Signs of Artistic Times in China

Every year there are about 400 exhibitions held around China featuring experimental art. These shows often take place in private galleries owned by foreign curators working together with Chinese partners. In China, these privately owned galleries often provide a vital alternative to some of the state-operated exhibition spaces, including the China National Art Gallery in the heart of Beijing. But, in order to position oneself even further into the laboratories of art making in China, one has to move more closely towards the edges of the field, and towards the independent art spaces where artists gather to create many new visual structures and continue the communication which constructs *art to come*.

Asian Art > East Asia

By Thomas J. Berghuis

As in other parts of the world, the state-funded and even many of the commercially operated exhibition spaces often seem to position themselves somewhat behind the actual front lines of cutting edge visual structures, which take place in the field of artistic production at the many grassroot levels of late modern societies around the world. Where these institutions to a certain extent provide an important stage for periodical art collections by presenting 'signs of *certain* artistic times' to the interested members of the public, they also seem to serve a wide variety of discourses that aim at regenerating both public and artistic morality and, often, at expanding the order of 'true' artistic capital, thereby, they often exclude certain pieces and construct new contextualizations for those works that have been selected.

In practice, this means that anyone who works within the field of cutting edge artistic production, either as a commercial player or someone whose aim it is to provide explanatory and illustrative incentives to the art we witness, has to be aware of the canonical and sometimes ideological powers that stand at the basis of many overview exhibitions held in art institutes across the world. For the domains where art is constructed lie in those spheres that precede the institutionalized network, a network that often connects itself with terms like the "Avant-Garde", "Modern Art", and "Contemporary Art", a world of art galleries, museums, art fairs, biennials, television programmes, magazine and newspaper enclosures. In his Professorial Lecture at the University of Sydney on 1 May, 2001, Terry Smith uses the term "*the angle of contemporary art,* which takes us to the laboratories of art, to the inner spaces where art is made these days, alongside the artists who are working themselves to extremes for us"[italics mine].[1]

In China, these places where *art to come* is constructed and where artists work in making the conceptional and practical provisions for art itself, include art academies, studios, artists' villages, and independently operated exhibition spaces, as well as privately organized art shows, which often last for no longer than a few hours. These locations together form the *experimental art* scene, a term that, at least in visual art, often indicates a process in which former visual structures become challenged and the artist makes room for new incentives, often allowing manifestations of a more personal, constructed perception on a given environment in the artwork. This means that experimental art can occur at any time and any place.

Experimental art, therefore, is most likely to set the domains of *art to come*. It indicates a continuing process of exploring a whole range of visual structures by the practicing artist."Contemporary Art", is a another term that has often been used to describe *art of our time*, but, at least with a capital C and A, the term also refers to "...the institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself and to its interested audiences all over the world."[2] Experimental art rather, by contrast to this, allows for continuous improvization and innovation within these existing structures, and might even become more useful in identifying the process of communicating *through* art, rather than bringing forth communications *about* art.[3]

In examining these early stages in which experimental art is made and former discourses are challenged, one enters the regions where artists are pushing themselves to extremes while creating a wide range of new visual structures, of importance, in that they constitute major shifts in communicating through the use of art in a wide variety of regions across China. Some such examples later became used in communications about art, both in China and abroad. This was the case with the shifts in artistic production that took place during the 1980s, shifts and which cumulated into the *China Avant-Garde* exhibition, held in February 1989 at the National Gallery of Fine Art in Beijing. For many viewers, in particular those coming from abroad, the exhibition came to be seen as part of a modernist movement. However, for many of the artists in China attending, the exhibition became important for its overview of a wide range of experiments in modern art that sprang up in various regions around the country over the preceding decade.[4]

More recently, the publication *Fuck Off/ Bu Hezuo Fangshi*, compiled by the Beijing-based art critics Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi and accompanied by a satellite exhibition to the 2000 Shanghai Biennial in downtown Shanghai with the same title, showed similar attempts to present an overview of many of the experimental artworks produced during the second half of the 1990s.[5] For many, however, the works in the catalogue came as a shock, in particular those by artists such as Sun Yuan (1972) and Zhu Yu (1970). Despite the fact that the publication did bring together reproductions of a large group of artworks produced in China during the 1990, however, it is already no longer part of *art to come*. Rather, the publication presents an overview of "signs of a *certain* artistic time" – namely, communication *through* art which had taken place at a variety of locations in Beijing and Shanghai during the late 1990s, including the privately organized underground exhibitions *Post-Sense Sensibility – Alien Bodies and Delusion* (Beijing, 1999), *Food as Art* (Beijing, 2000), and *Bu Hezuo Fangshi/ Fuck Off* (Shanghai, 2000).

During the second half of the 1990s, and mainly outside the realm of large institutional structures, a great number of these privately operated art shows sprang up around China. These were often held at private locations outside the centre of major cities, such as Beijing, where the artistic community meets to collaborate in staging and documenting numerous private shows. Although these exhibitions seldomly last for more than just a few hours, they are the foundation of the *cutting edge* artscene, and, therefore, provide an environment for continuous experiments in creating new visual structures and new instances of communicating *through* art. These locations also serve as spaces where the artist community can meet, discussing and sensing 'signs of *new* artistic times'.

One of the most recent examples of such an exhibition was *Post Sense-Sensibility*: Spree, held on 11 May 2001 at a local theatre in Beijing. The show was directed by Qiu Zhijie who, in 1999, had already organized the show *Post-Sense Sensibility – Alien Bodies and Delusion* together with the independent curator Wu Meichun. At 3pm the doors were locked and, for the next three hours, visitors were confronted with a series of performances that included Zhou Ren's *Massage*, Liu Wei's *Let's Get Happy Together*, Wang Wei's *Wedding*, and Wu Ershan's *Love is Like a Wave*. For his performance *Let's Get Happy Together*, Liu Wei hired a professional female striptease dancer, and together they danced inside a 2 sq. meter glass box. As their dance became more erotic, Liu Wei began covering the glass walls with pigs' blood, creating an orgy of ambiguous vulgarity, which seemed senseless and surpassing all reason.

Those visitors who had arrived after the official opening time found the entrance doors to the exhibition space locked and were only allowed to watch a live video recording of the show projected on a small television screen in the theatre's corridor. Some, anxious to find out more, used their mobile phones to call those inside the exhibition space in hopes that they could be let inside. Despite their efforts, the entrance door remained locked and, instead, those outside were confronted with a situation in which 'real time' information wanders in an 'unreal space' of visual representation. *Post-sense Sensibility*, therefore, described not merely a scene in which artists produced works that move beyond any form of sensibility, but, even more so, only by witnessing the making of an artwork in 'real time' and 'real space' is the recipient allowed to open all senses to the work. By contrast, the experiences of those watching a visual registration of the show often become connected to the selected medium of reproduction, and even more so when the work becomes part of a publication on art, or a feature about art. <

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1 See: Smith, Terry. *What is Contemporary Art: Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity, and Art to Come*. Published by Artspace Visual Art Centre as part of their Critical Issues Series, no. 6. Sydney: Artspace Visual Art Centre Ltd., (2001).
2 ibid.
3 Further comments on the way art functions as communication can be read in: Luhmann, Niklas. *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft (Art as a Social System)*. Translated from German by Eva M. Knodt. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, (2000).
4 In particular when taking into consideration the Chinese title of the exhibition, *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishuzhan, or Exhibition of Modern Chinese Art.*
5 See: *Bu Hezuo Fangshi/Fuck Off*. Beijing: Private Publication, (2000).

> Asian Art Online

With the continuing expansion of connections to the Internet, in early 2001 the Art Agenda started to follow this development in true multi-media style. Opening hours were replaced by links to the e-mail addresses and websites of the various institutes listed in the Asian Art Agenda. Now anyone with access to a server can log on to continuous information on Asian Art in cyberspace: "Link yourselves..."

WWW.biennaleofsydney.com.au
Biennial of Sydney: Official website of the Biennial of Sydney. "Engage, Inspire and Belong" would most likely be the advice from the organization. The site includes a list of venues as well as a wide range of continuously expanding information on the participating artists. Of particular interest is the link to the website of the previous edition of the biennial in 2000. The direct link: www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/biennale2000/events.html gives you a general idea of the event.

WWW.koreawebart.org/FUNK.html
Korea Web Art Festival: There is something charming about the music played upon entering this site, linked to the main site of Multi Media Art Asia Pacific Inc. (www.maap.com.au), a non profit organization promoting innovative art and technology in Australia and the Asia Pacific regions. But the real "FUNK" starts by clicking on the various artists' links, in particular that of 0100101110101101.org, a.k.a. Nakamura. Typing these numbers is only the start of endless permutations. This is a warning: Don't link this to a computer you love. It is art, after all...

http://arts.tom.com/
The ARTUNION: One could get taken to court these days for pushing users into hooking up to one particular software programme. But, once you cross a wide variety of language barriers, it seems that Explorer (The one with the E instead of the N) is the way to go. Such as with this site, which is entirely in Chinese. If 'thou master the language' and be able to read the contents of this website, a world of art in China will become accessible: 'Chinese art for pro's.' This site includes a range of critical reviews on many exhibitions in China, as well as a range of essays by artists and art critics working in China. 'Engage, Inspire and Belong' by logging on to one of the chat-rooms.

http://buddha.artgallery.nsw.gov.au
Buddha – Radiant Awakening: Official website on the recently held exhibition Buddha – Radiant Awakening at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia: This site uses Flash. This site gives information. But can I really 'visit Buddha'?