

*“China” on Display for European  
Audiences? The Making of an Early  
Travelling Exhibition of Contemporary  
Chinese Art—China Avantgarde  
(Berlin/1993)*

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**Contemporary Chinese Art—Phenomenon and Discursive Category  
Mediated by Exhibitions**

Exhibitions have always been at the heart of the modern art world and its latest developments. They are contested sites where the joint forces of art objects, their social agents, and institutional spaces intersect temporarily and provide a visual arrangement for specific audiences, whose interpretations themselves feed back into the discourse on art. Viewed from this perspective, *contemporary Chinese art*—as a phenomenon and as a discursive category that refer to specific dimensions of artistic production in post-1979 China—was mediated through various exhibitions that took place in the People’s Republic of China (hereafter, People’s Republic). In 1989, art from the People’s Republic also began to appear in European and North American exhibitions significantly expanding Western knowledge of this artistic production. Since then, national and international exhibitions have multiplied, while simultaneously becoming increasingly entangled: the sheer number of artworks that circulate between Chinese urban art scenes and Western art metropolises has risen steeply, as have the often overlapping circles of contemporary artists, art critics, art historians, gallery owners, and collectors who successfully engage across both sides of the field. To a certain degree these agents govern exhibition-making and act as important mediators or “cultural brokers”<sup>1</sup> globalizing the discursive category of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent study that explores the notion of the “cultural broker” from a transcultural perspective see Rudolf G. Wagner, “China ‘Asleep’ and ‘Awakening.’ A Study in Conceptualizing Asymmetry and Coping with It,” *Transcultural Studies* 1 (Spring 2011): 4–36, 92, and note 157, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://transculturalstudies.org>. An earlier essay that applies the term to (Western) curators of (non-Western) art exhibitions was written by Mari Carmen Ramiréz, “Brokering identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation,” in *Thinking about exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 21–38.

Chinese art: it is covered in worldwide news media, promoted by museums with an international outlook both inside and outside the People's Republic, and established by agents whose actions are not confined to local or national settings. Significantly, these activities are no longer governed by Cold War ideologies, at least not in the same ways they were prior to China's Reform and Opening Policy, initiated in the late 1970s, and the fall of the Iron Curtain in late-1980s Europe.

These observations logically imply that the category of contemporary Chinese art is neither monolithic nor clear-cut but rather subject to continuous renegotiation, being reconfigured for and by each exhibition. However, my research on Western exhibitions of artwork produced in the People's Republic after 1979, as well as the development of exhibition activities in China during the same period, shows that several factors account for the tendency of these exhibitions to claim and even brand the category as a stable canon of artworks, artists, art practices, and artistic concepts. This canon does not easily change or broaden over time, despite the fact that the number of people active in the art world has risen. Meanwhile, exhibition-making has become part of a prosperous transnational culture industry, exemplified by the worldwide proliferation of biennials, art fairs, and auctions.

The numerous group exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art displayed to European and American audiences in the last twenty-five years bring forth two recurring observations: first, the claim that a show represents the best, most innovative, and representative of recent artistic production in the People's Republic; second, that the exhibition provides an artistic window through which to understand "China" as such. No doubt such claims are hardly new and can be dismissed as the conventional marketing rhetoric of Western art exhibitions, which present non-Western artwork as an attraction based on assumptions of cultural difference. Yet if we consider exhibitions as platforms where processes of cultural symbolization take place, we can examine the conditions under which art produced in the People's Republic becomes visible in the West and vice versa. However, it is important to remember that these processes are inherently pre-configured and produce notions of "the West" and "China" in relation to historically changing and permeable national, cultural, and economic boundaries, which themselves determine the degree to which mutual artistic exchange and the transfer of art objects and agents can occur. Nonetheless, an examination of these processes enables us to question how such exhibitions negotiate notions of identity and difference, contributing to change(s) or stabilizations in these boundaries.

## Historical Background and Socio-Political Asymmetries Governing Exhibition Practices in China and the Western World during the 1980s

This paper proposes to investigate the conditions that (in)formed the first large group exhibition of contemporary Chinese art from the People's Republic presented in Europe after 1979: the travelling group show *China Avantgarde*, which opened in Berlin in early 1993.<sup>2</sup> Before analyzing the exhibition in detail, it is important to recapitulate the historical conditions that had a decisive impact on its making. I will contextualize *China Avantgarde* in relation to two important forerunners that exemplify the differences between the Chinese and the European exhibition scenes in 1989: *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* in Beijing and *Magiciens de la terre* in Paris. The exhibition in Berlin explicitly refers to these earlier events, their concepts, and agents, thus drawing on a small social network that already linked art and artists across European and Chinese borders.

In general, the development of post-Cold War contemporary Chinese art was marked by fundamental political, economic, and institutional asymmetries that existed between a) the unsettled situation governing exhibitions in the People's Republic after the iconoclasm of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), on the one hand; and b) the highly differentiated modern museum and gallery infrastructure of Euro-America with its internationally connected art market and extended public and private funding systems, on the other. During the 1980s, these asymmetries fueled the dynamic flow of art objects and agents as politically enhanced cultural exchange became increasingly common as a result of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Policy.<sup>3</sup> Yet contemporary Chinese art was largely ignored by West European and American audiences until 1989,<sup>4</sup> when

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2 This paper goes back to a talk I held in connection with the International Conference "'China' on Display: Past and Present Practices of Selecting, Exhibiting and Viewing Chinese Visual and Material Culture," chaired by Francesca Dal Lago at Leiden University, December 6–8, 2007. She edited an early version of the text, envisioned as an altered publication in her edited volume, forthcoming 2012. I also would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers whose insightful, encouraging and constructive comments helped me to improve the current version. Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to Monica Juneja as well as Andrea Hacker and her team, who have generously and professionally supported the publication in technical, linguistic, and stylistic regards.

3 One important aspect of this renewed cultural exchange was the exhibition of foreign art, which stirred much attention in the Chinese art world and allowed Chinese artists to see Western and non-Western art firsthand. See Hans Van Dijk, "Bildende Künste nach der Kulturrevolution. Stilentwicklungen und theoretische Debatten," in *China Avantgarde*, ed. Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1993), 22.

4 Exceptions include some small group exhibitions in American college galleries and two larger shows at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California, USA: *Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary*

it suddenly began to appear in group exhibitions that were imported by prestigious institutions of modern and contemporary art, thereby skipping the tedious path through small galleries or non-profit art spaces, which conventionally leads to recognition by the major public museums.

Another route for the reception of Chinese art within the medium of twentieth-century Western exhibition space has been its display in museums dedicated to the presentation of artifacts and the art of “foreign civilizations,” or in museums that specialized in (East) Asian art in particular. Besides ancient bronzes, jades, ceramics, and religious sculptures, these institutions often featured traditional Chinese art forms such as calligraphy and ink-and-wash painting on paper or silk, yet similar works marked by the stylistic changes that resulted from the encounter with Western modernism were largely excluded.<sup>5</sup> And while ancient works and pre-modern artistic techniques, crafts, and designs were often admired by Western collectors and travelers to China, the results of Chinese artistic modernization—at least when obviously entangled with Western artistic expressions—usually found no appeal. If considered at all, these objects were often classified as “inferior”

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*Painting from the People's Republic of China* (39 artists) in 1987 and *'I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne' and Other Works: Selections from the Chinese New Wave and Avant-garde Art of the Eighties* (44 artists) in 1991. Both were staged at the Pacific Asia Museum only, which is an institution dedicated to presenting the cultural and ethnological aspects of arts created in Asia and the Pacific Islands. While the following early exhibitions took place in institutions whose focus was contemporary or modern art, they often included only Chinese artists who had (recently) emigrated to the West: *Chine, demain pour hier* in 1990 with site-specific installations in the small town of Pourrières, France (6 artists); *Silent Memory* (8 artists) in 1993 at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, England; *Fragmented Memory. The Chinese Avant-garde in Exile* (4 artists) in 1993 at the Wexner Center of Art, Columbus, Ohio, USA. The first small group exhibition that falls into the more narrow definition of contemporary Chinese art, as formulated in this paper, and consisted mostly of artists still working in the People's Republic of China was *New Chinese Art, Post-Mao Product* in 1992/3 (7 artists) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. For a Google Earth-based visualization that maps ca. 60 influential post-1979 group exhibitions of contemporary art from the People's Republic at art institutions in North America, Western Europe, Australia, Hong Kong, and Japan, see the author's pilot project *GECCA mapped* at [www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/heidelberg-research-architecture/hra-portal/detail/m/franziska-koch-projekt-exhibition-map.html](http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/heidelberg-research-architecture/hra-portal/detail/m/franziska-koch-projekt-exhibition-map.html), launch date January 2012. This online resource will allow the user to explore the above-mentioned exhibitions through metadata such as the names of curators, number of artists, exhibition dates, links to the hosting art institutions, and catalog cover illustrations.

5 Prime examples of such museums in Germany are: the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, in Cologne (founded in 1913); and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, in Berlin—a recent fusion of the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst (established in Berlin, 1906) and the Museum für Indische Kunst (founded in 1963), the latter goes back to the Indian Collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin, which was founded in 1873. Other prominent examples are: the Musée Guimet (founded in 1989) and Musée Cernuschi (inaugurated 1898) in France; the Victoria and Albert Museum (going back to 1852) as well as the Asian collections of the British Museum in England; the Chinese collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (inaugurated 1876) and the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. (opened 1923) in the USA, to name but a few.

to and "derivative" of Western accomplishments. This perspective followed the logic of colonial taxonomies and the Eurocentric master narrative of a Western "mission to civilize," with its Enlightenment claims to universal and teleological (stylistic) progress; developments that the non-Western world and "developing countries" in particular would need to catch up with before being considered "equal."

Especially after World War II and the founding of the People's Republic of China under the Chinese Communist Party, in 1949, Western museum exhibits tended to exclude ink paintings and calligraphy from the People's Republic, thereby affirming a pre-modern focus that was based upon ideological concerns. Occasionally, the resulting gap in their collections was filled by means of displaying contemporaneous art from Taiwan and Hong Kong that followed the "indigenous" Chinese aesthetic tradition, or works by Chinese émigré artists, who followed traditional artistic idioms.<sup>6</sup>

Then in 1993, one finds early signs of a revised exhibition practice in Western museums of modern and contemporary art: in general, these revisions can be considered the beginning of a broader Western reception of contemporary art from the People's Republic. Besides *China Avantgarde*, which toured Europe following its première in Berlin, the exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989* was inaugurated in Hong Kong and subsequently staged in Australia and the USA, and seventeen Chinese artists made their debut at the Venice Biennale in Italy. These three events were pivotal to the early international success of Chinese art. It was through them that categories such as "modern," "avant-garde," "experimental," or simply "new"<sup>7</sup>—designating

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6 The post-1979 (and in particular post-1989) transformation of exhibition practices in these (art) museums with non-Western regional, cultural, and/or anthropological profiles merits a separate paper, which would supplement the findings made in relation to the reception of art from the People's Republic in those Western museums that are specifically dedicated to modern and contemporary art. Although such analysis lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is indicative of the separate receptive strands that the Western exhibitions of "modern," "avant-garde," or "new" Chinese art considered in this paper largely excluded artworks in the traditional idiom, i.e., ink paintings on paper. The exhibition makers implicitly or explicitly legitimized this exclusion not only by referring to art categories derived of Western modernism, but also because art academies and artists in the People's Republic themselves conventionally classify ink-and-wash painting as *guohua* (国画), "national painting," thus distinguishing it from *xihua* (西画), "Western painting," (which generally means academically painted oil-on-canvas works). However, this institutional differentiation is itself a modern, complex, and dynamic process that changes over time. Nonetheless, viewed through the "curved" lens of Western exhibition catalogs published during the last 25 years, these publications attest to the fact that this distinction holds true; as much as a single catalog might illustrate exhibits that show the ongoing fluidity and fuzziness of these contested categorical and institutional demarcations.

7 For English discussions of the terms "Chinese avant-garde" or "experimental art" written by Chinese scholars who are also influential in the Chinese art scene, see: Gao Minglu, ed., *The Wall. Reshaping*

artistic production that had evolved within the context of political reforms undertaken by the Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping–mediated Chinese art to audiences outside of mainland China.<sup>8</sup> In China—and consequently in Western catalogs as well—these attributes generally refer to a heterogeneous field of artistic practices that enabled Chinese artists in the 1980s to go beyond the revolutionary propaganda imagery of the previous decade and overcome severe political restrictions in the field of art.<sup>9</sup>

For the purpose of this article, it will suffice to simplify the volatile and multilayered realities of artists working in the People’s Republic from 1949 to 1979 by stating that the directive which dominated the production and display of art during this period “was to serve politics.” In essence, this meant that artistic production had to conform to the ruling (and often changing) Chinese Communist Party line and its totalitarian regime. Artworks and their makers were defined as the “cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary

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*Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York/Beijing: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo Art Galleries/Millennium Art Museum, 2005), 43–56; and Wu Hung, *Transience—Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the 20th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12–16. A very valuable volume that translates influential primary sources into English, albeit without republishing the original Chinese texts, which are hard to find in Western libraries, is: Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010). For a critical rereading of these authors and the current Chinese discourse, from a Critical Theory perspective, see: Paul Gladston, “Writing on The Wall (and Entry Gate): A Critical Response to Recent Curatorial Meditations on the ‘Chineseness’ of Contemporary Chinese Visual Art,” *Yishu. Journal for Contemporary Chinese Art* 6, no. 1 (March 2007): 26–33; and Gladston, “(More writing on) The Wall: Reshaping (Gao Minglu’s Vision of) Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Yishu* 6, no. 3 (September 2007): 103–110. This pointed critique motivated Gao to respond with: Gao Minglu, “Who is Pounding The Wall? A Response to Paul Gladston’s ‘Writing on the Wall and (Entry Gate): A Critical Response to Recent Curatorial Meditations on the ‘Chineseness’ of Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Yishu* 6, no. 2 (June 2007): 106–115. Gladston further elaborated and broadened his reflections in: Gladston, “Permanent (R)evolution: Contemporaneity and the Historicization of Contemporary Chinese Art, Part Two,” *Yishu* 9, no. 3 (May/June 2010): 96–102.

8 See Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare. The Chinese Avant-Garde 1979–1989. A Semiotic Analysis* (Hongkong: Timezone 8, 2003). She discusses some of the most canonical artworks of this period and their political context. For a comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the development of modern art since the foundation of the People’s Republic, see: Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China 1949–1979* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994). A study that largely draws upon earlier research is: Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China. 1949–1984* (Hongkong: The Chinese University Press, 1998). And a groundbreaking study from which all these publications draw is: Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art of the People’s Republic of China* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1988).

9 The artistic development that began in the mid-1980s was embedded in a wider cultural discourse, referred to as “cultural fever” (wenhua re, 文化热) by Chinese intellectuals. See Wang Jing, *High culture fever. Politics, aesthetics, and ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

machine,”<sup>10</sup> as Mao Zedong—quoting Vladimir Lenin—had outlined in his 1942 “Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art,” which became the main guideline for cultural politics after the foundation of the People’s Republic. The notion of “art for art’s sake” was explicitly rejected<sup>11</sup> and works of art thus accused ran the risk of being censored or destroyed. Their makers, on the other hand, had to fear varying forms of punishment that, at different stages in the political development of China and especially during collective campaigns of “thought reform,” ranged from regular sessions of “self-criticism,” to public criticism in the state-controlled media, to being sent to the countryside or factories in order “to learn from the farmers and workers.” During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (hereafter, Cultural Revolution), public humiliation, the imprisonment of artists for any supposed deviation, and the castigation of their family members was particularly common and violent.

However, as Julia F. Andrews observed:

“Art was in China an occupation of high social and economic status. China took its own art extremely seriously, as is evidenced by the great amount of critical writing on the subject, the government sponsorship of national exhibitions, the training of art students, and, perhaps most important, the canonizing of particular artists and styles of art as superior to those of earlier times. The Chinese government invested generously in the production of art. Even though housing was in short supply, artists were given studio space, supplies, and money to travel. Chinese artists painted pictures that those in charge deemed to be of high quality, even as the nation’s critical standards grew more distant from those of the outside world.”<sup>12</sup>

In general, jobs were assigned by the state linking every citizen to a specific “work unit” (*danwei*). Until well into the 1990s, this system of work units exerted a decisive power over the life of any “art worker.” Not only did it regulate the supply of artistic material, studio space, and income, but the

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10 Mao Tse-tung, “Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art” (May 1942), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. III. Accessed 20.11.2011, [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3\\_08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm), see unpaginated “Conclusion, May 23, 1942, [section] III.”

11 *Ibid.*, Mao says: “There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause [...]”

12 Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 8–9.

work unit also decided on the private living conditions of its members, such as the granting of marriage applications, the allocation of housing, as well as the opportunity to move.<sup>13</sup>

In such an increasingly controlled environment, incentives for artists to experiment and deviate from officially approved styles of artistic expression—namely, socialist realism, and the reformed style of ideologically affirmative, mostly figurative ink painting, as well as adapted forms of “folk art” that featured political messages—were scarce. In addition, continuous friction in the cultural bureaucracy and fights within the various Party wings often led to the sudden and serious disgrace of those very artists who had been singled out as role models. When one considers the violent iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution—which intensified the political restriction on all cultural expression and led to the closure of art academies, universities, and even schools in its paradoxical attempt to collectivize and simultaneously control education and artistic expression—one can understand how Mao Zedong’s death in 1976 and the subsequent political and economic liberalization implemented under Deng Xiaoping in 1978/79 came as a relief to many artists.

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13 Karen Smith, *Nine Lives. The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Zürich: Scalo Verlag, 2005), 407–449. Smith describes, among others, the life of the artist Wang Jianwei (b. 1958). His biography is similar to that of many artists who came of age in the post-revolutionary period and serves as an example to illustrate how individuals were affected by the state apparatus: Wang was sent to the countryside for two years as were many of the urban youth in Mao’s attempt to regulate the Red Guards, an initially successful strategy to reestablish his position as the “Great Helmsman” of the country. In order to escape this collective relegation, Wang joined the People’s Liberation Army in 1976, obtaining a discharge in 1982. Subsequently, he was able to attain the humble position of store master at Chengdu Painting Institute, where he could paint in his spare time. Despite the fact that Wang was not an accredited artist, as those who studied at the institute, three of his paintings were accepted at the annual national art exhibition. But the jury had to overrule the institute’s director in order that at least one of Wang’s paintings could participate: and the painting won the first prize in its category. Having served in the army, he was finally granted the right to enroll at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou—without having to pass the rigorous entrance exam and despite the age limit for students—for the two-year postgraduate program designed to educate a new generation of teachers. Even though he had married in 1983, the couple could not live together because both were natives of and therefore registered in different cities (Beijing and Chengdu) and attached to different work units. After his graduation in 1988, and after Wang was granted the right to move from Chengdu to the Beijing Painting Institute in 1990, it took the couple another three years until they were finally granted an apartment that they would not have to share with other couples, and yet another year to upgrade to a flat with a kitchen. Smith explains that these living conditions often significantly influenced the artistic media and formats which the first generation of post-revolutionary artists chose, and that Wang’s transition from painting to conceptual projects and later to theatrical performances and documentary video works was also motivated by a lack of studio space for painting and a heightened awareness of and interest in social issues based on his own experiences.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the older generation of rehabilitated artists cautiously tried to reform academic standards and official notions of socialist realism. They successively enlarged the narrow ideological canon of figurative oil painting, ink painting, and sculpture by (re)introducing motifs and stylistic features that had been forbidden. A telling example is Luo Zhongli's photorealistic and larger-than-life sized portrait of a poor peasant called "Father" from 1980, which won first prize at the 2nd China Youth Art Exhibition.<sup>14</sup> As Martina Köppel-Yang points out, this drastic depiction of a farmer's poverty—his sunburnt and wrinkled face with rotten teeth, the dirt under the nails of his injured hand holding a lacerated bowl of tea—deconstructed the beautifying and heroic propaganda imagery of farmers and workers that had dominated the previous decade under Mao's regime, as exemplified in pictures collected by the National Museum of China at the time, such as Wang Xia's "Girl of Sea Island" from 1961 and Jin Zhilin's "Commune secretary" from 1974.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the deconstruction of propagandistic imagery, it is important to note that the monumental portrait was emphatically called "Father," hinting at a critical disengagement from Mao Zedong as the sole figure that had previously been monumentalized and incessantly staged as the "father" of the masses, adored by faithful and honoring children.<sup>16</sup>

While Luo's portrait still followed socialist ideals laying bare the strained situation of the peasants, many younger artists attempted to abandon the socialist understanding of art altogether. Through imported and by now more frequently translated books, magazines, and other media (formerly banned or forbidden to circulate), artists became increasingly acquainted with the currents of twentieth-century Western art. This led to challenging appropriations mostly at the hands of first generation art students, who had graduated in the mid-1980s from art academies that were reopened in the late 1970s. Their artwork and exhibition activities spread across the nation and they were soon coined the '85 New Wave Art Movement ('85 xinchao meishu yundong, 八五新潮美术运动),<sup>17</sup> widely discussed in official art

14 Luo Zhongli, *Father*, 1980, oil on canvas, 215 × 150 cm. [http://www.namoc.org/en/Collection/200902/t20090205\\_66388.html](http://www.namoc.org/en/Collection/200902/t20090205_66388.html) Accessed on 12.12.2011.

15 Wang Xia, *Girl of Sea Island*, 1961, 173 × 84 cm, oil on canvas. [http://www.namoc.org/en/Collection/200902/t20090205\\_66506.html](http://www.namoc.org/en/Collection/200902/t20090205_66506.html). Accessed 12.12.2011. Jin Zhilin, *Commune Secretary*, 1974, 107 × 87 cm, oil on canvas. [http://www.namoc.org/en/Collection/200902/t20090205\\_66432.html](http://www.namoc.org/en/Collection/200902/t20090205_66432.html). Accessed 12.12.2011.

16 Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 92–103.

17 Gao Minglu, a Chinese art critic and major editor of the art magazine *Meishu* (*Art Monthly*) from 1984 to 1990 and temporary guest editor of *Meishubao* (*Fine Arts in China*), claims to have coined this term in an influential article about the numerous artists' groups active at the time, see: Gao Minglu, "The 1985

magazines at the time.<sup>18</sup>

In the absence of a broadly established Western-style art market—with commercial galleries, private and corporate funding of artistic production, various museums for modern and contemporary art, and non-profit art spaces—and amidst the insecurity and opportunities that the Reform and Opening Policy had created, Chinese artists were keen to pave new ways to reach the public and stir an interest in their art. They hoped that this would help them gain political freedom and economic independence from the official cultural bureaucracy.

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New Wave Art Movement,” in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery and Asia Art Archive, 1993), C–CIII. This is the English translation of an article originally published as: Gao Minglu, “Bawu meishu yundong,” *Artists' Newsletter (Meishujia tongxun)*, no. 5 (April 1986): 15–23. After moving to the USA in 1991, Gao explored and published further details of the movement in his doctoral thesis: Gao Minglu, “The '85 Movement: Avant-garde Art in the Post-Mao Era.” PhD diss., Harvard University, 1999. On page 43, he writes: “In the two years 1985 and 1986, seventy-nine self-organized avant-garde art groups, including more than 2,250 of the nation's young artists, emerged to organize exhibitions, to hold conferences, and to write manifestos and articles about their art. A total of 149 exhibitions were organized by the groups within the two years.” One reason for Gao's emigration was the political restrictions imposed on art criticism and exhibition activity following the Tiananmen Incident. In September 1990, the editorial team of *Meishu* was replaced by conservative editors and Gao was suspended from work: Gao, *Reshaping*, 368–383, 374. Gao's first Chinese monograph on the '85 New Wave art movement had been published more than a decade earlier: Gao Minglu et al., *History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1985–1986 (Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Peoples Press, 1991).

18 See Gao, “The '85 Movement,” 43–44: “Avant-garde ideas and art groups were enthusiastically promoted in new magazines and newspapers such as *Meishu Sichao (Art Trends)*, founded in January 1985; *Zhongguo Meishubao (Fine Arts in China)*, begun in July 1985; and *Huajia (Painters)*, first published in October 1985. Established journals such as *Meishu (Art Monthly)*, the most influential magazine in contemporary Chinese art world, published by the official Chinese Art Association since 1950, also strongly supported the young art groups due to an open-minded policy and the young editorship. *Jiangsu Huakan (Jiangsu Pictorial)*, a magazine traditionally focused on ink painting, also shifted attention to the '85 Movement. Many of the publications' editors were young critics who themselves were involved in the avant-garde. These journals reported the activities of the group movement. During 1985 and 1986, I myself travelled nationally several times to visit various groups and collected a lot of materials, such as manifestos, slides of their works, articles and notes. In the April 1986, I gave a talk entitled ‘Bawu meishu yundong,’ (The '85 Art Movement) at that year's National Oil Painting Conference (Quanguo youhua taolunhui) organized by the Chinese Artists Association; in it I discussed the art ideas and works of various groups and showed about 200 slides to an audience consisting mostly of influential artists. Since it was presented at the first official meeting in the art world after the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign and it sent a sign of political relaxation and a policy of more openness, the publication of this text helped ease, to a degree, the suppression of some avant-garde groups by local officials. In *Zhongguo Meishubao*, Li Xianting and his fellows created a special section for the avant-garde groups, called *Qingnian qunti zhuanlan (Young artists groups)*, and continually reported on and discussed the groups' activities, ideas and works.” On page 44, note 30, Gao adds: “[...] Li Xianting, one of the most influential critics of Chinese avant-garde was an editor of *Meishubao* from 1985 to 1990. Peng De and Pi Daojian, the active critics from Hubei Province, were the founders of *Meishu Sichao*. Li Luming, a critic and artist from Hunan Province, founded *Huajia*.” For a short but concise discussion of these art magazines, their makers, structures, and debates at the time, see: Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 52–54.

## 1989 in Beijing: *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde*

Gao Minglu,<sup>19</sup> a prominent art critic and editor of the art magazine *Meishu* (*Art Monthly*), together with a group of enthusiastic critics and some artists<sup>20</sup>—among them the renowned art critic Li Xianting<sup>21</sup>—successfully inaugurated the seminal exhibition *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* (literally translated: *Chinese modern art exhibition*) in 1989.<sup>22</sup> After

19 For his earliest account of the exhibition, in Chinese see: Gao Minglu, “Fengkuang de yijiubajiu-zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan shimo [1989—A Crazy Year: A Description of the Beginning and End of the ‘Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan’ Exhibition],” *Qingxiang* (*Tendency Quarterly*), no. 12 (1999): 43–76. For a brief Chinese-English account of this exhibition and its forerunners, see: Gao, *Reshaping*, 69–70, 371–376. For his most detailed English account, see: Gao, “The ‘85 Movement,” 84–112.

20 See “Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan chouzhan tonggao, diyihao [Announcement of the organization of the Chinese Modern Art Exhibition],” *Zhongguo Meishubao* (*Fine Arts in China*), no. 44 (October 1988): 1. This public announcement followed the foundation of the Organizational Committee of the *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan choubei weiyuanhui*) on October 8, 1988 in Beijing, electing Gao Minglu as its chair. He provides an English transcript of the announcement’s nine points in: Gao, “The ‘85 Movement,” 94–95. On page 95 he specifies: “[...] 6. The advisers [of the exhibition] are: Ru Xin [chair of the Chinese Aesthetic Study Society (*Zhonghua quanguo meixue xuehui*)], Li Zehou, Liu Kaiqu [influential artist of the older generation], Wu Zuoren [influential artist of the older generation], Shen Changwen [director of the Sanlian Publishing House (*Sanlian shudian*)], Shao Dazhen, Tang Kemei, Jin Shangyi and Ge Weimo. 7. Members of the Organizational Committee are: Gan Yang [editor of *Culture: China and the World* (*Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie*)], Zhang Yaojun, Liu Dong, Liu Xiaochun, Zhang Zuying, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Tang Qingfeng, Yang Lihua, Zhou Yan, Fan Dipan, Wang Mingxian, Kong Changan and Fei Dawei. 8. Director of the Preparatory Committee is: Gao Minglu.”

21 For an early account of the exhibition by Li, see: Li Xianting, “Wo zuowei Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan chouzhanren de zigongzhuang [My point of view as curator of the Chinese Modern Art Exhibition],” *Meishu shilun* (*Art History and Theory*), no. 3 (1989): 24. Reprinted in English as “Confessions of a ‘China/Avant-Garde’ curator (1989)” in: Wu and Wang, *Primary Documents*, 116–120.

22 The catalog of the exhibition *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* lists the seven co-organizing entities on its bilingual cover pages as follows: “*Wenhua: Zhongguo Yu Shijie, Congshu* (*Culture: China and the World*, a book series); *Zhonghua Quanguo Meixue Xuehui* (*China National Society of Aesthetics*); *Meishu Zazhi* (*Art Magazine*); *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* (*Fine Arts in China*); *Dushu Zazhi* (*Reading Magazine*); *Beijing Gongyi Meishu Zonggongsi* (*Beijing Craft and Art Cooperation*); *Zhongguo Shirongbao* (*China Urban Sight Press*).” But the catalog does not identify the members of the organizational committee by name except Gao Minglu, who is acknowledged as the author of the preface located on the first two pages of this unpaginated, 46-page booklet. Much later Gao recalls in Gao, *Reshaping*, 70: “After its initial conception during the Zhuhai Conference in 1985, *China/Avant-Garde* had to be ‘recognized,’ which meant finding a sponsor. For one year, not a single organization was willing to sponsor the event; meanwhile the China Avant-Garde Art Research Institute, an organization formed by critics, disbanded. By the time I started the project in 1988, I had already secured the support of the highly influential journal *Dushu* (*Readings*) and its publisher SDX Joint Publishing Company, as well as that of the Chinese Fine Arts Institute. But in the end, I still had to obtain the permission of the Chinese Society for Aesthetics before we could proceed with the exhibition at the National Museum of Fine Art [today NAMOC].” For an account of the exhibition that also examines some of the exhibited works in detail and mentions Li Xianting’s pivotal role, see: Köppel-Yang, *Se-miotic Warfare*, 62–65, 174–180.

preparations that lasted three years,<sup>23</sup> the group was finally able to schedule the event for February 5–19, 1989 at the China Art Gallery (today called National Art Museum of China, NAMOC) in Beijing.<sup>24</sup> According to Gao Minglu, this was the first time in the history of this prestigious institution (built in 1958) that a show was staged without financial support from the central or local governments or work units, a convention that characterized the state-controlled cultural activities of museums in the People's Republic until the late 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Through a variety of sources—this included private connections with liberally oriented organizations (such as the Tianjin Writers and Artists Association) and private businessmen, and the individual contribution of 100 RMB per exhibiting artist—the organizational committee succeeded in raising 118,600 RMB. Although they did not reach their target budget of 150,000 RMB, the funds were sufficient to realize the exhibition.<sup>26</sup>

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23 Gao Minglu details the exhibition's preparatory phase in the chronology included in Gao, *Reshaping*, 373–374: “1986 [...]. In November, the Chinese Modern Art Research Committee (Zhongguo xiandaiyishu yanjiuhui), an association of about thirty critics, is founded in Beijing, in part as a planning committee for the nationwide avant-garde exhibition [...]. 1987 [...]. A planning meeting [...] is held on March 25 and 26 in Beijing. The show is given the seemingly neutral working title *Nationwide Exhibition of Research and Communication of Young Art Groups (Quanguo qingnian yishuqunti xueshu jiaoliuzhan)*. Authorities see through the ruse, however, and on April 4 ban all organized scholarly communication among young people. Then, on April 12, a leader of the Chinese Artists' Association (Zhongguo meishujia xiehui), a government-approved organization directed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), approaches the chief organizer of the exhibition [Gao himself] with a request to terminate his activities. Plans for a nationwide exhibition are halted.” The background to these temporary political restrictions was the campaign against “bourgeois liberalism” that targeted new cultural activities and political thought in 1987 through mid-1988. For further obstacles during the making of the exhibition, see note 27.

24 For the official, bilingual website of the National Museum of China (Zhongguo Meishu Guan) see: <http://www.namoc.org>. Accessed on 21.11.2011. Its online archive of “Past exhibitions” currently goes back as far as January 2006. Although it lists a considerable number of related artists and organized exhibitions under the English section “History,” the groundbreaking *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde*, its makers, and exhibiting artists are conspicuously absent. Also, the modernist artworks presented in the section “Collection > Highlights > Fine Arts > Oil Painting” underscore the manner in which the museum tries to underpin the ambivalent state agenda: most of the participants from *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* do not feature here, even though they subsequently took part in some of the museum's exhibitions, and despite the fact that today they belong to China's top-selling and globally most renowned art stars.

25 See Gao, “The '85 Movement,” 96.

26 See *Ibid.*, 96–102, 100–102: Gao lists the sum raised by the Tianjin Writers and Artists Association at 20,000 RMB, that of “various factories and companies” at 40,000 RMB, another 100 RMB per artist, which equaled “about the amount of their monthly salary” and totaled 18,600 RMB. He explains that the biggest private sponsor was the businessman “Song Wei, who ran The Great Wall Fast Food Company (Beijing Changcheng quazhan) and contributed 50,000 yuan [RMB] to the exhibition, without stipulation and contract [...]. Due to the misfortune of his business [which closed two months after the exhibition as a consequence of the political repression that followed Tiananmen], the organizational committee paid back 30,000 yuan [RMB] of his original 50,000 yuan [RMB] donation to Song Wei as a loan for securing his business. Song Wei has never returned the money and left the budget problem to

*Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* is considered a landmark in the history of modern Chinese art, not only in regards to its institutional and economic aspects but also in relation to its participants and the category of artwork presented: more than 177 works by at least 120 artists<sup>27</sup> were displayed in an official space and to a large urban public, despite the fact that the works fundamentally called into question official notions of art. The show was extensively discussed in Chinese art magazines and received some limited Western media coverage.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the claim to be "modern" (*xiandai*), as the Chinese exhibition title suggested, was (re)configured through the inclusion of art forms and media that had largely been excluded from previous public museum exhibitions, such as installation and performance art as well

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the organizer [Gao Minglu himself] to suffer it for about two years [in note 121, Gao writes that with the help of fundraising friends he was able to pay back the money before leaving China in 1991]. By the time of the exhibition opened in February 1989, the organizational committee had collected 118,600 yuan [RMB] (about \$23,000). The original budget was at least 150,000 yuan [RMB] (about 30,000 \$). That included the fee for gallery space (more than 50,000 yuan [RMB]), shipping fees, fees for space design, advertising fees, conference fees, the catalog fee and so on." Given these numbers it remains unclear why Gao speaks of 118,600 rather than 128,000 RMB as total funds raised; since the exchange ratio that Gao uses in the text greatly varies (from 4 to 8.45), the US dollar amounts remain doubtful. Still, his calculation demonstrates how large even the economic dimensions of this exhibition were.

27 Early Western accounts of the exhibition indicate a higher number of artworks and artists than listed in the actual exhibition catalog, see for example: Julia F. Andrews, "Chronology of Chinese Avant-Garde Art. 1979–1993," in *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-garde in Exile*, ed. Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1993), 11: she states "297" artworks; cf. Van Dijk, "Bildende Künste," 32: he speaks of "around 300 works"; and cf. the later account in Gao, *Reshaping*, 374: he writes "a total of 293 paintings, sculptures, videos, and installation by 186 artists." All three authors agree that there were 186 artists, but do not give the source of this estimation. In contrast, the exhibition catalog lists only 120 artists by name; in addition, it mentions one unspecified artists group (The Southern Artists Salon) and in three other cases declares that a work was co-authored with "other artists," who remain unnamed. The catalog only mentions 174 exhibition items, providing their titles and material but no dates and sizes; 53 of these are shown with color illustrations. The discrepancy between the catalog and the actual number of artworks on display surely had pragmatic reasons (e.g., the need to print it in advance); however, political issues were also at stake, since some of the unauthorized performances that took place during the opening would have been censored if announced in the catalog. Therefore, it is correct that the actual number of participating artists and artworks was higher than in the catalog. The catalog was affordable at 5 RMB and was printed in a first edition of 10,000 copies, according to the following imprint on the back cover of the small volume: "Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan, English Translation: Hou Hanru, Book Binding Designer: Chen Weiwei, Publisher: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, [Address of the] Licence Holder: Nanning Shi Hetilu 14, Printer: Guangxi Minzu Yinshuachang, first edition published: 1989/1/1, Format: 787 x 1092 1/24, first edition with 10,000 pieces, ISBN 7-219-01014-1/J.162." The catalog is now accessible online at the Asia Art Archive: [http://www.china1980s.org/files/feature/lpb12s\\_201009091433111406.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/feature/lpb12s_201009091433111406.pdf). Accessed 12.11.2010. I also thank Francesca Dal Lago for providing me with a copy of it.

28 For an overview of newspaper and magazine clippings about the exhibition, which includes 11 foreign language and 55 Chinese language clippings (including newspapers based in Hong Kong) from the year 1989/1990, see Gao, "The '85 Movement," 260–264. Since this overview leaves out Li Xianting's influential account of the exhibition in *Meishu Shilun* in March 1989, it seems to present a partial selection. See: Li, "Confessions," in Wu and Wang, *Primary Documents*, 119.

as conceptual works.<sup>29</sup> While the predominance of oil and ink paintings (110 of the 174 works listed in the catalog) can be attributed to the artists' academic training, the relatively high proportion of thirty-one "installation" (*zhuangzhi*), "performance" (*zhanchu*), and "mixed media" (*zonghe cailiao*) artworks highlighted the new diversification and the reference to Western art forms that were a feature of the '85 New Wave Art Movement.

All fifty-three works with color illustrations in the small exhibition catalog depart from official conventions (despite the fact that they are mostly figurative paintings) by presenting their motifs in abstracted, distorted, fragmented, gestural-expressive styles or through collage and mixed media techniques. In addition, their titles ostentatiously depart from the conventional themes that dominated the official Chinese art practice of the time: national heroes and leaders of the people, history paintings with socialist subject matter, or landscape paintings that convey the beauty of the People's Republic and glorify the (politically-guided) heroic endeavors of the masses staged in front of such scenic views. Instead, this selection of artworks stressed individual subjectivity, the depictions of daily life, urban settings, the ugly side effects of modernization, and disturbing emotions.<sup>30</sup>

Gao Minglu recalls that he obtained official support to mount the exhibition from the Chinese Artists' Association (required by the National Art Museum) only after he agreed to exclude artworks "that were: 1. opposed to the Communist Party and the Four Fundamental Principles (Sixiang Jiben Yuanze) [四项基本原则<sup>31</sup>]; 2. pornographic (interpreted as any display of sexuality)

29 The categorization of artworks listed in the catalog is: of 174 artworks, 85 are listed as "oil painting" (*youhua*), including one work specified as "oil paint on paper" and two works as "oil and collage" (*youhua and pintie*); 23 as "water and ink" (*shuimo hua*), plus one "rubbing with ink on Chinese paper" (*xuanzhi mo tuoyin*) and one "spray brush and ink on paper" (*zhi penhui pintie*); 14 as "synthetic material" (*zonghe cailiao*), apparently meaning mixed media; ten works as "installation" (*zhuangzhi*), four of which were marked as "installation [made of] photographs" (*zhuangzhi zhaopian*); seven as "performance photos" (*zhanchu zhaopian*); five as "sculpture" (*diaoshu*); four as "pottery" (*tao*); three as "acrylic" (*bingxi hua*); three as "wood carving" (*mudiao*); three as "relief" (*fudiao*); three as "soft sculpture" (*bigua*); two as "silk screen" (*siwang banhua*); two as "etching" (*tongbanhua*); two as "printing" (*banhua*); two as "paper cutting" (*jianzhi*); one as "graphics" (no translation in Chinese is given, even though the term *pingmian sheji* would have been possible); one "iron sculpture" (*duantie*); one "paint on photographs" (*zhaopian jiaogong*); and one work was designated as being made of "plastic" (*suliao*).

30 See the illustrations of the catalog online at [http://www.china1980s.org/files/feature/lpb12s\\_201009091433111406.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/feature/lpb12s_201009091433111406.pdf). Accessed 12.12.2011.

31 These principles were stated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 as beyond (public) debate: the principle of upholding 1) the socialist path, 2) the people's democratic dictatorship, 3) the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and 4) Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought.

images; 3. performance or action pieces."<sup>32</sup> But he was still able to insist on "having performance in a form of documentaries,"<sup>33</sup> which meant the display of performance photographs, illustrated in the catalog as well as recorded in the opening day documentary made by filmmaker Wen Pulin.<sup>34</sup>

Yet upon first encountering the exhibition's title on banners and billboards or on the bilingual catalog's cover pages, Chinese visitors would not have necessarily associated radical and groundbreaking art forms with the term "modern" (*xiandai*), as it also referred to ideologically affirmative art forms such as realist oil painting with socialist subject matter. After all, cultural officials had adopted Deng Xiaoping's affirmation of the "Four Modernizations" (*sige xiandaihua*, 四个现代化)—a directive to enhance modernization in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology—and proclaimed it a guiding principle in the arts as well. Rather, it was the eye-catching exhibition logo designed by Yang Zhilin<sup>35</sup>—an adaptation of the traffic sign for "No U-turn"—that immediately signaled to the audience the artists' attempt to change art, and maybe even its social impact in a way that would preclude a return to former academic, institutional, and official conventions.

In fact, the logo was ubiquitously present at the exhibition site and in the show's larger context: it was depicted on the catalog and on huge banners that were strung across the museum's entrance steps (because the museum would not allow them to be hung from the roof top as originally planned); it decorated

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32 Gao, "The '85 Movement," 93.

33 Ibid.: "[...] it may be easy to understand why the authorities would prohibit performance and action art, because performance art was totally new art form completely breaking out the conventional idea of art. Secondly, in the Chinese avant-garde art movement, performance art was extremely provocative in directly venting individual liberality and long-time suppressed intuitive feeling. Thirdly, since it was very common that performances took place in public spaces unpredictably as happenings, to the authorities it would seem easy for them to be transformed into political events, such as a demonstration."

34 See the two illustrations of performances in: Zhongguo Meishu Guan (China Art Gallery Beijing), ed., *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-garde* (Beijing: Zhongguo Meishu Guan/China Art Gallery, 1989), 12 (unpaginated): image no. 16, subtitled "Hou Hanru, Yang Jiechang (Jie Cang), Speaking. Communication. Mankind (Photos) (Performance)"; and no. 17, subtitled "Wei Guangqing and Other Artists, Suicide I (Photos) (Performance)." Wen Pulin's documentary film sequences show that some of the performance photographs were hung as a series neatly framed under glass, while other photographs of art performances were integrated in collage-like presentations or directly posted onto the museum walls. See his documentary film clips at: <http://wason.library.cornell.edu/Wen/archive.php>. Accessed 18.11.2011.

35 Gao Minglu spells the designer's name "Yang Zhilin" in the subtitle of fig. 18 that illustrates the logo in: Gao, "The '85 Movement," unpaginated illustration appendix; cf. Li, "Confessions," 119. According to Li, the name of the designer is "Zhang Zhilin," and he himself asked the designer to create a logo and then accepted Zhang's suggestion of the adapted traffic sign.

the captions affixed next to the artworks;<sup>36</sup> it was printed on invitation cards and on the organizers' letterhead, and in some cases these documents were additionally stamped with a red seal bearing the logo. This extensive use conveys the will of the organizational committee to enhance the exhibition's public visibility and effectively brand the event, giving its heterogeneous content a unifying, provocative, and iconic "corporate identity."<sup>37</sup> The more radical connotation of the exhibition's English subtitle demonstrated, even to those viewers who did not understand English, that the curators referred to an *international outlook*, daring to call their exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* in what was a deliberately radicalized translation of the actual Chinese into the lingua franca of Western art centers (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Cover illustration of the catalogue *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* 1989.

36 See Wen Pulin's film documentation of the opening day, as in note 34.

37 The Asia Art Archive Hong Kong website that is dedicated to this exhibition provides exemplary evidence of these materials, see: [http://www.china1980s.org/files/feature/lpb12s\\_201009091433111406.pdf](http://www.china1980s.org/files/feature/lpb12s_201009091433111406.pdf). Accessed 12.11.2011. See also the three digitalized film sequences by Wen Pulin, which document the opening day, including most of the seminal performances, the display of artworks, the visitors, and the reactions of security personnel, as in note 31. These clips clearly show how the logo was used as a branding tool within the museum as well as on the building's exterior.

As Gao Minglu explained in his later writings:

The Chinese title of the exhibition of *China/Avant-Garde* is ‘Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan (Chinese Modern Art Exhibition)’ rather than ‘Zhongguo Qianwei Yishu Zhan (Chinese Avant-Garde Exhibition).’ We chose different titles in Chinese and English because during the ’80s, ‘xiandai’ (modern) was more frequently used than ‘qianwei’ (avant-garde) in the Chinese art world. We chose ‘xiandai’ as the Chinese title, which means new and radical art, and is more suitable for its own cultural context. On the other hand, in a Western context ‘modern’ might indicate modernism, an old style. Although ‘avant-garde’ is also out of fashion in the West, we thought it closer to the idea behind the Chinese avant-garde and proper for foreigners’ understanding the new art movement.<sup>38</sup>

Radicalizing only the English subtitle was surely also a wise choice in light of the curators’ previous problems with censorship.<sup>39</sup> It turned out to be an effective strategy to catch the attention of Western art critics, exhibition makers, and audiences as well.<sup>40</sup> Given the relatively small number of Westerners living in

38 Gao, “The ’85 Movement,” 89, note 116.

39 See Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 56. Following the accounts by Gao, she traces the original idea to organize *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan* back to the influential conference of art critics and artists, the *Zhuhai Symposium* (originally: *Great Slide Show of Young Artistic Trends ’85 and Scientific Symposium (Bawu qingnian meishu shichao daxin guandeng zhan ji xueshu taolunhui)*) on August 15, 1986. It was co-organized by the Painting Institute of Zhuhai and *Meishu (Art Monthly)* on the initiative of artist Wang Guangyi. At the time, the exhibition was still envisioned to take place in the Agriculture Exhibition Center in Beijing (Beijing shi nongye zhanlanguan) in 1987. As Köppel-Yang notes, p. 63: “However, in 1987 a second campaign against bourgeois liberalism created a conservative climate. Because of this, as well as for financial reasons, the exhibition was delayed. [...] Further, in November 1988, the Huangshan Symposium—or Symposium on Modern Chinese Artistic Creation 1988 (*Baba Zhongguo xiandai yishu chuangzho yantaohui*)—convened as a preliminary organizational meeting. Artists and critics presented recent works and trends, made a preliminary choice and discussed new strategies. [...] While both the Chinese Artists Association and the National Gallery supported the project, *China/Avant-Garde* was the first national exhibition organized by professional art critics, rather than by cadres, and the first one that was privately financed. [...] Song Wei became China’s first nouveau riche collector of contemporary Chinese art. He bought several paintings exhibited in the show, for example Wang Guangyi’s series *Mao Zedong—Black Grid*, and took others for consideration. His plan to found a museum for modern art in one of Beijing’s traditional courtyard houses did not, however, succeed.” On p. 65, note 147, Köppel-Yang also mentions that the artist Wang Luyan acquired some of the artworks Song had only taken for consideration, and later sold some of them to the former Swiss ambassador to China, the private collector Uli Sigg. This early collecting trade between Chinese artists and Western buyers is affirmed by Sigg himself in a more recent interview: Matthias Frehner, “Zugang zu China. Uli Sigg im Gespräch mit Matthias Frehner,” in *Mahjong. Chinesische Gegenwartskunst aus der Sammlung Sigg*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 16.

40 See Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 63–64: She mentions that Gao Minglu and Li Xianting were

Beijing and the short time span of the exhibition, not many foreigners could actually visit the show.<sup>41</sup> But the predominant citation of the exhibition's English subtitle in chronologies of Chinese art events,<sup>42</sup> which many Western exhibition catalogs now provide, inevitably enhanced a Western reading of the participants and their artistic concepts in association with the general spirit of historical European avant-garde movements and their canonized (anti-)modernist claims: such as anti-academism, radical self-expression and artistic subjectivity, the annihilation of "high art" in practices of the everyday, and art practice as transgression and as an attack on the institution of art itself.<sup>43</sup>

The events on Beijing's Tiananmen Square (June 4, 1989) brought hopes for further political liberalization to a sudden, dramatic end and reaffirmed the severe official restrictions on art exhibitions and other cultural events that had already partially affected the *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde*. In fact, authorities closed the exhibition twice due to two scandalous art actions: On the opening day and without official approval or a gun license, the female artist Xiao Lu fired two gunshots in her installation entitled "Dialogue"; authorities arrested her partner, the artist Tang Song, and subsequently Xiao Lu as well,<sup>44</sup> closing the exhibition that same day and not

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the main agents and decision makers behind the curatorial concept, but had diverging views and responsibilities: "For Li Xianting, however, the exhibition was not a retrospective but an event of the Chinese avant-garde movement, 'active and offensive,' with room for experimental works. Since Li was responsible for design and construction, his ideas strongly impregnated the exhibition. The exhibition occupied six rooms of the National Gallery. Li designed the first room, in which he showed pop art, installations and performances as provocative stimuli to disturb aesthetic habits. By contrast, other rooms on the first floor presented important trends of the 1980s as a retrospective according to thematic and stylistic criteria, such as 'Sublime Atmosphere/Concept of the Great Soul, Emphasis of the Cold, Emphasis of the Hot'." On p. 195–196, Köppel-Yang provides the transcription of an interview with Shui Tianzhong, who was the editor-in-chief of *Zhongguo Meishubao (Fine Arts in China)* from 1987–89, where Li Xianting was working as well. Shui confirms the diverging strategies of Gao and Li. Cf. Gao Minglu's narrative that does not mention Li's role and speaks instead of spontaneous art actions and a "war" against institutionalized notions of official art, in Gao, *Reshaping*, 69–70.

41 The documentary of Wen Pulin (see note 34) repeatedly captures the faces of Western visitors in the crowd (less than twenty according to my observation), which seems dominated by middle-aged male Chinese visitors.

42 For a recent extensive online compilation of exhibition catalogues that provides chronologies, see the website of the Asia Art Archive Hong Kong at: <http://www.china1980s.org/tc/chronology.aspx>. Accessed 8.11.2011. Most of these chronologies start with exhibition activities as early as 1978/9 and end in the year of their publication. *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-garde* is always mentioned as one of the most prominent and largest early exhibition events.

43 For a theoretical discussion of avant-garde that was also cited in the Anglo-American discourse, see: Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1974). See further explanations in the text below.

44 For a Chinese discussion of the exhibition, see Lü Peng and Dan Yi, eds., *Zhongguo xiandai yishu*

allowing it to reopen until five days later, on February 10.<sup>45</sup> Then on February 14, the second closure was precipitated by an anonymous and later proven to be fictitious bomb threat, written by artist Liu Anping. The authorities reopened the museum on February 17, just two days before the end of the exhibition.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the show was open for only seven of the planned fourteen days, and the organizational committee was heavily fined and debarred from future exhibition activities.<sup>47</sup> While these circumstances hindered the exhibition from functioning in conventional ways and prevented subsequent exhibition activities with the same outlook, they greatly enhanced its reputation as a truly vanguard event.

In retrospect, this exhibition seems to have mediated the locally specific and sometimes contradictory struggles of artists who: a) tried to reform and perhaps even partially break with official notions of art and the affirmative exhibition practices of the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party; while b) simultaneously seeing themselves as active participants in the Party's call for modernization, reform, and opening within the cultural domain. Their socio-political critique from its many coded disguises to its most explicit expressions—

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*shi 1979–1989 [Chinese modern art history 1979–1989]* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1992), 325–253. For a detailed analysis of the exhibition that also discusses the debates of Chinese art critics surrounding the pistol shot event, see: Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 62–65 and 174–180. Xiao Lu's intervention and the installation was subsequently canonized as a work authorized by both her partner and herself, often underlining Tang's authorship as a radical avant-garde artist. Only recently has Xiao Lu made conscious and artistic efforts to reclaim single authorship for this seminal work, questioning the gender bias that greatly privileged male artists during the 1980s and 90s, see the autobiographical fiction Xiao Lu, *Dialogue* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010). For a psychoanalytically inspired critical reading of her claims and latest works in this regard, see Adele Tan, "Elusive Disclosures, Shooting Desire. Xiao Lu and the missing sex of post-89 performance art in China," in *Negotiating Difference. Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, ed. Franziska Koch et al. (Weimar: VDG Verlag, 2012), forthcoming.

45 See Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 175.

46 The author of the anonymous letters calling for a closure of the exhibition saying there were explosives hidden in the National Gallery was not discovered. Liu Anping had sent three letters of the bomb threat: one to the National Gallery, one to the Municipal Government, and one to the Beijing Public Security Bureau. See Gao, "The '85 Movement," 110–112. Liu Anping confirmed this fact in a conversation with me.

47 See Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, 64: "The National Gallery imposed a fine of two thousand Yuan [today ca. 220 €/ 300 USD] on the seven co-organizers of the exhibition, for breaking the regulations and conditions specified in the exhibition contract. In addition, the gallery announced that further exhibition projects of these organizing units would not be accepted for a period of two years." This was equal to an exhibition ban on the entire range of experimental and vanguard artistic production, because the seven co-organizing entities were the main magazines that had encouraged and favorably published comments on the '85 New Wave art activities; any official display of artwork would need at least one such co-organizing institution to acquire the official permission to exhibit.

that is, from the majority of more cautious and officially approved paintings to the unannounced, spectacular, and scandalizing artistic performances staged at the opening—negotiated the inner boundaries of Chinese artistic production and related official attitudes. They also self-confidently pushed the frontier of the broadening contact zone of artistic exchange located between the art worlds of China and those of Europe and America.

### 1989 in Paris: *Magiciens de la terre*

While the climate for innovative exhibitions changed dramatically in China after the Tiananmen Incident—barring the public display of vanguard projects during the following years<sup>48</sup>—the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*<sup>49</sup> was organized by a major European institution that same year and featured three Chinese artists from the People's Republic: Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang. All three had presented works at *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* only three months before this European debut.<sup>50</sup>

The controversial show organized by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Pompidou and La Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris from May 18–August 14, 1989 marked an important turn in Western mainstream exhibition practice.<sup>51</sup> It sought to question the Eurocentric and colonial approaches that

48 For an account of the problems of exhibiting after June 4, 1989, see Francesca Dal Lago, "Locating Creative Space," in Doran, *China's New Art, Post-89*, LXII–LXIII; and Nicholas Jose, "Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989–93," in Doran, *China's New Art, Post-89*, XXXVII–XL. For an account of Chinese official reactions at the time, see John Clark, "Official Reactions to Modern Art in China since the Beijing Massacre," *Pacific Affairs* 65 (Autumn 1992): 334–352.

49 Jean-Hubert Martin, ed., *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1989).

50 See their artworks illustrated in the catalog of Zhongguo Meishu Guan (China Art Gallery Beijing), *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-garde*, fig. 5, 11 and 16 (unpaginated part of illustrations); and in the catalog of Martin, *Magiciens de la terre*, 186–187, 188–189 and 266–267.

51 For a discussion of the *post-colonial turn* in relation to the museum and previous exhibitions such as the notorious *Primitivism in 20th Century Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (Museum of Modern Art New York, 1988), see Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age," in *Contemporary Art and the Museum. A Global Perspective*, ed. Peter Weibel and Andrea Budensieg (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 16–38. The Tate Modern (London) convened a panel discussion in 2009 commemorating 20 years of the post-colonial turn in exhibition practices, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/eventseducation/symposia/17464.htm>. Accessed 8.11.2011. The reconsiderations of eminent critics, who evaluated three important 1989 exhibitions that marked the turn (*Magiciens, The Other Story, and the Havana Biennial*) are available as podcasts at: [http://static.tate.org.uk/1/onlineevents/podcast/mp3/2009\\_04\\_03\\_Exhibitions\\_and\\_the\\_World\\_at\\_Large-2.mp3](http://static.tate.org.uk/1/onlineevents/podcast/mp3/2009_04_03_Exhibitions_and_the_World_at_Large-2.mp3); [http://static.tate.org.uk/1/onlineevents/podcast/mp3/2009\\_04\\_03\\_Exhibitions\\_and\\_the\\_World\\_at\\_Large-3\\_4.mp3](http://static.tate.org.uk/1/onlineevents/podcast/mp3/2009_04_03_Exhibitions_and_the_World_at_Large-3_4.mp3); [http://static.tate.org.uk/1/onlineevents/podcast/mp3/2009\\_04\\_03\\_Exhibitions\\_and\\_the\\_World\\_at\\_Large\\_no\\_maharaj-1.mp3](http://static.tate.org.uk/1/onlineevents/podcast/mp3/2009_04_03_Exhibitions_and_the_World_at_Large_no_maharaj-1.mp3). Accessed 8.11.2011 See also the affiliated paper publication

had historically defined the genealogy of modern art and its universalistic claims, excluding the visual and artistic production of those areas which did not adhere to the humanistic master narrative of progress evidenced by an aesthetic evolution of styles. As the French art historian and one of the first curators to promote contemporary African art in France, Pierre Gaudibert,<sup>52</sup> wrote in his contribution to the *Magiciens* catalog: the mainstream exhibition policy vis-à-vis non-Western art was still one of ignorance and declassification. He therefore called for a "de-centering approach," when curating works from "artists of cultures, which are different from ours":<sup>53</sup>

The symbolic violence of the legitimizing artistic power of the Occident—with claims to natural universality—terribly extends to all artists of these 'other' peoples. They are immediately and almost automatically judged as followers and epigones, as pale imitators of renowned occidental artists or they are considered as producers of visual objects, which are savored as collectibles for private homes, but deemed unworthy of real or imagined museums.<sup>54</sup>

Curators such as Gaudibert and Martin critiqued European art discourse and exhibition practice for having long predicated their modernity on the essential "otherness" of non-Western works. They pointed out that Western institutions had largely dismissed these works as "primitive," "handicraft," at best skilled copies of Western masterpieces, or as ritual objects with no aesthetic agenda of their own, supposedly formed in tribal cultures where the notion of art and artistic authorship did not exist. Martin and the curatorial team of *Magiciens*<sup>55</sup> decided

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by Jean Fisher, "The Other Story and the Past Imperfect," *Tate Papers* 12 (Autumn 2009): <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/fisher.shtm>. Accessed 8.11.2011. For an elaborated post-colonial European exhibition concept after *Magiciens* that included Chinese artists, see Marianne Brouwer, ed., *Heart of Darkness* (Otterlo: Stichting Kröller-Müller Museum, 1995).

52 Pierre Gaudibert (1928–2006) was the curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris from 1966 to 1972, where he created the contemporary section titled *Animation–Recherche–Confrontation* (ARC), whose aim was to provide a cross-cultural program of music, literature, and fine arts to the new French middle class. He later became the director of the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniques de Paris, which today is the Musée du Quai Branly. See Pierre Gaudibert, *L'Art africain contemporain* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d'Art, 1991).

53 Pierre Gaudibert, "La planète tout entière, enfin..." in Martin, *Magiciens*, 18–19.

54 *Ibid.*, 19: "La violence symbolique du pouvoir de légitimation artistique de l'Occident—à la prétention naturellement universelle—s'applique terriblement à tous les artistes de ces peuples 'autres.' Ceux-ci sont jugés immédiatement et presque automatiquement comme des suiveurs et des épigones, de pâles imitateurs d'artistes occidentaux connus ou bien tenus pour des producteurs d'objets visuels savoureux à collectionner dans sa maison, mais indignes de musées réels ou imaginaires." English translation in the text by F.K.

55 The catalog acknowledges Martin as the general curator, Mark Francis as his vice-curator, and Aline

to challenge these problematic notions of art, inviting a hundred living “creators” from all five continents and presenting them in light of the “magic” of creativity rather than “art.” As Martin argues in the catalog’s preface:

It is with the word ‘magic’ that one commonly qualifies the vivid and inexplicable influence, which art exerts. It seemed appropriate inasmuch as it was wise to avoid the word ‘art’ in the title, which would inevitably have labeled creations that stem from societies that do not know this concept.<sup>56</sup>

Instead, the umbrella term *magiciens* (magicians) was meant to enhance an anthropological approach that would place exhibiting “works coming from the Third World [...] on an equal footing with those of our [Occidental] avant-gardes [...] without] persisting to put these creators in a ghetto [by exhibiting their works in isolation rather than alongside their Western counterparts], in an ethnographic category of archaic relict derived from colonial exhibitions.”<sup>57</sup> According to Martin, the overall aim was to show and thereby “to affirm their existence in the present.”<sup>58</sup> However, the exhibition was heavily criticized for failing to achieve these aims and for leaving unquestioned the dominance of the European art museum, the role of the white curator, and the European aesthetic and art market preference for the exotic or archaic as modernism’s “alter ego.” As the post-colonial reading of the exhibition by artist-cum-critic Rasheed Araeen pointed out at the time:

If we wish to challenge this distinction [between modern and traditional], then it will have to be done *within* a context that

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Lucque and André Magnin as assistant curators with Claire Blanchon and Marie-Jeanne Peraldi as sub-assistants. In addition, Franck André Jamme, Corneille Jest, Francois Lupu, Bernard Lüthi, Bernard Marcadé, Jean-Louis Maubant, Carlo Severi, Jacques Soullou, and Yves Véquaud were charged with special missions to help select art from around the world.

56 Martin, “Préface,” in *Magiciens*, 8–11, 9. “C’est par le mot de ‘magic’ que l’on qualifie communément l’influence vive et inexplicable qu’exerce l’art. Il a paru approprié dans la mesure où il était prudent d’éviter dans le titre le mot ‘art’ qui aurait d’emblée étiqueté des créations provenant de sociétés qui ne connaissent pas ce concept.” English translation in the text by F.K.

57 *Ibid.*, 8.

58 *Ibid.*: “[...] même ceux qui déclarent sans ambages qu’il n’y a pas de différence entre les cultures ont souvent bien du mal à accepter que des œuvres venues du tiers monde puissent être mises sur un pied d’égalité avec celles de nos avant-gardes [...] .] Pourtant, de l’idée d’une enquête sur la création dans le monde aujourd’hui, on pouvait imaginer de n’exposer que des auteurs non occidentaux, sachant que l’existence de l’art dans nos centres ne fait pas de doute. C’était persister à mettre ces créateurs dans un ghetto, dans une catégorie ethnographique de survivance archaïque issue des expositions coloniales, alors qu’il importe d’affirmer leur existence dans le présent.” English translation in the text by F.K.

challenges the dominance of Western culture. ‘Magiciens de la terre’ has very cleverly confused this question by assuming that other cultures are facing some kind of spiritual crisis resulting from ‘Western contamination.’ The crisis is, in fact, of Western humanism; its failure to come to terms with the modern aspiration of the ‘other.’<sup>59</sup>

The European art world had begun to invite “the others” on supposedly equal terms, acknowledging the colonial and modernist assumptions that had hitherto governed the reception and integration of non-Western art in European institutions, markets, and discourses. Yet it seemed unprepared to follow through with the implied relativization, critique, and de-centering of its own established artistic notions and the prevailing power relations of its agents and institutions.

### 1993: A First Peak at Group Exhibitions of Contemporary Chinese Art Abroad

The European public had to wait another four years to be able to visit several exhibitions entirely dedicated to the contemporary artistic production of the People’s Republic.<sup>60</sup> The two key exhibitions—*China Avantgarde* and *China’s New Art, Post-1989*—opened in 1993, touring various museums in Europe and Asia during the period 1993–1997: *China Avantgarde* premiered in Germany and then travelled through several neighboring countries, while *China’s New Art, Post-1989* opened in Hong Kong and then travelled to Australia, England, and the USA. The latter also produced smaller offspring in commercial galleries in Taiwan and England, and supplied a few pieces of “representative” work for the *22nd São Paulo Biennial* (Brazil, 1994). Lastly, contemporary Chinese art made its debut in June 1993 at the *45th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (XLV Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte. La Biennale di Venezia)*. Taken together, these three major events in 1993 created a significant media echo and stimulated large public attention. They can be viewed as the first bold signal that contemporary Chinese art was being included in the canonical network of international artists and the Western art market (see table 1).<sup>61</sup>

59 Rasheed Araeen, “Our Bauhaus Others’ Mudhouse,” *Third Text. Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture* 3, no. 6 (Spring 1989): 3–14, 14. This special issue of the journal was devoted to a critical analysis of *Magiciens de la terre*.

60 See the author’s GECCA *mapped*, a Google Earth-based visualization of such exhibitions at the time, as in note 4.

61 For an account of Chinese art at the Venice Biennales, see Francesca Dal Lago, “Papercuts, Colorful Pictures and Mountains of Shit: ‘China’ at the Venice Biennale, 1980–2007,” International Symposium *China on Display: Past and Present Practices of Selecting, Exhibiting and Viewing Chinese Visual and Material Culture*, 6–8 December 2007, University of Leiden, Netherlands, unpublished paper. Chinese

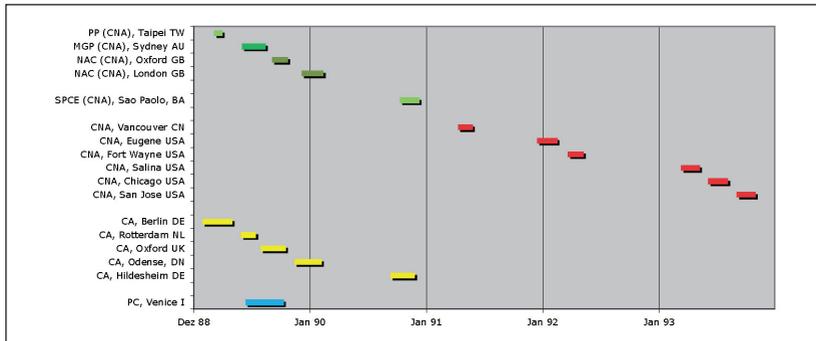


Table 1: Early Western Group Exhibitions of Contemporary Chinese Art, Duration and Location: *China's New Art, Post-1989 (CNA)*; *Mao Goes Pop (a variant of CNA)*; *Biennale: São Paulo-Chinese Exhibition (a variant of CNA)*; *Post-Mao Pop (a variant of CNA)*; *New Art from China (a variant of CNA)*; *China Avant-garde (CA)*; *Venice Biennale: Puntì Cardinali-Chinese Exhibition (PC)*. Chart by Franziska Koch.

## China Avantgarde in Berlin

A chronological analysis of this eventful year should correctly begin with the exhibition *China Avantgarde* organized in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin,<sup>62</sup> which opened on January 29 (a day before *China's New Art, Post-1989*)<sup>63</sup> and closed on May 2, 1993, and whose opening day alone

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works had participated in the Venice Biennale prior to 1993; however, the popular papercuts and works in socialist idioms were not placed in the section of “contemporary art.”

62 For the English edition of the catalog, see Haus der Kulturen der Welt, ed., *China Avant-garde. Counter-currents in Art and Culture / 中國前衛藝術* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). I use the German catalog as the basis for citations translated into English, because the published translation of the English edition is partly of poor quality. In what follows, I refer to the House of World Cultures using its German acronym HKW.

63 Considering the different time zones, the German opening on a Friday must have taken place almost at the same time as the opening in Hong Kong on Saturday, the next day. However, the Hong Kong catalog reprint of the Asia Art Archive Hong Kong (2001), which states “Exhibition Dates: 1993[.] 30 Jan–28 Feb[.] Hong Kong Arts Festival, Hong Kong Arts Centre and Hong Kong City Hall” (see fifth page of the unpaginated introductory section) differs from the original catalog published by Hanart TZ Gallery Hong Kong (1993), which states “Exhibition Dates and Venues: 31 January–14 February, 1993[.] Exhibition Hall, Low Block, Hong Kong City Hall, Central, Hong Kong[.] 2 February–25 February, 1993[.] Pao Galleries, 4th and 5th Floors, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2 Harbour Road, Wanchai, Hong Kong” (see fifth page of the unpaginated introductory section).

drew 1,000 visitors.<sup>64</sup> The exhibition subsequently travelled to the newly opened Kunsthal Rotterdam in the Netherlands (May 29–July 15, 1993), to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oxford, England (July 31–October 17, 1993), and finally to the Brandts Klaedefabrik in Odense, Denmark (November 13, 1993–February 6, 1994); its last venue was the Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim, Germany, which provided space for this unexpected display (September 12–November 27, 1994) as part of the local China Festival.<sup>65</sup>

The exhibition functioned as a platform for a multilayered translational process that introduced Chinese artworks to an interested European public. I will explore this process by focusing on the creation of the exhibition’s title and on the selection of artworks that were exhibited or otherwise presented in the catalog. In addition, I will examine the aims of the curatorial team and the obstacles posed by the wider institutional and political context of the time. A detailed discussion of the many artworks on display lies beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, it will treat the individual exhibits in a summary manner, only occasionally highlighting specific works (such as those of Huang Yongping or Wang Guangyi) in order to exemplify artistic strategies, styles, and positions that were common at the time and, therefore, helped the curators to affirm their exhibition concept. Overall, the analysis tries to present various and diverging factors and agencies that (in)formed the exhibition as an early platform where notions of both *China* and contemporary *Chinese art* were negotiated in cultural, political, and economic respects after 1989.

### **The Making of a Title: *China Avantgarde* or rather a Chinese artistic avant-garde?**

The German title of the exhibition *China Avantgarde* referred both literally and substantively to the English subtitle of the *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* organized in Beijing four years earlier. The exhibition in Berlin presented sixteen artists, the first nine of whom had exhibited in this earlier event, bolstering their reputation as influential artists in China and

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64 Andreas Schmid, “The Dawn of Chinese Contemporary Art,” in Koch et al., *Negotiating Difference* (forthcoming 2012).

65 Curiously, these dates cannot be found in the German edition of the *China Avantgarde* catalog, nor are they listed in the archive of exhibitions accessible on the House of World Cultures website. I thank Andreas Schmid for providing me these dates and related press material and news clippings. In an interview, he mentions that a Spanish institution was also interested in inviting the exhibition but the idea was not realized. See Andreas Schmid, “Interview about the making of ‘*China Avantgarde*’ conducted by Franziska Koch,” January 8, 2008.

abroad: Ding Yi, Geng Jianyi, Gu Dexin, Huang Yongping, Wang Guangyi, Wu Shanzhuan, Yu Youhan, Zhang Peili, Fang Lijun,<sup>66</sup> Zhao Bandi, Zhao Jianren, Lin Yilin, Ni Haifeng, Wang Jinsong, Yan Peiming, and Yu Hong.<sup>67</sup> Due to limited exhibition space and budget constraints, the curators resolved to present another forty-four artists in the catalog only, eleven of whom had also taken part in Beijing.<sup>68</sup>

The Berlin catalog enhanced the international recognition of the previous Chinese exhibition by describing it as a seminal event, which had comprehensively, authoritatively, and effectively made visible a new artistic movement with avant-garde claims, the ongoing artistic achievements of which the Berlin show allegedly wanted to present. Yet, as one of the Berlin curators, the German artist Andreas Schmid, stated in a private interview:<sup>69</sup> Wolfger Pöhlmann, the in-house curator who headed the HKW's department "Art and Film," insisted on this title largely because he considered it an attractive and very marketable label in view of the positive connotations that the term avant-garde carried within the European art-historical context and popular discourse. In both realms *avant-garde* is associated with artistic dynamism, abrupt stylistic changes, the revolt against tradition, and the idea of attacking a self-contained sphere of "high art"; the avant-garde gravitates around the aesthetic notions of "high art" in order to fuse or open them to the experiences of the *everyday*, thereby transgressing the established notion of beauty. This line of thought is also reflected in the catalog's introduction, in which Pöhlmann explains the perspective on Chinese art that the Berlin exhibition intended to provide. The artworks on display were to make visible what he considered a double characteristic of Chinese artistic production, which is marked by both references to modern Western concepts of art and to those inherently Chinese:

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66 The *China Avantgarde* catalog claims Fang Lijun participated in the *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan* exhibition (Beijing), as do many current gallery websites that present his curriculum vitae, but the Beijing catalog does not mention him.

67 She is the only female artist who exhibited in Berlin; another seven were among the 44 artists who did not exhibit in Berlin but were portrayed in the catalog. The small percentage of female participants is typical of early exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art shown within China and outside.

68 The 300-plus page Berlin catalog provides short biographical dates and descriptions of their artistic approach, and features at least two (often four to six) illustrations per artist: Ai Weiwei, Cai Guoqiang, Chen Danqing, Chen Haiyan, Chen Shaoxiong, Chen Zhen, Gu Wenda, Hu Bing, Liang Hao, Li Tianyuan, Liang Juhui, Liu Shaojuan, Liu Wei, *Liu Xiaodong*, Ma Desheng, Ma Kelu, Qin Yufen, Qiu Ping, Ren Rong, *Song Gang*, *Song Haidong*, Tan Ping, *Wang Deren*, Wang Gongyi, Wang Keping, *Wang Luyan*, *Xu Bing*, Xu Tan, Xu Zhongmin, Yan Li, *Yang Jiechang*, *Yang Jun*, Yuan Shun, *Zhang Jianjun*, Zhang Wei, Zhao Gang (Gang Zhao), Zhao Suikang, Zheng Chongbin, Zhou Yunxia, Zhu Jinshi, *Xiao Lu*, *Tang Song*, Zhao Wenliang, Yang Yushu. The italics mark those artists who participated in *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan*. *China/Avant-Garde*.

69 Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008.

[On the one hand] China's new zeitgeist, which is primarily exemplified by the new individualism that accompanies the orientation towards commodities and consumption, is reflected in all cultural realms. On the other, the examination of [Chinese] tradition takes center stage. Even if formal analogies to artistic styles that we are acquainted with such as Pop Art, Minimal Art, Conceptual and Land Art, Performance, Video and Installation Art, Photographic Realism, [and] Informel impose themselves [upon us European viewers] when beholding the works, again and again upon closer inspection we discover the Chinese roots. This is one of the essential aspects that simultaneously constitute and determine the autonomy and specific quality of the Chinese modern [or, Chinese modernism]. The alienated symbol of the traffic sign 'No U-turn' [Pöhlmann writes: 'Not return', F.K.] served as poster-motif for the Beijing exhibition 'China/Avant-Garde'; despite the incisive events of 1989, it seems that the development in cultural as well as social life cannot be turned back. Our exhibition title 'China Avantgarde' alludes to this. Better than vague and easily misunderstood terms such as 'modern' or 'contemporary,' the term *avant-garde* describes a characteristic that also pertains to the most recent Chinese art, because *'avant-garde' describes artistic flows that blow-up traditional forms of expression and want to introduce new developments. Avant-garde artists express both the crisis of art's function and meaning and a passionate search for a new sense of artistic agency and rebellion against the isolation of artists from society.*<sup>70</sup>

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70 Wolfger Pöhlmann, "Einführung," in Haus der Kulturen der Welt, *China Avantgarde*, 9. "Der neue 'Zeitgeist' Chinas, der sich vor allem an dem mit der Waren- und Konsumorientierung einhergehenden neuen Individualismus festmachen lässt, spiegelt sich in allen Bereichen der Kultur. Auf der anderen Seite bleibt die Auseinandersetzung mit der eigenen Tradition das zentrale und beherrschende Moment. Selbst wenn sich bei der Betrachtung der Werke chinesischer Kunst formale Analogien zu uns vertrauten künstlerischen Stilrichtungen wie Pop Art, Minimal-, Concept- und Land-Art, Performance, Video- und Installationskunst, Fotografischer Realismus, Informel aufdrängen, entdeckt man bei näherer Beschäftigung immer wieder die chinesischen Wurzeln. Dies ist einer der wesentlichen Aspekte, der zugleich die Eigenständigkeit und spezifische Qualität der chinesischen Moderne ausmacht und bestimmt. Als Plakatmotiv für die Pekinger Ausstellung 'China/Avant-Garde' diente das verfremdete Symbol eines Verkehrszeichens 'Not return', und trotz der einschneidenden Ereignisse von 1989 scheint sich im kulturellen wie gesellschaftlichen Leben die Entwicklung nicht mehr umkehren zu lassen. Unser Ausstellungstitel 'China Avantgarde' spielt darauf an, und der Begriff der Avantgarde trifft besser als vage und missverständliche Worte wie 'modern' oder 'zeitgenössisch' ein Wesensmerkmal auch der jüngsten chinesischen Kunst, denn 'Avantgarde' bezeichnet künstlerische Strömungen, die überlieferte Ausdrucksformen sprengen und neue Entwicklungen einleiten wollen. Avantgarde-Künstler bringen die Funktions- und Sinnkrise von Kunst ebenso zum Ausdruck wie die leidenschaftliche Suche nach einem neuen Sinn künstlerischen Handelns und Aufbegehrens gegen die Isolation der Künstler von der Gesellschaft." English translation and italics in the text by F.K.

The Berlin title followed Pöhlmann's agenda by almost literally translating into German the English subtitle of the Beijing exhibition, simply omitting the diagonal slash between *China* and *Avant-Garde*. In fact, this translational mediation effected the international proliferation of the English label *avant-garde* in reference to experimental and Western-oriented Chinese artistic production, which Gao Minglu and his organizational committee had precisely had in mind when initially choosing the English (sub)title. Adopting it and making it the main title for the Berlin show effectively promoted the label in the Western reception of contemporary Chinese art and guaranteed that European media coverage of the exhibition automatically reinforced it in public discourse.

However, Pöhlmann's decision and the underlying interpretation of the Beijing and Berlin exhibition titles had not been uncontested. The three main curators of the Berlin show—the Dutchman Hans Van Dijk, the German Jochen Noth, and Andreas Schmid—were initially not in favor of *China Avantgarde*. They thought their exhibition quite distinct from its Chinese forerunner and did not want to create the mistaken impression that they were merely restaging or offering a direct sequel to Beijing; using a title that resembled and resonated so strongly with the “original” might suggest just that. Moreover, they wanted to avoid political connotations that might be transmitted by the title of the Berlin catalog (as will be elaborated in the section “Art-Historical Connotations of the Title”). The response of both Western museum audiences as well as potential Chinese readers of the catalog—an English and a (Hong Kong) Chinese edition were published<sup>71</sup>—would inevitably be colored by the ideological issues of 1989 that had marked the fortunes of *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde*. The trilingual catalog was an exceptional and pioneering instance in early Western group exhibitions of post-1979 Chinese art.<sup>72</sup> Yet translating back-and-forth a

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71 The German edition was published in time for the Berlin opening, the English and Chinese editions a year later. For the English edition, see note 62. For the Chinese edition, see Wolfer Pöhlmann et al., ed., *中國前衛藝術 (Zhongguo qianwei yishu)* (Hong Kong S. A. R.: Oxford University Press, 1994). While the English edition is a one-to-one translation of the German catalog, the Chinese edition (written in traditional Chinese) includes four additional texts: Li Tuo (“1985”); Gao Minglu (當代大陸新潮美術, “Dangdai dalu xinzhao meishu,” “Contemporary New Wave Fine Art of Mainland China”); Zhang Xudong (從「朦朧詩」到「新小說」, “Cong ‘menglongshi’ dao ‘xinxiaoshuo,’” “From ‘misty (or hermetic) poetry’ to ‘New Novel’”); and Dai Shihe (寫實—從技法到精神, “Xie shi—cong jifa dao jingsheng,” “Realism—from technique to spirit [or meaning]”).

72 Pöhlmann, “Einführung,” 9. He considers it “our [the German curators’] duty to make understandable and accessible our evaluation and reflection on their [the Chinese artists’] work also expressing our gratitude and appreciation through realizing an English-Chinese version of the present catalogue.” Translated from the German by F.K.: “[...] uns eine Pflicht, durch Realisierung einer englisch-chinesischen Version des vorliegenden Kataloges unsere Wertung und Reflexion ihrer Arbeit auch als Ausdruck unseres Dankes und unserer Wertschätzung verständlich und zugänglich zu machen.” To the best of my knowledge, the first large group exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art held outside China

politically as well as art-historically charged term such as *avant-garde* ran the risk of creating strong references to its twin connotations: *avant-garde* in the *art-historical* and in the *political* sense, which were not necessarily defined the same way within the different cultural contexts at hand.

### Excursus: Theoretical Debates on the Term *Avant-garde*

The preceding observations merit an excursus that will illuminate the theoretical background of the term *avant-garde*. Although also at stake in the making of the Berlin exhibition, its organizers seldom related in explicit ways to the strained history of the term.

As its long and contradictory history conveys, the term has been strongly contested in Europe and beyond.<sup>73</sup> Arguably, the most familiar (and equally most debated) publication that related Anglo-American writings on the topic to European discussions was Peter Bürger's ambitious *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984; *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 1974). In his Marxist reading of late-nineteenth-century French and German usage and of early European literary and artistic vanguard movements (such as surrealism, futurism, Dadaism, and Russian constructivism), Bürger observed that:

The preposition *avant* means not, or at least not primarily, the claim to be in advance of contemporary art (this is first true of [Arthur] Rimbaud), but rather the claim to be at the peak of social progress. The artist's activity is *avant-gardist* not in the production of a new work but because the artist intends with this work (or with the renunciation of a work) something else: the realization of a Saint-Simonian utopia or the 'multiplication' of progress, a task that Rimbaud assigns to the poet of the future. Inasmuch as *avant-garde* artists go beyond the sphere of art, they stand in a relation of tension to the principle of aesthetic autonomy. The Saint-Simonians [socialist co-combatants in the 1820s] polemicized against the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, [Heinrich] Heine was amused by the 'uprisings' of the Young Germans against Goethe, and

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which continued this practice were: *China's New Art, Post-1989* in Hong Kong (1993) and *Die Hälfte des Himmels* in Bonn, Germany (1996). Since the 1990s, Chinese catalogs of contemporary group exhibitions frequently include English translations; however, Western group exhibitions of Chinese art with bilingual catalog publications or separate Chinese editions are less frequent.

73 See for example the long article on the history of the term by Karlheinz Barck, "Avantgarde," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al., vol. 1 (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2000), 544–577. Although not wholly Eurocentric in scope, since he discusses South American debates relating to the term, Barck does not include any from Asia.

Rimbaud condemned all of Western poetry as mere entertaining game. The avant-garde needs autonomous art in order to protest against it.<sup>74</sup>

Stressing this as a basic paradox of the European vanguard movements, Bürger suggests that despite their divergent programs and political positions “they all share the questioning of the autonomy of art [...], the protest against an art that has removed itself from life praxis”<sup>75</sup> by affirming “the social function of the artist [...that results] either in anarchist revolt or engagement for the revolution.”<sup>76</sup> Further, since “the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life” essentially belong together, and the vanguard movements “(with the sole exception of Dadaism) never abandon aesthetic claims, despite their anti-aesthetic attitude,” the avant-garde faces “aporias [...] in the process of trying to realize their project.”<sup>77</sup> As Bürger observed: “The *political* dilemma arises wherever revolutionary engagement is serious, as it must lead to a collaboration with radical left or right parties or groups”<sup>78</sup> and results in the artists losing their autonomous stance. “The *aesthetic* dilemma is connected to the fact that the institution of art survives the avant-garde attack on it,”<sup>79</sup> inasmuch as their artworks all end up in the very institution that they attacked. Moreover, these movements did not succeed in abolishing traditional art categories (as Dadaism sought to do), nor in uniting subjective transgression and social revolution (as the surrealist project proclaimed), nor in collectivizing the cultural means of production (as the constructivists had demanded). Consequently, Bürger diagnosed a “failure” of the historical European avant-garde movements; however, he insisted that this notion could be misleading “because it conceals the fact that that which has failed has not simply disappeared, but continues to exert influence precisely in its failure.”<sup>80</sup>

Hal Foster, a prominent post-modern American critic of Bürger’s theory, specifically questioned the German scholar’s underlying evolutionist narrative which allowed him “to present history as both *punctual and final*” and “treat the historical avant-garde as pure origin and the [post-

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74 Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 185-189, 186.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 187.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 188

80 Ibid.

war Euro-American] neo-avant-garde as riven repetition," thus assuming that "to repeat the historical avant-garde, [...] is to cancel its critique of the institution of autonomous art; more, it is to invert this critique into an affirmation of autonomous art."<sup>81</sup> Against the "seductive despair" of Bürger's diagnosis (based on what Foster calls "the pathos of all Frankfurt School melancholia"), Foster concludes that his reading "is *mistaken* historically, politically, and ethically. First, it neglects the very lesson of the avant-garde that Bürger teaches elsewhere: the historicity of *all* art, including the contemporary. It also neglects that an understanding of this historicity may be *one* criterion by which art can claim to be advanced as art today. (In other words, recognition of conventions need not issue in the 'simultaneity of the radically disparate'; on the contrary, it can prompt a sense of the radically necessary.) Second, it ignores that, *rather than invert the prewar critique of the institution of art, the neo-avant-garde has worked to extend it.* It also ignores that in doing so the neo-avant-garde has produced new aesthetic experiences, cognitive connections, and political interventions, and that these openings may make up *another* criterion by which art can claim to be advanced today."<sup>82</sup> Therefore, Foster proposes the hypothesis that "rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde might the neo-avant-garde comprehend it for the first time?" In this context, "comprehend" does not mean "completes" but rather "recognizes" that both the historical *and* the neo-avant-garde are part of an "interminable" creative critique.<sup>83</sup> Although none of these authors had Chinese art movements in mind when they tried to define the notion of the avant-garde or considered recent re-actualizations of its claims and strategies in neo-avant-garde expressions, alone this brief discussion shows that applying the term to post-revolutionary Chinese art activities might be useful, while simultaneously running the risk of losing its object in translation.

In this regard, let us consider the American art historian Norman Bryson, who applied the Euro-American understanding of the term in the contextualization of works by the '85 New Wave Art Movement. This led him mainly to observe basic socio-political differences between the Chinese and the Western art worlds:

If in the West the historical problem of the avant-garde has been its enduring weakness relative to the cultural and economic mainstream, in

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<sup>81</sup> Hal Foster, *The return of the real: The avant-garde at the end of the century* (Cambridge, MA/London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001), 10–11.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

China the situation has been almost the reverse: a political avant-garde, the Party, has monopolized power for fifty years.<sup>84</sup>

Following the discursive differentiation between political and aesthetic aspects of the avant-garde, as outlined by Bürger, Bryson states:

The art from the People's Republic presented in this exhibition [*Inside Out: New Chinese Art* at the Asia Society Museum in New York, 1998] describes a very different historical experience, of the avant-garde (xianfeng) in office and in power—avant-garde practice in varying degrees sponsored or underwritten by the state [...]. If in the West the impulse to launch 'another movement' has been channeled into an aesthetic ghetto, in the People's Republic it has been a state prerogative, and one formidably used.<sup>85</sup>

While Bryson follows Bürger in describing the historical "failure" of the European avant-gardes to realize their desired synthesis of autonomous art and modern, rationalized life, he suggests that for Chinese artists the challenge was to ensure that the state did not absorb the entire artistic sphere.<sup>86</sup> He describes this problematic relationship as marked by ambivalent processes of "entanglement" and "recuperation," which became even more complex after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in 1979:

[...] for now forms of thinking which earlier might have qualified as dissident or counter-revolutionary were capable of being reclassified and harnessed to the state's own program of economic diversification and the maximization of profit. From this perspective, aesthetic practices that clearly advertised their relationship to western precedents or counterparts, or that sought to build the institutions of an art market, could be recognized and tolerated as necessary components of the latest state drive toward modernization. A society in need of advanced technology and consumer goods, and a new place in the global economy, must perforce accept new modes of aesthetic activity (conceptual art, performance art, installation art) alongside new music, new fashion, new cinema—and a new stock exchange.<sup>87</sup>

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84 Norman Bryson, "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde," in *Inside/Out. New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998), 51–58.

85 *Ibid.*, 51–52.

86 *Ibid.*, 52.

87 *Ibid.*

Bryson follows Chinese critics such as Gao Minglu or Li Xianting, who suggested that paintings of the so-called Chinese “Political Pop” were an artistic response to the new unanimity of socialist reign and capitalist market reforms:

If the uncanny resemblance between state avant-gardism and aesthetic avant-gardism represented one range of possible complicities, the introduction of capitalist principles and a burgeoning art market represents another, and between them both sides of the ‘dual system’ appear to have colonized all the available space in which an authentic avant-garde might possibly maneuver.<sup>88</sup>

However, Bryson’s dualist differentiation between historical European avant-gardes and the Chinese art movement, between the socialist regime and its capitalist agenda seems suspiciously simple and heroic, when he states that “the People’s Republic is now a society where the principle of contradiction—the epic collision of socialist and capitalist cultures—has been allowed to develop to a unique and historically unprecedented degree [...]. The terrain opened up by colliding forces affords singular opportunities for aesthetic intervention and social critique.”<sup>89</sup> Yet this position enables Bryson to offer an idealistic third way, which he believes Chinese artists can pave as (self-empowered?) subjects located between the pressure of the state and the market, albeit at the “microlevel” of daily activity:

What is perhaps being sketched here is an idea of power that, in the West, can be expressed only in tentative terms: that in societies of disciplinarity, ideology may no longer be required to be the primary cohesive force binding the subject in social space. What holds the social formation together are modes of activity whose basis lies at the microlevel, in the myriad acts of repetition and self-regulation by which the subject inscribes itself in social discourse. Viewed negatively, the art that enacts this position can be thought of as the expression of ‘cynical reason,’ as Peter Sloterdijk has described it. The cynic knows his beliefs to be empty, he is already ‘enlightened’ about his ideological relation to the world; to that extent he has rendered himself immune to the charge of bad faith, or of complicity with the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 53. He then goes on to describe the following artworks to illustrate his argument: “Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation” by Geng Jianyi (1987); “Ice: Central China 1996” by Wang Jin (January 28, 1996 in Zhengzhou City); Wu Shanzhuan’s “Red Humour” (1986); Xu Bing’s “Book from the Sky” (1987–91); and works by Zhang Peili, Song Dong, and Qiu Zhijie.

dominant order. What this position constructively opens up, however, is a new territory of analysis and practice. For if power is no longer to be located at the macrolevel of the great ideologies, in the colossal and mythic confrontation of socialism and capital, and if it is instead to be found at a microlevel that is ‘below’ politics and ideology, then individual subjects are able to intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms. If the basis of cultural reproduction lies in the subject’s own capacities for compulsive repetition and system-building, the significance of aesthetic practice is that it permits those capacities to be deflected or redirected toward the subject’s own ends. The art of the avant-garde becomes a model of the ways in which subjects—however great the historical pressures acting upon them—may organize and lead their own lives.<sup>90</sup>

More than a decade later, Bryson’s faith in the Chinese artist as an enlightened, self-contained, and independent subject flying below the radar of “macrolevel” politics and ideologies seems strikingly romantic, in view of the overwhelming commercialization of Chinese contemporary art and the lack of independent, (self-)critical mechanisms; the Chinese government now supports all kinds of artistic expression, as long as it is profitable and complies with the newly implemented “cultural industry.”

The following section will not explore the art-historical responses of Chinese curators-cum-critics or art historians, who subsequently dealt with the topos of a Chinese avant-garde,<sup>91</sup> but will return to the beginnings of its practical negotiation and institutionalization within the medium of the group exhibition. One instance where the early translational problems and transcultural entanglements of the term became evident was the making of the exhibition title *China Avantgarde* in Berlin.

### **Art-Historical Connotations of the Title**

As far as the *art-historical* and inter-exhibitionary implications of the title are concerned, the reference to the Beijing show was not at once obvious to the German public. Most likely, they would learn about the exhibition by reading texts written by Pöhlmann and others in the Berlin catalog, since the Beijing event had not been broadly reported in Western media nor were contemporaneous

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 57–58.

<sup>91</sup> For a discussion, see the literature given in note 7.

Chinese reviews translated at the time.<sup>92</sup> Unlike the intellectual art lover in China, a German viewer could not immediately associate the new artistic approaches and scandalizing performances of Beijing's *China/Avant-Garde* with the German exhibition title *China Avantgarde*. In this regard, Pöhlmann's assumption seems to have been correct: that the Berlin audience would simply take the label *avant-garde* to mean an artistic movement that claims a radical break with tradition and brings about marked changes in modern artistic styles. For the German audience, however, the artworks themselves did little to confirm this idea since—as Pöhlmann mentions in his introduction—stylistically they looked rather familiar, even conventional to the European eye; in the last section of this paper, an analysis of the display will explore this effect. Despite presenting artwork whose very existence was previously unknown to the German public, the obviously Western-inspired language of most pieces did not make a radical statement, especially when considered against the stylistic achievements and concepts of historical European avant-garde artists.

In the well-established European museums of modern and contemporary art, Chinese artists experimenting with modernist Western stylistic features—such as surreal, abstracted, fragmented, collaged, or gestural-expressive ways of handling paint—even seemed quite natural given the Eurocentric and progress-oriented logic of Western modernity in art. As previously mentioned, this line of thought assumes pre-modern Chinese artistic production to be “authentic” and “classical” in its own right, while art created after coming in contact with European or American modernism, including socialist art practices, be assessed in relation to its European forerunners and counterparts, who constitute the dominant center of the modern world. In this respect, the Chinese artworks shown in Berlin seemed to attest to the hegemony of Western concepts of modernism, inasmuch as they were seen to appropriate and not radically alter or break away from them. Therefore, reading the title in the possible sense of *China* as the subject claiming to be (art) *avant-garde*—a new force that might succeed or even overcome historical European and American *avant-garde* art movements and their formal characteristics—must have struck the European art public as a provocative yet utopian marketing slogan. Hence, when viewing the artwork in relation to the exhibition's main title, the dominant interpretation was to understand it as representing a Chinese art movement that is vanguard only in relation to its own cultural context.

Still, the fact that the European curators kept the nominalization of *China* when transferring it from *China/Avant-Garde*, instead of advertising more modestly

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92 For a recent compilation and translation of three contemporaneous Chinese reviews, see Wu and Wang, *Primary Documents*, 113–132.

and specifically a “*Chinesische Avantgarde*” (Chinese Avant-garde), slightly contradicts Pöhlmann’s argument. While in his introduction he stresses that one should take the “Chinese roots” into account and not overlook the Chinese artistic traditions, the decision to capitalize *China* in the title partly hampers such a nuanced approach—especially when allusions to Western styles impose the feeling of familiarity upon the European viewer. Even though the title places the geographic term on par with the European notion of a radical modern artistic movement, it deliberately generalizes possible, significant specificities of *avant-garde* by attaching it to the country and culture of *China* as a whole, instead of to *Chinese* artistic endeavors in particular. However, one should keep in mind that this translation was connected to the institutional strategy of exhibiting artworks embedded within a more comprehensive program, which mapped out China in its many cultural facets rather than exclusively concentrating on the latest experimental Chinese fine arts. It also indicates that because China was generally considered to be a distant and culturally unfamiliar country to most exhibition visitors, the main strategy must first be to advertise the culture as a whole. Only when reading the catalog essays does it become clear that the exhibition more specifically questioned the complex art-historical relationship between (historical) European avant-garde concepts and the vanguard modernist concepts of Chinese artists. Nonetheless, the Berlin audience was correct in its interpretation of the title as an “exhibitionary avant-garde event” in relation to European mainstream art presentations: for the first time since the Cultural Revolution a whole range of contemporary artworks from the People’s Republic was put on display that neither affirmed the official art doctrine of the Chinese government nor persisted to focus on widely appreciated art and artifacts of pre-modern China. This in itself made the Berlin show a vanguard endeavor in the European context. After all, the show and its catalog demonstrated that many Chinese artists were, in fact, engaged in renegotiating modernism in alternative ways, thereby pluralizing its meanings.

### **Political Connotations of the Title**

That the Berlin exhibition was directly involved with the question of discursive as well as institutional power is evident in the *political* issues that were at stake in choosing a title. The three main curators were concerned about a title that would indeed relate closely to the Chinese exhibition in 1989, because they knew that European audiences would associate this year with the negative image of the People’s Republic depicted in European media reports of the violent repression of mass protests on Tiananmen Square. In addition, recent insights into the socialist regime of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which had come to light in the wake of German reunification, would loom large in the Berlin

reception of art created in another communist country. As a result of this media discourse and local historical experience, the curators were concerned that the exhibition’s Chinese artists would be equated with Chinese political dissidents: a simplistic ideological interpretation that they wanted to avoid because it was likely to obscure the inherently art-related and increasingly autonomous stance that had marked the artistic production of the last decade in China.

The curators would probably have agreed with Bryson’s differentiation between the historical European avant-garde movements and the approaches in experimental Chinese art of the late 1980s (and for a short period after 1989 as well): While the European avant-gardes often claimed to revive art in order to engage with “real life”—tearing down any overly autonomous, segregated, purely aesthetic, or self-contained place of art in society—Chinese artists were eager to establish art as a sphere that was independent, at least from the political aspects of everyday life under the centralized regime of the Communist Party. They struggled to free artistic practice and discourse from the reigning cultural politics and from the superimposed state bureaucracy with its controlling mechanisms. This did not, however, exclude their struggle for official recognition, nor necessarily lead to their opposing the Leninist-Maoist doctrine of “art for the sake of the people.” It was in order to change people’s attitudes and culturally reform society that many artists wanted their new stylistic approaches to be included in academic curricula, to be broadly discussed at symposia and in art magazines, and hopefully to have their works shown in state-controlled galleries such as the National Art Gallery in Beijing.

Yet especially after the events of June 4, 1989, most artists refrained from taking an openly political stance, choosing instead to withdraw from public engagement into private, low-profile exhibition activities, if they engaged in any at all. It had become clear to many young Chinese artists and critics that the Communist Party would not grant further artistic freedom, but had tightened its control and was determined to strictly censor any exhibition project that did not conform to its ideology. In retrospect, one can find many reasons that existed for the fact that the subject matter of the feverish artistic production of 1980s China (even though initially triggered by political liberalization) was not necessarily concerned with Party politics. Given all these circumstances, the foremost aim of Schmid, Van Dijk, and Noth was to present the striking complexity and plurality of artistic concepts en vogue in the People’s Republic at the time, including many works that did not allude to issues of (cultural) politics.

The strained diplomatic relationship between the People’s Republic of China and Germany, as well as between the other European countries that hosted the touring exhibition in 1993/94, presented another aspect of the curators’ political concerns. In order to calm potential institutional worries regarding

the foreign relations of and with China, Noth formulated in a 1991 draft of the exhibition project that “any kind of political connotation, for instance in the sense of ‘dissident art’ should be avoided [by the curatorial concept],” since “the exhibition’s goal is to document artistic, not outspokenly political qualities.”<sup>93</sup> In addition, he warned that “every open confrontation with Chinese authorities may threaten the participating artists or at least their participation (if they still live in China).”<sup>94</sup> Yet the curator also remarks that a “certain benevolent neutrality of Chinese authorities is to be expected, as long as they are under the impression that Chinese culture is presented in ways that apparently demonstrate its liberal quality to the outside world, without interfering in Chinese internal affairs.”<sup>95</sup> The exhibition draft further proves that Schmid and Noth expected to encounter difficulties not only from the official Chinese side, but also sought to caution potential collaborating art institutions not to jeopardize the undertaking within Germany, where “direct political confrontation with the Chinese regime would possibly discourage sponsors and cause pressure from German authorities.”<sup>96</sup>

The precarious curatorial attempt to focus on artwork that ran the risk of official Chinese disapproval, on the one hand, without stirring official attention, on the other, proved necessary and prudent. Although Chinese officials had made Van Dijk leave the People’s Republic on earlier occasions, suspecting foreigners of involvement in the democratic movement on Tiananmen Square, he and Schmid were able to revisit China as tourists in 1991 and 1992<sup>97</sup> and

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93 Jochen Noth, “Skizze des Ausstellungsvorhabens ‘Chinesische Avantgarde in den neunziger Jahren’ [Draft of the exhibition project ‘Chinese Avant-garde in the Nineties’],” (unpublished, type-written document, dated 16 Februar 1991), 1–4, 3. I thank Andreas Schmid for providing me with a copy of the document. “[...es soll] jeder offene politische Akzent etwa mit dem Stichwort ‘Dissidenten-Kunst’ vermieden werden...[, da] die Ausstellung vor allem künstlerische und nicht manifest politische Qualitäten dokumentieren soll.” English translation in the text by F.K.

94 Ibid.: “[...weil] jede offene Konfrontation mit den chinesischen Behörden die beteiligten Künstler selbst oder zumindest ihre Teilnahme (wenn sie noch in China leben) gefährden kann.” English translation in the text by F.K.

95 Ibid.: “[...Es ist jedoch auch eine] gewisse wohlwollende Neutralität chinesischer Behörden solange zu erwarten [...], solange sie den Eindruck haben, dass hier chinesische Kultur dargestellt wird, die ihnen Liberalität nach außen zu bescheinigen zeigt, ohne sie im Innern zu stören.” English translation in the text by F.K.

96 Ibid.: “[...] direkte politische Konfrontation gegen das chinesische Regime evtl. Sponsoren abschrecken und sogar Druck von Seiten deutscher Behörden auslösen kann.” English translation in the text by F.K.

97 Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008: He recalls that the first China visit with Van Dijk took place November 4–December 1, 1991; December 8, 1991–January 17, 1992 he flew to New York to visit the Chinese artists Hu Bing and Gu Wenda, who had emigrated to the USA. The second visit to China was made in 1992 by Van Dijk, Pöhlmann, and Schmid and only lasted ca. two weeks

contact and discuss their exhibition project with local artists. However, they avoided officially declaring the purpose for their travels. Similarly, most of the participating artists obtained a tourist visa for Germany and attended the opening of the exhibition in Berlin.<sup>98</sup>

It was only shortly before the opening in January 1993 that a Chinese diplomat in the Berlin branch office of the Chinese Embassy voiced concerns about the content of the exhibition. In an unofficial conversation with a local German politician (a member of the Berlin Senate), the Chinese diplomat argued that most of the invited artists were not famous in the People’s Republic and consequently the exhibition would create a misleading impression of the actual cultural life of his country. Moreover, the Chinese representative criticized the fact that a significant number of the participants were living outside of China at the time.<sup>99</sup> Schmid writes that the Chinese ambassador later travelled from Bonn to Berlin to protest against the exhibition, claiming that it did not present what could be called authentic or representative modern Chinese art.<sup>100</sup> However, coming at this late juncture the ambassador’s gesture did not threaten the exhibition, rather it reaffirmed the non-official nature of the artwork on display and the title’s suggestion that the art belonged to an

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(according to Schmid, who could not remember the exact dates of this second journey during the interview). Cf. his later written statement in Schmid, “The Dawn,” (forthcoming) where he recalls: “During the preparatory phase the curatorial team traveled several times for research purposes in order to meet as many Chinese artists as possible. In 1991 Hans Van Dijk and I went to China for more than three weeks. At first Hans was afraid that the Chinese authorities would not let him enter the country. But we were lucky and did not meet with any problems at this point. In 1992 Jochen Noth, Hans van Dijk, and Wolfer Pöhlmann as the head of the art and film department of the HKW went to China again for about two weeks, while I stayed in the office. In June 1992, I flew to New York to visit Chinese artists there. It was the first time that I met Ai Weiwei, who was living in poor conditions in Soho. In Paris, Hans and I met with Huang Yongping, Yang Jiechang, and other artists. On another tour with the HKW’s lorry, Hans and I drove to Amsterdam. We talked the night through with the artists and gathered further material. I also remember under what astonishing conditions we met the artist Fang Lijun in November 1991, before he became one of the best-selling Chinese artists and an international star of the Chinese art scene only three years later [...]. At that time, he lived in an artists’ village called Xicun (West Village) near the old Summer Palace Yuanmingyuan on the Western outskirts of Beijing. His living and working space was very small, measuring not more than 18 square meters. At the time that Hans and I went to see him, he had not been able to sell one single drawing or painting. His participation in our exhibition and in another traveling exhibition, which opened in Hong Kong also in 1993, kick-started his career.”

98 Schmid, “The Dawn Art,” forthcoming. He mentions the artists Lin Yilin and Zhao Bandi in particular. The former also travelled to subsequent venues and adapted his installation in situ.

99 The note of the German politician regarding this conversation also conveyed that the Chinese officials would not actively intervene, but rather rely on their headquarters in Bonn to undertake any further steps. I thank Andreas Schmid for showing me the unpublished note written by the member of the Berlin Senate, dated January 5, 1993.

100 Schmid, “The Dawn,” forthcoming.

avant-garde movement operating outside of or in opposition to the ideological mainstream of its country and beyond the Party's control. Political side effects such as these indicate that the curators and artists indeed operated in a delicate arena between two very different and still relatively separate cultural and political systems. This made it necessary to think through each step of the exhibition, to negotiate diplomatically, and to avoid as much as possible involving official entities and institutions on either side.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, the curators had to solve yet another major logistical problem—the export of the artwork—in unorthodox ways.<sup>102</sup>

### Synthesis in Translation: The Final Title

In the end, the initial concerns of the curatorial team about the attention-grabbing and politically charged title ceased and a telling compromise was found: the Berlin exhibition was called *China Avantgarde. Zhongguo Qianwei Yishuzhan* (中国前卫艺术展). Significantly, the Chinese translation that the curatorial team in Berlin prominently provided on the catalog cover is not the same as the original Chinese title used in Beijing: *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan* (中国现代艺术展). The more literal translation of *avantgarde* as *qianwei* (前卫) eliminates the broader and less radical meaning of the term *xiandai* (现代), *modern*, substituting the latter with the more politically and art-historically charged specificity found in the German title (fig. 13).

While the choice of the divergent Chinese term *qianwei* prevented a literal, one-to-one reference to the Beijing show, the connection was paradoxically provided by the German reference to Beijing's English subtitle, *China/Avant-Garde*. In fact, Berlin's Chinese translation radicalized the militant connotations of Beijing's English subtitle: the term *qianwei* (as its French and English counterparts) originally derives from a military context in which a combat group or unit of guards (*wei* / 卫—garde) operates “before” or “at the forefront” (*qian* / 前—avant) of the main battlefield; the armed forces operating behind this group being guided to victory with the help of these vanguards.

101 Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008: He recalls that the strongest positive reaction from German political circles was a letter sent by the former chancellor of West Germany Helmut Schmidt, who congratulated the curators on their exhibition. Schmidt was the first German chancellor to visit the People's Republic; the visit took place in 1975 at the end of the Cultural Revolution.

102 Ibid. Schmid states that some of the artwork was imported by the artists themselves, in their hand luggage; others were declared as “decoration material” by Western businessmen who exported them as personal belongings.

As Gao explained, the reason for not applying this term to the artworks on display in Beijing was the fact that it was less frequently used than the broader term *xiandai*; however, he does not explain why this term had more currency than *qianwei*.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps the reason is that the public self-positioning of the '85 New Wave artworks and unannounced, pioneering art performances on display in Beijing had first to affirm and publicly establish this vanguard status, which only the English subtitle dared to predict? After all, during the lengthy making of this exhibition the organizational committee itself did not agree on whether the show should be a retrospective of recent artistic trends or a presentation of the most radical, current artistic approaches, committed to groundbreaking artistic progress. Only after the closure of the exhibition, the performance scandals, and the repression of further artistic experiments in the aftermath of the Tiananmen protests, was the non-official status of the majority of exhibiting artists and affiliated critics solidified. In retrospect, their attempt to change the ideologically-dominated artistic conventions seemed pioneering, notwithstanding the fact that by the end of 1989 it also seemed the lost cause of an avant-garde movement that had politically failed.

By 1993, the term *avant-garde art* was used in China precisely and explicitly to describe experimental, non-affirmative approaches and to distinguish those artists who had not completely given up their '85 New Wave-spirit nor succumbed to political pressure after 1989. It described artists who tried to reorient their artistic production under the given circumstances in ways

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103 The term *qianfeng* (先锋), "the vanguard," was already used by early Chinese communists as the title of their 1920s journal, doing so in reference to their understanding of the Western political avant-garde. The journal was secretly published in Shanghai between July 1924 and February 1927, see: Emdymion Porter Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual*, 2nd rev. ill. ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 996. But nationalist writers, who were associated with the anti-communist ideals of the Guomindang, also published a magazine during the early 1930s with the title *Xianfeng Zhoubao and Xianfeng Yuebao*, wherein *xianfeng* (先锋) is another translation for "avant-garde," composed of *xian* / 先 meaning "before" or "first" and *feng* / 锋 originally denoting a "swordpoint" or more generally something "sharp," i.e., the spearhead of a movement, see: *Literary Societies of Republican China*, <http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/denton2/publications/research/soc.htm>. Accessed 23.11.2011. And a literary and art magazine dedicated to the early adaptation of Western artistic avant-garde styles named *Yifeng* (艺 / 艺 denoting "art") also existed in the 1930s. It published a special edition on surrealism in October 1935 to which artists such as Liang Xihong and Li Dongping contributed, having learned about European art styles during their studies in Japan, see: Lang Shaojun, "Wegbereiter der modernen Kunst in China," in Haus der Kulturen der Welt, *China Avantgarde*, 50. After the victory of the Chinese communists and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the terms *qianwei*, *qianfeng*, and *xianfeng* were used to designate the Communist Party as the "avant-garde" of the people in accordance with Marxist-Leninist and Maoist political thought. Compared to these terms' resonance with the Party's long-standing official rhetoric, *xiandai* seems to have been defined as less narrowly and ideologically leftist in 1989. After all, Deng Xiaoping had made the "Four Modernizations," (四个现代主, *sige xiandai zhu*) the motto of the day. So simply calling the exhibition "modern" (*xiandai*) also prevented the potentially dangerous implication that the artists were publicly claiming themselves instead of the Communist Party to be the (cultural) "avant-garde" of the people.

that still allowed a continuing search for new expressions, separate from the official call for a socialist concept of art. In this regard, the Chinese subtitle of the Berlin exhibition can be seen as a historiographic instrument that reinscribed and translated the artistic movement in China and the Beijing exhibition as more *qianwei* than *xiandai*—a manifestation of a Chinese “avant-garde” rather than simply another Chinese “modern” exhibition.

### The Curators and the Institution

The Berlin exhibition owes its success in part to the curators’ expert knowledge of the conditions of Chinese art production. Unlike the curatorial team of Jean-Hubert Martin in Paris, who consulted the mainland Chinese art historian Fei Dawei, having no in-depth personal knowledge of the Chinese art scene,<sup>104</sup> all three curators of the Berlin show had studied or worked for several years in China in close contact with artists and other intellectuals. They were very much aware of the sharpened division and heightened tension between the so-called official versus non-official positions in the arts post-1989, as well as of the fact that the latest response of artists seemed to be a de-politicized stance or at least a disillusioned search for (economic) niches that would allow them to make a living through their art. Even though the curators were critical of the European connotation of *avant-garde* in the sense of “negatively oppositional,” especially when applied indiscriminately to the kind of Chinese artwork that the Communist Party disapproved of, they nonetheless applied the term in their catalog essays when writing about the artists and the background of their work; yet they applied it in accordance with its use by Chinese artists themselves.

The German artist Andreas Schmid (b. 1955) moved to Beijing in 1983 to study Chinese and was enrolled as an art student at the famous Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (today China Academy of Art, CAA) from 1984 to 1986.<sup>105</sup> In an autobiographical remark, he recalls meeting members of one of

104 In a conversation with me in fall 2006, Jean-Hubert Martin mentioned that he travelled for several days in China and relied on Fei Dawei, who introduced him to Chinese artists.

105 Andreas Schmid was born in Stuttgart, Germany, where he also studied painting and art education at the State Academy of Fine Arts from 1974 to 1981. In Hangzhou, he studied seal carving, calligraphy, and the history of calligraphy. At the time, foreign students were not yet allowed to join the oil painting department, which lacked adequate teaching staff following the persecutions during the Cultural Revolution. Today he works as an artist based in Berlin, is additionally active as curator, and regularly writes for the section on contemporary Chinese art of the e-journal *artnet.com*. In 1997/8 he organized the exhibition *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der Volksrepublik China (Contemporary Photography from the People’s Republic)* in Berlin, Chemnitz, and Darmstadt, Germany. He also co-organized the project *Dreams of Art Spaces Collected* that investigates independent project spaces and initiatives run by artists and art associations in Asia, Europe, and Australia and was presented at the

China's first and most influential post-revolutionary artist groups, the "Stars" (Xingxing), in Beijing before getting to know Hangzhou art students such as Gu Wenda, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Wu Shanzhuan, and Chen Yanying, who were about to become influential proponents of the '85 New Wave Art Movement (fig. 2).<sup>106</sup>



*Fig. 2: Andreas Schmid during the making of China Avantgarde at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin in 1993, sitting in Ni Haiheng's installation Territory. Photograph: Hans van Dijk. Courtesy Andreas Schmid*

The trained designer and artist Hans Van Dijk (b. 1946 †2002) moved to the People's Republic in 1986 and soon began to document and exhibit

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*Guangzhou Triennial 2008*. For biographical details, see his website: <http://andreasschmid.info/vita.php?l=en>. Accessed 02.12.2011.

106 See Schmid, "The Dawn," (forthcoming) and Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008: He specifies that he came into contact with Zhang Peili, saw the graduation works of Geng Jianyi, and became friends with Gu Wenda. The senior students Wang Guangyi and Huang Yongping had already left the academy after their graduation and were no longer working in Hangzhou.

works by the new generation of Chinese artists.<sup>107</sup> In 1993, he founded an art consultancy in Beijing, which joined with the Belgian collector Frank Uytterhaegen and the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei under the name China Art Archives and Warehouse in 1999, and still exists today (fig. 3)<sup>108</sup>.



*Fig. 3: Hans van Dijk (1946–2002) during a preparatory journey in Wuhan 1991. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.*

Jochen Noth (b. 1941), a former leading activist of the German communist students' movement, sought political exile in the People's Republic in 1979. In 1986, he became a German language lecturer at the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, DAAD) in

<sup>107</sup> Hans Van Dijk was born in Deventer, the Netherlands. He studied at the Arnhem Arts Academy and the Eindhoven Design Academy, graduating in 1970. After developing an interest in Chinese classical furniture, language, and culture, he moved to China in 1984, studying at Nanjing University and at the Nanjing Art Academy (Nanjing Yishu Xueyuan). In 1993, after an intervening period of time when he was officially disallowed from staying in China, he founded the New Amsterdam Art Consultancy (NAAC) in Beijing. After a business merger, he continued to archive documents on ca. "5000 Chinese artists," according to Robert Bernell, see: Robert Bernell, "In Memoriam: Hans van Dijk (1946–2002)," *China Information*, no. 16 (2002): 108. The online version of this article can be found at: <http://cin.sagepub.com/content/16/1/108.citation>. Accessed 02.12.2011. See also a biographical website in memory of Van Dijk established by Ai Weiwei: [http://www.archivesandwarehouse.com/Gallery/CAAW/new\\_gallery/hans/hans.htm](http://www.archivesandwarehouse.com/Gallery/CAAW/new_gallery/hans/hans.htm). Accessed 02.12.2011.

<sup>108</sup> See the homepage of CAAW <http://www.archivesandwarehouse.com/Gallery/CAAW/html/caaw.html>, accessed 12.12.2011 Today, the institution is run in cooperation with the Swiss gallery owner Urs Meile, whose Lucerne-based gallery (established in 1992) opened a branch office in Beijing's Cao Changdi District in 2005 in an architecture designed by Ai Weiwei.

Beijing, establishing close contacts with intellectuals in the capital’s literary and art scenes.<sup>109</sup> After returning to Germany in 1988, he founded the *Asien-Pazifik-Institut für Management*, a China-related business consultancy.

Andreas Schmid had known Jochen Noth from his language studies in Beijing. In 1990, several years after their return to Germany, the two made plans to exhibit contemporary art from China. However, their first attempts to convince smaller culture and art-related institutions such as the Art Gallery of the DAAD<sup>110</sup> in Bonn or the *Künstlerhaus Bethanien* in Berlin<sup>111</sup> were declined or met with complete disinterest. According to Schmid, one main reason for this was that exhibiting Chinese artworks was considered politically incorrect in light of the Tiananmen Incident.<sup>112</sup> It was Wolfger Pöhlmann of the HKW who finally read their proposal and agreed to have a closer look at their photographs documenting Chinese artworks. These materials convinced Pöhlmann as well as the director of the HKW, Günter Coenen, who courageously suggested in a March 1991 meeting to plan the exhibition as part of a larger cultural program that would include public readings of Chinese literature and poetry, the presentation of theatre plays and films, and concerts of classical Chinese music as well as rock bands from the People’s Republic.<sup>113</sup>

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109 Jochen Noth studied German literature at Heidelberg University during the 1960s, where he became a founding member of the Central Committee of the Communist League of West Germany (*Kommunistischer Bund Westdeutschlands*) and actively engaged in the radical leftist students’ movement. As official editor of the League’s press releases, he faced several charges by the German government, issued in 1975 and thereafter. He avoided imprisonment by leaving Munich for Vienna, Paris, and London, where he continued to work for the communist movement, before finally seeking political exile in the People’s Republic in 1979. There he worked for the German department of Radio Beijing and later became a German teacher in a foreign language institute of a university in Beijing. Increasingly working in cooperation with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which was in close contact with the German Embassy in Beijing, the political charges against him were finally eased in 1986. For an extensive German biographical interview, see Jochen Noth, “Jochen Noth, Management-Berater und ehemaliger Maoist im Gespräch mit Dietrich Brants,” <http://www.swr.de/swr2/programm/sendungen/zeitgenossen/archiv/-/id=660644/nid=660644/did=2268738/8rgdxx/index.html>. Accessed 04.08.2007.

110 This gallery still exists today with the mission to exhibit art and visual culture from foreign countries. It focuses on art scenes that are unfamiliar to the broader German public and works in close cooperation with German curators, artists, and scholars living abroad, who work for or cooperate with the DAAD in these countries.

111 The *Künstlerhaus Bethanien* in Berlin was founded in the mid-1970s when local artists occupied the former hospital building and began to establish it as a non-profit space for international residencies and artistic exchange. To date more than 950 international artists have been included in its residence program, see <http://www.bethanien.de/kb/index/trans/de/page/history>. Accessed 22.11.2011.

112 Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008.

113 Schmid, “The Dawn,” forthcoming. He mentions that the cultural program staged the first European concert of Cui Jian, who is known as the “first Chinese rock-star.” The concert was attended by

The idea of a comprehensive set of events featuring different aspects of Chinese cultural production closely followed the institutional framework of the HKW: composed of several departments with the overarching mission of enabling cross-disciplinary programs that would present the contemporary culture of foreign countries, mainly from the Third World, to the German public.<sup>114</sup> This institutional profile was established in 1988, after the belated restoration of the iconic Berlin Kongresshalle: the Congress Hall was built by the architect Hugh Stubbins as the American contribution to the international fair of architecture and construction INTERBAU in 1957, and collapsed in 1980 due to structural defects. With German reunification the structure catapulted into the geographic heart of the capital (previously a marginal location near the Berlin Wall) and the institution into its cultural scene. The initially exclusive focus on so-called Third World countries rapidly adapted to include nations that (formerly) belonged to the communist-governed world, the latter having previously been excluded from the official agenda of West German cultural exchange.

Shortly after the initial agreement with the HKW, Schmid and Van Dijk met at a symposium of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Bonn. Among its discussants were Fei Dawei, the Chinese consultant of *Magiciens de la terre*, and the artist Huang Yongping, both of whom had remained in Paris following the exhibition. More than a year after *Magiciens*, Fei had organized the exhibition *Chine demain pour hier*, enabling six emigrant Chinese artists<sup>115</sup> and three musicians to elaborate and present site-specific works in the village of Pourrières in southern France. Despite these promising exhibition activities, the Heinrich Böll Foundation had just declined an exhibition proposal by Van Dijk; learning about the plans in Berlin, he enthusiastically joined the project. According to Schmid, Van Dijk's private archive on contemporary Chinese art already contained substantial information on several artists and included the collected issues of influential Chinese art journals; these materials featured the new artistic approaches of

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4,000 enthusiastic listeners at the HKW. The saxophonist Liu Wei and China's renowned female rock band, Cobra, also performed. Schmid recalls well attended public readings of Chinese writers such as Gu Cheng, Bei Dao, Duo Duo, and Yang Lian. The company of actor Meng Jinhui from Beijing presented Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; Tan Dun from New York conducted Dutch musicians interpreting the work of Chinese composers; and the program also featured films related to China. In addition, The Museum of East Asian Art in Berlin-Dahlem inaugurated an exhibition of Chinese ink painting created in traditional idioms.

114 Bernd Michael Scherer, *The House. The Cultures. The World* (Berlin: Nicolai Verlag, 2007). See also the website created on behalf of the 50th anniversary of the HKW: <http://www.hkw.de/en/hkw/gebauede/50/kongresshalle.php>. Accessed 06.12.2011.

115 Huang Yongping (based in Paris since 1989); Yang Jiechang (based in Paris and Heidelberg since 1989); Cai Guoqiang (based in Tokyo since 1987); Gu Wenda (based in New York since 1987); Yan Peiming (based in Dijon since 1981); and Chen Zhen (based in Paris since 1986).

1985–1989 and were difficult to find in Europe.<sup>116</sup> As such, this additional source of information substantially helped the curatorial team assemble the catalog.

While the HKW granted Schmid and Van Dijk a full-time curator's contract, Noth worked part-time for the exhibition because of other professional obligations.<sup>117</sup> According to Schmid, and the imprint of the catalog, they divided the curatorial work including publications and other exhibition preparations: Van Dijk was responsible for the compilation of the artists' bibliographies and other textual documents, Schmid researched the images, and Noth was in charge of the overall editing of the catalog. The display in Berlin was supervised by Wolfger Pöhlmann and Kai Reschke from the HKW, who discussed the arrangement with Schmid and Van Dijk; in Rotterdam Van Dijk was the sole contact for the local museum staff; and Schmid was in charge of the displays at the exhibition's later venues in Oxford, Odense, and Hildesheim.<sup>118</sup> The overall budget for the Berlin exhibition was fixed at 820,000 DM, including the production cost of the catalog, preparatory travel, and the curators' remuneration. Compared to other exhibitions, such as *China! Zeitgenössische Malerei* (China! Contemporary Painting) held in Bonn (1996), this sum was barely sufficient to cover the costs of advertisement for the Bonn show. For all venues together, Schmid remembers the actual costs to have been 945,000 DM.<sup>119</sup>

### **The Selection of the Exhibiting Artists and Those Additionally Presented in the Catalog**

In the exhibition draft of 1991, the co-curator Jochen Noth wrote that the goal was "to show artworks of contemporary artists of the PRC, who partly live in exile, partly in China" and share the common characteristic "that they work with forms of expression and motifs in their artworks [that are] *independent* of the official Chinese art doctrine and have *detached themselves from conventions and*

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116 Schmid, "The Dawn," forthcoming. He mentions the journals *Xin Meishu*, *Meishu Bao*, and *Jiangsu Huakan*.

117 Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008. He mentions that the monthly salary for their full-time curatorship was 1,500 DM per person; further, that conflicts arose after the Berlin opening because the HKW did not extend Van Dijk's contract, even though he was heavily involved in facilitating the overall program during the entire exhibition period and the show's preparations for the additional venues.

118 Ibid. He recalls that he and Van Dijk had little say as regards the actual placement of artworks on display in Berlin, because the institutional hierarchy privileged Wolfger Pöhlmann and Kai Reschke. The cooperation with the in-house curators in Oxford and Odense was much more collaborative, and in Hildesheim, Schmid was completely free to arrange everything by himself.

119 Ibid. He states that the costs for Odense were 72,000 DM, and for Oxford 36,000 DM.

*traditions* to such an extent that they have arrived at an *individually* expressive [art] language.”<sup>120</sup> Apart from this general description, the curators could only specify their field of interest more precisely by defining it as something that the production *should not be*. This classification indicates how fuzzy the terms *Chinese avant-garde* or *modern Chinese art* still were during the making of the exhibition. Basically, it was the exhibition selection itself that determined—at least in Europe—what kind of art and which artists would be considered part of Chinese vanguard art after 1993.

In their draft, Noth and Schmid proposed selecting “around 15 artists” where there is

...noticeable evidence of them not belonging to one of the following categories of contemporary Chinese art:

Works that serve the official art doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party. This concerns artworks in the tradition of socialist realism as well as those that make use of modern ‘Western’ language, the content of which however is marked by political, propaganda statements, as, let’s say, a painting in the Cubist tradition with the declaration ‘Even the girls of national minorities are nowadays dancing to the sound of modern cassette recorders’ [...] ‘Academic’ modern works [...] that transfer [...] stylistic elements of post-romantic Western art without aiming at a [critical] examination of their content [...] and] often have a purely decorative, idyllizing character. Works of traditional Chinese painting, at least those that cultivate traditional motifs and stylistic forms in an unconcerned [literally: ‘unbroken,’ F.K.] manner.<sup>121</sup>

120 Noth, “Skizze,” 1–4, 1–2. “[...] Werke von zeitgenössischen Künstlern aus der VR China vor[z]ustellen, die teils im Exil, teils in China leben [...] und deren Gemeinsamkeit ist], dass sie in Ausdrucksform und Inhalten ihrer Werke unabhängig von der offiziellen chinesischen Kunstdoktrin arbeiten und sich soweit von den Konventionen und Traditionen gelöst haben, dass sie zu einer individuellen ausdrucksstarken Sprache gefunden haben.” English translation and italics in the text by F.K.

121 Ibid.: “[...] Werke, die] erkennbar *nicht* zu folgenden Kategorien der zeitgenössischen chinesischen Kunst gehören: - Werke, die im Dienst der offiziellen Kunstdoktrin der KPCh stehen. Das betrifft sowohl Werke in der Tradition des Sozialistischen Realismus, als auch solche, die sich einer modernen ‘westlichen’ Sprache bedienen, deren Inhalt aber von einer politischen, propagandistischen Aussage geprägt ist, etwa ein Gemälde in kubistischer Tradition mit der Aussage: ‘Auch die Mädchen der nationalen Minderheiten tanzen heute zum Klang moderner Kassettenrekorder’. [...] - ‘Akademische’ moderne Werke. Damit sind gemeint Bilder oder Plastiken, die Stile und Stilelemente aus der nachromantischen westlichen Kunst übernehmen, aber ohne dass eine inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung damit verbunden ist. Solche Bilder, die häufig den Ölmalereiklassen der Kunstakademien entspringen, haben meist einen rein dekorativen, idyllisierenden Charakter. - Werke der traditionellen chinesischen Malerei, zumindest wenn sie die traditionelle Motiv- und Formensprache mehr oder weniger ungebrochen pflegen.” English translation in the text by F.K.

The exhibition draft then continues to specify several crucial problems for the selection process: First, the fact that many of the artists who were considered worthy of being selected were located in different parts of Europe, America, and Australia, having recently left China. While the curators still classified them as "Chinese" artists, it worried them that these recent diasporic art communities were marked by "rivalry and the formation of cliques," a fact that Noth describes as "typical for exiled communities in general, [...] and even more so for Chinese artist groups in exile."<sup>122</sup> Second, the concept contrasts exiled artists with the situation of those young, vanguard artists still living in China, who were considered to work "under strong political pressure, partially secluded, possibly having to fear contact with foreigners."<sup>123</sup> In his article on the making of the exhibition, Schmid recalls the recently graduated artist Fang Lijun as an example of just such strained working conditions. The curators met Fang in Beijing's artist village Xicun at Yuanmingyuan, where he struggled to live as an independent artist rejecting any state-provided employment.<sup>124</sup> And the catalog describes Ni Haifeng as another example of a rather isolated artist, working on the island Zhoushan near Shanghai on a reduced salary after having been dismissed from a position as art teacher in 1989 on the charge of inappropriate political attitudes and style of dress.<sup>125</sup>

In their draft, the curators also anticipated problems in translating the artworks' cultural contexts for European audiences. In a statement that partially contradicted the premise that the curatorial choice of non-official, vanguard, and Western-oriented approaches could enhance the European reception, the organizers expected European/German viewers to appreciate the Chinese artworks at times "mainly in terms of Western influences, [thus...] ignoring the

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122 Ibid., 1–4, 2: English translation in text by F.K. For the German original see note 123. They do not give examples of such cliques, but in the 2008 interview, Schmid mentions Chinese artist groups in New York (Gu Wenda, Hu Bing) and Paris (Huang Yongping, Yang Jiechang, Chen Zhen, Yang Peiming) which they had contacted. The diverging opinions between influential mainland critics such as Li Xianting, who accused the emigrated artists of obviously catering to Western taste, affirm certain tensions. The Paris-based younger art critic Fei Dawei wrote a response to Li defending the stance of these artists, who faced different environments, which caused them to explore different artistic approaches without necessarily forgetting their own cultural background. For a discussion of both positions, see Carol Lu, "Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds," *e-flux*, no. 1 (December 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/102>. Accessed 16.11.2011.

123 Noth, "Skizze," 1–4, 2. "[...] Rivalitäten und Cliquenbildung [...typisch für] Exilgruppen allgemein, [...] und für chinesische Künstlergruppen im Exil noch viel mehr. [...] Chinesische Künstler in China dagegen arbeiten] unter starkem politischen Druck, [...] verstreut, z.T. [...] zurückgezogen [...] und müssen u. U.] Kontakte mit Ausländern fürchten." English translation in the text by F.K.

124 Schmid, "The Dawn," forthcoming.

125 Haus der Kulturen der Welt, *China Avantgarde*, 148–149.

originality that lies in a very Chinese concept of the image.”<sup>126</sup> While these viewers would probably “underestimate such pictures as mere imitations, [... in] other cases the decorative charm of Chinese motifs will be overestimated, despite their conventionality.”<sup>127</sup> A third possible misconception is seen in the fact that when “pictures have a manifest social content, they often enjoy the fame of [expressing political] dissent.”<sup>128</sup>

The curators sought to solve such complex problems by forming a selection committee that “should exclusively consist of non-Chinese members.”<sup>129</sup> They were convinced that this composition would avoid the pressures of influence deriving from the official political side and/or the factionalism of Chinese artist groups. In case of disagreement, the representatives of the HKW, Wolfger Pöhlmann and the director Günter Coenen, as well as the curators of the other museums in Oxford, Odense, and Rotterdam should have the last word.<sup>130</sup> The committee was actually made up of Noth, Van Dijk, Schmid, and Pöhlmann.

According to Schmid, the first call for participants addressed to Chinese artists living in Asia, Europe, and the USA in 1991 resulted in 150 applications.<sup>131</sup> When visiting these artists, the curators gathered additional materials and came to the conclusion that they had to widen their initial focus from the proponents of the '85 New Wave Art Movement and participants in the 1989 *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* exhibition to include new painting trends that had emerged after 1989:

From the '85 New Wave artists they chose, in particular, those who had continued

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126 Noth, “Skizze,” 1–4, 2: “[Europäische Betrachter neigen...] gelegentlich dazu, in solchen Bildern vor allem die westlichen Einflüsse wiederzuerkennen [...], sie übersehen die Originalität, die in einer ganz chinesischen Bildauffassung liegt.” English translation in the text by F.K.

127 Ibid.: “Sie unterschätzen solche Bilder dann als bloße Nachahmungen. In anderen Fällen wird der dekorative Charme chinesischer Bildelemente überschätzt, obwohl sie ganz konventionell sind.” English translation in the text by F.K.

128 Ibid.: “Wenn Bilder einen manifesten sozialen Inhalt haben, genießen sie oft einen Dissidentenbonus.” English translation in the text by F.K.

129 Ibid.: “[Die Kommission sollte...] ausschließlich aus Nicht-Chinesen bestehen, da nur so vermieden werden kann, dass ihre Arbeit vom Druck von Cliquen-, Familien- oder Regionalbeziehungen und -Intrigen beeinträchtigt wird.” English translation in the text by F.K.

130 It is interesting to note that four years earlier, in the *Magiciens* catalog's introduction, Martin's rationale to exclude local curators was that European curators did not know any local curators and it would take too much time and money to establish a joint working agenda. In Berlin, even though the mutual contact and collaboration with Chinese curators was already in place, precisely this prompted the European curators to avoid a joint exhibition project.

131 Schmid, “The Dawn,” forthcoming.

to experiment: Zhang Peili, known for his early video works (fig.4); Geng Jianyi, with a conceptual work documented by photographs and small mixed media sculptures (fig. 5); the autodidact Gu Dexin with his environments made of melted plastic sheets (figs. 6–8); Ni Haifeng, with mixed media installations involving (ink) painted characters and numbers on plastic sacks filled with clothes and hung above a layer of bricks to form a pedestal, and the series of four overwritten photographs of a performance (figs. 9–12), and Wang Guangyi with oil paintings mixing socialist propaganda with iconic, capitalist brands in a pop-art style (fig. 13); the latter style had similarly appeared in the works of the older painter Yu Youhan (as in the background of fig. 9 and 15), who was therefore called the "father of Chinese pop-art" and also included.



*Fig. 4: Exhibition view of four video films by Zhang Peili (b. 1957): 30 x 30, 1988 (upper left), The Chinese Character 'Wei' No. 3, 1991 (upper right), Ci Hai–Standard Pronunciation, 1992 (below), and Homework No. 1, 1992 (center), on display at China Avantgarde at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin 1993. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.*



Fig. 5: Geng Jianyi (b. 1962): *Building No. 5*, nine black/white photographs, each 80 x 60 cm, 1990, detail. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 6: Exhibition view of *China Avantgarde* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin 1993: Gu Dexin (b. 1962): 1993-01-29, in-situ installation, grain and plastic material, 1993 (center); Geng Jianyi (b. 1962): *Building No.5*, nine black/white photographs, 1990; *Building No. 5*, nine black/white photographs, each 80 x 60 cm, 1990 (right). Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 7: Exhibition view of *China Avantgarde* at the Kunsthal Rotterdam 1993: Gu Dexin (b. 1962): 1993-01-29, in-situ installation, grain, plastic material and ladder, 1993 (center); Yu Hong (b. 1966): *Beginners*, oil on canvas, 168 x 167 cm, 1991 (back left); Zhang Peili's (b. 1957) video film *Ci hai-Standard Pronunciation*, 1992, and *The Standard Pronunciation of 1989*, triptych, oil on canvas, each 100 x 80 cm (back center); Fang Lijun's (b. 1963) *Group Two No. 11*, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm and *Group Two No. 3*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 1992 (right). Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 8: Exhibition view of *China Avantgarde* at the Kunsthal Rotterdam in 1993: Gu Dexin (b. 1962): 1993-01-29, in-situ installation, grain, plastic material and ladder, 1993 (center); Fang Lijun's (b. 1963) *Group One No. 5*, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, 1990 (back left). Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 9: Exhibition view of China Avantgarde at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin in 1993: (front) Ni Hai Feng (b. 1964): *Territory*, in-situ installation, mixed media, 1993; (back left) Yu Youhan (b. 1943): *Mao Zedong's Periods of Life*, oil on canvas, 100 x 280 cm, 1990; (back second from left) Yu Youhan: *Chairman Mao in discussion with farmers from Shao Shan*, oil on canvas, 167 x 119 cm, 1991; (opposite side) Yu Youhan: *Renminbi (Peoples Money)*, two pieces out of four, oil on canvas, each 100 x 218 cm, 1988; (back, center, obscured) Yu Youhan: *Mao Zedong with Asian, African and Latin American Friends*, oil on canvas, 100 x 280 cm, 1990. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 10: Exhibition view of China Avantgarde at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin in 1993: (front) Ni Hai Feng (b. 1964): *Territory*, in-situ installation, mixed media, 1993; (left) Ni Hai Feng (b. 1964): *Without Effect*, one of four black/white photograph-collages, 1992; (back center to right) Yan Peiming (b. 1960): *Head*, oil on canvas, 207 x 155 cm, 1992 and *Two Heads*, oil on canvas, 130 x 780 cm, 1990; (right) Yu Youhan's (b. 1943) *Portrait of Mao Zedong*, oil on canvas, 167 x 119 cm, 1992. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 11: Exhibition view of *China Avantgarde* at Brandts Klaedefabrik in Odense in 1993/94 (front) Ni Haiheng (b. 1964): *Territory*, in-situ installation, mixed media, 1993; (back left) Gu Dexin (b. 1962): 1993-01-29, in-situ installation, grain and plastic material, 1993. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.

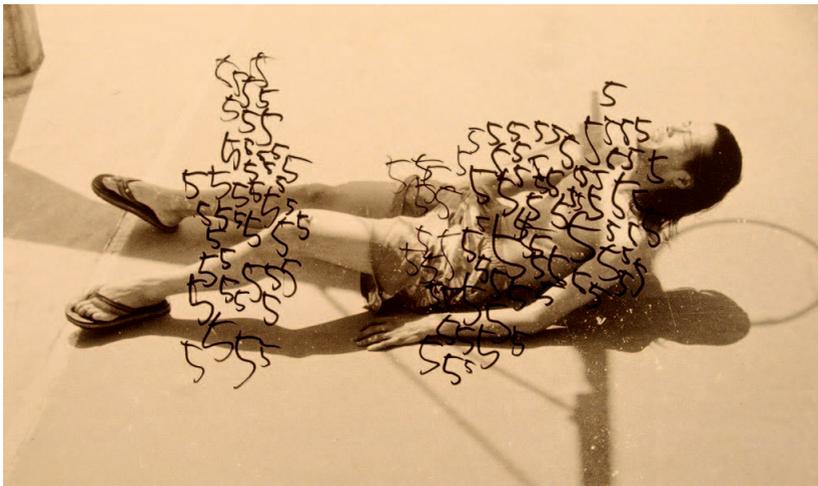


Fig. 12: Ni Haiheng (b. 1964): *Without Effect*, one of four black/white photograph-collages, 1992. Courtesy: Andreas Schmid.

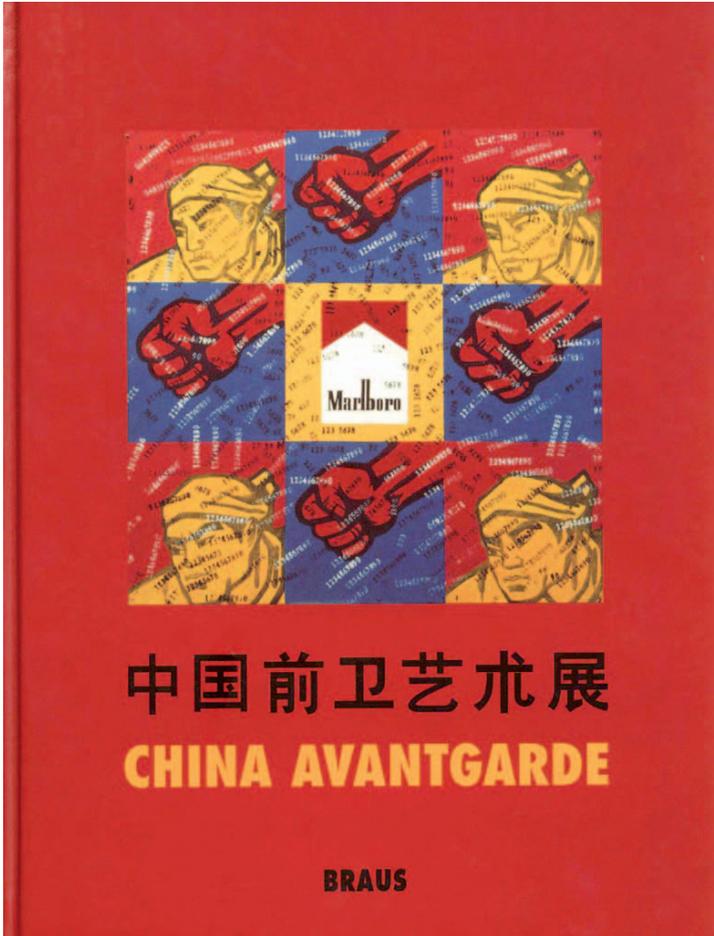


Fig. 13: Cover illustration of the German catalog *China Avantgarde, Edition Braus* (Heidelberg, 1993) featuring Wang Guanyi's (b. 1956), *Great Criticism–Marlboro*, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, 1990

As representatives of the more recent trends and artist groups, the curators selected: Lin Yilin, who worked with bricks reminiscent of the huge construction sites in Guangzhou, where he was active in the artist group “Big Tail Elephant” (fig. 13 and fig. 14); the curators offered a first German debut to the works of recently graduated painters Fang Lijun (fig. 16, 17), Zhao Bandi (fig. 18), Wang Jinsong, and Yu Hong (as in the background of fig. 7)



Fig. 14: Exhibition view of Yin Yilin's (b. 1964) installation *The simple wall*, wall of bricks with plastic sacks filled with water, 1993, and Zhang Peili's (b. 1957) video film *Ci hai—Standard Pronunciation*, 1992, and *The Standard Pronunciation of 1989*, triptych, oil on canvas, each 100 x 80 cm, 1991, on display in *China Avantgarde* at Brandts Klaedefabrik in Odense, Denmark in 1993/94. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 15: Exhibition view of Yin Yilin's (b. 1964) installation *The simple wall*, wall of bricks with plastic sacks filled with water, 1993 (center); Yu Youhan's (b. 1943) *The Life of Mao Zedong*, oil on canvas, 100 x 280 cm, 1990 (right); Fang Lijun's *Group Two No. 2*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 1992 and *Group Two No. 5*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 1992 (back center and right) on display in *China Avantgarde* at the Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim 1994. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 16: Exhibition view of Fang Lijun's (b. 1963) *Group two no. 2*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 1992 (right), and Yan Peiming's (b. 1960) *Head*, oil on canvas, 207 x 155 cm, 1992 (left), on display in *China Avantgarde* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, 1993. Photograph: Courtesy Andreas Schmid.



Fig. 17: Exhibition view of Fang Lijun's (b. 1963) *Group Two No. 2*, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 1992, *Group One No. 5*, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, 1990 (back left); Wang Guangyi's (b. 1956) *Great World–Necessary Violence*, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, and three oil on canvas paintings from the series *Great Criticism*, 150 x 100 cm each, 1990 (back center to right), on display in *China Avantgarde* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Oxford 1993. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.



*Fig. 18: The artists (from left to right) Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1960), Wang Jingsong (b. 1963) and Ni Haifeng (b. 1964) in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin in front of Zhao Bandi's (b. 1966) *Little Zhang*, oil on canvas, 215 x 140 cm, 1992, and left of Yu Youhan's (b. 1943) *Renminbi (Peoples Money)*, two pieces out of four, oil on canvas, each 100 x 218 cm, 1988. Courtesy Andreas Schmid.*

As opposed to many of the '85 New Wave artists, these participants did not reject realist painting idioms. Rather, they infused their figurative portraits of predominantly young people in undefined or private settings, with strongly ironic or humorous depictions that showed them as disillusioned, disinterested, or bored by political matters and bereft of any clear-cut ideological attitude. The only painter who exhibited abstract paintings was the Shanghai-based artist Ding Yi.

Yan Peiming (Dijon), Zhao Jianren (Amsterdam), Huang Yongping (Paris), and Wu Shanzhuan (Hamburg)—the only artists already living outside the People's Republic—were included with works that partly responded in situ to the Berlin institution. For example, Huang mounted papier-mâché made of washed books and journals on nine columns of the HKW entrance hall



*Fig. 19: Huang Yongping (b. 1954) mounting his in-situ installation 9 Pillars for China Avantgarde in the foyer of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, paper pulp attached around nine columns, 1993. Photograph: Andreas Schmid:*



*Fig. 20: Detail of Huang Yongping's (b. 1954) 9 Pillars for China Avantgarde, in-situ installation in the foyer of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, paper pulp attached around nine columns, 1993. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.*

In addition, he displayed a utility sink with books stored underneath, as if to be washed, and the resulting paper pulp in the sinks thereby visualizing the process of discursive and material amalgamation that he undertook.



Fig. 21: (Center) Huang Yongping (b. 1954): installation *Saladette*, mixed media, 1993 and (back) Yan Peiming (b. 1960): *Two Heads*, oil on canvas, 130 x 780 cm, 1990, on display in *China Avantgarde* at the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* Berlin, 1993. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.

Huang’s work can be taken to exemplify the transcultural trajectory of Chinese artists who emigrated to Europe or America and then changed their strategic adaptations of Western artistic concepts and styles and the respective negotiations of their cultural identities. With his work in Berlin, Huang related back to an earlier, groundbreaking installation created after his time as a core member of the Xiamen Dada group, active around 1985/86 in the southern provincial town of Xiamen. At the time, the artist had begun to experiment with aleatoric ways to create artwork, deconstructing the notion of the “masterpiece” and criticizing the institutional aspects of art. This approach was inspired by Western artists and philosophers such as Marcel Duchamp, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and John Cage as well as by Chinese concepts of Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>132</sup> For the installation he used a turning

132 For Huang’s explanation of his artistic concepts at the time, see the catalog of his American solo show: Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chung, eds., *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005). The show’s extensive website also features valuable articles

wheel inscribed with short instructions that he stopped by chance after posing the question, how to unite Western and Chinese artistic traditions: the answer was “wet method.” In consequence, the artist washed Wang Bomin’s *History of Chinese Painting* and Herbert Read’s *A Concise History of Modern Painting* for two minutes and placed the resulting paper pulp on a broken glass plate supported by a wooden box inscribed with the exact date (December 1, 1987) and manner of production. Two years later, Huang exhibited this work at the *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde*, also showing the conceptual piece “How to tear away the National Art Gallery with a rope.”<sup>133</sup> He and his Xiamen Dada friends suggested the displacement of this powerful institution by means of a tricycle that would tear away the building, its entrance columns tied with long ropes to the vehicle.

While Huang continued to use paper pulp created from washed books and journals for his installation “Reptile” at *Magiciens de la terre*, this artwork did not attack the European museum as directly as had his conceptual work the National Art Gallery in Beijing. On the contrary, in the Centre Pompidou (Paris) Huang gave the papier-mâché a more symbolic form alluding to both ancient Chinese grave mounds and to huge turtles, a Chinese emblem for longevity. While thereby expanding the conventional motifs on display in a European modern art museum with forms stemming from a Chinese cultural background—forms that would usually be shown in archeological exhibitions—the artist did not explicitly challenge the French museum. Only in Berlin did Huang again resolve to address the supporting architectural skeleton of the institution, when he chose the nine columns of the HKW foyer as the site for his installation. In this case, he attached the paper pulp at different heights around the columns, as if the amalgamated result of the “washed” cultural discourses in books and magazines had overtaken the modernist inner structure of the institution and were either oddly decorative or threatened to swallow the “bones” of the building. Indeed, the accumulated textual material looked as if stranded by a heavy flood, as if the paper pulp was a trace that remained to indicate the level of feverish cultural interaction that might previously have filled the building.

In 1999, he was invited to install artwork in the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (directed by Harald Szeemann) and once again seemed

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and illustrations of his work, including quotes by Huang, see Hanru Hou, “Change Is the Rule,” 2005, <http://visualarts.walkerart.org/oracles/details.wac?id=2232&title=Writings>. Accessed 21.11.2011.

133 For an illustration and short analysis of this work, see Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*, her fig. 14, unpaginated part of illustrations.

to have refined his critical approach to art institutions. Although he had given up using papier-mâché, Huang again used columns, in this case in the form of large tree trunks that pierced the exhibition pavilion. The Chinese artist turned French citizen "crowned" the classicist architecture and its historical mission of national representation with mythological animals made of metal, a composition that formally alluded to traditional Chinese ridge turrets decorating imperial palaces. In retrospect, Huang's artistic critique of the modern art system and its institutions grew from a more radical, Dadaist attempt in Beijing (1989) to a more synthetic and decisively transcultural approach in 1999. While his critique continued to undermine the nationalist, colonialist, and Eurocentric modern history of the museum, it was constructively fused with elements that point to an entangled or kindred history of art and its institutional aspects.

The other emigrated artists who exhibited at *China Avantgarde* also elaborated on issues of their cultural and socio-political backgrounds, as exemplified by Yan Peiming's huge black-and-white oil portrait of Mao Zedong conducted with wide, expressive brush strokes (left in the background of fig. 10). While Yan applied the same style, colors, and portrait-genre to all his works, the choice of Mao Zedong as subject matter seemed a conscious effort to deal with the power of this political figure and the iconic qualities that Mao-portraits had acquired during the previous decades of visual propaganda in China. However, by treating the portrait of the dictator in the same manner as the other, anonymous heads that he painted (fig. 9, fig. 15, and fig 20), Yan seems to have found a way to deconstruct and lay bare the effects of monumental power and acts of veneration that previous depictions of the "Great Leader" were able to instill and provoke. Another example of critical transcultural engagement, albeit less dedicated to questioning inherited art forms such as oil painting or overwhelming motifs such as Mao Zedong, was Wu Shanzhuan's conceptual performance "Red Humour International." He documented his various attempts to work as a foreign art student on a tourist visa in Germany, including at the Kassel Documenta IX in 1992. During the Berlin exhibition he was hired to work in the HKW's cafeteria and exhibited the documents that proved his employment and foreign resident status.



*Fig. 22: Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1960) in front of his conceptual work including the contract for the Laborer of Berlin, 1993, hired by the canteen in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin during the exhibition China Avantgarde. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.*

According to the biographies in the Berlin catalog, half of the sixteen participants had studied art in Hangzhou, another quarter in Beijing, two in Shanghai, one in Guangzhou, and one in Dijon. Apart from the three recently emigrated artists and Yan Peiming, who had already left China in 1981, the remaining three-quarters of exhibiting artists worked in Beijing (six artists), in Shanghai (two), and one each in Guangzhou, Wuhan, Hangzhou, and Zhoushan. These numbers indicate that the curators were able to realize their goal of organizing an exhibition that predominantly featured recent works by artists from the People's Republic. And the regional distribution of participants not only reflects the fact that non-official art approaches were products of the biggest Chinese urban centers and the hosting art academies, but also indicates the importance of the curators' personal networks. While Schmid's studies in Hangzhou helped to recruit many artists with this academic affiliation, Van Dijk's residence in Beijing was the background for contacting the majority of artists who worked in the capital. In an effort to expand this limited regional scope and provide a broadened panorama, the curators included short biographies and illustrations of the works of forty-four additional artists in the catalog. In the catalog's appendix, the sixty featured artists are divided into two

separate lists, ordered according to their place of study, current residence, and year of birth. This classification illustrates that the participants had recently split into a majority of thirty-three artists living abroad and a minority of twenty-seven residing in China.<sup>134</sup> Half of the exhibiting artists belonged to the generation born before 1960; the other half was born between 1960 and 1966. The oldest exhibiting artist was Yu Youhan (b. 1943), while the youngest participant was Yu Hong (b. 1966). Given that this span of time had witnessed several marked changes in the Chinese art educational system, in the official doctrines regarding the arts, and in divergent working conditions—and included the harsh decade of the Cultural Revolution—the catalog makes clear that artists with differing experiences, formative backgrounds, and a variety of heterogeneous approaches began to reconfigure modern art after 1979. Thus the catalog provided broader background information, which helped to further contextualize the Berlin selection and vanguard positions in light of their historical, social, and cultural aspects.

### Exhibited Artworks

Of the three Chinese artists who took part in *Magiciens de la terre*, Huang Yongping and Gu Dexin showed installation works and only Yang Jiechang presented ink paintings on paper at the Paris exhibition in 1989.<sup>135</sup> In *China Avantgarde* installations still played an important role, with six of the sixteen artists presenting large mixed media arrangements that respected and adapted to the on-site architecture, including one set of video works by Zhang Peili that ran on four television monitors (fig. 3).<sup>136</sup> Although the installations

134 14 of the emigrated artists lived in the USA (nine in New York, two in Michigan, one in San Francisco, one in Vermillion, and one without detailed location); seven in Germany (five in Berlin, one in Düsseldorf, one in Hamburg); six in France (three in Paris, two in Dijon, one in Aix-en-Provence). 14 of the artists residing in China lived in Beijing, four in Guangzhou, three in Shanghai, two in Hangzhou, two in Nanjing, one in Wuhan, and one in Zhoushan.

135 See note 50.

136 Exhibition catalogs play an important role in this transfer process. On the one hand they inform curators about works already presented in former exhibitions, on the other hand different catalogs sometimes reproduce the same images in order to portray the work of an artist or include photographs of displays that the actual exhibition catalog could not yet include because it was printed in advance. For example, the *China Avantgarde* catalog uses a photograph of Gu Dexin's installation made of plastic sheets in 1984 that was already included in the *Magiciens* catalog, albeit as a blown-up and mirror-inverted detail. The *China Avantgarde* catalog also presented a photograph of Huang Yongping's installation "Reptiles" (1989), realized for *Magiciens* but not yet illustrated in its catalog. And *China Avantgarde* also reused the same photograph of Huang's "'A History of Chinese Art' and 'Short History of Modern Art' after washing the books two minutes in a washing machine" (1987) that had appeared in the catalog for Beijing's *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde*.

were prominently placed in the middle of the exhibition halls and given proportionally more space in the catalog than in the exhibition itself, they were outweighed by fifty-nine paintings (fig. 9, fig. 10, figs. 15–18 and fig. 21). The imbalance between these different art forms closely mirrored the ratio of paintings to installations exhibited in Beijing's *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan. China/Avant-Garde* (1989)<sup>137</sup> and spoke to the fact that painting was still the preferred medium of many Chinese artists, especially those of the youngest generation.<sup>138</sup>

A characteristic feature of the European reception of *China Avantgarde* was the heightened media attention given to paintings (as opposed to installation works), many being reproduced in articles that reviewed the Berlin exhibition. Journalists most frequently illustrated the paintings of Fang Lijun, Yu Youhan, Yu Hong, and Yan Peiming with motifs that depicted easily distinguishable Chinese facial features and political icons such as Mao Zedong. Ironically, the installation work—considered the most avant-garde art form in China and certain to have been censored in official Chinese venues and media coverage—did not receive much attention in Europe.<sup>139</sup> Viewers approached it as they would the mixed media installations of Western contemporary artists and found it difficult to associate any specific cultural context to these Chinese works. On the other hand, the narrative aspects of figurative painting were not only easier to relate to—given the comparison with earlier European painting styles—but the academic realist training of the Chinese artists was familiar to German art lovers, who were acquainted with its prominence in the socialist artistic production of the former GDR. Consequently, these viewing experiences provided an easily accessible context from which to evaluate the stylistic, technical, and motif-related similarities and differences of the Chinese artworks on display.

Another reason why painting became a particularly influential selection criterion for future European and American exhibitions is the preference shown by the art market. Andreas Schmid recalls that the prominent German collector Peter Ludwig—who specialized in American pop art and also collected emerging pop painters from the former USSR—became interested

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137 Cf. note 50.

138 In fact, painting dominates the exhibition accounting for two-thirds of exhibited works (and 45% of the artworks illustrated in the catalog). Performances (documented with photographs) and installations account for only one-seventh and one-eighth of the exhibited works, respectively. However, installations appear much more prominently in the catalog (29% of all illustrated works) than in the actual exhibition, while photography is less prominently featured (at only 10%).

139 I thank the HKW for providing me with a copy of the press clippings, comprising more than 100 pages, on which this observation is based.

in Chinese art as a result of the Berlin exhibition, buying two paintings by Fang Lijun.<sup>140</sup> Apparently Fang’s work appealed to the collector not only because painting was (and still is) one of the most marketable art forms—an established commodity that is easier to transport, store, preserve, and hang than most installation work—but also because the artist’s academic training assured technical quality. In addition, the figurative realist style together with Fang’s depiction of smirking, bald-headed men, who resembled cloned and exaggerated alter egos of the artist himself (fig. 16 and fig. 23), seemed to present a radically altered vision of Chinese modern life, one that stood in stark contrast to the young, faithful Maoist heroes that German viewers had come to associate with official Chinese modern art.



Fig 23: View of Fang Lijun’s (b. 1963) *Group One No. 5*, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, 1990, in front of his studio at Yuanmingyuan, Beijing, photographed in 1991. Photograph: Andreas Schmid.

140 Schmid, interview conducted by Koch, January 8, 2008. Schmid was approached through the gallery owner Krings, who consulted the collector. After showing Krings the exhibition, Schmid was invited to Cologne to give Ludwig a presentation, after which the collector decided to buy two pictures by Fang Lijun. The HKW website states that one of the paintings sold for 12,000 DM, mentioning that twelve years later works of comparable size were already sold for 180,000 USD at a Sotheby’s auction in Hong Kong, see: <http://www.hkw.de/de/hkw/gebauede/50/1993.php>. Accessed 17.12.2011.

## The Catalog's Cover

The considerable marketability of these new trends in Chinese painting is further exemplified by the cover of the exhibition catalog (fig. 13): it features an oil painting by Wang Guangyi with the title "Great Criticism–Marlboro" (1990). The painting's square format is composed of nine smaller square images that alternate between the detail of a fierce-looking peasant's head and his downward-striking fist. This repetitive pattern is interrupted by the logo of the Marlboro Cigarette Company, located in the center of the piece. While the grim face of the man and his fist are reminiscent of Chinese revolutionary propaganda posters, seemingly objecting to the iconic capitalist brand in the middle of the picture, long sequences of printed numbers in black and white irregularly cover the whole pictorial surface, as if to immerse both the human conviction and the advertisement for the cigarettes in the same indifferent sphere of leveling numbers and calculations. The cigarette company had no reservations about Wang's playful and ironic juxtaposition of communist and capitalist motifs: as the catalog's imprint reveals, the company was itself the owner of the piece. According to the catalog's appendix, the work was not exhibited, and yet it featured on the cover and again within the volume. This decision to advertise the much broader and varied content of the exhibition with an undisplayed painting that stressed the hybrid conjunction of Chinese propaganda motifs and emblems of Western consumerism, demonstrates the economic and institutional constraints that the exhibition faced. The cover image obviously references the Marlboro Company, which is acknowledged as a sponsor of the exhibition, but it also illustrates that the artists as well as the curators relied on conventional market mechanisms in order to draw attention to their projects. Placing an installation on the cover would not have yielded any direct association with Western stereotypes or images of "China," nor stirred art-historical or political connotations referring to the exhibition's title term, *Avantgarde*.

While it would have been equally possible to market the exhibiting artist Zhang Peili as China's first video artist or Huang Yongping and his Xiamen Dada group as representative of early Chinese concept art and *institutional critique*, it was painters like Fang Lijun and Wang Guangyi who would soon be equated internationally with new Chinese art. Even though the Berlin curators gave great emphasis to installation works in the actual display, the environment of reception that included art market preferences seemed to determine the future tendency of giving central visibility to painters.

## The Catalog’s Layout and Narratives

Important Chinese agents—who had a huge impact on how the European audience evaluated the artwork on display—are among the nine Chinese authors of the catalog’s sixteen essays, and include the prominent critics Li Xianting and Zheng Shengtian, the latter a professor of painting at the Hangzhou Academy. Their narratives cover topics that include: the chronological development of modern Chinese art from 1979 to 1993, modernist art since the 1920s, the role of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Chinese art history, art criticism, and traditional aesthetic concepts. The catalog’s seven texts that focus on fine arts are completed by nine essays on Chinese modern music, literature, theatre, film, photography, architecture, and urban and popular culture.<sup>141</sup>

The differing agendas of these European and Chinese authors successfully carved out a discursive space that established contemporary Chinese art as the most important, prolific, and promising part of all artistic production in China. While the European authors envisaged their role as that of mediating agents who would bring back into view the socio-political and historical conditions that fell out of Western sight during the Cold War era, the Chinese writers used the European exhibition and catalog as a powerful platform that allowed them to circumvent the official, local discourse and foster counter-narratives backed by international reception. In keeping with these aims, the articles by Li Xianting and Zheng Shengtian detail the chronological development of experimental and semi-official artistic events since 1979. They trace the roots of the new stylistic and conceptual approaches of the youngest generation of Chinese artists as far back as the first modernist artistic production in 1920s and 30s China. While they take into account the decisive Maoist art doctrine and the institutional context of Chinese art academies and museums, they stress the independent stance of vanguard artists and critics since the 1980s, and argue that Chinese artists developed their own ideas rather than simply creating a derivative version of Western modernism.

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141 Table of contents: “Beijing 1979–1992: frequent changes of scene” (Jochen Noth); “The fine arts after the Cultural Revolution: stylistic development and cultural debate” (Hans van Dijk, Andreas Schmid); “An introduction to the history of modern Chinese art” (Li Xianting); “The precursors of modern Chinese art” (Lang Shaojun); “Aesthetics, art history and contemporary art in China” (Pi Daojian); “Modern Chinese art and the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou” (Zheng Shengtian); “The Dao in modern Chinese art” (Liu Weijian); “The small freedom of the market: Chinese cinema during the period of reform” (Hsien-Chen Chang); “How do you recognize reality? Issues in contemporary Chinese literature” (Michael Kahn-Ackermann); “Chinese hermetic lyric poetry” (Sabine Peschel); “Modern Chinese lyric poetry” (Yan Li); “The Chinese spoken theatre” (Antje Budde); “Beijing’s experimental theatre” (Meng Jinghui); “Chinese music in the 1980s: the aesthetics of eclecticism” (Barbara Mittler); “Cui Jian and the birth of Chinese rock music” (Liang Heping, Ulrike Stobbe); “Contemporary Chinese photography from a ‘correct’ to a ‘fragmentary’ world-view” (André Kunz).

The catalog's chronological exhibition overview is the most important instrument with which to present a compelling narrative of experimental Chinese approaches that constitute a substantial artistic movement in their own right. The chronology demonstrates to foreign and Chinese readers that this new artistic movement had already realized more than eighty exhibitions in official and non-official venues situated in China and abroad: it begins in 1979 with the Beijing exhibitions of the "Stars" (Xingxing huahui, 星星画会) and the "No Name Group" (Wuming huahui, 无名画会) and ends in 1992 with recent shows in Beijing and Tokyo. While the information effectively communicates both the vibrancy of the Chinese modern art scene during the 1980s (with the peak of activity from 1985 to 1987) and the growing number of exhibitions taking place outside China after 1990, it does not include all official art exhibitions opened in China during this period; it therefore leaves unclear which proportion of "mainstream" exhibition activity these "vanguard" events actually represented.

While Western art historians and exhibition makers used this chronological overview and an avant-garde focus to explore the uncharted art-historical space of China, Chinese proponents could thereby bridge the lack of adequate, post-1989 platforms for their historiographic claims. The latter more or less openly criticized official notions of art, and used the Western catalog as an alternative site to establish a counter-discourse; a site where their negotiation of modernity in art and their account of the function of art might gain public recognition, albeit to a great extent still invisible to Chinese audiences. They assumed that their narratives once published internationally would eventually feed back into Chinese publications and journals.

For different reasons, both sides had a strong interest in telling the story of the Chinese avant-garde art movement as one that began in 1979, as a rupture with the artistic production under Maoist cultural politics. In the framework of the Eurocentric master narrative of modernism, it appeared logical and compelling to argue that the new Chinese approaches were mainly nourished by renewed contact with Western art trends made possible by the political reforms of Deng Xiaoping; hence, implicitly retaining the claim that Western modern art discourse and practice were decisive in the formation of new Chinese art. And for the Chinese art critics it was essential to stress a radical break with former art forms and practices, and argue in favor of a post-revolutionary perspective that looked to the West in order to undermine the dominant power over artistic production exerted by the Party; in so doing they secured their own position as independent voices and makers of the avant-garde. Neither side had an interest in acknowledging and assessing the ambivalent reality wherein many artists participated in official activities as well as independent exhibitions.

Instead, most European and Chinese observers argued in favor of a clear-cut distinction between vanguard, experimental approaches and politically affirmative, official stances.

### Preliminary Conclusions

The early exhibition *China Avantgarde*, together with its Hong Kong competitor *China's New Art, Post-1989* and the Venice Biennale of the same year (1993) undoubtedly shaped a standard perspective on contemporary Chinese art, which continues to influence European and American audiences to this day. Even though the political overtones in the Western reception of contemporary Chinese art have changed, they have not yet disappeared. It is now the image of China as a rising global player—the powerful organizer of the 2008 Olympic Games and an entity that questions the Western concept of human rights and “eats up” worldwide oil resources—which continues to dominate Western news and consequently influences the reception of Chinese art in Europe and America. And exhibition practice has also gone global: Although 1993 was a climactic moment that introduced Chinese group exhibitions in the West, this type of panoramic approach, which explains Chinese art in cultural and socio-political terms, still prevails at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In fact, it is even fostered by the Chinese government’s historical decision to invest in contemporary art shows as an instrument of foreign politics: the exhibitions *Living in Time* (Berlin, 2001) and *Alors, la Chine?* (Paris, 2003) were created through official cooperation between the respective governments.

Similarly, it is noteworthy that although curators, art critics, collectors, and gallery agents have multiplied, there is still a strong tendency to rely on the same powerful local mediators and renowned “cultural brokers” when staging an international show of contemporary Chinese art: Li Xianting was once again asked to write for the *Mahjong* catalog in Bern (2005) and Chang Tsong-zung, the initiator of the Hong Kong exhibition, was chosen to join the curatorial team of the *International Guangzhou Triennial: Farewell to Post-Colonialism* in fall 2008; Zheng Shengtian has become the editor of the critical magazine *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, based in Canada and Taiwan, and the HKW staged further exhibitions dedicated to contemporary art from China and other East Asian countries.<sup>142</sup>

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142 For example: *China—Between Past and Future* curated by Wu Hung (March 24–May 14, 2006), included a program of Chinese photography, opera, music, films, lectures, and a symposium; and *Re-imagining Asia. A Thousand Years of Separation* curated by Wu Hung and Shaheen Merali (March 13–May 18, 2008).

And equally significant is that although the circle of Chinese artists who exhibit internationally has grown continuously, twenty-nine of the 110 artists in the Swiss exhibition *Mahjong*, which toured Germany, Austria, and the USA from 2005 to 2007, are the same as twelve years ago. If one considers only the one-third of *Mahjong* participants who were born prior to 1970,<sup>143</sup> then 30% of them were already presented in 1993. And taking Gao Minglu's 2005 publication *The Portraits of 100 Most Influential Artists in Contemporary Chinese Art*<sup>144</sup> as another reference point, forty-five of these one hundred artists were already presented in one or more of the three 1993 exhibition catalogs (even if their work was not exhibited). This indicates the canonizing power of these early exhibitions and exhibition makers, providing most of their participants with a stepping stone to an international career.

Lastly, although the subject matter of contemporary Chinese art has changed, it still remains internationally renowned for figurative painting, replete with ironic and political allusions. And Chinese performance art, which began to grow in the late 1990s, is still largely mediated through photographs or video films, scarcely staged directly in the West and mostly underrepresented in Western group and panorama exhibitions. However, the amount of installation art from the People's Republic has increased enormously and has developed into a special subtype: huge site-specific or event-related commissioned works have been installed in European or North American art institutions and biennials, often benefitting from cheap labor and the low price of art materials in China. Such productions cater to the ongoing Western desire for emblematic works that represent the power of China as a rising market force.

Cai Guoqiang's award-winning contribution to the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999, "Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard,"<sup>145</sup> or his project "Closing

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143 Since the generation born after 1970 was too young to have participated in the exhibitions of 1993.

144 Gao Minglu, *The Portraits of 100 Most Influential Artists in Contemporary Art* (Wuhan: Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005).

145 See five illustrations of the large-scale installation on the artist's homepage: <http://www.caiguoqiang.com/shell.php?sid=6&pid=33>. Accessed 22.11.2011. The text specifies the artwork as: "108 life-sized sculptures created on site by Long Xu Li and nine guest artisan sculptors, 60 tons of clay, wire and wood armature, and other props and tools for sculpture, four spinning night lamps, facsimiles photocopies of documents and photographs related to Rent Collection Courtyard (dated 1965)." For a detailed contextualization of this work, see Britta Erickson, "An 'Other' Point of View: Cai Guoqiang Takes 'The Rent Collection Courtyard' from Cultural Revolution Model Sculpture to Winner of the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale International Award," *Chinese-art.com* 2, no. 1 (1999): <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Other/other2.htm>. Accessed 12.12.2011. The ensuing, heated Chinese debate on Cai's "copy-right infringement" is mentioned

Rainbow: Fireworks Project for Closing Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games<sup>146</sup> are only two of the most obvious and sometimes hotly debated examples. Similarly popular events were Ai Weiwei's two contributions to Kassel's *Documenta 12* in 2007: "Template," an outdoor construction assembled from numerous "recycled" traditional Chinese wooden doors and windows; and "Fairytale,"<sup>147</sup> a project that brought 1001 Chinese to live in Kassel during the event and document their personal experiences with cameras; as well as his recent large-scale installation, "Sunflower Seeds,"<sup>148</sup> presented at the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in London (2010).

In light of these developments, critics are skeptical about the tendency of the "Chinese avant-garde's" mature proponents to overly monumentalize and exploit the spectacular function of art. This concern demonstrates just how much and how quickly Chinese artists have become part of the institutional and economic mechanisms that function within the global mainstream, and which bridge previous asymmetries that existed between the Chinese and Western art worlds.<sup>149</sup> This mutual rapprochement, adaptation, and dialogue led to what has recently been called "the global contemporary,"<sup>150</sup> significantly omitting the lingering question of the avant-

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in the catalog: Esther Schlicht and Max Hollein, eds., *Art for the Millions. 100 Sculptures from the Mao* (Frankfurt/München: Schirn Kunsthalle/Hirmer, 2009), 149–196. This catalog includes an essay by Christof Büttner on the "Transformations of a Work of Art. 'Rent Collection Courtyard,' 1965–2009," 20–48, that explores the historical background of the original work, on which Cai's restaging is based, and an essay by Martina Köppel-Yang reflecting on Cai's references, "Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard. Commentaries on and Projections of a Utopia," 162–169.

146 See two illustrations on the artist's homepage: <http://www.caiguogiang.com/shell.php?sid=6&pid=33>. Accessed 12.12.2011. See also Brianne Cohen, "Cai Guo-Qiang's Explosion Events as Performances of Planetarity?," in Koch et al., *Negotiating Difference* (forthcoming, 2012).

147 Salome Schnetz, ed., *Ai Weiwei: Fairytale. A Reader*. (New York: JRP/Ringier, 2011). Among others, the volume offers texts by Roger M. Buerger (the curator of *Documenta 12*) and Ai Weiwei himself.

148 Juliet Bingham, ed., *Ai Weiwei. Sunflower Seeds* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010).

149 See for example the conscious ambivalence with which some critics received Ai Weiwei's "Sunflower Seeds": Kristina Kleutghen, "Editor's review: Ai Weiwei 艾未未, Sunflower Seeds (2010). Unilever Installation, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, 12 October 2010–2 May 2011," *Modern Art Asia*, no. 5 (November 2010): 1–3, <http://modernartasia.com/Kleutghen%20Ai%20Weiwei.pdf>, accessed 12.12.2011; and Paul Gladston, "At an Oblique and Markedly Penumbra Remove: A Critical Review of Ai Weiwei's Installation 'Sunflower Seeds' at Tate Modern Turbine Hall," *Randian*, December 24, 2010: [www.randian-online.com/en/reviews/reviews-overview/sunflower-seeds-gladston.html](http://www.randian-online.com/en/reviews/reviews-overview/sunflower-seeds-gladston.html). Accessed 12.12.2011.

150 See the exhibition: *The global contemporary. Art worlds after 1989* (September 17, 2011–February 5, 2012), <http://www.global-contemporary.de/en>, accessed November 22, 2011, curated

garde. Yet the example of Ai's recent imprisonment by Chinese officials on dubious, evidently politically-motivated charges demonstrates that neither does the historical Western distinction between an aesthetic and a political avant-garde seem applicable, nor do we see a repetition of the multifaceted tensions that surrounded this dichotomy in Beijing (1989) or Berlin (1993). Rather, it would seem that the previous "multi-centered avant-gardism," marked by various conceptual, temporal, and spatial imbalances and divergences has arrived in the "global village." When coining the term "global village" in reference to a post-literate electronic age, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan did not envision a peaceful, culturally homogeneous, pastoral idyll, but rightly foresaw the potential for great disagreement, discontinuity, and contradicting diversification resulting from a virtually shrinking globe.<sup>151</sup> In the last three decades, the intensified relationships, multiple flows, and boosted circulation of images and their makers and brokers—all members of a transcultural community that has been drastically and abruptly reconfigured by media-technological and economic changes—raise the likelihood that ongoing negotiations of cultural differences and identities will no longer keep to the neat, aesthetic framework of the museum, nor be easily dismissed as just another political scandal or violation of artistic freedom.

After this retrospective evaluation of the significant, medium-term influences that exhibitions provided with their categorizations, selections, agents, and institutions—forming and informing early attempts to put Chinese contemporary artworks on display for Western audiences—we should carefully revisit current global displays and ask how they present Chinese art, enhancing certain images of "China" and obscuring others.

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by Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg at the Museum of the School of New Media (ZKM) Karlsruhe, Germany; and related publications of the consulting research project "Global Art and the Museum," which has published, among other texts, Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *The global art world. Audiences, markets, and museums* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009).

151 Gerald Emmanuel Stearn, *McLuhan Hot & Cool* (Penguin Books, 1968), 137, 279, 280, and 314. In the 1960s, McLuhan detailed his vision of the "global village"—the world in the post-literate electronic age—with remarkable prescience, 280: "The more you create village conditions, the more discontinuity and division and diversity. The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquility were the properties of the global village [...]. The tribal-global village is far more divisive—full of fighting—than any nationalism ever was. Village is fission, not fusion, in depth. People leave small towns to *avoid* involvement [...]. The village is not the place to find ideal peace and harmony. Exact opposite. Nationalism came out of print and provided an extraordinary relief from global village conditions. I don't *approve* of the global village. I say we live in it."