

Carol Yinghua Lu
**The Missing
Front Line**

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In the past five years, Chinese art has become triply deficient: lacking a questioning approach, lacking a sense of history, and lacking a view of values. The majority of artworks, art projects, and exhibitions are in a *vacuous* state. When they are not infinitely magnifying certain everyday experiences, individual trivialities, and emotions, they are nihilistically discussing abstract concepts, life, and Zen, casually elevating these concepts to the level of “resistance.” There is aversion to discussing the commercialization and commodification of art, and the artistic creator as entrepreneur. Many artists divide their work evenly between time in the studio and time spent interacting with the society of collectors, financiers, and social elites. The value of art is directly equated with its commercial value and its social reception.

Concealing the triple deficiency of artistic practice are the words “contemporary art.” Though “contemporary art” is a term of temporal relativity, it has given many artistic practitioners a form of “atemporal” legitimacy. This “atemporality” is unmoored, feeling no need to explain its origins, care for the past, or to touch on larger problems. As long as something takes place in the time and space of “contemporary art,” it is as though it can be self-evidently affixed with the label “contemporary art.” I am not here to roll up my sleeves and get to the bottom of who qualifies as “contemporary,” nor do I have any intention of treating “contemporary art” as a faction. What is important is to ask: How did we get to this understanding of the contemporary? Where did we come from to arrive here? The presence and development of the contemporary art system encourages us to avoid answering or asking these questions.

The “New Normality”

The more craftily written art writing and criticism is, the more vapid and powerless the dressed-up art appears to be. Most artistic practitioners lack curiosity about their surroundings, and have no interest in engaging audiences in dialogue. Artists are merely concerned that their artworks be placed within this system, consumed and circulated for their own benefit. The critical ecosystem surrounding exhibitions and artworks has become a production line. A glance at the constantly updating exhibition reviews on popular art websites shows a consistent formula: short reviews, between four hundred and a thousand words in length, either praising the artist or casting out a line of criticism to show the writer’s independence by simply listing the works in the exhibition. Reading a dozen exhibition reviews is like reading the same one over and over, no matter how much the exhibition content differs. Not that it often does: many

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A street scene in Chaozhou, a small coastal city in south China, February 2017. Photo: Liu Ding.

exhibitions are much the same, minus a few changes in artists' names, a few changes in the way Zen thought is expressed, a change of abstract form, or a change of internet "totems." Is it art that leaves me so disappointed? Are my expectations of artistic practice too high? Is it too much to ask that art possesses ideas, speak, and even do something?

Young artists, novel and appealing, are quickly drawn into the art system. Frequently they enjoy an extended honeymoon period of being viewed, supported, consumed, discussed, and described. Meanwhile, artists who have been working since the 1970s and '80s are highlighted as part of a particular art movement, even being lauded as the movement's leading or representative figures, gaining the affirmation of the art system. These older artists have been brought into international exhibitions that focus on presenting Chinese art, and have been the center of attention for collectors and the art market. However, after so many years, *their work remains undescribed* in terms of its art-historical relevance. They circulate without being critically examined, considered, or analyzed. A widespread anxiety remains among these artists, born in the 1950s and '60s, about whether the attention placed on them will shift, with the passage of time, to their body of work. As it is, their practice is reduced to a few representative achievements before the discussion moves on to focus on their market value. Very little transcends the topics of supply and demand. We could say that in over thirty years of the progression of Chinese contemporary art, much work and thinking has yet to be described or contextualized art historically.

A shared concern among Chinese artists and practitioners is that they do not know from what position to discuss, expound on, and view their own work. A few discursive methods control the discussion of art, limiting it to such frameworks as historical determinism, evolutionary development, and generational replacement. Some critics and historians are skilled at using one specific language to automatically exclude other value orientations arising from different approaches outside of the dominant narrative. This presents us with the immediate, pressing challenge of keeping those people and things who have been excluded at the forefront of our imaginations.

Beginnings: 1949–1978

Today, the Chinese government is the largest employer in contemporary art, exercising near-total control over the allocation of resources, exhibition opportunities, and platforms. The government manages and oversees the creation and output of contemporary art. By playing the

role of agent, sponsor, and patron of Chinese contemporary art in the international field, it aims to gain greater authority domestically. Alongside the increasing acceptance and accommodation to the existing state system in the field of Chinese contemporary art, there has been a marked increase in nationalist sentiment among practitioners of the art field. This is a new historical situation, one that represents a drastic change in artistic practice and discourse, even if the groundwork for it was laid decades ago.

The existing narratives of contemporary art in China rarely consider anything prior to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Contemporary art is treated as a new phenomenon, easily distinguished from what came before it. The prevalent disregard of the three decades immediately following the founding of the People's Republic gives a false impression that contemporary art can be free of any inherited ideological framework. Since 2013, the artist Liu Ding and I have been researching the historical narratives and ideological frameworks of Chinese contemporary art in a sixty-seven-year timeframe.

To study the formation of "Chinese contemporary art" in the New China is to recognize the extremely complex artistic system that has gradually taken shape since 1949, and its multiple inner contradictions. The current historical narrative of the origin of Chinese contemporary art stresses its rupture from the fine art tradition, and describes contemporary art as in a "transitional" state in terms of its relationship to art before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Such a perception fails to sufficiently account for many actions and directions witnessed in contemporary art of the past three decades. Although such dualistic narrative structures as art vs. politics, heterodoxy vs. orthodoxy, oppression vs. submission, independence vs. dependence might have a certain historical legitimacy in specific contexts, they are far from being adequate when it comes to describing the versatility, complexity, and fluidity of both current and historical realities. Such a narrative structure based on dualist oppositions forms into a basic description and consciousness. It is an inert extension of the "revolutionary" narrative plot, subjectively suspending the varied conflicting elements in the space and time of history. The narrative construct of contemporary art that bases its legitimacy on its "avant-garde" position has long revealed its limitations and narrow-mindedness in failing to provide stimulus to both artistic practitioners and to diversifying historical accounts of art. Re-analyzing and rediscovering the directions of Chinese art in the three decades after the founding of the People's

Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 is essential if the characteristics and judgments of contemporary Chinese art today are to be understood.

Socialist Realism with Chinese Characteristics

The Chinese socialist movement was a resistance movement as well as a movement of modernization carried out through nation-building and industrialization. Its historical experience and lessons are intricately linked to the modernization process itself. In the research that Liu Ding and I are undertaking, we have proposed treating Socialist Realism as a visible thread of modernity in China. The evolution of Socialist Realism in China has always been intertwined with aspirations towards modernization. The issues of modernization in contemporary China were not simply raised by Marxism; China's Marxism is itself an ideology of modernization. China's socialist movement not only had the realization of modernization as a fundamental goal; it is also a primary trait of Chinese modernity. There is a difference between the concept of modernization in the Chinese context and the concept of modernization in theories of modernization. The Chinese concept of modernization encompasses a value system composed of socialist ideology. Mao Zedong's socialism was, on the one hand, an ideology of modernization and, on the other, a critique of European and American capitalist modernization. Clearly, the politics of names is also the politics of memory. The conceptual tradition of our Socialist Realism is the formation of a named reality that extends to this day. By placing it within an internal field of vision for examination, we hope to begin discussions and efforts to recreate the circumstances of its complex diversity.

The origins of Chinese Socialist Realism lie in the political and social crisis of the early twentieth century. The May Fourth Movement began in 1919 after the Treaty of Versailles transferred the Shandong peninsula on China's east coast from defeated Germany to the Empire of Japan. Driven by a deep-rooted patriotism, Chinese scholars and thinkers pursued a rhetorical and conceptual revolution in literature. The Movement took a utilitarian view on art and culture, which grew out of its concern that Chinese art and literature, like other cultural institutions, had fallen behind in the international competition for modernity and that drastic measures had to be taken to remedy this situation.

Driven by the calls for enlightenment of the mind and revolution, Chinese scholars and thinkers were anxious to resolve the fate of the nation; art and literature became a channel

through which a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from the national character to the nation's future, would be addressed. The most fundamental shift in the history of this commitment was when the Communist Party established Yan'an as the center for literature and art in 1942, attracting many leftist artists and writers to join. Prior to this event, it had been intellectuals and thinkers who mobilized and guided the reform and revolution of literature and art. Since the "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," politicians have been the decisive force of literature and art in China – Mao above all. The concern of reforming art was no longer that of seeking a remedy to save the country from crisis, but one of legitimizing the absolute position and power of the Communist Party.

At the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao endeavored to stem and deflect three trends in artistic practice: realism, sentimentalism, and satire. These were all denounced as wrong to the extent that these served "petty-bourgeois" interests or communities. Henceforth, literature and art were to serve the masses, and by extension, the Party under Mao, who ruled in the name of the workers, peasants, and soldiers.

No revolutionary writer or artist can do any meaningful work unless he is closely linked with the masses, gives expression to their thoughts and feelings and serves them as a loyal spokesman. Only by speaking for the masses can he educate them and only by being their pupil can he be their teacher. If he regards himself as their master – as an aristocrat who lords it over the "lower orders" – then no matter how talented he may be he will not be needed by the masses and his work will have no future.

Is this attitude of ours utilitarian? Materialists do not oppose utilitarianism in general but the utilitarianism of the feudal, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes; they oppose the hypocrites who attack utilitarianism in words but in deeds embrace the most selfish and short-sighted utilitarianism. There is no "ism" in the world that transcends utilitarian considerations; in class society there can be only the utilitarianism of this or that class.¹

The literary and artistic framework in the seventeen years between 1949 and 1966 – after the founding of the PRC and before the Cultural Revolution – was mainly derived from the

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interpretation, and subsequent specification, standardization, and institutionalization of Mao Zedong's literary theory and thought, led by the Party's leftist cultural leaders headed by Zhou Yang. As Mao's leading theoretician, Zhou Yang elaborated on Mao's conception in writing, and realized the formation and institutionalization of early leftist culture in China.

Even after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou maintained Mao's influence over art and literature. At the Fourth National Conference on Literature and Art on November 1, 1979, Zhou delivered a speech entitled "Carry forward the Cause to the Future, Literature and Art in the New Era of Prosperous Socialism," giving an overview of the history of socialist literature and art in China, while conveying the Party's policy on literature and art to the country's cultural practitioners. This iconic text set the blueprint for the basic historical structure as well as the contemporary image of Chinese literature and art. Zhou pointed out in his talk that

Looking back on our country's literary and artistic development in the last thirty years, with the exception of the ten years of turmoil caused by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, our literary and artistic work for the most part, followed the literary and artistic direction set by the Party and Comrade Mao Zedong, with Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as our guiding principles at large. Mao Zedong's thinking on literature and art is an important component of Mao Zedong Thought, which has educated generations of literature and art workers in our country.²

In his report, Zhou Yang told the workers that

the main task is to correctly handle three relations: one is the relationship between literature, art, and politics, including how the Party leads literary and artistic work; and the relationship between literature, art, and people's life, which is the issue of realism in artistic creations in practice; the last being the relationship between tradition and innovation in literary and artistic work, that is how to implement the policies of bringing forth the new through the old, adapting ancient forms for the present, and making foreign things serve China. Whether or not these three relationships are handled correctly directly results in the success or failure of socialist literature and art.³

These three problems directly pulled literary and

artistic work in the new era back to the narrative framework and evaluation system of the seventeen-year-period after independence and before the Cultural Revolution, as a continuation of Zhou Yang's "old view" on the relationship between literature, art, and politics. Not only did Zhou Yang summarize and reflect on literature and art from the last thirty years, he was also a pioneer in the artistic practice of the new era. In fact, his thinking can be seen as the "theoretical version" of the general outline of literature and art for nearly thirty years.

After 1978 China, in its "reform and opening," placed reform before opening early on.

The rethinking of Chinese socialism in the 1980s was carried out within the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, and thus its critique of socialism could not extend into a rethinking of the reform process and the Western modernity upon which it was modeled. To the contrary, the critique of socialism became an act of self-affirmation in the post-Cold War era.

The practice of contemporary art in China has never strayed far from the official framework. In 1978, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided to rehabilitate all rightists. The Ministry of Culture, China Artists Association, Beijing Literature and Art Association, and other relevant bodies held commemorative exhibitions and posthumous exhibitions for the late artists who were condemned as rightists and persecuted by the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution.

In January 1979, the Spring Festival Painting Exhibition (*Xinchun huazhan*) opened in the waterside pavilions of Zhongshan Park, featuring landscape and still-life paintings. The exhibition was organized by a handful of artists including Pang Jun, Yan Zhenduo, and Zhang Jiayi. The more than one hundred exhibited oil paintings were created by over forty painters, mostly from Beijing. The participating painters included elderly, middle-aged, and young ones, some professionals and some amateurs. All exhibited works were decided by the artists on their own, without any censorship. All participants were treated equally and the atmosphere was a relaxed one.

The organizing artists of this exhibition approached Jiang Feng, a former cultural official just free from imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution and about to be reappointed as the head of the China Artists Association, the highest-level governmental body for the administration of art. In Jiang Feng's foreword to the exhibition, which was reprinted four times in all the subsequent exhibition booklets of the Beijing Society of Oil Painting, an artist collective founded as a result of the Spring Festival Painting Exhibition, he proposed to "freely set up



Installation view of *Salon, Salon: Fine Art Practices from 1972 to 1982 in Profile – A Beijing Perspective*. The exhibition, which opened on January 7, 2017, is part of a joint research project on the legacy of Socialist Realism in the historical discourse of Chinese contemporary art by Liu Ding and the author. Images appear courtesy of Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum.

painters' associations," to organize exhibitions without restriction or censorship, as well as to trade art freely. His proposition was warmly received by the middle-aged and young painters all over the country.

Many art associations and societies emerged in Beijing and across the country in response to Jiang Feng's advocacy of the democracy of art at the end of the 1970s. Statistics from the 1980 meeting of the China Artists Association showed that there were 166 active painters associations across China between 1979 and 1980. These associations organized exhibitions, forums, and exchange activities.

The art events taking place in the late 1970s and early '80s in public spaces in Beijing exemplified changes in China's governance of art and a positive trend toward public space. By this point, art practitioners had a chance to contribute to the development of a healthy public culture, owing to a brewing of new thoughts in the art community between 1977 and 1978. The significance of that period was the review and criticism of the Cultural Revolution, the art during the Cultural Revolution, as well as issues that emerged in literature and art development during the seventeen years before the Cultural Revolution. Another significant development was the theoretical reflection on far-left politics and practices by high-ranking government officials who were artists and writers, further breaking with the constraint to interpret everything in terms of "class conflict" and far-left politics.

In December 1978, Zhou Yang had made a crucial speech entitled "Literature and Art in the New Era of Socialism" at the Guangdong Literature Work Forum. Zhou began by stating that the mission of literature and art in the new era of socialism was to depict the reality of socialism and new social practices, with a diversity of themes. He said that literature and art works could agree or disagree with, and praise or expose, these new practices. "No comment" was also an acceptable tone in the works. In terms of forms and styles of art, Zhou Yang mentioned Mao Zedong's "policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend," and derived from it two "freedoms" – freedom in the development of different forms and styles in art, and freedom of discussion on different schools of thought. Zhou Yang concluded by talking about the governance of art and literature, proposing to relax censorship and to remove political constraints on literature and art. The speech was a sign of a relaxation of the governance of art and literature from mid- and high-level governmental authorities. Cultural officials in Beijing like Jiang

Feng and Liu Xun implemented the idea of the message, i.e., freedom of art and liberation of thought, in their practices. So the artists working both inside and outside of government bodies echoed the message from the grassroots level, which turned out to be a productive interaction with authority, helping to explore and define a new practice of literature and art in a whole new domain and era.

In the political arena, two years after the Gang of Four's downfall, the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978 put a decisive end to slow-moving Party work. In the meantime, a new political space appeared after the Session, facilitating the "change-seeking" process across society. This process of change-seeking brought people with all kinds of backgrounds and various desires to a convergence in 1979. In this fleeting convergence, most political and social elites used in a selective manner the previous practices of the seventeen-year-old PRC to legitimize change-seeking. They also fully acknowledged the PRC's achievements in these seventeen years, based on which the May Fourth Movement spirit was reiterated. The relevant explorations culminated in the middle and late stages of the Cultural Revolution, and also the first ten years of reform and development, symbolizing the end of an era and leaving a rich legacy to the upcoming 1980s, when China's reform witnessed constant redirection and deepening.

The practice of contemporary art in China has always worked within a framework of official permission and refusal, official control and relaxation. In popular perception, however, this official framework is simply dismissed as an external condition that contemporary art practice situates itself in opposition to, basing its legitimacy on its divergence from and disregard of the state's ideological structure. On the contrary, in reality contemporary art practice in China is always directly subject to such a fundamental framework of ideas. One manifestation of this subordinate relationship between contemporary art and the state's ideological structure is the imagination of the West and the Western art system in the self-projection of Chinese contemporary art. Once, when I was interviewing artist Shi Chong, he said,

In the 1980s, we were still in the process of learning. We were learning Western classical art, on the one hand, and Western modern art, on the other. It was right in the middle of the process of switching from one to the other. In fact, after the 1990s, whether it was rooted in Western classical

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art forms or in Western modernist art forms, we were all searching for the greatest possibilities.

Even in the 1980s (a period which many witnesses describe as a “process of learning from the West”), the view of the individual practitioner – their mindset towards understanding, probing, judging, referencing, and learning Western modern and postmodern art – was still based on a Materialist critical standpoint, and gleaned from short-term utilitarianism. In an essay in the first volume of *International Aesthetics*, Shao Dazhen wrote in 1986,

Postmodernism raises many new topics that are certainly worth treating with importance. Some of their views are worth our further research and consideration. But as an overall view, as an art system, postmodernism is preposterous. It fundamentally rejects the principle that art is a reflection of life, that it in turn influences life, and thus rejects the social function of art.⁴

On this point, the art scene’s acceptance of the “West” and the “international” was not decoupled from the field of vision of the nation and its new government. “De-Westernization” has, to a certain extent, been a part of every step of China’s modernization process. Constantly expounding on and shaping dominant culture has served as the process of establishing the Party’s leadership in the Chinese intellectual and cultural fields.

In the late 1980s, China began following a development strategy of “two ends outside,” meaning focusing on importing raw materials and exporting products to foreign markets, which resulted in unprecedented levels of openness. The gradually deepening relationship between internal reform and external openness was not only manifested in mutual economic supplementation, technology transfers, and the study of systems. The relationship between the internal and the external was also an ideological construct. The phrase “lining up with international practices” became commonplace, but at the same time a strong nationalistic awareness was also externalized in the slogans popular among the cultural and commercial scenes: “only through localization can we have internationalization” and “the more ethnic, the more global.”

In 1987, the first “Exhibition of Chinese Oil Paintings” took place at Shanghai Art Museum. In this exhibition, there emerged two new trends of painting: one of a classical style, as in Western

classicism; the other abstraction. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese painters had made various attempts to free themselves from the constraints and legacy of Socialist Realism. To do so, most painters took a curious path, going in a backward direction within an oversimplified understanding of the Western tradition of painting, referencing its models of practice in search of the truth of painting. In essence, this was driven by their desire to break away from the revolutionary aesthetics and discourse of art from Mao’s period.

The “classical” trend and the “abstract” one were two such attempts. They arose at this time specifically in response to what was called the ’85 New Wave, which mainly referred to the phenomenon of a dozen young painters’ collectives emerging in different Chinese cities between 1984 and 1986. Most of these collectives distinguished themselves from other coexisting practices and trends of thought by subjecting themselves to the influences and discourses of Western modern art in preference to the convention of Socialist Realism or Chinese ink wash traditions. Along with the introduction of Western modern art practices, there were many philosophical books and humanistic concepts being translated from the West through the first half of the 1980s. The young painters involved in the ’85 New Wave had tapped into these intellectual resources for inspiration and concepts for their practice. Meanwhile, many artists and art critics came forward after 1986 to publish articles criticizing the roughness of the stylistic and aesthetic language of artworks in the ’85 New Wave movement, blaming philosophical concepts for hijacking artists’ attention to the artistic language of their works.

In 1988, art critics such as Li Xianting were quick to spot a significant wave of changes in the art world, which took the form of a nation-wide debate on the subject of the “purification of language” (*chunhua yuyan*) in Chinese. As an editor of *Fine Arts* magazine, Li invited Meng Luding, an artist teaching in the Central Academy of Fine Art, to write an essay entitled “The Process of Purification,” questioning the insufficient attention artists had paid to the language of art – meaning the technical and stylistic quality of art – while giving too much weight to conceptual consideration. This debate was intensified by an “orchestrated” confrontation of two positions, one advocated by Meng Luding, who switched to abstract painting at this time in his own practice, and the other by Li Xianting himself. While Meng emphasized the importance of keeping art to itself, Li called for the “big soul” as a response, insisting on art’s responsibility to give consideration and visibility to social and humanistic concerns.



A portrait of Jiang Feng, an image of the Spring Festival Painting Exhibition, and Jiang's foreword to the exhibition.

In October 1988, *Fine Art* magazine organized a discussion around the theme of “Art and Culture, Spirit and Language,” reevaluating the relationship between artistic language and cultural concerns. In the discussion there was a sense of urgency to purify (meaning to improve and to upgrade) the “rough” language, specifically the formal aspects of artworks.

As the discussion unfolded on all fronts, it became clear that advocates of the “purification of language” were proposing a way of practicing art that divorced the aesthetic and stylistic concerns of art from concepts, content, and meaning. It arbitrarily equated any consideration beyond the stylistic aspects of artworks to that of “politics,” and set up a dualism between art and politics, between the artistic language and any concerns of a philosophical nature, between form and meaning.

Such intellectual movements both in art and literature in the late 1980s were driven by a compelling desire to break away from Mao’s revolutionary tradition and from that of the stiffened art and literature system. This system came into being through Mao’s era and had become stagnant and restrictive by the 1980s. Within this escape from a former discourse, there was also the aspiration to be modern, to establish a modern art history in China based on an understanding of the Western one. Yet, even

as artists and writers tried to correct the politicization of art from Mao’s revolutionary discourse, they set up a simplistic dualistic structure of value between art and politics, between art and thought, between form and content, between modernism and backwardness.

In the following decades, this discussion turned out to be a process of constructing a new ideological structure for literature and art. The “purification of language” went on to replace the subject that it criticized: on the surface, the over-conceptualization of art at the cost of neglecting artistic language; and deep down, Mao’s revolutionary tradition of art. Under the influence of the “purification of language,” ideology-free and depoliticized artworks became a new embodiment of the political ideal itself.

In this period, many artists answered the call to “purify language” – to make works that showed a strong depoliticizing tendency and that voluntarily abandoning ideological concerns. Many turned to representing their everyday reality with pop-art aesthetics and approaches, or through a cynical and indifferent attitude. Others invoked the period of Mao, but merely through representations of its visual culture. This gave rise to a generation of painters whose works were grouped into “political pop,” “cynical realism,” and “the new generation painters.”



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Interestingly, the market that emerged for these artworks consisted mostly of sympathetic Westerners and Western museums. After a few international exhibitions, there arose an overbearing discourse around this work rooted in the post-Cold War ideological perception of “political art” in China. While the works were depoliticized, the narrative and consumption of them were derived from political frameworks.

The depoliticizing tendency in both the Chinese art world and Chinese society was further accelerated after the 1989 Tian’anmen Democracy Movement. In 1988, economic reform was in full swing. For many people, to engage in enterprise – either to work as a member of a company or to set up a business – was not just an economic choice but an opportunity to participate in the currents of the time. The enthusiasm was reinforced by the government’s endorsement of risk-taking in economic ventures. But the Party leadership deliberately contained such enthusiasm, circumventing political discussions and replacing them with pragmatic and technological aspirations.

After 1989, the nation sped up the process of carefully crafting a market. The essence and significance of this creation is far more than a social event. Its most fundamental goal was the hope of using market principles to regulate all of social life, and to more covertly and deeply implant the national will as a means of social organization. The workers, peasants, and soldiers were gradually supplanted as social role models by successful business and political figures. This figure of the business and political role model, produced by powerful political and media mechanisms, became the representative of the contemporary Chinese social elite and the leader of social values.

The 1990s alienated artists and intellectuals from the political agenda of the government; even though they were mobilized and implicated by such an agenda, they could no longer play a critical and active role in defining it. The perpetuation of pragmatism and the industrialization of intellectual and artistic practice aggravated such a divorce. In his observations on China’s intellectual landscape in the 1990s, Wang Hui raises an important difference from the 1980s, namely that the intellectual scene, which saw itself as the cultural elite and oracle in the 1980s, had by the 1990s quickly realized that they were no longer the cultural elites and shapers of values in contemporary China, and that they needed a means of adapting and confronting the ubiquitous commercial culture. This sense of being unfit also permeated the field of art. One striking change was the increasing development of the market and its increasingly visible role as a

force in the art system, which was complemented by the emergence of some curators, critics, and artists who became actively engaged in the progression of the market orientation of contemporary art. They all shared the goal of wresting more social space for contemporary art practice, with the belief that by demonstrating contemporary art’s commercial potential they could win more possibilities for expression and practice. They also drew inspiration from their limited understanding of the Western art system, believing the West to be a highly commercial society in which foundations, galleries, museums, and other institutions worked together to promote the commercialization of art. This understanding and thinking led them to actively engage in the project of commodifying and commercializing art.

Curators and art agents began to work together to devise exhibitions, name canons of artistic creation, and categorize and brand artists. Some artists consciously changed their packaging and look, voluntarily donning Western-style suits, writing their own bios, providing proposals upon requests from exhibition organizers, publishing bilingual catalogues, getting involved in the widespread discussion of the price of critical essays, and affirming that critics should be highly paid laborers. These shifts were all markers of this phenomenon. Flipping through the pages of the China Artists Association journal *Artists Communication* from 1994 to 1995, we can see that the mechanism of the art market, art fairs, and auctions was already quite normalized. The magazine reported on these events in very positive tones, with only scattered voices of skepticism and criticism. In a series of essays on the ’94 China Art Fair published in 1995, one writer by the name of Xiao Meng wrote in an essay titled “Return to Your Role – Thoughts Evoked by the ’94 China Art Fair” about how the art market had become the focus of attention in art circles in recent years: “Overnight, everyone from painters to theoreticians have become experts on the issues of the market.”⁵ Nearly every issue of *Artists Communication* from this time contained reports on the market and auctions, including the publication of full seasonal auction results in the journal’s pages, such as the entire list of artworks and prices for the Sotheby’s and Christie’s 1995 Spring Auctions of Chinese contemporary oil paintings.⁶ From this data, we find that the 1994 Guardian Fall Auction was held in Beijing, and fifty contemporary oil paintings were on sale, with an 89.8 percent closing rate; that *Upland Wind* (188 x 255 cm) by Chen Yifei, which was auctioned in mainland China for the first time, sold for RMB

2.6 million yuan, setting a price record for that artist in mainland China. These pieces of information outline the landscape of an art market quickly rising to prosperity. In these pages, we read about: how the state had defined and implemented “Measures for the Administration of Artworks” and had repeated, as a beginning, the rich, market-oriented insights of the “Taiwan experience”; reports on the developing Moscow art market; artist Wu Guanzhong’s lawsuit against an auction house for selling a counterfeit work; how art history graduate Wu Jin created and played the role of the independent agent; how artists of the Yuanmingyuan artist village hung Chinese and English signs on their doors and sold their own artworks; and that some wealthier artists were building houses for themselves at Songzhuang.

In these texts, we can gain a sense of how the state’s intention of making society more market-oriented was, to a certain extent, internalized and transformed into practice by the art industry, and quite effectively. Though some critics and curators who advocated participation in the construction of the art market repeatedly emphasized the commodification of art as a cultural strategy, in the process of putting it into practice participants often became too engaged in these roles, and benefited from them. Gradually, they unconsciously came to share in the state’s project of using the market to realign and divide social classes, and reshaped themselves from consciousness to behavior. In the process of participating in and benefiting from the commodification and commercialization of art, the general sense of acceptance and constantly rising prices came to conceal the urgent need to develop a critical vision in artistic practice.

Certain professionals went from viewing the struggle for commercial impact and public influence as a survival strategy to affirming and internalizing the rules and logic of commerce, and from actively shaking the existing order to joining it. These individuals lost sight of their original motives. In this period, the state expended great energy on developing the market and promoting urbanization, thus accelerating the process of the social division of labor. It organized the intellectuals as a whole into such industries as state administration, educational institutions, research institutions, commercial activities, the technology sector, and the media, thus turning them into beneficiaries of the reform period while also cutting off their historical ties to workers, peasants, and soldiers. Likewise, increasing market orientation and specialization led to the atomization of the art industry. On the one hand, the art system was reconstituted and reshaped by the values of

commercial society. On the other, the contraction of space for social expression led to widespread anxiety about the legitimacy of art after the end of the 1980s.

In facing society, the legitimacy of art depends on the demonstration of quantifiable, visible, and functional value (such as entertainment). In the process of presenting their worth to the outside world, art professionals reshaped themselves by magnifying their ideological content and highlighting art’s role as a describer of those repressed by the government and those in the opposition. This reshaping of the self frequently found resonance in the art market and the international scene, eventually turning it into part of the self-image of art professionals.

Since the 1990s, as the art market has thrived, the elite representatives and value orientation of the art market have grown increasingly in accord with the main values driven by the state in the social sphere. Artists have been increasingly assessed by their auction prices and market coverage, and have gained social recognition and status through their commercial success. If, during the Cultural Revolution and right after its end, elite artists and intellectuals were the subjects of attacks, they maintained tense, uncompromising relationships with the social and political order while continuing in a spirit of criticism and reflection of history. Since the 1990s, the order the art system has gradually carried out is a restructuring from within, one that internalizes the universally accepted values, logic, and operational methods of the social sphere, equates price with value, quantifies and materializes practice according to immediate success and visible results, places little to no emphasis on ideas, and actively and harmoniously fuses with the social reality around it. Meanwhile, the self-declaration of elite status and identity has, through economic conditions, decoupled these people from the salaried and lower classes of society, and pulled them increasingly further from the struggles for developmental rights among these social classes. We could venture to say that the critical potential of art has withered. The commodification of art has been accepted by both art professionals and the government. In the process, art professionals’ optimistic projections and blind entry into the “market” reached unprecedented levels of accord with the content of state ideology and trends of society.

After 1989, some of China’s intellectuals placed their full faith in the growing market to solve the issue of democracy in China, and contemporary art’s growing market was part of this trend. But in reality, the economy and

market have never been separate from the notion and field of the state, a fact that has been diluted and ignored in accounts and analyses of contemporary art. One important reason is that participants once believed that this market strategy could bring the possibility of a form of autonomy from state ideology, which they used to defend their commercial behavior. In market conditions, the operations of cultural capital are an important facet of overall social activity. The control of cultural capital and the media define the cultural trends and ideological orientation of society. The controllers of capital are also the controllers of political power. Meanwhile, when the commodification of art reached a certain point and led some artists to become wealthy before others – enabling them to join the “new aristocracy” with their fancy cars and cigars – the unequal distribution of rewards led to stratification within art. On the one hand, these newly wealthy artists continued to enjoy the social attention and entitlement that stemmed from their enhanced economic status. On the other, they had to endure the sense of disappointment at their perceived “selling out” – having gone from being considered “vagrants” in the 1990s due to the lingering effects of China’s population control policies, from having a “marginal status” and being “dissidents” against state ideology, to becoming “celebrities” and enjoying salaried positions at the National Academy of Painting and other official art institutions. The new works they produced could never again be interpreted from the angle of ideological critique, even if they still sought new possibilities for creation within that interpretive framework.

There was one striking blind spot in the synchronized market shift of Chinese society and the field of art: the former wariness regarding state ideology’s permeation of every level of society was set aside, and marketization was seen as a route to political democracy. The unequal market was even viewed as a natural part of the progression towards democracy. In fact, in this process, the groups that benefited from China’s economic reforms formed a new alliance that achieved widespread influence. If the discussions of the 1990s universally placed “society” outside the realm of the state, and imagined the self-operations of the market as a natural progression towards democracy, thus hampering political thinking regarding universal democracy, then discussions of contemporary art also encountered the same misunderstanding and limitations of awareness. People placed “contemporary art” outside of the realm of the state, and likewise imagined democratic prospects through the market. The art industry’s faith in the market and economic

forces grew even stronger after the year 2000. After nearly a decade of local evolution in China, Chinese art capital also followed the globalizing national outlook to extend olive branches to art institutions in the slowing economies of the US and Europe, in hopes of using the power of capital to open up the so-called “gates to academia” of the world, and gain access to the influence of the art systems of developed nations to shape value.

University of Oxford anthropology professor Xiang Biao describes the localization efforts of certain Chinese artists and film directors in the 1990s as follows:

In Zhang Yimou’s hands, when Chinese people weren’t fussing and fighting everywhere and following extreme customs, they were only acting out the most basic (and sometimes extreme) emotions and desires. They lacked their own sense of history, sense of society, and ability to think ... Zhang Yimou’s “nationality” no doubt successfully went out into the world, but his success, rather than assisting in China’s communication with the world, served as an impediment to true mutual understanding.⁷

The Chinese contemporary art practice constantly featured in Europe and the US, and the specific discussion that formed around them, presented a commonality: they often diagrammed particular social atmospheres and the political markers and social memories of the Mao era, and were thus deemed to possess a critical spirit and crowned as the representatives of Chinese contemporary art culture. Reading essays about artists and their artistic practice since the 1990s, it is easy to see that most accounts attempt to establish a link between reality and artistic creation. This interpretation of art found efficacy in the real world, and such interpretations that did so in a diagrammatic way particularly resonated with the projections of many European and American commentators regarding Chinese contemporary art. Practitioners in the Chinese art industry, including artists and critics, also made their own projections onto the Western art practices being disseminated into China. Their understanding and practice of pop, for instance, universally interpreted as a critique of consumerism, led to the magnification of this critical element in their creations, and turned them to a practice of expressing critical meanings and attitudes. This description and interpretation seems to have given their art practice a basis in art history (Western art history) while also establishing their so-called connectedness to the reality of

Chinese society.

The feedback from reality, particularly from European and American art institutions in the 1990s – such as the Venice Biennale – as well as the selection and affirmation of certain types of art in the newly forming domestic market made self-doubt and reflection within art seem less current and pressing. It temporarily suspended these fragmented, hesitant, clumsy, sincere, and biting thoughts, making it seem as though they had been shrouded by a dense fog. On the contrary, the question of how to establish a systematic and immediately recognizable approach in criticism and discussion became a key, universal pursuit.

In the 1990s, the anxiety in the Chinese field of art came from multiple fronts. On the one hand, after the experience of 1989, the art world needed to seek out new conceptual and practical methods with modernist awareness. Within this trend, there were many work modes and visual schema with a “rational face,” such as the New Measurement Group and the work of such artists as Qian Weikang, Geng Jianyi, and Wang Jianwei. On the other hand, the choices, passions, and discourses from the West became the object of both aspiration and anxiety for artists. Zhou Tiehai’s 1999 work *Airport* featured speakers repeatedly playing announcements for international flights departing from Shanghai, as well as seven fake international magazine covers the artist had created between 1995–98, which featured his own image. These were the most direct expressions of the consciousness, aspiration, and urgency of international participation. Much of the internationalization in the field of Chinese art in the 1990s was a passive process of being selected, invited, and consumed. At the same time, artists also faced an increasingly market-oriented art industry pushed by the logic of capital.

Art production was, on the one hand, restricted by the operations of state machinery, and on the other, increasingly restricted by the activities of capital and the market. The effects of the latter have grown increasingly apparent since the 1990s. It cannot be ignored that the economy and the market have never been outside of the realm of the state, but we still lack a clear recognition of this more complex and concealed historical relationship and condition, and have yet to describe and explore it.

In this period, most artists continued to follow their bodily and artistic instincts in their work, and certain art criticisms continued to seek a basis for creations on the psychological, sociological, and philosophical levels. But commentary on art itself remained overlooked. One could say that artistic practice fell to the fate of excess projection on the levels of

narrative content and social awareness, while the artistic nature in creation – namely the recognition of art itself – lacked adequate awareness, platforms, and atmosphere for discussion and consideration. This presented artists with many difficulties, even anxieties. For them, the entire academic field of art lacked an internal recognition of art or the discourse of art. Artists seemed to always need to present a certain realistic legitimacy for their creations, a pseudo context. But that was not necessarily what they were interested in, and some artists had no choice but to resist. The widely disseminated “political pop” and “cynical realism” of the 1990s were results of this conspiracy between art criticism and artistic creation. They truly did fit with the demand for rapid dissemination and consumption by the social mentality and the art market. But on the other hand, this summarization and delineation served to mislead about art practice itself, and particularly about the artists’ own understanding of their practices. Political directedness and social topics often became the medium and language of artists’ works, and also became the only path for art criticism to approach creations. Art was iconified and simplified. Certain expansive decorations, disseminations, and misreadings of artistic creations for material gain were magnified into a perfect knowledge, and the artworks, once pressed into historicized narratives, lost much of their original color, while the organic and serendipitous nature of artistic practice itself was both consciously and unconsciously overlooked. A certain clumsy, original state of art, certain unclassifiable, primal, spontaneous, private, serendipitous, individual elements of artistic creation and thinking, had been diluted, forgotten, and overlooked in the process of the industrialization, universalization, and refinement of art. If these superficial values and practices in creation, criticism, and art mechanisms of the 1990s hampered true mutual understanding between China and the rest of the world, they also shaped a profound estrangement within art and between universal society and artistic creation.

Today’s creators could be said to have moved to another extreme. Since the year 2000, though they have gradually adapted to and begun to follow the economic rules of capital in their art production, and attempted to draw from European and American models in the regulation and construction of China’s contemporary art system, their creation and thinking has still been stuck on superficial criticisms of the market and the artist-comprised art system, and has never been able to touch on the deep issues of strict government control and political interference.

More worryingly, the critical function of art has, today, gradually declined to the level of superficial performance, constantly vacated by capital consumption on various levels and in various forms. “Depoliticization” and “dehistoricization” have become the most important traits of the Chinese contemporary art field. Under these circumstances, the avoidance of politics and the maintaining of silence have not only become correct, they have become sincere. They have also become the best path for entry into the logic of capital.

Interestingly, at present, the art industry in China has formed a superficial self-sufficiency. With the gradual flourishing of the art market after the year 2000, the self-consumption of contemporary art, unlike in the 1990s, became a possibility, at least for those galleries and artists whose work unconsciously followed relationships of supply and demand. As it was for the nation, the economic order suddenly controlled the choice to create, to present artworks, to collect art, and even the standards and authorities over artistic creations. To this day, economic power is still the strongest force in the field of art. The expansion and permeation of economic power went hand in hand with the state’s full entry into the economy.

After the year 2000, when contemporary art had already undergone over twenty years of progression, critics and art historians began attempting to record and describe the work of the past. But these accounts were overwhelmingly monolithic in their descriptions of artists’ works. The art consumption of a growing market came to reinforce this monolithic narrative. The singularity of social ideology and values also strengthened this monolithic description to become the sole standard guiding the consumption of art, and even came to shape and influence the future direction of some artists’ practice. Even if most artists in their hearts still aspired towards art, still hoped their works could maintain vitality, and still expended varying degrees of effort to these ends, they were still swayed by the desire for market affirmation and scholarly affection. For most artists born in the 1970s and ’80s and who matured and rose to fame in the ’90s, their speechlessness and the widespread view that they belonged to a past era drove them into disorientation, confusion, and struggle. On the one hand, through raw accumulation from the early ’90s to the financial crisis of 2008, they had assembled large amounts of capital and were able to enter into the new aristocracy and elite class of the supposedly classless contemporary Chinese society. Interestingly, as they acted within this class, they were able to shape themselves into a certain form of social celebrity

through such mechanisms as charitable art auctions. In this way, they were able to maintain a dialogue with society, thus gaining a certain affirmation of value. Meanwhile, they were left at a loss by their inability to enter into the sights of the active discussion of art by curators and critics. It seemed they had lost a connection to artistic discourse and the development of art.

These actions continued along the lines of the Chinese Communist Party’s 2003 announcement of a shift in its nature from a revolutionary party to an administrative party. This announcement included a series of important shifts that would have a profound effect, such as an affirmation of private ownership, the declaration of an end to the reallocation of farmland, and the encouraging of private business people to join the Party. Peking University professor Dai Jinhua accurately pointed out the significance these changes would have for the political culture of China:

The series of policy shifts in 2003 mark a total turn from the predicament of Chinese political culture that had grown increasingly drastic since the 1980s owing to the Tiananmen Square Incident. The predicament was the rupture in the continuity, ideology, and ideas of political economics in the party. Thus, for a long time, China’s government and officialdom had been in a difficult, speechless state, a state where they could not say what they could do, and they could not do what they could say. Mainstream discourse had become a destructive, even impeding force against mainstream forces. Any official statement could be used as a powerful policy against officialdom. This predicament gave rise to many cultural issues. Primarily, it revealed the emptiness of mainstream ideology.⁸

Some artists such as Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi, and many others gained attention and a central position in the artistic spectacle in the 1990s, only to gradually lose this sense of centrality after 2008. They chose to mold themselves through the spiritual and physical trials they faced, and hoped that through this bodily action they would gain new creative momentum that would push them past the creative rut they were in. Some artists grabbed backpacks, hopped on the simplest forms of transportation, and set out for remote regions to take photographs, collect materials, and exile themselves. Some artists returned to traditional Chinese landscape painting in hopes that this approach could establish a channel for understanding the work of past artists while also gaining new creative

visions.

Compared to romantic aspirations toward dreams and art, most artists today follow a method of work and participation in the art system that is strongly realist in tone, while socialist significance is derived from everyone's aspirations towards progress and development for art as a whole. For example, artists exploit market mechanisms to raise the price of their own art and gain social influence, which they then use to organize documentary exhibitions on themselves, thus solidify their success through mythmaking. One such artists is Fang Lijun, who was extremely popular among international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s and became a representative figure for Chinese contemporary art, both in terms of the exposure he received and the market value of his works. Since around 2012, he worked with galleries and dealers to place exhibitions of his work in museums and universities. In addition to showing his artworks, he put together an exhibition of archival materials of his life and practice, to monumentalize his own status. The exhibition managed to travel to many provincial museums and galleries in universities across the country.

After this, the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing successfully crafted a completely new narrative of China's image within globalization: a peacefully rising, harmonious-minded China. In this narrative, an image of China as connecting imagined community and a high level of individuality began to emerge.⁹

The question is, which reality is more real: what we see and hear in front of us, or what is taking place on levels we cannot see? If we look at what we can see, then by statistics and scale, the industry of Chinese contemporary art can only be described as flourishing. A complete art system, for which so many practitioners strove and yearned in the 1990s, has begun to take shape. This is evidenced by the many galleries, art museums, art institutions, art fairs, collectors, academies, curators, and museum directors across the country as well as artists who have taken on bureaucratic roles and begun to shape the world around them. This increasingly strong local art system has provided each of us with a clear sense of direction. As long as they are willing, every individual can strive for a place within it, play a role, blend themselves in smoothly, and enjoy the conveniences of the system. Though the line between official and private individuals has never been truly clear, today the two have found unprecedented accord in the interest of mutual benefits and needs, and no longer exclude each other. In 2009, when contemporary artists Luo Zhongli, Xu Bing, Cai Guo-Qiang, Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fanzhi, Fang

Lijun, and Yue Minjun, among others, joined the China Contemporary Art Academy – a division of the government-backed Chinese National Academy of Arts – the event made waves. Many voices criticized the apparent co-opting of contemporary art by the official system. Soon, however, the platform and resources provided by the official art system turned such participation into a widely accepted new normal.

In recent years, the capital support system for contemporary art production has shown unprecedented energy. When we began the research and curatorial work for "Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art"¹⁰ in 2010, we predicted and sensed at the time the trend of capital taking a more dominant role in artistic discourse. Through this project, we had hoped to discuss and partially release the pressure practitioners felt within such a production relationship. Quite obviously, however, it is unstoppable. The development of the industry seems to have resolved the question of "legitimacy." The latter was a leading component of the questioning mentality of the 1990s.

In the summer of 2013, after many Chinese artists, curators, institutions, and investors spontaneously invested massive amounts of money to hold satellite exhibitions during the Venice Biennale, and failed to achieve the desired international effect, the Chinese art scene entered a short period of low activity before quickly turning to self-restoration. The satellite exhibitions during the Venice Biennale had intended to prove to the world that Chinese art could be presented equally on one of the best international platforms. Yet the shows were neither warmly received, nor did they generate further opportunities for Chinese artists to be included in international exhibitions or museum collections. It wasn't long, however, before the center of focus shifted to the establishment of a local value system. The system's current composition can be described as being quite rich, with many facilitators, ample funding involving many individuals and corporations (both Chinese and foreign) as well as art academies across the country, along with, of course, the active participation of many local governments. The mutual assistance between these forces has formed a massive native system for the consumption, support, presentation, and collection of contemporary art.

With the opening ceremony of the Central Academy of Fine Arts School of Experimental Art on September 4, 2014 at the CAFA Museum, the model of teaching contemporary art creation in the academies as a degree focus, for which artist Lu Shengzhong had striven for over a decade, became a model that art academies across the

country.

On May 15, 2015, the exhibition “CHINA 8 – Contemporary Art from China on the Rhine and Ruhr” opened simultaneously at nine museums scattered across eight cities in the Rhine-Ruhr region of Germany, with works from 120 Chinese artists. It was, to date, the largest, officially approved contemporary art exhibition ever held in Germany. The Chinese counterpart in China, which was responsible for the organizational work for this exhibition with the Foundation for Art and Culture Bonn, was the China Arts and Entertainment Group. In addition to the German curators, the Chinese curator was Fan Di'an, director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. When German chancellor Angela Merkel traveled to China between June 12 and 14 to discuss a trade deal on twenty-four items of collaboration, including the automotive, aviation, and rail industries, the document included cooperation on official exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, such as “CHINA 8.” Equal numbers of exhibitions of German art will be held at multiple museums in China. “CHINA 8” was the largest “collective presentation” of Chinese contemporary art to follow the dozens of Chinese exhibitions at the 2013 Venice Biennale. A great nationalistic undertaking thus underwent the transformation from a privately funded, self-organizing act to one supported by state capital and a state platform.

In the summer of 2015, Shanghai hosted three simultaneous art fairs, with support and funding from the municipal government. Meanwhile, many private museums, funded by both individuals and corporations, were granted varying levels of support in terms of land use and cultural policies. There is also, of course, the Sixth Beijing International Art Biennale held by the People's Government of Beijing, the China Artists Association, and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. These production mechanisms in the contemporary art field suffer from no lack of support from the government, which, as patron, lays down a wide range of visible and invisible boundaries on the practical direction, scope, and interpretation of contemporary art. This local mechanism not only controls most art and discourse rights; it also constantly uses mechanisms of exchange, patronage, and donation to extend its influence into Europe and the US. Recently, there has been a series of gifts and donations by private individuals to European and American museums with the demand of being able to choose and hire curators. Then there was the “feast” of “CHINA 8.” These events are a part of the movement to export values through Chinese capital (both state and individual). This process is not so much participation as it is an “invasion” of powerfully

subjective demands. In a sense, this process is also a process of “de-Westernization” and “de-internationalization.” It shows new capital and new national authority using different operational models to demonstrate its strength in international society.

We also cannot overlook the ubiquitous presence of the “post-internet” trend in exhibitions and galleries, which releases long pent-up anxiety among Chinese practitioners about their failure to move in sync with the world. Now it seems that the world is as flat as the image, accessible at a single click. The fragmented is the rational and form is idea.

As the “totem art” of a new era, the creative approach of post-internet art, which goes from one image to the next, seems to allow for the temporary suspension of the exploration of concrete issues, making the local irrelevant in the global field of vision on an unprecedented level. As a new language that can circulate across the art world, post-internet art allows for an obsession with the aesthetics of language itself, with no need to get entangled in the contents and ideas expressed by language. We can sense that the new clothing of technology seems to have provided the best route for the redemption of the conservatism of the art academies. The once fervent, persistent debate on “art for life” and “art for art's sake” that began in the 1980s has now been simplified into “art for the art system” or “production for the system.” This system intertwines the interests and wills of officialdom and business. In these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand the increasingly conservative leanings presented by a young generation of artists raised in the era of globalization. We are increasingly left with young artists who openly declare their impatience or indifference towards political and societal matters. Some simply consider politics and social issues irrelevant. They are more responsive towards and feel more responsible for the art system than the wider society they are part of.

The practices, discourse, and ideas in the field of contemporary art are, to a great extent, identical in composition to the realistic logic of Chinese society. To trace this compositional similarity and agreement, we must use a historical framework to open a path to understanding the widespread trends of depoliticization, dehistoricization, and de-internationalization in the field of Chinese contemporary art. The various phenomena, creative methods, and artistic discourses today require an understanding that transcends the surface, and a sufficient amount of time and continuity to gain a field of vision for examining these movements. Only by constantly returning

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to the past can we gain a deep view on the present. We must avoid commemoration and memorializing.

Artists and art practitioners today must, to a great extent, face a powerful sense of a loss of position. Though they are all involved in certain projects or creative processes, they always feel that they are not being described, that they are absent from the lively, dominant discourse – a sense of dissatisfaction of unknown origin. This can be seen on social media and in online art journalism. Everyone seems to have a pressing urge to take action and get involved, as if through action they can gain a path to involvement in reality, to affirm each other's presence, and to pressure each other; but the deeper motives beneath these actions and their connections have yet to be penetrated. The urgency to act is still driven by some bodily instinct and desire. Most instant responses to the various spectacles that rise and fall in the art system are passive, instantaneous reactions rather than active reflections on the mechanisms of art, and are certainly not the continuous direction of the artist's work and thinking.

More specifically, we face a wide range of specific issues, conundrums, and challenges, and we draw from our respective understandings, instincts, abilities, and resources to respond within creations, within the art industry, and within the social system in an attempt to overcome these pressures we place on each other. Each member of this industry uses a particular form to get involved. The various themed projects and temporary spaces run by artist-curators in recent years are the release of this pressure. These projects are often anxious to prove their presence, and this urgency surpasses any artistic topic. Through these paths, artists are able to huddle together for warmth and release their own pressure while simultaneously exerting more on their peers. A reciprocal sense of anxiety is heightened rather than alleviated through each other's actions. In fact, within an as-of-yet unclear narrative of the contemporary condition, we, of course, cannot avoid feeling overlooked and excluded, nor can we find the entrance into this secret conference.

Today, in order to participate in the Chinese contemporary art system, one must accede to the general assumption that the art industry and art are interchangeable, that they can be spoken of as a single whole. The price of visibility is to accept that the development of the art industry can be the topic of the whole conversation, to the point that there is no longer any need for a detailed discussion of art practice, much less to assess it with any other set of criteria – scholarly, romantic, or otherwise. The discussion of the industry has monopolized the discussion

of art. The construction of the industry has replaced scholarship of the social-historical field. The rise and fall of the industry can seemingly be equated with the rise and fall of art. Contemporary art in today's China – we shall temporarily suppose the existence of such a distinction and such a group of practitioners – has long lost its front line, and has become deeply embroiled in the whirlpool of the hegemony of capital and the official system. More importantly, as we witness the drastic changes unfolding before our eyes, we should realize that much of the groundwork for it was laid decades ago.

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