

Chinese contemporary art: where it comes from, where it goes

1. Introduction

When Deng Xiaoping ushered in an era of reforms in China, artists took advantage of the relative economic and cultural openness to contribute to the general change of the society and “modernize” the art of their country, adopting a subversive attitude towards social and cultural conventions. Artists were attracted by what looked to their eyes like new materials and new formal languages from the West. I will use the term “Chinese contemporary art” (中国当代艺术, *Zhongguo dangdai yishu*) here to refer to this art created in China since 1978, at first outside the academies. In the 1980s, the term “avant-garde art” (前卫艺术, *qianwei yishu*) was often used but, in the 1990s, it became “experimental art” (实验美术, *shiyan meishu*). Both referred to the art that fought for creative freedom and was distinct from four types of art that proliferated then: the official art of the Party; academic art based on technique and standardized aesthetic values; urban visual culture from Hong Kong; and the international art that aims at a market (Chan 2010, 33). However, in the 1990s, after the creative explosion of the previous decade, when there was still no pressure coming from the national market, some Chinese contemporary art was irresistibly attracted to the international market, giving rise to an avalanche of exhibitions in the West and reaching astronomical monetary values at the beginning of the millennium. These values decreased after the 2008/9 financial crisis, as did the number of exhibitions abroad. In China, the eagerness for experimentalism have characterized the last few decades. Art markets have gone global, with Asia playing a relevant role, and I will try to understand how Chinese contemporary art can forge its way in this new context.

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2. The 1990s and the emergence of the foreign market

Aiming at obliterating from collective memory the events of Tiananmen and thus avoid conflict, the Chinese government soon adopted a new strategy: accelerating the process of economic reforms and generating a spectacular growth of the country's wealth. Consumerism became fashionable for

the people in general and commercialization of cultural production became fashionable for new artists. These new artists did not share the idealism and ardent intellectuality of the artists of the previous decade. Politics seemed absurd to them, and they preferred to leave social problems to the care of the government. Their art was more internalized, linked to the search for oneself.

But neither Chinese collectors nor the government were then interested in purchasing works by Chinese contemporary artists; there wasn't even a support system for their artistic activity. However, and quite swiftly, it was then that some obscure artists ascended to international stardom. It is crucial, therefore, to understand who the agents behind this incipient market were. How was this possible? It was possible because the power behind the ascension of Chinese contemporary art were foreign collectors and commercial galleries.

Uli Sigg, Swiss ambassador to China from 1995 to 1998, and one of the greatest collectors of Chinese contemporary art who accumulated a huge collection when the paintings were sold for a few hundred dollars, recalls:

It was foreigners who made the market. The foreigners in China were basically business professionals as diplomats who had three or four-year contracts or postings with a joint venture or the diplomatic service. They were not art collectors. (2005, 16)

By acquiring and putting the works into circulation, these collectors boosted the development of Chinese contemporary art. Thus, in the 1990s, the galleries that opened and sold avant-garde works in China were mostly owned by foreigners with international connections. The upshot was that the art that pleased foreigners based in China, most often than not people with no great knowledge in the field, rose to the forefront of Chinese contemporary art in the West. Therefore, it was a certain Chinese contemporary art that came out of obscurity to gain international stardom. These were mainly works from three movements, known as Political Pop (政治波普, *zhengzhi bopu*) and Cynical Realism (玩世写实注意, *wanshi xieshi zhuyi*), whose golden age occurred between 1989 and 1992; and, in the late 1990s, the so-called Gaudy Art (严肃艺术, *yansu yishu*).

Using oil painting as a medium, Political Pop (Wang Guangyi, Li Shan, Yu Youhan, ...) represented in an absurd or humorous way commercial symbols of the West coexisting with figures, for instance, appropriated from the *baotou* (报头) (Wang Guangyi), "masthead" booklets published during the sixties and seventies that aimed at teaching artisans and aspiring artists to create didactic political art. It placed side by side the heroes of the Cultural Revolution, the workers, the peasants and the soldiers, and the logos of Marlboro, Kodak, or United Colours of Benetton from Western advertising posters, as in Wang Guangyi's *The Great Critique* (1990), perhaps the most iconic work of its kind. Surfaces were smooth and the red colour prominent. These artists were interpreted by Westerners as addressing political issues but transformed in such a way that they became objects of commercialization.

A little later, Cynical Realism, whose most echoing names (Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Liu Wei, Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Jinsong and Zhao Bandi...) came from the academies and excelled in figurative oil painting, was seen as resorting to a sarcastic attitude when dwelling on 'real' life themes, previously considered as being irrelevant in art: boredom, consumerism, and problems arising from the expansion of the economy in a rapidly modernizing China, such as corruption in bureaucracy and social inequalities. For example, Fang Lijun's bald men yawn, stroll by the sea, swim and laugh, but as if installed in the absurdity of daily life. Yet, as Yi Ying recalls, and even though Fang Lijun himself declared not to be interested in politics, and informed that the men represented in his works of the

early 1990s were symbols of his psychological world, they were nevertheless interpreted in the West as political symbols of China's "liberation" (Yi Ying 2001, 42).

Influenced by Jeff Koons, Gaudy Art, by the end of the decade, appropriated the aesthetics of Chinese folklore and consumer society (Li 2008, 28). While emptying the meaning of traditional motives, it presented consumer goods with such an impact that it made art unable to compete with them, leaving it no alternative but to join in their game. Among the names of Gaudy art are the Luo brothers and Feng Zhengjie.

Both Political Pop, which did not appropriate from the media ready-made images, but copied them with a brush, as well as Cynical Realism and Gaudy Art, did not abandon oil painting. In this sense, they were still heirs of the academy and its prevailing realistic style and figurative oil painting. Realism was not totally abandoned. On the opposite, as noted by Yi Ying (2011, 22), in the 1980s and 1990, the prevailing Western art styles in China were realism (with names like American Andrew Wyeth and Canadian Alex Colville), which is not modern, and the post-impressionism of early modernism, styles that did not clash with the training received in the official academies.

3. The weight of Western taste

What attracted foreigners to Political Pop, Cynical Realism and Gaudy Art was their presumed exhibition of stereotypes about the Chinese identity –their 'exoticism'. As Stephanie Tasch remarks, "it is exactly these artistic positions, that look the most 'Chinese' in the eye of the Western beholder, and that are therefore easy to consume aesthetically, that establish maximum prices in the circulation of goods in art." (2007, 36). Political Pop, for instance, looked at national issues instead of looking at the West but did not use politics as an act of rebellion. Were politics actually the main concern of this art? It was interpreted so in the West despite Wang Guangyi's open stance in his manifesto that artistic production does not embrace humanist and utopian ideals, but rather serves financial interests and the demand for fame. And, symptomatically, for the Chinese government these art styles could be exported because they seemed to be politically innocuous (Pi Li 2005, 36).

Stressing that the attention given by the West to Chinese contemporary art emerged in the aftermath of the Tiananmen events and China's economic boom, Hou Hanru claims that the origin of the Western collectors and curators' preference for Political Pop and Cynical Realism, clearly visible in the numerous exhibitions organized outside China during this decade, lied in the conveyed image that the artists were fighting against their country's regime, suffered from its 'oppression' and aspired to Western-style 'freedom' and 'democracy':

In organizing Chinese contemporary art exhibitions in Western institutions, a certain ideological superiority on the part of the West can be traced back to Cold War ideological competitions between the West and the East, and to nineteenth century exoticism. Sometimes this is the very motivation for organizing these exhibitions. (1994, 363-4).

The simplistic Western ideological-political interpretation of Chinese contemporary art was also criticized by Ai Weiwei who is unsuspected of nurturing any sympathy for his country's political regime:

Since the 1979 *Stars* exhibition, held a few years after the end of the Cultural Revolution (an event generally regarded as the first open attempt by contemporary artists to win ideological emancipation), Chinese contemporary art has attracted attention in the West and been characterized there as “anti-government”. Even today, when China government is no longer what it once was, this kind of Cold war-era simplification still occurs. It is partly the result of making naïve judgments about a culture without really understanding the development and changes it is undergoing, but it is also caused by the complexity, confusion, and divided social reality that lies between China’s socialist ideology and its political and cultural status quo. (2005, 13)

Chinese curator Pi Li sums up the situation well when he states that “the West's understanding of Chinese art was distorted from the beginning.” (2005, 82). In a very recent book, Wang (2021) exposes to what extent Chinese contemporary art was a victim of this distortion by advancing illuminating new interpretations of the work of artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi, Sui Jianguo, Zhang Peili, and Lin Tianmiao, revealing that they were above all presenting fundamental questions about the very nature of art history, and about the meanings and possibilities of art.

But to achieve commercial success in foreign ground, some Chinese artists did begin to explore the lode of being taken by 'dissidents' in the West. As the American writer Andrew Solomon remarked: “The artists are aware that if they don't accommodate foreign tastes (including the taste for the “Chinese exotic” and for “localism” and for “democratic yearning”), they will have no one to see or to buy their work.” (1998). In sum, they ended up acquiring *marketing* expertise to make money with their works and being represented in foreign galleries. Politics became used to attract the international art market, in line with the Western ideology and understanding of Chinese culture.

However, in 1990s China, there were groups that followed lines initiated in the 1980s, when the pressure from the market was still absent, that were characterized by conceptual radicalism and artistic experimentalism, such as the “New Measurement Group”, also translated as “New Calibration Group” (*Xin Kedu Xiaozu*, 新刻度小组, 1989-1996, formerly known as *Xin Jiexi Xiaozu*, 新解析小组, “The New Analysts”). This Beijing group was formed by Wang Luyan (1956), Gu Dexin (1962) and Chen Shaoping (1947). From 1988 on and over a period of eight years, they were dedicated to developing an artistic method based on mathematical measurements and calculations, using rules, formulas, diagrams, signs, and creating five documents where they registered their processes, *Analysis IV* (解析IV, *Jiexi IV*). Through a purely numerical and rational research, they aimed at extinguishing individuality, avoid emotional interference, escape conventional creative art and predetermined conclusions, and transcend ideological problems. They gave rise to a new language of “non-art”, situated between literature, mathematics, and linguistic research. Unfortunately, all their documents and manuscripts were destroyed by the group when its members split due to internal differences and their refusal to let their work be absorbed by the system (for a description of their works see Yan 2020, 304).

Groups like this, as well as some performance art or incipient video art (see Yan 2020, 163), were overshadowed in the West by the tremendous success of Political Pop and Cynical Realism. But, as art forms too dependent on Western taste and object of a distorted interpretation, the future market of Political Pop and Cynical Realism has been questioned (or will it be saved by new interpretations like Wang’s (2021)?), while nobody questions the future market of artists who achieved international recognition around 1990, almost at the same time as the artists of Political Pop and Cynical Realism, such as Xu Bing.

A group of artists who were active in China in the 1980s left China in the 1990s towards various Western countries or Japan. Their first solo exhibitions abroad launched international careers that span to the present day, such as the case of Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, Liu Dan, Wang Tiande, Wang Dongling, Wang Jiecheng, Li Huayi, Qiu Zhijie, Qin Feng, Feng Mengbo, Liu Fenghua, and Chen Zhen. They ended up creating what Gao Minglu calls the "third space" (Hao & Gao 1998), meaning the art produced outside of China by Chinese artists. Their work results from a reflection on Chinese cultural and artistic traditions, such as calligraphy and landscape painting, sculpture, music, and gunpowder.

4. The new millennium

When China became an official member of the World Trade Organization in 2001, the Chinese state realized the economic and diplomatic potential of contemporary art and decided to implement a new cultural policy: the promotion of the arts in the international arena. A new exhibition format was conceived that represented a significant change in the history of the state as a patron of contemporary art in international contexts: official bi-national panoramic exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art to take place in Europe. The first ones were, in 2001, "Living in Time", at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin and, in 2003, "Alors, la Chine" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

It was then that the internal Chinese art market exploded. Museums began to buy and exhibit contemporary art and the media began to publicize it. Since the 2000s, hundreds of studios, museums, galleries, public and private, official art zones and clusters have opened doors across China. In Beijing, more than fifty art auction houses were launched, including Poly Auction. Also in Beijing and by the hand of Belgian collector Guy Ullens, The Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) opened in 2008 and soon became the epicentre of artistic life. Far were the times when any work exhibited to the public had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture.

On the international arena, Chinese contemporary art also cemented its place in this decade with names of the nineties Political Pop, Cynical Realism and Gaudy Art, like Zhang Xiaogang, Feng Zhengjie and Yue Minjun, ascending to meteoric heights in the markets. In 2004, Sotheby's and Christie's together sold twenty-two million US dollars in contemporary Asian art, mostly Chinese. The market peaked in 2007 and 2008. In 2007, five out of ten live best-seller artists at auction were Chinese.

However, it was a short-term success. The market collapsed when it was invaded by speculators and auction houses were accused of conspiring with artists to increase the prices. As a result of this situation and the global economic crisis, million dollar works in auction houses in the previous year could not be sold in 2009 or were sold for half the price.

With the official acceptance of experimental art and the consequent growth of support for the development of contemporary art in China, as well as a greater ease in organizing exhibitions and curatorial projects, the first decade of the 21st century witnessed the return to their homeland of many artists who had moved abroad, including Xu Bing, Liu Dan, Chen Danqing, Xing Danwen, Wang Gongxin, Lin Tianmiao, Li Huayi, and Wang Zhiyuan.

The new contemporary artists that emerged in this effervescent decade devoted themselves to the exploration of new visual languages, new media, of multiple themes and possibilities. As Yan

summarizes, “Chinese art of the first two decades of the twenty-first century has many facets, like a polyhedron”. (2020, 452) The phenomenon of de-ideologization accentuated, or perhaps artworks just became more difficult to be interpreted in that way. Artists seemed to favour themes such as loneliness, the *internet*, fashion, alienation, and the consequences of the economic revolution that had made them a generation with no major financial concerns, as in the paintings of the so-called Cartoon Generation born in the late 1970s and 1980s.

5. The 2010s

An interesting phenomenon of the 2010s was the sharp decline of realism. In the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century, realism, which had taken root in China back at the beginning of the 20th century, still enjoyed great prestige and popularity. However, oil painting has meanwhile been relegated to the margins. Political Pop oils lost the flame and repeated themselves, although they still have market value. Photography began to dominate, with fewer and fewer artists resorting to traditional oil painting (Yi Ying 2011, 31).

China’s contemporary art scene exhibits great vitality with new generations, whose members have often studied abroad, injecting great variety at all levels. Creative freedom continues to increase and artistic practices to diversify. Experiences with new media, multidisciplinary, non-objectual practices, site-specific or time-relevant, grew notoriously, and China has become one of the most vibrant countries for contemporary art, with names like Ding Yi, Cao Fei, Xu Zhen, Zhang Huan, Jia Aili, Chen Xiaoyi, Cheng Ran, Su Xiaobai, Wang Guangle, Huang Yuxing, You Jin, Xu Lei, Lin Tianmiao, Zhan Wang, Cui Jie, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, Wang Sishun, Li Zhen, Wang Yin, Yang Fudong and the Liu Dao group (Six Islands).

Nevertheless, the undergoing preference for installation and performing arts does not mean that Chinese contemporary artists are “copying” the West (installation and performance have, in fact, oriental roots, as shown by Ely 2009). Contrariwise, some Chinese artists manage to shock Westerners and arouse their anger and even censorship. Two performances, one by Zhu Yu, *Eating People*, which featured a photograph of the artist eating the body of a dead baby and another by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Linked Bodies*, in which the bodies of a pair of Siamese twins were stained with the artists’ blood, were shown in Britain and shocked the viewers so severely that it was considered an offense to public decency by a British commission. In direct contrast, in China, and with the same performances, the artists won the 'young artist 2003' award from the Chinese Contemporary Art Awards. (Wiseman 2011, 5)

Also, Gu Wenda, who in China had been censored for inventing new characters suspected by the authorities to be a secret code with political significance, was also censored by the American authorities for using a powder made with human placenta in a work with Chinese medicines at an exhibition in New York. It was offensive 'in religious terms' and in moral terms, as well as for 'alluding to abortion', and its exhibition was forbidden. And in 2017, at the New York Guggenheim Museum exhibition “Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World”, three of the works by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, and by Xu Bing and Huang Yongping, were the object of the most vehement protests for using live animals and turned out to be withdrawn or modified.

Wiseman (2011) distinguishes three recurrent themes in Chinese contemporary art that are absent in the West. The first two were identified by Norman Bryson in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* and the

third one by herself. Firstly, the individual's relationship with social spaces created by the intersection of socialism and materialism; secondly, the relationship of the individual with languages that convey meaning; and, thirdly, the revelation of a raw, wild, primitive nature, resorting to worms, gunpowder, dust, corpses, and blood.

In that decade, the economic impact of the cultural sector grew exponentially, becoming one of the most profitable in Chinese society. More than 1200 contemporary art museums were built across the country. Galleries, art fairs and auction houses opened at an impressive pace. China became the third largest art market, after the US and the UK, with 18% of global sales in 2019 (but it was second in 2018 and first in 2011). Chinese contemporary art became the object of growing interest in its own country. Most buyers (60%) were now Chinese nationals, but it is too early to say what this change may mean in terms of transformations in art itself.

A new cosmopolitan generation of art collectors was also formed, of both ancient Chinese art (bronze objects, jade, ceramics, furniture...) and ancient Western art, as well as contemporary art. Some own private museums built specifically to exhibit their collections and sponsor emerging artists. It is no longer the government, but these private collectors who redefine contemporary art in China. Nonetheless, since Christie's international art auction in 2015, there has been a marked and new preference among Chinese collectors for the purchase of works by the big names of Western art, as it is considered a safer bet than Chinese artists and even ancient Chinese art. Since the 2009 economic crisis, Western collectors and curators have also become much more cautious in their acquisition of Chinese contemporary art. The international interest in it has diminished considerably while interest in contemporary African art has increased.

Vine (2017) puts forward two explanations: the first is that the content of Chinese contemporary art remains culturally and psychologically strange, though one might object that this happens with the generality of contemporary art, regardless of its origins; the second objection is more pragmatic: the monetary value of Chinese contemporary art fluctuates in an uncontrolled way, given that China does not follow the same market rules. As for Chinese contemporary art exhibitions in the West, they are still being organized, but there is a tendency to play it safe, in the sense that they usually show works by the most renowned artists, many of them coming from the eighties' movement New Wave '85, or else follow the trends, such as art created by women.

6. What future?

Caught in the middle of a series of political and commercial interests, it is now important to think about the artistic value of Chinese contemporary art. In general, Westerners fall into two distinct groups: those who appreciate the Chinese classical tradition and to whom new artistic forms do not seduce because they find nothing genuinely "Chinese" in them; and those who appreciate Western contemporary art and for whom Chinese contemporary art is but a collection of *pastiches* from the West, looking at it with undisguised contempt.

But what does it mean to 'be Chinese'? Wiseman (2011, 215) distinguishes a weak sense and a strong sense. The former means that the work was created by an artist of Chinese origin, although it may not show obvious signs of its provenance. The latter occurs when the meaning of the work is accessible only to the Chinese. Wiseman finds that most works lie between these two poles. But should we look at modern and contemporary art in terms of where it has been produced in this era

of migrations and mobility? Even if it seemed to make some sense for Chinese contemporary art of the 1980s and the 1990s does it still make sense now? And does it make any sense to take Chinese art as an expression of the cohesion of a geographical and cultural identity (probably artificial, even more so in the case of a gigantic country like China)?

From the perspective of Peng (2011), Chinese contemporary art has reached the third level of the new International Style, and it is through this style that it can paradoxically find its own identity. Authenticity can only be achieved if Chinese contemporary artists break free from fascination with the past and with symbols of Chinese culture that prevent them from fully experiencing current affairs and contemporary culture. However, it is important not to confuse International Style with Eurocentric International Style. In fact, the new International Style is characterized by the absorption of ideas from both one's own cultural history and the history of foreign cultures. Persisting in this vein, Peng criticizes Chinese artists who adopt what he calls 'cultural pop', i.e., who take advantage of their cultural tradition to build an exotic image that attracts Western eyes. This art is completely uninteresting to the Chinese themselves, as Chinese culture and its symbols are everyday currency for them, neither exotic nor problematic. He points out Xu Bing and Gu Wenda as pioneers of this trend, noting that Xu Bing's work, however, escapes superficiality because, although it reveals its Chinese condition, does not adopt that as its main goal.

Carter takes only a slightly different perspective. He recognizes the interest in exploring one's cultural roots, as they are better understood and closest to the artist. But he also emphasizes that there is a whole universal vocabulary to be explored. The 'serious' Chinese artist must "remain connected to Chinese roots and also create art that is meaningful and appreciated in a changing world where East and West are drawn ever closer." (2011, 315) Creating art in a global context implies using visual forms and ideas without regard to their geographical and cultural provenance, i.e., implies having a universal vocabulary available. According to Carter, and to overcome the limitations of previous decades when Asian art was not placed on the same level as Western art, there are signs in China that artists intend to lead contemporary art towards new directions.

According to Peng (2011) Chinese contemporary art can be divided into three phases: following the Other, being valued by the Other, and finally founding its own identity. However, I would object that, if Chinese contemporary art followed the Other in the 1980s, it did insofar as Western visual languages met the artists' own needs and traditions, having to reinvent itself in this process.

I would also argue that if Chinese contemporary art was especially valued by the Other in the 1990s, it must be recognized that it was a *certain* Chinese contemporary art, interpreted in a *certain* way, and that there were internal movements that developed at the confines of this dynamic.

Liu (2011) advocates that, in the thirty years between 1978 and 2008, Chinese contemporary art evolved from a de-sinization to a re-sinization, that is, from decontextualization to recontextualization. Paradoxically, it is in this age of globalization that re-sinization is taking place, without prejudice to its synchronization with global art. Liu adds that it is when Chinese contemporary art becomes more distinctly Chinese that it can be global at its best and overcome its former condition as an outcast. This perspective seems to meet the concept of "glocal". The operative concepts of global (that which is free from the influences of its native soil and, therefore, able to be adopted internationally) and local (that which stubbornly carries the marks of its native soil, and which is supposed to be difficult to adopt internationally) have undergone an important development, giving rise to the "glocal" neologism. Sociologist Roland Robertson (1996) used it in his attempt to understand the ways in which the local and the global interact to produce a "global

culture". "Glocal" is derived from the Japanese term *dochakuka* ("global location", a global perspective adapted to local conditions), where the local is considered the best way to understand the global. Robertson argued against the vision of globalization as a concept that implies the triumph of culturally homogenizing forces and the disappearance of history and place. And he argued that what is called "local" is constructed on a trans/supra-local basis to a large extent; that is, 'local' is not the opposing pole of 'global'. The concept of globalization has always implied what is conventionally called local.

As early as 1998, Cotterdec remarked that the trend of the future, not only amongst mainland China artists but also amongst Taiwan and Hong Kong artists, was an appropriation of both the local and the global, of the past and the future: "interweaving styles that the impatient West feels it knows all too well with traditions that it barely understands at all." However, as Wiseman (2011) states, in this age of *internet* and travel, where more and more people around the world have a greater chance to understanding China and its traditions, Chinese contemporary art may well become a new great pole of attraction, thus meeting Cotterdec's words:

Whatever direction Chinese art follows, a Western audience will have to take note of it and learn to meet it on its own terms. The China of the Forbidden City may still be an enigma, but in a world of shrinking physical size and eroding cultural boundaries, it is also the house just across the street. (1998)

Although museums, galleries and auction houses in the West no longer refuse to recognize modernity in the art of other continents and avoid seeking the Chinese or African "exotic", the impression remains that they avow its importance and regularly exhibit it in order to be able to claim "globality", i.e., they still show it as the art of the Other. However, with the new prominent economic, financial, and cultural role of the Asia-Pacific area this situation will soon be over. The world is moving towards greater fluidity and plurality, decentralization, and fragmentation on practically every front. The art field will also become more fluid, defragmented and plural, representing more and more the diversity of terrestrial demography. With the rise of museums, galleries, and historians of contemporary art from other geographies, Western museums, galleries, and historians will tend to lose their protagonism. Art history itself will necessarily become more inclusive. Western art historians and critics will be challenged to understand what assumptions are at play in Chinese contemporary artworks and to find out what kind of questions should be addressed to them, avoiding the obstacles of Eurocentrism, simplistic readings, and restrictive frameworks.

It should not be forgotten that Chinese (or African or South American) contemporary art came later to the global arena. Therefore, it is not possible to subsume the various arts created in different regions of the globe into a single narrative. Though Chinese (or African or South American...) art needs to be examined according to its historical and local specificity, art is, by itself, a universal language, and therefore it cannot be reduced to its mere nationality or to an isolated monoculture. Contrariwise, it can only be understood if one takes into account the network of dynamic and significant relationships it has established through time and space. This approach has the advantage of depriving art –regardless of the place where it has been produced– of any claim to autonomy. It also prevents the development of Eurocentric perspectives.

As Wang (2021) clearly shows, there is an urgent need to rewrite the history of Chinese contemporary art in the light of interpretations that deflate the naive and ill-informed reading

according to which Western art exerts a subduing influence on it and that the former derives from the latter; or, even worse, that Chinese contemporary art is mostly political activism.

Artists, too, cannot adopt a passive position, and look at “global art” as an external force. It is also up to them to preclude the silencing of their particular voice as a consequence of the overbearing focus on geography. The upshot will depend on their ability to face the difficult question of identity and their position vis-à-vis the past and the future. And, above all, is up to them to create art whose *meaning* is globally relevant; and thus show that globality cannot be reduced to the mere international acceptance and circulation of works of art.

Chinese contemporary art surely is a privileged place to think about the encounter of cultures, as well as the intertwining of the present and the past. Besides that, let us not forget that many Chinese contemporary artists, in addition to mastering the techniques and history of Western art, enjoy the advantage of knowing traditional Chinese art and its techniques; and that the same cannot be said for Western artists. In that sense, they are more international.

Conclusion

Since it runs parallel and as an alternative to the history of Western contemporary art, the history of Chinese contemporary art can only be understood in the light of its own evolution. Thus, collector Uli Sigg’s words (quoted below) reek of a serious lack of contextualization. They are, in addition, still tainted with a Eurocentric, even orientalist vision. This happens when he mentions “the time lag” of Chinese contemporary art or that the Chinese did not “push back the frontiers”; when the term “exotic” is used; and when “analysis” (Reason) is assigned to Westerners and “intuition” to the Chinese. Sigg seems to see China as a particular case of Western culture and takes the more “developed” Western world as a model to follow, as if this was the only possible path.

I often ask myself how formally innovative contemporary Chinese art really is. Is it innovative, or is contemporary Chinese art simply so different that we are impressed by what seems exotic to our eyes? (...) My view is that while the Chinese use the same media as Western artists, there is, admittedly, a certain time lag. (...) the Chinese have not introduced a new medium into world art; they have, in fact, had to use the same repertoire as everyone else. It is certainly not one of the merits of Chinese artists that they have pushed back the frontiers of basic theoretical questions of art. Issues such as the “last picture” or the “picture after the last picture” have never interested Chinese painters. You just don’t find that kind of formalist and academic debate about the medium as such. Abstract art, too, long frowned on ideologically, has been able to hold very few artists’ attention long term. That has to do with the specific Chinese mentality and the different way they approach certain problems. In many areas of science and the arts there are many fundamentally different approaches. The general thrust is quite different from the one that has preoccupied Western art over the last hundred years. Chinese approaches are less analytically inquisitive and more intuitive, and reality bound. (2005, 15)

Sigg seems to forget that abstraction did not present itself to the 1980s Chinese with the same aura as it emerged in the West, a mix of pioneering and extreme spirit formed through a long and sometimes difficult artistic process. In China, abstraction was just one amongst many other Western art styles which they came into contact with. Furthermore, abstraction was not as foreign to them as it had once been for Westerners, because it could be found in traditional painting and

calligraphy. Minimalism, installation, economy of means, emptiness, could all be found in the Chinese traditional arts. Besides, it is important to emphasize that the Chinese never lacked the capacity for theoretical reflection: they were creating works of aesthetic theory many centuries before the Westerners, since at least around 300 AD. If they haven't reflected on the "last picture" or the "picture after the last picture", the Chinese reflected on many other issues that have been neglected in the West. And it is likely that there was nothing for them to add to a theme that they received already warmed up from abroad, even more so when the history of their own contemporary art diverged from the history of Western contemporary art and dragged along different problems.

Finally, there is no shortage of abstraction-related names in Chinese contemporary art. The case of Shanghai in the late 1970s and early 1980s is paradigmatic, with names like Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Yu Youhan, Qiu Deshu, Chen Zhen, Zhou Changjiang, Gu Wenda, Cha Guojun and Shen Cheng practicing various styles of abstraction, although it was, in fact, a minority group. Later on that decade, Xu Hong, Li Liang, Qin Yifeng, Shen Haopeng, Shen Fan, Wang Nanming, Zhang Lansheng, Shang Yang, Liang Quan and Ding Yi were steady names for abstract art. By the late 1980s, "abstract art was so widespread in China that the movement has been described by the prominent art critic Li Xiangting as part of an artistic trend of searching for a "purified language." (Zhang, 2020). Even in the 1990s, characterized mainly by realism and figurativeness, Shanghai artists like Zhou Changjiang and Ding Yi persisted in abstraction, the former in abstractionism and cubism, the second adopting horizontal and vertical lines. As for younger generations, one should take note of the names of Huang Jia and Zhang Xuerui.

Moreover, when Chinese artists appropriated the visual language of Western artists, they were moving the original into a very different context where it was reinterpreted in a very different way. And the appropriation of foreign art languages is one of the recognized features not only of Chinese traditional art but of Western art as well, especially modern (for example, the impressionists and post-impressionists with Japanese woodcuts and Picasso with African tribal art) and contemporary art. As Solomon noted:

The artists of the Chinese avant-garde have no more copied Western styles than Roy Lichtenstein has copied comic books or than Michelangelo copied classical sculpture. They have used Western styles cannily and meaningfully to accomplish artistic ends of their own. The form looks similar; the language is imitative; the meaning is foreign. (1993)

Let us not forget that the influence of Japanese, Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist art and thought in Western modern and contemporary art is far from irrelevant. In *Overview*, the Guggenheim Museum of New York tried to show exactly that in its 2009 exhibition "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989". It exhibited 250 works by 110 artists from the 1860s until the 1980s, clarifying to what extent the evolution of American art owes to appropriations and integration of Asian sources:

Vanguard artists consistently looked toward "the East" to forge an independent artistic identity that would define the modern age –and the modern mind– through a new understanding of existence, nature, and consciousness. They drew ideas from Eastern religions, primarily Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as classical Asian art forms and performance traditions. (Munroe 2009)

Even though each artistic creation is rooted in a certain cultural environment, artists are free to choose between nurturing this connection or going beyond it, extending the borders of their

language. Art, all of it, has always been a privileged place for syncretism and miscegenation. Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Thomas Bayle, Michael Biberstein, Alberto Carneiro, to name just a few, are artists who assume Chinese influences in their work, whether from thought or from art itself. We therefore must demystify the idea that Western modern and contemporary art is 'purely' Western.

In addition, the concepts of modernity and contemporaneity must be problematized when applied to non-Western cultures, in this case, the Chinese culture. According to curator Pi Li, the idea that modernity expands from the West to the rest of the world and that the rest of the world, always lagging behind, tends to mimic Western modernity by reaction is "outrageously simplifying". Pi Li also questions the view of Chinese contemporary art as a reaction to a modern Western provocation, or as being conceptualized according to an opposition between tradition and modernity, both derived from a Eurocentric ideology (Pi Li 2003, 78).

According to Jonathan Hay, the American historian of Chinese art, there are indeed not one, but several modernities, some of which spring from the heart of what is commonly considered, in the Western world, as non-modern or pre-modern (Hay 2008, 114). Hay adverts that a modernity that did not derive from the West has always been at play in the history of Chinese art, visible above all in the works of the 'individualists' of the 17th century. Wang (2011) also notes that the 'individualists' paintings of fish, flowers, birds, and rocks show that innovative experimentation can be detected in Chinese art long before the 20th century. Their stylistic innovations in terms of brushstrokes, colours, expression, abstraction, embody a shift of attitude from the adopted artistic conventions by their predecessors.

In short, the roots and internal logic of Chinese contemporary art do not fully coincide with those of Western contemporary art and, therefore, the former should neither be understood nor purely defined according to the conceptual frameworks that are applied to the latter.

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