

# To enter art history – reading and writing art history in China during the reform era

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Figure 1 Lin Jiahua, *To Enter Art History - Slideshow Activity*, 1988, Courtesy of the artist and the Fei Dawei Archive held at the Asia Art Archive.

In November 1988, Lin Jiahua, Chinese artist and member of the Xiamen Dada group, organized the event, *To Enter Art History – Slideshow Activity (Jinru yishushi – huandeng huodong)* (figure 1) in Xiamen, China. Documentary photographs of the event capture slide images of masterpieces from the canon of Western art projected onto the naked body of the artist. In one image, the face of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is distorted along the curves of the artist's posterior. In another, the

profile of the artist is covered over by the *Mona Lisa*, her eyes, nose and mouth masking the artist's cheek. The artist's chest provides a screen on which the genitals and legs of Michelangelo's *David* are projected, while a close up of the artist's face is lost under the hard lines and emphasised cross-hatching of Picasso's rendering of prostitutes in *Demaiselles D'Avignon*. In the photographs documenting the event, the body of the artist and the images projected from the slide are flattened into a single hybrid image. As the artist physically enters into the frame of a slide and 'enters' art history, the work questions the relationship between the body of Chinese artists and Western art historical masterpieces.

The slideshow played an active role in shaping the presentation of both Chinese and foreign art history during the 1980s. As Chinese artists and critics began making government funded, educational trips abroad, the slide became a medium of exchange between contemporary art practices in China and Western art. Returning from a government sponsored study trip in Minnesota, Zheng Shengtian, a professor at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, brought back thousands of slides taken in North American and European art museums.<sup>1</sup> In 1986, Fei Dawei, an art history professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, travelled to Paris with more than a thousand slides of works by '85 New Wave artists to use when giving lectures about contemporary Chinese art.<sup>2</sup> However, in addition to acting as a means to share art practices transnationally, the slideshow played an integral role in the construction of a history of contemporary art practices in China, particularly in documenting and presenting the '85 New Wave Movement to domestic audiences. The slideshow acted as the format for the first national

<sup>1</sup> In September 1981, Zheng Shengtian became the first art education to officially travel to the United States to teach as a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota with the intention of returning to his post at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts as an expert in Western art. When he returned to China in 1983, he had amassed a collection of thousands of slides taken during his trips to museums in the United States, Canada, Mexico and twelve European countries. It was the 'the largest collection of international art' in China of the time, and Zheng was invited to art academies around China to give talks about Western art. From 'Interview Transcript: Zheng Shengtian' 31 Oct 2009 [http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\_detail.aspx?interview\_id=45 accessed 19.05.2014]. See also Zheng Shengtian, "New Journey to the West" in Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching, ed., *ARTiculations: Undefined Chinese Contemporary Art*, Princeton, NJ: P.Y. and Kinnsay U. Tang Center for East Asian Art, 2010; and also 'Chinese Artist Takes in Western Art at U' *Skyway News*, Minneapolis, 4 Nov 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Fei Dawei traveled to France with 1,200 slides of Chinese art. The slides were mainly of the '85 New Wave, taken in 1985 and shown at the Zhuhai conference, but he also included about 100 slides of official art in order to show a comparison between the unofficial art activities of the New Wave and official art in China. See Fei Dawei interview for the Asia Art Archive's project, 'Documents of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990' [http://www.china1980s.org/global/liquidplayer.aspx?url=../files/interview/fei-daweienglish\_201011110158275392.flv accessed 07.05.2014].

presentation of recent art practices in China and was also as the medium used to select participants for the first national exhibition, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, held in 1989. In August 1986, the ‘Grand Slideshow and Symposium on the Art Trends of ‘85’ (*‘85 Meishu sichao faxing huandeng zhanlan lilun yantaohui*) provided a public, collective viewing experience of recent art practices in China, and is largely considered to have been the initial stimulus for the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition.<sup>3</sup> The ‘Grand Slideshow’ afforded Chinese artists and critics the chance to look at contemporary art practices in China as a whole and emphasised their desire to write a new history of Chinese art. The slide offered a cheap, portable medium to ‘exhibit’ contemporary artworks without the expense of organising a large-scale national exhibition. However, artists and critics at the event acknowledged the limitations of viewing artworks through slides and thus proposed a national exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Preparations for the national exhibition continued at the ‘88 Symposium on the Creation of Chinese Modern Art’ (*‘88 Zhongguo xiandai yishu chuangzuo yantaohui*) held at Huangshan.<sup>5</sup> For the Huangshan Conference, artists throughout China again submitted slides of their work; however, these were used to select artists and artworks that would be included in the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. Even at the latter exhibition, a collection of slides was available for sale.

*To Enter Art History*, organised concurrently with the Huangshan Conference, draws out questions about the relationship between the canon of Western art history and contemporary art practices in China. At the same time, Chinese artists and critics attempted to write a history of the development of Chinese art after the Cultural Revolution.<sup>6</sup> However, this history was intimately tied

<sup>3</sup> The ‘Grand Slideshow and Symposium of Art Trends of ‘85’ was held in Zhuhai from 15-19 August, 1986. It was organized by the Painting Institute of Zhuhai and the arts newspaper, *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*). Wang Guangyi acted as the main organiser. Responding to an open call, Chinese artists submitted more than 1,200 slides, from which 342 slides were selected and presented at the conference. During the symposium, several people proposed organising a national exhibition of recent art practices after acknowledging some of the limitations of showing slide images as opposed to real artworks. See Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011; Zhou Yan, ‘Background Material on the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*’ in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 114-115; Gao Minglu, ed., *The ‘85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, Vol. 2, Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008; ‘The Artworks of the Grand Slideshow of Art Trends of ‘85’, *Meishu*, 1986.11; and ‘The Grand Slideshow of Young Art Trends of ‘85 at the Zhuhai Symposium’, *Zhongguo meishubao*, no. 38, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Zhou Yan, ‘Background Material on the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*’ in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Zhuan Huang, ‘An Antithesis to Conceptualism: On Zhang Peili’, *Yishu*, vol. 10, no. 6, November/December 2011, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Wu Hung has argued that ‘an important characteristic of the ‘85 New Wave Art Movement

to the history of modern art in the West. Chinese critics were preoccupied with the ‘impact’ (*chongji*) of Western modern art on recent art practices in China. This impact was debated in the pages of art magazines as well as at conferences and symposia throughout China.<sup>7</sup> In his talk at ‘The Grand Slideshow,’ invited speaker Gao Minglu not only questioned what the standards and principles of Modern art in China should be, but furthermore asked whether or not modern Chinese art should be measured against Western modern art.<sup>8</sup> Gao Minglu’s comments underscore the preoccupation of Chinese critics with the ‘impact’ (*chongji*) Western modern art had on recent art practices in China. Lin Jiahua’s physical entrance into the canon of Western art history parodies these discussions, but more importantly, poses the question: why should Chinese artists enter into an art history that is already defined by the canon of Western art?

In this paper, I analyse how Western art history was imported, translated and negotiated in China during the Reform Era. I argue that *To Enter Art History* anticipates a change in the relationship between Western art history and contemporary Chinese art practice from the translation and appropriation of Western modern art in the 1980s to the participation of Chinese artists within the emergent international structure of contemporary art of the 1990s. This shift brought about a fundamental change as to how Chinese artists and critics not only interpreted and used Western art history but also how they conceptualised their relationship to it. Despite the significant impact that the importation of Western texts had on the development of experimental art practices in Reform Era China,<sup>9</sup> there has been little scholarship on the actual processes of circulation, translation and interpretation of those texts and their role in providing the foundation for the internationalisation of Chinese art practice in the 1990s.

The importation of foreign art history and the subsequent writing of art history in China form part of the network of global circulation. Benjamin Lee and

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was the self-awareness and sense of urgency in regards to the composition of its own history. Even as this avant-garde movement began to unfold, its organizers and key participants were beginning to rapidly accumulate materials and to compose the history of this movement.’ Wu Hung, ‘Wang Guangyi in the 1980s and Chinese Contemporary Art History Composition - A Proposal on Methodology’ in Huang Zhuan, ed., *Thing-In-Itself: Utopia, Pop and Personal Theology*, Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing House, 2012, 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> The first conference of this sort was the National Art Theory Conference held in Yantai in July 1986, entitled ‘Chinese Art under the Impact of Western Culture’ (*Xifang wenhua chongji xia de Zhongguo meishu*).

<sup>8</sup> ‘85 Art Trends’ Grand Slideshow Exhibition - Collecting Works Notice’ in Gao Minglu, ed., *The ‘85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, Vol. 2, Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008, 74.

<sup>9</sup> See Gao Minglu’s *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art*, Wu Hung’s *Making History* and the Asia Art Archive’s project, ‘Documents of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990’ <http://www.china1980s.org/en/Default.aspx> (accessed 07.05.2014).

Edward Li Puma argue that the global circulation of things, texts and goods is not only an economic process but also a cultural one.<sup>10</sup> Studies of global circulation must consider not only economic modes of value exchange but also cultural modes of value exchange, thus the analysis of value exchange must be expanded to cultural objects in order to understand how ‘meaning circulates *meaningfully*.’<sup>11</sup> Lydia Liu argues that as a text circulates internationally, a universal meaning of the text cannot be directly translated from one text to another or from one context to another; alternatively, she emphasises the importance of analysing the ways in which its meaning is made meaningful in a new context.<sup>12</sup> In order to do so, the meaning-value of these translated texts must be studied as a ‘problem of exchange and circulation,’<sup>13</sup> taking into account the direction in which the text travels, its purpose, its translation, its audience, and related forms of unequal global exchange. Forming part of a network of global circulation, Western art history and theory must be considered within a specific historical context and within their specific ‘occurrences of historical contact, interaction, translation, and the travel of words and ideas between languages.’<sup>14</sup>

In order to understand how Western art history was made ‘meaningful’ in China in the 1980s, the first section of this paper reviews the introduction of foreign art history into the contemporary Chinese art world after the Cultural Revolution. I analyse the types of materials that were translated and their origins in order to identify not only the direction in which these texts circulated internationally but also the art historical canon that was imported. I argue that artworks made in the mid-1980s reproduced this canon and the relationship of the Chinese art world to it. The second section explores how Chinese artists and critics negotiated this received canon in order to make it meaningful to domestic art practice. By combining Western modern art and contemporary Chinese art into a single discourse, Chinese art critics were able to legitimise new and experimental art practices in China. In the final section, I investigate how Chinese artists began ‘to enter art history’ in the 1990s and how Chinese artists as active participants in the global art world impacted domestic art history and criticism. How Chinese art entered into art history changed from the writing together of Western modern art and Chinese art practices to an actual entering into the international art market and exhibition

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Lee and Edward Li Puma, ‘Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity’, *Public Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, Winter 2002, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Lydia H. Liu, ‘The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign’, in Lydia H. Liu, ed., *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Lydia H. Liu, ‘The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign’, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Lydia H. Liu, ‘The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign’, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity, China 1900-1937*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995, 19.

structure. Significantly, writing about the Chinese art world is no longer domestically focused but is instead determined by a complex set of transnational relationships as Chinese artists began to participate in the international art world. Additionally, as Chinese artists move around the world, they change how information about foreign art is circulated.

### Reading Western art history in China

The widespread Chinese translation of Western books about art history and art theory began in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping initiated the Policy of Opening and Reform that followed the Cultural Revolution.<sup>15</sup> In October 1979, Deng Xiaoping, at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists announced a new cultural policy that actively encouraged the diversification of literary and artistic styles and the importation of ‘foreign things to serve China’; at the same time Deng maintained that art should continue to serve the people.<sup>16</sup> Western books were actively brought into China, translated and published for a large audience, radically transforming the cultural and artistic landscape of China and leading to the ‘80s ‘Culture Fever.’ During this period of ‘Culture Fever,’ Chinese artists and art critics were introduced not only to art history and philosophy, but also to Western studies of Chinese history and culture, of particular note, books about the May Fourth Movement, early twentieth century Chinese debates about Modernism, Chan Buddhism, and

<sup>15</sup> This is not the first time Western texts were actively translated into Chinese following the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. According to Kuiyi Shen, ‘In 1973-74, a large-scale translation of modernist Western plays and novels was undertaken in Shanghai and Beijing. The texts were not publicly circulated, the distribution was instead strictly limited to high-ranking officials and professionals within the art and literary worlds, including art academy professors. The texts were labeled “internal materials for use in criticism.” In ‘A Journey of Dreams: Art of the Zhou Brothers’, in *Zhou Brothers: 30 Years of Collaboration*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004, 17. These books were called *neibu congkao* (internal reference). See also John Clark, ‘System and Style in the Practice of Chinese Contemporary Art: The Disappearing Exterior’, *Yishu*, vol. 1, no. 2, August 2002; and Shuyu Kong, ‘For Reference Only: Restricted Publication and Distribution of Foreign Literature During the Cultural Revolution’, *Yishu*, vol. 1, no. 2, August 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Deng Xiaoping’s statement at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists, October 1979: ‘We must serve with Comrade Mao Zedong’s policy to ensure that our literature and art serves the broad masses of the People. First and foremost, it must serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. We must preserve with the policies of allowing a hundred flowers to bloom, abandon the old in favor of the new, use foreign things to serve China, and make the past serve the present. In terms of cultural creation, we advocate the free development of different styles and genres. In the realm of cultural theory, we advocate free debate between different points of view and academic schools.’ As quoted by Geremie Barme, *In the Red*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 20.

Daosim.<sup>17</sup> Books on art history and aesthetics were often published as series' in addition to 'picture books' (*huace*), which provided general overviews of Western art history with few textual descriptions or explanations. Art books translated into Chinese included Herbert Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (translated in 1979), Benedetto Croce's *Principles of Aesthetics* (translated in 1983) and Edward Luce-Smith's *American Art Now* (translated in 1988). Periodicals, however, provided the most important means of circulating these translations to a large population of Chinese artists. In art magazines, including *Fine Arts (Meishu)* and the *Jiangsu Pictorial (Jiangsu huakan)* translations of Western texts were frequently published in addition to Chinese-written brief histories of foreign art and updates on recent international events. Additionally, two magazines dedicated exclusively to introducing foreign art practice to the Chinese audience were established - *World Art (Shijie meishu)*, published by the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing and the *Journal of Art Translation (Meishu yicong)* edited by Fan Jingzhong at the Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy (ZAFA) in Hangzhou.<sup>18</sup> Eventually by the mid-1980s, art schools including both CAFA and ZAFA received and later subscribed to many Western art magazines, including *ArtNews* and *Art in America*.<sup>19</sup> These materials resonated within many artists' styles, artworks and oeuvres.

*World Art* and the *Journal of Art Translations* simultaneously introduced Chinese artists and critics to the history of art from ancient cave painting to recent art practices of the 1980s. The published texts were selected from available materials and often did not follow a thematic or chronological order. Within a single magazine issue, translations of Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky would be placed next to essays on modern and contemporary art in Europe and America. Articles about African, Indian, Mesoamerican and Oceanic art would be ordered before or after texts about art from different time periods, from ancient cave paintings to the Greeks and Romans to the Medieval and Renaissance periods.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gu Wenda interview for the Asia Art Archive's project, 'Documents of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990' [http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\_detail.aspx?interview\_id=39 accessed 19.05.2014]. See also Gao Minglu's interview for the same project

[http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\_detail.aspx?interview\_id=37 accessed 07.05.2014].

<sup>18</sup> See 'Introduction to the Periodical' (*Fakanci*), *World Art (Shijie meishu)*, vol. 1, 1979, 1 and 'The Revised Preface' (*Gaiban qianyan*), *Journal of Art Translations (Meishu Yicong)*, vol. 1, 1980, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Gu Wenda interview for the Asia Art Archive's project, 'Documents of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990' [http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\_detail.aspx?interview\_id=39 accessed 07.05.2014].

<sup>20</sup> The Table of Contents for *World Art* in 1979 and 1985 provide two examples of the types of texts that were being translated. Issue 1 of 1979 included the texts: 'Song of Praise to Power and Beauty,' 'Impressionism,' 'Van Gogh Discusses Painting,' 'Modigliani,' 'A Brief Introduction of Western Modern Art Genres,' 'The Beauty of Chinese Scenery,' 'The Theme and Image of Monumental Sculpture,' 'Michaelangelo's Character,' 'Karl Hubner's *The*

Additionally, *World Art* and the *Journal of Art Translations* frequently published articles by foreign scholars about traditional Chinese art, particularly ink painting. While the process of translation was rigorous, the selection of texts to be translated was not systematic; instead, editors were dependent on translating texts that they had access to in either the publishing house and art academy libraries or in personal collections, and also subject to government controls and censorship.<sup>21</sup> However, the majority of the translated texts were imported from the United States and Europe and as such presented a history of art dependent on a Western historical narrative. This narrative separated ancient or traditional art from around the world from Modern art made in Europe and later America. This distinction is clearly demonstrated when reviewing 'The Catalogue of Foreign Art History' published as a series in *World Art* beginning in 1984. The series provides sections about art from around the world starting with ancient art. Beginning with the Middle Ages, the series became dominated by the development of Western art up to modernism. Other national and regional art practices are presented as separate from these European developments. However, despite the prominence of the Western canon, Chinese artists were not entrenched within its system and often did not read these lengthy articles but instead focused their attention on photographic reproductions of foreign artworks.<sup>22</sup> Chinese artists, thus, read these texts with a certain degree of flexibility – they could take what they needed and often did not know the historical context or significance of the works.

The simultaneous and ahistorical reception of these texts is made visible in Chinese artworks that graphically represent Western masterpieces in the mid-1980s. *To Yearn for Peace* (1985) by Wang Xiangming and Jin Lili and *Exhibition* (1986) by Mao Xuhui both present reproductions of Western masterpieces that are shown in a bricolage fashion, combining different styles and artworks into a single artwork. In *To Yearn for Peace*, a young girl looks out at the viewer while standing in front of a large painting. The painting is a mishmash of iconic Western masterpieces, including Picasso's *Guernica*, Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* and Édouard

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*Weavers in Silesia*, 'The Traveling Exhibition of 1871,' 'Rodin and Boisbauran,' a Russian translation, 'To Young Artists' by Matisse, 'A Brief History of Ancient Egyptian Art and Archeology,' and notes about art from around the world. Issue 1 of 1985 included the texts: 'Bertel Thorvaldsen,' 'Danish Master of Sculpture – Bertel Thorvaldsen,' 'Historical Female Artists – The Status of Women in the History of Art,' 'Japanese Modern Paper Cutting,' 'The Mainstream of Japanese Painting of Modern Beauties,' 'On Alex Colville's Art,' 'A Window for Today's French Art – Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary Art,' 'A Concrete Painter,' 'Balthus's Paris,' 'On Western Modern Art,' 'Conceptual Art,' 'From Art Nouveau to Bauhaus,' and 'The Foreign Art History Catalogue.'

<sup>21</sup> See letters between Lü Peng and Ping Ye held in the Lü Peng Archive at the Asia Art Archive.

<sup>22</sup> Huang Yong Ping interview for the Asia Art Archive's project, 'Documents of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990' [[http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\\_detail.aspx?interview\\_id=104](http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=104) accessed 07.05.2014].

Manet's *Execution of Emperor Maximilian. Exhibition* is a collage of two people standing in a museum's gallery, both gazing down at a Western sculpture of a nude while three framed images hang on the wall behind them – Ingres' *The Source*, a figure rendered in an expressionistic fashion by Mao Xuhui, and a black and white photograph of a Chinese opera character. Both artworks are set in an art gallery or museum, and both directly reference Western art history through the reproduction or imitation of Western art masterpieces. In both artworks, by reproducing these Western art history masterpieces, Wang Xiangming, Jin Lili and Mao Xuhui attempt to place Chinese viewers in direct relation with the history of Western art. However, this relationship is limited to viewing – just as the Chinese figures in both artworks stand outside of the framed paintings. The Western paintings are framed, thus closing off any possibility for contemporary Chinese painting to be combined or participate in the history of Western art.

By having the figures stand outside of the frames, the artists Wang Xiangming, Jin Lili and Mao Xuhui visually represent unequal forms of global exchange. Foreign texts, usually written in the United States or Europe (and to a much smaller extent in Russia or Japan), were translated into Chinese, whereas the presence of information about contemporary art practice in China was largely absent in the United States and Europe. Hans Belting argues that 'modernization is always seen as synonymous with the import of Western media, which not only inform about the Western world but produce the mirage of proximity to and of the accessibility of the West, including its culture.'<sup>23</sup> In both *To Yearn for Peace* and *Exhibition*, the figures stand next to the reproductions of Western art but are never included within it; this strategy visually reinforced their proximity. However, Chinese art critics acknowledged this separation, frequently stating that Chinese artists were not participants in the development of Western modern art nor contemporary Western art circles, but merely outsiders (*juweiren*).<sup>24</sup> The translated texts that were distributed throughout China in the 1980s were not concerned with or intended to provide Chinese artists a means to participate in art practice internationally, but rather were focused on the development of domestic art practices.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the 'mirage of proximity' is not as important as the question of how Chinese artists and critics acknowledge unequal forms of global exchange and attempt to make these translations meaningful within a Chinese context.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Zhu Qingsheng, 'Contemporary Paintings of the West Viewed from this Side of the Ocean' (*Dangdai xifang huatan ge'an guan*) speech originally given at the 'National Symposium on Oil Painting' (*Quanguo youhua yishu taolunhui*) in April 1986, published in *Literature and Arts Research* (*Wenyi yanjiu*), vol. 4, 1986, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Koppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003, 40.

### Writing art history - Chinese art and the problem of the West

By 1985, Western art history and theory had permeated Chinese art criticism to the extent that not only critics but entire artist associations wrote about and organised conferences to discuss the ‘impact’ (*chongji*) of Western art on contemporary art practice in China.<sup>26</sup> Despite calls for opening and reform by Deng Xiaoping and other Party leaders, the exact path artists and critics should follow moving forward was not clearly defined.<sup>27</sup> Thus these debates point to the difficulty of making Western art history meaningful within Reform Era China. The influx of art theory, different art histories, and art historical methodologies ‘brought on vast formal and ideological explorations in both art practices and art writings.’<sup>28</sup> These sources helped Chinese art critics rebuild the practice of art history and art criticism after the Cultural Revolution, and moreover contributed to innovating the Chinese tradition of art history, which emphasised connoisseurship.<sup>29</sup> Responding not only to the translated texts but also to new art historical methodologies, art critics began to re-write foreign art histories, emphasizing aspects of exchange between Eastern and Western art practices. Eventually these re-writings led Chinese art critics to re-interpret Western art history by combining it with Chinese art history into single historical narratives. Paralleling the ‘writing-together’ of Chinese and Western art history, Chinese artists literally and visually combined these histories in their works.

Throughout the pages of Chinese art magazines, including *Fine Art*, *The Trend of Art Thought* (*Meishu sichao*), *Jiangsu Pictorial*, and *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) two trends emerge as critics attempted to forge meaningful relationships between the newly imported foreign materials and contemporary art practices in China. First, critics attempted to place contemporary Chinese art within the linear history of Western modern art as a way to substantiate and explain art practices in China that were hybrid. This process of historicisation occurred as critics repeatedly rehearsed the development of Western modern art and then connected this historical lineage to contemporary Chinese art. However, there is a temporal disconnection between Western modern art history and art practices in

<sup>26</sup> See the 1986 National Art Theory Conference, “Chinese Art Under the Influence of Western Culture” (*Sifang wenhua chongji xia de Zhongguo meishu*) held at Yantai and organized by the Shandong Chinese Artists Association.

<sup>27</sup> Koppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Peggy Wang, ‘Art Critics as Middlemen: Navigating State and Market in Contemporary Chinese art, 1980s-1990s’, *Art Journal*, Spring 2013, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Pi Daojian as quoted by Hans van Dijk with Andreas Schmid, ‘The Fine Art after the Cultural Revolution: Stylistic Development and Cultural Debate’ in Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pohlmann, and Kai Reschke, ed., *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1994, 22.

China during the 1980s. The second trend is the use of Eastern philosophy as a means of interpreting Western modern art, thus inverting the causal relationship between Western modern and contemporary Chinese art production. By emphasizing the role of traditional Chinese culture and philosophy within contemporary art practice but also foreign modern art practices, critics attempted to redirect naturalized power relations between the ‘modern’ West and the East.

The recombination of Western modern art history and contemporary Chinese art practice was prevalent in texts during the 1980s, the earliest of which was written by Shao Dazhen, the editor of *Fine Arts* and *World Art* and a professor of art history at CAFA. Published in 1983 in *World Art*, in ‘Must Go Our Own Way’ (*Yao zou ziji de lu*), Shao Dazhen recounts his experiences in Italy and France, focusing specifically on the way in which French artists used Eastern art to innovate Western art traditions. Using the Impressionist appropriation of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, Picasso’s use of African sculpture, and the influence of Laozi and Chan Buddhism on the development of abstract art, Shao Dazhen argues that these appropriations led to the advancement of modern art in Europe and America. By re-writing the development of Western modern art by focusing solely on instances of cultural exchange, he calls into question dominant position of the canon of Western modern art within world art history. He also underscores that the canon of Western art history has been composed through a process of selection, in which art historians chose which artists should be included within the canon and which should not.<sup>30</sup> By making this observation, Shao Dazhen thus substantiates his own re-writing of the canon. Using Picasso as an example, he explains how European artists thoroughly investigated non-Western art (including Japanese prints and African sculptures) in order to bring innovations to European art. However, he warns Chinese artists that they cannot just transplant modern art into China but rather that modern art must be studied carefully in order to advance Chinese art practice.<sup>31</sup> Through this study of modern and traditional art, East and West, Shao concludes that ‘our artists must find their own way.’<sup>32</sup> In emphasizing the hybrid developmental history of Western modern art, Shao Dazhen justifies the appropriation of non-Chinese artistic styles and concepts as a way to innovate art practice in the face of heated debates within China about the impact of Western art on domestic art practices, which often advocated for the development of a more thoroughly ‘Chinese’ national art practice.

Zhu Qingsheng, at the time a Masters student in art history at CAFA, in his speech ‘Contemporary Paintings of the West Viewed from this Side of the Ocean’ (*Dangdai xifang huatan ge’an guan*), advances Shao Dazhen’s argument. Zhu Qingsheng argues that a lack of mutual understanding or familiarity (*gemo*) between Chinese artists and Western modern art is a site of productive exchange between

<sup>30</sup> Shao Dazhen, ‘Must Go Our Own Way’ (*Yao zou ziji de lu*), *World Art (Shijie meishu)*, vol. 2, 1983, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Shao Dazhen, ‘Must Go Our Own Way’, 68.

<sup>32</sup> Shao Dazhen, ‘Must Go Our Own Way’, 68.

contemporary art in China and Western art practices. According to Zhu Qingsheng, the concepts and history of Western modern art are appropriately applied to describe art practices in China in the 1980s because modern art allows the viewer to interpret multiple possible meanings. The viewer or Chinese art historian thus has a tremendous amount of freedom when trying to understand modern art and its significance. In the context of China, its value is derived precisely because of the possibility of multiple interpretations. He encourages Chinese artists to bring out 'thousands of this type of misunderstanding' and to 'arouse lots of responses' in order to develop contemporary art in China.<sup>33</sup> However, Chinese art historians and artists are still in the first stage in trying to figure out the relationship between Western modern art and contemporary Chinese art, because, Zhu argues, Chinese artists and critics do not yet have a clear understanding of modern art. In order to begin to provide clarity, Zhu Qingsheng offers a rehearsal of modern art history after World War II including the birth of post-modern art and the shift of the centre of the art world to New York City. At the same time, he maintains that Chinese artists did not participate directly in the history or development of Western modern art.<sup>34</sup> For Zhu, misunderstanding is important for the development of contemporary Chinese art practices because it provides Chinese artists with the freedom to appropriate foreign art. However Zhu Qingsheng makes a distinction between appropriating or misunderstanding Western art by Chinese artists and the imitation or copying of Western art.

Lin Chun's 'Talking about Art Has No Borders' (*Yishu wuyou jing tan*) demonstrates how Chinese artists and critics applied Eastern philosophy to interpret Western modern art history. The article was published in a special section of *Fine Arts*, called 'Discussing the Problems of Western Modern Art' (*Xifang xiandaipai wenti taolun*) in 1985. After providing a quote by Laozi and one from the *Yijing*, Lin Chun, an artist and member of the Xiamen Dada group, describes a series of paintings from a Buddhist monastery, called *Ten Cow Painting*, in order to explain the concept of nothingness and 'having no borders' (*wuyoujing*).<sup>35</sup> Through a series of ten separate scenes, the painting illustrates a shepherd first forgetting his cows and later, forgetting himself. At this moment of forgetting himself, the shepherd intuitively understands what it means to 'have no borders.' For Lin Chun, abstract painting is a type of 'having no borders' because it is one of art's ultimate attainments (*jizhi*).<sup>36</sup> Chan Buddhism, therefore, provides essential concepts that can be applied to understand the development of abstract art in Europe and America. In

<sup>33</sup> Zhu Qingsheng, 'Contemporary Paintings of the West Viewed from this Side of the Ocean', 47. Emphasis is my own.

<sup>34</sup> Zhu Qingsheng, 'Contemporary Paintings of the West Viewed from this Side of the Ocean', 48.

<sup>35</sup> Lin Chun, 'Talking about Art Has No Borders' (*Yishu wuyou jing tan*), *Fine Arts (Meishu)*, vol. 10, October 1985, 58.

<sup>36</sup> Lin Chun, 'Talking about Art Has No Borders', 59.

order to understand the concept of ‘having no borders’ within the history of Western art (from ancient art to Impressionism), Lin Chun divides Western art history into two paths – the first follows classical art, where art and the naturalization of art’s borders emerge. The second deviates from classical art, where an art without borders emerges.<sup>37</sup> For Lin Chun, the development of art styles is important, especially because he understands art’s development as a series evolving out of and rejecting the styles that came before. For this reason, when judging modern art, it cannot be cut off from art history. He warns against indiscriminately copying superficial knowledge of older artists because the resulting artworks will be reduced to the ordinary and will ‘lose its original lustre.’<sup>38</sup>

In each text, the canon of Western art history is re-interpreted in order for it to become meaningful within the specific needs of the Chinese context. Lydia Liu has argued that ‘the foreignization of the other must be conquered in order for the other to assume exchange value in the marketplace.’<sup>39</sup> In the marketplace of the Chinese art world in the 1980s, Chinese critics ‘conquer’ the other history of Western modern art by first re-writing that history to emphasize instances of encounter and exchange and then by writing together that history with contemporary art practices in China. From this, Chinese critics are then able to find and apply the meaningfulness of Western art history to contemporary Chinese art. Shao Dazhen justifies the use of foreign art by Chinese artists through his rehearsal of the development of Western modern art as a series of encounters between European artists and art made outside of Europe. Shao Dazhen urges that foreign art plays an integral role in innovating national art practices and encourages Chinese artists not to follow only the West or only traditional Chinese practice but to take different aspects of each in order to ‘go our own way.’ In a similar fashion, Zhu Qingsheng justifies the borrowing of foreign art to develop contemporary art practice in China. However, what is distinct in Zhu’s text is his emphasis on ‘misunderstanding’ as a dynamic source of innovation. Importantly, misunderstanding disrupts the naturalization of the mutual intelligibility of languages, visual or linguistic. Finally, Lin Chun reads the development of abstract modern art through the concepts of Chan Buddhism. By applying Chinese philosophical concepts that were increasingly evoked by contemporary artists working in China, Lin Chun attempts to connect these practices to conceptual and abstract art in the West. However, he provides a methodology that is diametrically opposed to the accepted practice of Western art history, which is to use the discipline of art history (which was established in the Europe) to analyse artworks from around the world. Lin Chun inverts this relationship, using Eastern philosophy to analyse modern art made in the West.

As critics interpreted Western art history meaningfully in China, the artist Huang Yong Ping combined Western modern art history with Chinese art in order

<sup>37</sup> Lin Chun, ‘Talking about Art Has No Borders’, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Lin Chun, ‘Talking about Art Has No Borders’, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Lydia H. Liu, ‘The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign’, 22.



Figure 2 Huang Yong Ping, *The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987, View of the exhibition « House of Oracles – A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective », Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2006 © ADAGP Huang Yong Ping, Courtesy of the artist and kamel mennour, Paris

to make both meaningless. In 1987, Huang Yong Ping famously washed a copy of the Chinese translation of Herbert Read's *The History of Modern Art* and Wang Bomin's *History of Chinese Painting*. The work, "*The History of Chinese Art*" and "*The History of Modern Art*" after *Two Minutes in the Washing Machine* (figure 2), produced a critical commentary on how modern art and traditional Chinese art were combined by Chinese artists in the 1980s. Huang Yong Ping displayed the washed together histories on top of a piece of glass resting on a shipping crate. After being washed, the individual pages of the books were torn and meshed together, so that what is written on each is indistinguishable and indivisible from the other. As the meaning is washed away and the pages of the texts are physically combined, both

histories are made inseparable and as such, the identity of the separate influences that are combined to create the work of art are no longer distinguishable. The work's methodology slyly combines elements of Chan Buddhism and Western philosophy in order to critique the discipline of art history (as it was received in China). The artwork was made according to instructions provided by a roulette wheel Huang Yong Ping developed to introduce chance as the primary method for making an artwork in order to expel the role of the artist's self-expression. At the same time, as the books are washed, he destroys the words that are written in the pages. His destruction of language can be attributed to both Chan Buddhist and Western philosophies. Chan Buddhism proposes that 'one cannot "understand the mind and see nature" without "renouncing words."<sup>40</sup> At the same time, Huang Yong Ping was reading texts by Wittgenstein who argued 'now and then, some wordings should be removed from language and be sent to be washed – after that, they can be brought back into communication.'<sup>41</sup> As such, Huang Yong Ping's methodology is similar to that of Chinese art critics who made Western art history meaningful by writing together with contemporary Chinese art practice, and yet utterly at odds. By destroying the meaning and identifying characteristics of both, Huang Yong Ping demonstrates the impossibility of writing an art history that can dissect the precise stylistic origins, conceptual methods, or theoretical backgrounds of contemporary art practices.

By writing Chinese and Western art history together, critics begin to invert the received power relations between China and the West. When Western modern art history is exported outside of Europe and America, it is exported as a 'universal' history and universal historical system. Through this perceived universality, it appears to be applicable to any context. However, as Western art history enters into China after the Culture Revolution as 'other' (i.e. foreign), its universality is always already called into question; Western art history must be made meaningful in the Chinese context. As Chinese art historians re-write the canon of Western modern art emphasising not a linear history of progressive development, but instead a series of encounters, new relationships between Chinese art and Western art emerge outside of the Western canon. In such a move, the relationship of Chinese art history as always other to or outside of Western art history is problematized. Writing together art histories provides the critics with the ability to re-order art history, and at the same time re-order the visual economy. The 'visual economy' is 'part of a comprehensive organization of peoples, ideas and objects;' the 'organization of the field of vision has much to do with social relationships, inequality, and power'

<sup>40</sup> Fei Dawei, 'Two-Minute Wash Cycle: Huang Yong Ping's Chinese Period', in Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong, ed. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Hou Hanru, 'Change Is the Rule', in Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong, ed. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005, 14.

which ‘bears relationship to the political and class structure of society.’<sup>42</sup> Through re-ordering the canon of Western modern art to emphasize the aspects of exchange and encounter in order to make a place for Chinese art practices within the canon, the three critics emphasise the hybrid nature of artistic development instead of a linear narrative of development that congeals international power relations along post-colonial lines, i.e. the modern West and the other.

Hans Belting observes that the exportation of media about Western modern art can always only provide the ‘mirage’ of proximity to the West.<sup>43</sup> While many scholars of Asian Modern art agree with Belting, the practice of writing together in China differs from previous examples of similar practices in Asia. Modern Indian art historian, Partha Mitter and modern Japanese art historian, Reiko Tomii, have observed similar approaches towards Western modern art in India and Japan respectively. For Mitter, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian art and critics entered into a ‘virtual cosmopolis’ where Indian artists were able to engage with European (colonial) culture and forms of knowledge.<sup>44</sup> In Japan, Tomii argues that Japanese art critics mobilized the term ‘international’ within their own art criticism in order to provide themselves with the impression of participating within the European and American art worlds after World War II.<sup>45</sup> However, what distinguishes the work of Chinese artists and critics in the 1980s from other Asian critics trying to re-write the relationship between Western and Eastern art is the temporal divide that Chinese critics enact. In India and Japan, the critics participated within contemporaneous debates with Western art practices, regardless of whether or not the West acknowledged their discourses. However, in China in the 1980s, art critics place contemporary Chinese art practices within the Western ‘past.’ This point does not demonstrate that Chinese art was ‘behind’ or that Modernism was belated in China, but rather, underscores how Chinese critics and artists were interested in the domestic situation as opposed to participating with the foreign art world. Chinese critics themselves repeatedly acknowledged that Chinese artists were not participants in either the development of modern art or contemporaneous art practices outside of China. Despite the temporal divide or lack of contemporaneity between Western modern art history and Chinese art practices, the importation and employment of Western art history inverts the power relationship between Western modern art and contemporary art practices in China

<sup>42</sup> Deborah Poole as paraphrased by Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> See Partha Mitter, ‘Frameworks for Considering Cultural Exchange: The Case of India and America’ in Cynthia Mills, Lee Glazer, and Amelia A. Goerlitz, ed., *East-West Interchanges in American Art – A Long A Tumultuous Relationship*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2011, 25.

<sup>45</sup> See Reiko Tomii, ‘Historicizing “Contemporary Art”’: Some Discursive in *Gendai Bitutsu in Japan*, *Positions*, vol. 12, no. 3, Winter 2004, 616.

by its re-ordering of art history, and at the same time the re-ordering of the visual economy. This practice is significant in two ways. First, the temporal divide between the art histories written together mirrors the global transition from modernism to postmodernism.<sup>46</sup> Second, by emphasizing instances of cultural exchange instead of progressive linear narratives of the development of Western modern art, Chinese art critics provide a framework for developing a new methodology for global art history.

### Entering art history

*To Enter Art History – Slideshow Activity* marks a shift in how Chinese artists and critics conceptualized their relationship to the canon of Western art history from readers and writers of art history in the 1980s to active participants within the international art world after 1989. As previously demonstrated, in the 1980s Western art histories were rapidly imported, translated and circulated throughout the Chinese art world, while only few Chinese artists, artworks, or information about Chinese art circulated outside of China. Starting in 1989 with the inclusion of three Chinese artists, including Huang Yong Ping, in the international, blockbuster exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, artworks by Chinese artists were increasingly shown in major international, perennial exhibitions. Chinese artists were also increasingly represented by established American and European art galleries. In an interview with the Asia Art Archive in 2007, Li Xianting discusses this change, stating:

The significance of China opening to the West was not that everyone followed the same path – Chinese artists alongside foreign artists – like we do today. It was only in the mid-1990s that Chinese artists had an opportunity to come face-to-face with Western artists, and participate in the same exhibitions. It wasn't open in this sense before. From the late 1920s to early 1990s, Chinese art was open to the West in terms of art history.<sup>47</sup>

Significantly, by marking a change in the pattern of the global circulation of art and art history, this change is not applicable to only Chinese art but also international art practices. The circulation of information about art shifts from one that is textually based (or using Belting's terminology – media-based) to an encounter that is participatory and based on the circulation of artworks in exhibitions. Belting argues

<sup>46</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Li Xianting interview for the Asia Art Archive's project, 'Documents of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990' [[http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview\\_detail.aspx?interview\\_id=60](http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=60) accessed 07.05.2014].

that global culture is a ‘phantom of the media’<sup>48</sup> because in the West, the ‘other’ is not necessarily recorded through texts but through exhibitions. In considering Chinese art, while information about Western art history was disseminated in China through writings of art history, the ‘entering’ of Chinese art into the West was done primarily through exhibitions.

As the presence of contemporary Chinese art within the international art world increased throughout the 1990s, Chinese art critics began to focus on the art market as a way for artists to enter art history as opposed to writing together Chinese and Western histories. In 1989, *Fine Arts* published an article entitled ‘How Does Art Move towards the World? – A Few Thoughts about Realistic Problems’ (*Meishu zenyang zouxiang shijie – ji ge shiji wenti de sikao*), which called for the establishment of a domestic art market in order for Chinese art to gain its reputation internationally.<sup>49</sup> Chinese art did not have a high reputation internationally, as evidenced from the exclusion of Chinese art in important international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale.<sup>50</sup> The article argues that the status of contemporary Chinese art is strictly connected to its market value. Therefore in order to raise its international reputation, two developments must occur. First, information about Chinese art must be disseminated abroad in order to make Western audiences more familiar with and knowledgeable about Chinese art. Second, a domestic art market must be established.<sup>51</sup> In 1991, art critic, Huang Zhuan establishes a relationship between the art market and art history, which is further defined by Lü Peng, an art historian, in 1992.<sup>52</sup> In an interview with *Yishu Shichang* magazine, Huang Zhuan asserts that ‘in this era of art history, commercialization is the most basic means for artists and artworks to enter history.’<sup>53</sup> For Huang Zhuan, an artist enters art history through the selection and influence of art dealers and gallerists, using the example of Leo Castelli, who ‘successfully created a model to consolidate the historical position of artworks and artists through commercial resources.’<sup>54</sup> Thus, according to Huang, in order to support this type of art history, China must establish ‘an art market of international standards.’<sup>55</sup> As critics asserted the necessity of the market to assign legitimacy and value to contemporary art practices, they changed not only

<sup>48</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 66.

<sup>49</sup> ‘How Does Art Move towards the World?’ (*Meishu zenyang zouxiang shijie – ji ge shiji wenti de sikao*), *Fine Arts (Meishu)*, 7 (1988), 18.

<sup>50</sup> The first exhibition of contemporary Chinese art at the Venice Biennale occurred in 1993 with the exhibition, “Passage to the Orient.” However, China did not have a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale until 2003.

<sup>51</sup> ‘How Does Art Move towards the World?’, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Lü Peng, ‘To Go to the Market’ (*Zuoxiang shichang*), *Jiangsu huakan*, no. 10, 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Huang Zhuan, ‘Who Is Going to Sponsor the History?’ originally published as ‘Shei lai zanzhu lishi,’ in *Yishu \* Shichang*, no. 6, September 1991, translated by Peggy Wang in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 292.

<sup>54</sup> Huang Zhuan, ‘Who Is Going to Sponsor the History?’, 293.

<sup>55</sup> Huang Zhuan, ‘Who Is Going to Sponsor the History?’, 294.

the role of art history as an arbitrator of aesthetic value and judgement, but also their own role in this system.<sup>56</sup> Significantly the market is established as the ultimate location where value is assigned to artworks, where the commodity value of the artwork replaces the meaning-value of the artwork as it circulates globally.

As the critical discussion shifted from entering Western art history to entering the art market, Chinese artists increasingly participated in the international art world, exhibiting their works at the 1993 Venice Biennale and 1994 Sao Paulo Biennial. When their artworks were included in more large-scale international exhibitions, many artists including Huang Yong Ping and Xu Bing left China. Xu Bing immigrated to the United States in 1991 after his artwork was publicly denounced in China following the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989.<sup>57</sup> In the United States, Xu Bing's artwork quickly gained favor with American galleries, museums and collectors. Within three years of arriving, his work had been exhibited at the Venice Biennale and he had his first solo show in America at the Bronx Museum in New York in 1994. As such, Xu Bing had successfully 'entered art history.' At the Bronx Museum, Xu Bing exhibited a work, entitled *Wu Street* (1993) where he revealed a hoax. In 1993, using the pseudonym Harold Phillips, Xu Bing published a falsified translation of a text originally written about the American abstract painter, Jonathan Lasker, in the Chinese art magazine, *World Art (Shijie Meishu)*. In the text published in China, Xu Bing replaced images of Lasker's paintings with images taken of abstract paintings Xu Bing had found discarded on a New York City sidewalk. The artwork is significant in that it is one of the first transnational artworks made by a Chinese artist because it was exhibited in New York City, but circulated as a published text in China. As such, the work is within two contexts, and should be read within both contexts.<sup>58</sup> In China, *Wu Street* critiques the system of importing and translating Western art history. In the United States, it critiques the international legibility of artworks as they are exhibited around the world. As it functions transnationally (or more specifically within two contexts), *Wu Street* draws out problems of translation, or to evoke Lydia Liu, the ability to render artworks meaningful as they circulate internationally. Once an artist has 'entered art history,' the circulation is no longer unidirectional, but a complex network of global circulations develops simultaneously. The role of Chinese art historians and critics necessarily changes because contemporary Chinese art is no longer only judged and assigned value within China, but abroad as well. When Chinese artworks are exhibited internationally, they are made meaningful through the context of the exhibition and are often not written about

<sup>56</sup> See Peggy Wang, 'Art Critics as Middlemen: Navigating State and Market in Contemporary Chinese art, 1980s-1990s', 8.

<sup>57</sup> John Clark, 'Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), 342.

<sup>58</sup> Orianna Cacchione, 'Wu Street: Tracing Lineages of the Internationalization of the Art World' *Yishu*, vol. 11, no. 1, January/February 2012, 12.

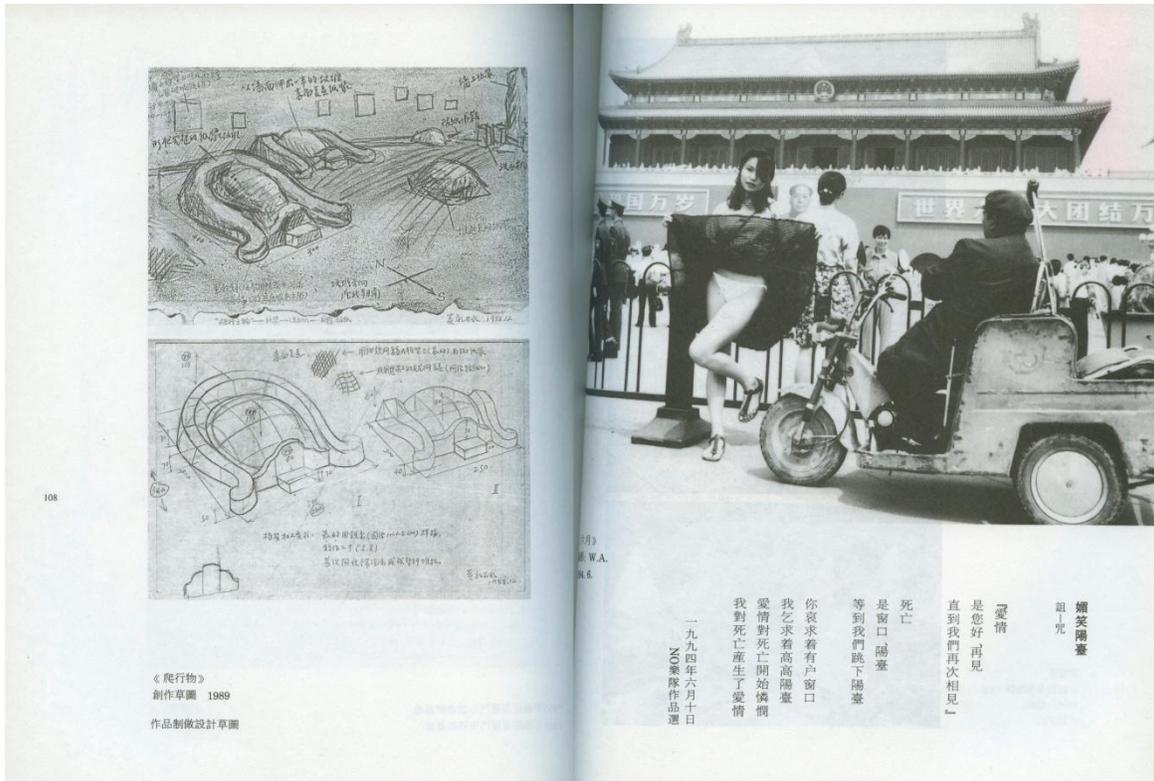


Figure 3 *Black Cover Book*, 1994. Photo credit: Ai Weiwei

At the same time in which Xu Bing exhibited *Wu Street* in New York City, he began to work with Ai Weiwei and Zeng Xiaojun in Beijing on the *Black Cover Book* (*Heipi shu*) (figure 3), the first artist self-published book on contemporary art practices in China. *Black Cover Book* provided a new way to circulate information about art practices in China led by artists who had lived and worked abroad. After 1989, the Chinese Communist Party imposed a crack down on not only art practice but also exhibitions and publications in China.<sup>59</sup> During this period, *Black Cover Book* provided a forum for Chinese artists to submit their works in progress and to engage with international art practices. In the call for submissions, the editors describe the journal as an ‘independent, scholarly, internal publication,’ with the intended goal to ‘pay attention to both domestic and international avant-garde artist thought’ from the standpoint of new art situations, international cultural trends, and the development of Chinese avant-garde art.<sup>60</sup> *Black Cover Book* does not contain texts about art history, but rather an interview with the Taiwanese American artist,

<sup>59</sup> See John Clark, ‘Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre’, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), 335.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Red Flad – Art Documents for Exchange’ in the Zheng Shengtian Archive held by the Asia Art Archive [<http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/7689> accessed 07.05.2014].

Hsieh Tehching and documentation of three of his works; a 'Studio' section documenting the recent art practices of Chinese artists; 'Modern Art Documents' which contains texts written by Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons and an interview with Andy Warhol; and 'Art News.' The book focuses on stand alone images documenting art practices and the artists' written or spoken words that were submitted directly by artists who responded to a nationally distributed call for contributions. In this way, the editors remove the role of both the art historian and the art critic so that the reader can make his/her own judgments and interpretations of the artworks presented. In a sense, this desire to showcase unmediated images of Chinese art practice echoes the call of the 'Grand Slideshow.'

In *Black Cover Book*, the editors replace the official system of art translations in China wherein contemporary Chinese art is always already temporally distanced from contemporaneously made foreign art in the attempt to provide a simultaneous account of art practices in China and in the United States. The images and texts included do not attempt to re-write or re-contextualise art history. Instead art practices are presented visually for the reader, which mirrors the mechanisms of the presentation of artworks in contemporary exhibitions where artworks are usually not mediated by text. *Black Cover Book* marks a significant shift in the circulation and dissemination of information about foreign art practices in China. The importation, translation and circulation of these texts is no longer solely managed by state-run publishing houses or through Chinese Artist Association-controlled art magazines but rather by a new group of globally mobile artists. Ai Weiwei had just returned to Beijing after living in New York City for over ten years and Xu Bing was actively travelling between both cities at the time when *Black Cover Book* was published. The book also marks a change in how meaning is made meaningful.

Once Chinese artists had 'entered' art history in the 1990s, the circulation of artworks and of art history had combined into a complex network of meaning making. This change had lasting and profound impacts on the writing of art history in China as art critics shifted their roles from the interpreters of artworks and their relationship to art history to focusing on the relationship between artworks and the art market. As this shift occurred, Chinese artists became agents in the circulation of information about foreign art practices as they themselves became more mobile, living abroad or travelling to exhibit their works in large, international exhibitions. This is demonstrated in *Black Cover Book*. However, for artworks, the problem of translation as an act of assigning meaning in new contexts becomes more complicated in the moment in which artworks by Chinese artists are increasingly exhibited abroad. In these instances, the artwork was interpreted within the context of the exhibition and not within the textual interpretation of written art history or criticism. In the early 1990s, as a global art world was emerging, Sarat Maharaj

attempted to ‘reindex the international space’ as the ‘scene of translations’<sup>61</sup> that were not just linguistic translations, but also visual translations. As the art world became dominated by a series of large-scale, international exhibitions, the problem of how to ‘read’ and interpret artworks from artists who did not share the same art historical narratives as those artists in the United States and Europe presented a problem for viewers and critics alike. For Maharaj, this multiplicity did not produce an easily translatable body of works but instead ‘produced difference.’<sup>62</sup> The entering of art history presents another series of problems: artworks are no longer bound to a single geographical or historical context from which to be interpreted, instead as they travel along different paths of global circulation they are endlessly made meaningful in new contexts.

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<sup>61</sup> Sarat Maharaj, ‘Perfidious Fidelity – The Untranslatability of the Other’, in Chang Tsong-Zung, Kaung-Hsing Chen, Gao Shiming, ed., *Sarat Maharaj Reader*, Guangzhou: Southern Daily Press, 2010, 28.

<sup>62</sup> Sarat Maharaj, ‘Perfidious Fidelity – The Untranslatability of the Other’, 28.