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Artnet News

How Chinese Art Became Contemporary

Learn more about a variety of theories about the beginnings of Chinese contemporary art.

By Ning Lu, March 11, 2013

Wenda Gu, *Unrecognizable Fake & Unfake Linguistic System*, 1985–1986, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, Beacon, NY

Geng Jianyi, *The Second condition*, 1989, Sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong for 2,420,000 HKD (312,258 USD) in 2009

Most narratives of Chinese Contemporary Art start from the end of the Cultural Revolution. Around 1979, Chinese artists were suddenly exposed to western art history, which led to a rapid turnover of artistic styles. Different art historians have different opinions about what happened next.

When looking at the variety of theories about the beginning of Chinese Contemporary Art, it's not difficult to notice that the differences among these theories are deeply rooted in the art historians' different understandings of Modern Chinese Art.

Zhang Peili, *X?*, 1987, Sold at Phillips de Pury & Company London for 102,000 GBP (207,485 USD) in 2007

Judging from the framework of western art history, Modern Chinese Art might have existed for five centuries.

In his essay *Double Modernity, Para-Modernity*, Jonathan Hay pointed out that a modernity that does not ultimately derive from Euro-America might have come into being in as early as the 17th century in China.¹

Fang Lijun, *Series 1, no. 5*, 1990–1991, Sold at Christie's Hong Kong for 21,940,000 HKD (2,819,725 USD) in 2011

However, most Chinese art historians would push this date forward by at least 300 years. For thousands of years, Chinese Art has developed in its own logic, which isn't easily interchangeable with the western model. It was not until the late 20th century that people started to use the western framework to define and institutionalize Chinese Art.

At the turn of the 20th century, under continuous military, economic, and cultural pressures from the West, Chinese intellectuals and artists began to seek help from the modern world to revive their weakening tradition. This New Cultural Enlightenment Movement not only legitimized western Modern Art in China, but also established a mainstream intellectual discourse that later became the foundation of Chinese modernity.²

Wenda Gu, *Unrecognizable Fake & Unfake Linguistic System*, 1985–1986, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, Beacon, NY

Other scholars believe that the Maoist ideology, which prevailed around the 1960s to the 1970s, dramatically broke the traditional boundary, and directly influenced the first generation of Chinese Contemporary artists who were born in the 1950s.³

In the 1980s, after Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended, a new artistic generation embraced western Modern Art again. And this time, the avant-garde movement emerged with a more radical tone of social and cultural criticism.

Xu Bing, *A Page from "A Book of the Sky"*, 1991, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, Beacon, NY

The avant-garde artists saw themselves as cultural pioneers whose task was to enlighten the masses, fight for social reform, and rebel against the past. They criticized the state-dominant ideology, which had long suppressed individuality.⁴

This utopian ideology underwent a huge transition in the early 1990s, as a result of the Tiananmen incident and the shutting down of the Chinese Avant-Garde Exhibition in 1989.

Gu Dexin, *B14*, 1982, Sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong for 1,280,000 HKD (164,427 USD) in 2011

With the failure of the democracy movement in the 1980s, and under the unexpected rise of mass culture, many artists abandoned their humanist passion. More neutral or even cynical attitudes gave rise to Political Pop and Cynical Realism in the 1990s. Realist painters have, for various reasons, attained monetary success. In contrast, avant-garde artists have lost their audience.⁵

Some believe that this downturn of the utopian avant-garde in the 1980s can be traced back to some often neglected art projects that took place around 1986 and 1987. These projects signified deep dissatisfaction with the on-going Modern Art movement. They tried to break out of the historical framework of western art, and embraced local history, instead of being fixed on philosophical thinking. Furthermore, they rejected collectivism and focused more on individual pursuits.⁶

Wang Luyan, 2004

Interestingly, artists involved in these early projects, such as Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Wenda, and Xu Bing, all became the leading figures in the Contemporary Chinese Art movement of the 1990s. The rise of these artists coincided with the weakening of the 1985 movement. Some believe that the exhibition of Modern Chinese Art in 1989 was, in fact, the last effort to sustain the waning momentum of the Modern Art movement, rather than a visionary project to bring the future to the present.⁷

These artists in the 1986 group had all traveled to the west during the late 1980s and early 1990s. If any sort of "rupture" really existed, it must have been in some way related to the artists' lives overseas.

"Now that we have a completely different but equally powerful benchmark (the western art)," wrote Xu Bing in his letter about Modern Chinese Art in 2007, "our understanding of the value of our own culture has become deeper and more objective. The more we understand the West, the more we cherish our own culture. Our traditional culture, socialist culture and even Cultural Revolution and Maoism are valuable. Only if we are able to combine these traditions with the western culture, can we create art of the future... Chinese avant-garde should be showed to Chinese people, instead of just catering to the taste of western curators."⁸

This quote explains why the art projects around 1986 tried so hard to break out of the framework of Western Art, and embrace traditional Chinese Art.

"My new work "Book from the Ground" may seem to be transnational and contemporary, and it incorporates new technology. However, the key to my inspiration for this work comes from our traditional hieroglyphic. Chinese people are the most sensitive to pictorial writings, this is why I'm so interested in this iconography," Xu explained in his letter.

Although Xu Bing and other artists from the 1986 group gained international recognition almost at the same time as the Political Pop and Cynical Realism artists, the art critics and art historians discuss these two groups separately. Many critics question the future market of Political Pop and Cynical Realism, but do not question the future market of the 1986 group. The fundamental difference between the two is that the former relies almost entirely on the West, and the latter sought out to represent their own culture and tradition.

But even Xu Bing himself has implied in his writing that Chinese Art hasn't become Contemporary yet. Real Contemporary, as some art historians have pointed out, is art that is de-"ideologicalised."

Ever since 1980, the Chinese Contemporary Art movement has been centered on one issue, the conflict between the official ideology ("the state institution in its own interests, produces a purposely misinterpreted conception of reality and endows it with the status of the 'truth', making it the official discourse") and the unofficial ideology (the motivation shared by avant-garde artists of the 1980s to break down the constraints of the authority of official discourse and reclaim freedom of expression). The continuous existence of ideologic-centricism lies in the prevailing antagonist way of thinking; the real "task" for the Contemporary artists is to carry out an "un-unofficial" art, which breaks out from the ideologic-centricism, and which encourages real freedom of creation.⁹

In as early as 1988, a Beijing-based artist group named "New Measurement" Group had already noticed such necessities and had started to experiment with this freedom of creation. These works were regarded by some art historians as the heart of the Chinese avant-garde movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

The three group members, Wang Luyan, Gu Dexin, and Chen Shaoping, spent eight years operating mechanically using rules, formulas, diagrams, signs, and manuscripts, which recorded their processes. This gave birth to a new 'non-art' language situated between letters, mathematics, and linguistic research; ideological problems were transcended by purely numerical and rational research.

However, just as the Guggenheim Museum tried to contact the "New Measurement" Group for an exhibition opportunity, they disbanded because of serious disagreements among the members. Sadly, all documents and manuscripts were destroyed during the incident. However, the "New Measurement" Group left behind millions of opportunities for future Chinese artists.

¹ Jonathan Hay, "Double Modernity, Para-Modernity," *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity and Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

² Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity: An Overview of Inside Out: New Chinese Art," *Inside Out New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (London, England: University of California Press, 1998).

³ Huang Du, "Some Thoughts About the Identity Crisis of Chinese Contemporary Art," *Art Focus* (March 2010).

⁴ Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity: An Overview of Inside Out: New Chinese Art," *Inside Out New Chinese Art*, ed. in Gao Minglu (London, England: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵ Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity: An Overview of Inside Out: New Chinese Art," *Inside Out New Chinese Art*, ed. in Gao Minglu (London, England: University of California Press, 1998).

⁶ Wu Hung, *How Chinese Art Became “Contemporary,”* at The Art Institute of Chicago (February 2010).

⁷ Wu Hung, *How Chinese Art Became “Contemporary,”* at The Art Institute of Chicago (February 2010).

⁸ Xu Bing, “Letter About Modern Chinese Art,” *2009 Beijing International Conference on Art Theory and Criticism* (Beijing: China Contemporary Art Forum, 2010).

⁹ Hou Hanru, “Towards an ‘Un-Official Art,’” *On The Mid-Ground* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2002).

Philip Tinari, Director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, China, highlights three watershed moments in the development of the contemporary art scene in China. Co-sponsored by the Johnson Museum of Art and the Department of History of Art and Visual Studies. Recorded April 25, 2016 as part of the East Asia Program's Cornell Contemporary China Initiative Lecture Series. Wu Hung, University of Chicago, explores the crucial moment in Chinese art that reset an avant-garde movement as he analyzes key art projects, experimental exhibitions, and the language of art criticisms. He is introduced by curator James Rondeau. This podcast is brought to you by the Ancient Art Podcast. Explore more at ancientartpodcast.org.