Inter
Art actuel

Existence of Art and Cultural Identity
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Number 71, Fall 1998

Asia: New Perspectives

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/57669ac

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Publisher(s)
Les Éditions Intervention

ISSN
0825-8708 (print)
1923-2764 (digital)

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Cite this article
THE POSITION AND CHANGES OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART

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The series of political events and social changes that erupted in Beijing in June 1989, the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991 have dramatically altered the political global map. The world suddenly entered an era in which new economic competition is intertwined with a variety of local cultures. China emerged on the world scene as a socialist state possessing a distinctive combination of economical reforms and political ideology. Today, Western nations are avidly competing to maximize profits from the Chinese market. At the same time, they are maneuvering to curb China’s development using various cultural problems as a lever. China is resisting these efforts. Under the barrier of patriotism and constructing cultural spirit, it is trying to place the brakes on the flow of Western cultures into the country. In this environment, experimental contemporary art has been curbed as an evil product of capitalism and placed in the difficult situation. However, the various restrictions, economic hardships, and growing complexity of the creative environment have not caused artists to abandon their avant-garde nature and experimental ways, or obliterated the existence of Chinese contemporary art. The contradictions, on a spiritual level, to curb China’s development using various cultural contexts as a lever. China is resisting these efforts. Under the barrier of patriotism and constructing cultural spirit, it is trying to place the brakes on the flow of Western cultures into the country. In this environment, experimental contemporary art has been curbed as an evil product of capitalism and placed in the difficult situation. However, the various restrictions, economic hardships, and growing complexity of the creative environment have not caused artists to abandon their avant-garde nature and experimental ways, or obliterated the existence of Chinese contemporary art. The contradictions, on a spiritual level, between the promotion of economic reforms and dogmatic conservatism and the development of fissures between tradition and contemporary culture have actually expanded artists’ spheres of activity and given rise to new techniques and methods.

From the perspective of contemporary Chinese art history, if art trends in the 1990s strengthened collective awareness and a complex about heroism, the trends in the early 1990s possessed a stronger political component. For instance, “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” echoed Western colonialism and the power politics after the end of the Cold War, while serving as an example of the connection between art and commerce. Since then, pragmatism and a utilitarian outlook have spread. Hordes of artists imitated and blindly pursued these trends, which needless to say, have governed the direction of contemporary Chinese art. However, we cannot help questioning the idea that politics is the key to recognizing the differences between cultures in the world. Chinese contemporary artist express this special cultural nature, irrespective of whether they are living inside or outside China and believe that artistic activities are one means to contribute to the construction of cultural heritage in the future.
Artists' works have a more international aura that is still rather weak compared to Beijing and other major cities. In Shanghai, which was formerly a colonial city, the artists' works allude to society, politics, and daily life with a more poetic aura that transcends the framework of officially sanctioned art. While intimately tied to daily life and culture, Beijing is the center of politics and culture. Historical and economic imbalances of a geopolitical nature are exhibited in differences in local culture, in a classical garden that has a powerful poetic aura. Yin Xiuzhen realized an outdoor work called Washing the River which measured human society and human actions and morals.

The direct involvement of art in daily life is a heartfelt wish that has long been embraced by Chinese artists. They reflect upon the nature of art through a process that consists of analyzing the structure of society and sublimating their criticism of society and culture in a work of art by means of their individual knowledge and imagination. Zhang Pei, Geng Jianyi, Wang Jinsong and Wang Jianwei are representative of this kind of artists. Since early on, Zhang Pei has used video as a medium to consistently pursue human emotions on a deep level in terms of his personal experience. Through threatening, oppressive images at first glance appear irrational, he raised a variety of questions to the public. Geng Jian creates his own artistic world by means of an objective existence that is created by imputing artistic concepts as a function of the Other. This approach is inherently founded upon the principles of structuralism. The artist himself does not create culture; rather, the self becomes part of culture, and the products of culture are transformed into art. Wang Jianwei has been influenced by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept, "The Public Space". Wang's activities, which brilliantly fuse intellectual quests with creative practice, have added a new page to contemporary Chinese art. A farm village in Sichuan serves as the setting for a recent video entitled Circulation: Sewing and Harvesting. Using a tea shop and other places, he creates an intersection between the individual and public space. He chooses a public space that is different from art museums and galleries, and employs a mass medium such as a television monitor, so that he searches for what art can do in the society by revealing the close relationship between the public space and everyday life.

Although Wang Luyan and Wang Jinsong employ different methods, they have produced works that show a deep interest in experiences gained from everyday life. In psychological states, and in the workings of the emotions. Wang Luyan's Restructured Bicycle offers the weird experience of moving backward rather than forward when pedaling a bicycle. By presenting unexpected movements like this, he challenges our uncritical everyday acceptance of "Common Sense" attached to the machines that human beings have created to fulfill specific functions. Like the family photograph in Wang Jingsong's Standard Family, Wang Luyan's work questions society through the use of material that is typical of the everyday Chinese lifestyle. In a series of silk screens, Hong Hao employs a mechanical approach and personal subjectivity to create a fictional work. With a unique sort of humor, the screenprint depicts society in which the changes that happen in the everyday, mundane life are transformed into art.

4. The new trends that have emerged include environmental art. This reorientation was nurtured by the artists' experiences in presenting their works outside of the milieu of art museums. In 1994, Qiu Zhijie, who lives in Germany, produced a work called Wind Water-Lily in which he floated 10,000 fans in the Kunming Lake, located in the beautiful setting of the Summer Palace in the northern part of Beijing. The work that transcended the past and the present, aristocratic and modern mass culture, in a classical garden that has a powerful poetic aura. Yin Xiuzhen realized an outdoor work called Washing the River which measured societal and human actions and morals. Wang Peng and others also conducted experiments of this sort out of doors in the vicinity of Beijing. The direct involvement of art in daily life is a heartfelt wish that has long been embraced by Chinese artists. They reflect upon the nature of art through a process that consists of analyzing the structure of society and sublimating their criticism of society and culture in a work of art by means of their individual knowledge and imagination. Zhang Pei, Geng Jianyi, Wang Jinsong and Wang Jianwei are representative of this kind of artists. Since early on, Zhang Pei has used video as a medium to consistently pursue human emotions on a deep level in terms of his personal experience. Through threatening, oppressive images at first glance appear irrational, he raised a variety of questions to the public. Geng Jian creates his own artistic world by means of an objective existence that is created by imputing artistic concepts as a function of the Other. This approach is inherently founded upon the principles of structuralism. The artist himself does not create culture; rather, the self becomes part of culture, and the products of culture are transformed into art. Wang Jianwei has been influenced by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept, "The Public Space". Wang's activities, which brilliantly fuse intellectual quests with creative practice, have added a new page to contemporary Chinese art. A farm village in Sichuan serves as the setting for a recent video entitled Circulation: Sewing and Harvesting. Using a tea shop and other places, he creates an intersection between the individual and public space. He chooses a public space that is different from art museums and galleries, and employs a mass medium such as a television monitor, so that he searches for what art can do in the society by revealing the close relationship between the public space and everyday life.

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In the midst of complex political and cultural relationships today, contemporary Chinese art is faced with new conservative pressure and yet is in a position of having to courageously escape from adverse circumstances. The emergence of the new movement for the studies of ancient Chinese thought and culture and Confucian-based education signifies an effort to fill the void left by the Cultural Revolution. Its purpose is to provide a kind of spiritual model for society. However, what China's unsullied youths yearn for is a credo that liberates their spirits. Post-colonialism offers a new awareness. From F. FANON to E. SAID and H. BHABHA, these theorists have overcome tremendous difficulties to become Europe's leading thinkers, and they display a tremendous influence that transcends national borders.

The author would like to thank Mr. Fumio NANOJO, independent curator based in Tokyo, Miss Akiko MIKI, Stanley N. ANDERSON, Janet GOFF, Richard SAMS, Miss Zhang FANG and others for their contribution to this article.

The trends in contemporary Chinese art since mid-1994 are closely intertwined with the situation in society, and concomitant changes in lifestyle. The art that is being produced frankly reflects the psychology and mental state of the artists in the new age. They are devising a kind of cultural strategy by actively participating in global activities rather than limiting themselves to China. This clearly bespeaks the importance of the fact that the modernity and cultural identity overlap. The eminent Chinese thinker and writer LU Xun characterized the uniqueness of China's culture and art as "something that was international, national, generational, and personal. This truly applies to contemporary art in China today."