INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, the overseas profile of the Chinese art world increased dramatically, as the number of overseas exhibitions and publications focusing on—or featuring—Chinese art grew year by year. At the same time, the relationship between Chinese artists and overseas art workers and consumers evolved from one of keen but largely uninformed interest to one that was both better informed and more self-conscious. By 2000, Chinese art had achieved a sustainable profile on the international art circuit, and scholars, critics, curators, and collectors had begun to treat it as part of the general scenery, rather than as an exoticism. The artist Zhou Tiehai has famously stated in his 1997 painting Press Conference that “The relations in the art world are the same as the relations between states in the post–Cold War era.” I would say that the art world relationship between China and the outside world, particularly the West, developed more like a romantic relationship during the 1990s: at first, both parties were curious about the newly discovered other, and wondered what could be gained from a connection. By the end of the 1990s, the heady excitement had gone, replaced by a sustainable long-term association. Although there is now a deeper understanding, there are still areas of uncertainty, moments of idiocy, and room for enjoyable flirtation.

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, this essay consists of separate histories of the profile of art by mainland Chinese artists as it appeared in exhibitions, publications, and scholarly research in the West, with an additional small section about strategies. The reception of Chinese art in other parts of Asia, particularly Japan, is a separate and rich story revolving around different shared interests and different misperceptions, and will not be covered in this essay.

EXHIBITIONS

The 1990s saw both rapid globalization and the artistic results of China’s policy of “strides to the world.” This confluence of circumstances implied an interest on the part of the West in other cultures and the production in China of art intended for consumption overseas. Particularly a decade ago, to introduce an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art into the schedule of a museum or public gallery required determination, leverage, and strategy. Over the years, the strategizing has become more sophisticated, and more effective. The other side of the coin is the fact that some Chinese artists have set out to design works of art to suit overseas consumption, often laying their machinations bare as part of the work.

Three issues colored Western reception of Chinese art at the beginning of the 1990s, and endure to this day: first, vestiges of the colonialist search for exoticism in “the other” persisted; second, June 4[, 1989] dominated Western perceptions of China; third, Western art experts frequently had difficulty seeing beyond the surface appearance of contemporary Chinese art, with the result that they perceived much as derivative. The first two issues have surfaced in exhibitions, and may have been exploited as points of accessibility for the art, particularly in group shows where there is a need for a unifying theme. Critics accused Magiciens de la Terre, for example, of fostering the perception of Chinese artists as shamans.

Early solo exhibitions launched the overseas careers of outstanding émigré artists. In 1987, Wenda Gu installed a major show, Dangerous Chestboard Leaves the Ground, in the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto. Yang Jiechang exhibited in Paris and London in 1990 and 1991, and Chen Zhen had shows in those same years in Paris and Rome. Xu Bing’s first solo exhibition in the West was Three Installations by Xu Bing in Madison (Elvehjem Museum of Art) in 1991. Huang Yong Ping and Cai Guo-Qiang began to have major solo exhibitions in the West slightly later. In the early 1990s Cai lived in Japan, where he was a resounding success. Flying Dragon in the Heavens (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, 1997) was Cai’s first solo exhibition in Europe, and Cultural Melting Bath: Projects for the 20th Century (Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1997) his first in the United States.

This group of exceptional artists was drawn on as a core for several group exhibitions, including Art Chinois, Chine Demain pour Hier (curated by Fei Dawei, Pourières, 1990), Silent Energy (curated by David Elliott and Lydie Mepham, eight artists, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1993), Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile (curated by Julia Andrews and Gao Minglu, four artists, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 1993), and Out of the Centre, curated by Hou Hanru, five artists, Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland, 1994). These artists became integrated into the fabric of the international realm of Conceptual art, appearing in such important exhibitions as Heart of Darkness (an exhibition of artists from throughout the world), curated by Marianne Brouwer (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, 1994).

In general, Australia and Europe proved to be open to experimental Chinese art earlier than the United States. While for decades Australia had considered itself culturally linked to Europe and the United States, during the 1980s it increasingly recognized ties to its neighbors in Asia. This mindset launched the Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT), originally planned as a series of three exhibitions to be held at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1993, 1996, and 1999, under the direction of Caroline Turner. The exhibitions’ success has resulted in the triennials’ continuation into the twenty-first century. Although the art included in the APT exhibitions was not limited to China (the first, second, and third triennials featured eight, six, and eleven Chinese artists, respectively), the exhibitions are nevertheless significant for Chinese art because of the idealism behind their organization, including the minimal influence exerted by commercial galleries and collectors in the selection process. As the triennial’s Senior Project Officer, Rhana Devenport, stated, the APT core principles include: “the desire to enhance cultural understanding through long-term engagement with contemporary art and ideas from Asia and the Pacific; a commitment to co-curatorship and consultation; and the location of the artist and the artist/ artwork/ audience relationship as central to the entire process.”

The Press Conference that launched the APT was the 1997 painting by Zhou Tiehai, which introduced the concept of the “Press Conference” to the West. The Press Conference (curated by Joan Lebold Cohen at the Smith College Museum of Art, 1982) was an exhibition of artists from throughout the world, with an additional small section about strategies. The reception of Chinese art in other parts of Asia, particularly Japan, is a separate and rich story revolving around different shared interests and different misperceptions, and will not be covered in this essay.
bitions— but rather to allow multiple curators to select art representative of the area for which they were responsible. The second triennial sought to avoid a Euro-Americentric perspective, first, by convening a series of forums to discuss issues relevant to the curatorial process, and second, by forming fifteen curatorial teams each of which included a curator native to the country whose art the team was selecting. For the third triennial, fifty-three curators and researchers worked with seventy-seven artists, ensuring a plurality of vision. While the curatorial process became cumbersome, it encouraged the emergence of artists who would not have otherwise achieved recognition. The east coast of Australia also saw the first significant Australian exhibition devoted exclusively to Chinese art: Claire Roberts’s small but powerful New Art from China: Post-Mao Product, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, in 1992 (seven artists).14

During the mid-1990s, Europe produced a flurry of group exhibitions focusing on contemporary avant-garde Chinese art, beginning with China Avant-garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture, at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 1993 (sixteen artists).15 In 1995, Change—Chinese Contemporary Art, organized by Folke Edwards, opened at the Konsthallen in Göteborg, Sweden (seventeen artists);16 and Des del Pais del Centre: avant-gardes artistiques xineses (Out of the Middle Kingdom: Chinese Avant-garde Art), curated by Imma Puy, was exhibited at the Centre d’Art Santa Monica in Barcelona (thirty-four artists).17 The next year, China! Zeitgenössische Malerei, curated by Dieter Ronte, Walter Smerling, and Evelyn Weiss, opened at the Bonn Art Museum (thirty-one artists).18 An almost identical exhibition, “Quotation Marks”: Chinese Contemporary Paintings, opened at the Singapore Art Museum in 1997, with twenty-seven artists.19 Many others followed.

Probably the most influential of all the early 1990s exhibitions of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art was the 1993 blockbuster, China’s New Art, Post-1989.20 Co-curated by Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xiaoting, China’s New Art, Post-1989 opened at the Hong Kong Arts Centre and City Hall, and featured fifty-four artists, most of whom had drawn attention at the 1989 China/Avant-Garde exhibition (Zhongguo xian dai yishuzhan) at the National Art Gallery in Beijing.21 China’s New Art, Post-1989 went on to tour the globe for several years, and had a long-lasting impact, shaping the overseas roster of important Chinese artists. A pared-down spin-off of this exhibition, Mao Goes Pop, China Post-1989 (with twenty-nine artists), appeared at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in 1993.22

Group exhibitions from the first half of the 1990s introduced contemporary Chinese avant-garde art to the West. Typically the catalogue texts accompanying the exhibitions located the art in terms of its political and sociological background, and sometimes explained its historical development. Some catalogues included comments from the artists. Once contemporary Chinese art had been thus introduced, however, exhibitions in this vein became redundant, except to the local populations.

Important exhibitions of the later 1990s provided new angles or introduced new materials. Examples include Die Hälfte des Himmels: Chinesische Künstlerinnen, organized by Chris Werner, Qiu Ping, and Marianne Pitzen at the Frauen Museum in Bonn in 1998 (twenty-four artists from mainland China);23 This exhibition of female artists’ works was a direct reaction to China! Zeitgenössische Malerei, which had appeared in Bonn two years earlier, purporting to present a comprehensive view of Chinese painting but including no women among its thirty-one artists. The under-representation of female artists is a pervasive problem in the field, and Die Hälfte des Himmels made a decisive statement.

Some exhibitions explored particular media. In 1997, Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties, curated by Chris Dreissen and Heidi van Mierlo (eighteen artists; Fundament Foundation, Breda, the Netherlands) focused on installation and performance art.24 That same year saw a major exhibition of contemporary Chinese photography, Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der Volksrepublik China, at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (sixteen artists).25


Regionalism proved a viable angle for the exhibition Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River, organized by Hank Bull, David Chan, Zheng Shengtian, and Xia Wei, exhibited in various Vancouver venues (eighteen contemporary mainland artists; 1998).31 Another angle was painting genres in curating Representing the People for the Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester (ten artists; 1998), Karen Smith focused on figurative paintings.32 All of the focused exhibitions provided their audiences with a view of China as a multifaceted culture, breaking down the notion of China as a homogeneous monolith, and encouraging a more nuanced appreciation of Chinese art.

The second blockbuster exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art (after China’s New Art, Post-1989), Inside Out: New Chinese Art, was curated by Gao Minglu in association with the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (forty-two mainland Chinese artists/groups).33 Although its core consisted of the major artists of the ’85 Art New Wave movement, its scope was widened to include younger artists, as well as artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan. After opening at the Asia Society and P.S. 1 in New York in 1998, the exhibition traveled to other American venues and several
countries. This exhibition brought wide attention to Chinese art, and encouraged a
debate on the viability of considering artists from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong
Kong as a unit. The exhibition’s presence in New York had the side effect of temporar-
ily heating up the market for contemporary Chinese art.

The end of the decade saw two shows that made creative use of the exhibition
format. Wu Hung’s Canceled: Exhibiting Experimental Art in China (Smart Museum of
Art, Chicago, 2000) conjured a canceled Beijing exhibition as an opportunity to
address the special issues surrounding the display and reception of art in China.14
Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing, featuring many works created during the
1990s, was the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery’s (Washington, D.C.; 2000) first major exhibi-
tion of contemporary Chinese art. Through the juxtaposition of early Chinese art with
Xu Bing’s works, I intended the exhibition to establish a provocative tension that led
viewers to question whether the contemporary pieces drew on the superficial appear-
ance of the traditional art, or made a deeper connection.

The 1990s saw the increasing inclusion of Chinese artists in group exhibitions
of international artists. For the 1993 Venice Biennale, curator Achille Bonito Oliva (con-
sulting with Francesca dal Lago) included fourteen Chinese artists in a section titled
Passaggio a Oriente.15 Cities on the Move, an innovative evolving exhibition curated by
Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, opened at the Wiener Secession, Vienna, in 1997,
with works by nineteen mainland Chinese artists.16 Twenty Chinese artists appeared
two years later in the 48th Venice Biennale, curated by Harald Szeemann.17 In 2000
Jean-Hubert Martin selected sixteen for Partage d’Exotismes: The Fifth Lyon Biennial of
Contemporary Art.18 In choosing twenty percent Chinese artists, Szeemann shocked
many people yet twenty percent of the world’s population is Chinese, and we can
guess that a similar proportion of the world’s artists are Chinese. Many accused the
curator of “playing the China card,” particularly when he chose only three Chinese art-
ists for the following biennial. The same was thought of Jean-Hubert Martin, who
selected several artists who created shocking works from animal or human body parts — supposedly “exotic” works that were created in an “exotic” land. Conflicting
feelings surround the selection for important overseas exhibitions: the desire to be
included, plus an insecurity concerning the motivations for inclusion.19

### STRATEGIES

Because inclusion in the international art scene is perceived as vital for contemporary
Chinese art, concerned figures in the art world have developed strategies to further
this goal. Key strategists are Chang Tsong-zung, Hou Hanru, and Zheng Shengtian.
Others—notably the foreign directors of commercial galleries in China—have played
essential roles, but with a lower profile. Possessing an astute grasp of the workings of
the international art world, combined with exceptional facility with both English and
Chinese, and with the financial means provided by his increasingly successful com-
mercial art gallery, Hanart TZ Gallery, Chang Tsong-zung was in the perfect position to
introduce avant-garde Chinese art to the West. He not only organized China’s New
Art, Post-1989, but also curated several exhibitions associated with international peri-
odical exhibitions, such as the São Paulo Biennial20 and the Venice Biennale,21 thus
bringng young Chinese artists to the attention of international curators.

A brilliant polyglot, Hou Hanru has been particularly effective in furthering the inte-
gration of Chinese art into the global art scene. In the early 1990s he wrote about con-
temporary Chinese art for progressive European journals, and became a voice for the
“third space.” As he moved into curating exhibitions of international art, he drew on the
Chinese artists with whom he was familiar, naturally leading them into a widened milieu.

Working with the artist-strategist Huang Yong Ping, he engineered the symbolic piercing
of the French pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale by works of art created by a Chinese
artist.22 As co-curator of the first Shanghai Biennale to exhibit international artists (2000),
Hou Hanru provided the exhibition with his imprimatur, thus drawing the attention of
important international curators to the Chinese art world.23

Zheng Shengtian was a key organizer of “I Don’t Want to Play Cards with Cézanne”
and Other Works: Selections from the Chinese “New Wave” and “Avant-Garde” Art of the
Eighties, the first large group exhibition of avant-garde Chinese art in the United States
(curated by Richard Strassberg, Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California, 1999).24 At
the time, he was affiliated with the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. He
went on to play an extremely important role in introducing avant-garde Chinese art to
the West, as director of Art Beatus, a gallery with branches in Hong Kong and
Vancouver, and through his involvement with the Annie Wong Foundation. The Annie
Wong Foundation contributed essential funding to important exhibitions, such as
Cities on the Move, and Cai Guo-Qiang’s installation at the 48th Venice Biennale.25

Unfortunately, the foundation has since redirected its efforts.

Chang Tsong-zung, Hou Hanru, and Zheng Shengtian have frequently acted as
middlemen for overseas curators. As such, they have strongly influenced which artists
were introduced to the world. Zheng Shengtian accomplished this on a large scale in
2000, organizing a “curators’ tour,” which took a group of important overseas curators
on a tour of China’s art centers.

Another strategy to introduce Chinese artists to the world was devised by the
major collector Uli Sigg, who funds an art competition—the Contemporary Chinese
Art Award (CCAA)—that is judged by international curators flown to China for this
purpose. As he has stated, the goal of this enterprise is to further a “continuous dialog
[of the artists] with their peers, with an interested public and ultimately with the inter-
national art world” as well as to “create a detailed record of the art produced over a
given period by younger artists.”26

### SCHOLARSHIP AND PUBLISHING

Publishing and scholarship conform to the same general pattern of dramatic and
steady growth of interest apparent in exhibitions during the 1990s. Although the
scholar Michael Sullivan has followed contemporary Chinese art for decades, ever since living in China in the 1940s, other Western scholars were slow to investigate this field. Fifteen years ago, one of my professors told me I was crazy to want to research contemporary Chinese art—because there was no such thing as contemporary Chinese art! Now that the field is gaining a higher profile, scholars are jumping into it, becoming instant “experts.” Not surprisingly, the most valuable research is being done by those with a long-term interest in the field, particularly those who have spent long periods of time in China.

In a field that is new, it is extremely important to assemble data while it is fresh. Those most dedicated to gathering raw data include John Clark, an associate professor at the University of Sydney, and Hans van Dijk, the late director of the China Art and Archives Warehouse in Beijing. For years, John Clark has been compiling archives of recorded artist interviews and other material, and Hans van Dijk worked tirelessly to create a database indexing research materials on artists. A readily available bibliography of materials published up to 1999, that I compiled, is available online at http://www.stanford.edu/dept/art/china. Several academic libraries, including the Art Library at Stanford University and the library of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, have built up substantial holdings in the field of late twentieth-century Chinese experimental art, ensuring the future viability of research in this field at their institutions. In 2000, Asia Art Archive was founded in Hong Kong, with a mission to gather materials on Asian contemporary art, beginning with a year-long focus of resources on China.

A second step in approaching a new area of study is to create narrative and descriptive histories. This is a way of sorting the raw data into meaningful form. Such narratives commonly appear in texts designed to explicate the art works displayed in exhibitions, for example in China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture, published in conjunction with the Haus der Kulturen der Welt exhibition of the same title.44 The majority of articles published on the subject of avant-garde Chinese art in such journals as ART Asia Pacific, Asian Art News, and “Chinese Type” Contemporary Art Online Magazine (a.k.a. Chinese-art.com) are in this vein, although they may include some art analysis or criticism, too. The most prolific writers with great facility in this manner include Chang Tsong-zung, Gao Minglu, Li Xianting, Karen Smith, and others. Narrative texts in book form are much rarer, and are almost invariably fragmented, either being selections of essays, or constituting a section of a wider narrative. An early effort was Gebrochene Bilder-Junge Kunst aus China, an assembly of essays and artists’ biographies organized by Martina Köppel-Yang, Peter Schneckmann, and Eckhard Schneider.45 Until a decade or so ago, general surveys of Chinese, Asian, or world art gave the impression that Chinese art faded out circa 1850 or 1900. This situation has improved, and experimental Chinese art has an appearance in such texts as Robert Thorp and Richard Vinograd’s Chinese Art and Culture.46 It is afforded significant coverage in Michael Sullivan’s narrative history Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China.47 Another kind of narrative study is that which focuses on a single artist. Surprisingly, only one such book-length text has been published. My exhibition catalogue The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words, deals largely with the artist’s works of the 1990s.

A special mention should be made of Chinese-art.com, for many years publisher of the only Western-language periodical devoted to contemporary avant-garde Chinese art, and unique in its mission to disseminate information in the field as expeditiously as possible, via the Worldwide Web. Publisher Robert Bernell launched “Chinese Type” Contemporary Art Online Magazine in late 1997; having devised a format that ensured both Chinese and overseas writers would be given the opportunity to publish their unedited texts. No other publication has brought such a volume of information or such a wide range of points of view to the attention of the West. A second English-language periodical focusing on contemporary Chinese art, Yishu, has just published its first issue from Vancouver. A third may be in the works, based in Honolulu.

The third step in comprehending a new field, following data gathering and the assembly of narratives, is analysis. John Clark has led the field with his superior ability to maintain a critical distance. If one seeks to understand the various approaches that have been used in writing about contemporary Chinese art, a good starting point is the introductory chapter to John Clark’s Modern Asian Art.48 Hou Hanru, too, has critically articulated issues in contemporary Chinese art. Many articles germane to the study of experimental Chinese art of the 1990s have been published in his collected essays, On the Mid-Ground.49 Scholars who have just completed or will soon complete doctoral dissertations in twentieth-century Chinese art, and who are making important contributions to a more critical analysis of experimental Chinese art, include Martina Köppel-Yang, Francesca dal Lago, Qian Zhijian, and Sasha Su-ling Wealland.

As we enter the 21st century, a time that may well turn out to be the “Asian Century,” art can serve as a unifying force, laying grounds for mutual understanding and appreciation. Chinese experimental art is becoming better recognized and better comprehended in the West, but it is essential that more effort be made to look beyond the surface. It is too easy to make assumptions, to project irrelevant desiderata onto the works of art, and to be satisfied by a surface sheen of “Chinese-ness.”

Notes
39. For more information about the inclusion of Chinese artists in major international periodical exhibitions, see Francesca dal Lago, ”From Crafts to Art: Chinese Artists at the Venice Biennale, 1980–2001,” unpublished paper.
45. *The Multi-Colored Project Pavilion* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1999).
47. *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993).