

## ZERO TO INFINITY: THE NASCENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART OF THE 1990S (2002)

By Karen Smith

### DOCUMENTING ART

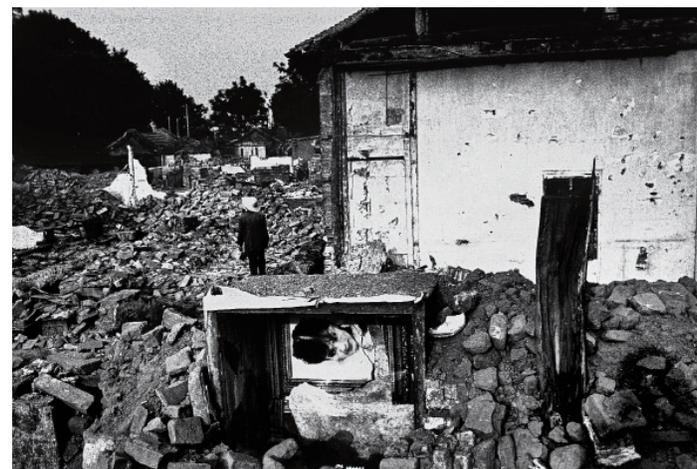
Through the first half of the nineties, the Chinese art scene was hand-molded by small but significant chance encounters and opportunities that continually moved the goalposts. An example of how this worked in assisting photography to gain a foothold is found in Geng Jianyi's 1992 photographic version of his 1990 installation work *Building No. 5* (*Wu hao lou*).

In 1992, contemporary Chinese art scholar Hans van Dijk was selecting works for *China Avant-Garde*, which opened in Berlin in January 1993.<sup>1</sup> Keen to convey the breadth of new Chinese art, van Dijk determined to include *Building No. 5*. Originally produced as a site-specific piece in Hangzhou, *Building No. 5* comprised a trail of discarded shoes spaced a pace apart throughout a small administration building earmarked for demolition and vacated for the purpose. The shoes reconfigured the footfalls of the building's former inhabitants through the imagined course of their day, poignantly emphasizing the melancholy of emptiness and imminent loss against the imagined bustle of its former functional life.

The only means of exhibiting *Building No. 5* was to enlarge the photographs that Geng Jianyi had originally taken as record of the work, captured using a domestic brand of black-and-white film. The images were grainy and thin on textural depth, yet as a photowork, *Building No. 5* was a successful, powerful piece, enhanced by black and white to a haunting, dramatic aura that convincingly conveyed a sense of dereliction against the building's former subjugation to socialist simplicity and function, and the sparsity demanded by each.

The process of producing this representation of the work kindled Geng Jianyi's interest in the role photography could play in Conceptual art. He was swift in putting this to the test. The initial result was conceptual works like *Who Is He?* (*Ta shi shei*), *A Reasonable Relationship* (*Heli guanxi*), the series *How To . . .* (*Walk, Laugh, Put on a Jumper, Take off a Coat*) (*Zenme . . . zou, xiao, tiao, tuoyi*), *This Person* (*Zhe ge ren*), *Identity Card* (*Shenfenzheng*), and *Floor* (*Di mian*), in which photographs were juxtaposed with texts or deliberately manipulated to test audience perceptions of photography as incontrovertible "truth." It inspired an ongoing fascination with the medium.

It is not hard to imagine that Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi's close friend and associate, might have found inspiration in the new direction his friend was taking and the motivation to test the possibilities of photography himself. In 1993, shortly after their two-person show in Beijing, Zhang Peili produced *Continuous Reproduction* (*Jixu fanzhi*), a photograph of a photograph, photographed again and again until it abstracted itself into oblivion, and implying the distortion of ideas, notions, preconceptions, and even facts through time and repetition. It remains a most succinct photowork, although the simple form of its content tended to be overshadowed by glossy and complex images that became vogue as gaudy, kitsch, and media-oriented art converged. *Continuous Reproduction* was a sharp reminder of how the past fades through time and repeated viewing until all "facts" are distorted. Also, of the camera's limitations in picking up detail; losing minute fragments at every round, which we might not notice from one incremental step to the next, but are proven essential to completing the "whole picture" when the first image is compared with the last.



Rong Rong. 1997 *No. 1(1) Beijing*. 1997. Gelatin-silver print, 39 3/8 × 59" (100 × 150 cm). David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

Both Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili would continue to subvert photography to the message they wished to convey. Their works were statements about ideas that could only be explored through the medium, and with results impossible to realize with any other.

Indicative of the open environment in Hangzhou at that time, and the influence of these two artists, in 1992, Qiu Zhijie, who had completed studies at Zhejiang Academy<sup>2</sup> (printmaking department, 1989), was also experimenting with photography, which would form a significant aspect of his oeuvre. In Hangzhou, contingent to the experiments carried out by the avant-garde elders based there, photography had credibility, which was not the case everywhere, as Qiu Zhijie discovered when he moved north to Beijing. There it was still seen through the viewfinder of conventional function, not yet recognized as a powerful medium for art.

### DOCUMENTING PERFORMANCE

As I have suggested, [through the first half of the 1990s] even where artists were beginning to employ photographic elements in their work, no one thought of being a photographer. Not even Rong Rong, who [was] initially determined to be an oil painter. Three failed attempts to enter art school persuaded him otherwise, and following experiments with a rented medium-format Seagull camera — the domestic Shanghai brand — he put canvas aside in favor of light-sensitive paper [pl. 32].

When moving to Beijing to begin photography studies at the Central Institute of Art and Design, student poverty brought Rong Rong to an impoverished place, but social comment did not yet interest him. He was drawn to the creativity that the environment spawned in the artists living there. The village was home to Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Zhu Ming, Cang Xin, the poet/singer Zu Zhou, and numerous others, who collectively christened it the East Village. The artists were almost entirely unknown. Publicizing events was not a sensible option. Thus, with only a limited audience to spread the word, Rong Rong's photographs became testimony to the East Village "movement." His stills successfully captured the tense anxiety and bated silence that underlay all gatherings and the darker reality which these artists faced every day. Each of these artists eventually achieved recognition, but external awareness of their art was undeniably fast-tracked via the images taken by Rong Rong and Xing Danwen.

Ma Liuming later used a camera in his performances with a self-timer that allowed him to photograph himself with his audience, but his work, like that of Zhu Ming and Zhu Fadong, was primarily about performance, not photography.

The performance art movement gained currency with the East Village's group ethic from early 1994. That did not mean that other artists were not experimenting with performance, nor with photographic documentation of their endeavors. Here, Wang Jinsong, Liu Anping, and Zhang Shaoruo stand as early pioneers of performance photography. Wang Jinsong and Liu Anping recorded their joint performance pieces in images of varied quality. Where one was immediately aware that the photograph is of an act, the act took precedence over the "photograph" [pls. 33, 34, 35].

Wang Jinsong acquired a camera in 1992, but it did not occur to him to use it to make "art" until 1996, when he produced *Standard Family* (*Biaozhun jiating*), which we will look at later. He had a fabulous eye and would be asked by many artists to capture their performances, like Wang Jin's *Red Train Tracks* (*Hongse tiegui*), in 1994.

Zhao Shaoruo's early experimentation with photography followed in the well-trodden footsteps of official practice of rewriting pictorial history by reordering political line-ups. He appropriated known images of Mao amongst the people, which he re-created, inserting himself as the radiant heart of the crowd. While this was not great art, it was in line with the mood of the times. In commandeering the same type of political and cultural signifiers, Zhao Shaoruo's photomontages paralleled the growth of Political Pop in painting. The technique was instantly apparent to a non-Chinese audience, which delighted in avant-garde works loaded with readable, daring iconography. Especially as the artist could have a cameo in his own photographs.

In summer 1994, at the home of artists Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, Wang Jin presented a test print of *Red Dust* (*Hongqi qu*), hot from the darkroom. It was a stunningly arresting image of the artist standing on an idyllic stone bridge above a gently meandering stream, flanked by lustily vegetated banks somewhere deep in China's agricultural heartland. Wang Jin's then-long hair echoed the flow of water, and the red dust he was emptying from a sack in his hands descended to the tributary's surface like a delicate autumn mist.

Lin Tianmiao was moved to question the artist's motive for what appeared a deliberate desecration of the environment. Wang Jin, ultimately concerned with making a visual impact, denied desecration. The ensuing discussion illustrated the varying attitudes towards environmental issues amongst artists. Blissful ignorance lay in provision for what seemed almost moral anarchy in photo works of the late 1990s.

In 1994, Wang Jin — also a graduate of Zhejiang Academy — used photography to record an event in step with East Village performers.<sup>3</sup> He continued with works like *To Marry a Mule* (*Gen yitou luozhi jiehun*) (1995) and *100%* (*Baifen zhi bai*) (1999). The success of these, particularly *To Marry a Mule*, added fuel to the fire that claimed the photographic "record" as the all-important cash cow.

It was another exhibition in 1995 that effected the next alteration in views held of photography. Almost no photo works had yet been exhibited in China although several had been published at home and abroad.

This "first" exhibition highlighted the Beijing art circle's conservative perceptions of the medium but did precipitate a degree of change.

In October 1995, Yan Lei — and the fact that he too graduated from Zhejiang Academy suggests a pattern here — showed photographs of two performance works in his solo show *Invasion* (*Jinru*). The performances were done in private without an audience, so the photographs were the artworks.

If photography purveyed truth, then mightn't it be capable of capturing images of reality stranger than fiction? East Village performance works were not always accorded credibility as art, but the photographs that documented them were compelling for the "truth" they depicted. However, the opening of Yan Lei's exhibition produced an outcry against "performances fabricated for the camera." It was curious given that photographer-artists like Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura were at that time riding high on the success of imitating and re-creating familiar scenarios for the camera. There would be a 360-degree turn around in attitudes in 1998, but in 1995, "standards" set by the brute actuality of East Village performances, meant that to be credible an act had to be authentic, no "cheating" allowed.

Yan Lei's actions were real enough yet the works were intended to convey more than the document of an event. He was deliberately tampering with "truth," what it was and how it was appraised. The aim was to play with audience perception. Unfortunately, at that moment, no one wanted to be toyed with. Artists did not wish to be challenged by other artists. Tolerance was low.

The breakthrough in altering attitudes was wrought by Zheng Guogu, whose series *The Life of Youth in Yangjiang* (*Yangjiang qingnian de shenghuo*), begun in 1995, validated play-acting to the hilt. Anyone who took these images for real was plain naïve. Zheng Guogu's native town was a stone's throw from Guangzhou, where the Big-Tailed Elephant group (*Da wei xiang*) resided. The group was a primal influence in the region, forward-looking in concept and diverse in use of materials, which often included photography, primarily as stills. It was present in their collaborative and independent activities as documentation and an element of a piece like Xu Tan's *Prostitute* series (*Jinü*) or Chen Shaoxiong's projection works. The geographical location provided a specific set of influences for artists within its sphere. It was just over the border from Hong Kong and part of the Pearl River Delta region, a special economic and trade zone. Daily issues were more localized than the politically driven ones that manipulated agendas in the north. Guangzhou's youth were particularly conscious of the unsupervised squandering of cash and time enjoyed by the progeny of the Hong Kong elite.

Exploiting local responses in deliberately obvious parodies of dressing up and grown-up make-believe, Zheng Guogu relayed the narrative of his stories through negative-sized contact prints placed in rows on a single sheet of paper like a storyboard for a film. Cruel mockery was made to appear as heaps of fun. He even enacted his own ideal wedding suffused with the idealized romance promoted on every billboard on every corner. The practice of using multiple images to complete one work created rhythmic flows that reinforced the farce of the romp. But soon his frames started to appear like real life. Or was it that real life had grown increasingly fantastical and performed in line with his photographed performances? The mood became cynical as he manipulated fragmented porn images, making ugly distortions of that which was meant to excite. Whilst the police dealt with the nastiness of vice, Zheng Guogu's subject paralleled an official campaign to oust distributors of pornographic material. The artist hinted at the nastiness of minds that thrilled to manufacture stimulation.

The issue could have been interpreted in many ways. Zheng Guogu was just making art. 1990s Chinese art played with racy topics in a syncopated fashion, groomed and combined for immediate impact, a momentary jerk of emotion and a lingering nod to the gray matter that never quite explained itself. Zheng Guogu's photography was ahead of itself, and his work inspired a bevy of followers dedicated to youthful fantasy, like that subsequently employed by Yang Yong, whose photographic documentation of "twenty-four hours in the life of bored but cute twenty-something Shenzhen girls of dubious employment" owed much to the narrative style evoked in

Zheng Guogu's work. Perhaps the most important contribution Zheng Guogu made to the advance of contemporary art photography in China was in evacuating the sense of preciousness that had crept into overly posed images of artists performing. It was an awareness that both he and Yan Lei would continue to exploit though not always via the medium of photography. And he made the multiple key.

#### OUTSIDE HELP

An important factor in the advance of photography in China's contemporary sphere was the opportunity to exhibit photographic-based works. It sounds obvious, but through the initial period of the avant-garde's evolution at home and for first showings of its art abroad, the emphasis was clearly on media that resonated within the Western contemporary art model. This was first painting and then sculpture, installation, and video.

By the mid-1990s, as photography took its place in the broader scheme of mainland art, suddenly everyone was at it. After being validated by exhibition space, it had become ripe for so much more.

It is also worth mentioning outside influences—although there is no space to trace them in-depth here. British artist Sam Taylor-Wood was clearly known in the later 1990s. A 2002 piece by Liao Bangming showed an apparently seamless 360-degree street panorama, but lacked her skill at infusing an oddity that makes it all work. She provided similar inspiration for the Gao Brothers' *Last Supper (Zuihou de wancan)*, among others.

Richard Billingham was another favorite. Song Yongping had been to New York, where Billingham had work at the Holly Solomon Gallery. Artists were travelling more widely and frequently, so books and catalogues were winging their way back to China in profusion. Chinese artists were swift to clock new trends.

In 1997, artists in Beijing had the chance to see photographs by Thomas Struth. The blandness of his works struck a chord with Luo Yongjin, with whom he exhibited. Then there was German Roland Fischer, who took a leaf out of Zhuang Hui's book and made portraits of hundreds of students from Beijing University. Lois Conner had been travelling to China since 1984 and was close with artists in Hangzhou in particular, like Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili. This represents but a toe in the surf.

#### TRENDS AND MOTIFS

Perhaps because the history of photography in contemporary Chinese art is brief, it all unfolded at once and with a jumbled range of themes, forms, and approaches. Do these relate to general issues at work across the contemporary art board? Which artists influenced what? How did photography go from zero to infinity in just ten years? With a brief chronology in mind, we can now look more at content.

To gain credence as pure art within a society where Western-style advertising and magazine culture were only just beginning to make any sense to the people's visual experience, art photography needed to differentiate itself from the principles photography served in the mass media. Perhaps for this reason, toward the late 1990s artists took pleasure in subverting the fantasies and ideals thrown up by popular culture. Evidently, in appropriating photography to fine art, the first act was to reject all notions of a conventionally "meaningful" event unless ratified in a deliberately petulant manner.

Artists retained the core criteria of photojournalism, which meant the supremacy of a single image, in telling a story, conveying message and meaning in one ten-second blast. One characteristic of art photography in China was the attention-grabbing nature of the subject, action, and scale employed: testy, dynamic, and huge.

Photography offered artists a way to survey their sociopolitical, economic, and cultural environment in a direct, contemporary way. The key lay in personal intervention, the artist as director-performer, whose presence in the work—physical or conceptual—was crucial to distinguishing a photowork from a pure photograph. This kind of approach was clearly demarcated in photoworks produced by Qiu Zhijie and latterly Xu Zhen and Yang Fudong, where the artists are both actors and choreographers of the action.

Obviously there were issues at work, in styles conducive to message, and a variety of compelling concepts. It is not always helpful to categorize art—as was attempted for nascent forms of expression in contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s. Unhelpful because as they gain more experience and their art evolves in other directions, most artists tend to confound the label accorded them. The majority of those who used photography did so in multifarious ways to different ends as their various concepts demanded. In the 1990s, the Chinese adapted to change quicker and in ways more pronounced than most foreigners could comprehend.

At first glance, clearly discernible approaches seem apparent that make tracing trends easier, such as social documentation versus pure concept. The technique is different and there would be different ideas at work, but these do not explain the reason or motive for the difference, nor the context against which the difference is made pronounced. The motifs and signs might be missed by someone from another culture unfamiliar with the local lingo. It mattered because those artists concerned to comment on Chinese contemporary social reality needed to convey the context if their work was to be understood and not perceived as oddly, exotically curious.

One reason that the labeling of works is problematic is that it is often hard to distinguish between "categories." Take for example terms like "social commentary" or "photographed images of self-performed pieces highlighting social issues": what is performance and what is comment? Either can, of course, be both. So do we put them together or in separate groups? What about self-portraits? Where is the line between performance, fantasy, and self? What is the boundary between any of these beyond which might be termed pure concept?

There are grounds to argue for these subject headings: the human figure as vehicle for social comment and pure self-enacted performance as means to social comment—as in painting, very few artists choose to work in a non-figurative or abstract genre, and but a handful look at "landscape." Most "purely conceptual" work also employed the figure as did those focused on the environment. Then there was the umbrella of new media and technology, which was as much subject as tool. Some of these could also be termed pure performance while a case could be made for conceptual comment.

The permutations are endless, and most artists could be said to slot into most categories, raising the issue of whether we analyze photoworks from an individual artist's overall direction or from specific isolated pieces. It seems more important to discuss specific works because—in all but a few cases where the artist concentrates largely on photography—more is revealed by a single piece about contemporary art and life in China as a whole. Trying to group disparate entities by trend only highlights their diversity.

However, there clearly were several different approaches being followed. First, the most significant category circles around straightforward social comment. Second, as described earlier, photography provided an interface between the new field of private performance, which was especially useful for theatrical ideas that would have required an enormous amount of social skill and financing to present publicly, neatly sidestepping issues of official permission and approval.

Third, and what was to become the dominant trend by 2000, a number of artists picked up the threads of narrative realism and storytelling that had previously been the exclusive domain of painted compositions. In addition to composing photographic frames, they could use multiple photographs to complete a work, relating the message through succeeding images. Fourth, but by no means last, new technology—technology that was largely new to China—opened up ways to manipulate images with applications that were more usually associated with handcrafted, not machine-made, art. Artists used the camera to produce profound visual comments on the contemporary Chinese situation. Within the span of a few years, from zero visibility and interest, a photography-based work had proved it could be many different things to many very different people.

#### GAMES AND GESTURES

Qiu Zhijie began exploring how contemporary life shaped daily existence and the outlook of society as individuals or en masse by appropriating cultural human gestures. These were humorous and relied on familiarity to strike at the borders of conservatism. From ideology to the physical realm, from smiles to shaking hands, he recognized that human action was governed by an impulsive response. In *Fine*, the posturing of his subjects demonstrates a theatricality, which comes naturally to the Chinese, for even if they don't practice it, *taiji* [t'ai chi] has instilled people with an extraordinary ingrained sense of poise and balance. Using the notion of a game with the exaggerated nature of acting out actions that games permit, Qiu Zhijie made the meaningful ridiculously simple.

He exhibited *Calendar 1998 (Rili 1998)* in 1999 in a solo show at the Central Academy in Beijing. It comprised an image of the same scene on each day of the month, taken at a different time of day forming a Hockney-like conglomeration. Later, photographs were also used as the "print" from stencils he created of carved bamboo and embossed on human skin. Qiu Zhijie used photography for what it brought to his art as and when he required it.

Humor also radiates from *Clock (Zhong)*, a 1996 black-and-white photowork by Wang Jinsong, which depicted the artist at various tourist sites in Beijing. Pinned to time and place by the hands of time affixed to the image, he thrust himself into each frame, asserting his power as witness to the changing capital. The rapid pace of change was inferred by the passage of twelve hours that complete the work, but the gesture was of youth stepping out from under the weight of history.

Against the sobriety of topics addressed, a lighthearted strain permeated Wang Jinsong's classic series *Standard Family* and *Parents (Shuangqin)*. *Standard Family* comprises two hundred photographs of one-child families, and was a quiet lament that these children would grow up without an extended family. It is a Chinese expression of a uniquely Chinese problem, a statement and record of fact, but a conceptual artwork and not a series of photographic family portraits. Almost no other work, report, or study could encapsulate the change sweeping society, like the external influences of clothing and accessories worn, which reveal as much about poverty and wealth as fashion trends and personality. This approach fell neatly between conceptual thought in Zhang Peili's *Continuous Reproduction* and Geng Jianyi's work, and straightforward documentation. It set a new standard.

The family was the subject of Yang Zhenzhong's 1996 "chicken" series. The chicken had been a common metaphor because the geographical form of China on a map resembles a chicken. It was a metaphor appropriated by Zhang Nian beginning in 1989. A quiet strength in Chinese art, he consistently produced work relevant to the

social moment, a large portion of which was performance or object-based, so photography served as documentation and was not always its intended form.

#### SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

Taking a cue from familiar, conventional forms of photography in China and his own "serve the people" performances, between 1995 and 1997 Zhuang Hui produced a series of panoramic group portraits. These were executed in tandem with a four-part work titled *One and Thirty . . . Workers, Peasants, Children, and Art World People (Yi he sanshi . . . gongren, nongmin, ertong he yishujie de ren)*.

Exploring the categories of the common people in a socialist society, Zhuang Hui participated in the snapshots. In each one the pose is the same, the artist's smile fixed, but the between-the-lines variants are striking. The group portraits, with Zhuang Hui positioned at the far right of each, had instant appeal, particularly for foreign audiences intrigued by modern Chinese society. This engendered endless invitations to exhibit the works abroad. The *One and Thirty* series conjured an insightful survey of proletarian life in the same way Wang Jinsong achieved it with *Standard Family*. It remains a valuable record of the era that achieved full credibility as art.

While many artists chose to act for the camera, Hai Bo elected to reenact the past, restaging group portraits found in his family's album. He sought out survivors of 1970s images and, by rephotographing them in the same positions, presented the great leap forward China has achieved since that era. The gaps created by those who had departed make a poignant space that speaks with the same power as blank space in Chinese ink painting.

As Gaudy art emerged in the mid-1990s, mass media had gained a broad profile in daily life, and kitschlike color, glamour, and lifestyles were omnipresent. This was coupled with an increasing proclivity toward computers and the availability of a vast array of affordable—pirated—software. The possibilities for playing with a photographed image were endless, and color now clearly distinguished art photography from its conventional counterpart. An Hong was the first artist to experiment with "gaudy" as a photographic process in outrageous self-portraits of glittering rainbow makeovers and saturated hues. Gaudy? Yes, but somehow fantastical.

#### FANTASTIC REALITY

In 1995, in the greatly restricted confines of his city-center apartment, An Hong created his Buddha series (*Foxiang*). Peking opera, traditional myths and fairy tales, all provided visual metaphoric elements transcribed to contemporary concerns. Lily pads, pink gauze, sensual swathes of colored silks, sweet youth and innocence, melded together in the halo of light before the camera lens. All combined to an adulative but invented life of the Buddha. An Hong's Buddha preached, enjoyed carnal pleasures, and then sought to free the world of sexually transmitted diseases. The image first grabbed attention before imparting a more serious message. The approach celebrated bright sensual impulses and pleasure that gently nudged the ribs of the viewer's moral conscience. An Hong's small series was responsible for liberating practice, subject, and content, paving the way for the next phase of creation.

The most successful and sublime member of the Gaudy movement to make photography was Wang Qingsong. His work was as fantastical as Pierre et Gilles, who were undoubtedly an early inspiration. Yet beyond the glitzy surface, he too raised questions about the direction in which society was heading under the glaring gloss of lush material extravagance. Parodying new social ideals, he portrayed himself as the Buddha, Shiva, the Christ, and a plethora of revered icons enmeshed in lavish clusters

of mass-culture consumer products. His visual language picked up where An Hong left off, drawing on widely varied sources. All serious elements were counterbalanced by a mockery of how developing nations fawn upon the First World and willingly kowtow before the pantheon of design gods that materialism engendered. Thus, he reduced the scale of Chinese figures, playing with the subtle nuances of religious and historical painting that suggested power over insignificance as an exaggerated presence versus a diminished one. The works inferred a bitter indignation.

#### MEDIA PROJECTIONS OF REAL LIFE, MANIPULATED

A number of artists played with television and print media in obvious ways, but none so well as Xu Yihui and Zhao Bandi. In the 1996 exhibition *Models for the Masses (Dazhong yangban)*, Xu Yihui included photographed images of himself stuck on mock television screens in a parody of permitted programming. Funny but smart.

The power of mass media to shape opinion and present the facts of the (art) world was a force Zhou Tiehai manipulated for his own poignant ends. In 1995–97, this took the form of a series of magazine covers imitating the well-known faces of publications like *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *frieze*, *Stern*, and the *New York Times*, re-created as format-perfect copies, but with headlines and images that make direct and succinct reference to the situation of, and the influences governing, art in China as he perceived them.

The obsession with media, exemplified in Zhao Bandi's work, was prefigured in Xu Xiaoyu's product shots. In a series of diptychs, she juxtaposed urban street scenes in which the American flag cropped up—as design element of pedestrian clothing or advertisement—with a photograph of an available product with the same flag used on the packaging as a marketing ploy. It was an astute observation of the subliminal manner in which the "American Way" was infiltrating daily life, given a further edge during the backlash against the U.S. that occurred after the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade in May 1999.

In 1997, Zhao Bandi started exploring ways to bring Chinese society closer to his art and vice versa. The result was *Zhao Bandi and the Little Panda (Zhao Bandi he xiong-mao)*, using a humorous, ironic motif for the Chinese situation that imbued his satire with pathos. Zhao Bandi's aim was social art that could be accepted and enjoyed by the masses. With the *Little Panda*, he succeeded, his topics referencing relevant social situations of the moment. The posters dealt with public issues such as drug abuse, safety, public health, the prevalence of fake products on the market, cleverly dovetailing with municipal government directives. The astuteness of the "panda" concept was to combine humor with the heart-melting cuteness of the toy and a serious acceptable message.

In late 1997, Hong Hao began inciting materialist ambition in photoworks that parodied slick, glossy, Western-style advertising media. It was his conduit for pointing to the standards that Chinese society had accrued as benchmarks of advance, modernization, Western, First World, and wealthy. He dressed in smart suits, donned blond wigs and blue contact lenses—an approach also used by Shanghai-based Shi Yong in a similar conceptual game—and surrounded himself with the prescribed trappings of an ideal, civilized, and successful lifestyle. The picture-postcard images of 1999's *The Tour Guide series (Daoyou)* jested about Western perceptions of China while mocking the face China presented to the world. Hong Hao played an enthusiastic, amicable guide, the implication being: who has the power to show what to whom? This led him to the journeys depicted in exemplary classical scroll paintings, journeys he revisited to examine physical environments past and present, not unlike Hai Bo's human comparative.

An undercurrent in 1990s art in China was satirical reworking of Pop art ideas gleaned from Andy Warhol and taken to new heights by Jeff Koons. Notions of the bright, garish, and throwaway attributes of contemporary life and capitalist consumerism, which was making inroads to the mainland, made sense to Chinese artists who found themselves in a nation whose sociocultural level provided plenty of kitsch in everyday life.

In acutely advanced Shanghai, Yang Fudong took a cue from Hong Hao's glossy lifestyle branding and turned the issue around to demonstrate the boredom and vapidness of obsessions with possessions. This spawned several followers in a like style.

Meanwhile in the capital, returning to the concept of truth associated with news reportage, Zhu Jia explored the power of media influence encapsulated in a single incontrovertible image. In common with an approach the artist Wang Youshen had taken in the 1997 work *Shining—Military Clubhouse (Shanliang—Jundui dalou)*,<sup>4</sup> Zhu Jia subverted the "truth" of a photograph by inferring a damaging message via outrageous association. He proved how easily the mind is deceived by a misleading pictorial inference. Once an insinuation is created, the damage is done. In *Have These People Had Sexual Relations? (Zhe xie ren you xingguanxi ma?)*, ordinary people are tainted by implication, although it is obvious that their proximity is incidental. It echoed the weight accorded plain images of doorways in Yin Xiuzhen's 1996 *Door (Men)*. These were simply the doorways through which she had passed from childhood to adulthood, but, like the images of vacant stairwells featured in Geng Jianyi's 1994 piece *Who Is He?*, they hinted at so much more.

Song Yongping employed media exposé in a devastatingly direct documentation of the mental and physical decline of his parents. Sensational maybe, especially the frames of himself stuck naked between his two tortured parents. Perhaps as example of vibrant health beside ravaged bodies? Or "son" as product of "parents" meeting the demands of filial piety? The work is tough, moving, and was born out of frustration at the artist's distance from Beijing, the lack of attention or exposure afforded. *My Parents (Wo de fumuqin)* confronted people with what this artist was not afraid to face. His act ran contrary to the basic tenets of conventional society, a taboo of the utmost extreme and, while not necessarily disturbing for mind-numbed foreigners, was distressingly shocking for a Chinese audience. But therein lay its significance. The issue the work addressed required urgent resolution in China, for an increasing number of parents found themselves alone and uncared for in old age, a sentiment mooted in Wang Jinsong's *Parents*; nursing is a full-time job, and Song Yongping had to make a choice. He gave up art to provide twenty-four-hour care for his dying parents. But in making the choice to care for his family first, he found a powerful subject for art. *My Parents* is the complete antithesis of Hai Bo's rose-tinted remembrance and healthy subjects. Even where people are missing, the gaps are clean and empty, not riddled with pain or neglect, at least none that is visible.

Against all this reality, in 1996 Wu Xiaojun chose a fictional, fable style of storytelling through a cast of small plasticine figures. These he molded himself to represent specific historical characters and recognizable types from Chinese society. In staged compositions, [author] Lu Xun rubs shoulders with Lenin, gun-toting John Wayne types with solid revolutionaries. The stories Wu Xiaojun dreamt up for his imaginary satirical dramas related to history, plotting the course of "known" factual events and positing an alternative outcome to the inevitable. The works represented those slender moments during which the incontrovertible was held to ransom; one slight shift of position or presence and the whole history might have been altered.



Song Dong. *Stamping Water*. 1996. Chromogenic prints, each 24 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (62 x 42 cm). Collection Artur Walther

#### FANTASY PERFORMED

From 1997, the styles and choice of subject matter introduced by the fantastic performances of An Hong and Wang Qingsong were taken up by a new breed of younger artists who combined them with media ideals of family, beauty, and modern living. Some were good, some not so good, for few did it better than Wang Qingsong.

Wuhan-based Li Wen came close but in a completely different way, employing a quiet, simple means of reminding the world that life is never quite so black and white, particularly poignant in the Chinese cultural context. Everything imaginable from his room to his own face, groups of friends, and natural objects were incised with a stark dividing line between a blackened and a whitened half. He developed this in small, equally black-and-white still lifes that were elegantly subtle.

By now, the self in photographic images was widespread and favored in a volume of works too numerous to list beyond the innovators mentioned above. One that does merit mention is Li Haibin's revisitation of the look of every decade from the 1900s to the 1990s, spot on all the way. Liao Bangming also made a valiant attempt to parody the new categories of "profession," dressing himself up as doctor, patient, businessman, sports personality, soldier, teacher, etc. And mention must be made of video artist Li Yongbin, whose still photographic output is small but whose projections were clearly an influence on many artists, notably Song Dong.

#### PLURALITY: THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT

By 1998, photography in contemporary Chinese art was almost the dominant medium. Many artists continued performing for the camera, but a growing body of work was dedicated to the physical environment, particularly cities and urban life. Speaking of change and China had become a cliché, yet change was everywhere and happening so rapidly that enthusiasm for propelling China into the modern age had turned to confusion. People no longer recognized the world around them. The disintegration of the familiar bred anxiety. This was reflected in a diverse range of photoworks.

First, in 1997, Rong Rong began a series about the ruins of the urban center as the old city gave way to redevelopment. *Ruins (Yizhi)* was infused with nostalgia and, like Wang Jinsong's *Standard Family*, offered no solution, just fact.

Zhang Dali had returned from Italy inspired by graffiti and embarked on a city-wide daubing of his tag. The simple, sweep-of-the-arm outline of a large, bald head mapped his extensive wanderings through the metropolis, sites to which he returned to photograph his handiwork. The photographs were then reproduced as inkjet prints on canvas, the color soft, the hard edges of buildings, walls, streets blurred by the process, giving them a quality alien to the urbanity they represented. Where they looked like painted cityscapes, they lost the tension of the original graffiti, becoming elevated to aesthetics. But too pretty, and they lost their punch: which pushed Zhang Dali to experiment. He turned to lightboxes, and the illuminated transparencies put the viewer back on the street, restoring a sense of rawness.

Looking at acceptable "graffiti" used to mark out sites for demolition, in 1999 Wang Jinsong produced *Chai*, which bore witness to all tagged parts of the city, earmarked for the bulldozer as low-rise made way for the grandeur of height. By 2001, even Zhang Nian was producing marvelous and humorous composite images referring to Beijing's large-scale transformation in anticipation of the 2008 Olympics. By now, Luo Yongjin had turned his full attention to systematically photographing incongruent new building styles where they invaded and clashed with existing architectural styles. With their visible seams, the Hockney-like patchwork form of his completed works deconstructed physical reality. The skill of execution applied to these multiple images rendered them one of the most enduring comments on contemporary change.

From the images of urban and provincial environments, the rich sweep of China's geographical breadth was revealed. Hong Hao, Wang Jinsong, and Zhang Dali focused on Beijing. Luo Yongjin's preference was for Luoyang and Shanghai. Down south, Chen Shaoxiong was making painstakingly fine miniature models of street scenes which he "slotted" into the actual landscape. He cleverly illustrated Guangzhou's buzzing pace. Contrasting the ideal of bright modern contemporary living with the actual result of pollution and detritus caused by rampant consumerism, the photographed models trick the eye and require a close look to untangle truth from fiction.

Not far away, Xu Tan was capturing images of planes flying into Hong Kong airport, apparently only just above the buildings. The planes grab attention first, but then eyes shift to the buildings—which are old, tired, and run-down. It was not exactly the glossy, well-heeled image that Hong Kong sought to promote. We assume this is the area to which the poorer section of society is relegated, which was not made clear, but that was not necessary for reading the attendant environmental and psychological dangers invoked.

In Hangzhou, Xiang Liqin produced digital compilations of architectural features characteristic of buildings in the city, painting them in a decorative and colorful fashion with immediate visual—if acid—appeal. Even this could not disguise the dilapidated state of structures only thirty years old, whose living conditions were neither decorative nor colorful.

For *House, Home, Family (Fangzi, jia he jia ren)*, Hangzhou-based Wang Qiang produced a beautiful sequence of sanitized panoramic sweeps of construction and destruction, encased in lightboxes.<sup>5</sup> The work echoed the moment in terms of form as much as content. Numerous artists were employing lightboxes in various ways and to varying degrees of success. Some of the most interesting works were by Wang Wei and Liu Wei, whom we will come to by reference to content in a while.

The most immediate way to pronounce the gulf between reality and the ideal living environment was to construct a set in the manner instituted by Chen Shaoxiong.



Gu Dexin. *October 31*. 1998. Chromogenic prints, each 49½ × 39⅝" (125.7 × 100.6 cm)

Model-making requires skill and dexterity often considered the province of women. In Shanghai, Wang Yiwu was creating worlds to match the "Chinese dream." Her fantasy constructs were filled with gardens blooming, landscapes flourishing, and people pocket-sized floating or submerged under water. Implied problems took on a serious aura as grass was replaced by sand: arid, dry, and incapable of sustaining life. Hers was a standard morality tale informed by an awareness of how humans abuse their living environment, provoking awareness in a cute, seemingly pretty, certainly alluring fashion.

Other young artists would pick up the element of cute and shift up a gear in the vernacular of the new millennium. It provided a stark contrast to the brutality of another strain of imagery that burst upon the fin-de-siècle scene.

#### THE TRADITIONAL BODY: AGGRAVATING TABOO

Brutality is relative. Standards of morality forever shift their ground. What emerged in the final months of the 1990s in Chinese art was not particularly brutal by some standards, nor especially immoral by others. It was new to China, shocking for those who confronted it and were unacquainted with the broader circumstances of the moment or comparable pursuits in Western art.

Gu Dexin had been a prime mover in shaping contemporary art in China since the mid-1980s. His impact derived first from his installation pieces but was reinforced by his major photowork *Meat/Hand (Rou/shou)*, which set a pace for the art-photography moment in which others were still grappling for appropriate form.

Performance-installation artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu needed photography to document their works, works that were altering the subtext of truth to materials in art, an alteration that fed back into photography. Huang Yan also used photographs to document an unusual painterly approach—gouache on pork chops—but his appropriation of classical ink techniques evolved out of a performance that was less actual performing than using his own flesh as the ground for painting. Like the female lead in Peter Greenaway's *Pillow Book* whose father used her skin as his "canvas," Huang Yan turned his wife's skill with a brush from conventional rice paper to tattooing his torso with meandering Chinese landscapes. Here, photography was part of an ongoing process of drawing his cultural heritage into the modern age.

In this new mood, the human figure was subject to tortuous interaction with animal and plant life. Wang Wei degraded the notion of portraiture by forcing his subjects under water, sandwiching the photographs in lightboxes, layered under swills of krill. A subsequent series slopped all manners of food stuffs over the subjects, which induced a stronger sense of revulsion than earlier images of fish and eels protruding from the orifices around his head.

Wu Ershan extrapolated stills from his video work of bodies roiling in vats of decay. The element of rot intrigued him enough to prompt experiments with [Cindy] Sherman-like single images, which seem plucked from a greater narrative. Isolated, they took on a disturbing aura of misdemeanor that even the obvious falsity of the forms could not erase.

Jin Feng, another conceptual artist with a penchant for flesh and living organisms, turned to photography for its fabulous detail and true-to-life color to produce multi-image triptychs revealing the transformation of a living animal to nicely jointed cuts of meat; ready to cook and complete with illustrations of the kind of dishes one might produce. This marked a pause in the computer-manipulated photographs he previously produced, which like many such experiments confounded its message in a profusion of technical whiz.

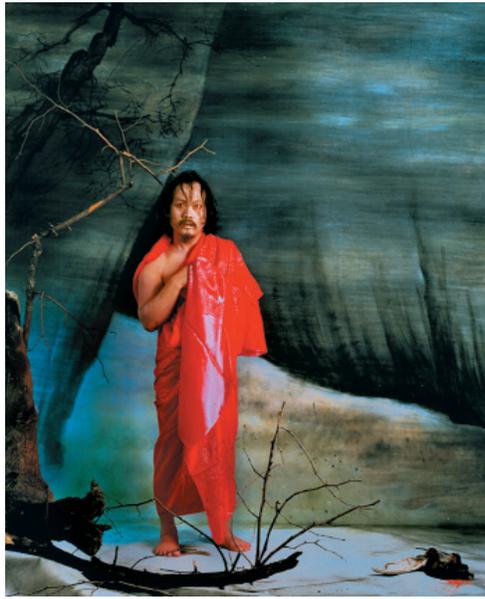
With the body so exhaustively exploited and images of it overstuffed with icons, decorative imagery, and an overwhelming array of signs, artists increasingly needed to find simple, direct means to define their content. In Shanghai, Xu Zhen alighted on a way to achieve profoundly memorable images that strayed into new territory. Among photographs of prostitutes at rest—the subject was becoming par for the course by 2000—he created a set of monumental male nudes tainted by subtle trickles of blood that ran down their inner thighs like untamed menstrual blood. These were mesmerizing even as they shocked.

Female genitalia have never moved far beyond being taboo in art, a taboo that Beijing-based Chen Lingyang encountered in presenting her work *Twelve Flower Months (Shi er yue hua)*. This was a series of compositions constructed as still lifes, each pivoted on the centerpiece of a hand mirror. Each mirror reflected the artist's own genitalia during menstruation, appropriating the physiological fact of menstruation through the passage of the year to the poetic concept of twelve flower months in traditional Chinese culture. Here, she finished what 1970s U.S. feminists started by "celebrating" the most fundamental aspect of womanhood, subjecting conventional culture to a very contemporary reading.

Similar initiatives could be found in the works of other young women artists, like the bold expression of sexual emotions and relations by Cui Xiuwen. *Little Ones (Xiao dongxi)* was unique in touching on disturbing strains of sexual perversion relating to pedophilia, a profoundly controversial and polemical issue in the West. Nothing shocks or angers more. Cui Xiuwen's subjects seem fully aware of the provocation they exude, which compounded the artist's own point and an experience which, though it might raise hackles, we cannot deny her.

In the late 1990s, Lin Tianmiao produced some of the finest reflections on the physical body that relied neither on sexual innuendo nor shock. Her intent negated both as she adulterated images of her own body, removing the organs of gender and hair. Her female eunuchs invoked the confused state of femininity in modern China and beyond. In soft shades of gray, printed digitally on canvas and not photographic paper, her works took photography to a different, extraordinarily integral level.

Beginning in 1997, one of the most influential contemporary art-photographers was Nanjing-based Hong Lei. His "bodies" were animal, his inspiration Song-dynasty painting, and his photographs subject to savage manhandling between the shutter closing and the emergence of the final print. Playing with the delicate, ethereal aspects of classical painting, his stylized compositions replayed the inspiration through contemporary elements and mood where ancient gardens met damaged, dead birds—beautiful, intact, but dead. The negatives were scratched to soften images then saturated with overblown hues of color. These techniques demonstrated a new level



Hong Lei. *After Liang Kai's (Song-Dynasty) Masterpiece "Shakyamuni Coming out of the Mountains."* 1999. Chromogenic print, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (100 × 81 cm)

of creative control over the photograph, putting artists back in the driving seat. Hong Lei's work was a visible influence on others of his generation, like Dong Wensheng, who made solid but variegated attempts at imitation.

#### TECHNOLOGY

Technology came of age in China in the 1990s, aided by economic reforms that advanced individual circumstances enough to support it. By the end of the decade, artists who had traveled regularly abroad were familiar enough with the centers of Western creativity to have reappraised their initial understanding of modernity. Photography matched the increasing disposability of the moment as the world moved toward a new millennium and the unknown it was perceived to contain.

New technology created the potential for disarming new techniques, like satellite imaging, which Li Tianyuan explored in 2000, and infrared and medical optical sensing, appropriated by Feng Feng from 1998. But such have yet to find a balance with concept in the work. The mere form of a new process or technology alone was not enough to win work credence as art, equally illustrated in the use of computer software for digital photography and video. But as artists became more comfortable using special effects, the urge to incorporate as many as possible gave way to a focused concern on what was specifically appropriate to the concept of a particular artwork and, in identifying the effect they required, finding innovative ways to make existing techniques achieve it. An example is He An's *Woman Raped by an Alien* (*Bei waixingren qiangjian de funü*), which took months of trial and error to generate on computer.

He An first produced computer-generated images in the style of popular advertising, combining the "cool" exhorted in the slogans of Western sports advertisements—like those produced for Nike, Adidas, and Reebok—with figures of a grim Chinese reality. The juxtaposition of "cool" slapped over the image of a figure with withered legs imparted a callous slant to the "Just Do It!" hype, questioning attitudes toward physical perfection.

The next project was *Fifteen Reasons for Fashion* (*Shimao de shiwu ge liyou*). Intrigued by the role of the Internet in connecting people from all social spheres, and

the anonymity it provides for expressing fantasies, He An placed a personal ad on a Chinese server calling for young people willing to be photographed as their interpretations of "cool." The result was a startling series of images, mainly of teenage girls, whose burning desire was to appear scarred. The sexy sleaze that they associated with their fantasy was similar to the morbid fascination with injury projected in David Cronenberg's film *Crash*, one of the few Western films that has not been widely seen in China.

Wang Peng, who devoted much of the mid-1990s to familiarizing himself in New York with creative computer software, demonstrated an advantageous application of effects. An initial series of neat, precise, and exquisitely elegant works on rice paper explored the presence of expatriates in their adopted environments. A second focused on the changing face of Beijing in seemingly innocuous street scenes with a twist, an odd angle, a subtle distortion of perspective that threw out a deliberate challenge to the keenness of the viewer's eye, and most importantly, in one of the world's most populous capitals, was made devoid of all vestiges of human life. Recognizing the desertedness only made the work more astounding.

#### CONCLUSION

The volume of photographic works produced from the mid-1990s on accounted for an indispensable proportion of important Chinese artworks of the period. Equally, photography *per se* exerted an equitable influence on contemporary art practice and form. The new millennium found Yu Hong revisiting her life using family album snapshots as the basis for oil paintings. In a more conceptual way, Yan Lei produced a series of monochrome paintings that were specifically intended to appear as photographs and blur the distinct visual boundaries between photograph and painting. These were somewhat in the vein of Luc Tuymans's canvases, a style also adopted by Sichuan painter Xie Nanxing, whose compositions took a cue too from Sam Taylor-Wood's photographic constructs.

Many of the issues in evidence were sharp, insightful, and conscientiously evocative of the Chinese situation. But by 2000, some artists had slipped into a flippant exploitation of the process. The mass embrace of photography by contemporary art circles and the growing interest of the international art world had encouraged an anything-and-everything approach to churning out photoworks. In particular, a seam of fantasy performance had become twee and shallow, the compositions badly framed with the background clutter of daily life visible on the fringes. This was not kitsch, conceptual, or clever, but was due to laziness, complacency, and a blind faith in the unquestioning interest of foreign institutions by young, ambitious artists impatient to make their mark. Or perhaps it was evidence of naïve technique, where, like the average tourist snap, the photographer saw only the subject and not the entire frame. Either way, photography had acquired a tacky, salubrious underside.

Photoworks were never an easy option, nor a fast track to artistic success. Like all good art, the concept and the message that inspired it were critical for a work to be endowed with enduring value. It is interesting that of all the artists employing photography through the 1990s, only Geng Jianyi and Bai Yiluo could be deemed to be experimenting with its essence—light, exposure, chemicals, and intervention in the darkroom.

From this decade emerged a large number of striking works ranging from more conventional approaches to documentation of and comment upon the social environment, to dynamic conceptual invention. E. H. Gombrich said of Cartier-Bresson, "In his capacity to record physiognomic qualities and thus to make reality speak, he found the camera

to be superior to the brush." It is certain that many contemporary Chinese artists chose the medium for its specific qualities and superiority to painting in expressing what they wanted to say. The explosion of photography in China through the 1990s demonstrated how artists recognized this potential, but more significantly, how they made it work for them.

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**Notes**

1. This was the first large-scale touring exhibition of new art from the mainland, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.
2. Hangzhou is home to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, which changed its name to the China National Academy of Fine Arts in 1995.
3. Department of Chinese Painting, 1987.
4. *Shining—Military Clubhouse*, 1997, transparent sheets, 600 x 365 cm, tables, chairs, fluorescent lamps, Breda, Chasse-Kazerne, part of the exhibition *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*.
5. Installation exhibition held in a furniture factory in Shanghai in 2000, curated by Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun.

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— Excerpted from *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 39–50.