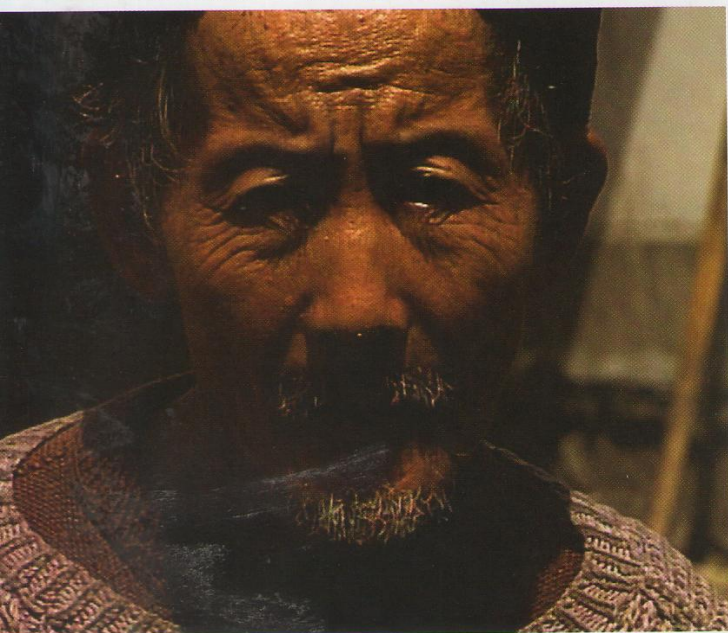




IT'S ABOUT TIME

Chinese conceptual artist Wang Jianwei talks about his
newly commissioned exhibition at the Guggenheim

BY BARBARA POLLACK



“The first time I saw Matthew Barney’s work, I didn’t ask if it was made by an American. I didn’t ask how it reflected the social conditions in the United States under democracy,” says Wang Jianwei. Knowing full well that that is precisely how Americans often evaluate Chinese contemporary artists, he adds, “Likewise, you don’t need to ask me about being a Chinese artist or if my work reflects something about China.”

It is this refusal to be categorized that has earned Wang a prized show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York—the first to be commissioned by the museum’s Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative. Entitled “Time Temple,” the exhibition features a series of sculptures, paintings, a new film, and a sound installation, and will conclude with a theatrical performance, *Spiral Ramp Library*, on February 12 and 13.

Wang’s statement might seem provocative, but it represents the viewpoint of an artist with a career that spans more than three decades, in China and elsewhere. “I wanted to present an artist who offers a broader perspective,” says Guggenheim curator Thomas J. Berghuis. Instead of offering a primer on Chinese contemporary art, he explains, this exhibition profiles “an artist at the forefront of innovation.”

At the opening of “Time Temple,” Wang presented a sound work in the Guggenheim’s soaring rotunda. Piped into speakers ringing the space were the voices of 20 individuals performing in the museum’s basement auditorium, declaiming on topics ranging from Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture to Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Library of Babel.”

Upon entering the exhibition proper, viewers are confronted with works (all 2014) jarringly different from the sound piece and from one another. Occupying the center of the room is a series of large geometric sculptures made of MDF boards laminated together. To make them, the artist both adds material and cuts it away over the course of several months. On one wall is a four-panel painting depicting a group of men sitting around a long boardroom table, examining and evaluating an antique vase. The painting looks like a work by a different artist, but on closer examination, the four sections present overlapping views, as if a camera were

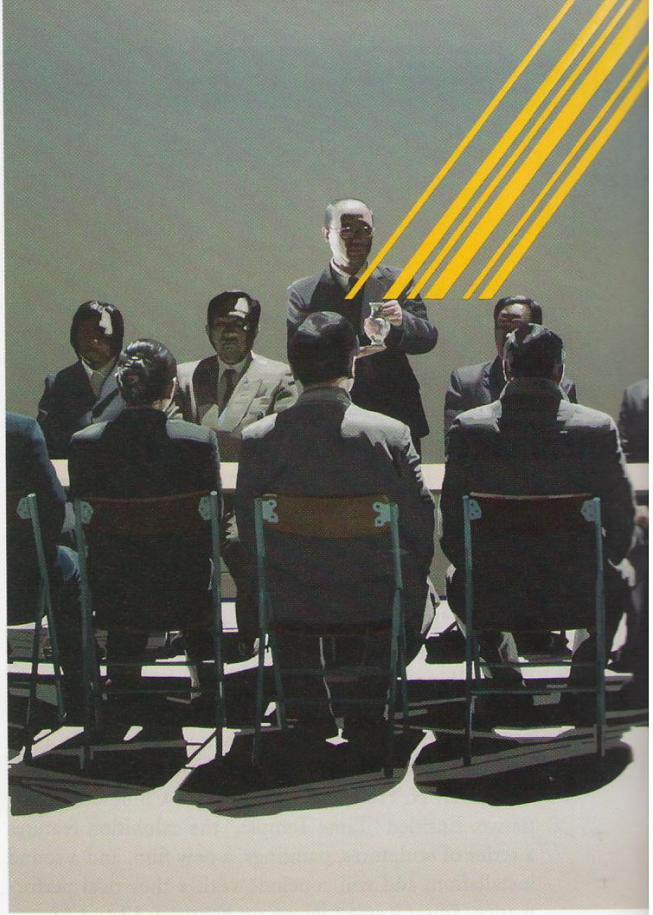
panning across the scene. As disparate as the performance, the sculptures, and the painting seem, they are tied together, at least in Wang’s mind, by their unfolding over time.

“If we think there is a possibility of having a revolution in contemporary art, I think that possibility starts with the concept of time,” Wang says, explaining that rather than looking forward to the future, he looks to the present as a moment containing infinite potential. In keeping with this philosophy, he runs his Beijing studio as a permanent rehearsal space, with all works constantly in flux. He employs only a handful of people, including two translators, two office managers, a studio director, and an assistant who helps him with the bigger sculptures. He works on many pieces at once, beginning his day by reading and writing, and then ensconcing himself in a private painting studio for several hours before moving to a larger space to work on his sculptures.

FOR ALL HIS CONCERN WITH THE SUBJECT OF TIME, WANG is one of the rare Chinese artists of his generation who does not dwell on the past, either with nostalgia or criticism. Born in 1958 in Suiming, Sichuan Province, he was forced to move to the countryside at the age of 17 as part of the reeducation program of the Cultural Revolution. With few other options available, he joined the military and lived as a soldier from 1977 to 1983.

“We had no television, no movies, not even lightbulbs,” he recalls, adding, “I took up painting mainly as a way to kill time.” Wang dismisses his early work, mostly oil paintings heavily influenced by Socialist Realism, the predominant style in China during that period. But one of his paintings, *Dear Mother* (1983), changed his life. Executed in an academic realist style, the work depicts a lone soldier writing home from a foxhole. In spite of having no formal training, Wang won the gold medal for this painting at the sixth National Art Exhibition in 1984. The opening ceremony

PREVIOUS SPREAD Wang Jianwei in his studio, Beijing, 2013. OPPOSITE Stills from Wang’s film *Living Elsewhere* (1999) about Chinese families living in an abandoned housing development in Sichuan province.



was held in Beijing, and he was invited to attend.

Far from home, Wang was asked to share a room with another Chinese artist, Zheng Shengtian. Zheng was, at the time, dean of the oil-painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (now the China Academy of Art), one of the most prestigious art schools in China. He had just returned from an extended stay in the United States and regaled Wang with accounts of life in the West, including such art forms as performance and installation still unheard of in China. "I thought he was a really nice, brilliant young man, and I invited him to come to Hangzhou," says Zheng, a curator who is also on the board of the new Institute of Asian Art at the Vancouver Art Gallery. But Wang didn't have the English language skills required to enroll in graduate studies at the academy, so Zheng arranged a position as a teaching assistant for him, allowing the young artist to quit the military and devote himself to his artistic development.

During the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy

paved the way for new cultural influences to enter China. At the art academy in Hangzhou, Wang was not only exposed to video and installation art, he was also able to acquire the first Chinese translations of writings by such thinkers as Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, and Wittgenstein, all of whom had a profound influence on his work. He was still painting, but he now added symbols and effects, including the illusion of time-lapse photography. When he left Hangzhou in 1988 and moved to Chengdu, he applied this technique to a series of portraits of patrons in teahouses.

By the time he moved to Beijing a year later to take a position at the Beijing Painting Academy, Wang was well on his way to becoming a successful painter. "I remember very clearly when I started going to China in the late 1990s, visiting the homes of young, up-and-coming financial people who were starting to collect work, and Wang's paintings were among their most prized," says International Center for Photography curator Christopher Phillips, who included an early video by the artist in



the exhibition “Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China” in 2004. “He could have easily been part of that wave of early painters who rode the auction-house records to financial success and riches in the early 2000s.” But by then, Wang had reinvented himself, first as an installation artist making works based on scientific research and mathematic principles that dissected social phenomena in China, and then as a documentary filmmaker.

“WHEN I LIVED IN THE FARMLAND, I HAD NO SENSE OF having a future. But when I took my first trips outside of China, to Hong Kong and then Australia, a door was opened and I was presented with many more options,” says Wang, adding, “So I grabbed them.” Unconcerned with consistency, he threw himself into a wide variety of mediums, something he continues to do today. “Basically,” he says, “I think working with different mediums has taught me that being in a closed system is rather harmful to your life as an artist.”

Wang’s 1997 documentary film *Production* represented a return to the subject of teahouses, but this time, he videotaped the slow-paced activity within establishments in Chengdu, carefully observing the ways in which people told stories and communicated with one another in these humble places. That year, he and another artist, Feng Mengbo, were the first two Chinese artists chosen to participate in Documenta X, with Wang showing *Production*. For *Living Elsewhere* (1999–2000), also set in Chengdu, he filmed a group of peasant families who had taken up residence in a complex of unfinished luxury villas. The four-hour film follows the families as they eke out an existence, raising chickens and planting vegetable gardens in the ruins of the abandoned housing development. “Wang puts a human face on what we normally encounter

ABOVE Wang’s *Time Temple*, 2014, a tetraptych in oil and acrylic on canvas alluding to time and movement. The frames for the panels are all of different depths, causing the image to undulate.

as sociological statistics,” says Phillips. “*Living Elsewhere* is a remarkable work that offers an in-depth exploration of a micro-society within the gaps created by the dislocations of Chinese society.”

Wang doesn't view these films as straightforward documentaries but, rather, as an alternative way of depicting reality akin to French New Wave's *cinéma vérité*. He followed his subjects for months, allowing his tale to unfold at a snail's pace.

By 2000, Wang had begun moving into experimental theater and performance art. “In 2002, I brought a group of curators to Beijing,” Zheng says, “including Okwui Enwezor and Lynne Cooke, and as soon as we arrived, Wang invited us to see his theater performance.” The piece, *Screen* (2002), was a multimedia theater work inspired by the Tang Dynasty scroll *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* by Gu Hongzhong. The scroll depicts Han Xizai, a minister of emperor Li Yu, disporting himself with guests. Supposedly Gu was sent to spy on Han by the emperor, who was suspicious of his minister's growing influence. Wang wrote the script, directed the performers, and created video projections and lighting design. The dress rehearsals were open to the public, and the fact that it was the first work by a contemporary artist to be held at a government-approved state theater garnered much attention. “It is a very complicated piece and quite a long performance,” says Zheng. “It was much more advanced than any other artists were doing at this time.”

SINCE THEN, WANG HAS MADE INCREASINGLY ELABORATE theater productions and multimedia installations. He was introduced to New York audiences with shows at Chambers Fine Art and he is currently represented by Long March Space in Beijing. Perhaps his most ambitious presentation took place at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing in 2011. Titled “Yellow Signal,” the exhibition consisted of four acts, with new elements brought into the museum every three weeks. Just as Wang considers the rehearsal periods of his productions to be more interesting than the final pieces, so he sees the yellow signal—the moment when a driver must decide to

stop or go through the light—as a moment of possibility.

In its first act, “Yellow Signal” presented video works, projected high above doorways within the exhibition space, which put viewers in various relationships to the action. One video, for instance, showed a line of people being shot by a firing squad from the perspective of the shooters, while another showed a man and a woman looking out to face the audience, as if posing in front of a mirror. Midway through the show, the same space was filled with basketball hoops. The fourth, and final, act of the exhibition was a performance, again rehearsed publicly and only formally presented on the last day of the exhibition.

“Basically, ‘Yellow Signal’ is about the moment where time becomes history, the line between the passage of time and the writing of history,” says Philip Tinari, director of UCCA. “It is political at its very core in the most fundamental way, but beyond that, it becomes very ambiguous.”

IN ADDITION TO ITS OTHER OFFERINGS, THE GUGGENHEIM exhibition includes a new film, *The Morning Time Disappeared* (2014), Wang's re-creation of Franz Kafka's classic 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis*. In it, a close-knit Chinese family deals with the repercussions of finding that their son, an upwardly mobile office worker, has turned into a giant salamander. With long takes and few edits, it is barely cinematic, more akin to a stage production than a movie. It can easily be read as a metaphor for contemporary China, where people must adapt to change daily in ways that are sometimes hard to digest or articulate. But the artist cautions against putting a Chinese frame around his work.

“Before coming to the Guggenheim, I was approached by many younger artists who said that they hoped more museums would do this—show the art simply as art, not as Chinese art,” says Wang. “It's like when I am going around a museum. I never look at the labels. I just look at the art itself. I hope that one day my art can be appreciated that way too.” ■

OPPOSITE A detail of Wang's wood, rubber, and steel sculpture *Time Temple 2*, 2014.

