

Chinese Art outside the Art Space

Editorial

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The notion of ‘exhibition’ originated from the West, in the context of our discussion, usually as an organized presentation and display of a selection of items in a space of art museum, gallery or institution that open to the public. Generally acknowledged, perhaps one of the earliest examples was first Paris Salon held in the Palais-Royal in 1667, and by 1699, the exhibition’s growth prompted a move to the Grand Galerie of the Louvre. Salon thus became the public space for art in the modern sense, inviting aesthetic judgments. Soon after, in the eighteenth century, art exhibitions proliferated throughout Europe and in Britain, most notably, there has been the annual summer show of London’s Royal Academy which was first unveiled in 1769. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, European cities and states began to sponsor large international art exhibitions to build up and secure their identities as cultural centres, including the Venice Biennale, founded in 1895, as one of the most famous and enduring examples (Altshuler 2008: 12-3). From the 1990s on, today, we have seen biennials and triennials established as instruments of economic and cultural development worldwide, whilst art has been exhibited mostly in the art museum and gallery spaces.¹

In China, ‘art outside the art space’ seems to be *natural*; it can be understood from either a cultural and historical perspective, or as a political proposition. From a cultural point of view, in the Chinese tradition of literati art, for instance, artworks were made, shared, and appreciated within the form of scholarly ‘elegant gathering’ (*yaji*), which was essentially a kind of private (rather than public) event within secluded (rather than institutional) spaces, certainly not available to all. Recorded in many classic paintings², artworks that consist of visual and textual or calligraphic components are usually examined within a small group of peers in a way that makes viewing a ‘social act’; or to an extreme, as the figure of individual and solitary subjectivity, the hand scroll (*shoujuan*) is even ‘the opposite to the social, collective viewing implied by the hanging scroll format’ (Clunas 2017: 55), in other words,

¹ There are a number of international art events produced outside conventional exhibition spaces. For example, since 2000, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale provides an opportunity to present projects and initiatives developed in its outdoor Art Field. And as the newly established Thailand Biennale, its first edition (2018) will be staged on the natural sites in Krabi, providing opportunities for artists to engage with the local communities and to develop site-specific and site-sustainable work.

² As a fine example, please see Xie Huan (1377-1452), *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden*, c. 1437. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

becomes a ‘private medium’, where ‘only a single spectator can manipulate the painting’s movement and control the pace of reading’ (Wu 1996: 61).

In the contemporary context, ‘art outside the art space’ indicates a new triangular relationship between art, art space and everyday life. In China, contemporary art was not necessarily developed to grow beyond the institutional walls; instead, literally, it was born outside the museum. From a political perspective, the ‘outside-ness’ immediately relates to the ‘unofficial’ status of contemporary Chinese art from its early development. In 1979 and 1980 sixteen exhibitions of avant-garde art were held in Beijing, Shanghai and Xi’an. Two exhibitions of the Star group, which included principal members Huang Rui (b. 1952), Wang Keping (b. 1949), Ma Desheng (b. 1952), defined an alternative position from the official Chinese art world, and marked a turning point in the art history of post-Mao era. On 27 September 1979, The artists decided to stage the first Star Art Exhibition (*xingxing meizhan*) on the iron fence surrounding China’s National Art Museum in Beijing, juxtaposed timely with *the National Art Exhibition in Celebrating the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China*, an official exhibition inside the building. Two days later the exhibition was removed by the police.³ With the help from Liu Xun, an officer of the Beijing Art Association, the Exhibition was eventually allowed to be shown from 23 November to 2 December 1979, again outside the ‘legitimised’ art space, in Beihai Park. By rejecting the highly polished, socialist realist style and the approach of depicting revolutionary and political events, the Star group had broken the silence. As Li Xianting (1993: 42) discusses:

The Star Exhibition marked the beginning of two particular characteristics of modern Chinese art: a critical awareness of politics and culture, and a symbolism based on the fundamental techniques of realism... graphic portrayal, philosophical meaning, and a somewhat grotesque presentation and expressiveness were emphasised. This indicates that the rebellion against realism was the starting point for the artists but at the same time they remained bound, consciously or unconsciously, to this tradition.

It has been generally acknowledged that contemporary art in China started from this 1979 Star Group art exhibition, although somehow seems to be too simplistic⁴. Noticeably, as recorded in the famous photograph (see page xx), it was staged next to the National Art Museum, which was built at the end of the 1950s with featuring the architectural styles of Chinese traditional attics and began to open to the public in 1963. By hanging their works of some 150 paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints precisely external to the National Art

³ The artists responded by holding a public demonstration on 1 October 1979, the thirtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic.

⁴ See ‘Editorial’, in JCCA 4.2&3, *Making the New World: the Arts of China’s Cultural Revolution*, p. 123.

Museum, the 23 young artists of the Star Group had proclaimed their self-identity as ‘outsiders’ to official art housed in China (Wu 2014: 33). Both the artists and audience could easily see the museum inside the fence, which on the one hand, refuted the licit entry of the artwork to that officially defined art institution; and on the other hand, was transformed by the artists as an alternative ‘space’ for the exhibition. Here, the distance, or such a ‘spatial dichotomy’⁵, is vital – between the building and the fence, the ‘official’ and the ‘unofficial’, between indoor and outdoor and between art space and everyday; it is apparent and visible.⁶

Today, the situation of Chinese contemporary art taking place outside the museum and galleries continues, but with a completely different momentum and agenda. If the Star exhibition, as a first representative of ‘unofficial art’, ‘non-official art’ or ‘avant-garde art’ from a political point of view⁷, was forced to appear as ‘outsiders’, then now, following such a vein of legacy, to produce and exhibit art outside art space seems to be autonomic determinations.

Art has been produced site-specifically for the spaces other than art institutions in China, including those of working venues, shown in a range of alternative spaces beyond galleries or museums, and has ‘happened’ in the public sphere and become political or social ‘events’, or artistic ‘incidents’. Creative curatorial and artistic strategies have been developed to respond to the constraints of art institutions, censorships and at the same time, to push the boundaries of how we understand art.

As an example, I was privileged to work with the team and the group of artists for the Fourth Guangzhou Triennial: *The Unseen*.⁸ In addition to the institutional spaces, the Guangdong Museum of Art as its primary venue, and the Guangzhou Opera House as a performance space, we chose the Grandview Mall (*zhengjia guangchang*) – one of China’s largest shopping centres, a public, non-art space – to be part of the Triennial. The Grandview Mall is located right in the centre of southern China’s prosperous Tianhe Business District. When it opened in January 2005, a more than 400 thousand square metre construction area was devoted to the development of a ‘shopping paradise’, built on the idea of ‘experimental consumption’. The Grandview combines retail, leisure, entertainment, dining, exhibitions,

⁵ See Pauline J. Yao, ‘Towards A Spatial History of Contemporary Art in China’, in this special issue.

⁶ After a decade long silence, a large-scale exhibition of with 297 works, *China/Avant-garde* conceptualized in 1986, took over that very official space, the National Art Museum of China in February 1989.

⁷ Or the term ‘un-unofficial art’ fabricated by Hou (1996: 41) Hanru.

⁸ Curated by Jiang Jiehong and Jonathan Watkins, the Fourth Guangzhou Triennial: *The Unseen*, presented work by more than 80 international artists from 24 countries and areas, from 28 September to 16 December 2012. As part of the Triennial, the Grandview Mall Project includes work of installation, sound and performance by 19 artists.

fitness, tourism, and corporate businesses, to provide consumers with an extraordinary experience of the everyday. The Grandview Mall Project of the Triennial was not a conventional ‘public art’ project, where any *available* shopping area would be selected merely as an alternative stage; instead, it encouraged artworks to leave art space and to merge with the reality.

In such a project developed, art must confront and respond to the rapid change and creative forces of urban life in China. This shopping mall space serves the needs of tens of thousands of people on a daily basis; it is not either a white or a black cubes as static indoor structures to be employed for art exhibitions. When the constant weave and flow of consumers and information, together with the dramatic design of its interior, highlighted by shining neon, dazzling signs and spectacles, converge in a forceful explosion of overwhelming visual impact, then, where is the space for art? Through creative strategies, art takes a proactive and practical attitude as it closely approaches, imitates, and appropriates reality, while simultaneously distinguishing itself from it – thereby engendering a new way of thinking about the art-life relationship.

I introduce two pieces of work here as examples in hope to illuminate the discussion. Since the first McDonald’s in China opened for business in Shenzhen in October 1990, American fast food culture has had a profound influence on the Chinese people and their attitudes towards lifestyle. In China today, almost every large shopping centre will, without exception, be equipped with a McDonald’s. In accordance with McDonald’s brand image specifications, in *I’m Lovin’ It* (Figure 1), artist Li Wei manufactured fifty signature ‘M’ logos and had them installed throughout the mall’s interior. When the iconic yellow ‘M’s’ pervaded the shopping centre, appearing on every single floor, such an eyeful of McDonald’s logos only serves to exaggerate what is already a prominent visual experience in the life of the everyday consumer. The logos are neither advertisement nor sheer irony. They perpetuate an absurd reality that already exists; each assuming that with a flick of the on-switch, customers will come to dine. In reality, however, not all people could find the actual restaurant. Yang Zhenzhong’s work, *Left Right Left*, too welcomed the challenge of its noisy visual environment. Noting that any kind of bright colour, even neon light, equally faces the potential threat of drowning in this chaotic space, the artist aptly chooses to re-appropriate the neon traffic light: namely, the pedestrian ‘walk’ or ‘don’t walk’ sign. Hanging in the northeast circular atrium of the Grandview, there are one hundred pairs of ‘walk’ and ‘don’t walk’ lights, conveniently arranged along the eave of the circular veranda (Figure 2). Two hundred red and green pedestrian symbols blink on and off at overlapping intervals, constantly switching from ‘walk’ to ‘don’t’ as if guiding a team, missing its captain, on a march to an

eternally unknown destination. This kind of quotidian outdoor visual signal feels completely out of place when planted indoors, and as such forms an almost grotesque kind of carnival line-up.

According to the record, the formal closure of the 1979 the Star Exhibition was announced as it had ‘interrupted the social order and people’s normal lives’ (Wu 2014: 34). While art is purposefully developed outside art space, or in other words, returns to life, where is the boundary between life and art? It can be an interruption, through a variety of media and approaches, including socially engaged art that discussed by a number of papers in this issue. And in some cases, art can even be seen as an ‘invasion’ into the daily existence that generates misunderstanding, confusion and confrontation, and at the same time, requires negotiations as an important process of art production, dissemination and perception. Art space today is open and fluid and art, is elsewhere, or indeed, everywhere.

Focusing on art made, displayed, performed or executed outside the conventional venues of art museums and galleries, this special issue aims to not only offer a unique perspective to understand Chinese art in the contemporary context, but also, more importantly, to extend to critical reflections upon the relationships between art and art exhibition, between curatorial strategies, artistic productions and audience perceptions and participations beyond China, and ultimately, between art and our daily life. This issue has been edited from primarily the presentations at the 10th CCVA Annual Conference, hosted at the School of Art, Birmingham City University on 12-13 October 2017. It was convened as a two-day event to invite researchers, curators, art historians, critics and artists at all stages of their careers worldwide to respond to the topic, aiming to provide an alternative perspective to understand the development of Chinese contemporary art and marking the 10th anniversary of the Centre. We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to all the contributors to the conference, the speakers during the two-day event, in particular, the keynote speakers Karen Smith and Pauline J. Yao for their inspiring discussions; the invited panel chairs, Jonathan Watkins and Monica Merlin; and colleagues and student volunteers at the School of Art for their enthusiastic and generous support.

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