

DIS- /CONTINUING TRADITIONS

CONTEMPORARY
VIDEO ART
FROM

CHINA



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The development of an internationally recognised contemporary art within the People's Republic of China since the late 1970sⁱ is broadly characterised by intersections between the legacies of Euro-American post/modernism—including their impact on spaces outside Euro-America, such as China—and China's localised cultural traditions, early twentieth-century modernisms and variations on Soviet socialist realism; the former imputing a general sense of 'contemporaneity' and the latter a certain qualifying 'Chineseness'. Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series (early 1990s-early 2000s), for example, brings together a painterly style akin to that of the American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein with imagery culled from Western corporate capitalism as well as the graphic propaganda of revolutionary China during the 1960s and 1970s. The work of other internationally well-known Chinese contemporary artists, including Ai Weiwei, Yu Youhan, Yang Fudong, Huang Yongping, Xu Bing and Cai Guoqiang can be read in much the same way.

From the standpoint of so-called "Third Space" postmodernismⁱⁱ—prevalent in Western/ised contexts During the 1990s and into the early 2000s—Chinese contemporary art can thus be interpreted as a site of immanent mutually assured deconstruction whose conspicuous hybridising of differing cultural elements suspends not only the rationalising division between tradition and modernity upon which Euro-American artistic modernism is based but also orientalisating conceptions of Western culture as superior to that of China.

Attendant upon the cultural intersections giving definition to Chinese contemporary art is an evolving array of particular variations in artistic thinking and practice, including

in recent years identifiable genres of activist ("activist"), feminist, post-humanist and hyper-virtual artⁱⁱⁱ. Although still readily identifiable as Chinese, if only by default with regard to the national-cultural identities of their contributors, those genres are otherwise increasingly congruent with the cosmopolitanism of contemporary art more generally on the international stage. Exemplary in this regard are recent performance and installation works by Ai Weiwei related to the international refugee crisis, such as *Law of the Journey* (2018): a monumental installation comprising a 70-metre-long inflatable boat packed with 258 faceless figures^{iv}, whose Chineseness is distinctly attenuated compared to earlier works by Ai such as *Forever Bicycles* (2014), with its discernible references to the readymades of Marcel Duchamp—specifically the assemblage *Bicycle Wheel* (1913)—and the visual spectacle of mass bicycle riding in the People's Republic of China during the Maoist revolutionary period.

Although Chinese contemporary art of the late twentieth and the very early years of the twentieth-first century can be understood to accord with the conspicuous hybridity identified by/with Third Space postmodernism, its more recent internationally-facing development has inclined in a number of cases toward a less obviously variegated trans-culturalism resonant with the internationalist outlook of the so-called "social turn" in the arts that has taken place globally since the turn of the twenty-first century.

At the same time, within an increasingly nationalist mainland China artistic tendencies have come to the fore that are strongly assertive of Chinese cultural identity, intentionally or otherwise, in accordance with ruling Chinese Communist Party ideology. The synergy of art with dominant political discourses within China is nothing new. The genre known as *Guo hua* (national painting)—involving the traditional Chinese painterly technique of ink and brush on paper or silk—was named during the early twentieth century as a significant adjunct to anti-imperialist Chinese republicanism. Moreover, since the founding of the communist People's Republic of China in 1949, CCP directives have consistently required artists and other cultural workers to support the strategic aims of the party and its avowed repudiation of Euro-American imperialism. What is different now is the prominence given within mainland China to modes of artistic expression reflective of China's long-standing cultural traditions that were previously suppressed during the time of the Cultural Revolution. Exemplary of which are paintings produced by the artist Pan Gongkai using traditional Chinese techniques that were extended into contemporary digitalised form as

the PRC's official contribution to the 2011 Venice Biennale. These artistic tendencies are accompanied by supportive critical writings, including by the art historians and curators Gao Minglu^v and Wu Hung^{vi}, both of whom have asserted differences in conditionalities and trajectories between the international Westernised art world and that of China.

Crucially, this coming to the fore coincides ideologically with appeals by the CCP, made increasingly since the 1990s, to the traditional Confucian ideal of a harmonious society as a way of offsetting the pervasively destabilising impact of the PRC's prodigious centrally-driven modernisation of the last forty years. It also accompanies the PRC's growing assertiveness on the international stage associated with the term "wolf-warrior diplomacy"^{vii}, as exemplified by arguably neo-colonialist/imperialist excursions into Africa and the South China Sea as well as the country's "One Belt, One Road" policy aimed at constructing a modern land silk route connecting China to Europe.

Viewed in that differentiated light, Chinese contemporary art can be seen to encompass a wide spectrum of expression which, on the one hand, seeks to deconstruct or attenuate and, on the other, heighten cultural differences; a condition congruent with the identification of a wider global state of intensely interconnected and conspicuously factional contemporaneity.

As this exhibition shows, however, there are Chinese contemporary artworks that do not accord neatly with either of those contrasting interpretations but instead bring together disparate cultural elements in ways that play somewhere (and nowhere) between the assertively deterritorialising tendencies of contemporary cosmopolitan-internationalism and a resistant Chinese identitarianism—both arguably idealising/romantic in their outlooks—while also interrupting, in comparably non-rationalist terms, the supposedly pervasive uncertainties of Third Space postmodernism.

Before the beginning of the twentieth century, art within China was produced, shown and received in relation to dominant discourses/practices associated with a Daoist/Buddhist inflected Confucianism. Confucianism is a system of thought and ethical reflection/teaching founded in the sixth century BCE by the intellectual and politician, Confucius/Kong Fuzi (Master Kong) (551-479 BCE) that looks toward the combined principles of a respect for elders/filial piety (*xiao*) and the past as well as humanistic beliefs in the

innate, divinely rooted, morality and perfectability of human beings (*xiu yang*) as the basis for a well-ordered, stable and harmonious society. That system was subject to continual reinterpretation in relation to changing circumstances, including the development of a syncretic neo-Confucianism involving the bringing together of Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian thinking/practice during the late Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). It nevertheless persisted as the dominant discursive foundation for China's dynastic-imperial order up until the founding of republican China in 1912.

Confucian principles and beliefs were embodied historically by the *Shi*, also known as the Literati; an exclusively male class who, until its overthrow, served for well over a thousand years as administrators of the Chinese dynastic-imperial state. Confucianism not only underpinned the *Shi*'s dedication to a stable and harmonious dynastic-imperial order, it also informed the development of what would come to be seen from the seventeenth century onwards both within China and Europe as a specifically Confucian-literati culture. As part of that culture aesthetical feeling was considered integral to the ritual veneration of elders and the past in addition to a related self-cultivating mastery of the arts, principally poetry writing and ink and brush landscape painting, considered indexical of the capacity of the Literati to successfully administer the Chinese dynastic-imperial state^{ix}.

The principles and beliefs of Confucian-literati culture are characterised by an "avoidance of rigid dichotomies" and a "balancing of binary opposites" as well as an "an integration and transcendence of objective representation and emotional expression"; derived in large part from and supported in the context of syncretic Confucianism by non-rationalist Daoist and Buddhist thought. Accordingly, Confucian-literati aesthetics stresses "not objective imitation but rather emotional communication, foregrounding the refined refinement and edification of natural desire." Confucian-literati art cannot, therefore, "be said to be either representational or expressive, in any absolute sense."^{xi}

Confucian-literati culture does not, as a consequence, uphold ideas of a dialectical critical distancing between the aesthetic and society considered crucial to Western post-Enlightenment aesthetic modernity. Informing the intersection of Confucian-literati aesthetics with the governance of the Chinese dynastic-imperial state was an assertion by the Daoist scholar Mencius justifying the overthrow of an emperor whose actions were

unbeneficial to the continuation of a harmonious society. In practice, direct confrontation of power was always difficult within the context of an authoritarian and vengeful Chinese dynastic-imperial state. In accordance with their ethical obligations, the Literati consequently developed more indirect forms of criticism involving literary-artistic allusion, eccentric behaviour and withdrawal. The function of art within the Chinese dynastic-imperial state was thus not only as a supporting adjunct to but also a locus of potentially oblique demurral from standing authority.

Contrary to orientalising Western conceptions, Confucianism is neither static nor monolithic but open to continual, albeit, metaphysically constrained, ethical reflection and reinterpretation. It constitutes a distinct discursive domain incorporating ideas of aestheticised resistance to authority promulgated prior to those of Euro-American post-Enlightenment modernity; albeit in non-rationalist ways that appear conceptually/practically weak from the more rationalising standpoint of the latter.

The present exhibition, ‘Dis-/Continuing Traditions’ showcases contemporary video art from China. Although all of the exhibited works make use of present-day globally prevalent digital-reproductive technologies in addition to disjunctive defamiliarization, collage-montage and assemblage techniques generally characteristic of post/modernist and contemporary art, each can also be interpreted as maintaining significant relationships with China’s distinctive Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian cultural traditions. Included in this are discernible formal reciprocities between absence and presence (*xu-shi*), vital resonances (*qiyun shengdong*) between art, humanity and nature, and oblique departures from established convention (*jianghu* – literally “rivers and lakes”), all of which are characteristic of a syncretic Daoist/Buddhist-inflected Confucian art and aesthetics. Works presented in the exhibition are marked by traces of traditional Chinese artistic thinking and practice while diffracting those traces through their mediation by contemporary technologies in multiple ways.

This bringing together of cultural tradition and contemporary technologies extends an existing strain of innovative artistic practice in modern China given initial impetus by the “composite” photographs of Lang Jingshan (Long Chin-san) (1892-1995)—described as “China’s first photographer” and “the father of Asian photographic art”—that combine lens-based reproduction and collage-montage with the multi-perspectival/temporal

compositional principles of traditional Chinese ink-and-brush painting. It also resonates with a wider modernising East-Asian aesthetic sensibility exemplified by the Japanese Confucian/Zen Buddhist scholar and twentieth-century garden designer, Mirei Shigemori’s (1896-1975) idea of a “timeless modernity”, involving disjunctive reworkings of rather than radical breakings with the past, and the maverick late seventeenth/early eighteenth-century Buddhist-Confucian painter, Shitao’s (1642-1707) upholding of traditional Chinese artistic thinking and practice as having the potential to renew human society and culture.

Informing the present exhibition is a close attention to the significances of artistic techniques and materials. Art’s significances are not confined solely to textual/iconic representations of meaning, they also extend to its material/technical means of production. The *technè*s of disjuncture characteristic of post/modernist and contemporary art, such as the use of collage-montage, readymades, assemblages and mechanical/digital forms of reproduction, can, for example, be understood to effect deconstructions of authoritative meaning through their uncertain traversing of familiar conceptual boundaries, including between art and non-art, tradition and modernity and West and East. In the case of Confucian art and aesthetics, the signature use of ink and brush on paper or silk to produce paintings and calligraphic poetry is considered indexical of wider reciprocities of being signified by a constellation of concepts ultimately related to the Daoist non-rationalist conception of a constitutive cosmological interrelationship between the otherwise opposed states of *yin* and *yang*. In the case of contemporary art intervening with Confucian aesthetics and artistic practices, it therefore becomes necessary to think parallaxically of the culturally loaded high-context meanings of differing techniques and materials as well the significance of their intersections with one another, which may be seen by turns from a Western/ised standpoint as deconstructive and from that of a syncretic, Daoist-Buddhist inflected, Confucianism as a potential means towards harmonising reciprocity.

This particular focus may be seen by some as intellectually dicey. As the historian of Chinese art, Craig Clunas indicates, within Euro-American contexts there is a durable tendency to view Chinese art as “uniquely bound up with the study of its own past, and the reworking of old themes.” Moreover, this view can be understood to buttress a wider orientalising distinction between a supposedly “dynamic” West and “static” East. With regard to which, the very idea of a modern Chinese art is effectively foreclosed, since that art is, as Clunas puts it, seen either as “Chinese”, and therefore ‘traditional’, or ‘modern’

and not ‘really Chinese’^{xvi}. Qualifying Clunas’s assertion, however, is his signal use of the word “uniquely.” As deconstructivist theory/practice shows, the modern is never entirely ‘of the now’. In spite of supposedly definitional assertions to the contrary, Euro-American modernism can be deconstructively revealed as always-already bearing the compound traces of prior cultural discourses as well as giving context to those of discursive formations to come—i.e. postmodernism and contemporaneity. The identification of Chinese contemporary art as a product of the translation-appropriation of Western/ised post/modernism and contemporaneity in relation to Chinese culture is therefore by no means unique but indexical of what can be seen as an intersectional condition immanent to cultural production, albeit one subject to parallaxic interpretation from differing cultural-discursive standpoints.

While Clunas is right to criticise orientalisising distinctions between a supposedly dynamic Western modernity and static Chinese traditionalism, this does not in and of itself foreclose on critical discussions of Chinese contemporary art’s patent commingling of identifiably Western/ised and Chinese cultural elements. Indeed, given the abiding impact of a historically male-dominated Confucianism on Chinese cultures and societies, including within the present-day PRC where neo-Confucian discourses have been invoked to support social harmony in the face of disruptive post-revolutionary modernisation, there is a pressing need to engage critically in such discussions. The works included in this exhibition are significant in their dis-/continuing of Chinese traditions in ways that are resonant but cannot be aligned conclusively with dominant discourses either within or outside the present-day PRC. In doing so, they stake diverse multi-faceted claims to Chinese culture—commensurate with the concept of *jianghu*—beyond any overweening containment or control.

Lynne Howarth-Gladston and Paul Gladston, October 2020

ⁱ The term “Chinese contemporary art” is now used widely to denote contemporary art in and from the mainland of the People’s Republic of China. It is important to differentiate here between the artworlds of the mainland People’s Republic of China, the special administrative region of Hong Kong, and the Republic of China, Taiwan. Hong Kong became part of the PRC after being handed over from British colonial rule in 1997. The RoC, Taiwan, is claimed by the PRC but remains an independent sovereign state. Hong Kong and Taiwan have consequently developed localised contemporary artworlds distinct from that of Mainland China

ⁱⁱ Third Space postmodernism is a variation on more general poststructuralist postmodernist thinking/practice. It posits the idea of signification as a “Third Space” through which meanings are deconstructed as a consequence of their translation from one linguistic-cultural context to another/others. This idea has been extended to that of a Third Space art which is understood to deconstruct the asymmetrical power relations of colonialism-imperialism by hybridising and therefore diffractively translating differing cultural elements. See Bhabha, Homi (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas, Taliesin (2018), ‘Extremes of the Existing Real: Narratives in Contemporary Chinese Art’ (<https://rinoartdistrict.org/do/lecture-taliesin-thomas-extremes-of-the-existing-real-narratives-in-contemporary-chinese-art>; accessed 15 August 2019)

^{iv} Biennale of Sydney (2018), ‘Ai Weiwei’ (<https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/artists/ai-weiwei/>; accessed 21 September 2020)

^v Gao, Minglu (2008), “‘Particular Time, Specific Place, My Truth’: Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art”, in Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 133–64

^{vi} Wu, Hung (2008), ‘A Case of Being “Contemporary”’: Conditions Spheres and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art’, in Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 290–306

^{vii} Zhu, Zhiquan (2020), ‘Interpreting China’s “Wolf-warrior Diplomacy”: what explains the sharper tone to China’s overseas conduct recently?’, *The Diplomat* (<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>; accessed 16 May 2020)

^{viii} See Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press

^{ix} Mullis, Eric C. (2005), ‘Carrying the Jade Tablet: A Consideration of Confucian Artistry’, *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/ca/7523862.0003.013/-/carrying-the-jade-tablet-a-consideration-of-confucian?rgn=main;view=fulltext>; accessed 28 April 2020)

^x Jiang, Cheng and Cai, Zong-Qi (2018) ‘Aesthetics’, *Oxford Bibliographies* (<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0160.xml>; accessed 26 April 2020)

^{xi} Jiang and Cai, ‘Aesthetics’

^{xii} Photography of China, ‘Lang Jingshan’ (<https://photographyofchina.com/blog/lang-jingshan->; accessed 20 May 2020)

^{xiii} Mansfield, Stephen (2014), ‘Mirei Shigemori: at home with stone’, *Japan Times* (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2014/11/29/travel/mirei-shigemori-home-stone/>; accessed 20 May 2019)

^{xiv} As cited in Yee, Craig (2017), ‘Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction’, *Randian-online* (http://www.randian-online.com/np_blog/the-classical-origins-of-contemporary-abstraction/; accessed 20 July 2017)

^{xv} Clunas, Craig (1999), ‘What about Chinese Art?’, in King, Catherine ed., *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 134–135

^{xvi} Clunas, ‘What about Chinese Art?’, 135

^{xvii} Clunas, ‘What about Chinese Art?’, 135



Birdhead (Ji Weiyu and Song Tao), *The Light of Eternity* (2013), single-channel colour video with sound 6'25". Video still courtesy of the artists and ShanghArt.

Birdhead (Ji Weiyu and Song Tao)

The Light of Eternity (2013), single-channel colour video with sound 6'25"

The Light of Eternity was made at the invitation of a film festival in the United States. All of the photographs shown in the video were taken for the picture album *The Light of Eternity* (2012). The photographs represent places where Birdhead lived and travelled between 2010 and 2012. In addition to representing the contemporary world, the video also references aspects of China's cultural past, including traditional ink and brush calligraphy and paintings of the natural world. Many of the photographs included in the video depict Shanghai, where Birdhead live and work and whose cityscapes comprise architectural layers from the city's colonial and revolutionary past as well as its futuristic present. Accompanying the video is a contemporary music soundtrack by the composer Liu Xing using traditional Chinese instrumentation and stylisations. The video's combination of sound and vision projects an assemblage of past-present-future tenses in which the historical, the everyday, the futuristic and the eternal continually intersect and impact upon one another¹. The video's title invites us to meditate (perhaps ironically), in accordance with Buddhist practice, on the contingencies of the present in light of the illimitable.

Video stills courtesy of the artists and ShanghArt.



Chen Hangfeng

A-Tong's Ancestral Home (2018-2020), single-channel colour video with sound and Chinese and English subtitles 19'50"

A-Tong's Ancestral Home uses a combination of documentary film and animation to bring together two intersecting narratives: one comparing contemporary scenes in China's Fujian region with photographs of the same locations by the pioneering Scottish photographer, John Thomson taken during the nineteenth century; and another, showing the exploration by torchlight of an abandoned traditional family house in a village alongside the Min River in Fujian. Accompanying the latter is a voice-over by a young villager passing on stories of his family's time as occupiers of the house as well as folk tales and legends handed down to him by family members and other villagers. The intersection of these narratives indicates the immense material changes that have taken place since the nineteenth century in a once extremely remote Fujian as the result of China's modernisation. It also shows how that modernisation continues to be marked by fragmentally remembered traces of China's recent and distant past.

Video stills courtesy of the artist





Liang Yue, *Giant Fur* (2019), single-channel colour video, without sound, 4'46". Video still courtesy of the artist and ShanghArt.

Liang Yue

Giant Fur (2019), single-channel colour video, without sound, 4'46"

Video #20150415 (2015), single-channel colour video, without sound, 7'27"

Moon (2012), Single-channel colour video, without sound, 20'00"

Giant Fur, *Video #20150415* and *Moon* can be interpreted as contemporary variations on artistic depictions of nature made with respect to literati-Confucian aesthetics as part of traditional Chinese culture. In the view of literati-Confucian aesthetics, artists should seek to develop and express an empathetic vital-energy resonance (*qiyun shengdong*)^{iv} connecting themselves with nature in accordance with the Daoist idea of a spontaneous foundational reciprocity between differing states of being (yin-yang). That resonance is also understood to extend to relationships between artists, their artworks the viewers of artworks and nature, constituting what might be described as a virtuous relay connecting all of those elements together in a potentially harmonious way. In the context of present-day climate change, such relationships between humanity and nature are of continuing and intensified ethical importance. Liang's nature videos are also open to interpretation with respect to the literati-Confucian idea of *xu-shi* (empty-full)^v which conceives of apparent absence as a site of illimitable meaning/feeling. The single-shot videos by Liang included in the exhibition record slowly or almost imperceptibly changing phenomena in nature that invite meditation on wider significances and feelings. In Chinese culture the roundness of the moon symbolises peace, prosperity and family reunion. The lunar surface photographed in *Moon* through the intervening shimmer of the earth's atmosphere is partially illuminated somewhere between its full and new (empty) phases.

"The video works produced by me included in the exhibition involve moving photographs of a distant moon, a large area of yellow grass, and a jet plane crossing the sky leaving behind a vapour trail at an angle to the sun and a passing cloud whose length increases like a digital scale.

Shooting natural objects accounts for a large proportion of my work. But it's difficult for me to find a clear reason why, other than I couldn't help but look at them. I just happened to see what

I had to record. I looked at the world through the lens, as if seeing myself; at that moment there was an inexplicable sense of intimacy, calm and joyfulness.

Giant Fur records a large expanse of yellow grass at the top of an island. When I stood there, I felt that the island was a huge breathing creature, so I felt that I had to take a picture of this mysterious breathing [speeding up the video reveals beyond the apparent stillness of its subject an optical unconscious of continual movement]. When I was shooting, I almost held my own breath. The shooting experience was very exciting. I felt that I was standing on the back of a huge animal, and I secretly shot it while it was sleeping...

I think everything captured by #20150415 is a gift. Sometimes I turn on the camera and stay in my imagination, waiting for something to happen or whatever, then suddenly this imagination that actually happened is #20150415, and it's very beautiful. I remember that my reaction at the time was probably like a fool with my mouth open, and then ecstatic but silent and afraid to speak, for fear that it would be alarmed by this quietly coming glory [as the video progresses it also records the turning of the earth relative to the sun and objects in the sky].



The shooting of Moon was a coincidence. My digital camera happened to fit on the mount of a super-large telephoto telescope protruding from the roof. The camera recorded the eternal twenty minutes belonging to that moment, slightly shaking. The moonlight penetrates the earth's atmosphere.

I think it

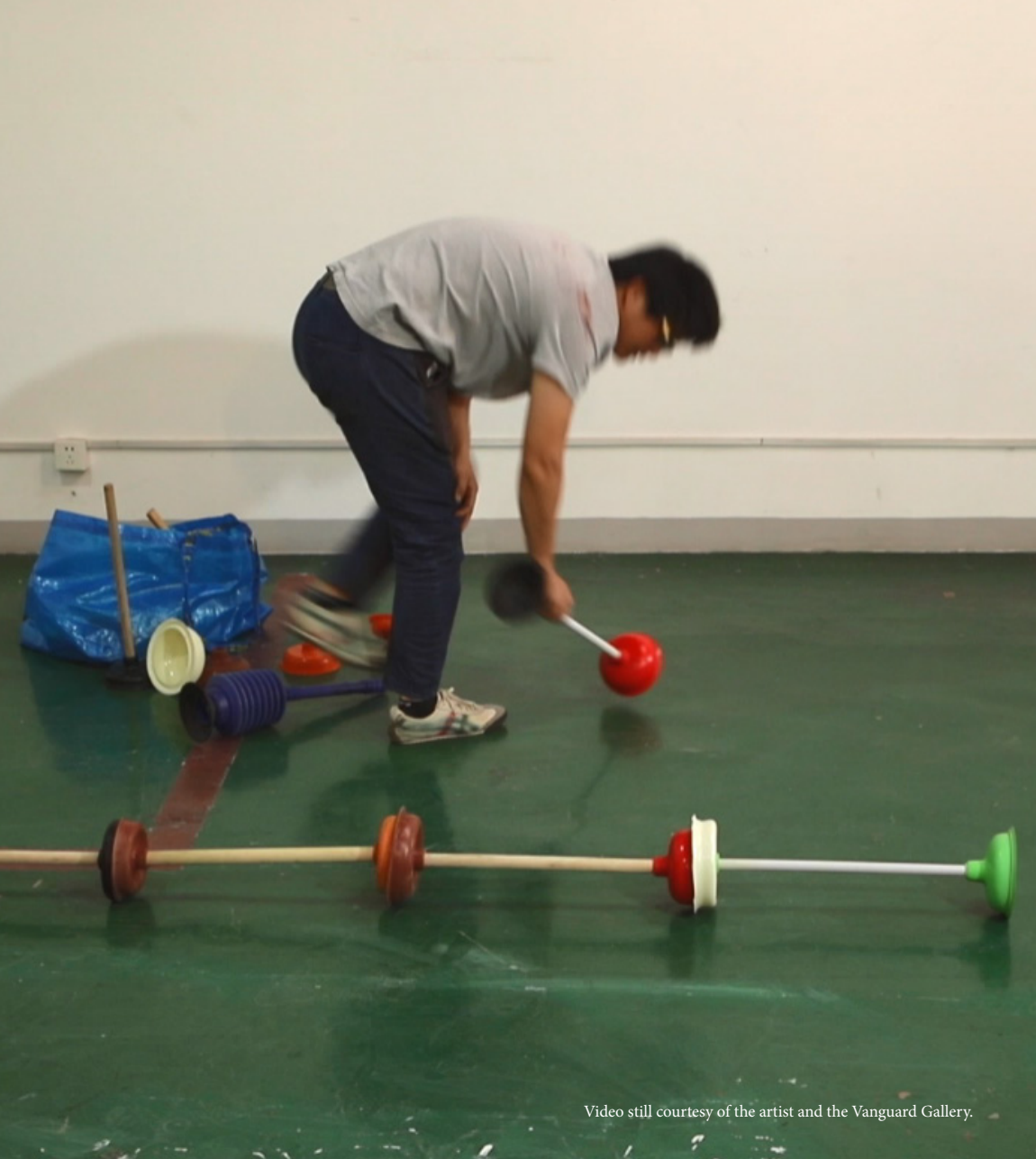
is a breathing light and shadow. When I look at it, I think it's a pure stare, very peaceful and beautiful..."

Liang Yue, 2020 , curators comments in square brackets

Video still courtesy of the artist and ShanghArt.



Liang Yue, *Video #20150415* (2015), single-channel colour video, without sound, 7'27". Video stills courtesy of the artist and ShanghArt.



Video still courtesy of the artist and the Vanguard Gallery.

Liao Fei

A Transitory Vacuum Sculpture (2015), single-channel colour video with sound, 9'44"

A Transitory Vacuum Sculpture shows the making of an impromptu assemblage of suction tools commonly used to unblock sinks and drains whose inherent instability when connected together resists its maker's efforts toward settled completion. As such, the sculpture can be interpreted as indexical of a constellation of ideas associated with traditional Chinese Daoist thinking and practice. Daoist thinking and practice is characterised by a view that conceives of the cosmos as being constituted by myriad interrelationships underpinned by a reciprocity between the mutually dependent, but otherwise opposed foundational states of *yin* and *yang*. It also views those interrelationships as moving cyclically between a spontaneously achieved state of harmonious reciprocation, overreaching human intervention and dissonant disintegration. The work is also informed by Liao Fei's close attention to the rationalising tendencies of Western philosophy and mathematics.

"The artist's interest in thinking is more like the role of a mathematician: his creation tends to toward a searching out of the logic behind things, and to practice that logic. Throughout Liao Fei's creative process, the most exquisite place always lies in his translation of the balance of mathematical equations into visual language. Through this low-level, almost merely verbal expression, his work allows us to experience the presence of mathematics, logic, and abstract things. However, what Liao Fei really wants to point out is the question of the existence of things: how is the logic of things created? Just like language cannot describe the things behind the grammar, we cannot specifically refer to the opportunities that created us and the logic upon which things operate. In other words, people are not able to grasp a drive. We can use a complete way to understand the so-called 'system' of things, how it occurs and how it stops.

Liao Fei's creations are often based on his greatest efforts to show that these systems are not permanent. Although the things under the system seem to be stable in operation, metaphysically, the truth provided by each system is only temporary and locally contingent. 'This sentence is wrong' can be said to be Liao Fei's footnote to his own creation. This means that one person attempts to use words to express against the logic of the language itself: the components in the system want to see the boundaries of the entire system."

Vanguard Gallery, 2015^{vii}

Tan Lijie

Hausmann in the Tropics (2017-2020), single-channel HD colour video with sound and Chinese and English subtitles 31'50"

Hausmann in the Tropics presents an artistic meditation on the reality of growing social divisions in contemporary China interspersed with highly aestheticised depictions of urban landscapes and imagined para-normalities redolent of China's Buddhist and animistic traditions. The fantastical half human-half animal creatures that appear in the video intentionally represent supernatural spirits imagined by the people who lived in/visit the abandoned house depicted in the video.

"Eszter's uncle and aunt live in a luxurious residential area far from the city. Eszter comes to their home on vacation. As a new comer, she felt so excited. But she was soon bored and depressed by the uneventful life there, looking out of the window, day after day, at the same beautiful surroundings. She finds a deserted villa nearby abandoned by its wealthy owner after he went bankrupt. On the top floor of the villa she finds a large and exquisite room for the Buddha. For a long time, no one came to worship there. Eszter is very confused about what exactly life is here..."

The video is a glimpse of a specific class in China, a microcosm of the real environment—a developing section of the city. Nowadays young people in China can hardly afford to buy a house without the financial assistance of their parents. At the same time, there are a large number of vacant, supposedly 'scarce', mansions. Weeds become the most active organisms in the vacant rooms, but the architecture itself does not decay. How does the unequal environment of human existence affect human beings?

The name of the film comes from the title of the sixth chapter of the book Planet of Slums by Mike Davis^{viii}, an American urban theorist."

Tan Lijie, 2020 ^{xi}

Video still courtesy of the artist.





Tan Lijie, *Hausmann in the Tropics* (2017-2020), single-channel HD colour video with sound and Chinese and English subtitles 31'50". Video still courtesy of the artist.

Xiao Lu

Yi (One) (2015), performance, single-channel colour video with sound, 3'11"

Yi (One) is a video recording of a performance by Xiao Lu staged at the Valand Academy of Fine Art, Gothenburg, Sweden on 5 September 2015. The performance, curated by Jonas Stampe, involved the use of handmade Xuan paper, water and ink traditional to Chinese literati-Confucian painting. During the performance Xiao pours ink and water over herself while standing on sheets of Xuan paper wearing a white shirt and skirt. As such, Xiao's performance can be interpreted as an embodied female intervention into China's historically male-dominated literati-Confucian artistic traditions. As part of those traditions, ink and brush are considered assertive and water and paper as receptive in respective accordance with the Daoist principles of *yin*, that which is masculine, positive and turns toward the light, and *yang*, that which is feminine, negative and turns away from the light. Xiao's positioning of her body between ink and paper as an active pourer and passive receiver obliquely disrupts the gendered asymmetry of that traditional order while maintaining the continuity of its basic materials and precepts. Xiao has stated in relation to this performance that "Ink is *Yin*, water is *Yang*, *Yin* and *Yang* becoming One is the Way of the Universe."^x Xiao's traditionally supposed absence from literati-Confucian culture invites meditation on its wider significances in the past, present and future.^{xi}

Video still courtesy of the artist.



Ye Linghan

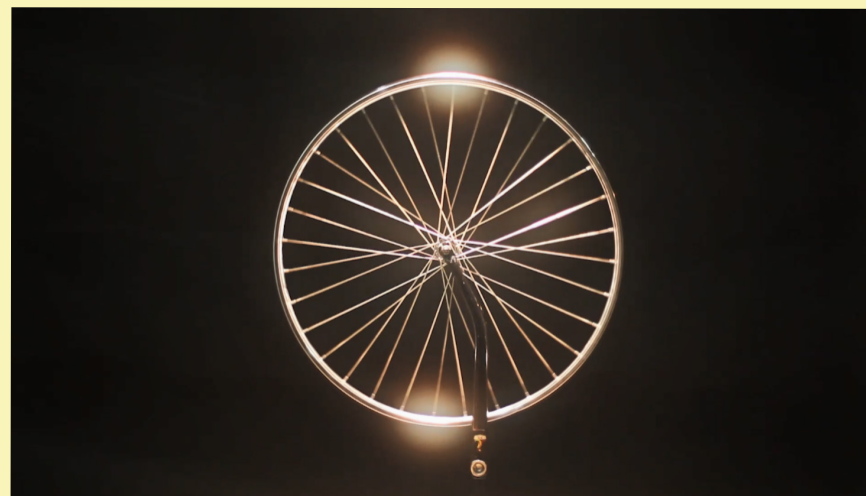
The Way Things Were (2015), single-channel colour video with sound, 1'17"

The Way Things Were shows a spinning bicycle wheel brightly illuminated against a stark black background. The bicycle wheel is not only redolent of Marcel Duchamp's assemblage *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) but also the traditional upholding of a wheel within Chinese culture as an analogy of Daoism's central principle, *the Dao* (the Way): the underlying principle or way of the universe involving a paradoxically dynamic and non-changing reciprocity between *yin* and *yang* that humanity is encouraged to follow spontaneously in ethical accordance with nature.

"That the Dao is depicted as a wheel, as the wheel of a cart, shows right away that the Dao is not static, that it is not something that eternally stands still, but rather something that moves – even though it does not change its shape. The wheel is not merely a thing, it is a kind of event, it is rotation and motion. The wheel is a running, it is a "pro-ceeding," a "pro-cess" (i.e., literally a "going forwards")."^{xii}

Rotation and Chrysler (2013), single-channel black and white video animation with sound, 27'13"

Rotation and Chrysler makes no immediately obvious references to Chinese culture, modern or traditional. Its sequential presentation of rotating animations depicting a drill bit, a spiral spring, a kitchen knife, a non-descript tower-like structure, an auger and New York's iconic Chrysler building are sequentially resonant but without any obvious cultural connotations beyond those of a certain 'Europeanness' attached to the graphically realistic style adopted throughout by the artist. Feelings evoked by the video's combination of starkly monumental imagery with a 'gothic' ambient soundtrack are perhaps more telling. From the standpoint of the Euro-American philosophical tradition, those feelings—which suggest an undefined and impending threat—are open to interpretation as a variation on the eighteenth-century Burckian sublime: the idea that greatness and the uncanny instil overwhelming feelings of pain/terror in contrast to the pleasure derived from beauty .



Video still courtesy of the artist and the Vanguard Gallery.

Traditionally within Chinese culture, comparable feelings are described by the Confucian idea of *da* (vastness or magnificence). In the *Analects*, the term *da* is used by Confucius to praise the Emperor Yao whose greatness he considers to be a source of both awe and moral supplication to power.^{xiii}

Rotation and Chrysler projects such feelings as accompaniments to the 'sublime' vastness and overwhelming menace/magnificence (dreadfulness) of the contemporary global capitalist spectacle.

"The Chrysler Building, which is the landmark of New York City as well as the representative of decorative art buildings, has its close-up shots in countless Hollywood blockbusters. The spire of the building, just like the ends of money and desire that make it a modern totem, is both mesmerizing and dreadful".

Vanguard Gallery, 2015^{xiv}

¹Based on a statement provided by the artists to the curators by e-mail, 27 August 2020

ⁱⁱBased on passages included in Chen, Hangfeng (2019), *Chen Hangfeng's Portfolio (Selected) 2006-2019*, self-published. Provided by the artist to the curators by e-mail, 5 September 2019

ⁱⁱⁱThe Chinese calendar is traditionally lunar. Contemplation of the moon is a recurring subject in Chinese painting and literature. In Chinese mythology the goddess Chang'e finds herself stranded on the moon after drinking an immortality potion. The Chinese lunar or mid-Autumn festival is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth month each year.

^{iv}See Yee, Craig (2017), 'Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction', *Randian*-online (http://www.randian-online.com/np_blog/the-classical-origins-of-contemporary-abstraction/; first accessed 20 July 2017)

^vKuo, Jason C. (2016), 'Emptiness-Substance: Xushi', in Powers, Martin J. and Tsiang, Katherine R. eds., *A Companion to Chinese Art*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 329–48

^{vi}From a statement provided by the artist to the curators by e-mail, 25 August 2020

^{vii}Li, Lise ed. (2015), *A Transitory Vacuum Sculpture*, Shanghai: Vanguard Gallery

^{viii}Davies, Mike (2006), *Planet of Slums*, London: Verso

^{ix}From a statement provided by the artist to the curators by e-mail, 24 August 2020

^xLu, Xiao (2018), *Xiao Lu*, self-published. Provided by the artist to the curators by e-mail 23 September 2019

^{xi}See Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston (2019), 'Beyond Dialogue: Interpreting Recent Performances by Xiao Lu', *di'van: a Journal of Accounts* 6, 194-211

^{xii}Moeller Hans-Georg (2006), *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory*, Chicago and La Salle Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 27. Also, see Internal Arts International (2012), 'The Analogy of the Wheel in Daoism and Ba Gua Zhang' (<https://www.internalartsinternational.com/free/the-analogy-of-the-wheel-in-daoism-and-ba-gua-zhang/>; accessed 10 October 2020)

^{xiii}Liu, Yuanyuan (2006), 'Kongzi de "da" he "zhunagmei" yu xifang "chonggao" meixue de yitong' (The Differences and Similarities between Confucian 'Giant' and 'Magnificence' and the Western 'Sublime'), *Lilun jianshe* (Theory Research), ix, 69–70

^{xiv}Li, Lise ed. (2015), *Ye Linghan*, Shanghai: Vanguard Gallery, 24

Ye Linghan, *Rotation and Chrysler* (2013), single-channel black and white video animation with sound, 27'13". Video still courtesy of the artist and the Vanguard Gallery.



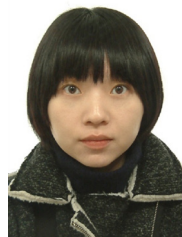
About the Artists



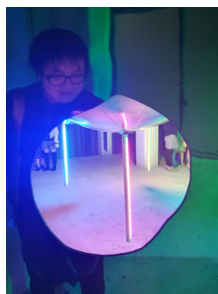
Birdhead (Ji Weiyu b.1979 and Song Tao b.1977) are photographers, assemblers, video makers and installation artists based in Shanghai, China. Song and Ji both graduated from the Shanghai Arts and Crafts School (2000). They started to work together as Birdhead in 2004. They have exhibited in China and internationally including in the solo exhibitions: “Welcome to Birdhead World Again – Tokyo 2019”, Kudan House, Tokyo (2019); “Welcome to Birdhead World Again – Vienna 2018”, Schiffamtsgasse 11, Vienna (2018); “Birdhead Solo Exhibition”, Yifeng Galleria (Bottega Veneta), Shanghai (2014); “Welcome to Birdhead World Again – London 2019”, Paradise Row gallery, London (2012); “Birdhead: New Village”, EX3 Centro per l’arte Contemporanea Firenze, Florence (2011); “Birdhead: Ji Weiyu and Song Tao”, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester (2009); and “Welcome to Birdhead World 2004-2005” ShanghArt H-Space, Shanghai (2005). They were nominated for the first Hugo Boss Art Award (2013).



Chen Hangfeng (b.1974) is a multi-media artist based in Shanghai, China and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He graduated with a BA in Painting from the Fine Arts College, Shanghai University (1997). His work has been exhibited in China and internationally including at: the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai; the Today Art Museum, Beijing; the Palace de Tokyo, Paris; the Collective Gallery, Edinburgh; the Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester; the Casino Luxembourg – Forum d’art contemporain (2009), Luxembourg; the Cable Gallery, Helsinki; and the White Rabbit Museum, Sydney. He has received numerous grants and residencies including from: the Arts Council of England - Visiting Artist, and the Asia-Europe Foundation (both 2009); and the Arts Council of England (2008). Work by the artist is included in the University of Salford Art Collection.



Liang Yue (b.1979) is a photography and video artist based in Toronto, Canada. She graduated with a BA from the Shanghai Art Academy (2001). She has shown her work in China and internationally, including. In the exhibitions: “New Art History, 2000-2018 Chinese Contemporary Art”, MOCA Yinchuan, Yinchuan (2019); “Chinese Contemporary Selected Videos”, Cinema Dynamo, Centre D’Art Contemporain Geneve, Switzerland (2018); “The 7th edition Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture”, Shenzhen (2017); “Intermittent”, ShanghART Beijing, Beijing (2016); “Easy Going”, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen (2014); “Liang Yue: The Quiet Rooms”, ShanghART H-Space, Shanghai (2013); “A Lecture Upon the Shadow”, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, U.K. (2012); “Numerous, Liang Yue’s Solo Exhibition”, Shanghai, and “Move on Asia, the End of Video Art”, Casa Asia-Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain (both 2011); “Shanghai Candid: Women In Motion”, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, U.S.A.(2010); “China Power Station - Part IV”, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Torino, Italy (2010); and “Shanghai Kino, Shanghai Kino”, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland (2009). She was awarded the Rote Fabrik Residency, Zurich, Switzerland (2015). Work by the artist is included in the collections of: Dr. Michael I. Jacobs, U.S.A.; Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, Norway; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (MUHKA), Belgium; and the Guy & Myriam Ullens Foundation, Switzerland.



Liao Fei (b.1981) is a multi-media artist based in Shanghai. He graduated with a BA from Shanghai Normal University (2006). He has exhibited in China and internationally including in the solo exhibitions: “*Res Extensa*”, Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai (2018); “Plain”, Shanghai Museum of Glass, Shanghai, “Perspective”, Yve Yang Gallery, Boston and “The Equator”, Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai (all 2016); “Liao Fei: This Sentence Is False”, PIFO Gallery, Beijing (2015); and “Surface Material Motion”, Vanguard Gallery (2013).



Tan Lijie (b.1991) is a multi-media artist based in Shenzhen, China. She graduated from the School of Intermedia Art, China Academy of Art, Hangzhou with a BA (2014) and an MFA (2016). She was also a post-graduate exchange student at Kingston University, UK (2015). Her work has been exhibited in China and internationally, including in the group exhibitions: “Freeland around the Second Line - Shenzhen Contemporary Art in 2019”, Hive Centre for Contemporary Art, Shenzhen (2019); “Reciprocal Enlightenment”, Central Academy of Fine Art Museum, Beijing and “The Unusual West Lake”, The First Art Scene of West Lake Photo Exhibition, Hangzhou (both 2017); “New China/New Art: contemporary video from Shanghai and Hangzhou”, Djanogly

Gallery, University Nottingham, UK (2015); and the Austria Electronic Arts Festival, Linz (2012). Works by the artist are in the collections of the White Rabbit Art Museum, Sydney and the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou.



Xiao Lu (b.1962) is a multi-media artist, poet and author based in Beijing. She is internationally recognised as a seminal figure in the development of Chinese contemporary art for her performance work *Dialogue/The Gunshot Event* (1989), which has become a significant focus for debates about the status of women's art in contemporary China.. She graduated with a BA from the Oil Painting Department of the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Art, now the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou (1988). She was resident in Australia from 1989 before returning to China in 1997. Since 2003 she has produced a series of sometimes highly

provocative performances, installations and videos, including *Sperm* (2006), an artistic document of the artist's search for a sperm donor after splitting with her long-time partner. She has exhibited in China and internationally, including in the solo exhibitions: “Impossible Dialogue”, 4A Centre Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, Australia (2019); “Studio Project: COIL”, Skew House, Beijing (2018); “Xiao Lu”, Skovde Art Museum, Skovde (2017); “Money Laundry → Anti-Money Laundry”, Hosane Space, Shanghai (2016); and “Open Fire”, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York (2006).



Ye Linghan (b 1985) is a video artist, animator and painter. He attended the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou where he studied mural painting and drawing, graduating in 2009. His work has been exhibited in the UK, Hong Kong and China, including in the solo exhibitions “Ye Linghan, Lucy III: Replication, Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai (2018) and “Ye Linghan, Gold-Circle-Tiger”, Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong (2014) and the group exhibitions, “The Process of Art: Tools at Work”, Power Station of Art, Shanghai (2019); and “Blackboard”, ShanghArt, Shanghai (2009). Ye has also exhibited at the Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai; the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Shanghai; and the Today Art Museum, Beijing.

About the Curators

Lynne Howarth-Gladston is an artist, curator and independent scholar. She graduated with a PhD in Critical Theory from the University of Nottingham (2012) and has published numerous essays and reviews on Chinese contemporary art. Lynne has exhibited her painting internationally, including in China, the UK and Australia, and was co-curator, with Paul Gladston, of the exhibition *New China/New Art - Contemporary Video from Shanghai and Hangzhou*, staged at the Djanogly Gallery, University of Nottingham (2015). She was also an expert contributor to the BBC4 documentary, *Kew's Forgotten Queen: The Life of Marianne North* (2016).

Paul Gladston is the inaugural Judith Neilson Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. He has written extensively on Chinese contemporary art and aesthetics with regard to the concerns of critical theory. His book-length publications include *Contemporary Chinese art: a critical history* (2014), awarded “best publication” at the Art Awards China (2015), and *Contemporary Chinese art, aesthetic modernity and Zhang Peili: towards a critical contemporaneity* (2019), which has been described as “a landmark work both in terms of cultural-criticism and art-historical analysis.” Paul was an academic adviser to the critically acclaimed exhibition ‘Art of Change: New Directions from China,’ Hayward Gallery-South Bank Centre, London (2012).

Acknowledgements

The curators would like to thank all of the artists whose work is included in this exhibition as well as Lise Li and Bobby Xun at the Vanguard Gallery, Shanghai and Lorenz Helbling, Jeanine Zhan and Lydia Li at ShanghArt for their enduring support in making it happen. They would also like to thank Joe Bugden, Ainslie Macaulay and their colleagues at the Salamanca Arts Centre for staging the exhibition and Nicole Robson for her work as the exhibition's graphic designer and on-the-ground assistant.



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