

Cai Guo-Qiang: Artists must refrain from pursuing bigger works at the expense of a smaller self...



The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the 20th Century, realized in part at the Nevada Test Site, February 13, 1996. Photo by Hiro Ihara, courtesy Cai Studio

What is the state of contemporary art in China? How do Chinese artists contribute to the creativity of contemporary art? Regardless of the specific circumstances of China, what artistic value do works have to show for the soaring prices they've fetched? What about creativity? Critical reception of contemporary Chinese art from inside and outside of China has focused largely on sociopolitical issues, national historical events, narratives of popular culture, and record market prices. However, limited consideration has been given to contemporary Chinese artists' artistic value and originality.

Commissioned by Qatar Museums, contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang, who serves as the curator of this exhibition, has devoted three years to research and development of *What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China*. The exhibition will open on March 14, 2016 at Qatar Museums Gallery Al Riwaq, featuring works by fifteen living artists and artist collectives born in Mainland China: Jenova CHEN, HU Xiangqian, HU Zhijun, HUANG Yong Ping, LI Liao, LIANG Shaoji, LIU Wei, LIU Xiaodong, Jennifer Wen MA, SUN Yuan & PENG Yu, WANG Jianwei, XU Bing, XU Zhen, YANG Fudong, and ZHOU Chunya. This large-scale exhibition examines the artist's individual pursuit of creativity in terms of artistic methods and methodology, attitudes, and concepts.

Conceived and edited by Cai Guo-Qiang, an exhibition companion reader, which discusses and

reflects on the creativity of contemporary Chinese art will be published. It includes an essay by Cai Guo-Qiang, which, from multiple angles, discusses art, the artist, art making, and the exhibition, in addition to the challenges confronted by contemporary artists, himself included. Faced with market lure and limitation of society, it seems easy especially for contemporary Chinese artists to succeed, who at the same time can be excused from failure. There is still a long, long way to go in order to become an artist and be part of a generation that can contribute to art history.

Talk Talk What About the Art

By Cai Guo-Qiang

Artists can remain tight-lipped about themselves, unfathomable, but I happen to be someone who likes to talk. I am always encouraging public dialogue in my arts, so how can I not participate? As I speak with the public, and with the art world, I am in fact thinking while speaking, picking up subjects as I wish. There may be things I haven't thought through myself. Some of these come from discussions I've had in my studio, and to the media. What I say about others may also hold true for myself. Some may be what I have heard from others, or what I probably shouldn't say at all, yet here I am writing nonetheless.

In any case, I'm not a professional curator or a critic, let alone a politician. I'm just an artist, so what's the harm in speaking freely about art, artists, exhibitions, and the process of creation, not thinking too much about responsibility. The topic of this exhibition is creativity with a focus on China, so inevitably the discussion here may sound rather outdated, or even preachy. I hope no one was expecting something more hip from me . . .

On Art

The artists of the '85 New Wave movement, including myself, were characterized by our idealism, and still are even today. To some extent we all fantasize that our art can help open up and liberate our society and culture, and that our works can make a contribution to the history of art. Facing the problems of our society, we always hope that art might make a difference.

In this we are somewhat different from the post-89 artists. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident, while intellectuals were still struggling to navigate themselves through the setback, artists very quickly found their footing. Generally speaking, the post-89 artists abandoned their ideals and adopted the posture of *kawaii* (Japanese for "cute") to confront the fate of the nation.

The development of *kawaii* can be traced back to the Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints and even erotic *shunga* prints, which were influenced by the Chinese New Year woodblocks of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). *Kawaii* has evolved into the Japanese manga of today, including erotic cartoons. In Japanese cartoons, the suffering and carnage of war are avoided through the application of *kawaii*, with the result that the process of introspection on past aggressions is muddled. In the twenty-first century, *kawaii* has once again been sold to the world in the form of modern art.

It is impossible for a nation not to discuss its history and culture following a major military

defeat. Yet broaching these topics requires facing up to a great mass of despair, and certain facts may be hard to justify. This might be the historical background that is critical to the flourishing of Japanese manga culture. I've heard that the postwar Japanese fireworks industry received a massive boost from the munitions engineers who were then entering the civilian workforce in droves. Good-looking and *kawaii* form the dual-core of the prosperous twenty-first-century cultural marketplace, making a mockery of our history and our present.

Contemporary Chinese art also has elements of *kawaii*. The catastrophes of the Cultural Revolution have been *kawaii*-washed with cartoon images of Mao Zedong, face festooned with flowery plants, as well as cutesy peasants, workers, and Red Guards fashionably dressed in name-brand Western clothing . . . the Tiananmen Incident all the more so as post-89 artists avoid the pain of the defeat of the democracy movement by transforming its ideals into *kawaii*-style cynicism. These works constitute what is often called Chinese Political Pop.

Kawaii has been a major win for Chinese art, as collectors can't seem to resist it. These wealthy individuals are often lacking in political aspirations and goals; any political system can serve as a stage for their "game" of business. Cute and fun fetch a good price at the art market because heavy or incisive works aren't well suited to the décor of the collectors' lavish homes. Pop art avoids political censure because it says nothing about suffering; it simply provides playthings to the *petite bourgeoisie*. The success of Chinese Pop is one manifestation of the world's fascination with *kawaii* culture.

Perhaps the failure of the democratic reform movement undermined the artists' will to fight, and *kawaii* art was the salve for their spiritual wounds. Irony and humor took the place of a fervent revolutionary spirit. The failures of political reform were compensated for by the boon of economic reform. Everyone anxiously enjoyed the benefits of economic reform: the accumulation of wealth, the increased living standard, and the expansion of personal desire. But if the acquisition of wealth does nothing to facilitate the liberation of the individual soul, it is nothing more than self-interested hedonism. The liberation of the individual soul will contribute to the opening up of society, accelerating the process of political reform. Generally speaking, the more freedom there is in the art world, the better the quality of art and artists produced. Nonetheless, we can still find exceptions in some free countries that have very little in the way of contemporary art. This tells us that the relationship between a society and the art it produces can't be easily reduced to a simple formula.

The Soviet Union also had its Pop art: Lenin and Stalin done up in cartoon style, crystalline tears

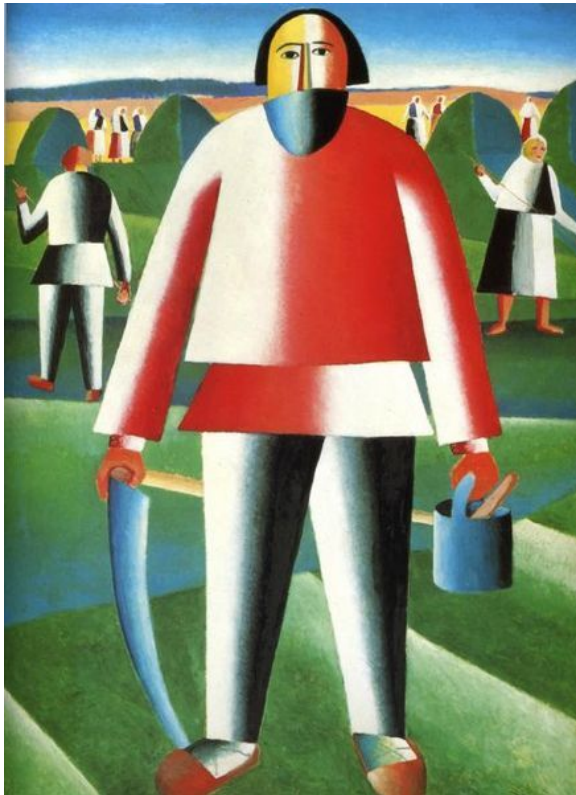


forming flowers and gems on the cheeks of naval officers, and so forth. It is ironic and saddening to occasionally overhear laments that after the collapse of the socialist system, the West completely lost interest in Russian art, and that the Russian artists and the Western critics lost their bearings, as did all of Russian society. Meanwhile, the

Alexander Kosolapov, *Lenin and Coca-Cola*, 1987. Photo by Marta Motagirl/flickr

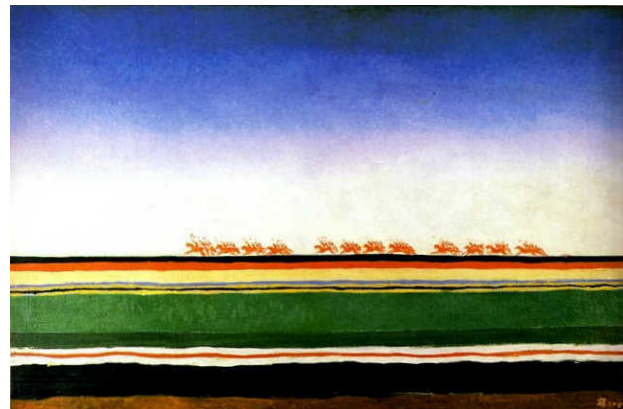
world has been viewing contemporary Chinese artists as still working and struggling under a socialist system. They are perceived as, and perceive themselves as, distinct from the mainstream of socialist art and culture. The connections between Chinese and Soviet modern and contemporary art are numerous beyond counting. The “teachers” (Russia) were gone, and the world started paying more attention to their “students” (China).

The forefathers of contemporary art, beginning with the avant-garde movement, started off by leaning towards socialism. This is true in both the USSR and the West. As leftists, these artists



opposed art for the sake of a small segment of the bourgeoisie. They believed in social care and the significance of enlightening the masses with art.

When these avant-garde USSR artists who aspired after industrialization, popularity, and modernity found their creativity and freedoms restricted by the social system, they emigrated, like Kandinsky and Chagall. Those who stayed behind, such as Kazimir Malevich, underwent forced self-reform



Kazimir Malevich, Left: *Mower*, 1930; right: *Red Cavalry*, 1928-1932.

in art. Socialism demanded that art serve politics by educating the masses with Social Realist works. Abstract art, and other exploration of pure artistic form, were seen as indulgent pursuits of self-expression, and a means of avoiding art's political responsibilities. The relationship between contemporary art and politics was similar in China, with an added layer of complexity imposed by the tension between the opposing cultural poles of Chinese tradition and Western contemporaneity.

In fact, the technique of post-89 painters in China has reached a level that is acceptable to the West, in many cases due to training in socialist art academies. They have also been influenced by modern and contemporary paintings in the West, so of course their painting technique was not entirely the same as that of the National Fine Arts Exhibition painters. [Editor's note: Roughly equivalent to the French Salon, the National Fine Arts Exhibition is a large-scale exhibition organized by the Chinese Artist Association in association with the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China. It represents the government's intent toward cultural policy. Beginning in 1949, twelve exhibitions were held through 2014. The most important art

exhibition regulated by the national government, it relies on a selection process and award committee to determine the national mainstream identity and standing of artists.]

But even after all these years, what many artists have yet to understand is that you don't paint your subject, you paint paintings. You paint a painting through the process of painting the subject. This is why Chinese artists are still enthusiastically imitating Wyeth, Richter, Freud, Hockney, and Tuymans, who understood exactly where both the appeal and difficulty of painting lies. Chinese forefathers of modern art, such as Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji), Guan Liang, Lin Fengmian, and Wu Guanzhong, may have been overlooked today; yet we have to admit that they took paintings seriously, committed to fusing the Chinese and the Western, and each managed to establish a discernable style of their own! As for the vast majority of artists today, if you took their chosen subject matter out of the equation, would you be able to distinguish one artist's work from another's?

In modern China, Marxism and Leninism were the major imported schools of Western thought. Following opening and reform, modern Western thought entered. Westerners often take it as gospel that China was isolated from the West for a long time, when in fact socialism is a Western mode of thought. From elementary school onwards, Chinese children sat in classrooms with bearded portraits of Marx and the whole gang hanging on the wall. Singing the *Internationale* and pondering how to liberate all of humanity, the Chinese think they are participating in a form of globalized education.

Frequently vacillating between believing that their culture is too profound for Westerners to fathom and believing that it is too backward to be worthy of discussion, the Chinese always have difficulty identifying who they are. By contrast, the Japanese managed to get themselves across to the world: viewing the West as a mirror, they have been trying to identify what is Japanese and what is the East, and what of these may be universally applied or accepted.

Takashi Murakami's exhibition *Little Boy* had very clear objectives. The artist's works displayed an understanding of complex questions. What constitutes the left and right of Japanese art and culture? What is possible in art, and what is difficult to attain? How can one understand and embrace the universal Western values? What should be the attitude toward the war? What is the gap between Japan and the West? What is the significance of *kawaii*: why is it accepted in the West, but still suspect to some in the Japanese contemporary art world? Is this a testament to the global influence of



Exhibition banner of *Little Boy* outside Japan Society in New York, 2005.
Banner image: Takashi Murakami, *Eco Eco Rangers Earth Force*, © 2005

Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. Photo by Reiko Tomii

Japanese art, or does *kawaii* simply satisfy the Western art world's desire for exoticism, bypassing the dereliction of duty of the Japanese cultural spirit within contemporary art? Murakami is aware of all of these questions and tackles them head on.

The Japanese are constantly monitoring their country's relationship to the U.S., paying close attention to America's major influence on their culture. When the process of Westernization was at its peak, leftist artists in Japan embraced internationalism and Western modern art. These internationalist youths were rattled when American stewardship of Japan was formalized by the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which provided the impetus for a national culture movement. Comparing postwar and prewar Japan, it is clear that there was a renewed interest in recovering the Japanese cultural spirit, and they have made no small accomplishments in the cultural coordinates of the modern world.

The question of what constitutes the legacy of Japanese aesthetics, and how Japanese art is to withstand the incursion of Western contemporary art have been hot topics in the contemporary Japanese art world. China and Japan share the complex feeling: modern art is a Western import; facing the West-dominated art world, contemporary Asian art must try to obtain recognition, while still speaking in its own voice, which is a challenging contradiction.

Murakami's exhibition of *kawaii* is the modern edition of the *ukiyo-e* prints, carrying exotic overtones. In spirit, it carries forward the heritage of traditional Japanese culture, while also reflecting the reality of Japanese society today. Yet it utilizes a formal language that might be called Western, or international. At times the leftist mainstream of contemporary Japanese art is surprised to discover that Murakami is, in a way, a rightist. The point of departure for the entire exhibition was an exploration of the spirit and soul of Japanese culture. Leftist critics in Japan are often frustrated to realize that the right would find more support in the U.S., and the same also applies to politics.

The West has a far better understanding of Japanese culture than it does of Chinese culture, and Japanese soft power outstrips that of China. Issey Miyake, Tadao Ando, and others clearly understood the rules of the international game, creating contemporary and international works that nonetheless represent the forward evolution of Japan's cultural heritage.

The influence of the West cannot be isolated to Japan. For China, including our exhibition *What About the Art?*, the West represents an important point of reference. The cultural pull of the West has always exerted a massive influence on China, seeding it with elements of modern Western culture. This is not restricted to the realm of art. These seeds have taken root in the Chinese political system, as well as in the Chinese consciousness of democracy and freedom. Indeed politics in the West have played a role in shaping the development of Chinese contemporary art.

On Artists

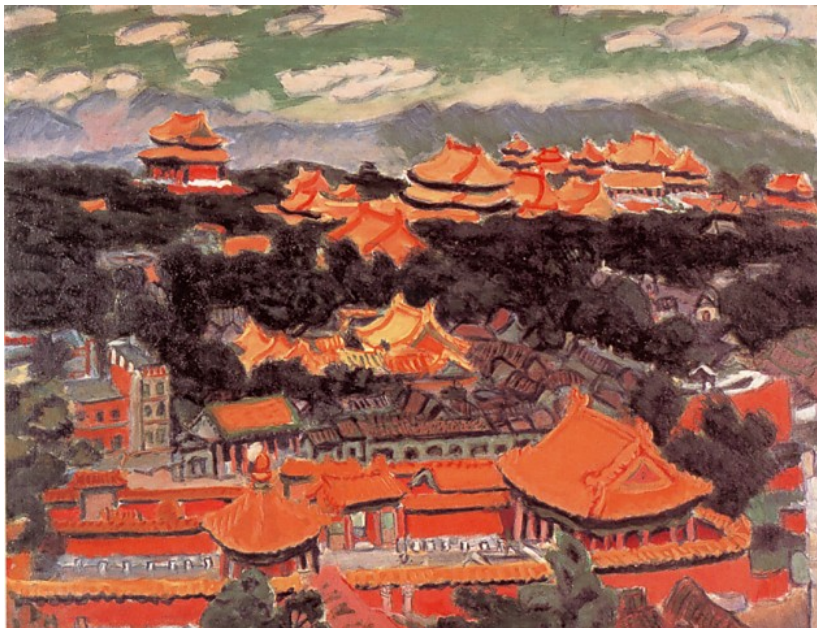
First and foremost, artists must have talent. This is your nature—you may be born to be sentimental and expressive. Secondly, you have to be trained. Through years of creating artworks across the globe a conceptual artist might find him- or herself filled with a thousand ideas for projects.

Then the question is: in this day and age, *do what?* To answer it you have to take into consideration your position in society, your own life and artistic career, as well as the resources and partners at your disposal. It is a judgment concerning one's entire situation, like looking at the pieces on the chessboard and knowing your next move. Besides, you need passion and determination to deconstruct and construct the history of art. Indeed, the gallery space is not just your display cabinet. The gallery and canvas are your battleground, not your market place; they should witness your struggles and wounds as you create art.

Recently I visited Milan and Florence. Michelangelo, Raphael, and Da Vinci, as well as Botticelli and El Greco—in all of their works you can see fierce artistic competition, swords flashing across the canvas. They were geniuses with a range of talents: painting, architecture, scientific discovery . . . but they shy away, knowing the canvas is their main battlefield.

Great artists are often clustered around the transitions between eras. The years from the late Ming to early Qing dynasties produced Bada Shanren (ca. 1626–1705), a descendant of the Ming imperial family who was forced into monastic exile by the new regime. His paintings reveal his resistance and frustration—through his own unique formal methodology, not direct portrayal of the bitter content. Ni Zan (1301–1374), who lived through the Yuan–Ming transition, is another example. Following the ravaging of his hometown by successive waves of revolts, he went into spiritual exile, passing his days freely roaming the countryside. Human figures in his works are invariably tiny specks in the vastness of a natural landscape. Whenever I see one of his paintings in a museum, it is as if I were instantly transported to a land of eternity where my heart belongs.

Some of the great Chinese artists of the modern era, such as Qi Baishi and Xu Beihong, were blessed with abundant talent. Given the massive changes they lived through in both art and society, they should have left a greater mark on the history of art, reaching a lofty spiritual realm, but their development seems to have been restricted by a number of external and internal factors. Qi Baishi spent most of his life painting crawfish and fulfilling commissions from patrons. A



Umehara Ryuzaburo, *Cijincheng Palace*, 1939

man of his talent and spirit could have achieved far more. As for Xu Beihong, he did innumerable portraits of various subjects at distinct stages of his lifetime, yet never departed from the “half classical” technique he had learned in France. Meanwhile, the Japanese artist Umehara Ryuzaburo, who studied painting in France a few decades earlier than Xu, was already exploring Impressionism and Expressionism from the West to further create a distinctively Eastern style of oil painting.

While the Chinese master artists were busy painting horses and crawfish with aplomb, like highly skilled craftsmen, their counterparts in the West were occupied by writing new chapters of art history. For example, Picasso was busy striving to break new ground—the Blue Period, the Rose Period, Cubism, Neo-Classicism—charging freely across all corners of the artistic map. Many people may well have excuses for their lack of achievement, but what excuses did Picasso offer, a Spaniard who emigrated to France without speaking the language, a man who lived through two world wars? Not easy for him either!

The history of modern China is indeed characterized by the demands of national survival and recovery. Yet many other countries have endured similar periods, if not always to the same extreme. In times of calamity, art and literature are often requested to adopt the forms that are more easily understood, so as to motivate and inspire the masses. Prints, ink painting, and posters are all forms of art that are easily produced and easily digested. But these conditions do not preclude the emergence of individual artistic methodologies and creative forms.

American power increased dramatically following World War I. The political and economic power of the U.S., along with cultural developments centered around the modern city, began to exert their influence on the world. The U.S. had been searching for its own culture, one that



would set it apart from Europe. When American artists, such as Hudson River School painters, used the technique and style of European oil painting to depict American landscapes or figures, the results were magnificent, though sometimes clinical like a geography textbook or illustrations fit for books of anthropology.

Albert Bierstadt, *Departure of an Indian War Party*, 1865.



Albert Bierstadt, *Departure of an Indian War Party*, 1865; *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865.

Progress came after American artists, like Cassatt and Sargent, moved to Paris to paint local landscapes and portraits, but American oil painting only truly found its footing with Hopper's



Edward Hopper, *House by the Railroad*, 1925.

desolate train depots, as well as the vast, empty stretches of newly paved road and the lost look of the new emigrants in street lighting. He used Western painting technique to capture the stark reality of a changing landscape. Meanwhile, in neighboring Mexico, artists were fusing Cubism, bold stylistic art in Southern Europe, and native American culture, to create large-scale murals that conveyed the mystery and upheaval within the American land and society. American artists studied in Mexico following the influence of Orozco and Rivera, which in turn opened the door for Mexican artists

to visit the U.S. Some of them, like Rivera and Siqueiros, were Communist Party members and painted murals critical of capitalism in the U.S.!

The U.S. had long been searching for its own path, but it was the Mexican artists who truly walked the road of new art of America. Their work was one of the inspirations that Pollock and



Diego Rivera, *New Democracy*, 1910. Palacio de Belles Artes, Mexico City.

other American artists drew on, reflecting upon the spirit and character of their own culture. It was inevitable for American artists to produce creative art that responded to the complex configuration that was America and the changes happening at lightning speed in their country. Once this creative energy was released, it could not be reined in again.



Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934. Recreated version of the painting.

Despite the host of difficulties and strife that plagued them, the Latin American countries nonetheless produced cutting-edge art since the twentieth century and thinking that served as a beacon to other nations, just as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* altered the global literary landscape!

These examples provide a useful point of comparison for today's vigorously developing China. The entire world is waiting to see what China will create from this era of deconstructing the old and building the new, of increasingly complex and changing relationships within and with the outside world. In a chaotic world where old values no longer apply, we need new forms and methodologies of art, not just reportage and documentation. If our art is to respond to the reality of today, without an innovative methodology, however responsive it may be, it will be forgotten by history.

Despite having studied so much from the West, contemporary Chinese artists have failed to incorporate the values of individualism. Most Chinese art arises from collective consciousness. Chinese artists did learn something from the West though, from their mode of operations, to successful commercialization of their work, to their mastery of the mixed-media form. From Cézanne onwards the progress of Western art has been dialogue between the individual and the history of art, the almost legendary discovery of new languages for artistic expression.

The reason the Chinese have never managed to understand individualism is that the individualism of the West has deep roots that can be traced back to reactions against the repression inherent in the religious paradigms of the Middle Ages. Following the humanist revival of the Renaissance, a new civilization took form based in the advance of both material and democratic political culture. China's May Fourth Movement of 1919 is a far cry from Europe's Renaissance. Though also based in the advance of science and democracy, it was primarily a movement aimed at saving the nation, not saving the individual, thus China never developed a basis for understanding individualism.

Some may deny this lack of individualism in China by pointing out that Chinese people are now selfish. They flaunt their wealth, disregard the common good, and are unwilling to take responsibility for their own society. Surely, critics say, this is the influence of Western individualism. My response is that this is egoism, not individualism. Individualism is affirmation and respect for the dignity and rights of the individual, as well as the individual's responsibility to society. China is lacking on both counts. Respect for the individual is not just a personal matter. It is also a national affair. For example, it has implications for issues of national unity. When the individual is respected within a nation, calls for independence will diminish.

Chinese art lacks the universal spirit of humanism. As a form of respect for the individual, humanism allows dialogue between individuals as equals, trying to maximize the justice that can be achieved in a society. This kind of universal value cannot simply be replaced by the so-called ideal of the unity of mankind as advocated by socialism.

If we look back on the rebellious spirit of artists in the 1980s, it is clear that the object of rebellion was collectivism, but ironically, the spirit of rebellion was expressed through collective action. Can any attention be given to real individual action? In such a way the words and explorations of an individual artist can only represent himself. His failures are his own. He alone is responsible for himself, but rightly because of this, he contributes to the vitality of the entire artistic community.

For the past few years, the China pavilion at the Venice Biennale has been filled with every form of art imaginable, from sculpture and painting to performance art, installations, and video, but this doesn't mean the exhibition has achieved the diversity of true individualism. To have a uniquely individual feature, in terms of artistic attitude and concept and artistic approach, as well as the chosen subject, a work can just be about the artist's personal sexual experience, or a heart-wrenching breakup. Such is the true diversity that characterizes individualism.

If you have not learned the lesson of individualism passed down from the European Renaissance, then it is difficult to formulate an individual attitude, concept, and form for your art. Your artistic attitude could be a concern for society, or it could be to overthrow or lampoon the entire history of art. This general attitude guides the creation of specific artistic concepts. From there you can begin searching for the form that will be the vessel for your attitude and concept. Good art is characterized by the fusion of these three levels— attitude, concept and form—into one coherent work.

If these three levels are absent, and you are merely presenting a subject (for example, if it was about China's ecological crisis), then if there is any risk involved, it could only be from political pressure. Whereas the real risk in art is that your work may have no value. If you commit to the goal of producing an artistic form that will leave its mark on the history of art, it is always a lonely and dangerous gamble. There is no certainty. You might spend a lifetime wandering among shadows of existing styles, unable to escape their paradigms.

Chinese artists are smart, but they lack the courage and great wisdom that allow one to play games with the entire history of art. Few artists in China are thinking to show the world a completely new way to paint, a new way to make a building, a new kind of clothing, or a new way to shoot a photograph. In the West, it's only a matter of time before the next game-changer arrives. England is not known for producing revolutionary schools of art like France and the U.S., but the country is still a success when it comes to individual artists. Turner, Moore, Freud, Bacon, and Hockney have all managed to redefine the coordinates of the artistic map.

Interesting artists are those that pose difficult problems. In fact, the biggest problem with contemporary art is often the lack of difficult problems! If challenge-free artmaking is a waste of energy, then where is the new artistic horizon? It may be true that there aren't many spaces left unexplored, but the bitter struggle to develop those new spaces is what gives art relevance and power.

China has a bustling art world, but the artists should not become too much like caged animals in a zoo—big and fat, but no longer ferocious, prone to be “devoured” by the system. Artists should not be so easily tamed; rather, they must remain wild. This holds true in every country. By far, being an artist has become too easy.

On Creation

Most artists discuss method, not methodology. There's a difference: methodology is to art practice as philosophy, the thinking of thinking, is to actions.

Creativity cannot be separated from individuality. In fact, artists in ancient China had an

abundance of individuality, giving rise to numerous methods and methodologies. Of course, feudal society was far from open, but this individuality found support in sources like the *I Ching* (*Yijing*). The *yi* in the title refers to “change,” in search of Dao, or “the golden law.” The “ten thousand things” that make up the universe, methods included, are always undergoing change. The one thing that doesn’t change is the Dao itself.

The essence of Chinese culture is in accord with the laws that govern the changing nature and universe. In comparison with the West, the East, which is relatively free of religious or divine strictures, should have nurtured more diverse and vibrant expressions of individuality.

Traditional Chinese theater affected the development of modern theater in the West. Even Stanislavski, the originator of “spiritual realism,” found the free-style Chinese theater tradition to be a useful mirror for self-reflection. Afterwards, proponents of modern theater in the West gained considerable inspiration and confirmation of their ideas from traditional Chinese theater, which provided them with new ways of conceptualizing what theater could be.

Take the traditional play *Sanchakou* as an example. A table and two benches on stage are sufficient to create the atmosphere of an inn. A blind struggle in the middle of the night is performed on a fully lit stage. This is the unique capability of Chinese theater to draw the audience into its atmosphere—the stage can represent boundless rivers and mountains, with tens of thousands of soldiers and military horses. Ten soldiers can enter the stage and unfurl their banners, and instantly the audience understands that an army of a hundred thousand has advanced onto the battlefield. The audience sees nothing ridiculous about this because they are enchanted by the symbolic aesthetics of the embedded paradigm.

In another play, the eyes of two lovers could be considered tied together by a gesture, after which they stand still as the other characters go about their business, singing. Time has stopped for the lovers; it no longer exists. In the midst of the singing, the invisible thread between the two is cut, and they return to the present moment, rejoining the world unfolding around them on the stage. Chinese theater has methods of performance, and a background methodology, that are distinct from those of the West, constituting a unique concept of performance.

Formalism is almost missing in Chinese art today; people are often concerned if the form has outweighed the subject. Actually, form itself could be a subject. Alternatively, exploration and discovery of new forms can give birth to new concepts, new attitudes, and even new subject matter, and new significances. By contrast, ancient Chinese artists placed a great deal of importance on form. The art of Chinese calligraphy is a concrete example of formalism in ancient China. Although calligraphers begin from rote copying before going on to develop an individual style, in the end the calligraphic strokes become the form. This is where the value of calligraphy lies, and can be appreciated independently from the character of the calligrapher and the content of what is written.

Fengshui has a very clear methodology, as well as a host of methods for dealing with specific problems. Take building imperial tombs as an example. Ancient Chinese architects first surveyed



图 11-1 清式图：东陵风水形势图。光绪元年为同治帝的高陵选址时绘制，以写意山水画法表现东陵风水来龙去脉的形势，在所选勘双山峪、松树沟、成子峪、宝特山等四处风水宝地中，最后由慈禧选定双山峪为陵址。

the surrounding mountains to assess their “meridian” before locating the most auspicious site for the tomb. One may wonder how progress could be constantly reported to the emperor over the years of construction. The answer would be 10-foot-long rulers. The ancient unit of measure was the *zhang*, equivalent to roughly 10 feet. The burial complex was measured out as a series of connected squares measured in whole *zhang* rulers. Once measured, a number representing the elevation was marked in the corner of each of the squares. The dimensions of the squares and their elevations were sufficient for the architect to begin building a scale model to illustrate the progress. It seems a remarkably scientific endeavor, similar in principle to the 3D models built by computer graphics specialists today.

A stone memorial gate called *paifang* at the entrance to the complex frames the tombs and surrounding mountains against the vast natural setting, while also serving as the threshold between the world of the living and the realm of the spirit. Much of the design work took place beneath the visitor’s feet. It was so designed that, seen along the path leading to it, the tomb complex lies in awe and peace against the “primary peak” and “supporting mountain” in *fengshui* geomancy.

Fengshui diagram of the Eastern Qing Imperial Tombs. Reproduced from Wang Qiheng, ed., *Fengshui lilun yanjiu/Research of Fengshui Theory* (Hebei: Tianjin University Press, 1992)

If the path were straight, the tombs at the feet of the mountains would appear desolate and dwarfed. Instead, the path has an intentional S-curve. Walking along the curve, the visitor would see endless mountains on both sides, the tombs nestled within the mountain’s embrace. After the bend, the path would charge straight forward. Naturally the complex and the mountains will continue to alter their proportions as the visitor approaches, as the buildings appear to grow in size. The architects then intentionally elevate the path without it being noticed. Thus, the harmonious proportions of architecture to natural scenery can be maintained in an eternal balance.

Just before the final approach, the visitor must cross a high, arched bridge. The descent from the peak of the bridge causes the tombs to suddenly soar into the sky. Finally appearing taller than

the mountains, the tombs now instill the proper sense of awe and respect in visitors.

Leaving the tomb, the visitor would be struck by the “platter” mountain and the “facing” mountain that stretch into the distance, which symbolizes the great expectations ahead of him. The entrance gate grows bigger, and the mountains become nearer, until they fit within the gate’s

central frame. This majestic view is meant to encourage the visitor, as a descendant of the deceased, to accomplish their own great deeds!

Embedded here is a unity of method and methodology, as well as a deft use of philosophy, aesthetics, and psychology. This comprehensive system of thought even takes into account peculiarities of the climate and seasons. Dry patches of ground can be planted with grasses and flowers, and sparse areas planted with pines, all to complement the effect of the scenery.

Just think about the breadth of vision of our ancestors! Their one-*zhang* ruler can be used to measure our art today, and our spirit and soul . . . From urban planning, landscaping, to installations—why is it that today, design aesthetics appear to lack depth? It is rare to find anything really creative or mind-blowingly good. The legacy of our ancestors has been reduced to surface décor and icons, or abstract preaching of feigned profundity, that sounds dubious even to ourselves.



Views of the gates at the Xiaoling tomb of the Hongwu Emperor. Reproduced from Wang Qiheng, ed., *Fengshui lilun yanjiu/Research of Fengshui Theory* (Hebei: Tianjin University Press, 1992)

People often say that an artist’s success depends on many factors: genius, ambition, training, strategy, and vision, as well as serendipity and luck. From the perspective of method and methodology, the development of an artist may be considered in five phases.

Suppose we are photographing a waterfall. The first phase is acquiring a feeling for beauty. Many people might take a photograph. If yours comes out better, it is because you are better at capturing and expressing beauty. The second phase is acquiring a distinctive artistic character and artistic methods of your own. Your photos become works of art. The third phase is developing a style. You must have an identifiable style whether you are shooting a waterfall, flowers, clouds, or a portrait. Even when you work in an entirely new medium, people must recognize that this is your work. This is largely a matter of having your own methodology. The

fourth phase is exerting influence. Your photographs are the product of method and methodology, but they must further influence many other artists, even those working in other fields. The fifth phase is transcendence. Shooting a waterfall cannot be for the sake of creating a photograph of a waterfall. In fact, there may not be a waterfall at all; the flower you see may not be a flower. There may or may not be such thing as art. In an act of pure creation you no longer distinguish between gain and loss, weight and lightness. A large number of literati throughout history have pursued transcendence, even as they seek recognition for their work.

Of course you can choose not to acknowledge these five phases. You could begin from a concept and an attitude, then look for the proper method and methodology to embody them. Quite a number of young artists in China are currently enamored with Tino Sehgal and his “constructed situations.” His method is to train performers to carry out his instructions within a performance setting. This might require that the performers interact with the audience, thus incorporating the audience into the work.

Sehgal has created a non-material form of art that embraces spontaneous occurrences. Shouldn’t this methodology based on the unfolding of events in time have been first developed by artists in the East?

Some artists may create works of innovative forms, but they may not be culturally sophisticated enough, or may lack insight into society and life. Narrating the events of this vast and complex universe in an original and effective artistic language is not a job for creativity alone. It seems that becoming a great artist—creating great art—is no easy matter.

Revolutions emerge from thinking and practicing at the boundaries of what is currently understood as art. The greatness of your work doesn’t lie in its price or size. Artists must refrain from pursuing bigger works at the expense of a smaller self . . .

On Exhibitions

The crisis of creativity begins with a poverty of faith, thought, and philosophy. These are the things that reconfigure our sense of space and time, deepening and broadening the range of our thinking and imagination. They liberate us from the confines of the world as it appears. The lack of these things would have an impact on art and the creativity of an entire society.

What questions should be raised by an exhibition of contemporary art, particularly of contemporary Chinese art? People often complain that China has many beautiful models, but few works to capture sheer beauty, or that China has many good stories, but all of our novels and movies are mediocre . . .

Artists should care about their society, and their art can represent the social and political problems, but the central issue in art is not one of content, but of the mode of expression. Indeed, one may ask, if it were divorced from politics and social issues, would Chinese contemporary art still be of any value? Artists have to understand that the issues of a society come and go, but only the works that have managed to effectively resolve artistic issues will live in history.

This exhibition of Chinese art is not about “China.” Instead it is focused on the “art,” the state of

creativity, in terms of the individual attitudes, concepts, forms, methods, and methodologies that artists use to express themselves.

An exhibition is often the manifestation of the curator's view of art. It may unavoidably contain biases and errors, but at the very least the questions it raises will stimulate thought and discussion. So, what about the art? What about artists? Often the artists won't tell us, though they understand these questions better than the curator does.

Can we remove their Chinese veil, and look at Chinese artists as we would their Japanese, Brazilian, and British counterparts? What are their goals, and how do they manifest in their work? What are their aesthetics, their methods? What are their attitudes and concepts? They would be terrified to face this kind of critique, all the while knowing this is essentially unavoidable.

In selecting these artists I of course compared them to Western contemporaries, and thought about the Chinese cultural background of their work. But more importantly, I thought about the unique character of their artistic language, and their spirit of exploration. All too often, we seek out the political and social significance in an artist's work while ignoring the rich significance of the artist's attention to form. The media would rather discuss the record prices set by a work of art than analyze how it was painted, and how well.

These days, artists often discuss how busy they are with commissions. It's a pity, really. They are so busy crafting art that they forget how important "craftsmanship" is to art. This exhibition is focused on "craftsmanship," alerting people that this is no easy matter. Successful artists may look like they have it all, when in fact they have nothing. They can sell paintings, make money, get into exhibitions, and receive prizes; but more importantly, what about their "craftsmanship"?

Western scholars of China would find it easier to identify the distinct qualities of contemporary Chinese art compared to their counterparts in the world, because these people understand the background of Chinese culture and society. However, the experts of modern Western art, whose analyses are based on an understanding of imagery and symbolism derived from modern iconology, would draw different conclusions about contemporary Chinese art. Art appreciation based in the visual manifestation and method of presentation has slowly leveled the field of world art history, all art observed and investigated with the same benchmark of "creativity." Indeed, all artworks are equal before creativity. If we were to evaluate contemporary Chinese art in the context of the global art world centered on the West, instead of in a Chinese context as we usually do, we might end up with a relentlessly different conclusion. But this relentlessness is constructive. Chinese artists should not be confined to a Chinese scholarly ghetto.

In China today, the critic and the curator are often the same person. Diligent and honest criticism is a difficult task, which carries risks and responsibilities. An honest critic may find himself shunned and isolated by all. Thus Chinese critics are more in the habit of giving praise and encouragement than pointing out the problems in art, or carrying out serious comparisons to historical or contemporary artists. Curating has become a commercial function, vested with a certain power. In the end, many critics find themselves unable to resist the temptation to begin curating exhibitions.

According to my experience, the way curators and critics discuss art is somewhat different from discussions among artists themselves. Conversations between artists are like between wild animals—raw, sensitive, and specific. Perhaps curators and critics are more like zoologists . . .

Though this time acting as a curator, I do not feel that I am discussing art with a changed identity—I am talking to artists as an artist, also commenting on the problems of criticism and curation. I have to admit though, that as an artist, I am convinced that the curator's role is to serve people. In the end, as a curator, all you are left with is a catalogue! Surely, being a critic is much more difficult!

Chinese artists are often too close to critics. Sometimes, while the artists have moved forward to grow and develop on the world stage, the curators and critics remain stuck in an old spot, lacking the due analytical ability to keep up with the state of the arts in China, and the theoretical advances made by artists.

In the same way that the world hopes in vain that Chinese economists will provide compelling analyses of the Chinese economy, it also hopes Chinese critics can provide an analysis of the Chinese art world. Chinese artists overseas are even less visible, having only rarely been the subject of academic research. In any case, their numbers have dwindled as many choose to return to China . . .

This exhibition is not a retrospective of contemporary Chinese art, nor is it an overview of the related trends or phenomena. Further, it is definitely not an exhibition to demonstrate creativity with Chinese characteristics. Instead, it *is* a spotlight for the creative power of individual artists.

I hope that addressing this topic in Doha will provide inspiration to, and find resonance with, young Arab artists seeking the creative means to address the relationship of Islamic culture to the rest of the world. Moreover, the big contemporary exhibitions and biennials often focus on popular controversies: the environment, refugees, terrorism, the cultural identity of the artist, and other textual and contextual analyses outside of the works themselves, with insufficient attention to artists and art practice in themselves. Therefore, the question raised by our exhibition is also for the contemporary art world in general.

And More . . .

The restrictions enforced by the Chinese Communist Party and China's socialist system have always been a handy excuse for China's embarrassing lack of contribution to contemporary world culture. Chinese culture and education are also frequent scapegoats . . . Of course social restrictions and educational problems affect creativity. However, we should also consider how many Chinese artists have already left China for so-called free countries where they have received Western educations, including education in art. Yet the problem persists: the world is rarely blown away by art and artists from China!

One must first have ambition to achieve artistic accomplishments. And one must have talent to realize the ambition. Only with ambition and talent does one have a chance to make a career out of and live on art. It further requires generosity to expand one's horizons, and establish a vision and foundation for ongoing creative work. Beyond success, artists must also maintain integrity,

keeping simple innocence without ever forgetting their point of departure . . .

The career of a good artist follows a natural course, like the unfolding of the seasons. There is a time to sow, a time to cultivate, a time to reap, and a time to store up one's bounty. One must be able to always navigate oneself—both in times of difficulty and of fame and gain.

The ability to remain innocent, and maintain one's passion for art is a blessed gift. Just be a genius who can create beauty—delve into the vast spiritual currents of humanity with your born playfulness, imagination, and curiosity, which can be further shared with others. This at the very least will bring endlessly unexpected surprises for yourself!

I know many will find these words trite, or even preachy. But if not this, what exactly should artists be doing?



Cai Guo-Qiang, Saudi Arabia, 2013. Photo by Shu-Wen Lin, courtesy Cai Studio

A companion reader to the exhibition *What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China*, edited by Cai Guo-Qiang will be published by Guang Xi Normal University Press. A 60-minute documentary film under the same title, directed by Shanshan Xia and produced by 33 Studio will also be on view in the exhibition.