to think for oneself. While it may at times be restricted or suppressed, this ability still exists.”⁵

In his films—*Outside* (2005), *Noise* (2007), *Up & Down* (2007), *Zheteng* (2010), and *Dialogue* (2014)—Wang Wo produces non-narrative impressions of daily life and reality in contemporary China. As a graphic designer he has worked since 2005 with Ai Weiwei Studio for which he has designed book covers as well as the cover of *Time* magazine in June 2013.⁶

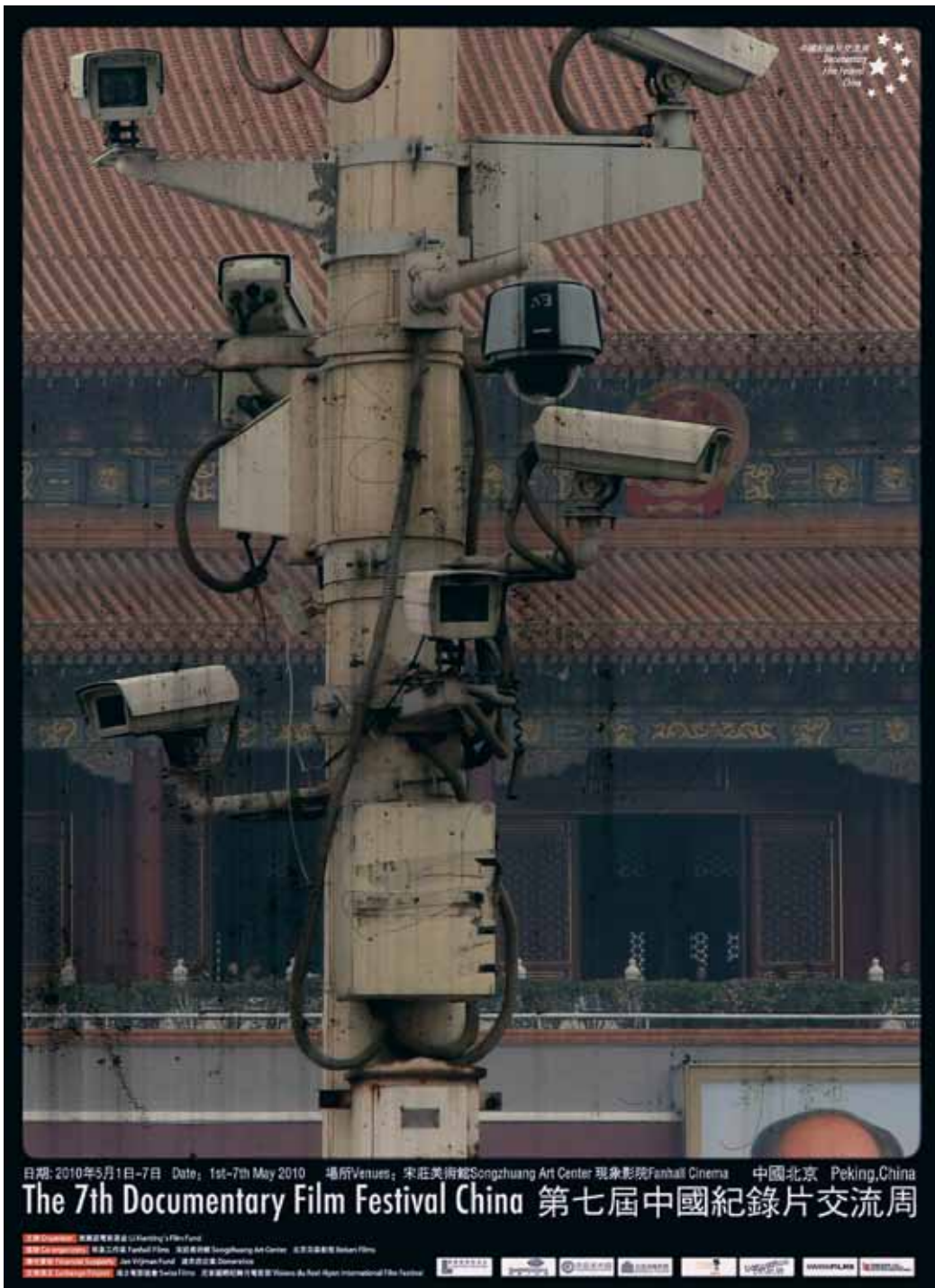
All his work—film, photography,⁷ and graphic design—has the common pursuit of a connection between art and society and reveals the distinct social and political consciousness of an accurate observer as well as a philosophy of independence.



Wang Wo, poster for the 4th Beijing Independent Film Festival, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Alice Schmatzberger: You studied design and worked as graphic and product designer, among other things. How did you finally arrive at working in the film business and starting a career as an independent filmmaker?

Wang Wo: This began only after I had finished my master's studies, in 2001. Around 2003 or 2004, I began to work on independent films. And since 2006, I have been regularly designing posters and images for Chinese independent films and festivals—for example, Beijing Independent Film



Festival, Li Xianting's Film Fund, China Documentary Film Festival, and Hong Kong Chinese Film Festival.

Wang Wo, poster for the 7th Documentary Film Festival China, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

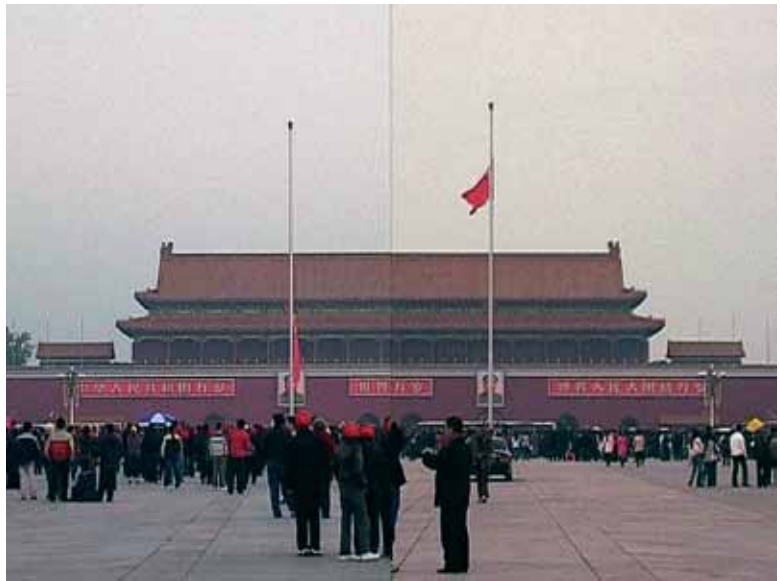
Alice Schmatzberger: What do your films centre on? Are they labelled documentaries?

Wang Wo: I bought my first video camera in 2001. Every day I strolled around and I recorded virtually everything I came upon. The idea of producing a film out of all this material then evolved rather slowly. So far I have accomplished three longer films—*Outside*,⁸ *Noise*,⁹ and *Zheteng*. Additionally, I did *Up & Down*, which is a short cut of eleven minutes.

Wang Wo, still from *Noise*, 2007, film, 60 mins., 40 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



Wang Wo, still from *Up & Down*, 2007, film, 11 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



Basically they all deal with every day life in Beijing and China; they are about the city, small ordinary stories of life in *hutong* and on the streets. They address political or economic events that affect peoples' lives. The footage for *Zheteng* was taken from television as well as from the Internet during 2008. It shows appearances and performances of various people and events in the form of reports, discussions, accounts, and special features.¹⁰

Alice Schmatzberger: Is there a distinction between your films and your photographic work? The latter deals with specific political or social events and moments in the history of China, such as the funerals of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, demonstrations related to the war with Vietnam, the famous “tank man” at Tian’anmmen Square, and the Sichuan earthquake, while your films are more about the ordinary personal lives of people.

Wang Wo: That’s typical of European thinking. Westerners always regard the political circumstances, developments, and events in China as something specific, something that is viewed as separate from the everyday lives of Chinese people. But for us, this is part of our daily life, our daily routine; therefore neither my photographic works nor my films are separate from everyday life. And in regard to content, my photographs do not follow



a different approach in comparison to my films. In China, so many things happen every day, be it a lively discussion on the street, a new politician, whatever. Take, for example, the artist Ai Weiwei; he is doing a lot of projects that are regarded by Westerners as being only a political statement. But for Chinese audiences these projects are just about normal life. So the so-called political is not something that is different from the daily lives of the people.

Wang Wo, still from *Zheteng*, 2010, film, 112 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Alice Schmatzberger: In most Western countries, typical media coverage and reports concerning China deal with political events, environmental disasters, or economic developments. There is seldom any feature or news about the culture of ordinary people—perhaps that is one of the reasons for this kind of thinking in the West.

Wang Wo: Every country has its own cultural phenomena and therefore also different perceptions of films or artworks. For example, I wondered about all the surveillance cameras I can see mounted on private houses here in Austria. This would never be the case in China, that people would have such cameras on their private homes. But this seems to be a normal habit for some European societies, whereas for the Chinese it would be a completely new form of behaviour.

Alice Schmatzberger: From where do you gather your image material? That is, for example, the single images that deal with specific historical or political moments that comprise your photography series *Untitled History* (2012–ongoing)? From what I understand, one of your main sources is the Internet, and then you digitally erase some details. Could you discuss your approach?

Wang Wo: I also take my material from newspapers, video, press photos—whatever visual material I encounter. I am a keen collector in this regard. During my different jobs I was always confronted with loads of image material, this is also the case when I scrolled through my own film material. And every time I went through all that film material, I thought about how this or that snippet or segment might look like as a single image. So it was there that the first thoughts emerged to create something more than just a film out of this material.

Wang Wo, *Untitled History 002*, 2013, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.



Concerning the erasure of details; you know that strong censorship exists in China. That means some ideas or images are simply not feasible; thus some topics or images perhaps are blocked on the Internet, and some searches for words or images may result in a blank screen. But if I digitally delete some details from sensitive images—for example, the slogans on the banners of protestors or the tanks at Tian’anmen Square—then maybe censorship can be evaded.

Alice Schmatzberger: What observations did you make—what kind of insights did you gain—when looking through all this visual material you work with?

Wang Wo: When you look at images depicting the Chinese Spring Festival, for example, you can see all these families sitting together throughout the whole country. If you then digitally delete some details in the photograph, like furniture, hangings on the wall, plants, etc., attention is drawn automatically to the individuals, and, especially, to their faces. Without the distracting surroundings in the picture, the human being itself emerges



very clearly. The expression on the face comes into focus—and you come to realize how so many people look more or less the same, with the same posture, the same facial expression, and the same gestures.

*Wang Wo, Untitled
History 013, 2013, digital
photograph, 40 x 25.6 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.*

Another example is images of political demonstrations, which are very rare in China, like on the occasion of Zhou Enlai's funeral, or during the trial against the Gang of Four, the successful qualification for the World Football Championship in 2001, or the hosting of the Olympic Summer Games in 2008—there always were proponents and opponents. But if you erase the wording on the banners and posters in the images, then one notices the similarities, and protests against or in favour of something all look the same. No matter what the topic is, there are always the same songs, the same choreography, so to speak. These are the fascinating details I want to reveal.

My impression is that Chinese people are more or less constantly under pressure. If there is eventually an occasion to gather, for example, at Tian'anmen Square, either to protest or to celebrate, then people have something in common, they have an opportunity to share something emotionally—no matter what it is about, whether it is an incident or a national celebration of something.

Alice Schmatzberger: What is the reason for keeping your photographic works untitled?

Wang Wo: Through these works I want only to insinuate history, or, better, a version of history. For example, I have deleted all specific information—that is, as I mentioned earlier, the words in the images dealing with political protests. Now, an altered image such as this offers multiple possibilities to the audience: you do not know exactly what the image is about; you do not

know if this situation truly happened in this way, or if it ever existed at all as represented in the picture. During the last ten or so years, everything has changed so fast, so fundamentally, in China that three months from now everything could be different again. Who knows? In a couple of months or years no one will remember exactly what really happened previously in history; one barely can connect a visual impression to a specific moment. Take as one example the Vietnamese War we were talking about: first it was the USA who went into war with Vietnam, but, later, China also went to war with Vietnam, although war was a rather short one (Sino-Vietnamese War, February–March 1979). But nowadays no one even seems to be able to recollect that this war between China and Vietnam ever took place.

Wang Wo, *Untitled History 005*, 2013, digital photograph, 40 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Another instance are the events of June 4, 1989.¹¹ When I worked as a teacher in Beijing, I once wrote the following numbers on the blackboard: 6 4 8 9. Then I asked my students what they these numbers might indicate. No one knew—one girl asked if these were the measurements of a woman's body. Information about the Tian'anmen incident is being suppressed, so memory and history are being erased, and, somehow, successfully. This is shocking.

All these important moments in history are fading away quickly. Because of this, I feel no necessity to label the individual images within my photographic series.

Alice Schmatzberger: So, on the one hand you address the evanescence or fleetingness of these moments. On the other hand, I understand you want to reveal a kind of uniformity or conformity within people's behaviour within and throughout history?



Wang Wo, *Untitled History 020*, 2013, digital photograph, 40 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Wang Wo: Yes. There are many of such examples I can cite; for instance, some time ago there was a protest against the government, and at the same time there was an event organized by the government to praise itself. If you look at images of both events you will see that everything looks the same. You cannot tell what is a protest against the government and what is an event celebrating the government.

I think Chinese citizens lack a kind of consciousness or awareness of their social responsibility to acknowledge the differences in this context, because it definitely does matter if one is part of an event against or in favour of something. There is no tradition of developing one's own opinion or point of view; this is something deeply rooted in Chinese society. This also predisposes one to external influences or even manipulation. In China, it is not easy to formulate your own opinion.

Alice Schmatzberger: Maybe this habit has roots in the traditional Chinese educational system. Westerners who have taught or lectured in China often recount that it is quite difficult to get into a deep discussion with a Chinese audience. Focus seems directed more to memorizing subject matter and not so much upon analysis.

Wang Wo: Since 1949,¹² our educational system has focused completely on exactly what you are saying: do not formulate your own opinion. You simply note where the majority stands, and then you align yourself with it. You do not discuss or consider different viewpoints carefully; there is an absence of any kind of public debate.

The educational system is just one of the causes. On the other side, this behaviour also results from life experience. It is not easy, and even more, it is not harmless to have your own opinion. We have a saying that goes something like this: The bird that first sticks out his head is going to be shot.

Alice Schmatzberger: Do you observe differences between generations in this regard? Does the younger generation, for example, the twenty-somethings, act or behave differently than older generations?

Wang Wo: There is of course a difference. In China, we make a distinction between those born in the 1980s, the first generation of the post-Mao era, and those born in the 90s. The latter generation is the first one that has grown up with the Internet; they know how to extract information, how to elude censorship, or how to access blocked websites. This generation, therefore, has more possibilities to access information and gain knowledge about history or what is going on in the world. In general, they are better informed.

Nevertheless, I do not observe a real change. There are still two parties involved: the government and the people. No real change can take place as long as one of these parties is not altering its approach or its line of action. If one side does not make any changes, then the other side also only has limited possibilities. There has to be an interplay between both sides that are involved.

Wang Wo, still from *Outside*, 2005, film, 78 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



A little anecdote of an experience I had at Tian'anmen Square: There is this big gate at the entrance to the Forbidden City, above which a portrait of Mao Zedong is hanging. Someone said to me: As long as this image is not removed, there will be no change. It is as if we as a society still are in those same old times.

Alice Schmatzberger: This image is not being removed, not even altered; therefore, as the counterpart of this image, does this mean society experiences no changes? And does this also hold true for the younger generations?

Wang Wo: Many people say that the generation of the 1980s holds out hope for future improvements in China. But that does not make any sense. Even earlier my father thought back then that the next generation—that is, I—would bring hope. Basically, everybody should live for himself, should shape his own living and not bother about the next generation. There is no meaning in waiting for a next generation. My father's generation simply accepted their living conditions. For myself, I do not want just to live with these circumstances. With my works of art, I am discussing current living conditions; I address the current circumstances of life. Through my projects I am dealing with all this. One should not wait for the future or the upcoming generations. When you live in China for forty years, it does not matter very much how the world outside is changing when, at the same time, within China, little change is taking place.



Take for example Ai Weiwei: He exhibits a strong appearance, but inwardly he may be suffering under the same circumstances as other people do. In the end, everybody has to cope for himself with all of this.

Wang Wo, still from
Dialogue, 2014, film, 120
mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Alice Schmatzberger: In Europe, there still somehow exists this sort of naïve social romantic notion that the more difficult the times are, the better the circumstances are for art. Tough times in the economy, politics, or whatever are good times for artists, so to speak, because there are then a lot of topics to address and reflect upon, a lot of nuisances, social injustice, upheaval, economic shortages, etc. Could such considerations be applied to China, too?

Wang Wo: There are big differences. On the one side, you find artists who deal almost exclusively with topics such as social circumstances, current political developments, environmental problems, etc. But at the same time there are others who live and work more according to the principle *l'art pour l'art*.

In the current times, there exists some unrest within the Chinese society. If an artist really seeks to pursue his artistic approach, to follow his interests undisturbed and untroubled, he has to leave the country and go abroad. The social environment in China at the moment is characterized by a greed for money, products, and fame. It is not easy to achieve something or be successful only with knowledge, skill, or commitment. I recently had a discussion with a Japanese artist who asked why Chinese documentaries are not developed in more detail and are not more sophisticated. It is because of all this unrest. For an artist there is so much to do, to reflect upon, to address, so much material to collect and to record, that there is no time for details.

Alice Schmatzberger: Photography and film have a very different history in China than in Europe. What significance does photography have within contemporary art?

Wang Wo: Photography is still something specific in China. Of course, there are many artists who have tried to work with this medium, but very few have succeeded in doing this successfully in the long run. As far as I remember, it was in the mid-1990s that many artists started to experiment and work with photography. Before then, cameras and all the equipment that accompanied them were simply too expensive. If you saw an ordinary individual on the street with a camera many people might have regarded this as a bit unusual. Today, it is still a specific medium because authorities strictly control image production. And it is still barely recognized as art by a broad audience.

Alice Schmatzberger: How are you continuing with your projects in photography or film? Would you reveal some details of your other currently on-going projects?

Wang Wo: I still have lots of material; therefore, I will definitely proceed with further photography projects. I started the *Untitled History* series only in 2012. I recently finished my latest film, *Dialogue*, a 120-minute documentary of talks with the Dalai Lama.¹³ My main task currently is to shoot a documentary about Inner Mongolia. I am also working on violence-related documentaries. And I will soon work on some pictures and paintings, too.

Notes

1. This title refers to Gao Shiming's assertion that "The 'decisive' moment put out by Bresson is not a gaze but a concerned glance, which has gone beyond the visual model of subjectivism, over the world through the lens." Gao Shiming, "What is the 'reality' you refer to?" in *Moving Images in China 1988–2011* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2012), 65–77.
2. This is a pen name; Wang Wo was born in 1967 as Wang Jianjun, in Hebei province.
3. Li Xianting's Film Fund not only founded the film school, but it also initiated the Beijing Independent Film Festival (which used to take place at Fanhall Film Arts Center in Songzhuang Artist Village, some twenty kilometres east of Beijing). The Beijing Independent Film Festival's 9th edition (2012) and 10th edition (2013) were both shut down by authorities.
4. Benny Schaffer, "Philosophies of Independence: The Li Xianting Film School," *LEAP* 8 (April 28, 2011), <http://leapleapleap.com/2011/04/philosophies-of-independence/>.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Time Magazine* 181, no. 23 (June 17, 2013), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601130617,00.html/>.
7. *Untitled History* series, ongoing since 2012.
8. "There are so many things that we can see and hear, but beyond our imagination—outside. Each day, we see, hear many things on the street, however, what do we really see and hear? What do we think about it? Through the lens we see and hear it again. Shall we think about it again? The things ceaselessly begin and end. Things gazed by me will not change. My gaze is just recording it!" Unpublished artist's statement.
9. "Aimlessness in the camera, commonality in the eye, violent buzz of noise, deserted chaotic scenes, . . . What the somewhat disorganized scenes give you is perhaps not enjoyment, not thinking, but further confusion—you can see a fuss, promotion in all seriousness, violence under bright daylight, quiet sadness, seemingly naive adult games, carnival extravaganza where the whole country cheers, ghostlike fireworks and explosions that make people tremble with fear—it is like offering a sacrifice to the noisy era." Unpublished artist's statement.
10. "Although the amount of information from television is considerable, its level of trustworthiness is low. Nonetheless, the space for reflection and imagination it offers the audience is expansive. Footage from the Internet has a bit of trustworthiness and a bit of untrustworthiness, but the actual amount of each comes totally from the spectator's own judgment. The material for the film was gathered during 2008. The year 2008 was not so different from the days before it and the days after. This is because the prior trouble-making has never stopped, and the coming trouble-making will persist. The intention of this film is merely to use lies to speak a word of truth." Unpublished artist's statement.
11. This refers to the incident at Tian'anmen Square, June 4, 1989.
12. The People's Republic of China was established by Mao Zedong on October 1, 1949.
13. Spring 2014.

Jonathan Goodman

Zhang Dali: Square Klein Sun Gallery, New York June 26–August 30, 2014



Zhang Dali, *Square*, installation view. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

For decades, Beijing-based artist Zhang Dali has been making art that challenges China's status quo, which, as I expect a large part of the Chinese art world would agree, needs to be challenged. His work has played an important role in the history of contemporary art in China, and his generation has had a major impact on the way social mores are addressed there. Zhang Dali's photographs documenting his graffiti, for example, along with outlines of his head cutout in the ruins of Beijing walls and buildings that were destroyed in order to make room for new architecture during the late 1990s, were signs of humanity in an otherwise dehumanized context. He is recognized as marked with the integrity of an independent—that is, as an artist who has not capitulated to market forces. This is a claim many Chinese artists can no longer make, caught as they are in the mesh of the bubble economy.

In Zhang Dali's exhibition entitled *Square* (Klein Sun Gallery, New York, June 26–August 30, 2014), viewers were confronted with the artist's poetic vision of Tian'anmen Square, a symbol of national prominence in Beijing, the capital city. Besides its purpose of promoting unity, Tian'anmen Square is best remembered as the site where the government brutally killed protestors twenty-five years ago. So, in some sense, Zhang Dali's *Square* memorializes the failure of the democracy movement in China, now often

seen as a tragic attempt at political freedom that came before its time, a time that is yet to be realized. While the title of his exhibition inevitably calls up the memory of the tragic events that destroyed the democracy movement, Zhang Dali has seen fit to correlate that event with the ongoing problem of poverty, especially as it pertains to migrant workers who populate the back streets of Beijing and other cities.

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 4*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 190 x 105 x 70 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.



While the press materials for the exhibition explain that Zhang Dali intended to provide his perspective on Tian'anmen Square through the works on display—alluding to the possibility for hope in addition to a history of violence—for me, the show expressed itself in images that conveyed melancholy or an absurd impossibility. In other words, the presence of hope in the face of actual events was insignificant to the point of disappearing. In the exhibition, white birds were hung from the ceiling—images of flight as an active freedom, creating a positive visual signifier of liberty. This was a compelling image, as

during the Cultural Revolution birds were driven from the city, so now there are no birds to be found in Tian'anmen Square. As a result, in Zhang Dali's installation, they now serve as a metaphor for freedom. Birds are also present in the exhibition in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*, clinging to the clothing or perched on the bodies of the cast fiberglass figures representing underprivileged migrant workers in Beijing (Zhang Dali hired models and paid them well to undergo the casting process), emphasizing a sense of passiveness, at times bordering on despair, that is embodied in the way the migrant workers sit or stand. Within this scenario, one hoped for something positive, namely, that the reality portrayed would provoke in viewers an empathetic view toward the workers, and in turn the underclass, who were represented here, but the countenance of these figures was muffled and downcast. They projected little or no assurance that their lives could be bettered in a material sense, and the doves that clung to their clothing only underscored the fact that alienation was to be the lot of these unfortunate people. Zhang Dali's tableau took the viewer to a place where private and public suffering converge—in ways that repeat much of what China has suffered already: endemic poverty.

The issues raised by the exhibition *Square*, then, are more complex than Zhang Dali's seemingly spare arrangement of people and birds might suggest. At what point does the presentation of suffering, in this case one

that seems to elude resolution, attract blame or public judgement? The artist's theme turns on desperation, but it is a desperation that is implied, rather than directly stated. Implication and suggestion go far in the not-so-innocent world of Chinese art, where varied strategies include both oblique and barely hidden critiques of the government's authoritarianism. Now that the Chinese miracle of a stable and robust economy has taken place, it seems almost pointless to ride against the waves of prosperity. But art's place in China has often been to point out ethical discrepancies and egregious mistakes committed by a government that will not tolerate criticism, let alone an independent voice. In line with that tradition, Zhang Dali has taken it upon himself to fashion a silent pageant of figures that resound with what he has called in discussion with me "the artist's pain," something akin to the psychic suffering of the intellectual who remains outside of society. Thus, *Square* makes its points in triple—as a memory of government savagery, as an existential statement underscoring the suffering of China's poor, and as a personal statement by the artist in search of a context that would place him in a moral setting that is meaningful.



We owe Zhang Dali thanks for this understated but important critique of China. At the same time, I wonder if a critical reading of *Square* would be so clear in China itself. One of the biggest problems in contemporary Chinese art is a lack of criticism worthy of its ambitious artists. On one level, it is difficult to hope for much; within the Chinese art system, the writer is often paid by the artist, who then pays the publication to print the article. Therefore, it would seem that any system for critique is impaired from the start.

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 1*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 170 x 105 x 74 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

In addition, censorship of artwork is tight, perhaps leading to constraints on critical commentary about the art. While there may well be consciously intended political implications within a given work, they are not met with extended public scrutiny—not because they are misunderstood, but because the consequences of conveying such understanding when a negative interpretation of the government is published may include a prison term for the critic. The problem also extends to artists themselves—not a far-fetched scenario, as we can see from Ai Weiwei's detainment and imprisonment, meant to punish him for his generally irreverent recalcitrance as much as for his rebellious political actions. Seen in this light, it is fair to characterize Zhang Dali's lyric resistance toward Chinese authoritarianism as something greater than one individual's noncompliance with conventional mores, let alone a rejection of governmental precepts. He is part of a small, but genuine, group of artists who have had the courage to confront

the government with their art—this despite the fact that Ai Weiwei has mostly shown abroad. This rebelliousness has been evident for more than a generation. Beijing's East Village artists, for example, lived in squalid conditions during the early 1990s and made some very challenging work that got under the skin of authorities.

Still, viewers of Zhang Dali's Square must keep in mind that this exhibition occurred in New York, and that any response to it by gallery viewers in China, if it was to be shown there, could be very different. In the West we are used to speaking our minds, even if it rarely seems to result in effective change. But in mainland China, even a subtle show of empathy for those who are repressed such as Square proposes may well have consequences for the artist, the very least of them being the shutdown of the exhibition. The Chinese state may ignore the apolitical, stylistically oriented efforts of the talented graduates from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and beyond, but what good is an art culture that is subdued by fear to the point of self-censorship? In a political sense, the government takes Chinese artists seriously, and there is genuine trepidation on the part of political authorities concerning an artist's political independence. As a result, there exists a great threat to artists' autonomy, both in their lives as creative people and in their personal circumstances.

As a consequence of the political pressures that are placed upon Chinese artists, Zhang Dali has often used allegory to make his point. It doesn't hurt that allegory can be read a number of ways; its variable readings disguise the artist's precise feelings, which may not be acceptable to the government. This does not mean that Zhang Dali is being willfully obscure, only that he is operating in a space that is indeterminate—in large part because he is relying on an intuitive exploration of the material at hand. Everything about Square is seemingly random—the figures are asymmetrically placed in different poses about the room, and the birds group into flocks that, while beautiful, could signal at the same time little more than their existence in mid-air. This arrangement is composed to hide the obvious; it reads like a story of poverty narrated in an atmosphere of anonymity and, sadly, intended for no one in particular, although the suffering evident in the figures is clear.

A facile reading of Zhang's Square would be to inflate it to some degree with existentialist precepts about the inexorability of injustice and economic disparity that is inherent to modern life everywhere. But this doesn't characterize the installation accurately. Square is in fact a critique of the aftereffects of a government callously determined to maintain its power, no matter what the price. This is what Zhang Dali *means*, but he cannot *say* so. This results in a counterweighted effect, where one understands the circumstances but is unable to openly articulate them. So much of Chinese life, in this writer's experience, is like this! One makes a point, like Zhang Dali, by being indirect—or worse, by not speaking at all. Of course, this generalization is open to exceptions. When Ai Weiwei was first imprisoned and no one knew exactly where he was, the intelligentsia in China certainly



discussed his detention. But there was little if any public outcry about his restraint, a failure no doubt caused by people's fear that they too might be detained. We can see a similar hesitation on the part of Zhang Dali, who simultaneously refers and does not refer to controversial historical incidents. This has nothing to do with his mettle as an artist; rather, it is based on the recognition that those in power tend to understand conventional truth and are confused by ambiguity.

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 10*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 80 x 170 x 93 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.



Even so, the acclaimed work *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* from 1988 by noted artist Xu Bing, for example, was received with mixed reviews by the Chinese government, which mistrusted the denial of meaning illustrated by the thousands of illegible characters that comprise the installation. Public criticism from authorities was one reason Xu Bing moved to America, where the engagement of intellectual freedoms were more agreeable with him. He stayed there for seventeen years. But now he is Vice President of Central

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 9*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 90 x 135 x 74 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, a position that has earned him mistrust from some within the artistic community in the sense that he is now an official spokesman for the school, which has ties to government. Taking the position within CAFA may well have been a mistake on Xu Bing's part, and the independent position taken by an artist like Zhang Dali stands out in contrast, especially in light of the implicitly uncompromising stand he takes in the current installation. *Square*, with all its ambiguities, makes clear that art stands for something, and, as time passes, one can begin to understand the implications embedded within the installation, a condemnatory recognition of the reality of suffering as opposed to the justification of ideology, the latter an abstraction corroding human dignity. The humanism suggested in Zhang Dali's sympathetic treatment of a vulnerable underclass is both a critique and a cure. Even if the problem of poverty cannot be eradicated, some good may be achieved by adopting an empathic embrace of the a human being's need for recognition and self-worth.

Along the walls of the gallery, Zhang Dali installed cyanotype photographs of birds (this cameraless process consists of letting light create a silhouette on light-sensitive paper). In *Deep Blue Sky No. 2* (2013), the birds, with



Zhang Dali, *Square*, installation view. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

their outstretched wings and feet, form a puzzle-like display in white against the blue of the paper. These are more hopeful images that stand in contradiction to the melancholy of the fiberglass figures encumbered with doves. The combination of these two points of view, one positive and the other fatalistic, add up to a balanced hypothesis that quite realistically combines reassurance and pessimism in regard to art making, politics, and human behaviour. It is interesting that Zhang Dali turns here to nature to make his point; nature stands out as innocent, functioning as a corrective to the human tendency to make mistakes. These birds, therefore, symbolize a way out—literally, a flight toward disenfranchisement—that serves to oppose the history of the 1989 massacre at Tian’anmen Square; this imagery can be extended to include the desire for freedom everywhere. *Square* may not be entirely precise in its meaning, but the general message is pointed and moving. One of Zhang Dali’s great strengths as an artist is his ability to make his visual details—in particular the poses of the migrant workers and the movement of the birds—both large and specific; the fusion of the two stances results in a highly successful artwork that merges opposites in an unusual way. The birds are both beautiful in their own right and constitute a symbol of the breathing space we need for a healthy society. The two expressions work together as well as alone.

All in all, the convergence of the installation *Square* with the cyanotype photograms calls attention to a complicated reality in China, one scarred



Zhang Dali, *Deep Blue Sky*
No. 2, 2013, cyanotype,
photogram, and ink on
rice paper. © Zhang Dali.
Courtesy of Klein Sun
Gallery, New York.



Zhang Dali, *Pigeons*
No. 1, 2013, cyanotype,
photogram, and ink on
rice paper. © Zhang Dali.
Courtesy of Klein Sun
Gallery, New York.

by the occasion of bloodshed, even though the exhibition is not so literal as to include representation of actual violence. The democracy movement in China, fueled by the students' rebellious optimism, was crushed, its leaders imprisoned or exiled. Zhang Dali, in response to this historical truth, has fashioned an affecting tableau that calls attention in subtle ways to the record of what happened. And while the Square in a direct representation of student protests, the tragedy of the crushed rebellion is reprised

in the affecting vulnerability of the migrant workers. But the exhibition is also more than that; it describes the psychic state of the poor—a problem that exists everywhere, not only in China, and that extends his point to global proportions. The use of birds as symbols of freedom provides Zhang Dali's audience an image of resolve, taking the Chinese people beyond some of the misfortunes of their past. This does not mean that he forgets what happened; indeed, the show suggests that the events of twenty-five years ago cannot be pushed aside. But the existential quality of Square convinces us that the points Zhang Dali is making exist beyond historical specificity; they attain a view of humanity that is startlingly real. In this way, he achieves the status of world citizen and world artist, one who helps open up the lines of communication with the rest of the world that China has at times denied during its recurring periods of inversion and mistrust. Thus, Square reminds us that a specific situation is capable of being read into a world-oriented outlook, a sign that Zhang Dali's art brilliantly addresses the global through the particular.

Huang Hai-ming

Restless Arrays and Psychological Landscapes Viewing Huang Zhiyang's *The Phenomenology of Life: Chapters in a Course of Study*

National Art Museum of China, Beijing March 28–April 18, 2014

Ink Studio, Beijing March 29–May 11, 2014

Huang Zhiyang, *Phallic Worshippers*, 1992, coloured ink on paper, triptych, 240 x 60 cm each sheet. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



Whether in his artistic practice or in his personal life, Huang Zhiyang has always been a key figure opposing the multiple oppressions experienced by minority groups in Taiwan. I believe Huang Zhiyang also has hope in the possibility of this minority eventually becoming the majority. His intention is self-evident through an earlier series of works titled *Phallic Worshippers* (1992), and is also noticeable in some of the social movements to which he has contributed. Huang Zhiyang reached one of his artistic peaks in the mid 1990s in Taiwan, and in the late 2000s he reached another peak in his career, after he moved to Beijing. The earlier peak was directly related to the politics of the opposition movement demonstrating against martial law in Taiwan,



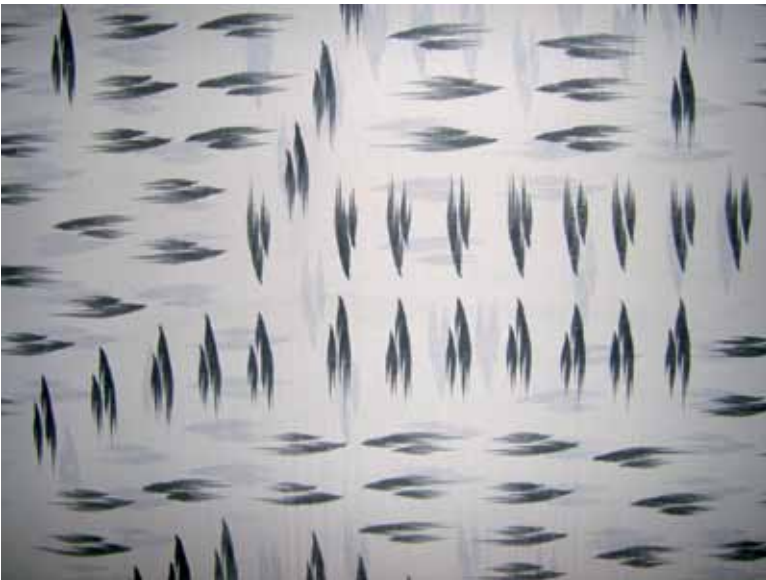
which was lifted in 1987, while the latter peak was more of a holistic response to the self-containment of mainland China's communist society following the dramatic changes generated by its sudden contact and engagement with the power of global capitalism and its modes of operation. His works not only openly convey a residual effect of contentious undercurrents and contradictions, they also evoke feelings that could arise only from the experience of this

Huang Zhiyang, *Phallic Worshippers*, 1992, ink on paper, triptych, 240 x 60 cm each sheet. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

ancient metropolis and its outpouring of globalized pop culture which is interwoven with its elegance, class, and imperial vigour.

2004–07 *Three Marks*

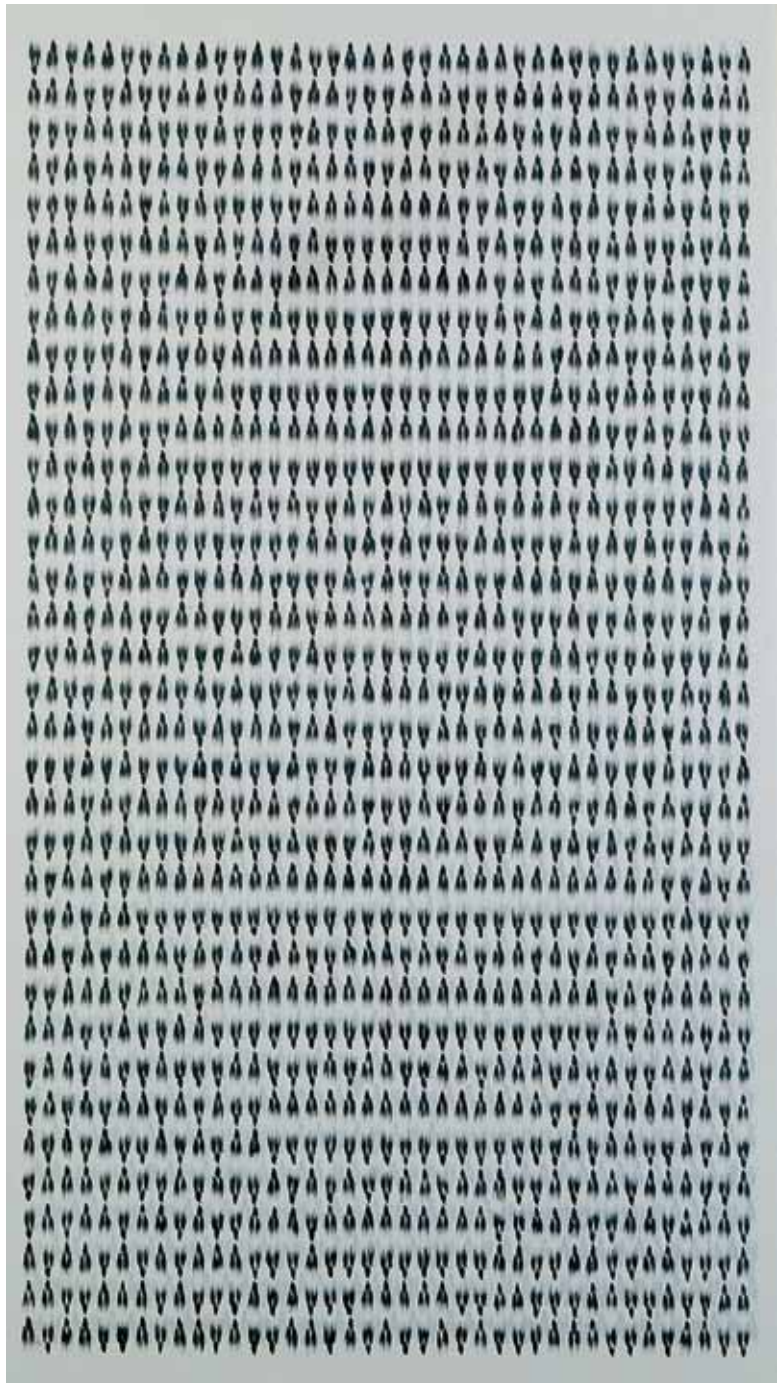
In the four years between 2004 and 2007, Huang Zhiyang created numerous paintings under the overall series titled *Three Marks*. This series can be further divided into four sections—Orderly Formations, Luminous Waters, Mystical Mountains, and Divergence/Convergence. Huang Zhiyang began with creating an ambiguous semiotic through his mark-making, resulting in symbol-like units that I refer to as “lust bugs.” These archetypal symbols, while idiosyncratic, are arranged in ordered and structured patterns like those of military formations.



Huang Zhiyang, detail of brush marks in the *Three Marks* series. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

Yet they could also be perceived as elemental forces in nature, such as the spirituality of a mountain or light from the sky that creates reflections in water. The most curious paintings are in the subcategory Divergence/Convergence (2004–07), where the units have been constructed and arranged to create an impression of movement comparable to a dynamic dance

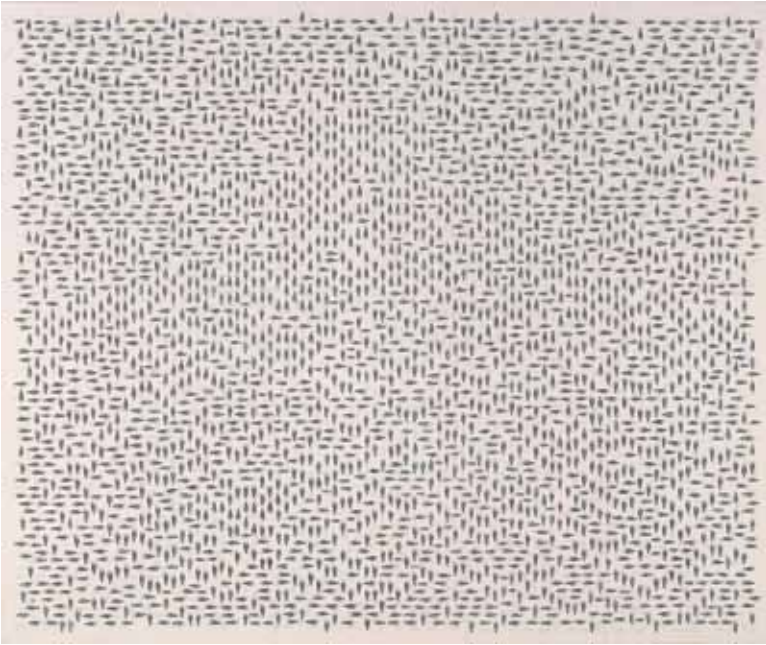
Huang Zhiyang, *Three Marks Water Light No. 4*, 2004, ink on rice paper, 225 x 125 cm.
© Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.Studio, Beijing.



Huang Zhiyang, *Three Marks Movement No. 1*, 2004, ink and mineral pigments on silk, 200 x 240 cm. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



formation, an organized and tactical group in demonstration, or even a spiritual ceremony where ghosts, spirits, and gods are summoned up from different dimensions. These works evolved into an analysis of and reflection upon humanity and systematic structures, especially when increasing the viewing distance and seeing everything in its entirety.



Huang Zhiyang, *Three Marks Mountain Spirit No. 1307*, 2013, ink and mineral pigments on silk, 200 x 240 cm. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

2006–07 *Zoon: Beijing-Bio*

The paintings that make up *Zoon: Beijing-Bio* (2006–07) gradually developed from earlier series such as *Maternity Rooms* (1992), *Flower not Flowers* (1992)—a series of dynamic prints depicting flowers and vines—*Zoon* (1996), and *Three Marks* (2004–07). Huang Zhiyang has achieved numerous progressions throughout his practice. In earlier work traces of experimentation are fairly visible, whereas later on his work came to express a distinctive state of being. Compared to the twisted and alienating contoured forms of the figurative paintings from 1992, *Beijing-Bio* shows maturity and is full of confidence. These works exhibit an energetic flow of life that attempts to accommodate the infinite and then disseminates it into what seems like the boundless. At the same time, they are like a new species of living creatures that are able to find enjoyment in the romantic lifestyle of an international metropolis.



Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio No. 07-07*, 2004, ink on rice paper, 475 x 140 cm. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

A few memorable and momentous passages of movement are presented in these paintings that suggest a whole range of things such as rose thorns on a stem, black lacing that is sensual and elegant, socialite women and their seductive postures and flirtations, metal wire tangled together with graceful and classical floral decorations, dragons and snakes, genetically



Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio Spring No. 1*, 2014, ink on silk, nine sections 475 x 140 cm each. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

engineered varieties of predatory plants, and artificial flowers possibly manufactured from new materials and biotechnologies. It seems as though the combined markings in these paintings are literally growing and creating new boundaries and borders and have the ability to connect and separate quickly. They are like fireworks exploding simultaneously from the same origin or like growing vines with buds and flowers that are synchronously sprawling, spreading nectar and pollen everywhere, attracting butterflies and bees to congregate around them. Often, these insects and flowers appear to become one, merging together with the thriving tentacle-like vines and fluttering in the swirling air. These *Beijing-Bio* works exude a distinct energy and vigorous physicality through what appears to be a body projecting incredible seduction and insanity, like feeling a lash from a whip, smelling a drift of perfume, or being squeezed in a solicitous hug.

Left: Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio Spring No. 1* (detail). © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



Right: Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio Spring No. 1* (detail). © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



Left: Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio Spring No. 1* (detail). © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



Right: Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio Spring No. 1* (detail). © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.







2008–13 Zoon—Dreamscape

An initial glimpse of these colourful works will remind viewers of Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist action paintings. However, these works are much more expansive in their detail, similar to the experience of the *Beijing-Bio* series. Through a high degree of control, Huang Zhiyang is able to present meanings in the strange rhythmic behaviours and complex relations within the image. Aside from the intertwining and bizarre organisms that possess characteristics similar to the plants and animals seen in *Beijing-Bio*, in *Dreamscapes* what is perceived is mainly a result of the experiences of city life. Although there is no direct representation of people, these paintings are like commotions or incidents that have caused people to gather together. Although there are no representations of architecture, we know these rhythmic colours may likely be emulating the physical motions and movements that one may observe in the lobby of a large department store, or in between the stores. And although there are no representations of automobiles or public transportation, we can sense objects accelerating and shuttling through a crowd. There are different modes of dissection here, but moments of convergence and connection are also present in Huang Zhiyang's visual labyrinth. While visually engaged with the subject of the work, viewers may also find it elusive and beyond the reach of comprehension.

Previous page: Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon: Beijing-Bio Spring No. 1*, installation view, National Art Museum of China. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon-Dreamscape No. 0802*, 2008, coloured ink and acrylic on silk, 280 x 475 cm. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

What is being represented in these paintings is not objects, buildings, or people; instead, they present imagery that resonates with the energy that is the residue of their making. They are not the result of an individual act, but several synchronized actions in progress. They are in a sense corporeal, similar to travelling inside a giant body, through its mucous textures with everything blending together within this huge, surreal, and distorted organ. I would use the words “psychological landscape” to describe Huang Zhiyang's *Beijing-Bio* and *Dreamscape* series. These works seem to have a variety of hyper-realistic and electric energies, yet we cannot articulate what they are exactly. Perhaps the feeling of the inexpressible is not only due to the excessive complexity of the work and ambition of the artist, but also because he has applied eclecticism in certain components of the work.

Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon-Dreamscape No. 1217*, 2012, coloured ink and acrylic on silk, 475 x 140 cm. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.



Seeing another Possibility in the Auspicious Beasts in the Factory

In these exhibitions two distinct tendencies flowed and conflicted with each other—one a clean-cut design aesthetic in the *Three Marks* series that is currently in style globally, the other an outburst of an uncanny yet wild and glamorous energy that is both bewildering and laden with a sense of disarray. This energy began to germinate following the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987 and reached its peak in the *Beijing-Bio* series. In fact, *Three Marks* had already started to convey a certain design aesthetic that is both wild and restrained, yet by 2006–07, *Beijing-Bio* veered in another direction, reaching a new height in Huang Zhiyang’s maturity and depth.



Huang Zhiyang, *Zoon-Dreamscape No. 1208*, 2012, coloured ink and acrylic on silk, 200 x 280 cm. © Huang Zhiyang. Courtesy of Ink Studio, Beijing.

However, if we shift our attention to the golden beasts that are placed in the corner of the gallery space at the National Art Museum of China, we come to realize that these monsters are conceived with references more to European mythology and design. The day after attending the exhibition’s opening reception at the National Art Museum, I went on a studio visit with Huang Zhiyang, where I saw a number of “unfinished” beasts that had not yet been painted gold. They were crude and violent creatures that threatened to take control over the public, drawing from the fear and desire of people in order to strengthen themselves. I see these golden beasts as having similarities to *Beijing-Bio* works, as they both represent well “evil in the purpose to be evil,” an idea Huang Zhiyang has been following and critiquing.

I had already felt how these situations were overpowering people just in the few days of my stay in Beijing. This city is supposed to be an exemplar in its support for the arts, and now it is moving almost in direct opposition to artistic practices and different methods of making exhibitions. I am truly afraid for the well-established Taiwanese artists in Beijing. I am worried that the situation might eventually distort their nature and their practice. But seeing Huang Zhiyang gave me confidence in his character and his determination. He has enough wisdom to create the best mode of resistance and opposition.

Huang Zhiyang, *Auspicious Beasts*, 2008, exhibition view of *The Phenomenology of Life: Chapters in a Course of Study*, National Museum of China. Photo: Courtesy Ink Studio.



Huang Zhiyang, *Waterfall No. 1*, 2008, brass with gold leaf, 140 x 100 x 220 cm, © Huang Zhiyang. Photo: Courtesy Ink Studio



Mark Dean Johnson

Fong Chung-ray at Eighty: Between Modern and Contemporary

Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco

February 15–June 30, 2014



Fong Chung-ray's recent exhibition of new work, entitled *Between Modern and Contemporary* and presented at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, was a triumph by the eighty-year-old master. It included nearly twenty large, even monumentally scaled, works constructed in the artist's now signature collage technique of using distressed and torn acrylic fragments and deeply layering them to canvas in elegant compositions. A few of these recall aerial landscape views or maps, sometimes in hues of blue and white suggesting land masses and water, and wrinkled, scarred and peeling flesh or paint, although the more typical chromatic harmonies of the works in this exhibition were subtly earth-toned. Several of the works in the show incorporated extended shreds of text. In Fong Chung-ray's work, text often has the appearance of *sgraffito*, of being scratched into the surface, adding to the impression that we are looking at and through several layers of walls that are simultaneously transparent and opaque. The incorporation of Chinese text is among the first signifiers that they should be understood as Chinese painting, but they can be seen as abstract works as well, and framing them within different art historical terms and contexts illuminates how the paintings operate on multiple levels and in different dimensions.

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.



Fong Chung-ray, *2013-7*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 195.6 x 144.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The text fragments in Fong Chung-ray's paintings are difficult to decipher but are often drawn from Buddhist scriptures,¹ although the artist has also incorporated other poetic sources in recent works; for example, a painting from 2011, entitled *2011-6*, features three poems by Mao Zedong. The rich warmth of these images suggests the artist's personal familiarity and engagement with Buddhist texts, and, indeed, Fong Chung-ray has studied

such texts for more than twenty-five years. In a recent essay entitled "A Retrospective Look," the artist noted:

In the 1980s, out of curiosity I started reading Buddhist scriptures. I became greatly impressed by the teachings of the translated Indian Sanskrit and was especially absorbed in its elaborate description of time and space. Whenever the scriptures refer to time it is described as infinite without a beginning or an ending. They also state that 'seeing through birth and death will bring forth one's tranquility.' When one elevates one's vision beyond the span of an individual into the universal process of 'forming, maintaining, decaying, and nonexistence' suddenly the pressure of time disappears into the infinity of the universe. Individual pursuit of fame and fortune pales in front of such infinite time and space. In the past, I thought of art as a noble cause and I was a young artist with the mission to innovate and revitalize while maintaining the tradition of Chinese ink painting. I realize now this was only an illusion, set up to put me in a box.²

The artist's personal experience of maturing, aging, and, in 2002, surviving a terrible car accident in which his wife was killed has likely only enhanced the profundity of his understanding of these passages.

In the same essay, Fong Chung-ray talks poetically about walls, linking the imagery of his paintings to a larger conceptualization of his own artistic exploration. He writes about his early work and the influences he absorbed from the abstract expressionism movement in New York. He articulates a beautiful metaphor about the process of finding his source at the border of specific limitations:

Looking around, our eyes see everywhere the signs of destruction left by time. For example. . . . Weather wearing a wall tends to leave signs of decay. . . . These traces are completely beautiful and completely abstract. I have always wanted to break free from the boundaries of traditional landscape in my painting: I suppose I should learn from these weather-worn walls³.



Fong Chun-ray's images of decrepit walls also sometimes evoke mountain landscapes—seemingly representing the porous edge of his aesthetic encounter with the ancient tradition of landscape painting. The gold to brown to grey/black colouration in these works evokes crumbling bricks and parched earth, and their highly textured surface recalls sun-damaged paint and crackled ceramic tile, with the text fragments peeling off and blowing away like dried posters and old notices pasted on walls. Interestingly, decades earlier, Fong Chung-ray also theorized the limitations of abstract approaches to painting and writing:

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

I feel more and more strongly that our modern art, in spite of its appearance of creativity, is in fact impoverished. . . . We have long insisted upon the superiority of abstraction, but sufficient detachment tells us that no single theory is the ultimate truth of art. . . . What survives the wash and crash of the tide are works of art created with universal compassion and quiet acceptance of life.³

Here again, the artist's goals are principally philosophical and reflective. Although this passage was authored long before the suggestion of walls appeared in his work, he describes the wearing of the tides of time that erodes the edges of the idea as more significant than the artist's primary conceptual or formal engagement with his work.

In fact, Fong Chung-ray has explored the edge of Chinese landscape painting and abstraction since the late 1950s, when he eschewed representation for non-objective painting. Born in Nanyang, Henan province, in central China, in 1934, Fong Chung-ray first fled to Canton to escape the Chinese Civil War and eventually relocated to Taiwan in 1949, at the age of fourteen. There, he studied art for only one year, beginning in 1952. In 1957, he founded an art association with artist Hu Ch'i-chung (b. 1927, Zhejiang province, China; d. 2012, Los Angeles, CA) in Taiwan and began exhibiting with the Fifth Moon Group (founded 1956) in 1961, then and today recognized among the most important Chinese modernist art associations of the twentieth century. Fong Chung-ray was impressed with and attracted to founder Liu Guo-song's (b. 1932, Bangbu, Anhui province) decision to return to Chinese ink and paper as his media, a decision that Fong Chung-ray himself also made, in 1963. For his early explorations in ink, Fong Chung-ray fabricated a hand-made brush from palm fiber and worked on cotton, hemp, or rice paper in an attempt to create a new kind of brush stroke and an innovative image. Even then, his compositions conveyed a fragmented space and his palette largely confined itself to browns and greys. While it is valuable to situate Fong Chung-ray's early career within this art historical context and early link to the Fifth Moon Group, it is important to evaluate his career more broadly.

For example, it is interesting to remember that several artists of the Fifth Moon Group relocated to the United States, where they continued their artistic extension of Chinese painting in a modernist abstract idiom. After receiving a Rockefeller Fellowship, Fong Chung-ray visited the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii and then travelled throughout the United States and Europe in 1970 and 1971; he then moved permanently to San Francisco, in 1975. His Fifth Moon Group colleagues like Hu Ch'i-chung had earlier relocated to San Francisco, in 1971, and then to nearby Carmel, in 1973; while Chuang Che (b. 1934, Beijing) moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1973 and later to New York City, in 1988. Both artists extended the language of Sino-American abstraction in significant ways



Fong Chung-ray, 2013–15,
2013, acrylic on canvas,
228.6 x 176.6 cm. Courtesy
of the artist.

and incorporated non-traditional materials in their work; Chuang Che's work also explored collage and elements of calligraphy. Beginning in 1978, Fong Chung-ray established a long-standing relationship with Triangle Gallery in San Francisco, exhibiting there in 1982, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011, as well as frequently sending work to Taiwan and Hong Kong. The Triangle Gallery regularly introduced Asian artists working in abstraction during

its fifty-year history spanning the years 1961 to 2011, ending only with the death from pneumonia of its Dutch/Swedish owner, Jack Van Hiele, at the age of ninety-three.

But Fong Chung-ray's late work is stylistically distinct from that of these peers. In the recent works featured at the Chinese Culture Center, Fong Chung-ray's surfaces are built up from fragments of acrylic paint first applied to plastic and allowed to dry and then pulled off from the plastic and applied to a large canvas. The irregular shapes and shattered textures give his work a sense of age and deterioration, but his process can be linked to that of an earlier generation of artists who developed varied approaches to abstraction. In 1956, artist Paul Horiuchi (b. 1906, Oishi, Japan; d. 1999, Seattle, Washington) created a collage entitled *Weathered* that incorporated torn shreds of black, red, and green coloured paper and also included calligraphy. Horiuchi was inspired after seeing an outdoor bulletin board in Seattle's International District where Chinese-language advertisements and notices had started to peel after a rain; he made similarly elegant torn-paper collages in formats that included folding screens, his signature format until his death. Horiuchi is today embraced and exhibited as an "Asian American" artist because he was born in Japan but participated in the Seattle art scene. Yet his work recalled the late-1940s and early-1950s close-up black-and-white photographs by Aaron Siskind (b. 1903, New York; d. 1991, Providence, Rhode Island) of peeling wall paint that were exhibited at the Charles Egan Gallery at the same time Egan was exhibiting the first generation of abstract expressionists, with whom Siskind was friends. Similarly, Mimmo Rotella's (b. 1918, Calabria, Italy; d. 2006, Milan) early 1950s *décollages*—a term referring to an image created by cutting apart and tearing away paper and inspired by dilapidated billboards in Rome—is another non-Asian modernist precursor of Fong Chung-ray's special technique, along with the work of earlier collage artists like Kurt Schwitters and George Braque, the artist who coined the term collage.

But collage techniques were first invented in China at the time of the invention of paper (perhaps 200 B.C.). Perhaps even more closely connected

Paul Horiuchi, *Weathered*, 1956, collage on board, 71.4 x 87 cm. Collection of Tacoma Art Museum, Gift of Paul and Bernadette Horiuchi, 1988.1.1.



and relevant to Fong Chung-ray's recent work is the art of Tseng Yuho (b. 1925, Beijing; currently living in Beijing), whose work has also been exhibited in Asian American theme exhibitions. Tseng Yuho first received a classical calligraphy and painting education in Beijing, but in 1949 moved to Hawaii, where she soon experimented with abstraction. By the late 1950s, Tseng Yuho had developed a personal collage technique she called *dsui-hua*, or assembled painting; she began exhibiting with Edith Halpert's acclaimed New York Downtown Gallery in 1960. Tseng Yuho has explained that her *dsui-hua* was based in scroll-mounting techniques, thus establishing a distinctly Chinese historical foundation for what we commonly refer to as "collage." Fong Chung-ray's recent work is also closely aligned with Tseng Yuho's: It is often similarly warm in tone and equally suggestive of portals or gateways. These collage masters remind us of the long history of Chinese collage and the sophisticated requirements of paper mounting as an integral dimension of Chinese culture.

Tseng Yuho, *Mural No. 4* from *Western Frontier*, 1964, nine-panel mural of palladium and gold leaf, handmade paper, tapa cloth, and acrylic paint mounted to pegboard masonite, 292.1 x 340.4 x 4.4 cm. Collection of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Wachovia Corporation, 2008.76.4.1-9.



The 2014 Fong Chung-ray exhibition at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco was curated by Manni Liu, herself a prior director of the Center, at the invitation of the Center's curator Abby Chen. It was Chen who specifically suggested to Fong Chung-ray that he create a huge new work for the gallery's largest wall, and this painting with its ambiguous calligraphy is one of the exhibition's most striking. Chen also insightfully subtitled the exhibition *Between Modern and Contemporary*. In so doing, Chen acknowledges Fong Chung-ray's long relationship to both modernist collage traditions and abstract expressionism. Chen recognizes that Fong



Chung-ray has developed a completely contemporary approach to Chinese art that incorporates calligraphy using ancient religious texts—and reinvents paper mounting within a completely new realm of reassembling and rearranging dried, cracked, and etched acrylic fragments of paint onto large-format canvases.

Fong Chung-ray, *Between Modern and Contemporary*, installation view. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco.

As noted above, these innovations can be linked to the earlier work of Asian American artists like Paul Horiuchi and Tseng Yuho. Although “Asian American” was first coined only in 1969⁴—both before and after works by Horiuchi and Tseng were being featured in group exhibitions together⁵—it signals another potentially valuable terminology for contextualizing Fong Chung-ray’s practice. The term Asian American—as opposed to terms like Abstract Expressionism or even Chinese painting—articulates an alternative transnational context and links diverse artists with backgrounds from East Asia who are connected by their engagement with creating art that involves paper mounting. Fong Chung-ray, Paul Horiuchi, and Tseng Yuho all extended the scale of their work in collage to mural formats.

Fong Chung-ray’s achievement is further emblematic of the generation of diasporic Chinese artists who were dispersed internationally after

Wei Jia, *No. 1779*, 2010, gouache, ink, pastel, xuan paper on canvas. 132.08 x 132.08 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



China's Civil War but who significantly advanced Chinese visual art and culture in powerfully original and visually compelling ways. This generation has yet to be fully appreciated and recognized. Still, their simultaneous engagement with aesthetic tendencies based in specific American

and Chinese avant-garde movements offers an expanded context for today's flourishing of Chinese art globally. For example, an excellent and almost concurrent exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America, New York, entitled *Oil and Water: Reinterpreting Ink* (April 24–September 14, 2014) and curated by Michelle Y. Loh, featured the art of three artists (Qiu Deshu, Wei Jia, and Zhang Hongtu) who all developed their practices in China during the Cultural Revolution and who also spent time in the United States. That Qiu Deshu and Wei Jia's work bear a direct connection to Fong Chung-ray's is notable in this context. Qiu Deshu's ink paintings regularly feature paper rips and tears that were initially inspired by seeing "cracks in the ground" in which the artist sees "profound truths." Wei Jia's collage technique of working with hand-made paper involves "a rigorously repeated cycle of tearing, mounting, and painting, which contributes serendipitous combinations"⁶—again recalling Fong Chung-ray's own technical approach. Clearly, Fong Chung-ray's place in this expanded view of the development of contemporary Chinese collage warrants further recognition and analysis. But as the artist has continuously reminded us in his own statements, such art historical measurements of the significance of his work are ultimately meaningless. What has deeper value is the appreciation of the depth and subtlety of his meditation on time and a Buddhist understanding of impermanence.

Notes

1. The Buddhist scriptures quoted are highly poetic and esoteric. One fragment in Fong Chung-ray's painting entitled *2013-7* is from the Surangama Sutra 大佛頂首楞嚴經 and translates as: "The awakement-wisdom ocean-uses is always pureness and perfection (覺海性澄圓), the mind at the perfection-pureness perceives one's instincts with instinct (圓澄覺元妙)." Translation provided by Abby Chen.
2. Fong Chung-ray, "A Retrospective Look," in *Fong Chung-ray: A Retrospective*, ed. Shu Jianhua and Xu Xinru (Santa Clara: Silicon Valley Asian Art Center, 2013), 10–11.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. The designation Asian American was first coined by scholar Yuji Ichioka (1936–2002) in 1969.
5. Horiuchi and Tseng were grouped together in the 1965 Pacific Heritage exhibition, organized by the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, which traveled to the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, the Art Gallery at U.C. Santa Barbara, and the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery—as well as in the 2008 exhibition *Asian/American/Modern Art: Shifting Currents, 1900–1970*, organized by the de Young Museum.
6. Wei Jia artist's statement, quoted in Michelle Y. Loh, "Oil and Water: Reinterpreting Ink," in the exhibition catalogue *Oil and Water: Reinterpreting Ink* (New York: Museum of Chinese in America, 2014), 20.

Iftikhar Dadi

Mapping Asia

Asia Art Archive Library, Hong Kong

April 12–September 29, 2014



The exhibition Mapping Asia was a new outreach program of Asia Art Archive (AAA), complementing various other programs it has developed over the past few years. A not-for-profit research organization, AAA has emerged as a leading resource for scholarly research on recent art in Asia. It is committed to making accessible records that document the development of art in the region, and it has extensive and growing holdings of published books, journals, and catalogues in its library, as well as rare primary archival materials that include records of exhibitions, journals, and writings, and curriculum materials donated by key artists and critics from various sites across Asia. AAA is based in Hong Kong, has a branch in New York, and has researchers working in a number of places including China and India. It maintains an active program of talks, performances, and screenings in Hong Kong, New York, and other locales in Asia, and provides open access to its holdings, many of which can be searched and retrieved online.

Exhibition view of Mapping Asia. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

While AAA does not normally collect art (except for some portfolios and videos of art historical significance), with Mapping Asia it has inaugurated a program of curated exhibitions that includes art secured via temporary loans. This is, therefore, an appropriate time to ask what AAA hoped to accomplish with Mapping Asia, how this furthered its research objectives, and why this exhibition did not replicate what museums, galleries, collectors, and critics are already engaged in.

Adam Bobbette, *On Unconsolidated Grounds*, 2014, archival installation. Courtesy of the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



AAA considered Mapping Asia a new manifestation of its existing outreach program, which exists in the form of the e-journal *Field Notes*. In the *Field Notes* publication series, AAA has invited scholars, curators, and artists to contribute to specific themes. Previously these have included responses on an “expanded” conception of “the contemporary,” in *Field Notes* 01 (a supplement to the well-known “Questionnaire on the Contemporary” published in the journal *October* in 2009), and another on “archive as method,” in *Field Notes* 02. Both exist on the web in downloadable PDF formats.¹ The third theme, “Mapping Asia,” has resulted in *Field Notes* 03, the exhibition at AAA Library, and a printed reader titled *Mapping Asia*² (a revised version of *Field Notes* 03), as well as scholarly talks and art events running through much of 2014, which have included presentations on topics such as African traders in China, citizenship in Hong Kong, talks by artists, and a musical performance on songs of resistance from India.³ (Disclosure: I serve on the Advisory Board of Asia Art Archive, and was also AAA scholar-in-residence during July and August 2014. For these reasons, this review examines only the exhibition and the printed reader, and focuses on emerging research questions that Mapping Asia project foregrounds, rather than an assessment of the exhibition on objective formalist grounds).

The Mapping Asia theme sought to foreground recent social and aesthetic dynamics that challenge the fixity of Asia as a geographic and social space. The layering of Asia as a discursive concept and its problematic coherence has, of course, long been a subject of critical analysis. Asia has been imagined in various ways in modern history, which includes episodes such as European cartographies and racial taxonomies in the early modern era, Okakura Kakuz’s spiritualist projections of the unity of Asia in his book, *The Ideals of the East* (1903) during the early twentieth century, the pre-World War II Japanese imperialist project, and superpower rivalry between the USA and its Asian allies, the Soviet block, and China during the Cold War. Today, Asia, including areas that formally fall under its geographic

ambit, is home to well over half of the world's people. How does one account for this riven, expansive history that continues to intervene into our present? How can recent art and scholarship strive to catalyze "Asia" in a critical register for today? In a nutshell, this is the challenge that AAA faces as a research organization—how to allocate its focus and resources in a strategic manner that unsettles narrow national and regional claims, and brings the history of its modern art into a productive dialogue with the present.



Exhibition view of Mapping Asia. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



Chinese ceramics in the exhibition Mapping Asia. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

One set of responses to these vital questions was provided by the Mapping Asia project, which sensibly abandoned any ambition for comprehensive coverage and instead offered incisive and specific case studies that illuminated facets

of networks and tensions in Asia's recent past and its fraught present. In its physical footprint, the exhibition was dense and compact, primarily situated along the walls of the AAA Library. It included printed matter of the kinds normally found in an archive—books, catalogues, policy documents on education, maps, posters, newspaper clippings, selections from documentary and feature films, sound recordings, and web links. These diverse items were interspersed with other objects—borrowed from various lenders or purchased from the market—that one might not expect in an archive collection and that included historical Chinese ceramics, commercially produced globes, prints, art videos, sculptures, and architectural models produced by artists and architects in various mediums and forms. All the works, whether they belong to the Archive or were brought in as loans for the exhibition, were presented with a kind of aesthetic equivalence. The exhibition thus evoked a display of exemplary objects that gesture towards larger projects, concepts, and histories.

Did this presentation unfold according to a certain logic of an archive that can function as a repository for diverse kinds of materials that necessarily remain fragments of larger compelling narratives that cannot be fully recovered but whose subterranean presence continues to exert gravitational effects on the present? An answer can be gleaned by examining two compelling works in the exhibition.

Robert Zhao, *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World*, 2013, 1 of 55 plates in a hand-crafted box, 34 x 24 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



Artist Robert Zhao's thoughtful and elaborate portfolio *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World* (2013) is a conceptual study that includes taxonomy, descriptive text, and photographic images. Many studies in this portfolio track the consequences of unintentional, willed ecological and genetic manipulation of animal and plant life in Asia today. A few plates from the portfolio were framed and displayed in two elevators of Hollywood Center (where AAA Hong Kong is located), nicely introducing the visitor to some of the issues in the larger exhibition as they ascended to the eleventh-floor library space. *A Guide* is a work of art that nevertheless follows the organizational logic of an archive (and indeed the logic of the exhibition itself, in offering disparate case studies), bridging the otherwise divergent intentionalities of the "normal" archival document and the "usual" formal work of art. This confluence was also evident in artist Kwan Sheung-chi's small,

Kwan Sheung-chi, *Hong Kong*, 2012, offset print, cardboard, 18 x 14 x 14 cm. Courtesy of a private collection and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



fragile, vitrine-cased globe titled *Hong Kong* (2012), which he fashioned by precisely folding a flat map of Hong Kong into a polyhedron sphere, as if Hong Kong and the sea around its immediacy now formed the entirety of the planet. Does this work offer a critique of the limited horizon of self-serving nationalism, or does it function as an invitation to understand Hong Kong as being (or needing to be) open to the world in the best sense? (Indeed, Hong Kong served as a meta-case study in this exhibition through numerous other works.) I would argue that the latter meaning is emblematic of AAA's larger project of archiving the record of Asia's recent art and its refusal to demarcate the contours of "Asia" in a fixed manner. Art historical research can and must deepen our understanding of specific sites of practice, but, simultaneously, it must situate local artistic developments



comparatively in larger conceptual, historical, and geographical frameworks—otherwise, one risks a collapse back into narrow, nation-state or ethnic agendas that unfortunately continue to characterize the fervent building of national and market-driven, official and private museums and collections in much of Asia today.

Wong Hoy Cheong, *Rajun, Gardener*, 1996, charcoal and silkscreen on paper, 125 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

It is therefore vital for AAA to continue to interrogate received wisdom with innovative curatorial practices, to continue to experiment with radically alternative modalities of exhibition making that rethink the way an *art archive* (rather than a gallery or museum) activates its collections. The question of AAA's *exhibition* audience now also arises, and to my mind, remains productively unsettled—it requires more reflection and experimentation via future projects. For instance, AAA might consider future exhibitions as a program in itself, in which a more limited set of objects and relations are presented on a regular basis and are galvanized further by talks and performances, allowing for closer focus on fewer case studies. But another way in which the works in Mapping Asia exhibition already has the capacity to further critical thinking and provide an afterlife for reflection beyond 2014 is that the objects on exhibit are also examined in essays in the *Mapping Asia* reader. Here I take a closer look at one such exemplary case, which demonstrates that the exhibitionary case studies work most effectively when they are in synergy with the Archive's other activities.

Bagyi Aung Soe (1923/4–90), a key figure in the development of modern art in Burma, studied art during 1951 at India's Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan, which was founded by Rabindranath Tagore. The University developed an innovative and experimental curriculum that sidestepped academicism and instead emphasized creativity and openness to folk aesthetics, as well as the relation between “Asian” philosophical themes

Bagyi Aung Soe, *Ché phawa daw nu nu (Tender are the Feet)*, 1972/2014, cinema poster made into wall paper. Courtesy of Pansodan Gallery, Kyauktada, Yangon, Myanmar, and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



and modern aesthetic developments. Upon his return to Yangon in Burma, Soe began to paint in ways that were a radical departure from his contemporaries by abandoning fidelity to existing external forms and, instead, grappling with an aesthetic of painting that gestured towards “reality beyond appearances.”⁴ As a consequence, his work was subject to much misunderstanding. Yin Ker’s lucid essay in the *Mapping Asia* reader, which is thoughtfully accompanied by images of Soe’s work, brings a necessary dimension to our understanding of Soe’s cinema poster for the 1972 film *Ché phawa daw nu nu* (Tender are the Feet) (director Maung Wunna) the poster is exhibited in *Mapping Asia* as wallpaper near a seating area. The film, which deals with the uneasy transformation of Burmese theatrical dance into modern cinematic forms, uncannily mirrors the trajectory of Soe himself, as the artist negotiated the demand for fidelity to traditional form with the existential need to address modernity through his experimental practice. Pointedly, Soe could do so only by exposure to artistic developments in other parts of Asia. Yin Ker’s essay nicely illuminates the need to track transnational linkages and comparative frameworks in writing the history of recent Asian art.

I conclude by offering a few reflections on ethics, which are not simply incidental or secondary but absolutely central to how archival and research



Installation view of Mapping Asia with Zarina Hashmi, *Dilli, A Parallel Narrative, Farewell*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.



Installation view of Mapping Asia. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

activity is framed and conducted. This provocation to ethics is powerfully resonant in Zarina Hashmi's woodcut *Dilli* (2010), in which a spare map of Delhi frames a poem in Urdu by the eighteenth-century poet Meer Taqi Meer (1723–1810), who lived during an era of plunder, violence, and instability in the capital of the weakened Mughal Empire in India. A translation reads:

Why ask where I come from, O dwellers of the East,
Knowing my homelessness you laugh as you taunt.
Delhi that was once the select city in the world,
Where only the chosen lived of every trade;
Then the heavens looted it and left it desolate,
I am a citizen, of that ruined place.

Erbossyn Meldibekov,
Transformer, 2013, bronze
and wood. Courtesy of the
artist and Asia Art Archive,
Hong Kong.



The “east” (*purab*) in Meer’s poem denotes eastern regions of South Asia, but one cannot help but also read this reference in the context of Asia today. The rapid development of various Asian countries in recent times has created a new social map of the region that is extremely uneven. East Asia’s economic and development indicators, for example, now compare favourably with those of the most developed Western nations, while instability and lack of human development afflict many areas in Southeast, South, and West Asia. Wars, refugees, poverty, and the ongoing destruction of historical artifacts form the reality of this other Asia. Through diverse case studies, this inaugural exhibition and its associated reader have further underscored Asia Art Archive’s vision of a progressive, inclusive, and interconnected Asia, one that provides a critical counterpoint to triumphalist ethnic, national, and market-driven narratives that are on the rise.

Notes

1. All *Field Notes* are accessible from a link on the masthead of AAA’s website: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/>.
2. *Mapping Asia* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2014). Also available online at <http://issuu.com/asiaartarchivehk/docs/mapping-asia-book/>.
3. For more details, see “Mapping Asia I Publication and Programmes,” <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Programme/Details/540/>.
4. Yin Ker, “A Short Story of Bagyi Aung Soe in Five Images,” *Mapping Asia* (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2014), 87.

Chinese Name Index

Ai Weiwei 艾未未	Huang Du 黃篤	Lu Yang 陸揚	Yu Jing 余景
An Ni 安妮	Huang Hai-Ming 黃海鳴	Mao Wencai 毛文采	Zhang Dali 張大力
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Cheng Meiling 鄭美玲	Ker Yin 郭思映	Tseng Yuho 曾佑和	Zhou Enlai 周恩來
Cheng, Adrian (Zheng Zhigang) 鄭志剛	Kwan Sheung-chi 關尚智	Wang Wo 王我	Zhou Ping 周平
Chuang Che 莊喆	Li Ran 李然	Wang Yiquan 王懿泉	Zhou Tiehai 周鐵海
Dai Yun 戴耘	Li Xianting 栗憲庭	Wei Jia 韋佳	Zhu Weibin 朱衛兵
Ding Yi 丁乙	Li Zhenhua 李振華	Wong Hoy Cheong 黃海昌	
Dong Xiwen 董希文	Lin, Sophia 林哲水	Xia Yilan 夏意蘭	
Fong Chung-ray 馮鍾睿	Liu Ding 劉鼎	Xiao Min 肖敏	
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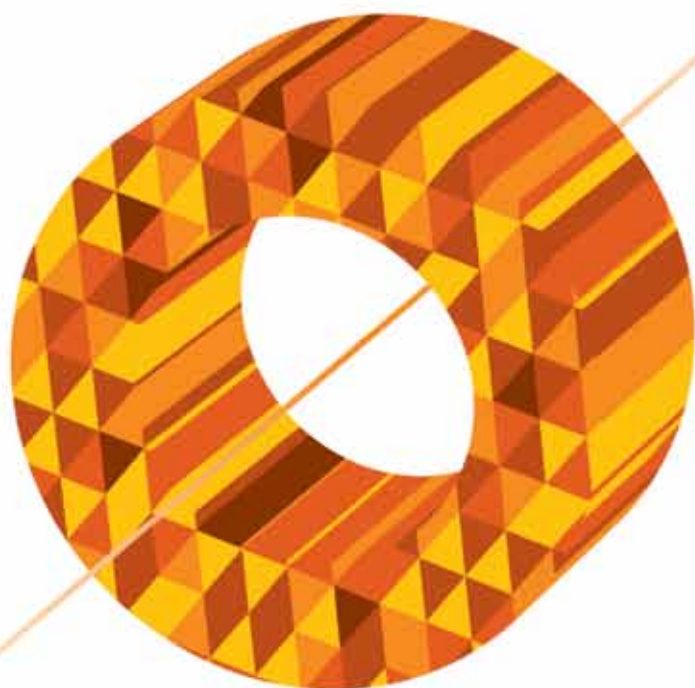
- Mur Nomade 是一間位於香港的策展辦公室及畫廊。我們與香港本地以及海外的藝術家、策展人緊密合作，共同構思不同類型的藝術活動以鼓勵促進文化交流與創意發展。我們歡迎各界的意見與提議。

Image: Exhibition view with Sarah Lai, *04:39 PM*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 122 x 183cm

Hong Kong artist Sarah Lai was the recipient of Mur Nomade's Travel Grant to France in Winter 2013, in preparation of her collaborative exhibition with French painter Sébastien Mahon, curated by Caroline Ha Thuc.

展覽現場照片；黎卓華作品 *04:39 PM*, 2014, 布面油畫, 122 x 183cm

Mur Nomade 資助香港畫家黎卓華於2013年冬天前往法國進行藝術差旅，此次差旅主要是為了與法籍畫家塞巴斯蒂安·馬翁舉辦聯展而促成的，策展人為Caroline Ha Thuc。



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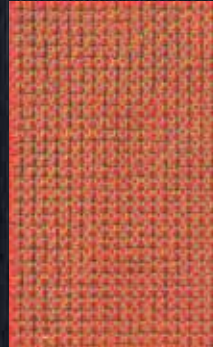
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