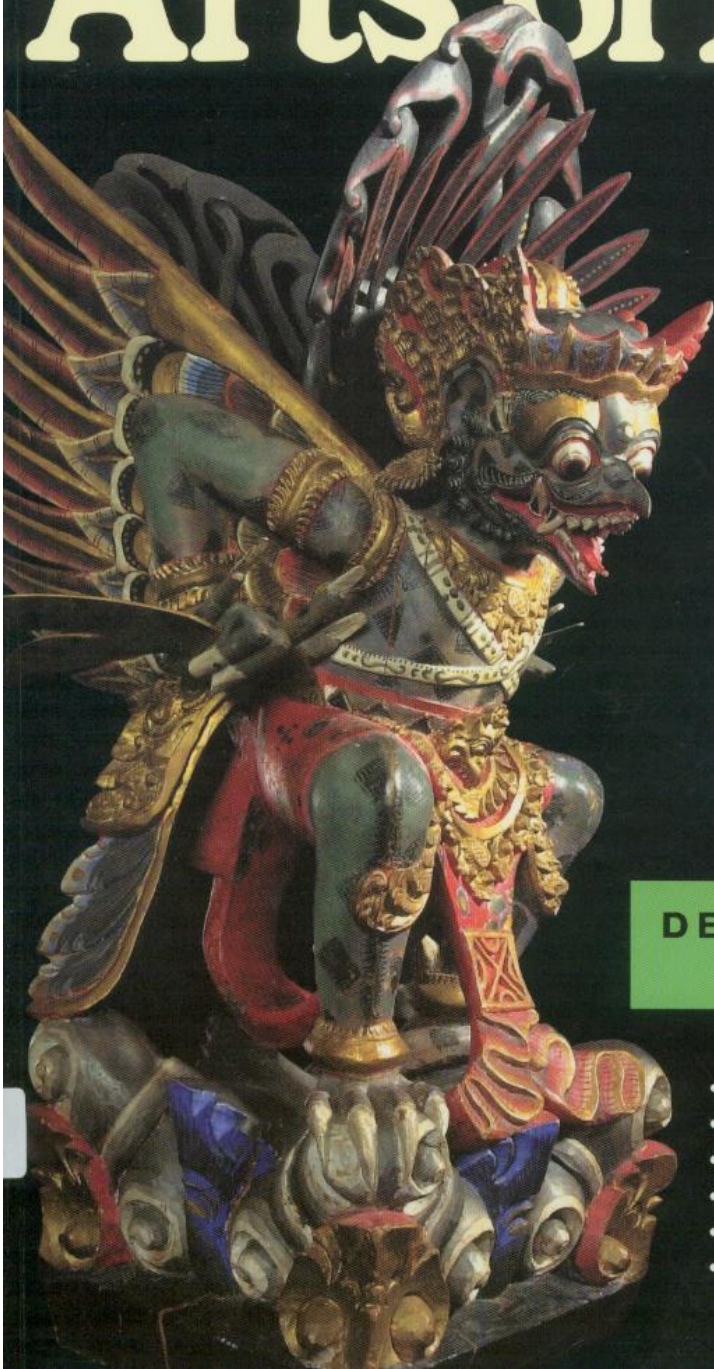


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Arts of Asia



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CHINA ON THE RADAR

POST- 1989 CHINESE ART FROM

THE LOGAN COLLECTION

Thomas J. Whitten

RADAR: Selections from the Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, (1) includes works by major artists from China, Japan, Britain, Cuba, Germany, the Netherlands, South Africa, and the United States. Of all these artists, those from mainland China are probably the least familiar to contemporary art lovers in the United States, and they thus best exemplify Kent and Vicki Logan's radar-like ability to identify promising new artistic trends. The Logans had begun collecting Chinese contemporary art in 1997, before the *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition in the Asia Society in New York and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that announced the emergence of Chinese contemporary art in the United States in 1998-1999.

The artists in Radar are amongst the most representative of the post-1989 group of contemporary Chinese artists. Their works are, in one way or another, a clear response to the huge changes in Chinese society that the artists have witnessed in the last two decades, and therefore fit perfectly the Logans' interest in art that reflects issues pertinent to society at any given point in time. As Kent Logan has pointed out "societies undergoing rapid changes are fertile grounds for artists".¹

The works selected (1) cover the three of the categories that Chinese critics have defined as representative of the 1990s: Cynical Realism, Political Pop, and Gaudy Art, as well as images of the performance art that has been amongst the most challenging genres for the Chinese public, let alone officialdom, to accept. Though such works have sometimes been decried as overly commercial "export art", for initially the market for the works was almost solely outside of China, they have also been instrumental in gaining the international recognition for Chinese contemporary art that has transformed the artistic environment within the country.

Of these categories, the works of the Cynical Realists are most evocative of the post-1989 period in China. Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun are the two most renowned cynical realist artists who have remained faithful to their initial vision. Profoundly affected by the student demonstrations and the bloody suppression of June 4th 1989, both artists chose to channel their malaise through figural works subtly critical of the situation in which they and millions of other urban youth found themselves at the time.

In Yue Minjun's words, "in 1989, a number of artists had started creating works about this sense of loss, which inspired me in some way. I began to work on images of rows of people that simultaneously aroused feelings of strength and mockery, which fit with my mood then and helped to relieve the unhappiness in my heart."² His work gained its most recognised style however only when the artist started to render his figures in a mockingly exaggerated version of his own image.

Ten of Yue Minjun's larger-than-life sculptures (2,3) dominate the Chinese section of the *Radar* show, their up- right stance as rigid as their forbears of two millennia past the terracotta warriors interred as testimony to the might of China's first emperor. Yet there are no military poses here, just the happy-go-lucky laughing loungeur that is Yue's standard image. This contemporary rendering of China's most iconic historical sculptural figures shows Yue's art at its cynical best, though it is his paintings that are better-known and that have of late been commanding record prices for the artist.

Yue turned to sculpture, he says, after a visit to the 1999 Venice Biennale, when he "had a strong feeling that many works rely on repetition and how they occupy space to produce a visual force. Media, information, and other aspects of mass culture thrive on constant repetition."³ Yue had originally intended to produce one thousand of his figures to heighten the dramatic effect, but space constraints at the time kept him to a grouping of twenty-five.

The Yue Minjun painting in the exhibition, *Life* (4), was begun with the concept of each posture representing a particular Chinese character. The pictographic quality of Chinese characters proved however too difficult to reproduce in a human pose, and "thus these poses, these eccentric poses, came into being".⁴

One of Yue Minjun's near neighbours in the village of Xiaopu east of Beijing-part of the Sougzhuang town- ship that has become home to many of China's artists is Fang Lijun, also creator of an instantly recognisable style.

1 In interview with the author July 2006.

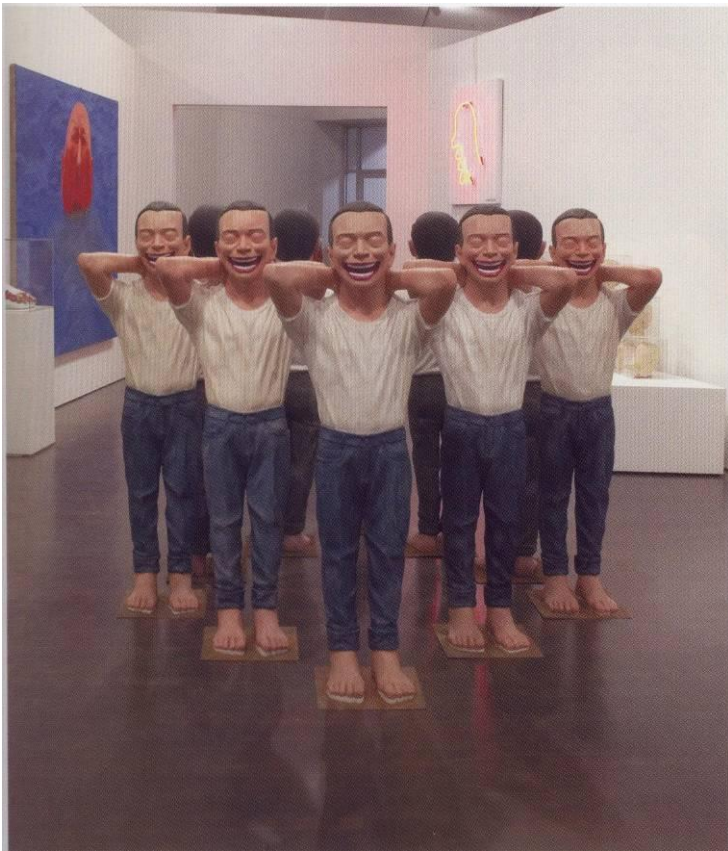
2 *Yue Minjun ---The Lost Self*, Hcbci Education Press, 2005.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*



1 View of the Radar exhibition installation in the Anschutz Gallery at the Denver Art Museum showing the section devoted primarily to contemporary Chinese artists



2 *The Last 5,000 Years*, 2000, by Yue Minjun, synthetic resin and acrylic paint, 74 3/4 x 27 1/2 x 15 3/4 in. (each of 5 figures). Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan. Logan 0938, TL-25453



3 *5 Terracotta Warriors*, 2002, by Yue Minjun, synthetic resin and acrylic paint, 74 3/4 x 27 1/2 x 15 3/4 in. (each of 5 figures). Logan. Logan 1112, TL-25452



4 *Life*, 1999, by Yue Minjun, oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 in. (each of 15 panels).
Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan. Logan 0682, TL-25439



5 *Series 3 No.15*, 1993, by Fang Lijun, oil on canvas, 67 1/4 x 102 3/4 x 1 5/8 in. Collection
of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art. Logan 0570, SFMOMA 99.120, TL-25445



6 980815, 1998, by Fang Lijun, oil on canvas, 983/8 x 1413/4 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Logan 0523, SFMOMA 99.118, TL-25444

Fang is represented in the exhibition by two large paintings that typify the variety of his water series.

The earlier work, completed in 1994, a year after he started these works depicting youth entirely surrounded in water, is in black and white, yet shows a colourful scene of swimmers cavorting under water (5). Fang's use of water suggests escapism, as well as the pursuit of pleasure in which the often idle youth indulged during the early 1990s as China reopened to the outside world. The work was one of several from the Logan Collection that was included in the *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* exhibition, helping Fang Lijun gain early recognition in the US.

In the words of the artist: "I choose water because it is a neutral image, you cannot say it is good or bad. People cannot live without it. In addition, it gives people a mixed feeling of kindness and detachment. We are conscious of its existence. It is much harder to feel the existence of air. Water is completely natural. I like the many senses it conjures, and its ambiguous relationship to people."⁵

But, as Beijing-based critic Karen Smith has remarked, water is also used by Fang to suggest the "futile power of one individual alone consigned to an overwhelmingly watery realm".⁶ The second work included in *Radar*, his huge 1998 painting, 980815 (6), is a striking example. The face of the swimmer is now contorted with effort, with the swell around him no longer conducive to play.

Like Yue Minjun, Fang has used multiple media to express his artistic ideas. He majored in printmaking at the

Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and switches comfortably between woodcuts, oils, and now sculptural works too, each medium providing input into the creative process of the next, just as indeed his black and white cross-fertilise with his works in colour." I formed the habit of using black and white as a preparation, which has its own individual value. It offers different sensations from colour painting. The colour works are equally a preparation for the black and white paintings. They work as a springboard for each other."⁷

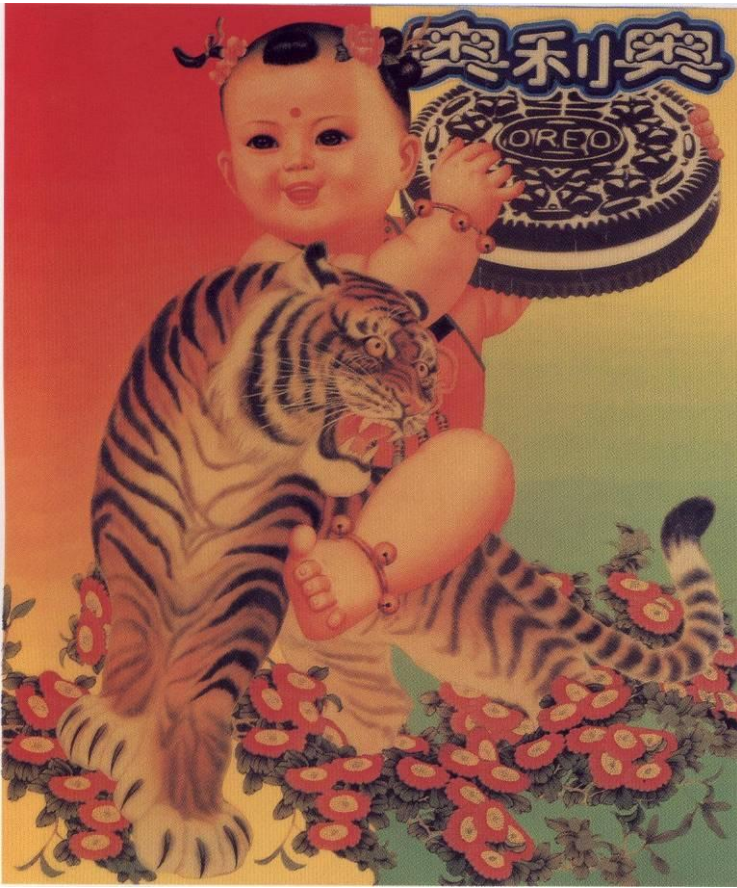
Of the many proponents of the so-called Gaudy Art, the Luo Brothers and Xu Yihui stand out for their use of the most traditional materials. The lacquer painting tradition in China goes back seven thousand years, and the earliest porcelains date to the Han dynasty, over two thousand years back. These media are well-suited to the production of gaudy works, with their lustrous surfaces heightening the kitsch effect, and their luxury status providing a fitting contrast to the brash contemporary content.

Luo Weidong, habitual spokesman for the three Luo Brothers describes it thus: "Through Gaudy Art, lacquer

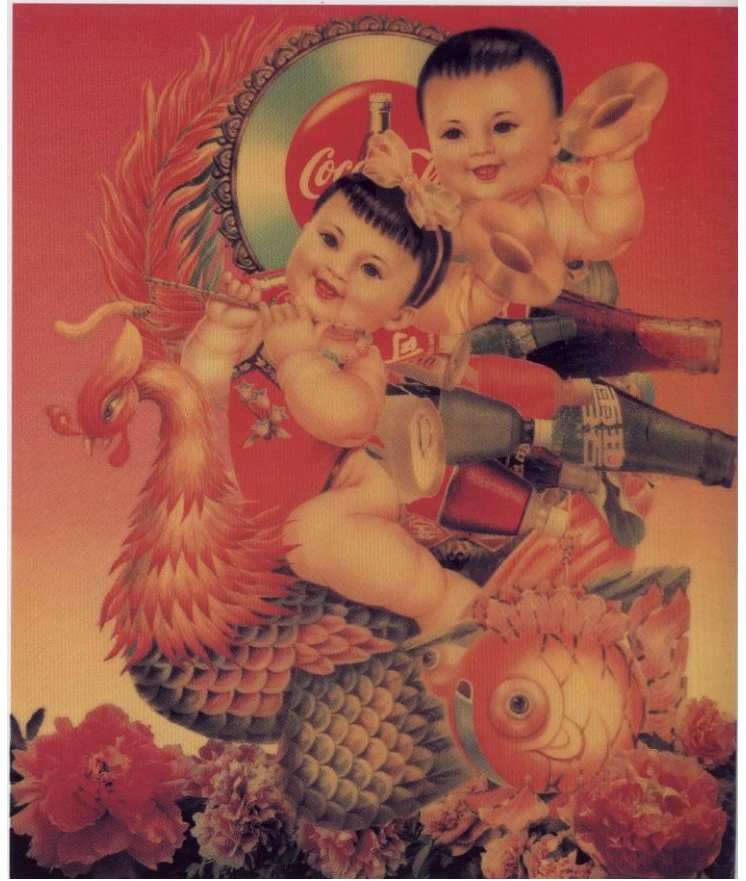
5 Fang Lijun, Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2001.

6 Karen Smith, *Nine Lives--The Birth of Avant Garde in New China*, Scalo Verlag AG, 2005.

7 Fang Lijun, Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2001.



7 *Welcome to the World's Famous Brands #15, 1997*, by Luo Brothers, lacquer and paint on wood, 25 1/4 x 21 7/8 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Logan 0454, SFMOMA 99.121, TL-25430



8 *Welcome to the World's Famous Brands #26, 1997*, by Luo Brothers, lacquer and paint on wood, 25 1/4 x 21 7/8 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Logan 0456, SFMOMA 99.123, TL-25431

painting has reached its apogee. The word 'yansu' (the Chinese word for 'Gaudy') is a combination of the two characters 'yan' meaning 'gorgeous' and 'su' meaning 'common' or 'vulgar', and lacquer manages to achieve both these qualities."⁸

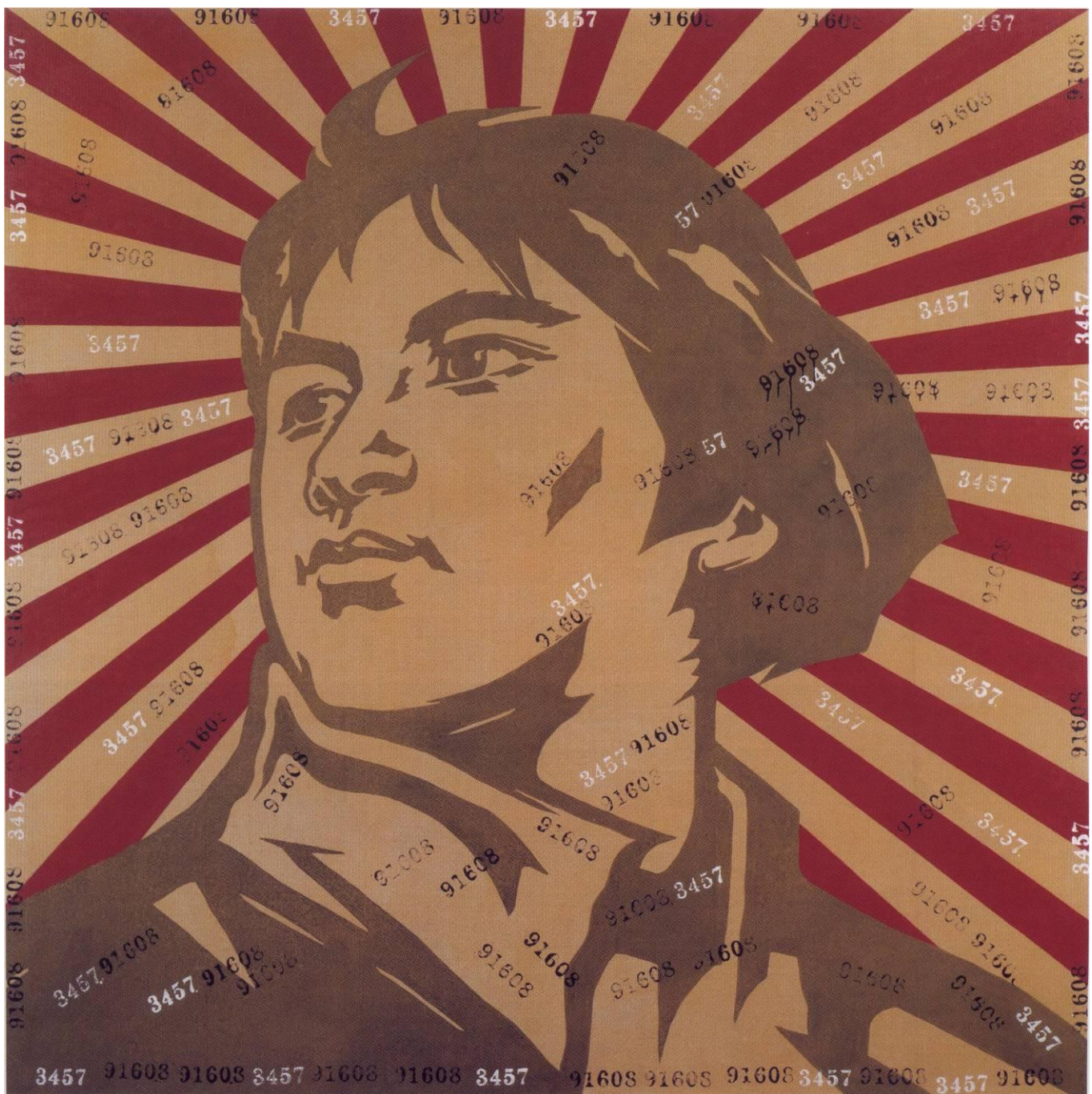
The Luo Brothers best-known series, *Welcome to the World's Famous Brands* is represented here with two small but typical examples (7,8). The combination of traditional Chinese images and auspicious symbols from folk New Year paintings (the tiger, chubby baby, rooster, peony, etc.) with well-known international brand names (Oreo cookies, Tsingtao beer, Coca-Cola, and Sony) reflects the striking changes underway in Chinese society with the growing commercialism generally accepted as a positive step despite its sometimes negative effects. Interestingly, prior to 1996, the series initially went by the title *Fuhua Shanghai or The Harm of Ostentation*, and then *Bangyang or Model*, and met with resounding disapproval from the authorities, with any exhibition quickly closed down. Only with the new title with its positive ring, were the works finally granted official acceptance.

Xu Yihui's porcelain sculpture *Little Red Book* (9) is another neat juxtaposition of imagery, but this time of an icon of the recent past together with the traditional and folksy. The red book lying on its bed of multi-coloured flowers is devoid of all words a meaningless empty shell still in a position of reverence. The resemblance of the whole to an over-decorated birthday cake emphasises the gaudiness, yet also serves to remind the viewer that the past is always open to reinterpretation.

Visually, the step from Gaudy Art to Political Pop is but a short one, with the commercial and the historical often colourfully combined in both genres. Wang Guangyi has been creating the defining images of Political Pop since about 1990, when, so the story goes, he set down a can of Coke onto a set of revolutionary images that he was leaving through, and realised the potential for the striking contrasts within his hallmark images *the Great Criticism* series. In these the bold typescript of well-recognised



9 *Little Red Book, 1996*, by Xu Yihui, painted porcelain, 8 x 20 x 15 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Logan 0458, SFMOMA 99.157, TL-25399



10 *Face of the Believer D*, 2003, by Wang Guangyi, oil on canvas, 78~ x 78~ in.

Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan. Logan 1009, TL-25438

Western consumer brands is set onto a bright mono- chrome background on which revolutionary figures strike their militant poses. Random groupings of numbers are then rubber-stamped over the whole, reaffirming the work's placement in the digital age, as well as suggesting bureaucratic approval.

Wang's *Face of the Believer* series, a large example of which is included in *Radar*, depicts a single revolutionary figure, usually in close-up, with the rubber-stamped numbers but without the brand-name or logo (10). Free of any emblem of capitalism, it is equally kitsch design as political pop.

As Karen Smith has documented in her chapter on Wang Guangyi in *Nine Lives*,⁹ Wang's choices of imagery has proved a most profitable one. Though the series is titled *Great Criticism*, his comment on the commercialisation of society has enabled the artist himself to enter the 21st century with great wealth and comfort. In his youth one of the more impoverished of the now well-known

Chinese artists, Wang Guangyi has now attained the success he most keenly sought.

Performance art in China has proven controversial even within the Chinese contemporary art circles. Much criticised, and usually misunderstood, as a means of self- promotion, and an excuse for the artists to indulge them- selves in violent or sexual situations, performance art was seen by its practitioners as a very direct way to comment on the social and political environment. Much of the work has proved to be a powerful medium for expression, and though the photographic records of the performance inevitably lose something of its original power, they remain clear statements of its intent.

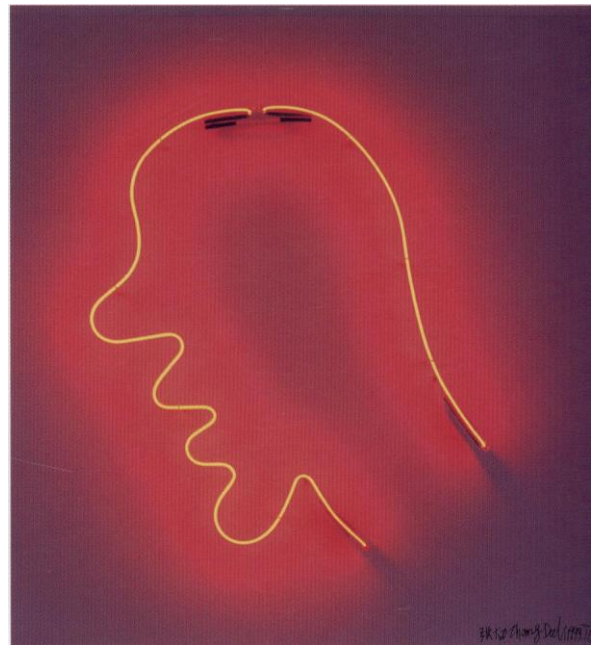
Zhang Huan, now resident in New York, was an early

8 *Luo Brothers*, Ray Hughes Gallery, 2002.

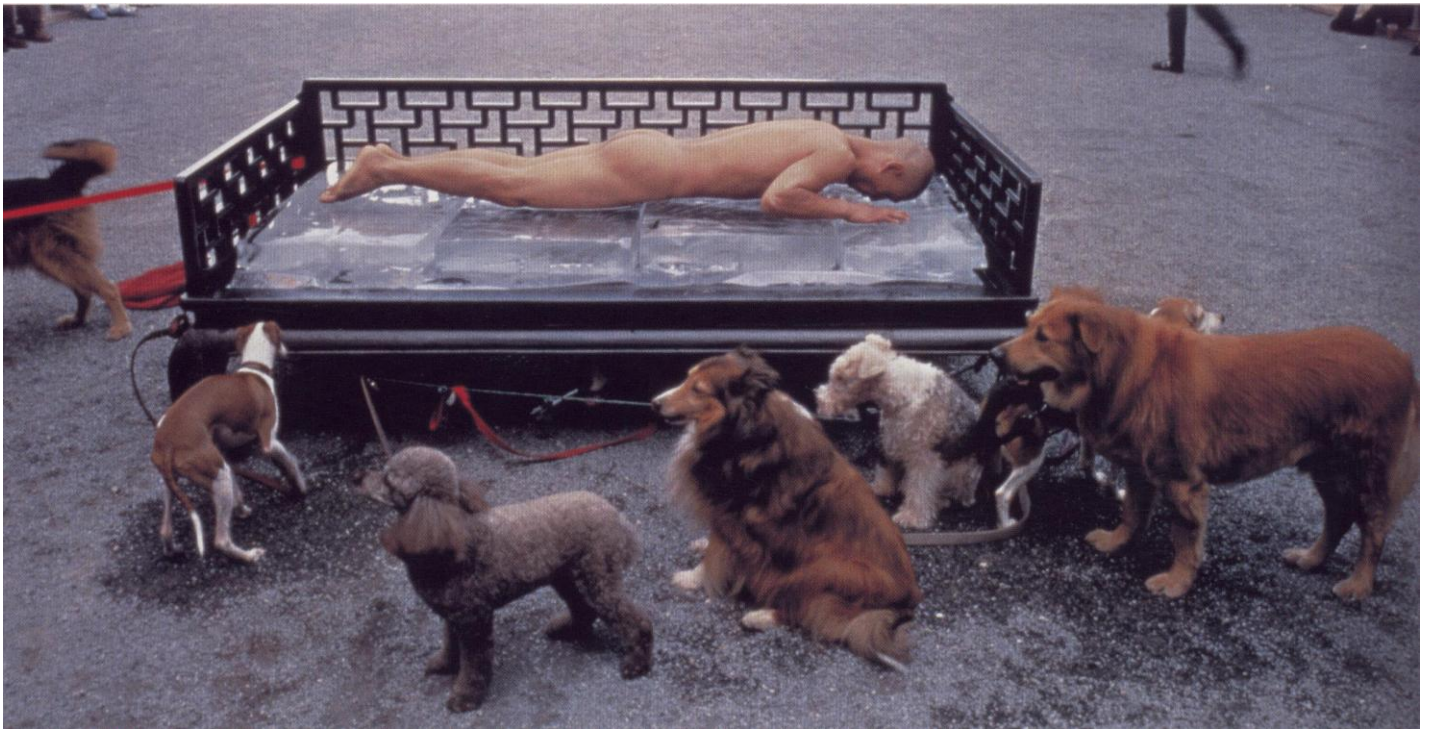
9 Karen Smith, *Nine Lives-- The Birth of Avant-Garde in New China*, Scalo Verlag AG, 2005.



11 *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain*, 1995, by Zhang Huan, dye destruction print, 46 1/2 x 66 1/2 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Logan 0598, SFMOMA 99.365, TL-25434



13 *Dialogue 11/11/99*, 1999, by Zhang Dali, red neon mounted on reinforced canvas, 51 1/8 x 51 1/8 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan. TL-25440 and other refreshments



12 *Pilgrimage--Wind and Water in New York*, 1998, by Zhang Huan, C-print on Fuji archival paper, 40 x 80 in. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan. Logan 0579, PTL-481

practitioner of performance art, always naked, often in a very self-abasing position. As the artist has stated: "I prefer to put my body in physical conditions that ordinary people have not experienced. It is only in such conditions that I am able to experience the relationship between the body and the spirit."¹⁰ In the case of *To Add One Metre lo an Unknown Mountain* (11), a 1995 performance together with a number of other artists near Beijing, the performance was also a vivid exploration of the relationship between man and nature, and it portrays an albeit uncom-

fortable image of the utopian ideal of communion between man and the greater cosmos.

Two of his 1998 works are also included in Radar, one of which being his first ever performance in New York City for the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. The work, *Pilgrimage Wind and Water in New York* (12), uses fengshui ("wind and water" being a direct translation of the Chinese term) as reference to what the artist describes as "the vitality and vigour of this metropolis characterised by the coexistence of cultures".¹¹



14 100 *Chinese*, 2001, by Zhang Dali, synthetic resin, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Each of 17 heads. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan. Logan 1004, TL-25412

In his performance Zhang Huan prostrated himself as if on solemn pilgrimage towards a traditional Chinese bed on which lay blocks of ice. The dogs tied around the bed barked in confusion as the artist lay naked and still for ten minutes on the ice. In a commentary on the performance, Zhang Huan confesses "I do like the city, but at the same time I have an unnameable fear. I want to feel it with my body, just as I feel the ice. I try to melt off a reality in the way I try to melt off the ice with the warmth of my body."¹² For the artist, dogs, treated better in the US than many human beings in China, are a visual reminder¹¹ of the differences between the two societies.

After Zhang Dali returned to Beijing from Italy in 1996, most of his works have concerned the rapid changes that he encountered in his homeland. His first response was the *Dialogue* series, in which, over a two year period, Dali (covertly spray-painted an outline of his head onto many of the old buildings in Beijing slated for demolition. This "dialogue" between city and individual established Dali's head as an oft-seen image, and, as walls on which he had painted gradually disappeared, in 1999 Dali produced a neon version (13) as well as photographs of his graffiti to create a permanent record.

The seventeen resin heads (14) on view here were part of a series of 100 heads that Zhang Dali completed over a year period 2001-2002. They are a continuation of his response to the changes in the urban environment, each being a unique resin cast taken from the mould of one of the millions of migrant workers who have flocked to Beijing to seek work in the city's booming economy. These migrants live and work in appalling conditions, and are, at best, ignored by their urban compatriots, yet most often they bear this treatment with stoicism. For the few dollars a day that they can earn is suf

ficiently enticing to encourage their migration from the even harsher conditions in the countryside. Official recognition of these vital contributors to the capital's wealth is negligible, and Zhang Dali's artistic documentation of this random sampling of 100 individuals is in every way an exceptional work. The casts of their heads, eyes closed in passive acceptance, are a comment on their plight.

In Dali's words "I have observed their faces, diligently I have looked for the traits of their character, but always in a blink the traits get confused and mingled. I know well that I have been looking for personality hidden behind faces without personality, hidden behind a plane and opaque story composed of personal compromises." And, in somewhat grandiloquent conclusion, "These one hundred Chinese tell, in fact, with their faces, one hundred stories lived in common. If we look at them as the continuation of the history of the Chinese race then their story is the history of the spiritual development of a civilisation."¹³

In the same way, this grouping of works in *Radar* is a snapshot of China's development through to the end of the 21st century, but, most importantly, wholly indicative too of the strength of the art encouraged by its ever-changing environment. The Denver Art Museum is fortunate to have Kent and Vicki Logan as locally-based collectors and benefactors with such sensitivity to international art trends.

¹⁰ <http://www.zhanghuan.com>. "Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *One Hundred Chinese*, Zhang Dali, Beijing Jiaxinda Arts Publishing Co., 2002.