

InsideOut

New Chinese Art

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SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AND ASIA SOCIETY GALLERIES, NEW YORK

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

This catalogue is jointly published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Asia Society Galleries, and the University of California Press on the occasion of the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, organized by the Asia Society Galleries, New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

EXHIBITION DATES

Asia Society Galleries, New York, and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, September 15, 1998–January 3, 1999

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, February 26–June 1, 1999

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Monterrey, Mexico, July 9–October 10, 1999

Tacoma Art Museum and the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, November 18, 1999–March 7, 2000

Beginning in spring 2000, the exhibition will be presented in several museums in major Asian cities.

The *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition and related programs are funded with major grants from The Starr Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, The W. L. S. Spencer Foundation, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The Taiwan portion of this project is supported in part by the Council for Cultural Affairs, Taiwan, ROC.

The New York presentation of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* is also supported, in part, with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Cultural Challenge Initiative, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, and the Annie Wong Art Foundation.

The San Francisco presentation at SFMOMA has been made possible by The Logan Family Foundation and Dennis and Shannon Wong. Additional support for related education programs at SFMOMA has been provided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles

University of California Press, Ltd.,
London, England

NOTE TO THE READER

The preferred name order of each author and of each artist in the exhibition has been respected, and other names are given in their preferred forms, when known. In the plate captions, list of works in the exhibition, and biographical information, family names are shown in italics, as in *Lin Tian-miao* and *Shu-Min Lin*, in both of which *Lin* is the family name.

Two systems for transliterating Chinese words (other than names) into the roman alphabet are in common use. In the essays, the preferences of different regions and writers have been observed. In the documentation, the *pinyin* system has been used for most Chinese words.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Inside out: new Chinese art/edited by Gao Minglu; with essays by Norman Bryson. . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Published on the occasion of an exhibition held at the Asia Society Galleries, New York, Sept. 15, 1998–Jan. 3, 1999, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Feb. 26–June 1, 1999.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-21747-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 0-520-21748-9 (softcover)

1. Art, Chinese—20th century—Exhibitions.

I. Kao, Ming-lu II. Bryson, Norman, 1949–.

III. Asia Society Galleries. IV. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

N7345.I58 1998

709'.51'07479461—dc21 98-21532

CIP

Publication Managers: Kara Kirk and Susan Chun

Editor: Joseph N. Newland

Designers: Catherine Mills and David Betz

Publication Assistant: Alexandra Chappell

Indexer: Susan Stone

Printed in Hong Kong

Cover: Zhang Huan, *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond*, performance at Nanmofang fishpond, Beijing, August 15, 1997, photograph by Robyn Beck.

Photography Credits: Illustrations have been provided by the artist or by the owner of the work.

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NORMAN BRYSON

In the final scene of Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town*, 1986, the villagers gather to celebrate the return of Hu Yuying, whose sufferings at the hands of Party officials have provided the main plot of the film.¹ For Hu Yuying has been the victim of a Party-led campaign to "cleanup" Hibiscus Town, to purge it of feudal and bourgeois class elements, and to establish it as a model socialist community. As the owner of a small but prosperous restaurant business, which the Party promptly shuts down, Hu Yuying has been targeted by the campaign as a conspicuous representative of the selfishness and profiteering that the Party seeks to eliminate: she is denounced as a counter-revolutionary, financially ruined, and reduced to sweeping the streets. In time, however, the Party comes to modify its thinking about the economy. The world turns, and now the very officials who had led the cleanup campaign find themselves denounced and ostracized, while Hu Yuying is given official permission to reopen her business. The banquet at which she entertains the entire village is the celebration of her social reinstatement; as the villagers eat, drink, and crack jokes, it seems that life has at last returned to normal. Then, one minute before the film ends, into the scene of the village's united happiness staggers Wang Quishe, a key official during the cleanup campaign, who is now homeless, destitute, and crazy. Beating a broken gong, he walks through the village shouting over and over the words, "Another movement! Another movement!" Festivities cease, the villagers fall silent. Wang Quishe is now only a crazy old man, but, "unless we are careful," one of them whispers, "his words may come true." Another movement: what will it be next time?

Xie Jin's scene points to one crucial asymmetry between the People's Republic of China and western countries with respect to the status of the avant-garde. If in the West the historical problem of the avant-garde has been its enduring weakness relative to the cultural and economic mainstream, in China the situation has been almost the reverse: a political avant-garde, the Party, has monopolized power for fifty years. In the course of their history, western avant-gardes have had to contend with constant marginalization; with the possible exception of the early Soviet avant-garde, ongoing struggle against the insidious forces of the dominant political economy has been the avant-garde's unrelenting destiny.² The art from the People's Republic presented in this exhibition describes a very different historical experience, of the avant-garde (*xianfeng*) in office and in power—avant-garde practice in

varying degrees sponsored or underwritten by the state. For in certain respects, the state has itself realized as political praxis what in the West has been confined to aesthetic gestures: the battle cry of a radical break with the past, the utopian promise of starting over from a constantly recreated “ground zero,” the voice of social critique, the claim that social change can be intensified and accelerated by those able to sense its global direction. If in the West the impulse to launch “another movement” has been channeled into an aesthetic ghetto, in the People’s Republic it has been a state prerogative, and one formidably used.

In terms of a politics of cultural resistance, while western avant-gardes might have occasion to envy the centrality and the range of social effects produced by state-led avant-gardes, they might also recognize something depressingly familiar when it comes to the other side of this advantage: the difficulty of *differentiating* avant-garde practice from the sphere of state activity, the challenge presented by the state’s preempting and absorbing the force of avant-garde strategies into its own sphere of influence—the whole problematic of complicity and entanglement which used to be called “recuperation.”

That problematic appears to have become all the more complex since the institution of the Party’s economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, for now forms of thinking which earlier might have qualified as dissident or counter-revolutionary were capable of being reclassified and harnessed to the state’s own program of economic diversification and the maximization of profit.³ From this perspective, aesthetic practices that clearly advertised their relation to western precedents or counterparts, or that sought to build the institutions of an art market, could be recognized and tolerated as necessary components of the latest state drive toward modernization.⁴ A society in need of advanced technology and consumer goods, and a new place in the global economy, must perforce accept new modes of aesthetic activity (conceptual art, performance art, installation art) alongside new music, new fashion, new cinema—and a new stock exchange.

Wang Guangyi’s Great Castigation series, 1990–93, indicates at least one possible response to the climate of socialist-capitalist combination—which the paintings rewrite as “double kitsch” (see pl. 35). If the uncanny resemblance between state avant-gardism and aesthetic avant-gardism represented one range of possible complicities, the introduction of capitalist principles and a burgeoning art market represents another, and between them both sides of the “dual system” appear to have colonized all the available space in which an authentic avant-garde might possibly maneuver. Interestingly, however, the pessimism of Wang Guangyi’s paintings seems exceptional within the present array of work from the People’s Republic. In his Great Castigation series, the aspirations active in the social field on each

side of the dual system (modified socialism, modified capitalism) are mocked and negated by reducing both to a level of kitsch design: each system is treated as a set of debased signifiers and formulae, as though both systems were already essentially dead. Perhaps as a kind of ironic self-protection, the Great Castigation series embraces this double failure as the work's own condition. And yet the majority of works shown here are able to find in the current situation a range of quite new possibilities.

What is striking about that situation is that the People's Republic is now a society where the principle of contradiction—the epic collision of socialist and capitalist cultures—has been allowed to develop to a unique and historically unprecedented degree (within certain bounds: the June 4, 1989, events in Tiananmen Square revealed them). The terrain opened up by colliding forces affords singular opportunities for aesthetic intervention and social critique. Here I will describe just a few of the paths which contemporary artists seem to have taken, some aesthetic practices and strategies that, at least to this observer, are both impressive and without obvious counterpart in the western context.

The first is the clarification of the changed relation of the subject to social space that is undertaken mainly, though not exclusively, by work in sculpture. Here “space” should be understood neither as a neutral container within which social processes occur, nor as the phenomenological horizon of individual perception, but rather as it is described by Henri Lefebvre: space as something that is *produced* by social forces.⁵ If socialism and capitalism both generate specific kinds of space, this is not as an incidental by-product of their economic and political organization, but fundamental (both product and precondition of their systems). For some western commentators, what distinguished the organization of space in the People's Republic, at least until the mid-1980s, was its deliberate homogeneity, which notably departed from the Soviet model. There, a limited application of the capitalist process of accumulation resulted in rapid growth that deliberately privileged particular “strong points” in large-scale enterprises and cities.⁶ Following a Leninist principle of uneven development, such strong points were able to achieve sometimes spectacular levels of development, but at the expense of peripheral areas that were “abandoned to stagnation and (relative) backwardness” (Lefebvre). The Cultural Revolution opposed the negative effects of the Soviet model by setting out to prevent the rift between strong and weak points, with particular emphasis being given to agricultural towns, and to undoing the opposition between town and country (for instance, through the transfer of urban groups to the countryside). At least in principle, the state aimed at the construction of a continuous national space in which collective ownership, combined with the avoidance of dominant “strong points,” wove a seamless fabric of space from the capital to the provinces.



Fig. 1

GENG JIANYI

Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation, 1987

Fig. 2

WANG JIN

Ice: Central China 1996, Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, January 28, 1996

The transformations proposed in this space by the state's relative moderation of the controls on free expression are the subject of Geng Jianyi's *Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation*, from 1987 (fig. 1). Looking from the outside in, viewers are constructed as anonymous members of collective space; looking from the inside out, the same viewers are framed as individual portraits inside ludicrous, mock-western frames. The wit of Geng's work lies in its clarification of the new public/private distinction opened in social space by the lightening of restrictions on individual expression; though at the same time the installation clearly satirizes the new "flexibility" that this situation opens up, the burden of being obliged to move from public to private and back again, which the latest stage of modernization now requires of its subjects. The tone of satire is considerably darker, however, in Wang Jin's *Ice: Central China, 1996*, a work from nine years later, when the negative consequences of socialist-capitalist coexistence have become much more apparent.

The ice wall that Wang Jin installed in Zhengzhou City in 1996 offers a stark view of the transformations wrought in space as a consequence of the new economic reforms (fig. 2). Zhengzhou City is an old industrial center, the capital of Henan Province, and as a result of the encouragement of the consumer economy, by the mid-1990s it was experiencing the boom conditions that have occurred in so many Chinese cities, in the period when national productivity and capital resources have been rapidly increasing. In the town center Wang Jin constructed a large wall of ice, into which had been set a selection of consumer items, expensive and desirable by any standards, including cellular phones, cosmetics, and jewelry.

The installation took place during the winter months in this cold northern city, though how many days the wall might have actually taken to melt will never be known, since it was swiftly dismantled by hands eager to lay hold of the goods it contained. The installation succeeded with admirable black humor in stating the terms of social atomization and divisiveness that are consumerism's bottom line, as well as spelling out the changed nature of the economic object. If the joke-stereotype of socialist goods is that they can never get beyond dramatizing the conditions of their own production, and that abysmal design values are deployed as a fetish to ward off the specter of the subject-as-consumer, now the shiny consumer-object was made the butt of a different set of jokes—and analyses. The first was that if the free trinkets in the ice wall illustrated the principles of the consumer economy, it was obviously by inverting them, since in consumerism proper "nothing is for nothing." The second was that if the ice wall had managed to cut through official pieties about the noble aim of achieving national prosperity, revealing instead the sheer force of greed that the new economy had released into social space, it was a greed from which no one could easily dissociate himself,

since all concerned were its accomplices—the Party that had fostered the new economic climate, the citizens who tore down the wall with their bare hands, even the artist himself (where had Wang found the money for the installation? on what grounds could such artistic potlatch be justified?). The ice wall managed to suggest, as well, something rather subtle about the strange new economic temperatures present within the consumer economy: the bargain-basement heat of consumers inflamed by the display of goods was literally pitted against a glacial order of objects, which both catered to desire as never before, and at the same time immobilized desire, freezing and “reterritorializing” desire into the monumental form of the commodity fetish.

Besides the disruption and reformulation of social space, many of the works presented in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* are strikingly concerned with the terms of discourse and the subject's place in discursive regimes; one can speak of a distinct art-and-language movement, including work by Wu Shan Zhuan, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, Qiu Zhijie, and Song Dong. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of this range of work is the centrality of the metaphor of script as a means of locating and analyzing issues of social orthodoxy and their relation to individuality, as well as the operations of power within individual subjects. In Wu Shan Zhuan's *Red Humor*, 1986 (pl. 5), the contents of consciousness are literalized as a set of disparate language fragments displayed on the walls, ceiling, and floor: political slogans from the Cultural Revolution appear alongside the newer slogans which, under Deng, had come to replace them; lines from classical poetry and Buddhist scripture are placed next to advertising captions, private messages, the title of a western artwork (Leonardo's *Last Supper*), medical texts, and jokes. On the floor, four large-sized characters announce the phrase “No one can interpret it” (*Wu ren shuo dao*).

If the installation is taken as a model of the circulation of social discourse within the individual subject, what it insists on is the radical heterogeneity of the ensemble: this is a subject defined as a more or less random collection of elements. While the political connotations of the work are somewhat elusive, what is clear is Wu's decision not to present the subject in dialectical terms: though the phrase “class struggle” puts in an appearance, together with other slogans new and old, these seem no more important than phrases like “Mr. Wang, I went home” or “No water this afternoon.”⁷ The mental “contents” on display refer to too many contexts and occupy too many levels for the subject they represent to be reducible to any of the global descriptions essential to the discourse of ideology (subject of class, subject of history). Though the work is strongly committed to the outlook of historical materialism—the subject does not appear as transcending the social field, but on the contrary as deriving from it in every way—what is missing is the coherence necessary to the operations of political discourse. Though many kinds



Fig. 3
WENDA GU
Pseudo-Characters Series:
Contemplation of the World (detail),
1984, Collection of Zhen Guo

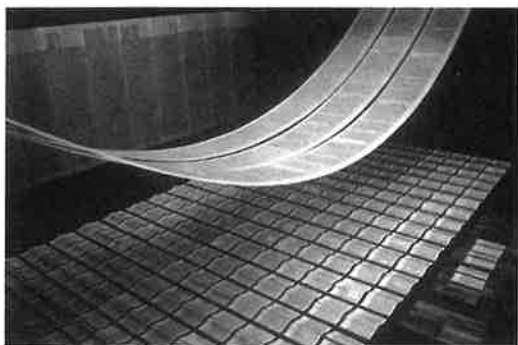


Fig. 4
XU BING
Book from the Sky, 1987–91,
Collection of the artist

of language are included, the emphasis on plurality or hetero-glossia neutralizes and drains the ideational or “content” level of language itself (“no one can interpret it”): essentially the level of ideology is evacuated.

The emptying out of the semantic dimension of language is indeed the central gesture of many of these language works. In the piece entitled “A History of Chinese Painting” and “A Concise History of Modern Painting” *Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* of 1987/1993, by Huang Yong Ping, the text of art history is reduced to pulp (pl. 16). In Wenda Gu’s *Pseudo-Characters* series, 1984–86, the ideograms convey a vestigial content, but their form has been severely distorted: characters are reversed, turned upside down, and rebuilt with their elements moved to the wrong place (fig. 3; pl. 3). In Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky*, 1987–91, boxed sets of books bound in blue paper covers seem at first sight to be authentic classical texts, printed in characters in Song script, but on further inspection none of the characters can be pronounced or understood (fig. 4; pl. 6).⁸ Xu Bing’s recent *New Language Project*, 1998, is a variation on the same idea. The work takes the form of an English-language dictionary where the alphabet is composed of elements of Chinese characters: as words in “English” the dictionary makes sense, but as “Chinese” the letters are meaningless. What are we to make of this semantic depletion?

To the western viewer, the act of randomizing language might seem to be a reworking of Surrealist automatic writing, or of William S. Burroughs’ cutting-up the “word lines”: a gesture of pure voluntarism in language, an utopian dream of escape from the orbit of the signifier and, by extension, from the social field. That may well be one aspect of these works, and yet the emphasis on semantic exhaustion or nullification seems to have a particular valence in the political context of the post-Mao years. Something of this may be sensed in Zhang Peili’s *Water—The Standard Version Read from the “Ci Hai” Dictionary*, 1989, in which Xin Zhibin, a star newscaster on Chinese Central Television (CCTV), who earlier in 1989 had been the first to report the massacre in Tiananmen Square, recites the words of a dictionary *as if* they were the news (1992 version, fig. 25). The rubbing out of the text’s semantic level has, in this case, everything to do with the waning of the Party’s authority, and of the credibility and viability of its discourse. With Xu Bing and Wenda Gu the connection is not as direct as it is with Zhang, yet it is difficult to avoid taking the aesthetic gesture of effacing the contents of script as a metaphor for a society in which the coherence of the discursive field, and of the subjectivity proposed and assumed by that field, may no longer be determined at the level of ideology—that is, of the shared beliefs and values of its members.

Consider, for example, Qiu Zhijie’s *Writing the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” One Thousand Times*, 1986 (pl. 8). The artist performed an exercise familiar to any serious student of Chinese calligraphy—copying again and again the perfection of Wang Xizhi’s classic text, the *Lanting xu*, or *Preface Written at*

the Orchid Pavilion—with this difference, that the copies were all made on the same sheet, which at the end of this process became a mass of illegible black ink. It is not the force of the original that is at stake here: the “first” version of the *Preface*, written in the fourth century, was already lost by the seventh century, when the Emperor Taizong ordered it to be entombed with his own body in the Zhao Mausoleum at Xi’an; the authority of the *Orchid Pavilion Preface* is that of the copy itself. If in Qiu Zhijie’s work orthography is a metaphor for social orthodoxy or cultural reproduction, the basis of the text’s power is not to be found in its contents—in what its author said—but in the sheer force of cultural repetition, especially through the internalization of social authority that is performed within the calligrapher’s body as he attempts to incorporate the text inside his own musculature and gestural reflexes. A comparable description of social power is suggested in Song Dong’s *Printing on Water*, 1996, in which the artist, standing in the middle of a river, repeatedly strikes the surface of the water with a heavy, archaic seal (pl. 9). The seal leaves no trace; its semantic dimension is instantly lost. What remains, however, is the central gesture of the subject’s interpellation within the graphic or social field, where power is located entirely within the individual subject’s repeated action of creating and re-creating the authority of the seal within his own psychophysical being, again and again.

The contents of Xu Bing’s imaginary books, or Wenda Gu’s characters, or Song Dong’s seal, are in each case drained of meaning. What that effacement dramatizes, beautifully and impressively, is that script—or the social field—may exist not only as a structure of contents or ideas; its coherence may instead come from its own compulsive systematicity, and at levels deeper than—or indifferent to—the ideological. What is perhaps being sketched here is an idea of power that, in the West, can be expressed only in tentative terms: that in societies of disciplinarity, ideology may no longer be required to be the primary cohesive force binding the subject in social space. What holds the social formation together are modes of activity whose basis lies at the microlevel, in the myriad acts of repetition and self-regulation by which the subject inscribes itself in social discourse. Viewed negatively, the art that enacts this position can be thought of as the expression of “cynical reason,” as Peter Sloterdijk has described it.⁹ The cynic knows his beliefs to be empty, he is already “enlightened” about his ideological relation to the world; to that extent he has rendered himself immune to the charge of bad faith, or of complicity with the dominant order. What this position constructively opens up, however, is a new territory of analysis and practice. For if power is no longer to be located at the macrolevel of the great ideologies, in the colossal and mythic confrontation of socialism and capital, and if it is instead to be found at a microlevel that is “below” politics and ideology, then individual subjects are able to intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms. If the basis of cultural reproduction lies in the subject’s own

capacities for compulsive repetition and system-building, the significance of aesthetic practice is that it permits those capacities to be deflected or redirected toward the subject's own ends. The art of the avant-garde becomes a model of the ways in which subjects—however great the historical pressures acting upon them—may organize and lead their own lives.¹⁰

NOTES

1. *Hibiscus Town* (Furong zhen), after the novel by Gu Hua; Shanghai Film Studio/China Film Corporation, 1986.
2. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
3. Julia F. Andrews has shown that the rapid development of avant-garde art in the period 1979–89, and especially in the years of intense activity from 1985 to 1989, had as its precondition a series of Party reforms and changes of personnel directly related to the goal of economic progress. See “Fragmented Memory: An Introduction,” in *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1993), pp. 6–13, and esp. pp. 8–10.
4. See, for instance, Li Honglin, “Open Policy Essential to Socialism,” *Beijing Review* no. 13 (April 1, 1985): 15–18; cit. Andrews, “Fragmented Memory,” p. 8.
5. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
6. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 421.
7. See Gao Minglu, “The Context in the Text: Meaning in Wu Shanzhuan’s Work,” in *Fragmented Memory*, p. 32.
8. See also Gao Minglu, “Meaninglessness and Confrontation in Xu Bing’s Art,” in *Fragmented Memory*, p. 28. The title of this piece has also been translated as *Book of Heaven*.
9. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
10. I would like to express my especial thanks to Gao Minglu for generously giving of his time in many stimulating discussions of avant-garde art in the PRC; and to Eugene Wang for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.