

Two Chinese Artists at *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015*

Whitechapel Gallery, London, January 15–April 6, 2015

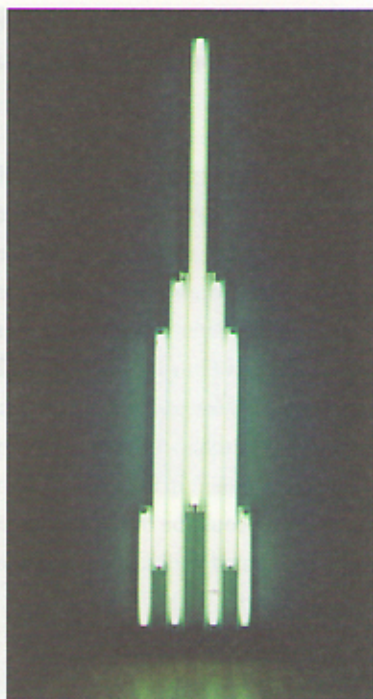


Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015, which opened to the public on January 15, 2015, at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, was described in the Whitechapel Gallery press release as a “A major new exhibition tracing a century of Abstract art from 1915 to today.”¹ The aim of the exhibition was to take “a fresh look” at the relationship between art and society and politics, shedding new light on the evolution of geometric abstraction. The more than one hundred works by eighty modern and contemporary artists, some household names, spanned countries and continents starting from Russia, with Kazimir Malevich—no surprise since *Black and White. Suprematist Composition* (1915) turns one hundred this year. Other well-known names included Alexander Rodchenko, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Rosemarie Trockel, Theo Van Doesburg, and Piet Mondrian. Taking over most of the gallery, the exhibition depicts for us, on two floors, the rise of Constructivist art from its revolutionary beginnings among the avant-garde in Russia and Europe through to 2015 in other parts of the world, including China, the Middle East, and South America.

Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015, installation view at Whitechapel Gallery, 2015. Courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, London.

Left: Kazimir Malevich, *Black and White. Suprematist Composition*, 1915, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm. Collection of Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Donation from Bengt and Jelena Jangfeldt, 2004.

Right: Dan Flavin, *'Monument' for V. Tatlin*, 1966–69, fluorescent tubes and metal, 305.4 x 58.4 x 8.9 cm. © 2014 Stephen Flavin/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Tate Collection: Purchased 1971.



For the curator, Iwona Blazwick, Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, abstraction was “the promontory onto the horizon of progress. Its very blankness represented the exhilarating void of the unknown and a springboard for the imagining of new tomorrows.”² Based on the early premise of geometric abstraction proposing a connection with “new models of social organization,” the press release explained that the exhibition is grouped under four themes, as follows: 1) “Utopia,” which imagines a new ideal society that transcends hierarchy and class, 2) “Architectonics,” which looks at how abstraction can underpin socially transformative spaces, 3) “Communication,” which examines the possibilities of abstraction for mobilizing radical change, and 4) “The Everyday,” which follows the way abstract art filters into all aspects of visual culture, from corporate logos to textile design.³

Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015, installation view at Whitechapel Gallery, 2015. Courtesy of Whitechapel Gallery, London.

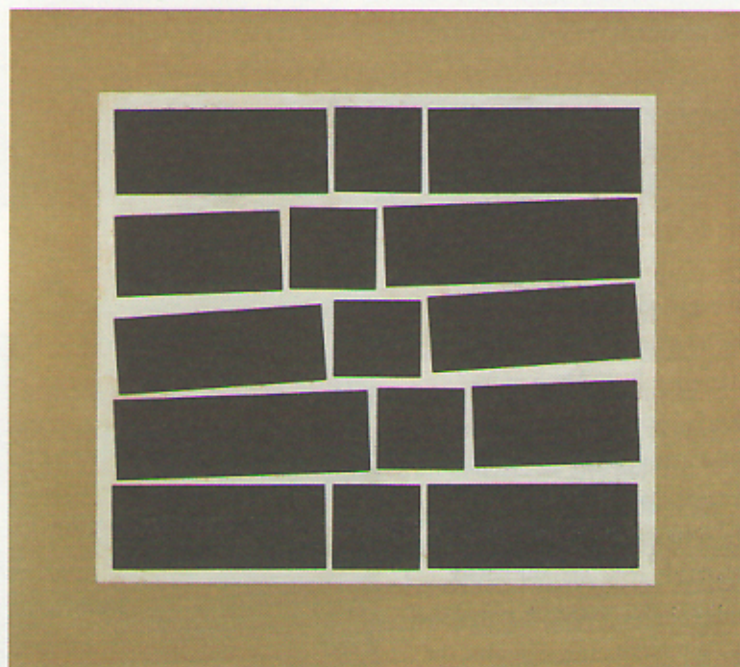
I will begin with a quick appraisal of the reviews and premise of the exhibition, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the two Chinese artists who were included. There was a general consensus in the reviews on the versatility of geometric shapes. Alastair Smart, writing for *The Telegraph*, noted that “[t]he exhibition demonstrated the remarkable creativity in abstraction



employed by artists in the last one hundred years, based on simple shapes of squares and circles, triangles and oblongs,” and *Time Out*, “a geometric show that isn’t square.” Others were derisive, claiming that the show presented “art that aimed to change the world . . . [and that was] big on revolutionary ways . . . rather than ways of seeing”; the *Guardian*’s Laura

Cumming noted that “Malevich opened the show without context, without mention of its original roots in Cubism and the destructions of the First World War.”⁴

The exhibition’s essential premise is that the past century has been the most democratic in human history and was well served by abstraction, the most democratic genre in art history. However, while this may be so, the fact that the selection process was not transparently democratic came under fire. Cumming lamented the exclusion of some of the more notable abstract artists: “Some of our most cherished living artists, Bridget Riley, Frank Stella, Robert Mangold, Ellsworth Kelly—are abstract painters, after all. But go to the Whitechapel Gallery’s survey of abstraction and you won’t find a single one of them in this massive show.”⁵ My guess is that another premise for selection could be the Whitechapel Gallery’s history in identifying artists who represented “firsts.” Among them are Picasso’s masterpiece *Guernica*, displayed at the Whitechapel in 1939, its first and only visit to Britain; the first major show in Britain of American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, in 1958; and the first shows of David Hockney, Gilbert & George, and Richard Long, in 1970 and 1971. As for those included in the current show, various other “firsts” were being lauded; Saloua Raouda Choucair, for example, who was producing abstract art in the 1940s, is considered the first contemporary abstract painter in the Arab world; Rasheed Araeen, who is the first Pakistani artist working with modular metal units in Britain; and Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, whose first solo show in London was at the Whitechapel in 1969.



Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema 464*, 1958, gouache on board, 29.8 x 33 cm. Photo: Todd White Photography. © the artist. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Catherine and Frank Petitgas.

Even more baffling about the selection process, for me, was the inclusion of two Chinese artists who came from a background entirely removed from the art movements that contributed to the development of abstract art. It may be that Zhao Yao and Liu Wei, along with Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi and Czech artist Bela Kolarova, made up for other gaps in the

*Experiences of the Black
Square: Abstract Art
Installation, 1915–2015,
installation view at
Whitechapel Gallery, 2015.
Left: Zhao Yao, Spirit Above
1971–1984, 2012. Right:
Liu Wei, Purple Air, 2014.
Courtesy of Whitechapel
Gallery, London.*



wider global arena, such as postwar abstraction in Japan and Korea, or, indeed, the abstraction inherent in the geometric patterns of Islamic art.

A plausible although unpalatable reason would be the exchange value of such art. It may be that for all the idealism initially associated with geometric abstraction, in recent times it has been co-opted by big business. This is echoed by the *Telegraph's* Alastair Smart, “This show’s story may begin in the dizzy throes of early twentieth century Communism, but it surely ends in the remorseless clutches of twenty-first century capitalism.”⁶ With the recent commercial success of contemporary Chinese art, it is not too much of a stretch in imagination, then, to understand why Liu Wei and Zhao Yao might have been included in the exhibition. Already, or coincidentally, denim, used by Zhao Yao in his artwork, is once again big in the clothing shops this spring. One may even conjecture that this meeting of art and the fashion business is reminiscent of Bridget Riley and her contribution to the printed patterns used in fashion during the swinging sixties. A catalogue entry confirms this: “[D]enim, . . . a material idealized for proletarian durability in the West, is a reminder of 1980s Chinese fashion.”⁷

But what is the context of abstraction for Chinese artists? Abstraction in the twenty-first century offers more than commercial possibilities to younger Chinese artists such as Zhao Yao and Liu Wei. It can constitute a wholehearted embrace of the new, the liberating, and the exciting, just as it did for Malevich and his contemporaries before the Soviet government enforced Socialist Realism as official policy in 1934. Abstraction can also offer a new theoretical framework and language, and a welcome split from the past—a voluntary forgetting, “an art of willful amnesia.”⁸

Abstraction has a long history in China going back to its ban by the Chinese government in 1949 for its decadent capitalist connotations.⁹ Arising from

the Constructivist and Suprematist reverts, abstraction holds a particular resonance for Chinese artists as they share a common root in its impulse for social change, one that is idealistic and revolutionary. With the ideologies of revolutionary utilitarianism during the Mao era still lingering, Chinese artists would probably not have difficulty relating to the early Russian paintings in the show, which demonstrate how artists were then able to break free of old conventions.

Malevich's *Black Quadrilateral*, undated, is clearly the lynchpin of the show, signaling his sky-high claims for abstraction, maintaining that it would break its earthly bonds and rise into a stratosphere of the spirit: "Follow me, comrade aviators, sail into the chasm!"¹⁰ It can also represent a way of escaping the oppressive regime of the West, as exemplified by the great pioneer Latin American artists who fled from the residue of figurative traditions imposed upon them by their Catholic colonizers from Europe—think, for example, of the work of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark, and other members of the Brazilian neo-concretist movement of the late 1950s. For Chinese artists, abstraction also was a way to reject traditional art practices, a promontory to progress and an emblem of the Chinese Dream,¹¹ a bid to wipe away the old order and start society anew. According to Blazwick, it "accustom(ed) painters to the new vision disengaged from objects . . . created an immense co-fraternity . . . cutting across the barriers of time and place . . . available on a single unhistorical and universal plane."¹²



Zhao Yao, *Spirit Above All 1-193A*, 2012, acrylic on denim, 200 x 222 x 8 cm. © Zhao Yao. Courtesy of Pace London.

Zhao Yao's work at the Whitechapel belongs to a series that was first exhibited in London in 2013 at Pace Gallery. It looks like a handbook of geometric abstraction, the canvases being made up of "circles combined with triangles to look like rabbit ears, circles on squares, cuboids that look like square rooms placed on their sides and some on their oblique sides,

Lyubov Popova, *Painterly Architectonic*, 1916, oil on board, 59.4 x 39.4 cm. Courtesy of Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.



with their roofs sliced off. . . . Pentagons, octagons, parallelograms, and intersecting rings. . . .¹³ His attraction to abstraction may have been derived from his obsession with mathematical puzzles.¹⁴ His seemingly mathematical constructions harken back to the days of the New Measurement Group in China in the 1990s, who “aimed at eliminating individuality and the arbitrary” to create work “based on series of mathematically formulated propositions.”¹⁵ This power of

logic derived from mathematics echoes the incessant references to the machine aesthetic that can be seen in Malevich’s *Scissors Grinder* (1912) and Lyubov Popova’s *Painterly Architectonic*, (1916), and in Zhao Yao’s work such references can be seen in *Spirit Above All I-93A* (2012), with its cuboids, and *Spirit Above All I-259* (2012), with its black circles recalling El Lissitzky’s *Proun Composition* (1925). Perhaps Zhao Yao is intentionally, or unwittingly, celebrating or challenging an aesthetic in China’s “Unfinished Revolution.”¹⁶ Or perhaps he is being cynical, as Robert Delaunay was, who was celebrating not so much the machine aesthetic, but who, according to Robert Hughes, while basking in the jubilation of modernity’s achievements in 1911 painted the Eiffel Tower thirty times, or perhaps Zhao Yao was trying to access the awe and antipathy of Ferdinand Leger’s *Cardplayers* (1917) after World War One.¹⁷

As far as Zhao Yao is concerned, every piece of his work entails a collaborative effort with his audience. He contends that it is important to him to acknowledge their presence, to show a desire to communicate, and to extend hospitality. He explained that some of his work is akin to TV soap operas and their relationship with their audiences: “I compare my recent work to a TV soap.”¹⁸

Zhao Yao’s work also seems to embody a shared desire with the Constructivist movement to involve the audience. Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), a Russian and Soviet literary theorist, critic, and writer, wanted to “de-automatize” the perceptions of the audience, to encourage the audience to learn about life through art through developing the skills of perception by making things that seem familiar to us unfamiliar. Zhao Yao’s provision of straw mats and albums of documentary photography at the Pace Gallery, London (showing his artworks being taken up a Tibetan mountain strewn round the gallery floor) is an indication of his desire to encourage learning through art, to invoke a more considered approach from his audience rather than the mere glance that most audiences give to artworks as they shuffle through the gallery.







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Zhao Yao, installation view
of *Spirit Above All*, 2012.
Photo: Stephen White. ©
Zhao Yao. Courtesy of Pace
London.

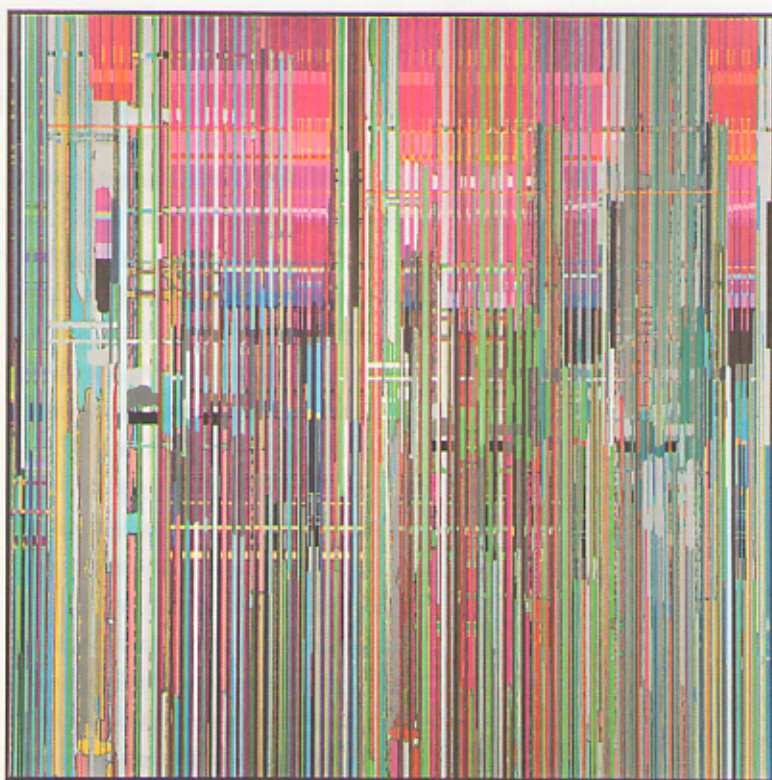
This active engagement with the viewers may also be a legacy of earlier Chinese artists who shared a concern for art to have a social purpose or to turn making art into a social project. Revolutionary artists of the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts in Yan'an during the 1930s, such as woodcarvers Gu Yuan, interacted with rural communities and invited them to critique their art. During the 1980s, Rustic Realism in China, which was first referred to as Scar Art, depicted the impact of the Cultural Revolution on ordinary people in rural and border regions. Luo Zhongli's painting *Father* (1980) is an influential example, shifting the focus of attention from celebrities and state figures to the common people, elevating an ordinary sunburned peasant as the subject of art. Today, there are some Chinese artists who take agency from communality, which ironically harks back to the Mao days. In terms of today, Zhao Yao is not alone in advancing a form of participatory art, and in collapsing the boundary between art and life. Ai Weiwei famously lives his life performatively in our media driven age, Zhang Peili's work is full of provocations, Xu Zhen's irreverence sits interestingly next to Zheng Guogu's sensitivity, and so on.

This social tendency may provide yet another reason for Zhao Yao's inclusion in *Adventures of the Black Square* as part of the premise of the exhibition was that "contemporary artists still experiment and challenge ideas of representation and reality, influenced by society and the evolving world around them."¹⁹ This was also exemplified by the inclusion of Sarah Morris's 2008 film *Beijing, 2008*, a depiction of everyday life in Beijing even though the only presence of geometric forms in the imagery were Chinese flags flying in the background. Blazwick clearly demonstrated unmitigated support for the social function of abstraction and suggested that, freed from the conventions of display, from representation and genres, "abstraction became an aesthetic analogue for dissolving social and political hierarchies' and can reach even into life..."²⁰

It is interesting that both Malevich and Zhao Yao were each in some way drawn to the mystical and to expressing in art spiritual reality beyond the

physical. For Malevich, the pinnacle of abstraction can be reached through the infinite, the spiritual, God, and the “supremacy of pure feeling.” For Zhao Yao, empirical exercises in the exploration of abstraction make possible access to the spiritual realm—something he hopes to achieve by observing, recording, condensing, and conceptualizing his journey with the artworks up a Tibetan mountain. In *Spirit Above All I-93A* (2012), there is an element of the coalescing of the geometric and the transcendental in a hexagonal shaped canvas printed over with geometric shapes and hung in the middle of a wall papered with a photograph depicting the landscape of a Tibetan mountain. Claiming to be non-religious, Zhao Yao is nonetheless impressed by the Tibetan people and the way they systemize their pilgrimage to Lhasa, the “place of Gods,” so much so that he organized the artworks to be carried in a difficult and treacherous trek (for both humans and artwork) up the Tibetan mountain to be blessed by a “Living Buddha,” a reincarnation of a previous Buddha according to Buddhist religious doctrine.

Liu Wei, *Purple Air No. 2*,
2014, oil on canvas, 260 x
280cm. © Liu Wei. Courtesy
White Cube, London.



If *Adventures of the Black Square* is the birthday party to Malevich’s *Black Square*, then Liu Wei may be a gatecrasher. Liu Wei’s work in the exhibition, *Purple Air No. 2* (2014), is almost exactly antithetical to Malevich’s. The former is hard-edged, machine-made, and fluorescent, and the latter, judging from *Black and White. Suprematist Composition*, 1915, in this show, is fragile, imprecise, and hand-painted. One has the precision of geometry, which is where the others falter. Liu Wei’s is impenetrable, while Malevich’s seem to have grown old gracefully,—their original black and white edges seeping into each other as if by osmosis.²¹ Liu Wei’s painting seems static, impermeable and lacking in dynamism, yet declamatory. Purple, pink, green, and blue emerge jarringly. To me, the translucency and luminescence of *Purple Air No. 2* coexist in lurid disharmony. The sensory experience of

attempting to study this squabble of colours is disrupted by the effect of what seems like a cascade of stroboscopic and flashing lights emitting from the painting.

For me, however, Liu Wei's strength lies in the diversity of his work. Many Chinese artists have earned a permanent place in recent art history through the instant recognizability of their work. Not so Liu Wei, for whom familiarity seems banal and originality is key. There exists almost a gulf of irreconcilable differences within his work, for example, between *Purple Air No. 2*, at the Whitechapel and earlier works such as *Indigestion II* (2004), a two-metre high pile of excrement made of tar—one of the petrochemical industry's residual products—or *Love it! Bite it!* (2006), made of edible rawhide bone treats for dogs. Looking at Liu Wei's overall oeuvre, there is no suggestion that abstraction is a customary way of thinking for him, even if his work in *Adventures of the Black Square* may.



Although lacking Zhao Yao's overt references to working with the audience and connecting with Tibet, some of Liu Wei's disparate works nonetheless carry a form of social commentary, albeit on an acerbic level. *Indigestion II* is an exploration of contemporary urban life and the architecture of the city. It is beset with satire and humour. The idea for the work originates, according to the artist, "from a picture of a giant that has gobbled up everything that crossed his path and who has excreted it all again just before the visitor passes by. If you take a good look at the excrement, it turns out that not everything he so greedily swallowed was digestible. The indigestible leftovers compose a miniature war scene."²² Indeed, upon closer inspection one can see

Liu Wei, *Indigestion II* (detail), 2004, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Liu Wei, *Indigestion II*, 2004, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

that the indigestible "kernels" of the excrement are actually hundreds of toy soldiers, airplanes, and instruments of war. It is a wry statement on some developed countries that have grown fat with progress, yet are plagued with war, human greed, and the unsustainability of today's consumption. In *Love it! Bite it!*, the floor becomes a congested conglomeration of architectural models of iconic stature, such as the Roman Coliseum and the Guggenheim museum, as well as other large, majestic-looking public spaces, towering buildings, and cathedrals. The work reads like a three-dimensional history of Western culture condensed into pale, ghostlike detritus.



Liu Wei, *Love It, Bite It*,
2008, installation. Courtesy
Whitechapel.

Similarly, although not immediately apparent, *Purple Air No. 2* is also social commentary, the stylized skyscraper cityscapes alluding to urban development. According to the Whitechapel catalogue entry, “a complex abstract grid of vertical lines in neon colours reference the ever-changing urban landscape and the alienation and corruption of the individual in a megalopolis.”²³ Liu Wei has been quoted as saying, “Cities are reality; all of China is a city under construction, and of course this influences me.”²⁴

This is perhaps why Liu Wei’s work has been included in the section titled “Architectonics,” which aims to track the effects of industrialization and urbanization. We are given a glimpse into how abstraction enables and facilitates emotional and psychological outlets. Even if for some in the Chinese art world, abstract art (*chouxiang yishu*) in the twentieth century Western sense does not exist at all,²⁵ it nonetheless is a useful tool for Chinese artists who are living in the midst of the tumultuous energy and ebullience that has unraveled over the last two decades. The emphasis that has been placed on the revolutionary roots of abstraction resonates with the idea of revolution in social and political practices in today’s China, and in the contradictory and fractured nature of her “alternative modernity.” As abstraction holds up an Adorno-esque mirror to the growing abstraction of social relations in industrial societies,²⁶ it is useful to be able to deliberate upon its social content, the abstract nature of social existence in China as it collides with the world in the process of globalization and as money and power take precedence over older social values.

It is also clear from the extensive array of work on display that abstraction offers artists the potential to play with meaning, even to resist meaning and interpretation. According to Blazwick, geometric abstraction enables artists and their communities to “throw off cultural baggage, to reinvent national

identity, and transcend the geopolitics of centre versus margin,” to achieve a “truer vision of reality.”²⁷ To be fair, none of the paintings in the Whitechapel exhibition evoke the uproar or mental turmoil that Malevich’s *Black Square* did to the St. Petersburg public when it was first exhibited in 1915.²⁸ Still, the irony is that even though the state of abstraction seems to have lost its revolutionary impulse and is increasingly used to describe a dystopian present, contemporary artists are still exploring its protean, multivalent character to propose it as an avenue for hope, if not utopia. In fact, geometric abstraction at the turn of the twenty-first century seems to offer a meta-critique of its own paradoxical history, yet “it still holds out the promise of the indeterminate, the unknown and the political. . . . [C]ritics cannot easily dominate the blankness of monochrome. It is a wild card, an active unconscious.”²⁹

The indeterminable nature of abstraction may be the attraction to Chinese artists, providing the scope to ameliorate the mood of disenchantment in China that Geremie R. Barmé refers to as “national nihilism,” and which some believe, cannot even be addressed by “craven pragmatism and opportunism.”³⁰ This presumed deplorable state of nothingness, indicted with the term “national nihilism,” is denied any *entendre* of philosophical skepticism or scrutiny of the impossibility of absolute cultural translation, or an interrogation of corporate diversion.³⁷ “National nihilism” denies and challenges discursive possibilities for artistic practices to examine the development of distinctive economic models in relation to the operation of the social, and the relationship between history and the contemporary. What is at stake is the lack of a discursive space to interrogate such contradictions and misinterpretation.

The idea of nihilism is useful in understanding Zhao Yao’s work at the Whitechapel. On the one hand, he seems pretty amicable as an artist and that perhaps weakens the work to the point of irresolution. His artworks and installations do not appear to be guided by any form or logic. In fact, Zhao Yao himself revealed at an online interview with the author (January 31, 2013) that there is no social significance or spiritual relationship in his installations; rather, they are merely an experiment to see how the different elements interact with each other, and with the audience. The geometric patterns created for brainteaser puzzles are to do with his desire to discover more about art and its relation with the audience. On the other hand, with art not from the mainstream, there is always an element of the impossibility of absolute translation, one of multiplicity of cultural references, and of course the enigma of art (the second scenario is too large a topic and not part of the remit of this article). From the transcultural perspective, nihilism is not necessarily clad with barbed wire. Certainly, connoting Nietzschean existential angst can easily come to mind, but equally nihilism can also connote Eastern perspectives such as Buddhist doctrine of inaction and Nirvana or a Daoist emptiness and spontaneity, which can be affirmative.³¹ Buddhism shares a nihilistic turning away from life and can be understood as a life-negating philosophy that seeks to escape an existence dominated by suffering, and for some it is their preferred religion. The ‘*wu*’ (nothingness) is an aspect of Daoism and can connote positively one who has freed oneself from all obstructing notions and distracting passions.

Zhao Yao's attempt at attaining a truer vision of reality, may not be to throw off his cultural baggage, as Blazwick suggested as one aspect of abstraction.³² Instead, he references Buddhism through Tibet, and in his view, this inclusion is to bring into the work some external factor that may potentialize meaning or layers of meaning, or to bring into question what lies beneath its formal qualities and symbolic meaning.³³ This comes full circle to reference nihilism as something not negative or adverse, not as a no-thing but as a positive effort. In combining geometric abstraction with a Tibetan Buddhist scene, he is setting up an inquiry of preconceived ideas of the norm, of other possible interpretations of religious and philosophical ideas, just as Malevich did with his exploitation of the suprematist work as "filled with the spirit of non-objective sensation."

Liu Wei, on the other hand, is not known to reveal much about himself or the intent of his work. Instead, it is thought by Xhinyu Chen, writing in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* that he would prefer to challenge the audience to consider their relationship to art and to aspire to experience first hand the power of art, even if through mundane, everyday situations.³⁴ Choosing titles like *Enigma* and *Puzzle* only add to this inscrutability. However, according to Liu Wei himself, the cause for his reticence is about being misunderstood or misrepresented. "I'm really perplexed by the discrepancy between what I set out to express and what gets expressed in the end. This explains why I don't write anymore and why I'm reluctant to grant interviews."³⁵ Whitechapel has presented him as suitably taciturn, that his work is about the democratization of meaning, quoting him that "having something (in a space) is extremely physical, something you can feel. I am only the intermediary, to provoke thought. This is democratic, but if I start providing explanations, I become an entity of power, hegemonic power."³⁶

The incorporation of the philosophical, the spiritual, and the presentation of perceptions of human qualities have existed in China since ancient times in the literati landscape—its garden culture and calligraphy. This underpinning of Chinese art is described by Wu Guanzhong as "abstract beauty, no subject, just form."³⁷ The interrogation of utopia resonates with the idealism of the Chinese Dream as part of the national yearning or a paradisaical dreamland. According to the Chinese online dictionary, *Chindict*, the Chinese translation of utopia is 世外桃源 (*shiwai taoyuan*), also referred to variously as "The Land of Peach Blossoms," "The Garden of the Peaches of Immortality," "imaginary land of joy and plenty," and "Shangri-la." Abstraction provides an interesting platform for Chinese artists, seeking their particular Chinese dream and carrying on the Unfinished Revolution. It allows for artists to free themselves from the bourgeois cult of the artist, albeit ironically transforming them into slaves to the institutionalization of art.

Abstraction lends itself to an interrogation of utopia, where, according to Blazwick, "Its floating, spatial dynamic made abstraction an analogue for Utopia as 'no-place'."³⁸ It allows for the parodying of the dystopian turn of a brave new world. For the Chinese government during the Anti-Spiritual

Pollution Campaign of 1983, this “no-place” is where abstraction inhabited the role of decadent bourgeois ideas.³⁹

If anything, the works by Zhao Yao and Liu Wei in *Adventures of the Black Square* demonstrate the perspicacity of many Chinese artists, not as imitators, but as artists imposing an almost Machiavellian boldness to probe abstraction's intellectual potential, to negotiate and interrogate meaning for an international audience, creatively and adaptably. What I would like to see is for this potential to be inclusive, not just for the international platforms and marketplace, but for there to be a discursive space for the construction of meaning from the local viewpoint. In the final analysis, abstract art demonstrates the capacity to enable and inform during this period of accelerated confusion—of antipathy, ambivalence, nostalgia mixed with forgetting, censorship and self censorship—if not from traditions, prejudices, or officialdom, then from the traumas of the recent past. The machine aesthetic encompasses agency, but also a dystopic potential to reduce artists to what Blazwick describes as “obedient apparatchiks or production line robots”⁴⁰ More positively, I would like to think of this to lead to a new glocal relational, by that I mean art interacting with its social context in the local and the global, coming full circle to circumnavigate China's venerable, age-old social values of *guanxi*.

Notes

1. “Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015,” press release, Whitechapel Gallery, January 2015, <http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/press/adventures-black-square-abstract-art-society-1915-2015/>.
2. Iwona Blazwick, “Utopia,” in *Adventures of the Black Square*, ed. Iwona Blazwick (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Prestel Publishing, 2015), 15.
3. “Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015,” press release, Whitechapel Gallery, January 2015.
4. Alastair Smart, “Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015, Whitechapel Gallery, review: ‘A journey worth taking,’” *Telegraph*, January 14, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/11344507/Abstract-Art-and-Society-1915-2015-Whitechapel-Gallery-review-a-journey-worth-taking.html/>. The Bottom Line, ed. Martin Coomez, “Adventures of the Black Square,” *Time Out*, January 27–February 2, 2015, 73. Laura Cumming, “Adventures of the Black Square review—art that aimed to change the world,” *Guardian*, January 18, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/18/adventures-of-the-black-square-review-whitechapel-abstract-art-that-aimed-to-change-the-world/>.
5. Cumming, “Adventures of the Black Square review—art that aimed to change the world.”
6. Smart, “Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015.”
7. Catalogue entry for Zhao Yao in Blazwick, *Adventures of the Black Square*, 276.
8. Blazwick, “Utopia,” 17. Blazwick quotes art historian Benjamin Buchloh's description of what abstraction was able to offer in the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe.
9. Michael Sullivan, “Orthodoxy and Individualism in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art,” in *Artists and Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 202. “The ban in China since 1949 on abstract expressionism, op art, kinetic art, minimal art etc., was not instituted on stylistic grounds. For example, theorists have said that China has no need of abstraction not on formalistic grounds but that abstraction was related to decadent capitalist culture but because China ‘already has, in calligraphy, a highly abstract art of her own.’”
10. Cumming quoting Kazimir Malevich, “Adventures of the Black Square review.”
11. The Chinese dream is popularly associated with Xi Jinping; it was his party slogan during his visit to the National Museum of China in November 2012 and frequently appears in the press.
12. Iwona Blazwick, “Utopia,” 15. Blazwick quotes critic and art historian Meyer Schapiro.
13. Voon Pow Bartlett, “Zhao Yao: Spirit Above All,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 12, no. 4 (July/August 2013), 77–86.
14. Zhao Yao, in conversation with the author, May 31, 2013.
15. Wu Hung, *Chinese Art at the Crossroads* (London: New Arts Media, 2001), 206.
16. “China's Unfinished Revolution” is the title of a talk given by Jonathan Fenby on April 30, 2013, that the author attended, at King's College, London. The speaker assessed the challenges facing China today and considered what the next generation of leaders will need to do to continue the revolution set in motion by Deng Xiaoping. “But the basic line remains as it was with Deng Xiaoping in 1978 to

- keep the red flag flying and to ensure that politics runs the world's second biggest economy," he said. Transcription of talk by Jonathan Fenby, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/183657#sthash.BLSDNH2g.dpuf/>.
17. Robert Hughes, "Mechanical Paradise," in *The Shock of the New* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1992), 9.
 18. English translation by the author of an interview with the artist (May 31, 2013), in which he said, "我把最近的创作比作电视剧。"
 19. "Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015," press release, Whitechapel Gallery, January 2015.
 20. Blazwick, "Utopia," 15.
 21. As Adrian Searle puts it, "Malevich's *Black Square* was made by a human, not a machine. Other artists in *Adventures of the Black Square*, the new exhibition at the Whitechapel, might draw straighter lines, disguise their touch and achieve more accurate geometries, but it doesn't make them better." See Adrian Searle, "Planet of the shapes: how art and society were driven to abstraction," *Guardian*, January 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/14/abstract-art-adventures-of-the-black-square-whitechapel-review-planet-of-the-shapes/>. "Malevich's legacy and its 'hard-edged blackness' has become metaphorical. Time has taken its toll but has graced it with a beauty that even he might not have imagined. The black edges seemed to have liquefied into the white background, and the white background has developed a delicious buttery shade, making the whole painting shimmer."
 22. "Liu Wei," Saatchi Gallery, http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/liu_wei.htm/.
 23. Catalogue entry for Liu Wei, in *Adventures of the Black Square*, 271.
 24. Guo Xiaoyan, "Liu Wei," in *Breaking Forecast: 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation Artists*, eds. Guo Xiaoyan, Jérôme Sans (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2010).
 25. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 311: "Paintings by Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Newman which were made in a utopian and abstract spirit and presented in pure, two-dimensional, geometric forms, can hardly be found in Chinese abstract art."
 26. Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, 1969), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_art#cite/.
 27. Blazwick, "Utopia," 16.
 28. Maks Karpovets, "Kazimir Malevich: the Ukrainian roots of his avant-garde art," December 27, 2011, *Time Out*, no. 76, 2011, [this link can be found on <http://www.day.kiev.ua/en/arihiv/no76-2011/>], <http://www.day.kiev.ua/en/article/time-out/kazimir-malevich-ukrainian-roots-his-avant-garde-art>, January, 2015. According to the article, Malevich's *Black Square* presented a challenge to common sense and morals. "For Petersburg (sic) public, the avant-garde exhibit was a challenge to common sense and morals. The audience felt fooled, seeing the primitivism and vulgarity of the canvases which were an overt mockery of the visitors' intellectual abilities."
 29. Blazwick, "Utopia," 18. Blazwick quotes Angeline Morrison.
 30. Geremie R. Barmé, *In The Red* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 104, n14, 413. According to Barmé, "National Nihilism," 民族虚无主义 *minzhu xuwu zhuyi*, has become one of China's bugbears, a form of cultural treason.
 31. Nietzsche's idea of nihilism is often misunderstood as agnostic and suggesting an abyss of nothingness. Many scholars believe that he was actually an affirmative thinker, one who endorsed moral values and our capacity to create our own moral compass. He also saw in humanity the potential to overcome the malaise of modernity in late-nineteenth-century Europe; see Warren Hyson, "Loughner's Terrible Violence and his Misunderstanding of Nietzsche," January 17, 2011, <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/135404/> and Wayne Klein, *Nietzsche and the Promise of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 34.
 32. Blazwick, "Utopia," 16.
 33. Zhao Yao, e-mail conversation between author and the artist, August 5, 2014.
 34. Xingyu Chen, "Liu Wei: Trilogy," in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, No. 5 (September/October 2011), 91–98.
 35. "The Return of the Individual: A Home Conversation at the Beijing Pavilion," November 4, 2007, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7, no. 3 (May/June 2008), 70–77.
 36. Iwona Blazwick and Magnus af Petersens, "Architectonics," in *Adventures of the Black Square*, 61.
 37. Quoted in Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 81.
 38. Blazwick, "Utopia," 16.
 39. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 80.
 40. Blazwick, "Utopia," 16.