

Carol Yinghua Lu
**Accidental
Conceptualism**

01/05

In China, pragmatism has ruled society for a long time and as a consequence anything conceptual or spiritual is deemed insignificant. It fits the principle of a totalitarian state to minimize the power of individual intellectual and rational thought, while at the same time promoting a value system that measures everything according to principles of functional application. Such a view spawns a dualistic and short-termed outlook on the world by simply dividing things into two categories: the useful and the useless. Though the Communist Party has been updating its ideology in accordance with economic and technological developments and revolutions in mass media, the core of its intention to eliminate differences of opinion and positions remains unyielding. Although there was a brief flirtation with intellectual engagement in the 1980s, the attention of the general public was swiftly diverted towards economic well-being and individual advancement, which subsequently became the foremost driving force for the country at the end of the decade. In the pursuit of absolute efficiency on the basis of time and cost, the mental space and aspiration for intellectual commitments are effectively eliminated.



Hu Xiangqian, *The Sun*, 2008.

In the cultural arena, the same instrumentalist mindset prevails, and the same simplicity of judgment applies to both the making and reading of works and the way artists elucidate and relate to what is happening around them. There has been a tremendous amount of visual art that bases all of its strength in narrative content that represents, borrows from, mirrors, replicates, or offers superficial critiques of fragments of a rapidly changing reality that is far too complicated and profound to grasp. This type of work has almost entirely dominated the Chinese art market, which in turn stimulates

more production. Collectors, foreign and Chinese, buy Chinese artworks out of fascination with either China's revolutionary past and sensational present, or for their profit prospect. This constitutes a vast demand. On the other hand, trained in the socialist-realism system adopted by all art academies in China, curators, art historians, and critics also rely on excavating the ideological, sociological, and psychological potential of a work so as to be able to analyze and interpret it, barely touching upon its artistic and conceptual dimensions. In the writing of art histories, artworks and art movements have generally had too much emphasis placed on the examination of their social parameters.

It is not only important but necessary to take a closer look at the inner logic and alternative trajectories of artistic evolution in China, irrespective of national, sociological, ideological, or financial attachments. To do this, one needs to dispense with the multitude of baffling and deceiving forms of recognition in this system that have become so dependent on a primitive art market. As an art system that doesn't tolerate or support the nurturing of other structural alternatives, how can the establishment of academic authority acknowledge a greater variety of practices? One particularly overlooked key to understanding Chinese contemporary art is conceptuality, which has acted as an indispensable underpinning for artistic thinking through the years.



Hu Xiangqian, *The Sun*, 2008.

The evolution of contemporary art in China never followed the linear logic of Western art history. Intellectual development was basically stagnant while it was held hostage by political movements throughout decades of communist rule. This situation worsened with the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 that severed not

only the country's intellectual ties to the outside world, but also the bloodline that connected it to its own history and cultural traditions. Education was suspended and an official disregard for knowledge and ideas was established. When the country reopened and resumed an 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 had happened in the rest of the world. Chinese artists rushed to shape their own methodology by adopting disjointed and sometimes misinterpreted information to adapt to the social, historical, and cultural specificity of the country. Modernism, post-modernism, classical philosophy, eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, liberalism, colonialism, and other intellectual movements from the Western world were all introduced to China at the same time to become simultaneous influences on artists' practices.

The 1989 China Avant-garde exhibition can be considered a rather extensive and reliable revelation of the mixture of styles and thinking contemporary Chinese artists were keenly exploring during the 1980s. The exhibition, however, was charged by a great sense of randomness, which was telling of the intellectual state in which the artists found themselves. Their system of knowledge was fragmented. On the one hand, the artists suffered from missed educational opportunities during the Cultural Revolution, and from having lost their ties to traditions that were wiped out by the Revolution. On the other hand, with a sudden shift away from the singular visual and cultural experience of the omnipresent revolutionary realism, artists were suddenly exposed to a dazzling variety of aesthetic and conceptual possibilities, which presented a question to artists with regard to how they should use these new possibilities. Often the decision was made according to instinct or attitude, and this would become the basis on which artists would form their own artistic strategy and language.

Although parallel practices continued to exist from the 1990s to the present today, international and market interest have been mostly focused on works favoring socially and politically charged subject matter over stylistic experimentation and conceptual investigation. Artists who created cynical realist, social realist, or political pop works, which spoke to a kind of collective imagination of Chinese society, gained so much recognition starting in the early 90s that they even believed in minimizing technological and formal complexity in order to divert the attention of the viewer towards the content of their depiction. Their methods for referring to social content became the central theme running

through their entire practice, leaving little room for anything else.

In the meantime, artists whose work questions and critiques the formation of our perceptions and our value system – in other words, artists who think about how we think – can hardly compete on an individual level for the spotlight, though this way of thinking and working has always been around, and has always been equally important for the development of contemporary art in China. It would be too vague and inaccurate, however, to simply label them as conceptual art or conceptualism.

While conceptualism emerged towards the end of modernism in partial response to Greenbergian formalism, Chinese artists never went through this particular stage, deemed the “nervous breakdown” of modernism. The emphasis on concept in the works of Chinese artists wasn’t positioned in opposition to the materials, colors, and formal characteristics of their works, whereas the incompatibility between meaning and material was taken for granted by early conceptualism. Chinese artists also shared none of the social context that was vital for the birth of conceptualism. Conceptual art, in its origin, came about not only to question artistic authority, but also as a response to the

political crisis being experienced in the Western world throughout the late 1960s. In China, a specific social context that was vital for the birth of conceptualism in the West was not present.

In the end, Chinese artists embraced conceptual strategies and influences consciously or unconsciously as a way to understand their own individual contexts. Often, artists combine both conceptual and aesthetic strategies to conceive ambitious and challenging works. Li Juchuan, an architect who has never built an actual building, made a work entitled *Measuring Wuhan Through a Straight Line Drawn in 30 Minutes* in 1994. In the city of Wuhan (where he is based) he drew a straight line on the ground that ran through a busy district he randomly picked out. The action lasted for thirty minutes, an arbitrary period of time. The result was an uneventful video that documented such a process. In a video by Beijing-based Li Yongbin in 2007 (*Sun, 2007*), the artist ran through a section of the city with a portable video camera in hand following the track of the setting sun, letting the camera take in whatever came into its lens throughout this journey. Due to the artist’s thorough calculation, the sun sets and the city goes completely dark exactly at the end of the tape. The video lasted for sixty minutes (the

03/05



Liang Shuo, *What Thing*, 2006–2008.

length of the tape) and captured a unique landscape of the city defined by the set of conditions that the artist designed for himself and the camera, as well as by the chance elements of nature and the sun.

The sun and the passage of time also fascinated a young artist named Hu Xiangqian, who is based in Guangzhou. Over the course of two months, he made it his daily routine to sunbathe for a few hours until the sun went down. The termination of the project was determined to be the point at which he became a black-skinned man (*The Sun*, 2008). Sui Jianguo, a trained and established sculptor in his 50s, chose to communicate his experience of the passing of time differently. Since December 25, 2006, he has been dipping an iron string into a pot of blue paint, an act he plans to repeat every day until the day he dies. (*The Shape of Time*, 2006–) Both actions can only be presented through documentation, sketches, notes, photographs, and videos.

04/05

recorded both the noise of his action and the darkness of the inside of the closet. In *Shine* (1994), he attached a video camera to himself and, playing a basketball with a friend, allowed the video camera to observe his opponent from a chance-determined perspective. Both works elucidated how he perceived his relationship to the internal world by showing something that is extremely immaterial.

Thinking about sculpture and the making of sculpture resulted in a fascinating experiment by young artist Liang Shuo. Selecting a random object or sculpture, he immersed this object in a pile of wet clay and removed it, leaving behind a hollow shape inside the clay. He then made a mold of this hollow shape, which he termed “the negative space” and subsequently produced a sculpture of this “nonexistence” (*What Thing*, 2006–2008).

Exploring the potential of chance, Lu Zhengyuan, a young sculptor and a student of Sui Jianguo in the Sculpture Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, hired an untrained farmer to make paintings based on print images of highly recognizable artworks by famous Chinese and international artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Damien Hirst, along with descriptions of the styles of these artists by Lu himself.

This is a modest picture of how contemporary Chinese artists are applying conceptual strategies, though I would hesitate to call them conceptual artists. More often than not, these artists use such strategies only occasionally or in a passing stage of their practice. While the idea is often the starting point of their consideration, the use of particular materials and aesthetic form plays an equally important role. Most of these works require explanation and an understanding of the artist’s idea and intention. They are not always instantly readable on a graphic level, using aesthetic cues in a rather modest way. They assume meanings that reflect what constitutes and defines art, but do not attempt to depict society at large. At times, the works speak to subjects pertinent in a global context, while at others the artists examine subjects specific to their personal history. Some works require meticulous planning and preparation yet can also be charged with sentiment and guided by emotions. Their conceptualism is, after all, accidental. It is, nonetheless, one to which Chinese artists will continue to refer in their practice so long as they draw uninhibitedly from the pool of artistic models and strategies, and reorganize them under the purview of their own law.

x



Liang Shuo, *What Thing*, 2006–2008.

Beijing artist Zhu Jia also attempted to portray something as intangible as time in two of his early videos. In *Closet* (1994), he held a running video camera as he dove into a big closet, rummaging around inside. The video

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.

05/05

e-flux journal #1 — december 2008 Carol Yinghua Lu
Accidental Conceptualism