

Carol Yinghua Lu

# Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds

01/09

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Carol Yinghua Lu  
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I was recently invited by the editors of *Afterall* to contribute to a book they are preparing on the monumental 1989 exhibition “Magiciens de la terre” with a text reflecting on the impact of this exhibition on the practice of Chinese artists. On that occasion I had a discussion with Chinese critic Fei Dawei, who had introduced the curator of the show, Jean-Hubert Martin, to many of the key artists of the ‘85 movement in China prior to the exhibition and worked as one of its regional advisors. As one of the earliest attempts to exhibit contemporary art from non-Western parts of the world in the West and to deal with the possibility of multiculturalism, this exhibition set an important precedent for many projects to come with its ambition of offering a global vision for contemporary art.

What concerned Fei and the many artists Martin encountered on his visit to China was the question of how to formulate the image of the contemporary in Chinese art. For this purpose, Fei deliberately set up studio visits for Martin to first meet with artists such as Wu Guanzhong, who worked in the modernist tradition or were part of the official art circuit in China, before leading him to meet the artists and critics of the ‘85 movement. At that time, both Fei and the artists consistently tried to convince Martin that contemporary art was something unfolding in the most lively manner in the country and that it represented the most current climate of artistic thinking and energy in the country – not folk art, not traditional art.

This visit left a strong impression on Martin. In the end, Chinese artists Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin, and Yang Jiechang were invited to participate in the exhibition, which also featured, for example, tribal art from Africa. It was a fortunate setup for Chinese contemporary artists – the relevance of their practice, which had previously developed in isolation, bound to circulate only within China, was situated and viewed in an international context for the very first time. This would also have a lasting impact on how Chinese contemporary art would be represented in the many exhibitions and occasions that followed in the West.

In 2006, German art historian Hans Belting pioneered a project entitled “Global Art and the Museum” in an attempt to document the global changes in contemporary art and its institutions. Acknowledging the fact that economic globalization has – along with its own institutional practices – taken contemporary art practice beyond the restrictions of national borders, he states:

With the new geography of auction houses, the art trade acts on a global scale, art museums, by contrast, operate within a

national or urban framework in which they encounter the most diverse audiences. While art collecting has become en vogue on an unprecedented scale, it often lacks a common notion of art. Contemporary art also invades former ethnographic museums, which are forced to remap their areas of collecting. As yet, the novelty of the situation defies any safe categories.<sup>1</sup>

This ongoing project, consisting of a series of panel discussions, lectures, conferences, and publications, will lead to an exhibition at the ZKM in 2011 (whose vision to present what could possibly be the global image of contemporary art today is an enormous challenge in itself). Belting, who back in 1983 proposed the end of art history and the end of art's historical narrative, has again stressed in this context that the German perspective is a local one, and that Western art history is a time-based and culture-specific concept whose sensitivity and relevance to other periods of time and cultures should always be re-examined. A workshop he led on global art at the ZKM this past summer proposed a paradigm shift; we were reminded to no longer think about the West as the singular model to be applied worldwide, but to reflect on how to expand this

model using experiences from elsewhere, or even to approach art from the perspective of a multitude of models.

As a participant in the workshop, I became more aware of my own specific local context, which is China, a country whose own position in challenging and redefining multiculturalism and global contemporality, both back in 1989 and twenty years later in 2009, has always been in question. Perhaps it's not simply a matter of creativity and what artworks are being produced, it's also a matter of perspective and methodology: how to view the works produced in this context and, more importantly, how to develop a way of working that is perceptive with regard not only to the works but also to their context, one that is closer to the works' internal complexities and constant transfigurations than to their external features and general applications.

In the following text, I would like to respond to the question "what is contemporary art?" through a historical self-reflection and by looking at the specific scenario in China through a very local perspective.

Even though China was absent from much of modernism's chronological progression, it has followed a unique track and used a set of

02/09



Cyprien Tokoudagba, *Voodoo Pantheon*. The sculpture group shows the Voodoo gods Zangbeto (with Horns, in the background), and Legba, sitting naked, judging a sinner. The group was originally crafted for "Magiciens de la terre" in 1989. from here.

coordinates that fuse Western and Chinese experiences. Today's Chinese artists are more than ever before deeply entrenched in an ever-evolving and gradually more autonomous system of art production and circulation, invigorated simultaneously by the continuous inflow of international knowledge and capital, but even more so by the sheer excess of local interest, investment, and imagination.

Artists, dealers, galleries, museums, art magazines, auction houses, biennials, and art fairs are interwoven into a tighter and tighter network, eagerly replicating the mature model established in the West, while continuously and uninhibitedly adapting it to the practical and philosophical needs of specific local conditions. The unparalleled imaginativeness and potential of this local system constantly defines and redefines the method of working here.

Incidentally or not, just prior to the opening of "Magiciens de la terre" in 1989, a regrettable transition occurred in China that resounded throughout many folds of public life, fundamentally shaping the collective political, social, cultural, and psychological landscape of China with a series of disheartening closures and departures. Cultural, spiritual, and artistic aspirations became secondary to a quickly spreading and highly infectious mood of market optimism and global trade. Economic development became an effective instrument for diverting people's attention from intellectual pursuits and enlightenment. The disregard for knowledge and intellectual pursuits planted during the Cultural Revolution continued to manifest itself in a new wave of brainless entertainment. Ignorance became understood by many as a fashionable state of being.

Meanwhile, 1989 generated many drastic turns in terms of intellectual dynamics as well as personal choices. It was the year when the preceding decade of ideological opening-up and cultural enlightenment came to an abrupt and disillusioning end. Yet the prospect of a new beginning for everyone remained irresistible, offering instant and tangible compensations and achievements. The market economy introduced a system of quantification and evaluation according to materialistic value. A pragmatic and functionalist mindset was firmly established.

A 1991 correspondence between Beijing-based art critic and curator Li Xianting and Paris-based curator Fei Dawei, both of whom were involved in the curating and organization of the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition in February of 1989, clearly revealed their differences, not only in their geographical positions but more profoundly in their intellectual judgments and value systems. In 1991, Li Xianting wrote:

Once art leaves its cultural motherland, it will surely die out. Exiled culture and arts have always happened in the macro cultural background in Europe. You [the artists and critics travelling abroad] represent new issues. What I want to know are opinions from every party. Although they were working against the same overall background, Warhol and Beuys each carried their respective cultural identities. Of course this is discussed on the condition that we acknowledge the new international system of value. Nationality is not the kind promoted by the government, but it does exist. We can't follow the postmodernist styles in the contemporary West using the so-called principle of modernism. In the world today, nothing can be considered avant-garde. No matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar.<sup>2</sup>

At a time when international companies already spread their wings all over the world, speculating upon and investing in a near future when they would reap the benefits of building and becoming part of a global market, some Chinese intellectuals still clung to the idea of cultural locality, in doubt of this "new international system of value." Such claims sounded extremely nationalistic and profoundly arrogant, lacking in curiosity or desire to understand the outside world. Unable to picture the West as an equal partner in cultural exchange, Li spoke about the West as both irrelevant and, at the same time, an impossible standard for the Chinese art world to emulate and be on par with. He certainly touched upon the issue of the impossibility of a contemporary avant-garde with his statement "no matter what you do, it always appears to be familiar," which remains a relevant point that constantly shakes up our decisions and judgments today.

Here I quote Li Xianting again:

But we all cherish your activities abroad. Maybe every kind of effort has its value. We are all cornerstones and nothing (we do) would be worth international attention. Do you really believe that you yourself have had an impact on the Western art world?<sup>3</sup>

In this condescending letter, Li Xianting was not only referring to Fei Dawei but to a group of Chinese artists and intellectuals who left China in the 1980s and '90s to pursue their careers in foreign countries. Among them were Huang Yongping, Chen Zhen, Wang Du, and Hou Hanru in Paris; Cai Guoqiang in Japan; Xu Bing, Zhang Huan, and Ai Weiwei in New York, and so on.

03/09

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Carol Yinghua Lu  
Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds

The conception of Chinese art as being unworthy of international attention or unable to have an “impact on the Western art world” was to quickly change with the increase in international attention on the political and social situation in China. In no time, Chinese contemporary art was embraced by the international art market as a hot item – not particularly for its artistic value, but for its ideological and sociological revelations. In this way, the label of Chinese art became extremely crucial to works that would command international recognition. For many years, even up until today, most Chinese artists, many of whom thrive in the art market, maintain a very strong national identity as compared to a very underdeveloped professional and individual identity. The biggest danger of all would be to then equate one with the other and enjoy artistic success based on identity politics without realizing its true nature.

The fad of buying and exhibiting Chinese art on an international level didn't really speak to the quality of artistic thinking and working in the country, but instead indicated the growing importance of Chinese economic and social power. The consequences of this dimension of the Chinese art world are strongly felt today with

the fall of the Chinese art market. It was a necessity of the so-called “cultural multiplicity” that the West was pursuing for their society to help sustain and glorify their global market activities. Chinese contemporary art was simply a souvenir one had to have to showcase one's international lifestyle. But the question of how actual contemporary art practice in China is relevant and valuable to that of the Western world remains unanswered.

Since the 1990s, a newly developed and unconstrained art market took over the Chinese art world as it was still in its infancy, before it had achieved the institutional diversity that characterizes longer-established art infrastructures in other countries. As a result, contemporary art in China has become almost entirely dependent on market forces, which have set themselves up as the dominant, and virtually the only system of evaluating and crediting artworks and the success of artists. The vibrancy of the market gave a huge boost to the confidence and ambition of the players and fed into the “bigger means better” frenzy. There were bountiful resources available to open galleries of 1,000 square meters, stage expensive productions, mount large-scale exhibitions, produce bulky catalogues, and host luxurious



Zhang Huan, *Berlin Buddha*, 2007. Aluminium, 370 x 260 x 290 cm.



opening-night parties. All of a sudden, everything was possible. Artists responded to such optimism with attempts at mega-productions. Artworks and art practices were discussed and received, not from an artistic and conceptual point of view, but on the basis of misplaced criteria such as size, production budget, market price, and the preferences of collectors.

Concerning artistic production itself, the advancement of contemporary art practice in China hasn't followed the linear logic of Western art history. Intellectual development was basically stagnant and taken hostage by political movements during the preceding decades of Communist rule. This situation worsened with the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which severed not only the link between the country's intellectual life and the outside world, but also the bloodline that connected it with its own history and cultural traditions. Education was suspended and knowledge and ideas were dismissed.

Thus, when the country reopened its doors and resumed its interest in culture at the end of the 1970s, there was already a great discrepancy between what was going on in the heads of Chinese artists and intellectuals and what was happening in the rest of the world. Chinese

05/09

artists rushed to assimilate disjointed and sometimes misinterpreted information and adapted it to the social, historical, and cultural specificity of the country in order to shape their own methodology. Modernism, postmodernism, classical philosophy, eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, liberalism, anti-imperialism, and other intellectual movements from the Western world were introduced into China all at once to become parallel and mixed influences on the practices of artists.

The 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition can be considered a rather extensive and reliable gauge of the mixture of styles and thinking that contemporary Chinese artists were keenly exploring during the 1980s. All of it, however, was charged with a great sense of randomness, which was telling with regard to the intellectual state of the artists. Their system of knowledge was fragmented. On one hand, they suffered from the missed opportunity for education during the Cultural Revolution and from a missing link to the traditions that were wiped out by it. On the other hand, the sudden shift from having one type of visual and cultural experience (the omnipresent revolutionary realism) to being exposed to a dazzling diversity of aesthetic and conceptual possibilities presented the artists



Ai Weiwei, *White House*, 1999. From the series "Finger," B/W Print, Edition of 10, 51 x 61 cm / 90 x 127 cm.

with the challenge of having to decide what to choose. Often the choice was made based upon an instinct or an attitude, and this would become the operational basis on which artists would form their own artistic structure and language.

Although parallel practices continued to exist from the 1990s up to the present day, the international interest and art market have been mostly focused on works that prioritize socially and politically charged subject matter over stylistic experimentation and conceptual investigation. Artists that created cynical realist, social realist, political Pop that feeds into a kind of collective imagination of a Chinese society have been gaining so much recognition since the early nineties that the artists even strove to minimize technological and formal complexity in order to focus the attention of the viewer on the depicted content. Their method of referring to social content has become the central theme that runs through their entire practice and leaves little room for anything else.

Li Xianting, who wrote the above-quoted letter in 1991, was an important figure in the 1980s whose editorial work in art publications such as *Meishu* (Fine Arts) gave crucial visibility and endorsement to promising young artists and artist groups. It was a time when artists and critics seemed to venture hand-in-hand into completely new territory, later overlooked by the political hype of proceeding years. This new territory involved recovering the normal need to express and experiment artistically without being bound by ideological or political obligations. Formal and conceptual investigations were considered to be a matter of intellectual awakening.

The “China/Avant-Garde” show was less a thematic group exhibition than a platform and occasion, as well as a valid context, for an outburst of emotional and spiritual energy pent up in the previous decades.

Just two years after the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, reality seemed much farther away. Contemporary art somehow took a back seat to what the country was occupied primarily with, namely, economic development. There were considerably fewer chances to exhibit publicly within China, and those who had been actively involved in the 1980s took the time to reflect on building group dynamics and collective ways of working such as through political activism, which offered a source of emotional comfort and courage. Artists and critics were also pondering and searching for a new future in the absence of a clear model to follow. It would take a few more years before the knowledge, understanding, and capital from the Western art structure, along with what Li called “the International system of value,” would trickle down to have an effect on

the formation of the art system in China.

It was around this time, in 1991, when Li wrote the letter to Fei quoted above. It reflected a rather conservative and functionalist mindset, one that rejected and critiqued the position of those artists and intellectuals who worked outside of China. He attributed the temporary inactivity of Chinese artists residing overseas to the fact that they were outside of their context. Fei pointedly responded by saying that the inability to respond to new contexts was deeply rooted in the education and ideology these artists were subjected to in China, and argued that only when the artists were able to surpass their given cultural and social contexts would they be able to truly succeed internationally. As Fei himself put it:

Most Chinese artists who have left China couldn't fully realize their talents as they did back in China. Besides the issues of language and practical life, the main reason was precisely the particular intellectual quality and way of thinking that were cultivated in their intellectual native land. It prevents them from entering the contemporary cultural issues in a new context. This kind of creative “drought” comes from the inability of these artists to turn what they have learned in their own country into something that can transcend the cultural gap and continue to be effective. Yet this “inability” is exactly the result of the long-term influence of the closed and conservative cultural spirit unique to Chinese society. Thus, I think what you said might be reversed: “Art must die out without leaving its cultural motherland.”

Naturally, what I meant by “leaving” is that art must have a side that transcends its native culture in order to develop. The world today is in the era of globalized culture and openness. We can only truly discover our own uniqueness and enable our native culture to gain momentum by perceiving and being involved in those common issues that transcend culture . . . To reflect on ourselves while keeping the door closed is like a person facing himself in a mirror. No matter how he thinks of himself, it is eventually making himself believe in himself. Although this can be regarded as “sticking to one's native culture,” it is actually no more than a self-tortured psychological habit developed in a long-term situation of being closed-minded. In my view, only when the “native culture” walks out of its “native culture,” can it

06/09

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Carol Yinghua Lu  
Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds

become the real “native culture.” It’s time to reverse what Lu Xun proposed in the thirties, “what is more national is more international” into “what is more international is more national.”

What we are doing, and what we want to do, is to gradually place issues brought from the Chinese context into the larger cultural background of the world, in a lively and creative way, so that it can set in motion a process of becoming “common” and “extensive.”<sup>4</sup>

There was a great deal of idealist passion as well as critical understanding of one’s own cultural context running through Fei’s appeal. Cultural specificity shouldn’t be a defining trait of one’s existence and thinking; it can however be valuable when placed in an international context to be scrutinized and renewed, in constant interaction and dialogue with an external cultural sphere.

Throughout the past two decades, under the influence of the art market, an infrastructure for contemporary art has slowly taken shape. Yet although it bears all the familiar characteristics of a mature art system – with galleries, contemporary art museums, art magazines, collections, art centers, archives, and so on – a lot of them are just forms without real substance. Art magazines run informational articles, which are rarely critical, and feature neither reviews nor art criticism. Art museums operate by renting out exhibition spaces and filling programs with paying shows, completely lacking in curatorial framework or presentation. Art centers accept shows supported by gallery money or the investment of private art dealers and so-called collectors (who are actually speculators). Art archives and triennials are initiated, funded, and curated by private gallerists who seek to feature their own represented artists in a broader and apparently more authoritative context. Art historians compile bulky histories of contemporary art heavily informed and influenced by their close circle of contacts.

While these roles in the scene are often very blurry, the more profound and problematic aspect is that no matter what motivation or scheme lies behind all of these institutions, the quality of their projects is always the lowest priority, and almost always compromised.

It’s interesting to observe this dynamic in the art scene by examining the way Chinese society is organized. In recent years, the interest in individuality that has arisen from a capitalist economy has met with a strong tradition of surrendering one’s own desires to those of a

collective situation. Collectivism is about the loss of individual desires, as well as of individual responsibility.

As for the Chinese artists based abroad, it would take longer for them to be recognized. However, the functionalist and results-oriented mentality prevalent in China was also hindering leading critics like Li himself, who was once among those making headway by looking beyond his given reality. Less than two decades later, many of the “exiled” artists who left China to live and work abroad in the 1980s and ‘90s have gradually returned to major cities in China, many with admirable international careers behind them. More importantly, these figures brought back not only their practice and artistic ideas, updated and shaped by their time overseas, but also a formidable number of possibilities for influencing the art scene within China.

In the case of Zhang Huan, an artist who lived in New York between 1998 and 2005, he had left China for the United States after gaining prominence in the performance art movement of early nineties China. Once in New York, it didn’t take long for him to be invited to perform and work with important American and international institutions. He proved able not only to overcome the constraint of cultural contexts, but also to transition effortlessly between two cultures, in either direction. In 2005 he moved back to Shanghai and established a fifteen-acre studio and production center on the outskirts of the city. Zhang’s continuing international success is the object of envy for many local artists and his way of working has certainly presented a new model for the local art scene. Here, he hired and trained skilled workers and technicians from various regions across the country, whose technical competence complemented his own thinking. This sophisticated and well-managed production workshop churned out a great number of Zhang’s physically imposing oversized sculptures.

Although made in China, Zhang’s current works are rarely exhibited inside the country, even though he exhibits actively and sells work on an international level. His first solo exhibition in China, planned last year for the Shanghai Museum of Art, was eventually cancelled due to sensitive content. The last decade of market inflation has given a lot of people false confidence and false belief in the sustainability of the local system. Here the lack of criticality and intellectual scrutiny is replaced by an overemphasis on networking, the formation of personal alliances, and the necessity of strategic maneuvering in order to tease a primitive market appetite. It is this very way of being that characterizes the local art system, which seems to have a hard time finding a way to

07/09

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Carol Yinghua Lu  
Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds

contextualize, understand, and present the international artistic language and practice of Zhang Huan. He remains an enigma for the art scene in China today.

Meanwhile, many people in the Chinese art scene are still perplexed and constrained by doubts of a general and primitive nature. One afternoon when I walked through the art district of Beijing, the few people I ran into – gallerists, directors of art spaces – coincidentally told me the same thing: now that the market is down, they want to discover new talent and work with young artists. This is as much an illusion as the idea that older and more established artists are no longer active or involved, and have thus lost their value. Like anywhere else, people are obsessed with youth and emerging talent, yet the difference is that the Chinese art structure hasn't diversified enough to gain the intellectual and theoretical momentum necessary to address the ongoing practice of already established artists and their relevance. The roles of the institutions are not clearly defined and everyone is competing for the same resources, while being simultaneously unable to develop a stable discourse through which to position the actual work.

What Fei Dawei argued almost two decades ago is unfortunately still a valid premise and goal for those of us working in China: how do we examine and activate our own cultural conditions and contexts in a global discourse, rather than emphasize our own uniqueness and become burdened by it? It's not international attention that will release us, but our self-discipline and critical engagement with our own practices and ideas that will possibly make us active participants in the global art scene, artists who do not lose sight of the rest of the world. Maybe it's less relevant to ask what is "Chinese art" than to think about what is contemporary in our own particular context and how it relates to the larger context of the world.

It seems that we are living in a contemporary world just like everyone else, and we have the same kind of exposure to news and information and entertainment; if we look hard enough, we find that we drink the same kind of coffee and are sensitive to similar kinds of things. But for many of us living in China, it's as if we are only beginning to make the journey to the contemporary. For China, the 1960s and '70s were periods of temporary suspension and removal from the modernist movements – and more importantly, from the transition from the modern to the contemporary – that took place in other parts of the world, and this distance proved to be devastating. In the past few decades, we have slowly built up a degree of confidence and resources, sufficient perhaps to

finally examine the same sets of concerns and issues on the same level, and to finally make the transition to the contemporary.

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08/09

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Carol Yinghua Lu  
Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds



Carol Yinghua Lu is an independent curator and art writer based in Beijing. She is the co-editor of *Contemporary Art & Investment* magazine and a frequent contributor to a number of international art magazines such as *Frieze*, *Contemporary*, and *Today Art*. Her texts on contemporary art have appeared in many art catalogues, books and magazines. A graduate of the Critical Studies program at the Malmö Art Academy, Lund University, Sweden, she was the China researcher for Asia Art Archive from 2005 to 2007. Her curatorial work includes “The Temperament of Detail” in Red Mansion Foundation, London, “Foreign Objects” in the Project Space of Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna, “The Weight of Reality” in Marella Gallery, Beijing, two curatorial projects in ARCO'06 and ARCO'07, Madrid, “Community of Taste” at The Inaugural Exhibition of Iberia Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, and “There is No Story to Tell: An Exhibition of International Artists” in Tang Contemporary, Beijing. She has co-taught the 2007 summer course for BA and MA art and architecture students from the California College of Art, acted as the art consultant for the Olympic Museum Lausanne on a major exhibition about China, and is on the jury for Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council for selecting cultural projects for its "China 2008–2010" program.

09/09

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Carol Yinghua Lu  
**Back to Contemporary: One Contemporary Ambition, Many Worlds**