

HARALD SZEEMANN TALKS TO CHINESE ARTISTS ABOUT VENICE, CCAA, AND CURATORIAL STRATEGIES (2001)

BACKGROUND

On April 2, 2000, following an in depth examination of materials of art works from 109 artists across China, the international jury for CCAA 2000 — the 2000 Contemporary Chinese Art Award — reached its final decision in Beijing. The jury comprised Harald Szeemann, curator of the 1999 Venice Biennale; Hou Hanru, Chinese curator resident in Paris; Li Xianting, China's leading critic/curator; conceptual artist Ai Weiwei; and CCAA Association founder Uli Sigg. The selection of the ten artists for this year's award was based on works produced in the two years 1998–99.

The prize for an overall winner was awarded to Xiao Yu, with the special prize for an artist under thirty years old awarded to Zheng Guogu.

CCAA 2000 was the second award given by the CCAA Association. The first art award was presented in 1998. The CCAA 1998 winning artists were: Zhou Tiehai for conceptual work; Xie Nanxing for oil painting; Yang Mian for oil painting.

The works of these three artists were subsequently shown in several major international exhibitions in Europe, including the 1999 Venice Biennale, and group shows in Paris, Portugal, Switzerland, and Germany.

Before the jury members Harald Szeemann and Hou Hanru left China, they met with a selection of artists based in Beijing to discuss the selection process and their impressions of the works they had seen, and to respond to questions about the significance and position of such an award in China. Artists present were Lin Tianmiao, Wang Gongxin, Wang Wei, Lu Hao, and Hai Bo. The transcription of the discussion follows here. It is preceded by a statement from CCAA Association founder Uli Sigg explaining the imperative for the award.

STATEMENT FROM THE ORGANIZER

Sigg: Why, beyond my personal commitment to contemporary art from artists from mainland China, did I decide to establish the CCAA (Chinese Contemporary Art Award)?

The contemporary art scene in China abounds with artists, yet, for artists to research and develop their chosen approaches in a reasonably sustainable way, a number of conditions must prevail. One such condition, which has yet to develop widely in China, is a continuous dialogue with their peers, with an interested public, and ultimately with the international art world. The CCAA aims to facilitate this dialogue. It will — through the archive it is building and the publications it will produce over time — create a detailed record of the art produced over a given period by younger artists, and increasingly mature artists. The composition of the jury secures a dialogue with the international art world. I believe that this is the most efficient way for contemporary art from China to gain exposure to internationally known curators such as Harald Szeemann or Hou Hanru, both for emerging artists and the new works of established artists.

I am convinced that the CCAA will be a significant institution in Chinese contemporary art, and that we will see an increasing number of artists participating. It will also contribute to the important debate concerning what constitutes Chinese contemporary art in the global context. In the future, the CCAA will also make provision for an award for outstanding research in this direction.

INTERVIEW

Lin Tianmiao: I would like to know how the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) is organized, or functions exactly. Does the jury remain the same each year, or does it change periodically?

Szeemann: To put it into context, there are many similar prizes to promote young creative talent in Europe. A month ago, I was in Mannheim, Germany, where they awarded a prize to artists under twenty-five. It was interesting, looking through the 620 entries, because we discovered previously unknown younger artists. We have a similar prize in Switzerland, although it's a federal institution.

In the 1960s, the centers for contemporary art were assumed to be New York, London, and Paris. I believe creativity should be happening everywhere. Attempts to promote such initiatives began to crop up, and soon afterward appeared almost everywhere. Creativity should not be bound to centers.

For me, it is important to stay in contact with what's going on with the work of younger artists. I think the CCAA aims to do the same thing in China. There are even more reasons to do it here, because the infrastructure for exhibitions has not developed. At present, you have just one rather conservative museum for contemporary art in Shanghai, which stops at a certain historical point, but at least it's a beginning.

The initiative for the CCAA is important because it is virtually impossible to travel all over China to see art. You need to see as much as possible to gain a better understanding of what is out there. Of course, we know from paintings and catalogues that the best paintings often reproduce badly, and the worst ones reproduce better. But you can still feel the intensity of what the artist is doing, even if only for the last two or three years of production. In this kind of event, on any one day, we can sift through a hundred or so artists, wanting to take part in this kind of contest.

Two years ago, I worked with twenty-five students on their final exhibition before graduating in Vienna. Academies, unlike competitions, are not about a jury. You talk to students, get to know them and their work a little. And then you suddenly discover, say, a twenty-six-year-old Russian whose work you never knew.

Today, there are so many young artists coming out of art academies that such competitions are valuable, as these are often their first contact outside the institution. It can be a fantastic start for a lot of artists to receive such an award. Prizes similar to the CCAA have their own history, here it is just the beginning of this type of award. You may well see such awards emerge all over the country even if their importance isn't immediately grasped.

With regard to the CCAA's jury members, three are from the original board, including myself. I think it's good that individuals with different perspectives contribute to the selection and decision process. I showed a larger number of Chinese artists at the Biennale in Venice this year because I'd been exposed to more works and ideas from my previous visit, as well as through the CCAA prize. It helps a lot to know the scene and have an outsider's eye for what is happening in China.

Wang Gongxin: When you look at art, what are the standards that you set? Is it possible to judge what is good — or bad — art?

Szeemann: Everybody can create his/her own ideas about what is art. If you are dealing with a vast number of artists and their works you begin to create an individual mythology, how you, personally, respond to a work of art. I have been doing selections for big shows like the Venice Biennale now for forty-three years. You get to know

a lot of generations of artists. At a certain point, although you work with a lot of institutions, and museums, some of whom are obsessed with their own criteria and selection of what they see as art, you have to hold firm to what you believe in. There is also what I refer to as the 'intensity' criteria: when I have an immediate response and feel more enthusiastic about certain works more than others.

When you do curate such shows, you have a vision of how you see its potential. Again, this is conditioned by the history of the show, like the Venice Biennale. Last year, I wanted it to be different from what visitors have experienced before. All the artists I selected are familiar to me, many include friends from the 1960s.

There are also other, more practical conditions to take into consideration no matter how many artists' works you would like to show. You always have to work with a certain amount of space. There are spaces that you invite an artist to work with, because you feel they will be able to respond to the particular site. Then, there are other spaces which you have to construct through a dialogue with the artist. In that way, the show becomes almost organic in nature. These spatial requirements mean you have to know what the artist does very well. It is also a confidence between you.

There is also an aesthetic element involved in selecting works, as I often envisage how they will look, or fit into the context of an exhibition. When I was selecting works for the Venice Biennale and initially came to Shanghai, I met Zhou Tiehai for the first time. I immediately liked the feeling of a double strategy at work, the way in which he plays the art world at its own game. In American or European art this type of strategy has been more or less lost, because art is so much part of the everyday. Newspapers used to cover art as much as sport, now more and more it is of course about money, and less sport, and still less art.

Wang Wei: I appreciate your comments, but is it possible that when you first came to China to look at the work for the CCAA you were able to employ the same criteria for looking at an art that you may be unfamiliar with? For example if you were to look at 110 artists' works here, can you still use those same guidelines, or parameters, for art in China? What happens if the work doesn't reach that standard? Is there still a job to choose something, even if you intuitively couldn't respond to the work?

Szeemann: We are also hunters. And when you are a hunter, you are always looking for a rare animal. I was a little bit disappointed that the young video artists I saw in Shanghai were not sending in their work to the CCAA. I was astonished that these twenty-one, twenty-two-year-old guys were not participating. In a way, I understand that the more an artist is known, he looks at the jury, and because of this one, or that one, decides not to send anything. It should be like the German youth prize where hundreds of young people send in material for consideration. Then, the jury will last two or three days. Maybe this is something that needs to be addressed.

Now we are able to see a lot more work through reproduction, slides or film sources, and you have more places now to go for such information. In Shanghai, you have Lorenz Helbling, who shows many artists at his gallery. He showed me much material. You have a lot of information on different levels, and then suddenly you are confronted with an image and curiosity begins to grow.

I was criticized for showing a more traditional artist like Wang Xingwei (in Venice), but I think we need to change the way we look at the history of art too. To always stay with Duchamp, Malevich, Mondrian, and Kandinsky becomes so damn boring. Different generations of curators see exhibitions as expressive mediums, and not just about the making of art history. This we leave to the museums. We know the reasons

they show say, Kandinsky, Miró, and Chagall — they get a lot of money. The income from such blockbusters helps fund more experimental works.

When I showed Wang Xingwei, a lot of people asked why, this is so academic. It is, but for me, it also had this kind of double strategy. The painting of a little boy who destroys this large glass by Duchamp without knowing what he's doing is such a perfect image of what we are looking for that I don't care if it's an academic painting. There's always a lot of things going on in our head, heart, stomach, when we encounter art. We are always looking for a new dimension to the way we curate.

Hou: The question of criteria as applied to works of art, actually, doesn't exist. I mean, international criteria. Everything is between global and local in the dialogues that come up about standards and values. Artists don't expect the CCAA, or any other art award, to be "the award for the best artist." One should not expect that this sort of prize has to do with concrete conditions; Who is buying? Who is on the jury? Etc. It's a theoretical result. At the same time, it's a symbolic gesture that shows what's happening during any given period.

The selection of jury members is very relevant. Harald Szeemann has [a] long [history of] international experience. Li Xianting and Ai Weiwei both live in China, and know perfectly what's happening. Then you have guys like me, who are kind of in between. So it's a combination of different points of view. But overall, I think the results are quite fair.

Szeemann: The main impetus for the CCAA, however, is because, for once, there was an intelligent Swiss ambassador to China, who is fascinated and enthusiastic about the art produced here. Old or established perceptions about what we see as art in the region shift, as more information about artists and their work becomes available. To illustrate my point: every Monday Mallarmé used to visit Manet in his studio. Then on Tuesdays, he would invite poets and painters to a regular gathering at his home. Since Manet was a rather quiet individual who was often ill, he didn't make the soirées. But Mallarmé told his visitors how beautiful the last painting was that Manet had painted. Subsequently, other poets went to visit Manet. The point, finally, and the fascinating thing about art, is that it's initially an encounter between two people. As the information spreads it rapidly builds momentum. The CCAA aims to do the same, for more people in China to get to know what it does, and to participate in the competition.

Wang Gongxin: I want to return to the question of standards, as for me, it is a complex and interesting question. There are not really any initiatives for national awards or prizes for contemporary art here, so something like the CCAA draws a lot interest. But where I feel people hesitate, where they are unclear, is that everybody's perspective is shaped by their cultural background and experience. My experience is that there is a difference between the way Western people and people from China look at or define art. So, there's a hesitation to enter this kind of competition (when the jurors are foreign). It's not actually a Chinese structure — it's not organized within the parameters that an artist like me is familiar with. There are certain ways that people interact. There's a slight discomfort at some point. Maybe it's just a personal feeling.

Szeemann: Your personal feelings about art are equally valid. As I've stated before, it is a human right to express or stand up for your convictions about art. For the CCAA, the structure of the jury has changed since the previous award to address the issues you raise. Last time, there were two Chinese and two European jurors. This time there are

three Chinese judges, two from inside the country and one working internationally, as well as two European members.

Wang Gongxin: I still think, that in order to look at some of the art in China today, there is a need for a better understanding of its cultural background. Chinese art over the past ten years has constantly been searching for its own standards and qualities, not merely those based upon Western criteria. And in the midst of all these people searching, the CCAA ends up setting some kind of standard for its own. How does this work?

Szeemann: What you are describing is nothing new, it has been happening for a long time. For example, in the 1960s, *Artforum* had to present a new cover with a new movement every year. The year you had the Hard Edge painter, the buzzwords were that "you have to have a damn good image," the next year, "it has to be physical," and so on. If, as we now say, it is the century for Chinese contemporary art, then it is emerging at a breakneck speed. I always believe it is not the medium that is important, but the intensity of the work. The intensity chooses the medium, and not the medium that makes art. Today, you can have interesting painters, video artists, photographers, even those that destroy photography. You can have virtually everything. That's why I say the intensity is the most important criterion, and not the medium.

Every artist goes through a tough period where they work alone, with no recognition, because the fashion is somewhere else. All the art journals and press have their own critics to promote what is, or isn't, interesting work. But curators are not critics; we are lovers in a way. We don't say all the rest is nothing, we just present what we love.

Hou: China has always been a very closed society, so when people ask questions about art from China, sometimes it is framed within this idea that somehow China is different. The presentations heard every day, on the radio or television, is that China is somehow special. Putting this aside, the responses of artists as human beings are very similar. In fact, a lot of the situations for people here, and for those who spend their time making art, are slightly easier than for artists, say, in Paris. In China, a lot of international curators, people from art institutions and the media are coming to pick up artists. Probably some Chinese artists have more opportunities than any Western artists. In fact, someone who only has three years' painting experience can suddenly appear in all these international biennials, from out of nowhere. Whereas a Swiss or French artist who's been working for years and years and has never got a chance.

But it's not just a question of whose responsibility it is, and how to define the criteria. It's more about the indirect situation. The last CCAA award was given to Xie Nanxing, Yang Mian, and Zhou Tiehai. The first two are painters, and have much more influence in the Chinese art world than Zhou Tiehai. Personally, I think that Zhou Tiehai's work is more interesting, more transcendent. Why such differing interests, and influences? It often has to do with the art world — how it's structured, what it expects, what kind of art it is promoted at a given time, what kind of education artists have received, and what kind of conditions they live in. All this means that we cannot give a very clear answer as to what sort of criteria a work needs to fulfill.

Lin Tianmiao: Before this year I hadn't heard of the CCAA, although I see how this kind of art award is important and has a lot of influence. But people here look for quick results when it comes to gaining recognition. Talk of the "Venice [Biennale]" was a constant topic of conversation. I was forever hearing people debating about Venice. Many people said that the Chinese art Harald Szeemann selected for Venice was just

like an exhibition of the works collected and owned by Uli Sigg, rather than a considered curatorial selection.

But back to my first question about changing the jury of the CCAA. Because of the CCAA's enormous influence on Chinese artists, the constitution of the jury becomes a very important factor.

Wang Gongxin: We know that the CCAA is an important award. What we are also trying to do is to get across the differences in the mind-set of people here in China who are looking for some sort of instant success or recognition. It's not like New York where people are very focused as artists. One of the major problems is that, initially, an award like this ends up setting the agenda.

Szeemann: But you see, I think an artist is alone, is a lone individual. An institution takes a long time to grow. It has to start somewhere. If you think of the Venice Biennale, the main problem today is that it has become this kind of polarity. On one side you have the old structure, the national pavilions, which reflect the power structure before the First World War. On the hill, you have France, Great Britain, and Germany. Japan, lower down, had a lot of money, so they bought a site between the smaller countries. Then you have this sort of democratic spread outward: America, Scandinavia, Denmark, and so on. On the other side, the international exhibition (Aperto) had to be a counterbalance to this national selection wing.

The CCAA is more a contest, but what happened this time is that there was not one winner and two who get a catalogue, but ten people, whose diverse styles reflect much more the Chinese situation than the time before. You have to start somewhere. It is maybe still local, but suddenly, it becomes more important and more interactive with artists living outside China, although it is mainly to help those who remain in the country.

Lu Hao: I think that Uli Sigg played a very important role in spreading information around China. Because there are few exhibitions here between Sichuan and Beijing, Shanghai or wherever, there is not really a great deal of information flow. Where the budgets are so constrained, it is not possible to invite artists from other regions, so there's not so much communication. Mr. Sigg went to all these places to look. In that way, he acquired a broad understanding of what's going on, and could pass this information on. Although he's a collector, he has taken on a role, which is almost like a critic/curator. This fills a space that Chinese curators here have yet to understand or fill. Critics here don't take enough interest, don't put enough effort into understanding the art that's happening all over their own country.

Hou: There are only twenty-four hours in a day. . . . He's right in saying that Chinese critics and curators haven't really been able to do what Uli Sigg has been doing, in terms of covering all the information of what's happening everywhere. It's interesting — in the 1980s, with the first avant-garde movement, for the critics in Beijing there was no way to communicate. It was so difficult even to make a long-distance call. But, at the same time, we knew basically everything from everywhere in the country. You have another kind of passion and another kind of enthusiasm. At the time, what was happening "yesterday" in Wuhan, we knew the next day in Beijing because people sent letters or messages. That was another structure. Today, I think the tasks for critics are rather different, in the sense that you have to cover a wide range of things, but are expected to also do in-depth research. There is not enough time to cover everything in this in-depth way. The issue is, perhaps, that too few people are

doing the job. The demand is to do everything at the same time. This is a common situation actually for all critics/curators. We travel all the time, trying to cover as much as possible and we have very little time to digest. We need another level of work, another role played by someone else to do in-depth research.

Szeemann: Lin Tianmiao said that in Venice, the works were mainly the Sigg collection . . . my first showing of Chinese artists was before I even came to China, at the Lyon Biennial [1997]. I was so puzzled by the Juan Muñoz work, the Chinese piece. At that moment, Lorenz Helbling felt very isolated, and he sent out letters. He said I was the only one to answer. In Lyon, I showed this little book by Xu Yihui, and Feng Mengbo's *Family History*. I had seen this in Berlin, where I was fascinated because you have a history without a path. What you had in the last fifty years in China was really something. It was more through these kinds of channels that I was in the beginning showing Chinese art. Then I came to China.

When I saw Wang Du's work, I thought, it is not possible in our countries that somebody is dealing with the key images of journalism and of the media like this. At the same time, it was done in a very audacious way: he chopped the images up and then put all this information on the table. Also, when I first saw Liang Shaoji's little beds with silkworms, I said to myself, we have healers and everything, but here was somebody who works with silkworms and convinces them to make their bed on metal, and not on wood. This dimension is not just Chinese. But it must be Chinese because it's silkworms, but the initial feeling was not to think it's Chinese.

I think that when we are asked to work in places like Japan or in Korea, we also have to take a different attitude. When I do Venice, I look at what's going on. But when I go to Korea, I discuss also what they want to know. You adapt yourself and make the most out of this condition. It depends a lot on us. When I'm here on a jury, like yesterday, I really concentrate on the works submitted. Of course, you bring in your ideas, but, since the Chinese judges were in the majority, the result was not exactly what I would have imagined.

Question: What concerns me is the misconception that arises as a result of the CCAA. Whatever artist gets selected acts as a signpost to the future. It sends Chinese art off at weird tangents. How do you avoid this happening?

Hou: This happens everywhere. We all know young students copy Bill Viola, or Matthew Barney, or *Artforum*. The question comes back to the artists. It's up to them to decide if they want to be part of a big event or a small exhibition. Sometimes a small exhibition might be more interesting than a Venice Biennale. Artists have to be very, very clear in their minds. I think it's time to go beyond this model of thinking, that is, to identify with one single model. It's a double bind in some ways but you have to try to avoid it.

Szeemann: The difference lies in perception. I think that this relatively young job of curator, which is not aimed at making a collection, nor building up property, is to stay free so that we can go on. We are not the final stage. We are the intermediary. We know that when we show an artist their prices go higher, but that is not our aim. We want to have an adventure. That's the main thing in our life.

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