

Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium²

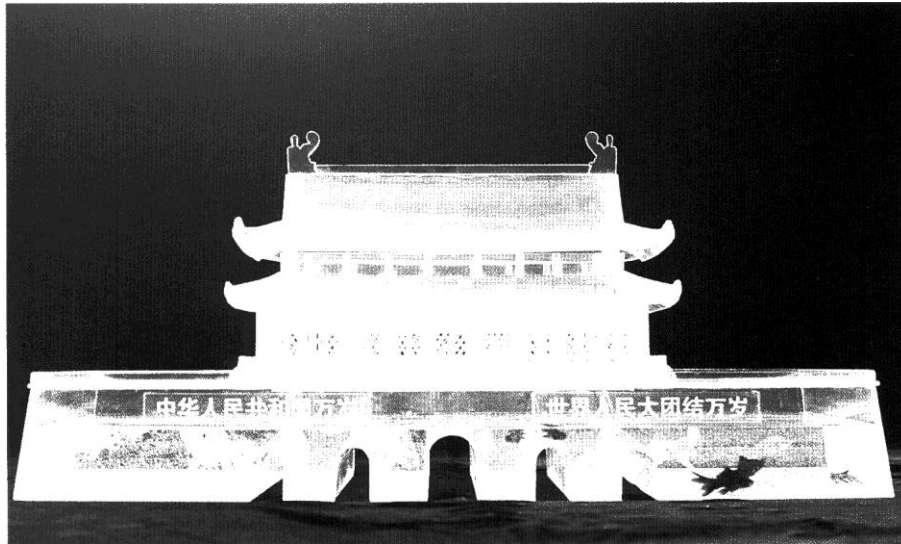
John Clark

Chinese art at the end of the century stands at something of a turning point. After the hysteria with which SO much interesting experimental art was received at the Venice Biennale in 1993 it would appear the Euramerican art world is still reluctant to accept it no longer has—if it ever had—any exclusive rights over modernity. But if this external reception still retains an unshakably atavistic core, what can be said of the situation in China itself?

If the 1970s had ended with a new potential freedom for artistic expression so long as “Chinese socialism” was left unchallenged, the end of the 1980s provided the bloody caesura of the Beijing massacre to the experimentation of the mid—and late—1980s when the status quo declared there would be no going back. Fortunately the powers that be forgot modernity is a future—oriented discourse, and left it to occupy whatever space there would be no going back to: the market economy, consumer culture, or even the nefarious life of surface “pop” and subterranean counter-culture movements.⁴

So modern art in China was given its space to negotiate by this closure to the past if not by the self—enclosed. Official art world. The academies still consented to train artists by about ten years' application of conservative art pedagogy derived from the Soviet Union,⁵ but not to allow much formal experimentation a part of the Curriculum within their doors. Public galleries consented to show the nude and the abstract, but not generally to exhibit installation or performance art. Officialdom allowed art exhibitions to be prepared, but to see a train of even the most unexceptional shut down even hours before their opening. Last minute representations about possible offence to public order were made to the Public Security Bureau with dreary regularity from unnamed “persons in the art world.”⁶

Meanwhile a string of successful accommodations with China—based and over—seas commercial galleries allowed many artists to earn a living from modern art which was often scatological if not hostile in intent to the status quo, but managed to express this without ostensible attack on “Chinese socialism.” when this “export production” made survival in China actually become a feasible option for modern artists—rather than the imaginary rationale of a number of overseas dealers who profited from it—the end came into sight of the concept of a Diaspora necessarily forced by the thwarting of professional development.⁷ Exile abroad was still required for those more actively hostile to the political status quo, but



1. Lu Hao, “Fishglobes (Tiananmen),” 1998, 50 x 100 X 50 cm, plexiglas and mixed media

Cultural exile now became more a matter of personal inclination related to the content of a given artistic practice.

However, the reality of political intervention in art via the sanctioning of particular artists and styles for official exhibition did not change. Nor did the use of privileged art forms for civilizational projects sanctioned by the Party disappear.⁸ Art was not to be a domain of cultural practice autonomous of politics even if the gap between what was sanctioned and what was not sanctioned was looser and less rigorously policed.⁹ Into this third space could appear comment on the vacuity of modern consumer culture,¹⁰ or even satirical comment on the iconography of great leader.¹¹ But in this most mediatised of societies there remained many unfaced horrors of recent history at home,¹² and almost no art was in the public domain which deconstructed or satirized official propaganda.¹³

Official art concerned itself with the aesthetics of the well-made, a performative, academic and ultimately vacuous definition of artistic achievement devoid of the contemporary contestation or at least engagement with the frictions of the modernizing lived world of Chinese which would give it meaning.¹⁴ In addition and in parallel, the “narrow road to the deep national” was pursued by an unholy alliance of convenience between conservative and meretricious oil painters who hid their lack of Creativity Under a mask of stylistic deformation in deference to modernity, with “Chinese—style” artists who had only to lift a brush and use ink on paper to claim the Cultural authenticity of their practice. Indeed the miasmatic



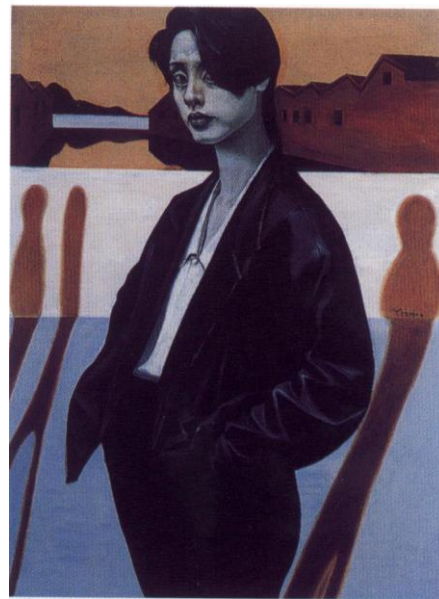
2. Sui Jianguo, Untitled, 1998, 70 cm high, aluminum

confusion between a spurious cultural or technical authenticity and artistic creativity served to reinforce the confirmation of such artists' legitimacy through restricted access to exhibition locations controlled by the Artists Association or its cohorts.

The relativity of art to the values at the site of display must have been clear to many in the Chinese official art world when its senior members were completely ignored by a stream of foreign art curators visiting China, as they headed to the studios of artists who in some cases could only exhibit their works abroad.¹⁵ By the end of the 1990s the very international *succes d'estime* of these artists indicated that both the system of training artists and the "consecration" of their works through access to public exhibition sites were in dire need of reform if not radical reevaluation, even from a "socialist Chinese" position. Conservative if decent academic artists could be heard to publicly complain that "the views of art at the centre are still very revolutionary," by that meaning, presumably, that those in the party leadership, and particularly those in the party Propaganda Department, were still unsympathetic to modern art.¹⁶ There is a broader art historical problem beyond issues of art ideology and institutions: the presence or absence of inter-relation or interaction between different art types in China is by no means transparent. This is largely because a great deal of interaction which might be ostensibly denied by artists is visible in their work, and also because



3. Feng Zhengjie, "Romantic Travel," 1997, 150 x 110 cm, oil on canvas



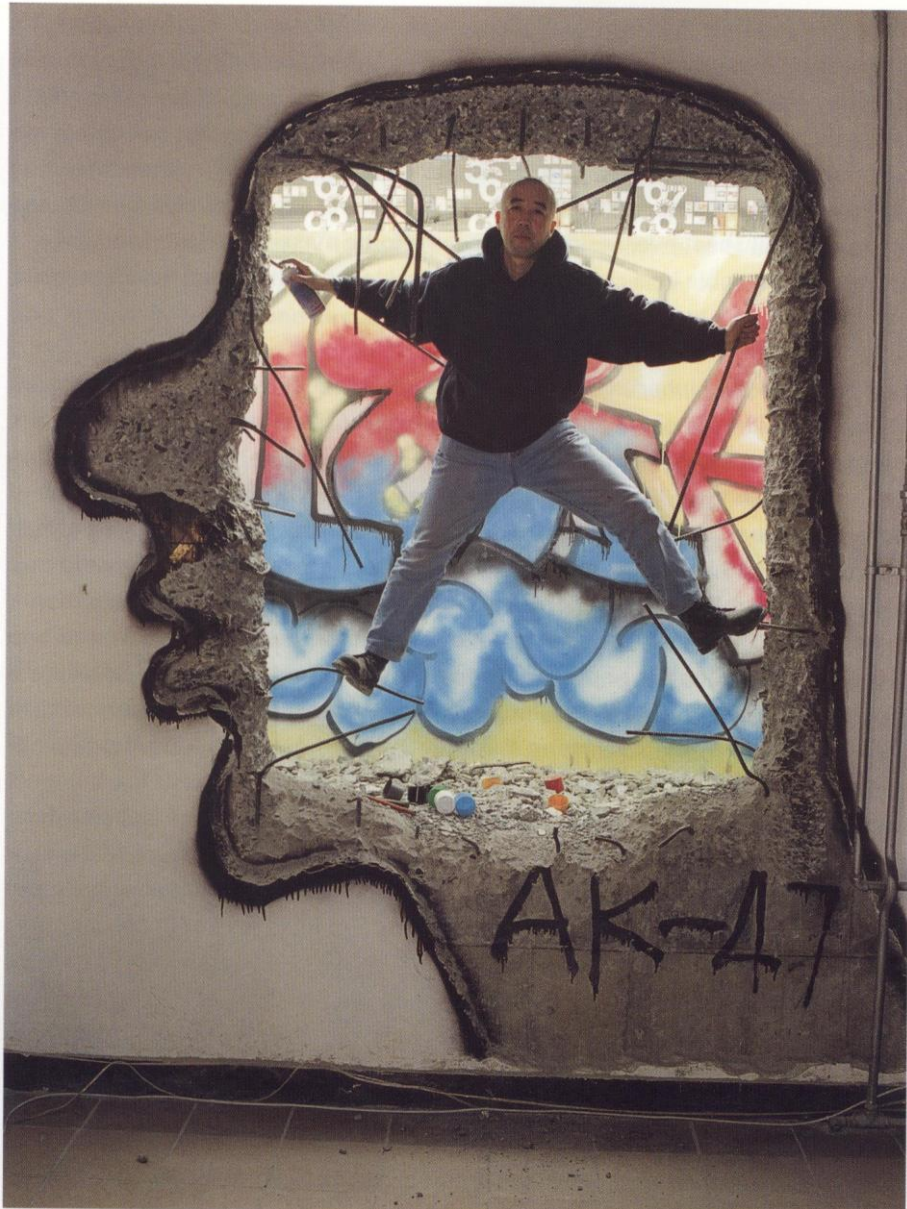
4. Yu Hong, "A Portrait of Nostalgia," 1990, oil on canvas

some discourses, notably those of guohua, academic oil painting, and socialist realist sculpture, may not be formally inter-related on the level of style but are closely interrelated in the common academic base of drawing practice enjoined for all art students in China since the mid-1950s. Furthermore the relation between, say, video or computer art and academic drawing, may appear to be slight, but the visualization tools in which artists have been trained, and about their competence in which many experimental artists are self-declaratively proud, are almost always those of academy drawing and realist painting. This is despite they themselves seeing their reaction as against the stereotypical and rigidly enforced art curricula to which they have been exposed, as well as narrow, even reactionary, notions of the art object and how it should be exhibited.¹⁷

The art of the 1980s and 1990s, for all the political constraint on anti-spiritual pollution campaigns in the 1980s and in the repressions which followed June 4th 1989, is quite widely documented in Chinese and in many non-Chinese exhibition catalogues and some books. Beyond these necessarily straightforward categories there are a number of general stylistic issues involving art works at the end of the 1990s. Probably among the most important, although only recently emerging from the seductions of "popist" or "cynical" art with its overseas market, has been the issue of what to do with two inheritances: the notion of the exhibitible art work, and the problem of representing the socialist heritage specific to the



5. Xu Yihui, "Fast Food Lunch Box," 1996, 25 x 45 x 30 cm, porcelain



6. Zhang Dali "Demolition," 1999, 320 x 250 cm

material discourse of art works. Both of these problems involve the naming of art styles or art subjects as "realist" or "socialist." Perhaps taking a more creative hint from the "popists" has been the recent sculpture of Sui Jianguo, which takes "socialist" material such as the figure of Marx and then parodies its Chinese absorption in figuring him in a Sun Yatsen jacket (see illus.2).¹⁸ Sui then takes that jacket and turns it into a massive figure, without its socialist leader inside, and made of metal sheet over resin. What seems to be massive, full, and so heavy as only to be moveable by a crane, is in fact massive, but empty, and light enough to be lifted easily by two people.

Two other kinds of inheritance press on the art object as a monument in modern China. One is the history of all the Chinese sacrifices in the bloody war with Japan, and by implied extension, of the sacrifices in the civil wars to found the People's Republic of China in 1949. The other is the appropriation to the new regime of historical China's symbols of rule and traditional authority. Sui Jianguo is also at present engaged in leading a large team of sculptors from all over China to make a series of narrative pillars about the anti-Japanese War. This is a truly monumental task. The scheme aims to make evident this suffering and heroic achievement in a clearly legible popular narrative, based in part on the style of Chinese low-relief folk sculptures. If Sui Jianguo's works represent populist appropriation with not a little irony in carrying through the third great sculptural project of People's Republic of China just as it is becoming quite unlike what the founders may have dreamed it to become,¹⁹ Lu Hao has made a series of icons of post- modern absurdity, the sign remaining with only the transparent traces of its referent (see illus.1). Famous buildings such as "Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) are formed like children's models from perspex and filled with animate creatures like goldfish, or in other cases birds, ants and worms. History is inherited as an empty symbol of power and forms the ecosphere of "cute" little folk, unaware that that their world is strictly bounded, not knowing that the outer symbol of their enclosure no longer functions for the ideals it was supposed to represent.

Such is the saturation with meaning of the academic art discourses themselves that they seem exhausted, breakable or frigid. Various kinds of meaningful abuse are possible such as the theft of poster forms and melodramatic stereotypes in Feng Zhengjie (see illus.3), part of the cynicism of which is the presumed open complicity of the audience in the theft - an audience able to recognize the stereotypes and their manipulation, but also to feel superior in their owning that recognition. This position has particular appeal to disenchanting ex-



7. Chen Wenbo, "Vitamin Z Windscreen," 1999, 200 x 150 cm (four panels), oil on canvas

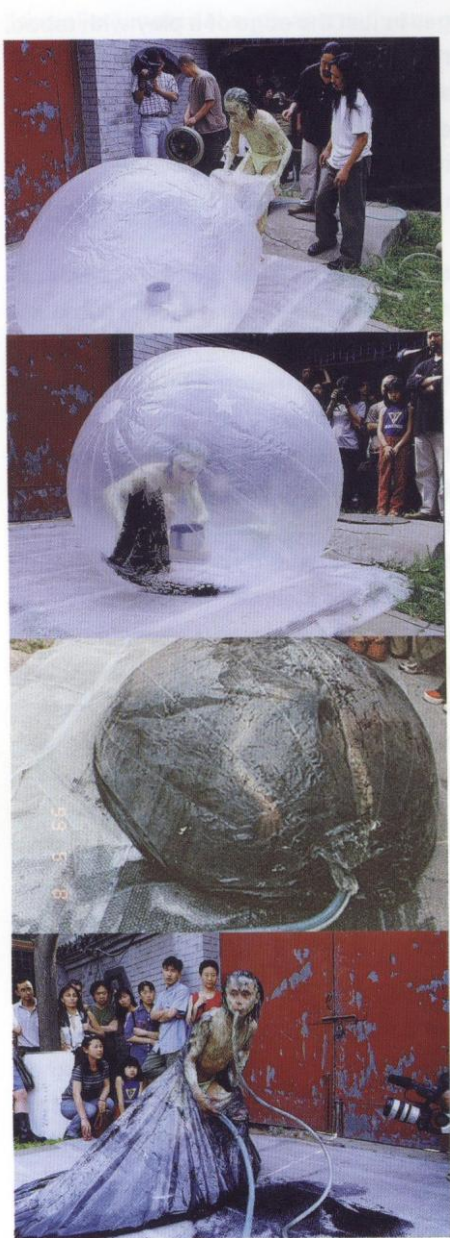
lies and expatriate salon chatterers. Academicism can also still hold faint sway in the cloyingly tasteful decoration of works by Yu Hong (see illus.4), the hint of female homo-eroticism in which is possibly too dangerous to bring entirely into the open. The complicit viewer now engages in just the edge of a play with taboo, without the risks of its full exposure. Where hackneyed discourses also gain some resuscitation is in their re-use to thematize, even stigmatize, the desires which are unleashed and channeled by consumer society, where objects or even selves seem purchasable or potent for re-embodiment from the surface of a world of goods and images now seen and circulated with ever-greater speed.

Perhaps it is this pressure to re-vivify the exhausted visual discourses by consumer society and its ever-widening re-definitions of selves that makes some artists call a halt and engage in a kind of concrete naming by way of resistance, it would seem, to this kind of artistic strategy. Thus the material impedimenta of daily consumer life can be turned into fetish-icons where there is no differentiation between the statement, idea and thing. Such Dadaist concreteness was essayed from time to time in the 1980s, but I think it awaited the edge of a broader, and by now mass, consumerism in the second half of the 1990s to give it real bite. It is also hardly surprising that some artists who had gained sinecures at painting institutes, such as Wang Jianwei in Beijing, put aside their brushes altogether (as Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi had earlier done in 1993 after their exposure at the Venice Biennale) and worked with other kinds of objects from daily life, especially those like hospital beds connected with mortality and a sequence for lives which may only have derived meaning from their positioning by elaborate and, in the end, non-life-saving social computations.



8. Liu Wei, "You Like Perk?," 1995,
150 x 200 cm, oil on canvas

If the work of the late 1980s had prepared experimental artists and their minority local audience to incline towards an automatic linkage of daily life and the art concept, almost in defiance of sovietized practice which presumed the art work was an elevated ideal drawn from that daily life but distanced from it in some realm of pure representativeness, so in the 1990s this assumption was carried further by some who put the image of the artist directly into the frame of the life they were experiencing. The artist, as in the work of Zhang Dali (see illus.6), becomes a shadowy representative of



9. Zhu Ming, Untitled, Beijing, May 8, 1999

those whose lives were lived in a place and passed through or passed off by it.

One of the characteristics of 1990s' work which becomes publicly exhibited is its repetition. There is a ritualization of seriality, either in the work-event itself, or in the series constituted from separate but linked works which produces a serial result. One repeated motif is of the face gazing out at the viewer; as in Chen Wenbo (see illus.3), sometimes this seriality is found within one work. One might ask from where does this need to repeat derive? Partly it must be due to securing recognition, or, since psychoanalytically speaking repetition usually indicates a kind of avoidance or at least a deferral, to securing the avoidance of non-recognition as a minimum goal of the artist. The curator or art mediator must be playing a role in making the artist known by the representation of works. I often have the feeling that on the other side of the repetition of an art event-work is the implicit gaze of the mediator or the artist on the viewer to see if recognition has

been achieved.

The need to repeat, one may even speak process, the self or its social constraint is to be transcended by the repetition. I of its compulsion, points to either the emptiness or fullness of the serial think this tendency lies behind the aggressive, sometimes misogynist, often misanthropist, painting of Liu Wei (see illus.8), who seems to compel a kind of revulsion by his repeated smears and painted simulation of ordure or other effluvia. From a different perspective the return to the body as a



10. Sun Yuan, "Honey," 1999, 300 x 150 x 160 cm, mixed-media installation (bed, ice, still-born fetus and human face)



11. Sun Yuan, "Honey" (detail)



12. Zhu Yu, "Theologie Portative (Pocket Mythology)," 1999, multi media installation (arm from human corpse, rope, etc.



13. Zhu Yu, "Theologie Portative" (detail)

site for enactment in 1990s performance art points to a lack of meaningful interaction with a large public. In China performance art has always been presented for a small public. If one may characterize it as such, the repetition of many small performances for small groups, although their formal content may change, may be a compensation for the lack of interaction through the serialization of the work.

The seamless complicity in the ordure of life, the slimy, bloody reality of flesh may be a way via rhetoric of horror and abuse that Gu Dexin hopes to achieve a self-transcendence. Certainly as one of the three members in the New Measurement Group of 1989-1995 he had sought to transcend the artist's ego by removing it from the art work through the generation of art works by means of mathematically random arrangements between three artists.²⁰ In the later 1990s he used real meat, pigs' offal and other "disgusting" but consumable entities which allowed the self to recognize its social constraints and thus provided some freedom to transcend them. This use of flesh serves as a metaphor, one speculates, for what flows raw, foetid and barbaric beneath the carapace of civilization.²¹ With some works this game of showing the aesthetic qualities in cruel or murderous social realities is more explicit. In 1998 SunYuan made an installation called "Honey" and achieved it via these instructions: (1) make a big bed of 1.5x3 meters; (2) put a big piece of ice 0.37 cm thick on the bed; (3) put a foetus in the ice so that only its face, arms and legs strike the surface (see illus.10-11). In a 1998/99

work by Zhu Yu called "Theologie Portative" (see illus.12-13), a dead person's arm is hung in the centre of a ground space covered with ropes, the arm grasps one end of the rope, but the arm is only seen clearly standing on the rope. One is given pause to think that if the self was to be transcended by abandonment in the 1990, by the late 1990s it is to be confirmed only through its sighting of realm



14. Gu Wenda, "Hair, United Nations Series: Temple of Heaven China Monument)," 1998, mixed media installation

horror, in some radical theatre of cruelty staged with real bits of death.²² Is this brute corporeal materialism a kind of revenge against a state which was itself founded on a doctrine of dialectical materialism?

Another way to transcend the self or its constraining realities is to invent a virtual one. This has been essayed in China in works which depend on highly technological interaction between the audience, sub-floor sensors, and the space, as in QianWeikang. Or it may be found in the infinite regression of the voyeuristic gaze as visualized for computer by Zhang Li from a conception of Geng Jianyi. It is only a variation of this virtuality and preoccupation with traces to step back and rewrite ancient calligraphic forms with human hair as in Gu Wenda (see illus.14), or to erect a signing scaffolding around a collapsed building to restore the now absent referent to the sign which has slipped from its solid, sovereign emplacement in the world.

²²This essay combines sections from two papers: the essay for the catalogue Modern Chinese Art Foundation, (Provincie Bestuur van Oost-Vlaanderen,1999), and also from tile Stylistics section of the first report on China from my comparative work on Chinese and Thai art in the 1980s and 1990s, delivered at the Art Association of Australia Annual Conference in Wellington, New Zealand in December 1999.

³For an overview of Chinese participation in the 1999 Venice Biennale see Francesca dal Lago, "Of Site and Space: The Visual Reality of Chinese Contemporary Art," Chinese Contemporary Art Bulletin,2:4 (1999), which is re-published here.

⁴See in general, Geremie R. Barme, In the Red. On Contemporary Chinese Culture (New York: Columbia University Press,1999).

⁵For some background references to the imported Chistyakov system and its operation in China see John Clark, "Realism and Revolutionary Chinese Painting," Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia 22 & 23,130-150. For a general overview of Chinese modernism see my papers "Art and Modernism in China,1900-97: A Review and Documentation," Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia 29 (1997),50-73, and "Modernity in Chinese Art,1850s-1990s: Some Chronological Materials," Ibid.,74-169.

⁶Among such exhibitions which were banned at the last minute were Leng Lin, Shi Wo/It's Me, Beijing, Xiandai yishu zhongxin, November 1998, and Zhang Zhaohui, Cong Zhongguo chufa xin yishu zhan/Departure from China: A New Chinese Art Exhibition Beijing, Shiji bowuguan,1999.

⁷Despite his internal critics about his role in engendering "political pop" it is to the enormous credit of the critic Li Xianting that he saw this as a possible way out of the impasse for modern art generated by the "velvet" repressions which followed the 1989 Beijing massacre.

⁸The lead item in a news broadcast in the notoriously over-controlled CCTV station in May 1999 showed Jiang Zemin lending his approval for higher cultural activities by a visit to a classical music concert.

⁹Risky underground works involving an absolutely nihilist contempt for humanist values and which in almost any other country would have seen the arrest of the artist for using a real human arm taken from a corpse were in the exhibition. See Wu Meichun, Qiu Zhijie et al, Houganxiang: Yixing yu Wangxiang/Post Sensibility: Alien Bodies and Delusion (Beijing, 1999).

¹⁰See the exhibition of art consumer works in a Shanghai supermarket by Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, Alexander Brandt, curators, Chaoshi/Art for Sale, (Beijing: Xiandai yishu zhongxin, 1999), also reviewed by Stephanie Tasch here.

¹¹See Ai Weiwei's own work on this image. For background see Geremie R. Barme, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

¹²During the Great Leap Forward it is estimated as many as 30 million people starved to death, including many documented cases of cannibalism. These events appear not yet to have reached the threshold of even the most tenuous representation in post-1979 art. See Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* (London: John Murray, 1996).

¹³Zhou Tiehai in Shanghai has chosen to satirize the representation of China and Chinese art in foreign advertising media and news magazines, not the representation of Chinese in China by official Chinese media. In fact much of his work which situates himself in a parody of foreign media was already anticipated in that of the Korean-Japanese artist Kwak Duck-Jun, some of whose manipulations of Time magazine covers as early as 1971 and as late as 1989, a good ten to twenty years before work in similar vein of Zhou Tiehai, who told me in a May 1999 interview that he was unaware of it. See the catalogue, *Phase 10 Jikko linkai, hen, Kwak Duckiunten* (Yokohama: Yokohama Bijutsukan, 1992).

¹⁴There is as yet no exhibition in China of work like those biting criticisms of modern history and consumer society found in paintings by Yang Maolin or Wu T~anzhang in Taiwan from the mid-1980s.

¹⁵In greetings and speeches made at the two separate 1999 exhibitions in Beijing at the China Art Gallery of Zhao Wuji and Xiong Bingming the emphasis was on the "Chinese" nature of the work of both, critics and artists being willfully ignorant of the fact that both artists had had French citizenship for many years and that whatever "Chinese" qualities might be discoverable in their work, it was also entirely interpretable within tendencies found within the Parisian art world of their times.

¹⁶Jin Shangyi made such a comment in spontaneous remarks at the end of the symposium to welcome Xiong Bingming. This inner leadership position continued despite the "tutorials" on modern art which were widely reputed to have been given to Party Secretary Jiang Zemin by Fan Di'an and Xu Jiang, respectively Vice-Director of the Central Academy of Art, Beijing, and Director of the Chinese Academy of Art, Hangzhou.

¹⁷This interpretation is indebted to conversations in Beijing in May 1999 with Jiao Yingqi.

¹⁸The jacket style popularly known in English as a "Mao jacket" and in Chinese as Zhongshanzhuang (Sun Yatsen jacket).

¹⁹The other two being the "Monument to the Heroes of the People" (?1956-59) in Tiananmen Square, Beijing and "The Rent Collection Courtyard" (1965) in Chengdu, Sichuan.

²⁰Interview with John Clark, 1990.

²¹Interview with John Clark, 1999.

²²This use of the body has displayed a rather ghoulish and, if enacted in almost any country outside China, implacably anti-humanist sign of the intensity of reaction by the "non-official." The real, severed hand used in Zhu Yu's early 1999 exhibition is said not to have been stolen but bought for 500 yuan, or about US\$75. Such brute materialism may also be a sign that there are some social or political situations which are so cruel, or mendacious about their own cruelty, that the artist who takes them as their subject may feel no compunction about trying to re-materialize them in the work.