"EXPERIMENTAL EXHIBITIONS" OF THE 1990S (2002)

By Wu Hung

NEW CONDITIONS FOR EXHIBITING EXPERIMENTAL ART

My survey of the exhibition spaces of experimental art in 1999 and 2000 yielded the following varieties:[1]

1. Spaces for public exhibitions (or "open" exhibitions) of experimental art:
   a) Licensed exhibition spaces
      1) Major national and municipal galleries (e.g., the National Art Gallery in Beijing, the Shanghai Art Museum, the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen)
      2) Smaller galleries affiliated with universities and art schools (e.g., the Art Museum of Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Art Museum in Beijing)
      3) Semiofficial art galleries (e.g., Yanhuang Art Gallery in Beijing, Art Gallery of Beijing International Art Palace, and Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum)
      4) Versatile exhibition halls in public spaces (e.g., the Main Hall of the former Imperial Ancestral Temple in Beijing)
   b) Privately owned galleries and exhibition halls
      1) Commercial galleries (e.g., the Courtyard Gallery, the Red Gate Gallery, and the Wan Fung Art Gallery in Beijing)[2]
      2) Non-commercial galleries and exhibition halls (e.g., the Design Museum in Beijing, the Upriver Art Gallery in Chengdu, and Teda Contemporary Art Museum in Tianjin)[3]
   c) Public, non-exhibition spaces
      1) Open spaces (e.g., streets, subway stations, parks, etc.)
      2) Commercial spaces (e.g., shopping malls, bars, supermarkets, etc.)
      3) Mass media and virtual space (e.g., TV, newspapers, and Websites)
2. Spaces for private exhibitions (or "closed" exhibitions) of experimental art:
   a) Private homes
   b) Basements of large residential or commercial buildings
   c) "Open studios" and "workshops" sponsored by individuals or institutions
   d) Embassies and foreign institutions

The main exhibition channels of experimental art in the early 1990s were private or closed shows, whose audience was mainly the artists themselves, their friends, and interested foreigners. Terms such as "apartment art" and "embassy art" were invented to characterize these shows. Starting from 1993, however, exhibitions began to be held in various public spaces.[4] Commercial galleries started to appear; some of them supported experimental art projects that were not aimed at financial return.[5] Some university galleries, such as the Art Museum of Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts became major sites of experimental art in Beijing, mainly because their directors — in these two cases Yuan Guang and Li Jianli, respectively — took on the role of supporting this art. Sympathizers of experimental art also emerged in state-run exhibition companies. For example, one such individual, Guo Shirui, then the director of the Contemporary Art Centre under the National News and Publication Bureau, began in 1994 to organize and sponsor a series of influential experimental art exhibitions.[6]

"Experimental exhibitions" of the late 1990s continued this tendency. Their organizers focused on the three types of public spaces listed above, and tried to develop

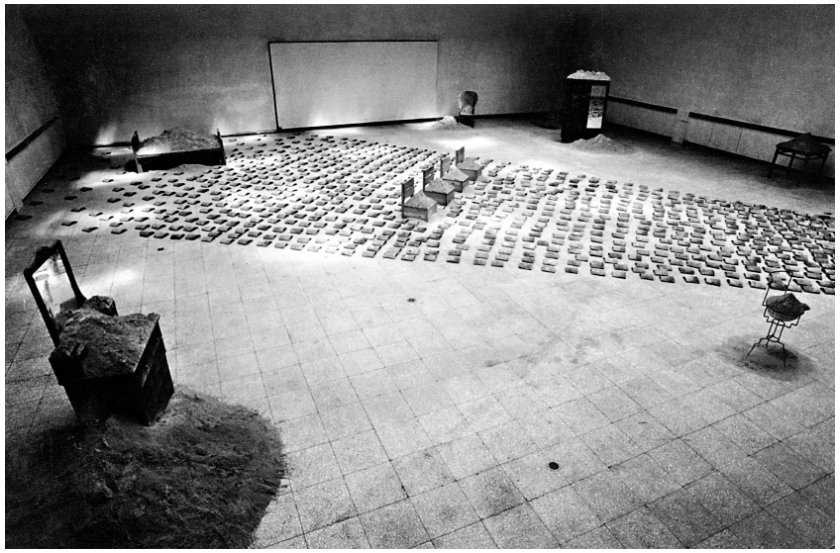
Xu Tan. *New Order*. 1994. Installation in Guangzhou

them into regular meeting places of experimental art with a broader audience, thereby cultivating public interest in this art. Their basic means to realize this goal was to develop exhibitions of experimental art in these spaces. Following this general direction, independent curators could still work with large or small licensed "official" or "semiofficial" exhibition spaces, but tried to convert their directors into supporters of experimental art. Alternatively, they could devote their energy to help privately owned exhibition spaces to develop interesting programs. A third strategy was to use "non-exhibition" spaces to bring experimental art to the public in a more flexible manner.

EXPANDING EXISTING SPACES: EXHIBITING EXPERIMENTAL ART IN PUBLIC GALLERIES

Let's take a closer look at these efforts and their conditions. First, important changes had taken place in many licensed public galleries, thus creating the possibility to bring experimental art into these spaces. Traditionally, all these galleries were sponsored by the state, and their exhibitions served strong educational purposes. Although this was still true in theory in the late 1990s, in actuality most of these public galleries had to finance their own operations, and for this and other reasons had to modify their image to appeal to a wider audience. As a result, their programs became increasingly polyfunctional. Even the National Art Gallery in Beijing routinely held three different kinds of exhibitions, which were more often than not ideologically self-contradictory. These included: (1) mainstream exhibitions organized by the gallery to support the government's political agendas and to showcase "progressive" traditions in Chinese art, (2) imported exhibitions of foreign art, including avant-garde Western art, as part of China's cultural exchanges with other countries, and (3) short-term and often mediocre "rental" exhibitions as the main source of the gallery's income (the gallery collects a handsome fee for renting out its exhibition space and facilities). It became easily questionable why the gallery could show Western avant-garde art but not Chinese

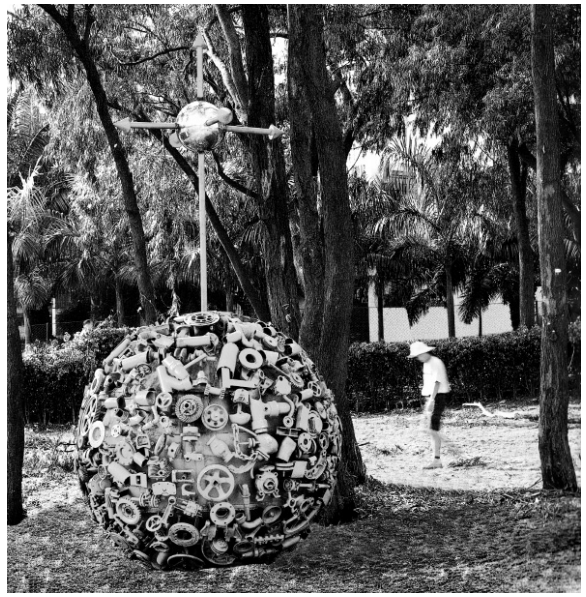
Poster produced on the occasion of *Exhibition of Recent Works by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi*, May 29, 1991, Diplomatic Missions Restaurant, Beijing



Yin Xiuzhen. *Ruined Capital*. 1996. Installation of furniture and cement at the Art Museum of Capital Normal University, Beijing

avant-garde art, and why it willingly provided space to an exhibition of obviously poor quality but not to an exhibition of genuine artistic experiment.

Unable to respond to these questions but still insisting on its opportunistic practices, the National Art Gallery — and indeed the whole existing art exhibition system — was rapidly losing its credibility. It is therefore not surprising to find that the position of the National Art Gallery was not always shared by other official art galleries. Some of these galleries, especially those newly established and "semiofficial" ones, were more interested in developing new programs to make themselves more cosmopolitan and "up-to-date." The He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, for example, advertised itself as "a national modern art museum only second to the National Art Gallery in Beijing."[7] Instead of taking the latter as its model, however, it organized a series of exhibitions to explore "the complex relationship between experimentation and public function, academic values, and visual attractiveness" in contemporary art.[8] A similar example was the Shanghai Art Museum, which assembled a collection of contemporary oil painting and sculpture in less than five years, and organized *Shanghai Spirit: The Third Shanghai Biennale* (2000) to feature "works by outstanding contemporary artists from any country, including Chinese experimental artists."[9] The organizers of this exhibition placed a strong emphasis on the relationship between the show and its site in Shanghai, a city which "represents a



Gao Brothers, *Prophecy*. 1999. Found objects, stainless steel. Installation view at the *Second Year-Long Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition*, He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen

specific and innovative model of modernization, a regionally defined but globally meaningful form of modernity that can only be summed up as the 'Shanghai Spirit.'"[10] Some independent curators were attracted by the opportunities to help organize these new programs, because they saw potential in them to transform the official system of art exhibition from within. In their view, when they brought experimental art into an official semiofficial exhibition space, this art also changed the nature of the space. For this reason, these curators tried hard to work with large public galleries to develop exhibitions, although such projects often required delicate negotiation and frequent compromises.

Generally speaking, however, national and municipal galleries were still not ready to openly support experimental projects by young Chinese artists. Even when they held an exhibition of a more adventurous nature, they often still had to emphasize its "academic merit" to avoid possible criticism. Compared with these large galleries, smaller galleries affiliated with universities, art schools, and other institutions enjoyed more freedom to develop a more versatile program, including to feature radical experimental works in their galleries for either artistic or economic reasons. If a director was actively involved in promoting experimental art, his gallery, though small and relatively unknown to the outside world, could play an important role in developing this art. Examples of such cases include the Art Museum of Capital Normal University and the Contemporary Art Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which held many original exhibitions from 1994 to 1996. If an independent curator wanted to propose to stage an exhibition for a short period and to keep it low profile, he was more likely to use such exhibition spaces.

Exhibitions housed in universities and art schools became prevalent around the mid-1990s, although some curators and artists made a greater effort toward the end of the decade to attract official sponsorship and to make an exhibition known to a larger audience. One such example was the recent 2000 *China: Internet, Video, and Photo Art*, held in the Art Gallery of the Jilin Provincial Art Academy. As many as fifty-two artists from throughout the country participated in this exhibition; their works were grouped into sections such as "conceptual photography," "multimedia images," and

"interactive Internet art." The sponsors of the exhibition included the Jilin Provincial Artists' Association and Jilin Provincial Art Academy, which provided the exhibition not only with an exhibition space but also computer equipment, supporting facilities for Internet art, and a fund of 50,000 yuan (about US$3,900). An additional fund of 50,000 yuan was raised from private businesses in Changchun. The exhibition attracted a local crowd, and also linked itself with artists and viewers far away through the Internet.

FORGING NEW CHANNELS: EXHIBITING EXPERIMENTAL ART IN SEMI-PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GALLERIES

From the early 1990s, some advocates of experimental art launched a campaign to develop a domestic market for experimental art. The first major initiative in this regard was the *First 1990s Biennial Art Fair* in October 1992, which showed more than 400 works by 350 artists and was supervised by an advisory committee formed by 14 art critics. Unlike any previous large-scale art shows, this exhibition was sponsored by private entrepreneurs and with a self-professed goal of establishing a market system for contemporary Chinese art. Its location in an "international exhibition hall" inside a five-star hotel was symbolic. The awards set aside for several prizes was 450,000 yuan (about $120,000 at the time), an unheard of amount of money for any of the show's participants. Suffering from the inexperience of the organizers as well as antagonism from the more idealistic artists, however, this grand undertaking ended with a feud among the three major parties involved in the exhibition: the organizers, the sponsor, and the artists.[11]

Two exhibitions held in 1996 and 1997 were motivated by the same idea of developing a market system for experimental art, but had a more specific purpose to facilitate the earliest domestic auctions of experimental art. Called *Reality: Present and Future* (*Xianshi: Jintian yu mingtian*) and *A Chinese Dream* (*Zhongguo zhi meng*), both events were curated by Leng Lin and sponsored by the Sungari International Auction Co. Ltd., and both took place in semipublic art galleries. The location of the 1996 exhibition was the Art Gallery of Beijing International Art Palace located inside the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza Hotel in central Beijing. Established in 1991, this gallery was funded by a private foundation, but obtained the legal status of a "public exhibition space" from Beijing's municipal government largely because of the political connections of the gallery's founder Liu Xun, who was the head of the semiofficial Artists' Association before he created this place and became its first director. The Yanhuang Art Gallery, location of the 1997 exhibition/auction *A Chinese Dream*, was the most active semiofficial exhibition space in China in the early 1990s. Founded by the famous artist Huang Zhou in 1991 and supported by two foundations, it was a private institution affiliated with an official institution, first with Beijing's Municipal Bureau of Cultural Relics and then with the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.[12]

The semipublic status of these two galleries gave them greater flexibility to determine their programs. This is why each of them could hold an exhibition/auction as a joint venture among three parties: an independent curator, a semipublic gallery, and an auction house. The position of the auction house in this collaboration was made clear by its vice chairperson Liu Ting, a daughter of the late Chinese President Liu Shaoqi: "At present, as a commodity economy continues to expand in China, how to build up an art market for high-level works has become one of the most pressing issues in cultural and artistic circles. The current exhibition, *Reality: Present and Future* sponsored by the Sungari International Auction Co. Ltd., represents one step toward this goal."[13]

Another noticeable example of a semipublic gallery is the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, founded in September 1999. Large enough to contain several football fields, this enormous gallery is part of an even larger architectural complex including two luxury hotels (one five-star and one four-star). The whole project is financed by Chengdu's municipal government and a Chinese American joint venture company called the California Group (*Jiazhou Jituan*). Deng Hong, the museum's director and the chairman of the group's board of trustees, states the purpose of the museum:

> Twenty years after China opened its doors and began to undertake a series of reforms, the achievement of our country in the economic domain is now recognized by the whole world. But we must also agree that progress in the cultural sphere, especially in the area of cultural infrastructure, falls far behind our economic growth. Since the mid-1990s or even earlier I have been thinking that we should not only build a large-scale modern art gallery with first-rate facilities, but, more importantly, need to introduce more advanced operating mechanisms and new modes in curating exhibitions,in order to facilitate and promote the development of Chinese art. . . . This is the fundamental and long-term goal of the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum."[14]

The museum's inauguration coincided with an enormous exhibition. Called *Gate of the New Century* (*Shiji zhi men*), this exhibition included a considerable number of installations and some performance pieces — content which would normally be omitted in a mainstream, state-run gallery. But the exhibition as a whole still followed the mode of a synthetic, anonymous National Art Exhibition. Partly because of such criticism, the museum decided to sponsor versatile exhibitions of more experimental types.

Unlike the Chengdu Contemporary Art Museum, which is partially funded by the local government and is thus defined here as "semipublic," some art galleries are entirely private-owned. A major change in China's art world in the 1990s was in fact the establishment of these private galleries, which far outnumbered semipublic galleries and provided more opportunities to exhibit experimental art outside the official system of art exhibition. Commercial galleries first appeared in the early 1990s, and by the end of the 1990s constituted the majority of private galleries. Strictly speaking, a commercial gallery is not a licensed "exhibition space." But because it is a licensed "art business" (*yishu qiye*), its space can be used to show artworks without additional official permissions. In the middle and late 1990s, quite a few owners or managers of these commercial galleries took a personal interest in experimental art, and supported "nonprofit" exhibitions of installations, video art, and performances in their galleries. Maryse Parant, who interviewed a number of such owners or managers in Beijing, noted that "these galleries are also precursors. They not only sell, they also serve an educational purpose, digging a new path for art in China, shaping a market so that artists can continue their work and be seen."[15] While mainly offering "milder" types of experimental art to Western collectors, these galleries occasionally held bolder shows organized by guest curators. One such show was the *Factory No. 2* exhibition held in Beijing's Wan Fung Art Gallery in early 2000. Curated by three young students in the Department of Art History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, this impressive exhibition featured installations and works with explicit sexual implications seldom seen in a commercial gallery.

Non-commercial, privately funded art galleries were an even later phenomenon in China. These were galleries defined by their owners as "non-profit" (*fei yingli*), meaning that they supported these galleries and their operations with their own money, and that the art works exhibited there were not for sale. Although most of these owners did collect, the main program of these galleries was not to exhibit private art collections but to hold a series of temporal shows organized by guest curators.

These galleries thus differed from both commercial galleries and private museums, and had a greater capacity to exhibit more radical types of experimental art. For this advantage, some independent curators devoted much time and energy to help establish non-commercial galleries.

There had been no precedent for this type of exhibition space in Chinese history. Nor was it based on any specific Western model, although its basic concept was certainly derived from Western art museums and galleries funded by private foundations and donations. Because China did not have a philanthropic tradition to fund public art, and because no tax law was developed to help attract private donations to support art, to found a non-commercial gallery required originality and dedication. It was a tremendous amount of work for curators and artists to persuade a company or a businessman to establish such an institution to promote experimental art. But because a gallery like this did not belong to a government institution and was not controlled by any official department, some curators and artists saw a new system of exhibition spaces based primarily on this kind of private institution. Their hope seemed to be shared by the owners of some of these galleries. Chen Jiagang, the owner and director of Upriver Art Gallery in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, made this statement:

> The rise of great art at a given time originates not only from the talented imagination and activities of a few geniuses, but also from the impulse and creativity of a system. To a certain extent, an artistic work completed by an individual needs to be granted its social and historical value by a system. After the sustained efforts and striving of several generations, contemporary Chinese art has made remarkable progress. But the system of contemporary Chinese art still remains mired in its old ways. Art galleries, agents, private-owned art museums as well as a foundation system have not yet been established, which, as a result, has obstructed the participation of contemporary Chinese art in contemporary Chinese life and establishment of its universality to a certain extent. As an important part in the contemporary art system, the function and development of art galleries is urgent.
>
> The Upriver Art Gallery has been established to provide the finest Chinese artists, critics, and exhibition planners with a platform in order to support experiments in and academic research on contemporary Chinese art. In this way, it hopes to stimulate the achievement of first-class art and its dissemination in society at large and the selection of works on academic merit.[16]

It is unclear how many galleries of this kind were established in the 1990s; the best known three were respectively located in Chengdu, Tianjin, and Shenyang.[17] Each of them had a group of independent curators and experimental artists as advisors. Some of the most original exhibitions of experimental art in 1998 and 1999 took place in these and other private galleries. Because the owners of these galleries were either large companies or rich businessmen, their influence and relationship with local officials helped protect the exhibitions held in their galleries. In addition, their connections with local newspapers and TV stations helped turn these exhibitions into public events. Several shows held in the Upriver Art Gallery, for example, supplied the media with sensational materials and attracted people of different professions and classes to the exhibitions. Encouraged by such attention, some curators took public interaction as their goal, developing exhibitions around themes that would arouse public discussion and debate. However, there was a serious drawback to this type of gallery and exhibition space: its operation and existence relied on the financial situation of its owner. It was not uncommon that when a company began to lose money, it immediately stopped supporting art exhibitions and even closed down its exhibition hall.

CREATING VERSATILE EXHIBITION SPACES: BRINGING EXPERIMENTAL ART TO THE PUBLIC

A significant effort made by independent curators and artists was to hold experimental art exhibitions in versatile, non-exhibition spaces. Instead of using either official or private regular exhibition channels, these were "site-specific" exhibitions that served two interrelated purposes: they brought experimental art to the public in a dynamic, guerrilla fashion, and in so doing transformed non-exhibition spaces into public exhibition spaces. The organizers of these exhibitions shared the belief that experimental art should be part of people's lives and should play an active role in China's socioeconomic transformation. Because these curators often wanted to demonstrate an unambiguous relationship between an exhibition and its social environment, most of these projects were strongly thematic and centered on certain public spaces. It was also common for these curators to ask artists to submit site-specific works for their exhibitions, and in this way encourage these artists to contextualize their art within a public space.

This direction was exemplified by a number of original projects developed in 1999 and 2000. For example, the exhibition *Supermarket* (*Chaoshi zhan*) was actually held in a supermarket in downtown Shanghai; the fashionable bar Club Vogue in Beijing became the site of the exhibition *Art as Food* (*Yishu dacan*); upon the opening of the largest "furniture city" in Shanghai, customers had the opportunity to see a huge experimental art exhibition, called *Home?* (*Jia?*), on the store's enormous fourth floor. The fact that a majority of these shows used commercial spaces reflected the curators' interest in a "mass commercial culture," which in their view had become a major force in contemporary Chinese society. While affiliating experimental art to this culture, their exhibitions also provided spaces for artists to comment on this culture, either positively or critically. Practically speaking, an exhibition held in a commercial space often involved a nuanced negotiation between the curator and the owner or manager of the space. Only because the latter saw benefit from the proposed exhibition — the prospect of bringing in more customers or gaining the image of being a "cultured" businessman — could the negotiation reach a happy conclusion. On the part of the curator, however, this negotiation was approached as an integral component of the experiment, because only through this process could a commercial space be transformed into a public exhibition space.

Related to such experiments in expanding public exhibition spaces was the effort to adapt popular forms of mass media to create new types of experimental art. The artist Zhao Bandi, for example, not only turned his conceptual photographs into "public welfare" posters in Beijing's subway stations, but also convinced the directors of CCTV [Central China Television] to broadcast these photographs for similar purposes. Other experimental artists created works resembling a newspaper. The most systematic undertaking along this line was a project organized by the art critic and independent curator Leng Lin. Here is how he described this experiment:

> This project was put into practice in July 1999. Called *Talents* (*Yibiao rencai*), it initially consisted of four artists: Wang Jin, Zhu Fadong, Zhang Dali, and Wu Xiaojun. Its purpose was to explore a new way of artistic expression by adapting the form of the newspaper. Derived from this popular social medium, this form combines experimental art with people's daily activities, and brings this art into constant interaction with society. This project produced a printed document

Wang Jin. *To Marry a Mule*. July 28, 1995. Photograph of performance, 109 × 71⅝" (277 × 182 cm)

resembling a common newspaper. Each of its four pages was used by one of the four artists to express himself directly to his audience. In this way, these artists' final products became inseparable from the notion of the newspaper, and the idea of artistic creativity became subordinate to the broader concept of mass communication. . . . We put *Talents* in public spaces such as bookstores and fairs. People could take it free of charge.[18]

But for some artists and curators, the newspaper was already too traditional a mass medium, so they began to explore newer information technologies such as the Internet. It became a common practice in the 1990s for Chinese experimental artists to build personal Web pages to feature their artworks. But independent curators also discovered this space to organize "virtual exhibitions." For example, supported by the Website Chinese-art.com based in Beijing, these curators took turns editing the "*Chinese Type*" *Contemporary Art Online Magazine*. Each issue of the magazine, primarily edited by an active independent curator of experimental art, integrated short pieces of writings with many images; the form was more like an exhibition than a conventional art journal. The significance of such "virtual exhibitions" could also be understood in a more specific context: when public display of experimental art became difficult in the early 1990s, some art critics curated "document exhibitions" (*wenxian zhan*) to facilitate communication between experimental artists. Consisting of reproductions of works and writings by artists scattered throughout the country, these traveling shows provided information about recent developments of Chinese experimental art. These "document exhibitions" were replaced in the late 1990s by "virtual exhibitions" on the Internet, which served similar purposes in a new period.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE "EXPERIMENTAL EXHIBITIONS"

Generally speaking, an exhibition becomes "experimental" when the focus of experimentation has shifted from the content of the exhibition to the exhibition itself: its site, form, and function. Issues about these aspects of exhibitions loomed large in the 1990s because of an increasing conflict between a rapidly developing experimental art and a backward system of art exhibition. Instead of seeking solutions in a radical social revolution, advocates of experimental art placed their hopes on China's socioeconomic transformation, and decided to speed up this transformation with their own efforts. Consequently, they planned many exhibitions to widen existing public spaces and to explore new public spaces for exhibiting experimental art, and to find new allies, patrons, and audiences for this art. In this sense, the experimental nature of these public exhibitions lay, first of all, in their professed goal of forging a "new system" of art exhibition in China. Under this general goal, each exhibition became a specific site for a curator to conduct a series of experiments. These experiments again stimulated the participating artists to experiment new concepts and forms in their art.

Although in theory an open exhibition is a public event and a closed exhibition is a private affair, the line between the two was not definite in the 1990s. An open exhibition was probably not so open after all because of concerns over possible cancellation. According to the artist Song Dong, for example, careful planning and keeping a low profile are two key reasons why the Art Museum of Capital Normal University was able to develop a consistent program of experimental art exhibitions during the three years from 1994 to 1996.[19] Although the gallery is a licensed, public exhibition space, the exhibitions held there during these years were short and mainly organized over weekends. These exhibitions inside a walled campus were not widely advertised; their timing was also carefully determined. All these factors made these "public" exhibitions actually semipublic or half-closed events.

On the other hand, although a closed show could be an informal gathering held in someone's house or apartment, it could also be a serious undertaking with a grand goal, realized only after painstaking preparation. Its opening could attract hundreds of people; and its impact could be felt in the subsequent development of experimental art for a long period. One artist has summarized what he sees as the only thing separating a closed exhibition from an open one: you know it's happening not through a formal announcement or invitation, but from an e-mail or a telephone call. Closed exhibitions still remained an important channel for exhibiting experimental art throughout the 1990s, but their significance changed in new social environments, and especially in relation to exhibitions of experimental art in various public spaces. In fact, the increased efforts to organize public exhibitions of experimental art altered the meaning and direction of closed exhibitions, and brought these private events into a broader movement of "experimental exhibitions."

For the most part, in the 1990s the reason for organizing a closed exhibition was mainly a matter of security and convenience: its organizer did not have to obtain permission and worried less about outside obstruction. But this reason was no longer sufficient for a closed show organized at the end of the 1990s: when many curators and artists were urging that experimental art be brought to the public, and when there was indeed a strong possibility to exhibit experimental art publicly, a closed show had to justify itself by providing additional reasons. A main reason was sought in protecting the "purity" of experimental art. Against the trend of exploring public channels for experimental art, some artists and curators insisted that any effort to publicize this art would inevitably compromise its experimental spirit. While this rhetoric was not new, its actual consequence was worth noting. Parallel to the ongoing effort to make experimental art accessible to the public, there appeared a countermovement of making closed shows more extreme and "difficult." The experiments using living animals and human corpses to make art can be viewed, in fact, as part of this countermovement:

since these experiments would almost certainly be prohibited by the government and denounced by the public, they justified the necessity of closed exhibitions planned exclusively for "insiders" within the experimental art circle.

Many closed exhibitions organized toward the end of the 1990s were no longer informal and casual gatherings at someone's home, but had become serious undertakings and reflected a growing concern with the purpose and form of this type of exhibition. Much thought was given to their sites and ways of organization, making these shows a special brand of experimental exhibition. One of them, *Trace of Existence* (*Shengcun henji*), was a major exhibition of Chinese experimental art in 1998. The curator Feng Boyi explains the exhibition's site in an article he wrote for the exhibition catalogue:

> Because experimental art does not have a proper place within the framework of the official Chinese establishment of art exhibitions, it is difficult to exhibit this art openly and freely. We have therefore selected a disused private factory in the eastern suburbs of Beijing as our exhibition site, hoping to transform this informal and closed private space into an open space for creating and exhibiting experimental art. Held in this location, this exhibition allows us to make a transition from urban space to agricultural countryside in a geographical sense, and from center to border in a cultural sense. This location mirrors the peripheral position of experimental art in China, and this exhibition adapts the customary working method of contemporary Chinese experimental artists: they have to make use of any available place to create art.[20]

Each of the eleven participating artists selected a specific location within the exhibition space as the site of his or her work. Song Dong, for example, used the factory's abandoned dining hall to stage his installation: twelve large vats containing 1,250 cabbages picked on the spot. Wang Gongxin projected his video *Shepherd* (*Muyang*) in a sheep pen with a real sheep in it [illustrated p. 339]. The curator subtitled the exhibition "a private showing of contemporary Chinese art," but they also supplied large buses to take several hundred people to view and participate in this one-day event.

Going one step further, some curators and artists made an attempt to create regular channels for private exhibitions. One of these channels was the "Open Studio" program sponsored by the Research Institute of Sculpture in Beijing. Initiated by Zhan Wang, the director of the institute and an active experimental artist himself, this program offered young artists spaces to exhibit controversial artistic experiments; the institute posed no limit on their experimentation. The second Open Studio, held on April 22, 2000, was actually a carefully prepared exhibition, called *Infatuated with Injury* (*Dui shanghai de milian*), organized by independent curator Li Xianting.[21] Several works on display used living animals and human corpses. During this exhibition, the hallway and the five "open studios" were packed with people. An investigation was soon conducted by the leadership of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the superior organization of the institute, to look into this "highly abnormal" event.[22] Here, the division between a public exhibition and a private one again became nearly indistinguishable.

CONCLUDING THE DECADE: THE 2000 SHANGHAI BIENNALE AND "SATELLITE" SHOWS

The Third Shanghai Biennale was held from November 6, 2000, to January 6, 2001. From the moment the Shanghai Art Museum announced its plan to organize a "truly international" biennale, this forthcoming exhibition had been perceived, discussed, and debated as an event of extraordinary historical significance. Representing the Museum's approach, Director Fang Zengxian, who also headed the Biennale's Artistic Committee, made this grandiose statement: "The significance of its [i.e., the Biennale's] success will far transcend the exhibition itself. As an activity established on an international scale that seriously addresses the issues of globalization, postcolonialism and regionalism, etc., this Shanghai Biennale will set a good example for our Chinese colleagues and is bound to secure its due status among other world-famous biennial art exhibitions."[23]

The Biennale also stimulated unofficial activities, mainly a host of "satellite" exhibitions organized by independent curators and non-government galleries.[24] As events, these exhibitions—both the Biennale and the "satellite" shows—largely fulfilled their mission upon their opening, which all took place within two to three days around November 6, 2000, as a series of linked "happenings." This strong sense of happening was also generated by the sudden get-together of a large number of artists and critics, reinforced by all the bustle and movement. Not only did the Museum invite many guests (including some of international renown), each of the "satellite" shows also formed its own "public." While the gap between the official and unofficial activities remained, participants from diverse backgrounds often intermingled and roamed together from one show to another, one party to another. However, a few days later Shanghai was left empty: most artists and art critics left and all the "satellite" shows were over. No longer threatened by competition and possible disruption, the Biennale alone persisted, though the excitement and exuberance once surrounding it was also gone.

The active events and happenings surrounding the Biennale confirmed my observation that, in the late 1990s and 2000, a dominant issue in Chinese art was the exhibition: its form, timing, location, and function. This is also why we find conflicting notions and positions surrounding the Biennale. Returning to the Shanghai Art Museum's own rhetoric, the Biennale was identified as an instant historical milestone because it inaugurated a "global" era for the industry of contemporary Chinese art exhibitions. This view may puzzle some people because, as it is well known, contemporary Chinese art had been part of the global art scene since the early 1990s, and many important international exhibitions now regularly feature works by contemporary Chinese artists. What needs to be understood is that this statement was limited to officially sponsored exhibitions, which had remained largely "local" before the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. Recalling that Beijing's National Art Gallery still refused to show installation, performance, and multimedia works, sympathizers of the Shanghai Biennale could easily see its reformist, if not even revolutionary, nature.

To the Shanghai Art Museum, the Biennale was also a huge breakthrough: it allowed this official art institution to proudly announce its entrance into the global art scene. Since 1996, the Museum had adopted the fashionable term "biennale" (*shuangnian zhan*) for a sequence of its exhibitions. Such adoption was superficial, however, because the two earlier Shanghai Biennales in 1996 and 1998 were basically domestic events. From the Museum's point of view, they consisted of a preliminary stage in a long-term evolution toward an established international norm: the Museum would eventually shed its "local" image and identity, and its Biennales would be "true to their names" (*ming fu qi shi*) and join the rank of other "true" biennales and triennales at Venice, Lyon, Gwangju, Sydney, and Yokohama—to name just a few.

This evolutionary approach to contemporary Chinese art had a definite locality in 2000: Shanghai. In fact, only by linking the Biennale to a Herculean effort of this city to (re)assert its global, cosmopolitan identity can we understand the exhibition's true rationale and feasibility. Viewed in this context, this flashy and costly Biennale was not

exactly the prime showcase in 2000s Shanghai. Housed in a refurbished colonial building, the visual excitement it offered to an international audience was nowhere close in comparison to the spectacular cityscape of Pudong. An oversized architectural circus, this cityscape startles visitors with a desire to impress and with an ambition to propel the whole city from the past to the future. Just a few days prior to the Biennale, Shanghai also expressed the same desire and ambition through "the largest staging of Verdi's *Aida* ever attempted in the world." Performed by Chinese and foreign musicians, it featured a grand march consisting of 3,000 PLA soldiers disguised as Egyptian warriors and all the elephants available in Shanghai.

The 2000 Shanghai Biennale also facilitated such a globalization program on a municipal level. The exhibition's thematic title was *Shanghai Spirit* in English but *Haishang Shanghai* in Chinese. The latter title, which means literally "Shanghai over the Sea," aimed at relating this coastal city to the outside world. But having pushed the "Shanghai spirit" this far, the exhibition's organizers had to stop and reassert the national identity of their project. Thus in their rationalization of the Biennale, internationalization or globalization eventually retreated to the background, while the Biennale itself "endeavored to promote Chinese mainstream culture."[25]

Since the Shanghai Art Museum invited Hou Hanru and Toshio Shimizu—two international curators of independent status—to join its curatorial team, to some independent Chinese curators the gap conventionally separating a government-sponsored art exhibition from their own independent projects had significantly diminished. Even though none of these curators were directly involved in organizing the Biennale, to them, this government-sponsored exhibition still reflected some refreshing changes. The two most significant changes were also the most sought-after goals of previous "experimental exhibitions" organized by these independent curators. As mentioned earlier, their first goal was to take over the curatorship of major art exhibitions; their second goal was to "normalize" or "legalize" (*hefa hua*) experimental art.

The Shanghai Biennale not only invited two independent guest curators, but also included video and installation works by some experimental Chinese artists. To those independent curators who had been campaigning for these reforms, this was certainly a victory for their part. Thus they constructed the Biennale's "historical significance" in quite a different way from that of the Museum's. While the Museum interpreted the Biennale as representing a new stage in an officially sponsored evolution from "local" to "global," these independent curators and critics linked the Biennale to previous unofficial exhibitions. From their point of view, the reforms in this Biennale resulted, to a large extent, from their persistent efforts in challenging and reinventing the old exhibition system. Zhu Qingsheng—a Peking University professor who is also an avant-garde artist and critic—claimed that the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was the most important Chinese exhibition since the 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) exhibition. Gu Chenfeng—another veteran organizer and critic of experimental art—compared the 2000 Shanghai Biennale with the 1992 Guangzhou Biennale organized by independent curators, which according to him initiated many new curatorial practices that then influenced subsequent art exhibitions in China.[26] Taken together, many of these statements reflected a collective attempt to forge an unofficial historiography, which attributed the main force behind the opening up of China's exhibition channels not to official reforms, but to initiations made in the unofficial sectors in Chinese art and to the general course of globalization.[27]

It would be a mistake, however, to take Zhu and Gu as representatives of all independent curators and experimental artists, because their views were by no means shared by everyone in the multifaceted community of experimental art. As mentioned

Interior view of the *Fuck Off* exhibition, November 4–20, 2000, Eastlink Gallery, Shanghai

earlier, some independent curators and artists openly opposed any collaboration with public art institutions, which they considered to be opportunistic and against the spirit of the avant-garde. In late 2000, this position was most self-consciously embodied by the off-Biennale exhibition entitled *Buhezuo fangshi*—literally "ways of non-cooperation" but rendered into English by the exhibition's organizers as *Fuck Off*. Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, co-curators of the show, explained this project: "*Fuck Off* is an event initiated by a group of curators and artists who share a common identity as 'alternative.' In today's art, the 'alternative' position entails challenging and criticizing the power discourse and popular conventions. In an uncooperative and uncompromising way, it self-consciously resists the threat of assimilation and vulgarization."[28]

Thus in their view, the main purpose of their exhibition was to counter and subvert the "master event"—the Biennale. In their vision, this "alternative" exhibition, though much smaller in scale, would challenge and debase the Biennale's centrality and dominance. In an interview, Ai Weiwei refused to call his show a "satellite" or "peripheral" activity.[29] To Ai and Feng, since their exhibition represented the "alternative" position in contemporary Chinese art, it played a critical role in challenging the dominant "power discourse" at this historical moment. From this position they interpreted the Biennale as posing a "threat of assimilation and vulgarization:" the inclusion of experimental artists in this official showcase could only destroy these artists' experimental spirit. Their refusal of this reformist official exhibition, therefore, also implied their rejection of a reformist historical narrative centered on the evolution or transformation of the official exhibition system, whether this narrative was formulated by the art establishment itself or by independent curators who hoped to change the system from within.

Some artists shared this anti-establishment position and designed their works as private critiques of the Shanghai Biennale.[30] But such projects were few; most works in the off-Biennale exhibitions—even in *Fuck Off*—did not engage with the "master event." Moreover, to my knowledge no Chinese artist invited to participate in the Biennale turned down the invitation. I was also not surprised to learn that the

organizers of *Fuck Off* also practiced certain self-censorship to ensure the show's realization, eliminating and restricting some art projects that might provoke a cancellation. These situations raised questions as to the effectiveness of this rebellious approach. In what sense did an "alternative" exhibition such as *Fuck Off* challenge the official show? How effectively did it shift the power center? To what extent could it realize its uncooperative intentionality? The significance of *Fuck Off*, in my view, mainly lies in its assertion of an alternative position, thus keeping this position vital in contemporary Chinese art. But it was far from clear, either in this particular exhibition or in the general practice of Chinese art in the last decade, what the "alternative" meant beyond self-positioning, attitude, and verbal expressions. This is perhaps why no real confrontation between the Biennale and other shows was found in the actual artworks they exhibited. It is true that the off-Biennale exhibitions contained some works that were aggressive or deliberately shocking. But stylistic and ideological solidarity was not the goal of these shows. Nonetheless, the Biennale's selection of artwork—ranging from Liang Shuo's realistic *Urban Peasants* to Matthew Barney's iconoclastic *Cremaster 4*, was clearly a compromise of hugely different aesthetic positions and judgments. With their conflicting self-identities and complex self-contradictions, all these exhibitions—both the official and unofficial ones—contributed to something larger than the exhibitions themselves, and will be remembered as part of an exciting moment in the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Notes

1. I should emphasize that this survey only covers spaces that have been used for experimental art exhibitions in recent years. The varieties listed here thus do not represent all types of exhibition space in China.
2. The Red Gate Gallery was one of the earliest privately owned art galleries in Beijing. Its owner, Brian Wallace, an Australian, became interested in contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s, and began to organize exhibitions in Beijing's ancient Observatory in 1988. He subsequently opened the Red Gate Gallery in 1991. The Courtyard Gallery, located in a spectacular location across the moat from the East Gate of the Forbidden City, was established in 1996 by Handel Lee, a Chinese American lawyer. The Wan Fung Art Gallery is also located in a formal imperial building, in this case the former Imperial Archives. A branch of a Hong Kong art gallery, it was established in 1993.
3. It is important to note that the "non-profit" status of these galleries is defined by their owners, who fund the galleries and their activities by using part of their business income. A gallery in this category usually does not have an independent license, and should be considered a "non-profit" enterprise within a larger licensed "business for profit" (*qiye*) sector.
4. It is true that some public exhibitions before 1993 featured experimental artworks. For example, the influential *New Generation* exhibition was held in 1991 in the Museum of Chinese History. But participants of this exhibition were all academic artists, and the show was sponsored by the official *Chinese Youth Daily* as part of the anniversary celebration of the May Fourth Movement that year.
5. One such project was Xu Bing's *A Case Study of Transference*, held in 1994 at the Hanmo Art Center, one of the first commercial galleries in Beijing.
6. These exhibitions include *Now, Dream of East: '94 Beijing*, *International Com-Art Show*, *Beijing-Berlin Art Exchange* (1995), *The First Academic Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Art* (1997), *Demonstration of Video Art '97 China*, *It's Me!* (1998), and *Art for Sale* (1999).
7. He Xiangning Art Museum, brochure of the gallery.
8. Ren Kelei (director of the He Xiangning Museum), "Social and Academic Goals of the Second Annual Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition," foreword to *The Second Annual Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition,* at He Xiangning Art Gallery (Shenzhen: He Xiangning Art Gallery, 1999), 8. (The venue has since changed its name to He Xiangning Art Museum.)
9. Zhang Qing, an organizer of the exhibition, told me this during an interview I conducted in April 2000.
10. Shanghai Art Museum, "Announcement of Shanghai Biennale 2000."
11. For a critique of this exhibition, see Gu Chengfeng, "Lixiang zhuyi degangfen yu pibei — Guangzhou shuangnianzhan, wenxianzhan texie" (The Excitment and Exhaustion of Idealism — A Close-Up Observation of the Guangzhou Biennale and the Research Documents Exhibition), in idem., *Ganshou youhou — Zhongguo dangdai yishu jingguan* (*Experiencing Temptation — A Quiet Observation of Contemporary Chinese Art*) (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 1999), 7–13. For an introduction to this biennale, see Lü Peng, *Zhongguo dangdai yishushi 1990–1999* (*'90s Art China*) (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000), 124–33.
12. For a brief introduction to these and other semi-official galleries, see Ma Hongzeng, "20 shiji woguo meishuguan de fazhan guiji yu sikao" ("Outlining and Reflecting on the Development of Art Galleries in China in the 20th Century), *Meishu guancha* (*Art Observation*), no. 4 (2000), 58–61.
13. *Xianshi: Jintian yu mingtian* (*Reality: Present and Future*) (Beijing: Sungari International, 1996), "Foreword."
14. Deng Hong, "Cujin he fanrong Zhongguo bentu yishu" ("Promoting Native Chinese Art"), *Meishu guancha* (*Art Observation*), no. 53 (April 2000), 11–12.
15. Maryse Parant, "Foreigners Define Market: City Galleries Compete to Supply Contemporary Works." *Beijing This Month,* no. 77 (April 2000), 42–43; quotation from 42.
16. *Zhuanshi shidai* (*Time of Revival*) (Chengdu: Upriver Art Gallery, 2000), Chen Jiagang 6–7. English translation revised based on the original Chinese text.
17. These are the Upriver Art Gallery in Chengdu, Teda Contemporary Art Museum in Tianjin, and Dongyu Museum of Fine Arts in Shenyang. Among them, Dongyu Museum focuses more on building up a private collection of contemporary Chinese art. See Robert Bernell, "Interview with Wang Yigang, Managing Director of the Dong Yu Museum of Fine Arts in Shenyang," *Chinese Type Contemporary Art Online Magazine* 2, no. 3 (May–June 1999), 19–22.
18. Leng Lin, "Yige zhide zhuyi de dongxiang" ("A Noticeable Tendency"), in idem., *Shi wo* (*It's me*), (Beijing: Zhongguo Federation of Literacy and Art Circles Publishing, 2000), 67–81, quotation from p. 69.
19. An interview with Song Dong conducted by this author in February 2000.
20. Feng Boyi, "'Shengcun henji' de henji—guanyu shengcun henji—98 Zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmozhan de yizhong miaoshu" (The Path to *Trace of Existence*: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98), in *Shengcun henji—98 Zhongguo dangdai yishu neibu guanmozhan* (*Trace of Existence*: A Private Showing of Chinese Contemporary Art '98) (Beijing: Art Now Studio, 1998), 9–11; quotation from 9.
21. For a published account of this exhibition, see Shu Kewen, "Mikailangjiluo jiepou de shiti" (Corpses under Michaelangelo's scalpel), *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* (Sanlian Life Weekly), no. 112 (May 2000), 70–71.
22. Typical examples of these exhibitions include *Post-Sense Sensibility* curated by Qiu Zhijie and Wu Meichun and *Infatuated with Injury* curated by Li Xianting. The former took place in the basement of a large residential building, and the latter was presented as an "open studio" in the Research Institute of Sculpture. Both shows attracted many people to their openings and made a strong impact on Chinese experimental art.
23. Preface to Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai Biennale 2000 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2000), English translation slightly modified based on the original Chinese text.
24. Four of these unofficial exhibitions had stronger thematic focuses and published exhibition catalogues. These were *Buhezuo fangshi* (*Fuck Off*) curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi; *Yichang yu richang* (*Unusual and Usual*) curated by Gu Zhenqing; *Youxiao qi* (*Useful Life*) organized by Yang Zhenzhong, Yang Fudong, and Xu Zhen; and *Yu wo youguan* (*About me*) curated by Lin Xiaodong.
25. Zhang Qing, "Beyond Left and Right: Transformation of the Shanghai Biennale," in Shanghai Art Museum, *Shanghai Biennale 2000*.
26. Zhu expressed this opinion in his speech given to the symposium held in conjunction with the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. For Gu's view, see his article "Xiangqi Guangzhou Shuangnian zhan" (Recalling the Guangzhou Biennial), *Shanghai Meishuguan tongxuan* (SAM magazine), 34 (2000), 5.
27. One can also find evidence for this attempt in Lü Peng's *Zhongguo dangdai yishu shi, 1990–1999/90s Art China* (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2000). This most up-to-date narrative of contemporary Chinese art represents an individual Chinese art critic's point of view.
28. Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, "About *Fuck Off*," in *Buhezuo fangshi (Fuck Off)*, privately published, 2000, 9. English translation modified based on the original Chinese passage.
29. "'Buhezuo' shi yizhong licheng zitai—guanyu 'Buhezuo Fangshi' de duihua" ("Non-cooperation" is a standpoint and an attitude—a conversation about "A Way of No-Cooperation"), *Xiandai yishu (Contemporary Art)*, no. 2, January 2001, 31.
30. Such examples include: Xu Tan's *Web Advertisement*, Gu Dexin's *2000.11.4: Easy Chair*, and Li Wei's performance at the opening of the Biennale.

— Excerpted from *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 83–97.