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An Overview of Contemporary Taiwanese Art

Contemporary Art with Chinese Characteristics

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Cover

A "DOMESTIC TURN:" CHINESE EXPERIMENTAL ART IN THE 1990S

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Figure 1: Artist Village in Yuanmingyuan. Photo: Zheng Shengtian

Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000), the First Guangzhou Triennial organized by the Guangdong Art Museum, provides a comprehensive survey and attempts a systematic explanation of Chinese experimental art of the period. The three main themes of the exhibition are "Memory and Reality," "Self and Environment," and "Global and Local." This essay discusses the first two themes, which together point to a new direction in Chinese experimental art of the 1990s - a "domestic turn" that transformed experimental art into a powerful vehicle of social critique. Before focusing on actual works of art, however, it is necessary to investigate the preconditions of this movement by looking at important changes in the lifestyle and social identity of experimental artists. These changes were crucial in that they encouraged social engagement and gave the artists a sense of independence - two factors indispensable to any kind of social criticism.

THE WORLD OF EXPERIMENTAL ARTISTS IN THE 1990s

China underwent a profound socioeconomic transformation during the two decades after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Starting in the late 1970s, a new generation of Chinese leaders initiated a series of reforms to develop a market economy, a more resilient social system, and an "open door" diplomatic policy that exposed China to both foreign investments and cultural influences. The consequence of this transformation was fully felt in the 1990s. Major cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, were completely reshaped. Numerous private and joint venture businesses appeared, including privately owned commercial art galleries. Educated young men and women moved from job to job in pursuit of personal well-being and a large "floating population" entered metropolitan centers from the countryside to look for work and better living conditions.

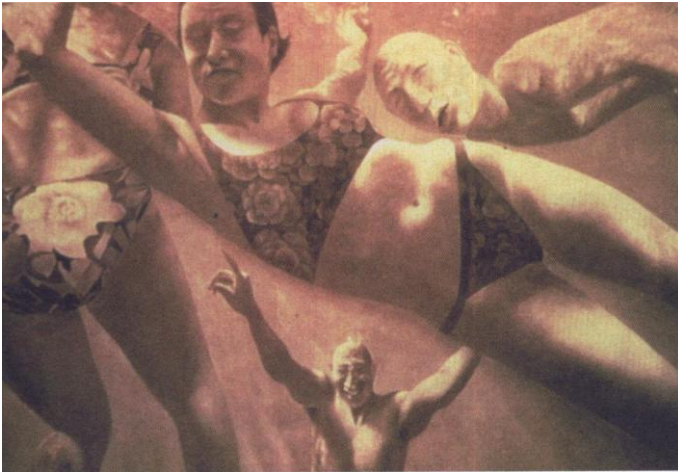


Figure 2: Fang Lijun, Series 3, number 15, 1993. Courtesy of the Tacoma Art Museum and the Henry Art Gallery

Many changes in the world of experimental art in the 1990s were related to this larger picture. Although a majority of experimental artists received formal education in art colleges and had little problem finding jobs in the official art system, many of them chose to become freelance "independent artists" (*duli yishujia*) with no institutional affiliation. There were, of course, artists who still wished and even struggled to maintain their jobs in public institutions but they were often forced to give up such options - as a result of their unorthodox artworks and approaches or their unconventional lifestyle and irregular travel schedule. To be "independent" also meant to become "professional" - a move that changed the career paths, social status, and self-perception of these artists. On the surface, freelance artists were free from institutional restrictions.

In actuality, however, they had to submit themselves to other kinds of liabilities and rules in order to support their livelihood and art experiments. It was in the 1990s that experimental Chinese artists learned how to negotiate with art dealers and curators and obtain funding from foreign foundations to finance their works. Quite a few of them developed a double persona, supporting their "unsaleable" experiments with money earned from the sale of their paintings and photographs.

Starting in the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s, a large number of experimental artists emigrated from the provinces in China to major cultural centers, especially the country's capital, Beijing. The result was a situation that differed markedly from the 1980s. In the '85 Art New Wave (*85 Meishu Xinchao*), most "avant-garde" art clubs and societies developed in the provinces and were active on the local level, while Beijing maintained its traditional position as the stronghold of official art and academic art. In the 1990s, Beijing became the mecca for young experimental artists throughout the country. Local experimental communities still existed but Beijing emerged as the unquestionable center of experimental art - mainly because it constantly attracted talented young artists from all over the country? These emigrant artists (mostly in their twenties) emerged after the 1980s to the forefront of experimental art. To this new generation, the Cultural Revolution was a remote past and their works often responded to China's current transformation, not to history and memory. They found such stimuli in Beijing - a city most sensitive to social changes and political tensions in the 1990s.

A direct consequence of these two changes was the emergence of residential communities of experimental artists, known as "artist villages" (*huajia cun*). The first of such communities was located in Beijing's western suburbs near the ruins of Yuanmingyuan, the former imperial park. While avant-garde poets and painters began to live there in the late 1980s, it was not until 1991 that it became known as an artists' village (fig. 1). It attracted media attention in 1992, as reports of its bohemian residents stimulated much popular interest. Around the same time, it was also "discovered" by art dealers and curators from Hong Kong and the West. After Fan Lijun (who was living there at the time) appeared in three large international exhibitions in 1993, including China's New Art, Post-89 in Hong Kong, China Avant-Garde in Berlin, and the 45th Venice Biennale (fig. 2), it developed a reputation as the "exhibition window" of Chinese experimental art.

In a broader sense, the artists' community at Yuanmingyuan introduced a particular lifestyle and provided a model for later "villages," including the one in Songzhuang, east of Beijing. Located in rural settings, these communities are also close enough to downtown Beijing to maintain close ties with the outside world. The initial reason for artists to move into such places has been mainly economic: it is cheap to buy or rent houses and to convert them into large studios and residences. Once a community has appeared it brings additional benefits to its members. First of all, it generates a sense of comradeship. The residents share an identity as independent artists; some of them are close friends who have known one other for a long time. Living in close proximity promises convenience for socializing and occasions for entertainment. Visitors, including important foreign curators and art dealers, can see works of a dozen or so artists in one day; it is no secret that such visits are crucial to obtaining global fame and financial gain. On the other hand, such possibilities necessarily imply social stratification. Some of the artist-villagers are internationally renowned while others struggle to eke out a basic living. Although artists in such a community are subjected to mutual influence (especially from those "successful" styles and subjects), they rarely form close groups based on common social or artistic causes. Such lack of shared commitment explains the ambiguous artistic characteristics of these communities. While a "village" attracts a large number of experimental artists to a single location, it does not necessarily inspire new ways of thinking and expression.

There is one noticeable exception to this general situation. From 1992 to 1994, the so-called East Village (Dongcun) in Beijing became the base of a group of emigrant artists who worked closely together and initiated a new trend in experimental art. Unlike the communities at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang, the East Village artists developed a closer relationship with their environment - a polluted place filled with garbage and industrial waste - since moving there was considered to be an act of self-exile. Bitter and poor, these artists were attracted by the "hellish" qualities of the village that contrasted with the "heaven" of downtown Beijing. Inspired by this contrast, their works were energized by a kind of intensely repressed desire. The significance of the East Village community also lies in its formation of a close alliance of performing artists and photographers who served as both audience and critics to one another (fig. 3). This alliance later broke down



Figure 3: Zhang Huan, to Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond. Photo credit: Flobyn Beck. Courtesy of the Tacoma Art Museum and the Henry Art Museum

under the allure and pressure of commercialism. When photographs of "East Village performances" became valuable, arguments over their authorship turned old friends into enemies. Whether in Beijing or in the provinces, experimental artists of the 1990s were preoccupied with two interrelated issues: their participation in the international art scene and the "normalization" of experimental art in China. The latter issue became increasingly urgent as tension grew between the international standing of these artists and their domestic status. Once again, we find a huge difference between the 1980s and the 1990s. While the '85 Art New Wave was predominately a domestic movement closely linked to China's internal situation at the time, experimental artists of the 1990s articulated their images and ambitions in an international context.

In sharp contrast to their popularity among foreign curators and collectors, Chinese experimental artists throughout the 1990s were still struggling for basic acceptance at home. Although books and magazines about avant-garde art were easy to find in bookstores, actual exhibitions of this art - especially those of installation, video and computer art, and performances - were generally discouraged by the art establishment (including state-run art galleries and schools). Even worse, misunderstanding and antagonism caused frequent cancellations and early terminations of experimental art exhibitions. This led experimental artists and curators to consider the "normalization" of experimental art the most pressing issue to face in China. In an effort to bring this art into the public sphere, exhibitions not only served as testing cases for legal rights, but also provided crucial means to establish rights to practice experimental art.

A prevailing view among advocates of experimental art during the early and mid-1990s was that this art could be legalized only when it had realized its economic potential. They subsequently launched a campaign for this purpose. The most important event in this campaign was the first Guangzhou Biennale, which opened in October 1992 and showed more than four hundred works by three hundred and fifty artists. Sponsored by private entrepreneurs, the exhibition had the self-professed goal of establishing a market system for contemporary Chinese art. Two other exhibitions held in Beijing in 1996 and 1997, entitled Reality: Present and Future and A Chinese Dream respectively, had the same general goal but served the more specific purpose of facilitating domestic auctions of experimental art. That these two shows took place in the Yanhuang Art Gallery and the Beijing International Art Palace - both "semi-official" exhibition spaces - represented another new phenomenon in the 1990s.

Through these and other exhibitions, "independent curators" (*duli cezhanren*) began to play a leading role in the "normalization" of experimental art. Not usually not employed by official or commercial galleries, these individuals organized experimental art exhibitions primarily in order to develop experimental art in China. They found their models in the curators of large international exhibitions. From the mid-1990s, many of their exhibitions indicated a new direction: these curators were no longer satisfied with finding just any available space to put on an exhibition - even a primary space such as the National Art Gallery. Rather, many of them organized exhibitions in order to create regular exhibition channels and eventually a new "exhibition system" in China. It became possible for these curators to pursue this goal as a result of the new conditions in their country. They believed that China's socioeconomic transformation had created and would continue to create new social sectors and spaces that could be exploited for developing experimental art. Their campaign for a new exhibition system involved multifaceted social maneuvers, including working with official and semi-official museums to



Figure 4: Xu Bing, Ghosts Pounding the Wall, 1990-91, rubbing on paper. Production view on the site of the Great Wall of Jinsbanling. Courtesy of the artist

renew or revolutionize their programs, advising private companies and entrepreneurs to support experimental art, and organizing exhibitions in various kinds of non-exhibition spaces such as shopping malls, bars, abandoned factories, and the street. This last effort is especially significant in that it resulted in a series of "experimental exhibitions" aimed at inventing new forms, spaces, and modes of interaction with the public.

While participants in the 1990s experimental art movement (including artists, curators, and art critics) acquired a strong sense of independence that had not been possible before in the art world of the People's Republic of China, they developed an equally strong desire to engage in contemporaneous social and political problems. These two general characteristics provide us with important clues to understand these artists and their projects. The following discussion shifts the focus of analysis from artists to their works. All my examples are chosen from the first Guangzhou Triennial and are illustrated in the exhibition's catalogue.²

MEMORY AND REALITY

Many of these projects reflect China's historical experience, express collective and individual memories, and forge dialogues between the past and present. Often large-scale performances, many of these projects took place at historical sites, the most prominent being the Great Wall (arguably the most important symbol of Chinese civilization and the modern Chinese nation). These works reflect different historical visions and artistic aspirations. For example, Xu Bing's *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990-91) involved a crew of students and local farmers. For twenty-four days, the artist labored to make ink rubbings from a thirty-meter-long section of the wall (fig. 4). The crew wore uniforms printed with Xu Bing's "nonsense" characters. The project was conceived as a grand performance and each stage was recorded on film and video. When the rubbings were assembled into an installation for exhibition, the audience found themselves encountering a paper Great Wall that transforms the solid national monument into its volumeless shadow.

Zheng Lianjie, on the other hand, transformed the Great Wall into a spectacular work of art. Also assisted by local farmers, he used red cloth to tie tens of thousands of bricks broken off from the Wall. The message of this project, entitled *Binding Lost Souls: Huge Explosion*, is twofold: on the one hand, the artist planned the project as a shamanistic performance to heal the historical wound of the old Wall, with each of the broken bricks standing for a "lost soul." On the other hand, with its



Figure 5: Installation view of Zheng Xiaogang's paintings at the 2001 Art Basel.
Photo: Zheng Shengtian

remains of tens of thousands of Chinese who were buried alive by Japanese soldiers during World War II. Below the wall, photographic images of the unearthed human remains were placed in two large basins under circulating water. "The water washes the image away," the artist explains, "just as time has washed people's memories clear of this atrocity that occurred fifty years ago."³ The vulnerability of printed images and the impermanence of the history and memory that they represent and preserve is a central theme in the works of Wang Youshen and other experimental artists like Zheng Xiaogang.

In some of Zhang Xiaogang's paintings from the early 1990s, an infant lies before a dark background comprised of eroded and scratched archival photographs, which are physical remains of the past and symbols of historical memory itself. Whether in the earlier Red Characters or the later Big Family, his paintings are always invested with his memories of the Cultural Revolution (fig. 5). As I have discussed elsewhere, the Cultural Revolution continued to influence experimental artists.⁴ Some artists, such as Ye Yongqing and Zhou Tiehai, evoke the image of Big Character Posters to encapsulate that bygone era. Other artists, such as Liu Dahong (fig. 6) and Yangjiechang, resurrect communist heroes and heroines but turned them into characters of highly individualized narratives. Memories of the Cultural Revolution also inspired symbolic representations of political power, such as Mao Xuhui's Patriarch, Geng Jianyi's Hole, and Zhang Hongtu's Studs (fig. 7). The last work imitates the shiny red door of an imperial gate in the Forbidden City. According to the artist, this door is an important signifier in China because it simultaneously exhibits and conceals political power. Both functions enable those in power to control Chinese people. Essentially iconoclastic, Zhang Hongtu's gate mocks this political philosophy. In the place of the glamorous and golden bosses on an imperial gate are ugly metal rivets that resemble rows of phalluses in various degrees of impotence.



Figure 6: Liu Dahong, Door Guards, 1991, oil on cardboard, 40 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Zhang Hongtu is one of the experimental Chinese artists who combined memories of the Cultural Revolution with a Pop art style, which resulted in the formation of Political Pop (zhengzhi popu). Generally speaking, Political Pop signaled a deepening stage in the deconstruction of a previous

political visual culture. Unlike "scar art" (shanghen meishu) painters from the 1980s, Political Pop artists had no interest in depicting tragic events from the previous decades. They derived specific visual references from the Cultural Revolution but erased any original political significance.

A typical strategy was to distort the references and juxtapose them with signs from heterogeneous sources, including commercial trademarks and advertisements (Wang Guangyi) (fig. 8), textile patterns (Yu Youhan), sexual symbols (Li Shan), and computer images (Feng Mengbo). As an important trend in Chinese experimental art, Political Pop brought post-Cultural Revolutionary art to an end. Its radical fragmentation of Cultural Revolution images exhausted the source of its pictorial vocabulary and reduced it to a number of pre-conceived compositional formulae. This interpretation

corrects a misunderstanding often found in Western introductions to contemporary Chinese art, which tend to identify Political Pop as a "dissident" political art produced under a Communist regime. In fact, most Political Pop artists were protesting against any ideological and political commitment; their intention was to de-politicize political symbols - not reinvest them with new political meaning. Although genuine social and cultural criticism existed in Chinese experimental art in the 1990s, it was related to an observation and representation of reality, not history.

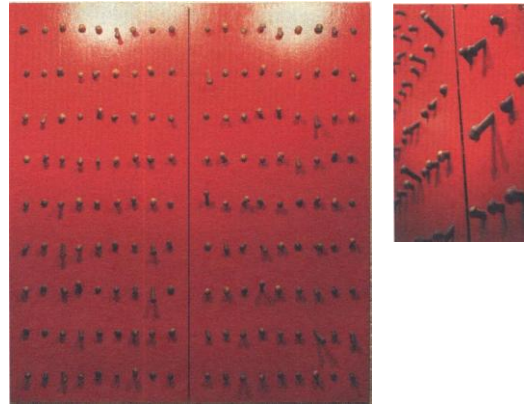


Figure 7: Zhang Hongtu, Studs, 1992, metal, wood, paint. 243 x 218 cm. Courtesy of artist

Reality, however, can never be separated entirely from history and what links the present to the past are often personal memories. From this perspective, Chinese experimental artists of the 1990s demonstrated an unmistakable interest in forging such "memory links" through their works. Hai Bo, for example, customarily juxtaposes two photographs taken several decades apart. The first - an old group photo - shows young men or women in Maoist or army uniforms; their young faces glow with an unyielding belief in the Communist faith. The second photograph, taken by Hai Bo himself, shows the same group of people (in some cases the surviving members) twenty or thirty years later. In an almost graphic manner, the two images register the passage of time and stir the recollections of viewers and certain moments in their own lives.

Differing from the photographs that frame a temporal duration with a beginning and an end, the subject of Wang Gongxin's Old Stool is time itself. His video installation consists only of a small black-and-white video screen attached to an old-fashioned wooden stool. The single image on the screen is a moving index finger that scratches the stool's worn surface. The finger's motion leaves its trace on the furniture and alludes to the movement of time.

Wang Gongxin's work is allegorical, but other experimental representations of the passage of time have more concrete subjects that are more biographical in intent. An outstanding example of this is the installation Women/Here by Sui Jianguo, Zhan Wang, and Yu Fan. As an "experimental exhibition" in its own right, this work responded to an important event: the Fourth International Women's Congress held in Beijing in 1995. Although many leaders of women's movements around the world traveled to China to participate in the event, they were, for the most part, kept separate from Chinese people. The three artists' answer was to hold a different "congress" (in the form of an art exhibition) in order to create an alternative space where, in their words, "an ordinary Chinese woman could become part of the international event and the contemporary movement



Figure 8: Wang Guangyi, Great Castigation Series: CASIO, 1990, oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist

of women's liberation."⁵ Their strategy was to make their mothers the "artists" in the exhibition, while reducing their own role to that of an editor of readymade materials in the form of their mothers' private belongings and personal mementos. Compiled into chronological sequences and displayed in a public space, these fragmentary materials tell the lives of three Chinese women, unknown to most people beyond their families and work units.

Women/Here demonstrated that, by the mid-1990s, Chinese experimental artists had largely freed themselves from the baggage of the Cultural Revolution. Their art now directly and forcefully responded to contemporary issues in Chinese society. Indeed, a close examination of Chinese art from the late 1980s to the early 1990s shows a steady increase in representations of contemporary subjects. Prior to 1993, the two art forms most sensitive to this change remained photography and oil painting. After 1993, performance, installation, digital imaging, and video became increasingly prevalent. A whole generation of independent photographers emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Reacting against the doctrine of socialist realism, these photographer sought to represent "real" Chinese people (often the nameless and injured). Zhang Haier's portrayals of urban prostitutes are among the earliest examples of this genre.

Yuan Dongping photographed mental asylum patients from all over China. Taken from eye level and left deliberately unpolished, his photographs convey a social criticism in the photojournalistic mode. Liu Zheng's My Countrymen represents a further development of this photographic practice. Although his subjects are also "stigmatized" people in the form of the disabled and impaired, old and sick, homosexual and transsexual, and beggars and wanderers, he abandoned the earlier informal journalistic approach in favor of visual monumentality and technical perfection.

In the field of oil painting, a turning point was the New Generation (Xinshengdai) exhibition, held in the Museum of Chinese History next to Tiananmen Square in 1991. Artists in the exhibition included Liu Xiaodong (fig. 9), Yu Hong, Song Yonghong, and Wang Jinsong among others. As the brightest products of China's best art colleges, these young painters aimed at representing the "spirit" of their time. What distinguished them from orthodox socialist realists was their under-standing of this "spirit." Instead of depicting revolutionary masses and broad historical dramas, they developed a penchant for representing fragmentary and trivial urban life. Their works rejected grand narratives and symbolism in favor of seemingly meaningless scenes found in everyday life around them: beauticians with exaggerated fake smiles, lonely men and women in a sleeping car on a train, and a group of yuppies taking a picture in front of Tiananmen (fig. 10).

These painters claimed that their works were devoid of deep meaning since life itself no longer had deep meaning. It can be argued that superficiality had become the real subject of New Generation art. The painted scenes of beauty salons, escalators, and night markets are the most common "surface" phenomena in a metropolis. These scenes were selected not because they were part of "reality" but because they best signified the concept of the superficial - which is also understood in terms of emotion and mood. New Generation paintings neither represent nor



Figure 9. Liu Xiaodong, *Midsummer*, 1989, oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm. Courtesy of the artist

demand strong feelings, such as love or hate. Some of them are lightly humorous or affectionate while others carry darker connotations of resentment or indifference. The boundary between New Generation painting and Cynical Realism is thus a blurry one. Although Cynical Realism is more well-known in the West, it was actually a branch of New Generation painting in the early 1990s. Cynical realist artists like Fang Lijun and Liu Wei have the same educational background and paint in a similar painting style as New Generation artists but distinguish themselves by their self-identification as rogues (*liumang*) and their attitude of malaise.

The impact of New Generation painting was strongly felt in the Chinese experimental art created during the middle and late 1990s and continued to represent contemporary social life - but often in a more exaggerated or distorted manner. The oil painter Zeng Hao, for example, depicts well-dressed young professionals and their material possessions as toy figures and furniture; their miniature form heightens the sense of dislocation and objectification. Likewise, Yang Fudong's



Figure 10: Wang Jinsong, Taking a Picture in Front of Tiananmen, 1990, oil on canvas, 125 x 185 cm. Courtesy of Hanart TZ Gallery

comic portrayal of *The First Intellectual* (2000) comments on the vulnerability and insecurity of the emerging generation of yuppies - a byproduct of China's social and economic reforms. Wang Xingwei's *Again Not the Perfect Score* explores the illogicality of the visual culture of today's well-to-do Chinese.

The Sichuan performance artist Luo Zidan conducted many projects amidst actual urban spaces. The subject of his *Half White Collar, Half Blue Collar* is the confusion that arises when people try to fit into the new socioeconomic system. Staged on the streets of Chengdu, this performance enabled Luo Zidan to interact openly with an audience. The increasing popularity of performance among experimental artists in the 1990s was, to a large extent, related to the desire of artists to engage in public issues and with the public. In their search for new visual languages to further such engagement, these artists found that performance art offered many ways with which to directly interact with society. A forerunner of such experiments is Wang Jin, who, beginning in 1993, conducted a series of powerful performances to address public issues. These performances, including *Red Flag Canal* and *Beijing-Kowloon*, focused on the relationship between past and present in relation to modern Chinese history. Another group of performances responded to the rapidly growing capitalist economy in China. *Knocking at the Door* (1993), for example, consisted of seven old bricks from the walls of the Forbidden City, each bearing on its uneven surface a supra-realistic depiction of an American currency note. Wang Jin continued to paint such "cash bricks" and used them to "restore" damaged sections of the palace wall. Other projects produced by Wang Jin express (again in ironical forms) the growing materialism in contemporary Chinese society. A new catchword in colloquial language for "making a fast buck" is "stir-frying money" (*chao qian*). Making the verbal expression literal, Wang Jin rented a space and set up a food stand in a night market in central Beijing in 1995. With all the aplomb of a master chef, he flied a wok full of coins for his customers. This project was called *Quick Stir-frying Renminbi*.

SELF AND ENVIRONMENT

Among all branches of contemporary Chinese art produced during the 1990s, experimental art most sensitively responded to the drastic changes in the environment: the vanishing of

traditional landscapes and lifestyles, the rise of post-modern cities and new urban cultures, and the large-scale emigration of populations. This art also responded to changes in the livelihood and social role of the artist in China. During this period, a large number of experimental artists moved from the provinces to major cosmopolitan centers, where they reinvented themselves as independent artists working for international exhibitions and a global art market. Not coincidentally, these artists were intensely concerned with identity and self-representation became a predominant subject of their work in various mediums, including painting, photography, performance, installation, and video. Their works reflected an urgent quest for individuality in a transforming society.

Underlying the heightened interest in representing the environment and the self of the artist was a "generational shift" in experimental art. Most artists who favored these subjects came to the forefront during the mid-1990s. While many of them were responding to the initiatives of the New Generation artists, their more active engagement with social issues led them to abandon the pictorial realism of New Generation painting. Their works - often taking the forms of installation, performance, and photography - document their direct and sometimes aggressive interaction with China's current transformation.

An important aspect of this transformation (and one that attracted much of their attention) was the rapid development of the city. A striking aspect of a major Chinese metropolis like Beijing or Shanghai in the 1990s was the never-ending destruction and construction that was manifest in the forest of cranes and scaffolding, the roaring sound of bulldozers, and the dust and mud. Old houses were coming down every day to make room for new hotels and shopping malls. Thousands and thousands of people were relocated from the inner city to the outskirts. In theory, demolition and relocation were conditions for the capital's modernization. In actuality, these conditions brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents: they no longer belonged to one another.

This situation is the context and the content of many works in 1990s experimental art. Zhan Wang's *Temptation*, for example, is about the disappearance of the human subject - a basic phenomenon associated with any form of demolition and dislocation. The installation consists of a group of "human shells" made of clothes and glue. The extremely contorted gesture of each torso gives the impression of passion, pain, torture, and a life-and-death struggle. Empty and suspended, these human forms are created not as self-contained sculptures but as individual "signs" of desire and loss that have the infinite potential to be installed in different environments. Meaning is contingent on their specific location. Suspended on scaffolding, they suggest a heightened sense of instability and anxiety. Placed on the ground, they are associated with dirt and evoke the notion of death. The most dramatic installation was the scattering of these hollowed mannequins throughout a demolition site. Both the ruined houses and the mannequins testify to a fascination with torn and broken forms and an attraction to destruction and injury.

Rong Rong's photographs of Beijing's demolition sites are also devoid of actual human figures. However, he has filled the vacancy with images left in the half-destroyed houses. These images originally decorated an interior but now form part of the exterior. A pair of dragons indicates a former restaurant; a Chinese New Year painting suggests traditional taste. These "leftover" images range from various pin-ups of Marilyn Monroe to Hong Kong fashion models. Torn and fragmented, these images still exercise an alluring power over the spectator - not only with their seductive figures but also with their seductive spatial illusionism. With an enhanced

three-dimensionality, abundant mirrors, and painting-within-paintings, they transform a plain wall into a space of fantasy.

These works can be viewed together with the photographs by Zhang Dali, the most famous graffiti artist in China. Between 1995 and 1998, Zhang Dali sprayed more than two thousand images of himself- a profile of his shaven head - all over Beijing, often in half-destroyed, empty houses (fig. 11). He thus transformed urban ruins into sites of public art, however temporarily. The locations he chose for his performance/photography projects highlight three kinds of comparisons. The first kind contrasts a demolition site with an official monument. The second contrasts abandoned residential houses with preserved imperial palaces. The third contrasts destruction with construction. Rising from the debris of ruined houses are glimmering high-rises of a monotonous, international style.

Zhang Dali's interest lies not simply in representing demolition, but in revealing the different fates of demolished residential houses from buildings that are revered, preserved, and constructed. His photographs serve as a bridge between Rong Rong's "urban ruin" pictures and another popular subject of 1990s Chinese experimental art: representations of the emerging new cityscape. Ni Weihua's *Linear Metropolis*, for instance, registers the artist's fascination with the intricate and abstract patterns of new types of buildings and roads - patterns that stimulate sensations never before experienced in Chinese visual culture. The new Chinese city deliberately seems to rebel against its predecessor. Whereas a traditional Chinese city has the typical, orderly image of a chessboard-like space concealed inside a walled enclosure, the new city is sprawling, fast and noisy, chaotic, and aggressive. The new city refuses to remain a quiet and a passive object of aesthetic appreciation.

Whereas Ni Weihua interacted with Beijing through his excited gaze, Zhao Bandi produced an image of the city through his "public welfare" art and Lin Yilin and Liang Juhui (two members of Guangzhou's experimental group Big Tailed Elephant) made their art part of the city's very movement. Lin Yilin conducted his 1995 performance *Safely Crossing the Linhe Road* on one of the busiest streets in Guangzhou. He built a freestanding brick wall on one side of the street and then took away bricks one by one from the wall to build a second wall next to the first. He continued this process many times until the wall "moved" to the other side of the street. While simultaneously simulating construction and destruction, this performance interrupted Guangzhou's traffic and presented itself as an integral feature (and problem) of the city. Liang Juhui also synchronized his performance *One-Hour's Game* with the city's movement - but he moved vertically instead of horizontally. He played computer games for a whole hour in an exposed elevator of a future highrise.

The emerging city attracts experimental artists not only with its new buildings and roads but also with its changing population made up of an increasingly heterogeneous group of people living in an increasingly crowded place. To Chen Shaoxiong (another member of Big Tailed Elephant) a heterogeneous city resembles the stage of a plotless tableau; what unites its characters is the place they share. This notion underlies his photographic installations, which are collectively entitled *Streets* and conceived and constructed exactly like a series of puppet theaters. Representing a street or square in Guangzhou, each installation consists of two detached layers. In front of a large panoramic photograph are cut-out miniatures consisting of passersby, shoppers, and policemen amidst telephone booths, traffic lights, different kinds of vehicles, trees, and anything one finds along Guangzhou's streets. Although these images are crowded in a tight space, they do not



Figure 11. Zhang Oali Demolition, Beijing, 1998

interact. The mass they form is a fragmentary one, without order, narrative, or a visual focus.

Similarly, the Tianjin artist Mo Yi represents his city through a study of its residents. His research started in the late 1980s, after he was criticized for producing "detached, lonely, and suspicious" images of people in Tianjin. In reaction to this critique, Mo Yi began to photograph people on the street by either tying his camera behind his neck or hanging it behind his waist and using an extension cord to take pictures. Thus, he was able to separate the camera lens from his gaze and see what people and the city look like when they were not subjected to his eyes. The experiment grew into a multi-year project and Mo Yi produced a large group of random photographs that have acquired a unique anthropological significance. Entitled *Expressions of the Street*, this series of photographs record the gradual changes on people's faces over the years.

There is no doubt that Chinese experimental art produced during the 1990s owes a great deal to the transformation of the city and the emergence of new urban spaces and

lifestyles. However, the chaos and high pressure associated with urban life drove many artists to rediscover nature through their art. Thus, when Wang Jianwei makes a video about continuous cycles of planting and harvesting crops or Song Dong tries to affix a seal on the surface of a river, they are not imitating Zen monks or the ancient literati. Rather, these attempts to engage with nature signify an attempt to return to a different time and space - a departure from the time and place in which the artists actually belong.

The examples discussed above make it clear that experimental representations of the environment are inseparable from artistic self-representations. In fact, such a close relationship sets experimental art apart from other branches of contemporary Chinese art. For instance, although academic painters also depict landscape and urban scenes, they approach their subjects as though they belong to an external, observed reality. Experimental artists, on the other hand, find meaning only from their interaction with the surrounding world. When they document such interaction, they customarily make themselves the center of a photograph or video (as seen in Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* or Song Dong's *Water Seal*). Zhu Fadong's performance/video project *This Person is for Sale* exemplifies this self-representational formula. In this video, he presents as a member of the "floating population" - people who have left the countryside and entered large cities for jobs. The video records the many trips the artist took around Beijing during 1994. Every morning, he went out with two lines written on his back: "This person is for sale; please discuss price in person." Following him, we travel all over Beijing: Tiananmen Square, a McDonald's restaurant, the National Art Gallery, Beijing University, the East Village of experimental artists, and a labor market where he mingled with other members of the floating population. This video has the effect of bringing a city, a population, and the artist into a single representation, with the artist remaining at the center.

When we shift our focus to self-representation, we find four basic modes frequently employed by experimental artists in the 1990s. The first is an "interactive" mode discussed above which involves the artist expressing him or herself through an interaction with his or her surroundings. The

subject of interaction, however, not only includes the environment but also people - as seen in Zhuang Hui's Group Portraits and Chen Shaofeng's Dialogue with Peasants of Tiangongsi Village. Both works (the former a series of large-format photographs and the latter a huge assembly of oil portraits) are "performative" in nature. For Zhuang Hui, taking a group picture of an entire crew of four hundred and ninety-five construction workers or six hundred employees of a department store requires patient negotiation as well as skilled orchestration. Such interaction with his subjects is the real purpose of his art experiment, whereas the photographs in which he appears merely certify the project's completion. Chen Shaofeng developed a similar approach in the conducting of his interactive project. When he was painting portraits of more than three hundred men, women, and children from Tiangongsi village, he invited his sitters to sketch him at the same time.

The second mode of self-representation discourages explicit depiction of individual likeness. Rather, artists express themselves through symbolic images and objects. Zhan Wang's Temptation is one such representation since the hollowed "human shells" imply the artist's own disappearance. To Cai Jin, the image of the banana plant is deeply associated with her own memories and personal life. She has painted this image on canvases as well as on various objects. Yin Xiuzhen's Suitcase is another example of work produced in this genre. Folding her old clothes and packing them into a suitcase, she then seals the clothes with cement mortar. The performance can be read as a symbolic burial of her past - as signified by her "relics" that are now invisible underneath solid concrete. Cang Xin's performance Trampling on the Face takes a different form but conveys a similar sense of self-sacrifice. Covering a courtyard with plaster masks made from his own face, he and his guests stepped on them and smashed them into pieces.

At the opposite spectrum from these symbolic representations, the third mode demands an explicit display of the body, which the artist employs as an unambiguous vehicle for self-expression. This body art emerged in Beijing's East Village, where artists like Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming developed two types of performance characterized by masochism and gender reversal. Exemplifying the latter type, Ma Liuming invented his female alter-ego, Fen-Ma Liuming, as the central character in his/her performances. Masochism is a trademark of Zhang Huan: almost every performance he undertakes involves self-mutilation and simulated self-sacrifice. In some cases he offers his flesh and blood; in other cases he tries to experience death by either locking himself inside a coffin-like metal case or placing earthworms in his mouth. By subjecting himself to an unbearably filthy public toilet for a whole hour, he not only identifies himself with the site but also embraces it. In a similar spirit, Yan Lei photographed his beat-up face in 1995. Masochistic self-representation acquired an even more extreme form in the late 1990s, as represented by several works in Infatuated with Injury, a private experimental art exhibition held in Beijing in 1999.

The fourth and last mode of self-imaging is that of self-portraiture, which constitutes an important genre in 1990s experimental art. A common tendency among experimental artists, however, is a deliberate ambiguity in portraying their likeness - as if they felt that the best way to realize their individuality was through self-distortion and self-denial. A particular strategy for this purpose was self-mockery, which became popular in the early 1990s and was epitomized by Fang Lijun's skinhead youth with an enormous yawn on his face. As a trademark of Cynical Realism, this image encapsulated a dilemma faced by Chinese youth in the post-89 period and introduced what may be called an "iconography of self-mockery" (which many experimental artists followed in the second half of the 1990s). Another method of self-denial is "self-effacement" and the making of



Figure 12. Facade Of Guangdong Museum of Art. Courtesy of the Guangdong Museum of Art

one's own image blurry, fragmentary, or in the act of vanishing. Many works in the exhibition *It's Me* (1998) fall into this category. More than one-third of the self-portraits by experimental artists in the recent publication *Faces of 100 Artists* also use this formula? A similar idea underlies Jin Feng's self-portrait entitled *The Process in Which My Image Disappears*. It shows the artist writing on face on a glass panel: as his handwriting gradually covers the panel, it blurs and finally erases his image.

Notes

¹ In particular, artists in several large cities, including Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chengdu, Taiyuan, and Nanjing, formed close working relationships to produce interesting works. Other experimental artists continued their individual activities in Hangzhou, Changchun, Ji'nan, and Yangjiang.

² Wu Hung, ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Art Museum, 2002).

³ "Everyday Sightings: Melissa Chiu interviews the Chinese artist Wang Youshen," *ArtAsia Pacific* 3, no. 2 (1996): 54.

⁴ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 17-22.

⁵ Sui Jianguo's letter to the art critic Gu Zhenfeng. Provided by the artist.

⁶ Shen Jingdong, *100 ge yishujia miankong* (Faces of 100 artists), 2001. Private publication.