



Asia Art Archive Conference Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia

Exhibition as Site—Extended Case Study (China 1993)

The following text and discussion are the final components of Yishu's coverage of the Asia Art Archive Conference, Sites of Construction, held in Hong Kong from October 21 to 23, 2013.

This segment examines the year 1993 and five important exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art organized outside of mainland China that introduced Chinese art and artists to other parts of the world. Keynote lectures, academic papers, and polemical positions from the Sites of Construction conference were published in the March/April issue of Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art.

Julia F. Andrews

Why 1993? Coincidence or Convergence?

1993 is the year in which contemporary Chinese art began to enjoy the attention of the global art world. Following the June 4, 1989, massacre at Tian'anmen Square and China's subsequent cultural freeze and economic isolation, the simultaneous appearance of contemporary Chinese art on several international platforms in 1993 seemed rather sudden. 1993 was only the beginning, however, as over the course of the decade that followed Chinese artists gradually entered the canon of contemporary art.

Why 1993? A few important events, international and domestic, artistic and political, laid the groundwork. Opening in Paris in May of 1989, the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, organized under Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou, made a powerful curatorial argument in favour of expanding the critical concerns within the field of contemporary art beyond Europe and America. Three Chinese artists—Gu Dexin, Huang Yongping, and Yang Jiechang—all of whom worked in a postmodern idiom, were among those to exhibit. The Pompidou's curatorial stand against the Eurocentric conventions of contemporary art, and the debates it inspired, had hardly been digested when, on June 4, the shocking Tian'anmen crackdown traumatized China's people and stimulated worldwide sympathy for them. Many of the country's brightest young talents, including both artists and art critics, left China and carried on their artistic missions in Europe, Canada, or the United States, demonstrating to international audiences the real accomplishments of their generation. In China, many artists were severely alienated, especially from the official art world, but

they did not stop working. With exhibition venues closed to them, they created art for its own sake in their studios or in their modest dwellings and continued to send slides to friends and to critics from now-banned periodicals who had nowhere to publish them. An unofficial art world, held together by networks old and new, gathered strength.

At the beginning of 1992, the elderly Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, recognized the economic and diplomatic damage to his country caused by the post-Tian'anmen freeze, and he made a highly symbolic tour to southern China to encourage a reopening of the economy to the world. By 1993, trade had begun to surge ahead of ideology at the forefront of official concern, and many restrictions fell away. Under the mantle of economic activity, a new and somewhat freer ideological space began to open up for art.

The first of the 1993 exhibitions to open was China's New Art, Post-1989, shown in the Hong Kong Art Center and Hong Kong City Hall in January and February 1993. Chang Tsong-zung, who had just curated an important and successful show to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 1979 Stars outdoor exhibition, began his project with the idea of bringing art displayed in the 1989 China/Avant-Garde exhibition to Hong Kong. The events of June 4 made this impossible, but his two years of research travel revealed to him that Chinese art was at the dawn of a new era. In collaboration with Li Xianting, he set about selecting work to demonstrate this new sensibility. The title of the resulting exhibition, China's New Art, Post-1989, made that point explicitly and its subsequent travels to Australia and the US disseminated widely the idea of a new epoch dawning in Chinese art. Like that of the 1993 China Avantgarde show in Berlin, which would follow almost immediately, the substantial catalogue was much more than the record of this event—it supplemented the curatorial framework with historical accounts that had never before appeared in English.

The Berlin exhibition in February 1993 was curated by Andreas Schmid, Hans van Dijk, and Jochen Noth and was originated by the Haus de Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin. As early as 1986, when he returned to Germany from his studies at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, Schmid intended to organize an exhibition of Chinese art that represented the '85 New Wave Movement. Jochen Noth, who had returned to Germany in 1988 after many years in China, hoped to show art from the No Name Group. In 1990, they proposed a joint exhibition plan, but in the wake of the June 4 events they were initially unable to find a willing venue. In 1991, HKW agreed to host the exhibition, and in May they met designer, curator, and scholar Hans van Dijk who had been forced to leave China in 1989, and enlisted him to join their curatorial team. What they found during their fifteen weeks of fieldwork in 1991, assisted by Li Xianting, was the appearance of a new generation of compelling artists who had emerged after the 1980s in their own private spaces and in the absence of an authoritative official art world. Inevitable budgetary and space constraints limited the ambitions of the Berlin exhibition to twelve artists from China and four Chinese artists living in Europe, but forty-four more artists were included in the catalogue, the first such scholarly work about contemporary

Chinese art published in the West. The exhibition travelled to a number of other museums in Europe, and its catalogues in German, English, and Chinese remain a significant scholarly resource.

Francesca dal Lago, who lived in Beijing first as a student and then as an employee of the Italian Embassy in Beijing, had many connections with young Chinese artists and had begun proposing to potential sponsors a European exhibition of their work. The 1993 Venice Biennale might be seen as a fortuitous conjunction of her individual aspirations with larger forces in the art world or even world politics. A more inclusive approach to world art pioneered four years earlier in *Magiciens de la terre* was integrated into the Venice curatorial vision when Biennale director Achille Bonito Oliva adopted as its central theme *The Cardinal Points of Art*. The subsection of the main exhibition that he called *Passage to the Orient* included a range of works by Europeans in some way affected by Eastern art and well-established Japanese artists such as the Gutai group, Shigeo Kubota, and Yoko Ono, as well as art from China. For China, Bonito Oliva sought assistance from dal Lago, who, along with critic Li Xianting, selected a strong group of fourteen Chinese artists for the show. The complications of bringing a dozen artists from China to Venice in 1993 is beyond what we can possibly imagine today, but this crossing of national boundaries was an extremely important step in bringing contemporary Chinese art into the global art world.

Art historian and curator Kong Chang'an was then writing for the magazine *Flash Art* in Italy, including a cover article of the January/February 1992 issue, in his project to present the new contemporary Chinese art to Euroamerican readers. Bonito Oliva chose this young Chinese critic to curate one of the twelve sections of *Aperto*, the section of the Biennale for emerging artists. The strong connection Kong Chang'an describes between *Flash Art* and the Biennale was not initially obvious, although the *Aperto* catalogue was a *Flash Art* publication. It was the first time, the organizers believed, that a Chinese critic had been asked to curate international artists who were not necessarily Chinese.¹ Among the eight artists Kong Chang'an selected, two, Wu Shanzhuan and Wang Youshen, were from mainland China, although Wang Youshen was the only one who then resided in China. Thus, in total sixteen mainland Chinese artists appeared at Venice in 1993.²

The account by the only artist on this panel to exhibit in 1993, Wang Youshen, is revelatory, as he recalls the powerful impact on Chinese artists of participating and observing other artists at work on site-specific installations. Venice was one of the first occasions in which a Chinese artist mounted such a work abroad and then returned to China to recount his experience. In Wang Youshen's dual role as artist and art editor (for *Beijing Youth Daily*), he roamed the Biennale site, meeting well-known international artists, watching how they worked in their assigned spaces and conducting interviews. He wrote about the event upon his return to Beijing and shared with fellow artists in China descriptions and advice for creating work in such an international context. As short-term travel abroad for Chinese citizens became less bureaucratically restricted, 1993 may also have marked