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SITE-BASED PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART IN THE LONG 1990S

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the first systematic study of contemporary Chinese site-based art, a mode of art practice that takes place in everyday urban spaces such as city streets, construction sites, and other unconventional locations. Combining extensive archival research and artist interviews, the study concentrates on the “long 1990s,” a period I have defined to include parts of the late 1980s and early 2000s. The “long 1990s” brings into focus a set of discursive issues and a corresponding set of socio-structural conditions including rapid urbanization, increased transregional mobility, and a growing market economy—both of which motivated site-based art practice. While many scholars have examined urban art practices in China during this period, I draw specific attention to the growing importance of working “on-site” to reveal how questions around site and space became central to contemporary Chinese art practice.

Site-based art practice in China had roots in the late 1980s but flourished in the 1990s as more artists began to literally take to the streets to merge their art and their own physical bodies with the everyday realities of the here and now. Although this form of art practice was in dialogue with site-based art practices in Europe and North America, I demonstrate the ways in which it was distinct, particularly in its integration of both site *and* time, a crucial aspect that current discourses around site-specificity overlooks. I develop the term “on-site” (*xianchang*), which was first used by Chinese filmmakers and artists in the mid-1990s to describe aesthetic practices that take place on-location, as a culturally specific yet expansive conceptual framework to understand site-based art practice.

While recent attention to politically committed, socially engaged art has prompted aesthetic practices to be seen as either a passive reflection of socio-economic realities or a form of resistance against them, I show how working on-site allowed artists and their artworks to become active and

critical participants in the social sphere without holding a predetermined social or political agenda. Considering how these art practices contributed to the expansion of physical, discursive, and social spaces, I reveal the ways in which on-site art practices articulated new forms of cultural expression in the public realm, transformed overlooked areas of the city into centers of social exchange, and linked these centers to sites abroad. Through four roughly chronological, thematic chapters that move from Chengdu and Lhasa, to Guangzhou, Beijing, Paris, and Berlin, the dissertation provides a transregional account of on-site art in China and an analytical method for examining how these practices emerged from and interacted with each local context. Through this history, I explore a set of interrelated questions: Why did artists begin working on-site during this period? How did they incorporate specific sites into the formal language of their art practice? And what were the aesthetic and socio-political stakes for doing so?

By framing site-based practice as a form of space-making, I illuminate how art, urban social life, and the built environment mutually transformed one another during a period of unprecedented urban change. My research demonstrates that since the 1990s Chinese artists have expanded static notions of site to connect the spatial and temporal specificities of local sites to multiple other sites within a transregional, global context.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the Beijing-based artist Zhang Dali began anonymously spray painting the profile of a large bald head in various alleyways, underneath highway overpasses, and on the walls of houses marked for demolition (Fig. 0.1). A subject of speculation and heated discussion by the city's perplexed public, these graffiti works, which later included hollowing out the silhouette with hammer and chisel, constituted a form of dialogue that the artist sought to have with a city undergoing dramatic urban reconstruction (Fig. 0.2).¹ Rather than thematize or represent this urban transformation, however, Zhang's work engaged it on-site through his physical actions at specific locations around the city. In this case, the presence of the artist at the site is visibly marked by the large bald head—a symbol of the artist that Zhang left behind. Informed by his newfound knowledge of graffiti art while living abroad in Bologna, Italy from 1989 to 1995, Zhang returned to China to pioneer this site-based urban art form and expand the possibilities of contemporary art practice in the country.

Zhang was not the only artist during this time who felt compelled to break with the museum-based, state-run art system to engage new urban sites and audiences by working “on-site.” While artists in the 1980s had already created on-site works at historically symbolic locations such as the Great Wall and Yuanmingyuan, the old imperial summer palace in Beijing, many in the 1990s increasingly turned to work directly in the spaces of their own everyday urban environs.² Elsewhere in Beijing, for example, a group of artists living in the periphery of the city created performance and photographic works in the dilapidated spaces of their urban village between 1993 and 1994 (Fig.

¹ For an account of the ways in which Zhang's work initiated a “dialogue” see, Wu Hung, “Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a City,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 749–68.

² Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, University at Buffalo Art Galleries, 2005).

3.12). In Guangzhou around 1993 members of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group—Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, and Xu Tan—began to stage performances in sites around the city including an abandoned residential building (Fig. 2.6) and the street in front of the city’s tallest skyscraper (Fig. 2.1). In Chengdu in 1995, artists from all over China converged for an art project to create site-based installations and performances at the city’s polluted urban river (Fig. 1.2). These are but a few examples of a widespread artistic turn towards urban, site-based practices that cannot be traced to a single origin point, but all seem to occur simultaneously during this period.³ Although these artists did not advance a unified set of claims for site-based art practice nor consistently use a single term to describe it, they all foregrounded their own personal, on-site interactions with specific sites as the basis for new forms of art practice.

This dissertation provides the first comprehensive historical account of site-based art practice in China. It charts the development of this new art form alongside the extraordinary spatial changes that occurred in various cities across China throughout the long 1990s, which, as I will argue, began in the late 1980s and reached a turning point by the early 2000s. I develop the term “on-site” (*xianchang*), which was first used by filmmakers and artists during this period to describe aesthetic practices that take place on-location, as a culturally specific yet multivalent framework to understand Chinese site-based art practices. On-site art practice had roots in the late 1980s but flourished in the 1990s as more artists began to literally take to the streets to merge their art and their own physical bodies with the everyday realities of the here and now. Considering this history from a global perspective, this study also includes accounts of artists practicing abroad or traveling between cities inside and outside of China to demonstrate the ways in which on-site art practice was informed by the movement of artists and ideas across geographical borders. Through four roughly

³ While artists in China have created works in specific public locations in the 1980s, I will demonstrate that a more sustained, long-term, and self-conscious articulation of a site-based art practice did not emerge until the 1990s. For these earlier examples see, Gao Minglu.

chronological, thematic chapters that move from Chengdu and Lhasa, to Guangzhou, Beijing, Paris, and Berlin, the dissertation provides a transregional account of on-site art practice in China and an analytical method for examining how these practices emerged from and interacted with each local context. Through this history, I explore a set of interrelated questions: *Why did artists begin working on-site during this period? How did they incorporate specific sites into the formal language of their art practice? And what were the aesthetic and socio-political stakes for doing so?*

As will be evident, the emergence of on-site art practice across the country was tied to both internal reasons within the development of art practice in China itself and extra-artistic reasons, most notably the social and spatial changes brought forth by rapid urbanization and the new market-oriented economic policies of the Reform Period. As art historians including Wu Hung and Gao Minglu have pointed out, China's deepening urbanization in the 1990s was an important stimulus for experimental art practices.⁴ Analyzing the works of diverse artists, including that of Zhang Dali, Wu has foregrounded "ruin image" as a theme in contemporary Chinese art of the late 1990s to show how artists subjectively internalized urban demolition and reconstruction through on-site art projects. From an urban studies perspective, Robin Visser has grouped urban art, film, and literature together to identify a "postsocialist urban aesthetic" that is informed by the specificities of urban planning, economics, and politics during the Reform Period.⁵

While these scholars have looked at the ways in which art reflected urban change, others including Elizabeth Parke and Meiqin Wang have framed urban art practice more proactively as

⁴ Wu Hung, *Internalizing Changes: Contemporary Chinese Art and Urban Transformation*, vol. 2008, The Geske Lectures (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2009); Gao Minglu, *The Wall*.

⁵ Urbanist Anne-Marie Broudehoux takes a similar approach but focuses on the city itself and the different cultural contestations over space and place during the Reform Period. Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-Socialist China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Anne-Marie Broudehoux, *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing* (London: Routledge, 2004).

forms of critique and resistance against the pervasive forces of state-led capitalist redevelopment.⁶ These latter approaches have drawn from Euro-North American theoretical traditions and art historical writings that consider urban art practice as forms of progressive spatial politics.⁷ Parke's recent study of the intersections between urban infrastructures and artistic practice in Beijing has demonstrated the ways in which artists subtly critiqued and undermined these state-implemented systems. Building on an earlier study of urban art practices, Wang's recent work on socially engaged art practices in the early 2000s advances social intervention and civic engagement as the basis for urban art practice.⁸ In a similar vein, the artist and art historian Zheng Bo has sought to understand practices of the early 2000s through the theoretical lens of "publicness" and the pursuit of social justice.⁹

Focused predominantly on artworks from the 2000s onward, recent scholarship on socially engaged art in China has suggested that in contrast to the 1990s, artists in the 2000s sought more direct forms of social engagement and activism. For example, Zheng Bo has characterized the early 2000s as a moment in which art practice recommitted itself to building a public sphere following a

⁶ Elizabeth Chamberlin Parke, "Infrastructures of Critique: Art and Visual Culture in Contemporary Beijing (1978–2012)" (Ph.D., Toronto, University of Toronto, 2016); Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Meiqin Wang and Minna Valjakka, eds., *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

⁷ These include the urban theories of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and David Harvey, among others. Art historical accounts of urban art practice in the Euro-North American context are also divided by those who promote more ameliorative approaches such as Suzanne Lacy and Grant Kester and those who advance positions of radical dissensus including Rosalyn Deutsche and Claire Bishop. Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012).

⁸ Meiqin Wang, *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China: Voices from Below*, Routledge Research in Art and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁹ Zheng Bo, "Creating Publicness: From the Stars Event to Recent Socially Engaged Art," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 9, no. 5 (September 2010): 71; Zheng Bo, "The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects" (Ph.D., New York, University of Rochester, 2012).

period of commercialization and profit-seeking in the 1990s.¹⁰ Meiqin Wang has argued that various historical factors have contributed to artists' sense of indifference to social problems in the 1990s, and that while some were concerned with socio-political issues, they responded through "representations of reality... rather than endeavoring for direct social engagement."¹¹

Notwithstanding the historic rise of socially engaged art practice in China in the second decade of the 21st century, these generalizations run the risk of misconstruing the 1990s as a period in which art practice was less critically or actively engaged in shaping urban realities. Such a periodization, I argue, can be attributed to an artificial divide between what is increasingly seen as an "activist" form of art and what is considered more passive, and by implication, less socially engaged. The privileging of an "activist" interpretation of art's relationship to urban social life unduly suggests that artworks that reflect, represent, embody, or internalize aspects of urbanization cannot be critical and active participants in shaping it. Likewise, the interpretive demand that aesthetic gestures advance clear socio-political agendas overlooks the complexity and nuance with which art practices engaged urban social life.

My account of on-site art practice in the 1990s suggests an alternative to this divide. It reveals the ways in which on-site art practice of the 1990s were neither simply passive reflections of China's socio-economic realities nor declarations of protest against it. By engaging urban sites and audiences on-site, such art practices foregrounded the artist and their artwork as active and critical participants in the social sphere. Yet far from taking an activist stance, on-site art practices often operated equivocally, without an explicit social or political agenda. This paradox is at the center of my investigations. To capture how artists understood the social significance of their on-site art practice in China during the long 1990s thus requires an approach that accounts for the ambivalent

¹⁰ Zheng Bo, "The Pursuit of Publicness."

¹¹ Wang, *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*, 5.

and manifold ways in which artists interfaced with the urban environment and the social realm. Making visible these social and aesthetic contributions, I show how on-site art articulated new forms of cultural expression in the public realm, transformed overlooked areas of the city into centers of social exchange, and linked these centers to sites abroad. Considering how these art practices contributed to the expansion of physical, discursive, and social spaces, this dissertation frames on-site art practice as a form of space-making to illuminate how art, urban social life, and the built environment mutually transformed one another during a period of unprecedented urban change.

The Emergence of On-Site Art Practice in the Long 1990s

While art historians have come to agree on a set of interpretations about the 1980s in China, understanding of the 1990s as a distinct period of artistic practice remains much more diffuse.¹² This dissertation frames the long 1990s as an art historical period that cannot be identified through strict decade markers, but rather through a set of discursive issues that motivated art practice and a corresponding set of socio-structural conditions that impacted artistic production. The “long 1990s” brings into focus a period, including parts of the late 1980s and early 2000s, marked by a heightened sense of the contemporary here and now. This sensibility was informed by the broader socio-economic changes of urbanization, increased transregional mobility, and a growing market economy, which directly impacted the lives of artists and development of contemporary art itself.

¹² With the exception of art historian Wu Hung’s extensive and highly influential work on the 1990s as well as Lü Peng’s survey of the 1990s, many historical surveys of contemporary Chinese art focus on the 1980s but do not cover or become more diffuse when discussing the 1990s. Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014); Lü Peng, *Zhongguo dangdai yishu shi, 1990-1999 [A history of contemporary Chinese art, 1990-1999]* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2000); Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo dangdai meishu shi, 1985-1986* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991); Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011); Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003); Jane DeBevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

This period can be understood in contrast to the early to mid-1980s. Coming out of the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the 1980s saw the proliferation of diverse “modern art” practices (*xiandai yishu*) that drew from Euro-North American modernist painting as well as literature and philosophy to challenge state-sanctioned forms of academic realism. These efforts coalesced in the mid-1980s under the term “’85 New Wave Movement” (*'85 xin chao yundong*), which was coined and theorized as an avant-garde (*qianwei*) movement by its chief proponent, the emerging curator and critic Gao Minglu. Gao’s writings, which constitute one of the earliest efforts to historicize this period, framed these diverse art practices as part of a broader cultural movement whose progressive social goals took up the historic mission of early 20th century national revival movements such as the New Culture and the May Fourth Movements.¹³ Artists of the 1980s who were part of the ’85 New Wave, thus, considered themselves the inheritors of both Chinese and Western avant-garde movements.

Between 1986 and 1989, Gao along with several prominent critics prepared to organize a large-scale exhibition that would showcase this explosive proliferation of modern art. The *China Modern Art Exhibition*, translated more provocatively into English as “China/Avant-garde,” opened on February 5, 1989 at the National Gallery in Beijing, one of the most prominent state-run art museums in the country. Far from a unified presentation, however, the exhibition of close to 300 works by 186 artists was rife with internal conflicts among organizers and participants and subsequently shut-down by the government due to the use of a real gun in an unplanned performance work. The controversies surrounding the exhibition and its mixed reception revealed the ways in which the notion of a coherent art movement was already untenable by 1989.¹⁴

¹³ Gao’s perspective was consistent with other critics writing at the time including Li Xianting, Liang Shaojun, among others. Gao Minglu, “The ’85 Youth Art Wave (1986),” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, trans. Kristen Loring (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 52–61.

¹⁴ This has been suggested by Wu Hung. Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*.

Following the show, state authorities severely sanctioned Gao and his fellow organizers, who were demoted from their positions as editors of prominent art journals, and censured the publishing and exhibition of unsanctioned art forms including installation, performance, and works influenced by Western modernism.¹⁵ State-run journals and museums reverted to promoting realist paintings and sculptures. Connecting this government backlash with the subsequent violent suppression of student protests in Tiananmen Square several months later on June 4, 1989, many critics and scholars have attributed the year 1989 as a decisive turning point, indicative of the end of the ideological fervor of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.¹⁶

In contrast to the 1980s, the 1990s has been characterized by art historians as a turn away from grand narratives in favor of a subjective and personal exploration of everyday social life. Employing the term “experimental art” (*shijyan yishu*)—more commonly used by artists in the 1990s—as opposed to “avant-garde art” (*qianwei yishu*), Wu Hung has noted the ways in which as early as 1987, some artists began to focus on individualized experiments with artistic language and materials.¹⁷ In fact, recent accounts of artistic practices in the late 1980s concur that changes in artistic sentiments had already occurred well before 1989. As art historian Katherine Grube’s reassessment of the period has shown, by the late 1980s many artists previously characterized as part of the ‘85 New Wave such as Zhang Peili, Geng Jiayi, and Song Lin—members of the art group Pond Society (*chi she*)—had already turned away from the overbearing goals of the historic mission.¹⁸ Through a series of performance and site-based works in the urban environment of Hangzhou

¹⁵ For an account of the state’s purging of editors affiliated with the ‘85 New Wave see, John Clark, “Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre,” *Pacific Affairs* 65, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 334–52.

¹⁶ As one of the first curators to use 1989 as a periodizing device, Chang Tsong-zung remarked in the catalogue for *China’s New Art, Post-1989*: “In shock, artists came to a sudden realization of their impotence in the face of real politics. The idealism and utopian enthusiasm so typical of new art in the 1980s met its nemesis in the gun barrels in Tiananmen.” Chang Tsong-zung, *China’s New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), i.

¹⁷ For a discussion of these artists see, Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, chap. 7.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Pond Society see, Katherine Grube, “State of Exchange: Contemporary Art and China’s Postsocialist Image Economy” (Ph.D., New York, New York University, 2018), 43–49.

between June and November of 1986, the Pond Society explored the relationship between art and everyday social spaces and audiences (Fig.0.3). These experiments not only constitute a prehistory to the on-site art practices that became prevalent in the 1990s, but also indicate the ways in which artists began to disconnect their art from the burdens of a protracted historic teleology and reconnect it with the everyday concerns of the present moment.

Noting the ways in which artists and critics shifted from using the term “modern” (*xiandai*) in the 1980s to the term “contemporary” (*dangdai*) in the 1990s, Wu has argued that the change in terminology points to a reconceptualization of art practice from a temporal and diachronic one to a spatial and synchronic one.¹⁹ Whereas artists and critics of the 1980s saw themselves as participants in a long modernization movement that had been interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, he argued, practitioners in the 1990s did not coalesce around any particular explication for the meaning or function of “contemporary” art. Although Wu does not expand further on this new synchronic moment, a close analysis of the long 1990s supports the notion that artists during this period developed a new spatio-temporal sensibility rooted in the synchronous present time and space.²⁰

On-site (*xianchang*): Art and Everyday life

In the early years of the 1990s artists turned their attention to the realities of their own everyday life. Writing on the emergence of a distinct new sensibility in painting practices between 1990 and 1991, the critic Yin Jinan took note of a group of academically trained artists focused on depicting “trivial matters from daily life” including urban life and everyday street scenes as well as

¹⁹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 128.

²⁰ In the conclusion of this dissertation, I will address Wu Hung’s spatial notion of the contemporary art as comprising three spheres, a concept that is closely related to his suggestion of synchronicity. Wu Hung, “A Case Of Being “Contemporary:” Conditions, Spheres, And Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 290–306.

portraits of individuals from their own social circles (Fig. 0.4). Yin labeled these artists “New Generation” or “Close-Up” (*jìn jùli*) painters, noting the way in which the latter term “implied a closing of the spiritual gap among art, concepts, and life.”²¹ For Yin this artistic engagement with daily life represented “a new type of Chinese realism,” distinct from the ways in which realism—both academic realism (*xieshizhuyi*) and socialist realism (*xianshizhuyi*)—had been practiced in China in the past.²² Yin’s assessment suggests that what distinguished the realism of Close-Up painters was an absence of the grandiose concepts and ideologies that had long undergirded this artistic format.

A parallel impulse to draw attention to the workaday conditions of everyday life can also be found in new film practices of the early 1990s. In the 1990 documentary *Bumming in Beijing* (*liulang Beijing*), filmmaker Wu Wenguang followed the lives of several experimental artists, including the aforementioned Zhang Dali, as they moved through their living environments and the spaces of the city (Fig. 0.5). Wu’s improvisational style, characterized by the use of an unsteady mobile camera (handheld cameras were recently introduced to China in the late 1980s), long-takes, and shooting “on-the-scene” (*xianchang*) as opposed to in the studio, contributed to what cinema scholars have called the “new documentary movement.”²³ In a 1996 essay Wu formulated his “on-the-scene” (*xianchang*) method as a distinct aesthetic based on “the filmmaker’s observation and witness of the real life of people and things.”²⁴ According to Wu, because “on-the-scene” occurs without the filmmaker’s active interference, it is “irreplicable, unrestorable, and cannot be clarified through

²¹ Yin Jinan, “New Generation and Close Up Artists (1992),” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, trans. Lee Ambrozy (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 155–57.

²² For a discussion of socialist realism see, Christine I. Ho, *Drawing from Life: Sketching and Socialist Realism in the People’s Republic of China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

²³ Cinema scholar Lü Xinyu has noted that this first phase emerged in the late 1980s and lasted until the mid-1990s. Lü Xinyu, “Rethinking China’s New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Social,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*, ed. Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 15–48.

²⁴ Wu Wenguang, “Huidao xianchang: Wo lijie de yizhong jilupian. [Returning to the scene: my understanding of a type of documentary film],” *Dongfang [Orient]*, no. 5 (1996): 91–93.

recourse to language,” and therefore related not only to site but also to a heightened sense of temporality.²⁵ As cinema scholar Luke Robinson has argued, “on-the-scene” aesthetics broke with the linear sense of time presented in official propagandistic documentary films, thus reflecting an epochal sense of skepticism towards the progressive grand narratives of the past.²⁶ Instead, “on-the-scene” documentary film practices of the 1990s conveyed a sense of the present as an unfinished and contingent process that relied on making evident the synchronous co-presence of the filmmaker and the active subject/site. Developing his ideas into an anthology of writings about “on-the-scene,” Wu summarized the term more succinctly as being “in the ‘here’ and ‘now’” (*xianzai shi’ he ‘zaichang’*).²⁷

Throughout the 1990s visual artists also redefined art practice, abandoning the conventional formats of painting and sculpture for new materials and methods that would allow them to thoroughly engage the here and now. Bolstered by European and North American examples of installation, performance, and conceptual art, one of the earliest groups to do so was the Guangzhou-based Big Tail Elephant Working Group (*Daweixiang gongzuozhuhu*), comprised of artists Lin Yilin (b. 1964), Chen Shaoxiong (1962-2016), Liang Juhui (1959-2006), and Xu Tan (b. 1957). Despite their academic training in painting and sculpture, members of the group took up these new art forms in order to immerse their art practice within the social and material realities of the urban environment. Between 1991 and 1998 the group used urban materials including salvaged concrete bricks, neon lights, and mannequins to create installations and performances on city streets and in construction sites in a manner that mimicked the urban processes of the city. Beginning in 1994, Beijing-based artists Yin Xiuzhen and Song Dong—also painters by training—employed vernacular

²⁵ Wu Wenguang, 91.

²⁶ Luke Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁷ Wu later compiled his writings into a 2000 anthology focused on the term “xianchang.” Wu Wenguang, ed., *Xianchang [On the scene]* (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2000).

objects including thread, books, roof tiles, and household items to create works sited in the everyday environs of Beijing's residential *butong* neighborhoods.²⁸ Like Lin, Yin's practice became deeply associated with the use of concrete, a material the artist encountered every day in a city undergoing extensive demolition and reconstruction. The incorporation of these unconventional materials into art practice intersects with what Wu Hung has recently called "material art" of the 1990s, or practices that foregrounded material, rather than image or style, as a means of artistic or social investigation.²⁹ A key distinction, however, is the importance of the materials' connections with specific sites in the works presently discussed. Indeed taking note of another set of early pioneers in the first half of the 1990s, Gao Minglu described the activities of Chengdu-based artists including Dai Guangyu as having "on-site characteristics" (*zhaichang xing*) due to their "direct relationship with local street life."³⁰ As Gao's emphasis of "on-site" suggests, these works asserted the artist's presence "on-the-scene," whether expressed literally through in-situ performances on the streets or through the connections with specific sites that materials facilitate.

By 1997, these aesthetic practices of being "on-site" extended to include ideas about art's encounter with a general public audience. For the year-long experimental art event *Wildlife (Yesheng)*, Song Dong invited artists all over China, including Yin, Dai, and the members of the Big Tail Elephant, to create art projects in their own locales that would "develop a direct relationship with a local environment," emphasizing the notion of "chance encounters (*buqi er yu*) between art and everyday audiences."³¹ By bypassing conventional exhibition methods, Song argued that artists could

²⁸ Wu Hung, "Vernacular' Post-Modern: The Art of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen," in *Chopsticks*, ed. Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, and Christophe W. Mao (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2002), 9–23.

²⁹ Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, eds., *Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2019).

³⁰ Gao Minglu, "Jietou qianwei: yu Chengdu xushi ['Street avant-garde: A narrative of Chengdu]," *Da Yishu [Great art]*, no. 2 (January 2007): 62–63.

³¹ Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, eds., *Yesheng: 1997 nian jingzhe shi [Wildlife: starting from 1997 jingzhe day]* (Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1997), i.

directly engage the public. Describing the goal of “chance encounters,” Song compared it to a car accident:

A passerby might accidentally see something strange, which could have an earth-shattering impact on him, or he might ignore it completely and just walk on by. So let’s say you just happen to be walking down the street and happen to see some art. Does this or doesn’t it produce some impact on the way you think? This is an open question. It’s much like a car accident. We never go somewhere to see a car accident; we only run into a car accident. When you do see one, however, you are shaken by the blood all over the place and decide the next time you’re on the road you will be careful. I find situations like this very significant.³²

Song’s anecdote highlights several important elements of this type of on-site, chance encounter art: first, the work should generate a heightened sense of being on-the-scene as witness to a happening; second, it should direct itself towards an unsuspecting public rather than an art-seeking audience; third, the encounter between the work and the public is an open-ended process—it neither presupposes an impact on all who see it, nor contains a preconceived message; and finally, despite the lack of predetermined meanings, the work has the potential to deeply impact the lives of its audiences. These descriptions characterize the twenty-seven performance, installation, and conceptual works produced for *Wildlife* as well as the many other on-site approaches taken by artists throughout the 1990s.

The desire to engage real sites and audiences and the uncertain nature of the interaction between on-site artworks and the public suggests a complex and ambivalent notion of art’s relationship to society and politics, a position that had been so clearly delineated throughout much of the 20th century. Most definitively, in two famous talks given at the 1942 Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao Zedong argued that art’s primary audience was the masses, and it should therefore serve and reflect the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers. Rejecting “art for art’s sake,”

³² Song Dong, “An Interview with Song Dong,” in *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, ed. Wu Hung (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2000), 144–47.

Mao argued that “literature and art are subordinate to politics” and should advance the revolutionary goals of its class and party, namely the establishment of socialism.³³ As art historian Julia Andrews has demonstrated, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Communist Party systematically implemented these ideas alongside the prescribed style of socialist realism through a centralized system of art education and production that had a lasting impact long after this period.³⁴ Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, many artists re-embraced the notion of art for art’s sake including the formerly condemned and newly rehabilitated French-trained artist Wu Guanzhong, who, in a widely debated essay from 1979, promoted formalist aesthetics over art that was “burdened with the additional obligation to preach.”³⁵ By the ’85 New Wave Movement artists ostensibly embraced formal experimentation as they disassociated themselves from the prescribed styles of the revolutionary period. Yet as Wu Hung has observed, the term “movement” suggests that much of the motivations for this art was still deeply rooted in longstanding assertions of art’s role in advancing social and political goals.³⁶ As discussed previously, advocates of the New Wave saw themselves as participants in a long modernization and national strengthening movement dating from the early 20th century.

Art historians have concurred that the social implications of art practice continue to be central to aesthetic expression in China throughout the 20th and into the 21st century.³⁷ As

³³ These remarks built on pre-existing ideas regarding the socio-political aims of art established earlier during the “New Culture Movement” (1915-1921), which tied cultural modernization to a national self-strengthening movement against Western incursions into China. Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies; University of Michigan, 1980), 75.

³⁴ Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³⁵ Guanzhong Wu, “Huihua de Xingshi Mei [Formalist Aesthetics in Painting],” *Meishu [Art]* 138, no. 5 (1979): 33–35, 44.

³⁶ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 92.

³⁷ These include the three foremost historians Wu Hung, Gao Minglu, and Lü Peng, among many others. Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*; Lü Peng, *Zhongguo dang dai yi shu shi*; Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*.

performance scholar Thomas Berghuis has shown, the earliest conceptions of performance art in China were rooted in the terms “*yundong*” (movement) and “*huodong*” (activity), and this understanding of performance as a *social* action became a core aspect of Chinese performance practices.³⁸ Nevertheless, in contrast to the manifestos issued by artists in the 1980s and the writings by critics who theorized the social and political basis for the ’85 New Wave, no definitive pronouncements on the socio-political mission of art were made in the 1990s. Both Wu Wenguang’s ideas about “on-the-scene” and Song Dong’s concept of “chance encounter,” which found wide acceptance in their respective fields, suggest a strong desire to engage everyday social life, yet did not articulate the socio-political implications of such practices. In the absence of, and perhaps fatigue from grand narratives about art, society, and politics, new conceptions of the relationship between art and everyday life had to be worked out in practice rather than in theory. As will be evident, throughout the 1990s artists working “on-site” found various ways to re-engage broader social and political issues in a manner that simultaneously continued to assert the primacy of formal experimentation and artistic autonomy over broader ideological agendas.³⁹

Expanding the Art System: On-site practices and New Exhibition Spaces

Throughout the 1990s artists not only formulated new understandings of art’s relationship to social life, but also initiated structural changes to the state-run art system by establishing new exhibition spaces and independent publications. For many artists during this period the scarcity of venues to exhibit experimental art was a key concern related to the present time and space of art

³⁸ Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2006), 38.

³⁹ Writing on art practices in the early 2000s, art historian Chang Tan has insightfully parsed out the complex and contradictory historical legacy of communism in contemporary art practices. Tan noted the emergence of what she terms a “communal aesthetics” that is “grounded firmly in social reality that nevertheless refrains from turning itself into political activism.” These sensibilities, I argue, were already developing in the 1990s, and was only later articulated with respect to social practice in the 2000s. Chang Tan, “Art for/of the Masses: Revisiting the Communist Legacy in Chinese Art,” *Third Text* 26, no. 2 (March 2012): 177–94.

practice. In a group interview on why Chinese artists began to create on-site works in the 1990s, Zhang Dali responded, “Because there were no available spaces—no galleries, no museum—in which I could exhibit my work, I thought ‘Let’s forget about a formal space; let’s do something which is directly related to and takes place in the environment.’”⁴⁰ Zhang’s comments point to the government’s hostility to experimental art practices following the closure of the *China Modern Art Exhibition* and the suppression of dissent after the tragedy of Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. In the immediate period after 1989 state-affiliated institutions—the primary platform for the arts—effectively banned the publication and exhibition of experimental art practices including installation and performance art.⁴¹ As a result, many artists began to produce works created for and exhibited in the spaces of their own homes. Calling the phenomenon “apartment art” (*gongyu yishu*), Gao Minglu has described this early 1990s tendency as a “retreat from the public sphere” and a “critique of social spaces and art institutions,” arguing that artists were not only unable but unwilling to exhibit in official public spaces.⁴² Not limited to the spaces of the apartment, however, these artists were interested more broadly in how art could be connected to the spaces of the everyday. As Gao himself pointed out, these practices foregrounded the artwork’s relationship to its physical environment. “Apartment art” can thus be considered a subset of a larger desire to work “on-site.” Indeed, many artists who first exhibited in their apartment, including Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, and Zhu Jinshi quickly turned to creating works in outdoor locations.

⁴⁰ Francesca Dal Lago et al., “Space and Public: Site Specificity in Beijing,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 74–87.

⁴¹ After the closing of *China Avant-Garde*, artists associated with the exhibition were given a two-year ban on exhibiting in the China Art Gallery and the magazines that supported these artists including *Chinese Fine Arts Weekly* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) and *Trends in Art Theory* (*Meishu sichao*) were shut down. Further exhibitions of installation, performance, and new media art were strongly discouraged by state-run art institutions. For an assessment of exhibition conditions during this period see, Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2000).

⁴² Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, 269, 276.

By 1991 and 1992 conditions for exhibiting experimental art had already showed signs of cautious recovery despite the continuation of censorship into the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, in 1991 the *Garage Show*, an artist-organized exhibition that included not only painting, but also installation, video, and conceptual art, successfully took place in the rented basement parking garage of the state-run Shanghai Education Hall (Fig. 0.6).⁴³ In contrast, when Song Dong tried to exhibit the performance, installation, and video mixed-media work *Another Lesson, Do You Want to Play with Me?* for a solo-show at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) Gallery in 1994, the exhibition was shut down by authorities within the first hour (Fig. 0.7).⁴⁴ Presenting a different perspective on why Chinese artists began to create on-site works in the 1990s, Song offered a rejoinder to Zhang’s response, noting, “Although this [lack of available spaces to exhibit] was one of the original motivations, we have also begun to realize how the site can become an intrinsic part of one’s artistic language.”⁴⁵ Indeed, what may have made Song’s solo-show at the academy seem so reprehensible to authorities was precisely the ways in which the work’s imitation of a classroom-like setting—replete with desks and real students—and its emphasis on un-intelligibility challenged the very spaces of the academic institution within which it was exhibited. In this context, later on-site works such as Zhang’s 1999 *Dialogue*, a graffiti work sited against the backdrop of the National Art Museum of China, should be read as not just a practical response to the lack of exhibition spaces, but an aesthetic interest in everyday spaces and a commitment to expanding the possibilities of artistic expression outside of institutionalized spaces (Fig. 0.8).⁴⁶

⁴³ For discussion of select works in the show see, Grube, “State of Exchange,” 91–105.

⁴⁴ Song Dong, interview with the author, June 28, 2019, Beijing.

⁴⁵ Lago et al., “Space and Public.”

⁴⁶ Zhang’s work also recalls earlier moments in which artists articulated their relationship to this official art institution such as the 1979 Stars Art exhibition staged at the gates of the museum perimeter and the Xiamen Dada art group’s *Towing the National Art Gallery Away* (1989), a proposal for the 1989 *China Modern Art Exhibition*.

The paucity of official venues to show experimental artwork, the awareness of potential censorship, and artists' own desire to expand their art practice heightened the stakes for how and where to exhibit, prompting a decade of experimental art exhibitions in unusual non-exhibition spaces and outdoor locations. Examining this phenomenon, Wu Hung has argued that artists and curators increasingly saw the exhibition itself—its site, form, and function—as an avenue for artistic experimentation, which in turn stimulated artists to produce on-site works.⁴⁷ Including art projects such as Song's *Wildlife* (1997-1998), Wu suggests that such experiments also explored larger questions about the relationship between art and society at large by engaging contemporary social issues in everyday spaces. Although Wu has focused on experimental exhibitions in the second half of 1990s, an influential precursor was the environmental art event *Keepers of the Waters* (1995, 1996), for which artists including Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen were invited to create on-site works in the urban rivers of Chengdu and Lhasa specifically to call attention to water pollution and advocate for its rehabilitation. Initiated by the American eco-feminist artist Betsy Damon, *Keepers* also reveals the ways in which on-site art and exhibition practices in China were also impacted by similar trends abroad. Yet while Damon—informed by North American practices of site-specific art—conceived of the on-site project through the lens of social and environmental activism, participating Chinese artists created works that problematized the assumed connection between working on-site and directly effecting social change. Song's notion of “chance encounters” as the basis for the experimental exhibition *Wildlife* can therefore be understood as a direct response to *Keepers*, one that offered a more open-ended model for how on-site exhibition and art practices could engage everyday sites and audiences.

⁴⁷ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*.

Throughout the course of the 1990s what began as a practical response to a structural issue—the lack of exhibition venues—gradually transformed into an experimental aesthetic commitment to working on-site. In turn, these on-site art practices also contributed to structural changes within the existing art system by creating alternative channels of exhibition and dissemination that were largely independent from state-run art museums and magazines.⁴⁸ In 1994 for example, artists Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, along with the artist-entrepreneur Zeng Xiaojun, co-published the *Black Cover Book (Heipi shu)*, which presented documentation of on-site works, artists statements, an interview with the New York-based Chinese artist Tsieh Tehching, art news, and translated texts by famous Western artists.⁴⁹ Attempting to establish the publication as a quarterly journal, the group was only able to produce two subsequent volumes, the *White Cover Book (Baipi shu)* (1995) and the *Grey Cover Book (Huiipi shu)* (1997) before discontinuing. In 1996 experimental photographers RongRong—a close associate of Ai— and Liu Zheng began producing another series dedicated to experimental photography. Between 1996 and 1998 the pair manually photocopied and hand-bound four issues of *New Photo (Xin sheying)* (1996). Both series of artist-led publications had limited print runs and circulated informally among experimental art circles.

To some extent, the effort to establish new discursive platforms that could support new art practices had already occurred in the 1980s. As art historian Martina Köppel-Yang has shown, new art magazines including *Chinese Fine Arts Weekly (Zhongguo meishu bao)* established in 1985 and *The Trend of Art Thought (Meishu sichao)* in 1984 were founded to cover the '85 New Wave, current art

⁴⁸ I use the caveat “largely independent” to acknowledge that while earlier studies of this history have divided the Chinese art world into “official” and “unofficial” realms, scholars such as Jane Debevoise have pointed to the institutions bridging the two. This is especially the case with *Wildlife*, which was organized in collaboration with Guo Shirui, the director of the state-run Contemporary Art Center, which was part of the National News and Publications Bureau. DeBevoise, *Between State and Market*.

⁴⁹ According to Stephanie Tung, the curator Feng Boyi helped to manage the project though he was not credited in the books. In the latter two editions the artist Zhuang Hui joined to take on Feng’s role. Stephanie H. Tung, “Black, White, and Grey: Ai Weiwei in Beijing, 1993–1997,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 6 (December 2017): 55–64.

trends, and theoretical issues.⁵⁰ Yet these publications—the former published by the China Arts Research Academy and the latter by the Chinese Artists Association of Hubei Province—were still closely affiliated with the academy, which was controlled by the Ministry of Culture, and with the Chinese Artists Association, which was controlled by the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party.⁵¹ Despite the progressive outlook of their editorial departments, the publications were ultimately subject to pressures from the state. After the events of Tiananmen Square, *Fine Arts Weekly* was shut down and its managing editor Li Xianting, was placed under investigation for his support of the new art movement.⁵²

In contrast to some of the ill-fated art journals of the 1980s, the artist-led publications of the 1990s were directed towards a smaller circle of like-minded experimental artists and thus fell under the radar of authorities. As the *Black Cover Book's* Notice to Contributors stated, it was “not openly distributed, not for sale, only for internal exchange.”⁵³ Likewise, *New Photo* stated that it was dedicated to “fellow idealists,” suggesting a much smaller and intimate audience than the readership of a large formal publication.⁵⁴ In the absence of exhibition venues, these publications, comprised mostly of images rather than writings, doubled as both arts journal and a kind of alternative “exhibition” space. Building on these efforts to bring like-minded artists in dialogue with one another, the 1997 art project *Wildlife* also featured a catalogue documenting the on-site works by the participating artists. As Wu Hung has suggested, the catalogue served as a technical solution to the challenge of exhibiting on-site works that were produced by different artists in regions across China

⁵⁰ Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare*.

⁵¹ Julia Andrews offers a helpful chart to understand the organization hierarchies of the Chinese art bureaucracy. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 6.

⁵² Clark, “Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre.”

⁵³ Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun, eds., *Hei pi shu [Black cover book]* (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing Company Limited, 1994), 160.

⁵⁴ RongRong and Liu Zheng, eds., *New Photo*, vol. 1 (Beijing, 1997), 2.

over the course of a year, thus constituting the mutual “site” of artistic communication.⁵⁵ While Song himself rejected the notion of a fixed exhibition space in any form, the catalogue of on-site works nevertheless draws comparisons with the practice of “document exhibitions” (*wenxian zhan*), or shows of conceptual sketches, photographs, and documentary records, which emerged in the wake of government prohibitions against exhibiting experimental art in the first half of the 1990s.⁵⁶ For participating artists who often worked spontaneously on-site with little or no audiences, the inclusion of their artwork documentation in the *Wildlife* catalogue constituted an exhibition insofar as it ultimately facilitated the display and dissemination of their work to broader audiences.

Whereas *Black Cover Book*, *New Photo*, and *Wildlife* served as a virtual exhibition space, in the late 1990s other artists and curators attempted to establish actual experimental exhibition spaces that were independent from both state-run institutions and the growing constellation of commercial art galleries.⁵⁷ In 1998 the curator Feng Boyi, in collaboration with the performance artist Cai Qing, organized the experimental exhibition *Trace of Existence: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98* (*Shengcun de bengji: '98 zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmo zhan*), which invited artists to create on-site works engaged with the physical spaces of the abandoned factory where the show was sited (Fig. 3.2). Cai, who had recently returned from living in Germany for a decade, sought to transform the disused space located in the city’s semi-rural periphery into a platform for experimental art activities and international artistic exchange.⁵⁸ The name of the art space, Art Now Studio (*Xianshi yishu*

⁵⁵ Song Dong, “An Interview with Song Dong,” 146.

⁵⁶ On “document exhibitions” see, Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, eds., *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2004), 22.

⁵⁷ While the discussion of commercial galleries is beyond the scope of this dissertation, Jane Debevoise has recently shown how galleries that developed in the late 1990s in Shanghai such as ShangART (est. 1996) balanced the necessities of profit-making with a commitment to supporting experimental art practices. Jane DeBevoise, “Shanghai 2000: Let’s Talk About Money,” in *Uncooperative Contemporaries: Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in 2000* (London: Afterall Books, 2020), 20–57.

⁵⁸ Feng Boyi and Cai Qing, eds., *Shengcun Hengji: '98 Zhongguo Dangdai Yishu Neibu Guanmo Zhan [Trace of Existence: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98]* (Beijing: Art Now Studio, 1998), Forward.

gongzuo shi), reflected the artist and curator's commitment to art practices that would engage the here (*xian*) and now (*shi*). In curating *Trace of Existence* as Art Now Studio's inaugural show, Feng selected artists whose on-site practices reflected their "trace of existence," which he understood as "artists' personal experience of and subjective intervention into certain aspects of real social life."⁵⁹ Bringing together art-, exhibition-, and institution-making practices, *Trace of Existence* exemplified the ways in which on-site practices constituted both an aesthetic and a structural form of space-making within the art system of the late 1990s.

Artists, Art Activities, and Urban Transformation

Throughout the 1990s efforts to create a semi-autonomous alternative art system with new discursive channels and social networks developed alongside the changing social identity of artists as they became increasingly independent from the state. For the first generation of art students to return to the art academy for training, after the disruption of the colleges by the Cultural Revolution, an art career after one's studies entailed either entering into a state-assigned work-unit (*danwei*) as a cultural worker or remaining at the academy to teach. This had been the case for prominent artists associated with the '85 New Wave such as Zhang Xiaogang, who graduated from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1982 and worked briefly as a scenery painter for a theater troupe before returning to teach at the academy.⁶⁰ This situation continued into the 1990s with a second generation of artists who graduated around 1989. As the state-implemented work-unit began to be replaced by a new economic system of privatized entrepreneurial pursuits, artists who were initially affiliated with the

⁵⁹ Feng Boyi, "Shengcun hengji de henji [The traces of trace of existence]," in *Shengcun hengji: '98 Zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmo zhan [Trace of Existence: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98]*, ed. Feng Boyi and Cai Qing (Beijing: Art Now Studio, 1998), 10.

⁶⁰ Zhang was initially placed into a factory *danwei* but refused these positions. For a detailed account on the artist see, Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Zurich: Scalo, 2005), 263–99; Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 51–80.

academy found new ways of supporting themselves as independent artists. For example, although Yin Xiuzhen taught at the Central Academy of Art and Design Middle School after graduating from the Fine Arts Department of the Capital Normal University in 1989, she eventually quit to become a full-time independent artist, taking on odd jobs to support her work.⁶¹ Others such as the CAFA-trained sculptors Zhan Wang, Sui Jianguo, and Yu Fan continued to teach at the academy, but formed an alternative network in which to develop their independent art practices. In 1995 the three established the Three Men United Studio, staging on-site works and exhibitions that significantly departed from academic conventions.

Others operated entirely independently. Despite having little to no academic credentials, many began to practice art independently on account of their own self-designation as an artist. In 1993, for example, the self-taught photographer RongRong moved to Beijing in pursuit of an artistic career. Supporting himself by working at a wedding photography studio—a burgeoning new industry at the time—RongRong joined a community of former CAFA graduates turned independent artists living in the outskirts of the city. Through their on-site performances and photographic practices, RongRong and his performance art collaborators Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Cang Xin, among others, transformed the ramshackle village where they lived into a hotbed of experimental art activities, self-styling the area “Beijing East Village.”⁶²

The development of artists as a social group was deeply intertwined with the restructuring of China’s socio-economic system during the Reform Period. In fact, RongRong’s arrival in Beijing and his socio-economic trajectory as an independent artist was part of broader changes that affected people of all occupations across China: with economic reforms and the growth of private industries, individuals became increasingly mobile, moving to big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and

⁶¹ Yin stated that she quit around 1998/1999. Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author, June 28, 2019, Beijing.

⁶² Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong’s East Village, 1993-1998* (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003).

Guangzhou for work. The large numbers of people who moved from impoverished rural regions to the city in search of work were known collectively as the “floating population” (*liudong renkou*), a term that referred to the ways in which they became unmoored from their household registration (*hukou*), a system that kept rural and urban populations tied to their respective domains.⁶³ The notion of “floating” was also applied to artists who moved to cities to pursue the arts. For example, the Chinese title of Wu Wenguang’s 1990 film *Bumming in Beijing* referred to the artists he documented as “drifting in Beijing” (*liulang Beijing*). A few of them, including Zhang Dali—originally from Harbin—had settled in an “artist village” (*huajia cun*) in the northwest outskirts of the city near the ruins of Yuanmingyuan, the old imperial summer palace.⁶⁴ The growing popularity of the Yuanmingyuan artist village as a center for graduates of the academy who did not enter the work-unit system attests to the ways in which Beijing quickly grew to become the country’s leading center of the arts. As journalist Wang Jifang’s first-hand accounts and interviews with artists living in Yuanmingyuan and the East Village has revealed, these alternative spaces and ways of living contributed to new notions of a “free” (*ziyou*), or “independent,” artist and art community in Beijing.⁶⁵

These socio-economic changes also impacted the urban environment in significant ways. The influx of migrants into the city transformed the urban periphery—a constantly shifting zone where the urban and rural intersect—into the most socially and spatially dynamic region of the city.⁶⁶

⁶³ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁶⁴ On the history of Yuanmingyuan and urban development see Anne Marie-Broudehoux. On the rise and fall of Yuanmingyuan and the East Village artist community see, Karen Smith and Wang Jifang. Broudehoux, *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing*, chap. 3; Karen Smith, “Heart of the Art,” in *Beijing: Portrait of a City* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2008), 107–19; Wang Jifang, *Ershi shiji zuihou de langman: Beijing ziyou yishujia shenghuo shilu [The twentieth century’s last romance: Documents of independent artists in Beijing]* (Harbin: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1999).

⁶⁵ Wang Jifang, *Ershi shiji zuihou de langman: Beijing ziyou yishujia shenghuo shilu [The twentieth century’s last romance: Documents of independent artists in Beijing]*.

⁶⁶ Xuefei Ren, “Lost in Translation: Names, Meanings, and Development Strategies of Beijing’s Periphery,” in *What’s in a Name? Talking about Urban Peripheries*, ed. Richard Harris and Charles Vorms (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 316–33.

As urban historian Thomas Campanella has explained, whereas the urban work-unit had functioned since the late 1950s as a self-contained spatial compound that kept work, housing, and social services in close proximity to one another, in the Reform Period the state scaled back its role as employer and landlord, allowing the new labor and housing market to take its course.⁶⁷ The resulting rural-to-urban migration in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the concentric expansion of cities as it did not concentrate in the center-city, but rather in the urban periphery, where much of the new, privately-developed housing was being built on abandoned villages and farmland.⁶⁸ Due to urban renewal in the center city, the periphery also absorbed large numbers of former inner-city residents who were forced out. Yuanmingyuan artist village and the “Beijing East Village,” both located just outside the city proper, were former villages that provided cheap housing for this new population. For both poor migrant workers and migrant artists alike, the periphery of the city became a site of arrival and a space in which to reinvent oneself.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s Beijing’s urban periphery, especially the area to the northeast of the Fourth Ring Road, became the site of concerted efforts to establish artist-run exhibition spaces that would offer alternatives to state-run art institutions. For example, when Cai Qing decided to establish Art Now Studio, he specifically chose an abandoned rural factory in this area; the experimental space was not only affordable, but also offered a source of artistic inspiration due to its particular associations with agricultural labor and its remote, therefore “alterative” status. Articulating these sentiments, Feng Boyi noted in the inaugural exhibition catalogue, “There is no place for conceptual art within the framework of the official Chinese art establishment...The

⁶⁷ Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China’s Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), chap. 7.

⁶⁸ According to Campanella, between 1980 and 1990 around 77% of all new housing built in Beijing was in the outlying suburban districts. During this time, Beijing’s central districts lost 82,000 people while its suburbs gained nearly 1.7 million new residents. Between 1990 and 2000 this phenomenon more than doubled with the city core losing another 222,000 and the suburbs gaining nearly 3 million new people. Campanella, 190.

location of this space, lying as it does between urban density and agricultural countryside, peripheral to a center, mirrors the position of conceptual art in China.”⁶⁹ Although Cai and Feng aspired to but never succeeded in making Art Now Studio into a permanent space for international artistic exchange, their efforts reflected a widespread desire to do so among artists and curators in Beijing. Since the mid-1990s, artists had begun renting studio space nearby at Factory 798, a half-abandoned industrial factory complex. Between 2002 and 2003 through a series of on-site exhibition activities organized by Feng Boyi, Huang Rui (another recently returned artist from Tokyo), RongRong, and their transnational network of collaborators including the Chicago-based art historian and curator Wu Hung and the Tokyo-based gallery owner Tabata Yukihiro, Factory 798 flourished into an informal arts district with privately-run exhibition venues and galleries.⁷⁰ Related efforts to establish another cluster of artist-run art spaces in the nearby urban village of Caochangdi were also led by Ai Weiwei and RongRong between 2000 and 2006.

Transregional Movement of People and Ideas

Since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s the development of contemporary art practice in China has been strongly influenced by the transregional movement of people and ideas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s many artists embraced a “craze for going abroad” (*chuguo re*) whether to take a brief tour, sojourn for multiple years, or permanently emigrate. These experiences abroad fundamentally transformed their art practices as their first-hand experience of seeing art practices abroad and their increasing participation in international exhibitions prompted them to grapple with

⁶⁹ Feng Boyi, “Shengcun hengji de henji [The traces of trace of existence],” 13.

⁷⁰ On the development of 798 see, Jennifer Currier, “Art and Power in the New China: An Exploration of Beijing’s 798 District and Its Implications for Contemporary Urbanism,” *Town Planning Review* 79, no. 2/3 (March 2008): 237–65; Meng Sun, “The Production of Art Districts and Urban Transformation in Beijing” (Ph.D., Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2010); Zhou Lan, *Kongjian de xiangdu: 798 yishu qu de shehui bianqian [Dimension of space: 798 art district’s social changes]* (Beijing: Zhongguo qing gongye chubanshe, 2012).

the temporal and spatial disjuncture of multiple artistic contexts. As a result, rather than conceiving of their work as a diachronic continuation of earlier art and cultural movements as many artists did in the 1980s, in the 1990s artists repositioned their works to respond synchronically to these changing sites and contexts. Examining the impact that Zhang Xiaogang's three-month trip to Germany in 1992 had on his artistic development, art historian Peggy Wang has shown how the artist reoriented his art practice from being a formal extension of Western modernism to developing a new visual language that could speak to the specificity of his personal Chinese experience. As Wang noted, for the first time, Zhang, who had only ever seen Western art in reproductions, was able to see how these artworks' formal innovations were actually grounded in their physical sites and contexts.⁷¹

For Zhang as well as many other artists who sojourned abroad much longer than he, the experience of Western art institutions also informed an understanding of art as part of a broader discursive and institutional system that required development and support. Many who returned or maintained dual homes in China and abroad adopted an organizational mentality, helping to foster transregional artistic networks and serving as a channel for the dissemination of information about domestic and international art practices. In 1994, for example, a small but significant wave of émigrés who returned to Beijing, including the artist couple Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen from Berlin; the couple Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao from New York; Ai Weiwei from New York; and Huang Rui from Tokyo, stimulated the domestic art scene. Both couples established their respective homes as a studio and exhibition space that championed on-site art practices. Ai not only began work on the *Black Cover Book* (1994), as discussed previously, but also co-founded the China Art Archive and Warehouse, an independent art space, with Dutch curator Hans Van Dijk and Belgian

⁷¹ Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, chap. 2.

curator Frank Uytterhaegen in 2000. And, as noted above, Huang's transnational connections would later aid efforts to establish Factory 798 as an arts district.

If artists active in the mid-1980s began to create art in response to the influx of books on Western art history and theory, by the 1990s many were already exhibiting abroad among their international contemporaries, traveling back and forth between China and the world. Beginning with several large-scale international exhibitions such as *The Magicians of the Earth (Les Magiciens de la Terre)* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989, which included three Chinese artists; *China Avantgarde* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 1993, which included sixteen Chinese artists; and the 45th Venice Biennale of 1993, which included thirteen Chinese artists, contemporary Chinese art began to receive broad exposure internationally. Examining this exhibition history, art historian Britta Erickson has shown that far from reflecting an egalitarian, globalized art world, these international exhibitions were marked by Western-centric ideological biases including a residual colonialist search for exoticism that favored stereotypically “Chinese” imagery, a Cold-War mentality that read Chinese artistic expression through the limited lens of political dissidence, and perceptions of Chinese art's derivativeness vis-à-vis Western innovation.⁷² As the critic Wang Nanming trenchantly quipped, “People do not pay attention to Chinese art because it is art.”⁷³

Encountering an international art world that was so thoroughly governed by a center-versus-periphery mindset, Chinese artists conceived their art practice as intervening in this unequal spatial paradigm by asserting the significance of the periphery. In a recent reassessment of what has been

⁷² Britta Erickson, “The Reception in the West of Experimental Mainland Chinese Art of the 1990s,” in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000*, ed. Wu Hung, Huangsheng Wang, and Boyi Feng (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 105–12; See also, Peggy Wang, “Making and Remaking History: Categorising ‘Conceptual Art’ in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 10 (June 2014); Franziska Koch, “China on Display for European Audiences? The Making of an Early Travelling Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Art: China Avantgarde,” *Transcultural Studies* 2011, no. 2 (2011): 66–139.

⁷³ Wang Nanming, “Xifang shuangchong biao zhun yu dang dai yishu piping de qitu [Double standards of the west and the wrong path of contemporary art criticism],” *Jiangsu Huakan* 209, no. 5 (1998): 2.

described earlier in this introduction as “Close-Up” or “New Generation” painting practices based on everyday life in the early 1990s, Peggy Wang has suggested that this turn to spatial specificity is directly related to anxieties of influence within the global art context.⁷⁴ According to Wang, “artists’ depictions of their own lives concretely confirmed their location in a specific time and place. [And] that this was framed, in turn, as a validation of their rightful place in the world.”⁷⁵ Indeed, the possibility that on-site art practice might offer an avenue out of Western bias had also been a motivating factor for Feng Boyi’s on-site exhibition *Trace of Existence* (1998). Framing the exhibition’s focus on practices that reflect everyday life as an intervention into the “continued insistence of socialist ideology and attitudes towards art in the minds of Western curators and the powers that be,” Feng expressed “the hope that by placing it [the exhibition] in a Chinese social environment it could be the start of something that would grow and could be nurtured independently in China.”⁷⁶ In the catalogue preface, Feng extended these ideas by drawing a series of parallels between conceptual art’s peripheral relationship to the official art establishment, the peripheral physical location of the exhibition space vis-à-vis the city center, and China’s peripheral place in the international arena. By asking artists to “work specifically to the site” and “give consideration to the making of art within a peripheral location, in China and not the “center,” and not in a Western museum,” the curator sought to reposition this triply peripheral status as the source of artistic inspiration and innovation.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Though Wang does not use the term “anxiety of influence,” her suggestion points to Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence,” which art historian Ming Tiampo has recently built upon to explore Japanese artistic strategies of responding to their sense of marginality vis-à-vis the Western art world. Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*; Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁷⁵ Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 40.

⁷⁶ Feng Boyi, “Shengcun hengji de henji [The traces of trace of existence],” 12.

⁷⁷ Feng Boyi, 13.

For Chinese artists working abroad, efforts to adapt to changing social and artistic contexts did not necessarily result in the development of an itinerant, placeless, and commodified form of art—as art historian Miwon Kwon had anticipated—or the predominance of works that pandered to Western tastes—as many Chinese critics including Wang Nanming had feared.⁷⁸ Rather, artists used on-site methods to explore specific historical connections across different local sites and uncover the complex processes and conditions of transregional contact. As early as the late 1980s, Zhu Jinshi, who spent eight years in Berlin, drew inspiration from his own journey from Beijing to Berlin to develop an on-site art practice that linked these two sites. In a number of conceptual art activities and performances in the streets of Berlin and at the Berlin Wall, Zhu reflected on the history of Cold War geo-political borders to envision new ways of crossing conceptual and physical borders. Even as the Paris-based Huang Yong Ping was directly accused by Wang of “conforming to the ‘Chinese characteristics’ mandated by the West,” a closer examination of his on-site approach reveals the ways in which the artist actually exposed the colonialist underpinnings of the burgeoning global art world and reflected on the contradictions of his own empowerment and limitations as an artist working within this system. Already creating on-site works that were intimately related to the everyday local spaces of Beijing in the first half of the 1990s, Yin Xiuzhen adapted her approach to engage sites outside of China as she began to work internationally in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Influenced by her experience of travel, Yin’s works from this latter period used on-site materials to draw connections across different sites and times, revealing the ways in which local sites—both inside and outside of China—are interpenetrated by global histories of contact, encounter, and migration.

⁷⁸ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Wang Nanming, “The Shanghai Art Museum Should Not Become a Market Stall in China for Western Hegemony: A Paper Delivered at the 2000 Shanghai Biennale,” in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung, trans. Robert Bernell (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001), 265–68.

The Early 2000s: A Turning Point

In the early 2000s, due to the increased mobility of artists and curators living and working domestically and internationally, on-site art merged with other genealogies of site-based art practice including site-specific art, social practice, and eco-aesthetics, among others.⁷⁹ While on-site art practice continues to the present, it no longer reflects the same set of issues, stakes, and sense of urgency that spurred its development in China throughout the long 1990s. This turning point can be traced to the first decade of the 2000s when experimental art practice became reintegrated with the state system, which not only recognized on-site art practice, but assimilated it in various ways. By the year 2000 roughly a decade of on-site art, curatorial practice, and informal institution building had not only expanded the field of possibilities for practicing contemporary art, but also contributed to a growing domestic art market, the rise of private art institutions and galleries, and official acceptance by the state. As critics have noted, the 3rd Shanghai Biennale of 2000, which took place at the state-run Shanghai Art Museum, was a milestone in this development.⁸⁰ The exhibition, which featured domestic and international artists working in formerly unsanctioned art forms such as installation and video, was organized by an international team of curators.⁸¹ Since the *Modern Art Exhibition* at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing was shut down by authorities in 1989, no other exhibition of contemporary art of this scale and ambition had been successfully staged in a national-

⁷⁹ Kwon, *One Place After Another*; Wang, *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*; Zheng Bo and Sohl Lee, “Contemporary Art and Ecology in East Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 215–22.

⁸⁰ Critics such as Zhu Qingsheng lauded it as “a watershed moment in Chinese art history” because it was “China’s first public, legitimately organized exhibition of modern art.” Zhu Qingsheng, “Zhongguo di yici hefa de xiandai yishuzhan: Guanyu Shanghai shuangnianzhan [China’s first legitimate modern art exhibition: The 2000 Shanghai Biennale],” in *Piping de shidai: ershi shiji mo Zhongguo meishu piping wencui [Era of criticism: selected works of Chinese art critics in the end of 20th century]*, ed. Jia Fangzhou, vol. 2 (Nanning: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 2003), 347–52.

⁸¹ *2000 Shanghai shuangnianzhan: haishang • Shanghai [2000 Shanghai Biennale: Shanghai Spirit]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum, 2000).

or municipal-level art museum in China.⁸² While scholars Wu Hung and more recently Mia Yu have examined the ways in which the biennial represented different and often conflicting positions within the art world, the biennial can also be seen as a key moment in the state's growing attempts to harness the arts towards economic and geopolitical goals.⁸³ As its title, "Shanghai Spirit" in English and "*Haisang · Shanghai*" ("Shanghai On the Sea") in Chinese, and its promotional materials featuring the city skyline suggests, the show marked a moment in which the official support of contemporary art intersected with the government-directed promotion of the city of Shanghai (Fig. 0.9).

The initial plans for the Shanghai Biennale did not originate from within the artistic community, but from the Shanghai municipal government's efforts at city promotion. As Jane Debevoise has recently pointed out, in 1997 the municipal government began to support an annual art fair with the explicit goal of promoting the business of art.⁸⁴ With substantial financial investment and top-level government support, these efforts sought to connect art with commerce in order to promote Shanghai as an international city of trade. A year prior, the Shanghai Art Museum also began to use the internationally popular term "biennale" (*shuangnian zhan*) to host two biennial exhibitions that were neither international in roster, nor cutting-edge in content and presentation.

⁸² In 1997 the *First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art 96-97* was planned to take place at the Capital Normal University Art Gallery and the National Art Museum of China but was ultimately cancelled by authorities. Other smaller-scale shows were staged at national art museums including *In the Name of Art: Chinese Contemporary Artistic Exchange Exhibition* (1996) at the Liu Haisu Art Museum in Shanghai and an annual outdoor sculpture exhibition series hosted at the He Xiangning Art Gallery beginning in 1998, but these did not receive the same level of government support and prestige as the Shanghai Biennale. Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*.

⁸³ Mia Yu argued that the biennale served as a test site for different understandings of the relationship between the global-local, one whose legacy gave rise to later approaches based on non-binary, local-to-local histories and connections, while Wu Hung reflected on critics' contradictory interpretations of its historical significance in relation to evolution of domestic art and exhibition practices in the 90s. Mia Yu, "Manifolds of the Local: Tracing the Neglected Legacies of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale," in *Uncooperative Contemporaries: Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in 2000* (London: Afterall Books, 2020), 62–86; Wu Hung, "The 2000 Shanghai Biennale: The Making of a "Historical Event," *Art AsiaPacific*, no. 31 (2001): 42–49.

⁸⁴ DeBevoise, "Shanghai 2000: Let's Talk About Money."

Elsewhere in the city, the municipal government also began to promote the city's cultural heritage by investing in the redevelopment of specific historical sites. In 1997 the city approved its first major adaptive re-use project at an old *lilong* neighborhood, a historically iconic form of row-house residential architecture specific to Shanghai. Opening in 2001 under the rebranded name of *Xintiandi* (New heaven and earth), the redeveloped area featured the restored façades and traditional alleyway structure of this historic urban form, but transformed the humble residential area into a “world-class” entertainment district (Fig. 0.10).⁸⁵ The government's decision to eschew the longstanding approach of *tabula rasa* redevelopment in favor of harnessing the *lilong* neighborhood's historic and cultural cachet can thus be understood ironically as also a method of “site-based” urban planning.⁸⁶ As architectural historians have noted, however, Shanghai's growing interest in historic preservation and adaptive-reuse stemmed more from a desire to appropriate the past for strategic city-building efforts, than from a true historic interest in these sites.⁸⁷

During this period of economically competitive city-branding, municipal efforts to capitalize on arts and culture intersected with longstanding efforts by artists and curators to establish alternative spaces for the arts. As discussed earlier, between 2002 and 2003 artists in Beijing had also been advocating for the preservation and adaptive re-use of Factory 798, a former state-run factory, as an informal arts district. Whereas the municipal government had previously sought to redevelop the area into a high-tech industrial park, through exhibitions and art activities that offered creative

⁸⁵ For an account of how *Xintiandi*'s adaptive-reuse design built upon the *lilong* architecture's association with the cosmopolitanism of Shanghai's 1920s and 30s “Golden era” see, Nancy P. Lin, “Imagining ‘Shanghai’: Xintiandi and the Construction of Shanghai Identity” (B.A. Thesis, Cambridge, Harvard University, 2011).

⁸⁶ The approach that the architect Ben Wood took in designing *Xintiandi* can also be seen as a form of contextualism, a design philosophy based on considerations of local site and context. On how contextualism was practiced in China during this time see, Wu Liangyong, *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing: A Project in the Ju'er Hutong Neighbourhood* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

⁸⁷ Ackbar Abbas, “Play It Again Shanghai: Urban Preservation in the Global Era,” in *Shanghai Reflections: Architecture, Urbanism and the Search for an Alternative Modernity Essays*, ed. Mario Gandelsonas (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 36–55; Jeffrey W. Cody, “Making History (Pay) in Shanghai: Architectural Dialogues About Space, Place, and Face,” in *Shanghai: Architecture & Urbanism for Modern China*, ed. Seng Kuan and Peter G. Rowe (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 128–41.

alternatives for the site, artists were able to convince the government to protect the burgeoning art district. With the growing recognition of the “soft power” of arts and culture, Beijing, which had just won the prestigious bid to host the 2008 Olympics in 2001, sought to promote itself as a city of culture and creative production.⁸⁸ In 2006, the municipal government officially designated the entire site of the factory complex as a “creative industry zone” (“*chuangyi chanye qu*”) to sanction and promote commercial art activities.⁸⁹ This key episode in 2006 is symbolic of the ways in which ongoing artistic engagements with urban sites to expand the spaces for the arts culminated in the institutionalization of the “art district” as urban planning policy.

As this historical account of the long 1990s demonstrates, throughout this period the issue of site and space became a central lens through which artists grappled with art’s relationship to society and politics, urban transformation, contemporary art’s development as a social and institutional system, and the relationship between Chinese art practices and the global contemporary art world. The broader social, economic, and physical changes that occurred during the decade were not just external phenomena that artists witnessed and reflected upon, but processes in which they were active participants. By leaving the space of the studio and the gallery to practice on-site in the world, artists not only contributed to expanding the field of art practice, but also constructed the necessary discursive, social, and structural spaces to support their practices.

On-site Aesthetics: Conceptual and Methodological Stakes

In 1999 *Art Journal* invited art historian Francesca Dal Lago to conduct a group interview with Song Dong, Zhang Dali, Zhan Wang, and Wang Jianwei, four Chinese artists whose practices

⁸⁸ Hu Jintao’s 2007 keynote speech to the Seventeenth National Congress emphasized “soft power” and the promotion of Chinese arts and culture. Zhang Xiaotian, “Chuangzao wenyi xin fanrong [Creating new prosperity through literature and art],” *Renmin Ribao*, October 26, 2007.

⁸⁹ Currier, “Art and Power in the New China.”

exemplified what was described as “site-specificity in Beijing.”⁹⁰ Proceeding apprehensively, however, Dal Lago began the discussion by acknowledging, “I don’t think in Chinese there is a term to describe the type of art that is the subject of our discussion today, which in the West is called ‘site-specific.’”⁹¹ Yet as each artist spoke about his practice, a set of commonalities emerged, despite the differences among their individual approaches. The four artists agreed that a key rationale for creating works in public was to get away from the museum and art audiences in order to engage the public, but they also asserted that this should not be construed as an institutional critique of exhibition spaces—a practice that had been central to site-specific art practices in the West.⁹² Instead, these artists sought to engage aspects of everyday life, bringing their art as close to it as possible. According to the artists, their work sought to enact an “exchange” or “dialogue” with Beijing’s drastically changing urban environment, one that did not just represent aspects of the city, but actually incorporated the processes of the city into the art-making process itself.⁹³ They emphasized the importance of their work’s relationship to its specific site, yet asserted that the work’s meaning was not predetermined, but instead emerged through an open-ended process in relation to the changes at the site and the audience.⁹⁴ While all of the artists claimed to engage public audiences with their works, they also expressed different opinions on what kind of impact they hoped to have, from a desire to offer audiences new perspectives to ambivalence over whether or

⁹⁰ Lago et al., “Space and Public.”

⁹¹ Lago et al., 75.

⁹² As Wang explained, “The process is not: ‘I reject the museum system. I refuse to do painting. I want to get rid of this and that, and then I get to site-specificity.’ For me, at least, this mode does not just derive from the refusal of other expressive media... They [Western critics] always think that it is made as a form of rejection or opposition to something else, and in fact it’s not so simple.” Lago et al., 78.

⁹³ Zhan discussed connecting the art-making process to what he was seeing around him, Zhang referenced “dialogue” and creating a “direct link with what is happening,” and Wang pointed to “the creation of a continuous exchange.” Lago et al., “Space and Public.”

⁹⁴ Wang noted that “After the object is produced, it is circulated to the audience. I consider this an open process,” and Song stated that he hoped to achieve “an unpredictable effect, an unforeseen type of relationship.” Lago et al.

not the audience mattered at all.⁹⁵ Above all, the four agreed that the issues and the historical conditions that motivated them to create works on-site were not reducible to the set of issues that had previously defined site-specific art practice in the West. The tension exposed in this interview underscores the ways in which there were two art histories that needed to be reconciled in order to understand the significance of these new art practices.

While the term “site-specific,” or the more general term “site-based” art, conventionally refers to works that are sited at a specific location and that incorporated elements of the site formally and conceptually, they also point to a historic genealogy and discourse of art in the post-war Euro-North American context. Writing on American site-specific art practices, art historian Miwon Kwon has shown how the genre has developed from practices in the 1960s and 1970s that were inseparable from the specific locations in which they are sited to practices in the 1980s and 1990s that foregrounded a more decentered notion of site.⁹⁶ Mobilized flexibly according to the aims of diverse artists, the term “site,” she noted, can include a network of interrelated spaces or economies, a community of people, and even a discursively defined set of issues linked by the artist’s mobile trajectory from one site to another. To account for these diverse notions of site, Kwon offered a more expansive reformulation of site specificity as “the cultural mediation of broader social, economic, and political processes that organize urban life and urban space.”⁹⁷ Moving beyond a genre-based understanding of “site-specific art,” this redefinition suggests that the critical significance of “site-specific” art lies in its ability to engage aesthetically with the socio-economic and political realities of everyday spaces.

Yet if site-specific art in the American context can be defined so capaciously as to no longer

⁹⁵ Song hoped to “teach and use different methods to tell people that things can be observed from other perspectives,” while Zhang stated ambivalently, “whether or not it can affect people, I have no way to imagine... eventually people will establish some sort of relation with it.” Lago et al.

⁹⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

⁹⁷ Kwon, 3.

refer to art created at a specific physical site, how might art historians still think productively about site-based art practice? Kwon concluded her study with the provocative suggestion of “site-relationality,” positing a future of art practices—and by implication art histories—that can think critically across sites, “finding a terrain between mobilization and specificity—to be out of place with punctuality and precision.”⁹⁸ For Chinese artists in the 1990s, site-based art practice was precisely a way of operating with punctuality and precision in relation to the here and now, while connecting it synchronously with other contemporaneous sites. As the preceding historical account of the Chinese art context of the 1990s and the rest of this dissertation will demonstrate, the stakes of such practices, as Kwon had also intuited, was nothing short of articulating a global contemporary art practice that could encompass both the local and the global in ways that neither essentialized the former nor succumbed to the placelessness of the latter.

To account for an artistic phenomenon in the Chinese context that is related to yet clearly distinct from site-specific art in the Western context, I propose the Chinese term “*xianchang*” or “on-site” to describe Chinese art practices that are situated within the particular spatial and temporal realities of specific sites in order to engage with and participate in broader social, economic, and political processes. Informed by the historic sensibilities of the 1990s—a period of growing transregional connectivity—Chinese on-site art practice necessarily encompassed a relational approach as artists considered specific sites synchronously in relation to multiple other sites both within and outside of China. As discussed previously, the term “*xianchang*” was first theorized by the filmmaker Wu Wenguang in the early to mid 1990s to describe a new approach to documentary filmmaking that captured the sense of being “on-the-scene.” Since then, “*xianchang* aesthetics” has been widely used in Chinese film discourse to understand the set of formal techniques involved in

⁹⁸ Kwon, 166.

shooting “live” and, more importantly, its socio-aesthetic motivations, the latter of which, I argue, share many similarities with those in visual art practice.⁹⁹ The issues that “*xianchang* aesthetics” raises within film discourse, thus, offer useful entry points into the central stakes and tensions undergirding Chinese on-site art practice.

For filmmakers and visual artists in the 1990s, operating on-site meant experimentally engaging aspects of everyday reality and society without a predetermined message. According to cinema scholar Luke Robinson, filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang foregrounded contingent and experiential phenomena that was not reducible to diegesis in order to assert the ways in which the structure of the film was not imposed *a priori* but evolved out of the filmmaker’s on-site interaction with his environment and subject matter.¹⁰⁰ These practices sought to develop an alternative to the by then discredited model of socialist realism (*xianshi zhuyi*) characterized by the state-directed, studio-based documentary practices that had been dominant until the late 1980s.¹⁰¹ The distinction that filmmakers drew between their new approach to representing reality and the previous era’s ideologically motivated one was also shared by their counterparts in the visual arts who were all too familiar with the oppressive paradigm under which art was seen as subservient to the state. As Wang

⁹⁹ Key cinema scholars who have written on “*xianchang* aesthetics” include Chris Berry, Luke Robinson, Zhang Zhen, and J.P. Sniadecki. Elizabeth Pernin has also suggested that the intersection between film and performance art practices under the notion of *xianchang* allows for an appropriation of space through action and therefore can also be understood as a mode of protest. Chris Berry, Xinyu Lu, and Lisa Rofel, *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*; Zhen Zhang, “Building on the Ruins: The Exploration of New Urban Cinema of the 1990s,” in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000*, ed. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 113–20; John Paul Sniadecki, “Digital Jianghu: Independent Documentary in a Beijing Art Village” (Ph.D., Massachusetts, Harvard University, 2013); Judith Pernin, “Relocating Further or Standing Ground?: Unofficial Artists and Independent Film-Makers in the Beijing Periphery,” in *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interfaces*, ed. Meiqin Wang and Minna Valjakka (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 237–60.

¹⁰⁰ Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary*.

¹⁰¹ See Chris Berry on *zhuan tipian*, state-produced, pre-scripted lecture, documentaries. Chris Berry, “Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism,” in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000*, ed. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 121–31.

Jianwei, whose on-site practice combined conceptual art and documentary cinema, more bluntly stated, “In the past, art, under the slogan “art must serve the masses of peasants, workers, and soldiers,” was used to control the audience. Consequently, we are now skeptical of art that is said to be meant for the people.”¹⁰² Connecting “*xianchang* aesthetics” to art history, Madeline Eschenburg has suggested that artists during this period reaffirmed the socio-aesthetic commitments that were so crucial to the art of the revolutionary period, but rejected the tendency to instrumentalize art towards a broader social and political agenda.¹⁰³ Developed within the distinct historical context of a post-revolutionary moment, the open-ended, process-based aesthetics of on-site practice came to embody the boundaries that needed to be upheld in order to re-engage social life after socialist realism.

Similarly, in their shared attempts to situate art practices in real spaces, artists and filmmakers had to navigate the fine line between art and everyday life. As Robinson has also shown, “*xianchang* aesthetics” presented filmmakers with a central conflict between their desire to embrace the unpredictability of pro-filmic reality and the need to systematize it within a structured diegesis.¹⁰⁴ For visual artists this perennial tension between art and everyday life also served as a creative impetus for on-site works. In the Big Tail Elephant’s appropriation of urban materials and mimicry of urban processes or in Zhang Dali’s works, which he described as employing “the same process: demolition... [to] destroy what is being destroyed while it’s being destroyed,” on-site art came so close to everyday reality as to be almost indistinguishable from it.¹⁰⁵ Describing this tension as a crucial motivation for on-site art practice, Zhu Jinshi remarked, “In an art museum everything you

¹⁰² Lago et al., “Space and Public,” 81.

¹⁰³ Madeline Eschenburg, “Migrating Subjects: The Problem of the ‘Peasant’ In Contemporary Chinese Art” (Ph.D., Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2018), 82–90.

¹⁰⁴ Luke Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private’: Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*, ed. Chris Berry, Xinyu Lu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 181.

¹⁰⁵ Lago et al., “Space and Public,” 83.

make is art, but once you take away the frame and do a work outdoors then you introduce this uncertainty over whether it's art... It seemed [to be art] but it also didn't seem [to be art] and we found new possibilities in that margin."¹⁰⁶

On-site art practices that troubled the distinctions between art and non-art were not only formal experiments as is often reiterated in art historical accounts, but also a historical response to what the literary scholar Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence."¹⁰⁷ According to the artist Wang Peng, a close associate of Zhang, "I wanted to realize an artwork that did not appear to be an artwork; something that isn't anything, evading the categories of performance, installation or photography."¹⁰⁸ Clarifying this point in a later interview, Wang added, "there were so many great artists and whatever you did, people would say the work was like so and so... Something that was nothing meant something that was not like what other artists have already done."¹⁰⁹ As cinema scholar J.P. Sniadecki has suggested, theories around "*xianchang* aesthetics" were similarly motivated by a desire to frame Chinese film practice as its own unique aesthetic tradition rather than a Chinese derivative of Western cinema verité and other direct cinema styles.¹¹⁰ For Chinese artists and filmmakers alike, working on-site could provide the material basis from which to develop a new artistic language that was commensurate with China's contemporary realities rather than being beholden to the stylistic innovations of other artists in other sites and times.

Finally, as Sniadecki and cinema scholar Zhang Zhen have argued, through techniques that self-reflexively drew attention to the embodied and moving camera "*xianchang* aesthetics" captured

¹⁰⁶ Zhu Jinshi, interview with the author, July 16, 2019, Beijing.

¹⁰⁷ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*.

¹⁰⁸ Adele Tan, "Getting Inside and Outside: An Interview with Wang Peng," in *Wang Peng* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ Wang Peng, interview with the author, November 24, 2018, Beacon.

¹¹⁰ Sniadecki, "Digital Jianghu," 83–86.

an intersubjective dynamic between filmmaker and subject.¹¹¹ This foregrounding of a shared social experience between subject and object is, according to Zhang, “charged with a sense of urgency and social responsibility.”¹¹² For visual artists working on-site, a similar sense of heightened immediacy is produced when they used their own bodies to enact forms of artistic labor in urban spaces. Yet this sense of social responsibility is directed less at intervening on behalf of public audiences, than at figuring the artists themselves as participants rather than passive observers or outside critics. This post-revolutionary reluctance to speak on behalf of the public suggests the emergence of an aesthetic-ethics that is distinct from a Marxist avant-garde aesthetics modeled on the ideologically liberated artist who rouses the bourgeois public from their false consciousness.¹¹³

Proposing “on-site” as both a descriptive term and a conceptual lens onto its key stakes, this dissertation offers several new insights for art history and aesthetics at large. First, “on-site” presents a historically specific way to understand how artists engaged the seemingly universal issue of art’s relationship to everyday life. This draws attention to the epochal and context-specific constraints and possibilities that informed artistic positions and formal innovations of the period. Second, “on-site” elucidates in practice what Kwon has theorized as “site-relationality” by illustrating the ways in which artists worked across sites at the scale of the city, the country, and the world. This account thus expands existing scholarship on site-based art practice, which has been framed as a localized genealogy with local ramifications, to consider it within a global context. Third, in contrast to site-specificity’s privileging of site, “on-site,” by way of its Chinese term “*xianchang*,” which implies both time and space, calls attention to an artwork’s orchestration of temporality and spatiality. Examining the ways in which on-site art practice engaged the here and now of both local and global realities,

¹¹¹ Zhang, “Building on the Ruins: The Exploration of New Urban Cinema of the 1990s.”

¹¹² Zhang, 116.

¹¹³ This Marxist paradigm is exemplified by Claire Bishop in her study of participatory art. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

thus provides a lens through which to understand how artists expressed their sense of contemporaneity.¹¹⁴ In this way, “on-site” also contributes to recent efforts to theorize contemporaneity as a historic concept.¹¹⁵ Finally, “on-site” offers a new way of thinking about contemporary art as both aesthetic practices that operate symbolically and socio-structural practices that establish connections between the art world and other types of urban social groups and spaces. Illuminating the ways in which art’s imaginative and conceptual propositions are deeply enmeshed with broader geo-spatial conditions of a globalized world, this dissertation joins recent scholars such as Peggy Wang and Sasha Welland in affirming the world-making agency of artists and artworks.¹¹⁶

Chapter Structure and Methodology

The main chapters of this dissertation bring together scholarship in art history, urbanism, and sociology; on-site field research; archival documentation including artists’ sketches, photographic and video documentation, writings, and letters; and extensive artist interviews. Primarily dealing with on-site performances and installations that were spontaneously created with little to no extant remains, I have approached the assembled body of materials in ways that are informed by recent methodological approaches to performance documentation and the artist interview.¹¹⁷ Drawing from performance scholars such as Mechthild Widrich who have underscored

¹¹⁴ This issue will be further discussed in the conclusion chapter.

¹¹⁵ Reiko Tomii, “Historicizing ‘Contemporary Art’: Some Discursive Practices in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 611–41; Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); Hal Foster et al., “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 3–124; Rasheed Araeen et al., “An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary: Part I-IV,” *Field Notes (Asia Art Archive Online Journal)*, no. 1 (April 2012), <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/an-expanded-questionnaire-on-the-contemporary-part-i/type/essays>.

¹¹⁶ Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*; Sasha Su-Ling Welland, *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹¹⁷ On the relationship between performance and documentation see, Michelle Maydanchik, “The Performative Stills of Early Moscow Actionism,” *Art Journal* 79, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 90–109; Mechthild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 1–10; Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*

the integral relationship between performance and documentation, I offer a reading of artworks that triangulates between performance, documentation, and the artist interview. In particular, I do not treat performance documentation as a transparent mediator of the initial performance, but instead as a distinct object of inquiry that possesses its own medium-specific visual and conceptual qualities, which shape subsequent understandings of the artwork. As Widrich has asserted, “performers, through the documents they release, become both actors and writers of their own history.”¹¹⁸ This is especially the case in Chapter Three, which explores the socio-symbolic aspects of the artist RongRong’s performance art photographs and their subsequent circulation in publications like the *Black Cover Book*.

Similarly, in my approach to analyzing published interviews and conducting my own, I have treated the interview as a dialogic process that is less focused on mining an objective “truth,” than arriving at an understanding of an artistic logic or sensibility that is at work often across different artworks from the same period within an artist’s oeuvre. In my approach to the interview, I have also sought to triangulate between existing interviews conducted by others and those that I newly conduct by cross-referencing and following up on responses already offered. My account has been deeply shaped by these conversations with artists, which I have cited as often as possible. Yet as art historian Jennifer Sichel has perceptively shown, the interview is suffused with inflections, intonations, cadence, affect, intersubjectivity and a “‘something else’ language cannot quite capture.”¹¹⁹ These insights gained from “tone’s ineffability” cannot always be conveyed through

(Bristol: Intellect, 2012); For a new approach to interview methodologies see, Jennifer Sichel, “Warhol’s Tone,” in *Andy Warhol Exhibits: A Glittering Alternative*, ed. Marianne Dobner (Cologne: Walther König, 2020); Jennifer Sichel, “‘Do You Think Pop Art’s Queer?’ Gene Swenson and Andy Warhol,” *Oxford Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 59–83.

¹¹⁸ Widrich, *Performative Monuments*, 73.

¹¹⁹ Sichel, “Warhol’s Tone,” 205.

direct quotations, and are instead suffused throughout my interpretation and acknowledged in the footnotes where relevant.

In foregrounding the voice of the artist, I have also chosen to emphasize artistic production over reception. Although conducting a public reception history is especially challenging for ephemeral on-site works, it is not entirely impossible as reports on art activities have been documented in magazines of the period and artists within the same regional circle are often witnesses to each other's performances.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, in keeping with the motivations behind on-site art practice, I have instead focused on artists and artworks to emphasize the power of aesthetic practices to imagine creative or conceptual possibilities that have an impact on the social realm, whether or not it can actually be perceived at the time. This approach is especially important to Chapter One, in which abstaining from public reception and the related issues of assessing whether or not the artworks successfully advocated for environmental change can better foreground the alternative ways in which artists understood the social significance of their on-site practice.

Finally, throughout my account I have emphasized the close relationship between art and exhibition practices, many of which were either initiated by artists themselves or the product of a creative collaboration between a curator and an artist. As a result, these "exhibitions" can often be considered closer to an art activity or project, rather than a formal exhibition, to which many on-site artists were in fact averse. Examining exhibitions across all the chapters, I understand these events as moments in which emergent ideas coalesce across different artists' practices or are saliently articulated through the project's conception, execution, and publication of related materials. Importantly, as exhibitions are also open-ended objects of inquiry, I have sought to explore the ways in which they reveal how ideas and practices are put to the test and/or contested.

¹²⁰ To the best of my knowledge, while scholars of contemporary Chinese art have incorporated public reception into parts of their research, no one has taken a fully reception-based approach to study this history.

While each of the four chapters can be considered an independent case study, considered together they present a historical arc that charts on-site art practice's development throughout the long 1990s and the broader social changes that informed it.

Chapter One examines *Keepers of the Waters*, the on-site environmental art event initiated by the American eco-feminist artist Betsy Damon in Chengdu in 1995 and Lhasa in 1996. Conceived as a collaboration between artists and the municipal governments of Chengdu and Lhasa, *Keepers* was one of the first large-scale public art events that offered artists a legally sanctioned opportunity to create outdoor, on-site public performances and installations that were seen by a large number of everyday audiences. While ideas about on-site art practice were still emergent in China, I show how the event's assertions of the social and environmental efficacy of on-site art practice offered a position against which artists defined their own practices. Contextualizing the event within American and Chinese discourses on art's relationship to social life during this period, I reveal on-site art practice's vastly different stakes in these two contexts. My analysis of the artistic approaches to site taken by the Chengdu-based artist Dai Guangyu (b. 1955), Beijing-based Wang Peng (b. 1964), Beijing-based Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963), and Shanghai-based Zhang Xin (b. 1967), reveals a cross-section of the different ways in which the social and political significance of on-site art practice was understood, practiced, and argued for within the Chinese context. This account demonstrates the ways in which the emergence of Chinese on-site art practice was informed by multiple sources of influence from within China, across different regions, and also from abroad.

While *Keepers* introduced Chinese artists to contemporaneous American approaches to site-based art, the development of on-site art practice had already emerged in China as an organic response to the social and physical changes of the urban environment in the 1990s. Established in 1991, the Big Tail Elephant Working Group (Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, Xu Tan, and Liang Juhui) represents one of the earliest instances of a coherent and sustained on-site art practice in China. In

Chapter Two, I examine how the group developed their on-site art practice in relation to the specific local realities of Guangzhou's urban center and later intersected with corresponding art practices and activities across China in the late 1990s. Proposing the term "urban insertion" as a counterpoint to Euro-North American frameworks of urban intervention, I demonstrate how this vanguard group critically investigated the socio-economic and material conditions of the city by inserting themselves and their works into the urban context. By closely following the trajectory of Big Tail Elephant, I illuminate how art practice, urban social life, and the built environment mutually informed one another during this period of unprecedented urban change.

The next two chapters consider art practice from a social and structural perspective, exploring how on-site practices contributed to the establishment of independent art spaces and facilitated connections between the domestic and international art world. Turning from the city center to the urban periphery, Chapter Three follows the trajectory of experimental photographer RongRong, a resident of "Beijing East Village," to explore how on-site performance, photography, and exhibition activities reimagined and transformed the peripheral spaces of the city into new art spaces and institutions that, to this day, continue to support experimental art practices. I use the term "periphery" as a geographical and cultural concept to explore the ways in which the development of experimental art and its socio-structural institutions are intimately related to the urban expansion of Beijing. Attending to the integral relationship between performance, photography, and the urban context, I demonstrate how these on-site art practices played a crucial role in constructing an alternative social identity for independent artists living at the fringe of the city. My account illustrates the ways in which this emergent social group and their international contacts helped to establish Beijing's Chaoyang district as a global center that connected local practices to international art networks.

Chapter Four directly addresses the issue of transregional contact and exchange, which has informed the development of on-site art practices in China. I examine three paradigmatic artists—Huang Yong Ping, Zhu Jinshi, and Yin Xiuzhen—whose experiences of travel and migration outside of China have informed their development of new artistic approaches to site. I use the term “transit space” as a framework to consider not only how each artist engaged actual spaces of transit such as airports and border zones, but also how their on-site art practices created aesthetic and conceptual spaces that facilitated ways of thinking and working across local and global sites. Their spatial sensibilities, I argue, captured and responded to the formation of a mobile and multi-sited global contemporary art world at the turn of the 21st century.

From Guangzhou’s city center to Beijing’s urban periphery, from the American Betsy Damon’s arrival in China to the outbound trajectories of Huang, Zhu, and Yin, this dissertation offers a multi-dimensional history of the ways in which contemporary Chinese art practices created new spaces of possibility within the global context.

CHAPTER ONE

Experiments in On-Site Art Practice: *Keepers of the Waters* in Chengdu and Lhasa

In the summer of 1995, an American environmental artist, Betsy Damon, invited a group of artists from the United States and China to create artworks in and around a polluted urban river in Chengdu and again in Lhasa the following year. The project, *Keepers of the Waters* (*Shui de baowei zhe*), was meant to call attention to water pollution and advocate for the river's remediation. The two iterations of the event saw the creation of a number of outdoor, on-site installation, sculpture, and performance works by artists across China, including Dai Guangyu (b. 1955), Wang Peng (b. 1964), Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963), and Zhang Xin (b. 1967), among others.¹ Compelled by the drastic urban changes that were occurring across the country, Chinese artists in the mid-1990s had turned to working outdoors in public spaces to reflect on the changing realities of their physical environments. While such practices were often spontaneous, covert, and regionally isolated, *Keepers* represents one of the earliest instances of an organized art event that brought artists from different regions together to work in this mode. Importantly, by encouraging artists to create on-site works that would call attention to environmental problems, the activist event was one of the first in China to posit the potential for art to bring about social and environmental change.

This unique art event was made possible through an instance of cross-cultural exchange and what was at that moment in the mid-1990s an unlikely alliance between the art world and the Chinese government. Having worked on a number of socially engaged environmental artworks

¹ The event took place from 29 July to 14 August 1995. Along with Betsy Damon herself, participants in *Keepers* (Chengdu) included Ang Sang, Beth Grossman, Cai Jian, Christine Baeumler, Dai Guangyu, Ge Ci, He Qichao, Kristin Caskey, Liu Chengying, Tang Liping, Tsering Lhamo, Wang Peng, Xu Hongbin, Yang Lijun, Yang Qi, Yin Xiaofeng, Yin Xiuzhen, Yu Leiqing, Zeng Xun, Zhong Bo, Zhou Zheng and Zhu Gang. The artist Dai Guangyu and other participants had organized two more unofficial iterations in Chengdu in 1997 and 2000. See Betsy Damon Archive, Asia Art Archive and Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China online archive: <http://seachina.net/seachina-intro.html>. See Footnote 20 for details on *Keepers* 1996 (Lhasa).

related to water conservation in the United States, Damon arrived in China with the intent of continuing this type of practice in Chengdu. Her interests fortuitously intersected with the Chengdu municipal government's growing concern for the pollution of its urban river system. In response to a citizen-led petition in the mid-1980s, the city had just initiated the 1992 Funan River Comprehensive Restoration Development Project (*Funan he zonghe zhenzhi kaifa gongcheng*) and was hosting a number of high-level meetings on environmental protection and water reclamation.² Elsewhere in China, a growing discourse around environmentalism also emerged around this time, at the same moment as the central government committed the country to the controversial Three Gorges Dam infrastructure project, which brought issues of water management and environmentalism to the fore.³ When Damon presented her water-related art projects to municipal officials, scientists and engineers at a local conference in Chengdu in 1993, the artist won the support of officials who were receptive to her combination of art, activism, science, and education. This positive exchange planted the seeds for two water-based environmental projects centered on the Funan River: the first, *Keepers of the Waters*, a series of public art activities sited at the river that would raise awareness for water protection in 1995 and 1996; the second, the *Living Water Garden*, a water filtration garden that would clean the city's polluted river while serving as an educational landscaped urban park.⁴

Because the contemporary art event was seen by officials as part and parcel of the broader river clean-up effort, *Keepers* had an unusually high level of government involvement and support. The event thus offered artists a legally sanctioned opportunity to create outdoor, on-site public

² For a brief overview of this infrastructural project see, Peter G. Rowe, *Emergent Architectural Territories in East Asian Cities* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2012), 142.

³ Michael J. Hathaway, *Environmental Winds: Making the Global in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Wu Hung, *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2008).

⁴ On the Living Water Garden see, Mary Padua, "Teaching the River," *Landscape Architecture* 94, no. 3 (March 2004): 100–107.

performances and installations that were seen by a large number of everyday audiences. At a time when state-sponsored exhibition venues elsewhere in the country barred such experimental art practices, artists who participated in *Keepers* were drawn by this rare chance to create and exhibit their works formally and in public. Indeed, although the historic rise of environmental awareness in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s forms the ostensible context and reason for the *Keepers* project, as I will demonstrate, environmentalism was one of, but not the most important concern for Chinese artists who participated in the event. To properly understand the significance of *Keepers*, it is important to differentiate between the art event as it was envisioned by its American curator and the individual art practices that emerged from it. As one participating artist, Dai Guangyu noted, “The subject of environmental protection was not at first critical. Mainly it was an art event.”⁵ Dai’s comments point to the ways in which participating artists saw the event as a means to develop their own artistic practices and concerns, translating the event’s premise and prompt in highly individualized ways.

Echoing Dai, I argue that the event served as a pretext through which artists could explore different approaches to creating outdoor, site-based installation and performance art—a format that many had just begun to work in around the mid-1990s. Their works thus reveal differing positions on the motives, goals, and aesthetics of such context-specific art practices. By tracking these issues, I complicate previous research on *Keepers* by delving beyond the event’s putative environmentalism to properly situate the artworks within artistic practices and concerns at the time.⁶ Indeed, current

⁵ Dai Guangyu, *The Heavens are High and the Emperor is Far Away*, interview by Petra Poelzl, trans. Margarete Werner, November 30, 2016, Asia Art Archive Hong Kong, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/betsy-damon-archive-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu-and-lhasa-dai-guangyu>.

⁶ *Keepers* has received little scholarly attention with the exception of the scholar Huang Chen’s discussion of its environmentalist strategies. Huang’s critique of *Keepers* for its “political innocent” mode of environmental activism fails to account for the ways in which the artworks’ actually questioned the very assumptions on efficacy that form the basis of his arguments. These assumptions on “efficacy” will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Huang Chen, “From Funan River to East Lake: Reflecting on Environmental Activism and Public Art in China,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 315–23.

scholarship suggests that what might be considered a distinctly Chinese eco-aesthetics in contemporary art only emerged later in the early 2000s primarily through a re-engagement with traditional Chinese landscape (*shanshui*) aesthetics.⁷ Rather than framing *Keepers* as a fully formed and unified position on either environmentalism or social activism, I understand it as an emergent moment in which new approaches and positions on outdoor site-based art's relationship to everyday social realities were developed against the backdrop of local and interregional influences.

Even before *Keepers*' promotion of outdoor, site-based art practices, Chinese artists had turned to working directly in everyday social spaces beginning in the 1990s partially due to the lack of formal exhibition venues available for experimental art. Yet as Robin Visser, Hou Hanru, and others have suggested, working in urban space increasingly became an aesthetic goal in its own right as everyday spaces were the most fertile sites for critical reflections on contemporary social issues. This phenomenon of "going outdoors" might be compared with Japanese and Korean practices from earlier periods. As art historian Reiko Tomii has shown, 1960s and 70s Japanese art practices in the "wilderness" were informed by the desire to be independent from mainstream art institutions and exhibition venues, which, in contrast to the Chinese context, had already been well established in Japan by this time.⁸ Writing on 1980s Korea, art historian Sohl Lee has demonstrated that notions of "outdoor" and "on-the-site" were informed by changing discourses around "nature" as an alternate site of aesthetic and social experience.⁹ Although Chinese artists in the 1990s shared a desire to work outside of existing geographical centers, art institutions, and conventional art forms, their distinct geo-historic contexts informed a different set of goals and strategies. In the account

⁷ Chang Tan, "Landscape without Nature: Ecological Reflections in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (December 2016): 223–41; Elena Macri, "Being, Becoming, Landscape: The Iconography of Landscape in Contemporary Chinese Art, Its Ecological Impulse, and Its Ethical Project," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 1 (February 2017): 32–43.

⁸ Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*.

⁹ Sohl Lee, "Yattoo and the Politics of Nature: What Ecological Thinking Discloses of Contemporary South Korean Art," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 265–86.

that follows, I demonstrate the ways in which going outdoors in the Chinese context was never an attempt to find an “elsewhere” outside of everyday social life – both the Chengdu and Lhasa rivers were located in or near city centers – but an effort to be even more deeply embedded within it.

For Chinese artists, working on-site was a means to engage social realities. As art historian Wu Hung has argued in his assessment of site-based art exhibitions in the Chinese context during the late 1990s, these artists “share the belief that experimental art should be part of people’s lives and should play an active role in China’s socio-economic transformation.”¹⁰ The connection that Wu drew between public site-specific formats and their broader social goals, however, has scarcely been taken up or interrogated in subsequent research. While scholars such as Meiqin Wang, Chang Tan, and the artist-theorist Zheng Bo have examined socially engaged projects of the early 2000s that drew from global trends of social activism, relational aesthetics, and site specificity, little work has been done on this nascent moment in the mid-1990s when Chinese artists began to draw connections between going outdoors, working on-site, and advancing broader social commitments through their art.¹¹ *How precisely did artists link their outdoor site-based practices – their forms and processes – to everyday contemporary realities and social life? How did they see their works operating in outdoor spaces and to what ends?*

Through archival photographs, videos, and documents recently released by the Asia Art Archive, on-site field research, and interviews conducted with artists and organizers, this chapter historicizes *Keepers* within a nationwide artistic trend to go outdoors and work on-site during the mid-1990s. It contextualizes *Keepers* within discourses on art’s relationship to social life during this period, outlining their vastly different stakes in the American and Chinese context. I focus, in particular, on the notion of *xianchang* or “on-site” art practice, which was used in the mid-to-late

¹⁰ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 38.

¹¹ Wang, *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China*; Tan, “Art for/of the Masses: Revisiting the Communist Legacy in Chinese Art”; Zheng Bo, “The Pursuit of Publicness.”

1990s to describe creative practices that emphasized the value of working in relation to real spaces and live audiences.¹² Through the notion of on-site art practice, artists and critics articulated new ways of engaging with everyday social life and environmental issues that nevertheless resisted art's subordination to any social or political agenda. In this chapter, I develop the term on-site as a conceptual framework that not only refers descriptively to site-based artworks, but also encompasses the varying social stakes implicit in such aesthetic forms. Exploring the different ways in which the social and political significance of on-site art was understood, practiced, and argued for within the Chinese context, I highlight four key works by artists Dai Guangyu, Wang Peng, Yin Xiuzhen, and Zhang Xin, each of whom pioneered differing approaches to on-site art practice. Although these were not the only artists and artworks in *Keepers*, they most pointedly exemplified the complex and often contradictory ways in which participating artists worked in relation to or pushed against the event's stated objectives to formulate their own forms of on-site art. As I will demonstrate, the tensions and contradictions that emerged from these new directions are productive for understanding the emergence of site-based art practices in China as a unique phenomenon that participated in and departed from similar global trends.

Art and Social Change: Betsy Damon's Intersection with Chengdu's Municipal Government

From the outset *Keepers* was an unusual experimental art activity whose genesis began through a government initiative entirely unrelated to art. In 1992 the Chengdu municipal government, with support from the provincial government of Sichuan, initiated the Funan River Comprehensive Restoration Development Project, a major urban planning and infrastructure project meant to modernize the city and facilitate real estate redevelopment, which had rapidly taken off in

¹² Lu Pei-Yi, "What Is Off-Site Art?," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 9, no. 5 (September 2010): 7–12; Lu Pei-Yi, "'Off-Site yishu' chutan [Preliminary study of 'Off-Site art]," *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum* 22 (2011): 9–36.

cities across China during the Reform period following the end of the Cultural Revolution. While urban redevelopment occurred throughout the country in the 1990s, Chengdu's plan was unique for its prioritization of water control and environmental planning—an issue that local citizen activists and intellectuals had advocated for since the mid-1980s.¹³ Recognizing that the revitalization of the river system was central to the city's future growth, the large-scale infrastructure plan, which was elevated to the city's highest priority, involved five separate components: 1) revitalizing the river through flood control and dredging, 2) laying sewage infrastructure along the river, 3) constructing a new system of ring roads along the inner and outer sides of the river, 4) creating a riverside green belt connected by a system of urban parks along the river, and 5) redeveloping the inner city.¹⁴ The last initiative involved a massive effort to relocate factories along the river that contributed to pollution and resettle impoverished residents living along the river in order to demolish the dilapidated area and develop new commercial and residential zones.

As Tian Jun, the Head of Publicity and Spokesperson for the Funan River Project recalled, at the time in China, revitalizing the river was thought of as purely an engineering and urban planning problem.¹⁵ When Betsy Damon arrived in Chengdu in 1991, however, her ideas on art and environmental activism offered a way to integrate arts and culture into the government initiative, eventually reframing it as an environmental project that included artistic activities and civic participation. Damon's specific proposal for a series of public art activities that would call attention to the river's environmental problems were initially met with resistance. According to Damon, "The government told me that they thought performance art and public art was a waste of time... I think

¹³ This is also due in part to the city's long history with flood control as well as the cultural and literary associations between the city and water. For a history of Chengdu's rivers see, Feng Ju, Tan Jihe, and Feng Guanghong, eds., *Chengdu funan lianghe shihua [A history of Chengdu's two rivers]* (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1998).

¹⁴ Chengdu shi Funan he zonghe zhengzhi zhihui bu [Chengdu Funan river comprehensive improvement command bureau, "Chengdu Funan he zonghe zhengzhi gongcheng jianjie [A brief introduction of Chengdu Funan river comprehensive improvement project]," *Chengdu jianzhu* 15, no. 3 (August 1995): 6.

¹⁵ Tian Jun, interview with the author, June 21, 2019, Chengdu.

they think of public art as disruptive if it's not a commissioned statue.”¹⁶ Yet the project was eventually championed by Jun and gained the full support of the mayor, Wang Rongxuan, along with Zhang Jihai, the Secretary General of Communist Party in Chengdu and director of the Funan River Project, and Li Yongqi, the head of the city's recently formed Environmental Protection Propaganda and Education Center. In this period of economic reform where municipal governments were empowered to experiment and adopt foreign ideas, more open-minded officials prevailed.

Crucial to this collaboration between Damon and the municipal government was their shared understanding of art's utilitarian social and environmental purpose. Both agreed that the proposed art activities could advocate for environmental issues, promote civic pride, galvanize public support for the river revitalization and urban infrastructure project, and ultimately—just like the broader project of which it was a part—enact concrete, demonstrable change. Above all, Damon and the municipal officials shared an instrumental attitude towards art. Although not all participating artists subscribed to these ideas, they would directly impact the conception and framing of the site-based art event.

Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu) 1995 and (Lhasa) 1996

Under the official-sounding organizational aegis of the “U.S. Keepers of the Water Society” and the Chengdu Environmental Protection Publicity Education Center, Damon reached out to artists in Chengdu and elsewhere in China through her local contacts Tian Jun; Zhang Xuehua, an official at the Environmental Protection bureau; and Zhu Xiaofeng, an anthropologist from the Chengdu Academy of Social Sciences who was passionate about contemporary art. The proposed

¹⁶ Betsy Damon, interview with the author, July 25, 2018, New York.

site-specific project drew young artists from across the country. These included Chengdu locals Dai Guangyu, Zhu Gang, Liu Chengying, who were part of the city's burgeoning performance art scene; Beijing-based artists Yin Xiuzhen and Wang Peng, who were beginning to experiment with site-based installations; as well as American artists Christine Baeumler, Kristin Caskey, and Beth Grossman, who traveled to Chengdu to participate in the events. As artists began to converge in Chengdu, Damon organized a series of interdisciplinary workshops that brought artists together with environmental scientists to discuss water pollution and reclamation. These conversations created a workshop-like atmosphere that provided participants with an opportunity to discuss their ideas and collaborate on their works.

The art activities planned for *Keepers* were sited in and along the Nan River, the southern half of the city's two rivers, which along with the northern Fu River, were collectively known as the Funan River. Two major areas of activities were sited near the Jinjiang Bridge, which forms part of the city's central North-South axis, and near the historic Hejiang Pavilion (Joining River Pavilion), which marks the auspicious site where the Fu and Nan rivers converge. Aside from the first art event on July 29th that featured a walk across town to the river, the main poster lists a tentative schedule for five days of activities from August 8th to the 14th.¹⁷ During this time, approximately twenty-three artists created twenty-one outdoor works of art that promoted the environmental goals of the project, using didactic and participatory means to engage public audiences. *Keepers* was met with unprecedented enthusiasm by the local public and extensively covered in highly favorable terms by the local media, which emphasized the art event's positive social benefits.¹⁸ As the Chengdu Nightly (*Chengdu Wanbao*) reported:

¹⁷ According to Damon, a week of torrential rain prevented them from continuing with their activities following the first event on the 29th. Betsy Damon, interview with the author, July 25, 2018, New York.

¹⁸ Mao Yan, "Xiang you yi tiao qingliang de he: Zhong mei yishujia jietou xuanchuan baohu funan heshui zhi huodong ceji [Wanting a cool and refreshing river: a report on Chinese and American artists' on-the-streets propaganda activity to protect the Funan River's water]," *Chengdu wanbao*, August 15, 1995, Asia Art Archive; Li

...artists who pay attention to their own living environment and moreover place their artworks on the streets to directly interact with public audiences is a first for Chengdu and even for the country, this is a new trend for contemporary art... The assistant mayor and deputy director of the Funan River, Zhang Jihai, enthusiastically asserted that the event had a positive social benefit and publicity impact, and hoped that the activity would continue to occur in our city in the future.¹⁹

Keepers' popularity and ability to raise public support for the river's revitalization fed directly into Damon's collaboration with the government to create the Living Water Garden, which commenced shortly thereafter.

Following the conclusion of *Keepers* in Chengdu, participating artists were inspired to invite Damon to organize another iteration in Lhasa, Tibet the following year. Lhasa was a natural choice as Chengdu, located in Sichuan Province, bordered Tibet, whose bodies of water were widely considered the headwaters of the region's rivers. Damon herself had previously traveled to Tibet and also hoped to bring the project there. With the support of government officials in Lhasa, the second iteration of *Keepers* took place at the Lhasa River from August 18th to September 3rd, 1996. It included several repeat participants such as Dai Guangyu and Yin Xiuzhen, as well as new invitees including Beijing-based artist Song Dong (Yin's husband) and Shanghai-based artist Zhang Xin, and a number of Tibetan artists, among others.²⁰ The event was sited in and around a centrally located shallow bank of the Lhasa River with a view of the Potala Palace, the symbolic center of the region, in the distance. The event commenced with equally great fanfare, featuring an opening ceremony attended by officials from Lhasa's Environmental Protection Agency and the local government.

Yang and Li Dan, "Bei te xi nüshi he shui [Ms. Betsy and water]," *Huaxi dushi bao*, July 28, 1995, 205 edition, Asia Art Archive.

¹⁹ Mao Yan, "Xiang you yi tiao qingliang de he: Zhong mei yishujia jietou xuanchuan baohu funan heshui zhi huodong ceji [Wanting a cool and refreshing river: a report on Chinese and American artists' on-the-streets propaganda activity to protect the Funan River's water]."

²⁰ Over 16 artists, including Damon, participated in *Keepers* (Lhasa). They were: Dai Guangyu, Yin Xiuzhen, Liu Chengying, Ang Sang, SuVan Geer, Li Jixiang, Ruan Haiying, Song Dong, Yang, Kayva, Zhang Lei, Zhang Shengquan (known as Da Zhang), Zhang Xin, and several as yet unidentified Tibetan artists. See Betsy Damon Archive, Asia Art Archive and Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China online archive: <http://seachina.net/seachina-intro.html>.

Local residents and Tibetan Lamas were invited to perform a series of prayer rituals along the banks of the rivers and one hundred boys from a local school joined the invited artists to fly kites.

Despite the highly public and ceremonious character of this opening event, artworks created in Lhasa differed significantly from those created in Chengdu. Whereas the Chengdu works tended to emphasize audience participation and didactic environmental activism, the Lhasa works explored how artistic materials and forms might engage with Lhasa as a site. This was due in part to the fact that Damon had less of an influence over the Lhasa events, given her ongoing work on the Living Water Garden project in Chengdu, which lasted until 1998. The change in location from mainland China to Tibet, an autonomous region of China, also had an impact on the tenor of event. From a practical perspective, artists were careful to tread lightly and avoid overtly activist or political overtures in a region that was actively policed by the Chinese state and rife with historic geopolitical tensions vis-à-vis the mainland.²¹ Prompted by the unfamiliar yet breathtaking landscape, which formed a sharp contrast to Chengdu's polluted urban river, many artists treated the Lhasa River less as a site in need of art activism than as a source of artistic inspiration.²²

Like the Chengdu iteration, the Lhasa event was begun and finished without controversy—a fact that would surprise most art world audiences familiar with the frequency of censorship and exhibition cancellations throughout the 1990s. The success of *Keepers* spawned two “unofficial” *Keepers* projects in 1997 and in 2000 organized by Dai Guangyu and other Chengdu-based artists without Damon, who returned to America following the completion of the Living Water Park. These were so successful that the 1997 event, which took place in the ancient Dujiangyan irrigation

²¹ For a discussion of Chinese developmental projects in Tibet and the PRC's territorialization of the region see, Emily T. Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

²² There may have been practical reasons for why the works were less participatory in mode: as cultural outsiders, the Chinese and American artists were unfamiliar with Tibetan social life and politics and more hesitant to engage given the risk of censure in a geopolitically sensitive region.

system near Chengdu, received special coverage in the state television program *Arts and Artists* (*Meishu xingkong*) hosted by the Beijing-based documentary filmmaker Wen Pulin.²³ An avid organizer of art performances and events himself, Wen traveled widely to document and report on experimental art activities across the country. *Arts and Artists*, which was nationally broadcasted, introduced audiences across China to the notion of site-specific installation art by comparing the activities in Chengdu to foreign precedents including Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast* (1968-69) and Hans Haacke's *Germania* at the 1993 Venice Biennale.²⁴ *Keepers'* success in elevating performance, installation, and site-based art practice to the national stage represents a heretofore unacknowledged official acceptance of these new art forms during the 1990s.

Bringing New Genre Public Art to China

While *Keepers* took place in China, it was strongly informed by its initiator Betsy Damon's own artistic background as an American performance artist rooted in traditions of art activism. A founder of the Feminist Art Studio at Cornell University between 1972 and 1973, Damon had been affiliated with the feminist art movement of the 1970s. The artist's early works such as the *7,000 Year Old Woman* (1977) and *Blind Beggarwoman* (1979), in which Damon crouched with a begging bowl and asked passerbys to share personal stories, were street-based performances that sought to interact with public audiences.²⁵ Beginning in the mid-1980s, Damon turned to environmental art and dedicated the rest of her practice to educating the public about water systems and their rehabilitation.

²³ Video clip from *Arts and Artists* (*Meishu xingkong*), Betsy Damon Archive, Asia Art Archive. Wen Pulin's primary archive is held at Cornell University, where I plan to undertake further postdoctoral research.

²⁴ *Arts and Artists* (*Meishu xingkong*), Betsy Damon Archive, Asia Art Archive.

²⁵ On Damon's eco-feminist art practice see, Ruth Wallen, "The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Art Practices on Contemporary Activist Art," *N.Paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, no. 14 (February 2001): 52–60; Eleanor Heartney, "All or Nothing," *Art in America* 108, no. 5 (May 2020): 40–49; Christine Filippone, "For the Blood of Gaia: Betsy Damon's Quest for Living Water," *Woman's Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (2018): 3–11.

Damon's approach to environmental art, which was first established with *Keepers* in Chengdu, involved bringing together multiple community stakeholders to collaborate on environmental solutions. Without precedent in China, such an approach can best be understood within the framework of American "new genre public art," a form of art activism popular during the mid-1990s.²⁶ Coined in 1991 by the artist Suzanne Lacy, who was also a feminist contemporary of Damon, new genre public art was characterized by collaborative projects that engaged local sites and communities to identify and redress social issues.²⁷ Though Damon never labelled *Keepers* as "new genre public art," its format shared similar goals and processes.²⁸

To kick off the series of events in Chengdu, Damon and the participating artists organized a walk across town to the Funan River (Fig. 1.1), which immediately preceded *Washing Silk*, the first artwork in the series (Fig. 1.2). The walk borrowed the format of a political demonstration that was familiar to the Americans and the Chinese—albeit with very different historical and political implications. Participants held a large banner titled, "Keepers of the Waters: Funan River Water Quality Protection Art Publicity Activity (*Shui de baowei zhe: Funan He shuizhi baohu yishu xuanchuan huodong*)."²⁹ Calling the event a "publicity activity" (*xuanchuan huodong*), the banner aligned the art project with the objectives of the municipal government's Environmental Protection Publicity and

²⁶ A prominent "new genre public art" exhibition in the U.S. was *Culture in Action* (1993), which took place in Chicago. Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson, and Eva M. Olson, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Joshua Decker and Helmut Draxler, eds., *Exhibition as Social Intervention: "Culture in Action" 1993*, Exhibition Histories (London: Afterall, 2014).

²⁷ Lacy, who was herself influential on Damon's art practice, sought to define the development of this new genre of public art as distinct from the tradition of public sculpture, which had by the late 1980s been perceived by the art world avant-garde as capitulating to neo-liberal demands for urban beautification, or worse, "corporate plaza art". According to Lacy, "new genre public art—visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives—is based on engagement." Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*, 19.

²⁸ Damon was influenced by Lacy's feminist art practice. Lacy, for her part, did consider Damon as a fellow "new genre public art" practitioner as she included Damon in the compendium of relevant artists in her seminal publication, *Mapping the Terrain*. Lacy, 215–16.

²⁹ The two possible translations for "xuanchuan" as publicity or propaganda and for "huodong" as activity or movement will be addressed in the following section of this chapter.

Education Center, whose name was listed on the banner as the sponsoring agency. As they marched through the streets, the artists gave out leaflets to the public, aiming for maximum visibility and direct engagement with audiences on the street.

Typical of new genre public art, the two works by the three participating American artists, Kristin Caskey, Christine Baeumler, and Beth Grossman, employed a didactic, dialogic and participatory format to raise awareness on environmental issues and prompt community action. Caskey's *Washing Silk* invited volunteers dressed in white to join her in washing long sheets of white silk in the heavily polluted river, thereby turning the sheets grey and didactically illustrating the pollution.³⁰ The artist was inspired by Chengdu's history as an ancient silk production center, where, according to local lore, merchants would wash their newly woven brocades in the river to achieve their characteristic brilliance.³¹ Baeumler and Grossman's *Dreams for a Pure River* invited the public to help construct a large candle-lit bamboo raft, which was paraded down to the river and cast off to float downstream (Fig. 1.3).³² The highly public event served as a closing ceremony for *Keepers* as a whole, inviting local storytellers and audiences to recount their own memories of the river and express their hopes for its future rehabilitation. Taken together as the first and last projects of *Keepers*, these works would seem to present outdoor site-based art and its resulting social efficacy all too easily as a done deal. For the three Americans working within this tradition, going outdoors—working on-site, incorporating public audiences, and engaging in everyday life—seemed to be an artistic mode that did not need to be self-reflexively examined.³³ As we will see, in the Chinese

³⁰ The volunteers were all artist participants in *Keepers*: He Qichao, Ciren Lamu, Zhou Zheng, Yu Leiqing, Ge Ci, Tang Liping, and Ang Sang. Betsy Damon Archive, Asia Art Archive

³¹ This custom lent the river its ancient name “Jin Jiang” or “Brocade River” which was used in the posters for Caskey's work.

³² My account is based on, Beth Grossman, Interview with Beth Grossman, interview by Cici Wu, August 4, 2017, Betsy Damon Archive, Asia Art Archive.

³³ Euro-North American discourse has debated widely over the forms, goals, values and stakes of community-based site-specific approaches. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud and art historian Grant Kester have endorsed nuanced models of ‘relational aesthetics’ and ‘dialogic’ approaches; whereas others such as Hal Foster, Claire Bishop and Miwon

context, it was an aesthetic choice whose strategies, goals and stakes—rife with ambiguities and contradictions—still had to be worked out.

“*Xianchang*” (On-site) and the Stakes of Social Engagement after the Cultural Revolution

Indeed, going outdoors in the Chinese context had a very different set of historical connotations and much more nuanced stakes. For Chinese artists and audiences, the act of publicly marching together under a banner with the rhetoric of “publicity activity” (*xuanchuan huodong*), which can also be translated as “propaganda campaign” (*xuanchuan huodong*), would have pointed to a different and more vexed legacy of art’s engagement with society and politics. As performance scholar Thomas Berghuis has pointed out, the Chinese term “*huodong*,” which is related to the term “*yundong*,” or “movement,” carries strong social and revolutionary connotations.³⁴ In the mid-1990s, however, *Keeper’s* activist overtones ran counter to the pervading zeitgeist of the post-revolutionary period. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, prominent artists and critics decried the “content-driven” art of the Maoist period, which had been promulgated by Mao Zedong’s well-known declaration that art should serve politics and the advancement of socialism.³⁵ More immediately, the failure of grassroots political activism during the Tiananmen Square student protest of 1989 cast a dark shadow over cultural practices that could be construed as even remotely political, much less overtly activist as was the case with *Keepers*. During the 1990s these factors contributed to

Kwon have also advanced important critiques. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Kester, *The One and the Many*; Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), Chapter 6; Kwon, *One Place After Another*; Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

³⁴ Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 38–39.

³⁵ Mao’s famous declaration was made as part of the 1942 Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. The backlash against these ideas during the 1980s was best expressed by the artist Wu Guangzhong in his 1979 article ‘*Huihua de xingshi mei*’ [*Formalist aesthetics in painting*], which promoted formal aesthetics over art that was ‘burdened with the additional obligation to preach.’ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”*; Wu, “*Huihua de Xingshi Mei* [*Formalist Aesthetics in Painting*].”

an overall wariness about any forceful notion of art's service to social goals. Likewise, artists chose more private modes of expression rather than associate with large-scale, highly visible, public art projects.³⁶

This began to change, however, with the increase in outdoor site-based art practices in the mid-1990s. As early as 1993, the artist Dai Guangyu and several others in Chengdu began creating outdoor works that have been described by art historian Gao Minglu as having “*zhaichang xing*” or “on-site characteristics” due to their direct relationship with local street life.³⁷ Around 1994, the artist Yin Xiuzhen and her artistic circle in Beijing also began working outdoors in the nearby suburbs of the city.³⁸ In 1995, the Shanghai-based artist Zhang Xin created her first outdoor work, rejecting the spaces of the institutional art gallery and siting her work on the lawn. Still hesitant to fully tie art back to any broader social movement (*yundong*), these works, nevertheless, indicate an artistic re-engagement with real-world sites and everyday social life. The siting of these art activities in public space, moreover, expanded art's audience from smaller art world circles to general audiences in their day-to-day environs. By the time of their participation in *Keepers* in 1995, the words “publicity activity” (*xuanchuan huodong*), which might have connoted formerly discredited ideas about art and social engagement, could be re-understood through the softer framework of “art activities” or “*yishu huodong*,” yet still carry some of the social imperatives implicit in such publicly oriented forms of expression.

While visual artists did not coalesce around any particular term for these outdoor, site-based art practices, their counterparts in film did begin to articulate an analogous aesthetic sensibility.

³⁶ Gao Minglu has described these more private modes as “apartment art.” Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, chap. 9.

³⁷ Gao Minglu, “Jietou qianwei: yu Chengdu xushi [‘Street avant-garde:’ A narrative of Chengdu].”

³⁸ In Chapter 4 I examine the influence of German ideas of site-based art practices on Yin and the artist Zhu Jinshi, who sojourned in Berlin and returned to Beijing in 1994. Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds., *Yin Xiuzhen* (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012).

Around the mid-1990s, the term “*xianchang*” was first proposed by the documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang, whose 1990 film *Bumming in Beijing* followed the lives of several experimental visual artists throughout the city. Writing in the journal *Dongfang* in 1996, Wu promoted “*xianchang*” as “the filmmaker’s observation and witness of the real life of people and things,” which, he emphasized, should occur without active interference.³⁹ According to Wu because “*xianchang*” is “unreplicable, unrestorable, and cannot be clarified through recourse to language” it is related not only to site but also to a heightened sense of temporality. As film scholars such as Christopher Berry and Zhang Zhen have noted, Wu and other filmmakers such as Jia Zhanke’s approach to shooting on-location (*xianchang*)—as opposed to using set designs—and his use of an improvisational style that responded to everyday environments, spurred the “new documentary movement” of the mid- to late-1990s.⁴⁰ Describing its openness to the contingencies of the real world, Zhang has described *xianchang* as a “charged with a sense of urgency and social responsibility.”⁴¹

If both contemporary artists and filmmakers sought to work in a “*xianchang*” mode, we should, nevertheless, understand the stakes of this renewed commitment to everyday life within the particular conundrums of engaging social and political reality after the Cultural Revolution.⁴² As film scholar Luke Robinson and art historian Madeline Eschenburg have suggested, the artistic emphasis on *xianchang* was an effort to take up social issues, while keeping at bay the discredited ideological aims of propaganda art and film.⁴³ In other words, working on-site reaffirmed the socio-aesthetic

³⁹ Wu later compiled his writings into an anthology focused on the term “*xianchang*.” Wu Wenguang, “Dongfang,” 91; Wu Wenguang, *Xianchang [On the scene]*.

⁴⁰ Zhang, “Building on the Ruins: The Exploration of New Urban Cinema of the 1990s”; Berry, Lu, and Rofel, *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*.

⁴¹ Zhang, “Building on the Ruins: The Exploration of New Urban Cinema of the 1990s,” 116.

⁴² Here, I echo art historian Chang Tan, who has argued that contemporary revivals of certain communal aspects of revolutionary art, nevertheless, refrained from overt political activism. Tan, “Art for/of the Masses: Revisiting the Communist Legacy in Chinese Art.”

⁴³ Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private’: Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*”; Eschenburg, “Migrating Subjects.”

commitments that were so crucial to the art of the preceding decades, but rejected the tendency to instrumentalize art towards a broader social and political agenda. Throughout the 1990s even as artists and filmmakers worked on-site and sought to blur the realms between art and everyday life, they continued to hold on to their own independent artistic visions. This dynamic between the artwork's social and its artistic commitments was evident at *Keepers*, where participants, aware of the activist goals of the art event, sought to formulate their own approach to *xianchang* aesthetics.

Publicity and Performance Art: Dai Guangyu and Zhu Gang's *Long Abandoned Water Standards*

One artist who most enthusiastically embraced the social and environmentalist goals of *Keepers* was Chengdu-native Dai Guangyu. Dai was an emerging leader of experimental art who was well connected with the city's cultural scene and the first artist that Damon made contact with when she arrived there. As Maya Kovskaya has shown, Dai hoped to use the public, on-site format to widely promote performance and installation art, practices that were still considered unusual and taboo at the time.⁴⁴ This was especially significant for the artist who had only two years earlier began to create on-site installations in various abandoned spaces around the city. Dai's early experiments, however, were met with censure from the local Provincial Party Publicity Department and quickly shut down, a fate consistent with that of many experimental art projects across the country during this period. With the approval of the municipal government this time, however, Dai sought to foreground on-site art's highly public character by emphasizing accessibility, incorporating different forms of mass communication, and physically interacting with public audiences.

⁴⁴ Here, I draw from Maya Kovskaya's interpretation, but reframe it within the concerns of on-site (*xianchang*) art practice Maya Kóvskaya, "Making Traces Together: Participation, Refusal, and the Origins of Dai Guangyu's Public Performance Art Practice," in *Dai Guangyu: Making Traces: The Arts of Participation and Refusal* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2017), 10–41.

Dai's performance installation, *Long Abandoned Water Standards* (with assistance from the artist Zhu Gang) was meant to reveal the extent of the Funan River's water pollution by submerging black-and-white photographs in trays of polluted water and allowing them to deteriorate over the course of several days (Fig. 1.4). Adjacent to these trays the artists arranged four bottles of cloudy water, a kettle, and disposable cups on a white table with a tongue-in-cheek placard announcing, "The Jin River water used here has been purified, please feel free to drink." The two artists then drank the 'tea' and offered it to reluctant passers-by.

Dai and Zhu staged the work in a highly trafficked sidewalk alongside the banks of the river. The work mimicked a public bulletin (*xuanchuan lan*), using this official format of issuing public announcements to address everyday audiences and declare counterfactually a citywide water shut-off due to the extensive river and groundwater pollution. On the ground in front of the public notice board, the artists carefully pasted thin sheets of white *xuan* paper to delineate a semi-transparent space on which the trays of deteriorating photographs were placed and where viewers could stand. This area marked both an artistic space and a participatory space of artistic address that anticipated and visualized the public gathering. Despite this designated space, viewers were at first hesitant to transgress the boundaries that separated the art space from the sidewalk.⁴⁵ As a result, Dai spontaneously splashed polluted water from the river onto the *xuan* paper-covered ground, dirtying the area and removing the audience's barrier to entry. By setting up a white ground precisely to muddy it with the waste product of real-life environmental pollution, Dai's spontaneous action broke the boundary of the art space, inviting the public audience into the artwork.

In addition to mobilizing the form of the public bulletin, Dai promoted his work and the event through his contacts in the local media. Serving as the local spokesperson and conduit

⁴⁵ Dai Guangyu, Keepers of the Waters talk at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, November 1, 2018, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/keepers-of-the-waters>.

between Damon and the cultural community of Chengdu, Dai helped the event gain widespread attention and public support. Through various newspaper and television interviews, the artist sought to promote performance art's social value as a means of legitimizing this experimental art form and its practitioners. According to Dai:

What we were thinking was that the government had no idea about installation art and performance art [...] we wanted to change the whole attitude towards art in China and we wanted to use the fact that the government was involved to be able to get the press to document and talk about it. We thought, that way, we could change the situation for Chinese artists, or at least for those in Chengdu.⁴⁶

For Dai, the public's on-site encounter with an accessible piece of installation and performance art could prompt effective social change. However, the social import of the work resided less in its environmentalist message than in its public promotion and elevation of an experimental art practice with which the public and the government was previously unfamiliar and to which it was even hostile. Rather than using art as a means to advance social and environmental goals, this was a case in which the artist used an activist agenda as a means to also advance art world goals.

Dai's participation in *Keepers* had a significant impact on his own artistic trajectory. After the event, Dai, along with other artists in Chengdu, continued the outdoor, on-site format, using the highly public "art activities" (*yishu huodong*) to continue to advocate for experimental art practice along with social causes such as the preservation of historic sites in Chengdu. Initiating the 719 Artist Studio Alliance, a loose consortium of Chengdu-based artists, in 1997, Dai's efforts to promote experimental performance in Chengdu contributed to the development of a distinctive performance art scene in the city known for its progressive social agendas and participatory formats.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Dai Guangyu, *The Heavens are High and the Emperor is Far Away*.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of performance art in Chengdu see, Sophia Kidd, "Conceptual Archaeology: Performance Art in Southwest China," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 10, no. 3 (June 2011): 36–46.

Art and Everyday Life: Wang Peng's *Rain Pavilion*

While Dai Guangyu's approach sought to blur the boundary between art and social activism, other artists such as the Beijing-based artist Wang Peng seemed to resist such instrumentalization. According to Wang, artworks should be distinguished from mere "propaganda" (*xuanchuan*).⁴⁸ This disavowal, which Wang was at pains to point out, offered an important counterweight to the position put forth by Damon and the municipal government. In an art event where the highly public, on-site format seemed to challenge the notion of an autonomous art space that was separate from everyday life, Wang created a work that seemed to reaffirm this very position. The contradictions surrounding Wang's installation *Rain Pavilion* dramatized an emerging question for many artists beginning to work in an on-site mode: *what constitutes art and the spaces of art when they become fully immersed in everyday life?*

Although *Rain Pavilion* was created in a highly accessible site and seemed to invite the audience's embodied sensory engagement, unlike Dai's work, it actually prevented visitors from entering its space (Fig. 1.5). Sited at Hejiang Ting (Joining River Pavilion), a historic double-pitched roof pavilion located at the confluence of the city's northern river (Fu River) and the southern river (Nan River), the installation enjoyed a prominent position in the cityscape (Fig. 1.6). Taking over the entire pavilion, the artist draped a thin white cloth all over the space including the stairs leading up to it. Blue and white lidded ceramic teacups were evenly arranged on the ground on top of the silk. Commissioning frozen ice blocks produced from the polluted Funan River water, Wang installed them along the timber brackets underneath the pavilion's roof and allowed them to drip onto the white cloth and teacups.⁴⁹ As the ice melted and dripped down like rain, the dirty water spread

⁴⁸ Wang Peng, interview with the author, November 24, 2018, Beacon.

⁴⁹ It is unclear whether Wang's work influenced Yin Xiuzhen's work with ice or the other way around. Wang recalls that *Rain Pavilion* was done on the first day of the event, before Yin's, whereas Betsy recalls this being the penultimate work, as listed in the poster schedule. Yin does not recall whose came first. See my interview with the

across the white fabric. According to Wang, the installation was meant to invert the function of a pavilion, which can be used to take shelter from the rain, by causing it to “rain” inside the pavilion.⁵⁰ In this way, the work also transformed a quotidian urban site into a specialized art space. Despite the unfurled cloth leading viewers up the steps, the melting ice and evenly arranged teacups hindered access to the central space, preserving a distinct artistic time-space framed by the architecture of the site. Illustrating this boundary, a photograph from the time shows Wang’s colleague Yin Xiuzhen, standing at the exterior eave of the pavilion and looking inward at the central space of the pavilion (Fig. 1.7). Prompted to create an outdoor artwork, Wang seemed to have paradoxically reverted to creating a gallery-like space that distinguished itself from the everyday.

Wang’s contradictory impulse of siting the work outdoors, yet asserting an autonomous art space stemmed from his ongoing reflections on what constitutes art and its proper spaces, a preoccupation shared among those in his circle in Beijing. With the influx of new information about contemporary installation and performance art practices outside of China, progressive artists like Wang were forced to expand their definitions of art—previously understood as either painting or sculpture to be exhibited in a museum space. Wang recalled that he was influenced by a 1991 Chinese translation of a study on the German artist Joseph Beuys, which introduced him to Beuys’ social understanding of art practice.⁵¹ As with many of his contemporaries who learned of Western art practices through books, Wang’s mediated understanding of Beuys was not profound, yet it

artists. Wang Peng, interview with the author, November 24, 2018, Beacon; Betsy Damon, interview with the author, July 25, 2018, New York; Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author, June 28, 2019, Beijing.

⁵⁰ Inversion can be seen as a key strategy and theme for many of Wang’s works since *Wall* (1993). It would later be carried over to his 1996 work *Inside/Outside* at the Vermont Art Center in the U.S.. Wang Peng, *Wang Peng* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2005).

⁵¹ This book was likely Taiwanese artist Wu Mali’s translation of Heiner Stachelhaus’s biography of Joseph Beuys. Heiner Stachelhaus, *Boyisi Zhuan*, trans. Wu Mali (Taipei: Yishujia chuban she, 1991); Heiner Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys* (Düsseldorf: Claassen, 1988).

nevertheless prompted his interest in the relationship between art and everyday life.⁵² In Beijing Wang also became associated with Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen, a Beijing-based artist couple who sojourned in Berlin for seven years before returning to Beijing in 1994. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, Zhu was influenced by Western site-based performance art practices, and upon returning to Beijing, had encouraged his friends to create spontaneous site-based works in outdoor locations.

Inspired by these ideas, Wang created the performance installation *Three Days* in a dilapidated corner pavilion of the Forbidden City a few months prior to participating in *Keepers* (Fig. 1.8). Like *Rain Pavilion*, *Three Days* took place in an outdoor location, using the site to explore what constitutes art practice in this newly expanded sense of the term. Laden with historic significance, the imperial-era pavilion, which had been walled up and repurposed as housing during the Cultural Revolution, was awaiting reconstruction as part of the city's efforts to rehabilitate its cultural monuments. Fascinated by the site's transformation over time, Wang sought to integrate his performance installation into the natural time-space of the urban site by inhabiting the pavilion for three days and three nights. During this time, he invited artist friends including Song Dong, Wang Luyan, and Zhang Huan to visit and converse with him on any topic *except* art. Wang carefully filmed and photographed the experience, restaging them along with the cot he slept on five months later after the pavilion was rehabilitated following his return from *Keepers* in Chengdu. Juxtaposed against the newly rebuilt pavilion, Wang's documentation marked the passage of time and served as a testament to the site's lifespan, of which he himself became a constitutive part.

Three Days was inspired by the New York-based performance artist Tsieh Tching, whose performance practice was featured in the highly influential 1994 artist publication the *Black Cover*

⁵² Beuys along with Andy Warhol, and Marcel Duchamp, were some of the Western artists most often mentioned by their Chinese colleagues, but because of limited publications as well as the language barrier, it is unclear how deeply Chinese artists were able to understand their art practices.

Book, which circulated among the artists at the time.⁵³ Tsieh's year-long durational performance works—described as “lifeworks” by the scholar Adrian Heathfield—placed pressure on the temporal distinctions between art and everyday life.⁵⁴ Like Tsieh's works, *Three Days* foregrounded the artist's lived experience of real time and real space, framing the artwork and the site as spatially and temporally coextensive. These goals were ultimately meant to blur the boundaries between art and non-art. As the artist explained:

I especially felt that I wanted to realize an artwork that did not appear to be an artwork; something that isn't anything, evading the categories of performance, installation or photography... I was interested in this corner pavilion because it demonstrated a process. It is not a process of demolition and rebuilding it, but a process of restoration, returning to its former state. It is also closely related to time.⁵⁵

For Wang the transformation of the site offered a way to visualize and experience *as art* the mundane passage of time. That Wang explicitly forbade any discussions of art among his artist visitors further indicates his aims to make the work as non-art-like as possible. Situating itself in a space and situation that could not properly be considered an art space, *Three Days* used on-site art practice to probe the threshold between art and everyday life.

If *Three Days*, along with a number of other works Wang created just before *Keepers*, pursued ways of attenuating the distinction between art and everyday life, *Rain Pavilion* might be seen as retrograde in its assertion of an autonomous art space.⁵⁶ *Rain Pavilion* could be considered an outlier to the artist's practice—a product of Wang's lack of familiarity or personal connection with

⁵³ The book will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three

⁵⁴ Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ Wang later clarified to me that what he meant by “not art” or “not anything” also may have implied creating something that was completely original and could not be derided as derivative of other artists' works. Wang Peng, interview with the author, November 24, 2018, Beacon; Tan, “Getting Inside and Outside: An Interview with Wang Peng.”

⁵⁶ These include works such as *We Live in Art* (1994), which was sited in Zhu Jinshi's home and placed a squat toilet and teacups on a dining table to recreate a dining room scene and *Wall · '93* (1993), which sealed the entrance to an art gallery and called attention to the physical spaces of the art world. Wang Peng, *Wang Peng*.

Chengdu's urban context. However, despite these two opposing approaches to the relationship between the artwork and the site, *Three Days* and *Rain Pavilion* reveal a common preoccupation with using the on-site mode to explore the highly fertile, yet ambiguously unresolved question of art's relationship to everyday life.

Embodying Site: Yin Xiuzhen's *Washing the River*

A close colleague of Wang Peng, the Beijing-based artist Yin Xiuzhen began to work in an on-site mode a year prior to participating in *Keepers*. Yin had originally studied and practiced painting, but beginning in 1994 turned to increasingly site-based formats, creating what art historian Wu Hung has called one of the earliest works of "Chinese Land Art".⁵⁷ Two early works such as *Tree of Parting* (1994) and *Tree Lute* (1995) were formal experiments that integrated elements of installation with the natural landscape of Beijing's urban periphery (Fig. 1.9 and 1.10). While these early works did not seem to be associated with a broader social agenda, at *Keepers* Yin's participatory performance work, *Washing the River*, drew a direct link between the on-site format and the event's goals of environmental change (Fig. 1.11). Sharing Wang's wariness toward "propaganda," however, Yin's work paradoxically motivated participants towards environmental action while questioning the very notion of the artwork's social efficacy. Ultimately rejecting a utilitarian understanding of on-site art practice, Yin turned instead to engage site through the use of site-based materials, foregrounding their socio-aesthetic potentials.

⁵⁷ Aside from this brief mention by Wu, the category of "Chinese Land art" has not been properly discussed in scholarship on Chinese contemporary art. In 2016, the exhibition *Digging a Hole in China* at OCAT Shenzhen examined works produced in China that bear a connection to land, positing that in comparison to the Western tradition of Land Art, which "sought a conceptual and geographical nowhere... [works in China] turn to a variety of issues such as the rights of ownership, management, and land use, and the transfer of and restrictions on these rights, weaving together a massive network that has already exceeded 'land'." Wu Hung, "Totally Local, Totally Global: The Art of Yin Xiuzhen," in *Yin Xiuzhen*, ed. Wu Hung, Hou Hanru, and Stephanie Rosenthal, Contemporary Artists (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2015), 56; Liu Xiuyi, "Shijian de dimao [Digging a Hole in China]" (OCAT Shenzhen, 2016).

To create *Washing*, Yin commissioned a local ice factory to produce ice blocks by using ten cubic meters of the polluted river water. She then stacked the ice blocks, forming a large rectangular mound on the banks of the river, and provided buckets of clean water and brushes inviting the public to join her in scrubbing the dirty sculpture. Although *Washing* would appear to illustrate the power of participatory performance, it also demonstrates that the conceit of simply scrubbing away water pollution was far too simplistic. Indeed, it is hard not to imagine the scene of abandoned buckets and the wet ground as anything but anticlimactic after two days of public fervor. Problematizing the assumption that artistic action is equivalent to social efficacy, the work set up a visible contradiction between the public's physical investments of labor and what little there was to show for it once the ice had melted.

A second piece that Yin created, the installation *Weighing the River*, operated through a similar logic (Fig. 1.12). The artist hung a set of small rectangular mirrors along the river's embankment walls, attaching each to a small weight scale. Capturing the image of the river in each mirror, the work suggested the impossible proposition that the river could have its dimensions and values objectively measured. The work suggests instead that the river's conceptual "weight"—whether cultural, social, emotional, or aesthetic—should be understood in alternate ways. Against the straightforward positivism of the overarching environmentalist campaign, both *Washing* and *Weighing* center attention on the river—or the site itself—as a material object to be experienced and reconsidered anew. Far from holding what the curator Hou Hanru has read as a cynical or "self-mocking" attitude towards enacting social change, Yin's approach located the social significance of the on-site work not in its ability to accomplish a predetermined social goal, but in its power to enact

what the theorist Jacques Rancière has described as a “redistribution of the senses,” or a way of making visible what once was ignored and suggesting alternate ways of sensing and acting.⁵⁸

Interviewed on site next to the artwork, Yin told a local reporter:

When I arrived [in Chengdu] I learned about the city’s water pollution problem and I felt that everybody should do something about it, no matter what your job is. We are artists, so to say, so we use artistic methods to embody (*tixian*) this river pollution.⁵⁹

Yin’s use of the term “embody” (*tixian*), comprising the characters “*ti*” (body) and “*xian*” (appear), points to the way in which the on-site (*xianchang*) work of art could make apparent (*xian*) the invisible conditions of its site (*chang*). By crystallizing the river as a concrete sculptural form, the artist materialized water pollution, prompting audiences to confront it directly on the street. As performance art scholar Meiling Cheng has noted, Yin’s sculpture became a “performative object” that catalyzed the audience’s action.⁶⁰ By converting the public’s enthusiasm (*reqing*, or literally, “heat feeling”) into a kinetic power that melted the ice blocks, the work also reformulated the audience’s participatory action into an aesthetic material and a formal element of the work.⁶¹ By reframing the river as an aesthetic site, Yin’s on-site work embodied (*tixian*) the site’s material conditions and social processes, visualizing their intimate relationship. As Yin had been careful to distinguish in her assertion that artists use artistic methods, *Washing* made clear that the artwork’s capacity to engage the social realm was inherent in its unique aesthetic modalities rather than its adoption of pragmatic social or environmental agendas.

⁵⁸ Hou Hanru, “Yin Xiuzhen,” in *Yin Xiuzhen*, ed. Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012), 86; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁵⁹ Yin Xiuzhen, 1995 interview in archival video from Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China Online Archive, <http://seachina.net/keepers-of-the-waters>. Accessed 25 April 2020.

⁶⁰ Meiling Cheng, *Beijing Xingwei: Contemporary Chinese Time-Based Art* (London: Seagull Books, 2013).

⁶¹ Yin’s approach has close parallels with Joseph Beuys’ notion of “social sculpture.” While information about Beuys was circulating among Yin’s circle in Beijing, it is unclear to what extent these works were directly in conversation with Western art traditions. In interview, Yin did not acknowledge any connections with Beuys.

A participant of *Keepers* in Lhasa, Yin continued to explore the transmedial relations between site, materiality, and social life in the installation *Butter Shoes*, created the following year in the Tibetan capital (Fig.1.13). Gathering several dozen pairs of used shoes from local Tibetans, Yin filled them with yak butter, and arranged them in dispersed pairs spread out over a shallow pool of water by the river. Imbuing the natural landscape with traces of human culture, the work also attended to the social significance of its two key materials, used shoes and yak butter, and their relationship to the physical site of Tibet. Yin had been fascinated by used clothing and shoes, two materials that she had already used in several previous works and would continue to use throughout her career. According to the artist, “clothing that has been worn is like ‘skin’ that can speak. It speaks of its experiences, and carries the warmth and aesthetic tastes of people.”⁶² Yin’s career-long use of used clothes and concrete, the latter of which will be discussed in Chapter Four, has been considered by Wu Hung as a key example of “material art,” a trend that emerged in the late 1980s and became fully developed in the 1990s. Yet while Yin’s contemporaries such as Lin Tianmiao chose highly personal materials such as thread to use as a signature artistic idiom, Yin’s interest in materials always related to specific sites.⁶³ By incorporating used shoes into the on-site work, Yin connected the work to the everyday lives of the area’s local inhabitants.

Yin’s use of yak butter is also inspired by her insights into the importance of this material to daily life in Tibet. Visiting the Potala Palace for the first time, Yin noticed that people would hold yak butter with their bare hands, bringing them to the temple to light candles and sometimes to eat.⁶⁴

⁶² Hou Hanru, “Hou Hanru in Conversation with Yin Xiuzhen,” in *Yin Xiuzhen*, ed. Wu Hung and Stephanie Rosenthal, Contemporary Artists (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2015), 19.

⁶³ For a discussion of contemporary Chinese artists’ interest in materiality see, Wu Hung and Cacchione, *Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*.

⁶⁴ Yin Xiuzhen, interviewed by Jane DeBevoise and Cici Wu, November 4, 2017, Asia Art Archive, New York. AA interview

At home, Tibetans would also drink yak butter tea for warmth. Noting this “hybrid of materiality and spirituality in the lives of Tibetans,” Yin remarked:

Yak butter can provide nourishment while also illuminating the spirit. When this spiritual material is placed in shoes, which can carry people to distant places, it’s like a form of transcendence, like a spiritual vessel that carries brutality and warmth through the beautiful scenery, stopping at this shore or that, solidifying on the ground, solidifying in the photograph.⁶⁵

Just as Yin had previously transformed the Chengdu audience’s enthusiasm into mechanical energy, here, yak butter embodied and solidified human spiritual energy, redepositing it into the abandoned shoes. Spread out across the panoramic terrain, the shoes express a direct and rooted connection with the land as much as they also suggest movement and transience rather than any static or stereotypical notion of Tibetan identity.⁶⁶

Returning to Beijing after *Keepers*, Yin would continue to develop an on-site art practice that combined her sensitivity to site, materiality, and social life by engaging with the changing urban environment. Yin’s works such as *Transformation* (1998) and *Road* (1998) would take place in outdoor locations, use found materials from the site, and engage public audiences to reflect on the realities of urban displacement and destruction.⁶⁷ Not limited to creating works within the domestic context—as will be discussed in Chapter Four—Yin would also travel to cities all over the world, adapting her art practice to respond to local material histories as well as the changing historical conditions of increased global mobility. Informed by her experience at *Keepers*, Yin’s approach to on-site art practice eschewed art activism in favor of more open-ended and poetic methods that were nevertheless deeply rooted in the social and material realities of specific sites.

⁶⁵ Hou Hanru, “Hou Hanru in Conversation with Yin Xiuzhen,” 19.

⁶⁶ Yin noted that she was surprised to find that Tibetans were wearing Sinicized and otherwise international style shoes rather than traditional Tibetan-style shoes. Yin Xiuzhen, interviewed by Jane DeBevoise and Cici Wu, November 4, 2017, Asia Art Archive, New York. AA interview

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the theme of displacement in Yin’s work see, Peggy Wang, “Dis/Placement: Yin Xiuzhen’s City Installations,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 4, no. 1 (March 2005): 87–101.

The Social Landscape: Zhang Xin's *Sowing*

As evidenced by Yin Xiuzhen's contribution to the second iteration of *Keepers* in Lhasa, by the following year, numerous participating artists came to see their work less in the vein of art activism with specific political messages than as an opportunity to experiment with on-site art practice and explore its social potential. Like Yin, the Shanghai-based artist Zhang Xin created an on-site work that was intimately connected to its site and sought to activate its latent social, material, and historical realities. In the performance work *Sowing*, Zhang took on the role of a peasant and transferred dirt from a nearby construction site to the middle of a well-traversed road alongside the Lhasa River (Fig. 1.14). Creating a four-by-four-meter patch, the shape of which suggests the Chinese character for "field" (田), Zhang labored for three days at the site to plant and grow native Tibetan barley. As Zhang had anticipated, however, bikes, trucks, and tractors that drove along the road gradually wiped the field away, leaving little trace of the artist's labor, except what can be seen in several photographs of the performance (Fig. 1.15). By dramatizing this tension, Zhang's work drew attention to the inevitable march of urbanization and its impact on the agrarian lifestyle and culture of the Tibetan region. Remarking on the inherent futility of growing crops on a barren road, Zhang referred to the element of hope and loss as a "linked condition" that structures this piece.⁶⁸

Zhang's performative engagement with the site in the guise of a peasant treats the Tibetan landscape critically, reframing it, as the scholar W.J.T. Mitchell has theorized, "not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed."⁶⁹ The performance thus connects the landscape to the figure of the peasant (*nongmin*), a deeply politicized social subject in modern Chinese history whose rural identity has often been conceived in

⁶⁸ Zhang Xin, *Keepers of the Waters* talk at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, November 1, 2018, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/keepers-of-the-waters>.

⁶⁹ W. J. T Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

dialectic relationship with urban identity. During the Cultural Revolution, peasants were celebrated and depicted in propaganda art as the heroes of the revolution and the basis for a new socialist system. With the beginning of the Reform Period, however, peasants and the country's rural regions became neglected in favor of market-oriented urban development. As a result, many rural regions either urbanized or became rapidly depopulated as former peasants migrated to urban centers to take up urban livelihoods, most notably construction work. As art historian Madeline Eschenburg has argued, since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the figure of the peasant as conceptualized in the realm of contemporary art, was not necessarily geographically tied to the countryside, but also linked to urban and peri-urban regions alike.⁷⁰

Visualizing what Zhang called the “linked condition” between rural and urban processes, the artist's selection of this particular site—an important road that connects Lhasa, an autonomous region of China, to Chengdu, or mainland China proper—also suggests an analogous relationship between the two geopolitical regions. Although Tibet had been annexed by the People's Republic of China in 1951, the region has remained culturally, ethnically, and economically distinct from mainland Han Chinese society. Yet despite Tibet's longstanding history of rural subsistence agriculture, by the 1990s mainland China's Reform-era policies began to fundamentally alter these existing structures.⁷¹ Roads such as this one, which connected China to Tibet, served as the primary conduit for Han Chinese immigration, cultural influence, urbanization, and subsequent socio-economic change. Far from mutual, such interregional interactions were subject to the unequal power dynamics of urban–rural, center–periphery, and industrialized–agricultural that bound the two regions together. Indeed, this vital road that connects Tibet to Lhasa ends at the site of a

⁷⁰ Eschenburg's account examines contemporary artworks from the early 2000s that incorporated peasants as participants. Eschenburg, “Migrating Subjects.”

⁷¹ Yeh, *Taming Tibet*.

Chinese military base, whose entrance signage written in large Chinese script can be seen just in the background of Zhang's work (Fig. 1.15).

Sowing thus surfaces the site's history of geopolitical contact as well as the tension between humans and the landscape. Rather than emphasize the presumed "naturalness" of the site, the structured give-and-take between the artist and other users of the road highlights the site's on-going constructedness—a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that points to the iterative processes of human actions, claims, and counterclaims that have always shaped the land.⁷² As a Han Chinese herself, Zhang's incorporation of her own body and manual labor on the Tibetan landscape self-reflexively juxtaposes the social position of the rural peasant as a land-based laborer against the artist's own position as an urban creative laborer who also uses the land to produce art. *Sowing*, therefore, situates the performing artist herself as not separate from the site, but rather embedded within the historical layers of broad social, economic, cultural and geopolitical processes that govern it.

Zhang's contribution to *Keepers* abandoned any attempts to instrumentalize the on-site work for the event's activist goals. Yet her deep reflections on the histories of the site attest to a different way in which on-site art can engage social realities. Echoing Yin's approach, Zhang's performance operated on a symbolic register by encapsulating and making visible the physical and social conditions of the site. However, unlike Yin's focus on the site at hand, Zhang's notion of on-site relationally connected two sites—the immediate one, Lhasa, and the distant one, Chengdu. By pointing to a context beyond that of its local milieu, *Sowing* linked what is on-site—here and now—to a spatially and temporally expanded network of sites and social identities, including her own.

⁷² I refer to philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's use of the terms "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Zhang's understanding of on-site, thus, expanded site-based art practice to encompass a relational notion of site, an approach that will be further explored in the following chapter.

Towards a “On-site” Aesthetic

The two iterations of *Keepers* in Chengdu (1995) and Lhasa (1996) proved to be an important testing site for different approaches to outdoor on-site art practice, a tendency that had just begun to proliferate across China around this time. An example of an early intersection between domestic art practice and international ideas on site-based, social and environmentally engaged art, *Keepers* offers a lens onto the unique and nuanced ways in which artists mobilized art to engage social realities during the Reform Period. As this account demonstrates, artists in the mid-1990s were already interested in the aesthetic and social possibilities that such a public and context-specific practice offered. When invited by Betsy Damon to create artworks that explicitly tied the outdoor, site-specific format to promoting a social and environmental cause, however, each artist responded in different ways. From emphasizing the public nature of the on-site artwork as a means to legitimize experimental art, to exploring the boundaries of art and everyday life, to embodying the social and material aspects of the site, to expanding the site to encompass a wider relational network of sites, Dai Guangyu, Wang Peng, Yin Xiuzhen, and Zhang Xin each adapted and modified Damon's approach to art and social activism.

Though distinct, these on-site approaches exemplified several interconnected characteristics: an outdoor, site-based method; an investment in the public's encounter with the artwork in a non-institutionalized art setting; and an engagement with contemporary social realities often without recourse to Western or revolutionary traditions of art activism. Importantly, this shared aesthetic emerged out of existing sensibilities and concerns that had been salient within the contemporary Chinese art world of the 1990s. Informed by different historical models for how art could engage

social life and public audiences, the artists pioneered new approaches to experimental art practice that were specific to the Chinese context. As the artists returned to their respective regions, they inevitably contributed to the proliferation of local inflections of on-site art practice. Subsequent site-based art activities and exhibitions such as Song Dong's *Wildlife* (1997–1998) and Feng Boyi and Cai Qing's *Trace of Existence* (1998), both of which included several artists in *Keepers*, attest to the ways in which on-site art practice continued to develop and gain traction in the second half of the 1990s. Reflecting a nascent moment in which ideas connecting art, site, and urban social life were beginning to take shape, *Keepers* suggests the beginnings of a distinct on-site art aesthetic and its ongoing influence on contemporary art practices in China.

CHAPTER TWO

The City as Site: The Big Tail Elephant Working Group in Guangzhou

In 1995, on a widened street alongside the construction site of Guangzhou's soon-to-be tallest skyscraper, a nondescript man moves a wall of stacked concrete blocks across the street, methodically stacking and unstacking each one-by-one amidst oncoming vehicular traffic (Fig. 2.1). This performance, *Safely Maneuvering Across Linhe Road*, by the artist Lin Yilin (b. 1964), a member of the Guangzhou-based Big Tail Elephant Working Group (*Daweixiang gongzuozhǔ*) exemplifies the highly unconventional ways in which the group incorporated the physical spaces of the city as the subject, site, and raw material of their art practice. Indeed, the piece engages with the urban environment in highly specific ways. The artist chose to locate the work on the street abutting the CITIC Plaza construction site in the rapidly developing new district of Tianhe (Heavenly River) in Guangzhou. The cinder blocks Lin used are taken from the site and therefore intimately connected to the material realities of the destruction and reconstruction of the city. And Lin's performance, a form of bodily engagement with the physical environment, registers an exchange between the artist's body and the urban site that can be understood in literal terms as an art *work*.

Lin's performance is representative of the thematic concerns and strategies of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group (BTE), which was comprised of artists Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong (1962-2016), Liang Juhui (1959-2006), and Xu Tan (b. 1957) (Fig. 2.2). Between 1991 and 1998, the group's Guangzhou-based art practice was rooted in the specific socio-economic conditions of the city, often quite literally on its streets. While many artists moved from the provinces to join the burgeoning art scene in Beijing in the 1990s, they were unique in their commitment to the city of Guangzhou, choosing its urban spaces as the site and subject of their work. Inspired by the city's urbanization, consumerism, and its new migrant population, Big Tail Elephant's artistic engagements

with Guangzhou transformed the city into an important center of experimental art activity in the early 1990s.

As art historians including Wu Hung and Gao Minglu have pointed out, China's deepening urbanization in the 1990s served as an important stimulus for experimental art practices.¹ These practices, they concur, do not simply reproduce or document urban reality, but instead internalize urban transformation as a subjective response that mixes personal, historical, and cultural memory. Grouping urban art practice with urban film and literature, Chinese studies scholar Robin Visser has sought to identify a "postsocialist urban aesthetic" and sense of subjectivity that is informed by the distinctive characteristics of urban planning, economics, and politics in the Reform Period.² While many scholars have written on the plethora of aesthetic practices that thematically or representationally engage the urban environment, less attention has been paid to the historic development of on-site art practices, a unique form of artistic interaction with specific sites and audiences that became prominent in the 1990s.³ As I will demonstrate, attending to on-site practices, especially the ways in which this unique format foregrounded artists' material, bodily, and temporal engagements with the real spaces of the city, offers new insights into the integral relationship between art practice and urbanization.

As discussed in the previous chapter, by the mid-1990s many artists across the country were working extensively on-site, using this new format to expand existing definitions of art and engage contemporary social realities. While my account of the art activity *Keepers of the Waters* reveals how Chinese on-site art practice intersected with and was influenced by American art practices in 1995 and 1996, this chapter moves back in time to examine on-site art practice's indigenous origins.

¹ Wu Hung, *Internalizing Changes*; Gao Minglu, *The Wall*.

² Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*.

³ Parke, "Infrastructures of Critique"; Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*; Wang and Valjakka, *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China*.

Turning from the previous chapter's analysis of different approaches to on-site art practice by artists from across China, this chapter traces the development of a single art group in a specific city over a period of time. I argue that BTE's collective art practice represents one of the earliest instances of a coherent and sustained on-site urban art practice in China. Through this account of their artistic trajectory, I explore the historic reasons for the emergence of on-site art practice in China and how this vanguard group used the unique format to engage with the social and physical changes of the urban environment. Despite a general acknowledgement of BTE's importance to the history of contemporary Chinese art — the group is included in various art historical surveys as well as domestic and international exhibitions — a comprehensive study of their artistic practice has yet to be undertaken.⁴ Building on art historian Katherine Grube's recent study of the group's early years between 1991 and 1994, and drawing on primary materials from the group's key exhibitions, interviews, and artists' statements, I demonstrate the ways in which the understudied group developed on-site art practice into a distinct aesthetic form that drew new connections between art and everyday life.

The first section of this chapter explores BTE's formation in the early 1990s and why the group turned away from conventional exhibitions venues to work directly in the urban environment. Contextualizing the group's artistic practices within the socio-economic changes taking place in Guangzhou and the larger Pearl River Delta region, I examine the ways in which the group innovatively used the city's sites, raw materials, and urban processes as both the physical context and artistic language for experimentation. Based on a close analysis of three key works, the second

⁴ Recently art historian Katherine Grube has discussed the Big Tail Elephant in a chapter of her 2018 dissertation and in a 2020 article, which draws on my own 2018 article on the art group. Katherine Grube, "Labouring Bodies: Big Tail Elephants in 1990s Guangzhou," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7, no. 2/3 (2020): 201–19; Grube, "State of Exchange," chap. 3; Nancy P. Lin, "Urban Insertion as Artistic Strategy: The Big Tail Elephant Working Group in 1990s Guangzhou," in *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interface*, ed. Meiqin Wang and Minna Valjakka, Asian Cities (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 181–208.

section of the chapter proposes the term “urban insertion” as a new conceptual framework to understand BTE’s artistic strategies. Departing from Euro-North American traditions of avant-garde confrontation and social intervention, “urban insertion” can be defined as a spatial practice that locates small gaps of opportunity within the city in order to stealthily slip in, at once mimicking urban processes such as construction work or real estate development, and at the same time critically investigating their material and socio-economic conditions. This unique on-site approach challenges existing understandings of urban spatial practice as either an unqualified critique of or a willing accomplice of capitalist forces. Instead, it reveals the ways in which artists of the period actually approached urbanization with equal measures of fascination and skepticism. The last section of this chapter considers BTE’s practice from a transregional perspective, placing the group’s activities within a broader network of intersecting on-site art practices and activities across China in the late 1990s. By closely following the developments of this important art group throughout the 1990s, my account illuminates how art practice, urban social life, and the built environment mutually informed one another during this period of unprecedented urban change.

Establishing the Big Tail Elephant Working Group

The Big Tail Elephant Working Group emerged at the beginning of the 1990s during a moment of uncertainty in the Chinese contemporary art world. As discussed in the Introduction chapter, art activities in the country experienced a drastic contraction as state affiliated institutions—the primary platform for the arts—effectively banned avant-garde exhibitions and journals following the closure of the *China Modern Art Exhibition* at the National Art Museum of China and subsequent events at Tiananmen Square in 1989.⁵ As Gao Minglu has pointed out, these events caused many

⁵ After the closing of *China Avant-Garde*, artists associated with the exhibition were banned from exhibiting in the China Art Gallery for a two-year period. Further exhibitions of installation, performance, and new media art were

artists to work and exhibit their art privately within the spaces of their own homes in the early years of the 1990s.⁶ Though censorship continued intermittently throughout the 1990s, conditions for art production and exhibition gradually showed signs of cautious normalization. In 1991 for example, the *Garage Show* (November 22 – 24, 1991), an experimental exhibition that included new art forms such as installation and conceptual art, successfully took place in Shanghai.

As graduates of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (GAFA) around the late 1980s, members of the BTE were not direct participants of the New Wave Movement even though its three founding members— Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, and Liang Juhui—had taken part as students in the *Experimental Show of the Southern Artists Salon* in September 1986.⁷ Between 1990 and 1991, the three founded the “Big Tail Elephant Working Group,” whose name was inspired by the European avant-garde group CoBrA.⁸ Xu Tan, another graduate of the Academy, joined the group shortly in 1993. Influenced by Western conceptual art of the 1960s, BTE’s works often combined appropriated objects and materials with multiple artistic media including performance, video, and photography.⁹ The use of the term “working group” (*gongzuo zu*) rather than a “collective” (*qunti*), which had commonly been used by artists affiliated with the New Wave in the 1980s, signaled the

strongly discouraged by state-run art institutions. For an assessment of exhibition conditions during this period see, Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*.

⁶ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, chap. 9.

⁷ The Salon took place in the Student Activity Centre of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou and featured a group performance, happenings, and installations. It exhibited once and was disbanded in 1987. See archival materials in “Southern Artist Salon,” Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art From 1980-1990, Asia Art Archive, http://www.china1980s.org/en/feature_details.aspx?feature_id=8. Accessed June 10, 2021.

⁸ In a group interview with Hans Ulrich-Obrist in 2005, Lin Yilin explained that the name was created because they wanted to use an animal name and they were aware of a Western group called CoBrA. Judging from Lin’s lack of interest in further explaining the name, it is likely that this was a contingent choice. Indeed, the members also experimented with new names that, according to Chen. Shaoxiong, did not have much significance in terms of their meaning, but was symbolic of a general self-reinvention. Lin for example, changed his name from Lin Weimin, a name with a highly revolutionary connotations, to Lin Yilin, which simply repeated his last name. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Hans Ulrich Obrist: The China Interviews*, ed. Philip Tinari and Angie Baecker, 1st ed. (Hong Kong: Office for Discourse Engineering, 2009), 49.

⁹ On conceptual art in the 1990s see, Zhu Qi, “1990s Conceptual Art and Artistic Conceptualization,” in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000*, ed. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 20–34.

group's departure from the kinds of leader oriented, ideologically driven group activities characteristic of the New Wave.¹⁰ While repudiating such groupthink mentalities, it is likely that the members continued with the group format for practical reasons such as pooling financial resources and combining exhibition opportunities during a period when the possibility for exhibiting works other than painting and sculpture was scarce. The emphasis on “working” highlighted this shift from ideology to pragmatism at the same time as it emphasized the thematic importance of urban labor to their practice.

Beginning in 1991, BTE organized a series of annual exhibitions in unusual non-exhibition spaces, an approach that first began as a response to the lack of venues for exhibiting experimental art and later developed into an aesthetic decision in its own right. Their 1991 and 1992 exhibition took place in the second floor of Guangzhou's No. 1 Worker's Cultural Palace and in the basement of the Guangdong Broadcast and Television University respectively. In these instances, Liang Juhui used his position as the Art Director of Guangdong Television to rent the venues and reassure authorities. Mounting exhibitions that could not be shown in official art museums in cultural palaces and university spaces was common for experimental exhibitions of the 1980s and 1990s. The aforementioned experimental exhibition *Garage Show* (1991), for example, took place in the rented basement car park of the Shanghai Education Hall, a cultural institution from the Cultural Revolution period (Fig. 0.6). While these choices were initially based on pragmatism, basement exhibitions, as art historian Wu Hung has argued, offered connotations of the artistic “underground,” including subversiveness, experimentation, and alterity.¹¹ By the late 1990s, basement shows in which artists showed viscerally challenging works for art world insiders, had

¹⁰ Xu Tan listed the Southern Artists Salon in Guangzhou, Gu Dexin's New Analyst Group, and the New Rationalist Painters as example of collectives with a single leader, to which their group was formed in resistance. Obrist, *Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 46.

¹¹ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 271.

developed into an intentional artistic gesture. In contrast to such insular tendencies, BTE's experimental shows in non-exhibition spaces were always conceived in relation to the urban context of Guangzhou. These alternative exhibition practices eventually developed into a singular aesthetic approach that was based on the very streets of the city itself.¹²

The City as Site and Material

As one of the premier sites of state-led experiments in free-market economic policies during the Reform Period (1978-present), the city of Guangzhou served as BTE's primary source of inspiration. With the inauguration of China's Open Door Policy in 1978 and the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Guangdong province in 1980, the Pearl River Delta region became as the curator Hou Hanru described it, "the main laboratory of economic, cultural, social and even political openness."¹³ By the early 1990s, urban transformation in the region had reached a breakneck pace, further bolstered by the popularity of retired Chinese Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour to Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai in early 1992, which reasserted the state's commitment to marketization.¹⁴ Since the opening up of capital markets, the creation of private enterprises, and greater municipal autonomy, Guangzhou has been dramatically transformed through the influx of capital, migrant workers, reconstruction, and expansion. These changes had an

¹² BTE prefigured another trend in the late 1990s and early 2000s when several experimental art exhibitions were staged in public venues such as shopping malls and bars. On these shows see, Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*.

¹³ In 1984, Guangzhou along with fourteen other coastal cities became officially designated as a SEZ. Hou Hanru, "Chen Shaoxiong, From Portable Streets to Private Diplomacy," in *Chen Shaoxiong*, ed. Robert Peckham (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2009), 2–19.

¹⁴ Vast amounts of scholarship have been devoted to the issue of urbanization in southern China. Those consulted in this chapter include, Gregory Bracken, *Aspects of Urbanization in China: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Peter J.M. Nas, *Directors of Urban Change in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); Rem Koolhaas et al., eds., *Great Leap Forward* (Köln: Taschen, 2001); Joseph Y. S. Cheng, *The Guangdong Development Model and Its Challenges* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 1998); Yue-man Yeung and David K. Y. Chu, eds., *Guangdong: Survey of a Province Undergoing Rapid Change*, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998); Stewart MacPherson and Yushuo Zheng, *Economic and Social Development in South China* (Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1996).

indelible influence on BTE's artistic practice. As Liang Juhui has remarked, "Our working methods changed in accord with the changes in the city. What's most important is that we've always been concerned with the development of the city, and this is the site around which we've positioned ourselves."¹⁵ Rather than simply treating the city as subject matter, however, BTE incorporated the material realities of Guangzhou in literal ways by appropriating commonly found materials and the city's urban processes. In this way, their works reflected a reciprocal relationship between the city and art praxis: the physical, economic, and political changes taking place in Guangzhou compelled a change in the group's use of materials, media, and processes, and in turn, this expanded field of art practice had a veritable impact on the city by uncovering and probing its very material conditions. Though each artist took different approaches and experimented with an array of materials and medium, it was above all, the shared reality of Guangzhou and the drastic transformation of the city during this period that continued to tie the members together.

In 1991 Lin Yilin began to use traditional brick, concrete blocks, iron, and wood in many of his projects in different sites around the city. When asked why he chose to use bricks, Lin once stated:

First, I am very interested in architecture, and in conceptual and minimalist art, and bricks are able to convey this. Second, when I first started to use bricks, I discovered that they are everywhere, because so many old houses have been torn down. The entire city is a construction site, full of bricks. For very little money, I could buy a truckload of bricks and use them to carry out these major projects.¹⁶

For Lin, the use of brick was not only practical, but through its very material qualities could provide a means to reframe Western conceptual or minimalist aesthetic within the daily realities of

¹⁵ Obrist, *Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 41.

¹⁶ Jérôme Sans, *China Talks: Interviews with 32 Contemporary Artists*, ed. Yün Ch'en and Michelle Woo (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009), 35.

demolition and reconstruction in Guangzhou.¹⁷ Seeing the entire city as one large construction site, Lin regarded it as the subject, site, and medium of his art. In the installation *Standard Series of Ideal Residence* (1991), Lin used iron armatures and stacked bricks to construct a series of structures halfway between conceptual sculpture and the incomplete shell of a house (Fig. 2.3). The Chinese title “*Lixiang zhuzhai biaoqun xilie*” (ideal residence, standard series) appropriated the clichéd verbiage of new building advertisements of the period, such as one from the Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po* advertising “Super Large-Style Luxurious Residence” apartment units in Shenzhen (Fig. 2.4).¹⁸ Lin’s work thus suggests the haphazard breakneck construction speed and the booming real estate market during this period.¹⁹ Yet the “walls” of Lin’s units jut out in strange angles and do not entirely delineate enclosed residential units. These evidently *un*-ideal units parallel the ways in which developers in the 1990s sought to maximize profits through new building standardizations for maximum efficiency. Diagrams of various unit configurations from the *Pictorial Guide to Speedy Architectural Design* and “Planning and Design of Superstructural Housing” from *Jianzhu Xue Bao*, exemplify these strategies and indicate the ways in which the towering new constructions and rigorously structured units shaped domestic life indoors and civic life in public spaces (Fig. 2.5).²⁰ Lin’s labor-intensive art *work* mimics the construction work of rebuilding the city into a modern metropolis. By using the materials of “standard” and “ideal” residences to create non-standard, non-ideal residences, Lin appropriated the very materials of the city to re-examine them anew. His

¹⁷ In the 1960s and 70s American artist Robert Smithson also incorporated materials from an exterior site into the “neutral” gallery space. Yet while BTE’s early installation works share many parallels to Minimalism’s redefinition of the installation space as phenomenological site, their unique trajectory would lead to new kinds of works more akin to performance than installation and land art. For a discussion of these Euro-North American practices see, Erika Suderburg, *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Reproduced in, Koolhaas et al., *Great Leap Forward*, 162.

¹⁹ As Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard Design School Pearl River Delta research team calculated, “Architectural design is produced ten times faster in China than in the U.S.” Koolhaas et al., 161.

²⁰ Reproduced in, Koolhaas et al., 186–87.

continued engagement with bricks and walls throughout the 1990s, speaks to the flexibility and enduring interest that the city-as-subject *and* raw material held for the artist as well as the other members of the group.

Whereas Lin used the city's physical materials of brick and iron to create his works, Xu Tan's project, *The Alternation and Extension of Sanyu Road No. 14* (1994) appropriated the city's economic exchange processes as its own type of medium (Fig. 2.6a). Taking place at No.14 Sanyu Road, a large old house in the inner neighborhood of Guangzhou, the work featured a provocative renovation plan for the site of the exhibition itself. In a derelict room on the second floor of the building, Xu conveyed his business plan for the space, which included a hair salon and a separate area for "other hair salon" services. According to the artist, in Guangdong, "hair salon" commonly also implied "brothel."²¹ The installation included a worn-looking mattress, pinned up black-and-white photos of the building, architectural plans, and drawings for how the individual rooms would be partitioned. Interspersed among these mock-ups are numerous large photographs of Xu himself in bed with a prostitute, demonstrating the sexual services his salon would offer by literally performing them in the role of the client. Drawn into this performance, the viewer is led to assume that the bed installed in the room is the same one Liang and the prostitute used in the photos. Curiously, in one of these scenes, Xu looks directly into the camera as if breaking the fourth-wall of his conceptual-performance-installation project (Fig. 2.6b).

Xu's work was at the intersection of multiple mediums: first, it was a conceptual proposal for converting the building into a lucrative multi-use commercial enterprise that was to be part bookstore, part hair salon, and part brothel; second, it featured an installation project that visualized the concept through the orchestration of photography, video, architectural drawings, text, and

²¹ Bernard Fibicher, ed., *Großschwanzelefant [Big Tail Elephant]* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1998), 98.

props; and finally, it was a documented performance that featured the artist himself as both industrious urban entrepreneur and lascivious brothel client. The artist's performance is, therefore, both fictional in his acting out of a role and real in his very *act* of manifesting his conceptual proposal to rent the space and use it for the commercial purpose of prostitution. Xu's work can be considered a form of "parafiction," a term that art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty has used to describe performative strategies that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, and whose very *plausibility* questions and provokes the viewer's critical assessment of normative reality.²² Xu's appropriation of a rental scheme thus draws attention to the real estate market itself.

According to Xu's explanation, the work reflected on the building's turbulent history—it was built shortly after the Japanese retreat from China during the Second Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s—and proposed new plans for its future.²³ During the Cultural Revolution, the house would have belonged to the state. However, beginning in the 1980s these properties were returned to private owners, setting off real estate speculation and the rapid growth of the housing rental market. Enterprising property owners would often sub-divide and rent out their buildings, aiding in the proliferation of small businesses, among which, was a new market for prostitution.²⁴ The owner of No. 14 Sanyu Road similarly sought to rent out his space for which Xu, among others, submitted a proposal. Yet ironically, a rental scheme that would likely have been overlooked by the municipal government as just a "hair salon," was sharply criticized by several newspapers due to the sexual content of Xu's artwork. The artist's proposal was rejected, but not the actual rental process. As Xu notes matter-of-factly, "The rental rights of No.14 Sanyu Rd. have been won by another company..."

²² Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (2009): 51–84.

²³ Fibicher, *Großschwanzelefant*, 98.

²⁴ Eva Li has shown that the economic development of Guangdong in the early 1990s has also resulted in the reemergence of prostitution, especially as a large percentage of the migrant labor coming into the region was female. Eva B. C. Li, "Welfare Provisions," in *Guangdong: Survey of a Province Undergoing Rapid Change*, ed. Yue-man Yeung and David K. Y. Chu, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), 285–302.

No.14 Sanyu Rd. will be altered and renovated according to different plans. The construction has already begun.”²⁵ The city’s rental market stops for no one.

Whereas previously Lin used the city’s physical materials of brick and iron to reflect on the changing urban environment, Xu’s project appropriated the city’s complex exchange of land, money, and services by mimicking it through performance. Because it attempted to adopt the economic workings of the city, Xu’s artwork seemed almost indistinguishable from the everyday realities of Guangzhou’s rental market system in the early 1990s. But by conceiving of his artwork as a parafiction that plays into the actual processes of property commercialization, illegal enterprises, and even sexual exploitation, Xu incisively bracketed out these burgeoning urban processes at the same time as he probed the limits of what they would allow. If, as Wu Hung has noted, “Xu Tan erased the boundary between representation and reality, and seamlessly merged contemporary art with contemporary life,” he was able to do so precisely through the doubled significance of performance: the artist is both an actor in his fictional scenario and a real-life actor in the socio-economic processes of the city to which he refers.²⁶

Performing Labor and Urban Processes

Xu Tan was not the only member of BTE to move towards performance art around this time. In fact, while the group focused primarily on installation art from 1991 to 1992, beginning in 1993 BTE started to incorporate performances that took place in outdoor locations rather than in makeshift indoor exhibition spaces.²⁷ While performance art had been practiced in China under the term “*xingwei yishu*” or “behavior art” since the late 1980s, BTE was at the vanguard of a new form

²⁵ Fibicher, *Großschwanzelefant*, 98.

²⁶ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 172.

²⁷ Prior to 1993, Chen Shaoxiong’s 1991 performance *Seven Days of Silence* was an early precedent

of performance practice that differed both from the theatrical group performances of the previous period and the bodily harm and abject, flesh-based works of the mid-to-late 1990s.²⁸ Instead, BTE's performances can be characterized by their individual and spontaneous character, their close relationship with on-site locations and audiences, and their interactions with urban socio-economic processes.

Although members of the group had participated in the 1986 Southern Artists Salon, which included a choreographed performance event featuring costumed performers and a set design stage, BTE's performance works in the 1990s were not group performances but singular engagements with specific sites and audiences. Their practices can be productively compared with performance practices concurrently developing in Beijing's East Village, which will be discussed in the following chapter.²⁹ Whereas East Village artists such as Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, and Cang Xin conducted performances for their artist colleagues in the outskirts of the city, BTE increasingly staged their performance works in centrally located public sites in the city center. Likewise, while the East Village artists sought to articulate an alternative artistic identity and art space at the urban periphery of the city, BTE physically immersed themselves in the commercial and developmental processes of the city center. Crucially, unlike the East Village artists' more expressive performances, BTE's works emphasized rote actions that, while not entirely evacuated of subjectivity, approach the dissolution of the performing subject within the urban processes it describes.

In Chen Shaoxiong's 1993 work *Five Hours*, for example, the artist used his body to perform the process of electricity consumption (Fig. 2.7). Staged outside the Red Ant bar, Chen sat next to

²⁸ On bodily harm and abject, flesh-based works see Silvia Fok, *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (Intellect Books, 2013); Jörg Huber and Zhao Chuan, *The Body at Stake: Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Art and Theatre* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013).

²⁹ BTE would have been aware of these experiments in Beijing as their 1993 performances were profiled alongside performance works by artists such as Ma Liuming, Song Dong, and Zhang Huang, among others in the *Black Cover Book* (1994) an artist magazine that circulated among conceptual and performance artists of the period. Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun, *Black Cover Book*.

an animal-like sculpture constructed from neon lights and used a green tube of lighting to connect his mouth to the animal's mouth. Sitting amidst a tangle of wires that connected the neon sculpture to the power outlets displayed on a table before him, Chen hung an electricity meter around his neck that measured the electricity consumption and displayed a clock and a sign that listed the performance's intended duration of five hours. As with the earlier work, *72.5 Hours of Electricity Consumption* (1992) (Fig. 2.8), which also featured the expenditure of electricity in the form of anthropomorphic neon sculptures, *Five Hours* figured the performing body as literally part of the electrical wiring and the consumption of electricity itself. Chen's work, along with Xu's *No. 14 Sanyu Road* (1994), performed the *workings* of a particular urban process such as electricity usage or the rental market, thereby reframing their art practice as a form of urban labor.

These performances can be characterized by what art historian Katherine Grube has recently called BTE's use of "laboring bodies," a description that draws attention to the ways in which their performances used "bodily temporalities and materiality" to explore the impact of a commodified urban culture on everyday social relations.³⁰ As Grube has incisively argued, the group's emphasis on performances of labor reveals a deep anxiety over the socio-economic position of the artist whose cultural labor has been rendered superfluous in relation to more economically productive forms of urban labor. Pointing to the sense of alienation in their works, Grube has framed BTE's performances as a radical critique of commodification. However, a closer attention to the formal means through which BTE performatively engaged with Guangzhou's urban socioeconomic realities, suggests a much more nuanced attitude. BTE's works performed the things that made the city run—electricity, construction, and commercial markets—integrating these systems into their very own bodies and subjectivities. As I will argue, this manner of mimicking and inserting

³⁰ Grube, "Labouring Bodies: Big Tail Elephants in 1990s Guangzhou."

themselves into the city's daily working processes, articulated both a sense of critical distance *and* propinquity to urban socio-economic realities. If the mid-1990s can be considered an important moment for the proliferation of new forms of performance art practices across China, BTE's works are significant not only for being at the vanguard of this shift, but also for developing a unique practice that was part and parcel of the city's physical, material, and social realities.

Urban Insertions: 1995 to 1998

From 1995 onwards, BTE continued to push farther outward into the public spaces of the city. Their performance works in public streets and various construction sites engaged the physical spaces and changes of the city at a moment when Guangzhou's aspirations to rebuild itself as an international city were being systematically implemented.³¹ It was during this period that some of BTE's most important public performances were created, including Lin Yilin's *Safely Maneuvering Across Linbe Road* (1995), Liang Juhui's *One Hour Game* (1996), and Chen Shaoxiong's, *Streetscape* series (1997-8).³² Many did not take place in the context of an exhibition, as did some of their earlier performance works. In fact, these performances in the city proper seemed to have collapsed the moment of the artwork's creation with the moment of its exhibition to a public audience. BTE's works during this period thus eschewed conventional exhibition sites and formats. Though they would have one last annual group exhibition at one specific location in 1996, the same format that had worked for them between 1991 and 1996 seemed no longer sufficient to truly engage the urban

³¹ Peter Cheung has argued that the change in municipal leadership to a technocratically minded mayor and Party Secretary in 1990 catalyzed major urban infrastructural changes. By 1993, the municipal government had drafted *Guangzhou's Development Proposal to Achieve Basic Modernization in Fifteen Years*, which included plans for market and urban core expansion in the city. Peter Cheung, "Guangzhou's Municipal Leadership and Development Strategy in the 1990s," in *Economic and Social Development in South China*, ed. Stewart MacPherson and Joseph Y. S. Cheng (Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1996), 122–39.

³² Other performance-based works during this period include: Lin Yilin, *Supper* (1995); Liang Juhui, *Digital Games*, (1996); Lin Yilin, *Drive Shaft* (1996); and Chen Shaoxiong, *Sight Adjuster III* (1996).

environment. Instead, they saw the rapidly developing Tianhe district of Guangzhou as a site full of possibilities for staging various performance activities. Lin's 1995 performance *Safely Maneuvering Across Linbe Road* was done on the street immediately facing the new construction site of CITIC Plaza, the soon-to-be architectural anchor of the district. The following year, Liang would install himself a few minutes down the street in the construction elevators of another skyscraper-in-progress, SINOPEC Towers, for his performance, *One Hour Game*. In 1997, Chen began to create photographic works taken from around the city, one of which featured views of the two aforementioned skyscrapers—the former fully sheathed and the latter still halfway in progress (Fig. 2.9). Indeed, this work, *Streetscape I* (1997-8), can be understood as a self-reflexive index of BTE's activities in and around Tianhe, juxtaposed against the speed of urban development and the visually dramatic spatial changes that were occurring.

The spatial coherence of the artists' choice of sites around the district (Fig. 2.10), the temporal unfolding of their practice alongside the changes of the city, and the visual similarities of their performance photographs featuring the same urban motifs—CITIC Plaza Tower, SINOPEC Towers, the signature golden sheathing of Metro Plaza tower—attest to the confluence of BTE's works during this period and their inter-textual legibility as a cohesive art-work. Drawing from art historian James Meyer's understanding of the "functional site" as not a static place-site but an "operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all)," I trace BTE's peregrinations in the Tianhe area between 1995 and 1998 as such a spatial practice.³³ The group's artworks and activities during this

³³ Meyer cites *Platzwechsel*, an exhibition organized by the Zurich Kunsthalle in 1995, as an example of a "functional site." He argues that while the show occurred in various locations throughout the city, it should still be understood as a single exhibition in which the visitor experiences each of the sites to come to a larger understanding of Zurich's history. James Meyer, "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 25.

period echo each other across sites and times, sharing a common interest in the functional site of Tianhe, or rather the urban changes of the city as it was happening in real time. I argue that what ties BTE's works together in this period is the common artistic strategy of "urban insertion," which should be understood as similar to but different from the terms "interruption" or "intervention," two concepts which have shaped interpretations of spatio-aesthetic actions in urban space.³⁴ Whereas prevailing readings of BTE's works often follow art critic and curator Hou Hanru's characterization of their practice as "temporal barricades in the "global city" and as a "guerilla war" of contemporary art... to open up temporal spaces for art by physically interrupting traffic and construction in the city," I demonstrate that the artists actually operated more subtly in the manner of urban *insertion* into existing spaces and flows.³⁵ Rather than *interruption*, which implies blockage and confrontation, such an artistic position of *insertion*, is one that seeks to locate small gaps of opportunity within the existing order of the city in order to stealthily slip in. In keeping with their longstanding interest in performance as a strategy for appropriating and performing the processes of the city, BTE's activities during this period sought to blend into the existing urban matrix at the same time as they sought to subtly distinguish their works from it.

As a new framework for understanding artistic practices in urban space, "urban insertion" builds upon art historian Rosalyn Deutsche's seminal writings on this topic by suggesting a more oblique model of engagement with the urban milieu.³⁶ Advocating for avant-garde artistic practices that challenged urban redevelopment in New York in the 1980s, Deutsche argued that "a genuinely

³⁴ The concepts of "interruption" and "intervention" has served as a basic explanatory framework for a wide range of scholarship on installation, site-specific, urban art, and performance art see, Deutsche, *Evictions*; Douglas Crimp and Louise Lawler, "Redefining Site-Specificity," in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 150–86; Hou Hanru, "Barricades, 'Big Tail Elephants Working Group,'" in *Großschwanzelefant*, ed. Bernard Fibicher (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1998), 45–59; Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*.

³⁵ Hou Hanru, "Barricades, 'Big Tail Elephants Working Group,'" 56.

³⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City," *October* 47 (1988): 3–52; Deutsche, *Evictions*.

responsible public art must, in [Henri] Lefebvre's words, "appropriate" space from its domination by capitalist and state power. In the tradition of radical site-specific art, public art must disrupt, rather than secure, the apparent coherence of its new urban sites."³⁷ Since Deutsche, scholars of Euro-North American art practice have assumed to various degrees that the relationship between public site-based art and urban sites is one of antagonistic confrontation, disruption, interruption, or intervention. For example, art historian Miwon Kwon's account of "site-specificity" as a discursive issue has demonstrated the ways in which site-specific art disrupted consensual discourse on what constitutes community, public, and site.³⁸ Extending this to the Chinese context, performance scholar Thomas Berghuis has shown how "behavior art" (*xingwei yishu*) performances in public spaces directly confronted and challenged commonly accepted social and moral codes.³⁹ Departing from this confrontational paradigm, however, I offer a new reading of the artists' engagements with the urban environment as not necessarily an oppositional intervention of prevailing socio-economic conditions, but one characterized by the subtler form of urban insertion.

Lin Yilin's *Safely Maneuvering Across Linbe Road* (1995)

Returning again to the opening example of Lin Yilin's *Safely Maneuvering Across Linbe Road* (1995), I re-examine in closer detail the particular ways in which this performance piece engaged with its site. According to the artist, the location was highly significant: "When I was looking for a site, I saw that Guangzhou was building its tallest building yet, they even claimed at the time it was the tallest in Asia, and so I thought it was meaningful to realize the performance on that street, because this site bore an interesting connection to the city as a whole."⁴⁰ The CITIC Plaza

³⁷ Deutsche, *Evictions*, xvi.

³⁸ Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

³⁹ Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*.

⁴⁰ Sans, *China Talks*, 35.

skyscraper, which was under construction from 1993 to 1996 indeed came to hold the title of tallest building in Asia, symbolically representing the ambitions as well as the speed at which they were carried out by the municipal government during the 1990s.⁴¹ Such massive construction efforts in Guangzhou and greater China have resulted in a dramatic increase in the country's production and consumption of cement—the very material Lin chose to highlight through his salvage of concrete breezeblocks as opposed to his earlier use of bricks.⁴²

As discussed in the introduction, Lin staged his work in a large street in Tianhe district despite oncoming traffic (Fig. 2.11). In Hou's analysis of this work and most other subsequent commentary, there is a common misconception that Lin's actions interrupted traffic.⁴³ Taking a closer look at the video clip of the ninety-minute performance, we can see that most incredulously, it did not. The artist's slow and steady movements across the street ensured that the cars could easily avoid him and drive right by. In one film still, Lin is shown so absorbed in his work that he doesn't even turn around to heed the large double decker bus that drove by just inches from him.⁴⁴ Lin inserted himself and the wall into the traffic as if attempting to disrupt it, yet the pace of traffic marched ever onward without interruption. Throughout the video there is a sense of tempo and rhythm to the cars, buses, and bikes driving by; the two construction elevators moving workers and equipment up and down the in-progress building; the construction workers working in the background; the occasional pedestrian who, seeing the artist, briefly slows down to take note of the

⁴¹ The building held that title for a mere two years until the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia overtook it 1998 only to be trumped by Taiwan's Taipei 101 in 2004. Such architectural one-upmanship attested to the regionally competitive growth of Asian cities beginning in the late 1990s.

⁴² Between 1990 and 1995, China overtook the United States and France in cement production and consumption, becoming the world's largest producer and one of the top five consumers of cement by 1995. Robert Wilson, "Building China: The Role Of Cement In China's Rapid Development," *The Energy Collective*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.theenergycollective.com/robertwilson190/347591/building-china-role-cement-chinas-rapid-development>.

⁴³ Hou, "Barricades, 'Big Tail Elephants Working Group,'" 84.

⁴⁴ See film still in, Heidi van Mierlo and Chris Driessen, *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties* (Breda: Fundament Foundation, 1997), 75.

scene; and then the artist, the slowest of all, moving his blocks across the street. Lin's laborious movements seem to participate with its own rhythm and vitality in that of the city, which during this period was expanding rapidly eastward from the old urban core of Dongshan-Yuexiu district into the developing Central Business District of Tianhe.⁴⁵

Yet through Lin's insertion into the scene and his intense concentration on the task at hand, he has added a new and different tempo to the city with its own personal sense of speed and time—the artist moves with the moving city, but is also slightly removed from it. Without losing its own rhythm, the work managed to neither interrupt the existing flow nor escape people's notice. Indeed, by mimicking the process of construction through the performance of building, un-building, and rebuilding the wall, the artist has subtly changed the milieu, bracketing out the unquestioned labor that was occurring at the CITIC Plaza construction site and elsewhere all over the city. Indeed, as cinema scholar Jia Tan has noted, Lin's attire of green pants and grey shirt is the same as those worn by the city's construction workers—migrant laborers upon whose backs the city was being turned into an economic powerhouse.⁴⁶ Yet the economic unproductiveness of Lin's labor contrasts sharply with the vast redevelopment efforts happening at the site, in the city, and nationwide. His work thus opened up for investigation the rapid yet cyclical nature of urban destruction and construction, the migratory condition of labor, and even the very value of labor itself.

Like Lin's previous use of bricks to construct un-ideal structures in *Standard Series of Ideal Residence* (1991), the wall here is divested of its functional value as an architectural element and its economic value as a real-estate investment. Likewise, Lin's construction labor, in contrast to that of the workers behind him, is in a state of perpetual self-erasure. However, by reframing his actions as

⁴⁵ Under the new municipal leadership of Mayor Li Ziliu, who took office in 1990, Guangzhou undertook several major urban projects including construction of the long-deferred subway system and expansion of the urban core eastward. Cheung, "Guangzhou's Municipal Leadership and Development Strategy in the 1990s," 133.

⁴⁶ Jia Tan, "Special Cultural Zones: Provincializing Global Media in Neoliberal China" (Ph.D., Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 2012).

a form of artistic labor and imbuing the found object with the force of the artist's own animus, Lin has invested it with new value as an instrument of investigation into the socio-economic conditions of the city. He explained, "When I made this work, I was thinking about how in a performance I could make a wall behave like a person, make it cross the street... to see the movement of this wall like an animal, moving and not static, owing to my labor, to the life I was giving it."⁴⁷ The artist's labor on the object caused a mutation to the once-solid mass: the wall is now a responsive, tactical object that is no longer rooted to a specific building or site but actually moves along with the changes of the city, mimicking its eastward expansion, its trail of rubble, as well as the migrant laborers that follow it.⁴⁸

Liang Juhui's *One Hour Game* (1996)

This interest in a highly concentrated yet "unproductive" labor is made most apparent in Liang Juhui's *One Hour Game* (1996) the following year (Fig. 2.12a-b).⁴⁹ Sited just several hundred meters down the street from Lin's work, Liang's performance of playing a video game for one hour was done inside the moving construction elevator of SINOPEC Towers, which began construction in 1992. A photograph of the performance shows the installation of a small television on top of a stand draped with white cloth and Liang wearing a blue construction hat, jean shirt, and blue jeans, playing the video game *Battle City*.⁵⁰ Similar to Lin's strategy, Liang's *Game* inserted itself into the

⁴⁷ Sans, *China Talks*, 35.

⁴⁸ If in 1981 American artist Richard Serra had famously asserted the site-specificity of *Tilted Arc*, a large and solid piece of metal, by protesting its movement from the site, Lin's on-site work demonstrated a new kind of site-based practice characterized precisely by its *lack* of solidity and its constant change and movement. On Serra's *Tilted Arc* see, Crimp and Lawler, "Redefining Site-Specificity."

⁴⁹ Around this time, Liang seemed particularly interested in the notion of game. Earlier that year at BTE's fifth annual group exhibition in the basement of the Zhongguang Building in Guangzhou, he created the interactive installation *Digital Games* (1996). A play on the Chinese word *shuzi*, which can mean "digital" or "numbers," Liang invited audiences to pick up music CD's placed on the steps of the building's stairwell and listen to them. He decorated the walls with number symbols. See, Fibicher, *Großschwanzelefant*, 94.

⁵⁰ The game was released in 1985 through Nintendo Entertainment System. Wanax, "Battle City (NES)," MobyGames, 2003, accessed September 26, 2017, <http://www.mobygames.com/game/nes/battle-city>.

daily work rhythm of the skyscraper's construction. The performance, which took place simultaneously with the construction work was not an effort to interrupt the flow of construction as purported by some scholars, but rather a syncing of the artist's body and frenzied video-game activity with the high-speed pace of construction that was happening in real-time.⁵¹

By inserting his private entertainment into a construction elevator that offered unobstructed views of the city through its metal grates, Liang blurred the boundaries between intimate private space and expansive public space. Indeed photo documentation of the performance offers the viewer two vantage points: the first, a close-up taken from outside the elevator, shows Liang behind the grates in a narrow caged space with his eyes focused on the television set and hands positioned on the video game controller (Fig. 2.12b) and the second, a wide-angle shot that crops out the building edge, showing Liang in the elevator suspended dozens of stories above the wide panoramic expanse behind him (Fig. 2.12a). Liang's face is half-turned back to look at the camera, as if acknowledging the precariousness of his vertical situation. This contrast seems to point to another set of vantage points: the view from the elevator low on the ground versus high above the city. Liang's changing position between the two, signaled two different experiences of the city: one cacophonous and experiential like the sights and sounds heard from the video recording of Lin's on-the-ground performance, the other calm and abstract, not unlike the gaze of the city's architects or urban planners.⁵²

⁵¹ The account given by Tan that "Liang invited the workers to play the video games wearing the safety helmets, thus interrupted regular construction flow" departs from the artist's own descriptions of the work as a solo endeavor in 1996/1997. Tan, "Special Cultural Zones: Provincializing Global Media in Neoliberal China," 147; Liang Juhui, "One Hour Game (Youxi Yi Xiaoshi) (1996/1007)," in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 208.

⁵² Michel de Certeau has famously distinguished between these two, advocating for ways in which everyday spatial practices such as walking can transform the spaces of the city beyond what has been imposed upon it by urban planners. BTE's urban practice exemplified such ways of engaging with the city. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, chap. 7.

It cannot be overlooked that the game the artist chose, *Battle City*, is one in which the player operates a tank that blasts its way through brick obstacles in a city maze seen from above (Fig. 2.13).⁵³ Yet like the elevator moving up and down the skyscraper, Liang could only move along two-dimensions in the game. His destructive movements in the virtual city thus contrasted sharply with his passive physical body as it was being moved by the elevator in the city where the tower was being constructed in real-time. The artist's search "for a means to reconcile passive and active conditions" speaks to a sense of helplessness as the individual is carried along by the massive urban changes happening around him.⁵⁴ It also hints at the strange spatio-temporal contradiction between frantic activity and the feeling that one is actually not going anywhere: like Lin's work, playing the video game for an hour achieved no end-goal in the real world and the movements up and down on the elevator only move in place, never actually going anywhere. As SINOPEC Tower was being built, Liang sat playing his game in its construction elevator, moving up and down with it towards an unrealized future. By inserting himself into the rhythm of Guangzhou's urban construction, the artist's *Game* brought a dimension of the absurd to the city's breakneck pace of construction.

Chen Shaoxiong's *Streetscapes* (1997-1998)

Like the other members of BTE, Chen Shaoxiong was also interested in issues of movement, speed, and the changing temporalities and demographics of the city. As part of *Wildlife*, a series of nationwide art activities between 1997 and 1998 that BTE participated in, Chen created the photographic series *Streetscape I-IV* (1997-8) (Fig. 2.14a-d).⁵⁵ Inspired by the dynamism of

⁵³ For a description of this game see, Wanax, "Battle City (NES)."

⁵⁴ Liang Juhui, "One Hour Game (Youxi Yi Xiaoshi) (1996/1007)."

⁵⁵ Initiated by the artist Song Dong and Guo Shirui, the director of the Contemporary Art Center in Beijing (a government run institution), *Wildlife* was an open-ended yearlong series of art activities by various experimental artists in diverse locales all over China. Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, *Wildlife: Starting from 1997 Jingzhe Day*.

Guangzhou's everyday urban street life, Chen meticulously photo-documented the urban landscape of pedestrians, vehicles, and signage at four busy traffic intersections around the city. He then cut out the individual motifs he wanted and reconstructed them into a three-dimensional photo-narrative landscape.⁵⁶ These streetscapes (*jiejing*), as he called them, were then re-inserted into the existing urban environment and re-photographed featuring the artist's own hand holding up the collaged piece.

Chen's work was no doubt inspired by the changing social terrain of Guangzhou in the 1990s. Between 1982 and 1990, the city's population had doubled from 3.2 to 6 million due to the influx of migrant workers, which grew from 200,000 to more than 1.2 million between 1979 and 1990.⁵⁷ Featuring an assortment of these new urban denizens, the collages captured the vibrant heterogeneity of the city, presenting not only disparate visual motifs recombined into an imagined scene, but also separate temporal moments spliced into a fictional present. Each streetscape is therefore a site out of site and a time out of time, made all the more apparent through its re-insertion into the real time and space of the urban background. These scenes embody an uncanny coupling of perceptual contradictions: they are familiar in that they contain recognizable elements of Guangzhou's urban life, yet entirely fictional and rearranged; they represent urban scenes of commotion and movement, yet they are resolutely still freeze-frame images; finally, the figures—even ones caught in mid-motion (Fig. 2.14c (detail))—are pasted into place on the piece of cardboard, yet the whole board itself is entirely portable and can be inserted into a variety of urban contexts.

Inspired by the visual flux of the urban environment, *Streetscapes* present a visual mode that is cognitively commensurate with the spatio-temporal reality of Guangzhou. As Chen explained, "The

⁵⁶ Chen Shaoxiong, "Wo weishenme yao paishe guangzhou jiejing," in *Chinese artists, texts and interviews: Chinese contemporary art awards (CAA) 1998-2002*, ed. Ai Weiwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2002), 95–96.

⁵⁷ Koolhaas et al., *Great Leap Forward*, 455.

physical presence of the individual experiencing such fast-changing urban scenery is entirely different from the passive observer of art.”⁵⁸ In order to adequately engage this urban environment, Chen’s statement suggests, art must first be transformed to be like it. *Streetscapes* play with vision, inducing a disoriented simultaneous vision, or double vision: the viewer must focus her eyes alternatively back and forth between the several planes of imagery, assessing the relationship between the photo-collage, the city backdrop, and the larger photo that documented the one inserted into the other.⁵⁹ In some cases, the picture-within-a-picture almost seems to merge with the real scene, while others seem more obviously superimposed. Upon closer inspection, however, these photo-collages only *gesture* to their relationship with the real site, since unlike a true *mise-en-abyme*, the two streetscapes don’t quite match up. Through Chen’s willful re-insertion of the streetscape back into the urban background, these isolated elements of people, cars, and signage—all ephemeral and transitory in nature—not only become signs divorced from their referent, but through their juxtaposition with the dissimilar background they question the very notion of a stable referent within the city’s shifting urban terrain.

By re-inserting these streetscapes into the city, Chen also called attention to the miniature streetscapes’ unmoored and rootless quality. Indeed, from his earliest experimentation with the photo-collage format, Chen was particularly interested in the notion of portability and transit. His first photo-collage, *The Street Dropped from the Sky* (1997) was a portable box with three stacked levels of scenes like a transportable dollhouse or a traveling suitcase.⁶⁰ By 2001, Chen would emphasize the streetscape’s portability by transporting them out of the Chinese context entirely and inserting them

⁵⁸ Pauline J. Yao, “Time Beyond Time: A Dialogue between Chen Shaoxiong and Pauline J. Yao,” in *Chen Shaoxiong*, ed. Robert Peckham (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2009).

⁵⁹ Beginning in 1994, Chen had become interested in video installation and vision. Chen’s *Sight Adjuster* series (1996-1997) is a similar experiment with recorded movement, double vision, and disorientation.

⁶⁰ Although curator Hou Hanru has described this portable box, photographic documentation of this early work has not been found. Hou Hanru, “Chen Shaoxiong, From Portable Streets to Private Diplomacy.”

into the streets of Berlin, Zurich, Paris, or whichever foreign country he next exhibited (Fig. 2.15). As will be discussed in Chapter Four, increasing opportunities for Chinese artists to travel and exhibit abroad in the late 1990s and early 2000s prompted artistic reflections on the spaces and conditions of transit itself. According to Hou Hanru, Chen's interest in portability is also connected to his fascination with tourism, international exhibitions, and globalization.⁶¹ The artist himself also remarked half tongue-in-cheek, "We want to join the WTO and we want everything that this world can offer, I would like my works of street images in China to be associated with Bangkok, Tokyo, Berlin, Paris, New York and other big cities alike. If so, I can provide a better dream for such a globalization."⁶² In fact, Chen's later development of the *Streetscape* series into souvenir-like props seemed to parallel the new position of contemporary Chinese artist as cosmopolitan elites who traveled from place to place, inspired by other cultures, but also trafficking his wares of "Chineseness" abroad.⁶³

Yet Hou's reading of the project as a celebration of "the politics of travel, migration, and nomadic life," fails to account for the uncanny disconnectedness between the elements of the photo-collage.⁶⁴ Indeed, the presence of Chen's own hand holding up each of the streetscapes like a prop or plaything prompts the question: *who is doing the inserting?* These isolated figures cut out from their context, willfully rearranged by the artist, and juxtaposed with various sites, call to mind transit's specific relationship to socio-economic power. For example, while the creation of new markets in Guangzhou has drawn thousands to the region in search of new opportunities, which has

⁶¹ Hou Hanru.

⁶² Shaoxiong Chen, "Streetscape Statement," accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.chenshaoxiong.net/?p=1291>.

⁶³ Melissa Chiu has discussed "Chineseness" as a unique strategy of cultural intervention used by Chinese diaspora artists to reinterpret Chinese culture from a distance. This trend of the itinerant artist and traveling works of art has also been discussed by Miwon Kwon in relation to changing notions of site-specificity. Melissa Chiu, "Theories of Being Outside: Diaspora and Chinese Artists," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, ed. Benjamin Genocchio and Melissa Chiu (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 327–45; Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

⁶⁴ Hou Hanru, "Chen Shaoxiong, From Portable Streets to Private Diplomacy," 6.

produced an overwhelming floating population; in response, the government introduced new strategies in 1994 to redistribute migrants to areas where labor was more in demand or to repatriate those unable to find a job in Guangzhou.⁶⁵ As an urban inhabitant of the city, Chen would have been acutely aware of these politics. In this light, his portable works can also be read as drawing attention to the paradox of transit's double-edgedness: For those who have the option to travel, transit is a form of leisure and liberation; yet for those who have become uprooted in search of work in China's growing urban centers, transit is the daily reality of migratory labor in an increasingly market-oriented country.

Chen's insertion of his own body into these works, as evidenced by the presence of the artist's hand in each photograph, also suggests a performative dimension that echoes earlier instances when members of the group have explored the slippage between performance art and reality. As the artist has remarked, "The city is really a lot like a stage... When you walk down the street you're both an actor and the audience."⁶⁶ Chen's comment suggests that the nature of the artist's relationship with the city moves fluidly between the positions of director, actor, and audience, as well as the varying degrees of being an active participant *in it* and a passive observer *of it*. As an artist, Chen can be slightly removed from the city, observing it from afar, even acting as a creative director as he has done with his streetscapes. However, the artist is also an inhabitant of the city, who, like the photographed people in his collage, is inevitably subject to the dictates of its socio-economic changes and flows. Chen's enigmatic expression in this photograph therefore belongs to a series of cryptic gazes— Xu Tan's, Lin Yilin's, and Liang Juhui's —through which the

⁶⁵ Roger C.K. Chan and Chaolin Gu, "Forms of Metropolitan Development in Guangzhou Municipal City," in *Economic and Social Development in South China*, ed. Stewart MacPherson and Joseph Y. S. Cheng (Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1996), 299; Koolhaas et al., *Great Leap Forward*, 249–57.

⁶⁶ Yao, "Time Beyond Time: A Dialogue between Chen Shaoxiong and Pauline J. Yao."

documented presence of the artist's body in the artwork signals his position as both actor and participant in the socio-economic processes of the city (Fig. 2.16).

The simultaneous fascination with and estrangement from the city as well as the dual role as participant and observer to the city's urban changes is a disposition at the heart of BTE's strategies of urban insertion. To "insert" means to introduce something new into something existing.⁶⁷ Yet the word also has the connotation of slipping into something, and it is precisely this slippage between maintaining the separateness of what is introduced and becoming part of the existing condition that BTE has been interested in exploring. BTE's urban insertions between 1995 and 1998 reveal a simultaneous desire to immerse the subject in the various processes of the city through appropriation, mimicry, and parafiction, while still maintaining a sense of critical distance. From constructing tectonic structures to playing video games, or recreating urban street scenes, the artists insert themselves into urban spaces in the guise of a role they've taken up, at times becoming almost indistinguishable from the subject matter their artwork seeks to describe. Yet in each of the performances the artist maintained a certain kind of contemplative space that was entirely his own: Lin was untouched by the traffic on Linhe Road, Liang was absorbed in his single-player game, and Chen was the invisible-visible hand behind his streetscapes. Far from being disengaged from the site, however, their art *work*—in the sense of actively *working* on, over, around, and between sites—managed to be presently *there* and "on-site" in their everyday practice of urban life. BTE's active and sustained engagement with various locations in Tianhe and greater Guangzhou therefore speaks to a cumulative urban practice that crossed and re-crossed the city streets many times over, across different sites and times. Through their urban insertions the artists pivoted back and forth between the domains of art and life, opening up small pockets of space for creative interrogations of the

⁶⁷ Merriam Webster Dictionary Online defines "insert" as "to put or introduce into the body of something: Interpolate." *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "insert (v.)," accessed September 26, 2017, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/insert>.

city's social and material realities—replete with its many ambiguities, contradictions, and also possibilities for experimentation.

Beyond Guangzhou: Big Tail Elephant's Transregional Connections

Since the formation of BTE in 1991, the group's art practice had been squarely centered on the urban environment of Guangzhou. By 1997, however, these practices can no longer be considered through a local lens. BTE's participation in *Wildlife*, an innovative transregional art project organized by Beijing-based artist Song Dong, connected their on-site art practice to a larger nationwide network of artists working in similar formats. As Wu Hung has pointed out, *Wildlife* was the first large-scale activity in China conceived specifically to experiment with on-site art and exhibition practices.⁶⁸ This convergence of on-site art practices across China also points to its crystallization as a distinct artistic trend by the second half of the 1990s. While Song himself had been creating on-site works in Beijing's streets and public spaces, he was inspired to organize a large-scale on-site art activity after participating in *Departing from the Gallery (Zouchu Hualang)* in Hong Kong in 1996, where he met Lin Yilin, and in *Keepers of the Waters* in Lhasa in 1996, where he met the Chengdu-based performance artist Dai Guangyu. Both art events invited artists to create works sited in the urban environment. Remarking on the growing sense of a shared artistic practice, Song noted, "in the past it had always just been me working by myself, but this time there were six of us [in *Departing from the Gallery*]. I felt that everyone's projects were linked because they were all connected to the place."⁶⁹ Through his conversations with other artists and curators during the two art activities, Song envisioned a new project that would develop and expand the notion of creating

⁶⁸ With the exception of its inclusion in Wu Hung's study of experimental art exhibitions in the 1990s, *Wildlife* has been largely overlooked by scholars despite the activity's inclusion of now canonical artists and artworks from the period. Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 142–47.

⁶⁹ Song Dong, "An Interview with Song Dong," 145.

works on-site. When Song returned to Beijing, with the help of Guo Shirui, the director of the Beijing Contemporary Art Center, he began soliciting participants across China including Dai; Zhang Xin, a former participant of *Keepers* based in Shanghai; and Lin in Guangzhou. The three artists eventually became “regional coordinators,” helping to identify other like-minded artists in their respective locales.

Wildlife, a year-long, multi-site art event, beginning in March 5, 1997 and ending on the same day the following year, invited artists from across China to create on-site works in their own regional contexts. Twenty-seven artists participated, including all the members of BTE and several artists who had previously participated in *Keepers*. Articulating in words what BTE had been moving towards since 1991, the project advocated working in “non-exhibition spaces, non-exhibition forms.”⁷⁰ Paralleling BTE’s approach to working spontaneously on the streets of Guangzhou, Song promoted the notion of “chance encounters” (*buqi er yu*) between art and the everyday audiences.⁷¹ As Song noted, the project asked participants to “develop a direct relationship with a local environment” and rejected “works that could be put anywhere... [that] showed little intention to connect an art project to a specific site.”⁷² Expanding BTE’s relational approach to multiple sites within a single city, Song connected the highly localized practice of on-site art practice to a broader decentralized network of artists and sites across the country. Song also devised a new format to “exhibit” these on-site works together. Over the course of a year, Song asked each artist to document their artworks through maps, conceptual plans, and photographs, and then mail these materials to Beijing so he could redistribute the information to the other artists. Song and Guo

⁷⁰ Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, *Wildlife: Starting from 1997 Jingzhe Day*, title page.

⁷¹ Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, 2.

⁷² Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, preface.

compiled the materials into a published catalogue, which, as Wu Hung has suggested, served as the mutual “site” of the exhibition.⁷³

Wildlife attests to the ways in which an interregional understanding of site became imbedded in the very notion of the presumably localized on-site art practice. This occurred not only structurally in terms of the networked social organization of like-minded artists across different regions, but also aesthetically in the transregional ways in which artists understood site. Many participants of *Wildlife* created works that featured the transit of objects from one site to another or the artist’s own performative movements across different spaces within the city. For example, in *Slowest Mailing Parcels* (1997), Chengdu-based artist Liu Chengying gathered soil from the city and mailed them to far-flung regions such as the U.S., Egypt, Austria, and Japan. While each artist created works at specific local sites, all worked with an awareness of the broader conceptual network of multiple other sites and artistic practices occurring elsewhere across the country. Indeed, the sense of transregional connection and mobility was reflected in the very design of the catalogue, whose front and back cover depicts a map of China with its various transportation networks weaving across the country (Fig. 2.17).

Connecting these aesthetic developments back to the urban context of Guangzhou, BTE’s contributions to *Wildlife* reveal the ways in which this transregional sensibility was also tied to broader changes occurring within the city. Like Chen Shaoxiong’s *Streetscapes*, works by other members of BTE honed in on themes of transregional mobility, a reality brought on by infrastructural developments in Guangzhou that connected this economic center to the larger Pearl River Delta region and beyond. In *New Times and Space Dimension for the Shuttle* (1998), Liang Juhui

⁷³ While this method drew from precedents such as document exhibitions (*wenxian zhan*) as well as the *Black Cover Book*, both of which brought regional artistic practices in dialogue with one another, *Wildlife* articulated an explicit artistic position on how to connect site-based art practice across multiple sites in what Song called a “non-exhibition” format. Song Dong, “An Interview with Song Dong,” 146.

trained his attention on the Guangzhou Railway Station, a major transportation infrastructure located to the west of the city (Fig. 2.18a-b). Taking on the identity of a tourist with bag and camera in hand, Liang walked for three hours, “shuttling” along the main road of the city between the Guangzhou Railway Station and the new central business district of Tianhe to the east. As Liang explained in the *Wildlife* catalogue, the work sought to:

Connect in a line the sites that most embody Guangzhou’s development and changes in recent years, and to use the identity of a tourist to shuttle back and forth for three hours, using the camera and video recorder to record the first impressions of what I see and smell, in order to find a state of coordination between the new public space-time and the movement of people in this new space-time.⁷⁴

The artist’s performance mimicked the flow of people through the city, tracing the ways in which new transportation infrastructures connected different parts of the city together and contributed to the increasing circulation of people across different regions. The work paralleled ongoing developments within the city such as the completion of Guangzhou’s first Metro Line 1 in 1998 and the 1997 completion of the Guangshen regional superhighway, connecting Guangzhou with the other major urban centers of Shenzhen and Dongguan in the Pearl River Delta region.⁷⁵

In Xu Tan’s *China Southern Airlines Welcome You* (1997), the artist turned his attention to air travel, another developing transportation infrastructure during this period.⁷⁶ Xu went to an area north of the city near Baiyun Airport and photographed the streetscape with planes flying overhead, later displaying them as projected slides at the Guangzhou College of Fine Arts Student Activity Center to the south of the city (Fig. 2.19a-b) The work highlighted one of the country’s three largest airlines, China Southern Airlines, which was headquartered in Guangzhou. Established in the late 1980s following the state’s privatization of the industry, China Southern was quickly expanding

⁷⁴ Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, *Wildlife: Starting from 1997 Jingzhe Day*, 20.

⁷⁵ Sun Pusheng, “Guangzhou ditie yi hao xian zhengshi shi yunying [Guangzhou Metro Line 1 officially in operation],” *Chengshi gongyong shiye [Public Utilities]* 12, no. 1 (1998): 16.

⁷⁶ The topic of transportation infrastructure and artists’ travels abroad will be further explored in Chapter Four.

internationally with direct flights to the U.S. and Europe by the mid-1990s.⁷⁷ Through the series of photographs, Xu captured the airline's incredible volume of flights, pointing to the growing prevalence of air travel in China. Juxtaposed against various street scenes and small shops, the looming figure of these low-flying airplanes dramatized the ways in which this locale was in fact thoroughly interpenetrated by transregional and global flows.

Liang and Xu's works contributed to a growing aesthetic interest in transregional movement by artists and curators during this period. While this domestic art project offered BTE an opportunity to link up with other artists across China, new prospects to exhibit abroad around 1997 also connected the group's art practice to an even broader international network.⁷⁸ In 1997 BTE was invited to participate in *Cities on the Move* (November 26, 1997 – January 18, 1998), a large-scale touring exhibition that took place first in Vienna, and later in a number of cities in Europe, the U.S., and Southeast Asia. Organized by the Guangzhou-born, Paris-based curator Hou Hanru and Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, the exhibition showcased artists and architects whose works were inspired by the speed and dynamism of contemporary urbanism in Asia.⁷⁹ *Cities on the Move* placed BTE's works in dialogue with art practices from other regions of the world, even offering the group opportunities to create on-site works in new locales abroad. In 1998, for example, Xu Tan participated in *Traffic Jam*, a component of the larger exhibition that invited six artists to create billboard posters to be sited in various urban locations. The artist displayed the same photographs from *China Southern Airlines Welcome You* in a large billboard juxtaposed against a major construction

⁷⁷ Ashley Renee Beane, "Aviation Relations between the United States and China: Are Open Skies on the Horizons," *Journal of Air Law and Commerce* 72, no. 4 (2007): 803–33.

⁷⁸ This had already occurred as early as 1993 when Lin Yilin was invited to represent BTE in the international exhibition *China-Avant Garde* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Though the other members were not included in the show, their biographical information and previous works were featured in the catalogue, which marked the first instance in which the group was introduced to an international audience. Jochen Noth, Wolfer Pöhlmann, and Kai Reschke, *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1994).

⁷⁹ Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Cities On the Move* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje, 1997).

site in Berlin's Friedrichstrasse (Fig. 2.20). The unexpected incursion of scenes from Guangzhou into Berlin's main thoroughfare would have prompted viewers to consider the ways in which the redevelopment of Berlin—whether through the movement of materials, capital, or people—could also be deeply connected to the changes happening across the world in Guangzhou.

As each artist began to receive independent opportunities to exhibit and work abroad, a seminal moment for BTE as a group occurred in 1998 when they were invited for a solo exhibition titled “Big Tail Elephant” (September - October) at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland.⁸⁰ Whereas previous shows had presented the members as individual artists, this exhibition, curated by the director of the Kunsthalle, Bernhard Fibicher, marked the international recognition of BTE as a group and foregrounded their collective contributions to contemporary art practice at large. Indeed, the catalogue texts written by Fibicher, Hou Hanru (who continued to promote BTE internationally throughout his career), and Huang Zhuan, another prominent curator in China, offered the earliest art historical accounts of BTE's art practice.⁸¹ This canonization of BTE as a group, however, simultaneously marked the end of their group-based artistic practice. With the growing recognition of their works and the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art, members of BTE began to reframe themselves as no longer a Guangzhou-based art group, but as globally active, individual artists. For BTE, the Kunsthalle show ultimately served as a “coming out” exhibition and a retrospective closing out of a period in which their art practice had been so closely in sync with the city-site of Guangzhou.

Conclusion

⁸⁰ Fibicher, *Großschwanzelefant*.

⁸¹ In 2003 Hou would curate *Canton Express* a special section of the Venice Biennale that featured BTE and other artists from his hometown of Guangzhou. Zheng Jianguo, *Guangdong kuaiche [Canton express]* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2003).

China's socio-economic changes have profoundly impacted the interests, sensibilities, and practices of a new generation of artists in the 1990s. In response to these changes, the members of the BTE directly engaged the physical and materials aspects of Guangzhou as a means to both participate in and critically examine the phenomena of urbanization. BTE's works in the early 1990s sensitively reflected upon a variety of issues concerning architecture and urbanization, capitalism, commercialization, labor, globalization, and a whole host of themes that artists continue to deal with today. As much as BTE incorporated urban sites and processes into their practice, they also figured themselves as prominent elements of their work. As Hou Hanru has noted, artists engaged with urban practice "often make their own bodies into a unique medium of expression within urban settings."⁸² BTE's interactions with sites around the city were always contingent on the body of the artist doing work on a particular site, thus linking their urban spatial practices to performance art. But such a strain of performance art was also quite different from those of their better known "behavior art" (*xingwei*) colleagues in Beijing. Characterized by a form of artistic labor that mimics urban labor and processes, BTE's performances explored the artists' vacillations between contiguity to and critical distance from their urban social and material realities. It is in this way that what can be called the "functional site" of the artwork is materialized through the discursive and physical shuttling back and forth of the artist between these two positions.

By contextualizing their practice within broader contemporary art developments across China, this chapter has situated the group at the forefront of various shifts towards on-site art practices and methods of exhibition in the mid-to-late 1990s. In addition to this historical account, I suggest the term "urban insertion" as a new framework for thinking about urban spatial practice. While most scholarship in the Euro-American tradition attribute the critical force of urban site-

⁸² Hou Hanru, "Filling the Urban Void: Urban Explosion and Art Intervention in Chinese Cities," in *On the Mid-Ground*, ed. Yu Hsiao-hwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2002), 187.

based work to its ability to interrupt, intervene, or disrupt the urban environment, thereby shocking viewers into becoming aware, active, and politicized participants, I show that BTE operated more subtly through methods of “urban insertion” into the existing spaces and flows of the city. Rather than antagonism or confrontation, I argue that such an artistic position signals a much more ambivalent attitude that self-reflexively acknowledges the artists’ dual position as both critical observer and participant in these urban processes. My analysis has eschewed assumptions of the artists’ socio-political agenda so as to explore the polysemy of the works as a function of these equivocal attitudes towards urban change. While urban site-based art practices have served as an important form of political critique against the ills of capitalism and urbanization, such notions of art as the site of political struggle fail to describe artistic practices in China in the 1990s.⁸³ Indeed, as I have shown, within the unique context of China’s new economic shift towards capitalism and its concomitant physical and social changes, at least at the outset of the 1990s, artists’ attitudes can be more appropriately described as interrogative and ambiguous in its “criticality” rather than having a fully formulated “critique.”

Informed by a period of radical urban transformation, BTE’s art practice is emblematic of the spirit of experimentation and open-ended exploration that characterized this era. In his assessment of artistic practice in the 1990s, Wu Hung has defined Chinese experimental artists as those who are characterized by “his/her determination to place him/herself at the border of contemporary Chinese society and the art world.”⁸⁴ In order to do so, he argues, “an artist must also

⁸³ This is not to reject the work of scholars such as Rosalyn Deutsche, Douglas Crimp, Nick Kaye, and Thomas Berghuis, who have used the framework of “interruption” to describe works that were certainly and even overtly political in nature, as in the case of Deutsche characterization of the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, who declared in 1992, “My art must be understood, then, as a form of aesthetic politics... of making space within the space of political art.” However, it is to argue that such a framework would fail to capture the spirit of BTE’s works. Krzysztof Wodiczko, “An Interview by Bruce W. Ferguson (1991),” in *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Critical Vehicles, Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 192.

⁸⁴ Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi, *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 12.

constantly renew his/her own marginality and must constantly re-position him/herself on the border in order to be continuously “experimental.”⁸⁵ While BTE might be characterized as one of the period’s most paradigmatic experimental artists, their works were not so much about borders in the sense of positioning themselves on the outside of an inside-outside dichotomy or in the sense of pushing boundaries by being explicitly provocative or “avant-garde.” Instead, their working practices were almost always more stealthy than they were confrontational. Yet by uncovering latent opportunities and placing themselves *within* the existing spaces of the city, they nonetheless managed to slip across borders, open up alternative spaces, and chart new trajectories for contemporary Chinese art and its forms of exhibition.

⁸⁵ Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi, 12.

CHAPTER THREE

Sites at the Periphery: Making Experimental Art Spaces in Beijing

Traveling on a shuttle bus from Beijing's Third Ring Road to a disused factory in the eastern urban periphery, visitors to the exhibition *Trace of Existence (Shengcun de bengji)* (1998) passed eleven markers on the side of the road, part of the on-site work *Distance* by the artist Zhang Defeng, which drew attention to the location's distance from the city's outermost perimeter (Fig. 3.1). Arriving at an abandoned factory in Yaojiayuan Village, Chaoyang district, visitors saw an assortment of artworks that incorporated the site to reflect upon themes of the countryside and everyday life (Fig. 3.2). The opening of this unusual exhibition marked the inauguration of Art Now Studio (*Xianshi yishu gongzuo shi*), a new experimental art space established by the performance artist Cai Qing. Cai, who had left for Germany in 1989, had recently returned to acquire and transform this abandoned factory in the city's semi-rural periphery into a platform for experimental art activities.

Located at the borderland between the rapidly modernizing downtown Beijing and the seemingly anachronistic spaces of the countryside, the abandoned factory space at Yaojiayuan Village seemed an unlikely place to establish an experimental art space. Indeed, much of the framing of this unusual inaugural exhibition served to emphasize the alternative location as a metaphor for the marginal status of contemporary experimental art. Explaining his rationale for founding Art Now Studio, Cai pointed out in the exhibition's catalogue introduction that while Beijing had developed so many modern spaces such as supermarkets, hotels, and apartment buildings, "we cannot find even one space for art... contemporary arts remain on the periphery (*bianyuan*) of modern culture and do not find ready acceptance."¹ Though somewhat exaggerated as a handful of

¹ Feng Boyi and Cai Qing, *Shengcun Hengji: '98 Zhongguo Dangdai Yishu Neibu Guanmo Zhan [Trace of Existence: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98]*, 8.

galleries did exist at the time, Cai's comment captures the still nascent state of Beijing's contemporary art system as well as its perceived marginality to mainstream culture.²

Echoing Cai's sentiments, the curator Feng Boyi wrote in the catalogue preface:

There is no place for conceptual art within the framework of the official Chinese art establishment, so it is hard to find opportunities to exhibit this kind of work freely. In selecting a disused private factory in the east of Beijing, we did our best to transform a private space to an open environment for the creation and exhibition of conceptual art. The location of this space, lying as it does between urban density and agricultural countryside, peripheral to a center, mirrors the position of conceptual art in China.³

Feng points out that while conceptual art, along with other new art practices such as performance, installation, and site-based art, were unacceptable to state-run exhibition venues, alternative venues outside of the city center could be created through artists' own private initiatives. Capitalizing on the area's marginality, Cai and Feng were thus able to transform an obsolete agricultural site into a semi-public exhibition space where like-minded artists and audiences could participate in a creative experience outside the conventions and limitations of official art institutions. Both Cai and Feng were committed to developing Art Now Studio into a long-term alternative space, yet despite the exhibition's strong attendance, it seems to have been the only one held at the Studio, which shuttered its doors in 2000.⁴

Trace of Existence and Art Now Studio's brief history illustrates the ways in which experimental artists sought to establish spaces in Beijing where they could live, work, and exhibit new forms of art that were not permitted in state-run venues. While artists had already begun to practice outside of the state-run art system since the 1980s, in the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s,

² These include the Capital Normal University Art Gallery, the Central Academy of Fine Art's Contemporary Art Gallery, Yanhuang Art Gallery, Beijing International Art Palace, Courtyard Gallery, Red Gate Gallery, Wan Fung Art Gallery. For an analysis of Beijing's art spaces in the late 1990s see, Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*.

³ Feng Boyi, "Shengcun hengji de henji [The traces of trace of existence]," 13.

⁴ To my knowledge, this was the only show.

the growing social network of artists, curators, and critics in Beijing, which comprised the burgeoning experimental art world, began to work together towards establishing independent art spaces in the outskirts of the city.⁵ This development of experimental contemporary Chinese art outside the official support of government institutions has often been described as “underground” (*dixia*) or “independent” (*duli*).⁶ Yet as Feng’s association of the location of the disused factory with the marginalized status of conceptual art suggests, “peripheral” was a much more apt description as it simultaneously describes the very spaces in which art has flourished in the physical landscape of the city and experimental art’s alternative positioning. As the case of Art Now Studio highlights, not only did the spatial precarity of Beijing’s art world mirror artists’ social and economic marginality, but such marginality could also be reformulated as a source of artistic creativity. Involving the cooperation of many artists and curators, the highly social activity of establishing art spaces in Beijing’s periphery was marked by a new sensitivity towards location and the creative integration of aspects of the physical site into the artistic vision of the space. Though often precarious and subject to dispersal and relocation due to lack of funding, invalid land-use rights, or other instabilities, these “space-making” activities nevertheless contributed incrementally to the formal establishment of larger long-term art institutions that continue to operate to this day.

Cai’s return to China also illustrates the ways in which the development of the experimental art spaces during the 1990s was spurred by the transregional migration of artists to and from Beijing. International émigré artists like Cai returned to China around 1994 seeking to foster the same kinds

⁵ My use of the term “art world” is informed by sociologists Howard S. Becker’s notion of the collective art activities that comprise “art worlds” and Pierre Bourdieu’s framework of “the field of cultural production,” which points to the institutional, social, and discursive structure of this art world. Howard Saul Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁶ The critic Li Xianting also used the term “*ziyou*” (free) artists to refer to their independence from state institutions. Li Xianting, “Preface,” in *Ershi shiji zuihou de langman: Beijing ziyou yishujia shenghuo shilu [The twentieth century’s last romance: Documents of independent artists in Beijing]*, ed. Wang Jifang (Harbin: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 1–4.

of dynamic urban art scenes they witnessed abroad by establishing informal spaces for exhibiting and discussing art. For example, in 1994 the artist couple Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen also returned from Berlin, establishing their home studio, Ganjiakou No. 303 west of the city center in Haidian district, as an exhibition and gathering space for their artist friends.⁷ That same year, another artist couple Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, who later participated in *Trace of Existence*, also returned to Beijing. Inspired by their experience of living in Brooklyn, New York, where there was a lively contemporary art community, they established their own home studio and exhibition space at Baofang Hutong No.12 near the city center in Dongcheng District.⁸ In 1999 the couple went on to establish an even larger experimental art space called The Loft New Media Art Space, located farther east from the city center in Chaoyang district.⁹ Lin and Wang organized art activities, exhibitions, discussion forums, and social events featuring a number of foreign curators, including the Chicago-based art historian Wu Hung and the Paris-based curator Hou Hanru.

More broadly, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the internal migration of artists into and around the city of Beijing impacted the urban environment in such an unprecedented way that it fundamentally transformed the physical spaces of the city and its future urban development. Drawn by the capital's burgeoning cultural scene yet often lacking legitimate working or residency permits,

⁷ Gao Minglu and Zhu Jinshi, *Ganjiakou 303: Zhu Jinshi* (Hong Kong: Pearl Lam Galleries, 2018).

⁸ The couple was inspired by the practice of “open studio,” or days when all the artists in their Williamsburg neighborhood would open their studio lofts to show their work to public audiences. Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, Wang Gongxin yu Lin Tianmiao: zai zhongguo meiyou hualang de 90 niandai, wo ba zhanlan ban dao le jiali [Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao: In the 90s when there were no galleries in China, I moved the exhibition to my home], interview by Wang Yidi, August 29, 2017, <https://www.artnetnews.cn/art-world/wanggongxinyulintianmiaozaizhongguomeiyouhualangde90niandaiwobazhanlanbandaolejiali-71420>; Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, Art in Their own Backyard: A Conversation with Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, interview by Li Yu-Chieh, 2014, MoMA Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCtYd3fY_LQ.

⁹ The art space was part of a bar operated by Lin's brother in Sanlitun, a popular nightlife area frequented by foreign diplomats. The art space was financed by income from the bar. Li Ming, “Cangku: zuihou yi ge wutuobang [Cangku: the last utopia],” *HiArt* (blog), August 19, 2014, <http://www.hiart.cn/feature/detail/504eqzo.html>; Gu Bo, “Cangku kongjian 2002 nian da shiji [Cangku space a record of major events in 2002],” *Xinlang shoucang [Sina]* (blog), June 19, 2017, <https://collection.sina.cn/yejie/2017-06-19/detail-ifyhfnqa4443492.d.html>.

artists who migrated to Beijing concentrated in the semi-urban peripheries of the city where rent was cheap. As early as the late 1980s artists began to settle in Beijing's western suburbs at Fuyuanmen village adjacent to the ruins of Yuanmingyuan, the former imperial gardens.¹⁰ By the early 1990s the existence of this "painter's village" (*huajia cun*) had drawn domestic and international media attention, contributing to an even greater influx of artists that brought new cultural energy to this far-flung location.¹¹ In 1994, however, the government's dispersal of the Yuanmingyuan artist settlement led to an exodus of artists to Songzhuang, another village in the far eastern suburbs of Tongzhou county.¹² In the early 1990s, another group of artists had also begun gathering at Dashanzhuang, a run-down urban village located just east of the still incomplete Third Ring Road, which, at the time, defined the city's outer limits. This area, later known as "Beijing East Village," was promoted by the artist Ai Weiwei, who had also returned to Beijing in 1994 after living in New York's East Village for the previous decade. The name "East Village" referenced the Yuanmingyuan artist village located in the western suburbs, which had also been referred to informally as "West Village," and was also likely influenced by Ai's accounts of New York's East Village art scene.¹³

Elsewhere in the center of the city, major changes were also occurring in the mid-1990s that would shift Beijing's art scene to the northeastern periphery of the city. In 1995 the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) campus located in Wangfujing, a popular commercial area at the heart

¹⁰ Wang Jifang, *Ershi shiji zuihou de langman: Beijing ziyou yishujia shenghuo shilu [The twentieth century's last romance: Documents of independent artists in Beijing]*, chap. 2.

¹¹ See discussion of the media attention in the following section of this chapter.

¹² For an account of the dispersal of Yuanmingyuan see Pernin. For an account of the artist village at Songzhuang see Ren and Sun as well as Yang. Pernin, "Relocating Further or Standing Ground?"; Ren Xuefei and Meng Sun, "Artistic Urbanization: Creative Industries and Creative Control in Beijing: Creative Industries in Beijing," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36, no. 3 (May 2012): 504–21; Yang Wei, *Songzhuang yishujia [Songzhuang artists]* (Tianjin: Tianjin daxue chubanshe, 2008).

¹³ Based on my conversations with RongRong, it seems the name had been agreed upon collectively by the artists who lived there, who were influenced by these references. RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype. See also, Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Qian Zhijian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 60–81.

of the city, was demolished to make way for a large commercial redevelopment project.¹⁴ The academy, which was already in need of new space to meet the demands of increasing enrollment, had agreed to move to a new campus in the northeastern periphery of Chaoyang district that would be designed and paid for by the developers.¹⁵ In the meantime, various departments of the academy sought out temporary classroom and studio space in semi-abandoned factories located in the area. Several faculty members including the sculptor Sui Jianguo rented additional studio space at a nearby factory complex, known informally as “798.” The new concentration of artistic activity that CAFA’s relocation brought to the northeastern periphery of the city drew more artists to 798 in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, resulting in the conversion of various spaces within the factory complex into artist studios and galleries. At the same time, some artists including Ai Weiwei and later the artist couple RongRong and inri also began to establish studio and exhibition spaces at Caochangdi, another nearby urban village in Chaoyang district just one kilometer away from 798.

The growing concentration of artists in Chaoyang district occurred alongside the municipal government’s own ambitious plans for the area. Outlined in the 1998 *Specific Controlling Plan of Beijing*, a four square kilometer area of Chaoyang district just south of the East Village at the crossing of the East Third Ring Road and Jianguomenwai Avenue (the city’s major East-West axis) was designated to be redeveloped as the city’s Central Business District (CBD).¹⁶ Impacted by a decade of economic and social reform, the large number of agricultural and industrial operations in Chaoyang district were fast becoming obsolete, prompting the reuse, redevelopment, and absorption of urban villages and factory spaces into the city. While much of this area was demolished and converted into

¹⁴ For an account of these events see, Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]* (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2013), 46–55.

¹⁵ Based on Chen’s accounts and my conversations with the artist Sui Jianguo, it was unclear who was the first to initiate and broker this deal, which involved CAFA, the municipal government, and a Hong Kong-based real estate development company. Sui Jianguo, interview with the author, July 23, 2019, Beijing. Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*.

¹⁶ Xuefei Ren, *Urban China* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 73–74.

residential housing or other commercial developments, some sites like 798 and Caochangdi, which had been adaptively reused by artists as studio-living spaces and exhibition venues, offered another alternative. As Beijing's economic and cultural center of gravity began to shift towards Chaoyang district, art activities and urban redevelopment increasingly intersected in this contested periphery zone, at times in conflict with and at other times in sync with one another.¹⁷ On the one hand, art establishments at 798 and Caochangdi challenged the municipal government's existing redevelopment plans—798, for example, was to be redeveloped as a high-tech electronics campus—and on the other hand, they also presented an appealing alternate option to officials who increasingly recognized the economic and geopolitical value of the arts and culture. Following artists' efforts to establish long-term art institutions in the area and their successful lobbying against eviction, both areas were later recognized as official arts districts and rezoned as a “Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster” (*wenhua yishu chuangyi chanye yuanqu*) in 2006 and continue to exist today.¹⁸

Exploring the integral relationship between art and urban development, this chapter examines on-site art activities at the city's fringes to show how art practices participated in transforming Beijing's urban periphery through the creation of new social and institutional spaces for contemporary art. While art historians have examined contemporary art practices that thematically engaged aspects of urbanization, these accounts tend not to connect artworks to the broader development of experimental art as a system of institutions—informal social spaces, galleries, and museums—and their relationship to urban development.¹⁹ On the other side of the

¹⁷ By examining this field of multiple, often overdetermined positions, this account presents a more nuanced understanding of art's intersections with urban development compared to canonical accounts of art's relationship to urban gentrification in the North American context. Deutsche, *Evictions*.

¹⁸ Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*.

¹⁹ Jane Debevoise's study, while not on urban art practice, is a notable exception for her synthetic treatment of the state and market system as well as independent alternative channels established by artists. However, her account focused primarily on the late 1970s and 80s, ending in 1993. DeBevoise, *Between State and Market*; For a discussion of the general discussion of contemporary Chinese art as a system in the 1990s see, Pi Li, “Systems of Chinese Experimental Art in the 1990s,” in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000*,

spectrum, while urbanists such as Jennifer Currier, Meng Sun, and Zhou Lan have examined sites such as 798 within the context of urban development, these accounts have largely focused on macro-level economic and structural changes.²⁰ Similarly, scholars such as Ornella de Nigris who have examined the development and organizational structures of contemporary art museums and biennales in China, pay less attention to the highly creative ways in which artists and artistic processes have contributed to these larger structural changes.²¹ My account brings these two perspectives together, joining recent scholars such as Christen Cornell, Judith Pernin, and Sasha Welland who have sought to explore the relationship between artworks, the art system, and urban transformation in Beijing.²² Emphasizing art's dual role as symbolic and material practices, I demonstrate how art practice at the urban periphery altered the physical spaces of the city.²³

To bridge urban history and the study of contemporary art and its socio-structural institutions, I extend the curator Feng Boyi's use of the term "periphery" as a geographic and cultural concept. As I will demonstrate, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s on-site artworks and

ed. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 75–82; Wu Hung, "From 'System' to 'Circle': An Analysis of the State of Avant-Garde Art in the Late 1990s (2003)," in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, trans. Zhuang Jiayun (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 307–10.

²⁰ Currier, "Art and Power in the New China"; Sun, "The Production of Art Districts and Urban Transformation in Beijing"; Zhou Lan, *Kongjian de xiangdu: 798 yishu qu de shehui bianqian [Dimension of space: 798 art district's social changes]*.

²¹ Ornella De Nigris, "The Infrastructural Shift in Contemporary Chinese Art: Biennials and Contemporary Art Museums," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 15, no. 1 (February 2016): 56–72; Other institutional history-based case studies include, Julie Chun, "The Inner Trappings of a Dragon: Long Museum, Shanghai," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 5 (October 2014): 20–28; Recent case studies on alternative artist run spaces have focused primarily on more recently established art spaces in the 2010s. Rania Ho, Wei Wang, and Pauline J. Yao, eds., *3 Years: Arrow Factory, 2008-2011* (Beijing: Jianchang kongjian, 2011); Biljana Ciric, "Artists and Institutions: Institution for the Future," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 11, no. 5 (October 2012): 6–24.

²² Christen Cornell, "Using Movement: How Beijing's Post-1989 Artists Capitalized on a City in Flux," *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 2 (March 2018): 276–96; Pernin, "Relocating Further or Standing Ground?"; Welland, *Experimental Beijing*.

²³ This approach also builds on revisions to traditional Marxist interpretations of urban change to account for the efficacy of cultural and symbolic practices. As even David Harvey has acknowledged, "[P]olitical mobilization through processes of place construction owes as much to the representational and symbolic realms as to material activities." David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), 322.

exhibitions located at Beijing's urban periphery in Chaoyang district reimagined marginal sites and social identities as the center and source of creative vitality. As a result, these art activities transformed formerly overlooked sites into informal art spaces that later developed into formal art institutions by the early 2000s. This concentration of art activities at the northeastern edge of the city eventually intersected with municipal efforts to establish Beijing's Chaoyang district as a new urban center. By using periphery as a conceptual framework, I examine the complex dynamic between center and periphery to reveal how Beijing's urban fringe became an important site within a broader global art network. More broadly, this exploration of peripherality both in terms of location and aesthetic positioning suggests the ways in which marginality itself might be seen as the basis for creativity, dynamism, and transformation.

Throughout the chapter, I follow the trajectory of the experimental photographer RongRong, whose migration from Fujian in southern China to Beijing in 1992 and whose subsequent efforts to establish artistic social networks and institutions exemplifies the trajectory of many other artists and curators during this period. Beyond an analysis of RongRong's art practice, I examine how his art activities intersected with a broader transregional network of artists, curators, and contacts including Zhang Huan, Ai Weiwei, Huang Rui, Wu Hung, and Tabata Yukihiro, all of whom contributed to the creation of new experimental art spaces during this period. Using RongRong as a narrative guide through this history, I explore three key sites in Beijing where on-site performance, photography, and exhibitions reimagined and transformed peripheral sites into vibrant art spaces. At the urban village of Dashanzhuang, later known as the "East Village," I examine the ways in which artistic collaborations between performance artists and photographers between 1993 and 1994 drew upon the area's spatial marginality to construct an alternative artistic identity and social network. At the defunct state-owned factory complex later known as "798," I examine the 2003 site-specific exhibition *Tui-Transfiguration: The Image World of RongRong and inri*, curated by art

historian Wu Hung in collaboration with RongRong and inri, as a shared creative endeavor to adaptively reuse and temporarily transform the obsolete factory into an experimental art space. Finally, at the urban village of Caochangdi, I examine RongRong and inri's founding of the Three Shadows Photography Art Center in 2006 as a new kind of long-term institutional space and international platform for contemporary photography.

Understood chronologically, the three cases reflect a broader historical development from the early 1990s when artists subsisted in the peripheral spaces of the city out of necessity, to the mid-to-late 1990s when they embraced peripherality as a marker of difference and the source of a site-based artistic identity, to the early 2000s when they established long-term art institutions in these spaces. Within the context of other contemporaneous artist settlements such as Yuanmingyuan, Songzhuang, and more recent centers of artistic activity in Chaoyang district, these three case studies are distinctive for the high degree of on-site artistic collaborations that integrated art, site, and social identity. Examining a wide variety of art projects including performance, photography, exhibition-making, architectural design, and institution-building at these three sites, I demonstrate the ways in which art practice and urban sites mutually informed and transformed one another throughout this period.

Beijing's Urban Periphery

In urban planning, the urban periphery describes a zone that lies at the outer perimeter of the city center where the urban and rural intersect, most commonly known as the suburbs. Yet as architectural historian Xuefei Ren has incisively pointed out, the urban periphery of Chinese cities do not resemble the typical form of the low-density American-style suburb.²⁴ Instead, the periphery

²⁴ Ren, "Lost in Translation: Names, Meanings, and Development Strategies of Beijing's Periphery."

in China refers to the urban-rural intersection (*chengxiang jiaojie chu*) or urban fringe of the city where a heterogenous mix of urban and rural uses and inhabitants intersect.²⁵ As urban historian Thomas Campanella has explained, the development of China's urban periphery can be attributed to broader socio-economic changes initiated in the Reform Period.²⁶ Whereas the socialist work-unit had functioned since the late 1950s as a self-contained spatial compound that kept work, housing, and social services in close proximity to one another, in the Reform Period the state scaled back its role as employer and landlord, allowing the new labor and housing market to take its course. The resulting rural-to-urban migration in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the concentric expansion of cities as it did not concentrate in the center-city, but rather in the urban periphery, where much of the new, privately-developed housing was being built on abandoned villages and farmland.²⁷ Due to urban renewal in the center city, the periphery also absorbed large numbers of former inner-city residents who were forced out. Rather than a fixed site, as Ren and Sun have noted, the periphery is a relative term that is constantly redefined in relation to the spatial expansion of the city center.²⁸ The urban periphery is therefore a relational concept whose physical site is almost always in flux.

In Beijing during the 1990s the Third Ring Road, which was then under construction, roughly marked the boundaries of the city outside of which lay the urban periphery (Fig. 3.3). On the east side of the city, this area encompassed most of Chaoyang district, which was designated as

²⁵ This area is also known various as the rural-urban fringe or the peri-urban zone. The urbanist Terry McGee has also coined the term “desakota” –Indonesian for “desa” (village) and “kota” (city)—to describe this phenomenon in South East Asia. Terry McGee, “The Emergence of Desakota Regions in Asia: Expanding a Hypothesis,” in *The Extended Metropolis: Settlement Transition in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 3–25.

²⁶ Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon*, chap. 7.

²⁷ According to Campanella, between 1980 and 1990 around 77% of all new housing built in Beijing was in the outlying suburban districts. During this time, Beijing's central districts lost 82,000 people while its suburbs gained nearly 1.7 million new residents. Between 1990 and 2000 this phenomenon more than doubled with the city core losing another 222,000 and the suburbs gaining nearly 3 million new people. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon*.

²⁸ Xuefei and Sun, “Artistic Urbanization.”

an “inner suburb” (*jinjiao*) of Beijing city (Fig. 3.4).²⁹ According to existing land-use rights, however, much of the land in the urban periphery was officially designated as rural land as opposed to state-owned urban land and was therefore under the jurisdiction of village collectives.³⁰ Although village collectives were forbidden from selling land-use rights to non-villagers, in practice they often rented or sold land-use rights to migrant workers as well as artists and filmmakers in need of living and studio space.³¹ This unregulated system of land-use combined with the continued expansion of the city has resulted in competing claims by the municipal government, private developers, local village collectives, migrants, and artists.³² As a result, Beijing’s urban periphery has become the city’s most dynamic site of spatial and demographic change and conflict.

Beyond its geographic definition, the periphery has also come to assume a number of negative connotations in popular cultural perception. Noting the wide variety of Chinese terms used to refer to the periphery including “suburb” (*jiaoku*) and “urban village” (*chenzhongcun*), Ren points to how they have all been perceived as lacking in urbanity, sophistication, and progress.³³ Instead, the periphery has been associated with poor infrastructure, lack of development, and the dilapidated living quarters of the transient population of rural migrant workers. Likewise, the periphery is also associated with industries that are considered too menial for city dwellers. In particular, much of the city’s waste collection depots, recycling factories, and garbage dumping sites are located in the

²⁹ Ren has noted that over the course of the 1990s the term “suburb” became less frequently used as the city began to implement a model of polycentric development with satellite cities or new cities (*xincheng*) to reduce urban sprawl. Although this was proposed in the 1993 Master Plan and continued to be upheld, according to Yan Huang, the deputy director of Beijing Municipal Planning Commission, the satellite town pattern was unsuccessful in containing existing modes of expansion. Ren, “Lost in Translation: Names, Meanings, and Development Strategies of Beijing’s Periphery”; Yan Huang, “Urban Spatial Patterns and Infrastructure in Beijing,” *Land Lines: Newsletter of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy* 16, no. 4 (October 2004): 1–5.

³⁰ On land-use and property rights in China and the complex process whereby rural land is reappropriated by municipalities see, Hsing You-tien, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³¹ Xuefei and Sun, “Artistic Urbanization.”

³² For a case study on how such clashes played out at the Yuanmingyuan artist village see, Pernin, “Relocating Further or Standing Ground?”

³³ Ren, “Lost in Translation: Names, Meanings, and Development Strategies of Beijing’s Periphery.”

periphery, employing hundreds of migrant worker waste pickers who live in the area (Fig. 3.5).³⁴ Each day large numbers of migrant worker waste pickers would enter the city to collect trash and cart it out to the periphery to sort and sell to recycling factories (Fig. 3.6). Reflecting on the intimate relationship between the city and periphery, consumption and waste, the literary scholar Wang Min'an has described how the city center's primary activity of consumption has resulted in vast quantities of waste, which is then expelled to the periphery.³⁵ Suggesting that the presence of garbage can even be used to establish the city's geographical center and periphery, Wang wrote evocatively, "Garbage has drawn a rope between the inner and outer city—the urban-rural integration zone... on one side of the garbage is the city, and on the other side of the garbage is the country. Garbage is arranging the structure of the city."³⁶ In Wang's dialectic characterization, the urban periphery is both the antithesis of the city center and integrally connected to it.

Despite the periphery's negative associations, this amorphous and indeterminate zone can also be a site of urban entrepreneurialism—as the new trash industries and the village landlords attest—as well as creative transformations, and even art activism. In her account of independent filmmakers living in various parts of Beijing's urban periphery from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, Elizabeth Pernin has suggested that artists used their geographic and social marginality as a specific mode of resistance to assert their claims to the space against state-led evictions and redevelopment efforts.³⁷ Similarly, cultural historian Jeroen de Kloet has observed that even as

³⁴ As Joshua Goldstein and Stephen Landsberger have shown, these industries emerged as a result of the decentralization of Beijing's Municipal Resources Recycling Company, which previously managed a network of sorting depots throughout the city. Joshua L. Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday: One Hundred Years of Recycling in Beijing," in *Everyday Modernity in China*, ed. Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua L. Goldstein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 260–302; Stefan Landsberger, *Beijing Garbage: A City Besieged by Waste* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

³⁵ Wang Min'an, "Laji yu chengshi jiegou [Garbage and the structure of cities]," *Hua Cheng* 1, no. 17 (2011): 200–208.

³⁶ Wang Min'an, 207.

³⁷ Pernin, "Relocating Further or Standing Ground?"

Beijing's periphery and the ring roads have come to demarcate those included or excluded from middle-class economic prosperity, they can also become the site of contestation through artistic and creative counter-narratives.³⁸ Whereas Pernin and Kloet have used the periphery as a framework to examine flashpoints of spatial conflict and creative resistance to displacement and urban redevelopment, I attend more closely to the ways in which artists first creatively envisioned an affinity with sites at the periphery and how their on-site art activities contributed to the transformation of these sites in ways that were both at odds with and aligned with state-led urban development.

Constructing a Peripheral Identity: Performance and Photography at the East Village

Between 1991 and 1994, a number of artists settled and produced work in a small impoverished village called Dashanzhuang at the urban periphery just east of the then unfinished East Third Ring Road. As art historian Wu Hung has shown, the transformation of this village into the internationally renowned “Beijing East Village,” a hotspot of Chinese behavior art (*xingwei yishu*), or performance art, was made possible through the collaborative activities of a close-knit subset of experimental artists who not only lived in the area, but also drew inspiration from their environs to create on-site works there between 1993 and 1994.³⁹ According to Wu, while the lifestyle of these artists was similar to that of the Yuanmingyuan artist community, artists at the East Village worked much more collaboratively and with an increased sensitivity to the significance of their physical

³⁸ Jeroen de Kloet, “Beijing Ring Roads and the Poetics of Excess and Ordinarity,” in *The City In China: New Perspectives On Contemporary Urbanism*, ed. Ray Forrest, Julie Ren, and Bart Wissink (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019), 141–56.

³⁹ In his important account of performance art in China, Thomas Berghuis notes the first use of the term “xingwei” (behavior) to describe Chinese performance art in 1987. According to Berghuis, “xingwei” marks the behavioral aspect or conduct of a socially meaningful action, and therefore had unique social and moral connotations within the Chinese context. For convenience I will use the English term “performance” throughout to refer specifically to “xingwei art.” Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 38; Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong’s East Village, 1993-1998*.

environment, which they incorporated into their works.⁴⁰ The group included, among others, artists Zhang Huan, recently arrived from Henan Province and a graduate of the CAFA's oil painting department; Ma Liuming, a recent graduate of the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts who moved to Beijing in 1993; and RongRong, an aspiring photographer from Fujian Province taking classes at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts. Despite some of the artists' academic qualifications, none of them entered into the state work-unit system, and instead pursued an independent art practice, supporting themselves through odd jobs. As Christen Cornell has argued, while previously the position of "artist" was determined by the academy, residents at the village disassociated themselves from the state-system and began to produce their own site-based social identities.⁴¹

Primarily migrants from the provinces and therefore outsiders to Beijing, artists at the East Village identified with their peripheral position in relation to the city center and, borrowing from the spatial connotations of their physical environs, formulated a new social identity as "independent artists" (*duli yishujia*) who began to break away from the state-run academic art system. Whereas Wu Hung has remarked that the 1990s can be characterized by the formation of an inner circle of independent artists whose non-organizational and non-institutional nature make the network difficult to trace, I show how performance photography at the East Village not only offers material traces of this informal social network, but also reveals artistic subject identities in the process of formation.⁴² I argue that the reciprocal collaborations between Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming's site-based performances and RongRong's photography played a crucial role in mutually constructing their collective social identity. These artistic collaborations *produced* the East Village as site and the East Village artists as subjects, and placed the village and its artists on Beijing's cultural map.

⁴⁰ Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*, 12.

⁴¹ Cornell, "Using Movement."

⁴² Wu Hung, "From 'System' to 'Circle': An Analysis of the State of Avant-Garde Art in the Late 1990s (2003)."

From the earliest moments of RongRong's encounter with the village when he first moved there in the winter of 1993, the artist was fascinated by the physical environs. In a set of photographs, RongRong portrayed the dilapidated area as the leftover or refuse of the consumerist city (Fig. 3.7). Evoking the passage of time, abandonment, decomposition, and even death, RongRong's camera focused on junk items including an abandoned set of arm chairs, a sofa, a dismembered mannequin, and doll's head, that had been placed unceremoniously on the side of the dirt road. Similarly, the artist's diary entries from the time would often describe this contrast between the productive city center and the stagnant periphery. As RongRong observed in November of 1993:

The construction work at East Third Ring Road carries on day and night. The noise is overwhelming. Lined with banners promoting the country's Olympic application, the well-lit road seems to extend into the distance with no end in sight. But we had to turn right at the Great Wall Hotel, and here the road became darker and darker; the dogs never stopped barking. I suddenly felt as if I was biking towards hell. Turning around, we saw the Lufthansa Mall, Kunlun Hotel, and the Great Wall Hotel -- like lights from Heaven, it is a totally different world out there.⁴³

Dashanzhuang was in fact the site of a large recycling depot where refuse from the city was gathered, picked over, and redistributed to factories that would ultimately turn the scrap into raw materials for reuse. The area was also home to a number of rural migrant workers who flocked to Beijing to work in the recycling industry, which grew significantly due to the rise in consumer waste in the city and the industry's privatization in the 1990s.⁴⁴ Often from poorer provinces such as Henan, Sichuan, Anhui, and Hebei, these recent arrivals settled in the urban periphery living in or near garbage sorting facilities for convenience and affordability.

⁴³ Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*, 19.

⁴⁴ For a study on the history of waste and recycling in Beijing see, Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday: One Hundred Years of Recycling in Beijing"; Landsberger, *Beijing Garbage: A City Besieged by Waste*.

At the village, RongRong and other artists mingled with migrant worker neighbors, developing a sense of affinity with them. As RongRong recalled, “We were the same as them. There’s no difference. They also came because they were searching for their own livelihoods.”⁴⁵ For the artist, also a recent migrant to the city of Beijing, independent artists and migrant workers were the same products of the Reform period in which livelihoods and social identity could be detached from the state system: the two shared the challenges of such a relatively new and marginal social identity, but also enjoyed the liberation that came from subsisting outside institutional structures. Indeed, as recent sociological studies of waste picking have noted, many pickers willingly choose what might appear to be a demeaning profession over factory work precisely because of the autonomy and flexibility it offers in contrast to the regimentation of factory life.⁴⁶ At the village both independent artists and migrant workers formulated what their new socio-economic identity meant in a rapidly changing economy.

Seen in this light, RongRong’s photos, rather than just emphasizing waste and refuse, also reveal the village’s derelict qualities as rife with artistic potential. Like these enterprising garbage pickers, RongRong also scavenged the village for artistic inspiration. In an early series of photographs featuring other village residents, RongRong framed the rock musician Zuoxiao Zuzhou (Curse) and his band the NO in the village’s outdoor environs among the garbage heaps. In one photo, Zuoxiao Zuzhou is shown sitting inside a trash barrel with his band members arranged around him on top of the barrel stacks (Fig. 3.8). Integrating the rock musicians with trash, the photographs idealized the identity of the poor yet independent artist, and would seem to visualize the refrain of a popular rock song of the period, “Nothing to My Name” (*Yimu suoyou*) by the Beijing-based rock icon Cui Jian who influenced youths like Curse and his band members to join the

⁴⁵ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

⁴⁶ Ka-Ming Wu and Jieying Zhang, “Living with Waste: Becoming ‘Free’ As Waste Pickers in Chinese Cities,” *China Perspectives*, no. 117 (2019): 67–74; Landsberger, *Beijing Garbage: A City Besieged by Waste*, 100.

burgeoning rock music culture of Beijing. Far from being useless, the garbage site and its materials are revealed in RongRong's photographs to be rife with the possibility for creative reuse within the realm of art and identity production.

RongRong was not the only artist in the village who appreciated the village and its detritus. Village resident Zhang Huan also began to collect refuse from the nearby garbage dumps to incorporate into his art practice. During this time, Zhang was inspired to transition from the classical painting tradition he studied at the academy to new forms of body-based performance. In October 1993, Zhang created his first performance *Weeping Angels*, which incorporated the head, arms, and legs of a broken baby doll (Fig. 3.9).⁴⁷ Zhang's new interest in urban detritus can be seen in a photographic portrait taken by RongRong on the occasion of the two artists' first encounter. Showing the artist seated against a background of assorted dolls, mannequins, and other salvaged items, RongRong's portrait of the artist depicts the items as not only part of Zhang's artistic materials, but also central to his very artistic identity (Fig. 3.10).

RongRong's encounter with Zhang Huan occasioned another performance by Zhang while the two were in his studio. Prompted and staged by RongRong, Zhang's performance, which Zhang later recounted as having an important impact on his artistic trajectory, should thus be seen as a collaborative work. As RongRong described in his diary entry of November 2, 1993, he asked if Zhang would pose "without your clothes on—like the dolls," and picking out a plastic artificial limb from Zhang's collection of junk, he encouraged the performance artist to incorporate the object.⁴⁸ In this series of photos from varying angles—quite unlike the balanced frontal composition of the

⁴⁷ This was part of a group exhibition of works from students at CAFA at Beijing's National Art Museum of China. Zhang provocatively staged his work in outside of the gallery at its steps. For Zhang's account of these events see, Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Qian Zhijian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China."

⁴⁸ For RongRong's account of these events see, Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*, 50–55.

previous portrait—RongRong used various angles to portray Zhang splayed out on the floor in an impromptu performance with the artificial limb held as if an extension of his own body (Fig. 3.11). Recounting the significance of this pivotal event to his subsequent development as a performance artist, Zhang himself noted, “The manner of my body’s participation completely moved me... The directness of using my own body made me feel grounded, and I told myself that this would be the only way for me. I needed nothing more... I don’t want anything. I only want my body.”⁴⁹ This collaborative encounter between RongRong and Zhang solidified an affinity between the two artists that would inspire subsequent collaborations of their performances and photographs that integrated the village site and their artistic identities.

Photography and the Mutual Construction of Artistic Identity

Throughout the rest of that year and into 1994 RongRong continued photographing his new artist friends at the village including the painter Duan Yingmei and the painter-turned-performance artist Ma Liuming, honing his craft to produce an intimate portrait of its creative inhabitants. At the same time, Zhang and Ma’s plans to stage new performance works proffered an opportunity for collaborations. On a hot summer day in June 2, 1994, Zhang performed the seminal work *Twelve Square Meters*, which established the artist’s reputation as well as that of the village as the center of a bold new performance art scene. Zhang had Curse, the rock singer, slather him in honey and fish oil before walking into the titular twelve-square-meter public squat toilet to sit for one hour while feasted upon by flies (Fig. 3.12). In a statement of this work the artist described an earlier encounter with a swarm of flies in the public toilets of the village that prompted his desire to recreate this

⁴⁹ Zhang Huan, “A Piece of Nothing,” in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu (New York: Asia Society, 2007), 51–97.

basest and most essential aspect of his everyday existence.⁵⁰ In contrast to the new constructions in the city center, buildings in Dashanzhuang and other villages like it were not equipped with plumbing so all residents shared a set of poorly maintained communal bathrooms. By siting this performance in the public toilet, Zhang sought to “discover the relationship between people and their living environment,” highlighting and empathizing with the deprivation that many migrants living in the run-down villages at the city’s periphery endured on a daily basis.⁵¹ Like RongRong’s photographs of *Curse and the band*, Zhang’s performance equated the squalor of the village with his own destitution as an artist, while also utilizing it as a source of creative expression.

Seen by only a small group of artist residents along with their friend, the artist Ai Weiwei, who had recently returned to China, and a few others, the performance was captured in detail by RongRong, Ai, and another videographer. Of the various photographic records of this work, those by RongRong stand out for their unique sensitivity towards the relationship between photographer, performer, and physical environment. An analysis of RongRong’s photographs not only highlights the interactive role that each element played in the performance, but also reveals the ways in which these elements contributed towards the construction of an artistic persona. Amplifying Zhang’s original intentions, RongRong’s photographs heroicize Zhang by foregrounding the relationship between the artist and the space of the public toilet. In three photographs shot from the open-air exit of the toilet, RongRong approached Zhang from an oblique angle, creating strong diagonal perspectival lines that open outward to the viewer and emphasize Zhang’s fierce forward-looking gaze (Fig. 3.12-14).⁵² In the main landscape format photograph, RongRong places Zhang to the far left of the frame, drawing out the sense of distance between the figure and the back entrance where

⁵⁰ Zhang Huan, “Guanyu shier pingfangmi de zishu [An account of Twelve Square Meters],” June 1994, Li Xianting Archive, Asia Art Archive.

⁵¹ Zhang Huan.

⁵² These are not the only photographs taken by RongRong of the performance but they are distinguished from many other more documentation-like photographs by their careful attention to composition and visual effects.

a small ray of light reaches the dim interior. The composition juxtaposes Zhang's body against the negative space of the empty public toilet which recedes to the back, producing a sense of tunnel-vision. This is particularly evident in comparison to a photograph by Ai Weiwei shot from straight on: here, Zhang is tightly cropped and the cavernous depth of the space is reduced to a shallow compacted space (Fig. 3.15). In RongRong's photograph Zhang's face and body, made reflective by the viscous honey and sweat on his body, emerges from the dark into the light, which is emphasized by the speckle of lens flare. While Zhang's original statement emphasizes the desire to re-experience a state of abject squalor, in RongRong's photographs the artist doesn't just belong to the wretched environment, but emerges heroically from it.

RongRong's representation of Zhang contributed to the growing mythology of the "unofficial" (*duli*) or independent "free artist" (*zìyóu yìshùjiā*), which began to receive increased attention in the first half of the 1990s when the public became interested in the lifestyles and living environments of the artists gathered at Yuanmingyuan. Artists at Yuanmingyuan were featured in Wu Wenguang's 1991 film *Bumming in Beijing* (*Liulang Beijing*) and in several newspaper and journal articles between 1993 and 1994 with photographs that introduced an even broader public to this alternative lifestyle.⁵³ In 1995 two solo exhibitions of photographer Xu Zhiwei's works, *The Arts' Environment: Photographs of Artists in Beijing* at the Ammonal Art Gallery and *A New Light on Chinese Artists: Photographs of Artists in Beijing, 1992-1995* at the CAFA Art Gallery showcased photographs of the Yuanmingyuan artists' living environs (Fig. 3.16). The latter show traveled to Hong Kong in January of 1996, further prompting overseas interest in the mainland art scene.

⁵³ Fo Guang, "Liulang yiren buluo: Yuanmingyuan 'yishujia cun' ceji [Drifting artist tribe: a record of Yuanmingyuan's 'artist village']," *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu*, no. 3 (1993): 18–19; Yin Jindi, "Yuanmingyuan 'huajia cun' jianwen [Information on the Yuanmingyuan 'artist village']," *Liaowang Zhoukan*, no. 17 (1993): 36–40; Yang Qigang, "Yuanmingyuan yishu cun: Feixu shang de wenhua qunluo [Yuanmingyuan artist village: a cultural community at the ruins]," *Dongfang Yishu*, no. 3 (1994): 12–16; He Lu, "Yuanmingyuan huajia cun tanmi [Exploring the mystery of Yuanmingyuan artist village]," *Kaifaqu daokan*, no. 2 (1994): 45–50.

Whereas Xu's photographs documented the artists in their environs at Yuanmingyuan, RongRong's works took a more active role in shaping the artwork and the performer's artistic identity. For example, in one photograph, Xu places the artist in profile in front of and surrounded by his completed paintings (Fig. 3.17). In this image, the artist's subject-identity is presented as already complete and laid out before the lens. At the village, because performance depended on the mediation of the photograph to be conveyed to subsequent audiences, RongRong's photographs took on a much greater co-authorial role. In the case of the aforementioned *Twelve Square Meters*, the initial performance and the performance-as-photographic-representation convey important creative nuances that mutually shape each other.

More importantly, for both the performance artists and RongRong, photography served as the site of a mutual recognition and affirmation of their respective artistic identities. According to a diary entry from the day that RongRong showed Zhang his portraits, RongRong described Zhang's fascination with his likeness and looked for a long time as if asking himself "Is that really me?" Remarking on the significance of this exchange, RongRong wrote:

In this forlorn and abandoned village, where you would never imagine that anyone would care about art, it was through my camera lens that these guys were recognized - for the first time but without any doubt - as serious artists.⁵⁴

Picking up on this insight, Wu Hung has remarked that "before these artists were accepted by the outside world, their identity as experimental artists was first recognized in their photographic images."⁵⁵ Yet far from being a one-sided process, the photographs worked both ways by also confirming the artistic identity of the photographer. Looking through his lens, RongRong saw

⁵⁴ Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*, 55.

⁵⁵ Wu Hung and RongRong, 54.

himself in the figure of Zhang Huan the artist, just as the resulting photograph—RongRong’s own artistic product—confirmed his own identity as an artist.

This mutual construction of artistic subject identities through photography was made even more evident in a photograph RongRong took of Xing Danwen, another photographer active in the East Village art scene at the time, photographing Ma Liuming conducting the performance *Fen-Ma Liuming’s Lunch II* on June 12, 1994 (Fig. 3.18).⁵⁶ Here a series of mutual relationships is set-up between RongRong’s lens and Ma Liuming’s performance; Xing’s lens and the performance, and between RongRong’s lens and Xing’s act of photographing. The photograph attests to the ways in which each element within the web of relations is integral to producing both the artists-as-subjects and their works-as-artworks. As a meta-picture—a picture that stages its own means of making meaning—the photograph reveals photography’s crucial role in this web of artmaking and identity construction.⁵⁷ Visualized through the performative interface of the photograph, Zhang and RongRong could be considered artists not because they graduated from the academy and took designated art positions assigned to them by the government, but because they self-identified as artists and were *seen* by others who identified similarly. Tautologically, in RongRong’s photographs, it was the artwork itself, in other words, the recursive capacities of photography, that produced the identity for which their creative actions could be legible as artworks.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ An equally important photographer from the period, Xing Danwen worked closely with artists at the East Village, especially with Ma Liuming, though she herself did not live in the village. For a recent account of Xing Danwen’s work at the village see, Li Yu-Chieh, “Gender and Performativity in Xing Danwen’s East Village,” *Third Text* 35, no. 3 (2021): 389–410.

⁵⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ This reading draws from art historian Michelle Maydanchik’s recent analysis of the performative work done by photographs in the identity construction of the early Moscow Actionists. Maydanchik’s work builds on that of other performance scholars who have noted the “recursive force” through which performance documentation performatively “enacts the artist as public figure” and enters them and their actions into discourse, culture, and history. Maydanchik, “The Performative Stills of Early Moscow Actionism”; Widrich, *Performative Monuments*; Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 11–18.

From Dashanzhuang to “The East Village”

The East Village artists sought not only to redefine themselves as independent artists, but also to transform their living environment into an alternative art space through their performance activities. On the occasion of a two-day series of performances by Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming from June 11 to 12th, 1994, Zhang repainted several road signs in the path leading up to the village with the words “Beijing East Village” (*Beijing dongcun*) in Chinese and English. From a practical perspective, the signs were simply meant for to direct audiences who were coming from the city center to view their performances. Visitors traveling to this off-the-beaten path village often found it difficult to find the place since the location was often only communicated through word of mouth and the occasional pager sent via the only phone in the village. Symbolically, however, the irreverent renaming of the village claimed and transformed the peripheral village into an art space for both domestic and foreign audiences. By using the name “East Village,” Zhang distinguished the area from the Yuanmingyuan artist settlement, also referred to as “West Village” (*Xi Cun*) while also drawing an imagined relationship to New York’s well-known “East Village,” an area of artistic activity in the 1980s.⁵⁹ Through return émigrés like Ai Weiwei, who himself lived in New York’s East Village, artists in Beijing had been inspired by its vibrant art scene.

RongRong’s photographs of this sign, again, enhanced and offered new meaning to Zhang’s action by emphasizing the specificity of the site. In a series of photographs, RongRong documented the signs from various angles, yet the repeated photographs from slightly modified positions betray a sense of dissatisfaction with the scenes recorded (Fig. 3.19). None seemed to capture the essence of the “East Village” until the moment when a garbage picker’s tricycle sped out from the village. RongRong’s camera froze the tricycle in mid-movement to the left of the “East Village” sign,

⁵⁹ Specifying the city “Beijing” as opposed to simply West Village would also indicate a stronger reference to New York’s East Village.

creating a sense of visual equivalence between the two (Fig. 3.20). Remarking on its significance RongRong noted, “This tricycle especially represents my feelings of being a migrant in Beijing at that time.”⁶⁰ While Zhang’s sign with its English characters gestured towards the artists’ international aspirations, RongRong’s image grounded their identity in their migrant status. The final photograph, which was adjusted in the darkroom to tone down the brightness of daylight, emphasized the remote desolation of this back-of-the-woods village with its dirt roads and humble *pingfang* (one-story buildings)—a sign of the suburb that urban reconstruction had yet to touch. Bringing all of these elements together, the photograph references the multiple affinities that constituted the identity of “Beijing East Village:” independent artist, migrant, peripheral, international.

While RongRong’s photos helped transform the social position of independent artists from being outside of normative society to becoming a coherent art world circle of independent artists and art audiences, the reality of the artists’ peripheral socio-economic status still made them vulnerable to state authorities. Zhang’s signs were, in fact, only up for the short span of a day since villagers upset over the irreverent renaming of their town promptly painted them over. Shortly after the two-day series of performance activities ended on the 12th, authorities arrived at the village, arresting artists Ma, Zhang, and another artist Zhu Ming on “pornography” charges. The arrest also dispersed other artists in the village since many of them like RongRong could not legally reside in the city without a Beijing residence (*hukou*) or occupation permit. By this time, however, the East Village had already entered into public discourse. While Zhang’s actions temporarily reclaimed the village as an art space, it was RongRong’s iconic photograph that solidified the art world identity of the East Village for posterity. What is striking about this photograph, which has come to represent the East Village artists in various exhibitions and book covers, is that it does not actually represent a

⁶⁰ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

single artist from the group.⁶¹ The location and its various connotations had already symbolically come to stand in for the East Village artists themselves.

An Imagined Community of Independent Artists

RongRong's photographs contributed to the formation of an independent art world both through the artistic spaces and identities that it helped to construct and through the social networks forged by the photographs' domestic and international dissemination. Whereas Wu Hung has remarked that the non-organizational and non-institutional nature of this circle of independent artists make their network difficult to trace, I show how the circulation of East Village performance photographs actually offered material traces of this informal social network and its transregional reach. Such a network produced by the photographs might be understood as a kind of "imagined community" or space of belonging that stretched beyond each artist's immediate social circles and physical locales.⁶² In addition to developing performance photographs as part of his own artistic production, RongRong presented a medium-size (12 in.) print to all the individuals he photographed as a gift. These photographs were vitally important as tools of social and artistic exchange among artists and with new audiences interested in their work as well as a tool of self-promotion.

RongRong's performance photographs along with those by Xing Danwen and Ai Weiwei could be found in the personal archives of influential art critics and curators such as Li Xianting and Hans

⁶¹ This photograph was most prominently used as the cover of the limited-edition photobook RongRong's East Village (2003) published by Chambers Art Gallery and the Chinese-language book of the same name, both by Wu Hung (2014). Its iconicity is due in no small part to these two publications, which not only published RongRong's photography but also incorporated selections from his diary of the period. Wu Hung and RongRong, *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*; Wu Hung and Mao Weidong, *RongRong de dongcun: Zhongguo shiyan yishu de shunjian [RongRong's east village: Chinese experimental art in a flash]* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2014).

⁶² My analysis of the ways in which photography contributed to the formation of an artist community draws from Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community" as a socially constructed community that is based not on physical propinquity, but on perceptions of belonging that are often mediated through media and images. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

van Dijk, another important supporter of the arts in Beijing at the time.⁶³ A highly influential critic throughout the 1980s and 1990s Li used his position to promote the East Village performance artists. In a 1994 article for *Mingbao Monthly*, a Hong Kong newspaper, Li introduced international audiences to performance art in mainland China and included two photographs of performances by Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming.⁶⁴

Beyond the informal exchange of photographs, artists also used them to establish more regular publication channels to share and promote their work to broader audiences. In 1994 Ai Weiwei, along with the artist Xu Bing and the artist-entrepreneur Zeng Xiaojun, began gathering materials for an independent art publication that would distribute information about new experimental works and activities across China and translate important foreign-language essays on art. The editors, later including the artist Zhuang Hui, published three volumes, the *Black Cover Book* (*Heipi shu*) (1994), the *White Cover Book* (*Baipi shu*) (1995), and the *Grey Cover Book* (*Huipi shu*) (1997).⁶⁵ Each edition featured profiles of artists from the East Village including Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, RongRong, as well as other experimental artists across China, and was illustrated by numerous photographs including RongRong's iconic photograph of Zhang Huan discussed previously, his photograph of Xing Danwen and Ma Liuming, also discussed previously, and other photographs by Xing and Ai (Fig. 3.21-22)⁶⁶ In contrast to the conventions of the day, many photographs of performance works were credited as authored works in their own right, attesting to the growing recognition of photographers as co-creators of performances and the importance of the photograph

⁶³ See Li Xianting Archive and Hans van Dijk Archive at Asia Art Archive.

⁶⁴ Li Xianting, "Jinqi dalu xingwei yishu yi pie [A glimpse at recent performance art in mainland China]," *Mingbao Monthly*, November 1994.

⁶⁵ Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun, *Black Cover Book*; Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Zhuang Hui, eds., *Baipi shu* [*White cover book*] (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing Company Limited, 1995); Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun, and Zhuang Hui, eds., *Huipi shu* [*Grey cover book*] (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing Company Limited, 1997).

⁶⁶ This occurs on page 66 and is accompanied by a separate poem by Zhu Zhou (Curse). In Zhang Huan's artist page (70-71) the image used was Ai Weiwei's mentioned above. Yet this image was not given an attribution.

as the primary medium through which audiences could retroactively access these one-time ephemeral performances.⁶⁷ The publications were independently published in Hong Kong since mainland China's official art journals were still hesitant to include content on installation, performance, and other new media, and would have especially balked at the inclusion of photographs of nude performances. With a two-thousand-copy print run for the first volume, the publication was distributed personally by the artists to contacts within the experimental art world.⁶⁸

The *Black Cover Book* was instrumental in recognizing the East Village as an important art scene and served as one of the earliest efforts to discursively frame its significance within the history of contemporary Chinese art. The publication included a highly enthusiastic article introducing the East Village as “A Place Where Artist ‘Drifters’ Gather” (“*Beijing dongcun – ‘liulang’ yishujia de juju di?*”) and connecting it to the precedent of “drifting” (*liulang*) artists in Beijing at the Yuanmingyuan artist village. Whereas Li Xianting's *Mingbao Monthly* article of the same year discussed the East Village artists as individuals, the *Black Cover Book* article focused on the Village community itself as a creative entity. It noted that the group, which included artists and musicians, were grounded in the social and political realities of their local context in their emphasis on “life experience and a perceptivity to the current cultural atmosphere” as well as “the specific context that artworks create.”⁶⁹ Yet the article also assessed the significance of the artists through an especially global lens, arguing that their art activities forged a new path for Chinese art that eliminated the opposition between “localism” (*minzhu*

⁶⁷ The selective crediting of the photographs may indicate a noted distinction between those photographs that are considered purely documentary and those that are constitutive of the work. For example, Xing Danwen's photographs which constitute Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming* (1993) series is credited, whereas Ai Weiwei's photo of Zhang Huan's performance *12 Square Meters* is not credited, but RongRong's of the same performance is. More likely than not, this may have been a transitional moment in which photographers of performance art were just beginning to be recognized as artists in their own right.

⁶⁸ Tung, “Black, White, and Grey: Ai Weiwei in Beijing, 1993–1997.”

⁶⁹ Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun, eds., “Beijing dongcun: ‘liulang’ yishujia de juju di [East Village: A place where drifting artist gather],” in *Hei pi shu [Black cover book]* (Hong Kong: Tai Tei Publishing Company Limited, 1994), 154.

zhuanyi) and “internationalism” (*guojihua*).⁷⁰ As art historian Peggy Wang has recently shown, discourses around “localism” and “internationalism” responded to Chinese artists’ sense of marginality in relation to Western art practice as they began to exhibit abroad and interface with European and American art systems throughout the 1990s.⁷¹ These issues would have been front of mind for Ai, Xu, and Zeng who had all lived and worked in the U.S. for extended periods of time.⁷² By framing art practices at the East Village within the discourse on localism and globalism, the editors subtly asserted a conviction—increasingly shared by artist in the latter half of the 1990s—that the local and the global were not fundamentally opposed and that a deep engagement with the local context could in fact also be thoroughly global.

Throughout the three publications the editors sought other ways to actualize this global vision of contemporary Chinese art by drawing transregional connections between different art practices. Placing photos and artist statements of the Beijing-based East Village artists alongside those such as the Guangzhou-based Big Tail Elephant Working Group and the New York-based émigré artist Hsieh Tehching, who had a special feature in the *Black Cover Book*, the publication linked these art practices together into an “imagined” transregional community of independent artists. By following these Chinese artist profiles with translations of statements from canonical Western artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Joseph Kosuth, the publication created a legitimizing discourse for these marginal art practices that still were not accepted within the official art system in China. Rather than seeking to enter this existing state-run Chinese art system, however, the book reflected the artists’ desire to create an alternative one for themselves. Although intended to be journal-like, the *Black Cover Book* addressed itself to fellow

⁷⁰ Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun.

⁷¹ Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*.

⁷² For accounts of these artists’ experiences abroad see, Ai Weiwei, John Tancock, and Stephanie H. Tung, *Ai Weiwei: New York 1983-1993* (Berlin: Distanz, 2011); Reiko Tomii, *Xu Bing* (London: Albion Books, 2011); Hao Sheng, ed., *Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2010).

experimental artists and supportive audiences within this circle, stating in its Notice to Contributors that the publication was intended for “internal exchanges” only and “not for public distributed.”⁷³ The publication’s editors, contributing artists, and audiences thus constituted the burgeoning social and discursive “space” of this alternative experimental art world.

While the transregional filiations with artists and references outside of China in the *Black Cover Book* occurred on paper, the book’s actual distribution and the growing proliferation of photographs and information about the East Village did begin to establish real connections with artistic networks beyond China. As Christen Cornell has argued, these efforts reflected “an interlacing of China’s art circles with overseas networks.”⁷⁴ Around 1994 RongRong met the artist Huang Rui who returned from Tokyo where he had been living since 1984.⁷⁵ RongRong showed Huang his photographs of the East Village, which Huang recommended to his longtime friend Tabata Yukihiro, the head of the well-established Tokyo Gallery in Japan. The gallery, which had a transnational outlook and was an early supporter of experimental art practices including Japanese Gutai and Mono-ha artists and Korean Dansaekhwa painters since the 1950s, had begun to take an interest in contemporary Chinese art.⁷⁶ Tabata had met Huang and the then relatively unknown artist Cai Guo-Qiang when the two moved to Tokyo in the 1980s, and he included them in a show of Chinese exchange students.⁷⁷ In 1989 Tabata travelled to Beijing to see the *Modern Art Exhibition* at the National Art Museum of China where he purchased eight works and exhibited them in the show “Chinese Contemporary Art Now” in Tokyo later that year. Inspired by the new artistic energy

⁷³ Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun, *Black Cover Book*, 160.

⁷⁴ Cornell, “Using Movement,” 289.

⁷⁵ Huang Rui returned to Beijing between 1992 and 1994 and was enthusiastic about the performance and photography at the East Village. Huang later introduced the two and they looked through his photographs together during one of Tabata’s visits to Beijing. Huang Rui, interview with author, June 8 – 10, 2020, WeChat video call.

⁷⁶ For a history of the gallery see, Mamiko Mochizuki, *Tokyo Gallery BTAP: 1950-2010* (Tokyo: Tokyo Gallery Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, 2010).

⁷⁷ Tabata Yukihiro, written correspondence with author, May 20, 2020.

in China, Tabata continued to support and exhibit the works of Chinese artists throughout the 1990s.⁷⁸

In September 1995 the gallery organized the three-person show, *The Witness of the Contemporary Art in China*, featuring RongRong's East Village photographs and those of photographers Xing Danwen and Xu Zhiwei (Fig. 3.23). Although RongRong was so poor that he could not even afford to attend the opening in Japan, the show was a turning point for the young artist as it confirmed that his performance photographs could be accepted as artworks in their own right. From 1995 onwards RongRong's East Village photographs received a number of international exhibition opportunities while simultaneously spreading knowledge of the performance artists, which in turn, creating new opportunities for Zhang and Ma to exhibit in Japan.⁷⁹ The following year, RongRong was invited again to exhibit his works in Tokyo at Gallery Q, and it was here that the artist met inri, a young experimental photographer who would eventually move to Beijing and become his partner and lifelong artistic collaborator. RongRong and inri's partnership further strengthened the ties between the Chinese and Japanese experimental art network.

By the summer of 1997 when the expatriate art historian and curator Wu Hung returned to Beijing to conduct research and interview RongRong for an upcoming exhibition on contemporary Chinese art at the Smart Museum in Chicago, the East Village was already in the past. All the artists had scattered to nearby areas in Chaoyang district, but more importantly, after gaining new domestic and international exposure they were no longer the marginalized artists they once were. Instead by the late 1990s RongRong, Zhang, and Ma became increasingly linked to international art networks,

⁷⁸ Tabata purchased a work from Xu Bing after visiting the artist's studio in 1989 and in 1991 the gallery showed Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*. Tabata Yukihito.

⁷⁹ In 1996 Ma Liuming was invited to the Japanese International Performance Art Festival organized by prominent Japanese curator Seiji Shimoda. In 1996 and 1997 Zhang Huan was included in two exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art in Japan. Zhang Huan, "Zhang Huan Select Performances," in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu (New York: Asia Society, 2007), 173–75; Seiji Shimoda, ed., *NIPAF '96: The 3rd Nippon International Performance Art Festival* (Japan: NIPAF, 1996).

traveling widely to exhibit abroad. RongRong's own meeting with Wu that year, in which they looked through and discussed RongRong's photographs from the East Village and more recent works, would sow the seeds for a number of exhibitions in China and abroad including a 2003 exhibition at Beijing's Factory 798, an emerging new artist space in Beijing's periphery. As will be discussed in the following section, this important exhibition, a collaboration between Wu, RongRong, and inri, contributed to the transformation of the former industrial factory complex into the city's and the country's premier contemporary arts district.

From 1993 to 1994 artists at the East Village produced a number of performance and photographs that championed the peripheral location and marginalized identity as the basis for an alternative artistic identity around which a broader independent art world network formed. In this process RongRong's photographs functioned on multiple levels to produce the "space" of this independent art world: as an interface between photographer and subject, it established a reciprocal gaze of mutual recognition between the performance artist and the photographer with respect to their artistic identities; as representation, it creatively constructed the performance and the identity of the performance artist for subsequent audiences; as artistic product, appreciated and collected independent of the performance, it further validated the social position of the photographer as an artist; as a tool of dissemination its iterative nature performatively reaffirmed the status of the performance and performance artist while making them available to secondary audiences; and as an object of exchange it established a social network within which the artistic identity and its products can be valued. In this sense, the photographs function as both a representation of the art world and its infrastructure. Its trajectory from a reciprocal interface of mutual validation to an art object of exchange transforms the figures and actions it depicts into discursively legitimate artists and artworks. In contrast to the individualistic connotations of the term "independent" (*duli*) artist, however, photographs of the East Village art circle reveal the ways in which these artists emerged

from within a wider social network of individuals that mutually reaffirmed and made possible such an identity and its cultural products. In this process, the village and its artists were transformed from simply the living quarters of a previously peripheral group of artists, to the larger-than-life art space of “Beijing East Village,” a hotspot of Chinese performance art. If the East Village can be understood as an experimental art site, this ‘site’ can be said to exist not just physically in this squalid village at the city’s periphery, but also in the world that these photographs actively constructed.

Transforming Peripheral Spaces: Exhibition Activities at Factory 798

By the early 2000s the city of Beijing had already expanded well beyond the Fourth Ring Road, which was completed in 2001, and was close to finishing the Fifth Ring Road, which was completed in 2003.⁸⁰ The East Village had been demolished and the area just south of it became the city’s international Central Business District, where construction for the city’s iconic China Central Television (CCTV) tower designed by Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren (Office of Metropolitan Architecture) broke ground in 2004. By this time the Chinese experimental art world had also grown to become a highly globalized, transregional network of artists, critics, and curators who moved and worked freely between domestic and international spaces. With this growing awareness of their cultural capital and power as a social group, experimental artists began to take a more active role in shaping the course of Beijing’s urban redevelopment at the periphery of the city. This intersection between art and urban development was most evident at 798, a large industrial factory complex located at the northeastern periphery of Chaoyang district between the Fourth and Fifth Ring Road.

Built between 1954 and 1957 during a period of rapid industrialization under the Communist Party’s first Five-Year Plan, the large industrial commune, then known as the 718 United Factory for

⁸⁰ See Table 8.1: Beijing ring roads in, de Kloet, “Beijing Ring Roads and the Poetics of Excess and Ordinarity,” 145.

Electronics, was part of a broader initiative to develop several heavy industries to the northeast of Beijing.⁸¹ A product of an international socialist collaboration between the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, the over one million square meter complex, the largest in all the socialist countries at the time, was designed and built with the aid of German architects and engineers who moved to Beijing to undertake the project.⁸² Showcasing the best of their country's modern industrial building heritage and expertise, the Germans designed the factories to meet state-of-the-art engineering standards and included lofty ceiling heights topped with curved, saw-tooth roofs with large bands of windows to allow for ample natural light (Fig. 3.24).⁸³ Though variations of the saw-tooth roof design had been employed in industrial buildings in Europe since the 19th century, German designers from the outset pointed out to their Chinese counterparts the distinctly German legacy of the Bauhaus, thereby solidifying the factory's almost mythical associations with Bauhaus architectural style to this day.⁸⁴ A vast commune, the 718 complex was comprised of six factories—among which factory 798 was the largest—and included a comprehensive set of social services such as dormitories, dining halls, sports grounds, kindergarten, and hospital, etc.⁸⁵ At its heyday, the factory was a key national producer of electronics, communications technology, and defense components, employing tens of thousands of workers who lived on the campus.

Once the pride of the state regime and a site toured by national and foreign dignitaries, the factory had dramatically reduced its output following China's economic reforms in the late 1970s. As

⁸¹ For an extended historical account see, Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*; Sun, "The Production of Art Districts and Urban Transformation in Beijing."

⁸² East Germany also sent numerous engineers and other experts to help with the initial set-up and running of the factory. Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*, 15.

⁸³ The structure was also built to withstand a category eight-level earthquake, which even exceeded both China and the Soviet Union's national specifications for industrial buildings. Chen Yifeng, 15.

⁸⁴ Chen noted that the German experts proudly told their Chinese counterparts about Bauhaus architecture and style. Chen Yifeng, 15.

⁸⁵ Sun, "The Production of Art Districts and Urban Transformation in Beijing," 213.

a result of the changing economy, former heavy industries were declining while new industries such as the service sector and computer-based high-tech technology were beginning to develop. In the late 1980s the complex was decommissioned from a national-level factory to a municipal-level one under the jurisdiction of Beijing city. In 1997, the Chaoyang district government consolidated the factories under the newly formed Beijing Seven Star Group, a municipal state-owned enterprise, and issued a new comprehensive plan to convert the area into a high-tech electronics campus, for which demolition and reconstruction would begin in 2005. In the interim, the Seven Star Group temporarily rented the factory's unused spaces to supplement its income. Attracted by the large space and cheap rent, many artists began to settle at 798, as the area was commonly called. By the early 2000s, 798 became the site of a growing experimental art community that was distinct from earlier artists villages such as Yuanmingyuan and East Village. Rather than living quietly at the site, artists adaptively reused the space, investing in its renovation to establish studios as well as public-facing arts spaces and galleries. Through highly collaborative efforts, the artist residents of 798 eventually took an active role in successfully lobbying the government to protect their rights to remain in the space at the cost of previous plans to redevelop it.

While recent scholarship has examined the historic role that artists at 798 have played in the development of the art district, these accounts have focused on economic, political, and social aspects, often comparing 798's development to the artist-led gentrification of New York's industrial SoHo district.⁸⁶ Few have examined closely how specific art activities including on-site artworks and

⁸⁶ Currier, "Art and Power in the New China"; Sun, "The Production of Art Districts and Urban Transformation in Beijing"; Informed by urban theory, sociologist Zhou Lan's book-length study of 798 considers the impact of artists in transforming the space, but pays less attention to specific exhibitions, Zhou Lan, *Kongjian de xiangdu: 798 yishu qu de shehui bianqian [Dimension of space: 798 art district's social changes]*; One exception is curator Berenice Angremy's brief discussion of important public exhibitions at 798 that have contributed to the development of the area, Berenice Angremy, "Dashanzi Art District: Creating a Site for Public Exhibitions," in *Beijing 798 gongchang: chuangzao Beijing de xin yishu, jianzhu yu shehui [Beijing 798: reflections on art, architecture and society in China]*, ed. Huang Rui (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004), 70–75.

exhibitions at 798 have creatively engaged with and reimagined the space. These artistic visions of the space first opened the public and the government's eyes to alternative possibilities for the site. Even before its official designation as an arts district in 2006, artists had already begun to symbolically “reconstruct” the factory into an arts space.

The history of contemporary art's intersections with 798, as the area was later commonly called, can be divided into three key phases: the initial settlement of artists in the area between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, a turning point around 2002 to 2003 when artists began to creatively re-envision and reclaim the area as an arts district, and 2006 when the government officially recognized this alternative vision and incorporated the arts district into its official urban planning policy. Like at the East Village, artists' studios at 798 developed organically, but unlike the poor conditions of the urban village, the large and well-lit spaces at 798 were particularly well suited for conversion into studio and gallery spaces. In 1995, the sculptor and head of the CAFA sculpture department Sui Jianguo became the first artist to rent studio space at 798. Sui's arrival at the factory was itself the result of the displacement of artists from the center of the city to the periphery. As discussed previously, the academy, which had occupied a central location in the heart of the city, was demolished to make way for a new commercial redevelopment.⁸⁷ While the CAFA sculpture department rented temporary classroom space at the Beijing Electronics Second Factory, Sui found additional space at 798, which was adjacent to the factory.⁸⁸ Even when CAFA's new campus was

⁸⁷ Sui along with two other CAFA faculty members Zhan Wang and Yu Fan, established the artist group Three Men United Studio and staged the group exhibition *Development Project* (1995) on the half-demolished grounds of the campus to reflect upon their displacement. For an account of this art project see, Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art The University of Chicago, 1999), 110–11; For a detailed account of the demolition and displacement of CAFA and its relocation to a factory location near 798, see, Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*, 46–55.

⁸⁸ According to Chen, Sui and the sculpture department needed more space to produce a large municipal commission for the Second-Sino Japanese War memorial at the Lugou Bridge (Marco Polo Bridge) and rented the main space at factory 798. Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*, 46–55.

completed in the nearby neighborhood of Wangjing, Sui and other colleagues from the academy would continue to rent personal studio spaces at 798.⁸⁹

As many artists moved to the area, signing temporary leases that would expire by 2005 when the state's redevelopment plan would commence, the growing artistic community at 798 contributed to several events between 2002 and 2003 that reclaimed 798 as an arts space and creatively promoted artists' vision for its future as an arts district. In October of 2002 Tabata Yukihiro, the owner of Tokyo Gallery in Japan, established Beijing Tokyo Art Projects (BTAP), the first gallery at 798.⁹⁰ As a pioneer BTAP demonstrated the area's potential as an arts space and set a number of precedents that shaped subsequent attitudes towards the factory space. First, BTAP's connections to the well-established Tokyo Art Gallery in Japan, lent the area international endorsement and cultural cachet. Second, on the advice of Tabata's longtime friend Huang Rui, who had also adaptively renovated his studio at 798, BTAP chose to acknowledge the space's historic architecture by minimizing any structural changes and leaving untouched the newly uncovered Maoist slogans leftover from the original factory (Fig. 3.25). Although BTAP repainted most of the space white, the gallery still conveyed the feeling of an industrial space and was enhanced by its unique historic reference, which emphasized the aesthetic value of adaptively reuse. Third, the gallery's highly professional inaugural exhibition in the fall of 2002 brought large numbers of the Beijing art circle and foreign art cognoscenti to 798 for the first time, thus placing 798 definitively on the city's cultural map. Organized by the well-known curator Feng Boyi with a catalogue foreword by the internationally renowned art historian and curator Wu Hung, *Beijing Afloat*, featured ten Beijing-based artists, including RongRong and inri, whose works reflected upon the city's changing

⁸⁹ Sui recalled that this was because the new campus did not provide personal studio spaces for its professors. Sui Jianguo, interview with author, July 23, 2019, Beijing.

⁹⁰ As Tabata recalled, to get around state restrictions on foreign-run businesses, the space could not be listed as an official gallery so it was called Beijing Tokyo Art Project. Tabata Yukihiro, written correspondence with author, May 20, 2020.

environment, thereby tying the development of the gallery to the city's contemporary realities (Fig. 3.26).⁹¹ BTAP's successful opening contributed to the largest influx of art galleries and new tenants to the area in the following year.

In the spring of 2003, artists Huang Rui and Xu Yong took the next step of organizing a public arts event including all the artists and arts organizations in the area. Hosting the event within the context of the impending demolition of 798 in 2005, the two took a number of steps to deliberately lobby against the area's destruction and reclaim it as an arts district.⁹² The two titled the weeklong series of open-studios, exhibitions, and events, "Reconstructing 798" (*Zaizao 798*), symbolically challenging the existing redevelopment plan by declaring their intention to "reconstruct" the factory complex into an art district. Echoing similar actions by the Beijing East Village artists in 1994, the two publicized the event by provocatively calling the area "798 Art District" in posters and signs mounted throughout the complex (Fig. 3.27). The blatant suggestion that artists could "reconstruct 798" into an art district prompted the first open conflict between artists and the Seven Star Group, who forced them to change their title to excise any claims to determining the future of 798. Yet as historian Chen Yifeng has pointed out, by this point the media coverage of the event had already widely promoted the notion that artists were "reconstructing" the "ruinous, dilapidated, and abandoned factory space" into a new "arts space" at 798.⁹³

While important in generating widespread public interest in 798, the two art events were limited in terms of their creative engagements with the physical space and history of the factory.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Feng Boyi, *Beijing "fushihui": Beijing Dongjing Yishu Gongcheng shouzhuan [Beijing afloat: Beijing Tokyo Art Projects inaugural exhibition]* (Beijing: Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, 2002).

⁹² Huang Rui and Xu Yong, "'Zaizao 798:' zonghe yishu huodong jihua gaiyao ['Reconstructing 798:' summary of the plan for comprehensive art activities]," in *Kongjian de xiangdu: 798 yishu qu de shehui bianqian [Dimension of space: 798 art district's social changes]*, ed. Zhou Lan (Beijing: Zhongguo qing gongye chubanshe, 2012), 188–91.

⁹³ Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*, 80.

⁹⁴ This was also the case for other public art events including *Transborder Language* (March 2003), which emphasized an international exchange between participating artists from China, Japan, and Korea; *Blue Sky Exposure* (March 2003), which focused on solidarity and creativity amidst the SARS virus epidemic; as well as a

BTAP's decision to keep vestiges of the slogans acknowledged the importance of the site's history and served as a precedent for other renovations of the area, but only three works in the opening show actively referenced or worked with the factory space.⁹⁵ *Reconstructing 798* was more activist in its intention to reclaim the area for the art world, yet the actual art activities that occurred did not necessarily draw inspiration from the uniqueness of its site. As Chen's point about public perception suggests, it was the enduring image of artists' transformation of this ruinous space that captured the public's imagination and ultimately provided a new and creative vision for the future of 798.

The Rebirth of a Ruin: Wu Hung's 2003 *Tui-Transfiguration* exhibition

In contrast to these two events, the exhibition *Tui-Transfiguration: The Image World of RongRong and inri* (September 17 – October 20, 2003), which took place in the Great Kiln factory at 798, was the first art event that prominently foregrounded the ruinous factory as the site and subject of artistic exploration and creatively engaged it through on-site strategies (Fig. 3.28).⁹⁶ The product of a collaboration between the art historian and curator Wu Hung and artists RongRong and inri, *Tui* was far from a conventional two-person retrospective. Instead, the exhibition honed in on the significance of the site to stage an interactive on-site relationship between the artists' works and the ruined factory space, evoking a sense of creative transformation. As Wu noted:

I feel that the show for me is not just about RongRong's or inri's photographs, it's also about the place. It's almost like there are two actors, one is the artist and their works and another is site and building—they talk to each other and comment on each other, or frame each other, and they become one.⁹⁷

few other exhibitions and events. A notable exception was the single-work exhibition of Wang Wei's *Temporary Space* in July 2003, which saw the artist hire migrant workers to create a brick wall structure that enclosed the exhibition area and then remove it brick by brick. For a discussion of these exhibitions see, Angremy, "Dashanzi Art District: Creating a Site for Public Exhibitions."

⁹⁵ One of the works RongRong and inri's *We Are Here* (2003) photograph series, which will be discussed in the following section.

⁹⁶ Wu Hung, *RongRong & Inri: Tui-Transfiguration* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004).

⁹⁷ Wu Hung, interview with author, June 30, 2020, WeChat video call.

Tui's on-site strategies thus transformed the space in two ways. On a basic level, it drew parallels between the themes of ruin, transformation, and re-birth in the artists' oeuvre and the physical state of the Great Kiln factory space, allowing photography and site to mutually inform one another. On another level, by facilitating a new way to see and experience the ruined space, the exhibition contributed to ongoing efforts to redefine the identity of 798 and establish it as a contemporary art space in Beijing. *Tui* thus enacted the "transfiguration" to which its title refers. Like the dual function of RongRong's photographs discussed previously, the exhibition was both an on-site art project *and* an infrastructure that contributed to the spatial expansion of the art world.

The initial ideas for the exhibition were based on a longstanding shared interest in urban ruins, first discussed between the two when Wu interviewed RongRong in the summer of 1997.⁹⁸ Returning to China to conduct research for his 1999 exhibition *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* at the Smart Museum (University of Chicago), Wu was struck by RongRong's photographs of the dilapidated East Village as well as the artist's more recent series between 1996 and 1997, which focused on urban demolition sites and the vestiges of torn photographs that were left behind in the ruins of half-demolished houses (Fig. 3.29).⁹⁹ For the art historian, the artist was not only part of a broader artistic trend that engaged the realities of Beijing's urban reconstruction, but also a quintessential "ruin" artist because his works did not just thematically engage urban ruins, but also reflected on the ruination of photographs themselves and broader conceptual issues such as trace, survival, and processes of change.¹⁰⁰ In *Transience*, Wu

⁹⁸ Wu's ongoing interest in the theme of ruins culminated in his 2012 publication *A Story of Ruins*, which examined the changing significance of ruin throughout Chinese visual culture from ancient times to the present. Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2012).

⁹⁹ Ruins served as a prominent sub-theme in the exhibition. Wu Hung, *Transience*.

¹⁰⁰ Wu noted that RongRong's works were "about the survival of images... ruins in many senses, both the ruins of buildings but also the ruins of photographs." Wu Hung, interview with author, June 30, 2020, WeChat video call.

included RongRong's photographs, providing the previously untitled series with the name "Ruins," and showed them among other works by artists such as Yin Xiuzhen, Zhan Wang, and Zhang Dali, all of whom engaged urban demolition in different ways.

Remarking pessimistically on the process of urban ruination in the exhibition catalogue, Wu wrote, "the breakdown between private and public space does not generate a new kind of space. Ruins form 'blind spots' in an overly crowded city... these ruins are therefore 'non-spaces'."¹⁰¹ The shared sense of trauma reflected the sentiments of a period in which under the 1990 Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal Program (*Weijiu fang gaizao*) vast swaths of the inner city were destroyed and millions of long-time inhabitants were forcibly relocated to the urban periphery.¹⁰² As Wu recalled:

My personal feelings about ruins in Beijing's cityscape was very acute at this moment because I returned to Beijing for the first time in 1991 after ten years of staying outside. When I went back the redevelopment of Beijing had just started. You saw a lot of demolition especially in the old quarter of the inner city. It was so striking to me... Then when I saw pictures like this [RongRong's photographs] it was very easy to relate to because I grew up in the inner city, in these low residential courtyard houses so I was very familiar with these kinds of houses. There was demolition everywhere around 1996 and 1997, so I think I wrote this in the *Transience* catalogue with a lot of emotion.¹⁰³

For Wu, RongRong's photographs were intimately tied to his own personal experience and outlook on Beijing's urban redevelopment.

At 798, the historical reality of urban development, obsolescence, and destruction was made even more palpable by organizing an exhibition in an abandoned factory. Since *Transience*, RongRong had hoped to collaborate with Wu again and approached him to curate a show of his and inri's photographs. In 2003 RongRong settled on organizing it at the Great Kiln factory in 798, which was

¹⁰¹ Wu Hung, *Transience*, 117.

¹⁰² Xuefei Ren, *Building Globalization: Transnational Architecture Production in Urban China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 132.

¹⁰³ Wu Hung, interview with author, June 30, 2020, WeChat video call.

quickly becoming Beijing's newest experimental art scene. Unlike other smaller spaces within the complex that had already been remodeled into studios and galleries, the enormous 213-feet long by 105-feet wide Great Kiln factory had been left in its original state of disrepair. As Wu recalled his first encounter with the space:

...there was still mounds of dirt, bricks everywhere... here you really felt the raw power of real stuff, we talked about ruins but this was the real thing... it was also of such an immense scale. And inside there were even little buildings where people were actually living, so you can't even say that this was a building, it was an entire space, like a stadium, and inside there were also ruins. Everything was so beautiful, the broken windows, the light coming in... the place was so exciting. To use a space like that to curate a show was a once in a lifetime opportunity.¹⁰⁴

Inspired by the potential of the ruined site, Wu and RongRong decided not to renovate the space, but to incorporate elements such as the industrial equipment, old furniture, interior buildings, and even the dirt on the ground into the exhibition design.

This shared aesthetic appreciation for the site also reflected an optimistic change in Wu's understanding of urban ruins: If displacement, demolition, and reconstruction was a reality over which artists seemed to have little control, the concept of ruins, reframed as an aesthetic and curatorial mode, might yet be creatively mobilized towards revitalizing these very spaces. Rather than repeat the theme of ruins, *Tui* instead centered on the theme of transformation and how ruins might gain new life. The lens of transformation applied equally to RongRong's photographic trajectory from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s and to Wu's aspirations for the factory space itself. The title, *Tui*, a classical Chinese term that refers to the process in which some arthropods and reptiles grow out of and shed their skin, draws from these allusions to discarded remains, transformation, and new life. A theme that had been latent since the *Transience* show, the image of "tui" was first suggested in Zhan Wang's *Temptation* series (1994), which was included in that 1999 exhibition. In the work Zhan

¹⁰⁴ Wu Hung, interview with author, June 30, 2020, WeChat video call.

arranged a group of contorted figures molded from clothes and glued to suggest the “shell” of a human form, placing them in various ruined demolition sites in Beijing (Fig. 3.30). Describing these discarded shells, the artist had remarked enigmatically, “It has no life, but it gives the hope of a better life—from here comes seduction or temptation.”¹⁰⁵ Likely inspired by this image, Wu came to treat the ruined factory as a kind of empty shell, or seductive space *in potentia*, from which new creative possibilities might emerge. As the curator wrote in the catalogue introduction for *Tui*, “[the various connotations of *tui*] all pertain to death but also convey the hope for a transcendent, albeit elusive, afterlife” and “resonate deeply with the photographs by RongRong and Inri.”¹⁰⁶

To emphasize this transformational process, Wu designed the exhibition as a trajectory through the factory space comprised of four sections—Ruin, Transformation, Rebirth, Self-Representation (Fig. 3.31). The design incorporated several display methods that served to architectonically demarcate the different sections. Whereas works that hung on or close to the perimeter walls belonged to the space and reinforced it, the more freestanding elements such the eight frames that were suspended from the ceiling, the frosted glass panels, and the gauze curtains created new spatial divisions and a channel of passage through the space, emphasizing the “temporal progression from death to rebirth.”¹⁰⁷ As visitors enter the exhibition through a dark hallway at the east of the building, they traverse the width of the space towards a brief English-Chinese introduction text—the only text in the exhibition. To the right are groups of works belonging to the “Ruins” section, all of which are displayed in rusted metal frames that the artist made himself in order to blend his works seamlessly with the rough and unfinished walls. The first group consists of RongRong’s *Wedding Gown* series and is displayed through eight sets of large photographs hung from

¹⁰⁵ Zhan Wang, quoted in, Wu Hung, *Transience*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ Wu Hung, *RongRong & Inri: Tui-Transfiguration*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Wu Hung, 44.

the ceiling to delineate the “Ruins” section (Fig. 3.32). Hanging close to the perimeter walls, another group of works—those that initially sparked Wu’s interest in the 1990s—depict torn posters and other photographic detritus along with demolished buildings (Fig. 3.33). Also in this section, a set of stairs leads visitors to a small abandoned office where *Fragments* (1998), a series of enlarged cut-up negatives were displayed. This series was produced when RongRong discovered a stash of destroyed film negatives among the ruins of an abandoned house. The cut-up fragments of a young couple posing nude in their home revealed uncanny slivers of limbs, breasts, and other body parts. Displaying these in a tucked away room where the derelict furniture was simply pushed to a corner, the exhibition reproduced RongRong’s initial sense of discovery among the ruins (Fig. 3.34). Considered together the works in this section create a dialogue between the photographic depiction of ruins in the old residential quarters of the inner city and the industrial ruin of 798, highlighting the shared reality of urban transformation within which the show’s Beijing viewers also lived.

Returning to the main exhibition floor, at the center of the space are four free-standing sinuous frosted glass panels planted in the dirt ground (Fig. 3.35). Hung on these panels are RongRong’s *East Village* series and inri’s *1999, Tokyo, Grey Zone, and Maximax*, photographs of performances and bodily interactions with urban space by each artist in collaboration with other performance artists. Both the dynamism of the display format and the interaction between body and space, performer and photographer in these photographs suggest the theme of “Transformation.” A central path through the curved panels leads viewers towards a white gauze screen on which a number of works featuring the couple in natural landscapes are hung (Fig. 3.36). The sheer screen serves as a portal allowing visitors to access the *Mt. Fuji* series, which is displayed through a row of hanging lightboxes (Fig. 3.37). Representing the couple’s artistic collaboration and personal relationship, works in this section constitute a “rebirth” in their artistic practice as a duo. Visitors coming to the end of this progression can re-circulate around the perimeter of the space to view

self-portraits of the two artists (Fig. 3.38) as well as the work *We Were Here*, a performance photograph collaboration by the two artists at 798 (Fig. 3.39).

The overall spatial and visual effects of the exhibition enhanced the sense of ruination but also reframed ruin from simply a state of dilapidation to a sense of expansiveness, openness, and possibility. Although the once light-filled factory floor had become dark and cavernous due to the number of dirt-covered or boarded up broken windows, the exhibition used high-powered spotlights—the single most expensive element of the show—to enhance the sense of forms and images emerging from the dimness. While suggesting spatial zones, the design of the exhibition avoided clear-cut boundaries, which opened up the possibility for meandering and exploring. This was enhanced through the selective use of a wide variety of materials and formats including the translucent frosted glass in the central space, the white gauze curtains through which the illumination from the lightboxes in the background can be seen, and the various hanging elements that draw the eyes upward towards the immense four-story-high ceiling. Whereas the ruins in RongRong’s photographs confront the viewer matter-of-factly with their striking frontality and shallowness of depth, the ruin of the factory site is imbued with a sense of space and possibility (Fig. 3.33). This expansive void creates a sense of indeterminacy, allowing visitors to imagine it as a fertile space for artistic creativity.

RongRong and inri’s own photographs of performative relationships between bodies and space, illustrate the ways in which art practice might activate such empty spaces. One enigmatic series, *We Are Here* (2002), hung to the left of the entrance, presents the couple’s own engagement with the factory space of 798 (Fig. 3.39). Invited to participate in the previous year’s exhibition *Beijing Afloat*, RongRong and inri were among the first to see BTAP’s space at 798 before it was renovated. Reacting to the latent possibilities of the space, the couple created one of, if not the earliest site-specific works at 798. In a set of six photographs, three of which were shown at *Tui*, the

couple registered a bodily encounter with the derelict site (Fig. 3.40-42). Altered through the photographers' post-production interventions, each depiction of the space suggests three temporalities—past, present, and future—and how they might intersect at 798. In the first image, the figures, most accurately resembling the actual bodies of the two artists, are shown as if visitors or witnesses to the factory's past. The nude couple—physically exposed and out of the place within the environment—stand among the industrial debris and face the factory's brightly lit windows, above which is painted a Cultural Revolution era slogan proclaiming, "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts!" (*Mao zhuxi shi women xinzhong de hong taiyang*). In the second image, the figures, now altered through hand-tinted colorings of yellow and blood-like red, suggest the presence of ghosts from the past. Depicting the now renovated space of BTAP, photographically altered through mirroring, the image points to a different moment in time in the site's history: the contemporary present. The final image depicts the two hand-tinted figures embracing each other amidst a white haze through which the word "we" from the slogan can be made out. The couple, and perhaps the collective 'we' of the viewer, is faced with an unbounded and dream-like space—a premonition of the factory's uncertain future. RongRong and inri's highly theatrical engagement with the empty space activates the site's multiple temporalities and offers an alternative vision of the space as a stage for artistic performance.

Echoing RongRong and inri's performative engagements with the ruins in BTAP's space, *Tui* also introduced a performance by the experimental dance troupe Void Dance Studio (*Kongkong Wushi*) shortly before the close of the exhibition (Fig. 3.43). In an evocative account of their inspired on-site performance, the choreographer and performer Liu Chun wrote:

Here in the factory, the dirt, the hallways, the sofas, the stairs, the glass walls and the pictures gave us all sorts of stimulation... Conversing with the work and with ourselves, we felt that we suddenly hit upon the feeling of dance—it was ignited. We swirled at the spot, and the dust swirled around us.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Wu Hung, 277.

Both RongRong and inri and the Void Dance Studio's performances initiated an interactive relationship with the space that transformed it from an empty shell into a vibrant artistic space that could inspire the imagination of the many visitors who came to 798.

Positioning *Tui*'s Social Commitments

Although *Tui* was exceptional for the ways in which it integrated artwork, site, and curation, the exhibition can also be understood as one among many innovative exhibitions that sought to expand the possibilities for exhibiting experimental art throughout the late 1990s. This was a subject that Wu Hung had been actively researching between 1999 and 2000 during his first year-long sabbatical study of the contemporary Chinese art world. Wu sought to survey the emergence of a wide variety of art institutions and informal spaces that were not run by the state and to understand how art activities and exhibitions were able to engage different types of audiences. This research culminated in his 2000 exhibition *Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* at the Smart Museum, which documented the various opportunities and challenges of exhibiting experimental art in the late 1990s. The show's catalogue paid particular attention to "site-specific exhibitions," shows that were often held in versatile, public, non-exhibition spaces in order to "demonstrate an unambiguous relationship between an exhibition and its social environment."¹⁰⁹ Explaining their significance, he wrote, "these exhibitions share the belief that experimental art should be part of people's lives and should play an active role in China's socioeconomic transformation."¹¹⁰ As an on-site exhibition, *Tui* embodied the very recent art history that Wu was only just beginning to narrate, and like the best of

¹⁰⁹ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 38.

¹¹⁰ Wu Hung, 38.

the shows that inspired him, it also actively participated in the transformations that were occurring both within the art world and in the urban environment at large.

Beyond supporting the work of two innovative young photographers, the exhibition deliberately contributed to ongoing efforts to reimagine and reclaim 798 as an arts space against its impending destruction and redevelopment in 2005. Following *Tui*, Wu published a catalogue in 2004 aimed at historicizing the exhibition's significance in relation to the site (Fig. 3.44). As Wu explained with precise urgency in the catalogue introduction, "At this point a group of activists—artists, curators, publishers, and gallery owners—are working hard to save the factories for the sake of contemporary art. Any creative art project taking place there, including *Tui-Transfiguration*, is part of this collective effort."¹¹¹ Written entirely by Wu, the close to 300-page illustrated catalogue—a creative endeavor in and of itself—drew from his recent research to tie the history of the factory space with the history of experimental art practice. To do so, Wu drew from the extensive archival research that the artist Huang Rui had published that year in a related effort to highlight the historical significance of the site and showcase the new art scene that was emerging there.¹¹²

Wu's belief in the show's contributions to the transformation of 798 also reflected a growing commitment to the social goals of exhibition-making among experimental curators in the second half of the 1990s. While this sense of mission can be traced back even earlier to the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s when participants of the '85 New Wave saw their artistic endeavors as a new cultural awakening for the nation, it was only in the latter half of the 1990s that these priorities became invested in the very format of the exhibition itself. By this point, staging an exhibition at a

¹¹¹ Wu Hung, *RongRong & Inri: Tui-Transfiguration*, 37.

¹¹² Huang published two bilingual books on 798 to which Wu also contributed an article about *Tui*. Wu Hung, "Tui-Transfiguration: An Experimental Exhibition at Factory 798," in *Beijing 798 gongchang: chuangzao Beijing de xin yishu, jianzhu yu shehui* [Beijing 798: reflections on art, architecture and society in China], ed. Huang Rui (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004), 58–69; Huang Rui, *Beijing 798: zai chuangzao de "gongchang"* [Beijing 798: Reflections on "factory" of art] (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2008).

particular site implied making a specific claim about the space: for *Tui*, it was to advance a vision for the site of 798 as a dynamic and open-ended art experimental art space. No longer operating as an outside observer of contemporary art, the art historian took on the role of an artist and became an active participant in the Beijing art world. Mobilizing art history and exhibition-making to advance the broader social mission to create new spaces for contemporary art practice, Wu provided 798 with a historic and discursive reframing that wrote the art world into the future history of the space.

The staging of *Tui* at such an unusual informal venue and the deliberate efforts to embrace its non-exhibition-like setting was reminiscent of numerous experimental exhibitions in non-exhibition spaces throughout the 1990s. Yet while this phenomenon reflected an earlier moment in which state-operated official exhibitions venues were unwilling to host experimental art forms, this was no longer the case in the early 2000s. Through a decade of efforts by artists to advance the development of contemporary art in China, experimental art had become increasingly accepted by state-run art institutions.¹¹³ In November 2000, the Shanghai Art Museum hosted the highly anticipated 3rd Shanghai Biennale, which featured domestic and international artists and was organized by an international team of curators. Including formerly unsanctioned art forms such as installation and video art in a state-run museum, the show was widely seen as the beginning of the “legalization” (*hefabua*) of experimental art.¹¹⁴ At the same time, the Biennale also represented a

¹¹³ For a discussion of the geo-political motivations behind state-sponsorship of contemporary art in the early 2000s see Michelle Lim. Lim’s discussion of the first China Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale (postponed from 2003 due to SARS) analyzes the state’s embrace of contemporary art as a politically motivated desire to exhibit “soft power” in portraying China as an open and forward-looking country to invite foreign investment. According to Lim, the successful showing of over twenty contemporary Chinese artists at the 1999 as part of the French and Italian pavilions influenced top leadership including President Jiang Zemin to take an interest in contemporary Chinese art. Michelle Y. Lim, “Navigating Floating Worlds: Curatorial Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art, 1979-2008” (Ph.D., Princeton, Princeton University, 2013).

¹¹⁴ This is reflected in the writings of the critic Zhu Qingsheng and curator Zhang Qing, among others. Zhu Qingsheng, “Zhongguo di yici hefa de xiandai yishuzhan: Guanyu Shanghai shuangnianzhan [China’s first legitimate modern art exhibition: The 2000 Shanghai Biennale]”; Zhang Qing, “Transcending Left and Right: The Shanghai Biennale Amid Transitions (2000),” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, trans. Phillip Bloom (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 347–50.

moment in which the institutional development and internationalizing trajectory of contemporary art in China intersected with state-directed efforts to develop and promote the city of Shanghai within an international context. The event drew both domestic and international visitors to the city as well as extensive media attention. Serving as a model for other ambitious cities across China, the Biennale demonstrated the power of the arts to contribute to a city's international prestige and its ability to attract capital investments.

Following the Biennale, a number of large-scale state sponsored exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art were organized including the first Guangzhou Triennial (2002), for which Wu served as the chief curator, and the first Beijing Biennale, which took place at the same time as *Tui*. In fact, *Tui* was deliberately planned in relation to the Biennale, which was located in the center of the city at the National Art Museum of China and the Beijing World Art Museum. The experimental exhibition would benefit from the influx of art audiences to the city and also set itself off against the main venue by drawing visitors to this alternative space outside the city center. As Wu himself noted, “the dialogue between the main show and the satellite show was a very interesting aspect.”¹¹⁵ This same strategy had in fact been employed when Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi co-curated the provocatively titled exhibition *Fuck-Off* (*Bu hezuo fangshi*) as a “satellite exhibition” and a direct response to what they perceived as the institutionalizing forces of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale.¹¹⁶ Also sited at a burgeoning art scene in an old industrial area at the edge of the city, *Fuck-Off*, like *Tui*, signaled its peripheral relationship to the “center.”

Whereas at the East Village in the mid-1990s experimental artists' marginal status in relation to the state-run art system was a reality that they later embraced, by the turn of the 21st century, to

¹¹⁵ Wu Hung, interview with author, June 30, 2020, WeChat video call.

¹¹⁶ In contrast to the Shanghai Biennale which was staged at the Shanghai Art Museum at the center of the city, *Fuck-off* was shown in a warehouse-turned gallery located along the Suzhou Creek at the northern periphery of the city. With the subsequent influx of artists and galleries around 2000, the area became known as the M-50 art district. Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi, and Hua Tianxue, eds., *Bu hezuo fangshi* [*Fuck off*] (Shanghai: Eastlink Gallery, 2000).

be “on the margins” was a deliberate position taken by artists and curators. In 2003, however, the field of positions had shifted so much so that the “center” also included parts of the experimental art world itself. *Tui*’s curatorial objectives were, in many ways, overdetermined: while wanting to promote regularized experimental art venues at 798 and transform it into an international art district, the show also hoped to maintain the spirit of the spontaneous, ephemeral, on-site art projects of the 1990s. This equivocal position was far from unusual, as many artists, critics, and curators in China worked so fluidly across distinctions between so-called “official” and “unofficial” platforms as to challenge its validity. That Wu, along with Ai and Feng, would consciously invoke the divide, however, indicates a felt need to maintain it against the homogenizing force of contemporary art’s institutionalization in the new millennium.

Unlike other artistic activities at 798, Wu’s exhibition was never meant to culminate in the establishment of a permanent art institution in the Great Kiln Space. What it offered instead was a sense of spatial possibility and the suggestion that the city’s abandoned and peripheral spaces, might yet be reimagined as a space for historical reflection and creative collaboration. *Tui* concluded over a decade of independent exhibitions and art activities that temporarily occupied and interacted with unique sites around the city to draw attention to their historical social and material realities. Many of these took place at the periphery of the city to draw attention to this highly dynamic yet contentious space. Without needing to consider long-term sustainability, *Tui*’s ephemeral and ad-hoc nature allowed it to be bold, experimental, and open-ended in its vision, gesturing to earlier periods when informal art activities were the norm rather than the exception.

Tui proved to be the last of its kind at 798. Its invitation to reconsider the Great Kiln factory as an art space was taken up in fall 2005 when the foundation of Belgian art collectors Guy and Myriam Ullens, one of the most important collectors of contemporary Chinese art, signed an agreement with the Seven Star Group to lease the space and establish the Ullens Center for

Contemporary Art (UCCA), a long-term contemporary art museum.¹¹⁷ The art museum would stage world-class exhibitions of works from the couple's 1,5000-piece art collection and host other international exhibitions. The establishment of UCCA and other long term art galleries at 798 represented a new phase of the area's history as the original plans for the redevelopment of 798 into a high-tech park were scrapped when the municipal government officially designated 798 a "Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster" (*wenhua chuangyi chanye yuanqu*) in late 2006.¹¹⁸ Jointly managed by the Seven Star Group and the Chaoyang district government, 798 was henceforth promoted as a site for arts, tourism, and cultural consumption in anticipation of the upcoming 2008 Olympics.

The conversion of the Great Kiln space into a world-class art museum as well as that of other factory spaces around the large industrial complex incorporated some but not all of the adaptive-reuse insights that artist first championed there. Designed by architects Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Qingyun Ma, the new 8,000 square meter UCCA maintained the building's overall structural frame, including its exterior façade and characteristic saw-tooth windowed ceilings, but introduced new subdivisions of the space to create clean white exhibition halls, a library, bookstore, and café (Fig. 3.45).¹¹⁹ By the time of its opening in November 2007, little of the site's sense of historicity remained save for the large tanks at the southern end of the entrance space, serving as token reminders of its industrial past. Nevertheless, the adaptive-reuse of the industrial complex represented a turning point in architectural preservation in China at the time. New state-led

¹¹⁷ The foundation was directed by curator Fei Dawei, who advised Ullens on the location and signed the twenty-year lease on behalf of the Foundation. For an extended discussion of the foundation's collecting history and the establishment of UCCA see, Lim, "Navigating Floating Worlds," chap. 2.

¹¹⁸ Desmond Hui, "From Cultural to Creative Industries: Strategies for Chaoyang District, Beijing," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (September 2006): 317–31; For a broader discussion of China's development of creative clusters and art districts see, Michael Keane, *China's New Creative Clusters: Governance, Human Capital, and Investment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹¹⁹ "UCCA Overview," Wilmotte and Associates, accessed May 20, 2021, <http://www.wilmotte.com/en/project/67/ucca>; See also, "French Firm Joins Chinese Art Scene," *Building Design*, no. 1778 (July 6, 2007): 3–3; Richard Vine, "Ullens Center Opens in Beijing," *Art in America* 95, no. 10 (November 2007): 41–43.

preservation efforts in the early 2000s such as Beijing's 2002 Plan for Protection of Beijing as a City of Cultural and Historical Importance had aimed to redress the previous decade's rampant destruction and redevelopment. Yet as architectural historian Xuefei Ren has noted, these largely focused on ancient imperial structures and residential hutong neighborhoods in the inner city, leaving out buildings from the city's socialist past.¹²⁰ The successful example of 798 drew new attention to the value of preserving industrial and socialist architecture in China, thus joining broader international trends such as Herzog & de Meuron's conversion of London's Bankside Power Station into the Tate Modern, which opened in 2000, and paved the way for future industrial adaptive re-use projects in China such as the Power Station of Art, which opened in 2011.

By the first decade of the 2000s, the contemporary art world had finally gained a foothold in the city by prompting the transformation of 798 into the city's and indeed the country's premier contemporary art district. Its many international art establishments and convenient location close to the international airport, further ensured its place as a node that connects Beijing to the global art circuit. As the city's center of gravity also shifted towards the east side with the eastward expansion of Chaoyang district, the formerly peripheral and obsolescent industrial factory at the edge of the city, became one of Beijing's main centers of cultural life. As one example of the many collaborative, space-making projects that galvanized contemporary artists and curators in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Tui* illustrates the power of on-site art practices to re-imagine and transform urban spaces. From the informal spaces of the independent art circle at the East Village to the strategic transformation of 798, the creation of new types of art spaces in Beijing point to the rapid maturation of the contemporary art world—its differentiated positions within the field—as well as how these processes play out within the physical spaces and spatial dynamics of the city.

¹²⁰ Ren, *Building Globalization*, chap. 4.

Establishing Art Institutions at the Urban Periphery: RongRong and inri's Three Shadows Photography Arts Centre at Caochangdi

In the span of a few years, under the official approval of the city government, 798 quickly developed into an international art district comprised primarily of for-profit galleries—with the exception of UCCA—along with gift shops, dining, and entertainment establishments. As the area's commercial development took off, artists affiliated with the early days of 798 such as Xu Yong began to express wariness and the need to “protect the core values of the district... to protect contemporary art.”¹²¹ Indeed, the dramatic rise of rent in the area pushed out artists who once kept studios in 798, prompting many to seek out alternative enclaves for living and artmaking within its vicinity.¹²² These include areas such as Huantie, Heiqiao (inside Huantie), Caochangdi, Jiuchang, Feijiacun, Suojiacun, Hegezhuang, Beigao.¹²³ All of these areas were rural villages located even farther in the periphery of the city. Of these, the development of Caochangdi into a new center of art activity actually occurred at the same time as 798 developed. And while the area was also host to a number of art galleries and organization, it established a different identity from that of the increasingly tourism-oriented 798.

Located a little over a mile northeast of 798 at the intersection of the Fifth Ring Road and the Airport Expressway, Caochangdi, which translates to “forage yard,” was an undeveloped urban village.¹²⁴ As in the urban village of Dashanzhuang (East Village), in Caochangdi, rural landowners informally leased spaces to migrant workers and artists. The fact that these predominantly illegal

¹²¹ Other artists, critics, and gallery owners interviewed for the publication raised similar concerns about commercialization. Cheng Lei and Zhu Qi, eds., *Beijing 798 Now* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), 139.

¹²² Between 2001 and 2005 the leasing prices increased sevenfold from an average of 0.65 RMB per square meter per day to 2 RMB by 2006 with some as high as 5RMB. Sun, “The Production of Art Districts and Urban Transformation in Beijing,” 228.

¹²³ Chen Yifeng, *Dangdai Beijing 798 shihua [A history of Contemporary Beijing 798]*, 132–37.

¹²⁴ For a general introduction to Caochangdi see, Robert Mangurian and Mary-Ann Ray, *Caochangdi Beijing Inside Out: Farmers, Floaters, Taxi Drivers, Artists, and the International Art Mob Challenge and Remake the City* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009); Christen Cornell, “Contemporary Chinese Art and the City: Beijing Art Districts 1989-2013” (Ph.D., Sydney, The University of Sydney, 2017), chap. 5.

arrangements with the village heads offered renters little rights or protection from eviction did not prevent some from developing long-term residences at Caochangdi. Caochangdi first intersected with the contemporary art world in 1999 when the artist Ai Weiwei leased a plot of land to build a modern-style studio home. Ai assumed the village was an unlikely candidate for urban redevelopment because of its peripheral relationship to the city center. Designed by Ai as a simple T-shaped brick and concrete structure, the building marked the artist's first foray into the discipline of architecture (Fig. 3.46). Shortly thereafter, Ai significantly contributed to the expansion of Caochangdi by building several additional artist studios and residences that drew many artists and art organizations between 1999 and 2008.¹²⁵ In 2004, RongRong and inri also settled in a studio space designed by Ai in Caochangdi, after their own home in Liulitun, just south of the former East Village, was demolished and redeveloped in 2003.¹²⁶

Following the success of *Tui*, RongRong and inri began to imagine a new type of art center that could, in RongRong's words, "transform the energy and hope we have invested in photography, into a physical space."¹²⁷ In 2007 the two rented a plot of land at the northeastern edge of Caochangdi and collaborated with Ai to design and build the Three Shadows Photography Arts Centre, China's first purpose-built independent space dedicated to photography (Fig. 3.47).¹²⁸ The 2,500 square meter building occupied a 4,600 square meter site and included exhibition spaces, a

¹²⁵ In November 2000 the China Art Archive and Warehouse, an independent art space that Ai established with Hans Van Dijk and Frank Uytterhaegen, moved into another Ai designed building in Caochangdi and became the first art organization in the area. Other galleries moved in as well including Platform Art Space in 2005, Pekin Fine Arts in 2005; Urs Meile in 2006 into a building designed by Ai, Chambers Fine Art in 2007 into the Red Brick Art Galleries and Studios designed by Ai in 2007. Ai Weiwei and Anthony Pins, eds., *Ai Weiwei, Spatial Matters: Art, Architecture, Activism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014); Eduard Kögel, "Grass-roots-branding: Ai Weiwei und Caochangdi," *Archithese*, no. 4 (2008).

¹²⁶ In the interim the couple lived in Wangjing for a year.

¹²⁷ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

¹²⁸ For an overview of the art center see, Wang Fei, "Rang nahan de shengying geng chuncui: fang san ying tang yishu zongjian RongRong [Making the sound of shouting more pure: Interviewing the artistic director of Three Shadows RongRong]," *Shuma sheying*, 2011; Abby Robinson, "Coming to Light: Three Shadows Photography Art Centre," *Trans-Asia Photography Review* 1, no. 1 (2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0001.106>.

library, a lecture hall, two darkrooms, a digital facility for professional grade printing, a café, and accommodations for artists residencies. Its mission was to “serve as a platform for the presentation, promotion, discovery and international exchange of high-caliber photography.”¹²⁹ Becoming one of Caochangdi’s most active and public institutions to this day, the Center was an important anchor to the developing art district.

The establishment of Three Shadows was part of the third phase in the on-going effort by artists and art world actors to build the physical and social spaces and structures of the Chinese contemporary art world since the 1990s. Distinct from the informal social spaces and networks established at the East Village and from the repurposed spaces at 798, the establishment of Three Shadows as an art institution represents not just an artistic interaction with an existing space, but the conception and creation of an entirely new kind of artist-led, non-profit art space, one that could provide the long-awaited institutional framework necessary to support new photographic arts.

The establishment of Three Shadows at Caochangdi was prompted by the same historical forces of the early 2000s that spurred the development of 798 into an arts district. Reflecting on this moment, RongRong noted:

I felt a kind of “fetal movement” You could feel that 798 was developing and so many international people were coming to my studio to talk to me about my work. It was a specific time period. It has to do with China’s development as a country and its relationship with the world.¹³⁰

RongRong’s comments alluded to China’s growing presence on the international stage, most notably marked by the country’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its winning bid and subsequent preparation for the 2008 Olympics in 2004. At that time efforts to support and expand contemporary art activities were similarly couched in terms of international representation and

¹²⁹ “About Us,” Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.threeshadows.cn/about/>.

¹³⁰ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

globalization. For example, when Huang Rui and Xu Yong proposed their plan for *Reconstructing 798*, they pointed to the new art activities at 798 as an example of a “regional resource that has been internationalized” (*difang ziyuan de guojixing zhuanhua*).¹³¹ Such technocratic semantics reflect artists’ genuine interest in “going global” and their strategic appeals to state bureaucrats, who by 2006 fully recognized the ways in which the development of contemporary art could be aligned with their own goals of economic development.

In the early 2000s contemporary artists, critics, and curators recognized the ways in which their activities could not be entirely separated from state and market forces. Nevertheless, many were determined to establish long-term independent art institutions and structures that could provide an alternative to the two. In a 2000 discussion forum of prominent domestic curators and critics hosted by Wu Hung in Beijing, the curator Gu Zhenqing remarked:

I feel that right now the old government art institutions founded on the basis of a planned economy—the Chinese Artists Association, the All-China Art Exhibition, the Academy of Fine Arts, all sorts of officially sponsored art institutions, etc.—are losing strength, but an alternative exhibition system that can be found in other countries has still not taken shape.¹³²

Outlining what would be required to take its place, the curator Zhu Qi explained:

Today, I feel that the question of systems is both a pressing and important question.... There has been little if any institutional or systemic support... The next step has to be to bring it into a system, a system whereby it can be conveyed to society, a system whereby it receives funding and publicity, whereby critics as a collective entity can undertake interpretations that facilitate the public’s understanding... I think that Chinese experimental art needs to work towards legalization (*hefabua*).¹³³

¹³¹ Huang Rui and Xu Yong, “‘Zaizao 798:’ zonghe yishu huodong jihua gaiyao [‘Reconstructing 798:’ summary of the plan for comprehensive art activities].”

¹³² The event was organized by Wu Hung and attended by Gu Zhengqing, Huang Zhuan, Leng Lin, Wang Mingxian, Qiu Zhijie, Wu Meichun, and Zhu Qi. Wu Hung et al., “Experimental Art and Experimental Exhibitions: A Roundtable Discussion on Exhibitions and Curatorship,” in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung, trans. Robert Bernell and Francesca Jordon (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2001), 112.

¹³³ Wu Hung et al., 119–20.

Calling attention to the importance of the “system,” these curators recognized that galleries alone would not be sufficient to support the growth of contemporary art and that new forms of institutional support and funding would be needed.

Efforts at museum-building had already begun as early as the late 1990s, but proliferated in the early 2000s as part of the so-called “museum fever” (*meishuguan re*).¹³⁴ As Ornella de Nigris has observed, the establishment of contemporary art museums in China occurred in three distinct waves even as different typologies continued to exist and develop alongside one another: First, in the late 1990s individual entrepreneurs and collectors established private art museums such as the Chengdu Upriver Museum (est. 1998); then in the first half of the 2000s real estate companies began investing in contemporary art and creating exhibition spaces such as the Today Art Museum in Beijing, which were part of larger development projects (est. 2002); and in the second half of the 2000s a more hybrid format of non-profit organizations that involved a mixture of private and public funding emerged such as the Shenzhen OCT Contemporary Art Terminal.¹³⁵

Three Shadows was unique among the plethora of art spaces founded during the first decade of the 2000s. In contrast to what de Nigris has described as the tendency of new contemporary art museums during this period to behave more like profit-driven cultural industries rather than true cultural institutions, Three Shadows developed a well-articulated program to support not only exhibitions, but also collecting, scholarly research and discourse, public engagement, artist residencies and annual awards.¹³⁶ Although it was legally registered as a private institution, it

¹³⁴ According to Jeffrey Johnson and Zoe A. Florence, by 2011 an average of 386 new museums were built annually in China, which far exceeded the U.S.’s museum boom from the mid 1990s to the late 2000s, during which only 20 to 40 museums a year were constructed. Jeffrey Johnson and Zoe A. Florence, “The Museumification of China,” *Leap*, no. 18 (December 2012), <http://www.leapleapleap.com/2013/05/the-museumification-of-china>; On “museum fever” see also, De Nigris, “The Infrastructural Shift in Contemporary Chinese Art: Biennials and Contemporary Art Museums.”

¹³⁵ Ornella De Nigris, “Chinese Art Museums: Organisational Models and Roles in Promoting Contemporary Art,” *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 5, no. 3 (2018): 213–28.

¹³⁶ De Nigris.

operated like a non-profit.¹³⁷ As RongRong recalled, prior to establishing the art space, he held a forum with many longtime artist and curator friends including Hong Hao, Zhao Liang, Cui Xiuwen, Ai Weiwei, Wu Hung, Karen Smith, and Zhang Li to collectively imagine what kind of space it should be.¹³⁸ Of the many topics discussed, the group focused on how to operate and financially support the space. While the legal and financial model of the art gallery was by then already well-understood in China, the notion of a non-profit art space was still unclear at the time.¹³⁹ Yet the artists agreed that the new space should be distinct from the for-profit gallery system and should serve instead as a platform for artistic exchange. RongRong and inri would personally finance the construction of the space from sales of their own artworks and subsequently they would seek international grants and personal donations to support the programming.¹⁴⁰

Three Shadow's highly focused vision to become a non-profit contemporary art institution rather than a cultural industry can be attributed to its artist-founder RongRong's longstanding interest in fostering structures of support for his own art practice throughout the 1990s. As discussed earlier, RongRong's development as an artist at the East Village occurred within the context of informal social spaces and artist networks. Following the artists' dispersal from the East Village in 1994, RongRong and inri moved further east to Liulitun, another urban village, where they continued to promote the same small and tight-knit art community by gathering artist friends at their home to discuss and share pictures of their work (Fig. 3.48). In the absence of proper spaces for

¹³⁷ According to RongRong, due to unspecified legal issues the art center could not be officially registered as a non-profit art space, even though it was operated as such. This is likely because of the informal land rental contract he held—a common issue to this day—and the fact that the legal category of a non-profit institution was still not well understood at the time. RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

¹³⁸ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

¹³⁹ For a discussion of the art non-profit structure in China see, Wang Nanming, *Yishu zhidu yu falü: Zhongguo yu guoji jiaowang de jieguo [Art System and Law: the result of exchange between China and International]* (Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2011), chap. 2.

¹⁴⁰ Due to financial constraints, beginning in 2008 Three Shadows began a small gallery operation by representing a selection of around eight artists. RongRong.

showing their works, they turned to self-publishing. In 1996, building on the precedent of Ai Weiwei's *Black* (1994), *White* (1995), and *Grey Cover Book* (1997), RongRong and fellow photographer Liu Zheng established *New Photo*, another independently published artist magazine (Fig. 3.49). Dedicated exclusively to experimental photography, *New Photo's* initial goals were simply to provide a platform for collegial exchange among like-minded friends working against existing photographic conventions. According to RongRong, *New Photo* was never intended to be a formal magazine until their foreign friends Karen Smith and Hans van Dijk recognized its importance and suggested they continue the project and sell it as a magazine.¹⁴¹ Without a license for public distribution and given the artists' limited finances, the magazine was entirely produced by photocopying pages and binding them by hand. As RongRong's photographs from that period show, the artists assembled the magazines themselves, crouched in the intimate spaces of RongRong's home (Fig. 3.50).

Between 1996 and 1998 *New Photo* published four issues.¹⁴² While only twenty to thirty copies of each issue were produced, the short-lived yet highly influential magazine had a profound impact on the contemporary photography community. It provided a much-needed space for young photographers to exhibit their works and drew other likeminded photographers from across China into their social network. It also cultivated a viewing audience and served as a channel of communication and peer-conferred recognition among members of this growing circle. Initially consisting of Beijing-based photographers in RongRong and Liu Zheng's immediate circle, it grew by word-of-mouth to include artists that the two had never even met. What tied this community of artists together was the shared pursuit of new photographic practices communicated across

¹⁴¹ RongRong.

¹⁴² These artist-led publications were further informed by the 1990s trend of "document exhibitions" (wenxian zhan), or exhibitions of conceptual sketches, photographs, and documentary records, which began as a response to the official ban on exhibiting experimental art immediately after 1989. Their low-budget, compact, and mobile format got around the constraints of a traditional exhibition format. On "document exhibitions" see, Wu Hung and Phillips, *Between Past and Future*, 22.

distances through the pages of the magazine. In some instances, the magazine even linked this domestic community with international audiences. When the German curator Andreas Schmid traveled to China in 1997 to consider works for a show on contemporary Chinese photography at Berlin's Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k), he met with RongRong and made selections based on the magazine.¹⁴³ Featuring works by Liu Zheng, Mo Yi, Zhuang Hui, and Zheng Guogu, *Contemporary Photography from the People's Republic of China (Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der VR China)* (September 27 – November 9, 1997) introduced these now internationally acclaimed photographers to foreign audiences for the first time (Fig. 3.51).¹⁴⁴

If *New Photo* created an imagined discursive space for experimental photography before it could have a real space of its own, the establishment of Three Shadows ten years later can be understood as its physical manifestation. Its location at Caochangdi, an out of the way urban village at the edge of the city, seemed to echo the peripheral environment of the East Village and Liulitun. As the artist recounted, “Caochangdi is a kind of island... There was no subway station or bus, but once I establish it, those who want to come will inevitably come.”¹⁴⁵ Three Shadow's architectural design was also reminiscent of the kinds of enclosed communal compounds that he had lived in during that earlier period. A modern interpretation of Beijing's characteristically grey-brick residential architecture, Ai's zig-zagged two-story bar building frames a landscaped triangle courtyard and reinforces a sequestered effect (Fig. 3.52). Visitors enter through a small gate to the north of the complex and make their way to the building's unassuming entrance at the opposite side of the courtyard (Fig. 3.47). The promenade through the building continues through several exhibition

¹⁴³ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

¹⁴⁴ Artists included An Hong, Geng Jianyi, Gu Dexin, Liu Zheng, Lu Zhirong, Mo Yi, Qiu Zhijie, So Hing Keung, Wong Wai-Hung, Yang Zhenzhong, Zhang Haier, Zhao Liang, Zhao Shaoruo, Zheng Guogu, Zhuang Hui. The show also traveled to the Kunstsammlungen der Stadt Chemnitz (1998). Andreas Schmid and Alexander Tolnay, eds., *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der VR China [Contemporary photo art from the People's Republic of China]* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1997).

¹⁴⁵ RongRong, interview with the author, May 17-19, 2020 and July 13, 2020, via Skype.

halls that traverse the triangular form and end at a café and bookstore. The sober visual effect of the building's simple grey brick façade, punctuated only by some bas-relief brickwork and sparse windows, deters those seeking commercial thrill and announces the institution's serious intentions.

Three Shadow's inaugural exhibition, *New Photo: Ten Years (Xin sheying: shi nian)* (June 27 to Sept 16, 2007), served as a retrospective on the development of contemporary photography since the late 1970s. Directly referencing the now historical magazine, the show drew attention to that moment in the late 1990s when the sense of a burgeoning artistic community developed around the publication of *New Photo*. Works in exhibition, including now canonical pieces such as Liu Zheng's *The Chinese* series, Zhuang Hui's *One and Thirty* series and Hong Lei's *Forbidden City* series, were taken directly from those published in *New Photo*. Strengthening this sense of historic continuity, the show's catalogue, was also designed as an editioned reprint of the original magazines with new critical writings and interviews of the artists featured in the publication. Indeed, the exhibition can be seen as a celebration and continuation of the magazine's efforts to create an alternative discursive space and system of support for young artists.¹⁴⁶

Whereas *New Photo* magazine as well as the informal networks that formed the nascent discursive spaces of the 1990s occasionally reached international audiences, Three Shadows was now in a position to more proactively establish these international connections. Additional public programs such as Three Shadows' annual Photography Prize beginning in 2008/2009 created the infrastructure for discovering new talent across China and connecting this domestic art world to international circuits.¹⁴⁷ The prize jury, comprised of a changing group of domestic and international

¹⁴⁶ This continuity was commented upon by at least one reviewer who pointed out that both the initial *New Photo* book and the art center were aimed at exhibiting, sharing, and discussing new photos. "Shi nian zhijian: San Ying Tang jilu de 'xin sheying' 10 nian [Between ten years: Three Shadows' record of New Photo 10 Years]," *Dongfang Yishu*, no. 15 (2007): 68.

¹⁴⁷ Song Ge, "San ying tang niandu sheying jiang jiexiao nianqing sheyingjia yan zhong de zhongguo [China in the eyes of young photographers: an annual award in The Three Shadows Photography Art Centre]," *Dongfang Yishu*, no. 11 (2009): 14.

critics, curators, and scholars gave young photographers access to influential art world arbiters who could confer validation and support.¹⁴⁸ Finalists for the photography prize were included in a group exhibition each spring and many received immediate representation by contemporary art galleries as a result. These efforts at creating a domestic yet internationally oriented institutional structure to support new photography can be seen as a reversal of the foreign-dominated process of selection and valuation in the 1990s when foreign curators traveled to China to select artists for exhibition and subsequent collection abroad.¹⁴⁹ At Three Shadows, jury members were invited to China to engage in an intellectual exchange with the artists, and the selected works were ultimately exhibited and attended by public audiences in China.

Despite Three Shadow's success, its faith in the long-term viability of its rental contract was not entirely secure from the vagaries of urban redevelopment, especially in the years surrounding the building boom of the 2008 Olympics. In April 2010, as RongRong and inri were preparing for Caochangdi Photo Spring, the Centre's first international photography festival, a notice of demolition was delivered, indicating an imminent yet unspecified demolition date.¹⁵⁰ Revealing the government's lack of a coherent development strategy, that same day, the center also paradoxically received official confirmation from the Ministry of Culture for the festival to proceed. In the end, the event was likely saved by the Centre's international affiliations with the prestigious Arles International Photography Festival and the extensive media attention it had already received.

¹⁴⁸ In an interview, the director of the Centre, Zhang Li, emphasized the importance of these international connections as well as the center's commitments to young artists. Zhang Li and Pu Zhuang, "Women zhuzhong yishujia yunong sheying meijie de nengli [We value the competence of the artist using photography as a medium]," *Zhongguo sheyingjia*, 2008.

¹⁴⁹ For a roundtable discussion among prominent contemporary Chinese artists on these issues in the early 2000s see, Harald Szeeman et al., "Harald Szeeman Talks to Chinese Artists about Venice, CCAA, and Curatorial Strategies," in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung, trans. Karen Smith (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2001), 148–61.

¹⁵⁰ For an account of these events see, An Xiao Mina, "Art Village: A Year in Caochangdi," *Places Journal* (blog), May 2012, <https://placesjournal.org/article/art-village-a-year-in-caochangdi/>.

Working with longtime friends Huang Rui and his partner Berenice Angremy—a French embassy foreign attaché— both of whom had ample experience promoting art activities and garnering public support at 798, RongRong used the art festival as a platform for protesting the demolition and redevelopment of Caochangdi. The festival hosted a public forum for residents of Caochangdi, organized an online petition, and used the media coverage to lend greater public attention to the issue. The community’s collective efforts were largely successful and today Three Shadows and the other art spaces that comprise the art district of Caochangdi still stand largely as they did then— saved from redevelopment, for now.

Conclusion

As this historical trajectory from the East Village to 798 and finally to Caochangdi demonstrates, from the 1990s to the early 2000s artists not only produced works that reflected upon their changing and often precarious living environments, but also created the spaces and structures within which such artworks could subsist and gain value as art. The artistic activities in each area, ranging from on-site artworks, exhibition strategies, and larger institutional projects, shape the parameters and possibilities of the Chinese contemporary art world. Three Shadows, along with other independent artist-led spaces that emerged in the early 2000s, represents the success of such long-term efforts involving the support and collaboration of a number of individuals. The social connections that such projects forged among artist, curators, critics, and gallery owners traversed transregional networks both inside and outside of China, informing this art world’s global outlook and working methods even as it responded to the specific conditions of the domestic context. Although long fought for and gained, “permanent” art spaces such as UCCA and Three Shadows are still vulnerable to the forces of urban redevelopment and spatial precarity as artists continue to fight for their right to remain in the artistic spaces that they have long cultivated to this day. The

history of these space-making endeavors at the urban periphery is recursive, since efforts to expand and create new spaces are ultimately met by forces of recuperation both symbolic—through intellectual cooptation—and real—through spatial deterritorialization—by market and state forces. Informed by the historic experiences of the 1990s, however, Chinese artists have proven resilient in their efforts to create more spaces for independent experimental art practice in Beijing and beyond.

CHAPTER FOUR

Transit Space: On-Site Art Practices in a Global Context

In 1994 the artist couple Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao returned to Beijing after living and working as artists in New York for seven years. Shortly after his return Wang created the work *The Sky of Brooklyn* (1995) in their Beijing hutong (Fig. 4.1). Visualizing a spatial continuum between Wang's home in Beijing and in Brooklyn, he dug an eleven-and-a-half-foot hole in his apartment and placed a video monitor and speaker at the bottom of it. The monitor showed a looped video of a blue sky and passing white clouds that was recorded at their Brooklyn apartment, and the speaker replayed an audio recording of Wang's own voice in Chinese saying, "What are you looking at? What's there to look at? There are a few clouds in the sky. What's there to see?" The unusual work seemed to both invite and rebuff the curious viewer's communion with the spacious blue skies of America.

Sky of Brooklyn also attests to Wang's dual familiarity with American and Chinese colloquial idioms, at once referencing the American phrase "dig a hole to China" and at the same time alluding to the Chinese phrase "*jing di zhi wa*" (frog at the bottom of a well). Joined by the common theme of foolishness, the former idiom describes a senseless task much like the impossible idea of digging a hole to the other side of the earth, while the latter describes the naiveté of a frog whose experience of the world is limited to his life at the bottom of a well. Unlike the frog, however, Wang *had* experienced the greater world and returned home with a heightened awareness of the different artistic contexts in which he sought to could occupy. *Sky of Brooklyn* thus captured the peculiar spatio-temporal sensation of living across two geo-cultural spaces and the ambivalent range of emotions between desire and disavowal, expectation and disappointment, emplacement and re-emplacement, elicited by such journeys and returns.

Wang's experience of migration is representative of a generation of artists who left China in the late 1980s in pursuit of new opportunities and experiences abroad. Some of these artists such as Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, and Chen Zhen would permanently emigrate, contributing to the development of vibrant Chinese diaspora communities in North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. Others, like Wang and Lin, returned to China in the 1990s and continued to exhibit internationally, traveling back and forth. The activities of artists abroad were also supported by a cohort of émigré art critics, curators, and art historians including Fei Dawei, Hou Hanru, Zheng Shengtian, Wu Hung, and Gao Minglu whose writings and curatorial activities established new discursive frameworks for this body of art.¹ In the early 1990s domestic artists who had never gone abroad before also began to exhibit at prestigious international venues. In 1993, for example, the 45th Venice Biennale and several other major exhibitions featured Chinese artists for the first time after the Cultural Revolution, spurring Western attention and enthusiasm, while sparking domestic debates over the structural inequities and biased conditions of their international reception.

These cultural encounters with the Western contemporary art world in the early 1990s initiated the first sustained discussion of how and whether contemporary art from China can be situated within a global framework that was still largely dictated by Euro-North American paradigms and expectations. Chinese critics quickly noted the ways in which Western reception relegated the significance of Chinese contemporary art to an illustration of cultural or political content rather than considering its aesthetic contributions. As the critic Wang Lin wrote in response to the selection of artists for the 45th Venice Biennale:

In Westerners' eyes, China is the last fortress for the opposition between East and West (despite being so unevenly matched) and a living fossil of the Cold War (although it's in the midst of transforming). Thus, Chinese artists (on principle) are all products of the Mao Zedong era; they are bearers of ideological burdens and embody powers of resistance.²

¹ As I will show, Fei and Hou were most active in promoting diaspora artists and art practices as a unique group.

² Wang Lin, "Oliva Is Not the Savior of Chinese Art (1993)," in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 366–68.

Wang's criticism points to the ways in which since the early 1990s Western audiences have persistently seen contemporary Chinese art—and indeed the world—through a reductive and outdated Cold War ideological lens, with democracy and freedom on the one side, and communism and oppression on the other. This bias, Wang argued, has prevented audiences from appreciating the ways in which contemporary Chinese artists are engaged with complex social and cultural issues on-the-ground in China and the world today. Furthermore, the reduction of contemporary Chinese art to its political and social content has prevented Western audiences to appreciate its formal and aesthetic innovations. As the critic Wang Nanming has incisively stated, “People do not pay attention to Chinese art because it is art.”³

These perceptions of structural bias have prompted Chinese artists and critics to assert the need for establishing their own standards of evaluating Chinese contemporary art. Some critics such as Wang Lin have advocated for a particularist point of view that emphasizes “the logic of Chinese art's own development,” using the domestic historical context as the standard by which to evaluate art.⁴ Others such as the émigré curator Fei Dawei have called instead for a universalist perspective that foregrounds “common issues that transcend cultures and that possess a certain universalism,” as a means to connect Chinese art to other practices all over the world.⁵ With the increased presence of contemporary Chinese artists abroad, debates also took place across the Pacific. In a 1994 College Arts Association paper titled “Siting China,” which was later presented as a talk for an exhibition of diaspora artists Huang Yong Ping and Chen Zhen at the New Museum in New York, the art

³ Wang Nanming, “Xifang shuangchong biao zhun yu dang dai yishu piping de qitu [Double standards of the west and the wrong path of contemporary art criticism].”

⁴ Wang Lin, “Oliva Is Not the Savior of Chinese Art (1993),” 368.

⁵ Fei Dawei, “Does a Culture in Exile Necessarily Wither? A Letter to Li Xianting (1991/2003),” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, trans. Phillip Bloom (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 252–54.

historian Alice Yang observed that the notion of “China” had become a site of multiple meanings and slippages.⁶ Proposing to situate China in relation to both global and local frameworks, Yang suggested that China and Chinese culture might be thought of as a site that is actively constructed by artists themselves. As art historian Katherine Grube has recently suggested, Wang’s *Sky of Brooklyn* can be read as precisely such an effort to construct a site between two different systems of art.⁷ Wang’s ambivalence towards the impossible spatio-temporality of simultaneity and connection across different sites, poignantly illustrates the difficulties of situating oneself within a multi-sited contemporary art world.

Taking on Yang’s proposition, this chapter examines the spatial practices of Chinese artists living outside of China and those traveling between China and the West from the late 1980s to the early 2000s to show how their experiences of transit across multiple sites prompted the development of new spatial sensibilities and on-site aesthetics. Expanding outward from the previous chapter’s discussion of the rise of Beijing’s urban periphery as a transnational site where artists, critics, and curators interfaced with international art networks, I explore the trajectories of three artists, Huang Yong Ping, Zhu Jinshi, and Yin Xiuzhen, working in locales outside of China. Directly addressing the issue of cross-cultural encounter, a theme that has been central to all the art activities discussed in this dissertation, I join recent scholarly efforts to narrate a transregional art history by exploring specific sites of encounter.⁸ In studies of diasporic Chinese artists, scholars such as Melissa Chiu

⁶ This paper was later included in the edited volume, Alice Yang, *Why Asia?: Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

⁷ My analysis builds on Grube’s reading of this work as Wang’s critique of the two differing systems of artistic value and interpretive frameworks between East and West. Whereas Grube focuses on the linguistic and visual doubling, I draw greater attention to the work’s spatiality. Katherine Grube, “Doubled Meanings: Reading Wang Gongxin’s *The Sky of Brooklyn*—Digging a Hole in China,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 6 (December 2017): 36–42.

⁸ Art historian Hans Belting has argued most forcefully for the study of global art history as a cross-cultural investigation from no single point of view. This has been reflected in efforts to trace histories of transnational encounters such as David Clarke’s study of the two-way cultural exchanges between Chinese artists and their Euro-North American counterparts in the early 20th century and Ming Tiampo and Reiko Tomii’s accounts of the connections between the post-war avant-garde in Japan and Europe. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter

have suggested that rather than framing the subjectivities of migrating artists around a loss of homeland as diasporic studies have traditionally done, accounts of migration should attend to how artists proactively transformed their cultural identities in their new locales.⁹ Yet while Chiu and other art historians have focused on the *effects* of migration, namely cultural translation and transformation, I offer a new perspective by examining the ways in which migration *itself*—its sites and institutional structures such as airports and border zones—became a source of artistic inspiration for Chinese artists.¹⁰

Examining how artists' engagements with specific sites of transregional contact gave visual form to their experiences of shifting physical spaces, discursive contexts, and spheres of geopolitical influence, I draw from cultural anthropologist James Clifford's study of travel to narrate what he called "a history of locations and a location of histories."¹¹ Modifying Clifford's emphasis on "travel," however, I use the term "transit space" as a framework that takes into account actual spaces that facilitate transregional movement as well as the ways in which traveling artists created artworks that operated like a transit space, connecting different sites, histories, ideas, and audiences together.¹² As art historian Peggy Wang has recently argued, rather than passively reacting to the

Weibel, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM/Center for Art and Media, 2013); David J. Clarke, *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011); Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*; Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*.

⁹ Chiu's suggestion can be compared to William Safran's classic definition of diaspora as expatriate minority communities who are defined in relation to the homeland in that they "1) have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland... 3) believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country... 4) regard their ancestral home as their true, ideal home and as a place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return... 5) committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland." Melissa Chiu, *Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China* (Milano: Charta, 2006); William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 83–99.

¹⁰ These accounts have tended to emphasize stylistic influence and translation or in Chiu's case, the changing notion of "Chineseness" as seen in the transformation of "Chinese" motifs in the works of diasporic artists. Chiu, *Breakout*.

¹¹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 31.

¹² While scholars such as Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro have recently used the term "migratory aesthetics" to describe cultural practices that register the impact of migration, I reserve the term migration to refer to

world, contemporary Chinese artists were active agents who “embed[ded] their art with the capacity to form their own terms of worldly engagement.”¹³ Attending to artists’ spatial aesthetics during this period of increased transnational migration thus reveals the ways in which contemporary Chinese artists actively worked through what it meant to be a contemporary artist in China and in the world.

Huang Yongping, Zhu Jinshi, and Yin Xiuzhen are paradigmatic contemporary Chinese artists in several respects. Huang and Zhu were exact contemporaries, born in 1954 and emigrating to Europe in the late 1980s. Huang and Zhu were part of a generation of artists who began practicing art in the 1980s deeply influenced by the influx into China of previously banned books on Western Modernism and modern philosophy. Zhu began painting in the late 1970s as a veteran of the Stars art group, one of the earliest avant-garde groups to emerge following the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).¹⁴ Huang was a key participant of the ’85 New Wave arts and culture movement and was the mastermind behind the Xiamen Dada art group, which was inspired by the historic avant-garde in Europe.¹⁵ While Huang would permanently settle in Paris and become a French citizen, Zhu, who stayed in Berlin for seven years, returned to China in 1994, joining a small but significant wave of return émigrés such as Wang Gongxin, Lin Tianmiao, Ai Weiwei, and Huang Rui, who would influence a younger generation of artists such as Yin Xiuzhen.¹⁶ Born in 1963 and beginning her artistic career after the 1980s, Yin never emigrated, but began to work as

the sociological phenomenon of transregional movement. Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, eds., *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2012).

¹³ Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 202.

¹⁴ For an account of Zhu’s involvement with the Stars art group see, Li Xianting and Huang Rui, *Stars 79-80 [Xing: Meizhan]* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2019).

¹⁵ For accounts of Huang’s involvement with the Xiamen Dada art group see, Fei Dawei, ed., *’85 xinchao dangan [’85 New Wave Archive]* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2007); For an introduction to Huang Yong Ping see, Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong, eds., *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005).

¹⁶ For an introduction to Zhu Jinshi see, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]* (Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008); Gao Minglu and Zhu Jinshi, *Ganjiakou 303: Zhu Jinshi*.

much internationally as she did domestically by the second half of the 1990s.¹⁷ Yin's career is representative of a period in which Chinese artists, and indeed artists all over the world, were no longer limited by national exhibition venues, but travelled continuously to participate in a burgeoning global network of contemporary art centers.

Deeply impacted by their experiences of travel, Huang, Zhu, and Yin each developed a unique spatial aesthetic that was shaped by their own individual sensibilities as well as the specific geographical contexts within which they operated. While Huang and Zhu were both active at the same time in Europe, they were informed by the distinct cultural and artistic milieu of Paris and Berlin, respectively. Rather than treat their experience of Europe monolithically, I “provincialize Europe” by looking at how Huang's experience in Paris—a longtime center of the art world and former colonial metropole—differed from Zhu's experience in Berlin—a much more decentralized artistic context that was at the frontlines of the waning Cold War.¹⁸ Huang's strong relationship with French art institutions, which offered both opportunities and constraints, shaped an aesthetic that was deeply attuned to the spaces and discursive structures of the Western art system. Exploring key works from the artist's early years in Paris, I examine the ways in which Huang connected the space of the art museum to a longer history of cross-cultural contact zones from the colonial exposition to contemporary airports. In Zhu's case, living in close proximity to the Berlin Wall heightened his sensitivity to borders and border-crossings. Examining Zhu's art activities during this period, I show how the artist created spaces and experiences of spatio-temporal simultaneity that conceptually bridged Berlin and his hometown of Beijing. For Yin, whose artistic milieu was firmly situated in Beijing, the experience of constant travel to diverse cities abroad shaped her interest in the

¹⁷ For an introduction to Yin Xiuzhen see, Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, *Yin Xiuzhen*; Wu Hung, Hou Hanru, and Stephanie Rosenthal, eds., *Yin Xiuzhen* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2015).

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

connections between local and global spaces. Tracing Yin's increasing engagements with sites outside of China over time, I show how the artist developed an on-site approach that connected Beijing to other local cities abroad by excavating material histories of migration and cultural contact. Considered together, Huang, Zhu, and Yin's distinct experiences of migration and unique aesthetic approaches demonstrate how cosmopolitan Chinese artists redefined static notions of site, cultural identity, and history.

The Museum as World Picture: Huang Yong Ping in Paris

In April of 1989, the Xiamen-based artist Huang Yong Ping arrived in Paris for the highly anticipated exhibition *Magicians of the Earth* (*Magiciens de la Terre*), which took place from May 18 to August 14 at two of the city's premier exhibition sites, the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle in the Parc de la Villette. Huang's installation *Reptiles*, which was created on-site for the exhibition, featured a pulped mass of various French and Chinese communist newspapers that were "washed" in the washing machine, three of which were also included in the installation (Fig. 4.2). The heaps of papier-mâché were arranged in several large mounds including two in the form of large tortoise-shaped tomb structures that were native to Huang's hometown of Xiamen. A continuation of Huang's interest in the messy nature of intercultural contact and exchange of ideas, *Reptiles* employed the same strategy as his 1987 work "*The History of Chinese Art*" and "*A Concise History of Modern Painting*" after *Two Minutes in the Washing Machine*, which pulped together a standard textbook by the Chinese art historian Wang Bomin and an introduction to modern Western art by Herbert Read that was widely read in China at the time (Fig. 4.3).¹⁹ This theme of cultural encounter would continue to preoccupy Huang throughout his career as an émigré artist in France.

¹⁹ Fei Dawei, "Two-Minute Wash Cycle: Huang Yong Ping's Chinese Period," in *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, ed. Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong, trans. Cheng Tzu-Wen (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 6–10.

Regarded as a pivotal moment in the development of “global contemporary art,” *Magiciens* marked the beginning of institutionalized efforts to expand the canon of contemporary art to include artists from outside of the Western world.²⁰ Organized by the French curator Jean-Hubert Martin, the director of the National Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Center, the ambitious exhibition sought to picture this more inclusive art world by including fifty artists from all over the world alongside fifty well-known artists who had already been working within the Western art system. *Magiciens* framed artists as contemporary “shamans,” celebrating individual creativity and artistic form rather than historical and social contextualization, of which there was little to none. Further emphasizing each artist as an individual among equals, the design of the exhibition promoted a sense of egalitarian multiculturalism by eschewing a nationalist format of differentiating artists by their country of origin. Its invitation for artists to create works on-site showcased artists’ exercise of creativity and contributed to the growing practice of commissioning site-specific art, which had become a standard practice in the exhibition of contemporary art since the 1990s.²¹ While the reception of *Magiciens* acknowledged its historical achievement of promoting diversity and inclusion, many critics questioned the premise of this “new internationalism,” raising questions regarding its standards of selection and contextualization, or lack thereof, of non-Western works and accusations of residual colonialist attitudes.²²

Despite these unresolved problems, *Magiciens* had an indisputable impact on the careers of many non-Western artists like Huang who, although already well-known in China, was hoisted onto

²⁰ Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la terre: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne, La Villette, la Grande Halle* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989); For a historical assessment of *Magiciens* see, Lucy Steeds, ed., *Making Art Global (Part 2): “Magiciens de La Terre,” 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013).

²¹ An important precedent for this practice is the 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Harald Szeemann, who encouraged the development of works in situ by selected artists.

²² Jean-Marc Poinsot, “Review of the Paradigms and Interpretive Machine, or, The Critical Development of ‘Magiciens de La Terre,’” in *Making Art Global (Part 2): “Magiciens de La Terre,” 1989*, ed. Lucy Steeds (London: Afterall, 2013), 94–108.

the international stage for the first time. As Huang subsequently noted, “my later development cannot be separated from the exposure I got from this top-quality Western scene... I was only thirty-five, and I was a long way away from the art I was used to doing in China—I was faced with a totally new environment and had to start all over again from zero.”²³ One of three participating Chinese artists, including the Guangzhou-based Yang Jiechang and the Beijing-based Gu Dexin, Huang spoke neither French nor English and did not have expressed aims to remain in France. Yet following the violent government suppression of student protests in Beijing at Tiananmen Square on June 4th and with the prospect of new exhibition opportunities in Europe, Huang, along with Yang, decided to remain in France as political asylum seekers, eventually gaining French citizenship.

Institutionalizing “Internationalism” and “Multiculturalism” in late 1980s-1990s France

Huang’s entry into French society occurred at a moment when notions of “internationalism” and “multiculturalism” were being institutionalized as part of the socially progressive cultural and political agenda of President François Mitterrand’s administration.²⁴ *Magiciens* was itself part of a broader bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution, which included a parade or “festival of the world’s tribes,” featuring diverse peoples of the world in a celebration of the country’s liberal democratic ideals of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”²⁵ As Michael Leruth has pointed out, the design of the parade also featured techniques of cultural *métissage*, or “cross-breeding,” such as the display of a

²³ Yu Hsiao Hwei, “Huang Yongping: If There Were Such a Thing as a ‘Religious Monster,’” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 14, no. 4 (n.d.): 61.

²⁴ My account draws from art historian Marie Leduc’s contextualization of Huang’s entry into France within the politically charged context of Paris’ Bicentennial celebrations and the student protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square during the spring and summer of 1989. Marie Leduc, *Dissidence: The Rise of Chinese Contemporary Art in the West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018).

²⁵ The event was a top priority of the French government, with an operation of budget of over 300 million francs. *Magiciens*, which was officially designated as part of the bicentennial in 1988, was given 30 million, the largest budget ever for a contemporary art event in France. Michael F. Leruth, “François Mitterrand’s ‘Festival of the World’s Tribes:’ The Logic of Exoticism in the French Revolution Bicentennial Parade,” *French Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (1998): 51–80.

human tricolor flag formed by Senegalese women or classical Indian dancers—representatives of British culture—dancing to discotheque house music (Fig. 4.4).²⁶ As with *Magiciens*, the bicentennial celebration was similarly critiqued by the Left for its problematic multicultural strategies. In an unwitting echo of Huang’s washing machine work, the critic Claude Arnaud satirically derided the celebration’s superficiality, commercialism, and lack of historical nuance in the pages of *Le Débat*:

Open the washing machine. Put in men, values, objects. Do not hesitate to mix the past and the future, the Revolution and house music, colonial soldiers and blacks. Close the lid, choose your program ... speed up ... patience!²⁷

For Arnaud and other cultural critics, late 20th century French multiculturalism, despite its many advancements, was far from fully reconciling French culture with its long colonialist history.

In the realm of contemporary art, French multiculturalism was at least successful in promoting increased exchange between artists in France and China. Whereas early 20th century exchange between the two countries was characterized by the arrival of Chinese artists who studied Western artistic techniques at the *École des Beaux-arts*, during the 1980s and 1990s the dialogue became increasingly two-way.²⁸ Huang’s invitation to *Magiciens* was in fact made possible through an earlier 1985 cultural exchange initiative by the French Ministry of Culture that brought four hundred French students to visit the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing.²⁹ Following the event, a young CAFA student and emerging art critic, Fei Dawei, was invited by the Ministry for a seven-month visit to Paris where he met Jean-Hubert Martin, who was then developing ideas for *Magiciens*.

²⁶ Leruth.

²⁷ Claude Arnaud, “Leur 14 juillet,” *Le Débat* 5, no. 57 (1989): 49.

²⁸ Craig Clunas, “Chinese Art and Chinese Artists in France (1924-1925),” *Arts Asiatiques* 44, no. 1 (1989): 100–106; Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), chap. 3.

²⁹ In her account of the cross-cultural exchanges that led to *Magiciens*, art historian Melanie Pocock notes that Jean Biagini, an artist advisor to the Ministry, also later invited Huang to become a participant in the cross-cultural workshop *Croisements/métissages* (‘Crossroads/Melting-Pots’) and to join the *École des Beaux-arts* in Aix-en-Provence as an associate artist. Melanie Pocock, “Terms of Encounter: The ’85 New Wave and France, *Magiciens de La Terre* and *Chine Demain Pour Hier*,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 4, no. 1 (February 2015): 34–54.

Heavily involved in the '85 New Wave movement in China, Fei, who would also permanently reside in Paris after 1989, brought twelve hundred image slides of contemporary Chinese artworks from the period and later guided Martin on his 1987 visit to China to select artists for the show.³⁰

For Martin, who was committed to bringing artists from the periphery into the Western contemporary art world, Huang's integration of Dadaist ideas with Chinese traditions of thought reaffirmed the creative value of his own efforts to place Western and non-Western artists in dialogue with one another. According to Martin:

I had the feeling that he [Huang] knew about John Cage and Duchamp. It was so interesting that he would explain these ideas in terms of Daoism, not in terms of Dada... He had this possibility to compare these two cultures.... And there was such humour in his work and the fact that he was playing with chance—chance has a big role in many of his works—and all of that was familiar to me given what I was looking for in Western art. It was perfect.³¹

As art historian Marie Leduc has argued, however, Martin's rationale was also based on a paradoxical desire for both difference and familiarity, which merely reaffirmed the Western art canon. Reframed more critically, Martin's interest in Huang can be understood through what art historian Ming Tiampo has called the non-Western artist's "double bind:" either be in dialogue with Western art history and risk being considered "derivative" or reference one's own culture and risk being viewed through an Orientalizing lens.³² To succeed in the French art world, Huang had to carefully straddle these two pitfalls in works that referenced both European and Chinese artistic traditions and histories of thought.

Benefiting from these cross-cultural engagements between France and China, Huang developed his art practice within the French institutional art system with the support of Martin, Fei,

³⁰ Pocock.

³¹ Marie Leduc, "Journey to China: Jean-Hubert Martin and the Introduction of Chinese Artists in the West," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 17, no. 5 (October 2018): 33.

³² Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*.

and Hou Hanru—another recent Chinese émigré to France—whose strong curatorial agendas framed his work.³³ Huang’s most notable works from the early 1990s were often facilitated either directly by one of these three curators or through their wider network of art world connections. Increasingly familiar with the Western art system, Huang sought to visualize its institutional structures in works that simultaneously reaffirmed and problematized the French art world’s vision of internationalism and multiculturalism.

The Museum as World Picture: *Theater of the World and The Bridge* (1993-1995)

In 1995 Huang was again invited by Martin, by then the director of the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania, to participate in a group exhibition of artists from around the world called “Gallery of the Five Continents” (“Galerie des Cinq Continents”). Like *Magicians*, the exhibition invited diverse artists representing the titular five continents, but sought to address earlier criticisms of decontextualization by inviting each artist to select artworks from his own culture to respond to. Huang was joined by fellow *Magicians* artists Frederic Bruly Bouabre from the Ivory Coast and Joe Ben Junior, a Navajo Native American from the U.S.; along with David Malangi, a Yolngu, Indigenous Australian, and Bertrand Lavier, the only Frenchman.

Huang’s work, *Theater of the World and The Bridge*, a combination of a piece produced earlier in 1993 and one created specifically for this exhibition, reflected his understanding of the transformations that can occur through travel and cross-cultural encounter (Fig. 4.5). The installation incorporated two caged forms stacked one over the other. The bottom piece, *Theater of the World* (1993), was a tortoise-shaped wooden cage fitted with drawers, which were used to introduce live insects and lizards that would devour one another inside the arena-like cage (Fig. 4.6).

³³ For a discussion of Fei’s curatorial strategies see, Lesley Ma, “A New Look at Chine Demain Pour Hier,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 6 (December 2017): 27–35; Leduc, *Dissidence*, chap. 4.

The top piece, *The Bridge* (1995), was created specifically for this exhibition. It featured a serpentine steel cage shaped like a bridge with live snakes at one end and live turtles on the other end. For his selected works, Huang placed ancient bronze objects from the Cernuschi Museum, a private Asian art museum in Paris, inside the bridge structure.

Both structures drew from premodern Chinese concepts and motifs.³⁴ *Theater* references the concept of “*gu*,” a poison in Chinese pharmacological legend that is derived by placing poisonous creatures together in a vessel, allowing them to devour one another, and then taking the venom of the last remaining creature.³⁵ The notion of “*gu*” reflects the idea of gaining strength and vitality by “absorbing” others.³⁶ Paired with *Theater*, *Bridge* references another set of ancient Chinese motifs pertaining to cosmology. The combination of the serpentine and tortoise-like cages alludes to the figure of Xuanwu, or the “Black Warrior,” one of the four symbols of the Chinese constellation represented by a turtle entwined with a snake.³⁷ *Bridge*’s suggestion of the meeting of the live turtles and snakes—the former representing stillness and the latter representing movement, as indicated in the artist’s sketch of the work—represents what Huang considered, “a new chaos, which does not result in conflict but rather results in a merger.”³⁸ Although *Theater* emphasized the combative nature of interspecies contact while *Bridge* presented a more harmonious outlook, both suggested that encounters of difference could produce creative tension and vitality.

³⁴ Huang’s notebooks reveal his awareness of the lexical polysemy of “*gu*,” which included worms growing in old rice and the I Ching hexagram representing chaos. Pages from Huang’s notebook are reproduced in, Vergne and Chong, *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, 32–37.

³⁵ Kristina Kleutghen, “Huang Yong Ping and the Power of Zoomorphic Ambiguity,” in *The zoomorphic imagination in Chinese art and culture*, ed. Jerome Silbergeld and Eugene Yuejin Wang (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), 413–14.

³⁶ Chiu reads the process of animals eating one another as part of a Daoist conception of life cycles as a “continuous cycle of growth and regeneration.” Chiu, *Breakout*, 135.

³⁷ *Xuanwu* is also one of the eight trigrams associated with chaos in the *Yi Jing* (*Book of Changes*) an ancient divination text that Huang has used repeated throughout his art practice. Kleutghen, “Huang Yong Ping and the Power of Zoomorphic Ambiguity,” 413.

³⁸ Jean-Hubert Martin, ed., *Galerie des 5 continents: Huang Yong Ping [Gallery of the 5 continents]* (Paris: Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, 1995), 26.

A metaphor for the meeting of Eastern and Western culture, the work is also a reflection of the psychological, inner transformation that can occur on account of physical border crossings. As the artist noted:

There is a physical border between countries. But there is also a more personal border of ourselves. The question is how to go beyond the limit of ourselves, beyond our own borders. These two kinds of borders very often overlap: when you cross the border to another country, at the same time, you feel you are going beyond your own self, beyond your own borders... Normally we think a person should have only one standpoint, but when you become a bridge you have to have two. This is also a kind of explanation for the concept of crossing the border of the self: as one person, you should have many standpoints. Between these two points, there is one that is more stable, your original personality and another point which is less stable, floating. This bridge is always dangerous... For me, the notion of danger is not negative, but positive—it creates the possibility to open up something else.³⁹

Huang's understanding of border-crossing as a liberating, albeit dangerous, experience of self-transformation, echoed what the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha was theorizing at the time as a cultural "third space," in which the negotiation of incommensurable differences across national cultures can result in a third, hybrid culture that challenges static notions of cultural essence.⁴⁰ Bhabha's concept offered a framework for émigré Chinese artists and critics to see travel and cross-cultural contact as an expression of individualism and personal agency. For Huang, this included the artistic license to borrow from different cultures including from one's own.

Huang's own statements about the work seemed to reaffirm the notion of individual creativity, noting with Derridian panache the idiosyncratic and imaginative ways in which he used ancient Chinese signifiers:

This 'gu' character gives me a lot of imagination, a poetic and mysterious sense for my work... signifiers are constantly replaced and renewed. It is a movement which enriches and expands the sense. This drift of meaning can even go very far, to irrationality, absurdity and chaos... When I use this metaphor, I replace the signifier without referring to the social rule.

³⁹ Huang Yong Ping, "Huang Yong Ping," in *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism*, ed. Gavin Jantjes (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998), 113.

⁴⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 207–21.

It is only a matter of a game between the signifier and me. The artist is here the originator of meaning.⁴¹

The work would appear to defend the creative agency of the individual artist—unmoored from obligations to “authentically” reflect his national culture—against those who have critiqued the use of Chinese iconography in the works of overseas artists as a form of self-Orientalization.⁴² Yet even as Huang embraced the creative freedoms that being a diaspora artist offered, he recognized the fault lines and contradictions of this late 20th century vision of multiculturalism.

Not only a metaphor for the productive self-transformation that comes from cross-cultural contact, *Theater and Bridge* connected Huang’s personal experience with a broader historical awareness of the structural constraints under which such encounters occurred. Indeed, the artist’s meticulous attention to the design of the two cages calls attention to the very structures that facilitate cultural encounters. *Theater*, the lower cage, was in fact created within the context of one such structure: an international artist residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany, to which he was nominated by Martin. The residency was founded in 1989 through a German federal initiative to create an institution for international cultural exchanges.⁴³ Reflecting ideas of cultural reconciliation at the onset of the reunification between East and West Germany that year, the Schloss sought to foster cross-cultural exchange by bringing together artists and scientists from all over the world. For Huang, the notion of a residency, at once a collegial

⁴¹ Huang Yong Ping and Philippe de la Rosa, “Interview with Huang Yong Ping,” in *Galerie des 5 continents: Huang Yong Ping*, ed. Jean-Hubert Martin (Paris: Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, 1995).

⁴² The critic Wang Nanming has called out Huang Yong Ping and other diaspora artists for promoting “Chinatown culture” by using symbols of China’s past in ways that are entirely unrelated to contemporary Chinese culture. Wang Nanming, “The Shanghai Art Museum Should Not Become a Market Stall in China for Western Hegemony: A Paper Delivered at the 2000 Shanghai Biennale.”

⁴³ According to Jean-Baptiste Joly, the founding director, the residency was modeled after the Collège de France in Paris, a research institution in the humanist tradition of education. Jean-Baptiste Joly and Marina Fokidis, “Together in Solitude,” *Schlosspost [Akademie Schloss Solitude Online Platform]* (blog), November 3, 2015, <https://schlosspost.com/together-in-solitude/>.

environment, and at the same time a cultural arena, may have induced a sense of competition or at least an awareness of one's place among others.⁴⁴ *Theater's* caged form, a product of his time at the Schloss, suggests that the freedom of self-expression offered by the residency is nevertheless framed within Western institutional expectations of creativity, innovation, and individualism.

Huang's notebook from the period further reveals the artist's interest in structures of control. In the second page of his entry on *Theater*, Huang pasted together illustrated architectural plans, drawings, and photographs of the panopticon, a prison building and an institutional system of control designed to regulate the behavior of prisoners (Fig. 4.7).⁴⁵ The panopticon was famously used by the French philosopher Michel Foucault to describe the emergence of a modern disciplinary society in the 18th century through institutionalized forms of state control and surveillance that were subsequently internalized by society. An avid reader of Western philosophy, Huang was well versed in Foucault and applied the philosopher's analysis of institutional history and power structures to his own understanding of the contemporary structures that facilitated his own engagements with Western culture.⁴⁶ Whereas Foucault focused his attention on prisons and hospitals, Huang turned to the contemporary airport, the space of transit with which he was most familiar as an artist beginning to exhibit and travel widely.⁴⁷

In 1993 when invited for a group exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow, Huang created the installation *Passage*, which drew from the artist's experience of the Glasgow

⁴⁴ In *108 Cards*, another work produced during the residency, Huang juxtaposed images of 108 canonical works of Western conceptual art with texts from an ancient Chinese medical compendium. These references indicate Huang's awareness of his dialogue with the Western art canon. See Huang's notebook on this work in, Vergne and Chong, *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, 32–33.

⁴⁵ Reproduced in, Vergne and Chong, 34–35.

⁴⁶ Hou Hanru, "Change Is the Rule," in *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, ed. Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 12–22.

⁴⁷ Around this time the French philosopher Paul Virilio theorized the airport as a testing ground for new control technologies that are later found in prisons and cities. Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

airport and the city zoo (Fig. 4.8). *Passages* reflected on the airport as a paradigmatic site of global mobility and internationalism. Using the spaces of the museum, Huang recreated the typical spatial divisions of the airport immigration area by replicating the international signage separating “EC Nationals” and “Others” and installing them above the entrances to two rooms in the gallery. The signs referred to the airport’s classification and physical separation of those belonging to the European Community—a precursor to the European Union, which went into effect the same year as the exhibition—and those considered “Others.” While the EC and the EU were premised on the notion of a transnational economic and transit zone, its inclusivity also depended on the exclusion of those considered “other”—a reality tangibly felt by any who like Huang were forced to wait in the long lines of “others” waiting to enter an EU country. Connecting the airport’s classification of people to the exhibition of animals at the zoo, Huang installed two large cages at each entrance. The artist originally proposed to place live lions in the cages to emphasize the sense of anxiousness he felt when passing through these airport terminals and facing the interrogation of immigration authorities. Foreseeably unable to gain permission from museum authorities to use live animals, Huang instead included lion excrements in the empty cages, which induced similar unease through its foul odor.

Passages points to the airport as a spatial infrastructure of travel that simultaneously facilitates freedom of mobility and transregional contact, while reinforcing national boundaries. Its combination of motifs from the airport and the zoo informed *Theater and the Bridge*, and indeed was fully integrated into a single work produced a year after *Gallery of the Five Continents*. In 1996 the artist was invited to participate in Manifesta 1, a contemporary art biennial initiated that year in Rotterdam. Passing through yet another airport to participate in the project, Huang took inspiration from Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport to create *Terminal*, a cage-like structure and miniature architectural model of an airport terminal in which insects and lizards were placed (Fig. 4.9a-b). As

with the Glasgow show, Huang would once again be barred from including live animals in this work due to animal rights critics. A form of censorship that dogged the exhibition of Huang's works throughout his career, the difficulties of fully realizing his works with animals seemed to reaffirm the limits of the West's cultural magnanimity.⁴⁸ More crucially, that the spaces and institutional structures of transit were so closely related to those of the art world in these projects indicate the ways in which, for the artist, their structures of regulation and control were one and the same.

Like *Passage's* use of the gallery space, *Theater of the World and Bridge* addressed the physical context of its museum site—the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania—to situate his contemporary engagements with the art museum within a longer history of multicultural encounters in French history. The work pointed to the ways in which the Western art museum's conceptions of multiculturalism were entangled with its colonial history. As noted previously, Huang responded to the exhibition's prompt to reflect on objects from his own culture by incorporating a Han-period funerary brick depicting mythological tortoise and serpentine motifs and twelve zoomorphic bronzes from the collection of the Cernuschi Museum. A private Asian art museum in Paris, the house museum contained over 5,000 works of art that Henri Cernuschi, a French-Italian banker, had accumulated during his travels to China and Japan between 1871 and 1873. The museum's display of objects, as shown in an early photograph, illustrate the eclectic tastes of a cosmopolitan elite whose vision of "multiculturalism" included both the appreciation and mass possession and aestheticization of cultural "others" (Fig. 4.10). Remarking on this collection in a magazine of the period, the art critic Louis Emile Edmond Duranty summarized the notions of cosmopolitanism of their day, noting that Cernuschi's Cantonese armchairs set among the house's Greek-style columns gave the impression of "ascending the home of a Greek Mandarin: an

⁴⁸ Huang's *Theater of the World and Bridge* was most recently censored for its use of live animals in the 2017 exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (October 6, 2017–January 7, 2018) at the Guggenheim Museum.

association less bizarre than it seems to be at first sight” (Fig. 4.11).⁴⁹ Duranty’s assessment of the Cernuschi collection celebrated a late 19th century vision of a “multicultural” world cultivated through the museological practice of collecting other cultures.

This vision guided the founding of the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania itself, which was originally built as the Museum of the Colonies, a pavilion in the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 (Fig. 4.12). Participating in a tradition of colonial exhibitions since the late 19th century, the 1931 exposition featured additional pavilions representing the various colonies as well as “human zoos,” or ethnological displays of “primitive” peoples. The Museum of the Colonies, which incorporated an eclectic architectural style and large frescoes depicting the people, flora and fauna of the colonies was intended to represent the hybrid synthesis of these different cultures under the aegis of the French empire (Fig. 4.13). As art historian Patricia Morton has argued, the exposition and the building reflected a colonialist vision of internationalism in which the empire’s diversity is celebrated and placed on display, but carefully segregated to maintain a hierarchical order with France at the top.⁵⁰ Reflecting upon the history of this museum site, Huang’s use of caged, live reptiles was not only an extension of his own artistic idiom, but also a direct reference to the fact that housed in the museum’s basement was indeed a large caged enclosure containing a tropical aquarium of crocodiles, turtles, and other exotic specimens collected from the colonies (Fig. 4.14).⁵¹ When these animals were first exhibited at the Colonial Exposition, they were accompanied by

⁴⁹ Louis Emile Edmond Duranty, “La Collection Cernuschi [The Cernuschi Collection],” *La Vie Moderne* 2, no. 18 (May 1, 1880): 274.

⁵⁰ Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

⁵¹ Along with the aquarium display, a luminous planisphere demonstrated the development of the colonial empire across the world’s oceans. Morton, 304.

didactics that explained their country of origin and the various commercial products that could be extracted from them.⁵²

Theater of the World and Bridge thus brought together multiple moments and sites—from the late 19th century to the late 20th, from the airport to the zoo to the art museum—to create a palimpsest of world pictures through which Western culture has sought to envision a multicultural world.⁵³ Even as Huang had been a beneficiary of the most recent iteration of Western internationalism, the artist interrogated this institutional system’s structural conditions with a sense of both fascination and aversion. *Theater and the Bridge*’s finely wrought steel armatures—carefully constructed according to the artist’s meticulous drawings—call viewers’ attention to the structure’s exquisite beauty and its violence (Fig. 4.15). Their scale-like geometric design both traps its animal inhabitants and showcases them, suggesting the museological vitrines that would have been in other parts of the museum. The nesting of *Theater* beneath the structure of the *Bridge* also draws viewers’ attention upward to the ocular openings of the museum architecture, bringing the space of the museum and viewers into this system of world pictures (Fig. 4.5).⁵⁴ The work thus points to Huang’s own selection as a participant in *Gallery of the Five Contents*, required by the exhibition prompt to “choose a number of objects from their own culture and comment on them” and perform within the caged arena of the museum setting.⁵⁵ Savvy viewers to the exhibition would have made these various connections between Huang’s cages, the exhibition premise, and the colonial era museum

⁵² “Histoire de l’Aquarium [History of the aquarium]” Aquarium Tropical, Palais de la Porte Dorée, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://www.aquarium-tropical.fr/ressources/l-aquarium-tropical/histoire-de-l-aquarium>

⁵³ Art historian Caroline Jones has drawn from Martin Heidegger’s critique of the 1937 world’s fair in Paris as exemplary of the modern conquest of the “world as picture” to explore the ways in which the contemporary art biennial functions as a “world picture.” Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World’s Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁵⁴ This final installation was different from Huang’s sketches included the catalogue, which show the two cages adjacent to each other. It is unclear whose final decision it was to nest them. Martin, *Galerie des 5 continents: Huang Yong Ping [Gallery of the 5 continents]*, 29.

⁵⁵ Martin, Preface.

and its tropical aquarium. Reporting for the *Libération*, the art critic Élisabeth Lebovici incisively noted that Huang's installation "merges with museology," observing that:

The exhibition has no theme, but a rule. As in board games or psychoanalysis; and this rule of the game, here it is: a "gallery of five continents," that is to say a very basic division of the world. One artist per continent, or five artists. And a section for each artist, responsible for choosing, in addition to their own productions, products of their culture.

Lebovici concluded that "the five artists have played the game."⁵⁶

Huang was not the only participating artist who scrutinized the exhibition's premise and formulaic prompt. Joe Ben Junior, who, like Huang had also participated in *Magiciens*, juxtaposed his sand paintings, which were inspired by Navajo healing rituals, with Jackson Pollock's *Black and White Number Twenty-six A* (1948) selected from the National Museum of Modern Art. Ben Junior's choice to incorporate Pollock's work as "objects from his own culture," problematized a simple ethnic delineation of "culture" and raised questions as to who had the right to claim whose culture as their own.⁵⁷ Even Bertrand Lavier, a Paris-based artist, reflected upon the museum's ethnographic legacy by choosing various quotidian objects from French culture such as a Bic pen and presenting it through museological display methods.⁵⁸ Uniquely self-reflexive among the works in the exhibition, *Theater and the Bridge's* nested structure points to the ways in which the artwork—even ones engaged

⁵⁶ Élisabeth Lebovici, "Cinq artistes de chaque continent proposent leurs oeuvres et un objet de leur culture: à Paris, une expo qui pose la question du rapport entre rituel et esthétique. Le monde cinq sur cinq [Five artists from each continent offer their works and an object of their culture: in Paris, an exhibition that raises the question on the relationship between ritual and aesthetics. The world five out of five.]," *Libération*, October 31, 1995, https://www.liberation.fr/culture/1995/10/31/arts-cinq-artistes-de-chaque-continent-proposent-leurs-oeuvres-et-un-objet-de-leur-culture-a-paris-u_145622/.

⁵⁷ While it is widely acknowledged that Pollock's work draws from indigenous cultures, the white male artist retains his creative "originality," whereas the same cannot be said of non-white artists who drew from the Western artistic canon. Ben Junior addressed these complexities in his description of Pollock's work and in an interview, both included in the exhibition catalogue. He noted that his dialogue with Pollock's work "leads me to reflect on the limits of reciprocal influence between my culture and the Western world, on the evolution of my Navajo cultural identity, and on the understanding of my work by a Western public." Jean-Hubert Martin, ed., *Galerie des 5 continents: Joe Ben Junior* (Paris: Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1995), 17–18.

⁵⁸ Jean-Hubert Martin, ed., *Galerie des 5 continents: Bertrand Lavier* (Paris: Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1995).

in institutional critique—and the art institution are locked in a dialectic: is the artwork an independent critique directed at the art system from the outside or might such a critique even be invited by the art system itself?⁵⁹ Are these international sites of cultural exchange true sites of individual freedom or do they reinforce cultural hierarchies as their historical predecessors—the world fairs and expositions—have done?

Already in 1989 Huang recognized the ways in which artistic creation was subject to the power structure of the art institution. In an essay titled “Art/Power/Discourse” Huang asked:

How is it possible to run away from power when mounting an exhibition of artistic form in a museum? How is it possible to enter a predesignated arena of power without taking part in the struggle?⁶⁰

In a 1991 interview, Huang referenced Foucault to connect questions of institutional power to the issue of artistic freedom:

In the Western industrial society, who exercises power and how?... Who makes decisions on my behalf? Who prevents me from doing one thing and allows me to do another? Who plans my actions and time?... In fact, today, ‘freedom of art’ is no longer possible. One has to identify with certain criteria. Then, how to continue to work? We have to face the choice of others and ourselves.⁶¹

Huang’s works and statements from the period reflected the artist’s ambivalence towards his physical and discursive entry into France and the Western art world. Unmoored from his homeland,

⁵⁹ The critic Zhu Qi intuited this when observing the controversy surrounding the émigré artist Cai Guoqiang’s appropriation of a well-known 1965 sculptural ensemble created by the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts for his winning work *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard* (1999) at the 48th Venice Biennale. Zhu noted that “they [the West] even elevate these artistic games or artistic tactics to the level of a kind of scholastic conceptual and theoretical presentation. The core of the problem lies in the question: why do Westerners do this?” Zhu Qi, “We Are All Too Sensitive When It Comes to Awards!: Cai Guo-Qiang and the Copyright Infringement Problems Surrounding Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard,” in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung, trans. Krista Van Fleit (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001), 63.

⁶⁰ Huang Yong Ping, “Art/Power/Discourse,” in *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*, ed. Philippe Vergne and Doryun Chong (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 86.

⁶¹ Huang argues that using the I Ching as a method of chance might offer a solution. Yet notably, he presents it as simply an “alternate reality” or an alternate system, rather than a way out entirely. Huang Yong Ping and Hou Hanru, “Haiwai zhuanfang: yu Huang Yong Ping de tanhua [Special interview abroad: a conversation with Huang Yong Ping],” *Jiangsu Huakan*, no. 12 (1991): 19–20.

the artist was able to freely incorporate Eastern and Western sources of inspiration. Empowered by the French art system and its embrace of multiculturalism, Huang found institutional support for his art. At the end of the day, however, Huang recognized the ways in which he found himself only to be displaced from one world system into another. *Theater and Bridge* ultimately encapsulated the tension between the extraordinary freedom that emigration offered and its immense constraints. Indeed, built into *Theater's* suggestion of creative uncertainty and chance encounter is an awareness that the animals' interactions can only occur within the confines of a predetermined field of possible outcomes. Likewise, while *Bridge* suggests a spatial communion between opposites, its sharp incline precludes, or at least challenges, this possibility. Working in Paris as an émigré artist during this late 20th century era of multiculturalism, Huang gave expression to the ways in which the structures of the burgeoning global art world both empowered and constrained artists from non-Western regions of the world.

Between Beijing and Berlin: Zhu Jinshi's Multi-sited Art Practice

Three years before Huang Yong Ping's arrival in Paris, the Beijing-based artist Zhu Jinshi and his wife, the artist Qin Yufen, traveled to Berlin in 1986 with only a suitcase and some of their recent abstract oil paintings and ink drawings. The couple were both self-taught artists who, inspired by the influx of books on Western modernism in the late 1970s, began to experiment with modernist painting against the socialist realist conventions of the day. As a member of the Stars art group (*xingxing huahui*), a coterie of avant-garde artists working in a modernist idiom, Zhu participated in the group's groundbreaking 1979 exhibition outside the National Art Museum. While the two had been practicing painting since then, their arrival in Berlin in 1986 would fundamentally change their artistic trajectories. Despite their temporary visa status, the couple would subsequently

remain in Berlin as illegal aliens until 1994 when they returned to Beijing to establish a studio that served as an important gathering space for artists in the city.

Like Huang, Zhu's initial experience of leaving his country was one of creative liberation. As the artist recalled:

When we were living in Beijing it was a little tense because we were doing avant-garde art so there was pressure and it was tense. But coming to Berlin that was gone, it was really like freedom... I felt like whatever I wanted to do, whatever I wanted to say it was all okay... There were just no boundaries and there were no restrictions, you did want you wanted, as long as you were willing to do it.⁶²

Yet as the artist also noted, "once you had freedom and you can do anything, you realize that you can't do anything and you don't know anything."⁶³ For the first two years of his stay in Berlin, Zhu would carefully observe and learn about Western contemporary art practices before undertaking any significant art projects.

Zhu's overall sense of possibility was shaped by the unique composition of the Berlin art scene, where forward-thinking cultural officials offered institutional support to young artists pursuing experimental art forms. Unlike Huang's experience with French institutions and curators, however, Zhu's relations with Berlin's cultural authorities were looser and less prescribed, thus shaping the artist's more open-minded and exploratory outlook. Like Huang, Zhu and Qin's arrival in Berlin was also the result of an earlier government-sponsored cultural exchange. In 1985, Dieter Honisch, then director of the West Berlin National Gallery, traveled to Beijing to mount a show on 18th century German Romantic paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Beijing where he was introduced to Zhu by a German foreign embassy official. Honisch later visited Zhu and Qin in their studio home and was struck by their innovative abstract paintings (Fig. 4.16). Zhu took Honisch to

⁶² Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

⁶³ Zhu Jinshi.

see other artists in Beijing, facilitating his first impressions of contemporary Chinese art and establishing a relationship that would lead the powerful director to invite the two young artists to visit Berlin the following year.

When Zhu and Qin arrived in Berlin in 1986, Honisch instructed Michael Haerdter, the founding director of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien (KB), a platform for contemporary art, to offer them a place to stay and work at his institution.⁶⁴ As unofficial artists in residence at the KB, the two were given the freedom to learn and explore. In the following year as their travel visa was about to expire, Zhu and Qin learned about the prestigious DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) Artists-in-Berlin Program and applied for it through the help of their friend Wolf Pause, a Berlin-based artist. Learning about the implicit protocols of applying for institutional support in the West for the first time, Zhu noted that “Pause spent a whole eight hours to help us fill out the application for the DAAD. He said that there was really a technique for applying and if you did it wrong, you’d lose your chance.”⁶⁵ With Honisch and Haerdter as judges that year, and with the support of the influential art dealer René Block (the head of the DAAD’s art and music section at the time), Zhu and Qin were able to receive the one-year residency and obtain another year-long visa from 1988 to 1989.⁶⁶ Each artist was also granted modest funds and a new apartment and studio space in Kreuzberg near the KB.

Although Kreuzberg was home to the Neo-Expressionist “Neue Wilde” (New Youth), a group of successful artists affiliated with the Galerie am Moritzplatz located not far from the KB,

⁶⁴ The KB was established in 1974 at a defunct hospital building that was scheduled for demolition. Among those protesting its demolition, Haerdter founded the KB as a project and exhibition platform for a wide range of artistic disciplines including theater, dance, visual arts, literature, music, performance, and architecture. “History,” Künstlerhaus Bethanien, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.bethanien.de/kuenstlerhaus-bethanien/geschichte/>.

⁶⁵ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

⁶⁶ See list of artists at, “BKP Award Fellows,” Berliner Künstler Programm, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/bkp-award-fellows/>

Zhu turned away from painting to embrace conceptual and site-based art practices.⁶⁷ Through several exhibitions in 1988 including *Positions in Art Today (Positionen Heutiger Kunst)* at West Berlin's National Gallery, *Timeless (Zeitlos)* at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art, and *Joseph Beuys* at the Martin-Gropius Bau, the artist had learned about conceptualism and Arte Povera, which would have a strong influence on his practice. Zhu also traveled to see the 1987 iteration of documenta in Kassel and Skulptur Projekte in Münster, two important art festivals that introduced him to methods of working site-specifically outside of the museum.⁶⁸ Intrigued by these ideas, Zhu befriended members of Büro Berlin, an art group that sought to expand Joseph Beuys's ideas of social sculpture by performing spontaneous actions and installations in public space.⁶⁹ As Zhu considered alternatives to museum-based art practice, he also became close friends with the conceptual artist Wolf Kahlen, who had established two experimental, artist-led art spaces—the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k. est. 1970), discussed in the previous chapter, and the Ruine der Künste Berlin, which would also partner with Zhu on several art activities featuring contemporary Chinese artists.⁷⁰ These diverse influences and contacts in Berlin prompted Zhu's interest in connecting his own art practice to the objects, spaces, and concerns of everyday life.

Living a mere 100 meters from the Berlin Wall, Zhu was also highly attuned to the physical and psychological divisions drawn by the Cold War both during and after the momentous fall of the Wall in the autumn of 1989. A key battleground of World War II and the Cold War, the partially

⁶⁷ The gallery was founded in 1978 by Rainer Fettig and other artists who were experimenting with expressive brushwork against the conventions of abstraction and minimalism at the time. Rainer Rolf von Bergmann, Rainer Fettig, Ep. Hebeisen, Anne Jud, Thomas Müller, Helmut Middendorf, Salomé, Berthold Schepers, Bernd Zimmer (Berlin: Galerie am Moritzplatz, 1978).

⁶⁸ Not all Chinese artists who visited documenta reacted similarly. For an account of the painter Zhang Xiaogang's sense of disorientation at the same exhibition see Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 62–64.

⁶⁹ The group was founded in 1987 by artists Raimund Kummer, Hermann Pitz, and Fritz Rahmann. Raimund Kummer, Hermann Pitz, and Fritz Rahmann, *Büro Berlin: ein Produktionsbegriff [Bureau Berlin: a productions concept]* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 1986).

⁷⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, in 1997 the n.b.k. included the photographer RongRong and many others in one of the earliest international exhibitions of contemporary Chinese photography.

ruined, history laden city of Berlin and the Wall itself were the subjects of intense artistic reflection at the time.⁷¹ The same year that Zhu arrived in Berlin, the German director Wim Wenders released the seminal film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel Über Berlin*, or “The Sky Over Berlin”), a poetic meditation on contemporary life in West Berlin shot through extensive takes of the ruined city spaces and the Wall (Fig. 4.17).⁷² For Zhu’s neighbors, the social and environmental artists Helen and Newtown Harrison—fellows at the DAAD residency—the Wall was the site of an unrealized project that was meant to take place on both sides of the Spree River, a natural border and extension of the division.⁷³ The Harrisons’ proposal, which would have involved participants drinking the water from the Spree on both sides of the border, fascinated Zhu, who was struck by how such an activity challenged traditional notions of the art object and its proper site. The fact that it not only took place outside of the art museum in the urban context, but also connected two distinct spatial zones demarcated by the Wall strongly influenced Zhu’s own subsequent art activities around the Wall.

As cross-border artistic activities attested, the Wall was not entirely ironclad, especially in the waning years of the Cold War. In fact, on the eve of the fall of the Wall on November 9th 1989, the KB was in the middle of an exhibition that included both West and East German artists, the latter of whom were granted temporary visas to participate. With the fall of the Wall, however, many East German artists moved to former West Berlin, experiencing the same sense of spatial reorientation that Zhu felt when he moved from Beijing to Berlin. As Sabine Hermann, an East German artist

⁷¹ Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Simon Ward, *Urban Memory and Visual Culture in Berlin: Framing the Asynchronous City, 1957-2012* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

⁷² For an analysis of how this film imagined the cityscape in ways that recalled pre-Wall memories and itineraries across the city see, Hannu Salmi, “Imagining West Berlin: Spatiality and History in Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire*, 1987,” in *Frontiers of Screen History: Imagining European Borders in Cinema, 1945-2010*, ed. Raita Merivirta et al. (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 17–39.

⁷³ To my knowledge, although the ideas for this project were recalled to me by Zhu, the Harrisons never carried it out. Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

and participant of the KB exhibition recalled, “In a very short time, I experienced many things for the first time: Francis Bacon at the National Gallery, my paintings in a Western context, and the collapse of all hierarchies that had previously been perceived as petrified. It was overwhelming.”⁷⁴ For Herrmann, as for Zhu, the process of border crossing involved the difficult task of reinventing oneself by figuring out how one’s art practice, informed as it was by a prior context, could integrate itself with an entirely new one.

For Zhu, the change in context required no less than a total reconsideration of artistic practice itself. As a painter who had learned about Western art primarily through books on modernism, Zhu’s experience of the diverse contemporary art practices he saw in Berlin prompted the question, “If art isn’t painting, what should it be?”⁷⁵ In re-establishing his artistic coordinates, Zhu was faced with multiple conflicting emotions: on one front, he needed to abandon his prior understandings of art, yet longed to find something deeper in Chinese culture that could serve as the foundation for a new practice; on another front, he wanted to connect with his Western counterparts, yet strove to challenge the Western art system from the outside. Describing the complexity of this psychological struggle, Zhu noted:

All Chinese artists who went to the West were fighting...we wanted to win against our opponent... we were all looking for a cultural conflict or a point of cultural pride... Chinese expat artists had a very strong sense of invasion... it was like the West supported us and we still fought with them!⁷⁶

Having thoroughly contemplated these issues for two years, the artist finally took up the task of his own artistic reinvention precisely by situating his practice across the different physical and discursive boundaries between Eastern and Western thought, Berlin and Beijing, and East and West Berlin.

⁷⁴ Kate Brown, “After the Fall: 30 Years On, Germany’s Art World Reflects on the Night the Berlin Wall Fell (and What Came After),” *Artnet News*, November 8, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/berlin-wall-30-years-2019-1694041>.

⁷⁵ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

⁷⁶ Zhu Jinshi.

Layering his own personal experience of immigration and border crossing onto his engagements with the physical spaces of divided Berlin, Zhu developed an expansive art practice that gave expression to his own spatial condition and the epochal spatial changes of the period.

From Painting to “Placement art:” *Fangzhen Project* (1988)

Zhu’s first significant work, *Fangzhen Project: One Cubic Meter of Canvas in Berlin, One Cubic Meter of Xuan Paper in Beijing* (1988) juxtaposed the two physical and discursive contexts of Berlin and Beijing (Fig. 4.18). The work, whose title “*Fangzhen*” translates to “square-shaped formation” featured the titular one cubic meter of canvas, comprised of separate rolls of canvas folded, stacked, and placed in his studio in Berlin and, simultaneously, one cubic meter of *xuan* paper, the traditional support for Chinese ink painting, similarly stacked and placed in his studio home in Beijing.⁷⁷ Intending the two parts of the artwork to be exhibited simultaneously, Zhu worked on the Berlin piece himself and sent money and instructions to his brother-in-law Yanping to create the *xuan* paper piece in Beijing.⁷⁸ While *Fangzhen*’s juxtaposition of canvas and *xuan* paper referenced the distinction between Chinese and Western artistic traditions, it indicated, more importantly, that the two needed to be equally reconsidered. The work reflected Zhu’s desire to leave behind painting altogether to pursue conceptual works and site-based installations. Using one of painting’s most essential materials, the flat support, to create something that wasn’t a painting, Zhu transformed these materials into a spatial concept.

While *Fangzhen* might be conventionally labeled as an “installation,” Zhu did not refer to it using the words *zhuangzhi*, the Chinese translation of installation. Instead, he used the verb *zhifang*, which can mean “to install” (hence the term “installation”) or “to place.” According to the artist,

⁷⁷ I will discuss the military connotations of the term “Fangzhen” in the following pages.

⁷⁸ Zhu deliberately sought Yanping’s assistance to ensure that a non-artist would carry out the work. The significance of non-art will be discussed in the following pages.

Fangzhen can be better understood as *zhibifang yishu*, or “placement art” so as to emphasize the artwork’s relationship to its site. Drawing insights from Minimalism, Zhu reinterpreted Donald Judd’s statement about “specific objects” to address the issue of site.⁷⁹ He explained, “It’s just like what Judd says, you just put the work there, you don’t have to give it anything [any meaning], all you have to do is just see it there. This [*Fangzhen*] is the same... it’s through location that its artistic language or its meaning is enhanced.”⁸⁰ Like Judd’s disavowal of painting’s pictorialism, Zhu also emphasized the importance of *Fangzhen*’s non-representational physical presence in real space. Yet while *Fangzhen*’s geometric forms seemed to evoke the minimalist object, what was more important for Zhu was the way in which they called attention to the specificity of their site—or two sites, rather—marking them and making their spatial relationship visible. Likewise, in contrast to the minimalist object’s reference to an abstract phenomenological space, *Fangzhen* framed its locations as intimately personal and culturally specific. Through the work, Berlin and Beijing as well as the cultural traditions they represent were rendered paradoxically distant and close—linked by a single artwork that seemed to be at two places at once.

Fangzhen’s multi-spatiality reflected Zhu’s sense of dual belonging both to his newfound artistic community in Berlin and to his former one in Beijing, which, far from left behind, was actively maintained through the artist’s constant written contact with friends and collaborators. Throughout his time abroad Zhu wrote regularly to the several Beijing-based artists including Wang Luyan, Gu Dexin, and Chen Shaoping, who had been collaborating with each other to develop a

⁷⁹ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Contemporary Sculpture: Arts Yearbook 8*, ed. William C. Seitz (New York: Art Digest, 1965), 74–82.

⁸⁰ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call. Judd’s original statement in “Specific Objects” is centered around the issue of the object’s “wholeness” rather than site. Judd’s full statement is, “It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting.” Donald Judd.

new form of tactile conceptual art.⁸¹ Through these letters Zhu and his interlocutors communicated new ideas about conceptualism, explained various art projects and proposals, and commented on each other's works. Remarking on the intensity of these long-distance communications, Zhu noted that “the distance didn't separate us, in fact our exchanges were even more intimate.”⁸² In a letter to Wang shortly before the exhibition of *Fangzhen*, Zhu entreated his friend to increase the regularity of their correspondence:

In order to allow the Beijing expression activity and the Berlin expression activity to have frequent close contact, I hope we can during this *hotline* period of time maintain one letter a week...⁸³

Zhu's unusual reference to this critical period of communication before the exhibition of *Fangzhen* as a “hotline period of time” (*rexian zhi shi*) referred to the connection between Berlin and Beijing in Cold War terms. The artist's words referenced the most notorious “hotline” of the period, the Washington–Moscow Direct Communications Link, which offered a form of communication across ideological lines. Like the historic hotline, rather than accept distance—whether geographic vis-à-vis his Beijing contemporaries or cultural vis-à-vis his Berlin contemporaries—as unbridgeable, the artist forged his own lines of communication across seemingly impermeable boundaries.

Fangzhen as a Mobile, Expansive, Multi-sited Art Project

Zhu's constant shuttling between the two cultural contexts of Berlin and Beijing contributed to his interest in the idea of the “nomad,” a term that the Italian curator Germano Celant promoted in reference to Arte Povera artists Mario Merz and Jannis Kounellis, whose works were influential

⁸¹ The three formed the group Tactile Sensation from 1987 to 1988 and the New Measurement Group between 1990 and 1995. Peggy Wang, “Responding to the World: Contemporary Chinese Art, Exhibitions, And Criticism in the 1990s” (Ph.D., Chicago, University of Chicago, 2010), 138–64.

⁸² Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

⁸³ Emphasis and translation mine. Undated letter reproduced and translated in, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*, 92.

on Zhu at the time.⁸⁴ Highlighting the nomadic qualities of Merz' works, Celant described the nomad as "drifting from one context to another, adapting to local foods and customs; their lifestyle never crystallizes into anything definitive or stable."⁸⁵ Such descriptions could have equally been applied to Zhu who was in fact an actual nomad and illegal alien in Berlin after he overstayed his visa following the DAAD residency in 1989. Zhu's personal circumstance and his interest in the idea of a nomad directly informed *Fangzhen*, which he had initially conceived as a nomadic form that could be placed in various different contexts. Zhu had even considered creating 100 canvas and *xuan* paper cubic forms that could be sited all over the world in non-descript everyday locations. Although the final *Fangzhen* was realized in only two sites, it embodied Zhu's expanded spatial sensibilities and aspirations.

Zhu's idea for a multi-sited artwork was also inspired by another nomadic influence: the American conceptual artist Michael Asher's trailer project at Skulptur Projekte Münster (June 14 – October 4, 1987), which Zhu saw in 1987 (Fig. 4.19).⁸⁶ Asher's trailer project, begun in 1977 and repeated every ten years for the festival, featured a touring trailer van that was parked at various locations around the city according to a set schedule determined by the artist. In each parked location the vehicle gave little indication of its status as an art object, blending into its everyday surroundings. For Zhu, the trailer project's dissolution of the boundaries between art and everyday spaces and its emphasis on the art object's mobility left a lasting impression.⁸⁷ Like the trailer project,

⁸⁴ Zhu noted that prior to returning to Beijing in 1994 he had read an artist interview with Kounellis discussing the concept of the nomad. I have not been able to track this down and it may be possible he misattributed the interview since "nomad" was a term that Celant, rather than Kounellis, promoted.

⁸⁵ Germano Celant, "Mario Merz: The Artist as Nomad," *Artforum* 18, no. 4 (December 1979): 53.

⁸⁶ Although Zhu visited the festival in 1987, he actually "saw" the trailer project in the exhibition catalogue and was compelled by its concept. The artist finally saw the work in real life in 1997. Kasper König and Klaus Bussmann, *Skulptur Projekte in Münster, 1987 [Sculpture Project in Münster, 1987]* (Köln: DuMont, 1987), 37–40.

⁸⁷ Zhu noted that Asher's work "cancels the exhibition function" and "cancels what we see as the difference between art and everyday life" because it is almost indistinguishable from everyday life, but can be recognized as art under special circumstances in the case of the decennial or through aesthetic discourses surrounding it. Zhu understood this post-Minimalist aesthetic as the standard art language of the day and sought to engage with it through works like *Fangzhen*. Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

Fangzhen's primary operation was the placement of a singular object at a specific location. Recall Zhu's observation that “*zhibfang* (placement [art]) is to place an object somewhere. It doesn't require you to do anything else. All you have to do is take it from here and put it over there.”⁸⁸ Though *Fangzhen* was not nearly as mobile as Asher's trailer, it implied a sense of conceptual movement. As a single work in two locations, *Fangzhen* would have prompted viewers to think across the two sites in order to visualize the other part of the work they cannot see. In other words, to truly “see” *Fangzhen*, viewers were asked to inhabit the impossible spatio-temporal condition of being in two places at once.

Following the creation of *Fangzhen* in 1988, Zhu extended and transformed the work into a series of open-ended art activities, performances, and conceptual proposals that were loosely related to one another. Although some were unrealized, the written proposals were understood by the artist as conceptual artworks in and of themselves and later exhibited as written documents in his 1991 show at the DAAD gallery. In *Room Activity One*, written on October 22, 1988, the artist continued his multi-site concept by outlining several activities that were intended to take place simultaneously in Berlin and Beijing (Fig. 4.20). Zhu proposed that during the exhibition of the one cubic meter of *Fangzhen* in Berlin and Beijing, viewers at each site should use rope, wood sticks, or ruler to survey their distance from the object and document the process through photographs. Not limiting the idea of measuring to only what was physically feasible within the room, Zhu hoped that participants might also conceptually “measure” the distance between the two distant geographical locations. As the artist noted, “measuring the distance is impossible to realize... a person or a small group has to walk from Beijing to Berlin... it implies something very vast— an expedition activity.”⁸⁹ As Zhu's broad instructions to “measure the distance between Fangzhen and any object, in any direction”

⁸⁸ Zhu Jinshi.

⁸⁹ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

suggested, the act of measuring one's relationship to *Fangzhen* should be understood as a mental activity that expanded participants' sense of spatial sensitivity to the relationship between things, people, sites, and times.⁹⁰

Seeking to break free from traditional notions of the finite, museum-bound art object, Zhu also expanded *Fangzhen* according to his ideas on “non-art” (*fei yishu*), which he understood as works that were so intertwined with his day-to-day actions and experiences as to be indistinguishable from them. In a letter written on November 18, 1988 to Yanping in Beijing, Zhu described a “non-art” activity that transformed the same rolls of canvas used in the cubic *Fangzhen* into a mobile form.⁹¹ The artist used parts of *Fangzhen* to sew a simple canvas backpack and “treating it as *Fangzhen*,” carried it outside to “let it breathe a little.”⁹² Anthropomorphizing *Fangzhen* and blurring the boundary between the object and his own subjectivity, Zhu described how “[After] It saw many scenes, people, events, it will slowly think a little, and find its own place, so once I returned home, it gained many new ideas.”⁹³ In another work from 1988, the artist disassembled the cubic *Fangzhen* and used the individual rolls of canvas to create several piles of canvas placed randomly in Marianneplatz, a public square just outside of the KB (Fig. 4.21a).⁹⁴ Zhu sat cross-legged among the piles, treating his own body as another unexpected object in the everyday urban environment (Fig. 4.21b).

Fangzhen took on an almost life-like quality whose expansiveness and flexibility mimicked Zhu's own travels and his open-ended attitude towards new sites and experiences. As Zhu observed, summarizing the various art activities related to *Fangzhen*, “It was all one work, it simply went around

⁹⁰ My translation of *Room Activity* proposal dated October 22, 1988 reproduced and translated in, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*, 89.

⁹¹ My translation of letter written to Yanping dated November 18-19, 1988, reproduced and translated with the incorrect name as “Yanhua” in, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*, 98.

⁹² *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*.

⁹³ *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*.

⁹⁴ Reproduced in, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*, 80–81.

back and forth.”⁹⁵ *Fangzhen* thus thematized Zhu’s intersubjective encounters across geographic, socio-cultural, and psychological boundaries. In fact, in a letter explaining the work to Wang Luyan, Zhu asserted that *Fangzhen* was concerned with the notion of “dialogue:”

The entire *Fangzhen* project from a certain perspective, is my intervention into the notion of “dialogue” ... Every interlocutor (*jieshao zhe*) answers the “dialogue” according to their own way. Beijing group, non-art group, the room, Berlin group, Berlin project studio are all part of the organizational structure of the exhibition activity, to go one step further, it is the individual, *Fangzhen* is our individual characteristics, and you all, or they, will inevitably experience your individual characteristics in the process of individual expression and in the process of mutual understanding, in this way, our “dialogue” is concretely put into operation, it is both a whole, and is extremely individual.”⁹⁶

In this declaration, Zhu noted that while each interlocutor might respond to the work in different ways, they will discover their individual characteristics in relation to others. Considered within the context of Zhu’s attempts to situate his art practice across Chinese and European traditions, the work can also be read as Zhu’s response to the pressing issue of how one might retain or even develop one’s artistic individuality in an unfamiliar context.

Boundaries and Conflicts

Despite Zhu’s sense of creative liberation, his art activities also contemplated the very real constraints that existed in everyday life, especially in the specific context of divided Berlin. Living so close to the Berlin Wall that he could look across to East Berlin from his studio window, Zhu was sensitive to the spatial and psychological effects of border zones. Through several performances along the Wall, the artist foregrounded the boundary between East and West Berlin to elicit a sense of tension between the two sides. In *Intervention* (1988) Zhu carried a piece of the *Fangzhen* canvas to a watchtower along the Wall to look at East Berlin (Fig. 4.22). In another untitled performance

⁹⁵ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

⁹⁶ My translation of undated letter reproduced and translated in, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*, 92.

action, the artist placed the same piece of canvas over a public bench and sat down to observe East Berlin (Fig. 4.23).⁹⁷ Like the initial *Fangzhen* work, Zhu's placement of the canvas at specific viewing locations along the western boundary of the Wall marked "here" as a site in relation to "there." In *The Canvas' Interview of Berlin* (1988), the artist placed the canvas on the Oberbaumbrücke, a bridge that traversed the Spree River and was one of eight heavily barricaded and policed border crossings between East and West Berlin (Fig. 4.24).⁹⁸ As the artist took pictures, he became aware of the East Berlin guards across the border observing his presence cautiously. Describing the work almost as a purposeful confrontation, Zhu explained, "...they can't control you, they can only watch you uncomfortably... Here there's a feeling of freedom. You know that they're not happy about it, but they can't hurt you. Doing this is like a dialogue, you threaten them."⁹⁹

Zhu's experience of the Wall and the antagonistic context of the Cold War can be mapped onto his own conflicted attitude towards working as an outsider within the Western art system. Despite his prolific activities and receptive embrace of cultural encounters, Zhu understood that the émigré artist's dialogue with the Western art would always entail some degree of cultural conflict. In fact, Zhu's use of the term "Fangzhen" as the title for his activities refers to a square-shaped battle formation employed in ancient Chinese military strategy.¹⁰⁰ Yet rather than outright conflict, as he may have hoped, what Zhu experienced instead was cold indifference. While some of Zhu's works in Berlin did receive positive reception from German newspapers, for the most part the artist recalled that the German art world "thought I didn't make sense and was being foolish. They

⁹⁷ This explanation was given by Zhu Jinshi, however, I have established that the bench was located at the former Gröbenstraße along the Spree River, just out of view to the right. Likely the artist misremembered, but the intention to be in dialogue with the border was still evident in his choice of location.

⁹⁸ Reproduced in, *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: Power and Jiangshan]*, 86.

⁹⁹ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

¹⁰⁰ Fangzhen is one of ten different strategy formations described in Sun Bin's *The Art of Warfare*, a military treatise that followed in the tradition of Sunzi's better-known work *The Art of War*. Sun Bin, D. C. Lau, and Roger T. Ames, *Sun Bin, the Art of Warfare: A Translation of the Classic Chinese Work of Philosophy and Strategy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), chap. 17.

thought I was just imitating them and that I couldn't become a successful artist."¹⁰¹ Zhu's reference to the issue of imitation referred to the ways in which non-Western artists working within a Western idiom were often considered "derivative" rather than truly innovative. For audiences familiar with Minimalism, conceptual art, and Arte Povera, *Fangzhen* would have appeared altogether *too* familiar.

In 1993 Zhu organized a group discussion in Berlin provocatively titled, "The West Is All Wrong" to collectively address the issues and challenges that Chinese expat artists working in the West faced (Fig. 4.25). The artist "gathered his troops" by inviting a number of important expats living across Europe and the U.S., including the Paris-based curator Fei Dawei, artists Huang Yong Ping and Yang Jiechang; the Hamburg-based Wu Shanzhuan, and the New York-based Gu Wenda and Ma Kelu, among others.¹⁰² The group discussion focused on the problems of the Euro-North American art system and how Chinese artists might break out from the Western art trends that had dominated contemporary art since the 1960s.¹⁰³ As Zhu recalled, "They came because, without coordinating beforehand, we all had the same ideas. Whether they were in Paris or New York, they didn't have enough strength alone, so we had to get together and talk it out."¹⁰⁴ The artists agreed that the goal was not to assimilate into the Western art system but to challenge it from their unique perspective as outsiders. As Zhu noted, "This interrogation isn't talking about whether you're coming from the East or the West, but actually the Western center itself is a problem."¹⁰⁵ To counter the ways in which institutional structures such as the museums and gallery system reinforced

¹⁰¹ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call. Tellingly, the work that did receive positive reception was created under the exhibition theme of "Chinese Art in Exile" and featured Chinese soy sauce bottles tied to a wooden raft. See a review of the show in, Jasmin-Martin Walker, "Die Kunststation Kleinsassen: 'Nicht Kunst' – ein Experiment [The Kleinsassen Art Station: 'Not Art' - an experiment]," *Hessische Heimat*, 1990.

¹⁰² When asked about whether he was aware of the military connotations of *Fangzhen*, Zhu responded, "Well, why do you think I called all these artists from Paris? Isn't it to get into battle formation?" Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

¹⁰³ Zhu recalls there were approximately 15 or so artists. Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, July 16, 2019, Beijing.

¹⁰⁴ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, January 28, 2021, WeChat video call.

¹⁰⁵ Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, July 16, 2019, Beijing.

Western standards of art, the artists sought to create more artist-led platforms. They formed an alliance with Zhu's Berlin-based friend, the Polish conceptual artist Ryszard Wasko, a former DAAD resident and Cold War exile in Berlin who shared their goals of countering Eurocentrism.¹⁰⁶ Ryszard had recently returned to Lodz after the fall of the Wall to establish the International Artists Museum, an alternative artist-led art space that showed works by international artists.¹⁰⁷ The Chinese artists travelled to Lodz to mount a small exhibition titled "Chinese Museum for Contemporary Art Project," which led to the first iteration of Gu Wenda's acclaimed *United Nations* series.¹⁰⁸

Zhu's Return to Beijing

Building on Zhu's growing interest in organizing art activities and his ongoing communications with artists in Beijing, the artist returned home in 1994 to set up an artist studio that could also serve as an experimental art space for other artist friends. Zhu was no doubt inspired by his close relationship with various founders of alternative art institutions as well as popular ideas of organizing art activities outside of the art museum. Like Wasko, who spent a decade in Germany before returning to Poland to establish an art space there, Zhu may have felt that he could have a greater impact on countering the Western institutional art system as an organizer of art events in Beijing. Before Zhu returned, for example, he had discussed with Haerdter an idea to have ten artists do works in each of their own homes, which was inspired by Belgian curator Jan Hoet's *Chambres d'amis* (1986), a citywide activity in Ghent that invited artists to create works in various private

¹⁰⁶ In 1981 Wasko initiated *Construction in Process*, a series of site-based art events in Lodz, Poland as an alternative to institutional art events. The series continued into the early 2000s and included notable participants such as Carl Andre, Nancy Holt, Richard Long, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, among others. Julia Sowińska-Heim, "The Urban Space in Łódź as an Archive. Material Traces of Construction in Process," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja [Art and Documentation]*, no. 12 (2015): 53–65; Ryszard Wasko, *Construction in Process Oct. 26 - Nov. 15, 1981, 37 PkWN Street, Lodz, Poland*. (Rindge: Thousand Secretaries Press, 1982).

¹⁰⁷ Lechosław Czołnowski, "Muzeum Artystów": międzynarodowa prowizoryczna wspólnota artystyczna, *Łódź [The Artists' Museum: international provisional artist's community, Łódź]* (Łódź: Muzeum Artystów, 1996).

¹⁰⁸ Zhu noted that Wasko also helped them to create a film about it.

homes.¹⁰⁹ Zhu hoped to bring these ideas about working outside of the museum and site-based art practice context back to Beijing.

Upon his return, the artist's ideas and practices intersected with those of a new generation of artists who sought to engage the spaces of everyday life through on-site art practice. As the art historian Gao Minglu has noted, Zhu's efforts to establish an artist-led art space also converged with that of other artists who similarly transformed their own living quarters into informal gathering and exhibition spaces.¹¹⁰ Along with the home of return émigré couple Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao in Dongsì and the East Village community of performance artists discussed in the previous chapter, Zhu's apartment in Ganjiakou served as another important hub for art activities in the 1990s. Zhu's ideas about placement art, outdoor non-art activities, as well as his vast knowledge of contemporary installation, performance, and conceptual art practices in the West had a strong impact on the circle of artists that gathered at Ganjiakou, especially Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, and Wang Peng, with whom Zhu became closely associated.¹¹¹ Together, these artists organized on-site art exhibitions in Zhu's home as well as outdoor art activities in the suburbs of Beijing, which had an especially strong impact on Yin Xiuzhen who had just recently turned away from painting to begin working on-site outdoors.

Even as Zhu settled in Beijing, his continued correspondence with friends in Berlin kept the two-way channel between Beijing and Berlin alive. Imagining the beginning of a new period of

¹⁰⁹ Discussed with the author in, Zhu Jinshi, interview with author, July 16, 2019, Beijing; and described in Zhu Jinshi's journal entry from January 24, 1995 reproduced in, Gao Minglu and Zhu Jinshi, *Ganjiakou 303: Zhu Jinshi*.

¹¹⁰ Gao Minglu has described Zhu's art practice as contributing to the phenomenon of "apartment art" in, Gao Minglu and Zhu Jinshi, "What Is 'Apartment Art'?" in *Ganjiakou 303: Zhu Jinshi* (Hong Kong: Pearl Lam Galleries, 2018).

¹¹¹ Other artist who frequented the studio included Wang Jinsong, Cang Xin, Zhang Lei, Ruan Haiying, Karen Smith, the film director Ma Yingli, the critic Huang Du, and the rock singer Zuoxiao Zuzhou (Curse), among others. Gao Minglu and Zhu Jinshi.

cross-cultural contact, Zhu now began writing to his friends in Berlin. In one of these letters from January 1995, Zhu wrote:

Are Berlin and Beijing very far apart? In reality, the answer is no. As attested by the air routes that were established a few years ago, it takes only about ten hours to fly from one metropolis to the other... As technology has been shortening the distance between the East and the West, decades of frozen communication lines between China and Europe are beginning to warm and thaw, but this is not enough. It is even more important for German artists to visit China personally and work together with their Chinese counterparts. The reciprocated visits and joint artistic creations of German and Chinese artists symbolize the beginning of contact, interaction, and exchange between these two cultures in contemporary society.¹¹²

As early as the summer of 1994, a month after Zhu returned, he invited his friend Wolf Kahlen and another Polish friend to visit Beijing and the three created a number of installations in Zhu's home. With Kahlen, Zhu was able to initiate his earlier plan, which they called "Ten Weeks in China" (*Zehn Wochen in China*) in the summer and fall of 1994 and changed to have ten artists each select a place of interest and create an on-site work there. Other artists who participated in the series of activities included Zhu's wife Qin Yufen; Huang Rui, who had also just returned to China from Japan; and Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, and Zhang Lei, all of whom later participated in the site-specific art event *Keepers of the Waters* in 1995 and 1996. Through Zhu, Kahlen met the artist couple Yin and Song, whom he would later invite to the *Ruine der Künste* in Berlin in 1997 for one of their earliest exhibitions and residencies abroad.

Throughout Zhu's trajectory from Beijing to Berlin and back again to Beijing, the artist's art practice reflected the two-way dialogue he sought to undertake as an artist moving across these two contexts. On the one hand, Zhu sought to communicate with his Berlin counterparts as a Chinese artist, and on the other hand, he sought to maintain close contact with his Beijing counterparts as a Berlin-based artist with newfound ideas on contemporary art. Since Zhu's Beijing friends initially

¹¹² Letter to undisclosed artist friends in Berlin dated January 30, 1995. Reproduced in, Gao Minglu and Zhu Jinshi, *Ganjiakou 303: Zhu Jinshi*.

could neither travel to Europe nor have the opportunity to communicate extensively with non-Chinese artists in the first half of the 1990s, Zhu took it upon himself to serve as a conduit for the cross-cultural exchange of ideas, eventually establishing new channels for artists to exhibit abroad in Germany. A product of his transregional outlook, Zhu's artworks from this period visualized what it meant to be a mobile contemporary artist who simultaneously occupied multiple sites of encounter at once.

Yin Xiuzhen's Travels Abroad

In 1996, two years after Zhu's return to China, the Beijing-based artist Yin Xiuzhen—a close associate of Zhu—traveled by airplane for the first time to Chengdu and then to Lhasa in 1997 to participate in the art event *Keepers of the Waters*. As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, this site-specific project initiated by the American artist Betsy Damon brought together foreign artists and Chinese artists from across the country. In this way it offered Yin the first of what would soon become a routine experience of traveling to different locales to create on-site works. Though Yin was still relatively unknown outside of Beijing at the time, by the following year in 1997 the invitations to exhibit her work multiplied exponentially to include shows in the U.S., the Netherlands, and Japan. Unlike Huang and Zhu, Yin did not emigrate from China despite the ways in which she became perpetually in transit between her home and the many cities abroad in which she worked.

A decade younger than Huang and Zhu, Yin is part of a generation of artists who graduated art school around 1989 and began their artistic careers in the 1990s. As such, Yin was not a participant of the 85' New Wave movement, which was strongly influenced by Western art and philosophy. Instead, as the art historian Wu Hung has argued, Yin's art practice developed out of a more minute interest in the vernacular spaces, materials, and experiences of everyday life in

Beijing.¹¹³ As she began to travel more frequently, however, her experiences of being in transit were also internalized into her art practice and served as a key source of inspiration. According to Yin, “I don’t like to stay in one place for too long. After a while I feel I have to leave the country to take a look around and then when I come back, I have a new perspective. People are always in a state of movement and flux. In this state people are growing.”¹¹⁴ Whereas Huang and Zhu experienced a sharp spatio-temporal break in their art practice due to their migration to Europe, Yin’s art practice transformed more gradually as she began to exhibit her work internationally in the second half of the 1990s. The artist’s works during this period at once reveal her highly personal encounters with specific locales and experiences of travel, and at the same time index broader global shifts in contemporary art practice.

Yin’s entry into the global contemporary art world intersected with Western art institutions’ growing interest in site-based art practices. Writing in 1997, for example, the American art critic Lucy Lippard advocated for art practices that recover a local sense of place, arguing that travel and migration have resulted in a collective sense of alienation and disconnection from specific locales.¹¹⁵ Yet Lippard’s emphasis on the local has also engendered significant critiques. As art historian Miwon Kwon has noted, such ideas have also led to the romanticization of “place” as the singular locus of authentic histories and an uncritical desire for a lost local identity.¹¹⁶ Informed precisely by her experience of travel and displacement, Yin’s art practice offered an alternate site-based approach, one that moved beyond static notions of place to reimagine local sites—both inside and outside of China—as interpenetrated by global histories of contact, encounter, migration.

¹¹³ Wu Hung, “‘Vernacular’ Post-Modern: The Art of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen.”

¹¹⁴ Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author, June 28, 2019, Beijing.

¹¹⁵ Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997).

¹¹⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

Localizing the Global

As Yin began to exhibit abroad more frequently in the second half of the 1990s, no site was arguably more important for facilitating her travels outside the country than the foreign visa office. An antecedent to the airport—often considered the paradigmatic site of international travel—the visa office, located within foreign embassy compounds, functioned as the first and most crucial portal between the local and the global.¹¹⁷ In China throughout the 1990s foreign embassies themselves were important sites of cultural exchange. Many embassies, including the German embassy, were located to the northeast of the city between the Second and Third Ring Road in Sanlitun, a designated diplomatic area in Chaoyang district that allowed larger embassy complexes. The district, which developed a vibrant nightlife and music scene due to the large number of foreign expatriates living in the area, became a cultural contact zone where Chinese and foreigners mingled. Foreign embassies and diplomatic officials were also some of the earliest supporters of contemporary Chinese art, often purchasing works, facilitating contact between Chinese artists and Western curators, or hosting exhibition activities.¹¹⁸ In 1994, for example, the German embassy hosted the exhibition Sino-German Cultural Exchange featuring several Chinese artists, and in 1997 the French Embassy hosted photographer RongRong's earliest solo show in the country.¹¹⁹ For Yin, the German embassy had special significance as its Goethe Institute library was also the site of indirect transcultural encounters through the many books and journals on Western contemporary art

¹¹⁷ While the airport has become an important cultural and artistic trope as well as the subject of artworks such as Martha Rosler's photographic series, to my knowledge few artists other than Yin have explored the fertile possibilities of the foreign visa office. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995); David Pascoe, *Airspaces* (London: Reaktion, 2001); Martha Rosler, *Martha Rosler: In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1998).

¹¹⁸ These include Francesca Dal Lago, who worked at the Italian embassy in Beijing and facilitated the participation of Chinese artists at the 1993 Venice Biennale; Bérénice Angremy, the partner of Huang Rui who worked at the French embassy in Beijing, and helped garner French support for Factory 798 and the Caochangdi arts districts; and Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador to China and largest private collector of contemporary Chinese art in the world; among others.

¹¹⁹ The 1994 show featured the works of Fu Lei, Li Qingwen, Li Zongjun, and Zheng Xuewu. See Sino-German Cultural Exchange event ephemera at Asia Art Archive.

practices it offered. Established in 1988 when up-to-date news on international contemporary art developments was still very limited, the foreign language library served many artists who wanted to look beyond canonical textbooks on Western modernism and earlier art periods.¹²⁰ Without the means to travel outside of China at the time, Yin and her art friends used the library as another portal to the world.

In 1998 Yin created the site-specific installation *Visa Office* in the titular visa office of the former Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (Fig. 4.26a-b). The work was part of a small informal exhibition hosted at the recently abandoned embassy, which had moved to a new location.¹²¹ Creatively transforming the abandoned office building into a temporary art space, the exhibition invited artists to create works in various spaces throughout the building. Honing in on her own personal experience of the visa office, Yin's work situated the global extraterritorial space within the local context of Beijing's urban reconstruction in the late 1990s.¹²² Yin emphasized the site's ruination by bringing cement dust and roof tiles that she collected from demolished *hutong* neighborhoods and construction sites and spreading these urban materials all over the room to form lumps of cement dust on the rows of chairs and counter tops of the service window.

As art historian Wu Hung and many subsequent scholars have observed, cement became a key material in Yin's oeuvre, one that reflected upon her intimate relationship with the destruction and transformation of the city of Beijing.¹²³ As the artist herself recalled, "At that time, Beijing was

¹²⁰ For a firsthand account of the founding of the Goethe-Institut in Beijing see, Michael Kahn-Ackermann, *Zuo zai liang zhang yizi zhijian: Beijing gede xueyuan qian yuanzhang a ke man koushu [Sitting between two chairs: an oral account by former director of Beijing Goethe-Institut Ackermann]*, trans. Liang Jingjing (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2018).

¹²¹ Due to the scarcity of archival materials available, much remains unknown about this exhibition, including the organizer and participants. Future research would track down and interview other participants, as well as collect photographic documentation.

¹²² Despite a common assumption that foreign embassies are extraterritorial, they are in fact still bound by the laws of their host country with some additional special provisions.

¹²³ Wu first considered Yin's use of cement within the context of "ruins" in the exhibition *Transience* and later considered the artist's use of cement as part of a broader phenomenon of "material art" in the 1990s. Wu Hung, "Sealed Memory," in *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The

undergoing major demolition and construction... so whenever I walked to work it was like walking through the ruins... or walking through the dust of cement.”¹²⁴ During this period, several of Yin’s works used cement to physically engage these material conditions of her everyday life. In the installation *Ruined Capital* (1996) Yin reflected on the destruction and redevelopment of her own neighborhood using four tons of cement dust, 1,4000 salvaged roof tiles, and furniture from the artist’s own home (Fig. 27). Placing the salvaged roof tiles—now no longer part of a coherent roof system—along with items from a domestic space dispersed across the gallery and covered in cement dust, the installation conveyed the sense of fragmentation that inhabitants of Beijing felt during this period of physical upheaval. Connecting the local, domestic scene presented in *Ruined Capital* to the international, bureaucratic site of the *Visa Office*, Yin also allowed the urban materials and sedimentation of cement dust to pervade this bureaucratic space, revealing the ways in which even the “global” spaces of the German embassy were not exempt from the processes of urban redevelopment that swept through the city.

Visa Office was, as Yin remarked, a kind of “dialogue” with the space of the foreign visa office, one that undermined its orderly decorum. As a site where applicants, including Yin herself, could obtain or be denied permission to travel abroad, the room itself, with its lined chairs and windowed ticket counters, conveyed the hierarchical bureaucracy that one had to go through in order to gain access to passage. Far from frictionless, international travel in the 1990s involved a lengthy process of gathering proper documentation, seeking official permission from various

David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 1999), 120–26; Wu Hung, “Yin Xiuzhen: A Graveyard of Demolished Houses,” in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, ed. Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2019), 218–23.

¹²⁴ Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author for The Allure of Matter exhibition, June 28, 2019, Beijing. Partially available online at, “Yin Xiuzhen,” The Allure of Matter, Smart Museum of Art and Wrightwood 659, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/yin-xiuzhen/>

domestic and international agencies, and enduring long lines.¹²⁵ More importantly, this process involved a complex psychological experience that included anticipation, fear of rejection, and submitting to callous scrutiny. As Yin noted, “When you applied for the visas, the officers—not even the German ones, but the Chinese ones—were very stern with you... Because a lot of people wanted to go abroad or stay abroad and emigrate, if you want to leave you have to wait in line at the visa office and they were always very insulting to you and made you feel very uncomfortable.”¹²⁶ Seen in this light, the cement dust and roof tiles strewn indiscriminately across the visa office seemed to buck the large sign at the front of the room declaring “Please wait behind the line” and other international icons of “do not touch” and “do not enter.” Blatantly disregarding these careful delineations of space, Yin’s use of cement seemed to subvert the very notion of rigid boundaries.

Cement’s unruliness in the visa office suggests another aspect of Yin’s use of cement that is less often observed. Whereas many scholars have pointed to cement’s connotations of ruin and destruction, few have noted Yin’s equal fascination with cement powder’s lightness and mobility.¹²⁷ Describing the allure of cement’s contradictory material qualities, Yin stated:

I feel cement dust is especially interesting because it feels light as a feather (*qing piaopiao de*), even though it’s a construction material and is like a stone once you have added water and sand, when it’s in the dry state of cement powder it is very light, it can float up when blown by the slightest breeze so it becomes like a cloud of dust.¹²⁸

Cement’s dust-like quality is precisely the reason why Yin felt it was so pervasive in her everyday life that it even became a part of her own physical body, “like cement was inside every pore [of my

¹²⁵ Yin’s husband, the artist Song Dong described this process of going to multiple agencies and having to get all his documents stamped. Song Dong, interview with the author, June 28, 2019, Beijing.

¹²⁶ Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author, June 28, 2019, Beijing.

¹²⁷ Building on Wu’s interpretations, art historian Peggy Wang has considered Yin’s use of cement in Ruined Capital as part of a language of destruction and displacement. Wang, “Dis/Placement: Yin Xiuzhen’s City Installations.”

¹²⁸ Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author for The Allure of Matter, June 28, 2019, Beijing. Partially available online at, “Yin Xiuzhen,” The Allure of Matter, Smart Museum of Art and Wrightwood 659, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/yin-xiuzhen/>

body].”¹²⁹ To Yin, then, cement was not simply an inert construction material, but something that had a life of its own and that closely pertained to her own life. As Yin went on to explain, “I feel cement has a life force within it, for example, when cement is floating it is light as a feather, but it also has a very heavy feeling, wherever it floats to and settles is where it grows (*shengzhang*).”¹³⁰ These statements pertaining to the movement of cement dust and its ability to “grow” in whatever terrain it lands in, can be connected to an earlier statement the artist made in 1998 when discussing her relationship with the city of Beijing:

My feeling is like that of a small seedling that has sprouted but has not yet emerged above the ground. I imagine that when the seedling grows it must press the earth surrounding it and that the earth must also press the seedling back. I feel that this is just like my relationship with my surroundings—a relationship of squeezing and pressing.¹³¹

Considered together, these statements about cement, and indeed Yin’s own sensitivity to her changing material surroundings, can be extended beyond its early genesis within Beijing’s urban context. Not limiting the use of cement to on-site works in Beijing, Yin continued to use the capacious material as a way to personally connect with the histories of other sites she increasingly came into contact with outside of China.

In 1997 Yin travelled to Europe for the first time to participate in the exhibition *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties* (May 21 – August 3), which took place in the Dutch city of Breda at the Chassé Kazerne, an old military barrack that had previously been converted into a dormitory for asylum seekers.¹³² Less inspired by the art she saw than by the specific histories of the locales she visited, Yin moved beyond touristic surface impressions, using

¹²⁹ Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author for *The Allure of Matter*, June 28, 2019, Beijing. Partially available online at, “Yin Xiuzhen,” *The Allure of Matter*, Smart Museum of Art and Wrightwood 659, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/yin-xiuzhen/>

¹³⁰ Yin Xiuzhen.

¹³¹ Wu Hung, “Sealed Memory,” 125.

¹³² Mierlo and Driessen, *Another Long March*.

cement to excavate and connect to these histories. For the exhibition, Yin created the on-site installation *Room No. 17 of Breda* in one of the building's refugee dorm rooms to reflect on its history of migration (Fig. 4.28). *Room No. 17* materialized the site's layered histories by encasing each of the dormitory's temporary beds—complete with pillow, sheets, and quilt—in a slab of concrete (Fig. 4.29). Within the concrete Yin buried timed explosives that shattered parts of the solidified concrete beds and strewn debris across the room (Fig. 4.30). At the wall on one end of the room, Yin hung a small black-and-white archival photograph of three refugees sitting on these very same beds (Fig. 4.31).

As with Yin's earlier works with concrete, the concrete encased beds of *Room No. 17* spoke to the sedimentation of memory. The heavy concrete slabs stood in for the historic presence and experiences of the many asylum seekers whose passage through the space have left imperceptible marks on the beds. Far from dormant, the explosive cracks on the blasted concrete suggest the eruptive dynamism of history and the legibility of its material traces. Yin's staging of explosive violence also points to the ways in which transregional migrations bore a direct relationship to global histories of military encounters. The construction of the Chassé Kazerne in 1899 was itself a response to the need to strengthen the Dutch military amidst growing tensions in Europe in the lead up to World War I.¹³³ In World War II, however, the barracks were later used by the German navy during Germany's occupation of the Netherlands. And between 1993 and 1996, the barracks were converted into a dormitory for asylum seekers to accommodate the large influx of refugees from civil unrest in Eastern Europe following the end of the Cold War.¹³⁴

¹³³ Frank Oosterboer, *Kazernes in Nederland: van barak naar paviljoensysteem 1567-1914 [Barracks in the Netherlands: From barracks to pavilion system 1567 - 1914]* (Soesterberg: Uitgeverij Aspekt, 2020). See Oosterboer's companion online archive, "Chassé barracks, Keizerstraat, Breda" Je oude kazerne nu [Your old barracks now], accessed May 19, 2021, <http://www.jeoudekazernenu.nl/kazernes-a-f/chasse/x-chasse.html>.

¹³⁴ Mierlo and Driessen, *Another Long March*, 27.

Yin's interest in the ways in which concrete can register and connect lived experiences to global histories can be seen in another work created that year in Berlin at the Ruin for Arts, a site also marked by the history of World War II. In the work *Dining Table* (1997) Yin created three tables of wet cement slabs with various fruits embedded on the table tops (Fig. 4.32). A process-based work, the decomposition of the organic matter alongside the ossification of the concrete produced a pock-marked surface that indexed the ghost-like presence of the missing fruits (Fig. 4.33). Sited just outside the building, *Dining Table* visually echoed its bullet-ridden concrete façade, a material vestige of the Soviet Union's attack on Berlin during one of the last decisive battles of World War II.¹³⁵ Yin's use of concrete across these two sites in Berlin and Breda attest to the ways in which this ubiquitous and seemingly inert material can reveal globally interconnected histories of war, violence, and migration.

While Yin's use of concrete suggests the sedimentation of history, it also alludes to an opposing impulse to destroy and build anew. Just as the old architectures of Yin's own hometown of Beijing were being demolished to make way for new concrete construction buildings, the historic thirteen-acre site around the Kazerne was also about to undergo redevelopment. In 1995 a modern theater of concrete and glass was built on the park grounds by Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger and in 1996 the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his international firm the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) unveiled a new masterplan to repurpose its historic buildings and transform the entire area into a high-rise residential district.¹³⁶ Yin's use of concrete in *Room No. 17* thus materialized the site's past, present, and future in a manner that also linked the city of Breda with Beijing, a city whose physical transformation would also be marked by the very same Dutch

¹³⁵ Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin, 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002).

¹³⁶ Pierijn van der Putt, "Chassé Park Breda," *DASH | Delft Architectural Studies on Housing*, no. 5 (2011): 148–55.

architect's concrete creations.¹³⁷ As Yin's exploded concrete fragments suggest, these interconnected histories are always restlessly in the process of transformation. As if recognizing the dynamic memories of the site that Yin made manifest, the city eventually moved the Breda City Archives and Breda's Museum to the building in 1998 following the exhibition.¹³⁸

Globalizing the Local

Yin's participation in *Another Long March* in 1997 marked the beginning of the artist's increased presence in international exhibitions. Whereas Yin's works from this initial period of going abroad focused on localizing global sites, another set of works from the early 2000s take a different tack by "globalizing the local." From 2000 to 2001 Yin was invited to two large-scale international exhibitions in Italy and Korea, where she experimented with different methods of bringing the spaces of everyday urban life in China to an international site. Responding to the exhibitions and their sites, Yin recreated the environs of specific locales in Beijing and Chengdu in ways that prompted viewer's awareness of the spatial relations between their own space and the sites represented in her work.

The first of these works, *Peking Opera* (2000) was created for the contemporary art event *Fuori Uso*, or "Out of Use," which took place in an overlooked urban space underneath a major highway in the city of Pescara, Italy (Fig. 4.34a-b).¹³⁹ The art event's premise, which sought to

¹³⁷ Rem Koolhaas and his firm the Office of Metropolitan Architecture has built extensively in China. In 1995 Koolhaas conducted an extensive study of urbanization in China's Pearl River Delta region, subsequently publishing it as, *Great Leap Forward* (2001), a research-based manifesto on the future of urbanism. Koolhaas later built Beijing's most iconic skyscraper, the CCTV tower between 2001 and 2012. Koolhaas et al., *Great Leap Forward*; For a discussion of Koolhaas' practices in China see, Yomi Braester, "The Architecture of Utopia: From Rem Koolhaas' Scale Models to RMB City," in *Spectacle and the City: Chinese Urbanities in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. Lena Scheen and Jeroen de Kloet (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 61–75.

¹³⁸ In 2017 Breda's Museum merged with the Museum of the Image into the Stedelijk Museum Breda, located near the Chassé Park. "Organisation" Stedelijk Museum Breda, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.stedelijkmuseumbreda.nl/en/museum/organisation>

¹³⁹ *Fuori Uso*, took place every four years and drew from a tradition of art events located throughout the city's urban space, which began with *Skulptur Munster*, held every ten years since 1977. Such art events were premised on

encourage viewers' awareness and creative use of everyday spaces, aligned with Yin's own site-based investigations at the time. Inspired by the city of Pescara and the connection between Italian and Peking opera, Yin enlarged three photographs of elderly Chinese socializing and singing Peking opera outdoors around the Shichahai neighborhood near her home in Beijing and installed them on the concrete pillars of the highway underpass. To recreate this environment, Yin also played sound recordings of the neighborhood Peking opera singers and installed various wooden stools that allowed visitors to sit and imagine the Beijing scene.

Yin's depictions of the elderly allude to the ongoing process of their displacement from Beijing's city center due to urban redevelopment throughout the 1990s. Although Shichahai was designated as a historic preservation site by the city's 2002 Plan for Protection of Beijing as a City of Cultural and Historical Importance, the restoration of the historic neighborhood rehabilitated old architectures for tourism at the expense of displacing its living inhabitants and traditional ways of living.¹⁴⁰ Through Yin's images of communal gatherings in urban space, however, the artist celebrated the neighborhood residents' ongoing resilience and creative use of city streets and alleyways as recreational areas. Viewing these elderly citizens and the sights and sounds of Beijing against the concrete backdrop of Pescara's highway underpass, viewers are never wholly transported to the illustrated scenes but made more aware of the distance between here and there. As art historian Peggy Wang has pointed out, the thick white border around each photograph served as a visual barrier separating the viewer's space from the space depicted in the image.¹⁴¹ Yet *Peking Opera's*

the notion that works in situ outside of the museum walls could prompt an encounter between viewers and artwork in real public spaces. Helena Kontova, *Fuori uso 2000: arte in autostrada [The bridges: art on the highway]* (Milan: G. Politi, 2000).

¹⁴⁰ Ren, *Building Globalization*, chap. 4; Chen Lin and Zhang Wenzhong, "Lishi jiequ difang wenhua de bianqian yu chongsu: yi Beijing Shichahai wei li [The Change and Reconstruction of Local Culture in Response to Urban Renewal and Globalization: A Case Study of Shichahai Historic District]," *Dili kexue jinzhan* 29, no. 6 (2010): 649–56.

¹⁴¹ Wang, "Dis/Placement: Yin Xiuzhen's City Installations."

creation of an interstitial spatial zone connects the two cities and transforms the leftover spaces of an infrastructure of transit into a space to sit, linger, and converse.

For the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, Yin further developed this spatial concept through the work *Teahouse*, which also transposed a scene of communal gathering at an open-air teahouse in Chengdu to the international exhibition context (Fig. 4.35a-b).¹⁴² The work responded to one of the exhibition's sub-themes "Pause," by juxtaposing forms of sedentary urban leisure with the mobile space of the international biennial. Unlike *Peking Opera*, which was imbedded into its highway underpass site, *Teahouse* constructed a unique spatio-temporal environment that was simultaneously separate from yet porous to the exhibition space. Yin arranged a set of sixteen tall mirrored panels into a four-by-four room-like space with spaced gaps between each panel to allow passage into and out of the space. The room was curiously visible and invisible from the exterior, at once drawing viewers inward to the new space, and at the same time reflecting outward to situate viewers squarely in the space of the biennial hall. On the interior of the panels, Yin mounted an enlarged set of photographs depicting a scene of people socializing and drinking tea in one of Chengdu's famous outdoor teahouses. Inside the space an assortment of wooden tables and chairs as well as a supply of sunflower seeds—a common snack in China—and tea brought over from Chengdu further encouraged visitors to participate in the scene. While aspects of the visual, spatial, and gustatory environment seemed to transport visitors to Chengdu, the deliberate gaps in between the panels also grounded visitors in the gallery space of the biennale. Sitting in the semi-enclosed area, visitors would have experienced the sensation of being both here and there at the same time.

In creating porous aesthetic spaces that connected everyday sites in China to locales outside of China, *Peking Opera* and *Teahouse* reflected Yin's own efforts to maintain a mobile lifestyle that was

¹⁴² An earlier version of this work, which used screen printed banners instead of solid mirrored columns was created for the 2001 exhibition *Crossroads: Urban Public Environment Art Exhibition* curated by Li Xianting at the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum. See Li Xianting Archive, Asia Art Archive.

open to experiences from abroad, while always keeping one foot on the ground. From the 2000s onward, as Yin continued to travel and exhibit extensively abroad, she began to turn her attention to the sites and objects that facilitate transit including airports, airplanes, and suitcases. In 2001, the artist created *Portable City: Beijing*, the first in a series of soft sculptures of miniature cityscapes made from used clothes and sewn into the interior of large suitcases (Fig. 4.36). A subjective impression of her hometown, *Portable City: Beijing* included a colorful array of skyscrapers and a television tower lined around the inner perimeter of the suitcase, alluding to the city's iconic ring roads.

The series, which would include over thirty cities, was based on her impressions of each new city she encountered as her lifestyle as an international artist took her all over the world. Yin's use of the suitcase appears to suggest a state of being completely mobile and unmoored from any particular place. As the artist explained:

When I began this series, I was constantly traveling. I saw the baggage conveyer at the baggage claim every time I traveled. Many people waited there. I was one of them. Since I always traveled with a huge suitcase, it felt like I was traveling with my home.¹⁴³

The highly portable modern suitcase can be compared to the traditional heavy wooden trunk, which Yin used in *Dress Box* (1995), a much earlier work that suggests the weight of memory and experiences (Fig. 4.37). According to Wu Hung, *Dress Box* was part of a performance in which the artist carefully folded, sewed shut, and placed her own old clothes from childhood to the present into the trunk and sealed them inside with concrete.¹⁴⁴ A somber work that suggests a ceremonial burying or a preservation of memories, *Dress Box* conveys the physical weight of over thirty years of the artist's personal memories and experiences. In contrast, *Portable City* suggests the ease of moving one's life and personal contents from one context to another.

¹⁴³ Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, *Chopsticks*, ed. Christophe W. Mao (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2002), 70.

¹⁴⁴ Wu Hung, "Sealed Memory."

Yin's engagements with motifs of transit with its evocations of weightlessness might appear at odds with her earlier works, which are deeply tied to the specific material realities of everyday sites. Upon closer inspection, however, the *Portable City* series also reveals the ways in which it is materially and historically connected to the local sites it represents. Each soft sculpture is made from used clothes gathered from inhabitants of the city. In the case of *Portable City: Beijing*, the clothes were gathered from Yin's own wardrobe and that of her family. Yin produced the work collectively with her family, whose used clothes and physical touch would have been embodied in the work's very materiality. The work's stitching together of clothes from different users also suggests the accumulation of diverse lived experiences and memories. As with concrete, Yin was interested in the ways in which used clothes were physically light yet symbolically heavy. According to Yin, "for me new clothes are blank, they don't have weight, but if it's been worn, it not only carries people's experiences, their values, their sense of fashion, but also society's traces."¹⁴⁵ As the artist notes, the symbolic weight that accrues to used clothes is not only personal, but epochal, standing in for an entire society at a certain period in time. A continuation rather than a departure from *Dress Box*, *Portable City* not only captures a specific site but also a specific temporality.

While the soft sculpture on the surface of each *Portable City* referred to Yin's subjective impressions of the city, the work's interior is imbedded with concrete references to the site. On the taut surface of cloth that stretches across each suitcase, Yin has imbedded a small aperture fixed with a magnifying lens that draws the viewer's gaze downward and inward to reveal a real map of the city. In this interior chamber, Yin has also included a small audio speaker that plays sounds from the local environment, which emanate outward from the suitcase. For *Portable City: Beijing*, Yin acquired the map from Beijing's well-known antique market, Liulichang, a historical area that offers another

¹⁴⁵ Yin Xiuzhen, interview with the author for *The Allure of Matter*, June 28, 2019, Beijing. Partially available online at, "Yin Xiuzhen," *The Allure of Matter*, Smart Museum of Art and Wrightwood 659, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/yin-xiuzhen/>

specific point of connection to real Beijing. As historian Madeleine Yue Dong has pointed out, Liulichang was historically part of Beijing's extensive used goods market, through which discarded objects could once again gain symbolic and historical value.¹⁴⁶ Not limited to visual experience, the work's inclusion of sounds of people singing Peking Opera in the Shichahai neighborhood—a continuation of the work *Peking Opera*—further allowed viewers to connect the suitcase's cityscape and map to a sensual soundscape of urban Beijing.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s Yin's experience of moving between different cities cultivated an awareness of the ways in which local sites are both uniquely distinct and enmeshed in global histories. Yin's works moved between China and the world, refuting distinctions between a Western "center" and a non-Western "periphery" to reveal the local histories of sites associated with the "global" and highlight the ways in which "local" sites can reveal deeper global connections. While Yin's works made spatial boundaries porous, they also continued to hold onto the specificities and juxtapositions between sites rather than collapse them together. Contributing to a new definition of on-site art practice that is based precisely on the notion of movement across sites, Yin's art practice articulated spaces of aesthetic experience between global rootlessness and local parochialism.

Conclusion

From the late 1980s to the present Chinese artists have experienced an unprecedented degree of international mobility, one that occurred alongside the emergence of an increasingly interconnected global contemporary art world. As this account of Huang Yong Ping, Zhu Jinshi, and Yin Xiuzhen's individual trajectories has shown, artists' diverse experiences of transit have

¹⁴⁶ Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 135–41.

contributed to new spatial strategies and approaches to sites. For Huang, the art museum and indeed the French art system itself became an important site in which the consequences of transregional encounter can be visualized and interrogated. For Zhu, who rejected the limitations of the museum context, the urban environment of divided Berlin became a space in which to envision new ways of bridging physical, cultural, and psychological boundaries. Less fixated on the distinctions between institutional and non-institutional spaces, Yin treated specific sites on their own terms, exploring the deeper material histories that both distinguish one site from another and connect them together. What the three artists share, however, is a willingness to travel across physical and mental borders in an effort to expand their art practice and their conceptions of the world. Collectively, their art practices give visual expression to the epochal conditions of global migration at the turn of the 21st century and create new aesthetic “transit spaces” that historicize the present by bringing multiple sites and times in relation with one another.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined how Chinese contemporary artists throughout the long 1990s have created on-site works that were intimately connected to the specific sites and spaces in which they lived. When I flew to Beijing in March 2018 to begin fieldwork for this project, I was able to see many artists' current living environments for the first time. Traveling from the heart of Beijing's Central Business District in Chaoyang district to ever farther locations beyond the Fifth Ring Road to Changping in the northwest suburbs or Shunyi in the northeast suburbs, I felt the sense of distance from the city viscerally in terms of the hours I spent on cars and trains, anxious because the grid-locked ring road traffic had already made me very late.

Some of the artist studios I visited didn't even have precise searchable addresses. For example, the artist Song Dong texted me the following directions:

Address of Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen's studio: Near [REDACTED] Village, Shahe District, Changping District, Beijing (outside the North Fifth Ring Road and within the North Sixth Ring Road). Please take the Badaling Expressway (Beijing-Tibet Expressway) in the direction of Beijing and exit at Exit [REDACTED]. Continue to the front side road (north), pass a traffic light and continue forward, when you encounter the [REDACTED] Bridge, adjust your steering wheel from the Beijing urban area to follow along the Badaling Expressway (Beijing-Tibet Expressway) side road for a short period of time. (That is, make a U-turn at [REDACTED] Bridge), and drive towards the direction of [REDACTED] indicated by the street sign (that is, after the first overpass, when you encounter the first Sinopec gas station, turn right and continue straight ahead ([REDACTED] Road) After crossing the railway crossing, immediately turn left and drive south along the side of the railway. After the wide road narrows, continue on. When driving near the end, you will see two red and white warning signs on the left side of the road, opposite the warning signs is a light grey big iron gate (with a set of door guardians) is it. Best wishes, Song Dong.

Following Song's precise instructions, my taxi driver and I ended up lost at a large trash sorting facility deep in the suburbs of Beijing, where we had to get out and ask the locals for directions. We struggled, took a few more wrong turns, and asked another man on a bike before we finally found the place where the dirt road running alongside the railroad tracks ended.

I recalled art historian Miwon Kwon's sense of wariness towards the nomadic condition of contemporary artists, curators, and academics. She noted in the conclusion to her own book, "It occurred to me some time ago that for many of my art and academic friends, the success and viability of one's work are now measured by the accumulation of frequent flyer miles."¹ It seemed that a good half of my time in Beijing was spent stuck in traffic driving out of the city, rambling down remote dirt roads, looking out at the semi-rural surroundings—an unlikely place for contemporary art. Things were a lot messier than what she described.

During one such visit to Huantie, an urban village just outside the Fifth Ring Road not too far from Factory 798, my taxi followed a gravel path along the railroad tracks until the road ended at a gate beyond which a modern two-story grey brick and glass building rose. This was the studio home of Huang Rui, an artist who had been instrumental to the history of 798's development. As I was finding my way into the lavish and sprawling compound, I ran into Peter Wayne Lewis, a Jamaican American painter and professor at MassArt who had a studio in Beijing and had come by for the evening. White Cloud House (*Bai yun guan*), as Huang's home was called, was built from bricks salvaged from the demolition of hundreds of *hutong* buildings, and it was part studio, part gallery, and frequent gathering spot for artist friends and academics. When I finally sat down to interview Huang about his ongoing efforts to establish an independent, legitimate, and sustainable art space, he responded rather poetically:

I am constantly striving to obtain this kind of space... compared to the darkness of politics, it is more independent... The literati Tao Yuanming, Bai Juyi, Su Dongpo and other later Ming, Qing, and Republican Era literati are all like this: they depict the space, and then they obtain this space. First depict, second obtain. And then within this space, they can more satisfyingly continue to depict. This is the historical fate of literati artists.²

¹ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 156.

² Huang Rui, interview with author, March 15, 2018, Beijing.

This image of the artist depicting an imagined space stayed with me, and I thought about the current house we were in—Huang had designed and built the space himself on farmland illegally leased from the urban village. Huang was in a pensive mood that night because, as he later explained, his home, the only residential building in an otherwise rural landscape, had recently been earmarked for demolition to make way for a high-speed railway. Huang had been petitioning the government to save it, and he claimed in an aside that the French president Emmanuel Macron had even personally written to Xi Jinping himself about it. But the fate of his home was still uncertain.

Huang's rumination about space is directly related to the fate of his own studio and to the story of the art district 798—two spaces that artists first imaged before they became a reality—but it is also related more broadly to a central concern of this dissertation: the relationship between the spaces created by the artistic imagination—the spaces that artworks open up—and the physical spaces of everyday life. As I hoped to have shown, on-site art practices engaged real spaces in order to *make* spaces, in the broadest sense of the term. Examples ranged from the concrete in Chapter Three where I discussed how on-site art practices simultaneously contributed towards the development of new art institutions in China to the more abstract in Chapter Two where I explored how the Big Tail Elephant created new spatio-temporal pockets within the city through which to interrogate the contemporary urban changes around them. Through these examples, I have also shown how artworks moved between the realm of the symbolic and the real, as when the artist Zhu Jinshi not only conceptually imagined but actually used his work *Fangzhen* to connect artists and activities in Berlin and Beijing. What made these practices so compelling to me was the directness, timeliness, and precision with which artists conveyed their historic realities as active participants. The urgency of demolition and spatial precarity was but one factor. Another was the pressing need to negotiate a space for themselves and their artistic vision, first within a domestic context and later within a much larger global context.

As I have suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, to work “on-site,” or “*xianchang*” in Chinese, is to respond to the here and now; it is therefore directly related to the state of being “*xiandai*,” or modern, in the sense of existing in or belonging to the present, a meaning which “modern” shares with the term “contemporary.”³ Because “modern” (*xiandai*) in both the Chinese and Euro-North American context has often been used as a period term to describe historical processes of modernization or modernism as an artistic and cultural movement, the term “contemporary” (*dangdai*) has emerged to generally refer to the study of art of the present and recent past, however these dates are defined. The ambiguousness of the term “contemporary” has recently been scrutinized by scholars working within the fields of “modern and contemporary art history” with some arguing for the use of contemporary as a period-specific term following Modernism/Post-Modernism and others arguing to use it more loosely as a relational concept.⁴ One of the most compelling directions coming out of these debates is how “contemporary” might intersect with another equally imprecise term: “global,” and the recent calls for “global art history.”⁵

In her study of 1960s Japan, art historian Reiko Tomii has seized on a second definition of “contemporary,” which refers to the condition of being “contemporaneous to” or co-existing at the same time as another, to explore how Japanese artists have regarded and sought to shape their

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online defines “modern” as “of, relating to, or characteristic of the present or the immediate past: Contemporary” and “contemporary” as “marked by characteristics of the present period: modern, current.” Handian Online defines “*xiandai*” (modern) as “contemporary, the current era we are in” (*dangdai, muqian women suo chu de shidai*). Merriam-Webster, s.v. “modern (*adj.*),” accessed May 27, 2021, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/modern>; Merriam-Webster, s.v. “contemporary (*adj.*),” accessed May 27, 2021, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contemporary>; Handian Online, s.v. “*xiandai*,” accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.zdic.net/hans/现代>.

⁴ Foster et al., “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’”; Araeen et al., “An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary: Part I-IV.”

⁵ James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

relationship to their contemporaries abroad during a period of heightened international exchange.⁶ Extrapolating from this context, Tomii has suggested that “contemporaneity”—the state of being contemporary—might be recast as a geohistorical concept defined as “a given locale’s perception regarding itself and the outside world, one empirically shaped by its interface with another locale and/or the outside world... as much objective “fact” as subjective “perception.”⁷ As Tomii has argued, such an approach contributes to global art history because it is fundamentally transnational and can serve as a new analytical tool for understanding the relationship between two locales at a given historical time in ways that destabilize the unequal paradigm of center-to-periphery.

As art historian Peggy Wang has shown, there are many parallels between what Tomii has described as the sense of peripherality pervasive in 1960s Japanese art discourse and how Chinese artists also felt vis-à-vis Europe and North America during the long 1990s.⁸ In both of these historical contexts, it was artists themselves who found new ways of first imagining and then actualizing new networks of transnational relationships. Emphasizing the importance of studying the individual narratives of artists themselves, art historian Wu Hung has defined “contemporary” (*dangdai*) as materializing through the kinds of individualized spaces created by artists as they moved between the two spheres of China’s domestic art spaces and the global network of a multinational contemporary art world.⁹ In other words, contemporary artists realized contemporaneity through art practices that moved back and forth between different types of spaces. As Wu stated more broadly, “‘Contemporary art’ [*dangdai yishu*] in Chinese thus does not pertain to what is here and now, but

⁶ Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*; Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013); Atreeyee Gupta, “An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary: Part III,” *Field Notes (Asia Art Archive Online Journal)*, no. 1 (April 2012), <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/an-expanded-questionnaire-on-the-contemporary-part-i/type/essays>.

⁷ Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*, 14–15.

⁸ Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art*.

⁹ Wu Hung, “A Case Of Being “Contemporary:” Conditions, Spheres, And Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art.”

refers to an intentional artistic/theoretical construct that asserts a particular temporality and spatiality for itself.”¹⁰

Bringing together these discussions of the “modern” (*xiandai*) and the “contemporary” (*dangdai*) within the context of global art history, I suggest, rather, that “on-site” (*xianchang*) offers a way to encompass “contemporaneity” in both the temporal and the spatial senses of the term: contemporary-as-modern (*xiandai*), with its emphasis on the intensity of the present moment, and contemporary-as-contemporaneous, with its emphasis on the interactive relations between multiple sites. As I have shown, Chinese on-site art practices expanded static notions of site to draw relationships across multiple sites on multiple scales, not just on the level of the local-global. This can be seen in the ways in which the artist Zhang Xin foregrounded the link between Lhasa and Chengdu, or in how RongRong understood the relationship between Beijing’s urban center and its periphery, or in how Huang Yong Ping drew a dense web of historical connections between the spaces of the art museum, the colonial exposition, the panopticon, and the airport. Artists’ ability to conceptually hold together multiple sites at once was much more plural and dynamic than the simple dichotomy between the local and the global would suggest. Their art practices point instead to local-to-local connections or what scholars such as Gao Shiming have called the paradigm of the “non-binary local”.¹¹ This suggests that to be “on-site,” therefore, is to be “here” and “now” with a heightened awareness of the present’s relationship to the “there” and “then” of other sites and times.

This is perhaps also where art history comes into the mix as a discipline built on the study of materials from the “there” and “then.” Approaching the study of artists, artworks, and archives so close to the present, contemporary art history must also grapple with different temporalities. When

¹⁰ Wu Hung, 290–91.

¹¹ Gao Shiming and Xu Jiang, “Shanghai 2000 shuangnianzhan da yuejin: Haishang Shanghai lizu hefang? [2000 Shanghai Biennale’s Great Leap Forward: Based on what?],” *Diancang-Jin Yishu*, no. 12 (December 2000): 72–75.

new archives are actively growing alongside and sometimes in dialogue with new research; when artists' interview statements change, contradict, or respond to their own statements or those by others over multiple years; when art historians, indeed academic advisors, themselves can be the subject of histories, how might the art historian historicize such a constantly moving target?

Likewise, in tracking artists and artworks that move across and engage multiple different sites and local contexts, on what solid ground can art historians situate these practices? In place of a definitive answer to these dilemmas, this dissertation offers the proposition that to narrate a contemporary art history that is commensurate with the expansive vision of the artists and artworks we study, one must also make new discursive spaces by moving nimbly across multiple sites and times with historic precision and timeliness—on-site and on-time.

APPENDIX: FIGURES

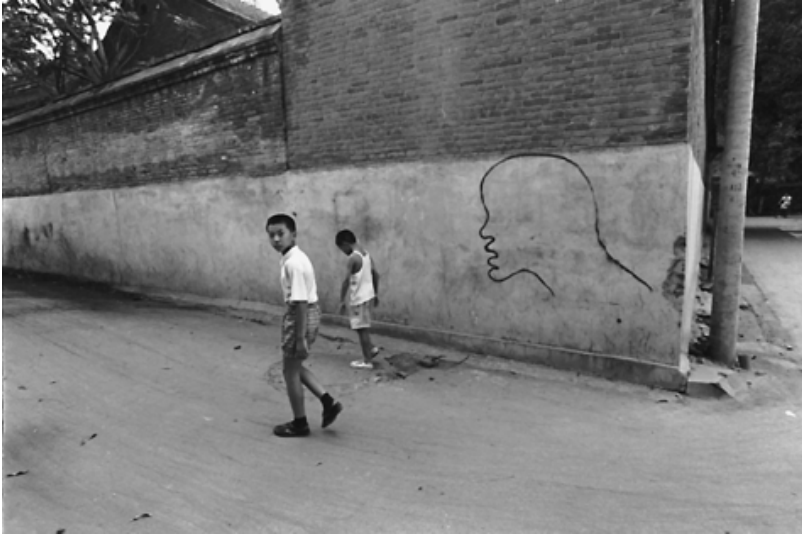


Fig. 0.1: Zhang Dali, *Dialogue - Longxing Hutong*, 1995, graffiti, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. "Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a City." *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 757.



Fig. 0.2. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue - Forbidden City*, 1998, graffiti, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Galerie Paris-Beijing.



Fig. 0.3: Pond Society, *No. 1 – Yang Style Tai Chi Series*, 1986, Hangzhou.
Source: Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 0.4: Liu Xiaodong, *Joke*, 1990, oil on canvas, 180 x 195 cm (70 x 76. in.).
Source: Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 0.5: Film still from Wu Wenguang, *Bumming in Beijing* (1990) showing the artist Zhang Dali at his studio home in Yuanmingyuan artist village.



Fig. 0.6: Installation view of *Garage Show '91*, 1991.
Source: Photograph by Andreas Schmid. China Avantgarde Exhibition Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 0.7: Song Dong, *Another Lesson, Do You Want to Play with Me?* 1994, performance, installation, Beijing.

Source: ARTSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.9889962> (accessed July 12, 2021).



Fig. 0.8: Zhang Dali, *Dialogue: National Art Museum of China*, 1999, graffiti, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Lu Hong and Qiu Haibo, eds. *Zhang Dali*. Beijing: United Art Museum, 2014: 62-63.

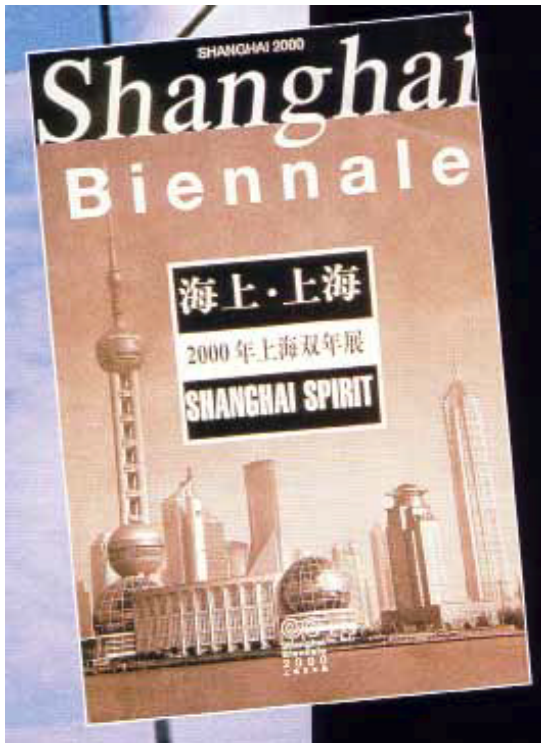


Fig. 0.9: Poster for the 3rd Shanghai Biennale, 2000
Source: Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014: 354.



Fig. 0.10: Shanghai Xintiandi
Source: Benjamin Wood, Studio Shanghai.



Fig. 1.1: Participants march across town to the Funan River. Artists Zeng Xun, Dai Guangyu, and Liu Chengying in the foreground.

Source: Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa), Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 1.2: Kristin Caskey, *Washing Silk*, 1995, performance, Chengdu.

Source: Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa), Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 1.3: Christine Baeumler and Beth Grossman, *Dreams for a Pure River*, 1995, Chengdu.
Source: Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa), Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 1.4: Dai Guangyu with assistance from Zhu Gang, *Long Abandoned Water Standards*, 1995, performance, installation, Chengdu.
Source: Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa), Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 1.5: Wang Peng, *Rain Pavilion*, 1995, installation.
Source: Socially Engaged Art in China Online Archive, <http://seachina.net/> (accessed July 12, 2021).



Fig. 1.6: Panorama view of the Funan River with Hejiang Ting (Joining River Pavilion), a historic double-pitched roof pavilion, in the foreground.
Source: Feng Ju, Tan Jihe, and Feng Guanghong, eds. *Chengdu funan liangbe shibua* [*A history of Chengdu's two rivers*]. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chuban she, 1998.



Fig. 1.7: Yin Xiuzhen standing at the exterior eave of the pavilion looking at *Rain Pavilion*
Source: Betsy Damon Archive: *Keepers of the Waters* (Chengdu and Lhasa), Asia Art Archive.

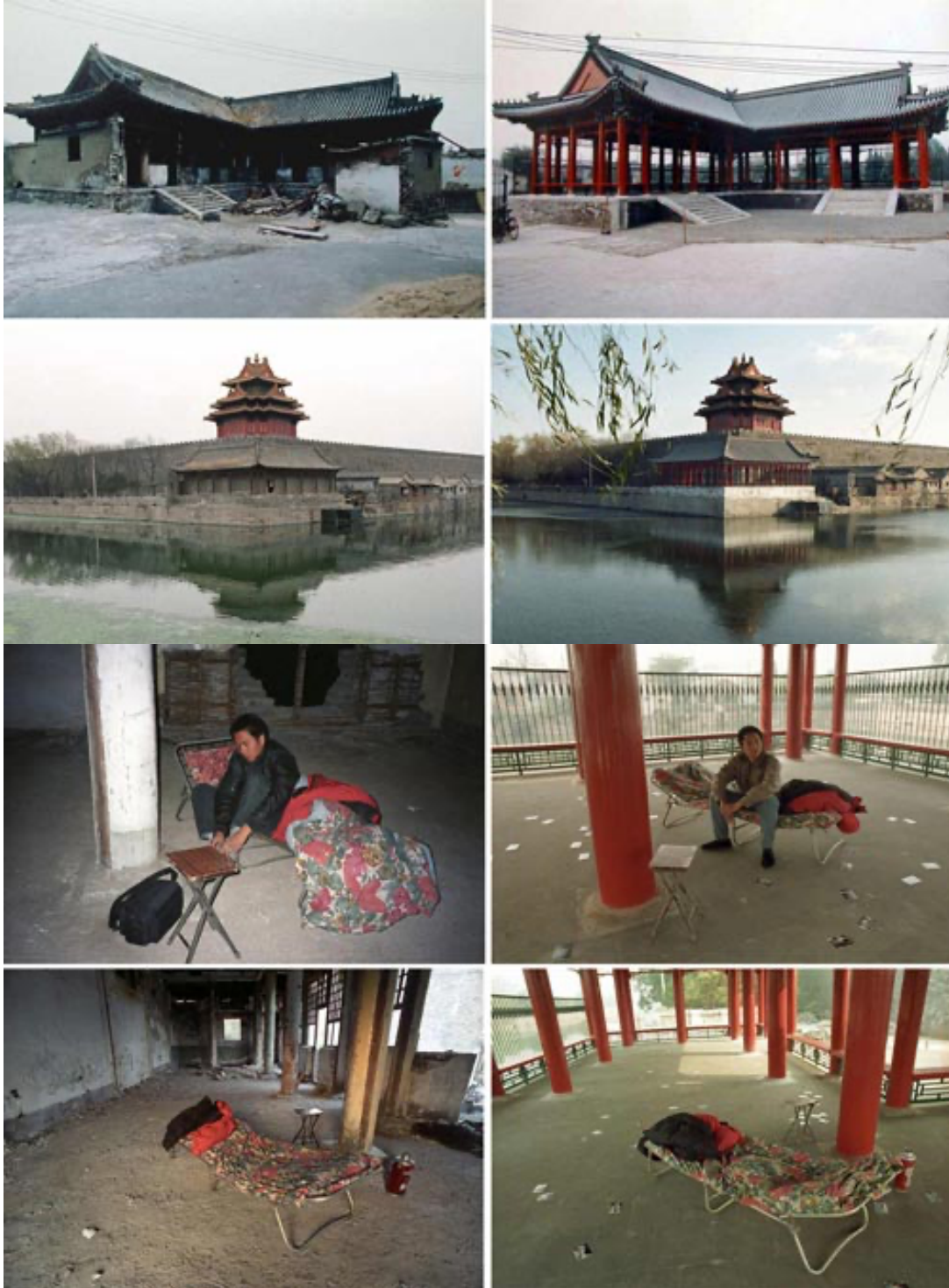


Fig. 1.8: Wang Peng, *Three Days*, 1995, performance, photography, installation, Beijing. Source: Wang Peng, personal archive.



Fig. 1.9: Yin Xiuzhen, *The Tree of Parting*, 1994, Beijing.
Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 15.



Fig. 1.10: Yin Xiuzhen, *Tree Harp*, 1995, Beijing.
Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 32-33.



Fig. 1.11: Yin Xiuzhen, *Washing the River*, 1995, performance, installation, Chengdu.
Source: Beijing Commune.



Fig. 1.12: Yin Xiuzhen, *Weighing the River*, 1995, installation, Chengdu.
Source: Beijing Commune.



Fig. 1.13: Yin Xiuzhen, *Butter Shoes*, 1996, installation, Lhasa.
Source: Socially Engaged Art in China Online Archive, <http://seachina.net/> (accessed July 12, 2021).



Fig. 1.14: Zhang Xin, *Sowing*, 1996, performance, Lhasa.
Source: Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa), Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 1.15: Zhang Xin, *Sowing*, 1996, performance, Lhasa.
Source: Zhang Xin, personal archive.



Fig. 2.1: Lin Yilin, *Safely Maneuvering Across Linbe Road*, 1995, performance, 90 minutes, Guangzhou.
Source: Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014: 194.



Fig. 2.2: Members of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group in 1993. From left to right: Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Juhui, Xu Tan, and Lin Yilin.
Source: Lin Yilin, personal archives.



Fig. 2.3: Lin Yilin, *Standard Series of Ideal Residence*, 1991, installation, brick, iron, wood, Guangzhou.
Source: Lin Yilin, personal archives.

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Fig. 2.4: “Super Large-Style Luxurious Residence” advertisement of apartment units in Shenzhen from May 20, 1996 in *Wen Wei Po*.

Source: Rem Koolhaas, Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, and Sze Tsung Leong, eds. *Great Leap Forward*. Köln: Taschen, 2001: 162.



Fig. 2.6a: Xu Tan, *The Alteration and Extension of Sanyu Road No. 14*, 1994, installation, performance, photographs, floor plan, video, text, Guangzhou.
Source: Xu Tan, personal archive.



Fig. 2.6b: Xu Tan, *The Alteration and Extension of Sanyu Road No. 14* (detail), 1994.
Source: Xu Tan, personal archive.



Fig. 2.7: Chen Shaoxiong, *Five Hours*, 1993, performance, installation, Guangzhou.
Source: Robert Peckham, ed. *Chen Shaoxiong*. Beijing: Timezone 8, 2009.



Fig. 2.8: Chen Shaoxiong, *72.5 Hours of Electricity Consumption*, 1992, installation, Guangzhou.
Source: Francesca Dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 2.9: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape I*, 1997-8, photograph, photo-collage, Guangzhou.
Source: Estate of Chen Shaoxiong.



Fig. 2.10: Map of Big Tail Elephant's works in Tianhe district, Guangzhou.
Source: Google Maps.



Fig. 2.11: Lin Yilin, *Safely Maneuvering Across Linbe Road*, 1995, performance, 90 minutes, Guangzhou.
Source: Lin Yilin, personal archive.



Fig. 2.12a: Liang Juhui, *One Hour Game*, 1996, installation, performance, white cloth, chair, television, video game, Guangzhou.
Source: Liang Juhui Memorial Archive, Libreria Borges Institut d'Art Contemporain.



Fig. 2.12b: Liang Juhui, *One Hour Game*, 1996, installation, performance, white cloth, chair, television, video game, Guangzhou.

Source: Zhang Zhidong, “Chengshi guashou: Daweixiang yu 90 niandai Zhushanjiao chengshi hua [Urban monsters: the Big Tail Elephant and the urbanization of the Pearl River Delta in the 1990s].” *Jiemian News*, March 26, 2017. <https://www.jiemian.com/article/1198664.html?t=t> (accessed July 12, 2021).



Fig. 2.13: *Battle City*, ca.1985, video game.

Source: Moby Games online. <http://www.mobgames.com/game/nes/battle-city> (accessed July 12, 2021).



Fig. 2.14a: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape I*, 1997-8, photograph, photo-collage, Guangzhou. Source: Estate of Chen Shaoxiong.



Fig. 2.14b: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape II*, 1997-8, photograph, photo-collage, Guangzhou. Source: Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 2.14c: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape III*, 1997-8, photograph, photo-collage, Guangzhou. Source: Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 2.14d: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape III* (detail), 1997-8, photograph, photo-collage, Guangzhou. Source: Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 2.14e: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape IV*, 1997-8, photograph, photo-collage, Guangzhou.
Source: Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 2.15: Chen Shaoxiong, *Streetscape – Gedachtniskirche, Berlin*, 2001, photograph, photo-collage, Berlin.
Source: Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 2.16: (From top left clockwise) Xu Tan, Lin Yilin, Liang Juhui, and Chen Shaoxiong. Source: Xu Tan, personal archive; Xing Danwen, personal archive; Liang Juhui Memorial Archive, Libreria Borges Institut d'Art Contemporain; Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, eds. *Yesheng: 1997 nian jingzhe shi [Wildlife: starting from 1997 jingzhe day]*. Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1997: 5.



Fig. 2.17: *Wildlife* catalogue, front and back cover

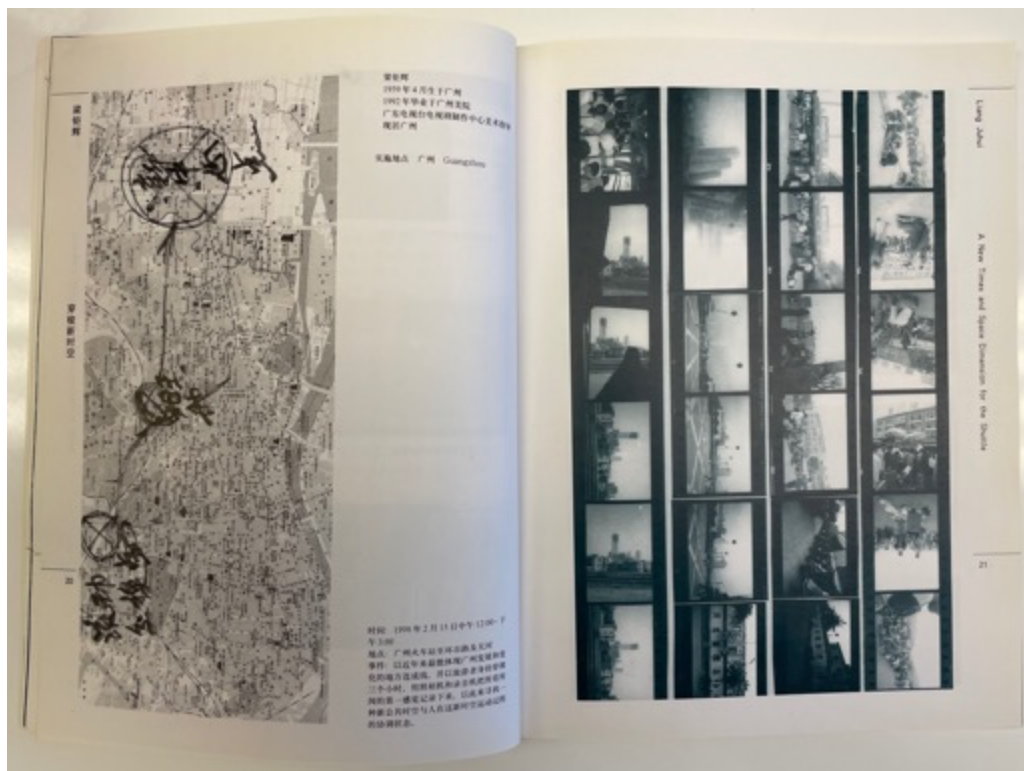


Fig 2.18a: Liang Juhui, *New Times and Space Dimension for the Shuttle*, 1998, performance, photographs, Guangzhou.

Source: Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, eds. *Yesheng: 1997 nian jingzhe shi* [*Wildlife: starting from 1997 jingzhe day*]. Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1997.

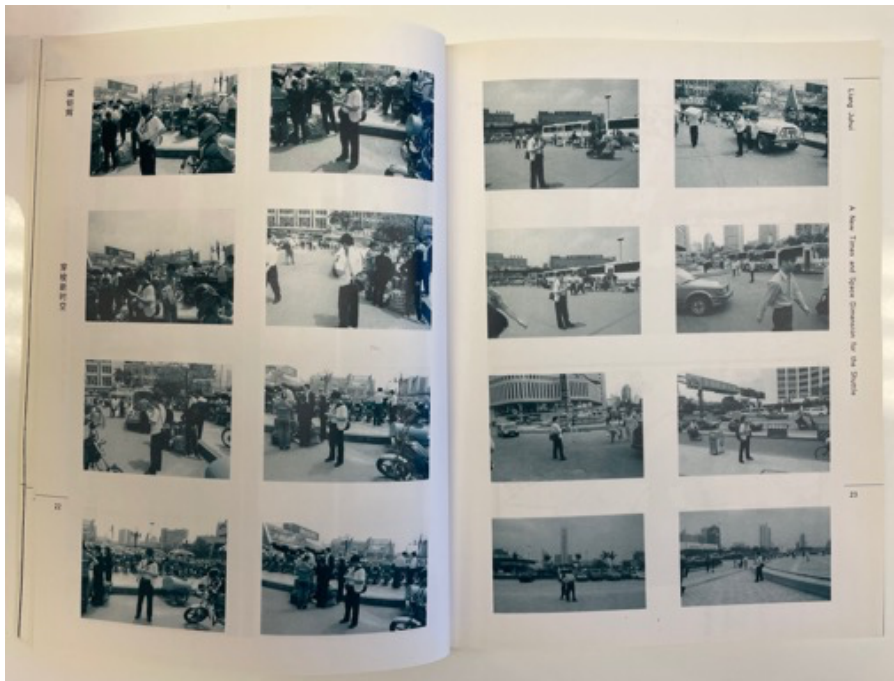


Fig 2.18b: Liang Juhui, *New Times and Space Dimension for the Shuttle*, 1998, performance, photographs. Guangzhou.

Source: Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, eds. *Yesheng: 1997 nian jingzhe shi [Wildlife: starting from 1997 jingzhe day]*. Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1997.

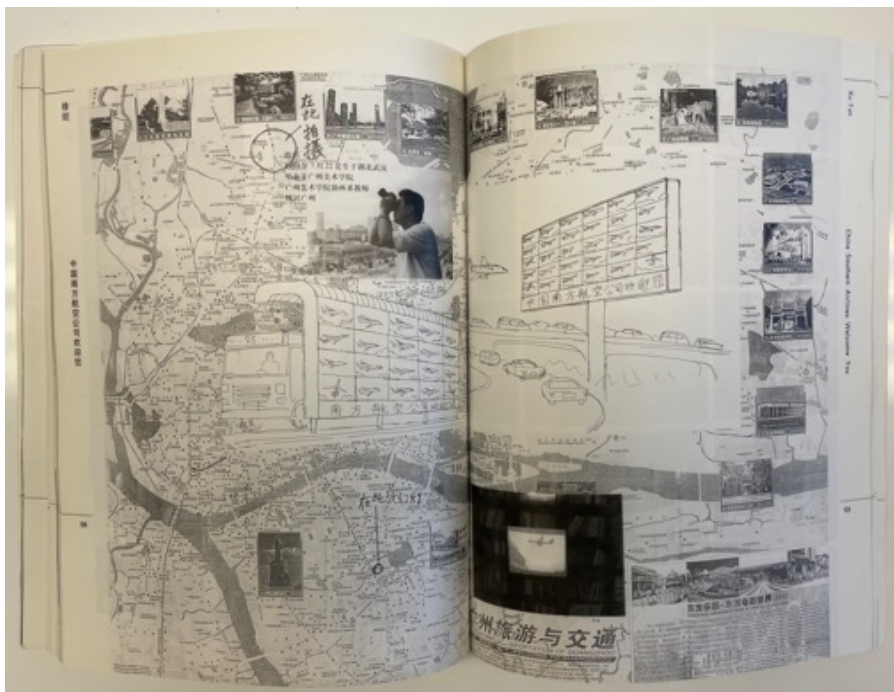


Fig 2.19a: Xu Tan, *China Southern Airlines Welcome You*, 1997, photographs, slide projection, Guangzhou.

Source: Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, eds. *Yesheng: 1997 nian jingzhe shi [Wildlife: starting from 1997 jingzhe day]*. Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1997.



Fig 2.19b: Xu Tan, China Southern Airlines Welcome You, 1997, photographs, slide projection, Guangzhou.

Source: Song Dong, Shirui Guo, and Pang Lei, eds. *Yesheng: 1997 nian jingzhe shi [Wildlife: starting from 1997 jingzhe day]*. Beijing: Contemporary Art Center, 1997.



Fig. 2.20: Xu Tan, Poster Project for Traffic Jam, Cities on the Move, Friedrichstrasse Berlin 1998.
Source: Hou Hanru. *On the Mid-Ground*. Edited by Yu Hsiao-hwei. Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2002: 229.



Fig. 3.1: Zhang Defeng, *Distance*, 1998, installation, Beijing.
 Source: Feng Boyi and Cai Qing, eds. Shengcun hengji: '98 Zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmo zhan [Trace of Existence: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98]. Beijing: Art Now Studio, 1998: 51.



Fig. 3.2: Audiences attending *Trace of Existence* at Art Now Studio in Yaojiayuan Village, Chaoyang district, Beijing. In the foreground is Cai Qing, *Till*, 1998, performance.
 Source: Feng Boyi and Cai Qing, eds. Shengcun hengji: '98 Zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmo zhan [Trace of Existence: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98]. Beijing: Art Now Studio, 1998: 60.



Fig. 3.3: Map of Beijing circa 1994 showing urban development, the central axes, and ring road system.

Source: *Beijing ditu ji* [*Atlas of Beijing*]. Beijing: Ce hui chuban she, 1994: 77.

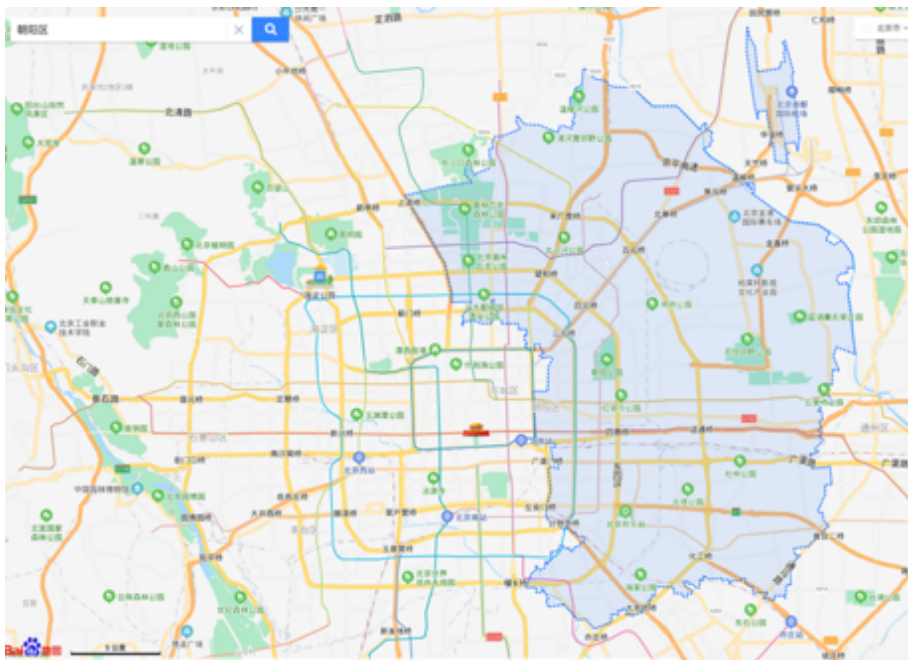


Fig. 3.4: Map of Chaoyang district, Beijing.

Source: Baidu Map.



Fig. 3.5: RongRong, *East Village No. 9*, 1993, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 21.



Fig. 3.6: Waste pickers on tricycles.
Source: Michael Robert Dutton. *Beijing Time*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008: 147.



Fig. 3.7: Untitled contact strips from RongRong's *East Village* series, ca. 1993.
 Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 16-17.



Fig. 3.8: Untitled photographs of Zuoxiao Zuzhou (Curse) and his band NO from RongRong's *East Village* series, ca. 1993.
 Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 35.



Fig. 3.9: Zhang Huan, *Weeping Angel*, 1993, performance, Beijing.
Source: Zhang Huan artist website,
http://www.zhanghuan.com/work/info_26.aspx?itemid=671&parent&lcid=118 (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 3.10: Untitled portrait of Zhang Huan in his studio from RongRong's *East Village* series, ca. 1993.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 56.



Fig. 3.11: RongRong, *East Village Beijing No. 17*, 1993, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 53.



Fig. 3.12: RongRong, *East Village Beijing, No. 20*, 1994, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 74.

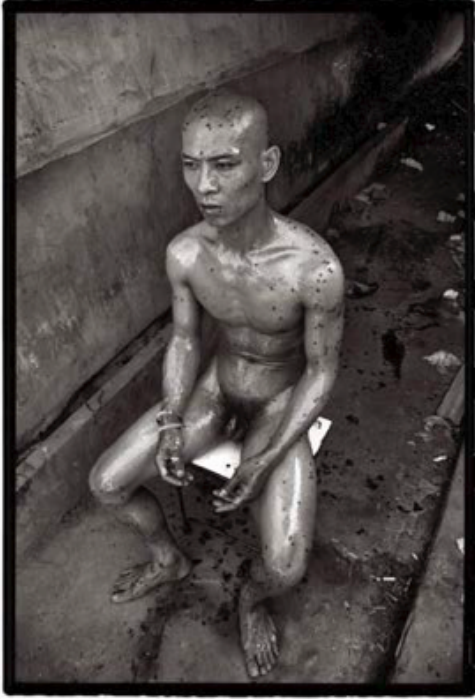


Fig. 3.13: RongRong, *Untitled*, 1994, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 75.

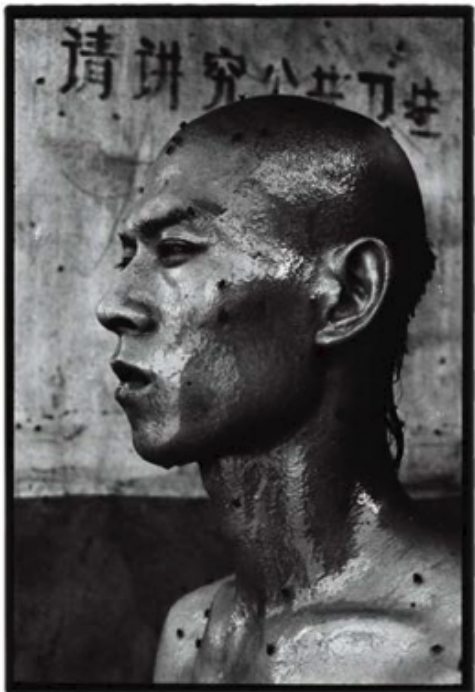


Fig. 3.14: RongRong, *East Village Beijing No. 19*, 1994, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 78.



Fig. 3.15: Photograph of Zhang Huan's *Twelve Square Meters*, 1994, attributed to Ai Weiwei.
Source: Li Xianting Archive, Asia Art Archive.

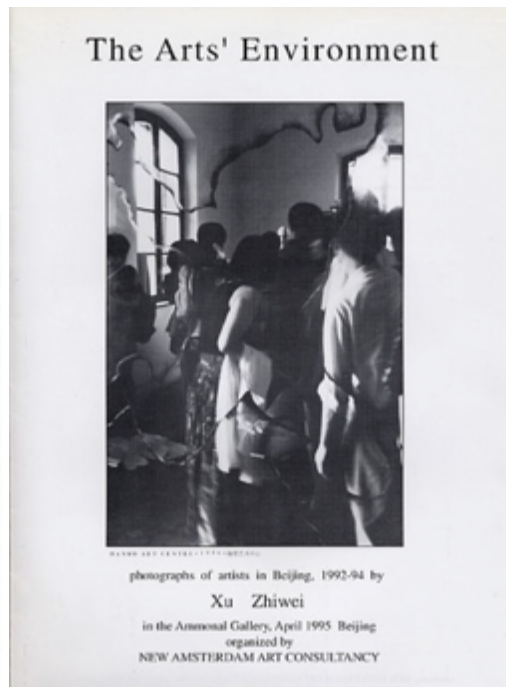


Fig. 3.16: Exhibition posters for Xu Zhiwei's solo show *The Arts' Environment: Photographs of Artists in Beijing* at the Ammonal Art Gallery.
Source: Hans van Dijk Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 3.17: Xu Zhiwei, *Untitled*, c. 1995-1996, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Hans van Dijk Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 3.18: RongRong, *East Village Beijing, No. 46*, 1994, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 84.



Fig. 3.19: Untitled contact strips from RongRong's *East Village series*, ca. 1994.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 60-61.



Fig. 3.20: RongRong, *East Village Beijing, No. 1*, 1994, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung and RongRong. *RongRong's East Village, 1993-1998*. New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003: 62.



Fig. 3.21: Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun eds. *Black Cover Book* (1994)



Fig. 3.22: Photographs of East Village performances in Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun eds. *Black Cover Book* (1994).



Fig. 3.23: *The Witness of the Contemporary Art in China*, September 4-22, 1995 at the Tokyo Art Gallery, Tokyo.

Source: Tokyo Art Gallery.



Fig. 3.24: Factory 706 designed with the saw-tooth roof.

Source: Huang Rui, ed. *Beijing 798 gongchang: chuangzao Beijing de xin yishu, jianzhu yu shehui* [Beijing 798: reflections on art, architecture and society in China]. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 132



Fig. 3.25: Renovation of Beijing Tokyo Art Projects.
 Source: Photograph by David Willen. Huang Rui, ed. *Beijing 798 gongchang: chuangzao Beijing de xin yishu, jianzhu yu shehui* [Beijing 798: reflections on art, architecture and society in China]. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 34.



Fig. 3.26: Exhibition poster and installation view from *Beijing Afloat*, October 12- December 31, 2002 at the Beijing Tokyo Art Projects, Beijing.
 Source: Beijing Tokyo Art Projects.



Fig. 3.27: Wang Chao, Remaking 798 poster, 2003.
 Source: Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014: 360.



Fig. 3.28: Installation view of *Tui-Transfiguration: The Image World of RongRong and inri*, September 17-October 20, 2003 at the Great Kiln Factory of 798, Beijing.
 Source: RongRong and inri artist website, https://www.rongin.com/exhibition_tui.html (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 3.29: RongRong, *Untitled (Ruin series) No. 1 (1)*, 1997, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 60.



Fig. 3.30: Zhan Wang, *Temptation series*, 1994, sculpture, Beijing.
Source: Zhan Wang, personal archive.

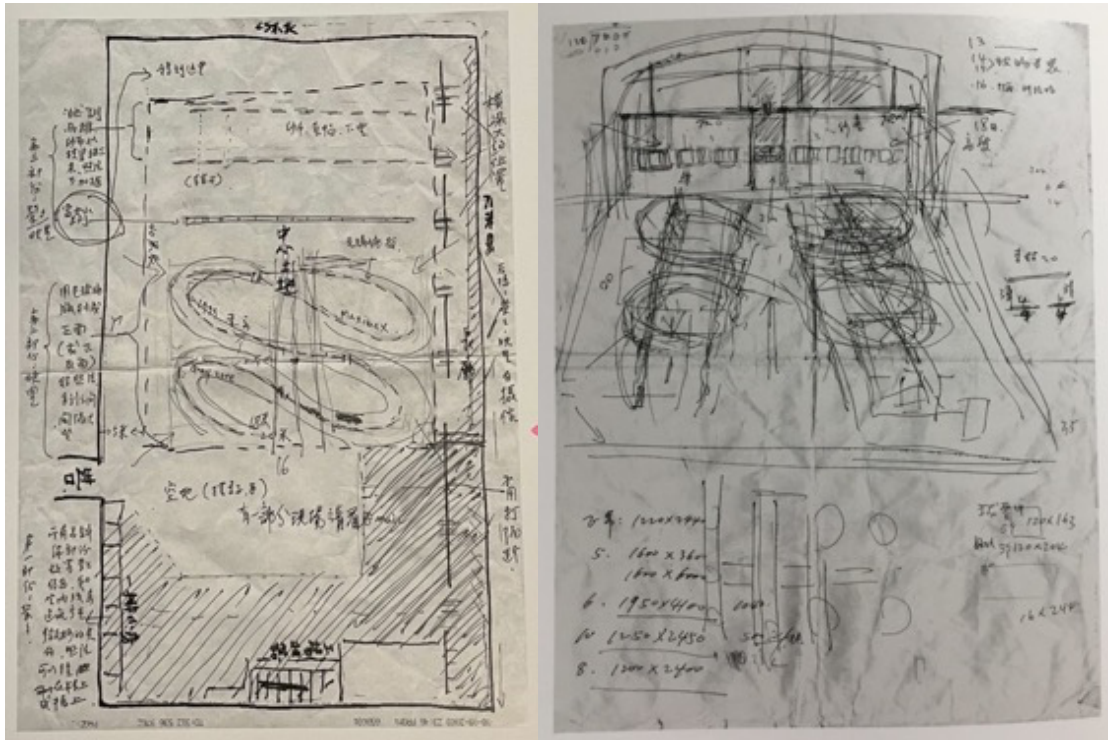


Fig. 3.31: Wu Hung, sketches for exhibition design of *Tui*.

Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 30-31.



Fig. 3.32: Installation view of RongRong, *Wedding Gown series*, 1997-2000, photographs, Beijing.

Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 89



Fig. 3.33: Installation view of RongRong, *Ruin* series, photographs, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 89



Fig. 3.34: Installation view of RongRong, *Fragment* series, 1998, photographs, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 51.



Fig. 3.35: Installation view of “Transformation” section of *Tui-Transfiguration*, Beijing.
 Source: RongRong and inri artist website, https://www.rongin.com/exhibition_tui.html (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 3.36: Installation view of RongRong and inri’s collaborative works in outdoor landscapes from 2000-2001 in *Tui-Transfiguration*, Beijing.
 Source: RongRong and inri artist website, https://www.rongin.com/exhibition_tui.html (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 3.37: Installation view of RongRong and inri, *Fujisan, Japan series*, 2001, photographs, performance.

Source: RongRong and inri artist website, https://www.rongin.com/exhibition_tui.html (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 3.38: Installation view of RongRong and inri's self-portraits.

Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 233-234.



Fig. 3.39: Installation view of RongRong and inri, *We Are Here* series, 2002, performance, photographs, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 235.



Fig. 3.40: RongRong and inri, *We Are Here No. 1*, 2002, performance, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 237



Fig. 3.41: RongRong and inri, *We Are Here No. 3*, 2002, performance, photograph, Beijing.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 239.



Fig. 3.42: RongRong and inri, *We Are Here No. 5*, 2002, performance, photograph.
Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 241.



Fig. 3.43: Performance by the Void Dance Studio (*Kongkong Wushi*) during the opening of *Tui-Transfiguration*.

Source: Wu Hung. *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2004: 272.



Fig. 3.44: Catalogue for the exhibition *Tui-Transfiguration: The Image World of RongRong and inri*.



Fig. 3.45: Main gallery space at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art designed by Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Qingyun Ma.
Source: Wilmotte and Associates website, <http://www.wilmotte.com/en/project/67/ucca> (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 3.46: Studio home designed by Ai Weiwei, 1999, Beijing.
Source: Ai Weiwei, and Anthony Pins, eds. *Ai Weiwei, Spatial Matters: Art, Architecture, Activism*. London: Tate Publishing, 2014: 154.



Fig. 3.47: Three Shadows Photography Arts Centre designed by Ai Weiwei, 2005, Beijing. Entrance door shown to the left.

Source: RongRong and inri artist website, <https://www.rongin.com/aboutts.html> (accessed July 13, 2021).

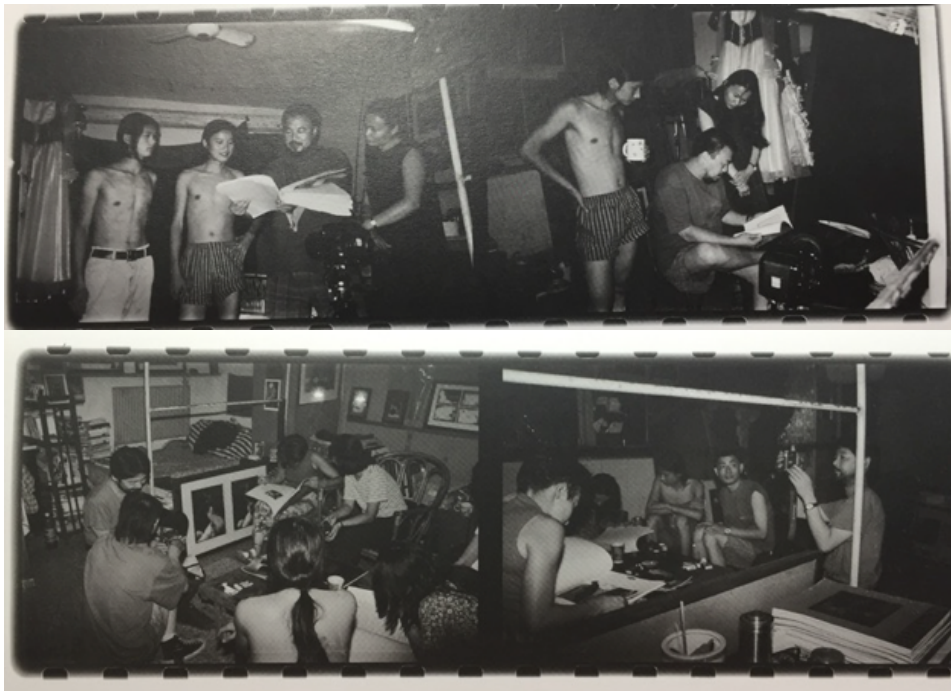


Fig. 3.48: Contact strips of artists looking at *New Photo* magazine at RongRong's home in Liulitun, Beijing.

Source: RongRong and inri. *Liu Li Tun*. Vol. 1. Beijing: Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, 2006: n.p.

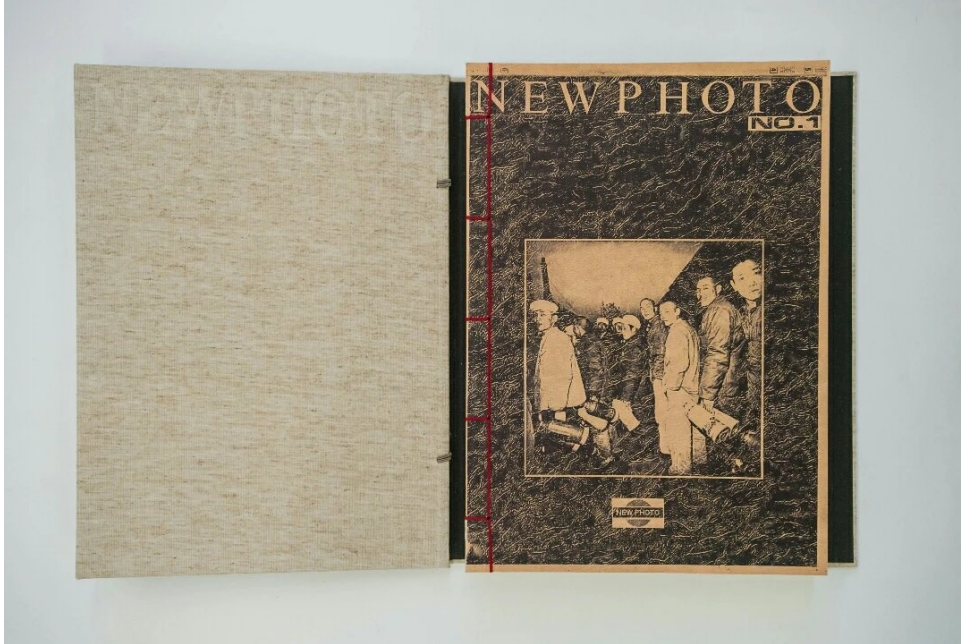


Fig. 3.49: Recreation of *New Photo* (1996-1997) produced on the occasion of *NEW PHOTO: Ten Years* at Three Shadows Photography Arts Centre.

Source: RongRong and inri artist website, <https://www.threeshadows.cn/cn/library/self-publishing/new-photo-ten-years-1996-2007/> (accessed July 13, 2021).

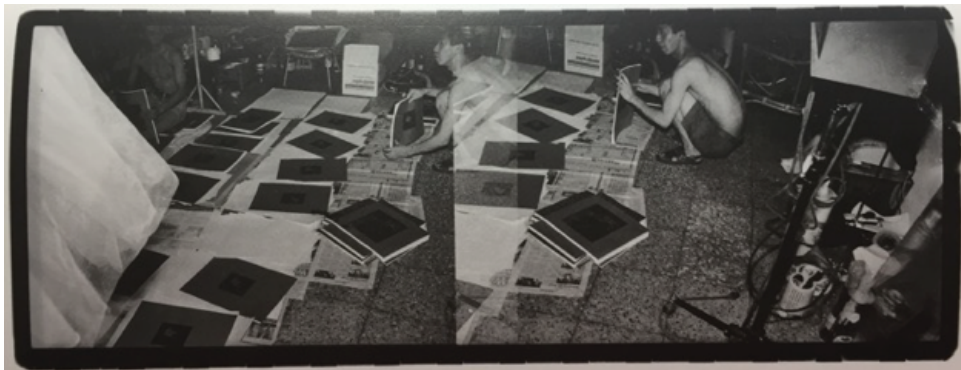


Fig. 3.50: Contact strips of Liu Zheng assembling *New Photo* by hand at RongRong's home in Liulitun.

Source: RongRong and inri. *Liu Li Tun*. Vol. 1. Beijing: Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, 2006: n.p.



Fig. 3.51: Exhibition ephemera from *Contemporary Photography from the People's Republic of China* (*Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der VR China*) at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin.
 Source: Hans van Dijk Archive, Asia Art Archive.

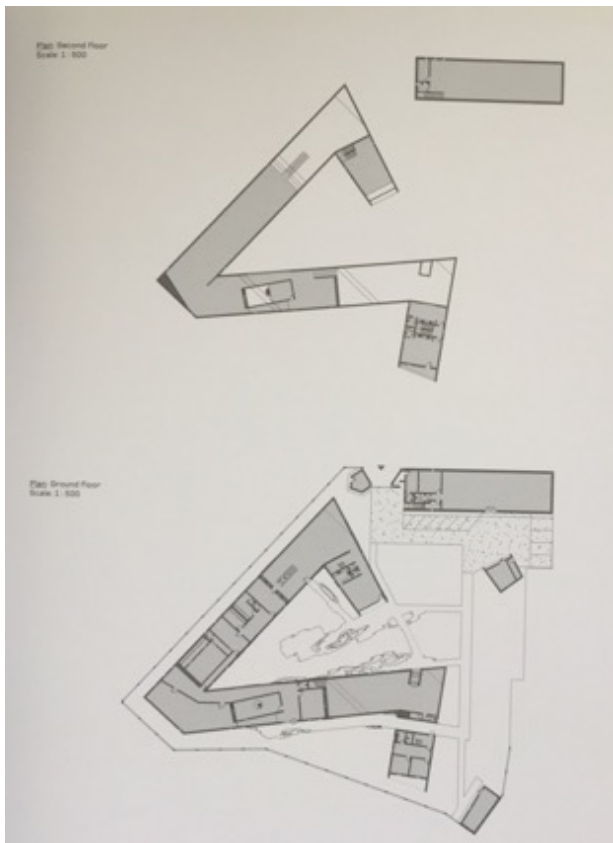


Fig. 3.52: Plan of Three Shadows Photography Arts Centre.
 Source: Ai Weiwei, and Anthony Pins, eds. *Ai Weiwei, Spatial Matters: Art, Architecture, Activism*. London: Tate Publishing, 2014: 203.



Fig. 4.1: Wang Gongxin, *The Sky of Brooklyn*, 1995, installation, video, Baofang hutong, Beijing.
Source: Francesca Dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.2: Huang Yong Ping, *Reptiles*, 1989, installation, paper mâché, washing machines at *The Magicians of the Earth* [Les Magiciens de la terre], Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris.
Source: Fei Dawei Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.3: Huang Yong Ping, *“The History of Chinese Art” and “A Concise History of Modern Painting” after Two Minutes in the Washing Machine*, 1987, installation, 29.2 × 73 × 28.6 cm (11½ × 28¾ × 11¼ in.). Source: Francesca dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.4: A 1989 Bicentennial parade float featuring a human tricolor flag formed by Senegalese women. Source: Jean-Paul Goude Archive.



Fig. 4.5: Huang Yong Ping, *Theater of the World – The Bridge*, 1993–95, cages (metal, wood), bronzes from the collections of Cernuschi Museum in Paris, tortoises, snakes, insects, 10.4 × 3.2 × 1.8 m at *Gallery of the Five Continents* [*Galerie des Cinq Continents*], National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania, Paris.

Source: Philippe Vergne, and Doryun Chong, eds. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005: 35.



Fig. 4.6: Huang Yong Ping, *Theater of the World*, 1993 at the Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart (1993).

Source: Philippe Vergne, and Doryun Chong, eds. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005: 36.

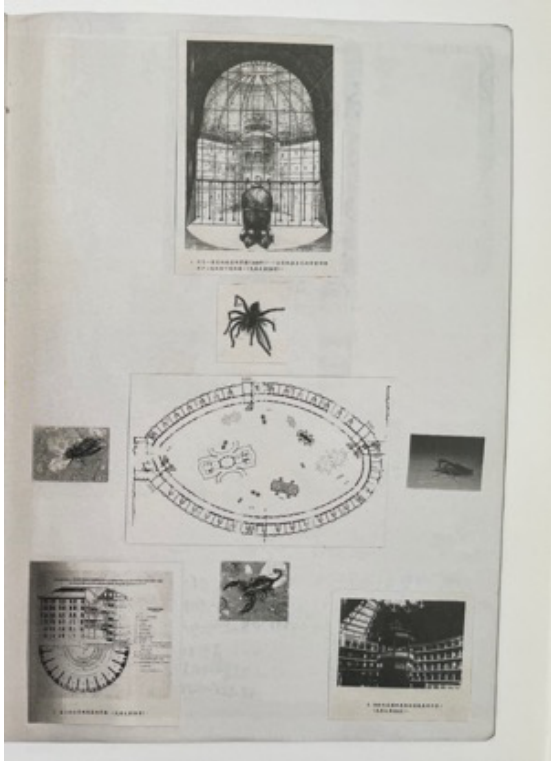


Fig. 4.7: Huang Yong Ping artist notebook.
Source: Philippe Vergne, and Doryun Chong, eds. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*.
Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005: 34-35 (insert).



Fig. 4.8: Huang Yong Ping, *Passage*, 1993, installation at Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow.
Source: Philippe Vergne, and Doryun Chong, eds. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective*.
Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005: 38.



Fig. 4.9a: Huang Yong Ping, Proposal for *Terminal* in *Manifesta 1* (1996), Rotterdam.

Source: Rosa Martinez, *Manifesta 1: Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 9 June-19 August 1996*. Amsterdam: Idea Books, 1996: 30.



Fig. 4.9b: Huang Yong Ping, *Terminal* (1996/1998) in *New Installations by Huang Yong Ping and Xu Bing* at Art Beatus Gallery, Vancouver.

Source: Zheng Shengtian Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.10: Cernuschi Museum Buddha room, ca. late 19th/early 20th.
Source: Musée Cernuschi website, <https://www.cernuschi.paris.fr/en/collections/decor-mansion> (accessed July 13, 2021).



Fig. 4.11: Cernuschi Museum entrance staircase ca. late 19th/early 20th C.
Source: Photograph by Louis-Émile Durandelle. Collection of Roger-Viollet, Musée Cernuschi website, <https://www.cernuschi.paris.fr/en/collections/decor-mansion> (accessed July 13, 2021).

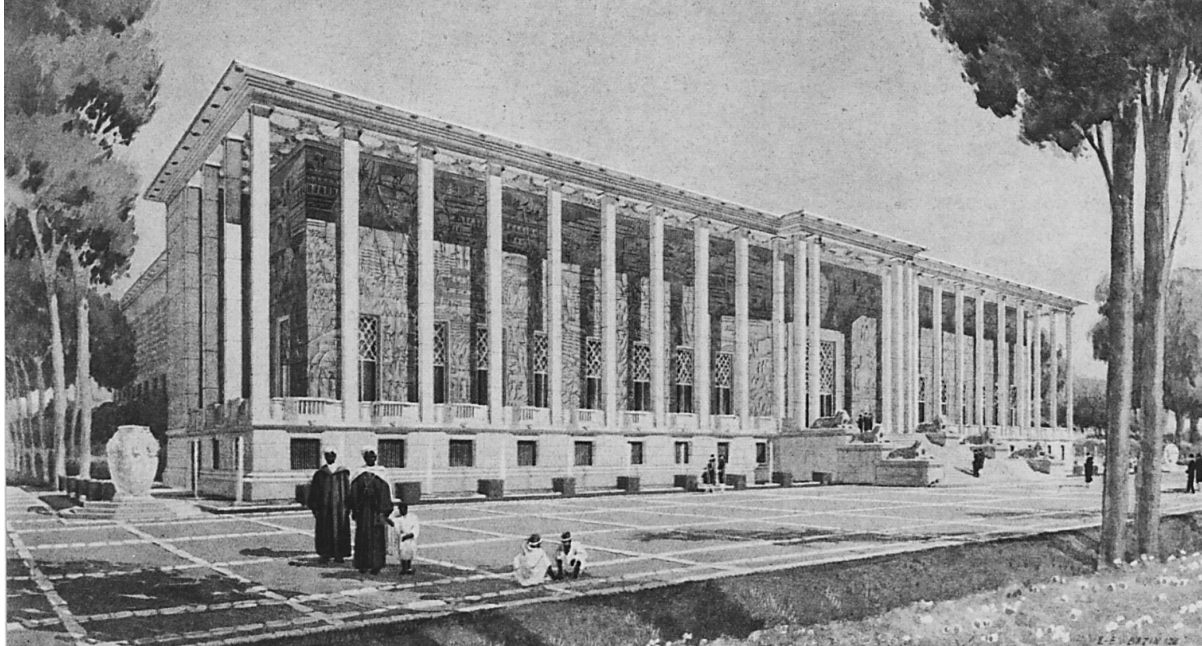


Fig. 4.12: Museum of the Colonies perspective drawing by Léon Bazin, ca. 1931.
Source: Patricia A. Morton. "National and Colonial: The Musée des Colonies at the Colonial Exposition, Paris, 1931." *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (June 1998): 363.



Fig. 4.13: Museum of the Colonies interior atrium, central mural.
Source: Palais de la Porte Dorée website, <https://www.palais-portedoree.fr/en/forum-frescoes> (accessed July 13, 2021).

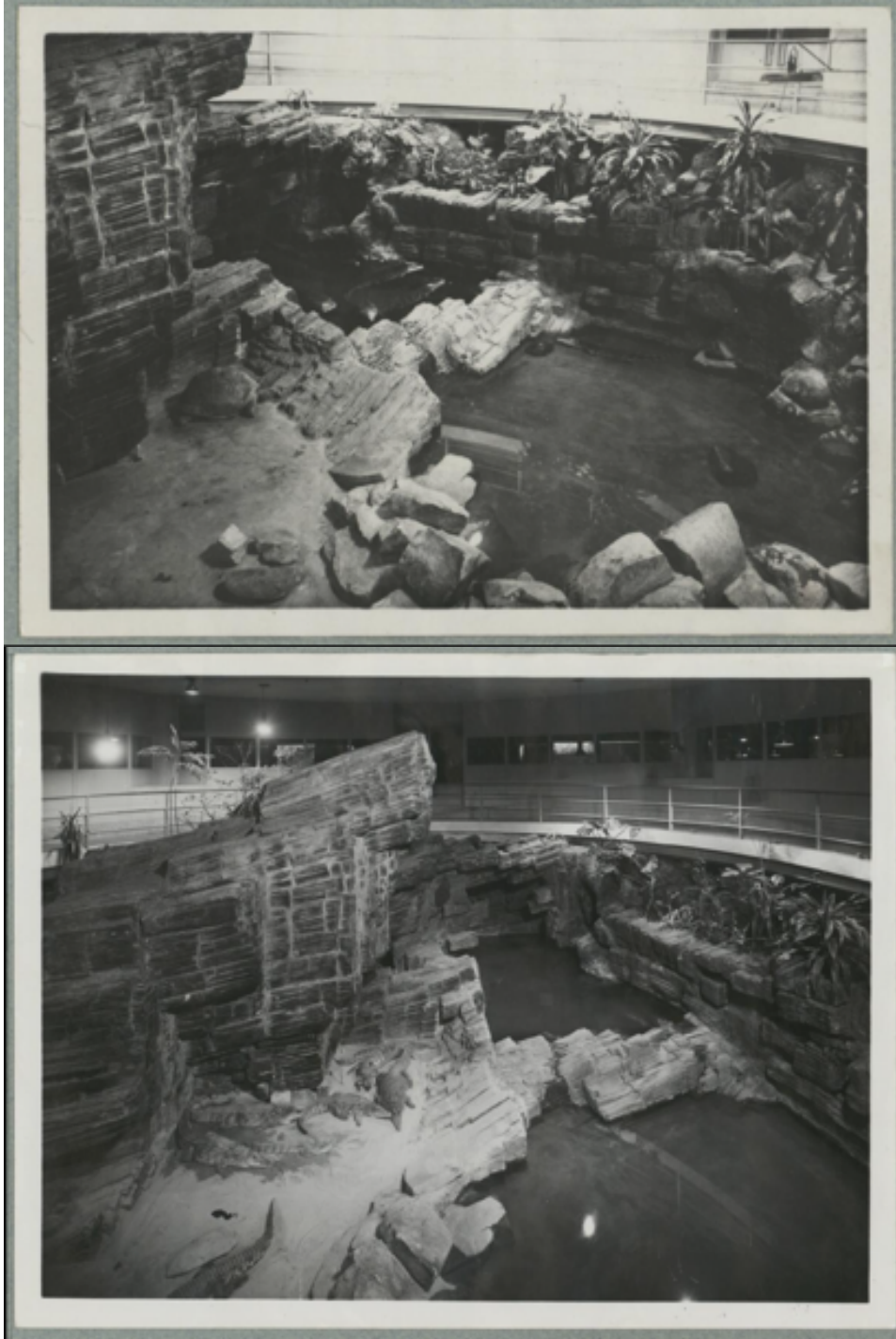


Fig. 4.14: Museum of the Colonies aquarium ca. 1930-1950.
Source: Collection Number PP0131332 and PP0131331, Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac Archive.

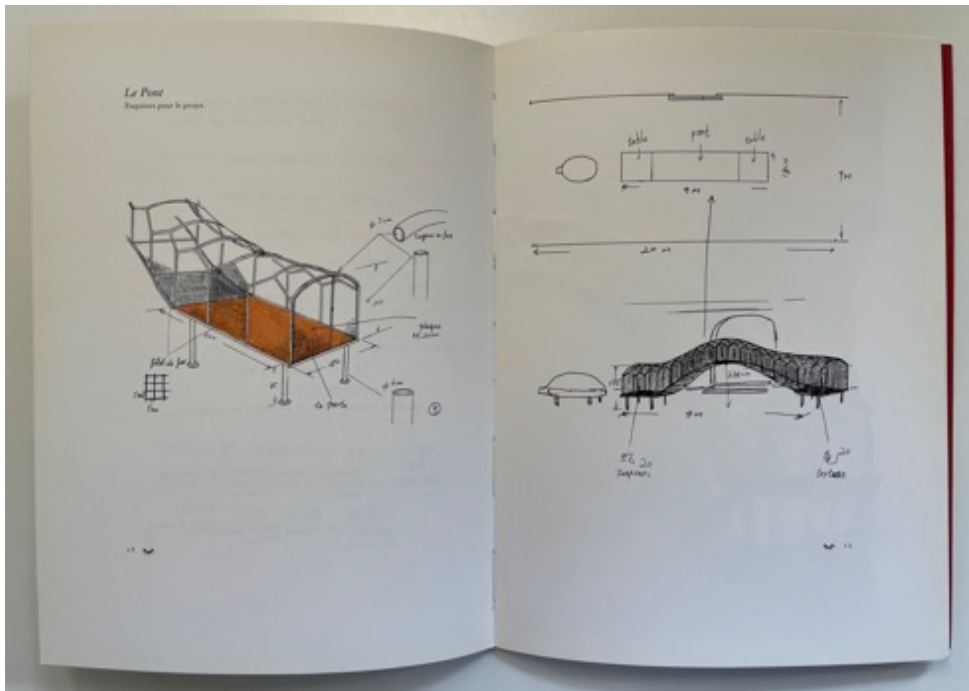


Fig. 4.15: Huang's drawings for *Bridge*.

Source: Jean-Hubert Martin, ed. *Galerie des 5 continents: Huang Yong Ping [Gallery of the 5 continents]*. Paris: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1995: 28-29.



Fig. 4.16: Zhu Jinshi, *Black Monk*, 1985, oil, linen, 160 x 120 cm.

Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 129.



Fig. 4.17: Film still from Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire* (1987).

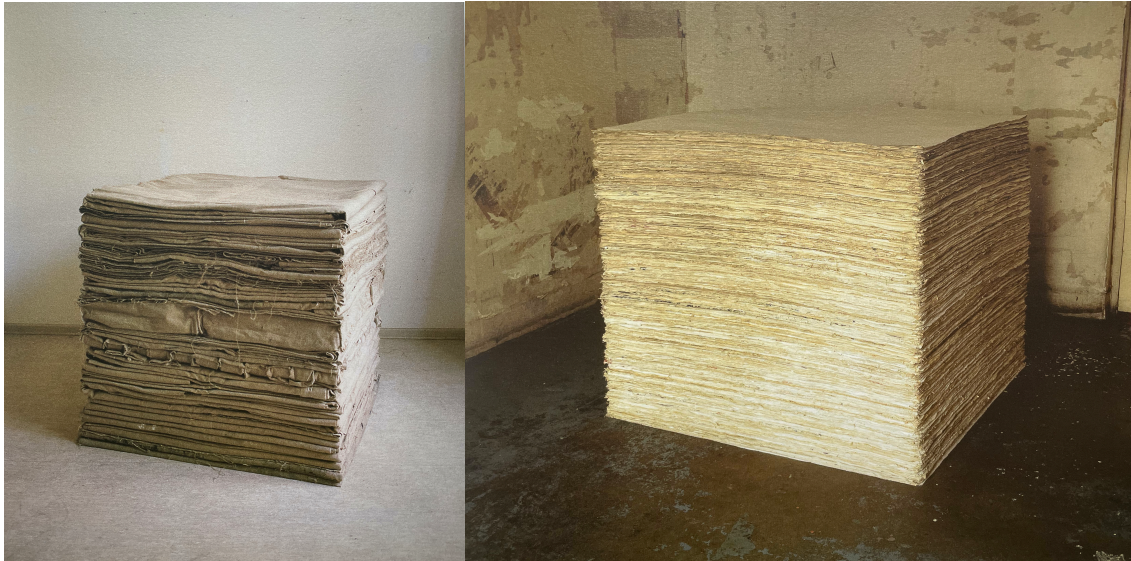


Fig. 4.18: Zhu Jinshi, *Fangzhen Project: One Cubic Meter of Canvas in Berlin, One Cubic Meter of Xuan Paper in Beijing*, 1988.

Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 69, 71.



Fig. 4.19: Michael Asher, Trailer project for *Sculpture Project Münster 1977*, trailer in various locations, Münster. Parking position, 1st week, June 4 – 11.

Source: Photograph by LWL / Rudolf Wakonigg. Skulptur Projekte Archiv, <https://www.skulpturprojekte-archiv.de/en-us/1977/projects/79/> (accessed July 14, 2021).

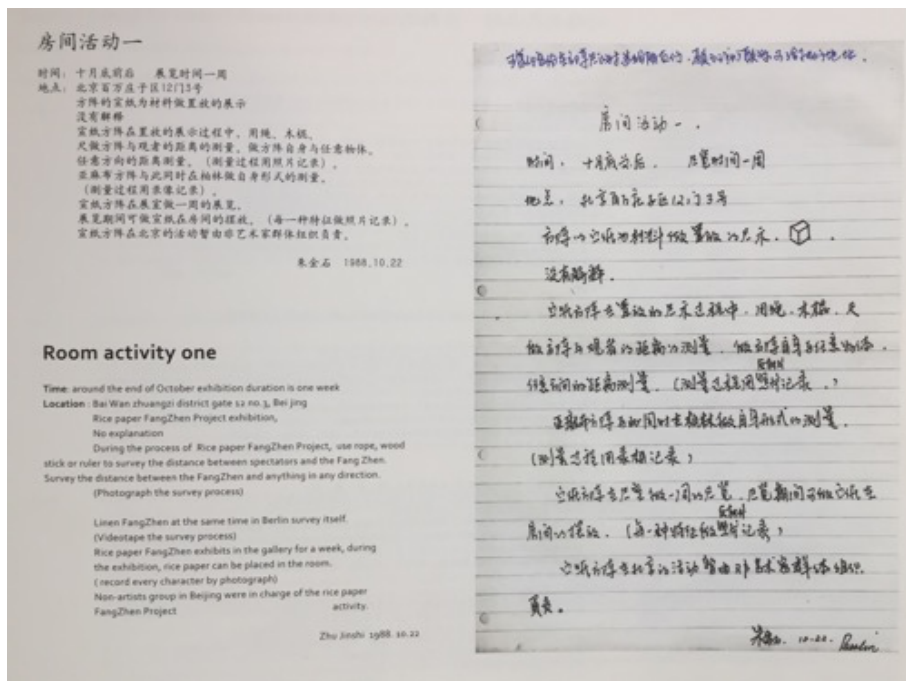


Fig. 4.20: Zhu Jinshi, *Room Activity One*, conceptual activity part of *Fangzhen*, written on October 22, 1988.

Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 89.



Fig. 4.21a: A performance activity part of *Fangzhen*, Marienplatz, Berlin.
Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 78-79.



Fig. 4.21b: A performance activity part of *Fangzhen*, Marienplatz, Berlin.
Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 80-81.



Fig. 4.22 Zhu Jinshi, *Intervention*, 1988, a performance activity part of *Fangzhen*, Berlin Wall.
Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan* [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 86.



Fig. 4.23: Zhu Jinshi, a performance activity part of *Fangzhen*, Spree River, Berlin.
Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan* [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 87.

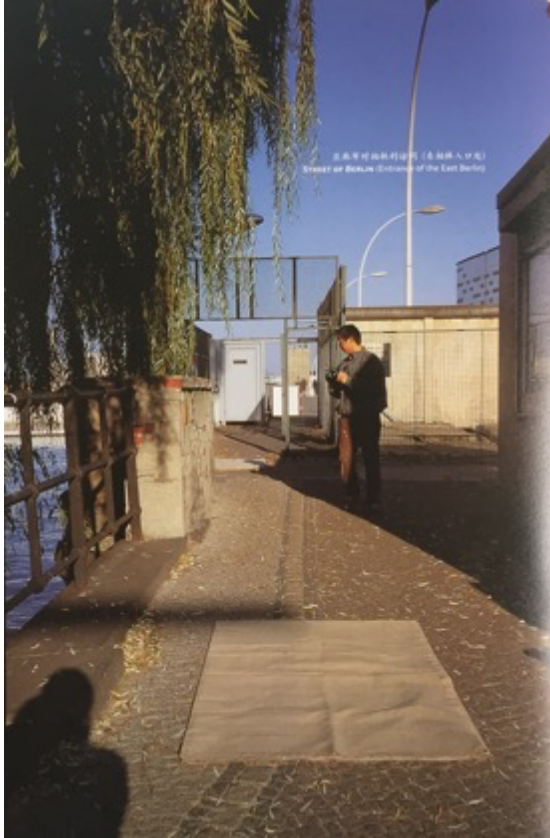


Fig. 4.24: Zhu Jinshi, *The Canvas' Interview of Berlin* (1988), Oberbaum Bridge, Berlin.
 Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 86.

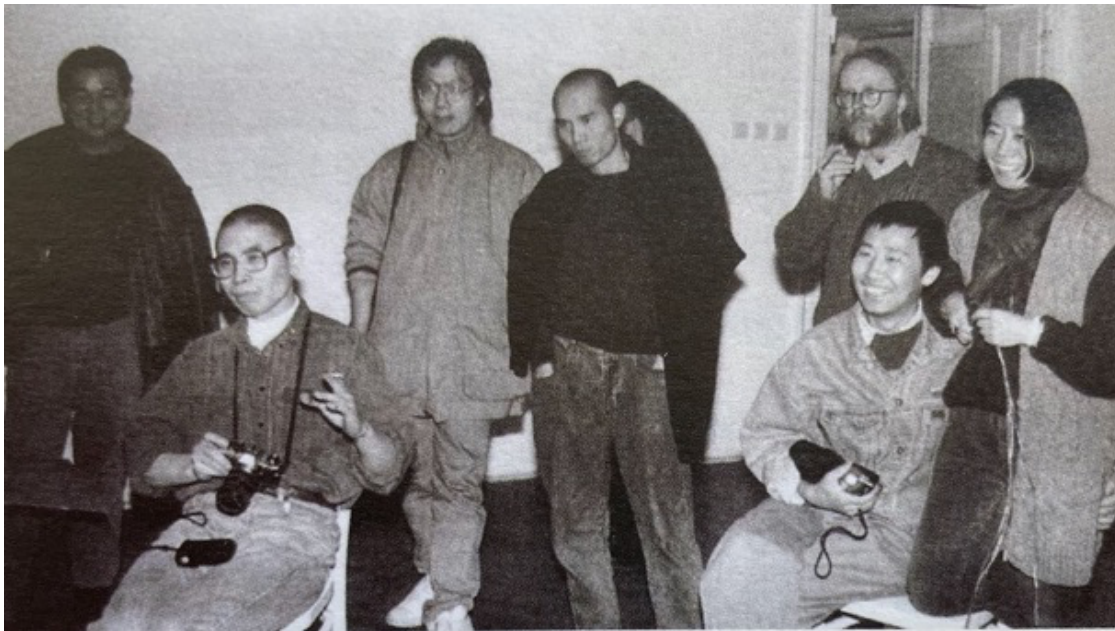


Fig. 4.25: 1993 meeting initiated by Zhu Jinshi in Berlin. From left to right: Yan Peiming, Ma Kelu, Zhang Jianjun, Yang Jiechang, Jerzy Grzegorski, Zhu Jinshi, Qin Yufen.
 Source: *Zhu Jinshi: Quanli yu jiangshan [Zhu Jinshi: power and jiangshan]*. Beijing: Arario Gallery, 2008: 135.



Fig. 4.26a: Yin Xiuzhen, *Visa Office*, installation at former Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Beijing, 1998.

Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 70.



Fig. 4.26b: Yin Xiuzhen, *Visa Office*, installation, at former Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Beijing, 1998.

Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 71.

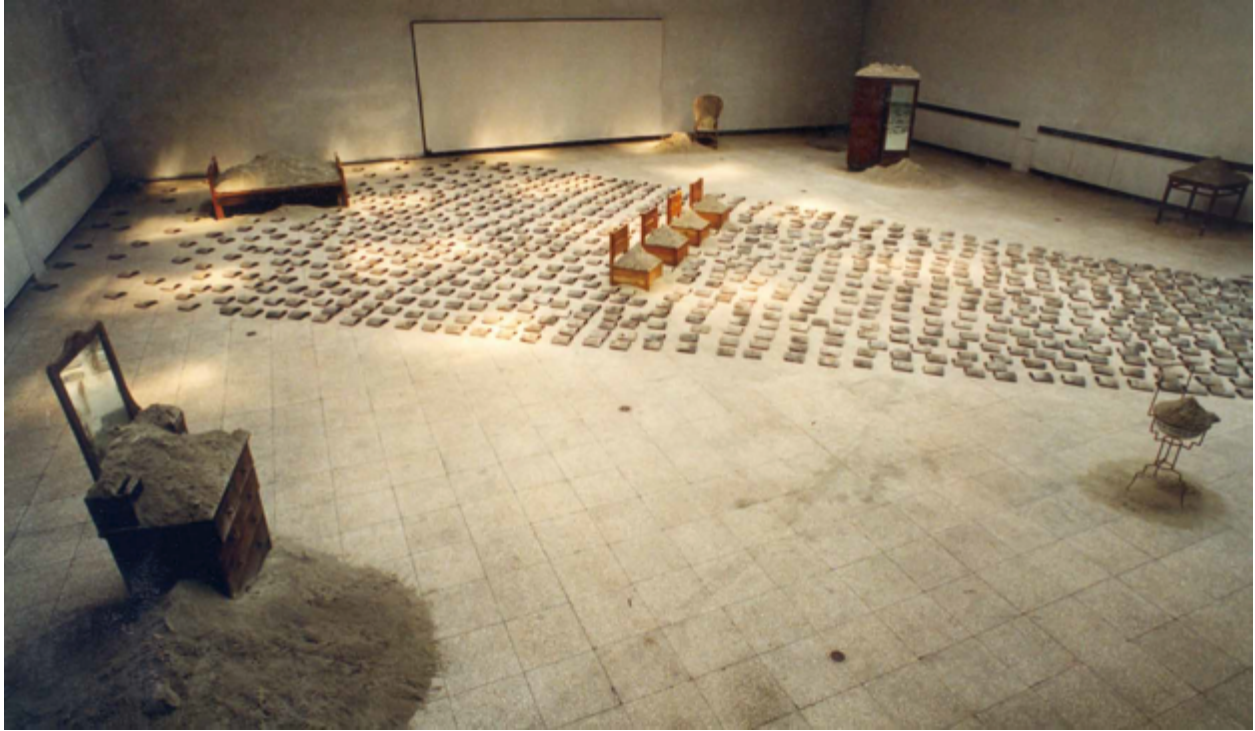


Fig. 4.27: Yin Xiuzhen, *Ruined Capital*, 1996, installation, at the Capital Normal University Art Gallery, Beijing.

Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 36-37.



Fig. 4.28: Yin Xiuzhen, *Room No.17 of Breda*, 1997, installation, bed, quilt, cement, explosive, photo, at *Another Long March* (May 21 – August 3, 1997), Chasse Kazerne, Breda.

Source: Francesca Dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.29: Process of creating Yin Xiuzhen, *Room No.17 of Breda*, 1997.
Source: Francesca Dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.30: Yin Xiuzhen, *Room No.17 of Breda*, 1997.
Source: Francesca Dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.31: Yin Xiuzhen, *Room No.17 of Breda*, 1997, enlarged photograph.
Source: Francesca Dal Lago Archive, Asia Art Archive.



Fig. 4.32: Yin Xiuzhen, *Dining Table*, 1997, installation, fruit, cement, table, 100 x 180 x 80 cm at the
Ruin for Arts, Berlin.
Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiuyan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 51.



Fig. 4.33: Yin Xiuzhen, *Dining Table*, 1997, installation, fruit, cement, table, 100 x 180 x 80 cm, at Ruine for Arts Berlin.

Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 50.



Fig. 4.34a: Yin Xiuzhen, *Peking Opera*, 2000, photographs, stools, sound recordings, at *Fuori Uso*, Pescara, Italy.

Source: Yin Xiuzhen, personal archive.



Fig. 4.34b: Yin Xiuzhen, *Peking Opera*, 2000, photographs, stools, sound recordings exhibited at *Fuori Uso*, Pescara, Italy.
Source: Yin Xiuzhen, personal archive.



Fig. 4.35a: Yin Xiuzhen, *Teahouse*, 2002 (exterior), mirror, inkjet wallpaper, sound, table, chair, sunflower seeds, tea, at Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju.
Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 129.



Fig. 4.35b: Yin Xiuzhen, *Teabouse*, 2002 (interior), mirror, inkjet wallpaper, sound, table, chair, sunflower seeds, tea, at Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju.
 Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 129.



Fig. 4.36: Yin Xiuzhen, *Portable City: Beijing*, 2001, installation, suitcases, used clothes, light, map, sound, 148 x 88 x 30 cm.
 Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 103.



Fig. 4.37: Yin Xiuzhen, *Dress Box*, 1995, used clothes, cement, homemade dress box, copper plate, performance, at the Beijing Contemporary Art Museum.
Source: Lu Jingjing and Zhang Xiyuan, eds. *Yin Xiuzhen*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2012: 19.

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