

'The Other Stage': Issues of Identity and Translation at The Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art

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Abstract

China's growth as an economic and political world power and has placed China in a position of importance within the global art world. This influence has also become reflected in the growing visibility of Chinese artists who have been exhibited in international art organisations and art markets since the 1990s. Meanwhile, the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFFCA) had been in operation since 1986 as a small arts centre for British Chinese artists but later began to expand its scope of research to include contemporary art from Mainland China in 1998 as well as exhibiting artists of Chinese descent from a multitude of backgrounds to eventually become the longest running non-profit gallery for Chinese contemporary art in the UK. This thesis, produced in collaboration with CFCCA, analyses the of the Centre's expanding role as an arts organisation over the past three decades, starting as a community centre for British Chinese artists, to an international and research focused art gallery. It will also discuss how the Centre's exhibition history reveals the development of its curatorial methodologies from exhibiting China as a subject to using discussions about China as its primary curatorial methodology.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Since its first incarnation as a festival for Chinese culture in 1986, the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art has evolved through a series of different roles for both the Chinese art communities in Manchester and as a contemporary art organisation. The Centre began as an artist-led space in Chinatown and later on Edge Street in the Northern Quarter (Fig, 1.1) dedicated to exhibiting and promoting the work of British Chinese artists. In the late 1990s, with the rise in popularity of contemporary art from Mainland China, the Centre expanded its curatorial focus to become an early specialist in Chinese contemporary art from artists from a range of backgrounds including a residency space and eventually working in a collaborative role for offsite projects and consulting for larger arts organisations. The Centre's curatorial methodologies and approaches to research have also changed over the years. Analysing the Centre's exhibition history shows a trajectory from China as subject, progressing the scope of the survey shows of the 1990s to emphasising solo exhibitions to developing a more critical and research-based approach to discussing issues surrounding contemporary China.

Since the Chinese Arts Centre, later rebranded as the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, first began as a small arts festival showcasing the work of British Chinese artists in Manchester in 1986, the Centre has played a central role in exhibiting Chinese contemporary art in the UK. The centre also contributed to research and education surrounding Chinese contemporary art and the promotion and representation of artists of Chinese descent. Through a study of CFCCA, this thesis will analyse the methods of cultural encounter through curation and art practice by examining selected exhibitions and artist residencies produced by the Centre. I will also explore the questions of translation within a wider context of exhibitions on Chinese contemporary art in the UK. This doctoral research project was initially organised by CFCCA and Birmingham City University as part of a range of projects undertaken by the Centre for its 30th anniversary which included a program of exhibitions and talks and opening the Centre's library and archive to the public. Not only did the Centre provide access to its site, archives and networks during the project, but the invaluable of experience and mentorship of its director, curators and staff.

The international interest in contemporary art from Mainland China increased dramatically during the 1990s, as the number of international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art and publications featuring or highlighting Chinese contemporary art increased in profile. The relationship between Chinese artists and western art institutions, collectors and academics had also evolved into a research practice that was both more rigorous and more critical in its self-reflection. The international representation of Chinese contemporary art has not only provided a commentary on contemporary Chinese culture but through the integration of art on a global scale, and from the outset of Chinese contemporary art becoming recognised within an international setting has become increasingly 'multicultural' and 'trans-Chinese'.¹ With artists working in and being influenced by multiple countries, Chinese artists had a major impact on contemporary art is its global influences such as modernity and changing social systems. Both *China Avant-Garde*² and *China's New Art, Post-1989* were pivotal in creating mainstream international awareness of Chinese contemporary art as well as opening discourses on cultural translation and transcultural curatorial practices including the prevalence of political dissidence in the representation of Chinese art in Western art institutions. The increasing interest of the international art world in Chinese contemporary art, as well as its growing interest in international academic circles, brought about the participation of many Chinese artists in renowned international festivals and exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale of 1993, 1995, and 1999 and Documenta X in 1997. It further resulted in the organisation of numerous exhibitions and retrospectives of Chinese contemporary art.³

¹ Lee, Leo Ou-fan, "Across Trans-Chinese Landscapes: Reflections on Contemporary Chinese Cultures" in *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41.

² Not to be confused with *China/Avant-Garde* at China Art Gallery, Beijing, 1989.

³ Koppel-Yang, Martina, *Semiotic Warfare: A Semiotic Analysis, the Chinese Avant-garde, 1979-1989*, (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2003), 32-33.

1.1 Research Background

While the title of 'Chinese art' can be applied to a number of different creative practices, including those in traditional media and styles such as literati ink painting, they are not necessarily perceived or portrayed by artists as 'Contemporary art'. Wu Hung's description of the initial definition of Chinese contemporary art as "art that self-consciously defines itself as "contemporary" and that is also accepted as such by curators and art critics worldwide" and refers to an "intentional artistic and theoretical construct that asserts a particular temporality and spatiality for itself"⁴. When this interpretation of the definition of Chinese contemporary art is viewed critically, one can argue that by this definition Chinese art is only 'contemporary' when it adheres to a western-defined standard of contemporaneity in relation to American and European art theory and criticism.

The influence of Western art and art theory in contemporary Chinese art, as well as the commercial success of Chinese artists catering to western collectors, has been widely criticised in both China and the West in both cases as being inauthentic to the artist's practice. While the commercial art market is not the focus of this thesis, it remains an important factor in the context of contemporary Chinese art and can be compared to international curating in the sense that both are selecting works by Chinese artists for the consumption of Western audiences. Belting has argued that historically an exclusion in the modern art world took place where non-Western artists were not included within the canon of Western art history which has led to retrospective efforts to historicise marginalised or 'other' avant-gardes.⁵ This can be seen in recent retrospective exhibitions such as *the M+ Sigg Collection: Chinese art from the 1970s to Now* exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery (Fig. 1.2) where the work of Chinese artists was viewed through an art historical lens. One might also consider the Royal Academy solo retrospective of Ai Weiwei and adding the artist as an honorary academician. However, Mainland China and the pluralistic identities of its territories, communities, and diasporas which I will refer to as 'Greater China,' retain an element of international interest relative to the cultural identity or the notion of 'Chineseness' in its iconography thus problematizing the curatorial approaches of survey exhibitions. The term 'Chineseness' is both open to interpretation and contentious when discussing the many

⁴ Wu Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 11.

⁵ Belting, Hans, "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate", in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, ed. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Berlin: Ostfildern, 2009), 38–73.

meanings of 'what it is to be Chinese,' whether that is terms of identity, traditions or culture. Within the context of contemporary art, this term is often used to identify the cultural signifiers or aesthetic choices within works that refer explicitly to aspects of Chinese society and culture. This can be embodied as references to classical Chinese art or calligraphy in works such as *Copying "the Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* (1990-1995) by Qiu Zhijie (Fig, 1.3) or contemporary social and cultural subjects such as Liu Xiaodong's use of Chinese migrant workers as subjects in his work. However, because of the non-static nature of 'Chineseness' as a term, it can be useful in discussing the expanded context of multiple Chinese identities, particularly within the scope of CFCCA which has grown to include 'Greater China' in both the identities of the artists it exhibits and within its curatorial research.

The representation of Chinese contemporary art in the United Kingdom can also be placed within the broader context of relationships between contemporary Chinese art and international audiences in general. However, there are several aspects surrounding exhibiting contemporary art in this country that can be perceived as unique to the UK. The first includes the specific problems of exoticism and misrepresentation in the context of post-colonial theory particularly in relation to the role of the British Empire in the colonisation of Hong Kong. The second is the recurring issue of 'Chineseness' and cultural identity in the UK as a site of diasporic communities and multicultural audiences. One of the primary questions that will be exploring through the thesis is how CFCCA has evolved in its curatorial approaches regarding the issues of defining translation, representation and cultural identity of contemporary Chinese and Chinese diasporic artistic practices. How has the notion of 'Chineseness' been addressed, re-evaluated or opposed within the context of the exhibition? One concern within curating Chinese contemporary art is the methods in which arts practitioners, curators and researchers face the issues of migration. The thesis will attempt to identify the space that can be occupied by Chinese contemporary art when it is continuously evoking a movement between places and cultures. It will also analyse the languages the curator or artist can use in the translation of works towards international audiences while also questioning the translation of cultures and its inherent flaws. These concerns push the frameworks that exist conceptually for cultural exchanges and allow a re-examination of their conceptual viability regarding new debates on cross-cultural curating and globalisation.

In addition to the diversity of Greater China, one can also consider the shift in the PRC's cultural identity which has also been in a process of change since the 1980s when the Chinese Communist Party began to participate in the international capitalist market economy. Since the 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party has employed Chinese contemporary art as an element of China's cultural diplomacy to articulate China's national identity. The notion of 'identity' holds a significance both on a personal level and as part of a wider official diplomatic process. The inclusion of Chinese contemporary art as a part of China's cultural diplomacy to display itself as a contemporary and globally facing culture is embodied in both official and unofficial pathways. Therefore, it can be argued that the theme of identity in Chinese contemporary art not only creates a site of discourse but a site of construction where a contemporary cultural identity is built as well as analysed. However, the influence of Western aesthetic models in Chinese contemporary art led to a critical and artistic backlash both from Chinese and foreign art critics both as a result of dialogues centred on early international exhibitions of Chinese artists and artistic projects that displayed a continued search for a national cultural identity in Mainland China.

These projects revealed a dissatisfaction with the ongoing contemporary art movement and attempted to resist the framework of the historical Western art canon by embracing elements of local history and traditional art and culture. This implies that despite any adoption of Chinese contemporary art into a global narrative of contemporary art, it will inevitably be placed in the position of 'other' by existing in a 'trans-cultural space'. This experience of migration and diaspora can be considered an 'in-between' space between homeland and present adopted land or, as Bhabha has coined, 'homelessness'. In the context of CFCCA, the gallery has consistently encountered problems regarding its identity as it operates as both a contemporary art institution and a space that focuses the majority of its programming on displaying artists of Chinese descent. The conflict between the centre's multiple roles has resulted in an expansion of the Centre's definitions of China and 'Chineseness' beginning in the 1980s as a creative space for British Chinese artists, to its inclusion of artists from the PRC in 1998 to its current criteria of including both Chinese artists and projects and research concerning China. This expansion can be seen as a loss of focus from the centre's original approach to its programming while still being seen as separate from other arts institutions due to its specialism. One could argue that as Chinese artists have received more attention internationally and as galleries and art institutions have become more globally focused in the past thirty years might be a sign that the need for a gallery such as CFCCA might diminish in the future.

While there have been studies concerning British Chinese contemporary art and CFCCA as a cultural institution, there are some notable exceptions. The first is an article by Dr Beccy Kennedy, *Outside Chinatown: The Evolution of Manchester's Chinese Arts Centre as a Cultural Translator for Contemporary Chinese art* (2015). *Outside Chinatown* is a case study of interviews with former staff members and practicing artists at the centre that took place at the time of the centre's rebranding from the Chinese Arts Centre to CFCCA in 2013 and tracks the evolution of the centre as an international arts institution.⁶ Of particular note are the misgivings among many of the interview participants towards the Centre's move towards international contemporary art and away from being a space for the practice and representation of British Chinese artists. Kennedy compares the loss of a large amount of the Centre's early archives in a fire to a metaphorical erasure of its past. She also equates the Centre's move to Manchester's Northern Quarter with its move towards the contemporary at the expense of moving away from its roots as an organisation manifested in the Centre's physical move away from Manchester's Chinatown. Another work is Diana Yeh's *Ethnicities on the move: 'British-Chinese' art-identity, subjectivity, politics and beyond* (2000), which focuses on the work and research of British-Chinese artists particularly in their work's engagement with and criticisms of cultural and ethnic identities in Britain.⁷ In *Manchester's Chinese Arts Centre: A Case Study in Strategic Cultural Intervention* (2018) Felicia Chan and Andy Willis also analyse CFCCA's changing role as a cultural organisation within the larger context of the UK's political and economic climate.⁸ While Yeh, Chan and Willis have focused primarily on a sociological study of the Centre and Kennedy's methodology is rooted primarily in interviewing former staff and artists, this thesis will explore the Centre's development directly through the analysis of its exhibition history and body of work.

⁶ Kennedy, Beccy, "Outside Chinatown: the evolution of Manchester's Chinese Arts centre as a cultural translator for contemporary Chinese art," *Modern China Studies* 1 (2015): 58-58.

⁷ Yeh, Diana, "Ethnicities on the move: 'British-Chinese' art-identity, subjectivity, politics and beyond," *Critical Quarterly* 42, no.2 (2000): 65-91.

⁸ Chan, Felicia & Willis, Andy, "Manchester's Chinese Arts Centre: A Case Study in Strategic Cultural Intervention." In: Thorpe A., Yeh D. (eds) *Contesting British Chinese Culture*. (2018), Palgrave Macmillan,

1.2 Research Objectives

At the beginning of this project, developed in collaboration with CFCCA, I had already developed an interest in translation, both in a linguistic sense and in terms of culture and had already begun to incorporate this into my research and artistic practice. *The Other Stage* thesis provided an opportunity for the exploration of the different aspects of the curatorial research as well as the creative practices of a range of curators and artists including the elements of translation and cultural encounters as well as explorations of cultural identity. The project was also an opportunity to review and evaluate the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art's curatorial strategies and its development as an organisation. As well as studying the Centre's projects, exhibitions, and residency programmes in a changing social and political context, the project was also an opportunity to explore the ongoing challenge of the curator to translate an artist's work into the context of an exhibition, in this case, this was met with further complications of cultural translation. This involved an analysis of the representation and translation of Chinese contemporary art in the UK, and the development of curatorial strategies for curating, collecting and exhibiting Chinese contemporary art. The central concerns of the research project involve the curating Chinese contemporary art in the UK using CFCCA as a basis for the research project.

The primary questions posed within this thesis ask how does CFCCA's exhibition history show how the Centre has evolved as an arts organisation since its opening in 1986. I will also question how the Centre has attempted to 'translate' Chinese contemporary art for audiences in the UK. The thesis will also go on to analyse how the Centre's purpose has changed over the years, how has it dealt with its conflicting identities and whether it is still needed or culturally relevant as a 'Chinese arts' organisation as opposed to a 'contemporary art' organisation. This will involve the analysis and evaluation of the centre's changing curatorial practice throughout its thirty-year history, its current trajectory of research, and the directions the organisation may take in the future. This highlights a range of challenges including being able to question the definition of 'Chinese art' and 'Chineseness' within a broader context of the international art world. It also highlights the impact of artistic practices and residencies within CFCCA by situating its methods of translation within a critical framework drawing on curatorial and transcultural studies. It will analyse the challenges of the curatorial and translational strategies used by CFCCA. The thesis will also analyse CFCCA's relationships between the curatorial team, contemporary artists and their

engagement with audiences. CFCCA's definition of 'Chinese contemporary art' has been expanded over the years to cover any works by artists of Chinese descent or any work that focuses on issues surrounding contemporary China.

The research outcomes of the project have provided an analysis and evaluation of the curatorial strategies of the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art relating to the curation of Chinese contemporary art in the UK. This will contribute to the Centre's continued research into Chinese contemporary art and provide a contribution to the understanding of the complex relationship between Chinese contemporary artists of multiple backgrounds and their audiences in the UK. The thesis provides an analysis and evaluation of strategies and research methodologies relating to the curation of Chinese contemporary art in the UK. The outcome of which served to extend to a critical analysis of art in a transcultural context, its translatability, and curatorial strategies to develop a coherent and specific theoretical perspective on contemporary curatorial practice. While there have been critical studies of the international impact of Chinese contemporary art, there remains a bias towards US-centric research with limited critical writing on the state of Chinese art in the United Kingdom outside of the exhibitions themselves. The curating of Chinese contemporary art in the UK is largely under-represented in comparison to other western cultural contexts such as the United States. A large part of the original research will consist of the analysis in detail of images and events concerning past exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art both at the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester and other exhibitions and events throughout the UK.

Throughout the thesis, another concern of the research will be the cultural significance of the curation of Chinese contemporary art within the UK. This will include an analysis of the strategies of past curatorial projects and the current trajectory in curatorial research and output since the initial shows in the 1990s and how this can be used to inform future projects. It will also discuss the past and current projects of the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art as a case study in both its approaches towards its exhibitions and how the work of its artists in residence have been represented in the context of audiences in the UK. It will also discuss how the centre presents Chinese contemporary art and culture within the wider cultural context of British art organisations. Another concern of the study is the organisation's strategies for curating, collecting and exhibiting Chinese contemporary art in the future in response to the engagement of UK audiences. This includes educational

programmes and socially engaged and public art projects as well as working as part of large-scale art festivals such as Asia Triennial Manchester where art is exhibited outside of the gallery space.

In comparison, the strategies of UK exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art have included a number of common themes following from previous international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art. This includes the focus on the representation of cultural identity or 'cultural authenticity' where the works or subject matters included are often framed as a representation of 'contemporary China'. The notion of 'cultural authenticity' or the image of cultural authenticity is a problematic term as it implies a singular or 'true' culture which has no basis in reality. Dean MacCannell's concept of 'staged authenticity' which involves the staging of a specific culture to create the illusion of authenticity to an audience provides a better illustration of this phenomenon particularly in terms of 'Chineseness.'⁹ This also includes the use of the 'New Chinese Art' style of survey show bringing a collection of recent works and emerging artists in order to present an image or snapshot of the Chinese contemporary art scene of the time. Thirdly these strategies have focused on 'the dissident narrative' continuing to represent works or artists from the "Chinese New Wave" and "Cynical Realism" movements of the 1980s or focusing the narrative of the exhibition as a portrayal of the dissident artist versus the Chinese state or on control and censorship.

Among the issues of curating Chinese contemporary art in the UK resides a recurring issue of identity, from broader questions of cultural identity to the specific context of the British Chinese diaspora. This links to the wider notion of 'multiculturalism' and its role in the expanded definition of contemporary British culture. The thesis will not only focus on how UK art organisations have adapted their approaches to the curatorial translation, re-contextualisation and debates surrounding Chinese contemporary art and Chinese nomadic and diasporic artistic practises but will also explore the aspects of these practices that are specific to the UK and the strengths and problems of its development. These practices, predominantly concerned with migratory art practices, site-specificity, and audience engagement have formed a consistent basis of mediation between cultures and identities.

⁹ MacCannell, Dean. "Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings." *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973): 589-603.

Within international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art and, by extension, exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the UK, the theme of identity and of translation is reoccurring. The main research objectives of the project included the exploration the Centre's curatorial research and to review and evaluate CFCCA's previous curatorial strategies and its development as an organisation, as well as studying its relevant projects, exhibitions, and residency programmes in a changing social and political context. This involved an analysis of the representation and translation of Chinese contemporary art in the UK, and the development of curatorial strategies for curating, collecting and exhibiting Chinese contemporary art, including educational programmes and socially engaged public art projects that realise the impact for a wider audience.

As well as representing cultural identities, another process of curating Chinese contemporary art is the 'translation' or interpretation of works, theory or curatorial themes for audiences in the UK. Translation in this context has been approached in several ways the most common being the use of translation through supplementary publications and education and engagement programmes. This can include the use of art theory and critical art language as an auxiliary method of communication between the artist, curator and audience. I will also explore acts of self-translation by artists working at the Centre through initiatives such as artist residencies and performance pieces. Curating an exhibition around a theme is a way of engagement with themes and threads to open out a greater understanding of China's situations and issues and the way Chinese contemporary art and culture interact with other cultures within a global context.

Through the review of CFCCA's past projects, this thesis will assess the significance of CFCCA's role in curating Chinese contemporary art in the UK. To define the scope of the research project, one must first define what is Chinese contemporary art and how is it exhibited in the UK. The generally accepted definition of Chinese avant-garde art is art created after 1979 when the Stars Group¹⁰ organised an unofficial exhibition of their work on the railings outside the China Art Gallery in Beijing. However, the growth of this art movement is specific to Mainland China and does not account for the work of contemporary artists in the UK, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The earliest exhibition of Chinese contemporary art that was organised by a UK art institution by this definition is the 1996 contemporary painting exhibition *Reckoning with the Past* at the Fruitmarket Gallery. This was followed by

¹⁰ A group of avant-garde and primarily self-taught artists which included Huang Rui and Ai Weiwei

Representing the People, a touring exhibition organised by the Chinese Art Centre in 1998 and showed the organisation's move from the representation of British Chinese artists to a greater definition of China as well as reflecting the international interest in contemporary art from Mainland China. Using these exhibitions as a starting point will allow a period in which to locate my research between 1996 and the present.

Since the initial international recognition of contemporary art from Mainland China, a number of thematic trends can be interpreted in past exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art within the UK. This includes the inclusion of commissioned projects such as site-specific installations, film and new media works, and performances that have been created in response to the site, the host city, or to the UK within exhibitions such as *The Real Thing* (2007) and the CFCCA exhibition *Harmonious Society* (2014). Another trend is the discursive criticism of 'authenticity', often playfully questioning previous attempts to encapsulate or translate the scope of Chinese contemporary art and instead demonstrating a more personal or pluralistic vision.

Due to the expanding definitions of Chinese contemporary art over time as well as the increasing role of artists working in a transnational context, one can explore the notion of 'Greater China.' Within the project, I also worked within an expanded definition of Chinese contemporary art to include CFCCA's definition of 'Greater China' which included artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan and Mainland China, as well as Chinese born artists based internationally and artists of Chinese descent. The Centre's broader criteria of exhibited works also includes works by artists who are not of Chinese descent but who explore China and contemporary Chinese culture within their practice. While this makes up a small portion of the Centre's general exhibition record it also includes a separate residency programme open to all artists dealing with China as a primary focus of their work. However, in the context of this thesis, I will only be covering exhibitions of works by artists who are part of the Chinese diaspora in the United Kingdom in addition to artists from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. This is because of the centre's original purpose of being a space for British Chinese artists as well as for the sake of clarity and focus on the research topic.

1.3 Methodology

The project employed the methods of analysing existing secondary sources including publications relating to the exhibitions selected for review within the thesis such as catalogues, reviews and promotional material. The second method will be the review and analysis of selected exhibitions. The research project focused on CFCCA's exhibitions to develop a critical analysis examining the curatorial strategies used in the exhibition of Chinese contemporary art through socio-political and transcultural perspectives. It also reviewed a selection of exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art from outside the organisation in order to illustrate the development and context of curating Chinese contemporary and its representation in the UK. It will also focus on three selected CFCCA exhibitions as case studies to develop a research-based critical analysis examining the curatorial strategies used in the display of Chinese contemporary art through socio-political and transcultural perspectives. In addition to this, because of the focus on transcultural curatorial practices within the research project, interviews were an essential part of the study to obtain an original and authentic contextual understanding of both past exhibitions and contemporary practices.

The key theoretical frameworks of contemporary curatorial theory and 'critical curating' will allow a contextualised theoretical discourse of Chinese contemporary art and the issues surrounding its international exhibition and translation.¹¹ This will include texts that focus on Chinese contemporary art in a wider context as well as the general critical theory of contemporary Asian art and global art. The interpretation and reception of Chinese contemporary art in an international context can be analysed through the study of curatorial approaches and audience receptions in British galleries as a particular case study such as the analysis of visitor numbers during *Representing the People* and audience feedback sheets collected during CFCCA's *Vital* festivals which I will discuss in chapters 4 and 5.

¹¹ Martinon, Jean-Paul ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

A Case Study of CFCCA

I aimed to progress the study of curatorial approaches from the general fields of curatorial theory and critical writing surrounding Chinese contemporary art, towards a specific and detailed series of case studies within CFCCA's past exhibitions to provide an appropriate depth of analysis. This involved a qualitative approach to the collection and evaluation of data. A large part of the original research consisted of analysing in detail images and events and records of exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art both at the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester and other exhibitions and events throughout the UK. This included an analysis of relevant artworks, photographic and textual records of past and current exhibitions at CFCCA. The rationale for choosing the exhibitions in this thesis was first to demonstrate the evolution of the Centre's transition from including the Centre as a platform for British Chinese artists to its internationalisation as an art space to its recent and ongoing reflective practice. I went on to include exhibitions which displayed different methods of interpreting works and engaging with audiences including artist residencies and performance art. Kuan-Hsing Chen first popularised the concept of 'Asia as method' in the field of cultural studies as a means of de-imperialising the production of knowledge in Asia and to disrupt the cultural hegemony of the West.¹² In a similar fashion, the progression of CFCCA's exhibitions and artist residencies have begun to show a shift in recent years from 'China as subject' to 'China as method' using China or aspects of China's culture, current events as entry points to their exhibitions.

The opportunity of gaining access to and observation of the non-academic participant is of significant benefit to the study and allowed an opportunity for a more in-depth study of the institution. Spending time at the Centre as part of a research placement in 2015, combined with subsequent visits also provided an insight into the decision-making processes and debates that occur within the context of the organisation and how these processes influence the eventual curatorial outcomes through discussions with the curatorial staff and access to the Centre's archives. The research project focused on CFCCA's exhibitions as case studies to develop a critical analysis examining the curatorial strategies used in the display of Chinese contemporary art through socio-political and transcultural perspectives as well as through the context of cultural translation. As well as looking at the group shows produced by CFCCA there are a number of important solo shows at the centre including Xu Bing's solo

¹² Chen, Kuan-Hsing, *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

exhibition *The Living Word* in 2003 after the centre moved its location to the current building as well as the Song Dong and He An solo shows in 2004.

The project addressed several curatorial concerns including curatorial theory and practice. Among them, I was able to analyse the evolving definition of 'Chinese contemporary art' in the wider international context from CFCCA's first major touring exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in 1999 until the present and to investigate the notion of 'global' artistic practice, or the experience of artists working through international residencies and its influence on UK exhibitions. I also examined the curatorial methods and strategies of other British art institutions and their approaches to cultural translation, including their strength and shortcomings, the connection between images of China in the media, and the presentation of Chinese contemporary art and culture in museums. In investigating the power structures and ideologies of UK art institutions and their influence on curatorial decisions concerning the collection and display of work by Chinese artists, I was able to question the role of diplomacy and cultural exchange within UK exhibitions and art festivals.

Among the CFCCA exhibitions that were included for analysis were *Representing the People*. This exhibition is the earliest example of the centre's involvement in 'Chinese contemporary art' in the context of contemporary art from Mainland China as opposed to 'British Chinese art', as well as being the centre's first touring exhibition. As an exhibition of contemporary figurative painting and photography, there is also an opportunity to draw comparisons with the *Reckoning with the Past* exhibition two years earlier, to analyse the early curatorial strategies of the centre compared to other galleries at the time. I will also focus on selected CFCCA exhibitions as part of the case study to develop a research-based critical analysis examining the curatorial strategies used in the display of Chinese contemporary art through socio-political and transcultural perspectives. Beginning with an analysis of the Centre's history and background in the first part; while the second part will discuss the expansion of the Centre's scope of research in the late 1990s under the leadership of Sarah Champion. The core struggle of the centre's branded identity in the past is the issue of trying to be both a contemporary arts organisation within the wider cultural sector while also specialising in Chinese art. Within this, its multiple identities remain effectively the same in the present and are addressed and readdressed periodically such as the retrospective conversations invited by the 30th anniversary programme.

Another case study opportunity is to begin an analysis of CFCCA's contribution to Asia Triennial Manchester 14, *Harmonious Society*. This provides an opportunity to study a CFCCA exhibition expanded into the wider context of contemporary Asian art through the triennial as well as engaging in global discourse. As the centre's most ambitious project and the largest group exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in the UK to date, *Harmonious Society* will also provide a primary case study for the current state of curating Chinese contemporary art in the UK as well as revealing the direction of future CFCCA exhibitions.

The art exhibitions that have been included in this thesis were chosen with the purpose of showing significant moments within the history of the organisation. For example, *Representing the People* (1999) is significant to the Centre as it was both CFCCA's first exhibition to include artists from the PRC as well as marking the beginning of the internationalisation of the Centre as a whole. For these historical exhibitions, as opposed to the exhibitions I attended in person as part of my fieldwork, I was able to engage with curatorial information and visual materials surrounding past exhibitions and projects held in the Centre's archive. This included different primary sources created as part of their exhibition programmes, such as catalogues, press releases, correspondence, audience surveys and questionnaires, online resources, and archives, which reveal detailed information about the Centre's research and curatorial processes as well as surveying the outcomes and published materials connected to these events. It also discusses the issues surrounding the impact of the triennial and its continued development culminating in the ATM14 exhibition *Harmonious Society* as well as the curation of 'live art' and engagement through an emphasis on events and performances.

As part of my research, I was working in partnership with CFCCA and given access to the Centre's library and archive before it became open to the public in 2016. This included the written proposals and statements of former directors, curators, and artists such as the Centre's former director Sarah Champion between 1996 and 2008 as well as images and documents from CFCCA as an important source. The drawback of using archival materials is that the records might not hold the richness of other forms of collecting data such as first-hand accounts and experiences. However, there is value in contextualising CFCCA's records with its concerns both at the time and reflectively in the present. The archive also contained interviews, statements and writing by CFCCA's past employees and associates, such as Sarah Champion and Karen Smith. However, a lot of the statements found within the archive were made both on behalf of CFCCA or as part of the Centre's press releases and therefore must be viewed as aligning with the Centre's agenda as opposed to the

personal opinions of the individual. However, Champion's interviews and statements still have value in the context of showing the concerns of CFCCA as an organisation.

Analysis of Exhibitions

In order to contextualise the curatorial strategies of CFCCA, there was a need to analyse exhibitions that had been organised by other British art institutions. While there have been numerous exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the UK since the opening of the Chinese Art Centre in 1986, I have chosen to discuss five selected exhibitions in chapter three of this thesis.¹³ The exhibitions I have analysed were chosen primarily due to the importance of the institution or of the significance of the exhibition within the British cultural sector, such as Tate and the Royal Academy.

The methods concerned with the curating of the work of international Chinese artists and exhibitions are primarily presented within a broad and primarily Western international scope. This includes examples of largely introductory survey exhibitions including *Passaggio a Oriente at the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993 as well as China's New Art Post 1989 and China Avant-Garde which both toured internationally in the same year*. Several retrospective exhibitions in the past five years have emerged focussing on the emergence and history of Chinese contemporary art thirty years after its initial international recognition as a way of analysing trends in its representation as well as the thematic trends of the works themselves. This includes retrospective survey exhibitions such as *The M+ Sigg Collection: Chinese art from the 1970s to Now* that have attempted portray a historicised perspective of Chinese art over the last four decades and solo retrospective shows such as *Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace* and a further solo show the Royal Academy which will be discussed in chapter three of this thesis..

Some of the key UK exhibitions I will be covering within the study are *Reckoning with the Past* (1996), and *The Real Thing* (2007). As an early example in 'contemporary' Chinese art defined by the proposal as opposed to modern painting, *Reckoning with the Past* served as a starting point for UK exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art and will be important in establishing the research framework involved in the project. It is also one of the few non-CFCCA hosted exhibitions to be shown outside of London and was the first exhibition

¹³ For a chronological list of Chinese contemporary art exhibitions, see appendix iv.

outside of CFCCA to have developed an exhibition of contemporary Chinese art that wasn't an international touring exhibition. *The Real Thing* was also a good example as it originated from the research framework of a major UK gallery with *The Real Thing* at Tate Liverpool showing an example of a curator-led exhibition. As one of the UK's largest art organisations with their own branding identities and ideologies, Tate's decision to promote a Chinese contemporary art exhibition is illustrative of China's increasing presence in the international art community as well as the country being the focus of international attention in the build-up towards the Beijing Olympics in 2008. This exhibition provided an insight into the evolving representation of Chinese contemporary art and the start of an expansion of the 'survey' style exhibitions of earlier years. *The Real Thing* was also chosen as an example thanks to a wealth of material on the exhibition's development including making contact with two of the show's curators, whereas an exhibition such as *The Revolution Continues* at the Saatchi Gallery was based around a single owner's collection and more private about the identities of its research and curatorial staff.

The decision to include Ai Weiwei as an example of a solo exhibition is also due to the cultural significance of the artist. It was also due to the time of the exhibitions, where two large-scale and high-profile retrospectives were being exhibited at the time of the research project, which provided the advantage of experiencing the shows first-hand and contributing new knowledge within the research. The shows were more than solo exhibitions but an attempt at historicising and canonising the artist's body of work.

Liverpool Biennial was chosen as an example of a UK biennial due to its importance and history as well as its consistent inclusion of artists from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan since 2006. Other potential examples included Asia Triennial Manchester and Tate Triennial at Tate Britain, the former was discussed as part of the CFCCA case study and the latter was not included due to the event being cancelled in 2012 and its absence of Chinese artists in its past programmes.

Interviews

During the project, interviews provided a valuable method of investigating specific issues surrounding transcultural curatorial methods and outcomes, and to develop in-depth discussions surrounding the current state of Chinese contemporary art and the directions it may move in the future. I was able to spend a period of time on-site at during the research

project based at CFCCA engaging directly with staff both conducting interviews and conversations with CFCCA's curatorial team involved with the Centre's current project. In addition to this, I conducted interviews with the curator Karen Smith, who co-curated both *Representing the People* and *The Real Thing* and who has acted as a consultant to CFCCA since the late 1990s, as well as Simon Groom, the former head of exhibitions for Tate Liverpool. There are a number of possible ethical issues that might arise through conducting interviews throughout the project. A primary aspect of my research that might result in ethical issues is the subject of confidentiality both in collected interviews and the possible access to confidential documents belonging to CFCCA, as well as conversations with the organisation and other restricted information. The publication of any confidential information of research value in the final thesis or supporting papers were discussed and agreed upon in advance with CFCCA and any other participants and collaborators before being published or submitted. This might include, for example, any quotes from internal documents, the minutes from staff meetings, discussions of the selection of specific artworks. The same applied to any interview participants where anonymity is not a viable option for clear analysis. Another cause for concern would be the ethical concerns of conducting interviews. During the course of the project, I was able to undertake qualitative research interviews with participants using an action research approach, such as recorded interviews and collecting related visual materials. In this case, the 'informed consent' of the interview participants was given beforehand through the completion of consent forms.

1.4 Thesis Overview

The second chapter of the thesis will begin with an analysis of existing research on curatorial theory and practice and positioning it in relation to Chinese contemporary art exhibitions in the UK. This will include a review of fields such as arts education, curatorial theory, British multi-cultural studies and representation, as well as politics and economics in contemporary art. This will all allow the formation of a comprehensive definition of Chinese contemporary art and its location within a Global Context. It will also produce a summary of the existing research on the topic of Chinese contemporary art in relation to cultural theory, global theory, and transculturalism, identifying the gaps in knowledge and placing the research within this theoretical framework.

The third chapter will provide an analysis of the move from early representations of Chinese contemporary art in the UK as a survey of a new art movement while reviewing the move towards its status as a site of international dialogues and cultural discourse. It will also discuss what Chinese art means in Britain regarding diaspora art as well as relationships with international artists. This will include a wide range of exhibitions at non-profit art events and organisations including group survey exhibitions, solo exhibitions, and participation in broader art events and exhibitions including artists from multiple nationalities. This will begin with an analysis of group shows *Reckoning with the Past (1997)* in comparison to earlier international shows such as *Silent Energy*¹⁴ and *China's New Art Post-1989*¹⁵. The chapter will also explore the role of curating as critical intervention including issues relating to thematic exhibitions, interactions with site and location and commission centric exhibitions including *The Real Thing. (2007)*¹⁶

I will then provide a case study of the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art's past curatorial practice, beginning with an analysis of the turn from the centre as an organisation representing British Chinese artists to an art organisation dedicated to Chinese

¹⁴ See Noth, Jochen, Pöhlmann, Wolfger & Reschke, Kai, eds., *China avant-garde: counter-currents in art and culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ See Chang, Tsong-zung ed., *China's New Art, Post-1989*, (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001).

¹⁶ See Groom, Simon ed., *The Real Thing, Contemporary Art from China*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2007).

contemporary art in an expanded context. The significance of selected solo exhibitions and residencies such as Xu Bing, Song Dong and He An both towards the artists' reception in the UK and their continuing international careers. Finally, the chapter will explore the centre's critical engagement through international collaboration in an art festival setting including the curation of and engagement with performance art through an emphasis on events and performances outside of the gallery space through interactions with the wider community including international art communities and audiences. This will also include the state of Chinese contemporary art in 'Biennial Culture' such as the centre's participation in Asia Triennial Manchester and a case study of *Harmonious Society* in 2014,¹⁷ providing an opportunity to study an exhibition within the expanded context of contemporary Asian art through ATM. I will then go on to investigate the research processes of the centre including its exhibition concepts, funding, collaborations and the extent that the centre's current research is informed by its past shows and contemporary British and Chinese art trends as well as its approaches to addressing and communicating changing social and cultural contexts. This will also include collaborations with international art organisations and developing relationships with artists and how these relationships continue outside of the initial projects such as the selection of graduates and early career artists. In chapter five I will discuss the use of such theoretical contexts and references and their role in the translation and dissemination of exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art. While this framework is crucial to curating in general, its use as an auxiliary language within the scope of audience engagement is commonly used within CFCCA's exhibitions.

¹⁷ Jiang, Jiehong, ed., *Harmonious Society: Asia Triennial Manchester*, (Manchester: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014).

Chapter Two: A Global Stage

In the case of a curatorial and art historical context, a review of the existing literature on this subject must include not only critical and theoretical texts but make full use of primary resources such as photographic records of exhibitions, catalogues and supporting literature as well as analysing the artworks themselves. Focusing specifically on curating Chinese contemporary art in the United Kingdom provides an even more limited collection of writings which are reliant on exhibition records, catalogues and reviews as opposed to critical analysis. However, this limited amount of in-depth analysis of British exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art allows for a new contribution to knowledge in curatorial theory which covers issues such as cultural representation, identity, and translation.

Contemporary art from Mainland China began to gain international recognition after the landmark contemporary art exhibition, *China/Avant-Garde* (1989) in Beijing.¹⁸ The exhibition was one of the earliest efforts to comprehensively exhibit avant-garde art including installation works and performances in a national art institute in China. The momentum of Chinese contemporary art can be assessed through the significance of the 1989 Beijing exhibition *China / Avant-Garde*. The legacy of this exhibition can be measured not in its influence in the shaping of subsequent art trends, but in the ways that it subverted the rituals of viewership. This outcome was linked to that timing of the exhibition and its location at the National Gallery of Art in Beijing which, since it was founded in 1958, had previously been used primarily for official exhibitions surrounding national commemorations and shows that solidified the communist party's ideologies. Traditionally the use of 'national' museum spaces, particularly spaces serving as major civic monuments, serve as sites of a country's ideological stance. Museums have been used to present a vision of cultural authority, and in these instances, the role of the museum's audience is to participate in the ritual of the museum's space, and in turn, internally legitimising the ideologies attached to the artworks or objects on display.¹⁹ In Contrast to the official discourse that was presented by the museum, *China / Avant-Garde*, curated by Gao Minglu and Li Xianting, changed the significance of the gallery space from a site of ideological proclamation into a site for debate,

¹⁸ This was arguably the first major exhibition of Chinese contemporary that was initiated by a group of artists, the majority of which were recent fine art graduates

¹⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 8–21.

subverting the atmosphere of the site with its use of performance and installation works including works by Xu Bing, Zhang Peili and Xiao Lu. In doing so, the exhibition opened up not only the first large-scale group exhibition of China's 'avant-garde' but a whole new aesthetic and site of discourse in which "an 'avant-garde' identity could exist at all".²⁰ By exhibiting these previously unseen works in this context, the curators and artists attempted to expand the audiences of the National Gallery's relationship to art and critical thinking, as well as strengthening the audience's role as a participant in the creation and assessment of the meaning and significance of experiencing art.²¹ The show was shut down shortly after its opening when Xiao Lu fired a pellet gun at her own work, *Dialogue*, (Fig, 2.1) resulting in the closure of the exhibition and the arrests of Lu and her partner Tang Song.

In the wake of *China/Avant-Garde*, a number of large-scale international survey exhibitions were organised such as *China's new art post-1989* which toured between 1991 and 1993, *China Avant-Garde* in 1993, and *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art exhibition* in 1998 which displayed works ranging from the 1980s to contemporary commissioned works. Therefore, these initial publications show a general and introductory approach to Chinese contemporary art, discussing a wide range of artworks and thematic trends rather than focusing on individual artists. This includes the critical writings of internationally based scholars and art critics such as Wu Hung, Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru which provide an essential insight into the history and context of Chinese contemporary art and contemporary art as well as its international recognition.²² While there is a range of writing on the political and cultural ideologies of Chinese contemporary art in the past thirty years, the criticism of international exhibitions relies mainly on a generalised definition not only of Chinese contemporary art and its international image but the concept of the 'western audience'.

Because an important aspect of Chinese contemporary art resides within Western art theory, it became apparent that labelling the 'Avant-garde' as such was problematic as it was following existing theory and productions. Hence the irony of a lot of works following this period particularly the work of Ai Weiwei and Xu Zhen reveal a post-modern, 'post-avant-garde' sentiment. The enthusiasm for the previous 'avant-garde' works and movements of the 1980s had also been obstructed by the social and political climate following the events of

²⁰ Sullivan, Lawrence R. ed., *China Since Tiananmen: Political, Economic, and Social Conflicts*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 267.

²¹ Wu, Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 19.

²² Hou Hanru, "Towards an 'un-unofficial art' De-ideologicalisation of China's contemporary art in the 1990s," *Third Text* 10, no. 34 (1996): 37-52.

the June 4th protests in 1989 and the subsequent governmental restrictions of the freedoms introduced in the 1980s.

This chapter will serve as a review of how exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art are represented in the UK and how these exhibitions are dependent on the research methodologies and ideologies of art organisations. Art exhibitions are hosted in spaces and institutions that vary in age, histories, content, target audiences, ideologies and agendas. The artworks on display are selected through a process of suppositions about the intentions of the organisation, curators and artists, as well as the social expectations and capabilities of the audience, the cases of legitimacy made by the presentation, and judgments of the artwork's legitimacy or realness of the items or settings shown.²³

²³ Karp, Ivan, *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2012), 14.

2.1 Britain and the Multi-Cultural

China's official cultural identity had also been in a process of reconstruction since the 1980s when the Chinese Communist Party began to participate in the international capitalist market economy, and since the 1990s the Chinese Communist Party has employed Chinese contemporary art as an element of China's cultural diplomacy to articulate China's national identity. The notion of 'identity' holds a significance both on a personal level and as part of a wider official diplomatic process. The inclusion of Chinese contemporary art as a part of China's cultural diplomacy to display itself as a contemporary and globally facing culture is embodied in both official and unofficial pathways. The influence of Western art history in Chinese art education and contemporary art has led to criticism both from Chinese and international art critics as well as from artists themselves. These projects revealed a dissatisfaction with the ongoing contemporary art movement and attempted to resist the framework of the historical Western art canon by embracing elements of local history and traditional art practices and cultures.

In the context of post-colonialism, it is problematic to attempt to label or reclaim something as culturally authentic the historical movement of national borders, trade and immigration the claim of a "singular national identity" becomes problematic.²⁴ The highlighting of the hybridity of the re-exploration of traditional cultures and the acknowledgement of external cultural influences and encounters that frequently occur within Chinese contemporary art also challenged the idea of "cultural homogeneity."²⁵

In a commentary on the changing landscape of Chinese contemporary art, Hou Hanru stated that the eventual criticism of art movements such as 'Political-Pop' and 'Cynical Realism' stemmed from a 'spectacle culture.' Hou claims that this trend in curating developed in international exhibitions such as the 45th Venice Biennial (Fig, 2.2) that had placed Chinese contemporary art as a medium for international consumption of a homogenised culture of a singular nation-state and thus removing the agency of individual artists.²⁶ In subsequent years the issues of global intervention in Chinese contemporary art, such as the commercial

²⁴ See Gladston, Paul, "International Curatorial Practice and the Problematic De-Territorialisation of the 'Identity' Show," in *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art* (Heidelberg: Springer Berlin, 2016), 17-29.

²⁵ Yao, Yung-Wen, "The Void of Chineseness: Contemporary Art and Cultural Diplomacy in China," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 5, No. 11, (November 2015): 971-975.

²⁶ Hou, Hanru, "Towards an 'un-unofficial art' De-ideologicalisation of China's contemporary art in the 1990s," *Third Text* 10 no. 34, (1996): 37-52.

demand for works in international art markets, have remained an ongoing presence in international discourses as well as the continuing discussion of how Chinese contemporary art can be defined in the present day. During the emergence of Chinese contemporary art and its reception internationally, artists and critics have investigated this issue of “otherness” from a number of different angles. In addition, one can question whether the use of references of Chinese language and imagery and traditions in Chinese contemporary art are catering to international perceptions of ‘Chineseness’.²⁷

Andrew Solomon's influential essay, *Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China*, made a large impact on the view of Chinese contemporary art among its increasing Western audiences.²⁸ However, the essay and other articles of its kind also established the primarily ideological concerns of Western analysis of Chinese contemporary art. Homi Bhabha has offered an insight into the Western reception of Chinese contemporary art:

Despite the claims to [what is] a spurious rhetoric of ‘internationalism,’ the relationship between Chinese artists and the postmodern art world is that they live in ‘the nations of others?’²⁹

This implies that despite any adoption of Chinese contemporary art into a global narrative of contemporary art, it will inevitably be placed in the position of ‘other’ by existing in a ‘trans-cultural space’.

In order to begin the study of curatorial strategies towards the work of Chinese contemporary artists, it is essential to look at Chinese contemporary art within a more comprehensive cultural discourse. While British postcolonial theorists have primarily focused on the representation of Indian, African and Caribbean arts and literature, these texts can also provide a framework regarding Chinese artists. The framework of postcolonial theory can also be expanded to theories of Globalisation to contextualise Chinese contemporary art within a wider cultural context including China's current position within global politics, economics and culture, contemporary art in a global field, as well as in the context of the political discourse surrounding Chinese contemporary art and culture. This can be expanded to address the broader discussion of politics and economics in contemporary art. While this

²⁷ Tsao, Hsing-yuan & Roger T. Ames, “A Dilemma in Contemporary Chinese Art: An Introduction”, in *Xu Bing and Chinese Contemporary Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections*, eds. Tsao, Hsing-yuan and Roger T. Ames, (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), 14-15.

²⁸ Solomon, Andrew, “Their irony, humor (and art) can save China.” *The New York Times Magazine* December 19, 1993, 42-72.

²⁹ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 30.

branch of cultural theory had initially come to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, it forms the theoretical context for CFFCA when it was first created as a community arts group.

While Stuart Hall's semiotic approach in 'decoding' cultural representations and discourses focused primarily on black diasporic identities while only touching briefly on the subject of Chinese identity and representation, these same models of communication can be used as a basis to study and analyse the representation of Chinese contemporary art. This critical framework in cultural studies will also include the concept of the 'other' in specific cultural contexts and the impact of Western cultural hegemony on non-Western cultural outputs. This can include both the influence of Western art disciplines and theory on Chinese artists, the lingering influence of British colonialism in formerly occupied territories such as Hong Kong as well as the nature of the representation of those artworks internationally using Said's notions of 'Orientalism' and western perceptions of Chinese culture.³⁰

The focus of Stuart Hall's *Representation* is a comprehensive study of the issues around identities. He takes note of that a long way from being altered; identity ought to be seen as a "production" which is a continually evolving process that is primarily occurring "within, and not outside cultural representation."³¹ Exhibitions are discrete occasions that make a "complex and limited representational framework" through the display of objects, visual representations and performances.³² Hall relates this observation particularly to the thought that there are two methods for considering 'cultural identity'. The first perspective is one that perceives cultural identity as the points of difference amongst Diasporas and the dominant culture, and additionally takes note of the similarities in the Diasporic experience. The second is an understanding of history as a shared culture that can be excavated from the obscurity and disenfranchisement imposed upon it. This lens of analysis has been widely used within post-colonial studies. Hall notes that this excavation of unseen histories, while not necessarily contributing to a singular culture, is an important aspect of re-assessing culture. When analysed through the discursive model, this historical imagining is able to provide a shared cultural representation for the present community.

³⁰ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

³¹ Hall, Stuart, *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 51.

³² Lidchi, Henrietta, "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures", in *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 168.

However, Said's stance in *Orientalism* is that this educates on the concerns of European and American dominance over the Orient or, on a broader understanding, of the 'other, than it is about the Orient itself. Indeed, even scholarly learning, in his perspective, has been influenced by this European dominance. Political domination has had an important impact on all parts of the relationship between the West and the Orient. This political connection invalidates Western perspectives on the Orient, which paint a false image. Drawing samples from sources in scholarly, literary, and political works, Said builds evidence of European cultural dominance and highlights the prevalence of Western perspectives and partitions the investigation into three parts, drawing primarily on the emergence of "Orientalism" prior to the 19th century, followed by its elaboration in the 19th century, and its continuation into the twentieth century.¹³³

Regarding Eurocentrism in global culture, Mosquera argues that Colonialism has created a division of interests. Whereas:

...non-Western countries took on board the problems of their own cultures in the sphere of traditions isolated from the contemporary scene at the same time as they adopted those of the west without making a connection capable of transforming both of them to the benefit of their interests and values in the existing global situation.³⁴

However, there are frequent examples of art that explicitly focus on 'difference' that have been valued, or alternatively have satisfied the expectations of the "other" in the postmodern landscape that veers into the territory of exoticism.

Instead of reviewing cultural theory as just an elite euro-centric creation or as objective, "The Commitment to Theory," that Bhabha proposes demonstrates that political ideologies work with and through theory and that cultural theory and political issues cannot be differentiated. In an attempt to build a "committed theoretical perspective" that is representative of post-colonial positions while avoiding "the politics of polarities" that deny hybrid histories and societies, Bhabha proposes the concept of society's "third space," or the 'in-between'.³⁵ For example, the intersectional spaces inside and among communities and cultures, which don't keep up a singular position but instead structure cultural identities as an ongoing creation of identity.

³³ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 26.

³⁴ Mosquera, Gerardo, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some problems around art and eurocentrism," *Third Text*, 6, no. 21, (1992): 35-41.

³⁵ Hall, Stuart, *Representation, Cultural Representations and signifying practices*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 21.

The concept of cultural production and consumption has also been applied to Chinese contemporary art. In an interview with the EU National Institutes for Culture, Carol Yinghua Lu argued that the concept of Chinese contemporary art in an international context adhere more to political and commercial agendas than to the interests of individual artists:

There are many challenges for many of us working in the context in China. On a general level, too much focus has been placed on Chinese contemporary art as a collective concept when it's really a notion that was created based on market consumption and international political interests. We can almost say that Chinese contemporary art is more of a political concept than a term that makes any sense artistically. In the past few years, there have been many presentations to introduce contemporary art from China as a cultural export, which gave artists and practitioners in China the possibility of being seen internationally, yet at the same time, this collective presentation has often disguised the nuanced work of individual artists, critics, curators and intellectuals.³⁶

This argument portrays the application of collective cultural identities as a double-edged sword, both generating international interest but also losing the identity of the individual or even the locality in the process. In a collection of critical essays centred on the Inside Out exhibition (1999). Gao Minglu claims that changing trends in Chinese contemporary art reflect political changes and globalised experience, beginning with a self-focused, defensive modernisation and later transnational modernity. The initial goal of the exhibition is to enrich the understanding of international audiences both visually and conceptually in relation to contemporary art from the selected Chinese regions. As a guest curator, Gao Minglu's critical concerns during the two years in which the project was undertaken was for the curatorial process to integrate both the exhibiting of the works and their interpretation within a theoretical context in which 'Chinese contemporary art' is placed as well as 'configuring an integrated but non-hegemonic structure.'³⁷

³⁶ Hellkötter, Katja and Lu, Carol, "The Role of Artists and the Arts, Conversations with independent art critic and curator, Carol Yinghua Lu and Lee Ambrozy, editor of Artform's Chinese Site", in *Europe-China Cultural Compass, Orientation for Cultural Cooperation between China and Europe*, EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture), eds. Katja Hellkötter & Yi Wen (Beijing: Goethe Institute, 2011), 114 – 119.

³⁷ Gao Minglu, "Towards a Transnational Modernity" in *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 15.

2.2 Representing Plural Identities in Curating Chinese Contemporary Art

Most academic writing concerned with the curating of the work of international Chinese artists and exhibitions are primarily presented through a broad and primarily Western international scope. While these exhibitions have some similarities with the curatorial strategies of UK art exhibitions, there are also a variety of approaches present across individual organisations and curators that are influenced by institutional and national ideologies as well as being driven by the individual research methodologies of individual curators. This has happened not only at CFCCA and its affiliated projects but can also be observed in earlier exhibitions covered in this thesis such as *Reckoning with the Past* and *The Real Thing*. In fact, since the majority of the exhibitions I have covered have included a Chinese or China-based curator it can be argued that the cultural production of the exhibitions leans towards a more research-based methodology with the curator acting as both a specialist in Chinese contemporary art and as a mediator or 'translator' for the artists involved. While these curatorial strategies are not without their problems, the notion of the International perceptions of Chinese contemporary art as an ideological construct in the 1990s began to be reassessed by the 2000s with more critical discussions of Chinese contemporary art such as the questioning of 'staged' cultural authenticity in *The Real Thing* in 2007 which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The key theoretical frameworks of contemporary curatorial theory and 'critical curating' allow a contextualised theoretical discourse of Chinese contemporary art and the issues surrounding its international exhibition and translation.³⁸ This will include texts that focus on Chinese contemporary art in a broader context as well as the general critical theory of contemporary Asian art and global art. The interpretation and reception of Chinese contemporary art in an international context can be analysed through the study of curatorial approaches and audience receptions in British galleries as a particular case study.

³⁸ Martinon, Jean Paul, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

Recent books by curators and art history scholars including Wu Hung and Gao Minglu have also attempted to chronicle and contextualise the previous decades of China's art history. These retrospective exhibitions and publications revisit the key moments in the late 20th and early 21st century, which brought the work of Chinese artists into contemporary art discourse.³⁹ This indicates an interest in the contextualisation of Chinese contemporary art in conjunction with the international interest in China as an emerging economic superpower and cultural centre, whose contemporary artists have achieved international success both financially in the commercial art market and as part of museum collections.

The attempt to contextualise the past to understand the present is heavily emphasised in Chang Tsong-zung's 1997 exhibition *Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting* which I will discuss in more detail in chapter three. The exhibition's 'Reckoning' in this instance postulates both a passing of judgement and a process of estimation. This is illustrated by the inclusion of a mixture of styles and imagery amongst the included works, from Yu Peng's referencing of traditional landscape paintings to Wang Xingwei's emulation of socialist academic painting styles to the Pop-Art influences of Yu Youhan's *Mao and his People* series, and finally Feng Mengbo's use of imagery and characters from the *Streetfighter* series of video games. These contrasting historical references throughout the exhibition created a dialogue between past and present as well as collective memory and nostalgia. These juxtapositions of contemporary and historical imagery reflected a 'Neo-Maoist' resurgence in China in the early 1990s and subsequently, a rise in popularity of Mao themed memorabilia or 'Mao Fever'.⁴⁰

At the time of the exhibition, the Fruitmarket Gallery also hosted a series of lectures on the issues regarding Chinese contemporary art during the post-1989 period. The topics of the programme included "*Contemporary Chinese Art in Context*" by Michael Sullivan which discussed the development of Chinese art in the twentieth century within the context of the political climate and social changes of the time. Sullivan also noted the influences of Western art history and theory on the artists in the exhibition and their peers. The series also included "*Mao's Legacy: Identity and Change*" by Isabel Hilton which introduced the theme of 'identity' within the context of contemporary Chinese politics, offering a historical

³⁹ See Wu, Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History: 1970s-2000s*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014). and Gao, Minglu *Total modernity and the avant-garde in twentieth-century Chinese art*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ See Barmé, Geremie, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

perspective to the political context of the exhibition. Finally, “*Chinese Gardens*” by Dr Craig Clunas offered a perspective on the cultural history of the exhibiting artists through the context of Chinese art history, aesthetics and Garden culture.⁴¹ The inclusion of some of the UK’s most prominent scholars in Chinese art history is noteworthy, as the exhibition is both positioned as a reassessment of the past while also being deconstructed and analysed through a historical lens as part of its broader audience engagement, bringing the confrontation with the past that it proposes out of the exhibition space and into a public dialogue. The lecture series also pre-supposed a need for the exhibition’s audience to be given a historical context within which to place the exhibition in a way that might not have been used in the present day. In contrast, more recent symposia and talks connected to exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, particularly those organised by CFCCA, have shifted towards a focus on artist and curator talks and specific social issues in contemporary China such as the symposia organised to accompany the *Harmonious Society* and *Micro Micro Revolution* exhibitions which I will discuss in chapters three and four.

Since the 1990s, Chinese contemporary art has rapidly found an international audience which can be attributed to both a greater process of globalisation and to China’s emergence as an economic and cultural superpower during that period. Such a process resulted in a subtle but substantial change of artist’s organic relationship with their regional reality. The Historical and social responsibility of the region on the work of artists in the previous period shifted into the identification with the tendency of globalisation. There is a conflicting narrative that is often taken to be emblematic of western modernity: the first is the concept of a unique European identity, and the second is the translatability of that identity into the narratives of non-European cultures.⁴² Curating Chinese contemporary art on an international scale doesn’t necessarily imply a stylistic quality which could be identified as inherently Chinese, nor a universal concept of a definition or authentic presentation of contemporary China. It may be challenging for Western art criticism to define the emergence of Chinese contemporary art and global art in general. However, the control set in place by an art-historical authority is not only a political issue but also an issue of art criticism and aesthetics. Contemporary art on a global scale may offer politically based criticism, but it can

⁴¹ Reckoning with the Past, Contemporary Chinese Painting, Programme for accompanying lectures, Asia Art Archive. https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/reckoning-with-the-past-contemporary-chinese-painting/search/events_id:2831/page/1/view_as/grid

⁴² Enwezor, Okwui, “Modernity and postcolonial ambivalence”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no.3, (2010): 595-620.

also portray criticism of art movements that are defined by the exclusion of other cultures and backgrounds.

Wu Hung argues that Chinese contemporary art is constructed simultaneously in multiple spaces, creating an identity through both local and international perspectives and changing its meaning when artists and curators traverse and interact within these spaces. As opposed to assuming that this form of contemporaneity is limited within contemporary art within a linear model such as dominant narratives within Western art history and within an existing cultural system, this pluralistic model emphasises the “heterogeneity and multiplicity in art production”.⁴³ By this definition, the production and display of contemporary art by Chinese artists outside of China carries cultural importance in relation to its domestic counterpart and is constructed by a combination of national and international perspectives.

The emergence of Chinese contemporary art in Mainland China began in the 1980s when a period of political liberalisation and the relaxing of international trade policies in China in the late 1970s. It allowed for a number of underground art movements such as the Stars Group that deviated from state-directed art styles that were predominant during the Cultural Revolution and has continued to develop since the 1980s incorporating Western art influences and experimental art practices.⁴⁴ The subsequent decades have seen a rapid expansion of the aesthetic horizons of Chinese art. The initial creative development of Chinese contemporary art has been characterised by Li Xianting as the exploration of seeking a dialogue with contemporary Western culture, as well as re-discovering the cultural identity of Chinese art in a contemporary context, and an emergence of a “‘humanist’ consciousness” within its reflective elements of political and social critique.⁴⁵ These aspects of creative practice can be used in creating a thematic definition of Chinese contemporary art in an expanded context.

Due to the characteristics of exportation within international curating, curators and art collectors from the West were able to set out the themes within which Chinese contemporary art was classified. At the time when Chinese contemporary art was beginning to surface in international exhibitions and art markets, the thematic content of a relatively narrow selection

⁴³ Wu, Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 11-12.

⁴⁴ Wu, Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 12.

⁴⁵ Li, Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of contemporary Chinese Art”, *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Chang, Tsong-zung, (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2001), 13-16.

of internationally successful artists was promoted in line with ideological values that appealed to its Western audiences such as free speech and art that fell into a narrative of protest. The use of 'dissident' or ironic representations of socio-political issues appealed to liberal political ideologies as well as the presentation of the artist as a figure of protest, particularly in the case of Ai Weiwei which I will discuss further in chapter three. The narrative of the dissident artist creates an "implicit justification" of European/American values regarding democracy and capitalism, emphasising the ideological differences and antagonisms between China and the West. In the article, *The Branding of Chinese Contemporary Art and its Politics (2014)* Chloe Preece notes a sense of contemporary exoticism in the early curatorial methodologies of curating Chinese contemporary art.

The movements deal directly with political themes but are distinctive in their refusal to take a stance, which perhaps is why the work was so attractive to the West, the packaging of the discourse could be manipulated to serve the most marketable narrative. Just as Said showed, romanticised images of Asia and the Middle East served an implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions; this "new" art market serves to continue to circulate a discourse of ideological superiority.⁴⁶

In this sense, the representation of Chinese contemporary art in conjunction with national identity is represented through an artificial construct as its portrayals are simplified at the risk of becoming reductive. These movements then came to represent an image of China to the West in a similar fashion to the promotion within the art market of nationally distinct art movements such as the Young British Artists. Preece claims that this 'branding' of cultures were produced to reflect and reinforce "specific socio-political hegemonic power structures."⁴⁷ In this case, the similarities that have been reflected back to Said's notion of Orientalism where the image of the Orient is contrasted with the West is not an accurate portrayal of reality but is instead a cultural production either through deliberate export catering to international audiences and markets or through misinterpretation. While this observation holds some value particularly concerning initial international representations through commercial art markets, there have also been efforts in recent years to gather together a more pluralistic representation of Chinese contemporary art and to expand the scope of their curatorial research both in terms of representing individual artists and ongoing site-specific discourses and educational programmes. While these curatorial strategies are

⁴⁶ Preece, Chloe, "The branding of contemporary Chinese art and its politics: Unpacking the power discourses of the art market", *Arts Marketing: An International Journal* 4, no. 1, (2014): 25-44.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

not without their problems, the notion of the international perception of Chinese contemporary art as an ideological construct is beginning to be reassessed.

Mosquera has commented that the curation of 'non-Western art' moved along an axis between the central and the peripheral. The centres "are not satisfied with sending their art to the periphery, they also bring back the art of their choosing from the periphery, under control, keeping disconnected the zones of silence."⁴⁸ Through this logic, the methods of transcultural curation are still firmly based within a Western framework with the art institutions curating cultures selecting, promoting and purchasing works at their discretion. The Eurocentric framework of western curatorial practices chooses what is valuable in the non-western art worlds and imposed it internationally through the systems of its art institutions. Apart from implications of colonialism, this method of curation risks provoking the art of the 'curated cultures' to change to appease the preferences of the dominant culture in which the other is curated, not only in seeking financial benefits through commercial art markets but following "the prestige of the paradigms legitimated by the centres."⁴⁹ For example, in chapter three I will discuss the commission-based system of Tate Liverpool's *The Real Thing* in 2007 which, despite having the intention of funding ambitious works from its selected artists, was still under the patronage of Tate for its collection.

The issue of 'curated cultures' has also been applied to Chinese contemporary art. In a commentary on the changing landscape of Chinese contemporary art and Hou Hanru stated that the eventual criticism of art movements such as 'Political-Pop' and 'Cynical Realism' stemmed from a 'spectacle culture'. The development of international exhibitions such as the 45th Venice Biennial that had placed Chinese contemporary art as a medium for international consumption of a homogenised culture of a singular nation-state and thus removing the agency of individual artists.⁵⁰ Hou also expressed discontent with Western art institutions for appropriating the discourse on Chinese contemporary art as well as viewing Chinese art from the wrong perspective both culturally and ideologically.⁵¹ As Hou Hanru states the

⁴⁸ Mosquera, Gerardo, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating" in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 105-112.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hou, Hanru, "Towards an 'un-unofficial art' De-ideologicalisation of China's contemporary art in the 1990s", *Third Text* 10, no. 34, (1996): 37-52.

⁵¹ Kharchenkova, Svetlana & Velthuis, Olav, "An Evaluative Biography of Cynical Realism and Political Pop", in *Moments of Valuation: Exploring Sites of Dissonance*, eds. Ariane Antal, Michael Hutter, & David Stark, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124.

'Western' art media "concentrate their energies and interests on revealing how 'unofficial' artists suffer from political pressure in the country as if the significance of both artists and work can only be found in ideological struggles."⁵² In chapter three this can be seen in the wide use of political and historical imagery in *Reckoning with the Past* in 1997, which uses themes of memory, trauma and even nostalgia as its basis for confronting the recent history of China as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. In a more recent example, this can be seen in the Royal Academy's retrospective of Ai Weiwei where the artist's reputation as a political dissident is placed as a prominent theme of the exhibition.

Another aspect of criticism surrounding Chinese contemporary art is its relationship with its Western counterpart, initially locating Chinese contemporary art criticism within the framework of the Western art canon. However, by the 1990s artists and critics began to question the 'universality' of these Western models and began to include a consideration of post-colonialism within Chinese art criticism. This perception is also argued by art critics such as Pi Li, who warned against accepting Western interpretations on works of Chinese contemporary art. Pi Li argued that by not being critical of the critiques imposed by Western art criticism Chinese contemporary art would be at the risk of falling into becoming something that it's not and would become dictated by 'Western tastes.'⁵³ The relationships with the West are an inevitable point of observation and discourse in exhibitions based in Western art institutions but through the acknowledgement of the contradictory problematisation and necessity of catering these exhibitions towards Western audiences.

Over the years, the strategies of researching and curating Chinese contemporary art internationally became more sophisticated and more efficient. On the other hand, a number of exhibitions attracted criticism due to the fact that some of the artists being represented had been viewed as creating works of art with the intent to appeal to international tastes and commercial trends. However, these early exhibitions also faced criticism for their ideologically influenced portrayal of Chinese contemporary art.⁵⁴ Instead of making the assumption that this form of contemporaneity is limited with modern and postmodern art as a linear narrative such as the dominant narratives within Western art history, this pluralistic

⁵² Hou, Hanru, "Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions: A New Internationalism", in *Global Visions: New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press, 1994), 79-88.

⁵³ Pi, Li, "My Life, My Decision: The Political Nature of Chinese Contemporary Art," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark (Hong Kong: New Art Media Limited, 2000), 46-51.

⁵⁴ Kharchenkova, Svetlana & Velthuis, Olav "An Evaluative Biography of Cynical Realism and Political Pop", in *Moments of Valuation: Exploring Sites of Dissonance*, eds. Ariane Antal, Michael Hutter, & David Stark, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124.

model that emphasises the “heterogeneity and multiplicity in art production”.⁵⁵ In effect, the international interpretation or misinterpretation of the artists’ work becomes an additional element to the curatorial research.

The use of survey shows of Chinese contemporary art has persisted into recent and contemporary curating. Exhibitions such as *Art of Change: New Directions from China* (Fig. 2.1) exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 2012 aimed to portray an overview of Chinese contemporary performance and installation art. Meanwhile, *The M+ Sigg Collection: Chinese art from the 1970s to Now* (Fig. 2.2 - 2.3) in 2015 that highlighted eighty works by Chinese contemporary artists collected over the course of four decades in an informatively led retrospective of Chinese contemporary art as it is currently understood within the global art world. It can be argued that the role of the survey exhibition has shifted from the ‘new’ to the historical. These exhibitions were dubbed ‘The China Show’, by UCCA director Philip Tinari who criticised them as exhibitions that problematically attempted to create both an image of the Chinese contemporary art scene and to interpret what the works say about contemporary Chinese culture and social issues.⁵⁶ Shows like *The M+ Sigg Collection* have taken works and artists who as recently as ten years ago were part of these survey shows and re-presented them through a historical lens.

Britta Erickson identified three issues that influenced the receptions of Chinese contemporary art in the West at the beginning of the 1990s and continue to be subjects of debate in present-day exhibitions. The first issue is the continued discourse on the colonialist search for exoticism in the concept of “the other”. The second is the influence of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square protests on Western perceptions of China leading to the reading of artworks through a political context. Thirdly the reception of Chinese contemporary art among Western art critics frequently resulted in perceiving works as being derivative of European and American art practices, often failing to analyse the works beyond their surface appearance. Concerns were raised by the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Chinese contemporary art in early international exhibitions organised by Western curators such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre* and the 45th Venice Biennale. The latter came under criticism for presenting a reductive history of Chinese contemporary art through their selection of works that conformed to ‘Political Pop’ and ‘Cynical Realism’ labels. Peggy Wang has argued that curators outside of China, in the wake of these exhibitions pushed forward the label of “conceptual art as a corrective term” against the

⁵⁵ Wu, Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2008), 11-12.

⁵⁶ Tinari, Phillip, “The real thing: Contemporary art from China.” *Artforum International*, vol. 46 no. 1 (September 2007): 454.

Western lens of viewing non-Western art as a derivative of Western art and claimed for “Chinese art incorporated a larger reorienting of the developing relationship between global art and its treatment of local histories.”⁵⁷

The first of these three issues have occurred in exhibitions and contain the possibility of being exploited as sites of accessibility for international audiences, particularly in early group shows where there was a need for a unifying curatorial theme. For example, in 1989 Gu Dexin, Huang Yongping and Yang Jiechang participated in the global contemporary art exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, (Fig. 2.3) organised by the Pompidou Centre in Paris and curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. This was arguably the first instance of Chinese contemporary art artists being represented in a major international art exhibition since the end of the Cultural Revolution. The show was curated in response to the earlier MOMA exhibition “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* as well as historical, ethnographic curatorial practices in Europe and set to subvert the Eurocentric artistic representation and colonial worldviews.⁵⁸ However, critics accused *Magiciens de la Terre* of fostering elements of mysticism and exoticism in the representation of the participating Chinese artists.⁵⁹ The early 1990s showed the beginning of a growing international interest in contemporary art from the Chinese Mainland. A few exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art were featured in the West in the late 1980s, either in the form of small solo exhibitions at smaller venues or as a minor element of a larger international exhibition.⁶⁰

The 45th Venice Biennale in 1993, was the first international art festival of its kind in which a group of Chinese artists participated, albeit in an unofficial context. The year before, Francesca Dal Lago⁶¹ had convinced the director of the biennale, Achille Bonito Oliva, to visit China. Dal Lago, in collaboration with fellow curators, Li Xianting and Liao Wen, had prepared a list of Chinese artists to be considered for the exhibition. This early representation of Chinese contemporary artists at the Venice Biennale faced heavy criticism

⁵⁷ Wang, Peggy, “Making and remaking history: categorising ‘conceptual art’ in contemporary Chinese art.” *Journal of Art Historiography*, no.10 (2014): 1-17.

⁵⁸ Hou, Hanru, “In Defence of Difference: Notes on *Magiciens de la Terre*, Twenty-five Years Later,” *Yishu: Journal Of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 3 (2014): 7-18.

⁵⁹ Erikson, Britta, “The Reception in the West of Experimental Mainland Chinese Art of the 1990s,” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 358.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 357.

⁶¹ Dal Lago was an Italian art historian who at the time was a cultural attaché of the Italian Embassy in Beijing.

at the time on Oliva's part, accusing him of an 'Orientalist' format in the presentation of the artworks and his selection of works through personal preference as opposed to a thematic or representative framework.⁶² In his article, *Oliva is not the Saviour of Chinese Art (1993)* Wang Lin also accused the Venice Biennale director of selecting the chosen artworks on misinterpreted ideological grounds. Wang Lin stated:

The limitations of Oliva's selections are not only due to the contingent and opportunistic nature of his engagement with avant-garde Chinese art but are also located in the covert Eurocentrism concealed in his standards of evaluation.⁶³

The problems faced within these international shows and the exhibitions that followed is one of social context and preconception. The curatorial challenge was to both challenge preconceived notions of Chinese identity in an international context while still portraying itself in a way which retains an identifiable cultural identity. When the focus of the artwork is turned from the social and cultural changes occurring in China and towards the concerns of illustrating those changes in a different cultural context, the original intention of the work becomes compromised. Through the perceived duality between China and 'the West', the exhibition and its included works become used as a point of reference in comparing the two. Fei Dawei has argued that:

We must start by transcending the differences inherent in national cultures: ...Cultural choices made on this level are profoundly voluntary and individualistic, and the concept of "motherland" should play no role at all. Only under these circumstances can contemporary culture develop with vitality. For the above reasons, Chinese artists abroad have been unable to bear the responsibility for promoting Chinese contemporary art, nor have they been able to "represent" anyone.⁶⁴

This implies that the significant challenges faced with representing Chinese contemporary art in an international context at this time continue to be the exoticizing and 'othering' of Chinese artists. Through the curation of exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* or *Passaggio a Oriente*, the separation of nationalities through curatorial methods are reminiscent of the ethnographic displays of a colonial past.

⁶² Dal Largo, Francesca, "Chinese Art and the Venice Biennale: The Virtual Reality of Chinese Contemporary Art," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark, (Hong Kong: New Art Media Ltd, 2000), 158-166.

⁶³ Wang Lin, "Oliva is Not the Saviour of Chinese Art", in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 366-368.

⁶⁴ Fei, Dawei, "The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Chang Tsong-zung, (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), 61.

Chinese contemporary art has also influenced the image of China internationally, and in promoting their own image of Chinese identity, the Chinese Communist Party has also shifted its focus on Chinese contemporary art as opposed to classical and traditional art practices as an “additional element of China’s cultural diplomacy.”⁶⁵ However, beyond creating a commemoration of the past in terms of relating to China’s official national identity and recognition, revisiting the artistic practices and methodologies of the 1980s through exhibitions like the *M+ Sigg Collection* raises further questions. For example, this raises questions as to which art history or histories have been commemorated as part of China’s art history and under whose authority, which also raises questions on whether aspects of this art history have been withheld or excised from this history⁶⁶ One can also question whether artists have achieved recognition, and whether the basis for that recognition is rooted in financial success or critical acclaim. In *The Art Critic as Middleman: Navigating State and Market in Chinese Contemporary Art, 1980s-1990s* (2013) Peggy Wang focused on a more economic model of analysing the recent growth of China’s art market and cultural sector. This included the sometimes conflicting interests of artists in China, commercial art markets and government interventions and the role of the art critic within these social structures of art production.⁶⁷ The display of Chinese art in Britain has been analysed through a museological perspective by Amy Barnes but this analysis excludes the element of contemporary curatorial practice and instead relies heavily on representations of historical artworks and ‘Revolutionary art’ at organisations such as the British Museum and V&A Museum with a specific focus on art produced during the Cultural Revolution. This displays a concern with the representation of China and Chinese culture in the UK with a gap in the current research surrounding Chinese contemporary art within a curatorial perspective in British art institutions particularly through the history of a single art organisation.⁶⁸

When considering the cultural challenges that face curating in a global context, the issues raised in the past decades are still able to raise relevant concerns. Different forms of curating and curatorial practice were offered within the context of an increasingly fragmented

⁶⁵ Yao, Yung-Wen, “The Void of Chineseness: Contemporary Art and Cultural Diplomacy in *China*”, *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 5, No. 11, (November 2015): 971.

⁶⁶ Hou, Hanru, *On the Mid-ground*, (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002).

⁶⁷ Wang, Peggy, “Art Critic as Middleman: Navigating State and Market in Contemporary Chinese Art, 1980s 1990s,” *Art Journal* 72, no. 1, (Spring 2013): 6-19.

⁶⁸ Barnes, Amy, *From Revolution to Commie Kitsch: (Re)-presenting China in Contemporary British Museums through the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution*, (PhD Thesis: University of Leicester, 2009), 8.

presentation of globalisation with increased visibility and representation of cultural diversity and the individual contexts of the artists. Gao Minglu, the curator of the exhibition *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, provided a framework for the exhibition that was both referential in its contextualisation of Chinese contemporary art. In his essay in the introduction of the exhibition's catalogue, Gao attempts to locate the changing artistic styles, thematic content and subject matter within the context of the tumultuous events in recent Chinese history. He highlights the contrast between an earlier self-focused phase of modernisation in Chinese art with the more commercial and globally focused transnational modernity that began in the late 1980s after the international interest in Chinese contemporary art began to emerge as a consequence of a globalised economy. These patterns of modernisation and development are also identifiable in Taiwan and Hong Kong at different points in history. Adopting a narrower focus within the exhibition's catalogue, Norman Bryson examines two features of the avant-garde movements in Mainland China: the negotiation of public and private sites and discourses. As a Western art historian, Bryson shifts the focus to the aesthetic practices and strategies in which the 'Chineseness' is located within the exhibition which are "both impressive and without obvious counterpart in the western context".⁶⁹

Gao Minglu also claims that changing trends in Chinese contemporary art reflect the political changes and globalised experiences, beginning with a self-focused, defensive modernisation and later "transnational modernity." He states that:

The primary goal of this exhibition is to enrich the western audience's understanding of contemporary art from the selected Chinese regions, both visually and conceptually. As a guest curator originally from China, my key concern during the two-year curatorial process has been to integrate the visual presentation of the artworks and theoretical interpretation of the context within which 'Chinese contemporary art' makes sense. Also, since there are significant historical, political, and regional differences between the four different societies represented, configuring an integrated but non-hegemonic structure was a challenge.⁷⁰

An essential work on the political ideologies of the PRC and their influences on Chinese contemporary art in the 1980s is *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-garde 1979-1989, A Semiotic Analysis* (2003) by Martina Koppel-Yang. *Semiotic Warfare* argues that the art of the Chinese contemporary art was an important factor in instigating the social and political changes that emerged after the Cultural Revolution had ended and that these art

⁶⁹ Garrels, Gary, & Mackenzie, Colin, "Introduction" in *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, eds. Norman Bryson and Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 12.

⁷⁰ Gao, Minglu, "Towards a Transnational Modernity" in *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, eds. Norman Bryson and Gao Minglu, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 15.

movements became more engaged in political commentary as the Cultural Revolution receded. Koppel-Yang analyses this trend in contemporary art within its context by exploring the administrative and ideological structures that influenced artists during that time as opposed to attempting to compare them with a western equivalent. The relationships between Chinese contemporary art and the social changes of the post-revolutionary period are explored through a semiotic analysis of the visual signifiers present in case studies of ten seminal works of Chinese contemporary art. These relationships have become sources of debate both in China and in international art circles and focus on the reasons why they were such a cause for concern for the PRC government.

Another work on a similar theme is *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, (2011).⁷¹ Edited by Mary Wiseman and Liu Yuedi, this book is a collection of essays surrounding the international reception of Chinese contemporary art and primarily focuses on modern Chinese culture, its historical and cross-cultural influences, and its philosophical dilemmas. *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art* provides a clear and varied understanding of contemporary Chinese aesthetics. Covering historical trauma, language and text and a site of social commentary, gender studies, and global intervention, the essays question the current understanding of Chinese identity in relation to the modern world. The book also analyses the methods that Chinese contemporary artists use to intervene with pre-existing cultural concepts to provide a commentary on current social and political concerns.

The various essays question the current understanding of Chinese identity in relation to contemporary society and international and the methods that Chinese contemporary artists use to intervene with pre-existing cultural concepts to provide a commentary of current social and political concerns. While these western perspectives are difficult to avoid particularly concerning cross-cultural curatorial strategies within western institutions, it is important to retain a critical and pluralistic discourse in order to re-evaluate the curatorial strategies of the past and present. In subsequent years the issues of global intervention in Chinese contemporary art have remained an ongoing presence in international discourses as well as the continuing discussion of how Chinese contemporary art can be represented and communicated in the present day.

⁷¹ Wiseman, Mary & Liu, Yuedi, eds., *Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

2.3 The Semiotics of Translating for Audiences in the UK

The objectives of art institutions in the United Kingdom were drastically modified in 1995 to focus more on the social considerations of their audiences with methods of public funding adjusted accordingly. The aim of this change in cultural policy was to reduce social exclusion inside the cultural sector and to attempt to broaden the reach of cultural centres through educational programmes and through 'increasing diversity' in its cultural representation.⁷² Historically, major art museums both in the UK and in the West as a whole have been dominated by "Eurocentric perspectives and participation".⁷³ Research on the existing disparities in the audiences of art galleries and art institutions has provided insights into the implications distance within aspects such as education, social class, and ethnic backgrounds. Meanwhile, individuals who are wealthier, white, and who have reached a higher level of education are more likely to attend an art exhibition or event, to watch or listen to arts or cultural programming through media or take part in an art activity.

Rethinking curatorial research in British museums and art institutions towards exhibitions with a 'multicultural' perspective has become a priority in the last few decades. Since the 1990s there has been a shift from previous administrative attitudes towards the distribution of funding and problems of the representation of contemporary global cultures, which prompted a need to expand the scope of museums. The absence of non-European artists from museum collections and contemporary art exhibitions led to an appeal to rethink contemporary curating and museum programmes.

Additionally, there was a movement in investment from the singular authority of the industry, which in the 1990s, prompted a discussion of new research methodologies for the improvement of museums. Legislature activities have energised creative commercial enterprises development, with a shift in promoting for aesthetic value and sustainability.⁷⁴ The creative industries have demonstrated a shift from "art for art's sake" and towards the acknowledgement of both the social role of culture and its place in an economical context, where the cultural sector is treated "as ingredients in a new cultural mix".⁷⁵ While certain

⁷² Ang, Ien, "The predicament of diversity: Multiculturalism in practice at the art museum," *Ethnicities* 5, no.3, (2005) 305-320.

⁷³ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁷⁴ Belfiore, Eleonora, "Art as a means of alleviating social exclusion: does it really work? A critique of instrumental cultural policies and social impact studies in the UK," *International journal of cultural policy* 8 no. 1, (2002) 91-106.

⁷⁵ Volkerling, Michael, "From cool Britannia to hot nation: 'creative industries' policies in Europe, Canada and New Zealand," *International journal of cultural policy* 7, no. 3, (2001): 437-455.

categorisations vary slightly between different cultural backgrounds, creative organisations primarily promote works and activities which highlight artistic talent and originality as their basis as well as using the cultural sector as a site of economic growth and employment opportunities through the production of the arts.⁷⁶

The field of museum studies in Britain has its basis in the study of semiotics, post-Saussurean semantic principle and, poststructuralism. Semiotics is concerned with the framework initially provided for the study of signs and signifiers in linguistics pioneered by the research of Swiss etymologist Ferdinand de Saussure during the early twentieth century by the same method.⁷⁷ While Saussure set out to analyse language structures but more importantly that the same methods are utilised as a signifying framework dependent upon signifiers which are made up of written, phonic or visual signs, and signifieds, the particular idea or meaning behind them. He contended that meaning depends on the examination and separation between signifiers which is acquired through the process of language learning. In this respect, understanding relies upon an imparted comprehension of an existing signifying framework which is socially constructed. To Saussure, signifiers and signifieds have an arbitrary association and their relationship is dependent on other individuals who offer the same signifying framework and agree upon an existing meaning.⁷⁸ Moreover, signifieds themselves are constructed through social environments. Both verbal and visual languages are not an objective interpretation of reality but a social development which is learned and negotiated, and which is representative of how reality is perceived by individuals or groups.

Saussure's related hypotheses of language and meaning were influential for the twentieth-century cultural theory, especially with the development of structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁹ Structuralism, similar to semiotics, attempted to identify structures in the association between social constructs and also argued that these contrasts were marked by binary oppositions, i.e. inside/outside. Roland Barthes, for example, sought after those plans for semiotics and structuralism through investigation of prominent cultural signs within media, advertising, and myth, in *Mythologies* (1957). At the same time structural

⁷⁶ Rentschler, Ruth, "Museum marketing: understanding different types of audiences," in *Arts marketing*, (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth Heineman, 2004), 139-158.

⁷⁷ De Saussure, Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, (London: Fontana, 1974)

⁷⁸ Mason, Rhiannon, "Cultural theory and museum studies," in *A companion to museum studies*, Sharon MacDonald, (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 17-32.

⁷⁹ Browitt, Jeff, & Milner, Andrew, *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 96.

anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, formed schematic analyses of social conventions such as marriage traditions.⁸⁰ Structuralism and semiotics have also become a core framework for western museum studies and art theory. In *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (1992), Susan Pearce uses discussions by Saussure and Barthes regarding 'langue' and 'parole', as well as referencing the structuralist concern with binaries and oppositions within the context of carrying out a schematic analysis of the museum collection. She also distinguishes the problematic limitations of validity within the structuralist theory.⁸¹ The term 'semiotic' has often been applied to the wider field of museology and art criticism in a less formal sense as an exploration of how art galleries and museums function as "systems of signification and can be read as texts" such as the museum as a site of social ritual.⁸² Susan Bassnett's *Translation Studies*, a book with a broad scope of research that combines different strands of translation studies and looks into elements of cultural translation and, particularly in English-speaking nations. It is an opportune mediation that tracks the rise of cultural translation studies as a different train, covering with etymology, artistic feedback, and reasoning. However, investigating particular issues of culturally diverse correspondence. Despite the fact that she underlines artistic interpretation, her book lays on what turns into the most widely recognised theoretical supposition amid this period: the relative independence of the translated content.

One of the primary concerns of the methodology behind curating Chinese contemporary art in the UK in the context of promoting diversity and multicultural representation and education is to provide accurate representations of Chinese contemporary art that are not prone to misunderstandings.⁸³ This corrective measure is a move to deconstruct earlier stereotypical representations of cultures as well as representations of race and ethnicity. Although it is an important move, given the institutional ideology of "mono-culturalism"⁸⁴ in the Eurocentric art canon, these notions of 'authenticity' and 'accuracy' need to be examined as they make the implication that the claims of Western culture are universal. Postcolonial and recent discourses on culture have questioned the notion of cultural authenticity and brought attention to the political construction of claims to authenticity. These discussions draw

⁸⁰ Levi-Strauss, Claude, *Structural Anthropology: Volume 1*, (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

⁸¹ Pearce, Susan, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992).

⁸² Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. London: Routledge, 2005).

⁸³ Marsden, Rachel, *The Transcultural Curator: Translating Networked Curatorial Practices in the Chinese Context since 1980*, PhD Thesis, Birmingham City University, 2017.

⁸⁴ Goldberg, David T. "Heterogeneity and hybridity: Colonial Legacy, Postcolonial Heresy," in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwarz & Sangeeta Ray, (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 72-86.

attention to how cultural identity is reinvented and repeatedly contested throughout history. The concept of representation as a process of the production of meaning is also a site of conflict for people of different cultural backgrounds. This struggle relates to how their social and cultural, experiences, as well as historical events, are shaped by a number of institutions, primarily through education but also through systems of cultural production.⁸⁵ The operation of art production as a global phenomenon exists in a counter-position to the Western history of art, as it aims to critique the former boundaries between “art” and “indigenous” or “popular production”.⁸⁶ It is in this spirit that British museums aim to promote the representation of diverse cultures in both their inclusion of artists and in through revisiting their existing collections.⁸⁷

Through the concept of translation as a cultural as well as a linguistic practice, translation can act as an important influence in the construction of representing of diverse cultures while “simultaneously constructing the subjectivities of its receptors.”⁸⁸ As the foundation of globalism becomes increasingly defined by the ability to communicate across languages and cultures, translation plays a crucial role not only in the primary sense of maintaining a mutual understanding between “national” languages and cultures but also through the more unseen processes of trans-cultural hybridisation that produce new identities. The concept of cultural translation in the context of curating can serve as a method in which one can both disseminate the wider dynamic of an exhibition’s cultural interaction and justify the reasoning behind the various forms of cultural representation. One particular concern is with the methods in which Chinese contemporary artists and the art critics deal with issues of migration and diaspora. To identify the space Chinese contemporary art can occupy when it is continuously evoking a movement between places and cultures. From this perspective, the most powerful influences in the construction of cultural identity appear to be not only the artists who are the producers of the artworks or the audience but the exhibition organisers and curators, who have the power to translate meaning between cultures and mediate between the artwork and museum audiences. The idea of curatorial translation can serve as a process that can explain specific forms of cultural representation and also generate an exchange between the viewer and the exhibition. The artworks are selected through a process of negotiations between both the organisation and curators and, curators and

⁸⁵ Desai, Dipti, “Imaging difference: The politics of representation in multicultural art education,” *Studies in Art Education* 41, no. 2, (Winter 2000): 114-129.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Belting, Hans, *Contemporary art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, (Berlin: Hatje Cantz 2007).

⁸⁸ Nelson, Brian, “Translating cultures, cultures of translation,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 28, no. 4, (2007): 361-365.

artists, as well as interpreting the social expectations of the audience, the cases of legitimacy or authenticity made by the presentation, and judgments of the artwork's legitimacy or realness of the items or settings shown.

Engagement with artists and their work is central to curatorial practice and are an element of the role of the curator where a measurable outcome has no guarantees. This requires a type of creative negotiation as it involves the support for the development of projects and ideas, facilitating dialogues, and continuously updating and re-thinking research. It could also be argued that the final manifestation of exhibitions is not the only task of the curator. The role of the curator has increasingly been expanded to include the production of commissioned artworks, performances and research, facilitating residencies, editing artist-books and exhibition catalogues, and organising related art events. In her essay, Rosalind Krauss describes how "critical operations," such as the history of art and art criticism, have historicised practices within the arts to create a trajectory for the development of sculpture from its "historically bound" categorisation.⁸⁹ Alternatively, rather than trying to simplify the pluralistic divergences that have occurred in the field into a historicised narrative, she recognises that they are a result of the changing conditions of a cultural landscape disrupting the original definition of art. As a result, Kraus locates the structures present within the 'expanded field' of sculpture that can acknowledge the transgressions and contradictions that have challenged existing definitions.⁹⁰ The same could be said of the contrast between traditional models of curatorial practice and their contemporary counterparts.

The post-colonial problematisation of exoticism with the reception of Chinese contemporary art is a primary concern in its representation both in the UK and the international art world. While Britain had previously presented 'ethnographic' displays of artworks and artefacts from China in museums throughout the 19th century, the first art exhibition dedicated solely to 'Chinese art' occurred as early as 1935 at the Royal Academy.⁹¹ Representations of Chinese art over the course of the 20th century, exhibitions of Chinese art in Britain, primarily focused on antiquities and dynastic art pieces. The criticism of these methods of curatorship implies that the image of China presented in British museums, and galleries were not representative of its reality but instead as it was perceived to be in Western minds. This implies the existence of a constructed and exoticized perception of Asia through the historical lens of

⁸⁹ Krauss, Rosalind, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 31-42.

⁹⁰ Fowle, Kate, "Who cares? Understanding the role of the curator today", in *Cautionary tales: Critical curating*, eds. Steven Rand and Heather Kouris, (New York: Apexart, 2007), pp. 26-35.

⁹¹ OUR ART CRITIC, "The Chinese Art Exhibition." *The Times* [London, England] 29 Nov. 1935: 12. The Times Digital Archive. Web. 19 Jan. 2015.

European merchants, missionaries and colonial invaders. This image of 'the Orient' was subsequently used as an entry point in some art exhibitions, both historical and contemporary, by catering to the expectations of audiences.

Up until these early international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, the presentation of Chinese art in the West had previously been displayed as objects of exoticism with a focus on historical artefacts and pre-20th-century artworks or modern traditional painting. These more museological approaches to curating art from China had come to be accepted as signifying the cultural heritage of China and the works of art it encompasses with works being exhibited chronologically or geographically. However, in the wake of the survey exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s, the promotion of Chinese contemporary art turned towards the avant-garde and proceeded to deviate from pre-conceived Western notions of China.⁹² Subsequently, the international representations of Chinese contemporary art have gone on to provide commentaries on Contemporary Chinese culture and later, in the case of CFCCA, to use China as a starting point for broader discussions.

Contemporary art shows from the 1990s onwards in Britain sought to challenge the perceptions of 'Chineseness' and represented the discrepancy of the linear artistic development favoured by Western art history in favour of globally focused and pluralistic curatorial approaches. Their thematic content and stylistic approaches to the works produced for these exhibitions challenged accepted notions of how audiences perceive art from China. The discourse of political ideologies and the notion of 'Chineseness' would become a reoccurring theme of art criticism for British exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art.

⁹² Smith, Karen, *Representing the People*, (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 1999), p. 8.

Chapter Three: In Search of The Real Thing: Portrayals of Chinese Contemporary Art in British exhibitions

This chapter will cover a series of exhibitions focusing on curating as translation, connection, and critical intervention using a selection of UK exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art outside of CFCCA. Starting with group exhibitions to explore issues relating to thematic exhibitions, interactions with site and location and commission centric exhibitions focusing on *Reckoning with the Past* and *The Real Thing* (2007). The discourse of political ideologies and the notion of Chinese identity, Greater China, and Diasporic identities would become a reoccurring theme of exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the UK. Contemporary art shows in Britain after the 1990s aimed to challenge the perceptions of contemporary China and represented the discrepancy of the linear artistic development favoured by Western art history in favour of global and pluralistic curatorial approaches. Their thematic content and stylistic approaches to the works produced for these exhibitions challenged accepted notions of how audiences perceive art from China. Another concern of the curator is the notion of authenticity, questioning the notion of authenticity and the problematic nature of the pre-occupation with authenticity. The next concern is the translational issues of the chosen works, attempting to mediate and establish a connection between the audience and the work, whether the original meaning of the work will be changed or expanded in a different context.

The Chapter will go on to provide an analysis of the interpretation of the narratives of selected solo exhibitions in the UK including a comparative analysis of Ai Weiwei's solo exhibitions at the Royal Academy and Blenheim Palace. The concept of the 'dissident narrative' and the late or post-Communist narrative have become a persisting concern of curating Chinese contemporary art in an international context. This narrative is largely informed by the initial international exhibitions of the 1990s, with the political and economic landscape informing the initial interest of exhibition audiences in early exhibitions and capturing public imaginations.

Finally, the chapter will cover the inclusion of Chinese artists in international shows and festivals looking at Liverpool Biennial and the relationships between local and global perspectives, movement within the international art world as well as the political issues that arise during the discussion of nationality and cultural identity within a global context. The 'hospitality' of Liverpool Biennial highlights the way in which Biennials infer the idea that art

is a universal cultural format through which issues of culture and identity can be addressed. The attempt of the curator to make the work relevant to the host institution or city, and to spark the consideration and discussion of how the themes and issues raised in the work can be compared to local events and situations.

3.1 Reckoning with the Past: The Legacy of the Survey Exhibition.

During the 1990s Chinese contemporary art experienced an increase in international attention. Large-scale national review shows were organised considering a wide scope of contemporary art exhibitions and events in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. 1993, in particular, showed the instigation of several important international shows including, *China Avantgarde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture* (Fig. 3.1) at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Fig. 3.2) at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in Hong Kong and *Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989* (Fig. 3.3) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, as well as the first exhibitions of work by Chinese contemporary artists at the Venice Biennale.⁹³ Both *China Avantgarde* and *China's New Art, Post-1989* were both landmark exhibitions that began a move towards mainstream international awareness of Chinese contemporary art as well as highlighting discussions surrounding cultural translation and transcultural curatorial practices.

In 1993 the opening in Oxford of the German touring exhibition *China Avantgarde* co-curated by Hans van Dijk retitled as '*Silent Energy*', was seen critically as an initial rejection of both these concepts, instead of seeming to stem from a western critical framework.⁹⁴ The exhibition was criticised at the time for the artist's use of Western art vocabulary and a reliance on the political aspects of the works.⁹⁵ However, the inclusion of installation art as opposed to an abundance of paintings set *Silent Energy* apart from other exhibitions in the UK during the 1990s such as *China's New Art, Post-1989* which took a broader scope in the works that were selected and exhibitions like *Reckoning with the Past* in 1997 and *Representing the People* in 1999 which focused on contemporary painting.

⁹³ Dal Largo, Francesca, "Chinese Art and the Venice Biennale: The Virtual Reality of Chinese Contemporary Art," in *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. John Clark, (Hong Kong: New Art Media Ltd, 2000), 158-166.

⁹⁴ Robertson, Ian, "Silent Energy", *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 12, September 1993, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/silent_energy/ [accessed 12/05/2015].

⁹⁵ Van Dijk, Hans, "The Fine Arts After the Cultural Revolution: Stylistic Development and Cultural Debate," in *China Avant Garde: Counter Currents in Art and Culture*, eds. Jochen Noth, Wolfger Pohlmann and Kai Reschke, (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 16.

The exhibitions that took place in 1993 can best be situated in the context of the ideological conflicts in a transitional period following the end of the Cold War, emerging critiques of global power dynamics particularly ideas of post-Colonial theory and Western cultural hegemony, combined with a cultural curiosity towards global art. With the increasing interest in globally focussed art curating world after the pivotal and highly controversial exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of the World) in 1989*, Western interest in the global perspective was on the rise. These exhibitions show an initial stage of international interest in Chinese contemporary art in the Western international art scene. This led to further commercial and critical attention towards the end of the decade, with exhibitions such as *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*⁹⁶ (1998) and *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* at the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art in Chicago in 1999.⁹⁷

China Avantgarde was exhibited from 1993 to 1994 in venues in Berlin, Rotterdam, Oxford, and Odense and provided a retrospective of Chinese art, design, and culture in the 1980s and early 1990s. The original exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt was co-curated by Hans van Dijk and Hou Hanru and displayed a wide selection of artworks and also represented a broader discussion of contemporary Chinese literature and the performing arts. The show was reinterpreted several times. From works shown in this exhibition, two broad trends can be identified; the first in the element of innovation, the experimentation of new creative languages while the second portrayed an ironic view of the narratives surrounding Contemporary Chinese culture and its ideologies by subverting its imagery.

While the Oxford exhibition *Silent Energy* (Fig 3.4) included some of the artists and curators from the *China Avantgarde* exhibition, it was considerably scaled down due to budget constraints. *Silent Energy* eventually included the work of eight artists, seven of which were based outside of China at the time of the exhibition as well as Hou Hanru who was still based in Paris.⁹⁸ *Silent Energy* also differed from *China Avantgarde* as the majority of the works were commissioned for the exhibition and installed by the artists. Hou noted this

⁹⁶ Gao, Minglu, *Inside/Out: New Chinese Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁹⁷ Wu, Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 19.

⁹⁸ The exhibition included works by Cai Guoqiang, Chen Zhen, Gu Wenda, Guan Wei, Huang Yongping, Wang Luyan, Xi Jianjun and Yang Jie Chang. At the time of the exhibition, only Wang Luyan was based in Beijing while the rest were living and working internationally.

emigration in the exhibition catalogue as a “transition between cultural and personal identity”⁹⁹ The theme of ‘energy’ referenced in the title is reflected through a number of explorations of materials, with a number of references to environmental and ecological concerns. This can be seen Gu Wenda’s use of powdered human placenta produced using methods from ancient Chinese medicine which subverts moral and cultural taboos (Fig, 3.4). Chen Zhen’s terraced field covered in ashes reflected both on the ecological impacts of agriculture and cultivation as well as the erosion of cultures. In contrast to *China Avantgarde* which mixed a variety of wall-mounted works and sculptural works together, *Silent Energy* used its limitations to its advantage. The commissioned works are large in scale and make the most of the available space.

Subversion was a primary strategy employed by Hou Hanru as well as concepts of transcendence of the body and the deconstruction of the self and the ‘Other’. An illustration of this deconstruction was the inclusion of Huang Yongping’s living installation *Yellow Peril* (Fig, 3.6) which consisted of caging a thousand locusts with five scorpions under a yellow canvas tent. The title of the work was chosen because the words for ‘locust’ and ‘yellow’ are pronounced the same in Chinese, referring to both the literal locusts in the installation and the reference to the common racist term. However, the pun relies on a knowledge of the Chinese language, and the attempt at translating it is deliberately highlighted as a wider divide between Chinese and English cultures and the inadequacy of translation as a whole.

These early international shows set a precedent for later curatorial methodologies and are still used as points of reference for art historical and curatorial practices such as retrospective approaches, contestation, and artists’ solo exhibitions and monographs. However, these early exhibitions also faced criticism for their ideologically influenced portrayal of Chinese contemporary art. The early international touring exhibitions of art from Mainland China were later followed by further projects organised by UK art institutions. These included *Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting* at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in 1996 and the touring exhibition *Representing the People* organised by the Chinese Art Centre three years later.

The Fruitmarket Gallery’s programme during the time of the exhibition included a continuation of its research into contemporary Asian visual arts after the success of one of

⁹⁹ Hou, Hanru, “A Chinese Energy Plan” in *Silent Energy*, eds. David Elliot and Lydie Mepham, (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 4.

its previous exhibitions *Information and Reality: Contemporary Korean Art* in 1995 and an exhibition of contemporary Japanese Photography entitled *Liquid Crystal Futures* in 1994. The *Reckoning with the Past* exhibition was conceived as a continuation of these shows which had proved popular among Edinburgh art audiences with the *Liquid Crystal Futures* exhibition later touring to Copenhagen, Berlin, Budapest, Gothenburg, and Tokyo. In the wake of this success, *Reckoning with the Past* was the first British exhibition of Chinese contemporary art to be funded by the UK government as it premiered during the Edinburgh International Festival before touring to three other Scottish venues. The exhibition catalogue that was published alongside *Reckoning with the Past* included essays by curator Chang Tsong-zung and John Clark focusing on the exhibition's themes of identity, historical trauma, disassociation, and the link with art and history and colonial modernism. The exhibition also included a selection of artworks that expanded beyond Mainland China to include artists from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Through its multiple historical references of both traditional painting techniques, cultural landmarks and social representations the initial aim of *Reckoning with the Past* was to present Chinese contemporary art as part of a 'crisis of identity,' elaborated in art through the metamorphosis of the artist's self-image both socially and culturally.¹⁰⁰

Nostalgia, Chang Tsong-zung argues, set a precedent for the selection of several of the works in the exhibition. The exhibition presents the desire to "reckon with the past," as an exploration of identity within fragmented histories and the desire to reclaim and re-assess those histories combined with a desire for a sense of historical continuity. These are the themes that underlie the exhibition which link the artists together in what was one of the first exhibitions of its kind to be organised and funded by a UK art organisation. Thematically the exhibition explored the illusion of cultural cohesion, which has existed at the heart of dialogues surrounding the concept of 'Chineseness,' and the anxiety of contemporary cultural identity. Like the previous exhibitions *Reckoning with the Past* also dealt with the concern of incorporating Chinese contemporary art within the context of a wider history of modern China, providing a historical context for the selected paintings and aiming to both showcase contemporary work while also providing a retrospective of recent art trends in China *particularly since 1989*. Showing the directions Chinese contemporary art has progressed displaying a period of renewed creativity inspired by the post-modernism of the

¹⁰⁰ Chang, Tsong-zung, "Reckoning with the Past," in *Reckoning with the Past, Contemporary Chinese Painting*, eds. Chang Tsong-zung and Graeme Murray (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 1996), 13.

West and driven by an increasingly reactionary movement that was critical of the idealism that accompanied the intellectual movement of the 1980s.¹⁰¹

Against this background, Chang argued that nostalgia was a key factor of the mood of the artists participating in the exhibition embodied in the combination of signifiers of the Cultural Revolution combined with the aesthetics of classical painting. Chang also elaborates how nostalgia in various guises such as mythology, history and questions of identity, is present within the artists' work, providing an insight into the cultural traditions which have informed their work.¹⁰² The issue which preoccupied most of the works in the exhibition is how contemporary art can be incorporated into a history of modern China. This concept of modernity can be defined strictly regarding the formal ordering of the work's subjects, clashing with the cultural purposes and formal discourses sanctioned by a political conception of contemporary China and its historical context.¹⁰³

Among the works included in the exhibition which displayed the typical signifiers of Political Pop or Cynical Realism was a 1995 work by Wang Xingwei, *The Road to Anyuan* (Fig. 3.7). The figure of Mao is implied by the re-enactment of the composition of one of the more famous images painted during the Cultural Revolution, the 1967 painting by Liu Chunhua titled *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* with the artist taking the place of Mao. *The Road to Anyuan* is a parody of a painting from the Cultural Revolution in which Mao is shown in a heroic pose setting off to Anyuan. The artwork served as a propaganda piece during the Cultural Revolution and was reproduced in numerous poster designs. The Wang Xingwei work retains a number of signifiers that a viewer from China would immediately associate with the original image such as the figure carrying an umbrella, the clouds in the sky, and the mountain landscape behind the figure. By painting himself in the place of Mao, Wang establishes a visual parallel with this popular icon and subverts it through a humorous reversal of the image in which the central figure is facing the opposite direction with his back to the viewer and the artist casts himself in the role of the Mao as the central figure of the painting, wearing a yellow shirt and western-style suit with the jacket over one arm instead of

¹⁰¹ Robert McDougall Art Gallery Bulletin, *First Major Exhibition Of New Art From China On View At The Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting*, 1998, available online http://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/media/uploads/2010_07/Bulletin_113.pdf [accessed 20.11.2015]

¹⁰² Kruse, Jeremy, "Review of Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting", *The China Journal* 41, (Jan 1999): 212–214.

¹⁰³ Chang, Tsong-zung, "Reckoning with the Past," in *Reckoning with the Past, Contemporary Chinese Painting*, eds. Chang Tsong-zung and Graeme Murray (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 1996), 17.

the grey robe shown in the Liu Chunhua version.¹⁰⁴ Works under the label of Political Pop include Yu Youhan's *Mao and His People* series (Fig. 3.8), and Feng Mengbo's dissection and parody of the terror of Mao Zedong's Red Guards in his *Streetfighter* series (Fig. 3.9), which combines the figure of a Red Guard battling characters from the popular *Streetfighter* video game franchise. In Yu Youhan's repeated paintings of Mao as an adulatory icon, drawing direct influence from Warhol and the Pop-Art movement, the paintings are both ironic and reverent. Meanwhile, the *Streetfighter* series is both shown as a joke and as a colourful and nostalgic memory of childhood. The image of video games including interactive digital works of video games based on Model Operas of the Cultural Revolution period are a recurring motif in Feng's work.

Contextualising Chinese contemporary art, or more specifically any history of contemporary art, cannot escape the likelihood that it will serve as a social study, regardless of the possibility that the social commentary is not explicitly addressed within the work. Notwithstanding, in a world brought into proximity between artistic communities through globalised economies, curators, critics, writers and researchers, the figures who have regularly accommodated these sorts of perspectives in different social spaces within contemporary art are continually serving to re-position the contemporary. The role of the curator involves interceding and occasionally shaping a collection of applied perspectives around an association of uniquely organized artists in a manner which is capable of being understood in a western context, and this method of visual language has been adopted in early examples of Chinese contemporary art exhibitions in the UK. The imperative element of curators such as Chang Tsong-zung is a level of research surrounding Chinese and global art developments or by their own experiences and perspectives. This particular position has played a significant role in the mediation of particularly Chinese contemporary art cultures to international art exhibitions, and here the role of early international curators such as Chang Tsong-zung, Hou Hanru and later Gao Minglu and Xu Zhen in the representation of Chinese contemporary art is prominent.¹⁰⁵ While the role of these Chinese curators as mediators assumes an essential part in embedding discourses on Chinese contemporary art into Western dialogues which previously would otherwise disregard them, they also show an international perspective for an expanded art historical narrative which incorporates China within the scope of global art.¹⁰⁶ However, it is misleading to accept that

¹⁰⁴ Dal Lago, Francesca, "Personal Mao: reshaping an icon in contemporary Chinese art," *Art Journal* 58, no.2 (1999): 46-59.

¹⁰⁵ Hou, Hanru, *On the Mid-ground*, (Beijing: Timezone 8 Limited, 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Clark, John "Asian Modernisms," *Marg.* 53, no.2, (Spring 2002): 102-111.

this could be founded on the curatorial practice from such mediators on a global scale even under a shifting definition of 'contemporary practice.'¹⁰⁷ This role of the curator as a mediator gains relevance when considering the wider social, political and cultural consignment of contemporary art curation and its research practices. The methodology took responsibility for the creation of a wider context which includes the collaboration of the curator, the artists, artworks, the work's concept and its eventual representation and realisation, the exhibition space and finally the point of engagement with an audience.¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the curator is placed in the role of both a practitioner and a collaborator in the social engagement of the exhibition.

When analysing the reception of these exhibitions from a critical standpoint the power relations between East and West that is present behind the ways in which Chinese contemporary art has been placed within the narrative of art history become apparent, in addition to how these interpretations have persisted and that as well as expanding the scope of analysis when considering these initial exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art and their importance as setting a precedence for the curatorial endeavours that would follow. Towards the end of the 1990s Chinese contemporary art had experienced an increase in international success. Large-scale national review shows were organised considering a wide scope of contemporary art exhibitions and events in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia, with a progression of touring international exhibitions shown in the UK in 1993 to the organisation of group exhibitions at British art institutions from 1996 onwards beginning with *Reckoning with the Past*. In the UK, *Silent Energy* (1993) was a scaled-down variation of the main *China Avantgarde* exhibition focusing primarily on installation art. The exhibition at the time was criticised for adopting a Western vocabulary as a method for expression. The artists included in the exhibition like many exhibitions at the time were based outside of China utilizing hybridity of visual languages such as Gu Wenda and Huang Yongping.¹⁰⁹ The primary aims of these exhibitions were to showcase a survey of the contemporary while also placing it in a social and cultural context. This framework has become a recurring aspect of curating group exhibitions. The use of the exhibition catalogue

¹⁰⁷ Robinson, Jenny, "Cultural geographies in practice Cities on the move: urban chaos and global change-East Asian art, architecture and film now," *Cultural Geographies* 7, no.1 (2000): 105-111.

¹⁰⁸ Cook, Sarah & Graham, Beryl, "Curating New Media Art: Models and Challenges", in *New Media Art. Practice and Context in the UK 1994-2004*, ed. Lucy Kimbell, (Manchester: Arts Council England and Cornerhouse Publications, 2004), 85.

¹⁰⁹ Robertson, Ian, "Silent Energy", *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 12, September 1993, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/silent_energy/ [accessed 12/05/2015].

and other supplementary publications such as symposia and educational events as a source of academic essays and artist biographies at a time when the publications of critical writing on Chinese contemporary art in the UK were limited; provided an important resource to both researchers and gallery audiences. The curatorial methodologies of these initial exhibitions have set the groundwork for curating Chinese contemporary art in the UK and have become a point of reference for the events that followed.

3.2 The Real Thing? Questioning cultural authenticity.

By 2006 the Chinese contemporary scene had shifted through a combination of early career artists from a younger generation and a continued move towards more conceptual artistic practices through new media, installation, and film making. Possibly through greater involvement with the international art world, these artists created a zeitgeist of contemporary China that portrayed a more nuanced series of concerns both of the state of contemporary China and the representation of Chinese contemporary art internationally.¹¹⁰ By that point, the PRC had experienced unprecedented economic growth and was beginning to emerge as a global super-power. These rapid changes served as a progression of artistic political and social commentary. By 2007 the PRC's government had increasingly adopted contemporary artists as a means of cultural export and diplomacy through their international exhibitions with the first 'official' Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale being organised in 2005. This policy of cultural export both facilitated and problematized China's 'official' artistic international output.¹¹¹

By 2008 there had been both an increased commercial interest in Chinese contemporary art and a shifting of focus onto global perspectives in contemporary art in the UK. Emerging from post-colonial and black arts movements in the 1980s and reflecting the trends of globalism that had taken shape over the course of the 1980s and 1990s and were continuing to gather momentum in the past twenty years. The mid-2000s saw the organisation of more large-scale exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art from major arts organisations in the UK. These exhibitions included *China Power Station* (2006) (Fig. 3.10) at Battersea Power station organised by the Serpentine Gallery, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* (2007) at Tate Liverpool and *The Revolution Continues* (2008) at the Saatchi Gallery and *Art of Change: New Directions from China* (2012). While certainly the largest of these exhibitions, *The Revolution Continues'* format as a collection exhibition, its alleged commercial agenda and the anonymity of its curatorial staff is problematic when researching curatorial methodologies. Similarly, despite being relatively recent shows, *China Power Station* and *Art of Change* remained largely entrenched in the initial curatorial methodologies

¹¹⁰ Novak, Alison, & Hakanen, Ernest A. "Themes and Affect in the Third Wave of Contemporary Chinese Art", *CASCA Journal of Social Sciences, Culture, and Arts*. 1 no.1, (2012): 49-62. <http://www.journal.casca.org.rs/2012/12/24/themes-and-affect-in-the-third-wave-of-contemporary-chinese-art/>.

¹¹¹ Li, Mingjiang, "China debates soft power," *The Chinese journal of international politics* 2, no.2, (2008): 287-308.

of the survey show discussed in part one of this chapter including a focus on a topic or theme, both Urban development and installation art respectively. Instead, the focus of this chapter will be centred on a case study of *The Real Thing* as the exhibition demonstrated both a critical approach to previous curatorial methods while still placing a focus on translation through context and the interaction with both the site and audience.

Art critic Philip Tinari refers to the phenomenon of such survey exhibitions as the “China show.” Referring to a series of international group exhibitions that involved the repeated exposure of the work of a “canonical set of artists”, the curation of which claims to represent some truth of a ‘new China’ or to capture a zeitgeist of contemporary Chinese culture.¹¹² On the surface, this does seem to describe the group shows from larger organisations mentioned in this chapter, including the choice of wording in the exhibition titles and the emphasis on ‘new art’ or being the first exhibition of its kind. The high-profile survey shows had also come under criticism from artists and critics alike, including Ai Weiwei who in an article for the Guardian lamented the lack of critical perspective in *Art of Change: New Directions from China* (2012), stating that the same select artists were being shown for the purposes of scale and spectacle as opposed to any real discussion of the social and political issues surrounding contemporary China.¹¹³ However, *The Real Thing* stands out from similar ‘China shows’ of the 2000s in that it openly questions what it is representing, dealing more with so-called perceptions of contemporary China than claiming to accurately show the creative directions of China’s contemporary art scenes. It is through this overarching theme of authenticity and the inauthentic that the exhibition comments more on the perception and expectations of the audience and can be seen as commentary, or even a satire of the stereotypical ‘New Chinese Art’ survey exhibition.

Observing the UK exhibitions at major cultural institutions together highlights several similarities (aside from the approximate exhibition size and the inclusion of many of the same artists), which certain thematic trends can be interpreted. The first being a move away from purchased and loaned existing works and towards commissions in a similar to *Silent Energy* over a decade earlier. However, with an increased international interest in Chinese contemporary art, China joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and the decrease in

¹¹² Tinari, Philip, “The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China.’ Review Of,” *Artforum* 46, no. 1 (2007): 454.

¹¹³ Ai, Weiwei (2012), “China’s Art World does not Exist,” *The Guardian*, 10th September 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/sep/10/ai-weiwei-china-art-world>.

airfares facilitated the purchase, loaning and commissioning of works on a grander scale. Site-specific installations and works created in response to the exhibition space or location are another feature of exhibitions after 2005, particularly in the case of *The Real Thing* and *China Power Station Part:1*. Both exhibitions took place at sites that were formerly important industrial landmarks namely Battersea Power Station which at its peak produced twenty percent of London's electricity and Liverpool's Royal Albert Dock and both exhibitions included works that dealt explicitly with industrialisation such as *Whose Utopia?* by Cao Fei which was included in both exhibitions. The turbine halls at Battersea Power Stations provided a vast space which facilitated large scale installation works such as Gu Dexin's *2006-10-7* (Fig, 3.10) which took up the entire top floor of the exhibition as well as using the acoustics of the building to create a collaborative sound piece *Awakening Battersea* in Turbine Hall B by the Institute of Sound and curated by Ou Ning. *The Real Thing*, by contrast, took place in the more traditional exhibition space of Tate Liverpool, with the majority of the works being displayed in the exhibition space on the gallery's top floor. (Fig, 3.11) However, several of the works were exhibited outside of the gallery in the area around the Royal Albert Dock including a fireworks performance by the Yangjiang Group, Ai Weiwei's *Working Progress*, and Gu Dexin's (*Light Funnel*).

In Adele Tan's *Diaaologue* article *Admittance Anxiety*, a publication released by the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, Tan highlights two methodologies for exhibiting contemporary Asian art and declaring its contemporaneity outside of the Biennial model, where the work is displayed under the broader theme of 'Chinese contemporary art' or it remains subsumed under a show topic. This can be illustrated through the curatorial research methodologies of *The Real Thing* first consciously taking an artist-led approach allowing any subsequent thematic trends to form organically and deriving the show's 'topical' elements after the fact.¹¹⁴ The concept of the 'China show' can be viewed for the most part for the twin ideals of presenting contemporary (if some of the time "subsidiary") art from China and how the works interact with current social substances in an immense nation in the throes of significant cultural changes.¹¹⁵

The focus of galleries in the 2000s expanded to include a more business-like framework aiming to expand audiences both regarding numbers and in a variety of social backgrounds,

¹¹⁴ Tan, Adele, "Admittance Anxiety", *Diaaologue*, Asia Art Archive, October 2009, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/725>.

¹¹⁵ Kirby, Simon, "Written on the Body," *Index on Censorship* 37 no.2, (2008): 120-131.

to increase audience engagement and educational programmes, and to produce programmes that were more diverse in terms of gender, culture and social class.¹¹⁶ *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China* aimed to move away from previous exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art, not just in the profundity and scope of the works, the entirety of which were produced after 2000 and outside of China, but in the coordinated effort between the co-curators Xu Zhen, Karen Smith and the Tate curatorial team and the artists commissioned to take part in the exhibition. Most of the works selected had either been produced outside of China or had been commissioned by Tate specifically for the exhibition. The exhibition was unique in its timing, with the contributing artists working towards a development that came from a comprehension and reaction to the contemporary world, the role of Chinese contemporary art in relation to it, and the critique of their positions as part of a society during an era of significant social change. Any thought of a singular identity or image of China as a nation as much concerning the art was placed into a wider space of plausibility and opportunities for an expanded view of Chinese art. *The Real Thing* highlighted 26 works by eighteen artists. Twelve of these works had been commissioned for the exhibition.¹¹⁷ Through a combination of public and private funding the sum of the commissions amounting to over £250,000, Tate could fund a large number of commissioned works its collection.¹¹⁸ This was also the basis for forming Tate's Asia Pacific acquisition committee and research centre.

Research for the exhibition had been underway since the late 1990s in collaboration with Beijing based curator Karen Smith and the artist and curator Xu Zhen. Simon Groom, Tate Liverpool's head of exhibitions at the time recalls that while the gallery arranged a large amount of funding for commissioned work, there was no overt curatorial direction or thematic limitations placed upon the artists, and therefore hot-housing specifically for a UK audience and the Tate collection. By this point the focus of the works selected had moved beyond the Cynical Realism paintings that had been shown in the previous decade and both *The Real Thing* and *China Power Station: Part 1* had reflected wider international trends towards new media and installation art. However, instead of catering to western commercial tastes, the commissions aided the development of more personal creative practices for the project. Groom recalls:

¹¹⁶ Hesmondhalgh, David, "Media and cultural policy as public policy: the case of the British Labour government," *International journal of cultural policy* 11, no. 1, (2005): 95-109.

¹¹⁷ The commissioned artists included Ai Weiwei, Yang Fudong, Gu Dexin, Qiu Xiaofei, Qiu Zhijie, Yangjiang Group and Zhou Tiehai.

¹¹⁸ Groom, Simon, ed., *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*, (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2007).

I think one of the things that struck us was that they (the works) were all kind of to do with of a new sort of sensibility around notions of 'the Real' and the new emerging reality around them, the fact that everything was changing very fast, one generation to another, each time we went to Beijing the whole city seemed to have changed, the rapid pace of development of the building all those kind of things. ...it's much more personal, in a way that we certainly hadn't seen before, so that was really interesting. I think again what was really interesting was how specifically they grappled with problems that were local to China but through that actually kind of hit on a wider chord. So, it was very much rooted in Chinese places, and Chinese stories and Chinese sensibility and I think that came through very much in the exhibition. So, it wasn't about universalism, nothing about that; it had to feel rooted, it had to feel relevant to a particular time and place.¹¹⁹

However, while the curatorial direction consciously gave creative freedom to its artists, the job of selecting artists to participate was predominantly the work of Karen Smith and Xu Zhen who beyond practical concerns placed importance on the methods in which the works would carry over. This translatability is usually the focus for British exhibitions, artworks that resonate with Chinese audiences are not necessarily the best works to show in Britain. Just as the works displayed in Britain are not necessarily the 'best' works or even the most representative of works, but they are aimed to be something with which audiences in the UK are likely to engage. Regarding creating an exhibition with the UK in mind, Karen Smith stated that:

Humor and irony are generally something that British audiences would generally respond to, for example, the Everest piece in *The Real Thing* (Fig. 3.12) was very playful, and people really responded to it.¹²⁰

While this method of selecting works and proposals runs the risk of being problematized as 'catering to western tastes' in a similar manner to the commercial agendas discussed in chapter one, it is also a necessary step in the process of curatorial translation. Instead of following international and commercial trends of purchasing artworks by Chinese artists the selection of artists submitting commission proposals attempted to find a balance between

¹¹⁹ Interview with Simon Groom 03/02/2016 see appendix i.

¹²⁰ Interview with Karen Smith 01/02/2015 see appendix ii.

the artist's practice and the possibility of making a point of connection with not only British but local audiences. For example, as the site of Britain's oldest Chinatown, the exhibition prompts discussion of the authenticity of 'Chinese' identities within the local diasporic community compared with artists from Mainland China.

The primary means of 'translation' as part of the two exhibitions involved a creative dialogue between the artist and the site. Among these works was a project by Ai Weiwei and Fake Studio located in the Albert Dock. Commissioned at over £100,000, remaining at more than eight meters high and made utilizing more than two tons of steel, *Working Progress (Fountain of Light)* (2007) (Fig. 3.13) a floating sculpture in the shape of a giant crystal chandelier; its design inspired by *Tatlin's Monument to the Third International 1919*. (Fig. 3.14) Planned particularly for its location in Liverpool, *Working Progress* uses the image of Tatlin's monument to reference both a time of twentieth-century modernism and industrialization in Europe that moulded the contemporary world and contrasts it with the contemporary industrial realities and artistic directions of Chinese contemporary art. As an image of the radical change at present occurring in China, where *Working Progress (Fountain of Light)* was constructed utilizing local steel. Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, was originally designed to be made up of two spiral structures made of glass and steel intended to stand twice as high as the Eiffel Tower and interlock with different levels spinning at different speeds. The monument was planned as a celebratory image of Soviet advancement. It was never built and stays for artist's right up 'til the present time the astounding image of an art movement that encapsulated Russia in the 1920s.¹²¹ In the same way that the image of the tower represents a time and place in history, the location of the site-specific work at the Albert Dock is representative of a time and place. *Working Progress* also shows a sense of humour in its imitation of the monument, co-opting both a Soviet sensibility and an iconic image of Western modernism, while the opulence of the rock crystal and lights hints at commercial luxuries. In a curatorial practice in the UK that previously placed value in the concept of cultural authenticity, *Working Progress* is deliberately inauthentic through its recycling of imagery. *Working Progress* deliberately represents itself as all the things critics had accused internationally exhibited Chinese contemporary art of becoming, namely westernised, parodic, and commoditised.

¹²¹ Lynton, Norbert, *Tatlin's Tower: Monument to Revolution*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

The exhibition additionally highlights a large-scale work by Xu Zhen, who also co-curated the exhibition. His work *8848 Minus 1.86* (2005) (Fig. 3.12) consolidates these components in an aspiring work concentrating on Mount Everest. The British asserted in 1856 that the summit was 8,848 meters in height, an estimation that despite clashing information, still formally stands. In May 2005, Xu Zhen staged a scaling of Everest in a series of fabricated photographs and videos culminating in the staging of the removal the mountain's summit and reducing its height by 1.86cm, the same height as Xu Zhen's, which was also on display in the exhibition. Different official and autonomous reviews subsequently made have reliably demonstrated that the height of Mt Everest is not as tall as had been thought, guiding, maybe, toward confirmation of an unnatural weather change, or a movement in the tectonic plates, however, its cause remains un-demonstrated. Again, the concept of 'the real' is questioned, where the British account of the height of Everest is an accepted fact, and yet it has never been proven. Xu Zhen not only questions the factual authenticity of the mountain's height but also leaves the audience to question the authenticity of the 'the summit.' As a co-curator of the exhibition as well as an exhibited artist, Xu Zhen's work seems to form a primary influence upon the themes and tone of *The Real Thing*.

Before undertaking the commission of *8848 Minus 1.86*, Xu submitted a wide range of proposals, many of which were deemed to be too provocative or dangerous including having a group of people attack someone in the gallery space and strip them of their clothing and handing out giant knives with every ticket issued which would have forced the visitors to carry them around the exhibition.¹²² Through these abandoned proposals, it becomes apparent that Xu was approaching the project not just in terms of creating a work for an exhibition but in the entire concept of the exhibition. However, the implementation of these proposals would have been undemocratic within the context of the wider show and would have been at risk of hijacking the exhibition at the expense of the other artists. Through Xu's artistic contribution, the curatorial elements within the show such as humour, whimsical narratives and subversions of expectations become apparent. In this sense, *The Real Thing*, while on the surface, follows many of the tropes of the survey exhibition, it can also be seen as a reaction to the trend of large-scale group exhibitions of 'new art from China' to create what can be argued as a 'post-survey' exhibition bordering on parody in Xu Zhen's case.

¹²² Smith, Karen, *The Real Thing, Contemporary Art from China*, (London: Tate, 2007), 141.

Wang Peng's contribution to the exhibitions was the commissioned video installation, *Passing Through Beijing* (2006) (Fig. 3.15). Within the film, the camera moves along the streets of Beijing following the artist as he pulls a line of string behind him attached to his jacket as he moves throughout the city, confounding spectators who in attempt to untangle themselves from the string or duck under it when it gets in their way. The project began in 1997 with the work *Passing Through New York* (1997) (Fig. 3.16) when Wang was living in New York and undertook a similar exercise through the streets of Soho. The two videos which were screened together during the exhibition, the reactions of the public were remarkably similar, with mixed responses of surprise, confusion and annoyance and yet the observers in both locations make no move to cut the string or to stop what Wang is doing. However, looking beyond the similarities, the works are contrasted where the observers in the New York video are aware that they are taking part in an art piece as the work took place in the city's main district for contemporary art, while the evasiveness of the observers in Beijing related more to the social behaviours of public life and was in keeping with the boundaries of social interactions in a crowded city.

Cao Fei's film *Whose Utopia? What are you doing here?* (2006) (Fig. 3.17) a video installation set in the Guangdong Osram lighting manufacturing plant.¹²³ The work was commissioned as part of a project entitled '*What Are They Doing Here?*' that was organised and funded by the Siemens Art Programme between 2000 and 2006 and involved artists from China undertaking a six-month residency at factories throughout China. Cao Fei began to undertake a residency at the Osram factory by sending out questionnaires to its workers that featured fifty questions, including "How do you feel about the factory?", "Why did you decide to leave your home and go to the river delta?" and "What do you hope to achieve in the future?"¹²⁴ The answers from the survey provided the inspiration of the hopes and dreams portrayed in the video. *Whose Utopia? What are you doing here?* documented the day to day conditions faced by an increasing number of factory workers, as manufacturers like Osram made the move to base their production facilities in China. The repetitive work of the production lines is contrasted with dream-like sequences in which the factory employees act out their private passions including ballet and playing instruments. This work can be read in several ways. For example, the repetitive and tedious work of the factory may not appeal to the views of some Western audiences who might view the worker's dreams simply as escapism. However, the final sequence of Cao Fei's video,

¹²³ Stojkovic, Jelena, "The City Vanishes: Urban Landscape in Staged Chinese Photography," *History of Photography* 37, no. 3, (2013): 360-369.

¹²⁴ Cao, Fei and Strom, Jorda, "Your Utopia is Ours," *Fillip*, no.4, Autumn 2006, <http://fillip.ca/content/your-utopia-is-ours>.

Whose Utopia? What are you doing here? entitled *My Future is not a Dream*, hints at the hopes and aspirations of the workers for a brighter future that might eventually be facilitated by their work in the lighting factory. The notion of reality is questioned, through the contrast of the monotony of the real world and the richness of the imagined worlds of the workers. The work also addressed the human cost of industrialisation, drawing a comparison of the British Industrial Revolution particularly in the North and China's position as a contemporary industrial centre.

For *The Real Thing*, Gu Dexin recreated the lighthouse funnel of the boat that served as Liverpool's last operational mobile lighthouse, taking inspiration from the vessel's light mechanism and bright red colour. (Fig. 3.18) The funnel was manufactured by a group of assembly line labourers from a steel plant in Tianjin from exact measurements and drawings of the original lighthouse boat to accomplish an exact replica of the original and worked as a functional lighthouse. The main adjustment the artist made to the structure included the component of sound from twelve speakers added around the light deck (Fig. 3.19). The sound pieces were composed of twelve incidental recordings including police sirens and sounds from city streets and were played simultaneously. Situated outside of the gallery space at the Royal Albert Dock, the work is both visually striking and appears at home within the architecture of the site. Like *Working Progress*, *Light Funnel* uses similar themes of imitation, outsources manufacturing, and playful juxtaposition. Both works engage with their location, with a piece of history that has been forged and remade in China.¹²⁵

In *The Real Thing*, a number of thematic trends can be interpreted. The first being a move away from purchased and loaned existing works from galleries and individual collections and towards commissions, site-specific installations, and works created in response to the venue or exhibition space. Another theme of the exhibition is the questioning of 'authenticity', including works that playfully and humorously present themes of reality, unreality, and imitation. Their works reflect on a broader theme of subverting the role of the museum as a colonial entity and its portrayals of 'authentic' cultures.

¹²⁵ Tate Liverpool, *The Real Thing, exhibition guide*, 2007, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/real-thing-contemporary-art-china/real-thing-exhibition-guide-1>

3. 3 Solo Retrospectives and the Politics of the Dissident Narrative

While there have been numerous small to medium scale solo exhibitions of Chinese artists in the UK including high profile artists such as Song Dong, Xu Bing and Cao Fei, the most significant and most widely publicised show in a major institution was the 2015 Ai Weiwei retrospective at The Royal Academy. While this exhibition follows many of the traditional curatorial methods of the retrospective; another large-scale exhibition *Ai Weiwei at Blenheim Palace* the previous year, created a surprisingly different narrative despite containing many of the same artworks. Ai Weiwei's story as a figure in the international media is almost as widely recognised as his artworks. In a previous couple of years, he expanded the scope of his constrained part of being an artist whose practice included activism in China to end up as a major commentator on the worldwide stage. In October 2010, Ai came to prominence in the UK's art scene with his *Sunflower Seeds* installation at London's Tate Modern art exhibition as part of the Unilever Series which included large-scale commissioned works from artists including Rachel Whiteread and Anish Kapoor¹²⁶ Ai Weiwei's *Unilever Series: Sunflower Seeds* (Fig. 3.20) is comprised of a vast number of ceramic sunflower seeds, made to scale by hand in porcelain. Before the exhibition closed in May 2011, Ai gained international notoriety as a political figure when the artist was arrested a month before the exhibition ended and was imprisoned for eighty-one days.

As a political dissident, Ai has produced projects that were openly critical of the PRC's government, many of which are shown within the retrospectives discussed in this chapter. However, Ai had simultaneously worked in cooperation with the state in the past. As opposed to trying to determine such inconsistencies and place Ai Weiwei as either a spokesman for human rights activism or a tool of the "neoliberal West."¹²⁷ This exhibition speaks to the thought of humorous pressure, where the irony is concerned with disagreements that are never resolved.¹²⁸ What is frequently lost from discursive research into China's simultaneous unprecedented social change and economic expansion is how researchers deliberately explore these rapidly moving global trends and social issues. As an artist Ai Weiwei is more conflicted both concerning the PRC government's joining of

¹²⁶ While the work was Ai's first solo exhibition in the UK, he had previously shown work in several group exhibitions.

¹²⁷ Callahan, William A. "Citizen Ai: warrior, jester, and middleman," *Journal of Asian Studies*. 73 no. 4, (2014): 899-920.

¹²⁸ Haraway, Donna, "Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

contemporary art as purposeful publicity, and the inclination of western media and art foundations to interpret Chinese artists into the part of the political dissident.¹²⁹

In the Blenheim Palace show in 2014 (Fig. 3.21), the curators of the Palace's first contemporary art show incorporated the collection of works into the surroundings of the rooms and gardens. The exhibition, which included a range of works spanning from the late 1980s to a new work commissioned for the show, was also organised in consultation with Ai through three-dimensional plan images as the artist was still banned from leaving China at the time. Artworks in the show were not labelled but placed in situ among the Palace's rooms. Identifying the works interspersed among the Palace's collection of art and antiques were left up to the viewer including works being displayed alongside the palace's unique gathering of Chinese porcelain and furniture.(Fig. 3.22 – 3.23) Along with the retrospective nature of the selected works, the other key focus of the Blenheim Palace exhibition is a contrast between Ai's body of work and the Palace's own collection of artworks and artefacts. The exhibition was acknowledged through cooperation between Ai Weiwei and Blenheim Art Foundation with the intention to incorporate Ai's works as a series of interventions into the Palace and grounds. Making space for reflection through juxtaposition, striking harmony between Ai's contemporary art and the Palace's own collection in an amalgamation of old and new. In addition to this, the decision to showcase Ai Weiwei as the first artist to be exhibited as part of the new Blenheim Art Foundation programme indicates the organisation's agenda to situate itself as a contemporary arts venue. Namely an organisation which is internationally recognised, able to explore contemporary art within an art-historical context, and politically discursive. This can also be observed with its subsequent exhibitions including Jenny Holzer, Lawrence Weiner, and Michelangelo Pistoletto, all of which can fall into these themes.

Some of the fundamental works of art on view included *Circle of Animals* (2010) (Fig. 3.24), a sculptural work that was an interpretation of the bronze statues of the heads of the Chinese zodiac animals that once surrounded the fountain-clock at Emperor Yuanming Yuan's Old Summer Palace in Beijing. The palace was destroyed and looted by the British during the Second Opium War in 1860. With the recreated artefacts placed on display in a

¹²⁹ Zhang, Lin, "‘Playing the Chinese card’: Globalization and the aesthetic strategies of Chinese contemporary artists," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4, (July 2015): 1–18.

British Palace which contains many valuables that were obtained as spoils of war Ai highlighted the violent history of the British Empire. *He Xie* (2010) (Fig. 3.25), which consists of over two thousand crabs sculpted out of porcelain placed on the floor of the Red Drawing Room. The forty-five-meter long cover; *Soft Ground* (2014) (Fig. 3.26) was commissioned for the Blenheim Art Foundation's collection and the exhibition. The markings on the carpet recreated the tire marks in the ground that were left by the tanks that were sent into Beijing to Tiananmen Square amid the student protests of 1989. By supplanting the Palace's original carpeting, the work was planned to make a stark juxtaposition between two different environments.

The decision to include Ai Weiwei as the first artist exhibited at the newly founded Blenheim Art Foundation at a venue that is synonymous with both the traditional British establishment and as a national monument illustrates a deliberate and somewhat cynical subversion of the 'official' art establishment. Here, Ai's position as both a representation of the 'dissident narrative' popularised by international presentations of Chinese contemporary art and as a mediator between conflicting cultural and political agendas. Because of Ai's reputation as an activist and his criticisms of the Chinese Government's stance on human rights, his work has often been framed regarding official narratives versus dissident narratives. However, the political implications of Ai's works are re-framed at Blenheim Palace in the context of Britain's history of imperialism and human rights abuses.

The following year saw the opening of the Royal Academy retrospective exhibition which included several of the same artworks. Both exhibitions had a certain degree of curatorial involvement from the artist (albeit from a distance) and were also hosted by a historical space that despite its move towards the contemporary is still representative of the old British establishment.¹³⁰ However, the ambiguity of the Blenheim Palace show was drastically contrasted by a more traditional curatorial approach to the retrospective solo exhibition with each room dedicated to a different project that followed a mostly biographical narrative with the labelling for the artworks relating both to the motivation behind the work and the artist's personal experiences. The experience of the exhibition was recreated as the virtual tour *Ai Weiwei 360* and serves as an early example of the use of virtual reality as part of an exhibition. The production of *Ai Weiwei 360* also unconsciously reflects the remote

¹³⁰ Doherty, Claire, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism" *Engage Review Art of Encounter* 15, (2004): 6-13.

collaboration between RA and Ai Weiwei whose involvement with curating both retrospectives occurred while the artist was under house arrest using detailed floorplans and architectural models to visualise the exhibitions. Where the interventions of Blenheim Palace were engineering encounters with the works without further explanation, the Royal Academy show is as concerned with Ai Weiwei's persona as it is with Ai Weiwei's art. (Fig. 3.27) In this sense, the extensive amount of media coverage for the exhibition including visa disputes and a crowdfunding project to install the *Tree* sculptures (Fig. 3.28) in the main courtyard are as much a part of the spectacle of the exhibition as the exhibition itself.¹³¹

Among the works shown at the Royal Academy in the final exhibition room, S.A.C.R.E.D (Fig. 3.29 – 3.30) is a series of reproductions of six rooms, worked to half scale, with every room reproducing a part of Ai Weiwei's imprisonment, occupying the final room of the Royal Academy exhibition. In 2011, Ai Weiwei was captured while travelling from Taipei to Hong Kong and was detained for 81 days under constant surveillance. The rooms recreate the everyday reality of imprisonment. The effect of this presentation lies in the force of visual art as a social record. Despite the fact that the PRC's attitude towards Ai Weiwei has hinted at change with his being granted permission to travel outside China in 2015, Ai Weiwei's artistic practice and voice report an uncomfortable period of social history.¹³²

An overarching theme of both exhibitions shows a repeated effort to connect with the past, whether through the revival of dying craft techniques, the use of salvaged materials from demolished historical buildings, or the collection, forgery or destruction of antique ceramics, touching on a broader element of both collective memory and amnesia.¹³³ However, the playful interactions of the artist with these fragments of the past, the questioning of authenticity and the perceived interconnection of salvage and demolition and destruction point not towards the piecing together of a single foundation but to what Foucault refers to as "one of the transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations."¹³⁴

¹³¹ The Kickstarter campaign has been archived here <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/royalacademy/bring-ai-weiweis-tree-sculptures-to-londons-royal>

¹³² Lucas, Tamara, "A window to the world of Ai Weiwei" *The Lancet* 386, no.10008, (2015): 2047.

¹³³ Halbwachs, Maurice, & Coser, Lewis, *On collective memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹³⁴ Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan-Smith, (London: Tavistock, 1972).

In *Souvenir from Shanghai* (2012) (Fig. 3.31) the concrete and bricks leftover from the demolition of Ai's Shanghai studio also display an element of commemoration and remembrance with the materials arranged systematically filling in the negative space of a rosewood bed frame from the Qing Dynasty to form a monumental structure. Both works while reflecting their ideological motivations, also reflect a conflict between the individual and the state. The creation and ultimate demolition of the *House* project were indicative of broader issues of the increasing deterioration of the British welfare state. *Souvenir from Shanghai*, on the other hand, is entrenched in Ai's personal and political history as an artist working in Shanghai. The installation was made from found materials from the remains of the site in Shanghai's Jiading district, where Ai Weiwei was invited to build a studio by the local government authorities as part of a proposed development of a new cultural district. However, in 2010 when the construction of the studio was completed, Ai was informed that the building would be torn down in response to Ai's increasingly outspoken criticism of the PRC's government.¹³⁵ The concept of the work as the monument is also commonly used as part of the British contemporary art sensibility as analysed in Scribner's *Requiem for Communism* role of the artwork within Western culture is embedded in the traditions of de-familiarisation, reframing, and deconstruction that have existed within "first-world" contemporary art within the past thirty years that have included multiple economic reforms within the UK, the large-scale decline of the British industrial labour and trade union traditions, and a move into a post-industrial economy.¹³⁶

For example, in Rachel Whiteread's Turner Prize-winning installation *House* (1993) (Fig. 3.32), focused on the act of filling the negative space occupied by the residence long occupied by ex-dock worker Sidney Gale and his family. The house, like others of its era and type in working-class neighbourhoods throughout London, had by the early 1990s found itself on a council list of condemned properties. In 1992, when Whiteread formally began to undertake the project, the terraced house at 193 Grove Road was the last of its block standing as until then Gale had refused to leave the premises, despite the extensive demolition work around him. While Whiteread's artistic intervention did nothing to avert or even forestall Gale's displacement from his long-standing place of residence. For her goal had never been to save the imperilled house for its tenants. Nor did the production of the work prevent the subsequent demolition of the terrace house. For her intention had also

¹³⁵ Saltzman, Lisa, *Making memory matter: Strategies of remembrance in contemporary art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹³⁶ Scribner, Charity, *Requiem for Communism*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

never been to stabilise or maintain the structure as some relic or museological reminder of an enduring architectural form and urban housing type. However, the impact of the work did perform a moment of remembrance and commemoration for the building and the social history of the area.¹³⁷

Both of Ai Weiwei's retrospective exhibitions ultimately illustrate how the artist has used various resources to create works that perform and interrogate the clashes of power, identity, and culture in spaces of global encounter. This includes a discourse on forgotten or revised histories, highlighting of human rights abuses and through the autobiographical recording of the artist's own experiences. While elements of both exhibitions are problematic, firstly creating a space of encounter and conflict in the space of power and authority and secondly relying on the artist's notoriety and public persona as a site of sensationalism. However, both exhibitions raise broader questions about the role of power and resistance, be it on an institutional or state level.

¹³⁷ Huyssen, Andreas, "Sculpture, materiality and memory in the age of amnesia" in *Displacements: Mirosław Balka, Doris Salcedo, Rachel Whiteread*, Jessica Bradley ed., (Toronto: Gallery of Ontario, 1998), 11-23.

3.4 Negotiating Representations in Contemporary Art Biennials

In addition to the survey and solo exhibitions discussed in this chapter, the inclusion of Chinese contemporary artists as part of a broader model of globally focused curating has become a recent yet growing trend in the UK. The use of the global model or the Biennial model has its strategic advantages. Firstly, it enables the display of works by artists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and international Diasporas without the political implications of representing a 'singular' national identity. Secondly, it can serve to re-frame works within a globalised discursive context expanding both the interpretation of the works by audiences. With the aspect of a specific cultural identity no longer being at the forefront of the curatorial strategy the direction of the global or multi-national exhibitions usually either adhere to a specific theme or title such as Liverpool Biennial or as a response to an aspect of art history or art practice.¹³⁸ Internationally focused exhibitions and art festivals designate an expansion of focus onto the globally facing aspects of contemporary art. These concerns are observed through the "procedures and forms of contemporary art."¹³⁹ Like the majority of Biennial art festivals, the ideological implications of Liverpool Biennial centre around the potential of diplomatic and international relations as well as plans for urban regeneration and community engagement.¹⁴⁰ However, the 'relational' aspects of these works also influenced by the subsequent wake of globalisation and post-industrial societies.¹⁴¹ Within the encounters created in both works, while reminiscent of Bourriaud's concept of relational art on the surface, are also fraught with tensions.

In earlier instances of biennials, including the case of the 45th Venice Biennale as discussed in previous chapters, the inclusion of Chinese artists or indeed 'non-Western' artists existed largely on the periphery of the 'official' pavilions. In the case of biennials, the peripheral is brought into the programme in search of legitimisation from the wider organisation and, "by default, accepts the conditions of this legitimacy."¹⁴² Charles Esche suggests that the globalisation of art within international art exhibitions and biennials has, through a process of

¹³⁸ For example, see *Pop Art in Post-Pop East Meets West (2015)*, the Saatchi Gallery

¹³⁹ Ratman, Niru, "Art and Globalisation" in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, Gill Perry & Paul Wood eds., (London: Yale university press, 2004), 281.

¹⁴⁰ Martini, Vittoria & Martini, Federica, *Just another exhibition. Histories and politics of biennials* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2011).

¹⁴¹ See Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Les Presses du Reel, 1998).

¹⁴² O'Neill, Paul, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

standardisation, “absorbed the difference between centre and periphery.”¹⁴³ According to Esche, the “centre first” model of global art that primarily began in the 1980s still has an influence over much of biennial culture. It requires influential institutions of contemporary culture to officially sanction artists or cultural movements on the “peripheral” to canonise it into the wider traditions of contemporary art. Even though many of the artists included in these exhibitions may have developed their creative practice on the fringes of the recognised art world:

Their energy is validated and consumed by the centre, and therefore the relationship between rim and hub remains in place. This is, of course, how globalisation operates - sometimes to the economic benefit of the patronised but rarely in the interests of maintaining their autonomy and sustainability.¹⁴⁴

The attempts to address the problems of translation and of presenting another culture at the risk of exoticism are a primary concern within curating including translation as a cultural practice as opposed to a primarily linguistic process in formulating the construction of representations of international cultures while at the same time “constructing the subjectivities of its receptors.”¹⁴⁵ To identify the space that Chinese contemporary art can occupy when it is continually evoking a movement between places and cultures. The primary concerns of Liverpool Biennial’s international projects include globalisation, movement, and representation.

This practice can be discussed in two ways, the first is cultural diplomacy in its purest sense, meaning the use of culture and the arts as a tool of soft power that promotes a specific cultural identity, explicitly using cultural exchanges between artists, and arts organisations to advance a country or culture’s political agenda on the world stage.¹⁴⁶ The second and much more broadly interpreted definition can be shown to encompass a broader array of cultural interaction that do not necessarily occur with the direct influence of government organisations, but are instead continually being organised between international cultural institutions, which, in turn, can be promoted in various ways by governments through funding

¹⁴³ Esche, Charles, “Debate Biennials,” *Frieze* 92 (2005): 105.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Nelson, Brian, “Translating cultures, cultures of translation,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 28 no. 4, (2007): 361-365.

¹⁴⁶ Meissner, Werner, “Cultural relations between China and the member states of the European Union,” *The China Quarterly* 169, (2002): 181-203.

and sponsorship.¹⁴⁷ This collection of diplomatic, cultural relationships simultaneously form the underlying ideological structure of events like Liverpool Biennial, and its critical framework notably in 2010 and 2012 where relationships, diplomacy, and host/guest dynamics were explicitly put forward as the festivals' central themes under the titles *Touched* and *The Unexpected Guest* respectively. These themes allowed for the exploration of representing cultural identity, negotiation of globalised culture, and travel and migration. The inclusion and representation of artists from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have been present in Liverpool Biennial's various programmes since 2004 which included works by Yang Fudong and Huang Yongping.¹⁴⁸ Huang Yongping's commissioned work *The Pole of the East* included a signpost and displayed in Liverpool city centre which directed pedestrians to 17 countries located east of Liverpool including Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. (Fig. 3.33) The design was based on signposts found in the local area and changed the symbol of a pedestrian into a soldier with a gun. The work directly references the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 by the US and its allies and in the global context of the biennial the work also directly questioned the UK's role as a dominant power in relation to the rest of the world.

One notable work by Lee Mingwei for the 2010 Biennial particularly explored the themes set by *Touched*. Lee's artistic practice which he has described as "social conceptualism"¹⁴⁹. Lee's works included in the biennial displayed a significant participatory element, where he staged personal encounters and created the potential to build moments of dialogue through the use of objects of sentimental value to the participant. This practice reflected the overall thesis of the 2010 Biennial, the title referring both the effect that art has on its audiences as well as an exploration of personal interactions and relationships. As lead curator Lorenzo Fusi stated:

Acknowledging the presence of the "other" is the most art can achieve. Senses and emotions are indispensable tools in this process of recognition. If it is difficult to fully understand one's own nature or intimate motivations, the attempt of capturing the essence of the "other" is generally a lost cause. Art does not make this impossible task any easier but facilitates proximity. By means of tactile, intellectual and

¹⁴⁷ See Nye, Joseph S. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

¹⁴⁸ Artists included to date on the official programmes include, Huang Yongping, Yang Fudong, Cheong Wong Hoy, Yuan Goang-Ming (2004), Chen Chieh-jen, Tsui Kuang-Yu, Jun Yang, (2006), Ai Weiwei (2008), Song Dong, Lee Mingwei, Will Kwan, (2010), Sun Xun, Hsieh Ying-Chun (2012) C. Spencer Yeh (2014)

¹⁴⁹ See Domela, Paul, ed., *Liverpool Biennial: Touched*, (Milan: Silvana Editoriale Art, 2011).

emotional approximations, the work of the artists presented tries to penetrate the armour we construct in order to defend and hide our vulnerable human fallacy.¹⁵⁰

The attempt to “capture the essence of the other,” within the context of Liverpool biennial can be seen as an attempt at translation via facilitating an interaction. In *The Mending Project* (2010) (Fig. 3.34-3.35), Lee used the act of sewing and mending as a means to build relationships between stranger in the form of communal encounters. Participants were asked to provide an item of clothing or other textile pieces that required mending and to sit opposite the artist while he darned holes and mended rips in the fabric. Rather than mending the item in a traditional method that would aim to conceal the holes in the cloth, he would embellish it with decorative embroidery using brightly coloured threads. The core concept of the work is the attempt to instigate or fabricate a moment of intimacy and dialogue between strangers. After revisiting the work for the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017 (Fig. 3.36), Lee noted that:

The act of mending took on emotional value as well, depending on how personal the damaged item was, e.g., a favourite shirt vs an old but little-used tablecloth. This emotional mending was marked by the use of thread which was not the colour of the fabric around it, and often colourfully at odds with that fabric, as though to commemorate the repair.¹⁵¹

In a similar exploration of personal stories and the elevation of ordinary possessions the installation work *Fabric of Memory* (Fig. 3.31) exhibited as part of *International '06* at Tate Liverpool during the 2006 Liverpool Biennial involved Lee inviting local residents to lend hand-made textiles such as knitting or hand-made clothing for the work, typically the garments and blankets were made and given to a family member. Both the maker and the recipient were asked to provide a history of the item, including the memories they had of giving or receiving the item and what feelings the item now evokes within the recipient. The items were kept in individual boxes with each object being stored with the two documented histories from the maker and the recipient.

In a similar theme as part of his first solo show at CFCCA in 2013, Lee presented an installation: *The Living Room*, (Fig. 3.37) which invited volunteers to play the role of “hosts” in a constructed “living room”. These volunteers were asked to fill the room with their own personal collections and belongings, sharing and engaging visitors in a dialogue about them. The installation aimed to create personal encounters asking questions such as “Why do we

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Lorenzo Fusi, *Aesthetica Magazine*, Issue 37, October 2010, <http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/lorenzo-fusi/> [accessed: 19/12/2017]

¹⁵¹ Lee, Mingwei, *Artist Statement for The Mending Project*, 2017, leemingwei.com [accessed: 19/12/2017]

collect things?” and “What does our collection say about us?”¹⁵² The installation required the viewer to physically participate, where the visitor’s movements within the installation changed what they saw of the piece. The use of personal possessions within Lee’s practice acts as a site for critical engagement on the development of identity, relationships, histories and narratives.

Song Dong also reflected on personal relationships in *Touched* and referenced his father through his work and addressed the strained personal relationship and the emotions derived from Chinese social conventions. The piece *Touching My Father* (Fig. 3.39), included in *Touched* was an interactive video-projection that narrated the artist’s need to achieve a physical and emotional contact with his father and the frustration at being unable to achieve it. The image of the artist’s hand is projected onto the body of his father portraying the sense of repressed emotions through the ghostly touch of the projection. This childhood separation further enforces the sense of distance in the work. The legacy of the Cultural Revolution is a reoccurring theme in Song Dong’s projects including *Waste Not* (Fig. 3.40), presented as a solo show at the Barbican in London in 2012. The work encompassed a collection of items that spanned fifty years of Chinese history by displaying every item ever purchased for his mother’s home during the last fifty years that she had meticulously kept and saved. The piece based upon the Chinese concept of *wù jìn qí yòng*¹⁵³ translates a means of survival through frugality into a monument to Song’s personal history, childhood, familial relationships as the artist in his mother’s entire lives are documented through their possessions.

In the 2012 Liverpool Biennial focused on the primary theme of hospitality and its multiple implications. The Tate collection exhibition *Thresholds* as part of the 2012 Liverpool Biennial investigated topics including British character, relocation and the global impacts of territorial clashes. Split into three segments; *Thresholds* showed a variation of the overarching themes of *The Unexpected Guest* including *Stranger than Self*, *Shifting Boundaries*, and *Territories in the Making* and investigated how artists in the UK have reacted to British cultural identity regarding its way of life and history. Aside from the juxtaposition of multiple national identities, the exhibition explored the impact of travel and migration and border conflicts. The voyeurism of relationships created through hospitality is one of the themes present in some

¹⁵² Lee, Mingwei, *Artist Statement for The Living Room*, 2013, leemingwei.com [accessed: 19/12/2017]

¹⁵³ Translates as ‘to make the best of everything’

galleries for *The Unexpected Guest*. *Threshold's* take on this is through the work of Hong Kong artist Pak Sheung Chuen. *A Travel without Visual Experience*, (2008) (Fig. 3.41 -3.42) an installation only viewable through the flash of a camera. In *A Travel Without Visual Experience* Pak Sheung Chuen travelled through Malaysia for the first and – what he chose ahead of time would be – the only time. Amid the five days he spent there, Chuen went about as though he were visually impaired; either keeping his eyes shut or blindfolding himself. While blindfolded, Chuen continued to take a series of photos during the trip to Malaysia, and the prints constituted the principal part of the installation. However, the room in which they were displayed was pitch dark, and the light permitted is that from a camera flash, which the viewer was provided upon entering the exhibition space. The work evokes the obsession with documenting everything while travelling and questions whether the photographer is present when they experience a place. The act of only being able to view the work through the action of taking a photograph illustrates the complex relationships present while visiting another place, the contrast between host and guest or local and tourist. This theme can also be observed within the wider context of the biennial by calling into question the efficacy of the interaction between the artist and host city, or indeed the works and their audiences.

The group and solo exhibitions talked about in this section, the incorporation of Chinese contemporary artists as a component of a more extensive model of comprehensively engaged curating has turned into an increasingly developing pattern in the UK. The utilisation of the international model or the Biennial model has its critical points of interest. Firstly, it empowers the showcase of works by artists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and global diasporas while being able to largely avoid the political ramifications of speaking to a "solitary" national character. Also, it can serve to re-outline works inside a globalised context extending both the elucidation of the works by their audiences. The use of participatory works, in particular, provide an opportunity for attempts at direct communication with audiences. The use of audience engagement and participation would also become a vital aspect of CFCCA's curatorial practice.

The initial strategies used in the international exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s have continued to be used or referenced in later exhibitions less as a direct progression and more as a starting point for further research and of periodical re-evaluation. While there isn't a direct progression in artistic or curatorial methodologies towards this pluralistic or global turn in the time between the early survey exhibitions of the 1990s and

later exhibition, it is still present through the development, evaluation and re-evaluation of these repeating concerns. The impact of *China Avantgarde* and *China's New Art, Post-1989* were directly referenced by Karen Smith in the development of *The Real Thing* and in her projects with CFCCA which I will discuss in the next chapter. The group and solo exhibitions talked about in this chapter, and the incorporation of Chinese contemporary artists as a component of a more extensive model of comprehensively engaged curating has turned into an increasingly developing pattern in the UK. This includes a move away from purchased and loaned existing works from galleries and individual collections and towards commissions, site-specific installations, and works created in response to the venue, exhibition space, or local area. Another trend is the discursive criticism of 'authenticity', as shown in *The Real Thing*, often questioning or re-evaluating previous attempts to encapsulate or translate the scope of Chinese contemporary art and instead demonstrating a more personal or pluralistic vision. The use of the 'later' international model has its critical points of interest. Firstly, it enables the showcase of works by artists of multiple cultural identities and global diasporas without the political ramifications of presenting a singular national character or as a recognition of the individual artist in the form of solo exhibitions and retrospectives as discussed in the Ai Weiwei retrospectives at RA and the Blenheim Art Foundation. It can also serve to re-frame works within a globalised or art-historical context extending both the elucidation of the works and their audiences.

Chapter Four: Pluralistic Identities and the Plural Identities of the Chinese Art Centre

Since its establishment, CFCCA has evolved through a series of different roles and curatorial practices. Beginning with an artist-led space in Chinatown dedicated to promoting the work of British Chinese artists to becoming an early specialist organisation in representing artists from Mainland China, to a residency space and eventually working in a collaborative role for offsite projects. The Centre's curatorial methodologies and approaches to research have also changed over the years, beginning with expanding the scope of survey exhibitions from the 1990s to organising the first UK solo exhibitions of artists such as Xu Bing and Song Dong, to developing more critical and research-based approaches using China as a method in which to discuss wider issues like the environment and internet cultures.

Working with an extensive network of partners including associate and guest curators and collaborations with organisations both in the UK and internationally the Centre has worked to maintain a programme of exhibitions, residencies, performances, festivals, and symposia. The Centre has also published a number of catalogues and essays on Chinese arts and artists including the exhibition catalogues for *Representing the People* and *Harmonious Society*, and works on British Chinese art, performance art and protest art. In October 2013 the Centre was rebranded as the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art.

The following chapter will focus on past exhibitions at CFCCA as case studies to develop a critical analysis examining the centre's strategies since it began as an organisation. Beginning with an analysis of the Centre's history and background in the first part of the chapter, while the second part will discuss the internationalisation and expansion of the Centre's scope of research in the late 1990s under the leadership of Sarah Champion. This will culminate in a case study focusing on the centre's first group exhibition from Mainland China, *Representing the People* in 1999.

The final section of this chapter offers an overview of the development of Asia Triennial Manchester (ATM) and the contributions made by the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art. This chapter will also discuss the impact of the triennial and its continued development culminating in the ATM14 exhibition *Harmonious Society* which, to date, was the largest

group exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in the UK, exhibiting the work of over 30 artists at six Manchester venues.

4.1 From Chinese Art to Chinese Contemporary Art

Throughout the history of the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA, formerly Chinese Arts Centre) the organisation has maintained a focus on promoting Chinese contemporary art and culture in the UK. (Fig. 4.1) Today, CFCCA is a driving association for the development of an expanded definition of Chinese contemporary art initially beginning as a space for British Chinese artists and growing to include artists from 'Greater China' region and multiple diasporic identities, creating a wide and varied programme. The Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, (formerly the Chinese Art Centre) the UK's oldest non-profit organisation concerned with exhibiting Chinese contemporary art, is noted for its programme of Chinese contemporary art shows as well as promoting artists through residencies for artists of Chinese descent and their collaborative projects. However, this has led to a range of obstacles including the need to question the definition of 'Chinese contemporary art' and 'Chineseness' within a broader context of international and global art theory, as well as a conflict between the centre's role as a platform for artists of Chinese descent and its broader role as a contemporary arts organisation.

The centre's origins began in 1986 when Hong Kong born artist Amy Lai curated *Chinese View '86* (Fig. 4.2), the first art festival to showcase artists of Chinese descent in Manchester, with the expectation of giving a stage to Chinese art and culture and to build up the positive character of Chinese society in Britain. By 1989 the Chinese Arts Centre opened at its first permanent location on Charlotte Street in Manchester's Chinatown as a non-profit arts organisation with government financing, established with the target of educating the general public in Chinese contemporary art and culture. However, the primary focus of the centre under Amy Lai was primarily centred around community projects in visual and performance art aided by local artists of Chinese descent. The Centre's first large group exhibition of contemporary art, *Beyond the Chinese Takeaway* in 1992, (Fig. 4.3) focused on the cultural experiences of British Chinese artists who were part of the second and third generation of British Chinese residents.¹⁵⁴ The shift towards contemporary art and later towards its expanded and international definition of Chinese contemporary art can in some

¹⁵⁴ Yeh, Diana, "Ethnicities on the move: 'British-Chinese' art-identity, subjectivity, politics and beyond," *Critical Quarterly* 42, no. 2, (2000): 65-91.

ways be interpreted as a distancing from the centre's roots at the expense of the British Chinese community.

In 1996, under the leadership of a new director, Sarah Champion, the Chinese Arts Centre moved to another venue on Edge Street in Manchester's Northern Quarter. The move flagged the Centre's intention to move away from the association with traditional Chinese art and towards becoming a contemporary arts venue and exhibition space. This reflected a greater cause for concern for the Centre becoming ghettoized culturally and separated from the wider arts sector. There was also a practical need to relocate as former acting director Kwong Lee, who worked for the Centre in various roles between 1992 and 1996, recalled that the while the Centre was active in community projects during this period, the space was small and "not great for exhibiting," as well as only attracting small audiences from the local community.¹⁵⁵

In an interview with Dr Beccy Kennedy, Yuen Fong Ling who was employed as the centre's exhibitions officer between 1992 and 1996 stated:

"To me, Directors are translators, who negotiate, interpret and even reconfigure information, in which this mindset becomes transformed into the exhibitions, education programmes, initiatives, resources, priorities, agendas of the centre. The role of a cultural translator has to mediate, gate-keep, adopt, and even adapt governmental, instrumentalised agendas to meet and service its audiences, stakeholders etc"¹⁵⁶

This observation is reflected in the multiple agendas of CFCCA's former directors from the community focused direction of Amy Lai to the focus of providing a space and platform for British Chinese artists in the early 1990s, to the expansion of the center's scope as an exhibition space and as an internationally facing organization under the leadership of Sarah Champion; and the rebranding from 'Chinese art' to 'Chinese contemporary art' during Sarah Fisher's time as acting Director in 2013. In this sense, the role of the translator is to adapt the role of the organisation according to the needs of the artists it represents and its audiences.

¹⁵⁵ Kennedy, Beccy, "Outside Chinatown: the evolution of Manchester's Chinese Arts centre as a cultural translator for contemporary Chinese art," *Modern China Studies* 1 (2015): 58-89.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

In an interview for CFCCA's 30th anniversary, Champion recalled joining the organisation at a point in which the centre was struggling financially and facing possible closure. This led to an effort to work with all the potential affiliates in Manchester and the district, addressing artists and figuring out how the Centre could continue to operate.¹⁵⁷ The renewed concern for the Center involved making Chinese contemporary art and culture available and visible to Manchester's art audiences, maintaining a strategic distance from conventional representations of traditional Chinese society and towards a more diverse exploration of contemporary Chinese art and culture.

The move from Manchester's China Town could be seen as typical of a more extensive social movement, expanding its area of research and representation from British Chinese artists to include a broader area of research within 'Greater China' amid this period and the initiative to urge broader audiences to engage with Chinese contemporary art.¹⁵⁸ The move towards broadening the Centre's scope to include artists from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Taiwan in addition to the work of British Chinese artists and artists of Chinese descent also reflects a strategic move towards the contemporary. As the raised international profile of artists from Mainland China in the mid to late 1990s was becoming an area of interest in contemporary art circles, the Centre responded in kind. This led to an increase in local and international funding opportunities and contacts with international artists and curators. At the time, Champion states that there was a growing international and commercial focus around artists from Mainland China. There was genuine enthusiasm for the work of British Chinese artists but the issue was that audiences were more intrigued by contemporary art from Mainland China than they were of British Chinese art and CFCCA had encountered ongoing difficulties in finding a balance between representing the work and interests of both groups finding a bias in funding towards international shows.¹⁵⁹

In Dr Beccy Kennedy's study of the Centre's trajectory from a community project to an international art gallery through the oral histories of its former staff members, the separation is reflected in both the Centre's staffing and location:

¹⁵⁷ Ng, Jean, *Interview with Sarah Champion*, Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Corsane, Gerard ed., *Heritage, museums and galleries: An introductory reader*, (London: Psychology Press, 2005), 163-83.

¹⁵⁹ Ng, Jean, *Interview with Sarah Champion*, Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2016.

The appointment of a non-ethnic Chinese director appeared to lead to a more mainstreamed, less ethnically orientated Chinese arts focus. The methodological difficulties I found in terms of sourcing exhibition materials from before the last decade and in piecing together the Centre's staffing over its duration may also be indicative of this change in the direction of the organisation, which also included its relocation beyond Chinatown.¹⁶⁰

Kennedy frames the Centre's move to rebrand itself as an almost symbolic removal from Manchester's Chinatown and notes the loss of many of the archive's early documents being lost or destroyed during a fire in 1999 as the erasure of its original identity. This can be further shown in the Centre's change in demographics from initially targeting the British Chinese community as its primary audience and moving towards the wider art-going community which remained "predominantly white and middle-class."¹⁶¹ However, despite opening the Centre's programming to a wider scope of artists, it would be inaccurate to accuse the organisation of marginalising British Chinese artists. CFCCA continued to exhibit the work of British Chinese artists through continued relationships with its early participating artists such as Susan Pui San Lok and Gordon Cheung. Its residency programs and the 'Personal Artists Development scheme (PAD) that began in 2005 began to directly fund and support the professional development of British Chinese artists and Chinese artists based in the UK. The Centre also organised a series of small-scale solo exhibitions for British Chinese art graduates and early career artists during this period called 'First Steps' which were held in the second gallery space at the front of the building.

In 1998, the Centre hosted a seminar *A New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts*.¹⁶² This centred around artists, writers and performers in an endeavour to attempt to advance the verbal confrontation of the Chinese community in the UK and to attempt to analyse and evaluate notions of 'Chineseness' or 'cultural authenticity', including a discussion of reconciling the multitudes of British Chinese identities. Moreover, the discussion was an endeavour to achieve an agreement so that the Centre could advance and focus on changing communities and focusing on the nature of the works commissioned for and exhibited by the Centre to demonstrate the expansiveness of 'Chinese art'. Additionally, it attempted to push

¹⁶⁰ Kennedy, Beccy, "Outside Chinatown: the evolution of Manchester's Chinese Arts centre as a cultural translator for contemporary Chinese art", *Modern China Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 58.

¹⁶¹ Dunbar, Zoe, *CFCCA Funding Agreement*, Appendix I : Audience Development Strategy, Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives, 2017.

¹⁶² *A New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts?* seminar report, The Place Hotel, 3 October 1998. Speakers Lois Keidan, David Tse, Naseem Khan, Kaleidoscope of Visual Arts. Cultural diversity, performance discourse, cultural categorisation, The Chinese Arts Centre.

audience perceptions of the scope of what can be defined as 'Chinese'.¹⁶³ The concept of setting a series of defined parameters of what constitutes Chinese contemporary art, while necessary in forging an identity for the Centre from a marketing perspective, continues to illustrate the struggle to balance multiple cultural identities many of which conflict with one another. The continued revisiting of the topic of identity in multicultural art spaces through curatorial, academic and educational discourses has become an ongoing necessity. The evaluation of the seminar in the Centre's archives summarises the concerns of its speakers and particularly the terminology in which Chinese contemporary art could be framed and discussed, the visibility of British Chinese artists, and the problematic nature of positive action and funding opportunities for artists. In an interview with R.J Preece for *Asian Art News*, Sarah Champion discussed the problems that were already apparent with forming a 'New Vocabulary':

"The problem now is that for a relatively small population, there are so many terms around—British Chinese, Eurasian, East Asian, Malaysian, Singaporean, whatever. We are called the 'Chinese Arts Centre' which excludes as many people as it includes. So, we are looking to come up with an all-embracing term, and it ends up being something so enormous that it doesn't make any sense at all. We were then looking to do something like 'Yellow' which is in-your-face and political. But a lot of our work is education, training, and information, and we know that some people would have no idea what we were talking about."¹⁶⁴

The debate of the New Vocabulary seminar highlighted the problems of labelling a diverse group of artists and practitioners. In the same way that the Centre's branding as 'Chinese' does not fully represent the full scope of the artists that it promotes. However, the use of a deliberately provocative term like 'Yellow' might highlight the inadequacy of the kinds of umbrella terms that the participants were debating it would understandably be inappropriate as such a racially charged word could not be used as an 'official' vocabulary of an arts institution.

Throughout the 2000s, the Centre kept on extending its work on a national stage, going about as an office for Chinese contemporary art in Britain and welcoming coordinated efforts with different associations. Continuously the Centre developed a system of residencies with

¹⁶³ Delacruz, Elizabeth M. "Multiculturalism and art education: Myths, misconceptions, misdirections," *Art Education* 48, no. 3, (1995): 57-62.

¹⁶⁴ Preece, R.J. "Chinese Art Manchester-style", *Asian Art News*, 8(6), in November/December (1998): 39-41.

the intent of improving the visibility of Chinese artists. The Centre's residency studio allowed the organisation to build up residential and financial backing for artists, who could investigate their art practice while living and working on site. At the point when Chinese Arts Centre's previous Curator Sally Lai took over the role as the Centre's Director in 2008, she was tasked with re-assessing the Centre's work and programming to adjust and react to changes in the political atmosphere. Under Lai's directorship, the Centre began to shift its focus to react to a changing dynamic of global art, and the developing circumstances globally with associations and artists across Greater China.

A prominent struggle of the Centre and the exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in the UK as a whole is the tension between cultivating a specific cultural identity and engaging with the broader British arts and cultural sector. Within the wider politics of cultural identity in the UK, the Centre's early emphasis on the diasporic identities of 'British-Chinese' art was able to build solidarity with emerging concerns with multicultural representation and cultural theory in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁶⁵ However the problematic nature of representing 'Chinese' artists within the umbrella of multiculturalism leads to several criticisms. The first being that the representation of artists in this way simultaneously celebrates cultural diversity within the art world while the containment and separation of their cultural identity within its own space has coded their work as "Other".¹⁶⁶ The second is that the term 'Chinese' in its broadest sense can already be read as a collective term for multiple cultural identities which can run the risk of imposing the representation of a hegemonic 'China' within a hegemonic 'Other'. Thirdly, any preoccupation with cultural identity in the reading of the artists' work is in danger of undermining other themes and discussions within their body of work.

Artists, in any case, have exploited the changing and subjective nature of cultural identity, such that 'British Chineseness' characterises a space in which an initial recognition of a culture or movement can be assembled, analysed and built upon.¹⁶⁷ For example, the artist Susan Pui San Lok specifically advanced past an immediate investigation of individual cultural identity to a wider examination of the classification of experiences included in

¹⁶⁵ See Hall, Stuart, "New Ethnicities" in *Black Film, British Cinema* (London: ICA, 1988), 27.

¹⁶⁶ See Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁶⁷ Hall, Stuart, "Minimal Selves", in *the Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity* (London: ICA Documents, 1987).

individual and collective developments of identity.¹⁶⁸ Susan Lok's body of work, in particular, incorporates themes that:

... explore the movements and co-temporalities of languages, cultures, histories, and subjects in flux; subjects for whom aspirations to 'settle' and 'return' may not be contradictory, and 'nostalgia' may be understood in more complex terms than a 'backward' gaze.¹⁶⁹

In Lok's 2005 solo exhibition at the Chinese Art Centre Golden (Years) (Fig. 4.4 – 4.5) provided a film portrait of an immigrant couple and used imagery of their pastimes such as ballroom dancing and keeping allotments as a metaphor of "cultivation", or tactics of acclimatisation. *Golden (Years)* aimed to create an analysis of the "tending" of both land and cultural memory through Lok's depictions of tending personal interests.¹⁷⁰

Lok's work Trilogies (Fig. 4.6) which was included are part of the CFCCA 30th anniversary programme drew upon fan uploads of various television adaptations of the 'wuxia'¹⁷¹ novel series *The Condor Trilogy* produced between Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Singapore, and first broadcast terrestrially between 1983 and 2015. For *Trilogies* Lok cut thirteen different versions of the adaptation spanning three decades into three separate screen sequences, condensing over 400 hours of footage into 195 minutes. One screen corresponds with variations on part one of the trilogy, *Legend of the Condor Heroes*; a second screen corresponds with part two, *Return of the Condor Heroes*; a third screen corresponds with part three, *Heaven Sword, Dragon Sabre*. Each sequence focuses on moments portraying the characters flying in a motif of certain gravity-defying lightness which is common within the genre, while the images variously degraded through worn VHS tape and low digital resolution reflect both the changing stylistics of *wuxia* along with technological shifts in the medium. Removed from their narrative contexts, the repetitive movements produce a hypnotizing and exhausting aesthetic of weightlessness, speaking to fantasies of literal and metaphorical flight Lok subverts the stereotypical signifiers of the martial arts genre.

¹⁶⁸ Yeh, Diana, "Ethnicities on the move: 'British-Chinese' art-identity, subjectivity, politics and beyond," *Critical Quarterly* 42, no. 2, (2000): 65-91.

¹⁶⁹ Lok, Susan Pui San, *Golden (Notes)*, Published by the artist available online at https://susanpuisanlok.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/spsl-golden_notes_book_25sept06.pdf, 2007, (2007); 8.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Wuxia, literally translated as martial heroes is a fantasy/adventure genre of Chinese fiction concerning the adventures of martial artists in ancient China.

4.2 The People Represented

In 1996, the Chinese Arts Centre, under the leadership of Sarah Champion, re-opened at a new venue on Edge Street in Manchester's Northern Quarter. The move represented a shift in the Centre's creative direction towards becoming a contemporary arts venue, with a designated gallery space and facilities.¹⁷² At the time, there was a growing international and commercial focus around artists from Mainland China and the departure from the Centre's original location in China Town area of Manchester could be read as a wider cultural shift in perception of the British Chinese community during this period and the desire to attract wider contemporary arts audiences to engage with Chinese art. A primary issue was that due to the initial series of international exhibitions from Mainland China such as *China's New Art Post-1989* and the growing commercial interest in Chinese contemporary art due to private collectors such as Uli Sigg audiences were developing a greater interest in contemporary art from Mainland China than they were of British Chinese art. The Chinese Art Centre had encountered ongoing difficulties in finding a balance between representing the work and interests of both groups once they had expanded their scope of research to include artists from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

This culminated in the coordination of the touring exhibition of contemporary painting from Mainland China *Representing the People* (1999) in collaboration with Beijing based curator Karen Smith. *Representing the People* was a medium scale exhibition comprising over forty works by ten artists under the theme of contemporary Chinese society at the time.¹⁷³ The exhibition both used the growing interest of the international art world to place the Centre as a distinctive contemporary art organisation while also using the future opportunities the exhibition provided to place themselves as a leading expert on Chinese contemporary art and in representing both British born and internationally based Chinese artists.¹⁷⁴ A primary difference from previous exhibitions was the inclusion of artists active in Mainland China at the time of the exhibition as opposed to internationally based artists. Another central curatorial decision of the exhibition was to focus on figurative painting and photography with an emphasis on portraiture united by the theme of attempting to represent contemporary

¹⁷² Ng, Jean, *Interview with Sarah Champion*, CFCCA Archive, 2016.

¹⁷³ The exhibition included works from Chen Wenbo, Duan Jianwei, Guo Wei, Huang Hancheng, Liu Rentao, Liu Xiaodong, Ma Boazhong, Song Yingping, Wang Jinsong, and Zhuang Hui

¹⁷⁴ Smith, Karen, *Representing the People*. Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre.

Chinese society.¹⁷⁵ The year of the exhibition coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China's founding as a country as well as occurring ten years after the June 4th incident. The exhibition aimed to visualise contemporary figurative painting and photography both as a product of its historical and social context and as a point of departure.

Instead of being hosted in the Chinese Art Centre's new venue on Edge Street, *Representing the People* was organised as a touring exhibition shown at the Laing Gallery, Newcastle, the Midlands Art Centre, Birmingham, the Upper Campfield Market Hall, Manchester, (Fig. 4.7) and the Aberystwyth Arts Centre. The use of external venues increased the overall space of the exhibition allowing the organisers to plan on a more ambitious scale than they were previously able to within the confines of the Centre's space. The use of larger more established museum spaces in three cities also increased the potential for new audiences and broadening interest in the organisation.¹⁷⁶ By the time the exhibition was being planned, the majority of exhibitions celebrating Chinese contemporary art shown in the West had utilised the interest surrounding modern Chinese culture to present multiple facets of Mainland China's contemporary art under the banner of national identity.¹⁷⁷ The types of survey exhibition that Philip Tinari critically referred to as the 'China Show' had already been exhibited in the UK, such as *Silent Energy* in 1993 at the Marlborough Art Gallery. However, *Representing the People* aimed to take a more personal approach with a focus of portraiture and paintings and photography that focused on the representation of scenes of daily life and the personal viewpoints of the selected artists.

In the initial exhibition proposal for *Representing the People*, Karen Smith acknowledges the influence of previous touring exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art while placing emphasis on contextualisation both historically and within contemporary society:

Diversity has never been the standard by which the standard of art of a nation is judged. Naturally, the early exhibitions - Johnson Chang's *China's New Art*, Post-1989 and Hans van Dijk's *China Avant-Garde* - were both ground-breaking and essential to alerting the world to Chinese contemporary art. However, such approaches became the model, and as they were repeated, gaps began to make themselves clear. Whence do such images, and art forms spring? What happened between the last Ming-dynasty portraits and Liu Xiaodong's new little emperor leaning against the modern sedan chair? When do five thousand years of ink painting and Buddhist-inspired sculptural forms suddenly become avant-garde? From Western media images of the Mao era to renegade artists and dissidents to the smart

¹⁷⁵ Smith, Karen, *Representing the People*, (Manchester: Chinese Art Centre, 1999), 29.

¹⁷⁶ Rentschler, Ruth & Hede, Anne-Marie, *Museum marketing*, (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁷⁷ Smith, Karen, *Initial proposal for Representing the People*. (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 1997).

men of modern economics, what lies in between as the mass of the remaining 99.5 percent of China? Surely the most simple question of all: what is China now, and where does contemporary art fit?¹⁷⁸

Here Smith's intentions for the exhibition are laid out in the sense that while *China's New Art, Post-1989* and *China Avant-Garde* were significant international shows, Smith implies a lack of social context in their methodologies. In order to justify the need for the exhibition Smith makes the argument towards showing the social aspect of contemporary painting or more pertinently connecting the art with 'the People.' This was not only attempting to portray contemporary China through portraiture and figurative painting but to also create a connection with audiences in the UK. However, while the previous exhibitions had not placed an explicit focus on figurative painting and photography in a contemporary social context, the artists that were shown, particularly in *China's New Art, Post-1989* were placed and studied under various categories that explored various social and political implications of the 'avant-garde' art being produced in China at that time. Namely, works that create ironic socio-political commentaries within the movements of 'Political Pop' and 'Cynical Realism' with works by Wang Guanyi and Zhang Xiaogang. However, the practical constraints of *Representing the People* led to a narrowing of the exhibition's focus and instead of covering all aspects and sub-genres the curators were able to produce a defined method of curation. While discussing the impact of *Representing the People* Smith stated:

The choice of using figurative painting and portraiture was a conscious decision because it was the first time contemporary society had been represented in that way. Also, the use of portraiture, while introductory, provoked a positive response from Manchester audiences and the exhibitions subsequent touring locations. The British view of Chinese society at that time was still of a heavily restrictive communist society, and people had little to no knowledge of the economic and social state of the People's Republic of China in the late 1990s.¹⁷⁹

How audiences in the UK would respond to the exhibition was also a primary concern when hanging the exhibition. In a fax to Sarah Champion during the planning of the exhibition, Smith discussed the hanging plan in terms of accessibility to audiences who knew very little about contemporary China at the time.

¹⁷⁸ Smith, Karen, *Initial proposal for Representing the People*. (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 1997).

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Karen Smith, 28/01/2015.

...I have worked through an idea that begins with the most approachable image of Chinese people and works through the difficult to the conceptual.¹⁸⁰

This implies somewhat low expectations of the level of audience engagement once the exhibitions opened, and an attempt to begin the viewer's progress around the exhibition space with more 'classical' definitions of painting. In the photographic records of the exhibitions at the Laing Gallery show the works hung in a typical 'white cube' space.¹⁸¹(Fig, 4.8) The hanging arrangement is simple and accessible. In some cases, particularly the works by Wang Jinsong, the larger paintings take up an entire wall due to the size of the gallery space, with no space between the panels and hung at eye-level with the audience. This level not only brings an intimacy to the audience's engagement with the works as they can observe them up close but it also encourages eye-contact between the figures in the paintings and the viewer, imitating a more personal relationship between people in the audience and 'The People' being represented. In contrast, the architecture of the Upper Campfield Market site displays a large amount of space between the works on the perimeter of an open space. (Fig, 4.9)

Representing the People was successful for a small show, attracting over 154410 visitors across its four venues based on the available data collected at the time.¹⁸² However, because it was outside of London and had quite a limited scope due to budget and the size of the venue it still only made a small impact. Smith was also highly critical of previous Western representations of Chinese contemporary art. She stated in the exhibition's catalogue that Chinese contemporary art walks a fine line between the exoticisation of Asian cultures in the West and the supposed lack of cultural signifiers in conceptual and new media works, or more accurately the cultural hegemony of European/American aesthetic practices within contemporary art. Smith argues that the cultural signifiers of contemporary art are undermined when an audience is faced with work that looks fundamentally the same as installations, video and performance work, exhibitions and conceptual pieces being created in the West, an entirely diverse point of reference is lost since it is regularly devoid of visual signifiers that the viewer anticipates.¹⁸³ However, to dismiss works in other media

¹⁸⁰ Karen Smith, Fax to Sarah Champion "Re- Hanging Plan for Representing the People", (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 1999).

¹⁸¹ O'Doherty, Brian, "Inside the white cube: notes on the gallery space." *Artforum*, 14(7), (1976): 24-30.

¹⁸² Champion, Sarah, "*Representing the People*" *A beginners guide to organising a touring exhibition with works from Mainland China*, (Manchester: CFCCA Archive 1999): 13.

¹⁸³ Smith, Karen, *Representing the People*, (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 1999): 8-9.

outright, such as installations and conceptual works seems to fall more towards an assumption on the part of the intended audience as opposed to a general lack of cultural signifiers in installation and new media art.

At the time, Britain had a more critical attitude towards transcultural exhibiting and contemporary and avant-garde art. This was thanks in part to the nature of the British press which had previously shown ambivalence towards the conceptual and minimalist works of the British contemporary art scene in the 1970s and 1980s such as the controversy over the Tate Gallery's acquisition of *Equivalent VIII* by Carl Andre.¹⁸⁴ However, contemporary art in Britain had been gathering pace in mainstream culture in the early 1990s. Culminating with the large-scale *Sensation* exhibition in 1997 and the opening of Tate Modern in 2000 challenging the "provincialism and backwardness of British art and to represent the emergence of London as the pre-eminent world centre for contemporary art exchange."¹⁸⁵ This was one purpose behind the Centre's and Smith's decision to concentrate on painting and photography as opposed to installation or conceptual works in *Representing the People*. By picking figurative works, there is promptly a system in which the works can be approached, contextualised and discussed. The works raise the question of what can be defined as 'Chineseness', or whether individuals can or can't react to artworks from a society they have interpreted as 'other'.

By aligning itself to a socio-art historical approach, *Representing the People* aimed to contextualise life in modern China from the perspective of the people who were living it in the context of the artists included in the exhibition. In the exhibition proposal, Smith acknowledges the problems of 'representing the people' via a small group of contemporary artists. While it was not necessarily the curator's initial intent to limit the range of artists included, it was instead an effect of the project's limitations regarding space and funding. The limited scope of the exhibition's criteria for its works brings the broad title of 'Representing the People' into question. The title is ironic as 'the people' cannot be represented in their entirety and instead is positioned as a critique of the 'China Show'. The conceptual aspects of Chinese contemporary art that had been the focus of several recent exhibitions in the West such as *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation*

¹⁸⁴ See Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1973), and Tate's acquisition of Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* in 1972.

¹⁸⁵ While, Aiden, "Locating art worlds: London and the making of Young British art", *Area*. 35, no. 3, (2003): 251-263.

Art in the Nineties at the Chasse-Kazerne in Breda (1997) were precluded from the scope of the exhibition.¹⁸⁶ Unlike broader showings of painting such as *Reckoning with the Past* (1997), *Representing the People* as an exhibition aimed to root itself in more immediate realities.¹⁸⁷ From the other end of the spectrum, purely academic portraiture and life studies were also excluded as subject matter here as they would have shifted the focus on the artists' trained ability and not their intuitive or dialectical response.

With the exception of Gui Wei, Liu Xiaodong, and Wang Jinsong the selected artists had not previously been exhibited in the UK and were primarily from a younger generation of artists. China had changed tremendously in the 1990s. The advance of social change, economics, consumerism and a broadening expansion of the middle-class had led to a marked change in the demographics, lifestyles and daily activities of ordinary people. The markers of the works chosen for *Representing the People* was not the prestige of the artist or the artworks but the consideration of the image and the thought process that inspired it and to break away from the 'survey' methods and processes of previous exhibitions. The works included in the exhibition, and the curatorial perspective had through moved from an attempt to capture a cross-section of Chinese contemporary art to a collection of transient and uncertain experiences of contemporary China through individual perspectives. However, the entire line up of artists in the exhibition was male, largely due to Smith and the Centre's curatorial team struggling to find female figurative painters that related to the theme of the exhibition. Therefore, the specific perspectives within *Representing the People* and the lens through which 'the people' are represented are considerably narrowed. In this way, the exhibition portrayed perspectives of the figure that were inherently concerned with masculinity and the male gaze such as Ma Baozhong's portrayals of militaristic imagery of soldiers and weaponry in *AKA series* (1998). (Fig. 4.10),

In the blurred randomly captured photographic work of Zhuang Hui's works *Bath House* series (1997) (Fig. 4.11) the viewer encounters the changing dynamics of personal spaces and traditional social rituals. The series of photographs were the only photographic prints included in the exhibitions and were juxtaposed by selected works from the artist's *One and Thirty...* series (Fig. 4.12) where the artist posed with thirty subjects from the categories of

¹⁸⁶ Heidi Van Mierlo, *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*. (Tilburg: Fundament Foundation, 1997).

¹⁸⁷ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical voices: Race, gender, self-portraiture*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

China's socialist society including workers, soldiers and peasants. Both series use photography as a means of documentation showing a contrast between the candid and posed photographs. The issue of documentation in the context of the exhibition also highlights the uncomfortable reality of the 'Chinese people' as the subject of the exhibition. Wherein the Chinese figures on display throughout the show are offered to the gaze of predominantly British audiences.

In addition to the objectification of Chinese bodies in this context the 1996 painting, *Violating Rules*¹⁸⁸ (Fig. 4.13) is one of Liu Xiaodong's figurative paintings and one of his earliest works to utilise the theme of migrant workers to express his social concern. *Violating Rules* depicts a crowd of naked male migrant workers riding on the back of a truck. The nudity of the figures can be seen as connecting their physically vulnerable condition with their general lack of self-determination. Responding to the economic development of the 1990s, of which disregard for human life was a by-product, Liu Xiaodong's work reflects the helplessness of the low-level workers. Necessity and survival have pushed the migrant workers in the painting to dangerous extremes. The objectification of the figures through nudity and also through their portrayal by the artist also parallels the objectification of cheap labourers. The inclusion of migrants as a subject in the exhibition also represents the rapid social and economic changes in China to the show's UK audiences.

The struggle with successfully portraying and translating *Representing the People* as an exhibition for a wider British audience reflected a more extensive and continuing problem with the organisation itself. This was not only through its financial and physical constraints but through its own issues of identity as it expanded its scope of expertise and research towards an international focus without undermining the representation of the British Chinese artists who helped to build the organisation. Ultimately, *Representing the People* was an ambitious project during a transitional period of CFCCA's history. The involvement of Karen Smith as a translator in both a literal sense in terms of making contacts with the artists involved and in an interpretational sense through her curatorial practice.

¹⁸⁸ This work is also translated as 'Disobeying the Law.'

4.3 Conflict, Compassion and Harmonious Societies

Between 2008 and 2014, CFCCA contributed to the programme of Asia Triennial Manchester (ATM) as well as embarking on a number of consulting roles and collaborations with external organisations and events. Biennials have played a central role in the development of contemporary art, particularly in creating opportunities for exhibiting work by international artists.¹⁸⁹ ATM brought its participating artists and organisations into a wider discussion of Asia with the Triennial's host city leading to discussions of a number of issues including border conflicts, wars, and colonial histories and relationships with the UK. The Asia Triennial was the first primary Asian Arts Festival of its kind in Europe with an emphasis on new work. Since 2008 ATM had focused on building new social organisations and research exchanges that have influenced exhibitions programming and informing curatorial practice.¹⁹⁰ The first Asia Triennial Manchester which took place in 2008 was connected by the overarching theme of 'Protest'. This offered a degree of research into both the local area and global while simultaneously reviewing the history of radical politics within Manchester, its excitement for new ways of approaching creative and curatorial practice, and resonances with Asia. The principal Triennial was unmistakable for joining open-air exhibitions, performances and a symposium, with assorted commitments from artists situated in the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan India, Korea, and Singapore. The Triennial of 2008 managed a unique perspective for the UK on the subject of Asia, creating a dialogue among artists and researchers as well UK based and international artists.

The Chinese Arts Centre's contribution to ATM08 included *Contemporaneous - Ink Animation* by *Chen Shaoxiong & Qiu Anxiong* as well as two residency exhibitions from Chongqing-based artist Mao Yan Yang and Hong Kong comic artist Kong Kee. Notable among the works by Qiu Anxiong including a video installation of *The New Book of Mountains and Seas* (Fig. 4.14) was inspired by the classical Chinese text the *Shang Hai Jing*¹⁹¹ which was a compendium of mythical creatures and medicines and places. Qiu's animations combine images of modern urban life with the Chinese mythology of the *Shang Hai Jing*. The animated video used imagery in the style of traditional ink painting while confronting issues in modern life including industrialisation, urbanisation, and

¹⁸⁹ Grandal G. Montero, "Biennialization? What biennialization? The documentation of biennials and other recurrent exhibitions", *Art Libraries Journal*, 37, no. 1, (2012): 13-23.

¹⁹⁰ Beccy Kennedy, REF2014 Impact Case Studies: Asia Triennial Manchester, <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=43531> [accessed 24/03/2016].

¹⁹¹ Literally translated as 'The Classic of Mountains and Seas.'

environmentalism. For *Contemporaneous*, while the exhibitions themselves fell under the ATM08 programme the interpretation of the triennial's theme which had been used a broad starting point as opposed to a literal interpretation. The Centre's exhibitions during the triennial were largely small scale with little collaboration with other art organisations opting instead for a more typical exhibition programme for the Centre at that time. Notably, during 2006 and 2007, the Centre had also gained funding for its own art festival after organising a national 13 venue tour of five Chinese performance artists in the show *China Live (2005)* culminating in the *VITAL International Chinese Live Art Festival (2006-7)*. A programme of Live Art events, film screenings and artist talks across Manchester which along with the organisation of *Representing the People* as a touring exhibition sets more of a precedent for the Centre's subsequent collaborative efforts as opposed to the 2008 Triennial.

The topic decided for the Triennial of 2011 was "Time and Generation" and was organised and researched by Alnoor Mitha and Leon Wainwright with the goal of welcoming artists, researchers, curators and audiences to investigate what characterises the passage of time within the context of contemporary art included the notion of identity through generations in history. This included the Chinese Art Centre's exhibition and related talks and publication *Institution for the Future (Fig. 4.15)* curated by one of CFCCA's associate curators, Biljana Ciric. The exhibition included artists from various national and cultural backgrounds within Asia who had brought their experiences of engagement with their local contemporary art scenes and who had been involved in developing projects and infrastructures within the arts in their home countries.

Through creating a debate of what an "institution for the future" might involve the participants explored an array of questions such as what the relationships between institutions and artists should be, as well as the opportunities for change within the institution through activism, and how should it connect to local and international communities as well as the role of the art institution as a site of knowledge production and research, and its relationship to the community. The curatorial methodology for *Institution for the Future* took a resistant and discursive approach to the concept of the art object and the gallery space and the relationship between the artist and art institution. This would be replicated later on in exhibitions such as *Micro Micro Revolution* in 2015 while also reinforcing the importance of relationships between the exhibition and its connected educational events including publications and symposia displaying a move away from the 'representative' method of curating of earlier years and towards a more analytical model of research. This has

remained a primary focus of the Centre's mandate for its curatorial research and its public programme.

The artists and collectives presented during the project included the Beijing-based art collective *The Utopia Group* (Fig. 4.16) consisting of Deng Dafei and He Hai. The Utopia Group focused the research during their residency at the Centre to explore the history and the decline of Manchester's textile industry. Part of the project involved creating a large ball of wool and a pair of knitted jumpsuits and proceeded to spend two weeks pushing the ball of wool around Manchester while moving backwards on all fours allowing it to become increasingly worn and dirty as it was moved between various landmarks in the city. The performance was recorded by Dan Shannon as a video work showing the artists' interactions with the public during their performance which was then displayed in the Centre's residency space for the remainder of the triennial.

Subsequently, in the following ATM14, the newly rebranded CFCCA undertook a significantly larger contribution to the Triennial programme. Under the overarching theme of 'Conflict and Compassion' as a starting point, the ironically titled *Harmonious Society*. The title was re-defined from the literal meaning of "Harmonious Society", 'hexie shehui', as an alternative reading of the characters 'tianxia wushi,' meaning "nothing (has happened) under the heavens." *Harmonious Society*, the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art's contribution to Asia Triennial Manchester 14 was an ambitious exhibition of works by Chinese contemporary artists and is one of the largest group exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art to be opened in the UK. The opening of the exhibition coincided with the 2014 Occupy Central 'Umbrella Movement' protests in Hong Kong¹⁹² and was given added relevancy during a time of conflict and uncertainty. The overarching narrative of *Harmonious Society* is not an explicit political commentary but a more open discourse of shifting and diverging social, cultural and political dynamics of contemporary society both in China and internationally.¹⁹³ In the rapidly changing state of contemporary culture, the theme of ongoing conflict, collective memory and traumas and colonial history is present across much of the exhibition.

¹⁹² Branigan, Tania "Hong Kong Activists Vow to Take Over Financial Centre in Election Protest," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2014.

¹⁹³ Wu, Dar-Kuen, "The Artistic Activism of Asian Artists: The Asia Anarchy Alliance' in *Harmonious Society at Asia Triennial Manchester 2014 Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art*", Jiang Jiehong ed., (Manchester: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014): 146-150.

The show not only encompassed a range of artists from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan but was able to raise a number of discussions on the various conflicts and social issues of contemporary China illustrated through connecting the largely commissioned works through local sites many of which were created to be site-specific or interacted with the site in a meaningful way such as the works by Wang Yuyang and Samson Young in the John Rylands library. The discursive relationship between place and artwork provided an opportunity for cultural translation firstly through the artist's practice in response to the site and secondly through the intervention of the work at the site with the viewer.

The use of site-specific works in museums and public spaces in six venues around Manchester is key to *Harmonious Society's* success both as an exhibition in its own right and as a response to the broader theme within Asia Triennial Manchester. In addition to the gallery and warehouse settings of CFCCA (Fig, 4.17) and ArtWork Atelier, (Fig, 4.18) the exhibition displayed works at the National Football Museum, (Fig. 4.19) The Museum of Science and Industry, (Fig. 4.20) Manchester Cathedral (Fig. 4.21) and the John Rylands Library (Fig. 4.22). The works in these locations provide a series of interventions within buildings that can be viewed as symbolically institutional spaces or sites of cultural importance. In this sense, a dialogue is created between the established site, the works and the audience. The method of a proposal-based series of commissions can draw parallels with shows like *The Real Thing* (2007) as discussed in the previous chapter. However, while *The Real Thing* had allegedly allowed its thematic narratives to appear organically after the fact *Harmonious Society* and by extension, the triennial as a whole had a clear and easily identified thematic starting point which was then realised through the artists' proposals. While this might encounter the risk of the works being ultimately led by the curatorial team as opposed to the artists, the framing of the exhibition and its subsequent branching of thematic sub-territories allowed for a coherent and structured series of artist narratives. In addition to this the works exhibited across the external sites were comprehensive thematically and in relation to the site to be viewed as smaller exhibitions in their own right.

An example of this dialogue is *Lost in Biliterate and Trilingual* (Fig, 4.23 - 4.24) by Annie Wan located in the John Rylands Library, a set of 18 ceramic books created by painting thin layers of clay between the pages of various dictionaries in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. As the books are fired the paper and the text it contained disintegrates leaving only the delicate form of the book. The work renders the reading process inaccessible

thereby destroying the function of the book. Within the context of a Library, this intervention of restricting access to a text raises questions not only of the limits of language and translation but of the presence of power structures surrounding access to information from banned books to classified information held by public authorities. Like Annie Wan's ceramic dictionaries the purpose of the book is transformed where the medium for text is rendered mute and transformed into a purely sculptural object.

This ambiguity of translation is also present in Jin Feng's *Chinese Plates* (2014), (Fig. 4.25) also exhibited in the John Rylands Library, as well as at ArtWork. This work consists of a series of wood panels carved with passages on human rights taken from China's constitution. The panels are carved in the style of a printing block in which the text is shown in reverse and complements the antique letterpress printing presses on display throughout the building. The obstacle of legibility created by the backwards text, like Annie Lai-Kuen Wan's ceramic books, also presents an element of restriction and unintelligibility within the process of reading and access to information.

Also, on display in the John Rylands Library, Wang Yuyang's *Breathing Books* (Fig. 4.26) is a site-specific installation located in the library's Historic Reading Room. In this 19th-century Gothic revival building, Wang Yuyang responded to the site by using the Chinese books in the Library's collection. The books were meticulously copied as hand-painted, hyper-realistic silicon sculptures, complete with exact replicas of the reading room's tables and chairs. The sculptures are so realistic that at a glance it would seem as though the books have been taken from their shelves and randomly placed in piles on the desk. However, as the viewer approaches, the objects, including the table and chairs, move as though they are breathing thanks to a series of sensors and small motors.

The installation is part of the *Breathing* series; the artist had been working on since 2005, where inanimate objects including whole offices stocked filled with computers, phones and office equipment and discarded coffee cups are given the illusion of life. Like Annie Wan's ceramic dictionaries the purpose of the book is subverted, where the medium of text is rendered mute and transformed into a purely sculptural object. However, where Annie Wan's work produces an immovable solid mass where the text should be, Wang Yuyang transforms the image of the book into a dynamic, moving entity. The movements of the breathing books evoke an almost supernatural element to the work as though the books themselves have

been come to life over time changing their role from a passive medium for text into playing an active role within the Library's space and context through movement and the sound of its motors. In *Lost in Bilingual and Trilingual*, the books are rendered solid by the firing process evoking a sense of fossilisation or decay. The languages contained within are transformed from pervasive international languages into relics. As the John Rylands Library holds an extensive collection of papyrus fragments, parallels can be drawn between the works and permanent collections where the ceramic and sculptural books are displayed as future relics.

Another example of interaction with the Library as a site is displayed through *Muted Situations* (2014) by the Hong Kong artist and composer, Samson Young. Young incorporated the social expectations of being quiet and conscientious while using a library to subvert the viewer's expectations of viewing a musical performance by instructing the singers and musicians to perform with the same intensity as they would in a usual performance while not producing any sound. The work has been directly compared to John Cage's *4'33* where the incidental sounds produced during the performance become the focal point of the work. The reference is continued through the display of a wider series of proposals for 'muted situations' on cards reminiscent of Fluxus cards. (Fig, 4.27) However, the work responds to the wider theme of the exhibition with the artist connecting 'harmony' with silence. However, while the work was included as an installation for the duration of the exhibition, the strongest aspect of the work was achieved through a live performance of a muted chorale during the opening of the exhibition which brought a direct connection with the site. (Fig, 4.28)

Another example of the collective memory of relics and found objects are two light installation works *Solar, Manchester* (Fig. 4.29) by art collective LuxuryLogico and *It Is Forever Not* (Fig. 4.30) by He An. LuxuryLogico is a Taiwanese multi-media art collective consisting of artists: Che Chih-chien, Lin Kun-yong, Chang Keng-hau and Chang Geng-hwa, specialising in new-media works that combine multiple disciplines such as music, performing arts and computer programming. *Solar* is an ongoing series of site-specific light installations, which have previously been displayed at sites in Taiwan and Hong Kong and made its European debut in this exhibition. The *Solar* installations are collaborative projects where the artists collected unused and discarded domestic and streetlights from the local communities hosting the displayed work. Through this recycling process, the artists highlight collective and local memory in re-assembling the lights into a giant sun-like arrangement that is illuminated at night. *Solar, Manchester* consists of an artificial sun made from 177 recycled

streetlamps. Each light bulb has been converted into an LED light, transforming the incandescent light into a modern and efficient light source. The installation's site in the courtyard of the Museum of Science and Industry also draws parallels between the UK's history of technology and industry and the rapid industrialisation and economic growth of Taiwan and the PRC. The work only becomes illuminated after dark where the brightness and pattern of the lights shift throughout the night. Work on the installation took place in Manchester for over a month. The artists, in collaboration with Salford City Council and Bury Council, collected outdated streetlamps that have long been a part of the collective memory of the city. Through the process of recycling found objects and the conversion to LED highlights issues surrounding energy consumption and efficiency.¹⁹⁴ The other work that explores the theme of urban memory through reusing light is *It Is Forever Not* by He An. Since China adopted its open-door policy in the 1980s, it became influenced by a wave of imported Western culture. He An grew up during a period of rapid urban expansion and economic and industrial growth and changing social and political circumstances. His works deal largely with the physical evidence and social memory of China's growing cities.

It is Forever Not is a sculpture constructed from Chinese characters from stolen neon advertising signs. He began to work with salvaged neon signs in 2000 and has employed them to construct words, names and phrases in his artworks. For the artist, the neon signs are given power beyond their initial function as shop signs and advertisements and become monolithic within the exhibition space. The use of found objects and light in the piece draws a direct parallel with *Solar*, where lights are taken out of their original context and repurposed as large-scale sculptural installations. However, where *Solar* implies a sense of optimistic regeneration, He An's light works reflect a more transient and psychologically poignant image of modernity, where the landscape and signage that populates it is constantly changing. The artist takes signs intended to be viewed from afar or from an elevated position and brings them closer to the viewer in a more intimate dynamic while the characters are rearranged to create more personable messages and slogans (Fig. 4.31)¹⁹⁵.

The passage of time and destruction of imagery is also apparent in the *Resenting Hong Kong Series: Resenting My Own History* (Fig. 4.32 – 4.33) by Pak Shueng Chuen displayed at CFCCA. Here the notion of 'collective memory' and the denial of that memory is

¹⁹⁴ Krauss, Rosalind, "Sculpture in the expanded field," *October* 8, (Spring 1979): 31-44.

¹⁹⁵ Whittaker, Iona, "He An: I am a curious blue I am a curious yellow" *ArtReview*, October 2011, 153-154.

addressed by a literal act of erasure. *The Resenting Hong Kong Series* can be read in a similar context as the work plays on the idea of Hong Kong distancing itself from its colonial past. As part of the work, British citizens were invited to deface the Queen's portrait on a series of HK\$1 coins by rubbing them on the ground. The gradual degradation of the image is a symbolic act of disassociation between Hong Kong and Britain. Meanwhile, the 'treasonous' act of defacing the Queen's portrait by scraping the coins onto the ground and recording the scar-like marks left behind by this process are representative of this disassociation as well as the remaining memories, influences, and physical remnants of colonial power.

The theme of social memory is revisited in the series of four video installations *Realm of Reverberations* (Fig. 4.34) by Chen Chieh-jen. The video pieces centre around the site of Losheng Sanatorium, Taiwan's first leprosy hospital and the extended protests surrounding its demolition.¹⁹⁶ The atmospherically lit black and white films show an archival recording of former residents and protestors. The film records and preserves details that would otherwise have been lost while showing long extended shots of demolished buildings and debris. The installation explores both nostalgia and past traumas as well as uncertainty for the future. The setting of the installation in the Museum of Science and Industry compliments the work as the museum is located on the site of the world's oldest passenger railway line showing a parallel between industry, obsolescence and regeneration.

Through the collaboration of Asia Triennial Manchester 14 and CFCCA, *Harmonious Society* has, among many of its themes, been influenced by a reflection upon the past through political, industrial, and social histories both in relation to the exhibition sites and the experiences of the artists themselves. Through these various reflections, and within the context of the Triennial's themes of "conflict and compassion" one can begin to raise questions about the future and the true meaning of a "harmonious society." Since 2008, CFCCA has contributed to the programme of Asia Triennial Manchester as well as embarking on a number of consulting roles and collaborations with external organisations and events. Through the collaboration of Asia Triennial Manchester 14 and CFCCA, *Harmonious Society* has, among many of its themes, been influenced by the reflection of the past through political, industrial and social histories both in relation to the exhibition sites and the experiences of the artists. The exhibition, when compared to the Centre's previous

¹⁹⁶ Loa, Lok-sin, "Thousands Back Saving Losheng Sanatorium," *Taipei Times*, April 16, 2007.

participating exhibitions at ATM, shows an evolution of curatorial methodology culminating in a large scale, multi-site project which places emphasis on a discursive model of curating. It also engaged with the wider themes and events of triennial as a whole and its host venues enabling further discussions of the concerns of the artworks within the context of Manchester and the UK. As seen in *Institution for the Future* the exhibition placed a degree of emphasis on more academically focused research methods such as collaborating with Manchester Metropolitan University and other partners in the UK and China. The show was workshopped at art organisations in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei as well as being presented at King's College London and the ATM14 Symposium.

As early as 1998, Sarah Champion was quoted as stating:

“In the next 10 years, I hope that Chinese Arts Centre will be snuffed out—that there will be no use for it.”¹⁹⁷

While this hope was perhaps a little optimistic, the evolution of the CFFCA's role as an arts organisation has shifted since the Centre's establishment in 1986 as evidenced by its change in scope in the late 1990s to its rebranding in 2013 positioning the Centre to emphasis 'contemporary' in its title. While the need for CFCCA as a platform for artists of Chinese descent might diminish in the future, the current advantage of the Centre as a specialist arts organisation is as a place of research. Through events like the *New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts* seminar and the more critical approach to survey exhibitions in *Representing the People*, the Centre was able to create a dialogue of self-reflection at an early stage that makes it unique as an organisation. Since the Centre was established before contemporary art from Mainland China began to be exhibited internationally and gain popularity within global art markets, it essentially grew in parallel with the experimental art movements that were emerging in the PRC during the 1980s. Once the Chinese Art Centre began to look to artists from the PRC as part of their programming, they were essentially in the same position as other UK art institutions and were encountering the same hurdles, including establishing contacts in China and language barriers. However, the collaboration with Karen Smith in 1998, much like her work with Tate Liverpool for *The Real Thing* provided a unique perspective on both the art scene in China at the time and an understanding of audiences in the UK.

¹⁹⁷ Preece, R.J. “Chinese Art Manchester-style”, *Asian Art News*, 8(6), in November/December 1998, 39-41.

While the *Representing the People* exhibition took ‘the people’ of China as its subject to create a sense of empathy with UK audiences, CFFCA’s exhibitions and projects throughout the past five years have moved towards using ‘China’ as a method for exploring broader themes in contemporary society. In *Harmonious Society*, the use of the city’s landmarks, and site-specific works commissioned for the exhibition that draw upon locational and historical parallels, result in the show being as much about Manchester as it is about China. The use of issues facing contemporary Chinese society and culture as a means of participating in the wider thematic debate has become an integral part of CFFCA’s programming such as *Digital Matters: The Earth Behind the Screen* in 2017 which explored the environmental impacts of the electronics industry and *Chinternet Ugly* in 2019 which focused on the influence of the internet and social media on a younger generation of artists. CFFCA’s agenda can arguably be interpreted as moving from representing China to engaging with socio-political conversations through China.

Chapter Five: Translation through Discursive Curating and Audience Engagement

This chapter will analyse CFCCA's developing curatorial practice regarding performativity and dialogue as well as the Centre's supplementary publications, education and audience engagement beginning with an introduction to the research processes of CFCCA. This will include the Centre's approaches to addressing and communicating changing social and cultural contexts and evaluating participatory projects and practices and the encounter between artist, curator, and audience. In choosing the artists and exhibitions, I included relatively recent exhibitions that displayed a substantial degree of public engagement either through the works or via the presence of the artists themselves. This chapter will join both meanings of translation, alluding to the speculations of Susan Basnett, André Lefevere regarding cultural translation studies and comparing them to the established visual languages utilised by curators and galleries as a means of mediating works for international audiences.

The first part will cover the Centre's role in exhibiting solo exhibitions focusing on Xu Bing's first UK solo exhibition *The Living Word* in 2003. The chapter will continue with a discussion of relationships with artists and the selection process for the Centre's Breathe Residency programme, including the continued relationships with former artists in residence, and the support of graduates and early career artists. This will also include an analysis of the Centre's expanded definition of 'Chinese contemporary art' in a global context through UK and international residencies, as well as problematic implications of this means of selecting artists in residence. It will also discuss CFCCA's arts education programme, its organisation of talks and conferences, and the Centre's relationship with universities and other institutions as well as public events and engagement within Manchester's wider art sector and its cultural significance as an international organisation.

5.1: Living Words, Curating Translation in the Xu Bing Solo Exhibitions.

In 2003 the Chinese Art Centre moved to its current location on Thomas Street opening a purpose-built exhibition space including two galleries, a residency studio, resource library and education suite. The inaugural exhibition for the new building was a solo exhibition of Xu Bing's work and the artist's first solo exhibition in the UK. In her notes for a speech given at the Centre's 21st Anniversary event, Sarah Champion mentions that Xu was supportive of the Centre despite it being a small organisation and offered to loan the works for the exhibition without charging an artist's fee.¹⁹⁸ The exhibition was once again partly organised by Karen Smith acting as a consultant and liaison with the artist. The opportunity to include Xu as the new Centre's flagship exhibition aimed to bring the Centre the prestige of an internationally acclaimed artist thus intentionally branding itself as a contemporary art organisation while Xu Bing's work, whose practice is so explicitly concerned with language also created an accessible discussion of language, translation and transcultural art practices with its audiences.

Xu Bing's solo show at the Chinese Art Centre in 2003 (Fig. 5.4 – 5.7) showcased the artist's investigations of the written language within his art practice.¹⁹⁹ The artworks included were created through explorations of traditional Chinese calligraphy and printing to installation works including *Bird Language*, where brass and copper birdcages whose wall comprise of English and Xu's "Square Word Calligraphy" text, containing sound activated mechanical birds as well as landscapes made up of repeated characters in *In Flight* (Fig. 5.5).

In *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* (Fig. 5.7) in the smaller space of Gallery 2 where gallery visitors, in the role of 'students', learned Xu's Square Word calligraphy through

¹⁹⁸ Sarah Champion, Digital File "sarah.doc", (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive 2007).

¹⁹⁹ whose international solo exhibitions include *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing* at the Arthur M Sackler Gallery Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. (2002); *Xu Bing: A Book from the Sky and Classroom Calligraphy* at the National Gallery of Prague (2000) and *Xu Bing: Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2001).

exercise books, blackboard notes and a video installation.²⁰⁰ The text appeared at first glance to resemble Chinese characters and therefore 'incomprehensible' at first glance to many Western eyes. However, throughout the process of copying the text, the viewer becomes aware that they are instead seeing English words stylised into symbols resembling Chinese characters. The use of English, which through cultural dominance is widely used as an international auxiliary language, illustrated through a script that uses the signifiers of Chinese characters, a writing system with over two thousand years of history, reflecting a diverse group of spoken languages and dialects. Through the transformation of one language represented by another, the characters within *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* creates a hybrid where the English speaking viewer who is unable to read Chinese approaches the work expecting not to understand the text when, in fact, they can. However, by contrast, the Chinese readers expecting to be able to read the text and find it is in fact in English and thus come into contact with a variety of arguments on language as a medium of power and resistance. This includes the capabilities of written language to be both divisive as a means to separate the educated and the uneducated or to unify as a standardised means of communication.

By the early 2000s, Xu Bing had become one of the most internationally recognised Chinese artists due to the critical receptions of his work *A Book from the Sky*. (Fig. 5.1) In the case of *A Book from the Sky*, the appearance of the installation holds a strong Chinese aesthetic as it emulates a specific historical printing style, creating the appearance of books and scrolls from the 12th century A.D. (Fig. 5.2). The Chinese text is subverted into by creating a set of characters which are visually similar to the classical Chinese writing system but have no meaning assigned to them. Xu spent two years developing these characters and hand carving them as moveable typefaces, then printed it to create a series of elaborately bound books and large scrolls designed to hang from the walls and ceiling of the gallery space. While there is technically no 'text' in a literary sense the work does connect itself with writing on a semiotic level, from the logic of the invented characters to the historical nature of the work's execution. The use of a typeface similar in style to those used during the Song Dynasty (Fig. 5.3) is a deliberate one, firstly for referring to a period of unprecedented growth and flourishing culture and technology in Chinese history, and secondly, because the typeface itself has endured as a widely used newsprint typesetting. The artwork was not initially intended for an international audience as it was produced during the 1980s at a time

²⁰⁰ Erickson, Britta & Xu, Bing, *The Art of Xu Bing: Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words*, (Washington: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2001).

when contemporary art from Mainland China was still in its infancy and had yet to attract the interest of international arts organisations or the art market. However, the widely acclaimed international reception of the work shows that *A Book from the Sky* was able to transcend from a work of significance within its own national context to an artwork concerned with a global audience. In opposition to the development of Simplified Chinese in the early 20th century and its standardisation during the Cultural Revolution in an effort, *A Book from the Sky* metaphorically removes that transparency and places the text out of the reach of the audience. The removal of meaning in this instance has the effect of concealment, giving the illusion of holding something culturally significant that the viewer isn't permitted to understand. To the viewer who is able to read Chinese, the work effectively renders the reader illiterate. In addition to this, the illegibility of the fake script of *A Book from the Sky* is not immediately obvious to those who are unable to read older forms of the Chinese script, which affects not only the international viewer but a large proportion of audiences from Mainland China.

In an interview, Xu Bing mentioned that in those initial exhibitions the public performed a form of “creative linguistic manipulation” attempting to read metaphors of political significance in and similarly searching to understand and decode the imaginary characters in *A Book from the Sky*.²⁰¹ This search for meaning reflects a greater amount of scrutiny of Xu's work including a close analysis of *A Book from the Sky* by several scholars. This revealed that the work had in fact used ten existing characters which had fallen into disuse. In one interview, Xu recalls how his work and the work of other contemporary artists during that period were heavily criticised by the Chinese press shortly followed by the Ministry of Culture issuing new rules restricting the display and press coverage of new art in art museums, magazines and newspapers.²⁰²

Keeping this international audience in mind, his strategies for introducing ‘traditional’ Chinese elements are purposefully combined with a deconstruction of basic cultural categories to deal with the liminal qualities of language. These themes allow the artist to access and assume the performance of ‘tradition’ while simultaneously denying its fixed identity and meaning within the modern world. Interpreters of asemic writing often place the

²⁰¹ Erickson, Britta, *Xu Bing: Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 17.

²⁰² Kaldis, Nick, ‘Trans-boundary Experiences: A Conversation between Xu Bing and Nick Kaldis,’ *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, June 2007.

practice into some wider social or cultural background, with the intentions that this will reveal the hidden meaning of the work.²⁰³ Works like *A Book from the Sky* that, in Norman Bryson's words, "(empty) out the semantic dimension of language" enact the contradictory effects supported by the configurations of their social spaces incorporating the act of not understanding the text into the work itself.²⁰⁴ The unsettling of the language user's understanding serves to unsettle their relation to language and their ability to identify with the language itself. In addition to this, this confrontation of language and understanding also served to exemplify the mental and physical performances of language that are left over and above syntax, such as the gestures of talking and writing or the mental effort of listening and reading.

In 2016, as part of its 30th Anniversary exhibition programme, inviting 30 artists who had previously exhibited with the Centre to contribute exhibitions, works or events to the Centre's programme. For its first exhibition for the 30th Anniversary programme, CFCCA exhibited the *Book from the Ground project* by Xu Bing, a multimedia project that sought to create a constructed written language system created by the artist culminating in a book written entirely in symbols and emoticons. (Fig. 5.8) Planning a second solo exhibition of Xu Bing's work to begin the anniversary programme was intended to both revisit the significant solo shows and artist contributions of the organisation's history as well as bringing the narrative of the Centre's history of its current site to come full circle as a solo show of Xu's work had been the exhibition to open in the Centre's new building and current site on Thomas Street 2003. The installation invited a comparison of the Centre's past and present curatorial directions as well as the artist's practice in the years following the 2003 solo show as Xu began working on *Book from the Ground* in 2003. The exhibition space for the work was set up as a room within a room in Gallery 1, the Centre's main exhibition space. The interior held a desk space displaying the artist's notes, collections and works on paper, emulating an office or studio space as well as a glass case displaying the evolution of a novel written in Xu's invented language from a notebook through various drafts to the final published copy and a pedestal displaying two copies of the finished book for visitors to read. Finally, the installation included a pair of desks with computers facing one another where visitors could send messages to one another that were automatically translated from English to Xu's symbol language. The remainder of the Gallery space was used to display a timeline

²⁰³ Wu, Hung, "A 'Ghost Rebellion': Notes on Xu Bing's 'Nonsense Writing' and Other Works" *Public Culture* 6, (1994): 411-418.

²⁰⁴ Bryson, Norman "The Post-Ideological Avant-Garde" in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 57.

of the Centre's history and past exhibitions on the gallery walls forming a circle around the constructed space for the installation, largely through printed wall displays and occasionally hanging original documents and photos and video footage. The use of the timeline both for the Centre's history and for the development of Xu's book visually link the work of the artist to the work of the Centre and evoke a sense of reflection and of progression. Both the installation and the timeline of the gallery's history have an archival element to their presentation as Xu spent over a decade researching and developing *Book from the Ground* while the inclusion of archival materials from the Centre attempt to create a vision board of the scope of the Centre's history. The viewer is invited into a quasi-academic space, to learn and to discover which harks back to the classroom setting of *New English Calligraphy* in the 2003 exhibition.

The aesthetic of the *Book from the Ground* project initially appears to reach a global audience yet contains a number of symbolic references to the Chinese writing system. Xu draws on elements of his own culture, which has been influenced by a complex and turbulent history, to address wider issues within the global debate.²⁰⁵ It can be argued that the problematic positioning of diasporic artists working in an international context allows a degree of displacement from the conventional categories of representation while becoming caught between the presumption of their own cultural 'traditions' compared to the separation from tradition and modernity.

However, by setting up a model that pitches tradition against modernity, there is a danger of overlooking the resilience of historical traditions and their reinvention through modern literary and visual culture.²⁰⁶ Where *A Book from the Sky* was universally unreadable, *Book from the Ground* was created as an imagined writing system that could be universally legible. Using influences from the initial standardisation and the constructed nature of the development of simplified Chinese, *Book from the Ground's* 'language of icons' taken from ideograms from street signs and airports combined with emojis and computer icons (Fig. 5.10) to create a new written language. In other words, it is an artwork that hypothesizes a universal form of written communication that moves beyond spoken language, class, and educational

²⁰⁵ Leung, Simon & Kaplan, Janet "Pseudo-Languages' A Conversation with Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Jonathan Hay," *Art Journal* 58, no. 3, (Autumn 1999): 87-99.

²⁰⁶ Liu, April, "The Living Word: Xu Bing and the art of Chan Wordplay" in *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art*, Tsao, Hsingyuan ed., (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011).

backgrounds, a traditional writing system influencing a proposed model for communication in the modern age.

The irony to requiring the use of translation software in order to access a language designed to be universally legible is apparent in the work. Part of the work required the use of an instant messaging system within the CFCCA installation that automatically translated Xu's writing system from typed English similar to a pinyin input method for computers. As a working language, the *Book from the Ground* projects is flawed as a universal language. As with any element of language be it natural or constructed Xu's language of icons requires the reader to learn systems that are separate from their natural language. Xu's 'language of icons' is purposefully oversimplified and can be read as highlighting not only the shortcomings of translation but of the expressive ability of language as a whole. For example, Xu's novel is written using the writing system from the project *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point (2012)*. (Fig. 5.9) In the book, the unnamed protagonist reads an email from a friend announcing his engagement using the symbol of a diamond ring to represent 'engagement' and a pink heart to represent 'love', presuming that the reader has some knowledge of the symbolism of western courtship rituals and internet messaging systems. Unlike previous attempts to create an international constructed language such as Esperanto in the late 19th century Xu's image-based text allows the viewer to read the text in their own natural spoken language, as the language of icons.²⁰⁷

As the installation shows Xu's notebooks and collections of icons arranged in a recreation of the artist's workspace it becomes apparent that the language is based in international spaces, borrowing signs from airports. It also requires the reader to have an existing knowledge of the semiotic significance of graphic signs and symbols such as road signs and computer icons which retain a primarily western ideography despite their common use on a global scale. However, the emphasis on the internet and travel in Xu's working process shows that despite its apparent sentiment of creating a language that claims to be understandable by everyone, his constructed language displays instead of the encroaching reality of a global society. This can be interpreted as a wider commentary on global politics, the influence of the Chinese script in the constructed script's morphology combined with an

²⁰⁷ See Forster, Peter, *The Esperanto Movement*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1982).

iconography steeped in western signs and codes could signify a struggle for cultural dominance under the guise of a global system. For a novel in a 'universal' script, *From Point to Point* is entirely focused on the developed world both in its depiction of everyday life and in its imagery and has been described.

While the initial plot of the novel is deliberately simplistic, the fact that it was written entirely in the 'language of icons' displays a surprising amount of detail for a sequence of pictographic images. In effect, Xu was able to translate commercial iconography into a common language, then back into a commercial reality showing that language and more specifically universal language immerses our lives at every turn in the field of internet communication, travel and multinational advertising campaigns. The use of iconic imagery in branding has been subverted as a means of communication, or it could be argued that brand imagery has infiltrated the global consciousness in a similar way to the evolution of natural language and its ability to adopt foreign words as part of its lexicon. The prevailing view of the Chinese language is a wide variety of spoken languages united by a common writing system. The use of a universal and standardised Chinese written text has been attempted at several points in Chinese history with varying degrees of success and often at the expense of other regional writing systems or in the case of the transition from Traditional to Simplified Chinese through various trials of language planning in the twentieth century. The use of altered or imagined language systems as a subversive cultural intervention is effective through the control and withholding of meaning. Whether Xu's work shows a degree of optimism for the theoretical progression of planned languages or a criticism of the political and social agendas that instigate them is open to interpretation. However, these works have served to contribute to broader discussions of Chinese contemporary art the cultural politics of language both in relation to Chinese political ideologies and issues surrounding globalism and global cultures. Meanwhile, the exploration of written languages or more specifically the cultural signifiers of language beyond its literal meaning creates a further discussion of the translatability of the works within the context of an international exhibition.

The morphology of the text holds many links with simplified Chinese. This includes the grouping of multiple images of combinations of different images to form new words. For example, a single image of a car can be multiplied to form the word 'traffic' in a similar fashion to Simplified Chinese where the character for 'tree' is multiplied to form the word 'forest'. As an artwork, the Book from the Ground project predicts a progression of global

communication from writing to image and the natural evolution of an increasingly multilingual global community. During the development of the project, the influence of the expanding speed of internet culture and the widespread emergence of a language of computer icons greatly influenced Xu's invented writing system. The project increased in scale and complexity, resulting in the creation of translation software developed by Xu and his team designed to convert written English, and later written Chinese, into this language of icons. Xu wrote in an article explaining the project that the increasing density of movement and migration among peoples has 'impelled the rapid formation and use of a system of international icons.'²⁰⁸

As an artist whose practice revolves primarily around the written language and acts of translation or of deliberate incomprehensibility, Xu Bing's work also reflects a broader issue of curating Chinese contemporary art for international audiences using a direct reference to translation and language learning as part of the exhibitions themselves. Both exhibitions included an element of audience engagement such as the calligraphy workbooks in the 2003 show and the ability to communicate via the icon-based writing system through an instant messenger programme in the 2016 show. In both instances, the viewer is interacting with and learning a fabricated language system leading to a direct discussion of both linguistic and semiotic translation and its cultural implications. The use of a pictographic system influenced by the Chinese script in *Book from the Ground* shows a degree of ambivalence about the principles of planned language reform as means to aid literacy and international communication if it is removed from political ideologies. However, the strong nationalistic agenda of planned languages display the difficulties of creating an apolitical language system.²⁰⁹

In addition to this, the visual language of curatorial translation can be perceived as a constructed language which ultimately serves the ideologies and agendas of the organisation. The broadening of the written language explored within Xu's artistic practice can also reflect the expanded scope of CFCCA's curatorial methodologies, representing the transition from a small artist's space to collaborating with a wide array of art organisations and events and moving beyond the limited gallery space into further venues and projects.

²⁰⁸ Xu, Bing, "Regarding Book from the Ground," *Yishu, Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, June 2007.

²⁰⁹ See Breton, Albert, "Nationalism and language policies," *Canadian Journal of Economics* 11, no. 4, (1978): 656-668.

However, the core struggle of the Centre's branded identity in the past of trying to be both a contemporary arts organisation within the wider cultural sector while also specialising in Chinese art and its multiple identities remains effectively the same in the present. The Centre's struggles with its multiple roles and conflicts of interest have been periodically discussed over the course of the Centre's history from the New Vocabulary for Chinese Art seminar in 1998 to the retrospective displays and publications during the 30th anniversary programme in 2016.

5.2 Curating through Constructed Interaction and The Curated Social Change of Micro Micro Revolution

The possibility of "translation" inside the field of visual art can be utilised as an expansive term to portray the act of imparting significance; and the presentation of art additionally uses different types of composed content, which might be an interpretation of cultural references or spoken and written language. Through a study of the 2015 CFCCA exhibition *Micro Micro Revolution*, the use of a curatorial methodology is in effect transformed into an auxiliary language as a means of translation where methods of research and critical curating combined with the auxiliary language of art criticism. The use of the theme of social change as the thesis of the exhibition is an accessible one to its intended audience. While audiences in the UK might not be informed on the contemporary social issues in Taiwan, the exhibition and the works proceed to contextualise these issues through more universal themes of ecology and grassroots community projects.

Since CFCCA's rebranding in 2013, the organisation has increased its commitment to increasing its research both in terms of collaborative research with academic institutions and in its curatorial output following the example of other UK arts institutions such as Tate, Liverpool Biennial and the Whitechapel Gallery. As part of its business plan for 2018-2022, the Centre has committed to curating a series of exhibitions around themes or research topics and promoting public and scholarly engagement with these programmes to facilitate a greater understanding of China's current situations and issues and the way Chinese contemporary art and culture interact with the rest of the world. This signifies a move away from the attempts to directly interpret Chinese contemporary art for UK audiences in exhibitions like *Representing the People*, as I have discussed in chapter four, and instead focusing on aspects of China, its politics, culture, history, people and current events, as points of discussion. The Centre proposes that 'the development of the research exhibition model examines how research might be incorporated into gallery practice and can illustrate ways through which gallery staff can begin to address recent concerns over the role of public institutions and their interaction with and relevance to contemporary audiences.'²¹⁰ Part of this commitment is reflected in the proposed criteria for the Centre's future programming, primarily focusing on "art that operates in social contexts and exists largely outside of private

²¹⁰ Dunbar, Zoe, *The role of Research at CFCCA*, CFCCA Funding agreement 2018, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2017).

spaces often creating social environments and encouraging participation,” As well as “artwork reflecting on visual culture more widely, for example, design, live art and film... Artwork by Chinese and non-Chinese artists that strongly reflects the influence of China or Chinese culture.”²¹¹ *Micro Micro Revolution* was among the research exhibitions curated during the Centre’s turn towards this methodology after its rebranding in 2013. The exhibition also included the work of one of the Centre’s associate curators whose writing and research of the current contemporary art scenes in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan provided an important resource for CFCCA’s programming and curatorial decisions during the 2010s.²¹²

Micro Micro Revolution was an exhibition of three Taiwanese contemporary artists and art collectives at the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester and organised by associate curator Lu Pei-yi. The small-scale exhibition focused on three ecological and socially focused projects from Taiwan. This included *A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek* (2015) by Wu Mali and Bamboo Curtain Studio (Fig. 5.10), *Plant-Matter Needed The Material World of the Riverbank Amis Tribe* (2015) Hsu Su-chen and Lu Chien-ming, (Fig. 5.11 - 5.12) and *500 Lemon Trees* (2015) by Huang Po-chih (Fig. 5.13 - 5.15). The initial thesis of the exhibition aimed to highlight the ambition of art practice as a platform for social change. As well as focusing on a theme that could easily be understood by UK audiences, the purpose of choosing this exhibition as a point of reference stems from Lu Pei-yi’s research of the artists’ works within a specific framework. Her research within art theory regarding social engagement and relational art uses the established theoretical framework initially as a means of interpreting the three projects in the exhibition. This is not the only example within CFCCA’s curatorial practice with elements of *Harmonious Society* using site-specific works as a means of facilitating cultural dialogues. However, Lu’s methods of analysis are more explicit placing the methods of the art’s production and continued production on the same level as the exhibition’s overall theme of social change. In addition to this, the use of social change is intrinsic to Lu’s translational curatorial methodology as the projects in the exhibition were paired with similar efforts of art and social change in the UK. In an interview Lu stated:

The main concern of socially engaged art is about people. I did not want to curate another passive ‘documentation’ show. We have three artists coming here to engage in face-to-face dialogue with UK local art organisations, socially engaged initiatives

²¹¹ Dunbar, Zoe, Programme and Talent Development, CFCCA Funding agreement 2018, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2017), 8.

²¹² The associate curators include Beatrice Leanza, Biljana Ciric and Pan Jianfeng in the PRC, Ying Kwok in Hong Kong and Lu Pei-yi in Taiwan.

and audiences through a talk at Tate Modern, a symposium at The Whitworth and public performances and demonstrations at the Whitworth's Saturday Supplement. The artists will share and exchange the similarities and differences between like-minded projects in the UK and Taiwan. I think these are very valuable experiences for both nationalities.²¹³

Through shared experiences of social change, be it environmental activism, urban regeneration or grassroots projects, the projects in *Micro Micro Revolution* and their corresponding projects at its symposium and related public events are able to share a common ground and be used as a site of discourse. Interpretation has a part to play, not just in facilitating shared comprehensibility between various 'national' languages and societies, additionally in the bigger procedures of diverse hybridisation that create new and distinctive cultural identities. The idea of interpretation can be used as an instrument that can both comprehend the more extensive element of an exhibition's social engagement and clarify particular types of social representation. One specific concern is with the routes in which contemporary artists and curators manage issues of visual and social communication within a specific cultural context.

'Interpretation' when it is defined as the creation of meaning, therefore applies to translation studies in a similar way to the field of visual art. The translator and the curator are both engaged in deriving meaning from their source texts or artworks bringing their frame of reference to the interpretation. Within the field of translation according to skopos theory, the process of the translation is determined by the 'skopos' (purpose) of the translated product. Through this process, the translated text is not completed until the reader or audience themselves has understood the interpretation, through the frame of reference of their own ideological background and knowledge. While the translated text or work must also remain both internally coherent and coherent with the integrity of its source material, the curator in the role of the translator has a responsibility to their art audience in the role of the 'reader'. Skopos theory can be paraphrased as the purpose of the translated text justifying the procedures of translation.²¹⁴ This would be applicable when the purpose of translating a text is in line with the intentions communicated by the original author. However, this method

²¹³ Author uncredited, 'Interview with CFCCA Director Zoe Dunbar and Associate Curator Lu Pei-yi.

²¹⁴ Vermeer, Hans J. "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action" in Venuti, Lawrence (ed) *Readings in translation theory*, (London: Oxon, 1989), 173-187.

becomes problematic when the translation purpose deviates or is otherwise separated from the purpose of the source text.

The question remains whether audiences may look to comprehend the work, not just in light of their absence of earlier information of Chinese culture and history, but also through a crucial distinction in perspective between Chinese contemporary and Western individuals. This is troublesome for a Western art historian or contemporary art audience to discover. This suggests that regardless of the possibility that an artist's work does not explicitly reference aspects of a culture or history, it might be worthwhile to comprehend the socio-political contexts in which a Chinese artist inhabits. Alternatively, one can consider the contexts for curators or audiences to consider other conceivable contrasts in perspective between the West and China so as to better comprehend Chinese contemporary art. Bassnett and Lefevere, argue that translation is dependant primarily on the context of the translated and target cultures. Translation is the result of a process conducted for the target culture, which in turn “cannot be explained through the mapping of linguistic correspondence between languages or judged with respect to universal standards of quality and accuracy.”²¹⁵

The ongoing process-based and participatory projects presented in *Micro Micro Revolution* used art as a medium to address a number of environmental and social issues, and as a platform for social change and resistance. However, the use of socially focused art also presented an opportunity to present a narrative of some of the issues faced in contemporary Taiwan including environmental conservation, economies, and the problems faced by the indigenous Amis communities. All three projects included an element of documentary processes within their presentation with both *A Cultural Action at Plum Tree Creek* and *Plant Matter Needed* including documentary video installations and *500 Lemon Trees* including Huang’s writing and photography documenting the project. The visual language of documentation is effective at both illustrating the progression of the works but is also accessible to audiences as a means of storytelling and quickly informs the viewer of the background and context of the project.

²¹⁵ Bassnett, Susan and Lefevere, Andre, *Constructing cultures: Essays on literary translation*, (Bristol: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1988).

CFCCA also presented a symposium to coincide with the exhibition's opening in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University which connected the artists from Taiwan who had taken part in the exhibition with a selection of interdisciplinary speakers from the UK. The topic of the symposium was a discussion on the role of contemporary art in addressing recent political and ecological issues, exploring relations between environmental art, science and ecology and engagement with the public. Lu Pei-yi and the artists involved in the exhibition presented alongside social and environmental projects from the UK as a means of creating an international dialogue.

Micro Micro Revolution endeavoured to take a resistant approach to the concept of the art object and the gallery space. All three projects were ongoing at the time of the exhibition and existed within specific localities within Taiwan, while the work presented in the gallery space were either ephemeral performances or experiences or recordings of research and events. While the existence of the art object cannot be wholly rejected in this instance, the emphasis is placed almost entirely on the projects as continually developing artistic practices that are open-ended and have more in common with social developments than traditional concepts of artistic practice. It is possible to view these projects as part of an expansion of Bourriaud's popular and perhaps over-used theory of Relational Aesthetics that were prevalent to global curatorial practice from the late 1990s.²¹⁶ However, the 'relational' aspects of these works also influenced by the subsequent wake of the digital age, and the political implications of grassroots social movements and protests in the age of social media such as the Arab Spring and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong have opened the potential for a wider debate surrounding social interaction.

Claire Bishop in her subsequent essay *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (2004) states that Bourriaud can no longer support his argument towards the birth of new relational practices because as she states the "microtopian ethos is what Bourriaud perceives to be the core political significance of relational aesthetics."²¹⁷ Which is potentially problematic, as any socially aware and engaged artist will always have to ask themselves whether the social engagement that is present can exist beyond the work. Bishop identified Bourriaud's book as a step towards identifying trends within in the artistic practices that were occurring during the 1990s. Bishop continues that "the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests since they rest too

²¹⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Les Presses du Reel 1998).

²¹⁷ Bishop, Claire 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,' *October* 110, (Fall 2004): 51-79.

comfortably within an ideal of 'subjectivity' as a whole and of the community as immanent togetherness."²¹⁸ This can imply the problematic notion of a universal society or experience that doesn't account for the pluralistic cultural identities that exist within the global community. Gere and Corris suggested that rather than a 'relational aesthetic' the works and research described an 'aesthetics of hospitality'. In acknowledging that art cannot, in any explicit or practical sense, be political without ceasing to be art.²¹⁹ However, the works included in *Micro Micro Revolution* contradict this reasoning as the works themselves are connected to social change albeit on a 'micro' level, within the immediate communities of the artists.

A Cultural Action at Plum Tree Creek an ongoing project by Wu Mali and Bamboo Curtain Studio. The Plum Tree Creek is located in the Taipei basin at the mouth of the Danshui River in Taiwan. The water in this area was heavily polluted, and in places had been built over or drained to make way for construction projects. The project, which was started in 2010, aimed to bring together local communities that live along its banks and who rely upon the river as a resource. The project aimed to reconnect the community with the river, to reclaim ownership of it and to care for it through a variety of sub-projects within the local community working with schools, universities, and community groups in Taipei including markets featuring local artists and artisans, community theatre, and plant and wildlife ecology. Meanwhile, in the gallery space, the three strategies of art, education, and social strategies that had been recorded throughout the project were exhibited through a series of films, photographic records and installations creating an immersive compilation of research and projects conducted in the area. The second work in the exhibition, *Plant Matter Needed*, takes the element of social change even further by recycling the work itself to be used as housing materials within the aboriginal communities in Taiwan. The project began in 2008 when the Sa'owac Village located in the Dahan River was threatened with demolition due to new urban development plans in the area. Artists Hsu Su-chen and Lu Chien-ming collaborated with the local community in the subsequent period of protest and reconstruction. Their project presents the story of the Sa'owac Village and raises the issues of its residents' right to live in the area, environmental concerns, and the marginalised status of the aboriginal communities within north Taiwan. The ongoing project promoted the rights of aboriginal communities while enacting 'real' change by rebuilding their settlement. The exhibition will

²¹⁸ Bishop, Claire "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, (Fall 2004): 51-79.

²¹⁹ Gere, Charlie & Corris, Michael, *Non-relational aesthetics*, (London: Artwords Press, 2008).

explore the project through photographs, videos and cultural artefacts within a reconstruction of one the Sa'owac Village dwellings.

In the accompanying symposium surrounding the exhibition, opening parallels were drawn between the *Plum Tree Creek* and *Plant Matter* projects and the community-based projects of Assemble Studios in Liverpool (Fig. 5.16). The *Granby Four Streets* comprise of four streets of Victorian terraced houses in Toxteth, Liverpool. After the Toxteth riots in 1981, Liverpool city council had acquired many of the properties in the area to be demolished for future development projects, buying out and relocating hundreds of residents. However, after cuts in funding and the cancellation and postponement of redevelopments in the area, the houses subsequently remained empty and in a state of disrepair. The remaining residents consistently contested plans for demolition and fought to save the houses leading to a decade-long community and arts movement. The project began with residents painting the empty houses and planting flowers in abandoned gardens to organising a thriving monthly market to present a sustainable series of grass-roots projects for the areas development. This built on the work already done by the local community and “translates it to the refurbishment of housing, public space and the provision of new work and enterprise opportunities.”²²⁰ As opposed to the utopian visions of the relational work proposed by Bourriaud these works continue to enact small-scale social change once the exhibition has ended. The parallels drawn between these grassroots projects enable a broader contextual discussion of the issues faced in the Taiwanese works and the more familiar urban regeneration projects occurring in the UK inviting the audience to create a point of reference in which to interpret the work.

500 Lemon Trees also adhered to the exhibition's theme of a social enterprise called for five hundred participants to invest five hundred Taiwanese Dollars to purchase a label with the promise of obtaining a bottle of Limoncello at the end of the project. The sales of the labels acted as a crowdfunding system that facilitated the planting of five hundred lemon tree in fallow farmland in north Taiwan that has been neglected for twenty years. Two years later the investors who took part in the project received a bottle of Limoncello onto which the label could be attached to. The project focuses on both socially engaged business practices and the production of art as methods for social change, re-establishing the relationship between farmers, the environment and contemporary business practices. Sharing some aesthetic

²²⁰ See Assemble Studios, Granby Four Street, Live Projects <http://assemblestudio.co.uk> [accessed: 04.08.2015]

sensibilities with Rikrit Tiravanija's *Pad Thai* (Fig. 5.17) series throughout the 1990s, on the surface, Huang's work which involved a performance of his written work while serving cocktails made from the Limoncello produced during the project seems to embody Bourriaud's image of 'relational aesthetics'. However, beyond Tiravanija's rejection of the art object, *500 Lemon Trees* demonstrates a narrative of globalised economies that includes a discussion of both the phenomena of social media and crowdfunding in the contemporary enterprise, the precariousness of local farming and industry, and the ethics of outsourced labour and the exploitation of illegal migrant workers.

Huang's enterprise-based practice both in *500 Lemon Trees* and *Production Line* can draw thematic parallels with the British interactive theatre project *World Factory* (Fig. 5.18). The project was created by Zoë Svendsen and Simon Daw in collaboration with Shanghai-based theatre director, Zhao Chuan. *World Factory* took the form of a real-time board game where the audience navigates the ethical dilemmas of running a Chinese textile factory, connecting the global industrial textile production in Manchester during the 19th century and its impact on socialist theory with the rapid economic growth that is occurring in contemporary China due to its own industrial expansion and its shifting position as a leading global economic power.

Huang's earlier work *Production Line – Made in China & Made in Taiwan* (2014) (Fig. 5.19), a project which involved creating a clothing factory production line was featured in the 2014 Taipei Biennial curated by Nicolas Bourriaud.²²¹ The continuation of this curatorial theme aimed to expand *Relational Aesthetics* to include human relationships with machines and the natural world and rethinks it within the framework of a new technological and mental landscape. It can be argued that the 'micro' social changes in *Micro Micro Revolution* also retain the constructed interactions of Relational Aesthetics. However, the projects within the exhibition also raise discussions of the sustainability of these social changes being able to continue and the comparisons that can be drawn between micro-localities and global trends.

While the role of the curator as translator or facilitator for intercultural dialogues is most obviously conveyed through supplementary materials accompanying the exhibition the narrative, visual language and methodologies undertaken in the exhibition itself are integral

²²¹ Taipei Biennial (2014), <http://www.taipeibiennial2014.org/index.php/en/> [accessed: 04/08/2015]

to the audience's understanding of the works. The final presentation of the works aims to be both coherent with the original context of the work and coherent within the context of the international exhibition. While the context of the source material is crucial, the cultural dialogue is directed towards the viewer. These elements can determine if the initial purpose of the artwork is still valid or if it must be adapted or even changed for the benefit of an international audience. The curator's role as interpreter becomes a balance between succeeding the 'purpose' of the exhibition while maintaining the integrity of the artist's work. In the case of *Micro Micro Revolution*, the use of the project's documentation, the element of performance and relational audience engagement and the drawing of parallels between the methods of social change between the Taiwanese and UK art projects allow a compelling narrative to be pieced together by the audience. Meanwhile, the collaboration between Lu Pei-yi, CFCCA's curatorial staff and the artists served to negotiate the purpose of the exhibition without undermining the source materials behind the projects. However, while the use of installation and film installation presented a coherent narrative within the exhibition, the addition of supporting presentations and engagement with the audience both at the exhibition's private view and symposium added to the show's thesis statement of social change through socially engaged art. It gives a space in which an arrangement of narratives and discourses may be played out. This may imply that we need to reconsider the manners by which arts organisations consider, bolster and advance public engagement. Alternatively, the influence of the discussion might be a progression of art institutions which can transform around artists' work, giving spaces for dynamic engagement, collaboration and thought.²²²

²²² Doherty, Claire, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism" *Engage Review Art of Encounter* 15, (2004): 6-13.

5.3 Breathe and Whisper, Translation through Conversation and Art Practice

In February 2003, the Chinese Arts Centre opened at a new venue in Manchester's Northern Quarter following an award of 2.2 million pounds from the Arts Council of England to create a purpose-built exhibition and residency space. In this new phase of the Centre's organisation, the Chinese Arts Centre began inviting artists from Greater China and artists of Chinese descent to submit proposals for opportunities for four artist residency projects that were organised throughout 2003. As part of the Chinese Arts Centre's agenda to develop the practice of artists of Chinese descent, *Breathe* was launched as the organisation's residency programme for new and emerging artists. The examples chosen in this section reflect an explicit influence of Manchester's location and culture on the works produced on the residency. However, the accumulation of nearly fifteen years of artist residencies has produced a range of research topics and methods of artistic practices. I will be including the residency work of He An (2003-2004), Kong Kee (2008), Kao Jun-honn (2014), and Ting-Ting Cheng (2019).

The invitation for proposals was open to projects from artists, researchers and interdisciplinary practitioners who would be able to create and showcase their work in the culmination of a solo exhibition, performance or event at the end of the residency. Alternatively, they could hold an open studio at the conclusion of the residency which generally lasted between one and three months and would be supported by joint funding from Arts Council England and the Baring Foundation. The aim of the residencies was to give the artist time to re-assess and develop their creative practice and to have the time and space to undertake a new work. In the case of artists from China, the residency also provided an opportunity to have their work exhibited internationally, making the residency a close combination of work and living. The residency studio measures thirty square metres with wooden floors and walls covered with plasterboard, three quarters of the residency space is available for hanging works in addition to the floor space. The studio also contains a lighting system and access to the gallery's audio/visual equipment. The space was designed to be flexible to suit the artist's practice.

Adjoining the studio space, the facilities also included a workshop, which allowed artists to make work on site and artist accommodation within the space comprising of a bedroom on a mezzanine level, a small kitchen, bathrooms and storage space (Fig. 5.20). The studio is at the front of the building next to the reception area and shop and is set up so that visitors will

encounter the space before visiting the main gallery. This implies that since the artist's living and working space are on the same site that the artist's practice itself is on display should they choose to open the space to the rest of the gallery. This spectacle of the artist at work and the creative process is portrayed through the architecture itself as equally important to any finished work produced.

Part of the criteria for selecting artists was for proposals that were challenging and innovative as well as the perceived impact the residency would have on the artist's career.²²³ This statement was setting the Centre's agenda both to be recognised as a contemporary arts organisation and to act as a launching platform for young and early career artists. This method of selecting works and proposals runs the risk of being problematized as 'catering to western tastes' in a similar manner to the commercial agendas discussed in chapter one. The ideologies of the arts organisation as discussed in chapter three regarding Tate Liverpool and *The Real Thing*, it is also a necessary step in the process of curatorial translation. Instead of following international and commercial trends of purchasing or commissioning artworks by established Chinese artists the selection of artists submitting residency proposals attempted to find a balance between the artist's practice and the possibility of making a point of connection with not only audiences in the UK but local audiences in Manchester.

The Breathe residency programme had primarily been open to UK based artists, with its first call for proposals explicitly calling for three artists from the UK and one international artist.²²⁴ The programme then continued to end its restrictions regarding the artist's country of origin and instead introduced separate residencies under the 'Whisper' residency title which provided opportunities for UK based artists whose proposals were concerned with Chinese culture. The artist's presence as a fixture of the venue also integrated them as part of the working fabric of Chinese Arts Centre with the opportunity for close relationships with the curatorial staff. They also had the option to participate in the gallery's programme and events and to allow their practice to be open to the public offering the public as well as other artists and people working within the cultural sector the chance to view the artist at work while holding open studio sessions or artist talks.

²²³ Breathe Residency Application criteria, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives).

²²⁴ Chinese Arts Centre Breathe Residency Call for proposals, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives, 2003).

In addition to this, the Breathe residency offered the opportunity for international artists to gain both the experience of exhibiting their work in a foreign country and a chance to engage with local artists and arts organisations in Manchester. This has led to several instances of the artist's engagement with the site or area is reflected in their practice or, alternatively, opening up a more significant discourse between the artist and the public regarding cultural identity. This focus on public engagement with artistic practice as well as with the exhibiting the artist's work was actively encouraged by the Centre as Sarah Champion the director at the time of the residency's launch stated "What we want is for people to come along and effectively adopt them... come in and talk to them, perhaps once a week."²²⁵ Therefore it was established early on that the perceived success of a residency depended not only on the artist's potential interactions with the site or the local culture but also with their ability to communicate with audiences both regarding the finished work and the working process. This was noted explicitly in the Centre's calls for proposals in 2015 stating that "Residencies have been more successful when artists create an active working environment within the live/work studio."²²⁶

By 2019, the Centre had begun funding and facilitating international residency exchanges with international partnered arts organisations for artists based in the UK. Here, the selection criteria become even more prescriptive, directing the artist to engage with the cultural context of the placement and the overarching themes of the Centre's exhibition programme:

Proposals should consider how you wish to work with and respond to the artistic and cultural context of your residency placement, alongside the hosting of a workshop and open studio in Taipei, and the nature of how this unique opportunity will benefit your research and practice. Proposals can also take in to account the CFCCA 2018 programme theme Future Cities which considers the concept of a future city and the implications of this.²²⁷

The addition of a proposal brief provides the advantage of a more open curatorial dialogue with the artist and a transparency for the types of work that are likely to be selected. As the Centre is investing both money and its resources into the residency and the development of the artist's practice, it is understandable for the Centre to place a priority on projects that are relevant to its creative directions and planned programming. However, the addition of a brief,

²²⁵ Interview with Sarah Champion, [bbc.co.uk, 27/11/2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/arts/2003/11/28/chinese_arts_centre.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/arts/2003/11/28/chinese_arts_centre.shtml) [accessed 24/03/2018]

²²⁶ CFCCA, "Criteria for Selection" *Breathe Residency Application Pack*, 2015-2016, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2015).

²²⁷ CFCCA, "Proposal Brief", *Taipei Artist Village Residency Open Call*, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2019), 2.

albeit a suggested one, narrows the 'openness' of an open call, placing the emphasis on the Centre's agenda rather than its previous emphasis on fostering and promoting early career artists as it had done with the Personal Artist Development scheme that was undertaken in 2006 to provide professional development to art graduates and early career artists based in the UK.

Although the Breathe Residency's first participating artist He An had never travelled outside China before this residency, his work had been largely influenced by his generation's exposure to, and fascination with, western culture, particularly youth culture that began to become more readily available in China during the 1980s. He An's work during this period was firmly interested in using the British style media. This included city's youth cultures particularly the Manchester music scenes of the 1980s and 1990s as well as the city's art communities to explore street culture, mass consumerism and the development of underground cultures first hand from the perspective of an 'outsider'.²²⁸ (Fig. 5.21) During the three months he spent in Manchester in 2003, He An's practice reflected the impact of western mainstream popular culture upon the emergent youth culture in China in the 1980s and 1990s. The work also related to the spread of western media through digital technology and internet and DVD piracy. In particular, the use of neon lighting had become a running motif of He An's artistic practice. By the 1980s, the period He An grew up in after China adopted its Open-Door Policy in 1978, a wave of imported Western culture resulted in rapid urban expansion, economic and industrial growth, and changing social and political circumstances. However, the higher manufacturing costs in the UK forced a different way of working during the residency, moving away from a material approach to a working process that involved careful planning and adding a more considerable input into the designing of the work and the use of new media. Through crossing the threshold of responding to western media in its original context through the physical relocation to Manchester, He An placed himself as both artist and outsider.

An alternative engagement with a sense of place was an exploration of social histories including where Hong-Kong artist Kongkee (Kong Khong-chang) chose to create an animated work which would later be shown at the 2008 Tatton Park Biennial. During his residency, Kongkee investigated the movement of plants and the movement of non-native species in contrast to the migration of people from China to the UK. The artist created

²²⁸ He An open studio and exhibition press release, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives, 2003).

drawings and animations based on the recollections of the older members of Manchester's Chinese community. The work *Migration* (Fig. 5.22) produced during the residency combined the various stories of the journeys of the Chinese immigrants merged with a wider exploration of the migration of plants through natural and artificial means such as the species of flowers, trees and shrubs that were indigenous to China that were regularly used in English gardens.²²⁹

Kao Jun-honn's research-based artistic practice has resulted in a documentary-style video piece developed from a residency in cooperation with the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, and the "Burning Issue" residency at the Taipei Contemporary Art Centre. Kao's work combined the use of detailed drawings with performance art and film. (Fig. 5.23). The work is partially inspired by the location of Manchester's Museum of Science and Industry which was built on the site of the terminus for the world's first passenger railway. In this work, the development of railway systems during the process of industrialisation is represented as being symbolic of the beginning of globalism in the modern world. Kao Jun-honn's work also researches the history of Taiwan's railways and its process of modernity. The research produced during this residency eventually became a basis for Kao's film installation *Malan* (Fig. 5.24) which was included in CFCCA's *Harmonious Society* exhibition in 2014.²³⁰ The title, *Malan*, refers to a folk song of the Amis, one of Taiwan's indigenous mountain cultures, in which an Amis girl threatens to commit suicide by lying across train tracks when her parents forbid her to marry a boy from the city. The reference to the song and the railway produces a link between the indigenous people and the city, as the song uses the symbol of the railway as a means of connecting the lovers as well as being the site of the girl's conflict, highlighting class and racial conflicts. The song "Malan Girl" was one of the first aboriginal songs to cross over into Taiwanese popular music in the 1960s, remaining before that point almost completely unknown outside of the Amis communities.

For *Malan Girl*, Kao Jun-honn also brought in narratives about an incident in 1986 in which a young man named Tang Ying-shen from the Tsou tribe was sentenced to death at the age of eighteen for the murder of his employers after suffering exploitation in his workplace. The film juxtaposes these two stories through its soundtrack, which uses excerpts of the son speaking and a voice-over reading Tang Ying-shen's farewell letter written in prison, both subtitled in Chinese and English. The film itself is a collection of scenes of a railway filmed in

²²⁹ The animation can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOoS809HWyc>

²³⁰ See Chapter 4.3.

part on the remains of the 1830 Manchester railway lines. Both works also draw upon the motif of industrialisation and transport systems that is emphasized by the location of the works in the museum. *Realm of Reverberations* and *Malan Girl* both address the struggles of marginalized groups in contemporary Taiwan through documentary and archival film in an effort to preserve subjugated histories through personal recollection.

Both Kong Kee and Kao Jun-honn used the residency as part of an ongoing process that extended into their art practice after the residency had been completed. The residency in the case of CFCCA does not necessarily aim to produce a completed exhibition. Instead, it focused on making the studio open to visitors culminating in an exhibition, performance or artist talk at the end of the residency with the option of holding open studio sessions. Artists are also encouraged to work with an 'open door' policy if they wish arranged in collaboration with the Centre's Programme and Engagement Coordinator. The initial call for artist proposals also recommended that at least two public events such as workshops or artist talks were expected to be delivered by the artist as part of their residency. In the agenda of CFCCA, the primary aim of the Breathe residency is in the development of creative practice, placing a degree of success on projects that are able to outlast the space and continue as a series of conversations.

In *Encountering Pedagogy through Art* Irwin and O'Donoghue argue that artist residency projects are successful when members see their endeavours, even entrenched ones, as "works-in-progress." Continuing input, appraisal of research development, and assessment from the point of view of artists, educators, students, and others are profitable in controlling change not just for the adequacy of anyone residency, yet for a whole programme. This emphasis on 'teaching' whether it is through social engagement or educational programmes incorporated into the residency reveals another aspect the artist's 'translation through practice.'²³¹ Wherein the artist engages with the site or location or social cultures and translates their initial experience through the project. The work or working process is then directed back towards the audiences who in this instance have become part of the site and conversations between the artist and audience become part of the working process.

The element of translation as an ongoing process was discussed by Susan Bassnett as a site that facilitates relationships between peoples "in which discursive transformations occur

²³¹ Irwin, Rita & O'Donoghue, Donal, 'Encountering pedagogy through relational art practices,' *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 31, no. 3, (2012): 221-236.

as different groups endeavour to represent themselves to one another” which enables a theoretical space where difference and culture, as well as their creative potential, can be explored.²³² Here the dialogue not only between the artist and their audience but between the artist and the location they are visiting provides an evolving series of translations, edits and evolutions of the artist’s work. The artist is not only endeavouring to translate their experiences into their art practice but to do so in a way that will connect with their audience and undergo a process of self-translation. Bassnett also argues that in the case of cross-cultural writers and creators the term 'self-translation' is problematic primarily because it allows the reader to consider the problem of whether there is an original ‘text’ or if the work has been created in a site of translation. The initial definition of translation assumed the existence of an original text, so when discussing the topic of self-translation, the assumption is that there that the translation in question was derived from “another previously composed text from which the second text can claim its origin.”²³³ However in the context of visual art the ongoing process of the artist’s practice during the residency the ‘original text’ is arguably the role of the proposal the subsequent work produced during the residency is a series of self- translations, conversations and re-translations of that initial idea. However, where the audience or other participant is involved in the project, the process of translation becomes collaborative in nature. Therefore, it is in these spaces of dialogue where opportunities exist for reconfiguring the subjects, situations, and sites for creative practice.²³⁴

The dialogue between artist and audience also relates to Heather Connelly’s discussion of art practice used to examine the transformations that occur in linguistic translation. Her thesis discusses the processes of translation that exist within performance art that reveals the space that exists “between the signifier and the signified” but also the autonomy that is assumed in an individual’s natural language as “a position that is called into question when someone speaks for us, or we speak for another.”²³⁵ While the resident artists are able to speak for themselves through their practice and audience engagement, they, in turn, hold the responsibility of adapting to another language both linguistically and creatively. The artists are chosen for residencies through a selection panel and while past calls for proposals have been open to all subjects and mediums

²³² Bassnett, Susan, *Translation studies*, (London, Routledge,2013), 57.

²³³ Bassnett, Susan 'The self-translator as rewriter,' in *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, Anthony Cordingley ed. (London, Bloomsbury,2013),13-25.

²³⁴ Sullivan, Graeme ed., *Art practice as research: Inquiry in visual arts*, (London, Sage, 2010).

²³⁵ Connelly, Heather, “Speaking through the voice of another: how can art practice be used to provoke new ways of thinking about the transformations and transitions that happen in linguistic translation?” (PhD Thesis, Loughborough University, 2015), 151.

In recent years, CFCCA have expanded the scope of their residency programming including facilitating residency exchanges between international arts organisations such as Artist Village, Taipei and Videotage, Hong Kong. The exchange strategy has not only invited artists from these organisations to participate in residencies at CFCCA but has also provided opportunities for UK based artists to work with these partner organisations. This reflected an initiative by Arts Council England in 2017 to invest in projects that placed a focus on cultural exchange and promoting artists from the UK internationally.²³⁶

In 2019, the Centre began to place calls for specific residencies with a brief or a guideline such as the Archive and Library Residency which used the Centre's archive collection as a starting point for the artist's work. This style of residency has the advantage of ensuring that the work produced interacts directly with the site and its history. The Archive and Library Residency was also open to a broader variety of practitioners to include writers, researchers and curators. People working within these spheres were not previously excluded from applying for the Centre's residencies, but the fact that the wording has changed to explicitly include them as opposed to the umbrella term of 'artist' shows a shift in the Centre's aims for the residency. In 2019 Ting-Ting Cheng presented a collaborative performance project with four Manchester based performers titled '*A turning away from debates that have not been concluded*' (Fig. 5.25) which was inspired by a seminar organised by the Centre in 1998, titled '*A New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts?*', which as discussed in chapter four intended to redefine the terminology for Chinese contemporary art and questioned the need for labels. The title of the performance is a reference to Felicia Chan and Andy Willis's comments on the same seminar where following a debate at the end of the seminar, attendees were unsurprisingly unable to come to an agreement or conclusion at the end of the discussion.²³⁷ With the only documentation of the seminar being a textual report of notes taken during the event held in the CFCCA Archive collection, Cheng used the information available within the archive to interview the seminar's attendees and speakers 21 years later, revisiting the same questions in the context of the present day. The script for the performance was written using the archive report, interviews, conversations with the performers and other writings on cultural theory.

²³⁶ Arts Council England, *The World Stage: International Opportunities for UK Arts and Culture*, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/FINAL%20-%20International%20Report%2012%20July_0.pdf, 2017. [Accessed 17.06.2019]

²³⁷ Chan, Felicia, and Willis, Andrew, "Manchester's Chinese Arts Centre: A Case Study in Strategic Cultural Intervention." In Ashley Thorpe & Diana Yeh (eds.) *Contesting British Chinese Culture*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 101-116.

The performance itself took the form of the four performers of different races and cultural backgrounds reading from a script.²³⁸ The decision to perform the work as a reading rather than a more traditional acting performance creates a dissonance between the contents of the script and the performance with the performers stumbling over words and at times giving a flat or robotic presentation of the work. The overt scripting of the work effectively transforms the debate into a dialectic with each performer representing the different opinions raised in the 1998 seminar. The initial script is presented as an approximation of the 1998 debate is repeated and deconstructed several times in a reflection on the debate in a current context. The repetition and deconstruction of the same points give the performance a cyclic element, reinforcing the lack of conclusion to the debate and that the conversations around the subject are ongoing over twenty years later.

Throughout CFCCA's artist residencies a number of thematic trends can be interpreted including the expansion of art practices to focus on new media and installation works, performance art, and later curating and research-based projects to produce works created in response to the Centre, to Manchester, or to the UK. The shift from a focus on the professional development of the artist and towards a more curatorial methodology in the Centre's selection of residency artists is another illustration of CFCCA's rebranding as a contemporary arts organization and move away from the promotion of individual artists and towards a research-based curatorial programme. The more internationally focused direction of residencies for UK based artists has also promoted a more discursive approach to translation in current and future projects as the artist is no longer bound to the CFCCA site as they might have been in the past. The element of cultural exchange in the Centre's more recent collaborations with Taipei Artist Village and Videotage, Hong Kong has lessened the onus upon the artist as a subject within the residency space and instead creates a conversation through the work of multiple artists and arts organisations.

²³⁸ The performers included Edenamiuki Aiguobasinmwin, Praewa Bulthaweenan, Hanaa Cara, and Naomi Sumner Chan

5.4 Performing Identities, Code-Switching, and Language Contact through Live Art

Performance art, and live art, are both terms that are used in various discourses and in various contexts that refer to works that utilise the engagement of the human body or of several bodies temporally. The performance can occur either when an audience is present during the performance as 'live art' or for audiences who engage with the work after the performance has been documented through modes such as photography or video installation. Performance art has played an important part in Chinese contemporary art from its inception.²³⁹ An example of this can be seen through Xiao Lu's incorporation of performance in Dialogue during *China Avant/Garde* in 1989. These methods of artistic practice through the communication of performances have an important role to play and remain an intrinsic part of Chinese contemporary art.²⁴⁰ In the context of an international performance art festival, the reliance on communication with the body is apparent through either linguistics or social coding. In choosing the artists covered in the following segment I have focused on works that contained direct references to both linguistic contact and social code-switching from artists of Chinese descent performed during the Chinese Arts Centre's live art festivals. The term "code-switching" or "language crossing" in linguistics refers to the use of a language which isn't thought to 'belong' to the speaker. The use of switching between languages or "code-switching" involves a shift across distinct social, cultural or linguistic borders and can sometimes raise problems with the authenticity or identity that the self-translator needs to address in the process of the translated encounter.²⁴¹ In the context of the Vital festivals, instances of code-switching exist not just linguistically but in the context of the dynamics of the artist as a performer and subject of their own work. The shift between these roles is highlighted further when one considers the imperialist undertones of artists of Chinese descent performing for a primarily white-British audience.²⁴² The confrontation between the artist and the artist as a subject is a recurring theme among the works selected for the festival such as works by He Chengyao and Brendan Fan.

²³⁹ See Berghuis, Thomas, *Performance art in China*, (Beijing, Timezone 8 Limited, 2006).

²⁴⁰ Jones, Amelia & Heathfield, Adrien, *Perform, repeat, record: Live art in history*, (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 12.

²⁴¹ Auer, Peter, ed., *Code-switching in conversation: Language, interaction and identity*, (London, Routledge, 2013), 291.

²⁴² While CFCCA has committed to reaching more diverse audiences with its programming an audience data report conducted by the centre in 2017 showed that 84% of visitors were British Nationals and 75% of all visitors were white.

In 2006, the Chinese Arts Centre organised an international festival of Live Art in Manchester to promote performance-based works being produced by artists from China and artists of Chinese descent. Vital 06 followed a collaboration with the Live Art Development agency in 2005 culminating in the touring live arts programme *China Live: Presentations of Contemporary Performances, Actions and Films*. In a similar format to the *China Live* festival which had taken place in London the previous year, Vital 06 contained Live Art performances, screenings of recorded performances and artists' talks and presentations.²⁴³ Vital 07 then continued with a programme of Live Art events by Chinese Arts Centre and consisted of funding the following year of artist residencies in collaboration with institutions from the UK with a focus on performance art.²⁴⁴ The events that were undertaken at Vital 07 also included an international conference in addition to its planned programme of performances.²⁴⁵

As Sarah Champion, the Centre's Director at the time explained: "The artists selected all represent the very best in the world, but their work also tries to directly connect to the audience for an extremely memorable experience."²⁴⁶ The statement reflects the overall methodology for the festival with the focus being on artists who would actively take the opportunity to engage, subvert or otherwise communicate with the audience as part of the performance with its main focus on 'live performances' as opposed to exhibiting recorded performance pieces. As part of the festival's global outlook, not all of the works in Vital necessarily referred to Chinese issues or Chinese identity. However, one of the elements that the performances did have in common was a pared-down and minimal aesthetic where the performances were primarily framed as events occurring between the artist and the audience. In the absence of a stage or technology, most of the works occurred either in or around the gallery space or occasionally off-site as street performances throughout Manchester. This focus on the performance in its most basic sense namely the use of the human body in real time and the formation of a relationship between the artist and the

²⁴³ *Selected artists included Patty Chang (USA), He Yun Chang (China), Dai Guangyu (China), Marcus Young (USA), He Chengyao (China), Mad for Real (UK), Edwin Lung (UK/Hong Kong), Lee Wen (Singapore), Lisa Cheung (UK), Yadong Hao (China/UK), Yuen Kin-leung (Hong Kong), Yuen Kin-leung (Hong Kong), Leung Po-shan, Anthony (Hong Kong) and Ying Mei Duan (Germany/China).*

²⁴⁴ Selected Artists included Yingmei Duan (China/Germany), Wen Lee (Singapore), Yadong Hao (China/UK), Marcus Young (USA), Leung Po-shan (Hong Kong), Rosa Mei (USA), Becky Ip (Canada), He Chengyao (China), Jason Lim (UK), Brendan Fan (UK), Hao Lang (China), Genevieve Chang (UK), Lushan Liu (Japan), Zhou Bin (China),

²⁴⁵ Vital '06 programme, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives, 2006).

²⁴⁶ Sarah Champion quoted in the Manchester Evening News 29.08.2007 <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/showbiz-news/oriental-art-comes-with-worldwide-influences-1047018> [accessed 10.03.2017]

audience, the artists in Vital worked with only minimal props and often involved the audience directly to communicate the performance element in live art as an active collaboration rather than a passive between the audience and artist.

After running for two years, the 2007 programme concluded the festival in the UK.²⁴⁷ Champion goes on to claim that had they continued to programme the Vital festivals “it would have let these programmes off the hook” justifying why they did not need to show the work themselves as the artists in question were being represented by the Chinese Art Centre.²⁴⁸ In addition to this, the beginning of the inaugural opening of Asia Triennial Manchester was also due to begin the following year providing an alternative arts festival programme within a more ambitious format in collaboration with multiple arts organisations in Manchester.

Concentrating on the basic observable boundaries of language in performance, the performances of Becky Ip and Zhou Bin cut through nuanced issues of language, translation and culture in the linguistic barriers of English and Chinese. In a six-hour-long performance, Becky Ip repeatedly traced stencils of the words “The date does not fall the country” in chalk on the pavement outside the Chinese Arts Centre. (Fig. 5.26) The phrase, which was also the title of the performance was translated using an online translation programme, translating the 1937 English quote “The sun never sets on the British empire” into Chinese then running the result through the programme again to translate the translation back into English. The resulting illegibility of the resulting translation The Date Does Not Fall the Country highlighted the inadequacies that are inherent in directly translating a language word for word and illustrated the weaknesses of language itself and the incomplete nature of automated translation programs in accurately conveying human experiences, as well as highlighting the agendas involved in the use of language and in the shortcomings of translation. The work is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on translation that “a dissolution of this foreignness that would not be temporal and preliminary, but rather instantaneous and final, remains out of human reach, or is at least not to be sought directly.”

²⁴⁷ While the festival concluded in the UK in 2007, *Vital 08 or the 2nd Vital Chongqing International Live Art Festival* continued the following year at 501 Contemporary Art Centre in Chongqing including former participating artists Lee Wen, and Dai Guangyu.

²⁴⁸ Champion, Sarah, *Vital: International Live Artists of Chinese Descent*, (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 2007), 9.

²⁴⁹ Ip's use of translation software takes this further where the attempt at instantaneous translation or automated translation through technology is ultimately futile.

In the development of the work, Ip openly critiqued the 'race-specific' curatorial initiative of both the festival and the Centre. She touched upon the broader criticisms of the Centre's struggle to maintain its identity as both a contemporary arts organisation and a space for Chinese artists revealing conflicting feelings of opportunity and ambivalence towards the organisation.²⁵⁰ The use of a quote about the British Empire highlights the problematic nature of the Centre's position within the greater British art community and raises the troubling awareness that the artist's participation in the art world as an artist of Chinese descent is systematised by the centrality of western culture. The unintelligibility of the results of translating and re-translating the phrase serves to both decentre and reclaim the artist's identity. In the footage of the original performance, Ip is slow and meticulous as she stencils the text onto the pavement with chalk, working on her hands and knees in the rain while the audience look on under umbrellas and raincoats. The use of a stencil designed to resemble a handwriting chart and the repetitiveness of the act is to also draw a parallel to the indoctrination and rote learning methods used historically in schools or being punished to write lines in school detentions. Ip's position on the ground suggests subjugation, particularly as the audience is standing. In her proposal for the work Ip had originally intended to continue stencilling the word on the pavement throughout Manchester:

The Date does not Fall the Country is a durational performance proposed to take place outdoors, in the surrounding areas of the Chinese Arts Centre and possibly further out amidst the city of Manchester. Using a stencil of text written in the form of a schoolchild's cursive handwriting chart, I will make my way through these surrounds, among buildings, parks and public monuments, filling in the stencil with chalk powder along the ground. The text will read: The Date does not Fall the Country.²⁵¹

These plans were later scaled-back and the performance was limited to the immediate area surrounding the Centre on Thomas Street. This was perhaps to the detriment of the work as not only would the performance have reached a wider audience from passers-by in the city and possibly eliciting a more spontaneous response, the symbolism of stencilling the text around public monuments and buildings would have made a direct visual connection with the commentary on Imperialism and the British Empire within the work.

²⁴⁹ Benjamin, Walter, 'The translator's task,' trans. Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, Lawrence Venuti ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 157.

²⁵⁰ Ip, Becky, *Notes from a 竹升*, project notes, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives, 2007).

²⁵¹ Ip, Becky, Vital Proposal, e-mail to Sarah Marsh, (Manchester, CFCCA Library and archives, 2007).

Zhou Bin approached the politics of language and the power of dominant language systems by writing “I am a terrorist” on his shirt and repeating the words “I am not a terrorist” including stutters and stammers into his speech patterns until he appeared to vomit and while attempting to repeat the sentence. (Fig. 5.27) The piece is both emotive in the sense of its subject matter and in the visceral reaction that it provoked from the audience resulting in concern for the artist’s wellbeing. Here the linguistic codes of language are discarded in favour of provoking physical and emotional reactions.

The use of repetition and impeded language in both performances also raises concerns of translation and language barriers where the repetition throughout the performance begins to empty out the semantic dimension of language and enact the contradictory effects supported by the too-rapid configurations of their social spaces. This emphasis on performance might also be prompted by a reconsideration of the use of language in relation to location and site. Where the location of the signifier may be read as being performed by the reader, then the functioning of language and social ritual provides an initial model for the performance of place.²⁵² The broadest definition of a ritual is a series of actions undertaken for their symbolic value and are often rooted in the traditions of a specific community or culture. Carol Duncan’s essay *The Museum as Ritual* highlights several ways in which the museum experience can be viewed as ritualistic as they hold a secular parallel to places of worship. The ritualistic aspects of the museum experience can be attributed to the ideology of the architecture and exhibition spaces as well as the social rituals that are demanded of its audience.²⁵³ The act of fulfilling the role of viewer or audience in a gallery space is a form of situational code-switching wherein one’s personal behaviour changes upon entering the environment.²⁵⁴

The ritual element of performance art, or the disruption thereof, was a primary concern in the work of Brendan Fan and Marcus Young. Like Zhou Bin, the two artists both employed an element of spontaneity to their works during Vital 07 without having a designated performance time but instead engaging (or not engaging) visitors throughout the festival. Both artists were marked in the festival programme as “intervening” in the performances and

²⁵² Kaye, Nick, *Site-specific art: performance, place and documentation*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-4.

²⁵³ Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. (London: Routledge 2005).

²⁵⁴ See: Gumperz, John, *Discourse Strategies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

other events and used the audience itself as a site for works that were able to subvert the desire to capture and document the live performances. Fan removed the distraction producing an observable work in order to explore the social coding of the audience and the relationship between the audience and the work. His interventions were immaterial to the extent that the performance could easily have remained un-witnessed or even potentially un-performed. By documenting his 'performances' or lack of performance in the gallery through signs on the walls and in performances spaces reading "Artist Secretly Watched the Visitors to His Exhibition, 2007" and handing out postcards reading "During your visit to Vital 07 an artist may secretly involve you in a performance without your knowledge," (Fig. 5.28) the true location of Fan's work is present outside the action of the performance or encounter and instead takes place in the imagination of the audience or somewhere that disrupts the social ritual of the audience. In an artist statement Fan describes the work being created out of an anxiety towards performance:

Putting together my artist proposal for Vital 07, I knew I wanted to build on existing themes within my practice concerning performance, its documentation, and how performances are experienced and reviewed by audiences. I was also conscious of the curatorial themes for Vital, and acutely aware of my reluctance (fear?) of actually performing or appearing before an audience. In past works, this reluctance has been circumvented by carrying out performances and interventions in private, with the acts re-presented through written and visual documentation (and on occasions not carrying out the performance at all, instead of producing fabricated documentation.) So, my project for Vital was another way of presenting a project to a live art audience without the actual performance (The project was later redone at a live art festival in France, which I didn't attend.)²⁵⁵

This sense of anxiety is carried through into the artwork where the audience's expectations are subverted by the prospect of being watched or included in a performance which may or may not happen. In his proposal for the performance,, Fan had initially intended for the postcards to be posted to visitors beforehand or handed out when they picked up their festival tickets.²⁵⁶ Through the suspense of an advanced warning about an activity that would not be enacted, the work replicates the anxiety of the performer onto the audience. One could argue that through thinking about the postcards and anticipating that something might happen to them, the audience has unintentionally taken on the role of the performer

²⁵⁵ Champion, Sarah, 'Brendan Fan: artist statement' in *VITAL: International Live Artists of Chinese Descent*, (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 2007), 66.

²⁵⁶ Fan, Brendon, *Artist Statement and Proposal for Vital 2007*, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archives, 2007).

and through a self-fulfilling prophecy of being “secretly involved” in the performance without their knowledge.

Fan continued to expand upon this theme in the 2011 exhibition *Liberation* where he utilised the social media platforms of Facebook and Flickr in order to create a series of acts that were carried out during the exhibition period.²⁵⁷ The audience was called upon to respond to them via the internet to test the limitations of online communication and provide a chance to question the way people receive and process information. On the opening day of the *Liberation* exhibition, Brendan Fan hosted a party in London simultaneously where he arranged a number of people to introduce themselves as ‘Brendan Fan’ to strangers and befriend them. Soyini and Hamera have claimed that performance can be employed as a theory, method, and event in research to ethically enter the domains the ‘other’.

Performance and ethnography in this instance are combined to explore the role of the performance within the art institution or cultural space: “in illuminating relations and theories of space, place, and Other; in the embodied, dialogical dynamics of public performance.”²⁵⁸

The uncertainty of the artist’s presence in Fan’s ‘performance’ works not only disrupts the implicated power and authority of the social interaction of the performer but questions the invitation into the domain of the Other.

The second work to include social code-switching also involved bringing the audience into the performance. Marcus Young performed a version of his performance work *Pacific Avenue* (Fig. 5.29) on the streets of Manchester for the *Vital 06* programme. Walking slowly from the Arndale Centre on Corporation Street towards St Ann’s Church, stretching what would have been a five-minute walk into half-hour performance. The artist made eye contact with each person who passed him in the street, and his slowness contrasted with the usual pace of Manchester’s city centre particularly as the artist also held up traffic while crossing the street. The disruption caused by Young through his unusual clothing and the slowness of

²⁵⁷ *Liberation* featured four artists from China and was an exhibition growing out of an ongoing discussion with Carol Yinghua Lu and Liu Ding following the blocked use of a selection of social-networking and self-publishing websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in China. The exhibition took the form of a visual art exhibition as well as a series of events and a blog discussion among the curators of the exhibition and invited guests. It proposed a close look into the boundaries of the Internet.

²⁵⁸ Soyini, Madison and Hamera, Judith, “Introduction: Performance studies at the intersections.” in *The Sage handbook of performance studies*, (London: Sage, 2006), 23-24.

his movements attracted mixed responses from the public from ambivalence to humour to discussions of the spiritual aspects of the work.²⁵⁹

In *Vital 07*, Young also addressed concerns of the material documentation of his performances by also creating encounters that existed outside the programme of the event by personally whispering in the ears of unsuspecting audience members while other performances were taking place during the festival. (Fig. 5.30) The focus on the immaterial and unquantifiable social communications is a major theme of both works. Young stated:

We all seem to want to label everything. This is a painting. Live Art will start at 2 pm. I don't give it a title because I don't want those urgent, romantic, secretive and gentle moments to be a thing, like an object. People have told me they forget what I whisper the moment they hear it. Nothing else matters much in those few simple moments. It's so private, yet it happened to many people at the festival in that same private way. I'm interested in the realm of the in-between, how we can feel and behave different there. Even by writing this dialogue with you I have labelled what I did at *Vital 07* a work of art, but it isn't meant to be just that. I'm trying to create that not knowing what something is before it happens or even while it's happening.²⁶⁰

Again, the spontaneous act disrupts the relationship between the artist and the audience by engaging them on a personal level and subverting conventional social codes. By reducing the observable content of his performances to small or non-existent actions, Fan and Young transgressed the social rituals of performing and what constitutes a performance by reducing their work to the basic, effective, elements of communication in performance. This aspect not only served as an intervention in the audience's behaviour, corporeality and expectation in *Vital* but also intervene in other artworks in the programme and altering them in interesting ways. As Bartlett suggests, the way that relational practices have mythologised the collective production of art and performance art, while the participation of the audience is an artificial construct, characterised by coercion and enforcement into the inclusion of the authorship of the work.²⁶¹

The use of linguistic or social code-switching reflects the overall methodology for the festival with the focus being on artists who would actively take the opportunity to engage or

²⁵⁹ BBC Interview/Report on Marcus Young DVD, (Manchester: CFCCA Library and Archive, 2006).

²⁶⁰ Champion, Sarah ed., "Marcus Young interview" *VITAL: International Live Artists of Chinese Descent*, (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 2007), 77.

²⁶¹ Bartlett, Voon, "Relational practice: The Audience as 'extras' or 'suffragettes'?" in *VITAL: International Live Artists of Chinese Descent*, Sarah Champion ed., (Manchester: Chinese Arts Centre, 2007), 118.

communicate with the audience as part of the performance. As part of the festival's global outlook, not all of the works included in this section necessarily referred to China or Chinese identity. However, the methods of disrupted communication with the audience reveal deeper threads of social behaviours behind moments of interaction. The code-switching evident within these performances reveal an attempt to draw from a variety of linguistic resources in the course of a single interaction. The questions it raises are linked both to what the artists are trying to achieve through disrupting language and social codes and what makes it possible for them to attempt what they are attempting to draw on colonial histories, social orders and reflexive reactions. While CFCCA hasn't continued to organise any further live art festivals, the organisation continues to exhibit and provide for performance art within its regular exhibition programme often showcasing performances by its artists at private views and events. This and the use of open studios making it a valuable aspect of the Centre's curatorial practice and public engagement.

Within the shift from language to culture was the opportunity to incorporate more extensive theoretical developments including Foucault's notions of 'power' and 'discourse' to redefine or question the context of the translator.²⁶² Linda Pittwood discusses the notion of the curator or art historian as a translator as well as suggesting that the academic language of art criticism is often redirected towards cultural translation within exhibitions. This can be seen in the form of catalogues, essays, press releases, symposia, and artist talks released in tandem with exhibitions.²⁶³ Wherein the role of the curator as a facilitator for intercultural dialogues extends from researching and constructing the exhibition to creating contexts for audience engagement. However, the visual language of the exhibition in itself can act as a conduit for a translational activity where the works or artists are included as part of a wider narrative or point of discussion.

This interpretive concept of the narrative of the exhibition signifies debates within cultural studies such as the 'creation' of cultural otherness through writing²⁶⁴, the problematic aspects

²⁶² See Foucault, Michel "The Subject and Power," *Critical inquiry*, 8, no. 4, (1982): 777-795.

²⁶³ Pittwood, Linda, "Parallel Realities: The Relationship between Translation Studies and Curating Chinese Contemporary Art," *Modern China Studies* 23, no.1, (2016): 75-94.

²⁶⁴ Fyfe, Gordon, ed., *Theorizing Museums. Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996).

of cultural representation, and a critical and self-reflexive response to these debates.²⁶⁵ These conceptual changes take place, for the most part, within writing in the field of art history and cultural studies; whereas, in the case of museums with collections or galleries without collections, these alterations are able to occur within the exhibition's narrative structure, translated to the space and to a visual language. In this sense, elements of 'visual language' and 'International Art English' used by the artist and curator act as an auxiliary language or a '*posteriori*' constructed language in which elements are borrowed from or based on existing languages, theory, and semiotics.

²⁶⁵ Pollock, Griselda & Zeman, Joyce, *Museums After Modernism. Strategies of Engagement*. (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

Conclusion

The curatorial methodologies of CFCCA, as well as its approaches to research, have developed over the Centre's 30-year history. Through analysing CFCCA's exhibition history we are able to track this development as an organisation. Beginning with China as a subject as evidenced by its early arts festivals in the 1980s and its survey exhibition of contemporary painting, *Representing the People*, in 1999, CFCCA would later develop a more research-based approach, using China as a methodology through which to discussing wider issues surrounding both contemporary China and global social concerns. The need to rethink the definition of Chinese contemporary art has stemmed from a dissatisfaction with earlier interpretations of the term as discussed at the beginning of Chapter One where the definition of 'Chinese contemporary art' was brought into question. The term 'Chinese contemporary art' has grown to cover a wide range of settings and covers an expansive array of contexts. The developing visibility of Chinese artists in both national and international spaces has put China in a place of significance inside the global art world as a focal point of contemporary culture. The representation of Chinese contemporary art in the United Kingdom can be placed within the broader context of relationships between Chinese contemporary art and its reception internationally in the Western art world. When looking at the early international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in the West, one could argue that the perception of Chinese art is only 'contemporary' when it clings to a western-characterised standard of contemporaneity in connection to Western art theory and criticism while also incorporating 'Chinese' cultural signifiers into the work or artist's practice. This can be illustrated by the initial international popularity of the Political Pop and Cynical Realism movements both critically and commercially. However, from the outset, the critical reception of international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art and the concerns of their curators and artists have involved questions surrounding both representation and translation. Namely, whether the artists' works are represented appropriately and whether the work will be able to communicate with international audiences. This is shown through many instances of exhibitions being led or partnered with Chinese curators from the exhibitions of Johnson Chang in the 1990s to the associate curators at CFCCA. As CFCCA was originally an arts centre for British Chinese artists, and because until the 1990s it was difficult for foreign curators to travel to China, the Centre did not initially have contacts in China until they began to work with Karen Smith for their first exhibition of contemporary art from China, *Representing the People*. Like other UK arts organisations, CFCCA found themselves at a specific starting point when it came to organise an exhibition of Chinese contemporary art. The fact that they identified as a 'Chinese Arts Centre' did not necessarily set them apart as

experts in the field during this time. In fact, due to the size of the organisation and its problems with receiving funding in the late 1990s would have put the Centre at a disadvantage.

The international interest in the Chinese art world has increased dramatically since 1989, as the number of international exhibitions featuring or highlighting Chinese contemporary artists has increased in profile and evolved in their thematic content and execution as the curatorial and academic research surrounding Chinese contemporary art continues to develop. The international representation of Chinese contemporary art has not only provided a commentary of contemporary Chinese culture and social issues but through the integration of art on a global scale, these exhibitions also represent a changing perception of Chinese art and culture in the West. However, the challenges of representing Chinese contemporary art in an international context remain a fixture of transcultural curatorial research and practices and carry over into present discourses on China and defining Chinese culture.

Identity

While the pluralistic or 'Greater China' model used by CFCCA provides a richer variety of research, dialogues and artists, this has arguably been at the expense of the Centre's initial goal of representing British Chinese artists. The Centre was initially set up during the 1980s some years before contemporary artists from China were beginning to receive international recognition. The decision to expand its curatorial scope, first to artists from the PRC, then to all artists of Chinese descent and finally to include artists from all backgrounds whose work concerned China, grew alongside the development of Chinese contemporary art. The Centre's shifting position as both a 'contemporary arts organisation' and a culturally specific arts centre has been a source of criticism for the ghettoisation of Chinese artists. A prominent struggle of CFCCA and the exhibition of Chinese contemporary art in the UK as a whole is the tension between cultivating a specific cultural identity and engaging with the wider British arts and cultural sector. As I discussed in chapter two, the Centre's early emphasis on the diasporic identities of 'British-Chinese' art was able to build solidarity within a wider political discourse along with the concerns around multicultural representation and cultural theory that had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and took inspiration from the BLK Art Group that had begun in Wolverhampton in the early 1980s. However, the problems presented by representing 'Chinese' artists within the umbrella of British multiculturalism led

to several criticisms. The first being that the exposure of such artists simultaneously celebrates cultural diversity within the art world while the dedication of a space to a specific cultural identity both others and ghettoises the artist's work. The second is that the term 'Chinese' is already an umbrella term for multiple cultural identities. Thirdly, any preoccupation with cultural identity in the reading of the artists' work is in danger of undermining other themes and discussions within their body of work where identity might not be the artist's central concern. Within the multitude of artists who have exhibited at CFCCA from a range of cultural backgrounds and experiences, the umbrella term of 'Chinese art' begins to become inadequate. As the space has broadened its scope to a more globally focused institution, one has to ask if the label is still necessary or if it has become a hindrance to its multi-national roster of exhibiting artists. In the introduction to *The Ruined Archive*, a discussion of how the modern museum can respond to the movements of an increasingly globalised world the museum or indeed the gallery space: "institutionalises a manner of seeing, and more generally of perceiving: it organizes the space in which items are displayed, normalises and controls the bodies of visitors passing through that space, and constructs its referent (and indeed its visitors) through the activity of exhibiting itself"²⁶⁶ In the context of CFCCA, the space is set up as both a site of translation but also as a site of 'the other' which as discussed in chapter four can be as damaging as it is beneficial to the artists who are exhibited there often as both 'object and subject'.

The shift from a local to an international arts organisation threatened to undermine the representation of the British Chinese artists who helped to build the organisation and has arguably provoked a change in priority of the organisation's mission statement. In addition to this is the Centre's expanded definition of what constitutes 'Chinese contemporary art' in recent years, namely that the artist should be of Chinese descent or that the work should be thematically concerned with China or Chinese culture. This definition is problematic in the sense that it may no longer be appropriate to describe CFCCA as a singular national identity to what has become an increasingly international enterprise. However, in the Centre's debates concerning its own identity, through events such as *A New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts* in the late 1990s and Ting-ting Chen's subsequent performance piece *A Turning Away from Debates that have not Been Concluded* both highlights the inadequacy of the

²⁶⁶ Chambers, Iain, Grechi, Giulia and Nash, Mark eds., *The ruined archive*. (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2014), 10.

terminology the Centre uses to identify itself and the problematic elements of attempting to identify as something else.

The core struggle of the Centre's branded identity since its move towards including artists from Mainland China and later Hong Kong and Taiwan is that it was trying to retain its roots as a space to showcase the work of Chinese artists and be a contemporary arts organisation within the wider cultural sector. Through CFCCA's gradual rebranding as a 'contemporary' arts institution as opposed to a 'Chinese' arts institution, the Centre both widens its scope for its projects arguably at the expense of the identity and representation of the artists who established it. However, the inclusion of Chinese contemporary art in the global art historical canon such as the Ai Weiwei retrospectives and more historically framed survey exhibitions such as the *M+ Sigg Collection* at the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2015 and *Art and China since 1989: Theatre of the World* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2018, indicate the inclusion of these artists in the global art world, perhaps shifting the focus from 'Chinese artists' to artists who are from China.

One of the most interesting factors impeding the Chinese contemporary artist internationally, again, is the notion of 'Chineseness'. The term, coined by the West during the early 1990's through early international exhibitions and commercial sales of Chinese contemporary art was used to describe a particular aesthetic or thematic quality of the art and the cultural identity of the artist. The term has been the catalyst for the debate and review of the essential characteristics of China. The development and subsequent discussion of the signifiers of an artist's cultural identity are further expanded by multi-cultural and contradictory views of what it means to be Chinese. While the term can be a depreciation of the Chinese identity, others use it to denote a pre-existing quality that necessarily identifies Chinese art in contrast to the West. The ambivalence surrounding this debate has caused deep-seated misunderstandings about Chinese contemporary art and its exposure internationally, arguing that the representation of Chinese contemporary art in conjunction with national identity is a constructed narrative made by the arts organisation, curator or artist, representing a simplified portrayal of a much wider and diverse arts community. Artists with cultural or political signifiers, therefore, came to represent the nation to the Western cultural sectors and art markets much like other nation-state-labelled art market commodities such as the Young British Artists.

While the issues of exoticism, ideology, and Western influences remain a concern in current curatorial strategies surrounding Chinese contemporary art, the definition of Chinese contemporary art in an expanded context and the evolution of its representation internationally have provided a platform for broader areas of debate. This can involve issues surrounding transnational experiences, and relationships between localised cultural identities and an increasingly globalised contemporary society. One can also argue that in the intervening decades between the first instances of Chinese contemporary art being exhibited and sold internationally and the current state of the art world, the knowledge and expectations of international audiences have become more nuanced. Whether a viewer is informed of China's history or artistic canon or not, the advent of the internet and the ease and affordability of long-distance travel has facilitated the element of cultural encounter in ways that were perhaps not possible thirty years ago.

It can also be argued that the demand for international survey exhibitions with a focus on a single culture or national identity have lessened in recent years. This has given way to solo retrospectives and thematic exhibitions, or exhibitions representing a wider selection of artists of multiple nationalities influenced in part by the rise of global theory and biennialism in curatorial approaches. However, the representation of 'Greater China' retains an element of international interest relative to the cultural identity or the notion of 'Chineseness' in its iconography thus problematizing the curatorial approaches of survey exhibitions. However, the notion of 'representing' Chinese contemporary art or even Chinese culture in itself is not necessarily the responsibility of the curator or artist, where the ethics of cultural identity and representation can be discussed not as an entry point for truth but as a site for discussion. Perhaps in the future as non-Western and minority artists become increasingly visible within the art world the need for a space such as CFCCA will lessen. As the Centre's current focus of its research on thematic projects such as environmental issues in China in *Digital Matters* or its highlighting of female artists in the collaborative series of exhibitions *NOW: A Dialogue on Female Chinese Contemporary Artists in 2018*.

Evolution

The strategies of earlier UK exhibitions have included a number of re-occurring themes following from previous international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art. These strategies have focused on a 'dissident narrative' of Chinese art that operated outside of the

involvement of the CCP and continuing to represent works or artists from the Chinese New Wave and Cynical Realism movements of the 1980s or focusing the narrative of the exhibition as an artist versus the state or on control and censorship. These curatorial strategies have also included the focus on the representation of cultural identity or cultural authenticity where the works included are taken as being representative of 'contemporary China'. This also includes the use of the 'New Chinese Art' model survey show bringing a collection of recent works and rising star artists to present an image or snapshot of the Chinese contemporary art scene of the time.

This curatorial method can be problematic, firstly creating a space of encounter and conflict potentially in the space of power and authority and secondly relying on the work of politically dissident artists as a site of sensationalism. However, solo exhibitions, such as the Ai Weiwei retrospectives discussed in chapter three, raise broader questions about the role of power and resistance, be it on an institutional or state level through the creative productions and strategies of the portrayal of dissident narratives in international spaces. They also call into question the Chinese government's numerous efforts to simultaneously promote and control Chinese contemporary art for its own purposes. Focusing on the reception of exhibitions sheds light on the problematic East-West power relations behind the ways in which Chinese contemporary art had been interpreted and canonised and how these interpretations have persisted in addition to adopting a more comprehensive scope when considering the importance of these exhibitions. This framework has become a recurring aspect of curating group exhibitions.

These initial strategies have continued to be used or referenced in later exhibitions as less of a direct progression but as a starting point for further research and re-evaluation. While there isn't a direct evolution of artistic or curatorial methodologies towards using China as a method to further explore more global concerns from the first survey exhibitions of the 1990s and the programs being developed in the present day, it is still present through the development, evaluation and re-evaluation of these repeating concerns. However, the curatorial strategies of the group and solo exhibitions discussed in the previous chapters, and the inclusion of Chinese contemporary artists and curators within a more extensive model of comprehensively engaged curating has been a consistent approach for exhibition in the UK.

Later curatorial strategies that gradually developed predominantly by CFCCA have continued to reassess or 're-present' these earlier themes. This includes a move towards the

representation of multiple cultural narratives and the artistic development through commissions and residencies, discursive approaches and re-evaluations of themes in Chinese contemporary art and curating, facilitating a relationship between the work or artist and the site as well as creating opportunities for audience engagement. In these later shows from the mid-2000s onwards, a number of trends can be interpreted. This has included almost from the beginning in exhibitions such as *Silent Energy*, *The Real Thing* and *Harmonious Society*, less emphasis on purchased and loaned works from galleries and individual collections and a move towards commissioned works. This has provided opportunities for discursive translation through site-specific installations and works created in response to locations and cultures where the exhibition has taken place. Another is the criticism of 'authenticity', as shown in *The Real Thing* in chapter three, often questioning or re-evaluating previous attempts to represent or translate the scope of Chinese contemporary art. The use of the 'later' international model has its critical points of interest. Firstly, it enables the showcase of works by artists of multiple cultural identities and global diasporas without the political ramifications of presenting a singular national character. It can also serve to re-outline works within a globalised context extending both the elucidation of the works and their audiences. The expanded scope of CFCCA's curatorial methodologies represents the transition from a small artist's space to collaborating with a wide array of art organisations and events and moving beyond the limited gallery space into further venues and projects.

Translation

The struggle with attempts at exhibiting and translating Chinese contemporary art within an exhibition for a wider British audience has reflected a more extensive and continuing problem with CFCCA itself not only through its financial and physical constraints but through its own issues of identity as it expanded its scope of expertise and research towards an international focus. As well as representing cultural identities, the 'translational' element of curating Chinese contemporary art involves the interpretation of works or curatorial themes for audiences in the UK. Translation in this context has been approached in several ways. The most common being the use of audience engagement, supplementary publications and events like talks from artists and curators. In addition to this, the visual language of curatorial translation can be perceived as a constructed language which ultimately serves the ideologies and agendas of the organisation. In other instances, processes of translation are embedded within the works or curatorial methodologies themselves.

The curatorial practices at CFCCA have inherently internalised many translational strategies when dealing with various theoretical, artistic, or cultural concepts but in the instance of transcultural curation, some nuances and subtleties are lost in within these processes. The act of mediation between the artist, the site, and the audience is never a pure distant and neutral intervention because it is contaminated by inhabited and internalised preconceptions about different arts, cultures and the world in general. For example, as an artist whose practice revolves primarily around the written language and acts of translation, Xu Bing's work exhibited at the Centre in 2003 and 2016 also reflects a wider issue of curating Chinese contemporary art for international audiences using a direct reference to translation and language learning as part of the exhibitions themselves. In addition to this, Throughout CFCCA's artist residencies a number of thematic trends can be interpreted including a shift from the development and promotion of art graduates and early career artists towards a focus on specific projects that fit in with the Centre's wider projects and emphasise research as a crucial element of the residency.

The element of translation as an ongoing process or as a site of encounter between peoples in which a series of discursive transformations occur as different groups endeavour to represent themselves to one another. This enables a theoretical space where cultural difference and their creative potential can be explored. The dialogue between artist and audience also relates to the discussion of art practice and performance art being used to examine the transformations that occur in linguistic translation. The process of translation and performance that reveals the space that exists between the signifier and the signified but also the agency that is also present in an individual's natural language. While the artist is able to speak for themselves through their practice and audience engagement, they, in turn, hold the responsibility of adapting to another language whether it be linguistical, culturally or creatively. It follows that the language of the artist varies according to the speaker and according to the structure of the linguistic interaction such as a site of dialogue or a process of self-translation or the producer's position in the particular context of the work. The use of linguistic or social code-switching in CFCCA's exhibition of live and performance artworks reflects the overall methodology for art practice and performance with the focus being on artists who would actively take the opportunity to engage or communicate with the audience as part of the performance.

The future of CFCCA's curatorial strategies, projected by its current director Zoe Dunbar, is placing a heavier emphasis on research and research-based curating. When this is put into

the context Sarah Champion's hope that eventually there would no longer be a need for a Chinese Arts Centre at all, one can see the projection of CFCCA's programmes a move to adapt the Centre as a contemporary arts institution once its initial purpose ceases to be culturally relevant. Since the Centre opened in the 1980s, its audiences in the UK have become part of a more global culture, with increased access to China through affordable travel and more relaxed visa policies, and greater access to information through the internet. Therefore, it can be argued that the responsibility of 'translating' contemporary Chinese art or, more to the point, interpreting contemporary Chinese art for international audiences is no longer an important factor in the curatorial methodology of an exhibition. In contrast to Karen Smith's endeavours to make contemporary Chinese art accessible to audiences in the UK, whether it was cultivating empathy with the subjects in *Representing the People* or the use of playful humour in *The Real Thing. During our conversation in 2015*

(The) translatability is usually the main focus for British exhibitions.... works displayed in Britain are not necessarily the 'best' works or even the most 'representative' of works but they are aimed to be the kinds of works that British audiences are likely to engage with.²⁶⁷

This illustrates that despite the origins of the artists the exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art that are being curated in the UK are still UK exhibitions aimed at UK audiences and are not necessarily representative of the realities of contemporary art and culture in China. In the case of CFCCA, the Centre has as much status as a British arts centre and a Manchester art centre as it has as a Chinese arts centre and, much like Wu Hung's theory of contemporary Chinese art developing concurrently both in China and internationally, the shows it produces are able to exist in multiple contextual frameworks.

By associating research with the Centre's curatorial functions such as its exhibitions and public programme, and publications and structuring research around an institutional framework enables the opportunity to develop a model based on the organisation's vision and aims rather than affiliating research with individual specialisms. As such the role of the research curator has become associated with the curatorial research within the institution and disassociated from personal research interests. The development of the research exhibition model examines how research might be incorporated into gallery practice and can illustrate ways through which gallery staff can begin to address recent concerns over the role of public institutions and their interaction with and relevance to contemporary audiences. In

²⁶⁷ Interview with Karen Smith 01/02/2015 see appendix ii.

this way, a research based exhibition can be a different vehicle that creates a sense of diversity that does not undermine the model of solo shows but complements it. What is different from the model of the research exhibition is that it can include elements of systematic academic research alongside artistic practices creating a multi-layered curatorial experience for a variety of audiences.

Overall, research exhibitions can be seen as the Centre's next development for its exhibition program as it has begun to use China as an entry point to explore wider themes and concepts. This can be seen in *Micro Micro Revolution* where the artworks not only drew parallels between issues relating specifically to Taiwan and the global social and environmental issues, but also exhibited works that illustrated larger projects outside of the gallery space. More recently this can be seen in exhibitions such as *Digital Matters: The Earth Behind the Screen* and *Aquatopia* in 2018 that focused on environmental changes and *Chinternet Ugly* in 2019 which explored China's online spaces and internet subcultures. *Digital Matters* in particular used China as a starting point to explore the effects of technology and development on the environment using artists from a range of nationalities and disciplines including the design and architectural research collectives Unknown Fields, MAP Office. This indicates a move away from 'China as subject' and towards using China as a method of research. While this approach is a recent addition to CFFCA's curatorial methodology, it shows a deliberate move from exhibiting Chinese contemporary art as a representation of China to using contemporary art to talk about China. The development of this practice within CFFCA's future projects would be an interesting topic for further research.

While CFCCA has seemingly entered a new stage in its management, its programme continues to develop with a greater emphasis on research and opportunities for audience engagement and education as well as further collaborations with larger arts organisations to attract wider audiences. This can be seen in its efforts to collaborate with other venues both in the UK and internationally in recent years and its investment in external guest speakers and artist talks and opening its library and archive. This is a self-conscious effort to overcome potential educational or cultural barriers that might be faced by visitors and to encourage greater understanding and public interest in Chinese contemporary art. However, as the leading authority on Chinese contemporary art and the only non-profit gallery in the country to specialise in representing Chinese artists, the Centre has contributed the majority

of curatorial research on Chinese contemporary art in the UK, and its influence has expanded beyond the gallery space.

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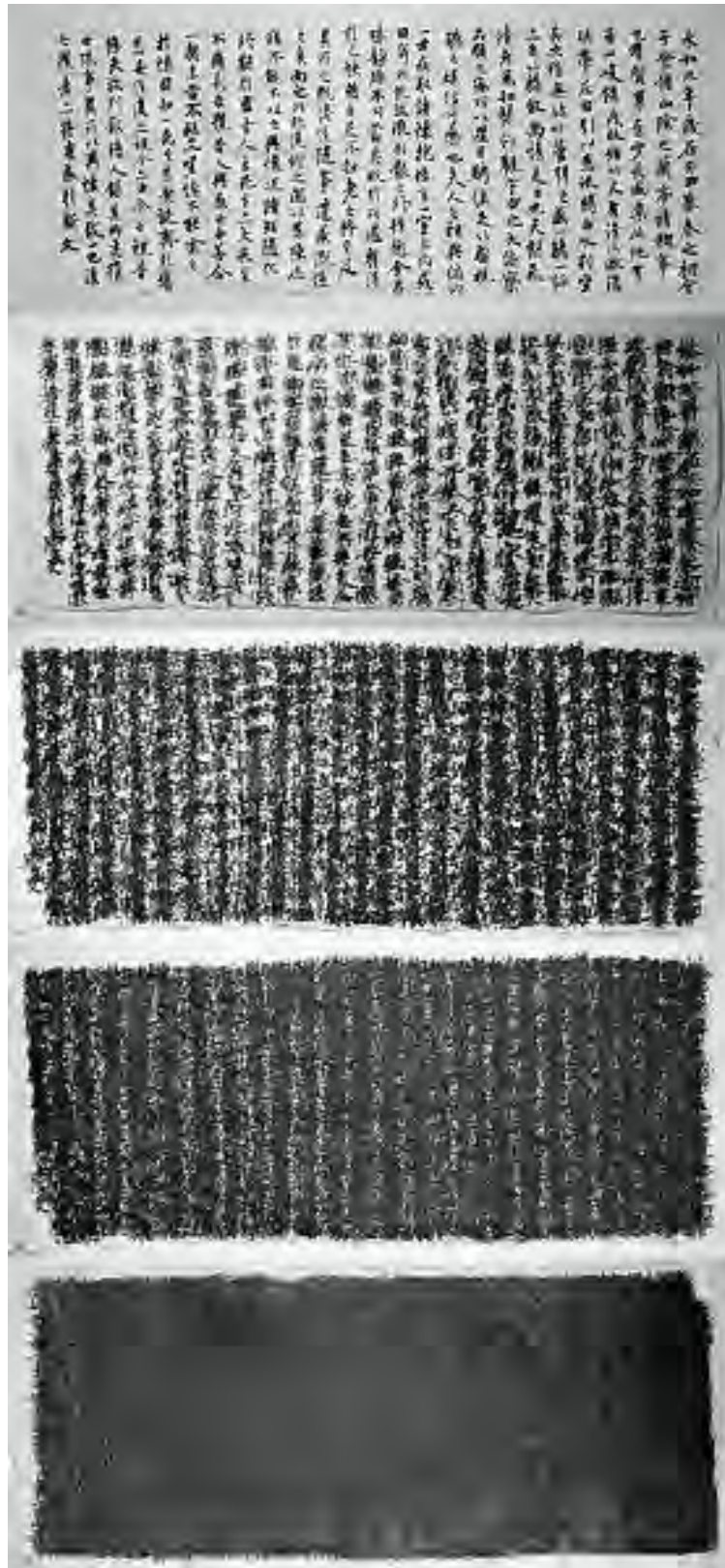


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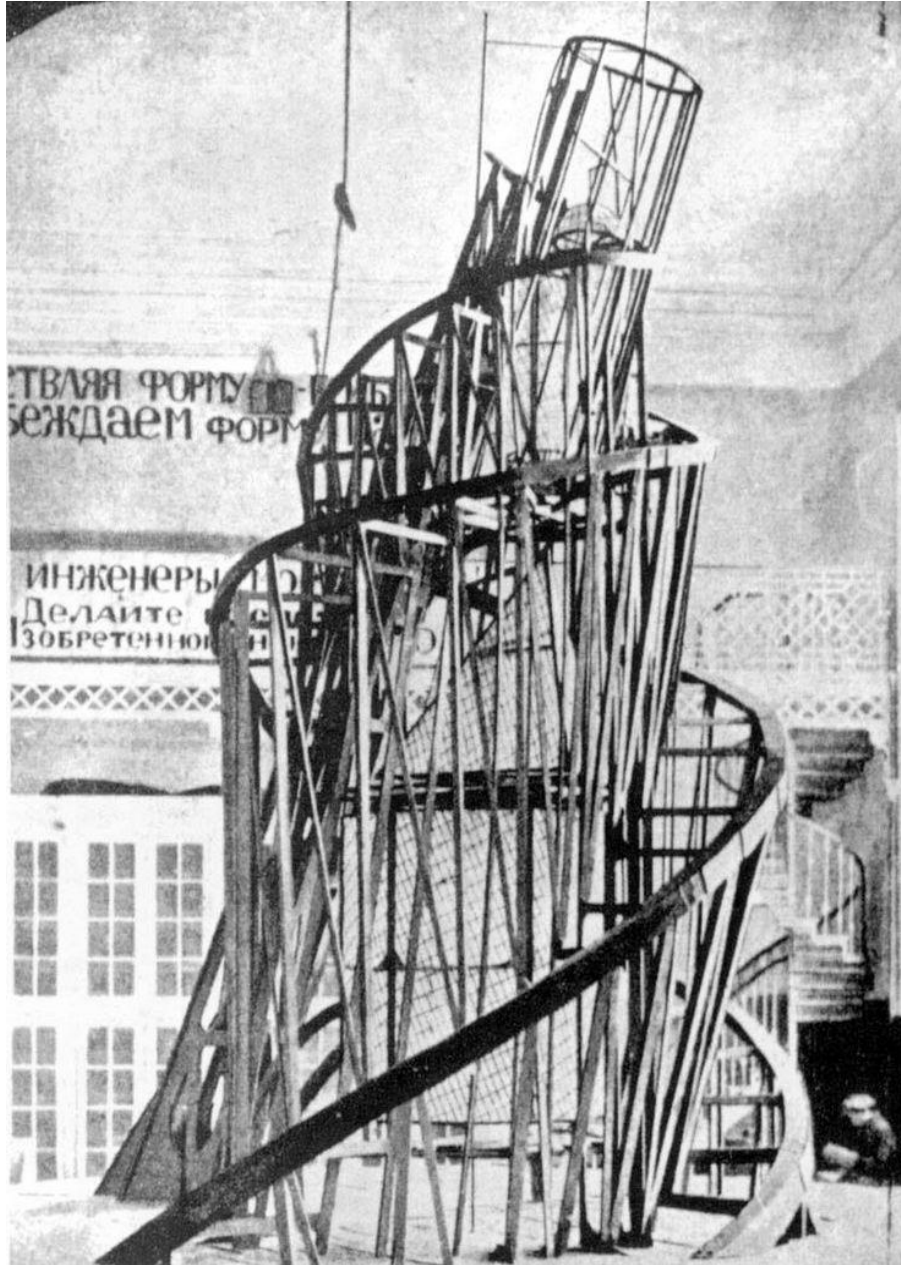


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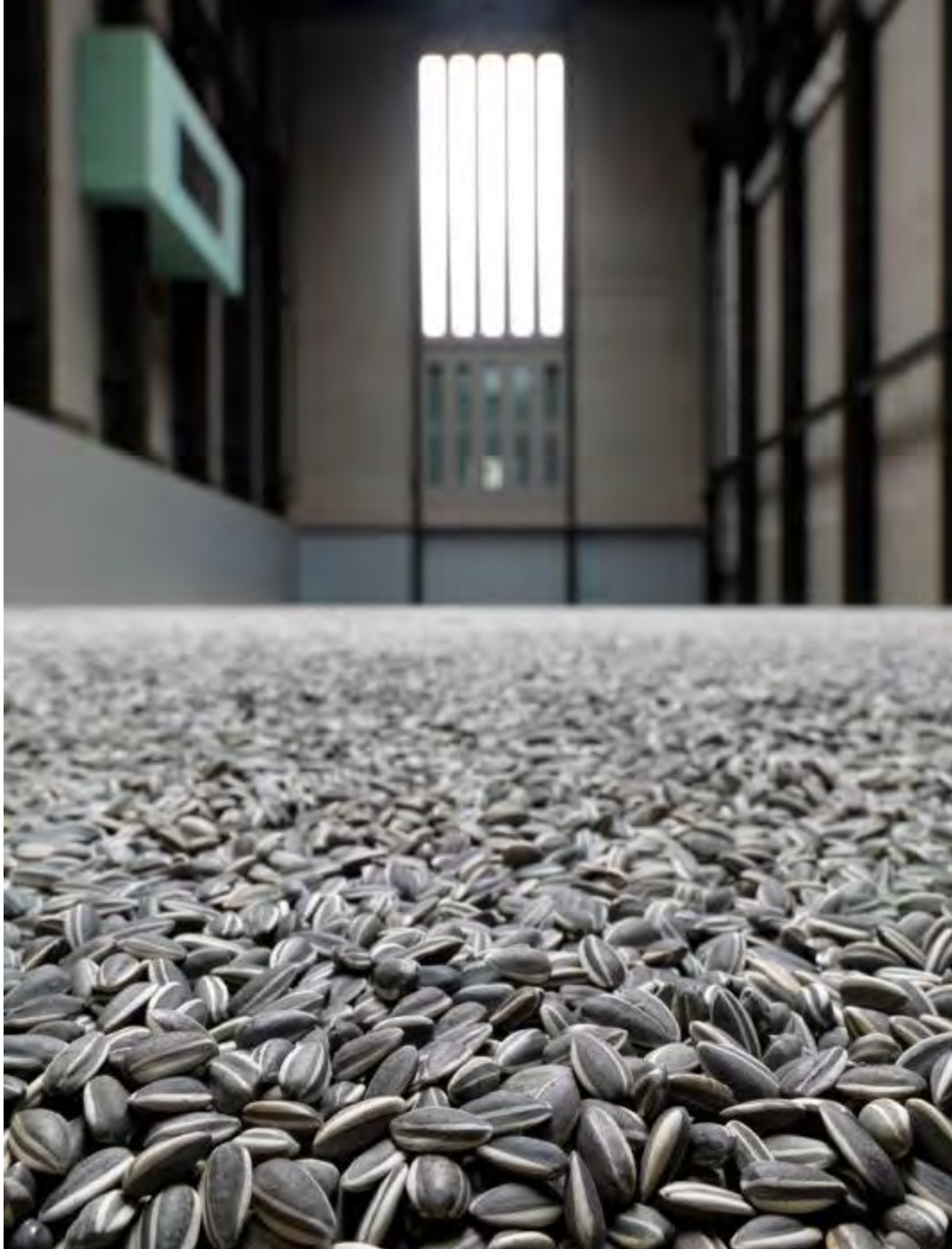


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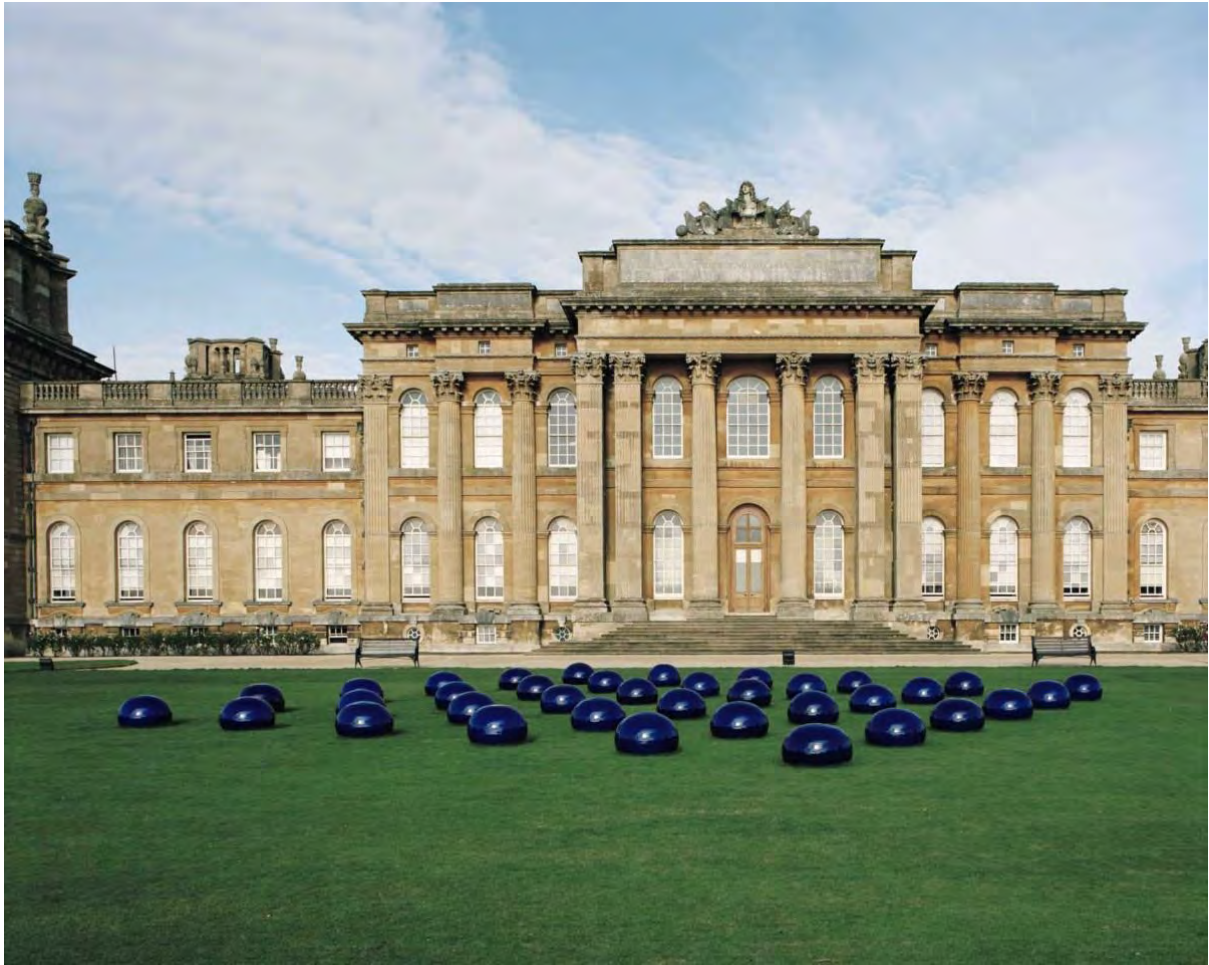


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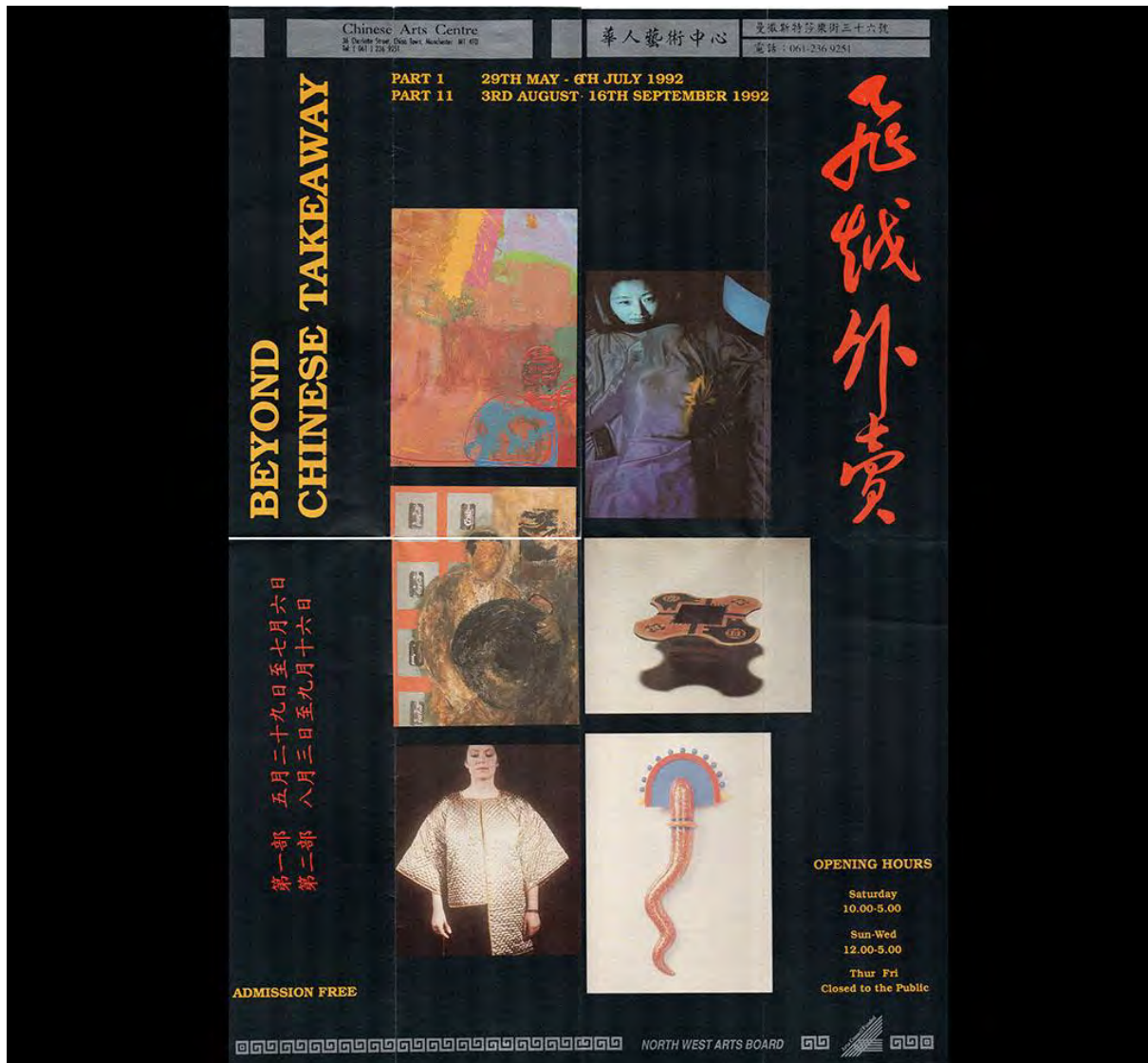


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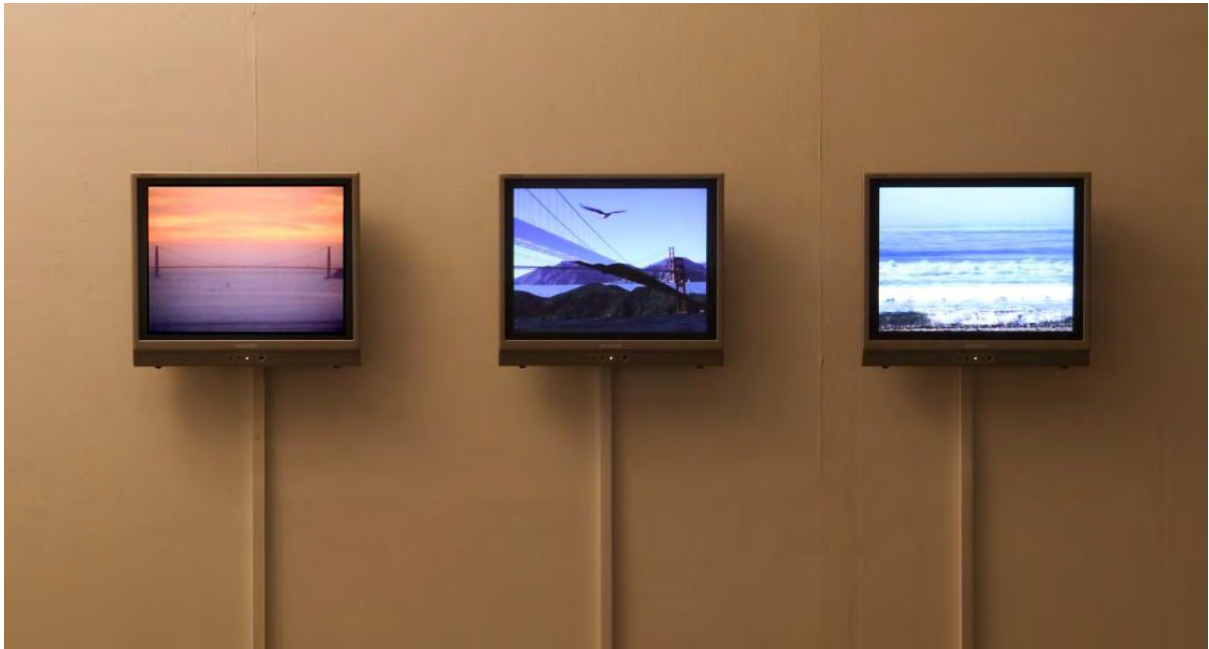


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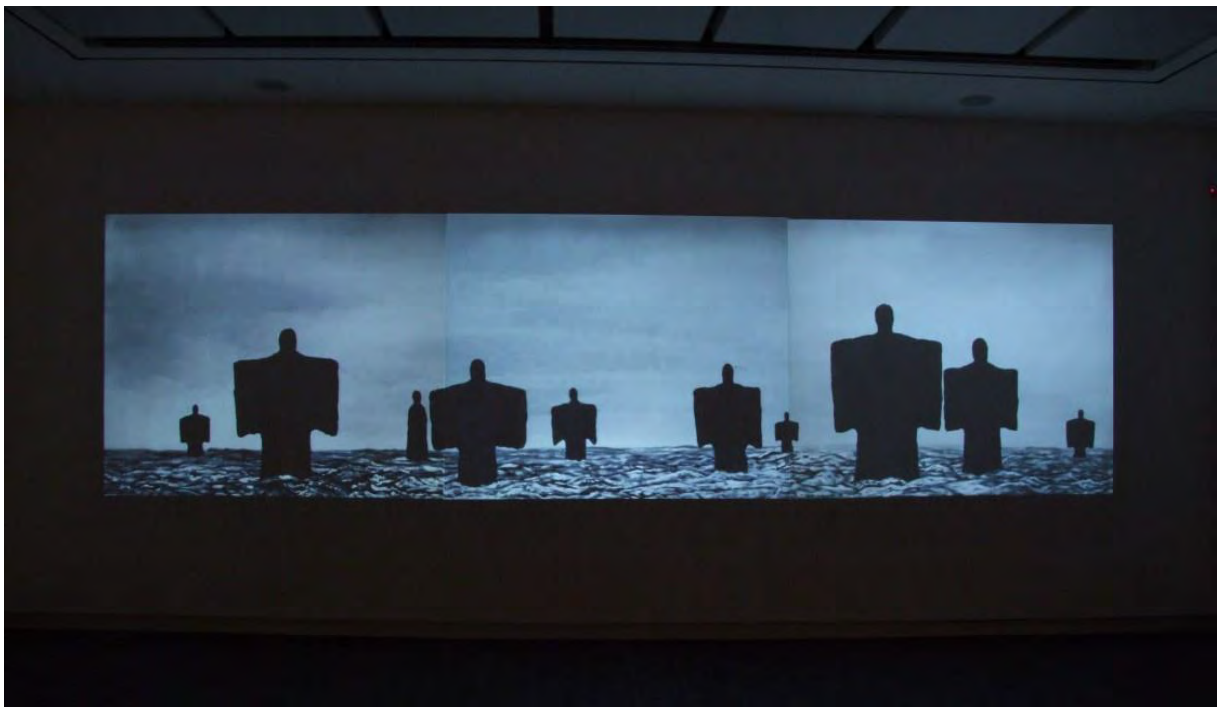


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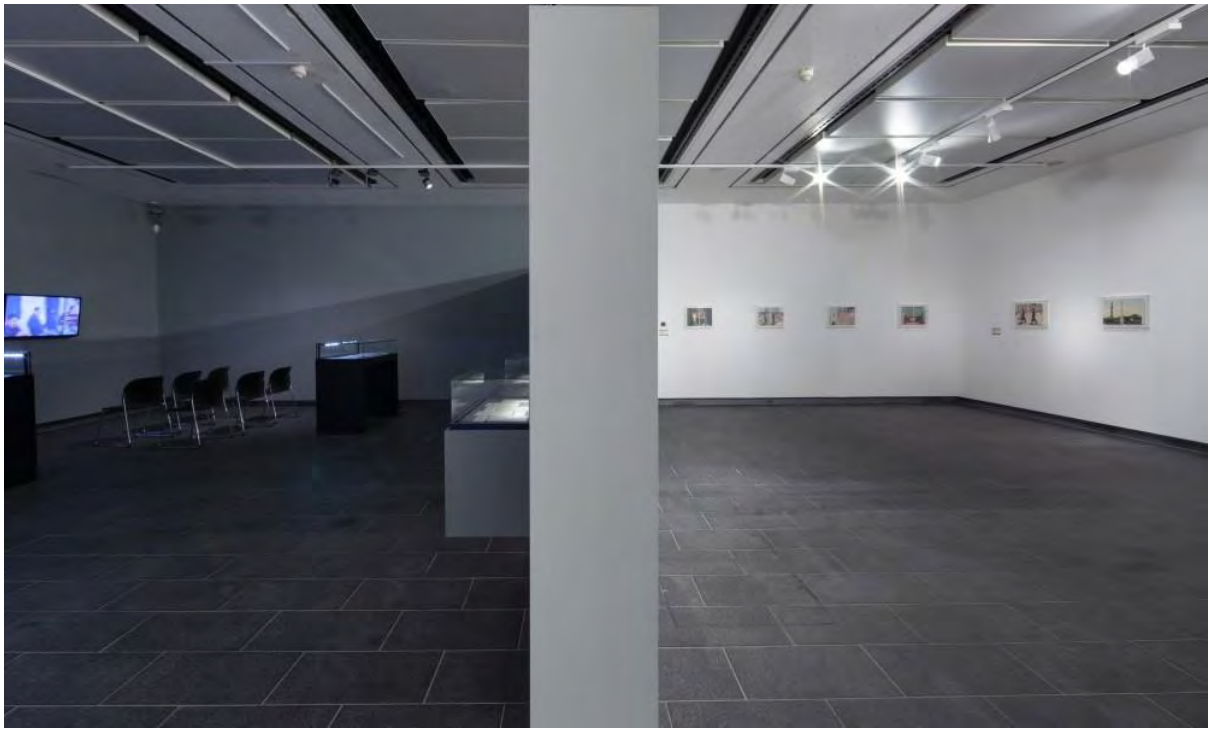


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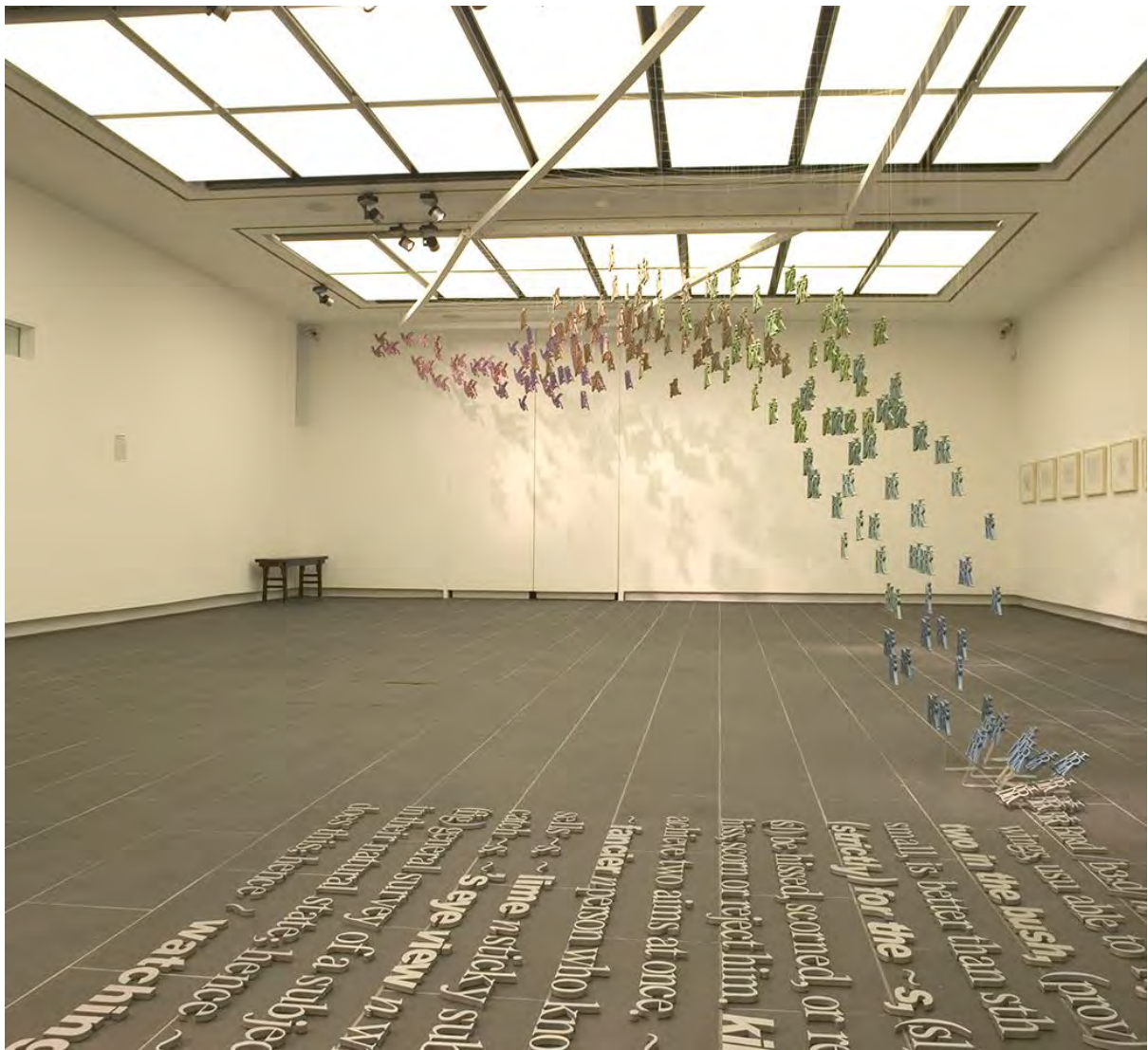


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Bird /ba:d/ *n* feathered creature with two legs and two wings usu able to fly. **A ~ in the hand is worth two in the bush**, (prov) Sth which one has, though small, is better than sth larger, which one has not. **(strictly) for the ~s**, (sl) bad; worthless. **get the ~** to be hissed, scorned, or rejected. **give sb the ~s**, scorn or reject him. **kill two ~s with one stone** achieve two aims at once. **~ cage** *n* cage for a bird. **~ cleric** *n* person who knows about, collects, breeds birds. **~ lime** *n* sticky substance put on bricks. **~'s eye view** *n* wide view seen from a general survey of a subject. **~ watch** *v* observe in a natural state; hence **~ watcher** *n*. hence **~ watching** *n*.

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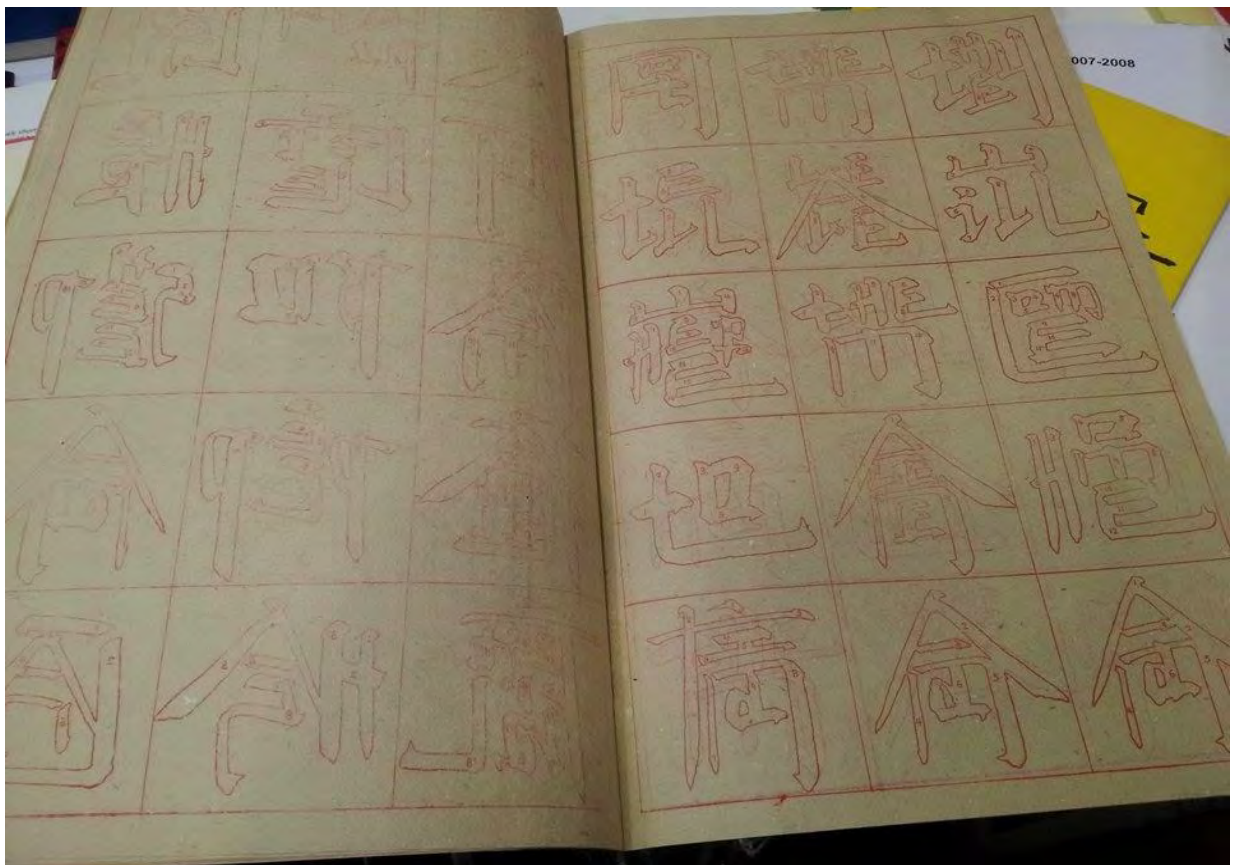


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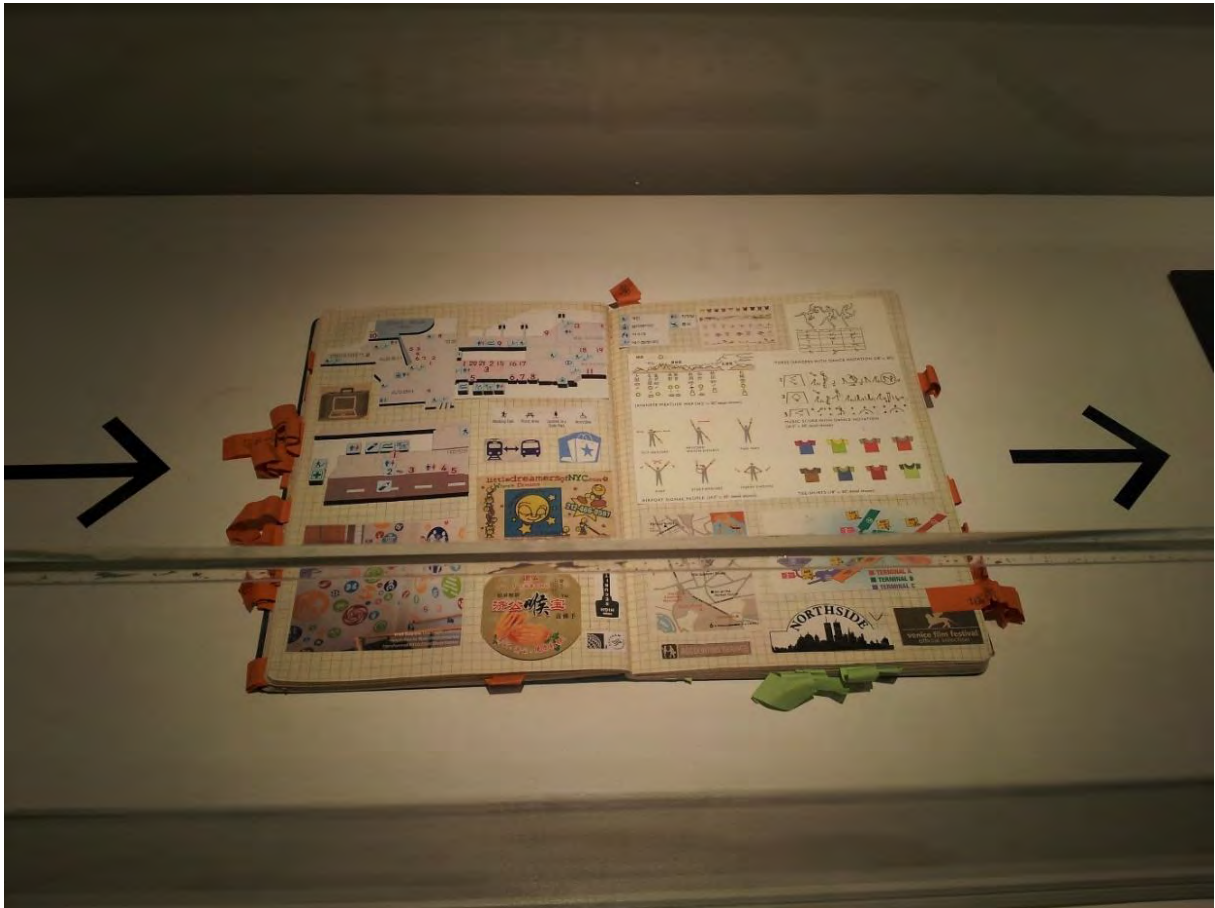


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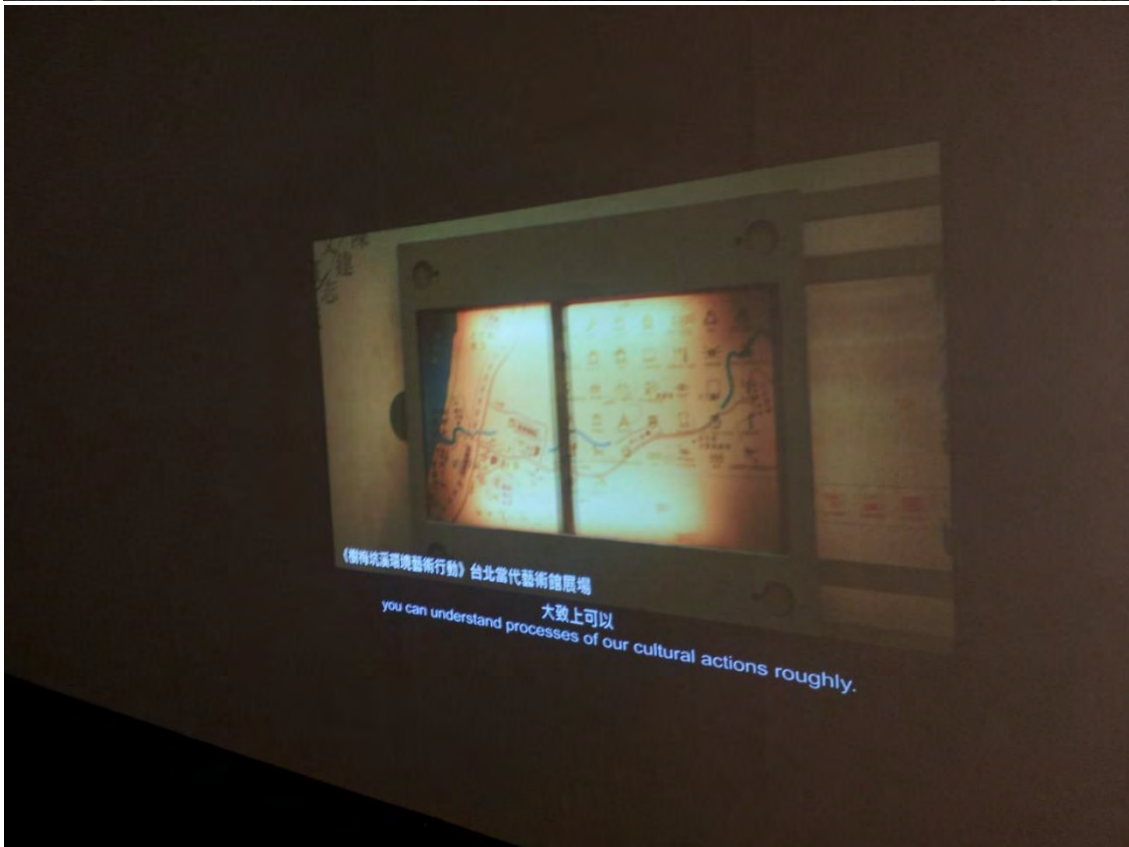


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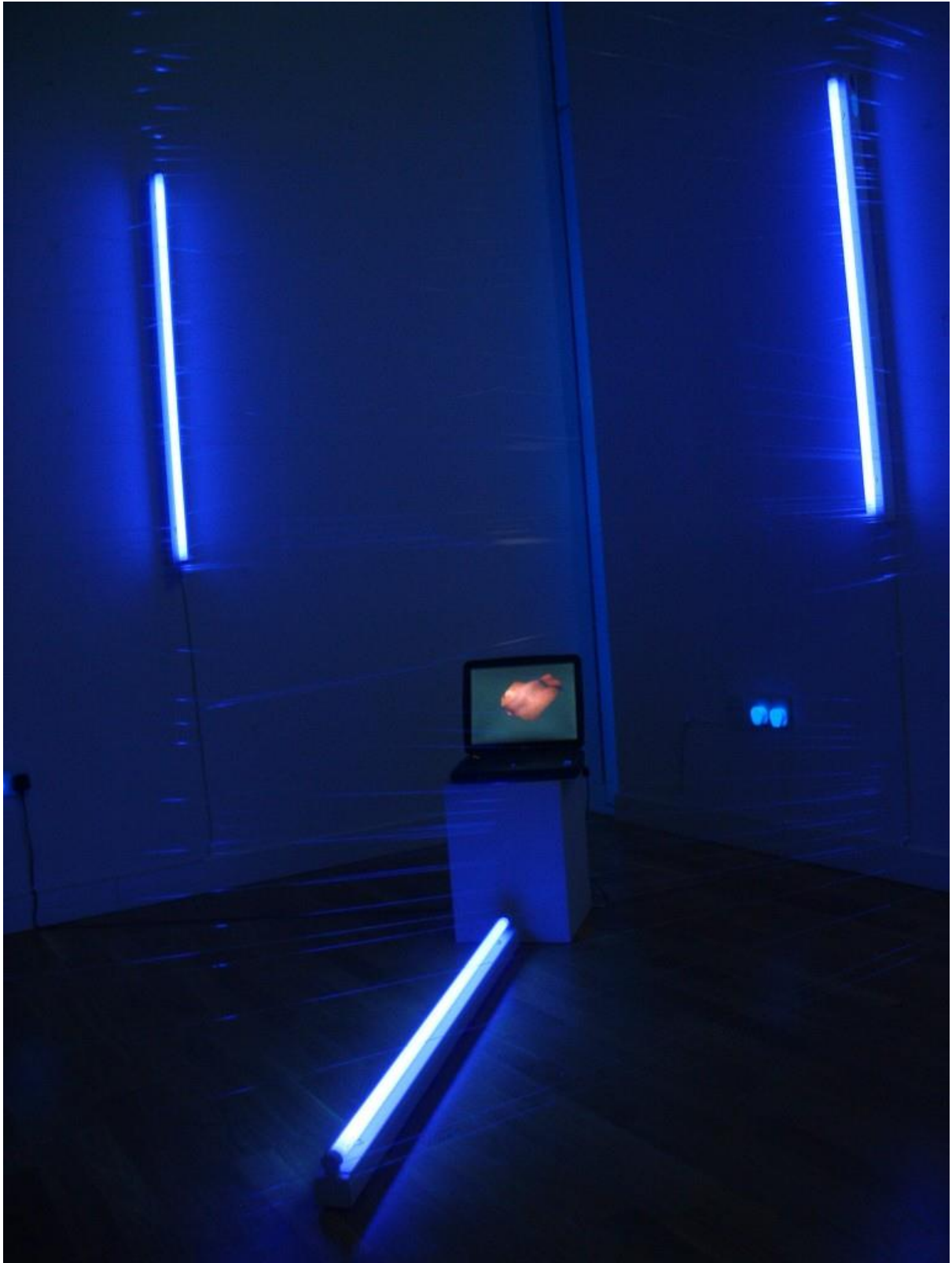


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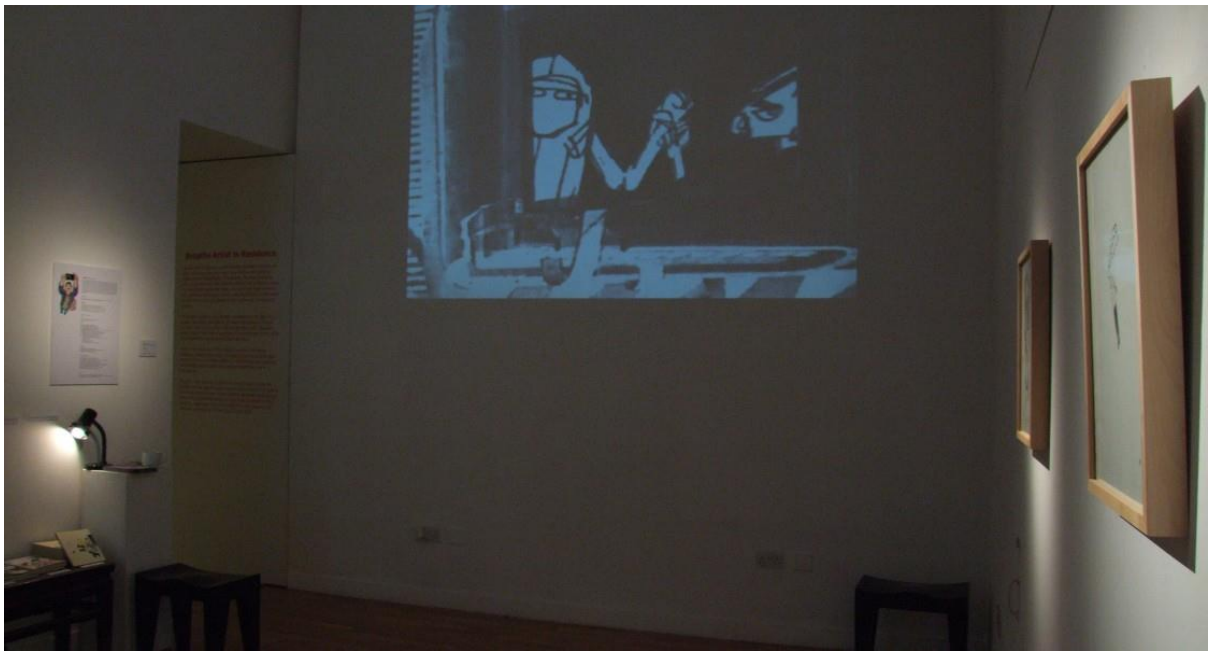


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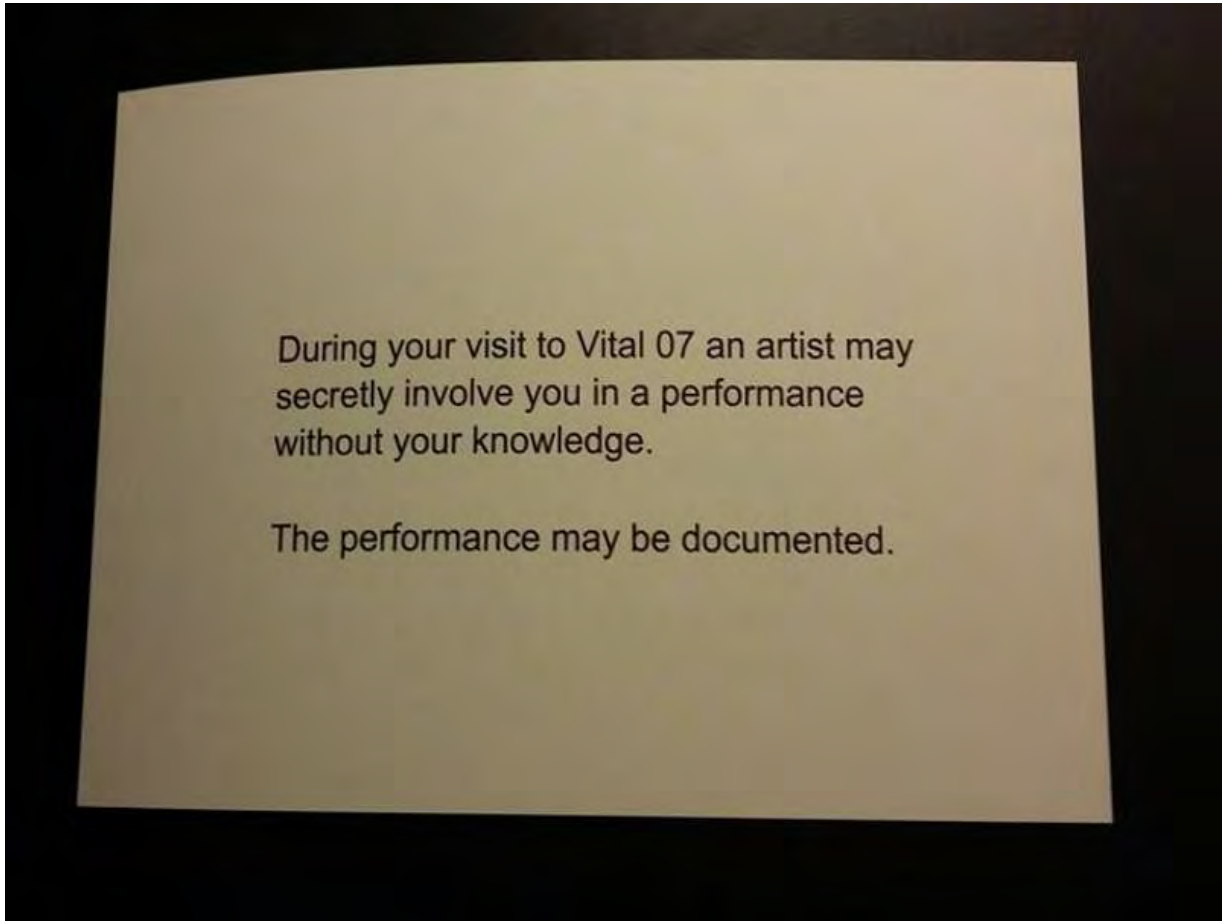


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Appendix i

Interview with Simon Groom, former director of exhibitions for Tate Liverpool

03/02/2016

LM: What I wanted to ask you about really is, when did the basis for the project start?

SG: Oh my god, that's like pre-history (laughs). Try to work out... So when did the basis for the project start, um... I suppose like all these things they start from one's own passion and curiosity. So, ever since I was at the Kettle's Yard (Cambridge) which is where I worked before Tate Liverpool, I was thinking about doing a show about China simply because, well it goes back even further to when I was at university, and that all the people I knew who were the most interesting were studying Chinese. And then they all went out to China and spent a year there (I didn't, because I was studying literature). And the day that we did our finals, the Tiananmen Square incident happened, so we'd all been up all night listening to what was unfolding in Beijing. And that really left a deep impression on me, thinking about China, but that's all kind of like a background, and then after Edinburgh I went to Japan and lived there for a year, and then after that in 1990 I stayed in China, and that was still when it was very closed, you couldn't get to certain areas, you needed foreign currency, all that kind of stuff. And it just blew me away, it was a fantastic place, so I always thought that it would be amazing to work there.

Then just, bit by bit, I made friends in the art world, and then my friends who had been studying Chinese, also ended up in the art world weirdly, so all of us somehow ended up in the art world. Which then made the possibility of doing something that much more real, so I always had half an eye on it, it becomes a personal passion. But it took a long time and it wasn't with any of those friends I knew at university or from before that spurred, it was simply by being at the Tate. And at the Tate, you know, if you have a good idea it's a great place because of its reputation there, its collections, its leverage of power and that sort of thing, to be able to put new ideas, or original ideas into practice. So, I went off and did a few research trips just to kind of understand whether a show might be possible, what the difficulties would be, whether there was anything worth looking at all, that kind of stuff.

And gradually the contexts began to form, I'm kind of very aware of all those issues about Westerners going over and posing it as a new universality of art, you know, liberalism, regionalism all those issues are kind of big and I just didn't want them to get in the way of what it was we were trying to do. Then very early on, having amassed a whole array of opinions from all kinds of people from universities academics to artists themselves, the curators to people working in the field, people outside the field and quickly came up with, well not quickly but, came up with the idea of something that could be workable. Working with the Chinese artist Xu Zhen who to me has been one of those artists who is very provocative, really knew what was happening with young artists, it was important that there were (artists of) a different generation. And then there was Karen Smith, the other curator who had been based in China, had been involved, not heavily but who knew people, just got on well, no political agenda or any of that kind of nonsense, and for me was invaluable because she had great contacts spoke Chinese and English, you know, we got on very well, we were about the same age. So with all those kind of things it kind of naturally happened and it was just a coming together of those very different talents and resources, and all that then just meant that we couldn't be accused of having a western view, that it was very informed from the inside, that we were working with artists, we didn't seek to impose a

theme. What we did is we just went around and we did a huge amount of looking and then out of it we just kind of sat down every so often and came up with those artists that we thought were really interesting or who had done really interesting projects, or works that we really liked, and we began to narrow it down. And then that was from about the year 2000 and we were beginning to see that there was kind of a generational divide between this kind of, there was the older generation, there's still something about their work that's still incredibly powerful like a lot of their predecessors in the mid-1990s that appeared to be very much stuck in that kind of western derivative mode, the kind of cynical realism stuff. So, the more we looked, the more that there seemed to be a kind of a difference, a distinction, something that was worth talking about and making visible in a new way.

So, once we had got a kind of long list of names then we began to just kind of throw around what it was that we thought was interesting about them, and interestingly, what did emerge was that even though pretty much all the artists had been trained as painters I think we only showed a few that could be called that and I think only one actually used painting in the final exhibitions and the kind of painting used was actually very different and the other one was Cao Fei who kind of painted these illusionistic things in the last room upstairs but the kind of art school class thing so there was painting on things to make them look as though they were distressed. So, all Chinese paintings, all Chinese contemporary art shows had previously been based one painting and this exhibition only had one painter in it, it had painters in it, but it only had one piece that was represented by painting. I think was kind of a big change.

But I think one of the things that struck us was that they were all kind of to do with of a new sort of sensibility around notions of The Real and the new emerging reality around them, the fact that everything was changing very fast, one generation to another, each time we went to Beijing the who city seemed to have changed, the rapid pace of development of the building all those kind of things. But unlike their predecessors there's a real quest for a kind of, you know they put themselves on the line it's much more personal, in a way that we certainly hadn't seen before, so that was interesting. I think a lot of it we kind of take for granted in the West that how painting, art, information, whatever, is there, but for them it was kind of a new,

or new in a professional setting in arts that doesn't mean to say that what they did western art was very different from that. I think again what was interesting was how specifically they grappled with problems that were local to China but through that, kind of hit on a wider chord. So, it was very much rooted in Chinese places and Chinese stories and Chinese sensibility and I think that came through very much in the exhibition. So, it wasn't about universalism, nothing about that, it had to feel rooted, it had to feel relevant to a time and place.

LM: Yeah, there's certainly a certain feeling of encapsulating the time because there's very few works before 2005 in the exhibition.

SG: No, that's right. So, the other thing to say I suppose is about the number of commissions. So again, it was giving an artist a mission to do whatever it was that they most wanted to do. So, it wasn't again us layering on a perception of what we thought they should be doing and instead it was giving them the opportunity to do whatever it was they wanted to do. And often it meant that they could go in a completely different direction, so Yang Fudong for example, was able to make that film and it was the first time that, he had been wanting to make it for so long, and it was the first time he had actually been given money to make whatever he wanted to make without feeling that commercial pressure or pressure from collectors or the gallery to make something that was upbeat that was kind of vaguely nostalgic of Shanghai in the 1920s or 30s, you know it's a pretty depressing bleak film and it

was one film that for him was really personal because it shows a village, a landscape, that was very common that he'd, certainly I don't know whether he experienced it first-hand but it was very real to him but it talks about a great rush to prosperity and that superficial value that came with money and all that. So, from that point of view, it was a really good show to have done because it was empowering the artist to say what it was that they wanted to or make what they wanted to.

LM: What I found really interesting about the show, you said that there wasn't much of a curatorial direction to it, but the themes of the show came out on their own almost, there were a lot of parallels being drawn between Liverpool and China around economic growth and urban development and all of that stuff. So, it's quite interesting how those things came out.

SG: Yeah

LM: Do you think that that came as a result of the commissioned works adding an element of site-specificity in the works.

SG: Yes, again looking back it was absolutely perfect timing. So, we couldn't have done that show a year before and we wouldn't have been able to do it a year later. Because we were quite early going in to explore what could be done, to pick up on this kind of new sensibility, so within that kind of time 2006 to 2007 the eyes of the world were kind of looking at China, it was the new powerhouse, it was this it was.

that, it was the new growing economy all that kind of stuff, governments were desperate to get in so there's always a kind of political and economic concern around it. And what it meant was that or what it looked to be was sort of a model for the future in the same way we were looking at Japan in the 1980s as being that kind of powerhouse for the new world, suddenly China was that place now in the 2000s and people were desperate to get in and be associated with it. Which meant that we were able to raise enormous amounts of money from individuals in order to support that set of work because Chinese art, or Chinese contemporary art was the new boom and it hadn't yet kind of, it was all so new, it was all really new, people (western buyers) couldn't even pronounce the names of these artists but they were already exchanging hundreds of millions of pounds while before you have established artists who never really got a look in in the West and spend their whole lives building a commercial reputation and suddenly you had artists who were three or four years out of art school who were already commanding those kinds of figures. It was kind of a completely mad world and nobody was quite sure whether the money would stick which was why we were able to do so many commissions because people would, we'd ask someone or we'd ask a gallery, they would find a collector who would support a new work being made. So we were incredibly fortunate in that way and then of course a year later the bubble burst, interest moved on they found a new commodity but just at that moment it was really good timing. So, it allowed us to do things we otherwise wouldn't have been able to do. And that includes Ai Weiwei, he was practically unknown (in Britain) and that was his first major, I think, European commission.

LM: Do you think that led on to his Turbine Hall commission and the big solo exhibitions that came out recently? Do you think the Real Thing was influential in that?

SG: Yeah, I mean of course it would have been on the radar but I think it took more than that, I mean Chris Durcon had worked with him at the Haus der Kunst so I think he was very keen on working with him so he would have been probably ultimately responsible for him coming over to Europe whether he knew what we were doing in Liverpool or not. It was a separate trajectory, I think. If anything, we reinforced it from an institutional point of view. But

also, at the time we were working on something called APAC which was the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee which was one of the committees Tate set up to acquire works from different parts of the world. And Ai Weiwei's name came up a few times in the list of artists to add to their collection, unfortunately we did buy anything at that time, I suppose we should have, but there you go, you don't always get it right. But from most points of view it became very important.

LM: Look back, because the show was almost ten years ago now, do you think there's a lasting impact of the show in exhibitions that have happened since?

SG: I really don't know, but weirdly it is one of those exhibitions that I still have people who go "Oh you did that show" you know, so on a personal basis I think it was good. I think also it was important to note that it was one of the very few shows where it did try and open a new world, a new dialogue, a new way of thinking and engagement with 'the real' that was uncynical and un-commercial. So, unlike pretty much every single show that suddenly appeared around that time or a bit later there was no kind of market manipulation involvement at all, I think that's a crucial distinction. Because there were other shows, big shows at major state museums that really should have known better and they trumpeted it as new contemporary art from China, in fact it was contemporary art from China, but usually from individual collections with the huge hype around them and then got sold off immediately afterwards, and that for me is really cynical. So for a lot of people they really used it as a real marketing opportunity, but for I think we did try to get under the skin of it and there's still some artists there who I think are brilliant who are still working and producing interesting work, but it's not the kind of work that's commercially viable.

LM: Tate Liverpool has sort of a reputation as the more experimental of the Tate group, do you think that kind of creative freedom had an influence on the show and allowed you to take more risks?

SG: Yes, very much so, I think if you're away from the centre you can get up to more mischief. And I think that audiences are always important to every institution, but you can be slightly more risk taking if you're not as dependant paradoxically on audiences as you are in London. It might sound a bit strange that in London you have a huge catchment area you've got all the collectors you've got all kinds of people who can support you but in fact that makes them more risk averse precisely because of all that. Whereas in Liverpool you can oscillate wildly between a really popular show which has maybe a fifth of the people you get in London and one that has only a tenth of the people you would get in London so you can afford to take more risks and that's definitely appreciated certainly by us I think. You know we did some great show up there that you would never do in London. So whether it was the Chapman Brothers or Sarah Lucas or Paul McCarthy or there was another show I did called the Secret Life of Clay which just put the medium of clay as a material used by the avant-garde that's been completely written out of history when almost every single major artist has worked in clay but hardly any of them are known for their work in clay. You know everybody from Gauguin to Picasso to Miro you name them they've worked on it. So, you can do quite scholarly exhibitions which can be quite ground breaking that you would never be able to do in London.

Appendix ii

Notes in Conversation from a Meeting with Karen Smith 29/01/2015

On Post-colonialism, multi-culturalism, and the position of Britain:

There was a very pro-active movement when it began in the late seventies/early eighties in British academia where the focus was on identifying the problematic aspects of multicultural representation and attempting to either solve or eradicate them in the case of offensive representation. And the Chinese Art Centre came about because of this need for representation for British Chinese artists and it would be interesting to see to what extent the centre still supports this now that it has shifted its focus to artists from China as a whole.

There is a unique position of multiculturalism in Britain, and the definition of what it is to be British has changed a lot in the last century or even in the last fifty years to the point where there is no longer a single definition of national identity like there might be in France, for example. There has been a fairly recent turn of representing other cultures as opposed to expecting total integration.

On British exhibitions and the state of Chinese contemporary art

Historically the state of contemporary Chinese art and society in general is still ongoing and in a state of flux. Because it is still so early in the development of the movement it might take a few decades to get a clearer picture of Chinese contemporary art and 'new Chinese art' as a movement with the benefit of hindsight.

Britain has a more critical attitude towards transcultural exhibiting and contemporary and places its culture institutions under greater critical scrutiny probably thanks to the nature of the press and media coverage in this country.

Britain has also traditionally been more reticent towards 'otherness' in terms of international exhibiting unlike Germany which borders a lot of countries and has had a changing identity as a nation, Britain still retains an island mentality and could be considered more resistant to foreign intervention.

Because of Britain's colonial history with Hong Kong and to a certain extent Shanghai the position of Britain as a host nation of exhibitions Chinese contemporary art is different to say Germany or the US, and this will often be a key concern when representing artists from Hong Kong and be a more direct point of discussion when it might be not be such a central theme to other international shows.

British audiences seem intimidated initially by contemporary Chinese art due to perceived cultural differences and language barriers. However, there has always been a historical fascination with Chinese art and design dating back from the British empire and this also carries through to a curiosity and desirability for contemporary Chinese art.

In terms of communist and post-communist art British audiences seem to respond more to Russian artists than Chinese artists because they are more familiar with Russian history.

On Wider International representations

There are definite economic influences involved in these international exhibitions, as with anything. There may have been some small exhibitions initially, but it wasn't until 2001 when China joined the World Trade Organisation that larger institutions like MOMA really began to see Chinese contemporary art as a source of reliable investment for its collections because of their emergence and popularity on the commercial market.

Saatchi is another example of this sort of commercial influence because it's based around an individual collection, but it also represents individual artists.

Art produced for biennials is often lost among the crowd or so out of context that it is no longer the best representation of China or Chinese culture.

Britain is definitely behind the rest of Europe in terms of output and research. But every country approaches it differently whether it's a commercial focus, solo shows, or a more biennial-like model. Documenta was probably one of the very earliest European international art festivals to include Chinese artists for the first time. The 1992 and 1997 shows were unique in that sense.

On Representing the People

Representing the people was a unique opportunity and location. The choice of using figurative painting and portraiture was a conscious decision because it was the first time contemporary society had been represented in that way. Also, the use of portraiture while introductory provoked a positive response from Manchester audiences and the exhibitions subsequent touring locations. The British view of Chinese society at that time was still of a heavily restrictive communist society and people had little to no knowledge of the economic state of China in the 1990s.

The concept of portraiture was fairly new in Chinese art outside of imperially commissioned pieces. Without this psychological interest in the individual China didn't experience the same kind of social reform that occurred during the Enlightenment in Europe and America.

These survey exhibitions are still marketed as a sort of novelty or as something new when in fact they've been going on for nearly 20 years now. Art of Change was still advertised as the 'first' exhibition of contemporary Chinese art in 2012 when there had already been several shows before it.

Representing the People was successful for a small show but because it was outside of London and had quite a limited scope due to budget and the size of the venue it still only made a small impact and it would be nearly ten years before major British institutions really began to focus explicitly on contemporary Chinese art.

On The Real Thing

There were more opportunities for funding these kind of projects in the build up to the Beijing Olympics but the main focus of interest during that time was on traditional art and more traditional ethnographic exhibitions, the British Museum did a show on the Terracotta Army and a second one in 2008 called China Landscape as well as the Olympic arts project and China Design Now at the V&A.

This translatability is usually the focus for British exhibitions, you could go to China and pick out the five 'best' artworks produced there but they won't necessarily be the five best works

to show in Britain. Just as the works displayed in Britain are not necessarily the 'best' works or even the most representative of works but they are aimed to be the kinds of works that British audiences are likely to engage with.

Humour and irony are generally something that British audiences would respond to, for example, the Everest piece in The Real Thing was very playful and people really responded to it.

The Real Thing also clashed with the Serpentine show as Battersea power station, China Power Station had a lower budget and was thin on the ground in terms of works.

With these 2007 shows there was a move towards engaging either the site and location more through residencies, workshops and commissions. It's easier to move an artist than to move a work so commissions are becoming the preferable mode of building an exhibition and they encourage relationships between artists and institutions.

Appendix iii

CFCCA 30-year Publication – Interview with Sarah Champion by Jean Ng, CFCCA Library and Archives

JN: When did you start your post at the CAC, and who did you take over from?

SC: I took over in June 1996, and there hadn't been anyone in post for a while.

JN: Do you know of the director before you?

SC: It might have been Wendy Hee.

JN: You were at the Centre for 12 years. In your 12 years, where did you want to take the organisation to when you first joined? Did that change along the way?

SC: What you need to understand is, when I came, all of the funding had gone. It hadn't done a show in a very long time. It didn't have a director. And so the Arts Council was on the board and appointed me. The brief I was given was to either stabilize the organisation, or to shut it down within 6 months. I was the only staff member, and after a few months I got a volunteer to come in to work with me who was Cloudy Tang. It then took another 6 months before I could stabilize the organisation and then employ her part-time to help me. To be honest, the vision was 'is this an organisation that I can save?' or 'has this passed its time?' and therefore it needs to be shut down. So basically, what I was doing was speaking to all the potential partners in Manchester and the region, speaking to artists and determining if there was a need for it, which I then determined that there was.

JN: In your time, can you recall some of the more memorable projects for yourself or the community?

SC: Representing the people was a large-scale touring exhibition on contemporary Chinese art. Doing the vital festival, nothing like that had been done before. The live art performance, nothing like that had ever been done before as well. And then of course getting the lottery money and building the building that you are in right now.

JN: With regards to representing the people, could you speak more to the conception of the exhibition and the reception of it being something that was touring?

SC: It was basically economics – how can we reach the broadest number of people and show them how fantastic this work is when we are a static venue. It was also to try and show what was going on with contemporary Chinese art in China at the time. And because a lot of the representation, because we had done the Hong Kong.

handover, it was kind of a cliché in what people thought contemporary Chinese art was, rather than what I was seeing on the ground. So, it was trying to bring as many people up to speed. It was also trying to give it real credibility.

JN: Moving on to more location-based logistics, could you speak to the move to Edge Street – the motivations, etc.?

SC: It was a number of things that came together. As long as the Chinese Arts Centre was in Chinatown, people assume that they were going to see traditional arts, or they assumed it

was just for the Chinese community. Psychologically, it needed to be moved to a space where it could be recognized as an arts venue first and foremost rather than a cultural venue. Secondly, we were on the first floor. And so there was no visibility and access to it. Also, that we were not visible, so you had to know it was there for you to be able to find it. And what I was really keen to do is to engage with the community, and if you are able to see it in the window, you are more likely to come in rather than actively researching, hunting, and then finding us. The other thing is just pure money. We were in a really expensive unit, so it was really an issue of trying to keep the organisation afloat.

JN: With regards to the edge street location, do you recall there being a significant change in the demographic of visitors?

SC: At the time, it was a very risky move because there was an intention for the area to become an arts and cultural quarter. But at the time we moved, we were very much the pioneers. So, it felt like quite an exposed move to make, and on the promise that other organisations would start coming after us. But it immediately categorized us as an arts organisation rather than a cultural organisation. We started to see the young urban scene coming to us rather than people who were coming into Chinatown and thought we were showing, perhaps Terracotta warriors or something and walking out disappointed.

JN: Moving on to more focused shows, do you recall the exhibitions – the desires of the golden lotus, Face of china, some of the more controversial shows? Could you speak to some of the responses from the community?

SC: I was very clear that I was running an arts organisation. So, I wanted to challenge people's perceptions of what Chinese artists were and weren't doing. So, it was very deliberate and very conscious on my part to try to show the breadth, but also push people's tolerances about what Chinese art was and wasn't. It was consciously done. The Chinese community, some people were frustrated and thought that it wasn't proper Chinese art, whatever that was meant to be. But within the arts community, the people were really quite open towards it and quite excited about what they were seeing.

JN: 1998, the seminar A New Vocabulary for Chinese Art that specifically spoke about the cultural diversity action plan – do you remember much about the seminar?

SC: We had a huge turnout for it, which was great. What was important for me was they were artists of all disciplines – we had musicians there, writers there, performers there, as well as visual artists. And it was really an attempt to try and move forward the debate I think. I'm out of the sector now, but I know one of the things that the Chinese community kept on trying to do was looking at definitions, whether they were British Chinese, whether they were British, whether they should come up with new terminology. And it was an attempt to try and draw a line under that and reach a consensus so we could actually move forward and concentrate on changing people's perceptions and focus on the quality of the work.

JN: In your time as director, did you perceive significant changes to the notion of "Chineseness" to the British community in particular, as well as the Asian communities?

SC: I think there needs to be a strong distinction between urban areas and other. If you were British Chinese growing up in Manchester or London, I think you would have felt like you were part of a diverse community and that you were understood and appreciated as part of British society. But if you were growing up in, for example, rural Lancashire, you probably felt like you were the only British Chinese family in the country. You felt very vulnerable because of that and you didn't feel a sense of place or belonging. And going back to the seminar that we did, we found people who were around the 20s and they were just exclaiming 'oh my god

there are other Chinese artists out there' and we were trying to break through that sense of isolation that we had. And not have to keep reinventing the wheel so that people could have some sort of a shared history. At the time, there was a massive awareness within the arts market about Mainland Chinese artists. And that pretty much infiltrated all of mainstream culture as well. It very much felt like we were pushing into an open door through the mainstream population. There was a real thirst and appetite for the work of British Chinese artists. The problem was, that people were more interested in Mainland Chinese art than they were of British Chinese art and trying to get a parity became quite difficult at some point.

JN: Why do you think there was the discrepancy?

SC: Money. There were some massive international dealers who were buying up the artwork and they decided that their focus was Mainland Chinese.

JN: So, it was more of an economic situation.

SC: Yes, but economics determine what shows get exhibited and which artists get scholarships. There was a big financial driver through it all.

JN: Moving on to the artist development scheme of CAC, how did the CAC team work within the whole idea of talent development?

SC: For me it was very much that I was seeing particularly British Chinese but also international Chinese artists, they didn't have the same networks that mainstream artists have. So, they were finding it much harder to get residencies within mainstream organisations. They didn't have the contacts. British Chinese artists didn't have the connections in terms of immediate family groups. Also, that, we wanted to make sure that they were the best that they could be. And we wanted to support them on a practical level, but also on an emotional level, and to give them as much profile as possible. And it seemed like a really good way to nurture them, to get them in front of significant people in the art world and really try and launch their careers with them.

Shortly before I left, I made an investment and we had dinners down in London. For example, we got together a group of British Chinese jewellery designers and then we would invite the crafts council, liberty's, whoever else to come and meet and make connections with these artists. So, we did a live art one, we did a fashion one, and it was very deliberate to try. Because we became very aware that British Chinese artists weren't networked in, and it was trying to manually make those connections. Also, many of those artists then went on to get shows or commissions. I think we did about 8 of them; we did a music one, a dance one, a drama one. For the drama one we get actors, writers, producers, and then we get the main commissioners to come in and really bond with them in an informal setting.

Everyone thought it was barking, because we were spending about £500 taking everyone out for a meal. But the amount of commissions the artists got out of it was phenomenal.

There was also a tour of live artists in the UK around 10 venues. The reception was phenomenal. There were people who had been to one show and would come to the other end of the country to see it again.

Appendix iv

List of Selected Group Exhibitions of Chinese Contemporary Art in the UK since 1993

1993 Silent Energy "China Avant-garde", Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, U.K.; Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik, Odense, Denmark

1993 China's New Art, Post-1989, Marlborough Fine Art, London.

1996 Reckoning with the Past: Contemporary Chinese Painting, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh.

1998 Representing the People, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester.

1999 Beijing in London, Institute of contemporary art, London.

2000 The Figure in Contemporary Chinese Art, The Air Gallery, Hanart, London.

2001 Dream 01, The Red Mansion Foundation, London.

2002 Dream 02, The Red Mansion Foundation, London.

2003 China Today, The British Library gallery, London.

2005 Between Past and Future: New photography and video from China, Victoria and Albert Museum and The Red Mansion Foundation.

2005 London Chinese Film Festival, SOAS, University of London.

2005 Beijing Stories, The Red Mansion Foundation, London.

2006 China Coup. Hospital, The Red Mansion Foundation, London.

2006 China Power Station: Part 1, Serpentine Gallery, Battersea Power Station, London.

2006 Take Down, Beijing, China, Through Popular Expression, The University of Central England in Birmingham.

2007 The Real Thing, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool.

2007 The Thirteen: Chinese Video Now, John Harsard gallery, Southampton.

2008 The Revolution Continues, new art from China, The Saatchi gallery, London.

2008 Beijing Map Games, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham.

2009 Mixed Maze, The Red Mansion Foundation, London.

2009 Tales of Angels, The Red Mansion Foundation, London.

2010 Pure Views: New Painting from China, Louis Blouin Foundation, London.

2012 INK – The art of China, The Saatchi Gallery, London.

2012 Art of Change: New Directions from China, The Hayward Gallery, London.

2014 Harmonious Society, ATM2014, Manchester

2015 Wastelands, Ovada Gallery, Oxford.

2015 Thinking Chinese, The Ming-Ai Institute (UCL), London.

2015 The M+ Sigg Collection: Chinese Art from the 1970s to Now, The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester.

2016 The world is yours, as well as ours, The White Cube Gallery, London.

2016 Contemporary Chinese Works on Paper, The Waterfront Gallery, Ipswich.

2018 Presence: A Window into Chinese Contemporary Art, University of Salford, St Georges Hall, Liverpool.