A GRAND MATERIALISM IN THE NEW ART FROM CHINA

Mary Bittner Wiseman

A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China

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For Emily

EPIGRAPHS

"The conception of an artwork usually begins with a sense for one's materials, the most rational relationship that exists between an artist and his or her work. I wanted to use tobacco as my primary creative medium, and it was only after this decision that questions of how and why to use these materials arose."[1]

"In Ai's case, the subject of his artistic practice is not his authority or identity as the creator, but the physical nature of the materials he employs—the wood, stone, ceramics and tea. . . ."[2]

NOTES

1. John B. Ravenal, ed., *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project, Duke/Shanghai/Virginia 1999–2011* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 64. Reprinted with permission.

2. Mami Kataoka, "According to What?—A Questioning Attitude," in Ai Weiwei, *According to What?* (Munich, London, New York: Delmonico Books Prestel, 2012), 16. Reprinted with permission.

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2007—*The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*, Tate Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool.

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2008—Cai Guo-Qiang, *I Want to Believe*, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

2008—*Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art*, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Chicago.

2009—Song Dong, *Waste Not*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

2012—Ai Weiwei, *According to What?*, Hirshhorn Museum of Art, Washington, DC.

2012—*Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao,* Asia Society and Museum, New York.

2017—*Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

2020—*The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.

Acknowledgments

This book includes two essays written in the wake of the Gao Minglu's 1998 exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art.* "Subversive Strategies" was published in a special issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* on global art and aesthetics (2006) and later in my *Subversive Strategies in the Contemporary Art in China* (2011), essays by American and Chinese philosophers and art historians, co-edited with Liu Yuedi. "Gendered Bodies" was included in *Subversive Strategies* and in *Beauty Matters* (2013), edited by Peg Brand. This book includes lectures written over the years between *Inside Out* and the Guggenheim Museum's *Art in China after 1989: Theater of the World,* whose brief was that the new Chinese art is global. The chapters on the global, the contemporary, and art have neither been published nor delivered as lectures.

Sincere thanks to Peng Feng for inviting me to lecture at Peking University, Wang Chunchen for having me give several lectures on contemporary Chinese art and Arthur Danto at the China Central Academy for Fine Art, Liu Yuedi for inviting me to a conference in Chengdu, Curtis Carter for inviting me to join American and Chinese philosophers at a groundbreaking conference at Marquette University, the China Institute in New York for having me help to inaugurate its website on contemporary Chinese art, and the Bryn Mawr-Haverford Philosophy Colloquium for inviting me to lecture. Conversations with the audiences in all of these venues, as well as with those at papers read at meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics and the International Association of Aesthetics, brought both profit and pleasure.

I thank Susan Feagin for inviting me to submit something to the special issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* she edited and started

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Introduction

When words fail, the world is not lost. It is there where matter and gesture, texture and touch reign. Where the concrete, the particular, and the material are, and where life is. Something is happening in the art world of China in the first decades of the century that promises to make a difference to a globalized art world. Two independent movements overlap in a way that is likely to reconfigure the art of the twenty-first century along lines being drawn by the new art from China. It has to do with *materia*l and with the *stories* that wrap around particular things: everyone understands both. The one movement is from the focus on language as what determines how we articulate ideas and see the world to a focus on what underlies, transcends, hides within language that we try to get at by reading through, below, or beyond its words. What is outside language is the material world of space and time with its quarks and black holes; electrons, protons, and neutrons; earth, air, fire, and water; natural kinds, artificial kinds, and individuals that are one of a kind. The turn from the linguistic to the material is the end of a line in the west that moves from Descartes's *cogito* through Freud's unconscious on to the body with its senses and network of nerves, where nerves are interfaces with the world more sensitive than senses. Neuroscience is their study. The material turn is a western one, but the Chinese have a reason to go below the levels of language: the presence in their world of the conflicting discourses of communism and capitalism.

The material turn of the new art from China is worthy of study for two reasons that have to do, respectively, with history and metaphysics. One, the change from communist to communist-capitalist China was abrupt, as the one from classical to communist China was not. The cut was as deep as it was sudden, but it did not go all the way down. Murmurs of the emperors and of Mao can be heard and provide an example of the past persisting even

though it has been put out of sight, Two, the material used in the new art is either an item like a train damaged in the Sichuan earthquake or a kind of thing like marks left by explosions of gunpowder. Often the material is also the subject of the artwork and is that to which the work calls attention. The call is to "look at this," where the "this-ness" of the subject is what the viewer is to appreciate and to wonder at, confronting it directly through its material, bypassing language. Back to the two overlapping movements. The second movement that overlaps with the material is globalization whose current phase began with capitalism's search for raw materials and markets and has, for a spate of reasons including the existence of the internet, come to include art. The two movements overlap because material, the other side of language, is a least common denominator and is understood across the globe. We all live in a material world. The materialism of the art from China makes it accessible and its Chinese-ness, the stories about its materials, makes it interesting. What the art's materialism consists in can be seen in exhibitions of new work by Chinese artists brought into this country. Two are of special interest.

In 1998 Gao Minglu, the curator of the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, said that the paradox of trying to present *the originality of new Chinese art on its own terms* in so different a setting as New York may best be described by the title of the exhibition, *Inside Out*. The exhibition's settings were the Asia Society in New York and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York. It introduced the new art from China to the United States, much as the Armory Show in New York in 1913 introduced modernism. Almost twenty years after *Inside Out*, in 2017, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* was mounted by the Guggenheim Museum. So far from there being a tension between the New York museum world and the new Chinese art in its originality and on its own terms, the claim is made by Alexandra Munroe, one of the exhibition's curators, that this art should not be part of a Sino-centric narrative but of a global one. It is at home anywhere.

A Grand Materialism looks at what happened in the twenty years between *Inside Out* and the Guggenheim exhibition in light of what has been shown in the United States and through the lenses of Peter Osborne's conception of the contemporary and Arthur Danto's definition of art. What we see in the art does not take us to sociology or the study of visual or material culture, but to philosophy: to epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. The new art is a path to knowledge about its subject, takes itself to have an ethical charge, and redraws the lines along which artworks are delineated. The presence of philosophy is reinforced by the interest of some Chinese artists in Taoism and Buddhism and by some Chinese artists reading widely in western philosophy. The seven chapters of the book speak to works, almost all of which were made in the years between the two exhibitions, and to our growing awareness of how

different is its tenor from that of the art whose family tree is modernism. The chapters begin by addressing the art made in the throes of the changes China was undergoing after the death of Mao in 1976 and end by seeing the new Chinese art as emblematic of an art that is global and contemporary.

Part I, "Crisis," looks at what artists in China went through when in 1978 bourgeois capitalism, the enemy of communism, was invited into China. Until then art had been limited to what furthered the revolution. Classical Chinese art had been forced into shadow; the greatest collection of it, that of the Imperial Palace, had gone to Taiwan. And western art had been banned. If the artists, all of whom had lived through the Cultural Revolution, wanted to make art that spoke to the new China, they were on their own. Or so it seemed. Chapter 1, "Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art," mines the art of those early years for the beliefs it took upon itself to overturn. Through their art artists sought to undermine, first, the presumption that the social space in which a communist government and a capitalist economy lived side by side was one in which they could be themselves; second, the presumption that the discourses of each could interpret the other; and third, that western concepts and theories of art were adequate to the new art.

Classical art might have gone to Taiwan, but there was still the influence, underground though it might have gone, of deeply entrenched views articulated in the fifth and seventeenth centuries by Hsieh Ho and Shitao, respectively. Chapter 2, "The Role of Expression in Chinese Art," harks back to their writings. Material versions of their prescriptions appear in some of the best new art and contribute to making the art global. The chapter begins with the analytic view of expression of Monroe Beardsley (1915–1985) and the broader view of Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007), who allowed that more than only psychological states can be expressed and that objects as well as agents can express. He is closer to the Chinese ancients than is Beardsley with his analytic account. Hsieh Ho laid out six principles for painters to follow and was primarily concerned with what they should express, whereas the later Shitao was more concerned with how, which was through the "one-stroke" that he claimed to be the quintessence of the creative act. The chapter ends with the work of a self-taught artist, Jizi, who sought to make art that was authentically Chinese in the classical sense and yet contemporary. Part I, then, deals with the time soon after the opening to the west and the time long gone when the Chinese way of looking at the world took the form of instructions to painters about how to capture that world in their work.

Part II, "Working through Art," shows artists using their art to work through issues raised by their strategic calling into question: one, their social space—how does the presence of capitalism affect their sense of themselves as Chinese; two, their language—what is the source of its meanings, of the

word "individual," say; and, three, their art and art theory—what is art's *raison d'être* if it is no longer to further the revolution. Questions about Chinese artists' relation to their past and to the west were rife. Chapter 3, "A Grand Materialism," continues Chapter 1's exploration of artworks whose material is their subject, for example, dust from 9/11, ash from Buddhist temples, gunpowder, worms, the contents of a home, wood from the Qing Dynasty, an old fishing boat, or works that are site specific, where the site is their subject. The chapter starts to organize what Chapter 1 had introduced and identifies examples of four forms in which matter is available to be the subject of a work of art: one, the material side of words; two, energy; three, material history; and, four, the woman's body. Material is particular and concrete, and so are events. The particularity and the concreteness account for the directness of their appeal. Chapter 4, "Gendered Bodies in Contemporary Chinese Art," is about the use of human bodies—our first, immediate, and most intimate encounter with matter—in art, where female and male artists use the body in works of art in different ways. The chapter begins with a discussion of the absence of the nude in Chinese art and goes on to detail how often the male body appears in art to do or to show something for which a body is not necessary. The female body as represented in art by women is hers alone. The art is interior, reflective, and about their bodies.

Part III, "Thinking through Art," dedicates a chapter each to the global, the contemporary, and the concept of art. Whereas Parts I and II were about work of Chinese artists, Part III brings western philosophy, current and past, into the conversation. The philosopher from the past is Hegel (1770–1830), who appears in Chapters 5 and 7, in 5 with a successor and in 7 with two predecessors. Chapter 5, "Art and China after 1989: The Theater of the World," is less centrally about the global than the other two chapters are about their topics. The chapter gets to the global though Hegel and a 1984 art exhibition; it begins by positioning globalism with respect to modernism and postmodernism. Since the shadow of Hegel is clear in the development of modernism, it looks at Hegel and briefly at the Annales school of historiography of twentieth-century France that unwove the single braid, the world spirit of Hegel, into which all aspects of a culture were supposed to be neatly woven. The exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* (1984) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and its critic, Thomas McEvilley, are shown to exemplify a Hegelian thesis and antithesis. McEvilley has been credited with launching multiculturalism, whose realization is globalism. The chapter ends with examples from one of the first exhibitions of Chinese art in Britain, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (2007), all of whose works were made after 2000, some of which exemplify a materialized version of the classical principles laid out in Chapter 2. Because material is something everyone

can understand, works whose materials play a paramount role reach across the globe.

Chapter 6, "*According to What?* and *Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao*," begins with Peter Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013). Artworks from the two exhibitions of the title test the aptness of his account of the contemporary. The two artists are quite different in that the work of Ai Weiwei in *According to What?* reaches out to the world, while that of Lin Tianmiao, who is a woman, is about covering and connecting, not opening up and reaching out. Osborne sees the contemporary as a modernism, of which he traces three stages. In the first, which began in the late nineteenth century, the aesthetic reigned. In the second, genres, which are species of the genus art, took authority from the genus so that something could be a work of art only by belonging to an art genre. It was no longer sufficient for a work only to imitate the world or cause a certain pleasure to be art. It had to hew to the definitions of a genre to qualify. However, later in the twentieth century, genre boundaries began to blur. and genres too lost their authority. In what Osborne calls modernism's third stage, an individual work was no longer art by satisfying a definition of art or by satisfying condition for belonging to a genre of art but had to make the case for itself that it merited the name "art." Art had become contemporary. Works were on their own, rather as Chinese artists were after China opened itself to western commerce and culture. This is Osborne's history of the contemporary. His analysis is that to be contemporary an artwork has to be in the "historical present," to have both an aesthetic and a discursive dimension, and to be *for* the present.

Chapter 7, "Mao's Legacy and Danto's Definition," begins with a discussion of Danto's claim that art has ended and its basis in Hegel for whom "the end of art" was the end of its role as an adequate medium through which the world spirit could become conscious of itself. Danto trades on the notion of something's becoming conscious of what it is in order to say that the modernist narrative of art ended with art's coming to this understanding of itself: "I am what I am, dependent on myself alone." That was the end of its search for self-knowledge and the end of the modernist narrative. And, he said, misleadingly, the end of art. Because of Hegel's importance to modernism, two predecessors are introduced, one of whom is Winkelmann, who is considered to be the father of western art history. This is followed by an account of Danto's epiphany when he saw Warhol's *Brillo Box* in a New York Gallery in 1964; it was that art's story had ended and art could now be anything, even a representation of a box of scouring pads. That is the first third of the chapter, which is immediately followed by an account of Danto's definition of art as being about something toward which it expresses an attitude through

a rhetorical figure that the viewer must interpret, and all this is done against a background of art theory and art history.

This brings us to Mao's legacy, which is to be seen in books by the first two winners of the Chinese Contemporary Art Critic Awards. Pauline Yao speaks against the idea that the artist owns her work on the ground that the labor of many contributes to its production. This is correct in that Chinese artists do cooperate with local people in places where they show their art, and they do have a strong sense of their connection with those who have anything to do with the work. This speaks to the strong sense of community forged during the Mao years. The other critic, Wang Chunchen, claims art has an ethical charge to intervene in society, saying that an artist cannot live in China now and not feel the imperative to use her art to speak out and to speak for. This comports with Mao's insistence that only art that furthers the revolution can be made, but Wang's point is that art's charge is to be for the people. Nowhere is the sense that art is for its own sake. Mao's legacy persists, changed though it might be.

However, neither the tradition, alive in a materialized form in the new art, nor such of the legacy of Mao that remains sends a clear signal to contemporary artists. Therefore, they are free to make an art that is new, depending on the artist and the audience working together rather than on art history or art theory. But most of all, depending on their material. Here we see the artist ceding authority to his material: "In Ai's case, the subject of his artistic practice is not his authority or identity as the creator, but the physical nature of the materials he employs—the wood, stone, ceramics, and tea—or the immaterial and intangible skills and efforts of the executing craftsmen."[1] Ai continues: "Rather than thinking of my projects as art; they attempt to introduce a new condition, a new means of expression or a new method of communication. If these possibilities didn't exist, I wouldn't feel the need to be an artist."[2] Danto's definition of art, based as it is on the artist's inviting the viewer to see reality in a new way by inviting her to see the subject of the art in a new way, fits happily with current Chinese art.

The chapter ends with applications of the definition, plus a look at a trilogy of exhibitions connected by the material, tobacco, each an amalgam of tobacco-related works, each compatible with Danto's definition. The trilogy, whose parts are connected only by their material, finds an uncanny echo in an opera by the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, *Die Materie* (1989). The composer said that "as a philosophical concept and a Marxist, aesthetic, and scientific notion matter inspired him to write four essays that were different enough in content to sustain tension while there were sufficient constants for the work to be experienced as a unity."[3] Matter connects the words sung mostly by characters from Dutch history who are as varied as a seventeenth-

century atomist, a thirteenth-century female mystic, Mondrian, Madame Curie, a symbolist poet, and instructions for building a boat. In both a Dutch opera and the new art from China, *die materei* and the concrete reality of particular events hold sway.

NOTES

1. Mami Kataoka, "According to What?—A Questioning Attitude," in Ai Weiwei, *According to What?* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2012), 16.
2. Kerry Brougher, "Reconsidering Reality: An Interview with Ai Weiwei," in Ai Weiwei, *According to What?*, 16.
3. Elmer Schonberger, "De Materei," in the text accompanying the CD by Schonberger Ensemble and Asko Ensemble with members of the Netherlands Chamber Choir.

Part I

CRISIS

Chapter One

Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art

The following review by Richard Vine, "The Report from Shanghai: After Exoticism," of an underground exhibition called *Fuck Off* that was held alongside the Shanghai Biennale 2000 appeared in the July 2001 issue of *Art in America*:

> Socialist realism, which was still acknowledged in the modern portion of the Guggenheim Museum's "China, 5,000 Years" exhibition in 1998, has vanished without a trace . . . [China] essentially skipped the stage of modernist formalism, moving in two Great Leaps, so to speak, from traditional ink painting to Socialist Realism to postmodern eclecticism. . . .
>
> The urge for practitioners to "catch up" with the West and to stand out from the overwhelming competition leads many to a strategy of shock. If one "Fuck Off" artist uses a dead baby (Sun Yuan in *Honey,* 1999, or Zhu Yu in *Eating People*, 2000), the next, it seems, must use two (Peng Yu [and Sun Yuan] in *Link of the Body*).
>
> After decades of censorship, China's young talents now seem obsessed with testing the limits of tolerance: How much provocation will the government permit? When will viewers begin to react with physical disgust or moral outrage? . . . These "progressives" are remarkably like avant-garde artists everywhere. . . . Nothing is more uniform, it seems, than art-world nonconformity.[1]

It is true that nonconformity is a mark of the avant-garde, but it can be argued, *pace* Richard Vine, that to read the work of Chinese nonconforming artists at the turn of the twenty-first century as doing nothing but testing the limits of tolerance is to do the art an injustice.[2] It is also to deprive oneself of a lesson about the possible functions and, hence, the nature, of art. The evidence for this can be found by looking at the art of the Chinese avant-garde as a series of subversions of the claims of certain beliefs to be true.

The first subversion is of the presumption that a communist government with a capitalist economy can carve out a social space in which people can be themselves; the second, that the discourses in place in China are interpretable; and the third, that western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, can be adequate to China at the turn of the new century. This way of looking paves the way for an answer to the question of whether there are concepts specific to a non-western aesthetics that have been omitted or marginalized in the west and would, were they to enter its critical discourse, enrich specific concepts in western aesthetics and philosophies of art. The question is whether there are traits or concepts present in the one art and absent from the other that are so deeply entrenched as not to be able to leave their context in order to enter the critical discourse of the other. An answer to this requires trying to separate out whatever in the work is clearly non-western and to characterize it in the language of western criticism.

In the fast-moving history of post-Cultural Revolution art in China there was a further forward leap from traditional ink painting to postmodern eclecticism not mentioned in the review in *Art in America:* from Socialist Realism to Political Pop, whose style, though not its content, was indebted to the art of the 1960s in the west. Political Pop performed the first of the three subversions through which the course of recent Chinese art can be charted. One reason to see the art as subversion is to discover what in it is global and what local. "Global" is here taken to apply to those activities that can shake free of their native soil and be transported to almost anywhere. This includes practices such as the manufacture of clothes for American companies and the analysis of radiological scans from American hospitals that have moved to China and to India, respectively. However, a difference between the economic and aesthetic cases leads to a difference between what "global" means in each. It leads also to a difference in the relations between global and local in each context. Something is global in the economic realm when it is unmarked by the culture in which it was born and local when it bears the imprint of that culture. For example, the "Made in China" tag is the only evidence that many articles of clothing designed and sold by American companies are not of American manufacture. The clothing could have been made anywhere, and aside from the tag there is no sign of its having come from China. The installations and performance art made by artists of the Chinese avant-garde, however, are marked by the Chinese present and past, and the western origin of these genres pales in the face of their Chinese-ness. What is imported can become so familiar as to lose its "outsider-ness" and come to be thought of as local or homegrown. But to a global audience they are still Chinese, and welcome for that.

China did skip the modernist formalism that reigned in the west throughout the period bracketed by the founding of the People's Republic of China

in 1949 and the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. An art conceived as significant form, an art whose content was disregarded for distracting the viewer from the plastic values whose creation is art's purpose, is a luxury that Chinese artists cannot afford. The formalist creates forms free of content, message, or meaning of any sort, forms the mere perception of which pleases. Chinese avant-garde artists, on the other hand, perform ritualistic erasures of conventional systems of intelligibility like language and art. In this activity lies the second subversion. It is performed for at least two different reasons. One is skepticism, cynicism, or despair about, finally, the intelligibility of extant languages and arts. The other is the performance of an intellectual exercise: to find out how much content or meaning one can take away and still have anything that does more than merely please. The exercise includes an experiment in imagination: Should the erasures succeed and the world be reduced to nothing but empty forms, would the artist's presence, his body and its gestures, be enough to remake the world? The answer from China today is yes.

Part of what is distinctive about the work of the Chinese avant-garde is its subject matter and, most important, the attitude the artist takes toward it. The subject matter of the most recent art is precisely the means through which the avant-garde performs its third subversion. The distinctiveness, the "otherness," led the United Kingdom's International Trade Commission to find a television program to have contained material that constituted an offence against good taste and decency, an offence to public feeling.[3] Forty-two viewers had objected to two pieces of performance art shown on a Channel 4 broadcast of *Beijing Swings* on January 2, 2003, at 11:05 p.m. One was Zhu Yu's *Eating People*, which contained a photograph of the artist eating the body of a dead baby, and the other, Peng Yu and Sun Yuan's *Link of the Body*, in which "the dead bodies of a pair of Siamese twins were smeared with the artists' blood."[4]

The fact that *Link of the Body* was found to offend good taste and decency in Britain and yet won for its artists the 2002 young artist prize in the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards highlights one difference between the global and the local—that is, the regional, the native, what cannot be exported or "shaken off."[5] *Link of the Body* is weakly global in its genre because performance art originated in the west, but the attitudes, ideas, and impulses it expresses are Chinese. Although a British commission found the broadcast of pictures of the work to offend public decency, the Chinese government apparently did not: it did not interfere with the underground exhibition alternate to the Shanghai Biennale 2000 that included *Link of the Body*. This leads to the thought that the avant-garde in China in the twenty-first century is speaking to something distinctively Chinese and that global audiences welcome this art

for its difference, its Chinese-ness, but only so long as the expressed attitudes toward the subject matter do not offend their own local codes of what is acceptable. What the Chinese-ness consists in must, of course, be adumbrated.

The mainland Chinese are living through the reinscription within their culture of the opposing sides of the Cold War that dominated the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the Chinese counterparts of the series of upheavals that caused the breakup of the Soviet Union and its satellites failed to bring about a similar effect, the fall of communism, when they culminated in the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The government forcefully suppressed them, and the coexistence of the communist government and its capitalist economy still defines the "new China." The people have to come to terms not only with the *prima facie* contradiction between the virtual obliteration of the idea of the individual under communism and the self-promotion of the individual under capitalism but also with the change from Mao's prohibition of any commerce with the bourgeois west to his successor Deng Xiaoping's invitation to western investors. And this all takes place against the backdrop of the "old China" that persists despite Mao's efforts to have cast it into shadow.

Imagine an art that is refashioning itself in a world that has in its last decades seen the end of communism in the Soviet Union and central Europe, the electronic revolution and the subsequent information explosion, and globalization. Imagine an art whose identity is in flux and whose exposure to the arts and ideas of the west was slight between the inception of communism in China in 1949 and the country's opening itself to the west in the late 1970s. Such is the art of China. Its story shows it to be in the service of what is no longer its primary function in the west: the reconstruction of the identity of a people and the reinvention of the idea of art itself. One specific Chinese difference, then, is the role its current art plays in the articulation of what can in China be said, thought, and even felt. This is the classic role of an avant-garde. The aesthetic avant-garde has been the pride of the west, but its avatars have moved east. The move gives rise to the question of whether and how much this eastern avant-garde is inflected by "China," by its ancient and its recent history. The question is whether and how what might fall out as distinctly Chinese can assert itself in the presence of the global reach of western practices. It is assumed, however, that as Chinese art moves onto the international stage, the hegemony of the art of the west will fade.

Installation and performance art abound in the work of these Chinese artists, but they are far from simply copying the west. Evidence for this is the presence of two themes with no obvious counterpart in the west identified by Norman Bryson in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*.[6] One is the relation of the individual to the social spaces created by the mix of materialism and social-

ism, spaces identified by Henri Lefebvre as having been produced by social forces as their preconditions and their products.[7] Distinctive of the organization of social space in the People's Republic of China through the mid-1980s was its homogeneity, which the Cultural Revolution sought to further by trying to erase the differences between town and country. The current social space, home to "communism with socialist characteristics," is homogeneous no more. The other theme specific to the new art is the individual's relation to the languages that articulate and convey meaning.

Social spaces and their languages make up Bryson's list. I have another. On it are items more nearly primitive, resistant though not immune to the incursion of "the languages of criticism and the sciences of man."[8] They are items from a brute and dumb nonsignifying nature, not from a nature domesticated in gardens, national parks, wildlife preserves, and landscape paintings. The list includes worms, gunpowder, dust, dead bodies, and blood. Both lists, however, recognize something in the current art that operates at a level below that of ideology, below where communism and capitalism collide. And below what the one United Kingdom watchdog considered the boundaries of good taste or decency and respect for human dignity.[9]

FIRST SUBVERSION

. . . of the presumption that a communist government with a capitalist economy can carve out a social space in which people can be themselves

Look first at one distinguishing theme to be found in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art:* responses to the social spaces created by Chinese communism's embrace of capitalism. It is the material for the first subversion that began soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution and appeared as a local version of Pop Art. Artists in Hangzhou, for example, made a series of installations called *Red Humor* in 1986–1987. Wu Shanzhuan made one in which the walls, ceiling, and floor of a small room were papered with communist slogans, lines from Buddhist texts, advertisements, jokes, the title of Leonardo's *Last Supper*—in a word, the contents of the mind of a mainland Chinese person living in the 1980s. Most of the papers were white with black characters, some few were red, and the whole was splashed with red paint. On the painted red floor were four large white characters spelling out "No one can interpret it," no one, not Deng Xiaoping or the CEO of MacDonald's. The room is a metaphor for a mind, and the subtext of the installation is that no sense can be made of the contents of a mind full of communist dicta and capitalist slogans. When the room is seen as a metaphor for the culture, the subtext is that its disparate

languages and the sayings they license cannot carry meaning because there are no shared meanings through which they can be read together.

Wu Shanzhuan chose the sayings used in *Red Humor* randomly, believing the artist not to be the main factor in the production of art and declaring: "Wu is an example of material. Nothing can escape from being material."[10] And nothing, it seems, can escape being turned into a commodity, a thing that can be traded for money. Indeed, in its January 2006 issue, *Artforum* reported that "it was only two months ago that an individual work by a Chinese contemporary artist surpassed the $1 million mark." On October 20, 2005, *The New York Times* reported that sales in China's leading auction houses "have risen from less than $100 million in 2000 to about $1 billion in 2003." The growth of the Chinese art market requires its artists to become increasingly subversive if they are to function as a *bona fide* avant-garde. This is exactly what they have done.

Historical materialism has matter and its conversion into materials that sustain human life, not human consciousness, is the engine that drives history. Capitalism, the system through which the goods of the earth are converted into commodities to be sold for money, has money as the engine driving history. Strange bedfellows these two, but the two materialisms of matter and money sleep together nonetheless. In the words of the curator of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, "The mass media's overwhelming of the population with propagandist images (such as Mao's art) or advertisement and entertainment symbols (such as Coca-Cola and Marilyn Monroe) apparently levels the differences between Mao's mass culture and Hollywood."[11]

Political themes from the Cultural Revolution joined Pop Art in a series of oil paintings by Wang Guangyi, one of which, *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* (1993) (Figure 1), combines the image of three workers lined up side by side above the soft drink logo.[12] Only the heads and raised left arms of the second and third workers can be seen. The first clutches a red book and all three hold one large fountain pen whose nib lies just above the second "C" in the white letters of "Coca-Cola" and whose length appears to be the pole of a red flag. If the first "C" is communism, then the second, the one threatened by the pen's nib, is "capitalism." Book and pen replace hammer and sickle. The flag and the back wall, deep yellow on top and red on the bottom, are peppered with ten-digit numbers, perhaps identification numbers or long distance telephone numbers, some white, some black. The conjunction of the two reduces the revolutionary workers and the logo of China's most popular company, Coca-Cola, to kitsch, trivializing the ideologies of Maoism and western economies. To reduce Maoism to kitsch is to subvert its authority over the people's beliefs and values.

Great Castigation: Coca-Cola is nothing more than an exemplification of materialism, historical and consumer, where "nothing can escape being ma-

terial."[13] Material cannot generate meaning, people do, but not deliberately. Wang Guangyi, like Wu Shanzhuan, belongs to an anti-author movement that holds artists not to be major factors in the production of art, and it is consistent with this movement to hold individuals not to be major factors in the production of language, that is to say, their intentions do not issue in meanings. How, then, does language have the authority it has? What is at issue is the source of meaning, and *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* says that the discourses of neither communism nor capitalism can authorize a set of shared meanings in a culture that contains both. Bryson suggests that gesture and its repetition, not ideology, is what legitimates discourses. The subversion of the authority of Mao leads straightaway to a crisis of language and to the second subversion performed by conceptual art.

SECOND SUBVERSION

> *. . . of the presumption that the discourses in place in China are interpretable*

The second theme found to be specific to Chinese art, then, the relation of the individual to language, follows from the first, which is the relation of the individual to the social spaces that house the former antagonists in the Cold War. *Red Humor* says that the two languages under one roof cannot be interpreted, and *Great Castigation: Coca-Cola* implies that this is because the signifiers of the only possible sources of meaning, the revolution and the market, are empty, reduced to kitsch. Nor can Chinese tradition enter the breach, put into the background as it was during the Mao years. This is the message of *"A History of Chinese Painting" and "A Concise History of Modern Painting" Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987) by Huang Yong Ping. The work is the pile of paper pulp left over from having washed the two books in a washing machine for two minutes. Because the two had been torn from their respective Chinese and western contexts and made to share each other's space, the meaning of each was washed away. In the pulp that remains, the material identity of each as a book, as well as its meaning, is lost.

Artists are making works that consist, in Bryson's words, "in emptying out the semantic dimension of language,"[14] enacting through their art precisely the effects of the contradictions supported by the too rapid reconfigurations of their social spaces. The unsettling of the language user's identity—revolutionary or bourgeois—unsettles her relation to language, and she cannot find herself in it. The response of conceptual artists has been to perform and document actions that not only dramatize the crisis of meaning by eviscerating

language's semantic content but also exemplify what is left over and above syntax: gesture, the body's performance of language. To talk, to write, is to do some physical thing. To listen, to read, is to use ears and eyes. And because there can be no private language, silently to think with words requires being able to use them to talk and to listen, to write and to read.

Two works of performance art in *Inside Out* can be read to say that since power in China seems no longer to reside at the level of the great ideologies, perhaps it lies in a level below them where individuals can act, where they can "intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms."[15] One work is *Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* (1986–1997) by Qiu Zhijie in which the artist does what any student of calligraphy must do and copies again and again a famous fourth-century text. The singular difference of Qiu's exercise is that he copies the words onto one piece of paper, which eventually becomes an unreadable black sheet. To do this, then, is to do no more than to encode the characters in the writer's hand, arm, and brain.[16] In the sheer repetitiveness of the activity, Qiu did the same kind of thing that is done by every language user with every use of a given word in a language. He embedded the words in the memory of his hand and mind, as each use of a word further embeds it in the language.

Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times makes of the artist's activity a metaphor for one dimension and one effect of language. The dimension is its use. Natural language is language in use, and for anyone competent in a language, its use is more or less automatic, as writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" becomes at a certain point in the exercise. The artist's repeated and systematic performance of language completely covers with signs the sheet that had been blank. The metaphoric effect of the artist's activity is to show language to be opaque because one cannot read *through* it and dense because one cannot read *between* its signs. It says, finally, that language blankets the world and all that is in it, and one cannot read the world through the opacity of the signs that constitute it. The world, it would seem, is lost.

The second work is *Printing on Water*, a performance by Song Dong in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996. Against the backdrop of mountains, the artist stands in a sacred river and, holding above his head a seal carved with the character for "water," again and again brings it down onto the water's surface. There is no coition of word and thing, however. No character, no matter what it signifies, can unite with or imprint itself on water. The calligraphy in *Writing "The Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* cannot be read and the character for "water" in *Printing on Water* cannot be written.[17] The artist is authorizing the seal by using it. But what is he using it for? Not to say anything. The repeated gestures of imprinting or writing are intransitive. In them writing is at its zero degree.

The world, the other side of language, everything that language is about, is lost. Indeed, the world is absent precisely because everything is shot through with the language by which the individual is surrounded. Or so it seems. At the height of the New Wave in Chinese art that succeeded the socialist realism of Maoist art, Xu Bing mounted his *Book from the Sky* (1988) (Figure 2) in the National Museum in Beijing. As *Red Humor* did, it surrounds its viewers with writing. On the walls are plastered scrolls reminiscent of the newspapers pasted on walls for everyone to read. Draped from the ceiling are yards and yards of scrolls in the format of ancient religious texts, and on the floor, books bound in the traditional Chinese way. Xu hand-carved four thousand blocks from which the scrolls were printed in the style of the eleventh-century Song Dynasty and "every detail of the piece was exquisite and perfect: the carved characters, the printing, the binding, and the meticulous design."[18] They were illegible. No one could read them. The viewer is cocooned in writing that cannot be read, in hundreds of illegible scrolls. Everything might be shot through with language, but, like *Book from the Sky,* it might mean nothing.

The repetitions in both *Writing "The Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* and *Printing on Water* are not in *Book from the Sky*. Xu Bing is not encoding Chinese characters in his muscles and mind by writing them repeatedly, nor is he authorizing the character by his repeated efforts to print it. Xu's artwork, the work of it, lies in the sheer doing of the project, almost three years of carving four thousand characters in wood blocks. It is a prayer, a meditation. "He suffered. It was like a morning prayer, the process was more important than the result," said Gao Minglu, curator of *Inside Out: New Chinese Art.* The "process," the exercise, the ritual, is like a dance, where a dancer's body knows what to do, and so in exercise and the performance of a ritual does the performer's body. Nothing, said Wu Shanzhuan, "can escape from being material."[19] Seen in this light, *Book from the Sky* bears witness to words and books being material things, things to be carved, printed, and bound. This book does not come from Confucianism, to which Xu's art refers, nor from the artist's intentions to mean. It comes, the title tells us, from the sky.

The idea of writing at its zero degree leads to the thought of art-making at its zero degree, to the third subversion, and to adding the new list to Bryson's list of social spaces and their languages. Earthworms and silkworms, gunpowder, dust, blood, and violence, in a word, nature brute, blind, and dumb is what is left, avant-garde Chinese artists suggest, when the world appears to be lost. It is the primitive that is left, whatever has penetrated, punctured, pierced the myriad social and semantic spaces that have failed to fulfill their promises of hospitality and legibility, their empty claims undermined by the art of the avant-garde.

THIRD SUBVERSION

. . . of the presumption that western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, are adequate to China today

A decade after *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing installed *The Silkworm Series* in a gallery for the 1998 exhibition *Where Heaven and Earth Meet.* In the gallery was a coffee table with books and magazines, framed pictures on the wall, a TV monitor screening the life cycle of the silk worm, and its accompanying VCR, whose cover was open. Silkworm moths lay eggs that hatch into worms that spin their threads over everything they come near, which, in the gallery, was everything including the mechanical insides of the VCR. The enveloping of things makes them unrecognizable, their words and images unreadable.

The Chinese have raised silkworms for more than two thousand years, and silk is an emblem of China. Traditional China is present in the silkworm, and so is the modern west in the form of installation art. Nature also is present. Compare this piece with, say, Damien Hirst's exhibition of the carcass of a once life-threatening shark in a tank of formaldehyde or, moving from an exhibition of death to that of dying, with an installation in which flies emerge from maggots, eat, and die when struck by an insect-o-cutor. These works use, they do not represent, the animals that are their subjects. In two of them, creatures, silkworms and maggots, are born and in one they die soon after birth. Every living thing is born and dies, but in the meantime they interact with other creatures, including human beings and their works. This meantime is the space occupied by Xu Bing's *Silkworm Series* in which the worms do what naturally they do, spin threads of silk that end up covering all of the paraphernalia of culture in the gallery.

Silkworms cover over; earthworms burrow under. In *New York Earthworm Room*, made for the same exhibition, Cai Guo-Qiang, who left China for Japan after 1989 and Japan for New York in 1996, appropriated Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room* that has been maintained by the Dia Center for the Arts since 1977. De Maria transported yards of earth to a New York art gallery. Decontextualized, it is no longer part of nature. Cai also transported yards of earth to an art gallery, but he reintroduced nature by putting worms and, therefore, life into it. Grass began to grow as the worms aerated the soil and nourished it with organic material. The earth was in one gallery in the exhibition in which a camcorder was focused on the grass, and in an adjoining gallery were video screens, connected by cable to the camcorder, onto which the earthworms' movements were projected.

The salient difference between the two installations of worms, on the one hand, and the work of Hirst and De Maria, on the other, is that the worms

were alive and active, while the objects in the works by Hirst and De Maria were not. The worms were decontextualized: they were active in an art gallery instead of nature. But they continued to make their characteristic contributions: one made silk, the other aerated and nourished soil.

Gunpowder was invented in China long years ago and is as much an emblem of China as silk is. Cai Guo-Qiang used it in his work *Traces of Ancient Explosions* (1985) made of gunpowder and oil paint on canvas. He used it in a different way in the *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10, Extending the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters* (1993) in which six hundred kilograms of gunpowder were connected to a long fuse on the ground at the western terminus of the Great Wall. On February 27, 1993, the fuse was ignited to cause a series of successive explosions. Of the project the artist wrote that "the 10,000 meter wall of light will form a line of Qi energy that will wake the Great Wall, which has been sleeping for thousands of years."[20] And it did so by extending the Great Wall westward.

Gunpowder is one instrument of violent destruction, and Ground Zero dust is the result of another, namely, of the two airplanes that crashed into New York's Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Xu Bing collected a bag of dust from the site, and with it he later made an installation in a gallery-sized enclosure in the National Museum and Gallery of Cardiff, Wales, titled *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (2003) (Figure 3). He sprayed the dust over stencils of letters spelling out two lines of a seminal seventh-century Zen poem. When the dust settled, the stencils were removed and the lines appeared in the dust: "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?" The work won the first Artes Mundi prize, an international arts prize awarded in 2004 for work in the exhibition in the National Museum of Cardiff.

Any worms and any gunpowder whatsoever could have been used without changing the identity of the works of which they were a part, but neither the site of the 10,000-meter wall of light nor the actual dust used to spell out the Zen poem could have been different without threatening the work's identity. And so are these artworks grounded in the world to which they relate not by imitating, representing, or idealizing but by incorporating it into themselves.

The position on the world's stage of the social and the verbal has been called into question by two of the subversions performed in the art world of China since the end of the Cultural Revolution. What shares the stage with them is the natural, the material, and the physical. The artworks introduced so far as examples of the third subversion have used living or once-living non-human things, on the one hand, and powders that caused and resulted from explosions, on the other. Matter enlivened in the one case and matter plain and simple in the other.

The subject of the final two artworks to be discussed is the human body. The body is not simply matter enlivened. It is matter made human, made conscious of itself, conscious of death, of its inevitable death, and, for the classical Chinese scholar and many an artist of the avant-garde, matter made conscious of its harmony with nature. On the other hand, in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim view, human beings are essentially different from the rest of creation because they alone are enlivened by the breath of God, himself beyond nature's pale. Human beings, matter-made-human, seek to control rather than to harmonize with nature. This difference from the west is manifest in these last two works.

Link of the Body (2000) by Peng Yu and Sun Yuan, deemed an offence against decency by a British Trade Commission, is a performance in which the dead bodies of conjoined infant twins are linked to the two artists by tubes through which blood flows into the mouths of the infants; the body of one twin is covered with blood. Linkages abound in *Link of the Body*. The most obvious is the link between the conjoined twins, the result of a misdirection in their fetal development. Then there is the indirect connection between the artists by virtue of their each being connected to the twins by a tube of blood, a bloodline, as individuals are connected with their forebears by bloodlines.[21] The artists "feeding" the Siamese twins are a male and a female, as they would have to be were they the twins' parents. The most moving link in the performance is the one between living and dead bodies. It constitutes an acknowledgment of death, not the desecration of a corpse. Perhaps "wonder at" is better than "acknowledgment of" in light of an answer Peng Yu gave in an interview published in *Chinese Artists: Texts and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998–2002.* Asked whether her influence had, as her partner had said his had, come from a photograph, Peng said, no, it came from her experience of the death of a childhood playmate:

> facing the death of a person is like an electric shock. I had a friend once . . . a little girl . . . [who] died of uremia. . . . When I saw her I suddenly had, I'm not sure what kind of feeling, but it was like *life could just fly from a person's body in an instant.* Sometimes I think that the second a person is born, or when a person dies, this is really fascinating, so I search for that kind of thing in my work. Sometimes *it amounts to something you or I don't dare to face*. It's also something very pressing and forces me to keep going. Sometimes I use these materials, do this kind of work, in this process I can get the kind of feeling I was talking about.[22] (Emphases added.)

She is talking about something that beggars understanding, namely, what happens in the instant a person is born or dies. The link of body to body: at birth the link between the bodies of mother and infant is sundered and the

infant becomes a single thing. At death the body becomes matter no longer enlivened, but matter that will decay as every generated thing does, gradually ceasing to be a body as it does. But until it does, it is a human body, a memory of a human being. The pathos of *Link of the Body* lies in the artists' act of infusing the dead bodies with their own (so it seems) life's blood as though to bring the bodies back or to dare us to face the futility of infusing them. As though daring us to face the difference between being alive and being dead, to face what we cannot understand and so can only acknowledge. If this reading of *Link of the Body* has merit, then neither government censure nor physical disgust nor moral outrage is an appropriate response.[23]

Look at a final example of a work whose theme is also blood and the human body, where the body is female and the blood, menstrual. It is a series of twelve photographs by Chen Lingyang, *Twelve Flower Months* (1999), made from November 1999 to November 2000. In each photograph the flower of the month specific to it lies near a mirror in which the artist's menstruating body is reflected. The shapes of the mirrors, each different as are the shapes of the photograph themselves, are those of windows and doors in traditional gardens, but instead of the mirrors showing the face of a beautiful woman they show the artist's menstrual blood from various angles, variously framed, lit, and colored. *Twelve Flower Month for the First Month Narcissus* is a square, relentless in its blackness, hung on the diagonal. An oval mirror suspended on a stand occupies about two-thirds of the left side of the plane, and three narcissus flowers and leaves, the right. Reflected are the bottom of the buttocks of the artist and her legs down to the back of the knees. Blood trickles down most of her thigh. The blood, the flowers, and highlights on the wooden stand are a soft rosy red, the leaves are green, the mirror is light-suffused. The whole is quiet, elegant, and beautiful.

The metaphoric connection of women with flowers is undermined when Chen pictures a real connection between female reproductive organs and flowering. The juxtaposition of menstrual periods and blooming flowers highlights the connection of each to the cycle of nature and, hence, to each other. And although, as Chen pointed out in an interview connected with her winning one of the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards in 2002, "[i]n traditional Chinese culture there is the notion of man in harmony with nature," the work still takes its audience by surprise.[24]

About this, Chen said that "[w]hen people see this work in a public space, it provokes various reactions. But the work itself also offers the possibility of dispelling such reactions. The possibility of dispelling may come from the traditional elements. . . . Provoking and dispelling . . . are inextricably bound together. Only through the process of provoking and dispelling can new possibilities emerge."[25] In *Twelve Flower Months* Chen dresses her menstrual

bleeding in the clothes of classical China: flowers and mirrors beautifully shaped like the windows in garden pavilions. The artist is treating the flow of her monthly blood as worthy a subject of art as flowers and mirrors are. Classical in their serenity and their symbolism, the photographs observe their subject in the way traditional Chinese thought observes the world.

When they made these works Chen Lingyang and Peng Yu were young women, one born in 1975, the other in 1974, who made art that sprang from a near preoccupation with and reflection on the nature-imposed limits of birth and death and the female body's reproductive cycle. Matter made human is matter made conscious of the mysteries of birth and of death and, for these two artists, made conscious of matter's embedded-ness in nature. What does this come to? The idea that they are not, that no human being is, different in kind from the rest of nature. One effect of this is that death is not regarded as something that has gone terribly wrong and menstrual blood is not regarded as unclean and the menstruating woman untouchable. They are seen as an integral part of the ceaseless cycles of reproduction, birth, and death. Another effect is that the artists treat with respect the materials they use for the third subversive strategy. They treat them as one treats things that have worth and not, at most, value.

Chen's experience of the rhythm of her body's periods is an experience of the rhythms of nature, of its repetitiveness and its duration. She said of the subject of menstruation that "I found myself harassed by the subject and could not put it out of my mind, it was both strong and apt enough for me to express what I wanted to express. . . . Thus, I used this subject for my artwork."[26] Limits, not repetitiveness and duration, are what move Peng Yu. The effort to capture in her work the feeling that "life could just fly from a person's body in an instant" is "something very pressing and forces me to keep going."[27]

Earthworms and silkworms, gunpowder and dust, dead babies and menstrual blood: here is a grand materialism, one deaf to the cacophony caused by the competing voices of communism and capitalism and immune to the divorce of signifier and signified caused by the competing discourses. When signs are emptied of meaning all that is left for language users to do is to "go through the motions," to speak, to write, to listen, to read the signs that carry with them, at least, the memory of meaning. Intransitive, these activities are language at its zero degree. Writing is at zero when the movements of the calligrapher's hand and brush are performed for their own sake, as the movements of a dance are, and speaking is zero when one recites a poem in a language whose script one can read but not understand. The evisceration of meaning from the signs of an individual's world leaves him with the material of the world, which includes the body and its movements.

Bryson's insight that since power in China seems no longer to reside at the level of the great ideologies, perhaps it lies in a level below them where individuals can act, where they can "intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms" is apt.[28] "Individuals acting" parses out as "bodies gesturing," where the gesturing body of the avant-garde artist is what is reconstructing the identity of a people and reinventing the idea of art itself. The material used in the artists' third subversive strategy constitutes a tutorial on the differences between nonliving, living, and conscious material things. The attitudes toward the various materials taken by artists of the avant-garde teach viewers willing to send themselves to school the Chinese difference. Lacking a coherent discourse in their dizzyingly fast-changing world, the artists work in a place that language barely reaches. It is a place where material human bodies, the stuff of the natural world and all that we have made of it and the material side of language hold sway. This is a place to which classical Chinese artists and theorists also go, most notably Hsieh Ho in the late fifth century and Shitao in the seventeenth. The next chapter takes a look at what they say and shows them to have an ally in Rudolf Arnheim.

NOTES

A version of this chapter first appeared in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (Winter 2007). Special Issue: Global Theories of the Arts and Aesthetics. Susan L. Feagin, Editor. A different version appeared in *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art* edited by Mary Bittner Wiseman with Liu Yuedi (2011).

1. Richard Vine, "The Report from Shanghai: After Exoticism," *Art in America* 89, no. 7 (July 2001), 30–39.
2. "Avant-garde" was used to describe the new art in its early years. By 2009, Ai Weiwei announced in a talk at Art Basel Miami that China had no avant-garde, perhaps on the ground that it described a movement in western art. Wu Hung said it was best called "experimental," but "contemporary" has become the preferred adjective.
3. The ITC is an "independent" quasi-judicial British agency that advises the legislative and executive branches of government that found Channel 4 in breach of section 1.1 of its Programme Code. URL: http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/itc/itc_publications/complaints_reports/programme_complaints/show_complaint.asp-prog_complaint_id=596.html. Accessed May 22, 2006.
4. From the report of the above ITC ruling.
5. Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) is an award-granting foundation established in 1998 by the Swiss collector and ambassador to China, Uli Sigg. The CCAA is, as of this writing the only such award granting program in China.
6. Norman Bryson, "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (University of California Press, 1998), 53.

7. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

8. The title is that of a conference at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966 in which contemporary French criticism and theory were introduced to the academic world in the United States.

9. The claims being made here are not about the whole of the contemporary Chinese art scene but about art shown in several exhibitions in the United States. Bryson's judgments are based for the most part on the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art.* Mine are based for the most part on it and two other publications. One is Zhang Zhaohui, ed. *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Xu Bing & Cai Guo-Qiang,* catalogue for a 1998 exhibition at the Art Museum of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2005). The other is Ai Weiwei, ed. *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998–2002* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002).

10. Wu Shanzhuan and Inga Svala, "Tourist Information: Alphabetical Aphorisms," a selection of writings distributed by Wu and Red Humor International, 1992–1993. Cited in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* 159. The idea that the artist is not the main factor in the production of art comports with Pauline Yao's claim in *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* (2008) that the artist does not "own" his work.

11. Gao Minglu, "From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China," in *Inside Outside: New Chinese Art*, 152.

12. When Wang Guangyi sent the image for this book, it was titled *Great Criticism —Coca-Cola*.

13. Wu Shanzhuan and Inga Svala, cited in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, 159.

14. Bryson, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* 56.

15. Ibid., 57.

16. Bryson describes the effect: the power of the text lies not in its content but "in the sheer force of the cultural repetition, especially through the internalization of social authority that is performed within the calligrapher's own body as he attempts to incorporate the text inside his own musculature and gestural reflexes." *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* 57.

17. All that remains of Song Dong's activity 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 with his own psychophysical being, again and again." Bryson, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* 57.

18. Zhang Zhaohui, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet,* 9.

19. Wu Shanzhuan, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* 159.

20. Zhang Zhaohui, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet,* 14.

21. The connection with ancestors is genetic, but the prescientific and popular view is that blood is what connects present with contemporary and long-gone members of a family.

22. "Sun Yuan and Peng Yu Interview with Ai Weiwei," in *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews,* 20.

23. This reading is made in light of Peng Yu's feelings about death. To read the work through its social context instead is to ask what the unnaturally linked twins stand for. East and west? Old China and new China? Communism and capitalism? Why is one splashed with blood and the other not? What does the bloodied one stand for?

24. "An Interview with Chen Lingyang by Chen Lingyang No. 2 (2001/4/28)," in *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA) 1998–2002,* 30.

25. Ibid., 30.

26. Ibid., 29.

27. Peng Yu, *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews*, 20.

28. Bryson, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art,* 57.

Chapter Two

The Role of Expression in Chinese Art

While emptiness, for example, is a value important in Chinese art but virtually absent from its western counterparts, expression is a value important in both, though emphasized more in Chinese than in western art. However, what is expressed in each is so different that when we explore its place in Chinese art, we get a privileged glance into a civilization older and unlike any in the west, as well as into a culture emerging from the rapid and far-reaching changes occurring in China over the last decades. The changes raise questions about what in the new China is irreducibly Chinese, questions tied to one raised by the phenomenon of globalization: What, if anything, is irreducibly of a culture such that only one versed in that culture can appreciate it? The changes suggest that the way to track the role expression plays in Chinese art is not so much to compare its roles in Chinese and in western art as to compare the roles in classical and in contemporary Chinese art, that is, to pay more attention to the then and now of Chinese art than to the here and now of the arts in China and the west. The concept is tracked through art rather than literature because western audiences are more apt to be familiar with the art of China than with its literature and because the high-voltage energy fueling the contemporary art scene in China is being expended in the creation of works of visual art.

A look at the experimental art being made by Chinese artists in light of classical Chinese theories of art demonstrates two things: first, that the current art is not indifferent to classical theories of what art should be and do, but with the crucial difference that, second, the current art focuses on the sheer materiality of the world. To discover what of the classical tradition persists in the experimental art being made now and what in it is new, look at two influential classical writings: Hsieh Ho's late fifth-century "Six Principles

of Chinese Painting" and Shitao's seventeenth-century *Expressionist Credo*. The enterprise promises three rewards that have to do with harmonies and dissonances between Chinese and western art; they are relevant because it is inevitable that we understand the new Chinese art against the background of our art and its theory.

First, the elaboration of the concept of expression in traditional Chinese art can teach us about Chinese views of what art is and what it does. Moreover, so far as the concept captures something essential to the art of China, it can trace a line from the classical tradition through the exposure to western modernism in the first half of the twentieth century, on to art's subsequent restriction to furthering the people's revolution after 1949, and to the increasing freedom from that restriction and exposure to western postmodernism after 1979. Second, on the assumption that not everything in the Chinese concept of art is applicable to western art without significant modification, the discovery of what in our art resists a concept's full application will begin to unearth fault lines between the arts of the two countries and highlight what is special about each. Third, through our engagement with the work of Chinese artists to which we have access, we test both our capacity to engage what comes from a different culture and art's capacity to reach something deeper than the ethos of the place of its birth, even when the art bears myriad signs of its place. In short, we test our ability to assimilate what erstwhile had been other and art's ability to expatriate. The sense of the difference between what is familiar and what strikes us as other heightens our sense of what is distinctive about Chinese art.

The art world in China from the time of Deng Xiaoping's invitation in 1979 to foreign investment and ideas up to the present has been changing so rapidly that no one movement or style has had a chance to take root or to take hold of artists' imaginations. Limited by no genres or styles, the artists are open to what other artists are doing throughout the wired world—which will soon be the whole world—and from the international exhibitions to which Chinese artists are now routinely invited. Moreover, experimental artists in China are wielding ever more influence worldwide as the number of overseas exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art grows. This is why and how the art of a culture reaches out to the arts of other cultures. China's historical situation, in particular the current exponential growth of capitalism there and its global reach, makes the work of its artists more nearly global than that of most countries.

Allow that "global" and "local" describe a gamut along which artworks are one or the other and that there might be none that are wholly one or the other. Call art local when people from other cultures could not have created it and audiences from elsewhere can hardly understand or engage it.[1] Because

such art resists its viewers, it strikes them as other. Artworks are global when viewers can respond to them readily enough to be able to appreciate them. Global artworks need not be free of all traces of their origin. It is necessary only that their viewers do not have to be conversant with the culture from which the works emerge in order to be able to engage them.

However, a crucial question is raised by what Richard Vine said in a panel discussion at the White Box Gallery in New York: "What we find in these situations is . . . an artist has been brought in from Nigeria or wherever and presents us with a work that looks very much like the work made in Brooklyn. So it is multicultural in a technical sense, but in an aesthetic and philosophical sense it is very monocultural."[2] The question: How much does how an artwork looks tell us about it? It can usually tell us what, if anything, is represented in the work. How closely connected are the look of a work and its mood or feel? How close is a work's look to the attitude it expresses, the story it tells, or what, finally, it does?

For the moment, it is sufficient to note that appreciation of the role that expression plays in classical Chinese art provides a lens through which to look at contemporary work. This is welcome because the practice, criticism, and theory of art in post-Mao China does not easily fit into the history of art in China up to and including art made in the spirit of Mao's 1942 *Talks at the Yuan Forum on Literature and Art.* Yet it turns out that with some transformations, the classical tradition reappears in the work of the some of the best current Chinese artists, and this makes it especially accessible to a global audience. Similarly, even though modernist and postmodernist art history and theory are not adequate to the new Chinese art, the questions they ask dramatize just what the Chinese artists are doing, and what they are doing puts pressure on western histories and theories to accommodate them.

It is not easy to fit the new Chinese art into either classical Chinese or current western art because the artists—especially those born during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)—are making art that asks what art is and what they as Chinese men and women are in the new China. Art historian Norman Bryson observed that given this tension, the search for a Chinese identity has to go on below the level of the discourses of either of these systems, political and economic, to where matter and gesture reign, to a place relatively free of language.[3] It turns out that this place is not so very different from the one the classical painter put himself into in order to be able to paint. He quiets himself, emptying himself of thoughts and feelings and thus of the languages in which he lives. Then he is closer than ever to the immediate feeling and thinking that are, respectively, instinct and intuition. From this place, the artist opens himself through quiet contemplation to the subject he is to paint. The earliest subjects of art were human beings whose representations went

into ancestors' tombs, though by the sixth century landscape was the favored genre as it has been for 1,500 years, indifferent to dramatic changes in styles and genres that mark the art of the west. It has been said of Chinese landscape that it is as true a form of expression as exists in the world, where art and spirit collude and become one.

There is a materialism present in the practice of the classical painter that began with calligraphy in the Shang Dynasty (1600 to 1100 BCE) when writing was incised on the surface of oracle bones and bronze vessels, incised because brushes became available only during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), which is when the manufacture of paper and ink was perfected. Add to these the ink stone, in which the inkstick was ground and mixed with water, and you have the Four Treasures of the Study: brush, ink, paper, and ink stone. These are also the treasures of the classical painter, whose art is ever indebted to that of calligraphy. The method of making the marks was valued as much as were the materials used. Each of calligraphy's several thousand graphs consist of a set number of strokes made in a prescribed order, left to right, top to bottom. Because of this regimen the viewer can mentally trace stroke by stroke and can know whether a stroke was made swiftly or slowly and whether a brush was put to paper gently or with force. And so is the viewer connected either in imagination or by mirror neurons with the practice of the painter.[4]

The resulting ink art, in its turn, is connected with the natural world through critics comparing, for example, the movement of the brush to a stone plummeting down a hillside or to the gracefulness of the fleeting patterns left on the surface of a pond by swimming geese.[5] Where the western critic speaks prose, the Chinese speaks poetry. Writing and, by extension, painting are often described in terms of the "bone," "muscle," and "flesh" of its lines. Contemporary art too is the expression of a robust materialism, a replay of the regard in which the natural world, the earth and the heavens, its rivers and mountains, was held by the classical tradition that Mao tried and failed to destroy through the destruction of the Four Olds—ideas, culture, custom, and habits—that was the charge of the Cultural Revolution.

EXPRESSION

Two western accounts of expression—the high analytic one of Monroe Beardsley and the more catholic one of Rudolf Arnheim—will provide a conceptual map against which what is distinctive about the classical Chinese concept of expression will stand out.[6] What is of special interest is the play between the stasis of the conception laid out by Beardsley and the dynamism

of the one laid out by Arnheim. The primary difference between expression in the arts of China and in the arts of the west lies in the nature of what is expressed and the importance to the culture of its expression in art.

Expression is a relation whose minimal formulation is given by Beardsley as "an artwork expresses a psychological state or quality." Limiting what is expressed to mental attitudes or activities implies agency, and Beardsley rewrites it as "someone expresses a psychological quality through a work of art." He rejects what he calls two natural readings of this. One is that it means that the artist felt, say, joy when she made the work. But he objects that there is rarely independent evidence available to verify this. Another natural reading is that the viewer feels joy when she looks at the work, but, he demurs, one could as well say that the work aroused joy in her. "Express" adds nothing. A third reading, independent of the psychological state of artist or viewer, is that the work expresses joy. Again, he notes that we can say the work is joyous and do not need "express."

The bare bones formulation gets this final complication: "something is expressed by someone in some way through some medium or other." The manner and the medium come to the fore but not nearly as much as they do in calligraphy and classical Chinese painting. In the Chinese arts the stroke itself is expressive as, say, are Jackson Pollock's drips. The way the medium is used calls attention to itself and to the deliberate movements of the artist's body. Artists express their attitudes toward their subjects not through ideas but by how they handle ink on paper, tempera on wood panel, oil paint on woven canvas, and the myriad marks on the myriad surfaces available to them. What they express is their individuality, each unique like a fingerprint. But what is equally important is that they express also the individuality of their subject, it, too, is unique. Beardsley's later "something is expressed by someone is some way through some medium" is compatible with the classical Chinse but is still far from the manner and the medium's capturing what is distinctive about the artist, her subject, and her attitude toward it.

Rudolf Arnheim says that nature is alive to our eyes: "its shapes are fossils of the events that gave rise to them."[7] We can extend this to works of art and, using Arnhein's apt "alive to our eyes," say that one way artworks are alive to our eyes is through their bearing the press of the hand that made them and the materials used. Arnheim's singular contribution is to claim that we do not infer a work's history from what we see, but directly experience it "as forces and tensions present and active" in the object's visible shape.[8] We see the dance of the paint as Pollock pours it over and around the canvas on the floor, and we see the interplay of tension-heightening and tension-reducing forces, the forces that are present and active in the paintings themselves. "Common to all varieties of traditional theorizing was the disavowal of any intrinsic kin-

ship between perceived experience and the expression it conveyed."[9] This is precisely what Arnheim denied, saying that what is expressed is not inferred from or identical with what is perceived. It is intrinsically connected with it.

The narrow view of expression is that only things with minds can express. A broader one is that objects, events, and scenes can express, but only what a person can experience or imagine experiencing. Arnheim uses Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), the theorist of empathy, to give flesh to the idea that things can express. Lipps gives an explanation of how we can find a temple's inanimate columns expressive that comports with Arnheim's view: "When I look at the columns I know from past experience the kind of mechanical pressure and counter-pressure that occurs in them. Equally from past experience *I know how I would feel myself if I were in the place of the columns* and if those physical forces acted upon and within my own body."[10] (Emphasis added.) This is a rich example. What the column expresses is the pressure upon it, and it can do this only to someone who knows *that* the columns are under pressure and *how it would feel* to be subject of such pressures oneself. Only then can I know "how I should feel myself if I were in the place of the columns." The column can express to her the pressure it is under because she has empathy with it, and she can have empathy because she knows what it is like to be under like pressure.

Similarly, a scene in nature can express peace to one who can empathize with the scene and feel its peacefulness. To be able to empathize I must be in a position to know "how I should feel if I myself were in the place of the field," that is, if I were the field. At first this looks like what Beardsley dismissed as the scene's simply causing the viewer to feel peace, but the scene in nature is doing more: it is itself expressing peace. But on Lipps's account the scene in nature or the column in the temple causes the viewer to feel peace or mechanical pressure, respectively, because she can imagine being (in the place of) the scene or the column. How an inanimate object can express anything is what is of interest. A sunlit meadow expresses peace to a person who can empathize with it and therefore know what it would be like to be that peaceful meadow. The person does not feel peaceful as herself; she feels as though she were the peaceful meadow. Nor does she project the feeling of peace onto the meadow. She, in her empathy, feels as though she were the meadow and as such feels peaceful.

There is a step in Arnheim's account that gets us to the intrinsic connection between perceived appearance and conveyed expression. His thesis is that objects have dynamic qualities and "*visual perception consists in the experiencing of visual forces*." It is the visual forces that are expressive.[11] The forces are best thought of as directed tensions that are to be sought in the object itself. A few examples will suffice to make the point that we directly

see dynamic qualities. His claim is that "every visual object is essentially a dynamic affair" and that this is overlooked because we are in the habit of giving metric descriptions of, for example, an equilateral triangle, reds and oranges side by each on a canvas, and any movement.[12] Described statically, they are, respectively, three equal straight lines meeting each other at angles of 60 degrees; wavelengths of 60 and 710 millimicrons; and an object moving at a certain speed in a certain direction. These descriptions fail to include what we actually experience, however, which is "the primary quality of all perception, [namely,] the aggressive outward pointing of the triangle, the dissonant clash of the hues, the on rush of the movement."[13] Arnheim's plausible claim is that because of the intrinsic connection between the aggression, the dissonance, and the onrush, on the one hand, and the perception of the triangle, the colors, and the movement, on the other, the dynamic qualities are themselves in the perceived objects. What is here in Arnheim compatible with classical Chinese art and its theory are, one, that objects can express and, two, that there is an intrinsic connection between what is perceived and what is expressed. Therefore, fully to see a work is to see not only what its lines, planes, and colors figure but also *what they express*.

To end this recital of the views of Beardsley and Arnheim on aesthetic expression are the words of two artists: T. S. Eliot and Leonardo da Vinci. Eliot said of a Chinese jar that it moved perpetually in its stillness, and Leonardo said of a painted figure that absent this expression it was twice dead, once because it is a figment, that is, not real, and twice when it shows movement of neither the mind nor the body. The Chinese classical painter would make one telling addition: a work is dead when it shows no *qi* or vital energy that the ancient Chinese believed permeates everything and binds all together. This is the life movement and vibration of vitality whose expression is the first of Hsieh Ho's six principles of painting.

HSIEH HO, THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF PAINTING (FIFTH CENTURY)

In the late fifth-century "Six Principles of Chinese Painting," painter and critic Hsieh Ho listed six technical factors of painting and said that few artists mastered them all.[14] He ranked twenty-seven artists into six grades, depending on which techniques they mastered and how well. The importance of the paragraph in which the principles are given cannot be overestimated. In *The Chinese Theory of Art: Transcriptions from the Masters of Chinese Art* (1967), Lin Yutang (1895–1976) called it the most influential paragraph ever

written on Chinese art and identified the first technique as the one undisputed goal of art in China.[15] Here are the techniques as Hsieh Ho described them:

> The first is: Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement. The second is: Bone Matter (Structural) Use of the Brush. The third is: Conform with the Objects (to obtain) Likeness. The fourth is: Apply the Colors according to the Characteristics. The fifth is: Plan and Design, Place and Position (i. e. composition). The sixth is: to Transmit Models by Drawing, that is, to copy the ancients.

And here is their rendering by a critic who flourished in the mid-ninth century, Chang Yen-yuan, to whom Lin Yutang said we owe our knowledge of ancient Chinese history more than to anyone else. Chang Yen-yuan wrote:

> Hsieh Ho in ancient times said: "What are the six techniques? First, creating a life-like tone and atmosphere; second, building structure through brush-work; third, depicting forms of things as they are; fourth, appropriate coloring; fifth, composition; sixth, transcribing and copying."[16]

The six are given in decreasing order of importance, where the first and the sixth are different from the middle four. The first tells the artist what he is to seek to express and the next four tell him how to do it, by achieving structure, likeness, color, and composition. The sixth, to transmit models by drawing, is what is done in order to learn the technical side of an art, yet no artist can master the all-important first principle, namely, to capture the painted subject's spirit resonance and life movement simply by copying works that display it. By the end of the Ming Dynasty in 1644, art was for the most part limited to slavish imitation of the styles of the ancients, and this state of affairs inspired the revolutionary expressionistic credo of the artist Shitao that is discussed below.

The classical Chinese artist's stroke is especially expressive. It is by building structure through brushwork, the second canon, that he captures the spirit resonance of his subject, the first canon. The twentieth-century art historian Osvald Siren called the structural brushwork of the Chinese artist the backbone and life-nerve of his art, qualities whose importance cannot be exaggerated.[17] Chang Yen-yuan, the first interpreter of the six canons, said of the vital spirit and the brush of the first and second canons, respectively, that he who produces a picture "through the concentration of his spirit creates a real picture . . . in real pictures every brush stroke reveals life."[18] And further: "He who deliberates and moves the brush intent on making a picture, misses to a still greater extent the art of painting, while he who cogitates and moves the brush *without any intention of making a picture,* reaches the art of

painting."[19] (Emphasis added.) The expression of the vital spirit of the painted subject is the result of the truth of the brushstroke that is, in turn, the result of the concentration of the spirit of the artist, the focused attention he pays to his subject. The attention, not deliberation, determines whether the stoke is made swiftly or slowly, the brush is applied gently to the paper or with force, the stoke is narrow or wide. Deliberation implies distance, whereas the artist, having emptied himself of thoughts and emotions, is aware only of the present and what is present before him. He is so concentrated on this as to be able to hear what Gerard Manley Hopkins said in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" that each thing does, namely, "fling forth its name."[20]

Of the above quotation from Chang Yen-yuan, Siren said that it captures what the ancient philosophers, whether Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist, said over and over: "to understand the meaning or significance of a thing, one must become the thing, harmonize one's consciousness with it and reach the mental attitude that brings knowledge without intellectual deliberation."[21] A two-pronged difference between Chinese and western conceptual geographies is adumbrated in these words. The first turns on the west's penchant for analysis rather than synthesis, for looking for differences rather than the harmonies that are sought and revered in the east. The second is the western belief that human beings are the center of the universe and that nature is theirs to master. The Old Testament shadows forth human beings as alone having the powers of judgment and will possessed by God, who made them in his image—hence their uniqueness. In the Chinese worldview, heaven, earth, and humankind are a harmonious unity, the same vital energy pulsing through all three.

There are more and less plausible counterparts in the west to artworks that satisfy Hsieh Ho's principles. A plausible counterpart to the satisfaction of the first canon is the lifelikeness praised in Renaissance art. Michelangelo, upon seeing the completed statue of Moses for the first time, is rumored to have ordered it to walk. And of many Renaissance paintings it was said that so lifelike were they that they lacked only breath. The lifelikeness of Titian's female nudes comes from the quality of the paint itself, which was applied in transparent layers that seemed to glow, creating the impression of warm, moist, living flesh. The art historian David Rosand (1938–2014) said of Titian that he substituted paint for flesh. His nudes are well described as matter made human.[22] He is a genius of color and light, not of line, not of the "bone manner in the structural use of the brush" of the second canon. He paints light as various textures—skin, hair, silk, glass, silver, sky, clouds—variously reflect the light that probes these surfaces to reach the primary colors of which they are all composed. Color is the subject of the fourth of the six principles, light of none. Oil paint brought color and light to the fore in Eu-

rope in the early fifteenth century, and it was color and light, not the vitality of his brushstroke, that led Titian to capture what he did of the movement of life and resonance of spirit of his subjects.

A change is wrung on the second principle also, building structure through brushwork, in western art. Line in the art of the west garners attention when it builds structure, but structure is built also with the distinctive brushwork of Impressionism, which brings attention to the brushwork along with interest in how things appear to the eye alone. The strokes and daubs and dots of paint capture the life of the modern times and of the outdoor places the Impressionists painted. The paint did the work, not the figures that emerged from the painted surface. In the art of Titian, paint transformed itself into flesh (and silk and silver and clouds), whereas in the art of the Impressionists, flesh, silk, silver, and clouds just are strokes, daubs, and dots of paint. Colors and shapes are what the innocent eye sees in the world, and the Impressionists invite us to become innocent again and see as though for the first time.

Cezanne formalized the paint strokes, making his painted mountains and towns into cubes, planes, and myriad colors. Even the portrait of his dead wife was reduced to the geometry of painted shapes. But the subjects were not structured to achieve likeness as Hsieh Ho's third principle requires, but rather to encourage his viewers to look at the subjects from a different perspective. The power of paint itself subsides in Cezanne to recede even further in Cubism, which is all line. Then Surrealism appeared and exemplified the classical Chinese commitment to a certain directness and immediacy from which deliberation and intention are absent. Neither Impressionism's perceiving eye nor Cezanne's geometrizing hand holds sway in Surrealism. The unconscious does. When the classical Chinese painter leaves his conscious thoughts and feeling behind in order to be open to what is before him, we see a version of the psychoanalysand's leaving his manifest thoughts and feelings behind in order to be open to what in him is repressed. Both painter and patient have to make an effort to free their minds. A critical difference is that the Chinese painter, but not the western one, having done this, is open to the nature of which he is a part. No mastery here, only kinship.

The unconscious determines what, but not how, the surrealist paints, whereas the unconscious or instinct governs what and how the Abstract Expressionist paints. He might, like the traditional Chinese painter, rid himself of conscious thoughts and emotions, but not of himself. The notions of the self in the two worldviews have little in common. In the west, thanks to Descartes, the thinking mind is taken to be the center of the world and, thanks to the Enlightenment, the individual to be a rational, self-interested atom. This notion, complicated by Freud's introduction of the unconscious, is resolutely a child of the modern western world. The Chinese artist does not express in

his art what we might call his center but *the center, the "what it is," of the subject that he is painting and that resonates in him*. We catch glimpses in the art of the west of Hsieh Ho's six principles, but they are skewed by the differences in the conceptual schemes through which the Chinese and the westerner negotiate their worlds.

SHITAO, *AN EXPRESSIONIST CREDO* (SEVENTEENTH CENTURY)

Shitao was a member of an imperial family of the Ming Dynasty who became a recluse upon the accession in 1644 of the Manchus to the throne the Ming had occupied since 1368. The *Credo* he wrote during his years of a monk-like life has been called the best and deepest essay on art written by a revolutionary artist. Shitao is called revolutionary for urging artists to create rather than to continue merely to copy the style of the ancients. Ming artists had come to put the sixth canon, copy the ancients, first. Since the opposite of copying is innovating or creating, and since Shitao decried the art practice of his time, creating was the theme of this document that is remarkable on two counts. One is for the role played in it by what he calls the one-stroke. The one-stroke method is, by his lights, the quintessential art action. It is the art of painting. The other is for his claim that the immensity of the world is captured by the pairs—hills-and-streams, mountains-and-rivers, stone-and-water, bones-and-blood, stillness-and-motion—as items on the Saussurian paradigm list tumble into each other. (Saussure's paradigm is a list of words that are substitutable for each other in the contexts in which each occurs. Hills, mountains, stone, bones, and stillness are close to each other precisely in their respective difference from streams, rivers, water, blood, and motion.)

The One-Stroke Method (Section 1 of the Credo)

This manifesto demonstrates the sheer materiality of Chinese art, an art whose matter is enspirited, "born of the spirit and born again," in Hegel's words, but matter nonetheless. Moreover, it gives to art, born as it is of one stroke of the brush, the role that in the west is assigned to language, assuming tthe world to have been the first work of art. The God of Genesis divided light from darkness by saying "Let there be light" and the world was born of a word, not a stroke. There was a speaker, God, whose word was unique in that his saying made what he said so. Yet, like all words, it was speech, not action, and it was a word, not an action, that occasioned the world. According to Shitao, everything, including language, owes its existence to the action of

the one-stroke. Something close to this idea appears in Derrida's argument in *Of Grammatology* (1967) that writing is prior to speech: the meaning of words depends on their differences from each other, difference depends on division and division, on a stroke.

Where the Nicene Creed of the Christian begins "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth," the expressionist creed of Shitao would begin "I believe in the one-stroke, which is that out of which all phenomena are born, [and is] applied by the gods and [is] to be appled by man."[23] Shitao said that in the primeval chaos there was no difference, and only when difference was introduced was method or law born. It was born of the one-stroke, which "contains within itself the universe and beyond. Thousands and myriads of strokes and ink all begin and end here."[24] Difference and law and language come into being only after the action of the one-stroke, not the word of a world-generating God. He goes on to say that an artist should be able to show the world in one stroke, which he can do only if his wrist is fully resposive, not to the appearance of things but to their nature, their spirit, their names. Here is Shitao's hymn to the movement of the painter's wrist and the way its moves the brush to express the vital spirit of the water and stone, the rivers and hills, that are the life blood and skeletal structure of the world:

> If the wrist is not fully responsive, the picture is not good; if the picture is not good it is because the wrist fails to respond. Give it life and luster by circular movement and bends, and by stopping movement give it spaciousness. It shoots out, pulls in; it can be square or round, go straight or twist along, upwards or downwards, to the right and to the left. Thus it lifts and twists in sudden turns, breaks loose or cuts across, like the gravitation of water, or the shooting up of flame, naturally and without the least straining effect. In this way it penetrares all inner nature of things, gives form to all expressions. . . . With a casual stroke, hills and streams, all life and vegetation and human habitation take their form and gesture, the scene and the feeling connected with it caught hidden or exposed.[25]

The pulsing energy of the prose captures the falling down of water and the shooting up of fire, movements of the body of the world. The artist expresses the spirit and life of the world's body by quieting and gathering himself so as to be able to "understand the inner law and catch the outward gestures of the delicate complexities of hills and streams and human figures."[26] The understanding informs the painting so that hand and controlling wrist know the inner law and outward gestures of things. Mind and hand are one as, then, are the brushstrokes. For the classical Chinese painter the work takes on a life of its own and comes out of her as naturally as breath: one could not tell the artist from her art.

Hills and Streams (Section 8 of the Credo)

Our critic said that the world with which the Chinese artist feels himself one is captured by the figure of mountains and water that provide, respectively, the structure and life blood of the world. Hills and streams exemplify certain contraries: high and low, still and moving, (apparently) changeless and always changing, solid and liquid. That these are the Chinese counterparts of the western mind and matter, male and female, culture and nature, reason and emotion, is significant in two closely related ways. It indicates the Chinese closeness to nature implied by the belief that heaven, earth, and humans are in harmony, and their rejction of anything like a Cartesian mind-body split, seeing instead a harmony between the two. Mind is embodied and the body intelligent.

The functions of mountains and water "lie not in themselves, but in their respective silence and mobility."[27] Mountains are silent and still, while waters move and make noise: oceans roar, brooks babble, waterfalls thunder, waves lap the shore. Again, from the final section of the *Credo* that the translator calls "the strangest discourse" he has ever translated:

> For the mastery of the world is revealed only by the function of water, and water encircles and embraces it through the pressure of mountains. If the mountains and water do not come together and function,there will be nothing to circulate with or about, nothing to embrace. And if there is no circulation and embracing, there will be no means of life and growth.[28]

There is here a materiality that is basic and grand. Seventeenth-century western science's featureless molecules, uniform, invisible, ever moving, are replaced by mountains and water.

Both Hsieh Ho and Shitao lay out what art is to express and how it is to be done. Hsieh Ho is the more straightforward. The vibration of vitality, resonance of spirit, movement of life of its subject are what are to be expressed. The artist is to prepare himself to paint by freeing himself so that he can respond to the vibrations and resonances of his subject. And then, he is to give way to the brush in his hand as he fashions the structure, likeness, color, and composition of his subjects. Shitao puts the *how* before the *what*. The *how* is the one-stroke method that is, in effect, the act of creating. The *what* is nature, the mountains and rivers without whose circulation and embrace there would be no life and no growth.

This chapter has introduced two modern western theories of expression and two classical Chinese theories—here and there, now and then. Beardsley limits the object of expression to psychological states and limits the subject to agents. Arnheim adds physical energies and tensions to Beardsley's psycho-

logical states as the possible objects of expression and adds inanimate objects to Beardsley's possible subjects. Different for the ancients is what, according to Hsieh Ho, the classical Chinese artist is to express, which is *qi*, the spirit or energy that courses through everything. *Qi* is the same in all, but what it courses through is individual, concrete, and particular, a "this." In this respect *qi* is close counterpart to western "existence." Whatever exists in the world is, like what *qi* inhabits, individual, concrete, and particular. *Qi* and existence are the same in all, but what they are in is (likely to be) the same only in existing or having *qi,* to which Arnheim's dynamism is close cousin.

Shitao's one-stroke is what initiates all existence, all understanding, and all activity that is not mere copying. This is not, however, an eastern foreshadowing of western modernism's focus on the new or original. For something not to be a copy, however, it is not necessary that it be novel or new. There is a sense here that there is nothing new; there is only reorganization, realignment, transformation. To be creative is to show what there is in a new way, to show it so that it is seen as it never was before or as though for the first time.

CODA

The goal of the self-taught ink artist Jizi (1941–2014) was to make contemporary what is authentically Chinese and to do it in a way that speaks to an increasingly global audience. What he meant by authentically Chinese is what lies in the principles of such as Hsieh Ho and Shitao. His work subverts current western ideas of what spirit and matter are and raises the question of what the vehicle of spirit is, matter, substance, some other more nuanced thing, or, indeed, everything. He sought to express in his art the unification of heaven, earth, and humankind through what he called the Dao of painting. An exhibition in January 2018, *Jizi, Journey of the Spirit*, at the White Box Gallery in New York showed twelve of his paintings and a forty-meter-long scroll. A panel discussion and question period saw the New York audience rise to the challenge posed by an art that western art theories are not able to address, in large part because of the west's robust skepticism about the spiritual. Among the works shown was *Dao with Long Wind* (2011) (Figure 4). Start with the Dao as characterized by Laozi (sixth century BCE, though some say fourth century): "There was something undifferentiated, and yet complete, which existed before Heaven and earth. Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change. It operates everywhere and is free from danger. It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; call it Dao."[29] This is certainly below the levels of discourse

and ideology; it is that out of which everything is made. Heaven, earth, and humnkind are born of the Dao, and it is this oneness, harmony, not identity, that Jizi seeks to capture in his inkscapes.

His work depicts interrelations among the visible, the phenomenal, the astronomical, and the cosmic. The visible is what is there to be seen; the phenomenal is an individual's experience of it; the astronomical is the discernible material universe beyond the earth's atmosphere; and the cosmic, immeasurably extended in space and time, contains the earth, its galaxy, and all those that lie beyond it. The phenomenal and the cosmic might seem to be at opposite poles, the experience of one individual at one time versus what is extended in time and space without limit. But to see them this way is precisely to beg the question against Jizi and the ancient principles of painting that express the Chinese conception of the world, the soul of China. For Jizi espoused the view, movingly expressed by Shitao, that the painter is so to open himself to what he is to paint that he is not only in harmony but is unified with it so that it is not perceiver and perceived, but pure perception, nothing but it. And what Jizi paints is not rivers and mountains but what is older and indefinitely far out or indefinitely deep down, whether into the universe, to the earth's tectonic plates, or to matter's electrons, protons, and neutrons, or into us, to what neuroscience studies or the unconscious harbors. Using images from the Hubble Telescope that in the 1990s gave evidence of the Big Bang, Jizi's ink, paper, and brush go back that far and out as far as imagination can travel. These are the things that Jizi paints, and the places he takes his viewers.

Is it, as he claims, contemporary? His charge is to show that the authentically Chinese spirit speaks to us today. The answer is yes. Globalization has expanded the social world available to us and cosmology and neuroscience have done the same for the natural world. Nor is history left out by him. It is there in the large (about eleven by six feet) *Dao with Long Wind* (2011) of which critic and curator Wang Chunchen said: "Jizi imagines turns and ruins of civilization. . . . However, this same painting symbolizes that he imagines an intact structure resembling the Potala Palace."[30] The palace is a fortress in Lhasa in China's Tibet Autonomous Region and was the winter palace of the Dalai Lama from 1649 to 1950. It is the most noteworthy of three structures in *Dao with Long Wind*; the other two are barely visible. One is on the left under the Potala Palace; the other is on the right, midway between the two. However, all pale next to the fierce swirls, the pulsing vitality of the waves of what feels like something elemental. But the buildings are there; they bespeak human history and an often glorious past.

Whereas traditional ink artists build form from lines, Jizi builds form from masses created out of light and dark. The bottom four-fifths of the canvas is

filled with roiling clouds of light and dark. A sliver of the bottom of a sphere defines the top one-fifth of the picture plane in which are quieter clouds that do not roil and swirl. In roughly the bottom half of the canvas, slightly to the right of center, is a large sphere whose left side is cut open from top to bottom and out of whose irregular insides pour clouds or waves. There is rich color in the work, the sphere is muddied purple and behind the Potala Palace is reddish brown. Cosmic sphere and palace face each other across a diagonal, the open side of the sphere facing the palace. Against the purple and red there is blue, in the sky, scattered though the black and white clouds, and in the sphere. There are also three very small stamps at the two bottom corners, two on the side with two buildings and one on the side with the third building, placed just where the image is cut off on the diagonal to leave two small blank corners. Like the buildings, they are intrusions of the human, the built and the written, into the otherwise primordial scene.

The audience at the White Box Gallery spoke of how visceral the paintings were, their effect palpable, and at the same time how sublime in the sense of being beyond us even as they have a hold over us. The paintings captivate; they get into our blood. Jizi said of the realm of art that it should be broad and deep, palpably material while infused with energy or spirit. It should express "a type of grand, broad, and virile beauty" in which one can see "the universe in the tip of a hair."[31] He went on to speak of how what he referred to as the barriers of experience restrain the artist's creative power. The barriers can be glossed as the limits imposed upon experience by conventions and language. When the artist finds the rare breach in the barrier, he can find his potential to be unlimited and "seek the source of truth . . . [experience] the silence and the stillness . . . return to an original state of non-being."[32] One might say this just shows him to be like other contemporary Chinese artists in having found the Dao or Buddhism; it does not show him to have made his art contemporary and *for* the present. However, he has made his art contemporary in two ways.

One, he has found a breach in the available trio of traditional Chinese art, modern western art, and market-driven art, as have other artists who have gone their own way. This is the freedom from rules that is, we have seen, the quintessence of the contemporary. Two, he has done this by going to the outer reaches of the cosmos and down to where matter is raw, to what exists, to the "something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before Heaven and earth . . ."[33] Jizi's is a grand materialism in the breadth and depth of its reach. Of its depth, Arthur Danto said: "I felt that these [works] showed what lies underground, what, if we were to dig deeply into the earth, we would discover, like caves and chasm. Or what we might find if we were to crack open a geode and discover a little world no less savage than the landscapes intimate."[34] Savage or primitive perhaps, but sublime as well. Jizi is of the

present in capturing its uncanny materiality fused with the spirit of the Dao that sends one back to the beginning and the spirit of the Buddha who sends one to where difference is no more.

NOTES

1. Steven Davies, in his *The Artful Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), argues for aesthetic universals on the ground that our common human nature gives us access, even though sometimes quite limited, to the art of other countries.

2. Transcript of a panel discussion about the exhibition "Jizi: Journey of the Spirit" at White Box Gallery in New York on January 23, 2018.

3. "For if power is no longer to be located at the macrolevels of the great ideologies in the colossal and mythic confrontation of socialism and capital, and if it is instead to be found at the microlevel 'below' politics and ideology, then individual subjects are able to intervene and innovate at their own scale and on their own terms." Norman Bryson, "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde," in Gao Minglu, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Pres, 1998), 57.

4. A mirror neutron is one that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes an action performed by another. Thus, the neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were himself acting. Such neurons have been directly observed in primates.

5. New York Asia Society Center for Global Education, "Chinese Calligraphy." Accessed October 24, 2019.

6. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetic Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1981), and Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Philosophy of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

7. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 417.

8. Ibid., 412.

9. Ibid., 448.

10. Ibid., 412.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. His name is Xie Ho in the Wade Gilles romanization of Chinese names.

15. Hsieh Ho, "The Six Techniques of Painting," in Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theories of Art; Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art* (New York: G. F. Putnam's Sons, 1967).

16. Osvald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painter-Critics from the Han through the Ch'ng Dynasties* (Peiping: 1936; rpt Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 19.

17. Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, 48.

18. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting,* 230.

19. Ibid., 230.

20. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," in Catherine Phillips, ed. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works Including All the Poems and Selected Prose* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129.

21. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting,* 24. Also:

> Or, in the words of Confucius: "He who is in harmony with Nature hits the mark without effort and comprehends the truth without thinking." The attitude is exactly the same as the Taoist idea of the identity of the subjective and the objective. "Only the truly intelligent understand this principle of identity. They do not view things as apprehended by themselves subjectively, but transfer themselves into the position of the things viewed. And viewing them thus they are able to comprehend them, nay, to master them; and he who can master them is near. So it is, that to place oneself in subjective relation with externals, without consciousness of their objectivity, this is Tao." (24–25)

22. Mary Bittner Wiseman, "Words about Women: Interpreting Titian," in *Source: Notes on the History of Art* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1998), 15–26.

23. Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, 150.

24. Ibid., 51.

25. Ibid., 155–156.

26. Ibid., 156.

27. Ibid., 155.

28. Ibid., 156.

29. Chapter 25 of the Book of Laotze, in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook on Chinese Philosophy,* trans. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 152.

30. Transcript of a discussion at White Box Gallery in New York in January 2018.

31. Jizi, "A Compilation of Jizi's Reflections on Art," in David Adam Brubaker and Wang Chunchen, *Jizi and His Art in Contemporary China: Unification* (Verlag, Berlin, Heidleberg: Springer, 2015), 140.

32. Ibid., 140.

33. The Dao, as decribed by Laotzi.

34. Arthur C. Danto, "The Seething World of Jizi's Paintings—As Viewed on a Macintosh Computer in a Manhattan Apartment on Riverside Drove," in David Adam Brubaker and Wang Chunchen, *Jizi and His Art in Contemporary China: Unification* (Verlag, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 125–27.

Part II

WORKING THROUGH ART

Chapter Three

A Grand Materialism

In a world turned upside down by Deng Xiaoping's opening China up to western investment, the art made by independent artists is one of the few vehicles available for asking certain questions. Since the opening, communism and capitalism have come to inhabit what are no longer familiar social spaces and speak what are no longer coherent political and economic languages.

Out of this world has emerged an art that functions where material things and material movements reign, below the level of the discourses available in China. Because familiar meanings have lost their moorings, the discourses no longer delimit what can be said, thought, and felt. The art that has emerged is grand in its materialism, in the materiality and vitality of words and of human bodies, in its use of gunpowder and ashes, of residues and remnants of things, and in its bow to the generative power of women's bodies. It is an art made out of the look and sound of words, life, energy, and particular material things.

Independent artists are those who work outside the far-reaching system of art education in China and who avoid the suppression of their work by the ever-watchful Communist Party and the demands of a profit-hungry international art market. Neither communist repression nor capitalist greed has them in its sway. Instead they obey an ethical imperative to ask what they are in a new China (the first subversion) and what words mean (the second subvesion) in a world stripped of the absolute certainties of the Mao years and presented with the bourgeois values whose embrace had previously cost people their lives. They ask also how they can relate to a nature now being ravaged to feed China's increasing industrialization.

Asking questions can be a subversive strategy. The iconic example is Socrates, found guilty of subverting the received values and beliefs of the Athenians by asking the youths about the meaning of the values and beliefs

they had been taught. But questioning need not be politically subversive. It is paradigmatically what philosophers do, and when no ready answers are forthcoming, the best of them say: "Why, then, not look at the matter in this other, often radically different, way?" Chinese artists have had no ready answer to the question of what art is in a world from which modern art had been barred and Chinese traditional art was one of the Four Olds—customs, culture, habits, and ideas—that the Cultural Revolution set out to destroy.

Therefore, the best of the independent artists started to look at art in a new way. Their art is to be relished neither only for its own sake nor for a terrible beauty it reveals in the sublimity of the wide world or in the reaches of the human heart. It is made in the service of their thinking and feeling for themselves by turning to actual things rather than to their myriad representations by classical Chinese or western artists. A last word before looking at examples of this material art new in its conceptions of itself and its aspirations to change the world, an art that joins avant-garde work coming out of third world countries: This art is not negotiating the opposition between Chinese and western. It has more in common with current Middle Eastern art, especially in light of the 2011 Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and neighboring countries, than it has with contemporary western art. The move away from the west can be seen in a 2012 exhibition, *The Ungovernables*, in the New Museum in New York. In it there were fifty artists, most in their twenties and thirties, only four of whom were born in the United States (and few in western Europe).

MATERIALS OF THE WORLD

There are several categories of art characterized by Chinese contemporary artists' focus on the material of the world: one has to do with language, another with energy or *qi,* another with destruction as material history, and yet another with the behavior of women's bodies. Examples of each will demonstrate what might be called the materialization of art. There is a story here. Words fail; raw energy is what is left. Energy can destroy, but it can also create and materialize a world.

Words I: The Promise of Meaning

The first is by Xu Bing (b. 1955), an artist raised in Beijing who moved to New York in 1990, after Tiananmen Square. He was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Award in 1999 and in 2008 was appointed a vice-president of the China Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. He now lives in both New York and Beijing. As we saw, in 1988, he exhibited his *Book from the Sky* (Figure 2) in the National Museum in Beijing. Hailed as a masterpiece

of twentieth-century art, it surrounds its viewers with writing. Viewers are cocooned in words they cannot read, in thousands of illegible scrolls. Here is a celebration of the materiality of the book—from the carved block to the paper it is printed on, to the book made by sewing the papers together. The book itself is something of value regardless of what is in it. Typically what is in a book are words or characters that combine a physical element, the carved or ink-brushed strokes, and a nonphysical one, the meaning. Regardless of the absence of meaning, the dance of the characters' strokes and lines, calligraphy, is familiar to readers of Chinese and beautiful to everyone. The strokes are independent of meanings they may convey, and these strokes can be printed mechanically thanks to the invention in China in 600 CE of fixed-type engraved printing. In themselves the characters in *Book from the Sky* are the possibility, the promise, of meaning.

In a reversal of this, Xu Bing designed *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994), in which English words, written in the format of a square, resemble Chinese characters. English speakers assume they cannot read them and are delighted when they can, as Chinese speakers expect to be able to read the *Book from the Sky* and are frustrated when they cannot. *Book from the Sky* gently suggests that what is being spoken in China now means no more than these characters do. Xu Bing said that the chatter of the artists around him was so empty and so loud that he had to go off by himself. He began then to carve the wood blocks, where the sheer doing of it was a meditation. We are here below the level of language and at the level of the movements of the hand that wields the tools that carves the block.

We are also outside of representation. The faux characters are *bona fide* Chinese radicals, not representations, as the flags and numbers in Jasper Johns's paintings are themselves flags and numbers and not representations of them. *Book from the Sky* is a meditation on the absence of meaning that focuses on the material side of language, on the strokes and sounds that typically carry meaning and on the ancillary arts involved in making and preserving them.

When meaning is absent either because it has been taken away from its material signs or has lost its footing in a time of dizzying social change, as it has in China, there is a place to go, even though one cannot stay there: to the primitive, to what escapes the networks of culture, to the utterly particular about which virtually nothing can be said and to which we can only point. Works of art do this when they so touch a viewer as to pierce through all she knows and expects and leaves her with nothing to say.

Words II: The Living Word

The Chinese language does not separate the breadth and curves of brushstrokes from their meaning as radically as western languages do, as we can

see in Xu Bing's *The Living Word* (2001) exhibited at the Morgan Library in New York in 2011. The installation in the Morgan consisted of 400 pieces of colored acrylic, laser-cut into Chinese characters for *niao* (bird) and strung together to form an undulating wave 50 feet from floor to ceiling. Written on the floor is the definition of the word.

In the 1950s, in order to increase literacy Mao decreed that the number of strokes in traditional Chinese characters be decreased, leading to a simplified version of the written language. The first character that takes wing in *The Living Word* is the simplified form of the character for bird, breaking away from the confines of the written definition to metamorphose into its traditional version and on to increasingly early forms, going back through time to the most ancient pictograms based on the natural form of a bird, and ends with the form of a bird itself. The work's title refers to the Buddhist inspiration "if you look for harmony in the living word, then you will be able to reach Buddha; if you look for harmony in lifeless sentences, you will be unable to save yourself."[1] Xu said that his work and method of thinking have been precisely a search for the living word—from the lifeless definition through the living word, which is the word in use, almost to the bird. As the word takes flight, the black of the words in the written definition pales to gray to lavender and on through the spectrum to red, as the colors in a rainbow do. Here the promise of meaning is the move from the written definition to the referent of the word, the bird itself, as though the character for bird that has the most life is the one that most nearly looks like a bird.

Chinese is a language whose writing is far different from ours in the presence of the visual element and the distinctiveness of the art of calligraphy, an art close to painting in which the fluid movements of hand, wrist, and arm are like those of a dance. What does it mean for a word to be living? Perhaps that it has the vital energy of which everything is made, rather than that it looks like its referent. This would be to make words approach to natural objects, which would more or less comport with a conceptual scheme in which the continuous and the complementary take the place of the oppositions that reign in binary-friendly western schemes.

The would-be words in *Book from the Sky*, lifeless, cannot flee the confines of the pages on which they were printed. The material substrate of words absent their meanings dramatized in *Book from the Sky* is displaced in *The Living Word* by apparently living characters taking flight from the words in their lifeless book-bound definition. The difference between matter and meaning, and lifeless and living, aside, the theme of the two exhibitions is the materiality of the word, as though to separate out the associated idea from the physical element and the real (or nonlinguistic) thing to which the word refers. However, even though the strokes bared of their meanings cannot signify, they can and do express, as the sheer movements of a dancer's or an athlete's body do.

Energy I: Writing with Fire

Where matter and its movements reign, so does energy. The transformational equivalence of energy and mass was posited by the special theory of relativity in 1905 and is reminiscent of the Taoist belief that

> The Tao then generated the complementary forces of yin and yang, which reorganized the primal energy into patterns of movement and transformation. According to Taoism, all things are made up of *qi*, which is vital enery or breath. Matter and energy are interchangeable, and transformation and change are constant.[2]

Zhuangzi (late fourth century BCE), the central figure in classical philosophical Taoism, said that "Living things were not the only things believed to have *qi*. He indicated that wind is the *qi* of the Earth. Moreover, cosmic yin and yang 'are the greatest of *qi*' . . . issuing forth and creating profound effects. . . . There is one *qi* that connects and pervades everything in the world."[3] Everything is made of a vital energy, *qi*, which, according to Einstein's "energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light," is interchangeable not with matter but with mass.[4] Accepting the idea that *qi* flows through all there is—rivers and mountains, the blood and bones of the earth, and human beings—the Chinese have a more robust idea of matter than have westerners, who oppose it to mind or meaning or form, always to matter's discredit.

Sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate—gunpowder, invented in China in the seventh century—and the energy they release is a signature of the art of Cai Guo-Qiang, who grew up in the coastal city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province, a city with commercial ties to countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe and home to many different cultures. Cai's milieu, then, was as broad as the sea, where Xu Bing's was as narrow as the walls of the university library where his mother worked and he played. Cai moved to Japan in 1986 and to New York in 1995, where he still lives. Before that, however, he studied stage design at the Shanghai Theater Academy and from his time there was imprinted with several things that set the course of his future work.

One is that the theater is based on time, on "how your work is revealed in time, how it develops and procedes, how the audience is engaged,"[5] which led him to regard the making of his art as a performance of which the resulting artwork is a material memory, a record of the activity. He was led also to engage others, often volunteers, in making his art because art is for him a communal as well as a temporal project. A telling example is *Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki* (2004) (Figure 5), a 15-meter long skeleton of a derelict fishing boat Cai found on the beach in Iwaki in Fukushima. A group of volunteers helped him to salvage it and shore it up, and each time it is exhibited seven fishermen from Iwaki reconstitute it for him. Spilling out of the hull are

small ceramic statues made in a town famous for producing *blanc-de-Chine* porcelain for export. The states of decomposition of the boat and the small deities "reflect the destructive power of time and the inherent beauty brought out by its passage."[6]

Another thing Cai learned in the Theater Academy is that there is a rich vein of eastern spiritual and material culture to be mined for an aesthetic and discursive framework alternative to those of western or official Chinese art. Mine it he did, finding "a concept of the universe based on the fundamental and primitive relationships between humans and nature"[7] and gunpowder, which he began to ignite on canvas in 1985. He chose it not only because it is it an explosion of energy but also because it is a hazard that produces an unpredictable splendor; in using it he is miming nature's being unpredictable, splendid, and potentially hazardous. His central idea is to use forces of natural energy to create works that connect both artist and viewer with the primordial and immediate states of chaos that are contained in the moment of explosion. The gunpowder drawings do not *represent* energy; the expenditure of energy *is* the artwork. The drawings, a record of the ignition of gunpowder across canvas or paper, involve three steps: the preparation of the paper and the disposition of the gunpowder; the ignition of the powder; and the aftermath, the drawing.

The explosion events, which he began in 1989 using gunpowder and fuse lines, involve the same steps: the preparation of the ground, which can use hundreds of volunteers; the actual explosion, which can be seen by thousands; and the videos and photographs that record the event and can be seen by millions. Although Cai has the idea and prepares the ground, the explosion is the artwork, and the gunpowder, not its ignition, is the active ingredient.We can see this in his 1993 *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*, *Extending the Great Wall of China 10,000 Meters* in the Gobi Desert, at the western-most section of the Great Wall. Over 100 tourists and volunteers laid 600 kilograms of gunpowder along 10,000 meters in a fuse line in the shape of a dragon. This was his largest event to date, and he organized a tour group from Japan to offset the cost. Over 40,000 volunteers and locals watched the fifteen-minute display in which a dragon of fire seemed to fly across the sky, an allusion to Chen Rong's *Nine Dragons* (1244) and a performance that could have been seen even by extraterrestrials, who are neither Chinese nor western. He borrowed the power of nature to extend the Great Wall by sending the dragon of fire 10,000 meters across the sky.

He also borrowed its power to mark and celebrate the Museum of Modern Art's temporary move from Manhattan to Queens in 2002 with *Transient Rainbow*, the first pyrotechnic event allowed in New York after 9/11. Cai choose to mark this with a rainbow, a thing of beauty caused by the sun's being refracted in droplets of moisture. The refraction causes the light to bend and all the colors of the world to appear in the sky, red in the outer and violet

in the inner part of the arc. Whereas the airplanes' movement through the sky into the Twin Towers caused death and destruction, *Transient Rainbow* put beauty into the New York sky where death had been. Another celebration in another city, the 100th anniversary of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway that runs from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to the City Hall atop which a statue of Ben Franklin stands was marked by *Fireflies* (2017). It was made up of 27 pedicabs festooned with 900 lanterns that snaked down the parkway at night, a dragon of brightly lit lanterns made in Cai's himetown of Quanzhou in the form of airplanes, emojis, stars, extraterrestials, telephones, a rooster (his zodiac animal), and highheels (his daughters' request). This was the largest public art project in the United States in a decade, and it was inspired by Cai's childhood memories of the lanterns that hung from every house in his hometown to fool the gods. Legend had it that the gods were angered at the corruption and sensualness of the people and determined to set the town afire. A daughter of the gods took pity and warned the people, who lit so many lanterns that when the gods saw them they were fooled into thinking that the people had set the town afire themselves. The art was in this way personal to Cai, and it was public: people were invited to ride in the pedicabs from one site to another for four long weekends. This is public art not only in being out where all can see it but also in being such that all can participate.

Energy II: Signs of Life

In Cai Guo-Qiang's 1998 *New York Earthworm Room*, energy from living worms replaces the energy of gunpowder and explosions. This was exhibited in New York with Xu Bing's *The Silkworm Series* (1998), both discussed in Chapter 1. They are here to exemplfy the energy characteristic of life. Objects used in the exhibition run the gamut from inorganic nature to living things to manufactured objects to electronic equipment: dirt, worms, table, books, picture, TV, and VCR. The *New York Earthworm Room* is a gallery full of thousands of pounds of dirt about 22 inches deep into which earthworms had been introduced, and a camcorder connected to a video screen lets the viewer watch the earthworms move. Cai has returned nature to the big pile of dirt, without which it would have been no different from Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room* (1977). De Maria recontextualized earth by taking it out of nature and displaying it in the Dia Art Foundation in Manhattan. Cai brought nature back into the gallery by using earthworms to aerate and fertilize the dirt so that grass began to grow. Earthworms burrow under; silkworms cover over. The cultivation of silkworms in China predates the inventions of printing and gunpowder by more than 1,000 years. Xu's *Silkworm Series* occupies a room in which there are a coffee table with magazines and books, a framed picture on the wall, a TV monitor screening a history of the life cycle of the silkworm, a

VCR whose cover is open, and the silkworms. They are everywhere, and over time they cover everything, including the TV detailing their life cycle.

Although one might be tempted to see these exhibitions as examples of the triumph of living things over the inanimate and the manufactured, they are better seen as examples of the harmony among them. Harmony there is, but there is also play between what the eye sees and the cameras show: the camera in the *Earthworm Room* extends our eyes to see what in nature we could not see, while the silkworms in the *Silkworm Series* keep us from seeing what, but for them, we would see on the TV monitor.

This is performance art where the performers are the worms, as the sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate are the performers in Cai's gunpowder art. Nothing is represented; no roles enacted. There are only the signs of the worms' activity, grass, and threads of silk.

Material History I: Remnants of Malicious Destruction

We have looked at art whose subjects have been language's material side and energy harnessed in gunpowder and in its natural form. There is a third class of works that use *particular material* things that were present in a certain place at a certain time to call attention or to pay homage to what happened there and then. This is art as material history, as public memory. The examples below involve bombs and earthquakes, the bombs the dark sides of gunpowder and earthquakes the dark side of nature.

The first example was exhibited in Cardiff, Wales, in 2004. It is the already mentioned *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (Figure 3) by Xu Bing, the man of letters, in which lines from a seventh-century Zen Buddhist poem are written in dust collected from the site of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11/2001: "As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?" The history of the material in which the words are limned is what gives the work its power. What Xu Bing does with it turns it into a work of material history and public memory.

Two more examples are by Zhang Huan, an artist raised in rural Henan Province who earned a master's degree from the China Central Academy of Art in 1993, after which he, with other young artists, established an alternative artistic community, Beijing East Village. When the government closed it in 1998, Zhang moved to New York. A further change came in 2006, when he became a Buddhist and returned to China, where he built a 75,000-square-foot studio in an old factory just outside Shanghai. On a trip to Tibet, he had found shards in copper and bronze from statues of the Buddha statues destroyed by the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. About them he said that when he came upon them they had a mysterious power, as though historial and religious traces were embedded in and not simply associated

with them. From these fragments he made sculptures that are themselves fragments of Buddha: fingers, a foot, a leg, a forearm, a head, a hand. He does not reassemble the shards into one Buddha figure, as though to do so would be to deny the violence that had been wreaked upon them, but he exaggerates their size.

His first such included nine large copper fingers, and where the fingers would have attached to a hand were small mesh cages, some of which had birds and tortoises in them, others small cloth statues. One, *Head from a Buddha Foot* (2006) (Figure 6), is distinctive in that the emerging head, out as far as the neck with its face down and chin on the ground, is a replica of the artist's. He had used his body repreatedly early on in works of performance art and later in replicas; he returns to that here. Whereas the goddess of widom, war, and craft, Athena, was born from her father Zeus's head, Zhang is born from the Buddha's foot—a sign of homage. It was exhibited outdoors on the grass at the Storm King Art Center in New York along with *Long Island Buddha* (2010–2011), a Buddha head lying on its right side, eyes closed, chin and cheek on the ground. A head out of which Zhang might have been born? The Buddha sculptures, shown in New York's Asia Society in 2007, are all parts that metonymically stand for the whole.That the Buddha figures are made of remnants of statues broken in the Cultural Revolution is as important as the figures themselves. In reincarnating them as works of art, Zhang reincarnates the history and religion of which they are traces.

Material History II: Remnants of Reverential Destruction

More waste and debris: the ashes that are physical evidence of the incense burned as prayer offerings in Buddhist temples. Waste they may be, but their causal story speaks to Zhang Huan, who uses them to make paintings and sculptures. Because the ashes are for him metonyms for the prayers themselves, the works of art they are used to make become prayers. For Zhang, as for Cai and other independent, experimental artists, the act of art making is not only more important than the object made, it is also a communal activity. This element harks back to the Mao years, but it refers also to the eastern idea that heaven, earth, woman, and man are woven into a web as fine and strong as any a spider made. Large quantities of incense ash are collected weekly from some twenty temples in Shanghai and taken to a warehouse where lighter ash is separated from darker and finer dust from coarser flakes. Powdered ash is brushed onto canvas prepared with an adhesive material and built up with larger flakes; sometimes the ash is mixed with water and glue and is dispersed on large canvases with such energy as to rival Jackson Pollock's paint-drippings.

Among the ash paintings is a series, *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains* (2010) (Figure 7), exhibited at Pace Beijing in the summer of 2010. Zhang has moved

from Buddhism to nature, and his using incense ash makes of his paintings prayers that we stop our predation of nature and instead strive for harmony with it. The South China tiger is the evolutionary antecedent of all the world's tigers and is one of the ten most endangered animals in the world. In the 1970s, there were over 4,000 South China tigers in the wild; none has been seen in the wild in the last twenty years. The South China tiger is the most rare, and Zhang has saved more than thirty-seven of them on his canvases. Their titles suggest that the tiger will not be free until it can return to the mountain, which it can do only when its habitat is no longer sacrificed to the building frenzy that industrialization brings and its parts are not sought for use in Chinese traditional medicine.

We have looked at artists who, in making art of the material effects of the 9/11 terrorists and the Red Guard destroyers of Buddha statues, are speaking out against the wrongs that were their causes.

Woman-Body I: Menstruation

In the work of the men we have seen, we find items from a material history of China: calligraphy, the Great Wall, gunpowder, silkworms, Buddha statues, and incense ash. In the work of the women we will see the rhythms and workings of a woman's body and therefore of her life.

Chen Lingyang was raised in a coastal province south of Shanghai and graduated from the China Central Academy of Fine Art in 1999. That same year she made *Scroll*, an eighteen-foot-long roll of toilet paper smeared with her menstrual blood, leaving indistinct shapes that could be forms in a misty landscape. It was shown only once, in *Fuck Off*, the underground exhibition held alongside the Shanghai Biennale 2000, where it was bought by Uli Sigg, a Swedish businessman, later Swedish ambassador to China, and the first person to collect contemporary Chinese art. One month after she made *Scroll*, Chen began taking photographs of her menstruating body and continued for one year, placing the flower of the month next to a mirror that reflects her menstruating, which is the possibility of her flowering. Each mirror has a different shape taken from the shapes of doors and windows in traditional Chinese garden houses. The series of photographs is *Twelve Flower Months* (1999–2000).

What Chen is doing here can be understood through her reply to Melissa Chiu, then director of the Asia Society in New York, who asked if Chen would say that her works represent a feminist perspective. Chen replied: "Maybe a better way to say it would be that *my works have to do with myself, and I am a woman*."[8] (Emphasis added.) This reveals two aspects of a revolution in contemporary Chinese art. The first is that her works have to do with *herself*. In a society where people are identified by their roles—editor Feagin, lawyer Goldstein, teacher Wiseman—and family members' relations to an in-

dividual are always specified—older sister, not sister; maternal grandmother, not grandmother—people are identified by their place in social and familial matrices. Chen's work has to do with her as an individual apart from these roles. The individual came center stage in the west in the Enlightenment, when the authority of the state was based on the consent of the individuals it governed and Kant's autonomous individuals governed themselves by the categorical imperative. But neither in the east nor in tribal cultures does the individual as such have the value it has in the west.

The second aspect of a revolution in art that Chen reflects is that she is a *material* woman, the behavior of her body giving the lie to such social differences as those between bourgeoisie and proletariat, so important in Mao's China. Both works bow to tradition, however. *Scroll* harks back to the traditional form of the scroll, and *Twelve Flower Months* bows in the inclusion of monthly flowers and garden pavilion frames. But more important is that here Chen shows that *this* is what women's bodies do, no matter the woman's social role, and women's power of generation puts them in far greater harmony with the rhythms of nature than ever men can be.

Woman-Body II: Gestation

Xing Danwen was born in Xian in 1967, and in 1992, like all but Cai Guo-Qiang of the artists above, graduated from the China Central Academy of Fine Art. And like all but Chen Lingyang, she spent time in the United States, studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York from 1998 to 2001, earning an MFA. As part of the series *I Am a Woman* (1994–1996), she made a triptych, *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995) (Figure 8), from three photographs of a pregnant friend who was born in the year the Cultural Revolution began. Each reflects a different perspective on pregnancy and a different attitude toward Mao, whose photographs appear in each image. The perspective endorsed by Mao is in the center photo where the virgin and child would appear in western religious triptychs.This work will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4; here it is sufficient to say that in the wide center photograph the woman's pregnancy is what is on display, whereas in the narrower photograph to its left there is a woman who happens to be pregnant; it is a fact about her, that is all. In the narrower photograph to the right of the center one there is a sensuous woman who just happens to be pregnant, but it does not detract from her sensuousness. The triptych rehearses also the ways that women can relate to the authority of Mao, but it is primarily about their relation to their bodies when they are in that uncanny state of being neither one nor two, and when their bodies do what they do independently of the will of their owners.

REMEMBER

In the early years of the twenty-first century, artists in China engaged with particular materials and places in a way rarely done in the west. This is art *as* history. What follows are further examples of artworks constructed out of specific materials that refer to particular events and particular places. They lead us to reflect on what this says about contemporary art in China and elsewhere, and it leads us to conclude that an art indifferent to the seductions of language calls attention to the material there-ness, the present-ness, of the world and its past while remaining immune to salient cultural disparities.

In *Hope Tunnel* (2010) (Figure 9), Zhang Huan exhibits a train damaged in the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province and says of it that it is a witness to history. This is art that insists that we not forget what it witnessed. It is art's using *particular material things* that are present in a certain place at a certain time to call attention to what happened there and then. The question to ask of any artwork is *to what* is it bidding us pay attention and *what kind of* attention. These works call attention to the facts that the dust and the bronze shards of Xu Bing's *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* and Zhang Huan's Buddha sculptures are what they are because of the actions of, respectively, the terrorists and the Red Guard, while the train is the way it is because of the earthquake that did its most devastating damage because of building inspectors who passed on school buildings not strong enough to withstand the force of the quake. They all point to what brought them into existence and put their causal stories on show, calling out to viewers to reflect on and to remember them.

There is here some of the urgency with which we are bid to remember the Holocaust, a heinous series of acts that should be remembered both out of respect for its victims—whose names and death dates remain—and in the hope that the memory will fend off a threatened repeat. The dust, the shards, and the train are material memories of disasters and the artworks instances of art's intervention in society, the need for which is rehearsed in Wang Chunchen's *Art Intervenes in Society: A New Artistic Relationship* (2010):

> Today, if we do not resort to art's social engagement and merely discuss its ontological form, we will either fail to touch its real essence or come to a meaningless, illusory argument. We will fail to grasp the historical and social value of artistic beings, leaving only commercial and superficial aesthetic values.[9]

Remember Buddha

The first example of such works is the already mentioned *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (2004) (Figure 3), a work that viewers cannot fully appreciate unless they know that the dust in which the lines are written is from the

site of the attack on the Twin Towers. Were the dust not in truth from there, the work would be fraudulent; one takes Xu Bing at his word that the work is true. This is hardly an isolated case; one takes artists at their word each time they put a work forward as their own. Yet even if the dust were not from 9/11 and a viewer were not to know that it was supposed to be, the work would have another life in the context of two feuding images of Zen Buddhism that, in the light of the artwork's *de facto* reference to 9/11, reprise the feud Islamic terrorists are having with the west. The first of the feuding images is that of the body as a Bhodi or wisdom tree and the mind as a bright mirror that the Zen practioner must keep wiping clean so that no dust will land on it. The second and competing image of Zen is that that there is nothing from the beginning, neither Bodhi tree nor bright mirror, and therefore the question:

> As there is nothing from the first,
> Where does the dust itself collect?[10]

There were from the first no individuated things and hence no individual minds to be kept free of dust. As to where dust does collect, if we talk about cosmic dust and let astronomy join the conversation, it does not. Cosmic dust exists in space, and a fraction of it, "stardust," consists of minerals that condensed as matter and flew away from exploding stars. Stardust existed before our solar system was formed.

To fully to grasp this work of material history, one needs to know not only the source of the dust but also the source of the lines written in it. Only so can one glean what the work says about its subject. Suppose now that the dust is from 9/11 and the viewer knows this and recognizes the lines. What does the work say about 9/11? The answer has to do with the Zen puzzle that consists in the impossibility of the words written in dust being able successfully to communicate that there is nowhere for dust to land in order to be written in. This mimes the impossibility of the power that was turned against the Twin Towers being able to achieve its end, no matter how inchoate that end might be. The words in the dust mean something other than what they say, as the attacks on the Towers achieved something—initiating the western world's war on terror—other than what they were meant to achieve, which was to further the struggle against the enemies of Islam, against the west.

The second example was also already mentioned, the set of Zhang Huan's sculptures fashioned out of fragments of religious sculptures savaged by members of the Red Guard and were, at the time of Zhang's first visit to Tibet in 2004, for sale in local markets. The Chinese had destroyed thousands of Buddhist monasteries and temples after a Tibetan uprising in 1959, and where there had been 6000 monasteries in Tibet when China invaded in 1950, by 1976 there were fewer than a dozen.

Where Xu Bing used the dust as a switch point to a Zen poem about there being nothing from the first, the poem an indirect comment on the ultimate futility of the assaults on the Towers, Zhang Huan uses shards of Buddha statues to comment on the ultimate futility of trying to destroy Buddhism. The difference between Zhang's Buddha sculptures and the Tibetan originals is telling.These sculptures say that dismantling statues of Buddha destroys nothing. Buddha is there in the hand with fingers assuming a mudra (a position expressing an attitude) full as much as he was there in what was shattered. Not only is the hand a synecdoche for the whole body, but the work implies that there is in the hand, as in the smallest finger, more calm, more ease, more spirit, more life than can ever be destroyed.

The Buddha is there in the hand sculpture as King Henry IV of France is there in the portrait that stood in his stead at his proxy marriage to Marie de Medici in 1600, rather than as the sacred person depicted in a Byzantine icon is supposed actually to be present in the icon. The sacred person was believed really to be there in the icon, whereas no one believed that Henry IV really was in the portrait of him. The portrait was like his word; it stood in his stead. The Buddha is present in the sculptures crafted by Zhang by virtue of their including material from the destroyed statues of him. Zhang would say also of the bronze shards what he said of the ash from temple offerings that he uses to make art, namely, that they are a collective memory, even a collective soul. This cannot be said of the marble from which Michelangelo's *David* was sculpted or of the wood from which the African masks that Picasso saw in the Ethnological Museum in Paris in 1907 were carved. The beauty and strength of *David* do not come from the marble, nor does the power Picasso felt in the masks come from the wood. The marble and wood are just marble and wood, as the dust and the bronze pieces are not just dust and pieces of bronze because they are redolent of what or where they came from.

A formal difference between Zhang's Buddha sculptures and those shattered in the 1960s is that some of his are monumental—*Three Heads, Six Arms* (2010), 27 feet high, weighing 15 tons, and *Three Legged Buddha* (2004), 26 feet high, weighing 12 tons. Zhang takes these out of the Tibetan temples from which their forebears had come and exhibits them out of doors and around the world, including in the Storm King Sculpture Park in New York, the Civic Center Plaza in San Francisco, and the courtyard of the Royal Academy of Art in London. The works in their grand repose dominate setting and viewers, overwhelming them even as their strange configurations confound them.

Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are self-evident references in the examples of works whose unique material is one source of their meaning. The pieces of copper found in Tibetan markets have, Zhang said, traces of history in them and anything in history—relics, remains, refuse—can be borrowed, altered, and reimagined. And so has Zhang borrowed, altered, and reimagined the

copper pieces. In Buddhist thought all entities are constructs, and although we perceive a world of discrete objects, they are empty of the identity imputed to them. Emptiness, *shunyata*, is a key concept in Buddhism. Yet to say that there are no identifiable things as the Zen Patriarch did is not to say that nothing exists: there is the dust that has no place on which to collect itself and there are the similes for the conditioned existence that is the subject of the Diamond Sutra (rule or aphorism):

> So you should view this floating world—
> A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
> A flash of lightening in a summer cloud,
> A flickering lamp, a phantom, a dream.[11]

Remember the Sichuan Earthquake (2008)

The third example of public memory is different from the other two in that it does not refer to to an eastern belief system like Zen or Buddhism and is itself an object, the car of a train. Moreover, the cause of its condition, the earthquake, was itself not something for which blame can be laid. A key part of Zhang's message in the exhibition of *Hope Tunnel* (2010) was that we must find ways to live in harmony with the environment rather than try to conquer it. The call here to live in harmony with nature is at odds with the modernity that can be said to have begun with the scientific revolution that enabled extraordinary control over nature, even wresting from it the means to destroy the world itself. It is not clear what it would mean to live in harmony with earthquakes, other than to prepare for them, but the call is to accede to nature's power and to acknowledge that it is the more powerful, our hydrogen bombs to the contrary notwithstanding.

There are two more works of art that refer to the Sichuan earthquake in Ai Weiwei's exhibition *According to What?* (2012–2014). One, *Wenchuan Steel Rebar* (2008–2012), like the train in *Hope Tunnel,* is a relic of the quake. It is a 20-by-40-foot, 140-ton minimalist floor sculpture made of steel rebar used to support concrete from schools destroyed in the earthquake. Standing at its 20-foot width, one sees 40 feet of attached horizontal rebars down the center of which curves a fissure of varying widths, within which there is yet another like fissure. The ruptures are in the lives of the children killed and of their families and in the earth itself. The other example is a different example of art as material history that speaks movingly about the schools and their students. The work is *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens' Investigation* (2008–2011). The name, year, class, and sex of each victim is printed in ink on white paper and was displayed on the walls of the first gallery in the exhibition. A soundtrack of a reading of the names accompanied the list, as did *Snake Ceiling* (2009), backpacks of the sort the children would have carried that snake, dragon-like, along the gallery's ceiling.

Remember the Three Gorges Dam Project

A final example is the exhibition *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2008). Art historian, critic, and curator Wu Hung asked four artists (a woman, born in 1975, and three men, all born in 1963) to visit the sites of the projected dam in the Yangtze River and make artworks in response to what they saw. The four reflect the varied experiences of Chinese artists today. One lives in Brooklyn, one is from a village destroyed to make way for the dam, one has spent most of his career beginning with high school at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he is now a professor, and one refused even to go to the local university, feeling suffocated when he looked at academic paintings. There is difference also in their mediums, which are performance art (Chen Quilin, artist from the local village), ink on paper (Yun-Fei Ji, Brooklyn), oil on canvas (Lui Xiaodong, the academy), and conceptual art (Zhang Hui, refused the academy). The last two, Lui and Zhang, one who embraced and the other who rejected the academy, said they were as influenced by reading arguments for and against the dam as they were from visiting the three sites themselves. While Yun-Fei Ji, the ink artist, was the only one not to make his work at the site, he visited it three times, talking with people who were being dispossessed and traveling all around the area. He had begun to make work that referred to the Three Gorges Project in the early 1990s, but once he visited the project, the work he made in response to it changed significantly.

The performance artist, Chen Quilin, made four videos of herself there, the first telling an ancient story in which a dancer performs a last dance before her defeated king and then commits suicide out of loyalty to him. This alludes to the defeat of the village by the proposed dam. The second tells another ancient tale in which the hero bows to the necessity of nature's forbidding his love to a woman who turns out to be a 1,000-year-old snake. Here is despair that gives way to acceptance. In the last two videos, there is reconciliation. The artist is using the recent history of this particular village, her village, to construct a way to reconcile herself to the momentous changes that industrialization is bringing to her country. She makes of the village's giving way to the dam a synecdoche of the country's giving way to capitalism and all that comes in its wake. This is an intervention in society that does not so much protest as subsume the social situation into art in order to come to terms with it.

Yun-Fei Ji made a long diptych scroll with mineral pigment and ink on mulberry paper, *Water Rising* (2006) (Figure 10), that is 17 inches by 20 feet. The two scrolls are hung on converging walls at whose corner they meet, the one scroll to be read from left to right, the other from right to left. The colors are those of cubist paintings, grays and gold, the lines are calligraphic and exquisite. They show people fleeing as they are in an eleventh-century scroll, but those in the early scroll are fleeing a natural, not as here a state-made, disaster. The

scenes are a tumble of piles of furniture, remnants of houses, bundles of possessions, and people carrying bundles, babies, whatever they can carry. Chaos and tears, beautifully rendered. Chaos in contemporary China was not confined to the sites of the Three Gorges Dam; Yun Fei-Ji said of the years following the Cultural Revolution: "Society was chaotic and we didn't know where it was heading. . . . We felt dissatisfied with society. When positioned within society, our lives seemed to vanish. Only in art did I feel like I could find a home."[12]

Uncertainty about where society was heading was due in part to the new relation to the west brought about by Deng Xiaoping's inviting western capitalism into his communist enclave. Yun-Fei Ji thinks that in the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars[13] China underwent a crisis:

> The pillars of our past—like Confucius and Laotzi—collapsed because we had to confront the power of the West. The suspicion toward the past persisted through the revolutionary years and the Cultural Revolution. Everything from the past was bad and we had to smash it all to pieces. I feel that there is a connection from the Opium Wars to the Cultural Revolution, all the way up to the Three Gorges Project.[14]

By associating the power of the west with skepticism about the value of China's tradition in this way, Yun-Fei implies that Deng Xiaoping's turn toward the west is a turn away from China's past. There is dramatic evidence of this in the overweening concern for the future and disregard for the past in the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. It has uprooted one and a half million people, destroyed villages and their ways of life along with cultural monuments and the past they commemorate, and polluted waterways with toxic waste from flooded factories and mines. Yun-Fei claims that from the Opium Wars to the Three Gorges Dam Project the power of the west—wielded through opium in the mid-nineteenth century and capital in the late twentieth century—was inimical to the continued respect that China had for its past and its traditions.

The painter Liu Xiaodong, long associated with the China Central Academy of Fine Art, made a monumental loosely brushed five-panel painting (8.5 feet by 34.8 feet), *Hotbed* (2005), working in haste on the roof of a building as the water was fast rising around it. He had but three weeks to work, in the course of which he had an epiphany. Free of the studio for the first time and painting the real things in front of him, including the migrant workers brought in for the project, rather than photographs of them, he saw himself as one of them, working in the world, not in the academy where he had spent his adult life. The actual world is the one in which the conceptual artist Zhuang Hui made his work. He drilled several holes in a different pattern at each site, photographed them, and then photographed their water-filled sites fourteen years later, recording, documenting not their hiddenness but their absence.

Absence is the memory of loss, and the Three Gorges Dam Project has been the engineer of the loss of homes and historic sites as well as of damage to the environment, particularly to China's water. Water is precisely what is at the heart of the exhibition *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2008). The country's need for water is practical and pressing. China abounds in rivers, having more than 1,500, as well as the longest and oldest man-made waterway, the Grand Canal (1,115 miles long, finished in 604 CE). They are crucial to China's flourishing: they irrigate its land for agriculture and unify the whole by connecting its far reaches, but there are two problems. One has to do with distribution, the other with industrialization. About 44% of the population and 65% of the cultivated land are in the northern and northeastern provinces, while only about 24% of the water resources are.[15] Furthermore, industrial waste is polluting the rivers, and few are the resources in place to purify the water that irrigates crops and supplies drinking water.

That China's waters need to be managed is clear and the government projects, necessary. They range from the 932-mile Red Flag Canal built in the 1960s by dynamiting through a mountain to the 600-feet-high and 1.3-mile-long Three Gorges Dam that provides water enough to fuel the largest hydroelectric power station in the world, all in the name of catching up with and superseding the industrialization of the west at the cost of respect for tradition and the Confucian respect for nature. It is fitting here to remember the words of the final section of Shitao's *Expressionist Credo,* "for the immensity of the world is revealed only by the function of water, and water encircles and embraces it through the pressure of mountains." The People's Republic of China has assumed the role of the mountains, putting pressure on rivers through projects like those mentioned above. The protest that is *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* is against the People's Republic arrogating to itself power over the rivers and their waters.

Dust, bronze shards, a train, rebars, names of children killed when their schools collapsed, the dam in the Yangtze River—art was made of these. Protests all, against Islamic terrorism, Red Guard havoc, the Chinese government's desire for profit over safety and the homes and livelihood of over one and a half million peasants, working through their quarrels with an art of particular things, and as we shall see, with their bodies, the topic of the next chapter.

CODA

Characters whose meanings have been taken away; words that fly from their definitions to the real things they stand for; gunpowder that explodes into

energy and reverts to matter as a charred drawing; gunpowder that explodes and stops time because it leaves no trace; worms moving through earth and over things, all part of the same dance; dust from the fall of a building, shards from the smashing of statues, ash from the offering of incense, destructions all, not all malicious; a scroll bearing the traces of a woman's bleeding, which women have done since there were women; photographs of a woman's year of blood; a triptych of a pregnant woman in various stages of submission to Mao and the flag of the People's Republic.

Many paths lead from here. One is from the fabric of the flag to the fabric that swaddles the newborn, the cloth a memory of the womb; another is from what goes on in the body of a pregnant woman to what goes on in explosions of gunpowder. Both unpredictable and hazardous; both tap into a primal energy; one lasts for a moment, stopping time, while the other, if all goes well, gives birth to a life whose time is its own.

But the road stops here, with the flight of meaning, the turn to raw energy, the writing of a material history of the actions of thugs and the prayers of Buddhists, and the photographs of women celebrating their individual material bodies, those bodies a still center when words loose their moorings, leaving the artist the stubborn truth of material things that persist. The past, and the real, are there, in things.

NOTES

1. The Morgan Library and Museum, "Xu Bing, the Living Word." Accessed October 23, 2019.

2. Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe, *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 32.

3. *Qi* (Chinese: "steam," "breath," "vital energy," "vital force," "material force," "matter-energy," "organic material energy," or "pneuma"), Wade-Giles romanization *ch'i*, the psychophysical energies that permeate the universe. Early Doaist philosophers and alchemists, who regarded *qi* as a vital force inhering in the breath and bodily fluids, developed techniques to alter and control the movement of *qi* within the body; their aim was to achieve physical longevity and spiritual power. "Chinese Philosophy," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed March 12, 2020. Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) regarded *qi* as emanating from *taiji* (the Great Ultimate) through *li*, the Song dynamic ordering pattern of the world. That tradition, whose ideas predominate in traditional Chinese thought, held that *qi* is manifest through yang (active) and yin (passive) modes a *wuxing* or the Five Phases (wood, metal, earth, water, and fire), which in turn are the basic processes defining the cosmos. See also yinyang. "Qi," in *Encyclopia Britannica* online. Accessed December 18, 2019.

4. Matter should not be confused with mass. "Mass, in physics, is a quantitative measure of inertia, a fundamental property of all matter. It is, in effect, the resistance

that a body of matter offers to a change in its speed or position upon the application of a force. The greater the mass of a body, the smaller the change produced by an applied force." "Mass," in *Encyclopia Britannica* online. Accessed December 18, 2019.

5. Krens and Munroe, *Cai Guo-Qiang,* 30.

6. Ibid., 214.

7. Ibid., 31.

8. Interview of Chen Lingyang by Melissa Chiu in *Between Past and Future: New Photogprahy and Video from China* (Gottengen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2004), 177.

9. Wang Chunchen, *Art Intervenes in Society—A New Artistic Relationship* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2010), 24.

10. April Liu, "The Living Word: Xu Bing and the Art of Chan Wordplay," in Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger T. Ames, eds. *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), 140.

11. Jason Daley, "Five Things to Know about the Diamond Sutra, the World's Oldest Printed Book," https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/Five-things-to-know-about-diamond-sutra-worlds-oldest-dated-printed-book-180959052/. Accessed March 11, 2020.

12. Wu Hung, *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Chicago: the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2008), 100.

13. The British East India Company smuggled opium from India into China beginning in the late eighteenth century, which led China to wage the "Opium Wars, two armed conflicts in China in the mid-nineteenth century between the forces of Western countries and of the Qing Dynasty which ruled China from 1644 to 1911/12. The first Opium War (1839–42) was fought between China and Britain, and the second Opium War (1856–60), also known as the Arrow War or the Anglo-French War in China, was fought by Britain and France against China. In each case the foreign powers were victorious and gained commercial privileges and legal and territorial concessions in China. The conflicts marked the start of the era of unequal treaties and other inroads on Qing sovereignty that helped weaken and ultimately topple the dynasty in favour of republican China in the early 20th century." Kenneth Platcher, "Opium Wars," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* online. Accessed December 18, 2019.

14. Wu Hung, *Displacement,* 103.

15. "Agriculture in China," http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat9/sub63/item348.html. Accessed July 23, 2020.

Figure 1. Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism—Coca-Cola* / oil on 200 x 200 cm canvas / 1990–1993.
Courtesy of the artist.

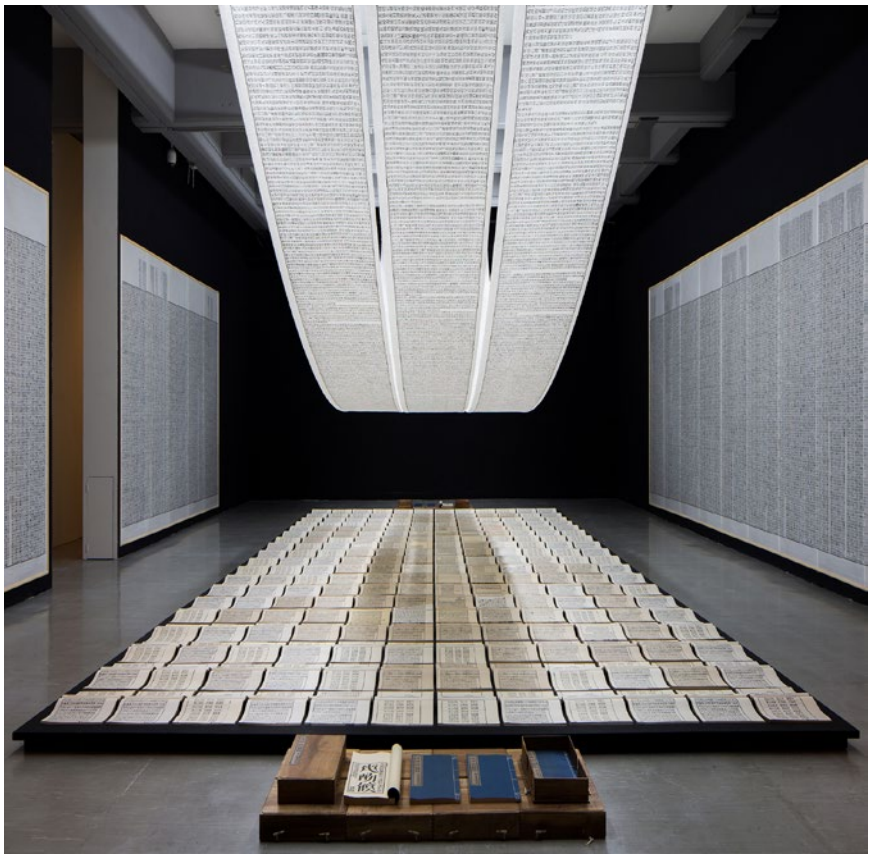

Figure 2. Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991. Mixed-media installation/hand-printed books and scrolls printed from blocks inscribed with "false" Chinese characters. Installation view at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2014. © Xu Bing Studio.
Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

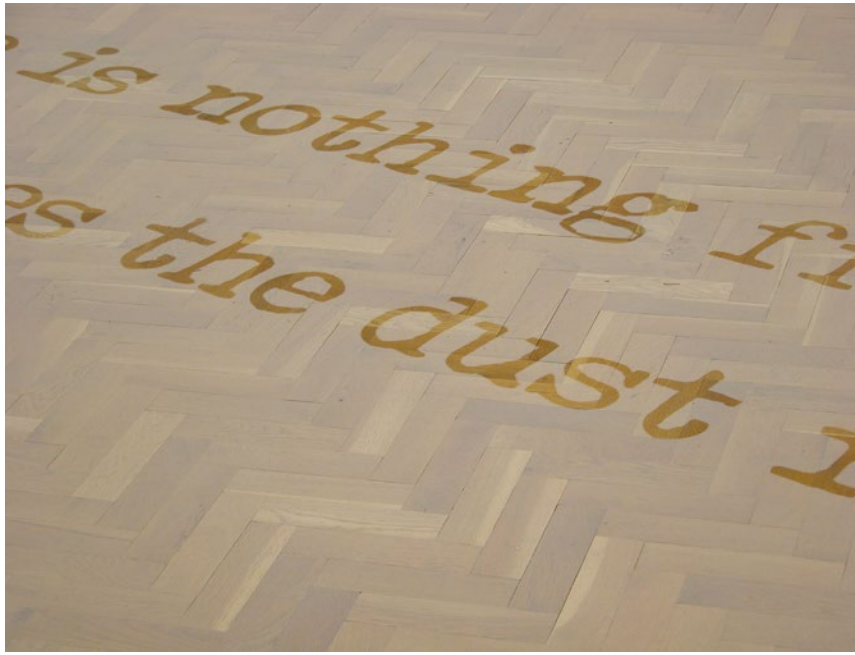

Figure 3. Xu Bing, *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (detail), 2004. 9-11 dust, stenciled text, scaffolding, photo documentary. Installation view at National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, Wales, UK, 2004. © Xu Bing Studio.
Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

Figure 4. Jizi, *Dao with Long Wind* / ink on paper / 193 cm x 337 cm / 2011.
Courtesy of Wang Chunchen.

Figure 5. Cai Guo-Qiang, *Reflection–A Gift from Iwaki* / excavated boat and porcelain / boat 500 x 500 x 1500 cm / 2004. Photograph by I-Hua Lee.
Courtesy of Cai Studio.

Figure 6. Zhang Huan, *Head from Buddha Foot*, 2006. Copper. 39" x 224" x 67" (99.1 cm x 569 cm x 170.2 cm).
Photograph courtesy the artist. © Zhang Huan Studio, courtesy Pace Gallery.

Figure 7. Zhang Huan, *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains, No. 32*, 2010. Ash on linen. 63" x 98-7/16" (160 cm x 250 cm).
© Zhang Huan Studio, courtesy Pace Gallery.

Figure 8. Xing Danwen, *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995). Three black and white photographs, right and left, each 20 x 13.48 inches, center, 20 x 30 inches.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 9. Zhang Huan, *Hope Tunnel*, 2010. Copper, iron, steel, aluminum, and wood. 193" x 1,732" x 197" (490 cm x 4,400 cm x 500 cm).
© Zhang Huan Studio, courtesy Pace Gallery.

Figure 10. Yun-Fei Ji, *Water Rising* (2006). Mineral pigment and ink on mulberry paper. Scroll, left panel 208 1/8 inches, right panel 241 7/8 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York.

Figure 11. Yun-Fei Yi, *Water Rising* (detail).
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York.

Figure 12. Cui Xiuwen, *Sanjie* (2003). Digitally manipulated chromo print mounted on plexiglass. Image size: 18 7/16 x 118 1/16 inches. Mounted size: 20 3/8 x 120 1/16 inches.
Courtesy Eli Klein Gallery, New York.

Figure 13. Huang Yong Ping, *Theater of the World*, 1993. Wood and metal structure with warming lamps, electric cable, spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, centipedes, lizards, toads, and snakes, 150 x 170 x 265 cm. Exhibition view: Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, 1993. © Huang Yong Ping.
Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Figure 14. Huang Yong Ping, *Theater of the World* (1993) and *The Bridge* (1995). Installation view Galerie des 5 continents, Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. © Huang Yong Ping.
Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Figure 15. Cai Guo-Qiang, *The Ninth Wave* / Installation incorporating ninety-nine life-sized replicas of animals, wooden fishing boat, one white flag, electric fan / 1700 x 455 x 580 cm / 2014. Commissioned by the Power Station of Art, Shanghai. Photograph by Wen-You Cai.
Courtesy of Cai Studio.

Figure 16. Wang Guangyi, *Things-in-Themselves* / 8,000 sacks of unhusked rice, and so on. / 2000 x 3000 cm x 1300 cm (variable) / 2012. Exhibition view: *The Thing-in-Itself: Utopia, Pop, and Personal Theology:* Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 17. Xu Bing, *1st Class*, 2011 (Tobacco Project, 1999–2011). Mixed-media installation/Tobacco leaves, live tobacco plants, various tobacco-related materials. Installation view at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, USA, 2011. ©Xu Bing Studio.
Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

Chapter Four

Gendered Bodies in Contemporary Chinese Art

The idea of beauty in the west has often been connected with the idea of woman, whose beauty was celebrated in sculptures of the nude introduced in classical Greece and in paintings since the sixteenth century. The nude is not a genre in either traditional or contemporary Chinese art, however, and although there has been nakedness in the representations of the body in the contemporary art of China, its presence is marked by two characteristics that distance the Chinese naked from the western nude. One is that gender boundaries are not drawn in the same way in China as they are in the west. In China they are not based on oppositions: what it is to be a woman is not, for example, simply to lack the traits that makes someone a man. Gender difference does not, therefore, make so deep a cut in the conceptual schemes in Chinese thought as it does in those in the west.

The other is that the female body is not identified or valued as an object of male desire but as the site and possibility of its flowering, while the male body is typically presented in contemporary art as marked in some unusual way or performing some unusual action. Neither is identified as an object worthy of respect or interest for its own sake. Nor does the idea of beauty take refuge elsewhere in Chinese art. Beauty understood as the mere perception of which pleases and as what pleases the eye first of all was not a value articulated or striven for by the artists of China, governed as they were by the six principles of painting laid our by Hsieh Ho in the late fifth century. It was to the spirit, not the eye, that the work of art made its strongest appeal. The art is notable for its beauty, but beauty is not what was sought, which was the harmony of the work with the pulse of the universe, that is, the satisfaction of Hsieh Ho's first principle.

Relative gender indifference and indifference to the body as such were also present in the attitude toward and treatment of the sexes in the reign of

Mao from 1949 to 1976. But gone are the dark blue genderless suits of those days, and the body itself is on show in the art of the Chinese contemporary. What exactly is on show? The brute presence, the there-ness and materiality of the body, its persistence despite the fragility of the memory of traditions, the instability of what count as social virtues and vices, and the uneven power of language to capture what is happening at the level wherein instinct, imagination, and intuition hold sway. And what might be learned from avant-garde art's foregrounding the materiality and persistence of the body? That art—born as it is of intuition and imagination—can express this fragility of memory, instability of values, and fallibility of language and enable its viewers to reconfigure their sightlines and habits of thinking, feeling, and even imagining. In the opening decades of the twenty-first century Chinese artists are asking what art is in the China made new by Deng Xiaoping's 1978 invitation to the west to invest in the natural and human resources of China. They might also ask about the Chinese-ness of the current art given that what is local in the new China is compromised by the country's now housing the formerly warring factions of the Cold War, communism and capitalism. While communism and capitalism do not exhaust the political and economic systems of the nations across the globe, they come near to doing so. There is, then, this simple sense in which the global has insinuated itself into the Chinese local. There is also a less simple way: the traits encouraged by capitalism sit uneasily next to those encouraged by the Cultural Revolution. The aim of this Revolution was further to erase the memory of imperial China and to abolish differences between city and country, intellectual and peasant, one individual and another. With capitalism, however, difference reigns, and the individual is increasingly on his or her own as the expansion of capitalism erodes "the idealism and altruism that once guided the Chinese conscience."[1]

China's artists are asking not only what art is but also what it is to be Chinese in these times. And one way in which they are working out answers about art and Chinese-ness is through artworks, including installations and performances, which represent or use the body. This art is perforce a new art because the continuity and life line of the history of the art of China was interrupted by Mao and because the rapid-fire introduction of the west's innovations and revisions of its own art history have come at such a pace as not to have had time to settle in and be naturalized by artists in China. It is an art that has lost its moorings in its own history and in western modern art. Functioning below the level of discourse, where the murmurings of classical China and the modern west can be heard along with the gradually fading voice of Mao, it is the laboratory in which criteria for something's being art and someone's being Chinese are being forged. It can, then, be called "experimental," which is what an art of the avant-garde is.

Such connection as contemporary Chinese art has with the art of the west is superficial because the art being made by Chinese artists incorporates neither the problems western artists were trying to solve nor the questions they were using their art to answer. The problems, questions, and tensions that drive the new art by Chinese artists can be addressed at the level of the body, at a level more or less immune to the ideologies of communism and capitalism, to the distance between the classical past and the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and to the overlap between local and global.

The female body in the new art can be put into two frameworks: one, that of the absence of the nude in the art of China, and the other, that of the failure of communication between Chinese and western feminisms that became clear in the course of an art journey made along the route of Mao's Long March in 2002. Lu Jie, the convener of the Long March, sought to explain the failure as follows:

> We are interested in feminist art in China, which has a very different genealogy and timetable from feminist art in the west, and particularly in America. What might be called Chinese feminist art started to develop more recently than in the west, and grows out of a different social world from that out of which western femininsm grew. In fact, part of the communist revolution was about feminism, and throughout the People's Republic there have been certain official manifestations of feminism quite different from what you see in the west, and which came before the women's movements of the 1970s.[2]

One reason for the failure of communication between feminist artists in contemporary China and in the west is that representations of women in the work of the Chinese artists tend to be about the women themselves rather than, as in the work of western artists, about how they are regarded by men. Before we look at the mode of presence of male and female bodies in contemporary art, however, consider the absence of the nude in this art.

THE ABSENT NUDE

The making, not the made, has traditionally been valued in the art of China, as it has been in its thought. Process, not product, and energy, not form, underlie and constitute the real. This is why the path of the flow of energy through the body, rather than anatomy, has been the lodestar of Chinese medicine, and why the human form does not have the role in Chinese art that it has in the art of the west. The gestures of the ink-drawn or clay-modeled human figures, the folds and curves of their robes and sleeves represent the path of the energy, the life force, the breath, and they capture what is important to

the Chinese about the human figure. In the Guimet Museum of Asian Art in Paris is a pair of terracotta female dancers from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). The women bend toward each other, one knee on the ground, spine, neck, and piled-high hair in a continuous curve, arms outstretched, each with one bent and one straight, their deep sleeves in motion. Their gaze is at the ground from which the rhythm of their bodies seems to rise: the space around, the earth under, and the gowns covering them are one. The body's form, as such, does not stand out. Put a polo stick in the hand of the dancing woman, put her astride a horse in the company of like-outfitted women and let the game of polo that China inherited from Sassanidean Persia begin. A number of such figures sport in the Guimet. Motion is everywhere: the horses run, the women lean with arms outstretched, and women and horses are one. These are funerary figures designed to play forever in the tombs of the privileged.

Move now from the Tang Dynasty to the turn of the twenty-first century, from women to men, motion to stasis, and free-flowing to constrained energy. In a performance called *Breathing* (1996), the artist Song Dong lay face-down for about forty minutes at night in Tiananmen Square where the temperature was minus 9 degrees Centigrade and, again, for about forty minutes during the day on a frozen lake in the old quarter of Beijing whose temperature was minus 8 degrees Centigrade. In Tiananmen Square, a thin layer of ice formed on the cement surface where Song breathed; the ice onto which he breathed on the lake was unchanged by his breath.

Song's body was joined with the surfaces on which he lay as intimately as were the dancers with the space within which they moved. Between the times and places on which he lay and breathed were these differences: night and day; a cultural and a natural site; earth covered with cement and water with ice; Song's breath made a difference on the Square and not on the lake. Whatever moral one might be tempted to draw from the result of his experiment, it was through his breathing on the surfaces to which he gave himself up that Song expressed the spirit, vitality, and life that Hsieh Ho would have an artist express in the act of making art. Song Dong in his performance showed himself to be one with the life that flows through all there is—heaven, earth, and human being—as the artist who made the Tang figures showed them to be one with the rhythm of the world.

As we saw, in *Printing on Water* (1996), Song Dong took a wooden block on which the character for water was carved and tried to print it on the water in a sacred river in Lhasa, bringing the block down onto the water again and again. In each case it was the gesture and the place in which the gesture was made that mattered, not whether it produced something lasting. In *Breathing*, Song did what one does to breathe life into someone and in *Printing on Water*, what one does to print a character by hand. *Breathing* occurred in places

on which the history of China has been written and on which a massacre had occurred on June 4, 1989 (Tiananmen Square) and in which ancient buildings are being demolished to make way for the new in another (neighborhood of the lake). *Printing on Water* was not performed on just any water, but on water in a river deemed holy by the people of Buddhism-rich Tibet. The sustained (breathing on the ground for forty minutes) and repeated (bringing of the block down) activity, not any resulting product, is what constitutes the art in these two works. In classical Chinese aesthetic theories, there is art when an artist captures the spirit and vitality of some object or activity through the use of the brush (of a traditional artist) or the body (of a performance artist) by giving herself up to the vital movement so that she transfers its resonance in her to the medium in which she is working. Song Dong did what one does when one breathes and when ones prints: he attended to his breathing by attending to nothing else, and he repeatedly brought the character block down even though his repeated motions did not "take"—he was just doing what one does when one prints.[3]

The sculpted bodies dance and play polo; the performing bodies breathe and print. In neither case, not in the time of the Tang Dynasty or now, is the body any more than a vehicle for the vitality of the universe, the site of the energies passing through it and keeping it in existence, not, as in western poststructuralism, the site of the languages passing through and identifying it. The artist as described in the Chinese treatises on painting is a person who can look at a mountain long enough for it to reverberate in him so that when, having quieted himself, he picks up the brush, and the brush, ink, hand, and wrist so move in harmony with the mountains to make it reappear on the paper.

If the body as such is not of moment in Chinese art, then the nude is not going to be. In particular, it is not going to define a genre whose members portray the ideal human body, stripped bare, with nothing hidden and nothing to hide. With no past and no future—because it is an ideal—there is for the west's nude no becoming and no passing away: it exists only in the present and is fully present, as only Being is.[4] Not only do representations of the unclothed human body not define a genre in the art of China, but the job for which the nude is conscripted in the west is not one the Chinese would choose. For on the Chinese view of the world, there is only what is not quite yet and what is almost no longer, what is already starting to leave: there is no pure presence. There is, that is to say, only coming to be and passing away. Unlike depictions of the nude in western art, representations of the body in Chinese art do not stop the flow of the world and the passage of time. Nor is it, as Courbet's *Origin of the World* implies, the source of the world itself.[5]

THE PRESENT BODY

Nevertheless, bodies are represented in paintings, photographs, and videos and are presented in performances in contemporary Chinese art even though they do not call attention to themselves but to what they are doing or are being used to do. Experimental artists use the image or presence of the body to do what they have also used calligraphy to do, namely, divest the subject of their art, whether it is the human body or written words, of its received meanings. Chinese characters are lines and shapes that have meaning, and calligraphy can be looked at either for the rhythm and grace of its brushstrokes or for what the strokes convey: signifier or signified can occupy center stage. The marriage of the *prima facie* incompatible theories of communism and capitalism and the relation of the present power brokers in the People's Republic of China to its recent and distant past have unsettled China's relation to language. Signifiers slip and slide over what they are supposed to signify, as stable meaning is all but lost. Contemporary China seems not to be intelligible at the level of discourse, and artists declare this by making works that enact the divorce of signs from their meanings.

What is it, however, to divest the human body of meaning? Or what is the analogue with respect to the body of stripping language of its meaning? Since Chinese thought does not distinguish mind from body, which it holds to be as enspirited as mind is embodied, to divest the body of meaning is not to divest it of spirit or mind or to treat it as an empty shell, the corpse-like thing that Descartes held body to be. Not only is mind not distinct from body in Chinese worldviews, but a person is not distinct from his or her social environment. Indeed, under Mao the *raison d'être* of everyone was to serve the social collective. The idea that this is what gives individuals their meaning and purpose is being rethought in much of the new art of China. The question of what can be the purpose and source of meaning for a human life is what occupies and shapes much of the work of the avant-garde. The idea that a person exists for the state has not simply been replaced with the western Enlightenment notion of men and women as rational self-interested individuals who exist for themselves alone, however. The matter is more complicated, and more interesting.

The hard fact of the body, dependent as it is on food, water, air, and shelter, but not on a ready-made world, is one locus of artists' asking about where and how individuals can fit into a post-Mao China. What is on show now that the collective character of the body has been dealt a blow by the removal of the genderless Mao suit and the individual body comes into view? The body is being reworked through its representations in the new art in much the same way as is the Chinese language. For example, in Xu Bing's *Book from the*

Sky (1987–1991) (Figure 2), open, hand-printed books on wooden mounts are installed in rows on the floor and scrolls hang from ceiling and walls. All are printed from four thousand hand-carved blocks of characters. However, Xu Bing invented the characters, and they are illegible. The *Book from the Sky* cannot be read.

Contemporary artists are treating the body in the uncommon way that Xu Bing treats the Chinese language. Look first at two works whose subject is language—Xu Bing's *Square Words—New English Calligraphy* (1994–1996) and Wenda Gu's *United Nations: Babel of the Millennium* (1999)—and then at two that use the body to question the relation of language to the human subject. In Xu Bing's square word calligraphy, mentioned earlier, altered English letters are combined in a square format to form words that are then combined in rows and columns to be read from top to bottom and left to right. The installation is a classroom with a video monitor that shows the artist demonstrating calligraphy and material with which the audience/student can practice. A most accessible example is a rectangle with black ground and white letters arranged in three columns and four rows. Reading the left hand column from top to bottom, we find "Little Bo Peep Little/Bo Peep Has Lost/ Her Sheep and Can . . ." and the story continues. This is not, however, just a fusion of the two languages but "draws upon principles of calligraphy to make the Chinese legible to an English-speaking audience, while insisting upon a formal structure that remains Chinese."[6] The calligraphy is neither Chinese nor English, but both. The forms of the letters and sentences are Chinese; the meanings of the words they make are not.

In 1993 Wenda Gu started using hair collected from around the world to make installations that comprise the *United Nations* series; some of the installations involve language. *United Nations: Babel of the Millennium* (1999) was commissioned for the atrium of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: it consists of 116 sheer vertical panels of woven hair on which are written pseudo-characters in Chinese, English, Hindi, and Arabic—three eastern and one western language—as well as a fusion of English and Chinese. The words may lack meaning, but the geography—China, India, and the oil-rich countries of the Middle East, with English fusing with Chinese—does not, nor does the fact that the unreadable words are written on panels of hair. People use their voices to speak, ears to hear, hands to write, eyes to read, and while spoken words do not stay (unless captured and stored electronically), written ones typically do. They stay on papyrus, on clay, on stone, on paper, and, now, on something made not from plant or earth but from the human body (hair)—or on the body itself.

There is a way to put language to an unusual use that connects it intimately with the body—by writing on it. A westerner might be inclined to interpret an

artist's writing on his body—as Zhang Huan wrote the names of his ancestors on his face for the series of nine chromogenic prints in *Family Tree* (2001)—as his showing the primacy of the materiality of the signifier. But this hardly need be shown to a Chinese audience: calligrapy is as valued for the quality and rhythm of its lines as it is for the meanings of the characters. The westerner, however, is not inclined to appreciate the look of a word, except in the work of artists like Glen Ligon whose paintings often show only words, as as in *Untitled (I Am a Man)* (1988), whose top line is "I AM," the second line "A," and the third, "MAN." The letters are withhout serif and of equal size, the words centered on the canvas. Calligraphy is close cousin to painting in that each is produced by the movement of the artist's wrist and hand with its ink-filled brush, movements whose curves mime those of the Tang dancers and polo players. Calligraphy, painting, and dancers are movement captured by ink, paper, and clay.[7]

In the first of the nine photographs that comprise *Family Tree* the frame shows only the artist's neck and the top of his dark-clad shoulders. About half of his face is character-free, while the other half bears names of his ancestors, a fraction of whose genes are his. Their genetic code is encoded in his genes as their names are written on his face, and since the traits handed down through him are expressed in him, we see his forebears in him as clearly as we see their names on his face. The point might be that so much of a person is composed of his genetic past that it is as though his lineage were written on his face. But it need not be, precisely because the ancestors are already there in his genes. This is but the first in the series of photographs in which the man's face is increasingly covered with names so that by the last one, only his eyes show through the black ink that blankets his face.

This can be read as a demystification of ancestor veneration, saying that the individuality of anyone who so submits himself to and identifies himself by his lineage will be erased. However, the ancestors' names themselves become unreadable as the man's face becomes unrecognizable. Is the last photograph in the series an argument for the primacy of the genetic over the linguistic? That is to say that the fact that the ancestors' names become unreadable does not matter because the forebears persist in the genes of their progeny: one's genetic inheritance is what it is independent of one's acknowledgment of or respect for those through whom it came. That the individual becomes unrecognizable does not matter because the individual offspring is important only for the genes he can pass on. Or the series could be a light-hearted *reductio ad absurdum* of the practice of identifying oneself by reciting from whom one came: "I am son of A who is son of B" and so on. The subject in the photographs tries to write (identify) who he is on himself in terms of who his ancestors are and the effort self-destructs.

In Qiu Zhijie's *Tattoo 1* (1997) the separateness of a body from its surroundings, not of an individual from his family tree or a name from a gene, is sacrificed to the word, and the word is "no" or "not." The photograph is of the artist, who is shown standing shirtless in front of a plain off-white ground. His body is shown cropped at the waist, and he stares straight ahead. The body is painted with a large red sign whose horizontal covers the artist's mouth, silencing him, and reaches almost to the edges of the picture plane. Vertical and diagonal lines reach down and across his chest. Most of the Chinese character is on his body, but some is on the wall with the result that the character signifies "no" or "not" only so long as the man's body is not taken away from its background, the off-white wall. So long as the character has meaning and is taken to obliterate the space between it and the wall, the man is not some significant thing independent of the sign and the wall. He cannot claim the impossible space between the sign and the wall. If, however, the sign is read as what it is, an optical trick, then were the man to move away from the wall, the red brushstrokes would cease to form the sign for "no," and the man would be something apart from his background or context. Just as a person cannot say "I am not," so no one can pin a sign on another that says "[he is] not." There has to be something that is not, something whose existence is denied. Either the man is a real and separate entity (and the character does not mean "not") or the brushstrokes have meaning (and the man is a phantasm). Either "not" makes impossible the existence of the individual *qua* individual or it ceases to have meaning.

Language is what is on show in these photographs of a man's head (*Family Tree*) and a man's body (*Tattoo 1*). There are pictures aplenty of bodies, but not written-on bodies. People use language. Here artists use their bodies to protest the power of language, to protest the supposition that if the human body were not specified, singularized, reified by language, it would meld into the earth and sky of which it is a part, just another vehicle for the life movement that courses through everything. The words in *Family Tree* merge the individual with his ancestors, blacking him out. The word in *Tattoo 1* does something more complicated by setting up an existential contradiction. The sign has meaning if and only if the body does not exist (as a thing extended in three dimensions), but then there is nothing to which the sign refers. If signs keep their familiar meanings, the individual is blacked out. In each of these two artworks, the body is assaulted by language in what amounts to an assertion that the identity of contemporary Chinese men and women is threatened by the weight of their lineage and the received meanings of the mélange of discourses—political, economic, and social—now in place in China.

Chinese Landscape—Tattoo (1999) by Huang Yan is another photograph in which the body is the ground, not for language but for landscapes. The art-

ist covered his chest and arms with white powder and painted on the body a map in the manner of the Chinese scholar artists. Huang said, as the scholar artist might have,

> Mountains and rivers are my way of reasoning; . . . mountains and rivers are where my heart and soul find peace; mountains and rivers are where my physical body belongs; . . . I am an avant-garde ink painter who paints mountains and rivers on my body; . . . I believe in instinct, I believe in mountains and rivers, I kill time in mountains and rivers.[8]

Huang Yan says further: "Landscape is an abode in which my mortal body can reside, landscape is my rejection of worldly wrangling, landscape is a release for my Buddhist ideas."[9]

The photograph can be interpreted as saying either that so deep is the connection of the Chinese people to nature that its rivers and mountains are metaphorically inscribed on their bodies or that the world is now upside down: the physical body is not in nature but nature is (represented) on the body. There is, however, a reading that eschews talk of metaphor and representation and takes the photograph to speak to the identification of human beings with nature. Rivers and mountains, their water and stone, and human beings are all of them physical things. How can human beings identify with these elements of their land? Rivers and mountains are *in* the body as blood and bone, and in *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo* they are *on* the body as a drawing. The artist makes the past present by painting as the scholar artists did and by declaring his fealty to the mountains to which it is now increasingly hard to surrender oneself—by surrendering his body, his skin, to them.

Ancestors, Chinese calligraphy, scholar artists, the mountains and rivers that define the landscape of China, are all, lest they be forgotten, acknowledged and put into question by the bodies in the photographs called *Family Tree*, *Tattoo 1*, and *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*. In these works, bodies are the site of artists' questioning, quarreling with, reconfiguring, and, finally, preserving their tradition, their language, and their land. What is passing through the body representations by these contemporary artists is not exactly Hsieh Ho's "Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement" of all there is. Rather, the body representations are the site of the artists' working through questions brought to the fore by the rupture in the social fabric caused by the political and economic changes of the last decades, working them through at the level of instinct and matter. The energy released in the artists and their work by this rupture is a version of the vibration of vitality classical artists sought to express in their work. A robust materialism is at work at the level at which art is currently being made: it is a level at which *bodies* are the most real things.

The works discussed so far have been by men. Song Dong used his body in *Breathing* to mark with his breath, which is his life, two historically significant sites in Beijing lest their past be forgotten, and in *Printing on Water* to demonstrate the failure of coition between word and thing. In each case the body did something, In *Family Tree*, *Tattoo 1*, and *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*, the bodies do not do anything but are the passive subjects of their artists' ideas. They are, nonetheless, resolutely present in the artworks and resolutely male.

THE FEMALE BODY

The materialism strikes a different chord when the material bodies are female. Their presence in works of art is not apt to be as vehicles through which to rethink the contemporary Chinese person's relation to her language or tradition or to be as objects for the male gaze, as often it is in western art. It is natural to ask what the presence of bodies, naked or clad, in works of Chinese contmeporary art can tell us about current perceptions of the feminine and of gender difference. It is appropriate, as well as natural, to look for answers in works by women. The first reason is that ideas about women and the feminine have typically been articulated by men and have tended, therefore, to ignore the experiences of women. To insist on the importance of this does not commit one to claim that women experience things differently from men. It is important that since in many circumstances women are regarded and treated differently from men, the experience of their own bodies belongs to them alone.

The second reason is reflected in something said by Chen Lingyang in an interview with Melissa Chiu:

> MC: Feminism has had an entirely different history here in China and I think there would probably be a tendency to see your works in the light of Chinese feminism. How do you feel about this, and what do you think about this identification? CL: I don't care if people think I'm a feminist. I have had a hard time with people. The first time I heard this term, it was used sarcastically by a professor of mine to describe a social phenomenon. . . . China is still very much a patriarchal society. MC: Wouldn't you say your works represent a feminist perspective? CL: Maybe a better way to say it would be that *my works have to do with myself, and I am a woman*.[10] (Emphasis added.)

The force of Chen's last words is heightened by her response to having been asked if feminist artists working in the United States in the 1970s were role models: "I worked from my own feelings and needs rather than very diligently going through art history. When you talk about art and the fundamentals you can't start from someone else's work."[11]

Chen was talking about *Twelve Flower Months* (1999–2000), her series of twelve photographs of her menstruating body combined with the flower associated with the month. The wonder of them is that instead of the mirror reflecting the expected flower or a beautiful woman, it reflects the possibility of her flowering. There is no narrative arc here, only repetition. A woman's periods follow the rhythm of nature and mark the movement of life through the species. The photographed streams of blood are a material analogue of Hsieh Ho's vibration of vitality.

The mirrors, window shapes, and month-associated flowers are from the dynastic tradition, whereas the subject matter of the photographs is not. But in its sheer materiality, the subject attests to the primacy in the new art of the fundamental workings of the body: Song Dong breathes and Chen Lingyang bleeds. Bodies breathe and menstruate without the cooperation of the agent whose body it is and despite the sociopolitical context in which it occurs. Where western abstract expressionists sought to give free rein to the instincts of the unconscious, and surrealists celebrated the fabricating talents of the unconscious in giving them rein, contemporary Chinese artists go into the body, not the conscious or unconscious mind, to tap into something primitive that can break through the scrim of all that communist-capitalist culture has constructed.

The triptych of chromogenic prints, *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995) (Figure 8) by Xing Danwen, mentioned briefly in Chapter 3 to make a point about the materiality of the body, is here used to catalogue the different ways of being a woman and to tell a story of the changing influence of Mao. The middle photo is more than twice as wide as the two side ones (30 inches to 13.48 inches), giving the work the dimensions of a tryptich. In the large middle panel, shot from below so that the viewer looks up to her, the woman's torso and lower part of her face, obscured by her hair, occupies the right half of the picture plane. The upper-left-hand corner of the plane has a picture of Mao, about half the size of the woman's torso. Behind both are one and a half of the four small stars on the Chinese Communist flag, the whole star touching her shoulder. The small stars stand for the people of the People's Republic of China—peasants, workers, bourgeoisie, and capitalists. The woman, pregnant, is equivalent to one and a half. In each of the side panels, the woman looks out at the viewer, as the woman in the middle panel cannot, only the bottom of her face is seen. In the right-hand panel, shot from above so that the viewer looks down on her, the flag falls gracefully from the frame of a painting of a reclining woman, clothed, to serve as a backdrop for the naked pregnant woman lying on her side in the direction opposite the woman in the picture. The same picture of Mao as was in the middle panel, now much smaller, is poised above the pregnant woman's head, as the body

of the woman in the painting is above her body. Mao has authority over her mind as the figure in the painting has over her body. The painting, the folds of the fabric linking it with the pregnant woman, her relaxed pose, all connect this with the western tradition of putting sensuous women's bodies on display. In the left panel, on the other hand, all is business. The woman is standing with head turned as though just interrupted, and we see in another room a table on which machine, perhaps a printer, sits. On a narrow strip of wall behind the woman is a reproduction of a painting from Li Shan's *Rouge Series* (1990), one of a feminized young Mao, with two standard pictures of Mao under it. Her body is shown cropped mid-torso, her pregnant belly no longer the subject of the work.

Reading the scroll-like triptych from right to left, we see, first, woman voluptuous and sensual; then, woman whose body is given up to her pregnancy, to Mao, and to the People's Republic; and, finally, woman as matter of fact, one who happens to be pregnant, standing under a picture of Mao as a young woman. In the right-hand panel the swelling breasts and stomach of the female, echoed by the supple folds of the draped flag, portray a figure men would desire. Move from how woman looks to what her biological function is: in the large middle panel the focus of the woman-body is on what is inside. She is pregnant and that is wherein her woman-ness lies. Move to the left-hand panel that portrays a scene where gender matters little. The triptych ends with a picture of a young woman looking out at the viewer and standing under a picture of Mao seen no longer as a commanding figure but as a young woman. That the subject of the photograph is naked shows only that she needs no disguise. This is nakedness as a material, not a social, fact, and not a lure: it says "this is my body." That's all.

Clothes are needed in social space and time, but not by the woman whose image is the subject of Chen Lingyang's nighttime photograph (22 by 68 inches) called *25:00, No. 2* (2002) because there is no 25 o'clock. Here the real world is resolutely urban. The photograph is a cityscape with vertical skyscrapers in the middle ground and horizontal five- or six-story buildings in the foreground. Little traffic is on the streets, and the only lights are a few illuminated signs and lit windows. The building in the dead center of the middle ground is perpendicular to the picture plane. Along the length of the roof of this building lies a naked woman, as tall as the building is long. Face-down, arms at her side, head and long black hair hanging over the building's side, she is a study in stillness. Her body captures the enormity and power of the sleeping city to which she submits yet over which she has sway. Her body is pale, the sky, a horizontal band taking up less than the top quarter of the picture plane, a middling blue. Buildings and streets are various shades of blue-gray, none so pale as her body or so blue as the sky. Together the two

reign over the city. In the night sky the moon appears, its cycle the cycle of blood photographed in the artist's *Twelve Flower Months*. It is fitting, then, that the artist has the female join with the night sky to rein in the male world that, she says, often gets mixed up in her mind with the real world.

> They both come from outside me; they both exist very forcefully, with initiative, power, and aggression. Facing these two worlds, I often feel that I am weak and helpless, and don't know what to do. . . . I wish that every day there could be a certain time like 25:00, when I could become as large as I like, and do whatever I want.[12]

The picture is a wish fulfillment, and the first wish is that her body were as large as she would like it to be.

In *Twelve Flower Month*s and *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, the female body is expressed in its closeness to nature through menstruation and gestation and in *25:00 No. 2,* in a fancied complicity with the night sky, as both female body and sky hover over the dense city rather as Gerard Manley Hopkins's Holy Ghost hovers over the world.[13] In none of the works is movement or gesture in view. The female reproductive system does what it does independently of the movements of the woman whose system it is, and *25:00 No. 2* pictures a sleeping dreamer. No motion there.

Look now at a work in which gesture predominates and the body speaks through its posture rather than its form. *Sanjie* (2003) (Figure 12) by Cui Xiuwen is a video shown on thirteen screens in which a little girl assumes the positions of the twelve apostles and Jesus in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495–1498). Before going into each posture, she stands up straight in front of the camera and then, "exceedingly slowly, takes up a pose, like an actress, with an astonishing intensity and verity. And when she has taken up the exact position of the model," she straightens up and bursts out laughing, a little girl again.[14] The clothes she wears are as significant as her gestures: they bespeak the time of the Cultural Revolution, as the gestures bespeak the setting of a grand betrayal that set in motion the revolution Christendom effected largely in the western world. The girl wears a white shirt with a red scarf under its collar and a pleated blue-checked skirt. Of the red scarf, the symbol of the Young Pioneer Group, the artist said that it

> represents a period in my memory, a mark of belonging to a certain generation, the desire to gain honor, the exciting and yet unsettling sentiment of being urged on by the martyrs who created the People's Republic, and even more so, the doubt and the quest of identifying the relationship between the individual and the group, and of the white shirt, that it "was always so white, white even in dreams, and yet it also created an image that was not exactly so white and pure."[15]

That image could be of things not so pure done in the name of the People's Republic or of the color of history fading and memory becoming vague and unreliable. The clothes and their color evoke a mood and a memory that make vivid the glory and burden of the People's Republic.

The memories are uneasy because the years from 1966 to 1976 are put into as deep a shadow by China's embrace of capitalism as was the shadow into which the Cultural Revolution put imperial China. The turn to capitalism was driven less by contradictions inherent in the world spirit's march toward self-consciousness (Hegel) or workers' growing resistance to exploitation by capital (Marx) than by the electronic revolution. Therefore those trying to understand and adjust to the changes occurring in China in the early twenty-first century are denied the comfort of familiar explanatory theories grounded in historical determinism. Under the sway of memories of the last heady decade of high Maoism and the sentiments they evoke, Cui Xiuwen does not go to where instinct and matter command the day, as do many contemporary artists, but to a time before the individual gets caught in the web of language. Once the individual is immersed in language, she at risk of losing touch with what is on language's other side—the stillness that can put one in touch with "the deep heart's core" of things.[16] She goes to the innocence of childhood to "erase the whole process of growing up. Let the girl bear the consequence of history. Let her balance herself in the process of breaking up, converging, evolving, and duplicating."[17] For this is what happens to the past when the present seeks to undo some of what the past has wrought: the historied past breaks up into shards that then converge with elements in the present, evolve into something new, or blindly repeat.

The artist goes to the innocence not only of childhood but also of gesture. The body speaks true in a way that words do not. Gestures, like words, can lie and be ambiguous or vague, but the gesturing body's physiological responses can be tamed only with an enormous amount of training and discipline. Fear, worry, embarrassment, shame, and much more write themselves on the bodies of those experiencing them. The body tells tales just as words do. In the subject of *Sanjie* there is this trio: the truth of the expression of the girl's body, the memory of the fifties through the seventies in her clothes, and the figures in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* whose gestures she copies. In the media in which the subject is presented, there is another trio: an oil painting that was finished first, a photograph, and the videos. It has been called "a composite artwork created with three methods," bringing to mind the triple accomplishments of the scholar artists who often put poetry, calligraphy, and painting into one work. In 2005 *Sanjie* was sold at auction in New York City as *The Three Realms (Sanjie)*. Were a fourth realm to be added and terracotta statues made of the girl in each of the gestures, the statues of the little girls

in their expressive postures could take their place alongside the Tang dancers and polo players in Paris's Guimet Museum. The focus on the material body in contemporary representations of male bodies strikes a different chord when the bodies represented are female. The chord sounded in *Twelve Flower Months* and *Born with the Cultural Revolution* is of the body's flowering and in *25:00 No. 2*, it is of a dream of the woman-body. In each work *the woman-body itself* is the subject—for what it does perforce or for its dream of itself. The bodies are not as those in *Family Tree*, *Tattoo 1*, and *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*, surfaces on which puzzles about language and nature are displayed, to be trumped by the bodies that "wear" them. Although puzzles are typically worked out in the mind, avant-garde artists put them on bodies to show mind not always to be adequate to them.

These male bodies are not necessary for the jobs they are represented as doing, whereas the female bodies are: even the body dreaming of its complicity with the moon and its rhythms. Their sex is what is necessary. But sex is not gender. While many male artists use their representations of bodies to raise questions that make their art conceptual, many female artists go to a place deeper than reason to discover their woman-ness in an art that is expressive. They go to what goes on in their bodies and to what their bodies can be used to express, which is what *Sanjie* and the Tang dancers do. Sex is not in play in *Sanjie,* but gender is. The little girl is the only one in the works discussed in the sections on the body that is clothed, and her clothes signify, as the curves of the robes of figures in classical art contribute to the expression of the vital rhythm of earth and sky. Here the clothes signify not the rhythm of the world but a set of desires and aspirations, a movement of the spirit of a time. Hers is also the only body that moves or gestures. Through her movements she is in harmony with the play of the world and of the human heart, with the faith and doubt, the love and fear that coursed through the men at the *Last Supper*, the men whose body language the little girl's body speaks. Gender is in play in *Sanjie* because its artist is a woman. In her words, she has erased the whole process of growing up by making a little girl the subject of her art, as though by identifying with the girl she can escape the strictures of being a woman in what Chen Lingyang called "still very much a patriarchal society."[18] To see how gender difference is being defined in twenty-first-century China, look at women representations in contemporary art and at who is making them. Women are. By way of their art, they are thinking and feeling their way through what it is to be a woman in China now, and the art they make has to do with them rather than, as in the west, with how men suppose them to been.

Chen Lingyang spoke for them all when she said: "My works have to do with myself and I am a woman."[19] She is a material woman, where matter is what composes earth and sky, woman and man, and all are subject to

generation and decay. The all-composing matter speaks through water and stone, blood and bone, through its motions and its stillness, its music and its silences. We are here deeper than reason and deeper than language. Words come later.

CODA

In the west beauty has been a member of the triumvirate of intrinsic values: beauty, goodness, and truth. Its appearances or instantiations have been characterized variously as copies of an ideal that exists in a realm untouched by time, manifestations of the mathematically balanced and harmonious relation of the parts of an object or event to the whole, and those things the mere perception of which delights. If there is a value in Chinese aesthetics that plays the role beauty plays in the art and aesthetics of the west, it will be as different from beauty as the conceptual frameworks within which Chinese thought and feeling operate are different from those within which western thoughts and feelings work themselves out. There is in Chinese thought no Platonic bifurcation of worlds into the unchanging and the changing; form, in its essence mathematical, is changeless and so is not a channel through which the world's breath flows. The vital spirit of a thing rather than its appearance is of value. And for artist and audience what is of value is their capacity for the stillness and the silence in which the pulse of all things can be taken.

NOTES

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1. "At the moment, China is witnessing a rapid growth in the economy, and with it comes unbridled greed and materialism. The idealism and altruism that once guided the Chinese conscience are gradually eroding. Like what the Cultural Revolution did, the money-centered mentality of today has threatened to destroy the Chinese character." From a project proposal by New York-based artist Zhang Jianjun that is quoted in Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 206.
2. While studying curating in London, Lu Jie examined the memory of his "individual experience in China in connection with the collective memory and consciousness of the quest for revolution." He was struck by the "romantic clash of idealism

and pragmatism" in the Long March through China that began in October 1934 when the beleaguered Communist Army was on the run and yet the marchers were "constantly thinking the unthinkable, trying to imagine a new society." He found this Long March Methodology at work in the production of the many nonbinary meanings in the course of the current "transformation of the Chinese system—the translations, the different ideologies, locations, and geographies." Quotations are from the website: www.longmarchspace.com/english/e-discourse20.htm.

3. This has a parallel in Immanuel Kant's analysis of the judgment of the beautiful: an object is judged beautiful when the understanding and imagination of the object's perceiver are working harmoniously as they would be if the perceiver were—as he is not—bringing the object under a concept. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 50.

4. An elegant explanation of the absence is to be found in Francois Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics,* trans. Maeve de la Guardia (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

5. Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*, 1866, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm. Paris, D'Orsay Museum. A naked female figure—cropped mid-thigh and below the shoulders—lies on the diagonal on a rumpled white sheet. The black background visible at the upper-left corner of the picture plane and the woman's pubic hair are the only dark things. It is an anatomically detailed vagina, the origin of the world, to which the title alludes.

6. Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milan and New York: Charta Art Books, 2006), 92.

7. Legend has it that Wang Xizhi, whose style of calligraphy shaped much later Chinese art, was influenced in the development of his style by watching geese fly, by the bending of their wings and the curve of their necks.

8. Artist statement by Huang Yan in Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2004), 206, published in conjunction with the exhibition *New Photography and Video from China* at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

9. www.vam.ac.uk/vasatic/microsites/1369_between_past_future/exhibition.php. Click on "Reimagining the Body" and choose Huang Yan from the photographer menu.

10. Interview of Chen Lingyang by Melissa Chiu in *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China,* 177.

11. Ibid., 177.

12. Interview by Chiu, *Between Past and Future*, 203.

13. In reference to "God's Grandeur" by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

> And though the last lights off the black West went
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs—
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

W. H. Gardner, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953), 27.

14. Michel Nuridsany, *China Art Now* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 2004), 238.
15. https://acaf.org.au/en/artwork/one_day_in_2004_no4.
16. The phrase is from the last verse of William Butler Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

> I will arise and go now, for always night and day
> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore,
> While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
> I hear it in the deep heart's core.

The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats: Definitive Edition, With Author's Final Revisions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 39.
17. https://acaf.org.au/en/artwork/one_day_in_2004_no4.
18. Interview by Chiu, *Between Past and Future,* 177.
19. Ibid., 177.

Part III

THINKING THROUGH ART

Chapter Five

Art and China after 1989

The Theater of the World

The exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* closed in the Guggenheim Museum in 2018, twenty years after the groundbreaking exhibition in New York, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, and forty years after Deng Xiaoping opened China to western investment. It closed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2019, thirty years after 1989, the year of the first avant-garde art exhibition in China, *China/Avant-Garde* and the student uprising in Tiananmen Square. This was also the year that saw the the fall of the Berlin Wall, the beginning of the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the invention of the World Wide Web. To remedy what they see as the too narrow focus of recent Chinese art history, which is being written as a China story even though Chinese art has been influential in the rise of a global contemporary art, the curators of *Art and China after 1989* say that their goal in the exhibition is

> to broaden the Sino-centric narrative. We present a focused view of an experimental art movement in light of wider conversations about post-1989 ideologies and their critiques, transnational modernity, postmodernism, difference and identity politics, and globalization. . . . What if Chinese art could act as a lens bringing into focus the intellectual and cultural conditions during those times not only of China but of our world overall.[1]

The idea is that art became global after 1989 in the wake of, among other things, the exhibition in Paris curated by Jean-Hubert Marin, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, for which artists from five continents were invited to participate, and the number of Chinese artists who either became expatriates or spent years abroad, mostly in New York or Paris.[2] The implication is that it was Chinese art that helped to pave the way for art from anywhere to become global.

The curators' desire to move the conversation about art in contemporary China from a focus on its Chinese-ness to the issues of modernity, postmodernism, and globalization raises the question of how to position globalism vis-à-vis modernism and postmodernism. Is it more nearly international and formal as modernism is or more nearly local and focused on content and the differences that postmodernism celebrates? Or both or neither? In order to sketch an answer and to show how experimental Chinese art determines the shape of an answer, we are going to look briefly at architects who exemplify the difference between modernism and postmodernism. They are Le Corbusier in *Vers une architecture* (1923) and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1972). To put flesh on the bones of the two-isms, we consider, again briefly, two conceptions of history: the thesis, antithesis, synthesis of Hegel and Marx and the very different model of the Annales school of Fernand Braudel. Before we finally turn to the materialism of the installation *Theater of the World* (1993), we look at another exhibition, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* (1984) held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the staunch critic of which, Thomas McEvilley, is said to have laid the groundwork for the field of multiculturalism. Then to the exhibition *Theater of the World* (1993) that can be said to have set the stage for the recognition and appreciation of difference that is the hallmark of globalism in art.

Two theories of each of architecture and history and two exhibitions thirty-five years apart make up the first part of the chapter, whose second part looks to the global reach of three works from an early exhibition of Chinese art at Tate Liverpool, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (2007).

MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

In what amounts to a manifesto, Le Corbusier wrote in 1923 that a great epoch had begun: there was a new spirit to be met in industrial production that is free from custom and styles and whose laws are consonant with the laws of the universe that we recognize, respect, and obey. They shine forth in architecture, "the play of masses brought together in light," of which Le Corbusier says:

> Our eyes are made to see forms in light; light and shade reveal these forms; cubes, cones, cylinders or pyramids are the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage; the image of these is distinct and tangible within us and without ambiguity. It is for this reason that they are *beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms*. Everybody is agreed to that, the child, the savage, the metaphysician. It is the very nature of the plastic arts.[3]

The idea is that architecture had been stifled by custom, by styles, where a style is "a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch, the result of a state of mind which has its own special character."[4] Style reflects the state of mind of a people at a time, not the laws of the universe that govern us all. So far as style purports or presumes to reflect more than the state of mind of a people at a time, it is, he says, a lie. The plastic arts, inspired by industrial design, have broken from the past and its confining customs to reach what is universal, the laws expressed in the design of machines. Industrial design has made us more fully appreciate the value of pure plastic forms, but the forms themselves are hardly new. "Egyptian, Greek or Roman architecture is an architecture of prisms, cubes and cylinders, pyramids or spheres: the Pyramids, the Temple of Luxor, the Pantheon, the Coliseum, Hadrian's Villa."[5] These plastic values ring in tune with the universe and range over history and culture. They are, then, international. Plastic art, by Corbusier's lights, traffics in neither anecdote, which he says undercuts the purity of the forms—plastic art is meditative instead—nor drama as the Gothic cathedral does. "*The cathedral is not a plastic work; it is a drama; a fight against the force of gravity, which is a sensation of a sentimental nature.*"[6]

The case is otherwise in Venturi, Brown, and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), which makes the case for architecture's contexts that are inevitably historical, anecdotal because particular, and dramatic because fighting against myriad forces. "We shall describe how we come by the automobile-oriented commercial architecture of urban sprawl that is the source for a civic and residential architecture of meaning, viable now, as the turn of the century industrial vocabulary was viable for a Modern architecture of space and industrial technology 40 years ago."[7] We are now, they claim, to look to urban sprawl, not industrial design; to the state of mind expressed in the style of the people we are housing, not the laws of an impersonal nature. And we see images rife with meaning, not abstract forms. This is postmodernism, a rejection of the values of high modernism. Schooled by the Marxism that has been more influential in Europe than in the United States to assign a nearly dispositive role to history in determining who and what we are, artists after 1960 began to pay attention to the particular and the concrete. They asked wherein the particularity of the particular lay, they asked for the name, for what is flung out in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame" (1877), where he says: "each thing finds tongue to fling out broad its name;/ Each mortal thing does one and the same:/ Deals out that being indoors each one dwells."[8] Le Corbusier, on the one hand, and Venturi, Brown, and Izenour, on the other, exemplify Hegel's thesis and antithesis.

Hegel and the Annales School

Hegel's view is that history proceeds in an ordered way from thesis to antithesis to synthesis as the spirit of the world works its way through the inevitable conflicts and contradictions that plague any era and culminates in the rejection of the earlier state that was contradicted by its successor, its antithesis. Yet the earlier state lingers until it and its negating successor are brought together in a synthesis either by recasting one or both of the conflicting issues or destroying one. This model rests on the assumption that the spirit of the world at any given time is so strong and well defined as to enable the myriad strands—cultural, economic, political, social—that make up a society to develop in the same way and at the same pace. The idea is that history develops as the spirit of the world becomes increasingly aware of itself; the development, then, is progressive as, for example, is Darwin's evolution, where only species that adapt to threatening circumstances survive. And it is exclusive: if a state of mind finds expression in a style not consistent with the reigning spirit of the time, expressed as it is in a style, little attention will be paid it and it will either not survive or go underground.

For example, Le Corbusier published *Vers une architecture* in 1923, and two years later *The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts* took place in Paris from April to October. Designed by the French government to introduce the new *moderne* style in architecture and the decorative arts, it had 15,000 contributors from twenty countries and was visited by sixteen million people. The style became known as Art Deco, a style that had little to do with industrial design and instead yielded, in architecture, the likes of Miami Deco and Pueblo Deco, celebrations of the local. An alternative to modernism, the life of Art Deco was short, which gave the palm to Corbusier's industrial design.

Hegel's model is challenged by that of the Annales school of historiography, whose most influential member was Fernand Braudel in the middle of the last century, which examines disparate things like climate, trade, demography, agriculture, commerce, technology, transportation, and communication that do not develop in the same way and at the same pace. One need think only of the speed of climate change and developments in computer technology to realize how relatively independent such dimensions of our world are of each other. Not only did Braudel challenge the idea that there was one single undivided spirit of the time, he also complicated the idea of historical time by proposing a three-tiered view of time that some regard as his most important contribution to thinking about history. The tiers are

> a very long, practically immobile environmental time (the *longue durée*); the medium time of economies, societies, and cultures; and the short time of dis-

> crete events (the subject of *histoire événementielle*). Far from a simple flow, human experience was registered on all three clocks, operated with speed-ups and delays, and left a vast range of physical as well as mental traces.[9]

This challenged, Braudel said, the reductionism of the reigning theories of the time, structuralism and Marxism, which latter replaced the spirit of the world in Hegel's model of history with, respectively, the static structure of systems of intelligibility and the economic forces of production. Instead of either of these, the Annales school "relied heavily on quantification and also yielded dazzling micro-studies of villages and regions."[10] Villages and regions are local, not global or transnational, and Annales school analyses are rife with particular details, not universal laws.

Where is current Chinese art here? It is undeniably global in that it is shown and appreciated globally. In Chapter 1, activities were said to be global if they could shake free of their native soil and be transported anywhere. In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalism* (1999) Thomas Friedman points out that a Lexus car can be made anywhere, whereas an olive tree cannot be grown anywhere.[11] The one can travel, the other cannot. That is over simple, however, befitting economic but not art globalism for which difference is an important part. We have now characterized art as global when it can engage and be appreciated by people the world over rather than when it bears no signs of its place of origin. On the contrary, part of the reason it is appreciated the world over is precisely because it bears those signs and through them brings the viewer into contact with a place and a culture she might not otherwise have known, as, for example, movies and *National Geographic* magazine and its television shows do. Global does not mean the absence of features identifying its place of origin, as modernism does, and it does mean a focus that values difference, as does postmodernism. Back now to the presence of both, one in an exhibition, the other in its now famous criticism.

"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art

We want to find a place for the global that is different from the universal of modernism, from the plastic forms recognized as beautiful by "the child, the savage, the metaphysician," forms from which the universe is made. To do this we are going to put human stories into the ring with plastic forms as something recognized as true by "the child, the savage, the metaphysician." An exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: The Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnadoe and seriously criticized by the Thomas McEvilley, is a good place to start.[12] This is because of the two extremes

laid out by the MoMA curators and McEvilley between which, I suggest, the global falls. Briefly, the difference is this: Rubin claims that the tribal and the modern are alike in consisting only of pure plastic forms that were the result of their makers relying on their instinct and intuition, rather than on concepts or contexts. This gets complicated by Picasso's experience of the tribal works. Art historians had assumed that what had powerfully impressed Picasso when he first saw African artifacts in the ethnographic museum at the Palais du Trocadero in 1907 was their form. However, he told William Rubin that it was not the form but their power that had struck him. We are still talking about an optical art, however; the power the viewer feels lies in what she sees, not in what she infers from or projects onto what she sees.[13] Nor does the power stem from anything the work says through its content. Rudolf Arnheim has convincingly argued that objects have dynamic qualities. "Every visual object is eminently a dynamic affair . . . [and] visual perception consists in the experiencing of visual forces."[14]

McEvilley insisted instead that the power of the primitive art lies in what it *does,* not in what it looks like, and to know what it does one must know what it was made for and how it was used. His argument is that to take the primitive pieces out of their contexts, absent the blood and mud that covers them as they are used in the rituals for which they were made, is to take away their identity. Placed as they were in vitrines in MoMA, they were but shadows of themselves. This is why McEvilley is credited with creating multiculturalism as we know it in the articles he wrote for *Artforum* immediately after the exhibition opened. Jean Hubert Marin, curator of the *Les Magiciens de la Terre,* said that it was because of McEvilley's work that in 1989 he made an exhibition of work from around the world.

All of this is directly opposed to what Picasso found, which was that the works can have an impact on their viewers independent of the viewers being aware of how they were used. He, like Arnheim, *saw* dynamism in them. If their power does lie within the primitive works themselves, and if, as the exhibition contends, there is an affinity between primitive and modern works, then there should be a power in the modern works as well. The dynamic qualities of works of abstract art are in the works, and they tie us to the physical world. We feel the works in and with our bodies, and they are not, as Malevich would have them be, "without any attribute of real life."[15] They have attributes of real life that manifest themselves in our bodies' responses. We live in space, are subject to gravity, feel the need for balance, and feel our weight and our bodies, their muscles and their bones. Malevich's squares, Pollock's swirls, Kandinsky's curves and squares, and Alice Martin's pencil-drawn lines are all gestural, as are Chinese calligraphy and what is so close to it, ink painting. The dynamic quality of such as Malevich's *Black Square*

(1913) is, however, different from the power emanating from the tribal African artifacts. McEvilley's point is that to appreciate the artifacts for their form alone is to ignore what they are, which is ritual objects. The presence and pulse of the rituals for which they were made is the source of their power, not the dynamism inherent in their lines and planes. It was this that Picasso, in an act of appreciation remarkable for its recognition, grasped.

According to McEvilley, we can appreciate the primitive works for what they are despite the violation done them by the exhibition only if we can imagine ourselves participating in the ceremonies for which they were made. Rubin says, in effect, that we cannot leave ourselves behind to imagine participating in a tribal ceremony. But we need not. The forms and force of the tribal works, likes those of modern works, speak directly to us and to our imaginations. Presumably, however, feeling the power of the sort that Picasso felt would help people imagine themselves in the ceremony. The degree to which one can or cannot do this is irrelevant to McEvilley's claim about the ontological status of the primitive work. What is paramount for our purpose is that the myriad conditions that were in place when the work was made—from the time and culture in which it was made to the history of the artist, her reasons for making it, the particular circumstances in which she worked—determine its identity. The historical context and the biography of the artist have no role according to the curators of *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, while they are decisive for McEvilley. Rubin and Picasso would say that to feel the work's power one need not imagine oneself participating in a tribal event for which it was designed, or even know its intended role. If the tribal works affect the viewer, it is as though by magic rather than by way of a story about its role in a ceremony, what is does to or for the participants in the ceremony, or an imaginative projection of oneself into the ceremony. The issue that divides the two curators and the one critic is the importance of contexts, irrelevant for the MoMA curators, crucial for McEvilley.

The Theater of the World

The *Theater of the World* points to two issues germane to experimental Chinese art: its materialism and its globalism. One goal of the exhibition named in this chapter's subtitle is to rewrite the Sino-centric narrative of Chinese art after 1989 as a global-centric one. The most important thing about the artwork, *Theater of the World* (1993) (Figure 13) by Huang Pong Ying (1954–2019), is the material used: snakes and turtles, insects, and creatures that feed on them. The installation consists of two structures. *The Bridge* (1995) (Figure 14) is a long snake-shaped cage supported on legs that arches upward in its middle and consists of thin metal vertical and horizontal

strips between which is a transparent material. In the cage are bronze statues of auspicious animals, snakes and tortoises, around which live snakes and tortoises crawl. *Theater of the World* (1993), sitting under the snake's raised middle section, is a wooden base on legs supporting a tortoise shell-like mound made of rectangular metal strips between which are what looks like mesh panels. Inside the theater are black beetles, cockroaches, centipedes, and other insects, and the lizards, toads, and snakes that feed on them. In both works are a warming lamp and electric cables. The works refer to a mythological creature with the head and tail of a snake and midsection of a tortoise that symbolizes the most potent pair, snake and turtle, in Chinese cosmology and, in some tales, is said to have created the universe. Huang was inspired both by the eighteenth hexagram of the *I Ching* that is about decay and by the panopticon of Jeremy Bentham.

The plan was to replenish the stock of insects throughout the exhibition. However, animal rights' activists made such an outcry that the museum banned the living creatures.[16] The empty theater and the comment its artist wrote on an Air France airsickness bag when he heard about the ban as he flew to New York for the opening are all that was shown in the museum. The insects in the *Theater* and the creatures that feed on them were doing what they do by nature, killing and being killed by each other, for food. Everything that comes to be passes away. Of the ban imposed by the Guggenheim, Huang Pong Ying wrote: "The curtain has fallen on the Theater of the World even before it has risen . . . Is this not a 'miniature landscape' of a civilized nation? . . . An empty cage is not, by itself, reality. Reality is chaos inside calmness, violence under peace, and vice versa,"[17] where the chaos is the sheer unpredictability of the manner and time of the death of any creature. What the artwork shows is part of the world, as does the behavior of the two different kinds of worms in Cai Guo-Qiang's *New York Earthworm Room* and Xu Bing's *Silkworm Series*, where the worms, respectively, crawled through the dirt and over the objects in the gallery.

Two other works were banned from the exhibition. One was Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* (2003), a seven-minute video of four pairs of pit bulls that face each other on treadmills but cannot reach each other because of restraints put on them. It was banned in response to activists' calling it animal abuse, even though the curators accurately enough characterized it as referring to the complexities of globalization and social complications of the world we share. We are here working at the level of nature and the instincts of its creatures, that is, below the level of discourse. One might object that in using animals and their instincts to say something, artists *are* operating on that level. What they are doing in using animals is better described as *showing* than as *saying*. They are showing us ourselves,

reminding us that we are part of the animal kingdom. What viewers make of that is up to them. The animals in these works are resolutely there as animals, doing what animals do, eating each other, threatening each other, nurturing plant life, and making silk, and, in a third work banned by the Guggenheim, having sex. Animals eat, fight, make things, and procreate, as people do.

The third banned work is Xu Bing's *A Study of Transference* (1994), now a photograph in which two pigs copulate, the male with faux Roman script written on his body and the female with faux Chinese characters on hers. The work might seem to be within the realm of discourse because it includes words, but they mean nothing and show language to be the tease that it is. This is language at its most material as it is in Cy Twombly's scrawls that look like writing but are not and in Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*. Illegible legibilities, Roland Barthes called them. Material language is gestural, existing only when written or sounded. The words written on the pigs do no more than identify one as China and the other as a western nation. Because the pigs are there as animals standing for something else, here China and the west, the work is on the level of a discourse that is nicely ambiguous. The work could be read to say that east and west are not so far apart if they can engage in the intimate act of coition, or it could be taken to say that the male west is having its way, trying to master, the female China.

This ambiguity is akin to the way east and west regard pairs like male and female, nature and culture, mind and matter. The west regards them as oppositions, where one is superior to the other, the superior one often defined as having something the other lacks. The east regards them as harmonies, each necessary for the well-being or full functioning of the other. This accounts for how Sun Yuan and Peng Yu could have their *Link to the Body* banned on British television in 2004 as offensive to public taste and yet have won the 2000 Chinese Contemporary Art Award for young artists. The west regards death as opposite and inimical to life, while the east treats the two as complements: the living just is what is born and dies. However it is read, *A Study of Transference* raises the question of what the relation of China is or might be to the west and to the rest of the world in which, challenged though it is by China, the west is still dominant.

The word "globalism" came into use in political science, which claims that it appeared in the United States in the 1940s. No doubt it did, but since the globalism in and of the art world is decidedly a child of television and the electronic revolution, globalism as it applies to art neither appeared just after World War II nor is centrally economic or political. It is more home spun than that. Through television and the internet people have indirect access to art being made and exhibited throughout the world and through international exhibitions and travel they have direct access. Art is broadly characterized as

global when it engages people in parts of the world distant from the culture of its artist. Art from another place, no matter how *prima facie* unfamiliar it may be, is welcome because it takes its viewer to that place. The goal of the exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* is to put the story of art in China into the global world. However, as David d'Arcy wrote in his review:

> her [Alexandra Munroe's] argument runs against almost everything on view. There will be lots of talk about what this exhibition *is*—and even whether it is a show of Chinese art at all, since so many of the artists live abroad. Yet even as some works echo Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys, almost everything points to China or views it head-on. The closer you look at the roots, the deeper they seem to go.[18]

He is right in that Chinese-ness is on display in the exhibition, but wrong if he supposes that art is global only when it bears no traces of the place of origin of it or its artists. He is wrong also in saying that because so many of the Chinese artists are expats there is a question as to whether it is a show of Chinese art at all. Many artists have said that living abroad has made them more aware of their Chinese-ness than ever they were when they lived in China. Work is of global interest precisely when it shows the shape and tenor of its place and its past in a story, and through the story the work endorses the claim made by the Roman playwright Terence (born 195 BCE in Carthage) that *nihil humani a me alinaum*, nothing is alien to the human.[19]

GLOBALISM

Just as the child, the savage, and the metaphysician can appreciate Le Corbusier's prisms, cones, and spheres, so can the Chinese, the Ethiopian, and the American, and this because they are universal. Art, however, is not universal in the same way, although the impulse to make it is.[20] Art comes not from reason, which Descartes reminds us is the same in all, but from deeper down. It is closer to the bone. Though instinct is the same in all, thanks to civilization, the forms it takes are different, and it is the differences that a culture's art displays. Descartes in the seventeenth century knew there were cultures in which the beliefs that seem so natural to us seem foolish, which humbles us. Similarly, art from other cultures also shows us that there are other ways of thinking and being. This is a source of hope and, what is important, can be an antidote to despair. Therefore, to have access to other arts is a gift, and to have access to an art from a civilization as old and as rich in its contributions as China is a special gift.

We start simply by calling art global when it is *de facto* global. Global is not a critical term as "contemporary" is.[21] If we look just at the 1998 *Inside Out* and the 2017 *Art and China after 1989,* it is clear that both exhibits contain works that do not use their materials or their particular sites to express what they express or say what they say. Yet the many that do are in fact especially accessible to a global audience. This is because material, stuff, that is not overlaid with cultural meaning and significance has a direct and immediate appeal. We live in a world of earth, air, fire, and water long before we become aware of the complexities of language and its constructions. This is a hymn not to homogeneity but to the immediacy and concreteness of these works' materials. Just as not all the material used in Chinese artworks exhibited globally is central to their identity, so works whose material is central to what they are are not all by Chinese artists. Here is one whose material is lightning, as the explosion of gunpowder is the material of many of Cai Guo-Qiang's works.

It is *The Lightning Field* (1977) of Walter De Maria (1935–2013) in which 400 stainless steel poles 2 inches in diameter and averaging 20 feet and 7 inches in height are arranged in a grid one mile by one kilometer wide. They stand on land 7,200 feet above sea level and are to be walked among and experienced over different times of the day, not just when, unpredictably, lightning strikes them. Cai Guo-Qiang's *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10, Extending the Great Wall of China by 10,000 Meters* (1993) used gunpowder as De Maria used lightning, but Cai's work is contextualized as De Maria's is not. Cai Guo-Qiang appropriated the Great Wall as a piece of land art and with a team of volunteers laid a ten-kilometer fuse across the Gobi Desert starting at the westernmost end of the wall with small charges every three meters and large ones every kilometer. The fuse was ignited at dusk on February 27, 1993. The explosion took fifteen minutes to travel the entire length of the line and was seen by forty thousand residents and tourists. Cai's material was gunpowder, invented in China in the ninth century, and the site of the project, the Great Wall, a Chinese icon. These are facts of history, not cultural overlays, and mark the work as Chinese. It was Cai who appropriated De Maria's *New York Earth Room* (1977), a work whose material is central, to make *New York Earthworm Room* (1998), adding life to De Maria's earth. In these four works, two by each artist, it is the material that makes them accessible across the globe.

It is important to say several things at the outset. First, given the lack of an accepted meaning of "global," what follows is an hypothesis about what gives a work of art a global reach. Second, difference is important in giving art this reach, difference, for our inquiry, that marks it as Chinese. Gunpowder and the Great Wall just are Chinese—hence the Chinese-ness of *Project for Extraterrestrials No. 10*. It is that simple. Third, art's globalism owes its

existence in large part to the electronic revolution, easy communication, and available transportation. To position globalism with respect to modernism and postmodernism it is enough to say that it lies between modernist context-free and the postmodernist context-rich art, between the modernist putting a work's content in the wings and the postmodernist putting it center stage. In art that is global content matters but not to the degree that its absence or presence does in modernism and postmodernism, respectively. Its materials and what they are used to say or to do matters more. Materials are what they are, no matter where they are, and because of this they communicate directly.

The principles articulated in Hsieh Ho's fifth-century "Six Principles of Chinese Painting" and Shitao's seventeenth-century *Expressionist Credo*, discussed in Chapter 2, have an uncanny connection with the new art's materialism and can help to explain its global nature. The classical principles are the other side of the global page, classical recto to global verso. Contemporary experimental Chinese artists have given the classical principles a singularly prominent role in the non-ideological but *de facto* historical global art world. Three works that appear in *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (2007) show how this is so. Two are works of performance art, the third is a series of oil paintings, where the subject, not the material, matters more. The exhibition was on view at Tate Liverpool from March 30 to June 10, 2007. Noteworthy is that none of the work shown had been made before 2000, the year of the first exhibition of contemporary international art in China that was organized by a state institution, the Shanghai Museum of Art. A satellite exhibition titled *Fuck Off* was curated by Ai Weiwei and, surprisingly, went undisturbed by the authorities. *The Real Thing* evolved through extended discussions with a range of artists, critics, and curators. Its curators, critic Karen Smith (who has lived in Beijing since 1992) and Shanghai-based artist Xu Zhen, did not want to limit the works shown to what fit an art critical thesis. Rather, they wanted the exhibition to reflect "the variety and strength of contemporary practice."[22] The commercialization of the art market coupled with the interest generated by China's having success in auctions of contemporary art had tempted artists to make works that are saleable rather than creative. These factors, the curators said, led them to take

> a creative risk in inviting proposals from those artists we thought most interesting, which provided an opportunity for artists to create a work in relative freedom from market . . . and also to avoid any accusation that the show was simply another western view of Chinese art that would conform to what a western audience would expect to see.[23]

The curators were struck by the diversity of views within the art world and by the variety of genres and styles with which many individual artists work. Within this plurality, no practice or style appeared that could be said to rep-

resent Chinese art. Moreover, "any idea of a unitary or coherent identity, for the country as much as for the art, has collapsed into an open space of infinite possibility, and parallel worlds."[24] Even though the curators set out with no presuppositions, certain themes emerged. If much art of the 1980s and 1990s set out to test boundaries,

> much art since 2000 is more personal and sincere, concerned with reflecting upon one's own place as an individual, rather than seeking to establish a collective position, in a society that is undergoing such rapid changes as to undermine a stable reference point. In short, a search for authenticity, be it private or public.[25]

Times of social and economic upheaval often create the need for those living through it to seek legitimacy and authenticity, and many have used art to work through fundamental qetions about existence and meaning.

Given the previous relative isolation of Chinese artists from western art during the Mao years, the artists did not locate themselves in modern art's master narrative. They were, then, free of it and different in this way from artists of the west. Although Chinese painters were exposed to modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century, that exposure vanished thanks to Mao, who denounced western art as bourgeois and corrupting. The western art world reintroduced itself to China in the 1980s with Pop Art, which soon became Political Pop, whose works equalized communism and capitalism by reducing their slogans to kitsch. This was a borrowed style, a vehicle for speaking up and speaking out, but not the real thing. Many artists did, however, encounter Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Jasper Johns, David Salle, and more when they lived in New York. Yet the work of these artists was new to Chinese artists, as though it had come out of nowhere. It was new to a westerner also, but it had come out of a lineage known to him.

THE REAL THING: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM CHINA (2007)

Several works from *The Real Thing* demonstrate how contemporary Chinese artists are ringing two changes on what the ancients bid them do. The first change is that contemporary artists use things other than brush and ink to make art. They use gunpowder, worms, ash, the car of a train, fragments from bronze statues, wood and furniture from the Qing Dynasty, the dam in the Yangtze River, their bodies in performance art, whole real objects in installations, the land itself in earth art. Many of the artworks are intended to be short-lived, living on in photographic and video records of them. Their

subjects are the materials, places, performances, installations, or earthworks themselves and are literally part or all of the artworks, whereas the mountains and streams of Chinese ink paintings are not. Yet just as the materials of the contemporary artists are not representations, neither are the mountains and streams of the classical artists. They are expressions of the resonance in the artists of the spirit of the mountains and streams.

The second change is to the critic Chang Yen-yuan's (circa 847) saying that to make a painting of something, the artist must understand it, and to do this he must "become the thing, *harmonize one's consciousness* with it and reach the mental attitude that brings knowledge without intellectual deliberation."[26] (Emphasis added.) The contemporary artist harmonizes her body, her senses, rather than her consciousness, with what she is trying to understand. There is a level below the conscious one at which the body knows. Dancers, gymnasts, and athletes all have this subliminal knowledge. So too do the hand, the eye, the senses of the painter know. The classical artist was often a scholar whose way to knowledge involved his consciousness.The contemporary artist, on the contrary, operates more nearly on the level of the dancer, the gymnast, or the athlete, on the level of the body and all its senses.

In "The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art," David Clarke notes that Mao had a private political agenda that he furthered with his swimming.[27] An avid swimmer, Mao crossed the strong-flowing Yangtze River in 1956, showing his fitness as a man and, by implication, his fitness as the people's leader. That Mao used his prowess in the water as propaganda is no doubt true, but what is more interesting is that whatever his reasons for making a public spectacle of his swimming, while he was swimming, he was in the water. This is no metaphorical oneness with nature but a real one. The same strategy appears again and again in the work of contemporary Chinese artists. Mao made literal the metaphorical union of the classical painter with the rivers and streams they painted. Art is made and life is lived in the new China below the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical. This is where the instincts are and where matter is. A grand materiality and literalness reigns—red is a pigment, ink is what it is and is not water, and the spirit of the rivers resonates through the person who is in them.

Contemporary Chinese artists have made artworks in which individuals interacted with water as in *Printing on Water* (1996), a performance by Song Dong in the Lhasa River in Tibet and *To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond* (1997) by having a number of people stand in it chest high, this by Zhang Huan. And they protested assaults on rivers as the curator Wu Hung did the Three Gorges Dam in the Yangtze River and Cai Guo-Qiang protested the air pollution that sent 16,000 dead pigs floating down the Huangpu River in Shanghai. There are few such works in *The Real Thing,* whereas there are

several striking works in which artists interact with mountains. A 2005 performance documented by video stills and photographs titled *8848 Minus 1.86* (2005) consisted of the artist Xu Zhen taking the measure of Mount Everest. The performance was accompanied by a text that began with a factual account of the Himalayas and ended with the announcement that Xu was going to reduce the size of Everest, the tallest of the Himalayas. The mountain was given its English name in honor of Sir George Everest, the British surveyor-general of India responsible for the Great Trigonometric Survey of India of 1802–1866 that will figure in another work discussed below. The height of the mountain was set at 8,848 meters in 1856.[28]

The account of the Himalayas by Xu Zhen closes with the announcement that on May 22, 2005, a Chinese team would climb to the summit of Everest to measure it again. Not until the end of this otherwise factual account does the artist write that "the Chinese citizen, Xu Zhen, and his team would climb Mount Everest, and cut off its top; reducing its height by 186 cm," which is Xu's height. This is "a task which, to the casual viewer, the team carried out successfully."[29] We are being treated to a simulacrum of the real world, a fictional world, and Xu Zhen wants us to suspend disbelief and look at the video stills, documentary photographs, and refrigerated summit of Everest as though he really had imposed himself on the mountain. Where Mao literalized the metaphorical, Xu Zhen fictionalized the real. Was Xu Zhen one with the mountain in his performance? Yes, deliberately to climb a mountain is to put oneself into intimate relation with it. In the simulacrum Xu Zhen did more than this, however. He left his mark on it by reducing its height by his own and, with that act, entered the history of the measurement of the height of the mountain. This hypothetical performance can be read either as an act of arrogant self-assertion in the face of a powerful nature or as a comment on how the exact measurement of the mountain does not touch its splendor or its sublimity. It is vast, and wonderful for that, regardless of whether it is more or less 1.86 meters.

The artist was in harmony with the mountain on May 22, 2005. They were equal partners in the encounter: it did not overwhelm him and he did not diminish it. In being Everest's equal, Xu showed himself to have captured its spirit and, therefore, to have satisfied Hsieh Ho's first principle. He paid homage to the mountain by (fictionally) removing its peak and putting it on display, knowing that this made no difference to the mountain. Where Xu Zhen pretended to subtract his height from the height of the mountain, Zhang Huan in *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain* (May 22, 1995) added one meter by having people lie on top of one another until a mountain that had been measured at 86.393 meters became 87.393 meters. The people, having

taken off their clothes, were divided into four rows by ascending wieght and told to lie on top of each other to form a pyramid.

Ten years later to the day that Zhang actually increased the height of an unknown mountain, Xu Zhen fictionally decreased the height of the most famous mountain in the world. Mountains are known and identified by their size, and Zhang Huan and Xu Zhen reduced the actors in the performance to size, thereby making them like the mountain.The ancients calmed their minds so that the spirit, the sense, of the mountain or river could enter, the contemporaries joined with the mountain in the one work by lying on it, in the other by (fictonally) taking possession of it. Think of the kind of joining with the land that consists in marking some off and saying"this is mine," where ownership is an intimacy. Think too of the experience of lying on the grass and feeling and smelling the earth. This is joining the earth, cherishing the relationship with it as the ancients cherished their relationship with the rivers and the mountains they painted.

Move now from the top of a mountain to the bowels of the earth and its coal mines. Reports from official Xinhua News Agency refer to coal mining as the "deadliest job in China" and to the mines as "killer mines."[30] "As China Roars, Pollution Reaches Deadly Extremes," reads the four-column-wide headline on the front page of *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 26, 2007. "Just as the speed and scale of China's rise as an economic power has no clear parallel in history, so its pollution problem has shattered all precedents." The article continues, "The growth derives . . . from a staggering expansion of heavy industry and urbanization that requires colossal inputs of energy, almost all from coal, the most readily available, and dirtiest, source." And, we might add, the most dangerous. China accounts for 80% of the world's deaths from mining accidents while producing but 35% of the world's coal. Artists use water and mountains as media as well as subject matter of art, but none are known to have used the insides of mountains as subject for art.

In 2006, Yang Shoabin made a series of numbered oil paintings, at least eighteen, called *800 Metres* (2006), a title that, like Xu Zhen's, cites a numbers of meters with no hint as to what the meters measure. Born in 1963, Yang Shoabin tells of growing up with Social Revolutionary Realism paintings full of sunshine, blue skies, and workers portrayed as knights of the state. But, he said, that time has passed and when he returned to the coal mines in the town where he grew up, things were dire. He could "only marvel at the vitality of these workers, and the life force demonstrated by their children" whose life is about nothing beyond survival.[31] He asked himself how we are to view their situation today against the revolutionary socialism of China's recent history, and the force of the question led him to paint *800 Metres*. Here the contemporary move is not from the metaphorical oneness with nature

of the classical painters and thinkers to a real oneness. It is rather from the state's identification of itself with the nature with which individuals should harmonize themselves to the identification of Yang Shaobin with the life of the coal miners. By implication, he identifies himself also with the mountain whose depths the miners engage as they work to wrest from it the coal necessary to sustain their country's economic boom.

Of the five paintings from the *800 Metres* series shown in the catalogue of *The Real Thing*, three, each approximately 2.5 by 3.3 feet, are close-ups of miners' blackened faces. In one of these three, there is one miner, in another, two, and in another, three. The man alone (No. 6) is set in the mine's changing room, the pair (No. 17) are in a cityscape, and the three (No. 8) are at the entrance to a mine where an elevator is taking men down and burrowing instruments stand idle. None are in the mine itself, and all are looking out at the viewer. All but one are still in the light of day as their viewers are. The other two of the five paintings exhibited are large, almost 7 feet by more than 11. The workers in them are working. In one (No. 2), four men are drilling into a rock that occupies more than three-quarters of the left side of the picture—the rock as important as the men, perhaps even more important. In the other (No. 3), two men and three women, naked from the waist up, are in a coal bin sorting through pieces of coal. Two of the women bend over, as their ancestors had done in rice paddies for centuries, with their backs to the viewer. The third woman turns three-quarters of the way to confront the viewer, her breast revealed. Of the two male miners, one is bent as the women are and the other turns three-quarters toward, but does not confront or meet the gaze of, the viewer. Only one, the woman, of the nine miners represented in the mine looks out at the viewer.

Were the viewer able to see and respond to the whole series, she would find the spirit of the miners to resonate in her and would, if spirit resonance is transitive, find the depths of the mountain with which the miners are intimate to resonate as well. The artist expressed the hope that *800 Metres* "will be read as a real critique of history and contemporary reality."[32] Yang Shoabin did not open himself to the timeless harmony of the realm composed of heaven and earth, hills and streams, stone and water, to which the scholar-painter-poet opened himself, but to the material reality of a society whose greatest achievement, rapid industrialization, is also its biggest burden.[33] The real critique of contemporary reality that Yang Shoabin makes in *800 Metres* is effective only if the viewer can open herself to the *ch'i-yun* (spirit resonance) and *sheng-tung* (life movement) of the earth's mountains through empathy with its miners.

There is a final work to be brought into this discussion about contemporary Chinese artists' intimacy with the earth and about how their intimacy, not in-

nocent of history, differs from that of earlier Chinese artists. This is a discussion mindful of the absence of any version of the desire to harmonize with the universe on the part of artists in the west. The work is *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu* (2006–2007), a multimedia installation and performance work made by Qiu Zhijie in 2006–2007. The artist teaches at the China National Academy in Hangzhou, and in June 2006 he took his students on a field trip to the western part of Sichuan where it borders on Tibet and is home to many Tibetan nationals. The initial purpose was to look for the origins of the myths of Shangri-La and to discover why it had become popular in the west after World War I "with the perceived bankruptcy of capitalistic ideals."[34] The idea of Shangri-La was born as the result of the first journey made across Tibet by an outsider, Nain Singh, a thirty-three-year-old Indian man who, in 1863, began two years of training under Captain T. G. Montgomerie of the Royal British Engineers in India. He was to gather enough data to map the territory from the Indian side of the Himalayas to Lhasa, Tibet's capital. Singh learned to walk in thirty-three-inch leg irons so that he could measure precisely the distance he traveled and to measure his orientation and altitude "using a mercury-filled tea cup and a thermometer inserted into his walking stick."[35] This project was part of the Great Trigonometric Survey in India mentioned above.

Qiu Zhijie believed that the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad on July 1, 2006, would change the Tibetan traditional way of life as nothing else had, not even the imposition of Chinese rule in 1959. In honor of that first trip to Tibet in 1865 and on the eve of the intrusion of the modern world with the railroad, Qiu Zhijie decided to walk from Lhasa to Katmandu, opposite the direction in which Nain had walked, which was the next leg planned for the railroad. He anticipated the forward march of the railroad by making a facsimile of a rail for the track for this future leg. To this end he collected pieces of metal from people along his route, again, a focus on the particularity of the material, had them melted down and forged into a rail that he suspended in space—a sign of this being the world's highest railroad. Moreover, to bring money to the artists in the region, he had them paint *tankas*—works that tell stories of holy men and disseminate spiritual values—describing Nain's journey. Qiu Zhijie tried to follow Nain Singh's ways of measuring and wore thirty-three-inch leg irons as Singh had done. After walking about 370 of the 500 miles of the trip, bad weather forced him to stop in 2006. He completed the journey early in 2007, suffering not from harsh weather but from the leg irons eating away at his ankles.

There are myriad messages in *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu*. Here are but a few. One, the artist is playing with the idea of time in walking where a past journey had been made and a future railway will be. He duplicated a journey made in the past but in the opposite direction, which puts him in the

direction of the continuation of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in the future. Two, by literally walking the walk instead of only talking the talk of the history of the myth of Shangri-La, Qiu Zhijie introduced a note of reality. Furthermore, he took the measure of Tibet with his body, using the length of his strides rather than a measuring instrument, paying the price with the chaffing of his ankles. Qiu is actually doing something similar to what Xu Zhen did (not really do) when he climbed Everest to take the measure of the mountain, reducing it by his height. Perhaps not incidentally, Tibet and Mount Everest have long captured the imagination of westerners, as, respectively, figures of mystery and sublimity. The two artists demystify them.

Where Yang Shoabin in his *800 Metres* takes issue with social revolutionary realism's idealization of labor by pitting the realism of *800 Metres* against it, Qiu Zhijie in *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu* takes issue with the imperialist motives behind the nineteenth-century British engineers' desire to map the land hitherto unexplored by outsiders. What the British found in Tibet gave rise to western fantasies that the new railway will destroy. His performance, then, followed the route of the long walk that gave rise to the myth of Shangri-La and is the same route of the rail line that will destroy it. The railway will destroy it both by letting its passengers see how much has already changed—they will see monks riding motorbikes and using cell phones—and by threatening to sound the death knell for the way of life that had excited the imagination of so many in the west. The story that began with Nain Singh's journey ended with the completion in 2006 of the final stretch of the Quinghai-Tibet railway from Lhasa to Katmandu, the stretch that Qiu Zhijie walked in *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu.*

A quotation from Qiu Zhijie captures a spirit running through the work in the *The Real Thing*: *Contemporary Art from China* and shows expression to have stayed at the fore in the new art in China: "Artists are only as good as the language they use to express themselves; to express their real feelings. Real personal feeling must reflect an historical sensibility, a social experience."[36] History and society. They temper but do not make us. Qiu Zhijie says our feelings are personal, that is, they are ours but inevitably reflect our experiences: we live in a world, and our sense of history, we live in time. Art is the language the artist uses to express not her intentions, it is more raw and more real than that, but her personal feelings. The global reach of the three works from *The Real Thing* lies in the fact that the actual bodies in *8848 Minus 1.86* (2006) and *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu* (2006–2007) and the represented bodies in *800 Metres* (2006) are acting in concert with mountains, their tops and their bowels, and with roads, doing what they just know how to do, namely, climb, mine, and walk. Two works are identified by numbers and the other by place names. Concrete, particular.

The activities are the works' materials and are alien to none. Where they are performed, however, will be exotic to many and welcome for that, especially the two works that put them in touch with the dream of Shangri-La and the sublimity of Mount Everest.

NOTES

1. Alexandra Munroe with Philip Tanari and Hou Hanru, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Simon Guggenheim Foundation, 2017), 26.
2. Jean Hubert Marin said that he would exhibit as many works by artists from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Australia as works by the combined number of artists from the United States and Europe.
3. Le Corbusier, *Toward a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 31.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. Ibid., 31.
6. Ibid., 32.
7. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972), 87 and 90.
8. W. H. Gardner, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953), 51.
9. Encyclopedia Britannica, Carole K. Fink, "Fernand Braudel: French Historian and Educator." Accessed October 28, 2019.
10. Ibid.
11. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalism* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1999).
12. Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," in *Artforum International*, November 1984.
13. Theodor Lipps would say that because the viewer herself experienced certain powers she can see them in artworks, and it is *as though* she inferred from her experience or projected her experience onto the work. But, phenomenologically, she sees or senses the power in or of the work of art directly.
14. Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 412.
15. In his book *The Non-Objective World* (1927), Kasimir Malevich wrote: "In the year 1913, trying desperately to free art from the weight of the world, I took refuge in the square."
16. Over the last several years, *Theater of the World* was presented in the United States at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in Boston. In both venues, the work appeared without modification.
17. What is written on the Air France air sickness bag by Huang Pong Ying that was displayed in the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.

18. The Art Newspaper, David d'Arcy, "Plenty to Chew On: *Theater of the World* at the Guggenheim." Accessed October 28, 2019.

19. *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds,* edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weidel, was published in connection with the exhibition of the same name at ZKM Center of Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. It does with exhibitions and works made by artists the world over what I am doing here with exhibitions in the United States (one exception from Tate Liverpool in 2007) and works by Chinese artists. Like *Art and China after 1989*, this exhibition takes 1989 as the year when art became global, and in becoming global, contemporary. The gravamen of *The Global Contemporary* is that once the west was no longer the center of the art world, making the rest of the world Other, there would be more than one center, none being hegemonic. The world became polycentric. Hans Belting et al. would be satisfied with putting the new art from China in a Sino-centric narrative so long as China was not seen as the Other but as its own center and as global for not being seen in light of art from the west.

20. Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

21. *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (2013), edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weidel, was published in connection with an exhibition of the same name at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany.

22. Karen Smith and Xu Zhen, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (Liverpool, England: Tate Liverpool, 2007), 10.

23. Ibid., 12.

24. Ibid., 11.

25. Ibid., 13.

26. Oswald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painters-Critics from the Han through the Ch'ing Dynasties* (Peiping: 1936; rpt. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 24.

27. David Clarke, "The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Art Journal*, Winter 2006, 57–77.

28. Xu Zhen takes this measurement to be authoritative even though an American team put a global positioning system on the highest bedrock in 1999 and found the mountain to be 8,850 meters.

29. Smith and Xu Zhen, *The Real Thing*, 137.

30. Ibid., 162–163.

31. Ibid., 167.

32. Ibid.

33. In September 2007, *The New York Times* began a three-part article on the problem of pollution in China.

34. Smith and Xu Zhen*, The Real Thing*, 98.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

Chapter Six

According to What? and *Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao*

According to What? is the title of an exhibition of the work of Ai Weiwei that was at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, in the winter of 2013. *Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao* was shown at the Asia Society in New York in the winter of 2012. The titles neatly capture the character of the exhibited work. The first exhibition asks according to what and how the work is to be understood, interpreted, and judged, and the second invites the questions of what or who is bound by what or whom and, more importantly, if there is such a thing as being or becoming unbound. What is most significant about the two are the materials used in the exhibited works. Ai Weiwei, for example, used 1,001 ordinary Chinese citizens in *Fairytale* (2007) and the names of over 5,000 children who died in the Sichuan earthquake in *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen's Investigation* (2008 to 2011). Lin Tianmiao uses silk thread and bones—that refer to China through silkworms and oracle bones—while they let her do what she wants to do, namely, explore the relationships between contrasts like yielding and firm, moving and still, and the conditions necessary for transforming one into the other. The one artist is political, the other philosophical; they both make poetry.

The exhibitions fall between the two group exhibitions discussed, respectively, in Chapters 1 and 5, the 1998 *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* that introduced Americans to the new art and the 2017 *China after 1989: Theater of the World* that wanted attention to be paid to the global rather than the Chinese dimension of the art shown. All of the art discussed here is global and contemporary. It is global for at least two reasons: it is accessible because of its materials and interesting because of its Chinese-ness. Interest in Chinese-ness stems both from the spell China has woven over the west for centuries and from China's growing presence on the world stage. This chapter will consider contemporaneity, and the final chapter will look at art-ness, suggesting that

the new art from China is, perhaps imperceptibly, changing what we count as art and what we take its charge to be.

Western readers and viewers will, for the most part, have seen mostly or only what is exhibited in western museums and galleries and in international exhibitions, which hardly make up the whole of what is currently produced and exhibited in China. Moreover, what is distinctively Chinese to a western viewer might not be seen as such to a viewer who is Chinese. That said, the Chinese art shown in the west can be seen to be distinctively Chinese in referring to its traditions, its unsettling recent history, or in using the particular materials it uses. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Mao sought to destroy what he called the Four Olds: customs, cultures, habits, and ideas. That he did not succeed is evident in the presence of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist ideas in the new art and in its use of materials and material objects from Imperial China. This is the new art's referencing of its past.

The recent history of China saw the dramatic and radical change from the pure communism that had dominated everything and every thought under Mao to what is now described as capitalism with socialist characteristics, that is, a capitalist economy subject to the will of a communist government. Chinese artists had been denied access to western art, a prohibition that started gently with Mao's talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942 that began:

> Comrades! You have been invited to this forum today to exchange ideas and examine the relationship between work in the literary and artistic fields and revolutionary work in general. Our aim is to ensure that revolutionary literature and art follow the correct path of development and provide better help to other revolutionary work.[1]

This speech was given at the time when Abstract Expressionism was beginning to make New York the center of the art world, yet it was beyond the pale of most Chinese artists. Therefore, the western art that appeared in China was not moored in western art history, to which Chinese artists had little access. Of their own art, only works of social realism were readily available. So shut off were they that during the Cultural Revolution one could be punished for just reading a western novel.

Well did artists ask according to what should they make their art. The experiments began as artists asked through their art how they could trust language, how western capitalism, the former scourge of communism, did not undermine their identity, and what art was if not the tool of the revolution for which the fervor began to wane after Mao's death. Finally, by the 1990s, artists used their art to protest the government's handling of the

rapid industrialization necessary for China to catch up with the west. This industrialization involved doing violence to neighborhoods, to their cultural monuments, and to nature, as, for example, the Three Gorges Dam Project did. Protesting industrialization and its effects is another way for the new art to refer to its recent history. The work in the two exhibitions discussed in this chapter displays these traits and highlights the political focus of Ai Weiwei and the gendered one of Lin Tianmiao. The exhibited work is distinctively Chinese, global, and, finally, contemporary.

This chapter looks first at the idea of the contemporary through the British philosopher Peter Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013), a sophisticated account of the contemporary of which this is a pared down and more simple version.[2] Osborne arrives at his idea of the contemporary through a particular conception of modernism that we will follow just to the point where art becomes contemporary. Then we look at some work exhibited in the two exhibitions named in the title of the chapter to see how the materials used in each contribute to their Chinese-ness, to their difference, and to their satisfying the conditions that makes them contemporary.

CONTEMPORARY ART

Just as the curators of the Guggenheim exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (2017–2018) saw 1989 as marking the time after which the new art in China became global, so Osborne sees 1989 as marking the beginning of the contemporary in art. Contemporary art is, on his view, a modernism. He asks:

> Can modernism really be written off as a living critical category? Or does it subsist, alongside and within the contemporary, as the affirmation of a discrete, complexly articulated historical-temporal form?[3]

He went on to say that we can answer this only by retrieving the fundamental *thought* of modernism so that we can ascertain the conceptual relation of modernism to "art" and to "aesthetic." The modern has to do with the new, but not everything present is new. The modern

> picks out from within the present those things that are new and makes them constitutive of its historical meaning or what we might call its "historical present." As such, the modern relies upon a certain temporal logic of negation, which, in splitting the present from within, makes "modern" an inherently subjective, value-laden *critical* term.[4]

Osborne concludes that so far from being over, as many critics say it is, modernism "structures the entire field of contemporary art to the extent to which 'art' remains a historically critical practice."[5]

General-Aesthetic Modernism

This first modernism was born out of the desire to claim for art autonomy, an in-itself-ness, which freed it from mimesis, from the burden of its representations having to resemble their subjects. *Aesthesis*, access to the sensible, sensed dimensions of the work, not mimesis, was what was paramount for Baudelaire, for example, for whom the lived sense of time, the sense of the fleetingness of the present, was aesthetic in the ancient sense of being what can be sensed. In the mid-eighteenth century Alexander Baumgarten made *aesthesis* the basis for a new kind judgment, one based on the senses, not the mind, based in particular on the feelings of pleasure or displeasure afforded by the sensations of a given object. He did this to be able to define good taste, which shows the judgment of taste to be a judgment of value, not of fact. Interest in good taste was occasioned by the rise of a middle class in Europe that could afford to buy art and wanted to know how to tell whether a work of art was good. Baumgarten's answer was that it was good if in good taste, which was associated with it's being beautiful. A good work of art is a beautiful work, one the mere perception of which pleases. Beauty is a distinctly aesthetic value, neither cognitive nor moral. This is the sense of aesthetic that Osborne says was used in aesthetic modernism, where the modifier "aesthetic" indicates that this was an art for art's sake, its purpose to please, not to educate or to edify. He is keen to point out that this is only a historical phenomenon, and there is no conceptual connection between the aesthetic and the modern. In this first of Osborne's trio of modernisms, something is a work of art if it was made to please through its aesthetic, that is, its sensed, properties. The specific arts were those familiar from the Renaissance—literature, music, painting, and sculpture—more alike in being the source of aesthetic pleasure than different in the means they used to achieve the pleasure.

Medium-Specific Modernism

This second modernism is one in which the genres of art become more important than the genus art, which is what was most important in the first, general-*aesthetic* modernism. Medium-specific modernism gave rise to a crisis that, in its turn, gave rise to generic-*artistic* modernism, which is where the contemporary is to be found. On Osborne's account the crisis came about in roughly three stages. The first began in 1945 with the end of World War

II and the start of the Cold War. The second began in the 1960s, a decade of upheavals: the Vietnam War and its protestors and the civil rights riots in the United States, the student riots in Paris in 1968, and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966. The third began in 1989, when the era of historical communism ended, capitalism appeared in Russia and the formerly communist countries in eastern Europe, and China tried to destroy the burgeoning movement for democracy in the People's Republic with its crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Osborne characterizes art as contemporary when made after 1989. Because the concept is a critical one, not all art made made after 1989 is contemporary. Only the art that satisfies certain conditions counts. Briefly, medium-specific art takes center stage after 1945, is put into serious question during the 1960s, and is replaced by generic-artistic modernism after 1989. The terms are Osborne's.

Medium-specific modernism appeared when an artwork's medium came better to identify it as art than its genus, art, did. Allowing that paintings and novels, for example, are alike in being works of art, the differences *between* them came to be increasingly important as differences *within* the genres began to appear. For example, Wassily Kandinsky's *In the Black Square* (1923) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) were significantly different from earlier paintings and novels but were nonetheless, respectively, a painting and a novel. Questions such as what makes a painting a painting and how the art of painting is different from, say, the art of music began to be asked as works appeared that raised the question. These questions mimed those asked by the Vienna Circle in 1917: How is philosophy different from physics given that both seek to know the nature of reality? In other words, what makes philosophy philosophy and physics physics? What makes a painting a painting and a novel a novel?

The questions about genres persisted: Were all paintings, all novels, art? No, came the answer—only those that were faithful to the requirements of their mediums rather than to the world from which they issued or the intentions of those who made them. An example of a limit imposed by a medium is that since painting is the application of marks to a flat surface, the use of perspective to make a painting look as though it were three-dimensional violates what was to become a definition of a painting. We do not say that premodern masterpieces that used perspective are not paintings, but we do say that they were artworks first, designed to occasion a distinct experience in their audience, and paintings second. The genres were certified as art when the word "art" was still rich with meaning, but when changes within the genres pushed them to the fore, the subjects took over from the king and genres reigned—hence Osborne's "medium-specific modernism." Something was art only by belonging to a particular genre of art, and "art" referred only to the set of the

art genres. Works were realities in their own right, independent of anything but the requirements of their genres.

Generic-Artistic Modernism or Contemporary Art

The third of Osborne's trio of modernisms, generic-artistic modernism, began midcentury as the lines between the genres of art started to blur. For one example, Robert Rauschenberg took a pillow, a sheet, and a quilt, scribbled on them in pencil, threw paint on them, attached them to wooden supports, and hung them on a wall to make *Bed* (1955). So much for making marks on a flat picture plane. *Bed* is three-dimensional. Is it a painting, as it is treated as being, or a sculpture? These disruptions were of a piece with the thought that it was not reasonable to call ballet, for example, an art form but not ice dancing on the ground that ballet belonged to the genre dance but ice dancing did not. The mid-1960s saw modernism and structuralism morph into post-isms as possible norms and meanings began to share conceptual space with actual ones. The former called received ways of organizing historical periods into question and the latter, received meanings of language. Suspicious that power had more of a role than reason or right in determining how to codify the past and the meanings of language, critics began to think against the grain. Possibility and plurality ruled. It became clear, however, that as therapeutic as the skepticism of the post-isms was, it left no room for judgments of value. Aesthetics and ethics, whose coin is elaborating criteria for for judgments of value, were at a loss, as they had been in the 1920s when the verification principle held that only sentences whose truth value could be verified by sense experiences had any meaning. Since sense experience cannot verify the truth of judgments of value, they were deemed meaningless.

Enter generic artistic modernism, to understand which we go back to the fundamental thought of modernism. "Modernist" can refer to a particular historical field of art or, when used in a quasi-transcendental sense as Osborne does, to an "enactment, within and upon the artistic field, of that performative temporal logic of negation that constitutes the structure of modernism in general."[6] This is the negation of the old by the new and the affirmation of the new. As the authority of art genres diminished, emphasis on the individuality of a given artwork increased. Osborne rejected Danto's claim that art ended in the Stabler Gallery in New York in 1964. He argued instead that the result of what began in the 1960s was not that art ended, although the hegemony of medium-specific modernism did, but that art became contemporary.

Osborne endorses Adorno's characterization of a crisis of modernism laid out in *Aesthetic Theory* (1974), which is that the crisis lay in the threat to artworks that follows from their increasing particularization or individualization

that followed on the loss of authority of genres, which had themselves taken their authority from the genus art. The threat is that individuals would cease to be utterly individual were they assigned a meaning, but absent a meaning they would be reduced to their materials. However, Osborne notes that Adorno did not move beyond this threat to appreciate the fact that critical theories develop out of the critical interpretations of individual works, from the ground up, and that the theories act as intermediaries between individuals and universals by setting up a dialectic between them. This dialectic puts the individual work of art within the crisis of modernism that is produced by art's increasing nominalism in which universals no more than names and only individuals exist. The dialectic, then, is not between an individual and a universal, but between an individual and a name, "art." Osborne concludes that

> the individuality of the work of art is the ontological marker of its autonomy—autonomous production of meaning (or, rather, the self-conscious *illusion* of an autonomous production of meaning)—as the basis of its constitution as an enigma. The enigma consist in the fact that in their autonomous meaning production, works of art act like subjects.[7]

Because meanings are social, the individual artwork that has produced its own meaning is no longer utterly individual. It belongs to the set of those things that have produced their own meanings. As genres lost their authority, the memory of Duchamp's urinal and the presence of Warhol's *Brillo Box* gave weight to the idea that anything can be art. A candidate for the name "art" need not possess certain characteristics, like being a flat surface to which marks had been applied or having been created to do no more than occasion a certain kind of pleasure. Yet it does have to have meaning, which it does by making its own, where doing so is what a subject or an agent does. But we are here, as Kant often is, in the world of "as if." Imagine a claimant to the name "art" that does not cause a particular kind of experience or belong to a traditional category of art, but says or does something to the critic, moves him, engages him, shows him something. Osborne has it that a work's making the case that it is art is *as if* it were a subject, a person, making meaning, as persons do. In sum, the word "art" denotes not a kind but the set of those individually made objects that (seem to) produce their own meanings. These are objects that have made the case that they are members of the genus "art."

To be contemporary, according to Osborne, a work must exist in an historical present, which is not a magic moment between the no longer and the not yet, but a moment constituted by the presence of the past and the promise of the future. In the historical present in which the contemporary exists, the old is negated and the new is affirmed. As we saw, the modern, "picks out from within the present those things that are new and makes them constitutive of

its historical meaning, or what we might call its 'historical present.'"[8] That within the present that is not picked out as new is, then, the old, having been negated by not having been picked out.

The past has to be there in the historical present in order to be negated so there is a sense in which it is there in its negation. The past does not vanish as though into air, nor does the new come out of nowhere. The new is born of and is in some complex way the death of the old, and its affirmation puts a lien on the future. But more central to the idea of the contemporary is that it puts a lien on the present: the contemporary must be of and speak to the historical present. It must be *for* the present.

To be contemporary a work must also have both a conceptual and an aesthetic dimension, aesthetic in the ancient sense of there being something to see, hear, touch, taste, or smell and conceptual in having a discursive dimension. A work cannot be only aesthetic, nor can it be only conceptual. The discursive element does not simply accompany and partially constitute the artwork as, say, Clement Greenberg's discourse partially constituted abstract expressionism.[9] It is rather one that emerges from interpretive confrontations with individual works as interpreter and interpreted cooperate in doing the work of the artwork, the work of making art, which is in part the work of making meaning. If a viewer engages a work, she has taken it to mean or to do something, but what she takes it to mean or to do has to be articulated or in some way made public, to amount to an interpretation. The interpretive confrontation is a conversation between a work and interpreter who, in the best case, tries out the critical discourses, frameworks, or theories at hand until something strikes her as capturing the work. The experience of the work and the language used to interpret it, that is, the *aesthesis* and the discourse licensed by the work, respectively, are the two dimensions a candidate artwork must have to be a work of contemporary art.

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

The recent history of China falls into three periods: the thirty-eight years between the end of the Qing Dynasty and the founding of the People's Republic of China (1911–1949); the twenty-seven years of Mao's reign (1949–1976); and the four-plus decades since Deng Xiaoping opened China to foreign investment in 1978.[10] In the first period, before Mao, the student protests of May 4, 1919, against the weak response of the government to the Treaty of Versailles, which allowed Japan to retain territories in Shandong that had been surrendered by Germany, gave rise to the New Culture movement. After the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, warlords dominated and were believed to be responsible

for the weakened state of the government. The New Culture movement was nationalist and sought to defy the warlords and all facets of traditionalism. It wanted to replace what it referred to as Mr. Confucius with Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy. John Dewey went to China in 1919 and lectured there for a year, and Bertrand Russell lectured and was given a warm response. Nonetheless, the movement ended up fostering what was to become the Chinese Communist Party, although Mao is said to have given it more due than it warranted.

Such openness to outside ideas and values that the New Culture movement seemed to have promised was put to rest by the talk Mao gave on art and literature in Yuan in 1942. Not just art but all human activities were to be subject to the Communist Party. In a brilliant move, Mao sought to have the Communist Party usurp the role played by nature in traditional Chinese thought and to garner for itself the same respect and love that tradition accorded nature. At first the art of the revolution only appropriated what later the Cultural Revolution would try to destroy, the old culture, customs, habits, and ideas.

In the third period, after Mao, the west reappears in the form of capitalism and its entrepreneurial freedoms, which gave rise to the desire among artists to become independent of the government-controlled art schools and exhibition system. In 1979, a group of avant-garde artists called The Stars exhibited their work on the street in front of the National Art Gallery. The police shut them down within two days. In 1989, the exhibition *China/Avant-Garde* opened in the National Art Gallery, with long black carpets leading up to the door with "No U-Turn" written on them. This was the first time the authorities allowed an exhibition that violated the principles of artistic creation laid down in the 1942 Yuan lecture. It was also the first time that performance, installation, video, and computer art were shown in public, but the video artist Zheng Peili said it was not art or the exhibition that mattered that day but the fact that they were making history.

Three months later came the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square when the hardline leaders ordered the military to enforce martial law as a result of student-led protests. This brings us to 1989, the year in which art became global (Guggenheim curators) and contemporary (Peter Osborne). In 1989, both Ai Weiwei and Lin Tianmiao were in New York; neither had yet to negotiate the differences that would determine his or her later art. For Ai Weiwei what is to be mediated through his art are the tensions between one and many, personal and political, past and present. Where the Chinese government has negated the first member of each pair, the one, the personal, and the past, the challenge is to recuperate them in a work of utter singularity. For Lin Tianmiao what she called contrasts were closer to the ground—gathering and scattering, proliferating and reducing, big and small, harsh and soft—than were more abstract contrasts such as one and many, personal and political.

The contemporary came into its own in the wake of 1) the failure of the post-isms to provide solid ground for making critical judgments about art and 2) the crisis in modernism caused by the increasing individualism of works (and their subsequent independence of genre norms) that lay claim to the name "art." The work of Ai Weiwei and Lin Tianmiao tests the aptness, if not the truth, of Osborne's account.

Ai Weiwei, *According to What?*

The title of this exhibition is taken from the title of a six-panel 16-by-7.3-foot oil painting made by Jasper Johns in 1964. It is a compendium of modernist themes from western art history in which, from a modernist position, he questions "the meaning and existence of avant-garde art, an approach that clearly distinguishes him from the postmodern appropriation art of the 1980s."[11] Johns's painting alludes to Duchamp's last painting, *Tu m'* (1918), and there is here a nice line of filiation with Johns's *According to What?* having been made in 1964, which falls almost exactly between the 1918 of the Duchamp and 2012, when Ai's exhibition opened in Washington, DC. Before Ai moved to the United States in 1981, a friend had given him some art books, including one by Jasper Johns, which Ai dismissed because he could not see how numbers and targets or beer cans and Coke bottles could be the subject of art. When he got to New York, however, he came into contact with the work and writings of Johns, which led him to Duchamp and Warhol, and he came to understand the centrality of the question of what can be the subject of art. He responded to these artists, starting with Duchamp, realizing that they were using targets and Coke bottles to question the definition of art and the social systems within which the art arose and to which the art was a response. The same questions became and still are the driving force behind his work. The artists were his art school and his introduction to the art of the historical present.

After twelve years in New York, Ai returned to Beijing 1993 when his father, Ai Qing, the renowned poet, became ill. In the years since he has done more than most artists to take up Osborne's challenge of making artworks that are particular, new, and, singularly, *for* the present. He said, "Rather than thinking of my projects as art, they attempt to introduce a new condition, a new means of expression, or a new method of communication. If these possibilities did not exist, I would not feel the need to be an artist."[12] He might not think of what he makes as art, but he does think of himself as in artist, and it is as such that he puts his work forward—his architecture, his blog, films, installations, music, photographs, sculpture. He has said that they are all the same, the product of (his performance as) an artist. The difference in genres does not matter because

> the aura of art has been dispelled not just in photography and cinema . . . but in all media. The emphasis on the artist's "originality" and hand has diminished. In Ai's case, the subject of his academic practice is not his own authority or identity as the creator, but the physical nature of the materials he employs—the wood, stone, ceramics, and tea—or the immaterial and intangible value of the skills and efforts of the executing craftsmen.[13]

What does matter is that he makes a difference, and that requires an audience to pay attention. He puts his work forward, and it is as though he asks the audience, beginning with curators, gallery owners, and critics, to look hard at the work and at how they look at the work, and given what it says or does to them, to decide whether or not it is art, or, what really matters, whether or not it is worth a viewer's attention.

This is somewhat reminiscent of Roland Barthes's observation that people did not know what to make of James Joyce's *Ulysses* when it was published in 1922. They could make no sense of it if they read it as they read, say, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), and so they had to read it carefully and slowly to try to figure out how its language worked. They had to use *Ulysses* to try to get inside language. In 2003, Ai said: "We can't just learn from Western art, but also need to examine and criticize our daily experience and our own thought. This is the nature of intellect as well as art, to question the basic foundation of being and our state of mind."[14] Both Barthes and Ai Weiwei focus on figuring out how works of art work, how they do whatever they set out to do, but there is an important difference. Barthes wanted to see how language works; he wanted to get as deep inside it as he could, for at the time he made the assumption that everything is shot through with language. He later came to look for what escapes language.[15] Ai Weiwei, reflecting the move away from language to the material and sensed world, to what is relatively free of language, uses his art to get deep inside, not language, but his daily experience and his own thought. He does this in order "to question the basic foundation of being," which, for the Chinese who tend not to traffic in abstractions, is concrete and particular—hence Wu Hung's attention to the Three Gorges Dam Project, Xu Bing's in *Tobacco Project* to the Duke family's tobacco companies, and Ai Weiwei's to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. What Ai and later Barthes share is the doubt that little escapes language and the growing suspicion that something is there that *does* escape. For Ai Weiwei, this is material and gesture and texture and touch; for Barthes an air, a "this" to which one can only point. The Chinese have always known that nature escapes it.

With a work of stunning originality, *Fairytale* (2007), Ai Weiwei made a work of art that used the daily experiences and states of mind of 1,001 ordinary Chinese people as they went to *Documenta 12* in Kasel, Germany,

in the summer of 2007. They were selected from about 3,000 respondents to an online announcement on the basis of having completed a questionnaire of 99 questions; they ranged from art students to people who had never left their villages. One, a member of an ethnic minority, could not get a passport because she did not have a name. She chose one. Videos were made of the experiences of each. The only conditions on them were that they agree to be interviewed before, during, and after the exhibition of which they were observers as well as participants. The work demonstrated that no matter how large the whole, the part that makes it up has value as an individual. This is so even when the individual is not qualitatively, but only numerically, distinct, as were each of the 100 million sunflower seeds that covered the floor of the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern, *Sunflower Seeds* (2010). Each had been made by hand in Jingdezhen, a city famed for its porcelain production.

"This notion of the 'hidden self' in large scale projects was the central theme of *Fairytale*."[16] The experiences of each participant were unique, starting from the particular arrangements they had to make in order to be able to go to Kassel and the adjustments they had to make when they returned. Part of the experience were the descriptions and evaluations they shared with others, for they, unlike most Chinese, had seen China from another country and saw themselves as Chinese among the myriad nationalities of the audience. The number 1,001 was chosen to avoid the featurelessness and anonymity of 1,000, and it appeared in two other ways in the exhibition. There were 1,001 late Ming and Qing Dynasty chairs placed throughout the exhibition for public seating, and an artwork, *Template* (2007), was composed of 1,001 late Ming and Qing Dynasty wooden window frames and doors from Shanxi where ancient towns and villages had been demolished. They formed an eight-pointed open vertical structure that created at its center the volume of a traditional Chinese temple. It was blown down in a storm during the exhibition and left that way as an exemplum of a work of nature.

Whereas the participants in *Fairytale* were of the present, the chairs, window frames, and doors were of the past. They were there as material memories of the past. The window frames and doors were shorn of their functions as were the stools, chairs, and tables from the past used in Ai Weiwei's furniture series. They are fragments of the past recontextualized, as fragment can always be. Such is *Souvenir from Beijing* (2002), a single brick from a dismantled house in a hutong inside a box made from wood from destroyed Qing Dynasty temples. There is no reverence here; this is the material past. It is what would last even if people with their memories did not. It is a material memory.

One year after *Documenta 12*, in 2008, was the Sichuan earthquake in which Reuters estimated over 9,000 school children lost their lives as their shoddily constructed school buildings collapsed while the commercial buildings and

hotels around them remained standing. The government would not release the names of the children who died, and Ai was part of volunteer group formed to collect their names. Not all of the families would cooperate, however, lest they be punished for doing what the government would not. *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen's Investigation* (2008–2011) are printed in black ink on white papers and hung on the wall in the first gallery of the exhibition in the Hirshhorn Museum. So far from remaining nameless, the children were further identified by having their birth years, gender, and class listed along with their names. A recording of the names that takes three hours and forty-three minutes played continuously; it is called *Remembrance* (2010). This exhibit was made all the more poignant by the presence nearby of the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982) by Maya Lin, which is two walls of polished black granite that meet at an angle and have carved into them the names of 58,000 soldiers killed in combat. Each work shows the materiality of language: the names are not only written or carved to be seen, but in one work the names are also heard and in the other they can also be touched.

In 2009, Ai Weiwei made an installation to be shown on the façade of the Haus der Kunst in Munich that was made of 9,000 children's backpacks that spelled out in Chinese characters the words of a mother whose daughter had died: "She lived happily for seven years in this world." It was when Ai was on a plane to Munich for the opening of this event in September 2009 that he suffered severe headaches from having been beaten for testifying in a trial against the government in connection with the quake. He had emergency brain surgery when he landed in Munich, having had a cerebral hemorrhage.[17] In addition to the printed and spoken names of children who died in the quake and to *Snake Ceiling* (2009), 55 feet of 350 children's backpacks that snaked along the ceiling of the gallery in which the names were shown and read, Ai made an artwork out of steel rebar that had been part of the school buildings that collapsed. It is the already mentioned *Wenchuan Steel Rebar* (2008–2012), a 140-ton rolling landscape of 6 by 12 meters made of 150 steel rebars recovered from the wreckage of schoolhouses. Each was straightened by hand, and the work has the quiet splendor of a work of minimalist art but for the fissures that wind down about a third of the middle of its length. It is the ruptures made in the earth by the quake and the disruption of the lives of the children and their parents. Powerful and silent, it sobers its viewers who know the source of its material. It could be a work of minimalist art like that of Sol Lewitt and Donald Judd, but as soon as one learns the history of its material, the simplicity of the form and the complexity of the history of the material create a tremor, as though in the plates of the earth.

It is an irony that *Fairytale*, a work that celebrated a group of 1,001 Chinese citizens, should have been performed one short year before Ai's memo-

rial for the nearly 9,000 children who left for school on the morning of May 12, 2008, to die in an earthquake because their schools were cheaply built. As a result of his art, his voice on social media, and the testimony he gave in the trail against the government for the inferior construction of the schools, Ai was under house arrest for eighty-one days in 2011. His passport was taken from him, not to be returned for four years, when, in 2015, he moved to Berlin. He left Berlin for Beijing after three years because of the language and the lack of sunlight but has kept his studio there.

On the PBS television show *Nightly News Hour* on September 30, 2019, there was a report on the degree of surveillance in China. The five most surveilled cities in the world are in China, which has 200 million surveillance cameras with facial recognition. There is what is called a social credit system so that, for example, whoever is filmed jay walking will be shamed by having his or her face posted on social media. In light of this, Ai made a marble sculpture, *Surveillance Camera* (2010). Itself unseeing, it is nonetheless relentlessly present, resolutely there, like the 200 million other cameras. According to what does Ai Weiwei make his art? According to his abiding sense of the dignity and the worth of each individual human being.

Lin Tianmiao, *Bound Unbound*

Lin Tianmiao was born in 1961 and was, therefore, of the generation whose members were children during the Cultural Revolution and for whom the appearance of capitalism brought a more dramatic change than it did for those born after the Mao years. Lin was in New York in 1989 when Tiananmen Square erupted; she had arrived in New York the year before, ten years after China had opened itself to western investment and culture. Artists in China were beginning to experiment outside the widespread state system of art education and distribution with groups such as The Stars Art Group, or just The Stars, whose dates are usually given as 1979 to 1983. Lin was in New York with her video artist husband, Wang Gongxin, and was part of the Chinese diaspora that included Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, Chen Yifeo, the filmmaker Chen Kaige, and the composer Tan Dun. She spoke of being in culture shock for the first three of her eight years in New York, when she had not yet begun to make art but went assiduously to galleries and other art venues. She reported that the city had a great influence on her, teaching her how to respect individuals, all kinds of materials, and the force of details, no matter how small. She had a job designing textiles while there and did not turn to art full time until she returned to Beijing in 1996. It is fitting that she should have had such a job since textiles and the threads of which they are made figure so prominently in her work, prefigured in her first substantial work, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*

(1995), made for the session "Women's Approach to Contemporary Art" in the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Fabrics cover, from swaddling infants to shrouding the dead, and are an apt figure for the woman's body, which encloses in its womb the child it bears. The ancestral line comes out of the woman's body as the thread it will spin into a web comes from the body of the spider and the silk thread from the body of the silkworm.

In 1996, she returned home for a visit. Pregnant with her first child, she was told that there were complications with the pregnancy such that it would be dangerous for her to fly. She stayed to deliver her son, and when family support enabled her to have a nanny, she and her husband chose to stay. Asked why she stayed in China, her short answer, "My body." She suffered another culture shock upon returning to Beijing, where artists could not exhibit in state museums, performance art was banned, and installations were not welcome. At the time she left, the art scene was vital with the likes of The Stars, who were followed by artists experimenting with different art forms under the aegis of the 1985 New Wave movement. Now that freedom had been damped.

Before considering the narrative arc that Lin's art followed, one in which cotton, silk, and bones play a leading role, look at her remarks about women, which lead to her remarks about contrasts and transforming them. She resists being called a feminist, as did Chen Lingyang of *Twelve Flower Months*, because of its distinctly western bias. Lin said in 2012 that "a feminist movement is when women begin to understand themselves well enough to know what they want. Right now in China, women have not reached that stage. . . . Today the government and the society do not extend women their due rights, which is the opposite of the environment they need."[18] When asked what she thinks most important for woman and for women artists, she tellingly answered that it is to become self-awakened and to get a sense of their own worth. She did not say that they should become aware of and work to overcome their oppression by society and the men who run it. Female and male, yin and yang, tend to be seen as complementary in China rather than as oppositional as they are in the west. Even so, in the same conversation she mentioned being against recent exhibitions that focused on the female figure because we "need better to discover ourselves rather than allow ourselves to be marginalized," that is, not let women be defined by others.[19]

In connection with a pair of installations of sculptures, one of five white statues of women and one of three pink statues of men, *Chatting* (2004) and *Endless* (2006), respectively, she said that the relationships among women are different from those among men. "The relationship between the men is more superficial; however, the relationship between the women is more primal, more instinctual, and sensitive.'"[20] To be at the level of instinct is to be at the level of the body. However, it is not to the body, but to the fabric that

covers it and the bones that shape it—to what is over and under the body—that she turns in her art. She is functioning below the level of knowledge, below what she doubts, namely, "the knowledge constructed by a so-called woman's perspective and the pitfalls of female narrative language."[21] She has said not only that the relationships among women are different from those among men but also that value systems of men and women are different. In the artist statement accompanying *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), Lin said that she wanted to explore "the subtle relationships of things in contrast, the conditions necessary for a shift from one aspect to another."[22] Her examples of contrast are, again, big and small, gathering and scattering, aggression and withdrawal, harshness and tenderness, proliferation and reduction, and male and female. The contrasts play out, she suggests, in the body, where the primitive and instinctual reign. It is where she goes to look for an answer to what she asked herself in New York: Who am I?

Look now to cotton, silk, and bones, the materials used in the works whose progress describes an arc along which play contrasts like wrapping and cutting, being the same and not being the same, coming out from and staying within covers. Each material refers to China; only cotton and silk refer to women. Bones know no difference. The thread is white cotton and is wound around itself to make balls or around everyday objects, binding them as women's feet were bound in China from the tenth to the early twentieth century. The allusion, at least to a westerner, is inescapable. At first only the feet of women in court were bound, later this extended to the elite, and by the time of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) 40 to 50% of women's feet were bound to about four inches to make them look like a lotus flower. Silk is said to have been exported along the Silk Route from as early as 4000 BCE; its production was a closely guarded secret. Today China supplies 78% of the world's silk. Silk, then, is quintessentially Chinese. The bones recall China's past for it was on bones, oracle bones and tortoise shells, that the earliest writing was found. It was pictographic, an obvious ancestor to subsequent Chinese script.

Lin Tianmiao's work for the United Nations Year of the Woman, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), is her first work made of thread and ordinary things, but here the ordinary things are not wrapped in thread as they are in the next several works. The work consists of a bed with an oval cut out of its center from which there are pointing up 20,000 large needles with threads of varying lengths, many quite long, ending in balls of cotton of much the same size spread out for many yards along the sides and foot of the bed. The cascade of threads is beautiful, like a waterfall, the balls of thread like bubbles caused by the rush. Hanging from the ceiling to the side of the bed are a pair of men's trousers pierced with needles and legs so long that they are folded over many times on the floor.[23] The empty trousers could not lie on

the empty bed because there are the 20,000 needles there that would penetrate him as the smaller needles on the trousers would penetrate a woman were one lying there. A video screened on the pillow shows Lin's hands endlessly winding. Lin has a keen memory of winding into cotton balls what seemed to be endlessly proliferating thread from when she was as young as four or five years old. White uniforms and gloves worn during the Cultural Revolution were, when worn out, unraveled to become threads that were wound into balls to be used again. It is as though the child wound the treads into balls only to have them break free to unravel as far as the imagination can go. Here Lin, now herself a mother, does as an artist what she hated doing as a child.

In the next works objects are bound. *Bound and Unbound* (1997) has 500 small household objects wrapped in white thread, all accompanied by a floor-to-ceiling screen on which a large pair of scissor is shown cutting a wall of vertical threads, cutting scissors to unbind what is bound. After these works of bound items come works that use photographs of the nude body of the artist from which come many long threads that, in all but one, *Daydreamer* (2000), end in balls of cotton. *Daydreamer* is a photo of the nude artist affixed to the ceiling with threads coming from all over her body to a low platform on the floor. The threads attach the dreamer to the real world; they bring her down to earth. Threads keep things together as well as cover them up to keep them from being together with other things. In another photograph of the artist's body come long threads that do end in balls of cotton, as though the balls had tumbled out of her body, unraveling as they went. They are its spawn, which the title *Spawn* (2001) implies. *Spawn* is a 13-by-4.5-foot canvas hanging from the ceiling on one side of which a photograph of the artist's body is printed. Here the cascade of threads comes from the blank back side of the canvas so that one cannot see from what the threads are coming, as one cannot see what is inside a body. Inside a woman's body are eggs or spawn that continue the ancestral lines, each of which has its own spawn, and so on. The individual woman can see but little of what she has unleashed on the world as the woman in the photograph cannot see what she leaves behind even though she is connected to it by the threads.

Another way the human body appears in her art is as installations that consist of a number of three-dimensional cloth figures made of myriad fabrics with heads that are either box-like or veiled to obscure the faces. At least one work is accompanied by videos in which every day sounds are accompanied by the fabric figures moving about; the videos are screened through large round windows placed regularly along the encircling wall. The work is called *Here? or There?* (2002). The cloth figures in it wreak havoc with the boundaries of the body. Flaps of material are parts of legs, furs, and ribbons that

pour from the bodies, clumps of silken string protrude from the chest, all apparently part of the body. Faces are for the most part absent. The installation consists of imaginative, fanciful, beautiful fabric mashups of human bodies that are accompanied by videos of them moving about adding sound and motion to what is silent and still. Would one rather be here, where the creatures are silent and still, or there, where they are speaking and moving? The series ends with *Mothers!!!* (2008), a room draped in white fabric is filled with creatures in whom the difference between a human body and a nonhuman thing has all but vanished: a clothes hanger, a tree, or cascades of hair or silk threads replace a head, folds of fabric replace a body from the waist up as many balls of cotton tumble from the cut open middle of a headless body.

Then, as though to rein in the madness, come the bones of which Lin said that because they are from the earth, they contain a mystery, which is why she likes them. The mystery is what attends things that are as basic as earth, air, fire, and water or electrons, protons, and neutrons. Earth is the most concrete of them and can be held as water, fire, and air cannot. Also, bones are the counterparts of mountains, as blood is of rivers, and we are blood and bones, as the universe is the rivers and mountains beloved of the ancient painters of landscapes. She valued them too for being all the same, whether they are from the lowest or the highest animal. Yet even at this level where differences fade, things are intertwined or cut off, gathered or scattered, proliferating or reduced, big or small, aggressing or withdrawing. We are in a physical world. Bones might be the same, but they cannot stay the same. The creature whose bones they are will die and the bones will be burned or returned to the earth. Transformation rules in the material world. *All the Same* (2011) is a nearly fifty-foot-long horizontal line of 180 of the 260 bones in the human body; they are synthetic bones wound in silk threads that are the colors of the rainbow, threads from the bones pooling on the floor to make a splash of color. The colors meld into each other as they do in a rainbow, and the bones decrease in size from left to right of the line. Each is different in color and size, but they belong together, all the same in the value of their contribution to the fifty-foot string of differences.

Tools are added to bones to which they are said to be nearly the same in *More or Less the Same* (2011), where a bone and a connected tool wrapped in silver thread rest on each of eighty stainless-steel stands. First in the arc of Lin's works household objects were wrapped, then bones, and now bones joined to tools. Tools, like bones, do not, we might say, exist for their own sake. One never meets a bone that is not part of the skeleton of an animal, and tools are used to make things. Why bones and tools? Perhaps it is this: neither bones nor tools are usually seen as other useful things like tables, chairs,

clothes, and bodies, are. Bones gives bodies shape and tools make and repair things; they exist in a shadow as chairs and bodies do not. *Almost the Same* (2011) both makes them visible and wraps them as one would wrap a precious thing and thereby sacralizes them. As an example of what can be said to be sacralized, *The Golden Mean* (2012) is an approximately fifteen-by-nine-foot panel of what looks like gold silk across which are strewn synthetic bones wrapped in gold silk, golden and blue threads, some in single strands, some in tangles, at least two pairs of scissors, and a few small blotches of bright blue. These bones are the only ones in the exhibition that are not wrapped in string, but the string with which to do so is there. So are two tiny pairs of scissors to cut the thread to the right size, one near the lower-left corner of the panel, the other about one-third in from the right side and one-third up from the bottom. The finger-holds of the scissors lie over two fingers of a skeleton hand that also has loose threads lain across it. Further, very small pairs of bones spill out from each of the top and sides of the panel as though running away lest they be bound. Bones and threads both join things, but threads also cover things. Why? To render them useless, to preserve them, to protect them? Threads sew the fabrics that make the clothes that cover the bodies whose form is given by its bones.

The golden mean is what lies between too much and too little and no doubt refers to what is between. Lin is interested in contrasts and how contrasting terms or traits can be transformed. The conceptual space between such terms or traits is, then, of interest to her. What is between is often what connects, as bones and thread do. What is joined can, we know, be sundered—hence, the scissors. However, it is the connecting, not the sundering, that interests Lin Tianmiao. It is, she will say in her artist statement for her 2018 exhibition in Shanghai, *Systems*, interconnectivity between humans and everything else that interests her. Yes, she might allow that each porcelain sunflower seed in Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* (2011) that covered 1,000 square meters of floor in the Tate Modern is an individual especially since having been made by hand, as is each seed in nature. But what she cares about is each seed's connection with the plant, the earth, and the sun, as each of these spreads out to include the whole.

Notice the difference between Ai and Lin in that in his work he goes out to as far as people go, while in hers, Lin stays close to physical objects and the materials that cover and underlie them. In later works she turns to words in Chinese and English that are used to name and label women. It is to words in English and Chinese, embroidering them on embroidery hoops and, with thick thread, on the floor, it is to names for women, many of them slang, that she turns. The embroidery hoops installation is *Badges* (2009). Notice, in her focus on what covers and what spills out of the body, how close she is to Chen

Lingyang (*Twelve Flower Months*) and Xing Danwen (*Born with the Cultural Revolution*). The works in *According to What?* and *Bound Unbound*, different in subject and in reach, are alike in being are contemporary in Osborne's sense of befitting their time, which they do by reflecting and contributing to the material turn that is a response to the mid-twentieth-century linguistic turn in the west, to creative work in the neurosciences, and to globalism. It is a response to globalism in that material in its myriad transformations is less bound by time and place, history and culture, than are all the meanings and uses it has borne over time and place. Material speaks across cultures in a way that the meanings that cultures invest it with do not. Material is a least common denominator, as are the stories that tell why the artists chose those materials or sites to make their works of art.

NOTES

1. marxist.org. Accessed June 2, 2019.
2. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).
3. Ibid., 72.
4. Ibid., 73.
5. Ibid., 72.
6. Ibid., 76–77.
7. Ibid., 85.
8. Ibid., 73.
9. Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), critic of mid-twentieth-century art, strongly influenced Abstract Expressionism and had a great influence on the field of criticism.
10. Some say that 2018, when it became possible for Xi Jinping to be president for life, marked the end of the relative freedom promised by Deng Xiaoping's opening of China to the west in 1978.
11. Mami Kataoka, "According to What?—A Questioning Attitude," in *Ai Weiwei, According to What?* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2012), 11.
12. Kerry Brougher, "Reconsidering Reality—Interview with Ai Weiwei," in *Ai Weiwei, According to What?* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2012), 38–49.
13. Mami Kataoka, "According to What?—A Questioning Attitude," 16.
14. Ibid., 10.
15. This is discussed in Mary Bittner Wiseman, *The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989 and 2017).
16. Mami Kataoka, "According to What?—A Questioning Attitude," 18.
17. I heard him lecture at Art Basel Miami in early December 2009.
18. Melissa Chiu and Lin Tianmiao, "A Conversation with the Artist," in *Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao* (New York: Asia Society, 2012), 18.

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Guo Xiaoyan, "The Defiant Narratives of Lin Tianmiao," in *Bound Unbound*, 22.
22. Melissa Chiu, "The Body in Thread and Bone: Lin Tianmiao," in *Bound Unbound,* 13.
23. A play on "Too big for his breeches," which means his ego is too big. No man would have an ego big enough to fit into the breeches in this work.

Chapter Seven

Mao's Legacy and Danto's Definition

Here is a story about art, about its end and its essence. It is a story that raises two questions with respect to contemporary Chinese art. The first is whether the history of art has come to an end in China with its opening up to the west in 1978, as Danto said art ended in the west with the the appearance of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* in the Stabler Gallery in New York in 1964. The second is whether Danto's definition applies to contemporary Chinese art, which is another way of asking whether an individual work qualifies as art by satisfying Danto's definition.[1] An obvious question is: How can there be anything new to qualify as art if art is at its end? Danto's answer is that art understood as what is embedded in and defined by the modernist narrative would end when the narrative ended, and it has ended.[2] The view that by the 1960s modernism was ending and giving way to postmodernism was, as we saw, challenged by both Osborne and Danto. Osborne claimed postmodernism to be modernism in crisis and by 1989 to have yielded to yet another stage of modernism. Danto, on the contrary, claimed modernism to have so completely ended as not even to survive in the form of postmodernism, whose name implies that it was born of modernism and carries its DNA as children carry that of their parents.

The framework for Danto's view of art history comes from Hegel, but the definition he gives of art is his own. Since he claims that the definition applies to all art, it has to apply to the contemporary art of China so that if it does not, the validity of the definition will be put into question. Yet a work of experimental Chinese art's not satisfying the definition might raise a question as to its meriting the name "art." The definition and the work test each other. What is radical about Danto's theory is that it is *because* the history of art is over that we can have a definition that will be true of all art, whenever and wherever it was made. What is over, according to Danto, is art history understood

as a master narrative with different stages, one morphing into the other in a way that we can eventually explain. One style develops out of another so that artworks are related as belonging to different stages of the same developing story, different scenes and acts of the same play. The idea of history as being able to weave together all the events of a time, no matter how various their contents and contexts, into a single neat braid is the legacy of Hegel.

The idea is this: If art is defined as mimesis or representation, as it was in premodern art, then the appearance of abstract art defeats that definition, and the story of art whose goal was representation gives way to what becomes the story of modern art. However, if art is not defined as being part of some narrative or other, then a given definition will not be defeated by the emergence of a work that does not fit into the defining narrative. But with the end of the defining narrative of modernist art, art has no direction from which a work can deviate and undercut the definition sanctioned by the narrative. Art can do and be whatever it wants. This puts a burden on and creates an exhilarating freedom for the artist, the audience, and the art critic. An upshot of this is that posthistorical art (art made after the end of the history of modern art) depends as heavily on *interpretation* for its identity as it had previously depended on its place in art's family tree. It is perhaps no accident that Danto started out as an artist, became a philosopher, and while still a philosopher became the art critic for the magazine *The Nation*. Art, art criticism, and art theory need each other. What we have here is a story about art theory and art criticism, of which Danto's work is a stellar example. Look first at the Hegelian background to Danto's claim and at how it is that *Brillo Box* (1964) dealt a deathblow to art history so understood. This is the first part of the chapter; the second is Danto's definition, and the third, its application to some works of the new art from China.

THE END OF ART

Hegel (1770–1831)

The story begins with Danto's philosophy of *art history* and ends with his philosophy of *art*, whose centerpiece is the desired definition. However, since nothing comes from nothing, the story really begins with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), whose conception of history as the record of spirit's coming to consciousness of itself over time resonated with Danto. What resonated in particular is that on Hegel's view, the world spirit first becomes conscious of itself through art. Hegel speaks of the world spirit, best understood as the spirit of the time expressed in its art and culture. The world spirit's becoming conscious of and expressing itself are in lock step.

We need not decide the question as to whether these are one thing or two that are essentially connected. We need but realize that we can know the spirit only though its expressions. What is key here is that history is conceived as a progressive development that brings changes in its wake.

The conception of history of Karl Marx (1818–1882) is a materialist one in which the relation between owners of the material means of production and workers, not between spirit and nature, is what changes over time. In the theory of evolution of Marx's contemporary Charles Darwin (1809–1882), thanks to the instinct for survival in each individual organism, the relation between the individual and its environment determines the way its species develops over time. Time and the changes it brings were the heroes of the nineteenth century in the west. Among those who paved the way for such theories were two eighteenth-century thinkers, a philosopher and an art historian and archeologist. The former was Gianbattista Vico (1668–1744), who hotly contested Descartes's rationalism, and the latter, Johann Joachim Winkelmann (1717–1788), whom Pope Clement XIII appointed Prefect of the Antiquities of the Vatican in 1763. Winkelmann was the first to apply the categories of style in a systematic way to the history of western art. He articulated the differences between Greek, Greco-Roman, and Roman art and is considered to be the father of western art history. Unrivaled in his knowledge of ancient art, he championed Greek art as the source and perfect model for western art. His *History of Ancient Art* (1764) is said to be the first book written in German to become a classic in English.[3]

Vico parried Descartes by looking to facts rather than ideas and to genetic accounts rather than analyses in order to understand the facts and ideas. His masterwork is *The New Science*, whose final version appeared in 1744, twenty years before Winkelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764).[4] Its central doctrine is that there is a philosophy of the human race that "produces an ideal eternal history . . . traversed in time by all the particular histories of the nations, each with its rise, development, acme, decline and fall."[5] The new science is, he says, a history not only of nations but also of the ideas, customs, and deeds of human beings. Given the inevitable decline and fall of nations, history's line is not straight, but spiral, moving from the bestial, that is, near to the state of nature, to the eras of gods.

Because human beings are prone to corruption, nations risk returning to the bestial and therefore failing as nations, that is, falling. When this happens, nations rise to live again through the eras of gods, heroes, and humans. This is a model of history alternative to Hegel's, according to which the world spirit moved directly from ancient Egypt to mid-eighteenth-century Europe, from symbolic art to Romantic poetry and on to philosophy, with no falls of empires or returns to a near state of nature.

Since Hegel's view of history is consistent with the way western art historians had theorized the history of art as Winkelmann had done from the ancient Greeks to the moderns, it was natural for Danto to turn to Hegel when seeking an explanation for the upheavals in the western art world in the 1960s. One prevailing view is that the causes and effects of the upheavals lay in modernism's gradually being replaced by postmodernism. Danto, however, rejected the term "postmodernism," saying that after modernism art became not postmodern but posthistorical. Better had he said post *art*-historical for he did not mean that after the 1960s art escaped history *tout court*, but that it was escaping western art history's master narrative, the last installment of which was the modernist one. Art was no longer to be defined by this narrative, written as it was in large part by Clement Greenberg.[6]

Crucial to Hegel's conception of history is that of the growing self-consciousness of spirit, which Danto transposes into the growing self-consciousness of art *as art*. There is something intuitively right about this transposition, as we see when we look at Hegel's account of spirit's journey to self-consciousness. Aristotle noted that people take pleasure in imitation, and the ancients, the Attic sculptors in particular, represented the human body so as to provide this pleasure. From Giotto de Bondone (1267–1337) through the Renaissance, artists sought faithfully to imitate nature and to represent the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface by using, among other things, devices such as perspective, foreshortening, and chiaroscuro. Hegel sees no significant change in the history of art from the ancient world until the eighteenth century, when spirit turned inward and away from the natural world represented in visual art to express itself in German Romantic poetry. Spirit's turning inward can only mean that artists started looking not to the physical world but to their feelings and their thoughts, and so to manifest the reigning spirit in the nonspatial terms of poetry and music, in words and sounds. But this is to get ahead of the story. In Hegel's very western view, spirit and nature are different, opposites even, but spirit first externalizes itself in natural forms and comes to recognize itself only in and through them. The relation between spirit and nature is represented in art, which is the first of three ways spirit becomes aware of itself. Religion and philosophy are the other two; in them spirit is expressed, respectively, through faith and reason.

Trios such as art, religion, and philosophy abound in Hegel. Another is symbolic, classical, and Romantic, the stages through which spirit goes as it gains greater and greater self-knowledge. In the symbolic era, exemplified by the art of Egypt, sensuous nature only points to or symbolizes spirit. In the classical era of ancient Greece, sensuous nature perfectly expresses spirit, especially in Attic sculpture, but spirit has yet little reflective self-awareness.

Finally, in the Romantic era in western Europe, spirit has come to have a highly developed, subjective sense of self, but it is not perfectly expressed in art, which, then discovers its limitations in its effort to express the distinctive features of modern consciousness of spirit as subjectivity. The physical was ascendant in the symbolic world, barely indicating the spirit inside it, while in the classical world, the two were in perfect harmony, and in the Romantic world, spirit was ascendant as artworks became increasingly less spatial. Art moved from the three dimensions of sculpture in Egypt and Greece to the two dimensions of painting—an important art of the Romantic era—to the absence of spatial dimensions in poetry, which sought to marry the conceptual and the sensual, and to music, which is purely sensual. Poetry was the art *par excellence* of Romanticism. Greek Attic sculpture and German Romantic poetry were, respectively, the high points of classical and Romantic art. The end of the classical era marked the end of the *perfection* of the expression of spirit in a sensuous medium. In the Romantic period spirit transcended its need for expression in a sensuous medium and eventually turned inward to the faith of religion and the reason of philosophy. What ended here was matter's ability to give an even merely *adequate* expression of spirit. Art would still be made, Hegel allowed, but it would no longer be the fullest expression of spirit, come now to virtually full self-awareness. What, then, would it express? The story continues.

Arthur C. Danto (1926–2013)

Danto also has a trio of art periods that reflect not the changing relations between art's material medium and its spiritual content but changing conceptions of what art is. In the first, art was mimesis or representation and had an essential connection to the world whose job it was to represent. In the second period, art came to the realization that imitating was just one of the things that art can do, and various theories arose about what art should be and do. Each theory tried to eliminate its competitors on the ground that what they were making was not art. Think, for example, of the rapid succession of styles from the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century as faithfulness to the world gave way finally to painting's self-consciousness about itself as painting. No longer tethered to the world by the legacy of the Renaissance, art turned its eyes from the world to itself, and asked what really *its relation to the world was*. It asked also what really *it was*. Driven by these new questions, art became more or less successively Impressionism, post-Impression, Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, color field painting, and so on. Each style was identified no longer by how it looked like the world but

simply by how it looked—until, that is, the appearance of conceptual art, which need have no look at all. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) called modern art "retinal art." As an antidote to retinal art, he took ordinary manufactured objects and exhibited them as works of readymade art, including such as *Bottle Rack* (1914), *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915), *Comb* (1916), and *Fountain* (1917), his most famous, a urinal signed "R. Mutt 1917." He put them forward as antidotes not because there was nothing in them to see, clearly there was, but to say that being of visual interest does not make, say, *Fountain* an art object rather than a urinal.

In a different art world and with different intentions, Zhang Huan and Song Dong, like Duchamp, exhibited real things as works of art in *Hope Tunnel* (2010) (Figure 9) and *Waste Not: Things, Memory, and Family Ethics* (2005–2011), respectively. There was this crucial difference from Duchamp's ready-mades: the identity of the particular objects Zhang and Song exhibited, a train damaged in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the contents of the home of the artist's mother during the Cultural Revolution mattered as the particular shovel in *In Advance of a Broken Arm* did not. Any shovel would have done. This is a different story: this Chinese art is art as memory, as history, by virtue of its particular material.

Retinal art would not be laid to rest for fifty years, when art became posthistorical and the third period of art began, which was when Sol Lewitt published "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1967), showing Duchamp's work to have borne fruit in the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. Art's becoming conceptual was not a rejection of the retinal in art, but a rejection of the view that art had to look a certain way or, indeed, that it had to look at all, it could be just an idea. That modernism should have appeared in the west in the second half of the nineteenth century and begun to disappear and radically to change in the second half of the twentieth is to be explained in part by changes in the cultures the art reflected. Modernism came on the scene after art began to present itself as a unified practice in the early nineteenth century and after museums were established to display the art of the past. Before that "art" would have been used to refer to a product of one or other of the so-called "fine arts." As a self-contained human practice, art in the early nineteenth century was drawing attention to itself, and the modernist question of what made art different from other human practices came in the wake of these changes.

Danto dated his realization that art had ended to his seeing Warhol's *Brillo Box* in 1964, the year that saw the United States escalate its involvement in the Vietnam War with the Gulf of Tonkin incident, pass a momentous Civil Rights Act, and have the Beatles, the English rock band that came to exemplify the 1960s, make their initial visit.

THE ESSENCE OF ART

What Danto saw in the Stabler Gallery was art being made about an ordinary everyday object whose reach went no further than the supermarket shelf and whose look was the same as what sat on the shelf. Because the differences were *indiscernible*, nothing sensible and, therefore, no aesthetic properties could indicate whether or not an object was a work of art. How, then, could one tell? Danto says how. The difference between art and non-art must be conceptual, if difference there is. His definition consists of five conditions a work must satisfy to qualify as art. One, it is about something, which means that it has a *subject* that it represents. Two, it projects a *point of view* or takes an attitude toward its subject. Three, it does this through a rhetorical figure, usually a *metaphor*. Four, the viewer has to *interpret* the metaphor. Five, it is made against a background of art history and art theory. This last means that, for example, Wassily Kandinsky's *Composition VI* (1913) and Kasimir Malevich's *Black and Red Square* (1915) could not have been made in the Renaissance because of what art was then understood to be.

Just as there is art after the end of the history of modern art, so there is a history of what counts as art after the end of narrative art history. This nonnarrative history is like a chronicle in which one thing simply follows another with nothing to explain why it does or why any item is part of the same chronicle as any other. What kinds of things follow each other and are in the same chronicle would be those that satisfied the definition of art. True, being part of a narrative can explain what something is and why it exists, and a nonnarrative history would not have such explanatory power. Yet there is much to do with things other than to explain them, and many are the relations between things other than those that rest on reasons or causes and effects. The condition that art must be made against a background of art history is not undone by narrative art history's having ended. What can change over time is not the definition but the kinds of things to which the conditions apply. What can change is what kinds of things can count as a subject, a point of view, a rhetorical ellipsis, an interpretation, or art history. Danto's claim that art has ended turns out to be the claim that narrative art history has ended, which underscores the fact that none of the concepts in his definition is simple or self-evident and they are, therefore, indebted to the theories of art and the philosophers and critics who construct them, as they ought, from art practice. Hence, the force of the condition that art be made against the background of an historically situated art theory.

Danto uses three pairs of indiscernibles to introduce the five conditions of his definition. The first pair is simple enough, an artwork and a real thing: Warhol's *Brillo Box* and one of the many boxes on the supermarket shelf.

The real thing is just what it is, a box of steel-wool cleaning pads, while the artwork is a representation of it. The *subject* of the artwork, what it is about, is the real thing from which it can hardly be distinguished. Warhol could have done what Duchamp did and put a real Brillo box in the gallery and titled it *Brillo Box*; instead he made something that represented the box. In doing that he was, according to Danto, expressing something that would make the viewer see Brillo boxes in a new way, and it is the viewer's job to figure out what attitude toward it Warhol was expressing. Duchamp was not doing exactly the same thing as Warhol. He challenged us to say why the urinal was not art, and Warhol dared us to say that *Brillo Box* was not. It was a representation, after all, and the urinal was not.

The second pair is a pair of representations. One is a 1962 Pop Art painting by Roy Lichtenstein, *Portrait of Madame Cezanne*, which is a painting of a Loran diagram of Cezanne's *Portrait of Madame Cezanne* (1885–1887). The other is the 1943 diagram by Erle Loran. The subject of Loran's diagram is Cezanne's portrait of his wife, and the subject of Lichtenstein's painting is Loran's diagram of Cezanne's portrait. Both are representations of their subjects. While Warhol was elevating mass-produced products to the status of art, it looked as though Lichtenstein were demoting masterpieces of art by reducing them to their diagrams. Loran tried to sue Lichtenstein for plagiarism, but his 1962 *Portrait of Madame Cezanne* was legally validated as original and the suit dismissed. Rather than demoting Cezanne's portrait, Lichtenstein was appropriating the diagram of it to make a point. The difference between the two lay in the fact that Lichtenstein painted Loran's diagram to make a point about Cezanne, while Loran did not diagram Cezanne's portrait to make a point about it. This is Danto's second art-making condition.

The same pair of representations serves to introduce the third condition, which is that the point of view required by the second condition is made through a rhetorical ellipsis, often a metaphor. Danto developed a theory of visual metaphor from "Metaphor, Expression, and Style" (1981) to "Metaphor and Cognition" (1992), and metaphor came to be increasingly central in his theory of art. An artwork is a metaphor, he claims, as far as it moves the spectator to see the subject of the artwork in the new way indicated by the point of view projected onto to it by the artwork. Lichtenstein used Loran's diagram as a metaphor for Cezanne's way of seeing the world. Loran reduced the portrait to geometry, and Lichtenstein used this reduction of the portrait to reduce Cezanne's way of seeing the world to geometry. We are now to look at the diagram on Lichtenstein's canvas and see that, for example, it is Cezanne's vision of the world as composed of cubes, cones, and spheres that prevails in his portrait of his wife.

The same pair of representations introduces the fourth condition, that the viewer must interpret the metaphor. This makes the viewer's role crucial to something's being a work of art. This is not unlike John Searle's condition that a speech act occurs only when the person to whom it is addressed receives it. The difference is that a speech act is addressed to a particular person, while an artwork is not. To understand the relation between the subject of the artwork and the attitude the work expresses toward the subject, the viewer has to discover what unites them. This is to make the viewer's interpretation necessary for a work to succeed; if the work cannot be or has never been interpreted, it has failed as a work of art, whose *raison d'être* is, according to Danto, to cause its viewer to see or feel toward its subject in a novel way. Loran reduced Cezanne's portrait of his wife to geometry and Lichtenstein reduced Cezanne's way of seeing the world to geometry. The diagram is a metaphor for how Cezanne saw the world because both his diagram and Cezanne's vision of the world reduce their subjects to geometry.

A third pair of indiscernibles introduces the fifth condition that the work be made against the background of art theory and art history. The final pair is Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615) and a book by a character, Pierre Menard, in a story by Jorge Luis Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (1941). The pair consists of word-for-word identical novels, one by Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) and the other by Pierre Menard, a character in a 1941 story. Both are works of art, and there are no differences within the novels, but they have different properties. The language in Menard's novel is archaic while that in Cervantes's is not. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is set in the time of its author; Menard's is not. And Cervantes is a real person, and Menard is not. The point of the example is to show that the historical context of a work is part of its identity. The background of art theory required by Danto will be one that is or was in place at the time of the creation of the work, which is why Malevich's *Black and Red Square* could not have been made in the Renaissance.

One of the subversive strategies in Chapter 1 was to subvert the belief that contemporary western art theory was adequate to contemporary Chinese art, and yet, in the face of this, Chapter 6 details Osborne's conception of the contemporary, and this chapter does the same with Danto's definition of art and claims that both are relevant to the art that is our subject. This does not undermine the claim that reigning western theories of art are not adequate to new Chinese art because neither Osborne nor Danto accept the one dominant at the time. Neither has accepted the postmodern continuation of the modernist narrative: Osborne because it does not allow value judgments, and Danto because it is too closely tied to modernism in being the negation of modernism's values. Each has the sense that art is now unmoored from historically

sanctioned theories, and this at the time when art is becoming increasingly global. Art made by Chinese artists living in China or elsewhere is marked by Chinese-ness even though it might look just like something made in Brooklyn by an American.[7] That is to say that to be global art need not be free of the culture in which it was born. There might not be only one spirit of a time and a place, and spirits that appear in one place might not be confined to that place or to that time, as postmodernism has shown us by combining disparate styles, often from different times, in one work. Nonetheless, the combination and configuration of these spirits are unique to a place and a time. Art reflects its time and its place, in part because of the conceptual background that both authorizes and defines the art.

This happens as art practice and art theory do a complicated and beautiful dance as they seek a reflective equilibrium, complicated as the dance is by the presence of art from other parts of the globe. Looking at any art though the conceptual lens of another culture reveals things about each that might not otherwise have been seen or known. Art theories reflect the different interests of their framers and are more or less fine grained. Moreover, they are theories of the art of their culture, which is a function in part of its history and geography. The gift of globalization in art is that we have access to the arts of different cultures through which we come better to understand our own as well as the cultures from which the other arts come. Osborne has said that critics' interpretations and the theories that surround them are the means through which individual works of art can make the case that they are art.

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

Mao's Legacy

When western investment was invited into China, the fact that the west's art was as welcome as its investments led the western art world to presume that the Mao era was more over than it was. Although the break from Mao was radical, it did not go all the way down. Lineaments of what remains are seen in the words of the first two recipients of the Chinese Contemporary Art Critic Awards that were founded in 2007. They show how different their attitudes toward art are from those of western critics. The first is from Pauline Yao's *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* (2008):

> My specific task here is to offer a means by which to understand art in China through the social politics of production, rather than through the common interpretive rubric of iconography and representation. . . . The ongoing treatment of authorship is intended not to settle questions of authorship and credit, but

> with respect to the cult of individualism that surrounds the capitalist system. Whose labor is encoded in the art object? Whose labor is valued, who does the valuing, and why?[8]

In the western world, capitalists and their managers provide the ideas, money, guidance, and oversight for others to produce goods and provide services; workers are those who actually produce and provide. In a communist world, the government does what capitalists and managers do, owning what it owns in the name of the people, all of whom are considered workers. This is the model in whose light Yao says that the credit for a work of art should go to all who have anything to do with making it. To do otherwise is to succumb to what she refers to as the cult of individualism. There is an elaborate and far-reaching system of art education in China, and until the west got involved there were no independent art galleries or museums. Since Mao's talk on art and literature in 1942, it was clear that the government or the communist party intended to control what art was made. But no more. The price paid by artists who sought to be independent of the system entitles them to be credited with what they innovate and create. Chinese artists do include and credit many others than themselves for their work, but to acknowledge their often nearly exclusive role in crafting the work is not to cede to them the idea for it.

For example, when it is exhibited, Cai Guo-Qiang brings the same seven Japanese workers to the museum to reassemble the fifteen-meter-long wreck of a fishing boat that had been trapped under the waters off the coastal Japanese city of Iwaki and is exhibited as *Reflection—A Gift from Iwaki* (2004). In the same vein, Zhang Huan, for the exhibition *Hope Tunnel* (2010) (Figure 9), made a video of the process of his crew going to Xian to buy a damaged car of a train and get it back to Zhang's studio in Shanghai, where it was cleaned up and made ready to exhibit in the Ullens Gallery in Beijing. The train itself and its full history are what is on display in the gallery, how it was damaged, rescued, and made ready to be shown. The work includes more than this, however. It includes what Zhang says about it that is displayed on a wall plaque in the exhibition:

> It is a witness to history, at a time when the whole world is looking forward toward the future, preserving the past seems more important then ever, reflecting on the disaster, investigating the causes, mitigating future disasters and living in harmony with our environment rather than trying to conquer it—that's where the real future is, the tunnel of hope that leads us to tomorrow.[9]

These words are as closely connected to the train as are the poems included with classical Chinese paintings over many centuries, exemplifying the Three Perfections: painting, poetry, and calligraphy. Painting was silent poetry and

poetry, painting with words. In the calligraphy of the poem is the same dance of lines as there is in the painting, so close are they. The traditional concern for harmony with nature expressed in Zhang's words is hardly a sign of his having succumbed to the capitalist cult of individualism.

Yao's idea that art in China is to be understood in terms of the social means of its production is not useful because it does not contribute either to working or to thinking through art to answer the questions of what art in China is and what it is for. The questions insist thanks to the hegemony, waning though it may be, of western art and the increasing availability of art from all over the globe. Yao's questions instead are "Whose labor is encoded in the art object? Whose labor is valued, who does the valuing, and why?" The answer is that it is the creative labor of the artist, the craft of the artist and his studio craftsman, many of whose solutions to problems that arise are creative. She might mean to include the work of those responsible for its being exhibited, such as shippers, packers, insurers, handlers, exhibition designers, and the like. But for them, the public would not see the work. Yet they are to be credited for no more than getting the physical object on display. Yao is making a legitimate plea that Chinese artists not forget that everything we have that is not an outright gift of nature, many of whose gifts need to be harvested, requires someone's labor. Her calling individualism a capitalist cult, however, could be based on the west's view that the state exists for the individual rather than the communist idea that the individual exists to serve the state. What many current Chinese artists want is not based on the question of who exists to serve whom, but for government and society alike to recognize that each individual is unique, something in and of herself, and worth respect for that. To call individualism a cult is to reduce the idea of the individual to a fabrication or an idealization of capitalism and to make a mockery of the wish of many Chinese artists to be respected as individuals.

In offering a way to understand art through its production rather than interpretation of what is produced, Yao is moving the object of understanding from a work's meaning to its material. This comports with the view that the material of a work, and its material circumstances, are as or more central to its identity and meaning as its form or its content. The incompatibility of the languages of communism and capitalism moved Chinese artists to pursue their art where matter, gesture, and instinct reign. This is of a piece with the movement in western art theory away from its focus on language to the body, its senses, and its neurological structures. Inquiry into the breadth and depth of the penetration of language into most aspects of our lives and thought was appropriate given its undeniable influence, but it is natural that this linguistic turn should have led to an effort to discover what might escape the networks of language, what might still be raw and real. This is where the senses hold

sway, particularly the simplest of them, touch, which puts us into direct contact with the material of the world. Yao's focus is not on the material, however, nor on how it is worked, but on those who do the working. Respect is sought for the work they do, yet what Chinese artists want is to be respected for who as individual men and women they are.

In *Art Intervenes in Society—A New Artistic Relationship* (2010) Wang Chunchen lays out a position different from Yao's. The book's title says what art's social engagement should be, namely, intervention in society. Wang said that art ought not be valued for its form, its aesthetic properties, or its commercial value, that is, we should not look on art as something that exists for itself alone or as a commodity. We should instead value art as an expression and interpretation of life. He goes on to say:

> With China's GDP soaring ever higher, it is impossible for people to face the radical changes around them with unperturbed minds and equanimity. Every social ailment comes into focus; every ethical principle is challenged. . . . All aesthetic questions [become] ethical ones. . . . Thus, Chinese contemporary art is no more than an appeal for individual rights, . . . a hard-won testimony to the value of the individual.[10]

Artists have been affected by the industrialization that came in the wake of capitalization. First, they lost their studios. In the 1990s and 2000s they had set up studios on farmland on the edge of the city and in abandoned factories, but by the late 2000s the studios were being destroyed to make way for urban development. Wang said this was a wakeup call to artists, a sign of how low the status and little the influence of art in China. Accordingly, his first example of an art intervention is *Warming Winter* (2009–2010) about the destruction of the Zhengyang Art District, in which the resident artists were joined by artists from elsewhere in lying down on the ruins of the district on January 10, 2010. They were artists on strike, and this at precisely the time when new Chinese art was gaining international recognition. This was intervention as protest, and protest as threat. Another work took a different tack, a performance in which Wu Yiqiang stood naked in the snow in the ruins on December 29, 2009; he was a figure of defiance, standing up without so much as the protection of clothes to those who tore the studios down.

Artists who chose to work outside the far-reaching state system of art would soon have no place to go. The art districts were lost for economic reasons. Performance art and independent exhibitions were forbidden lest they threaten social stability, that is, for political reasons. Thanks to a booming art market, however, that changed. Art became a positive cultural entity, and the government eased up on artists by no longer banning their underground

art or arresting them. That did not last. In 2011, Ai Weiwei was under house arrest for eighty-one days, ostensibly for tax evasion, but really for protesting the government's role in and reaction to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Even so, restriction on artists' free expression came from another quarter, as the art market tempted artists to make art that threatened to stifle their experimental spirit. Meanwhile, the prosperity that contributed to the rise of the art market created severe social problems such as depredation of the environment, growing economic inequality, and disparity between urban and rural life. Industrialization requires land for factories and water to power its machines. This has led to massive expropriation of farmland: 40 to 50 million farmers have recently lost their land. In 1978, 82% of the population was rural, 18% urban. By 2016, 43% of the population was rural, 56% urban, and much of the shift had not been voluntary. In light of these changes, Wang Chunchen said, "If one has not lived in such a country for long, it is impossible to grasp the feelings provoked by fleeting spatial-temporal transformations and to gauge such a fundamental transformation's full impact on the spiritual and psychological condition."[11] The effect of the need for water is seen in the exhibition *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2008), for land in *Warming Winter* (2008–2009), and for land and profit in *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains, No. 32* (2010) (Figure 7), a series of at least fifty-five paintings in ash by Zhang Huan.

Wang Chunchen notes that contemporary artists announce through their practice that the nature, value, and function of art has changed utterly. They asked what art was and also how art could be contemporary, that is, *for* the present. This mattered because in the present people and the environment are being sacrificed to industry and its markets, and they cannot speak their minds. But artists can. They can by staying below any particular ideology, below words to where live the impulses, desires, and thoughts that give birth to words. It is from there that artists are better able to see through, under, and around the contradictions of communism and capitalism. To do this, to go there, is not to seek an objectivity that puts them above and outside the action or situation; it is rather to seek to go as far down inside it as possible, beyond what Kant calls "the dear self," in order to reach what Yeats called "the deep heart's core."[12] To intervene is to intercede, to mediate between two things, where harmony is the relation between virtually any two things most valued in traditional Chinese thought. This is because of a fundamental belief that there is a deep-down harmony between heaven, earth, and humankind. There is the further belief that art can mediate dissonant relations between people and nature, and people and society, by doing what the people cannot so easily do and be heard, protest, remind, make a plea, express a wish, set an example, and look and talk in a new way.

This can be done more subtly in China than in the west for a reason that is not always noticed or given due credit, one that can at best be glimpsed here. Chinese names and descriptions are often poetry, and symbolism is rife. Look, for example, at the names of the back three palaces in the Forbidden City. One is the Palace of Celestial Purity, which means "lucid sky" and is a symbol of national stability and the clear and magnanimous behavior of the emperor. It also represents the masculine. Another, the Palace of Earthly Tranquility, represents the feminine. The front of the three palaces represents the emperor's supreme, solemn, dignified, glorious, and majestic kingship. One of the four gates in the city is the Gate of Supreme Harmony and another, the Gate of Divine Might.[13] More poetry and less symbolism is to be found in one connoisseur's already mentioned description that likens the power of the brush to the force of a boulder plummeting down a hillside or the gracefulness of the fleeting patterns left on the surface of a pond by flying geese.

In a different register, Indo-European languages are more abstract and Chinese closer to concrete experience: the former fashions nouns out of verbs and adjectives and relies on such second-order nominalizations, whereas the latter relies on verbs and adjectives. Perry Link in *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, and Politics* asks how far our belief in "the real existence of 'government', say, or 'the good' . . . derives from the mere linguistic quirk underlying our propensity as speakers of English to traffic in nominalized abstractions?"[14] An abstract question like "What is the meaning of rhythmic patterning in language" can be asked more directly with "What does rhythm do in language?" This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's saying one ought not ask, for example, "What does the word 'time' mean?" as though expecting an answer like "Time is . . . ," but should instead ask how the word is used. This does keep the conversation about language, but asks a matter-of-fact question about how the word functions in everyday life.

Wang Chunchen said that all aesthetic questions become ethical ones given the way people's lives are being increasingly determined by the needs of industrialization and the market. Mao was right that art should serve the people, although he meant it was to serve the communist revolution. Wang too wants art to serve the people by saving them from becoming pawns in the play of capital, as many people came to be at the dawn of the industrialization of the west. Charles Dickens, for one, played the role that Wang hopes artists will play in contemporary China. Art, then, is not to be judged by its aesthetic properties, but by when and how it mediates the needs of the people with the needs of the economy by communicating to them and to the government how the people's well-being is at risk. There is a sense in which *Art Intervenes in Society* is a screed against industrialization and, therefore, capitalism, and what it is doing to the environment.

Consider, for example, Cai Guo-Qiang's *The Ninth Wave* (2014) (Figure 15), a work commissioned by the Power House Station of Art in Shanghai, China's first publicly funded contemporary art museum, for the first solo exhibition of his work in Shanghai. It consists of an old fishing boat from Cai's hometown of Quanzhou that was outfitted there with ninety-nine life-sized animals fabricated by him and his workshop. On July 12, 2014, the boat sailed from there to arrive at the Huangpu River on July 17 and sail past the Bund in Shanghai. Tigers, pandas, camels, and apes cling to the sides of the boat like the people in Ivan Alvazovsky's 1850 painting, *The Ninth Wave,* of survivors of a shipwreck barely holding onto the ship's mast and their lives, helpless in the face of nature's unforgiving forces. The title refers to the nautical tradition that waves grow larger and stronger in a series up to the ninth, the largest. Cai's work is a response to an appalling effect of the environmental crisis evidenced by the high levels of smog in the air that led in 2013 to 16,000 dead pigs found floating down the Huangpu River. Cai's *Ninth Wave* expresses shock at what we are doing to nature and cries for the government and the people to do something. Once the boat docked at the pier by the Power House Art Station, it was put into the museum, where there were eleven other works by Cai in various media. One, alluding to the pollution of the river, was *Silent Ink*, 2,000 liters of black ink poured into a 250-square-meter lake dug out of the gallery floor. Another was *The Bund without Us*, a 27-by-4-meter gunpowder drawing of the Bund overtaken by nature and without people. Cai used animal and plant images from the later nineteenth-century Shanghai School that evoked the era of the literati painters who lived when life was simpler and people lived in harmony with the nature we are depredating.

Similarly, the curator Wu Hung, in *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2008), invited four artists working in different genres to respond to the project. This is an interesting difference from what curators in the United States are apt to invite artists to respond to, namely, to works in their museums or to another particular artist, but not to a large and unsettling engineering project like the Three Gorges Dam. Two of the four artists whom Wu Hung invited turned to the tradition. The video artist Chen Quilin referred to two ancient operas, *Farewell My Concubine* and *Madame White Snake*, in two of the four videos she made to catalogue her changing attitudes and feelings toward seeing her home village submerged. The ink artist Yun-Fei Ji made a scroll showing people fleeing a disaster in the manner of traditional scenes of people fleeing but from natural disasters, not such as those caused by the Three Gorges Dam. In a marked difference from how western critics and curators interact with artists, the catalogue for *Displacement* has lengthy interviews by the curator, Wu Hung, with each of

the four artists. Their history—who their parents were and what they did, the artists' education and how they came to be artists—does not place their art in the appropriate art historical narrative, which is what would have been of interest to a western curator, but in history simply. In the face of the anonymity of people during the Mao years, it is interesting that such details are sought and made available. We know, for example, that Xu Bing's mother worked in a library where he spent hours playing with books he could not read and that Cai Guo-Qiang was raised in a coastal town where he saw explosions in battles over the water and became familiar with boats. Contexts and connections are prized in China as they are not in the west.

This brings us to the two questions with which the chapter began. The first was whether the history of art had come to an end in China with its opening up to the west. The answer is no. The point of my sketching the positions of the two winners of the contemporary art critic awards was to note how each is faithful to a practice from the Mao years. Yao is faithful to the egalitarian refusal to single out an individual as the "owner" of an artwork and Wang to the insistence that art has an ethical charge to make people's lives better, as did the Communist Party, founded as it was on a promise to improve people's lives. Nor is there a decisive break with the art of the classical tradition despite Mao's efforts to effect one. Yun-Fei Ji, whose stunning ink scroll is in *Displacement*, said to Wu Hung in his interview that he was impressed with a fellow painter, Huang Binghong, who accepted modern things "while completely preserving things from the ancient tradition."[15] Yun-Fei Ji not only appreciated the ancient tradition's being preserved but also realized his connection with it, for he said: "I read a lot of philosophical texts and I suddenly realized that the blood ties with ancient China were even clearer than I had thought."[16] Despite what one might expect in light of Mao's efforts to dim the memory of the classical tradition and refuse entry to art from the west, connections between the art and thought of the Chinese today and the art and thought of the west and Chinese tradition are there, perhaps hidden, in the art. Moreover, Chinese art history was not cast in the form of a Hegelian narrative, coming to an end as narratives do. Were Danto to be asked if a new narrative might begin, he would say that art, thanks to modernism, had become so self-aware as to say "I am what I am and nothing else, dependent on myself and myself alone," that is to say, they no longer need a narrative to define them. Then Andy Warhol came along and said to art, "No, you are not dependent on yourself alone," as the world in the form of Brillo boxes, Coca-Cola bottles, comic strips, and pictures in newspapers and magazine came crashing in. Art, conceived in the high modernist mode, was over, rules about what could and could not be the subjects of art were gone. From the claim that art could be *about* anything to the further one that anything could *be* art was but a short step.

Danto's Definition

The second question asked at the beginning of the chapter was whether Danto's definition applies to the new Chinese art. The answer is yes. Something is a work of art if is about something that figures in a rhetorical trope and has been made against a background of art theory. This is to say that not only is art no longer art by virtue of how it looks but neither is it art just by being art, "I am what I am and nothing else, dependent on myself and myself alone." It is art by virtue of what it does, which, according to Danto, is to show the viewer its subject in a new way, a way that enlightens, moves, or in some other way engages the viewer, and there are myriad ways to do this. *Displacement,* for example, is an intervention in society by showing how like the ravages of a merciless nature are the effects of the dam on people's lives. Art is rhetoric. The job of the viewer is to discover what the trope says about its subject. The work is good if it presents its subject in a new way, and there are different ways of being good. One is to achieve its effect immediately, as, say, Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–1499) does. Another is for a work to have depth and reveal what it has to reveal slowly; yet another is to have breadth and reveal different, even conflicting, things, ambiguities, about its subject, as, for example, Titian's San Salvador *Annunciation* (1564) does.

Here now are three recent works by Chinese artists that answer to Danto's definition of art and a fourth work that puts pressure on the identity of a work of art, on the idea of a single work, and on the concept of the subject of a work, how focused it must be to count as one. This is Xu Bing's *Tobacco Project* (1999–2011).

Water Rising (2006)

Here are several recent Chinese works read through Danto's definition. The first is Yun-Fei Ji's ink scroll *Water Rising* (2006) (Figures 10 and 11) that was exhibited on two walls, meeting at the corner, in *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2008). Yun-Fei Ji had been interested in the dam since the 1990s, and some of his first works on the dam were in an exhibition of his work at the Boston Museum of Fine Art in the early 1990s. When Wu Hung invited him to participate in the exhibition, he visited the site for three weeks in 2002 and came away with a quite different sense of what was happening there than he had before. His idea was to paint an ink scroll in the manner of the early masters, although here people are fleeing a manmade disaster. The devastation was great, buildings had fallen down, furniture was thrown about willy-nilly, branches blocked the way, and people were struggling to carry their possessions on their backs, on bicycles, in wagons, however they possibly could. They were distraught

and near despair. The subject of the work is the effects of the government's having built the dam, causing people quickly to leave as the water rose about them and upended their lives. Aware of the harm that water can do, Yun-Fei made art in response to Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005, and the title of an exhibition of his work in the James Cohan Gallery in New York was the Chinese proverb *Water That Floats the Boat Can Also Sink It. Water Rising* is a metaphor for the power of nature, and the link between the subject of the work, the effects of the Three Gorges Dam and the power of nature is their both being able to wreak havoc on people's lives. From the metaphor it follows that the government, by virtue of having built the dam, is assuming the power of nature to control the waters as, in nature, mountains do. As Shitao had said, and we repeat:

> For the immensity of the world is revealed only by the function of water. And water encircles and embraces it through the pressure of mountains. If the mountains and water do not come together, there will be nothing to circulate with or about, nothing to embrace. And if there is not circulation and embracing, there will be no life and growth.[17]

The government-built dam is linked to nature's mountains by the metaphor that is *Water Rising*. Nature is what the Chinese traditionally revere and to which they strive to adapt themselves. *Water Rising* shows the government's trying to take nature's place, which is to become what the people revere, and it shows the price of the government's making itself a figure for the mountains by controlling the circulation of the Yangtze River to be causing devastation to people, towns, and cultural monuments. Nature itself can and has caused devastation, but whereas we cannot avoid nature's violence, the government can avoid causing the violence it causes. Here is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the government's right build the dam. Assume that a government's responsibility is to provide for its citizens and its pursuit of a policy that harms its citizens contravenes its fulfilling the responsibility. Assume too that China hardly needs the largest power station in the world (which it was until 2016) to provide the increased power it needed for industrialization. That is, the ruin of villages and harm to the environment was not necessary. Therefore, the assumption that the government was justified in building the dam is wrong because it contradicts the presumption that the role of government is to care for its citizens. So does *Water Rising* tacitly argue.

Fairytale (2007)

The second work to which definition is applied is *Fairytale* (2007) by Ai Weiwei. Its subject is the 1,001 Chinese who traveled to and participated in

Documenta 12 between June 16 and September 23, 2007, in Kasel, Germany. *Fairytale* is a metaphor for travelers, and the link between the 1,001 Chinese and travelers is visibility. The Chinese who traveled to Kasel were at the same time the material subjects of the artwork *Fairytale* and were meant to be visible. They were the objects of the gaze of the exhibition's viewers, and at the same time they were observers of the other art objects in the exhibition. As comprising the artwork *Fairytale*, they were visible: artworks intended to be seen. Travelers, which also they were, think of themselves as invisible, having traveled to see what there is to see, not to be seen. However, all travelers, whether immigrants, refugees, pleasure seekers, commercial travelers, or whatever, are visible insofar as they do not blend in, even if only by not being inhabitants of the places they visit, but often in more obvious ways, the way they, look, dress, and act. The assumption is that since travelers do not travel in order to be seen, they are not seen. It is as though their intentions were all. The link between the 1,001 Chinese and travelers, then, is visibility. This is a weak version of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which says that the effort to measure precisely the speed of an electron will change its position randomly so that one cannot simultaneously measure its speed and position. A traveler's presence in a place changes the place, sometimes imperceptibly, so that it is impossible for her to experience it as it is without her foreign presence. Extreme examples are cities or towns whose identity is threatened by being overrun with tourists, as Dubrovnik and Venice are threatened by cruise ships, one of the largest of which carries 6,680 passengers.

Things-in-Themselves (2008)

The third artwork to be read in light of Danto's definition is *Things-in-Themselves* (2008) (Figure 16) by Wang Guangyi, which consists of a room filled floor to ceiling with 5,000 burlap bags of rice, of which he said:

> This particular material has no particular meaning, though the installation has a profound impact on all of us. . . . In many ways, it resembles the influence the term "the thing-in-itself" had on me . . . twenty years ago I made an analogy, saying that the spirit is a product of filling. . . . The burlap sacks are filled with spirit, something invisible and intangible. The phrase itself has a certain theological, revelatory aspect. . . . Grain is a very basic thing. From the perspective of the "descent of the sacred," when we have eaten our fill, we can survive.[18]

Wang Guangyi goes on to say that on a deeper level of interpretation, rice, a grain, would be connected with Genesis in the Old Testament where God says "'Let there be light, and there was light' and wind, and rain, and grain."[19] The subject of *Things-in-Themselves* is grain, and grain is here a figure for

food. The work is a metaphor for transformation, where the link between food and transformation is being necessary for existence. Food is necessary for our existence, as transformation is necessary for the existence of the universe—think of the Big Bang and of evolution—and it is a process to which all matter is subject. The title calls grain a thing-in-itself, an apt name. Kant's things-in-themselves, *noumena,* do not themselves appear, but there would be no appearances, no sense data, without them. They are necessary for sense experience and are, therefore, an important source of knowledge. Similarly, grain and many foods cannot be eaten raw, and, unless we were hunters and gatherers, without it we could not survive. *Noumena* enter our minds and grain or food, our bodies, only when transformed. The transformations do not stop there. Appearances contribute to knowledge only when concepts are imposed upon them, and products made of grain and all food nourish only when digested, itself a complicated process.

Complicated also was the process of putting together the installation, about which Wang said that his art is made by the hands of the people. Two dozen men stacked up the bags of rice, and it took a crew to truck the rice in from far away. He spoke of this as a puzzling thing, "A thing that is the imagination of the artist, but this imagination required countless people to make it a reality."[20] Here Wang, *contra* Pauline Yao, credits the imagination of the artist for the idea even as he credits "countless people" for its embodiment. (She is right, however, that when artists talk and consult with local people, say, in making their work, the others do contribute to its creation.) The aesthetic dimension of this particular embodiment of Wang Guangyi's imagination played its part: "When it reached five meters, my heart was at ease, because the feeling it presented was exactly what I wanted. The mixed aroma of burlap and grain . . . [was] not overwhelming but alluring . . . something about it penetrates you."[21] This is visceral, as is the most interesting work coming out of China in its concreteness, its particularity, its materiality.

Tobacco Project (1999–2011)

Things-in-Themelves is a work made of bags of rice, a staple food of China, the world's largest producer of rice, whose cultivation is labor intensive and its mechanization barely advanced. *Things-in-Themselves* shows how valued rice is in China. Tobacco is a different matter. Rice and tobacco, vegetable life that joins the animal life of *Where Heaven and Earth Meet* (worms) and *Theater of the World* (insects and crawling things that prey on them) that serve as the material in works of new Chinese art. *Tobacco Project* involves a family, a university, a vast commercial enterprise, and exhibitions in three venues, Duke (2000), Shanghai (2004), and Virginia (2011). Xu Bing said that "*To-*

bacco Project collects and organizes various tobacco-related materials into something that is hard to define as either sociology or art."[22] Moreover, the second exhibition, the one in Shanghai, was not a coherent visual display, nor was there a theme connecting the works. "Instead, tobacco inspired him to create a series of disparate objects and installations, each pointing to a specific memory or mediating on the general role of the cigarette in human life . . . some were personal and intimate," like the medical records of his father, who died of lung cancer in 1989, which he projected on the wall of a building for sorting and storing cured tobacco leaves.[23] What makes the trio of exhibitions one is their material, tobacco. *Tobacco Project* is three sets of individual works *about* tobacco that *use* the plant, the cigarette, and the paraphernalia associated with making, selling, and smoking tobacco. The artworks use, they do not *represent*, their subject. This is art's most direct materialism.

Each exhibition was a response to an invitation from Duke University, The Shanghai Museum of Art, and the Virginia Museum of Art, respectively, each in a city in which tobacco had played a significant role. Xu Bing went to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, in 2000, and the first thing he noticed was the smell of tobacco. He learned from a tour guide that the city had been the center of the tobacco industry in the late nineteenth century and that James B. Duke (1856–1925), the founder of the American Tobacco Company, was also the founder of Duke University. He also learned that Durham was known for its cancer research institutes funded by local cigarette manufacturers.[24] Durham is intimately connected with tobacco and the Duke family. And Xu visited tobacco factories; he said that when he goes somewhere new, he likes to visit local factories because "the 'intelligent' machines are often far more akin to art than contemporary installation work,"[25] sounding here like Le Corbusier, who found industrial design more beautiful than the historical styles. After all that he learned, he came to a decision:

> When I saw the refined tobacco materials at the cigarette factory, I realized that I didn't want to see these objects burned, that they could instead be used someplace else—in art, for instance. The conception of an artwork usually begins with a sense for one's materials, the most rational relationship that exists between an artist and his or her work. I wanted to use tobacco as my original creative medium. It was only after this decision that the questions of how and why to use these materials arose.[26]

Shanghai figures in the James B. Duke story in that in 1881, when a cigarette rolling machine was invented, Duke asked for an atlas and, upon finding a place whose population was 430,000,000, said "that's where we are going to sell cigarettes." The place was China. The American Tobacco Company joined with a British one, and the British American Tobacco Company built

the Universal Leaf Factory in Shanghai in 1888. It sold 1.25 billion cigarettes in 1902 and 80 billion in 1928. As the British had taken opium into China in the mid-nineteenth century, so the Americans took tobacco into China the early twentieth. Opium and tobacco bring both pleasure and pain in the form of addiction or disease. The massive sales were the result not just of the attractions of tobacco but of Americans doing what they do so well, selling. A widespread marketing campaign used graphics on cards and yearly calendars so well that it was said to have changed the visual culture of Shanghai. Hinged wooden boxes of cigarettes with the brand name in striking lettering on the cover would include picture "trade cards" to be collected and traded tucked into its lid. Virginia completed the trilogy when Xu was asked to contribute something to the Virginia Museum of Fine Art by a trustee whose father had been sent from China to Virginia to learn the tobacco trade. Virginia had a long history with tobacco. Settlers from Britain landed in Jamestown in 1607, and in 1615 it was written that everything in Jamestown, even the streets, were planted with tobacco. Tobacco farmers depended on West African slave labor and European markets; the American Revolution is supposed to have been funded in part by tobacco sales to France.

Ever the man of letters, Xu Bing embossed a compressed block of tobacco with the words "Light as Smoke"; rubber-stamped cigarettes of the "Zhonghua" brand with English translations of sayings of Mao; printed Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice" on black matches, one word per match; made accordion-like books of cigarette tip paper printed with English translations of Tang poems; and even more. The most dramatic of his tobacco word art are three books, each with a spread of four and a half feet, made of dried and stretched tobacco leaves rubber stamped on the Duke version of *Tobacco Book* (2000) with a passage from Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry 1890–1930* (1980), on the Shanghai version (2004) with a Chinese translation of the passage, and on the Virginia version (2011) with a passage from *True Discourse on the Present State of Virginia* by Ralph Hamor (1615). In the Duke *Tobacco Book* Xu put tobacco beetles that ate away at it, introducing living things doing what they do, as Huang Pong Ying did in *Theater of the World* (1993). Tobacco is in the exhibitions in all its forms: green and leafy in *Nature's Contribution* (2011), a live tobacco plant in a pot; brown and dried in the *Tobacco Books*; and smoke and ash in *Traveling Down the River*, in which a long uncut cigarette is lain, burning, along a reproduction of *Along the River in the Qingming Festival* by Zhang Zedaun (1085–1145). Finally, cigarettes are repurposed as in *1st Class* (2011) (Figure 17), where 500,000 1st Class brand cigarettes were made into a tiger rug of about 480 by 180 inches, recalling Zhang Huan's *Free Tiger Returns to Mountains* (2010) (Figure 7).

Where is Danto here? Where is the global? Where the contemporary? Each of the exhibitions in *Tobacco Project* is like *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art in China* in not having a curatorial thesis. The works are not united by genre, but by their materials, all tobacco related, and they are united in being art as that is defined, more loosely than is usually realized, by Danto. The subject of a work, what it is about, is the star of his conception. The work exists to show its viewer something in its subject not before seen, and to do it by what we are used to calling a figure of speech but can as well call a turn of the hand with whatever its marking, recording, or composing material is. Start by acknowledging that nothing is put forward—said, done, shown, worn, composed—*without being done in some way or other*, without expressing an attitude. Something is a work of art, for Danto, if it captures something novel (his word) in its subject. The work shows what the subject *can be*, but has not been seen to be. We are in the realm of possibility. And since the same thing can be the subject of *myriad* works, we are in the realm of plurality. Does this mean that the subject dissolves into all that can possibly be seen in it? No. There is an important sense in which a thing just is the sum of its possibilities. Here we are in metaphysics with its questions about the is-ness of a thing, of its properties, and of the properties of its properties; we need Aristotle. We are also where value judgments are, as when a work of art tries to show in its subject what is not or cannot be imagined to be there, that is, when it fails as a work of art.

Where is the global? When its material or particular site is the subject of a work of art, there is a story about the subject—about the earthquake, the dam, the temple ash, the rice, the tobacco. People everywhere understand and relish stories, as people everywhere understand and respond to material and material things. By an historical accident and for various reasons, artists in China are making art at the level where matter and gesture, texture and touch, the immediate and the direct, instinct and imagination, hold sway. This is art whose global appeal is clear. Where is the contemporary? How is this art *for* the present? This is a precarious moment in history. As different sorts of boundaries vanish, others appear, like the one between real and screen presence, making the presence of the concrete, particular, material real all the more to be sought because it is there; it exists. We created the screen and its promise to change the world, but we did not create the material world and cannot but wonder that it, that anything, exists. An art that traffics in the concrete and the particular, the material, that makes its subjects, stripped bare of language, present before us, is one that can put us in awe, can, as Danto once said, "turn us around by their thunder," their sheer there-ness. Atoms moving in a Lucreatian world would not excite the wonder that this world in its richness does. Art as Danto characterizes it is meant to show us *what things are*,

which is their material and their stories. Art's charge is to reveal its subject. Chinese artists bid us *pay attention* to the sight and sound of words, to particular things, to material, to what "flings forth its name" in order to take the pulse of what is coursing through them to harmonize, not heaven, earth, and humankind, but rather state, society, and individual. The art puts its subjects before us—Buddha statues, names of children from Sichuan, words that have no meaning, rice, tobacco, insects, temple ash—so that we can see what they are and hear what they say.[27]

NOTES

1. Lest "definition" imply that its object is an essence rather than a word, think of it as giving the criteria for the correct use of "art." This allows for the openness built into Danto's definition.

2. In 1989, twenty-five years after Danto's epiphany in the Stabler Gallery, it was argued that what had come to an end was the history of art within which modernism, one of the glories of the west, defined what art was, making the west the center of the art world and the rest of the world its Other. The end of the modernist narrative, recognized by Danto, turned out to be the end of the hegemony of the west. The art of each culture, no longer dismissed as the Other, was seen to have its own history. There were, then, many art histories and many art worlds, among which there was transfer, transformation, and translation. This is given an excellent treatment in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA, and London, The MIT Press, 2013).

3. Johann Joachim Winkelmann, *The Art of Antiquity, vol. 1 and 2* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2011).

4. Gionbattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin, 2000).

5. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Gianbattista Vico." Accessed July 20, 2019.

6. Art Story: Modern Art Insight, "Clement Greenberg: Historian and Critic." Accessed November 21, 2019. "Probably the single most influential critic of the 20th century . . . he is most closely associated with his support of Abstract Expressionism. . . . His attention to the formal properties of art—color, line, space, and so forth—his rigorous approach to criticism, and his understanding of the development of modern art—although they have been challenged—have influenced generations of historians and critics."

7. In a panel discussion at White Box Gallery in New York, Richard Vine said, as was noted earlier, that a work by, say, a Nigerian could look exactly like one made by an American in Brooklyn. While it would be technically multicultural, it would not actually be. This is a case of the formalist refusal to consider context.

8. Pauline Yao, *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China* (Blue Kingfisher, 2009), 19–20.

9. Design Boom, "Zhang Huan: *Hope Tunnel* at UCCA." Accessed October 23, 2019.

10. Wang Chunchen, *Art Intervenes in Society—A New Artistic Relationship* (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2010), 73.

11. Ibid., 12.

12. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Fineman (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996), 39.

13. Top China Travel, "The Three Back Gates of the Forbidden City." Accessed October 23, 2019.

14. Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, and Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

15. Wu Hung, *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Chinese Contemporary Art* (Chicago: The Small Museum of Art, 2008), 99.

16. Ibid., 99.

17. Quoted in Mary Bittner Wiseman and Lui Yuedi, eds. *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 229.

18. Demetrio Paparoni, *Wang Guangyi: Works and Thoughts 1985–2012* (Milan: SKIRA, 2013), 388.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 389.

21. Ibid.

22. John Ravenal, ed. *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project Duke/Shanghai/Virginia 1999–2011* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Museum of Art, 2011), 63.

23. Ibid., 36.

24. This information is from Wu Hung, "Xu Bing's Tobacco Project and Its Contexts," in *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project*, 31.

25. *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project,* 17.

26. Xu Bing, "Tobacco Project 1, 2, 3," in *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project*, 64.

27. On February 7, 2020, the *Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, curated by Wu Hung, opened at the Smart Museum of Art of the University of Chicago. Its website said: "Early in the 1990s, artists working in China have experimented with various materials, transforming seemingly everyday objects into large-scale art works. These artists have exploded fireworks into paintings, felted hair into gleaming flags, . . . deconstructed old doors and windows to make sculptures. . . . Artists continue to explore and develop this creative mode. . . . For the first time, *Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* brings together works in which conscious material choice has become the means of the artists' expression, representing this unique trend throughout recent history. This exhibition features 48 two- and three-dimensional works made from a range of unique and humble materials."

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