post NOTES ON MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART AROUND THE GLOBE

“Everyone Has the Right to Refuse to be an Artist”: A Dialogue with Wu Shanzhuan

By Yu-Chieh Li, Wu Shanzhuan 吳山專 Posted on March 17, 2015

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The philosophy of Karl Popper, Dadaism, and the visual codes of China’s Cultural Revolution converge in Wu Shanzhuan’s abstruse conceptual work, a poetic anomaly that well represents the spirit of the experimental art circle in China in the 1980s. Wu developed his set of theories about readymades based on his reading in the 1980s of Karl Popper’s theory about World 3. The title of this interview is quoted from Wu’s critique of Joseph Beuys’s statement “Everyone is an artist,” which he believes to be an undemocratic precept. In this conversation, Wu emphasizes the importance of the right of refusal; “everyone” should have the freedom to participate or not participate in art, so that “everyone” does not merely become an instrument of Beuys’s artistic statement.

After executing a series of performance pieces engaging institutional critique, including several installation works done in collaboration with a small group of fellow experimental artists, Wu moved to Reykjavík and Hamburg in 1991, where he continued his text-based and ephemeral work, and became one of China’s many prominent “artists in exile.” Over the years, he has participated in international exhibitions and represented “China” overseas, including at the Venice Biennale in 1993. Today Wu lives and works in Shanghai, Hamburg,

and Reykjavík, and his trajectory since the 1990s parallels that of many Chinese experimental artists of the post–Cultural Revolution generation.

This interview was conducted by Yu-Chieh Li, Andrew W. Mellon C-MAP Fellow, and took place on June 30, 2014, in Shanghai.

Shanghai, June 30, 2014

Interview conducted and edited by Yu-Chieh Li

Transcription and translation by Lina Dann

Read the Chinese version here.

Exhibitions Overseas in 1993— *Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank*

Li: You exhibited works in Hamburg as early as 1988. How did that come about?

Wu: I graduated from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1986, and afterward I returned to my hometown in the Putuo District of the Zhoushan Islands. In 1984 my alma mater started a foreign exchange program, mainly with Minnesota, and occasionally with certain institutions in Europe. In 1987 K. P. Brehmer, a capitalist realist artist from Germany, was invited to our school to give a lecture on the history of Western art. Professor Fan Xiaomei called me in Zhoushan and said, “We’ve got someone from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts who’s interested in your work.” So I packed up some slides and traveled from Zhoushan to Hangzhou, where I met Brehmer. He said he could include my work in an exhibition, and he actually did.

Li: So you didn’t personally oversee the installation?

Wu: No. It was a three-person show at the Galerie Vorsetzen in the red-light district of Hamburg. Brehmer was one of the partners in the gallery, which is why he had so much say in introducing Chinese art. At the time there was already constant communication between China and Germany, not only in the political sphere but also among galleries

holding exhibitions of Chinese art. That is how I became one of the artists in Brehmer's show *Gao Zicheng–Wu Shanzhuan–Schröder: 3 x China*.

Li: What works did you display?

Wu: I don't know how they were presented, but Brehmer selected five or six slides and took them back to Germany. I suppose that my works were presented in printed form.

Li: You took part in many exhibitions in 1993, including major group shows like *China's New Art, Post-1989* in Hong Kong, *China Avant-Garde* in Berlin, and *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University.

Wu: Yes, contemporary Chinese art was really popular at the time. It seemed as if every European country was doing something with it—Denmark, the U.K., Germany—as well as the Wexner Center in the U.S. But none of these venues was a mainstream museum, which I find interesting.

Li: You took part in so many exhibitions in one year, all of them in different places. In a way you were a representative of contemporary Chinese art. Did you find that each institution presented its story differently?

Wu: Their main goal was to create a package. The artists involved were well aware that each of us was only one piece of the whole package, that we made up a collection. All the shows told me the same story [about Chinese artists]. As to why the number of participating artists differed in each case—there might have been shortfalls in funding or it might have been hard for the artists to obtain visas.

Li: Which of the shows did you attend?

Wu: I went to Venice, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United States.

Li: This was your first time at the Venice Biennale. What was it like?

Wu: I felt less like a piece in a puzzle [than he had in the other shows mentioned above]. I was part of the Aperto. At the 1993 Venice

Biennale, works by Chinese artists were included in two sections: *Passage to the Orient*, organized by Achille Bonito Oliva [in association with Francesca Dal Lago], and the Aperto [reserved for younger and lesser-known artists]. Kong Chang'an1 was one of about ten curators appointed to choose works for the Aperto, and Bonito Oliva selected artists with them. Kong Chang'an recommended three artists, then Bonito Oliva made his calls. Among the Chinese artists, they chose Wang Youshen, me, and Lee Ming-Sheng, from Taiwan.

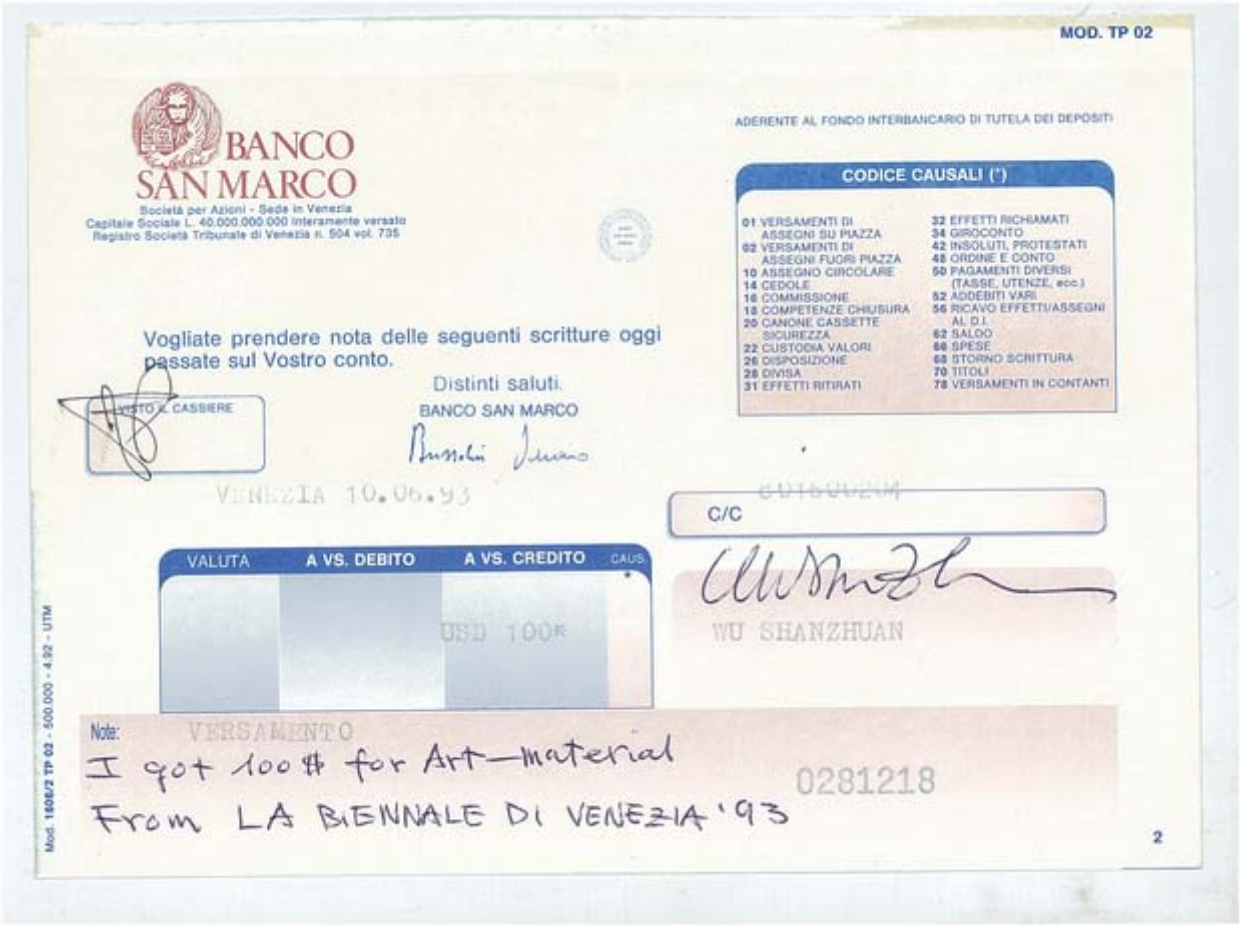
Li: So Kong Chang'an brought in the three of you?

Wu: Yes, that's why I said it was a completely different project from *Passage to the Orient*. Bonito Oliva had the attitude of someone working for an NGO; his open-mindedness was admirable. My *Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank* was chosen for the Aperto. The courier who came to pick up the piece from me said, "We're here in Hamburg to pick up an artwork titled *Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank*." He thought it was a concrete piece of art when, in fact, I had just deposited the funds given to me by the Biennale into the bank.

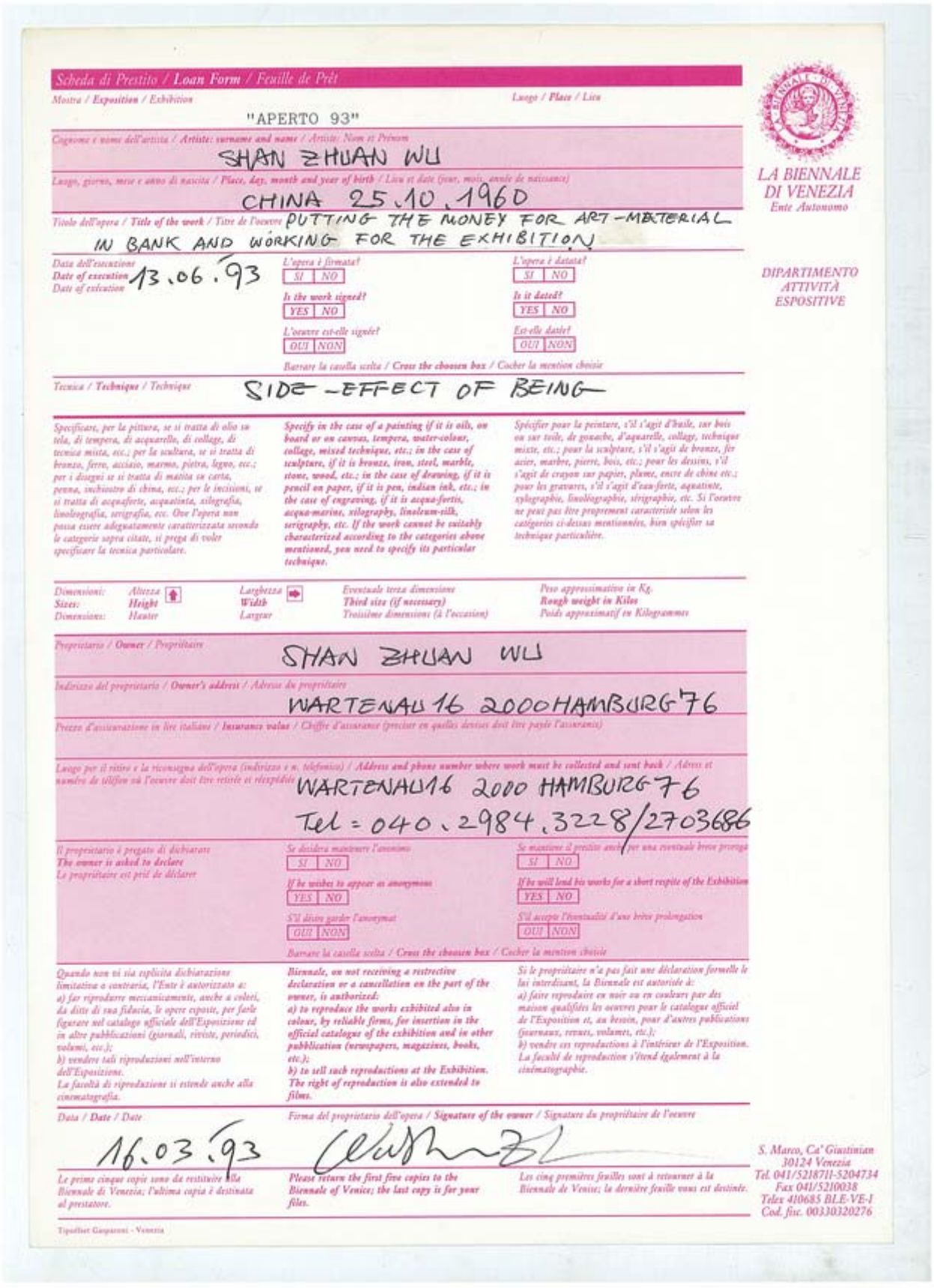
Li: And they really came to pick it up?

Wu: Well, the transport company had nothing to do with the Biennale committee. The art transporters were simply notified that they were to collect a piece in Hamburg titled*Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank*. In fact, it was just an artwork trying to illustrate the relationship between artists and society. That is, here I am, accepting an invitation to present an artwork, and I receive the money to cover the work's material costs, but instead I decide to put the money in the bank and rip up the deposit slip. In 1993 it was quite a successful piece: as the artist behind it, I was under no obligation [to produce a concrete object], and yet the execution of the piece as a performance was thorough. It's kind of like Duchamp, who also rid himself of obligations [to produce art in the traditional sense]. A while later I heard that someone else had done an identical piece at Documenta 12, another *Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank*. Several people told me about it. The work I did for Venice was the second in a series of three works I executed that year. The first entailed renting out the

exhibition venue where I was scheduled to have a show; the second was to deposit the funds for art materials in a bank; and the third was to work for money on site at the exhibition. You can see from these three pieces how financial survival is an important issue for artists, and how this financial challenge is so strong that it can become the subject of an artwork. When I look back today, I'm still glad that I executed these three pieces in 1993.



Wu Shanzhuan's receipt for the $100 production fee, paid by la Biennale di Venezia in 1993. Photo courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive



Scheda di Prestito / Loan Form / Feuille de Prêt

Mostra / Exposition / Exhibition: "APERTO 93"

Luogo / Place / Lieu: LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA Ente Autonomo

Cognome e nome dell'artista / Artiste: surname and name / Artiste: Nom et Prénom: SHAN ZHUAN WU

Luogo, giorno, mese e anno di nascita / Place, day, month and year of birth / Lieu et date (jour, mois, année de naissance): CHINA 25.10.1960

Titolo dell'opera / Title of the work / Titre de l'oeuvre: PUTTING THE MONEY FOR ART-MATERIAL IN BANK AND WORKING FOR THE EXHIBITION

Data dell'esecuzione / Date of execution / Date of exécution: 13.06.93

L'opera è firmata? / Is the work signed? / L'oeuvre est-elle signée? SI / NO — YES / NO — OUI / NON

L'opera è datata? / Is it dated? / Est-elle datée? SI / NO — YES / NO — OUI / NON

Barrare la casella scelta / Cross the chosen box / Cocher la mention choisie

Tecnica / Technique / Technique: SIDE-EFFECT OF BEING

Specificare, per la pittura, se si tratta di olio su tela, di tempera, di acquarello, di collage, di tecnica mista, ecc.; per la scultura, se si tratta di bronzo, ferro, acciaio, marmo, pietra, legno, ecc.; per i disegni se si tratta di matita su carta, penna, inchiostro di china, ecc.; per le incisioni, se si tratta di acquaforte, acquatinta, xilografia, linoleografia, serigrafia, ecc. Ove l'opera non possa essere adeguatamente caratterizzata secondo le categorie sopra citate, si prega di voler specificare la tecnica particolare.

Specify in the case of a painting if it is oils, on board or on canvas, tempera, water-colour, collage, mixed technique, etc.; in the case of sculpture, if it is bronze, iron, steel, marble, stone, wood, etc.; in the case of drawing, if it is pencil on paper, if it is pen, indian ink, etc.; in the case of engraving, if it is acqua-fortis, acqua-marine, xilography, linoleum-silk, serigraphy, etc. If the work cannot be suitably characterized according to the categories above mentioned, you need to specify its particular technique.

Spécifier pour la peinture, s'il s'agit d'huile, sur bois ou sur toile, de gouache, d'aquarelle, collage, technique mixte, etc.; pour la sculpture, s'il s'agit de bronze, fer acier, marbre, pierre, bois, etc.; pour les dessins, s'il s'agit de crayon sur papier, plume, encre de chine etc.; pour les gravures, s'il s'agit d'eau-forte, aquatinte, xylographie, linoliographie, sérigraphie, etc. Si l'oeuvre ne peut pas être proprement caracterisée selon les catégories ci-dessus mentionnées, bien spécifier sa technique particulière.

Dimensioni: Altezza / Height / Hauteur — Larghezza / Width / Largeur — Eventuale terza dimensione / Third size (if necessary) / Troisième dimensions (à l'occasion) — Peso approssimativo in Kg. / Rough weight in Kilos / Poids approximatif en Kilogrammes

Proprietario / Owner / Propriétaire: SHAN ZHUAN WU

Indirizzo del proprietario / Owner's address / Adresse du propriétaire: WARTENAU 16 2000 HAMBURG 76

Prezzo d'assicurazione in lire italiane / Insurance value / Chiffre d'assurance (preciser en quelles devises doit être payée l'assurance)

Luogo per il ritiro e la riconsegna dell'opera (indirizzo e n. telefonico) / Address and phone number where work must be collected and sent back / Adresse et numéro de téléfon où l'oeuvre doit être retirée et réexpédiée: WARTENAU 16 2000 HAMBURG 76 Tel = 040.2984.3228/2703686

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Loan form for Wu Shanzhuan's work *Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank* from la Biennale di Venezia, 1993. Photo courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive

Li: How did you present them?
Wu: Well, *Putting the Cost of Art Materials in a Bank* was an object at large, that is, we don't really know where the money is. The other was to rent out the exhibition venue, which meant the artist behind the work was no longer responsible for the space, a situation illustrating artists' survival issues. This piece was planned for the Venice Biennale but wasn't realized there. I finally did the piece later that year in Rotterdam.
Li: So in Venice you only carried out the one about the bank?
Wu: Yes. That bank piece only cost the Venice Biennale $100. When budgets were being discussed for Venice, I considered how much would be appropriate for an installation, and $6,000 was the amount I proposed as a fair price for materials [nevertheless, Wu only received $100]. Later, when I proposed a piece for the Wexner Center, I again suggested $6,000. I actually proposed the idea of putting the money in the bank to the Wexner, too, but they seemed to think, "Wow, poverty is driving this man insane." They didn't think of it as a quiet, passive presentation of an artwork, which is why I ended up doing *Missing Bamboo*.2 That is, I went from freeing myself of all the responsibilities that go into making an installation to becoming a one-man team: an importer, salesman, and retailer of toys. I imported goods from China, communicated with museums, and made the sales myself.

Wu Shanzhuan. *Missing Bamboo*. 1993 © 2015 The artist.

The 1980s: Zhoushan and Zhejiang: I Tried to Get into Art School Seven Times

Li: After graduating from middle school, you didn't go straight to art school. Instead, you worked as an electrician's apprentice.

Wu: Well, in 1977 I failed for the first time to get into art school, and so naturally I needed some kind of work. This job allowed me to have another shot at preparing for the entrance exams. Things were a little different then, because you could take the test several times. I'm not sure if they still allow that, but in my case, I had to take the test seven times before I got in.

Li: It seems that you share certain experiences with Wang Guangyi.

Wu: Oh, I'd say he is much brighter. After all, I had to take the test seven times. Plus, Guangyi comes from a privileged background; he

majored in oil painting. I went through the normal art school system of Zhejiang. At that time, the education bureau of Zhejiang Province was recruiting students to train to become art teachers, but there were no professors at Zhejiang Normal University who were qualified to train future art teachers. At the much more selective Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts there were, and so students who were admitted to the art-teachers' training program at Zhejiang Normal University that year got to study at Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. That's how I got into art school.

Li: Were you already hanging out with Wang Guangyi and Zhang Peili?

Wu: No. For a year or two I attended the same school as Guangyi; I entered in 1983 and he graduated in 1984. We weren't close then; we were sort of separated by the hierarchical structure of the program.

Li: Was it because he was an oil painting major?

Wu: Well, art schools are somewhat like military schools.

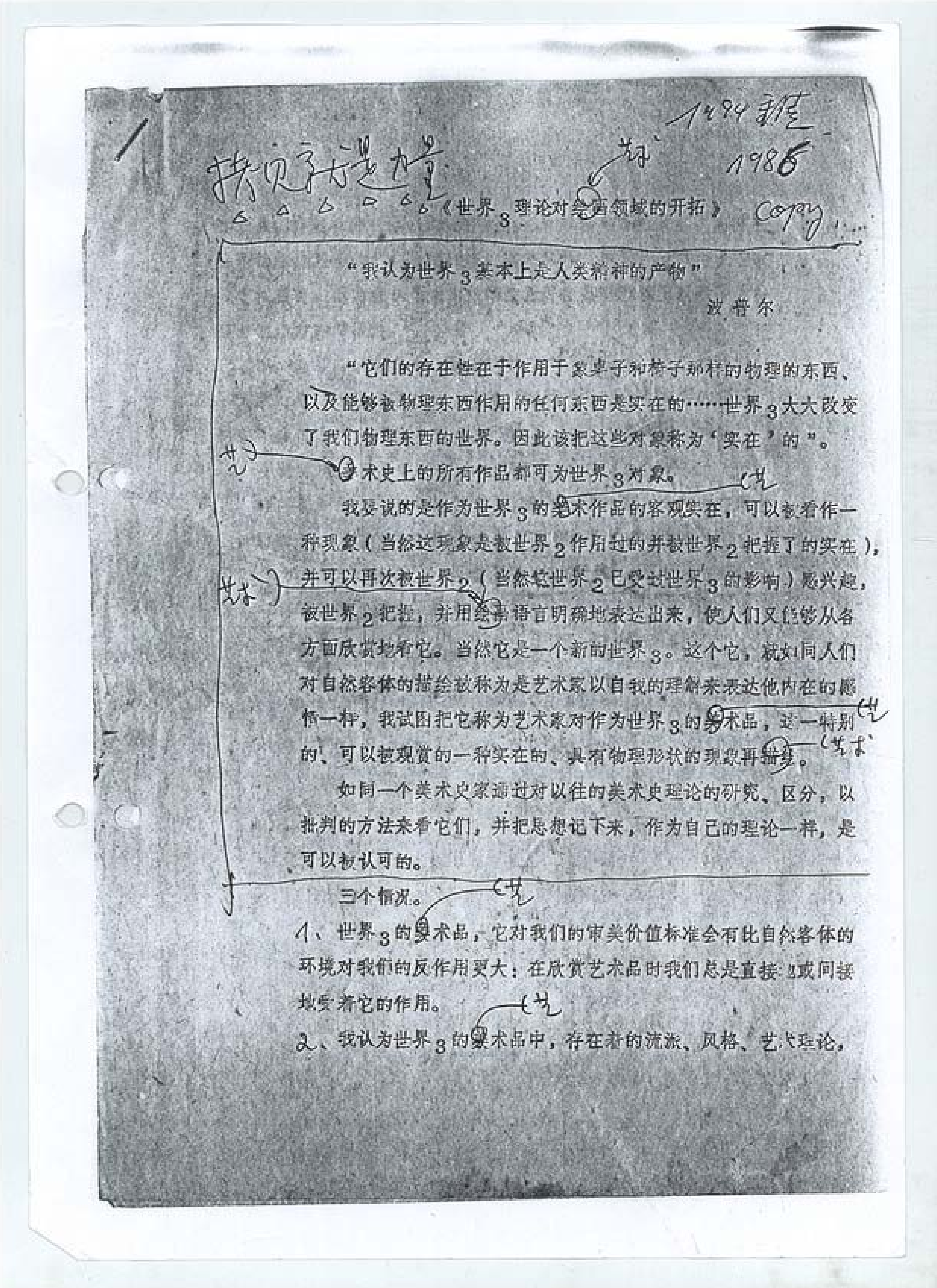
Early Conceptual Works, about World 3 and Readymade Objects

Li: You wrote articles on Conceptual art back in 1985 or 1986, pretty early to be taking on those ideas. Were you consciously abandoning painting? Did that cross your mind?

Wu: No. All artists of our generation had to work on research and theory; we had to make artworks, but we also had to sell them ourselves. It was exhausting but fun. This is why the 1985–86 generation is so robust; its members can accomplish a lot. First of all we would present an idea for a piece, then we would discuss why we had conceived of it in a certain manner, and afterward we had to execute the work, market it, and sell it; all this was required at the time. Ghuangyi, Peili, Song Yonghong, Huang Yong Ping—all of us did this.

Li: Your articles from that time are no longer really about painting. For instance, there was a lot of discussion going on then about modern painting and contemporary Chinese art, but you were already talking about objects.

Wu: I guess I just realized and understood earlier than others that things do not necessarily embody the meaning humans impose upon them. I was quicker to understand the power of objects themselves.
Li: Did you come across the art of Duchamp and Beuys at this time?
Wu: I'd say that I did so in around 1986, but their work wasn't yet clear to me. Beuys might have been clearer, because I was more experienced in performance and social actions. As for Duchamp, I had some knowledge of him, but as far as the intensity of objects go, Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* might have influenced me more. I came across this little book, or perhaps a quote from the book—keep in mind that we rarely had access to complete, original texts [by foreign authors]. Later, Popper's language and writing style crept into my own writing.
Li: "Wu's Things" are divided into three categories. It seems to me that their structure is similar to Popper's Worlds 1, 2, and 3.
Wu: Yeah, I vaguely recall Popper saying that the objects that result from the integration of man and nature can collectively be called World 3. The greatest thing he did was to point out that the essence of World 3 is actually World 1 [the world of physical objects and events]. I was astonished. That's why I wrote the article titled "Theories of World 3—On Painting."
Li: In your 1985 article "Copying Is Power," you mention World 3. Is this a reference to your own text "Theories of World 3—On Painting"?
Wu: Yes. I wrote "Theories of World 3—On Painting" a long time ago, perhaps in 1983, while I was a student at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. That's why paintings are discussed.



《世界$_3$理论对绘画领域的开拓》

"我认为世界$_3$基本上是人类精神的产物"

波普尔

"它们的存在性在于作用于象桌子和椅子那样的物理的东西、以及能够被物理东西作用的任何东西是实在的……世界$_3$大大改变了我们物理东西的世界。因此该把这些对象称为'实在'的"。

美术史上的所有作品都可为世界$_3$对象。

我要说的是作为世界$_3$的美术作品的客观实在，可以被看作一种现象（当然这现象是被世界$_2$作用过的并被世界$_2$把握了的实在），并可以再次被世界$_2$（当然被世界$_2$已受过世界$_3$的影响）感兴趣，被世界$_2$把握，并用绘画语言明确地表达出来，使人们又能够从各方面欣赏地看它。当然它是一个新的世界$_3$。这个它，就如同人们对自然客体的描绘被称为是艺术家以自我的理解来表达他内在的感情一样，我试图把它称为艺术家对作为世界$_3$的美术品，这一特别的、可以被观赏的一种实在的、具有物理形状的现象再描绘。

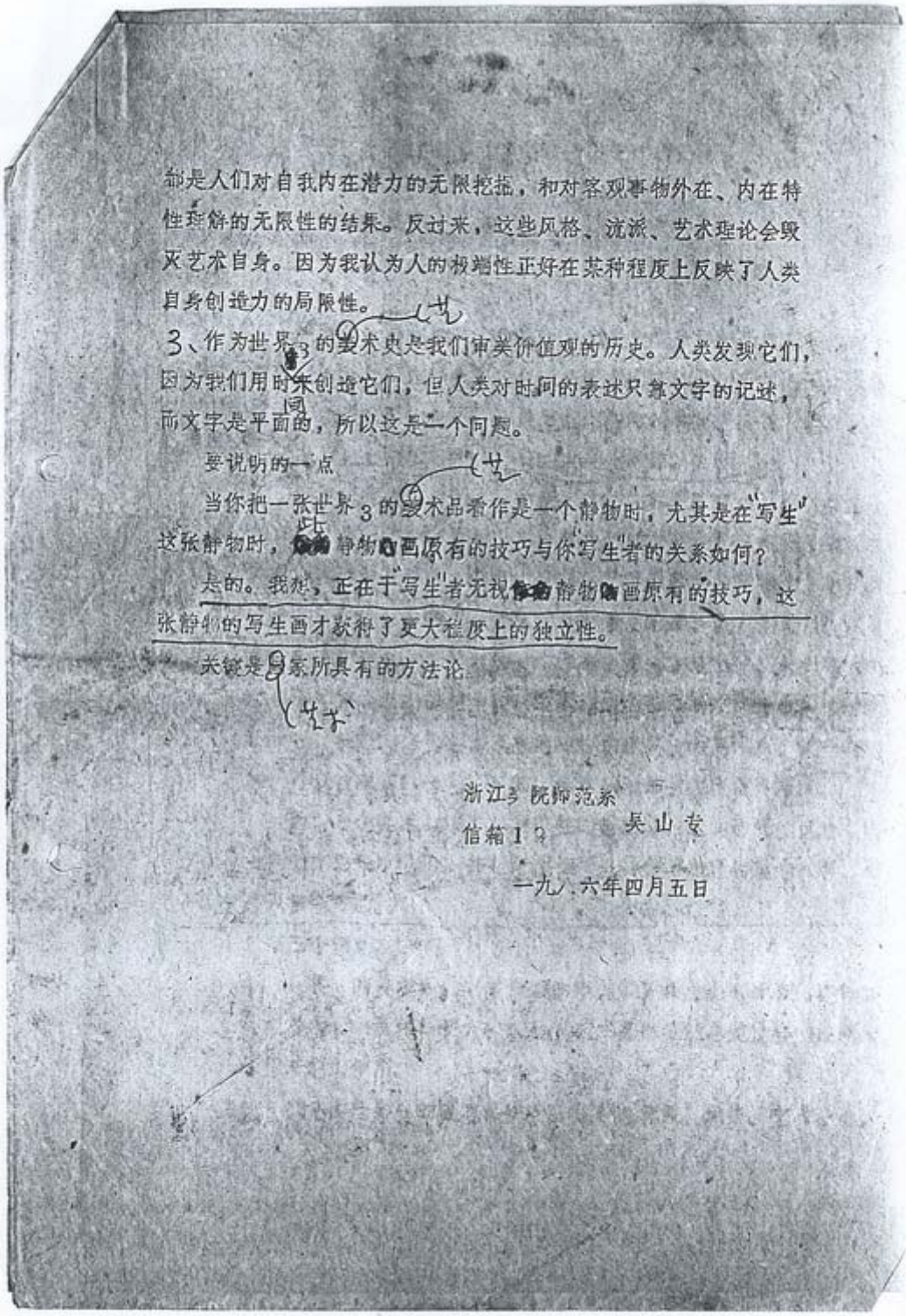
如同一个美术史家通过对以往的美术史理论的研究、区分，以批判的方法来看它们，并把感想记下来，作为自己的理论一样，是可以被认可的。

三个情况。

1、世界$_3$的美术品，它对我们的审美价值标准会有比自然客体的环境对我们的反作用要大：在欣赏艺术品时我们总是直接地或间接地受着它的作用。

2、我认为世界$_3$的美术品中，存在着的流派、风格、艺术理论，

The existing copy of the article "Copying Is Power." © 2015 The artist. Photo courtesy the artist and Fei Dawei



都是人们对自我内在潜力的无限挖掘，和对客观事物外在、内在特性无限的结果。反过来，这些风格、流派、艺术理论会毁灭艺术自身。因为我认为人的极端性正好在某种程度上反映了人类自身创造力的局限性。

3、作为世界3的艺术史是我们审美价值观的历史。人类发现它们，因为我们用时来创造它们，但人类对时间的表述只靠文字的记述，而文字是平面的，所以这是一个问题。

要说明的一点

当你把一张世界3的艺术品看作是一个静物时，尤其是在"写生"这张静物时，静物画原有的技巧与你写生者的关系如何？

是的。我想，正在于写生者无视静物画原有的技巧，这张静物的写生画才获得了更大程度上的独立性。

关键是自家所具有的方法论。

浙江美院师范系

信箱19　　吴山专

一九八六年四月五日

The existing copy of the article “Copying Is Power.” © 2015 The artist. Photo courtesy the artist and Fei Dawei

Li: And later on you revised it?
Wu: Yes. As for “Copying Is Power,” by mistake I probably substituted that title for “Theories of World 3—On Painting” in the nineties while compiling the index to my writings.
Li: Could readymade objects be considered part of World 3?
Wu: Sure.

Everyone Has the Right to Refuse to Be an Artist

Li: You wrote “Art during the Cultural Revolution” in 1987, and I found it fascinating. In it you say that art language stemming from the Cultural Revolution might have characteristics that don't even pertain to the Cultural Revolution. When you wrote this article, you had already conducted a series of experiments with language: you worked with language as form, but you emptied it of content. Wang Guangyi operated in a similar way with images.
Wu: Guangyi and I had different views from other artists of our generation; we realized that language and images were meaningless.
Li: Artists of the 1985 generation seem to constantly refer to emptiness. What is your opinion of this? Do you think it’s a specifically Chinese phenomenon? A phenomenon resulting from the Cultural Revolution?
Wu: I’d say that it’s more of a phenomenon among Zhejiang artists. You might see it more in my work, since I started from nothing. To maximize the capacity of a container, we must first empty it; we remove the original contents, and then we can measure it. We also acknowledged a sense of aggression. In light of Popper’s World 3, the essence and meaning of Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* [a cultural object] is comparable to the essence and meaning of an apple [a natural object]. We were awestruck by this! And what is the meaning of it all? Filling in.
Li: What are you filling in?
Wu: Whatever it is. This is how art works; the meaning of art lies in its “giving.” That is, you summon it, and you give it something; apparently

there’s also the problem of the receiver. Who is to receive it? If there is no one, then it’s a tragedy.

Li: Many artists have been considered prophets. That is to say, they embedded messages in their work that no one found, or, as you just said, for which there were no receivers, until maybe one hundred or two hundred years later.

Wu: That is why we must devise a strategy for creating mythology through art. We must establish a mechanism, otherwise it [art] will be meaningless.

Li: So your work is really about the message and not the object itself?

Wu: Well, you need a lot of physical evidence to get the message across. Inga [Inga Svala Thorsdottir, Wu Shanzhuan’s partner and collaborator] and I often debate why we need such physical evidence. Can thoughts really be conveyed through an object? But when we regard objects as physical evidence, it helps us understand Duchamp. What are the use and effect of physical evidence? A piece of physical evidence tells us that any identical object not present here today cannot, in fact, have witnessed this same event; this particular object is unique. Take, for instance, this cup I hold in my hand to prove that we conversed today. Now, any other cup identical to it is not physical evidence of our conversation. Only this particular one is. This is how its uniqueness is presented.

Li: Would you say that this is how you interpret Duchamp’s work?

Wu: I would say that this reading can open up Duchamp’s work to diverse interpretations.

Li: Is this idea your readymade work?

Wu: Yes. Now, this can only prove how brilliant Duchamp was. Because of those endless interpretations of meanings. As artists, we should remember Duchamp, because we can always lay out more ways to interpret his work.

Li: You differ with Beuys when he says that everyone is an artist.

Wu: I would put it this way: everyone has the right to refuse to be an artist.

Li: To refuse to be an artist?

Wu: For Beuys, it was a strategy, and this strategy is a scam. I would put it differently by saying that everyone has the right to refuse to be an artist. This is something I proposed back in 1993 or 1994. To express such a right of refusal is important; giving people such a right allows them to refuse Beuys's dictum. Let's put it this way: In court, there are two ways to operate—one is to presume innocence, and the other is to presume guilt. We choose the presumption of innocence. Beuys presumes guilt when he says that everyone is an artist.

Rauschenberg and Early Performance Installations

Li: You went to see Rauschenberg's exhibition3 at Beijing's National Gallery in 1985, is that correct?
Wu: Yes, everyone went to that show.
Li: Some people refused to talk to about it.
Wu: That exhibition was extraordinary. Rauschenberg's influence on Chinese art is very significant. He gave Chinese artists greater scope for imagination—for how far one can reach. At the societal level, this influence was huge.
Li: Did you ever communicate with him in person?
Wu: No. By the time we saw the exhibition, he had left.
Li: But before that, you and a couple of friends4 worked on what seemed to be an installation piece in Zhoushan. Why did you rent a temple there?
Wu: The temple served as a museum for Zhoushan art and culture. There was no religious freedom back then, and so this space served as a community space. We didn't actually rent it; we had a friend who worked there. He said, "Hey! We've got extra room. Why don't you work here?" We used the space for reasons of convenience more than anything else.
Li: You did these text-based pieces as a result of your group discussions, is that right? Because you mentioned that this group of yours had the idea of doing something together.
Wu: Yes, but Rauschenberg was important, too.

Li: But you started working before Rauschenberg came, which was in November.

Wu: Do you know why he's important? Because he serves as a contrast; that is, he shows you alternatives of presentation. You saw how he utilized those materials; it's brilliant.

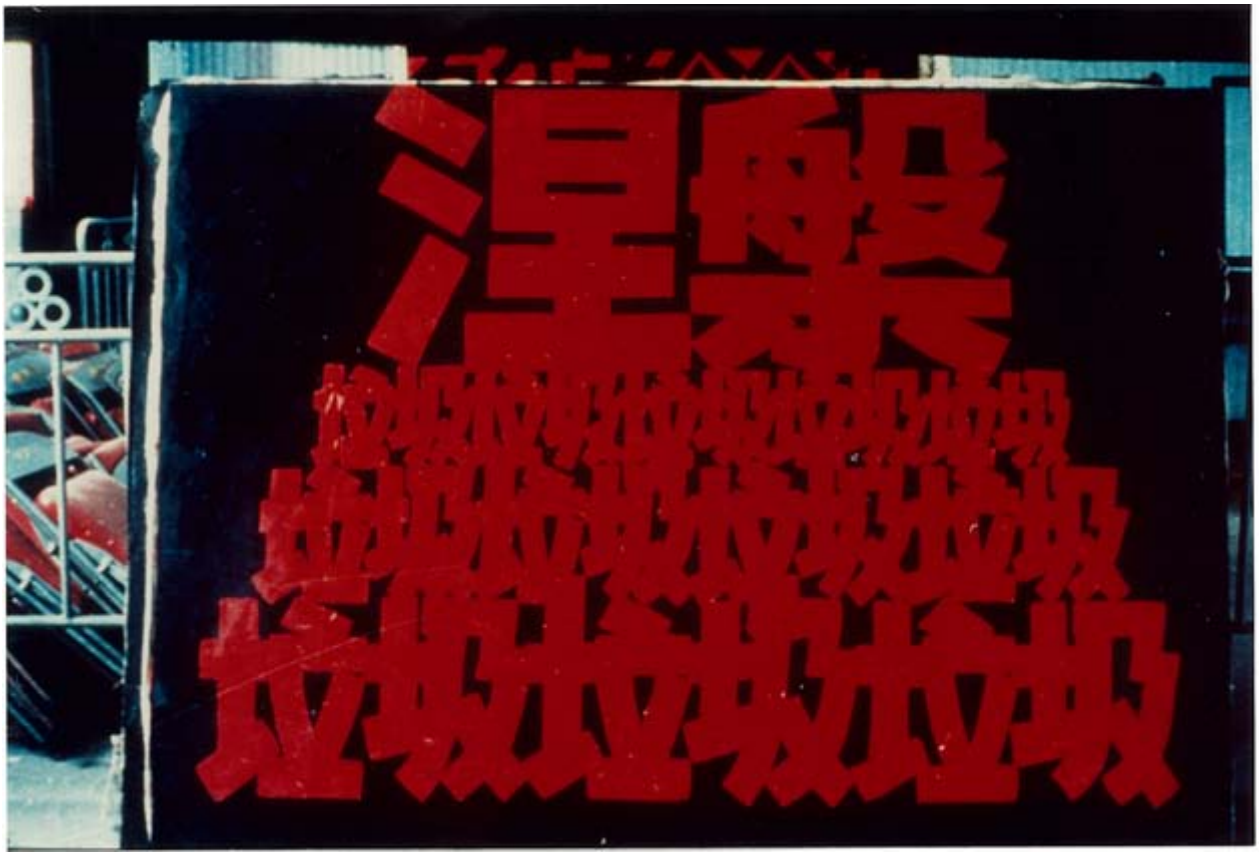
Li: Did you know other artists who were working with language as art, like Joseph Kosuth and On Kawara?

Wu: Well, we knew little about Conceptual art. Yet not knowing much can sometimes serve to one's advantage. We learned more about Western art from printed reproductions than from the texts they illustrated. That is why we actually believed we were the inventors of text-based art. If we had had more knowledge back then, we might not have had the courage to pursue it. The choice of using language was the result of a long, fierce discussion.

Li: What is the medium used in the paintings *The Last Supper*, *Garbage Nirvana*, and*70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*?

Wu: Industrial paint and synthetic board.

Wu Shanzhuan. *The Last Supper*. 1985 © 2015 The artist. Photo courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive



Wu Shanzhuan. *Garbage Nirvana*. 1985 © 2015 The artist. Photo courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive

Wu Shanzhuan, Huang Jian, Lu Haizhou, Luo Xianyue, Ni Haifeng, Song Chenghua, and Zhang Haizhou. *70% Red, 25% Black, and 5% White*. 1985 © 2015 The artists. Photo courtesy the artists and

Li: The written phrases in these works are appropriated from found texts?

Wu: Some of the phrases are taken from news fragments.

Li: *The Last Supper*?

Wu: Language from the Bible.

Li: The phrase “garbage nirvana” also appeared in your novel *Today No Water* [2008].

Wu: Yes, the phrase is like my poetry. At that time I was taking photos, writing, and composing poetry.

Li: This is really poetic, unlike other terms you appropriated. It’s garbage and nirvana, two things that don’t mix.

Wu: I’m from Putuoshan Island, a sacred Buddhist site. In Buddhist canons, garbage and nirvana belong together. Garbage and nirvana may seem like opposites, but they’re not; they’re at either end of a single passageway. It’s not a random mixture; it’s planned and structured.

Li: Were you studying books on Buddhism or Taoism at the time?

Wu: Yeah, a little. I was reading the history of Chinese philosophy in works that quoted original texts—second- or thirdhand information. I was reading books by great writers such as Feng Youlan5.

Li: In 1985 and 1986, a lot of people did installation works or paintings. They liked putting symbols of Taiji in their work, and so did your group.

Wu: It’s a little embarrassing, but under the circumstances, I guess it was all right to do once.

Li: So was it spontaneous, and not serious?

Wu: It wasn’t that embarrassing, I think.

Li: Some people enjoy making meanings out of these things, expecting you would provide some explanation or interpretation relating to Taoism.

Wu: In a sense, the works we made during this phase were a sort of hodgepodge of ideas and a compromise among the members of the group. It might have been that one of the members suggested we put

in a Taiji symbol, and so we agreed because we were working as a team.

Li: Were you the leader of the group?

Wu: Definitely.

Big-Character Posters

Li: Let's talk about your work *Red Humor*. You mentioned that sometimes you call the piece *Big-Character Posters*, sometimes it's *Today No Water*, and sometimes it's *Red Humor*.

Wu: This work has had a lot of titles, including *Today No Water: Second Movement Third Measure*. Why? Well, it is related to quartets in music. We used this title when the piece was presented in the art journal *Art Trend*, published in Hunan. "Big-Character Poster" was the most official title. We've also used "*Today No Water*." I mean, we referred to it as "the big-character poster for the work *Today No Water*." Here's the thing, it belongs to the Red Humor series, but it wasn't the title of the work. "Red Humor" was simply a name for the collection of things I did during this period.

Li: Sometimes this work was dated 1986, and sometimes 1985. Did you actually finish it right before you left art school?

Wu: I think it was 1986, because in 1985 we worked with the Heiti fonts (East Asian Gothic typeface), and so we must have done the piece after I graduated, which was in 1986.

Li: And at that time you were back in Zhoushan?

Wu: Yeah, the correct date would be 1986.

Li: Were these photos taken when you were halfway through the work?

Wu: We set up and shot these images in my studio. Fei Dawei6 was in France and wanted to see the work, and so I shot this set of photos for him.

Li: And the images were shot at different times, is that correct? Because I see that in each photograph the work is shown at a different stage of development.

Wu Shanzhuan. *Big Character Posters*. 1986 © 2015 The artist. Photo courtesy the artist and Asia Art Archive

Wu: The installation looks like theater decor. The written words were done by my friends, not me.

Li: Did they come up with the words? Did you plan from the beginning to ask them to contribute the written texts in this piece?

Wu: Each of them had to produce something, and I orchestrated the procedure. Each person came in, wrote their words, and left. I would apply some paint; I painted the red, but they wrote the words. Some of them were artists, others were students or friends. Basically the idea was to give them a platform, and they would come over and write as they pleased.

Li: They were free to write whatever they wanted?

Wu: Yes.

Li: Some of the phrases look as if they're from advertisements seen on the street.

Wu: Advertisements . . . hmm. I shot photos of street ads at the time and had a stack of these images. I would pick an image and say, “Hey, write this!” or “Imitate that!”

Li: So you set up a script.

Wu: Well, sometimes they would say, “What am I supposed to write?” After all it can be tiring to brainstorm. So I would say, “Why don’t you do this, or that?” The whole thing was produced this way, in a friendly atmosphere.

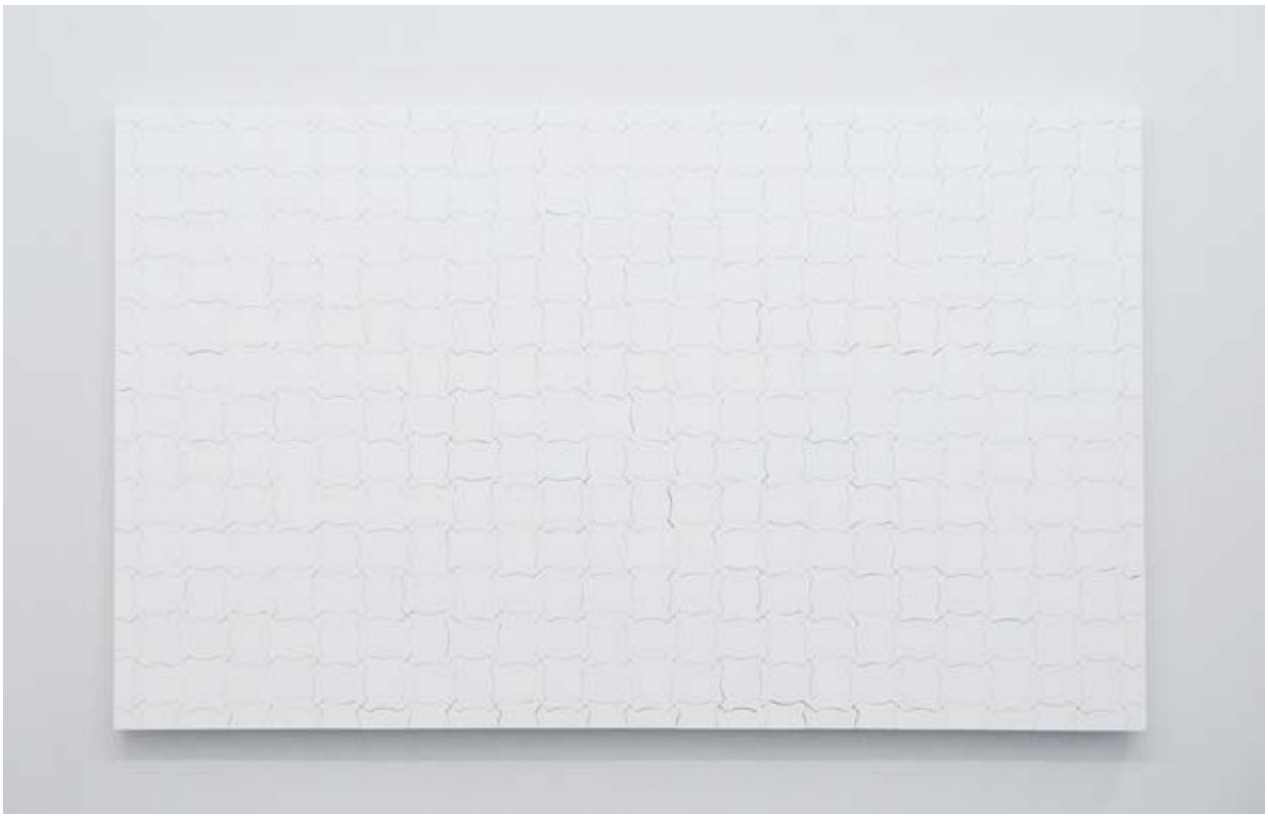
Li: Is the work *Big-Character Posters* related to your experience during the Cultural Revolution?

Wu: I was considering questions like “What concepts haven’t been borrowed and used yet?” So I thought of using the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution as a form, and wrote “Art about the Cultural Revolution” in 1987. In this article I used the analogy of soil and apple trees to talk about art, in which I posited that soil represents societal circumstances and apples represent artworks. This might suggest that a particular kind of soil is necessary to grow a certain type of apple tree and produce a certain kind of apple. Yet to say that the properties of the soil must also be the properties of the apple would be a false claim; it does not necessarily follow the logic.

Working with Inga Svala Thorsdottir: About *Little Fat Flesh*

Li: Have you produced any art on your own since you started working with Inga Svala Thorsdottir?

Wu: Of course. I work with Inga based on the idea of sharing; this is a very important concept in our work together. Take *Little Fat Flesh* as an example. That work focused more on visual presentation and explored the potentials of sharing. The more you share, the more you expand.



Wu Shanzhuan and Inga Svala Thórsdóttir. *Little Fat Flesh*. 2012. MDF, magnet, lacquer, 112 × 184 × 4 cm. © 2015 The artists. Photo courtesy the artists and Long March Space

Li: Can the image *Little Fat Flesh* expand and extend indefinitely?

Wu: Yes, just like a puzzle can. It might be one of the more successful projects in mechanical engineering. I think that's because of its stability or its capacity.

Li: The parenthetical form in *Little Fat Flesh* appeared quite early—as early as in a notebook from 1991.

Wu: Yes. It is derived from two sources; the form comes from nature, but it is also the symbol for fish in the Bible. You know, Jesus and all that—that's why it's been replicated again and again. Inga and I have three phases in our working method: brainstorming, communication, and realization.

Li: Do you think *Little Fat Flesh* is something that can be easily replicated? Do you believe it to be a symbol that represents the world?

Wu: I would say that it is an icon representing a world view.

Li: Does that world view in any way resemble religion?

Wu: It is possible that it might to someone else.

Li: Is there any kind of primal sexual connotation in it?
Wu: Interpretations are layers you impose. There’s something tricky here: any interpretation can reveal sexual connotations. In a way, these icons become intriguing because of the sex-related layers they carry.