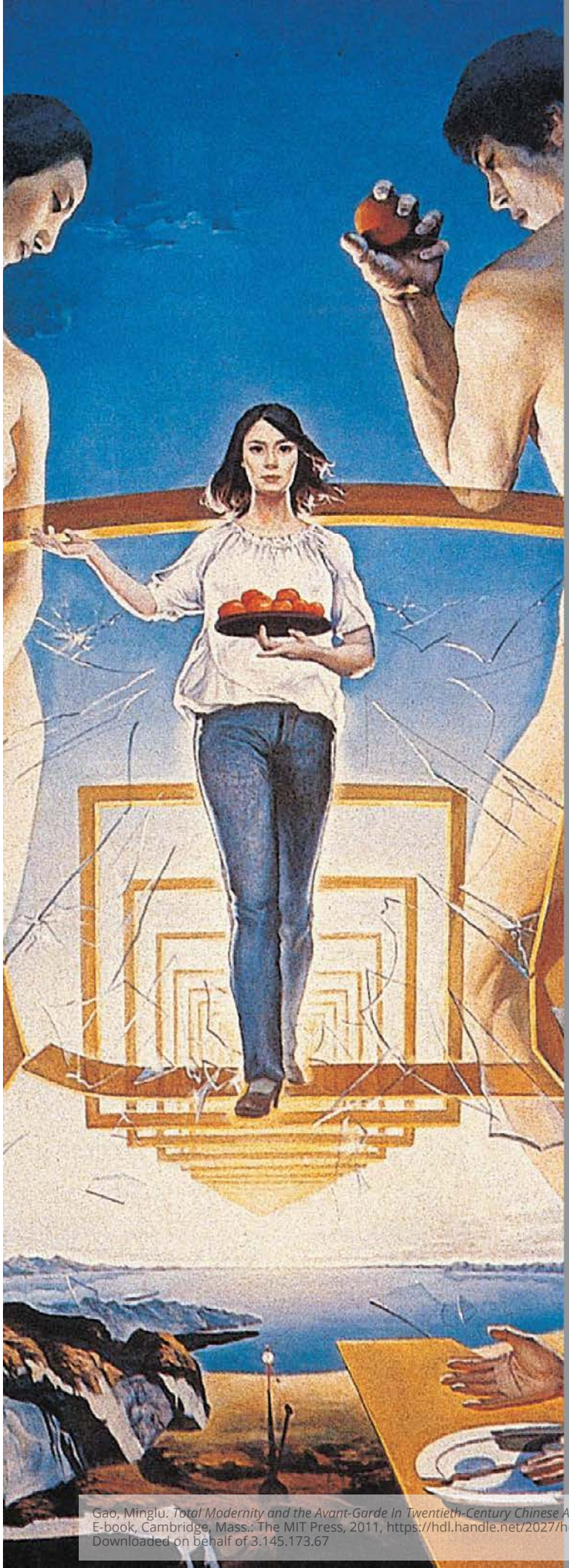
Part Two

The '85 Movement



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The Map of the '85 Avant-Garde Movement

A renewal of official support for intellectual interchange with the West began in early 1985. The Anti–Spiritual Pollution Campaign ended and the government embarked on a series of liberal reforms. Released from the restraints of the previous three years, avant-gardism flourished across the arts—literature, dance, music, visual art, and film. This phenomenon would soon be known as the '85 Movement, a name I first used in early 1986 during a lecture summarizing and introducing the movement to the nationwide art community. In February 1985, the Chinese Writers Association held its fourth conference in Beijing, denouncing conservatism and calling for freedom of expression (*chuangzuo ziyou*). A parallel development occurred in the visual arts with the widespread appearance of unofficial groups, largely cohering into a unified movement.

This period was characterized by the most intense discussion of culture since the early twentieth century. Many works of Western philosophy, history, aesthetics, and psychology appeared in translation. Numerous scholarly conferences were held one after the other. Chinese scholars, both in China and abroad, involved themselves in the debate. At the same time, ancient Chinese philosophy, history, culture, and religion were reevaluated, criticized, or accepted according to contemporary standards. The discussion proceeded in three stages, as in the early twentieth century: first, there was an analysis of similarities and differences between China and the West (*Zhongxi yitong*); second, comparisons took place considering the respective merits and flaws of Chinese and Western culture (*Zhongxi youlue*); and third, discussions concerning the future of Chinese and Western culture (*Zhongxi qushi*) ensued.[1] In the art world, the tension between traditionalism and antitraditionalism was focused on whether or not tradition required modernization, on the definition of modernism in contemporary art, and above all on Chinese attitudes toward and evaluations of Western contemporary art.[2] In this atmosphere, the artists eagerly sought information on Western modern art by any means, especially through publications and exhibitions. Most of their information came from articles translated from foreign languages or from writings by a few Chinese scholars who introduced Western modern art into Chinese magazines. Among the publications and exhibitions, the most important and influential was Herbert Read's *Concise History of Modern Painting*, which was translated in 1983 into Chinese. In the early 1980s, the book was probably the only source for Chinese artists to learn about Western modern art directly from the West.[3]

The first influential Western art exhibition was a survey of Robert Rauschenberg's work that opened in November 1985 at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, although some important foreign art exhibitions had taken place in Beijing starting in the late 1970s.[4] Rauschenberg's exhibit had a profound impact on artists of the '85 Movement. This was the Chinese public's first opportunity to see original works by a contemporary Western artist. In 1985 Rauschenberg delivered a lecture at the Central Academy of Graphic Art in Beijing and participated in a discussion with Beijing artists including Wang Luyan, Zhang Wei, Ma Kelu, and others who were members of the Stars and No Name, the groups that were not operating under official sanction.[5]

This newly charged intellectual environment was made more acute by the rather sudden appearance of a new avant-garde movement in early 1985. In 1985 and 1986, seventy-nine self-organized avant-garde

Figure 3.1
Exhibition in He Mole's house in the Beijing diplomatic compound, 1985. Robert Rauschenberg and Wang Luyan are seen here talking in front of Wang Luyan's work. Photograph provided by Zhang Wei.

art groups, including more than 2,250 of the nation's young artists, emerged to organize exhibitions, to hold conferences, and to write manifestos and articles about their art. A total of 149 exhibitions were organized by the groups within the span of these two years.[6]

Avant-garde ideas and art groups were enthusiastically promoted in new magazines and newspapers such as *Meishu sichao* (Art trends), founded in January 1985; *Zhongguo meishubao* (Fine arts in China), begun in July 1985; and *Huajia* (Painters), first published in October 1985. Established journals such as *Meishu* (Art monthly), the most influential magazine in the contemporary Chinese art world, which had been published by the official Chinese Artists Association since 1952, also strongly supported the young art groups due to an open-minded policy and the young editorship. *Jiangsu huakan* (Jiangsu pictorial), a magazine traditionally focused on ink painting, also shifted attention to the '85 Movement. Many of the publications' editors were young critics who themselves were involved in the avant-garde.[7] These journals reported the activities of the group movement. During 1985 and 1986, I myself traveled throughout China many times to visit various groups, and I collected significant documentary materials, such as manifestos, slides of the artists' works, articles, and notes. In April 1986, I gave a talk entitled "Bawu meishu yundong" (The '85 art movement) at that year's National Oil Painting Conference (*Quanguo youhua taolunhui*) organized by the Chinese Artists Association; in it I discussed the art ideas and works of various groups and showed about three hundred slides to an audience consisting mostly of influential artists.[8] My speech was the first announcement of the emergence of the '85 Movement to the Chinese art world and public. Because it was presented at the first official meeting in the art world after the Anti–Spiritual Pollution Campaign was launched in 1983, and as such sent a sign of political relaxation and a policy of more openness, the publication of this text helped ease, to a certain degree, the suppression of some avant-garde groups by local officials. In *Zhongguo meishubao*, a special section for the avant-garde groups was created, called "Qingnian qunti zhuanlan" (Young artists' groups), and it continually reported on and discussed the groups' activities, ideas, and works.[9]

The academies also played a very important role in the avant-garde groups. In the post-Cultural Revolution period, the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art in Chongqing, Sichuan province, in southwest China, was the dominant educational center, as all of the most influential scar and rustic realist painters were alumni. The most influential academy for the generation of the '85 Movement, however, was Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, about two hundred kilometers from Shanghai. This academy has been a leading art educational center since the first half of twentieth century. In the 1980s, Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art built on the modern art legacy initiated by Lin Fengmian by keeping a more open view toward

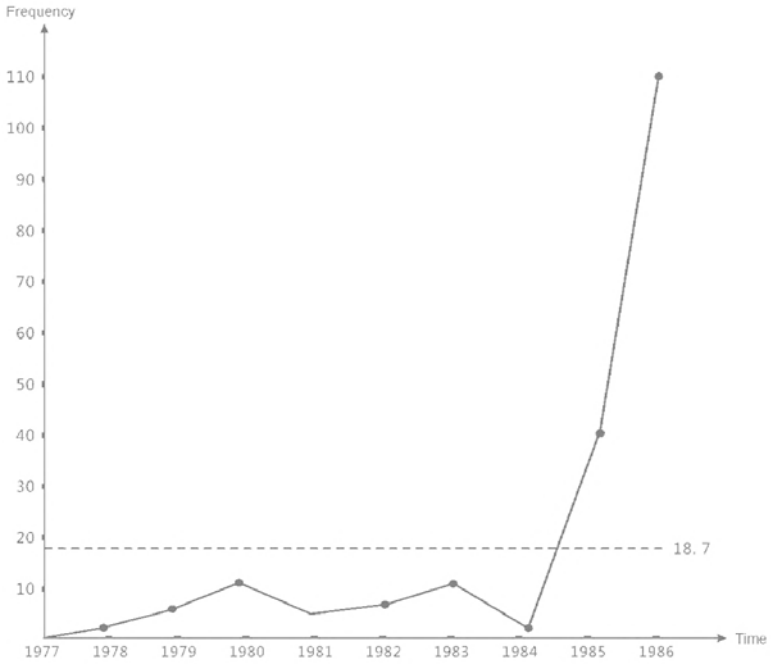
Year / Area	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	Total
Liaoning										1	1
Beijng		1	4	8	1	1	4		10	16	45
Zhejiang									1	8	9
Shanghai			1				1		2	9	13
Shandong									4	1	5
Yunnan				1	1					1	3
Tianjin										1	1
Sichuan				1					3	3	7
Shanxi									1	2	3
Inner Mongolia				1		1				3	5
Jiangsu									4	6	10
Anhui					1	1					2
Shanxi					1				4	1	6
Hunan						1	1		2	2	6
Tibet									1		1
Fujian							1		1	6	8
Jiangxi									1		1
Guangdong							1		1	4	6
Qinghai										1	1
Hubei							1		2	38	41
Heilongjiang							1				1
Jilin									1		1
Heibei										1	1
Gansu								1			1
Henan											2
Foreign Country						2			1	4	7
Total Times	0	1	5	11	4	6	10	1	39	110	187
Total Areas	0	1	2	4	4	4	7	1	16	20	

Figure 3.2

An overview of avant-garde activities throughout China, translated from Gao et al., *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986*, 623. The chart was made by Tong Dian, one of the authors of that book.

Figure 3.3

The increasing numbers of avant-garde activities from 1977 to 1986; translated from Gao et al., *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986,* 620. The chart was made by Tong Dian, one of the authors of the book.



中國美術報

FINE ARTS IN CHINA

中国艺术研究院美术研究所主办　总第2期

新的一代　新的观念

从伊甸园走出来

在新时代——亚当·夏娃的启示（油画）

渴望和平（油画）（一等奖）

思潮　信息

Figure 3.4

***Zhongguo meishubao*, no. 2 (August 3, 1985).**

Western modern art, on one hand, and paying equal attention to traditional Chinese culture and philosophy, such as Chan Buddhism, on the other.[10]

Young, academically trained artists began to play a leading role in the mid-1980s, in particular some graduates of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art: Wang Guangyi, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Huang Yongping, Gu Wenda, and Wu Shanzhuan were all leading figures in the '85 Movement and all attended the Zhejiang Academy. The artists might not have learned much from the school's teachers directly, because in China's academies a realist style has always dominated, even after the Cultural Revolution. However, they learned from some young teachers and their classmates outside the classroom, and, most importantly, they were stimulated by the books imported from Euro-American circles in the early 1980s. When the international exhibition called the "Exhibition of International Art Publications" ("Guoji yishu shuzhan") opened in the National History Museum in Beijing in 1982, Xiao Feng, then the director of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, decided to buy all the publications from the exhibition. These rich resources, published in various languages, later greatly stimulated the '85 Movement generation.[11]

The other source of stimulation came from the open educational environment fostered by the school's general policies. For instance, the nature of the 1985 graduation exhibition of the Zhejiang Academy was quite different from those before and caused an intense controversy, because a number of the works shown were experimental, expressing many different individual conceptions and styles. In 1985 the school changed the rule that senior students must follow their instructor's favored subject matter, style, and technique, and allowed the students to create a single work in any freely chosen style as their diploma work. Moreover, under the new policy, students could choose different conceptual or stylistic approaches that allowed the creation of multipart series. As one teacher said, "Under the party's reform policy, we ask students to express their undistorted thinking and true feeling in boldly exploring their unique language in order to free their talents and individual insight."[12] The many controversial experimental works displayed in the class of 1985's graduation exhibition caused a sensation in the Chinese art world, thereby encouraging a new generation of artists born in the 1960s, and trained after the Cultural Revolution, to adopt the new avant-garde orientation.

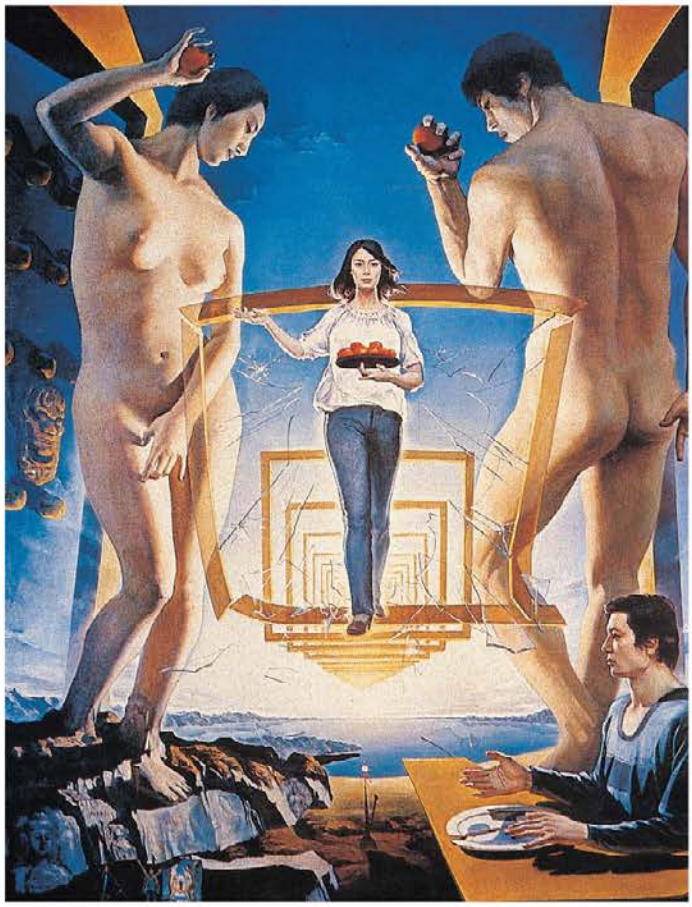


Figure 3.5

Zhang Qun and Meng Luding, *In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve*, 1985.

Similar phenomena also took place in some other academies, especially in Sichuan, Beijing, and Guangzhou.[13] In May 1985, the exhibition "Young Art of Progressive China" ("Qianjin zhong de Zhongguo qingnian meishu zuopin zhan"), held in the National Art Museum of China, brought together work from various academies, including those in Zhejiang, Beijing, and Sichuan. The most remarkable works in this show combined neorealism and Western surrealism, an approach typified, for instance, by a work executed by two senior students of the Central Academy in Beijing, Zhang Qun and Meng Luding, *In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve* (*Zaixinshidai—yadang he xiawa de qishi*).[14]

Compared to the Stars group and scar painters of the generation of the Red Guards, the new generation of artists was able to take its consciousness of spiritual liberation in wider cultural and political directions. Zhang Qun and Meng Luding's above-mentioned painting represented the early '85 Movement's consciousness of its own role in the project of enlightenment, even if it was a rather premature and naive piece of work inspired by surrealism. In this painting, a young woman bursts out of a wall from a glass frame, holding an apple, a biblical symbol of original sin. A young man sits waiting. The naked bodies on either side symbolize Adam and Eve. Behind them, there are the two open doors of the Forbidden City; underneath their feet are images from the Dunhuang Caves, symbolizing tradition. The tensions between the inside and outside of the frame, inside and outside of the wall, and inside and outside of the gates symbolize the fact that the new generation of avant-garde artists was broadening its consciousness of space from political ideology to the pursuit of individual freedom, and breaking free from all sorts of confinements, including political and authoritative ones. The piece also caused an intense debate among the members of the Prize Committee of the exhibition.[15]

The artists of the '85 Movement, however, rebelled against the academies that spawned them, as the artists embraced a social direction that was boldly articulated in opposition to individual style and self-indulgence as pursued by the new academics and the amateur avant-garde of the Red Guard generation.

Geographically, most art groups were located on the east coast and in central China, especially in the cities of Beijing or Shanghai and in Jiangsu, Hubei, and Zhejiang provinces, where there are large concentrations of population. Throughout modern Chinese history these areas have been more advanced in education and more industrialized. Most of the groups were in favor of a conceptual approach, regardless of the kind of media they employed. In contrast, art groups located in the northwest and southwest, areas still home to a traditional agricultural lifestyle and most of the minorities in China, were interested in frankly and militantly expressing their intuitive feelings and favored primitive themes. Very frequently, artists there deployed images of minority people and an abstract expressionist style.

(North and South) East Coast

Along the east coast, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing were the centers of the nationwide avant-garde movement. Among the avant-garde groups located in the east, however, one of the most influential groups of the '85 Movement, the Northern Art Group (*Beifangqunti*), was not located in those centers but rather was founded in March 1985 in Harbin, Heilongjiang province (the area formerly known as Manchuria). The group promoted a "civilization of the north," which its artists believed would surpass both Western and traditional Chinese civilizations. Emulating surrealism, their paintings often featured barren landscape elements and abstract forms suggested by the glacial terrain of northern China to express their concepts of what they called *lixing huihua* or rationalist painting. The artists Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, and Ren Jian were the most influential and played a leading role in the '85 Movement.

As mentioned before, Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province, played a very important role in the '85 Movement due to the importance of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art. Members of the Hangzhou-based self-organized group called the Pool Society (*Chishe*), including Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, and Wang Qiang, were notable for their biting sense of humor and absurdist spirit. Their works featured "gray humor" (*huise youmo*) paintings, performance works, and conceptual art (see chapter 6). Their practice, begun in the mid-'80s, influenced the artists of the '90s. In January 1986, the "'86 Last Exhibition, No. 1" ("'86 zuihou huazhan yi hao") opened at the Zhejiang Art Gallery. Organized by seven young artists of the Zhejiang Academy, including Gu Wenda and Song Baoguo, it featured readymade objects and performance works. The show was closed by authorities three hours after its opening because of the sexual content of some of the works. Three months later, Wu Shanzhuan and fellow artists in Hangzhou held two private exhibitions of installations entitled *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White* (*Hong 50%, hei 25%, bai 5%*) and *Red Humor: Big Poster* (*Hongce youmo: dazibao*), which began their practice of language art (see chapter 7).

In comparison with other areas, Shanghai was a uniquely modern cultural center and home to some

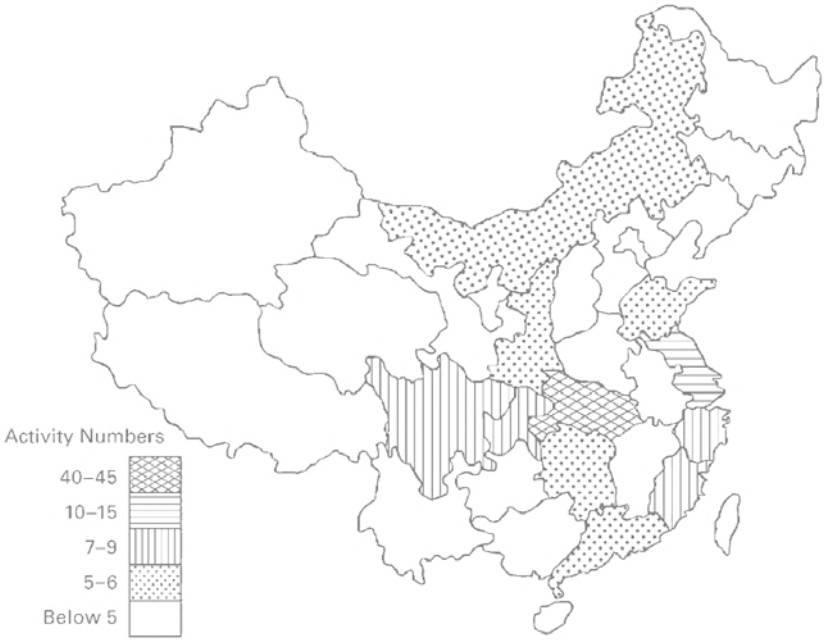


Figure 3.6

Avant-garde activities (mainly exhibitions and conferences) in the provinces from 1977 to 1986; translated from Gao et al., *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986,* 625. The chart was made by Tong Dian, one of the authors of the book.

Figure 3.7

A party of the 777 Group, including Shu Qun, Ren Jian, Zhang Shuguang, Lu Ying, and Zhang Qianti, 1984.

early modern art groups, such as the Storm Society (*Juelanshe*), which emerged in the 1930s. In the '85 Movement, Shanghai's avant-garde practice was also distinctive. There were not as many art groups as in the other big cities in the east. Rather, Shanghai artists practiced their art more individually and seldom founded lasting groups sharing a similar style and concept. The only exception was the M Art Group (*M qunti*) led by Song Haidong, yet another Zhejiang Academy graduate, who created performance and conceptual art for about a year (see chapter 6). However, in Shanghai during the mid-1980s, various exhibitions and activities provided numerous opportunities for young artists to communicate with one another.[16] Many experimental group shows in 1985 and 1986 rebelled against authority and conservatism.[17]

Among these group shows, "Convex/Concave" ("Aotuzhan") was one of the most provocative avant-garde events in Shanghai, with an impact similar to that of the militant performance of the M Art Group show. The gallery space of "Convex/Concave" was decorated with the forms of the Chinese characters *aotu* (convex/concave), and most works in the show were installations, sculptures, and mural paintings. Various readymade objects and strange signs were mixed together, to demonstrate that they were artworks by Shanghai bohemians with an unconventional attitude. As Li Shan said, "Tradition has suppressed us and made it hard to breathe. We need something like this show to mock reality."[18] The show caused a sensation in Shanghai and many university students visited it, discussing and debating while in the gallery. A report by Li Jian published in the most important Shanghai newspaper, *Xinmin wanbao,* was titled "The Incomprehensible Convex/Concave Exhibition" ("Buke siyi de aotuzhan"). The reporter described a bohemian-type art that was extremely similar to that of the East Village in Manhattan.[19]

Figure 3.8

Wang Qiang, *Adagio in the Opening of Second Movement, Symphony No. 5,* 1985. In the background is the exhibition "'85 New Space" ("Bawu xinkongjian").

Figure 3.9

Group photo of the cast of *Hamlet in Heaven*. From right to left: Zhu Wei, Hua Dong, Sun Baoguo, Yang Min, Lu Zuogeng (original name Lu Yongqiang), and Wang Danshan, 1986.

Figure 3.10

Members of the "86 Last Exhibition, No. 1" in the collective creation *Hamlet in Heaven* (stage photo no. 5), 1986.

Figure 3.11

The poster for "Convex/Concave."

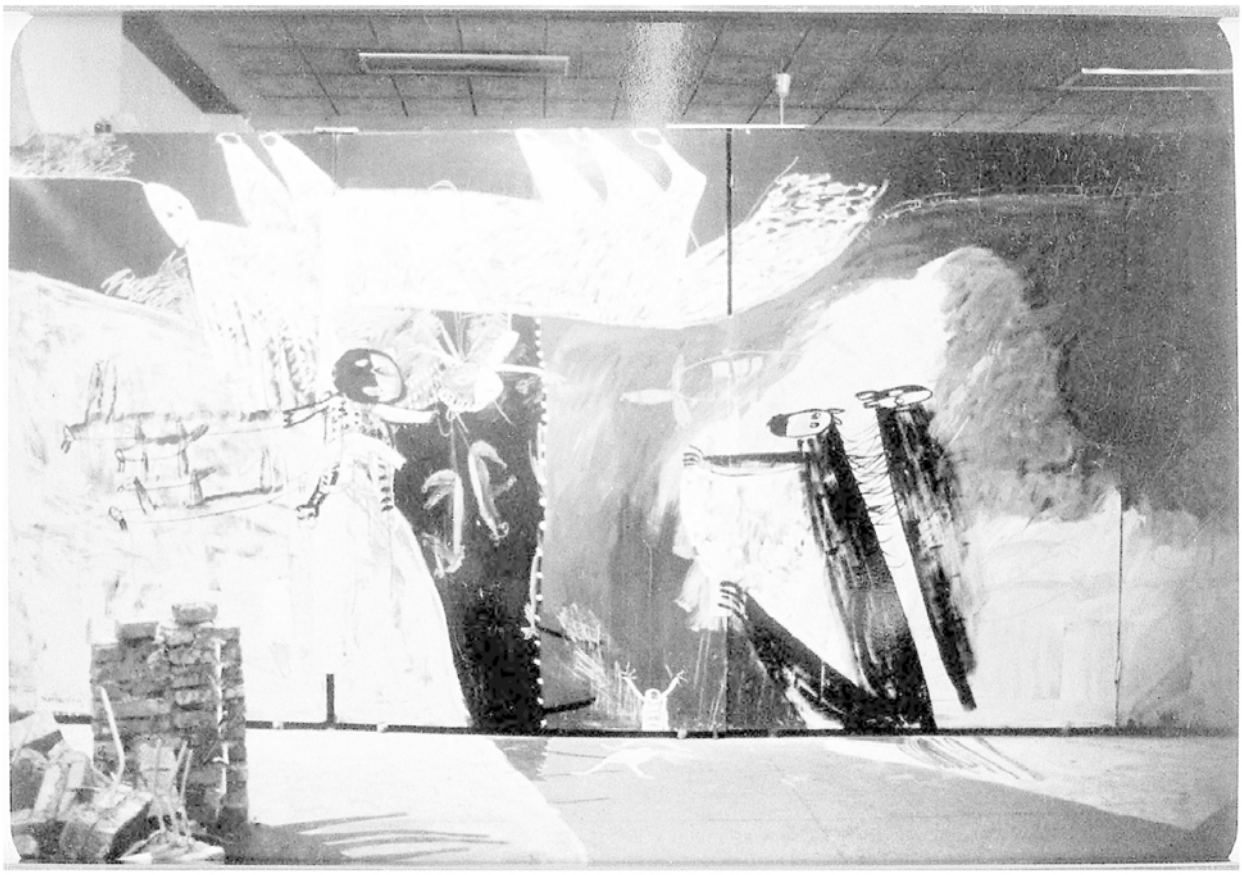


Figure 3.12

Li Shan, *The Waking Dream,* 1984.

Beijing is a national political and cultural center. It also played a very important role in disseminating information on the '85 Movement nationwide, because many critics, and a number of magazines, are located there. Beijing is also the most sensitive place politically, which makes avant-garde practice and challenges to authority or censorship more controversial there than anywhere else in the country. For instance, two influential national art journals, *Meishu* and *Zhongguo meishubao*, were targeted in every political campaign of the '80s. In Beijing, it is also very easy to make an art event into some kind of political event. The best example of this was the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, which was closed by the authorities twice because of performances connected with it.

It seems, however, that the young artist groups in Beijing of the mid-1980s were still influenced by the new academicism, mainly emanating from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Art. They were not as vital and antagonistic as most of the avant-garde groups in other cities and provinces. One reason might be that the groups in Beijing were organized more or less officially or pseudo-officially. For instance, the biggest and most powerful young artists' group was the Beijing Youth Painting Society (*Beijing qingnian huahui*), which was officially organized by the Beijing Communist Youth Community (*Gongqingtuan Beijingshi weiyuanhui*). It was founded at the time of its first exhibition opening on May 16, 1986. That was the year during the 1980s when China was most open politically, and the Beijing Youth Painting Society organized a number of experimental exhibitions. Perhaps the most radical art group in Beijing was the group of artists from the Central Academy of Fine Art who organized the "November Exhibition" ("Shiyiyue huazhan") held at the Forbidden City.[20] The twenty artists in this group show later formed the Beijing Youth Painting Society under the government's auspices.

Figure 3.13

Ma Lu, *Dream Is Just Dream*, 1985.

Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province, was another important base for avant-garde practice in the '85 Movement. Among its groups was the Red Journey, established in 1987 and led by Ding Fang (see chapter 5), who was a typical rationalist painter devoted to quasi-religious themes of sacrifice. The group consisted of the principle organizers of the 1985 "Jiangsu Art Week Modern Art Festival" ("Jiangsu qingnian yishu zhou: Daxing yishuzhan"), an influential exhibition covering all the arts.[21] The New Barbarianism (*Xin yexing zhuyi*) group emphasized and pursued primitivism and individual freedom in its art, opposing the approach of the Red Journey's rationalist painting.[22] The group movement in Nanjing peaked in 1986 with an open-air exhibition called "To Bring into the Light" ("Shai taiyang") that took place in Xuanwu Lake Park (*Xuanwuhu gongyuan*) from September 1 to October 5. About one thousand artists participated, displaying about seven hundred works on the grounds. The goal of this self-organized activity was to eliminate any institutional barriers confining young artists. It also allegorized the illness of the contemporary Chinese art world, and prescribed as a treatment the taking of healthy sunlight.[23]

Nanjing was also the place that cultivated a new Chinese ink painting movement, called new literati painting (*xinwenrenhua*). This grew out of the city's long tradition of literati painting and the presence of an influential modern ink painting school in the city.[24] In 1985, critic Li Xiaoshan's article "The End and Death of Chinese Painting" shocked adherents of tradition across the nation.[25] New literati painting quickly became known nationwide after the artists had an exhibition in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in July 1987.

Outside of Nanjing, in Xuzhou city in Jiangsu province, the "Xuzhou Modern Art Exhibition" ("Xuzhou xiandai yishuzhan") was an extremely violent exhibition organized by several avant-garde groups, including the Sunday Painting Society (*Xingqitian huahui*), the Rhinoceros Painting Society (*Xiniu huahui*), the Red, Yellow, Blue Painting Society (*Hong, huang, lan huahui*), and the Black-White Creative Society (*Heibai chuangzaoshe*). The aggressive and provocative works in the show drew criticism that derided the artists as "animals," "ugly

Figure 3.14

"Jiangsu Art Week Modern Art Festival," October 1985.

Figure 3.15

A photograph of "To Bring into the Light," Nanjing, 1986.

and wild," "psychotic with bipolar disorder," and so on.[26] In the manifesto of the exhibition, the artists wrote, "We were told one morning that God is dead. Various icons have been marked with a 'cross' in blood-red color. How can we rescue our restless souls? There are two Chinese characters for 'destroy' written on the unsteady banner of the show. While we are relentlessly pushed by some incomprehensible desire to go forward, we are seeking a new God, in order to touch her beautiful face—and then open fire to kill her."[27]

The '85 Movement continued to spread, peaking in 1986 with the emergence of a number of conceptual or anti-art (*fanyishu*) groups in eastern China. The conceptualists challenged not only propagandist art and the new academicist styles, but the idealism of their avant-garde colleagues as well. Their principal goal was to eradicate utopianism, subjectivity, and the artist's hand. Their primary media were language and readymade objects. Their conceptual sources were Dada and Chan (Zen) Buddhism, the latter of which, like Dada, attempts to break free of any doctrine or authority. A number of the leading artists of these groups graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art.

The most extreme philosophical and conceptual art project was by the Xiamen Dadaists, a group based in Xiamen city, Fujian province, and led by Huang Yongping. Huang had already begun his conceptual art practice in 1983, when he studied at the Zhejiang Academy. The establishment of Xiamen Dada in 1986 coincides with the creation of its manifesto, which was written by Huang and entitled "Xiamen Dada: A Kind of Postmodernism?" ("Xiamen Dada: Yizhong houxiandai?"). In it, Huang advocates the synthesis of Dadaism and Chan Buddhism (see chapter 6).[28]

In Fujian province, there were several avant-garde groups in Fuzhou, the provincial capital, and Quanzhou, a famous ancient Chinese seaport. In Quanzhou, the most influential group was BYY. This name comes from the three initial letters of the pinyin romanization of *bu yi yang* (difference), demonstrating the group's antagonistic attitude. The group consisted of thirteen artists, including Cai Guoqiang, now based in New York and well known internationally. The group had two shows.

Figure 3.16

"The Xuzhou Modern Art Exhibition," 1986.

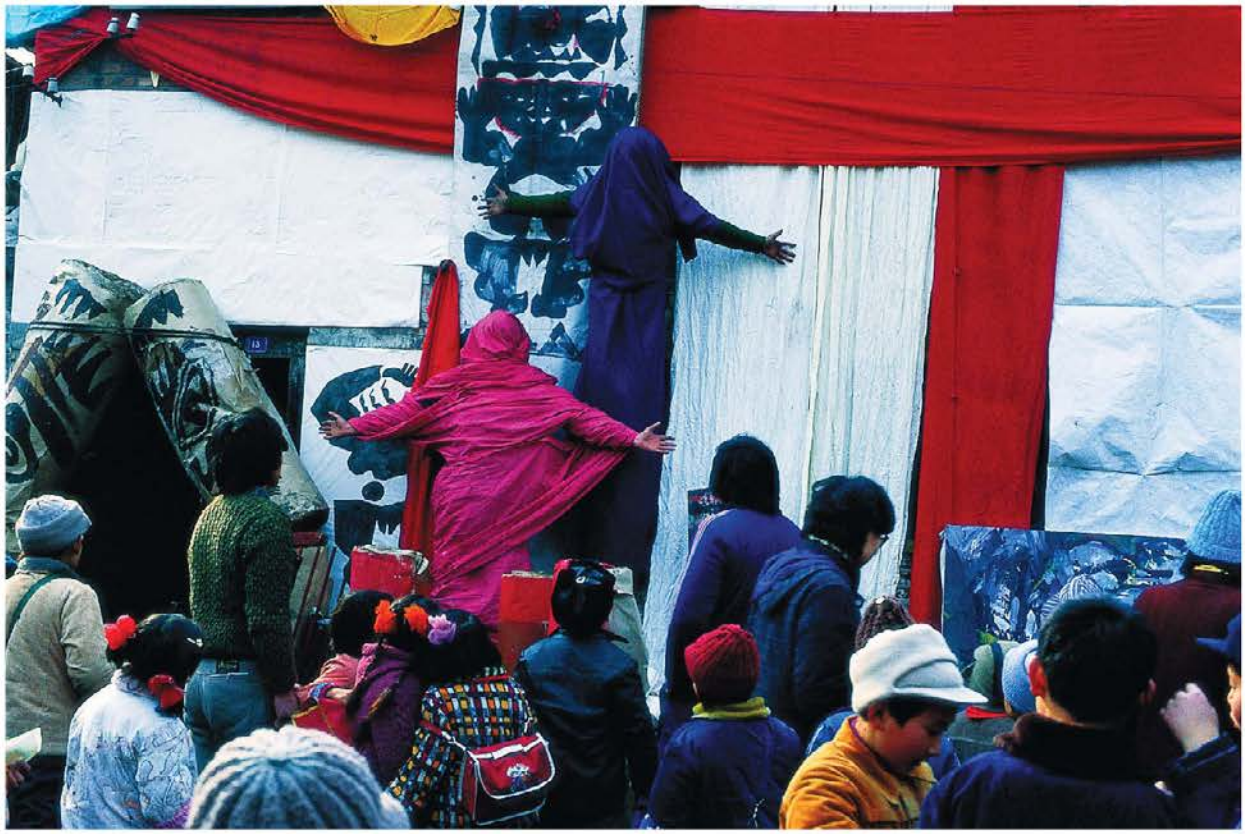


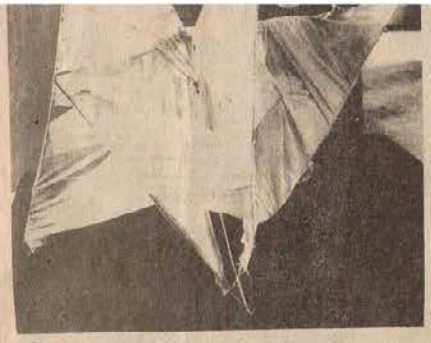
Figure 3.17

Rhinoceros Painting Society, *'87 Body Art*, 1987.

新达达 现代艺术展 9月28日至10月5日

林：

厦门达达 ——一种后现代？

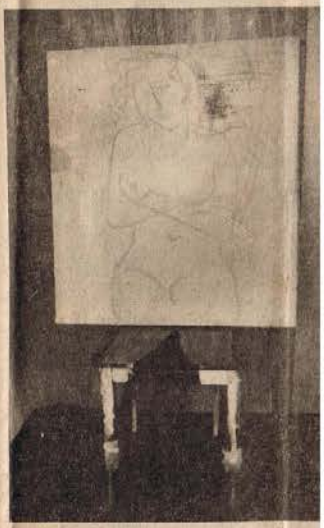


△ 折成的黑影（铁丝、棉布、漆）
1986 焦耀明

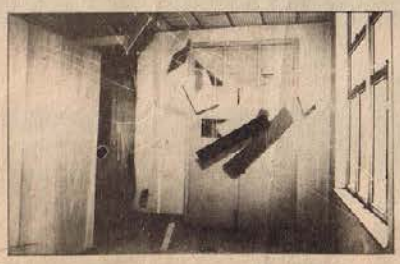
◁ 折成的白影 （铁丝、棉布、漆）
1986 焦耀明

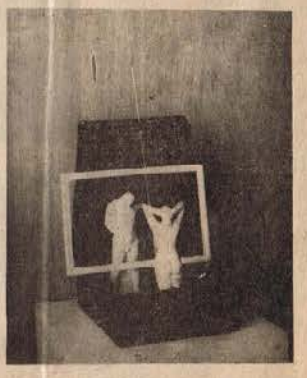
1986 焦耀明

▷ 灰色的空间（橡胶帆布）
1986 焦耀明



▽ 蒙德里安作品的支解方式
（棉线、木片、漆） 1986 焦耀明





△ 自上盖下的结构 （画布、油彩、实物）

◁ 行将死亡的主题 （实物、陶土）
1986 焦耀明

厦门群艺馆 现代美术研究室编印 1986年10月 责任编辑：蔡立雄、黄永砯 摄影：李世平

Figure 3.18

Catalogue of the "Xiamen Dada Modern Art Exhibition" with Huang Yongping's manifesto, October 1986.

Figure 3.19

The cover of the exhibition catalogue for "BYY Group," 1986.

Figure 3.20

Chen Lide, *Injured Buddha,* 1987.

The second, called the "Quanzhou Modern Art Exhibition" ("Quanzhou xiandai yishuzhan"), included eighty-eight works, most of which were randomly selected readymade objects from daily life. The objective of the show was to eliminate the taste of intellectual aristocrats (*guizu qixi*).[29]

In Guangdong province, on the south coast of China, avant-garde groups took an antagonistic attitude in their conceptual art projects, too. The "Shenzhen Zero Exhibition" ("Shenzhen lingzhan"), so named because it had zero funding and no institutional framework, was up for only two days on the streets of Shenzhen, a Special Economic Zone near Hong Kong. Twenty-five artists from across the nation displayed their works, a number of which were readymade objects, on the street.[30] In Guangzhou, the Southern Artists Salon (*Nanfang yishujia shalong*), founded by Wang Du, Lin Yilin, and others, organized the *First Experimental Exhibition* (*Diyici shiyanzhan*), a mixture of performance, painting, and music.[31]

Even in the city of Tiantsin, which is on the east coast a hundred kilometers from Beijing and is frequently called a "cultural desert," about ten groups of young artists emerged in 1985, and their exhibitions and activities received unprecedented public attention.

Central China

Characteristic of the avant-garde art groups in this area were extremely large group exhibitions with participation by large numbers of artists. Often the primary goal of the exhibitions was not pure art-making, but art-making as part of a larger social and political program: to break down barriers, conventions, and suppression by the authorities. This situation might have owed in part to the cultural fact that central China is the birthplace of Chinese traditional culture and has many important archaeological sites, a legacy that might contribute to a resistance to modern culture. Therefore, the avant-garde strove to bring fresh air into the art world, yet avant-garde artists also had to negotiate with the local government. Most avant-garde groups presenting in this area in the 1980s got their activities approved by the local governments from the beginning, although later they were frequently strongly criticized by conservatives who had initially supported them.

For instance, the Three Step Studio (*Sanbu huashi*) was established by Wang Yazhong and Song Yongping in Shanxi province in January 1985. The group's name has two meanings: the beginning stage of an activity, like the "one, two, three" that may begin a physical exercise; and a small studio only three steps across. Their first exhibition opened in Taiyuan City Workers' Palace (*Taiyuan gongren wenhua gong*), Shanxi province, and featured installations constructed from ordinary tools used by peasants along with many readymade objects. The exhibition was sanctioned by officials in Shanxi, especially by Li Qun, a well-known left-wing woodcut artist who had been active during the 1940s in Yan'an and now served as the chairman of Shanxi Artists Association; he even wrote a preface for the first modern exhibition in the area. Just before the opening, however, the exhibition was halted by the local government. The Three Step Studio organized a second exhibition in November 1986. Many ceramic sculptures were displayed, and a number of performances took place in the show. When *Meishu* published an article by Song Yongping and his brother Song Yonghong describing their performance called *Experience on a Certain Day in 1986* (*Yijiuliubanian mori de tiyan*), however, Li Qun sent a letter to the editor of *Meishu*, strongly criticizing the magazine for its support of this sort of "Western bourgeois decadent art."[32]

The most active groups in central China were in Hubei and Hunan provinces, the birthplace of the Chu culture (from the eighth to the third centuries BCE). In the mid-1980s, the two official art organizations, the Artists Associations of Hubei and Hunan, seemed more open than those of the other provinces in the area. For instance, in early 1986, the Hubei Artists Association, led by Zhou Shaohua, a painter who had been a teenage soldier of the Red Army when the Communists came to power in 1949, decided to organize a large "Festival of Youth Art in Hubei" ("Hubei qingnian meishu jie") to enliven the conservative Hubei art world by encouraging young artists to organize and fund their own exhibitions in the festival.[33] In August, a number of critics including myself, Zhu Qingsheng, Zhou Yan, and Wang Xiaojian were invited by the Hunan

Figure 3.21

The poster for the "Shenzhen Zero Exhibition," 1986.

Figure 3.22

Southern Artists Salon, the scene of the *First Experimental Exhibition,* 1986.

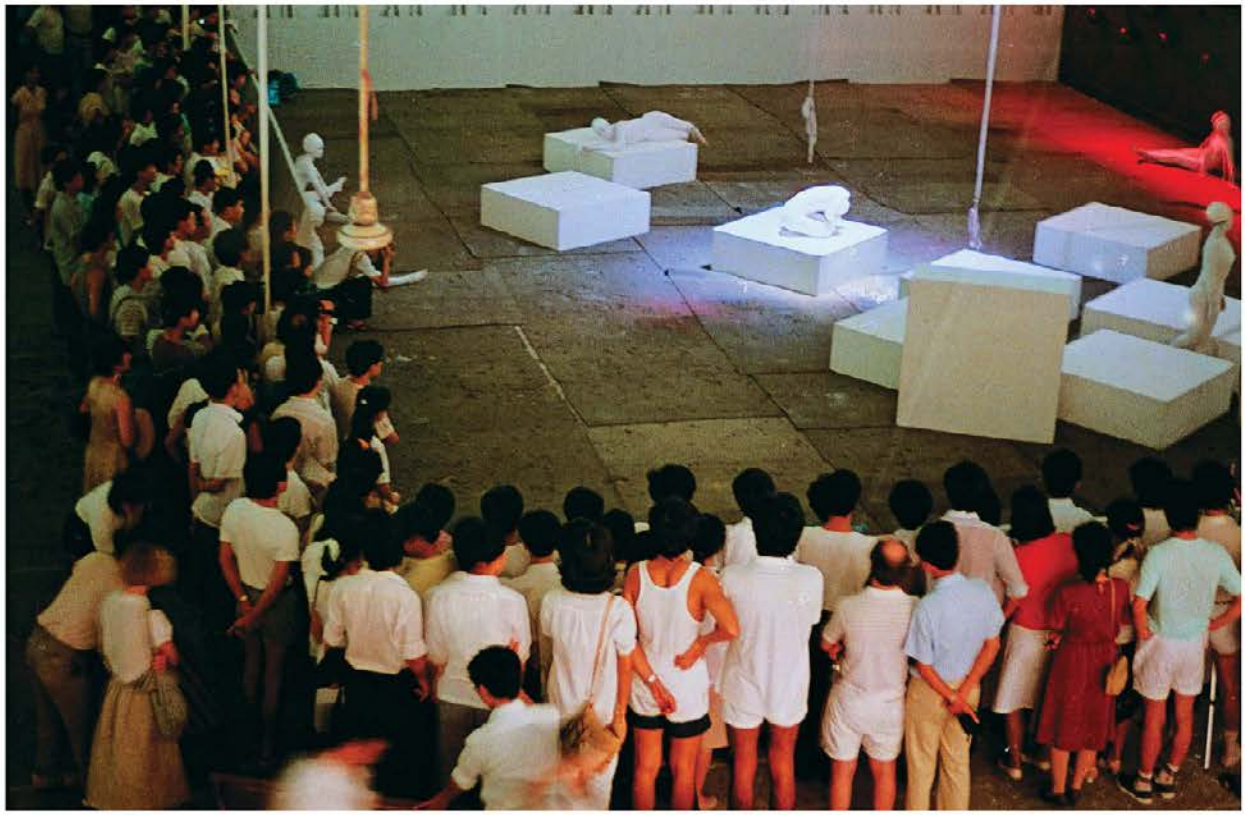


Figure 3.23

The first exhibition of the Three Step Studio, 1985.

Figure 3.24

Wang Jiping, *Flags,* 1985.

Figure 3.25

Song Yonghong, *Experience on a Certain Day in 1986*, 1986.

and Hubei Artists Associations to give lectures in Changsha, the capital of Hunan, and Wuhan, the capital of Hubei, to introduce the artworks of groups in the '85 Movement—which astonished the young artists of Hubei. In November of 1986, the largest exhibitions of the '85 Movement opened under the title "Festival of Youth Art in Hubei" in ten cities in Hubei province, including Wuhan, Huangshi, Xianggan, Yichang, and Shashi. About fifty groups participated and some two thousand works were displayed at twenty-eight exhibition sites. A striking characteristic of the works was a trend toward fusing vernacular culture, including ancient sources of Chu culture, and contemporary styles.[34]

The young artist groups and their exhibitions dominated the contemporary art world in Hunan. About ten groups were organized in 1985 and 1986. The best known was the Zero Art Group (*Ling yishu jituan*), which included sixteen artists with the average age of 25. The first exhibition organized by the group took place in Changsha from December 25, 1985, to January 5, 1986. What does the "Zero" mean? The answer can be found in the manifesto of the group, written by Luo Mingjun: "Zero is a symbol of our group. Zero makes us think about the sun, the origin of the world, and our ancient splendid tradition. Our consciousness emerges from ground Zero, where the future meets and crosses the past, and expands infinitely forward. Zero is also the perpetually moving wheel of our age taking us toward the future."[35] The artists of the group deployed various modern forms such as surrealism, expressionism, cubism, photorealism, pop art, happenings, and so on. Most of the works in the exhibition were of a pop type, combining readymade objects and happenings. For instance, in the small yard between the second and third galleries, the artists left the tables, chairs, wine bottles, and debris of an opening party as a work called *Zhoumo* (Weekend).[36]

In November 1986, the young critics Deng Pingxiang and Li Luming organized an exhibition called the "United Exhibition of All Groups of Hunan Young Artists," sponsored by the Hunan Artists Association and Hunan Young Artists Association. The exhibition took place in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.[37] The eighty-three works exhibited were in various media ranging from ink paintings to installations. The goal of the exhibition was to show that the '85 Movement was too bohemian and revolutionary; the artworks sent a message that the organizers and artists sought a return to academicism and the traditional aestheticism of a more genteel and elegant style or taste. This orientation of the show was criticized by many young critics for its nostalgia, rustic exoticism, and a lack of socially critical concern. Conversely, it was praised by many middle-aged master academic painters because of its pure artistic approach and distance from political critique.[38] The exhibition featured a new tendency among young Hunan artists to use an older approach to modern art, one that had been adopted by many early Chinese modernists of the 1930s: a modernism with Chinese characteristics.

This approach was not, however, characteristic of most avant-garde groups of central China. In Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Anhui, and Jiangsi provinces, a number of avant-garde groups and their exhibitions of the mid-1980s had a sudden impact in the art world. The "Henan First Oil Painting Exhibition" ("Henan diyijie youhuazhan") of 1985 marked the first step of Henan painters toward a visual revolution. On May 4, 1986, Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province, first felt the impact of modern art when the "Zhengzhou First Youth Art Exhibition" ("Zhengzhou shoujie qingnian meizhan") opened in the Henan Provincial Agricultural Gallery. A total of 124 artists contributed 221 works, and about 4,700 people visited the show. The exhibition was mounted by the self-organized City Artists Association and approved by the Zhengzhou Youth Committee. Many works featured a sort of cynical attitude and allegorized the reality of suffering using various modern painting styles, such as surrealism, cubism, and expressionism. The show caused an intense controversy, as the following analysis of the audience's comments shows:[39]

Figure 3.26
The invitation letter for *Tribe· Works Exhibition of Tribe·Tribe*, 1986.

Figure 3.27
Huang Yali, *Sublime and Contemplation Series (7 pieces), 1986.*

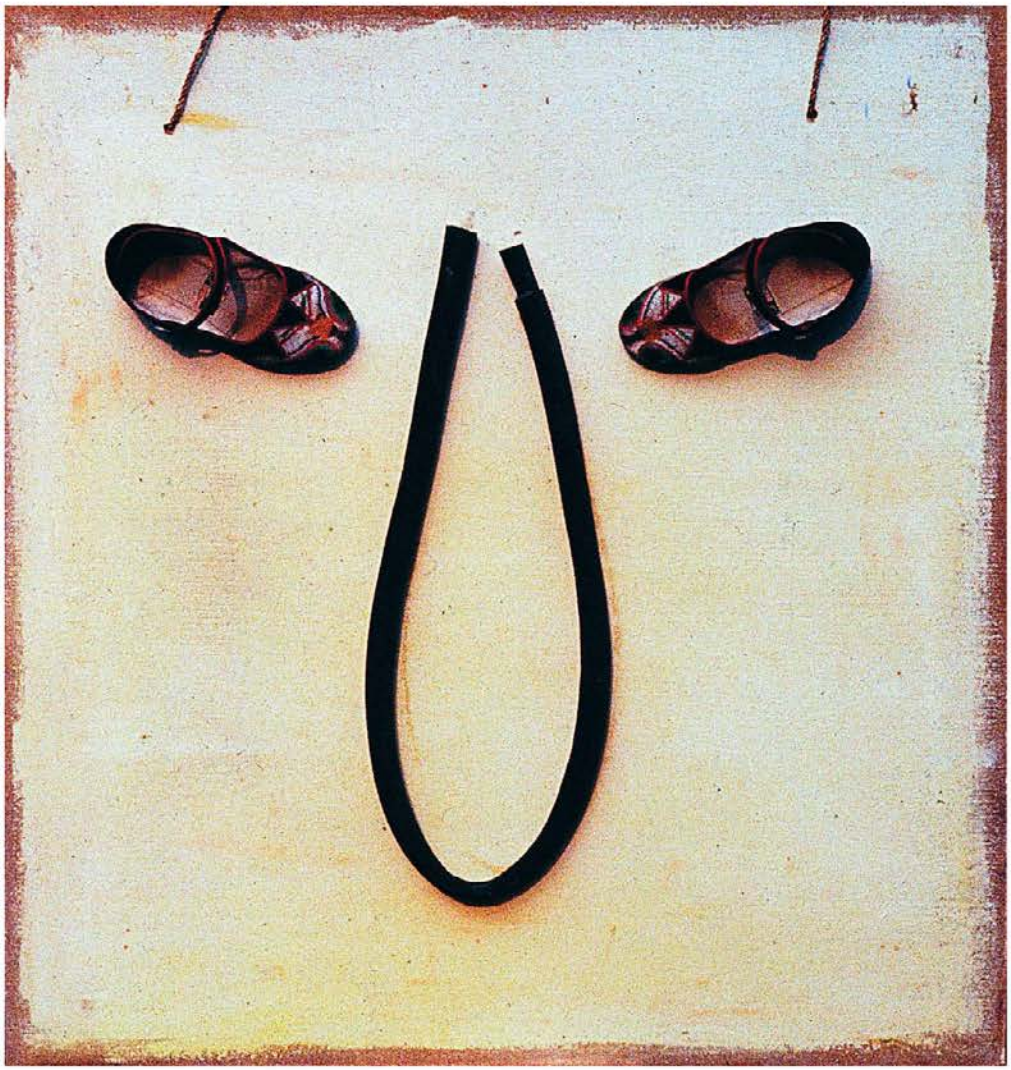


Figure 3.28
Luo Mingjun, *I*, 1985.

Figure 3.29
Zero Art Group, *Weekend*, 1985.

Audience	Percent of total	Comments
Workers	12%	Critical of the show as hard to understand, liked realistic style
Peasants	3%	Cursing and abuse
Officials	8%	Silence, incomprehensible, interested in the organizational form
Soldiers	2%	In favor of realistic style, resistant to abstract style
Students	17%	Supported and encouraged experimental work with content of social critique, hoped more exhibitions of this type could happen and more communication would take place between artists and young people
Professional artists	10%	Supported, but thought that the works lacked sophistication, thoughtfulness, and individuality and were just copies of Western art
Amateurs	26%	Fascinated, wrote debates and jokes
High school Students	6%	Confused, commented sincerely with positive views
Others	8.5%	Incomprehensible, too abstract, but liked the experimental orientation of the show

These percentages, in fact, were very similar on average to all the polls responding to avant-garde events of the '85 Movement.

In Longyang, Henan province, one of the most famous ancient Chinese capital cities, avant-garde practice also assailed the conservative cultural atmosphere. The most extreme avant-garde exhibition, which combined performance, happenings, installation, and mixed-media objects, was "Luoyang Modern Art Field" ("Luoyang qingnian yishuchang"), held by eighteen young artists in January of 1987. Unique to the rationale of this exhibition was the concept of *chang* or "field." An article written by participants Hou Zhen and Zuo Xiaofeng demonstrated that the idea of *yishuchang*, or "art field," is different from that of the environmental art or land art of the West, as well as from that favored by some Chinese architects for their specific space designs. *Yishuchang*, basically, is a term similar to a traditional philosophical concept, *Dao* or "principle," which is anywhere and nowhere. Accordingly, their *yishuchang* was characterized by the pursuit of a traditional nationalist spirit (*minzu jingshen*), and their Dada-like artworks were similar to those of Huang Yongping's Xiamen Dada in proposing a way of transformation between Chan Buddhism or Daoism and Dadaism.[40] The Henan artists thought, however, that the practice of Xiamen Dada was still rationalistic. What the artists of *yishuchang* sought was complete randomness and a true irrationality that was a primitive impulse and provocation.[41] Thus their works, such as photographs, readymade objects, performance, and various cynical-realist-style paintings, were placed in a mess in a gallery without any orientation. Thirty-seven artists made the space totally disordered and chaotic. Many conservative critics and artists were incensed by the show and wrote a letter to the city government accusing the exhibition of running wild and making society unstable. The result was the closure of the show two weeks before the originally scheduled date. The authorities impounded the exhibition site for investigation and ordered the artists to submit all relevant materials, including their documentary pictures and writings. A month later, the city government held a meeting to criticize the *yishuchang*. However, because the scholars and critics who had

been asked to come to the meeting did not attend, the meeting was canceled. The artists, therefore, were not punished, and their ten-thousand-word-long defense, which expressed the artists' sincere concern about art and their responsibility for Chinese culture, turned out to be unnecessary.[42] The shutting down of the show, in fact, had been anticipated by the artists before it opened. The text of the exhibition catalogue included a mourning poem for the exhibition: "As an exhibition, it will be closed, but as art it will not be concluded."[43]

In the other provinces of central China, such as Shandong, Anhui, Hebei, and Jiangxi, there were also many avant-garde activities in the mid-1980s. In November 1985, the "Shangdong Art, Photography, Calligraphy, and Seal Cutting Exhibition of the International Youth Year" ("Guoji qingniannian Shandong qingnian meishu, sheying, shufa, zhuanke yishu fengxianzhan") opened in the Shangdong Industrial Exhibition Gallery (*Shandong gongye zhanlanguan*). It was organized by the Shandong Youth Association (*Shandong qingnian lianhehui*) and included 3,250 works. About twenty thousand people visited the show. The main goal of the endeavor was to create a healthy climate for modern art: "The exhibition will be open to different forms and ideas, and will therefore not show prices or masters in order to encourage the exploration of new modern art ideas and forms."[44] Many provocative works caused controversy. Two of the artists who participated in the exhibition, Dong Chao and Li Han, organized an avant-garde group called the Black Union of Southwest Lu (*Luxinan heise lianmeng*) in Heze, Shandong province, in November 1985. They proclaimed that their artistic ideas were influenced by the philosophies of Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre, and refused to accept any so-called "culture." The only thing they admired was the earth and its freshness, and they said, "We glorify life. We know nothing about how to create art, but follow our own intuition."[45] The first collective work by the group was a performance project called *Painting Frame Series* (*Huakuan xilie*), which involved the artist Li Han going through holes cut in three framed canvases.

One of the most famous mountains in China is Mount Huang (*Huangshan*), located in Anhui province. The mountain has attracted and nursed

Figure 3.30

Li Han, *Painting Frame Series*, 1985.

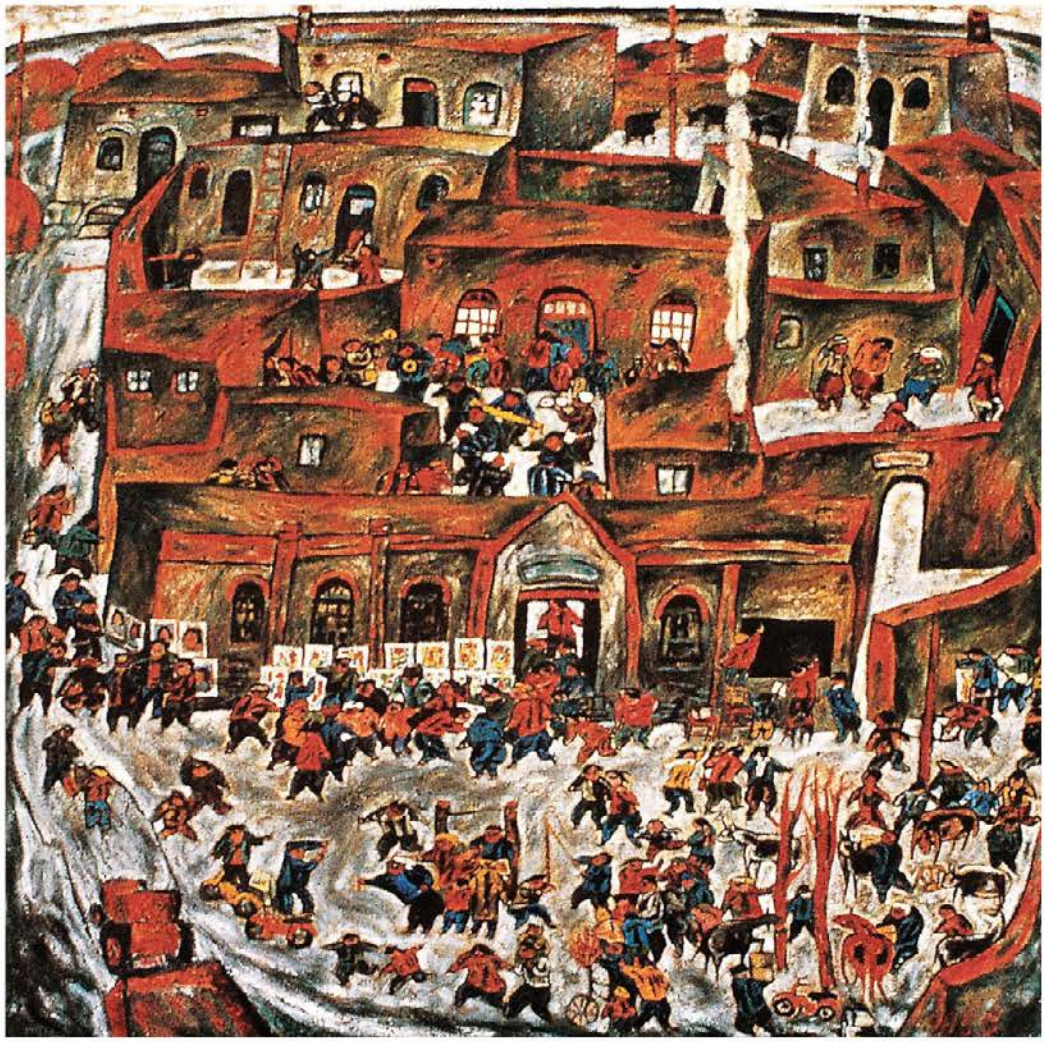


Figure 3.31
Wang Huanqing, *A Story of the "Twelfth Lunar Month,"* 1986.

many generations of traditional ink painters and painting schools. In contemporary Chinese art, Mount Huang has again played an important role for a new art movement. In April 1985, the "National Oil Painting Conference" ("Quanguo youhua taolunhui") was held in Jing county, located at the foot of Mount Huang. The fact that the meeting was even held demonstrated the breaking down of political obstacles in the search for new art ideas after the retardataire Sixth National Art Exhibition of 1984. Although most participants were middle-aged academic painters, its atmosphere sent a message of freedom to artists nationwide. In August 1988, an avant-garde conference called "'88 Chinese Modern Art Conference" ("'88 Zhongguo xiandai yishu yantaohui") was held at Mount Huang, at which about one hundred artists gathered to prepare for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition of 1989. In 1986, "The First Anhui Oil Painting Exhibition" ("Diyijie Anhui youhuazhan"), an experimental show, took place in Hefei, Anhui province, and involved all of the active young artists in the area.

In Jiangxi province, the "Jiangxi Second Youth Art Exhibition" ("Jiangxi dierjie qingnian meizhan") opened in October 1985. Although organized by the official Jiangxi Provincial Cultural Department and Jiangxi Artists Association, the exhibition featured a transition from post-Cultural Revolution art to that of an avant-garde. Many works were influenced by the art groups of the east coast, taking conceptual approaches and using various media. In Hebei, three young artists—Duang Xiucang, Qiao Xiaogang, and Wang Huanqing—organized a group called the Rice and Sheep Painting Society (*Miyang huahui*) in

resistance to traditional literati culture. They called for a return to primitive and folk art traditions while searching for the root of the "wild freedom" (*yexing de ziyou*) of humankind.[46] Their first show, entitled "New Works of the Rice and Sheep Painting Society" ("Miyang huahui xinzuozhan"), opened in Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei province, in January 1986; it comprised 180 oils, ink paintings, papercuts, woodcuts, and sculptures by the three artists.

Southwest and Northwest

In the '85 Movement, southwest China was one of the most active areas, parallel to the avant-garde art of the east coast. One of the groups founded there, the Southwest Art Group (*Xinan yishu qunti*), has been one of the most influential groups in the nation. More importantly, unlike most other avant-garde groups, most of which disappeared in the late 1980s, the Southwest Art Group has maintained its group connection until the present day. The artists of the group who played very important roles in the '80s, including Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, and Ye Yongqing, were also involved in the new avant-garde art movements of the '90s, such as cynical realism, and became leading artists.

The most active part of southwest China was Sichuan province, where scar painting appeared in 1979, and many avant-garde art groups were organized across the province, in big and small cities such as Chongqing, Chengdu, and Fuling, in the mid-'80s. In the remote provinces of southwest China where the largest concentrations of minorities live, such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Guanxi, and even Tibet, some avant-garde group and exhibitions also emerged.

After the initiation of scar painting and rustic realism, the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art continued to play an important role in the '85 Movement. In 1985 and 1986, three self-organized student exhibitions (*zixuan huazhan*), supported by the teachers of the school, were held in the academy. The students were excited, saying, "Freedom is coming!"[47]

Three influential exhibitions were organized by three different avant-garde groups. The first was the China Anonymous Painting Society (*Zhongguo wumingshi huahui*), founded in Chongqing, Sichuan province, in 1982 by Yan Xiaohua (b. 1962) and Zhao Runsheng (b. 1966); it included many young amateur artists from around the country. Like a guerrilla force capable of fighting anywhere, the group held exhibitions and various activities from Sichuan to Beijing.[48] Their first nationwide exhibition, the "First National Exhibition of the China Anonymous Painting Society Group" ("Shoujie Zhongguo wumingshi huahui de quanguo meizhan"), opened in Nanquan Park Gallery in Chongqing in October 1985. There was no dominant or hegemonic orientation among the works displayed, but rather a common thread of seeking free experimentation: "To pursue freedom is absolutely the first priority for our artists. The refusal of any doctrines and criteria is our principle. What we admire is that art is complete irrational action," wrote the artists in the exhibition catalogue.[49] Another amateur artist group existed in Fuling, Sichuan province, where it organized a show called the "First Perspective Painting Exhibition" ("Shoujie shiye huazhan"), bringing a fresh breath of modern art to the public.[50] The largest unofficial exhibition in Sichuan province in the '80s was the "Sichuan Youth Red, Yellow, Blue Painting Exhibition" ("Sichuan qingnian hong, huang, lan huihua zhan") organized and financed by seventy young artists. It took place in the biggest gallery in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, from June 21 to July 6, 1986. The show resulted the founding of the group Sichuan Youth Red, Yellow, Blue Painting Society on December 7, 1986.

In Guangxi, a province of the minority people known as the Zhuang, there was also an avant-garde exhibition called the "Yitai Painting Exhibition" ("Yitai huazhan"), which took place at the Open Air Theater in Nanning (*Nanning qiyi lutain juchang*) on April 27, 1986. The unprecedented exhibition attracted an audience of about forty thousand and was said to be the most spectacular event ever held in the area.[51]

In April 1986, a Tibetan avant-garde group led by Li Yanping exhibited in the Beijing People's Cultural Palace (*Laodong renmin wenhuagong*). The five artists of the group had lived in Tibet for about ten years, and displayed works that combined modern abstract styles and Tibetan Buddhist images and themes.

Figure 3.32

Li Yanping, *An Image for Tibet, No. 3*, 1986.

Northwest China, compared with the east coast, is a remote and undeveloped region including several of the provinces where minorities have autonomous areas, such as Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia, where various nomads have traditionally lived, and other provinces including Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai. In the middle '80s, avant-garde groups spontaneously emerged in every province of northwest China.

In Inner Mongolia, a private businessman financed and sponsored an avant-garde exhibition called the "Exhibition of Young Artists of Western Inner Mongolia" ("Neimenggu xibu qingnian meizhan"), which opened in Baotou, the biggest city in western Inner Mongolia, in April 1986.[52] In July 1986, in Chifeng, a small city in eastern Inner Mongolia, ten young artists founded a self-organized group and held an exhibition entitled "Modern Art Exhibition" ("Xiandai yishu zhan"), bringing the '85 Movement to this marginal area. The reception of the exhibition was similar to that met by other such occurrences in the '85 Movement: unprecedented audience numbers, intense debates, and overwhelming comments.[53]

In Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi province, after a four-year silence in the art world caused by the authorities' shutting down in 1981 of the "Xi'an First Modern Art Exhibition," which was organized by nine students of Xi'an Academy of Fine Art and seven students of Xi'an College of Foreign Languages, a new wave of avant-garde art suddenly flourished in 1985. In October, ten young artists organized an exhibition called the "Exhibition of Vitality" ("Shengsheng huazhan"), in which they displayed about one hundred pieces of modern-type sculpture and painting. The exhibition, like the most avant-garde group exhibitions everywhere in the '85 Movement, emphasized the response from the audience. *Yijianben* or "comments notebooks" were put in the exhibition space. The artists demonstrated their aspiration for freedom in the catalogue preface: "For art, there is no rule, no criteria, no example, no model, no success, no master, no perfection, no long life. For us, art is thought, emotion, ego, pain, lonely, scream, disorder, psychotic and limitless suffering. The law of art is revolution."[54] In November 1986 the "Haowangjiao Modern Art Exhibition" ("Haowangjiao xiandai yishuzhan") was organized by fifteen young teachers of Xi'an Academy of Fine Art, and included eighty works. In December 1986, two more experimental shows opened in Xi'an, including "Modern Art Design" ("Xiandai sheji") and the "Wandering Exhibition of Modern Art" ("Xiandai yishu xunhuizhan").

About twenty artists founded a group called the Qingqing Society (*Qingqing she*) in Qinghai province on October 12, 1986, and held a self-financed exhibition in Qinghai Provincial Gallery. The artists said, "Even in a marginal area like Qinghai, we can also experience the impact of the '85 Movement. Although our works may not be able to catch up with the mainstream of the movement, what we want is to release our restless voices."[55] In northwest China, the most active avant-garde activities were in Gansu province, and the avant-garde artists of Gansu should be proud that one of the earliest avant-garde exhibitions in the '85 Movement took place in Lanzhou, the provincial capital.

Avant-garde experimental art practices can be traced back to the late 1970s, just after the end of the Cultural Revolution, when a few amateur artists were involved in exploring modern individual styles. Their effort initiated the later avant-garde movement of Lanzhou. In 1981, several artists, including Cao Yong and Cheng Li, organized a modern art exhibition entitled "Innovative Painting Exhibition" ("Chuangxin huazhan"), which opened in Wuquan Mountain Park (*Wuquanshan gongyuan*) in April 1981. Having absorbed various Western modern art forms, the artworks of the show featured "art for art's sake" and expressed the artists' goal of breaking out of the old ideological barriers. Between 1981 and 1984, self-organized group shows were strictly prohibited nationwide, and experimental art could be only executed underground, at home. For instance, in autumn 1982, Cao Yong and Cheng Li held solo shows at their homes and secretly invited a small circle of writers and artists to visit.

In 1983, when Cao Yong, Cheng Li, Liu Zhenggang, and other artists were disappointed by the conservative organizational approach of the Sixth National Art Exhibition, they did not apply to participate in the exhibition, but decided instead to organize an opposition exhibition in Gansu at the

Figure 3.33

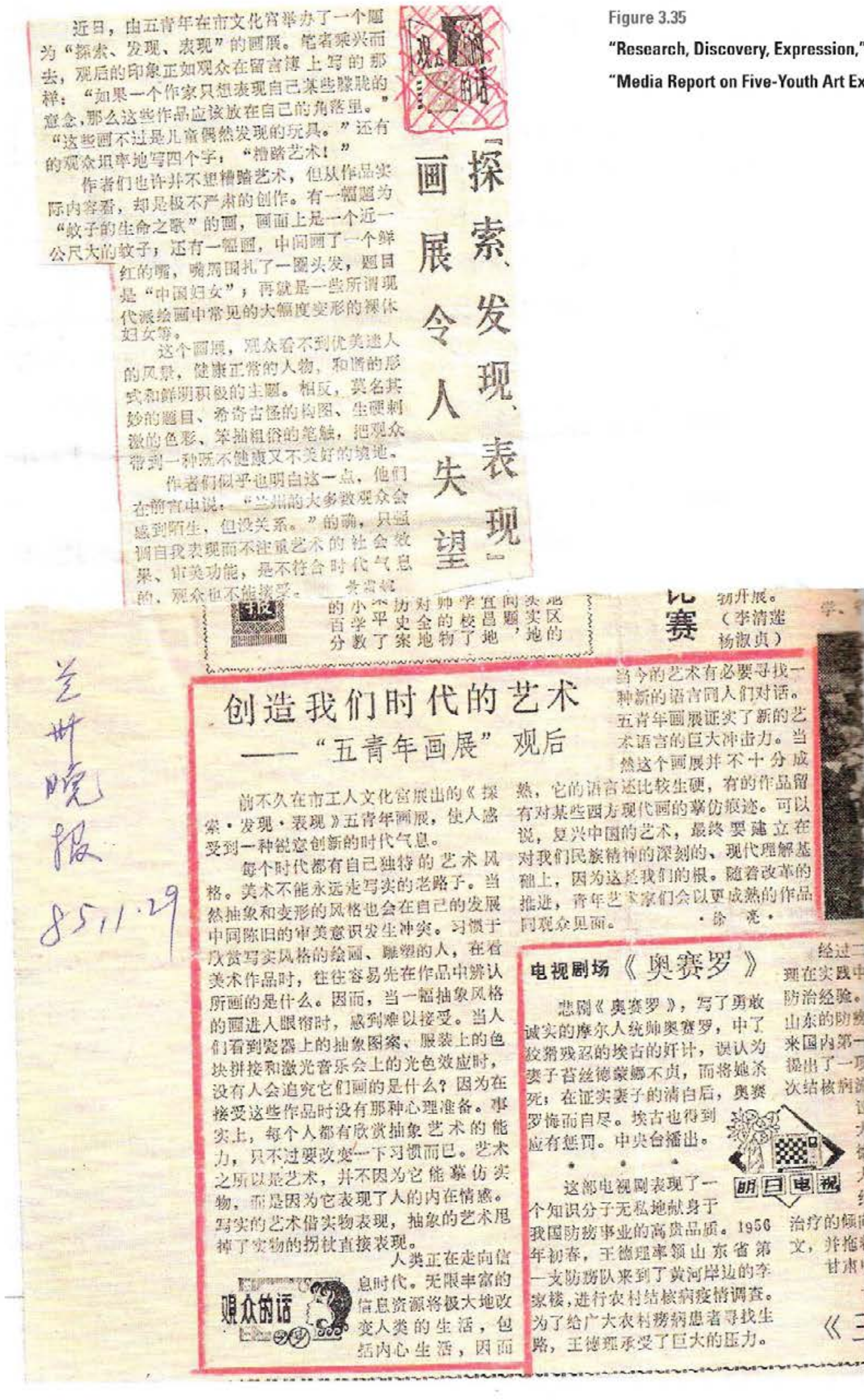
The comments notebooks from the "Xi'an First Modern Art Exhibition," 1981.

same time. Unfortunately, it did not take place due to the political campaign against "spiritual pollution." After the national exhibition closed in late 1984, the artists started to set up their exhibition in a very secret way and for a very short time—one day and two nights. On December 20, the exhibition, entitled "Research, Discovery, Expression" ("Tansuo, faxian, biaoxian"), opened in the Lanzhou Workers' Cultural Palace to show the works of five artists led by Cao Yong. The exhibition caused a sensation and a controversy. Because of its provocative tone and the overwhelming reaction from the public, it was said to be another Stars exhibition in Gansu, and was called even more radical than the Stars activities in Beijing in 1979, which turned out to be among the most important political events in the contemporary Chinese art world.[56] This exhibition inspired many young artists to want to join the five-man group, and the group was enlarged to fifteen. In August 1985, seventy-nine works by the fifteen artists were displayed in another avant-garde exhibition called "85.8 New Art" ("85.8 xinyishuzhan") in Lanzhou.[57]

The approach of the avant-garde art of this group was very similar to that of the other current of life artists (discussed in chapter 5), who advocated an anti-urban pastoralism or regionalism, along with the exploration of individual desire, which, they argued, had been suppressed by collectivist rationalization. Among them, Cao Yong was one of the most extreme. His collage work entitled *The Face of Modern Tragedy No. 1* (*Xiandai beiju de tushi No. 1*) is a good example. A huge monster, with the body of a cat, a pair of ox horns, an evil mouth, a pair of glasses, and smoke coming from its nose and anus, flies in the sky. To its tail is tied a slogan, "In the daytime, under the moonlight, I start my journey from Freud's house," below which there are many classical and modern buildings mixed in disorder to symbolize a "global village." In *The Face of Modern Tragedy No. 2*, a monster lies on a land consisting of many naked female bodies, and in its mouth are crowded many dressed female figures, some Western, such as the Mona Lisa and Marilyn Monroe, in addition to many familiar faces of Chinese women. In his works, Cao Yong attacked the alienation stemming from both authoritarianism and modernization.

Figure 3.34

Yang Shufeng, *Game*, 1986.



“探索、发现、表现”画展令人失望

近日，由五青年在市文化宫举办了一个题为“探索、发现、表现”的画展。笔者乘兴而去，观后的印象正如观众在留言簿上写的那样：“如果一个作家只想表现自己某些朦胧的意念，那么这些作品应该放在自己的角落里。”“这些画不过是儿童偶然发现的玩具。”还有的观众坦率地写四个字：“糟蹋艺术！”

作者们也许并不想糟蹋艺术，但从作品实际内容看，却是极不严肃的创作。有一幅题为“蚊子的生命之歌”的画，画面上是一个近一公尺大的蚊子；还有一幅画，中间画了一个鲜红的嘴，嘴周围扎了一圈头发，题目是“中国妇女”；再就是一些所谓现代派绘画中常见的大幅度变形的裸体妇女等。

这个画展，观众看不到优美迷人的风景，健康正常的人物，和谐的形式和鲜明积极的主题。相反，莫名其妙的题目、希奇古怪的构图、生硬刺激的色彩、笨拙粗俗的笔触，把观众带到一种既不健康又不美好的境地。

作者们似乎也明白这一点，他们在前言中说：“兰州的大多数观众会感到陌生，但没关系。”的确，只强调自我表现而不注重艺术的社会效果、审美功能，是不符合时代气息的，观众也不能接受。

创造我们时代的艺术

——“五青年画展”观后

前不久在市工人文化宫展出的《探索·发现·表现》五青年画展，使人感受到一种锐意创新的时代气息。

每个时代都有自己独特的艺术风格。美术不能永远走写实的老路子。当然抽象和变形的风格也会在自己的发展中同陈旧的审美意识发生冲突。习惯于欣赏写实风格的绘画、雕塑的人，在看美术作品时，往往容易先在作品中辨认所画的是什么。因而，当一幅抽象风格的画进人眼帘时，感到难以接受。当人们看到瓷器上的抽象图案、服装上的色块拼接和激光音乐会上的光色效应时，没有人会追究它们画的是什么？因为在接受这些作品时没有那种心理准备。事实上，每个人都有欣赏抽象艺术的能力，只不过要改变一下习惯而已。艺术之所以是艺术，并不因为它能摹仿实物，而是因为它表现了人的内在情感。写实的艺术借实物表现，抽象的艺术甩掉了实物的拐杖直接表现。

人类正在走向信息时代。无限丰富的信息资源将极大地改变人类的生活，包括内心生活，因而当今的艺术有必要寻找一种新的语言同人们对话。五青年画展证实了新的艺术语言的巨大冲击力。当然这个画展并不十分成熟，它的语言还比较生硬，有的作品留有对某些西方现代画的摹仿痕迹。可以说，复兴中国的艺术，最终要建立在对我们民族精神的深刻的、现代理解基础上，因为这是我们的根。随着改革的推进，青年艺术家们会以更成熟的作品同观众见面。

·徐 亮·

观众的话

兰州晚报 85.1.29

Figure 3.35

“Research, Discovery, Expression,” in Lanzhou, “Media Report on Five-Youth Art Exhibition,” 1985.

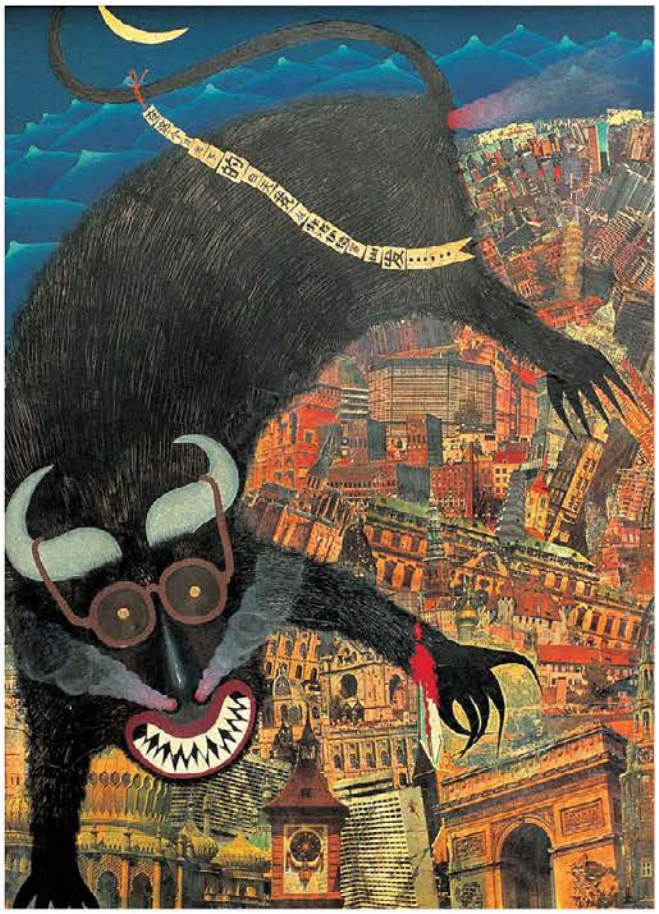
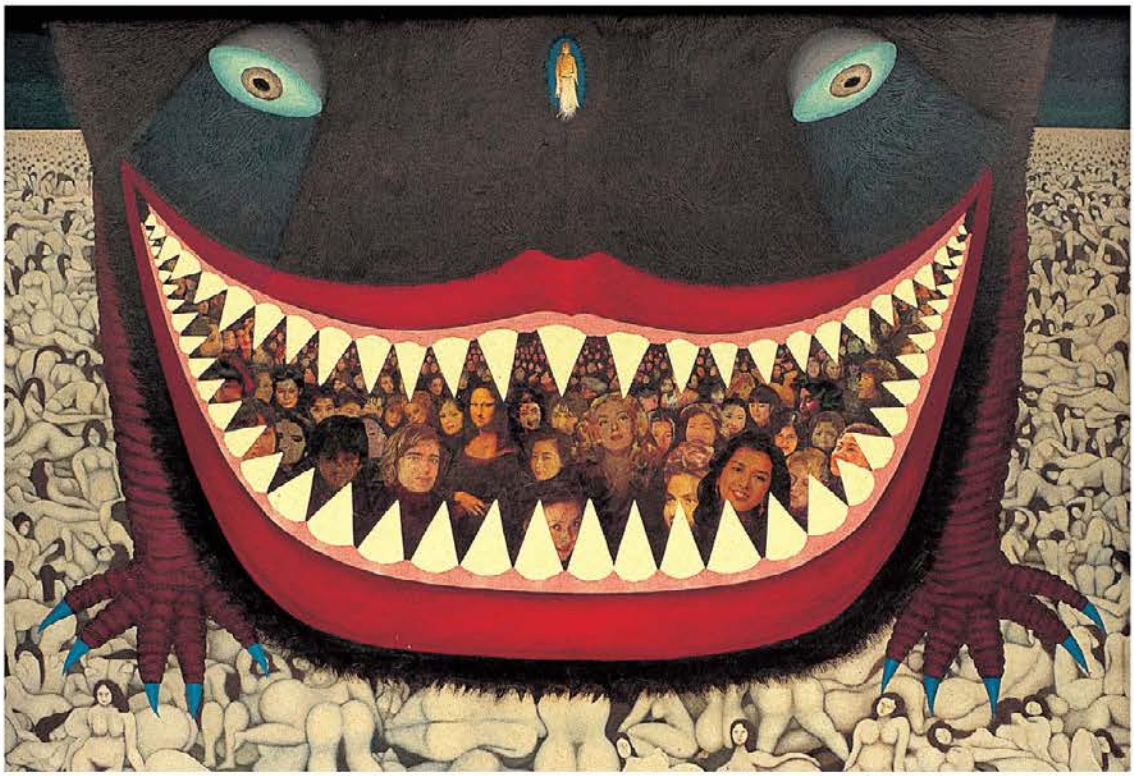


Figure 3.36

Cao Yong, *The Face of Modern Tragedy No. 1,* 1985.

Figure 3.37

Cao Yong, *The Face of Modern Tragedy No. 2,* 1985.



The Purpose, Function, and Features of the Groups

Why did the artists of the '85 Movement like to organize groups rather than play a role as individual artists? The groups had two primary functions. The first was defensive. The dangers facing a solitary artist creating avant-garde art, and thus attacking society, or even criticizing the art establishment are obvious. In the face of past governmental suppression, the artists saw the need to form a stronger united force. For example, when criticism or castigation was addressed to a group, the group naturally felt an obligation to protect every member and not to let an individual artist bear his or her hardship alone. For this reason, most controversial artistic activity since the late 1970s has been conducted by groups. The two exhibitions of the Stars group in 1979 and 1980 were strongly criticized by the government, but no individual artist was singled out for particularly strict punishment. The "Ten-Man Exhibition" of 1983, held in Shanghai, was closed by the government after three days and criticized in *Jie fang ribao* (Liberation daily), but none of the artists was individually punished. The exhibition in Hangzhou entitled the "'86 Last Exhibition" held by six artists of the Zhejiang Academy, was closed by the Zhejiang provincial propaganda bureau three hours after it opened. Although the exhibition received intense criticism, none of the artists was punished.[58]

A second function of such groups was that an artist could find individual value from participating in his or her group.[59] Usually one thinks of groups as suppressing the identity of the individual, but in the special circumstances of China during the 1980s they provided individuals with opportunities to vent what would otherwise have been suppressed. Because members of a group felt less concern for their reputation than each might alone, the structure permitted them to overcome their artistic and social inhibitions. The group became more powerful than the individual. Moreover, members came to believe that they could collectively overcome failure. Perhaps more significantly, the risks of failure were lessened, for the group sheltered its members from a sense of individual responsibility for a negative result.

In the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition of 1989, for example, many performance artists attacked society with a vehement stance otherwise impossible for an artist acting as an individual. They knew that the organizers of the exhibition, not the artists themselves, would be

Figure 3.38

The artists and members of the organizational commitee for the "China/ Avant-Garde exhibition during a gathering on the day after the exhibition was shut down, National Art Museum of China, February 6, 1989. Photo provided by Zhou Yan.

held responsible in any punitive governmental response. On February 13, 1989, the National Art Museum of China assessed the organizational committee of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition an official penalty of a fine of two thousand yuan and issued a ban on holding any exhibitions in the National Art Museum within the next two years. And for myself, the organizer and principle curator of the exhibition, my punishment was to be dismissed from my job and forced to study Marxism at home for two years without the possibility of lectures, publications, travel, or curatorial work due to my devotion to the exhibition and support of the avant-garde movement. Even though some avant-garde exhibitions were closed by the authorities within a few hours of opening, the group identity gave avant-garde artists the visibility they sought. For example, the first show of the Three Step Studio in Taiyuan, Shanxi, originally scheduled to last for two weeks, was open for only one day. Nevertheless, when I published some exhibited works in my capacity as the sympathetic editor of *Meishu,* they attained a legitimacy that could not be withdrawn, even after the official provincial art association accused *Meishu* of supporting bourgeois liberalism.[60]

A third important element was economic. Because the avant-garde groups were organized by the artists themselves, not by the government, and had no commercial foundation, they bore the burden of renting exhibition space, purchasing materials, and paying for transportation. A group was better able to raise such funds than an individual. The most important activity of the avant-garde groups was organizing exhibitions. The significance of this function cannot be overestimated, because it was almost impossible for a young artist working through official channels to have a solo exhibition in China. Among the groups, the Southwest Art Group made a successful effort to organize a series of group exhibitions, proving that a well-functioning group, rather than an individual, can make such events happen.

Many similar examples can be found for the latter half of the 1980s. An important factor in the failure of leftist authorities to suppress the young artists, of course, was the changed political situation of the period and the relatively open attitudes of many members of the art establishment concerning creative freedom. However, the group identity helped, as well, by giving the artists the confidence to persist in the face of obstacles and giving them better visibility among critics and sympathetic cultural leaders.

The artist initiatives of the '85 Movement were normally not called "painting societies" (*huahui*) but rather "groups" (*qunti*), as they were movements under the banner of the larger avant-garde art movement. The function of a *qunti* is very much like a *zhandou dui* or "a vanguard troop," as the Red Guards named themselves during the Cultural Revolution. The '85 Movement's activism, antagonism, and radical concepts rendered it incompatible with traditional concepts of art, often resulting in criticism and suppression. It was therefore a collective effort consciously trying to gain autonomy, not the continuation of a classical group or a particular school. The groups' collective revolutionary approach, similar to that of "battle squads," was shaped by specific circumstances. The collective could empower its members with courage, or inspire risk-taking and attempts at resistance, because the collective would assume ultimate responsibility. When someone had to be punished for the group's activities, it was usually the organizing "work unit" or its leader that was implicated, not the individuals in the group. When a group came under tremendous pressure from the outside, the freedom of individuals would not be sacrificed. Instead, the collective helped to release the psychological oppression of the individuals. Conceptually speaking, individuals were thus able to come forward with more radical ideas.[61] It was precisely the collective nature of the '85 Movement that strengthened its anticonservative and antiauthoritarian power.[62]

At the same time, innumerable conferences and cultural debates were held on and off university campuses during the period of the "cultural fever" (*wenhuare*) in the mid-1980s. Influenced and informed by the cultural fever, many self-organized groups of young artists emerged during the middle of the 1980s. Members of the groups of the '85 Movement consisted of poets, musicians, and philosophers in addition to artists. The exchange between artists and the rest of the intellectual world, both international and within China, changed the

Figure 3.39
A group photo of artists attending the "Xuzhou Modern Art Exhibition" in 1986: from left to right, Ma Bosheng, Xu Yongsheng, Wu Pingren, Yang Yingsheng, Gao Tianmin, Qu Yan, and Shi Dihua.

identity of the avant-gardist from that of an artist to that of a "cultural soldier" with interests in broader cultural and political issues. This broadening of focus served as the foundation for the "anti-art" projects of the avant-garde '85 Movement in terms of merging culture and art as one, in contrast to the previous new academicism and amateur avant-garde. While the '85 Movement was commonly criticized for its rough and unrefined style, the artists should not be thought of as a stylistic school, but rather as a philosophical and cultural movement as a whole.

I first coined the term '85 Movement in the mid-1980s. A few years later, at Harvard, I read Renato Poggioli's fascinating book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. I realized that his understanding of the idea of a "movement" was quite similar to my own. In the section entitled "The Concept of a Movement," he describes a distinction between the notion of a movement and a school: "We call the old-fashioned regroupings 'schools,' we call the modern ones 'movements.'" This is because "the school notion presupposes a master and a method, the criterion of tradition and the principle of authority," and "the school is inconceivable outside the humanistic ideal, the idea of culture as a thesaurus." The movement, instead, "conceives of culture not as increment but as creation—or as a center of activity and energy."[63] Therefore, virtually all of the usual manifestations of modern art, and more specifically avant-garde art, are to be identified with the concept of a movement rather than a school. For instance, we never refer to Dada as a school; rather we refer to the Dada movement, the surrealist movement, and so on. "A movement," Poggioli writes, "is constituted primarily to obtain a positive result, for a concrete end. The ultimate hope, naturally, is the success of the specific movement or, on a higher, broader level, the affirmation of the avant-garde spirit in all cultural fields."[64] It sacrifices itself in order to break with conventions and move a culture forward. This definition can also be applied perfectly to the idealism of the '85 Movement.

Peter G. Christensen summarizes the four characteristics of a movement in Poggioli's sense: (1) activism: self-promotion of a movement out of "sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure"; (2) antagonism: a spirit of hostility toward something already in existence; (3) nihilism: a kind of "transcendental antagonism," which "finds joy not merely in the celebration of movement, but even more in the act of beating down barriers, seizing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way"; (4) agonism: a kind of "transcendental activism" in which a movement "welcomes and accepts its own self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements."[65]

Some of the theories of the avant-garde by Western scholars may inspire us to think further

about the nature and function of the group movement of Chinese avant-garde. Some Western scholars consider the Western avant-garde an experiment of aesthetic modernity based on the feelings of the artist as the personification of alienation. This theory of alienation in capitalist society was initiated by Marxists and developed by existentialists, and has frequently been applied by Western scholars to characterize the modernists, especially the avant-gardists, as a rebellious, decadent, and resistant minority set against the rest of the capitalist society. Among such studies, Renato Poggioli pays particular attention to Marx's idea of alienation and variously considers "avant-gardism as ideology and as an aesthetic myth."[66] One may consider the '85 avant-garde movement as an alien force, targeting not vulgarity and philistinism in a consumer society, as did its Western counterparts, but rather a totalized society with its tradition and ideology. However, the notion of alienation is perhaps not the precise term to apply to the Chinese avant-garde. On the contrary, it cannot be stated strongly enough that Chinese avant-garde artists always embrace society while seeking individualism and creative freedom; they have a fascination with being united with their own target. There is no way for them to escape to an ivory tower; on the contrary, they must go onto the street and confront the public and authority. They themselves are part of the institution. If they are alienated, they alienated themselves, because they are in a system that includes them.

Despite the significant differences between the Western avant-garde and the '85 Movement in terms of their differing targets and levels of acceptance, we may still find many mental or ideological similarities on the levels of abstract spirituality and basic attitudes of rebelliousness. From this point of view, Poggioli's four-part typology of the avant-garde may also fit the '85 Movement. One of the features of the '85 Movement was the shunning of traditional studio work by the artists, who were focused instead on social projects taking place in the public sphere, such as villages, factories, streets, and plazas. For most of them, the artwork was never considered for its commercial or even artistic value. It was a spiritual vehicle to involve the public and society. This was not only due to their idealism, their hopes for enlightening the masses, the enjoyment of being involved in a movement, and their sensibilities growing out of Mao's revolutionary legacy, but also because of the complete absence of an art market, either local or international, in the middle '80s in China. This feature may be related to a tendency of activism, one of Poggioli's four elements.

Antagonism is Poggioli's second characteristic of the avant-garde. According to Poggioli, in the West, antagonism is characterized by the alienation of the free creative artist from the public and from tradition, and is socially expressed in eccentric dandyism, ivory tower bohemianism, or hooliganism. One may consider that the '85 Movement was an antitraditional movement. Its antagonistic attitude to tradition, however, was expressed in a very ambivalent way, for though the artists criticized traditional elegant forms, such as late literati art, they also respected a certain antagonistic spirit derived from traditions such as Chan Buddhism. The movement also made a departure from the socialist realist tradition. The artists' criticism of the latter, however, was very hesitant. Certain revolutionary strategies, such as those of the propagandist teams who frequently visited villages and factories during the Cultural Revolution, were sometimes still a part of the dream of the avant-garde.

In China during the 1980s, the major audience for Chinese avant-garde art was composed of intellectuals and university students, rather than the middle class with which the Western bohemians or hooligans were confronted. For the Chinese intellectual public it is not even necessary to comprehend any one particular work in its entirety, for all that need be grasped is the function of avant-garde art as a whole in the reform and total modernity project.[67] In order to grasp the essence of the avant-garde, it is necessary to understand its cultural presuppositions, which include the revolutionary values of social criticism and the cultural value of antagonism. It was very important for the Chinese avant-garde movement's survival that a context of intellectual culture in the 1980s existed.

According to Poggioli, the third aspect of the avant-garde is nihilism, or an action that drives it beyond self-control. An aesthetic enthusiasm for seeking a surrealistic future, embraced by the

Chinese avant-garde in the 1980s, was perhaps partly inspired by surrealism and Dadaism, movements that exemplified nihilism very strongly according to Poggioli. In fact, nihilism relates to the second characteristic of the avant-garde, antagonism, defined by Poggioli as a kind of "transcendental activism" in which a movement "welcomes and accepts its own self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements."

Most artists of the '85 Movement, especially the rationalist painters, believed that they bore the responsibility to make sacrifices for the nation's future, and yet they themselves suffered the life of a transitional generation. On December 2, 1985, for instance, the Pool Society's "'85 New Space" exhibition opened in Hangzhou in Zhejing province. An article published in *Meishu*, "Yongganzhe de xisheng" (The sacrifice of the brave), described the intention of the artists. They thought that it was impossible under the circumstances in China for their generation to surpass the achievements of their own tradition or the peak of modern Western culture; it might need several generations. They thought of themselves as being like the foundation on which the next generation would build to go on to reach the summit of the future.[68] The "Art Field" exhibition, held by the Luoyang Modern Art Study Group, was closed a day after its opening, fulfilling the group's expectation of suppression stated in the preface to the exhibition catalogue with a tragic tone: "As an exhibition, it will be closed, but as art it will not be concluded."[69]

In early 1988, most groups of the '85 Movement simultaneously disbanded. This was not mainly due to the political pressure of the Anti–Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign begun in early 1987, but was effected instead by a growing market society, a result of the economic reform encouraged by Deng Xiaoping since the early 1980s, which put a pressure even stronger than political pressure on the idealism of the avant-gardists. They needed to find a means of survival beside the creation of art, which apparently was the primary function and purpose of the groups.

No matter which perspective it is viewed from, the '85 Movement in general cannot be named as an art school or a period trend. Rather it was the birth of Chinese contemporary art and the foundation of all Chinese contemporary art of the last two decades. It is from this movement forward that many historical events, important artists, particular philosophies, and their ensuing heritage have developed.

4

The "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition of 1989

From February 5 to 19, 1989, the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition took place in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. This was just two months before the beginning of the Tian'anmen Square student democratic movement, and four months before the governmental shutdown of the movement on June 4, 1989. As the principal curator of the exhibition, I was involved in the entire three-year preparatory process, including garnering sponsorship, negotiating with officials, fundraising, and chairing the organizational committee, among other duties.[1]

In recent years, I have done a number of projects in China, including organizing the twentieth-anniversary show commemorating the original 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition. These past years have witnessed a rebirth of idealism with a new critical approach engaged in both social and aesthetic arenas. This rebirth of idealism was the primary impetus driving me and my team to undertake the organization of the anniversary show commemorating the original historical events.

I scheduled the 2009 show and events to take place on the same day in February as the original "China/Avant-Garde" opening. However, the police gave notice of cancellation to us in person, just the night before the opening day of the anniversary events. This closing actually repeated the events that happened twenty years ago with the original "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition. This reminds all Chinese artists and intellectuals that the growth of industrial modernity has not resulted in much change within the Chinese political system. Chinese modernity has a long way to go in terms of reform and democracy.

With frustration and anger, I made a declaration of protest to the public on February 5, 2009, at 3:00 p.m. outside the National Agricultural Exhibition Center (*Quanguo nongye zhanlanguan*), the designated time and place for the opening of the events and exhibition. Many artists who had participated in the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition were available on the scheduled opening day, and they attended my declaration. The complete words of the declaration were as follows:

A Declaration of Protest

Late at night on February 4, 2009, the Public Security Bureau of Chaoyang District in Beijing notified the Organizing Committee of the Twentieth Anniversary of the "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition that the commemorative event, which was to be held at the Beijing National Agricultural Exhibition Center on February 5, at 3 p.m., must be canceled. No legal basis for the provision was provided.

As the head of the Organizational Committee of the "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition in 1989, and the Chief Consultant and Curator of the current commemorative events, I would like to lodge a strong protest to the Public Security Bureau of Chaoyang District in Beijing. These commemorative events are legitimate cultural practices, conducted within the bounds of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. The Organizer and the working team have committed tremendous time, resources, and energy to launch these events. Members from the art and cultural communities as well as the general public are ready to participate. Without any prior consultation and communication, the Public Security Bureau of Chaoyang District arbitrarily issued an order to forbid our events—such action is an utter violation of the constitution and a blatant transgression of our civil rights. I am deeply indignant at such enforcement and would reserve my right to take further legal actions.

Gao Minglu,

Early morning of February 5, 2009

Figure 4.1

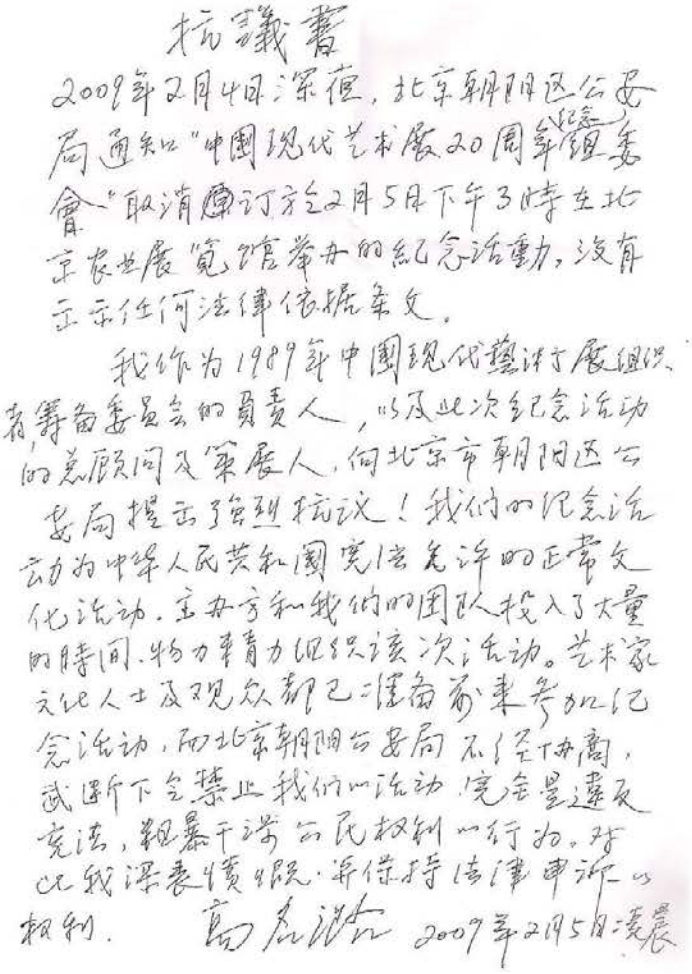
Gao Minglu, principal curator of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, addressing the public after the police closure because of the gunshots, February 5, 1989. Photograph provided by A Zhen.

Figure 4.2

Gao Minglu, the principal curator, reading his declaration, "Protest," in front of the public in the plaza of the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, February 5, 2009. Photograph provided by Yang Zhilin.

The cancellation brought the enthusiasm of 1989 back to the artists, along with cause for reflection upon China's current art scene and its methods and theories. What we most miss from the days of the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition is the belief that art is made not only for the art community itself, nor for the market and biennial exhibitions, but rather for a broader social purpose, and that it should be exhibited in a public environment, accessible by all. Artistic practice means creating something more significant than just an art object. Above all, it is a means of enlightenment. This is the legacy of the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" show.

However, there is still a certain amount of confusion about the original exhibition, as only a few people, and then only rarely, can get firsthand information about it. First, it was not merely an exhibition in an interior gallery space that was twice shut down by the officials (as most people know). It had a difficult curatorial history and it turned into a great social space mirroring the politics, economy, and culture of the period. Although the exhibition involved the efforts of many artists, critics, and scholars, I am the only one who went through every stage from the beginning to the end and had contact with all the various circles of society with whom we engaged, such as officials, police, businessmen, leaders of state-owned enterprises, intellectuals, dissidents, writers, artists, and critics. The exhibition can be seen as a total durational event on a stage enacting a play of social happenings. Second, the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" show's sensational results overshadowed its historical and aesthetic details, such as its curatorial approach and its display methodology and structure, among other things. Few people know how many artists and works were included in the show, and many are confused as to how many times it was shut down. Some say three times, some one time. Finally, people may appreciate only its social significance but easily overlook its conceptual side. Almost none of the artworks were paid adequate attention and received critical discussion, with the exception of a few performance works, which may have been overpoliticized under the particular circumstance of late 1989. Even the most sensational two gunshots by Xiao Lu were not analyzed nor understood properly, due to the media attention surrounding


抗議書

2009年2月4日深夜，北京朝阳区公安局通知"中国现代艺术展20周年纪念会"取消原订于2月5日下午3時在北京农业展览馆举办的纪念活动，没有出示任何法律依据条文。

我作为1989年中国现代艺术展组织、筹备委员会的负责人，以及此次纪念活动的总顾问及策展人，向北京市朝阳区公安局提出强烈抗议！我们的纪念活动为中华人民共和国宪法允许的正常文化活动。主办方和我们的团队投入了大量的時间、物力和精力组织该次活动。艺术家、文化人士及观众都已准备前来参加纪念活动，而北京朝阳公安局不经协商，武断下令禁止我们的活动，完全是违反宪法，粗暴干涉公民权利的行为。对此我深表愤慨。保保持法律申诉的权利。

高名潞 2009年2月5日凌晨

Figure 4.3

The original copy of the declaration.

their public effect. Xiao Lu's two gunshots were not only significant actions in the public sphere, but also enactments of the ambiguity between a female individual's experience and the public interpretation thereof. It was this dislocation between public and private that made her gunshots and installation the most controversial artwork in the exhibition. Her conceptual framework and approach involved the old generation of socialist realism, her emotional state, and her attitude toward the environment of urban modernity. The interpretation of her work, however, still remains incomplete, as it has hitherto been based on a superficial, dichotomy-ridden perspective (national versus personal, political versus artistic).

An Aborted Exhibition Plan in 1987

The flourishing '85 Movement impacted the conservative status quo and brought fresh air into the contemporary Chinese art world. Some open-minded, middle-aged academic painters organized an official meeting called the National Oil Painting Conference, which took place in Beijing in April 1986. Major academic painters from across the nation participated. More significantly, considering the open policy and my suggestion, the organizers also invited some leading artists of the avant-garde groups, such as Shu Qun, Zhang Peili, Li Shan, and others, to join the meeting and have a dialogue with the academic painters. I was invited to give a lecture at the conference, and I spoke on "The '85 Art Movement" ("Bawu meishu yundong"), giving a general view of the groups and discussing their art ideas, activities, and artworks; about 300 slides were shown. The lecture, and especially the showing of the slides, was a convenient and effective means to give an overview of the '85 Movement. Furthermore, it inspired the participating avant-garde artists. During the meeting, I discussed with Shu Qun, Zhang Peili, and Li Shan the possibility of having a nationwide slide show in Guangdong. The idea for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was initiated, then a public announcement was made during the Zhuhai Conference from August 15 to 19, 1986.

At the time, Wang Guangyi, the leading figure of the Northern Art Group and rationalist painting, had just moved to Zhuhai Academy of Painting (*Zhuhai huayuan*), an institution located in the Zhuhai Special Economic Zone. As it was a new territory and a new school, it was ambitious and motivated to host a national event to expand its profile. Wang Guangyi and Shu Qun came to Beijing to see me and we made a plan for the conference. I finally convinced the Zhuhai Academy of Painting, with the publisher and organizers of *Zhongguo meishubao* in Beijing as cosponsors, to organize the slide exhibition.[2] In August 1986, the first large-scale semiofficial conference of the '85 art movement, entitled the "Zhuhai '85 New Wave Large-Scale Slide Exhibition" ("Zhuhai bawu meishu sichao daxing huandengzhan"), was held in Zhuhai. Representatives from avant-garde groups and critics from all over China attended the event. The organizing committee of the exhibition, led by myself, received about 1,200 slides sent by groups from across the nation. From these, 342 works from 31 groups were selected and displayed in the show.[3] The most important outcome of the meeting was the decision to organize a large-scale exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art.

After the Zhuhai conference, I began to try to convince an influential official institution to be a sponsor for organizing an avant-garde exhibition. In China during the 1980s, no exhibition, whether a group show or solo show, could be held without an official unit as a sponsor. No official units, however, wanted to take the risk and be a sponsor for the exhibition. Even the respected Chinese art journal *Zhongguo meishubao,* which had originally promised to do so, gave up due to political pressure. After failing to find an official sponsor, I, along with some art critics, in particular Zhu Qingsheng, a young teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art, and Liu Xiaochun, the chief editor of *Zhongguo meishubao*, became aware that we needed to found our own organizations. After some preparatory work in November, the Chinese Modern Art Research Society (*Zhongguo xiandaiyishu yanjiuhui*), a self-organized association of about thirty critics from all over the nation, was founded in Beijing, in part as a planning mechanism for an avant-garde exhibition.[4]

Helped by the Beijing Young Painters Society, I worked out an exhibition space and signed a contract with the National Agricultural Exhibition Center on January 7, 1987. The exhibition was planned to

open on July 15, 1987.[5] The reasons for choosing the National Agricultural Exhibition Center as the site were, first, that the Ministry of Culture could not control it, and second, that it had an open-minded vice-director, Wei Tongxian, who had graduated from the Central Academy of Graphic Art in Beijing in the 1960s and who supported the avant-garde exhibition. Furthermore, it had great gallery space and the building itself had been named one of the Ten Great Constructions (*Shida jianzhu*) during the Soviet-influenced period of the 1950s.

With this news, I sent a letter to the representatives of the avant-garde groups nationwide to invite them to come to Beijing for a meeting.[6] On March 25 and 26, 1987, the first exhibition planning meeting was held in Beijing, and about twenty artists from some of the major avant-garde groups gathered there.[7] Lacking a secure meeting place, the meeting site was moved from place to place, even meeting once, during the winter, in a cluttered courtyard used primarily for storage. This was done largely as a result of the Anti–Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign, a hard-line political movement being conducted at the time. Student demonstrations were staged in a number of Chinese cities in late 1986. Authorities responded with a campaign against "bourgeois liberalism," targeting all new political and cultural thought. The campaign continued through mid-1988, significantly hampering the activities of the avant-garde. Facing political pressure, however, all the artists and critics who joined the meeting decided the exhibition would still be opened in the middle of July, in the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, under the title of the "Academic Exchange Exhibition for Nationwide Young Artists" ("Gedi qingnian meishujia xueshu jiaoliuzhan").[8] The title avoided radical terms like "avant-garde," "modern," and so on, which would have been insulting and a red flag to political officials.

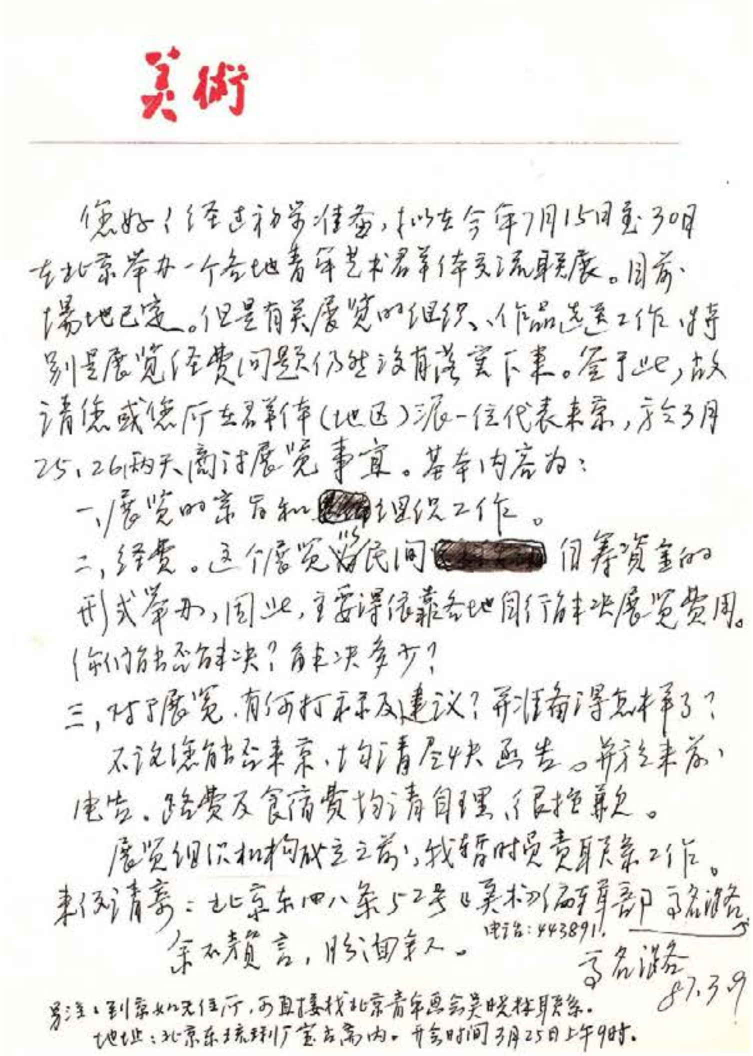
On April 4, 1987, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued an official document prohibiting any professional associations from holding scholarly activities with a national scope. In response, the Chinese Artists Association, an official organization under the Communist Party, immediately contacted me, making a clear statement and issuing an order to cease preparing the avant-garde exhibition for the

Figure 4.4

A meeting during the "Zhuhai '85 New Wave Large-Scale Slide Exhibition and Conference." From the left are Li Shan, Fei Dawei, Gao Minglu (speaking), Liu Xiaochun, Zhu Qingsheng, Peng De, and Pi Daojian.

Figure 4.5

National Agricultural Exhibition Center, Beijing.



美術

您好！经过初步准备，拟在今年7月15日至30日在北京举办一个各地青年艺术群体交流联展。目前场地已定。但是有关展览的组织、作品选送工作，特别是展览经费问题仍然没有落实下来。鉴于此，故请您或您所在群体（地区）派一位代表来京，于3月25、26两天商讨展览事宜。基本内容为：

一、展览的宗旨和[redacted]组织工作。

二、经费。这个展览以民间[redacted]自筹资金的形式举办，因此，主要得依靠各地同行解决展览费用。你们能否解决？能解决多少？

三、对于展览，有何打算及建议？并准备得怎样了？

不论您能否来京，均请尽快函告。并请来前电告。路费及食宿费均请自理，很抱歉。

展览组织机构成立之前，我暂时负责联系工作。来信请寄：北京东四八条52号《美术》编辑部 高名潞。电话：443891。

余不赘言，盼回复。

高名潞
87.3.9

另注：到京如无住所，可直接找北京青年画会吴晓林联系。
地址：北京东琉璃厂宣古斋内。开会时间3月25日上午9时。

Figure 4.6

The original copy of the letter from Gao Minglu inviting artists from around the nation to come to Beijing for the preparatory meeting for the exhibition.

Figure 4.7

Group photo taken in the yard of the Beijing Youth League after the preparation meeting for the "Academic Exchange Exhibition for Nationwide Young Artists" in the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, March 26, 1987. (The author is sixth from left in the front row.)

National Agricultural Exhibition Center and to break up the Chinese Modern Art Research Society. The result was that the first attempt to hold the exhibition was aborted, although most of the preparatory work had already been completed.

My Negotiation with the National Art Museum of China and Various Officials

In early 1988, the political situation eased. I started again to prepare for the avant-garde exhibition. At that time, when the possibility of having the exhibition in another space in Beijing such as the National Cultural Hall (*Minzu wenhua gong*) also failed, I decided to try for the National Art Museum of China because of its important position and symbolic role, although I knew it would be extremely difficult to get. It is the only national art gallery that shows contemporary art in the official academic sense, and it is directed by the Ministry of Culture. It was built in 1958, the year before the ten-year celebration of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It is one of the so-called Beijing Ten Great Constructions finished at that time. Each Great Construction is a specific symbol of greatness.[9] For that reason, the National Art Museum is a symbol of the highest authority, and is nationally important in the Chinese art world. All important official art exhibitions are held there, such as all sessions of the National Art Exhibitions, which are held by the Chinese Artists Association and the Ministry of Culture every five years, and some commemorative exhibitions, such as the Exhibition for the Celebration of the Establishment of the People's Republic of China, held in the twentieth, thirtieth, and fortieth anniversary years. Once an individual artist has a show in the National Art Museum, it means that his or her art position has been established and accepted by the official apparatus, the nation's highest art authority.

For this reason alone, it was very important for the avant-garde to use and modify the symbolic image of the National Art Museum, putting a heretical show in the sacred art palace that it had never been able to enter. For the first time, intensive critical activity would be engaging with the National Art Museum, exemplifying the suppressed, skeptical identity of the avant-garde. This would bring about the double result of challenging authority by a very aggressive means and giving a boost to the development of the avant-garde movement, if it received the expected public attention.

In order to gain the use of the National Art Museum, however, I had to find a legal sponsor, because the National Art Museum does not accept shows lacking official units as sponsors. Because no official units in the art world wanted to take the risk due to the conservative atmosphere at the moment, I shifted my attention outside the field of art for sponsorship. With the help of my colleagues, in particular Liu Dong, an influential young scholar, and Shu Qun, artist and writer and one of the authors of *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986*, the avant-garde exhibition proposal was immediately supported by three major official units led by some influential liberal intellectuals in China, including the editorial committee of Culture: China and the World Series (*Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie*), led by Gan Yang; SDX Joint Publishing Company (*Sanlian shudian*), directed by Shen Changwen; and the Chinese Aesthetic Study Society (*Zhonghua quanguo meixue xuehui*), chaired by Ru Xin. With a proposal stamped with the seals of three famous units in hand, I submitted an application letter and gave a slide presentation to the directors of the National Art Museum in April 1988. Soon after, I received a refusal stating that the National Art Museum could not handle the political and artistic orientation of the exhibition.

In the summer of 1988, the Anti–Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign seemed almost over. Therefore, the organizational work of the exhibition gained support from four more official units, including *Meishu*, *Zhongguo meishubao*, the Beijing Graphic Art Company (*Beijing gongyi meishu zonggongsi*), and China City Environment (*Zhongguo shirongbao*), as co-organizing sponsors. Support also came from some influential artists of the older generation, such as Wu Zuoren, Liu Kaiqu, Jin Shangyi, and Zhan Jianjun. Carrying the proposal sealed by a total of seven legitimate official units, I applied to the National Art Museum again in September 1988. With no solid reason to refuse, the National Art Museum was forced to accept the proposal, but it established the one condition that I had to get permission from

the Chinese Artists Association, the most legitimate official body in the Chinese art world.

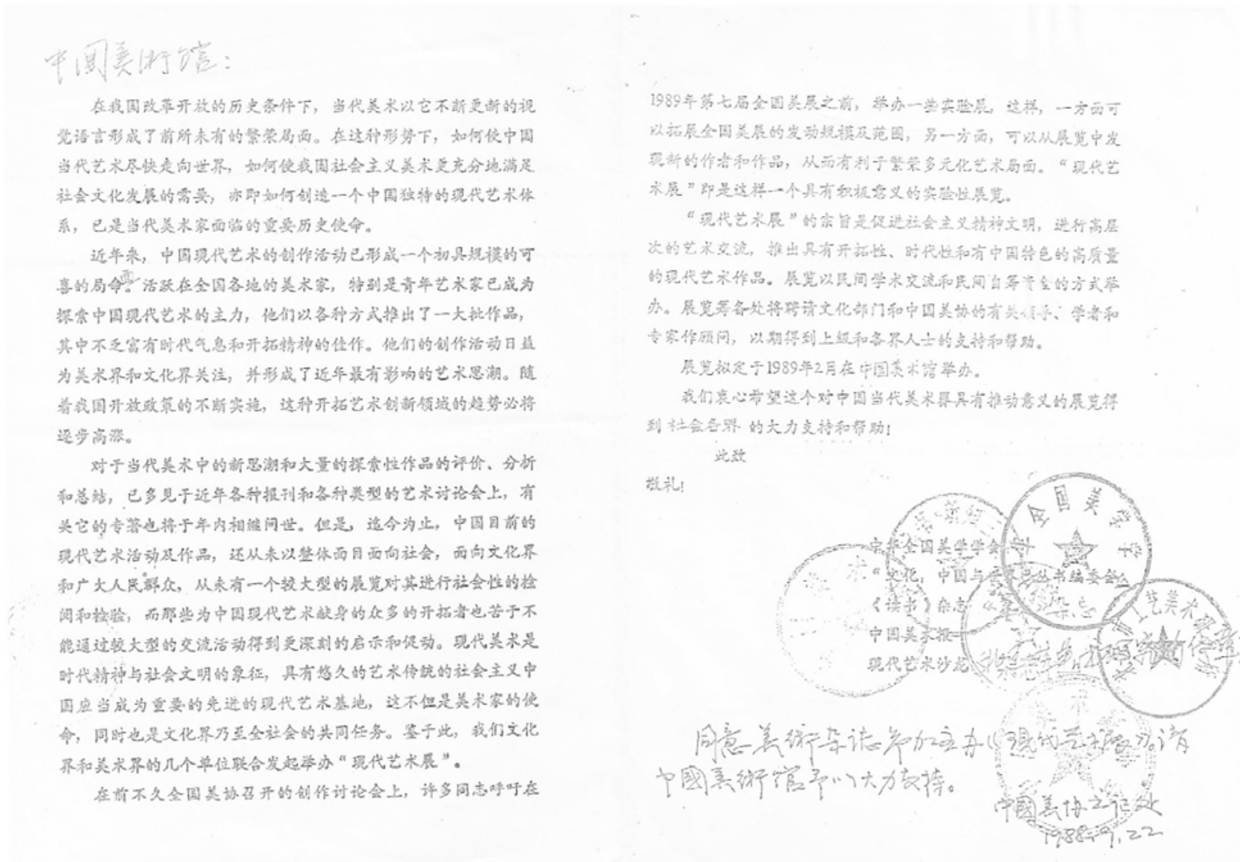
Although some small group shows had appeared in the National Art Museum after the Cultural Revolution, including the Stars in 1980, the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was to be the first national-scope unofficial exhibition in China since 1949.[10] The most controversial point was that it was a show of artwork done in Western modern and postmodern styles. These art styles and schools have always been considered heretical by the government. Therefore, the exhibition faced the censorship of both the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party and the museums of the Ministry of Culture. The Communist Party's organization within the art world is the Chinese Artists Association, which is directed by the party's Propaganda Department. The museums, such as the Imperial Palace Museum and the National Art Museum, are directed by the Ministry of Culture, a large governmental department. Generally, though, the Communist Party has more authority than any other government agencies. Therefore, sometimes the Party will cancel an exhibition plan although the museum may have already accepted the proposal. Furthermore, the possibility of having an avant-garde exhibition accepted by both the Party and the government was dependent on the occurrence of an opportune moment when the government relaxed its control on art policy, comparatively speaking.

I submitted the same proposal to the Department of the Secretary, the leading group within the Chinese Artists Association, and gave a presentation to three high-ranking officials, Ge Weimo, Kan Fenggang, and Dong Xaioming. Dong was the youngest official among them and was supportive on the matter. With Dong's help, the officials set up a meeting with me. After a three-hour meeting, the Department of the Secretary of the Chinese Artists Association finally granted permission and signed, sealing the proposal, after I agreed to accept the conditions given by the officials.[11] The Department of the Secretary demanded that three types of artworks not be allowed in the exhibition: those that were opposed to the Communist Party and the Four Fundamental Principles (*Sixiang jiben yuanze*), those that included pornographic images (interpreted as any display of sexuality), and those that were *xingwei yishu*, literally "behavior art," or action/performance art.[12] The first two restrictions were abstract and symbolic, not substantial, but it was difficult for me to accept the third one. In the '85 Movement, performance art was extremely important as a mode of directly venting individual free thought and long-suppressed intuitive feeling. The reason for this prohibition was the fact that performances commonly and unpredictably took place in public spaces. To the authorities it would seem easy for a performance to be transformed into a political event, such as a demonstration.

In order to achieve the goal that the avant-garde exhibition should take place in the National Art Museum, I made a compromise and accepted these conditions, but insisted on having performance art present in the form of documentaries. This time the officials made a compromise as well and signed the proposal under the seals of the sponsors, saying in essence: We hereby agree that *Art Monthly* [the official journal of Chinese Artists Association] be involved as the sponsor of "China Modern Art Exhibition," and we expect sufficient support from the National Art Museum.[13]

Since it had the approval of the Chinese Artists Association, the National Art Museum was forced to accept the exhibition plan, but deliberately chose for it an unpopular date: the period of Chinese New Year. The opening day would be the eve of the Chinese New Year, when the Chinese people are usually at family gatherings rather than joining in any public activity. Nonetheless, there was no choice for me: the only way was to accept the harsh terms.

On September 17, 1988, I organized a meeting at which all the sponsors and their representatives formed the Chinese Modern Art Exhibition Organizational Committee (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan choubei weiyuanhui*). The committee consisted of fourteen members who were active scholars and art critics in the Chinese contemporary cultural world. I was the head of the committee (*choubei weiyuanhui fuzeren*), or principal curator. At the time, in 1988, there was no such term such as *cehuaren* or "curator" in the Chinese art world. The *fuzeren*, or "head" of the organizational committee, was equivalent to the principal curator in today's international manner; and the organizational committee was similar to today's



中国美术馆：

在我国改革开放的历史条件下，当代美术以它不断更新的视觉语言形成了前所未有的繁荣局面。在这种形势下，如何使中国当代艺术尽快走向世界，如何使我国社会主义美术更充分地满足社会文化发展的需要，亦即如何创造一个中国独特的现代艺术体系，已是当代美术家面临的重要历史使命。

近年来，中国现代艺术的创作活动已形成一个初具规模的可喜的局面。活跃在全国各地的美术家，特别是青年艺术家已成为探索中国现代艺术的主力，他们以各种方式推出了一大批作品，其中不乏富有时代气息和开拓精神的佳作。他们的创作活动日益为美术界和文化界关注，并形成了近年最有影响的艺术思潮。随着我国开放政策的不断实施，这种开拓艺术创新领域的趋势必将逐步高涨。

对于当代美术中的新思潮和大量的探索性作品的评价、分析和总结，已多见于近年各种报刊和各种类型的艺术讨论会上，有关它的专著也将于年内相继问世。但是，迄今为止，中国目前的现代艺术活动及作品，还从未以整体面目面向社会，面向文化界和广大人民群众，从未有一个较大型的展览对其进行社会性的检阅和检验，而那些为中国现代艺术献身的众多的开拓者也苦于不能通过较大型的交流活动得到更深刻的启示和促动。现代美术是时代精神与社会文明的象征，具有悠久的艺术传统的社会主义中国应当成为重要的先进的现代艺术基地，这不但是美术家的使命，同时也是文化界乃至全社会的共同任务。鉴于此，我们文化界和美术界的几个单位联合发起举办“现代艺术展”。

在前不久全国美协召开的创作讨论会上，许多同志呼吁在1989年第七届全国美展之前，举办一些实验展。这样，一方面可以拓展全国美展的发动规模及范围，另一方面，可以从展览中发现新的作者和作品，从而有利于繁荣多元化艺术局面。“现代艺术展”即是这样一个具有积极意义的实验性展览。

“现代艺术展”的宗旨是促进社会主义精神文明，进行高层次的艺术交流，推出具有开拓性、时代性和有中国特色的高质量的现代艺术作品。展览以民间学术交流和民间自筹资金的方式举办。展览筹备处将聘请文化部门和中国美协的有关领导、学者和专家作顾问，以期得到上级和各界人士的支持和帮助。

展览拟定于1989年2月在中国美术馆举办。

我们衷心希望这个对中国当代美术界具有推动意义的展览得到社会各界的大力支持和帮助！

此致

敬礼！

中华全国美学学会
“文化：中国与世界”丛书编委会
《读书》杂志
中国美术报
现代艺术沙龙

同意美术家协会参加主办《现代艺术展》。请中国美术馆予以大力支持。

中国美协书记处
1988.9.22

Figure 4.8

The proposal for the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, with official signature and sponsors’ seals.

curatorial team. Among the committee members, Li Xianting, the editor of *Zhongguo meishubao*, was in charge of exhibition space design (*zhanting sheji*), and Zhou Yan, a teacher from the Central Academy of Fine Art, was in charge of scholarly activities, such as conference and catalogue. Fan Di'an, Wang Mingxian, Tang Qingnian, Fei Dawei, and Hou Hanru all were young critics who were taking various roles on the team.

On the same day, the committee released a public announcement with information on the founding of the committee and details about the show, which was later published in *Zhongguo meishubao* as the following:

> Preparation Notice for "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition, No. 1
>
> 1. It has been decided that a China Art Show will be held from February 7 to 20 at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.
>
> 2. The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition will exhibit for the first time featured artworks made with modern concepts and in the modern spirit to the art world in both China and internationally, as well as to the general public. The show will also reflect the art movement and avant-garde explorations in the past few years that are being debated and evaluated in art circles, and the value and significance of modern art in the development of Chinese culture. As a high-powered exchange and research event in the field of modern art, the show will boost the development of art pluralism in the Chinese art world.
>
> 3. The sponsors of the exhibition are: the Editorial Board of Culture: China and the World Series, the All-China Aesthetic Association, *Meishu*, *Zhongguo meishubao*, *Reading Magazine* (*Dushu*), and Modern Art Salon. Preparation work, which has been approved by the Chinese Artists Association and the National Art Museum of China, will be assumed by the Organizational Committee of the exhibition.
>
> 4. The exhibition will collect works nationwide. All entries must demonstrate the established artistic concept of the artist bearing his/her individual character, modernity and novel visual form. Those who want to participate must submit photos, slides, a design plan, titles, sizes of their works, plus their installation requirements and résumés to the Organizational Committee for appraisal no later than

单位：中国艺术研究院美术研究所 ● 国内外公开发行 ● 国内统一刊号：CN11-0138 ● 周报 ●●

中国美術報

NE ARTS IN CHINA 1988年第44期（代号—113）

报将那类向各种传统的关于"何为艺术"的观念提出根本性挑战的艺术现象放在"前卫艺术"的栏目之是否合适，权作一家之见。重要的问题是，当理论界对新潮艺术争论不休时，对达达、行为（表演）、方触觉等等艺术现象却很少展开争鸣和讨论，而中国艺术要想健康发展，必须伴随着对一切艺术进行探索的理性思考和价值判断。为此，我们开设了"前卫艺术"的伴生栏目——"'前卫艺术'讨论"。

卫艺术"讨论 ●

还给大众？

——也谈"触觉艺术"

●邹绍君●

制造物（包括科学和艺术）反过来成为异化人的是人类无法彻底根除的二律背反现象，把艺术"的口号肇端于艺术的非大众倾向——曾源过纪以来力图"还给大众"的理论与实践来自两克思主义者的"艺术为千千万万劳动者"（列二农兵服务"（毛泽东），二是西方曾大大流行。前者区分把艺术作为社会革命的工具，将转换为艺术的政治化，而随着政治的堕落命"），所谓"还给大众"也就堆落为以通俗大众。随之丧失的不只是"还俗"的初衷，也包。后者的"还给"（波普艺术家似无"还给"但他们要把艺术推向大众的动机和行为是不错是一个艺术运动，是把大众所熟悉的，现代城市制造物转换为艺术，并展示一种对世界无关痛痒度，以对抗现代艺术（如抽象表现主义）的探索见和神秘性，然而它们没有把艺术还给大众，不过的实物感觉倾向取代追求宗教性精神意义的传面作为波普成员普分支的艺术家个人，如布莱不错，"触觉艺术"比新达达主义者在非艺术这点上走得更远，以至把艺术创作与接受都还原为抛弃了一切传达和交流的自我体验行为，还原为零。这等于说，大众只要感觉到了自己的触觉，就是把艺术还给了他们。取消即归还。这无异于愚弄——非不关心大众生命需要（包括精神需要）的玩世者对大众的愚弄。如果有人能够从自我触觉中获得某种"亲切""和谐"和"自足"的心理满足，那他一定不是某个普通的大众，而是被某种目的和理性左右的人，如宣称要把艺术还给大众的"触觉"艺术家。而企图在这种"触觉艺术"中获得"无比自由的崭新世界"，更是一个心造的幻影，果壳庭在题为《前卫艺术》的评论中指出"触觉艺术""无法排除个体偶然的、低级的感觉"因而"可能失去通过精神上的'形而上'与整个人类对话的'文化性'"，却又肯定说它"也许是目前最彻底地把艺术还给大众的途径"，这实在令人不解。失去了文化性的低级感官活动，还是不要"还给大众"为好。

艺术能否彻底还给大众？我看不能。即便构想了未来社会最高理想的马克思，也只是从合理分工与平等创造的

中国现代艺术展

筹展通告

第一号

1、定于1989年2月7日至20日在北京中国美术馆举办"中国现代艺术展"。

2、"中国现代艺术展"将第一次较大型、完整地向社会，向国内外文艺界展示具有现代艺术观念和精神的艺术作品；将集中反映近年美术界关注、争鸣、评价的主要艺术思潮和实践探索面貌，显现现代艺术在当代中国文化发展中的价值与意义；展览将作为一次高层次的现代艺术交流与研讨活动，促进我国美术的多元发展。

3、举办这次展览的单位是："文化：中国与世界"丛书编委会、中华全国美学学会、《美术》杂志、《中国美术报》、《读书》杂志、现代艺术沙龙。筹备工作由展览筹备委员会负责。筹备过程得到了中国美术家协会、中国美术馆的大力支持。

4、展览面向全国征集作品。要求作品体现艺术家基本确立的、具有个性的艺术观念，要求作品具有内在精神的现代性和在此层次上新颖的视觉面貌。谨望愿意参展的美术家于12月1日前向筹委会寄出作品的照片、幻灯片或创作设计稿；作品的详目、尺寸和布展的方案。要求：个人从艺简历，以供评选（幻灯片的质量应达到制版水平，作品幻灯片一律不送，独幅作品的宽度一般不超过2米。联系人：北京前海西街17号中国美术报蒋文娜，邮政编码：100009）。

5、评定参展作品的评审委员会在筹委会成员基础上邀请有关领导、专家、学者组成。

6、本展览的顾问为：汝信、李泽厚、刘开渠、吴作人、沈昌文、邵大箴、唐克美、靳尚谊、蒋建慧（以姓氏笔划为序）。

7、筹备委员会成员为：甘阳、张颖均、刘东、刘骁纯、张祖英、栗宪庭、高名潞、唐庆年、杨圆华、崔彦、范迪安、王明贤、孔长安、费大为

8、筹备委员会负责人：高名潞

9、展览期间将组织多层次、多种方式的学术传播和交流活动，并组织对参展作品进行评奖。

"中国现代艺术展"筹备委员会

1988年10月 北京

Figure 4.9

"Preparation Notice for 'China/Avant-Garde' Exhibition, No. 1," published in *Zhongguo meishubao* (right column), October 31, 1988.

February 1. (Slides must be able to go through plate making and will not be returned. The width of single pieces cannot exceed 2 meters. Send all materials to Ms. Qin Wenna, Qianhai Xijie 17, China Academy of Arts, *Fine Art in China*, Beijing, 100009, China.)

5. The Appraisal Committee will, apart from the members of the Preparatory Committee, also be composed of officials, experts, and scholars.

6. The advisers of the show are: Ru Xin, Li Zehou, Liu Kaiqu, Wu Zuoren, Shen Changwen, Shao Dazhen, Tang Kemei, Jin Shangyi, and Ge Weimo.

7. Members of the Organizational Committee are: Gan Yang, Zhang Yaojun, Liu Dong, Liu Xiaochun, Zhang Zuying, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Tang Qingfeng, Yang Lihua, Zhou Yan, Fan Di'an, Wang Mingxian, Kong Changan, and Fei Dawei.

8. The Head of the Organizational Committee is: Gao Minglu.

9. Academic activities and promotions in various forms will be held in the course of the show. Awards will be granted to the entries.

Organizational Committee of China/Avant-Garde, October 1988.[14]

The Difficulties of Fundraising

It seemed to me that the problem of the budget was even more difficult than that of political censorship. The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was an unprecedented event in Chinese contemporary art history. It was distinct from the normal exhibitions held in the National Art Museum of China in terms of both its political sensibility and its financial sources. Although it was lucky to be accepted, due to the temporary easing of the political situation, this did not mean that any corresponding financial support would come from the National Art Museum and the government. All museums in China are governmentally controlled cultural enterprises, and until the late 1980s the majority of art exhibitions held in museums such as the National Art Museum of China had been financed either by the central government or by local governments and organizational units.

Before the late 1980s, the financial resources for most exhibitions held in the National Art Museum of China (and other museums) could come from three sources. One source was an official organizing unit that had enough money to budget for the exhibition. Another option was a budget that was planned and supported by the central government, especially for important official exhibitions. For example, in 1984, the Ministry of Culture allocated 900,000 yuan (then about $300,000) for the Sixth National Art Exhibition, which opened in the National Art Museum of China (and seven other sites in different cities) in September 1984. Thirdly, if the organizing units did not have sufficient funds provided by their local government, they would try to obtain money from other official units, such as government-controlled factories or companies that had achieved higher fiduciary success and had excess profits.[15]

Because of the transition from a planned national economy to a market-based one, the traditional system of official patronage has changed since the mid-1980s. For instance, under a national law, most of the profits earned by a governmental enterprise must be submitted to the government at the end of the year. Under the new marketing system, some national enterprises may use part of their profits to finance certain cultural enterprises, so that they can benefit from the cultural programs, such as through free advertising on television, in art galleries, on invitations, and in catalogues. More importantly, however, such financial support might effectively boost the mutual private relationship (*guanxi*) between the leadership of the enterprise and the exhibition organizers. Furthermore, most of the time an intermediary, perhaps the decision-maker on the patron's side, would take a percentage of the total financed amount (10–30 percent).

This phenomenon did not appear until the late 1980s. Although the central Chinese government tried hard to prohibit the corrupt phenomenon of *zanzhu* or "donations," it was unsuccessful due to the limitation of the governmental system itself. In the past two decades many rich private enterprises have appeared in China, and a few of them have become patrons supporting unofficial cultural programs, such as exhibitions, to demonstrate their pure enthusiasm for promoting new culture and art. One of the reasons for this system might be the different Chinese tax system: in the West the corporations and

private businesses who financially support a cultural program can get the benefits of a tax deduction, but in China there are no such benefits for Chinese private corporations. They decide to devote their own resources simply to support cultural enterprises.

Obviously, it was impossible for "China/Avant-Garde" to get financial support from the government, and the six sponsors were themselves struggling and could only provide moral support. Thus, raising money turned out to be a tough challenge for the organizers of the avant-garde exhibition, for whom it was a totally unprecedented experience.

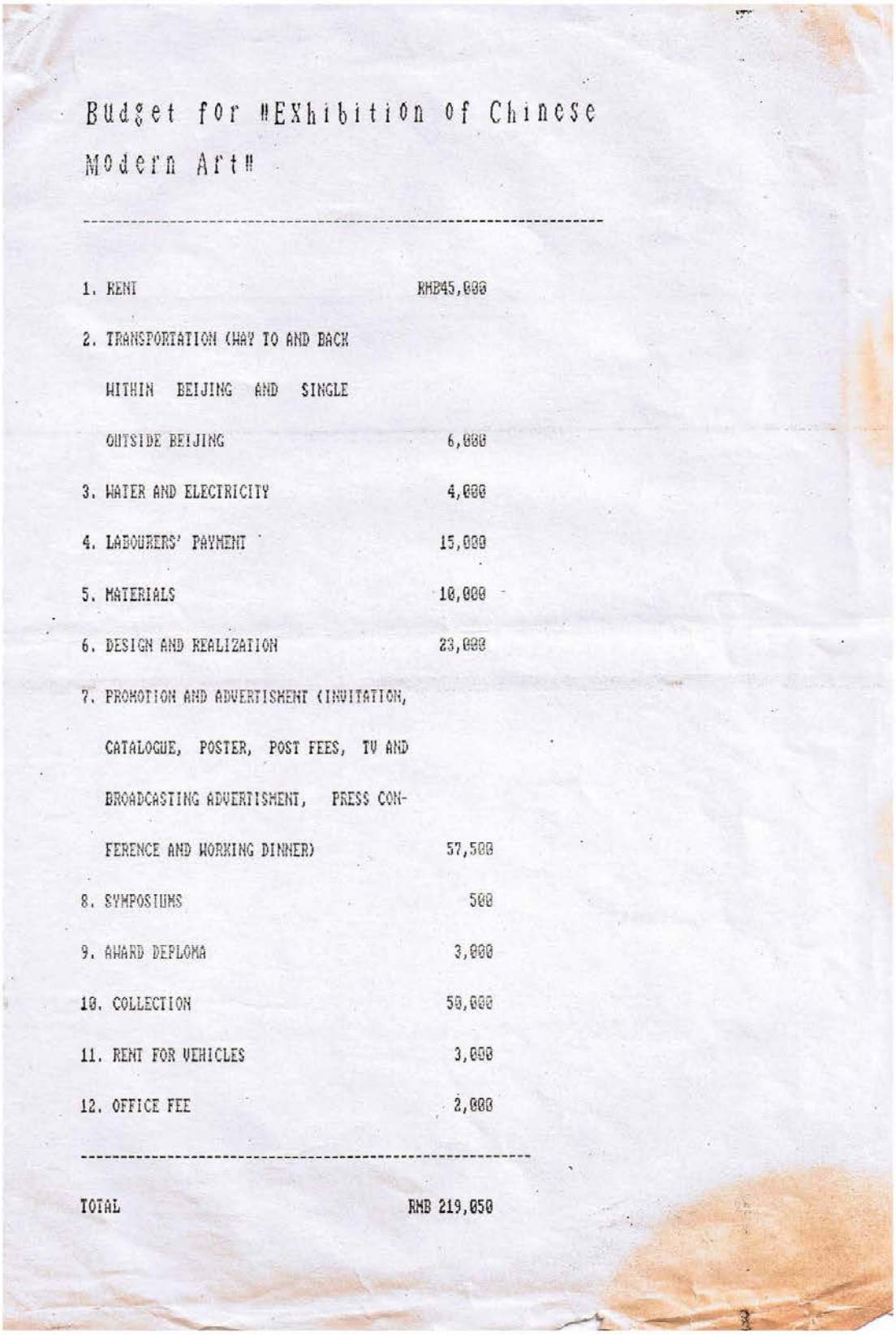
After the exhibit site was confirmed, the organizational committee of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition immediately wrote an open letter to the public seeking support. It was drafted by Fan Di'an, who was in charge of issuing documents and dealing with public affairs. I then shifted my concentration to fundraising, the most difficult work at the moment, after the other curatorial difficulties were overcome and the artworks were collected. I traveled to Shanghai and Nanjing in south China, Harbin in northeast China, Wuhan in central China, and Tianjin, my hometown in north China, to raise money.

At first, one of the largest national corporations, the Panda Electronic Industry Corporation in Nanjing (*Nanjing xongmao dianzi gongsi*), agreed to donate 200,000 yuan (at that point about $40,000), with the stipulation that the exhibition must provide the corporation with advertisements in the space of the exhibition, in newspapers, and on television, as well as contribute a number of the artworks from the exhibition to the corporation. Unfortunately, two months after the start of negotiations, just as the president of the company was about to sign the contract, he changed his mind and withdrew the company's support without any explanation. All of this transpired a mere two months before the exhibition was to open. At that moment, the committee had received only 2,500 yuan, which was less than 2 percent of the entire budgetary projection of at least 150,000 yuan ($30,000). The fundraising requests of the organizational committee were refused by almost everyone, which was profoundly frustrating. On one hand, the political pressure and lack of financial resources endured by the avant-garde exhibition were mainly due to the political sentiments against avant-garde art. On the other hand, since traditional and academic art has been the dominant art style in China since the 1980s, it was not surprising that the avant-garde was an incomprehensible art form for the public. Therefore, both the exhibition's political risk and its lack of promised commercial benefits discouraged potential financial supporters.

Facing these enormous difficulties, I was forced to seek other means of raising funds. Together with a friend, Wang Mingxian, who was also a member of the committee, I described our troubles to some friends in the cultural world and to all avant-garde artists, asking for their assistance. Then Zhang Kangkang, one of the most famous novelists in China, who had been sent to Heilongjiang province as a reeducated student during the Cultural Revolution, published an article expressing her sympathies with the committee. She appealed to her readers, and especially to Feng Jicai, a popular novelist based in Tianjin, to support the avant-garde exhibition.[16]

At the time, Feng Jicai was the chairman of the Tianjin Writers and Artists Association, and he strongly supported modern experimental art; an immediate response garnered some funds for the exhibition from factories and the magazine *Free Discussion on Literature* (*Wenxue ziyoutan*) in Tianjin. I twice made round trips between Beijing and Tianjin on the same day in order to have enough materials to convince Feng. This moved him. With Feng's help, I received 20,000 yuan and brought it back to Beijing. This money suddenly made the avant-garde exhibition viable, though it was far from an adequate amount.

Several artists also managed to convince their businessmen friends to donate. The effect was that various factories and companies contributed, in total, 40,000 yuan (about $10,000). Among the artists, some took on labor in exchange for contributions, and some even donated their own works, or gave works from their collections of traditional paintings, to the contributors. Moreover, along with their entries to the exhibition, every artist who participated in the show voluntarily gave 100 yuan, about the amount of a month's salary, to the committee. Thus 186 artists contributed 18,600 yuan (about $4,000).



Budget for "Exhibition of Chinese Modern Art"

1. RENT	RMB45,000
2. TRANSPORTATION (WAY TO AND BACK WITHIN BEIJING AND SINGLE OUTSIDE BEIJING	6,000
3. WATER AND ELECTRICITY	4,000
4. LABOURERS' PAYMENT	15,000
5. MATERIALS	10,000
6. DESIGN AND REALIZATION	23,000
7. PROMOTION AND ADVERTISMENT (INVITATION, CATALOGUE, POSTER, POST FEES, TV AND BROADCASTING ADVERTISMENT, PRESS CONFERENCE AND WORKING DINNER)	57,500
8. SYMPOSIUMS	500
9. AWARD DEPLOMA	3,000
10. COLLECTION	50,000
11. RENT FOR VEHICLES	3,000
12. OFFICE FEE	2,000
TOTAL	RMB 219,050

Figure 4.10

The original copy of the expenditure budget of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition (English version).

The most moving story of the fundraising was that of a private businessman called Song Wei, who ran the Great Wall Fast Food Company (*Beijing changcheng kuaican*) and contributed 27,000 yuan to the exhibition. His ambition was to build the first private art museum in China, to be named the Great Wall Art Museum (*Changcheng yishu bowuguan*). After the avant-garde exhibition closed, he collected about fifty major works from the exhibition directly from the artists. He thus turned out to be the first major private collector of Chinese avant-garde art, before it had gotten any attention in the international market. Unfortunately, he soon gave up this significant work, as various factors (such as financial difficulties during the June Fourth Tian'anmen incident, family situation, and physical problems) forced him to gave up collecting entirely.[17]

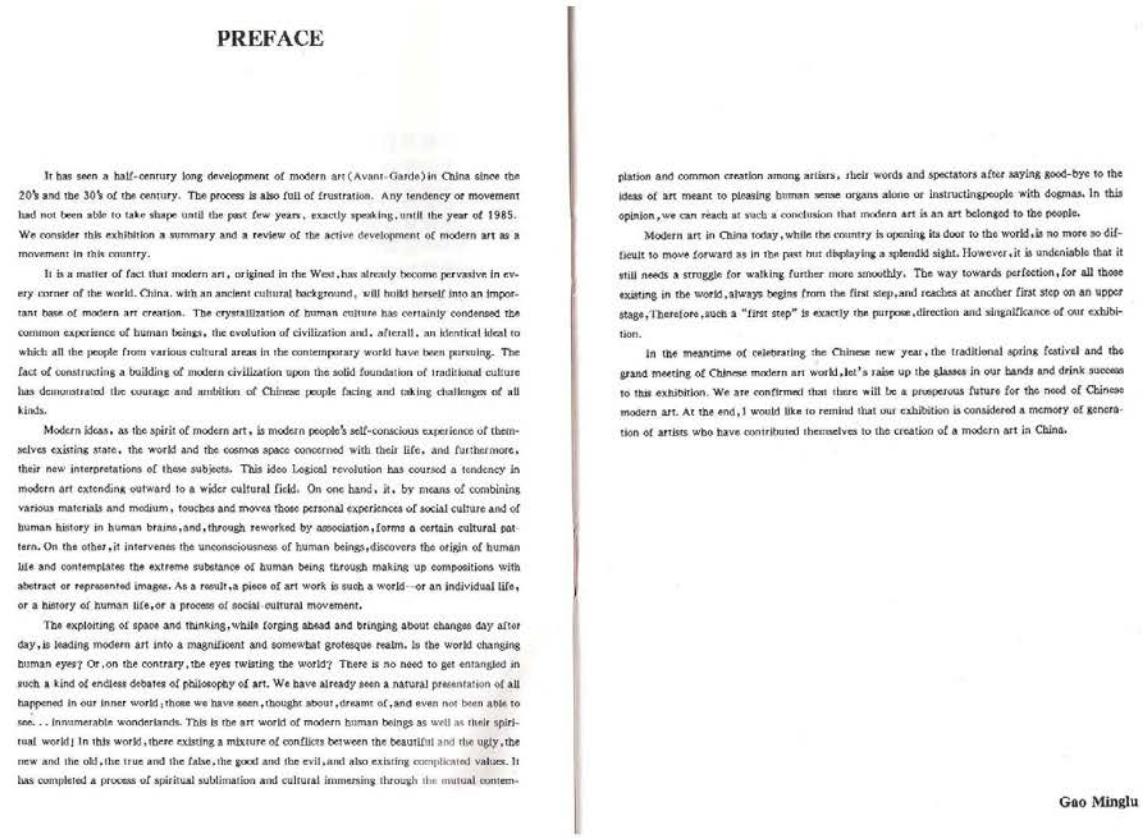
Song Wei's retreat was both symbolic and realistic. It revealed both the lack of financial ability and diminished interest from private rich people in China. On the other hand, although the Chinese avant-garde art of the 1980s should be recognized as an international phenomenon, directly influenced by Western modernism and postmodernism through translations and foreign exhibitions, without foreign market and institutional connections it was domestic in economic terms. It was not until the end of the Cold War, in particular after the mid-1990s, that international collectors and the international art market came to China. Before that, attention came not from professional international art collectors and museums, but mainly from amateur, personally interested investors, for instance ambassadors in Beijing such as Uli Sigg, writers, or non-mainstream gallery owners.

By the time "China/Avant-Garde" opened, only a few foreigners had bought Chinese avant-garde works. The Tokyo Modern Art Gallery collected six pieces during the exhibition, which initiated foreign interest in collecting this type of work.

Regrettably, by the time of the exhibition opening in February 1989, I had raised only 118,600 yuan (about $23,000). The original goal was to raise at least 150,000 yuan (about $30,000), and the sufficient amount would have been about 220,000 yuan (about $44,000). That amount included the fee for the use of the gallery space (more than 50,000 yuan), shipping fees, fees for space design, advertising fees, conference fees, the catalogue fee, and so on. Although the amount we had collected was still not the total amount we had hoped for, the exhibition could be opened. I was forced to cut some of the original budget, and failed to have an ideal catalogue published for the exhibition. We were only able to produce a small publication, with my preface on the opening page followed by a catalogue, a total of 46 pages.[18]

Two Closures and a "Small Tian'anmen Square"

While working to overcome the political and economic difficulties associated with the show, the committee had shipped the 300 exhibition pieces from provinces all around the country to Beijing. Under the censorship laws, the committee was required to get official approval of all the works from the authorities. On February 4, 1989, the day before the opening of the exhibition, the officials of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party, the Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Artists Association, and the National Art Museum of China came to the exhibition galleries to examine and officially approve the avant-garde exhibition for the public opening. In order to get strong support, the committee also invited some influential older artists and art historians from the Central Academy of Fine Art to join in the inspection. A number of the works were criticized by the censorship group because of their political and sexual content. After a heated dispute between the censorship group, the members of the committee, and academic experts, most of these controversial works were kept in, but three pieces were pulled. Among the works denied by the committee, but finally kept in, the most controversial one was Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong No. 1*, which the censors accused of putting Mao into a jail. The work was allowed to remain after the artist wrote an inscription explaining what he intended to tell the audience. After the censorship meeting on February 4, 1989, Wang Guangyi and I discussed the inscription and decided to write a note beside the painting which said that Mao was one of the most influential political figures in Chinese modern history; we should evaluate his historical role using



PREFACE

It has seen a half-century long development of modern art (Avant-Garde) in China since the 20's and the 30's of the century. The process is also full of frustration. Any tendency or movement had not been able to take shape until the past few years, exactly speaking, until the year of 1985. We consider this exhibition a summary and a review of the active development of modern art as a movement in this country.

It is a matter of fact that modern art, origined in the West, has already become pervasive in every corner of the world. China, with an ancient cultural background, will build herself into an important base of modern art creation. The crystallization of human culture has certainly condensed the common experience of human beings, the evolution of civilization and, afterall, an identical ideal to which all the people from various cultural areas in the contemporary world have been pursuing. The fact of constructing a building of modern civilization upon the solid foundation of traditional culture has demonstrated the courage and ambition of Chinese people facing and taking challenges of all kinds.

Modern ideas, as the spirit of modern art, is modern people's self-conscious experience of themselves existing state, the world and the cosmos space concerned with their life, and furthermore, their new interpretations of these subjects. This ideo Logical revolution has coursed a tendency in modern art extending outward to a wider cultural field. On one hand, it, by means of combining various materials and medium, touches and moves those personal experiences of social culture and of human history in human brains, and, through reworked by association, forms a certain cultural pattern. On the other, it intervenes the unconsciousness of human beings, discovers the origin of human life and contemplates the extreme substance of human being through making up compositions with abstract or represented images. As a result, a piece of art work is such a world—or an individual life, or a history of human life, or a process of social-cultural movement.

The exploiting of space and thinking, while forging ahead and bringing about changes day after day, is leading modern art into a magnificent and somewhat grotesque realm. Is the world changing human eyes? Or, on the contrary, the eyes twisting the world? There is no need to get entangled in such a kind of endless debates of philosophy of art. We have already seen a natural presentation of all happened in our inner world; those we have seen, thought about, dreamt of, and even not been able to see... innumerable wonderlands. This is the art world of modern human beings as well as their spiritual world! In this world, there existing a mixture of conflicts between the beautiful and the ugly, the new and the old, the true and the false, the good and the evil, and also existing complicated values. It has completed a process of spiritual sublimation and cultural immersing through the mutual contemplation and common creation among artists, their words and spectators after saying good-bye to the ideas of art meant to pleasing human sense organs alone or instructingpeople with dogmas. In this opinion, we can reach at such a conclusion that modern art is an art belonged to the people.

Modern art in China today, while the country is opening its door to the world, is no more so difficult to move forward as in the past but displaying a splendid sight. However, it is undeniable that it still needs a struggle for walking further more smoothly. The way towards perfection, for all those existing in the world, always begins from the first step, and reaches at another first step on an upper stage, Therefore, such a "first step" is exactly the purpose, direction and singnificance of our exhibition.

In the meantime of celebrating the Chinese new year, the traditional spring festival and the grand meeting of Chinese modern art world, let's raise up the glasses in our hands and drink success to this exhibition. We are confirmed that there will be a prosperous future for the need of Chinese modern art. At the end, I would like to remind that our exhibition is considered a memory of generation of artists who have contributed themselves to the creation of a modern art in China.

Gao Minglu

Figure 4.11

The small catalogue of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition and the preface by Gao Minglu.

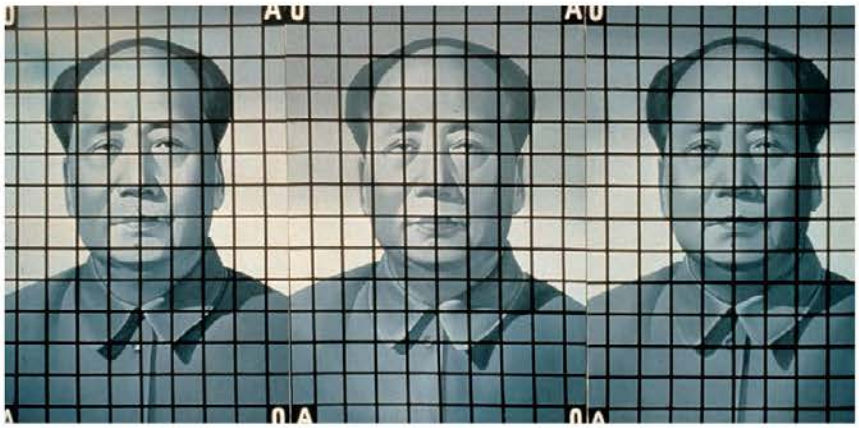


Figure 4.12

Wang Guangyi, *Mao Zedong No. 1*, 1988.

rational analysis and logical thinking, which were represented in the work by the grid drawn on the surface of Mao's official portrait.

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition opened on February 5, 1989. The works in the exhibition were distributed over six gallery spaces that occupied three floors, and included 297 pieces in various media including painting, sculpture, photographs, video, and installations. This day was a mammoth festival for every avant-garde artist. Five enormous black banners were extended on the ground in the square in front of the National Art Museum marked with the exhibition title and logo, which was designed by Yang Zhilin and based on the public traffic sign indicating "No U-Turn." According to the original design, the five banners were to be hung from the roof of the exterior of the museum facing the square. This plan was rejected by the director of the National Art Museum, but the artists solved the problem by laying them out on the ground.

The exhibition's opening ceremony was shrouded by a nervous and solemn atmosphere, as if something was bound to happen. After I gave a speech celebrating this important historical event, the birth of the first

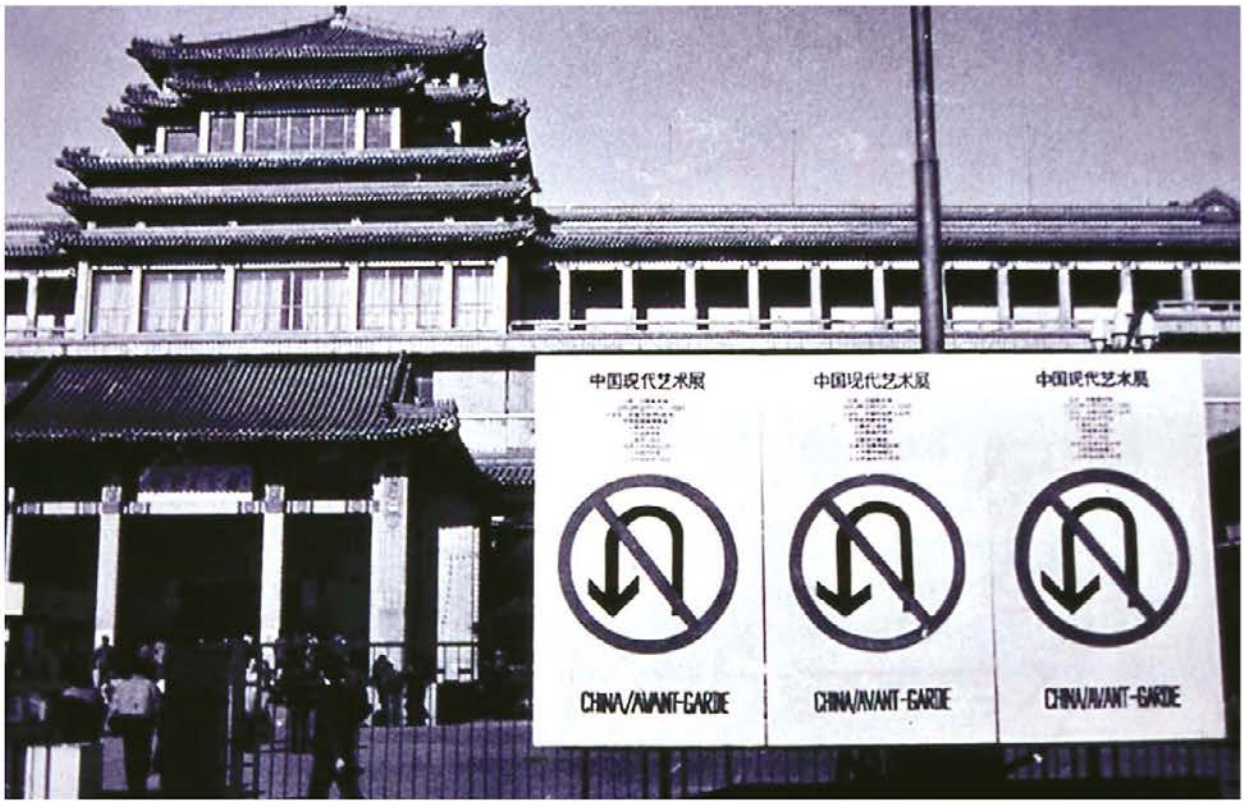


Figure 4.13

The National Art Museum of China, Beijing, with the poster of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition designed by Yang Zhilin.

Figure 4.14

The site of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, the square in the yard of National Art Museum of China, February 5, 1989. Photograph by A Zhen.

Figure 4.15

Gao Minglu giving the opening speech in the interior reception hall at the National Art Museum of China, February 5, 1989.

avant-garde exhibition in contemporary Chinese art history, the public entered the galleries. They were immediately met not only with the provocative installations and paintings, but also with several surprising performances, true happenings.

Wu Shanzhuan began his performance *Big Business* (*Dashengyi*) in the gallery of the first floor. Wu had brought 300 kilograms of fresh shrimp from a fishing village in Zoushan, Zhejing province, where he worked as an art teacher for mass cultural education. He wrote the price of the shrimp on a blackboard and began selling them. The first buyer was Liu Kaiqu, the honorary director of the National Art Museum and one of the most influential sculptors in China. This work demonstrated Wu's idea that modern art in modern society is just a big business, which was a thesis he had presented in an avant-garde conference held in Huangshan city, Anhui province, in 1988. He explained his performance after the shutdown of the show by the authorities, saying, "The National Art Museum is not only a place to display artwork, but it also can be a black market [*heishi*]. For the Chinese New Year, I have brought first-quality shrimp suitable for export from my home village in celebration of the holiday and to enrich people's spiritual and material life in our capital. The unit price: 9.5 yuan. Place of display: National Art Museum. Urgent for buying."[19]

Another performance artist whose work was not otherwise represented in the show, named Zhang Nian, sat in the corner of the gallery on the second floor hatching eggs. In his manifesto, which hung across his chest, he wrote: "During the incubation period, I will not discuss theoretical questions with anyone, to avoid harming the younger generation." The artist Li Shan, one of the most important painters of the rationalist painting group, seated himself at his installation and began washing his feet in a basin decorated with many portraits of US President Reagan. This cynical behavior was undoubtedly a kind of blasphemy against the sacred art palace—the National Art Museum of former days. An hour after the opening, Wang Deren threw more than seven thousand condoms onto all the works on all three floors of the building, to demonstrate his hegemonic power over all the works displayed in the exhibition. In other words, he attempted to use condoms to unify all the works.[20]

Figure 4.16

Wu Shanzhuan, *Big Business: Selling Shrimp*, 1989.

Three hours after the opening of the exhibition, Xiao Lu, a young woman artist from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, fired two gunshots, which shocked the National Art Museum. Xiao Lu suddenly pulled out a gun and fired two shots at her installation, *Dialogue*; or more precisely, at a mirror between two telephone booths in which stood full-length pictures of a male and a female student talking to each other on the phone. The president of the Beijing Public Security Bureau, who was on the spot, immediately seized Tang Song, a friend of Xiao, who was standing near the installation, and ordered me to close the exhibition. The reason given was that the scene of the gunshot had to be preserved intact in order to trace the cause of the incident. (Actually the Public Security Bureau had long been suspicious of the organizational work of the exhibition. There were at least ten plainclothes public security persons in the galleries.) Immediately after the shooting, several police cars fully loaded with armed personnel arrived in the square in front of the National Art Museum. The police rudely ordered that the gallery be shut down for three days. Public news from both inside and outside of China reported on this event.

In China there is a law that prohibits citizens and resident foreigners from owning guns; the only exceptions are for soldiers and police personnel, who have permits. The Beijing Public Security Bureau stated that both Xiao Lu and Tang Song had violated this law and had to be detained. At four o'clock in the afternoon, encouraged by her uncle, Xiao Lu surrendered herself to the authorities. After being detained for two and a half days, both people were released because there was no evidence that the two artists had plotted a murder. However, because of the

Figure 4.17

Zhang Nian, *Hatching Eggs*, 1989.

Figure 4.18

Li Shan, *Goodbye*, 1989.

Figure 4.19

Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, 1989.

Figure 4.20

Police cars entering the square of the National Art Museum of China after the gunshot at the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, February 5, 1989. Photograph by A Zhen.

The New York Times.

Police in China Close Art Show After Artist Shoots Her Work

Would-be visitors to an exhibition of avant-garde art yesterday in Beijing being confronted by a locked gate. Police closed the exhibition after artists defied a ban on performance art and a sculptor shot

was not clear if the show would be reopened.

At one point, two carloads of riot policem into the crowd, but left immediately when t were surrounded by curious onlookers.

Figure 4.21
The *New York Times* article reporting on the closure.

shooting and other events, the exhibition was forced to close for three days. The government authorities still believed that this incident held political meaning, and most of the foreign news media reported it as a political event. According to the claims of the two artists, their shooting was nothing more than a celebration of finishing the installation work, no matter what the public thought about it. After the two artists were released; they gave me a declaration in person, asking me to make a public announcement on their behalf. The declaration is as follows:

> As parties to the shooting incident on the day of the opening of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, we consider it a purely artistic incident. We consider that in art, there may be artists with different understandings of society, but as artists we are not interested in politics. We are interested in the values of art as such, and in its social value, and in using the right form with which to create, in order to carry out the process of deepening that understanding.
>
> Xiao Lu, Tang Song[21]

Although Xiao Lu was named as the author of the installation, and she was also the person who opened fire, the media and art circles widely took both Xiao Lu and Tang Song to be the initiators and performers of the two gunshots because Tang was the first one arrested. There was even a rumor that Tang came from a military family background and had lent the gun to Xiao, until Xiao declared that the gun she used was in fact borrowed from Li Songsong, a teenage friend of hers, who did have a military family background. No one doubted the coauthorship of the two gunshots until, fifteen years later, Xiao Lu openly declared that she was the only author of the gunshot as well as of the installation. The gunshots were part of the installation as a whole. Xiao was silent about her work and never mentioned the question of authorship until the end of her fifteen-year relationship with Tang Song in 2004.

The declaration of her solo authorship of the *Dialogue* and the gunshots began with five letters Xiao wrote me in the period between February 4,

Figure 4.22

Xiao Lu, *Fifteen Shots—From 1989 to 2003*, 2003.

2004, and March 23, 2004. After I received the letters I responded to her in a letter encouraging her to claim her authorship, because, first, it was her right to declare the truth, and second, it was very important, not only for the generation of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition but also for the younger generation, to rediscover the complex context of this historical event made by a particular female individual.[22] The ambiguity that disturbed Xiao Lu's emotions eventually broke out fifteen years after her two gunshots in the National Art Museum of China. In another performance work, she made fifteen gunshots on photos with her own image as a metaphor for her hidden anger at herself. Although the fifteen shots were made in 2003, the title of the work is *Fifteen Shots—From 1989 to 2003*. The shots in 2003 were a bitter memory as well as a farewell to the past.

The two shots of 1989 were aimed at a mirror; those of 2003 at the photos. Fifteen years ago, the sound shocked the gallery, Beijing, even the world; this time only herself, because she made the shots at a firearms instructional club, the only place where Chinese are allowed to open fire.

Why did Xiao Lu sit in silence for fifteen years? There definitely was a personal emotional reason at the beginning, as she and Tang Song immediately fell in love when both were arrested. There was also a reason that was a crucial cause of the performance itself. Xiao Lu's gunshots were not, as people commonly said, merely a violent gesture against authority; this is too simple and superficial an interpretation. In her recent biography, she explains that as a teenage girl she had been raped by an older socialist realist artist, who was also her godfather.[23] The anger this caused might well bring her to a totally rebellious orientation including an embrace of avant-garde art, and thus a departure from the path of her parents, who were also Soviet-trained socialist realist painters. One may then understand the gunshots by Xiao Lu as a paradoxical, ambiguous act. On one hand, this was a demonstration against her revolutionary bloodline, congruent with the youthful zeitgeist that was running in public and political networks at the particular moment before the June Fourth Movement. On the other hand, it was also a violent declaration of self-protection, in opposition to the common conception of females as powerless. Anger was everything at the moment for her, because she could not tell the public the nature of her distress. The only way of venting was to open fire on the artwork *Dialogue*, which she had made for her graduation.[24]

This dislocated, or ambiguous, relationship between private and public, avant-garde and revolutionary, in the sense of Xiao Lu's personal background and experience, as well as of female discourse and the national (and the avant-garde) ideological discourse, made her *Dialogue* with the two gunshots the most sophisticated and controversial work in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, as well as in Chinese contemporary art history.[25]

In another controversy, the East German Embassy accused the exhibition of violating that country's sovereignty, because of Song Haidong's small installation work in which the artist put a "wall" on edge between East and West Germany on a globe. I was informed by an official of the Chinese Artists Association that the embassy had asked that the piece be removed from the exhibition. The artist then removed the work, which was immediately collected by the Tokyo Modern Art Gallery. Ironically, the removal might be seen as a foreshadowing of the coming down of the Berlin Wall, which occurred not long thereafter.

All of this performance art reflected, from different angles, the artists' opinions about art and society. Their work provoked a great deal of controversy, which was intentionally manipulated by their secretly planned happenings. None of the performances had been announced to the National Art Museum, and some not even to the curator and organizational committee, before the opening of the exhibition.[26]

After the exhibition had been closed four days, it opened again on February 10, 1989. However, the Public Security Bureau forced me to hire twenty security personnel to enforce the prohibition on performance art. I had to accept this and pay their salaries to the Public Security Bureau in order to keep the exhibition open.

The run of the avant-garde exhibition was not as peaceful as the National Art Museum of China and the Public Security Bureau had expected. On February 12, after the reopening of the exhibition, the museum, the Public Security Bureau, and the Beijing city government separately received three anonymous letters with the same content, which was made up of clipped and pasted newspaper characters. It said, "You must close the 'China/Avant-Garde' exhibition immediately, otherwise we will set off bombs in three places in the National Art Museum of China."[27]

The Beijing Public Security Bureau and the National Art Museum nervously discussed ways to deal with the threat. They informed me of the situation, showing me the letters and forcing me to make an immediate determination about whether the exhibition should close or remain open. Meanwhile, the Public Security Bureau pointed out that if I agreed to keep the exhibition open, I would have to answer for any explosion. I refused to take responsibility for the bombs, and also refused to close the show; I maintained that the Beijing Public Security Bureau, not the committee, had the true duty to avert any explosion.

At night, however, the Beijing Public Security Bureau and the National Art Museum received a command from the president of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party and the president of the Ministry of Culture: the exhibition must close for two days while the Beijing Public Security Bureau searched for bombs in the gallery.

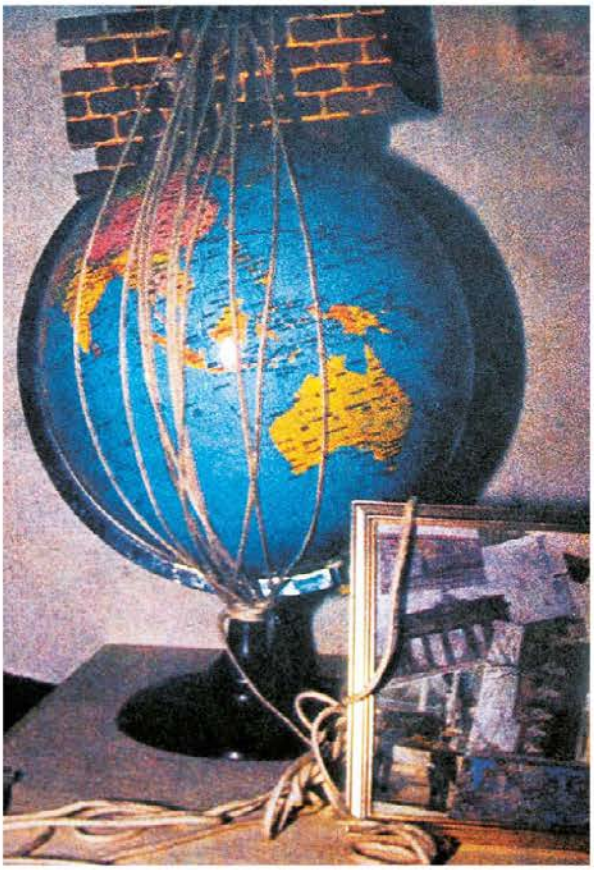


Figure 4.23

Song Haidong, *The Earth from the Aliens' Point of View*, 1989.

The public and artists were excited by the second shutdown and celebrated by any means, because the shutdowns might have been seen as a symbol of the avant-garde's provocative and aggressive ideology. Someone even made a public commemorative envelope for the second closure, helping people remember the dates (which appear on the bottom left).

The Beijing Public Security Bureau used armed police and various other means, from modern technical equipment to search dogs, to search for the bombs in all corners of the National Art Museum of China over the two days of the closure. Predictably, however, there were no bombs in the gallery. Was it a joke? Of course, it was possible that the letter was a real threat, but it was also possible that it was another performance, like Xiao's two gunshots. It was not known who sent the letters until 1995, when the Zhejiang Public Security Bureau detained an artist named Liu Anping, from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, for creating the anonymous letter as a performance.

After the exhibition opened again on February 17, the atmosphere was even tenser and much more sensitive than before. The viewers were required to leave their bags at a place indicated in the square in front of the gallery before they were allowed to enter. There were more guards watching for bombers. The art exhibition seemed to become a dangerous battlefield in which any unpredictable incident might occur at any time.

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition closed on February 19. It had only remained open, in total, for eight days and two hours. The original plan was for the show to last fifteen days.

The National Art Museum of China and the official authorities accused the sponsors, rather than the artists, of having violated the stipulations that the Chinese Artists Association had imposed on the exhibition. Hence, the National Art Museum of China made a decision that each of the seven sponsors of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition should be fined 2,000 yuan, and none would be allowed to hold any shows in the National Art Museum of China for the next two years. The complete notice from the National Art Museum of China is as follows:

Figure 4.24

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was closed down for two days.

Figure 4.25

***Closing Down Twice,* commemorative envelope made by Zhang Riyao, a postal designer. On the bottom left are marked the dates of the two closing periods.**

Notification of Fines Imposed on the Sponsors of the "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition for Agreement Violation and Shooting-Induced Suspension of Show

The "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, which opened on the morning of February 5 at our gallery, has violated the exhibition agreement and the rules of the National Art Museum of China. On more than one occasion, black cloths bearing the show signs were spread on the square in front of the venue, and award plaques bearing the words *Jintian xiawu tingshui* [No water this afternoon] and framed with red silk were hung on public toilets. At one point, three persons covered with white cloths came out of the exhibition hall. On the east hall of the first floor, some persons were selling fish and shrimp; or washing their feet and throwing condoms or coins. On the second floor was somebody who was hatching eggs.

The officials of our gallery informed the director of the organizational committee and the representative of the sponsoring units and demanded that these violations of the exhibition agreement be remedied, but to no avail. As a result, the plaques had to be taken down from the toilets by the officials of our gallery. Then around 11 a.m., a shooting occurred on the east hall of the first floor which resulted in the closing down of the exhibition and suspension of ticket sales by the Public Security Bureau.

The sponsoring units of "China/Avant-Garde" should be held primarily responsible for the above-mentioned incidents. The occurrences were not only a violation of the exhibition agreement, but also disturbed the normal work of other shows and caused great damage to the reputation of the National Art Museum of China. Because of this, we have decided to fine the violators—the organizational committee—2,000 yuan and ban the seven sponsoring units of "China/Avant-Garde" from holding any exhibitions at the National Art Museum of China in the next two years.

A copy of this notification will be sent to the following sponsoring units of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition:

Meishu, Culture: China and the World Series, All-China Aesthetic Association, *Zhongguo meishubao*, *Reading Magazine*, Beijing Arts and Crafts Corporation, and China City Environment.

Cc: Art Bureau of the Ministry of Culture

Chinese Artists Association

The National Art Museum of China

February 13, 1989

Perhaps there was an understandable ambivalence among the government officials. Because the avant-garde exhibition was the first large-scale and completely Westernized exhibition held in China after the opening to the West, the Chinese government probably wanted to use the show as a symbol of its cultural policy of increasing openness. This allowed the avant-garde artists to use this opportunity to achieve their own goals. Ann Scott Tyson, a staff writer of the *Christian Science Monitor* who was at the opening of "China/Avant-Garde," wrote: "The outrageous stunt revealed how China's avant-garde artists are brashly taking advantage of the opportunity provided by eased state censorship in a bid to spark greater public attention for their highly unorthodox art."[28]

Two months after the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, the Beijing student demonstrations broke out. Following the government's crackdown on the democratic movement on June 4, 1989, the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was repeatedly attacked as an important manifestation of the evils of bourgeois liberalism. Moreover, the exhibition was later referred to in print by some hard-liners as a small Tian'anmen Square of the art world, partly because Xiao Lu's gunshots can be seen symbolically as the first gunfire of the June Fourth students' insurrection (*baoluan*).[29]

As the organizer of the exhibition, I inevitably also got punished by the government. After the June 4 incidents, I was informed by the authorities that I needed to study Marxism at home, and I was prohibited from editing, publishing, lecturing, and traveling outside Beijing. A year later, I got an invitation letter from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and Ohio State University. After about six months of waiting for approval from the authorities, I finally received a passport issued by the authorities and was able to go to the United States as a visiting scholar in October 1991.[30]

One may ask why the 1989 exhibition used "China/Avant-Garde" as its English title while the original Chinese title, "Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan," literally means " Chinese Modern Art Exhibition." In Western art history, "avant-garde" and "modernism" went side by side, they were almost the same thing, although in the postmodern period there was a contrasting "neo-avant-garde." But in the Chinese context of the late 1980s, *qianwei* (avant-garde) seemed more radical and broader than *xiandai* (modern art). Therefore, when I discussed the English title of the exhibition with some critics, such Zhou Yan, the editor of the exhibition catalogue, and Hou Hanru, the catalogue's translator, we all agreed that "avant-garde" made more sense than "modern" as a translation of the original Chinese title. We also had a feeling that although "modern" in the Chinese context means "new," in the West it might be a term out of fashion, even suggesting a period style. The term "avant-garde," however, is more contemporary, ongoing, and not confined to a style. It particularly fit the art of the '85 Movement in the second half of the 1980s.

In fact, it was not until the lead-up to the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition that Chinese artists and critics of the '85 Movement began widely and formally to use the term "avant-garde" to define the new art. The most commonly used term in the 1970s and earlier 1980s had been "modern" (*xiandai*), but sometime around 1986 or 1987 some critics, artists, and writers began to use the term "avant-garde" (*qianwei*, usually in visual art, or *xianfeng*, commonly in literature) to name the new art and new literature. Some *guannian* art groups, such as Xiamen Dada in Fujian, the M Group in Shanghai, and the Southern Artists Salon in Guangzhou, claimed that they were pursuing a "surpassing avant-garde" (*chao qianwei*). Therefore, they declared that their ideas tended toward "postmodernism" or the "contemporary" (see chapter 6).

Generally speaking, then, before the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, "modern," "avant-garde," "postmodern," and "contemporary" had all been used by the artists of the '85 Movement. After the 1989 exhibition, however, "modern art" (*xiandai yishu*) was no longer used to define any new art phenomenon in the Chinese art world, and "avant-garde" became the term most frequently used, especially in the first half of the 1990s, both domestically and internationally. Since the later 1990s, "contemporary art" (*dangdai yishu*) has become the most popular term.

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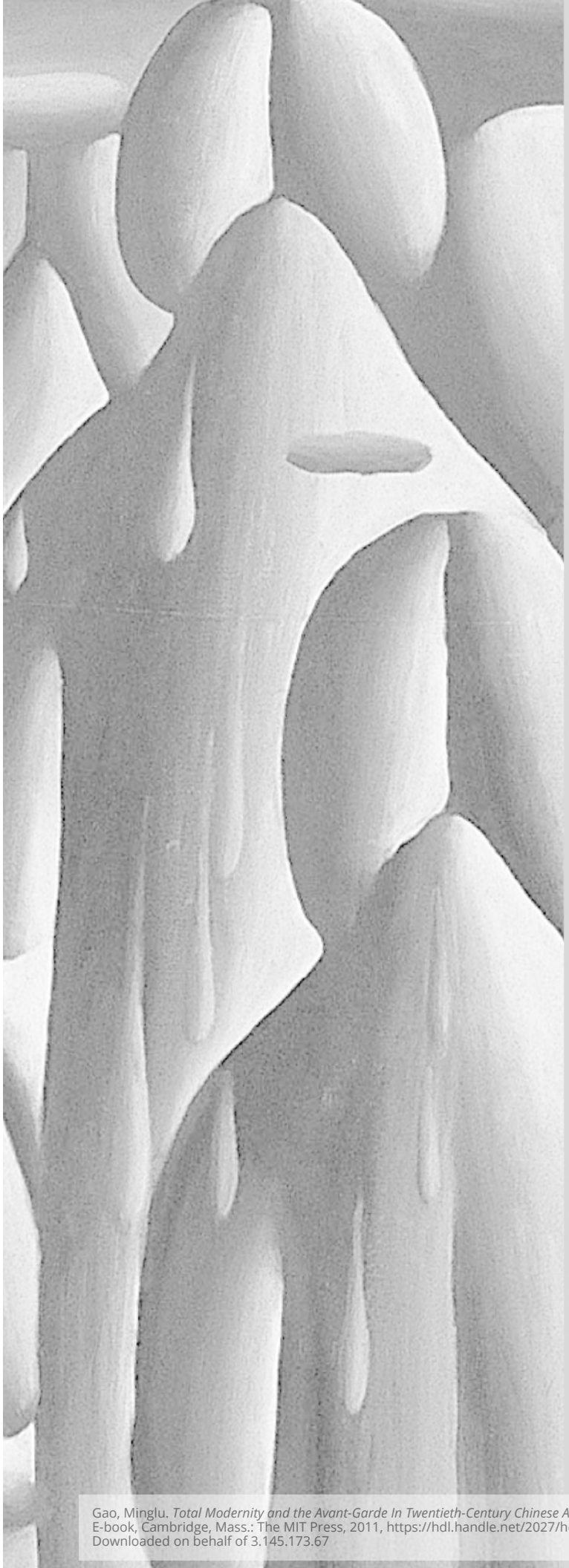


5

Metaphysical Modernity

Rationalist Painting and Current of Life Painting

The art groups described in this chapter are grouped together by the belief that artwork should evoke "the spirit of humanism" (*renwen jingshen*) or "humanism and rationalism" (*renwen lixing*). Although, since the Renaissance, humanism in the West has been differentiated from the modern idea of individualism, in China after the Cultural Revolution the term "humanism" (*rendaozhuyi*) indicated the search for individual freedom in conjunction with a fraternity searching for what is most noble in the human condition. Additionally, Chinese humanist ideas strongly opposed the division of people into different classes. As discussed in chapter 2, the scar (*shanghen*) and rustic painters presented this humanism in their art either by showing the emotional wounds inflicted on the Chinese populace or by depicting the poor, innocent peasants and pastoralists in the countryside. Simultaneously in literature, a "searching for roots" (*xungen*) movement arose containing two conflicting camps, those of "native soil writing" and "urban literature." As rustic realist painting and the scar group addressed scenes from the Cultural Revolution, the tendency to examine the customs and mores of local regions, known as *xungen* fiction, first appeared. It was a modest reaction against the increasingly formulaic scar literature (*shanghen wenxue*) of the late 1970s and early '80s. Scar literature openly deplored the national chaos and individual suffering of the Cultural Revolution.

However, the generation of the '85 Movement immediately launched another campaign of humanism (*renwen jingshen*). It was a significant departure from the earlier one launched by the post-Cultural Revolution generation, because the 1980s generation, in general, was pursuing an idealistic future characterized by cultural modernity, no longer looking backward to traditional or native roots to explore certain historical values of humanity. For them, humanity itself represented the nexus of the issue of modernity, transcending the struggles of the painful past and personal experience. In this sense, the '85 Movement departed from the "realistic" restrictions of the post-Cultural Revolution generation, who mostly targeted the Cultural Revolution period.

Further, they returned to the May Fourth heritage of seeking cultural enlightenment and total modernity. As described in my 1986 speech delineating the '85 Movement's characteristics: "In the art world, a movement emerged that embraced all the issues of the May Fourth Movement and revived the core spirit of the cultural movements begun in the early twentieth century. It is part of the cultural debates and is the cultural fever of the year."[1]

Transitional Avant-Gardes Look toward the Ideal Future

In the mid-1980s, after China suddenly opened to the rest of the world, many intellectuals and a new generation of artists who had received academic training thrived with a strong dose of Western modern and contemporary influence. The humanism embraced by the artists of the '85 Movement reflected a desire to transcend both Mao's ideology of "proletarian people" and the complaints of the "wounded people" espoused by the Red Guard generation, especially the artists of the Stars group and of scar painting. On the contrary, the artists of the '85 Movement identified themselves as "universalists," which in this specific moment revealed the core of Chinese modernity, a modernity ready to embrace all advances from different ages and civilizations and to go beyond the reality of existing

civilizations. "Humanism," in this context, was an idealistic hope of producing a spiritual order in which a new future would be built; it also implicated an ambiguous modern Chinese nationalism in its strident search for a specifically Chinese modernity. At the same time, this humanism continued the post-Cultural Revolution period's tendency to desire more personal freedom after several decades of selfless devotion to Mao's revolution, during which humanism was criticized as bourgeois.[2]

The humanism of the '85 Movement is a rationalist rather than empirical notion. It is this rationalism that distinguishes the '85 Movement's "humanism" (*renwen*) from the previous postrevolutionary "humanism" (*rendao*). Of the two, *renwen* is broader and goes beyond political and Marxist narratives. If *renwen* mostly refers to the idealism, liberty, and freedom of an individual intellectual, the rationalist quality indicates a desire to awake from a black ideological midnight. I first used the notion of "rationalism" (*lixingzhuyi*) and "rationalist painting" to summarize and analyze the new art's philosophical tendencies following the post-Cultural Revolution generation. In "The Recent Developing Trends of Oil Painting" ("Jinnian youhua fazhan de liupai"), I used *lixingzhuyi* or "rationalism" to define the social skepticism and criticality of the Stars group, saying that rationalism was equivalent to moral functionalism (*daode gongneng zhuyi*) in art, as revealed in the Stars' manifesto. However, I also indicated that the Stars' art language, in itself, was insufficient to bear the entire burden of a much-needed moral philosophical function.[3]

In another essay titled "About Rationalist Painting" ("Guanyu lixing huihua"), I first defined rationalism by delineating three tendencies: (1) a spirit that transcends concrete phenomenological reality while pursuing a permanent, ideal order in the form of truth seeking; (2) a cultural reflection and critique; (3) a desire for freedom and self-determination. These three perspectives cover the different approaches of rationalist painting exemplifying the most powerful and fulfilled "humanism" in the '85 Movement.[4]

Rationalist painting, which included many groups of artists living in cities on the east coast of China, used cool, solemn, and sometimes grim forms to convey a philosophical and semireligious feeling. The major artists of the rationalist painting group included the Northern Art Group (*Beifang qunti*) in Harbin, Heilongjiang province; the Pool Society (*Chishe*) in Hangzhou; the Red Journey (*Hongselü*) in Nanjing; and some artists in Shanghai.

The broader phenomenon called current of life painting (*shengming zhiliu*) consisted of many groups of artists in western China, including the Southwest Art Group (*Xinan yishu qunti*) led by Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, and Pan Dehai, as well as the Three Step Studio in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, led by Song Yongping and others. This trend addressed the significance of humanism in the breakdown of a collective rationalization that had suppressed individual consciousness and desires. Interested in foreign philosophy, psychology, and literature, these painters' approach and philosophy were very much like the "current of life" expressed as *élan vital* by Henri Bergson. Therefore, we use this notion to describe the natural disposition of life that embraces violence, irrationality, and intuitive action presented in the art of this period.

Although rationalist painting was more rational and current of life painting more expressive and emotional, they shared a common interest in determining the intrinsic substance of human nature, on a level that transcended individual experience. Their surrealist-inspired images had nothing to do with disenchantment with reality; quite the opposite, as their humanist impulses come from their pursuit of real truth (the true aim of Western surrealist philosophy, as it developed immediately following World War I).

When Mao's utopia crumbled, the people's majestic dreams and idolatrous enthusiasm were also destroyed. Immediately, however, another kind of utopia was promoted by a new generation of artists born in the 1960s who matured in the middle 1980s. Even in its anti-utopian stance, that is to say, this artistic avant-garde aimed to replace Mao's utopia with another utopian project of cultural modernity. This modernity would be determined in an idealistic way when the art project of the '85 Movement committed to close involvement in social and cultural practice. The vision of the total modernity project, however, was oriented toward a perfect future, rather than toward a radical reform

of the contemporary social environment. It is this motivation that made the art praxis of China in the 1980s a transcendent avant-garde. Moreover, there was a further entanglement with the narratives of modernity from the May Fourth Movement, characterized by a passionate quest for a society of committed intellectuals evolving out of principles born in the Confucian period.

Though they considered themselves a transitional generation, most artists of the '85 Movement believed they bore the responsibility for the nation's future and were enthusiastically willing to make sacrifices to bring about social reform.[5] Among all of the artists who participated in this driving project of Chinese modernity, rationalist painting groups were the most influential.

The social and cultural changes of the 1980s led the artists of the '85 Movement to express "humanistic enthusiasm" in their art, and to promote themselves as thinkers. Even though they were influenced by surrealism, we cannot define their paintings as "surrealist" in the sense commonly used by many critics, because the specific historical circumstances were quite different. The Western surrealists employed a dialectical juxtaposition of real and unreal to reveal the hypothetical utopian state of subjective freedom even while they existed in a state of objective *un*freedom. Accordingly, surrealism, like modernism in general, was reduced by Adorno and others to an artistic strategy of protest against capitalist society characterized by a failed methodology of resistance.[6] The unreal or dream scenes in the works of surrealism convey an irrational critique of the idealistic, progressive capitalist social modernity that had caused unprecedented human disasters, including the world war. This reversal between real and unreal, ideal and nonideal, cannot be found in the rationalist painting of China, for the latter conveys an integrative pursuit of the ideal in a harmonious but "transrealistic" scene. The comparison with Western surrealism ultimately fails to explicate the important phenomena of the Chinese avant-garde.[7]

Rationalist painting sought to unify painting praxis and reality, but with a metaphorical, not surrealist, approach to the pursuit of subjective freedom. The project of the Chinese avant-garde, at this moment, was neither dialectic nor a negation; rather it was a representation of a realm transcending (not resisting) reality, a mental realm of meditation and philosophical enlightenment that involved both the surrealist and the social realist style. However, because of their rationalist and philosophical characteristics, I coined the term rationalist painting (*lixing huihua*) to define these works.

Among the representatives of the rationalists, the Northern Art Group was the most prominent, including the major artists Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun, Ren Jian, and Liu Yian. Promoting a "civilization of the north," they made the rather extreme claim that the culture of the temperate zone was dying and had to be replaced by a new culture from the northern climates. They subscribed to a long-held belief that a masculine strength inherent in northern Chinese culture was opposed to the comparative weakness of both Chinese traditional culture (which they associated with southern China), namely the literati culture that began in the fourteenth century, and modern Western civilization.

Apparently, their theory concerning the "civilization of the north" reflected a desire to strengthen nationalism and simultaneously create a new modern society at the important moment when China opened to the world. Deriving their style from images of surrealism, the artists sought an imagery that would express the strength and the silent, pure atmosphere of the frigid zone.[8] This pursuit of a quasi-religious purification reflects the artists' dream of founding a rational social order for China's future. However, importantly, they would build this future on the ruined foundation of contemporary culture. The image of Christianity became a metaphor for a new order of civilization more progressive than any previous. For instance, in his *Absolute Principle* of 1985, Shu Qun subordinated Christian iconography within a rationalistic grid, representing an order the artist considered capable of creating a sublime realm with which to purify reality.

In the beginning, the artists of the group demonstrated that their art creation was based not a study of art but rather of culture. As they proclaimed in their manifesto:

Figure 5.1

Shu Qun, *Absolute Principle*, 1985.

First of all, we would like to declare to the public that the "result" displayed in front of you is not the fruit of "creation." Like other behaviors of mankind, it is only one of many behaviors, except that the aim of this one is to establish a world with a new worldview. In this "world," all the old traditions of mankind will be gone and a new, strong, eternal and immortal "world" will be born instead.

We set forth the following requirements for our own paintings: our paintings are not art! Instead, they are only a means to express our way of thinking, constituting a part of our total thinking. We are firmly opposed to the so-called pure painting language and the cliché of making full of use of the property of painting materials in terms of the "autonomic" principle of painting. It is because we believe that to judge whether a collection of art has value or not depends primarily on whether it demonstrates genuine reason or the force of wisdom of mankind, and exhibits the noble qualities and sublime aspirations of human beings.

It is our opinion that Eastern and Western cultures have disintegrated and been replaced by a newborn culture—the civilization of the north. (This does not mean that the local cultures of northern Europe or northern Asia will dominate world civilization, but it is a symbolic concept based on the fact that in the whole cultural history of the East, Eastern cultures are constantly moving toward the north.) The culture of mankind, from its inception, has possessed a deep-rooted tendency to move gradually toward the frigid zone. This north-moving tendency shows that the inner force within mankind flows externally toward a direction full of conflicts. This manifests the inner spirit of human beings.[9]

Because of their dedication to cultural study, the artists of the Northern Art Group wrote a number of interdisciplinary essays on art, culture, and philosophy in the years 1985 and 1986.[10] These proclaim that the artist should act as a cultural soldier fighting for the future of a healthy society. On September 9, 1985, the Northern Art Group held a conference entitled "The Penetration and Outlook of Northern Art," which was supported by the Artists Association of Heilongjiang province. The group attempted to found a theoretical magazine, though it failed due to many difficulties. The theory and concepts of the Northern Art Group immediately spread to nationwide avant-garde circles, however. After they were noted by some important young editors, the activities of the Northern Art Group were extensively reported in journals and newspapers, receiving both affirmation and criticism. The approach of the Northern Art Group was the most philosophical among the rationalist painting groups, and it drew a lot of attention from critics and philosophers. In 1987, when the group held a conference in Changchun, the former Manchurian capital, to discuss rationalist painting, a number of critics and philosophers, including myself, participated.

Within the '85 Movement, conceptual art groups such as Xiamen Dada and artists of the current of life groups strongly criticized the Northern Art Group as being typical of rationalist painting, with a conceptual orientation of rationalization and constructive principles which, others believed, might easily lead to a suppression of individual feeling and desire.[11] For these other groups, the most important goal was to destroy any cultural doctrine, rather than construct a new civilization.

Another similar rationalist painting group was the Red Journey group located in Nanjing, Jiangsu province. The leading artists were Ding Fang, Yang Zhilin, and Xu Lei. Ding Fang was another of the most influential artists of the rationalist painting of the 1980s. Ding was born in Wugong, Shaanxi province, in northwest China, in 1956, moving south to Nanjing when he was a teenager. From 1978 to 1986 he studied as an undergraduate and then graduate student at the Nanjing Academy of Arts. After he graduated in 1983, he taught at the same school until he moved to Beijing to pursue a career as an independent artist in 1986.

Figure 5.2

The rationalist painting conference, Changchun, February 1987.

Along with Yang Zhilin and Xu Lei, Ding Fang was one of the major organizers of, and a participant in, the 1985 "Jiangsu Art Week Modern Art Festival" ("Jiangsu qingnian yishu zhou: Daxing yishuzhan"), the first influential exhibition covering all the experimental arts there. In 1986, after Ding returned from seeing the Zhuhai slide exhibition of the '85 Movement, he and another seven artists, including Yang Zhilin, a teacher at Nanjing Normal University (who would design the logo of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition of 1989), Xu Lei, Shen Qin, Zhai Xiaogang, Guan Ce, Cao Xiaodong, and Xu Yihui, decided to organize a new group named the Red Journey. (Red symbolizes life, so that Red Journey is the journey or process of life.) Principles published later in the brigade's manifesto show that their central concern was how to find and express their tragic feelings as they pursued a sublime and mystical artistic expression. They wrote, "We will build a common substance through our honest sacrifice. We are looking for a new life created from the depth of our hearts. We will touch the sublime when we sail toward the Faramita [*bian*, heaven]. We will be called by a holy command when our spirit meets the eternity."[12]

Figure 5.3

Red Journey, outdoor gathering and exhibition, City Wall, Zhongshan Gate, 1986.

The other *renwen jingshen* direction, the current of life, tended to address questions about the nature of life in order to explore humanitarian values. The primary difference between their artistic goals and those of the rationalists was that the current of life painters expressed their opinions about the nature of life by venting their own individual emotions or expressing their own life situations. While the rationalist painters looked forward to a purified utopian world in the future, current of life painters looked the other way, backward and inward, through images of distorted bodies or of people living a simple life.

Different artistic groups within this trend had different ideas about both the nature of life and the nature of art. Some groups emphasized that life is instinctual, while some emphasized the idea that life is a process of accommodation. Usually, their process of artistic expression started as a venting of individual emotions, but it then evolved to express social meaning as well. After expressing their individual feelings, these artists sometimes found that their problems stemmed from society. They were mainly influenced by existentialism, expressionism, and the writings of Freud. Their individualism contained the elements of a strong collective imbued with social concerns.

The Southwest Art Group was perhaps the most influential and typical group in the current of life trend, both in its idea and practice, just as the Northern Art Group was within the rationalist trend. Although the name of the group was geographical, this by no means implied that all its artists were from southwest China. They were, in fact, from various provinces, including Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, which are all in southwest China, as well as Shandong and Jiangsu provinces and the city of Shanghai on the east coast. Using "Southwest" in the name indicated two things. First, the major artists, such as Mao Xuhui, Zhang Xiaogang, Pan Dehai, and Ye Yongqing, were from the southwest, where they initiated the first exhibition of the group. Second, the geographical association indicated various cultural and aesthetic traits, such as simplicity, "primitivism," and a naive style. Like the artists of the Northern Art Group, those of the Southwest Art Group held many meetings and wrote a number of articles in addition to creating their artworks.[13]

In summary, the current of life artists, especially those in the Southwest Art Group, had two major concerns. They shared a basic philosophy with rationalist painting, but also significantly distinguished themselves from rationalist painting.

According to the current of life painting philosophy, art was not an act of materialization. Instead, it was a channel for the soul of mankind. Therefore, there were no such things as art criteria or standard art forms, as all of this came from the current feelings of human beings. For instance, Zhang Xaiogang believed that art was equal to love and was made of all kinds of dreams, whereas Pan Dehai was overwhelmed by a mammoth sense of the universe, believing in the idea of a superhuman. Mao Xuhui loathed beauty, praising truth instead as the primary force, especially the cruel inner reality of a tumultuous soul.[14]

For the artists of the Southwest Art Group, art, precisely speaking, was something rooted not in an abstract human being, but rather in a specific person. Their art and lives were to be resolved as a whole, and thus art epitomized a grand soul (*dalinghun*).

Activism was foregrounded. Though this was a feature of all the avant-garde groups of the '85 Movement, the practice of the current of life artists

was particularly characterized by activism, and action was the highest objective of their art. In the preface to the brochure for the "Third Exhibition of New Specific Images" ("Xin juxiang disanjie zhan") of the Southwest Art Group, the artists wrote, "You will not be able to act, if you are not aware that the first priority of human life is action."[15] With this consciousness of activism, the artists devoted and even exhausted themselves in the quest to overcome any political barriers or economic difficulties.

When postmodernism reached its peak in the Euro-American art world, and idealism and modernism had been undermined by various deconstructive methods, the Chinese art world of the 1980s, notably the rationalist painting and current of life schools, moved in a totally different direction. Although there was considerable disagreement between rationalist painting and the current of life tendency, as well as some conceptualist groups, such as Xiamen Dada, the main purpose of the avant-garde groups was to question orthodox ideology. This questioning was not meant in the way of destruction or deconstruction, as in the case of Mao's Red Guard. Instead, there was a demand for the reconstruction of the cultural spirit in the 1980s, geared toward reform and modernity. The "humanism" of the '85 Movement, therefore, drove the avant-garde toward devotion to rediscovering human nature without expressing a destructive attitude. Perhaps the Cultural Revolution destroyed too much, and the post-Cultural Revolution generation had complained too much. It therefore followed that this was a time to reconstruct. All Western influence, no matter whether modernist or postmodernist, could serve in this project. Thus, the '85 Movement, in particular all the *renwen* groups, was an idealistic, total modernity project. For them, art was not merely material production, but rather a program for reestablishing culture following a period of great destruction and trauma.

Metaphor One: The Thinker and the Apple

Rationalist painting often used the compositional model of a man thinking. The "thinkers" in the rationalist paintings were the artists themselves, without any concrete, individualized facial features; they were universal figures representing the '85 generation. At the beginning of the '85 Movement, these "thinker" subjects appeared quite often, sometimes along with images of apples, or with a book (or something like a paper text) or sometimes a cup of water on a table. Stylistically, they combined realism and surrealism. For a generation that read philosophy and contemplated abstract and metaphysical ideas, these images were essential metaphors. The apple was a metaphor of knowledge and enlightenment, while the book and the water were metaphors for the resources of knowledge and thinking.

This typology first emerged with the new academic generation, in particular in the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou, during the first half of 1985. It spread with the emergence of rationalist painting in the avant-garde groups nationwide.

In early 1985, a group of recent art school graduates executed several works on the theme of awakening from the Dark Ages. One example was Zhang Qun and Meng Luding's *In the New Era: Revelations of Adam and Eve* (see figure 3.5), which was displayed in the 1985 International Youth Art Exhibition in Beijing, where it sparked a controversy over its subject matter, as well as for its depiction of nudity. The artists used the biblical story of Adam and Eve tasting the forbidden fruit as a metaphor for China's youth, who had already begun to awaken. The young woman holding an apple broke out of the picture's frame, and the young man awaited a taste of the apple. The palace door behind the nude figures, as well as the mountain with the Dunhuang Buddhist caves in the background, suggested the opportunities open to the new generation. In an article entitled "Awakening in the New Era," the artists advocated a reevaluation of the past, and of reality, in the context of the "new era" of opening and reform.[16] Rather than retreating to the outdated countryside and taking the world of "the other" as a theme, as the rustic painters did, the artists of the '85 Movement chose to directly comment on Chinese modernity. The new generation positioned themselves to face society directly with a metaphor involving more self-consciousness, urban environments, and the metaphysical state of their

Figure 5.4
Li Guijun, *Studio*, 1985.

own generation. In Li Guijun's *Studio*, the painter on the left seems to think rather than paint, while the young painter on the right is reading a book and the young woman in the middle is listening. The atmosphere in the studio seems to have nothing to do with art, rather philosophy, and the artists are concerned with meditation rather than painting.

There was a historical, religious, and cultural dislocation present in their approach. For instance, in Christian iconography the apple is a symbol of original sin. In 1980s China, it was a symbol of enlightenment. Many artworks also used the cross, the symbol of Christ's sacrifice, to imply a new intellectual spirit. The painting was a space in which the birth of Christianity, Renaissance humanism, and current Chinese modernity were all conflated in an integrative, metaphorical composition. For the Chinese avant-garde, it was a historical space, framed by "a particular time, a specific space and choice."[17] A number of artworks with similar themes were made at this time by new academic students. For example, a younger artist from Hunan province, Yuan Qingyi, created an oil painting, *The Spring Is Coming* (*Chuntian laile*), in which a young man gazes back to his table on which an apple and a book are laid. We cannot see his face; the back view of a thinker was very commonly used in paintings during this period. The anonymous, faceless angle served to make the figure a symbol for everyman, even when depicted with a typical realistic technique. Although, in the painting, we are not able to see his emotional state or read his facial expressions, we can imagine a positive attitude by considering the pose. In this instance, looking back is a specifically Chinese futurist vision, not a backward gesture, because the book and the apple are metaphors for the future and the spring.

In his essay "I and 'I' and … ," Yuan Qingyi explained this "self-portrait": "I first enter into abstract thought, and from there I find a quiet attitude. If the artist stands in the position of the Dao, he can expand people's thoughts from tiny details into the entire universe." Thus, the space of the canvas is not a place for living but rather an unlimited space for thought. Yuan also believed there were things in common between traditional Daoist philosophy and Sartre's existentialism.[18]

By comparing this work with a 1980 oil painting with a similar title, *Spring Has Come* (*Chunfeng yijing suxing*) by He Duoling, a scar painter, we may find the crucial difference between these two narratives about the "coming spring." In He Duoling's painting, a village girl sits in a field facing the viewer with a sorrowful, emotional expression. Here too the "spring" is a suggestion of the future, but the girl is representative of the passive, wounded Chinese people who need the revitalizing spring to rescue them from the dormant past (and the current status quo). In Yuan's painting, the younger man is a master; he is in charge of his fate and thinking about, as well as being involved with, the generative energy of the coming spring.

Figure 5.5

Yuan Qingyi, *The Spring Is Coming*, 1985.

Figure 5.6

He Duoling, *Spring Has Come*, 1981.

Figure 5.7
Geng Jianyi, *Two People under the Lamplight*, 1985.

Geng Jianyi, an oil painting student from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art who later became one of the leading figures of the Pool Society, gave one of his paintings the title *Two People under the Lamplight*. In this work, a young man holding a newspaper and a young woman are seated facing the viewer, with a cup on the table; there are no features to indicate any expression of individual emotion, nor is there any gender differentiation, with the exception of the hair. They are just modern young people without even any indication of their nationality. In this sense, they may be considered thinkers and universalists, typologically speaking.

Some have tended to define this as a surrealist painting. It has a realistic theme with a spontaneous composition in which the scene takes place, although it is very unspecific about the location and time. Light seems also to be used as a metaphor (of enlightenment, or thought possibilities), rather than a realistically portrayed artificial light in an interior space. It is this stylistic approach with certain unreal elements that makes it difficult to define as either illusionistic or representational in style. This is a fundamental feature of rationalist painting. It may come from the traditional aesthetic phrase, "the approach is in between likeness and unlikeness" (*miao zai si yu busi zhijian*).

Zuo Zhengyao, a rationalist painter from Hubei province, also presented the "thinker/apple" typological metaphor in his contemporaneous painting *Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wife* (*Laozi Zhuangzi he qizi*). In the painting, Laozi and Zhuangzi, the ancient philosophical founders of Daoism, are seated in a garden-like place along with a woman, who is holding an apple. They are all facing us, but all wear a similar expression. This is another story that took place in an Oriental Garden of Eden. According to the artist, the three different gestures of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the wife present different philosophies about the apple. Zhuangzi says, "If the apple matures, it will fall down itself." Therefore he is waiting without doing anything. Laozi says, "Let me have my plate and knife ready." Therefore he is holding them in his hand. Qizi (the wife), an Oriental version of Eve who is also a philosopher (as we can tell from the character *zi* in her name), says nothing, but randomly picks an apple from the tree and eats it. Qizi is a stand-in for the young generation, whose attitude of activism defies any doctrine or rules.[19]

Figure 5.8

Zuo Zhengyao, *Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Wife*, 1985.

Figure 5.9
Wang Guangyi, *The Frozen North Pole: No. 30,* 1985.

Wang Guangyi, in his *Frozen North Pole* series (1985), also made use of this "thinker/apple" model. In one painting, two people, again with no gender indicated, are seated in front of a table with some small fruits (possibly apple) on it, while the background is the frozen North Pole. The painter attempts to freeze everything except spirituality, thinking, and meditation.

Gu Wenda, another leading figure in rationalist painting, made *Self-Portrait with a Window Behind* in 1985. Here the artist's self-portrait is rendered in a repetitive format, seated rigidly in a gesture of meditation while his hand holds an apple.

Interestingly, most of the "thinker/apple" paintings were made in 1985, without any evidence to show an exchange of ideas, or indeed any

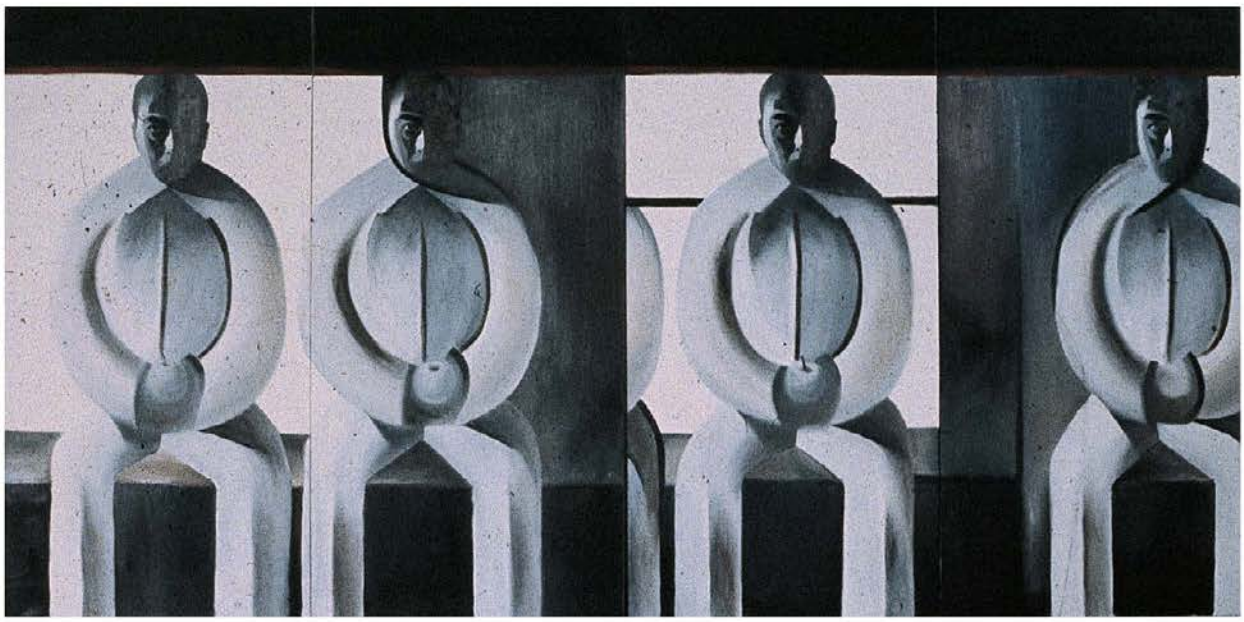


Figure 5.10
Gu Wenda, *Self-Portrait with a Window Behind,* 1985.

Figure 5.11

Zhang Jianjun, *Human Beings and Their Clock*, 1985–1986.

communication between the painters. In this kind of realist-surrealist painting, each artist represented him or herself as thinker, philosopher, or cultural mediator. The spaces in which they stand, or more commonly sit, are very similar in the use of lighting sources such as lamps, windows, the sun, or in some cases a clock. The locations vary from an empty room to an open landscape, a purist garden, or even somewhere outside the human world, as in the heavenly scene depicted in Zhang Jianjun's *Human Beings and Their Clock*.

The ultimate purpose of these paintings is the glorification of the new man who grandly carries out the goals of a new, enthusiastic humanism. After the *Frozen North Pole* series of 1985, Wang Guangyi created his *Postclassical Series* of 1987, in which he employed and modified religious or grand-manner themes from classical Western paintings. In *The Death of Marat*, 1987, Wang abstracted the figure of the martyred French revolutionary leader and thinker Jean-Paul Marat from Jacques-Louis David's iconic 1793 painting. He doubled it in a symmetrically opposed composition painted in a muted palette of grays. This rationalization of sacrifice as an instrument of a more perfect spirituality uses art like religion to depict a purified ideal Chinese spirit and a healthy, noble life. For Wang, the tragedy of Marat is an example of spiritual transcendence: "This series of paintings, called *Postclassicism*, are the best works of my mature period. Their significance and cultural value is that they exhibit the idea that the aim and spiritual significance possessed by life is higher than life itself, upon which lie all the lofty qualities of man."[20]

The tragedy of Marat, for Wang, is also the glorification of a noble spirit, a necessary qualification for entry into the period's "thought" culture. In the same essay, he poignantly asked, "What is a noble

Figure 5.12

Wang Guangyi, *The Death of Marat*, 1987.

spirit? It is a special conviction held by a man about his position in the universe, the only compelling force for the revival of the whole culture."[21]

Metaphor Two: "Frozen Land," "Primeval Land," and "Yellow Earth"

This sort of "thinker's" subjectivity was taken to such extremes in the middle of the 1980s that human subjects became inadequate to it. Only the language of metaphor and meditative forms could represent this extremely inflated subjectivity. Therefore, rationalist and current of life painters sought the grand partners of the earth and the universe as foci for their elite meditations, and we can see everywhere in their writings such terms as "universe," "earth," "nature," "eternity," "solemnity," and "the sublime." On the rational level of the Dao, the natural landscape and the human figure confront each other. This makes us think of the world of ancient Chinese landscape painting, especially the great painters of the Northern Song, who worked in what scholars call the monumental style. With the exception of Gu Wenda, Ren Jian, and a few other ink painters who committed themselves to reconstructing a kind of new monumental ink painting (what I call universal current or *yuzhouliu*), most rationalist painters rarely used traditional landscape techniques.[22]

The pursuit of this visual language led to two special characteristics. One is the complete elimination of the specificity of the individual (body, gender, emotion, psychology). The other is the strengthening and emphasizing of universal human characteristics, until the human figure becomes robotically uniform. For example, in Cheng Xiaoyu's painting *The East*, even the most fleeting moments in human existence have been made abstract. Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi painted what seem to be

Figure 5.13

Cheng Xiaoyu, *The East*, 1985.

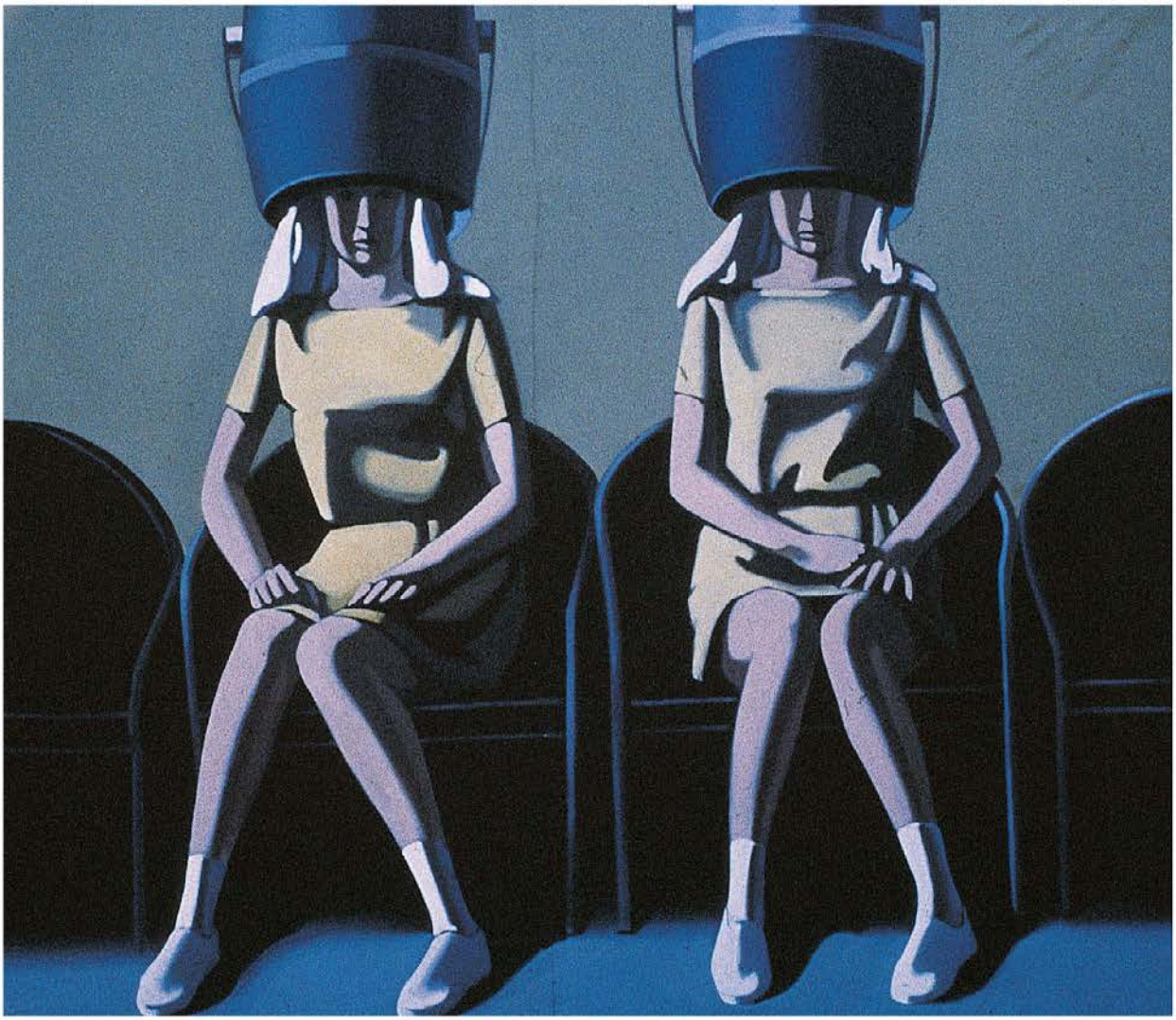


Figure 5.14
Geng Jianyi, *Haircut, No. 4—Fashion and Style in the Summer of 1985*, 1985.

aliens or extraterrestrials. In the context of 1980s rationalist painting, nearly all human forms reside in abstract scenes and spaces that lack distinguishing characteristics.

Characters are often inserted into "universal" scenes without any concrete backgrounds. The background is often empty, and the colors are often blue or otherwise cold, to hint at the presence of a higher-level reality. The earth and sky become the background for the characters in these paintings. The earth, particularly high plateaus, often gives a sense of life, and this sense of life is but a projection of the artist's ideals.

Works in this category include Wang Guangyi's *Frozen North Pole* series, Ren Jian's *Primeval Chaos*, Ding Fang's *Yellow Earth* series, and Gu Wenda's as well as other ink painters' universal stream paintings.

As discussed earlier, the Northern Art Group, represented by Shu Qun, Wang Guangyi, and Ren Jian, used the frigid temperatures of Manchuria as both a background for their paintings and a projection of their spirits. They all lived in northern China, and they sought a theoretical foundation for their region's culture. Wang Guangyi intended his 1985 *Frozen North Pole* series to signify "a kind of beauty of sublime reason which contains [a] constant, harmonious feeling of humanity," noting that "here, both creator and the created are moved by the atmosphere of the sublime and by dignity, rather than by common aesthetic and visual pleasure."[23] In these paintings, orderly, identical figures face the future and are only seen from behind. The background resembles the frozen land and mountains of the Arctic. He wrote about this concept in one of his essays:

> I am very sensitive to the first signs of the ups and downs of a culture, for my life began in the cold and pure land of the north. The tragic scene generated by the solid image of the northern land, a pure spiritual land, made me spiritually feel the restlessness and horror of life in front of the hostile and cold nature. Therefore, I instinctively transformed my restlessness and confusion to a surrealistic state that transcended myself.

Figure 5.15

Wang Guangyi, *Frozen North Pole*, 1985.

Figure 5.16

Ren Jian, *Primeval Chaos* (detail), 1986–1987.

> If the creativity of mankind can be deemed to be the manifestation of an individual's reaction to the changes of the universe, the art forms created by an individual's freedom shall possess a perception of spiritual transcendence. Behind these forms is hidden the prototype of life's tension, which is totally different from the aesthetic concept of "the pleasure of representation." This life tension develops along an upward, spiritual path, constituting the whole chain of humanity's culture. The prophetic art forms created by some noble healthy persons can undoubtedly serve as examples of the development of a culture of human beings.
>
> My own art forms can, without any doubt, also serve as examples. The solid, Polar Region in the north, one of my early art forms, expresses a bright yet serious rationality of life's expansion.[24]

The land and earth in Ren Jian's paintings are even more mysterious and monumental than in Wang Guangyi's work. Ren Jian devoted himself to exploring and presenting Eastern mysteries, and created abstract forms or images based on traditional Chinese concepts about the beginnings of the human world. A series of paintings dating from 1985 to 1987 gave form to his philosophical reconfiguration of the universe. He created various symbols and signs with references from the Book of Changes (*Yi jing*), a Daoist text, making a thirty-meter-long painting in 1986–1987 in the form of a traditional ink-and-wash hand scroll. The painting, entitled *Primeval Chaos*, used imaginary images to describe the origins of life in a primordial era.[25] This primordial universe, however, has nothing to do with archaeological study, nor is it a mythical narrative in a visual form; rather it is a metaphor employed to transcend the existing aesthetic pleasure of the "representation of reality" (*fanying xianshi*). For Ren Jian, to imagine a primeval land through a peculiar, or specific, visual form is a systematic attempt to liquidate the cliché of realism and representational theory. In this, rationalist painting seems to share something with Western modernism at the turn of the twentieth century. The difference is that the Chinese style never goes to extremes, but always stays in between pure abstraction and mimicry.

Similar to Ren Jian were the Shanghai painters Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Chen Zhen, Zhang Jianjun, and others. The difference is that the Shanghai painters portrayed the primeval land in a more symbolic form by visualizing Oriental philosophy about the beginning of the universe. Chen Zhen

Figure 5.17

Chen Zhen, *A Painting about Mind Moving*, 1984.

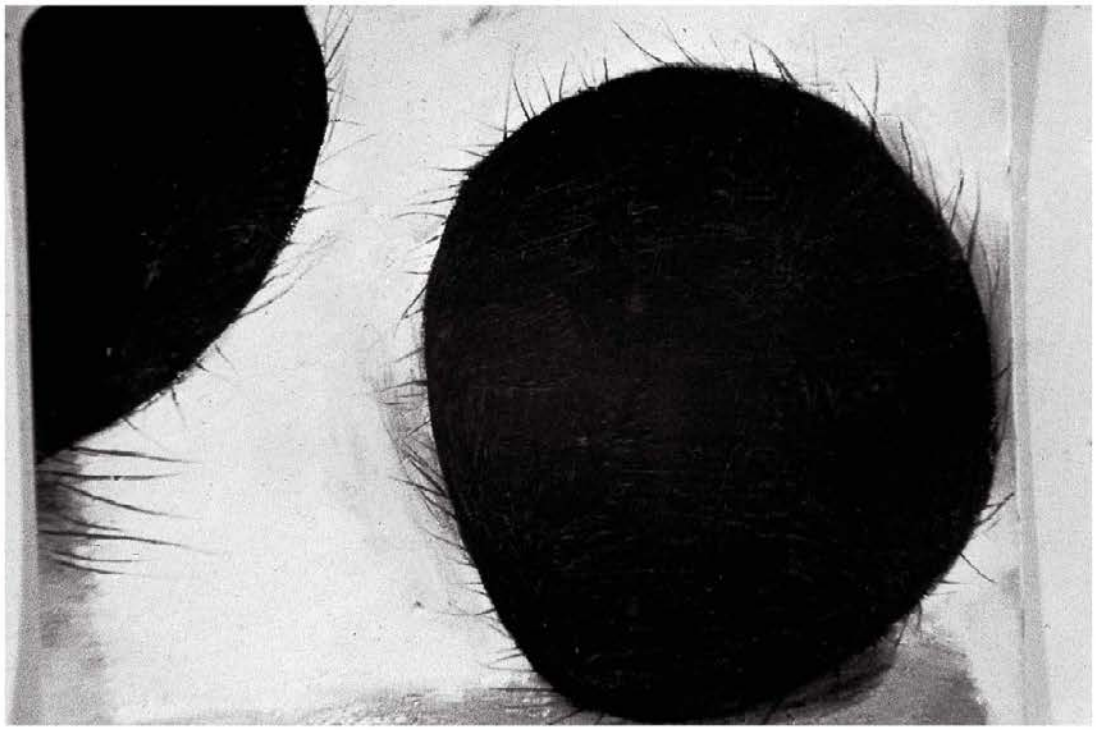


Figure 5.18

Li Shan, *Expanding Series, No. 1*, 1984.

Figure 5.19

Yu Youhan, *Circle Series*, 1984.

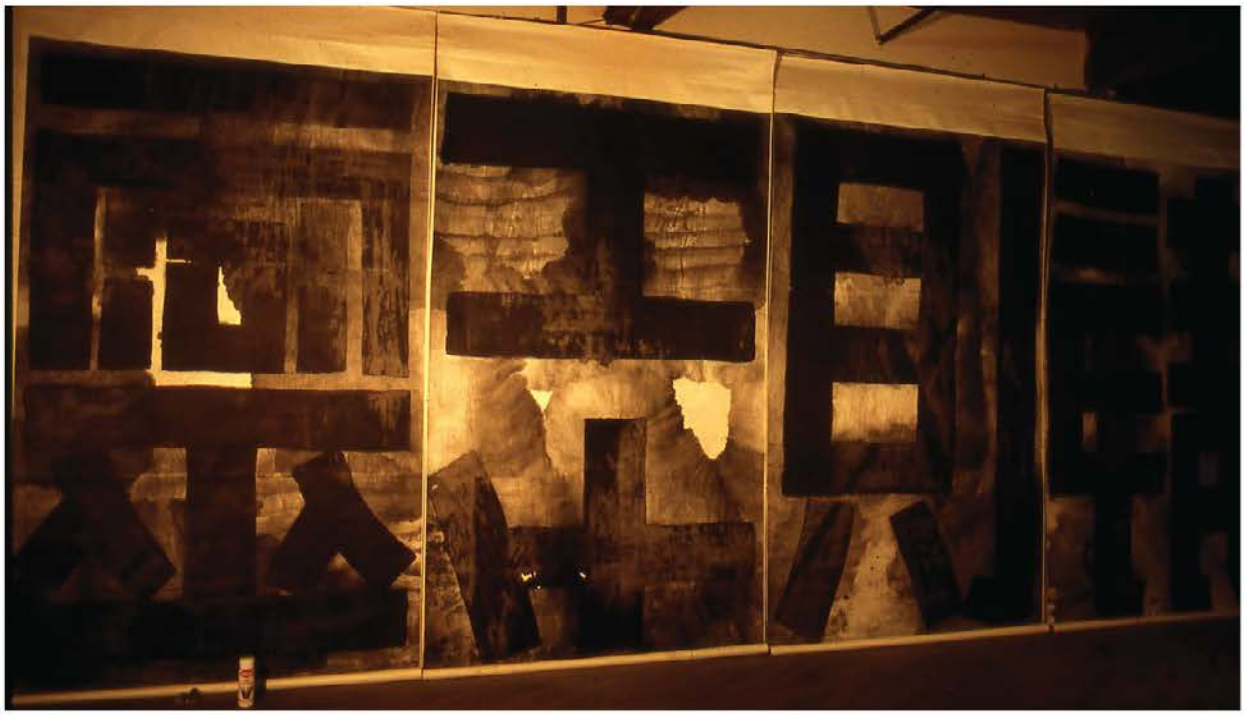


Figure 5.20

Gu Wenda, *Mythos of Lost*, 1985.

was a painter who was extremely interested in both Chinese and Western philosophy and wanted to demonstrate his interpretation of the structure of the universe, including extraterrestrials. He used dots to combine *qi* or "energy" and divinatory symbols to suggest certain motions in what he called the "stream of *qi*" (*qiliutu*). Chen moved to Paris in 1986, and soon he gave up this Oriental philosophical dream and shifted to an interest in postmodernism and the issue of cultural identity.[26] Li Shan was also interested in the Oriental mysteries and a certain pseudo-abstract style. The circles in Li Shan and Yu Youhan's paintings, however, have nothing to do with modernist geometry, though the philosophical code reminds us of modernism. The soft, reserved round shapes, and the ink paintings of lines and dots, all suggest an Oriental spontaneity and a hint of human life and the body.

These Shanghai painters all sought to use the mysterious universe of ancient Eastern philosophy to rid culture of the previous philistine tendency of socialist representation. Consequently, abstract symbols thoroughly obscured human forms in their works, as the human form—most notably that of Mao—had been the basis for all propagandistic representation in the past. Physical landscapes were ultimately aimed at presenting metaphysical ends, replete with the internal realities of these Chinese new "humanist" thinkers.

In the middle of the 1980s, otherworldly scenes also became important material for avant-garde ink-and-wash painting. This tendency made a departure from both traditional landscape painting and the revolutionary representational landscape. A number of painters were involved in the ink movement. In Zhejiang province, Gu Wenda became the primary representative of an avant-garde ink-and-wash painting movement called scholarly painting (*xuezhe huihua*), which addressed painting as a scholarly study. The painting's subject matter commonly involved characters, land, and a hint of the human body, joined together in a harmonious composition suggesting an otherworldly or surreal place. But Gu's form of otherworldly landscape was rather a representation of the human spirit (see chapter 7); here the land serves *li*, or principle, and idea. He believed that the paintings of the Northern Song Dynasty were the most valuable, virile, and sublime.[27]

Figure 5.21

Ding Fang, *Drawing of a Landscape,* 1984.

Figure 5.22

Ding Fang, *The Summons and Birth*, 1988.

On the other hand, he thought the literati painting style, which followed the Northern Song, was weak and powerless. This criticism of the literati painting of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when Chinese reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao launched the art movement called the "revolution in art."[28]

Ding Fang was another important rationalist painter of the 1980s. If we say that the earthly and otherworldly landscapes discussed above were similar inasmuch as they explored purely spiritual questions, Ding Fang's landscapes were more concrete, showing the soul and flesh of a nation, as well as a portrait of the identity of Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s. Ding Fang was born in Wugong, Shaanxi province, in northwestern China, in 1956. He and seven other artists, including Yang Zhilin, a teacher and his colleague at Nanjing Normal University, Xu Lei, Shen Qin, Zhai Xiaogang, Guan Ce, Cao Xiaodong, and Xu Yihui, decided to organize a new group named the Red Journey.[29]

Ding Fang's first artistic endeavors took place between 1982 and 1985, when he worked with rustic realist painting. His rustic painting, however, did not exoticize the lives of ordinary people. Instead, Ding sought to explore the rational structure of nature through images of the constant stillness of the land and depictions of the cycle of human life. In these paintings the land seems covered not by soil, but rather by solid metal.

In 1985, Ding Fang abandoned rustic themes. He returned to the Yellow Plateau in his home province, and while there he shifted his attention away from capturing the essence of the land and the lives of the people who live on it. Instead, Ding sought a symbolic mode of expression that would strengthen national culture. His representative works of this stage are the paintings entitled the *Castle Series* (1985). They depict the land of the Yellow Plateau turned to ruined castles and combined with parts of the Great Wall and villages. Ding Fang describes his pursuits of this period by saying, "I have been looking for a spirit hidden in the northern world." Elsewhere he said, "What I am striving for is an unsophisticated, realistic style which aims to express the spirit of the north by a simple and solid artistic language. These realist techniques are forceful even if regarded as outdated. But I still insist that the silent greatness inherent in the northern lands is the foundation for this art to enter into the future culture of mankind."[30] In these works, Ding created monumental compositions by combining intricate brushstrokes with a giant landscape.

This leads us to think of the twelfth-century art historian Mi Fu's (1052–1107) appraisal of the tenth-century painter Fan Kuan. Commenting on Fan's brushstrokes, Mi said Fan "used a great deal of ink and did not distinguish between rocks and earth [*tushi bufen*]. No one in the present dynasty surpassed him. His mountain streams spring from the depths of nowhere; his waters seem to have a voice of their own."[31] The surface of the earth in Ding's paintings is the skin of the national soul, like that of the German artist Anselm Kiefer, who has committed himself to painting the national soul of the former West Germany. Like Wang Guangyi's, Ding Fang's new works of 1987 and 1988 had an extremely romantic tendency. He used bright colors and exaggerated emotions to emphasize a quasi-religious approach. The titles of works in this series include: *The Summons and Birth*, *Will and Sacrifice*, *The Enlightenment of the Original Spirit* (*Yuanchuang jingshen de qishi*), *Self-Transcendence*, and *The Power of Tragedy*. In *The Summons and Birth*, the artist transformed the land and city that he had drawn before into a godlike face that shines on and summons humans. The dominant color is gold, symbolizing divine light.[32]

Metaphor Three: Wild Earth and Minority Body as Eternal

The current of life artists from western China sought a different way to represent the grandeur of human life by employing a metaphor of their individual experiences of nature, land, and native people, rather than attempting to transcend reality as the rationalist painters had. Therefore, the metaphorical language of "land" for the artists of the current of life movement was not the Northern Art Group's "frozen land," the Shanghai painters' primeval symbols, nor Ding Fang's "yellow earth," but rather the virginal "wild soil" (*retu*) of southwest China. Wild in this case meant original, simple, and uncivilized. Although the frozen land is also original and simple, it was

civilized in the metaphorical sense as interpreted by the rationalist painters. This is partially because of the geographical location of Yunnan province in the southwest, where minorities still live in the old agricultural lifestyle.

One may define this approach as another form of rustic art. In fact, there was a connection between the Southwest Art Group and rustic painting. First, Zhang Xiaogang and Ye Yongqing, two of the major members of the group, were the classmates of Luo Zhongli, Cheng Conglin, and He Duoling, who were the leading scar and rustic artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In fact, Zhang Xiaogang was involved in rustic painting in the later 1970s, but his painting did not get as much attention as that of his classmates from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art. It was very natural for Zhang and Ye to carry on with a similar rustic mentality in the practice of the Southwest Art Group. Second, Zhang, Ye, and Mao Xuhui were all born in Kunming, Yunnan province; they shared a similar regional interest in portraying their own land and people.

The rustic interest of the Southwest Art Group in the middle of the 1980s, however, was quite different from that of the rustic painting initiated in Sichuan in the late 1970s. The latter used the rustic life as a "true life" to comment on the previous political life and to address humanism, departing from Mao's political and class struggle. The former, however, attempted to infuse their "neo-rusticism" with a much wilder and abstract appearance in order to perform a metaphorical and philosophical meditation on what it means to be human. This quality, above all, distinguished the approach of the Southwest Art Group from that of the rationalist painters. Furthermore, the former respected and believed in concrete individual experiences and intuition, at the expense of rational thought. This by no means suggests that the current of life and rationalist painting had no common philosophical interests. On the contrary, both proclaimed the possibility of transcending individual and phenomenological life, and both pursued a grand soul (*dalinghun*). Therefore, both made a clear departure from the political life of the post-Cultural Revolution period, and both employed their land as a metaphor in the philosophy of total cultural modernity.

This approach involved a kind of meditation, the meditation that dug deep into individual souls rather than observing irrelevant social phenomena. In the mid-1980s, Mao Xuhui's art began with an extremely wild and concrete personal focus. He worked at a store, producing marketing advertisement boards, and read novels by Franz Kafka. He was bored with life, his spirits remaining low even when he got back to his living quarters. There, he would stand by his window watching the road lamps and pedestrians. If this could not disperse his loneliness, he would depict his ennui on canvas, painting restlessness, love, dilapidated life, and the feeling of falling. He became extremely interested in pure instinct. In about 1985 he wrote, "When I put into the magic bucket of artistic form the things in life that disturb people, that are irrational, that are disorderly, that have a strong presence even though they are indefinable, then I feel delight … driven by primitive impulse and desire, I have to break out of my inner world by blowing off my head, my soul, and all my secrets with a completely vented open mind. After harshly beating all the monsters on a gallows, I then cheerfully leave."[33]

In this period, Mao Xuhui painted the *Guishan Series* (*Guishan xilie*). Guishan is an area where many minorities have lived since prehistoric times. Sheep, land, trees, and minority people were the major images in his compositions. Often, the people hold tree branches or other agricultural symbols in their hands. In *Guishan Series: Encounter on Red Soil*, a couple gaze at each other in silence. The tree branch the man offers the woman is a symbol of the love that comes from the land and is at the root of all human beings.

Like Mao and Pan Dehai, Zhang Xiaogang resorted to drink as a result of his disappointment with life. This influenced his art: the major themes of his work during the mid-1980s were focused on death and dreams. His drinking sprees eventually led to stomach troubles that caused him to be hospitalized. At the hospital, he was confined to a white bed in a white room and had to take white tablets every day. During that period, he produced a series of disquieting sketches. The images were no longer of grasslands, but rather of monster after monster, interspersed with falling bedsheets chased by menaced souls. At that time he wrote, "Mankind's

Figure 5.23

Mao Xuhui, *Guishan Series: Encounter on Red Soil*, 1985.

love has been divided into two parts. The first half enjoy their colorful daily life, while the other half move toward death driven by a self-propelling force."[34] For Zhang, dreams—especially the nightmares he experienced in the hospital—were the moments in which he experienced enlightenment, mentally floating between death and life.[35]

Zhang Xiaogang, like Mao Xuhui, abandoned the tendency toward self-indulgent expression in order to focus on reality. He attacked the human distortions that society caused by glorifying the pastoral, simple life. In *Eternal Life*, painted in 1988, a ceremonial image of minority people surrounded by animals and wigwams depicts a celebration of "wildness." This ritualistic, ageless life became the major theme of Zhang's paintings during the late 1980s. A similar ceremony was captured in another painting, *Yin Yang Cycle*, which portrayed a couple who share the same lower extremity kneeling in prayer. This is reminiscent of the ancient god and goddess, Fu Xi and Nu Wa, whose joined lower body was that of a snake. The painting symbolizes the noble purity of rustic life, which the artist, considering himself a modern man, identified as the true and original human consciousness.

This kind of imagery, often based on experiences in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, or other remote areas, appeared frequently in the 1980s. For instance, Su Xinping, a painter from Inner Mongolia and a young teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art in late 1980s, frequently painted Mongolian people sleeping, drinking, and walking under a magic shadow, which was a metaphor for the psychological impact of modernity in general. Some of these works undoubtedly implied a conflict between the idealized "primitive life" and modern civilization. This conflict was basic to the psychology of the artists, and is particularly acute in contemporary urban China. On the one hand, the artists wished to oppose modern society for its suppression of human nature, thus their praise for the pure and simple life; on the other hand, they believed the people who lived this "primitive life" in remote areas lacked the ability to change modern society. The praise of "primitivism," pastoralism, and naturalism in the works of the artists of the Southwest Art Group, called nature consciousness (*ziran yishi*), was not an exotic or irrelevant subject matter to them but rather a supplement to urban modernization.[36]

Figure 5.24

Zhang Xiaogang, *Eternal Life*, 1988.

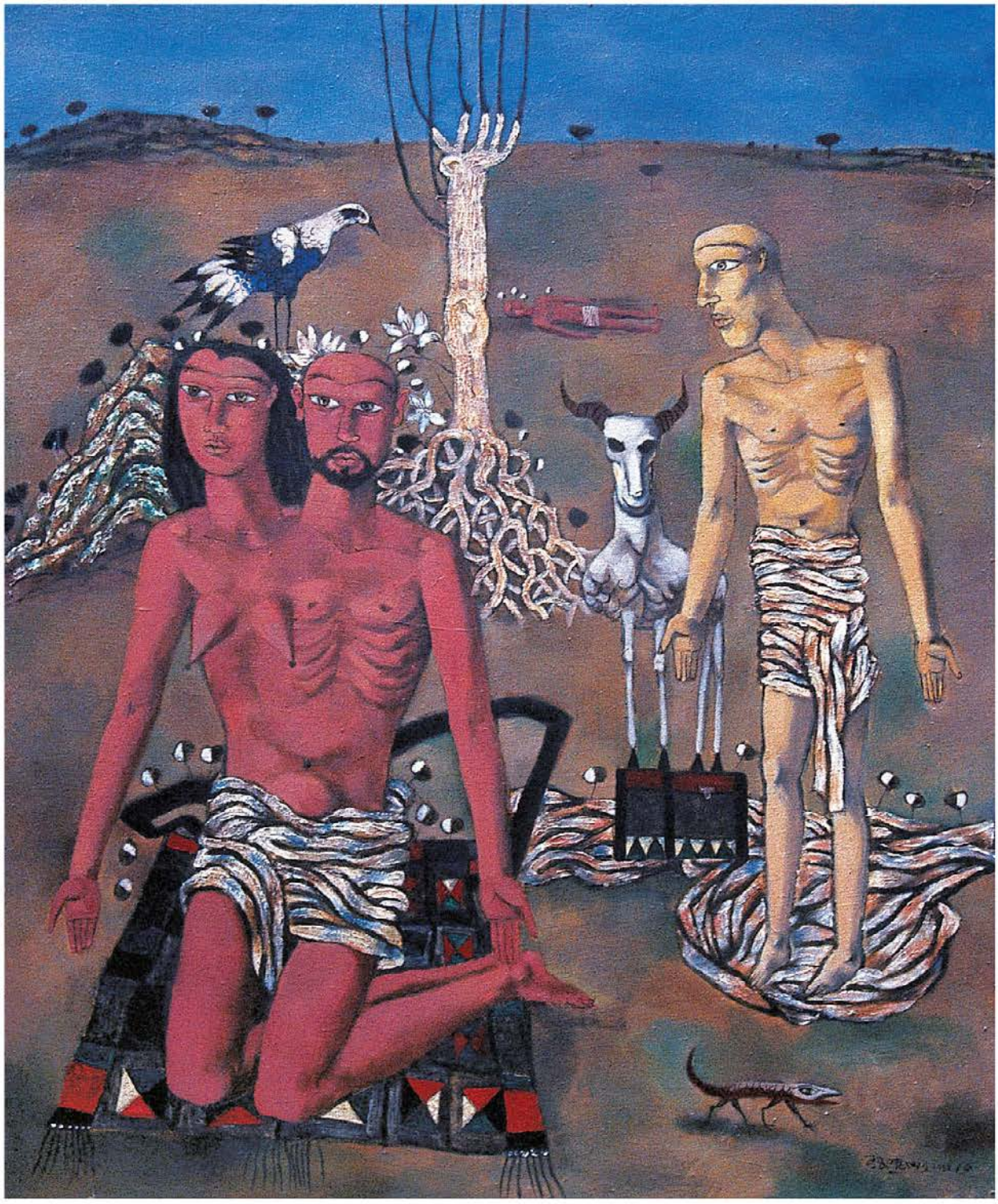


Figure 5.25

Zhang Xiaogang, *Yin Yang Cycle*, 1988.

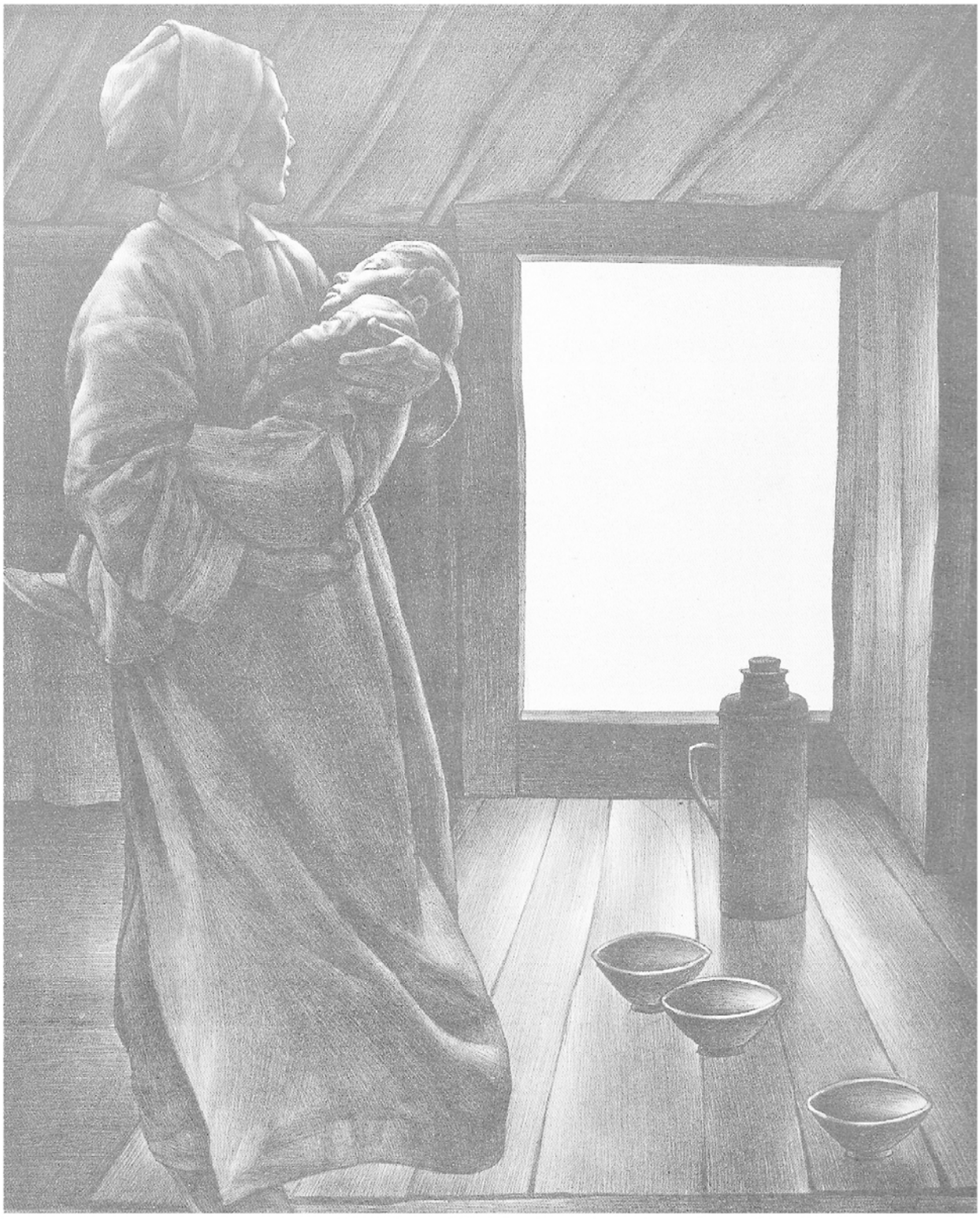


Figure 5.26

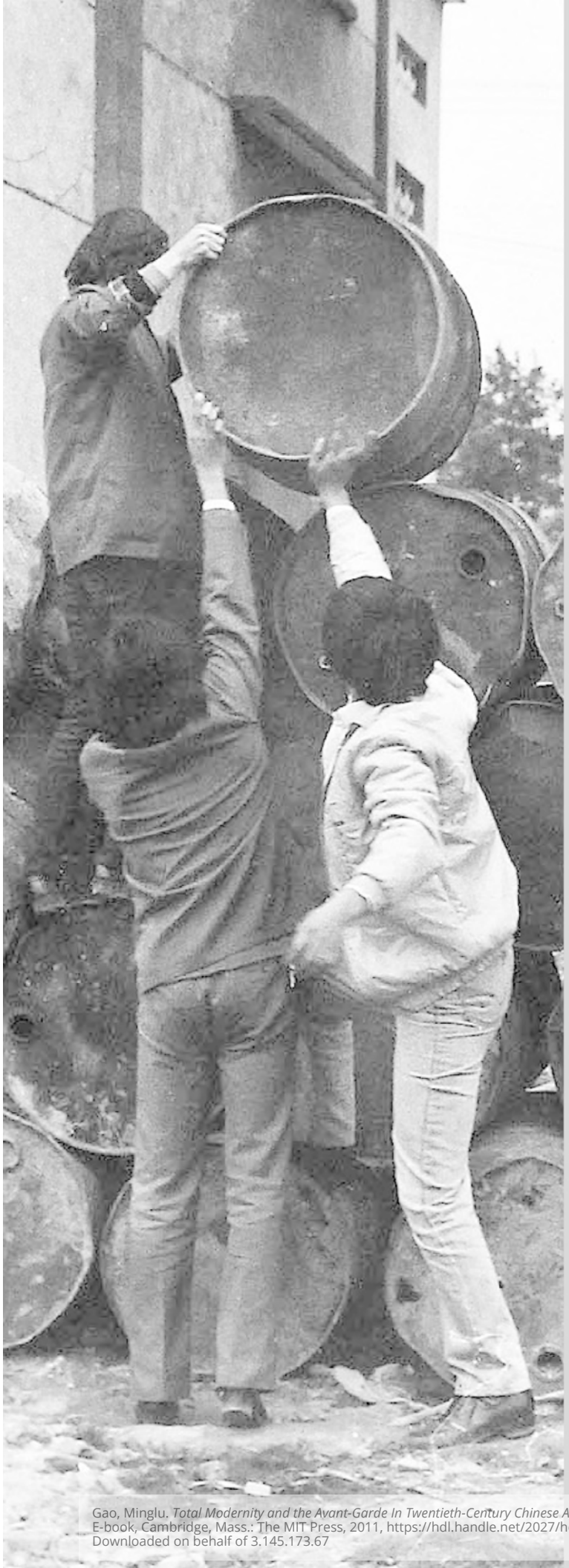
Su Xinping, *Wait,* 1989.

By 1988, a "socio-capitalist" society had begun to develop in China, and intellectuals were becoming fatigued from dreaming of an ideal future. The artists of the Northern Art Group, such as Shu Qun and Ren Jian, abandoned their earlier idealism. Like many of their fellow artist-intellectuals, they moved away from grand themes to undertake specific analyses of the social environment. By 1988, Wang Guangyi shifted his attention away from idealism and grand themes as well, to initiate a more specific investigation of reality. The earliest hint of this shift is seen in his 1987 *Red Reason and Black Reason* series, in which red-and-black grids imply a pop-type approach, or cut-and-paste method, instead of a representational and utopian approach. He started to criticize "the modern myth" (*xiandai shenhua*), which may refer both to Mao's revolutionary period and to the later avant-garde iconoclastic utopias. In stark contrast to his earlier humanist tendencies, he proclaimed that we had to "liquidate the enthusiasm of humanism" (*qingli renwen reqing*) and that art was created only to achieve stardom in media society and the market.[37] He called art a strategy (*youxi*), and Andy Warhol's pop, as well as the hypercritical pop of the British circle around Richard Hamilton, became his models.

Wang created a series of portraits of Mao Zedong; in February 1989, just four months before the Tian'anmen incident, he caused a sensation by exhibiting *Mao Zedong No. 1* in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition (see figure 4.12). In this work, a grid was superimposed on an official portrait of Mao: the revolutionary leader and the utopia he stood for were imprisoned within the measurable confines of an analytic frame. Wang's technique harks back to the large-scale propagandist technique of employing a grid to enlarge and transfer a small-scale mock-up to a monumentally large portrait or propagandistic mural. This work might have been created with a critical intent rather than an overt commercial goal. Generally speaking, before the Tian'anmen democracy demonstrations of 1989, the avant-gardists of the '85 Movement had not yet become involved in the commercial marketing of art due to the lack of international outlets and institutional attention.

In his *Absolute Principle* of 1985, Shu Qun made use of the cross, the Christian symbol for representing a new order and idealism. In the late 1980s, however, he turned away from this vision and created a different version of *Absolute Principle.* In this version, he added three additional panels to the original painting, so that the Christian iconography and the grid progressively vanish. This series was displayed in 1989 in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition. The fadeout mirrors the demise of the intellectuals' idealism about the total modernity project.

Meanwhile, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi also shifted their attention from rationalist painting to conceptual art. In 1988, the transitional nature of deconstructivist theory began to permeate the artistic milieu's mentality. This shift occurred an entire year before the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition and the events of June 4. The consequent loss of idealism and disillusionment occurred significantly before the June 4 incident. It was in the early 1990s, though, that this mentality reached its apex and political pop and cynical realism became a major trend.[38] I will discuss this avant-garde transition issue in chapter 7.



6

Chan Meets Dada

Merging Destruction and Tradition in the Avant-Garde Mentality

Guannian Gengxin: Revolution in Ideas

The Chinese term *guannian* means "idea." Around late 1984 and early 1985, *guannian gengxin* became the most popular notion among the avant-gardists and the younger generation. It even had an impact on the circle of middle-aged academic artists. *Guannian gengxin* literally means to have a "revolution in ideas." After the Open Door policy and new painting trends emerged in the prior several years, the change of ideas became a fundamental issue in the development of Chinese contemporary art, as opposed to the mere substitution of themes or style. But what is *guannian* in the particular Chinese context? It first refers to a desire for further cultural exchange between China and the West. With a strong voice advocating greater openness and freedom in the creation of art, it became a common point of view in the literary and art worlds during the middle of the 1980s.[1] It entailed a pursuit of revolutionary ideas in the creation of art, rather than emphasizing material production. In this context, "ideas" are not concepts in the sense of Western conceptual art; rather it is concerned with promoting an avant-garde cultural revolution, often highly critical, in art.

Apart from the influential trend of a specifically Chinese form of humanism (*renwen*), discussed in the previous chapter, this avant-garde of ideas became the most radical art propagated by the '85 Movement. It first emerged in the middle of the 1980s, in tandem with the *renwen* tendencies of the '85 Movement. In my historic essay defining the '85 Movement, I divided the avant-garde groups into three elements. The first two were the previously discussed rationalist painting and current of life tendencies, which passionately engaged in "enthusiastic humanism" (*renwen jingshen*). The third element manifested as what I called a "revolution of ideas imbued with activism" (*guannian gengxin yu xingwei zhuyi*).[2]

The phenomenon of a revolution in ideas in the '85 Movement was inspired by Western contemporary art, including conceptual art, the name given to a North American and British art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as usual in the Chinese context, the purpose and the revolutionary logic are different from the Euro-American if one examines the comparative situations with any specificity.

The term "conceptual art" was translated into Chinese in two ways in the 1980s: "idea art" (*guannian yishu*) and "concept art" (*gainian yishu*). *Guannian* carries with it a much broader set of connotations than *gainian*. The former refers to the general meaning of mind-based or thought-based practice in a particular context, while the latter has a narrower definition of a specific notion. Chinese conceptual art is more accurately defined as idea art (*guannian yishu*), because the artists working in this vein were committed to examining broad cultural and social issues, rather than focusing on the internal concerns of art itself, as was the case in the first phase of Western conceptual art practiced during the late 1960s. For instance, the Art and Language group attempted to probe the relationship between words, objects, and images while studying the signification theories of French theorists such as Saussure, or later of Wittgenstein. In Chinese art, there has never been a theory that attempts to divide words from images, or study them separately. Due to the integral nature of calligraphic history, and the essential allegorical, metaphorical, and poetic coupling of words and images in the history of Chinese art, there is no Western historical relationship that can

accommodate this equivalency. In some Chinese idea art, such as that of Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, or Wu Shanzhuan, images and words are resolved into one holistic concept. This is partially because the Chinese language is itself based on pictographic images, with no separation between word and image. I will discuss this issue in the next chapter.

It is also important to note that, unlike its Western counterpart, idea art in China did not develop from a logical or historical progression of aesthetic avant-gardism. Never has there existed in China a sphere of aesthetic autonomy as described by Peter Bürger and other Western theorists of the avant-garde. The European and North American conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s was, in this respect, a new movement that furthered the modernist project by questioning the role of art as an instrument of representation while challenging the institutional apparatus, ultimately leading to what some postmodern theorists would call the dematerialization of art in the 1980s. What was essential to the Euro-North American experience, and perfectly epitomized by the stance of Marcel Duchamp, was the critical examination of art institutions and the complicated quest for autonomy inherent in the Western avant-garde tradition.[3] As the father of Western conceptual art, "Duchamp did not hail 'Anti-Art' like the Berlin Dadaists, but rather a subtly complex form of 'Non-art.'"[4] Nonetheless, the conceptual art that emerged in the later 1960s in North America and Britain seemed to continue the search for aesthetic autonomy in a failed avant-garde tradition. Non-art still respects the line of art history; anti-art (in the sense of inclusion and synthesis, rather than exclusion and split), however, to which I rather refer the Chinese avant-garde, attempts to modify the relationship between art and the total social and cultural system in which it exists.

In positioning itself as an anti-art project, the '85 Movement, and especially idea art, adopted the same foundation as Mao's Red Guard art during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, the revolution in ideas also continued the total modernity project from the early twentieth century's revolution in art, as discussed in chapter 1. The difference between Mao's anti-art and the earlier intended revolution in art was that the former was populist, whereas the latter was still based on an intellectual, or elite, model.

The anti-art methodology of Chinese idea art, therefore, was not a logical, conceptual development of art from within, but a response to the external forces of both the social and the artistic environment. In the 1980s, Chinese idea art played a role similar to that of Dada; that is to say, it was a vehicle for challenging social and aesthetic conventions. The anti-art project of the 1980s was initiated by Huang Yongping in conjunction with the Xiamen Dada group, and further developed by Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, and Xu Bing, among others. This group of artists of the 1980s also embraced traditional philosophy, in particular Chan Buddhism, which encourages an ironic sensibility and a refusal to privilege any one doctrine over another in the search for truth. The third arsenal of influences for Chinese idea art's attack on the status quo was Mao's revolutionary art, especially its nihilistic and destructive philosophy, which one may be able to find in aspects of the work of Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and a number of others. In the approach they pioneered, the Chinese language and its characters became the major sources of Chinese idea art.

Unlike the idea artists of the 1980s, who committed themselves to a philosophical elaboration of Chan principles in art, the artists of the 1990s had little interest in philosophical and linguistic elaborations of an anti-art project. Instead, they freely selected and transformed quotidian objects in their surroundings. They continued the anti-art tradition of the 1980s, making some unmarketable (and impossible-to-display) works of art in their apartments, or on the streets, in response to both the harsh political environment and ever more widespread consumerism. The anti-art sentiment of the early 1990s was even more extreme than that of earlier times, marked as it was by the dramatic dematerialization and deinstitutionalization of the projects. The artists began to share, however, some common interests and targets with their Western counterparts, due to the rising prominence of the transnational art market forces of the 1990s.

This anti-art project could also be seen as a critique of Chinese idea art that both comments on and encourages a closer investigation of the moral

condition of the avant-garde itself. In the 1980s, the idea artists were critical of the romanticism and utopianism of their avant-garde colleagues, like those involved in the new Chinese humanism (*renwen*), such as the rationalist and current of life painters.

The difference between *renwen* and *guannian* was that while the *renwen* artists advocated ideas when making artworks, the idea in their specific humanist practice was materialized. From a methodological perspective, "ideas" for the *renwen* artists were more or less equivalent to themes; although *renwen* artists proclaimed that their art went beyond art, their art fundamentally existed as a reflection of thought. In other words, *renwen* artworks contained materialized ideas based in moral or philosophical tendencies.

The *guannian* artists of the '85 Movement, on the other hand, were concerned with the function of art, and sought to answer defining questions such as: What is art? What is contemporary art in the changing context from modernism to postmodernism? What is the relationship between social life and art-making? What is the relationship between the writing of art history, artworks, and the social system? In other words, the Chinese idea art project during the 1980s (as well as 1990s) was about social power and discourses related to art.

The *renwen* painters strove to replace Mao's previous representational art, including its byproducts (e.g., scar and rustic painting). This replacement and criticism did not engage the methodological aspects of art but rather its moral aspects. The *guannian* artists, however, wanted to completely undermine any kind of representation, including that of the previous *renwen* art.

Therefore, the Chinese idea artists of the 1980s positioned themselves as investigators of the corruption of their avant-garde colleagues; and yet again, as the social critics of Chinese modernity. The apartment artists of the early 1990s, and the artists of Chinese maximalism which peaked in the mid-1990s, engaged in a project of a different kind of dematerialization, which can be defined as materialization involved in daily experience, using inexpensive materials, proposals on paper, and repetitious, time-consuming labor to make their small-scale installations in various private spaces. Artworks of this kind served to distance the artists from material desires and the social corruption that affected the avant-garde circles of the 1990s.

The revolution in ideas exemplified by Chinese *guannian* art had several demonstrative features. One was the blurring of boundaries between social life and art within a Chinese context. Recall that intellectual life was one of the most important driving forces of Chinese social reform during the 1980s, as discussed in chapter 3. Both Chan tradition and Mao's legacy existed as referential models for this revolution in ideas. The exploration of the division between art and life is one of the most important legacies of Western conceptual art since Duchamp. Chinese avant-garde artists of this period disdained only presenting the notion, and consequent materialization, of the idea into artwork. Instead, they attempted to turn ideas or concepts into holistic entities through their enthusiastic activism. In many ways, they succeeded and were able to make art a social event of daily life.

The second important feature of Chinese *guannian* art was the search for contextualization, which resulted in a rejection of arbitrary readings of the work of art while critically assessing the power of authorship embedded in the cult of the artist. Within this context, Chinese conceptual art approached anti-conceptual art through an examination of the individual's experience, involving a kind of meditation. Ultimately, it was not the *concept* of art but the *process* of making the art that defined this conceptual turn. One may follow this line of development from Xu Bing's word works, such as *A Book from the Sky* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, to the forms that we call maximalism.

Finally, it is very important to note that the Chinese idea art project represented a paradoxical negotiation between a perceptual aesthetic and its complete destruction. Again, unlike most of their Western counterparts, Chinese avant-garde artists never attempted to relinquish or diminish the power of the visual. On the contrary, the Chinese deployed visual power to enhance the conceptual meaning of their works. The best example of this sort is Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* of 1986–1987 (see chapter 7 for a full discussion). This attempt at balance between the visual and the conceptual was characteristic of all the *guannian* artworks, and it had its roots in traditional Chinese aesthetic theory, which discouraged extremes

of any type in art practice. This negotiation had two functions. One was to go beyond the traditional idea of art representation and reach the realm of a totalizing cultural sphere. Second, the negotiation between the visual and the conceptual is the foundation of Chinese language, which played an important role in shaping ideological orthodoxy throughout Chinese history. Needless to say, traditional calligraphy and script became one of the major weapons for the *guannian*. By employing the Chinese language, the *guannian* project involved both a reconstruction and a simultaneous deconstruction of Chinese heritage, as it established a critical contemporary transformative methodology and denuded calligraphy of its didactic institutional function.

In this chapter, I will discuss the *guannian* projects from 1985 to 1989 that established a foundation for the next generation to follow. In the following chapters, I will move to the *guannian* projects in alternative spaces, including the apartment art (*gongyu yishu*) and maximalism (*jiduo zhuyi*) of the 1990s.

The *guannian* project of the 1980s consisted of three different aspects: (1) a Chan-Dada-oriented direction, which was mainly practiced by the Xiamen Dada group led by Huang Yongping; (2) the practice of language art, adopted by Wu Shanzhuan, Xu Bing, and Gu Wenda; and (3) the activities that attempted to cross the boundary between art and daily life. The last approach was spread mostly in the 1990s, in maximalism and apartment art. Many artists and groups of the 1980s were involved with various visual languages. For instance, consider the tactile art (*chujue yishu*, discussed in chapter 7) created by Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin in Beijing; some art projects generated by the Pool Society in Hangzhou and the M Group in Shanghai; and some pop art and performance art by the groups from Fujian, Shanxi, Guangzhou, Hubei, and Hunan provinces. No matter how different the projects were, the main purpose of *guannian* art from this period was to make a revolutionary break from the old concepts of art. They sought not only to go beyond the long-dominant forms of socialist realism, but also to break with all the new trends in art that had emerged after the Cultural Revolution, including the humanism (*renwen*) of the '85 Movement.

For example, in 1986 Huang Yongping published an article entitled "Xiamen Dada—A Kind of Postmodernism," in which he directly challenged the "lofty spirituality" and "rationalism" of the Northern Art Group.[5] Artists such as Xu Bing and Wu Shanzhuan carried out the greatest subversive attacks on utopian tendencies. The revolution of ideas in the '85 Movement evolved into an anti-art project that emerged from the philosophical level. Here, anti-art meant rebelling against old art, the hypocrisy of art, and totalitarian and institutional art.

Anti-Art

Huang Yongping can be considered the pioneer of Chinese idea art, when viewed in terms of almost every characteristic of Chinese *guannian* art discussed above.[6] Born in 1954, Huang Yongping graduated from the Department of Oil Painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou in 1982. He then worked for seven years as a secondary school teacher, after which he left China for France.

The key tenets of Huang's philosophy are: (1) art is not significant in and of itself, at least insofar as it expresses a person's individuality; (2) it is only when something can bring about change in specific contexts that this thing can be called art; (3) moreover, one must completely demolish the notion of art and destroy any doctrine or system that has prescribed goals for art. Huang's anti-art project sought to demolish not only the material form, function, and system of art, but also the game of art itself. It is important to note that although his anti-art project was influenced by Dadaism, its theoretical basis was in traditional philosophy, in particular the theory of nothingness or *wu*.

Although Huang rarely commented on contemporary Chinese art before he left for Paris, almost every step of his strategy was targeted at a fashionable contemporary trend in art. In 1983, he devoted himself to a project with the eventual goal of eliminating self-expression from the art-making process. Huang was working in opposition to aestheticism, which was fashionable among academic painters in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s who valued self-expression and individual style.[7] Like Duchamp, Huang asserted that industrial mass

production was far more truthful and powerful than any subjective art with a unique, individual style. He created a series of paintings using a spray gun and lacquer rather than a brush and oil paint, and titled the works *Paint [Spray] Gun Series*. All of his "paintings" were similarly associated with the industrial equipment that he used to create them, such as *Pipe with T Shape* (*Dingzixing guandao*). The unsentimental titles and images tend, as Huang said, to "demolish any trace of a human's individual style with unique strokes."[8]

Also in 1983, Huang Yongping and fellow artists organized an exhibition called the "Five-Man Exhibition" ("Wuren huazhan") in which they displayed various readymade works. As they demonstrated, "the show attempts to question the illusion of representation in art and its associated criteria, and the experimental works of the show are presented as a bridge to link daily life and art together."[9]

When the '85 Movement emerged, Huang decided that rather than express social meanings in artworks as the humanists did, he wanted to challenge the idea of originality in the work of art. Considering the work of art to be meaningless and believing that artists should not subjectively incorporate meaning into their work, he sought a completely random approach, one based on the concept of nothingness (*wu*).

At this time, he made a series of works titled *Nonexpressive Painting: Roulette Wheel Series* (*Feibiaoda de huihua: Zhuanpan xilie*) in which the "paintings" (he refuses to see them as paintings) were made according to the instructions of a spinning wheel, incorporating chance, or castings from the *Yi jing* or Book of Changes, an ancient Daoist volume.

Figure 6.1

Huang Yongping, *Nonexpressive Painting: Roulette Wheel Series*, 1985.

According to Huang, the goal was "to extend art creation into a simplified nonformalist, nonbaroque, nonsymbolic, nonexpressive, nonskillful, and nonunique condition."[10]

The final form of the "painting" was, for Huang, not important; what was important for him was how the result was generated. In the *Roulette Wheel Series*, Huang made objects according to a strict set of procedures he determined for himself, which led to a very impersonal work of art. The procedures included several steps:

1. Create a turntable demarcated into eight sections, with marks of eight divinations from the *Yi jing*.
2. Mark on the canvas eight identical sections.
3. Assign a certain code to each color. For example, green (ink) was Number 4, red (oil) was Number 12, blue (acrylic) was Number 20, and paint thinner was Number 11. The assignment of codes to these colors was purely random. There were a total of twenty-five codes.
4. Create dice with codes that corresponded to the colors. For example, color Number 1 corresponded to Number 1 on the dice. Each die would be used only once in sixty-four throws.
5. Spin the turntable sixty-four times to determine the position of colors on the canvas, with the random stopping of the turntable determining the matching selection.
6. Fill out a form with the two codes (position and color) and place the colors on the canvas in the positions marked on the form. Then the painting is completed.

After Huang Yongping finished four canvases of this sort of "painting," he gave up. He thought the process was too boring. On the other hand, he avoided creating any kind of "authentic" method, as many of his friends suggested he might do after hundreds of pieces were done. His main goal was to criticize and distrust any aesthetic connotations. He wanted to leave this incomplete project behind. He also strongly asserted that using the roulette wheel in this artwork was different from gambling, because he did not intend or desire any result, whereas the gambler does. Thus Huang made a machine (the roulette wheel) into a person (an artist), at the same time as making a person (himself) into a machine.[11] Ironically, viewers always seem to seek the expression of a certain aesthetic taste, like that of a Pollock-like abstract expressionism, in these "paintings" of Huang's. Paradoxically, his substantial verbal descriptions and the irrational action behind his project did not overcome the effective surface of the "paintings," i.e., their style and forms.

Huang further developed this idea of randomness from the *Roulette Wheel Series* in a work he created for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in 1989. This time, however, he left the mechanics to the audience, after creating certain roles and questions. The work included six small turntables, each made of wood and with a plastic carrying case, inside of which there was a photocopied set of instructions indicating how to use the turntable to create artwork. The instructions were as follows:

1. To move or not to move = to create or not to create (two choices)
2. Where to begin? (Determine the location [on the painting]): 1–360 degrees
3. When to begin? 1–24 hours
4. What material to select? 1–64 [choices]
5. How to create? (Random numbers [on the wheel])
6. To compare [the painting] with which [masterpiece]? Select from Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today: From Abstract Expressionism to Surrealism* (Oxford: Phaidon). Total illustrations: 392

At the same time, Huang also created a big turntable on which he marked 384 (a number also from the *Yi jing*) different choices and possibilities for art-making, which he randomly selected from dictionaries, texts on art history, books on the history of ideas, and so on.

This repetitious and time-consuming process of art-making and demolishing of the artist's arbitrary subjectivity, initiated by Huang and the idea art of the '85 Movement, spread in the 1990s in the form of maximalism.

In 1986, Huang Yongping produced a number of works and writings engaging another anti-art project, which was manifested in his provocative essay "Xiamen Dada—A Kind of Postmodernism?" ("Xiamen Dada—yizhong houxiandai?").[12] His philosophy, combining Dada and Chan Buddhism,

Figure 6.2

Huang Yongping, *Roulette with Six Plates*, 1989.

was summarized in the essay, in which he asserted that, "in their degree of spirituality, Chan Buddhism is Dada, and Dada is Chan."

The iconoclastic theories of the seventh-century Chan master known as the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng (638–713), inspired many artists from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, such as Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Wenda, Song Haidong, and Huang Yongping, partially due to the great fascination with and study of Chan Buddhism in the academy in the early and mid-1980s. Following this Chan theory, Huang Yongping rebelled, using the concept of destruction; for Huang, there was a nexus of distinction and affinity between Chan Buddhism and postmodernism due to their insight, simplicity, and extremely skeptical attitudes.

Embracing these extreme attitudes eventually culminated in several events, including the "Xiamen Dada Modern Art Exhibition." After the exhibition, Huang Yongping had his fellow artists burn all the works they had shown. A similar event, called *Artworks Become Trash, 8:30 p.m.–10:00 p.m., November 9, 1987* (*Zuopin laji chuli, 8:30 p.m.–10 p.m. 11/9/1987*), took place at a garbage dumpster in Xiamen. Huang Yongping and his cohorts threw more than ten of their paintings into the garbage dumpster and let the garbage truck take them away at the regularly scheduled time.

On December 1, 1987, Huang created one of his most cynical conceptual works by placing two books in a washing machine. The books were *A History of Chinese Painting* by Wang Bomin, recognized as one of the most authoritative texts on Chinese art history, and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* by Herbert Read. Read's was the first book of its kind to be translated into Chinese, and it was the most influential English text on modern Western art in the China of the mid-1980s.[13] Huang offered a cynical interpretation of this work: "In China, regarding the two cultures of East and West, traditional and modern, it is constantly being discussed which is right, which is wrong, and how to blend the two. In my opinion, placing these two texts in the washing machine for two minutes symbolizes this situation well and solves the problem much more effectively and appropriately than those debates lasting a hundred years."[14] This work, which eventually consisted of a pile of paper pulp, was first displayed in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in Beijing in 1989.

Figure 6.3
Huang Yongping and Xiamen Dada burning all their works after an exhibition, 1986.

Figure 6.4
Huang Yongping, *Artworks Become Trash, 8:30 p.m.–10:00 p.m., November 9, 1987*, 1987.

Figure 6.5

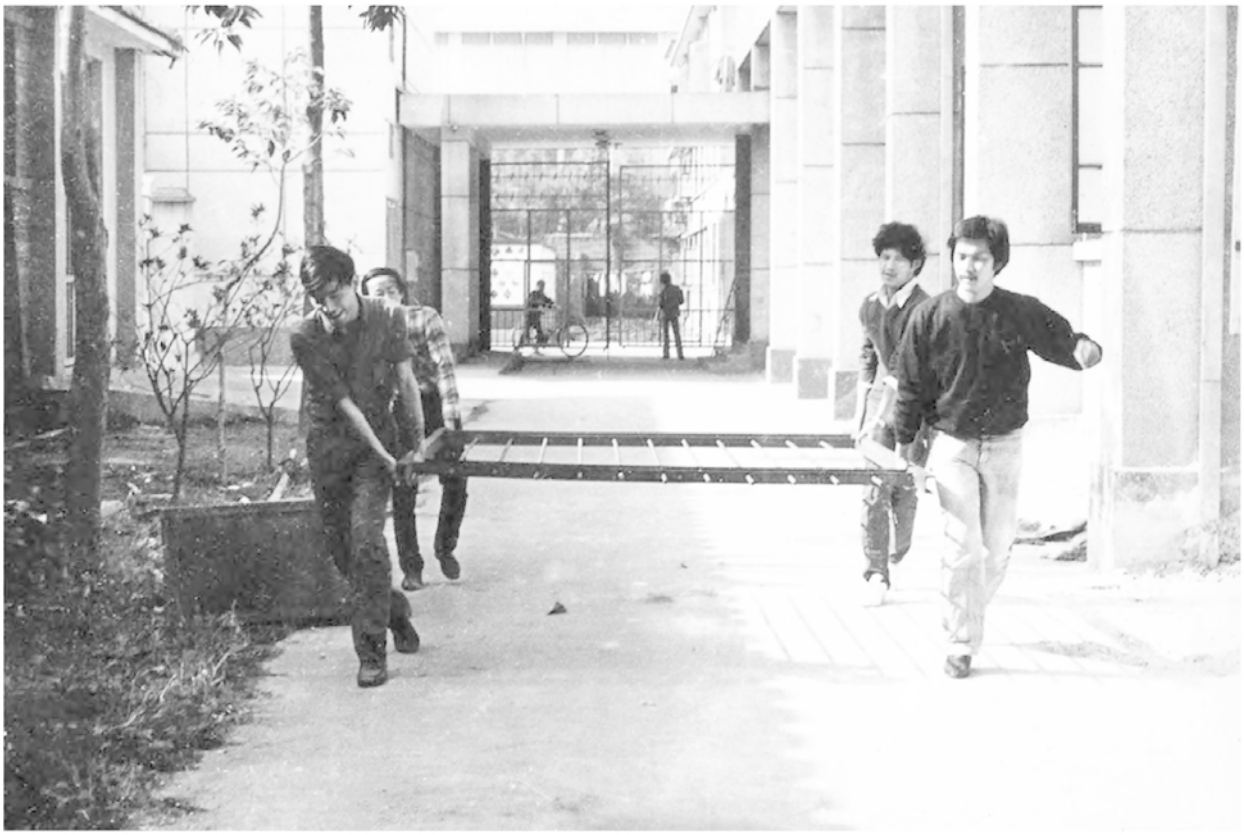
Huang Yongping, *History of Chinese Art and a Concise History of Modern Painting in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987.

The Significance of Nothingness

For the artists of the '85 Movement, life was a universal and abstract concept, which was more highly valued than a specific and personal experience of daily life. They emphasized cultural and philosophical concepts in an effort to impact the viewer's understanding of the environment, whether natural, urban, or social. Many art groups of the '85 Movement took their "cultural activities" (*wenhua huodong*) into the public sphere. For instance, Song Yongping and his fellow artists twice took their "countryside cultural activities" into Shanxi province, in 1986 and 1987. A similar activity, which they called sunbathing (*shaitaiyang*), also took place in Najing Xuanwu Park in 1986. The concept of life in Huang Yongping's idea art practice, however, was more philosophically influenced by the tradition of nothingness (*wu*), which has also been translated as "inaction." In Huang's practice, this *wu* can be understood as "do nothing in art making." Huang combined Dada with Chinese aesthetics by employing traditional Chan and Daoist philosophy in the creation of his works.

Xiamen Dada organized an exhibition titled "An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province" ("Fasheng zai Fujian meishuguan nei de shijian zhanlan"), which took place on December 16, 1986. The artists did not install works of art in the gallery. Instead, they gathered materials such as big iron grates, wooden panels, a handcart, concrete, fans, damaged sofas, and couches or chairs from the yard of the Art Gallery of Fujian Province in Fuzhou city. Then they moved them into the gallery space. One hour after the exhibition opened, the artists were given notice that the exhibition had to be shut down immediately for "a certain unknown reason." The result did not disappoint Huang Yongping. He was actually pleased with the closure, because the act resulted in nothingness. Just as the artists brought nothing with them, they also left with nothing. For the Xiamen Dadaists, the exhibition only proved that it was the museum system that determined the fate of the artwork.[15] The event dealt with the meaninglessness of the art object and the art-making process.

Here, Huang shifted his attention from investigating the meaning of the art object to questioning the whole art system and art institutions.



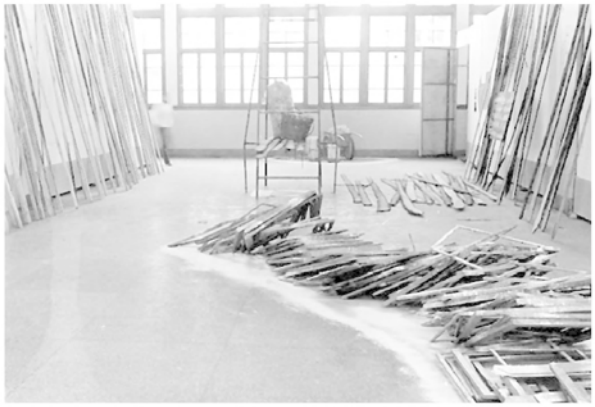


Figure 6.6

Lin Jiahua, Ren Yueming, Huang Yongming, and Yu Xiaogang setting up "An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province," 1986.

Figure 6.7

"An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province," 1986.

This became the next project in his career, which was marked by a futile exploration determined to negate art history and art institutions. An example of this was his *Pulling the National Art Museum of China Away*, which was a proposal for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition. Huang's goal was to involve the National Art Museum of China in his work, and to take the symbol of the nation's official art, namely the building of the National Art Museum of China, as the object of his attack.[16] The plan was very provocative, and the proposed symbolic action of pulling the National Art Museum of China away was an extremely political statement. Unsurprisingly, the proposal was rejected by the museum. The artist's substitute work in the exhibition was a long rope suspended from the third floor to the first floor, running along galleries to stairs. Not one visitor paid attention to the rope, though occasionally it tangled and twined around their feet. This revealed Huang's idea of randomness again, as well as his interest in creating a chance relationship with people's lives.

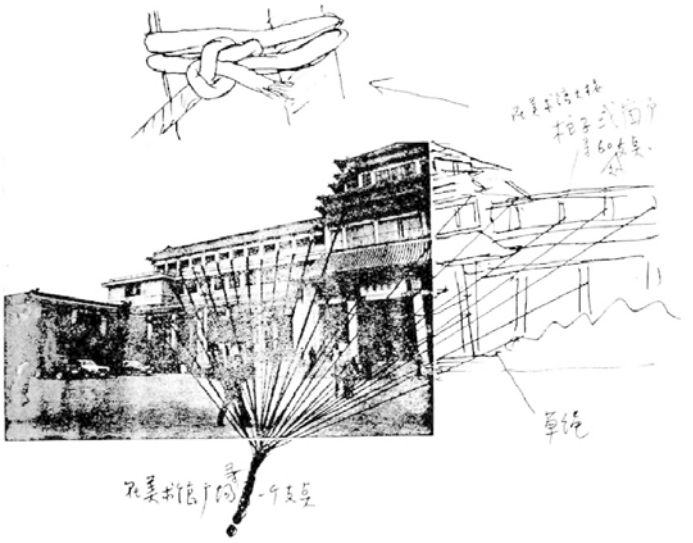


Figure 6.8

Chen Chengzong, Jiao Yueming, Lin Jiahua, Linchun, Huang Yongpan, Wu Yiming, and Huang Yongping, *Proposal for Pulling the National Art Museum of China Away*, 1989.

Figure 6.9

Huang Yongping's rope project in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition.

In 1987, Huang Yongping and his colleagues undertook many important projects in Xiamen, most of which were discussed in Huang's "Thinking, Making, and Projects in 1987" ("Baqinian de sikao, zhizuo de huodong").[17] After the abrupt closure in 1986 of the exhibition "An Event Taking Place in the Art Gallery of Fujian Province," it became extremely difficult for Huang and the Xiamen Dada group to find museum or gallery space. In early 1987, Xiamen Dada began a new project investigating the possibility of making art in alternative spaces, addressing the public at large rather than accommodating the museum's audience. They planned to have their version of process art take place in various public spaces: a garbage dump, a slaughterhouse, a public toilet (the only place without a street number in Chinese cities), a hospital, a road, a bus station, a shopping mall, or a ruined building, all places that were "anywhere and nowhere."[18] Furthermore, the artists themselves used only their concepts and the public space for the creation of their art. This process, called *wuzhong shengyou*, involved no art materials, art institutions, or art audiences. The method of *wuzhong shengyou* was this:

1. If you do not remove any objects from a place, the objects themselves automatically become artwork.
2. Remove some of the objects from a place, and the remaining objects become artwork.
3. The objects and the people exposed at a site together become artwork.

Huang's *Environmental Works*, dating from April 1987, were also associated with the idea of *wuzhong shengyou*. Huang began several works in his quest to find a greater creative power, delving into areas such as time, air (including pollution), or the unknowing involvement of the public, in order to completely demolish any artistic intention or motivation. But therein rests the impossibility of success, due to the well-established intentional fallacy of both interpreting these works and executing them.

On April 20, 1987, Huang made a wooden box that contained a long scroll of blank paper, 110 by 100 centimeters in size, which he pulled partly out of the box and then connected to an easel. He made a mark and wrote the date on the paper every time he pulled out more paper from the box. He repeated

Figure 6.10

Huang Yongping, *No Move Needed, the Objects Themselves Automatically Become Artworks*, 1987.

Figure 6.11

Huang Yongping, *Need to Move, Add, or Remove Objects to Make Artworks*, 1987.

Figure 6.12

Huang Yongping, *Rearrange the Objects to Make Artworks*, 1987.

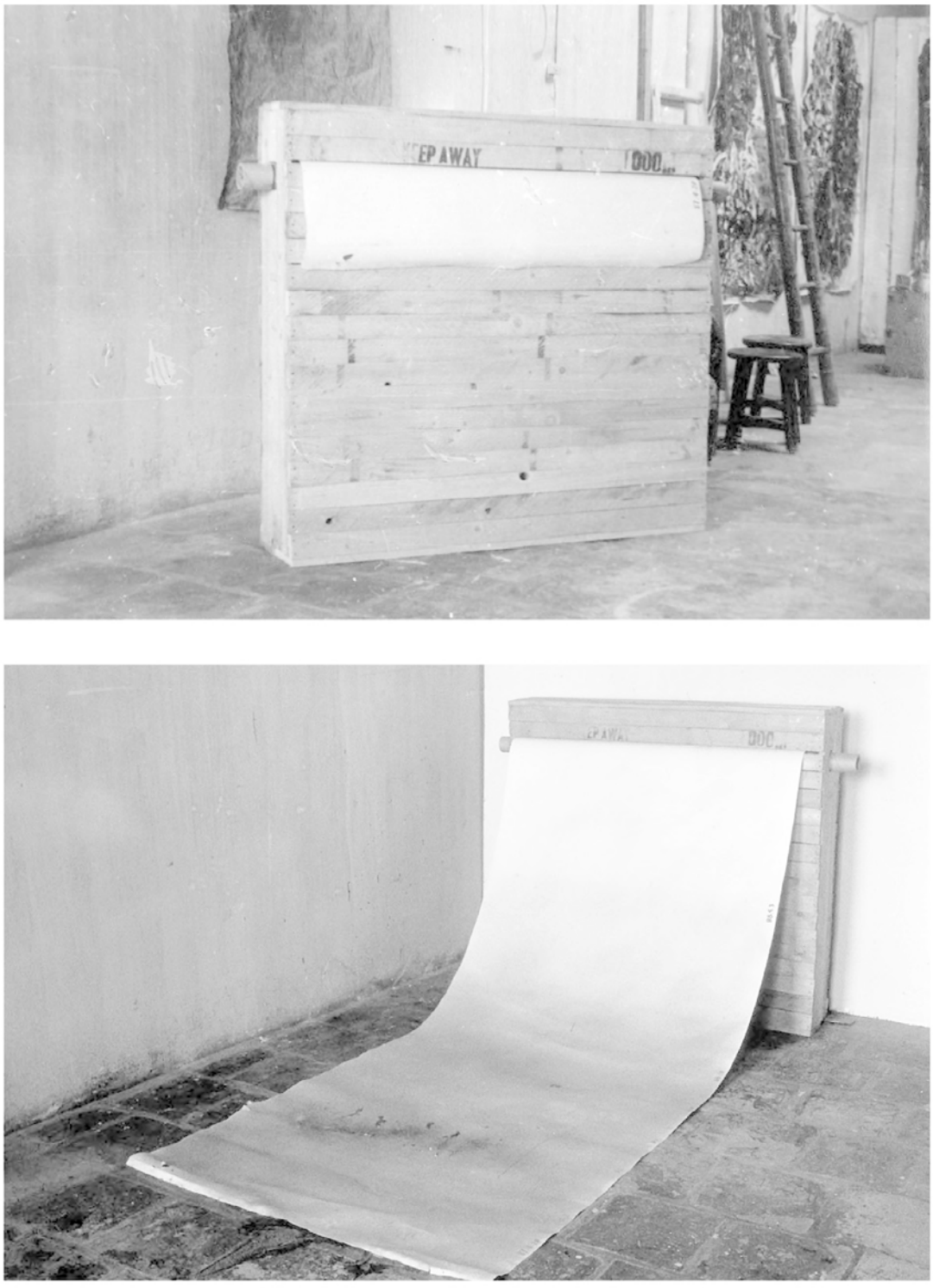


Figure 6.13

Huang Yongping, *Dust*, 1987.

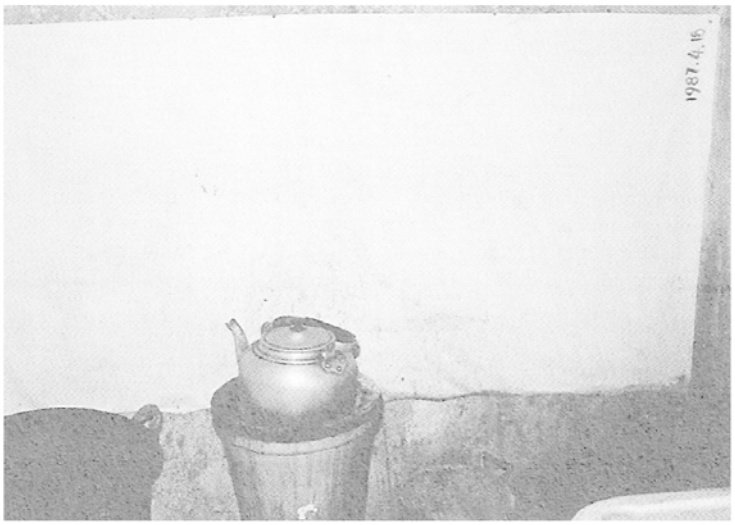


Figure 6.14

Huang Yongping, *The Kitchen, April 18–December 18, 1987.*

Figure 6.15

Huang Yongping, *Sharpening Pencils, December 16, 1987–January 25, 1988.*

the process for a period of two years.[19] Sunlight and pollution caused the paper to become dirty, and it yellowed because of its acidic base. Huang titled the completed work *Dust*. Huang also made a work titled *The Kitchen*. Between April 18, 1987, and December 8, 1987, he hung a canvas above the stove in his kitchen, where it was exposed to cooking smoke, dirt, and dust. In addition, from December 16, 1987, to January 25, 1988, he left a 122-by-240-centimeter piece of canvas on the floor in a classroom of the high school where he was an art teacher. During their drawing class, the students would drop pencil shavings and other debris on the canvas to "create" a painting.

Art Merging with Life

Apart from Xiamen Dada, the most radical art of the time was that which promoted the idea of activism. The art taking place early in the movement, in the middle of the 1980s, especially attempted to break free from old ideas of art by incorporating certain philosophical and artistic approaches. For artists so engaged, performance was the best means to promote a true connection between people, life, and art.

A prime example was the performance by the Southern Artists Salon in 1986. When the '85 Movement began, some young artists who lived in Guangzhou in the southern province of Guangdong, such as Wang Du and Lin Yilin, became concerned with the perception that Guangzhou was a "cultural desert."[20] To change this misconception, they founded the Southern Artists Salon (*Nanfang yishujia shalong*) on May 14, 1986. They were a mixed group of artists from different fields, such as fine art, architecture, philosophy, literature, music, dance, and film. The major ideas of the group were articulated by Wang Du in his speech at the founding ceremony. Wang criticized both Chinese tradition and Western modernism. He proclaimed that the boundaries between the new and old, and the East and the West, should be eliminated through a new attitude of cultural pluralism and diversity. The concept of the Southern Artists Salon, as Wang indicated, was contemporaneity or *dangdai zhuyi*, a phrase whose meaning is close to postmodernism.[21] In order to express this concept, the artists planned

to create a sort of "environmental art" (*huanjing yishu*) to destroy the boundaries of different art forms and eliminate obstacles between artists, artworks, and their audiences. They contributed their blood in blood drives, attracting financial support. These actions enlisted many supporters and enabled them to eventually make their exhibition plans a reality.

On September 3, 1986, the Southern Artists Salon held a performance event called the *First Experimental Exhibition* in a stadium at Guangzhou Zhongshan University, also known as Sun Yat-Sen University. It took place twice. The artists stated, "At first glance, when the audience entered the exhibition hall, they felt that they were being surrounded by a peculiar environment in which human beings were being purified by a sublime spirit."[22] The exhibition space was covered by two colors—black and white. On one side were some balls formed in strange shapes protruding from a black wall, and on the other there were some panels. Some were painted with human upper parts and others with human lower parts, to attract the audience to stand behind "incomplete human bodies." At the center of the stadium, there were ten movable boxes on which, or surrounding which, were ten female figures resembling moving plaster statues. Some were lying down, some knelt on the ground or followed music; all were illuminated by light projections. "The people involved in the performance, and the audience outside the stage, were encouraged to experience a spiritual encounter at a specific moment, going beyond previous artistic fantasies characterized by bland imagination and illusion."[23]

In the middle of the 1980s, when some anti-art activities, such as the practice of Xiamen Dada, attacked the institutional framework of art production, some anti-artists rejected the institutional framework altogether. Song Yongping and other artists of the Three Step Studio had a cultural activity project in July of 1986 that they called *The Country Project* (*Xiangcun jihua*). They took their sculptures and paintings to remote villages in an attempt to communicate with illiterate peasants while living and eating together with them. Resisting the elitism of professional bourgeois artists tied to academic institutions, Song and his comrades acted out the drama of the "reeducated students" of Mao's Cultural Revolution, when elite cultural producers were forced to learn to work for the people as they were educated in popular culture by the people. Their motto, "Serve the People," endorsed by Mao, demonstrated the paradox of populism in contemporary Chinese society. Since an art that served the people was not a reality even in Mao's period, *The Country Project* represented an attempt at a purified process of art production, this time with neither propagandist nor commercial aims. From another perspective, these kinds of social actions popularized in the '85 Movement reflected the antagonism some artists felt in response to the booming urban commercial culture. Thus, the artists involved referred to their works as "village cultural projects" (*xiangcun wenhua huodong*).

The activism of the M Art Group (*M yishu qunti*) was another project of anti-artists condemning elitism. The M Art Group was founded in October 1986 by Song Haidong, who was born in Shanghai in 1958 and trained in the Sculpture Department of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, starting in 1985. He went on to teach at the Shanghai Art College with other Shanghai artists. The "M" of M Art Group is the first letter of "man," "montage," and "morphist." Here, "man" refers to the artists' male gender, since all the artists from the group were men, while "montage" symbolized the artists' incorporation of different elements, and "morphist" was a metaphor for their changing sensibility in art.[24]

In their manifesto, they proclaimed that the M Group recognized the fact that many people still admired what the M Group considered bogus artists protected by old value systems and their associated crude, hollow works. Therefore, they advocated that artists walk out of their studios, plunge into real life, and impart the truth to the people at large. The manifesto also criticized the extreme views held by modernists, who demonstrated a totally different form of individuality that caused alienation and disorder and fostered a wild rhythm of life inherent to industrialized societies. The M Group's attitude of nothingness, which runs counter to industrialized and capitalist human culture, was intended to disrupt people's normal breathing patterns and heartbeat, depriving them of their confidence in material existence. The M Group held fast to the tenet that

Figure 6.16

The scene of *First Experimental Exhibition* by the Southern Artists Salon, 1986.

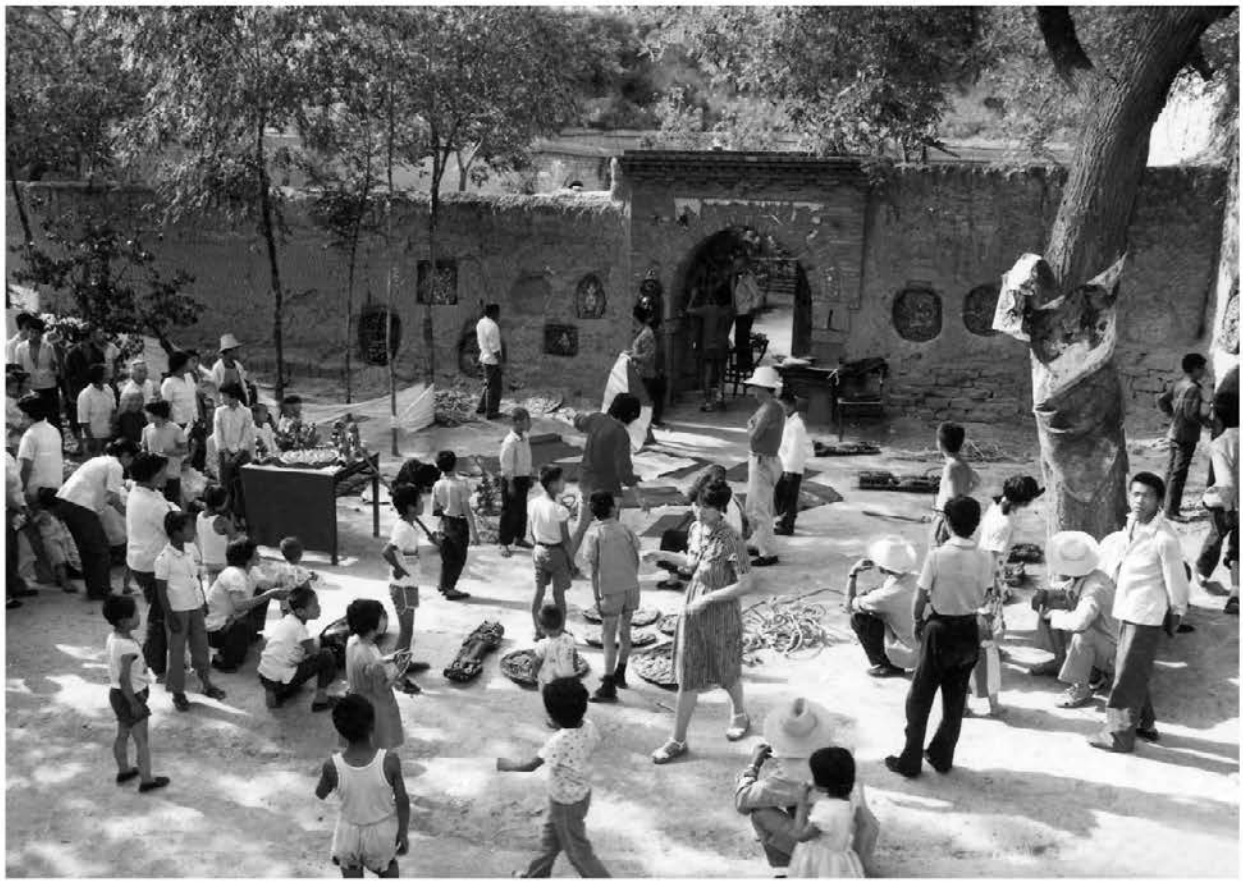


Figure 6.17

Song Yongping, Wang Jiping, and others, *The Country Project,* 1986.

artists should respect man and life, for life itself is art. They believed that artists should regard themselves first of all as common people in society. In their creative process, the M Group attempted to break with the man-made, traditional definitions of time and space designated by such terms as "modern," "Oriental," "Western," "music," "drama," "film," and "painting." These categories reinforced barriers. The works of the M Group would borrow actions and events from common, daily life.[25]

On December 21, 1986, a series of visual lectures by the M Art Group took place in the Theater of the Shanghai Workers' Cultural Palace (*Shanghai gongren wenhuagong*). Sixteen members of the group successively got on the stage, enacting a silent performance, and an audience of about two hundred people, including young poets, university students, and journalists, was invited to join in for the duration of one and a half hours. There was no logical sequence between the individual sections. All sections emphasized the connection between life and art, as they aimed to break down, by various means, separations derived from old art ideas and forms.

There was, however, a lot of suffering and violence in the performance. For example, in *Ceremony* (*Yishi*), a naked artist, Tang Guangming, was forced into a wooden restraint by two followers, then beaten with willow branches while clamped with instruments of torture until he collapsed onto the stage. In *Violence* (*Baoligan*), Zhou Tiehai stood naked while two other artists punished him by pricking his back with needles.

Such works were all violent, masochistic, and sadistic in one way or another. Any sort of wrapping, binding, hanging, or beating that one can imagine took place. Although the action militantly expressed the artists' rebellion against the restraints of conventional art ideas, this sort of wild, violent behavior, usually enacted upon the artists' own bodies, revealed, intentionally or not, the sorrows

Figure 6.18

Members of the M Art Group with their manifesto, 1986.

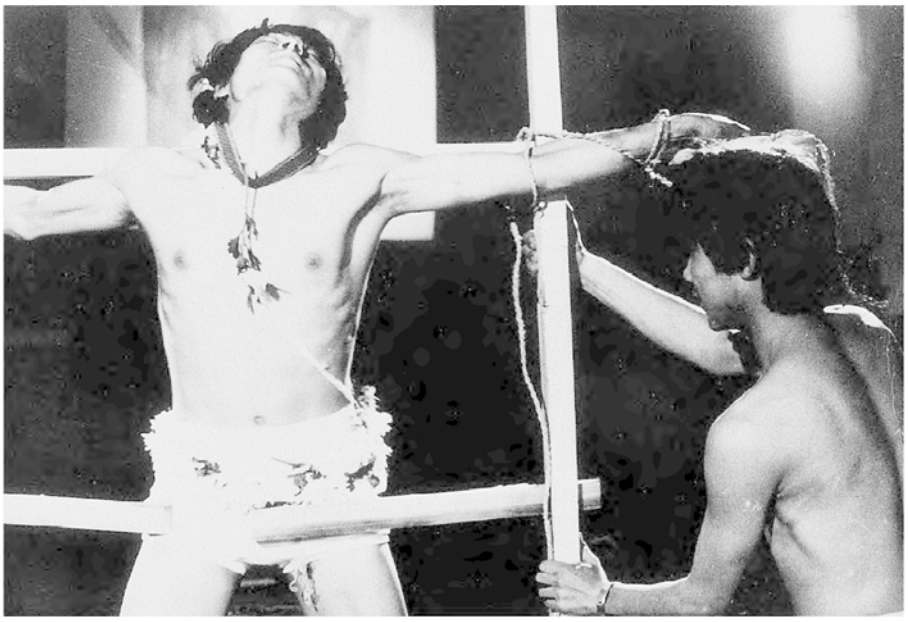


Figure 6.19

Tang Guangming, *Ceremony*, 1986.

Figure 6.20

Zhou Tiehai and Yang Xu, *Violence*, 1986.

and disturbances hidden in the artists' souls as they found themselves straddling cultural epochs and influences while trying to forge a new way.

The revolution in ideas of the '85 Movement was an important part of the overall project of the cultural avant-garde. This revolution intended two things. One was to take the most destructive and radical avant-garde concept from Dadaism as a model to destroy the conventional notion of art in the Chinese context, in order to merge with the international contemporary art world. The other affected the cultural avant-garde. Artists such as Huang Yongping, also devoted to traditional philosophy, saw the revolution in ideas as a model that could go beyond art per se into a broader world context. Huang's practice in the 1980s was one of the most philosophical approaches of the ideological revolution. Among those who experienced a similar destructive/constructive mentality, he was the most interested in how to break down the boundary between life and art. In the next chapter, I will discuss some art projects that are more focused on either linguistic reconstruction or ambiguous imagery play.

7

Metaphor over Meaning

Language Art and Gray Humor

Language, including both its writing and meaning, was investigated by a number of artists in the '85 Movement, most notably Wu Shanzhuan, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and the New Mark Group (*Xin kedu*). They are also part of "idea art" (*guannian yishu*). Rather than making a revolution in ideas to challenge the old ideas of what constitutes art, as Huang Yongping and others did, the artists discussed in this chapter directly used "ideas"—Chinese characters, which in Chinese linguistic tradition combined both conceptual and pictorial elements—to make their own idea artworks, which did not attempt to give a clear concept or meaning to the audience (nor to themselves, I believe), but rather to create a visual space in which looking, reading, and reinterpretation might be involved as an unseparated metaphorical complex, which could go beyond linguistic meaning or meaninglessness.

Xu Bing began his magnum opus *A Book from the Sky* in 1987, while he was a teacher at the Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing. Wu Shanzhuan was another artist who used Chinese characters as his basic material, but he paid more attention to randomly collecting the language of mass culture. Wu appropriated Mao's linguistic culture, which was developed for proselytizing during the Cultural Revolution, as well as that of contemporary consumer culture, in order to create a kind of new hybrid, thereby generating both nonsensical and plurisensical language. By juxtaposing these contradictory fragments of language in his art—fragments that are omnipresent in Chinese mass culture—he sought to eliminate the illusion of authorship and expose irreconcilable tendencies in the intended function of the language of mass culture.

Xu Bing took another approach, never providing any complete text, meaningful sentence, or even legible character for his audience. His *Book from the Sky* is an ocean of meaningless and fictitious "characters" that he painstakingly invented. The significant meaning of the work was in its traditional literati form. The fact that the characters were incapable of conveying any meaning whatsoever was cleverly hidden, confounding the viewer's expectations derived from the literati form's hallowed tradition of conveying meaning. Xu manipulates to an extreme this version of an elite myth so as to utterly undermine the myth itself. The approaches and methodologies of both Wu and Xu were apparently inspired by traditional language and philosophy. Their works made sense by means of the transformation of tradition into the contemporary context according to the artists' interests.

From the perspective of Chinese etymology, the works of Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, and Wu Shanzhuan completely transformed the traditional metonymic functions, or indicatives (*zhishi*), that were highly coded attributes of Chinese characters as laid out in the traditional "six functions" theory (*liu shu*) of Chinese writing. These artists' strategies changed the characters into purely pictographic (*xiangxing*) elements.[1]

Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor* Series: The Recontextualization of Political and Consumerist Mass Language

Born in 1960 and trained in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, Wu Shanzhuan began his Cultural Revolution-inspired pop art practice in 1986, at the same time as the emergence of the '85 Movement.

Figure 7.1

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red, Black, White—Cash*, 1986.

Figure 7.2

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series: Red Seals*, 1987.

His *Red Humor* series, begun in 1986, might be seen as a precursor of the political pop that flourished in the early 1990s.

A pronounced pop art affinity has always been strong in Wu's art, beginning with his *Red Humor* installations in Zhejiang in 1986 and 1987. The *Red Humor* series consisted of four parts: *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* (*Chizi: dazibao*), *Red Seals* (*Hongyin*), *Windy Red Flags* (*Hongqi piaopiao*), and *Big Business* (*Dashengyi*).

Wu Shanzhuan often used readymade objects in his work, or simulated the appearance of objects from daily life. Wu prefaced his *Red Humor* group with his 1986 work *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*, a collaborative project installed in an old temple. The exhibition combined neatly printed phrases and slogans from advertisements, newspapers, classical poetry, Chinese religion, politics, and the discourse of daily life in startling ways. One painting took the form of a sign saying "Cabbage, three cents a catty." Another had the words "Garbage, garbage, garbage" written in such a way as to resemble a pile, on top of which perched the word "Nirvana." The ratio of colors specified in the title, however, immediately evoked the tensions of Chinese political confrontations, particularly those of the Cultural Revolution, with red representing good Communists, black representing enemies of the people, and white representing the nonaligned.

Red Characters: Big-Character Posters, a major work installed the following year in the artist's studio, resembled a chaotic scene, once again from the Cultural Revolution. He used the easily recognizable format of wall posters from the Cultural Revolution, but drew messages from the surrounding environment to convey the multiple dimensions of contemporary political, social, and economic information. The messages included political slogans like those from the Maoist period, including "Exercise for strength in the class struggle," as well as price notices, advertisements, newspaper titles, commonly used phrases, classical poems, Buddhist texts, traffic signs, weather forecasts, and announcements such as "Comrade Wang, I am back." Lines of ancient poetry and the title of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* also appear in the work. On the floor he wrote four Chinese characters: *wurenshuodo*, meaning "nobody can interpret them."

Figure 7.3

Wu Shanzhuan and others, *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*, 1986.

Figure 7.4

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*, 1986.

The phrases in *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* can be translated into English as follows:

> To pay fine 5 yen / do you want to know how tall your child will be / wonton soup, steamed turtle fish / lottery saving / welcome / 45928 / seat for disabled and aged / wet paint / the movement of birth control / asking for divorce / 24 pieces / we are parasites / winning a prize from the national committee of economics / watch shore ahead / parents: newborn children during 1982–1983 / paint service / box for complaints / it is selfish / umbrellas for sale / healing / recipe / kindergarten this way / a broken wheel / selling stone poles / official study in the afternoon / dogs / shift to another line / Comrade Wang: I am back / propaganda letter #87 / to struggle with selfishness and to criticize revisionism / The Last Supper / public toilet / serve the people / good treatment of skin disease / address for red star hotel / comrades: if you cross the street during the red light, you will be fined / baptisms / specialist in tooth treatment / today no water / boat timetables / garbage 3 cents a pound / today it is raining / the loves of the world stars / pissing forbidden / menu for today's special / pill for fatty / looking for missing person: Wu Shanzhuan, male, around 74 meters tall, long dark hair, wearing glasses, slightly dizzy … / one hand carrying reformation, the other carrying economy / important / intensive / pill for party / exercise in strengths for class struggle / dating for marriage / modern poetry movement / *Gone with Wind* / down with / "for season red" tampons / superstitions / stop the endless rain / to create a new style / all rights reserved / nirvana / garbage / seeking some erotic writing / turn left, there you are / long life / famous foreign nude paintings / five moon. …[2]

When he made the big-character signs, quite a number of additional objects were also produced including buckets, hospital bottles, and rice bowls, among other things, all of which were covered with red paint and words. At the time Wu Shanzhuan was making the *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*, he also collected many plastic characters. Some were displayed in a transparent box with an electric light inside; some were three-dimensional, others two-dimensional.

The phrases and characters listed above were all found prominently posted on the street, showing the tumult of desires in Chinese society. In the installation, most of the writing was done by Wu Shanzhuan's friends, including officers, workers, politicians, gamblers, actors, actresses, businessmen, and fishermen whom Wu Shanzhuan invited to be involved in the selection and writing of the phrases.[3] *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* took its form from the "red ocean" (*hong haiyang*) of the Cultural Revolution, consisting of posters, flags, red books, and the image of the red sun which symbolized Mao, but it was filled with characters found in daily life at home and on the streets. Creating both lexical and symbolic confusion, this "mistake" produced an absurd image of a particular reality, exposing a cultural deficiency if one were to consider Mao's failed utopian project. *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* conveyed to the audience a deep sense that Chinese society was already far away from the Cultural Revolution.

Wu represented various categories of discourse in conjunction with their contradicting polar opposites, such as serious and ironic, grand and trivial, religious and secular, revolutionary and capitalist, all of which were devoid of the artist's own voice, with the exception of his act of choice. In his theoretical writings of the time, Wu expressed greater interest in the sounds and outward forms of Chinese characters than in their function as language.[4] Yet, because of the rich eclecticism of the popular language he adopted, the viewer naturally associated the images with many aspects of his or her own experience. Each phrase meant something different depending upon its social, cultural, or political context. Two phrases Wu frequently met on the street, "You will be fined for crossing the street during a red light" (*chuang hongdeng fakuan*) and "Today no water" (*jintian tingshui*), inspired him to use "red humor" (*hongse youmo*) as the major category for all of his individual works. For Wu, the two phrases mentioned above belong to a "red humor" category of symbolic meaning derived from personal experience. Once, when a red light was on, Wu saw nobody on the street: the red light was then a signifier that was sent into a void of reception, negating both its function and meaningfulness. Another time, when Wu was washing his hands, he saw the announcement "Today no water" written by the Local Residential Committee (*Jumin weiyuan hui*) hanging on the wall. Again, the announcement was meaningless, because there was, indeed, water.

The two phrases, and what they signified, were at odds with the real contexts in which they operated, and thus they made nonsense coexist with a visible reality.[5] This prompted Wu to think further about the Chinese character *chi,* which encompasses two different meanings: both "red" (*hong*) and "empty" (*kui kong*). The meanings of *chi*, thus, are paradoxical and contradictory. On one hand, *chi* (red) represents a specific visible color which ultimately cannot be disassociated from its revolutionary identification in modern Chinese history (in phrases such as Red China, Red Guard, and so on), and the other *chi* (empty) indicates meaninglessness.[6] It is just such a paradox, surrounding the complexity and ambiguity of the Chinese signifiers for the color red, that made Wu Shanzhuan's installation and performance works (embodied by *Red Humor*) formidable in their layers of multiple meanings. Furthermore, the reception of these works was extremely complex, given the local, national, and global audiences' propensity to bring their own meanings to the work. Above all, Wu provided diverse channels for understanding the cultural implications of text, delivered in a compelling visual form.

In his 1986 essay entitled "The Birth of Red Characters" ("Chizi de dansheng"), Wu first analyzed the two different meanings of *chi* as described above, and then discussed his approach to the installation *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters.*[7] Wu wrote:

> I think that *chizi,* namely meaningless characters manifested in original, beautiful outward forms, make much more sense than what we call *wenzi* [language]. In modern art history, we no longer purely paint, because the concept of art has totally changed with modern art history. Currently in China, many artists devote themselves to conceptual art or to rationalist painting, a sort of scholarly painting formed in between a realistic and surrealistic style. This direction, however, will truly make art meaningless [*quikong*] or empty, and art will lose what it used to be. Art finally becomes something cynical and meaningless, like the phrase "You will be fined for crossing the street during a red light." I am interested in telling a story of this "red humor" to people by presenting it in an extreme visual form which is my work *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters*. The effect is extremely unpredictable and magnificent. *Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* is an investigation into the true human condition.[8]

Most installations from Wu's *Red Humor* series created a political atmosphere without stipulating any concrete political content. The result could be a mockery of society, of politics, and perhaps even of artists themselves. Going one step further, one could say that Wu's games with the visual language of Chinese politics reduced the deadly phenomenon of the Chinese political movement to nothing more than red humor. Wu, however, tended to investigate the meaning of authorship by denying any incorporation of his own in the meaning of his works. He believed that the Chinese characters themselves were a sufficient form of visual art, requiring no further manipulation. Not only were the characters perfect in form but also, more important, they were completely filled with historical and cultural meaning, so they become independent of man's subjective meaning. Wu believed that by making choices, artists could select the meaning of language, but they had no ability to give it meaning. With this philosophy in mind, he chose to imitate linguistic forms rather than invent them, by juxtaposing randomly selected phrases and characters in unusual or startling ways. This gave his work an ironic quality. He made no lofty conceptual claims for his installations and performances, or for any of his art. Yet as one talks to Wu, reads his writing, and experiences his work, his humorous and seemingly unsystematic comments begin to make sense.

Wu's use of simple aphoristic statements and obvious images could be seen as part of an ironic strategy that pushed the viewer to a nonlinear, slightly fragmented, almost intuitive chain of responses that continued well after leaving the space. He asked the viewer to experience a series of interlinking meanings rather than to directly read any one of them. Serious forms from the Cultural Revolution, such as big-character posters with the red, black, and white colors of traditional China, were diluted by the humorous phrases he used. Wu's Chan Buddhist-like quick wit plunged the viewer into an oddly compelling reality.

In 1987 he finished two other sections of the *Red Humor Series*, *Red Seals* and *Windy Red Flags*. The *Red Seals* consisted of two different types of seals: big, fake, nonsensical official seals fabricated by Wu, as well as some individual, private seals modeled after actual personal seals of the artist's friends, classmates, and relatives. The pseudo-official seals created by

Figure 7.5

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Red Seals*, 1987.

Wu, such as "Committee of Workers for Painting Characters" (*Chizi gongzuo zhe xiehui*) and "Red Character Revolutionary Committee" (*Chizi gongzuo zhe weiyuanhui*), were painted on one-meter-square pieces of rice paper and hung on the wall along with some red flags and nonsense characters. The forms of these signifiers were familiar to the Chinese, recalling the red ocean of the Cultural Revolution.

The official seal has been very important in modern Chinese history. Any official document must bear the stamp of a seal to show its verification by an official unit. An individual's personal seal, long employed in tradition, remains the most important identification for Chinese individuals, even in contemporary society. *Red Seals* thus generated ambiguous and multifaceted meanings when the official and personal, the public and private, the fake and the real were juxtaposed. The tradition underwent a transformation.

The performance and installation project *Windy Red Flags* included many small-scale revolutionary objects. For instance, as part of a performance, Wu made a "correct" mark and the two characters *yiyue*, or "I have reviewed," on an official announcement. In another performance, Wu masqueraded as a new member of the Communist Party in a mock oath-taking ceremony under a red flag. He stood against a wall on which some fake political slogans were written and upon which he had hung many nonsense characters. In another performance, Wu presented himself as the chairman of a political meeting speaking to the public. Once, he even performed as a counterrevolutionary "criminal," also known as an ox ghost or snake demon (*niugui sheshen*), being criticized and punished by Red Guards.

Thinking of the meaning of the red characters, or *chizi*, Wu Shanzhuan developed his ideas concerning the definition of art and the relationship between the artwork and the artist. He compared the relationship between the artist and his work to that between the soil and the plant. The earth is necessary to the growth of the plant, but the soil does not determine the species of the plant; evolution has already made that selection. Similarly, according to Wu, the artist

Figure 7.6
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Windy Red Flags—I Have Reviewed*, 1987.

Figure 7.7
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Windy Red Flags—Oath*, 1987.

Figure 7.8
Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor Series, Windy Red Flags—Violent Criticism*, 1987.

cannot determine the result of his work. From this point of view, Wu concluded that the art of the Cultural Revolution was different from the politics of the Cultural Revolution. The former was like a plant, and the latter would be the soil.[9]

For Wu, the artist's intentions, or methods of working, were far less important than the work itself. "In the end," he wrote in 1985, "the artwork uses a concrete person (the artist) as a means. The concrete person will die, but the work may continue to exist."[10]

Thus, Wu claimed that the artist should not function as the dominant factor of art production. He or she is no more than an object like any art object, i.e., a material. Wu's use of the concept of material and object greatly undermined the idealism and subjectivity initiated by previous utopian artists. His *Red Humor*, filled with various discourses, was a distracted scene of chaotic signifiers made uniform through the use of the color red.

There was a shift in Wu's approach to art, from the purely conceptual to the realistic, in late 1988 and early 1989, when the economic boom reached China. In an article, Wu said, "We should no longer pay attention to the question of what is art by concentrating on the art object; instead we should investigate the social structure and art environment where artworks are located." He used the term *dashengyi,* "big business," to define the new art phenomenon emerging at that time in China. "To visit an art museum is the same as eating breakfast in a restaurant. … I will return the salt to the ocean and bring it back to those to whom it belongs."[11]

Noting the impact of commercialism on the Chinese art world of the late 1980s, Wu Shanzhuan pointed out that art activity is a big business at the 1988 Chinese Modern Art Convention (*1988 dangdai yishu yantaohui*) in Tunxi, Anhui province. In the paper he presented at this meeting, Wu said,

> 1987 was the year when *shengyi* [business] was truly and completely accepted by the Chinese masses. Although some Chinese intellectuals tried to escape from this commercialism, *dashengyi* has become an affair of all Chinese citizens, and for the first time an overwhelming materialism has been tied to the idealistic Chinese intellectuals and business. Soon after, business became unified with art institutions, scholarship, and political authority. Now business has become a nationalistic affair and recording machine of the successful stories of politics, scholars, monks, popular stars, lawyers, and artists. … Business art [*shengyi yishu*] has lowered art down to a "business icon" [*shengyi ouxiang*] easily recognized by the masses.[12]

Based on these ideas, Wu created a performance called *Dashengyi* for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in February 1989. It was his first work to completely replace linguistic practice and an overtly political art form with that of daily commerce. The piece involved him carrying 30 kilograms of live shrimp from Zhoushan, the island where he lived, to Beijing, where he sold them at the exhibition's opening. After the opening, and with the enforcement of the official prohibition against performances, he marked his shrimp stand "temporarily closed today for stocktaking" (*jinri panhuo, zhanting yingye*). His typically terse explanation was that art was big business. In a statement on *Dashengyi*, he proclaimed that selling shrimp was a rebellion against the National Art Museum, an official court of opinion that judged art. It was also a criticism of art critics who turned "artworks" into anything that fit their interpretation.[13]

Figure 7.9

Wu Shanzhuan, *Dashengyi—Selling Shrimp*, 1989.

Xu Bing was born in 1955 in Chongqing, Sichuan province. Well established as a woodcut artist in the early 1980s, Xu devoted himself to creating a number of woodcut prints that might be considered the most impressive "rustic realist" images of printmaking in China. In 1982, he finished his work for his MFA degree by creating a series of woodcut prints depicting the common life of village peasants. The prints were based on sketches made during the period he spent as a "reeducated student" from 1973 to 1977, during the Cultural Revolution.[14] By the middle of the 1980s, Xu had gradually abandoned this thematic concern and begun to explore the unique nature of printed language. In the first half of the 1980s, he received several important national prizes because of his excellent technique and the academic approach of his printmaking. For instance, in the Sixth National Art Exhibition (1984), his woodcut print *Flower and Pencil* was awarded a silver medal. Beginning in the middle 1980s, Xu began to think about how to make printmaking more conceptually sophisticated.

In June 1986, Xu Bing and his colleagues Chen Jinrong, Chen Qiang, and Zhang Jun rolled a big wheel painted with different colors along a long roll of rice paper to make a print work.[15] In the same year, Xu created a five-scroll print entitled *Five Series of Repetitions*, in which he depicted ponds of tadpoles as well as fields of vegetables and grains in a conceptual way. In the work, Xu raised questions about the reproductive nature of printmaking. He carved a woodblock and then imprinted a long scroll with a sequence of images. In the final composition, a set of images progresses from solid black through successive carvings to solid white, as more and more of the wood is whittled away. Thus, Xu literally dematerialized the object, deconstructing representation as he simultaneously created and destroyed the artwork.[16] Obviously, the subject matter in the prints was no longer the central concern as it had been in his early works; instead, methodology became the major concern.

In his article "The Exploration and Rethinking of the Repetition of Painting" ("Dui fushuxing huihua de xintansuo yu zairenshi"), Xu Bing addresses four major points he raised in the project. First, its distinct visual form and goals depart from that of conventional printmaking, because *Five Series of Repetitions* was printed in an edition of only one unique copy, the original and final. Both the block of wood and the scrolls are the complete work as a whole, as the making of the work destroyed the possibility of its reproduction. Second, it records every remaining detail of the carving process. Third, it reconstructs the relationship between the artwork and audience. Fourth, it presents both the process of the creation and the artist's thoughts.[17] This approach, very importantly, initiated the methods adopted in his two subsequent works *A Book from the Sky* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall.*

Xu Bing's first major installation piece of this type is *A Book from the Sky*, on which he began work in 1986. It was created from numerous hand scrolls

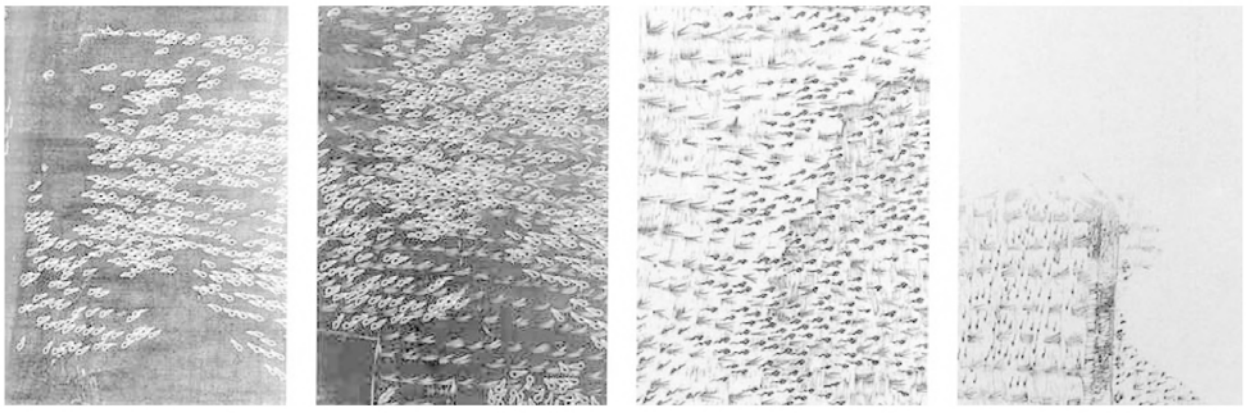


Figure 7.10

Xu Bing, *Five Series of Repetitions,* 1986.

Figure 7.11

Xu Bing, working on *A Book from the Sky,* 1987.

about five hundred feet long, with printed texts that resemble traditional monumental painting styles. There also are boxed sets of books that are bound in blue paper covers and strongly resemble traditional Chinese books. The work was first exhibited in 1988 at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, and subsequently shown in a number of venues in Asia and the West. What was extraordinary was the fact that the thousands of Chinese characters printed on the books and papers were invented by Xu himself. The piece was the product of three years of intensive labor. Xu hand-carved over two thousand pieces of wooden type to print what look like Chinese characters in the Song Dynasty style. None of Xu's characters can be recognized or pronounced. However, since the characters were invented by the artist, composed of rearranged elements from real Chinese characters in the Song Dynasty style, they are still inviting enough to attract the audience to attempt to read or decipher them. When Xu created the two thousand nonsense characters, he knew that in reality there are two thousand characters that make sense. The paradoxical interaction between the work's superficial, textual meaninglessness and the diverse cultural understandings of the readers makes the piece unpredictable.[18]

Xu Bing's artworks might be seen as another kind of destruction of traditional culture. The desire for destruction apparently relates to the anti-

Figure 7.12

Xu Bing, blocks made for *A Book from the Sky,* 1987–1991.

Figure 7.13

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky,* 1989.

ideological stance of the generation of artists of the '85 Movement, who were tired of the previous Maoist utopia and its state-dominant ideology. Xu's approach, however, was not to erase writing and the texts themselves, but rather to create many fake characters and a nonsensical text with a significantly monumental, legitimate, and classical form in a deconstructive way. On the other hand, through his complete avoidance of legibility in the text, Xu somehow removed all semantic significance from the splendid monument, a myth and symbol of authority.

The space created in Xu Bing's work related to a traditional Chinese philosophical idea of "emptiness" (*xu*) or "nothingness" (*wu*), a crucial concept in Chan Buddhism and Daoism. In Chan thought, the moment of the realization of "emptiness" is the moment in a person's experience when the mind is opened to discover a richer realm of truth, namely enlightenment.[19] Xu Bing's approach to meaninglessness in his art was apparently influenced by the concepts of *xu* and *wu*. He wrote in a short article:

> For more than a year I ceaselessly invented, carved, and printed a set of twelve volumes of "Nonsense Writing" (*A Book from the Sky*) which no one in this world can understand. The unbelievable amount of work threw its audience into confusion. One of my painter friends once told me about a "crazy" guy in his home village, who always went out to collect waste paper at a certain hour, washing these papers in a river, carefully mounting them piece by piece, and then storing them under his bed after they had become dry and flat. I thought quite a long time about this person's behavior. Finally I realized that it was a kind of "Qigong"—a kind of cultivation of the Dao. It was indeed a very powerful kind of "Qigong." [It exemplifies] an Eastern way of achieving true knowledge—obtaining sudden enlightenment and correspondence with Nature by endlessly experiencing a fixed point. …
>
> Nowadays the art world has become an arena. What do I want from it? Handing one's work to society is just like driving animals into a slaughterhouse. The work no longer belongs to me; it has become the property of all the people who have touched it. It is now concrete and filthy. I hope to depart from it, looking for something different in a quiet place.[20]

While the Chinese conceptualists, such as Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, and Huang Yongping, used ideas from traditional Chan Buddhism as a foundation of their contemporary art approach, and saw Dadaism as a borrowed model of destruction, the concepts used by these artists differ. For instance, the difference between Xu Bing and Huang Yongping parallels that between the Northern and Southern schools of Chan Buddhism. Xu's long period of labor to create an empty space of meaning may be compared to the Northern School of Chan, which emphasized gradual enlightenment. The Southern School's emphasis on sudden enlightenment is more like what we find in Huang Yongping's concept of Dada-like destruction and Wu Shanzhuan's natural and spontaneous juxtapositions. All of them, however, share the common idea of *wu*, or nonbeing and nothingness, based in traditional Daoist philosophy. And this concept of *wu*, as used by the artists, was not for the pure enjoyment of a traditional philosophical game; rather it was for a deep expression of their feelings about contemporary reality.

Xu Bing's second major installation was his *Ghosts Pounding the Wall,* a three-story-high ink rubbing taken from a section of the Great Wall. As displayed in the Elvehjem Museum at the University of Wisconsin in late 1991, the work involved massive black-and-white scrolls hung from ceiling to floor across the building's central court. At the lower end was a mound of dirt that looked like a tomb, pinning the scrolls to the floor.[21]

Xu Bing and his crew labored in the Badaling Mountains in a rural area near Beijing for twenty-four days in 1990 to make impressions of the surface of the Great Wall, using a technique traditionally employed for reproducing fine carvings of calligraphy. Over the course of several months, the ink-smudged sheets of Chinese paper were reassembled and mounted. For Xu, the expenditure of utmost effort was necessary to create an imposing psychological and physical space similar to the space of the Great Wall itself. Yet the piled earth of the tomb at the foot of Xu's paper Great Wall is an obvious symbol of death. The confrontation between the splendid, if ghostly, paper representation of the Great Wall and the nihilistic physical presence of the earthen grave mound raises doubts about the purpose of human effort, not only questioning the

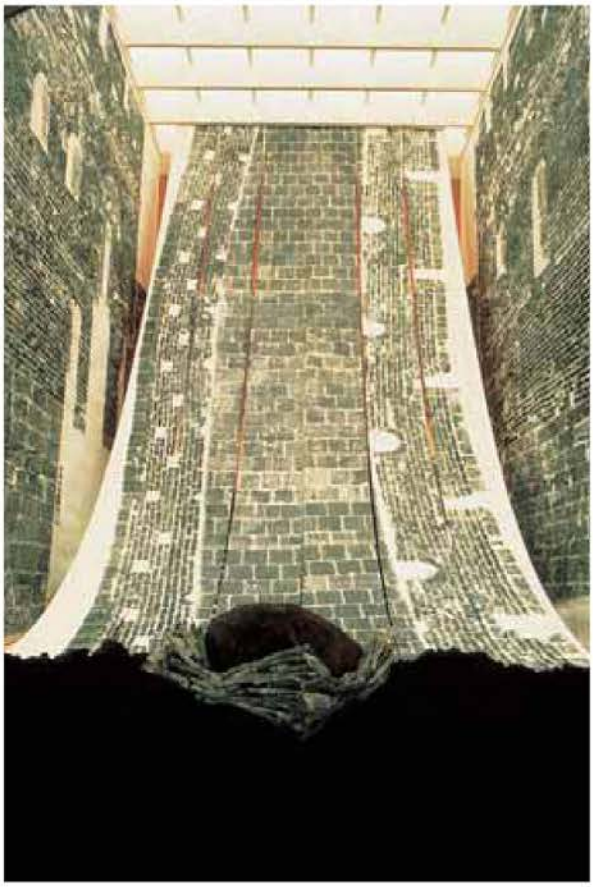


Figure 7.14

Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, 1990–1991.

Figure 7.15

In 1990, Xu Bing and his crew spent twenty-four days making ink impressions of the Great Wall for *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.

artist's replication of the rough and inelegant surface of the Great Wall, but more generally questioning all human effort, including the labor required for the construction of the original Great Wall.

In the twentieth century, the powerful image of the Great Wall has become a symbol of the greatness of China, as it is one of the largest man-made constructions in the world and the product of two thousand years of labor. During the Anti-Japanese War, it was also a symbol of national salvation and defense against the invasion of the Japanese. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the image of the Great Wall, along with certain industrial landscapes, symbolized a reunified, newborn modern state. Recall that Shi Lu's 1954 painting *Changcheng wai*, or *Beyond the Great Wall* (see figure 1.13), for instance, pictures the happiness of the Mongolian minority people in the unity of the new modern China, while exemplifying the enjoyment of modernization as symbolized by a railroad reaching the outside of the Great Wall. The area beyond the Great Wall was traditionally a contested space between the Han people and the northern nomads. But now the Han and the barbarians are unified. Since the Cultural Revolution, avant-garde artists have used the image, and even the sites, of the Great Wall to further their new project of Chinese modernity by ambivalently using this symbol of nationalism. Thus, the Wall has become an ambiguous social force and powerful symbol of a nation that needs modern strength, on one hand, and a conservative state-ideological power on the other. The Wall no longer exists as an eternal symbol of greatness; on the contrary, it is now seen as weak and dubious under the impact of Western modernization and the control of its own totalizing power. The skepticism adopted by the avant-garde

and reflected in the Great Wall project can be found in many performance works and conceptual art projects dealing with the Wall. For instance, in a performance by a group of artists called Concept 21 Group, the artists masqueraded as wounded people who were helpless against the powerful symbol of the Great Wall.

Xu Bing may have been conveying a similar message in his installation. Scholarly research suggests that the Wall actually was built over a much shorter period than popularly thought and that it was strategically useless as a defensive border in its own day.[22] In his simulation of the Great Wall, Xu Bing embodies the meaninglessness of its construction through his own exhausting activity of pounding the wall with ink-drenched wads of cloth. Even the title *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* conveys the meaninglessness of human effort, relating as it does to a popular Chinese folktale in which a traveler, lost in the middle of the night, keeps walking in circles as if ghosts had built a wall around him to prevent him from continuing in his chosen direction. In spite of its purported meaninglessness, however, the work echoes with meanings related to China's politics and social reality. The artist seems to mock himself and the futility of his own exertions; he is unable, even with extraordinary effort, to do anything about his own circumstances and environment, like his ancestors confined by the barrier of the real wall or the traveler surrounded by an imaginary one. On the other hand, Xu's work could also be considered a strong criticism of the conservative authority in contemporary Chinese society. Xu noted that Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), a Chinese scholar, described the Great Wall as the product of conservative minds, intent on the impossible goal of closing China off from the rest of the world as if in a giant garden: although the wall was strong and was guarded by a powerful military, the nature of humankind rendered its purpose futile. The meaninglessness of the Great Wall here evokes cultural confrontations of various kinds: between the real creative power of China's ancient people and its simulation by the contemporary artist; or between China's heritage of national greatness and its current reality.

Figure 7.16

Chinese soldiers guarding the Great Wall, 1933.

Figure 7.17

Concept 21 Group, *Saving People from Death,* one series of performances on the Great Wall, 1988.

Gu Wenda's *The Pseudo-Characters,* 1984–1986

Gu Wenda has also been involved in an art- and language-based project since the mid-1980s. Gu was born in 1955 in Shanghai, and trained in the Department of Chinese Painting of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in the early 1980s. Between 1982 and 1985, Gu, who has great technical facility in traditional Chinese painting, tried to use modern Western forms, especially that of surrealism, to remold traditional Chinese painting. Although he himself has largely abandoned traditional painting since, this phase of his career did influence a generation of younger artists, creating a new school of ink painting referred to as "universal current" (*yuzhouliu*). Gu's ink painting style has been recognized as a sort of "new scholarly painting" (*xin xuezhe huihua*). However, after this phase, he applied his efforts to installation and conceptual art.

Unlike Wu Shanzhuan, who used language to investigate the meaning of authorship, and Xu Bing, who devoted himself to revealing a meaningless language world by creating a monument of nonsense, Gu Wenda's language project aimed to destroy the underlying structure of the Chinese system of building characters while maintaining its calligraphic style, thus creating a conflict between concept and aesthetic pleasure. This conflict expressed Gu's skepticism about human rational capability. He turned traditional archetypal calligraphy on its head, using upside-down, reversed, incorrectly written, and restructured characters on huge sheets of Chinese paper. His 1984–1986 series *The Pseudo-Characters* used splashed ink on rice paper. The strategy of Gu's destruction was to write calligraphy by imitating the style of classic masters, using nonsense (or wrong-sense) characters. Once, he invited three women and three men to write the same Chinese character (*jing*, or "still") using an incorrect structure of the elements and their different individual styles. Then, like a traditional calligraphy teacher, Gu made red marks, using a circle to mark a correction and a cross to indicate a mistake. In 1987, even in writings such as letters to friends and essays published in magazines,

Figure 7.18
Gu Wenda, *A World in Calm Observation 2*, 1985.

Figure 7.19
Gu Wenda, *Pseudo-Characters Series—Silence*, 1986.

Gu deliberately punctuated texts at random, consciously departing from conventional literary practices.[23] Gu's skepticism about language and his conceptual process encompassing the essence of the nature of things had a special resonance in Chinese culture, because the written language is ideographic rather than alphabetic. Therefore, the Chinese language is imbued with far greater metaphysical meaning than Western written languages. With *The Pseudo-Characters*, Gu sought to destroy the system of syntax and grammar that carried so many aesthetic and cultural connotations for so many millennia in traditional Chinese society.

The New Mark Group and Its Tactile Art

Yet another way to undermine the significance of concepts, language, and authorship was adopted by the New Mark Group, which consisted of three artists—Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, and Gu Dexin—who worked on the *New Analysis* project for eight years, from 1987 to 1995. Decrying the individualism of contemporary art, they sought to expunge subjectivity by creating a rationalized discipline to order the artist's mind. The group developed a set of rules agreed upon by all three artists before they began to make objects. Their first group project was *Tactile Art* (*Chujue yishu*) of 1988, which was a series of diagrams variously showing temperatures, the sizes of spaces, and the categories of human feelings. The viewer is meant to examine and judge the data presented in the diagrams.

What the artists of the group sought to achieve in the *Tactile Art* project was to liquidate rationality directed by language, which can only handle certain kinds of concepts. Although *Tactile Art* still used these concepts, as Chinese characters and numbers appeared in the diagrams, their function was to awaken the sleeping tactile sense and liberate it from various constraints, such as goals and concepts, in order to endow the tactile sense with new significance. The characters and numbers indicating temperatures and feelings in the diagrams, such as *shiwai ershiliu du* (exterior 26 degrees) and *shou wo shou* (hand in hand), "are not about themes, descriptions, happiness, sadness, anger, or pleasure; neither are they about truth itself, nor rhyming schemes,

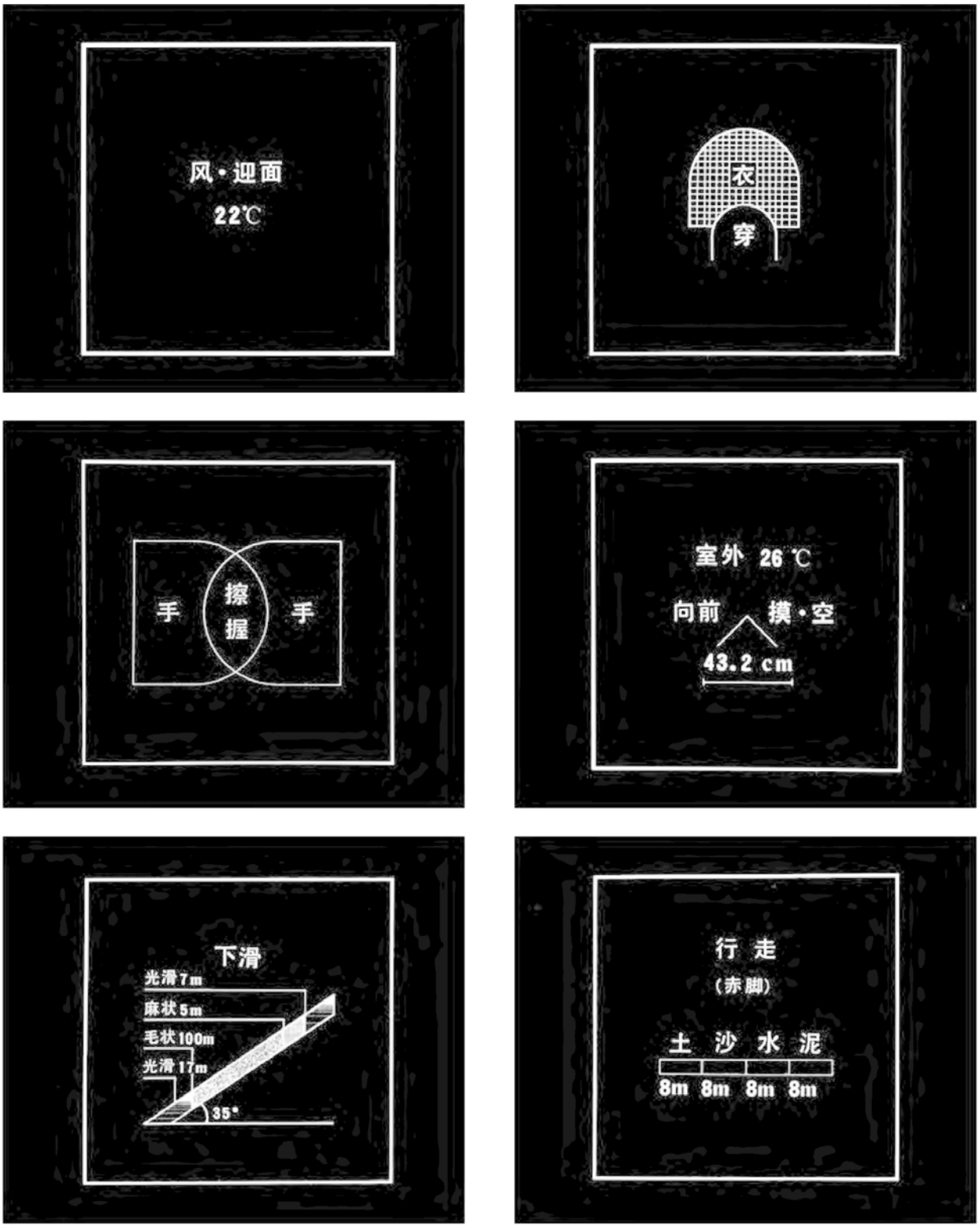


Figure 7.20

The New Mark Group (Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping, Gu Dexin), *Tactile Art,* 1988.

phonetics, forms, expressions, rhythm, intuitions, illusions, consciousness, or unconsciousness. Rather, they are a pure, delicate, and thorough contact between human body and outside world."[24] This presented an extremely closed, individual experience with maximum freedom. There was no need to communicate and exchange meaning, wherein lies the project's essential significance. According to Wang Luyan, tactile art was not something used by the artists to show off, but was the fastest, most direct approach that could arouse a universal reaction from all people. The artists are no different from people at large; they no longer influence or torment the public with extremely narrow terms, like art that seeks a unique individual character.

In the conclusion of the group's manifesto, Wang Luyan wrote, "They and others exist together in a tranquil and pure space of tactile art with no explanations, understanding, exploration, or communication. Those vulgar and meaningless phenomena, such as condescending artists making indiscreet remarks, creating a man-made gap, are gone. There is no incomprehensibility, no liking and disliking. What the artists and common people get is maximum freedom and relaxation, which can be easily obtained by relaxing yourself. Through the boundless space of tactile art, artists and people in general alike will own a free and new kingdom."[25]

Gray Humor and the Pool Society

In 1985, an important avant-garde group led by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi was established in Hangzhou, one of the most important ancient capital cities in China. The city was located on the shore of West Lake (*Xihu*), one of the most famous traditional landscape sites in China. In the early twentieth century, the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art, under its former name of Hangzhou National Academy of Art (*Hangzhou guoli yizhuan*), played an important role in the modern Chinese art movements of the early twentieth century. Some leading Chinese artists of that movement, such as Lin Fengmian, the first director of Hangzhou National Academy of Art, were ambitious to found a new modern Chinese art system by combining traditional art with Western modern art, and this concept influenced many generations of Chinese artists in the twentieth century. Some artists involved in the left-wing woodcut movement of the 1930s, such as Hu Yichuan and Jiang Feng, were trained in the Hangzhou National Academy of Art and later participated in the Anti-Japanese War and in Mao's revolution at his famous communist base in Yan'an during the 1930s and 1940s. Almost forty years later, a new generation of avant-garde artists trained at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art took another step toward a revolution in art when they played leading roles in the '85 Movement. Huang Yongping, Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Peili, and Geng Jianyi, whom I have mentioned above, all graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art and founded some of the most influential avant-garde groups, such as Huang Yongping's Xiamen Dada and Wang Guangyi's Northern Art Group.

Two of the leading artists of the '85 Movement, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, devoted themselves to a Hangzhou-based avant-garde movement from the middle of the 1980s into the 1990s. They created numerous artworks in various media including painting, installation, performance, and conceptual art. Regardless of the specific significance of using different media, the group of artists around them, called the Pool Society (*Chishe*), was characterized by two major points. First, they opposed the notion that art should function to bring happiness and pleasure to the public; instead, they employed different painting styles, materials, and rules to try to find any means of making the audience uneasy. Geng Jianyi said, "Basically, we are opposed to the simple American-style happiness which seems to be a beautiful state, a state changing from life to death, thus a state of escapism. If we create a form which brings about sleepiness in the audience, that would be a debacle for us."[26] Second, they recognized that most people were accustomed to emotionless behavior, preferring a life without vitality and fresh air, while categorizing all existing art forms into a set pattern of knowledge. Therefore, what the Pool Society did was to create conceptual traps that would imitate what they considered insensitive reality by exploiting certain numb images and boring rules, all in order to stimulate people to engage with their art. They played this serious game with materials and

language to closely investigate the difference between human contact and isolation, as well as to expose the human condition from a demystification viewpoint.

Soon after he graduated from the Zhejiang Academy in 1984, Zhang Peili and his fellow young artists Zha Li, Bao Jianfei, Song Ling, Wang Qiang, and Xu Jin founded a group called the Youth Creative Society (*Qinnian chuangzao she*). Demonstrating an admiration for modern ideas and rationalist language oriented toward anti-expressionism, the Youth Creative Society's first group exhibition was entitled "'85 New Space" ("Bawu xinkongjian"). It opened in the Gallery of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art on December 2, 1985. Twelve artists, including Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, participated in this show, which featured fifty-three examples of "gray humor" paintings.

Zhang Peili was born 1957 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. He has taught in the Hangzhou School of Graphic Art since 1984. In the 1985 exhibition he displayed four oil paintings on two different topics: music and swimming. In his *Please Enjoy Jazz* (*Qing xinshang jueshiyue*), a drummer standing stiffly and a rigidly sitting trumpeter exist in a triangular composition, without sentimentality, in a dark gray, empty, and unspecific background. Similar in style, *Swimming* (*Yongzhe*) and *Summer Swimming* (*Zhongxia de yongzhe*) transform a familiar urban space into an inanimate cosmos-planet space where people live indifferently as if they were mechanomorphic human beings.

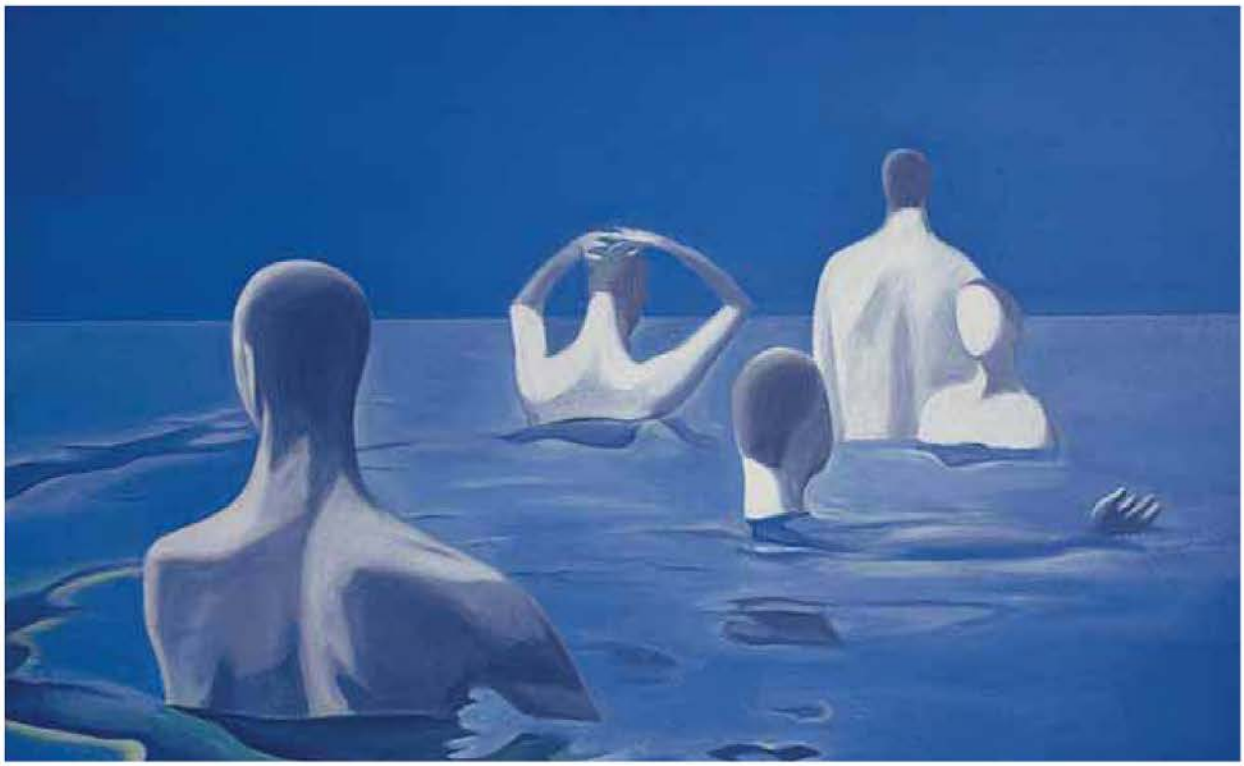
Geng Jianyi was born in Zhengzhou, Henan province, in 1962. He graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in 1985 and has taught in the Zhejiang Silk College. In the "'85 New Space" show, Geng Jianyi's *The First Haircut in the Summer of 1985* (*Yijiu bawunian xiaji de diyige guangtou*) presented a person getting a haircut in a cosmic space, instead of in a barbershop.

We may characterize this group of paintings as "gray humor" (*huise youmo*), as they are definitively marked by a cynical tone. Reacting to an inevitable, but unfamiliar, urban modernization and the consequent alienation among people, and between society and the individual, this trend formulated human figures of various classifications while generalizing them with indifference and numbness. These paintings presented a neutralizing attitude and a new realistic technique that duplicated the referent, not to represent but rather to project it into a decontexualized frozen moment in time. Then the real, or original, referents become slightly surreal and a distance is created between artist, image, and audience. The artists attempted to shock the public through cynical and insensitive images that allegorized reality. In a statement, Zhang Peili said, "I refuse to give the audience any comfortable means of appreciation or aesthetic pleasure in my work. The images in my paintings are lashing people with a heavy whip in order to wake up their numb minds and insensitive condition."[27]

After a number of intense discussions, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling, Bao Jianfei, Wang Qiang, and Wang Ying founded an artists' group called the Pool Society on May 27, 1986. They felt the need to find a new way to continue their explorations after the accomplishments of the "'85 New Space" exhibition. In their announcement of the founding of the Pool Society, they said, "We seek to ultimately express our ideas. We attempt to have a pure experience in searching for an intuitive condition. We will formulate our practice in any useful way, whether traditional or contemporary, unique or common. We are concerned that the process of the practice involve everybody's interest, regardless of the specific material goal of artistic creation."[28]

The name Pool is a metaphor of a condition of enlightenment, a situation of intermixture. The following is excerpted from the manifesto of the Pool Society:

> Art is a pool.
>
> Our survival relies on carbohydrates.
>
> What we are doing is not what we want to do, but what we must do.
>
> Our bodies are completely dusty.
>
> Can people benefit from art activity?
>
> Is artwork for appreciation and visual pleasure?
>
> We pursue a proper purification.



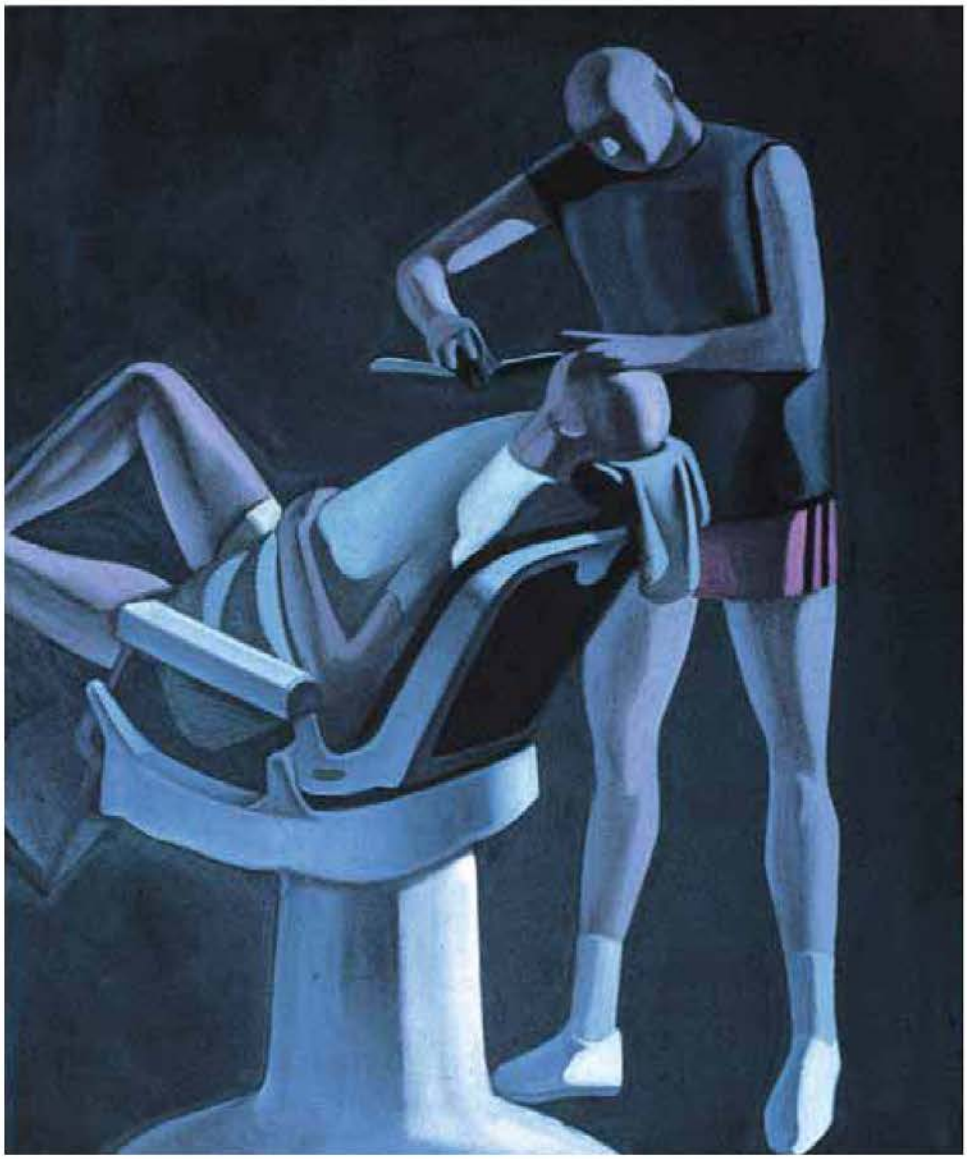


Figure 7.21

Zhang Peili, *Please Enjoy Jazz,* 1985.

Figure 7.22

Zhang Peili, *Swimming,* 1985.

Figure 7.23

Geng Jianyi, *The First Haircut in the Summer of 1985,* 1985.

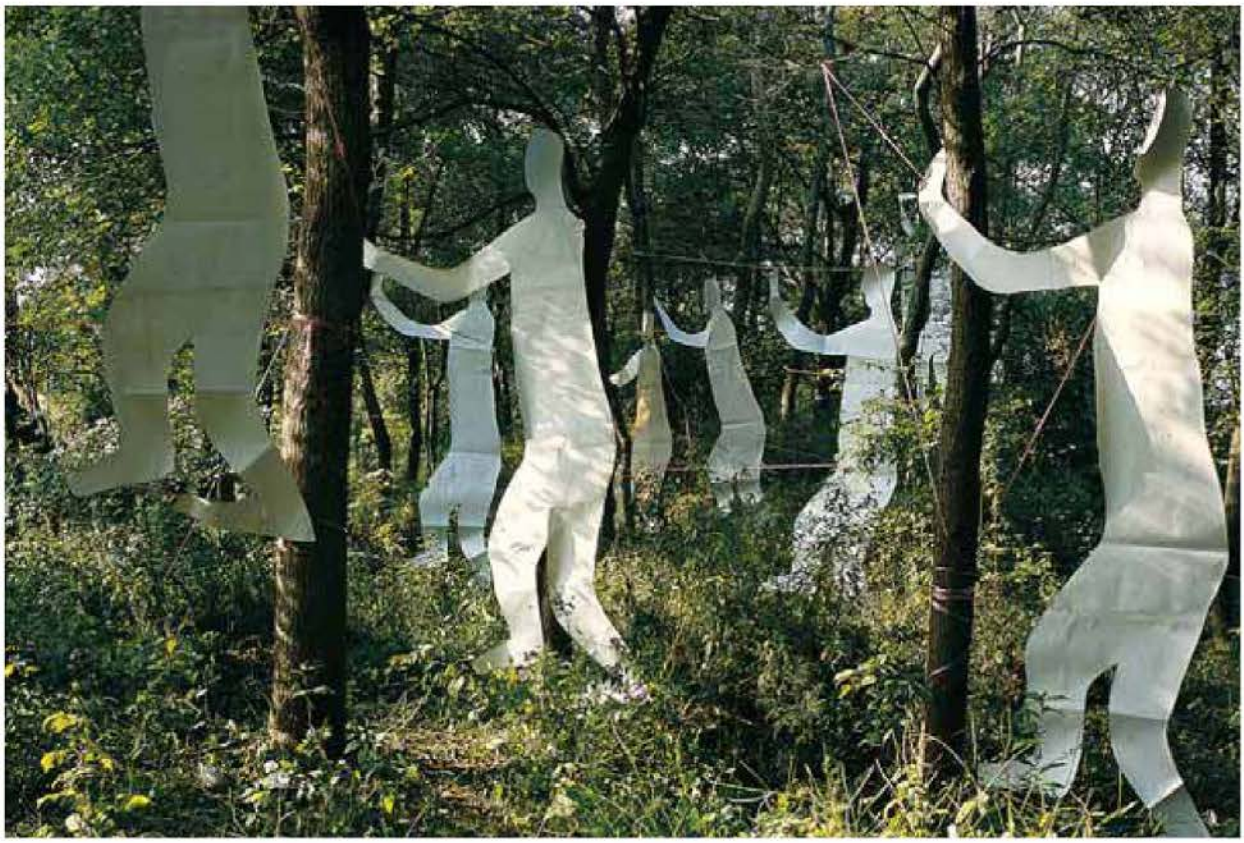


Figure 7.24

Pool Society, *The Travelers in a Green Space No. 2*, 1986.

Figure 7.25

Geng Jianyi and Song Ling, *King and Queen No. 3*, 1986.

Our thinking is stream-of-consciousness and irrational.

We strive to catch up with our intuitive energy.

The alienation of art is rational, mechanical, and reproduction is determined by certain pragmatic goals.

We intend to reach the sublime moment when we are tired but excited.

It is important to get into fusion.

Has anybody ever experienced a sort of rational impulse?

The moment of fusion makes you thrilled, and a wakening moment enlightens you.

We admire connotations on a "high level," and pay great attention to them.

The result is less important. The plan will come to fruition, if there is a seed.

Truth cannot be verbalized.[29]

The first group activity of the Pool Society took place from 9:00 a.m. on June 1 to 4:00 p.m. on June 2, 1986, in Hangzhou. The project was called *Yang's Taiqi Series No. 1* (*Yang-Style Taiqi*), with twelve individual pieces, each of which were three meters high, consisting of diagrams in the form of paper cuts representing the twelve different programs of the Yang style of the martial art *taiqi* (tai chi). The panels were posted on a wall on Nianshan Road, located on the shore of West Lake. The artists of the Pool Society were very excited about this nonprofit, purely spiritual activity. Zhang Peili said, "It was not a novel gaming activity, nor a well-designed experimental art project; it was an honest and natural dialogue between the artists and the people walking on the street."[30] According to Geng Jianyi, however, the work was not created just for the enjoyment and happiness of artists and audience. Rather, they attempted to create something strong and obviously strange enough to stimulate the audience.[31] Five months later, a similar project, entitled *The Travelers in a Green Space No. 2* (*Luse kongjian zhong de xingzhe, dierhao*) was completed by the group. Nine paper-cut diagrams of Yang-style art were hung on the trees in some woods near West Lake.[32]

Around the same time, the Pool Society artists did two performances. One was called *King and Queen No. 3* (*Guowang he wanghou disanhao*), in which the artists Geng Jianyi and Song Ling were wrapped with newspaper while sitting on a similar newspaper-wrapped branch. The "king" and "queen" assumed many different positions, while gesturing as if they were mechanomorphic persons made of newspaper. The other performance was called *Baptism No. 4* (*Xili disihao*). Song Ling entered a wooden box, and other artists put newspapers in it until Song was completely buried by the papers.[33]

Figure 7.26

Song Ling, *Baptism No. 4*, 1986.

Metaphorical Abuse in the Reception of Art: Works by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi in the Late 1980s

From 1987 to 1989, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi created a number of paintings, installations, and conceptual proposals. Most notably, Zhang painted a series of oil paintings called the *X? Series* (*X? xilie*). The primary images in the paintings are clinical chairs and gloves. Before he started to paint, he wrote down a series of steps in order, which he intended to strictly follow. He duplicated photographs of hospital-like clinical chairs and surgical gloves in about one hundred large oil paintings in which numbers marked on the canvas point to different parts of the subject, all of which related to a methodical set of paint-by-numbers instructions. Zhang then published these instructions in an article that also laid down strict conditions for the display and viewing of the *X? Series*. For instance, only visitors taller than 4'3"and shorter than 5'8" were to be admitted to the exhibition. People wearing colors from the red and yellow color family as well as lovers and couples were not allowed to visit it. The visitors had to follow a set route through the exhibition, and discussion was prohibited.[34] Zhang's work commonly dealt with states of helplessness and pain, using forms derived from the world of clinical medical apparatuses as the leitmotif. In this series, his punitive attitude toward the viewers was believed to be a reaction to previous public apathy expressed during his earlier public art projects.

In 1988, Zhang Peili created a performance/object work entitled *A Report on the Hepatitis Infection in 1988 (Guanyu yijiubabanian jiagan chuanran de baogao)*. An installation of the same title made of glass, surgical gloves, lacquer, and plaster powder was displayed in the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in 1989. In his childhood, Zhang had experienced a prolonged illness, and during that time he was touched only by people wearing surgical gloves. Gloves became an obsessive lexical maker of traumatic memory for him. They signified a point of contact that was simultaneously a point of isolation. During the hepatitis epidemic of 1988, Zhang sent a series of anonymous parcels containing surgical

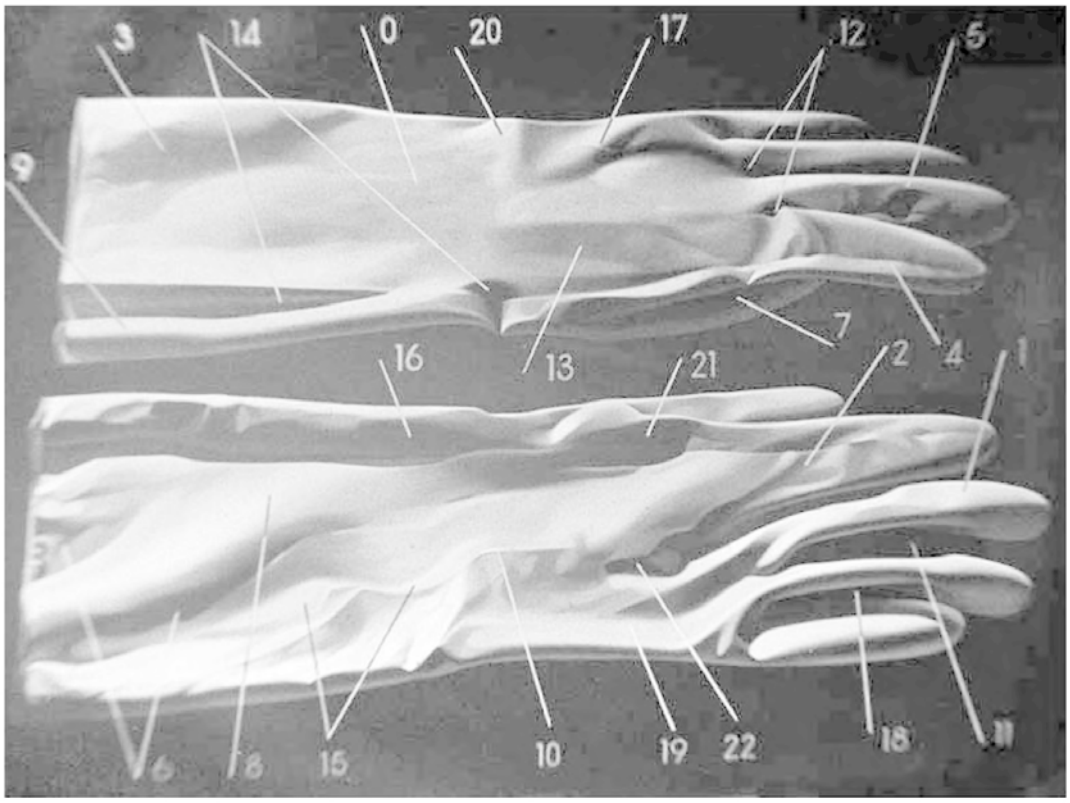


Figure 7.27

Zhang Peili, *X? Series*, 1986.

Figure 7.28

Zhang Peili, *A Report on the Hepatitis Infection in 1988*, 1988.

Figure 7.30

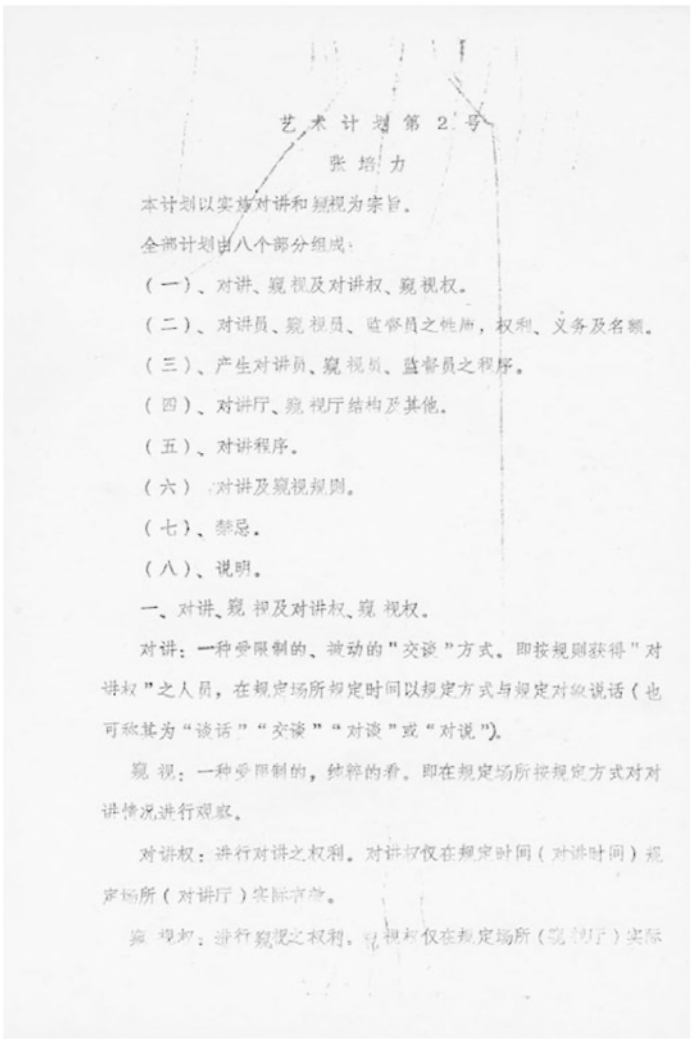
Zhang Peili, *Brown Book #1*, 1988.

Figure 7.29

Zhang Peili, *A Report on the Hepatitis Infection in 1988*, detail, 1988.

rubber gloves, or parts of gloves, to important figures in the Chinese art world. The last consignment included a letter informing them that the parcels had nothing to do with their moral behavior, but that they must not try to contact the other recipients or the sender.[35] This installation/performance project was called *Brown Book #1* (*Hepishu yihao*).

After late 1988, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi started to pay more attention to real communication, but in a very cynical and allegorical way. Zhang spelled out his approach in the following statement: "The undertaking of an extreme anti-art project, extending the grounds of artistic language and expanding media, seems to offer numerous possibilities: but in actuality, what we really can select and make use of for our own purposes is limited. In the end, economy and sparseness of language [are] a virtue."[36] All of Zhang's projects dramatize this communicational reality. From 1987 to 1988, he began to construct harsh, and extremely rigid, rules governing the exhibition and viewing of his artworks. After *Brown Book #1*, Zhang created a similar project called *Art Plan #2* (*Yishujihua erhao*). Also dating from 1987, it was a twenty-page list of instructions. According to Zhang, this instructional plan concerned talking and peeping. The whole plan included eight parts: 1. Talking, peeping, the right of talking and the right of peeping. 2. The nature, rights, duties and number of talkers, peepers, and



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对讲：一种受限制的、被动的"交谈"方式。即按规则获得"对讲权"之人员，在规定场所规定时间以规定方式与规定对象说话（也可称其为"谈话""交谈""对谈"或"对说"）。

窥视：一种受限制的，纯粹的看。即在规定场所按规定方式对对讲情况进行观察。

对讲权：进行对讲之权利。对讲权仅在规定时间（对讲时间）规定场所（对讲厅）实际产生。

窥视权：进行窥视之权利。窥视权仅在规定场所（窥视厅）实际

艺术计划第2号

张培力

Figure 7.31

Zhang Peili, *Art Plan #2*, 1987.

Figure 7.32

Geng Jianyi, *Second State*, 1987.

supervisors. 3. Procedures to select talkers, peepers, and supervisors. 4. A description of the talking room and the peeping room. 5. A description of the talking procedure. 6. Rules for talking and peeping. 7. Prohibitions. 8. Directions. In each part of the plan, Zhang specified in minute and tedious detail the conditions under which people should be admitted to an art exhibition. For instance, visitors must again be taller than 4'3" and shorter than 5'8"; they should not speak, and they were required to follow a marked route with mathematical precision.

Elsewhere, in 1987, Geng Jianyi painted a set of large oils entitled *Second State*. Each painting portrayed the face of his colleague Song Baoguo, another leading avant-garde artist and a teacher at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art. The paintings show a huge, robotic face that seems to be grimacing, but actually is an overemphasized and exaggerated image of Song's visage in different moments of laughing. The complete hysteria presented by the paintings is caused, not by an excessive or uncontrollable emotion, such as fear or panic, but rather by a rational, controlled, and highly cynical attitude. Geng Jianyi painted this series in many different formats. He composed different works with various numbers of panels; the largest consists of four panels. The viewer may think that the paintings focus on embarrassing situations of everyday life, or the portrayal of alienation and the hypocrisy of human relationships. The approach of Geng Jianyi was "the principle of attack," targeting accepted norms of behavior and everyday rules.[37] In Geng's own statement written on August 20, 1987, when he and two other artists of the Pool Society, Zhang Peili and Song Ling, all began new painting series, he raised four major points to explain the paintings:

> 1. *Principle of thriftiness in using color* Years of research on color has distanced us from the intoxication of color, and we no longer care about psychological pleasures. In creating a series of works, the Pool Society confines its use of colors to three kinds, rendering paintings virtually in monochrome by careful manipulation of them. We have a theoretical backing for insisting upon this approach, i.e., drawing the audience's attention to monochrome form that belongs to a spiritual sphere. We have always believed in our ability to catch the function of solid and stable forms. This does not mean that the Pool Society ignores colors. All of us used to employ a myriad of colors to express the shapes of feelings and wonderful rhythms to make the audience relaxed and joyful. It is only because we no longer need a sense of flowing. To be exact, the Pool Society in choosing this direction (very decisively) has made a sacrifice, running counter to the principle of sensual pleasure held by most people. We hope to use our principle of thriftiness to appeal to the audience on the metaphysical plane.
>
> 2. *Directness* Aside from presenting a strong sense of scale, it creates, most importantly, nearsightedness in the audience [*jinshiyan de guanzhong*]. When people discern all the details within the prescribed

focal distance (or they are too nearsighted to see anything), they are forced into reactions that do not come out in a natural way. We are fully aware of wrong judgments resulting from the fact that audience members tend to fill gaps by subconsciously utilizing their past life and aesthetic experiences. It is not our intention to satisfy some in the audience who tend to regard themselves as experts and are interested in continuing to increase their knowledge. There used to be a lukewarm, ambiguous relationship between artworks and audiences, which enhanced the desire to acquire knowledge and other unhealthy habits of the audience. What we want to promote is a direct relationship with the audience, which can serve to eliminate the possibility of misunderstanding. The reaction on the part of the audience can only be genuine in this relationship, coming from their gut instincts rather than from knowledge.

3. *Without comment* Of all the approaches, the creative process of the Pool Society is the simplest and best-knit. First of all, various images are created out of medical instruments, expressive tools, and species of life. The images are then made permanent by a camera before being enlarged in scale and their gaps filled with coordinates. Efforts are made to avoid any "traffic accident" whenever the brush is applied and during the connecting process, so that the paintings look very objective, without the vitality of life. It is presenting only an investigative report that contains nothing but facts. We are only concerned with its authenticity and exactness.

4. *Repetitious function* What makes *X.?*, *Second State*, and *Meaningless Choice* [*Wuyiyi de xuanze*] markedly different from customary paintings on canvas? No component painting in any of these series is valid as an independent entity. They have to be connected with the others to form a unified whole. As a result, repetition is inevitable. Any form will repeat its past manifestations in a slightly different manner; this is similar to the forms common in religious rituals. We believe this is also a pure art approach. Let us look at the repetitious effect of various religious rites. Ranging from similar attire, behaviors, or banners to the repetitious ringing of bells, speaking of slogans, nonstop singing of hymns, and dancing, the rites have made countless souls excited by their infiltrating power. They cause a spontaneous conditioned reflex; yet they also bring people back to their past, mysterious experiences. We are also considering what effects the repetition employed by the Pool Society can have on us.

> Zhang Peili's *X.? Series* is to be composed of 144 single paintings (and include the spatial effect of the room in which they are hung); only six of them have been accomplished to date. Three components of *Meaningless Choice* by Song Ling, *Ox*, *Sheep*, and *Dog*, have been finished. Similarly, only four paintings (a parallel group) in the *Second State* by Geng Jianyi have been finished.[38]

In 1987 and 1988, Geng Jianyi also created several game-based works, to structure an alternative relationship between the people who were involved as audience and those involved as part of Geng's work, mostly the viewer and the viewed. One of these, from 1987, is called *Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation*. In a classroom, Geng built a walled space with frames around cuts in the walls, and invited the audience to participate as both the viewers and those who are viewed. Those people looking in from outside were identified as the audience, who looked upon an exhibition with many subjects derived from the idea of Hell framed in the Western classical manner. The people looking out from inside were framed as individual portraits and thus became part of the "paintings." The title implied that the flow between insiders and outsiders might be a metaphor of the cycle of water moving in a water work. And the changing position of each person from outsider to insider demonstrated an alternative space, where the subject-object relationship, encompassed by traditional modes of spectatorship, was questioned.

In 1988, as the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition was being organized for the National Art Museum of China, Geng co-opted curatorial authority from the organizing committee by sending invitations to some one hundred artists, requesting biographical information and deliberately misrepresenting himself as an organizer of the show. Most artists filled out the forms, either honestly or cynically, and returned them. Geng then exhibited them as a conceptual artwork entitled *Investigative Forms* (*Diao chabiao*) at a well-attended art conference (which included many of the artists duped by Geng's game). He thereby allowed the public, rather than a panel of judges, to determine the merits of each entry. Some of the artists, such as Huang Yongping and Wu Shanzhuan, gave cynical responses, as seen in the translations of their completed information forms.

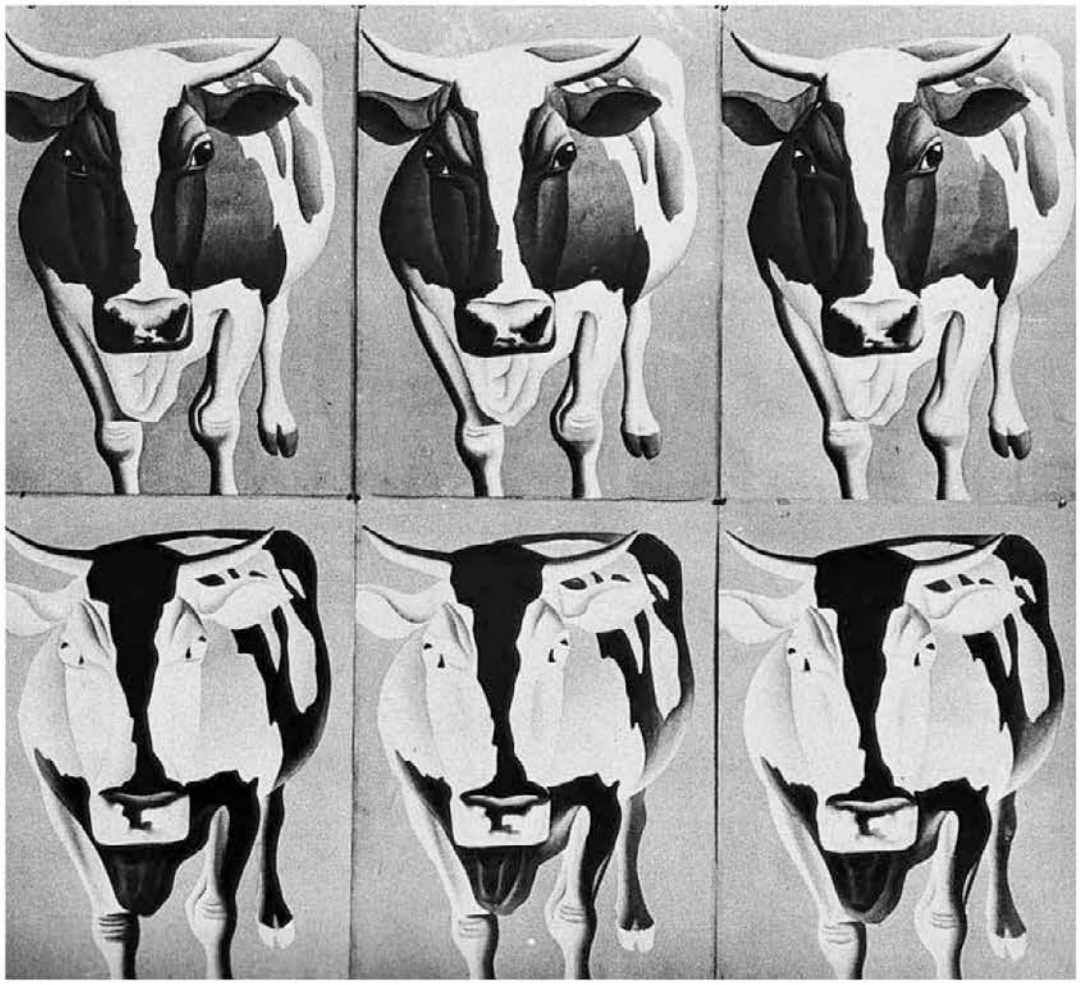


Figure 7.33

Song Ling, *Meaningless Choice No. 1*, 1987.

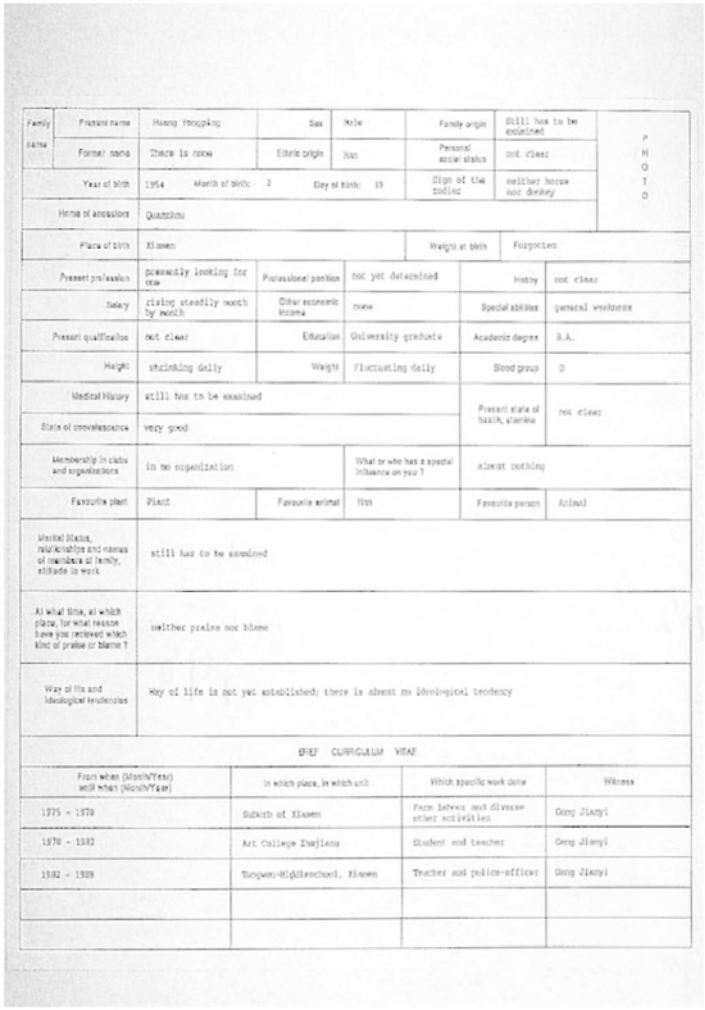
Figure 7.34

Geng Jianyi, *Tap Water Factory: A Mutually Voyeuristic Installation*, 1987.

In the early 1990s, Geng Jianyi's investigation of the relationships between artworks, artists, and the public in conventional exhibition spaces changed direction as the Chinese social structure was changing. He began to pay attention to broader and more complicated relationships, not only between people and art objects but also between people and the social system, as those relationships were manifested in art institutions. A newly cynical approach might be indicated in a statement Geng wrote in 1991:

> I used to think that a completed artwork was like the completed act of taking a piss: when it's finished it's finished—you don't go carrying the contents of the chamber pot around with you. But now things are different, you can't just take a piss whenever you like anymore and be done with it. There are special bathrooms, akin to museums and art galleries, who want to expose you in your most basic acts. And doesn't everybody now accept this situation as normal? The people going in for a look are all very interested, comparing who is big and who is small. How is it that I was born in this age of institutions? And how is it that I want to be proclaimed the champ? It's really a shame.[39]

This shift, from the conceptual focus of his early work of the '80s to the investigation of alienation produced by materialism among metropolitan people, can be found in many of Geng's performance/installation projects of the 1990s. For instance, in 1994, his *Reasonable Relationship* was done in connection with a group project, *November 26 as a Reason* (*Shiyi yue ershiliu ri zuowei liyou*), which required that the participants create a work dealing with the events taking place on that specific day. *Reasonable Relationship* is a record of a performance process, in which Geng hired a woman he met on the streets of Hangzhou, his hometown, to "observe the streets of Shanghai." He signed a contract with her detailing her duties and salary. The woman was to report the things she saw, and the people she communicated with, by submitting physical evidence such as photos, tickets, receipts, and the like. Through the work, Geng wanted to reveal the reality of people's urban lives, which could only be demonstrated by material evidence: he believed that people could not communicate with each other in a nonutilitarian way except through contract.[40]



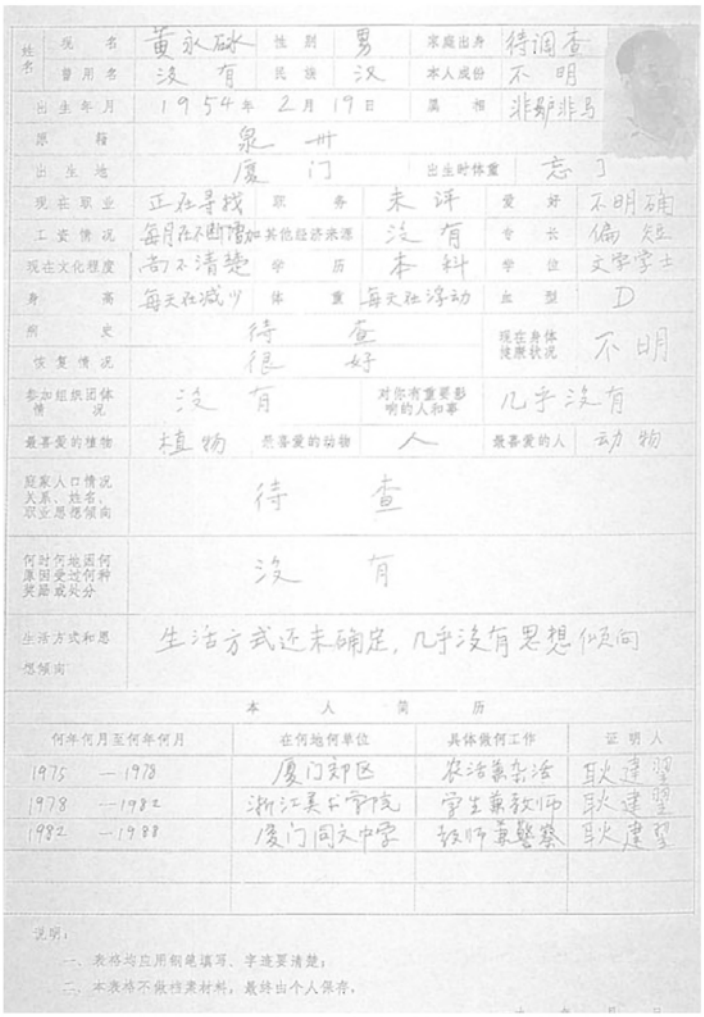
Family name	Present name	Huang Yongping	Sex	Male	Family origin	Still has to be examined	PHOTO
	Former name	There is none	Ethnic origin	Han	Personal social status	not clear	
Year of birth	1954	Month of birth: 2	Day of birth: 19		Sign of the zodiac	neither horse nor donkey	
Home of ancestors	Quanzhou						
Place of birth	Xiamen				Weight at birth	Forgotten	
Present profession	presumably looking for one		Professional position	not yet determined		Hobby	not clear
Salary	rising steadily month by month		Other economic income	none		Special abilities	general weakness
Present qualification	not clear		Education	University graduate		Academic degree	B.A.
Height	shrinking daily		Weight	fluctuating daily		Blood group	O
Medical History	still has to be examined					Present state of health, planned	not clear
State of convalescence	very good						
Membership in clubs and organizations	in no organization			What or who has a special influence on you ?		almost nothing	
Favourite plant	Plant		Favourite animal	fish		Favourite person	Animal
Marital Status, relationships and names of members of family, attitude to work	still has to be examined						
At what time, at which place, for what reason have you received which kind of praise or blame ?	neither praise nor blame						
Way of life and ideological tendencies	Way of life is not yet established; there is almost no ideological tendency						

BRIEF CURRICULUM VITAE

From when (Month/Year) until when (Month/Year)	In which place, in which unit	Which specific work done	Witness
1975 – 1978	Suburb of Xiamen	Farm labour and diverse other activities	Geng Jianyi
1978 – 1982	Art College Zhejiang	Student and teacher	Geng Jianyi
1982 – 1989	Tongwei-Highschool, Xiamen	Teacher and police-officer	Geng Jianyi

Figure 7.35

Geng Jianyi, *Investigative Forms—Huang Yongping*, 1988.



姓名	现名	黄永砯	性别	男	家庭出身	待调查
	曾用名	没有	民族	汉	本人成份	不明
出生年月		1954年2月19日			属相	非驴非马
原籍		泉州				
出生地		厦门			出生时体重	忘了
现在职业		正在寻找	职务	未评	爱好	不明确
工资情况		每月在不断增加	其他经济来源	没有	专长	偏短
现在文化程度		高不清楚	学历	本科	学位	文学学士
身高		每天在减少	体重	每天在涨动	血型	D
病史		待查			现在身体健康状况	不明
恢复情况		很好				
参加组织团体情况		没有	对你有重要影响的人和事		几乎没有	
最喜爱的植物		植物	最喜爱的动物	人	最喜爱的人	动物
家庭人口情况关系、姓名、职业思想倾向		待查				
何时何地因何原因受过何种奖励或处分		没有				
生活方式和思想倾向		生活方式还未确定，几乎没有思想倾向				

本人简历

何年何月至何年何月	在何地何单位	具体做何工作	证明人
1975 — 1978	厦门郊区	农活集杂活	耿建翌
1978 — 1982	浙江美术学院	学生兼教师	耿建翌
1982 — 1988	厦门同文中学	教师兼警察	耿建翌

说明：

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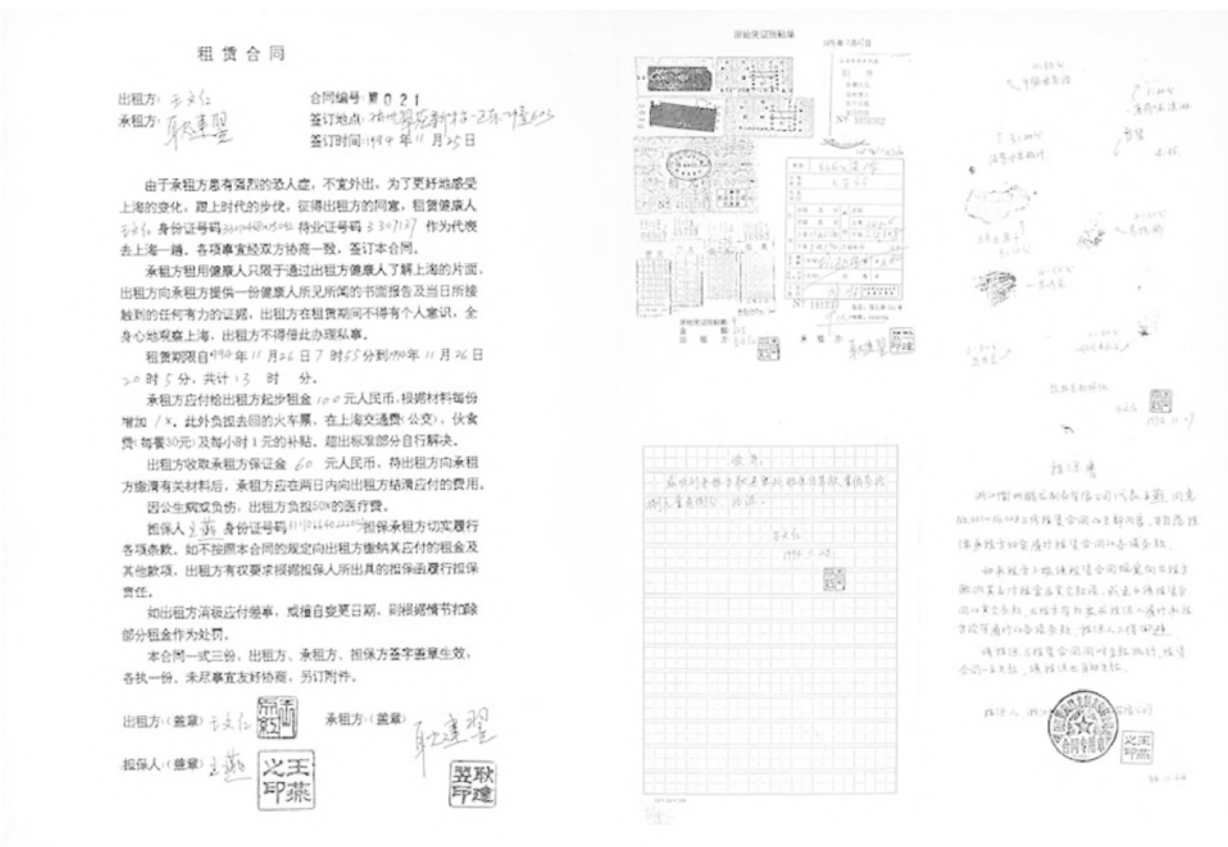
耿建翌 浙江丝绸工学院服装分院 杭州310012



租赁合同

出租方：[illegible]　　合同编号：0 2 1
承租方：[illegible]　　签订地点：[illegible]
签订时间：1994 年 11 月 25 日

由于承租方患有强烈的恐人症，不宜外出，为了更好地感受上海的变化，跟上时代的步伐，征得出租方的同意，租赁健康人[illegible] 身份证号码[illegible] 待业证号码 [illegible] 作为代表去上海一趟，各项事宜经双方协商一致，签订本合同。

承租方租用健康人只限于通过出租方健康人了解上海的片面，出租方向承租方提供一份健康人所见所闻的书面报告及当日所接触到的任何有力的证据，出租方在租赁期间不得有个人意识，全身心地观察上海，出租方不得借此办理私事。

租赁期限自[illegible]年 11 月 26 日 7 时 55 分到[illegible]年 11 月 26 日 20 时 5 分，共计 13 时 分。

承租方应付给出租方起步租金 100 元人民币，根据材料每份增加 / ×，此外负担去回的火车票，在上海交通费（公交），伙食费（每餐30元）及每小时 1 元的补贴，超出标准部分自行解决。

出租方收取承租方保证金 60 元人民币，待出租方向承租方缴清有关材料后，承租方应在两日内向出租方结清应付的费用。

因公生病或负伤，出租方负担50%的医疗费。

担保人[illegible] 身份证号码[illegible]担保承租方切实履行各项条款，如不按照本合同的规定向出租方缴纳其应付的租金及其他款项，出租方有权要求根据担保人所出具的担保函履行担保责任。

如出租方消极应付差事，或擅自变更日期，则根据情节扣除部分租金作为处罚。

本合同一式三份，出租方、承租方、担保方签字盖章生效，各执一份，未尽事宜友好协商，另订附件。

出租方：（盖章）[illegible]　　承租方：（盖章）[illegible]

担保人：（盖章）[illegible]

Figure 7.36

Geng Jianyi, *Hiring Contract in Reasonable Relationship*, 1994.

Part Three

The Post-'85 Avant-Garde