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China: Then and Now

When I embarked on my curatorial career in the 1970s, video attracted me because it was on the cutting edge. I discovered a dynamic counter culture (offspring of the Beats and Woodstock) flourishing in Manhattan's desolate Soho district, in rural upstate communes, and in alternative art centres across Canada. Art from this ad hoc context found itself more on the fringes of prevailing conceptual and minimal art. Technically, this was still the dark ages, before faxes and Web pages. Pioneering media artists shared their clunky portable video cameras (weighing twenty pounds) and the crudest on-the-fly editing systems for "open-reel" half-inch tape. Denizens like me climbed dank staircases and congregated in dusty lofts for impromptu screenings of the latest black-and-white videos and for inter-disciplinary performative experimentations. A joint passed around eased viewers into unhurried events that stretched far into the night. Process took precedence over saleable product. With travel and long distance phone calls being expensive and therefore infrequent, information from the hardcore reached more out-of-the-way practitioners through publications such as *Radical Software*, a grass-roots, sophisticated how-to; *Avalanche*, an in-depth interview magazine that captured the grit of downtown New York; and the *Satellite Video Exchange Directory* that came out of Vancouver.

My fascination with Asia began in the 1970s with Japan, the video technology leader known for its well-designed gear. Motivated to discover how Japanese artists used the new consumer tools, I made several research expeditions while organizing the survey exhibition *Video from Tokyo to Fukui and Kyoto*. On a later foray in 1981, I made it to Seoul on an expedition set in motion by the perspicaciously global Nam June Paik. Gradually my horizon expanded to include China.

At the American Film Institute's 1989 Video Festival in Los Angeles, the Taiwanese-born artist Shulea Cheang presented her own videos, along with several recent documentaries from mainland China, and I wanted to learn more about the discourse that was taking place among these previously isolated artists. I heard that dog-eared copies of *ArtForum* and *Art Press* circulated widely among friends. The handful of artists who were able to travel abroad became influential conduits, returning with catalogues, postcard-sized reproductions, and vivid impressions of museum exhibitions. Young artists idolized the triumvirate of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Joseph Beuys because of the maverick stand these three artists took against established art forms.

Wu Wenguang and his documentary *Bumming in Beijing—The Last Dreamers* (1990), now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, opened my eyes. In 1988 Wu Wenguang began recording five struggling avant-garde artists. Each had illegally moved to Beijing from the provinces to pursue their own artistic dreams. Wu Wenguang adroitly used a small camcorder to shoot with an unbiased *vérité* methodology. (Wu had trained as a newspaper journalist prior to becoming a newsroom editor.) Without music or voice-over narration, Wu Wenguang punctuated his subjects' candid ruminations about life, art, and the future, interspersed with shots of them scrounging for food, and doing everyday tasks in minuscule apartments and squalid back alleys. As the documentary concludes, only one of the five artists remained in Beijing. The other four had moved to Europe or the United States after the Tian'anmen Square incident of June 4, 1989.

Upon completing a four-month sabbatical in Tokyo, I met Cai Guo-qiang at his 1993 show in P3 Gallery, an alternative exhibition and performance space conjoined to a Buddhist temple. I entered from a busy street and came face-to-face with the head of a menacing dragon. The mythological beast's vast neck descended a flight of stairs to a large subterranean gallery, where its torso wound round and round and transformed the space into a maze.

A dank scent wafted through the air. The aroma came from a small room off to one side, where earthy brews steeped in dozens of clay pots set on clay braziers. Cai Guo-qiang handed me his mysterious infusion in a tiny cup. It felt very Alice in Wonderland but healing, a recurrent theme in Cai Guo-qiang's work. Eschewing China Pop, which was becoming very popular in mainland China, Cai Guo-qiang used techniques that were closer to the methods of a shaman, bringing together dissimilar entities on the basis of their similitude.

Back in New York I became friendly with a group of expatriate Chinese painters, and they supplied contacts when I set off for Hong Kong to give a lecture. Investigating the media art scene there, I met Ellen Pau and her Videotage associates. They all held various day jobs but tirelessly organized video workshops, screenings, and an annual international festival.

Before the handover to mainland China, the Hong Kong art scene had a harsh disconnect between Chinese and British cultural systems. Artists seemed trapped by the divide between traditional and contemporary, unsure about their own identity and aesthetic direction. At artist run alternative spaces I encountered energy, openness, and provocative installations. Brush and ink artists could not fathom why MoMA never showed their work, to which I responded, "Have you ever approached the Chinese department of the Metropolitan Museum?" Conversations with Johnson Tzang at Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong (founded in 1983) helped to shed light on the incumbent tensions and differences.

From Hong Kong I set off by train for the mainland. I met Guangzhou art school faculty and students, who graciously opened their studios. The paintings and sculpture felt staid, unlike the school's design department

that hummed with state-of-the-art activity. Mandated to be entrepreneurial and therefore current, professors with students were designing full on commercial advertising work. This gave them financial independence and access to the latest computer hardware and software.

Stir-fry

Now hooked on China, from home I sought the most up-to-date reports, and my German, French, and Italian colleagues shared information about what they were uncovering in China's increasingly dynamic art scene. Ready to tackle media in the Middle Kingdom, I received a modest travel grant from the Asian Cultural Council. Two weeks before departure, the MoMA administration agreed to put my research on line as daily "curatorial on-line dispatches" on a site entitled *Stir-fry*. (This was pre-blog, in the early days of the Internet.) In September of 1997, I set off lugging a backpack stuffed with a computer, camera, tape recorder, and cables. I also brought someone along who could make it all work, to put something on the Web.

I doubted whether I would actually be able to get the information out to New York, and indeed, using the Internet in China in 1997 proved to be an adventure. While not always fun, still I managed to send data to New York nearly every night from the business centre of my hotel, painstakingly using dial-up. Back then MoMA had only a pilot Web site, so a crew at the art Web site *ada'web* assembled my content into an engaging form. There are many ways of characterizing this China site—one might call it an "Artalogue" or "Art Travelogue." Everything I wrote consisted of my impressions and opinions, as I recognized that politics were complex, and I did not want to create a bad situation for anyone.

Beijing

I arrived in Beijing with a short list of artists' names and a general sense of my itinerary. On the first day, artists Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao hosted a welcoming dinner with ten promising Beijing artists, the critic Li Xianting, and a young art historian who translated for me. Over the next few days I made studio visits.

Wang Gongxin, born in 1960, epitomizes a generation that grappled with new avenues of expression in a rapidly evolving nation. Trained as a realist painter, he received a B.A. from Beijing's Capital Normal University in 1982, and continued his painting studies at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Cortland and in Albany. Spending additional time in Manhattan, he made ends meet by making portraits of art aficionados outside of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There, working on the sidewalk, he met other dislocated Chinese artists in need of cash, including Ai Weiwei. Living in Williamsburg, Wang Gongxin and his wife Lin Tianmiao—also an artist who supported them in New York by designing children's clothes—stayed for seven years. Numerous installation ideas gestated during this incubation phase. Wang Gongxin was particularly struck by the precision and craft in how Bill Viola devised his metaphorical work, which he saw in a 1987 show I organized at The Museum of Modern Art. Viola's meticulous attention to every detail that went into the construction of his immersive "tuned environments," which adroitly sublimated the technologies, made a lasting impression on Wang Gongxin.



Wang Gongxin, *The Old Bench*, 1996, single-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Wang Gongxin, *The Sky of Brooklyn*, 1995, single-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Wang Gongxin's *The Old Bench* (1996) consists of a small LCD screen inserted into the surface of a weathered Ming-style workbench—an object as iconically “Chinese” as a blue Mao jacket. The flat screen depicts life-sized fingers meditatively moving back and forth over the craggy surface of the bench as splinters lodge into the fingertips. By its oblique reference to a discomfort with long-held traditions, this disquieting scene addresses the anxieties that accompany progress. *The Old Bench* might also be read as a metaphor for Wang Gongxin's own trajectory as an artist.

Responsible for an early example of installation art in China, *The Sky of Brooklyn* (1995) linked his former home in Williamsburg to his new one in Beijing. Wang Gongxin was one of the first artists to experiment with video in a non-documentary manner. To install *The Sky of Brooklyn*, he had workers dig a ten-foot-deep hole in a small room just inside his front door. At the bottom of the abyss Wang Gongxin placed a video monitor, which glowed with footage of the Brooklyn sky that was recorded from the roof of his former apartment. Reversing the American childhood fantasy of “digging a hole to China,” Wang Gongxin combined this notion with the Chinese saying “look at the world from a well” (an aphorism encouraging introspection). Informal invitations were sent out to friends and colleagues, and, famously, more than one thousand inquisitive people stopped by their modest home to see this novel art form and gaze at a piece of New York sky. With an innate curiosity and openness, Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao became cross-cultural mediators between China and the West.

Lin Tianmiao, *Bound and Unbound*, 1995–97, eight hundred household objects, video, cotton thread, installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Lucky for me, Lin Tianmiao set up her installation *Bound and Unbound* (1995–97). She had painstakingly enshrouded nearly a hundred household utensils, such as a tea kettle, with thread. At the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, Wang Gongxin invited many artists, including Li Yongbin and Qiu Zhijie, to come and show me their latest video work.

I also caught up with the conceptual artist Song Dong, who was sharing his tiny flat in one of Beijing's courtyard compounds with his artist-wife, Yin Xiuzhen. Internationally recognized today as innovators, the two balance challenging demands of active careers with day-to-day interactions among their local community. Entrenched within their old-fashioned neighborhood has instilled both Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen's work with an element of candor. The couple's discrete art practices revolve around installation, and combine aspects of performance, video, photography, sculpture, and in his case, painting. Both work with the humblest of materials. For Song Dong this might include an inexpensive mirror, or an enormous traditional writing brush with which he deftly writes in Chinese on sidewalks with quickly evaporating water. In such public thoroughfares as Tian'anmen Square, he has repeated simple actions, including jumping, with earnest purposefulness. In the process he explores notions of transience and change, not surprising for an artist based in a city undergoing radical transformation.

In the 1980s, when Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen started out, contemporary art in China was just getting off the ground as the country set its sights on modernization. Deng Xiaoping's emphasis on entrepreneurialism brought access to new technologies and a wider range of information. Song Dong carried out subtle performative actions, making video works that early on tended to be technically straightforward. He would set up a fixed camera, and the action (performed by himself) unfolded in the space in front of the lens. With minimal editing, his videos generally lasted as long as the event, and were organized within a conceptual framework. At the start, with few video examples to follow, Song Dong (like his slightly older peers Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxin, Li Yongbin, and Wu Wenguang) devised his own media and performance techniques. Encouraged as a calligrapher since childhood, he was liberated from art school curriculum once he stepped outside of conventional art and television and narrative film forms. He manipulates time and memory in personal ways.

A good example is *Broken Mirror* (1999). Crouched down on one of Beijing's busy side streets, Song Dong aimed a video camera at an unframed glass mirror. He inconspicuously recorded the mirror's display of pedestrians and bicyclists tranquilly happening by, behind him. As soon as the artist started pounding a hammer against the mirror's surface, heads of passersby whipped around to stare. Mild curiosity morphed into incredulity when the mirror noisily broke into shards and shattered, revealing the street scene behind the glass. The cleverly mediated view of street action was exposed. With the mirror gone, the ebb and flow of foot traffic returned to "normal" and the video came to a close.

During my Stir-fry trip, Feng Mengbo was the only artist in China with a computer. (I used his equipment to send several of my Beijing dispatches to New York.) In addition to producing interactive CD-ROMs, Mengbo was outputting his digital images as iris prints, on scrolls, and silk screened on aluminum panels. He had just participated in Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, and the Gwangju Biennial in Korea. His *Taking Mountain DOOM by Strategy* (1997) is a modern story of what happens when the heroes

Song Dong, *Broken Mirror*, 1999, single-channel video, 4 mins. Courtesy of Beijing Commune.



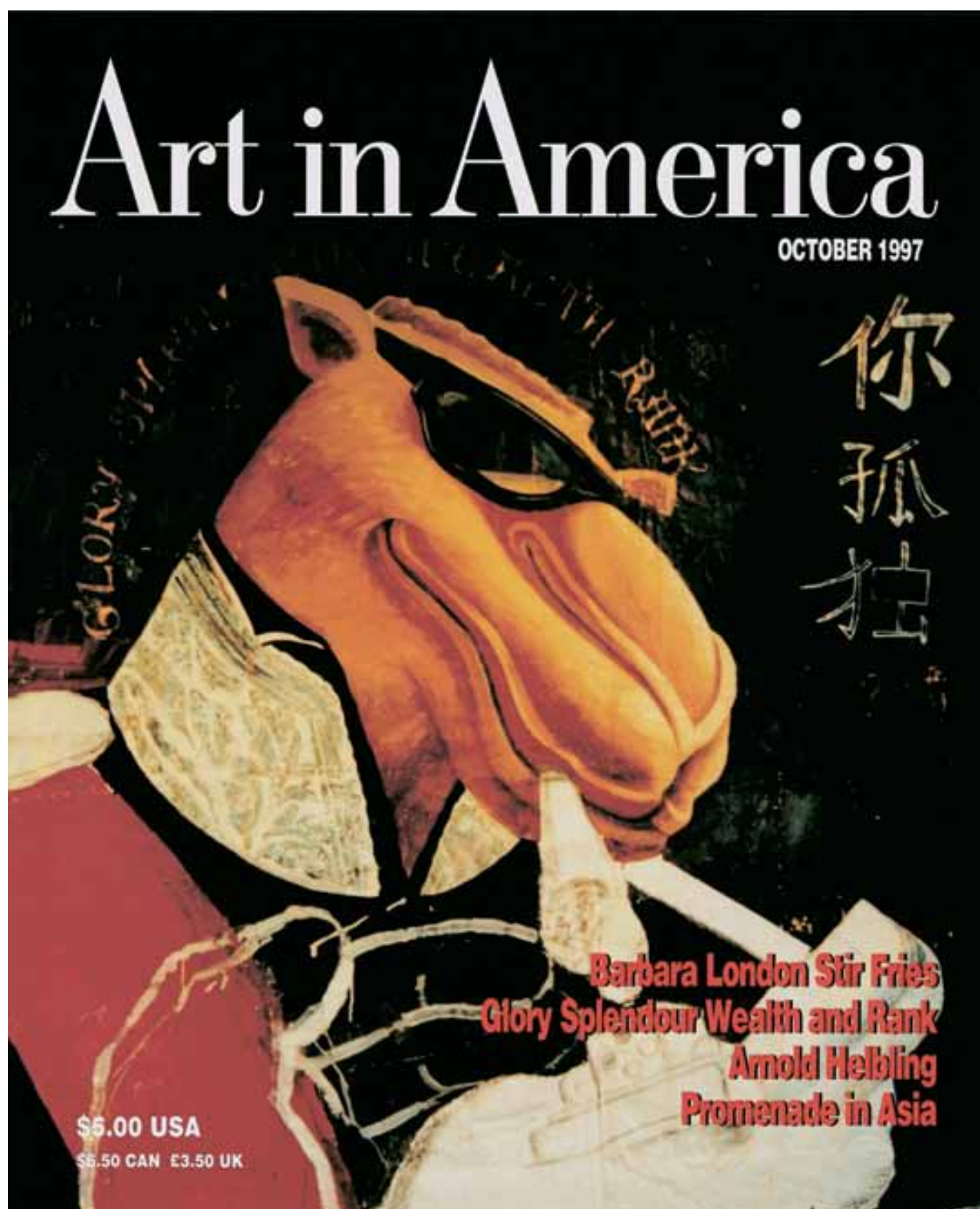
of the Beijing Opera meet the masters of the video game *Doom*. A live event, an historic battle in the Chinese revolution of the late 1940s, Mao's revolutionary forces defeated the Nationalist armies at Tiger Mountain. In the 1950s, reality segued to the novel, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*. Then the tale took the form of a Beijing opera, and in the late 1960s, *Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy* blossomed as a major motion picture, one of a handful made during the Cultural Revolution.

In Mengbo's CD-ROM, players are unsure which side will triumph, the young *Doom* sharp-shooters or the leaping, twirling footwork of Yang Zirong, the hero of the old guard. Yang Zirong's impressive moves would soon exhaust and trash Arnold Schwarzenegger's plodding Terminator. But is anyone fast enough to escape the cross-hairs of *Doom*: "Taking Mountain *Doom* By Strategy"?

Shanghai

Moving on to Shanghai, I met Lorenz Helbling. His then new ShanghART gallery occupied a small area of a mezzanine in the Portman Hotel. Indicative of how emergent the art scene was back then, Helbling gradually transitioned from his miniscule space to multiple warehouse-sized galleries, and a roster that includes the best contemporary artists in China.

I visited Zhou Tiehai, who had just completed his sardonic Joe Camel series of large tableaux, painted mainly on newspaper. In his drawing *Joe Camel, Are You Lonely?* (1997), Joe, with his gargantuan proboscis, really has it made. He wears a halo of words—Glory, Splendor, Wealth, Rank—confirming that he has everything an artist could possibly want. Despite the realization of the ultimate dream—his face on the cover of *Art in America*—he is lonely.



Zhou Tiehai's work documents the buffeting that idealism has endured in an increasingly materialistic age. Born at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Zhou Tiehai believed the party line that exhorted Chinese youth to save the world, to come to the aid of starving people everywhere. The Cultural Revolution promoted a great idealism. The opening to the West in 1978 destroyed Zhou Tiehai's ardor for service to humanity. Not only were the capitalist countries well-fed, they were rich. In the subsequent battle for the soul of the Chinese people, everyone agrees

Zhou Tiehai, *Fake Cover: Art in America*, 1997, print, 27.5 x 23 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

that money has overwhelmed idealism. Nevertheless, Zhou Tiehai reminds viewers that material acquisition can never be as joyful as people coming together for a cause. “Money is all that anybody cares about,” he scornfully declared, a mantra of modern China.

Zhou Tiehai hosted a Yunnan-style dinner in his home with me, Helbling, the collector Uli Sigg, the painter Ding Yi, and Harold Szeeman. As commissioner of the Italian pavilion of the 1999 Venice biennial, Szeeman was on the prowl.

I took a two-hour train ride to Hangzhou and visited the National Academy of Art, where Western art was introduced into China. (The Academy was founded in 1928 and its first director believed that traditional Chinese art would be enriched by admixing Western art. The second director thought otherwise. Chinese art is very different, he advised, and a gap should be maintained between Chinese and Western art. The issue is still unresolved.) I spent a day with Zhang Peili, who went on to become founder and Dean of the media department at the Academy. Committed to ideas, Peili (who had also spent time in New York) felt that art should disturb old ways of thinking yet, at the same time, remain relevant to a changing society. Peili’s first video works were made with rudimentary gear and revolved around concise actions performed largely by him. Without a tradition in China to follow, video offered a clean slate. He made videos as bare bones as Bruce Nauman’s. Peili stepped outside of narrative forms, recording what appears to be “reality” but are pithy conundrums to unravel. Simple, poetic actions act as metaphors for incisive political and social critique, including reckoning with the pain of the country’s recent history and a rapidly shifting national identity.

Zhang Peili explained how he made his first video to present at a small, elite conference in Huangshan, and questioned how anyone in China could be avant-garde given the circumstances of their then closed environment. Rather than making the requested presentation on Hangzhou’s creative environment, Zhang Peili challenged powwow attendees—fellow “experimental” artists from across the country—with his new video.

Zhang Peili, *30 x 30*, 1988,
video, 120 mins., 30 secs.
Courtesy of the artist.



30 x 30 (1988) depicts the artist’s hands in close-up. Wearing a pair of latex gloves—a reference to the country’s filthy standards of communal living and the then rampant hepatitis, which the artist recently had caught—he holds a thirty-by-thirty centimeter mirror. This is a standard size in China, roughly twelve inches square. He drops the mirror and meticulously glues the shards back together. After dropping the mirror a second time, reassembly is more difficult. The entire procedure takes about three hours.

He again used a stationary camera to record himself seated on a chair in *Document on Hygiene* (1991). (His straightforward production techniques have to do with philosophical as well as practical reasons.) Dressed in prison uniform-like clothes, he solemnly and slowly washes a chicken in a basin



of water set on the floor in front of him. The camera dispassionately records as he lathers up and rinses the disgruntled chicken. At the start, the bird flaps and fidgets in resistance but gradually succumbs to the unpleasantness, and resembles a water-logged feather duster.

Left: Zhang Peili, *Document on Hygiene*, 1991, single-channel video, 24 mins., 45 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom and opposite page: Zhang Peili, *Eating*, 1997, 3-channel video installation, 28 mins. Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Zhang Peili's concept came from a childhood experience: "Then, life was simple and hard. Most households kept chickens and I took care of ours. They weren't pets—they were raised to be eaten—but they were the closest thing I had to a pet, so I played with them and in doing so observed their habits. Chickens avoid water, preferring to bathe in dust; it would never occur to anyone to wash them."¹

Zhang Peili leaves it ambiguous about the issues of power and control. Who is imprisoned—the chicken, the artist in his prison uniform, or both? Washing should be pleasant, but it is impossible to know how a chicken feels about contact with water—whether joy or anguish.²

With the word "document" in its title, the video also evokes a dry, analytical, almost government-issued lesson on cleanliness. While bathing can be sensual, the implication here has more to do with coercion than pleasure.

Another reference is even more obscure to non-Chinese. The simple silhouette of a bird resembles the geographical spread of China's borders. Taken further, the allusion could refer to the ideology in which Mao bathed the people, subduing the masses with his own brand of soap (i.e., ideology).³ And so he subtly critiques the social, political, and authoritarian environment.



Zhang Peili also showed me his just completed *Eating* (1997), a video sculpture with three synced monitors stacked one on top of the other. (In 1998, the Museum acquired and exhibited *Eating*.) Each details a different point of view of the same concise and modest action. The top monitor focuses on ear movement during chewing, and the base monitor shows a knife and fork attacking a piece of cake. These composed, fairly static shots are in colour. Separating them is a black and white action view of the cake traveling from plate to mouth. Shot with a camera taped to the eater's wrist, the disorienting perspective turns eating into a weird event. The delivery of morsels to a gaping mouth is surreal.

In the same way that many non-Asians are adept at handling chopsticks, the Chinese fellow in *Eating* devours Western foods—cake, tomato, and



hard-boiled eggs set on European-style ceramics—with knife and fork. It is as if a sentence is parsed into subject, object, and verb. In this humble but insightful work Peili was confronting the effects of unrestrained modernization and the impact of the global on the local, especially in terms of daily life. The humble citizen, as in J. Alfred Prufrock, is measuring out life, bite by bite.

Guangzhou

Once I reached Guangzhou, I sought out Big Tail Elephant, a four-member group of artists. Co-founded by Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, and Lin Yilin, and later joined by Xu Tan, they became known for aggressive social criticism and their underground exhibitions at the entrances to bars, in parking lots, abandoned houses, and construction sites were seen only by a small audience of friends. Big Tail Elephant never had a manifesto or declaration of any kind because they believed creation to be a process, and fixing their principles would allow limited space for change and self-criticism. They had weekly conversations, and didn't feel that production had to be their only format for dialogue and exchange. Big Tail Elephant was both a method for considering the issues they were interested in, and a democratic attitude towards life. The role of its members was non-hierarchical, a rare example of peck-less order. People in China know their place and their link in a chain that stretches from peasant to Emperor (Chairman), and the absence of a personal power structure in Big Tail Elephant was as revolutionary as their work.

Big Tail Elephant presented their work to me at Libreria Borges, a bookstore that engulfed owner Chen Tong's modest apartment. On the wall were framed photos of Alan Ginsburg, Umberto Eco, Vladimir Nabokov, and Jorge Luis Borges. Books were stacked everywhere—art books about Francis Bacon, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Miro, in addition to translations of Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, E. L. Doctorow, and a few Shakespeare plays. The French luminaries Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Derrida were represented in depth. The French cultural attaché steadfastly supported this bookstore by helping them import publications (along with Beaujolais Nouveau), bringing world literature to Guangzhou's writers and artists.

Most recent Big Tail Elephant member Xu Tan arrived with a slide projector and slides. An easy-going bear of a man with a ready laugh, he did not have the air of a determined faultfinder. He presented an installation, and at first glance, “let it all hang out” seemed to sum up his critical position. I learned there was method in his madcap methodology. He lumped together lobster and crab from an upscale Guangzhou restaurant (Arc de Triomphe), Renaissance paintings (his copies), tacky neon lights, a plastic Schwarzenegger, a taxi's rearview mirror with a dangling Mao, and lots of other street junk that he was happy to identify. The theme of the installation was disharmony in society.

“Long live Chairman Mao,” “Down with U.S. imperialism,” “Down with Soviet revisionism”—these were the first English words that Xu Tan learned, and in that order. His exuberance and humour is an important part of his message. Art should not always be serious or heavy handed; obedient to the nostrums old guard artists learned from Soviet Russian teachers.



Lin Yilin, *Standard Series of Ideal Residence*, 1991, installation, brick, iron, wood. Courtesy of the artist and DSL Collection.

Lin Yilin's *Standard Series of Ideal Residence* (1991) appeared in the first exhibition of Big Tail Elephant held in a hall the group rented in Guangzhou's Workers' Palace. At the time, Lin Yilin scarcely understood the meaning of "installation." The 1980s had opened China to a flood of Western art, but Lin Yilin's quick scan of twentieth century art left him confused, and he resolved to begin with a concept—the wall—and develop it.

The power of a wall comes from the physical effort to build it. Lin Yilin put together the architectural structure of *Standard Series of Ideal Residence* without any help from construction workers. He hauled all the bricks to the exhibition space himself, rescuing them from the rubble of demolished buildings.

"Wall" as a concept holds special significance in China—there is the Great Wall and the wall around the Forbidden City where the dynasts lived. But walls are everywhere and in all forms—walls of silence, walled up emotions, the Berlin wall, government and bureaucratic walls.

After feeling the power in the wall he built, Lin Yilin applied his energy to moving walls, to physically transporting them. As an action at a busy intersection, *Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road*, Lin Yilin moved a wall, brick by brick, at a snail's pace across the street. For a foreigner unaccustomed to the chaos of bicycle, motorcycle, and automobile traffic, Lin Yilin's way of crossing the street seemed like a practical idea.

The power of a wall is founded on its stability. If a wall moves, the power resides in the mover, not the wall. In a continuing series of these wall performances, Lin Yilin showed the power a person can acquire by moving a wall. In Hong Kong, during the nervous run-up to the transfer of the territory back to China, the authorities rejected his demonstration and forced him to curtail his planned performance.



Later that evening on the climb to the top floor of his nine story walk-up apartment, Lin Yilin explained that he lived on a mountain peak. His apartment was well appointed, with a balcony and a view. He denied that he is middle class—aside from the apartment fixtures, he had few possessions. The apartment belonged to his then employer, an interior design company, but he anticipated buying it soon. Until then, all dwellings were owned by companies and leased to employees at a nominal rent. Trouble with a boss could mean loss of salary and home. Lin Yilin noted that apparently over fifty percent of homes had been bought by the people living in them, and this was a giant step in unleashing China's labour force.

Lin Yilin, Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road, 1995, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

At that time, Chen Shaoxiong was focusing on ink drawing, photography, and installation (his stop action animation came later). He explained that he saw Fluxus artists as a complementary inverse of his work. Whereas Fluxus had a global network, his was local. He exchanged ideas with peers but worked alone. Living in Guangzhou in the 1990s, in every minute of every day, it was possible to sense drastic changes in the social environment wrought by the process of urbanization. These changes in the structure of Chinese society have also been accompanied by a shift in its value systems. His middle school textbooks had Mao Zedong's political theory of three worlds, but after graduating he had Karl Popper's concept of World 3, that of objective knowledge. These two totally opposed worldviews are a classic example of the confusion of theories and values artists were facing at that time. It's like taking all of these things that are mixed up in one's memory—the Cultural Revolution, the educated youth, economic reform, and the opening up to the West—and bringing them all together in a short period of time, but with the narrative destroyed, much like a movie preview.



Chen Shaoxiong, *Ink History* (detail), 2008–10, ink on rice paper and animation, 3 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Recently MoMA acquired Chen Shaoxiong's *Ink History* (2010). In this three-minute animation, he encapsulates the chronicle of modern China, from the fall of the Qing dynasty to the present, through an advancing sequence of images. Viewers are able to scrutinize not only key moments of the past, but reflect upon how representations are used to construct the historical record. Composed of carefully edited and sequenced still shots of Chen Shaoxiong's ink and brush paintings—based on well-known photographs of events ranging from the May 4th demonstrations of 1919 to the 2008 Olympic games—*Ink History* reinterprets familiar images, juxtaposing them against a dense sound-scape of patriotic anthems, military marches, and explosions, all heard against the steady ticking of a stopwatch. He explores how images shape public memory and national identity, and, in his hands, the intimate process of ink drawing personalizes the grand narrative of China.

Conclusion

After *Stir-fry*, I organized the exhibition *China Now* (2004), out of which the Museum acquired a dozen videos. Returning to Guangzhou in 2003, I caught up with the young artist Cao Fei and her then partner, Ou Ning, a graphic designer and activist. Ou Ning had founded U-thèque, an independent organization that screened international films and videos—procured via Hong Kong distributors—in bars and cafes, and published independent film magazines. U-thèque had eight hundred members living in Guangzhou and nearby Shenzhen.

Cao Fei, Ou Ning, and ten others were just completing a video, *San Yuan Li*, for the Zone of Urgency section of the 2003 Venice Biennial. Curator



Hou Hanru's focus was on social problems in Asian cities, and, interested in the idea of "alternative spaces," he commissioned U-thèque to make the documentary.

Ou Ning, Cao Fei, U-thèque, stills from the film *San Yuan Li*, 2003. Courtesy of Ou Ning and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Acquired by MoMA, *San Yuan Li* is an eloquent portrait of a densely populated, "traditional village" within Guangzhou and under siege by China's urban sprawl. Long considered an eyesore by the government, San Yuan Li inhabitants tended to have complicated backgrounds, including a high rate of criminal records and heavy drug use (ironically San Yuan Li was the site of the opium wars in the mid-nineteenth century). Through interviews and research, the U-thèque group came to understand the beauty of this community, and their video captured the complexity of the area's twenty-four hour rhythm and the social networks that provided a safety net and organically eased up potential conflicts that resulted from the chasm between its poor inhabitants and rich developers from outside (uncomfortable with the group's accurate portrayal of the area, the local government ultimately banned U-thèque as an illegal organization).

Cao Fei, Ou Ning, as well as Yang Fudong in Shanghai, belong to the first generation of Chinese artists born in a digital age with easy access to foreign culture. They are the polar opposite of fifth generation filmmakers, who, during the 1980s received official training at sanctioned film schools. In the late 1990s young artists knew everything about international film history, having studied on their own by pouring over inexpensive pirate DVDs. By 2000, this younger generation was well-versed and using digital cameras to make their films. They were able to bypass China's mainstream state censors and conventional film distribution networks, and they used underground channels (and FedEx) to send and exhibit their work abroad. They cleared the way for the new streams of independent cinema and media art that followed.

Artists everywhere are benefiting from media art being better understood, with new technologies now ubiquitous and easier to handle. Regularly included in contemporary exhibitions, artists' media work is being acquired both privately and institutionally, now that preservation issues are becoming resolved.

China has younger thinkers who are looking to their historic roots and are astutely wrestling with local aesthetics on a global stage. Intellectuals such as Gao Shiming and Qiu Zhijie in Hangzhou, CAFA museum director Wang Huangsheng in Beijing, and Zhang Ga in New York are making strong contributions to the theoretical discourse within China.

Since my first research trip in Asia more than thirty years ago, I have traveled far and wide seeking out talented artists, working hard to understand the new contexts and younger voices. I have visited their studios, gathered documentation, and slotted the information in file folders now accessible in MoMA's library. Over the years, I have followed the work of many artists as they matured. Today, the new kid on the block is boundary breaking media art, and I still have the urge to be on the cutting edge. And China remains very much on my mind.

Notes

¹ Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Zurich: Scalo, 2005), 388, 390.

² *Ibid.*, 390.

³ *Ibid.*