

CHINESE CURATORS: DIRECTED BUT LACKING A PATH (2003)

By Zhang Qing

In China in the 1980s, the word "curate" was still something rather foreign. Although the '85 New Wave was enthusiastically supported all over the country, with frequent exhibitions and advocates for art emerging one after another, and every exhibition making vigorous declarations regarding the current state of the nation, the curator still did not have an explicit role in these exhibitions. The *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*), which opened during the Chinese New Year in 1989, marked the preliminary stages of the formation of an organized group possessing real academic power. *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) published the names of the organizers and a synopsis of the exhibition, as well as announcements and other information about it. Given the scale and difficulty of the work involved in mounting this exhibition, as well as the impact that it had on Chinese art history, it should be seen as the eve of the birth of the curator in China.

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II CURATORS' CULTURAL ATTITUDES IN VARYING SITUATIONS

The conditions of Chinese art in the 1990s were rich and complex. At home and abroad, inside and outside of the system, from corporate culture to collaborations between Chinese people and foreigners, [this period] can truly be described by its mutual interactions. Different parties put forth extraordinary efforts from their own individual perspectives. Because curators faced differing circumstances, the cultural attitudes that emerged from their curatorial projects proved to be wide-ranging and diverse. The fact that curators faced different conditions is only one aspect of this phenomenon; another factor to be noted is that the identity of the curator was constantly in flux. Hence, their unstable circumstances and identities created a certain amount of ambiguity in their cultural focus. This has also resulted in the confused state of today's curatorial thinking — that is, the universal reality of curators' ambiguous attitude toward culture. Although this was the case, curators can be said to have tried with all their heart to fulfill their duties. On the one hand, in this era of infinite, instantaneous change, they strove to produce curatorial opportunities, no matter how limited. On the other hand, in the midst of the realities of social, economic, existential, and technological pressures, they thought deeply, searched for vitality, and amid this rush, they formed their own distinctive attitudes toward culture and curatorial characteristics.

THE EMERGENCE OF INDEPENDENT CURATORS FROM COMPLICATED CIRCUMSTANCES

After 1989, although Chinese art entered a phase of dormancy, this period also fostered a number of independent curators. Looking back on history, we find that in experimental art exhibitions from 1990 onward, either artists or critics assumed curatorial responsibilities; this was also a vivid and dramatic time. *New Generation Art* (*Xin shengdai yishu zhan*) (1991, Beijing), which was curated by Wang Youshen, gathered New Objectivist artists working in Beijing and gave them their first opportunity to show collectively. *Garage Art Exhibition* (*Cheku yishuzhan*) (1991, Shanghai), curated by Song Haidong, exhibited oil paintings, installation art, video art, and (still photographs of) performance art; it brought together new and vigorous works from avant-garde artists in Shanghai and Zhejiang province. The *Big-Tailed Elephant Group Exhibition* (*Da wei xiang gongzuozu yishuzhan*) (1991, Guangzhou), which was curated by Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, and Liang Juhui, showed the investigations of Guangzhou artists into the field of installation art.

The *Modern Chinese Art Research Documents Exhibition* (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu yanjiu wenxian ziliao zhan*) (1991, Beijing), curated by Wang Lin, was presented in Beijing, Shenyang, Nanjing, Chongqing, Wuhan, and Guangzhou. The artists used the medium of documents to communicate and exhibited photographs of recent works, notes, and other such materials. At the time, this exhibition allowed artists from all over the country to come to understand each other's creative development and circumstances through reading these documents. The *Second New Academic Art Exhibition* (*Di er hui xin xueyuan yishuzhan*) (1993, Hangzhou), curated by Yang Jingong, attempted to pursue an academic spirit in order to clear away the repercussions of "New Wave art." *Two Attitudes Toward Identity* (*Xingxiang de liangci taidu*) (1993, Shanghai), curated by Shi Yong and Qian Weikang, made use of physics, optics, and metrology, among other things, to conduct artistic experiments. *The Place of Installation and Language* (*Zhuangzhi, yuyan de fangwei*) (1995, Shanghai), which was curated by Wang Nanming, showed the appropriation of readymades, as well as the re-appropriation of appropriated ideas. *In the Name of Art* (*Yi yishu de mingyi*) (1996, Shanghai), curated by Zhu Qi, focused on revealing the current state of installation art. *Cutting Off or Extending Forth: Land Art* (*Shi qieduan haishi yanshen—dijing yishuzhan*) (1996, Jinan), curated by Zhang Qing, involved experiments with land art by both local and foreign artists on the banks of the Yellow River Railway Bridge. *Image and Phenomena* (*Xianxiang, yingxiang*) (1996, Hangzhou), curated by Wu Meichun, focused on revealing new works of video art. *It's Me!* (*Shi wo*) (1998, Beijing), curated by Leng Lin, introduced one aspect of investigations of art during the 1990s. *Post-Sense Sensibility: Distorted Bodies and Delusion* (*Hou ganxing, yixing yu wangxiang*) (1999, Beijing), curated by Wu Meichun, revealed the works of a new generation of artists. *Supermarket* (*Chaoshi zhan*) (1999, Shanghai), curated by Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Alexander Brandt introduced a new line of thinking by connecting artists' works to commodities.

Infatuated with Injury (*Dui shanghai de milian*) (2000, Beijing), curated by Li Xianting, touched upon the use of human specimens and animals as mediums [for art] and aroused the attention of both local and foreign critics. *Post-Material* (*Hou wuzhi*) (2002, Beijing), curated by Huang Du, brought to light the conflict between spirit and matter in today's society, while also touching on the details of daily life. *Fuck Off* (*Buhezuo fangshi*) (2000, Shanghai), curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, exhibited experimental works by forty-eight artists. *Unusual and Usual* (*Yichang yu richang*) (2000, Shanghai), curated by Gu Zhenqing, showed the differences among artists [working] between the unusual and the usual. *"No One Home"* (*Meiyou ren de fangzi li liang zhe deng*) (2000, Shanghai), curated by Li Xianting and Wang Ziwei, showed the newest artistic investigations of twelve artists.

Within these twists and turns, independent curators formed their own individual attitudes toward culture. While wanting to realize their curatorial projects, however, curators encountered financial difficulties.

The *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* (*Shoujie 90 niandai yishu shuangnian zhan*) (1992, Guangzhou), curated at the beginning of the 1990s by Lü Peng, and the *First Chinese Oil Painting Biennial* (*Shoujie Zhongguo youhua shuangnian zhan*) (1993, Beijing), curated by Zhang Xiaoling, each involved a tripartite coalition of art critics, artists, and entrepreneurs. The goal of this was, on the one hand, to maintain a certain academic quality in the art by dispatching a group of critics to guarantee the quality of the exhibited artworks, and on the other hand, to use excellent works of different styles to repay the entrepreneurs' investments. Although these two pioneering cooperative experiments both became "one-time biennials" for different reasons, their models

influenced the vicious cycle of and shadowed collaborative relationships in many subsequent exhibitions. In truth, in the past ten years, there has not been a single curator who has not collaborated with entrepreneurs; one could say that the history created by China's independent curators is the history of the collaboration between independent curators and entrepreneurs. However, this manner of collaboration largely lacks a solid foundation.

Why? These entrepreneurs are mostly "nouveau riche" who emerged after the opening and reform period. According to Marx's theories of capitalism, during the early stage of the development of capitalism, there can only be unbridled exploitation of surplus value, which is used to expand production. This recently earned money cannot possibly be used to patronize or invest in art and culture. But the people who make contact with these entrepreneurs are often critics, curators, and artists. They [the critics, curators, and artists] often appeal to the fact that they are old classmates or friends [of the entrepreneurs] or that they share familial relations. In doing so, they use their friendship to bypass the laws of the market in order to advance art, creating collaborations that, like a "castle in the sky," lack any foundation. Because Chinese people still maintain a tradition of emphasizing fellowship, many entrepreneurs have been led into situations in which they were not aware of the true nature of the circumstances. They have been infected by the passionate artistic pursuits of idealistic curators and artists and their frenzied attempts to advance various types of partnerships. However, money is a real, practical thing. It is engraved with Arabic numerals, and these inflexible numerals will never allow a penny to become a dime simply because of someone's grandiose idealism or naïve romanticism.

Thus, in the preliminary discussions for many exhibitions, the collaborators are always ardent and enthusiastic, but as their relationship develops, the exhibition nears, and the entrepreneur's money is needed to print catalogues and to rent the exhibition space, the entrepreneur suddenly sobers up; in one fell swoop, the fervid dinner-table discussions on art change to issues of economic interest. At a time when Chinese contemporary art had not yet completely entered the market and before tax breaks were given to entrepreneurs for patronizing the arts, no entrepreneur could, like a fortune-teller, predict the future value of art and its relation to the development of business. Consequently, entrepreneurs suddenly came to realize that their companies were not philanthropic organizations for the arts. Thus, if they did not withdraw completely and immediately, then at the very least, they drastically revised their meager budgets. I do not know how many exhibitions were aborted or were strangled in their cradles because of such things, nor do I know how many exhibitions were simply hastily opened and silently closed.

Why? One basic reason was the curators' lack of funds. Throughout almost all of the 1990s, this was a difficult problem that curators collectively faced when first beginning their careers. Many curatorial projects and academic themes were unable to be realized because of a lack of funds; by and by, many curatorial ideas eroded away with the passing of time. Although this was the case, the curators of this period often fought shoulder-to-shoulder with artists, sharing both honor and disgrace. Why? This was a unique feature of the art of an era characterized by a lack of opportunities and funding. But, amid their repeated failures, curators gained the ability to interact with all realms of society, they learned methods to bring about collaboration between art and economics, and gained the possibility of transforming their profession and status.

Thus, in order to achieve independence, curators proposed a form of social practice and set out to accumulate professional experience. From one perspective, we can see that Chinese critics thus emerged from their studies. They were no longer puzzled

by the blows of repeated failure, and instead, in their various failures, they recognized the nature of the work of the curator, the relationship between the curator and contemporary society, and the relationship between the curator and the progress of the era. Thus, many young curators continued to brace themselves while continually learning from the lessons that they learned from failure. They adapted to the conditions and rules of contemporary society, economics, and law. Amidst the evolution of contemporary art, they opened up new topics for study. Although they teetered hesitantly as they emerged from these vicissitudes, they never avoided revealing independent curatorial attitudes toward cultural politics. Given that no school in China had a program in curatorial studies, all independent curators in China were, without a doubt, self-taught, learning through concrete practice based on the contemporary conditions of art and society during this dynamic time in Chinese history.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN FOREIGN AND CHINESE CURATORS

When foreign and Chinese curators collaborate, the usual situation is that a foreign arts organization dispatches a curator to China, where he works together with a local curator. The Chinese curator may propose a list of artists, and the foreign curator will meet with the artists and make selections. Alternatively, the two curators may work out a common plan through discussions and go together to find artists. The location for such an exhibition is usually a foreign art museum. Because a foreign museum or foundation assumes financial responsibility, this type of exhibition is a relatively relaxed affair for the Chinese curator in terms of funding and operational issues. His primary job is to mediate between the foreign curator and the participating artists and to deal with any technical issues that may arise. Depending on the nature of the exhibition, the Chinese curator may propose different artists. For example, in Li Xianting and Chang Tsong-zung's *China's New Art, Post-1989* exhibition [1993, Hong Kong, circulated internationally], they showed new works by more than fifty artists and divided them into six themes: Political Pop, Cynical Realism, Emotional Bondage, Ritual and Purgation, Introspection and Retreat in Formalism: New Abstract Art, and The Wounded Romantic Spirit. *Open Your Mouth and Close Your Eyes—Beijing-Berlin Art Exchange* (Zhangkai zui, bishang yan, Beijing-Bolin yishu jiaoliu zhan) (1995, Beijing), curated by Huang Du and Angelika Stepken, exhibited the works of Chinese and German artists. *Jiangnan—Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River* (1998, Vancouver, Canada), curated by Zheng Shengtian, Hank Bull, [David Chan], and Xia Wei, revealed the main paths of the development of modern and contemporary art in the Jiangnan region, as well as the cultural influence of geography on contemporary art. *China Art Now!* (2001, Singapore), curated by Zhang Qing together with Kwok Kian Chow, director of the Singapore Art Museum, showed the history and current reality of the various faces of Chinese contemporary art. One could say that these curators— from their different sides and distinct times and places— extended Chinese contemporary art to the international stage and released its voice. Of course, there are also exhibitions involving the collaboration of Chinese and foreign curators that are sponsored by national arts exchange programs. For example, *Living in Time* (2001, Berlin), curated by Hou Hanru, Fan Di'an, and curators of the Hamburger Bahnhof museum in Berlin during the 2002 "Week of Chinese Culture" in Germany, and *Alors, la Chine?* (2003, Paris), curated by Fan Di'an and the curators of the Centre Georges Pompidou during the 2003 "Year of Chinese Culture" in France. Both represent state efforts to reveal the faces of Chinese contemporary art and to enable the international art world's recognition of China's newest cultural policies and its degree of cultural openness.

CURATORS AND MUSEUMS

Along with an ever-increasing number of museums, curators have gradually become a part of the [institution of the] museum. There are generally three types of museum exhibitions: first, exhibitions — either permanent or temporary — curated by in-house curators according to the special interests and general direction of the management of the museum; second, thematic exhibitions curated by either local or foreign curators who simply rent the space of the museum for their exhibition; and third, exhibitions curated by in-house curators, who in collaboration with either local or foreign museum curators or independent curators, discuss themes together, choose artists, and organize the exhibition. At present, the Shanghai Art Museum, the Guangdong Museum of Art, and the He Xiangning Art Museum [in Shenzhen] have already begun to form good curatorial systems. This is reflected by the fact that the Shanghai Biennale and the Guangzhou Triennial were both exhibitions curated by in-house curators in collaboration with local and foreign curators. These pioneering practices may simply be unique to this transitional period as museums are trying to determine how to form curatorial systems. But, they also are a concrete reflection of the complete reformation of Chinese culture. Beginning in 1998 with its *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture (Dangdai diaosu yishu nianduzhan)* curated by invited [guest] curators, the He Xiangning Art Museum has developed a worthwhile model of collaborative practice. The project of rebuilding the National Art Museum of China is already complete, but we do not know what measures they will take for forming a curatorial system. To put it simply, under these historical conditions, regardless of whether they are building museums or grasping the aesthetics and directions of art, curators have exerted tremendous efforts.

CURATORS AND PRIVATE MUSEUMS

Entrepreneurial culture in China is diverse, but for a private company to found a museum, collect works, and curate exhibitions — this is still a rather idealistic undertaking in China. Looking at the situation from the 1990s until now, we see that the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum invited Shui Tianzhong and Liu Xiaochun to curate *Gate of the New Century (Shiji zhi men)* (1999); in terms of scale, this, together with the [First] Chengdu Biennial (2001), curated by Liu Xiaochun and Gu Zhenqing, was China's largest exhibition in a private museum. But, sustainability remains problematic. The Upriver Art Gallery, which was once very active, had Zhu Qi curate its *Reincarnation Era (Zhuanshi shiqi)* (2002, Chengdu). The *Northeast Young Artists Exhibition (Dongbei qingnian yishuzhan)* (2000, Shenyang), curated by Wang Yigang at the Dongyu Museum, and *Ouh La La Kitsch (Kua shiji caihong zhan)* (1999, Tianjin), curated by Li Xianting and Liao Wen at the Teda Contemporary Art Museum, were both exhibitions that had great scholarly value, but for various reasons, these museums, like the majority of private museums in China, successively breathed their last breath. In 2003, the Liyang Architecture Art Museum was founded and had Zhang Qing and Ai Weiwei curate its exhibition *Junction — Architectural Experiments of Chinese Contemporary Art (Jiedian — Zhongguo dangdai yishu zhong de jianzhu shijian zhan)* (2003, Shanghai). In terms of both scale and quality, the exhibitions at the aforementioned private museums were quite impressive. They created a platform for scholarly exhibitions in China, and even more importantly provided a stage on which curators could grow and develop. But, the crux of the problem lies in the fact that investment into private museums is decided according to a business's yearly economic conditions. A new enterprise may realize that transferring its capital into building culture could, from a certain perspective, be seen as evidence that the enterprise has

already surpassed the early stages of accumulating capital. These actions elevate the image and quality of the corporation and thus simultaneously allow it to become a constituent component of modernized urban culture. For a private museum, stability is the most important thing. Just as Siemens, Shiseido, and Samsung have come to play a role in contemporary art through the image of their particular cultural investments and private museums, presumably in the future, influential private museums will also be established in China. At the same time, roles for curators in such private museums will also take shape. And, accordingly, curators and private museums will form collaborative relationships beneficial to both parties. Such relationships should be more pragmatic, more energetic, and, still more importantly, make academic pursuits and cultural aims even more explicit.

THE FUNCTION OF OVERSEAS CHINESE CURATORS

Overseas Chinese curators are curators, critics, and art historians who left the country in rapid succession after 1989, and curate exhibitions of overseas Chinese artists abroad as well as various other international exhibitions. They have made great contributions to introducing Chinese contemporary art to the international art world. In 1990, Fei Dawei curated *Chine demain pour hier* in a small village in the south of France; the six participating artists were Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang, Wenda Gu, Yan Peiming, Yang Jiechang, and Chen Zhen, and the exhibition included large-scale installations, demolition earth works, etc. It was an important exhibition that revealed the strength of overseas Chinese artists in a very focused manner. At the same time, during their more than ten years of artistic practice, these artists had not only produced wonders of Chinese art, but also composed a new Asian art history with their individual works. In the United States, Gao Minglu curated *Fragmented Memory* in 1993 and *Inside Out* in 1998, both of which revealed the contemporary state and particularities of Chinese contemporary art. In 1999, Wu Hung curated *Transience* at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art. He used insight gained from researching contemporary art history to analyze the current state and trends of Chinese contemporary art. But, the most active curator in the international scene is Hou Hanru, who, together with Hans Ulrich Obrist, curated *Cities on the Move* in various places throughout the world from 1997 to 1999. These exhibitions not only brought together talented artists from various Asian countries into the "migrations of international art," but they also simultaneously created an agile, adaptive manner of curating. In 1999, Hou curated the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale; he co-curated the 2000 Shanghai Biennale and the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, and he was one of the curators of the 2003 Venice Biennale. His curatorial philosophy centers on selecting non-Western artists, but he also opposes nationalism and thus attempts to merge marginal artists from Asia into global currents, while continually using new powers to subvert the established international art world. He, like Japan's Yuko Hasegawa, Korea's Yu Yeon Kim, and Thailand's Apinan Poshyananda, has already become one of Asia's most cutting-edge curators, and he has driven Asian art's high-speed sprint ahead; at the same time, in the midst of the globalization of culture, he has worked to ensure that the discourse of Asian art becomes a force that cannot be ignored in the future global history of art.

Looking at it in light of the entire history of Chinese art, a short period of ten years hardly seems like much. But, the changes that occurred in Chinese art from the 1990s onward were enormous. If we were to describe this as "fast changing," we would not be exaggerating. Contemporary art, both in terms of its conceptual transformations and its blending — both actively and passively — with international art

practices, reveals the cultural characteristics of this dynamic period in China. In everything from the birth of independent curators to the formation of collaborative methods between Chinese and foreign curators, from the emergence of overseas Chinese curators to collaboration between curators and museums, galleries, and enterprises, and even in the realization of exhibitions abroad curated by independent Chinese curators, we find testimony to the fact that Chinese curators are, as [individuals engaged in] a brand new profession, gradually coming to have an effect on the quality and rate of development of contemporary art. Curators use their independent personalities and characters, coupled with distinct scholarly interests and aesthetic philosophies, to fully reveal the criticality, independence, and marginalized nature of experimental art. They are specifying the context for the development of contemporary art and eagerly looking forward to its trends and tendencies. Viewing themselves as serving the art world, they seek to explore and grasp the orientation of contemporary art. Although this is the case, we should be clear: given the reality of the cultural system and the laws in China today, curating — as a profession — has still not been completely recognized by society, it has not yet been completely utilized by cultural systems, and has not received the legal and economic protection that it ought to have. Thus, the state of affairs now facing Chinese contemporary art might be summarized as: curators have no paths; they only have a direction.

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