Document generated on 06/09/2025 8:58 p.m.

Inter
Art actuel

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Number 71, Fall 1998

Asie : nouvelles perspectives
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)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Du, H. (1998). Existence of Art and Cultural Identity: The Position and Changes of Chinese Contemporary Art. *Inter*, (71), 33–35.

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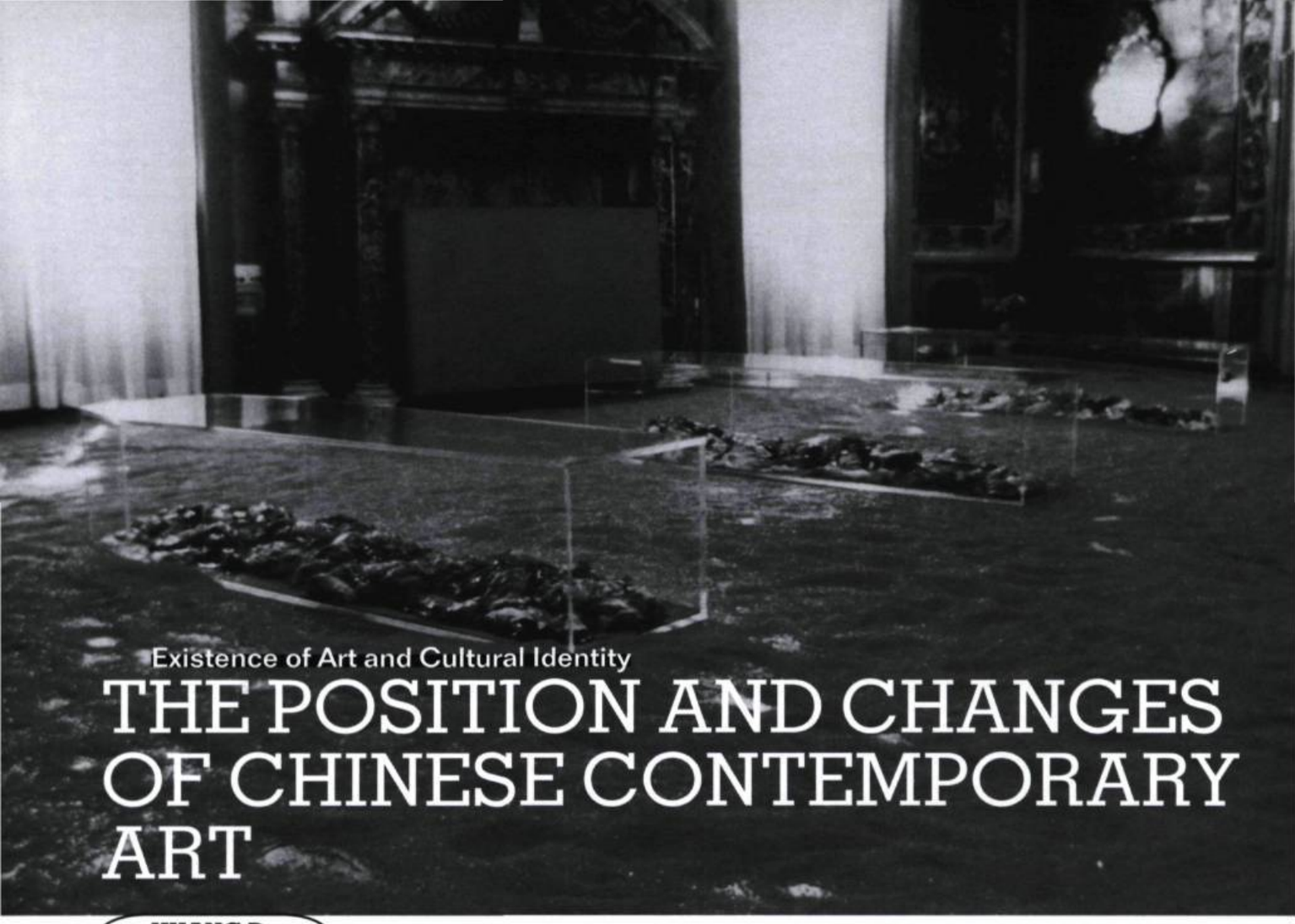

Existence of Art and Cultural Identity

THE POSITION AND CHANGES OF CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART

HUANG Du

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, and 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 banner 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 only key to recognizing the value of contemporary art. If so, what remains when contemporary art is separated from all social and political contexts ?

By looking at the development of art history, we see that the specific art styles are fixed and identified, so it seems that there is no further development of them. In other words, "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism" cannot avoid this sort of fate. In fact, the end of these movements was heralded by the Venice Biennial in 1993. Since then, contemporary Chinese art has been creating new trends, backed by sudden changes in Chinese social structure and the expanding world of ideas along with today's borderless information society. In recent years of the post-socialism, many young artists who constantly search for freedom through the practice of artistic creativity have emerged. They have dismantled the rigid authority and dominant position of realism and succeeded in overcoming the narrow political outlook of "Political Pop" and "Cynical Realism". The changing social values have sparked greater self-awareness among artists. Contemporary Chinese art abruptly became more multi-dimensional and complex as a result of the advent of conceptual art, installations art, environmental art and performance art.

1. Today, artists take modernity and cultural identity to be the starting point for creative activity. In *the Consequences of Modernity*, the British scholar Anthony GIDDENS observes that discontinuity or rupture is an underlying characteristic of the contemporary world [1]. Indeed, the contemporary world has brought about a completely new lifestyle that has never been experienced, or imagined, before in the history of the world. Naturally, the present follows in the footsteps of the past, but Chinese artists do not accept the contemporary uncritically. They use an international language for interacting intimately with society. Based on modernity, artists create formulas for expressing a profound spirit, while reflecting on the nature of the times. Using their own cultural background as a starting point, they transcend time and space as they measure the reality with new knowledge. At the same time, they are trying to create new art on the international stage by squarely confronting history and reality and recognizing the difference 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.

2. The living environment and cultural identity of individual artists defines the special character of their work. While living abroad since 1989, outstanding artists such as HUANG Yongping, CHEN Zhen, and YANG Jiecang in Paris, XU Bing and GU Wenda in New York, ZHU Jinshi in Berlin, WU Shanzhuan in Hamburg, and CAI Guoqiang in Japan, began to lose recognition of China's reality as they face the new cultural problems that have emerged since the end of the Cold War. The Immigrant culture which characterized their work is a result of the fusion of problems of the center and periphery, cultural identity, and the Chinese culture which is fading out in their mind. HUANG Yongping's *The Great Roulette*, CAI Guoqiang's *Sanjo Tower*, ZHU Jinshi's *Impermanence*, and CHEN Zhen's *Round Table* are examples of works that convey a kind of duality. I would like to call such works the "Culture of Exiles".

On the other hand, the art activities inside China is very closely related to the political and social situation. In spite of the difficult circumstances in which they work, artists observe the reality of Chinese society very closely, and their experiences in daily life give them a richer vocabulary and inspiration. Since 1993 interaction with the outside world has flourished. The exhibitions are still held mainly overseas and not inside China ; however, these sorts of opportunities to show their works have made artists aware of their strengths and originality. In addition, the *New Asian Art Show* covering China, South Korea, and Japan, which was held in Beijing in 1994, and *Open Your Mouth, Close Your Eyes*, a joint Chinese-German exhibition held in Beijing in 1995, offered artists an opportunity to view with their own eyes the works of Chinese and foreign artists, and fostered deeper awareness of their own artistic creativity.

Photo : GU Dexin, *June 7, 1995.*

Historical and economic imbalances of a geopolitical nature are exhibited in differences in local culture. Beijing is the center of politics and culture. Artists continually converge there from around the country. While intimately tied to diverse realities that surround the individual artist, the artists' works allude to society, politics, and tradition. In Shanghai, which was formerly a colony ruled by the Great Powers, the political element is rather weak compared to Beijing and artists' works have a more international aura that follows the trend of the times. Also, the information age has already set down roots here and artists often use advanced technology. In commercially prosperous Guangzhou, the acceptance of commercialism and popularism are reflected in the artists' works. These distinctive regional characteristics can also be perceived in the work of LU Xun (1881-1936) in the first part of the twentieth century [2].

3. In recent years, artists have discovered new methods and venues for exhibiting their works that transcend the framework of officially organized exhibitions. Since there are virtually no opportunities to display experimental works in public museums. Since 1994, however, artists have begun to employ their own unique methods to break out of the present situation, such as presenting performance art and exhibiting their work in their homes and studios. ZHU Fadong has done performances on the street and in shops, and WANG Jinsong and LIU Anping have done likewise in buses. SHI Yong created *City Space : Moving — Leaping 12 Hours* on the streets of Shanghai.

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, QIN Yufen, who lives in Germany, produced a work called *Wind Water-Lily* in which she 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 linked tradition 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 society 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 Peili, GENG Jianyi, WANG Jinsong and WANG Jianwei are representative of this kind of artists. Since early on, ZHANG Peili 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 that 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 imputting 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 Jungen 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 interrelationship 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 Jinsong'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 created a fictional work. With a unique sort of humor, the screens depict society in which the changes set in motion by human beings themselves are now occurring so fast that they can no longer be controlled.

GU Dexin's *June 7, 1995*, which was shown in Venice in 1995, and his most recent work *November 28, 1996*, use as material raw pork meat which horrifies all spectators. The subject evokes an image of the cruelty and violence that lurk under the surface of contemporary society. GU constantly focuses his attention on relationships that always exist simultaneously in opposition to each other, such as the soul and the body, life and death, art and everyday life.

In 1994, ZHANG Huan produced a performance piece called *65 kgs*, in which he suspended his body from the ceiling, and the drops of blood that dripped down were scorched by the electric heater that had been placed on the floor. In a similar vein, MA Liu Ming has been creating performances in which hermaphroditism is the main

Photos : 1-2-3. WANG Jian Wei. *Circulation : Sewing and Harvesting* ; 4. HUANG Yong Ping, *100 Arms of Guan-Yin* ; 5. WANG Quing Song, *The Last Supper* ; 6. WU Shan Zhuan et Inga SVALA

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theme. In contemporary society, where all conceivable forms of artistic representation are present, the performance artists seek the certainty of their own existence by means of absurd acts that are accompanied by physical and mental pain. These sorts of performances are shaped by masochism and extreme narcissism. All fashions and popular phenomena are shattered, and fear and beauty fuse inside the bodies of the artists. Although romance and violence are intertwined, the hearts of the artists remain uncertain. In spite of receiving a benediction, their bodies and souls writhe in pain. Furthermore, both WANG Jin's *Marriage to a Mule* and YAN Lei's *Invasion* render ambiguous the boundary between public and private space. What is legal ? What is normal ? In their artistic activities, these two artists apply the scalpel to " sensible" relationships between society and art.

The recent activities of women artists have both energized and broadened the scope of contemporary Chinese art. This is by no means a temporary fad or social movement, nor is it a superficial imitation of the wave of feminism that swept Europe and the United States in the 1970s. Long before that, MAO Tse-Tung proclaimed that "Women support half of heaven." The question of equality between the sexes has almost completely been resolved in China. It is purely an issue involving artistic activity. The influence of theories of post-modernism and post-colonialism can be perceived in the works of women artists, along with the influence of Chinese political concepts. The creative activities of the women, which allude to subjects such as women's psychology, sex, heightened sensibilities and maternal affection do not simply cling to the realm of art, but are intimately linked to society and daily life at the same time. For instance, YIN Xiuzhen's *Dress Box* rests upon experiences and memories from her own childhood as it relates to her happy life thus far, while JIANG Jie's *Baby* is brimming with a sense of maternal love.

The 21st century is almost upon us. All of the values that have been held in the past have collapsed, and the economic competition is generating new encounters with different cultures. Amid the sudden globalization, the old political and economic paradigms have collapsed, and awareness of the center and periphery is fading. In this post-modern world, cultural theory and practice lie before us as the most important task in the new age. In the realm of ideas, structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and 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.

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 creed that liberates their spirits.

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."[3]

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[notes]

1 Anthony GIDDENS, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge, U.K. : Polity Press, 1990).

2 "The Beijing School and the Shanghai School", vol. 5 of *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* (Beijing : The People's Literature Publishing House, 1981). In this volume, LU Xun states that Beijing was the capital and political center of the country during the Ming and Ching dynasties. Shanghai is a foreign concession and a commercial center. Consequently, the intellectuals in Beijing are on the side of the establishment, and have no connection with commercial activities, unlike in Shanghai. Those who are close to the establishment make a name for themselves as bureaucrats, while those with strong ties to commerce accumulate profits. Both sides work only on behalf of their own lives. Lu Xun is alluding to the correlation between topographical factors and the culture of a region, while maintaining a distinction between the social environment and regional and personal differences in China. Also see "Northerners and Southerners", vol. 5 of *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* (Beijing : The People's Literature publishing House, 1981).

3 *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* (Beijing : The People's Literature Publishing House, 1981). LU Xun also mentioned on *The Art Exhibition* of TAO Yuanqing (vol. 3 of *the Complete Works of Lu Xun*) that the artist tries to create his own world with new figures and color. In Tao's image, there exists the ancient soul of the Chinese which, strictly speaking, remains a national characteristics. New thoughts surge into China from all over the world. Awaking, fighting against, revolting against and taking off to participate in world events... if it can be said China is a member of the world, then such a situation is understandable.

The author would like to thank Mr. Fumio NANJO, 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.

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